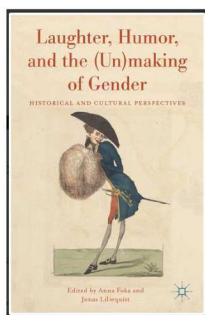


# Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)Making of Gender

## Historical and Cultural Perspectives

*Edited by*  
Anna Foka and Jonas Liliequist



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## CHAPTER NINE

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### *Humor, Women, and Male Anxieties in Ancient Greek Visual Culture*★

ALEXANDRE G. MITCHELL

The paper's general context is visual humor in ancient Greece but its main focus is on the way in which women from different backgrounds were portrayed and mocked by (mainly) male Athenian vase-painters between the sixth and fourth centuries BC.<sup>1</sup> The driving idea is that men tried to the best of their abilities to control women, and their fears are revealed in comic depictions. The artists were really artisans: they usually did not have patrons as they mass-produced their often well-designed utilitarian objects for the marketplace. Their production followed the rule of fashion and because these objects were ubiquitous in Athens, and showed every aspect of daily life and mythology, they offer us a popular vision of what troubled, fascinated, or amused most Athenians. In many respects, the main problem in studying women in classical Athens is that they have often been seen as an undifferentiated mass. The paintings on Greek vases open a different path to studying women in Athens. Their goal was to please their viewers in order to sell their pots. Whether the vases were produced by men or women is not as important as the identity of the final consumer or even the purchaser. One's productions do not always show what one believes in personally, but what one wants to sell. This is why on the one hand I am particularly interested in the *revealing* nature of humor, the fact that humor brings out what is hidden in conventional discourse and on

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the other hand the vases both contradict and comfort interpretations originating in the ancient textual evidence.

After a few preliminary notions (1) on the purpose of studying visual humor and a discussion on conventional representations of women in Athens, the paper will then focus (2) on four comic female types involving wine, sex, laziness, and gossip. These striking images raise many issues, among which are masculinity and the loss of control, consumerism (buying patterns, gendered shopping, the intended and the final use of these vases), and finally the fear of counter-culture critique and female social networks.

## 1. Preliminary Notions

### Visual Humor

A unanimous definition of the laughable does not exist among theorists on laughter, nor can they even find a tacit agreement on what arouses laughter. But for the sake of convenience and as we are only interested in what humor reveals rather than its nature, let us define *humor as the intellectual stimuli that provoke laughter because they have been intentionally prepared to this effect and perceived consciously to this effect*.

The study of visual humor in ancient Greece offers insightful views on ancient Greek society, its values and customs, just like the proverbial *mirror* of Old Comedy that offers a distorted yet truthful reflection of ancient Athenian social customs and beliefs. Is it possible to identify comic scenes in an ancient culture after such a long span of time? Our knowledge of Ancient Greek society is profound, thanks to tremendous amount of scholarship in philology, epigraphy, history, and archaeology over the last two centuries. Yet, to identify visual humor among hundreds of thousands of vases, one must reconstruct what was conventional from what was not, then establish which unusual images were intended to be humorous. The principles of parody, caricature, and situation comedy are the same today, cross-culturally, as they were in antiquity. What changes from one village to the next still today are the comical references and local taboos. Images intentionally produced to ridicule are a way of dealing with subjects that are difficult to broach in a "serious" way. It is as if humor enabled us to distance ourselves from the subject and thus squint at our innermost fears. Visual humor will give us a distorted vision of men's fears that in turn will help us understand more about women, certain forms of masculinity, and other related issues.

Gender Studies and Classical Archaeology

Gender studies have pushed the boundaries of scholarship far and wide and archaeologies of sex and gender, studying past societies through their material culture by closely examining the social construct of gender identities and relations, emerged as a specific (mine) field of research in the 1980s. Indeed, "much of the way we learn how to be men and women in any society comes not through explicit discussion but through the inexplicit experience of living in a world of things."<sup>2</sup> It is an extremely complex interpretative process, especially when one's main evidence is archaeological remains.<sup>3</sup> Gender scholars first wondered where ancient women were located, focusing on their public and domestic roles. They then turned to the status of women and issues of patriarchy. Yet, we still do not agree on the exact location of the men's or women's quarters in Greek houses: the visual evidence points to women's typical actions rather than loci.<sup>4</sup> The current studies of women in antiquity have moved away from the history of women to the history of gender with complex intersections between gender, class, race, and ethnicity in classical cultures. In this chapter, we will focus on the interplay between male fears and how women could be controlled in ancient Athens.

Conventional Images of Women

On vases depicting scenes from daily life, we find three main types of women: "respectable" wives (and daughters),<sup>5</sup> servants, and prostitutes. The wives are often shown indoors, wearing lengthy and heavy clothing, sometimes jewels. Their long hair is either worn loose or in a bun (*sakkos*). They might sit on indoor chairs, performing various domestic activities such as wool work, raising babies, cooking, and kneading dough. Outdoors they tend tombs, get married, shop, and sell goods at the market, and, as we shall discuss further, fetch water at the fountain house.

