

GIRLS ONLY

THE USE AND ABUSE OF FEMALE-CENTRIC EVENTS IN PATRIARCHAL RELIGIONS

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This paper examines how an ancient Greek fertility festival called Thesmophoria and Southern Baptist women's conferences both benefit and harm women. Although these events are separated by millennia and religious beliefs, both are female-centric and occur within a dominating patriarchal context. During these occasions, women are led by members of their own group, focus on their religion together, and exclude men from their activities. As a result, these events seem to benefit women by allowing them to leave their homes and interact with other women of their faith without the direct supervision of their male relatives or leaders. However, because these events operate with the permission of the patriarchal society and uphold its values, they are ultimately harmful to women because they do not allow any real changes to be made to the society's structure or values, even if those changes would improve women's lives. While these events are beneficial in a short-term timeline, they function only as pressure valves in the long run as a way to relieve the tension women feel because of the restricting gender roles placed upon them.

A common childhood experience for young girls is gathering together in a backyard or a bedroom and declaring a “girls only” or “no boys allowed” space for themselves, usually to ward off annoying little brothers or create solidarity within the group. This female-centric space gives every girl freedom to speak her mind and time away from her normal responsibilities and family members. Religions can offer similar spaces to women that allow them to express themselves, lead, and practice their faith without the direct supervision of their patriarchal societies. One such opportunity in ancient times was a fertility festival called Thesmophoria that Greek polytheists celebrated, in which women led other women during an exclusively female event to honor the goddess of agriculture Demeter. During the short festival, women practiced their religion without the supervision of their male relations and were even duty-bound to follow the female-centric rituals of the festival. Likewise, the modern-day women’s conferences held by the Southern Baptists mirror this festival in that they provide women a space and time to practice their religion with each other almost exclusively. Both of these events were and are seen as positive opportunities for women in which they can freely practice their religion together within a patriarchal context that otherwise restricts their rights and opportunities to act on their own. However, I argue that both of these events function as short-term pressure valves to relieve the societal tension that women experience and actually create long-term damage by reinforcing the patriarchal values that oppress women in the first place.

In the short-term, the festival Thesmophoria was an exceptional moment in Greek life and culture for women to practice their religion with

each other and without the interference or supervision of their male relatives. As I will explain later in this paper, Greek women’s rights were quite limited even for the wives of citizens, and this festival was an opportunity for women to leave their homes, gather with other women, and recognize their shared female identity. However, it is important to remember that women would not have needed this event if their female identity were not covered up and hidden away during the rest of the year. While aspects of Thesmophoria seem liberating and even touching, the festival’s purpose within the Greek patriarchal society complicates that positive view.

In terms of what scholars know about Thesmophoria, there is evidence of its annual celebration from as early as 2000 BCE across the Greek empire, including celebration sites called “Thesmophorion sanctuaries” and references to the goddess Demeter as “Thesmophoros” (Stallsmith 28). Although the festival was held throughout this massive empire, scholars know the most about the Athenian Thesmophoria in particular. As a result, this paper only addresses the Athenian Thesmophoria, even though some of the ideas would have likely applied to many of the other locations as well. The most important thing to know about the Athenian festival is that only the wives of Athenian citizens were allowed to witness it or participate in it; a man’s presence was so offensive that it was sacrilegious (Stallsmith 28). Out of this group, some women known as *archousai* led the procedures and ensured that it followed the proper rituals. The use of the word *archousai* is significant because it mirrors the word *archon*, which referred to Athens’s male leaders; this word choice means that the women leaders of Thesmophoria were a temporary equivalent of the men who led Athens. (Faraone 25). As a result of

this female leadership, male presence and supervision were totally eliminated from Thesmophoria.

The festival took place in October or November each year as a “pre-sowing ritual” that appealed to Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, to provide a fertile harvest for Greek farmers (Stallsmith 28). It was three days long, with the second day being used for fasting and the third day for gathering sacrificed animals and feasting. During this time, women lived together in temporary huts (Faraone 25-6). Although three days is very little time each year, these three days were filled with rituals known almost exclusively to women and practiced exclusively by women. For example, one interesting element that occurred throughout the festival was “shameful talk” which would normally be egregious for citizen’s wives but was accepted in this context as lending itself to encouraging fertility (Stallsmith 29-30). The nature of this speech is not totally clear, but it seems that the women were facetious with each other in a way that was not appropriate in everyday Athenian society. If I had to make an educated guess, I think women were probably complaining about their husbands and Athenian leadership during this time simply because they could. This speech is interesting because it allowed, even required, women to break the codes of conduct they normally followed. Not only could they break the rules, they had to break them to follow the ritual correctly. Outside the unique space of Thesmophoria, women would likely not have had the freedom to speak negatively about their husbands and leadership with people who would understand and commiserate. Within

