

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 37

Prostitution and Sexuality in Greece and Rome

CLCS4007

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- ▣ The nearest parallel in Greek to the term sexuality is *ta aphrodisia* “the matters of Aphrodite”.
- ▣ Greco-Roman moral standards distinct from those developed in post-classical Western culture?
- ▣ Essentialism vs. Constructionism.
- ▣ Evidence:
 - Changes on pottery representing changes in sexual attitudes or preferences? – influence of techniques? – function of vessels.
 - Literary evidence – representations of ideals? – representations of extreme and unacceptable?

Marriage

- ▣ Girls often married in Classical Athens around or not long after the on-set of puberty to a husband often at least twice as old.
- ▣ Mutually satisfying marriages clearly existed but do not often make it into historical record – testimony of court speeches, and gravestones – sentiment (even if sincere) often conventionally worded.
- ▣ Xenophon *Oec.* – union of wife and husband; contra Aristotle *Pol.* – male supremacy.



Sarcophagus lid –
Etruscan, third century BC.

Adultery and Debauchery

- ▣ Habitual adulterers can often be thought of as effeminate - surrendering oneself to desire.
- ▣ Great public visibility of Roman women (advertise social status) – women's sexual behaviour sphere of unease for in Roman society.
- ▣ Erosion of morality leading to damaging of the state/community – **Sallust. *Cat.* 10-13** – Romans saw debauchery as a foreign import.

“That he was given to adultery not even his friends deny, although it is true that they excuse it as committed not from passion but from policy, the more readily to get track of his adversaries' designs through the women of their households.” – **Suetonius *Divus Augustus* 69.**

Roman Laws on Adultery

- ▣ Adultery made a public crime by Augustus in 18 BC – *Lex Iulia de Adulteriis Coercendis* - previously a family matter – fathers had power to kill offenders in the act, husbands did not have authority to kill the wife.

“He also enacted certain laws, and among them one of severity, which forbids a wife to leave her husband, but permits a husband to put away his wife for using poisons, for substituting children, and for adultery...” **Plutarch** *Romulus* 22.3.

“The stern pride of Gaius Sempronius Galus [Consul 166 BC] as a husband was equally harsh. He divorced his wife because he found that she had gone around public with her head unveiled... Publius Sempronius Sophus... humiliated his wife by divorcing her, though she had done nothing more than dare to go to the games without his knowledge.”
– **Valerius Maximus** 6.3.10,12.

The Art of Seduction

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, stop them becoming bored
with you.

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

Elite Anxiety about Sex

- ▣ Foucault *The Care of the Self* – emphasis on maintenance of body and soul, strong emphasis on moderation and abstinence (emphasis on Roman stoicism) – shift away from marriage as political tool.
- ▣ Medical treatises about the potential pitfalls of excessive sex – Galen warns the patient to be aware of the balance of the bodies humours before the expulsion of moisture.
- ▣ Common *topoi*? – distinction between periods?

Resisting Desires

“They say that Faustina, the daughter of Antoninus Pius and wife of Marcus Aurelius, was once fired with the love of a gladiator... she suffered from a protracted sickness over this and eventually confessed to her husband. Marcus referred this matter to the Chaldaeans. Their counsel was that the gladiator should be killed and that Faustina should bathe herself in his blood, then sleep with her husband in this condition.” – **SHA *Marcus Aurelius* 19.**

