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CONTROLLING DESIRES

Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome

Kirk Ormand

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This one is for Ella.

Eight

Rome and Roman Sex

The history of Rome, and Roman culture, begins traditionally in the eighth century BCE and continues, with various interruptions, well into the sixth century CE. Needless to say, I cannot survey every era of this remarkable city-state. To briefly orient my reader, however, I provide here the barest sketch of the different periods of Roman history. As was the case with Greece, sexual practices and attitudes surely changed over the long span of Rome's development as a political state and eventual domination of the West; it will be the task of the following chapters to highlight some of those shifts, changes, and breaks.

According to tradition, Rome was founded in the year 753 BCE. Unfortunately, we have no contemporary sources from the early centuries of Roman civilization; indeed, it is not until some 500 years later, at the end of the third century BCE, that the earliest surviving Latin literature was written, and even then, what survives are the comedies of the Roman playwright Plautus. Nothing like a reliable history of Rome exists from these time periods, and the later historians who do write about it (such as Livy, who is active early in the first century CE) recount the clearly mythical stories of early Rome as if they were historical fact. Though such historical works give us some indication of the military, political, and legal history of the development of Rome, when it comes to issues of behavior, they tend to reflect the attitudes of the time in which they were written. All of this is to say that, for the first 400 years of Roman history or so, we can say almost nothing with certainty about Roman attitudes toward sex and sexual behavior.

My survey of Roman sex, then, will begin with the earliest surviving Roman literature, beginning in the late third and early second century BCE. During this time period, Rome's form of government was a republic, in which two consuls were elected as the preeminent officeholders for each year. Rome's government and society developed significantly over the 400-year period from the beginning of the city to our earliest sources, and interested readers are encouraged to look into these early centuries. At the time that my survey begins, however, it is important to note simply that Rome exhibited a rigorous class

structure. Citizens were divided into two separate, though largely overlapping, systems of status. In the first, a citizen was either a patrician or a plebeian; these statuses were a matter of birth, and the patrician families tended to represent what we would think of as old wealth. (Traditionally, the patricians were descended from the members of Rome's first senate, as constituted by the mythical figure of Romulus; what, if any, fact lies behind this idea is impossible to determine.) Patricians controlled the Roman Senate throughout the republic, and initially, only patricians could hold important offices in the government. During the fourth and third centuries BCE, the plebs grew in power and privilege and eventually won the right to their own legislative body, the plebeian council.

At the same time, Roman citizens in the republic were divided into five property classes, based on wealth; of these, the first two classes (the *equites*, often translated "knights") and first class (the "senatorial" class) together held a majority of votes in the *comitia centuriata*, a legislative body that chose the holders of important offices and determined matters of war and peace. (A confusing but important point is that membership in the senatorial class did not equal membership in the senate.) Needless to say, patricians tended to outnumber plebs in these first two property classes, though in the later republic, a class of wealthy plebs became part of the ruling elite.

Even more important than the various divisions of citizens into different kinds of classes, however, was the distinction in Rome between citizens, freedmen, and slaves. Citizens, regardless of class or property status, held certain unalienable rights, such as the right not to be beaten or used sexually by another citizen. Slaves, on the other hand, were legally the property of their masters and literally had no control over the use of their bodies. Freedmen were former slaves who had been manumitted by their former masters; though free, they did not have full citizenship rights and in some cases were thought of as owing deference to their former masters. Their freeborn children, however, were full citizens.

In the first century BCE, Rome entered the period of the late republic; with the dictatorship of Sulla in 81 BCE, a series of challengers threatened the republican government, culminating in the civil war between Julius Caesar and the republican forces of Pompey. This period is particularly rich for the study of sexuality because from it we have the legal speeches and letters of the great orator Cicero as well as the erotic poems of Cicero's contemporary, Catullus. In the 50s BCE, Julius Caesar rose to power, though he was killed by the last guard of the republic in 44. After a series of political maneuvers and battles, however, his adopted son Octavius, later known as Augustus Caesar, established the Roman Empire (with himself as emperor) in 27 BCE.

The era of Augustus is particularly important in the study of sexuality because he enacted a series of laws meant to encourage marriage and to limit extramarital sexual activity.¹ In 18 BCE, he passed the Julian law on marriage (*lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus*). This set of regulations stipulated that citizen men between the ages of 25 and 60 and citizen women between 20 and 50 were to be married. The law provided considerable encouragement

to comply. Men who were not married could not inherit legacies outside of the sixth degree of relationship, and those who were married without children could only inherit half of these legacies. More important, men who were married and had produced three children were given increased access to certain political offices and were allowed to progress more rapidly up the ladder of political power. Women who had produced three children in a marriage were allowed to perform legal and economic transactions on their own behalf, without the use of a guardian. All in all, the law provided significant incentives.

