

CLASSICAL GREECE

480–323 BCE

• Pindar's Odes •

The classical age in ancient Greece is usually conceived as extending from the battle of Marathon in 490 to the defeat of the Greek allies by Philip of Macedon at Chaeronea in 338. Among its finest achievements are to be reckoned the establishment of democracy at Athens, the Athenian tragic drama, the comedies of Aristophanes, the sculpting of the Olympian Zeus by Phidias, the philosophical dialogues of Plato in the fourth century, and—if we extend the period by a generation or two—the teachings of the Stoics. After 400 the political leadership of Greece passed from Athens to Sparta and then to Thebes. The Macedonian phalanxes extinguished Greek liberty at Chaeronea but spread Greek culture to undreamt-of distant realms through the campaigns of Alexander. In all of these culminating developments in literature, art, philosophy, and war, male love in some form or other was to play a part.

The herald of this cultural efflorescence was the poet Pindar, who was thirty when the Athenians triumphed over the Persians at Marathon. Born in a Boeotian village near Thebes, he ranked after Sappho as Hellas' greatest lyric poet. Like Alcaeus and Theognis before him, Pindar was an aristocrat with ties to many noble families. Consequently his poetic eulogies of young men pay much heed to birth and breeding. But unlike his predecessors, he was not soured by political strife. Pindar saw his art as a noble calling in which inspiration and a superbly polished technique served one high purpose. His odes are stately, dignified, and sublime, his elevated style contrasting with the unbuttoned casualness of Ibycus and Anacreon in much the same way that Milton's solemnity in seventeenth-century England would differ from the witty colloquialism of Donne and the cavalier poets. But if Pindar differed from his predecessors in style, he shared one characteristic: Athenaeus classed him with Ibycus and Anacreon as a notably, even "im-

moderately," erotic poet. After citing some of Pindar's most impassioned praise of youthful athletes, he observed, "Altogether, many persons prefer liaisons with males to those with females."¹

A cliché of traditional classical scholarship claims that "the homosexual ethos seemed limited to an elite subculture."² But Pindar's odes—which were very much public poetry, sung formally at ceremonies in halls or temples or in front of a victor's house—unselfconsciously treat of homoerotic desire. In his first Olympian ode Pindar rewrites Greek mythology. According to the received legend, Tantalus had chopped up his son Pelops and served him to the gods at dinner to test their omniscience. Pindar rejects this story as degrading to the gods' dignity. Pelops temporarily disappears in Pindar's ode, not because he is boiled in a cauldron but because Poseidon has abducted him for amorous purposes, thus setting a precedent for Zeus's later rape of Ganymede. Pindar's remodeling of the story was meant as a compliment to Pelops, whose history, told in marble, adorned a famous temple at Olympia, and to Elis, the nearby city that claimed Pelops as its legendary founder.

Though he challenged Ganymede's precedence, Pindar used the myth in other odes. In the tenth Olympian, he describes the young boxer Hagesidamus as "fair to look upon" and "graced with that bloom which, in olden days, by the blessing of Aphrodite, warded off from Ganymede a ruthless fate"—that is, the mortality Zeus's love spared him.³ But it is not only handsome faces and muscled bodies that appeal to Pindar; in the Sixth Pythian he also compliments Thrasybulus on his modesty, his literary talent, and the amiability of his temper, which outdoes the sweetness of the "honey-bee."

Though Pindar preached moderation in love and cautiously limited it to its "due season," his emotions did not always accord with his maxims. In his old age he fell in love with Theoxenus of Tenodos, who revived all his youthful ardor:

Right it were, my heart,
To cull the flowers of love in due season, in life's prime.
But whosoever, once he has seen the rays
Flashing from the eyes of Theoxenus,
Is not tossed on the waves of desire
Has a black heart forged, in cold flame, of adamant or of iron,
Having no honor from Aphrodite of the quick glance . . .
But I to grace the goddess, like wax of the sacred bees
When smitten by the sun,
Am melted when I look at the young limbs of boys.⁴

One account of Pindar's death tells how, aged eighty, he died in the theater of Argos leaning upon the shoulder of Theoxenus.⁵

• Greek Tragedy •

We may assume that some Greek lyric poetry, like some modern verse, was written for a specialized audience. But Athenian drama, to justify the expense of public performances, must necessarily have had a wide appeal. Were homoerotic themes popular in the classical Athenian theater? Here is Athenaeus' testimony on the point: "So active was the pursuit of love-affairs, since no one regarded erotic persons as vulgar, that even a great poet like Aeschylus, and Sophocles, introduced in the theater love themes in their tragedies—the first that of Achilles and Patroclus, the second that of the boys in *Niobe*: hence some call the tragedy *Paederastría* [sic] and the audience gladly accepted such stories."⁶ Here Athenaeus not only reveals the existence of a class of dramas now lost to us but vouches for their breadth of appeal.

It is assumed that Aeschylus' lost play *The Myrmidons* showed Patroclus donning the armor of Achilles to fight at Troy and Achilles' grief when his friend was killed. We know it now only from fragments, but its outline is fairly clear.⁷ Its emotional climax was Achilles' speech over his lover's corpse. Finding Patroclus' body stripped naked on the battlefield by the Trojans, Achilles reproached the dead man in two lines that underlined the sexual side of their passion: "Had you no reverence for the unsullied holiness of your thighs / Ungrateful for the many kisses I gave you?"⁸ Sophocles struck a similarly erotic note in another lost play, *The Colchian Women*, where he described Ganymede as "setting Zeus's majesty aflame with his thighs."⁹

That Sophocles' *Niobe* should have been renowned as a play about male love may seem especially strange. In the legend, Niobe boasts that she had borne more children than Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis. For this hubris the divine pair shoot dead her seven sons and seven daughters. It is difficult to imagine how an erotic interest can have been paramount in this devastating maternal tragedy. Plutarch, however, gives a detail that confirms Athenaeus: "When the children of Niobe, in Sophocles, are being pierced and dying, one of them cries out, appealing to no other rescuer or ally than his lover."¹⁰ The moment cannot have been merely incidental: the re-titling of the play as the *Paederastría* shows that the theme must somehow have been fully developed in the drama.

Though we know little of Aeschylus' love affairs, a plethora of tales have come down to us about his fellow dramatists. We learn that, in bisexual Athens, Sophocles, a strikingly handsome youth himself, was chiefly attracted to young men. Athenaeus calls him "as fond of young lads as Euripides was fond of women."¹¹ Plutarch, in his life of Pericles, records an episode during a naval expedition: when the poet praised a beautiful boy, presumably a young recruit, Pericles warned him that a general must keep not only his hands clean but even his eyes.¹² Yet, as was customary, Sophocles married and had children; one son, Iophon, also wrote tragedies.

Matthew Arnold hailed Sophocles as a serene sage who saw “life steadily and saw it whole.” But this Victorian dignity is hardly projected by Plutarch or Plato or by other anecdotes that have come down to us. One story tells how, on a visit to Chios, Sophocles tricked a handsome wine-bearer into bringing his lips near his cup so he could steal a kiss. In his defense Sophocles declared: “I am practicing strategy, gentlemen, since Pericles told me that though I could write poetry I didn’t know how to be a general.”¹³ The gossip Hieronymos of Rhodes recounts another anecdote: when Sophocles was sixty-five he lost his cape to a boy who made off with it after they had consorted in a field outside Athens. Euripides teased him by boasting that he had enjoyed the youth “without paying any bonus.”¹⁴

Euripides, the last of the three great tragedians, also wrote at least one play on a pederastic theme, his lost *Chrysippus*, which told of the boy’s rape by Oedipus’ father Laius, king of Thebes. Euripides’ fascination with women did not preclude an interest in his own sex. In 408, at odds with the Athenians who disapproved of his religious skepticism, he accepted an invitation to the court of King Archelaus of Macedon. Archelaus, an enthusiastic patron of Athenian culture, was already host to Euripides’ fellow dramatist Agathon, who ranked next after the three immortals as a writer of tragedies. Agathon was both beautiful and effeminate—a side of his personality satirized by Aristophanes in the *Thesmophoriazusae*. In Plato’s *Symposium*, supposedly set in 416 BCE on the occasion of Agathon’s winning the prize for tragedy, Aristophanes classifies Pausanias and Agathon as males who are attracted to other men, hinting that they are lovers, and Socrates makes the same assumption when he encounters them together in the *Protagoras*.¹⁵ When Euripides (at age seventy) arrived in Macedon, he fell in love with the younger playwright, who was then about forty. As a couple they became the proverbial instance of love between older men. Plutarch concludes: “Euripides . . . observed upon embracing and kissing Agathon, though the latter’s beard had already grown, that even the autumn of the fair is fair.”¹⁶

• Phidias •

As Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were supreme in drama, so Phidias ranked first in sculpture. His Olympian Zeus was perhaps the most admired work of art in classical antiquity. To Dio Chrysostom it was “the guardian of Hellas when she is of one mind and not distraught with faction”: “When you stand before this statue, you forget every misfortune of our earthly life, even though you have been broken by adversities and grief . . . so great is the splendor and beauty of the artist’s creation.”¹⁷ Pliny called it the statue “which nobody has ever rivaled.”¹⁸ Quintilian declared that “its beauty can be said to have added something to traditional religion, so adequate to the

divine nature is the majesty of his work.”¹⁹ Eventually it was counted among the Seven Wonders of the World. Unfortunately, all of Phidias’ masterpieces have perished: his manner can now best be judged from the Parthenon frieze, which he designed and supervised.

