Teaching With and Around Ancient Greek Pederasty in Western Civilization Classes

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Many colleges and universities across the United States require all or some students to take a "Western Civilization," "Great Books," or European history course. As wide-ranging general education courses, these tend to be taught by instructors who could not possibly have attained subject expertise in all of the time periods or regions covered. This—coupled with the fact that culturally conservative ideological imperatives may drive the retention of "Western Civilization" courses—means that instructors are often under-equipped to treat complex and delicate issues related to sex and sexuality when they arise in course material.

This document aims to offer some best practices for acknowledging and incorporating into class discussion one specific theme related to sex and sexuality in "Western Civilization" courses: the social institution of pederasty, particularly as discussed in classical Athens and in the works of Plato. I come to this document with three investments: I have a decade of research experience in the intellectual history of male homosexuality in modern Britain, in which the reception of classical paradigms related to same-sex sexuality looms large; I was previously an instructor in Columbia University's Core Curriculum, where I encountered confusion, misinformation, and avoidance of the subject of pederasty as it figured in the multiple Platonic texts in the curriculum; and I am a queer university teacher who takes seriously the imperative to create a welcoming and safe classroom climate for LGBTQ+ students. I am not, however, a classicist, ancient historian, or philosopher, and I do not have specialized research expertise in ancient Greek, Plato, or ancient sexuality.

What Classical Athenian Pederasty Is and Is Not

- In this document, I am using "pederasty" (*παιδεραστία*) to refer to a specific normative ideal governing the gender and sexual order of elites in classical (fifth and fourth centuries BCE) Greece, especially Athens. Plato seems to have been immersed in a world that celebrated and sought to embody this ideal, and it assumes a central role in many of his dialogues. But it wasn't the only way that same-sex sexuality was ordered in antiquity. Moreover, as with any academic topic, scholars disagree: about the extent to which Platonic pederasty was merely an ideal or actually descriptive of everyday practices, and whether Plato was typical or unusual among other men of his time, social class, etc. in the specific emphases he places on certain ideas and practices related to pederasty. I'm focusing here on the Platonic ideal and instances when that understanding appears to be corroborated by other pieces of evidence, but you can consult some of the works listed in the "Further Reading" section below for wider perspectives and a sense of the historiographical debate.

- Pederasty was organized around a binary: erastes (*ἐραστής*)/eromenos (*ἐρωμένος*). "Erastes" and "eromenos" come from the active and passive participles of the verb *ἐρᾶν*, "to love"—so they might be translated as "lover" and "beloved." The erastes was a mature adult man, the active partner in sex, who was meant to take an aggressive role in pursuing or courting the eromenos. The eromenos was an adolescent/teenage boy, the passive partner in sex, who was meant to coyly and modestly respond to the erastes's overtures. This binary was much more operative in classical Athenian society (as was an active/passive binary in many times and places) than a hetero/homo binary, which doesn't really pertain in this cultural context.
- Pederasty was a social institution, not a sexual orientation. Erastai could pursue relationships with eromenoi while being married to women. Being an eromenos was a life-stage that adolescent boys would grow out of—transitioning to marriage and perhaps also to being erastai themselves. A concept of innate orientation towards same- or opposite-sex attraction is not *mostly* how the ancient Athenians talked about pederasty (though there are exceptions to this). In classical texts you sometimes see someone describe himself as a "lover of boys"—but this is more of a taste/aesthetic preference/outlook on the world than it is a congenital orientation.
- The power dynamic of pederasty was meant to be an unequal but reciprocal one: the erastes seduced the eromenos, but in return provided education, mentorship, and gifts (visual evidence suggests that roosters and rabbits were popular). Cultural value was attached to the naïveté and modesty of the eromenos. Eromenoi could be ostracized for being perceived as promiscuous, or for taking an active role in pursuing erastai. Both the erastes and the eromenos were free men (remember, classical Athens was a slave society). Sexual abuse of enslaved people of all genders was probably very common, and was not subject to the same strict norms governing elite pederasty.
- The word *παιδεραστία* literally means "love of boys/children." Age difference was clearly essential to how pederasty was supposed to operate. Visual evidence depicts erastai with beards and eromenoi without, to signify that age difference. Beauty standards for eromenoi emphasized lack of facial and body hair. Someone was supposed to age out of being an eromenos when he began to grow a beard—a milestone that some lyric poets, among others, responded to with disappointment. This suggests to me that the ideal eromenos was a pubescent adolescent, someone who *might soon* develop a beard. Taking into account that people today typically enter puberty earlier than people did in the past, and that our modern conception of childhood didn't really pertain in most times and places, we can therefore understand eromenoi as being adolescent pubescent boys/young men, maybe in their mid-to-late teens—but not, it is important to emphasize, young children. For comparison, in classical Athens women might marry as soon as they reached puberty, but men typically married when they were in their twenties or thirties. So, perhaps we might think of being an eromenos, for elite men, as an intermediate life stage between childhood and adulthood—something that did not pertain for elite women, who went straight from childhood to marriage, or for people of other social classes.
- Elite pederasty as represented in Plato emphasizes looking, not touching. It's about gazing longingly at the beautiful boy exercising in the gymnasium, about flirtation: think of the interaction between Alcibiades and Socrates in the *Symposium*, the "is that a scroll in your

