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ANCIENT HISTORY

THE EVIDENCE FOR WOMEN'S LITERACY IN ARCHAIC AND CLASSICAL ATHENS

Abstract: This paper challenges the entrenched assumption that women in Archaic and Classical Athens were overwhelmingly illiterate and excluded from the textual culture of their time. Drawing on a wide range of literary, visual, and material evidence, it argues that female literacy—while uneven and socially stratified—was significantly more widespread than previously acknowledged. Incidental references in tragedy and comedy, domestic and religious inscriptions, graffiti, and dedications all reveal that women read, wrote, and engaged with texts both privately and publicly. Iconographic evidence from Attic vase painting also depicts women reading and writing in domestic and social contexts, while inscriptions on personal items and dedications to gods demonstrate functional and literary literacy, including poetic compositions. This paper also analyses the role of writing in female religious practice and its significance for self-expression and public commemoration. Rather than passive observers, Athenian women appear as active participants in the literary and religious life of their polis. The paper concludes that the exclusion of women from formal education did not preclude their access to literacy, and that the written culture in Classical Athens was more inclusive, especially within elite and religious spheres, than has been assumed by modern scholarship.

Keywords: *Female literacy, Classical Athens, Inscriptions and graffiti, Athenian vase painting, Religious dedications.*

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of the level of literacy in Archaic and Classical Greece has focused on the men of Athens. Recent work has argued for a growing level of literacy in male Athenian citizens through the fifth century and links this to the demands of democratic government. The development of Athenian democracy went hand in hand with the proliferation of state records which recorded the minutiae of public decisions. This both demanded and encouraged literacy on the part of Athenian citizens, men who were active participants in their government.¹ Hence the demands of popular government, in particular, has led to the conclusion that 'the great majority of Athenian citizens' were literate.² Indeed, literacy is the key tool that allowed Athenian democracy to work, providing the communication necessary for the popular participation

¹ MERRITT 1940, 89–93; TURNER 1952, 9; HARRIS 1989, 74; BELLOWS 2023, 173–174.

² HARVEY 1966, 628–629; women are not considered citizens with regard to this statistic. BURNS 1981, 371 also focuses on the literacy of citizens.

that characterised the Athenian model of government.³ However, this view of the development of literacy in Athens ignores women.

Where literacy among women in Athens is acknowledged, this is typically taken to be at a low level and more likely prevalent among non-Athenian women living in Athens. Older scholarship characterised women in the Classical Greek world in general as largely illiterate and this view has predominated: "There must have been a high rate of illiteracy... among women."⁴ A specific percentage of illiterate women in Athens has even been floated: 'With regard to Greek women, this [illiteracy] could easily have extended to 95% of them or more.'⁵ Yet, there is no real evidence on which to base this sort of statistical conclusion. It does, however, speak to a preconception that women were not engaged with the literature that flourished in the Greek world, especially Athens, in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Worse, it leads to the denial that a poet such as Erinna, the most famous female poet in the Greek world after Sappho, could even have existed.⁶ There is, nevertheless, evidence from Athens and elsewhere in the Greek world to challenge such a negative view. There are texts written by women and for women, as well as many images of women reading texts. A review of that evidence needs to be done in conjunction with an analysis of references in Athenian literature that speak to the literacy of women. While such literary and visual evidence for female literacy has been considered before, each example has conventionally been treated with great scepticism, and when analysed independently from the totality of the evidence found to be inconclusive. Bringing together the literary and material evidence instead provides the necessary context in which to read that evidence.⁷

LITERARY TEXTS

Although there is significant incidental reference to literate women in tragedy and comedy, previous scholarship has found this evidence not to be definitive. For example, while theatre-goers see that Agamemnon sends a letter to his wife Clytemnestra, modern scholars have traditionally noted that the fact that we do not see her physically receiving and reading the letter means it is not clear that she read it herself. Thus, the example of female literacy is found to be ambiguous.⁸ Yet, the desire of a husband to write to his wife shows that she is imagined as engaged in written communication. Phaedra is capable of writing a message herself: she even has her own seal that she uses on her letter, one recognised by her husband.⁹ The foster mother

of Stratophanes, on her deathbed, writes down details of his family for him.¹⁰ There is no hint in any of these examples that the audience should view the literacy of these female characters as abnormal. Further, Aeschylus' suppliant women are urged by their father, Danaus, metaphorically, to record what they need to remember 'in the notebooks in their minds' (φυλάξαι τὰμ ἔπη δελτουμένας, Aesch. *Suppl.* 179), an allusion to writing that they do not find strange. Later he tells them:

καὶ ταῦθ' ἄμ' ἐγγράψασθε πρὸς γεγραμμένοις
πολλοῖσιν ἄλλοις σωφρονισμασιν πατρός,

And engrave this, along with the many other wise lessons
of your father that have been written down. (Aesch. *Suppl.*
991-2)

Danaus uses 'engrave' in a metaphoric sense to mean 'remember,' to record permanently. This is a metaphor that Aeschylus likes to use: Prometheus tells Io that she has to remember the route he will give her by engraving it in the 'unforgetting tablets of your mind' (ἐγγράφου σὺ μνήμοισιν δέλτοις φρενῶν, Aesch. *PB* 788-9).¹¹ Female characters are thus commonly portrayed as familiar with the idea of writing, as a way of recording a memory.

On the other hand, Iphigenia, stranded in Tauris, says that she had one of the prisoners write a letter for her. We do not know why she did not write it herself. Nevertheless, her desire to correspond with her friends by letter is evidence of her being a member of a literate community.¹² Deianeira is another stage character whose literacy has been considered questionable. Sophocles has her describe an 'ancient tablet inscribed with signs' which she was incapable of reading. Yet in this case the text was an unusual and ancient tablet and the writing is described as 'cryptic' (ξυνθήμαθ').¹³ Later she speaks of memorizing an instruction given to her as if it were 'indelible writing on a bronze tablet' (ἀλλ' ἐσφζόμεν / χαλκῆς ὅπως δύσνιπτον ἐκ δέλτου γραφὴν *Tr.* 682-3) using a simile that implies her own familiarity with writing and the use of written records.

Elsewhere, Xenophon's gentleman, Isomachus, expects his young wife to be able to read and write. Her duties as a manager of the household include keeping itemized lists of objects in storage.¹⁴ Other women appear well able to read, understand and even keep financial records.¹⁵ As the Greeks used letters as numerals, both the Athenian acrophonic and the Ionic alphabetic number systems required knowledge of the alphabet. Moreover, Herodotus presents a woman from Istria as perfectly capable of teaching her Scythian son to speak and write Greek (τὸν ἢ μήτηρ αὐτῆ γλῶσσάν τε Ἑλλάδα καὶ γράμματα ἐδίδαξε *Hdt.* 4.78.1). Although we have no literary evidence for girls attending schools in Classical

³ BELLOWS 2023, 139-41; MISSIOU 2011, 143-149. For the view of a much more restricted level of literacy in Athens, HARRIS 1989, 106-108; against this view MISSIOU 2011, 130-33 and *passim*. For a thorough review of Archaic and Classical evidence, COLE 1981, 131-137.

⁴ HARVEY 1966, 621.

⁵ HARRIS 1989, 107.

⁶ WEST 1977, 117-119 argues that the work of Erinna was pseudonymous, a girl was not capable of composing poetry of the standard of *The Distaff*.

⁷ As BELLOWS 2023, 140 argues in considering evidence for male literacy in Classical Athens.

⁸ Eur. *IA* 99-103, *cf.* the sending of a second letter 108-112. For discussion of the evidence from tragedy, COLE 1981, 134-135.

⁹ *Hipp.* 856-859.

¹⁰ *Men. Sic.* 131.

¹¹ This imagery is noted and discussed by MISSIOU 2011, 104-105.

¹² Eur. *IT* 584-5; Iphigenia recites the letter to Orestes and Pylades 769-787.

¹³ Soph. *Tr.* 157-9 λείπει παλαιάν δέλτον ἐγγεγραμμένην / ξυνθήμαθ', ἄμοι πρόσθεν οὐκ ἔτη ποτέ, / πολλοὺς ἀγῶνας ἐξίων; συνθήματα as cyphers (*LSJ* s.v.), as argued by COLE 1981, 134-135.

¹⁴ Xen. *Oec.* 9.10. For discussion of this and other examples, HARVEY 1966, 621.

¹⁵ *Lys.* 32.14; *Dem.* 41.8-9.

Greece, that a mother is attested as a teacher suggests that home-schooling was a normal practice. While we may not believe that Aspasia taught her partner Pericles his rhetoric, that women did teach at home may still be reflected in that story.¹⁶ In addition, the daughter of a Socratic follower, Arete, a philosopher herself, is attested to have been the teacher of her son Aristippos μητροδίδακτος ('mother-taught').¹⁷

Athenian comedy also provides evidence of women's knowledge of the process of learning to read. Callias' comedy *The Letter Show* or *The Letter Tragedy*, presents a chorus of women who represent the letters of the alphabet. They sing a song that imitates the way the Greeks learnt to read and write, pairing consonants with different vowels as single syllables after reciting the alphabet.¹⁸ The chorus addresses each other specifically as women as they then recite the vowels:

ἄλφα μόνον, ὦ γυναῖκες, εἴ τε δεύτερον
λέγειν μόνον χρή. (Χο.) καὶ τρίτον μόνον γ' ἐρεῖς...

Ladies, you have to say the alpha on its own, and secondly the 'ei' on its own. (Chorus) And you'll say the third on its own ... (Callias fr. 1 in Athenaeus 453f)

In another passage from the same work, also quoted by Athenaeus, a female character spells out the name of her baby to the chorus of women.

κύω γὰρ, ὦ γυναῖκες. ἀλλ' αἰδοῖ, φίλοι,
ἐν γράμμασι σφῶν τοῦνομι' ἐξερῶ βρέφους.
ὀρθὴ μακρὰ γραμμὴ ἴστιν' ἐκ δ' αὐτῆς μέσης
μικρὰ παρεστῶσ' ἐκατέρωθεν ὑπία.
ἔπειτα κύκλος πόδας ἔχων βραχεῖς δύο.

For, ladies, I am pregnant. But through embarrassment, my friends,
I will tell you my baby's name letter by letter.
There is a long upright letter; from its middle
come small, upturned ones on either side.
Then a circle with two short feet. (Callias fr. 1 in Athenaeus 454a).

Callias is spoofing a device used in tragedy, where a character describes letters to spell out a key word rather than saying the word itself. The other characters in the scene, and of course the audience, recognize the word from the description of the letters.¹⁹ Here the women on stage, specifically addressed by the speaker as 'women' and '(female) friends,' are taken to be literate. The speaker is too embarrassed to speak the baby's name and even, it seems, to utter the names of the letters in its name themselves.²⁰ She

¹⁶ Both Callias (f. 21) and Aeschines the Socratic attributed the rhetorical prowess of Pericles and Lysicles to the teaching of Aspasia (Schol. Pl. *Menex.* 235e); Plato has Socrates declare her his teacher of rhetoric, noting that she prepared Pericles and many other good speakers too (*Menex.* 235e); for discussion of the historiographic problems, LEMOINE 2020, 135–157.

¹⁷ Str. 17.3.22; Diog. Laert. 2.83, 86; *Suda s.v.* Aristippos, Alpha 3908.

