

Classical Athenian Family in the Limelight: Was there Affection between Athenian Spouses?

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The objective of the study is to re-examine the literary evidence in par with the vase paintings that show scenes from domestic settings in order to perceive whether any affection existed among Athenian spouses because the interpretations given with regard to some such domestic settings seem problematic.

The generally accepted view based on the conceptions of the authors of normative texts is that the Athenians considered their wives only as a machine which produce legitimate children and they looked for courtesans, prostitutes and hetaerae (respectable courtesans) for entertainment and that they bore no sentiments of affection for their spouses. Many paintings on Attic red and black figure vases are interpreted and explained following such perceptions.

Yet, information from literary sources, more precisely those from Athenian drama and law court speeches infer that the condition of Athenian families was not as stern and cold as preached and promoted by normative writers such as Plato and Aristotle. This idea is further confirmed through many domestic scenes depicted in Athenian vases such as the domestic scene shown on the Harvard hydria. The scene on it can be interpreted as demonstrating a nucleus of an Athenian family comprising a mother, father and child (with a maid).

Not everyone was ready to accept this point of view, probably, when looking at the youth with restrained thoughts of Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon, who describe the husband or the groom as twice as old as the bride which easily fits with the cold relationships they instilled into their relationships when they further asserted that the husbands spent more time outside their homes perhaps in the agora or gymnasium with their peers and not with the family at home. Yet, information from Athenian dramatists and orators pile up in favour of warm affection between spouses.

The insight we are provided with through a meticulous study of our literary sources and vase paintings is that there were positive sentiments such as warm affection between Athenian spouses as in any other normal society in antiquity or in our era. This cold and negative picture on the relationship between Athenian spouses has resulted from taking the perceptions of authors of normative texts, whose intention was to present the ideal picture they expected of their society but not the real scenario, as the ultimate characteristic of the Athenian society.