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The Lyceum of Greek Women and the Idealization of Female Greek Beauty

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Introduction

The *Lyceum of Greek Women* was founded in late 1910 by Kallirroï Parren and a group of women comprising her closest associates. Kallirroï Parren, was born in Crete in 1859 as Kallirroï Siganou. She worked as a teacher and she was also employed as a journalist and wrote novels. Fluent in many languages, Parren travelled outside Greece and was considered one of the few women intellectuals at the end of nineteenth century Greece. After her marriage to the journalist Ioannis Parren from Constantinople, she visited her husband's native city, where she was frustrated by the status of women and decided to devote her life to female emancipation¹.

According to the *Lyceum's* statutes, which were officially recognised on 19 February 1911², its objectives included the creation of a coalition among women in the 'Letters, Arts and Sciences'³. The publication of the Lyceum's official periodical, the *Bulletin (Deltion)*, attempted to provide a platform for the group's aims. The Lyceum's members aspired to work for the 'progress of their gender' and for the preservation and revival of Greek customs and traditions (dances, songs and costumes); in short, to increase awareness both for gender equality and for the preservation of Greek folk culture⁴.

This twofold aim represented the culmination of Parren's lifetime struggle. The establishment of the *Lyceum* combined her feminist concerns with her folklorist interests which were inextricably linked to Greek nationalist objectives of that time. In fact, Parren was convinced that the progress of the feminist cause would contribute to the revitalisation of the Greek nation and vice versa. Accordingly, a nationally minded and knowledgeable about the Greek culture woman would eventually contribute to the creation of a healthy, prosperous and vigorous nation.

The *Lyceum's* Festivals and Women's Performance

From the very first year of its existence until the end of the inter-war period (which for Greece is habitually set in 1936 and the establishment of the Metaxas dictatorship) the Lyceum organised various festivities in order to instigate a revival of Greek traditions. A whole division, the Department of Festival Organisation, was charged with preparing the festivals of the Lyceum primarily but not exclusively⁵ at the Panathenian stadium in Athens which was the one that hosted the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. Parren's desire for the organisation of the such festivals dates back to

these very first Olympics, when she suggested a re-enactment of the ancient Panathenian procession of highly respectable Athenian maidens in order to mark the sporting events with ‘genuine Hellenic beauty’. Even though the event did not materialize in 1896, Parren found the opportunity to introduce similar festive events already in 1911. In May 1911, the first public festival called ‘Blooming festival’ (*Anthesteria*) was organised by the *Lyceum* in an Athenian hall (Zappeion)⁶.

The first festival to be held in the Panathenian Stadium in 1914 was followed by one in 1915; for the next decade the realization of these festivals was halted due to extenuating political circumstances but in short, between 1925 and 1938, the *Lyceum* conducted or co-organised over a dozen public events in the Stadium⁷.

The set-up of the festivals was based on a steady core of repeated features structured around archaic performances and modern, folk dances. A great number of young women (at times accompanied by men), all dressed in traditional costumes and ancient-like attires appeared in the open-air stadium in the presence of a class- and gender-mixed audience. They were enthusiastically received by the authorities and the Athenian public⁸ and were used as an additional proof of the assumed ‘uninterrupted’ bonds between ancient and modern Greece via the folk tradition of the Byzantine era and the folk culture of the Hellenic territory during the Ottoman rule.

The number of the performers, primarily women, varied through the years amounting to hundreds in the 1920s while major emphasis was placed not only on their gender but also on their class origins since it was often quoted that the girls are members of the upper class and ‘daughters of our best families’⁹, just like the vast majority of *Lyceum* members that were cited as women of the upper class according ‘to social conventions’¹⁰ who undertook the task to spread the knowledge of the ancient Greek ‘spirit and art... from the hut of the poor to the palace of the rich’¹¹. In short, women who

wished to enrich Greek society by re-awakening its cultural heritage.

The performances emulated the form of processions that took place in ancient Greece and included folk dances from the contemporary countryside comprising an awkward amalgam of various historical eras related to glorious features of Greek history from prehistoric (Minoan) to medieval (Byzantine). Such a mixture reflects the desire of *Lyceum* members and of contemporary spectators to comprehend an undisputable link between various historical periods as well as the continuity of Greek culture. Prominent politicians, major intellectuals, wealthy middle- and upper- class businessmen, as well as members from all social classes were among the thousands of spectators during the years of the performances.

