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The Erotics of the "Asexual": the Paederastic Ideal in Greek Marriage

This paper suggests that an important factor in Greek marriage of the classical period was sexual attraction to barely pubescent or early adolescent girls that is parallel to the attraction to boys of the same age. It proposes that an erotics centered on the (apparent) asexuality of the childish or immature body was a powerful motive for marrying very young girls, and that anxiety concerning virginity or the legitimacy of children was of secondary importance. Menarche, which probably occurred at around 14, was the usual signal of marriageability, though girls could be married as young as 12 (Demand, *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece*, 1994, 10-11). The Hippocratic *On Virgins* shows that some girls married before menarche, as it recommends marriage and childbearing to cure an illness resulting from the blockage of "accumulated menses" (8.466-70L) - surely, in fact, the absence of their onset. The paederastic ethos was not, in short, limited to same-sex relationships, and this paper discusses the evidence for the idealizing of the immature female body for its own sake, and not for its potential to assimilate to masculine ideals of beauty (*pace* J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse*, 1991², 207).

While there is ample evidence to support the view that Greek men married very young girls because they wanted chaste and docile wives, they were hardly unique in this regard, and many who shared their desire recommend marrying mature young women. Hesiod warns men to marry a wife of good character lest they become the village laughing-stock (*WD*, 701-703), yet he also recommends that the woman be 19 (698). The Romans of the early empire, who surely wished to ensure family honor, appear generally to have married girls in their late teens (B. D. Shaw, "The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage," *JRS* 77 (1987), 43). Early marriage was criticized by Plato, who in the *Republic* proposes that brides be 20 (460e; cf. 16-20, *Laws* 785b), and by Aristotle, a staunch supporter of patriarchy, who recognizes the risks to mother and child of early pregnancy (*Pol.* 1335a13-23); the latter reasoning was shared by the Spartans, whose young women married relatively late (Plut. *Lyc.* 15.3) (Demand 102). Thus, the traditional rationale for very early marriage is not sufficient to account for the phenomenon.

Why should we seek explanations for sexual behaviors for which there may have been no other cause than that they gave pleasure? This was Kenneth Dover's sensible questioning of the theory that Greek same-sex pederasty is a vestige of Indo-European initiation rituals; any didactic function, he suggested, was likely to have been the result of the relationship, not its cause ("Greek Homosexuality and Initiation," in *The Greeks and Their Legacy*, 1988, 125). This paper, likewise, asserts that sexual attraction to the immature female body outweighed concerns for virginity, the legitimacy of children, and even for the health and safety of mothers and babies, in determining the age at which Greek girls of the classical period frequently married.

Evidence for an erotics centered around the immature child, male or female, comes from artistic and literary sources where, in relation to adult men, both boys and girls were represented as being modest, shy, and coy (H. A. Shapiro, "Eros in Love" in

Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome, 1992), 63; Henderson, 207). Older youths and adult men and women might take measures to appear not just younger, but sexually immature: youths would rid themselves of facial and bodily hair, just as married women and female prostitutes regularly depilated their pubic hair (Henderson, 207). In vase painting and sculpture, youths are depicted with unusually small genitals evocative, perhaps, of those of much younger boys; this convention is in keeping with what Robin Osborne calls the "emasculatation of the beardless figure," which from 500 BCE on is shown nude and, except in the case of athletes, without ligaturing of the penis, in order, he claims, to maintain the fictional asexuality of the youth ("Men Without Clothes," in *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean*, 1998, 90-99). Women and girls were likewise frequently represented as not fully developed, with firm bodies, small breasts, and little pubic hair (Henderson, 207).

We have failed to notice the paederastic ethos in relation to marriage, this paper concludes, because of two common assumptions: 1) that marriage in the classical period was solely a socio-economic arrangement, with little or no role for erotic desire; and 2) that opposite-sex and same-sex relationships are antithetical, so that the same erotics cannot be posited of both. Thus, "Why would they marry barely pubescent girls?" and "Why would they pursue barely pubescent boys?" are treated as wholly unrelated questions, as if they were not being asked of the same men.