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Homosexuality in ancient Rome

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Towards the end of pagan antiquity the ascetic and mystical philosopher Plotinus expressed the wish that real thinkers should 'scorn the beauty of boys and women'.¹ The love of boys and women, as applied to men, is referred to scores of times in ancient literature: the one was the same as the other, and what one thought of one went for the other as well. It is incorrect to say that the ancients took an indulgent view of homosexuality. The truth is that they did not see it as a separate problem; they either tolerated or condemned the passion of love, whose legitimacy they questioned, as well as moral laxity.

If they censured homosexuality, they censured it as they did love, courtesans or extra-marital affairs — at least as far as active homosexuality was concerned. They had three standards which were quite distinct from ours: free love or exclusive marriage, sexual activity or sexual passivity, freedom or slavery. To seduce one's slave was a venial offence, and even severe moralists hardly bothered about such a trifling matter;² on the other hand it was disgraceful for a Roman citizen to act as the passive instrument of another's pleasure.

Apuleius defines as unnatural certain revolting practices indulged in among men,³ not because they are homosexual but because they involve servility and excessive sophistication. For when an ancient says that something is unnatural, he does not mean that it is disgraceful, but that it does not conform with the rules of society, or that it is perverted and artificial. Nature meant either society or a sort of ecological ideal, directing people

¹ Plotinus, *Enneads*, ii, 9, 17.

² But see Musonius, xii, 6–7; cf. Quintilian, v, 11, 34.

³ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, viii, 29.

to self-mastery and self-sufficiency. One had to learn to be satisfied with nature's fairly small requirements. Hence there were two attitudes towards homosexuality: the lenient majority found it normal, while the moralists found it sometimes artificial, just as they did all the pleasures of love.

Artemidorus,⁴ who is a fair representative of the indulgent majority, singles out 'relations that conform with normal behaviour' (his own words), i.e. with one's wife, with a mistress or with a 'male or female slave': but 'to let oneself be buggered by one's own slave is not right. It is an assault on one's person and leads to one being despised by one's slave.' Abnormal relations are incestuous. Relations that conflict with nature include bestiality, necrophily and intercourse with divine personages.

Political thinkers arrived at puritanical conclusions because they felt that all forms of love or lust, homosexual or not, were uncontrollable and enervated the citizen-soldier. Their ideal was victory over pleasure, of whatever kind.⁵ Plato drew up the laws of a utopian city from which he banished pederasty, which he said was against nature, since animals (he thought) never copulated with their own sex. But re-reading his works⁶ one finds that pederasty is not so much against nature as in excess of what nature demands of us. Sodomy is an excessively licentious and unnatural practice. Plato is opposed to slackness and the distractions of love, nature being to him simply an additional factor. His plan is not to lead passion back to strictly natural habits by only allowing love for women, but to suppress it altogether, only allowing sexual activity for the purpose of reproduction. It does not seem to have crossed his mind that one could be in love with a woman! With a similar line of reasoning he might have denounced gastronomy as enervating: nature, he would say, shows us, through the example of animals, that one should eat to live, not live to eat. What is unnatural about pederasty is not so much the use of the wrong sex, as the complicated pleasure it gives. Plato does not see it as a capital offence, but rather as an improper act — by reason of its 'positions'. It is forbidden, but for the same reason that associating with a woman who is not one's wife is forbidden.

It is not enough simply to find the expression 'against nature' in the texts. One has to understand what it meant to antiquity. For Plato it was not the homosexual who was unnatural, but only

⁴ *Onirocritica*, pp. 88–9.

⁵ Cf. Plato, *Laws*, 840C.

⁶ *Laws*, 636B–D, and 836Bff.; *Symposium*, 211B, 291CD; *Phaedrus*, 249A; *Republic*, 403B.

the act he committed. It was a question of degree. A pederast was not a monster, a member of some alien race with incomprehensible impulses, but simply a libertine impelled by the universal desire for pleasure, who went so far as to perform an act — sodomy — that was unknown among animals. There was no ritual taboo on pederasty.

Greek and Roman texts are full of homosexuality in action. Catullus boasts of his prowess, and Cicero celebrates the kisses he plucks from the lips of his slave-secretary.⁷ According to taste some chose women, some boys, some both. Virgil preferred boys only,⁸ the Emperor Claudius women. Horace repeatedly tells us he adores both. Poets glorified the favourite of the formidable Emperor Domitian as freely as the writers of the eighteenth century were to celebrate *la Pompadour*, and it is notorious that Antinous, Hadrian's catamite, was honoured by an official cult after his early death.⁹ So as to please every reader, the Latin poets, whatever their own personal tastes, made a point of hymning both sorts of love. A favourite theme of light literature was to describe and compare the pleasures of the two.¹⁰ In a society where the most straight-laced critics regarded sodomy as merely licentious, no concealment was necessary and lovers of boys were just as numerous as lovers of women: all of which says much for the 'un-natural' character of human sexuality.

