

## Classical Athenian Homosexuality: Pederasty and Controlling One's Desires

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The modern world is one where a person's sexuality is used to determine much about them. To say that one is gay or straight brings with it an untold level of understanding, whether accurate or assumed, about the person who speaks up on the issue of their sexuality. So much of the present western world has also been influenced heavily by the current Judeo-Christian paradigm of what makes one heterosexual or homosexual. Thinking in this sense, it can be easy to assume that the world has always been this way. However, history is a giant collection of contradictions. Where the present Judeo-Christian stance clings to the belief that men sleep with women and that it has always been this way, there is a mountain of resources that claim otherwise. Comfortable or not to think about, humans have been sleeping with members of the same sex for millennia.

Classical Athens, from late sixth century C.E. to the late fourth century, was a society where being gay, at least from the modern description of two males engaging in sexual action with the other, was so engrained in the culture as to be inseparable. Even then, there were vast differences in Athenian homosexuality from the current. Pederasty, the homosexual relationship between an adult man and an adolescent outside his family, was an everyday occurrence and almost every man of some wealth partook in the 'beautiful' and hairless boys of Athens. It was not shameful to be the one penetrating his lover either; it was only shameful to be the one penetrated, as that would defy common gender roles. Classical Athens was a world where pederasty was seen as a moral good and the present understanding of homosexuality was shunned for its effeminizing influence on the citizen-elite of Athens.

*The Clouds*, written by the playwright and satirist Aristophanes of Athens, is about a son learning to think and disagreeing with his father. While there is much more going on in the play about the role of the infamous Sophists who taught around Athens during the end of the fifth century and the use of knowledge, one passage in particular is a useful tool into seeing some of the Athenian viewpoints on adult homosexuality. Two men—called Better Argument and Worse Argument—try and sway the son of a prominent man into entering their school to learn rhetoric. Note that the term 'wide-assed' was the popular slang used against adult males who partook in homosexual behavior and should be seen as an insult.

Better Argument: Will (the son) have any argument he can use to save himself from being wide-assed?

Worse Argument: And if he does become wide-assed, how will that harm him?

B: You mean, what further misfortune could he ever suffer that would be greater than that?

W: Well, what will you say if I confute you on this point?

B: I'll remain silent; what else?

W: Come on then, tell me: from what type of person do advocates come?

B: From the wide-assed.

W: I agree. Again, from what type do tragedians come?

B: From the wide-assed.

W: Quite right. And from what type do politicians come?

B: From the wide-assed.

W: Then do you realize you were talking nonsense? Again, look and see which are in the majority among the audience.

B: There, I'm looking.

W: Well, what do you see?

B: That, heavens above! the wide-assed are the *vast* majority. At any rate, I know *that* one is, and that one over there, and that one with the long hair. (Whoever was playing Better Argument was allowed to point to whoever he wanted)

W: Well, what are you going to say?<sup>1</sup>

Better Argument is convinced that being a 'wide-ass' was the supreme dishonor for an Athenian—nothing else. Worse Argument replies that every man in attendance of the play has taken part in homosexuality behavior, whether he admits to it or not. The humor of the play may have been lost on the men that Better Argument claimed to personally know were involved in homosexual intercourse no matter how in jest the allegation was made. Classical Athens may not have wanted its male population to engage in the behavior, but to assume that a law was followed so closely as to destroy itself would be foolish. The reason for the shame of two men engaging in intercourse was not a religious one either, nor was it to ensure a steady population.

This is where understanding Athenian homosexuality can become difficult. There was no shame in two men loving each other to the Athenians, no shame in loving your fellows. There was great shame, however, in acting like a woman and being anally penetrated by another man. There was the shame to the Athenians. Being penetrated caused a normal relationship to become something taboo and shunned by many. A short fragment attributed to the orator Hyperides, dated around 343

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<sup>1</sup> Aristophanes. "Clouds," in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of basic documents*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), lines 949-1113.

to 322 B.C.E. makes known just how strongly at least some took the issue of gender roles in Athens:

“Finally, what if the judge in this case I am arguing were Nature, which has divided the male personality from the female in such a way that it allots to each its own work and duty? If I were to show you that this man abused his body by treating it like a woman’s, would Nature not be utterly astonished if anyone did not judge it the greatest gift that he was born a man, but hastened to turn himself into a woman by a corrupted gift of Nature?”<sup>2</sup>

Hyperides makes known that nature itself is disgusted by men who act like women; men who are passive in the homosexual relationship are defying their gender role, and that simply does not sit right with Hyperides, or Athens for that matter.

