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Sex in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BCE

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When it comes to beliefs, attitudes, and customs concerning sex and sexuality, classical Athens makes for a particularly rich and tantalizing case study. As an Athenian guest at the fictional drinking party in Plato's *Symposium* proclaims, 'the customs concerning *erōs* ('love' or 'desire') in other cities . . . [are] laid down in simple terms, while ours . . . are complicated (*poikilos*)' (182a).[1] The particular reference here is to the unwritten rules concerning the courtship of boys by men, but there are plenty of other ways in which the sexual attitudes and practices of classical Athenians are 'complicated'. Making sense of the patchwork of laws concerning the punishment of the crime of *moicheia*, a term which can be loosely translated into English as 'adultery', or understanding Greek attitudes towards 'rape', for which there is notoriously no single equivalent term in ancient Greek, have certainly proven challenging for scholars. The very language of love in classical Athens is also complicated, with Greek possessing a whole series of terms describing desire and affection – most prominently *erōs* and *philia* – which fail to map onto an English term or concept in a wholly straightforward way.

The discussion in this chapter focuses on sex and sexuality in Athens in and around the classical era (480/479–323 BCE). A unique set of events in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE combined to establish Athens as a highly prosperous, cosmopolitan, and influential city-state in the Greek-speaking world: the establishment of its radical democracy; the discovery of a valuable seam of silver at nearby Laurion; Athens's growth as a trading and naval power; and the city's prominent leadership, alongside Sparta, in the Persian

1 All translations in this chapter were produced by the author in collaboration with Judith Owen and Dimitra Kokkini Robson. Throughout, the conventional system for citations of ancient sources is used, with square brackets employed to denote spurious or dubious authorship.

Wars, which twice thwarted attempts by Persia to invade mainland Greece. (The conclusion of these wars, in 480–479 BCE, is conventionally seen as the beginning of the classical era, and the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE its end.) Crucially, this growth in power and self-confidence set the stage for a cultural and intellectual flowering in Athens quite unparalleled in any other city-state of the time, which in turn has bequeathed a rich mixture of both written and material sources.

Our written sources from classical Athens include tragic plays (tragedy originated as a specifically Athenian art form), comic plays such as those of Aristophanes and Menander, philosophy (Plato was another native Athenian), and a wealth of legal speeches by rhetoricians such as Demosthenes and Lysias. They also include inscriptions, which can provide valuable insights into the workings of Athens's democracy and the lives and beliefs of its residents. Equally valuable are the material remains from the classical era, which include painted pottery, funeral monuments, public art and architecture, and all manner of artefacts. It is evidence types such as these that will be drawn on in this chapter to explore how aspects of erotic and family life were perceived, represented, and idealized – and sometimes denigrated – in the classical era. Not that reconstructing the realities of life as experienced by the full range of citizens, immigrants, and slaves in the city is in any way straightforward. Not only do accidents of survival leave gaps in our evidence, but such literary sources as we do possess are also almost exclusively the work of elite men (mainly, but not always, citizens: significant figures such as the philosopher Aristotle and the orator Lysias enjoyed resident immigrant or 'metic' status in Athens). Importantly, then, the glimpses that our sources provide of the lives and experiences of women, slaves, poorer citizens, and immigrants are typically refracted through an elite male lens. Equally important to stress is that the limitations of space allow for only occasional glimpses of the rich modern scholarship on Greek sex and sexuality and the lively debates that our sources have inspired. (See also Chapter 5 by Allison Glazebrook in Volume II of this work.) The aim of this chapter will be to provide a concise overview of three key elements of the sexual life of classical Athenians: marriage, prostitution, and same-sex relationships.

Marriage: Ages of the Bride and Groom

In contrast to men, who enjoyed a certain amount of freedom to engage in pre- and extra-marital sex in classical Athens (including with prostitutes and other men, as described below), the only socially sanctioned sexual outlet

for 'respectable' women was within marriage. For girls, a typical age to wed seems to have been around fourteen. Certainly, fourteen is the age of the bride in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (Household Management), a fictional dialogue from the mid-fourth century BCE featuring a farmer, Ischomachus, who relates the trials and tribulations of settling this girl into her new role as a wife with domestic responsibilities. Fourteen has also been suggested as the average age in Athens of menarche or first menstruation,[2] and given the emphasis on female virginity before marriage, a father's desire to marry off his daughter while she was still a teenager is perhaps understandable.

While there will inevitably have been some variation in the precise age that girls married, it seems reasonable to infer from the following passage from Aristophanes' comic play *Lysistrata* (first produced in 411 BCE) that the window of opportunity for a girl to be married was relatively narrow. Lysistrata's exchange with an elderly, male magistrate – which concerns the negative effects of the protracted absence of men from the city during the ongoing Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) – also neatly evokes the social importance of marriage to women and the pathos involved in a girl failing to find a husband (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 594–7):

LYSISTRATA: I am deeply distressed about the girls growing old in their chambers.

