

ROME AND GREECE

323 BCE—138 CE

• Sexuality and Empire •

What the followers of Alexander failed to achieve, the Romans accomplished during the next three centuries—the consolidation by force of arms of a far-flung and stable empire. After their bitter struggle with Carthage for control of Sicily and the western Mediterranean, they were able to extend their rule first to Spain, north Africa, Macedonia and Asia Minor, and then to Gaul, Egypt, and Britain. Impelling the Romans to these victories was what Nietzsche was to call, admiringly, “the will to power,” an overwhelming need to dominate. The Pax Romana brought peace, order, and prosperity to Rome’s new provinces, but it also brought subjugation and an enormous proliferation of slavery. This development was to have a significant influence on the way Romans viewed sexuality, and homosexuality in particular.

The conquest of Hellenistic Greece was fraught with ironies. Rome’s supreme achievements were in civic administration, law, and engineering. But in 180 BCE Greece far surpassed Rome in philosophy, science, and the arts. The relatively crude and unpolished Romans were soon forced to recognize the cultural superiority of a people they had defeated in the field. Their admiration, however, was selective. Greek culture had enormous influence on Roman literature and art and colored the expression of erotic feeling; but some venerable Greek institutions—such as civic gymnasia—never took root in Rome at all.

Inevitably, when the Romans encountered Greek civilization they encountered Greek homosexuality. Here, in particular, the two cultures diverged. The Greeks were able to conceive of love between an older and a younger male as a protective and affectionate mentorship, while the Romans, generally speaking, did not accord this privileged status to male relationships. There was no taboo of silence such as developed under Christianity—the Romans were quite willing to acknowledge the prevalence of same-sex desire. Indeed, the earliest Latin literature treats it quite openly. The swaggering

hero of Plautus's comedy *The Braggart Soldier* (c. 200 BCE) has an eye for handsome young men as well as women, and numerous casual references to male homosexuality appear in Plautus' other plays.¹ But male love was not, as with the Greeks, a theme for philosophical or forensic panegyrics. It did not have the same high cultural import and was not regarded as the root of deep, inspiring personal devotion.

On the contrary, homosexual relations were perceived primarily as a form of dominance, an extension of the will to power. We see this in early Roman comedy, where the same-sex intrigues are not between men and freeborn youths but exclusively between masters and slaves.² The Greeks deprecated such servile liaisons as ungentlemanly, but these relationships were the only ones that Roman society accepted unreservedly. Since the slave population of Italy increased dramatically in the late third and second centuries BCE—some authorities calculate that slaves made up as much as 40 percent of the population—opportunities were ample for Roman masters. By 200 BCE Cato the censor was to complain that a good-looking slave boy cost as much as a farm.³ The spread of slavery had a paradoxical effect, preventing any general prohibition against male homosexuality per se from taking root but casting a special stigma on the passive partner and preventing Romans from idealizing male passion as the Greeks had.

For the Romans, homosexual relations were not in themselves good or bad. But to submit to penetration was to be feminized and humiliated. Such an experience, if it became public knowledge, invited reproach and ridicule from a man's enemies. The analogy between military and sexual defeat was strongly felt. A striking instance was the teasing of Rome's greatest general at his triumph, when Caesar's soldiers sang mockingly of his youthful affair with the king of Bithynia: "Caesar conquered the Gauls, but Nicomedes conquered Caesar."⁴

In Greece, to be the beloved protégé of a respected ruler was an honor. In Rome, it was an embarrassment and an occasion for ribald humor. The amorous-sexual vocabularies of the two languages reveal the distinction. In the line just quoted, the same verb, *subigere*, "to subjugate," signifies both the public and the private "conquest." Greek usage incorporated some form of the root *eros* (love) into such words as *paiderastia*, *erastes*, *eromenos*. Roman men did not embrace lovers (*amantes*) but rather *pathici*, *cinaedi*, *exoleti*—terms suggestive of passivity, degradation, and abuse. No cultural heroes exemplified male love in Rome, as Achilles did in Greece, the Yellow Emperor in China, and an exalted bodhisattva in Japan. What homoerotic myths the Romans knew were borrowed from Greece.

Indeed, if we look for the first records of homosexuality in Roman history, we find them not in legends but in Valerius Maximus's *Memorable Facts and Sayings*, a handbook compiled about 30 CE for rhetoricians and orators.

Book VI recounts a dozen notorious offenses against “chastity,” half of them homosexual and involving military or civil officials who abused their rank to coerce subordinates. Family honor might also be at stake: Fabius Maximus Servilianus (126 BCE) is said to have killed his son for his complacency to men and then voluntarily exiled himself for shame at this dishonor.⁵ The earliest anecdote, dating from 326 BCE, is perhaps the most revealing. Livy tells the story at length as an important development in Roman jurisprudence. A freeborn boy enslaved for debt had been beaten by his master when he rejected his advances. The populace, hearing his cries and seeing his lacerated back, objected to these indignities. What is significant, however, was the Senate’s response. They did not pass a law to protect slaves from assault; instead, it was decreed that freeborn Romans could no longer be enslaved for debt.⁶ Faced with a choice between limiting sexual access to slaves or limiting slavery, the Romans chose to limit slavery.

Valerius Maximus’ cases were handled by administrative or paternal action with no reference to any specific law against homosexuality. Such a measure has been assumed to exist in the so-called *Lex Scantinia*.⁷ Our knowledge of this statute is, however, fragmentary and uncertain; its date, scope, and relevance have all been called into doubt. It has been suggested that it was enacted in 226 BCE, when a Roman tribune, C. Scantinius Capitolinus, was convicted of soliciting another aristocrat’s son.⁸ But Roman laws were named not after offenders but after the men who proposed them. The first known mention of the Scantinian Law appears in 50 BCE in two letters to Cicero, but the context provides no hint of what it dealt with.⁹ The Emperor Domitian (81–96 CE) invoked it in a campaign to enforce sexual morality, but again exactly what it punished is not clear.¹⁰ The only text in the pre-Christian period to connect the law definitely with homosexual behavior is Juvenal’s second satire, c. 100 CE, where it seems to be understood as penalizing *cinaedi*, that is, passive males.¹¹ Writing shortly before this, Quintilian, in his *Institutes*, tells us that a fine of 10,000 sesterces (\$2,000?) was the penalty for seducing a freeborn boy.¹² Most authorities think he is referring to the Scantinian Law, but the matter remains unclear.

Nevertheless, sex with freeborn boys was certainly frowned on in Roman society, along with adultery and the seduction of virgin daughters, all of which violated the honor of the *paterfamilias*. An orator named Haterius, pleading in the courts in the Augustan age, put the matter succinctly: “Losing one’s virtue is a disgrace [*crimen*] for a freeborn boy, a necessity in a slave, and a duty [owed to his emancipator] for the freedman.”¹³ (In Rome emancipation was a civil and religious procedure by which the freed slave might still be required to render certain services, including, on occasion, sexual ones, to his former master.) But though sex with freeborn boys was disapproved, it was not seen as degrading. The “conqueror” was regarded with the

ambivalent mixture of censure and envy successful Don Juans have met with in most societies.

• Cicero and Roman Politics •

The Senate under the Republic was Rome's most respected institution, arguably one of the world's greatest deliberative bodies, and Cicero was its most admired orator. But the dignity of the assembly imposed no reticence when it came to sexuality. Accusations of adultery, incest, and homosexuality were common. Such indiscriminate smears were one of the least attractive sides of Roman public life. Whether they had any serious effect is a question. So much mud was thrown that its consequences must have been slight. Julius Caesar and others withstood attacks of this sort repeatedly, apparently not much damaged. Such scandal was the spice of political debate, not a determining element. If allegations of homosexuality had ended careers in ancient Rome—as they would have, certainly, in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century England—the Roman political stage during the turbulent last century of the Republic would have been bereft of Sulla, Pompey, Cataline, Caesar, Clodius, Mark Antony, and Octavius; in short, it would have lacked most of its principal players.¹⁴

Cicero's surviving speeches amply demonstrate how politicians used such insinuations. In 60 BCE Cicero prosecuted Verres, the governor of Sicily, for financial corruption and accused him of using violence against married women and freeborn youths. Still worse, he was not only "a man among women" but "a degraded contemptible woman among men."¹⁵ A decade later Cicero delivered his celebrated attack against Cataline, who had plotted with discontented radicals and debt-ridden aristocrats to overthrow the Republic, depicting his followers as effeminate, ready "to love" and (more damagingly) "to be loved."¹⁶ Publius Clodius Pulcher, the patrician who had deserted his class to become a leader of street mobs and who had instigated Cicero's exile in 58 BCE, was accused of numerous affairs with women, including his sister. To these charges Cicero added another, alleging that as a boy he had been the "debauched favorite of wealthy rakes."¹⁷

