

DYNAMICS OF DESIRE: GIFT-GIVING AND RECIPROCITY IN ANCIENT GREEK HOMOEROTIC COURTSHIP¹

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The article addresses the problem of reciprocity in homoerotic relationships in classical Athens. According to the more traditional approach, the ‘pecking order model’, these typically asymmetrical relationships almost inevitably involved humiliation of one of the partners, who literally or metaphorically assumed a passive and therefore ‘unmanly’ role. Although more recent studies tend to underline the artificial character of these scholarly reconstructions, they still fail to account for the nuances of ancient homoerotic courtship. I argue that some sources often used by scholars as reflecting negative attitudes towards homoeroticism may actually testify to the existence of very clear rules of highly valued and praised behaviours of passive partners. These rules formed an implicit ‘grammar’ of social actions but were never explicitly codified.

Keywords: Ancient Greek sexuality; reputation; reciprocity; theory of practice; paederasty; prostitution.

The phallogocentric principle and some of its offshoots

It is commonplace that the history of scholarly paradigms may often be described as a sinusoidal curve.² The scholarly discussion of Greek sexualities is exceptional here only because it fits the model even more closely than one might expect. After many years during which the silence over peculiarities of ancient Greek sexual life was broken only occasionally,³ the publication of seminal works by Foucault (1976–84), and Dover (1978), followed by Keuls (1985), Halperin (1990), Cantarella (1992), and others signalled a period that may be called, paraphrasing and blending the titles of some influential works, *Two Decades of*

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² Kuhn 1962: *passim*.

³ Most notably by Bethe 1907.

Greek Phallocracy.

This view of Greek sexuality's scholarly paradigm is based on the observation that some categories employed by scholars to describe their own sexual lives (or the lives of their contemporaries) were culturally specific and not necessarily applicable to phenomena observable in other cultures. Thus, paradoxically, Dover's *Greek Homosexuality* goes beyond what in *etic* terms was (and still may be) called *homosexuality*, as it suggests that ancient Greeks only occasionally thought of sexual orientation as a stable and exclusive pattern of attraction to persons of a specific sex. What allegedly counted more, at least for those who were reasonably free to choose the object and means of gaining sexual satisfaction, was the role they assumed. The more 'masculine' (in a particular sense of the word) one's role was, the more desirable that role became. Thus, according to this model, sexuality was merely a mode of expressing and negotiating a relationship of power, hierarchy and domination, in which the active or insertive role was reserved for the politically and socially privileged, whereas the penetrated belonged to the vast category of non-real-male-adult-citizens, including women, boys, slaves, foreigners, male prostitutes, and pathics.⁴

The paradigm's attraction is quite obvious. The insertive role, regardless of the biological sex of the actors, may indeed indicate domination, as is clear from parallels from both non-human mammals⁵ and human communities, most notably in penitentiary or military contexts. At the same time, the explanatory potential of the phallocentric principle goes well beyond mere erotic tastes. As Eva Keuls' *The reign of the phallus* (1985) shows, it can be used as an almost universal key for understanding all kinds of cultural phenomena. Some offshoots of the theory happen to be completely counterintuitive and yet, at the same time, perfectly coherent and logical. Karen Bassi (1998), for instance, constructs a hermeneutic system in which being active *per se* is a masculine prerogative, while being passive is charged with morally inferior unmanliness. Thus, when Odysseus in Book 4 of the *Odyssey* is looked at by Nausicaa and becomes an object of her desire, he is turned into a feminised victim.⁶ Sublime as it is, the hermeneutical key becomes a serious threat of misinterpretation, if for no other reason than, as Wittgenstein would put it, the fact that the distinction between actions and states is not always clear-cut and transculturally universal. In the *Odyssey* passage, it is doubtful that Nausicaa should be seen as a subject intentionally directing her desire towards an object; rather, she is presented as a toy in the hands of Athena,

⁴ Winkler 1990, especially 45–70; Keuls 1985; Cohen 1991. See also Fisher 1998; Cartledge 1998.

⁵ See especially Bagemihl 1999.

