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# A Comparison of Ancient Roman and Greek Norms Regarding Sexuality and Gender

An Honors Project

Cody W Goetting  
5-1-2017

Sex, sexuality, and gender norms continue to be a pressing matter in the modern political and social scene, with debates revolving around several important topics such as means of expression, comfort, biology, culture, among many others, too numerous to list entirely. The existence of these issues is not new, however, as every civilization must establish its own norms and mores in regards to these issues. Among the most significant cultures to influence the development of modern western civilizations, the classical Greco-Roman culture which developed throughout the western Mediterranean must be considered amongst the foremost; and their viewpoints of these issues are no different. While nothing exactly matches perfectly today to the classical opinions, it is still imperative to trace the origins of these opinions so that one may be able to follow their development to the modern ideas which exist today. This paper represents research done for two different assignments required as a capstone for the Classical Civilizations degree, showcasing research done in regards in the specific topic area having already been introduced, but showcasing both the Roman norms as well as those of the two most prominent Greek City-State, Athens and Sparta.

Depictions of roman sexual activity as debauched and foreign to modern viewers seems to have become the norm for Hollywood producers of late. In nearly every movie that takes place in ancient Rome, viewers can count on seeing a few things: the imperial faction will be covered head to foot in purple, SPQR will be plastered on every street corner, and someone will try to have sex with their sister. Furthermore, on the opposite end of the spectrum, a woman will be among the forefront of a campaign to change roman society (perhaps even the same sister as before).

Contrary to this view, the ancient Romans, just as our modern society, had ingrained into their society the beliefs that each gender had certain distinct expectations placed on it. These

expectations influenced how one was expected to behave in every type of interaction they participated in, not merely including sexual relations. In modern western culture, the common cultural opinions were largely influenced by puritanical beliefs, and a gradual move away from them. Some of the recent beliefs that are examples of this being the belief that marriage is an institution between one man and one woman, the husband works while the wife stays home, and the husband is the head of the household, among others. In ancient Rome, however, a culture that did not experience the puritans, the expectations and even the very way the Romans defined terms such as 'gender' and 'sexuality' differed greatly from what the modern audience would identify it as.

Rome, being a society where men held the vast majority of power, based its idea of gender around what it viewed men, or 'vir', to be. Therefore, in contrast to the common modern viewing of gender as a two dimensional plane with the axes being masculinity and femininity, the Roman view could be more accurately described as a one dimensional line with a point centered on what makes up the 'man' with the degree of 'un-manness' increasing as one deviates from that central point.<sup>1</sup> As such, while women were not the only group of people included in the group of 'un-man', they are arguably the most prominent and commonly referred to among that group.

With this in mind, it makes sense to first describe what, in Roman culture, it was deemed proper for a man to do. The overarching belief of how a proper man was to behave can be described as "impenetrable penetrators".<sup>2</sup> This definition then allows various social factors to allow the Roman conceptualization of male sexuality. For example, someone of sufficiently low class, such as a slave, would not be able to defend their body from violation from others, and as

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<sup>1</sup> Hallet, Judith P; Skinner Marilyn B; ed. *Roman Sexualities*. Princeton University Press, 1997. (33)

<sup>2</sup> Hallet, Judith P. *Roman Sexualities*. (30)

such they are not classified as *vir*, but perhaps as a *cinaedus*, one who is penetrated or the ‘un-man.’<sup>3</sup> This distances the concept of gender in the Roman mind from their concept of biological sex and moves it closer to another form of social distinction.<sup>4</sup> While only men could be *vir*, being a man did not guarantee one the title.

That is not to say however, that biological sex had no influence on the Roman view of gender. While being male did not guarantee one the status of *vir*, being a woman automatically assigned one to the status of the ‘un-man’. While a Roman male citizen could establish an identity for himself, women were dependent on the connection to her family for that identity; first her father, then her husband, then her children. As such, in terms of sexuality, women were viewed as serving as child bearers, providing legitimate heirs to her husband. In contrast to the role of men as the impenetrable-penetrators of society, women were to provide the needed support to the men. Therefore, where men were supposed to gain influence over others, even if only in their vocation, women were supposed to aid in the advancement of others.<sup>5</sup> Slaves, the other common group included among those considered ‘un-men’ could be viewed in a similar way, that the purpose of their lives is to advance the position of another, namely their owner. The difference between the two (women and slaves) is that obviously women, on the Roman social ladder, held more rights and privileges than even slaves.<sup>6</sup>

The capacity of the *vir* to be active in relations was also linked to male virility. Boys and old men (*puer* and *senex*, respectively). It is worth noting that the term for a young boy, *puer*, also refers to male slaves as well [usage would be determined by the context that the word was used],

