HIDDEN FROM HISTORY

RECLAIMING THE GAY AND LESBIAN PAST

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A MERIDIAN BOOK
The sexual practices and institutions of the classical Greeks, along with the enduring prestige that in modern times has traditionally surrounded their achievements, have long made them a kind of rallying point for lesbians and gay men of the educated classes, to whom they have seemed to offer an ideological weapon in the struggle for dignity and social acceptance. Recent scholarly attempts to bring the Greeks within the purview of the emerging "history of sexuality" have also focused on "Greek homosexuality." Against this background, David M. Halperin argues that in fact the Greek record confronts us with a radically unfamiliar set of values, behaviors, and social practices. These, Halperin further argues, expose the purely conventional character of our own social and sexual experiences, including, most notably, "sexuality," conceived as an autonomous dimension of human life, and "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality," understood as the fundamental organizing principles of sexual object-choice. According to Halperin, "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" do not properly name eternal aspects of the human psyche but represent, instead, a distinctively modern cultural production alien to the experience of the ancient Greeks. The study of the cultural articulation of sexual desire in classical Athens therefore calls into question the stability of the concept of "sexuality" as a category of historical analysis.
In 1992, when the patriots among us will be celebrating the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, our cultural historians may wish to mark the centenary of an intellectual landfall of almost equal importance for the conceptual geography of the human sciences: the invention of homosexuality by Charles Gilbert Chaddock. Though he may never rank with Columbus in the annals of individual achievement, Chaddock would hardly seem to merit the obscurity that has surrounded him throughout the past hundred years. An early translator of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia sexualis*, Chaddock is credited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* with having introduced “homo-sexuality” into the English language in 1892, in order to render a German cognate twenty years its senior. Homosexuality, for better or for worse, has been with us ever since. Before 1892 there was no homosexuality, only sexual inversion. But, as George Chauncey, Jr., has demonstrated:

Sexual inversion, the term used most commonly in the nineteenth century, did not denote the same conceptual phenomenon as homosexuality. “Sexual inversion” referred to a broad range of deviant gender behavior, of which homosexual desire was only a logical but indistinct aspect, while “homosexuality” focused on the narrower issue of sexual object choice. The differentiation of homosexual desire from “deviant” gender behavior at the turn of the century reflects a major reconceptualization of the nature of human sexuality, its relation to gender, and its role in one’s social definition.

Throughout the nineteenth century, in other words, sexual preference for a person of one’s own sex was not clearly distinguished from other sorts of nonconformity to one’s culturally defined sex role. Deviant object-choice was viewed as merely one of a number of pathological symptoms exhibited by those who reversed, or “inverted,” their proper sex roles by adopting a masculine or a feminine style at variance with what was deemed natural and appropriate to their anatomical sex. Political aspirations in women and (at least according to one expert writing as late as 1920) a fondness for cats in men were manifestations of a pathological condition, a kind of psychological hermaphroditism tellingly but not essentially expressed by the preference for a “normal” member of one’s own sex as a sexual partner.

This outlook on the matter seems to have been shared by the scientists and by their unfortunate subjects alike: Inversion was not merely a
to a rapidly growing lexical breed most prominently represented by the hybrid names given to other recent inventions—names whose mere enumeration suffices to conjure up the precise historical era responsible for producing them: e.g., “automobile,” “television.”

Unlike the language of technology, however, the new terminology for describing sexual behavior was slow to take root in the culture at large. In his posthumous autobiographical memoir, My Father and Myself (1968), J. R. Ackerley recalls how mystified he was when, about 1918, a Swiss friend asked him, “Are you homo or hetero?”: “I had never heard either term before,” he writes. Similarly, T. C. Worsley observes in his own memoir, Flannelled Fool (1966), that in 1929 “The word [homosexual], in any case, was not in general use, as it is now. Then it was still a technical term, the implications of which I was not entirely aware of.”12 These two memoirists, moreover, were not intellectually deficient men: At the respective times of their recorded bewilderment, Ackerley was shortly about to be, and Worsley already had been, educated at Cambridge. Nor was such innocence limited—in this one instance, at least—to the holders of university degrees: The British sociologist John Marshall, whose survey presumably draws on more popular sources, testifies that “a number of the elderly men I interviewed had never heard the term ‘homosexual’ until the 1950s.”13 The Oxford English Dictionary, originally published in 1933, is also ignorant of (if not willfully blind to) “homosexuality”; the word appears for the first time in the OED’s 1976 three-volume Supplement.14

It is not exactly my intention to argue that homosexuality, as we commonly understand it today, didn’t exist before 1892. How, indeed, could it have failed to exist? The very word displays a most workmanlike and scientific indifference to cultural and environmental factors, looking only to the sexes of the persons engaged in the sexual act. Moreover, if homosexuality didn’t exist before 1892, heterosexuality couldn’t have existed either (it came into being, in fact, like Eve from Adam’s rib, eight years later).15 and without heterosexuality, where would all of us be right now?