The Julian law on adultery (*lex Julia de adulteriis*), passed in 18 or perhaps 16 BCE, made sex with another man's wife a violation of criminal law (rather than being subject to a civil action) for the first time in Roman history. The punishment for violation was significant: both the man and woman were exiled to an island and had their property confiscated. Though enforcement of these laws must have been spotty, it was not unknown. In the year 2 BCE, Augustus banished his own daughter Julia (the elder) to an island after she was convicted of adultery.

It is against this background that we must read the erotic poets of the Augustan period. The poets, including Propertius, Tibullus, Horace, and later, Ovid, all adopted speaking personas who gloried in extramarital affairs with married citizen women, perhaps fictional, perhaps not. In addition, these poets extol the virtues of such affairs, in direct opposition to more traditional Roman male activities, such as participation in the military and management of business. Their poems, then, had the potential to be read as subversive of the moral attitudes of the Augustan regime. Indeed, Ovid eventually pushed the emperor too far, though we do not know exactly how, and was himself banished in 8 CE. Perhaps his poetry simply cut too close to the bone, and the emperor found that he could no longer tolerate the poet's playful undermining of legal sanctions against adultery.

Augustus's reign, which lasted until his death in 14 CE, was by all accounts highly successful. Though social changes did not take place overnight, it is clear that the creation of the Empire radically changed structures of power in Rome. Augustus did not disband the offices or legislative bodies of the republic; part of his genius was to leave these structures in place, while legally having the powers of several important offices conferred on himself for life. What this meant, however, was that a new superstructure of power and influence existed on top of the old Roman republican structures. Closeness to the emperor himself could invest a person with personal influence that could not have been achieved under the republic.

Later emperors showed less restraint than did Augustus, and as the Empire developed, personal, familial structures of power grew in importance. With them grew increasing paranoia about the role of powerful women, especially those in the imperial household. When most readers think of the Roman Empire, they think of the famously corrupt emperors of figures like Caligula, Claudius, and Nero; and indeed, the period of the first century CE saw the development of a culture of lavish spending and unprecedented personal

power. It is also during this period that traditional structures of wealth began to erode. Even some freedmen became quite wealthy as members of a new merchant class, and with their wealth acquired considerable power; such members of a *nouveau riche* come under vicious attack from satirists and moralists such as Juvenal, who express alarm at the unsettling of traditional class structures.

Finally, some of our most important evidence for legal practices comes from the late Empire. These legal sources provide a singular problem because the texts of the laws exist in digests, summaries of laws from all periods of Roman history. These digests were written down in the sixth century CE and later, and it is not always easy to tell at what period a particular law was in effect. As a comprehensive account of Roman law, however, the digests are an invaluable source.

ROME AND GREECE

There can be no doubt that the Romans were different from the Greeks in myriad ways: their social structure was more carefully stratified; their view of themselves as a military state was more pronounced; their clothes, food, and literature were all different from those of their Greek counterparts. Needless to say, then, the Roman's ideas of sex, sexual practice, and sexual identity were not identical to those in Greece. In this chapter, I provide a brief outline of the differences between the two, before turning to individual case studies.

From the start, it is important to note that the line between Greece and Rome is not quite as clearly drawn as it may seem. Greek cities began colonizing Italy in the sixth century BCE, some four centuries before our earliest Latin literature. Greek pottery, moreover, was highly prized by the Etruscans in Italy (a high number of the pots from Greece that depict erotic scenes come from Etruscan graves), and it appears that the Romans and Etruscans were in contact from the earliest era of Roman history. In the time periods for which we have secure historical sources, moreover, Greeks were a constant presence in Rome: Greek slaves regularly served as schoolteachers for elite Roman families, and educated Romans from the early republic onward learned to read and write Greek as well as Latin.

In the matter of literature, moreover, Roman authors explicitly acknowledged their debt to their Greek predecessors. Plautus and Terence indicate in their plays that their dramas are based on the New Comedies of Menander, Diphilus, and other Greek authors. Catullus, the earliest extant writer of Latin lyric poetry, imitates the meters of Sappho and refers to the (fictional, or at least fictionalized) addressee of his love poems as "Lesbia," a clear reference to Sappho. The great Roman orator Cicero studied the Greek litigators and indicates his approval, especially, of Demosthenes. Virgil, whose epic masterpiece the *Aeneid* is among the best-known pieces of Western literature, owes an obvious debt to Homer, but a significant debt to Greek Hellenistic poets as well, especially Apollonios of Rhodes. To study Rome, then,

one must always be aware of the weight of Greek tradition, and this makes the analysis of cultural practice particularly tricky. When Catullus writes of his beloved Lesbia, does his poetry reflect Roman attitudes and practices? Or is he, perhaps, merely imitating Greek love poetry? It is not always easy to sort out the strands of one culture from those of another, and we must bear in mind that Roman literature and culture is always an amalgamation of sorts.