The debate regarding women's status, whether they left their homes or not, and related issues has generated a huge amount of scholarship.<sup>6</sup> The image of the submissive wife described by Xenophon in his *Oeconomicus* has permeated our categories of thought, but luckily we have many other sources to paint a different picture than an elitist Athenian's fantasy of a submissive wife. By taking a middle view between Xenophon and, for instance, Aristophanes, one may recreate what the Athenian view of women might really have been. Indeed, Aristophanes won many dramatic competitions, and the decision of the jury, which was composed of democratically appointed men, probably reflected popular sentiment.



Many of the problems regarding the assessment of women and status are due to the fact that women are often portrayed as an “undifferentiated mass.”<sup>7</sup> Wealthy wives could send servants on various errands, while women of more modest means or from poor households left their house to work without being slaves or prostitutes.<sup>8</sup> Women were not strictly isolated from the outside world but had so much to do, maintaining their household that they had little spare time for anything else. In Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*, Kalonike says: “It’s difficult to get out of the house this early. We’ve got to do our husbands little favours, we’ve got to get the servants out of bed, we’ve got to put the children to bed, wash them and feed them.”<sup>9</sup>

Still, the enduring constructed image of a discrete and demure Athenian wife described by Xenophon<sup>10</sup> is also to be found on some vases. A small red-figure wine jug (chous) in New York (Figure 9.1)<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 9.1** Drunk man banging on a door with his stick at night. Tentative woman on the other side holding an oil lamp. Chous, Attic RF, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 37.11.19; 440–420 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.

shows a drunk naked man wearing the typical reveler's headband, knocking roughly with his staff at a front door (the roof is indicated by the tiles above the door). A woman moves forward from the other side with great hesitation, her right finger brought to her mouth in a gesture of fear. She holds an oil lamp which indicates that the scene is occurring at night. She might be thinking what Philokleon tells Bdelykleon in Aristophanes's *Wasps*: "No, it is a bad thing to drink; from wine come broken doors (*thurokopesai*), beatings, thrown stones; and then the money to be paid after a drunken bout."<sup>12</sup> She is fully dressed and her long hair is attached in a bun. Even though Theophrastes commented on lurid women stating that "They [women] answer the front door themselves,"<sup>13</sup> this woman has all the attributes and demeanor of a frightened "respectable" wife woken up in the middle of the night by a drunk.

Servants on vases are often smaller, wear plainer clothes, and have shorter hair, as on a red-figure hydria in Paris (Figure 9.9),<sup>14</sup> where three Thracian servants fetch water from the fountain place.<sup>15</sup>

Prostitutes, just like "respectable women," could be wealthy or poor. *Pornai* were anonymous streetwalkers or brothel prostitutes who catered to a large number of absolute strangers. The *hetaira*, however, was a mistress of one or two lovers who supported her financially. She offered her company for discussions, play, and sex.<sup>16</sup> According to Kurke,<sup>17</sup> the binary relationship between the *porne* and the *hetaira* is a discursive and ideological construct; both words should be considered as concepts used in different modes and contexts. The ordinary *pornai* are usually shown naked with cropped hair, used and abused sexually, sometimes even beaten: these women are utterly objectified. In contrast, *hetairai* were often dressed as "respectable wives" but with commercial erotic overtones (e.g., inclusion of money satchels in the scene to indicate payment).<sup>18</sup> As in life, they were the expensive companions of revelers at drinking parties, often found half-naked, reclining on cushions, talking, and drinking wine. Some are even shown wearing the *sakkos*, while others wear reveler headbands: they are the visual cross between a "respectable wife" and a prostitute.

To sum up, as in textual evidence, the limits between different statuses in vase painting are slightly blurred; the painters used identifying details from each category to embellish or degrade another category of women. But, in most circumstances, clues are present to aid in the identification of *hetairai*, *pornai*, and "respectable" wives.

## 2. Four Examples of Male Anxiety

Women were the target of male jokes and criticism in literature since very early times (seventh century BC with Semonides of Amorgos and sixth century with Hesiod *Works*)<sup>19</sup> but it is Athenian comedy that offers the most useful data: "we should not expect to find realistic portrayals of people, but rather stereotypes, embodying the fears and anxieties, the mild, underlying paranoia about what might happen."<sup>20</sup> Athenian comics wrote about women as adulterers, drinking on the sly, lazy, and spending their time gossiping. Under the guise of comedy, they revealed men's darkest fears.

### *Sex-Crazed Women: The Fear of Adultery*

In contrast to Xenophon, the Attic Orators, and even Pericles's funerary oration,<sup>21</sup> who all portrayed women as modest beings, Aristophanes and other comics described them as shameless lustful creatures.<sup>22</sup> It is doubtful that husbands complained about having sexual wives, but they might have feared being inadequate or cuckolds. Their fear was not only rooted in the loss of honor and self-worth,<sup>23</sup> but in issues of inheritance and property. If the "legitimate" wife were to have a child from another man, the immediate family inheritance line might be broken. Until women had children, they were inherently distrusted because they came from a different oikos and had no particular allegiance to the new husband and his oikos. But, once they had produced legitimate heirs, they were entrusted to care for the household and defend their husband's property against the outside world.