The comparatively recent genesis of heterosexuality—strictly speaking, a twentieth-century affair—should provide a clue to the profundity of the cultural issues over which, hitherto, I have been so lightly skating. How is it possible that until the year 1900 there was not a precise, value-free, scientific term available to speakers of the English language for designating what we would now regard, in retrospect, as the mode of sexual behavior favored by the vast majority of people in our culture? Any answer to that question—which, in its broadest dimensions, I shall leave to the intellectual heirs of Michel Foucault to settle—must direct our attention to the inescapable historicity of even the most innocent, unassuming, and seemingly objective of cultural representations. Although a blandly descriptive, rigorously clinical term like “homosexuality” would appear to be unobjectionable as a taxonomic device, it carries with it a heavy complement of ideological baggage and has, in fact, proved a significant obstacle to understanding the distinctive features of sexual life in the ancient world.16 It may well be that homosexuality properly speaking has no history of its own much before the beginning of our century. For, as John Boswell remarks, “If the categories ‘homo/heterosexual’ and ‘gay/straight’ are the inventions of particular societies rather than real aspects of the human psyche, there is no gay history.”17

II

Of course, if we are to believe Foucault, there are basic historical and cultural factors that prohibit the easy application of the concept of homosexuality to persons living in premodern societies. For homosexuality presupposes sexuality: It implies the existence of a separate, sexual domain within the larger field of man’s psychophysical nature and it requires the conceptual demarcation and isolation of that domain from other, more traditional, territories of personal and social life that cut across it, such as carnality, venery, libertinism, virility, passion, amorousness, eroticism, intimacy, love, affection, appetite, and desire—to name but a few. The invention of homosexuality therefore had to await, in the first place, the eighteenth-century discovery and definition of sexuality as the total ensemble of physiological and psychological mechanisms governing the individual’s genital functions and the concomitant identification of that ensemble with a specially developed part of the brain and nervous system; it had also to await, in the second place, the early-nineteenth-century interpretation of sexuality as a singular “instinct” or “drive,” a mute force that shapes our conscious life according to its own unassailable logic and thereby determines, at least in part, the character and personality of each one of us.18

Before the scientific construction of “sexuality” as a positive, distinct, and constitutive feature of individual human beings—an autonomous system within the physiological and psychological economy of the human organism—a person’s sexual acts could be individually evaluated and categorized, but there was no conceptual apparatus available for identifying a person’s fixed and determinate sexual orientation, much less for assessing and classifying it.19 That human beings differ, often markedly, from one another in their sexual tastes in a great variety of ways (of which the liking for a sexual partner of a specific sex is only one, and not necessarily the most significant one) is an unexceptionable and, indeed, an ancient observation;20 but it is not immediately evident that differences in sexual preference are by their very nature more revealing about the temperament of individual human beings, more significant determinants of personal identity, than, for example, differences in dietary preference.21
And yet, it would never occur to us to refer a person's dietary object-choice to some innate, characterological disposition or to see in his or her strongly expressed and even unvarying preference for the white meat of chicken the symptom of a profound psychophysical orientation, leading us to identify him or her in contexts quite removed from that of the eating of food as, say, a "pectoriphage" or a "stethovore" (to continue the practice of combining Greek and Latin roots); nor would we be likely to inquire further, making nicer discriminations according to whether an individual's predilection for chicken breasts expressed itself in a tendency to eat them quickly or slowly, seldom or often, alone or in company, under normal circumstances or only in periods of great stress, with a clear or a guilty conscience ("ego-dystonic pectoriphagia"), beginning in earliest childhood or originating with a gastronomic trauma suffered in adolescence. If such questions did occur to us, moreover, I very much doubt whether we would turn to the academic disciplines of anatomy, neurology, clinical psychology, or genetics in the hope of obtaining a clear or a guilty conscience ("ego-dystonic pectoriphagia"), beginning in earliest childhood or originating with a gastronomic trauma suffered in adolescence.