“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 *NH* 28.256.**

Prostitution

Prostitution in Athens

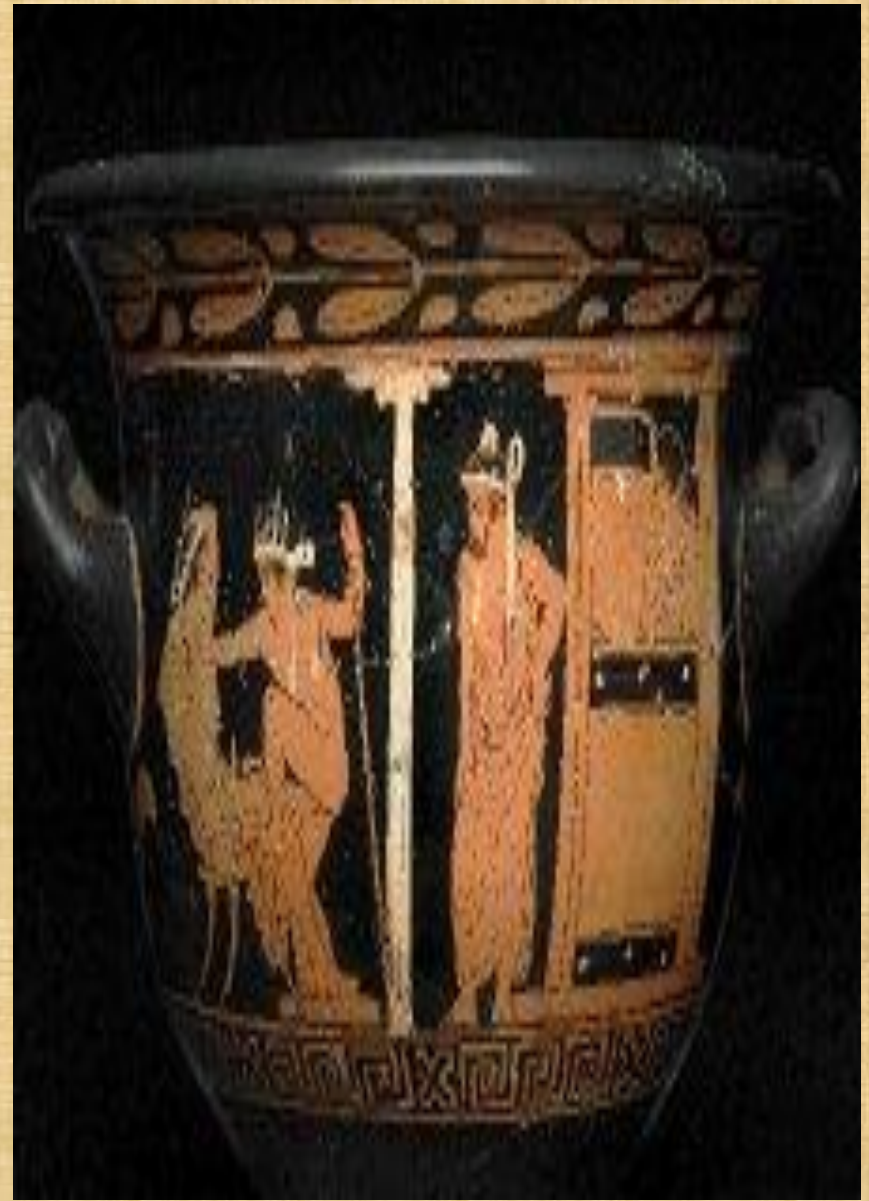
“We keep companions [*hetairas*] to give us pleasure, concubines [*pallakai*] to tend to our person on a daily basis, and wives [*gynaikai*] to produce legitimate children for us and be trustworthy guardians of our possessions.” – **Demosthenes 59.122.**

- ❑ *Pornē* “whores” – *hetairas* “companions”; gradations of free (metic), slaves – age, appearance, talent, education, personal charisma.
- ❑ Athenian citizen who prostituted themselves was barred from addressing the assembly, holding office and entering a temple – **Dem. 22.21-31, 73.**

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



Shuvalov Painter, Berlin – c. 5 century BC.



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

The Sex Trade – Rome

- ▣ *Meretrix* (Latin, lit. ‘a woman who earns).
- ▣ Prostitutes deemed *infamis* – large numbers seem to become prostitutes as a result of enslavement – some daughters/wives prostituted.
- ▣ Difficult to know the extent of co-operation or coercion.

“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.

“In the same year [AD 19], bounds were set to female profligacy by stringent resolutions of the senate; and it was laid down that no woman should trade in her body, if her father, grandfather, or husband had been a Roman knight. For Vistilia, the daughter of a praetorian family, had advertised her venality on the aediles' list — the normal procedure among our ancestors, who imagined the unchaste to be sufficiently punished by the avowal of their infamy. Her husband, Titidius Labeo, was also required to explain why, in view of his wife's manifest guilt, he had not invoked the penalty of the law. As he pleaded that sixty days, not yet elapsed, were allowed for deliberation, it was thought enough to pass sentence on Vistilia, who was removed to the island of Seriphos.”
– Tacitus *Annals* 2.85.

Red Light District?

- Gathering together the prostitutes from the public places - Circus, the theatre, the stadium, the baths - *SHA Elegabalus 26.3-5*.
- *Leones* – brothel-keeper.
- 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).
- Non-brothel prostitution at major public venues – prostitutes often wore a man's toga.
- *Vicus Sobrius* – Festus (382L) states that this was the only street in Rome without *tabernae* (shops) or *cauponae* (inns).