After Caesar's assassination, Cicero launched his most famous political campaign—against Mark Antony. In the series of bitter denunciations we know as the *Philippics*, he repeatedly impugned Antony's morals and manhood. To the modern imagination, fed on Shakespeare and Hollywood, Antony is the Roman heterosexual lover par excellence; to his contemporaries, he was also known as an ardent pursuer of youths. (The Jewish historian Josephus mentions the unwillingness of King Herod to entrust his wife's handsome sixteen-year-old brother to him.)¹⁸ Cicero was able to attest to an especially damaging episode. Alleging that Antony in his youth had sold

himself to older men, Cicero, in the second Philippic, gives an unusually intimate picture of a turbulent Roman love affair, purportedly at first hand:

You assumed a man's gown [at 17], and at once turned it into a harlot's. At first you were a common prostitute, the fee for your infamies was fixed, and that not small; but Curio quickly turned up, who withdrew you from your meretricious traffic, and, as if he had given you a matron's robe, established you in an enduring and stable wedlock. No boy ever bought for libidinous purposes was ever so much in the power of his master as you were in Curio's. How often did his father eject you from his house, how often did he set watchmen that you might not cross the threshold! while you nevertheless, with night as your abettor, at the bidding of lust, and the compulsion of your pay, were let down through the tiles.¹⁹

Antony's lover, Gaius Scribonius Curio, Cicero claimed, had begged him to defend him if his father should sue to recover the six million sesterces (\$120,000?) he had given Antony to pay his debts.

But the crux of Cicero's speech is the dramatic moment when Antony publicly offered Caesar a crown. Accusing Antony of asking "slavery" for the Roman people, Cicero harks back to his affair with Curio. "You should have asked for it for yourself alone, whose life from boyhood showed you would submit to anything, [and] would lightly be a slave."²⁰ In the thirteenth Philippic Cicero repeated the incriminating analogy: "For if his boyhood had suffered the lusts of those who were tyrants over him, was he also to set up over our children a master and a tyrant?"²¹

In his philosophical writings, Cicero appeals not to Plato or the Stoics but to Epicurus, who thought the ideal life was one of unruffled calm and considered love a threat to this equanimity. Epicurus' chief Latin disciple was Lucretius, who, in Book IV of *On the Nature of Things*, paints a vivid but alarming picture of sexual passion, reducing love, in his materialist view, to a physiological phenomenon. Just as blood from a wound in battle spurts toward the foe who has dealt the blow, so the man smitten by the shafts of Venus, Lucretius tells us, is drawn toward his tormentor, whether it be "a lad with womanish limbs, or a woman radiating love from her whole body."²² For Lucretius, love is not a divine madness, as in the *Phaedrus*, but madness in a pathological sense. Wounded men should not turn away from sex but should cure love's wounds by promiscuous affairs. "Do not think that by avoiding grand passions you are missing the delights of Venus," he assures his readers. "Rest assured that this pleasure is enjoyed in a purer form by the healthy than by the love-sick."²³

The view of love in the philosophical debates Cicero sets in his villa at Tusculum is equally sour. It is astonishing to realize that, compared to the voluminous writings of the Greeks, the four or five pages in Book IV of the

Tusculan Disputations are the most extensive treatment of love in extant Latin prose. Appearing in an account of “undesirable perturbations” of the soul, they parallel Lucretius. Quoting the Latin comic poet Caecilius to the effect that love may be wise or senseless, insane or desirable, Cicero can accept only the negative judgments. Medea’s destructive passion for Jason is, for him, love’s prototype.²⁴ Plato and Zeno were wrong in valuing love: Epicurus was right.

The cult of love, Cicero thinks, originated in that scandalous institution, the Greek gymnasium.²⁵ Even if such a thing as chaste love could exist, it would be wise to avoid it, since it can bring only trouble and anxiety. Cicero’s recommended treatment parallels Lucretius’: the lover must be shown how contemptible the object of his affections is and distracted by a change of scene or new interests, though Cicero stops short of endorsing promiscuity.

• Greek Love in the *Aeneid* •

Given the hostility toward homosexuality of Rome’s native traditions and of Roman philosophy, it may seem surprising that any Latin writer would make a serious effort to naturalize Greek love. Yet one poet attempted the feat. In most respects the *Aeneid* is a conservative poem, telling the story of Aeneas, who after the fall of Troy founded a colony in Italy from which Romans claimed descent. Taking the *Iliad* as a model, Virgil made his poem a propaganda piece for Roman imperialism. In line with Augustus’ policy, he sought to revive the *mos maiorum*, the “customs of our ancestors,” in a nation where they were fast vanishing. The theme of the poem is *pietas* (devotion)—to fathers, to the gods, to national ideals. Its message is that Romans must sacrifice their individual desires to destiny and the state. With such an ethos, we would expect duty to triumph over love—and it usually does. Dido, the queen of Carthage, is a sympathetic figure, but Aeneas, at the gods’ command, must leave her to fulfill his fate in Italy. Virgil seems to be saying, “Make war, not love.” So it is surprising to find one grand passion in the *Aeneid* not just condoned but presented for emulation, and that a love affair *more Graeco*, “in the Greek fashion,” as the Romans put it.

We first meet Nisus and Euryalus in Book V, when Aeneas pauses in Sicily to celebrate funeral games in memory of his father. Eager men line up for the footrace—“Nisus and Euryalus in the lead— / Euryalus exceptional for beauty / And bloom of youth, whom Nisus dearly loved.”²⁶ In Book IX the Trojans land in Italy and are besieged by the Rutulians while Aeneas is on a diplomatic mission. The lovers reappear, this time sharing military duty:

Nisus guarded a gate—a man-at-arms
With a fighting heart . . .

Euryalus was his comrade, handsomer
 Than any other soldier of Aeneas
 Wearing the Trojan gear: a boy whose cheek
 Bore though unshaven manhood's early down.
 One love united them, and side by side
 They entered combat, as that night they held
 The gate on the same watch.²⁷

Nisus conceives a daring plan: he intends to slip through the besiegers' lines under cover of night with a message for Aeneas, who does not know the danger his troops are facing. When Euryalus begs to go with him, Nisus is at first unwilling, but the boy prevails and the two set out, wreaking much butchery on the sleeping enemy. Then, separated from his comrade in the darkness of a thick wood, Euryalus is surrounded by enraged soldiers, whom Nisus tries to distract with shouts and taunts but to no avail—Euryalus is cut down.²⁸ Nisus, mad with grief, charges Euryalus' attackers and is himself slain; he falls dead on the boy's body.

Clearly, Virgil is trying to incorporate into a Latin poem a love that would parallel the devotion of Achilles to Patroclus in the *Iliad*. He is challenging both Roman tradition and the cynicism of Cicero and Lucretius. Why does he do this? The Romans' anxieties about sexual submission had inhibited their acceptance of the Greek ideal, but Virgil is not plagued by these fears—he values a personal tie that is protective, self-sacrificing, and heroic for its own sake, quite apart from its military utility.

Moreover, the Greek view seems to have appealed to something in his own personality. The authorship of the earliest biography of Virgil is in doubt—it may be by Suetonius or Donatus. But the sketch characterizes the poet's desires as directed especially to boys ("libidinis in pueros pronioris").²⁹ Since it is unusual for a biographer to assign a specific sexual orientation to a Roman, we may assume that this side of Virgil's personality struck his contemporaries. This was because Virgil seems to have adopted toward his favored boys something like the protective, nurturing role of the Greek *erastes*, taking responsibility for their education and upbringing. As his biographer puts it, "He was especially given to passions for boys, and his special favorites were Cebes and Alexander, whom he calls Alexis in the second book of his 'Bucolics.' This boy was given to him by Asinius Pollio, and both his favorites had some education, while Cebes was even a poet."³⁰

When Nisus falls in Book IX of the *Aeneid*, Virgil addresses the dead lovers and makes a prophecy:

Fortunate both! If in the least my songs
 Avail, no future date shall ever take you
 Out of the record of remembered Time,
 While children of Aeneas make their home

Around the Capitol's unshaken rock,
And still the Roman Father governs all.³¹

But Virgil failed. Nisus and Euryalus never became exemplars of love and valor for the Romans, as Achilles and Patroclus and the tyrannicides were for the Greeks.

• Meleager and Callimachus •

Despite this, Latin erotic poetry was strongly influenced by Greek poets of the sixth and fifth century and their successors in the Greek Anthology. The anthology, a collection of some 3,700 epigrams by over three hundred poets, was edited by the Byzantine scholar Constantinus Cephalas about 917 CE. It devotes two books to love poetry. Book V contains some 309 short poems on the love of women. But Book XII rivals it with 258 poems on the love of boys composed over a period of more than a thousand years, from 600 BCE to the sixth century CE.