Idealized Beauty

A central common thread to all these festivals was the splendour of the female figure, one that was often quoted as the 'eternal Greek beauty', an essentialist concept around which these festivals had developed. An assortment of instances from the various performances through the years of the festivals' existence clearly illustrates the viewpoints and the objectives of its organisers. The idealised fifth century figures of Karyatides and those of the powerful fighters Amazons together with the female hunter goddess Artemis were evoked to remind the spectators of feminine beauty.

A graceful appearance was expected to be the main feminine trait during the festivals. Personifications of ancient female characters were adjusted to contemporary idealisations for women and were presented as 'virgins' while women dressed as byzantine princesses were watching from seats modelled as byzantine towers. Girls

representing the seasons of the year and different parts of Greece (some of which had been recently added to the country after the Balkan wars) performed traditional folk dances. Reports on ‘virgins’, even more, ‘graceful virgins’ with ‘indescribable beauty’ are abundant. The concluding remarks of a female spectator in her report regarding the festival are revealing: ‘We can all see that the contemporary Greek woman is a genuine descendent of her ancient sisters, which had been highly praised by so many poets and writers’¹².

Women’s public performances and the sight of women’s bodies in public - in contrast to the usual domestic space - is vested with positive meaning as these performances are associated with political, national and historical instances that were meaningful to the contemporary audience. The beauty standard precludes any sensual connotation of the word. The projection of the aesthetic ideals of classical beauty turns these women to idols of respectability. They do not represent improper images of dancing women and the erotic element has been eradicated; instead, the haughtiness and dignity of the nation are thought to find their proper expression through the theatricality of the performance and the physical charms of the festival performers. Local newspapers extolled these appearances which were sanctioned precisely because they involved purportedly immaculate, virgin images, literally on display. The *Lyceum* girls, coming from every corner of the Hellenic territory, were perceived as parts of an organic and beautiful whole that was breathing through these young female bodies. The nation was presented as a physical being, a natural body and its aesthetic value ranked among its most important features.

A key aspect of the nationalized beauty ideal was the bond with harmony and health. Beauty was recognized as a by-product of harmony in the romanticized ancient Greek sense and it is not fortuitous that quite often the reporters would refer to

the statue-like beauty and the plasticity of the performers' bodies. Fifth century statues as eternal standards of beauty were recalled from the collective memory while the girls re-enacted their performances in a solemn and poised way¹³. Health was also viewed as a prerequisite for beauty closely linked to youthfulness which was another critical characteristic of the performers. The link between beauty and health is a cross-cultural view that still endures today. During inter-war Greece, beauty was inextricably related to the preservation of health and prescriptive literature of this time period made clear references to the connections between these two aspects of a 'good life'¹⁴. In the eyes of contemporary spectators, dances, songs, costumes but mostly the women who wore them 'all these beauties combined appeared in the Panathenian Stadium, their youth and splendour... held a feast of glory... which presented our rigorous race with all the beauty and harmony preserved from high antiquity to our days'¹⁵.

Women, Aesthetics and the Nation

Similarities to ancient standards of beauty were essential in the process of a search for 'eternal' Greek female beauty, virginity, bodily grace, decency and nobility. The beauty standard under question is bursting with audacity and vitality, elements that are both regarded as indispensable to the Greek culture and part of an essentialized 'Greek psyche'. The *Lyceum* women provide insights into the nationalist discourse projected both by its president and by the proponents of an uninterrupted Greek historical continuity. Parren herself had fully endorsed the nationalist slogans of the time (such as 'Greece is the "chosen" nation which draws its superiority from its ancient heritage'¹⁶).

In these decorous spectacles, which functioned as high-brow entertainment, featured the physical charms of upper class women; the latter, were used as national icons and their aesthetic image is showcased as an authentic representation of the Greek culture. As Parren herself suggested, the festivals display ‘the unique phenomenon of a culture, advanced from the time of its very emergence, which through its development amidst centuries of barbarian and other rule, lost nothing of the nobility of the race, the beauty and harmony of line and colour’¹⁷.