Actually, with regard to property, a very fine balance between surveillance and trust bound husbands and wives. "Just as the owner of invisible property had to cultivate a relationship of trust with the holder of his property, so too an Athenian woman needed to maintain a good relationship with her *kyrios*. The law limiting a woman's transactions did not prohibit her from engaging in transactions above this limit (i.e., it set no penalty if she did so); rather, it gave a legal basis to her *kyrios* to invalidate the transaction if he wanted to."<sup>24</sup> But if the wife had an affair, the adulterer, a foreigner to the oikos, could gain access to a man's possessions. "How? Not through any possible baby, but directly through the wife."<sup>25</sup> This fear explains the sexual innuendoes found on some vases that clearly portray respectable wives.

On a number of vases women handle dildos, engage with giant phalli or fantastical beings called phallus-birds (whose neck and head

consist of an erect penis, sometimes with a scrotum at the base).<sup>26</sup> Some were probably intended to be *hetairai*, but many could be “respectable wives.”

On our first comic vase, a red-figure cup in Berlin (Figure 9.2),<sup>27</sup> two “respectable” wives, dressed in heavy garments and their hair in a sakkos, stand back to back while working at raised trays, probably kneading dough. Above them is a fantastical being, a phallus bird. It has no agency in the scene, in contrast to other scenes where it ejaculates or copulates with satyrs or women. The phallus bird has been interpreted as a funerary apotropaic symbol,<sup>28</sup> but why should the intended function or meaning of all cups found in tombs be funerary simply because tombs happened to be their final resting place? The clue to understanding the picture lies in the animal’s frozen, almost heraldic air. It most probably symbolizes the women’s sexual thoughts while they are at work, in a similar fashion to speech balloons in comic strips. It is a picture of escapism while carrying out dull domestic duties. It is comical



Figure 9.2 “Heraldic” phallus-bird symbolizing the women’s sexual thoughts while they are at work. Cup, Attic RF, Berlin, Antikensammlung, 1966.21;500–490 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.



**Figure 9.3** Visual pun. Side A: woman washing clothes. Side B: woman stepping into a basket full of dildos. Pelike, Attic RF, Syracuse, Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi, 20065; 510–470 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.

in that they are not looking at each other, work back to back, and still, “both think of sex.”

Another unusually comic scene is shown on a red-figure pelike in Syracuse (Figure 9.3).<sup>29</sup> The humor arises from the extreme contrast and similitude between the two sides of the same vase. On one side, a young “respectable” wife wearing a *sakkos* has just undressed (her shoes and clothes are wrapped in a bundle on a stool) and is about to wash. A cleaning sponge and a strigil are hanging in the background.

On the other side of the pelike, a woman steps into a container as if to bathe. But the clay vase has turned into a wicker basket, the water having given way to dildos. They have eyes like phallus birds, which brings the dildos to life. The humor lies in the conjunction of the woman’s exaggerated sexual appetite (she prefers a phallic immersion rather than a bath) and the surprise effect, an important asset in humor, between the two sides of the vases, which graphically are almost identical, with a comic twist.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, a red-figure pelike in London (Figure 9.4)<sup>31</sup> shows a “respectable” wife outdoors in a farm yard, distributing seeds to erect phalli instead of chicken. It is a parody of a dull, repetitive farming activity, turned into an escapist erotic fantasy. Another fully clad woman on a red-figure pelike fragment in Athens (Figure 9.5)<sup>32</sup> stoops down to pet affectionately a phallus bird that cranes its neck to look up at the woman. This gesture of female empowerment is surprising because of its stark contrast with the many images of rape. Rape scenes on vases are visualized reenactments, but these erotic fantasies of “respectable” wives are the



**Figure 9.4** Woman throwing grain to upright phalluses as if they were chicken. Pelike, Attic, RF, British Museum, E819; 440–420 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.



**Figure 9.5** Woman petting affectionately a phallus bird. Pelike, Attic, RF fragm., Athens, Agora Museum, P27396; c.480 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.



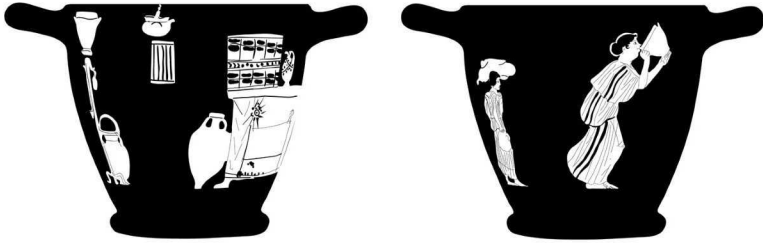
**Figure 9.6** Farming girl fighting off the advances of phallus-geese. Drawing, after Martin van Maele, *La Grande Danse Macabre des Vifs*, 1905.

expression of male sexual fantasies and paranoia. The last drawing in this series by the erotic artist Martin van Maele (1863–1926) (Figure 9.6)<sup>33</sup> dates back to 1905. It shows almost 2,400 years after our Greek vases a farm girl attacked by phallus geese. The meaning of this image is quite different: it emphasizes virginal temptation and fear; a male vision of a young woman’s fantasies of geese turned into phalluses.