Despite this cultural debt to Greece, however, another strand of Roman ideology was particularly concerned with distinguishing Roman practices and attitudes from those of the Greek cities, which Rome formally conquered in 146 BCE. For stern Roman moralists such as Cato the elder (active in the early second century BCE), solid Roman morals and practices were in danger of decline because of influence from the decadent, soft, and unmanly Greeks to the east. This narrative of insidious moral degeneration because of the temptations of a decadent population in one's own midst is one that should be familiar to modern readers; it is mobilized frequently today in our own political discourse. In Rome, the idea of Greekness took on different values at different times and in different contexts, but it was nearly always a bit dangerous to be too enthusiastic about things Greek. For Nero, his admiration of the Greeks and his willing participation in Greek athletic events and poetry contests became further proof of his general unsuitability to rule Rome.

In studying Rome, then, the ideas that I outlined in chapters 1–7 will never be far away. Greece is a constant source of comparison, for the Romans as well as for us. At times, the Romans seem to imitate Greek ideas without complication, and at others, they work hard to distinguish Roman practices and morals from their soft, eastern, conquered neighbors.

GREEK LOVE?

In part because of the strain of rhetoric that presents Greece as soft and decadent, it has sometimes been asserted that homoerotic relations between males were not a part of indigenous Roman culture; rather, the argument goes, the Romans were all normal straight men, until they were corrupted by the Greeks, at which time they fell prey to the insidious culture of pederasty.² Adding some weight to this view is the fact that many of the words used to describe male-male sexual relations are loanwords from Greece: *cinaedus* (Greek *kinaidos*) and *catamitus* (probably derived from the Greek name Ganymede) are taken to indicate a Greek origin to same-sex relations.

There are, however, several problems with this line of argument. Most important is the simple fact that Latin literature, from the early comedies through the late republic and well into the imperial period, speak frankly and openly of men's desire for boys as well as women. The sheer pervasiveness of such references as well as the offhand way in which they appear in multiple texts argues against the idea that love of boys is a Greek import.



Warren cup, side A. A man and boy are engaged in love-making, while a figure at the far right peers in the doorway. © Trustees of the British Museum.

It appears that a Roman man could legitimately desire virtually any social inferior, whether a young slave, an older slave, a noncitizen woman, or his wife. The Romans did criticize some Greek practices and as will become clear, they did view the Greeks as suspiciously soft in a variety of ways. But there is no indication that they thought of the love of boys as particularly Greek, and indeed, the term *Greek love* (which appears in numerous discussions of this issue) does not appear in any of our Roman sources.³

It is true that Roman law did not allow for the Greek practice of pederasty, in which an older citizen man would cultivate a sexual relationship with a citizen boy. The reason for this, however, is not that the Romans disapproved of sexual relations with boys; rather, they disapproved much more strictly than did the Greeks of sexual relations with *citizen* boys, which they viewed on par with sexual relations with unmarried citizen women. In an often quoted passage from a little-read play of Plautus, a slave and his master are discussing the master's love affair. The two stand before a house, where the master's beloved resides:

- PALINURUS, *the slave*. Be careful where you walk; love what you love with witnesses present.
- PHAEDROMUS, *his master*. But a pimp lives here.
- PALINURUS. Nobody prohibits this or forbids it—if you have the money, you may buy what is openly sold. No one prohibits anyone from going on the public street so long as you do not make a path through fenced fields. So long as you stay away from brides, widows, unmarried women, (male) youths and free boys, love whom you like. (Plautus *Curculio* 31–38)

The scene begins with Palinurus worried that his master is in love with a forbidden love object, most likely a free woman. Once he learns that they are standing in front of a brothel, his concerns are dispelled. And in the explication of what is in bounds and out-of-bounds (colorfully indicated through the metaphor of fenced fields), Palinurus provides a full picture of who is a legitimate love object. On one hand, the field is fairly open: women as well as boys and youths are apparently not only thinkable, but fully acceptable. On the other hand, the picture is narrower than in Greece: no category of citizen woman (married, unmarried, widowed) is available, nor any citizen males. Who, then, is left? Only nonfree residents of either sex. The question of whether or not the sex is “openly sold” also has considerable weight in Roman legal texts: a man could not be convicted of adultery if he could prove that the woman he slept with was a prostitute.

Given these considerable legal restrictions, one might expect that the Romans would view the practice of pederasty (in the restricted sense of the love of citizen boys) as particularly Greek. As Williams has shown, however, the Romans simply did not do so.⁴ Sexual relations with a citizen boy could be harshly criticized, and indeed harshly punished, but were not viewed as a “Greek” activity. Perhaps more important, when the Romans do speak of Greek softness and vice, it appears that sex of any kind, let alone sex with citizen boys, is only one aspect of that vice, and often not an important one. To take only one example, Plutarch, a Greek writer living in Rome in the second century CE, discusses the pernicious influence of the Greeks:

For the Romans were especially suspicious of the practice of anointing, and they thought that nothing was so great a cause of slavery and softness of the Greeks as the gymnasium and the wrestling ring. These give birth to listlessness and leisure in the cities, and mischief, and pederasty, and to ruining the bodies of the young by sleeping and wandering around, rhythmic exercises, and strict diets. Because of these things, they have forgotten and given up their weapons, and are delighted to be called nimble athletes, and beautiful, rather than noble hoplites and horsemen. (*Roman Questions* 40.274d)

What is Greek here, then, is hardly just pederasty, or indeed any particular attitude toward sex at all; rather, pederasty is mentioned only as one of a list of symptoms of a general disease of improper attitudes. The Greeks are,

simply put, wasting their time with idle pursuits that serve no immediate purpose. Rather than taking pride in military activities—the one thing that any good Roman would prize—they would rather play about with sports. Shocking behavior indeed. This idleness, to the Roman mind, is indicative of a more general lack of purpose and has led directly to the Greeks’ current state of enslavement. But it is neither caused by, nor indicative of, an especially Greek form of desire; as Craig Williams says, “‘Greek love’ is a modern invention.”⁵

ROMAN IMPENETRABILITY

Michel Foucault argued that sexuality is a result of the particular discourse that comes out of a nineteenth-century medicalization of sexual behaviors. If this is true, then one should not expect the Romans to hold modern sexual categories as significant, and indeed, they did not. One can find some Romans (though not many) who appear to have held strong preferences for sex with one gender over the other, that is, whom we might identify as having a sexual orientation. But as was the case for Greece, these preferences were not generally thought of as constituting an identity, nor were they in themselves sufficient to mark out a person as perverse. On the other hand, the Romans, like the Greeks, held strongly to the idea that a man’s role in sex, whether penetrating or penetrated, was of utmost importance.

In fact, the Romans were much more rigid than were the Greeks about the idea that a citizen man should never be penetrated, even when still a youth. Jonathan Walters has argued that the Roman word for man (*vir*, plural *viri*) is more than an indication of sex, but rather an indication of both gender and class status. *Viri* were men who had the right to penetrate non-men of various sorts. A more class-neutral term, *homines*, was regularly used to indicate men who were not of citizen status and who therefore could be penetrated, at least theoretically, by *viri*. But even more commonly, slaves were regularly called *pueri*, that is, “boys.” They were regarded as not full men, and unlike the *pueris liberis* (free boys) mentioned in both legal and literary texts, they were not protected from acts of penetration by citizen men.⁶

Gender in Rome, then, was more than a question of biological sex; it was also a question of citizen status. Only *citizen* men were fully men when it came to sex, and others were relegated to an inferior position. Such a notion of gender was also reflected in the language that was used to talk about males who were penetrated by *viri*: such a man was said to *pati muliebria*, literally, “to suffer womanly things.” When it came to sex, then, Rome consisted of two kinds of participants: men and everyone else, a group that Williams has argued is best thought of more or less coherently as non-men. Obviously, within the group of non-men, there were significant differences: a rich citizen woman was not subject to the same kinds of sexual abuse and availability as was a slave boy. But from the point of view of a desiring man, the important thing was that everyone else belonged to this inferior gender/class and that he did not.

This system of gender/class also means that sexual activity had somewhat different permutations of meaning than it did in Greece. In the Greek world, one could lose citizenship rights if convicted of male prostitution, and in that regard, one's sexual behavior had ramifications extending to all aspects of public life. In Rome, a similar situation occurred, though the lines of significance were somewhat different. One of the marks of a free man in Rome was that he could not be whipped or beaten. In most situations, a man who could be beaten would be assumed to be a slave, which meant that he could also be used sexually. A citizen who was beaten or penetrated, then, ran the risk of slipping in the class structure, of being taken, quite literally, for a slave.

There was, however, one important exception to the rule about beatings, and that was the case of the citizen soldier. Soldiers could be beaten by their superior officers; in this one regard, they were at the mercy of another citizen man. Here, however, the context is carefully marked so as not to be confused with other kinds of beating: a centurion could only beat his charges with a vine staff. Moreover, a story that several Roman authors and orators used as a paradigm concerned a soldier who killed his superior officer on the grounds that the officer wanted to violate his sexual integrity. Not only was the soldier not convicted for the killing, but he was honored by the general Marius.⁷ A soldier could be beaten, but this did not signify sexual availability in the way that other beatings might.

What of the men who were sexually penetrated? If citizens, the episode carried considerable shame, as later chapters will show. It is also worth noting what kinds of people were subject to this kind of shame, and here again one sees significant differences from the Greek world. In the Roman legal codes, men who had been penetrated (or *pati muliebria*) were often lumped together with gladiators and actors, two professions that evidently carried a considerable stigma. In Greece, of course, no shame whatsoever accompanied acting on the civic stage; it was, in fact, an honor for young citizen men to be part of a tragic chorus. In Rome, by contrast, actors are often asserted to be prostitutes, and in any case, no citizen can appear on stage without experiencing deep disgrace. It is not clear why this should be the case; Catherine Edwards suggests that these three categories of males (actors, gladiators, prostitutes) were treated as analogous because no such person was in control of his own body.⁸ In different ways, and with different social valences, each was an object of citizens' desiring gaze and provided pleasure to citizens without being in control of that pleasure. In any case, the shame associated with performing on the Roman stage certainly marks one of the sharpest differences between Greece and Rome.

