

The Women of Lemnos

by [Nikos Akritas](#) (September 2024)



Philoctetes Left on the Isle of Lemnos by the Greeks on their Passage Towards Troy (David Scott, 1840)

2,500 years ago the Greek tragedians wrote plays about the women of Lemnos. They were based on a myth in which the women of the island had committed mass androicide, killing not just their husbands but all male members of their society, lest the sons of the murdered grew to manhood to avenge the atrocity. But what had led the women to commit such a heinous crime?

According to Apollonius of Rhodes, author of the *Argonautica*, the men of Lemnos had abandoned their wives for Thracian women. Preferring to cohabit with the latter and ignore the needs of their wives and children.

Such a state of affairs resulted—as queen Hypsipyle relayed to the leader of the Argonauts, Jason—in maltreatment of the Lemnian women, with no possibility of redress, and a lack of protection for children. In this way, the women and children were left in a wretched state of desperation. What options were available to them? To accept their position as abandoned and potentially destitute? Ultimately beggars and easy targets for all manner of crimes. To fight amongst themselves in a nasty, brutish state of nature? Or to do away with the men and enjoy, once more, protection, freedom from abuse, and a more secure future for their (female) children?

The latter became the preferred option. The only male survivor being the queen's old father, saved by being cast in a chest onto the sea waves which carried him to safety.

The story is a fiction but as with all classic tales, tells us something timeless about the human condition. For this is not just about a patriarchal society where women are abused by men, but about the most vulnerable in society and the protections afforded them. When the play was staged the actors, as well as the audience, would have all been men (although women could attend plays staged at religious festivals). Today, in the West at least, all can enjoy the play and discuss its nuanced messages and questions over how society deals with injustice. This is because we have come a long way since the ancient Greeks. All members of society are afforded the same rights and women and children afforded protections their predecessors never enjoyed.

But how things change. The misogyny of past societies has returned in the guise of rights for others. Gender bashing and religious minorities feel no compunction to overturn what has,

for the first time in history, given legislative and social equality to women. From females forced to compete against men and share their washrooms and prisons with them, putting them at risk, to those who lose their jobs for merely questioning such ideologies, we have reached a stage where women in our society are now viewed as those from mythical Lemnos. Their safety, well-being and enjoyment of life are no longer of equal merit to that of men's. They are not returned to second class status but are reduced to that of a third class because some men claim they are themselves women.

This discrimination through the back door does not just affect women. It extends to children in our society. Children, ultimately the responsibility of their parents, can oppose their parents' genuine concerns for their safety and well-being by spouting what they have heard of such ideologies that wreak havoc in our societies. And so authorities, siding with a child's claims, can force parents to accept what is not in their child's interests. To concede to their young offspring being plied with drugs in their indulged confusion and worse. Children are left vulnerable to very controversial, dangerous ideas and suffer the consequences.

This is confounded by a belief in the relativeness, or should I say an overt discrimination, of cultures that has also taken hold of our societies. No matter the idea, religion, way of life, if it is *other* it is good. And so mysoginism, female child abuse, honour killings and religious hatred is given an air of acceptance, or a milieu in which to thrive, in the guise of *culture*. Women and children are the main victims of such abominable conditions. Those who would seek to protect them are old fashioned, patronising, at best misguided, but all too often accused of being part of an oppressive Western conspiracy.

The Lemnian women sought to protect themselves and their children from abuse and terrible hardship, death even, through an act of extreme violence. They committed a shocking act in

response to inhuman conditions. But it is human nature, if we are allowed to mention such things, to protect those we love, regardless of the fickle trends of society. Maternal and paternal instincts are often the measure against which society should gauge if its rules have gone too far.

If the state is to have a greater say than parents over what is good for children, what incentive is there to have them? To endure the physical challenges and hardships of pregnancy, childbirth, years of toil, and financial burdens only to find their influence over their children's upbringing diminishing. To raise children who are ultimately 'owned' by the state. Parents become mere providers of the next generation, for the state to decide how they should be moulded and ultimately utilized. Freedom becomes an antiquated idea.

To deny parents a say in some of the most important areas affecting their child's future well-being; to reduce women's rights to those of third class citizens; and to accept 'cultural' imports incompatible with a host society's understanding of right and wrong is to abandon one's responsibilities towards their loved ones and reject a society which encourages universal human rights.

Queen Hypsipyle, going against the grain and saving her old father, was rewarded by being sold into slavery. A fitting metaphor for how those speaking out with genuine concern for the current direction our societies are taking, are treated today.

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