¹⁸ Callias fr. 1 =Athenaeus 10.453c–f. We should date Callias to the end of the fifth century rather than earlier: ROSEN 1999, 147–149. For syllabic alphabet lessons, Plat. *Stat.* 277e; BECK 1975, 16.

¹⁹ Athenaeus cites examples of this device in Euripides, Agathon, Theodectes and Sophocles (454b–f); see ROSEN 1999, 156–157.

²⁰ On the obscene but obscure joke that lay behind this passage, ROSEN 1999, 156.

nevertheless describes the shape of the letters in the baby's name. In so doing, she demonstrates her familiarity with Ionic letters which may have only recently been adopted in Athens.²¹ These scenes suggest an assumption of the normality of women being literate.

Antiphanes, a Middle Comedy playwright of the first half of the fourth century BC, also represented women on stage as literate. In his play *Sappho*, the poet appears in conversation with a man who tries (and fails) to solve a riddle that she sets him.

Σ. ἔστι φύσις θήλεια βρέφη σφύζουσ' ὑπὸ κόλποις
αὐτῆς, ὄντα δ' ἄφωνα βοῆν ἴσθησι γεγωνόν
καὶ διὰ πόντιον οἶδμα καὶ ἠπείρου διὰ πάσης
οἷς ἐθέλει θνητῶν, τοῖς δ' οὐδὲ παροῦσιν ἀκούειν
ἔξεστιν, κωφὴν δ' ἀκοῆς αἴσθησιν ἔχουσιν

(Sappho) There is a female creature that keeps her children safe in her bosom; even though they are mute, they lift up a loud cry through both the sea swell and the whole land to whatever mortals they want; and even people who are there cannot hear them; their perception of sound is deaf. (Antiphanes fr. 194 K.-A. = Athen. 10, 450e)

The solution to Sappho's riddle is a letter:

Σ. θήλεια μὲν νῦν ἔστι φύσις ἐπιστολή,
βρέφη δ' ἐν αὐτῇ περιφέρει τὰ γράμματα·
ἄφωνα δ' ὄντα ταῦτα τοῖς πόρρω λαλεῖ
οἷς βούλεθ', ἕτερος δ' ἂν τύχη τις πλησίον
ἐστὼς ἀναγινώσκοντος, οὐκ ἀκούεται.

Sappho: A written-message is a female creature, and the letters she carries around in her are her babies. Even though they are mute, they speak to people far away, whomever they want to. But anyone else who happens to be standing next to someone who is reading does not hear them. (Antiphanes fr. 196 K.-A. = Athen. 10, 451a–b).

Sappho is represented as an intelligent woman, fully conversant with this genre of intellectual word-play game. The responder to the riddle sets the action in contemporary Athens (late 370s BC).²² The audience sees in this fictitious Sappho a contemporary woman who is familiar with both letter writing and manipulating a word to mask its meaning. While this fragment does not represent her reading or writing herself, the implication of Sappho's knowledge of letters and letter-writing demonstrates she is a woman familiar with both.²³

A fragment of Menander suggests that it is dangerous to teach a woman to read and write:

γυναῖχ' ὁ διδάσκων γράμματ' οὐ καλῶς ποιεῖ
ἀσπίδι δὲ φοβερᾷ προσποτίζει φάρμακον.

A man who teaches a woman her letters does no good: he provides venom to a fearful viper. (Menander fr. 702 K.-A.)

²¹ The work is likely to have been produced soon after the adoption of the Ionic alphabet in Athens (403 BC): see ROSEN 1999, 149.

²² On the date see OLSON 2021, 11.

²³ That the real Sappho may have published her erotic poetry as a written text, STEHLE 1997, 288–318.

We do not have the context for this statement, but taking it at face value, it suggests that someone was teaching a female character to read and write or proposing to do so. The misogynistic characterization of the literate woman as a viper implies recognition of the ability of women to exercise literary skills once acquired. There is no reason to take this as implying that women did not learn to read and write. On the contrary, the speaker suggests knowledge of the outcome when women have been so taught. The gender of the teacher is also significant in this fragment: the issue was that the teacher was male.

Cicero, while writing sometime later, gives an example of a woman's critical prose, reflecting this negative misogynistic view of women's writing:

sed meretricula etiam Leontium contra Theophrastum scribere ausast —scito illa quidem sermone et Attico, sed tamen

but even that little prostitute Leontion dared to write against Theophrastus—it is true that she had a neat Attic style, but even so! (Cic. *Nat. Deo.* 1.93)

Leontion was an Epicurean philosopher. As a companion of Epicurus, she lived in the second half of the fourth century BC and so was a contemporary of Theophrastus. Cicero condemns her for writing a treatise against Aristotle's pupil and successor, not on the strength of her arguments nor on the quality of her work—indeed he actually praises her written style—but on the fact that she, a woman, is challenging such a respected figure in Greek philosophy. He repeats too the disrespectful characterization of Leontion as a prostitute found in earlier references to her as an Epicurean.²⁴ The negative assessment of the work of a woman is typical of a patriarchal society such as Cicero's Rome, but nevertheless demonstrates that he had information about a woman engaged in written philosophic debate.

Euripides' chorus of Corinthian women say:

ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἔστιν μοῦσα καὶ ἡμῖν,
ἢ προσομιλεῖ σοφίας ἔνεκεν,
πάσαισι μὲν οὐ, παῦρον δὲ γένος,
<μία> ἐν πολλαῖς, εὐροις ἂν ἴσως
οὐκ ἀπόμουσον τὸ γυναικῶν.

On the contrary, we too have a Muse, who associates with us to impart wisdom. While not with all women, you could find a small class—one woman among many—of women that shares in the Muse. (Euripides *Med.* 1085–9)

Euripides' text is unfortunately corrupt, although the sense is clear. The women assert their ownership of the art of the Muses, while also allowing that not all women are so cultured. Plato echoes this sentiment, saying that some women are naturally strong in the Arts (μουσική, mousike), while others are not. This is not, however, an attribute that is peculiar to women; he also notes that some men may be

²⁴ On Leontion, Plin. *NH* 1.Pref. 29, 35.99, 144; D.L. 10.4–7, 23; Philodemus *VH* 2 1.119; Athen. 13.585d, 588b, 593b–d, 597a; Plut. *Non Posse* 1098b; on the misogynistic treatment of Leontion in the sources see ARENSON 2023, 86–91.

completely 'without a Muse', *amousos*, even when engaging in philosophy.²⁵ Lysistrata also says that she is well trained in the art of the Muses (οὐ μεμούσωμαι κακῶς, Ar. *Lys.* 1126–7) attributing this to the many 'arguments' of her 'father and elders.'²⁶ She does not specify if the elders were male or female. Lysistrata's statement of her intelligence comes in a quotation of Melanippe's words from Euripides' *Melanippe the Wise*.²⁷ Likewise, in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, a female character quotes Euripides at least twice while alluding to various tragedies throughout her speech.²⁸ Thus, knowledge of literary works was represented in female characters on stage too.

Incidental evidence from Greek theatre shows that literacy among women could be presented as normal by playwrights such as Aeschylus and Euripides at least as early as the fifth century.²⁹ Herodotus, writing around 430 BC, sees it as unproblematic that a Greek mother would teach her son to read and write. And from Rome we know that Leontion was for a woman who could write with style in the second half of the fourth century. In addition to this literary evidence we also have material evidence that supports the conclusion that literacy is well attested, at least among the wealthier class of women.

IMAGES

Artists in fifth century Athens regularly show women reading. There are at least thirty-six documented images of females reading or holding book rolls or writing tablets on Attic vases in the period 450–360 BC.³⁰ Nevertheless, somewhat unreasonably, modern scholarship has declared the visual evidence for women's literacy that comes from Classical Athens to be problematic.³¹ Instead of seeing actual women reading there has been a tradition of interpreting the females in these scenes as either Muses, non-Athenian hetaerae or Sappho (who is treated as an exception to the rule regarding female literacy). The use of such images as documents for social history has thus been questioned. Yet, although artists may construct idealised or imaginary scenes, they also without doubt reflect reality in scenes from everyday life.³² Indeed, when it comes to artistic depictions of men, there seems to be no debate that the scenes have a basis in reality.

²⁵ Pl. *Rep.* 455e; *Soph.* 259 d–e.

²⁶ The term λόγους, 'words,' that she uses encompasses the idea of formal speeches, arguments and discussions; for respect for the wisdom of women as elders, Aesch. *Eum.* 849–850; cf. Ar. *Ecl.* 473, *Eq.* 1302.

²⁷ *Lys.* 1124–7 = Euripides' *Melanippe the Wise* fr. 483 Nauck, fr. 482 Collard. The scholion suggests the quotation is only one line (as Collard); Nauck is less sure which line.

²⁸ Ar. *Thesm.* 383–432, esp. 403–404, 413; AUSTIN/OLSON 2004, 175–88; c.f. also Pax 146–8. Aristophanes also provides evidence that texts of Euripides were in circulation, *Ran.* 52–54.

²⁹ For 463 or thereabouts as the date of the *Suppliant Women*, SOMMERSTEIN 2019, 40–44.

³⁰ BECK 1975, 56–8; n. 349–373, 396, 399b, pl. 69–75 (36 examples); COLE 1981, 133; IMMERWAHR 1964, 18–35 (25 examples); 1973, 143–147 (6 examples); GLAZEBROOK 2005, 39–40 (30 examples).

³¹ Discussed by COLE 1981, 133–134; WILLIAMS 1993, 100–101; LEWIS 2002, 157–159. BECK 1975, 55 argues that the evidence from Athenian pottery demonstrates that girls were taught to read and write.

³² LEWIS 2002, 7–8; GLAZEBROOK 2005, 3–4; on everyday life in Attic art, OAKLEY 2020, 4–5.

As noted above, the women in images with book scrolls are commonly interpreted as Muses, personifications of literary arts rather than actual mortal women. However, these females are in dress and attitude not noticeably different from the other mortal women found on such vases. The figures are clearly modelled on Athenian women, not supernatural or personifications. Where an outdoor setting or perhaps the company of Apollo (but not always) sometimes provides context to indicate that goddesses are to be read in a particular scene, even then, the viewer will nevertheless see the 'Muses' in dress and appearance as identical to Athenian women.

That Athena herself may be depicted writing also speaks to the literacy of women in Athens.³³ On one lekythos, the artist names the Muse Calliope and her mother, Mnemosyne, and so distinguishes them as immortals.³⁴ Yet, even in this domestic scene of a mother and daughter enjoying music together, there is nevertheless a mortal reference point that draws upon an idea or perhaps ideal of female social behaviour. The inclusion of mythological characters in scenes from daily life is typical of Attic art in the second half of the fifth century and reinforces, rather than denies, the evidentiary value of these examples of female engagement with literature. Indeed, Sappho speaks of women sharing the roses of Pieria (παδέχης βρόδων τῶν Πιερίας), as a metaphor for poetic ability.³⁵ Sappho herself was later transformed into the tenth Muse by Hellenistic poets.³⁶

We can take as another example a red-figure Attic kylix now in the Fitzwilliam Museum.³⁷ The exterior shows four female figures, two of whom are reading scrolls. One of the other women holds musical pipes, the other a box for the scrolls. The women stand in pairs on either side of a male figure holding a lyre, whom we can take to be Apollo (or Mousaios); the god sits on a rock, setting the scene as outside. The presence of the god indicates that the women are to be taken as Muses. The scene is a musical one, the females with the scrolls have the lyrics for the musician or are themselves singers. The interior of the same kylix shows two women standing together, one leaning on a pillar, one reading from a scroll to the other, reciting poetry or singing herself (Fig. 1).