This general distaste for ‘soft’ men also appears to influence more of Aristophanes’ work, as the comic playwright would accuse men of having a “hot-tempered anus” or possessing the “asshole of a furnace” to convince the audience of the character’s passive role in homosexuality and, therefore, earn the audience’s scorn. To the Athenians, men were men and women were women. To be accused of being a passive homosexual was a grave insult for any Athenian man to suffer as it meant a lack of strength and courage; “Plato in the *Laws* assumes the passive homosexual will be a coward, on the following logic: ‘Women are cowardly, that pathic is penetrated like a woman, ergo the pathic will be a coward.’”<sup>3</sup>. In another of Aristophanes’ plays, a character is sentenced to death, but is clothed in women’s attire; he pleads to be displayed nude rather than in women’s garb so everyone knows that he is in fact a man. This man would rather leave his body open to birds to pick and feed than be mistaken for a woman. Not being mistaken as a woman appears to have been a very important task for any man worth his *hoplon*.

Receiving anal penetration also spoke of something else important to the Athenians—self-control. Any shame about homosexuality came about because of the Athenian’s image of themselves as proud, selfless, and most importantly, full of self-rule or *enkrateia*. Greece’s old enemy Persia provides an example of everything the Athenians believed themselves not to be: “[The Persians were] self-indulgent, seduced by

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<sup>2</sup> Hyperides. “Fragment 215 C,” in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of basic documents*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 155.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce S. Thornton, *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality* (Westview Press, 1997), 107.

luxury, ruled by a monarch, and above all, effeminate.”<sup>4</sup> The opposite of these effeminate Persians must surely be an ideal for the Athenians and that ideal was found, however much romantically, in the hoplites.

Much like Jefferson’s view of the gentleman farmer in Colonial America as the ideal person, the hoplites were seen as the ideal Athenian. These were the middle class of Athens, men who could afford the necessary shield, armor and weaponry of the hoplite. They were also seen as the most ‘manly’ of their compatriots for “[the hoplite] was a strong, well-disciplined man whose emotions and desires were under his own control.... The essential quality of the hoplite was manliness, *andreia*.”<sup>5</sup> One need only look at the Sacred Band of Thebes to know that homosexual relationships existed between hoplites and that loving one’s fellow man was not deemed unmanly. It was losing control of one’s senses that alienated the Athenians towards homosexual behavior and being anally penetrated by another man was seen as succumbing to one’s desires. That loss of control meant that no responsibility could be given to the ‘wide-assed.’ How could they be expected to live in a democracy and have all the responsibility that entailed when they could not even control their own desires?

In Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, Socrates stands in the camp of self-rule above all else as well, but his approach to keeping that self-rule intact appears to involve not risking temptation. Socrates said “one (must) abstain resolutely from sex with beautiful boys, for it was not easy for a man who engaged in such things to behave moderately”<sup>6</sup>. Socrates soon explained that beautiful people were similar to tarantulas with the ability to ensnare men with limited effort. Comparing beautiful women or men or, as will be discussed later, boys to tarantulas may appear somewhat cruel, but Socrates was adamant that falling for the charm of someone beautiful was a very real threat to any moderate man.

Xenophon was still somewhat weary of accepting the advice. Socrates insisted, “Unhappy man, what do you think you would experience by kissing a beautiful boy—if not instantly becoming a slave instead of a free man, spending money on harmful pleasures, having no time to give thought to anything fine and noble.”<sup>7</sup> To Socrates, the risk of losing one’s rationality and sense was not worth the short pleasure of kissing someone beautiful. Athenian tradition was to maintain this

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<sup>4</sup> Kirk Ormand, *Controlling Desires: sexuality in ancient Greece and Rome* (Praeger, 2009), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ormand, *Controlling Desires: sexuality in ancient Greece and Rome*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Xenophon. “*Memorabilia*,” in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of basic documents*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 169-170.

