

Speculum Africanum: Looking at Modern Nigerian Women
in the Teaching of Gender in the Ancient World
Mark A. Thorne (Wheaton College)

One of the ongoing challenges in teaching the ancient world to modern students is helping them recognize both the similarities that connect as well as the “otherness” that separates our world from ancient Greece and Rome. As part of a recent course I taught on “Women in Antiquity,” I decided that I would try to tackle this challenge not solely by a binary comparison of ancient against modern but by establishing a broader matrix of three cultures that would help the students triangulate toward a more meaningful understanding of the lived experiences of ancient women. Toward this end, I chose to have the class compare the lives of women in our own United States, in ancient Athens and Rome, and also in modern Nigeria. This project turned out to be a very insightful and positive experience for everyone involved. In this talk I will describe the lesson plan I employed by way of discussing its methodology, the various activities involved, and finally suggestions for implementing it successfully in the classroom.

The project is organized around a common set of interview questions that are posed to each cultural group. They examine: 1) basic demographic and work information 2) daily routines, 3) division of responsibilities, 4) how the women spend their time and money, 5) perceived social expectations on women *contra* men, 6) rites of passage that women in that culture, especially marriage, 7) views toward children of either gender and the content of their respective educations, and 8) where and how women experience community. The students’ first task is to establish a base-line for their own American or “Western” cultural expectations by conducting the set of interview questions with at least one American-culture adult mother. In my recent class, this stage helped reveal how comparatively egalitarian most attitudes have become toward gender divisions in the past couple generations.

The second task is to read through at least four of the interviews given to Nigerian women and then write a short paper that summarizes their findings and compares them with the earlier American interviews. I chose Nigeria specifically because I have a long-time friend who is a professor at a major university in that country who was able to conduct the interviews. The choice of a place like Nigeria is so beneficial for this project because it provides on the one hand a concrete, real-world point of comparison contemporary with the student’s own lives but on the other hand a much more “traditional” set of cultural values that is more reminiscent of what we find in ancient Greece and Rome. The interview subjects range from urban women with college degrees to poor women in rural villages with virtually no access to education. My students found this stage the most illuminating and rewarding, since they were confronted with living, breathing women whose life situations and cultural expectations were often so different from their own and thus offered a challenge to their own Western-influenced gender assumptions.

The third and final task is to pose the same interview questions to a “typical” Athenian or Roman woman whom they create for this project. My students found that this final phase of the project helped to bring everything together while also providing a welcome opportunity for their creativity, given that they were not merely making generalized observations about ancient women but were able to envision a specific individual with her own unique life situation. This final phase thus serves as a kind of capstone project which allows the student to synthesize all they have learned in the course about the daily lives, cultural values, and social expectations of ancient women.