

The lives of women in Classical Athens

The legal definitions of the role of women which were examined in the previous chapter provide important evidence for the way in which women in Athens were expected to behave. Clearly, women's lives would have been influenced to one degree or another by these regulations. However, not all areas of behaviour are taken account of by the law, and even legally enshrined roles can be negotiated and manipulated. In this chapter I shall be attempting to bypass the legal statements and explore the reality of women's day-to-day experience, but not without supplying the usual reminder about the masculine and upper-class bias of our sources.

EXPOSURE

Although there seems to have been no legal or moral bar on the exposure of infants of either sex, the sources record no single real-life instance. The references to it are all either general, metaphorical or fictional, and although it seems likely that exposure did sometimes take place, it has to be admitted that we are basically ignorant about the extent to which it was practised.

The babies who were most at risk, regardless of their sex, were probably those who were illegitimate, sickly or handicapped. Socrates, in Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus* (161a), prior to investigating an argument to see whether it is ill-formed, asks the man who has produced it, 'Will you be able to bear seeing (your child) examined, and not get angry if someone takes it away from you, even though it is your first delivery?'; while Aristotle recommends that there should be a law forbidding the rearing of disabled children (*Politics* 1335b). Whether the Athenians were in the habit of exposing healthy legitimate children is unclear. Modern scholars who believe that they did have generally maintained that more girls than boys would have been disposed of in this way. Their arguments have rested in the main on the low valuation of daughters (see pp. 132-3), which is hardly conclusive, and on demographic speculation, which is more persuasive.

Golden (1981), for example, has suggested that an oversupply of marriageable females, brought about by a combination of the practices of early marriage and frequent remarriage for women, could only have been avoided if the Athenians had exposed as many as 10 per cent of all females born. There is some literary support for this view, although it comes from the Hellenistic period: a third-century comic poet Posidippus writes, 'Everybody raises a son even if he is poor, but exposes a daughter even if he is rich' (fragment 11, Kock).

But, as Golden recognises, the suggestion is open to objections. The non-infanticidal death rates of males and females are unknown, so that we cannot be sure that the surplus was not wiped out in other ways (for example, infant mortality could have affected more girls than boys because of inferior care). Moreover, the practice of keeping concubines and worries about young women who will not be able to find husbands (see pp. 115, 119) could be seen as indicating that some surplus of marriageable women did in fact exist. There would certainly have been periods, most notably at the time of high casualty rates during the Peloponnesian War, when the state would have wanted to maintain this surplus, in order to increase the citizen birth-rate: one measure which helped to achieve the latter was, as we have seen (pp. 128-9), the granting of citizenship to the children of concubines. Where individual motives for infanticide are concerned, the cost of providing dowries would very likely have deterred men from rearing daughters; but having too many sons would have been equally undesirable, since the estate would have to be divided among them.¹ The subject, in short, is fraught with difficulties. Probably the most that can be said is that there may have been times in the Classical Age when the Athenians were exposing more girls than boys, but it is unlikely that the practice was generalised.

The passage from Plato's *Theaetetus* quoted above indicates that the wishes of a mother may not have been taken into account when the decision was made to expose a child. The responsibility, in the case of legitimate children, would have rested with the father, the child's *kyrios*. But the deed itself would often have been performed by the midwife or a household slave, who would have placed the baby in a deserted spot, or possibly near a rubbish-heap, shrine or crossroads where there would have been a chance that someone wanting a child would have picked it up. Mothers who decided to expose illegitimate children would naturally have found the process an agonising one, as Euripides recognises when he creates the character of Creusa, who has been haunted all her life by the memory of her baby, the product of a rape, stretching out his arms to her as she wrapped him in a shawl and tearfully laid him on the ground (*Ion* 954-63).

GIRLHOOD

Children of both sexes received just one personal name. Most girls' names were feminine forms of those given to boys, and often seem to us to be singularly inappropriate - 'Hegesistrata', for example, means 'army-leader'. Sometimes, however, they were more obviously feminine: they might denote abstract entities, such as Euphrosyne (Happiness) or Eirene (Peace), or the qualities which women were expected to display, as in Malthake (Soft), or Eukoline (Contented). The latter, however, were rare among citizen women in Classical Athens.²

There is evidence to suggest that daughters were less highly valued than sons. One of the 'crafty dodges' attributed to females in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* (564-5) involves a woman who exchanged her girl baby for a slave's boy and passed the latter off as her own; and in *Women in the Assembly* (549), a man who is complaining bitterly about

his wife's absence at a friend's confinement is told, 'Never mind, it was a boy'. The desire for an heir to perpetuate the family would have been partly responsible for these reactions, though the rapture that greeted the birth of a boy would doubtless have become an embedded cultural response. Girls may also have been less well fed than boys. Xenophon reports that in Greek states other than Sparta girls lived on the plainest fare and were often allowed no wine; he points out in addition that their sedentary lives were hardly conducive to health (*Constitution of the Spartans* 1.3).

Nevertheless, some men may have been quite happy to be presented with a daughter once the obligatory son had appeared on the scene. Athenian plays are not short of references to elderly men's affection for their female offspring: for example, in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, Iphis, remembering how his daughter used to cradle his head in her arms and kiss his face, says, 'To an aged father there is nothing more sweet than a daughter. Boys have greater courage, but they are less given to tender endearments' (1101-3).

When they were small, girls probably mixed quite freely with boys. But at about the age of six, when boys began to go to school (see below), the dichotomy between the public male sphere and the domestic female sphere would have started to enter the lives of children: Girls who stayed at home with their mothers learning how to perform household tasks would have had far fewer opportunities for socialising with members of their own sex than did boys, who in addition to school also went to the gymnasium and to athletics festivals. As girls neared puberty, the segregation from males would have become more of an object of conscious concern. A young unmarried woman might not be sent on an errand, because 'it is not nice for girls to creep through the crowd' (Euripides, *Orestes* 108), and she ought not to be seen even standing on the roof of her house (Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 93-4). Athenian feelings on this matter seem to have been shaped as much by a concern for maintaining appearances as by a desire to keep young women away from the danger of male contact. Whether young women had many opportunities for evading segregation is difficult to ascertain, but among girls of the lower classes surveillance may have been much less strict.