It is assumed that the nucleus for Book XII was the so-called *Garland of Meleager*, a collection of poems that appeared about 60 BCE. Meleager, a Syrian who lived in Gadara (one of the ten Greek cities that formed the so-called Decapolis in Palestine), is passionate, with an Oriental exuberance, and playfully histrionic. His poems, forty of them addressed to boys and another forty to women, are full of pretty conceits that he is not averse to repeating. If a certain boy had wings and arrows, he declares, he could pass as Eros himself. (So he describes Praxiteles in epigram 56, Zoilus in 75, and Antiochus in 78.) Quick, he begs his friends in mock alarm, pour cold water on me, I've dared to look on Dionysius—a boy, not the god (81). He is driven to the verge of ecstasy and despair by Andragathus, Diodorus, Charidemus, and Cleobolus and is at least mildly attracted to Heraclitus, Dion, Uliades, Philocles, Diophantus, Aristagoras, Theocles, and Sopolis. (There is a matching list of enticing women.) No wonder he exclaims "the heavy gale of Desire drives me storm-tossed; for now I swim in a [varied] sea of boys."³² He does name a few special favorites whose charms have (temporarily) blinded him to all else. He is philosophical about Charidemus; if Zeus bears him away as a second Ganymede, all he asks is a "sweet, melting glance" and a kiss at parting (68). But he will fight the god himself for Myiscus. Zeus has promised not to take him, but Meleager is nervous if he so much as hears a fly buzz—it might be Zeus's eagle (70). At times he professes a preference for women, but in this as in all else he is inconstant: "It is Cypris [Aphrodite], a woman, who casts at us the fire of passion for women, but Love [Eros] himself rules over desire for males. Whither shall I incline, to the boy or to his mother? I will tell you for sure that even Cypris herself will say, 'The bold brat wins.'"³³

Homoerotic poetry in this vein appears in Latin poetry at least as early as

Meleager. Light on this subject comes from Aulus Gellius, a litterateur who wrote in Athens two and a half centuries later. His *Attic Nights*—conversations between Greeks and Latins who compare their literary cultures—provide much information about lost authors. A Latin-speaking guest at one symposium shows some embarrassment when the Greeks complain that Latin poetry is *anaphrodisias*, that is, without (the charms of) Aphrodite. To this end he recites four early Latin poems, two of which are addressed to males. One is by Valerius Aedituus, who in the age of Marius and Sulla was already imitating Greek erotic epigrams:

O Phileros, why a torch that we need not?
Just as we are we'll go, our hearts aflame.
That flame no wild wind's blast can ever quench,
Or rain that falls torrential from the skies;
Venus herself alone can quell her fire,
No other force there is that has such power.³⁴

The second homoerotic poem is by Valerius' contemporary Quintus Catullus, who was consul in 102 BCE with Marius. Catullus was a member of the Scipionic circle, an aristocratic intellectual with a distinguished career as a soldier, politician, and poet. He has no hesitation, however, about revealing that he has fallen passionately in love with another male, one Theotimus.³⁵

Latin literature entered upon its golden age in the first century BCE and showed a marked dependence on Greek models. The chief influence on lyrical poetry was the Alexandrian school, which had flourished in Hellenistic Egypt some two centuries earlier. The Alexandrians strove above all else for elegance, polish, and sophistication, and they prized erudition. Their leader, Callimachus, who wrote in the early third century BCE and held an important post at the famous library, was no Walt Whitman: "I loathe all common things," he wrote in an epigram. Like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, he consciously forged a new style and was content to limit his audience to the learned few. But though Callimachus was an innovator in style, he was an erotic traditionalist: a dozen of his epigrams appear in Book XII of the Greek Anthology. As fastidious in love as in art, he would have disapproved of Meleager: "I hate the cyclic [epic] poem, nor do I take pleasure in the road that carries many to and fro. I abhor, too, the roaming lover, and I drink not from every well."³⁶ He apologizes for having once let his feelings run away with him. Love and wine were to blame: he appeared at a boy's door at night, but, he protests, he did not make a disturbance by calling out his name—he only kissed the doorpost.³⁷

• Catullus and Tibullus •

Catullus, Rome's first major love poet, whose short life ran from c. 84 to 54 BCE, admired Callimachus and translated him. His arrival on the scene dra-

matizes as nothing else does how deeply divided Roman views were on love and sex. Livy had pictured an austere, puritanical early Rome, a society of hardworking farmers who did not know luxury or dissipation. Catullus, who did not share this ideal, inaugurated an age in which poets defied tradition and mounted a veritable erotic revolt. Famous as the lover of “Lesbia” (whom he begins by praising rapturously and ends by cursing obscenely), he admonishes his mistress, “Let us live and love, and value at one farthing all the talk of crabbed old men.”³⁸ In the same poem he begs her for some thousands of kisses. As if to confirm his bisexual impartiality, he later addresses a boy named Juventius, on whom he bestows even more:

If I should be allowed to go so far as kissing
Your sweet eyes, Juventius,
I would go on kissing them three hundred thousand times;
Nor would it ever seem I had had enough,
Not if I harvested
Kisses as numerous as the ears of standing corn.³⁹

It has usually been assumed that Latin poems to boys must be addressed to slaves. Catullus appears to have broken the taboo by writing to a freeborn boy and, moreover, using his real name, for he calls his favorite “the flower of the Juventii” (24), implying that Juventius was the scion of a distinguished family. The love affair did not run smoothly, however. Catullus steals a kiss but is devastated when the boy wipes it away as if it was from a “dirty whore” (99). Yet Catullus himself hardly cuts an amiable figure. The most unlovable of love poets, he can be meanly snobbish about his rivals: how, he asks, can Juventius tolerate Furius, who is poor, or another suitor who is sickly (24, 81)? When he fears that someone may seduce his boy, he becomes violent, threatening him with the punishment of an adulterer—a radish in his rectum (15). His hypermasculinity finds vent in insults hurled at anyone suspected of taking the passive role. His favorite term of abuse, employed in poem after poem, is *cinaedus* (“faggot”). He calls Caesar a *pathicus* and makes the same charge against his lieutenant Mamurra (57). (He later apologized and was forgiven.) When his own manhood is called into doubt by acquaintances who snicker over his “thousand kisses,” he begins an untranslatable poem (16) with a threat of rape: “Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo, / Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi” [“I’ll sodomize you anally (*pedicabo*) and orally (*irrumabo*), Aurelius, you queer, and Furius, you faggot”]. Few Latin writers have dramatized their anxieties about masculinity so vehemently.

Tibullus, the first of the Latin elegists, was of a gentler mold. Tibullus had served with Augustus’ generals in Gaul; but, like young Americans of the Vietnam generation, he favored love above war, which he saw as mere plunder. “Down with bugles and flags!” he writes. “Wounds and wealth to the greedy!”⁴⁰ He prefers the modest comfort of his farm, where he wields a

14. The Warren cup.
Roman, silver, first
century CE.

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

15. The Warren cup,
reverse.

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

pitchfork and carries home stray lambs. The pleasures of rural life include the delightful Delia, but she proves fickle. He veers in another direction—his fourth elegy is a homosexual counterpart to Ovid's *Art of Love*, for which, indeed, it may have provided a model.

The poem opens with Tibullus' plea to the god Priapus to tell him how boys may be wooed. Priapus, whose phallic image guarded fields and crops, was generally associated with rough sexual humor. But here, in a different vein, the god instructs Tibullus with sympathetic tenderness:

"Trust to no gentle band of boys," he told me.
 "They give you too much reason to grow fond—
 one by his skill in reading will attract you;
 one, swimming strongly in a quiet pond;
 one by his young and touching self-assurance,
 and one, perhaps, still shy enough to blush."⁴¹

Like the Cretans, Tibullus places personality above beauty. It is the boy's intellectual promise, or his boldness or vulnerability, which attracts him. Priapus' speech gives a unique picture of a man and boy sharing pastimes in the Italian countryside:

"Whatever it may be your lad asks of you,
 do not refuse. Love gains by what love yields.
 Go where he goes—a thousand miles or farther,
 under the August sun that burns the fields
 or under skies grown dark and heavy-clouded,
 marked with the colored bow that threatens rain."⁴²

In the end, Tibullus makes a painful confession: he has set himself up as a guide to lovers, but his Marathus has scorned him. Was this boy a slave? Commentators have thought so, but can the elaborate courtships Tibullus describes be directed at slaves? Possibly they were: sensitive Romans must have renounced the rights of sexual access the law theoretically gave them and declined to force themselves on unwilling boys. Whatever the case, elegy nine of Book I is a litany of reproaches: Marathus has been seduced by money and gifts. Tibullus hopes Marathus' new lover's wife will cuckold him in turn. The passion and recriminations fall into the same pattern as the Delia poems: they are the common coin of the Latin love elegy.