Two of Phidias’ *eromenoi* are known to us. One was Agoracritus of Paros, his pupil and disciple, who modeled a colossal Nemesis at Rhamnus in Attica.²⁰ So close was this statue in style to Phidias that it was rumored Phidias crafted the work for his lover and allowed him to palm it off as his own. Pantarces of Elis was even more closely associated with the sculptor. A statue at Olympia commemorated his victory in the games, and another at Elis honored him for making peace with the Achaeans and effecting the release of prisoners of war.²¹ Pausanias reports a tradition that Phidias memorialized their love by representing Pantarces as an athlete in the frieze that decorated the base of his Zeus at Olympia, where the young man was shown binding his head with a ribbon.²² Phidias also paid amorous homage by inscribing on the finger of the god the words *Pantarces kalos* (“Pantarces is beautiful”), much to the scandal of one Christian critic, Clement of Alexandria, who found united in this one detail two of his prime aversions, homosexuality and paganism.²³

• The Comedies of Aristophanes •

Greek tragedies on male love have vanished, leaving only comments and occasional lines. But there is no dearth of references to homosexuality in the comedies of Aristophanes, the first of which was performed in 427, a few years after Phidias’ death. In the *Thesmophoriazusae* (“The Women at the Thesmophoria,” a festival of the mother-goddess Demeter, from which men were excluded), Agathon appears dressed as a woman, his excuse being that he is writing a tragedy and must imagine himself in the role of its heroine. Another favorite target is the contemptible Cleisthenes (not the restorer of democracy but a professional informer of ill repute), who is mocked in the *Acharnians* as an effeminate eunuch and in the *Lysistrata* as a resource for sex-starved husbands whose wives are on strike.

This ridicule shows that not all forms of consensual homosexual behavior were approved by the Greeks. In particular, it demonstrates how the Greeks saw effeminacy in the male as degrading. The masculine status of the adult Athenian male was not jeopardized by sexual acts with other men or boys so long as he took the dominant, active role. Literary and anthropological evidence shows this bias to be widespread. It is reflected in Greek comedy and in the satirical epigrams of the Greek Anthology; in Roman poetry in the attacks on effeminate men in Catullus, Juvenal, and Martial, all of whom favor boy love but violently excoriate the passive adult; and in the “macho”

ethic of the modern Mediterranean world and Latin America, where the maintenance of the male role is the crucial concern. In imperial Rome, as Christianity took hold, this cultural trait was to have deadly consequences in Roman law.

This being the case, *katapygnos* (having broad buttocks) and *euryproctos* (having a wide anus) were common abusive epithets in Attic Greek. Aristophanes uses them freely. Sometimes they mean merely “contemptible” or “trashy,” but some sexual coloring remains. What is surprising is how frequently Aristophanes applies them to his fellow citizens. Politicians, lawyers, and generals are all berated as *euryproctoi*, that is, men who will stoop to anything to succeed. In *The Clouds*, Aristophanes’ spokesman, Right Logic, includes the audience generally in the charge. There is, undoubtedly, something unpleasant in this phenomenon—the closest Aristophanes comes to gay-baiting. It must have elicited forced and uneasy laughter by playing on the audience’s fear of demasculinization and reinforcing prejudices against men who did not conform to the Athenian male stereotype. Philo’s homicidal fury lay ahead.

But Aristophanes is no puritan. Casual sexual encounters of all sorts seem as desirable to Aristophanes’ plebeian heroes as they seemed abhorrent to Socrates, Plato, and their circle. As usual in Greek society, bisexuality is taken for granted. When Dionysos in *The Frogs* admits to an urge, Heracles unselfconsciously asks whether it is for a woman, a boy—or a man? (Only the latter would have provoked a snicker: Dionysos is the only Greek deity represented in myth as playing a passive role.)²⁴ The boisterous Athenian workmen who are Aristophanes’ protagonists are randy for any kind of sex that does not compromise their maleness. Philocleon in the *Wasps* enjoys examining naked boys as part of his jury duty. In the *Acharnians*, Dicaeopolis hails the phallic god he worships as an “adulterer” and *paidēastes*.²⁵ At the conclusion of the *Knights*, its hero is awarded both a boy and a troop of girls as prizes.²⁶ In the *Birds*, Peisetairos fantasizes a utopia “where the father of a good-looking boy will meet me and go on at me as if I’ve done him a wrong: ‘That was a nice way to treat my son, Stilbonides! You met him when he’d had a bath, leaving the gymnasium, and you didn’t kiss him, you didn’t say a word to him, you didn’t pull him close to you, you didn’t tickle his balls—and you an old friend of the family!’”²⁷

No side of human life is idealized in Aristophanes. Gods, statesmen, poets, military commanders, wives—everyone in these comedies is venal, coarse, lecherous, gluttonous. Even Dionysus, the patron of the festival at which the plays were presented, is portrayed as a coward and buffoon. It is not surprising, therefore, that male love is treated without glamour or sentiment. Perhaps the character who comes closest to recognizing a ideal side to pederasty is Karion in *Wealth*, who laments that boys no longer yield to men from love but only for gifts or money.²⁸

• Plato's *Symposium* •

So far, our picture of male amours in ancient Greece has been drawn from poetry, drama, art, and historical anecdotes. With the dawn of the fourth century, new and more complex perspectives appear. The philosophical discourses of Plato and Xenophon offer a cornucopia of opinions and insights, with vivid glimpses of the intimate side of Greek social life. In the place of fragmentary comments we have elaborate debates, with a wealth of sociological detail and, in the case of Plato, subtle characterizations and touches of irony. Undoubtedly the most brilliant and instructive of these works is Plato's *Symposium*. But its very richness presents special challenges. Its seven speakers were well-known Athenians who express significantly different views on the male eros. This raises important questions. Do the words Plato puts in their mouths, so often at odds with his own, represent views widely held in Athens, or were they simply idiosyncratic? And to what extent was Plato's own position, conveyed through his mouthpiece Socrates, accepted by Greek society? Was it typical, or was it rather the view of a utopian dreamer, like his proposals regarding marriage and property in the *Republic*?

Plato's outlook was colored by his heredity. He was born into a wealthy aristocratic family claiming descent from Solon and Athens' ancient kings. In 404, at the end of the Peloponnesian War, relatives and friends of Plato participated in the oligarchic terror that convulsed Athens under the Council of Thirty; the restored democracy, in revenge, executed Socrates in 399. Plato's detestation of popular government must have been powerfully reinforced by this judicial murder. His own social philosophy combined the Cynics' devotion to the simple life (rejecting both luxury and familial comforts) with an aristocratic ideal of service which sank individualism in Spartan communalism. Like most Greeks, he was passionately devoted to intellectual debate. He was also Greek in his ardent belief in love—that is, male love. But he abhorred pleasure as much as he did democratic politicians, and sexual pleasure was for him especially threatening. Plato's ideal lovers remain palpitantly desirous of each other but unremittingly chaste.

His own susceptibility to young men—to judge from his poignant descriptions of such feelings in the *Charmides* and *Phaedrus*—must have been intense. Diogenes Laertius in a biographical sketch quotes five poems ascribed to Plato as evidence of his “passionate affection” for males. (There are also three, less certainly Plato's, addressed to women.) Agathon's kisses, Plato declares, draw his soul fluttering to his lips. Of Aster, his pupil in astronomy, he wrote, punning on his name: “Star-gazing Aster, would I were the skies, / To gaze upon thee with a thousand eyes.”²⁹ In another poem he hesitates to praise Alexis' beauty: he lost Phaedrus through such praise. Plato's authorship of these lines has occasionally been challenged, but most scholars regard them as authentic.

