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How, Where and with Whom: The Politics of Sex in Ancient Greece

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A catchy title to pull in the punters and entice them away from going punting proper was appropriate for an MCR lecture on a warm afternoon in May. This paper, in living up to the promise of that title, discusses the politics of sex through an investigation of the sexual positions and activities of women, men, slaves, foreigners and satyrs (half men, half horse creatures) as depicted on the pots and pans that surrounded the ancient Greeks. The question for this paper is: how does the display of the sexual act itself contribute towards the making, breaking and maintaining of social, political and gender hierarchies in the societies within which the images are visible? What does it mean to put, what we today might consider, 'private' business on public display? What indeed are the politics of sex?

Such an investigation is not itself new in Classical scholarship, yet a re-visit is merited for three reasons.

First, today's society is still grappling with this very question: how to evaluate private sexual choices as a marker of public character and status. In the latest spat between Sven Goran Eriksson and the press over his liaisons with an FA Club secretary, the argument was partly whether Sven's private affairs should have any bearing on his ability to perform his public role as manager. Should your sex life have a bearing on your role and status in society?

Second, despite such debate over the role of sex in our society, images of sex from societies such as those in ancient Greece, are considered, not as being able to contribute to this debate, but, at best, as titillating erotica, sold in calendar form from Sparta to Samos. Such packaging desensitises us from understanding how these images worked within the society in which and for which they were created and stops them from bringing their full weight to bear on our 'sex debate' today. The 'position of the month' doesn't really get us very far, except in highlighting our own voyeuristic tendencies.

Third, where these images have been considered in their original context, their role has often been characterised as maintaining strict social, political and gender boundaries within ancient Greek societies. Boundaries, which have then often been used as moral support for the strict sexual mores of their investigators' own eras.

In this paper, I hope to address these issues by arguing that, if we do take some time to position (ourselves and) these images properly, a much more dynamic and unbalanced picture of social distinction emerges. The politics of

sexual positioning - the how, where and with whom of ancient Greece - is a much more complicated world than the tourist calendars could suggest. Far from being mere pornography, these images not only illuminate how Greek societies regulated themselves, but can also help us to understand the role and meaning of the "Sven sex" debate, which we find ourselves in today.

Before we delve into the supposed kamasutra of ancient Greece, let me first define what we are going to look at: the art produced in democratic Athens during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. "Democratic" Athens was a place where only citizen men could participate in the democratic business of the city: a long way from what we understand as democracy today. Women, slaves and foreigners were excluded. Such a polarization between those who were "in" and those who were "out"; between the citizen male 'Self' and the woman, slave and foreigner 'Other', can help us to understand a famous statement of Athenian civic identity: "I am not a slave, I am not a foreigner and I am not a woman". The logic was: if I am not part of the Other, I must be part of the Self.

One such occasion that crystallised this demarcation of Self and Other was the Symposium: an all male party, where men got together to drink, play games, talk philosophy and politics and fornicate with each other and with prostitutes. Participation in the symposium confirmed your male citizen status and it was at these symposia that many of the images, which we will be discussing, were displayed.

What were these images displayed on? Potters and painters in Athens churned out clay vessels of different shapes and sizes all with specific uses - carrying water, wine, drinking, cooling etc. and on which they painted scenes. The content of these scenes varied enormously from myth to daily life to sex to fantasy to horror and to death.

The images of sex depicted on these pots portrayed different types of people (namely, men, women, slaves and foreigners) having sex in different ways in different places. As such, the male citizen who used these pots and looked at these images learnt about how the Self and Other had sex. By seeing what the Other did, the citizen learnt what he should not be doing (if he wanted to be part of the male citizen Self). In short, these images seem to have confirmed for the viewer what was 'correct' sexual activity for the male citizen.