After a catastrophic Greek-Turkish war of 1897, Parren had projected a plan for gender equality through which women’s ‘national activities’ legitimized their presence in the public sphere. Patriotic actions were the priorities set for certain women and their active engagement in those helped reformulate the hitherto social conventions, hoping to attain a ‘new contract’ that would remove further restrictions imposed upon women’s public action¹⁸. The feminists who had espoused classicism and the aesthetics of ritual practices longed to experience, in their own perspective, the transformative nature of rites. The performances in those nation-celebrating festivals were fully justified as public events. The *Lyceum of Greek women* had, in addition to its feminist objectives, the task of serving national interests ‘in favour of women, the family, the race and the nation’¹⁹.

Bearing in mind the close affiliation of such goals with the Great Idea (*Megali Idea*), which was the dominant ideology of the time²⁰, it is hardly surprising that the Lyceum’s activities were endorsed by a diverse nationally-minded audience, while the contemporary press praised its contribution to the implementation of the Great Idea through the preservation of Greek tradition and the promotion of nationalist values. The public endorsement of this effort led to hymns regarding the *Lyceum* activities: ‘Women are activated, the Greek woman entered the national scene and from the passive

doll position she used to hold so far in society, the Athenian lady at least, wishes to contribute her equal share in the struggle for national existence and be proud of it²¹.

It is an historical commonplace that at key moments of formation and unrest, nationalist discourses involve symbolic and image representations of a personified female nation due to the desire for national reproduction²². Nature is gendered as female and is endowed with women's reproductive realities. Women were thought to be the guardians of tradition and the loci of national purity. Women's bodies are appropriated by the nationalist discourse and practice and culturally idealised beauty is associated with the nation's pride and self-assuredness for the future. This was not a uniquely Greek phenomenon. In a revealing article about nationalisation of women's imagery in the Habsburg Empire, 'female beauty was a symbol of collective national worth and a source of collective national pride'²³. In a pseudo-scientific sense, taxonomies of female beauty were created and even though it could be recognized that women from all races can be beautiful, it was suggested that the distinct character of their beauty depends on their nationality²⁴.

Concluding Remarks

The task of the *Lyceum* members, which constituted the educated female elite of Greece, was to bridge the gap between the past and the present, to prove that the seed of ancient culture was not dead and revived anew in the bodies of the contemporary young ladies. The heritage of classical beauty was passed on to these girls to provide them with a most valuable wealth for the future. The Greek culture was thought to be durable but also capable of renovation. Past traditions blended with the present and permeated it with refreshed vigour and beauty²⁵.

For the feminists of the *Lyceum* the ideal of classicism culminated in social, national and aesthetic integrity. In a period that was critically formative both for the setting of the borders of the Greek state and for the creation of an early European-like bourgeois class, the classical beauty aesthetic could demarcate the romantic character of nationalism, provide the sense of continuity and belonging necessary for the citizens of the newly integrated Greek state and at the same time provide the upper class women of the organisation with a political identity which could re-shape their social standing.

Towards the end of the inter-war period, the *Lyceum* began to face financial difficulties²⁶. As a result of the unsuccessful war of 1922 and the decline of the Great Idea, the festival gradually lost its popularity and the *Lyceum* a considerable source of income. Throughout its long existence, the organisation's interests were differentiated according to national and international political circumstances. Therefore, some of its departments were weakened or strengthened accordingly. At the beginning of the 1930s, the *Lyceum*'s concerns for women's political emancipation were overridden by its activities for the preservation of Greek folk culture. Such an emphasis, together with its politically conservative make-up, allowed it to continue its operation during the ultranationalist, authoritative Metaxas regime in the post-1936 era.

¹Sasa Moschou-Sakorrafou, *History of the Greek Feminist Movement [Ιστορία του ελληνικού φεμινιστικού κινήματος]* (Athens: Private ed., 1990), 94-5; Koula Xiradaki, *The Feminist Movement in Greece. Pioneer Greek Women (1830-1936) [Το φεμινιστικό*

κίνημα στην Ελλάδα. Πρωτοπόρες Ελληνίδες (1830-1936)] (Athens: Glaros, 1988), 56-7.

²Eleni Μpromπου-Protopapa, *The Lyceum of Greek Women, 1911-1991*[*Το Λύκειο των Ελληνίδων, 1911-1991*] (Athens: *Lyceum of Greek Women ed.*, 1993), 24-5.

³Anonymous, “Editorial,” *Efimeris ton Kyrion*, 25/1002 (1911): 1556.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Eleni Fournaraki, “Bodies that Differ: Mid- and Upper- Class Women and the Quest for ‘Greekness’ in Female Bodily Culture (1896–1940)”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 27/12 (2010): 2071-2071, 2077-2078.