Plato's best-documented attachment, in which love, politics, and philosophy mingled, was for Dion of Syracuse. Dion was the nephew of the tyrant Dionysos, who ruled Sicily and southern Italy. Enamored of Plato's wisdom, Dion brought him to Syracuse in 387 hoping to win his uncle over to a less harsh and arbitrary form of government. The visit was a notable failure, but Plato returned twenty years later, again at Dion's request, to act as mentor to the tyrant's heir. But the second Dionysos proved no more tractable than the first: Dion was exiled and Plato with him. After throwing himself enthusiastically into the founding of the Academy at Athens, the conscientious but arrogant and self-righteous Dion invaded Sicily and overthrew Dionysos, only to be himself assassinated after a brief, turbulent reign. The depth of Plato's feeling for him is clear in the epitaph he composed: "[Now] in your wide-wayed city, honored at last, you rest, / O Dion, whose love once maddened the heart within this breast."³⁰

Plato wrote the *Symposium* about 385, shortly after his first journey to Syracuse. The dialogue, set thirty years earlier at Agathon's house where friends have met to celebrate his victory as a dramatist, provides an engaging picture of casual Greek manners. The men recline in pairs on couches, a custom which invited some amorous teasing, and compete in composing panegyrics on love—what modern stag party would choose such a theme? Though statements by the various speakers are often carelessly cited as "according to Plato," they represent, in fact, quite various attitudes, and it is necessary, if we are to understand what the dialogue has to tell us about Athenian views on homosexuality, to differentiate them carefully.

Some assumptions are shared. All assume that serious love will usually mean love between men, generally love of an older for a younger male. Phaedrus strikes the keynote: love is an exalted experience, to be fostered and cherished. His argument is first of all, as we have seen, the traditional military one. The crucial test is the lovers' willingness to face death, a more likely test of men than of women. Phaedrus does, however, recognize one notable exception—Alcestis, who died to prolong the life of her husband, Admetus. But Achilles, who sacrificed himself to avenge his beloved Patroclus, ranks as the archetype of hero-lovers.

Phaedrus' speech is naive, enthusiastic, uncritical. It is no doubt meant to represent the first notions that might come into the mind of a literate Athenian of an idealistic turn. In his pro-amorist zeal he goes so far as to conjure up an "army of lovers" who, fighting side by side, might conquer the world. More startling still is his novel claim that a city of lovers would be, of all communities, the "best governed"—another speaker will take up this theme. But throughout we are left in the dark on one point: is the love he is extolling "platonic" in the common sense of the word, or does it allow for a sexual element?

Pausanias, the next speaker, takes up this point. The Greeks worshiped

gods under different aspects in different places: Aphrodite bore, among others, the epithets Pandemos (“of all the people” or “of the streets”) and Urania (daughter of Uranus or Heaven). From these two designations Pausanias derives his distinction between two kinds of love, a lower (or common) love and a higher (or heavenly) love, both associated with the goddess. This distinction is so much a commonplace of Western ethics that one is startled to realize that this is its first appearance. The lower love is purely carnal, the higher adds spirit to flesh. (It is important to realize that Pausanias’ “heavenly love”—unlike later versions—does not exclude the physical.) They are further differentiated by the objects of their desire. The common love is such as the “meaner sort of men” feel for women as well as youths. The other, higher love is the love of youths whose beards have started to sprout, that is, of “intelligent beings whose reason is beginning to be developed.”³¹

Pausanias thus gives a rationale for Athenians who are attracted to post-adolescent males. In this he challenges the traditional norm: most Greeks considered beardless boys the more appropriate objects of desire. To argue that his is no merely eccentric taste, Pausanias appeals to two other Greek values: pleasure in intellectual converse (which only older youths are capable of) and enduring fidelity. The love of boys is fleeting, but devotees of the Uranian Aphrodite who choose young men, he claims, “are ready to be faithful to their companions, and pass their whole life with them, not to take them in their inexperience and . . . then run away to others.”³² We know that many Greeks had relations with both women and boys. But Pausanias clearly identifies another class of man—a *class* who are exclusively devoted to their own sex, approximating the modern conception of the “homosexual.” This idea of a homosexual “orientation,” though by no means central to Greek thinking as it is to ours, was certainly understood by Plato and his contemporaries.

Sentiment in ancient Greece overwhelmingly approved male love, but on the question as to whether such love should be physical, opinion was divided. Pausanias takes a middle ground: boys may grant their favors to men but only under certain conditions. In Elis and Boeotia male relations are fully accepted by the law, and sexual contact is taken for granted. The suppression of male love in Ionia he explains as a policy of tyrannical rulers. Pausanias rejects both traditions, the first as libertine, the second as repressive, arguing instead that an honorable young man should yield his favors only to an older man who will be his mentor in the pursuit of wisdom and virtue.

Eryximachus, who speaks next, is pompous and prudential. Aristophanes, who follows him, is as fantastic and imaginative as Eryximachus is prosaic and sets forth an engaging myth. Originally, he speculates, all human beings were double creatures with two faces, four arms, and four legs, and of three kinds—double males, double females, and doubles formed from both sexes.

But when these quadrupeds rebelled against him, Zeus split each in two, whereupon the severed halves desperately tried to reunite by embracing. Aristophanes, of course, lacks our modern vocabulary, but his taxonomy, in effect, distinguishes what we would today call heterosexual and homosexual orientations. But his prejudice against heterosexuals is marked, even outrageous, and homosexuals get all the praise:

Men who are a section of that double nature which was once called androgynous [made up of a man and a woman] are lovers of women, adulterers are generally of this breed, and also adulterous women who lust after men. The women who are a section of the woman do not care for men, but have female attachments: the female companions [that is, lesbians] are of this sort. But they who are a section of the male follow the male, and while they are young, being slices of the original man, they have affection for men and embrace them [the Greek verb implies a sexual sense], and these are the best of boys and youths, because they have the most manly nature.³³

In this passage male chauvinism passes into gay chauvinism, so far did Greek conservatism invert modern conservatism. The coupling of men and women provided, Aristophanes tells us, for the continuation of the race; in the case of male pairs, their intercourse made it possible that, “if man came to man, they might be satisfied, and rest, and go their ways to the business of life.”³⁴ Like Pausanias, he also speaks of pairs of males who “pass their whole lives together.”

Aristophanes’ myth also stakes out a moral position. Aristophanes admits that some Greeks call such lovers “shameless,” but this criticism merely stimulates him to a more emphatic defense.³⁵ Not only do male halves make the *best* politicians, *only* they, he claims, have distinguished themselves in public life—an obvious exaggeration, as the case of a Pericles indicates. Since Aristophanes so often attacks politicians in his comedies, Kenneth Dover has speculated that he must be speaking here with dead-pan “sarcasm.”³⁶ But Phaedrus has already made a similar claim that male lovers make the “best governors” of cities. And, as we have seen, this association of statesmanship with male love affairs would have seemed not a paradox but a truism to Athenians familiar with the history of their city.

In Aristophanes’ romantic peroration we sense that the spirit of Plato has made him his medium:

When they [halves of the double male] reach manhood they are lovers of youth, and are not naturally inclined to marry or beget children—if at all, they do so only in obedience to custom; but they are satisfied if they may be allowed to live with one another unwedded . . . And when one of them meets with his other half . . . the pair are lost in an amazement of love and friendship and intimacy, and one will not be out of the other’s sight, as I

may say, even for a moment: these are the people who pass their whole lives together; and yet they could not explain what they desire of one another. For the intense yearning which each of them has towards the other does not appear to be the desire of lover's intercourse, but of something else which the soul . . . has only a dark and doubtful presentiment . . . And the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love.³⁷

But can couples who formed such life-long bonds be identified in a culture where the norm was more often pederastic? The answer would appear to be yes, in the Platonic Academy. After the death of Plato, headship of the school passed to his nephew Speusippus. Then, with the accession of Xenocrates, it devolved for a century (from 339 to 240) from lover to lover. Diogenes Laertius (who wrote his *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers* about 220 CE) tells us that the young Polemo, on a dare, burst into Xenocrates' class quite drunk, wearing a garland on his head. Xenocrates, unfazed, continued his lecture on temperance. Polemo, enchanted, stayed, became first Xenocrates' pupil, then his *eromenos*, and in the end a teacher famed for his austere dignity. Polemo in turn took as his lover Crates, to whom he became so attached that they lived together and "not only shared the same pursuits in life but grew more alike to their latest breath, and dying, shared the same tomb." Laertius gives their epitaph: "Passing stranger, say that in this tomb rest godlike Crates and Polemo, men magnanimous in concord, from whose inspired lips flowed sacred speech, and whose pure life of wisdom, in accordance with unswerving tenets, decked them for a bright immortality."³⁸ Polemo and Crates took their meals together with another pair of co-habiting philosophers, Crantor and the brilliant young Arcesilaus, whose critically probing mind was to revitalize the Academy.