The two figures in the tondo have been taken to be Muses too, or 'housewives, hetaerae or imagined poets.'³⁸ However, there is no need to read them as hetaerae: the artist has not

distinguished these females from depictions of respectable mortal women.

If we argue that female poets are to be imagined, we have to accept that such women were part of Athenian literary culture. This means rejecting the argument that we cannot take an image such as this as evidence for Athenian women reading, because of the allusion to immortals on the exterior of the kylix. The artist has given the viewer images of women reading.

As a parallel argument, there are many depictions of women holding and/or playing musical instruments. These are commonly taken to indicate that women were musical. For example, on this kylix we note that one of the female figures in the exterior scene holds musical pipes. Whether we take her in this illustration to be a Muse or not, the image is of a female who is musical, modelled by the artist on an actual female musician.³⁹ There are numerous other illustrations of women, who are not illustrated as Muses, depicted playing pipes that substantiates that reading.⁴⁰ Looking at both the exterior and interior, we see three *women* reading, who are thus literate.

A red-figure cup dated 475–25 BC attributed to the Sabouroff Painter (Fig. 2) provides an example that is less easy to contest. A seated woman reads from an open scroll which she is holding. Another woman stands behind her. In front of her stands a young boy. The scene shows the boy being assessed for reading ability, with the seated woman checking the recitation against her text. She is thus teaching the younger person to read. The scene has been interpreted as a mother and son. That a woman engages in literary education speaks to her own mastery of the skill as well as demonstrating a domestic female role in education that may have been quite common.⁴¹

An Athenian red-figure lekythos dated to 440–430 BC and attributed to the Klüggmann Painter shows a woman reading from a scroll (Fig. 3). She has been taken to be a Muse, even though the scroll box and hanging flute case suggest an indoor domestic setting, and nothing in the scene suggests this is not to be understood as a domestic scene.⁴²

Scrolls painted on Attic pottery represent books of poetry.⁴³ The fact that a woman is reading a scroll identifies her as someone engaged with literature, someone with higher level literary skills that go beyond a simple 'functional' literacy. The flute case indicates training in music as well,⁴⁴

³³ Attic red-figure amphora (c. 480 BC), Munich Staatliche Antikensammlung 2314 (J1185); *BAPD* 203805. DILLON 2013, 400 discusses this example and notes that Iris appears with a writing tablet to record her messages in a red-figure kylix, 490–80 BC, San Antonio Museum 86.134.60; *BAPD* 7139.

³⁴ Attic red-figure lekythos, 450–40 BC, Syracuse Arch. Mus. 20542; *BAPD* 207230; BECK 1975, n. 369.

³⁵ She notes that this is something that women will no longer be able to do once they have died, Sapp.55.

³⁶ Dioscorides *AP* 7.407; [Plato] *AP* 9.506; Antipater of Sidon *AP* 7.14, 9.66; Antipater of Thessalonika *AP* 1.65; Anon. *AP* 9.571; GOSETTI-MURRAYJOHN 2006, 21–45.

³⁷ 'Athenian cup with Apollo and muses' (Fitzwilliam Museum designation): 450–400 BC. Fitzwilliam Museum: GR.51.1864; attributed by Beazley to the Group of Cambridge 73; BECK 1975, n. 354 and 360a, b; *BAPD* 217287. For this and further images: <https://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/65632>.

³⁸ CLARK 1989, iv.

³⁹ For the symposium host sending the *auletris* to perform for the women of the house, Plat. *Sym.* 176e.

⁴⁰ BECK 1975, n. 374–383, 395a–398, 400, 403–405.

⁴¹ Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum 8210; *BAPD* 212206; AVI 0148; ARV² 838 n. 27; BECK 1975, n. 349; IMMERWAHR 1973, 144–145. Link to image: <https://hdl.handle.net/11245/3.2190>. It has been suggested that because a Nike is depicted in the tondo, we should read the scene as a reading competition: BECK 1975, 55. On the 'classroom' setting, SIDER 2010, 547–8; for a mother teaching, Hdt. 4.78, cited above. For a parallel with a male teacher, see Attic red-figure kylix c. 485 BC, Douris, Berlin 2285; *BAPD* 212206; ARV² 431 n. 48; BECK 1975, n. 53–54, also n. 76–80.

⁴² Louvre CA 2220; *BAPD* 215858; Beck 356; interpreted as a 'Muse (?)' by BEAZLEY 1963, 1199. Link to image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Muse_reading_Louvre_CA2220_n2.jpg. The identity of the hanging item is not clear: for flute case (?) see Louvre museum image text.

⁴³ IMMERWAHR 1973, 18, 28.

⁴⁴ For the idea that some Athenian women were functionally literate,



Fig. 1. Attic red-figure kylix 450–400 BCE, Fitzwilliam Museum GR51.1864.



Fig. 2. Attic red-figure kylix, Sabouroff Painter, 475–450 BC. Amsterdam, Allard Pierson Museum: 8210.



Fig. 3. 'Muse' reading a scroll. Attic red-figure lekythos, ca. -435 425 BC. Louvre CA 2220.

while the open box at her feet suggests she owns more than one text.

In the tondo of a kylix now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, a young woman leads another by the hand (Fig. 4). The second young woman is holding writing tablets with a stylus in her right hand.⁴⁵ Leaning away from the other woman, the one holding the writing implements appears hesitant to proceed. This visual element has led to the image being characterized as a schoolgirl being taken reluctantly to a lesson. The exterior of the kylix shows two groups of six women, similar in dress, age and appearance to the two in the tondo, and there is a set of writing tablets among their belongings too. The similarity of the figures means we should read both the interior and exterior scenes together: the two women in the tondo are heading to or from this gathering. We can observe from these images as a whole that the artist saw writing implements as not out of place in the company of women.⁴⁶

GOLDEN 1990, 73.

⁴⁵ Attributed to the Painter of Bologna 417, c. 460–50 BC, Metropolitan Museum 06.1021.167; BAPD 212067; BECK 1975, 350; RICHTER 1936, 107–108, pl. 80, 181. Link to image: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247330>. Compare RICHTER 1936, 108–109, pl. 81 where a boy depicted with a writing tablet is identified as a schoolboy.

⁴⁶ Images of male pupils writing on Athenian vases are themselves quite

Significantly, scholars have been reluctant to take this image as evidence for the schooling of females in Athens. For example, this image has been branded as a 'joke', a parody of the idea of a boy going to school, basing this interpretation on the assumption that the Athenian viewer would know that women did not go to school in Athens.⁴⁷ An alternative interpretation that denies the reading of the women as Athenians, identifies both the women in the tondo and the pairs around the exterior as *hetaerae*. However, the women on this kylix are respectably dressed, not drinking nor in the company of men. Thus, a gathering of women need not always be read as sexual.

There is a line of thinking that arises from a common fallacy that *hetaerae*, who might come from a different city state but could be Athenian, were somehow better educated than Athenian women. However, that *hetaerae* were necessarily foreign courtesans and educated to a level unavailable to Athenian women, is not supported by the evidence.⁴⁸ Moreover, the image itself has been taken to imply a male gaze, with the context for the use of the kylix being taken to be a symposium. Yet we should not assume that the artist painted the scene solely for a male viewer. There is ample evidence that women owned kylikes too, and that they might use them, without men being present, for religious or funereal purposes.⁴⁹

Another interpretation, that rejects the image of literate Athenian women, sees the women on this kylix as Spartans. This follows a line of argument that characterized Spartan women as better educated than Athenian women and hence more likely to be in possession of writing implements, even on an Athenian kylix.⁵⁰ It is true that Plato tells us that Spartan girls participated in the musical arts (*mousike*), a term which embraced poetry, music, and literature, all activities that defined an educated person.⁵¹ He also has Socrates tell us that Athenian women should follow the educational model of the Spartan women and take up '*mousike and gymnastike together*' as they do.⁵² Yet, Plato does not deny Athenian women a share in *mousike*; Socrates points out that some (Athenian) women are stronger in *mousike* than others, indicating that they do have a share in it.⁵³ The key additional element of *gymnastike* is the point of difference that distinguishes the Spartan woman. What seems ridiculous to the Athenian in this dialogue is that

rare: see BECK 1975, n. 42, 53B, 72.

⁴⁷ WOLICKI 2015, 311; NEILS/OAKLEY 2003, 247, fig. 46a; GOLDEN 1990, 73–74, fig. 11.

⁴⁸ On the women in the scene being *hetaerae*: GOLDEN 1990, 73–74; OAKLEY 2020, 105 asks if they are 'courtesans in training'; for the wholesale rejection of the identification of *hetaerae* on Attic pottery, BÉRARD 1999, 89. On the fallacy of *hetaerae* being better educated than other women, WOLICKI 2015, 314; on Athenian women included in the Greek sympotic culture KENNEDY 2015, 71–73.

⁴⁹ For a woman with a kylix in a funerary context, an Attic white-ground red-figure kylix (c. 500–450 BC), Berlin 3171; BAPD 9025364. For female owners of kylikes, see the examples of Melosa and Philto below.

⁵⁰ NEILS 2012, 164–165 interprets the women on this kylix as Spartans, partly on the basis that Spartan women received more education than Athenian women. POMEROY 2002, 3–5 argues that Spartan women did go to school, unlike Athenian women.

⁵¹ *Mousike* was any activity which the Muses oversaw, including reading and writing as well as music: Xen. *Const. Lac.* 2.1, *LSJ* s.v. (as HARRIS 1989, 99).

⁵² Pl. *Leg.* 806a, *Rep.* 452a.

⁵³ Pl. *Rep.* 455e.



Fig. 4. Athenian Kylix, c. 460–50 BC, attributed to the Painter of Bologna 417: Metropolitan Museum.

women would participate in *gymnastike*. His reason for this is an assumption that the women would have to take part in the physical training naked, as the men did. This is not something Athenian women would do (nor, indeed, did Spartan women participate in physical training naked).⁵⁴

Domestic scenes of women reading start around 450 BC and reflect an aspect of reality, at least for those who could afford a book. Reading, along with playing musical instruments, is depicted as an attribute of an elite woman.⁵⁵ That women are shown reading in the company of other women suggests this could be a social event, a way in which women shared literature with each other. An example of this is an Attic red-figure hydria which shows three women listening while one reads (Fig. 5).⁵⁶

⁵⁴ On the physical training of Spartan girls and what they wore for this, WOLICKI 2015, 315–317.

⁵⁵ LEWIS 2002, 157–8 notes that images of female literacy start along with images of Muses from 475 BC; that the evidence demonstrates the literacy of Athenian women, IMMERWAHR 1964, 27–34.

⁵⁶ Attic red-figure hydria, 475–425 BC, British Museum 1885, 1213.18: 400574001. Link to image: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Hydria_Sappho_GR_1885.12-13.18.jpg; BAPD 207083; BECK 1975, n. 351; cf. a similar scene of where Sappho is imagined reading in the company of three other women, Athens, National Museum 1260: image link: <File:Group of Polygnotos - ARV 1060 145 - Sappho reading from>

It is clear that women did learn to read. Where they are depicted with a writing implement, if not necessarily in the act of writing, we can take it as demonstrated that they could write too. While such imagery does not define what portion of the population were literate, and there may be a level of idealisation in such portraits of the activities of the elite, nevertheless we see that women were imagined by artists as engaging with literature, just as they were also depicted playing and listening to music together.⁵⁷

Reading is often associated with music in Attic art. A good example of this is a red-figure hydria attributed to the Niobid Painter. On this hydria a woman is shown playing a lyre while reading a scroll held out to her by another woman.⁵⁸ The scroll suggests the lyrics she is singing to her own accompaniment. The performer is seated on stage, which is significant. It indicates that she is presenting a public performance. A third woman stands to the performer's left,

<bookroll with women - Athens NAM 12883 - 01.jpg - Wikimedia Commons>.

