Rebecca Futo Kennedy

*Immigrant Women in Athens: Gender, Ethnicity, and Citizenship in the Classical City*


The title of Rebecca Futo Kennedy’s new book, *Immigrant Women in Athens, Gender, Ethnicity, and Citizenship in the Classical City*, is a misnomer, as she readily admits. It might more aptly have been called, ‘The Ideology of Metic Women in Athens’. Kennedy is interested in the depiction and lives of historical metic women, (a diverse group that includes free immigrants, those descended from immigrants, and freed slaves), as well as in dramatic representations of non-Athenian female figures who become metics or who, she argues, are likened to them. More precisely, she investigates how ‘developments in citizen ideology and socio-political and economic realities of the city intersected and impacted metic women’ (p. 7).

The first chapter reviews the position of metic women in law before and after Pericles’ citizenship law was passed in 451/0 BCE. A surge in female immigration must have been the impetus behind the law, Kennedy reasons, because the law had the greatest impact on the fortunes of free foreign women in Athens. Kennedy believes that the law had a negative effect on metic women not because they were barred from marrying citizens per se but because the children produced in such unions were ineligible for citizenship. Although Kennedy is likely correct that unions between citizen men and metic women continued to occur, it is difficult to know how such unions were characterized, especially since the citizenship law uses the language of legitimacy (a status that depends on marriage) to designate potential citizens.

In different ways, chapters two and three make the case that the operation of the citizenship law created stronger prejudices against metic women during the second half of the fifth century. Tragedy is the focus of chapter two. According to Kennedy, although the presence or arrival of foreign females always posed a threat for a tragic city, it was possible to ameliorate the threat in earlier tragedy by appropriating them for the marriage system, as in Aeschylus’ *Suppliant* and *Eumenides*. In later tragedy, however, influenced by the operation of the citizenship law, the successful incorporation of foreign women is more difficult and sometimes not possible at all. A key example is Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, in which Phaedra, foreign-born wife of Theseus, is depicted as having an inherited and infectious sexual disease, a representation that Kennedy argues tells us something about how actual metic women were viewed in Athens.
The third and fourth chapters trace the way that foreign and/or metic women in Athens have been assimilated to prostitutes, both by ancient writers and modern scholars. Arguing that Aspasia was not a prostitute or courtesan, Kennedy in the third chapter considers the meaning and ideological inflection of the term *hetaira*. She finds that *hetaira* was ‘originally a name used to refer to elite women, sometimes of foreign birth, who participated in sympotic and luxury culture’ (p. 74). In other words, the *hetaira* was not a courtesan or high-end prostitute by definition. Although I found this argument of great interest, it is lightly drawn. The same thing can be said for the discussion of the *hetaira* in chapter 4. There Kennedy notes that what ‘binds the women known as *hetairai* together in our fourth-century sources is that they were all independent women without families … She was a woman who was her own *kuria* …’ (p. 114).

While Kennedy is certainly correct to emphasize that the ancient sources often express bias against metic women in sexual terms, especially the lawsuits, in her effort to rehabilitate the *hetaira* she may overstate the case for inoculating her from the realm of sex work. As many scholars have observed, whether or not a woman is labeled *hetaira* or something else has more to do with the person doing the labeling than with the status of the woman so-labeled. This is not to say that there wasn’t some fourth-century meaning of the term *hetaira* along the lines that Kennedy suggests, but rather that she does not offer a complete analysis of the evidence or supply a methodology to deal with the context-dependent and intersecting ideologies in play when the term is used by different speakers in different sources.

The fourth chapter also reviews some familiar territory regarding the legal vulnerability of metic women. The highlight and original contribution of the chapter involves *pallakia*, usually translated as concubinage. While not feasible for citizen women after Solon’s laws and Pericles’ citizenship law, the institution, according to Kennedy, served as a marriage alternative for metic women. In other words, when various legislation reduced the attractiveness of *pallakia* as a marriage supplement for citizens, the institution remained available for metic women, giving them some security when they entered a citizen’s household; Kennedy emphasizes that *pallakia* was based on a legal contract. In chapter five, she suggests that eventually *pallakia* covered a variety of relationships that brought a woman into a man’s household, including caretaker and governess.

Chapter five argues that prostitution was not a prevalent form of work for metic women. To support this, Kennedy marshals evidence for a variety of female occupations, including woolworker, perfume-seller, honey-seller,