

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SEXUALITY in LITERATURE – Ancient Period

ANCIENT LITERATURE (Greco-Roman; Mesopotamian; Egyptian)

I

Ancient **GREEK Literature** expresses the human sexual condition; eros is deified, the erotic is a driver—for pain or pleasure—at every turn, and, depending on the era, pornography and sexual transgression are given play. As we know from Greek classical sculpture, the human body and its beauty are joyful sights for (at least the) Athenian male of all periods. In the palaestra, on the running track, or simply at ease in the gym, few sights so delight that male as do naked and beardless young men. These social dispositions—entirely male, to be sure, for proper women stayed home and knitted—reflect themselves from the earliest epic, Homer's in the eighth century B.C., through many fragments of sexual passion in Greek lyric—from the 7th to the 5th centuries—to bawdy themes in Greek comic drama, thence to Hellenistic mimes and to a vast collection of erotica from papyrus and sherds recovered in modern times from the sands of Egypt.

In Homer, both mortals and gods can be dazed, and rendered senseless, by *eros*—the power of physical love. The mover for the *Iliad* is the blind love of Paris for Helen, and their world shaking elopement to Troy. Homer depicts the gods as libidinous: when Hera wants to lure her husband, Zeus, away from the battlefield, she dresses in her sexiest, and adds a love potion acquired from Aphrodite. Odysseus and Penelope 'long for one another' repeatedly in the *Odyssey*, the climax of which is their reunion. Greek lyric poetry, which flourished for more than two centuries, from 750 B.C., begins and ends with erotically charged poetry. Sappho writes from inside a women's coterie in 6th century Lesbos. Her Lesbian love is hot and elegant, carved into pure form, from intense feeling. Addressing her *beloved*, she wishes simply that she might be seated where her lover's interlocutor is seated, basking in the beloved one's radiance. The Parian poet, Archilochos, who was also a mercenary soldier, vividly describes the power of *pothos*, longing, the mind-boggling confusion of sexual desire, and the overwhelming ease and weakness that follow physical love. The Greek comic poet, Aristophanes, excels in deploying burlesque scenes which center on sexual desire. His *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.) still fires up audiences. The women of Athens, disgusted with their menfolk's preoccupation with war, refuse sex until the men will agree on a peace treaty. The play revolves around the two sexes' sufferings, longings, cheatings, and eventually resolution. In deeper and more archaic themes—as in *The Thesmophoriazousae* (411 B.C.) or the *Ecclesiazusae* (391 B.C.)—Aristophanes tracks the (slapstick but dangerous) fate of a cross dressing male who hides out in a secret women's festival, or the fates of men 'captured and violated' by old women, in an Athenian versions of Sadie Hawkins day. These latter plays bridge away from the more agonizingly heterosexual, toward the more complex, reflective, and perverse dimensions of love.

With the literature of the Hellenistic period—especially Herondas (in his mimes; 3rd cent. B.C.)—Greek literature begins to dote on new themes we might call sado-masochistic, say genre playlets in which lustful and bad tempered mistresses punish naughty servants. We are en route toward such off genre sexual fantasies as *Lucius or the Ass* (2^d century A. D.), in which we are treated to elaborate descriptions of animal human intercourse. The male fantasy world opens out, in Lucian of Samosata, perhaps the author of the above *Lucius*, to reveal 'low-life female stereotypes like old madams, mannish lesbians, and naïve call-girls.' (p. 587, EEL). From such cross-sexual phantasmagoria we have come a good millennium from the open hearted laughter of the Homeric gods, at the sexual peccadillos of their fellow immortals.

Discussion Questions

To what would you attribute the change in character, of ancient Hellenic erotic literature, from the time of Homeric epic to that of the Second Sophistic (2^d and 3rd centuries A.D.)? How would you describe that change? Do the sexual values of current western culture vary with the era in question?

Is the prevailing sexual climate of an age a deep indicator of the character of that age? Or would there be ages in which prevailing sexual practice and taste would be independent of the broader culture of the time? Examples?

Does literature seem an art form in which the sexual climate of an age will display itself? How does literature compare, in that regard, to sculpture or music? Does contemporary music, in the western countries, reflect the sexual climate of those countries?

The literature of ancient Greece arguably lasts for a millennium, and is thus traversed by two other cultures—Roman and Christian. Were those intersections significant for the nature of Greek erotic culture? Or is there a noticeable unbroken continuity, from beginning to end in Greek culture?

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, vol. I, New York, 2006.

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Davidson, James, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens*, New York, 1998.

