

Parthenos or Prostitute: Neaira Living in Athena's Shadow

When we think about women in classical Athens, we think about them behind the closed doors of the house making limited public appearances during festivals, or funerals. Yet another group of contemporary women does not conform to this. Neaira was one of them. In this paper I will explore the unusual life of an unusual Greek woman. The aim is to get a better understanding of what was proper and immoral for typical Athenian women, as well investigating the ethical jurisprudence of the Athenian court system.

To understand how different Neaira was from your typical 4th century Athenian woman, we must first get a mental picture of what that archetypal woman was like. A respectable lady in Athenian society was not seen and not heard. She would not have talked to any man out side of the family, and even with in her own family she would have very little interaction with the males. From pottery paintings we can safely conclude that a respectable woman would not even eat her meals in the same room as the men.ⁱ The only time an Athenian lady would be seen in public would be during religious festivals and rituals or funerals.ⁱⁱ

The only real perk to being a proper Athenian woman would be to pass on citizenship to your offspring so the sons could become leaders in military and government, and the daughters could become proper wives for other sons to marry and consequently continue the cycle.ⁱⁱⁱ The perfect Athenian woman would be a virgin like Athena, or a *parthenos*, until marriage. It is interesting, however that the primary virtue of women in classical Athens is to be dutiful and loyal to their husbands and moderate in their behavior^{iv} given that the goddess Athena never married and was no where near moderate in her behavior, seen in myths like the weaving story with Arachne.^v By studying the trial against Neaira, we get a brief glimpse into time. We can see the inner workings of various aspects of Athenian society during the mid 4th century BCE, and it is a priceless look into women's history.

ⁱ Hamel, 27, see also page 9 of this report. See also Bers, 161, footnote 40, "Respectable women were normally excluded from this sort of social contact with men to whom they are not related.

ⁱⁱ Hamel, 14-15, "And even women who were successfully segregated from the male society most of the time had occasions to leave the confines of their home one in a while. Greek women attended festivals. They grieved for their dead at funerals." See also Hamel, 100, "Women who were (known to have) been found with moichoi [lovers] in Athens lived afterward in disgrace, prohibited by law, for example from attending public sacrifices, where they might associate with and corrupt respectable women." See also Blundell, 125, "But the husband of an adulterous wife was legally bound to divorce her, on pain of suspension of his citizen rights, and she was henceforth barred from participation in all religious activities of the state, which meant she was cut off from the one form of public involvement available to women in Athens."

ⁱⁱⁱ Blundell, 129. "After the introduction of Pericles' citizenship law, there would have been a considerable difference in the way in which Athenian women, as distinct from alien women, were viewed by men. Athenian women would become important as channels through which political as well as economic rights were transmitted to the next generation of citizens.

^{iv} Glazebrook, 165. See also Blundell, 126, "A woman's chastity was therefore the concern not just of herself and her family, but also of the state."

^v The story of the weaving contest between Athena and Arachne, where Arachne boasts she can weave better than the goddess, and she does. Then the goddess goes crazy and beats the woman so badly Arachne hangs herself for shame. I find it interesting that women must be "moderate in their behaviors" given the patron saint of Athens somewhat erratic behavior.