

# Women in Ancient Athens (part I)



# Some of today's topics:

- Marriage
- Domestic labor
- Memorialization for the deceased
- Beliefs about women's bodies
- The physics and sociality of the domestic sphere
- Prostitution
- The figure of Aspasia

# Thucydides 2.45.2

“If I also must say something about a wife’s virtue to those of you who will now be widows, I will state it in a brief exhortation. Your reputation is glorious if you do not prove inferior to your own nature, if there is the least possible talk about you among men, whether in praise or blame.”

# Medea's Great Speech



Euripides, *Medea*, 431 BCE  
Trans. Kovacs, lines 430-451

Of all creatures that have breath and sensation, we women are the most unfortunate ... When a woman comes into the new customs and practices of her husband's house, she must somehow divine, since she has not learned it at home, how she shall best deal with her husband. If after we have spent great efforts on these tasks our husbands live with us without resenting the marriage-yoke, our life is enviable. Otherwise, death is preferable. A man, whenever he is annoyed with the company of those in the house, goes elsewhere and thus rids his soul of boredom. But we must fix our gaze on one person only. Men say that we live a life free from danger at home while *they* fight with the spear. How wrong they are! **I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once.**



# Compare Phaedra's Great Speech (in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, lines 391-418)



When love wounded me, I considered how I might bear it most creditably. My starting point was this, to conceal my malady with silence ... My second intention was to bear this madness nobly, overcoming it by means of self-control. But third, when with these means I was unable to master Aphrodite, I resolved on death, the best of plans, as no one shall deny ... I knew that both the deed and the passionate longing for it were discreditable, knew besides that I was a woman, a thing all men hate.

Damnation take the woman who first began to besmirch her marriage-bed with other men! ... But I also hate women who are chaste in word but in secret possess an ignoble daring. How, o Aphrodite, Lady of the Sea, how can these women look into the faces of their husbands? How do they not fear that the darkness, their accomplice, and the timbers of the house will break into speech?

*Epinêtron*

















engyê:  
“marriage”  
(both  
betrothal  
and  
contract)





# Adultery & Divorce: Some Facts

- Woman was considered passive in cases of adultery: i.e., husband of a woman who had been sexually assaulted or who had committed adultery was legally obliged to divorce her
- A woman condemned of adultery could not participate in public ceremonies, wear jewelry, and was unlikely to remarry
- Penalty for sexual assault of a woman was less severe (a fine) than the penalty for seduction, which implied a relationship over time
- Dowry had to be returned upon divorce to wife's father or legal guardian
- Interest on dowry if full repayment not possible

# Grave Stêlê of Pausimache ca. 390 BCE

“It is fated all who live must die; and you, Pausimache, left behind piteous grief as a possession for your ancestors, your mother Phainippe and your father Pausanias. **Here stands a memorial of your goodness (aretê) and good sense (sôphrosunê) for passersby to see.**”  
(trans. Clairmont)





# Male Anxieties about Women's Bodies

“... in men, the nature of the genital organ is disobedient and willful, like an animal that is not amenable to reason, and spurred on by its desires, it tries to dominate everything. **And again in a woman, for the same reasons, the matrix or what is called the womb is a creature (zōon) within her that desires the procreation of children. Whenever it remains unfruitful long past the right time, it becomes irritated.** Wandering all directions through the body and stopping up the airways, it interferes with breathing, causing extreme distress all sorts of other illnesses until and desire and love unite the two sexes”

- Plato, *Timaeus* 91b-d, trans. Larson

# Gender Determination in Hippocratic *Treatise On Regimen*

Sex	Gender of seed (with * to denote dominant quantity)					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
MAN	male	male*	female	female	male	female*
WOMAN	male	female	male*	female	female*	male
CHILD	male	male	herm.	female	female	female

A] “brilliant in soul and strong in body”

B] “brave male child”

D] “extremely feminine and fair in appearance”

E] “female child who is bolder than average”

F] “female who has a reputation for being ‘mannish’”



# Hipp. Treatise “*On Diseases of Women*”

“These diseases are dangerous ... and for the most part they are both acute and serious, and difficult to understand because of the fact that women are the ones who share these sicknesses. ... Sometimes diseases become incurable for women who do not learn why they are sick before the doctor has been correctly taught by the sick woman why she is sick. **For women are ashamed to tell even if they know, and they suppose that it is a disgrace, because of their inexperience and lack of knowledge.** At the same time the doctors also make mistakes by not learning the apparent cause through accurate questioning” (62).

