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Sexuality in Fifth-Century Athens

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In recent decades and particularly in the last ten years, much valuable work has been done on the theme of sexuality in the world of Greece and Rome. In a post-Freudian era this is presumably to be expected, but we should not forget that, until quite recently, it was virtually impossible to discuss sexual issues in an open and non-judgmental way; it is sufficient to point to the bowdlerisation of Aristophanes, and to Fordyce's scandalous edition of Catullus, which omitted 32 poems on the spurious grounds that 'they do not lend themselves to comment in English'.

Now, happily, a saner climate of opinion prevails, in which the present essay on sexuality in fifth century Athens is not exceptional. Such essays as this have been greatly facilitated by the appearance of a number of books on ancient sexuality and, in particular, by the appearance of David Halperin's great book *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (London 1990). [1] What follows here is considerably indebted to Halperin.

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There is now a very considerable body of evidence to suggest that human sexual behaviour is, to a great extent, socially constructed. That is to say that the way women and men conduct their sexual lives is determined to a marked degree by what a particular society finds acceptable. Before we come to Athens in the fifth century BC, it is instructive to consider the case of Ireland in the 19th and 20th centuries.

From 1820 on sexual behaviour in Ireland was constructed out of the economics of the small farm [2] and had little to do with the doctrines of Roman Catholicism, and still less to do with those of Jesus Christ. This highly puritanical organisation of sexuality obtained, without interruption, until 1960 and caused a great deal of suffering to many women and men. The Roman Catholic Church has never seen fit to acknowledge publicly the grave scandal which its enthusiastic endorsement of this wretched puritanism constituted.

All revolutions are betrayed, but some are betrayed more spectacularly than others. After 1922 Ireland was controlled by the emerging Catholic bourgeoisie, whose aim was independence itself rather than social reform and the provision of an adequate standard of living for the people. This bourgeoisie clearly subscribed to De Valera's dictum that 'Labour must wait'; used independence to further their own interests; and inevitably imposed their value system on the new State. As Kavanagh said, 'The Revolution created a new rich class at the expense of the general population'.[3]

because of the particular economic factors that shaped it. Having achieved ownership of land after a considerable struggle in the late 19th century, farmers sought to preserve their holdings intact, and hand them on to a single son. The social pattern that usually resulted from this basic economic fact was that the son who inherited had to marry late, that one daughter was provided with a dowry to marry, and that the remaining unmarried children had to emigrate. Since there was no question of sexual activity outside marriage, the Irish people from 1820 to 1960 were subjected to a degree of sexual continence virtually without parallel. As Kavanagh wrote, 'From the point of view of chastity this must be the most remarkable country in the world'.[4]

Hence the form of sexual behaviour that seemed to many Irish people to be immutably determined by the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church turns out to be socially constructed out of the economics of the small farm.

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Sexuality in fifth century Athens was also socially constructed. The basic point here is that human sexuality in Athens was organised to meet the needs of the adult male citizen, whose body was the locus of all power in the state. All other human beings--all women, all slaves, all foreigners, and adolescent aristocratic boys--existed sexually in relation to the adult male citizen and existed for his sexual gratification. Aristocratic women existed to provide, after marriage, legitimate children; all other women were regarded as sexually available to the male citizen, whether they were prostitutes, concubines, or high-class courtesans. Slaves, who were women and boys, the lowest level of society, were similarly sexually available to male citizens. These citizens also engaged in homosexual relationships with adolescent boys between the ages of 12 and 18 from their own class, these relationships being more complicated in their practice and ideology.