#### Drinking Women—Loss of Control

The second male fear concerned women drinking wine on the sly. Husbands were not afraid of wasted or “siphoned wine” (“You are at hand when furtive wives unlock the storeroom door, or siphon off the wine”) but rather of its influence on women.<sup>34</sup> In losing control, women could not be good mothers nor take proper care of the household, and thus we return to the inevitable fear of economical loss.<sup>35</sup>

A red-figure skyphos in Malibu (Figure 9.7)<sup>36</sup> shows a well-kept cellar (A). On the other side (B), a young slave girl, with cropped hair, follows her



**Figure 9.7** Woman gulping wine on the way from the storage room to the men's symposium. Skyphos, Attic RF, Malibu, The J.-Paul Getty Museum, S80.AE.304; 460–440 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.

mistress while carrying a full wineskin on her head, a bag on her shoulder, and a hydria in her hand. The overweight mistress hurriedly drinks wine out of a large skyphos, “her large lips glued to its lip to increase the flow of the liquid.”<sup>37</sup> The woman’s long and heavy dress and hairstyle are that of a “respectable” wife. They must be bringing wine to a symposium. As female citizens could not attend such an event,<sup>38</sup> she can only drink on the sly, on the short way between the cellar and the symposium.

### The Sleeping Guardian or Lazy HouseKeeper

The third masculine fear concerned lazy housekeepers. Indeed, even wealthy wives would have had their hands full managing the *oikos*, and the lack of activity of “lazy” wives could potentially lead to a complete breakdown of the household and its dependents, leading ultimately to serious economic loss. A key to visual as well as verbal humor lies in the use of comic archetypes. Comic artists knew as they do today that certain archetypes always produced the same comical effects by playing opposing concepts or images. The sleeping guardian is one such comic archetype. The guardian, whose sole purpose is to protect something of value, falls asleep on his watch. Add this archetype to another of the lazy woman found in literature since the time of Semonides, and the cocktail is twice as potent.

A Boeotian red-figure pelike in Munich (Figure 9.8)<sup>39</sup> shows on one side a butcher chopping meat on a tripod with his typical broad blade knife. On the other side, a woman is reclining on a chair next to a tall pole or lamp stand. At its very top hang a few slices and chunks of meat. A cat perches on the foot of the stand. The two sides of this pelike must be observed as one complete narrative.





**Figure 9.8** Woman fallen asleep while guarding meat chopped by her butcher husband. A cat is looking up at the food. Pelike, Boeotian RF, Munich, NI 6159; Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.

Vases often show greedy animals, usually cats and dogs.<sup>40</sup> It is likely that our cat intends to climb up the long pole because it has sensed the presence of meat. These poles are frequently found in butchery scenes,<sup>41</sup> as food had to be kept out of reach of greedy animals. The woman is asleep: she is leaning her head on her right hand and her eyes are shut.<sup>42</sup> She was keeping an eye on her husband's produce but fell asleep "on duty." She is a comic archetype: the sleeping guardian. She also conforms to a Greek male stereotype of lazy women, loitering instead of doing their housework.

#### Gossips at the Fountain Place

The fourth male fear and comic stereotype is that of gossiping women. Men jeer at female interaction calling it gossip, because they fear what is potentially discussed (men's foibles) and female social networks of friends and neighbors running in parallel to men's.<sup>43</sup> As discussed above, there has been a huge amount of scholarship on whether women left their homes or not.<sup>44</sup> "One often-repeated generalization about men's space and women's space in the classical Greek polis is that women were confined as much as possible to the domestic interior, while men dominated outside spaces."<sup>45</sup> But we came to the conclusion that they did go outdoors. So, what did they do outdoors besides work? One repeated visual example of female interaction on vases is women fetching water from public fountains. This

was a female space *par excellence* in most cultures, where women from various households met to exchange news, pester about their husbands, and cover a million other topics of conversation.<sup>46</sup> This reflects the gendered division of labor in traditional communities, in which domestic water collection is typically associated with women's roles. Cohen points out that many women would not have had a well in their home nor slaves to fetch water for them or might have simply wanted to go themselves.<sup>47</sup> The public fountain is still a focal point for women throughout the Mediterranean world (Spain, Italy, Greece, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and North Africa),<sup>48</sup> but also many other parts of the world, such as India,<sup>49</sup> Nepal,<sup>50</sup> Thailand, and Vietnam,<sup>51</sup> and various sub-Saharan African countries.<sup>52</sup> L. Neveit breaks the mold of the usual debates on female spaces, using topography to show how women left their homes, locating them in immediate or extended urban neighborhoods.<sup>53</sup>

The first vase (Figure 9.9), alluded to above, displays three Thracian servants fetching water from a fountain that might or not be inside the city space. Even though the fountain resembles more a natural spring



**Figure 9.9** Three Thracian servants fetch water from the fountain place. Hydria, Attic RF, Paris. Musée du Louvre, CA2587. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.

from a rock with twigs sprouting above, one of the servants steps onto a man-built step and another servant is about to pick up a hydria from a square base or altar to the left. The three women show us how to gather water: (1) they place the hydria under the water flow, (2) they steady the filled and heavy vase on a flat surface before (3) placing it, upright, on their head.