Education?







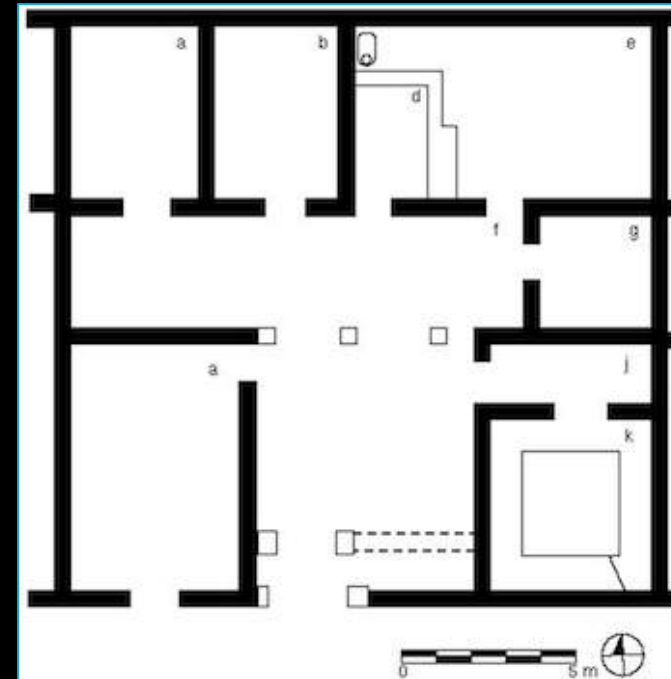
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Classics 10, Fall 2019





# Lysias (4<sup>th</sup> C BCE), third speech

“He came there at night in a drunken state, broke down the doors, and entered the women’s rooms: within were my sisters and nieces, whose lives were so well-ordered that they are ashamed to be seen even by their relatives.” (trans. Lamb)