⁶ Bassi 1998:124–133.

who made her experience a specific state of mind.⁷

In the orderly world of the epics, directed by the external voice of the poet, *deus ex machina* resolves the problem of human agency. In the real world, the situation is rather more complex. As Thomas Hubbard (1998:71) puts it, ‘those who have actually been in love with attractive men or women twenty years younger than themselves know where the true power in the relationship resides’. In other words, in a stereotypical situation of erotic pursuit, as known from ancient literature and iconography, although an asymmetry of roles is usually taken for granted (as it is, for example, between Zeus and Ganymede), a particular kind of reversal is often referred to or at least presupposed: being desired could mean control over the person who desires.⁸ Already Homer made Hera manipulate her husband by means of erotic attraction (*Il.* 14. 153–351). Even more relevant is the frustration expressed by Alcibiades in Plato’s *Symposium*, where Socrates is said to be exceptional, as he had not lost control over himself in the presence of the attractive and willing youth (216c–219c).

The critical opposition

Hubbard’s influential article, *Popular perceptions of elitist homosexuality in classical Athens* (1998), has become a cornerstone in the opposition to the more dogmatic followers of the Dover-Foucault paradigm. Read as polemical against the binary ‘active equals good/ passive equals bad’, it appears as an invaluable voice of common sense. It should, however, be noted that the author went too far in the opposite direction in arguing that lower- and middleclass Athenians regarded pederasty as something foreign and reserved for the elites, and that the stronger the class tension, the less commoners sympathised with lovers of boys and their beloveds.⁹

Hubbard was subsequently criticised, most notably by Andrew Lear (2015) and Julia Shapiro (2015). Both scholars concur with Hubbard’s claim that homoerotic sex was never seen by Greeks as unquestionably desirable and always good (which no scholar in fact ever doubted), and that its various facets were

⁷ See also Davidson 2007:101–105 for further examples (some quite entertaining) of misapplication of the phallogocentric principle in scholarly works from the 1990s.

⁸ See, e.g., Lear 2015:121–122.

⁹ Hubbard maintains his position with only minor modifications in subsequent publications; cf. 2014; 2003:86–88. Although not turned into a dogma similar to the phallogocentric principle, its reception among scholars was generally warm even if not always enthusiastic; see Davidson 2007:446–465; Robson 2013:51; Skinner 2014:146–154; Lear 2014:113. On the sharp distinction between popular and elitist perceptions of sexuality see, e.g., Sissa 1999:156–158; Todd 2007:344; for the opposite view, Shapiro 2015; Bednarek 2017.

subject to debate. The ancients who engaged in the discussion were neither for nor against homosexuality as such, and the distinction between enthusiasts and critics does not translate to any pro- or anti-elitist standing. As Shapiro (2015:205) concludes,

Every passage discussed here can plausibly be interpreted as criticising not pederasty *per se*, but pederasty performed badly by one or other partner in the relationship. Anti-elite invective took the form not of repudiation of pederasty, but of accusations that aristocrats failed to live up to the rules of legitimate eros.

In what follows, I would like to contribute to the ongoing discussion by trying to provide an answer to the question why protocols of erotic conduct attested to in Athenian texts are so evasive that it is mostly difficult to determine (1) whether their authors praise or criticise something and (2) what exactly the object of their attention is. This will require a closer look at the aspect of gift-giving in homoerotic pursuits, which happens to be no less ambiguous than any other aspect of homoerotic experience.

Aristophanes' Plutus

A particularly illuminating point of departure for this inquiry is provided by a dialogue in Aristophanes' *Plutus* (149–159), the complexity of which seems to have been underestimated by scholars:

XP. Καὶ τὰς γ' ἑταίρας φασὶ τὰς Κορινθίας,
ὅταν μὲν αὐτάς τις πένης πειρῶν τύχη,
οὐδὲ προσέχειν τὸν νοῦν, ἔὰν δὲ πλούσιος,
τὸν προκτὸν αὐτάς εὐθὺς ὡς τοῦτον τρέπειν.
KA. Καὶ τοὺς γε παῖδάς φασὶ ταῦτ' οὗτο δρᾶν
οὐ τῶν ἔραστῶν, ἀλλὰ τὰργυρίου χάριν.
XP. Οὐ τοὺς γε χρηστοὺς, ἀλλὰ τοὺς πόρνονους· ἐπεὶ
αἰτοῦσιν οὐκ ἀργύριον οἱ χρηστοί.
KA. Τί δαί;
XP. Ὁ μὲν ἵππον ἀγαθόν, ὃ δὲ κύνας θηρευτικάς.
KA. Αἰσχυρόμενοι γὰρ ἀργύριον αἰτεῖν ἴσως
ὄνοματι περιπέττουσι τὴν μοχθηρίαν.

CHREMYLUS. They say that the Corinthian whores pay no heed, whenever a poor man happens to approach them, but if a rich man does so, they wiggle their ass in his direction right away.