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<sup>3</sup> Skinner, Marilyn B. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005. (212)

<sup>4</sup> Hallet, Judith P. *Roman Sexualities*. (30)

<sup>5</sup> Shelton, Jo-Ann. *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*. Oxford University Press, 1998. (288-92)

<sup>6</sup> Shelton, Jo-Ann. *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*. (163-74)

showing the inherent link in viewing slaves and children as similar in their difference from being *vir*), therefore, were viewed as prone to passivity, the former because they are not yet virile the latter because their virility has left them. Furthermore, passivity understood as the Romans would is not merely the enjoyment of being penetrated but rather the failure of willpower. For a *vir* to be penetrated was to dismiss the Roman belief of his inviolable body for a mere form of pleasure. This is indicative of a moral bankruptcy of self-control first and only secondarily a betrayal of a sexuality.<sup>7</sup>

As such, *vir* applies to a very limited group of men who were Roman Citizens in good standing with the social norms of roman culture. Not all males are men, placing the foundation for the roman view of sexuality already on a shaky foundation, as one could plausibly, if the status of *vir* was attained, eventually lose that status. Add to this the fact that being a *vir* is by no means guaranteed (one does not begin life as a *vir* and one does not end life as such) means that the foundation for roman gender roles was always placed precariously on a slippery slope at the bottom of which is the loss of manhood.<sup>8</sup>

There is one problem with this view of the *vir* as always being inviolable from both physical and sexual assault, however insecure this view may have been, and that is the Roman soldier. The central concept of the Roman state, and by extension roman manhood, the soldier at arms, ironically puts himself in a position to have his body violated by potential enemies and his superior officers. In this way, the roman soldier moves dangerously close to becoming the ‘un-man’, yet the crucial difference remains that he cannot be assaulted sexually. Furthermore, any scars from being beaten with a vine staff (the tool officers in the roman army were permitted to

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<sup>7</sup> Skinner, Marilyn B. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. (212-3)

<sup>8</sup> Skinner, Marilyn B. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. (212-3)

perform beatings with) or a sword seem to have been regarded as the opposite of scars denoting a servile beating.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of sexual relations, this means the man must always take the ‘active’ role as opposed to the ‘passive’. The role of the Roman man in sex is to find sexual pleasure by penetrating the body of another whom he finds beautiful. It does not matter whether the other person in question is biologically male or female, simply so that the relation does not cause social unrest (such as forcing a *vir* into a passive role or bedding a married woman of high class) and so that he takes the active, penetrative role. As such, our modern notions of classifying someone as gay or homosexual, straight or heterosexual, or bisexual would have little in common with the mind set of an ancient Roman.<sup>10</sup>

Ancient Rome, as a society, attached no negative stigma to same sex male relations to the man who held the active or insertive position in the relationship. However, one who took the receptive role, especially one who was charged with enjoying such a role, was held in scorn by society. Such a man would be called words like *pathicus* and *cineadus*, words that were serious charges.<sup>11</sup> Homosexuality, however, was often viewed in the same terms as heterosexual relationships, just as it is today. In a homosexual relationship, one partner was (and still often is) described as the woman or ‘unman’ and the relationship as a whole understood in the same manner as a dichotomy of the dominance of the active partner over the passive.<sup>12</sup> The negative connotation of the passive partner aside (which had nothing to do with homosexuality but rather being passive in a relationship) sexual attraction to men and even boys was considered perfectly normal, however sexual contact with free born boys was treated the same as relations with a

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<sup>9</sup> Hallet, Judith P. *Roman Sexualities*. (39-40)

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, John R. *Roman Sex*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003. (87)

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, John R. *Roman Sex*. (90)

<sup>12</sup> Hallet, Judith P. *Roman Sexualities*. (33)

married woman. This is due to the social issues this causes, the free born boy, while not yet a *vir*, has the potential to become so; if he were to be forced into a passive role his future manhood would be thrown into doubt. A married woman having an adulterous affair threatens the integrity of the upper class by potentially causing conflict between two families. Therefore, the two crimes are treated similarly as they both throw into doubt the validity of the next generation and raise potential conflicts in the current one.