Greek culture, Thesmophoria stands out as a space in which women could act on their own and act outside the normal societal standards they faced.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the festival was the time women spent fasting on the second day to imitate and respect the grief Demeter experienced after her daughter Persephone was kidnapped and raped by Hades, the god of the dead (Faraone 25-6). Sometime before the festival began, a few women threw sacrificed piglets as well as pine tree branches and cakes into the underground rooms of the sanctuary. On the third day, all of the women collected the rotting remains of those materials and put them on altars available to local farmers, who could then take some of this mixture to enrich their crops for the next harvest (Stallsmith 31-2). The use of the remains is important because it gave Thesmophoria and the participating women a stake in their society or a way to directly contribute to its growth and prosperity. Overall, the festival combined religious elements with rituals that provided practical benefits to the society which supported it.

While the specifics of the festival are not important to modern, casual readers, what does matter about this time is that women lived with each other, led each other, and observed the grief one woman felt for her daughter because of the injustice a man had committed against her. Basing the festival on Demeter and Persephone’s story shows that the festival was an opportunity for women to unite with each other over their shared female identities. Although rape was hardly limited to Greek women, there is certainly a trend in history of

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males raping local women to establish dominance during conquest and of men exerting great sexual control over their wives as a way to monitor society. Thesmophoria stands out in history as a moment in which women recognized and bemoaned the injury done to one of their own by a man. In this context, Thesmophoria is exceptional because women could address these injustices instead of being forced to accept them. Even by modern standards of gender equality, this festival is uniquely female-centric.

As ideal as Thesmophoria seems, its patriarchal trappings are obvious when it is placed in its full cultural context. Athens is famously known as the birthplace of democracy and the common man's voice, yet Athenian women did not have this same experience outside Thesmophoria. For example, the only women in Greece who could use their own names in court were priestesses; otherwise, Athenian women were known through relationships with men such as with their fathers or husbands (Gilhuly 18). In general, women were supposed to fill very particular sexual and societal roles as citizen's wives, had to be sexually submissive to their husbands, and had to maintain a clean reputation through their anonymity and support of their husbands (Stehle 78, Gilhuly 17). In other words, women played a quiet, even passive background role to support their husbands's political endeavours. Thus, any public expression of genuine autonomy was rare, and this limitation changes the kind of power that Thesmophoria had.

Because Thesmophoria was the only time when women had public self-expression in this patriarchy, it did not allow for transformative ideas or actions in the long run. Since their time and ideas were largely controlled by men, women were not able to make effective

changes by themselves in society. Any changes they wanted to effect had to go through men and be enacted by men to be valid. Plus, women only had three days together during the festival, after which they had to return to their husbands and households. Once they were separated into their individual situations, they did not have the same persuasive power that they had as a collective. This arrangement damaged their chances of accomplishing change because individual Athenian men could stop the efforts in their own homes before the movement grew so powerful that it demanded a response from a male collective. Since these women could not change the society they lived in, perhaps they just embraced the time they had away from those limitations and tried to relieve the pressure they felt from their society. As a result, Thesmophoria only relieved that pressure women felt and did not change women's lives for the better outside those three days.

If this is the case, how does it change the way we look at Thesmophoria? Instead of the festival being shockingly feminist in a patriarchal society, I argue it is a patriarchal device that gives women just a taste of their actual wishes so they would be content with the oppression forced upon them. Thus, it was not a marker of equality, but another tool used to oppress women. After all, the religion and society which contained Thesmophoria ultimately supported male superiority; as a result, any female spaces must support maleness somehow or exist with its permission as the festival existed with the permission of the Athenian male leaders. Thesmophoria functioned as an outlet for the female anger and frustration the patriarchy needed to quiet. In a short-term timeline, Thesmophoria was a pressure valve that allowed women to commiserate, have some time together, and feel that they had a stake in their society. Of course, the women did

have a small stake because the fertilizer they made would contribute to their city's agricultural production and thus had a civic benefit. Nevertheless, in the long run, this outlet covered up the year-long oppression women faced by giving them three days of freedom and control. Thus, the festival did not change a patriarchal society, but rather contributed to its continued existence by venting possible resistance to that society. In the end, Thesmophoria was damaging, not because it was inherently damaging, but rather because the society which supported it used it as a tool for continued oppression of women.