So what did the Other do? Women were politically inferior to men in Ancient Athens, but also held great power as they were key to the continuation of the citizen race. Yet that role was continuously threatened by a woman's supposed natural promiscuity and high sex drive. This was itself due to, according to medical writings, their bodies being dominated by their sexual and reproductive organs as well as their lack, according to philosophers such as Plato, of a control mechanism in their brains.

The images displayed on the pots at the symposium went a long way to both constructing and confirming these stereotypes of the female Other to those attending.

A woman's ability to run amuck was shown by the mythical stories of the Amazons, who killed their husbands and cut off one of their breasts to fight against, typically, Greek citizen men. Not only Amazons were shown as fighters, but 'normal' women who had subverted the natural order to such a degree that they fought with large erect penises.

Images of women engaged in sexual activities were also displayed for the male viewer, which confirmed the notion of a woman's unquenchable sexual appetite. Women were portrayed as avid masturbators (unlike the citizen male for whom masturbation was a *faute de mieux* reserved for slaves). Women 'liked' using multiple sex toys, and one was even shown using an upside-down amphora - the vessel used for storing wine for the symposium - to pleasure herself (Figure 2).



Figure 2 - Woman misusing an amphora.

Source: ARV 238,5

This image demonstrated not only a woman's sexual appetite, but also the deviant nature of both the appetite and the woman, since such activity subverts the 'correct' use of the amphora as a vessel for pouring wine at the citizen male symposium. How could women ever be citizen men, when they didn't even know how to use an amphora properly...

Indeed so subversive was the female sexual appetite that women were thought to enjoy (and were shown as enjoying) relations with other women and even with animals.

By depicting women engaging in these types of sexual behaviour, these images not only justified the social and political inferiority of women but also outlined to the citizen male what he shouldn't be doing if he wanted to maintain his own superior position.

Slaves were depicted engaging in masturbation like women. Moreover slaves were often depicted as having large phalluses. Contrary to today's obsession with size, the Athenian citizen male did not consider a large penis as an advantage, since it closely connected its owner with the animal kingdom,

particularly the donkey, which was a subservient animal. The large penis was a sign of lower class status rather than masculine prowess and we only need look at the plethora of ancient Greek male nude statues with small unobtrusive penises to confirm this. Indeed athletes and young men used to tie up their penises (a process called infibulation) to minimise their appearance.

Images on Greek pots also portrayed foreigners as having different sexual tendencies to the Athenian citizen male. Foreigners were thought of as principally effeminate. This identified them with females, and so male foreigners were often shown in the less dominant receiving position when having sex with Greek men (Figure 3). When having sex with each other, they were portrayed as having sex in such an acrobatic way so as to put both partners in an effeminate position (Figure 4)



Figure 3 - A Greek man approaches a Persian man who is bent over. The image runs round two sides of the same vessel
Source: Keuls 1985 Fiv.261



Figure 4 - Scythian men's acrobatic sex acts
Source: Sutton 2000 Fig. 7.4

Images of the Other having sex helped to construct a pattern of how not to have sex if you were a citizen male. At the same time, some images on pots showed citizen men engaging in sexual relations demonstrating how they should have sex.

In their relations with women, these images clearly demarcate two categories of relationship - one with hetaerai (the prostitutes of the symposium) and one with wives. Interestingly, images of the citizen male actually having sex with his wife were very rare indeed! Wives were portrayed sitting inside the house waiting for the drunken husband to return, or approaching the bedroom with oil flasks, or, in mythical stories, being raped by their husbands, but actual marital sex between citizen man and his wife was almost absent.

Such an absence rings louder when we place it in relation to the plethora of images that show detailed sexual encounters between men and hetaerai. Men were shown in the act of penetration, always in a dominant position, and often with a money-bag present in the image to characterise the nature of the act (Figure 5). Multiple orgy scenes were also represented with men occasionally shown beating the hetaerai, both as part of the sexual act and, it seems, as punishment for poor performance.



