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# A CLASSICAL EDUCATION

*Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, then  
another thousand. Catullus*

Classical writers may not have invented sex but they were among the first to document it in graphic detail. As the royal philosopher King Solomon, writing in Ecclesiastes nearly 3,000 years ago, commented, ‘There is nothing new under the sun.’ And it’s a theory that certainly seems to have been borne out by the Ancient Greeks and Romans: however perverse the practice, they almost always tried it first. It is no coincidence that many modern words connected with sex, from aphrodisiac and eroticism to nymphomania and zoophilia, are Greek in origin ...

## IT’S A MAN’S WORLD

Classical Greece was a great place to be a man and less so to be a woman – or at least a respectable woman, who was expected to remain chaste and be rarely seen. Married women usually stayed at home with other women while their husbands socialized. Wives rarely dined with their husbands and never if there were guests.

Women were generally not regarded highly by the ancient Greeks and they had few legal or political rights. You only have

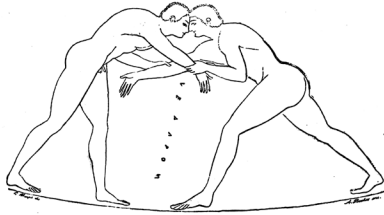
to look at their flawed goddesses and positively malevolent fictional heroines: Euripides' vengeful Medea, who murdered her cut up her brother, is just one case in point. For many men, the only point in marrying was to have legitimate heirs, so it is little wonder that women wanting to be relatively free might be drawn to the life of a courtesan. Known as *hetairai*, high-class courtesans were usually well educated and respected, holding positions in society reminiscent of later European royal mistresses. In the fourth century BC, the Athenian statesman and orator Demosthenes wrote, 'We have *hetairai* for our pleasure, concubines for our daily needs, and wives to give us legitimate children and look after the housekeeping.'

## NOT TONIGHT, DARLING

The lack of social relationship between married couples had an effect on the birth rate, and large families were virtually unknown. The historian and philosopher Xenophon evidently saw this as a grave problem in the third century BC, decreeing that, 'by law, a couple lacking a legitimate heir is required to have sex at least three times a month' until the wife became pregnant.

One sinister result of the low status of women was a high level of female infanticide, with baby girls abandoned or left to their fate outside on open hillsides. Over in Sparta, male infanticide was also practised if the baby was considered too weak or imperfect in some way: a brutal early form of eugenics.

## MALE WORKOUTS



Wrestlers on an ancient Greek vase painting

At its extreme, the modern stereotype of Classical Greece is of open homosexuality, appreciation of the male form culminating in naked wrestling, and mixed public baths where anything was permissible. The reality was rather different – both more innocent and more shocking.

On the one hand, the public baths were strictly segregated, male and female, and never mixed. On the other, Greek gymnasiums were all-male preserves where the athletes did indeed wrestle in the nude.

The word gymnasium comes from *gymnos*, meaning ‘naked’.

But gymnasiums were designed to train young men not just to wrestle but also to exercise and compete in a variety of sports in preparation for public games. They were also meeting places, where philosophical and intellectual debate might take place.

Exercise was viewed as an important part of a young man's education, stressing as it did health and strength. Athletes were naked as a tribute to the gods and also to encourage an aesthetic appreciation of the male form. One can see how this might be open to different interpretation.

### MENTORING

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Similarly, it was customary for well-educated men to 'adopt' teenage males, acting as intellectual guides to complete the youths' moral and social development when their formal schooling ended. 'Since we are all likely to go astray,' Sophocles once said, 'the reasonable thing is to learn from those who can teach.'

Classical scholars disagree as to whether any physical relationship was traditionally involved in these educational mentorships, but the fact that philosophers including Socrates, Plato and Aristotle felt compelled to condemn homosexuality with adolescents suggests that relations were not always entirely innocent. That said, and education aside, homosexuality between adult and teenage males was certainly not entirely taboo in Ancient Greece, as vase paintings often rather graphically show. By the fifth century BC the practice of *paidierastia*, or pederasty, was well established in Greek culture.