



Rome: Ancient

by Eugene Rice

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When Romans write about love, they normally are even-handed: For Ovid (43 B.C.E.-17 C.E.) love can be inspired by "a boy or a girl" (*aut puer aut ... puella*) and Lucretius (94-55 B.C.E.) sees no difference "whether boy or women" (*sive puer ... seu mulier*).

Musonius Rufus (*ca* 30-102 C.E.) taught Stoic moral philosophy at Rome during the reigns of Nero and Vespasian. He stressed that sexual intercourse is just and lawful only when it occurs in marriage and for the purpose of begetting children. For a man to have sex with boys or other men is unjust and shameful--and also "contrary to nature."

The contrast will alert us at the outset to the variety of Roman attitudes to same-sex eros.

The Roman Sexual Code

No religious or ethical principle made male-male sex, as such, immoral or illegal. At the same time, a recognizable code of permissions and constraints attempted to regulate sexual relations among males as closely as it regulated sexual relations between men and women.

The sex of one's partner could be a matter of surprising indifference. Horace, who never married, "burned with desire, sometimes for tender boys, sometimes for girls." Martial writes, in the (fictive) first person singular, of penetrating males anally, penetrating females vaginally and anally, and being fellated by both male and female partners.

What mattered more was role, age, and status. The freeborn adult Roman who liked to copulate with males penetrated slave boys, eunuchs, and male prostitutes with as little reproach as he penetrated his female slaves, his female concubine, or female prostitutes.

In contrast, seducing a *puer praetextatus*, a freeborn male Roman who had not yet put on the *toga virilis* (this rite of passage happened at about age fifteen), was a serious offense; and fathers tried hard to protect the *pudicitia* (sexual modesty, chastity) of their sons. No easy task: "A handsome son," notes Juvenal, "keeps his parents in constant fear and misery, so rarely do *pudicitia* and good looks go together."

Nor did citizens who valued their reputations have sex with each other. For a free adult male to be penetrated anally or orally by another free adult male, by a freedman, by a boy, by a male prostitute, or by a slave was a disgrace. Roman male homosexuality was predominantly a form of pederasty that did not exclude relationships with women and was governed by a firm distinction of role that stigmatized adult male passivity as servile and effeminate.

Servilis Patientia

The contrast between Roman and Greek homosexuality is most striking in how the two societies tried to regulate the sexual relations of adult citizens and freeborn boys. In Athens, ideally, both parties were freeborn and social equals; the tie between them was consensual; and (in some instances) educational as well as sexual. At Rome, the typical same-sex relationship was between a citizen (active) and his adolescent slave (passive).

The slave had no rights, while the rights of the master included unrestricted sexual access to the slave's body. So radical an inequality created a realm of compliant submission (*servilis patientia*) that shaped profoundly the sexual behavior and attitudes of Romans.

One obvious result was the easy availability of same-sex pleasure to the slave owner. Another was the freedom to enjoy himself without self-reproach or fear of criticism from the neighbors. Not even the "Romans of old," records Plutarch, "thought it shameful for a man to love male slaves who were in their season of youthful beauty."

According to the poets, the male slave bought and kept for sexual purposes was young and tender. His face should be white as milk. He has sparkling eyes. Soft, sweet-smelling locks tumble down to his shoulders. His nose is slightly aquiline, his lips as red as roses from Paestum. His skin is smooth as a girl's. Just the faintest fuzz may disfigure his adolescent cheeks. His kisses are delicious, and his breath when he wakes up in the morning smells like ripening apples, a leafy field after spring rain, or a flower garden humming with Sicilian bees. He has honeyed thighs and a soft anus. When his boy grants the master love's true joys, he is as happy as Jupiter with Ganymede.

Pederastic romance, however, cannot obscure the assimilation of sexual receptivity with a slave's submission to his master.

Muliebris Patientia

For a freeborn male to be penetrated by another male was shameful for a second reason: to consent was to let himself be used as a woman and a wife.

Male anxieties about effeminacy have been in Western culture since the Greeks a perennial source of misogyny and bigotry. In so patriarchal a society as Rome, any comparison of a man to a woman was thought to humiliate the man.