EDUCATION

When Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.5.2) refers to a dying man's desire to find a trustworthy person to look after his son's education and protect his daughter's virginity, he is probably highlighting a common dichotomy in the upbringing of males and females. Whereas many boys between the ages of about six and fourteen attended small private schools, there is very little indication that girls received any education outside the home.³ Some women, nevertheless, seem to have been literate. In a law-court speech, for example, a guardian accused of having defrauded his nephews of their inheritance is said to have been challenged on his administration of the estate by the boys' mother, who appears to have been perfectly familiar with the contents of an account book found by her sons (*Lysias* 32.14-15). Vase paintings in which women are shown in a domestic environment holding book-rolls may represent the activities of real-life females from the privileged upper classes.⁴

But the evidence for literacy among women is scanty, and it would almost certainly have been the exception rather than the rule. Only one of the women in Athenian tragedy – Euripides' Phaedra (*Hippolytus* 856-81) – is represented as knowing how to write, and in another of Euripides' plays (*Iphigenia in Tauris* 582-7), Iphigenia has had to

ask a Greek prisoner to write a letter for her. In a society which relied heavily on the spoken word, illiteracy would certainly not have been as great a handicap as it is perceived to be today, and the level of literacy even among males may not have been very high. But there can be no doubt that more males than females would have been able to read and write, and this discrepancy would have reinforced the notion of the intellectual inferiority of women. Most Athenian girls, it must be remembered, would have been married off at an age when boys were still living at home with their parents and still in some cases receiving formal education. As Sourvinou-Inwood has pointed out (1988, p. 78, n. 84), a girl's maturation was considered to be complete when she became capable of bearing children; that of a boy was a much more protracted affair, and involved initiation into the civic and military duties and rights of a future citizen.

Literacy may even have been regarded as a dangerous accomplishment in a woman: a later writer of comedy warns that a man who teaches his wife to read is giving additional poison to a horrible snake ([Menander] frag. 702, Kock). In general, female ignorance would have been viewed by some people as an important part of the barrier erected between women and the outside world: in Xenophon's treatise on household management, a husband Ischomachus reports that before their marriage his wife had been carefully supervised, 'in order that she might see and hear as little as possible, and ask the fewest possible questions' (*Oeconomicus* 7.5). The only woman in Classical Athens known to have displayed intellectual accomplishments of any note is Pericles' mistress Aspasia, who was a foreigner (see p. 148); and none of the female poets whose names have been preserved (see p. 85) was Athenian.

Those women who did learn to read and write were probably taught at home by their mothers. Some scenes on vases suggest that privileged Athenian girls may also have had lessons in music and dancing from outside tutors; and lyre-playing may have been one of the skills acquired by some upper-class women.⁵ But undoubtedly the most common form of instruction received by girls in the home would have related to their domestic role. This would often have taken the form of helping out with tasks such as cooking, cleaning, caring for younger children, and handicrafts. Even Ischomachus's sheltered young bride had learned how to make a cloak out of wool and hand out spinning to the slave-girls (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.6).

There is no evidence to suggest that Athenian girls were given any kind of systematic athletics training in the gymnasium, as boys were; but some interesting vase paintings of the sixth and fifth centuries indicate that they may not have been so rigorously confined to the home as might be otherwise imagined. One pot of the late sixth century represents a scene in which young women are bathing naked in the open air, apparently in a creek. Some are swimming, some diving, some anointing themselves with oil, some combing their hair, and two stand under makeshift showers. We cannot be sure that the viewer was intended to see these as citizen girls; but there is nothing in the representation to indicate that they are either Amazons, nymphs or prostitutes, as some have suggested.

Fragments of pottery from the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron (see p. 30) show girls who are taking part in running races. This activity would certainly have had a ritual significance, and the nudity of some of the older running girls perhaps points to a rite performed prior to the completion of the period of service, in which the shedding of the bears' yellow gowns symbolised the approaching bridal night and the imminent transition to womanhood. There are no other depictions of real-life female athletes on surviving Athenian pots, but there are a number of representations of the mythical sportswoman Atalanta, who is sometimes shown engaged in a wrestling match with the

hero Peleus, and in one example is seen leaning on a pick-axe, the tool used by wrestlers to break up the earth in the competition area. It is difficult to believe that Atalanta's habitual costume in these paintings – skull-cap, bra and shorts – was not based on something worn in real life. Finally, scenes in which fully-grown girls are shown washing at a basin and using a strigil (an athlete's scraping implement, Fig. 21) can perhaps be interpreted as depictions of post-athletic ablutions. The presence of an element of fantasy in these representations should not be overlooked, and none of the material indicates with any certainty that it was considered acceptable for Athenian girls to engage in sporting activity outside a restricted ritual context. However, the idea should not be dismissed out of hand.⁶

THE RELIGIOUS ROLE OF ATHENIAN GIRLS

In Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata*, a chorus of Athenian women gives a recital of the honours conferred on them by their city when they were girls. These take the form of a progression of religious offices: 'As soon as I was in my seventh year I became an *arrhephoros*. Then I was an *aletris*. At the age of ten in honour of the *Archegetis* I was an *arktos* shedding the yellow gown at the festival at Brauron. Then as a beautiful girl I acted as a *kanephoros*, wearing a string of figs' (*Lysistrata* 641–7).⁷

An *arrhephoros* ('bearer of secret things') was one of two or possibly four girls, chosen by the magistrate in charge of religious affairs, who resided 'for a certain time' (Pausanias 1.27.3) on the Acropolis in Athens (Fig. 37a), and who made a mysterious nocturnal visit to an underground shrine of Aphrodite in the gardens on the north slope of the hill, carrying unnamed sacred objects on their heads.⁸ They were also entrusted with a less arcane task, helping the priestesses to set up the loom for the weaving of the sacred robe presented to Athena at the Panathenaia (see p. 26). The *arktos*, or bear, was the girl who served Artemis, possibly for as long as a year, at her sanctuary at Brauron in eastern Attica (see p. 30): the title *Archegetis*, or first leader, is probably being applied here to Artemis, the leader of the band of girls, and 'shedding the yellow gown' may refer to the races which the girls ran in the nude (see p. 133). Very little is known about the other two roles mentioned by the chorus. An *aletris* ('grinder') may have ground meal for a special cake offered to a goddess, possibly Eleusinian Demeter. The cults of a number of divinities had *kanephoroi* ('basket-bearers') attached to them; these were young women, probably chosen among other things for their good looks, who in religious processions carried baskets containing sacred objects. The nature of the particular ritual mentioned in the *Lysistrata* is unknown.

There is little evidence to support Brelich's theory (1969, pp. 229–311) that the chorus's recital alludes to what at one time had been a system of universal female initiation based on four successive grades. The number of girls engaged in all these roles was very small, and with the possible exception of service at Brauron, there is no reason to believe that it had ever been any larger.⁹ Their initiatory quality is also debatable. The only one which seems to have involved a ritual of segregation prior to entry into a new life is service at Brauron, where girls in the pre-menstrual phase who dressed up as bears may have been acting out a period of non-human existence preceding their socialisation as fully adult wives and mothers. The other roles do not appear to have included any initiatory element, other than that of temporary separation from their families. This in itself, however, while certainly not amounting to a full-scale rite of passage, would at least have helped to prepare a girl for the trauma of her marriage and her permanent

removal from her home. At the same time she would have been introduced to the role which she was to play as an adult in the religious life of the community.

