

Depictions of Female Jugglers in Classical Athens

In the course of the entertainment in Xenophon's *Symposium*, a skilled female dancer juggles twelve hoops, and thus elicits from Socrates the observation that "a woman's nature happens to be in no way worse than a man's, but it lacks judgement and strength" (2.9). This oxymoronic remark has been taken to reflect women's inferior status in Classical Athens (e.g. Gilhuly 2009; cf. Baragwanath 2012), but the significance of the activity of juggling for social constructions of gender remains to be recognized. In this paper I consider the relationship between juggling and women's social roles in Athens through an analysis of depictions of young women juggling in 5th century Attic vase painting. I argue that these scenes showcase a kind of 'conspicuous non-production', in contrast to the labour and material production associated with the typical paradigm of female dexterity, namely, domestic textile manufacture.

There are more than fifty known examples of such scenes, enough for the motif of 'woman juggling' to be considered commonplace (catalogues can be found in Pfisterer-Haas 2003 and Todisco 2013). The female jugglers in all cases are fully clothed, usually seated, and located in the 'women's quarters'; sometimes other iconography connotes textile work (e.g. Bochum, Kunstsammlungen Ruhr-Universität, S 148), and often a wool basket stands before the juggler, who apparently tosses balls of wool (e.g. Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, 48.271 and London, BM, E606). While some view the juggling as a popular pastime for girls (Neils and Oakley 2003), harmless play disassociated from work (Lewis 2002), or even a ritualistic game to determine prophetically one's future love life (Karouzou 1945, Sabetai 1993; cf. Pfisterer-Haas 2003), the connection between juggling and textile manufacture is overt in many scenes, which implies that the manual processes involved in juggling can be understood as parallel to those in wool-working. Here I apply the argument of Paul Bouissac, a scholar of circus semiotics, that

modern juggling demonstrates a wasteful consumption of energy without any physical product after a process of manual labour (Bouissac 1976; cf. 2010). Along this line, then, the Attic vase scenes of women juggling, which evoke the ideal of textile work, emphasize both the technical ‘handicraft’ of the juggler and her lack of final product. Moreover, the vase paintings find parallels with the literary *topoi* of eroticism in ball-play and the tossing of apples (e.g. Hom. *Od.* 6.99-116, Anacreon 358 *PMG*, Ar. *Nub.* 997); several vases depict men offering gifts to the juggling woman, and in others the women juggle apples rather than wool. Apparently, the illustrations of juggling also connote desirability. Thus the paintings symbolically unite youthful play, the erotics of ball games, and a conspicuous indication of the woman’s manual ability. In short, a woman’s expert manipulations in juggling symbolize her capacity for manual textile work, and the vase scenes reveal a positive ideal for the display of dexterity in a domestic space.

The kind of juggling showcased by the dancer in the *Symposium*, a form of spectacle (cf. 2.1), stands in contrast to the juggling illustrated on the Attic vases. If the former could stir Xenophon’s Socrates to remark that women’s nature ‘lacks judgement and strength’, the latter, in its emphasis on the potent capabilities of female hands, surely offers a positive counterpoint for how representations of juggling can contribute to gender ideologies.

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