

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 5 – Women in Classical Athens

CLCS4007

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Interpreting the Sources (1)

- ❑ Can we always take what are sources tell us or show us at face value, especially where it concerns gender?
- ❑ Our literary sources are written predominately by men and would have been listened to or read mainly by men.
- ❑ Issues of social status and wealth – most of the population had to work by necessity.
- ❑ These authors are predominately wealthy members of the elite – ideal Vs reality.

Interpreting the Sources (2)

- ❑ Few literary works written by women (notable exception includes the poetry of Sappho).
- ❑ When “female” issues or opinions are stated these are either composed by or at least filtered by male authors.
- ❑ Male fears – adultery, illegitimate children, overbearing women.

Women in Philosophical Dialogues

- ▣ Views of the ideal woman.
- ▣ Alternate or idealised societies – cf. Plato's *Republic*.

“Then the women guardians must strip, since they clothe themselves in virtue instead of robes, and they must take common part in war and the rest of the city's guarding, and must not do other things.”
– **Plato *Republic* 456b.**

Socrates wife Xanthippe

“As Socrates looked on he remarked: “This girl's feat, gentlemen, is only one of many proofs that woman's nature is really not a whit inferior to man's, except in its lack of judgment and physical strength. So if any one of you has a wife, let him confidently set about teaching her whatever he would like to have her know.”

If that is your view, Socrates,” asked Antisthenes, “how does it come that you don't practise what you preach by yourself educating Xanthippe, but live with a wife who is the hardest to get along with of all the women there are--yes, or all that ever were, I suspect, or ever will be?”

“Because,” he replied, “I observe that men who wish to become expert horsemen do not get the most docile horses but rather those that are high-mettled, believing that if they can manage this kind, they will easily handle any other. My course is similar. Mankind at large is what I wish to deal and associate with; and so I have got her, well assured that if I can endure her, I shall have no difficulty in my relations with all the rest of human kind.”

These words, in the judgment of the guests, did not go wide of the mark.” – **Xenophon *Symposium* 2.9-10.**

Women in Tragedy

- ▣ Many plays set in a mythic past.
- ▣ Many plays not set in Athens.
- ▣ Women frequently portrayed in a prominent role:
 - noble women – Antigone, Andromache
 - dangerous women – Medea, Clytemnestra

“You abomination, you vilest, most hateful woman, to the gods and to me and to the whole human race. You had the heart to take the sword to your own children to whom you gave birth, and you have left me childless and devastated” – Euripides *Medea* 1323-25.

Women in Comedy

- ▣ Often set in a contemporary context.
- ▣ Parodies or exaggerations for comic effect.
- ▣ Value of incidental comments?

“Not long ago, our young girls could marry older men. Now, thanks to Euripides’ bullshit, that can’t happen either! All the old men listened to that line of his... the one that says, “The old man who marries a young woman marries a tyrant!” - Outrageous!

“And what do your houses look like these days, thanks to this Euripides? I’ll tell what they look like: They look like and feel like prisons! Locks and bolts everywhere, “special” women’s quarters, and mountainous bloody dogs at the front gate to keep our lovers away! Fine! We’ll overlook all that but then, once upon a time, we used to have some responsibilities in the running of our households. Not any more!” - **Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazousai* 410-20.**

Legal Speeches – Polemical Attacks

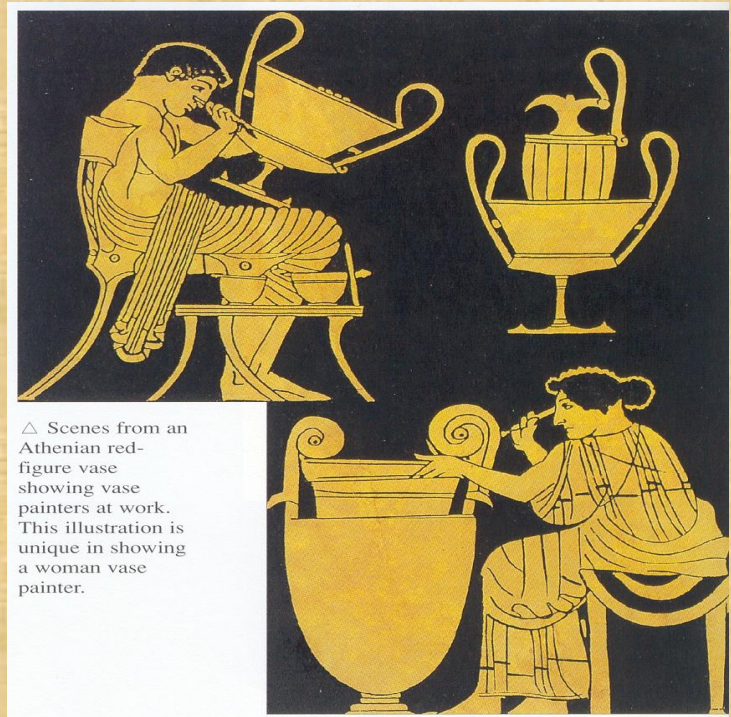
- Discuss actual events – although these are often presented in a manner best designed to help themselves and harm their opponents.
- Often only one litigant's speech is preserved.