Classical authors allow themselves just as many allusions to homosexuality as they do to any other ribald topic. There is no difference between Greek and Latin writers, and the love that tends to be called Greek might equally be called Roman. Should we believe that the Romans learnt it from the Greeks, who taught them so much else? If the answer is yes, one might infer that homosexuality is such a rare perversion that one people can only have picked it up through another's bad example. If, on the other hand, it appears that pederasty was indigenous in Rome, the astonishing thing is not that a society should practise pederasty, but that it should not practise it. What needs explanation is not Roman tolerance but contemporary intolerance.

The second answer is correct. Rome did not have to wait for hellenization to allow various forms of love between males. One of the earliest relics of Latin literature, the plays of Plautus, which pre-date the craze for things Greek, are full of homosexual

⁷ Cicero, quoted by the younger Pliny, vii, 4, 3-6.

⁸ From *Vitae Vergilianae*.

⁹ From Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*.

¹⁰ See the astonishing *Comparisons of Love* by Lucian or the pseudo-Lucian.

allusions of a very native character. A much repeated way of teasing a slave is to remind him of what his master expects of him, i.e. to get down on all fours. The *Fasti Praenestini*, the 25 April in the Roman calendar, was the festival of the male prostitutes, the day after that of the courtesans, and Plautus describes them waiting for their customers on the Tuscany road.¹¹ The poems of Catullus are full of stock juvenile insults in which the poet threatens to ravish his enemies to show his superiority. This is the world of heroic bravado, with a very Mediterranean flavour, where the important thing is to be the ravisher, never mind the sex of the victim. The same principles ruled in Greece; but, going one better, they tolerated, even admired a romantic habit that scandalized the Romans. This was the supposedly Platonic love of adults for *epeboi*, the free-born youths who frequented the gymnasium, where their admirers went to watch them exercising naked. In Rome the place of the free-born *epebos* was taken by the favourite male slave. If the master was so oversexed that his girl slaves were not enough, he had to ravish the boys;¹² rather in excess of what nature allowed, but still smiled on by ordinary folk.

The important thing was to respect married women, virgins and youths of free birth. Legislation allegedly suppressing homosexuality was in fact meant to stop free-born citizens from being ravished like slaves. The *Lex Scantinia* of 149 BC was confirmed by proper Augustan legislation on the same subject. This protected free-born youths and girls alike. Sex had nothing to do with the question. What mattered was being free and not being a passive agent. The lawgiver was not trying to ban homosexuality; he simply wanted to protect the young citizen against infringement of his or her person.

It was a world in which marriage contracts specified that the future husband would take 'neither concubine nor catamite', and where Marcus Aurelius congratulates himself in his journal for having resisted the attraction he felt for his male and female slaves, Theodotus and Benedicta; a world in which one's behaviour was judged not by one's preference for girls or boys, but by whether one played an active or a passive role. To be active was to be male, whatever the sex of the compliant partner. To take one's pleasure was virile, to accept it servile — that was the whole

¹¹ Plautus, *Curculio*, 482; for slaves' passivity (*puerile officium*) cf. *Cistellaria*, 657, and many other texts. On servile sexuality, see the important study by R. Martin, 'La Vie sexuelle des esclaves' in J. Collard et al., *Varron, Grammaire antique et stylistique latine*, Paris, 1978, p. 113ff.

¹² Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, i, 16; Petronius, xlili, 8.

story. Woman was passive by definition, unless she was the sort of freak we are not concerned with here. Problems were looked at from the masculine viewpoint. Children were of no great importance, as long as adults did not allow themselves to be used for their pleasure and confined themselves to taking it from them. In Rome these children were slaves and counted for nothing, while in Greece the *epheboi*, being not yet citizens, could still play the passive role without dishonour.

Utter scorn was heaped on the free-born adult male who was a homosexual of the passive variety — *impudicus* or *diatithemenos*. Some of the Stoics were maliciously suspected of secret effeminacy, which they concealed under an affectation of exaggerated virility. They probably had in mind the philosopher Seneca who preferred athletes to boys.¹³ Passive homosexuals were thrown out of the army, and at a time of mass executions¹⁴ the Emperor Claudius is recorded as sparing the life of one *impudicus* who had 'female inclinations'. The blood of such a one would have soiled the executioner's sword.