CARION. And they say that boys do the same thing, not for the sake of

lovers, but for money.

CHR. Not the good and noble boys, surely, but the male whores. For the good and noble ones don't ask for money.

CA. What then?

CHR. One wants a good horse, another asks for hunting dogs.

CA. Perhaps because they are ashamed to ask for money, they cover their baseness with pretence.

Hubbard, who provides the translation above as an illustration of his point, notes (1998:52):

The boys involved in pederastic relations are also the object of comic opprobrium. In *Plutus*, the powers of the god Wealth are illustrated by the behavior of prostitutes, both, male and female... The practice of giving and receiving pederastic courtship gifts, so richly illustrated on Athenian vases,¹⁰ is here regarded as no different from outright male prostitution.¹¹

The comic passage evidently contains bitter criticism of what probably was the social reality. Yet, something more than what Hubbard saw can be read between the lines, since the division of roles between Chremylus and Carion is hardly a coincidence: it is the latter, a cynical slave and an *enfant terrible*,¹² who utters the punchline (159) that traditional gifts may be equated with money. The passage's overall structure suggests that this comic climax, although quite inevitable, was meant to convey an unexpected idea. Thus, it presupposes a system of values in which Carion's observation was to be understood as an aberration from the norm as stated by Chremylus (155–156): unlike prostitutes, good boys are not supposed to take money and it is disturbing when sometimes they do just that. The idea is in fact presupposed by the complaint of Carion (153–154) that boys do what they do, *not for the sake of lovers, but for money*, which quite clearly indicates that boys were expected to do the contrary, namely, to care for their lovers rather than for financial gratification.

The bitter humour of the passage cannot be properly understood unless seen in the context of the play, which happens to be all about the power of money that endangers traditional values. The topic was by no means the invention of Aristophanes: the issue was also raised a decade previously by Plato in the

¹⁰ On iconography of homoerotic courtship, see most notably: Beazley 1947; Lear and Cantarella 2008.

¹¹ On the passage see also Dover 1978:145–146; Ormand 2009:73–74; and Shapiro 2015:192–193.

¹² On the construction of Carion as an almost stock character, see Norwood 1931:271–272; Ehrenberg 1951:173; Olson 1989:193–199; Dillon 2004:144; Akrigg 2013:111–123.

Euthyphro (especially 14a–15b),¹³ where the religious specialist was inquired by Socrates about the meaning of sacrifices and gifts to the gods: do immortals need the things we offer them? The answer was obviously negative, but even so, traditional piety was impossible without material tokens of reverence or gratitude towards immortals.¹⁴ Socrates' question does not mean that the dialogue criticises these forms of worship; what is rather at stake, is their correct interpretation, which none of the speakers incidentally manages to provide. This suggests that Plato and his contemporaries were clearly aware of the paradoxes of reciprocity based on gift exchange, the rules of which were not codified in any culture until the work of Mauss (1925), Malinowski ([1922] 1932), and Polanyi (1944). They were certainly never made explicit by the ancient Greeks. According to anthropologists, traditional gift exchange is all about the relationship between people or between them and their gods, and not about the goods exchanged. This is why it differs from trade. Paradoxically, none of the actors involved in an exchange should admit that he or she does not care for the objects as such. However contemporary analogies may mislead, this 'common misrecognition' (Bourdieu 1977:5–6 *et sparsim*) finds a parallel in contemporary behaviour: when someone receives a present, it is polite to pretend to like it (no matter how tacky) for sake of the relationship with the person who gives it.

This may partially explain why the Greeks were unable to describe the dynamics of gift exchange but were very sensitive to it at the same time:¹⁵ they could see as well as any anthropologist how it worked and that it was little more than a self-conscious game, the rules of which were left unmentioned and at which the *hetairai* were the Grandmasters. Similarly, many Greeks of the archaic and classical period were unquestionably masters of language games, which they played in a very conscious way. Nevertheless, their attempts to codify its abstract rules (grammar) brought rather poor results (cf. Arist. *Poet.* 1456b–1458a). After all, to speak and to understand a language is not the same as being able to speak *about* a language. By the same token, understanding a cultural code does not entail being able to describe it.

Perhaps due to the fiction thus created, even theorists of gift-giving tend to

¹³ See also the comments of Bailly 2003:102–107; Chateau 2005:139–147.

