

Course: Classical Civilisation 1A: Early Greece from Troy to Plataea

Assignment (e.g. essay, portfolio, commentary etc.): Essay

Title (if it is an essay): What does Greek lyric poetry have to say about men and women in love relationships at the time that it was produced?

Matriculation number: XXXXXXXXXX

Are you happy for your assignment to be used in future training of markers? **Yes/no**

Are you happy for your assignment to be used as an example for future students? **Yes/no**

The basis of love relationships within Greek society in the Archaic period has been discussed at length, in social and moral terms by Dover and Foucault. Furthermore, the roles of men and women were represented by the Greek lyric poets in this context within a highly-patriarchal framework. The position of the Greek lyric poets to comment on the cultural practices and sentiments of the day allows an insight into the links the Greeks drew between love relationships between men and women within different contexts: sexual and marital relationships, genders roles, and the links made to the divine. The various factors all entail a power relationship, of superior and inferior. Particularly due to the habitual linking of such styles of lyric poetry and the alcoholic, highly-sexualised revelry of the symposium setting, the male lyric poets give a stark insight into the patriarchal standards within which the twin concepts of gender and romance were considered. Yet we also have a small degree of female insight into the same subject. I will explore firstly the basis in nature considered of Greek love relationships, then the central sexual aspect, and the gender-based and societal ideals placed upon men and women combined in love relationships according to the poetry (particularly given the setting in which the poems would have been performed), and throughout these the defining concept of divinity which was always present; I will do this primarily with reference to the studies of Lear and Mace, who argue for the interpretation of the poet (specifically Anacreon) as more of a 'model' character, and a reinterpretation of lyric poetry within more-modern attitudes to homosexuality respectively.

The belief that love relationships were inherent within nature, existing within the natural order, is reflected in many lyric poems, through men and women being compared with nature, animals or plants. This suggests that the relationships described were considered to be derived irrefutably from natural acts. The acts of men and women in love relationships were themselves natural. This idea is particularly pertinent when it comes to Alcman, whose view of love relationships is fundamentally tied to the relationships already existing in plants and animals. The distinction of one particular woman is that of a sur-natural racehorse among natural sheep –

‘the dancers’ famous principal herself
stands out like a racehorse set among the sheep,
a thundering winner, the sort you see in dreams
as you doze in a cavern’s shade’ (fr. 1, line 27).

This clearly invokes a hierarchy of animals, in which trained racehorses hold a level of natural power superior to sheep, suggesting a similar hierarchy existing within beauty. Similarly, Sappho describes the beauty of one subject by saying that when she bathes, ‘[t]he stars about the lovely moon/withdraw and hide their shining forms’ (fr. 34); beyond simile, this is a statement that female beauty exists upon the same plane as the celestial nature of the planets. These comparisons go beyond a simple comparison between human good looks and natural phenomena found elsewhere, and tells us that, for the Greeks,

not only did love relationships exist in a way that was paralleled to and tied with nature, but that the relationships themselves existed as a part of the natural order.

Moreover, through the description of the fornication of divine characters (e.g. Euneus fr. 8c), it is clear that the Greeks considered love relationships to be an activity that was intended by the gods to be carried out by mortal men and women. As was the standard model of Greek life, just as one might seek a god's help with a task, or visit the oracle to gather information, a Greek involved in some degree of love relationship saw their predicament in terms of divine intervention, or acceptable morally if it was deemed acceptable by a god: for Euneus, a homosexual but paederastic relationship is considered acceptable because Zeus, 'once....fell for Ganymede' (fr. 8c). To refer love relationships to the gods as they apparently should be, poets frequently invoke the goddess Aphrodite and occasionally the divine Eros (e.g. Anon. Theognidea fr. 1323-6, among many others mentioned throughout this essay). See the anonymous ritual song: 'Pit off our old age until later,/O lovely Aphrodite!' (fr. 872) – the Spartan cult of 'Aphrodite who postpones old age'¹ are the epitome of a culture who are presented by the Greek lyric poets as believing old age the antithesis of a serious love relationship. Mace emphasises the idea of 'old age as an impediment to eros'². Perhaps, as in Iambic fragment five, it is the case that a woman old is not worth a man: 'To Xanthe, aged lady, much beloved/by women'. Mortals haven't the possibility of eternal youth which the gods have, and so the potential for Eros' or Aphrodite's intervention is necessary for men and women in love relationships.