• Theocritus and Corydon •

Theocritus, who wrote about 270 BCE, shared with Callimachus the leadership of the Alexandrian school. Indeed, one of Callimachus' love poems is addressed to a young man named Theocritus whom authorities identify with the poet. Here, two hundred years after Euripides and Agathon, is another

example in Greek literary history of the two leading poets of the age appearing as lovers.⁴³

Theocritus is a typical Alexandrian in his elegance, grace, and internationalism. The setting of his poems spans the ancient Greek world—Syracuse (where he was born), southern Italy, the Aegean island of Cos, Alexandria itself. Literary scholarship knows him best as the fountainhead of the so-called pastoral, whose conventions two thousand years of poets imitated, from Virgil to Spenser, Milton, and Arnold, by affecting to don the garb of simple shepherds. His so-called idylls, or “short pieces,” run typically from two to ten pages. Those in the pastoral mode vary considerably in tone and style. “The Harvest Festival” (Idyll 7) is artificial and subtle, while “Goatherd and Shepherd” (Idyll 5) is an impolite exchange between two unlettered countrymen.

The shepherds in “The Harvest Festival” are sophisticated poets in disguise. One of them, Lycidas, laments the departure of his (male) lover for Mytilene, while his comrade loves the girl Myrto but devotes his song to the plight of his friend Aratos, who “yearns deep in his heart for a boy.”⁴⁴ Both rustics speak with elaborate courtesy. By contrast, Comatas and Lacon in “Goatherd and Shepherd” counter boast with boast and insult with insult. Comatas brags of the girls who favor him, Lacon of the boys he enjoys. With peasant malice, Comatas reminds Lacon of an earlier encounter: “But don’t you remember that screwing I gave you, when you grinned / And wagged your tail briskly and held tight to the oak tree?”⁴⁵

Most poignant of the tales is Theocritus’ account of Heracles’ tragic love for Hylas (Idyll 13). The hero, seeking the golden fleece, had set sail with the Argonauts and the curly-haired Hylas, whom he loved. Heracles, we are told, taught the boy “as a father would his dear son, / All that had made him a good man and famous.”⁴⁶ (No Roman would have written in this style!) But when the ship docks near the Hellespont, the boy is lost. Sent for water, he fascinates the nymphs of a pool, who seize him so that he drowns in their embrace. The distraught Heracles searches long and far, plaintively calling the boy’s name and refusing to return to the ship. Finally, his exasperated comrades depart and leave him to his grief.

Not all of Theocritus’ poems are dramatic vignettes. In Idyll 12 he speaks his own voice:

You have come, darling boy! At last after two nights and days
 You have come! But those anxious with longing grow old in a day.
 As much sweeter spring is than winter, as apple than beach plum . . .
 So great is my joy at your coming, and to you I run
 Like a wayfarer parched by the sun to the shade of the oak.
 O that the Loves might breathe alike on us both,
 That we two might become a legend for all men hereafter!

“Divine were they among those who lived in earlier times,
 The one the inspirer,” as a man of Amyclae [Sparta] might put it,
 “The other a mirror,” as a Thessalian might say,
 “And under an equal yoke did they love one another,
 Then there were golden men, when the beloved reflected the love of
 the lover.”⁴⁷

He hopes that two hundred generations hence someone will bring him word in Hades that their love is still known among men. In Idyll 29 he promises a fickle boy the same devotion Achilles showed to Patroclus; in Idyll 30 he complains that he is still the victim of love, though the hair on his temples is white. Reading these poems, we are struck by how much of the classical tradition of Greek love is still alive in the Alexandrian age.

This rich tradition runs much thinner in Latin. We have seen how Virgil, with small success, tried to habituate the idea of heroic love in the *Aeneid*. Yet his second eclogue became the most celebrated expression of male love in the Latin language. The poem, Theocritean in style and setting, is a lament by Corydon, the head shepherd on an estate in Sicily, who is distraught at the indifference of Alexis, his master’s spoiled darling. Despite its dramatic form, Latin commentators regularly read the poem as a personal statement. Virgil’s Latin biographer, we have seen, assumed he was in love with “Alexis” and identified the boy with a slave Virgil’s patron had given him.⁴⁸ Later writers have added to the poem’s notoriety. Byron shocked regency England by citing it in the opening canto of *Don Juan*, and André Gide gave the title *Corydon* to the controversial defense of homosexuality he published in 1924.

Virgil depicts Corydon’s passion with psychological realism and a touch of wry irony. Corydon describes himself as *rusticus* and bemoans Alexis’ disdain for the simple pleasures of rural life. (Virgil’s biographer noted his own rustic appearance.) The shepherd tries desperately to recommend himself, but we smile at the self-deception of the besotted lover. This is the Epicurean view of love as a futile madness, softened by a touch of sympathetic humor. Do something practical, the shepherd counsels himself at last in frustration, prune your vines, weave a basket—you’ll find another Alexis.

• Horace’s Odes •

Horace was a close friend of Virgil and shared with him the munificence of Augustus’ wealthy confidant, Maecenas. Though he wrote no epic to rival the *Aeneid*, he was recognized as Virgil’s successor and Rome’s new laureate. Horace had more firsthand knowledge of Greek life than his friend Virgil, having spent two years in Athens as a student, and his poetry often imitated recondite Greek meters while remaining quintessentially Roman in its sentiments. Amiable (when not irritated), modest (when not praising his

own talents), pointedly uninterested in politics (when not singing the glories of Augustus' Rome), Horace took a relaxed attitude to love and sex that demonstrates all too well how a Roman slaveowner might disregard the sensitivities of the human beings he controlled:

If you're dying of thirst, do you ask if the goblets are golden?
 Or if you're famished and starving, refuse every food in the world save
 Peacock and turbot? Then why, if your groin is distended, and right at
 Hand is a slave girl or slave lad of yours that you crave in the moment's
 Urgency, why should you choose to endure the discomfort of passion?
 I wouldn't. I'm for a love that's accessible, easy to come by.⁴⁹

Horace's love poems, as we might expect, lack the idealism of Virgil's tale of Nisus and Euryalus and the passion of Catullus. A multitude of Lalages, Glyceras, Pyrras, and Chloes flit dimly through his pages. He informs us that his solicitous father chaperoned him to school to prevent any hint of scandal, but this does not seem to have inhibited Horace in his own pursuit of youths. In one satire he makes a Stoic philosopher chide him for his "crushes on thousands of girls" and "thousands of boys."⁵⁰ In Epode 11 he claims to have spent three summers enamoured of Inachia; now he loves Lyciscus, whose tenderness surpasses any woman's—only a new passion for a girl or boy will free him. He comes closest to real feeling in the opening of his last book of odes, which he published in 13 BCE when he was fifty. He has been heart-free for eight years; now, he asks

Must it be war again
 After so long a truce? Venus, be kind, refrain
 . . . I take no joy
 In the naive hope of mutual love with woman or boy . . .
 Why then, my Ligurinus, why
 Should the reluctant-flowing tears surprise these dry
 Cheeks, and my fluent tongue
 Stumble in unbecoming silences among
 Syllables? In dreams at night
 I hold you in my arms, or toil behind your flight
 Across the Martian field,
 Or chase through yielding waves the boy who will not yield.⁵¹

Such verse was acclaimed, but was it respectable, that is, could it hurt a political career? It is a paradox that Roman law and Roman oratory decried male liaisons, while Roman poets felt free to avow their love of boys quite unself-consciously. What are we to make of this cultural schizophrenia?

First, we must note that, if there was a law, prosecutions were all but unheard of. Nor did the possibility that youthful male affairs might be raked up in politics seem to deter upper-class boys from indulging in them. As for

moral attitudes generally, these varied widely, from conservatives who lamented the passing of the *mos maiorum* to others who, like Ovid, rejoiced that the “good old days” were past. Some later Stoic philosophers, such as Musonius Rufus and his pupil Epictetus (60–140), deplored all sexual relations with slaves, but the typical Roman’s view was more lax.⁵² Sexual behavior was not proscribed on religious grounds; the concern was rather that a male should not violate another man’s property—that is, his wife, daughter, or son—or take a passive role. This, and not the gender of a man’s partner, was the operative principle in Roman morals.

