

The Expressive Effects of Civic Education: Women, Slaves, and Foreigners at Athens

The Athenians, for all their talk of freedom and political equality, famously excluded a large portion of their population from the political goings on of their democracy, namely women, slaves, and foreigners. Consequently, the study of Athenian civic life has focused largely on the activity of male, enfranchised citizens. This has largely been the case for the study of civic education in Athens, which received relatively little attention from Greek historians. The Athenians educated their citizenry in good democratic behaviors through various informal means, such as the imitation of fellow citizens, in lieu of a formal, state-wide educational institution, which did not appear until the end of the 4th century (and indeed after the “end” of democracy itself in Athens). The study of civic education in Athens has focused primarily on this institution, the *ephebeia* (Friend 2018, Henderson 2020), as well as the concern for civic education in philosophy and theater in Athens (Ober 2001, Poulakos and Depew 2004, Lape 2004). But when we take into consideration those who were excluded from civic activity, there appears a much richer—and problematic—image of the practice of civic education in Athens.

It is true that civic education was ostensibly directed toward male citizens and how they should conduct their political lives. But this does not mean that women, slaves, and foreigners had no role in civic life or in this educative system. Studies on these marginalized groups (e.g. Osborne 1995, Kasimis 2018, Campa 2019, Forsdyke 2021, Vlassopoulos 2021) have demonstrated the widespread and dynamic involvement in civic life of these people, as well as their presence in the Athenian political imagination despite their formal exclusion from politics. This paper aims to build on the existing literature about the relationships of women and non-citizens to ancient Athenian society from the point of view of civic education. I will argue that

one of the functions of civic education was to maintain the political status quo of democracy by reinforcing the exclusion of women, slaves, and foreigners from politics. That is, because of the expressive effects of Athenian civic education, citizens and non-citizens alike were taught that those excluded from public activity were to remain confined to their homes, exploited for labor, or subject to duties that citizens were not, all for the sake of the stability of the democracy. Consequently, the exploitation and exclusion of these marginalized groups influenced the way civic values developed in Athens. The study of how those on the margins of Athenian society were involved in democratic civic education bears implications not just for our understanding of ancient Greek democracy but for understanding exclusionary practices in modern democracies as well.

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