PENETRATED IDENTITIES?

If, as Williams suggests, the Romans had two large categories for sexual types—men and non-men—then they also had a dizzying array of subcategories with which to describe men who, for whatever reason, were penetrated

in sex. Of particular interest are citizen men who *choose* to be so penetrated; a slave was assumed to have no choice in the matter (much like a woman). But some men evidently did enjoy being penetrated, or at least Roman moralists were afraid that some men did, and these men were carefully scrutinized, categorized, and ridiculed.⁹

Although each of the terms used to describe penetrated men has a slightly different emphasis, it is important to note that in general, such terms are terms of abuse, and they have the desired effect primarily through assimilation to the female gender. A typical word of abuse, for example, is *mollis*, or "soft." A man who is *mollis* is probably able to be penetrated, but this is a secondary meaning; at a more basic level, the word simply means that, like a woman, such a man does not demonstrate the solid, even hard (*durus*) qualities that characterize impenetrable men. Such a man would also be assumed, moreover, to be soft in areas that have nothing to do with sex—to have a penchant, for example, for warm baths and delicate clothing.

Similarly, the word *impudicus* (unchaste) is often used for a man who is willing to be anally penetrated. This may seem a more straightforward category of sexual identity than *mollis*, as it clearly contains an inherent value judgment—one might assume, that is, that the Romans saw anal penetration as inherently immoral. But in fact, the word *impudicus* should be understood as closely related to the word *pudicitia*, which, especially for women, often means simply "chastity." A man who is *impudicus*, then, is indeed acting out-of-bounds, but not because of any moral judgment about anal sex (at least, not any judgment about the penetrator), but because such a man is behaving like a loose woman in allowing himself to be penetrated. Significantly, men are not *impudici* for penetrating too many partners; this is a term that is applied only to the penetrated.

Even more clear is the term *pathicus*, which is related to the phrase *pati muliebria* (discussed earlier). To be "pathic" is to have things done to you, rather than to be the one doing them. This is never good for a Roman man and is, again, closely tied to the idea of a feminine gender identity.

Perhaps the most problematic term, however, is the word *cinaedus*, which comes from the Greek *kinaidos*. It has often been assumed that a *cinaedus* is a passive man, and some commentators have wanted to translate it as "passive homosexual" to draw lines of political alliance between ancient *cinaedi* and modern gay men.¹⁰ It is true that *cinaedi* are often assumed to be sexually penetrated. But again, as Williams has made clear in his large-scale study, the characteristics of *cinaedi* extend well beyond the realm of specific sexual acts. *Cinaedi* are described as being particularly sexually voracious in a number of texts, and their behavior is not just passive, but scandalously loose. They are attacked as adopting feminine modes of speech, dress, and walk. And finally, it appears that the word *cinaedus* can have a transferred meaning of simply "sexually immoral." At one point, the poet Catullus refers to a female prostitute as *cinaedior*, literally, "more cinaeduslike" (Catullus 10.24–25). A *cinaedus*, then, is best understood as someone who violates the basic rules of gender decorum, rather than as a member of a particular sexuality.

PRIAPUS AND PHALLIC CULTURE

One of the interesting aspects of Roman sexual culture was a particular interest in the size of a man's penis. One sees this fascination in a number of literary sources, some of which are discussed in subsequent chapters: Seneca criticizes a man, Hostius Quadra, who uses magnifying mirrors to enhance the imagined size of a man who is penetrating him; in Petronius's *Satyricon*, one of the characters of the novel is picked up in the bath after a crowd stands around wondering and applauding at the size of his penis. While certain aspects of Greek culture certainly revolved around the phallus as an image of fertility, in Rome, there seems to have been an appreciation of size for its own sake.

One aspect of this phallic culture comes in the form of a Roman god of fertility and gardens, Priapus.¹¹ Priapus is often figured as a crude wooden statue, in the form of a man with a preternaturally huge phallus. He stands guard over gardens and uses his member as a weapon in that service: would-be thieves are warned that if they attempt to steal fruit from the garden, they will be raped by Priapus himself. A unique corpus of texts by unknown authors, the *Carmina Priapea* (Priapic Poems), provides a series of poems in various meters, in which Priapus is imagined as the speaker. The date of these poems is not secure, but they are generally assumed to be Augustan (i.e., early first century CE). Priapus is imagined as being more than willing to have sex with boys, women, or adult men. Several of the poems suggest a rising scale of humiliation for the person whom Priapus will penetrate, with oral sex being the most humiliating. A few examples here will suffice to give the reader an idea of the flavor of these poems.