At the conclusion of the *Symposium* Plato uses the persona of Socrates to communicate what we may assume to be his own doctrine of love, a view that tacitly rejects the "mixed" love defended by Pausanias. When a temperate man finds beauty in a youth and tries to educate him, such an intellectual marriage, Socrates declares, is more intimate than the union of man and wife. But Socrates thinks men should ideally turn their attention from the beauty of individual boys to a beauty that is abstract and general. They should turn from intense love of one person to a love of all beautiful forms and finally to an abstract love for the beauty of political institutions. So, step by step, the love of fair boys and youths leads ultimately to a love of divine beauty purged of the alluring beguilements of the material world. By such stages the pederast becomes a contemplative sage and social philosopher.

For all its clever charm Socrates' argument seems, in the end, more than a little strained. Looking back at its beginning, one wonders how an admiration for a civil code or a constitution can bear any intelligible likeness to

those feelings Socrates entertained, say, for Charmides. To clinch his argument and establish his point that sexual temptation can be overcome by a wise and temperate man, Plato ends on a dramatic note: a newcomer to the party, the young and handsome Alcibiades, his tongue loosened by wine, tells how Socrates resisted his attempt at seduction, much to the amazement of the youth, who thought his charms irresistible.

• The *Phaedrus* and the *Laws* •

In a second dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, Plato's Socrates elaborates on his doctrine of love to provide what was only briefly sketched in the *Symposium*, an erotic psychology. In these pages devoted to a vivid analysis of homoerotic arousal, Greek prose reaches its greatest poetic heights. Once again, Phaedrus is the naive enthusiast, commending a speech by Lysias which argues that a boy should prefer a non-lover to a lover as a sex partner, since the non-lover will be less jealous and more likely to remain a friend when their affair is over. Phaedrus is delighted with Lysias's paradoxes, but Socrates ironically praises the speech, then revises its logic, and finally condemns it as blasphemy against the holy ideal of love.

For Socrates, love is a god, and the feelings love inspires are not common madness (as Lysias had claimed) but a divine madness to be cherished. Other ideas such as justice and temperance exist without shape or color; only beauty among the eternal realities possesses an immediately seductive visibility.³⁹ While corrupt men will feel only desire for beauty, the true initiate will be enraptured by its godlike image. Content merely to gaze upon the youth who embodies it, he will overcome lustful impulses and strive to lead his beloved to wisdom and dignity. So Socrates appropriates Pausanias' pedagogic eros but outlaws physical contact.

Plato's ideal is wholly asexual; a Spartan at heart, he worships discipline, not liberty and spontaneity. For Plato, pleasure, and especially sexual pleasure, is the great evil to be resisted. To experience an orgasm is for him the ultimate humiliation, for at such a moment reason is out of control and passion supreme. To make his point, Plato, in the voice of Socrates, introduces the famous myth of the soul as a charioteer guiding a white and a black horse. The black horse, symbolizing sexuality, is ugly and deformed; the charioteer must struggle at all costs to subdue him by jerking the bit and covering "his abusive tongue and jaws with blood."⁴⁰

Socrates advises the *eromenos* to respond positively to the lover who treats him with reverence, since "the good will of the lover" is "worth all other friends or kinsmen."⁴¹ Reciprocating, the boy will yearn to be yearned for. Like the lover, though less strongly, he desires "to see him, touch him, kiss, embrace [lie down by] him, and probably not long afterwards his desire is ac-

complished.”⁴² But for Plato every expression of affection is permissible short of this sexual release. Yet at the end of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates does not wholly despair even of those men who enjoy “that desire of their hearts which to the many is bliss.”⁴³ The wings that will ultimately carry the lovers to heaven will sprout less quickly, but the boon of love-madness will assure that, as they grow more chaste, they too will at last escape the darkness of earthly existence.

Contemplating this remarkable flow of eloquence, we may concede that few writers have written so enthusiastically of love between males or traced the ebb and flow of erotic stimuli so brilliantly. Fewer still have labored so hard to make frustration seductive. The fathers of the church, who frequently looked askance at Plato because of his homoerotic sensibility, could at least appreciate this last achievement.

Plato died in 348 at the age of eighty while working on his final treatise, the *Laws*. The *Republic* had depicted an ideal communist utopia ruled by philosopher-kings. In the *Laws*, an Athenian, a Spartan, and a Cretan discuss a city the Cretan proposes to found, less utopian but more realizable. It is, in fact, a blueprint for a narrowly repressive commonwealth on the Spartan plan, marked by a harsh puritanism. There will be no freedom of thought or opinion, and strict censorship is to control literature, art, and science. Since humans are by nature anarchic, Plato wants to adopt some religion to provide a supernatural sanction for morals and inculcate strict obedience to the state. Forgetting, or disregarding, the fate of Socrates, he proposes that any who question this faith shall be imprisoned and, if recalcitrant, killed. It is not surprising that a critic has called the *Laws* “these prolegomena to all future Inquisitions.”⁴⁴

Nowhere is this growing intolerance more evident than in Plato’s treatment of homosexuality. In the *Laws* Plato attacks all non-procreative sexual behavior. He praises Sparta and Crete because their Dorian communal life subordinates the individual to the order and obedience he admires, but he complains that both fail in one particular—their toleration of sexual relations between males.⁴⁵ The Athenian (who is usually taken to be Plato’s spokesman) attacks Sparta’s laws as encouragingly permissive and accuses the Cretans of inventing the tale of Ganymede to justify their own practices.⁴⁶ In his new city, Plato wishes to abolish such acts entirely.

Plato defends this severity on the grounds that relations between men are “unnatural.”⁴⁷ We may justly ask what, exactly, he means in this context by this slippery and ambiguous word. Obviously, he does not think this behavior rare or uncommon among human beings. Indeed, he admits that it is not. Usually moralists who condemn certain kinds of sexual activity as unnatural (as, for instance, masturbation, coitus interruptus, or the use of contraceptives) base their condemnation on a teleological assumption, that is,

that sexual activity has a unique purpose, namely procreation. Plato does in fact object that same-sex relations are infertile, tacitly ruling out other possible ends, such as intimacy, bonding, or pleasure.

Plato gives a second argument that might seem to justify the term: he maintains that homosexuality does not exist in the animal world. This is a view we now know to be false.⁴⁸ Finally, Plato attacks the widely held Greek belief that same-sex bonds promote military courage, complaining that the passive partner demasculinizes himself by adopting a female role inappropriate for a warrior, while the active partner fails to show a proper disdain for pleasure. Courageous men, in his eyes, should be steeled to pain and indifferent to pleasure. In failing to show contempt for pleasure, the dominant partner has succumbed to what Plato calls an “effeminate” or cowardly temptation.⁴⁹

Plato’s Athenian candidly admits how drastically his new law will go against popular Greek opinion. Virile young men will scoff and call his effort to ban pederasty absurd and unfeasible. But, Plato argues, some famous athletes have been known to abstain from boys and women during their training for the Olympic games. If these vigorous and healthy but uneducated men are capable of this feat, he thinks the average Greek should be.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Plato freely acknowledges the difficulty in getting the Greeks to adopt a law forbidding male relations. How can Greek society be persuaded to perform a *volte face* and repudiate so strong a tradition? Plato’s solution is a radical one, uncannily prophetic of the course Christian Europe was later to follow. To suppress homosexuality, lawmakers must invent a new religious taboo, a taboo that will inspire in the average man a horror akin to the horror he feels toward incest. The act must be labeled (like incest) “unholy” and “hated of God.”⁵¹ Only such an extreme measure will terrify him into chastity and make him willing to support the new legislation.⁵²

Few readers have warmed to the *Laws*. The discipline Plato advocates would subject all citizens to the minute supervision usually found only in military barracks. Liberals have perceived in his ideal state not just a foretaste of medieval Europe but of twentieth-century fascism. Nor have modern conservatives been drawn to his utopia; it drops the communism of goods and wives advocated in the *Republic*, but it is a closed society that bans foreign trade and foreign travel, forbids its citizens to engage in business, strictly limits wealth, and condemns all money-making as hostile to civic and personal virtue. Totally remote from the modern world, his inward-looking state, severed from the rest of humanity and decrying commerce, has indeed more in common with medieval Japan, where samurai warriors led Spartan lives, sealed themselves off from outside influences, and looked with contempt on trade and business. But, by an irony of history as we shall see, this unique society, otherwise so similar to that envisaged by Plato, failed to embrace his sexual puritanism.

• Xenophon •

Another disciple of Socrates, Xenophon, also wrote a *Symposium*, less well known than Plato's and less scintillating but illuminating as to Socrates' views on love. Xenophon was not a professional philosopher but first a soldier and later a country gentleman. At thirty he joined the expedition of Cyrus, who was trying to overthrow his brother, the Persian king. His *Anabasis* tells how he helped lead ten thousand Greeks back to safety through many hardships after Cyrus' defeat and death. Later, his Spartan sympathies and service with the Spartan king Agesilaus led to his exile from Athens and twenty years of retirement on a Spartan estate. There, he wrote on practical subjects like horsemanship and estate management and set down his recollections of Socrates in his *Memorabilia*.

