HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ANCIENT GREECE – Sex, Love and Marriage

Sappho The sixth century Lesbian poet, Sappho, writes of her beloved, and does so in a subtle indirection which fantasizes the mood of a person in the proximity of Sappho's own girl. The difficulty of the translation is apparent especially in the last stanza, where the particular color of Lesbian sedge is in the balance, and the reader must contribute something personal to the notion of 'cold sweat.'

'He's equal with the Gods, that man' He's equal with the Gods, that man Who sits across from you, Face to face, close enough, to sip Your voice's sweetness, And what excites my mind, Your laughter, glittering. So, When I see you, for a moment, My voice goes, My tongue freezes. Fire, Delicate fire, in the flesh. Blind, stunned, the sound Of thunder, in my ears. Shivering with sweat, cold Tremors over the skin, I turn the colour of dead grass, And I'm an inch from dying.'

The thiasos tradition. Despite the difficulties imposed by distance in time and language, we read into this poem a profound longing of woman for woman, and mark this poem among the many poems and fragments Sappho addressed to women she 'loved.' The farther we go into this Lesbian theme, on the island of Lesbos in Archaic Greece, the more we understand, what we knew anyway, that love and desire dwell deeply inside social practice—as deeply as habits of eating or worshipping. Thus the love group inside which Sappho realized her desire life was a remarkable fragment of Archaic Greek social existence, the thiasos, or women's affective group. On Lesbos the thiasos tradition, which was destined to die with the change of cultures, brought together, pre-marriage, young women of aristocratic line, in dance, chorus, and pure socialization.

The bond of the lovers The bond holding these lovers to one another was the narrow space they occupied between youth and the married condition, which was without question their social destiny, but the cost of which, to freedom of female affections, could be felt in their bones, and wanted expressing. Marriage, then, was without question the woman's destiny in Ancient Greek social life, and the procreation of children was recognized, as openly as possible, to be the purpose of marriage. If we travel with a bride and groom to fifth century Athens, we will find that their wedding itself is simply the keystone in a wide network of affiliations that hold them to one another. As in most pre-industrial societies—and to some extent perhaps in all of them—two individuals who marry are essentially bringing together two different families and their interests.

Marriage and bride price In the Ancient Athenian marriage the bride price, paid by the groom to the bride's family, may be either in cash or land, depending on the status of the groom's family, and it is his responsibility to see to the maintenance of that gift, for the support of his bride, in case of a divorce or death of the groom. In exchange for which the bride commits herself totally to the household and welfare of her husband. While it is likely that the marriage, between the bride and groom we follow here, was long in the preparation, it will be during the marriage itself that the bride makes evident that she is acting through her own decision. (The revelatory act? During the night time chariot procession, in which the bride and groom are driven to the husband's home, the bride will eat a quince or apple from the husband's larder, thereby signifying her dependence on his provisions.) Flute music will accompany the pair through the torchlit night until they reach the new home that is prepared for them. There they will make the most of the marriage night, receive propitious gifts the next day, and begin their life together.

The married woman The new bride's life would from that point on be devoted to taking care of her house and family, performing useful and essential tasks like spinning and weaving, and on the whole remaining indoors, to be seen as little as possible except by her women friends, and in the intimacy of her own house. The husband could, at his own discretion, go on to lead quite a different life. If he were prosperous he could 'go out with the boys' as often as he liked, say to symposia of the sort we noted last

week, or to chat with hetairai—woman who were up for higher class, and expensive, sex, and who were educated enough to talk with men of culture, even indeed with rulers, as was the case of the well known closeness of Pericles with Aspasia. Our married friend could even visit prostitutes, abundant but risky.

Homosexual love Or of course, and this is where our story of sex and marriage grows more Greek and more complex, our male friend could follow the path taken by many of his friends and associates, and deposit his fancy on some handsome young male between the ages of 12 and 17, blooming and innocent, and become the lover of that younger person until the end of puberty, when body hair began to sprout. Were that to happen, and the older man to become an erastes to the eromenos (loved) youth, a mentoring relationship could ideally be formed, on which the youngster would rely for acculturation into the society, while the older partner could rejuvenate himself with the body of nubile youth. Were this to be the course that matters took it is easily imaginable that our male friend could openly, and pleasurably (to him), embrace a poly-erotic life with which his wife would be 'satisfied.'

Discussion questions

What kind of learning experience do you see in the erastes-eromenos relationship, as it played out in the gymnasium?

Would there have been 'content' to this learning? Or was it, as you understand the system, primarily a combination of sensuality with learning the ropes for being a full member of society?

Have you trouble understanding our description of the role of married women in Greek society? Is it possible that we thoroughly misunderstand the intimacies on which the family is based? Is there any way we can penetrate into the gunaikeion, and see into the world views of women there?

Does marriage in ancient Athens seem to you primarily a means for bringing families and property together, and thus serving economic rather than emotional needs? Is that true at all of the society in which you yourself live?

Reading list

Foley, H. P., T*he Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Princeton, l994.

Games of Venus, Verse from Sappho to Ovid, London, l991.

Halpern, D. M., *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality,* London, l989.

Hubbard, T.K*, Homosexuality in Greece and Rome,* Berkeley, 2003.

Lefkowitz, M., *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Baltimore, l992.

McLure, L., *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World*, Oxford, 2002.