ARISTOPHANES, HIPPOCRATES AND SEX-CRAZED WOMEN

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ABSTRACT: This article argues that medical literature corroborates the image of the Greek woman as sexual, lively and assertive, against the image of the Greek woman, as presented in the higher genres of Tragedy, Oratory and Philosophy, as a subdued and demure being, locked away in dark quarters in "oriental seclusion". Typically such images of women in comedy have been interpreted as gender transgressions or inversions, as jokes intended to create laughter, and consequently as highly inaccurate images of Greek women, and as an unreliable guide towards understanding perceptions on female sexuality in the Ancient Greek World. Medical literature approaches issues of gender from a different angle. It is not devoid of gendered angles; on the contrary, medical literature reflects social stereotypes of gender and sexuality quite accurately. However, unlike the higher genres medical literature does not have moral objectives. Its purpose is not to form the character of the patients but to safeguard their health, and character forming only comes in to the extent that it contributes to good health. In this respect medical literature preserves a view of life which is in some ways closer to real life and consequently highly valuable to the social historian who tries to understand gender stereotypes in the ancient world. Medical literature places emphasis on active female sexuality as a guide to good health, and in this respect enhances comedy's view of the woman as a very sexual being.

One of the most powerful orthodoxies in 20th century scholarship is the essentially pessimistic view of Athenian women as demure, faceless creatures condemned to an uninteresting existence in the women's quarters. This view of Greek women was consonant with male expectations of women in the first half of the 20th century, when classical scholarship for the first time took its first hesitant steps into the exploration of the social and cultural history of the ancient world.¹ In those earlier days the status and condition of Greek women was often compared with that of 20th century women in the Middle East, living in a state of "oriental seclusion".² Scholars were searching through the sources for evidence confirming that women were living with high standards of respectability segregated from the undesirable company of strange men, and that the ancient world enforced a morality of silence, seclusion and respectable anonymity. The advent of feminism in the 1960’s paradoxically consolidated this view, as it was consonant with an image of the past where the female voice was silenced.³

³ See for example the important collection of articles by McClure and Lardinois (2001), and, on another note, the delightful poem by the modern Greek feminist poet Ioanna Zervou entitled King Phallus:

I am she who does not speak but is spoken to
she who doesn’t write but is written to
she who descends from the night of time mute.
My rage swells the rivers of rebellion
lowering my own cry killing the language
In this scheme of things major areas of classical scholarship and women’s history were sidelined or totally ignored, because they did not fit in with the theory of the obscure respectable figure. For example, the economics of segregation and respectability always assumed that women had the financial comfort and security to be able to stay away from public places and the prying eyes of strange men. However, the Sicilian expedition alone left thousands of widows, many of whom were not independently wealthy with small children and an entire household to provide for, and could not go back to their natal families simply because there was no close male relative left alive to care for them. Many of them did have to work, outside the house and talk to strange men and live in the real world, away from the protective shadows of the gynaeconitis. And the only study on women’s work in the ancient world until the 1980’s was a dissertation by Pieter Herfst, written in 1922, and even with a few localized contributions in recent years, a complete and systematic study of women’s work in ancient Greece, in all its diversity and complexity, is still to be written.

The reason why we still do not have a single comprehensive study in this important area is not because there is not enough evidence. The plays of Aristophanes, Euboulus, Hermippos and almost every other comic poet are full of working women, and abundant references to women’s labor can also be found in oratory, medical literature, philosophy and in every aspect or ancient life for which we have evidence. The reason why this critical chapter in the history of ancient women is so badly neglected is that it does not fit the stereotype, and in fact cancels so many firm assertions in modern classical scholarship about women, their seclusion, isolation, passive attitude to life, silence and exclusion from society. It would be difficult to sustain such assertions in the face of evidence suggesting that thousands of women had to earn a living in classical Athens.