Figure 5 - man and hethera with money purse
Source: ARV 923,29

Citizen men are also portrayed having relationships with other citizen men. Here a complex line had to be negotiated since in having sex between men, one at least had to be in a receiving position, thus imitating a foreigner or a woman. At the same time, actually being penetrated (in any position, dominant or not) was also tantamount to identifying yourself with a woman. A form of sex was thus often employed (in the images on pots at least), which allowed both males to dominate and which avoided penetration. This was called 'intercrural sex', where men faced each other and placed the other's penis between their thighs (Figure 6). In their relations with other men and with citizen boys, it seems, seduction and pursuit was fine, yielding to that seduction in a conventional way was not.



Figure 6 - two men face one another for intercrural sex in the centre of the image.
Source: ABV 297,16.

In this way, images on pots used at the symposium probably mirrored events going on in front of them. It would be wrong to deny that there wasn't an element of titillating erotica about them. They may even have acted as spurs to action. However by re-presenting such behaviour in art, these images also helped to confirm and structure how the Athenians saw particular acts and with whom they associated them. This in turn marked the boundaries between the male citizen Self and the woman, slave and foreigner Other. How you have sex and with whom (or what) made explicit social, political, ethnic and gender differences. That expression of Athenian civic identity "I am not a slave, I am not a foreigner and I am not a woman" might well also have run: "I do not masturbate, I am not penetrated, I am always dominant".

However, strict boundaries and sex have never been easy bedfellows. Into this clear-cut picture of sexual behaviour and social boundaries must now be introduced the creature called the satyr.

A creature half horse-half man, standing on two horse legs with an enormous permanent erection, the satyr was incredibly popular in images on pots throughout the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., particularly on pots designed for the symposium. The satyr frolicked around drinking wine, acting drunk and dancing with Dionysos - the God of wine and the symposium just as the male citizens did.

Yet satyrs have often been thought to sum up everything the citizen male did not want to be since they had all the bad (sexual) traits of women, slaves and foreigners. Satyrs buggered each other and gave each other oral sex (Figure 7). They exposed themselves and masturbated turned full frontal towards the viewer. Names, such as Terpekelos (meaning 'shaft pleasurer'), were painted above them, chosen specifically to highlight their 'shameful' activity. They showed off the size of their penises by hanging things off it and balancing wine cups on it (Figure 8). They dressed up to look like foreigners and used their penises as weapons. A satyr was even portrayed in a 69 position with a deer. Moreover, to solidify his connection with the Other, one satyr was portrayed as having sex with an amphora, subverting its 'proper' use just as we saw a woman doing (although at least, in order to penetrate the amphora, he had to use it the 'right' way round!)



Figure 7 - Satyrs as the other
Source: Berlin 1964.4



Figure 8 - Satyr balances a wine cup
on his penis
Source: Berard 1989 Fig 171

Satyrs have often been thought to merely reinforce the boundaries we have already seen. In being half horse, half man, the satyr naturally goes too far and thus helps the watching citizens guard against breaking those sexual social and gender barriers. Or does he? Instead of guarding those boundaries, does the satyr actually show how easily they are confused? Does the satyr, in being sexually über-zealous, womanise the man within him and show how easy it is to become part of the Other?

Such an interpretation has been bolstered by the more recent study of images on pots, particularly those created between 520-470BC, which have long been disregarded by scholars intent on preserving what they thought was the strict sexual code of ancient Greece, which in turn was being used to support the strict moral code of their own times.

In this period of turbulence surrounding the Persian wars, there were images on pots of citizen men allowing themselves to be penetrated in a non-dominant position like women. There were images of men masturbating like slaves. Men were even shown to invite buggery by offering their anuses to the viewer(s) of the pot and seen to have sex with animals, just like women and satyrs. Indeed men were possibly even more Other than satyrs, as they were shown to vomit and defecate at symposia, something satyrs never did.

Citizen man, as those images of the half horse half man satyr and these occasional images of men behaving badly suggest, was not so far away from all the categories of Other as we have been led to believe. Together, these images have subverted the very clear distinctions other images seemed to have put in place.