“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.**

- ▣ See also similar ideas about Solon setting up cheap brothels – **Athenaeus 13.569d.**

Homosexuality

Pederasty in Athens

- The “penetration model” – Kenneth Dover.
 - Examination of textual sources and visual evidence from 6th to 5th century vases.
 - Erotic relationship between adult males and adolescent boys (both slave and free) regarded as acceptable – spoken of with same terminology.
 - Youth normally from time of second stages of puberty growing a full beard – c. 15-18.
 - Dominance-submission relationship, be it with women, boy or other adult male.
- *Pederasty* – the courting of an Athenian youth (*erômenos* – beloved) by Athenian adult male (*erastês* – lover), both as object of desire but also notionally as a “protégé”.
- Acceptable conduct of “beloved” – expected to resist physical advances – *hybris* laws.

“For assuredly he will not be moved to affection because he is a youthful companion to one who is not youthful, or because he is handsome when the other is no longer so, or because he is untouched by passion when the other is in its sway. For a youth does not share in the pleasure of the intercourse as a woman does, but looks on, sober, at another in love's intoxication.” -
Xenophon *Symposium* 8.21.

- An inscription between the pair represents running figure saying, “I am Eurymedon” and the other “I stand bent over”.
- Potential message “we buggered the Persians”?



“Eurymedon vase” Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg – midfifth century BC.

Confined to the Aristocracy?

- ▣ Kenneth Dover – argument that Homosexuality predominately for the rich? – Contrast between philosophy (esp. Plato) and comedy.
- ▣ Strong connection to culture of the symposium?
- ▣ Athleticism and elite male competition?
- ▣ Similar in Roman society – “one of those who went about bare of clothes but adorned with gold and costly gems. The Roman voluptuaries always took delight in these lads.” – **Herodian 1.17.3.**
- ▣ **Municius Felix (28.10)** accuses Romans of tolerating all sexual license as *urbanitas*.

Homosexuality in Rome

- In Rome (as in Greece) for an adult male to physically assume the receptive role was to surrender masculine status and render one feminine.
- Social and legal prohibition on sex with free-born boys – lacking relationship of Greek pederasty.
- Homoeroticism often represented in conservative Roman sources as a Greek import – the vocabulary consists of many Greek terms.
- Could often be used as a slur – cf. Caesar as “Queen of Bithynia”.
- From a Roman perspective blame is attached to using adult male slaves, rather than boys, as passive partners.

▣ Men who had “used their bodies in woman’s fashion” were forbidden to act as advocates in Roman courts – *Digest 3.1.5*.

“In early youth he incurred the reproach of sundry shameless acts. Sextus Pompey taunted him with effeminacy; Mark Antony with having earned adoption by his uncle through unnatural relations; and Lucius, brother of Mark Antony, that after sacrificing his honour to Caesar he had given himself to Aulus Hirtius in Spain for three hundred thousand sesterces, and that he used to singe his legs with red-hot nutshells, to make the hair grow softer.” – *Suetonius Divus Augustus 68*.

Literary and Poetic References

- ▣ A number of poets – Catullus, Tibullus, Persius, Martial, Juvenal – refer to open homosexual relations, sometimes involving themselves.
- ▣ Petronius *Satyricon* – main character Encolpius, and Ascyltus and Giton.
- ▣ Toleration and acceptability among the circle of writers and readers?

Roman Views on Oral Sex

- ❑ Romans thought oral sex to one of the basest sexual acts – seen as contaminating the mouth.
- ❑ It was considered most shameful to perform it on a woman.
- ❑ *Fellator* – someone who enjoys performing oral sex on a man – *cunnilingus* pleasure women.

Useful Reading

- ▣ Skinner, M. B. (2005) *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- ▣ McGinn, T. (2006) 'Zoning Shame in the Roman City', in Faraone, C. A. and McClure, L. (eds.), *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press: 161-176.
- ▣ Flemming, R. (1999) 'Quae Corpore Quaestum Facit: The Sexual Economy of Female Prostitutes in Rome', *Journal of Roman Studies* 89: 38-61.
- ▣ MacMullen, R. (1982) 'Roman Attitudes to Greek Love', *Historia* 31 (4): 484-502.