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0521479347 - Foucault's Virginité: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality

Simon Goldhill

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The sexy, witty and often bizarre novels, poetry and dialogues of the first centuries of this era (works such as Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon* and Plutarch's *Amatorius*) were being composed at the same time as fundamental ideas about the body, gender and sexuality were being set in place with the rise of Christianity and the Church to dominate the pagan world. Modern writers on the history of sexuality have largely ignored this literature in favour of prose treatises, philosophy and Christian homilies. Simon Goldhill, writing with the same wit and verve as the ancient writers he engages with, sets out to put these texts back into the history of sexuality. The result is a dazzling celebration of sex and sexuality in the Greek literature of the first centuries CE.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars in many fields: it is a lively and readable contribution to literary criticism, classical studies and the history of the novel; to the discourse of sexuality and gender studies; and to early Christian studies and theology. All Greek is translated.

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This lecture series was established by public subscription, to honour the memory of William Bedell Stanford, Regius Professor of Greek in Trinity College, Dublin, from 1940 to 1980, and Chancellor of the University of Dublin from 1982 to 1984.

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FOUCAULT'S VIRGINITY

*Ancient erotic fiction and
the history of sexuality*

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and Fellow of King's College*



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'Male lions don't desire male lions, because lions don't do philosophy.'

If wonder is the beginning of intellectual enquiry, it is wonder and laughter that has prompted the essays in this book. My opening quotation comes from a late Greek text that sets up a debate on whether it is better to desire boys or to desire women; it's a claim from a wonderful and erotically charged demonstration that male desire for males is the only true choice for a philosopher.¹ The three essays that make up this volume are all concerned with Greek writing from later antiquity about desire, *eros*. In particular, the erotic narratives of the novel tradition form the main body of the material to be discussed; and the development of a normative discourse about desire provides the questions on which I focus: what the proper nature of desire is, how it is to be written about, how it is to be controlled and patrolled. My overriding concern (thus) is with the interplays between desire's narratives and the normative.

While most of the texts I shall be considering show the wit, verve and outrageousness of the period known as the Second Sophistic, it must not be forgotten that at the same time there is taking place one of the most important transformations in Western cultural attitudes to sexuality and the body, a transformation inevitably associated primarily with the rise of Christianity. At about the same time as the author of the *Erotas* was using lions to prove the natural connection between philosophy and desiring boys, Augustine was arguing that even if a female body had been penetrated and violated by an *obstetrix*, 'a female midwife', 'whether by testing, malevolence, inexperience or chance', surely only the *integritas* and not the *sanctitas* of the girl's body had been damaged.² Defining the

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mutually implicative categories of *integritas* (wholeness, integrity, being untouched), and *sanctitas* (holiness, purity, untouchability), is a fundamental labour of Christian homiletics on desire and the body. Part of the importance of the works I shall be discussing comes simply from the teleology – set firmly on the agenda by Michel Foucault, Peter Brown and others – that sees later antiquity as the time when a crucial modern inheritance was formulated. My key texts – humorous, oblique, baroque – play an integral role in this intense and passionately contested development.

There are three contemporary debates to which I hope these essays will make a contribution. The first and most straightforward contribution is to literary criticism and classical studies, which have largely ignored both the central and the marginal texts of the following chapters. It is surprising how often one reads about the rise of the novel in the Western tradition without encountering not merely the name of Heliodorus, the widest read of Greek novelists from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, but also any recognition of the ancient novel at all. Although Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, now the most famous of the novels and the focus of my first chapter, has in recent years begun to receive some of the attention it deserves – the chapter can thus be shorter than the others – there has been little discussion either of *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, Achilles Tatius' masterpiece, or of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* (despite its huge influence in the Renaissance), or of Plutarch's *Amatorius*, or of the epigrams, or of the prose homilies that all find a place in what follows; none has been admitted to the canon with regularity or relish. Only part of the blame for this can be laid at the doors of the Victorians, who found the sexy, violent and sophisticated writing of the novels inappropriate for Classical Study. Or as it was put by an academic in Cambridge, objecting not so long ago to their inclusion in the Tripos: 'Just Not Greek'. The novels certainly aren't Thucydides . . . It's customary to begin a book that stars the Greek novels with a lament or an apology, followed by plot summaries. I will just say that I hope what I have written will turn more readers towards the pleasures of a remarkable and underappreciated corpus.

The second debate which informs these essays is the contemporary interest in the history of sexuality, or more precisely in the history of the discourse of sexuality. There is not much in these

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essays about what people did to or with each other: the historiographical problems for such a project in such a period are well known. My focus is on what gets written about desire – and this discussion may help show some of the ways in which the lures and tropes of narrative, the stories told about desire, are an intrinsic element in the formation of a culture's negotiation of sexuality. Surprisingly and in striking contrast with, say, the literature of the classical city or the poetry of Republican Rome, the Greek writing I discuss has only rarely been allowed to have a voice in the history of sexuality. I hope to show not only that it has been wrongly silenced, but also that what it has to say may make a telling contribution to the general question of how desire is (to be) written about. The writers I discuss are nearly all male writers and my concern (thus) is primarily with the multiform constructions of male sexuality. The middle chapter is in all senses central: the first chapter's concern with violence, innocence and the construction of norms through reading about desire, and the third chapter's concern with the representation of females as objects of male desire, frame the discussion of male desire for males. The aim of this book is to explore how the male desiring subject is articulated within and across such a variegated range of interlocking fields, disciplines, writings, questions.