The view of man as impenetrable penetrator applies not only to sexual relations but also to bodily harm as well as the safety of the Roman civilization. In Roman legal writings being physically beaten is spoken of in equitable terms to being sexually assaulted, as both involve invasive assault on the of the bodily inviolability of another *vir*.<sup>13</sup> The Roman concept of bodily inviolability also held great importance to the viability of the Roman state. As addressed above, the degradation of Roman men to ‘feminized’ forms of pleasure (allegedly) marked the decline of Roman moral foundations. The Roman insistence on physical domination was also representative of Roman military campaigns and subsequent domination of foreign peoples. The poet Catullus, speaking of his former lover ‘Lesbia’ (a pseudonym for Sappho of Lesbos) relates her predatory dealings with her partners with Roman expansion over many different people. Furthermore, he uses terms that border on the erotic when he describes these expansions as penetrating enemies who are soft or unmanly. As such the view of domination is seen as paramount to the continuation of the Roman state in several ways.<sup>14</sup>

This view also carries over into a very specific act of sex involving any oral penetration. With the importance placed on speaking in roman society (whether public orations or mere small talk), the mouth was seen as especially sacrosanct, as it was the social organ that made society

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<sup>13</sup> Hallet, Judith P. *Roman Sexualities*. (38)

<sup>14</sup> Skinner, Marilyn B. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. (221)

possible. Annaeus Seneca, in his complaints about the increasing negative traits of the next generation, labels them as lazy, unable to focus, and worst of all, effeminate. He goes on to say that it takes a man to be a skilled public speaker.<sup>15</sup> As such, any accusations of performing fellatio or cunnilingus would, along with the standard social stigma of being penetrated, carry the additional stigma of having a sullied and impure mouth. As before, however, this stigma only applies to the one being penetrated in these circumstances (in regards to cunnilingus, viewed from the roman viewpoint, the one receiving is viewed as the penetrator, the one performing as penetrated as opposed to how modern audiences may imagine), as before, no stigma whatsoever attaches itself to a man who can assert himself and penetrate another (assuming such an act is performed legally of course).<sup>16</sup>

However, in the case of cunnilingus, yet another social stigma applies. Not only is one who performs cunnilingus on another being penetrated, and making their mouth impure, but they are also having this done to them by a woman. This is inherently worse than being penetrated and made impure by a man, as at least it is the job of the *vir* to penetrate others. To be penetrated by a woman was viewed as unnatural, almost to the point of going against the natural law. Therefore, taking this viewpoint to its next logical step, same sex female relations were viewed in the same light, as extremely unnatural. Just as with same sex male relations, ancient Romans cast same sex female relations in the same light as hetero relationships, however they then ran into an issue. While it is fairly simple to not only move one of the males in a same sex relationship to a lower social standing in order to keep the view that the natural relationship is between penetrator and penetrated, the translation to female same sex relations is not as easy. For one issue, stigmatizing and ostracizing someone to a lower social status is easy enough, however,

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<sup>15</sup> Skinner, Marilyn B. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. (247)

<sup>16</sup> Clarke, John R. *Roman Sex*. (118-24)

for the viewpoint of ‘the penetrator is always right’ would mean bringing women in same sex relations to the same level as men. There is also the issue that, for male same sex relations there is a natural way for one to penetrate and one to be penetrated. In contrast, there is no natural way for a woman to penetrate anyone, cunnilingus aside. As such, in roman accounts of lesbian sex the woman is described as a woman who requires a fake phallus in order to perform the duties of a man. This requirement for ‘artificial’ means of penetration only served to strengthen the Romans view of lesbian sex as unnatural.<sup>17</sup>

This distrust applied to any woman who appeared to act outside of the traditional role of women, and therefore acted in a masculine sense and affairs suited for men. For example, Sallust, in describing Sempronia’s support for the Catiline conspiracy, says that she (Sempronia) often acted with “masculine daring and boldness.” Some of her offenses included being able to dance and play the lyre better than was seen as necessary for an honest roman woman. Yet even Sallust admits that these talents (among others, write poetry, converse intelligently, etc.) are far from contemptible in and of themselves, even calling her a “woman of great wit and great charm.” The problem arises in that these talents were held by a woman, where they normally (and therefore properly) are to be pursued by men.<sup>18</sup>

This major difference between how modern society and ancient Rome viewed sex also carries into how prevalent depictions of sex that a modern viewer may describe as ‘pornographic’ in a Roman city. In one Roman Domus (The house of the Vettii) the first thing visitors would see upon entrance is a depiction of the god Priapus weighing his huge phallus on a scale against a bag of coins with a basket of fruit just underneath (Clarke p. 20).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Clarke, John R. *Roman Sex*. (126-8)

<sup>18</sup> Shelton, Jo-Ann. *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*. (297)

<sup>19</sup> Clarke, John R. *Roman Sex*. (104)

While modern viewers may view this as a kind of prank on the unsuspecting visitor, a joke which is worth more, the phallus of Priapus or the gold coins; which would win this clearly humorous struggle? However, this is likely how a modern viewer would view the painting of Priapus; to an ancient Roman such a painting would likely be seen as a genuine attempt by the owner wishing any visitor three kinds of prosperity: financial (the bag of coins), agricultural (the fruit basket), and sexual fertility (the phallus). What's more, in the Roman view, sexual fertility was equated to financial success as evidenced by the fact that the phallus is weighed evenly with the bag of money (Clarke 104).

