

Pedagogy and Homosexuality in Ancient Greece

1. Pederasty and Pedagogy

It is clear from a variety of sources that from the Archaic period onwards, pederasty (or adult male to male child love/sex) was part of the gymnasia and hence the educational system. Usually this took the form of intercrural sex, foreplay, and gift-giving to boys.

2. The myth of the Three Sexes (Halperin 19)

According to Aristophanes [in Plato's *Symposium*], 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 being 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, quotes selectively). Boswell [a critic]...interprets this to mean that according to Plato's Aristophanes homosexual and heterosexual interests are "both exclusive and innate."

3. Does Homosexuality Make Men "Soft"? A Critique of the *Molles* by Caelius in *De morbis chronicis*, a later Roman text that has a 2nd C A.D. Grk. source (Halperin 22)

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 impeccable masculinity by noting how difficult it is to believe that such people actually exist; he goes on to observe that the cause of their affliction is not natural (that is, organic) but 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 women 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. The mental disease in question...strikes both women and men alike and is defined as a perversion of sexual desire.

4. Did Homosexuality and Pederasty Disrupt the Athenian Social Order?

A. SEX AS POWER

1. "the attitudes and behaviors publicly displayed by the citizens of Athens...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" (Halperin 29).
2. "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" (Halperin 30).
3. Sex is hierarchical: "'Active' and 'passive' sexual roles are ...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 in his sexual precedence--in his power to initiate a sexual act, his right to obtain pleasure from it, and his assumption of an insertive rather than a receptive sexual role" (Halperin 30-31).

B. SEX AS WEAKNESS

1. In his comedy *Thesmophoriazousae*, Aristophanes mocks Agathon for "wearing women's clothes in order to understand better a female character in a play he was writing. Because of this and other portraits of male passives, Aristophanes has often been considered as critical of pederasty...[however] His ridicule targeted only men who took the 'female role' in sex or became obsessed with pursuing boys" (Percy 186).
2. "To prevent the type of homosexuality caused by practice instead of nature, Aristotle prescribed a puritanical education that prohibited obscene paintings and sculptures as well as kisses authorized even by Plato in his *Republic* (486b). He further recommended that boys and youths should be protected from the advances of slaves and segregated from their elders in the gymnasias (*Politics*, 1331a, 1336a) (Percy 188).

5. Journal/ Discussion Questions:

1. How is male-male love depicted in the Greek lyrics we are reading? Pick one poem and analyze it in detail. (See the lyric handout for help.)
2. How is pederasty portrayed in Athenian art? What do you make of the subversive moments in Greek vases? Compare one of the images from the Greek vase paintings to your poem. (See <http://www.androphile.org/preview/Culture/Greece/SWpottery.htm> for examples)

Bibliography

- Halperin, David. *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*. NY: Routledge, 1990.
- Percy, William. *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece*. Urbana, IL: U. of Illinois P., 1996.