

Women and Homosexuality

Love Between Women

Love in the thiasoi: Sappho, Alcman's Partheneion and female initiation

Although the present discussion of homosexuality set out from evidence of love between women, we then shifted our attention to the long-drawn-out and much more visible history of love between men. There was good reason for this. Unlike pederasty (the most important manifestation of Greek homosexuality), love between women, as it did not serve as an instrument to form the citizen, was of no interest to the city. Consequently it found no space in the reflections of philosophers and even less in the laws which, as we saw, intervened in this area of sexual life only to prevent a culturally important feature such as pederasty from degenerating into trivial love affairs, and to punish those adult males who, in breaking the rules, not only continued to behave 'like women', but did so in pursuit of easy money. And love between women, which in this perspective was perfectly irrelevant, remained something of which only women continued to speak. Thus, sadly, we know little or nothing of how they experienced it, what space it occupied in their lives, what effects it had on their emotional life and its consequences on their attitude to men. Everything we know about female homosexuality (apart from what men say about it) comes, in fact, from Sappho.

Daughter of Scamandronymus and Cleis, Sappho was born in Mytilene, in the island of Lesbos, about 612 BC.¹ From an aristocratic family (we know that her brother was a cup-bearer in the town hall of Mytilene), Sappho was married to a man called Cercylas, to whom she bore a daughter named Cleis. In Mytilene, where she spent a great part of her life (between 604 and 595 she lived in Sicily), Sappho was at the head of one of those associations of young women called *thiasoi*, on the nature and function of which we must dwell in order to understand

the conditions under which the loves of Sappho were born and, as we shall see, were inevitably destined to end.

The *thiasoi* were communities of women, the existence of which is documented not only in Lesbos where, as well as Sappho's *thiasos* there were also the *thiasoi* of her rivals Gorgo and Andromeda, but also in other areas of Greece, especially in Sparta.² What sort of communities were these? They were not simply 'finishing-schools for young ladies', as some definitions have suggested, where purely spiritual loves flourished between the girls.³ The *thiasoi* were something different and more complex.⁴ They were groups with their own divinities and ceremonies, where girls, before marriage, went through a global experience of life which – leaving aside the differences attributable to differences of gender – was in some way analogous to the experience of life that men had in corresponding masculine groups.⁵ And the girls received an education within this community life. With reference to Lesbos, in particular, the *Suda* names three *mathētriai*, meaning three 'pupils' of Sappho, who was called *didaskalos*, or 'schoolmistress'.⁶

What did Sappho teach her pupils? First of all music, singing and dancing: the instruments which transformed them from uncultivated little girls, which is what they were when they came to her, into women whose memory might live:

But when you die you will lie there, and afterwards there will never be any recollection of you or any longing for you since you have no share in the roses of Pieria; unseen in the house of Hades also, flown from our midst, you will go to and fro among the shadowy corpses.⁷

Sappho writes this to a rival, who has not learned from her those things which would have allowed her to escape from ignorance, and thus from oblivion. But Sappho was not only a mistress of the intellect: her girls also learned from her the weapons of beauty, seduction and fascination: they learned the grace (*charis*) which made them into desirable women. From this point of view, the definition of Sappho's circle as 'a finishing-school for young ladies' is not mistaken. But the description is certainly inadequate: in these 'ladies' clubs' the girls of Lesbos (and of other cities, given that Sappho's pupils included Atthis of Miletus, Gongyla of Colophon, Eunice of Salamina) went through an experience which, in our eyes, was quite unsuitable for 'respectable young ladies' – they loved other women. And they loved them with a passionate love, experienced with exceptional sensibility and ecstasy, as we can see without the slightest hint of doubt in the poems which Sappho, over the years, dedicated to her girlfriends at different times: 'I bid you, Abanthis, take (your lyre?) and sing of Gongyla, while desire once again

flies around you, the lovely one – for her dress excited you when you saw it; and I rejoice . . .’. That is her request to one friend.⁸

‘The moon has set and the Pleiades; it is midnight, and time goes by, and I lie alone.’ Here, on the other hand, is the fruitless wait for love.⁹ That love, sadly and inevitably, was destined to end when the beloved girl had to leave the *thiasos*, to be married:

. . . and honestly I wish I were dead. She was leaving me with many tears and said this: ‘Oh what bad luck has been ours, Sappho; truly I leave you against my will.’ I replied to her thus: ‘Go and fare well and remember me, for you know how we cared for you. If not, why then I want to remind you . . . and the good times we had. You put on many wreaths of violets and roses and [crocuses] together by my side, and round your tender neck you put many woven garlands made from flowers and . . . with much flowery perfume, fit for a queen, you anointed yourself. . . .’¹⁰

Then, once again, another love affair: ‘Love shook my heart like a wind falling on oaks on a mountain.’¹¹ And another, painful and invincible: ‘Once again limb-loosening Love makes me tremble, the bitter-sweet, irresistible creature. . . .’¹²

Love remains her theme in the very celebrated ode cited by the anonymous author of *On the Sublime*, and imitated countless times (among others, by Catullus). It is certainly the most famous poem not only by Sappho but in the whole of Greek lyric poetry: the ode for a friend whom Sappho contemplates while, forgetting her, she speaks with a man, perhaps the one who is to become her husband:

He seems as fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter. Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast. For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying. . . .¹³

Such are the accents of love in Sappho’s poetry. If one puts aside all preconceived notions, it is difficult to deny that what we have here is true love, in the fullest sense of the term. The fact that this is true love has recently been highlighted in a very strange perspective by George Devereux, who examines Sappho’s attitudes and expressions in a medical and psychoanalytical vein; in fragment 31 Devereux reads the unmistakable symptoms of an ‘anxiety attack’.¹⁴

Women and Homosexuality

Sappho, he observes, reveals among other things the following symptoms: abnormal heartbeat and a psycho-physiological inhibition of speech ('For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped'); a sight disturbance, probably of vascular origin, and a roaring in the ears ('I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum'); trembling and pallor caused by the constriction of the surface capillaries and by a streaming of blood toward the inner organs ('a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass'). In clinical terms, these are the symptoms of an anxiety attack. And having explained all this, his conclusion is as follows: what Sappho felt was true love, but of a rather special kind. It is true, Devereux concedes, that anxiety manifestations can occur in any love-crisis, but he observes that in the Greek sources the crises that provoke anxiety attacks arise from pederastic, and not heterosexual, love. This observation is correct for a simple reason: for the Greeks true love, passion, the cause of anguish and torment, meant homosexual love. But Devereux sees things differently. In his view, what makes the manifestations of homosexual love anxious is the perceived 'abnormality' of the feeling. An abnormality, he adds, which by no means contradicts the hypothesis that Sappho was also a schoolmistress or a cult-leader: one frequently finds cases of women who, precisely because they were homosexual, 'tended to gravitate into professions which brought them in close contact with young girls, whose partial segregation and considerable psycho-sexual immaturity – and therefore incomplete differentiatedness – made them willing participants in lesbian experimentation.'¹⁵ These are the words of Professor Devereux, whose interpretation of Greek female homosexuality does seem to me to reveal certain symptoms: symptoms of the distortions which can result from a refusal to accept in practice (whatever about general statements of principle) the reality of cultural differences, and the consequent evaluation of one aspect of a people's way of life in a framework which alters its meaning and renders its value incomprehensible.

Greek culture in the seventh and sixth centuries BC (the period with which we are concerned) not only accepted as normal the existence of love relationships between women in the life of the *thiasoi*, but formalised these, through the celebration of an initiation-type ceremony, which brought two girls together in an exclusive paired bonding of a marital type.

To clarify the meaning of initiation marriages within the *thiasoi*, and to provide proof of their existence, we have the celebrated parthenion (a song for a chorus of virgins) by Alcman, the 'Louvre parthenion'.¹⁶ Composed in Sparta on commission, this celebrated the recognition by

the *thiasos* of a love affair which had now become exclusive between two girls, Agido and Hagesichora; an official union, one might say, which was solemnised by the recitation of a choral song.

Significantly, given that not all directors of *thiasoi* were capable, like Sappho, of composing songs personally, this one was written on commission by Alcman. But what exactly did the song proclaim?