Young women in Athens were accorded a number of other ritual duties. The weaving of Athena's sacred robe was carried out by a team of girls, the *ergastinae* (or workers), who were chosen from the aristocratic families of Athens. In the spring month of Munychion, girls carrying boughs of sacred olive wrapped in wool walked in procession to the temple of the Delphinium, where they made supplication to the presiding deities Apollo and Artemis (Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 18.2). A little later in the year, the temple of Athena Polias on the Acropolis was given its annual spring-clean: girls who were called 'Washers' and 'Bathers' removed the ornaments from the ancient statue of the goddess, and in the procession that followed Athena's robes were probably carried away to be washed (Plutarch, *Life of Alcibiades* 34.1). Musical performances were also a part of the religious life of girls: during the festival of the Panathenaia a chorus of young women kept up an all-night vigil on the Acropolis, and danced and sang in honour of the goddess.¹⁰

SEXUAL SEGREGATION

In the first half of this century much of the scholarly discussion about the position of women in Classical Athens centred on the issue of their seclusion.¹¹ Nowadays, there seems little doubt that sexual segregation did at least exist as an upper-class ideal. Xenophon (*Oeconomicus* 7.30) produces a classic statement of it when he puts into the mouth of Ischomachus the words, 'So it is seemly for a woman to remain at home and not be out of doors; but for a man to stay inside, instead of devoting himself to outdoor pursuits, is disgraceful'. According to Plato (*Laws* 781c), women are a race 'accustomed to an underground and shadowy existence'; while the spectacle of Athenian women crouched in doorways, asking passers-by for news of their husbands, fathers or brothers after a disastrous defeat in battle, is described in one speech as 'degrading both to them and to the city' (Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 40). The market-place was apparently included in the public locations deemed unsuitable for respectable females, for it seems to have been common for husbands or slave-girls to do the shopping.¹²

The segregation of male and female citizens was also applied to those occasions when the social life of the *polis* penetrated the private house. The *symposium*, the party where men drank and talked with their friends, was not an event for citizen women, although mistresses and female entertainers might attend. If a woman went out to parties with a man, this was regarded as proof that she was a courtesan and not his lawful wife (Isaues 3.13–14). In her own home a wife would not be expected to have any contact with male visitors. She was not present when guests were entertained, even if the invitation had been an impromptu one (Lysis 1.23). To say that a woman talked to men, or even that she opened the front door herself, was tantamount to calling her a trollop (Theophrastus, *Characters* 28).

The home was the arena devoted to the private life shared by males and females, and any violation of the home might be interpreted as an affront to the modesty of its womenfolk, even if the incursion had manifestly been made for other purposes. This aspect of the code of honour is highlighted in a number of law-court speeches. In one, the speaker relates how his opponent Simon, in the course of a drunken raid on his house, had entered the women's rooms and encountered the speaker's sister and niece, 'who had lived so modestly that they were ashamed to be seen even by relatives'. Even

Simon's companions felt that this was a monstrous act (Lysias 3.6–7). In another oration, the speaker is careful to contrast his own behaviour with that of his opponent's associates. Before entering the house of his opponent Theophemus in order to seize some surety for equipment which should have been handed over to him, he had first ascertained that Theophemus was unmarried (Demosthenes 47.35–38). He was not, in other words, likely to run across any women. But later, when Theophemus's brother and brother-in-law broke into the speaker's house, they confronted his wife and children in the courtyard. The resulting commotion brought one of the neighbours running up, but even in these circumstances he did not like to enter the house in the absence of its master (Demosthenes 47.52–61).¹³

The issue of sexual segregation is a complex one, however. Those scholars who in the past were anxious to defend Athenian men against accusations of locking up their womenfolk often made much of the fact that in tragedy and comedy females seem to have little difficulty in leaving the house.¹⁴ This, one might argue, is a necessity arising from one of the conventions of Athenian drama, which often deals with relations between family members but is almost always set outside the home. It is also thematically significant, since the interaction between private (feminine) concerns and public (masculine) ones is something which interests many Athenian dramatists, and symbolically the threshold of the house is the location where this occurs (see p. 179). Moreover, male characters in drama sometimes express their discomfort at seeing women engaged in exchanges in a public place. Euripides' Achilles is desperately embarrassed when he is forced into conversation with a free-born woman, Clytemnestra, in the Greek camp (*Iphigenia in Aulis* 821–34); and Electra is warned by her husband that 'It is shameful for a woman to be standing with young men' (Euripides, *Electra* 343–4). In comedy, too, a woman who leaves the house may be suspected of having an assignation with a lover (Aristophanes, *Women in the Assembly* 520).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that in many references it is the fact that women are seen conversing with unrelated males, rather than their appearance out of doors, which is found to be offensive. Segregation is not the same thing as seclusion, and some people may have thought it acceptable for women to emerge from the house occasionally provided that they kept apart from male company. The belief that 'a woman's place is in the home' is not linked solely to the aim of protecting her chastity. Many women would have had plenty of work to keep them there as well. When a character in the *Lysistrata* says 'It's difficult for a woman to get out of the house', she adds 'What with dancing attendance on her husband, keeping the servant-girl on her toes, putting the baby to bed, bathing it, feeding it . . .' (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 16–19). The domestic and time-consuming nature of women's work must have contributed greatly to the notion that a woman who was seen too much out of doors must be up to no good, so that neglect of one's housewifely duties would have become synonymous with a lack of modesty.¹⁵

For many women of the lower classes, complete confinement to the home would not have been feasible. In a democratic society, Aristotle asks, 'who could prevent the wives of the poor from going out when they want to?' (*Politics* 1300a). In those homes where there was no well in the courtyard, and no slave to fetch water, women would have to go to the public fountain. The female chorus in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (327–31) speaks of the crowd that gathers round the fountain in the morning, and scenes like this are also depicted in vase paintings (Fig. 22); there is no reason to assume that all the women represented in these are to be seen as slaves, aliens or courtesans. Lower-class women also

went out to work, and even where they were employed indoors (for example, as midwives), they would of course have had to leave the house in order to get to their jobs. Although many of the working women in Athens were probably the wives of resident aliens, there is evidence that citizen women worked as grape-pickers (Demosthenes, 57.45), and that some of them sold goods – such as ribbons, garlands, vegetables and bread – in the market.¹⁶ When Lysistrata summons the 'seed-and-pancake-and-green-grocery-market-saleswomen' and the 'garlic-selling-barmaid-breadwomen' among her female followers, she is probably referring to Athenian rather than to alien women (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 457–8).

Clearly, lower-class women – the majority of the female citizen population – had a number of legitimate reasons for appearing out of doors. Segregation does not necessarily break down in these circumstances. Most of the activities which took women out of the home would not have necessitated a great deal of converse with men, and as Gould (1980, p. 48) has suggested, citing comparisons with modern rural Greece, there may still have been a 'residual sense of boundary . . . marking them off from the strange males with whom they must have come face to face'. Women who lived in the country, who may have been responsible for tasks such as tending gardens and feeding chickens, probably had more cause to leave their houses than town-dwellers.¹⁷ The strictest segregation was likely to have occurred in the city, where there were far more unknown men on the streets, and where public space may always have been regarded primarily as male space, occasionally penetrated by females. Until 431 BC, the majority of the Athenian population lived outside the urban centre, but this picture changed when the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War necessitated the evacuation of the Athenian countryside. The women who at that stage came to live in the overcrowded city may have experienced an intensification of the constraints upon them. It is interesting to speculate that the frustration of these countrywomen, coupled with a growing need for women to go out to work (see pp. 138, 145), may have produced an increasing disjuncture between male expectations and female behaviour.