If such questions did occur to us, moreover, I very much doubt whether we would turn to the academic disciplines of anatomy, neurology, clinical psychology, or genetics in the hope of obtaining a clear causal solution to them. That is because (1) we regard the liking for certain foods as a matter of taste; (2) we currently lack a theory of taste; and (3) in the absence of a theory we do not normally subject our behavior to intense scientific or etiological scrutiny.

In the same way, it never occurred to premodern cultures to ascribe a person's sexual tastes to some positive, structural, or constitutive feature of his or her personality. Just as we tend to assume that human beings are not individuated at the level of dietary preference and that we all, despite many pronounced and frankly acknowledged differences from one another in dietary habits, share the same fundamental set of alimentary appetites, and hence the same "dieticity" or "edility," so most premodern and non-Western cultures, despite an awareness of the range of possible variations in human sexual behavior, refuse to individuate human beings at the level of sexual preference and assume, instead, that we all share the same fundamental set of sexual appetites, the same "sexuality." For most of the world's inhabitants, in other words, "sexuality" is no more a fact of life than "dieticity." Far from being a necessary or intrinsic constituent of the eternal grammar of human subjectivity, "sexuality" seems to be a uniquely modern, Western, even bourgeois production—one of those cultural fictions that in every society give human beings access to themselves as meaningful actors in their world, and that are thereby objectivated.

At any rate, positivism dies hard, and sexual essentialism (the belief in fixed sexual essences) dies even harder. Not everyone will welcome a neohistoricist critique of "sexuality." John Boswell, for example, has argued reasonably enough that any debate over the existence of universals in human culture must distinguish between the respective modes of being proper to words, concepts, and experiences: According to this line of reasoning, the ancients experienced gravity even though they lacked both the term and the concept; similarly, Boswell claims that the "manifest and stated purpose" of Aristophanes’ famous myth in Plato’s *Symposium* "is to explain why humans are divided into groups of predominantly homosexual or heterosexual interest," and so this text, along with a number of others, vouches for the existence of homosexuality as an ancient (if not a universal) category of human experience—however new-fangled the word for it may be. Now the speech of Plato's Aristophanes would seem indeed to be a *locus classicus* for the differentiation of homo from heterosexuality, because Aristophanes' taxonomy of human beings features a distinction between those who desire a sexual partner of the same sex as themselves and those who desire a sexual partner of a different sex. The Platonic passage alone, then, would seem to offer sufficient warrant for positing an ancient concept, if not an ancient experience, of homosexuality. But closer examination reveals that Aristophanes stops short of deriving a distinction between homo- and heterosexuality from his own myth just when the logic of his analysis would seem to have driven him ineluctably to it. That omission is telling—and it is worth considering in greater detail.

According to Aristophanes, human beings were originally round, eight-limbed creatures, with two faces and two sets of genitals—both front and back—and three sexes (male, female, and androgyne). These ancestors of ours were powerful and ambitious; in order to put them in their place, Zeus had them cut in two, their skin stretched over the exposed flesh and tied at the navel, and their heads rotated so as to keep that physical reminder of their daring and its consequences constantly before their eyes. The severed halves of each former individual, once reunited, clung to one another so desperately and concerned themselves so little with their survival as separate entities that they began to perish for lack of sustenance; those who outlived their mates sought out persons belonging to the same sex as their lost complements and repeated their embraces in a foredoomed attempt to recover their original unity. Zeus at length took pity on them, moved their genitals to the side their bodies now faced, and invented sexual intercourse, so that the bereaved creatures might at least put a temporary terminus to their longing and devote their attention to other, more important (if less pressing) matters. Aristophanes extracts from this story a genetic explanation of observable differences among human beings with respect to sexual object-choice and preferred style of life: males who desire females are descended from an original androgyne (adulterers come from this species), whereas males descended from an original male "pursue their own kind, and would prefer to remain single and spend their entire lives with one another, since by nature they have no interest in marriage and procreation but are compelled to engage in them by social custom" (191e—192b, quoted selectively). Boswell, understandably, interprets this to mean that, according to Plato's Aristophanes, homosexual and heterosexual interests are "both exclusive and innate."
But that, significantly, is not quite the way Aristophanes sees it. The conclusions that he draws from his own myth help to illustrate the lengths to which classical Athenians were willing to go in order to avoid conceptualizing sexual behaviors according to a binary opposition between different- and same-sex sexual contacts. First of all, Aristophanes' myth generates not two but at least three distinct "sexualities" (males attracted to males, females attracted to females, and—consigned alike to a single classification, evidently—males attracted to females as well as females attracted to males). Moreover, there is not the slightest suggestion in anything Aristophanes says that the sexual acts or preferences of persons descended from an original female are in any way similar to, let alone congruent or isomorphic with, the sexual acts or preferences of those descended from an original male; hence, nothing in the text allows us to suspect the existence of even an implicit category to which males who desire males and females who desire females both belong in contradistinction to some other category containing males and females who desire one another. On the contrary, one consequence of the myth is to make the sexual desire of every human being formally identical to that of every other: We are all looking for the same thing in a sexual partner, according to Plato's Aristophanes—namely, a symbolic substitute for an originary object once loved and subsequently lost in an archaic trauma. In that respect we all share the same "sexuality"—which is to say that, despite the differences in our personal preferences or tastes, we are not individuated at the level of our sexual being.