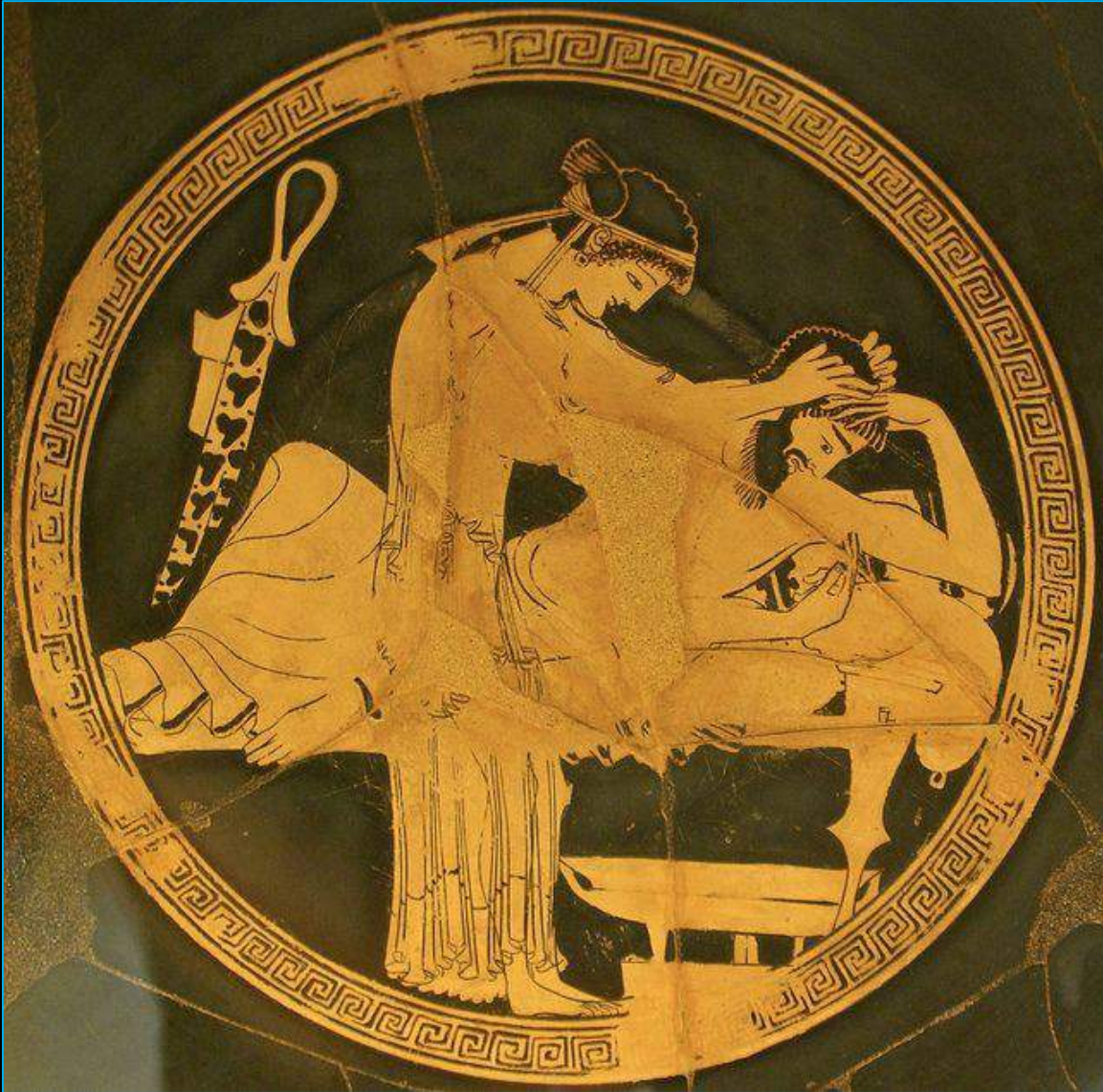


# Available “Professions”?

- *Hetaira*  
 (“professional companion”)
- *Pornê* (“prostitute”)
- Wet nurses,  
weavers, grape-  
pickers
- Garland-maker







“We have courtesans  
for pleasure,  
concubines for the daily  
service of our bodies,  
and wives for the  
production of legitimate  
offspring.” –  
Demosthenes, 59.122











Aspasia, concubine  
and common-law wife  
(*pallakê*) of Perikles

Roman copy of 5<sup>th</sup>-C BCE original



This may be a fitting place to raise the query **what great art or power this woman had, that 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 ... **Aspasia, as some say, was held in high favor by Pericles because of her rare political wisdom. Socrates sometimes came to see her with his disciples, and his intimate friends brought their wives to her to hear her discourse,** although she presided over a business that was anything but honest or even reputable, since she kept a house of young courtesans.

- Plutarch, *Perikles* 24



# Interpreting Ancient Prostitution

“Often highly educated, it was their business to take part in all men’s interests; **they were their own mistresses**” (F.A. Wright, 1923).

“So you bought up women and set them in various places to be used in common ... One obol and in you jump. No prudery, no nonsense, no rejection. **You get laid right away ... and in any manner you wish. Once you’ve finished, you tell her to go to hell, she’s a stranger to you now.**” (Fr. of a comedy by Philemon, quoted in Athenaeus *Wise Men at Dinner* 13, 569e-f)

# Silent Power

“I offered my husband a silent tongue and gentle looks. I knew when to have my way and when to let him have his.”

Andromache, in Euripides' *Trojan Women* lines 655-7



“Sometimes it helps to be a little deaf” - RBG



