

Hetairas: The Pre-Feminist Empowered Women of the Western Antiquity

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Abstract

Women being equal to men is a rare episode in antiquity. However, the existence of hetairas proves that the oppression of women throughout history cannot be steadily maintained as the sole relationship between the sexes, where men always dictate the dynamics of power. The strategic utilization of their sexuality enabled hetairas to participate in the intellectual, political, and artistic fields; such experience of a select group of women should be seen as a nuanced exposition of women's history before the advent of the feminist movement. The hetaira, whose identity was associated with the elite sympotic culture, was antithetical to both the prostitute and the wife in terms of her privilege for self-definition and economic independence. With her capability to navigate the spaces dominated by men, a hetaira may seemingly appear empowered by not being commodified, just like a prostitute or a wife who was unable to live outside the sanctity of marriage. However, her 'glory' is at the mercy of the attention and material benefits she receives from her male patrons.

Keywords: *hetaira, prostitute, prostitution, wife*

INTRODUCTION

Discussions about Prostitution may be a bit taboo, but it is indisputably an indelible portion of human history. The economic and political aspect of the practice of prostitution is seen in the oppressive relationship between the agents—the consumer and the seller/sold. It is the male population, both masters and slaves, who are the benefactors

of this practice with the female population usually the slaves, at the receiving end. *Common prostitution is a hard job where the sexually and economically oppressed woman—subjected to the arbitrariness of the police, the humiliating medical checkups, the whims of her clients, and the prospect of germs, sickness, and misery—is really reduced to the level of a thing* (Beauvoir 2009, 692). However, another aspect of prostitution that should not be overlooked is how women have strategically used their bodies to feel ‘empowered’ in the political spaces created by and for men. As stated by Tsoucalas, et al. (2021, 232-233):

Prostitution in ancient Greece symbolized both the lust and sexual freedom of women, while at the same time, it could signal the relationship of female potency to control men. Prostitution thrived in Greek antiquity in places like Corinth, Samos, Lesbos, Athens, Delos, Ephesus, and Egypt. It occurred in brothels, in the streets, and temples. Slaves and freed women, as well as young women and sophisticated hetairas, served as prostitutes.

The Hetaira and the Prostitute

Even Modern Feminism supports the argument that the hierarchy among women depends on their economic class. Classism plays a crucial factor in how women, despite being the inferior sex became on ‘equal’ footing with men. Indeed, elite women enjoy privileges compared to their women slave counterparts; hence, prostitution can be profoundly understood using the comparison between the sophisticated *hetairas* and the prostitutes of the *hoi polloi*. *Traditionally, scholars have assumed that the difference between a hetaira and a pornē was class, but both were prostitutes* (Kennedy 2015, 62). Based on an article by Hullinger, *the Classical Greek equivalent to the English ‘prostitute’ is the pornē (πόρνη), a term which is derived from the verb πέρνημι (‘to sell’) and which evoked a woman explicitly merchandising her sexual favors. Ultimately, both the prostitute and the pornē are associated with the idea of ‘indiscriminately making an offering to the public’* (Hullinger 2019, 80-81). *The service provided by the profession of the hetaira is encapsulated in the Classical Greek ἑταίρα, which literally means ‘companion’ with a feminine grammatical gender. Sometimes, this word simply indicates a ‘female friend’* (Hullinger 2019, 81).

The hetaira is a 'courtesan' or 'mistress,' often supported by one or two men alone, serving as their companion at symposia and revels, as well as servicing their sexual desires. The pornē in contrast, is the common streetwalker or occupant of brothels, providing sex for payment to a large and anonymous clientele (Kurke 1997, 107-108). Brothel inmates are 'stripped for action,' completely naked. What they offer, in contrast to the seduction and romance of the hetaera, is demystified sex (Kurke 1997, 129). From these descriptions, the site of engagement and the accessibility of the male gaze (public vis-à-vis private) discriminate the hetairas from prostitutes aside from their economic class. If elite men are the sole patrons of hetairas, how does their relationship work? Based on the description of Kurke (1997, 112):

Within the 'anti-city' of the aristocratic symposium, the discursive category of the hetaira participates in the complete exclusion of the public sphere, especially the city's monetized economy. Instead, the impulse to mystify economic relations for sex generates the category of the hetaira within the framework of gift exchange. And while the hetaira affirms and embodies the circulation of *charis* within a privileged elite, the pornē in aristocratic discourse figures the debased and promiscuous exchanges of the agora.