Cicero himself provides a piquant example of these contradictions. He had attacked male liaisons in his speeches and denounced Greek love in his *Disputations*, but he was not above writing love poetry himself on occasion. The poems have been lost, but evidence of their tenor comes from the letters of Pliny the Younger, who comments on them. Cicero’s example gave Pliny the courage to imitate him: “I have discovered the wanton *jeu d’esprit* of Cicero [in which] he complains that, with malice prepense, Tiro had deceived his lover [Cicero] and cheated him at night of a few kisses that had been promised him after dinner. After reading this, I said to myself: why conceal my loves and timidly avoid publishing them? Why not admit that I too know the tricks of a Tiro, and a Tiro’s flirtatious charms and the deceptions that add fuel to the fires?”⁵³ Tiro was a slave of Cicero’s, but an unusual one. The twice-divorced Cicero made him his secretary and later, having freed him, his literary executor. After Cicero’s death Tiro wrote his biography and had a distinguished literary career of his own. This was almost Greek love.

• Ovid’s Myths •

With Ovid there were no contradictions or hesitations: from the start his sympathies were with the poets of the moral revolt. Inevitably this put him at odds with Augustus, whose new official policy encouraged marriage and large families to provide officers for Rome’s armies and administrators for her colonies. Finally, the outraged emperor expressed his anger by exiling Ovid, alleging the subversive influence of his *Art of Love*, a manual of stratagems for seducing women.

Ovid can confidently be identified as a tolerant heterosexual. At the outset of the *Loves*—poems dramatizing an affair with a woman that did not run smoothly—Ovid makes the typical Roman assumption that love is genderless when he asks, “What can I do in light verse? I have no boy I can sing of, / No nice long-haired girl making a theme for my lays.”⁵⁴ In the same vein, Ovid’s most famous poem, the *Metamorphoses*, treats the bisexuality of Greek myth without prejudice. What was for the fathers of the Christian

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

16. Zephyrus and Hyacinthus.

Red-figure cup, c. 490 CE.

church an indelible blot on Greek religion is for Ovid a source of poetic inspiration. He is limited only by his theme, which is supernatural transformations. The homoerotic tales in the *Metamorphoses* center on the figure of Orpheus in Book X, where he tells the story of Orpheus' loss of Eurydice and then recounts the legend that Orpheus' interest later turned to boys. In addition, he makes Orpheus sing at length "the love of boys," a device which allows Ovid to describe Jupiter's metamorphosis into an eagle for the love of Ganymede and the transformation of Cyparissus, beloved of Apollo, who, after his pathetic death is changed into a tree.

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

17. The Bacchantes attack Orpheus. Fresco, Casa dei Vettii, Pompeii, 1st century BCE.

Among these tales Ovid lavishes most art on the story of Hyacinth. Apollo, setting aside his divinity, leaves Delphi for love of the young man, but once again an accident deprives him of the boy: Apollo throws a discus that inadvertently kills his beloved. (In some versions of the myth, the jealous wind god, Zephyrus, himself enamoured of Hyacinth, directs the fatal missile.) Ovid's depiction of Hyacinth's death echoes Virgil's lines on the death of Euryalus:

The wound was past all cure. So in a garden,
 If one breaks off a violet or poppy
 Or lilies, bristling with their yellow stamens,
 And they droop over, and cannot raise their heads,
 But look on earth, so sank the dying features.⁵⁵

Apollo assures him that he will be reborn as a flower that will commemorate his grief.

When Orpheus finishes his song, a fierce band of Thracian Maenads set upon him. Infuriated that he has deserted women for the love of boys and taught this “art” to other Thracians, they beat him to death with clubs and stones. For this deed, Bacchus turns the women into a grove of oaks. This brutal murder, which is presented as a crime by Ovid, seemed just to medieval moralists, who damned Orpheus as the malign inventor of pederasty.

• Lesbianism •

Quite different in mood is the tale of Iphis and Ianthe in Book IX. As a lesbian love story, it is all but unique in classical literature. When Iphis’ mother becomes pregnant, her husband decrees that the child must die if it is a girl. She bears a girl, conceals her sex, and gives her a name of ambiguous gender: Iphis. When this “son” is thirteen, the father chooses the golden-haired Ianthe as “his” bride. Ovid treats the love of the two girls sympathetically:

They were of equal age, they both were lovely,
 Had learned their ABC’s from the same teachers,
 And so love came to both of them together
 In simple innocence, and filled their hearts
 With equal longing.⁵⁶

But as the marriage with its inevitable disclosure draws near, Iphis recoils in horror, calls her love “monstrous and unheard of,” and bemoans her cruel fate. The goddess Isis resolves the impasse by turning her into a boy. Iphis’ self-loathing may serve as an instance of what we might now call internalized homophobia. But what, we may ask, is Ovid’s own attitude toward lesbian love? Perhaps he wants us to see Iphis’ self-rejection as the naiveté of youth—she is, after all, only thirteen. More likely, however, Ovid is reflecting the prejudice of the classical world, which did not extend to lesbianism the same tolerance it granted pederasty.

References to love between women are sparse and rare. An epigram in the Greek Anthology by a third-century poet, Asclepiades, blames two women of Samos for taking the wrong path to love: he asks Aphrodite to hate them (Book 5, epigram 207). Phaedrus, the Roman fabulist, writing about 50 CE,

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

18. Female athletes. Mosaic, Villa Romana del Casale, Piazza Armerina, Sicily, 3rd–4th century.

explained lesbianism by a poetic allegory: Prometheus coming home drunk from a party had mistakenly interchanged the genitals of some women and some men. It is revealing that Phaedrus parallels female homosexuality not with male homosexuality generally but only with the passive form, as something akin to it in perversity. As a result of Prometheus' error, he comments, "Lust now enjoys perverted pleasure."⁵⁷

Seneca the elder, discussing a legal case, mentions a husband who killed his wife and her female lover and implies that their crime was worse than ordinary adultery.⁵⁸ A few decades later, Martial, with his typical blunt crudity, satirized a woman he calls Philaenis, an athlete who plays ball in a bikini, wrestles in the mud, vomits wine before dinner, gorges herself, and drinks again (Book 7, epigram 67). Stereotyping lesbians as hypermasculine, Martial introduces the curious theory that lesbians had unusually long clitorises that allowed them to penetrate other women sexually. More oddly still, Philaenis sodomizes boys to prove her masculinity.

Male homosexuality appears occasionally in the extant prose Greek romances, but lesbianism is far less common. In the *Babyloniaca* of Iamblichus

(c. 150 CE), we hear of an Egyptian princess, Berenice, who loves and marries another woman. The novelist, however, denounces such love as “wild and lawless.”⁵⁹ Lucian’s fifth “Dialogue of the Courtesans” (c. 180) parallels Martial a century later by again presenting a masculine stereotype: Megilla calls herself Megillus and wears a wig to cover her shaved head. She is “married” to Demonassa of Corinth but is herself from Lesbos. Her new friend Leaena comments: “They say there are women like that in Lesbos, with faces like men, and unwilling to consort with men, but only with women, as though they themselves were men.”⁶⁰ Megilla seduces Leaena who, however, thinks the experience too disgusting to describe. Obviously we are far from the sophisticated aestheticism of Sappho’s circle, where women cultivated beauty and the arts.

In another dialogue, also ascribed to Lucian but in fact written some time after his death, two men debate which is better, male love or heterosexuality. One speaker protests that legitimizing male affairs would logically lead to the condoning of lesbianism—which would be unthinkable. His rhetoric gives a glimpse of how a hostile Greek male of about 270 CE conceived of women who loved women:

But if males find intercourse with males acceptable, henceforth let women too love each other. Come now, epoch of the future, legislator of strange pleasures, devise fresh paths for male lusts, but bestow the same privilege upon women, and let them have intercourse with each other just as men do. Let them strap to themselves cunningly contrived instruments of lechery, those mysterious monstrosities devoid of seed, and let women lie with women as does a man. Let wanton Lesbianism [“tribadism”]—that word seldom heard, which I feel ashamed even to utter—freely parade itself, and let our women’s chambers imitate Philaenis, disgracing themselves with [androgynous] amours.⁶¹

One clue to the speaker’s disgust may lie in the reference to Philaenis. Martial, as we have seen, had used the name as generic for what we would now call a lesbian. The historic Philaenis purportedly wrote a sex manual in the fourth or third centuries BCE describing lesbian sexual practices in a fashion that was regarded as outrageously obscene. Philaenis’ work may have colored ancient views of love between women adversely. But the speech indicates another reason lesbianism appeared so offensive in Hellenic eyes. The crime (as in the case of male passivity) lay in its violation of prescribed gender roles.

