

Cosmetics in classical Athens

Introduction

My character Markia has been offered the business opportunity to make a transaction with an Athenian citizen on selling him her cosmetics, I have chosen to make a one-time deal where I will sell off my entire stock of cosmetics to fund my character's decision to move to Macedonia with her new Oikos, her lover, as his concubine after her brother Talkon gave her away. From this essay I wish to understand the basics of cosmetics in the classical period in Athens and whether women wish to wear cosmetics or if it was a social standard that they were forced to uphold.

Content

In classical Athens, a fair complexion was often seen as the peak of female physical beauty because it hinted to the idea that the woman was wealthy, as a rich woman in classical Athens wouldn't have much need to leave her home.¹ So, in turn to achieve what Athenian women believe to be the ideal skin color they would whiten their skin by using white lead or as the author called it *psimuthion*,² which is extremely dangerous because if it is inhaled whilst it is another means to which Athenian women modified their appearance would be using alkanet root to redden their cheeks to give themselves a blush,³ which is similar to how in modern-day women also do the same but with makeup.

Whilst there are a lot of classical counterparts to modern makeup there are some cases where they the classical Greeks couldn't produce a version without it being extremely dangerous or it having not much of an effect, "Of an equivalent of the modern lipstick there is surprisingly little trace. The non-waterproof nature of ancient cosmetics may be the reason for this; but it is scarcely credible that the lips should have been the only part of the face to remain 'unadorned'."⁴ From this information I can make the inference that whilst lipstick or lip cosmetics might have been rare, there are cases that have shown that they did exist as the author later in the paragraph said that "We have also a Greek case on which is depicted a lady with a small brush in her hand, apparently painting her lips."⁵ The author in this quote cited a book by William Smith, called *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*.⁶ Returning to the topic of lipstick and of a piece that I quoted, I saw the author saying that cosmetics of the classical period was not waterproof which if exposed to water could have led the makeup to wash away which would have ruined the appearance of a women during that period and could have led to mockery of said appearance.

Although all the scholarships that I have read on the subject so far have suggested that mostly all women, the ones that could afford it, in the classical would have worn makeup or cosmetics, some scholarship have shown proof that this is not the case, "Xenophon read his wife a severe curtain-lecture on the subject, and she-dear, meek, long-suffering creature—promptly abandoned all thoughts of cosmetics, and sought a healthy complexion by the energetic performance of her household duties."⁷ From this text that the author of "My Lady's Toilet" quoted I can make the deduction that some men and women from the classical Greek period did not like the idea of

¹ GLAZEBROOK. "Cosmetics and Sôphrosunê: Ischomachos' Wife in Xenophon's Oikonomikos." . pp. 235–236

² GLAZEBROOK. "Cosmetics and Sôphrosunê: Ischomachos' Wife in Xenophon's Oikonomikos." . pp. 234

³ GLAZEBROOK. "Cosmetics and Sôphrosunê: Ischomachos' Wife in Xenophon's Oikonomikos." . pp. 235

⁴ Walton, F. T. "My Lady's Toilet." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 15, no. 44, 1946, pp. 72.

⁵ Walton, F. T. "My Lady's Toilet." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 15, no. 44, 1946, pp. 72.

⁶ Smith, W. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Library Collection - Classics).

⁷ Walton, F. T. "My Lady's Toilet." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 15, no. 44, 1946, pp. 72.

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cosmetics which could disguise the true appearance of a women, this is quite similar to a debate that is happening in modern day. Another deduction that I have made links up with a previous comment on the non-waterproof nature of cosmetics and may have been one of the reason why Xenophon did not wish for his wife to wear cosmetics because if it rained or if her face got wet then her makeup would have been ruin and Xenophon would not have wanted that shame to be put on his wife or the shame that it might reflect onto him

Conclusion

To conclude this essay, I believe that my character, Markia, and the decision that I have made for her is the correct one, as from what scholarship and ancient texts that I have read then the process of creating cosmetics is surprisingly simple and could be done in a pinch. Another conclusion that I wish to make would involve the question that I proposed myself at the beginning of the essay, that whether classical Athenian women wish to wear make or if it was a social standard that they had to uphold, and from the scholarships and ancient texts that I have read, I believe that the reason that classical Athenian women wore makeup was because of a social standard, the reason why I believe is would have to come from the quote on Xenophon's wife and how quickly she gave up her cosmetic enhanced appearance to go without.

Bibliography

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4,5,7 Walton, F. T. "My Lady's Toilet." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 15, no. 44, 1946, pp. 68–73. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/641994.

6, Smith, W. *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Library Collection - Classics).