



Greek and Roman sexualities

Everyday Life in Athens and Rome
(HPHP4020)



Sexual concepts and terminology

- No easy correlation between our term sexuality and Greek or Latin (though lots of words for sexual acts and desires):
 - Cf. the nearest parallel in Greek to the term sexuality is *ta aphrodisia* “the matters of Aphrodite”.
- Are Graeco-Roman sexual norms distinctive from those developed in post-classical Western culture?
- Essentialism vs. Constructionism (not to be conflated with nature vs. nature debate or determinism vs. voluntarism).

Interpreting the evidence

- **Literary evidence:**
 - Representation of ideals, or extremes (unacceptable)?
 - Satire and invective (social ills); love poetry (idealised)?
- **Iconographic evidence:**
 - Changes on pottery representing changes in sexual attitudes or preferences? – influence of techniques? – function of vessels.
 - Frescos and mosaics – symbolism or realism?
 - Art is not necessarily an accurate representation of life or a “photographic” snapshot – missionary position?



“Modern” conservatism

- Erotic statues and paintings often shipped to museums in 18th and 19th century without proper record of provenance.
 - Deliberate destruction of some of this ancient material.
- First *secretum* (“secret museum”) in the Herculaneum Museum recorded in 1795 – required special permit to see “obscene” objects.
- “Lewd” material in Classical texts either omitted or kept in original Greek or Latin (sometimes translated into Italian).
- Study of sexuality in Classics picked up in the 1970s.





Sarcophagus lid – Etruscan, third century BC.

Marriage

- Merely a transactional arraignment?
- Genuine affection difficult to pick out due to conventions?
 - e.g., funerary epitaphs, social discourse about ideal wife, etc.
- Xenophon *Oec.* – union of wife and husband; *contra* Aristotle *Pol.* – male supremacy.

Adultery and Debauchery



- Habitual adulterers can often be thought of as effeminate - surrendering oneself to desire.
 - “That he was given to adultery not even his friends deny... [this was excused as for] policy, the more readily to get track of his adversaries' designs through the women of their households.” – **Suetonius *Divus Augustus* 69.**
- Romans saw debauchery as a foreign import (**Sallust. *Cat.* 10-13**).
- Killing adulterers.
 - Notionally possible to kill male committing adultery with one's wife in Athens.
 - Adultery made a public crime by Augustus in 18 BC – *Lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis* (restricting power to kill offenders in the act).

Alas, a youth has too much confidence in his own
looks

If he waits until she asks him first.

Let the man approach first, let the man speak
imploring words:

She will receive flattering entreaties courteously...

But if you sense that the request is arousing smug
conceit,

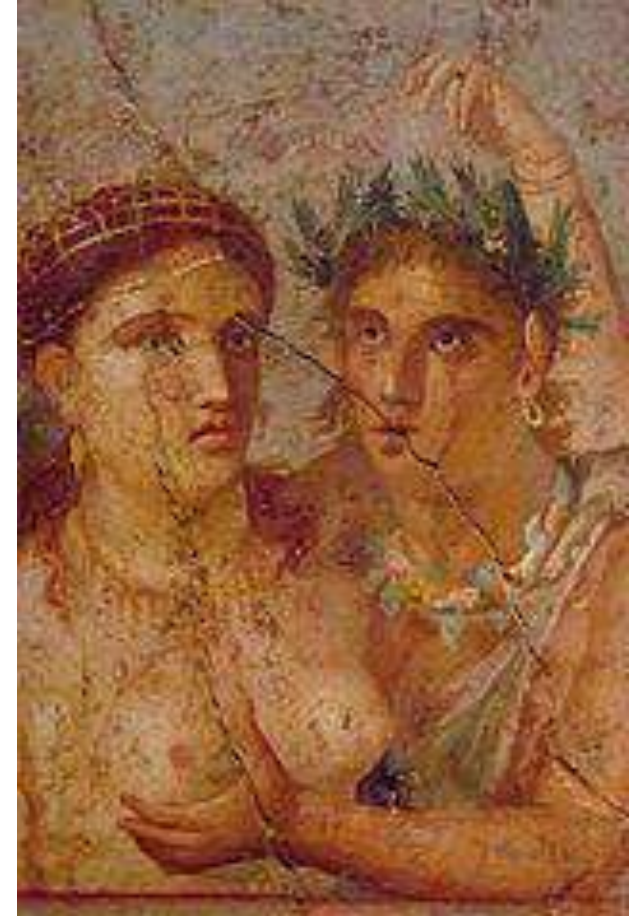
cease your efforts and step back.