The second vase, a black-figure hydria in Oxford (Figure 9.10),<sup>54</sup> shows much more clearly the engaged discussions between at least six well-dressed women (embroidered peploi) at the fountain place. On the very far left, a woman stands on the krepis of the fountain place filling up her hydria. To the right, two women holding their filled hydriai upright on their heads are turned to the right, away from the fountain, whereas the other two women they are gesturing to in conversation are turned toward the fountain place waiting to fill up their hydriai (placed sideways on their heads). There are numerous representations of women at fountains in the black- and red-figure techniques. Some show clearly fountain houses, others simpler fountains, some women



**Figure 9.10** Six women discussing at the fountain place. Hydria, Attic BF, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1910.775; 550–515 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.

are named, for example, “Anthyla (Flora, or Florie) Rhodon (Rosy) is pretty.”<sup>55</sup> None of these vases are comical. They simply show women conversing at fountain places.

But, one hydria shows a comic version of this daily life scene: on a red-figure hydria in Madrid (Figure 9.11),<sup>56</sup> two women are standing at a fountain house, which consists of a Doric column erected on a one-stepped krepis with a lion’s head spout shown in profile. From their gestures and poses, they are conversing. The woman on the left is carrying a hydria upright on her head and her feet are turned to the left which indicates that she is leaving. The “taller” woman has left hers beneath the fountain’s spout. Both women wear a tiara, which indicates that they are most probably citizens. The woman on the right’s hydria is overflowing with water pouring out from the lion’s-head spout. The woman on the left turns toward the other woman. With these simple elements,<sup>57</sup> the overflowing hydria, the gestures of discussion, the indications of departure of the woman on the left, and her lingering (head turned right), the painter has shown two gossips so engrossed in their conversation that one of them has forgotten her hydria, the very purpose of her presence at the fountain place. A similar



**Figure 9.11** Male humor: two gossiping women at the fountain place. One has forgotten her overflowing hydria. Hydria, Attic RF, Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, 11117; 500–480 BC. Photograph © A. G. Mitchell.



**Figure 9.12** Male humor: two gossiping women at the fountain place. One has forgotten her overflowing hydria. Lekythos, Attic BF, Thebes, Archaeological Museum, 6151; 510–490 BC. Photograph © A. G. Mitchell

scene of gossiping ladies (they all wear chitons and himatia and hair-gillets) is shown on a black-figure lekythos in Thebes (Figure 9.12),<sup>58</sup> where the water streams half in the vase and half outside. This typical scene of situation comedy could almost be transposed to the theater. These two vases are the only ones I am aware of, among the numerous representations of ordinary women filling their hydriai at fountain houses or at fountains,<sup>59</sup> in which women have let their hydria overflow or misplaced it.<sup>60</sup>

Did not men gossip at the Agora or elsewhere in Athens? Kartzow,<sup>61</sup> a specialist in gossip studies,<sup>62</sup> writes: “The stereotype is that gossip belongs to women . . . Ancient as well as modern sources do not claim that men never gossip but a gossip is usually a woman.”<sup>63</sup> In the seventh century BC already, Semonides of Amorgos wrote:<sup>64</sup> “Always yapping, even if she sees no human being. A man cannot stop her by threatening, nor by losing his temper and knocking out her teeth with the stone, nor with honeyed words, not even if she is sitting with

friends, but ceaselessly she keeps up a barking you can do nothing with."<sup>65</sup>

Foxhall and Neher also consider roof spaces used by women in antiquity as gossiping arenas.<sup>66</sup> The authors equate these roof spaces to the use of balconies in Renaissance Venice. Indeed, in his study of balconies as gossiping spaces in Renaissance Venice, Cowan writes:<sup>67</sup> "Balconies lie in a liminal position. They are neither entirely part of a house, nor are they part of the street," and further (p. 728): "Balconies were good places from which to have a gossip at first- or second-floor level without leaving home. Close proximity across a street could lead either to relaxed relationships or bitter enmities."