The third area of debate is signalled by my title and is a subset of the previous two, namely, the specific and influential contribution to both classical studies and the history of sexuality made by Michel Foucault. His final books, *The History of Sexuality*, vols. 2 and 3, with their strongly articulated overall view of a vast period, coupled with sets of readings of often obscure texts, set out to do for later Greek and Roman writing (as well as earlier texts) what Peter Brown has achieved for the Christian apologists and polemicists. Foucault's work has been deeply influential and profoundly provocative – with great cause. A recent critic has commented, however, that there hasn't been much criticism of these later volumes, except, she adds somewhat sniffily, for occasional classicists complaining of Foucault's inaccuracies of interpretation (as if mere (mis)reading was unimportant when there are Big Ideas to be discussed).³ She herself goes on to analyse Foucault's concept of the self and sexuality with barely a reference to the texts from which his conceptualization is developed. This is paradigmatic, it seems, of a difficulty in maintain-

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ing the balance between an engagement with the sweep of Foucault's vision, and an engagement with the series of individual readings from which that sweeping vision is formulated. I will in my classicist hat sometimes point to places where systematic misreading seems to me to be more than usually debilitating to an argument. But my major interest, most explicitly articulated in the second and third chapters, is with how Foucault (and certain Foucauldians) have discussed the formation of a sexual discourse, its boundaries, negotiations and contestations. It is not by chance, I shall argue, that it is the *narratives* of the novels (and works like Plutarch's *Amatorius*) that are treated most inadequately by Foucault. The engagement required by these allusive, ironic, and highly self-reflexive texts produces not only problematic history, but also a problematizing frame for the homiletic texts with which Foucault is most concerned.

Much as Foucault is necessarily part of the history he describes, so too I am acutely conscious of the necessary implication of a critic in such a subject, not least when I examine the problematic status of claims to truth and authority, to be the teacher who knows, the *erotodidaskalos*, in ancient and modern discussions of desire, and the complicities involved in reading and writing about desire. Who could escape with *integritas* and/or *sanctitas* untouched from such debates? Even the constant questions of such self-consciousness – what Hegel calls the 'labour of the negative' – cannot conceal that to speak about desire is to speak from a position of (some) authority (even or especially when contesting the certainty of authorization). It is in the full sense of the phrase that I wish this book to be seen as a *contribution* to an ongoing, contemporary debate. An opening for further discussions. Amid the vulnerabilities of (intellectual, social, sexual) self-positioning, the rhetorical stance of the distanced, objective, unimplicated commentator on such material is simply an untenable claim. The question is, how is engagement to be negotiated?

The chapters that follow are essays, and make no pretence to a fullness of coverage, nor have I tried to provide the lengthy bibliography that classicists like. I have included the Greek of most passages discussed, however, because few people will have ready access to all the relevant texts. They are put at the bottom of the page to be easily ignorable by non-Greek readers, who are an intended

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readership. The three chapters look at virginity and the complicity of reading erotic narratives; male desire for males, and how irony and comedy affect the normative nature of erotic narrative and arguments about desire; the representation of the female and female desire in male arguments about the properness and control of desire. The three topics are clearly interrelated not least in their consideration of how the normative emerges from, is inscribed in, and is manipulated by erotic narrative.

I was first asked to speak about the novel by Jim Tatum for the International Conference on the Ancient Novel at Dartmouth, and I owe thanks to him and the other participants at that superb congregation for their educative responses to what has now after many years become chapter 1. These three essays owe their present form, however, to the invitation of Professor John Dillon on behalf of the Faculty of Classics at Trinity College, Dublin, to give the Stanford Memorial Lectures, which were delivered in 1993 under the title 'Ravishing Bodies and Penetrating Arguments'. For the kind hospitality of all the department and the audiences in Dublin much thanks. Thanks too go to the Department of Classics at Cambridge which granted me sabbatical leave during which the lectures were prepared and given. In turning the lectures into essays, and the essays into a book, I have been helped by discussions with many friends and colleagues: Carol Gilligan and Judith Butler kept me focused on the general issues; the Cambridge ancient fiction *équipe* were particularly helpful, especially Richard Hunter and Helen Lakka, who read and annotated; Froma Zeitlin read and debated much of this during her time in Cambridge (and still is debating); Malcolm Schofield, Jonathan Walters, Kate Cooper, Geoffrey Lloyd read greater or lesser parts with care and assistance; John Henderson, as ever, read, commented, and supported through it all.

I dedicate this book with love to Sarah Rebecca Goldhill, for hugs and kisses, while it was being thought about, sketched and typed.