• Petronius’ *Satyricon* •

To turn from Ovid to Petronius is to leave poetic myth for street-corner realism, sentiment for satire. It is generally assumed the author of the *Satyricon* was Nero’s “arbiter of elegance,” a man who was said to have “made luxury a

fine art” and who probably composed his story as entertainment at the imperial court. Called the first novel, the *Satyricon* may also claim to be the first gay fiction, for the characters’ embroilment in homosexual affairs forms the center of the rambling plot. The book is a merciless picture of low life in first-century southern Italy, unedifying but funny, mixing many styles from the rhetorically pompous to the racy and illiterate.

The chief figure is Encolpius (“the crotch”), who is consumed with passion for Giton, an effeminate sixteen-year-old who is also courted by Ascyltos, the third member of this trio of thieves. Ascyltos’ adventures take him to the dinner table of Trimalchio, heavy with the most extravagant meal ever served. Trimalchio, the freed slave, is a boastful vulgarian, enormously rich—he would like to buy Sicily—but quite candid as to how he got his start in life: “For fourteen years I was my master’s pet. But what’s the shame in doing what you’re told to do? But all the same, if you know what I mean, I managed to do my mistress a favor or two.”⁶² Petronius’ contemporary, Seneca the philosopher, inveighed against the “troops of catamites [*exoleti*]” with smooth skin and down on their cheeks who met with shameful treatment at the end of Roman banquets.⁶³ In the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio and a friend infuriate their wives by fondling their own favorite slave boys at the dinner table.

Eventually Giton elects to leave Encolpius after a night with Ascyltos. Encolpius berates the errant couple in this Ciceronian fashion:

Was it for this that I fled from justice, that I deserted the [gladiatorial] ring and murdered my host? Is this the reward of my courage and my crimes—to be abandoned, an outcast, a beggar, in a cheap inn in a Greek town [that is, in southern Italy]? And who is the author of my loneliness? A young man [Ascyltos] polluted with every perversion and vice; a man who by his own admission deserves to be banished; who paid for his freedom with his debauchery and for his debauchery with his freedom; whose body is bought as one buys a ticket; who was treated like a woman even by those who knew him to be a man! And what of his partner in crime? A little boy [Giton] who gave up his trousers for skirts; whose mother persuaded him never to be a man!⁶⁴

As in senatorial politics, it is the lovers’ participation in the female role that is the point of Encolpius’ scurrility.

The one moment of tenderness in the novel comes when Encolpius, reunited at last with Giton, faces shipwreck with him:

I, meanwhile, was clinging to Giton with all my strength, sobbing with terror and tragic despair. “O gods in heaven,” I cried in bitterness of heart, “is this your justice, that two lovers should be united only at the moment of death? Alas, not even that: for the Fates are cruel and soon the seas will overturn the ship and the wild waves sunder even two lovers’ last embrace

. . . Quickly stripping off his clothes, Giton snuggled underneath my tunic and lifted his face to be kissed. Then, to keep the jealous sea from breaking our embrace, he bound his belt about us both and buckled it tight. "One last solace at least remains, Encolpius," he cried. "Whatever may happen now, at least we shall lie united in love upon the heaving swell a while, and if perchance some kinder current than the rest should cast us on the shore, some passerby, by simple human kindness moved, may build us both a single grave."⁶⁵

The rogues, of course, survive. The sentimental rhetoric of this passage looks forward to the Greek romances of following centuries, in which, however, homosexuality plays only a subordinate role.

• Suetonius and the Emperors •

The *Satyricon* is a unique document whose witty pages condemn offenses against taste but hardly against morals. In this it reflects the libertine side of imperial Rome. If the erotic poets are conscious rebels who live to love, and Petronius wholly amoral, Roman historians of the period continue to reflect the censoriousness of the republican age, so that male affairs are used to denigrate the politically powerful much as they had been in Cicero's day. Indeed, the amount of personal scandal in political biographies gives the impression that such amours were all but ubiquitous at the highest levels of Roman society. So Edward Gibbon, learned in the Latin sources, added an acerbic footnote to his pages on Hadrian in his *Decline and Fall*: "Of the first fifteen emperors Claudius was the only one whose taste in love was entirely correct."⁶⁶

Much of our information about the sex lives of the Roman emperors comes from Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*. These much-browsed biographies appeared a few years after Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, and yet their treatment of male relations could hardly be more different. But to what extent is Suetonius merely retelling scandalous gossip? Are his accounts colored by political bias? Suetonius' sketches are on the whole dry, factual, and unrhetorical. He has sometimes been read as hostile to the institution of the empire, as in his biography of Julius Caesar, where, after praising Caesar as a general and statesman, he criticizes him for usurping authority. Such overt judgments, however, are rare. Nevertheless, Suetonius seems unwilling to let slip any detail that might reflect negatively on an emperor's character.

Suetonius wrote about 120 CE but, like Cicero, mentions male relations only in a hostile context. His first chapter, on Julius Caesar, sets the pattern:

There was no stain on [Caesar's] reputation for chastity except his intimacy with King Nicomedes, but that was a deep and lasting reproach, which laid him open to insults from every quarter. I say nothing of the notorious lines of Licinius Calvus: "Whate'er Bithynia had, and Caesar's

paramour [*pedicator*, active partner].” I pass over, too, the invectives of Dollabella and the elder Curio in which Dollabella calls him “the queen’s rival, the inner partner of the royal couch,” and Curio, “the brothel of Nicomedes and the stew of Bithynia.” I take no account of the edicts of Bibulus, in which he posted his colleague as the “queen of Bithynia,” saying that “of yore he was enamoured of a king, but now of a king’s estate” . . . But Gaius Memmius makes the direct charge that he acted as cup-bearer to Nicomedes with the rest of his wantons [*exoleti*] at a large dinner-party, and that among the guests were some merchants from Rome, whose names Memmius gives. Cicero, indeed, [has] written in sundry letters that Caesar was led by the king’s attendants to the royal apartments, that he lay on a golden couch arrayed in purple, and that the virginity of this son of Venus was lost in Bithynia.⁶⁷

Suetonius then records Mark Antony’s charge that Augustus had earned adoption by Caesar through sexual favors but discounts this story as a political slander.⁶⁸

Suetonius explores the sexual histories of the tyrannical emperors Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero with particular relish. We may feel that in some cases he is simply repeating stories uncritically without trying to assess his sources. This is especially true of Tiberius, whom Suetonius accuses of staging sex shows in the privacy of his retreat at Capri and systematically abusing children.⁶⁹ With Caligula and Nero he is more circumstantial. Of Caligula he reports that a young aristocrat named Valerius Catullus “publicly proclaimed that he had violated the emperor and worn himself out in commerce with him.”⁷⁰ Nero’s profligate nature is illustrated by his castration of the young Sporus, their mock marriage, and his treating him publicly as his empress. Suetonius then claims that Nero married his freedman Doryphorus in the same fashion as Sporus had married him, “going so far as to imitate the cries and lamentations of a maiden being deflowered.”⁷¹ Even the short sketches of the three men who held the throne for brief intervals after the death of Nero are rich in sexological detail. We are told that the elderly Galba, whose parsimoniousness with his troops cost him his throne, preferred “full-grown, strong men” to boys, that the spendthrift Otho “according to some” was Nero’s bedmate, and that the gluttonous Vitellius had got his start in life as a performer in Tiberius’ erotic entertainments so that he bore the nickname “Spintria” (sphincter).⁷²

Suetonius would have had a vivid recollection of Domitian’s reign of terror, which he had lived through as a young man. The first two Flavian emperors, Domitian’s father and brother, are treated favorably. He admires the modest and amiable Vespasian and hails his son Titus enthusiastically as the “delight and darling of the human race.” Though Suetonius describes the young Titus as maintaining “troops of catamites [*exoleti*] and eunuchs” be-

fore ascending the throne, he treats this as a piece of youthful folly that Titus put behind him before his short but exemplary reign.⁷³

Suetonius wastes no time, however, in damning Titus' younger brother Domitian, the last emperor whose reign he records. His opening paragraph charges that Domitian, as an impoverished young man, had sold himself to the consul Claudius Pollio, and he cites a letter in which the emperor-to-be promised the older man an assignation.⁷⁴ He says nothing, however, about Domitian's well-known attachment to the handsome eunuch Earinus, to whom both Statius and Martial addressed complimentary verses. Presumably this is because sexual relations with a slave carried no stigma. But even if we discount some of Suetonius' allegations, we are left with a remarkably high incidence of homosexuality among Rome's rulers in the first century of the empire. Indeed, same-sex liaisons seem to have been as common in the world of high politics as they were among the poets of love.

• Statius, Martial, Juvenal •

Contrasting with the gritty realism of the *Satyricon* and the succulent scandals of Suetonius is a poem Statius wrote for his lawyer friend Flavius Ursus on the death of a beloved youth named Philetus. Statius, who lived in the second half of the first century, was much admired in his own day and by Dante and Chaucer in the high Middle Ages, when he was (inexplicably) thought to be a Christian. The sixth poem in the second book of his *Silvae* is a rarity in Roman literature, lines which treat a male love affair from a point of view essentially Greek.