⁵⁷ BECK 1975, 55, pl. 374–405

⁵⁸ Attic red-figure hydria, Niobid Painter, c. 460–450 BC, New York (Solow Art and Architecture Foundation); BAPD 11020; AVI 5763a; KAUFMAN-SAMARA 1997, 290–2 fig. 9; SMITH 2016, fig. 7.4. For image see: <https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetailsLarge.asp?recordCount=1&id={42F-C0F63-02D0-437A-86E8-3C491FE261DE}&returnPage=&start=>



Fig. 5. Attic red-figure hydria, 475–425 BC, British Museum 1885, 1213.18.

holding her lyre and box of scrolls, waiting for her turn to perform. The stage setting normally indicates a musical contest and the presence of two musicians in the scene, one waiting for her opportunity to perform, supports the idea of a musical contest.⁵⁹ This is clearly a contest for women, in which reading and musical skills were necessary, and demonstrates engagement by women in the competitive performance culture of Athens. While the women have, inevitably, been identified as Muses or hetaerae, this illustration nevertheless shows that women might be active members of the performing arts in Classical Athens.⁶⁰

It is anachronistic to separate the imaginary in art from a reality on which it may have been based. While we may contest presumptions on whether we are seeing gods, non-Athenian born women or Athenian women, vase painters in Athens in the fifth century did not see any difference in form between any of these: distinction was added with text to name the figures, if desired. Thus women holding scrolls

should be identified as literate. While the life of leisure and the ownership of scrolls may represent an elite ideal, the literacy that underpins the images of reading may include a broader social range of women.

The art of Athens, we may conclude, substantiates the idea found in Athenian literature that it was normal for women in Athens to be able to read. Images of women as Muses, engaging with scrolls of poetry, began to appear from the mid-fifth century. This reflects a development of interest among Athenian artists in depicting Athenian female society.⁶¹ In drawing conclusions about Athenian society from such images, we should acknowledge that reading such images is not without problems. Indeed, it has been argued that the predominance of women performing with scrolls rather than men arises from a gendered view of such an activity: that reading poetry was a female rather than male activity and therefore considered not as significant and that the women are performing others' works rather than creating their own.⁶²

⁵⁹ For illustrations of musicians on a stage in musical contests, see BECK 1975, n. 234–240.

⁶⁰ For Muses, PRANGE 1989, 201 n. 191; for a private concert in an elite woman's house, BÉRARD 1989, 91; KAUFMAN-SAMARA 1997, 292 identifies the scene as a musical contest for women, while allowing that it may have been imaginary.

⁶¹ See IMMERWAHR 1964, 28–34 who cites 16 examples.

⁶² GLAZEBROOK 2005, 3–6; on attitudes to books, 29–35.

In contrast, I would argue that women were the intended owners of the vessels on which such images were painted and this in part explains the focus on female activity.⁶³ Women were depicted with literary scrolls because such scrolls came to be more common in the fifth century. The acknowledgement of their engagement with literary texts need not imply any contrast with male activity. Rather, just as Socrates may share the ‘treasures’ that books contain with his friends (Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.14), women are shown participating in literary culture together. This is illustrated on an Attic red-figure hydria where five women are illustrated enjoying the music played by two other women, as another woman sings (or at least reads) from a text she is holding. One of the women listening to the performance holds her baby, reinforcing the domestic nature of the literary gathering.⁶⁴

DIPINTI AND GRAFFITI

Hydriai were a type of vessel normally used by women rather than men, as depictions of women at fountains show.⁶⁵ Attic hydriai regularly have texts painted on them: such texts were created for their owners and users, that is, women. An example is a black-figure hydra depicting women at the Kallirroe fountain. In this example, the fountain and six women are named.⁶⁶ Likewise, a pyxis depicting marriage preparations has the name of seven women painted on it. This object was certainly made for a woman, perhaps as a wedding present and the painter included the names on the pyxis for the intended recipient.⁶⁷ A fifth century red-figure pyxis, now also in the British Museum, provides a further example.⁶⁸ On this vessel, no doubt also made for a woman, the painter drew six women in what might be considered typical female domestic activities. Five of the women are named as mythological heroines: Helen, Klytaimnestra, Cassandra, Iphigeneia and Danae. The artist has thus created an object to prompt the owner to reflect on the mythological stories of these heroines through the addition of their names. These heroines are painted in typical female domestic situations, bringing an immediate parallel between them and the woman for whom the object was made.⁶⁹

Short graffiti texts to and from women that have survived on material objects owned by women provide further evidence of their literacy. An Attic white-ground pyxis, now

in the Boston Museum of Fine Art is one such example. This carries a short text incised into the lid.⁷⁰

Λυσάνδρα ἔδδκε Λυσιμάχιδι

Lysandra gave [me/this] to Lysimachis

The text reveals that both Lysandra and Lysimachis are literate. The publisher of this pyxis has previously suggested that Lysandra may have asked her father or brother to write the inscription for her.⁷¹ It is more likely that Lysandra wrote the inscription herself. The message is personal to the two women: there would be no point to Lysandra adding the text to her gift unless text meant something both to her and Lysimachis. Additionally, the shape of one of the letters used (the chi) suggests that Lysandra came from part of the Greek world that used the West Greek alphabet, such as Boeotia or Euboea, or had at least been taught her alphabet from someone who came from there.⁷²

Another example of a gift between women inscribed with their names is a bronze hydria dated to the second half of the fifth century BC. The text shows that the hydria was given twice.

Σκαφσις Ἡερμαία ἔδδκε. Κύτις Φιλοξένη ἔδδκε

Skaphsis gave [me] to Hermaia. Kytis gave [me] to Philoxene.⁷³

The inscriptions provide the names of four different owners, all women. While we cannot be sure of the date of their ownership, this hydria was valued enough to be given as a gift at least twice, each time from one woman to another. How it passed from Hermaia to Kytis we do not know. Nevertheless, the recording of two of the instances of the giving of the hydria on the vessel itself give it its own history, reminiscent of the way precious objects in epic are accorded value through their record of being passed on as gifts.⁷⁴ The recording of the giving of this vessel must have meant something to both the givers and the receivers: the text had meaning for them all.⁷⁵

The labelling of an object to identify its owner is one way in which literacy is demonstrated. A bronze hydria dating to the sixth century BC carries the simple label: Φίλη (Phile).⁷⁶ This would have identified the owner of a vessel that may have been taken from the house to the local water source to be filled on a regular basis. Such hydriai were both carried and,

⁶³ For images of women purchasing or selling oil or perfume (for which small vessels were required), *BAPD* 8235, 9458, 13701, 45356, 202574, 202575, 206905, 206990, 207715, 215365, 215366, 302994.

⁶⁴ Attic red-figure hydria, c. 475–25 BC, Plovdiv, Regional Museum of Archaeology: IV.13; *BAPD* 9032479; for discussion OAKLEY 2020, 106–108, with illustrations fig. 5.5a–b.

⁶⁵ E.g. there are many examples of such black-figure hydriai in the British Museum (520–510 BC): BM 1836,0224.169, 1837,0609.53, 1843,1103.66, 1843,1103.77, 1868,0610.3 (*BAPD* 320163, 302066, 320013, 306483, 302273); cf. *Ar. Lys.* 327–330.

⁶⁶ BM 1868,0610.3; *BAPD* 302273, c. 510 BC. Image link: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1868-0610-3.

⁶⁷ Attic red-figure pyxis attributed to the Eretria Painter, 440–15 BC, BM 1874,0512.1; *BAPD* 216969. Image link: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1874-0512-1.

⁶⁸ Dated c. 475–70 BC, BM 1873,0111.7; *BAPD* 209970; attributed to a follower of Douris. Image link: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1873-0111-7.

⁶⁹ MANGIERI 2010, 441–443.

⁷⁰ Attic Pyxis c. 450 BC Boston Museum of Fine Art 65.1166; *BAPD* 3345; TRUITT 1969, 81; STEINHART/WIRBELAUER 2000, 285. Image link: <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/154011/lidded-container-pyxis-with-women-and-their-wool?ctx=91919a0d-da88-4d02-b3cc-16a17d5c-841d&idx=1>.

⁷¹ TRUITT 1969, 81.

⁷² TRUITT 1969, 81 suggests that the women may have been sisters and granddaughters of Aristeides, hence members of the Athenian elite.

⁷³ SOWDER 2015, 22, cat. 3.2; Sowder also discusses a similar gift, Athanodora to Amphotis (cat. 3.5).

⁷⁴ E.g. Hom. *Il.* 2.100–108, 10.266–71, 11.19–23, 22.468–72, 23.740–9.

⁷⁵ For other examples of women’s names in graffiti as giver or receiver of a vessel, SOWDER 2015, 22–23; a Corinthian alabastron (c. 600 BC), ‘Woinantha gave me and a headband to Myricha’ and a fourth century gold ring (‘a gift for Kleita’): STEINHART/WIRBELAUER 2000, 272, 287, n. 13, 39.

⁷⁶ The name is well attested; cf. SOWDER 2015, 22, cat. 3.1.

as name labels such as this tell us, owned almost exclusively by women.⁷⁷ The label is designed to be understood not just by its owner, who already knows whose vessel it is, but by others with whom she is spending time. Both the owner and intended reader must share the ability to read for the label to have any value. The social group that the owner of such a vessel would mix with would be other women, at a water fountain or at a religious event at which water was needed, such as the Hydrophoria.

Texts on Greek pottery attest to women's literacy outside of Athens too. A proto-Corinthian *aryballos* provides an example from the seventh century BC of a woman's object which has a metrical graffito in Euboean script.

Ταταίεσ ἐμὶ λέρυθος· ἡὸς δ' ἄν με κλέφσει, θυφλὸς ἔσται.
I am the *lekythos* of Tataie; may whoever steals me be struck blind.⁷⁸

Tataie claims her ownership of her *lekythos* and calls down a curse upon anyone who might steal it. The text provides a warning to any would-be thief who must be literate too. The written warning would only impact someone who could read it. There is thus an assumption of community literacy in the composition and local inscription of such a message.

A black-figure Attic *kylix*, now in the British Museum, has graffiti on the underside of its foot written in verse.

Φιλτῶς ἤμὶ τὰς καλὰς ἀ κύλιξ ἀ ποικίλα
I am the many-coloured *kylix* of the beautiful Philto⁷⁹

Philto's cup was imported to Rhodes in antiquity where the text was written in the local dialect. The message is simple but written in poetic metre.⁸⁰ We do not know who wrote Philto's inscription: it may have been Philto herself or someone who composed the text for her to appreciate.

Another Attic *kylix* carries an inscription proclaiming the ownership by a woman who lived outside the Greek mainland.