Xenophon's *Symposium* imitates Plato's in its setting. Friends have gathered at a celebration arranged by Callias for the handsome Autolycus, who has just won a victory in the Panathenaic games. Once again we witness the power of male beauty to inspire love:

A person who took note of the course of events [at the feast] would have come at once to the conclusion that beauty is in its essence something regal, especially when, as in the present case of Autolycus, its possessor joins with it modesty and sobriety. For in the first place, just as the sudden glow of a light at night draws all eyes to itself, so now the beauty of Autolycus compelled everyone to look at him. And again, there was not one of the onlookers who did not feel his soul strangely stirred by the boy; some of them grew quieter than before, others even assumed some kind of a pose . . . Those who are inspired by chaste Love [Eros] have a more tender look, subdue their voices to more gentle tones, and assume a supremely noble bearing. Such was the demeanor of Callias at this time under the influence of Love.⁵³

Socrates declares that all the men present are lovers. One, he notes with catholic tolerance, is even in love with a woman—his wife! Finally, he sets forth at length his own views, arguing for the superiority of a purely spiritual love, which, since it is not based on physical bloom, will last until old age and, since it respects the honor of the beloved, will more likely be reciprocated by him. In contrast, carnal love turns the boy into a possession and must be clandestine so as not to offend the boy's relations. Moreover, the boy will not, he thinks, share in the pleasure of intercourse as a woman does and must consequently look with chilly contempt on his partner's ecstasies.

Aware of the sanctions Greek tradition provided, Socrates employs all his rhetorical skill to de-eroticize homoerotic myths and legends. He argues that Zeus was attracted to Ganymede solely for his mental attributes and that Homer portrayed Patroclus not as an object of Achilles' passion but as

his comrade. Harkening back to Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates also counters Phaedrus' argument that homosexuality promotes military morale. He admits that the Eleans and Thebans may encourage such practices but denies the Athenians do and claims that in Sparta male love between warriors exists without the least spark of concupiscence. (We note the disagreement here with the *Laws*.) In every way, spiritual and mental qualities are supreme; the body and its desires are to be sternly repressed.

The dialogue ends curiously. Excited by a boy and girl who mime the love of Dionysus for Ariadne, the eager guests say farewell to their lovers and take horse for home and their wives. With this conclusion, Xenophon anticipates Shakespeare's Sonnet 20. There, enraptured by his young friend's beauty, Shakespeare proposes the same schizophrenic solution and also divides his love between the sexes:

But since she [Nature] prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure."

Xenophon's own attitudes toward love do not seem to have been quite so puritanical as Socrates', as Clifford Hindley has recently demonstrated. In the *Anabasis*, where Xenophon speaks of himself in the third person, he recounts a romantic tale whose hero is a common soldier:

There was a certain Episthenes of Olynthus [a Chalcidian settlement in northern Greece] who was a lover of boys, and upon seeing a handsome boy, just in the bloom of youth and carrying a light shield, on the point of being put to death, he ran up to Xenophon and besought him to come to the rescue of a handsome lad. So Xenophon went to Seuthes [a Thracian prince] and begged him not to kill the boy, telling him of Episthenes' turn of mind, how he had once assembled a battalion with an eye to nothing else save the question whether a man was handsome, and that with this battalion he proved himself a brave man. And Seuthes asked: "Would you even be willing, Episthenes, to die for this boy's sake?" Then Episthenes stretched out his neck and said, "Strike, if the lad bids you and will be grateful." Seuthes asked the boy whether he should strike Episthenes in his stead. The boy forbade it, and besought him not to slay either. Thereupon Episthenes threw his arms around the boy and said: "It is time, Seuthes, for you to fight it out with me for this boy; for I shall not give him up." And Seuthes laughed and let the matter go.⁵⁴

Episthenes' histrionic gesture—it is almost Shakespearean—might tempt us to dismiss the episode as a literary invention if it were not vouched for by an eyewitness in a sober historical work.

In his *Economist* Xenophon gives another example of the effect that Greek love might have on men who do not belong to the cultured elite. There, he speaks of the kind of steward a wise owner will avoid employing on his farm,

warning against three particular sorts: those who are too fond of wine, or of sleep, or of “amorous affection.” The latter, we are told, will be too sentimentally obsessed with his *eromenoi* to attend properly to business. It would be, he comments, “no light task . . . to discover any hope or occupation sweeter to him than that which now employs him, his care for his beloved . . . [or] to invent worse punishment than that he now endures in separation from the object of his passion.”⁵⁵ Since Xenophon is giving hard-headed practical advice on estate management, we may assume that some men of the slave class did in fact behave this way and that the intractability of lovesick stewards could be a serious problem for their masters.

• Aristotle’s Dicta •

Aristotle was Plato’s pupil and studied with him for two decades at the Academy. Their temperaments, however, contrasted. Plato was the poetic utopian, Aristotle the down-to-earth scientist and social observer. Hailed in the Middle Ages as “the master of those who know,” Aristotle produced treatises on physics, biology, politics, metaphysics, and ethics and is known to have written, in addition, a dialogue *On Love* and *Theses on Love*.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, these latter works have both been lost, and we are left to guess his opinions by piecing together miscellaneous remarks. These suggest a skeptic who cautiously distances himself from the popular Hellenic enthusiasm.

What does he say? In the *Politics* Aristotle takes note of the Cretans’ effort to curb population through pederasty but fails to give us his opinion (after promising to do so) on the morality of such relations.⁵⁷ He lists tyrants who have been assassinated for sexual misbehavior, including some who met death at the hands of *eromenoi*—for instance, Periander of Ambracia, who was killed “because, when drinking with his boy lover, he asked if he was yet pregnant by him.”⁵⁸ Nowhere does Aristotle strike the idealizing note of Plato and Plutarch. On the other hand, his comments on the passive adult in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are neither contemptuous in the popular style of Aristophanes nor moralizing in the style of Plato. Rather, they smack of the clinician who seeks a scientific explanation for human behavior. He thinks that male sexual passivity may sometimes be classified with plucking out the hair or nail-biting as “morbid propensities . . . acquired by habit,” as in the case of those “who have been abused from childhood.” Other cases appear to result from “natural disposition.” We should not blame men of this sort, since they suffer from a morbid disposition which, however, does not “fall within the limits of Vice.”⁵⁹ In the *Problems*, a work traditionally ascribed to Aristotle but in fact compiled much later, we encounter a physiological explanation for sexual passivity. In such cases, the unknown author conjectures, semen is diverted to the anal region, causing congestion which seeks relief.⁶⁰

In one instance, Aristotle's misogyny inclines him to see a certain advantage in male relations. He complains in the *Politics* that women in warlike states have too much power, since they often rule cities while their husbands are on campaigns, an arrangement he thought had proved especially disastrous in Sparta. Such a danger, he notes, does not arise among "the Celts and any others who have manifestly honored sexual intercourse among males." Rejecting as unrealistic Plato's ideal of the chaste soldier, Aristotle finds the myth of Ares consorting with Aphrodite suggestive, "since all warring types are conspicuously obsessed by sexual relations either with men or women."⁶¹

• Zeno and the Stoics •

At the end of the classical age in Greece the most influential school was not the Platonic Academy or Aristotle's Lyceum but the Stoa, or "porch," founded by Zeno, a Cypriot businessman converted to philosophy who began to teach in Athens about 301. Stoicism is often perceived as an ascetic philosophy that subordinated feeling to duty and held pleasure in contempt—the opposite of what is popularly conceived as Epicureanism. It is, consequently, often assumed that the Stoics held a negative view of sex. But this was not true. There was a major divergence between Stoicism's original Greek and later Roman exponents, who did indeed reject same-sex relations. This was because the first Stoics derived their ethical teachings from Diogenes and his fellow Cynics. Diogenes, like Socrates, favored simple living, without luxuries, and tried to reduce life to its bare necessities. He lived in a clay tub, ate raw meat, and shocked the Athenians by breakfasting (against custom) in the agora. To make the point that one should satisfy one's needs as simply as possible, he masturbated in public, remarking only that he wished he could assuage his hunger as easily by rubbing his belly.⁶²

Zeno of Citium was a pupil first of Polemo in the Academy, then of Crates the Cynic, Diogenes' disciple. Central to his teaching was the doctrine that the law of morality was the same as the law of nature. But this rule meant something different to the Stoics than to Plato. In its early phase, Stoicism was, like Cynicism, a back-to-nature movement, with a contempt for artificial conventions and taboos. Their philosophical detachment (*apatheia*) extended not just to pain and sickness, good or ill fortune, life or death but also to what they saw as popular superstitions. Sometimes they interpreted this doctrine in a way that startled their contemporaries. Why condemn incest, Zeno asked, when Oedipus had given Jocasta fine children?⁶³ Where Plato toyed with the idea of introducing new prohibitions, the Stoics sought to demystify sex by challenging custom and placing consensual behavior in the category of things indifferent.