A routine maneuver around this thorny issue has been to argue that the women mentioned in those situations were low class and not respectable, and this is precisely where part of the problem lies. Class and respectability are not the same. A married woman who sold wreaths to feed her children was low class but certainly respectable. Such problems, where modern theories are contradicted by substantial evidence, are certainly not limited to areas that have received little attention, but are manifested just as much in areas which have received more attention, like the representations of female sexuality, or one might say over-sexuality, in Comedy. There we have a similar dilemma. On the one hand the mighty stereotypes of the segregated, effaced and socially inadequate female are looming in the background, but on the other hand there is...
an immense diversity, richness, and vivacity in the representations of Athenian women in Comedy, which arguably match better real life than the very schematic and idealized versions of more elevated genres. The wives of Athens in all three women plays of Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, the *Thesmophoriazousai* and the *Ecclesiazousai*, are respectable, but at the same time highly sexual, lively, passionate, with a proclivity for drink and a fondness of lewd jokes. Far from the sheltered and isolated figures of high literature they have friends, they know their neighbors and other women of their town, which means that they also have a public life outside the protective walls of the inner oikos. This view of Athenian women is so vastly different from the orthodox view in 20th century literature that scholars had to interpret it as an exception, an aberration or an unrealistic convention specific to the genre of comedy, which does not accurately reflect Athenian life.

For Lauren Taafe the “feminine” in Aristophanes is an imaginative construct, and the Aristophanic woman is not real. John Gilbert, one of Taafe’s reviewers, points out that the bibliography most often quoted in support of her assumptions are 1980’s favorites like Michael Foucault, Froma Zeitlin and Helene Foley. This was the time when the stereotype of the silent, effaced and marginalized Greek woman was at its strongest. For Eva Stehle the Aristophanic woman is a male theatrical construct, which cannot speak for women, as female roles were played by male actors, and in the Thesmophoriazousai this feature is exploited as part of the plot. Judith Fletcher has argued that the women in Lysistrata are so far removed from their traditional role as child-bearers that once they take the oath they start acting like men. The implication of this would be that the pronounced sexuality of the Athenian female as we encounter it in Lysistrata is in fact a male attribute temporarily assumed by the women. Froma Zeitlin has discussed female characters on stage within the context of gender and genre transgressions. Michael Shaw sees a polarization between oikos and polis, and in his scheme of things when women act outside their traditional roles as mothers, wives or legal minors, they transgress into the world of men. Helene Foley accepts the concept of transgression from one sphere to the other, but sees it as a dialectic between the two spheres rather than a contrast. In a similar spirit Gwendolyn Compton-Engle sees the changing of cloaks between men and women in the *Ecclesiazousai* as significant not only of a gender reversal but also a dialectic between the oikos and the polis. Ralph Rosen considers feminine roles on the Attic stage as subordinate and employs the image of the obedient and subordinate female to interpret the chorus of the *Poleis* of Eupolis. Rachel Finnegan subscribes to the view of gender transgressions in the case of strong female characters on the comic stage, and further argues that the images of

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6 For example: Lys. 1-145; Th. 298-602; Ec. 617-624.
8 Stehle 2002: 369-406.
female sexuality in comedy are comic topoi with no bearing to reality.\textsuperscript{13} Jeffrey Henderson has suggested that female characters did not appear in Attic Comedies before the time of Pherecrates, and in fact Lysistrata may have been the first female protagonist. However, B.W. Millis has correctly answered that our evidence is too scant to allow us to draw safe conclusions about the early days of Old Comedy, and when women appear in Comedy there is nothing to suggest that their presence is out of the ordinary.\textsuperscript{14}