Second, and equally important, Aristophanes' account features a crucial distinction within the category of males who are attracted to males, an infrastructural detail missing from his description of each of the other two categories: "while they are still boys [i.e., pubescent or preadult], they are fond of men, and enjoy lying down together with them and twining their limbs about them, . . . but when they become men they are lovers of boys. . . . Such a man is a pederast and philerast [i.e., fond of or responsive to adult male lovers]" at different stages of his life (Symposium 191e-192b, quoted selectively). Contrary to the clear implications of the myth, in other words, and unlike the people comprehended by the first two categories, those descended from an original male are not attracted to one another without qualification; rather, they desire boys when they are men and they take a certain (nonsexual) pleasure in physical contact with men when they are boys. Now since—as the foregoing passage suggests—the classical Athenians sharply distinguished the roles of pederast and philerast, relegating them not only to different age-classes but virtually to different "sexualities," what Aristophanes is describing here is not a single, homogeneous sexual orientation common to all those who descend from an original male but rather a set of distinct and incommensurable behaviors that such persons exhibit in different periods of their lives; although his genetic explanation of the diversity of sexual object-choice among human beings would seem to require that there be some adult males who are sexually attracted to other adult males, Aristophanes appears to be wholly unaware of such a possibility, and in any case he has left no room for it in his taxonomic scheme. That omission is all the more unexpected because, as Boswell himself has pointed out (in response to the present argument), the archetypal pairs of lovers from whom all homoerotically inclined males are supposed to descend must themselves have been the same age as one another, inasmuch as they were originally halves of the same being. No age-matched couples figure among their latter-day offspring, however: The social reality described by Aristophanes features an erotic asymmetry absent from the mythical paradigm used to generate it. In the world of contemporary Athenian actuality—at least, as Aristophanes portrays it—reciprocal erotic desire among males is unknown. Those who descend from an original male are not defined as male homosexuals but as willing boys when they are young and as lovers of youths when they are old. Contrary to Boswell's reading of the passage, then, neither the concept nor the experience of "homosexuality" is known to Plato's Aristophanes.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from careful examination of the other document from antiquity that might seem to vouch for the existence both of homosexuality as an indigenous category and of homosexuals as a native species. Unlike the myth of Plato's Aristophanes, a famous and much-excerpted passage from a classic work of Greek prose, the document to which I refer is little known and almost entirely neglected by modern historians of "sexuality"; its date is late, its text is corrupt, and, far from being a self-conscious literary artifact, it forms part of a Roman technical treatise. But despite its distance from Plato in time, in style, in language, and in intent, it displays the same remarkable innocence of modern sexual categories, and I have chosen to discuss it here partly in order to show what can be learned about the ancient world from texts that lie outside the received canon of classical authors. Let us turn, then, to the ninth chapter in the Fourth Book of De morbis chronicis, a mid-fifth-century A.D. Latin translation and adaptation by the African writer Caelius Aurelianus of a now largely lost work on chronic diseases by the Greek physician Soranus, who practiced and taught in Rome during the early part of the second century A.D.