⁶*Ibid.*: 2065-6.

⁷Fournaraki, “Bodies that Differ”: 2076.

⁸Μpromπου-Protopapa, *The Lyceum*, 32-8.

⁹ K. Parren, *Report of the Lyceum of Greek Women activities (1911)* [*Λογοδοσία των δραστηριοτήτων του Λυκείου των Ελληνίδων (1911)*] cited in Μpromπου-Protopapa, *History*, 51.

¹⁰Μpromπου-Protopapa, *The Lyceum*, 52.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 48.

¹²Eleni I. Siphnaiou, “The Festival of the Lyceum of Greek Women at the Stadium” [“Η Εορτή του Λυκείου των Ελληνίδων στο Στάδιο”], *Ellinis*, 7/5 (1927): 108-109.

¹³Athina Gaitanou-Gianniou, “A Festival at the Stadium” [“Μια Γιορτή στο Στάδιο”], *Ellinis*, 5/5 (1925): 101-3.

¹⁴Maria Kyriakidou, “The ‘Power of Beauty’: Promoting Gender Stereotypes in Inter-War Greece”, *Women in Society*, 3 (2012): 28-38. In a similar vein, in inter-war Britain, the connection between health and beauty was viewed as a duty for all women, a path to their happiness as wives and mothers and vital in view of the

‘valuable national possession, the future race’, Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, “The Making of a Modern Female Body: Beauty, Health and Fitness in Interwar Britain”, *Women’s History Review*, 20/2 (2011): 304.

¹⁵Kallirroï Parren, “The Dance at the Stadium’ [“Ο Χορός εις το Στάδιον”], *Efimeris ton Kyrion*, 28/1053 (1914): 2586.

¹⁶Efi Avdela and Angelika Psarra, “Engendering ‘Greekness’: Women’s Emancipation and Irredentist Politics in Nineteenth-Century Greece”, *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 20/1 (2005): 73.

¹⁷Mpompou – Protopapa, *The Lyceum*, 160.

¹⁸Avdela and Psarra, “Engendering ‘Greekness’”: 74-75.

¹⁹Anonymous, “Kallirroï’s Parren Lecture at Parnassus” [“Η διάλεξις της κυρίας Καλλιρρόης Παρρέν εις τον Παρνασσόν”], *Efimeris ton Kyrion*, 25/1002 (1911): 1548.

²⁰ The latter envisaged the liberation of unredeemed Greeks and was dear to the majority of the Greek population, men as well as women. The Great Idea was based on the notion of the ‘civilising mission’ of the Greeks in the Balkan Peninsula and such idealisation was used in order to provide an alibi for the desired expansion of the Greek state, Konstantinos Tsoukalas, *Dependence and Reproduction. The Social Role of Educational Mechanisms in Greece (1830-1922)* [Εξάρτηση και Αναπαραγωγή. Ο Κοινωνικός Ρόλος των Εκπαιδευτικών Μηχανισμών στην Ελλάδα (1830-1922)], (Athens: Themelio, 1987), 26-8.

²¹Anonymous, “Chronicles from the Daily Press Regarding the Greek Dances” [“Χρονογραφήματα από τας Καθημερινάς Εφημερίδας δια τους Ελληνικούς Χορούς”], *Efimeris ton Kyrion*, 25/1004-5 (1911): 1589.

²² Barbara Einhorn, “Insiders and Outsiders: Within and Beyond the Gendered Nation” in *Handbook of Gender and Women’s Studies*, ed. Kathy Davis & Mary

Evans & Judith Lorber (London: Sage Publications, 2006). Retrieved from:

http://www.sagereference.com/hdbk_genderstudy/Article_n12.html>.ChapterDOI:

10.4135/978-1-84860-802-3.n12, 7 Nov. 2012.

²³ Alexander Maxwell, “Nationalizing Sexuality: Sexual Stereotypes in the Habsburg Empire”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14/3 (2005): 273.

²⁴ *Ibid*: 277-8.

²⁵ For a relevant case in inter-war East Asia, see Catherine Yeh, “Refined Beauty, New Woman, Dynamic Heroine or Fighter for the Nation? Perceptions of China in the Programme Selection for Mei Lanfang’s Performances in Japan (1919), the United States (1930) and the Soviet Union (1935)”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6/1 (2007): 75-102.

²⁶ Mpompou-Protopapa, *The Lyceum*, 170.