Zeno held that sexual relations were neither good nor bad in themselves:

men, he declared, should “have carnal knowledge no less and no more of a favorite [*paidika*, beloved boy] than of a non-favorite, nor of a female than of a male.”⁶⁴ Despite his radical theorizing, Zeno, we are told, was abstemious about sex. But he was not unsusceptible. Once, “being enamoured of Chremonides, as he and Cleanthes were sitting beside the youth, he got up and upon Cleanthes expressing surprise, ‘Good physicians tell us,’ said he, ‘that the best cure of inflammation is repose.’”⁶⁵ One biographer, Antigonos of Carystus, faulted Zeno for not holding to his professed policy of nondiscrimination, complaining that he “never resorted to a woman, but always to boy-favorites.”⁶⁶ Cleanthes, Zeno’s successor as head of the Stoa, and Chrysippus, whose voluminous writings defined orthodox Stoic doctrine for subsequent generations, also held relations with boys to be morally neutral.⁶⁷

But if the Stoics regarded sexual activity as itself indifferent, they nevertheless placed a high value on love that involved more than desire. Like Socrates and Plato, they perceived its educational possibilities. Zeno and his followers held that “the wise man will feel affection for the youths who by their countenance show a natural endowment for virtue,” that is, not for beautiful boys but imperfect specimens who nevertheless show some promise of improvement.⁶⁸ Cicero noted the high esteem the Stoics showed for love in his *Tusculan Disputations*—in a somewhat dyspeptic fashion, since he did not share this enthusiasm.⁶⁹ Their interest in the subject is attested by the number of treatises they wrote: we have records of books on love not only by Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus but also by later Stoic writers such as Persaeus of Citium, Aristion of Chios, and Sphaerus.⁷⁰ This partial catalogue reminds us what a vast literature in Greek on this theme has been lost; what remains are a few stars from a galaxy.

Later adherents to Stoicism, embarrassed by what came to be seen as the somewhat scandalous views of its founders, tried to expurgate Zeno’s writings. Yet in spite of his heterodox teachings, Zeno himself was regarded as living an exemplary personal life. “More temperate than Zeno” became a proverb in Greece. When he died at ninety, having taught in the city for some forty years, Athens, more generous to Zeno than to Socrates, voted him a golden crown as someone who had “exhorted all the young men who sought his company to the practice of temperance” and made his own life “a model of the greatest excellence.”⁷¹

• Aeschines’ *Against Timarchus* •

Philosophers’ ideals may differ widely from popular standards. Drama of the sort that flourished in Athens under civic sponsorship is a better index of public opinion. Better still are speeches addressed to political bodies or juries; on such occasions the orator must above all else take into account common prejudices and common enthusiasms. Fortunately history has preserved

for us an oration—Aeschines' *Against Timarchus*—which makes judgments of homosexual conduct its central theme. Dover is surely right in identifying it as a key document in assessing Athenian popular morality as it bore on male love.

Aeschines had every incentive to consider carefully the sentiments of his audience when he spoke in Athens in 345, since his life was at stake. During Philip of Macedon's military and diplomatic struggle to dominate Greece, Aeschines had supported a treaty that turned out badly for Athens, and Demosthenes had accused him of accepting bribes. Allied with Demosthenes in his attack was a young politician named Timarchus. Aeschines' defense was to charge that Timarchus was legally incompetent to address the jury because of his immoral life.

Aeschines, in his long and impassioned indictment, cites Athenian laws that prohibited any citizen who has prostituted himself from serving as a civic magistrate, priest, or herald. They also forbade such men to plead cases before public bodies "for the man who has made traffic of the shame of his own body . . . would be ready to sell the common interests of the city also."⁷² Aeschines charges that Timarchus has notoriously led the life of a male courtesan, passing from one wealthy patron to another in order to indulge his extravagant tastes after he had exhausted his patrimony. Sometimes jealousy among his clients had led to brawls in the street. All this, Aeschines claims, is public knowledge.

What is most interesting about Aeschines' attack, however, is the stance he adopts toward homosexuality generally. His position is roughly that of an American politician indicting a football player of note. He is at pains, so to speak, to make it clear he does not disapprove of football. Indeed, Aeschines tries to anticipate the defense Timarchus' party will make. Some Athenian general, he predicts, "a graduate of the wrestling schools" and "a student of philosophy," will try to make it appear that Aeschines' attack is a "first step in a dangerous decline in the culture of our youth," invoking the names of Achilles and Patroclus and Aristogeiton and Harmodius.⁷³ Aeschines' strategy is to anticipate this by casting himself in the role of a defender of the chaste and honorable love "that is the experience of a kind-hearted and generous soul."⁷⁴ We have already noted Aeschines' argument that Homer in the *Iliad* meant Achilles and Patroclus to be perceived as lovers.⁷⁵ Aeschines quotes lengthy passages from the *Iliad* to support this view. Obviously, this was the popular line to take, and Aeschines expects his hearers to approve an exegesis that made the heroes lovers.

Aeschines also names with approval a number of handsome young men then living in Athens well known for having attracted lovers. This, he implies, is entirely acceptable, but he contrasts them pointedly with Timarchus, who has disgraced himself by selling his favors. He even makes a personal confession: "I do not deny that I myself have been a lover and am a lover to

this day [he was about 45], nor do I deny that the jealousies and quarrels that commonly arise from the practice have happened in my case."⁷⁶ He frankly admits to having made a nuisance of himself in the gymnasia in his pursuit of young men and to composing erotic poems, which he predicts the opposition will read aloud to embarrass him.

Though Aeschines skirts the delicate question whether the "honorable" loves he describes were Platonic or "mixed," his description of his own affairs suggests sexual possession. Taken as a whole, his speech is potent testimony that ardent attachments to young men were acceptable to the average Athenian who might serve on a municipal jury. Aeschines won his case.

• The Sacred Band of Thebes •

In classical Greece, not only Athens but cities with every kind of constitution took notice of the fact of male love. Aristocracies where the privileged few held sway recognized its power to forge bonds between promising youths and conservative mentors. Democracies saw it as insurance against tyranny. Tyrants sometimes forbade it or, more often, tasted its pleasures, suffered the revenge of rivals or alienated lovers, and lamented that their very omnipotence made it impossible ever to be sure they enjoyed disinterested affection. But the major source of its prestige remained (despite Plato) its contribution to military morale. In the fourth century this heroic tradition found its most famous embodiment in the so-called *hieros lochos*, the Sacred Band of Thebes. This force, created by the Theban general Gorgidas, was made up of pairs of lovers who at first fought interspersed throughout other regiments. Then, under his successor, Pelopidas, it fought as a separate contingent of shock troops. Its success was to make Thebes for a generation the most powerful state in Greece, and its fate was in the end the fate of Greece itself.

Theban tradition easily sanctioned such an institution. Thebes and Elis are repeatedly cited as the two states of the Greek mainland which most unqualifiedly encouraged male relations. Xenophon, in his *Constitution of Sparta*, observed that such relations were transitory at Elis but that at Thebes men and boys lived together "like married people"; perhaps this reflected Cretan patterns.⁷⁷ The cult of Heracles was especially strong in Boeotia. Aristotle, in a lost work, described a "tomb of Iolaus" dedicated to the hero's lover and companion-in-arms, where Theban lovers in his day still plighted mutual devotion. Plutarch thought the "Sacred" Band derived its name from this rite.⁷⁸

In 404 the Peloponnesian War had come to an end with Sparta's total defeat of Athens. But the victors misused their power. Sparta wielded its new hegemony harshly, imposing oligarchic rulers favorable to their interests on states that formerly had democratic regimes. Among these was Thebes,

where in 382 a Spartan commander treacherously seized its citadel and installed new pro-Spartan leaders. Three years later democratic Theban exiles returned and recaptured the fortress, the Cadmeia, in a daring coup that drove the Spartans out. Conflict with the most formidable military regime in Greece now seemed inevitable. At this crucial juncture Gorgidas, in 378, organized the Sacred Band, which realized—within a few years of the writing of the *Symposium*—Phaedrus' fantasy of an "army of lovers."