The topic of this chapter is molles (malthakoi in Greek)—that is, "soft" or unmasculine men who depart from the cultural norm of manliness insofar as they actively desire to be subjected by other men to a "feminine" (i.e., receptive) role in sexual intercourse. Caelius begins with an implicit defense of his own unimpeachable masculinity by noting how difficult it is to believe that such people actually exist; he then goes on to observe that the cause of their affliction is not natural (that is, organic) but is rather their own excessive desire, which—in a desperate and foredoomed attempt to satisfy itself—drives out their sense of shame and
forcibly converts parts of their bodies to sexual uses not intended by nature. These men willingly adopt the dress, gait, and other characteristics of women, thereby confirming that they suffer not from a bodily disease but from a mental (or moral) defect. After some further arguments in support of that point, Caelius draws an interesting comparison: "For just as women called tribades [in Greek], because they practise both kinds of sex, are more eager to have sexual intercourse with women than with men and pursue women with an almost masculine jealousy... so they too [i.e., the molles] are afflicted by a mental disease" (132–133). The mental disease in question, which strikes both men and women alike and is defined as a perversion of sexual desire, would certainly seem to be nothing other than homosexuality as it is often understood today.

Several considerations combine to prohibit that interpretation, however. First of all, what Caelius treats as a pathological phenomenon is not the desire on the part of either men or women for sexual contact with a person of the same sex; quite the contrary: Elsewhere, in discussing the treatment of satyriasis (a state of abnormally elevated sexual desire accompanied by itching or tension in the genitals), he issues the following advice to people who suffer from it (De morbis acutis, 3.18.180–181).56

Do not admit visitors and particularly young women and boys. For the attractiveness of such visitors would again kindle the feeling of desire in the patient. Indeed, even healthy persons, seeing them, would in many cases seek sexual gratification, stimulated by the tension produced in the parts [i.e., in their own genitals].37

There is nothing medically problematical, then, about a desire on the part of males to obtain sexual pleasure from contact with males; what is of concern to Caelius,58 as well as to other ancient moralists,9 is the male desire to be sexually penetrated by males, for such a desire represents the voluntary abandonment of a "masculine" identity in favor of a "feminine" one. It is sex-role reversal, or gender deviance, that is problematized here and that also furnishes part of the basis for Caelius's comparison of molles to tribades, who assume a "masculine" role in their relations with other women and actively "pursue women with an almost masculine jealousy." Indeed, the "soft"—that is, sexually submissive—man, possessed of a shocking and paradoxical desire to surrender his masculine autonomy and precedence, is monstrous precisely because he seems to have "a woman's soul confined by a man's body" and thus to violate the deeply felt and somewhat anxiously defended sense of congruence on the part of the ancients between gender, sexual practices, and social identity.40

Second, the ground of the similitude between Caelius's molles and tribades is not that they are both homosexual but rather that they are both bisexual (in our terms). The tribades "are more eager to have sexual intercourse with women than with men" and "practise both kinds of sex"—that is, they have sex with both men and women.41 As for the molles, Caelius's earlier remarks about their extraordinarily intense sexual desire implies that they turn to receptive sex because, although they do, they are not able to satisfy themselves by means of more conventionally masculine sorts of sexual activity, including insertive sex with women;42 far from having desires that are structured differently from those of normal folk, these gender-deviants desire sexual pleasure just as most people do, but they have such strong and intense desires that they are driven to devise some unusual and disreputable (though ultimately futile) means of gratifying them. That diagnosis becomes explicit at the conclusion of the chapter when Caelius explains why the disease responsible for turning men into molles is the only chronic disease that becomes stronger as the body grows older (137).

For in other years when the body is still strong and can perform the normal functions of love, the sexual desire [of these persons] assumes a dual aspect, in which the soul is excited sometimes while playing a passive and sometimes while playing an active role. But in the case of old men who have lost their virile powers, all their sexual desire is turned in the opposite direction and consequently exerts a stronger demand for the feminine role in love. In fact, many infer that this is the reason why boys too are victims of this affliction. For, like old men, they do not possess virile powers; that is, they have not yet attained those powers which have already deserted the aged.43

"Soft" or unmasculine men, far from being a fixed and determinate sexual species, are evidently either men who once experienced an orthodoxy masculine sexual desire in the past or who will eventually experience such a desire in the future. They may well be men with a constitutional tendency to gender-deviance, according to Caelius, but they are not homosexuals. Moreover, all the other ancient texts known to me that place in the same category both males who enjoy sexual contact with males and females who enjoy sexual contact with females display one or the other of the two taxonomic strategies employed by Caelius Aurelianus: If such men and women are classified alike, it is either because they are both held to reverse their proper sex roles and to adopt the sexual styles, postures, and modes of copulation conventionally associated with the opposite sex or because they are both held to alternate between the personal characteristics and sexual practices proper, respectively, to men and to women.44 No category of homosexuality, defined in such a way as to contain men and women alike, is indigenous to the ancient world.