Philetus, whose name means "beloved," is described as loyal and affectionate. Most favored slave boys were curled darlings with girlish features. But Statius insists that this fifteen-year-old was manly, modest, and mature in judgment and bore himself proudly, "like a young Spartan" or an athlete in the Olympic games. His appearance recalled not Ganymede but heroes like Theseus and Achilles. Statius compares his devotion to Ursus with Patroclus' love for Achilles and calls it "Cecropian," that is, Athenian. So exorbitant is Statius' praise that we suspect he was half in love with the boy himself. In the end he feels compelled to remind us that the youth was, after all, only a slave.

Martial and Statius were contemporaries who shared the same friends and patrons, but neither mentions the other. Perhaps this silence is significant, since few poets can have been so antipathetic. Statius is learned, idealistic, and literary; Martial is cynical and, in matters of sex, unblushingly explicit. His fourteen books of epigrams describe erotic behavior with the thoroughness of a first-century Kinsey. He is more revealing than any other Latin writer as to his own preferences and quite as willing to let us know what he disapproves. He does not, however, assume the dignity of a moral philosopher. His brief, witty poems end not with sermons but with malicious innu-

endoes. He is the tabloid reporter who reflects not high principles but the visceral reactions of the man on the street.

Martial's hierarchy of sexual prejudices is clear. He has no aversion to what we know invidiously as the "missionary" position, but anal intercourse with women is quite as acceptable; so is pederasty. Playing the role of a pathic or *cinaedus* will, he assumes, bring any man into contempt (2.51, 3.71, 9.47). But worst of all is the fellator or cunnilinguist (2.28, 2.50, 3.81, 6.26). Such men or women, whether they perform heterosexually (1.77, 4.84) or homosexually (7.67, 9.27), are beyond the pale. He admits he enjoys having women fellate him, but to reciprocate would be unthinkable degrading (9.40, 9.67).

Martial is avowedly, even aggressively, bisexual. He cites Virgil's Corydon eclogue (8.55) and, like Catullus, whom he resembles in many respects, writes "kissing poems" to boys (3.65, 6.34, 10.42, 11.6, 11.26). He straightforwardly portrays the frustration his thwarted lust brings and its manual relief (11.73). He confesses that effeminate boys hold a special attraction for him (12.75). But he is not prejudiced against boyish masculinity; one fantasy paints his ideal boy as an exotic blond Egyptian with unbraided hair who is a "man" to all others but a "boy" to him (4.42). He sycophantically flatters Domitian's favorite, the beautiful Earinus, in a whole series of poems (9.11, 12, 16, 17, 36), but this was no more than Statius had done before him. He allows himself a single moment of sentiment in an ocean of filth, writing tenderly of two young men whose romance ended in death (6.68). More typically, he reports, with a scandalmonger's relish, the marriage of "bearded Callistratus" to "rugged Afer" in a ceremony that included a bridal veil and a dowry (12.42).

Like Martial, Juvenal is a satirist, but where Martial is content with short squibs whose point of view does not differ from a street boy's, Juvenal writes powerful verse and wears the frown of an angry preacher. He inveighs fiercely against effeminate men and masculine women, upstart plebeians, and foreigners—especially dark-skinned men from the East. His sixth and longest satire is directed against women generally, whom he denounces as shrews, spendthrifts, nymphomaniacs, and murderers. Here is the most vitriolic misogyny in the ancient world. Juvenal's second satire, attacking effeminate males, is only one third as long, but its one hundred and seventy scornful hexameters still make this diatribe the most extensive piece of writing on homosexuality in classical Latin.

Juvenal begins by singling out a class of moralists who offend him—men with bristly arms and "hair shorter than their eyebrows" who profess austere masculine virtue but are in fact *cinaedi* who allow themselves to be penetrated by other males. ("Sleek are your buttocks when the grinning doctor cuts into the swollen piles"—that is, the doctor interprets the man's depilation as a sign of passivity.)⁷⁵ Juvenal protests that he finds it easier to

forgive openly effeminate men who do not hide their tastes. But he belies this professed tolerance by attacking a lawyer who sports a transparent robe in the courts, men who wear necklaces and ribbons and take part in the worship of the Bona Dea (a women's cult), and men who are concerned about their complexions—like the Emperor Otho, whom he denounces as a pathic who carried a mirror into battle.

Juvenal is especially shocked when such practices appear in patrician families. The Gracchi clan was uniquely associated with Rome's masculine power—they traditionally carried the heavy shield of Mars in state processions. Juvenal is incensed by a Gracchus who appeared as a bride in a same-sex wedding in Rome. Will such affairs, he asks, eventually be announced in the news of the day? (He did not foresee the twenty-first century.) Given his xenophobia, one might expect Juvenal to blame these alarming new tendencies on foreign influences, but he finds the source of the "plague" in Rome itself. Rome, he thinks, will infect the barbarians.

Modern readers may be puzzled by Juvenal's sixth satire. Juvenal paints women as such undesirables that no man in his right senses would think of marrying one and counsels a friend to prefer suicide. Then he makes a startling proposal: wouldn't it be better, he suggests, "to take some boy-bedfellow, who would never wrangle with you at night, never ask presents of you when in bed?"⁷⁶ But of course from the Roman point of view there was no contradiction: pederasty did not compromise a man's male status. Verses by Juvenal's friend Martial throw further revealing light on Juvenal's own preferences. Extolling the pleasures of his Spanish farm, which he invites Juvenal to visit, Martial commends one of his new servants, a young huntsman "that you would like to have with you in a secret grove."⁷⁷ Perhaps men who were attracted to other men felt most strongly the need to denounce *cinaedi*.

• Hadrian and Antinous •

The first century after Christ saw an unusual number of bizarre and tyrannical personalities assume supreme power in Rome, most notably Nero, Caligula, and Domitian. But in 96 Domitian was succeeded by the elderly Nerva, the first of the "good emperors" of the Antonine line. His short reign inaugurated what Gibbon—taking a Eurocentric view—called "the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous."⁷⁸

This zenith was first attained under Trajan and Hadrian, both of whom seem to have been predominantly homosexual. The Spanish Trajan was a robust and simple soldier, unassuming and accessible, without guile or harshness, so that, Dio Cassius tells us, he was "loved by all and dreaded by none save the enemy."⁷⁹ Extending the empire by his conquest of Dacia (modern Romania), Mesopotamia, and Assyria, he was the only emperor to rival Alex-

ander in reaching the Persian Gulf. He made the laws more humane and built a forum in Rome that was one of the architectural marvels of antiquity, where his triumphal column and arch still stand. A grateful Senate bestowed upon him the title *Optimus*, recognizing him as the best of emperors. Dio Cassius commented on his love of wine and boys but thought he remained within the bounds of Roman decency: "I know, of course, that he was devoted to boys and to wine, but if he had ever committed or endured any base or wicked deed as a result of this, he would have incurred censure; as it was, however, he drank all the wine he wanted yet remained sober, and in his relation with boys he harmed no one."⁸⁰

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Trajan was succeeded by his protégé Hadrian, a fellow Spaniard and second cousin. As energetic as his predecessor, Hadrian was a much more complex man. His imperial policy was not as aggressive as Trajan's: keeping the army well equipped and its morale high, he withdrew to more defensible borders along the Danube and the Euphrates. But where Trajan was not well educated, Hadrian was an ardent philhellene who spoke better Greek than Latin. Arguably the most brilliant of Rome's rulers, he was an expert in mathematics and military affairs, a musician, a painter, and a poet who was fond of erudite debate. Like Trajan, he built lavishly: we still marvel at the Pantheon and at the architectural synopsis of the empire he designed for his villa at Tivoli. Usually just, generous, and kind, he could be moody and harsh and did not enjoy Trajan's universal popularity. He was perhaps the best administrator among the emperors and an adroit statesman in all but his handling of the Jews, who cursed him as a persecutor. He shared Trajan's attachment to boys, wrote poetry on this theme, and was rumored to have had affairs with some of his predecessor's favorites.⁸¹ In the end, death was to blazon one such passion before the world.

A tireless traveler, Hadrian made it a policy to visit every part of the empire, from Gaul and Britain (where he

19. Antinous. Delphi, c. 130 CE.

built his famous wall) to Egypt and the East. In Athens in the winter of 128–129 he acted as archon or chief magistrate, was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, and raised the city to a new height of splendor, endowing it with an extensive new suburb, a magnificent library, and imposing temples to promote his romantic Panhellenism. Somewhere during these peregrinations he met and fell in love with Antinous, a handsome youth from Bithynia, who became part of his entourage. Perhaps he came upon him during an earlier visit to that province, perhaps he met him as a student in Athens. All we know for certain is that Antinous accompanied Hadrian on a tour of Egypt and that he drowned in the Nile at the age of eighteen or nineteen.