<sup>7</sup> Xenophon. “*Memorabilia*,” 11.

rationality as well. Living in a democracy, having plentiful self-rule meant that rationality and moderation must be ever present in the citizenry or else the city would collapse. Socrates' advice for the men tempted by beautiful women or hairless youths was to simply abstain from sexual intercourse.

Male prostitution also helps shine a light on Athenian understanding of male homosexuality. The Athenians took the issue of male prostitution very seriously as any male citizen found prostituting himself to his fellow men and could be proven to play the passive role in homosexual intercourse would lose some of his citizenship rights including the right to introduce legislation and bring criminal cases to court. The reason for this draconian measure can be seen above. How could men who readily sell their bodies for money be trusted in a democracy to act honorably? Indeed, men proved to be prostitutes were to stand on the same level of deserters:

[there are] four classes of men whom the law prohibits from speaking in the assembly: those who beat their father or mother, or do not support them; those who fail in their military duty; those who have prostituted themselves; or those who have squandered their patrimony.<sup>8</sup>

Strangely, male prostitution was not illegal in Athens for the citizenry. If a man desired to take part and risk losing some rights if discovered then he was free to do so. The reason for this appears to be due to the state-subsidized brothels that employed both male and female, Athenian and foreign prostitutes. There was also "no great shame...attached to visiting a prostitute for recreational sex" for Athenian men who could afford the rather inexpensive rates.

Another absolutely crucial component of homosexual relations in classical Athens is that of pederasty. Quite simply, prominent men in Athens took along boy lovers for sexual gratification as well as to become a moral guide for the young Athenian boys. So prevalent and strong was this love of boys that Xenophon relates a story in his *Anabasis* of a soldier rescuing a beautiful boy from being put to death:

"There was a certain Episthenes from Olynthus, a boy-lover, who, seeing a beautiful boy, just at the beginning of adolescence, holding a light Thracian shield and about to be put to death, ran up to Xenophon and appealed to him to come to the rescue of the beautiful boy... 'Episthenes, would you be willing to die in the place of this boy?' So Episthenes stretched

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<sup>8</sup> Ormand, *Controlling Desires: sexuality in ancient Greece and Rome*, 83.

out his neck and said, 'Strike, if the boy wishes and will be grateful to me'"<sup>9</sup>

Here, presumably after a battle, is a soldier willing to have himself killed to rescue a boy, not even a teenager because the boy is beautiful, quite a powerful thing to see.

Today, the issue of pederasty is one of complete and total rejection on all counts. To Athenians, however, the relationship was meant to improve both the boy and elder:

Because of the importance they attached to the role of these sexual relationships in molding noble and virtuous citizens, the Athenians and other Greeks went to great pains to protect the ennobling character of these relationships."<sup>10</sup>

These pains included not allowing some low-class or undesirable citizens from entering the *gymnasia* where a great bulk of homosexual activity took place.

The typical relationship between boy and older man is seen in the *erastes* and *eromenos*. The former is the elder who actively pursued the youths with presents and promises of imparting wisdom. The latter is a youth who was expected to play a demure acceptor of his elder's advances. The age for the *eromenos* would begin at twelve or thirteen and continue until the first signs of manhood began appearing—things such as facial or body hair, muscles or a deeper voice. When manhood eventually set upon every boy, they became the *eromenos*. This was a man, ideally under thirty, as that was the marrying age for Athenian men, who would pursue a boy of his choice. Accepting the advances was up to the boy.

The *eromenos* walked a very small tight rope of social interactions as the older men pursued them. Accept too many advances and love too many men and the boy would risk being called indecent for his lack of control. Deny too many and the boy chanced the loss of connections with Athenian elite for his later life. The proper acceptance and denial of lovers also helps explain the attitude of classical Athenian pederasty; the 'nobility' of it all as mentioned earlier. By learning what was just and good from his elders, the boy was becoming a proper Athenian citizen. Many believed that "The boy's brilliance...lies in the direction of

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<sup>9</sup> Xenophon. "Anabasis 7.4.7," in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of basic documents*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 66.