Romans relied on stereotypical tokens of effeminacy to identify men willing to be receptive partners in same-sex acts. Such men were known as *cinaedi* or *molles*. The *cinaedus* signals he is ready to be used sexually as a woman by letting his hair grow long, wearing see-through silk togas of green or saffron, perfuming himself with balsam, plucking his eyebrows and painting his eyes, mincing when he walks, and worst of all, shaving his legs and buttocks. Men, said the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, are hairy by nature; if they shave their body hair or pluck it out, it means they want to be women.

The deep-seated prejudice against adult male passives distilled in formulas like *servilis patientia* (slave-like submission) and *muliebris patientia* (woman-like passivity) helps explain the provisions of the much debated *lex Scantinia* (mid-second century B.C.E.), the only Roman law directed against same-sex acts before the legislation of the Christian emperors in the fourth century C.E. Scraps of good evidence from Juvenal and Suetonius suggest that the law criminalized the two main prohibitions of the sexual code: the seduction of an underage freeborn boy and the anal and oral submission of a Roman citizen to penetration by another male.

The law was almost never enforced, though it was still on the books and remembered in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. If the boy was willing, the penalty was very likely a fine; if the boy was forced, the penalty could be capital, as it was in several instances during the early Republic.

The Fraternity of *Cinaedi*

When we look at the Roman sexual landscape from the perspective of the receptive partner, two important facts emerge: first, that the *cinaedus* and his partner represent a pattern of desire, erotic object choice, and sexual pleasure different from the unexclusive pederasty of the majority of Roman males; and, second, that there existed at Rome recognizable cohorts of men whose preponderant erotic interest was in adult partners (androphilia).

The many charges of adult passivity in political slander and character assassination and the very many disobliging references to pathics in satire, histories, graffiti, lampoons, essays in moral philosophy, in legal, scientific and medical writings, and in the apologetic works of Jews and Christians, constitute a formidable body of evidence showing that passive androphilia was a widely observed fact of Roman social and sexual life, deviant and reprehensible in the opinion of many citizens, but present, threatening to masculine self-esteem, and in its visibility and incidence commensurate with the alarm and reprobation it aroused.

Every *cinaedus* abused for passivity by hostile observers had active androphile partners. Who were they?

Some were slaves. For when we look for exceptions to predominant sexual patterns, we can be sure that it was in the private space where the desire of the master defined the necessity of the slave.

Some were professional male prostitutes who took the active role in anal and oral intercourse. Some were amateur hustlers able and willing to give pleasure in exchange for maintenance, gifts, and a leg up in the world, or to gratify their own taste for sex with passive adults.

In the ninth satire of Juvenal we meet a rich man named Virro who is an adult passive and impotent with women. His client Naevolus penetrates both him and his wife. Virro now has a little son and daughter and silences gossip by showing them off as proof of his manhood. Virro writes Naevolus love letters and drools over his naked charms. Naevolus complains that the stingy Virro pays him too little for his loyalty and exertion: "The slave who ploughs a field has it easier than the one who ploughs its owner."

But there also existed at Rome active androphiles who desired and willingly chose to have sex with other adult males, played the active role, and were not slaves, freedmen, or prostitutes. Latin-speakers had a name for this variety of homosexual desire: *adulorum amor*. And they had names for the men who felt and acted on it: *libidinis in mares proniores*, "men inclined to sex with males," as distinct from men "whose desire is for boys" (*libidinis in pueros proniores*).

P. Sulpicius Gallus, for example, was a *homo delicatus*, a receptive bottom "mad for men" (*virosus*); his lover was adult, rich, and freeborn. According to Cicero in a private letter to his friend Atticus, hostile gossip accused L. Afranius, consul in 60 B.C.E., of daily fellating L. Lollius Palicanus, a Roman citizen. Catiline was powerfully built, a brave and reckless soldier and unscrupulous conspirator, but Cicero assumed no necessary skepticism in his audience when he called him the lover (*amator*) and the husband of Gabinius. Verres, who was also a notorious womanizer, was the passive partner of a social equal, the senator Aemilius Alba, whom Cicero describes as Verres's long-time friend and *amator*. The emperor Titus preferred men to boys and was the active sexual partner of adult prostitutes and eunuchs. The emperor Galba was "inclined to sex with males, but only with those muscular and fully adult."