Agido and Hagesichora (who seems to be the leader of the choir) appear in the song unambiguously in the role of a couple whose bond, now an exclusive one, takes away all hope from the girls in the choir, who are aware of the fact that nothing, no present and no temptation, will ever be able to detach Agido from Hagesichora, and persuade her to love another:

For abundance of purple is not sufficient for protection, nor intricate snake of solid gold, no, nor Lydian headband, pride of dark-eyed girls, nor the hair of Nanno, nor again godlike Areta nor Thylacis and Cleësithera¹⁷

they sing. And then, turning directly to Agido,

nor will you go to Aenesimbrotā's and say, If only Astaphis were mine, if only Philylla were to look my way and Damareta and lovely Ianthemis; no, Hagesichora guards me.¹⁸

Agido, therefore, will no longer confide her love affairs to Aenesimbrotā (evidently the director of the *thiasos*), and will no longer seek her intervention to obtain the love of one among her many companions: she now loves only Hagesichora, for ever.

Alcman's verses, identified by A. Griffiths as a nuptial song,¹⁹ do in fact celebrate a marriage: but not a heterosexual marriage, as Griffiths thought. As already stated, they are the consecration within the *thiasos* of an initiation ceremony of the type which, as attested by Himerius,²⁰ were also celebrated in the *thiasos* of Sappho, to which Aristaenetus also refers.²¹

At this point, after noting that love affairs between women emerged in a context of initiation (which is what these 'ladies' clubs' were concerned with), is it reasonable to establish a parallel with male homosexuality?

Recently, Bernard Sergent has highlighted a set of features which are shared by female and male initiation procedures. Just as boys spent a period of segregation far from the inhabited community, learning the arts of hunting and war, so also the girls congregated at the edges of cities, in border zones: at Karyai, between Laconia and Arcadia, or at Limnai, between Laconia and Messenia, if they were Spartan; at

Brauron, one of the areas of Attica furthest from the city, if they were Athenian. In these places, where special sanctuaries were established, they spent a period of segregation, exactly like their male counterparts, and in this context amorous relations grew up between the mistress and some of her pupils. But even after listing and noting these points, I cannot agree with the consequences drawn by Sergent: that the most ancient testimony on homosexuality (that of Sappho) makes an institutional link between love between women and that fundamental rite of passage in female life – marriage.

Undoubtedly, as already noted, love affairs between women (at least the ones we know about) arose during the period of female life institutionally designed to mark the passage of a girl from the class of virgins to the class of married women. But a fundamental difference springs to mind when one thinks of female and male love affairs. Sex during initiation, for boys, was with an adult. For girls, on the other hand, it was sometimes with their mistresses, and sometimes (as shown by Alcman's parthenion) with another young girl of the same age. The educational function, which in the male initiation process was directly linked to the sexual relationship, in female initiations seems to be fulfilled in the first place by the whole experience of community life. Within this life the homosexual bond, even if institutionalised through a ritual marriage (as in the case of Agido and Hagesichora), appears less like an educational relationship and more like the free expression of reciprocal feeling, giving rise to an equal relationship between two people who have chosen each other, neither having authority over the other nor accumulated experience to pass on.²²

The homosexual relationship can be explained in the context of male initiations – in different ways, admittedly, but at least it is capable of explanation. According to Bethe, as we saw, the lover, by subordinating the beloved, 'inspired' him with virile power by transmitting his sperm to him. Other scholars maintain that sodomy was an act of submission by a young male to an adult, a form of necessary humiliation before being admitted to the dominant group which held power. But what symbolic and social significance could be attached to love between women? Sex between women takes place on an equal basis, it does not involve submission, it cannot symbolise the transmission of power (not even the power of generation, the only power held by women).

There is no possible symbolic meaning, then, and no possible social meaning, when one thinks about it: a woman, when she gets married, does not join a group of older people with power over younger people of the same sex. She enters the family of her husband, where she is subject to him and to the other men who form part of the *oikos*. In this

context, if any sexual relationship can have a meaning as an act of initiation, it would have to be heterosexual intercourse, possibly symbolised in ritual form.²³ It certainly could not be a relationship with another woman.