The result of all this is that 'Democracy at Athens ... was not what we might call a purely "political" system; it was a system of sex and gender as well'.[5] This sexual system, in which the adult male citizen entered into an arranged marriage, was free to have sexual relationships with other women, and also courted adolescent boys, does not correspond to anything in modern Western experience; it was, as Louis MacNeice says, 'so unimaginably different / And all so long ago'.[6] Consequently, we have to reckon with the fact that 'Homosexuality and heterosexuality, as we currently understand them, are modern, Western bourgeois productions. Nothing resembling them can be found in classical antiquity'.[7]

The deep division between Greek and modern attitudes to sexual matters can be most obviously seen in the way sexual acts are viewed. For the Greek sexual acts are not mutual, taking place between two consenting adults, but are deeply polarising and involve hierarchical domination; in masculine discourse sex is something that you do to somebody. To be specific: sex takes place between an active, penetrating actor who possesses the phallus and a passive, penetrated person. These active and passive roles in sex precisely correlate with superior and inferior social status: the superior person is the adult male citizen who can have sexual relations only with his inferiors, with women, slaves, foreigners, or boys. The Greeks, like many Mediterranean peoples, were puritans about virility; because he is a citizen the man has sexual precedence.

As a result, in fifth century Athens the system of sexuality is constituted by politics, by the principles on which Athenian public life is organised. So we must conclude that 'it is not sexuality which haunts society, but society which haunts the body's sexuality' (Maurice Godelier).

Indeed we can go so far as to say that for Athenian citizens there was a single form of sexual experience, in which they were dominant. There were not, therefore, as we like to think, two differently structured psychosexual states of heterosexuality and homosexuality, but a single state available to adult males, in which the same kind of desire could be attached to any desirable person, woman or boy. Gender does not, then, enter into this system at the level of difference between men and women; rather, gender enters in at the level sexual subjects are constituted, the system being gendered as a specifically male form of desire, wide-ranging, acquisitive, object-directed. As a result, women and boys are considered sexually inert, with women's desire being passive and objectless.

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have done it. These wretched evasions about the love that dare not speak its name (Alfred Douglas) led to Mahaffy's book *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* (1874) being withdrawn because it treated (and condemned) male homosexuality; they also led the Dean of a Cambridge college in E.M. Forster's novel *Maurice* (published only in 1970) to tell a student who is translating from an unnamed Greek author: 'Omit: a reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks'.

Now we know better. A crucial moment was the publication in 1978 of Sir Kenneth Dover's great book *Greek Homosexuality*, illustrated with pictures of vase-painting that leave no doubt about the reality of sexual relationships between Athenian men and adolescent boys. A further important moment was the publication of Volumes 2 and 3 of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality: The Uses of Pleasure* (1984) *The Care of the Self* (1986). Foucault, who divorced sexuality from nature and regarded it as cultural production, raised crucial issues:

(1) how is sexual experience constituted in a given culture, i.e. what are the actual types of sexual activity?
(2) in what terms--terms of power or equality--is sexual experience constructed?
(3) how does sexual experience relate to other forms of experience, to political, social, and economic experience?
(4) is sexual activity different for different members of society, for men and women, for members of different social classes?

Let us now try and answer these questions in regard to homosexual behaviour in Athens. Since all power resided in the body of the adult male citizen, we are not talking about a relationship between equals, but between a powerful man and a powerless boy. Nevertheless, since casual social contact between aristocratic men and women was virtually impossible and since these men entered into an arranged marriage, romance was displaced from being between men and women to being between men and adolescent boys.

The ideology involved here is complex. On the one hand, it was considered natural for the man to pursue beautiful boys; as Pindar says, 'I melt when I see the fresh young limbs of boys'. On the other hand, the boy was required to yield reluctantly and to do so because of his respect for the man. Various restrictions--no access before dawn or after dark--made the courtship tricky and public decorum was required. To some extent, a double standard obtained: the man should pursue, the boy should not yield.

In practice, of course, the boy did yield and physical sex took place. One position that seems to be preferred and which does not involve phallic penetration is that of 'intercrural' intercourse, in which the adult man puts his erect phallus between the thighs of the boy. At other times, anal intercourse will have taken place, in which the man is the active penetrating actor, the boy the passive penetrated sufferer.

It must be stressed that the man engaging in this homosexual activity was or could be married to a woman. Consequently, the labels we have--homosexual, heterosexual, even bisexual--are utterly inadequate to what we are talking about: the man is in an arranged marriage, pursues adolescent boys, and sleeps with women or boys who are prostitutes. Furthermore, the male in this system enacts a cycle of sexual behaviour: at one time he is the sexually pursued adolescent boy, at a later time he is the sexually pursuing adult male.

