

Find a piece of evidence from Ancient Sources and discuss

I have to show is that Eratosthenes had an intrigue with my wife,
and not only corrupted her but inflicted disgrace upon my children
and an outrage on myself by entering my house; that this was the
one and only enmity between him and me¹

In Lysias 1, entitled “On the Murder of Eratosthenes” the above four lines appear². Within the work Lysias covers an adultery case in which a man is pleading his case following his murder of the perpetrator³. Lysias was a speech writer who worked as such in a professional capacity for the courts⁴. Due to this, Lysias is a very good contemporary source (having died around 380 BCE)⁵ to understand specific social issues of the time. This is because his source material would come from the people themselves and include their everyday issues. It is a good indication of how people of the time actually lived and thought. Lysias himself was a loyal supporter of democracy, and as such politics also play a role in his oratory works⁶.

The text itself does lend itself to the time period in question quite aptly. This is because adultery in ancient Athens was always seen to come hand-in-hand with a sense of “corruption”⁷, it came with the idea that if women were to remain virtuous, they had to be loyal to their husbands⁸. Adultery was seen as a major crime, demonstrated in not only the hefty punishments towards the perpetrators, but also shown in the many mythological wars with such a crime being the catalyst⁹. Thereby showing that for the ancient Athenians at least, the actions taken and the feelings described in the text by Lysias were not uncommon and thusly not an overreaction. In fact, due to being seen, even at the time, as a spokesperson for everyday life, his works often covered such common cases and demonstrated how people lived within the laws of the time¹⁰.

However, it should also not be seen or taken to be the only way in which cases of adultery were dealt with. This is because although the laws did justify killing in such cases of infidelity¹¹, it should also be said that public honour meant a lot during the time of ancient Athens and some husbands would resultantly prefer to hush everything up in hopes to avoid the scandal such a “disgrace” would herald¹². And even if they didn’t, most still went to financial compensation before the killing of the man in question¹³.

But, despite this, the text is still very significant because the feelings stayed the same, and as such Lysias’ defence would remain. The sense of shame on the family in question did not go away, no matter how it was dealt with in each particular oikos¹⁴.

¹ Lys. 1,4

² Lys. 1,4

³ Lys. 1,4

⁴ Todd, 2012

⁵ Todd, 2012

⁶ Todd, 2012

⁷ Lys. 1,4; Berger and Nicholas and Treggiari, 2012

⁸ Richlin, 2012

⁹ Hom. Il. 3,50-57; Aristot. Pol. 5,4,1303b 20-33; Pomeroy, 1995, p.97

¹⁰ Todd, 2012

¹¹ Xen, Hier. 3,3; Pomeroy, 1995, p.97

¹² Roy, 1997, p.14

¹³ Roy, 1997, p.13; Berger and Nicholas and Treggiari, 2012

¹⁴ Jameson, 2012

In conclusion, Lysias 1 and the text above showcase the feelings of a man scorned due to adultery, and the feelings demonstrated within the text are a good indication of how adultery was seen on a social level¹⁵. Something which demonstrates fully the ideas that such a crime affected how the entire family was seen socially, not just the ones involved. It was a speech which Lysias effectively portrayed in the favour of the commonly held opinion on adultery at the time.

¹⁵ Lys. 1,4

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