Clearly, I do not wish to deny the initiation value of female societies. What I do wonder, however, is whether in the light of what we have seen so far we are entitled to think about the homosexual relationship as a stage in the initiation of women to marriage. And I believe that the response must be negative. The homosexual relationship, although linked by context and culture to the period of a woman's life when girls changed from the status of virgins to the status of married women, seems to me devoid of the institutional educational value which was attached, in male initiations, to intercourse with another man.

Female homosexual relationships were very different from those which linked the male subject of initiation to his adult lover. On the male side, this was inevitably shaped by asymmetrical roles within which the physical and intellectual inferiority of the boy was a necessary condition for the realisation of the indispensable pedagogical function. My feeling, in short, is that female homosexuality, which in the *thiasoi* found the widest possibilities for expression as a free bond of affection, was constructed from outside – which is to say, by men – on the model of pederasty.

It is no coincidence, I believe, if the emphasis on the pedagogical aspect of relations between women is placed by a man such as Plutarch. In Sparta, he writes, the best women loved girls, and when it happened that two of them were in love with the same girl, they tried (although they were rivals) to co-operate in the improvement of their beloved.²⁴

It is no coincidence that it is men who make female homosexuality into a perfect mirror of the male variety, forgetting the fundamental differences which I have tried to bring out. Nor is it a coincidence that the term used to indicate the young love object, *aitis*, is taken from the male sphere.²⁵

The idea that female homosexuality had a function of initiation does not emerge from a reading of Sappho. Undoubtedly, Sappho is well aware of the importance of education in the life of the *thiasos*. She is proud of the role of 'teacher' which she performs there. She speaks with evident and clear-cut contempt of those girls who have not learned grace, poetry and culture from her. But the tone of her love poetry leaves all this aside. Homosexuality, in the female sodalities, is not pedagogical: it is an elevated, 'cultured' relationship. It is something which ennobles, as the love relationship always does (or at least, so they say). But that is all it is: simply love.

It is now necessary to set the evidence on female homosexuality within its social and historical context. The seventh and sixth centuries BC were a time of transition in Greece, which was moving away from the pre-literacy of Homeric times, and towards a literate society.²⁶ Formerly, communities regulated their lives around institutions with powers that were still fluid (such as the assembly and the council of elders in Homer). Now Greece was developing into a fully and completely political society. This was a far-reaching transformation, with inevitable consequences for women's lives. In Homeric society, marriage was an instrument for establishing relations of friendship and power through an exchange of women. In the *polis* it became the institution designed to perpetuate the *oikoi*, and with them, the city itself.²⁷ As we know, in tandem with this transformation, women were relegated to a reproductive role and definitively segregated within the confines of the domestic walls, or within the still more limited boundaries of the women's quarters.

But Sappho lived before all this happened. She lived, in fact, during the turbulent period of transition, when women still had some possibility of living not simply as potential or actual instruments of reproduction, but as individuals who, at least during one phase of their lives, were socialised and instructed. It was understandable, then, that some of them, including Sappho, were capable of writing about themselves and their own feelings.²⁸

Things changed quickly. The *thiasoi* disappeared, and with them the possibility for women to be cultivated, and perhaps also to experience true love. Now destined for marriage from the youngest age, and prepared for this and nothing else, women learned to know only one type of love: the one they were supposed to feel for a husband whom they would not be allowed to choose for themselves. This does not mean that they did not love this husband: on the contrary, it is most probable that they loved him sincerely. Having no other choice, and not being able even to conceive of a different destiny (if they were not wives, they were courtesans or prostitutes), marriage was truly the locus of love for them, but a love made up, first and foremost, of devotion, obedience and respect. This was the love which the Greeks taught their women. What about passion? What about freedom to choose the object of one's love, freedom to leave him, abandonment and repentance, hope and despair, all of those things which, along with affection, are fundamental parts of love?

It seems very unlikely that Greek women experienced all of this within marriage (apart from some exceptional cases). Perhaps – in addition to adultery, where they presumably tried to find it – they

continued to experience this type of passionate love in homosexual relationships. And perhaps it is true that at this point, as Dover suggests,²⁹ homosexuality for them was a type of 'counter-culture', in which they received from their own sex what segregation and monogamy denied them from men. But on all of this, after Sappho, silence has fallen.