Μελόσας ἐμὶ νικατέριον· ξαίνοσα τὰς κόρας ἐνίκε
I am Melosa's victory prize; she defeated the girls in carding⁸¹

This inscription uses the sixth-century script and orthography of Taras, a Laconian colony in Apulia in the

southeast of Italy.⁸² The inscription is strong evidence that Melosa was a young woman who was literate. There would be little incentive for Melosa to have her name and victory recorded on her prize if she were not, at some level, herself literate. The text is in verse, as Philto's was, and also inscribed on the base of the foot of the *kylix*.⁸³ As it was normal practice to hang *kylikes* on the wall when not in use, the text on the bottom of the foot would be on display to anyone who visited the room where they were hung. The messages they held would therefore be immediately visible.⁸⁴ The compositions suggest that there was an intended readership that went beyond Philto and Melosa themselves. The girls mentioned in Melosa's text designate a wider female community of which she was an active member and define a potential social group of female readers who would appreciate the verse.

Another example of graffiti on a wine cup that exemplifies the assumption of literacy is a message from a man to a woman. On a Boeotian black-glaze *kantharos* (a wine cup) Mogeia scratched in verse:

Μογεία δίδοτι τῆι γυναίκε δῶρον Εὐχαρίτ' Εὐτρετιφάντο
κόλυλλον, ὅς γ' ἄδαν πίε.
Mogeia gives a wine cup as a gift to his wife Eucharis,
daughter of Eutretiphantos, so she may drink her fill.⁸⁵

The message records the gift of the cup, along with a promise of unlimited wine, from a husband to his wife. Her status is made clear, both by her designation as his wife and by the inclusion of her patronymic. Mogeia clearly expects Eucharis to be able to read and appreciate the record of him giving her the cup, a text which he took the trouble to write in iambic trimeters.⁸⁶

There is also evidence for women's literacy in casual, informal texts that have survived on sherds of pottery in Athens. These are short notes that were written on broken pottery.

Unfortunately, wooden tablets were used for everyday notes and these have not survived.⁸⁷

Εὐμελις ἦκ[ε] / ὅς τάχος. / Ἀρκέσιμος.
Eumelis come as quickly as possible. Arkesimos.⁸⁸

⁷⁷ There are many illustrations of women collecting water with hydriai (perhaps at the Hydrophoria festival): e.g. 6th century BC Attic black-figure: Würzburg, Martin von Wagner Museum L316, L317, L304 (*BAPD* 301815, 301818, 306484); Berlin, Antikensammlungen F1725, F1908, F1910, F1895 (*BAPD* 17082, 302065, 302895, 320041); Boston MFA 28.47, 61.195 (*BAPD* 73, 351087); New York Met. 06.1021.77 (*BAPD* 351090) (and examples from the BM listed above). For interpretation of women in fountain house scenes, HANNESTAD 1984, 254–255; KOSSO/LAWTON 2009, 87–92.

⁷⁸ Dated c. 670 BC, BM 1885,0613.1; *LSAG* 240.3, pl. 47; *IG* XIV 865. For a parallel Euboean curse c.700 BC, BESIOS/TZIFOPOULOS/KOTSONAS 2012, 339–343, n. 2, MΘ 2248.

⁷⁹ Dated 490–470 BC, BM 1885,1213.30; *BAPD* 9017134; *LSAG* 357.27; *IG* XII.1 719.

⁸⁰ Two seven-syllable trochaic dimeter catalectic lines, MILLER 2014, 212; SMITH 1885, 372–374).

⁸¹ Attic black-figure eye-cup c. 540–530 BC, Metropolitan Museum of Art, n. 44.11.1; *BAPD* 13330.

⁸² The provenance of the *kylix*, while not fully documented, is secure; JEFFERY, 279–80 identifies the graffiti as the earliest example of Tarentine local script and dates it to the sixth century BC.

⁸³ On the metre of Melosa's text (three first epitrites—iamb plus spondee—followed by an iambic dimeter catalectic): ARENA 1990, 125–126; GALLAVOTTI 1977; 24; cf. MILLER 2014; 203. On women spontaneously composing iambic poetry, cf. Hom. *Hymn to Dem.* 200–05.

⁸⁴ For women ladling wine with a *kylix* hanging in the background, Attic red-figure *lekythos* 500–450 BCE (Pan Painter), Haverford College; *BAPD* 206359; see also e.g. Attic red-figure *kylix* c. 500–450 (Douris), British Museum 1843,1103.15; *BAPD* 205096.

⁸⁵ *Kantharos*, c. 450 BC, Paris Musée du Louvre K198; *BAPD* 1009211, *IG* VII 3467, JEFFERY 1990, 93, 95.18, pl. 9; STEINHART/WIRBELAUER 2000, 273, 286.

⁸⁶ Two iambic trimeters (with his name Mogeia sitting outside the verse); *CEG* I 446, MILLER 2014, 226.

⁸⁷ On the use of wooden and wax tablets in the Greek and Roman world, DEGNI 1998.

⁸⁸ *Agora* XXI B7, Athens, c. 475–450 BC.

The short text conveys a message from a man to a woman. The personal nature of the message strongly suggests that Eumelis is expected to be able to read it herself.⁸⁹ Other short love messages are also found on pottery sherds. There are examples in the voice of a male, expressing love for a female or male,⁹⁰ as well as examples of women expressing love for a man:

Λυκόμαχ[ος καλός][δ]οκεῖ Ἴανθίδ[—].

Ianthis thinks Lykomachos is lovely.

Ἀλ{λ}καῖος καλός / τὸ δοκεῖ Μέλιτι

Alkaios is lovely, so Melis thinks.⁹¹

Each of these texts presents a short erotic discourse, a woman's expression of admiration for a particular man. The women have previously been defined as hetaerae or prostitutes, on the assumption that they would otherwise not know any men who were not immediate family members. This has been challenged on the basis that elite women may have participated more widely in Athenian social culture than our traditional view of the secluded Athenian woman allows.⁹² Whatever the social status of these women, the texts provide evidence of women's voices. In addition, many sherds have been found with just a name written on them, a few with two names, including women's names. The purpose of these sherds is not known. It has been suggested that they may have been used to identify belongings or other goods, or perhaps they were written by children learning to write their own names.⁹³

CURSE TEXTS

Other private texts have survived in the form of small lead tablets (lamellae) recording curses or private questions put to gods. These include at least 104 texts by women submitted to the gods at the oracle of Zeus and Diona at Dodona.⁹⁴ Some of the texts may be dated to the fifth or fourth centuries BC although most are from the fourth century and later. While not Athenian, they provide evidence for literacy of women in the wider Greek world. A text from the fourth century BC provides an example.

ἀ(γα)θὴ τύχη · ἐπερωτῆι Πλαυράτα τὸν Δία [καὶ τὰν] Διώνα(ν) · ἢ ἐντ[υ]γγάνουσα Πλάτωνι Κάρπω[νος σὺν π] αἰδαγόν{ν}οισι θεοῖς ἐ(σ)σεῖται μοι ἀγαθὸν καὶ ὠφέλεια.

Good Fortune: Plaurata asks Zeus and Diona: whether it will be beneficial and a good thing for me if, with the help

⁸⁹ LANG 1976, 9.

⁹⁰ *Agora* XXI C3 (mid. 6th century BC), C7 (late 6th –early fifth century BC).

⁹¹ *Agora* XXI C10, C19, Athens (early 5th century BC).

⁹² KENNEDY 2015, 65–6 challenges the traditional wife/hetaera dichotomy and argues that Ianthis and Melis may have been elite women; COLE 1981, 131 that they must have been prostitutes.

⁹³ LANG 1939, 16; examples of women's names from the 7th–4th centuries BC on sherds: *Agora* XXI F4, F8, F24, F84, F113, F117, F158, F176, F182, F184, F188. For examples of practice alphabets on sherds, *Agora* XXI A1–A11, Athens, early 7th–4th centuries BC.

⁹⁴ KATSADIMA 2017, 132 and n. 14.

of the divinities of childbirth, I sleep with Platon son of Karpon.⁹⁵

Plaurata's text is personal. Although she starts in a more impersonal third person, the author slips a first-person pronoun into her message to Zeus and Diona. She does not ask directly about the possibility of having children but rather implies in her message that she is seeking help to become pregnant.

Kleunika, in another fourth century text, is more direct in her question.

[Side A] Θεός· αἰτ[εῖ]ται Κλευν(ι)κα [τ]ὸν Δία τὸν Νάϊο[ν] καὶ τὰν | Διώναν [τ]έκνα{ν} οἱ γενέσθαι ἐξ ἄλλω [ἄ]νδρὸς | καὶ τίνα κα θεῶν θεραπευο(ύ)σα(ι) γένοιτο τέκνα. [Side B] Κλε(υ)νίκα ἐξ ἄ(λλου)

[Side A] God. Kleunika asks Zeus Naios and Diona to have children by a different man and what god she should serve to have children.⁹⁶ [Side B] Kleunika by a (different man).

This text is intriguing. Kleunika demonstrates that she is keen to have children and wants to know which divinity can best assist her to achieve that goal. She notes that this would be with 'a different man' which we could also read as 'a different husband.' She may be a widow or divorced, but the text could also mean that she is contemplating leaving her current husband to fulfill her desire to become a mother.⁹⁷

Another short text from Dodona may also be attributed to a woman:

[ἦ] παρήβακε; ⁹⁸

Is he past his prime?

The text is a single verb. It means 'to be elderly,' and was applied to men who were too old to have children.⁹⁹ The relative frequency of questions by women about having children at this oracle provides the context for the interpretation of this text as another question by a woman concerned to have a child.¹⁰⁰

Women also inquired at this oracle about leaving their homes.

ἢ ἀπιούσα ἄλλ[ο] τί μοι ἀγαθὸν ἐσσεῖται;

If I leave, will I have a better situation?¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ DVC 2609A, second half 4th century BCE: text LHÔTE/CARBON 2021a. On such questions, PARKER 2016, 79–80.

⁹⁶ DVC 2552A, B, 375–350 BC: text LHÔTE/CARBON 2021b.

⁹⁷ For discussion, LHÔTE 2021.

⁹⁸ DVC 3982B, c. 400–375 BCE: text LHÔTE 2020.

⁹⁹ It is so used by Thucydides, Thuc. 2.44.3–4; as LHÔTE 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Couples and men also seek such advice: e.g. a couple DVC 313; women asking for children, DVC 342B, 347A, 885A, 1318A, 1909B, 2609A, 2674B, 3289A, 4115A, 4164B. For the frequency of women seeking advice about having children, PICCININI 2015, 141–7, KATSADIMA 2017, 133. LAES 2020, 185 finds ten certain examples of women inquiring about children at Dodona (and 81 in which the gender of the inquirer is uncertain); for women asking for children at Epidauros, LIDONNICI 1995, A4, B1, 3, 5, 21, 22, C1, 2, 6, 17.

¹⁰¹ Dodona, 4th century BC; text Lhôte 2006, n. 62); EIDINOW 2007, 103.7; 2012 n. 12.

The questioner has not shared the full context behind her question, nor even her name. This, and other similar examples, have been considered the words of a slave or manumitted slave who is entertaining the idea of leaving her owner or former owner.¹⁰² Whatever the social or legal position of these women, we see from these examples that writing is a means of communication for them. They connect privately with the oracle by way of text. These examples come from the end of the fifth and the fourth century BC; they demonstrate literacy in the community was widespread at this time.