Sexual segregation was often a feature of social gatherings in Athens, but there were some events – such as funerals or weddings – where women would have been in mixed company. These would have been mainly family affairs, but women did attend the large state funeral which was conducted for men who had died in the Peloponnesian War (see pp. 128, 198), and they were also present at state festivals (see pp. 160–3). However, occasions such as these probably provided little or no opportunity for converse with unrelated males (see p. 126).

There is no reason to believe that women were isolated from companions of their own sex. Many women, particularly in the lower classes, would have had their own circle of friends and neighbours, part of an autonomous sphere of female relationships which existed in parallel with the masculine social network. Women went to help each other when they were in labour (see pp. 131–2), and might pop into a neighbour's house to borrow some salt, a handful of barley, or a bunch of herbs (Theophrastus, *Characters* 10). When Euphiletus's wife (see p. 126) slipped out one night, she told her husband that she had gone next door to relight a lamp (Lysias 1.14). One speaker in a lawsuit informs his hearers that his own and his opponents' mothers had been close friends, 'and used to visit each other, as was natural when both lived in the country and were neighbours, and when, moreover, their husbands had been friends when they were alive' (Demosthenes 55.23–4). Female friendships, unlike their male equivalents, were formed and conducted within the home, and some men may well have been suspicious of these 'hidden'

relationships. It is, after all, a male playwright who puts these words into the mouth of a female character, Hermione: 'our homes are a sink of evil. Against this/ double-lock your doors and bolt them too./ For not one wholesome thing has ever come/ from gadabout female callers – only grief' (Euripides, *Andromache* 949–53).¹⁸

The seclusion of women, while it may have existed as a masculine ideal, could probably only have been put into practice by the affluent classes. As an effective demonstration of a man's ability to protect the purity of his womenfolk, it would have been a mark of masculinity, of status and of wealth, and it is little wonder that it was mentioned by speakers in the law-courts who were anxious to stress their respectability. But by the end of the fifth century a tension may have been developing between ideal and reality. Euripides' *Andromache* reveals a contradiction between expectations about women and their actual behaviour when she delivers this personal apology:

First, since a woman, however high her reputation,
Draws slander on herself by being seen abroad,
I renounced restlessness and stayed in my own house;
Refused to open my door to the fashionable chat
Of other wives.

(*Women of Troy* 648–52)¹⁹

In comedy, a woman might well be one of the 'other wives' who ignored her husband's wishes: 'If we visit a friend for a celebration, wear ourselves out and fall asleep, you men turn up and search the place from top to bottom, looking for "the bane of your life"' (Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 795–6).

The same tension can be perceived in attitudes to women of the poorer classes. In the fourth century, a man named Euxitheus could be deprived of his citizen rights because his mother, having worked as a nurse and a ribbon-seller, was suspected of not being Athenian; and yet, he argues (Demosthenes 57.45), many Athenian women have become nurses, wool-workers, and grape-pickers, on account of our city's misfortunes (probably the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War). 'We do not live', he points out, 'in the way we would like' (57.31). The theory that it was the mark of an Athenian woman to stay quietly at home had certainly not been demolished, but it was obviously being put under great pressure at a time of considerable economic hardship.

Scholars who earlier this century argued against the Athenian practice of seclusion were troubled by the notion of contempt for women which they believed it implied. In this, they were imposing their own standards of judgement on the men of ancient Athens. It is perfectly possible for women to be 'valued' but also to be denied the same rights as men, and the ideal of seclusion would undoubtedly have been viewed by Athenian males as indicative of their great regard for women and of their own diligence in protecting them. It is perhaps only by women today that it is construed as a mark of a lack of freedom and equality for women which has nothing to do with either contempt or its opposite. Of the extent to which Athenian women themselves felt compelled to challenge the ideal we know very little; but there are at least some clear signs that they were on occasions able to evade male vigilance, and to build up an alternative system of female friendships which ran counter to prevailing notions of feminine decorum.

HOUSES

Our knowledge of Athenian houses is limited, since very few have been excavated, and the literary sources contain no detailed descriptions of them. The evidence that exists

suggests that in the city they were situated on narrow winding streets, and that even those belonging to upper-class families were very simple in design and construction. The walls were of mud-brick on stone bases, and the rooms were grouped on two or more sides of a small courtyard, which sometimes had a well. In some cases there were upper storeys. There seems to have been very little in the way of elaborate decoration, and furniture and ornaments were sparse. The port of Piraeus, which attracted a growing population in the fifth century, had similar houses, but they were arranged in regular blocks. Country dwellings also had much the same plan, but some of them had larger courtyards, with porticoes along one side.

The boundary between the public world of males and the private world of females was encountered even within the home, at least among the upper classes. Male guests were entertained in the *andron*, the men's dining room, which was a place for talk and also for flirtations with female entertainers and handsome youths; while women spent much of their time in the *gynaikeion*, the women's quarters. The latter consisted of either a single room or a suite of rooms, and might be located on either the ground floor or, where one existed, on the upper storey. It was here that women did wool-working, looked after their children and entertained themselves. The unmarried women of the household and the female slaves would also have slept there, as might the wife on those occasions when she did not join her husband. Even a humble home which had no slaves may have had a room restricted to the women's use, although there is no direct evidence for this.

The most detailed literary account of household space is to be found in the speech in which Euphiletus defends himself against a charge of murdering his wife's alleged lover (see p. 130). Euphiletus explains that his small dwelling had two storeys, and that at first the women's quarters were upstairs, and were equal in extent to the men's quarters below. However, when their child was born, this arrangement was reversed, and the women's quarters were moved to the ground floor so that his wife would not have to keep going downstairs to wash the baby. This presumably means that there was a well in the courtyard. His wife often slept downstairs so that she could feed the infant in the night. On one occasion when Euphiletus came back unexpectedly from the country, the baby began crying, and he insisted that she go down to feed it. She taunted him with wanting to get his hands on the young slave-girl in her absence, and playfully turned the key in the lock when she left, only returning at dawn. Later, he says, he realised that the lover had been in the house, and that the slave had been making the baby cry on purpose (Lysias, 1.9–14).

Excavated Athenian houses tend to support this picture of partial segregation within the home. Where men's and women's quarters can be identified, they are often, when both are on the ground floor, on different sides of the courtyard, and the men's rooms are generally near the street door or opposite to it. Sometimes, rooms in which loom-weights have been found have the remains of staircases in them, which suggests that women might have been able to move from their workroom on the ground floor to the sleeping area above without having to emerge from the women's quarters. The houses generally had only one entrance, so that there was no back door where women might have a casual chat with neighbours.²⁰ A husband who was suspicious of female friendships would therefore have found it relatively easy, when at home, to police his wife's activities.