Kurke argues that the political intention of the elite is to give them a sense of exclusivity from the way *hoi polloi* do their carnal consumption. Hetairas belong to the symposia where they can freely challenge the dominance of the male participants, and pornē belongs to the brothel and the market where they are sold as commodified goods. In Davidson's book *Courtesans and Fishcakes, commodities are interchangeable, easily measured, and compared, their quantity and quality can be broken down into units, often into units of currency. They are somewhat featureless, rather than anonymous articles, and the exchange of commodities reflects this anonymity (Davidson 1997, 110). Prostitution is an index of democracy (Kurke 1997, 128). Prostitutes are like coinage, state-subsidized prostitutes (at least in the Athenian imaginary) endow all citizens with an equal phallic power. If hetaira functions like metals in the fantasy of aristocratic symposium, the pornē circulates like money in the agora (Kurke 1997, 130). Unlike the egalitarianism of public coinage, Davidson argues that (1997, p. 110):*

Gift exchange, on the other hand, establishes relationships not between objects but between people, who are thenceforth linked by ties of patronage and friendship. Consequently, gifts are personal. They should be unique, individual, and resistant to objective evaluation. Unlike commodities, gifts are sticky objects. A gift is never completely lost to the giver. A nice illustration of this principle in Greek culture is the way that when a city makes a gift to god at a Panhellenic shrine like Delphi or Delos, the gifts remain in the city's own specially built treasury. A gift also maintains a connection by burdening the receiver with debt and obligation. An exchange of gifts, similarly, is far from final, merely the latest episode in a long history of giving and repaying favor.

Dualism and the Greek Mind

There is an explanation for why Greeks tend to think of opposites. Between the hetairas and prostitutes, the first belongs to the symposia and the latter to market and brothels; the first is a symbol of privacy/intimacy and the latter is a symbol of public/anonymous relationship. Such differences extend to their association with autonomy and slavery, gift giving and coinage, and then hierarchy opposite to democracy. Cohen explains that (2006, 96):

This Greek binomialism reflects the Hellenic tendency to understand and to organize phenomena not (as we do) through definitional focus on a specific subject in isolation, but through contrast, preferably antithesis. Where modern Western thought generally posits a broad spectrum of possibilities and seeks to differentiate a multitude of slightly varying entities, ancient Greek assumed not a medley of separate forms, but only a counterpoised opposition, complementary alternatives occupying in mutual tension the entire relevant cognitive universe. For modern thinkers, opposites are mutually exclusive; for the Greeks, antitheses were complementary (and thus tended to be inclusive). Greek commercial institutions accordingly tend to derive their meaning from their binomial interrelationships with their putative opposites.

Sex becomes hubris when it is reduced to an impersonal activity, a mere commodity, sex that means nothing, rather than sex that reflects mutual attachment. It is not too difficult to see how the whambamthankyouma'am kind of sex celebrated in comic visits to the brothel could be associated with a word that elsewhere denotes insolent behavior (Davidson 1997, 117). Free Athenian purveyors of erôs sought carefully to avoid all suggestions of dependence, and sought to manifest their autonomy through elaborate, sometimes seemingly recherché, mechanisms. Thus, among the hetairoi of Athens, contractual arrangements for sexual services—whether directly explicit—were the norm (Cohen 2006, 109). A job is different from labor, it is done in an alienating, continued, and repetitive manner. Labor is not alien to the elites of Ancient Athens as it is an exercise of their autonomy. For free Athenians, a pervasive moral tenet was “the obligation to maintain an independence of occupation... and at all costs to avoid seeming to work in a ‘slavish’ way for another.” In Aristotle’s words, “the nature of the free man prevents his living under the control of another” (Cohen 2006, 100). Moreover, (Cohen 2006, 110):

Formal contracts were not the sole indicia of a labor relationship compatible with the work ethics of free Athenians. Other manifestations included control over one’s physical and familial surroundings, including the ownership of valuable personal property (the antithesis of servile confinement in a brothel), the freedom to choose the clients with whom one associated (the antithesis of compulsory sexual submission to any would-be purchaser), the provision of reciprocated largess to one’s lovers, the appearance of leisurely dedication to cultural and social activities, and the pursuit of work not merely as an economic necessity but also as a mechanism of self-definition.

