

Account for the
nature and
characteristics of
prostitution in ancient
rome and po...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A Roman man had many options when it came to sexually gratifying himself. Firstly if he were married there would be his wife, but this certainly did not have to be his only sexual partner. A Roman man would often have slaves “ and the possibility that their master might make sexual use of them, was an unquestioned Roman tradition. ” (Roman Homosexuality; Craig Williams P. 37). A Roman man could also turn to prostitutes- persons who were not his slaves who he paid for sexual pleasures.

Prostitutes would often be slaves owned by masters called ‘ lenones’ (pimps) who hired them out to men. This would often take place in a brothel; these establishments were perfectly legal and quite commonplace in Ancient Rome. Brothels were seen as an unsavoury but necessary part of the urban landscape of cities like Rome and Pompeii. As is seen in the ruins of Pompeii archaeologists found many buildings that they believed were Brothels, due to their structure (lots of bedrooms) as well as the erotic paintings on the walls.

Prostitutes and Pimps were widely regarded as untrustworthy characters and both fell under the Roman category of “ he who has made a living with his body” (along with thieves, gladiators, gladiatorial trainers, debtors and curiously actors) and were therefore in the lower class of citizen that were “ forbidden from participating in the governments of small towns” (Roman Homosexuality; Craig Williams P. 39). An interesting punishment in the Augustan rein was to “ compel adulteresses to work as prostitutes in brothels” (Prostitution, Sexuality and the Law in Ancient Rome; Mc Ginn P. 171) this gives some idea of a prostitute’s status.

The most common users of brothels in Rome and Pompeii were young male citizens. This is because there was a huge differentiation in the ages that Roman males and females were married off. Roman men would often not be married until they were in their late twenties. Their female counterparts however, could be married off as young as twelve. This led to the “widespread belief that prior to settling down in marriage young men should be allowed to sow their wild oats- in the appropriate fields of course” (1991 Roman Marriage “Iusti Coniuges” from the time of Cicero to the time of Ulpian; Susan Treggiari P. 00-301.).

As sex “between an unmarried Roman woman and a man of any status... was illegal (stuprum)” (2001 Augustan Rome; Andrew Wallace-Hadrill P. 67) the appropriate fields were reduced to a choice of slaves or prostitutes. Prostitutes could be men, women, boys or girls; it was socially acceptable for a Roman male to have penetrative sex with any of these. Even the monumentally conservative M. Porcius Cato was said to approve of the use of prostitutes within certain limits. Horace relates this anecdote:

When a certain well known man was coming out a brothel, the godly judgement of Cato said, “Well done, sir; for as good as foul lust swells the veins, it is right for young men to come here, and not to grind away at other men’s wives. ” (Horace Sat. 1. 2. 31-5) What Cato is saying here is that the persistent sexual urges of young men are best fulfilled in a brothel rather than aiming themselves at other men’s wives. However it is imperative to also examine the ancient commentary on Horace by Acro who adds a significant detail to the story.

When Cato saw the young man coming out of the same brothel on several occasions Cato scorned him: “ Young man, I commended you on the understanding that you were coming here occasionally, not living here! ” occasional visits to brothels were seen as acceptable by even the most conservative Romans as long as they were in moderation, a young Roman ought to have the manliness control of his lust not to “ squander his wealth into a whores guts” (2002 Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World; Laura K. McClure P. 24).

In Ancient Rome there was no stigma for having homosexual anal sex. Brothels would contain a fair selection of men and boys also for sale to the Roman man. Anal sex was seen as an act best carried out with young boys “ before their butts become hairy” (1992 The gardens of Priapus; sexuality and aggression in Roman humour; Amy Richlin p. 92). This is also reflected in some poetry of the first centuries A. D and B. C there are clear indications of the view that anal intercourse is more pleasurable with boys than with women.

A poet that prescribes to this view is Martial. In one poem Martial is found by his wife having anal sex with a young boy whore. When his wife tells him that she can give him the same pleasure she is harshly dismissed “ Stop giving masculine names to your affairs, and think of it this way wife: you have two cunts. ” (Martial 11. 43. 11-2). In other words while he is perfectly willing to penetrate his wife anally, her anus is not a boy’s anus but merely a second vagina.

Literary texts of a less blunt nature are likewise permeated with the assumption that a normal Roman man will openly seek to have sexual relations with persons of either sex. Roman men could often become infatuated with a particular prostitute and fall in love with them. A stock figure in Roman comedy is a father distressed by his whoring son who has fallen in love with a prostitute. This does not necessarily have to be a female prostitute and 'beautiful boys' were also objects for infatuation. One outrageous case where this was in evidence was the shocking trial of Flamininus.

Flamininus was a distinguished nobleman who was serving as a proconsul in Gaul. Flamininus arranged at large state expense to have a young male prostitute called Philippus sent to him from Rome. Philippus arrived in Gaul frustrated that he had missed a Gladiatorial contest. At the large banquet that evening Flamininus boasted to the young prostitute that he would make it up to him, during the course of the evening Flamininus summoned to his table a local nobleman who had been granted asylum in the Roman governor's headquarters.

He asked Philippus if he would like to see Gaul die since he had missed the Gladiatorial show. Philippus had only but half nodded when Flamininus took a sword and hacked the nobleman to pieces in front of all those assembled for the banquet. Flamininus was expelled from the senate for publicly showing his eagerness to "entertain a wanton whore that lay in his arms" and "letting his actions be influenced by his companion's desires." (Roman Homosexuality; Craig Williams P. 45).

This interestingly shows that there was actually nothing scandalous about a distinguished nobleman using prostitutes as long as they were kept in their place. The sexual positions also played a very important role in the use of prostitutes. It was important for Roman men to always be in the dominant position, occasionally a Roman man might have a prostitute go on top (This was seen as 'naughty' as this was a position which no Roman would do with his wife, giving her the 'power' in sex) but this was not a common feature of intercourse with prostitutes.

With anal sex it was imperative that a Roman man should be "the 'active' not the 'passive' partner". (1990 *The Constraints of desire: the anthropology of sex and gender in the classical world* John J. Winkler p. 24) Men who were 'buggered' were subjected to jibes and ridicule, seen as un-masculine and un-Roman. This was because they were surrendering their 'control' and adopting a submissive position, effectively becoming a woman in sex.

Altogether the nature and characteristics of prostitution in ancient Rome and Pompeii could not be more different to views held in contemporary western societies. Seen as unsavoury but necessary, visiting a brothel on the odd occasion was perfectly fine as long as a Roman man was seen as in control of his lust. However if he overindulges himself and becomes a very frequent visitor then he would face harsh reprisals and even prosecution. It was seen as Un-Roman to squander one's wealth on vices such as prostitutes, wine or gambling, and un-manly not to be able to control one's lust.