The passive homosexual was not rejected for his homosexuality but for his passivity, a very serious moral, or rather political infirmity. The passive individual's effeminacy was not the result of his perversion, far from it: it was simply one of the results of his lack of virility, and this was still a vice, even where no homosexuality was present. Roman society never bothered to ask if people were homosexual or not, but it devoted an excessive scrutiny to tiny details of dress, speech, gesture, and deportment in furthering its contempt for those who showed a lack of virility, whatever their sexual tastes. On several occasions musical shows (for which the name 'pantomime' was invented) were banned by the state as being enervating — unlike gladiatorial performances.

This all helps to explain another, unexpected obsession. There was one type of sexual behaviour which was absolutely disgraceful, such that people would pass the time asking who was 'one of them'. This behaviour, which among scandalmongers was on the same lines as contemporary references to 'queers', was fellatio. The historian needs no excuse for bringing it up since Greek and Roman texts refer constantly to it, and it is our business to give our own society a sense of the relativity of values. Fellatio was a very dirty word, and we read about cases¹⁵ where disgraceful

¹³ Dio Cassius, lxi, 10, 3–4. For the concealed softness of the Stoics, beside Martial and Juvenal, see Quintilian, i, *praef.*, 15.

¹⁴ From Tacitus, at the time of the trials of Messalina's lovers.

¹⁵ From Martial.

fellators try to hide their infamy under the lesser shame of pretending to be passive homosexuals! There is an appalling scene in Tacitus where Nero is having the slave of his wife Octavia put to torture to make her confess that the Empress has been guilty of adultery. She endures every torment to save her mistress's honour and replies to her torturer 'Octavia's vagina is purer than your mouth'. We might think she meant that nothing could be more unclean than the mouth of a slanderer. Not so. She means that the torturer is a monster of vice, and signifies her meaning by a single gesture — fellatio. This perversion was depicted as something fantastically depraved, similar to the present-day insults of racism. Apuleius describes bandits, and Suetonius even Nero, who abandon themselves to fellatio, as people who indulge in vices whose pleasure lies in their very viciousness. Was not fellatio the basest form of self-humiliation? It gets a kick out of supinely giving pleasure to another, and servilely offers up any part of the body for another's enjoyment; sex has nothing to do with it. For there was a second practice, no less vile, which obsessed people just as much — cunnilingus. How remote from Japanese culture, where the libertine Samurai boasted of the variegated pleasure he could lavish on his women.

Whence comes this extraordinary balance sheet of pleasure and vices? There are at least three causes, which must not be confused with one another. Rome was a 'macho' society like many others, some slave-owning, some not. Women were there to serve men, to satisfy their desires at need, to get pleasure from them if they could; and even that pleasure was suspect, for, against all probability, prostitutes were thought to be women who were looking for sensual enjoyment. Secondly, the cult of virility was the hidden part of the iceberg in ancient societies. As a brief analogy, consider the hatred of effeminacy in militaristic groups or in pioneer communities that feel themselves in a hostile environment. Finally, Rome was a slave-owning society in which the master had sexual dominance, so that slaves made a virtue of necessity in the saying 'There is nothing shameful in doing whatever the master orders.'

In this slave-owning society — before the days when Stoics and Christians preached equal sexual morality for all (more to make the masters chaste than to protect their slaves) — moral standards varied with social status: 'To be *impudicus* (that is passive) is disgraceful for a free man' wrote the elder Seneca, 'but it is the slave's absolute obligation towards his master, and the freedman owes a moral duty of compliance.'

Thus the sort of homosexuality which was completely tolerated

consisted in active relations between a master and a young slave, his catamite. A typical Roman aristocrat had a wife (whom he treated with some consideration, for she could divorce him and take back her dowry), female slaves who were concubines if he so desired, and his offspring (of whom he saw little for fear of displaying weakness, for they were the future masters who had a harsh upbringing at the hands of servants or a grandfather). He also had a slave boy, an *alumnus*, on whom he lavished his paternal instincts, if he had any, and who was often a child he had had by a slave (though it was absolutely forbidden for anybody, even the father, to suggest such a thing). Finally he had his favourite, or a whole army of favourites. Madam was jealous of them; the master protested that he did nothing wrong with them; nobody was taken in, but nobody was allowed to cast aspersions. Madam was not happy till the day the favourite grew a moustache, for this was the moment when the master ceased to subject him to indignities that were unsuitable for a grown man. Some, more lecherous, preferred not to cease: then the overgrown favourite was known as an *exoletus*, meaning that he was no longer *adolescens*, and decent people found him repellent. Seneca, who thought that nature should always be left alone, was disgusted that some dissipated characters had their beards removed from favourites, even when they had outgrown the age of compliance.