What flees, many women desire: they despise what
is in front of them;

By coming on more gently, you stop them becoming
bored with you.

- **Ovid *The Art of Love* 1.707-18.**

The Art of Seduction



Pompeii - House of
Caecilius Iucundus

Elite Anxieties about Sex

- Foucault *The Care of the Self* (emphasis on Roman stoicism) – shift away from marriage as political tool.
- Medical treatises about the potential pitfalls of excessive sex – Galen and the balance of bodily humours.
 - “If the loins of a woman are smeared with the blood of a tick from a wild black bull, she is made to find sex repulsive, as Osthaneas says, and love too, if she drinks the urine of a billy-goat, with nard mixed in to disguise the disgusting taste.” – **Pliny *HN* 28.256.**
- Faustina (wife of Marcus Aurelius) and her passion for a gladiator (**SHA *Marcus Aurelius* 19**).



Sexuality, Status and Symbolism

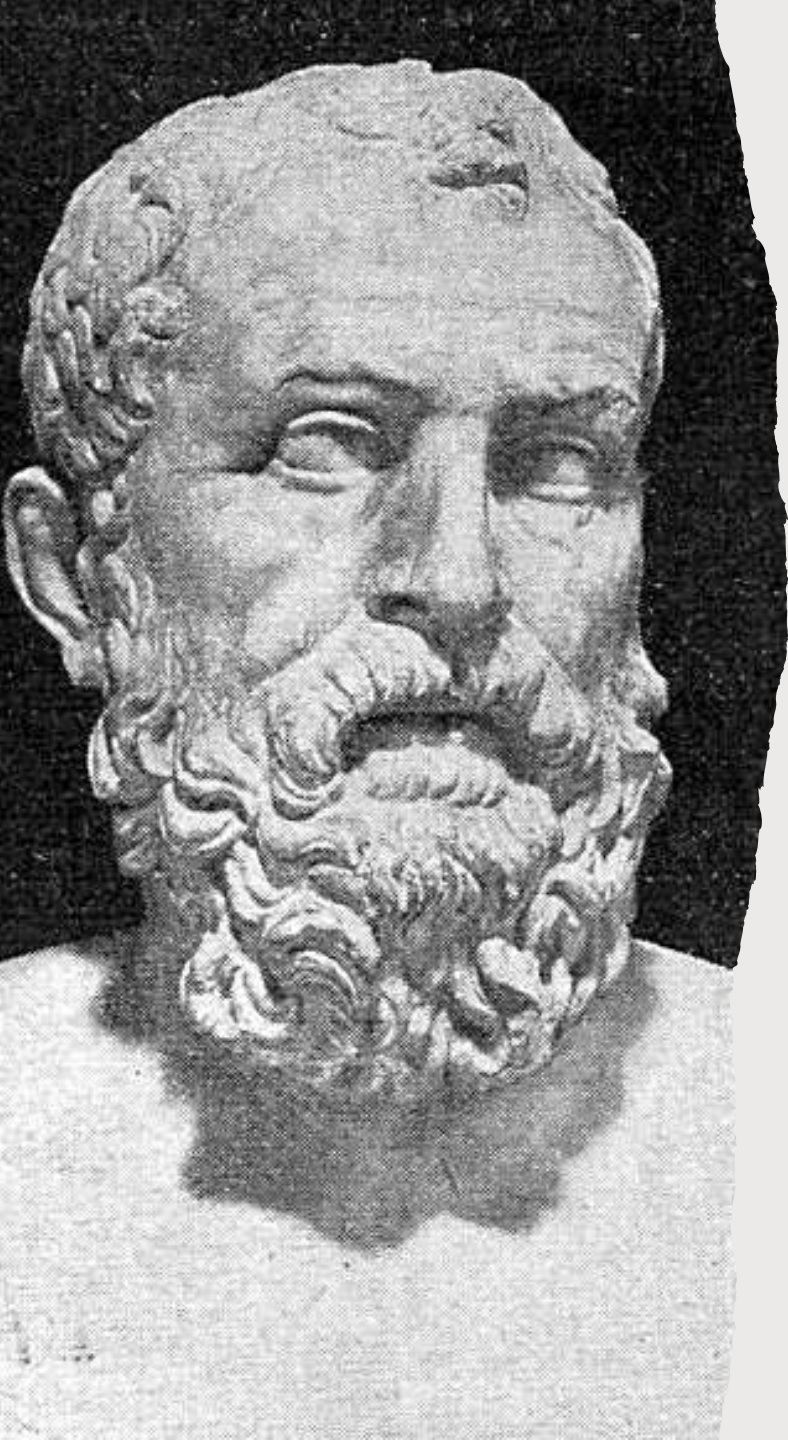
- Erotic” paintings a high art – pretensions to status?
 - Young people enjoying the blessing of Venus.
- Paintings meant to be seen by a wider audience (“cook’s bedroom”, House of the Vettii).
- Scenes of sexuality also found in public spaces.