The Hetaira and the Wife

Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, states that *marriage has an immediate corollary in prostitution. Hetaerism follows mankind in civilization as a dark shadow upon the family. Man, out of prudence, destines his wife to chastity, but he does not derive satisfaction from the regime he imposes on her (2009, 680). The legitimate woman, oppressed as a married woman, is respected as a human person; this respect begins seriously to bring a halt to oppression. However, the prostitute does not have the rights of a person; she is the sum of all types of feminine slavery at once (Beauvoir 2009,*

681). *In the Solonic Law on adultery, space was the primary indication of whether it was legal to have sex with a woman. Public spaces, the streets, the agora, brothels, sex stalls, and 'shops' were contrasted with the private space of the oikos, which means both 'home' and the people who live there, the family, or the household* (Davidson 1997, 112). The wife and the prostitute differ in the roles they play and the spaces they occupy, they are the extremes of our comparison. However, things become puzzling in the case of hetairas as they are *not quite prostitutes but not quite wives (though some became wives)* (Kennedy 2015, 63). The hetairas' role include providing but is not limited to erotic pleasures to the men they engage with; and akin to wives, their relationships are intimate and are not transactional (unlike the prostitutes).

The absent wife, as she was the antitype of the porn□, was also the antitype of the hetaira, removed from the symposium as, ideally, from contact with nonkin men in general, bound in exclusivity and belonging to the interior of the house (Blazebey 2011, 69-70). *An ideal wife is chaste, faithful, dutiful, obedient, modest, and a productive member of her household. In contrast, the hetaira in oratory provides sex to anyone who can pay, is excessive in her behavior, and is often arrogant and impious. She is also a drain on a man's oikos on account of her extravagance and cost* (Glazebrook 2006, 128). *The sexuality of the hetaira is, as far as the legitimate oikos is concerned, sterile. In the classical ideology of marriage, the wife belonged, in her function of childbearing, to the sphere of Demeter, in stark contradistinction to the hetaira, who belonged to the sphere of Aphrodite, of erotic pleasure, and was "incapable of giving rise to authentic and lasting fruits"* (Blazebey 2011, 75). Their sexuality became popular inspiration by artists and intellectuals in their 'artistic' and 'intellectual' exercises (Beauvoir 2009, 693):

There has always been a vague connection between prostitution and art, because beauty and sexuality are ambiguously associated with each other. In fact, it is not Beauty that arouses desire: but the Platonic theory of love suggests hypocritical justifications for lust. Phryne baring her breast offers Areopagus the contemplation of a pure idea. Exhibiting an unveiled body becomes an art show; American burlesque has turned undressing into a stage show. "Nudity is chaste," proclaim those old gentlemen who collect obscene photographs in the name of 'artistic nudes.'

As the object of a masculine liberty of pleasure, the hetaira represented a transcendence of the exclusive, introverted world of the oikos (Blazeby 2011, 70). Pederastic homosexuality and the heterosexuality of prostitution come together as the hallmark of a distinctively sympotic sexuality. It is by her inclusion in this anti-productive world of male homosociality that the hetaira assumes her aspect as quasi male (Blazeby 2011, 75). If the character of sympotic activity is 'anti-egalitarian,' Blazeby argues otherwise that the encounter between the hetairas and the elite male participants can be seen as an extension of the promiscuity of the agora. Based on the writings of Davidson and Kurke, the symposia and agora are two sides of the coin; consistent with the dualist orientation of the Greek mind. Yet, hetairas represent a surrender of private wealth in the interests of the male egalitarian community.... the hetaira herself appears as an item of equal distribution: there is one for each man just as their portions of food and drink are identical. In scenes of group sex, a hetaira may quite literally be shared by two or more men (Blazeby 2011, 70). Furthermore (Blazeby 2011, 77):

The bonding with nonkin males in the enjoyment of liberal pleasures—had something fundamental in common with that of the customer of the brothel.... In this view, the symposium socialized a man by detaching him from narrow, private household interest—which is also to say class interest inasmuch as the oikos as the unit of economic and biological production and reproduction was also the basic unit of wealth and birth difference—and attaching him to a larger common interest and identity.