Curses are another type of private and personal text that were written by women. In such texts, women reveal their most personal concerns over relationships with others. In an example from the fourth century, a woman named Phila sets a curse to prevent a man named Dionysophon from marrying Thetima.¹⁰³ This curse was written on a lead scroll and buried in the grave of a man named Makron:

Θετίμας καὶ Διονυσοφῶντος τὸ τέλος καὶ τὸν γάμον καταγράφω καὶ τὰν ἀλλὰν πασὰν γυναικῶν καὶ χηρῶν καὶ παρθένων, μάλιστα δὲ Θετίμας, καὶ παρκαττίθεμαι Μάκρωνι καὶ [τοῖς] δαίμοσι καὶ ὅποκα ἐγὼ ταῦτα διελ<ί>ξαιμι καὶ ἀναγνοίην πάλ<ε>ιν ἄνορ<ύ>ξασα, [τόκα] γᾶμαι Διονυσοφῶντα, πρότερον δὲ μή· μή γὰρ λάβωι ἄλλαν γυναῖκα ἀλλ' ἢ ἐμέ, [ἐμὲ δ]ὲ συνκαταγηρᾶσαι Διονυσοφῶντι καὶ μηδεμίαν ἄλλαν. ἰκέτις ὑμῶν<ν> γίνο[μαι· Φίλ?]αν οἰκίριτε δαίμονες φίλ[ο]ι, δαπινὰ γὰρ ἴμαι φίλων πάντων καὶ ἐρήμια· ἀλλὰ [ταῦτ]α φυλάσσετε ἐμὴν ὄ[π]ως μή γίνηται τα[ῦ]τα καὶ κακὰ κακῶς Θετίμα ἀπόληται· [...] ἐμός, ἐμὲ δὲ εὐδαίμονα καὶ μακαρίαν γενέσται·

I curse Dionysophon and Thetima's ceremony and marriage; also (the marriage to him of) every other woman, both widows and maidens, but especially Thetima's, and I entrust this to Makron and the deities. And if I were ever to dig up, unroll and read this once again, then Dionysophon may marry and not before. May he not take any other woman as his wife except me, and may I and no other woman grow old beside Dionysophon. I am your suppliant: pity [Phila] dear deities, for I am abandoned and deprived of all my loved ones. But keep this for me so that these events may not happen and so that evil Thetima dies very badly. ... of me, and I become happy and blessed.¹⁰⁴

The curse will hold its power, Phila believes, while the dead Makron and the underworld deities keep hold of the text. If the text is unearthed, unrolled and read again by Phila herself, then the curse will be lifted. Phila asks those in possession of the scroll to guard it for her so that her curse may not be broken and thereby her future and happiness

with Dionysophon may be assured. The scroll was found in Pella, a part of the Greek world considered culturally backward. Yet, the text demonstrates that Phila could both read and write.¹⁰⁵ The very personal nature of the sentiments expressed here, especially the emotional revelations, make it unlikely that anyone other than Phila herself wrote the text.¹⁰⁶

A fourth century example from Attica has a similar purpose. In this curse, the female author attempts to prevent Aristokydes from marrying anyone else:

Ἀρι[σ]τοκύδη καὶ τὰς φανο(υ)μένας αὐτῶι γυναῖκας· μήποτ' αὐτὸν γῆμαι ἄλλην γυναῖ<κα> μηδὲ παῖδα.

(I bind) Aristokydes and the women who put themselves on show for him; may he never marry another woman nor a girl.¹⁰⁷

The woman setting this curse has been characterised as a hetaera, a mistress attempting to prevent her lover from moving on to someone else. While that is a possible reading of the text, it is also possible that Aristokydes' wife, or a woman who desires to marry him, wrote the curse with the intention of eliminating potential rivals.¹⁰⁸ The ability to write down her wishes allowed this woman, whatever her social status, to set her binding spell on Aristokydes.¹⁰⁹ This body of evidence comes from the fourth century and shows that across the Greek world, where a wider range of types of evidence has been preserved, literacy of women is well attested.

RELIGION AND DEDICATIONS BY WOMEN

Religion was a vital part of life in the ancient Greek city, and literacy was important in key aspects of religious observance, including dedications and memorials for the dead. Women's importance in both these aspects of religious practice is well established although the implications of these roles for their literacy has not been fully acknowledged.

An Athenian red-figure fragment, now in the Bowdoin College Museum, shows a woman climbing a ladder. This is thought to be a depiction of her participation in an activity that was part of the observance of the Adonia (Fig. 6).¹¹⁰ In front of the woman on the ladder sits another woman, reading from a scroll in her lap. The implication is that the reading or singing of the text was also an activity of the Adonia.¹¹¹ The ability to read is a skill used by a woman in this illustration of the performance of this rite.

¹⁰⁵ That [Phila] was the author, VOUTIRAS 1993, 45; 1998, 17–9, 58–67.

¹⁰⁶ VOUTIRAS 1998, 58.

¹⁰⁷ Attica 4th century BC; DTA 78, EIDINOW 2007, 368.

¹⁰⁸ EIDINOW 2007, 215–16; VOUTIRAS 1998, 57 suggests an antithesis in gender terms in the curse between 'woman' and 'παῖς' (a word which is ambiguous in gender, translated here as 'girl'), understanding it as 'boy' (with γῆμαι then interpreted figuratively). However, παῖς is also used to refer to a young woman (Ar. *Lys.* 697), especially in contrast to a married woman or in the context of marriage (e.g. Ar. *Lys.* 595; Eur. *Med.* 19, 554; *Pho.* 7; *IA.* 835–6, 841); alternatively, 'child' may be meant as the object of an implied verb (hence: '...nor [father] a child,' as in *Isoc.* 15.156.4).

¹⁰⁹ See FARAONE 1991a and 1991b on binding spells.

¹¹⁰ Attic red figure fragment, 450–400 BC; Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick (ME) 1923.5; BA 9037927; <https://artmuseum.bowdoin.edu/objects-1/info/1670>.

¹¹¹ For the Adonia in women's poetry, Sappho 140, Praxilla 747 PMG.

¹⁰² DVC 1486A, end of 5th century BC, CHANIOTIS 2007/2011 SEG 57–536 n. 13; DVC 73, c. 400–390 BCE, LHÔTE 2023; CHANIOTIS 2007/2011 SEG 57–536 n. 12. EIDINOW 2007, 102.3; cf. DESBIENS 2017, 9–10; 201; PARKER 2016, 84.

¹⁰³ The name Phila is a restoration (VOUTIRAS 1993, 45); other short female names could fit here too. The text is in a Doric and Northwestern Greek dialect, taken to represent Macedonian Greek: O'Neil, 2006; VOUTIRAS 1998, 20–34. That curse tablets were written by individuals, not written by professionals on their behalf, see DUFAULT 2017, 31–49.

¹⁰⁴ SEG 43:434, Pella, c. 380–350 BC, Archaeological Museum of Pella; VOUTIRAS 1993; DUBOIS 1995, 196; VOUTIRAS 1998, 8–16; O'NEIL 2006, 193–6; EIDINOW 2007, 214–15, 452–3; CHRISTESEN/MURRAY 2010, 435.



Fig. 6. Fragment of red-figure vase 450–400 BC. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1923.5.

Dedications to the gods were regularly labelled in some way that acknowledged the donor. While the objects themselves may have long been lost, inventories have been preserved at religious sites that record donations, such as records for the Parthenon and the Braurion on the Acropolis of Athens.¹¹² An example of a dedication by a woman is one made by Dexilla which we find recorded in an inventory for the Opisthodomos of the Parthenon, dated to the early fourth century BC.

ἐγ κιβωτίῳ ποικίλῳ, ὁ Κλειτῷ Ἀριστοκράτος τῶ Ὀλίου Κίμωνος γυνὴ ἀνέθηκε· ἐν τῷ κιβωτίῳ ἐνὶ ἐγ κυλ[ιχνίδι σφρα]γίς χρυσῶν δακτύλιον ἔχουσα· Δέξιλλα ἀνέθηκε·

In the colourful box which Kleito, the wife of Aristokrates, the son of Oulios, son of Kimon, dedicated: in the box in a jewellery box there is a gemstone set in a gold ring; Dexilla dedicated it.¹¹³

Dedications such as these were meticulously and permanently recorded on stone. The name of the dedicators and a description of the precious objects are carefully itemised. Dexilla's ring is described as inside a *kylichnis*, the Classical term for a woman's jewellery box.¹¹⁴ That in turn was inside a box given by Kleito. She is carefully identified, with her social status as wife of a prominent member of the Athenian elite included in the record. While there are some objects in the inventories without the name of the donor, these serve to highlight the fact that most objects do include the name of the dedicator. This is also good evidence that the name was recorded on or with the object. While some dedications are described as 'ἀνεπίγραφον', 'unlabelled,' these are relatively few in number when compared with the number of objects that were labelled.¹¹⁵

¹¹² E.g. IG II² 1514–1530; LINDERS 1972; CLELAND 2005.

¹¹³ IG II² 1388 81–3; 398/7 BC; it also appears in IG II² 1396 and later inventories: see HARRIS 1995, 51–2 n.37. Kleito's father, Aristokrates, was born around 440 BC, Davies 1971, 307. For other female dedicants of objects in the Parthenon, HARRIS 1995, 225–228.

¹¹⁴ GAUNT 2013, 384; MILNE 1939, 247–254.

¹¹⁵ E.g. IG II² 1514 28, 44, 61, 65, 66.

While most women were defined androcentrically, as Kleito is here, twelve women in the Parthenon and Erechtheion inventories are listed by their own name alone. It has previously been suggested that this was because they were working-class women.¹¹⁶ While we do not know their social or marital status, we can conclude that they had a choice in the way that they wanted to be identified and that they had sufficient material resources to make their donation. This desire to label dedications speaks to a deeply literate society. While adding a name tag in itself may be considered low-level or functional literacy, the desire to have one's name on display, both for the god to know who had presented the gift and for the wider local community to recognise the contribution, speaks to an expectation that the text will be read.

Further evidence comes in the form of garments dedicated to Artemis by women.

Παυ[σιστ]ράτη [χιτ]ω[νίσκ]ον χ[ε]ριδῶ : Διογνή[τη χιτ]ωνί[σκ]ον παραλ[ο]υρ :] Μάλθακη Μόσχου θυγάτηρ [Λεωσ]θένο[υ]ς γυνή παρ[υ]φ : λή[θ]ιδιον· Θεοπόμπη χιτωνί[σκ]ον περ[ι]ήγητον [κ]τεν[ω] : Χαιρ[ι]ππ[η] κάλυμμα : Λυσῶ [ιμάτιον] χρυσᾶ γράμμα[τα ἔχ] : κάλυμμα ἀγραφον, πρό[ς] τῆι ἐλάφωι·

Pausistrata, a sleeved short-*chiton*; Diognete, a purple-edged short-*chiton*; Malthake, daughter of Moschos, wife of Leosthenes, a light cloth with a woven border; Theopompe, a short-*chiton* with a scalloped border; Chaireppe a veil; Lyso, a *himation* with golden letters; an uncatalogued veil near the hind.¹¹⁷

Both at Brauron and on the Acropolis, women worshiped Artemis Brauronia as a protector of women before and after childbirth. As we see from the inscription, women dedicated articles of clothing to the god: the inventory picks out specific details to identify the articles donated. It is significant that a copy of the inventory at Brauron was made and published on the Acropolis in Athens. This allowed the Athenian community to know who had donated what.¹¹⁸ Most of the donations are identified by the personal name of the donor, suggesting that the object most probably had the name attached to it; Malthake's includes the names of her father and husband too. The occasional example, such as a veil in the extract from the list above, does not have the name of the donor (this example is listed as ἀγραφον, 'uncatalogued'). This reveals that while names were not necessarily supplied with every item, for the majority they were.¹¹⁹ Interestingly, Lyso dedicated a lettered garment and the golden letters gave her dedication a particular significance.¹²⁰ She is not alone in this: we also read that Kallippe wove letters into

¹¹⁶ HARRIS 1995, 237.