Love at banquets

Together with the *thiasoi*, and extending beyond the time when these disappeared, ancient Greece had other places where it is not only possible but even probable that women loved freely among themselves. This seems to be documented to a certain extent. But in these cases the love involved was very different from that concerned with initiation. These other places were banquets, on whose social and cultural function we have already dwelt in speaking of male homosexuality.

The banquets were meeting places reserved for men. The only women admitted were flute players, dancers, acrobats and courtesans: Leucippe, for example,³⁰ or the blonde Euripile,³¹ or again the noisy Gastrodora³² and Callicrite.³³ These women hired by men had different roles but a single function: making the banquet more enjoyable for those who paid them. And it seems plausible that in the course of these banquets, either as a spontaneous consequence of participation in a feast where eroticism played a major role, or perhaps (although this is only conjecture) at the request of the males present, there were more or less casual amorous encounters between courtesans, flautists, acrobats and dancers.

Apart from reasonable speculation, this possibility is attested by a lyric poem, as celebrated as it is controversial, dedicated by Anacreon to a girl from Lesbos:

Once again golden-haired Love strikes me with his purple ball and summons me to play with the girl in the fancy sandals; but she – she comes from Lesbos with its fine cities – finds fault with my hair because it is white, and gapes after another.³⁴

The last two lines are ambiguous in the original Greek, and have given rise to a problem which is still debated by the critics. Is the 'other', towards whom the girl from Lesbos turns, scorning the white hair of the poet, another girl, or another shock of hair, younger but also male?

The correct response can be sought, in the first place, through Anacreon's use of the verb *chaskei* ('gapes'). This verb indicates an attitude of ecstatic stupor, which the critics (when they do not extract

themselves from embarrassment by reading 'another' as male rather than female, arguing that the correct reading of the Greek word is *allon*, masculine, and not *allēn*, feminine)³⁵ have usually considered as referring to another woman, partly basing this assertion on the well-established homosexual reputation of the girls of Lesbos.³⁶ If true, this would confirm my hypothesis on the identification of banquets as a place where love affairs between women flourished. But the correctness of this interpretation has been hotly debated in recent years. In fact, according to Bruno Gentili,³⁷ the erotic renown of the girls of Lesbos in antiquity was attributable to another 'speciality': oral sex which, according to the ancients, was actually invented on this island,³⁸ and which the Greeks indicated with the verb *lesbiazein*.³⁹

The word *lesbia* would thus have nothing to do with the current meaning of the term. A homosexual woman in antiquity was called a *tribas*; the use of *lesbia* in this sense does not go back earlier than the ninth or tenth century.⁴⁰ Similar considerations apply to the verb *lesbiazein* which, as already pointed out by Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, has no connections with Sappho.⁴¹

In conclusion, the girl from Lesbos, according to this view, is not being described by Anacreon while she is looking at another woman in an ecstasy of love. The 'other' towards which the girl from Lesbos turns with open mouth, scorning the white hair of the poet, Gentili argues, 'is probably another shock of different (pubic) hair, obviously black, belonging to another of the male guests at the banquet'.⁴² This hypothesis deserves careful consideration on account of the well-deserved authority of its proponent. But I believe that the translation of *allēn* as 'another girl' remains possible, and leads to some reflections on female homosexuality which it would be a mistake to leave out, and which do not necessarily derive from an anachronistic interpretation of the term 'lesbian'. The idea of a young courtesan being attracted by another woman is quite plausible, whether or not she comes from Sappho's island. Banquets, for courtesans, were a place of work. They were paid to entertain the guests during a feast where, in all probability, mainly masculine loves arose. In this erotic atmosphere, it is not difficult to imagine that they too might feel homosexual desires. Deep down, other women were the only ones that they were not obliged to love 'under contract'. Might one not imagine that sometimes – perhaps even frequently – banquets allowed them to escape their professional destiny, and feel some non-mercenary emotions? One can hardly avoid speculating that elements of homosexuality formed part of the relationship between courtesans. And this is confirmed by the evidence of Alciphron, an author from much the same period as Lucian (perhaps a younger

contemporary). Four books of his 'letters' have survived: from fishermen, farmers, parasites, and courtesans.