Furthermore, this painting is not the only depiction of Priapus in the house of the Vettii. The other is a statue of the god found originally in the garden of the Domus, with a hollow hole in the penis to allow a stream of water to spurt out. This statue, placed along the primary visual axis of the home would have greeted visitors upon entrance into the Domus along with the painting by the doorway. This statue touches on two other aspects of how sex, and by extension Priapus, was viewed in ancient Rome.

The first refers to the humorous aspect of sex. Surely it is no coincidence that for a fountain, the Vettii brothers chose a statue that at a distance would appear like a man urinating. Aside from the visual trickery, it also may be in reference to a collection of humorous verses dedicated to the god called the Priapea, in which the Phallus of Priapus is used to defend the owner's garden by using the phallus from a nearby statue as a weapon.<sup>20</sup> However, the difference between how a modern audience may find these objects humorous and an ancient Roman is in the details. Someone today would likely be thrown to giggles and fits simply at the sight of a phallus displayed so prominently in a home. However, obviously, the ancient Roman upper class

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<sup>20</sup> Clarke, John R. *Roman Sex*. (104-6)

saw no problem in this, or else why would they go to the great efforts it surely must have entailed to commission such art pieces. As such, it is safe to assume that the humorous aspect in such pieces would have been a secondary thought; they were functional art pieces first and potentially humorous conversation starters second. It is also important to note that certain visual clues existed that alerted ancient Romans when a depiction was meant to be humorous or not, namely unusual physical attributes. This explains the large number of examples of dwarfism in Roman art, as well as the humor implicit in the excess of Priapus (as well as the shocking number of dwarfs with exceptionally large penises).<sup>21</sup>

In a broader sense however, the use of comedy in both modern and ancient times is revealing in that it highlights what that society views as abnormal or ‘the other’ as the audience already views any abuse the comedian heaps upon them as acceptable. Rome, as a patriarchal society, often used women for this role, among foreigners of a distinct ethnicity. Slaves also fell into this category as well. This, in combination with more physical humor (such as the deformities of dwarfism, hunchbacks, or abnormally large penises) paints a picture of what Roman society viewed as normal or acceptable.<sup>22</sup>

The use of a statue of Priapus in the garden also points to a second aspect of how the ancient Romans viewed sex and fertility, briefly touched on earlier. That point is the protection of fertility against numerous kinds of evils. While Priapus appearing in a garden can be understood as he was the protector of such gardens, Romans (as well as many modern people living around Mediterranean Sea) viewed many superstitious evils around them. One of the most pervasive of these superstitions is the ‘Evil Eye’, which someone could use to send evil particles to another that was envied to make them sick or even kill. In defense of this, one turned to the

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<sup>21</sup> Clarke, John R. *Roman Sex*. (111)

<sup>22</sup> Skinner, Marilyn B. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. (2479-50)

opposite of evil, things like fertility, laughter, and strength. For example, an iron depiction of a dwarf with an unusually large penis would cover all three examples (iron as strength, the dwarf and unusual penis both being found humorous, and the penis doubling as a symbol of fertility) .<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note, however, that all literary sources come almost solely from upper class Roman males. These literary sources then influence how artistic depictions of certain activities are interpreted. Therefore, modern interpretations are left with a maddeningly narrow viewpoint of how ancient Romans actually felt toward sex and sexuality that brings a unique possible set of prejudices and biases that may not have been common throughout the lower levels of roman culture, alienating practically all women and poorer people in the roman state. Obviously the acts that have been hereto described as bringing shame and social stigma to at least one, if not both parties involved if caught, happened; otherwise the stigmas would have died out and not have been used so vigorously in defaming one's enemies. As the saying goes, there is no smoke without fire.

However, what of the lower classes of Romans, those whose voice has been lost to history, those who had nothing to lose by being socially stigmatized and likely no one who would have gained anything from going through the trouble such an accusation would bring? Numerous artistic depictions survive showing 'taboo' sexual actions; certainly not all of them were commissioned to exist humorously or as mere conversation starters. In the lower classes of roman society, it would make sense to assume that women could not afford to remain as the shut in house wives the upper classes wished them to be, the economic benefit they could provide their family would be too great for many to pass up to fit into a more ideal roman family. Undoubtedly these actions were at least somewhat common, it would be folly to assume that they

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<sup>23</sup> Clarke, John R. *Roman Sex*. (108-12)

only happened in the back rooms of scandalous and shameful Roman citizens as the literary record would indicate (and even then most of these accusations were fueled by some ulterior motive). However, the extent and frequency to which they truly happened, as well as the energies someone would likely go to bring the possible social repercussions to such a 'nobody' may never be known.

