The Eyes Have It: Female Desire on Attic Greek Vases

In his important work on desire in Greek art, Andrew Stewart asserts that the prevailing picture of sexuality in classical literature "regularly portrays men as primarily lusting after boys, and women as sexually insatiable" (1995, 82). Stewart further argues that all the heterosexual visual erotica are subsumed within the larger homosocial structure of Athenian society. Women are simply circulated among the males "as the basic mechanism for defining men as the true embodiments of the social field, and so convey a symbolic privilege upon the male subject" (1997, 156). Stewart's conclusions are supported by Marilyn Skinner's 2005 study of the pottery evidence of Athenian sexuality from the late archaic through the classical period, which she says shows the celebration of "male homosocial bonding" and the "abuse of prostitutes" that "affirms hegemony over inferiors" (109). Sian Lewis questions this prevailing interpretation in her thorough investigation of female iconography on Athenian vases. As Lewis points out, sexually exploitive and degrading sexual acts toward women are not numerous on Attic pots; she counts only five, which is a small number in comparison to the extant erotic vases. In fact, Lewis argues, significantly more scenes can be found with "affectionate gestures" between male and female partners (122-4).

My paper argues in favor of Lewis' position by emphasizing the depiction of women as desiring subjects on Attic vases, which I believe has been under-evaluated in this debate. I challenge the simple dichotomy that sees women either as degraded sex objects (as seen on everyday symposium cups) or as powerful threats to males (as seen in mythological scenes, like those with the goddess Eos). I show that a continuity of female desire can be seen between these two categories of vase paintings when we focus on eye-

to-eye contact between men and women as direct evidence of women as desiring subjects, not just desired objects. The mutual gaze between partners can be interpreted as emphasizing the flow of desire in both directions between the engaged figures. It asserts the woman's right to look as well as be looked at.

Being a desiring subject can also mean wanting to be desired in return. Moreover, the mutual gaze, rather than the phallus, as the focal point of eroticism moves the Greeks away from a one-dimensional view of sexuality. Desire is not just about genitals, about penetrating and being penetrated; it is also about what Anne Carson calls a "bittersweet" reaching for what is absent, which the "in medias res" quality of erotic vases evidences, where the sexual act is shown at the moment of arousal and choice, the time of heightened desire and anticipation for both partners. Often in such scenes, both everyday and mythological, the female is depicted as being the active agent moving toward the male, as they gaze into each other's eyes.

Such pictures challenge a common assertion about Athenian women: that for them to show desire meant to fall into the stereotype of the sexually insatiable woman who was simply feared and never desired. The question is this: If a woman desires too much, can she also be desirable? Certainly there was always a double bind for Athenian women. In expressing desire, they risked being viewed as excessively passionate; but lacking it meant relegation to a passive receptacle. I hope to problematize and nuance this dichotomy by showing that the excess of the desiring women in these pictures was arousing and appealing, as well as fearful, for the Greek men who were the makers of these vases.

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