These elegant, linguistically refined prose epistles (Alciphron is defined *attikistēs* by Eustathius)⁴³ describe in particular with great psychological subtlety the world of the courtesans, their customs, their problems, their relations with their lovers and with other courtesans, sometimes rivals, sometimes friends. And the letters also describe their moments of rest, the days in which, far from men, they carry on together riotously, free at last. 'Songs, gibes, toasts until cockcrow, perfumes, crowns, little cakes.' Thus Megara describes a feast to Bacchis, who has not taken part in it:

But the thing that gave us the greatest pleasure, anyhow, was a serious rivalry that arose between Thryallis and Myrrhina in the matter of buttocks – as to which could display the lovelier, softer pair. And first Myrrhina unfastened her girdle (her shift was silk), and began to shake her loins (visible through her shift), which quivered like junkets, the while she cocked her eye back at the waggings of her buttocks. And so gently, as if she were in the act, she sighed a bit, that, by Aphrodite, I was thunderstruck.⁴⁴

A homosexual turn-on? Barely hinted at, the hypothesis cannot be ruled out, especially in view of the fact that an explicit reference to a relationship between women appears in the same author's 'Letters from Farmers'.

Women and Male Homosexuality

The fundamental importance of love between men, combined with the widespread prevalence of these relationships throughout the course of Greek history, inevitably had a profound impact on heterosexual relationships, both by determining male attitudes to the female sex and by forcing women to reckon with a sector of their men's emotional lives from which they were totally excluded. But what exactly did Greek women think of male sexual habits?

Unfortunately, we are not in a position to know whether they saw the *erōmenoi* as dangerous rivals. Posing this question, Dover writes: 'in general the pursuit of eromenoi was characteristic of the years before marriage . . . so that wives will comparatively seldom have had grounds for fearing that their husbands were forming enduring homosexual attachments.'⁴⁵ But while this was true in many cases, in many others these 'competitive' attachments remained in being, as Dover himself

admits when he recalls what the heroine says in Euripides' *Medea*. In her celebrated lament on the unhappy fate of womankind, she points out that a woman must first submit to the will of her father, who gives her a husband that she has not chosen. She is then forced to stay with this man, whether she wants to or not. Otherwise, she would be open to blame. Meanwhile, the husband can leave her whenever he feels like it, without suffering any consequences. Nor is this all. Whenever a husband feels that he has enough of his home he can go out and recover his spirits with somebody who is *philos* – obviously meaning an *erōmenos*.⁴⁶

In Xenophon's *Symposium*, furthermore, Critobulus, just married, speaks such a passionate paean of praise about his friend Cleinias that we are left in no doubt as to their relationship. At night, he says, I can't sleep because I can't see him. By day, the best thing that can happen to me is to see him. I would give him everything I own, willingly and with no sense of sacrifice. If he wanted me to, I would be his slave; for him, I would even go into the fire.⁴⁷

Xenophon again, this time in the *Hellenica*,⁴⁸ tells how Alexander, tyrant of Pherai (respectably married) had a young *erōmenos*. One day, being angered with him, he imprisoned him as a punishment. Alexander's wife then interceded on behalf of the youth, but this led to disastrous results. Alexander put his young friend to death, and the woman, overcome by grief, killed herself.

An unusual tale, as Dover observes. Reading it, the thought strikes him that Alexander may have suspected a love affair between his *paidika* and his wife. Indeed, the suspicion is almost inescapable. But does it make sense to generalise the implications of this suspicion, and imagine that wives, far from being jealous, took advantage of the possibilities which their husbands' homosexual attachments offered them? If this were the case, the foremost topic of interest would not be female jealousy, but male jealousy. Take a husband betrayed by both his wife and his *pais*: of whom was he more jealous, the wife or the boy? On mature reflection, the problem does not merely affect married men: women were very dangerous rivals for all pederasts. When they reached a certain age, their beloved boys inevitably began to be attracted by the female sex, or at least to think of getting married. The lovers were equally certain to be stricken by frightful jealousy.

In Plutarch's *Amatorius* we have already had an opportunity to see the torment and rage felt by Pusias when Bacchion, his *erōmenos*, decides to marry Ismenidora. And one of Theocritus' *Idylls* shows that the case of Pusias is anything but exceptional.