We would be wrong to look on antiquity as a paradise of permissiveness and to imagine a total lack of moral principles. It is simply that the principles seem shocking to us: something which might make us suspect that our own most strongly held convictions are not much better. Did homosexuality have to be concealed? Was it allowed? A distinction has to be made. Liaisons existed, illicit but tolerated, like adultery in high places today, or free cohabitation. As such they are mentioned in literature without censure; but the interested parties would be discreet enough to admit nothing, and pretend to know nothing. This was how the Romans treated affairs with favourites, and the Greeks with *epheboi*.

There were many other relationships that were regarded as immoral as well as illicit. Most homosexual behaviour was disapproved of, though not for present-day reasons. Relationships with *exoleti* were considered particularly repugnant; so were all-male ménages; so was the homosexual behaviour tolerated in the closed world of the army (we have to wait for Salvian and the period of the great invasions for details of this), and finally the prostitution of adolescent youths from good families. Prostitution

in this sense is rather a big word, for in Rome the sexual objectives — boys and girls — were regarded as such passive agents that money was unhesitatingly offered to the little creatures. The result was that, even if a virtuous matron or an upright young man were offered money for their favours, they did not have to look upon themselves as venal. In Rome, paying court meant naming a figure. So much so that for parents it was a problem to find a school where their sons' morals would be shielded from temptation. To reassure his clientele the schoolmaster Quintilian in his writings expressed great horror of love for *epheboi*.

Finally, there were relationships that were illicit, immoral and, above all, loathsome. These were more than blameworthy actions committed in an unguarded moment, but acts the awfulness of which recoiled on the author and showed that simply to be capable of such an act proved that he or she must be beyond the pale. This was to pass from moral condemnation to something like racial apartheid today. Of such a kind were passivity in free men, excessive compliance in women, cunnilingus, finally lesbianism, especially in the active partner. A woman who behaved like a man was simply a wrecker of the natural order — a monster, as bad as a woman who mounts her lover, said Seneca.

So in the end we are left with a picture of homosexuality which was just as idealized as our own, but in a different way. Every variety was reduced to one supposedly typical model: the relationship of an adult with an adolescent who derived no pleasure from it. The Romans liked to think that this was typical, because such a relationship, that was active and called for no display of tender feeling, was soothing, unruffled by the storms and enslavements of passion: 'May my enemies all fall in love with women and my friends with boys' wrote the poet Propertius in a moment of bitterness, for pederasty 'is a gently flowing river, marked by no shipwrecks. What harm can one come to in such a narrow channel?'¹⁶ Roman homosexuality, with all its oddities and disconcerting limitations, derived from a politically motivated puritanism. Praise for women had to come from someone as carefree as the poet Ovid, who explained that the charm of heterosexuality lay in the shared pleasure, something that boys never felt.

In conclusion, one might ask how homosexuality came to be so widely practised. Was the number of homosexuals perhaps artificially increased by just one particular idiosyncrasy of the ancient world — contempt for women? Or is homosexuality

¹⁶ Propertius, ii, 4.

a normal condition of human sexuality, which in this case was given a chance to reveal itself through a different sort of repression? The second answer is no doubt the correct one. We have to be clear about this, surprising though it may be. Living with a man, preferring boys to girls, are facts of life: it is a question of character, of the Oedipus complex, of what you will. It may not be a majority taste, but it is not that of a very small minority. Moreover almost anybody can have physical relations with his own sex, and what is more, get as much pleasure as he does with the opposite sex. So a heterosexual who tries it as an experiment finds to his intense surprise that it is really no different, and that the trip was hardly worth while. Some useful evidence on this subject emerged during the international congress of the homosexual movement 'Arcadia'. It should be emphasized that heterosexuals who made this sort of statement had never considered having relations with boys, had never suffered from any repressed desire to do so, and had hardly thought about it at all. They imagined that, if they 'had a go', they would merely be disgusted. Everything went well and they were not disgusted. But that was all: they did not try again, because women in the long term were more interesting and to their taste, and in present day society, more accessible.

All this is enlightening. Imagine a society in which homosexuality is tolerated, where boys are not under surveillance and lovers can woo them without fuss. Let us suppose that in this society marriage is not the central institution that it is in ours, and that fleeting emotional relationships may be kept on one side and serious things like marital relationships on the other. Rome yesterday, Japan today, are examples of this. In such societies there will undoubtedly be a constant minority interested in boys only; but the majority too will occasionally enjoy a homosexual affair, since these brief indulgences will be tolerated and no one need be inhibited by social disapproval. Men are not animals and physical love is not dominated by the sex difference. As Elisabeth Mathiot-Ravel used to say — sexual behaviour is not sex-bound.

Bibliography

Michel Foucault's *magnum opus* on the *Aprodisia* will appear shortly. Meanwhile the first chapter of John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, Chicago, 1980, should be read. The essential work on Greek homosexuality is K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, London, 1978. F. Buffière has made a useful and interesting collection of texts in *La*

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