The portraits of Antinous show him as a young man of astonishing beauty. The face is princely, brooding, melancholic, with full features crowned by luxuriantly curling hair. Sometimes the expression is boyishly naïve, sometimes sophisticated and sensual. His physique combines the athleticism of a Greek ephebe with a hint of oriental voluptuousness, as if the artist had studied both Praxiteles and Hindu sculpture. But if a thousand statues, coins, and gems reveal what Antinous looked like, we have only limited knowledge of his life with Hadrian.

A circular relief set into the Arch of Constantine in Rome shows him on a boar hunt with the emperor in Asia Minor. Another relief, which depicts Hadrian standing on the mane of a slain lion, illustrates a better-documented episode. On his arrival in Egypt in 130 Hadrian heard of a ferocious lion that was ravaging Libya. Always an enthusiastic hunter, he set out with a party to rid the desert of this menace. An account of the hunt, and Antinous' part in it, appears in a commemorative poem by the Alexandrian poet Pancrates. The details may have been provided by the emperor: "Antinous sat in wait for the man-slaying lion, holding in his left hand the bridle-rein, and in his right a spear tipped with adamant. Hadrian was the first to hurl his brass-fitted spear; he wounded the beast but did not kill it, for he intended to miss the mark, wishing to test to the full the sureness of aim of the beautiful Antinous."⁸² But the lion charged before Antinous could act, and Hadrian was forced to make the kill.

Within a few weeks the boy whose life the emperor had saved was dead. Hadrian's grief was overwhelming; we are told "he wept like a woman."⁸³ Yet the circumstances remain a mystery. Was Antinous' death an accident, or did he drown himself deliberately? Dio Cassius' *History*, written a century later, gives the earliest and fullest account. Dio had consulted Hadrian's autobiography (now lost) but offered his own speculations:

[Antinous] died in Egypt, either by falling into the Nile, as Hadrian writes, or, as the truth is, by being offered in sacrifice. For Hadrian, as I have stated, was always very curious and employed divinations and incantations of all kinds. Accordingly, he honored Antinous, either because of his love

for him or because the youth had voluntarily undertaken to die (it being necessary that a life should be surrendered freely for the accomplishment of the ends Hadrian had in view) by building a city on the spot where he had suffered this fate and naming it after him; and he also set up statues—or rather sacred images of him—over almost all the world.⁸⁴

In all likelihood the death was an accident. But perhaps some prophecy had been made by Egyptian priests, whose religion keenly interested the emperor. Later legend assimilated the presumed immolation to the Alcestis myth. Thus, Aurelius Victor wrote in 360: “Others maintain that this sacrifice of Antinous was both pious and religious; for when Hadrian was wishing to prolong his life, and the magicians required a voluntary vicarious victim, they say that, upon the refusal of all others, Antinous offered himself.”⁸⁵

Fifteen centuries later a grieving Mogul emperor memorialized his beloved wife in the majestic Taj Mahal. Hadrian worked on a grander scale, raising a whole new city, Antinoopolis, on the banks of the Nile where his lover had died. The founding edict, issued on October 30, 130, ordained that it should be a monument to the dead boy, a religious shrine, and a new Greek settlement and administrative center. Hadrian’s dream was amply realized. Sumptuous with temples, marble colonnades, and statuary, the new town grew and flourished for centuries, surviving Christianity and the Arab conquest of Egypt. In 1798, when Edme-François Jomard surveyed the site at the behest of Napoleon, he was overwhelmed by the vast ruins. Two majestic avenues were flanked by hundreds of columns. Topping these, and elsewhere in the city, Jomard counted 1,344 statues and busts of Antinous. Fortunately, Jomard oversaw the publication of a giant folio with handsome illustrations recording the scene.⁸⁶ For when another French Egyptologist arrived in 1863, the magnificent ruins had disappeared. The city had fed a cement works that relentlessly ground up its centuries-old columns, temples, and statues.⁸⁷ Enterprise had turned into dusty lime the greatest monument ever built by love.

Antinoopolis was above all else the city of a new god. Hitherto, Roman emperors and their relatives had been deified by the Senate, but for a commoner to be divinized was unheard of. But Hadrian, in the extravagance of his devotion, had Antinous proclaimed an immortal. Such an idea seems strange to us today, but Roman, Greek, and Egyptian tradition provided ample precedents. An obelisk inscribed with hieroglyphs honoring Antinous, now on the Pincian Hill in Rome, hails him as “companion to the gods of Egypt” and identifies him with Osiris, the god of death and rebirth. Among the Greeks, too, a mortal might become divine: the Spartans had dedicated a temple to Apollo’s *eromenos* and celebrated his festival annually at the Hyacintheia. The new worship of Antinous had a surprisingly wide popular appeal. Archaeologists have found half a million jars that held offerings to his shrine at Antinoopolis. In his cult the mystery religions of Eleusis and

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20. View of Antinoopolis, c. 1800. From *Description d'Égypte*.

the East blended with the Greek ideal of the heroic lover. It fitted the religious mood of an age that exalted oriental belief in salvation, sacrifice, and resurrection.

Inevitably, parallels were drawn with Christianity. The pagan apologist Celsus, hostile to both new faiths, protested that the honors paid to Jesus were “no different from those paid to Hadrian’s boy-favorite,” a comparison that must have galled the church fathers.⁸⁸ None of the cult images of Antinous hints at any relation with Hadrian. It was left for hostile Christians to emphasize Antinous’ sexuality. The Spanish poet Prudentius imagined the new god lying in Hadrian’s bosom, “robbed of his manhood.” Athanasius, the embattled defender of orthodoxy, writing in Alexandria (c. 350), accused the cultists of “worshiping a sordid and loathsome instrument of his master’s lust.”⁸⁹

Hadrian himself conceived of Antinous’ godhead in a highly mystical fashion. It has been plausibly argued that the inscription on the Pincian obelisk is a translation into hieroglyphics of a Greek text by Hadrian. It hails the new god as “Osiris-Antinous the Just” who has been “raised again to life” and “grants the requests of those who call upon him.”⁹⁰ Despite opposition, devotion to Antinous was widely diffused, as a detailed survey by Royston Lambert has shown. Images of Antinous have been found scattered throughout the length and breadth of the Roman Empire. More than thirty cities in Asia Minor, Greece, and Egypt depicted Antinous on their coinage as a god or hero, and children who had known the apostle Paul might have prayed for salvation in the new god’s temple at Tarsus.⁹¹ Since Bithynia was an Arcadian colony, Hadrian made the Arcadian city of Mantinea the center of his cult in Greece.⁹² Athens also had two congregations of devotees, and excavations at Delphi, Olympia, Corinth, Argo, Eleusis, and Epidaurus attest to local hom-

age.⁹³ Even in Italy, where his veneration might have been suspect as a foreign importation, seven temples have been found. Antinous' cult was not only widespread, it was also lasting. We might expect it to flourish only as long as Hadrian reigned. But it survived the emperor's death by several centuries. Annual commemorative games were still being held at Athens in 266 and at Argos a century later. Attacks by Christian polemicists—Tertullian, Clement, Jerome, and others—attest to the cult's persistence until the definitive triumph of Christianity under Gratian and Theodosius in the late fourth century.⁹⁴

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Representations of Antinous rank among the greatest masterpieces of late classical art. Winckelmann called the noble and superbly finished Mondragone head, disinterred at Frascati in 1760, "one of the finest things in the world" and the relief from the Villa Albani "the crown and glory of sculpture in this age."⁹⁵ The most majestic statue is the powerful Antinous-Dionysos of the Vatican Sala Rotunda; the finest is the ephebe of Delphi, the so-called Antinous-Apollo, discovered in 1893. In all of them there appears a strikingly new conception of beauty, inspired by a single living person but multifaceted. The unique face and the stalwart figure are unmistakable in the more than two hundred portraits that have come down to us, but the expressions vary. The bas relief of Antinous as the agricultural god Sylvanus, dug up by vine-workers in the Campagna at the beginning of the last century, is bucolically placid; in contrast, the statue from Eleusis, though stiff and technically awkward, looks with painful sympathy on the sufferings of humanity. Into these likenesses of a boy loved and deified by an emperor, different artists have poured a multitude of aspirations. Their homage to divine beauty and grace embodies a synthesis of Greek religious and aesthetic ideals, Roman power, and oriental mysticism.

21. Antinous as an Egyptian god. Marble, c. 130 CE.