Theocritus, in his thirteenth *Idyll*, tells of the capture of the young

Ilas by three nymphs, and the despair of his lover Heracles. A myth, of course, but the idyll is addressed to Nicias, whom Theocritus wishes to console for the loss of his *erōmenos*, by persuading him that it is natural for boys, at a certain age, to start to appreciate women. What has happened to Nicias, he points out, previously happened to Heracles. And Heracles, in the end, resigned himself in the face of the inevitable; so Nicias must do the same.⁴⁹

After this aside, we may return to the problem of how women experienced male homosexuality. On reflection, I believe that the women with most to fear from male rivals were not wives, but courtesans.

In the long run, what did wives have to lose? The loves which a Greek man felt for his wife and his *pais* were so different that in all probability, unless he was really going too far, the husband's male attachment did not take anything away from his wife. Wives and *paides* lived, so to speak, in different territories, not only materially (the wives in the house and family life, the *paides* in banquets and social life) but also emotionally. Conjugal love, with some rare exceptions, was really a form of affection, as we know, with marital sex orientated prevalently not to say exclusively towards procreation. The love for *paides*, on the other hand, contained a major intellectual component, and sex with them, judging from descriptions, was erotically exhilarating.⁵⁰

The real rivals of wives were not the *paides*, but other 'respectable' women who could induce their husbands to divorce them, thereby depriving them of what marriage had brought: their married status. This is the meaning of the expression *lechos* (the bed) for which Greek women became each other's rivals, sometimes, like Medea, even being prepared to kill for it. 'Woman', says Medea, 'quails at every peril, / Faint-hearted to face the fray and look on steel; / But when in wedlock-rights she suffers wrong, / No spirit more bloodthirsty shall be found.'⁵¹

The 'bed', then, is the only force capable of provoking rebellion among women. And in Greek tragedy, 'bed' is a key word in understanding how relationships within marriage or comparable situations were experienced. Given the impossibility of devoting much space to this topic, it will be enough to consider the meaning of the 'bed' in a tragedy which has two women as its protagonists: Euripides' *Andromache*.

Andromache, after Hector's death, has been assigned as part of the spoils of war to Neoptolemus, who keeps her as a concubine. Hermione, wife of Neoptolemus, daughter of Helen and Menelaus, accuses her of having caused her sterility with her evil arts, and taking advantage of her husband's absence, becomes involved in a plot to kill

her rival and the son whom the rival has given to Neoptolemus. But the plan fails and Hermione, to escape her husband's wrath, runs away with Orestes, to whom she had been betrothed before marrying Neoptolemus.

This is the plot of the tragedy, but what is of great interest to us is the attitude of the two women. Andromache does not love Neoptolemus, and continues to think of Hector as her true 'husband'. But she defends her status as a concubine. Hermione, whose jealousy has left her prepared to commit two murders, displays no sorrow when Orestes tells her that he has hatched a plot to slay Neoptolemus. The only object of competition is the 'bed', a key word which occurs no fewer than twenty times in the tragedy. And what the bed means, first and foremost, is social security, both for wives and for concubines.⁵² This security could never be taken away by a husband's or a lover's *erōmenos*. *Paides* were not real rivals for wives. They were real and dangerous rivals only for courtesans, the companions of social life for Greek men. The *paides* could not only take away the attention of a courtesan's more or less occasional clients, but thereby also remove her earning power, and thus her livelihood. A hint of the rivalry between this category of women and the young men in question can easily be seen in one of Theocritus' *Idylls*, where Simichidas is hoping that one day the lovely Philinus, who is causing pain to Aratus, who is in love with him, may one day learn the pains of love himself. 'Can't you see? He's riper than a pear,' says Simichidas, 'and the women say, "oh dear, Philinus, your pretty flowers are dropping!"'⁵³

'The women,' says Theocritus: but would 'respectable' women in Greece ever have used such language? Locked away in their women's quarters, how could they have known at what stage of ripeness were Philinus' 'flowers'? What occasion would they have had to meet him and make him the butt of their gibes? Despite the greater freedom of the Hellenistic era in which Theocritus writes, it would be truly unlikely that the women in question could be anything other than courtesans.