¹⁴ Sacrificial ritual, at least of the Olympian type (Olympian vs. chthonian; see Scullion 1994), was evidently meant to produce the state of reciprocal χάρις (favour, goodwill) between human and gods in spite of the fact that the division of the sacrificial victim was outwardly uneven; see Van Baal 1976:161–178; von Reden 1998:266–269; Van Straten 2005:15–30; Hitch 2009:93–140; Parker 1998; 2011:136–137. It seems quite telling that the word χάρις is also one of the key terms describing conditions of idealized erotic exchange; see MacLachlan 1993, especially 56–72; on its comic use, Vetta 1980:68.

¹⁵ Thus Davidson 1997:123.

fall into the trap of defining it as a (*primitive*) form of economic exchange, as if it were a substitute for trade or barter in societies that have not developed (*as yet*) such practices.¹⁶ *Kula*, the most canonical example of ceremonial gift exchange on the Trobriand Islands and described in all handbooks of cultural anthropology, is illuminating in this context. It consists of giving and accepting necklaces and bracelets which are highly charged with symbolic value and cannot be exchanged for goods such as food, tools, or any raw material. Thus, it stands markedly outside of economic exchange. Barter, in Trobriand called *gimwali*, takes place alongside *kula* but is distinct from it.¹⁷

Unfortunately for us, Euthyphro, Plato, and some of their contemporaries, the distinction between non-economic gift-giving and the various forms of economic exchange may be less obvious than in the case of *kula*. Among other factors, the nature of the objects exchanged tends to blur the distinction. When, say, a cauldron can be given as a present, but can also be sold or exchanged for some other object or even a service, the difference between these modalities lies in the intention of the parties involved.¹⁸ Objects exchanged in the Homeric epics, however expensive or rare, belong to the category of commonly used items, with additional value resulting from their origins (Hephaestus' products) or their long history of transmission between famous human owners. If no one doubts that their exchange has more to do with symbolic capital than their economic value, it is because the omniscient narrator does not leave much room for speculation.¹⁹ Outside of the epics, however, the mere observation that an object had limited value in terms of currency, could call into question the social meaning of the exchange. This is why it became a comic common place that the thigh bones

¹⁶ The problem has been recently addressed, among others by Hénaff, who in an essay, 'Is there such a thing as gift economy?' (2014), not unexpectedly gives a negative answer to the question he asks in the title. See also Hénaff 2013 and various chapters in Carlà and Gori (eds.) 2014.

¹⁷ Malinowski 1932:96: 'Often, when criticising an incorrect, too hasty, or indecorous procedure of *Kula*, they will say: "He conducts his *Kula* as if it were *gimwali*"'; see also Malinowski 1932:189–191; 362–364; Hénaff 2014:74.

¹⁸ Ideally, some time should lapse between gift and counter-gift, which makes it different from barter, as it increases the risk that the receiving party will fail to reciprocate the gesture and makes it all a matter of mutual trust (Bourdieu 1977:171; see also Gouldner 1960:174–175; Favole 2010:67–72). This is not, however, (1) always true in traditional gift exchange, since sometimes the action of a giving party is reciprocated immediately (e.g. *Il.* 6.232–6). At the same time, (2) many contractual obligations involve a noticeable time lapse between payment and rendition of a service or delivery of goods, which means that this aspect, although important, is not an acid test.

¹⁹ On gift-exchange in Homer, see Finley 1978:74–73; Donlan 1981–82:1989, Van Wees 1992:228–237. On its problematization in ancient Greece after Homer, see Seaford 1994: *passim*, 2004: *passim* and von Reden 1998:255–278.

and/or backbones²⁰ offered to the gods were totally useless to them and to mortals. There is, after all, something suspicious about buying blessings with something only fit for a dog. The practice became funny or disturbing, however, only when presented explicitly in such terms.²¹ In a similar way, it could be funny that the bodies of attractive boys were exchanged for hunting dogs, fighting cocks, hares, strigils, or other objects, but the humour arises from the fact that such a view was obviously wrong even though it may appear logical: what was really reciprocated was not the gift in its materiality.

Thus, the passage in the *Plutus* actually indicates that Aristophanes and his audience were very much aware of the protocols of pederastic courtship; what was exploited for comic purposes was the misinterpretation of its nuances. Hubbard mistakenly took this distorted view of pederasty as the message of the passage.