“...he came there at night in a drunken state, broke down the doors, and entered the women's rooms: within were my **sister and my nieces**, whose lives have been so well-ordered that they are ashamed to be seen even by their kinsmen” – **Lysias**
Against Simon 3.6.

“And when each one of you goes home, what will he find to say to his own wife or his daughter or his mother, if he has acquitted this woman?--when the question is asked you, “Where were you?” and you answer, “We sat as jury.” “Trying whom?” it will at once be asked, “Neaera,” you will say, of course, will you not? “because she, an alien woman, is living as wife with an Athenian contrary to law, and because she gave her daughter, who had lived as a harlot, in marriage to Theogenes, the king, and this daughter performed on the city's behalf the rites that none may name, and was given as wife to Dionysus.” And you will narrate all the other details of the charge, showing how well and accurately and in a manner not easily forgotten the accusation covered each point. And the women, when they have heard, will say, “Well, what did you do?” And you will say, “We acquitted her.” At this point the most virtuous of the women will be angry at you for having deemed it right that this woman should share in like manner with themselves in the public ceremonies and religious rites; and to those who are not women of discretion you point out clearly that they may do as they please, for they have nothing to fear from you or the laws. For if you treat the matter with indifference or toleration, you will yourselves seem to approve of this woman's conduct. “ - **Demosthenes *Against Neaera* 59.110-1.**

Women on Vases

- ❑ Idealism, reality or both?
- ❑ Pieces of art or utilitarian objects, e.g. transport vessels, utensils, ceremonial vessels?



- ▣ Most Attic vases not found in Athens.
- ▣ Large numbers found in Etruria.



Women in Athens

- ❑ No right to actively participate in politics.
- ❑ No right to represent themselves in court, required a legal guardian (*kyrios*).
- ❑ A woman would have a guardian throughout her life.
- ❑ Do not inherit property but are given a bridal dowry.
- ❑ Girls, at least among elite, often married off at 14-16 years of age – husbands late twenties if not older.
- ❑ Men often in twenties when they marry – usually have social circle of friends outside the household.

Women in Athenian Society – Looking After the *Oikos*

“The god designated that the woman should guard what is brought into the household, because he knew that a fearful soul is better at guarding. He also gave a greater share of fearfulness to the woman than to the man. Because he knew that it would be necessary for the one who did the outdoor work to defend the household, if someone tried to hurt it, he allotted to him a greater share of courage.” –
Xenophon *Oeconomicus* 7.25.

Bearing and Rearing Children

- ▣ Giving birth potentially hazardous – loss of blood, diseases and hygiene, complications.
- ▣ High birth-rate, high infant mortality-rate.

“They say that we live a life free of danger at home while they face battle with the spear. How wrong they are. I would rather stand three times in the line of battle than once bear a child.” – **Euripides *Medea* 248-51.**



- ▣ ὕστέρα – *hystera* – hysteria = disturbance of the uterus.

“As for what are called women's diseases: the womb is responsible for all such diseases. For the womb, when it is displaced from its natural position, whether forward or back, causes diseases.” – Hippocrates *Places in Human Anatomy* 47.

“Indistinct breathing in consumptives, and also in those who have not borne children, is bad. – Hippocrates *Epidemics* 6.7.8.

Women and Work

- ▣ Poorer families may rely on wives to help.

The rest of the Greeks expect their girls to imitate the sedentary life that is typical of handicraftsmen -
- to keep quiet and do wool-work. - **Xenophon**
Constitution of the Lakedaimonians 1.3



Hydria – vessels for carrying water –
image of women collecting water.

“[Garland Seller] ... I am a single mother. A widow. My husband died in Cyprus, leaving me with five kids which I had to bring up on my own, with great difficulty and sacrifice. I’m doing it by weaving garlands and selling them in the myrtle market.

[Raises her basket of garlands for all to see].