Changing room of the Suburban Baths, Pompeii

Prostitution





Prostitution in Athens

- *Pornē* “whores” – *hetairai* “companions”; gradations of free (metic), slaves – age, appearance, talent, education, personal charisma.
 - “We keep companions [hetairas] to give us pleasure, concubines [pallakai] to tend to our person on a daily basis, and wives [gynaikai] to produce legitimate children for us and be trustworthy guardians of our possessions.” – Demosthenes 59.122.
- Athenian citizen who prostituted themselves politically and religiously disbarred (Dem. 22.21-31, 73).
- Solon setting up cheap brothels – Athenaeus 13.569d.



Shuvalov Painter, Berlin – c. 5 century BC

- Bell krater (mixing bowl).
- Two young men about to have sex while a man and a woman look on (right).
- Brothel scene?
- *Anthesteria* – a festival associated with wine, youth and breaking taboos.
- Spoof of tender sentiment.



Red figure Krater – Dinos Painter, c. 5th century BC – British Museum.

Sex trade in the Roman world

- *Meretrix* (Latin, lit. 'a woman who earns').
 - Deemed *infamis*.
 - Vistilia and the aediles' list (Tacitus *Annals* 2.85).
- Prostitutes through enslavement or economic necessity.
- Red light districts?
 - Evidence from Pompeii – at least 35 brothels dispersed around the town – near gates, domus, baths, inns, snack-bars – lack of zoning (no apparent moral zoning).

“If a woman has Venus in her house, she will be full of vile lust, accessible for the pleasure of all, and always in thrall to the impulses of a meretrix; on account of the necessity of this life she will set up in the business herself, or contract to a leno.” – **Firmicus *Eight Books on Astrology* 3.6.22.**



“There’s no happy medium. Some will only touch
women

Whose ankles are hidden beneath a wife’s flounces:
Another only those who frequent stinking brothels.

Seeing someone he knew exit from one, Cato’s
Noble words were: ‘A blessing on all your doings, since
It’s fine when shameful lust swells youngsters’ veins
For them to wander down here, and not mess around
With other men’s wives.’

-Horace *Satires* 1.2.28-35.