So what was so scary about women gossiping? "Gossip is insinuated critique of power while hiding behind anonymity... gossip makes public what was supposed to be private."<sup>68</sup> When women gossip, they create social ties outside of what one could describe as male dominance. The fountain, a female-circumscribed area at the center of male public territory, was the ultimate daily gossip location. Du Boulay confirms this with regard to most traditional societies today:<sup>69</sup> "the fountain alone provides women with a means of meeting and chatting with people whom they would not otherwise encounter." This was what men feared, not gossip but what lurked behind it, female empowerment through female friendships.<sup>70</sup> If Greek vases seem at first glance (Figures 9.11 and 9.12) to simply ridicule women's friendships, the extra twist that is displayed in these images reveals a deep-seated fear of women's friendships, something we know quite well from Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* and its female social revolutionaries.

#### A Fanciful Epilogue

It is doubtful that these eight comic vases (over-sexed women—Figures 9.2–9.5; drunks—Figure 9.7; lazy housekeeper—Figure 9.8; gossips—Figures 9.11, 9.12) would be interpreted differently depending on who bought them and for what purpose. Yet, their psychological impact might have been different whether a woman or a man viewed or chose these vases. One could attempt to reconstruct different viewers' scenarios and buying patterns,<sup>71</sup> especially gendered ones. "The distinction here is between two different ways of thinking about visual images. The first takes images as reflections of accepted truths. From this perspective modern advertising images represent widely shared and accepted notions of the roles of men and women.

But we can instead or simultaneously think of images as a means for the circulation of propositions that might be contested. Not everyone accepts the kind of ideals projected in contemporary advertising” (Joyce 2008, 16). It is also doubtful that whoever bought these vases “misunderstood” their intended meaning, but one can imagine too that they may have bought a number of pots containing oil or wine and not really paid attention to their representations.

Three reminders: First, anyone could buy these inexpensive pots at the market. Second, based on representations of vases in use on vases themselves, certain shapes were produced for a specific function. If we look at our four comic types, Figure 9.2 is a decorated wine-drinking cup probably intended for banquets or home. Figure 9.7, a skyphos, was also a wine-drinking vessel. Figures 9.3–9.5, and 9.8 were pelikai, used for the storage of liquids (wine, water) and solids such as grain. Figure 9.11, a hydria, was a water jar identified by its three handles, two for carrying and one for pouring. The final shape in Figure 9.12 is a lekythos, a small oil container for personal use. We also know that certain shapes of vases or pottery objects were intended for women, such as certain perfume flasks, jewel boxes, or *epinetra* but none of our comic vases apply.<sup>72</sup> Third, we know from the vases themselves that women bought and sold objects at the marketplace.

### Female Viewers

*The porne.* She probably would not have laughed at the comic sexual fantasies of respectable women as her daily life amounted to soulless sex from morning to night in crowded brothels. She may or may not have laughed at the drinking on the sly scenes. The lazy woman or sleeping guardian would have raised a smile as it was so far from her daily life and a comic archetype. But the chatty women at the fountain place would not have been funny: would she not feel envy at the idea that these women had the freedom to meet, socialize, and chat at the fountain place?

*The hetaira.* She would probably have laughed (laughter of superiority) at these poor wives fantasizing about sex, because she was probably the reason their husbands were not so preoccupied in satisfying their legitimate needs. She would have felt superior and free even though she was of a far lower social status. Similarly for the “drinking on the sly” scene, a hetaira could drink her heart’s content. The

lazy worker is a consensual image that might have made her laugh at the archetype of the sleeping guardian. The final image of "respectable wives" gossiping would not have raised a smile but rather made her wonder whether she was the talk of the town, as she was quite probably hated by most Athenian wives. She would never have been part of a social network involving the "respectable wives" chatting at the fountain.

*The servant.* She probably would have laughed out loud at the idea of her uppity mistress being sexually frustrated; she may have thought something along the lines of "she's no better than me." The same attitude may have prevailed with the wine-drinking scene and the lousy housekeeper as servants carried out most of the domestic work. The final image might really have made her laugh as it would have reminded her of her daily bouts of gossip with her fellow servants at the fountain house. Surely one of the conversation topics must have concerned their mistresses.

*The respectable maiden.* The sexual fantasies would probably have been somewhat subversive or possibly raised a guilty smile, depending on how far she had been sheltered from the outside world. It is also unlikely she would have laughed at an image of a drunken mother-figure. The lazy house worker is a comic archetype but she might have thought "if men had half my mother's workload, they'd probably take a nap too." She would probably be amused and certainly not threatened by the gossiping wife images.

*The respectable wife.* She was the only self-reflexive case among our potential viewers. More than the others, her view would really depend on her good or lack of sense of humor. The fantasies could raise a smile of recognition, or she may have pestered about men's fantasies, thinking "sex is the last thing on my mind when I'm making bread or feeding the chicken." The drinking-on-the-sly image might have raised a guilty smile she might have found it demeaning. Or she might also have known a female neighbor drinking on the sly and this visual parallel might have amused her. The same notions are prevalent for the "lazy housewife." The last image of gossiping women might have amused her, but just like the respectable maiden, she would not be threatened by her own female friendships.