A few texts note the existence of males who enjoyed both roles, the double art of loving and of being loved (*amare et amari*). Seneca claims to know about a group of shameless young men who alternated roles and penetrated one another (*qui suam alienamque libidinem exercent mutuo stupri*). According to Suetonius, the emperor Caligula delighted in reciprocal intercourse (*commercium mutui stupri*) with Marcus Lepidus, a mime named Mnester, and "certain hostages."

At Romans 1:26-17, the Latin Vulgate of Paul's epistles attests reciprocated male desire, "males for males lusting in their desires for one another" (*masculi in masculos...exarserunt in desideriis suis in invicem*). So does the early second-century *Apocalypse of Peter*, which pictures the torment in hell of "the men who defiled themselves with one another in the fashion of women." Salvian, writing in the middle of the fifth century, noted the prevalence of reciprocal intercourse (*mutuo inpudicitia*) in Roman Carthage before the city fell to the Vandals.

Eunuchs for Religion

Gender-structured homosexuality is most visible in antiquity in religious settings, and especially among the male attendants and servitors of two popular fertility goddesses, Cybele or the Great Mother (*Magna Mater*) and Atagartis or the Syrian goddess (*dea Syria*).

Two practices gave these enthusiasts their distinctive profile: castration, usually voluntary self-castration, and transvestism, both first attested in surviving Greek sources toward the end of the fifth century B.C.E. and in Latin some two centuries later.

Imagine a wild festival in honor of *Magna Mater* or the Syrian goddess, "our all-powerful universal mother." Young men possessed by a divine madness cast off their clothing, slash their testicles with broken flints, run down the street carrying their genitals in their hands, and toss them through an open door. The women of the household care for him, dress him in women's clothes, and preserve his testicles in a special receptacle, similar in size to a pyx, the little box used by Christians to store consecrated eucharistic wafers.

The best explanation for religiously motivated self-castration may lie in a failure to reconcile two beliefs widely shared in the ancient world: one, that sacred functions can be performed best by persons of perfect continence; and two, that voluntary continence is impossible for any intact male--leaving the enthusiast with no alternative but chastity by the knife.

The new initiates of either cult (called indiscriminately *galloi* by Greeks and *galli* in Latin) became itinerant revivalists, begging, beating their backs with cords (the droplets of blood were another offering to the goddesses), and sharing with townspeople and villagers their prayers and exuberant rituals.

Cultivated Greeks and Romans regarded the gender inversions of the *galli* with disapproval. They called them "half-males," *semimares* (Ovid), and half-men, *semiviri* (Juvenal). Catullus seems to have believed that castration turned eunuchs into women. In a wonderful poem on the self-castration of Attis, legendary prototype of the eunuch priest, he pictures the youth grieving for what he has lost: "Ego mulier," he says, "I am a woman [now]." Others viewed them as neuter--neither male nor female, or as a third sex (*tertius sexus*)--combining, as it were, male and female into one.

Ribald narratives like *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius mocked the *galli* for their high-pitched voices, their rouge, mascara, and face powder, their yellow sandals and saffron-colored garments of linen or silk. And like many of their contemporaries, these authors took the further step of imagining them as *cinaedi* and *molles*, passive sexually and inexhaustibly avid for the receptive role in anal intercourse, little better than male prostitutes. Indeed, Apuleius calls them "he-whores."

At the beginning of the fifth century C.E., the *galli* were still plying their trade. An indignant St. Augustine took it for granted that the rites of the mother of the gods included the enactment by her eunuch servants of the sexual role of women: *muliebria pati*.