Female Homosexuality Seen By Men

As we have seen, once the period of 'initiation' homosexuality is passed, it is very difficult to imagine what women really felt about loving other women, and to identify the space and function that it had in their lives. It is anything but difficult, on the other hand, to determine what men thought about women who loved each other.

Although rare, the references are crystal clear. We start again with

Plato's well-known myth on the origin of the sexes, in the *Symposium*: as men and women were two halves of an original being (which was, as we saw, either a double man, or a double woman, or a hermaphrodite), and given that each of the halved creatures searches for its other half, those who derive from the hermaphrodite are heterosexual, while those who are descendants of those beings which were originally equipped with two sets of male organs or two sets of female organs are homosexual, and they search for another man or another woman respectively. There is one difference, however: men attracted to other men are the best, the only ones capable of dealing with public affairs, the only ones who, precisely because they love what is similar to themselves, attain fullness of being. Women attracted by other women, on the other hand, are *tribades*. This word is full of disturbing significance: *tribades* were savage, uncontrollable, dangerous females.

What remains to be decided is whether the image of homosexual women remained constant over time, or whether it changed in some way, and if so, in what direction. But here we are faced again with a lack of sources: after Plato, silence descends on this subject, and the only chink in the darkness allowing some information to seep out opens up after several centuries, with Lucian of Samosata. In a work of undoubted authenticity (unlike the *Amores*, which was attributed to him but is not his work) Lucian directly tackles the question of female homosexuality.

In the fifth of his *Dialogues of Courtesans*, Clonarium and Leana, two courtesans, are exchanging confidences. Clonarium has heard that Leana is the lover of a rich lady from Lesbos, Megilla, who loves her *hōsper andra*, like a man. Leana admits this, saying however that she is ashamed of it, because it is unnatural (*allokoton*). But this confession is not enough for Clonarium: she wants to know what sort of woman Megilla is. Leana replies: *hē deinōs andrikē* – she is frightfully masculine.⁵⁴ Then, giving in to the insistence of her friend, Leana relates how the story began. Megilla had organised a feast, together with her friend Demonassa of Corinth, and had hired Leana as a harpist. But the party ended late, and Leana was invited to spend the night with Megilla and Demonassa. Remaining alone with her, they began to kiss her and try increasingly daring approaches, until Megilla, now very excited, took off her wig, revealing a completely shaven head, like an athlete's. She claimed she was really a man, living with Demonassa as with a wife. But Megilla was not a man in the physical sense of the term. In response to Leana's question, she said that she did not have to *andreion* ('the men's thing'). She had no need of this male 'thing': she had her own way, much more pleasant, of playing the husband. I was

born a woman like all of you, she says, but my mind (*gnōmē*), my desires (*epithumia*) and all the rest (*talla panta*) are those of a man. Then, she asked Leaena to allow her to demonstrate that she was no less able than a man (*ouden endeousan mē tōn andrōn*): and Leaena permitted her this privilege. But despite the insistence of her friend Clonarium, Leaena does not wish to relate the details of what happened. These details, she protests, are *aischra* (shameful).⁵⁵

This dialogue is very significant, firstly, I believe, on account of the characterisation of Megilla, a woman who shaves her hair to appear like a man, and who, on Leaena's explicit declaration, is 'frightfully masculine'. In fact, the description of Megilla shows us not so much a homosexual as a 'transvestite'. Unlike pederasts, the most virile-looking of all men, homosexual women lose the natural characteristics of their sex, becoming a sort of caricature of maleness and appearing as a phenomenon in nature which reveals its monstrosity at first sight. So much for Megilla, the man-woman. And what about Leaena, who gets seduced? Not for nothing is she a courtesan. It is no mistake that she has not become the mistress of Megilla either for love or because she is carried away. As she explicitly states, she was attracted by the woman's rich gifts.⁵⁶ Prostitutes, then, give themselves to homosexual love affairs. And even women with as little sense of decorum as prostitutes know that to love another woman is an unforgivable act. As well as saying this explicitly, Leaena blushes in recounting her adventure.⁵⁷

After many centuries, the negative connotations of female homosexuality, and its condemnation, emerge even in a dialogue like this, which is anything but a moral tract, with the same clarity as from Plato's few inexorable words.