No scruple need prevent us, to be sure, from qualifying as "homosexual" any person who seeks sexual contact with another person of the same sex, whether male or female. But the issue before us is whether or not we can accurately apply our concept of homosexuality to the ancients—whether or not, that is, we can discover in the historical record
of classical antiquity evidence of behaviors or psychologies that are amenable to classification in our own terms (obviously, we can, given the supposedly descriptive and trans-historical nature of those terms); the issue isn't even whether or not the ancients were able to express within the terms provided by their own conceptual schemes an experience of something approximating to homosexuality as we understand it today. The real issue confronting any cultural historian of antiquity, and any critic of contemporary culture, is, first of all, how to recover the terms in which the experiences of individuals belonging to past societies were actually constituted and, second, how to measure and assess the differences between those terms and the ones we currently employ. For, as this very controversy over the scope and applicability of sexual categories illustrates, concepts in the human sciences—unlike in this respect, perhaps, concepts in the natural sciences (such as gravity)—do not merely describe reality but, at least partly, constitute it. What this implies about the issue before us may sound paradoxical, but it is, I believe, profound—or, at least, worth pondering: Although there have been, in many different times and places (including classical Athens), persons who sought sexual contact with other persons of the same sex as themselves, it is only within the last hundred years or so that such persons (or some portion of them) have been homosexuals.

Instead of attempting to trace the history of “homosexuality” as if it were a thing, therefore, we might more profitably analyze how the significance of same-sex sexual contacts has been variously constructed over time by members of human living groups. Such an analysis will probably lead us into a plurality of only partly overlapping social and conceptual territories, a series of cultural formations that vary as their constituents change, combine in different sequences, or compose new patterns. In the following paragraphs I shall attempt to draw a very crude outline of the cultural formation underlying the classical Athenian institution of pederasty, an outline whose details will have to be filled in at some later point if this aspect of ancient Greek social relations is ever to be understood historically.

III

The attitudes and behaviors publicly displayed by the citizens of Athens (to whom the surviving evidence for the classical period effectively restricts our power to generalize) tend to portray sex not as a collective enterprise in which two or more persons jointly engage but rather as an action performed by one person upon another. The foregoing statement does not purport to describe positively what the experience of sex was “really” like for all members of Athenian society but to indicate how sex is represented by those utterances and actions of free adult males that were intended to be overheard and witnessed by other free adult males. Sex, as it is constituted by this public, masculine discourse, is either act or impact: It is not knit up in a web of mutuality, not something one invariably has with someone. Even the verb *aphrodisazein*, meaning “to have sex” or “to take active sexual pleasure,” is carefully differentiated into an active and a passive form; the active form occurs, tellingly, in a late antique list (that we nonetheless have good reason to consider representative for ancient Mediterranean culture, rather than eccentric to it) of acts that “do not regard one’s neighbors but only the subjects themselves and are not done in regard to or through others: namely, speaking, singing, dancing, fist-fighting, competing, hanging oneself, dying, being crucified, diving, finding a treasure, having sex, vomiting, moving one’s bowels, sleeping, laughing, crying, talking to the gods, and the like.” As John J. Winkler, in a commentary on this passage, observes, “It is not that second parties are not present at some of these events (speaking, boxing, competing, having sex, being crucified, flattering one’s favorite divinity), but that their successful achievement does not depend on the cooperation, much less the benefit, of a second party.”

