

Notes on Quiz #4: Living Unpublicly in Athens

1. Who were the hetairai? What role did they play in Athenian society? Why is it tempting to idealize them?

“In classical Athens, prostitutes had to be registered and were subject to a special tax. Those at the top of this social scale were called *hetairai*, or ‘companions to men.’ Many of these, in addition to physical beauty, had had intellectual training and possessed artistic talents, attributes that made them more entertaining companions to Athenian men at parties than their legitimate wives. It is no accident that the most famous woman in fifth-century Athens was the foreign-born Aspasia, who started as a *hetaira* and ended as a madam, and in the course of her life lived with Pericles, the political leader of Athens.”

“The *hetaira* had access to the intellectual life of Athens, which we nowadays treasure, and a popular courtesan who was not a slave had the freedom to be with whoever pleased her. Admittedly our sources are biased, but the fact that we know of some courtesans who attempted to live as respectable wives, while we know of no citizen wives who wished to be courtesans, should make us reconsider the question of which was the preferable role in Classical Athens—companion or wife.”

2. In *The Bacchae*, who attacks Pentheus and tears him to pieces? Why do they do this?

The Maenads—women of Thebes induced into a frenzy by the liberating rites of Dionysus, and led by Pentheus’s mother, Agave—attack Pentheus while he is spying on their rampage. In their dream state they believe he is a lion. Pentheus himself is feeling the effects of the god’s power and seeing things as well. The Maenads rend him to pieces, and Agave brings the head of the “lion” home as a trophy of the power that the women have together.

All of this is the result of Thebes not accepting Dionysus and ignoring his rites, which Pentheus has outlawed. Dionysus exerts his power as punishment for the city and its rulers, to teach them the wrath of the gods and the possibilities of inhuman understanding released through the frenzy.

EC1. In Classical Athens, all of the following were true about seduction EXCEPT:

- (a) Seduction was considered more serious crime than rape, because it implied longer contact
- ✓ (b) Adultery via seduction was allowed one day a year, on the Festival of Eros
- (c) The aggrieved husband had the right, but not the obligation to kill the seducer
- (d) As with rape, the male was always understood to be the guilty party, not the female

EC2. According to Pomeroy, why did Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle all believe Spartan customs regarding women were more wholesome than those of Athens?

“Motherhood at an early age, combined with a life spent indoors, was disadvantageous to the health of the Athenian woman. More children were born in the first half of the twenty-year reproductive period than in the second half, making the period from approximately sixteen to twenty-six years old the most hazardous. It is interesting to recall here Plutarch’s approbation of the Spartan custom of having girls marry at eighteen, since they are then in a better physical condition to bear children, although he preferred earlier marriages for other reasons.

“Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle all believed that Spartan customs concerning women were more wholesome. Xenophon praised the Spartans for nourishing their girls as well as their boys, for it was unusual among the Greeks to do so. This differentiation in nourishment could exist even for suckling newborns. ... Xenophon also approved of the Spartan custom of encouraging women to exercise so that they could maintain a good physical condition for motherhood. The well-developed physiques of Spartan women caused comment among the Athenian housewives in the comedy *Lysistrata*, although it may be suggested that performing household chores, especially moving back and forth before the loom, offered an Athenian woman ample opportunity for strenuous exercise. In the *Republic*, Plato prescribed physical exercise for women and stated that females should become parents for the first time at twenty and males at thirty. Later, in the *Laws*, he reduced the age minimum for females to any time between sixteen and twenty. Aristotle suggested that pregnant women be forced to exercise by passing a law that they must take a daily walk to worship the divinities presiding over childbirth. He also noted that it was undesirable for the very young to produce offspring, since more of the babies were likely to be female, and the mothers endured a more difficult labor and were more likely to die in childbirth. He suggested that the optimum age for marriage was eighteen for women, thirty-seven for men.”