At the same time, and continuing down to the end of the fifth century BC, satyrs started to look, in images on pots, increasingly like the citizen man. The supposed antithesis of citizen man increasingly became indistinguishable from him. They dressed like old citizens, chatting up the handsome young men (Figure 9). In these images, the satyr's body, once so distinguishable from that of a man, humanised to such a point that the two were synonymous. Satyrs even started to imitate the mythical heroes of Athens, like Perseus and Heracles.



Figure 9 - Satyr on left chatting up a youth

Source: Berard 1989 Fig 192

However, satyrs did not only imitate citizen man, but all the categories of Other as well. They imitated slaves and low class workmen: treading grapes, cooking, caring for donkeys and sculpting. Satyrs echoed the activities of foreigners and women echoed satyrs by dressing up to imitate them.

The satyr made the citizen viewer double take about the differences between him and every other section of society by copying each of them (with regard to their sexual antics); by taking over their roles or imitating them in everyday activities and by letting themselves be imitated. The satyr was everyone from slave to woman to foreigner to citizen man. He linked them all through his character and thus tore down the boundaries that those initial images, even those of the satyr himself, set up (and which generations of scholars have been happy to accept). If the satyr could be all of these categories, then how much real difference was there between them?

The satyr thus challenged the citizen viewer to think about how he defined himself and whether the Self and Other boundary really existed at all.

One drinking cup demonstrated this inter-changeability very well. On one side, a satyr's face looked directly at the viewer (Figure 10). The foot of the cup had been replaced by a set of male genitalia. When the user drank from the cup, he drank from the satyr. Moreover when he lifted the cup by the handles to drink, a satyr face on the other side of the vessel covered his. The drinker presented 'his' satyr face, and pointed 'his' genitalia at the other members of the symposium. While he drank, the citizen man literally became the satyr with all that such a transformation entails.



Figure 10 - A drinking cup with Satyr faces

Source: Oxford 1974 344

Images of sexual antics on pots in Ancient Athens thus both structure and subvert a way of defining citizens and non-citizens by their sexual practices. They seem to, instead of just structuring a firm line between Self and Other, make that line purposefully problematic and they leave that problem as a matter for the viewer.

Each individual citizen is made to re-consider what he thought he had understood about sex at the very time and place where he may well be engaging in it, in front of others, at the symposium, attendance at which was supposed to confirm his citizen status. Indeed the place where the boundary between citizen man and non-citizen man is most likely to be reached - in the heady midst of the wild symposium party - is the place where these images (are themselves placed to) question where that boundary actually lies.

Through these images, bought and chosen by the symposium giver, the citizen symposiast is forced to think about what exactly a citizen is and what exactly a citizen does. Moreover each individual reacted (and then acted) within the symposium group, in front of that group. Images of sex forced the viewer to think, (re-)act and thus to some extent define himself in front of his fellow citizens.

In a similar way, members of the MCR as part of the audience group to this paper in May, defined themselves to that group by their reactions to, and thoughts about, the images shown (although readers and college authorities will be glad to hear that this was as far as the similarity with the ancient symposium went!)

The question of sex and society is not a new one. What these images throw up is the implausibility of sexual behaviour, or behaviour in general, offering strict boundaries which are able to demarcate a Self and an Other, an "Us" and a "Them". Such a polarisation ignores the grey middle ground and the satyr, in Athenian art, seems to have been used to make an issue of just such an area. The point of these images seems to me, not to come to a conclusion about where the boundary lies, but to make the issue of the middle ground a source of constant debate and discussion, through which society is able to evolve. Such discussion continues to this day in, at the very least, the form of Sven, the press and the MCR Graduate Lecture series.

My thanks go to the MCR president for inviting me to speak in May and to Mr D. Murphy in calling for this contribution to the College Magazine, as well as to you, the readers, for taking the time to peruse it.

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