Not only is sex in classical Athens not intrinsically relational or collaborative in character; it is, further, a deeply polarizing experience: It serves to divide, to classify, and to distribute its participants into distinct and radically dissimilar categories. Sex possesses this valence, apparently, because it is conceived to center essentially on, and to define itself around, an asymmetrical gesture, that of the penetration of the body of one person by the body—and, specifically, by the phallus—of another. Phallic penetration, moreover, is construed as sexual “activity”; even if a sexual act does not involve physical penetration, it still remains polarized by the distribution of phallic pleasure: The partner whose pleasure is promoted is considered “active,” while the partner who puts his or her body at the service of another’s pleasure is deemed “passive”—read “penetrated,” in the culture’s unself-conscious ideological shorthand. Sexual penetration, and sexual “activity” in general, are, in other words, thematized as domination: The relation between the “active” and the “passive” sexual partner is thought of as the same kind of relation as that obtaining between social superior and social inferior, between master and servant. “Active” and “passive” sexual roles are therefore necessarily isomorphic with superordinate and subordinate social status; hence, an adult, male citizen of Athens can have legitimate sexual relations only with statutory minors (his inferiors not in age but in social and political status): The proper targets of his sexual desire include, specifically, women, boys, foreigners, and slaves—all of them persons who do not enjoy the same legal and political rights and privileges that he does. Furthermore, what a citizen does in bed reflects the differential in status that distinguishes him from his sexual partner: The citizen’s superior prestige and authority express themselves by his sexual precedence—by his power to initiate a
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The very enterprise of inquiring into ancient Greek “sexuality,” then,
necessarily obscures the nature of the phenomenon it is designed to
eludicate because it effectively isolates sexual norms from social practices
and thereby conceals the strict sociological correspondences between
them. In classical Athens sex, as we have seen, was not simply a private
quest for mutual pleasure that absorbed, if only temporarily, the social
identities of its participants. Sex was a manifestation of public status, a
declaration of social identity; it did not so much express an individual’s
unique “sexuality” as it served to position social actors in the places
assigned to them (by virtue of their political standing) in the hierarchical
structure of the Athenian polity. Instead of reflecting the peculiar sexual
orientation of individual Athenians, the sexual protocols of classical Ath-
ens reflected a marked division in the social organization of the city-state
between a superordinate group, composed of citizens, and a subordinate
group, composed of noncitizens; sex between members of the first
group was practically inconceivable, whereas sex between a member of the first
group and a member of the second group mirrored in the minute details
of its hierarchical arrangement the relation of structured inequality that
governed their wider social interaction. Far from being interpreted as an
expression of commonality, as a sign of some shared sexual status or
orientation, sex between social superordinate and subordinate served, at
least in part, to articulate the social distance between them. To assimilate
both the senior and the junior partner in a pederastic relationship to the
same “sexuality,” for example, would therefore have struck a classical
Athenian as no less bizarre than to classify a burglar as an “active
Athenian” or a boy as a “passive criminal,” and the two of them alike as
partners in crime55 (burglary—like sex, as the Greeks understood it—is,
after all, a “nonrelational” act). The sexual identities of the ancient Greeks—
their experiences of themselves as sexual actors and as desiring human
beings—were hardly autonomous; quite the contrary: They were insep-
rable from, if not determined by, their social identities, their outward,
public standing. Indeed, the classical Greek record strongly supports the
conclusion drawn (from a quite different body of evidence) by the French
anthropologist Maurice Godelier: “It is not sexuality which haunts soci-
ety, but society which haunts the body’s sexuality.”56

In classical Athens, then, sexual partners came in two different kinds—
not male and female but active and passive, dominant and submissive.57
The relevant features of a sexual object were not so much determined by
a physical typology of genders as by the social articulation of power. That
is why the currently fashionable distinction between homosexuality and
heterosexuality had no meaning for the classical Athenians: There were
not, so far as they knew, two different kinds of “sexuality,” two differ-
cently structured psychosexual states or modes of affective orientation, but
a single form of sexual experience, which all free adult males shared—
making due allowance for variations in individual tastes, as one might
make for individual palates. Thus, in the Third Dithyramb by the classical
poet Bacchylides, the Athenian hero Theseus, voyaging to Crete among
the seven youths and seven maidens destined for the Minotaur and
defending one of the maidens from the sexual advances of the libidinous
Cretan commander, warns him vehemently against molesting any one of
the Athenian youths (in’ éthieon: 43)—that is, any girl or boy. Con-
versely, the antiquarian littérateur Athenaeus, writing six or seven hun-
dred years later, is amazed that Polykrates, the tyrant of Samos in the
sixth century B.C., did not send for any boys or women along with the
other luxury articles he imported to Samos for his personal use during his
reign, “despite his passion for relations with males” (12.540c–e).58 Now
both the notion that an act of heterosexual aggression in itself makes the
aggressor suspect of homosexual tendencies and the mirror-opposite no-
tion that a person with marked homosexual tendencies is bound to hanker
after heterosexual contacts are nonsensical to us, associating as we do
sexual object-choice with a determinate kind of “sexuality,” a fixed
sexual nature, but it would be a monumental task indeed to enumerate all
the ancient documents in which the alternative “boy or woman” occurs
with perfect nonchalance in an erotic context, as if the two were function-
ally interchangeable.59 Scholars sometimes describe this cultural forma-
tion as a bisexuality of penetration60 or as a heterosexuality indifferent to
its object,61 but I think it would be more accurate to describe it as a
single, undifferentiated phallic “sexuality” of penetration and domination,
a socio-sexual discourse whose basic terms are phallus and non-phallus.62