WOMEN IN THE HOME

Although rigorous seclusion may seldom have been put into practice, it is clear that on the level both of ideology and of real life the home was a woman's predominant sphere of activity. The most comprehensive account of the ideal is given by Xenophon in the treatise *Oeconomicus* (7–10), where the 'model' husband Ischomachus describes in detail the education which he gave his young wife when they were first married. To modern readers Ischomachus may well come over as an insufferably pompous and patronising character, but credit must be given to the respect which he shows for his wife's managerial role within the home. It must be borne in mind, however, that his attitude probably does not represent the norm among Athenian males, who were more likely to have placed a low value on women's domestic work.

In instructing his young bride, Ischomachus warmly recommends a sexual division of labour which determines that husband and wife will play complementary parts in establishing and maintaining an orderly household. Human beings, he says, need shelter for the storage of goods, for the rearing of children and for the production of food and clothing. While men are constitutionally suited to productive labour in the open air, women are by their natures – being more soft, tender and anxious than men – suited to indoor tasks. According to Ischomachus, a woman is like a queen bee: she despatches others to their jobs outside the home, supervises those who work inside and stores, administers and distributes the goods that are brought into the house. In addition to these duties, Ischomachus' wife will be responsible for training and managing their slaves, and for looking after anyone in the household who falls sick. She has to organise the household equipment and personal belongings according to a rational scheme. When this tractable wife asks for her husband's advice on how she can best maintain her looks, Ischomachus' prescription is to avoid too much sitting about: she should stand over and supervise her slaves when they are weaving, baking or handing out stores, and should go on tours of inspection of the house; when in need of a more vigorous work-out she can knead and roll out dough, shake coverlets and make the beds.

Ischomachus' bride, we are led to believe, welcomes her new duties with enthusiasm, and demonstrates her considerable intelligence by her dutiful response to her husband's training. When she modestly points out that none of her work would be of any use if Ischomachus were not such a diligent provider, he replies that his labours too would be to no avail if he had no-one to guard what he had produced: 'Do you not see what a pitiful situation those unfortunate people are in who are forced to pour water into sieves for ever ...?' Their is a partnership in which their separate natures and roles perfectly complement each other.

A similar if rather less fulsome testimony to the importance of the woman's role is contained in a fragment from the play *Melanippe*, by Euripides: 'Women manage homes and preserve the goods which are brought from abroad. Houses where there is no wife are neither orderly nor prosperous. And in religion – I take this to be important – we women play a large part ... How then can it be just that the female sex should be so abused? ...' (*Select papyri* 13, Page). Euphiletus (see p. 126) shows little respect for the value of his wife's work, which is hardly surprising in the circumstances; but he does make it clear that although he had watched her carefully when they were first married, he had begun to trust her with the control of his possessions once their son had been born (*Lysias* 1.6). Although women were not allowed to engage in monetary transactions of any significance (see p. 114), it would seem that they were often responsible for

managing the domestic finances. Lysistrata supports her contention that women are quite capable of controlling the treasury of Athens by pointing out that they have been in charge of the housekeeping for years (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 492–7); and Plato claims (*Laws* 805e) that men in Greece hand over control of the money to their wives.

In addition to the duties already outlined, women in poorer families with no domestic slaves would of course have been responsible for all the cooking, baking, cleaning and washing. They and their more affluent sisters would also have been involved in caring for and educating their children, in the case of the girls probably up until the time they left home (see pp. 132–3). Some reasonably well-to-do women, such as Euphiletus's wife (see p. 139), breastfed their own children, but it seems to have been a fairly common practice to engage a wet-nurse: free-born Athenian women were preferred, but slaves and resident aliens were also employed, especially by the poor.

Women of all social classes would have engaged in the important task of wool-working. Although better-off women had slaves who did the bulk of the work, literature and vase paintings indicate that their mistresses assisted and guided them in their labours (Fig. 23). Textile production was a vital part of the domestic economy, and some households would have been completely self-sufficient in this respect, even producing their own wool, although raw wool could also be bought on the market. Women in the home were responsible for preparing fleeces, for spinning thread and for weaving lengths of cloth on the loom. Wool was by far the most common fibre, but flax was also used by the better-off, since linen was prized as a material from which finer garments could be made.

Weaving in particular was viewed as the quintessential female accomplishment, and it was common for women to honour a deity with a gift of a fine piece of work. As well as producing the material, they were also responsible for making it up into finished articles. However, most of the clothes worn by the Greeks required a minimum of sewing, since they consisted in the main of simple rectangles of cloth which were belted or pinned into place. Much of the interior decoration of a home was also supplied by its womenfolk, in the form of wall-hangings, bedcovers and cushions. The best items would probably have been displayed in the men's dining room, the most public part of the house, where they would have served to demonstrate the skill and devotion to duty of the female members of the family. Weaving must have been back-breaking and laborious work, but there can be no doubt that for Athenian women their handicrafts would have been a source of pride.

According to Ischomachus, women naturally have more affection for newborn children than men (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.24). This affection must often have been a source of grief to Athenian women. Golden (1990, p. 83) estimates that the infant mortality rate may have been as high as 30–40 per cent in the first year of life, and that the majority of Greek mothers could have expected to bury at least one child in their lifetime. In addition, some of them would have had to cope with the exposure of an infant (see pp. 130–1). Some modern scholars have suggested that, in circumstances such as these, mothers become conditioned not to feel too great a sense of loss at the death of a child, and that the experience of maternal love is consequently not such a potent element in women's lives as it is at other times or in other places.²¹ Golden (1990, pp. 82–9), however, believes that children in ancient Greece received loving attention from their mothers, but that their grief at a child's loss was diffused through ritual mourning practices and through sharing their sorrow with other adults involved in their care. The existence of the practice of exposure, he suggests, tells us nothing about the response of

parents to the death of any child whom they had decided to raise: it is even possible that children are less likely to be neglected in societies where infanticide is permitted, since the children that are reared are positively wanted.²²

There is certainly no shortage of references in Classical Greek literature to the agony experienced by mothers at the loss of a child. Aeschylus (*Agamemnon* 1417–18), Sophocles (*Electra* 530–81) and Euripides (*Electra* 1020–29 and *Iphigenia in Aulis* 880–end) all allow Clytemnestra to speak of the grief which she feels at the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia. Hector's widow Andromache, in Euripides' *Women of Troy* (757–62), utters a heart-rending speech of farewell to her young son when he is taken away to be executed:

... Dear child, so young in my arms,
So precious! O the sweet smell of your skin! When you
Were newly born I wrapped you up, gave you my breast,
Tended you day and night, worn out by weariness –
For nothing, all for nothing! Say goodbye to me
Once more, for the last time of all...²³

The concern of real-life mothers for their children is revealed by Aristotle when he describes how some women (presumably those who are poor or unmarried) give their children up to others to rear, and are content to see them getting on well, and to go on loving them, even though the children are ignorant of their true parentage and cannot love them in return (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1159a). Numerous dedications were made to healing deities such as Asclepius by mothers on behalf of their sick children; and in one Athenian epitaph of the fourth century a woman named Xenocleia is said to have died of grief for her young son (*IG* 2.2, no. 12335).