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Zeitlin, Froma, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, Chicago, 1996.

li

Ancient **ROMAN erotic literature** makes its appearance in the dramas of Plautus (250-184 B.C.) and Terence (comedies produced in the 160's B.C.), whose works are the first significant imaginative writing in Latin, and bears many stamps of Greek culture within them. Plautus writes a bawdy theater, with many salacious jokes spoken by rustic characters, and picked up from the rougher earlier stages of Latin language development. The tenor of sexuality in his work is evident in the highly staged 'rapes' that fascinated audiences: a young man knocks up a young lady during a nocturnal banquet, but then, remorseful, falls in love with her and marries her. Like Plautus, his contemporary Terence, while sensitive to women's worlds, joins the spirit of his time in viewing women as cultural and social inferiors. An equally significant poet of the pre-Christian era, Lucretius (97-55 B.C.), writes in his epic *On the Nature of Things* a vision of life from the standpoint of the Epicurean philosophy: one should avoid the emotional uproar that accompanies sex excitement, thus avoid marriage and lust, and remain self-controlled.

Catullus (84-54 B.C.) and Horace (65-8 B.C.) write from a more open society than the earlier Latin poets: either sophisticates by class (Catullus) or members of the new post-Augustan Imperial society, with its patrons and coteries. Catullus led a licentious life full of passionate loves, such as that for one Clodia (aka Lesbia, in Catullus's poems, following the name of Sappho's homeland); his love poems set a new standard for unbridled sexual experiment, controlled only by a splendid prosody which almost never falters. Horace, while praising the beauties of the rustic life, grows most fervent when celebrating, in perfectly turned elegiac verse, the beauty of still beardless young naked men. The same erotic motif preoccupies the verse of Horace's contemporary, Propertius (50-15 B.C.). Overriding all these lyricists, in his full hearted concern for the erotic, is Ovid (43 B.C.-17 A.D.), in whose splendidly crafted iambs we rehearse the gamut of attitudes toward sexuality. In his early work, the *Amores*, as well as in the later *Ars Amatoria*, *The Art of Love*, Ovid lays out a rule book and game plan for lovers, teaching them the wiles of getting the loved one in your bed. In his late semi epic excursion, *The Metamorphoses*, Ovid delights in retelling cynical tales of the sexual life of the gods.

Roman prose erotica surpass even the Roman lyric in sexual directness. We think most of Petronius' *Satyricon* (1st century A.D.) and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*) mid-second century A.D.

Petronius digs into the late Greek novella, pederastic lore from Greece, and various satires on Homeric epic, to come up with his outrageous farrago of catamites, whores, well hung slaves, and worn out priestesses who claim to cure impotence. Apuleius' tale, likewise plundered in part from Greek legend, highlights a young man, turned into an ass, who falls deep into witchcraft, fornication and human sacrifice. Lust runs rampant through the hero's wanderings, until at last he regains human form. As with Petronius, Apuleius runs deep erotic threads through a tale made up for him, in large part, by equally scatological Greek predecessors.

Discussion Questions

Have the examples we chose from Roman erotic literature a broadly different character from those we chose from Greek erotic literature? What differences do you note?

You will observe that the Roman erotic writers we highlight cluster around the first century B.C. and the two following centuries. Can you note the developments of Rome, as a cosmopolitan city, which seem to play into this outburst of brilliant erotic literature?

How do you evaluate the prominence of homoerotic themes in Greek and Roman literature? Was the homoerotic viewed as a transgressive act, in these literatures, or as a natural stage in human development?

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- Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, Vol. I, New York, 2006.
Fantham, E., *Roman Literary Culture, from Cicero to Apuleius*, Berkeley, 1994.
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White, P., *Promised Verse: Poets in the Society of Augustan Rome*, 1993.

Example

*I'll fuck you up the ass and down the throat,
Anal Aurelius and facial Furius,
For deeming me indecent and effete,
A pansy author writing small soft verses.
A goodly poet's life must needs be pious,
But it's unnecessary in his verses.
Lines lie unspiced, unwanton and unwitty
Until they get indecent, with small, soft
Ticklings enough to stoke the nether needs
Not in young boys, but aged and bushy-backed
Men with arthritis of the crotch. You read
The thousand kisses from one woman packed
In my tight lines, and call me girl? Take note:
I'll fuck you up the ass and down the throat.*

The Original:

Pēdicābō ego vōs et irrumābō
Aurelī pathice et cinaede Fūrī.
quī mē ex versiculīs meīs putāstīs
quod sunt molliculī parum pudīcum.
nam castum esse decet pium poētam
ipsum, versiculōs nihil necesse est
quī tum dēnique habent salem ac lepōrem

Sī sint molliculī ac parum pudīcī
et quod prūriat incitāre possint
nōn dīcō puerīs sed hīs pilōsīs
quī dūrōs nequeunt movēre lumbōs
Vōs quod mīlia multa bāsiōrum
lēgistis male mē marem putātis.
Pēdīcābō ego vōs et irrumābō.

This poem, no. 16 in the Carmina of Catullus, is addressed to two members of Catullus' friendship coterie. He falls out with them because they mock his poem *da mihi milia basia* (Carmina, #5) with the suggestion that he is slack and effeminate. Catullus slashes back, as in the present poem, to mock the two old gents, and to impute, to each of them, that they are passive sex-recipients. For the Romans and Greeks homoerotic love was acceptable, sometimes marvelous, but to be the passive partner, to get it up your anus, was widely viewed as contemptible. Catullus gives it to these two guys both in the face and in the ass.