While the fragmented nature of classical Greek city-states means that each distinct city-state had a slightly different culture from its neighbors, there are certain, overarching characteristics which, when combined, can be seen as constituting the aspects of a unified "Greek" identity. These characteristics bridge even some of the larger sub-groups of Greek city states, such as the distinction between city-states falling into either Dorian and Ionian cultures. Of these characteristics, one of the most prominent and universal would have to be the patriarchal distribution of power and opportunities within the city. Even in the few cities where women held rights and responsibilities more comparable to men, this power was held largely through holes in the political system, and women still were not seen in as comparable equals to men in key social concerns. Athens, often hailed today as the founder of western democracy, however, does not even fall into this category of some equality; in fact, quite the opposite. The patriarchy in classical Athens was followed to such an extreme that it could be seen as borderline worship of the male sex, often depicted through phallic imagery as conquering over females. This ideology was mirrored in practice, as the Athenians held their women in extreme levels of subjugation under their men. Even by a contemporary, classical Greek perspective, Athens, surrounded by a sea of patriarchal societies, still manages to set itself apart from its fellow

Hellenistic city-states through the enthusiasm which they pursue their belief of the superiority of the male sex and oppression of the female.

What first must be examined therefore is the manner in which most of the Greek city-states viewed the proper role of women, in order to provide an informed culturally appropriate case to compare Athens too. The standard Greek city-states were by no means egalitarian in their own ways, so the fact that Athens surpasses even this benchmark shows how extreme they truly were. The most common course the life of a woman would take could be divided into two parts: before marriage as a ‘courtesan’ and after marriage as mother and housekeeper. In both roles, they would be held within the sections of the home designated as the ‘women’s quarters’ (*gynaekonitis*) of whichever man was in charge of them, father or husband. In many households this room was an interior room, so that no windows existed which would allow the women to see out or a male passerby in.<sup>24</sup>

The primary expectation from society for a young, unmarried girl would be to find a suitable partner and marry them. Through their formative years, even young girls would be restricted to the women’s quarters of the household, where they would receive the absolute minimum in terms of education. These skills included basic reading and writing and perhaps some skills in musical instruments; the most important however were various textile skills such as spinning and weaving clothing. The importance placed on the loom was due to this being one of the few ways a woman, secluded so much within the house, could contribute to the wealth of her family. All of these skills were taught by either her mother or another woman of the household, so that women did not learn skills that would make them “cleverer than befits a

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<sup>24</sup> Licht, Hans. *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*. New York: Barnes and Nobel, 1932. (18, 28-31)

woman.”<sup>25</sup> Formalized, external education by professional teachers was reserved for men, and a woman would not have had the higher knowledge to engage in upper class conversations. Even if a woman had found herself in the middle of a conversation about recent political events or business specifics, she likely could have offered little, due to the lack of relevant knowledge she possessed. Eventually, a marriage arranged by her father would be put forward which she would be forced to accept, including a dowry to ‘buy’ the husband. The goal of the marriage would be the production of children to take care of the parents in old age, and any transfers of wealth likely served the goal of easing the costs of additional mouths to feed until this benefit could be reaped. This arrangement of marriage would most likely be made with no concern given to the wishes of the girl, or at least as only a secondary concern after the improvement of the family’s standing. Just as a piece of property she is transferred from one household to another which she knows little to nothing about where she is expected to serve the primary goal of birthing children.<sup>26</sup>

When she was finally brought into her new home as wife, her expectations would change dramatically. She would still be expected to contribute to the betterment of her household, however the means in which she would do this now became by producing children and raising them. Her term of motherhood would last for girls until they were married off and left the household, and for boys until they came to an age suitable that they could leave the household to pursue greater education. Marriage was therefore in the Greek world primarily a means to an end in order to secure the continuation of the family and the citizen population of the city. This duty was then threefold: one part to the family to ensure the proper and easy inheritance of wealth and

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<sup>25</sup> Licht, Hans. *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*. (28)