This is only a small sample of a lengthy debate, surprisingly resting on a single assumption and never questioning it. This assumption states that philosophical works like the \textit{Oeconomicus} of Xenophon, and rhetorical platitudes about respectability found in tragedy, philosophy and oratory are the true reflection of the lives of Athenian women, while comedy presents a stylized and essentially unrealistic image. This is a curious assumption in itself, given that very often comedy is funny precisely because it cuts through those social pretentions, and reaches to the core of the inconvenient truth which individuals and society had been trying to disguise. But if comedy can be suspect because of its nature, the more elevated genres like tragedy, philosophy and oratory come under suspicion just as much, because they serve certain agenda, sometimes a didactic purpose, sometimes a very schematic and one-sided presentation of morality, and sometimes a pretence that the world is not what it seems to be. The central question in this quest is whether we can we find a genre which is, at least for the most part, devoid of the agenda of high literature and more straight-faced than comedy. It is the contention of this study that medical literature can handsomely fulfill this role and help us decide how seriously we can take the issues of female respectability, spatial segregation and sexual subordination. It can also help us decide whether comedy is subverting the rules of society and the roles of each gender, or simply reflects common, mainstream views, albeit presented through a distorting mirror in order to achieve its primary goal to induce laughter. Comedy, it appears, has an unexpected ally and defender in the relatively plentiful writings of the Greek physicians which have reached us.

The representation of women in the Hippocratic corpus has been the subject of several studies so far. Representative of the tone of these studies is Helen King’s assertion that “Her virginity (sc. the Greek woman’s) is both socially desirable and medically dangerous”.\textsuperscript{15} This paradox is only created if one assumes that from a social point of view sexual abstinence is a desirable state for Greek women, as that assumption would be in direct conflict with the dominant view in Greek medical literature until the time of Soranos that virginity is neither desirable nor medically recommended for young girls who have started their menstrual cycles. But this assumption is far from safe, and it is my contention in this study that it is a modern creation on the basis of limited evidence. Studies analyzing the construction of the feminine in Hippocratic medicine, rely on the same 1980’s favorites to reconstruct the social background of these works as studies regarding the construction of the feminine in Greek comedy, and as in the

\textsuperscript{13} Finnegan 1990: 100-106;
\textsuperscript{14} Millis 2001.
\textsuperscript{15} King 1998: 203; for the chapter on the Green Sickness see pp. 188-204.
case of comedy what modern scholarship argues and what the classical texts say
do not match, equally in medical literature there is a conflict between the
construction of feminine ideology, as concocted in 20th century studies, and the
actual works of the Hippocratic corpus. The only difference is that in the case of
medical literature it is considerably harder to explain the discrepancy as a result
of “gender inversion” or “comic fantasy”. 

What needs to be re-examined is neither the sources nor their
interpretation, but the almighty stereotypes in the construction of the feminine in
20th century literature. This, of course, would be a vast topic which not even a
hefty monograph would be able to discuss in sufficient detail; here I have no such
ambitions. I narrowly focus on the issue of female sexual activity in comedy and
medical literature and argue that both genres suggest a much more sexual image
of the Greek woman that philosophy, oratory and to a certain extent tragedy
would dare to admit. This image would not be consonant with the unrealistic
ideal of Xenophon’s Oeconomicus, but it would be perfectly in line with the
physicality, cult of beauty and the body, overt sexuality and unashamed
sensuality of the period before embarrassment over one’s body became the norm
and the rule in later antiquity. The highly sexual female of the Greek comedy and
the Greek medical literature is not a caricature but a more realistic representation
of the Greek woman than the unrealistic caricature of the wife of Ischomachos.

That ancient medical literature reflects contemporary social views has
been noticed by previous scholars, most notably, Helen King, Lesley Dean-Jones
and Ann Elis Hanson. Here it would be sufficient to offer a couple of brief
examples. In the Hippocratic Aphorisms (5.42) we read:

Γυνὴ ἔγκυος, ἢν μὲν ἄρσεν κῦῃ, εὔχροός ἐστιν· ἢν δὲ θῆλυ, δύσχροος.

A pregnant woman has a healthy color if she is going to give birth to a
male, but an unhealthy color if she is going to give birth to a female.