MAJOR AUTHORS / WORKS

[Ovid](#) (B.C.E.43-A.D.17) [AMORES](#) - [ART OF LOVE](#) - [HEROIDES](#) - [METAMORPHOSES](#)

iii

Mesopotamian, Akkadian, and Sumerian literatures are rich in erotica—reaching back into deeper cultural strata than the Greco-Roman—and yet present a problem less present in the classical: religion and erotica are far more deeply intertwined in the Middle Eastern religions, than in those of the Western Mediterranean. It is as though the sexual drama which generates organic life on earth was foreshadowed by the powerful phallic and vaginal forces that were the first gods. *An example may suffice.* The most procreative god in Sumerian erotic cosmology is Enki, whose phallus waters the reeds and inseminates the river valleys. From such premises the erotic imagination runs wild. Enki's wife gives birth to another goddess, with whom—his daughter—Enki generates another goddess, until the cycle has generated four daughters. Whereupon Enki's original wife complains that his love making is 'purely mechanical,' so Enki gently caresses his beloved before sex, and enables her to collect his sperm and grow plants from it. When Enki observes these plants he consumes them, making himself pregnant, and ill. The goddess Ninhursaga puts Enki in her vagina, and on his behalf gives birth to four gods and four goddesses, who set about healing the wounds of Enki. What more could one want, in the blending of the erotic and the cosmic, a blending which, in Sumerian culture, is the central act of creation.

To repeat, the erotic imagination of such literature is worlds away from the Greco Roman. For a parallel, one would have to go to Hesiod's *Theogony* (7th cent. B.C.), which touches archaic religious senses more deeply even than Homer. We are reminded there that Eros—one of the four original gods in Hesiod—functions as a companion to Aphrodite, the 'goddess of erotic desire,' who was herself born from the seafoam swirling with the severed genitals of the God of the Sky, Ouranos. One comes close, in such archaic Near Eastern memories from Hesiod, to the sensibility of the Sumerian myth maker. One is also reminded, again, of the distance between the largely out in the open style of the Greek classics, and the profoundly psycho-archaic strata of the Mesopotamian mythmaker.

Discussion Questions

What essential difference do you see, between the erotic cosmology of the Middle East, and that of the Western Mediterranean—Greco-Roman? Are the erotic traits of the Classical tradition colored by the relative 'rationalism' of the Homeric Hesiodic predecessors? How does ancient Hebrew cosmology compare to that of the Ancient Middle East?

Can you see, in this primal Mid Eastern religious-erotic material, sources for the exploration of the deep dynamics of the human mind? Much to read here; if you don't it, look into Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*, 1959.

Selected Readings

Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, Vol. 2, New York, 2006.

George, Andrew, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Harmondsworth, 2003.

Kramer and Maier, *Myths of Enki, The Crafty God*, Oxford and New York, 1989.

Leick, Gwendolyn, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature*, London, 1994.

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iv

Ancient Egyptian love poetry differs from Mesopotamian (and from most Greco- Roman) poetry, for its discretion, and subtlety of sensuality. This poetry, which dates largely from the period between 1300-1150 B.C., reaches us largely as part of four papyrus collections, one large sherd, and a variety of smaller fragmentary pieces of writing. The poems themselves are hieroglyphic, which means that their sound and concrete sensual meaning can be difficult to recapture, but we see that their stock in trade is innuendo, sensuous longing, indirect statement. (None of which applies to the robust and often cantankerous cosmic/orgiastic poetries of ancient Mesopotamia.) The poems themselves, as we see from their content, not only speak person to person, but are frequently pieces chanted en route to festivals, invoking the aid of gods in love matters, or begging for love as a cure for the lover's disease (love.) There is almost no sexually explicit love poetry among this Egyptian material. Rather, to rephrase the above, the tenor is sensuous and indirect: 'my sister's mansion, her door is in the midst of her home. Her doors are open, the bolt is unlocked...Oh that I were made the doorkeeper!' Or 'I am yours like an acre planted with flowers for me, and with every kind of sweet-smelling herb.'

Discussion Questions

Whereas Greco Roman literature was written in a phonetic alphabet, the literatures of the ancient Middle East and Egypt were written in scripts which obscure their phonetic base. What do you suppose is the effect on the language products we inherit from these two different cultural zones?

Do you see a broadly different imagination behind Egyptian lyric poetry, and the cosmogonic poetry of the ancient Middle East? To what would you attribute that difference? To social and historical setting? To 'race'?

How does Egyptian love poetry differ from post-Romantic love poetry in the West? Think of the romantic lyrics of Elizabeth or Robert Browning, of Edna St. Vincent Millay, or Paul Eluard. Would the ancient Egyptians have valued the sentiments being expressed in those bodies of poetry?

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Foster, J.L., *Love Songs of the New Kingdom*, Austin, 1969-74.

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