*The older "respectable woman."* As she would have been less likely to be molested by men, she would have been freer of her movements within the city space. The comic erotic fantasies might have raised a smile thinking back to her youth and the other three types of images might



or not have made her laugh depending on her own sense of humor, especially the consensual comic archetypes.

**Male Viewers (with the Exception of Married Athenian  
Men Who Are the Subject of This Article)**

*The male servant.* The respectable woman's sexual fantasies might have made him laugh: he might have fantasized about his mistress, possibly thinking that she was not so "respectable" after all. The woman drinking on the sly would probably have made him laugh as well, as he might have thought "if they only knew how much I drink on the sly!" (the Paphlagonian servant in Aristophanes's *Knights* would have probably concurred). The lazy housewife would have made him laugh as a comic archetype, but he would definitely laugh at the last image of the gossiping wives as he would probably feel as threatened by these images as other men, thinking here of female servants.

*The young unmarried man.* The respectable wives' sexual fantasies might have made him laugh as much as titillate him, despite (or maybe because of) the danger of getting caught in the act by a jealous husband. The drinking-on-the-sly scene might have made him laugh, but he might have conflated the image of his own mother with the visual image and found it disrespectful. As an archetype, the sleeping guardian would have made him laugh, as he might have imagined himself sleeping on duty during his military service. The final image of gossiping ladies would have made him laugh as he would have been as paranoid about it as most Athenian married men.

**Metics**

Whether they were rich or poor, metics were of a lower status than citizens who were born so. Metic women were probably of even lower status. After Pericles's citizenship law, things for metics went from bad to worse. Before then, metics might have tried to emulate citizens in the hope of become citizens one day. But there was no point doing so after 451 BC. The reactions of metics would probably be aligned on that of Athenian husbands and metic women on that of servants.

In view of the erudite works on spectatorship in ancient Greece,<sup>73</sup> this is a rather coarse and unscientific epilogue, but it enables one to think

“out of the box” about numerous ancient voices muffled by the past and endless viewing possibilities. For one interpretation of each comic image based on the visual evidence, there were probably countless conflicting views of passersby based on their gender, age, status, and ethnic background.

### Notes

\* Abbreviations of major vase-painting publications: *ABV*: Beazley, John D. *Attic Black-figure Vase-painters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956 | *ARV*<sup>2</sup>: Beazley, John D. *Attic Red-figure Vase-painters*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963 | *Add*: Burn Lucilla, Glynn, Ruth. *Beazley Addenda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982 | *Add*<sup>2</sup>: Carpenter, Thomas H., Mannack, Thomas and Mendonça, Melanie. *Beazley Addenda*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 | (BA#): Oxford, Beazley Archive (BA) Database number | *Para*: Beazley, John D. *Paralipomena. Additions to Attic Black-figure Vase-Painters and to Attic Red-figure Vase-Painters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. For an excellent overview on Greek vases, see Sparkes 1996, 140–167. On the cheap price of vases in antiquity, see Vickers (2002); on the potential commercial value of signed vases, see Heesen 2009; see Osborne 2004 on the context of discovery. All vases are Attic except when mentioned otherwise.

1. See the woman painting a volute krater in a workshop. Red-figure Hydria fr., Vicenza, Banca Intesa, c.278 (B.A. 206564). *ARV*<sup>2</sup> 571.73, 1659, *Add* 128, *Add*<sup>2</sup> 261, *Para* 390. From Ruvo. Attributed to the Leningrad Painter. On the various interpretations of the scene, see Papadopoulos 2003, 198–199.
2. Joyce 2008, 20.
3. Nelson 2007, vii.
4. Spencer-Wood 2007, 284. The function of the various areas of the house changed according to the specific activities carried out in them at different times of the day (Lin Foxhall 2007).
5. Lawful married wives in contrast to concubines (indistinguishable from the former in the visual evidence).
6. For an overview, see Katz 1992, Blundel 1995, Lewis 2002, and O’Higgins 2003.
7. Pomeroy 1975, 60.
8. On snooty upper-class women who look down on working men, see Mitchell 2009, 56–57, 69–70.
9. *Lysistrata*, 16–19.
10. *Oec.* 7.14.
11. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 37.11.19 (BA 539). 440–420 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
12. *Wasps*, 1253–1255.
13. *Char.* 28.15.

