

‘But in general, Solon’s laws concerning women seem very absurd. For instance, he permitted an adulterer caught in the act to be killed; but if a man committed rape upon a free woman, he was merely to be fined a hundred drachmas;’ (Plut. Sol. 23)

This essay looks at an extract from one of Plutarch’s 48 Lives¹. It considers the content and context of the text, both to the author, Plutarch, and the subject, Solon, in relation to perception of sexual crime.

Plutarch was born in Charonea in Boeotia during first century CE². Not much is known about his early life³. He travelled widely, studying under the Platonist Ammonius in Athens⁴, visiting Alexandria, ‘Rome at least twice, and travelled in Italy’⁵. His works can be divided into two sections: the *Moralia* and the *Parallel Lives*, as series of bibliographies⁶. Of the hundreds of works attributed to Plutarch by Lamprias⁷, Plutarch considered the *Parallel Lives* ‘as the major enterprise of his career’⁸.

The extract comes from the biography of Solon⁹. It is not contemporary as Solon lived in sixth century BCE; the exact dates are debated but Freeman posits he lived from 639 BCE to 559 BCE¹⁰. Solon was an Athenian citizen¹¹. He was appointed archon in 594 BCE¹² but little is known of his life before that, except that he travelled widely¹³. Plutarch describes the circumstances that led to Solon becoming archon¹⁴, his actions as archon¹⁵ and after leaving Athens¹⁶.

The extract describes some of the laws Solon put in place during his term as archon¹⁷. Plutarch compares the punishments set for adultery and rape¹⁸.

As Plutarch studied in Athens, he had access to Athenian texts and records in the libraries there¹⁹. Plutarch would have had access to sources no longer existing today, such as the remains of the axons used to record Solon’s laws²⁰. As well, history was a popular topic, something Plutarch noted himself, describing the ‘thousands’ who were ‘revising’ the ‘chronological canons’²¹. Overall, this would imply that Plutarch’s work, despite being nearly seven hundred years later, cites the laws concerning rape and adultery accurately.

The Julian laws forbade sex with virgins and outside of marriage, on punishment of death for the adulterer and banishment, divorce and fines for the woman²². In Athens, adulterers were punished more harshly as they were ‘worse than rapists’ because they called into question the parentage of children and made ‘wives to be more attached to them than to their husbands’²³. It can be inferred that Plutarch compared Solon’s laws with the ones he was familiar with and these differences led to him give the opinion that ‘Solon’s laws concerning women seem very absurd’²⁴.

In conclusion, the extract can be assumed to be accurate despite being a later source and Plutarch’s opinion can be explained by cultural differences.

¹ Russell 1973:18

² Russell 1973: 1-2

³ Russell 1973:3

⁴ Russell 1973:4

⁵ Russell 1973:7

⁶ Russell 1973:18

⁷ Russell 1973:18-19

⁸ Russell 1973:100

⁹ Plut. Sol. 23

¹⁰ Freeman 1976:153-4

¹¹ Freeman 1954:17

¹² Freeman 1954:19

¹³ Freeman 1954:17

¹⁴ Plut. Sol. 1-13

¹⁵ Plut. Sol. 14-25

¹⁶ Plut. Sol. 26-32

¹⁷ Plut. Sol. 23

¹⁸ Plut. Sol. 23

¹⁹ Russell 1973:4

²⁰ Plut. Sol. 26

²¹ Plu. Sol. 27

²² Shelton 1988:54-55

²³ Cohen 1991:107

²⁴ Plut. Sol. 23

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