MAGISTRATE: What? Don't men grow old, too?

LYSISTRATA: Really, By Zeus! You're not comparing like with like. A man comes home and even if he's grey-haired he can find a young girl to marry soon enough. But for a woman time is fleeting, and if she doesn't seize the short chance she's got, no-one wants to marry her and she's forced to sit there, hoping against hope.

As this passage suggests, when it came to the age at which men married, different considerations were in play. Indeed, despite the impression given by marital scenes on painted pottery, which characteristically depict idealized husbands and wives in the bloom of youth (Figure 1.1), our literary sources indicate that, in the case of first marriages at least, a groom could often be twice the age of his bride, or more. To turn once again to Xenophon's

2 D. W. Amundsen and C. J. Diers, 'The Age of Menarche in Classical Greece and Rome', *Human Biology* 41 (1969): 124–32.

Figure 1.1 A wedding scene showing a youthful groom clutching the wrist of his bride while a winged Eros hovers between the pair playing the aulos (a reeded double-flute). Fragmentary red-figure loutrophoros (vessel used to carry water for a ritual wedding or funeral bath) by the Washing Painter, *c.* 430–420 BCE. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, 1174. Source: Photograph courtesy of the German Archaeological Institute, Athens, D-DAI-ATH-NM 3840 (Wagner in 1933).

Oeconomicus, Ischomachus is roughly thirty years old at the time of his marriage, the gap in age and life experience between the mature husband and his young wife creating something of a teacher–pupil dynamic in their relationship. In a similar vein, Plato's advice to men is to 'marry at some point between the ages of twenty-five and thirty' (*Laws* 6, 785b), while the sixth-century BCE lawgiver and statesman Solon suggests in his poetry that men should marry and have children between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-five (Solon fragment 27.9–10).

In accounting for the age gap between bride and groom, it is perhaps most profitable to see tradition and social expectation as the key forces in play: presumably few Athenians thought to question the established marriage

practices of their city. For citizen men, it is perhaps significant that it was at thirty that they gained their full quota of citizen rights: before this age, a man was ineligible for civic roles such as generalships and magistracies, as well as serving on juries and Athens's council. As for women, their 'premature marriage' (to borrow Eva Keuls's phrase) no doubt had the effect of socially containing them at a point in their lives – early adolescence – when girls were perceived to be at their most volatile, while conveniently allowing them to be trained in the ways of a new household at a young age as well.[3] The transition from natal household to marital household that marriage entailed would inevitably have been a major and unsettling life event for a girl. The anxieties experienced by the new bride are arguably captured on the faces of women being led towards their marital homes on red-figure pots (see Figure 1.1), and in tragedy, too, we find some telling examples of women articulating the uncertainties and stresses that marriage brings, such as in the following excerpt from Sophocles' fragmentary tragedy *Tereus* (fragment 583.3–10):

> [PROCNE:] When we are young we live the sweetest life of all, I think, in our father's home . . . But when we acquire the bloom of youth and intelligence, we are thrust out and sold away from our ancestral gods and our parents. Some go . . . to joyless homes, and others to reproachful ones.

Importantly, too, the bride is often presented as an enticing, erotic figure both in literature and on painted pottery. In the often bawdy world of Aristophanes' comedies, a fictional farmer, Trygaeus, talks excitedly and lasciviously about his bride-to-be ('What about when I'm in bed with her holding those titties close?' *Peace* 863) and in nuptial scenes on painted pottery the bride is frequently accompanied by a winged Eros figure (see Figure 1.1), the embodiment of sexual desire.

Athenian Citizenship Laws

During the classical era, various moves were made to restrict the pool of women that a male citizen was entitled to marry. Most famously, in 451 BCE, the statesman Pericles introduced a law stipulating that, for a man to be an Athenian citizen, both his parents had to be true-born Athenians – and not just his father, as had previously been the case ([Aristotle,] *Constitution of the*

3 Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 103.

Athenians 26.3; Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 37.3). This reform is perhaps best seen as populist in character: with citizen men forced to choose wives from among a relatively small pool of ethnically Athenian women, a poor citizen father who might otherwise have struggled to find a husband for his daughter saw his chances of finding a match greatly increased. The rules of Pericles' citizenship law were occasionally relaxed, especially during the war-ravaged years of the late fifth century BCE, in order to expand the depleted citizen body. Exceptions were occasionally made for individuals, too, most famously for Pericles himself, whose son by his foreign mistress, Aspasia, was granted citizenship (Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 37), thus saving the boy from the status of a *nothos*, 'bastard', which would have greatly restricted both his civic rights and ability to inherit.[4] At some point towards the middle of the fourth century BCE, however, Athens's laws were strengthened further, making it positively illegal for an Athenian citizen to marry a non-Athenian ([Demosthenes] 59.16 and 52).