<sup>26</sup> Thornton, Bruce. *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997. (161-164)

property; one to the city to ensure there are farmers and soldiers to serve its needs; and to the gods to ensure another generation who would worship and sacrifice to them. Indeed, women would likely be referred to as either “the mother of” or “the wife of” whoever the more prominent male member of their family was. To further demonstrate this point, women were only accepted without excessive questioning when they were easily recognized as the mother of a specific citizen. This would mean that not only would she have to have given birth to a boy, but he would have had to reach adulthood, and a prominent enough status that he would be known throughout his community.<sup>27</sup>

The reasons for such draconian control over women’s lives are complex, but they may be shortened in summary as being due to the Greek view that women were unable to control their impulses in the manner men could be trusted to do; impulses, which had the destructive capability of dooming the entire city. Women were viewed as temptresses, unable to control the influence of Eros, god of lust. While men were more capable spiritually and mentally to refute such temptations, women could provide the final nudge into decadence and debauchery. Things such as wine, fear, sleep, envy, and many more emotions are also able to soften the resolve of a man, and using any of these in excess or improperly was also frowned upon. In a world where male reasoning is seen as the epitome of logic, anything that diminishes his capacity is a detriment to the world.<sup>28</sup>

Female desire was considered practically inexhaustible, while also lacking the possession of the logical means of men to curtail their desires, meaning that left unchecked the female sex is destined to a life of destructive excess. Indeed, Aristotle describes the difference in control of

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<sup>27</sup> Licht, Hans. *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*. (18, 33-38)

<sup>28</sup> Licht, Hans. *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*. (18, 33-38)

natural impulses by the mind between men and women in much the same language as that of a master and slave. While a man contains a rational self-control innate within himself by merit of his sex, the woman is instead meant to bow obediently to the men in her life, who will control her excesses for her, since she lacks this ability. This language used by recent grooms mirrors the same used for taming a wild animal, containing a number of punishments and rewards for good behavior.<sup>29</sup> For example, Xenophon describes one fifth century groom in his *Oeconomicus* as having to wait a time until his bride was “accustomed to my hand, that is, was tamed sufficiently to play her part in a discussion.” While the exact accuracy of the conversation with Ischomachus may be debatable, as with all forms of dialogue the speakers must at least represent beliefs accurate enough for the audience to believe they would say such a thing. Whether the conversation between these two actually happened is a moot point, the fact that it could have is telling enough.<sup>30</sup>

Greek mythology is full of cautionary tales of what may happen should women be given both the power and the freedom to act on these impulses. For example, first Medea murdered her brother and threw his body to the sea in order to flee with Jason, a man who she loved not at decision of her father but at the harm of her family. This decision was later condemned when Medea chose to destroy him when he decided to leave her for a new bride by murdering not only his new bride and father-in-law, but also her own children. For her emotion-fueled revenge, justified or not, she ruined not only her family, Jason’s, but also the ruling family of the city, a truly horrifying prospect to the ancient Greek audience. Pandora is another example of a woman

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<sup>29</sup> Halperin, Dennis; Winkler, John, and Froma Zeitlin. Eds. *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, chapter seven, translated by H.G. Dakyns, The University of Adelaide, ebook, last updated 17 December 2014

who could not control her curiosity and impulses, condemning all women to share the blame for releasing every evil upon the world. Even exemplary women such as Penelope are only able to resist their temptations, not do anything to remove their cause (in her case, the suitors invading her home), and are still questioned constantly due to the negative stereotypes their sex bestows upon them.

In light of this already decidedly patriarchal culture, it may be difficult to imagine how Athens could stand so far beyond her peers in this unsavory regard. Ingrained in her very society is a vast culture of the subjugation of women by men however. This societal belief is visible in the plays her poets produced, the works of art and pottery made and decorated by her artists, and even in the very foundational myths concerning the creation of the city as well as its mythological past.

The stories which form the mythological basis for Athenian public religion reveal quite a lot about the Athenian psyche in regards to how they viewed women, beginning with their patron goddess Athena and her birth. While Athena was indeed a female divinity, she lacks any feminizing characteristics beyond the physical. Starting with her birth, she was totally devoid of any feminine influence, springing from Zeus' head already fully grown and armed in the manner of a man. This birth both completely removes the role of the mother in a fantastical description of a male womb, and further removes the role of the mother in the development of the young child. Athena furthermore, while a powerful goddess, contains almost no feminizing characteristics beyond her status as patroness of the crafts and her skill with the loom. She attires herself in traditional male battle attire, relishes in wars and battle, wields the weapons of Zeus, and accompanies heroes on their quests. The combination of powerful female deities seems to be something the Athenians could scarcely comprehend as well; defeminizing Athena by removing

her sexuality and giving her characteristics more similar to a man, similar to Artemis; depicting Hera as practically impotent in regards to her characteristic domain, especially when compared to how Zeus consistently adulterates on his marriage to her and produces better children than her; or viewing Aphrodite as little more than a seductress of men.