Both sides of hetairas' status are integrally a function of the transcendent, antidomestic quality of sympotic conviviality. The hetaira, in her opposition to the excluded wife and in her role as a figure of antiproductive sexuality, brings the sexuality of the brothel into the house, but at the same time, she is promoted to a paradoxical reciprocity as a participant in convivial homosociality (Blazeby 2011, 75). Blazeby contends that the common ground between hetairas and prostitutes is their sterile sexuality and both women were an item for a shared male revelry. Both the symposia and the agora are non-domestic spaces, while oikos is the space dominated by the wife. Finally, to reiterate the important details presented regarding the convergence and divergence of wife, hetaira, and prostitute (Blazeby 2011, 77-78):

When the matter at issue is the contrast between the symposium as an institution of sociality, of personal bonds, in contradistinction to the impersonal, socially disembodied relations of the marketplace, the opposition between hetaira and pornē is marked. When, however, it is a question of the symposium as an institution of male nonkin conviviality as instantiated in liberal pleasure, identifying convivial society with civic community in contradistinction to household interests and identities, the opposition between wife and prostitute is marked, and hetaira and pornē are collapsed into one category.

Hetairas as Empowered and Elusive Women

Giving herself to many men, she belongs to none definitively; the money she accumulates, the name she 'launches' as one launches a product, ensures her economic autonomy. The freest women in ancient Greece were neither matrons nor common prostitutes but hetairas (Beauvoir 2009, 694). Their selection of whoever will sleep with them is the entire prerogative of hetairas. Wives, on the other hand, are usually married through arrangements as demanded by societal rituals and economic reasons. In this respect, hetairas are closer to (adulterous or potentially adulterous) wives than prostitutes (Davidson 1997, 125). Pornai in contrast, can only have sex with ho boulomenos, 'whoever wishes' (Davidson 1997, 125). Aside from this privilege, hetairas have no shame in being capricious. A display of this behavior exposes their power to dominate men who are physically and economically superior to them. In this libidinal game of subterfuge, the pursuers need her attention more than she needs them. A hetaira must always have the freedom to exercise her whim and keep alive the possibility, however small, of doing something for nothing or of not returning the favor at all (Davidson 1997, 125). Hetairas capitalized beyond the usage of their bodies because their 'talent' must exceed the rigidity of the competition against other women of 'sophistication,' (Beauvoir 2009, 694):

Paradoxically, those women who exploit their femininity to the extreme create a situation for themselves nearly equal to that of a man; moving from this sex that delivers them to men as objects, they become subjects. They not only earn their living like men but also live in nearly exclusively masculine company; free in their mores and speech, they can rise to the rarest intellectual

freedom—like Ninon de Lenclos. The most distinguished among them are often surrounded with artists and writers who find ‘virtuous women’ boring.

Following the descriptions of Davidson and Kurke, economic and political distinctions separate the hetaira from the prostitute. As previously mentioned, some factors can cause the blurring of boundaries between hetairas and other categories of oppressed women, one of which is the avoidance of legal accountabilities by both hetairas and their male patrons. Hetairas do not pay taxes like what prostitutes do. *Athenian women who practiced this way of life could be exposing themselves and their lovers to the laws of adultery, even death. The fragile status of the gift depended on their fragile status as ‘companions’ rather than common prostitutes* (Davidson 1997, 124-125). *Scholars assimilated a hetaira to the modern courtesan, a type of mistress or kept woman who participated in the elite social life of various periods of European history, particularly the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries* (Kennedy 2015, 63). Another reason that confuses what hetairas really are is the fact that the world of prostitution is always in a constant state of becoming, (Glazebrook & Henry 2011, 5):

The status of women who worked as prostitutes could be fluid rather than fixed. A woman could move from the status of enslaved prostitute to that of a concubine of one man (pallake) or to that of free agent (and even become wealthy, as commonly understood by the use of the term hetaira), and back again. The fourth-century orator Antiphon’s first speech recounts events in the life of a pallake whose lover is planning to hand her off to a brothel. Menander’s comedy *The Woman from Samos* recounts the misadventures of Chrysis, who is currently a pallake but whose status can tip back to that of streetwalker the instant her lover wants it to. In a corollary example from oratory, Alce begins her career working as a slave in a brothel, but is eventually freed and becomes the favorite of a wealthy Athenian.