¹¹⁷ IG II² 1529 10–15, after the middle of the 4th century BC; CLELAND 2005, 39–40, 146.

¹¹⁸ On the significance of the community recognising these women, SOURVINO-INWOOD 1988, 111–13; KIRK 2021, 110–52; EKROTH 2003, 93.

¹¹⁹ KALLIONTZIS 2021, 133–134 for the term 'uncatalogued' in these inventories and discussion of other Braurion inventories.

¹²⁰ Perhaps with the donor's name or a short motto (cf. Aesch. *Sept.* 434; Plut. *Dem.* 20). On expensive embroidery, cf. Arist. 838a, a *himation* said to have been sold for 120 talents.

the garment she dedicated.¹²¹ That a woman would make or commission a garment with golden letters, perhaps intended for dedication although not necessarily, demonstrates that she is part of a literate community. She is making a public statement through the text on the object she most probably created herself. In addition, a dedicatory poem by Nossis, written around 300 BC, shows that objects donated by women may have also been labelled with more than just their names:

Ἦρα τιμήσσα, Λακίνιον ἂ τὸ θυῶδες
πολλάκις οὐρανόθεν νεισομένα καθορῆς,
δέξαι βύσσινον εἶμα, τό τοι μετὰ παιδὸς ἀγαυᾶς
Νοσσίδος ὕφανεν Θεουφίλις ἁ Κλεόχας.
Honoured Hera, you who often leave heaven
and watch over your sweet-scented Lacinian temple,
receive this linen cloak which, with her noble daughter
Nossis, Theuphils daughter of Cleocha wove for you.¹²²

Eight of the twelve extant epigrams by Nossis describe objects dedicated by women. What we do not know is whether Nossis wrote her epigrams to be displayed with the dedications she describes or whether her poems were for literary publication alone.¹²³ Either way, she demonstrates that it was important for the dedicators to be remembered along with the object that they had given and this demanded literacy.

The text of an offering made by a woman named Meneia in the mid-fourth century demonstrates the desire and ability of women to make public statements through written dedications. On the Acropolis of Athens, Meneia articulates a personal reason for her gift:

Ἀθηνάαι Μένεια ἀνέθηκεν ὄψιν ἰδοῦσα ἀρετὴν τῆς θεοῦ.
Meneia dedicated (this) to Athena upon seeing in a vision
the excellence of the god.¹²⁴

Here Meneia testifies publicly to a personal connection with Athena. She shares her vision of the god's divine power in a text which is put on display in a public place. Meneia uses text to advertise the special favour she has received from the god, which is a form of self-promotion. Other women also made public declarations of their achievements in a religious space too. Deinophila dedicated two statues, each with a votive text, to Artemis Agrotera (the hunter) at a rural sanctuary in Thespiai 'after experiencing a vision.'¹²⁵ Such dedications provided a medium through which women could make a public statement about themselves. While most of

our examples come from the fourth century, Smikythe and Mikythe are examples of women who recorded dedications in the fifth century.

Σμικύθε πλύντρια δεκάτεν ἀνέθεκεν.

Smikythe, a washerwoman, dedicated a tithe.¹²⁶

[Μ]ικύθη μ' ἀνέ[θηκεν] | [Αθ]ηναίηι τό[δ'] ἄγαλμα | [εὐξ]
αμένη δ[εκάτην] | [καί] ὑπὲρ πα[ίδων] | [καί] ἐαυτῆ[ς]. |
Εὐφρων [ἐποίησεν].

Mikythe dedicated me, this statue, to Athena, after vowing a tithe on behalf of her children and herself. Euphron made (me/this statue).¹²⁷

Smikythe and Mikythe are dedicators who report the fulfilment of vows they have made. In keeping their promises to the god, they imply that the god has listened to and answered their prayers, fulfilled the request made in the vow. Both these inscriptions were on public display on the Acropolis, the most sacred space in Athens. Mikythe and Smikythe also use text on the objects they paid for (a sculpture and basin on pillars) to make a public statement of their own success and piety. As a tithe, the material value of the objects they donated was a statement of their disposable wealth. It is particularly interesting to see that Mikythe includes her children in her vow but does not name their father nor indeed her own father.¹²⁸ She presents herself as a self-made woman, succeeding as a parent as well as in her material earnings.

The dedication by a woman named Melinna is a fourth century example of yet another woman promoting her own achievements:

χερσι τε καὶ τέχ[ν]αις ἔργων | τόλμαις τε δικαίαις | θρηναμένη
τέκνων γεν[ε]ὰν | ἀνέθηκε Μέλιννα | σοὶ τήνδε μνήμην, θεᾶ
Ἐργάνη, | ὣν ἐπόνησεν | μοῖραν ἀπαρξάμενη κτεάνων,
τιμῶσα χάριν σὴν

With her hands, skill at work and honest courage Melinna raised her family of children and dedicated to you, Goddess Ergane, this memorial, making a first fruits offering of a portion of her property which she earned, honouring your favour.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ IG I³ 794; RAUBITSCHKE 1949, n.380; Athens: Acropolis, c. 490–480 BC. There are two other dedications by a Smikythe (perhaps the same woman) from around the same date: IG I³ 574, 700. On tithe offerings in Ancient Greece, JIM 2014, 130–75, who suggests that Smikythe, as a washer woman, could not have been wealthy; however, it is possible that πλύντρια was the title of a woman who held a key role in the ritual washing of the cult statue at the Plynteria festival in Athens; she would therefore be a member of the elite (Xen. *Hell.* 1.4.12, Plut. *Alc.* 34, Lycurgus fr. 44 in Harpokration, s.v., *Suda* π1818 (Adler)). Hesychius tells us that the title of two girls in Athena's temple was similar to this, the *Plyntrides* (or *Loutrides*), Hes. λ1277, also Phot. *Lex.* λ408. For other basins donated by women around the same date, IG I³ 921 (Kallikrite); IG I³ 934 (Kallisto).

¹²⁷ IG I³ 857; Athens, Acropolis, 470–450 BCE; RAUBITSCHKE 1949, n.298; DILLON 2002, 15; AVRAMIDOU 2015, n. 30. For a woman's dedication on behalf of another woman, Malthake for Thrattis, *Athenian Agora* XVIII V559, SEG 21:784 (4th century BC; Athens). Aristomache and Charikleia dedicated a similar pillar around the same time: IG I³ 858; RAUBITSCHKE 1949, n.297; Empedia, also as a tithe, a little earlier: IG I³ 767; RAUBITSCHKE 1949, n.25; Philea dedicated a pillar with a bronze statue around 500 BC: IG I³ 800; RAUBITSCHKE 1949, n.191.

¹²⁸ For discussion, AVRAMIDOU 2015, 9.

¹²⁹ IG II² 4334; second half 4th century BC; EM 8804; CEG 774; JIM 2014, 139.

¹²¹ IG II² 1514 7–9 and IG II² 1515 2–3: χιθωνίσκος[ς κτενωτ]ὸς περιποικίλος, Καλλιπῆ· οὗτος ἔχει γράμ[ματα ἐ]νυφασμένα· A thin tunic with scalloped boarder, richly embroidered, Kallippe: this has woven letters; CLELAND 2005, 12, 132.

¹²² Nossis 3 (PLANT 2004, 64) = *Anth. Pal.* 6.265. For Nossis' female voice, SKINNER 2005, 112.

¹²³ BOWMAN 1998, n. 55; PLANT 2004, 63.

¹²⁴ IG II² 4326, mid. 4th century BC; see VERSNEL 2011, 290 for *arete* as the power of the god from this date.

¹²⁵ *IThesp* 233 and 234; 4th century BC; MCCREDIE/STEINBERG, 1960, 123–5.

Melinna makes a public statement of her success and places it in the text that accompanied the object she donated to the god. For the idea of a woman making a dedication from her earnings, compare a fifth century bronze basin dedicated by Meliteia (dated 475–50 BC), inscribed, Μελί[τει]α [μ' ἀνέθε]κε[ε]ν ἱμάτιον δεκάτεν: 'Meliteia has dedicated me as a tithe of the himations,' suggesting she may have earned an income from making the garments (*IG* I567³).

An earlier dedication by Lysilla of a bronze cymbal, inscribed Λύσιλλα ἀπαρχὴν Ἀθηναίαι: 'Lysilla to Athena as a first offering,' (*IG* I547³) may indicate her profession as a dancer or musician, or perhaps speaks to her use of the instrument in worship.¹³⁰ We cannot tell from their names alone whether these women were citizens or non-citizens, but we can conclude that small bronze offerings like these are the dedications of women who are not wealthy nor members of the elite.¹³¹ Their evident literacy demonstrates that women below the highest class were engaged with communication through texts too.

Melinna's dedication was more substantial than these. Her text announces that she put up a μνήμη, both a permanent, physical 'record' and 'memorial.' She speaks of her own success as a mother, her hard work, her courage and her special relationship with the god: she articulates the favour (*charis*) the god has given her, thereby proclaiming her own honour. While we do not know who composed the text, we do know that Melinna presented it on an object and thus to make a public record of her achievements. In publishing this text, she communicates in writing with a literate community, those readers that she wants her text to impact. In engaging with her readers, she situates herself as part of that literate community too. Moreover, that community gave voice to her words, the viewers speaking aloud her name and accomplishments as they read her words.¹³² There is some functional similarity, therefore, in the public declaration of success in this dedication inscription, and the celebration of success by Kyniska, the first woman to win an olympic crown.¹³³

Epitaphs recorded on gravestones give us yet another opportunity to hear women's voices through the offering of public texts that honour women. Where the text of the epitaph is written in the voice of a woman, the reader naturally takes it as her own words. She has shared her sentiments for the deceased with the reader through a public text. An epitaph for a nurse named Melitta provides an example.

Ἀπολλοδώρου | ἰστοελοῦ θυγάτηρ | Μέλιττα. τίτθη.
ἐνθάδε τὴν χρηστὴν τίτ[θ]ῆν κατὰ γαῖα καλύπτει
Ἴπποστράτης· καὶ νῦν π[οθ]εῖ σε.

¹³⁰ Fragment of phiale and bronze cymbal, Athens National Museum X 7271, 17525: MAKRES/SCAFURO 2019, 66, 70, 73–74).

¹³¹ MAKRES/SCAFURO 2019, 72; c.f. ALESHIRE 1989, 65–67. We can add as examples a statuette (lost) on an inscribed base and a bronze mirror, both dedicated by a woman or women named Glyke as a tithe around 480 BC (*IG* I³ 536, 548bis); a statuette of Athena Promachos dedicated by Meleso (*IG* I³ 540); MAKRES/SCAFURO 2019, n. 3, 15, 16, 19, 21.

¹³² For the significance of the viewers reading the texts on monuments aloud, DAY 2010, 32; 2016, 213.

¹³³ IvO. 160; CEG II 820; see Paus. 3.8.1–2; 5.12.5; 6.1.6; *Anth. Pal.* 13.16; conventionally dated to 396 BC.