In addition to this motherless birth of their patron deity, the mythological foundation of the city was just as motherless, which also serves as a reconciliation of Athena's perpetual virginity and her apparent early mythological connection to the early dynastic Athenian families. Hephaestus assaulted Athena sexually, and while he was unsuccessful, his seed still fell on the ground. From this spot on the earth sprung Erichthonius, who Athena then raised to be ruler of the city after the current king Cecrops. Just as their patron deity was, the mythological founder of the ruling dynasty of their city was likewise born without the female contribution to conception in a recurring tale of male uterus envy one sees in the myths concerning the births which Zeus enacts unassisted compared to those of Hera.

In addition to these, just as other city-states the Athenians also depicted important events from their heroic, mythological past, such as the Trojan War. Unlike other city-states, however, the Attic pottery depicts in overwhelming the "Amazonomachia", the section of the war where the Trojans are aided by their Amazonian allies, and specifically focusing on the actions of heroes such as Achilles defeating the queen of the Amazons, Penthesileia (see Fig. 1). In addition to this traditional version of the myth, the Athenians also created a version where their national hero Theseus instead defeats Queen Penthesileia as she invades Attic lands, a scene depicted on the West Metopes of the Parthenon (see Fig. 2). Furthermore, in many artistic representations of these battles, and in pieces depicting men and women together in general, the male victor is depicted as standing triumphant over his enemy, his weapon pointed at the genital area. The

depictions of long objects held at waist height pointed at the sexual areas of a woman are meant to invoke the penetration of the victor over the defeated women, in a sexual and cultural manner. (see Fig. 3).<sup>31</sup>

Just as they sought to control the femininity of their mythological women, the hereditary requirement of citizenship (both parents had to be full citizens), as well as the issue of inheritance meant that strict laws concerning the chastity of women followed. Chastity was the one virtue that women could attain to achieve and maintain, and its importance was crucial to the family. Chastity, or what may be more accurately described as following the husbands will, was both praised in young women, sought for in a bride to be, and ensured by the structure of the home. If a woman were to engage in adultery, the legitimacy of the father's heirs could and would be called into question, and no easy answer could be given without a modern DNA test. Without this guarantee, the foundational principles of Athenian citizenship, and therefore the core of the city, would find itself slowly eroded by insecurity about the legitimacy of bloodlines and rights.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to this, Sparta provides a telling example that not all city-states followed patriarchal norms to the extreme pursued by Athens. Starting from childhood, Sparta provided a state prescribed educational for both boys and girls. While this education split at an early age, in order that the boys' education focus more on their military training, the girls still were able to follow their education until about the age of eighteen when they were married. This combination of a state education and the longer time to pursue it allowed girls a much wider opportunity for

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<sup>31</sup> Keuls, Eva. *The Reign of the Phallus*. Berkeley & Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1993. (38-47)

<sup>32</sup> Thornton, Bruce. *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*. (165-169)

education than their Athenian counterparts. Furthermore, since the education of boys was focused so heavily on military aspects, it is likely that the education of the girls would have provided a stronger cultural foundation than boys. While the education of both sexes would have stressed the continuation of the Spartan way of life, men would have ensured this by a drilled military force, while women would have sung about the abstract virtues personal excellence and competition could provide to the city. The education of girls was not limited to such arts, however, with Spartans placing emphasis on the physical education of women, likely a total anomaly in the Greek world. Such training regiments entailed running, wrestling, and hurling the javelin and discus; many of the same measures a boy would face, although likely less strenuously followed.<sup>33</sup>

As with Athens, the primary goal of a Spartan marriage was an overlapping consideration for the perpetuation of the prosperity of the individual family, as well as the continuation of a strong backbone of citizens for the city. Unlike in Athens however, the woman played a key role in assessing the potential a child she and a potential man would produce, even at times engaging in relationships outside of her marriage, when all parties affected consented. This practice of “wife-sharing” was intended to ensure the production of the best children for the city, and that every male had a child to pass his wisdom on to. Unlike in Athens, the paternity of the child would not be questioned assuming all involved (the two men and the woman) consented to such matters beforehand.<sup>34</sup>

Likewise, the fact that women could own land and property in Sparta eliminated the need for a father to provide a dowry in marriage, another difference from the situation in Athens. This

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<sup>33</sup> Pomeroy, Sarah. *Spartan Women*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. (3-14)