<sup>10</sup> James Neill, *The Origins and role of same-sex relations in human societies* (Mcfarland & Co., 2009), 169.

encouraging the right kind of lover. He gladly gives those favors ‘which are just and good.’<sup>11</sup>

It is also possible to see the relationship as a baser thing, one of unequal reciprocity and favored towards the *erastes*. The trade was sexual enjoyment for wisdom or lessons. In Plato’s *Symposium*, one finds that “Plato’s Pausanias...calls on this ideal as the justification for the boy’s physical gratification of the lover—it’s acceptable as long as its purpose is ‘virtue/excellence’ and the lover will make the beloved wise and good, that is, reciprocate a benefit for a benefit received”<sup>12</sup>. So long as receiving pleasure from the youth made it capable for the *erastes* to dispense wisdom and proper ethics then the relationship was more than okay—in fact, it was preferred.

These relationships were not one-sided however, a man forcing himself on a boy without the youth’s consent would be breaking a rather serious law in Athens designed to protect the people of the citizenry. *Hybris* was the unwilling penetration of someone and would result in the loss of citizenship rights for the accused. This law covered women and children, as well as men. In fact, penetration of boys was forbidden because, again, it was seen as womanly and against the noble intentions of the relationship. To assume it never happened would be foolish however. Remember the insults of Aristophanes and that no rule is ever always enforced. Some boys would even lie about being penetrated to save face in front of their *erastes* to guarantee continued instruction on the proper path of life.

A story by Phantias, a pupil of Aristotle, shows an ideal relationship of boy and man. A beautiful boy enchanted another man, Antileon of Heraclea in Italy, but, alas, the boy did not feel Antileon’s love. For weeks, the man would try and win over his love with, what can be assumed, sweet words, promises of wisdom, and gifts. The boy refused to budge. The boy asked of Antileon a favor: take a bell guarded by the local tyrant. A most impossible task it was believed, but Antileon grew his courage and snuck to where the bell was placed. Antileon would kill the guard and steal the bell. This murder and theft won over the boy and the two loved each other dearly until the tyrant caught wind of the boy and sought after him as well. Antileon refused to share his love, “Antileon was outraged. He told the boy not to incur risks by refusal; but he himself, when the tyrant was leaving his house, rushed up and assassinated him.”<sup>13</sup> The history of the story is dubious as there appears

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<sup>11</sup> Ormand, *Controlling Desires*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> Thornton, *Eros: The Myth of Ancient Greek Sexuality*, 198-199.

<sup>13</sup> Phantias. “Hyperides, Fr. 215 C,” in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of basic documents*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 62.

to be no account of a tyrant at Heraclea other than this one, but the tale of a man torn apart by his love of a boy is an apt one and shows just the relationship Athenian pederasty was meant to create—a relationship of improvement for both and the assurance of morally strong and manly citizens.

Again, Athenian pederasty was meant to make the *erastes* and *eromenos* the best they could be in order to keep the city strong and morally virtuous. This may sit uncomfortable for the modern reader, but the men this system created included the likes of Demosthenes, the great orator who spoke against the growing tyranny of Philip II, who would move a boy into his house where his wife lived. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the larger than life philosophers of ancient Greece all spoke on the virtue of the *erastes/eromenos* relationship. Sophocles, the playwright, would pursue young boys well into his sixties. The moral validity of this system is completely rejected by the modern world, but the Athenians would be shocked by these present social mores.

Classical Athenian homosexuality is a radically different thing from the current western mindset. In the modern world, homosexual love is expected to involve two adult men, but this would be considered immoral to the Athenians. It is crucial to know that the reason for this supposed immorality was not religious, but because of the belief that being penetrated revealed the passive homosexual to be womanly and unfit to control himself, let alone the state. The most prevalent homosexual love was between a man and boy, something very different from today. The morality of the issue can be debated until the end of time, but the history of it is rather clear in what the Athenians saw in homosexual love. In an ideal situation, Athenians believed pederasty improved both *erastes* and *eromenos* as the two would have to work at being worthy of the other's attention and love.