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We move on now to consider the position of women in this sexual system.[8] To begin with, Athenian women had no power: they were excluded from politics; from the army, navy, and war; from the law courts; from the Olympic and other Games; from agriculture and trade. In short, women were excluded from the male agonistic world of challenge and response, from what Athenian males saw as the real world. They were also uneducated and men had a low opinion of women's intellectual capacity; Shelley said this led women to acquire 'the habits and qualities of slaves', and an Athenian male could be held incompetent at law for being under the influence of a woman. Indeed Athenian women had to have a guardian (kurios) in law, a male with authority over her.

The domain of the Athenian aristocratic woman was the house (oikos). So while men worked in public space, in the Ecclesia, the law courts, the agora, the streets, women worked in private space at cooking food, spinning clothes, supervising slaves. What we are talking about here is a form of Mediterranean social control; male honour is at risk through

Athenian aristocratic women were defined by the social significance of their bodies. They entered an arranged marriage at about the age of 14 to a much older man and the purpose of the marriage was to produce legitimate children. As the father of the bride says to the groom: 'I give you this woman for the ploughing of legitimate children'; and, as the speaker in *Against Neaera* says,[9] 'courtesans we love for the sake of pleasure, and concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives we love to bear us legitimate children and be the trusted guardians of our household'.

The implications of this after modern psychoanalysis are all too clear: a woman is either a wife or a whore. Compare Victorian England where this classic 'split' is also found: on the one hand, there is the Angel in the House, on the other sexually available whores, servants and so on. In Athens this sexual scenario clearly lends an edge to an idealised homosexual love for boys, as it does in the male world of Victorian England (in public schools, the army, the navy).

Adultery with an aristocratic woman was considered a heinous crime, a more serious crime than rape, because it was the offence against the man that mattered; his honour was offended and, besides, how could he know whether his children were legitimate? The penalties for such adultery were therefore severe and, technically at least, an adulterous man caught by a citizen having sex with his wife, mother or sister could be killed on the spot; in any case, other heavy penalties could be exacted.

In reality, therefore, Athenian aristocratic women led extremely restricted lives; in Greek literature, on the other hand, and particularly in tragedy and comedy, women play a very prominent role. This paradox struck Virginia Woolf forcefully in 1929:

> 'If woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this woman is in fiction. In fact .. she was locked up, beaten and flung about the rooms. A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents fixed a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.'[10]

The classicist Helene Foley has remarked on the same paradox in regard to Athenian women:

> 'Although women in fact play virtually no public role other than a religious one in the political and social life of ancient Greece, they dominate the imaginative life of Greek men to a degree almost unparalleled in the Western tradition ... Greek writers used the female--in a fashion that bore little relation to the lives of actual women to understand, express, criticize, and experiment with the problems and contradictions of their culture.'[11]

Halperin [12] explains this paradox by claiming that the silence of actual women in Greek public life and the volubility of fictional 'women', who are invented by male authors, are connected by strict logical necessity: Greek men effectively silenced women by speaking for them on those occasions when men chose to address significant words to each other in public, in the drama, and they required the silence of women in public in order to make themselves heard and impersonate women without impediment. As 'Agathon' says in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* (155-56), 'whatever we don't have, we capture by imitation (mimesis)'.

These impersonated women have been described as 'female intruders', who go into the male world and disrupt it.[13] Two examples must suffice here, one from tragedy and one from comedy. In Euripides' *Medea*[14] Medea champions the value system of sexual love and of the house (oikos), which have been trampled on by Jason, who champions the value system of a royal marriage and of the state (polis); Medea enters the polis, becomes male and destroys Jason's world by killing first his new wife Glauke and her father Creon, and then her own two children. Medea is then given sanctuary in Athens by King Aegeus, brought there from Corinth in the chariot of her grandfather, the Sun-god. So this quadruple murderess is endorsed