If there is a lesson that historians should draw from this picture of
ancient sexual attitudes and behaviors, it is that we need to de-center
sexuality from the focus of the interpretation of sexual experience. Just
because modern bourgeois Westerners are so obsessed with sexuality, so
convinced that it holds the key to the hermeneutics of the self (and hence
to social psychology as an object of historical study), we ought not
therefore to conclude that everyone has always considered sexuality a
basic and irreducible element in, or a central feature of, human life. On
the contrary, if the sketch I have offered is accurate, it seems that many
ancients conceived of “sexuality” in nonsexual terms: What was funda-
mental to their experience of sex was not anything we would regard as
essentially sexual; rather, it was something essentially social—namely,
the modality of power relations that informed and structured the sexual
act. Instead of viewing public and political life as a dramatization of
individual sexual psychology, as we often tend to do, they saw sexual
behavior as an expression of the dominant themes in contemporary social relations. When Artemidorus, a master dream analyst who lived and wrote in the second century A.D., came to address the meaning of sexual dreams, for example, he almost never presumed that such dreams were really about sex: They were about the rise and fall of the dreamer's public fortunes, the vicissitudes of his domestic economy. If a man dreams of having sex with his mother, according to Artemidorus, his dream signifies nothing in particular about his own sexual psychology, his fantasy life, or the history of his relations with his parents; it may signify—depending on the family's circumstances at the time, the sexual postures of the partners in the dream, and the mode of penetration—that the dreamer will be successful in politics, that he will go into exile or return from exile, that he will win his lawsuit, obtain a rich harvest from his lands, or change professions, among many other things (1.79). Artemidorus' system of dream interpretation begs to be compared to the indigenous dream lore of certain Amazonian tribes, equally innocent of "sexuality," who (despite their quite different socio-sexual systems) also believe in the predictive value of dreams and similarly reverse what modern bourgeois Westerners take to be the natural flow of signification in dreams (i.e., from what is public and social to what is private and sexual): in both Kagwahiv and Mehinaku culture, for example, dreaming about the female genitalia portends a wound; dreamt wounds do not symbolize the female genitalia.

To discover and to write the history of sexuality has long seemed to many a sufficiently radical undertaking in itself, inasmuch as its effect (if not the intention behind it) is to call into question the very naturalness of what we currently take to be essential to our individual natures. But in the course of implementing that ostensibly radical project many historians of sexuality seem to have reversed—perhaps unwittingly—its radical design: By preserving "sexuality" as a stable category of historical analysis not only have they not denaturalized it but, on the contrary, they have newly idealized it. To the extent, in fact, that histories of "sexuality" succeed in concerning themselves with sexuality, to just that extent are they doomed to fail as histories (Foucault himself taught us that much), unless they also include as an integral part of their proper enterprise the task of demonstrating the historicity, conditions of emergence, modes of construction, and ideological contingencies of the very categories of analysis that undergird their own practice. Instead of concentrating our attention specifically on the history of sexuality, then, we need to define and refine a new, and radical, historical sociology of psychology, an intellectual discipline designed to analyze the cultural poetics of desire, by which I mean the processes whereby sexual desires are constructed, mass-produced, and distributed among the various members of human living-groups. We must train ourselves to recognize conventions of feeling as well as conventions of behavior and to interpret the intricate texture of personal life as an artefact, as the determinate outcome, of a complex and arbitrary constellation of cultural processes. We must, in short, be willing to admit that what seem to be our most inward, authentic, and private experiences are actually, in Adrienne Rich's admirable phrase, "shared, unnecessary/and political."