Priapia 25 provides a representative sample of the genre. Priapus makes a general threat to a hypothetical thief, who is presumed to be male:

This field is entrusted to me; whoever brings
a thieving hand to it
will learn that I am not a eunuch.
Perhaps he would say to himself, "no one
here, in this remote spot among the fruit trees
will know that I have been buggered," but he'd be wrong.
The deed will be done with serious witnesses/huge balls.¹²

In particular, this poem emphasizes that there is an aspect of shame to being penetrated by this phallic god; thieves are warned against taking comfort in the agrarian countryside, where they might think that no one will see the deed being done. Through a clever pun in the Latin, the god's testicles become the legal witnesses of the man's sexual humiliation.

Poems 13, 28, and 35 all refer to oral sex as a particularly degrading experience for the person performing fellatio:

I warn you: boy, you will be buggered; girl, you'll be fucked.
A third punishment remains for a bearded thief. (*Priapea 13*)

You, who plan evil deeds and do not restrain
yourself from stealing from the garden,
you'll be buggered with my foot-long cock.
But if such a serious and painful punishment
is not effective, I'll try something higher up. (*Priapea 28*)

Once, thief, you'll be buggered; but if again
you are taken a second time, I will screw your mouth.
But if you try a third theft,
then you will suffer both this punishment and that:
you'll be buggered and mouth-screwed. (*Priapea 35*)

The first of these three poems is particularly interesting because it shows the god as not particularly discriminating in his sexual objects. Each kind of person to be screwed has his or her own method. The fact that the bearded man will suffer *irrumatio*, that is, forced to perform oral sex on the god, perhaps reflects the idea that at his age, performing anal sex on him is no longer an attractive option.

It is also interesting to note that in poems 13 and 28, oral sex is clearly alluded to, but in careful periphrasis, as if the god were hesitant to actually say the word. Part of the pleasure of reading the poem comes in figuring out what the god means; our understanding is meant to come with a masculine chuckle. In poem 35, however, the poet clearly has no hesitancy about being explicit, and anal and oral sex are doled out in precise escalation for each violation.

One final poem from the collection deserves mention, and that is poem 51. This relatively long piece (27 lines) begins with Priapus wondering aloud why it is that so many thieves come to his garden when "whoever chances upon me pays the price / and is hollowed out right up to his arms?" (*Priapea 51.4-5*). He then lists all of the qualities of his garden that are not any finer than any other garden and comes to a rather unexpected conclusion:

Although I have all these things in my field,
the neighboring gardens do not produce any poorer.
But you ignore these, and come to the place
guarded by me, most unchaste thieves.
You fly to the punishment which is entirely too well known;
the punishment itself, what I threaten with, attracts you. (*Priapea 51.22-27*)

The poem suggests, with a sly wink, that some thieves might want to be penetrated. In this case, then, this Priapus is particularly ineffective. Instead of preventing thieves from stealing from his garden, he is plagued with a perverted lot who steal specifically to enjoy the punishment. Of course, the humor of this poem stems from the idea that wanting to be penetrated by Priapus should be deeply shameful. By suggesting that if someone steals from his garden, that person is a deliberate pathic, the speaking Priapus accomplishes his goal by other means. The poem itself, by implying deliberate passivity, becomes the deterrent against theft.



Priapus weighs his phallus in front of a bowl of fruit. Though his member is unusually large, this Priapus is more realistic in proportion than many; note as well that he is not shown as fully erect. Casa dei Vettii, Pompeii. First century CE. Photo taken by the author.

Priapus is a country god, rude and crude, but with a sense of humor. His sexual aggression is an object of boast, rather than of actual fact. But his bluster is also typical, in many ways, of Roman ways of talking about sex. Men especially speak of sex in violent terms, as a mode of dominating other males and establishing their own social and political superiority. We will see this attitude toward sex, for example, in several of the poems of Catullus. In the comic work of Petronius, who wrote during the time of the emperor Nero, Priapus acts as a motivating deity. The hero of Petronius's novel, Encolpius, has somehow angered the garden god, and he spends much of the narrative suffering from a humiliating impotence and being forced to undergo bizarre

sexual punishments and cures for his condition. In that work, the humorous side of Priapus seems to have come to the fore. Petronius satirizes the Roman male's preoccupation with penetration and reveals the hero's cock in all its ridiculous detail.

WOMEN, NORMAL AND DEVIANT

Women in Rome had a bit more freedom than those in Greece. A Roman wife might eat dinner out with her husband, for example, or initiate loans from her own capital resources. In later periods of Roman history, it is clear that women sometimes wielded considerable monetary power. This is not to suggest that the women of Rome enjoyed anything like full political autonomy. Throughout Roman history, citizen women were legally under the watch of a male guardian: initially a woman's father, later, sometimes, her husband. A father's ability to scrutinize and control the actions of his daughters, known as the *patria potestas* (literally, "father's power"), was wide ranging. It included the right to decide not to raise the daughter after her birth, in which case, she would be exposed to die.