Tribades and Tribadism

The Roman counterpart of the effeminate male was the masculine female, the tribade (*tribas*; plural *tribades*). *Tribas* is the ancient term closest to our notion of a lesbian. Although the word is Greek and

derived from the Greek verb *tribein*, "to rub," its earliest surviving occurrences are in Latin texts. A Latin-language equivalent was *frictrix*, literally "a woman who rubs." Although the noun *virago* (plural, *viragines*) usually connotes mannish goddesses like Minerva and Diana or female warriors like the Amazons, one author, the fourth-century lawyer and astrologer Firmicus Maternus, used it regularly to mean *tribas*.

Two epigrams of Martial offer an early Roman picture of tribades. They delight in masculine pursuits. They play handball, run, jump, wrestle, and exercise with heavy weights. They gorge on meat and drink unwatered wine until they vomit. "Bassa" slyly associates only with women, not to hide her adulteries with men, but the better to mask her sexual preference for women. "Philaenis" not only enjoys "rubbing" and cunnilingus; she penetrates women with an artificial phallus (*olisbos*) or her own enlarged clitoris, "fiercer than a husband stiff with lust."

There is no technical word in either Greek or Latin for the sexual partners of tribades. Martial calls one such person *amica*, "girlfriend." More common was to imagine them as wives. Tribades had "wives" the way *cinaedi* had "husbands." The astronomer Ptolemy mentions the "lawful wives" of tribades and Clement of Alexandria denounced women who married each other. It would seem to follow (though the evidence is very sparse) that tribades were believed to court, and "marry" adult women (as *cinaedi* did adult males). To the degree that this is so, tribadism (the class noun is *tribaké*) contrasts sharply with sapphism. Sappho loved girls. No one depicted her "acting like a man;" and she cultivated the femininity of her adolescent girls as carefully as *erastai* protected the masculinity of their *eromenoi*.

Sexual Categories

Romans were aware of the diversity of their own sexual tastes and practices and curious about its causes.

How, for instance, they ask, shall we account for the existence of *tribades* and passive males (*molles mares*)? The fabulist Phaedrus (c. 15 B.C.E. -50 C.E.) answers that Prometheus, while he was fashioning human beings out of clay, spent a whole day sculpting the male and female genitals. Before he could attach them, Liber, a rustic god of fertility and wine, invited him to dinner. Prometheus staggered home late, drunk, and half-asleep. He was so befuddled that he fixed female genitals to some male bodies and male organs to some female bodies.

Notice that even before Prometheus's mistake the unfinished prototypes were already male and female humans. The tale is about gender, not about sex. The tribades of Prometheus have the bodies of women and the "minds and desires" of males; the men he calls *molles mares* have the bodies of males and the sexual tastes and desires of females. In order to explain the origin of contemporary same-sex behavior (of which he disapproved), Phaedrus nevertheless traced both inclinations back to the creation of the human race.

A Medical Model

Behind the fable lie the two-seed theory of conception and the so-called "right-left" paradigm of sexual differentiation. The model grounded variation in sexual object choice on the embryology of Hippocrates and Galen and satisfied the curiosity of the ancients for many centuries. The Christian writer Lactantius (ca 250-ca 317 C.E.) has left us an unusually clear exposition of the theory.

Men have two testicles and two seminal vesicles. The testicle on the right side of the body contains male seed, the one on the left side female seed. (In the bodies of both sexes the right side is masculine and the left feminine.) Likewise in women, the uterus is divided into two parts, the right side masculine, the left feminine.

Both parents contribute seeds to conceive the child. The nature (*natura*) and sex of the child are determined by the proportion of paternal and maternal seeds in the mix that triggers conception, by

whether the father's seed has come from his right or left testicle, and by the part of the uterus (left or right) in which the male parent's seed has fallen.

If male seed from the father flows into the left or female part of the mother's uterus, a male is conceived, but feminine characteristics will dim its "masculine splendor." The male child will have beautiful features, too white skin, delicate limbs, short stature, a soft voice, a weak mind, or several of these.

Vice versa, if female seed from the father lodges in the right or masculine part of the uterus, a female results, but the child will exhibit more masculine traits than normal sexual differentiation allows, to wit, strong limbs, excessive height, facial hair, a low voice, an unlovely countenance, a daring spirit, or several of these.