The very name hetaira— ‘companion,’ ‘friend’ — is ambiguous, a euphemism. Their language likewise is characterized by double-meanings, notoriously enigmatic, parodic, and punning (Davidson 1997, 135). *The difficulty involved in defining a hetaira, then, is all part of the*

hetaira's plan. A hetaira remains a hetaira only so long as she can foil attempts to pin her down. This uncertainty keeps her on the right side of laws and taxes and builds a glass wall between what she does and what goes on in brothels. Much more than that, however, it makes her sexy (Davidson 1997, 126).

For Kennedy, there must be a historical explanation for this confusion regarding the identity of the hetaira and what they do. Kennedy (2015, 61) states that during the Late Sixth Century BCE, *the word hetaira designates not a status but a person associated with a set of behaviors typical of the sympotic culture of the Greek elite* (Kennedy 2015, 61). *The hetaira is perceived as providing many varieties of 'pleasure' to her clients, indicating that she is not a prostitute (who only provides sexual gratification) but, instead, an Entertainer* (Hullinger 2019, 85). Even during the Archaic and Classical Periods, some women of high status attended sympotic activities alongside their male counterparts. Since women are not expected to participate in male-dominated tasks, those women earned disreputable statuses. *But this was also a period when the elite culture of habrosunê became the target of negative criticisms. This negative turn resulted from two factors: first, the Persian Wars and its subsequent anti-Eastern rhetoric, and second, a turn toward isonomia and the connecting of luxury with tyranny and hubris as the Athenians democratized more thoroughly* (Kennedy 2015, 71). By the Fourth Century BCE, Kennedy (2015, 62) observes that:

The meaning of hetaira became associated with marriageability, thus losing its distinct meaning by becoming tantamount to promiscuous slavery and putting her extravagance as a direct antipathy to the decency of the wife. The wife-whore dichotomy underlies many approaches to women in Athens and intersects with scholars' use of the language of respectability. They typically label a woman as disreputable if she is named in the courts, on the comic stage, or appears in a sympotic image. It is a short step to labeling her a prostitute, which then is assumed to exclude her from the category of wife and citizen.

With the degeneration of the meaning of hetaira as a sympotic companion/behavior, most Athenians would later associate it with a *slave, freedwoman, or xenê—a woman who was clearly non-Attic—because astai who became prostitutes in Classical Athens seems to have*

been rare. Being a hetaira meant the male client would not recognize any of her offspring as his responsibility and that the polis would not recognize them as Athenians (Glazebrook 2006, 134). All in all, the negative attitude towards prostitution as a form of slavery, the societal expectation for citizen wives to stay in the household, which in effect, led to the bad reputation of unorthodox citizen women who participated in the symposia, and the confusing identity of hetairas that can overlap to a courtesan, mistress, or a prostitute all contributed to the diminished meaning of hetaira as a companion without the enslaved and sexual innuendos.

CONCLUSION

Women's participation does not equate to an egalitarian division of expectations and privileges. The earliest role of hetairas as 'companions' or 'entertainers' implies an accessorial role of women in the workings of the symposium. As women were allowed in the spaces of men, it made them easy targets of derogatory judgments of the Athenian citizenry that expected them to remain invisible. Transcendence is an aversion to quintessential women. Wives were invisible beings whose function was reduced to childbearing; nevertheless, such inferiority was offset by their cultural image as respectable facilitators of the household. This façade of chastity exposes the sexual bias among the elites where men and women must adhere to their 'proper places.' As has been previously discussed, hetaerism emerged because of marriage. Due to the socially imposed roles of wives as agents of fertility, the practice of hetaerism later gained a repulsive notoriety when it became associated with the public commodification of flesh. Prostitutes were the most oppressed women as they were sold into the zones of commodification. *It is not their moral and psychological situation that makes prostitutes' existence miserable. It is their material condition that is deplorable for the most part* (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 692). Pornai, hetairas, and wives were not able to escape the curse of womanhood. Whether in the form of economic, moral, psychological, or sexual exploitation, suffering is attached to their mundane existence in the same way that prostitution is inextricably linked to the history of human civilizations.

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