

The Gay Gaze in Ancient Rome

SHADI BARTSCH traces the development of Platonic theories about “boy-love” from ancient Greece to imperial Rome. The term “boy-love,” however, is misleading: it implies love of a child no older than twelve, whereas the Greeks preferred adolescents, *eromenoi*. The distinction is important because of the mistaken belief, seen everywhere in current discussions of sexuality, that pederasts are the same as pedophiles, attracted to pre-pubescent. *Erastes*, usually young men who partnered with *eromenoi*, were not pedophiles.

Having undergone a long and tortuous evolution in the Platonic Academy and among the early Stoics, conceptions of pederasty changed further when Panaetius and Posidonius introduced Stoicism to the Romans. The *gravitas*, *dignitas*, and manliness of the Republican *patres familias*, Rome’s stern-minded elders, could not accommodate the pederasty of the Greeks. These *patres* maintained a posture of austere masculinity and warrior prowess when displaying themselves in public as orators or triumphant generals, their bodies inviolable, a status distinct from that of public figures such as actors, gladiators, and other *infames*. The *patres* could not conceive of their sons as *eromenoi*. It would have destroyed the notion of bodily inviolability.

To curry favor with the Roman elite, Greek importers of Stoicism obligingly cleaned it up, omitting references to pederasty so praised by Zeno and Chrysippus, the Hellenistic founders of their school. Cicero in his eclecticism adopted this attitude, and Seneca, whom Bartsch overestimates, took it to a further extreme. The process reminded my late collaborator Warren Johansson of what happened when Jewish psychoanalysts, fleeing the Nazis, imported Freudianism into the United States. To ingratiate themselves with Bible-thumping Ameri-

Cover art: Banquet scene. Fresco from the Tomb of the Diver, Paestum, Italy, 5th century BCE.

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**The Mirror of the Self:
Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the
Gaze in the Early Roman Empire**

by Shadi Bartsch

University of Chicago Press.
325 pages, \$45.

cans, these German-speaking outsiders introduced to Freudianism a harsh condemnation of homosexuality that the founder did not share. (In addition to the famous letter to an American mother reassuring her that she need not take steps to alter her son’s homosexuality, Freud had written a letter to a Viennese newspaper saying much the same. Johansson discovered this letter and sent a copy to England’s Wolfenden Commission, then deliberating decriminalization of homosexuality. The Commission took due note.)

A critical dispute among classicists that Bartsch ignores to her peril is the average age of first marriage for Romans and its implications for Roman as opposed to Greek homosexualities. Traditionalists hold that Romans in fact married young, males at around eighteen and females at fourteen-and-a-half on average.

The Greeks, on the other hand, at least after 620 BCE, generally delayed marriage, with males waiting until about thirty, which provided for a prolonged period for *eromenoi-erastes* pairings. Females usually married at about sixteen but in Sparta by law not until eighteen, allowing them to develop physically and emotionally in a way that did not happen in other ancient societies, where girls tended to marry at puberty. Recently, scholars led by Richard Saller (*Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family*, 1996) and Brent Shaw have suggested that Roman males in fact married at 28, which, if true, would have given them the same opportunities for homosexual love the Greeks had. Lelis et al. (in *The Age of Marriage in Ancient Rome*, 2003) have disproved these revisionists. The hypothesis of late marriage ages for Romans does not hold water under close scrutiny.

Another scholarly controversy concerns the Roman law known as the “*lex Scantinia*.” Recently, some classicists, such as Beert Verstraete and Vernon Provencal (eds., *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West*, 2006) and Eugene Rice (GLBTQ.com), have claimed that it prohibited any free Roman male from being sexually penetrated. Fortunately, Bartsch is not persuaded by this revisionist claim and follows Craig Williams’ authoritative



The Warren Cup. Silver, 1st century CE. British Museum, London

Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity (1999), maintaining instead, like all pre-World War II scholars, that the sparsely attested *lex Scantinia* imposed no such blanket prohibition on Roman males of the citizen class. Free youths and subordinate citizens were of course protected from unwanted or violent homosexual advances by laws about *stuprum*. If the *lex Scantinia* had prohibited all penetration, as the revisionists falsely claim, Roman homosexuality would have been vastly different from what it was.