Greek love relationships were inherently about sex; 'for Foucault....the Greeks were so preoccupied with penetration as to provoke feelings of disgust.'³ (although Davidson asserts retroactively a homophobic slant upon the events of Sappho which is questionable, he is useful as an emblem of the increasing view today that sex was the central aspect of the Greek lyric poetry concerning love). The poet Anacraeon's focus on wine and sex was enough to see him described as a largely erotic-Bacchic poet, Cicero saying 'nam Anacreontis quidem tota poesis est amatoria' – essentially, Cicero regarded all of his poetry as erotic in nature⁴. And yet there was an inherent link between such ideas of sexual love, and the way in which this graduated to marriage: 'a Miss by your face, but lower down a Mrs.' (Praxilla fr. 754). It is clear that these patriarchal ideas of marriage were inherent to love relationships at the time in the fact that even Praxilla, a poetess, perpetuated and seemingly agreed with these details.

¹ Mace 2001, 194

² Ibid

³ Davidson 2001, 4

⁴ Lear 2008, 52

It is clear that ideals of relationships (including sex) are inherent to any love relationship in the period; the love relationship between an older man and younger boy was expected to centre on the transfer of knowledge, even if it came as ‘other things’ were transferred, to the extent that some of the lyric poets felt honour-bound to side-line the romantic aspects within their description: ‘the denial of the importance of boys’ beauty in paederastic relations [is] presented as praiseworthy’ in some sources⁵, suggesting that the idealised paederasty was not deemed to be in the place of the more-idealised love relationship of a man and woman. And yet these homosexual relationships were so normal that other poets were free in certain situations to praise a boy’s puerile beauty: just as Zeus pursued Ganymede, Simonides is free to pursue one with ‘the downy skin of pre-pubescent youth’⁶ in fragment el. 22. And, to return to the comparisons with Homeric heroism, the standing of men and women in relationships tallies with the standing of men who do or do not go to fight; just as there is an ideal wife, an ideal young boy for a paederastic relationship, and so on, the ideals associated with love relationships tied into the general ideas of men and women within a militaristic culture (compare the ways an ideal wife or lover is described with the way, for example, in which Mimnermus describes an ideal soldier in fr. 14 – both have a specific ideal to which to aspire).

The ideal of sex is linked strongly with the idealised, heterosexual nature of Greek love relationships. Beyond short-term relationships between an older and younger man alluded to in some poems, or between two women as seen in Sappho (even though lesbianism could at times be levelled as a charge⁷), the standard for a relationship is always between two people, and heterosexual. When Hipponax in fr. 114a describes the need to ‘pluck his arsehole’, it seems that in Greek love relationships a male had to be in the position of emulating a woman to be desirable to a man like he; to be desirable to the heterosexual male, another male had to be in essence the equivalent. This seems also to go both ways; a woman in a relationship with another woman like Sappho was unthreatening to the heterosexual order that the lyric poets tried to espouse coherently, and a woman desirable to a man was the equivalent of a paederastic boy: the man’s inferior in terms of knowledge. The conclusion from this is that all of these two-person Greek love relationships were based around a structure of a dominant and inferior partner, just as within the context of a relationship between a god and a mortal. These even seem to go far enough as to have class implications within Theognidea fr. 193: ‘Good name and bad name marry, force of circumstance,/which gives a man new standards’. The male seems bound by stereotypes to marry whomsoever will allow him to maintain the dominant partner which Greek lyric poetry reflects must exist within these love relationships. Similarly, in the Neobule fragment it is clear that male climax

⁵ Lear 2008, 50

⁶ Mace 2001, 193

⁷ Ibid, 95

and ejaculation is prioritised. For a woman to be subject, not object, is a transgression of norms, a rejection of the idea referred to by Stehle of a 'transcribed female role'⁸.

It is also clear from the lyric poets that the details of love relationships were a, if not the, defining feature of a person's life. Indeed, to be without Eros makes life not worth living to some (Mimnermus fr. 1). Sappho describes how, Artemis having chosen to be a virgin, 'gods and men/call her virgin and deers shooter' (fr. 44A). Artemis' defining characteristic of the Hunter, even despite being a deity, is considered a lesser epithet than her status as one going without romantic entanglement. Furthermore, despite supposedly being accepted as a virgin, the one extant fragment of the poetess Telesilla tells of Artemis, even so, being burdened with having to evade the river-god Alphaeus' advances. The burden of a woman, particularly, to have a 'love' relationship (a rape-based relationship cannot be considered one of love, but the sexual basis saw it being addressed in similar fashion by the lyric poets in this period) prospective at any moment is defined in the manner in which 'in 654 col. iii [the poet] lists the rapes by various gods of the nine daughters of the Asopus River'⁹. The arena of poetry was dominated by men, just as the love relationships of men and women described by men and women in their poetry was also dominated by men in terms of power, and the lives of those in the poetry was dominated by their sexuality.