14. Musée du Louvre, CA2587 (B.A. 205691); *ARI*<sup>2</sup> 506.29, *Add* 123, *Add*<sup>2</sup> 252. Aegisthus Painter. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
15. These servants are identifiable as Thracian from their tattooed arms. See Herodotus 5.6 and Zimmermann 1980.
16. Lévy (1976, 105) writes that highflying courtesans, such as the expensive Lais, must be distinguished from the anonymous *pornai* that populate banquets (*Ar. Ach.* 1091) and work at the City gates (*Ar. Knights* 1400, 1403), inside the Kerameikos (Schol *Ar. Knights* 772), or at Piraeus.
17. Kurke 1997, 106–150.
18. On satchels in scenes, see Keuls 1993, 260–266. On hetairai, see Reinsberg 1989 and Kurke 1997.
19. *Works* 699–705.
20. Gardner 1989, 51.
21. For a different view of Pericles's funerary oration, see Tyrrell 1999.
22. See also the *Philogelos* (a second-century Book of jokes) which includes a number of misogynistic jokes with sexual undertones (e.g., 244A).
23. On issues of masculinity, see Rosen 2003.
24. Johnstone 2003, 267–268.
25. Gardner 1989, 54.
26. On phallus birds, see Boardman 1992.
27. Antikensammlung, 1966.21 (B.A. 5119). 500–490 BC.
28. Lewis 2002, 89.
29. Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi, 20065 (BA 202175), *ARI*<sup>2</sup> 238.5, *Add*<sup>2</sup> 201, *Para* 349. From Sicily, Gela; Myson; 510–470 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell. See also an attic red-figure amphora, Paris, Musée du Petit Palais, 307 (BA 202706), *ARI*<sup>2</sup> 279.2 *Add* 103, *Add*<sup>2</sup> 208. From Italy, Capua; Flying-Angel Painter; 500–490 BC.
30. See Freud (1905) on the “psychological” reasons for laughing. The viewer is held simultaneously by two opposite visual meanings and the unexpected meaning is suddenly chosen against the more common one.
31. British Museum, E819 (BA 215062), *ARI*<sup>2</sup> 1137.25, *Add*<sup>2</sup> 333, *Para* 454. From Italy, Nola; Hasselmann Painter; 440–420 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
32. Agora Museum, P27396. c.480 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
33. After Martin van Maele, *La Grande Danse Macabre des Vifs* 1905.
34. Aristophanes, *Assembly of Women* 14–15. See also *Lysistrata* 195–197.
35. See Noel 1999.
36. The J.-Paul Getty Museum, S80.AE.304 (BA 10146). 460–440 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
37. Oakley 2000, 240.
38. *Lys.* 1.23.
39. Antiken sammlungen NI 6159 (previously 2347, V249). Recently “cleaned.” Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
40. Mitchell 2009, 49–58.
41. See Faraone 2012 for recent work on butchers and sacrifice in ancient Greece. But all butchery images were not sacrifice related: see Ekroth 2007, 272.

42. On sleeping figures, see McNally 1985.
43. Blundell 1995, 137.
44. See also Davidson 2011, 598. On the rejection of the straightforward equation of women with the home on theoretical grounds, see, for example, Helly, Reverby 1992 and Brumfiel 2008. On women and agricultural labor, see Scheidel 1995, 1996. For wide-ranging economic female activities, see Brock 1994. For similar issues in contemporary society, see Veauvy 2004.
45. Davidson 2011, 597.
46. Aristophanes, *Lys.* 327–331.
47. Cohen 1989, 7.
48. See Bourdieu 1974, 221–222.
49. Ghosh 2007, 443, 450–451. See also O'Reilly 2006; Bisht 2009, 307, 311.
50. See Saul 1999, 33 on the division of labor.
51. Coyle 2000, 492, 499–500. See also Earth, Anh 2006.
52. Odebode, Godwin 2012, 187, 190. See also Thompson 2011.
53. Nevett 2011. Llewellyn-Jones (2007) notes that even when men were present in significant numbers, women might have worn a veil, but this is not substantiated by the visual evidence.
54. Ashmolean Museum, 1910.775 (B.A. 1033). 550–515 BC. Drawing © A. G. Mitchell.
55. On the women's names, see Rotroff 2006, 7.
56. Museo Arqueológico Nacional, 11117 (BA 201985), *ARV*<sup>2</sup> 209.167, *Add* 97, *Add*<sup>2</sup> 195. Berlin Painter; 500–480 BC. Photograph © A. G. Mitchell.
57. Olmos and Balmaseda 1977–1978, 25.
58. Archaeological Museum, 6151 (BA 9606), *ABL* 108. From Greece, Boeotia, Rhitsona; 510–490 BC. Photograph © A. G. Mitchell.
59. Diehl 1964, 131, 230–231; Manfrini-Aragno 1992, 127–148.
60. See the discussion in Mitchell 2009, fn.133 on the scenes involving Polyxene at the fountain.
61. Kartzow 2009, 44.
62. On gossip studies, see Merry 1984 and a recent overview by Foster 2004.
63. See also Hunter 1990 on gossiping in classical Athens.
64. *Fragmenta* 7, 12–20.
65. Translation Lloyd-Jones, H., *Females of the Species: Semonides on Women*, Noyes Press, 1975.
66. Foxhall and Neher 2011, 497.
67. Cowan 2011, 721.
68. Kartzow 2009, 47.
69. Du Boulay 1974, 209.
70. See also Taylor's study on social networks and female friendships (2011).
71. On the archaeology of consumption and buying patterns, see Mullins 2011 and Crook 2000. For the Athenian agora, see Thompson 1993.
72. On the issue of the final user, see Lewis 2002, 8–9, 11.
73. For example, Stansburg-O'Donnell 2006 and Hedreen 2007.

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