pocket or are you just pleased to see me?" joke at the start of the *Phaedrus*, the gymnasium setting of the *Charmides*. Visual evidence depicts intercrural sex (as well as lots of genital fondling, etc.). Some scholars have suggested that elite Athenians perceived anal sex as low-status, and that it was especially immodest or inappropriately effeminate if an eromenos allowed himself to be penetrated. (Yes, all the double standards that you think are going on here, and the disavowal of rape, are going on.)

- All of this does not mean that age-equal relationships, penetrative sex between men, etc. did not exist in ancient Athens. In fact, we know from legal evidence that people were having other forms of sex, because they were prosecuted criminally for it. For example, several of the sources listed below in "Further Reading" discuss the oration of Aeschines against Timarchos, a legal case in which a man was prosecuted for prostitution. All we can say is that some elite male writers were especially invested in pederasty, and that Plato, at least, considered pederasty sufficiently normative that it appears as an assumed context underlying content in the dialogues that is not centrally *about* pederasty. (There are some good examples of this in the *Republic*: see e.g. 402d–403c; 474d and following.)
- The ideal of pederasty that we encounter in Plato didn't necessarily pertain in other Greek city-states, or in the Roman Empire/Hellenistic period. It was not a significant part of how sexuality was ordered for most of the history of Latin Christian Europe. But it held outsize importance for scholars and activists who from around the late eighteenth century sought in recognizably "modern" ways to argue for the existence of a category of person defined by same-sex sexual attraction, and/or for the decriminalization of sex between men. For many men who desired men in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, who had even the most rudimentary of classical educations, Plato was where they first encountered mention of same-sex desire. For men who first came to an understanding of what same-sex desire was through encountering a text like the *Republic* in school, then, pederasty once again became paradigmatic. It was the point from which they started thinking about same-sex sexuality, even if they later moved towards a sexual-object-choice-centric model more like our present conception of sexual orientation. Pederasty had another life, then—rediscovered/reinvented in the modern period as a locus for a modern conception of homosexuality or queerness.
- Some people in the modern period have continued to cite pederasty in support of having sex with, or romantically pursuing, children or college students. In recent years, for example, one prominent scholar of ancient sexuality was convicted of possession and distribution of child pornography, and another has been investigated for his sexual harassment of students and avowed advocacy of adults having sex with minors. (In this document, I have decided not to cite the research of these scholars.) Conversely, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, politically and religiously conservative voices have invoked pederasty in order to generate panic around the idea that gay men are sexual predators, with results that have destroyed lives and livelihoods. There are complex moral and intellectual questions, with high political and personal stakes, surrounding the historical relationship of classical Athenian pederasty to modern homosexuality and how we talk generally in the classroom about sex, sexuality, and sexual ethics. It is all the more important, therefore, to have conversations with students that are fact-based and rooted in historical context, and that are careful not to fan the flames of homophobia and moral panic.