An integral aspect of those love relationships described is the extent to which they conform to traditional, patriarchal gender stereotypes of archaic Greece; most pertinently this is outlined in the necessity for a female partner to be a good wife, as in Semonides fr. 7; even though there is such a diversity of women listed, all amount within the context of their love relationship to be an inferior partner. For Anacreon in fr. 444: 'Virginal Love/agleam with longing', a virgin (presumably a woman) is merely someone who is *going to*, and more importantly *wants* to have a sexual relationship in the near future. Effeminacy in a man too old to be the inferior in a paederastic relationship could be considered a defect¹⁰ in the same way that Hipponax in fr. 92 deems such extreme measures –

'She spoke in Lydian: *'Faskat ikrol'l*–
in Arsish, 'Up the arse....',
and [pulling down] my ball by the bal[d patch]
she thrashed me with a fig-branch, like [a
scapegoat]
fast[ened in] the stocks. And there [I was]
under two torments: on one side the branch
[was killing] me, descending from above,
[my arse on the other] spattering me with shit.
The passage stank; and dung-beetles came buzzing
after the smell, over fifty of them:
some attacked, while others [whet] their te[eth],
and others fell upon the Arsenal doors....'

⁸ Stehle 2009, 60

⁹ Stehle 2009, 65

¹⁰ Lear 2008, 53

— necessary to treat impotence. Furthermore, as soon as one is old enough to grow facial hair, to graduate from the stage of being the diminutive in a paederastic relationship, one is supposedly burdened by a woman. The extent to which the sex that so defined a love relationship is set within the confines of the patriarchy becomes clear within the context of Archilochus' (fr. 196a) description of rejecting the woman Neobule: she would make a bad wife due to her beauty having withered and being insatiable. Hipponax was so convinced of this that he in fr. 68 considered that '[t]wo days in a woman's life give greatest pleasure:/those of her wedding and her funeral.'

Finally, the intention of lyric poetry, to be performed at some kind of gathering – the auloi or the symposium – informs us a great deal of the manner in which the Greeks viewed love relationships: as a topic of public discourse, and as on the same level of importance as themes of death and politics. This tells us that the nature of a successful love relationship was akin to a heroic victory (for the men), hence the parallels drawn by many lyric poets between love and mythical heroism¹¹. It also leads us to question whether or not love relationships were commonplace enough to the degree that they became just another literary trope, in the manner of a sinking ship as state. If this were to be the case, it would seem that perhaps the exultations of love expressed are not always to be taken literally, and yet furthermore that the kinds of love described in a way that is generic was understood as universal. In this sense, the link of love poem to symposium – where a cup might be dedicated to anyone who had been in love – acts as a means for the audience to be united in hearing a poem, so common were the themes of love relationships, and such was the fact that erotic poetry in the manner of imitation of previous well-known poets was considered commonplace¹². It seems clear that the taking on of a prior poet's identity, or even performing a poem on the nature of love relationships in their style (as in for example the Theognidea, all of which was transmitted at some time, perhaps spuriously, as having been written by Theognis¹³), de-personalises in some instances the love relationships in a way that can only be reducing the nature of a love relationship to a muse in the literary sense. Lear points to those examples in which Anacreon, Theognis and Archilochus take on the persona of a third party in their poetry. If a poet who was so varied can be 'remembered exclusively as a poet of wine and love'¹⁴ in the way that Anacreon is, the love described is doubtful in its authenticity as an unimpeded expression of a love relationship. The idea of love relationships as so everyday seems convincing given the extent to which the style of lyric poetry used commonplace sex as a metaphor, through 'creative' sex references: 'Keep back, make way for the god:/erect and bursting, he wants to pass straight through' describing a theatrical prop in a ritual (Ritual fr.851a); 'Bendova's isle' as West's translation of a Calypso-based Homer reference and pun¹⁵ (Hipponax fr. 129). These do not seem a serious expression of love relationships as


¹¹ Mace 2001, 187

¹² Lear 2008, 49

¹³ West 1993, xiv

¹⁴ Lear 2008, 51


¹⁵ Translator's explanation of pun in notes: West 1993, 206



found elsewhere. The way which Sappho puts a twist on the heterosexual customs of Greek poetry in fr. 31 ties this idea into the larger sphere of poetic discourse, one characterised by ‘playful unexpected twists of thought’¹⁶. The very love relationships themselves being characterised within the poems were seen then by the Greeks as playful, to be considered not necessarily entirely seriously, or at least only as seriously as a large, phallic prop in a ritual.

The Greek lyric poets, in this framework of power-play, tie the idea of love relationships ineluctably into the larger sphere of Greek life in general, in the Archaic period characterised by power-play in politics (it is no coincidence that the poets who tie love and politics were often banished on political grounds, and would perform symposium poetry interchangeably upon these two themes of love and politics). What is clear is that, just as the majority of poets were men, the attitudes taken by many people were tied to a dominant male viewpoint, although it is the burden of further research to establish whether this weight of evidence is genuinely reflective of reality or merely an issue with the bias of canon that has passed these fragments down, and modern scholars such as Davidson who seem determined to assert a continuing misogynist bias upon what remains.

¹⁶ Cazzato, Prodi 2016, 7



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