Greek tragedy, and Greek myth in general, are nevertheless remarkable for the amount of violence that takes place between parents and children.²⁴ The tendency to focus attention on murderous mothers can perhaps be attributed to an underlying anxiety about sexually active females which found its most forthright expression in imaginative literature (see pp. 173–80). Although such acts of violence were doubtless not unknown, there is no evidence to suggest that in real life they were any more common than they are in our own society.

A more realistic picture of relations between women and their adolescent sons is probably to be found in a section of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (2.2) in which Socrates chastises his sons Lamprocles for being bad-tempered with his mother, and treats him to a long recital of the selfless toil undertaken by mothers. Even so, Lamprocles replies, no-one could possibly put up with my mother's vile temper. Admittedly, she hasn't done me any physical injury, but she says things which one wouldn't want to listen to for anything in the world. In Aristophanes' *Clouds* (42–74) there is a portrait of a more indulgent parent. Young Pheidippides, according to his father, has been hopelessly spoiled by a mother who resented her marriage to a social inferior and helped to foster her son's expensive passion for chariot-racing. These sketches, which hardly present a positive view of mothers, probably reflect more accurately than tragedy the conscious responses of the average Athenian male to the institution of motherhood. A pervasive downgrading of the mother's role was perhaps responsible for the relative dearth of images of mothers and children in Greek art.

These rather bleak representations of motherly love must be considered alongside the adverse publicity which wives often receive in Athenian literature. In tragedy, wives may be murderous, like Clytemnestra, bitterly jealous, like Hermione and Deianeira (see

above, p. 124 and p. 206, Ch. 11, n. 22), lustful, like Phaedra (see p. 31), or horrifically vindictive, like Medea, who murders her own children in order to rob her faithless husband Jason of his triumph over her. Tragedy's only significant depiction of a loving relationship between husband and wife is to be found in Euripides' *Alcestis*, in which the heroine agrees to die in place of her husband Admetus. In Aristophanes' comedies, wives are less violent, but are often seen as wily, devious, prone to adultery and overfond of alcohol. In the fourth century the comic playwright Eubulus provided this ironic comment on wifely virtue: 'Oh honoured Zeus, am I the man ever to speak ill of wives? Zeus, may I perish if I do, for they are the best of all possessions. If Medea was an evil woman, Penelope was a good thing. Some will say that Clytemnestra was wicked. But Alcestis can be set against her as good. Perhaps someone will speak badly of Phaedra. But ... by God, there must be another good wife. Who? Alas, poor me, I've already got through all the good wives, and I've still got so many of the terrible ones to talk about' (frag. 116, 117, lines 6–15, Kock).

However, although most Athenian men probably had a utilitarian attitude to matrimony, this would not necessarily have prevented a loving relationship from developing in the course of a marriage. Ischomachus is anxious to point out to his new wife that he has not married her for reasons of passion, but because he believes that she will make a suitable partner in the home and in the rearing of children (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.10–11); but, by his own account at least, a bond of mutual affection does appear to develop between the couple. To the somewhat unreliable testimony of male writers on the subject of marital relations there can be added the fact that from about 420 BC onwards there was a considerable increase in the popularity of family burial plots, and that in grave-reliefs of this period joint commemoration of a husband and wife was relatively common (Fig. 24). These changes can perhaps be attributed to a gradual privatisation of male concerns, allowing a growing acknowledgement of the part played by one's domestic life in the securing of personal fulfilment.²⁵ Nevertheless, the expression of love for a wife remains a comparatively rare feature of Classical Greek literature. Aristotle may express the most common male view of relations between husband and wife when he says that their affection for each other is 'in accordance with merit: the husband, as the superior, receives the greater share' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1161a).

Few Athenian authors are prepared to acknowledge that the position of Athenian women in the home may have amounted to one of power. Yet references to female control of a household's possessions (see pp. 140–1) invite speculation on the possibility of a domestic inversion of public authority patterns, bolstered by the institution of the dowry (see p. 116). More circumstantial evidence is provided by some law-court speeches. In one, we hear about a family meeting where a mother, in a very competent and forceful manner, tackles her sons' guardian (her own father) about his mismanagement of their estate, at the same time demonstrating her sound knowledge of the family finances (Lysias 32.10, 12–18). Women might also be present at discussions about the terms of a family member's will, and might even represent their husbands on these occasions (Demosthenes 41.17–19). Aeschines in one of his speeches (1.170) refers to rich young men whose fathers were dead and whose mothers were administering their property.

In many instances women would have wielded power through the more indirect methods of nagging or doing things behind their husbands' backs. Euphiletus (see p. 139) bears unwitting testimony to the operation of this power: he clearly sees himself as

master in his own home, yet his account reveals that his wife was able to speak to him very freely, that her 'joke' of locking him in the bedroom came off, and that she was moreover able for some time to get away with conducting a love affair under his nose. Aristophanes' comedies are a rich source of information on similar female strategies. In *Thesmophoriazusae* we hear about infertile women who sneak babies into the house (407-9), and wives who have duplicate keys made so that they can smuggle extra provisions out of the larder (418-28). Praxagora in *Women in the Assembly* (520-727) is always ready with a smart and often abusive retort in her verbal exchanges with her husband. On the basis of the *Lysistrata* we can surmise that withholding sex may have been another female ploy for gaining control over a spouse. Methods such as these were viewed with disfavour by men, but Aristophanes is quite prepared to acknowledge that they could prove very effective. The contrast between the vigorous and outspoken women characters of comedy and the silent and submissive female of the Athenian ideal can probably be explained in part by the fact that inside some homes at least the public face of family life disappeared, and the obedient wife of male discourse was transformed into a genuinely powerful one.

Comedies and law-court speeches offer in this way a valuable insight into a side of Athenian life rarely referred to in the bulk of Athenian literature, which generally focuses attention on public power structures and views the home, if it is mentioned at all, as an extension of the masculine sphere of authority. In legal terms this authority certainly existed, as we have seen; and the ideal of masculine government of the household is forcibly expressed in works such as Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (see p. 140). Yet between the cracks of the legal and normative framework there appear these glimpses of an alternative and informal pattern of female power. This may to a small extent have filtered out into the public arena as a result of wifely influence over husbands on political and legal questions (see p. 128). The close relationship established between *oikos* and *polis* in Athenian ideology meant that the importance of male domination of the home was recognised; but it also permitted at least a hypothetical reversal of the flow of power. If women and not men were dominant in the private sphere, were the effects of this not bound to be felt in the public domain?

Few Athenian men would have been willing to voice this question openly. But Athenian awareness of the possibility is demonstrated by the frequency with which tragic and comic playwrights envisage a situation in which women intrude into the world of public affairs. This topic will be discussed in detail in a later section (see pp. 172-80), but one particular instance can be noted now. In the *Lysistrata* (567-86) the heroine produces a brilliant analogy between the processes involved in the preparation of raw wool for weaving and the tactics required to create political cohesion in the city. Aristophanes, for one, seems to have been conscious of the fact that the overlap between private and public concerns meant that women, by drawing on their domestic skills, might be capable of making an intellectual as well as a physical contribution to the well-being of the state. Too much should not be made of the issue of female power, for the allusions to it are rare and, in the case of comedy, may be highly imaginative. But it is by no means impossible that a whole area of alternative power structures has been ignored or suppressed by the patriarchal literature of Classical Athens. Once again one must regret the absence of an authentic female voice from the sources for this period.