Selecting a Groom or Bride

When it came to determining whom you married in classical Athens, kinship, geography, and the social circles in which your father moved seem to have been the major factors. One of the most common fates for a girl was to be married to her paternal uncle or cousin, with marriage to a half-brother also a possibility as long as the two siblings were born of different mothers (the son and daughter from different wives of the statesman and general Themistocles married one another, for example). One way to understand the prevalence in classical Athens of endogamy, or marriage within the family group, is in terms of inheritance, since it ensured that property would remain within the confines of a fairly narrow bloodline (normally that of the father's family). Exogamy, or marriage to members outside the family group, on the other hand, could potentially be used to shore up allegiances with individuals with whom the family had a close association or shared a common cause. And so another common scenario we find is for a girl to be married to a member of a neighbour's household or for a close friendship between two men to be cemented by the marriage of their kin. Family groups often seem to have practised both endogamy and exogamy when marrying off their

4 Daniel Ogden, *Greek Bastardy in the Classical and Hellenistic Periods* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 38–9.

daughters, suggesting that they were careful to strike a balance between protecting their inheritance interests and building links with neighbours and associates.[5]

This somewhat unromantic view of marital ties – as informed by familial concerns about inheritance on the one hand and social allegiances on the other – usefully serves to reveal some of the realities underpinning married life in classical Athens. In this light it is also worth noting that arranging the match was the job of the girl's *kyrios* (legal guardian or steward, normally her father), who was evidently under no obligation to consult the girl herself. Nor was it only his daughters' marriages that a father would oversee: it seems to have been quite normal for a man's father, if he was still alive, to take an active interest in arranging a match for his son, too. Accounts of a father's actions in seeking a bride for his son often emphasize the role of consultation and persuasion – qualities we also find hinted at in descriptions of suitors asking for the hand of a girl from her guardians (Demosthenes 40.12; Isaeus 2.3–4, 2.18). Even if the bride-to-be was not consulted (unlike the prospective groom), however, a father is likely to have considered himself to be acting in the girl's best interests. In a legal speech by Demosthenes, the speaker lists worthiness, convention, and the views of others as factors that men characteristically take into account when identifying a suitable match for a girl ('each of us considers who is worthy to marry into our families as an in-law . . . and these matters are also determined by certain customs and opinions', Demosthenes 20.57).

It is tempting, then, to think of Athenian marriages as arranged by men in the interests of men, with the wishes of the girl neither sought nor considered. Yet this may be to overlook the influence exerted by family members such as the girl's mother and, indeed, the girl herself. Given the narrow range of individuals an Athenian girl could generally be expected to marry, there is every reason to suppose that the bride and groom would at least have seen each other, and perhaps even interacted with each other, at some stage in their lives prior to the betrothal and wedding. From previous contact with the prospective husband, many a father would be in a position to take an informed view as to the suitability of the match for his daughter, as would other members of his household – although the extent to which his own or others' opinions on such matters held sway is, of course, a matter of speculation. In the fictional world of Menander's comedies at least (first performed in the late

5 Cheryl Anne Cox, *Household Interests: Property, Marriage Strategies, and Family Dynamics in Ancient Athens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 21–2 and 28–37.

fourth century BCE), we find examples of romantic love leading to marriage, including in one play an instance of two age-mates, Chaireas and an unnamed sister of another character, Cleostratos, whose intention to wed one another stems from their acquaintance since childhood (*The Shield* 262–7). This said, Menander's plays also contain instances of marriages arranged with little or no consultation of the parties involved.

Somewhat disturbingly from a modern viewpoint, Menander's comedies also contain instances of sexual assault leading to marriage. Indeed, his now fragmentary *The Hero* even seems to have contained a double rape plot, with the play's 'happy ending' stemming from the fact that both mother and daughter discover that the citizen men they married when pregnant are in fact the men who raped them. (The important consequence in the fictional world of the play is that their children are therefore legitimate and have citizen status in Athens.) Rape is a common theme in Greek myth, too, and mythical rapes feature prominently in classical art, in which the focus of interest is characteristically the pursuit and capture of the young girl rather than the sexual act itself. Instructively, however, there is no record in our sources of an act that we can unequivocally point to as 'rape' being prosecuted in a classical Athenian courtroom: this plausibly implies that such assaults as did occur in the city were routinely hushed up.

