

Greek literature is full of hilarious women, but it is difficult to uncover the humor of respectable women in Classical Athens. Lysias I, *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*, presents a joke purportedly made by a “real” Athenian woman; at I.12-13, the unnamed wife of Euphiletos engages in a humorous exchange with her husband. The purpose of this paper is to examine this woman’s joke in its cultural and rhetorical context and answer the following: How could including this scene have been expected to help the defendant’s case? How would the court have viewed joke telling by an Athenian wife?

In this passage, the speaker details his wife’s scheme to be with her lover downstairs in the same house. The wife avoids suspicion by making a joke of her husband’s request for her to leave to nurse their crying baby. She claims that he wants her to go so he can rape the servant girl again, and then playfully locks the door behind her. This scene has been examined for clues about Lysias’ characterization of the defendant. The revelation of a tryst with a household slave artfully undermines the excessively perfect image of him presented elsewhere in the speech while further painting him as a trusting, sympathetic cuckold, a character notably familiar from comedy (Carey 61-62, 70). While this interpretation of the husband is surely correct, what it misses is that the scene is equally important for what it reveals about the wife. By placing this joke into the general context of women’s humor as well as further exploring echoes with passages from comedy like *Arist. Thesm.* 383-519, it becomes clear that this scene paints a portrait of a corrupted wife that underlines the defendant’s argument about the real dangers that comes from adulterous seduction.

This scene is clearly intended to stand out because the unnamed wife is allowed direct speech. It is marked as humorous through its terminology of laughter (Halliwell): γελάω (the husband’s response to the accusation) and παίζω (the woman continuing the joke by teasingly locking the door). This joke is about sex, a drunken husband forcing himself on one of his slaves, and uses the euphemistic περᾶω for the attack. This sexual nature and choice of words places the joke into the realm of female humor, both that found in ritual contexts (O’Higgins) and that identified with erudite *hetaerae* (McClure).

Joking is revealed as insidious behavior, one of a number of grounds for fear by the head of an *oikos*. The idyllic image of the proper *oikos* presented at the opening of the speech is ruined after the wife is spotted by her seducer at a funeral procession (7-8, a rare public event). After the corruption, she is seen wearing makeup (14, another marker of *hetaerae*; McClure and Culpepper Stroup) and attending the Thesmophoria with her lover’s mother (20, as an all-female festival, a source of anxiety for the male mind, already explored on the comic stage). The defendant argues that seduction is worse than rape because it ruins the seductee’s mind, making the woman closer to her seducer than her own family (33). This humorous scene is therefore presented as further proof of the corruption for which Eratosthenes was responsible; the wife is now clever as a *hetaera*, her off-color joking a tool to hide her bad behavior. The other good Athenian men would respond to these indicators, and full of anxiety about their own wives and *oikoi*, vote that the defendant was justified in taking action.