Plutarch was born (c. 46 CE) in the tiny village of Chaeronea some twenty miles west of Thebes and lived there all his life. Particularly interested in Boeotian traditions, he gives us, in his life of Pelopidas, the only substantial account we have of the Sacred Band. In tracing its origins, Plutarch shows himself unhappy with the legend that Oedipus' father, Laius, had been the first to introduce pederasty to Thebes. Instead, he ascribes its institution to judicious civic authorities "who first made this form of love customary among the Thebans." Finding Theban youth unruly, they sought to "relax and mollify their strong and impetuous natures in earliest boyhood." To this harmonious end, Plutarch tells us, they trained them in the music of the flute and "gave love a conspicuous place in the life of the *palaestra*, thus tempering the dispositions of the young men."⁷⁹

Apparently Gorgidas was killed in some skirmish shortly after he founded the band, for the next year its leadership passed to Pelopidas, the young Theban who had led the exiles in their rebellion. Under siege by the Spartans, the Thebans at first hesitated to challenge their redoubtable enemies in a formal battle. But having unexpectedly come upon a Spartan force while reconnoitering at Tegyrae, Pelopidas daringly attacked. Though the Spartans outnumbered them two or three to one, his spirited leadership won the day. Plutarch thought the occasion remarkable: "For in all their wars with the Greeks and Barbarians, as it would seem, never before had Lacedaemonians in superior numbers been overpowered by an inferior force, nor indeed in a pitched battle where the forces were evenly matched. Hence they were of an irresistible courage, and when they came to close quarters their reputation sufficed to terrify their opponents, who also, on their part, thought themselves no match for Spartans with an equal force."⁸⁰

Plutarch called the undefeated Pelopidas "valiant, laborious, passionate, and magnanimous."⁸¹ But his fame was eventually overshadowed by his friend Epaminondas, whose life in several points contrasted with his own. Pelopidas was rich but modest in his style of living; Epaminondas, despite his renown, remained poor until the day of his death. Pelopidas married and had children; Epaminondas died unwed. At the time the Cadmeia was seized, Epaminondas was looked upon as a scholarly recluse. A devoted disciple of the Pythagorean sage Lysis of Tarentum, who had settled in Thebes, he divided his time between exercises in the gymnasium, lectures, and philosophy. Though he declined to participate in the assassination of the Spartanizing

Thebans, once the revolt began he joined Pelopidas in re-establishing democracy. Early in their careers he bravely risked his life to save his wounded friend. Though they competed for glory on the same narrow stage, they were never rivals—an unusual circumstance among jealous Greeks. Epaminondas now developed into an orator and statesman as well as a soldier. Indeed, it was he who, at a peace conference in 371, challenged Sparta's overlordship of the Peloponnesus. In retaliation the Spartan king Agesilaus angrily excluded Thebes from the peace treaty. Thebes hastily prepared for full-scale war.

The battle that tried the issue between Sparta and Thebes was, according to Pausanias, "the most famous [victory] ever won by Greeks over Greeks."⁸² At Leuctra in 371, Epaminondas devised a new maneuver. He strengthened his left wing and, holding his right wing back, attacked the Spartans obliquely, throwing them into confusion. Then Pelopidas led the Sacred Band to the charge and smashed the squadron commanded by the Spartan co-king, Cleombrotus, who was killed on the field. Epaminondas' lover Asopichus also won fame in the battle. He put up so formidable a fight that his shield, decorated with a representation of the trophy that the Thebans had erected at Leuctra, hung as a conspicuous offering at Delphi.⁸³

Their defeat at Leuctra destroyed at a blow the military supremacy the Spartans had enjoyed for centuries. In the wake of his victory, Epaminondas invaded the Peloponnesus, freed the provinces of Messenia and Arcadia from the Spartan yoke, and carried the war into the suburbs of the city; this was the first siege the Spartans had suffered during the six hundred years that the Dorians had occupied the Peloponnesus. Thebes was now the leading power in Greece.

The victorious Epaminondas acted with a magnanimity that contrasted with Spartan tyranny. He reestablished Messene as Messenia's provincial capital and built a new city, Megalopolis, as a center of defense for the long-subjugated Arcadians. Though the hegemony of Greece now fell to Thebes, he declined to subject other cities to Theban domination and pillage, as the Spartans and Athenians had done earlier when they wielded power. No doubt he had the intelligence to realize that the economic and military resources of Thebes would not have sustained this enterprise. As a result he won a unique fame as a liberator rather than an exploiter.

Classical and modern historians alike have joined to salute Epaminondas as Greece's greatest warrior-statesman. Diodorus Siculus, who wrote in the age of Julius Caesar, thought he "excelled . . . all Greeks in valor and shrewdness in the art of war."⁸⁴ Diodorus ranked him above Solon, Themistocles, Miltiades, Cimon, Pericles, and Agesilaus in generalship and reputation. "For in each of the others you would discover but one particular superiority as a claim to fame; in him, however, all qualities combined. For in strength of body and eloquence of speech, furthermore in elevation of mind, contempt of lucre, fairness, and, most of all, in courage and shrewdness in

11. Epaminondas.
J. Chapman, engraving,
1807.

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

the art of war, he far surpassed them all.”⁸⁵ Diodorus was a Sicilian Greek and perhaps partial, but his Latin contemporary, Cornelius Nepos, a man of a markedly different tradition, was if anything even more eulogistic. In his *Book of the Great Commanders* Nepos expresses concern that his readers will look askance at Epaminondas’ reputation as a musician and dancer but begs them to remember the Greeks esteemed such frivolities. He praises without reservation Epaminondas’ intellectual and athletic prowess and finds he meets Roman standards of temperance, prudence, and seriousness: he was

“practised in war, of great personal courage and high spirit” and “such a lover of truth that he never lied even in jest.” One part of his character was quite unclassical (if we except Caesar): “He was self-controlled, kindly and forbearing to a surprising degree.”⁸⁶ Nepos acclaims him as one of the few successful Greek military leaders whose integrity was equal to his talent. His contemporary Cicero agreed. Discussing the influence of culture and philosophy on such leaders as Peisistratus, Pericles, Timotheus, and Agesilaus in his *De Oratore*, Cicero hailed Epaminondas as “perhaps the most outstanding figure in Greek history.”⁸⁷

Theban pre-eminence lasted only as long as Epaminondas lived. Pelopidas, leading a force north to free the people of Thessaly from the vicious Alexander of Pheras, was killed in 364 in a rash attempt to engage the tyrant in single combat. The Thessalians mourned and granted their would-be liberator heroic honors.⁸⁸ Alexander was subsequently dispatched by his wife: one of her grievances was that the tyrant had made her younger brother his bedmate.⁸⁹ In the meantime, the weakening of Sparta left the Peloponnesus in turmoil. Rival factions in Arcadia summoned Thebes and Sparta to their aid, and Epaminondas once more found himself face to face with his old foes at Mantinea in 362. His brilliant strategy again routed the Spartans but at a fatal cost. Diodorus records the story of his death. Pierced by a spear, he was told he would die when the point was withdrawn from his chest. After conversing with his friends, he said, “It is time to die,” and ordered them to withdraw the spear.⁹⁰

Another lover of Epaminondas, Caphisodorus, also died at Mantinea; Plutarch tells us they were buried together on the battlefield.⁹¹ Pausanias, visiting Thebes in the second century after Christ, found these verses inscribed on a statue raised in Epaminondas’ honor:

By my counsel was Sparta shorn of her glory,
And holy Messene received at last her children:
By the arms of Thebes was Megalopolis encircled with walls,
And all Greece won independence and freedom.⁹²

A few years before Pausanias’ visit, the Emperor Hadrian had inscribed his own tribute on another monument to the Theban which stood on the site of his death.⁹³

The Theban Sacred Band met its nemesis in Philip of Macedonia. In 367 when Philip was about fifteen, he had been sent as a hostage to Thebes and remained there for three years while Thebes was at the height of its prestige. Philip must have been stirred by the victories of Epaminondas and Pelopidas and fascinated by their new fighting methods, since we later find him revolutionizing military practice by adapting them to his own purposes. Dio Chrysostom credits Philip’s later diplomatic sagacity to the education he received from Epaminondas and makes him the *eromenos* of Pelopidas.⁹⁴ Perhaps he was, or perhaps this is an honorific assumption in accordance with

the Hellenic motto, “Cherchez l’amant,” for Plutarch says Philip lived not with Pelopidas but in the house of Pammenes, the general who was to assume leadership after the death of Epaminondas.⁹⁵ As a military leader, Pammenes was an enthusiastic advocate of the discipline that formed the Sacred Band. Plutarch quotes (several times) Pammenes’ criticism of Homer’s Nestor for organizing regiments on tribal lines. “For tribesmen and clansmen make little account of tribesmen and clansmen in times of danger; whereas, a band that is held together by the friendship between lovers is indissoluble and not to be broken, since the lovers are ashamed to play the coward before their beloved, and the beloved before their lovers, and both stand firm to protect each other.”⁹⁶