ATHENIAN WOMEN WORKERS

In addition to the jobs already mentioned (pp. 136-7), Athenian women of the lower classes took employment as washerwomen (Lefkowitz and Fant, 1982, nos. 50 and 51), wet-nurses (Demosthenes 57.35), and midwives (see p. 110). The majority of these activities involved a marketing of the skills which women had acquired as providers of food or childcare. A fifth-century vase painting records one type of female employment not related to the domestic sphere: in a scene representing a potter's workshop, a woman sits to one side of a group of men applying paint to a large pot (see Bérard, 1989, p. 10, fig. 1). Such a woman may well have been an alien or slave rather than Athenian; and the occupation was doubtless an unusual one among members of her sex. The most elevated female profession recorded belongs to a woman of the mid-fourth century named Phanostate, whose tombstone states that she was both a midwife and a doctor: 'she caused pain to none, and all lamented her death' (Lefkowitz and Fant, 1982, no. 52). There is no evidence to suggest that women doctors were at all common in Athens, but there is perhaps a grain of truth in a story told by a later Latin writer about an Athenian woman named Hagnodice who was forced to disguise herself as a man in order to practise obstetrics, and later demonstrated her true sex by raising her tunic in court when accused of seducing her patients (Hyginus, *Fabulae* 274).

Opportunities for paid work within one's own home must have been severely limited, but one example is recorded by Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 2.7.1-12). In a conversation with the philosopher Socrates, a man named Aristarchus once complained that as a result of the political turmoil produced by an oligarchic coup in Athens an assortment of homeless female relatives had moved into his house, and as a result he had to support no less than fourteen people. Socrates suggested that these relatives be put to work making clothes. Though Aristarchus was at first reluctant, he finally set his womenfolk up in a wool-working business, and as a result they not only succeeded in providing for their own maintenance but also achieved great job satisfaction.

It is impossible to assess what proportion of Athenian women took on paid work, or how easy it was for them to find it. It is clear that in the fourth century there was still a stigma attached to the working woman (see p. 138); but the economic troubles which Athens experienced as a consequence of the Peloponnesian War and her subsequent loss of empire would have undoubtedly produced an increase in the number of women seeking employment, and some of them may, like Aristarchus's relatives, have been relatively well-born.

RESIDENT ALIENS

As a busy trading centre, Athens in the Classical period attracted a large number of immigrants, mostly from other parts of Greece but also from the Near and Middle East. Non-Athenians who were given permission to live in Athens were known as metics, and by the start of the Peloponnesian War they and their families may have comprised as much as one-sixth of the total population. Their status was always an inferior one, since they were excluded from citizenship and were not allowed to own land. Most of them probably had humble occupations such as metalworking, building, carpentry, retailing and farming rented land. But a notable few made large fortunes in industry or banking, and would have mixed on equal terms with members of the Athenian upper classes. Slaves who were given their freedom by their owners were also accorded metic status.

The majority of women in the metic class would have been the wives and daughters of male immigrants or their descendants. A significant disability was imposed on the

daughters of metics in 451/0 BC, when Pericles' citizenship law (see pp. 120–1) removed from those of them who were married to Athenian men their right to give birth to Athenian citizens. A metic woman's chance of marrying an Athenian husband would have been vastly reduced at this point; but some of them would have lived with Athenian citizens as their concubines (see p. 124). A small minority of metic women would have come to Athens independently and registered in their own right as resident aliens; most of them were probably prostitutes.

We know very little about the lives of metic women, but as they were not in most cases (in all cases, after 451/0) vehicles in the transmission of citizenship, it is possible that masculine control over their behaviour was less rigorous than in the case of Athenian women. A larger percentage of them would have had jobs outside the home, and the range of occupations which they undertook may have been wider. The majority of metics appear to have lived in the city rather than the countryside, and it is possible that as neighbours they mingled quite freely with Athenian women of the lower classes, whose lives would have resembled theirs in most respects. However, a difference in status marked by their exclusion from the religious role of Athenian women may have produced a social barrier.

SLAVES

Most members of Athens' sizeable slave class (see p. 96) were males, who worked in mining, agriculture or manufacturing industry. It is difficult to know how far down the social scale ownership of slaves went, but it may have been the case that most peasant farmers would have tried to keep at least one slave to help with work on the farm. 'Middle income' citizens would in addition have been able to afford at least one domestic servant: Euphiletus (see p. 126), who tells us that his house was a small one, employed a single slave-girl in his home. But no Athenian household appears to have contained enormous squads of slaves; even among the wealthiest citizens it seems to have been rare for the number to have exceeded ten. Most of the slaves employed in houses appear to have been female, and their jobs included shopping, cooking, cleaning, childcare and wool-working. In an affluent household some of the female servants had specialised roles, such as housekeeper, cook or nurse. Only specially-favoured slaves were allowed to marry and rear children, and casual sexual relations with fellow-slaves may also have been prohibited in most cases: Ischomachus puts a stop to nocturnal assignations by fixing a bolt on the door of the women's quarters (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 9.5). Sexual relations with the master of the house were probably another matter, but the fact that the wife of Euphiletus taunts her husband with wanting to get his hands on their slave-girl (see p. 139) suggests that these affairs were not accepted as a matter of course. The children born as a result of such associations would almost certainly have been disposed of by exposure.

Euphiletus's slave-girl performed an additional, unofficial, duty when she was employed as a go-between by his wife's lover, a desperate and dangerous measure, for the girl later informed on the couple when Euphiletus threatened her with a whipping and being thrown into a mill (Lysias 1.18, 23). Female slaves must often have been their mistresses' confidantes in matters where their complicity was less problematical, for the relative seclusion of upper-class women would have meant that many of them developed close relationships with their slaves. In tragedy, Medea and Phaedra discuss their deepest feelings with their old nurses; and Athenian tombstones often depict intimate

scenes involving the deceased woman and her slave-girl (Fig. 25). It is possible that a sense of their common exclusion from the masculine world of public affairs would have produced a degree of identification between Athenian women and their slaves.

PROSTITUTES

Women's work was not generally valued by Athenian males, and as a consequence the only form of female employment about which we have any detailed information is prostitution. The majority of prostitutes were probably women, although establishments where one could hire young men were apparently quite common. Both male and female prostitution seems to have been legal, since the people employed in both categories paid a special tax. The port of Piraeus and the Ceramicus or Potter's quarter were two of the better known 'red-light' districts of Athens.²⁶

Making love to a respectable Athenian woman who was not one's wife or concubine was an enterprise fraught with difficulty, not to say danger (see p. 125), and brothels provided men with a readily available and cheap alternative. The range of what was on offer is described by Xenarchus in this fragment from his comic play *The Pentathlete*, written in the fourth century:

... in our city ... there are, after all, very good-looking young things in the whore-houses, whom one can readily see basking in the sun, their breasts uncovered, stripped for action and drawn up in battle formation by columns, from among whom one can select whatever sort one likes – thin, fat, squat, tall, shrivelled, young, old, middle-aged, full-ripened – without setting up a ladder and stealthily entering [another man's house] ... For the girls themselves grab people and drag them in, naming those who are old men 'little father', those who are younger 'little bro.'. And each of them can be had without fear, affordable, by day, towards evening, in every way you like.