Children

A central objective of marriage for classical Athenians was the production of offspring. The emphasis on fertility and reproduction is immediately clear from the standard formula we find for the important business of the couple's betrothal (*enguē*), which saw a girl pledged to her future husband 'for the ploughing of legitimate children' (Menander, *Perikeiromene* or 'Girl with Cropped Hair' 1013–15). Fertility is a theme that surfaces throughout the various stages of the wedding rituals, too, the formal elements of which included not only a feast and a marital procession to the groom's home (see Figure 1.1), but also the withdrawal by the couple to their marital chamber. This would traditionally be guarded for the night by a friend of the groom acting as doorkeeper, while female friends of the bride sang outside. According to post-classical sources, this singing supposedly muffled the sounds of the bride's sexual initiation, while the presence of the doorkeeper served to 'prevent the women from helping the screaming bride' (scholiast on Theocritus 18; Pollux 3.42).

The desire to have children was seen as a fundamental and natural part of the human condition, with marriage and motherhood assuming a particular importance for women – hence the pathos of the situation outlined in the *Lysistrata* passage quoted above. Children played a key role not just in inheritance but also in the continuation of the religious traditions of the household (*oikos*), since they were the means by which family cults would be maintained in future generations; male offspring were more desirable since they provided a more straightforward mechanism for inheritance. In addition, parents could expect their children to care for them in old age – indeed, they were legally bound to do so (Plutarch, *Life of Solon* 23.1 and 4) – which provided further motivation for a couple to reproduce. Childlessness was seen as problematic, but while medical remedies for infertility were characteristically aimed at women, it was evidently not always the wife who was thought to be at fault. A fourth-century BCE legal speech by Isaeus provides the touching example of an ageing man named Menecles, who breaks up what seems to be a happy, if childless, marriage in order to set his wife free to marry another man and thereby escape the fate of childlessness (2.6–9).

Divorce

As this last anecdote implies, Athenian law allowed for divorce. This could be effected either by mutual consent, as in Menecles' case: the *apopempsis* or *ekpempsis* ('sending away' or 'repudiation') of the wife by her husband; or by a more complex process such as the *apoleipsis* or 'abandonment' of the home by the wife, for which she required the support of a male guardian, such as her father, and the involvement of a public official, the chief magistrate or *archon*. Attested examples of divorce are rare, however, with just nine documented cases from the classical era.[6] This figure does not include what is perhaps the most dramatic Athenian separation saga of all, however, namely the attempted 'abandonment' of the aristocrat Alcibiades by his first wife, Hipparete. Rather than allow her to see the divorce through, and thereby deprive him of the substantial dowry which she had brought to the marriage, Alcibiades apparently provoked a cause célèbre by having Hipparete dragged home by force through the marketplace before she could reach the *archon* ([Andocides,] *Against Alicibiades* 4.14; Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 8.2–5; and while this may be an extreme case, it is not the only time

6 Louis Cohn-Haft, 'Divorce in Classical Athens', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995): 1–14, at 4.

we hear of Athenian men using physical force against their wives). In the tragedy that bears her name, Medea states that 'there is no blame-free divorce for women' (Euripides, *Medea* 236–7), and while it may be divorce by 'abandonment' that is being alluded to here (the word used is *apallagē*, implying 'release' from a contract), the power of gossip and the importance to women of their reputation in a society such as classical Athens should not be underestimated.

It is relevant here to consider another scenario that would also prompt divorce, namely the crime of *moicheia*. This term is often translated by the English word 'adultery', but unlike adultery, it was not just illicit sex with a man's wife that qualified as *moicheia* but illicit sex with *any* female who fell under his legal protection, such as his unmarried daughter or sister. The marital status of the male lover – the *moichos* or 'adulterer' – was immaterial, so *moicheia* could in theory be committed by two unmarried people. The fact that classical Athens could boast a host of statutes, pertaining either directly or indirectly to *moicheia* and its punishment, suggests that the fidelity of 'respectable' womenfolk and the legitimacy of their offspring was something of an obsession for its citizens. Possible punishment for the *moichos* ranged from his summary imprisonment and ransom ([Demosthenes] 59.64–7) to the insertion of a radish into his anus by the wronged party (Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1079–84) – with the killing of the *moichos* caught in the act apparently a pardonable offence under the law of justifiable homicide ([Aristotle,] *Constitution of the Athenians* 57.3; Demosthenes 23.53).

Death and Remarriage

A far more common ending to a marriage than divorce was the death of one of the partners. By one estimate, the median life expectancy in the ancient Greek world (that is, the age which only 50 per cent of people reached) was 44.5 for men and 33.6 for women,[7] with disease, warfare, and death in childbirth regularly bringing marriages to an early end. Perhaps as many as one in five births resulted in the death of the mother.[8] Remarriage was evidently customary for divorcees, widows, and widowers alike, with women of childbearing age and of proven fertility potentially valuable commodities for households requiring an heir. It is also plausible that an

7 J. Lawrence Angel, 'Ecology and Population in Eastern Mediterranean', *World Archaeology* 4 (1972): 88–105, at 94.
8 Sue Blundell, *Women in Classical Athens* (London: Bristol Classical Press/Duckworth, 1998), 49.