On his return to Macedon, Philip put to use what he had learned at Thebes. When he came to the throne, he organized a strong professional army and, having secured his position in the north, managed by a series of adroit diplomatic maneuvers to extend his power into southern Greece with the intention of unifying the entire country under his command. When Thebes and Athens belatedly formed an alliance to oppose him, the crucial battle took place in 338 at Plutarch’s Chaeronea. The Sacred Band, still intact and undefeated, remained the prime troops of the Greek army, but this was their *Götterdämmerung*. True to their traditions, they stood their ground and were killed to the last man, so that the bodies of the three hundred lay strewn on the field. In the triumph of victory Philip came upon the remains of the regiment he had known in Thebes as an adolescent thirty years before. Plutarch describes his response: “And when, after the battle, Philip was surveying the dead, and stopped at the place where the three hundred were lying, all where they had faced the long spears of his phalanx, with their armour, and mingled one with another, he was amazed, and on learning that this was the band of lovers and beloved, burst into tears and said: ‘Perish miserably they who think that these men did or suffered aught disgraceful.’”⁹⁷

When the geographer Pausanias visited the site four hundred years later, he saw their memorial. In the empty fields, overlooking the common grave of the Thebans, before a row of cypress, stood a gigantic marble lion.⁹⁸ It stands there still. Its present restoration was undertaken in 1902 by an organization called the Order of Chaeronea. (This was in fact a secret, quasi-Masonic society of English homosexuals, founded and led by the reformer George Cecil Ives.)⁹⁹ Modern excavations of the battleground have recovered the remains of 254 men, almost the whole complement of the Sacred Band, laid out in seven rows.¹⁰⁰

• Philip and Alexander •

Philip had used Theban lessons to smash Thebes. He did not long outlive his victory. Successful in his effort to unite Greece, Philip stood poised to invade

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

12. Memorial to the Sacred Band at Chaeronea. 338 BCE.

Persia when, two years later in 336, he was assassinated at his daughter's wedding under sensational circumstances. Most accounts of the deed speculate on the possible complicity of his wife, the fierce Olympias, and his half-estranged son, Alexander. The full story is less well known, but it is given in circumstantial detail by Diodorus Siculus and confirmed by Aristotle.¹⁰¹ The polygamous Philip, who "waged war by marrying," had several wives and nu-

merous mistresses, but he also had male favorites. One of these, Pausanias ("beloved by him for his beauty"), had been succeeded in his affections by another young man who bore the same name. The elder Pausanias denounced his rival as a whore who did not love the king: "Unable to endure such an insult, the other kept silent for the time, but, after confiding to Attalus, one of his friends, what he proposed to do, he brought about his death voluntarily and in a spectacular fashion. For a few days after this, as Philip was engaged in battle with Pleurias, king of the Illyrians, Pausanias stepped in front of him and, receiving on his body all the blows directed at the king, so met his death."¹⁰²

Appalled at this suicide, Attalus, who was one of Philip's chief generals, invited the elder Pausanias to a feast, made him drunk with wine, and had him raped by his muleteers. When Pausanias demanded vengeance from Philip, the king was sympathetic, but since Attalus was one of his most valued commanders and the uncle of Philip's newest wife, he did not punish him. Pausanias bided his time; then when Philip was walking in his royal robes unguarded at his daughter's wedding, he stabbed him to death before the assembled guests. Such violence, occasioned by an offense given to a lover, was not new in Macedon. Sixty years earlier, in 399, Archelaus, the patron of Euripides and Agathon, had been killed by two former lovers bent on revenge for what they regarded as slights at the hands of the king.¹⁰³

The ranks of the Sacred Band had been broken at Chaeronea by a cavalry charge led by the eighteen-year-old Alexander. With Philip dead, Alexander now began the astonishing career that would make him master of Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt, Persia, and northeastern India. In one respect, however, he differed strikingly from his father—he was not a womanizer. Plutarch conjectures that he had known only one woman before his marriage, a remarkable record for a Macedonian ruler. He was also restrained toward male slaves: when a commander offered to procure him two beautiful boys, he indignantly declined.¹⁰⁴ When Alexander praised the *eromenos* of Charon of Chalcis, Charon told the boy to kiss him, but Alexander demurred: "That will not delight me so much as it will pain you."¹⁰⁵

Later in his career he relaxed this abstemiousness. Male favorites were popular among the Persians whom Alexander conquered. (Herodotus had taken note of this a century earlier and ascribed it to Greek influence.¹⁰⁶ Here is a unique case of a culture claiming precedence with a new form of sexual activity.) According to Quintus Curtius, a Persian general who had served the defeated Darius presented Alexander with a peace offering at Hyrcania, namely, a Persian boy named Bagoas, "a eunuch of remarkable beauty and in the very flower of boyhood, who had been loved by Darius, and was afterwards to be loved by Alexander."¹⁰⁷ Later, Alexander met and married the Bactrian princess Roxana, but he seems to have kept Bagoas with him during his Indian campaign and even during the terrible march across the desert of

13. Alexander at the Battle of Issus. Mosaic from Pompeii, second century BCE.

Gedrosia. Plutarch recounts an incident that took place at the end of this adventure. To celebrate his arrival at the Gedrosian capital, Alexander held athletic and musical contests. "His favorite, Bagoas, won the prize for song and dance, and then, in all his festal array, passed through the theatre and took his seat by Alexander's side; at sight of which the Macedonians clapped their hands and loudly bade the king kiss the victor, until at last he threw his arms around him and kissed him tenderly."¹⁰⁸

Athenaeus, at his gossip dinner party, cites Alexander's contemporary, Dicaearchus, for a slightly different version of the incident which makes the conqueror less shy: "He was so overcome with love for the eunuch Bagoas that, in full view of the entire theatre, he, bending over, caressed Bagoas fondly, and when the audience clapped and shouted in applause, he nothing loath, again bent over and kissed him."¹⁰⁹ If this account is true, it suggests that Alexander publicly acknowledged the role Bagoas played in his life. Even more striking is the enthusiasm with which the Macedonians ap-

plauded the Persian, considering the distaste his troops showed for Alexander's adoption of Persian dress and customs. Perhaps the fact that Bagoas had shared their hardships in the desert had made him acceptable.

Alexander's closest and most enduring emotional tie was not with his Persian favorite, however, but with his boyhood friend Hephaestion, who had studied with him under Aristotle in Macedon, commanded armies during the march to the East, founded cities at his friend's bidding, and become his grand vizier in Persia. One important inspiration for Alexander's ambition was Homer. He slept with the *Iliad* under his pillow and consciously took Achilles as his model. In this romantic dream, Hephaestion was cast for the part of Patroclus. On a visit to the site of ancient Troy, Alexander deliberately dramatized these identifications: he himself sacrificed to the hero Achilles, Hephaestion at the shrine of Achilles' companion. They assumed the same oneness. When the aged queen mother of Persia, brought captive to Alexander's tent, bowed by mistake to Hephaestion, who was taller and handsomer, Alexander eased her embarrassment with the remark: "Never mind, Mother. For he too is Alexander."¹¹⁰

When Hephaestion died of a fever in Ecbatana in 324, Alexander's grief surpassed even Achilles'. He hanged the doctor who had attended the sick man, refused to eat or drink, cut his hair and the manes and tails of his horses, dismantled the battlements of cities, and sent to the oracle at Siwah to ask divine honors for his friend. Hephaestion's enormous funeral pyre was a Babylonian ziggurat, an eighth of a mile square at the base and two hundred feet high, tier after tier decorated with magnificently ornate wooden statues. His cremation, which cost ten thousand talents, was arguably the most spectacular funeral in history. Yet, here in the fourth century, we are left with the same ambiguity we found in Homer. The same cloud of uncertainty surrounding the love of Achilles and Patroclus envelops the Macedonians. Despite the intensity of Alexander's feelings, we cannot be sure that they were lovers, though they may have been in their early years. Even Plutarch, the indefatigable chronicler of amours, who seems to have read very widely in now-vanished sources for his biographical sketch, fails to make that claim.

With Alexander, the classical age of Greece comes to an end. From now on Greek culture would recognize not one but two intellectual capitals: Athens and Alexandria, the splendid new metropolis Alexander had established in Egypt. Even more than in the archaic age, male homoeroticism had played a visible and important part on the major stages of the Greek world. To understand Greek culture at its zenith, we must take this into account. Whether expressed as heroic devotion, playful amorousness, or brutal violence, male love was often a crucial element in war or politics. In art and literature it had left its mark abundantly, while inspiring the subtlest and most daring philosophical speculations. Wherever the spotlight of history shines in this brilliant world, we find the love of male for male.