In this case one can see patriarchal social attitudes coloring medical opinion.
Giving birth to a female is socially undesirable, thus the unhealthy look. The
actual wording, however is interesting; in Greek an adjective is used for
male/female, and although a child is implied no noun is used at this point. One
would think that the use of a noun like παιδίον “child”, κόρος “son”, κόρη
“daughter”, and so on, might change the dynamic.

Another statement from the Aphorisms (7.43) was as puzzling to Galen, as
it is to us. The Hippocratic author thought that no woman can be ambidextrous
(Γυνὴ ᾠμφιδέξιος οὐ γίνεται). Galen did not understand this statement either, and
he is guessing that it could be because of the weakness of the muscles in a
woman’s hand, compared to a man’s. In reality probably the reasons for this
perception were social: men were forced to develop ambidexterity more than
women, and a good example would be the way a man would need both hands
used in a specific way in the Greek phalanx formation. The left hand always held
the shield and the right held the sword or spear. A left-handed man would need
to learn very early in life to handle his sword with the same dexterity as a right-
handed man, if he wanted to live. A woman at home would be more at liberty to use whichever hand she felt more comfortable for her tasks and duties. Skills and dexterities developed in social settings and roles were interpreted as biological facts. Much of the female biology, as viewed by the mostly male medical practitioners of the classical period, was a social construct based on attitudes affirming male dominance and superiority, and this is why it is important to take notice of those instances where medical literature does not seem to conform with the 1980’s stereotypes. In those instances our perceptions of the stereotypes are misaligned, not the sources themselves.  

J.R. Pinault has noticed that Soranos contradicts 500 years of medical literature in order to explain that sexual abstinence was not harmful to the body. Pinault explains this as the result of changing attitudes towards sexuality in the 1st century AD. The message of abstinence, at least outside marriage, is becoming stronger, and Soranos is perfectly in tune with views which were gaining ground in his time, like those of the Jewish philosopher Philo, who wrote around the same time:

> We the descendants of the Jews have excellent customs and laws. Everywhere else it is permitted after their 14th year of age to use with great insolence prostitutes and all kinds of lowly whores and women who earn a living with their bodies. Among us, however, it is not even permissible for a courtesan to be alive, but the death penalty has been established for a woman who practices prostitution. We do not go with any other woman before lawful intercourse, but pure we enter into marriage with pure virgins, because we prefer its purpose to be not pleasure but the sowing of legitimate children.

Paola Manuli has interpreted the entire *Gynaecology* of Soranos as a eulogy of abstinence, but Ann Elis Hanson countered this argument by pointing out that so much in this work is about pregnancy and childbirth, and that Soranos does not consistently advocate abstinence. It is fair to conclude that the Gynaecology has been influenced by contemporary social views about sexuality, and serves as an important witness to the changing social attitudes about virginity and female sexuality, as it enshrines those attitudes into biological and medical explanations. As the pagan Greek world was coming to a close, and the ideologies which fueled its energetic march through history were changing, so was medical science. However, what is true for the 1st century and the transition into a more prudish and sexophobic era, must also be true for the preceding centuries. Until the time of Soranos, the view that sexual abstinence was harmful to the female body, and just as much the male body (retention of sperm), was one of the most universal and long lasting medical orthodoxies. This view is firmly established into medical doctrine in several Hippocratic studies, such as *Afflictions of Virgins, Nature of
Woman, and elsewhere in the corpus. The author of Afflictions of Virgins observes:

Πρῶτον περὶ τῆς ιερῆς νούσου καλεομένης, καὶ περὶ τῶν ἀποπλήκτων, καὶ περὶ τῶν δεμάτων, ὡς οἱ φθοβόντες οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἰσχυρῶς, ὡστε παραφρονέειν καὶ ὄρην δοκεῖν δαιμονίαν τινος ἐχουσών δυσμενέας, ὡς τε μὲν νυκτῶς, ὡς τε ἡμέρης, ὡς τε ἀμφοτέροις τῇ ἑωτῶς δυσμενέας, ὡστε ἔπειτα ἀπὸ τῆς τούτως ὁμοιότητος τῶν πολλῶν ἡδονή ἀπιγγυνοῖς πλέον ἔχοντες ἡς ἄνθρωπος ἀθυμοτέρη γάρ καὶ ὀλιγωτέρη ἡ φύσις ἡ γυναικειή. Αἱ δὲ παρθένοι, ὡς δὲ ὀρθὴ γάμου, παρανδροῦμεναι, τούτῳ φθορᾷ πάσχοντες ἢ ἀπηγχοῖσθεν, πλέονες δὲ γυναῖκες ἢ ἄνδρες ἀθυμοτέρη γάρ καὶ ὀλιγωτέρη ἡ φύσις ἡ γυναικειή. Αἱ δὲ παρθένοι, ὡς τε μὲν νυκτῶς, τούτῳ σαφῶς ἡμέρης, τούτῳ δὲ ἑωτῶς, ὡς τε μὲν νυκτῶς, τούτῳ ἑωτῶς ἑωτῶς, ἐπειτα ἀπὸ τῆς τούτως ὁμοιότητος τῶν πολλῶν ἡδονή ἀποφρονοῖσθαι, πολλοὶ ήδη ἀπηγχοῖσθεν, πλέονες δὲ γυναῖκες ή ἄνδρες ἀθυμοτέρη γάρ καὶ ὀλιγωτέρη ἡ φύσις ἡ γυναικειή.

First, regarding the so-called sacred disease and apoplexy and terrors, those afflictions of which people are so terrified that they lose their minds and they think that they see hostile demons going after them, some times during the night, sometimes during the day, and sometimes both. After such a vision many hang themselves, more women than men, because feminine nature is less brave and more timid. When it comes to virgins, those who are of marriageable age but left without a man, suffer this affliction especially during menstruation, while they were not afflicted by this condition before.

The medical orthodoxy in Hippocratic medicine and subsequent centuries, all the way down to the time of Soranos, was that sex was necessary for a woman’s good health, while virginity was harmful. Giulia Sissa has defined virginity in ancient Greek culture as a concept broader than the state before the breaking of the hymen, one that occasionally was sanctioned by some cultic significance, but otherwise undesirable and dangerous. Helen King while discussing a medical condition named Chlorosis (the Green Disease), which appears for the first time in Renaissance medical manuals and supposedly afflicted young girls, convincingly argues that it is derived from Hippocratic beliefs about virginity as a harmful state. King correctly traces the name of the disease back to a famous fragment of Sappho, where love is presented as a disease taking over the body, and making someone sweat and turn “green” or “pale” (chlôros). The cure for this condition was marriage and regular sexual intercourse:

οὐκότε δὲ ἄνευ φαντασιάτων, ἡδονή τις, ἢ ἄφινεν τοῦ θανάτου ὡσπέρ τινος ἀγαθοῦ. Φρονησάτως δὲ τῆς ἀνθρώπου, τῇ Ἀρτέμιδι αἱ γυναῖκες ἦσαν τα πολλὰ, ἅλλα δὲ καὶ τὰ πουλυτελέστατα τῶν ἰματίων καθιεροῦσι τῶν γυναικειῶν, κελευόντων τῶν μάντεων, ἐξαρατόης. Η δὲ τῆς ἄπαλλαγῆς, ὡς ταῖς μή
ἐμποδίζῃ τοῦ ἀίματος τὴν ἀπόῤῥυσιν. Κελεύω δ’ ἔγωγε τὰς παρθένους, ὡς τὰχιστα ἐνοικήσαι ἀνδράσιν.

Sometimes, even without the hallucinations, there is a certain pleasure in thinking of death as if it were a good thing. If the woman goes back to her senses, the other women dedicate many other gifts, and especially very luxurious women’s garments to Artemis, deceived by the advice of the soothsayers. But the real reason for the recovery is that there is no longer anything preventing the flow of the blood. My advice is that as soon as something like this afflicts virgins, they must immediately be given in marriage to a man.