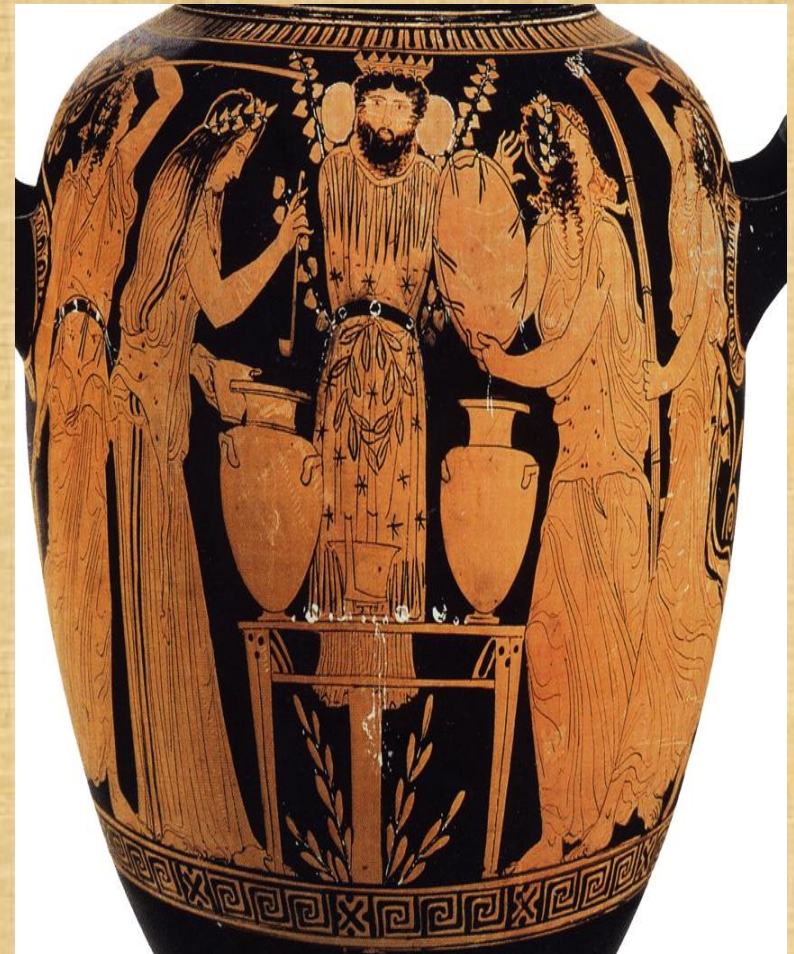
Until now I wasn’t doing too bad a job of feeding my kids –it was hard but I managed, but now, now this... this tragedy writer [Euripides], is going around everywhere, telling all the men that there are no gods! He’s gone and convinced them all that there are no gods, for gods’ sake and so what happens? My income is now half it ever was!” – **Aristophanes**

Thesmophoriazousai 446-454.

“He has said this too about my mother, that she served as a nurse. We, on our part, do not deny that this was the case in the time of the city's misfortune, when all people were badly off; but in what manner and for what reasons she became a nurse I will tell you plainly. And let no one of you, men of Athens, be prejudiced against us because of this; for you will find today many Athenian women who are serving as nurses; I will mention them by name, if you wish. If we were rich we should not be selling ribbons nor be in want in any way. But what has this to do with our descent? Nothing whatever, in my opinion.” - **Demosthenes 57.35**

Women, Religion and Ritual

- Major cults with important priestesses
 - priesthood of Athena Polias.
- Women and men participating in religious processions - Panathenia
- Female only festivals
 - Thesmophoria, festival of *Arkteia* (*arktoi* – she-bears).





Lekythoi – urn for storing oil, often associated with funerary context

Influential Women

- ▣ Aspasia of Miletus – mistress of Pericles.

“Aspasia... she managed as she pleased the foremost men of the state, and afforded the philosophers occasion to discuss her in exalted terms and at great length... the woman had the reputation of associating with many Athenians as a teacher of rhetoric... Twice a day, as they say, on going out and on coming in from the market-place, he [Pericles] would salute her with a loving kiss. - Plutarch *Life of Pericles* 24.

Prostitution

- ▣ Hetaerae = courtesans – ideally educated and witty companions.
- ▣ Prostitutes and flute girls.

“... The old man was a wild beast at the party.
Awful, simply awful! The worst piece of
drunken behaviour I’ve ever seen!...
[Philocleon has run off with the naked flute
girl] ... I’ll make you my number one mistress!
– **Aristophanes *Wasps*** [lines 1300-1350).

Obscurity and Praise

OBSCURITY

[purported speech of Pericles]

“On the other hand if I must say anything on the subject of female excellence to those of you who will now be in widowhood, it will be all comprised in this brief exhortation. Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad.” -

Thucydides 2.45.2.

PRAISE

“On noticing that his eldest son, Lamprocles, was out of humour with his mother, he [Socrates] said: “Tell me, my boy, do you know that some men are called ungrateful?...

“So this mother of yours is kindly disposed towards you; she nurses you devotedly in sickness and sees that you want for nothing; more than that, she prays the gods to bless you abundantly and pays vows on your behalf...- **Xenophon, Memorabilia 2.1, 10.**