καὶ ζῶσαν σ' ἐφίλουν, τίτθη, καὶ νῦν σ' ἔτι τιμ[ῶ]
οὔσαν καὶ κατὰ γῆς, καὶ τιμήσω σε ἄχρι ἂν ζῶ·
οἶδα δὲ σοὶ ὅτι καὶ κατὰ [γ]ῆς, εἶπερ χρηστοῖς γέρας ἐστίν,
πρώτῃ σοὶ τι[μαί], τίτθη, παρὰ Φερσεφόνοι Πλούτωνι τε
κεῖνται.

Melitta, daughter of Apollodoros, a resident of equal status. Nurse.

Here the earth hides the good nurse of Hippostrate; and now she longs for you. While you were alive, I loved you, nurse, and now I still honour you, though you are beneath the earth, and I will honour you as long as I live. I know that beneath the earth too, if in fact there is a reward for those who are good, the first honours are yours, nurse, beside Persephone and Pluto.¹³⁴

The epigram is written in verse, in the voice of Hippostrate, whom we take to be the girl depicted in a relief on the epitaph with Melitta. The verse text that accompanies the relief is in Hippostrate's voice. It is normal in such texts to extoll the virtues of the deceased and explain why she deserves recognition. However, Hippostrate makes the declaration very personal to her. She reveals how much she misses her nurse; she loves and honours her. The first-person voice, personal tone, emphasized in the change of voice from the more formal third person in the introductory line and the personal address to the deceased, has led readers to conclude that Hippostrate composed the verse herself.¹³⁵ The text expresses the voice of a woman speaking to another woman. It is a public statement of her personal feelings.¹³⁶ The visitor to the epitaph would take on Hippostrate's sentiments about Melitta and her voice as they read aloud the text written in the first person. The verse thus not only displays the author's ability and engagement with this genre of poetry but voices a woman's specific feelings about another woman.

Examples of a mother's grief for her child provide further examples of the importance of public texts to women as well as to men.¹³⁷ An epitaph in verse for a woman named Biote was made for her by her friend Euthylla around 430 BC.

πιστῆς ἠδείας τε χάρι|ν φιλότῆτος ἑταῖρα |
Εὐθυλλα στήλην τήνδ' ἐπέθηκε τάφω|
σῶι, Βιότη· μνήμη γὰρ | ἀεὶ δακρυτὸν ἔχοσα |
ἠλικίας τῆς σῆς κλαί|ει ἀποφθιμένης.

By grace of your loyalty, sweetness and friendship, your friend Euthylla placed this stele on your grave, Biote. For she laments, keeping every teary memory of your lost youth (*IG* I³ 1295 bis, *CEG* 1 97).

Public recognition of women through such texts, particularly when the recognition is by women too, implies community literacy. Verse epitaphs for women are attested earlier in the fifth century BC too, such as the epitaph

¹³⁴ *IG* II² 7873, *AJUK* 4.6 n.37, *CEG* 571: c. 330–320 BC; marble stele British Museum BM 1909,0221.1.

¹³⁵ VESTRHEIM 2010, 64–66; PITT 2022, 93.

¹³⁶ That a nurse may have a life-long connection to a family, Dem. 47.55; his mother was a nurse, Dem. 57.44–5; in myth, Dionysus named Nysa after his nurse, Ar. *Alex.* 5.2.6. *IG* II² 12387 recognises the nurse Paideusis for her excellence too. For nurses in the Greek world, see VILATTE 1991, 13–15).

¹³⁷ A mother's grief for her child provides a comparable example: e.g. from Athens *IG* I³ 1205, *CEG* 1 38; 1206 *CEG* 1 35 (both c. 530 BC); *IG* I1311³; from Amorgos (450 BC) *SEG* 15:548, *CEG* 153.

attributed to Simonides for Archedike, daughter of Hippias.¹³⁸ In addition, before the end of the fifth century, the priestess of Athena Nike received public recognition in a funerary stele with a verse inscription.¹³⁹ The decrees that appointed her and set her remuneration had earlier been inscribed on a stele set up on the Acropolis (IG I³ 35, 36).¹⁴⁰ The contextual evidence for the literacy of the women of Athens thus argues that the priestess was among those who read the decrees.

CONCLUSIONS

ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἔστιν μουσα καὶ ἡμῖν
For we have a Muse too¹⁴¹

We should therefore reject the premise that women only participated in the written world of their polis through intermediaries who would read and write for them.¹⁴² In *Medea*, the chorus of women of Corinth claim that they have a share of *mousika*, music and literary culture, although they admit, sarcastically, that this is not something that all women share.¹⁴³ Greek literature and art focus on the lives of the elite and demonstrate that literacy was normal for elite women. Evidence for the lives of non-elite women is less forthcoming, although inscribed small bronze offerings provide examples of women of more modest means recording their dedications in texts.

The current view that women in Archaic and Classical Greece, particularly in Athens, were less literate than their male peers is erroneous. Evidence from the second half of the fourth century is more plentiful, but texts and images from the fifth century and even earlier provide testimony to women's literacy. Women are depicted on fifth century Athenian pottery reading scrolls and engaging with literary texts. Indeed, adult males are seldom depicted in Attic art holding book rolls, whereas adult women often are. The association of music and reading, with an implication of the leisure time available to master and enjoy these pursuits, are markers of the status of these women as members of the elite. However, this does not mean that literary texts were necessarily confined to the rich alone: Plato's Socrates tells us that Anaxagoras' books were readily available for no more than a drachma, suggesting that books were not that expensive.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸ Semonides *Epig.* 26a (Campbell): Thuc. 6.59.3; attributed by Aristotle: *Rhet.* 1. 9. 20, 1367b.

¹³⁹ IG I³ 1330; CEG 1.93.

¹⁴⁰ IG I³ 35 is dated to around 450 BC; IG I³ 36 to 424/3 BC (MARK 1993, 104–108).

¹⁴¹ Eur. *Med.* 1085.

¹⁴² Harris 1989, 34–35, 56.

¹⁴³ Eur. *Med.* 1087–9; PODLECKI 1989, 63 points out they are being sarcastic; for the idea of women who are *amoussa*, see HALLIWELL 2012, 19 n.11.

¹⁴⁴ Plat. *Apol.* 26d–e. We lack solid evidence for the price of books. There is some evidence for the cost of papyrus: in the Erechtheion building accounts of 407–5 BC, two papyrus rolls (χάρται) cost 2 drachmae 4 obols; a roll (perhaps longer) is 3 drachmae 3 obols (IG I³ 475, 289–91; IG I³ 477.1–2). Third century BC accounts from Delos give the cost of papyrus rolls at 1 dr. 3 ob., 1 dr. 4 (or 4½) ob. and 2 dr. (with one perhaps at 10 dr.): IG XI.2.205, 224, 287; I Delos 316; cf. a couple of coppers for a small piece of papyrus for a commercial agreement [Dem.] 56.1. Stories of the extraordinary

When Lysandra gave Lysimachis a beautiful pyxis, she inscribed a message to her for a reason. The authorship of the inscription has been called into question, yet there is no good reason to doubt that message was from someone and for someone who would understand the text. The wealth of evidence, textual and visual, for women writing in both the fifth and fourth centuries is thus overwhelming: women engaged with each other, with their wider social networks and with the gods through written texts.

The types of evidence that have survived do limit the genre of texts by and for women that are represented. Many of these are only brief. Nevertheless, brief messages in graffiti, labels and texts on objects owned by women do still attest to wider literacy within the community, and not to a limited level of functional literacy. These texts include compositions in verse that demonstrate a higher-level literary competence. Private messages have survived too, in questions to gods at an oracle, revealing private aspirations and desires that were not meant to be seen by others. Some written curses were deliberately hidden and form yet another genre of private text that has survived to attest to the literacy of the author as well as to her most secret thoughts. In contrast, texts composed to accompany dedications were very public messages both to the gods and to the wider community, and demonstrate a way in which women could announce their own achievements. This wider community included other women.

The importance of writing in religious practice should not be downplayed. Along with memorials to the dead, some of which are in women's voices and may have been written by women too, dedications to the gods acknowledge contributions by women made in their own voices.¹⁴⁵ Such texts abounded in public places, such as on the Acropolis in Athens, where women would regularly spend time. Texts by women were published there, in important and sacred spaces, and attest to the significance of women in the community. Indeed, they testify that the women were active members of the Athenian community.¹⁴⁶ They were written for other women to read as well as men. While it has been argued that the evolution of democracy at Athens was a major driver in the development of literacy among the male population, the growing importance of texts for communication with the gods through the Classical period attests to the wider literacy of the religious community too. Women very much led this religious community. So, when Myrrhine, the first priestess of Athena Nike, passed away around 410 BC and a verse epigram was composed for her funerary monument, that poem was for the women of Athens to read, not just the men.¹⁴⁷

prices paid for books are apocryphal: Plato's purchase of a book (or books) of Philolaus (Gellius 3.17.1–6; Diog. Laert. 3.9, 8, 15, 85; *Iam. Vit. Pyth.* 31.199); Aristotle's purchase of books of Speusippus (Gellius 3.17.3); Pythagoras' daughter, Damo, could have sold his notes for a great deal of money, but did not (*Pyth. epist.* 2); the deposit of 15 talents surrendered for official Athenian copies of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides (Galen *CMG* 5.10.2.1.78–80=17a.606 Kühn); cf. official state copies of these texts collected in Athens (Plut. *Mor.* 841f); Martial, at a much later date, noted that his book cost four coins (sc. sesterces) but could be sold for two (*Ep.* 13.3).

¹⁴⁵ For inscribed female votives on the Acropolis, AVRAMIDOU 2015, 2–7.

¹⁴⁶ SOURVINO-INWOOD 1988, 111–113; EKROTH 2003, 93.

¹⁴⁷ IG I³ 1330; CEG 93; LOUGOVAYA-AST 2006, 220–222.

The exclusion of women from education has a shocking current iteration in Afghanistan. While girls may not have attended what schools there were for boys in Archaic and Classical Greece, they nevertheless were not excluded from education. They learnt to read and write, perhaps at home and largely from their mothers, at least in those families who could afford the time for them to do so. Lysistrata (quoting Melanippe), tells us that she is an intelligent woman; that she has learnt many arguments from her father and elders, hinting that women's education may have gone beyond what their mothers taught them. Women were active participants in a culture where they could promote their own achievements in public space in permanent form. So, when Aristophanes created a female character who criticises Euripides' depiction of women in his tragedies, quoting lines from Euripides in the course of her criticism, we may take her knowledge of his work as both plausible and representative of female engagement with the performance culture of Athens.¹⁴⁸ Thus also, by the mid-fourth century, a young woman such as Erinna was perfectly capable of composing hexameter verse of a high standard in which she could allude to the language of Sappho, a fellow poet whose work she had no doubt read and knew well.¹⁴⁹

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¹⁴⁸ That women, most likely, did attend dramatic performances in Athens, HENDERSON 1991, 133–147. The reperformance of Attic tragedies is attested outside of Athens in the fifth century (Hdt. 6.21.1; *Life of Aeschylus* 18); in Athens from 386 BC (IG II² 2318 201–3); knowledge of Euripides' plays shows they were regularly performed; that texts were in circulation: see NERVEGNA 2020, 579.

¹⁴⁹ For the echo of Sappho in Erinna, WEST 1977, 117; cf. BOWMAN 1998, 39–59; this paper nevertheless disagrees with West's conclusion that a girl was not capable of composing poetry of the standard of Erinna's *Distaff* 1977, 117–119.

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