

Political *Parthenoi*:

The Social and Political Significance of Female Performance in Archaic Greece

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Abstract

This thesis will explore how social and political conditions in archaic Greece affected the composition of poetry for female choral performance. My primary source material will be the poetry of Alcman and Sappho. I examine the evidence suggesting that poems by both Alcman and Sappho commented on political issues, using this as a basis to argue that women in archaic Greece may have had a more vocal public presence that has previously been imagined. Rather than viewing female performance as a means of discussing purely feminine themes or reinforcing the idea of a disempowered female gender, I argue that the poetry of Alcman and Sappho gives *parthenoi* an authoritative public voice to comment on issues in front of the watching community. Part of this authority is derived from the social value of *parthenoi*, who can act as economically and socially valuable points of exchange between communities, but I shall also be looking at how traditional elements of female performance genre were used to enhance female authority in archaic Sparta and Lesbos.

Once this has been established, this thesis will proceed to examine how public female performance dealt with major political and social issues in the archaic world. I shall argue that the performance of *parthenoi* did focus on primarily feminine concerns such as marriage, desire, and abduction, but that it could also be an opportunity to discuss much broader political themes that were of major importance to the entire *polis*. Alcman and Sappho use their poetry as a vehicle to comment on the society in which their poetry was composed, both discussing threats to order and representing solutions for a stable society. The content of female performed poetry was often composed as much for a male audience as for the performers themselves, using traditional female performance as a means of commenting on the current political climate. Through arguing these factors, the intention of this thesis is to suggest a much more prominent public role for archaic Greek females than has previously been recognised.

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