Like a number of other books published by Chicago, *The Mirror of the Self* is not likely to become a bestseller, replete as it is with such sentences as this:

Ethical theorists critical of this modern tendency, such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Bernard Williams (1985), along with Gill himself, have suggested that a more appropriate way of understanding the normative ancient self (and its anticipation of new, non-Cartesian descriptions of selfhood in the present day) is to recognize the role of interpersonal and communal relationships in its formation and its moral judgments. Following this line of thought, Gill would reject what he calls the “subjective-individualist” tradition of thought about selfhood and substitute an “objective-participant” model.

As the acknowledgments note, many experts have combed through this text, and as far as I can see it is free of factual error.

It does, however, risk putting nonspecialists to sleep. Most will not plow through quibbles with such scholars as Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, Christopher Gill, A. A. Long, and, of course, Michel Foucault, of whom Bartsch says:

The general trajectory of *The Care of the Self*, too, describes a very different arc from the one of this book. Where I have stressed the de-ethicalization of boy-love in the Roman world, Foucault goes further to argue that this shift in emphasis, along with the new technologies of the self, strengthened the valorization of the marital bond in early imperial Rome in general, leading to “the existence of a ‘heterosexual’ relation marked by a male-female polarity.”

I personally learned a lot from *The Mirror of the Self*—more, I must confess, than I ever wanted to know about “the gaze,” a subject less tediously handled by John Clarke and Thomas Hubbard. Bartsch says next to nothing about types and frequency of actual sexual behavior, whether homo or hetero. Though she doesn’t say so, by the late Republic Roman matrons and especially widowed mothers were freer and better off than those in any other ancient society. A queer thing about Bartsch is her almost total neglect of women (except Sappho and Medea). If a male author had been guilty of such one-sided treatment, he would surely have been excoriated, but far be it for me to complain about undue attention to men and their sexuality. ■

While New York Slept

CO-AUTHORS Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons have written an ambitious and groundbreaking book that should at last give Los Angeles the prominence it has long deserved in gay history. Indeed the modern gay movement may be said to have been born in L.A. with the founding of the *Mattachine Society* in 1950 and of *ONE, Inc.* in 1952, and with the publication of its magazine, *ONE*, in 1953.

In 1994 Jim Kepner’s International Gay & Lesbian Archives (begun with his collection in 1942 and opened to researchers in the 1970’s) merged with *ONE* to become what is now *ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives*. It is the oldest gay organization still operating in the U.S., and it is close to being the oldest in the world. The Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center (The Center) is the largest and best-funded GLBT organization of its kind in the world. The Metropolitan Community Church is the oldest and largest GLBT church and the largest GLBT organization in the world. Bookstores with readings and cultural groups have been active as almost nowhere else in the U.S. When incorporated in 1984 West Hollywood was the first city anywhere to be governed by a majority of gay and lesbian officials.

Why is L.A. not better known for these accomplishments? It seems to have suffered a double neglect. Although founded in

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Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians

by Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons

Basic Books. 431 pages, \$27.50

1781, it was always perceived as a “young” city, inferior to New York and San Francisco, if not even to other U.S. cities. Its history and cultural life were seldom disseminated until the end of the 20th century. When Gay Liberation did take hold, Stonewall became the central image of that movement, and a more radical politics seemed almost to erase what had been accomplished in L.A. during the preceding twenty years. The radical accomplishments

in their time of *Mattachine* and *ONE* were perceived as accommodationist and their leaders as old fogies by a younger and more activist generation.

The book offers a comprehensive history of gay Los Angeles, starting with the cross-dressing *berdache* or two-spirit Native American peoples and picking up with the 19th-century migration across America and the large number of cross-dressing women it included. Other stalwart women included Eliza Farnham, who wrote in 1856 about her farming life with another woman. Faderman and Timmons cite that there were twelve men for every woman in 1850, but oddly they don’t discuss the intimate male-to-male bonds that must have occurred at this time. They do, however, discuss these relations starting in the 1880’s, which were widespread and well documented by local newspaper articles, usually from the vantage point of arrests or scandals. Men in lodging houses were often spied upon or even entrapped, while wealthier men’s private parties were infiltrated by the police. In addition to these headline-grabbing incidents, the authors

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