The condition described here is probably Type I Bipolar Disorder with psychotic features. The author considers traditional recourse to religion a deception and provides a scientific explanation, instead. As with many other conditions which affected women the ready-made scientific explanation that retention of menstrual blood caused the affliction is routine. The body is sick because there is too much blood trapped inside it, and the correct course of action was to release that blood. This would happen if the woman had intercourse, which would open the closed mouth of the womb. This is why the ancient physician suggests that the correct treatment of bipolar disorder is marriage. Regular sexual intercourse afterwards would restore the woman’s health as the menstrual blood could flow freely from the widened mouth of the womb, or be used to nurture the embryo during pregnancy.

The view that marriage and regular sex are necessary for a woman’s well-being is also consonant with legal provisions regulating marriage. A family was expected to find a husband for a daughter from a very young age, as soon as she reached sufficient physical development to have sexual relations with a man. This happened around the age of 14, an age not very different from the age of consent in many modern countries. More importantly, if no living male relative legally entitled to conduct a marriage contract with the future husband of the woman on her behalf was alive, the automatic process of epidikasia (namely marriage through adjudication) was activated as soon as the woman reached the age of 14. The woman became an heiress (epikleros) and the nearest male relative of her father ought to marry her, or step aside in favor of the second nearest relative. The property of the family went with the woman to her new husband, who would

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23 Lesley Dean-Jones and Helen King have explained in sufficient detail this fundamental premise of Hippocratic Medicine.
24 Synoikein is a term which applied to lawful marriage, not to simple cohabitation or sexual relations between a man and a woman.
25 Modern legal systems set the age of consent usually around 16. Among different US states it fluctuates between 14 and 18, with 16 been the most common. A slightly lower age of consent is generally the rule among European countries: 14 is not uncommon (e.g. Italy, Estonia, Bulgaria, Albania), and in some places it is set even lower (e.g. 13 in Spain). 14 is also the age of consent in China. Throughout the world it fluctuates between 12 and 21 (online data: http://www.avert.org/age-of-consent.htm).
26 A woman could be given in marriage through a standard contract by her father, brother or paternal grandfather.
be essentially the manager until children were born in the marriage, who
inherited the property of their grandfather. As a result of this process a husband
was always found for the woman. These arrangements may seem strange to the
modern reader, but they were intended to ensure that every woman in Athens
had a husband from a young age. Even if menstruation normally began at a later
age, as some studies have argued, the family did not take the risk of keeping a
young girl for too long without a husband. Sound medical advice from the period
would certainly have told them to do so. Although the reasons behind these
provisions are obviously socio-economic, medicine sanctioned tradition and
provided a rationale and a further incentive why marriage at such a young age
was very highly recommended.

Medical literature, comedy and the laws of Athens agree on this point, that
women needed regular sex in order to keep their good physical and mental health
and balance. The women of Aristophanes are respectable, and yet sex-crazed; this
was their nature, and a man’s penis was not just an instrument of pleasure,
although it was unashamedly that too, but also a necessary accessory for a
healthy life. The fear of overt sexuality, and the social rules of feminine
respectability in the first half of the 20th century were responsible for the
dismissal of the evidence from comedy as nothing more than a joke, a poetic
transgression or a male fantasy. Overt sexuality, which seemed incompatible with
the etiquette of civilized feminine behavior in the 20th century, was extended to
the Greeks, despite good evidence that they did not have the same hung-ups and
anxieties, and that it was not until later antiquity that sex was associated with
moral degradation. In reality, the comic representation of the highly sexual
woman is compatible with the provisions of Athenian law, which go to unusual
lengths to ensure that no woman is left without a man, and also with
contemporary medical views on the female body. In this respect comedy and
medical literature probably preserve more authentic images of Greek women
than the stylized literature from which 20th century scholarship drew to justify its
own prejudices and insecurities.
Bibliography