<sup>34</sup> Pomeroy, Sarah. *Spartan Women*. (37-42)

led to another difference between the Spartans and the Athenians, concerning the matter of infanticide. While both city-states prized the birth of male children, they employed different means to achieve this goal. In Athens, this goal was achieved by the strict control placed by men over women, and the impetus for fathers to expose female children in order to avoid the difficulties, both social and financial, they entailed. In Sparta, by contrast, the male children were placed under extensive scrutiny from birth, and left to exposure if they were found to be sickly or lacking in any regard. Female children however, were largely left to without question to be raised by their mothers, as their contribution to Spartan society was not so dependent on a strong physical foundation that could be discerned after birth.<sup>35</sup>

As stated above, the one key aspect of a woman's contribution to society that could be impeded by a diminished constitution was childbirth. As in Athens, the woman's primary duty was in the production of children for the family and state. Unlike Athens however, the ability for a woman to additionally increase the standing of her family by providing material goods was greatly lessened, with much of the work provided by Helot slaves, not technically a part of any household. The Spartan method for creating proper mothers was again different from the Athenian way, with the former opting to provide mothers with superior nourishment and the ability to expend that energy on creating a strong body, unlike their Athenian counterparts, perpetually locked inside their husband's home. This allocation of rations draws another comparison to the lesser amount of food given to boys, in order to expose them to hardships they may face on campaign.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Pomeroy, Sarah. *Spartan Women*. (37-42)

<sup>36</sup> Pomeroy, Sarah. *Spartan Women*. (51-54)

As such, while the cultural standard throughout Classical Greece was that of patriarchy, the two city-states most prominent to modern examiners manage to occupy two opposite ends of the spectrum. As with many other things, Athens and Sparta find themselves of opposite cultural opinions on how to deal with women in their respective societies. Athens largely chose to restrict the roles that women could take in their city, confining them to the innards of their household until they could be put to use for their family, either through marriage or childbirth. When not working towards these goals, they likely spent their time devoting themselves at the loom, working in whatever way they could to provide a good to increase the material standing of the household, something they seldom were able to reap the full rewards from. The Spartan women, however, enjoyed a much larger comparative degree of freedom, such as being able to receive a better education and exercise freely. In order to ensure the next generation would be strong, the Spartans started by ensuring those who would give birth and raise those children would themselves be strong.



Fig. 1 Reconstructed Attic black figure pottery portraying the death of Penthesileia by Achilles<sup>37</sup>

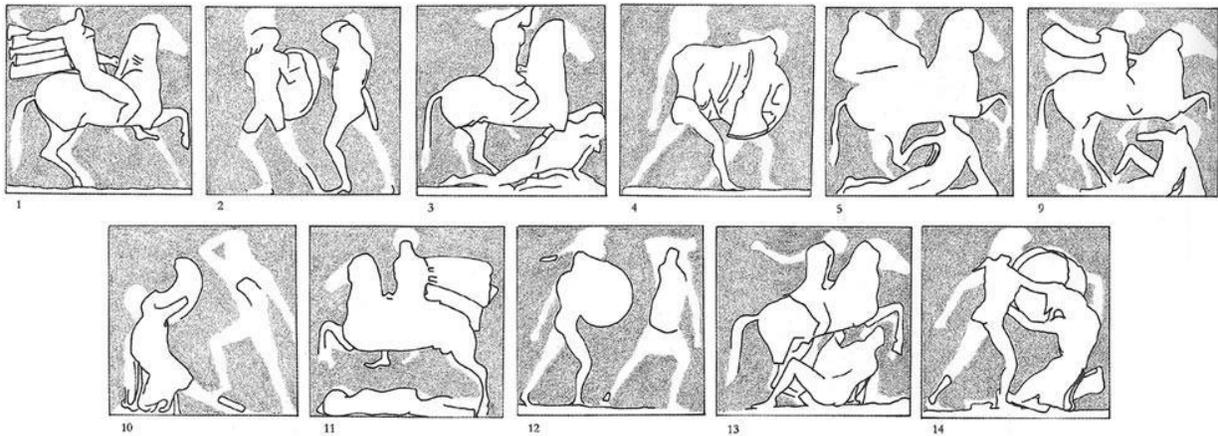


Fig. 2: Drawing showing reconstructed figures of the West Metopes of the Parthenon, which depicted the Amazonmachia<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> London, amphora by Exekias, The British Museum, 1836.

<sup>38</sup> Boardman, John. *Greek Sculpture in the Classical Period*. September 1985. Accessed 11 December 2016 from <https://amodernmanonancientwomen.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/metopes-westuniversity-of-oxford.jpg>



Fig. 3: Terracotta column krater depicting Hermes and Poseidon abducting women. Note the origin and position of the two men's weapons. <sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> New York, column krater attributed to the Orchard Painter, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1906.

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