

Gender and Sexuality in the Liberation of Thebes

In the winter of 379/8 BCE, a group of Theban men disguised as women entered a banquet for Theban officials and assassinated them. The officials had been ruling the city as tyrants backed by a Spartan garrison. One member of the liberation group, working on the inside as secretary to the pro-Spartan officials, had promised the officials that the most beautiful married women in Thebes would attend the banquet (Xen. *Hell.* 5.4.4, cf. 5.4.5; Plut. *Pel.* 9.2, 10.2; *Mor.* 596f). When the disguised liberators entered the banquet hall, they were greeted with shouts and applause as if they were to be the entertainment for the night (Plut. *Pel.* 11.3). But the liberators soon threw off their disguises and set to work cutting down the tyrannical officials. The liberators then went to the house of the man who had originally brought Spartan forces into Thebes. They found the man relaxing after dinner with his wife, who was weaving; and after a bitter struggle, they dispatched him and terrified his wife into utter silence (Xen. *Hell.* 5.4.7). These actions initiated a political revolution in Thebes, spurring the entire population to come together and drive out the Spartan garrison from the Theban acropolis. Once this was accomplished the Thebans established a democracy and within a decade the city became the most powerful state in Greece.

This paper focuses on how gender and sexuality played central roles in the liberation of Thebes. By disguising as women, the liberators relied on traditional stereotypes of women as passive sexual objects to catch the tyrannical officials off guard. The liberators had put women's clothes on over their body armor and covered their faces with thick garlands to complete the subterfuge (Plut. *Pel.* 11.1-2; *Mor.* 596d). The pro-Spartan officials' excessive sexual desire for married women was one of the key components to the success of the entire plot. Although the liberators did not include women in the assassination plot, a brief review of several other

political revolutions in the ancient world will demonstrate the significant role women did play in other political upheavals (e.g., Hdt. 1.60-61, 1.107-108, 3.68-69; Thuc. 6.56, 6.59; Livy 1.57-59). It is especially important to emphasize the agency of women when attention turns to gender and sexuality. By placing the liberation of Thebes in its broader historical and social context, we gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of women, gender, and sexuality in antiquity and beyond.