

THE LADDER: Sexuality of Ancient Greece as an instrument of social mobility

Anacreon once wrote a lyric which included the lines, “ I love Cleobulus, I am mad for Cleobulus, I gaze at Cleobulus.”¹ Because this Cleobulus is in other fragments named as a boy, may we then assume that Anacreon was homosexual? Or does that modern term not apply to the Ancient Greeks? Any argument for Anacreon’s “sexual aberrance” (by contemporary Western standards) would be complicated, then, by others of his poems in which he longs for a girl. And then there is his admiration for a slave. Taking the poet’s full collection into account, then, might suggest desires motivated by some other factor than male flesh. But what is sexuality without the sex-object? David M. Halperin suggest that “Greek and Roman men..generally understood sex to be defined in terms of sexual penetration and phallic pleasure, whether the sexual partners were two males, two females, or one male and one female.”² The ancients’ choices pertaining to sex, then, would seem to be modeled more on some sense of power or male completeness rather than on individual sexual object choices.

In fact, considerations of anatomical sex (male or female) differences do not seem to have entered into the minds of the Greeks at all. Though they realized that a man and woman paired were required to propagate the species, Diotima-via-Socrates-via-Plato claims that it is an equally salubrious fate to focus instead on the birthing of beautiful, good ideas between friends. Furthermore, “the beauty exhibited in all bodies is one and the same.”³ So in a group consciousness which placed no definite distinctions between the physical male and female, the

¹ Lyric poems by Anacreon: **1.29 – 1.34** Hubbard, 36-38

² David M. Halperin, “Homosexuality,” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 720

³ Plato, *Symposium*, tr. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1951), 31-72

‘right and wrongs’ of sex was necessarily placed on other views of societal appropriateness. Artemidoros, a popular dream analyst of the time, clarifies that “‘*Natural and conventional*’ acts are all those in which a man penetrates a social inferior..., is penetrated by another man, or masturbates.”⁴ In other words, because ‘social inferiors’ of a Greek man were understood to be their wives, slaves, or young boys of a lower social class, ancient “sexuality” was not “sexuality” at all (in the way that we know it as individual sexual preferences based on the phenotypic and biological differences between men and women), but a complicated political network through which a Greek man was expected to ascend to power.

For example, in Pindar’s Olympian ode, the poet mentions a reworked history of Pelops, the ivory-shouldered man who so captured Poseidon’s fancy. Though he ostensibly played the penetrated role in the subsequent relationship, the fact that it was to the god of the seas made it an unnatural coupling to be foreborn. What makes Pelops a strong, respectable masculine figure is that he confronts Poseidon with a bold proposition – that if the god appreciated his sexual services, Poseidon will help him win Hippodameia, “the glorious daughter of a king in Pisa,” as his wife. The god consents, and the princess bears Pelops six sons to become “lords of the people.”⁵ Here, we see a sexual choice made with an eye to a long-term sociopolitical agenda. Though Pelops *did* (perhaps shamefully) become the lover instead of the masculine beloved, “a lover may submit to any form of servitude to his beloved without shameful servility...[and] servitude which has for its object the acquisition of excellence.”⁶

The wisdom of sex for personal gain is a fickle one, though. As a tool for social mobility, sexual nature may be called into question when, like Timarchos, the personal gain is deemed to be waste and unnecessary excess. Such a man, Aeschines (read: the Greeks) reason,

⁴ Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, “Unnatural Acts”, p. 36

⁵ Pindar, *First Olympian Ode*, tr. Richmond Lattimore, *The Odes of Pindar*

⁶ Plato, *Symposium*

who would sell his body for money when he has squandered his own inheritance, could easily sell the nation in a position of higher power. Note, however, that the judgement again falls not because of Timarchos' sexual objects (men), but because of the social interactions through which he becomes acquainted with them.⁷

With these various textual examples, then, we have arrived at the conclusion that sexuality did not exist in its current dichotomy of homosexual – heterosexual in ancient Greece. Rather than anatomical differentiation, people were arranged into genders of 'masculine' or 'feminine', terms dependent upon much older stereotypes of dominant social behavior and independent of an individual's biological sex. Because it is the 'masculine, penetrative' form that was seen to be the most fit to govern, sexual choices ultimately pointed to desires for personal, social, and/or political gain rather than any innate inclinations. For the ancient Greeks, "sexual identity does not organize the person but is peripheral to the central goals and worries which are focused on survival."⁸ It is, unsurprisingly enough, the same brand of self-interested sexuality which would appall and disgust even many impious minds of today.

⁷ Aeschines, 1 (*Against Timarchus*): 4.7 Hubbard, 131-53

⁸ Winkler, "Unnatural Acts", p. 43