(frag. 4).²⁷

Squandering one's money in brothels was certainly not regarded as a respectable way of passing one's time, but it was not considered to be anything out of the ordinary if a young man paid an occasional visit to a prostitute, and the activity would have been within most men's means. In the Classical period the sixth-century lawgiver Solon was credited with having purchased slave women and put them to work in brothels at prices which everyone could afford. This measure was seen, at least by a character in a comedy written by Philemon in the late fourth or early third century, as one which was in accordance with the democratic tendencies of Solon's other reforms: 'But you found a law for the use of everyone; for you were the first, Solon, they say, to discover this practice – a democratic one, by Zeus, and a saving one (I should know, Solon!): ... you bought and stationed women in various public locations, equipped and fitted out as common possessions for all. They stand there naked, so you won't be fooled: what you see is what you get ...' (fragment 4).²⁸

There were in fact a wide variety of sexual partners available for hire in Classical Athens.²⁹ The most affordable were the *pornai*, the common prostitutes who staffed the brothels, the great majority of whom were probably slaves owned by the brothel-keeper. Of a slightly higher class were the prostitutes who walked the streets, most of whom were either freed slaves or free women, either metics or Athenians, who had been forced into the trade by poverty. The female dancers, flute-players and acrobats who

were hired to perform at upper-class male drinking parties provided sexual services as well as entertainment.³⁰ They were probably mostly slaves, but as skilled artists they would have been more expensive than the average prostitute.

Sometimes a favourite prostitute might, if she were a slave, be purchased by a wealthy client and set up as his concubine. This had been the fate of the hapless Neaera (see p. 121), who as a prostitute in Corinth had been bought by two young men for the large sum of thirty minae. When they were about to be married and had no more use for her, they offered to let her buy her freedom (generously granting her a discount on her original purchase price) on condition that she did not ply her trade in Corinth. Neaera raised the required twenty minae by organising a whip-round among her old clients, and came to Athens with the one who had contributed the most, a man named Phrynion. He introduced her to fashionable society by taking her out to upper-class drinking parties; women who appeared at these gatherings were not considered respectable, and Neaera's activities on these occasions were apparently more scandalous than most. According to her accusers, Phrynion used to have sex with her in front of the other guests, and at one particularly wild party she bestowed her favours on a large number of the men present, including some of the slaves (Demosthenes 59.29–33). Not surprisingly, Neaera eventually left Phrynion.

At the top end of the sexual market were the women known as *hetaerae*, or 'female companions', often referred to nowadays as courtesans. These were sophisticated beauties, occasionally Athenians but more often metics, who charged very high prices for a single night in their company, and who sometimes reserved themselves for a few chosen lovers. They represented the only significant group of economically independent women in Classical Athens. The most famous *hetaera*, and indeed the most famous woman of fifth-century Athens, was Aspasia, who had been born in Miletus, graduated to being a controller of other *hetaerae* and finally became the mistress of the statesman Pericles. She was renowned for her intelligence and political astuteness. According to Plutarch (*Life of Pericles* 24.3), she used to receive visits from Socrates, accompanied by some of his pupils, and other men used to take their wives along to listen to her. In Plato's *Menexenus* (235e–236b), Socrates in what is admittedly a jesting frame of mind claims that Aspasia taught him and other men, including Pericles, the art of rhetoric, and credits her with having been the true author of Pericles' famous funeral oration.

After divorcing his wife, Pericles lived with Aspasia until his death. The degree of influence which she exercised over him is impossible to assess, but a number of Athenians seem to have regarded her role as an illegitimate intrusion into the male-dominated political system. She was the object of some vicious caricatures in comic plays, and her name has been found inscribed on a lead curse tablet. According to Plutarch, Pericles was induced by Aspasia to declare war on the Samians, because this would benefit the people of Miletus (*Pericles* 25.1); and Aristophanes (*The Acharnians* 515–39) concocts a fantastic story, featuring the abduction by some men from Megara of two of Aspasia's prostitutes, in order to explain Pericles' motive in introducing a notorious ban on Megarian trade which precipitated the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. At one stage Aspasia was prosecuted for impiety and for procuring, but was passionately and successfully defended by Pericles at her trial. Undoubtedly Pericles' mistress was serving in all of this as a vehicle for indirect attacks on Pericles himself; but one can easily imagine that in the exclusive and patriarchal ranks of Athenian citizens there would have been a hostile reaction to the possession by an individual foreign woman of a power which may well have been quite considerable.

OLDER WOMEN

The age difference between males and females at marriage would have meant that quite a large number of Athenian women were in their late twenties or early thirties when they were widowed. Some of them, as Garland (1990, p. 212) has pointed out, would also have become grandmothers at about the same age. The youthful appearance of a woman named Ampharete who is seen on an Athenian tombstone of the late fifth century cradling her grandson in her lap is therefore not at all surprising (Fig. 26). The epitaph which relays her words to the passer-by is indicative of the close relationship which might exist between a woman and her grandchildren:

I hold the dear child of my daughter, whom I held in my lap when we were alive looking on the light of the sun, and hold now when he is dead as I am dead.

A widow was still of child-bearing age would have had a good chance of remarrying, especially if her dowry was a substantial one. If she remained single and had a son or sons, she would generally have remained in her late husband's *oikos*; if there were no sons she could either return to the *oikos* into which she had been born or stay on in her old home with her husband's heir. The person on whom the guardianship of her dowry had fallen – her son, her nearest male relative or her husband's heir – was obliged by law to support her. Speakers in the law-courts often use their widowed mothers' dependency as a way of arousing the sympathy of the jurors.³¹ Bonds of affection may often have united these sons and their mothers: one tombstone of the fourth century BC announces that Telemachus is buried at the right-hand side of his mother, and is not deprived of her love (IG 2.2 7711). But non-relatives might be far less respectful in their attitudes towards elderly women, and might, like Aristophanes (e.g. *Women in the Assembly* 938–1111), picture them as sex-starved 'old bags'.

One compensation for ageing enjoyed by women who had passed the menopause was the greater freedom of movement allowed to them by male notions of propriety. A significant number of the women workers already discussed (p. 145) were probably post-menopausal; nurses seem often to have been elderly women, and according to Socrates (see p. 130), midwives had to be beyond child-bearing age. The attitude behind this relaxation of restraint is probably summed up by the fourth-century orator Hype-rides when he states that 'a woman who leaves the house ought to be at the stage in life where people who meet her ask, not whose wife she is, but whose mother' (frag. 205, Jensen). If this relative lack of concern about the comings and goings of older women was indicative of their diminished value in men's eyes, this would not necessarily have troubled the women concerned.