But when the father's male seed flows into the right half of the mother's uterus and his female seed into the left, the two fetuses will be normal, the one possessing the beauty proper to the nature of women and the other the manly strength (*robur virile*) of mind and body proper to males.

The Astrologers

To explain sexual preference, the Romans relied as much on their astrologers as on their physicians.

The permutations of the starry map make us chaste or unchaste, faithful or promiscuous, libidinous or frigid, sterile or fertile, attractive or off-putting, unbridled or moderate in our sexual practice, active or passive, inclined to sex only with women, or only with boys, or with both women and boys, or only with young men, or with males of any age, or with slaves, or with our nearest relatives, or with prostitutes.

The most comprehensive surviving Latin astrological treatise is the *Matheseos libri octo* of Firmicus Maternus. When he began it in 334 C.E. he was a wealthy retired lawyer of the senatorial class. His sources range from Hellenistic times to the recent past. We may safely take his views to represent a conceptualization and explanation of sexual variation widely shared both in his own day and in earlier centuries.

Firmicus pays almost no attention to men who desire only women nor to women who desire only men; these inclinations of desire are too ordinary, in his view, to require explanation. He concentrates on the non-procreative sexual drives.

His taxonomy of sexual types includes a class of adult males who are exclusive pederasts. Such men are sterile, they never marry, and they are incapable of sexual acts with women, even when they are randiest. They are always (*semper*) lovers of boys. They are furiously and unnaturally (Firmicus signals his disapproval) given to anal intercourse.

Corresponding to the men who have sex exclusively with boys is a class of women who love and have sex exclusively with women. He calls them "mannish women" (*viragines, mulieres viragines*). They never (*numquam*) couple sexually with men, for if "the Sun and Moon are in masculine signs and Venus is also in a masculine sign in a woman's chart, women will be born who take on a man's character and desire intercourse with women in the manner of men."

Firmicus, like Ptolemy before him, recognizes all the commoner inflections of sexual taste. For example: "If Mercury and Venus are in conjunction in the 19th degree of Aries, they make the natives impure of mouth" (*inpuros ore=fellators*). Saturn in aspect with Venus in any way "will make the natives *molles, cinaedos*, men who give themselves to slavish acts." It is the celestial ambient that produces professional and amateur prostitutes, even lesbian prostitutes (*mulieres vero viragines meretrices*).

But what is most useful for us to retain from the ancient theorists is a renewed sense of the range of sexual

categories available to Romans, of the elasticity and variety their sexual tastes, and of the candor with which they report and picture their sexual acts.

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About the Author

Eugene Rice, who died on August 4, 2008, was Shepherd Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University. His last book, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, was awarded prizes by the American Society of Church History, the American Catholic Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Historical Association. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, he instituted Columbia University's first "Seminar on Homosexualities" and served as an adviser to Columbia University Press for its series on gay and lesbian studies. At the time of his death, he was working on a history of Western homosexualities.

The term Ancient Rome refers to the city of Rome, which was located in central Italy; and also to the empire it came to rule, which covered the entire Mediterranean basin and much of western Europe. At its greatest extent it stretched from present-day northern England to southern Egypt, and from the Atlantic coast to the shores of the Persian Gulf. The civilization of Ancient Rome was rooted, directly or indirectly, in all these earlier cultures. Rome wasn't built in a day, as the cliché reminds us. Neither did the greatest power of the ancient world fall in one swift cataclysm as some past historians believed. The history of Rome is long and complex: a village grew into the Eternal City that's still a wonder today; a monarchy became a republic and then an empire; Italy was conquered before Europe, parts of Africa and the Near and Middle East were incorporated into an empire that had around a quarter of the world's population under its governance. Ancient Rome made its way from a small handful of villages in the ancient times to becoming the city-state that controlled Italy and which, in the end, became the luxurious capital of a vast empire. Under the command of great generals like Julius Caesar, its disciplined troops defeated almost all of its enemies. Around the 1st century AD, Rome ruled the ancient kingdoms of Egypt, Syria, Greece, part of Africa and even the wild barbarian lands of Europe. Ancient Rome civilization. Ancient Rome. Contents.