When a woman got married, she might do so in one of two ways. If she married *cum manu* (literally, "with her hand"), then the *patria potestas* transferred to her husband, and she became legally as a daughter to her husband. If she married *sine manu* (without her hand), her father retained legal guardianship over her. For a variety of reasons, marriage *sine manu* appears to have become increasingly popular during the first century BCE. This may well have led to a certain population of upper-class women who exercised greater social and economic mobility during this time. If a woman were married *sine manu*, and her father were to die, she would no longer be under the direct *potestas* of any male. She would still be subject to guardianship, but in some cases, it appears that such a woman was allowed considerable freedom. A woman named Clodia seems to fall into this class, the sister of one of Cicero's great political rivals. Though much in Cicero's attack on her should be read skeptically, she appears to have enjoyed wide discretion in matters of finance as well as sexual liaisons.

At the same time, Roman men viewed this level of freedom as deeply problematic. Women were assumed to be not in control of their sexual desires; left to their own devices, they would, it seems, have sex with virtually any man at any time. Catullus, whose love poetry is often written from the point of view of a lover who wishes to have affairs with a married woman, is nonetheless shocked and dismayed to discover that his beloved Lesbia is not faithful to him. In one particularly angry poem, he suggests that she "takes on three hundred lovers at once, not being truly in love with any, but breaking the groins of all" (Catullus 11). The sexual appetite of independent women cut both ways, it seems.

For more traditional Roman moralists, this sort of sexual appeal had political ramifications as well. The great danger that women posed was that they were considered likely to parlay their sexual attractiveness into direct

political power. At one point, the Roman historian Livy reports that the elder Cato made the following speech in an attempt to block the repeal of laws against financial extravagance on the part of women:

Gentlemen, do you wish to create this contest among your wives, so that the rich will wish to have that which no one else is able, and the poor will reach beyond their means, lest they be held in contempt because of it? Once they begin to be ashamed of what they should not, they will not be ashamed of what they should. What she is able to do by her own means, she will procure; what she is not able, she will ask her husband. How wretched he will be, both the husband who is persuaded and the one who is not, since what he himself will not give, he will see given by another. Now women are commonly making requests of strange men and, what is worse, they demand legislation and votes, and from some men they get them. (Livy 34.4.16–18)

Lurking just below the surface of Cato's concern about women's sumptuous spending is a question of a wife's loyalty to her husband. If extravagance is allowed, then women will ask their husbands for things; if their husbands will not give them, then they will ask "strange men" (*alienos viros*), a phrase that really means "men outside of their family or husband's family." Though sexual infidelity is not spelled out here, the idea of a woman having business dealings with such "strange men" all but means exactly that.

Even normal women, then, were viewed with suspicion when it came to sexual matters. Because of their presumed sexual appetite or, perhaps, their lack of control over sexual desires, they needed to be watched carefully and kept within the social circle of immediate family. As for their sexual role, however, a normal woman was assumed to be passive, in the rather strict sense that she was always to be penetrated. So much describes the expectations of women as a gender; what of the expectations of their sexual behavior within those gender norms? Women could be penetrated vaginally, orally, or anally and still be considered normal. Wives, of course, might object to certain sexual acts and might prefer not to perform fellatio or have anal sex with their husbands. But in terms of sexual norms, a prostitute would be considered normal, as long as she was penetrated.

What of women who are depicted as sexually deviant? The primary word used to describe them is *tribas* (plural *tribades*), a troubling term that is often translated as "lesbian." The origins of the word are of little help: it appears to be derived from a verb that means "to rub" or "to grind," and in fact, it is nearly always used to denote women who have sex with other women. One might argue, then, that in the case of women, the category of sexual deviance is sufficiently close to our own that we should think of them as equivalent, that is, that we should translate *tribas* as "lesbian."

A close reading of the sources in which *tribades* appear, however, makes this identification less easy. As is the case for terms of male deviance (*cinaedus* and the like), virtually all of our sources come from invective. No *tribas* ever self-identifies as such. The terms of the invective, moreover, are telling: in case after case, what is particularly disturbing about *tribades* is that they "take the part of men" or "act like men" in the performing of sex. In a few

extraordinary cases, a *tribas* is described as penetrating a *boy* (see, e.g., Martial, 7.67). It may be the case that Martial is exaggerating, taking the *tribas's* mannishness to an absurd extreme. But even so, the exaggeration shows that what is primarily disturbing about the *tribas* is not that she has sex with another woman, but rather that she is gender-deviant in taking the active role.

To be fair, not all cases of invective against *tribades* are so clear-cut. In one often cited passage, the elder Seneca describes two women who are sleeping together as both being *tribades* (*Controversiae* 1.2.23). This does begin to look more like lesbianism than the purely active-passive distinction on which I have been insisting. But even here, it is not fully clear that the love object is what makes a *tribas* a *tribas*; it seems more likely that, for the Romans, a sexually active woman was the primary form of deviance, and when two women were in bed together, one of them had to be deviant. It was, perhaps, of relatively little concern to distinguish which of them was the real *tribas*, the active partner.

