

"Poor Little Rich Girl":
The Plight of the Athenian Heiress

by S.L. Ager

The term "heiress" in the context of ancient Athens is really quite misleading. For us, it may conjure up images of Gloria Vanderbilt or Barbara Hutton, "poor little rich girls" whose lives seem to have been blighted by their fortunes. In spite of the undeniable truth that money can create more misery than it cures, it's probably still difficult for most of us to feel great sympathy for those who inherit wealth. But an ancient Athenian "heiress" did not really "inherit" wealth (by our standards); and she surely does deserve our sympathy.

An Athenian "heiress" (or, to use the Greek term, an *epikleros*) was, by definition, a woman or girl (perhaps even an infant) whose father died without leaving her any brothers. In the normal course of events, a man's sons inherited all his estate; the only thing a daughter could expect from her father's property was the dowry which would be handed over to her husband on marriage. But if a man died without leaving any sons, then his estate had to go to his daughter (or daughters), and she would then become an *epikleros*. The term is usually translated as "heiress", but in fact it means "she who goes with the estate". It's a very significant word, because it underlines the peculiarity of the position of Greek heiresses. The estate was not inherited *by* her; rather, she herself, along with the estate, was "inherited" by her father's male next-of-kin.

What does this mean in practical terms? Not that she was enslaved, although with respect to her freedom of action, she might as well have been. It means that her father's male next-of-kin had the right--and the duty--to claim her in marriage, and take the estate along with her. He did not have an absolute right to the property, although he would certainly benefit from the use of it; his primary obligation was to impregnate his heiress-bride, and produce a son who would then be the true heir of the *epikleros*'s father's estate and name. The greatest necessity was imposed on an *epikleros* to have children; otherwise, her father's household, his *oikos*, would become destitute and his line would come to an end. She herself was not a sufficient scion of her father's line. She had to produce a son, who would inherit the estate

which she herself had never truly inherited. The property merely passed through her, as did the biological identity of her father, transmitted on to her son. And in the interest of this prime concern of producing a son, an injunction was laid on the man who married her: by *law*, he had to have sex with her at least three times a month.

Who is this "next-of-kin" who has the right to marry her? Not a brother, of course, though not perhaps for reasons you might think. The Athenians were not troubled by marriages between half-sister and half-brother, provided they were children of the same father, not the same mother. The real reason, of course, is that if her father had had a son (and she a brother), then *he* would have been the natural heir to their father's estate, and she would never have become an *epikleros*. So, in the absence of a son, a man's next closest male relative (in Athenian law) was his brother. This means that an *epikleros*'s paternal uncle, her father's brother, was the man with the primary right to claim her in marriage. Many an *epikleros* must have faced the fate of marrying her own uncle, who could even divorce his own wife to do it if the *epikleros* and "her" money were particularly tempting. If he chose not to marry her for some reason, then his own son had the next claim on her. There was a descending scale of priority of claim among the male relatives of her father, and Athenian society expected and well-nigh demanded that she be married by one of them.

It was a most shocking lapse of behaviour, perhaps even criminal, to leave an *epikleros* unclaimed. Her most important duty to society was to produce an heir for her father's *oikos*, and so she had to be placed in a position where she could reasonably be expected to make babies. Immense social and legal pressures were exerted in order to ensure the marriage of an *epikleros*. But what if she were already married when her sonless father died and left her an *epikleros*? Well, with a little forethought, there might be a minimum of disruption caused by the inheritance; if her father had adopted his son-in-law (her husband) as his son before dying, then the estate would naturally pass to the married couple and then on to their children. But plans like this (which were often pursued as a solution) might hit any number of snags, such as (for example) the refusal of the son-in-law to go along with the idea (in being adopted by his father-in-law, he would have to renounce all natural inheritance claims on his own father's estate). Then serious disruption to the *epikleros*'s life might indeed

occur--because her uncle still had the first right to claim her. That she was already married, and might even have produced children, was not enough--unless her husband was formally adopted as her father's son, her uncle had the right to dissolve her marriage and insist on marrying her himself. According to the fourth century orator Isaios, this heartless practice was common enough that "many men" lost their wives in this manner.

So the Athenian heiress was not someone to envy. The insistence on her biological identity as a mere link between her father and her son, the regulations hemming in her marital possibilities, the potential destruction of her pre-existing marriage, the fact that the estate which defined her as an "heiress" was never in any real sense *hers*--all this perhaps gives, for once, real poignancy to the phrase "poor little rich girl".