Best Practices for Addressing Pederasty in the Classroom

- **Be historically accurate, specific, and morally neutral.** You may wish to ensure that your students are clear about the distinction between Athenian pederasty and our modern concepts both of "pedophilia" and of "homosexuality," and also to remind students that different times and places have differing norms concerning sexuality, definitions of childhood, etc. I try to strike a balance between refraining from condemning age-unequal relationships involving adolescent eromenoi that happened 1600 years ago, and also making space for students to (maturely and respectfully) express their discomfort with the concept if that's something they need to get out of the way.
- **Don't go out of your way to avoid pederasty.** There is simply no excuse for avoiding a discussion of pederasty in a text like the *Symposium*, for example—don't, through your own awkwardness or lack of knowledge, unintentionally convey to your students that there is something embarrassing or distasteful about the subject, or that in order to study "Great Books" we have to heavily censor their sexual content. Don't be like the great Victorian translator of Plato Benjamin Jowett and change all the male pronouns to female ones! However…
- **Decide whether you actually want to foreground pederasty in your discussion.** There is a balance to be struck between not ignoring something, and overwhelming students with too much information about a complex issue that isn't necessarily central to your discussion. Depending on the material you're discussing and the focus of your class, you may decide you will only confront pederasty if the students raise it (on the other hand, you might wish to explicitly pose it as a topic of discussion and push the students to talk about it even if they're uncomfortable). But go in with a plan so that you're prepared.
- **Connect pederasty to other course themes related to sexuality.** How are sexual ethics part of a broader ethical program that a given author lays out, and what can that program tell us about the time/social context in which they were writing? (In Columbia's CC, related texts might include the Qur'an, Augustine, Wollstonecraft, Mill….) If you do this early with the Greeks, it can set you up to have productive discussions about sexuality throughout the course. I am also partial to the introduction to Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, which can provide you (and perhaps also your students, though it's a difficult text) with tools to confront the insistent presence and simultaneous routine disavowal of male homoeroticism in the western canon.
- **Teach your class as if there are queer students in it.** Statistically speaking, there probably are! Bear in mind that this topic may be especially sensitive and difficult for queer students, and also that it may not be apparent to you, or to your students, who specifically in the class might be coming from a place of personal experience/vulnerability. Some students might be invested either in claiming or in distancing themselves from a narrative about ancient Greek sexuality that feels personally meaningful to them; others might be in the closet and anxious that a class discussion about pederasty is putting them under the spotlight. And beyond what college students today are familiar with, there is a long history of gay and queer people claiming personal identification with classical antiquity of which I believe it's important to be

respectful. At the same time, some students may come to class with stereotypes or misinformation about pederasty's relationship to modern homosexuality that can shade into homophobia, and that it might therefore be important to step in and correct. Even if you weren't planning to have a class discussion about pederasty, something may come up that you need to address from the perspective of student support and classroom inclusivity. Hopefully the historical info above can help you to feel equipped to do so in a fact-based way.

Why All This Matters

While our present conception of sexual orientation is a recent invention (and may already be on the way out), people in all times and places have desired and had sex that was in some way non-normative or proscribed. Historical narratives about gender and sexuality difference have played powerful roles in queer self-fashioning—often as against a long and painful history of censorship and disavowal of homoeroticism in the classical tradition. We can—and should—acknowledge queer histories in the undergraduate classroom in the same way that we increasingly build consideration of gender, race, and other categories of power and difference into our teaching; and there are real political stakes to doing so. We can—and should—confront misunderstandings about the history of sexuality that can (mis)inform our discussion of other course material and that can lead to homophobia and other forms of prejudice. We must also ensure that these subjects are fully integrated into general education courses and not hived off into "special topics" classes, leaving students with the misleading impression that "western civilization" is only the province of straight white men.

My personal view is that "western civilization" classes should be discarded in favor of more up-to-date approaches to introducing students to the humanities disciplines, but many of us are not a position to enact large-scale curricular reform at our universities. We can, however, ensure that what is going on in our *own* classrooms is sensitive, inclusive, and faithful to the latest scholarship. By addressing classical Athenian pederasty when it comes up in the classroom, we can model rigorous academic engagement with issues of historical, abstract moral, and personal complexity—which is exactly what should be happening in a college humanities classroom.

Further Reading

- John Addington Symonds, "A Problem in Greek Ethics" (privately printed, 1883 (now available widely online in public domain))
- Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978)
- David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 1990)
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
- James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2007)
- Gideon Nisbet, *Greek Epigram in Reception: J.A. Symonds, Oscar Wilde, and the Invention of Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

- Emily Rutherford, “Impossible Love and Victorian Values: J. A. Symonds and the Intellectual History of Homosexuality,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75, no. 4 (2014): 605–27
- Kate Fisher and Jana Funke, “The Age of Attraction: Age, Gender and the History of Modern Male Homosexuality,” *Gender & History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 266–83
- Nicholas L. Syrett, “Introduction to ‘Sex across the Ages: Restoring Intergenerational Dynamics to Queer History,’” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 46, no. 1 (March 2020): 1–12