Even though Thesmophoria was celebrated millennia ago, the conferences of Southern Baptist women today mirror its exceptional religious opportunity for freedom for women in a patriarchal context; however, over time, these conferences also reinforce patriarchal ideals that limited space for women in the first place. Unlike the single annual event that Thesmophoria was, there are many annual conferences within the denomination available to women. Three examples of recent women's conferences include the For the Church Women's Pre-Conference from the Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the Lifeway Women's Leadership Forum with the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Equip training from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary ("SBC Search").

These three meetings demonstrate common characteristics of women's conferences, some of which ultimately reflect the patriarchal elements of the Southern Baptist denomination. For example, the Women's Pre-Conference of 2019 featured four female speakers and was a half-day event that "exists to encourage women who are in the throes of ministry in their homes, their churches, and throughout the world" ("FTC

Women's Pre-Conference"). Likewise, the two-day long Lifeway Women's Leadership Forum hosted female speakers (with just one male exception) who spoke about modern sexuality, ministry, and religious leaders' spiritual health (Student Life). Last, the Equip training event for the upcoming year had not been posted, but its website gave the following description of its events each semester: "These mini-conferences are led by faculty wives or guest speakers who will share from their own experience and wisdom. Speakers at Equip provide practical tips, share personal experiences, and help prepare women to apply their theological education to everyday ministry" ("Equip: Practical Training for Women in Ministry"). These three events are quite similar in their approach to women fellowship; they are all short, host primarily female speakers, and try to encourage women in their ministry efforts and in their everyday lives. In other words, like-minded women have a short opportunity to physically leave their homes, meet each other, and discuss the problems they share. As a result, these conferences are wonderful opportunities for women in the short term to grow in their faith and spend time with other women who wish to do the same.

Within the Southern Baptist culture and even Baptist culture generally, these events are seen as positive opportunities for women to grow as Christians and develop relationships with other women; however, like Thesmophoria, these conferences are a unique opportunity within the religion to do so since the culture is extremely patriarchal otherwise and limits what women can do. From my own experience of growing up in Baptist and Southern Baptist churches, I can safely say that the Southern Baptist denomination has a reputation (that it probably deserves) for being sexist because of its emphasis on men as the

spiritual leaders in a nation, in churches, and in homes, potentially to the exclusion of women from all positions of power or influence. The denomination tends to approach the Bible without considering how a verse can reflect the time and society it was written in and still demonstrate an important principle underneath those historical influences. As a result, some verses about gender roles in the Bible have been, in my opinion, interpreted in undesirable ways which affect how Southern Baptist people talk about the Bible and apply it to their lives. As one women's study scholar explains, this approach truly took form as the denomination fought against the liberal and specifically feminist society that was forming in the mid-twentieth century. She continues to say that that "as the struggle progressed, women themselves broke into factions" and "formed their own disparate groups and organizations around competing concepts of womanhood" (Flowers 8). Thus, this issue of what it means to be a woman and to be a Christian woman is ongoing and formed around a protest against feminism and a more liberal society. Consequently, any opportunities for women within this denomination all stem from a patriarchal urge to define a woman's position below a man's and to contain her to certain spaces where her actions do not threaten the man's position or power.

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and these events. Communications scholar Brian Kaylor examined articles concerning women from August of 2004 to January of 2005 from *The Baptist Faith and Message*, an official magazine published by the Southern Baptist Convention (a body which discusses and suggests official doctrine). He notes that the articles refer to women in three ways as the "submissive wife,

fulfilled mother, and secondary Christian" (Kaylor 338). In his text, he then analyzes each role and its implications in the faith. To quote Kaylor's elegant phrasing, these articles imply that "women are supposed to be wives in order to find completion in their lives, and that they must submit to their

husbands' decisions and authority"; that "women not only should be mothers, but should want to be because that is the only way they will be fulfilled in life and it is the best way to serve God"; and that women in ministry are best suited to working with children or in traditionally feminine roles of librarianship, cooking, and singing (Kaylor 342). Despite all of these restrictions, women are still supposedly equal to men under God's eyes and can work in the church as long as they are under the supervision of the presumably male pastor (Cook 190).

Here lies the source of tension and limitations for Southern Baptist women within their faith. Their role in their faith is supposed to be active, but they act only in ways that prioritize their children and husbands. Of course, because having a husband and children is so often tied to the Christian woman's identity, having a

family is seen as necessary to be whole, with few exceptions. However, marriage itself comes with the patriarchal rules of obeying a husband and managing a godly household under his authority. Thus, a woman's place is not on her own in her church and in her society, but under her husband and under her pastor in these places. Of course, this role is reminiscent of the Athenian citizen's wife, a woman in a supporting role for greater good of the society. In both cases, women are supposed to trust the guidance of their husband and other leaders and quietly manage the responsibilities given to them. Even though the denomination tries to honor women in the roles it gives them, it did give them roles that limit the way they can think and act in their homes and in their churches, both places where they should be able to think and act freely.