FOUCAULT AND ROME

In many ways, then, the picture that Foucault and his followers have drawn for Greece also holds true for Rome. Foucault has come under considerable criticism, however, for his discussion of Roman texts, which constitutes all of volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality*. In this volume, Foucault argues for two parallel developments: first, he sees an increased concern in the imperial period in Rome with physical and spiritual regimes of moderation, including moderation of sexual activity, as a way to maintain general health. At the same time, he suggests, the Romans placed a greater emphasis on the emotional bonds to be found in marriage, to the detriment of other forms of sexual pleasure. In a passage that has been frequently cited, Foucault argues, "Philosophers condemn any sexual relation that might take place outside marriage and prescribe a strict fidelity between spouses, admitting no exceptions."¹³

Foucault is not entirely wrong in these observations, but I must admit that the picture he draws is significantly incomplete. In the first place, Foucault jumps from the fourth century BCE in Greece (with which he ends volume 2 of *The History of Sexuality*) to the imperial period in Rome, beginning roughly in the middle of the first century CE. To do so is to ignore the first 200 years of Latin literature, including some particularly rich sources for the discussion of sexuality; Foucault loses all of Cicero, and perhaps most important, all of the early erotic poet Catullus. As later chapters will show, Catullus is little interested in the regimes of moderation that Foucault cites and discusses.

Moreover, even within the time frame that Foucault discusses, his selection of texts has much to do with the picture that he draws. Foucault primarily cites philosophers like the Stoic Seneca from the first century CE and medical writers such as Galen from the second century CE. He does not discuss, for example, the early-second-century satirist Juvenal, who attacks, and

therefore paints a picture of, Romans who engage in excessive behavior of all sorts. Nor does he deal with Juvenal's contemporary Martial, who is perhaps even more pungent and outrageous than Catullus was 150 years earlier.

If Foucault's picture of developments in ideas about sex in Rome is incomplete, however, it is important to emphasize that it is not entirely wrong. As a reading of Stoic philosophy and of new medical regimes, Foucault's third volume has much to recommend it. Perhaps even more important, Foucault considers at some length the way in which the nature of power changed as Rome became an empire and the long-standing class structure of Rome began to shift. With an emperor overseeing Rome, being a wellborn Roman citizen was no longer sufficient to guarantee real power. Indeed, personal closeness to the emperor came to count for more than traditional structures of authority, and this left Roman senators and upper-class citizens unable to confidently negotiate within the imperial court. The increasingly complex and private network of power embodied in the emperor's household was certainly one cause for the increased popularity of Stoic philosophy, which advocated developing and maintaining a serene inner life, regardless of the political turmoil in which a man might find himself.

CONCLUSIONS

The following several chapters, arranged roughly chronologically, will show the ways in which the Romans thought about sex, sexual behavior, and sexual identities from about 200 BCE to the later Roman empire, about 200–300 CE. As will become clear, attitudes and ideas do shift over this broad expanse of time. As was the case for the study of Greece, however, the kind of evidence that we have also significantly colors the picture that scholars paint for each time period. In the early years of Latin literature, our sources consist of Roman new comedy, which is greatly concerned with the testing and eventual confirmation of the prevailing class structure. A hundred years later, our richest evidence comes from the legal speeches and private letters of the orator Cicero. In the last years of the first century BCE and the early first century CE, we find a wealth of love poetry, addressed to both young men and women. The era of Nero provides us with the wicked satire of Petronius and the somewhat pedantic moralizing of Seneca the Younger. In the late first and early second centuries CE, the invectives of Juvenal and Martial provide a highly critical view of sexual perversions of all sorts. And finally, the later Roman imperial period provides a canonized set of Roman laws that, unfortunately, gives us laws from every era of Roman history in a synchronic digest.

Each of these sources, then, provides a different kind of information about Roman attitudes toward sex. As this study progresses, certain themes will remain clear. First, it does not appear that the Romans thought of people as homosexual or heterosexual, as the modern West does. Second, like the Greeks, the Romans placed a high premium on a man's ability to control his

own sexual desires, and especially to avoid falling prey to the temptation to slip into the other gender: to *pati muliebria*. But perhaps most interesting is the fact that the Romans did think of certain sexual appetites as constituting men and women as sexual types, to a greater degree than did the Greeks: the Roman *cinaedus* and *tribas*, though not corresponding to our sexual categories, appear to have both a sexual morphology and, at times, a recognizable sexual identity. Again, the valence of these identities is not the same as that of a modern sexuality, and the legal issues of their definition should not be confused with our own debates about gay rights, but the recognition of sexual types, and perhaps even sexual identities, is important for the study of Roman sexuality.