Because of these restrictions, conferences are exceptionally free spaces in the same ways that Thesmophoria was. For a short period of time, it is acceptable—even commendable—for a Southern Baptist woman to leave her home without her husband and attend an event that her pastor is not leading himself. Moreover, other women in the denomination will be meeting for the sole purpose of trying to improve themselves as Christians in the uniquely feminine roles of wife and mother. The ability to discuss these identities with like-minded people in similar positions is rare outside female-centric spaces like these conferences. For example, the conferences' descriptions that specifically mention households and sexuality imply that these events are supposed to give women a chance to talk about their identities as women without the presence of their husbands. Thus, focusing on these background ideas in a female space leads to women helping each other define their place in their society and learning

how to work well within it. Even though these conferences are not as ritualized as Thesmophoria was, they share the same goal of allowing women to explore their faith and female identities together and without the interjections of their husbands. Overall, these conferences are surprisingly female-centric in spaces and times of male domination.

However, because these women are like-minded and because the topics of these conferences reinforce their preexisting beliefs, these events will likely never transform those beliefs into something more empowering. Like Thesmophoria, these events are problematic because of the limitations the denomination applies to them. Since Southern Baptist women do not often have the opportunity to speak freely within their churches, they will likely try to resolve the problems they face within the framework of their faith instead of reexamining what they were taught about their faith. The fact that a woman can go out of town to attend a conference means that she can share her problems openly and without fear of judgment from those she sees each week since, like all large gatherings of people, Southern Baptist congregations tend to have a few gossips within the crowd. But, because of the limited time frame, it is easier and faster for women to resolve those problems through the faith that they already know instead of genuinely discussing what they were taught in light of what the Bible actually says and implies. While the conferences can help women think about their individual problems, they do not help women consider the gender roles that may contribute to those problems since they are designed to reinforce those roles and the beliefs behind them.

If conferences were as transformative as I wish Thesmophoria had been, Christian women might instead reexamine

what they were taught and what they heard about marriage, gender, sexuality, or womanhood in the Bible while they were apart from the men who benefit from women's indoctrinated submission. If this were the case, women would have the opportunity to reinterpret the Bible's doctrine and, in that reinterpretation, consider whether the patriarchal men and women who taught them added and enforced incorrect doctrine. This new set of eyes could lead to a change in how the doctrine is taught or in how people apply it to their lives. However, like Thesmophoria, transformation does not seem to occur because the events just reinforce the system that made them necessary in the first place.

Even though both Thesmophoria and the Southern Baptist women's conferences seem empowering, they cannot truly change women's lives in the long-term because they exist within a patriarchy and with its permission. As a result, both Thesmophoria and Southern Baptist women's conferences are short-term tools to relieve the oppression women experience due to their patriarchal surroundings. This alternation of relief and pressure creates a self-perpetuating cycle that is unlikely to stop without a major change. While it is unclear how Greek women could have changed their society, there does seem to be a slight movement among Southern Baptist women and girls to leave the denomination or to stop following its particularly limiting rules. For example, as the girls who are raised in the denomination grow up, I notice that they often stray away from the rules and roles that their Southern Baptist families previously enforced. However, this change is not due to the conferences which only reinforce those old beliefs; instead, if this gradual shift continues, it will likely be because young women view those beliefs as unnecessary and

limiting in a modern world.

Neither Thesmophoria nor the conferences are a black-and-white situation where men are nefarious overlords and women are cowering victims. Some Southern Baptist women, and Athenian women in their time, sincerely believe that their way of life is good and have wonderful relationships with their patriarchal husbands. Perhaps such women do have real agency in this cycle if they are indeed choosing to participate and understand what they lose and gain from that way of life. However, the real-world concern that comes from this topic is that some women may continue to fulfill roles and follow rules that harm them, only because they do not know that they can reexamine the principles that supposedly justify those things. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that women who believe in such a lifestyle may pressure other women to do the same and ostracize them if they do not. Events like Thesmophoria and the Southern Baptist conferences could help women by giving them an opportunity for that reexamination without the risk of ostracization, but these gatherings only vent pressure and help that patriarchy to remain in place. If these events were not patriarchal, women could transform the oppressive way they were taught to think about religion into something liberating.

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