Aeschines: Prostitutes vs. good boys

A similar lack of explicitly described categories and distinctions nonetheless intuitively perceived by a community, may be why Aeschines' speech *Against Timarchus* has caused such controversy among scholars.²² The speaker was clearly at pains to demonstrate the radical clash between how Timarchus and his sponsors allegedly behaved, and the acceptable norms for behaviour by noble boys and their lovers. According to Aeschines, his opponent squandered his patrimony and then rendered sexual services to other men in exchange for luxury goods. This was clearly considered to be outrageous. Curiously enough, when he explains that his condemnation of this form of prostitution by no means meant the condemnation of pederasty as such, he actually fails to indicate the difference between the two categories apart from some very generic notions expressed in terms that an unfriendly audience may have regarded to be meaningless slogans (Aesch. 1. 159: χωρίς μὲν τοὺς διὰ σωφροσύνην ἐρωμένους, χωρίς δὲ τοὺς εἰς ἑαυτοῦς ἐξαμαρτάνοντας). Instead of clear markers for proper and improper behaviour, he lists some boys who had good reputations even though loved by many, and others who were notorious for their erotic misconduct (Aesch. 1. 157–8). This indicates that the assumed distinction was deeply rooted in the Athenian culture and easily recognised when specific examples were given. At the same time, no acid test was known for distinguishing between an acceptable relationship and an unacceptable one. Why? It calls for another distinction.

²⁰ On the identification of the god's share burnt on altars, see Van Straten 1995:118–143; Berthiaume 2005:241–251; Ekroth 2009:125–151.

²¹ Redfield 2012:176–178.

²² See especially Fisher 2001, with further bibliography.

True and fictive friends

David Konstan (2013) recently analyzed the paradoxical way in which gift-giving in erotic relationships with female courtesans (*hetairai*) is described in New Comedy and its Roman adaptations. Curiously enough, even though the language used by the poets has much in common with traditional gift-giving, this seems to be only a façade behind which a contractual exchange of services for goods takes place.²³ This could not be otherwise, given that comic (and probably real-life) *hetairai* lived on things euphemistically called *presents* (*dōra*), the monetary value of which was essential to the woman's livelihood.²⁴ This innocent linguistic shift permitted them to pretend entering into a reciprocal relationship other than economic exchange with their clients.²⁵ It resembled a love relationship, based on mutual attraction, where gift-giving is for cementing the bond rather than a contractual agreement to pay in money or kind for sex. Yet, *hetairai* occasionally dropped the pretence for comic purposes to let the audience know that this charade was merely a cover for their real intentions to extorting as much from their clients as they could; this is what Marshal Sahlins (1972) called *negative reciprocity*.²⁶

It may be no coincidence that the volume in which Konstan's study appears also contains an essay in which Zeba Crook (2013) describes another, yet similar manipulation. Crook introduces the notions of *fictive friends* and *fictive gifts* in patron-client relationships (which connote a commercial aspect), where clients receive rewards for services to their patrons, respectively. What makes a friendship *fictive* is the unequal status of the parties involved, with one to a large degree dependent on the generosity (another euphemism) of the other. Gifts are called *fictive* because unlike *true* gifts they cannot be reciprocated by counter-gifts, due to the limited resources of the receiving party. A failure to reciprocate a gift causes a state of imbalance similar to a debt, which in the case of a *fictive*

²³ A good example is provided by Ter. *Eun.* 162–182, with Konstan's (2013:100–101) exegesis.

²⁴ It should be noted that even the word *ἑταῖρα* (companion) may be taken as originating from a euphemism. See especially Cohen 2015:37, *pace* Kurke 1999:183. In Roman comedy, *hetairai* were called *amicae* (e.g., Plaut. *As.* 83); in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (3.11.4) Theodote calls φίλοι men whose benefactions paid her living expenses. See also Davidson 1997:121.

²⁵ Perhaps the best example is provided in Xen. *Mem.* 3.11, in which Socrates converses with Theodote, a well-off woman who admits that she possesses no other livelihood than her *friends* (*philoî*). It is telling that the passage does not contain any explicit references to payment, prices, or anything that could evoke commercial exchange. Even the word *hetaira* does not appear, though there can be no doubt that this was Theodote's trade; see Davidson 1997:120–121.

²⁶ See especially Davidson 1997:120–127; Kurke 1999:176–219; Cohen 2015 and 2006.

friendship gives rise to a relationship of patronage.

As Paul Millet observes in an already classic essay, the elements indicative of a patron/client relationship are:²⁷

an exchange of goods and/or services that is reciprocal; (ii) the relationship must be a personal one, and of some duration; (iii) the relationship must be asymmetrical, inasmuch as the two parties are of unequal status, offering each other different sorts of goods and services. To these elements I would tentatively add a fourth, namely the relationship was conducted along lines largely determined by the party of superior status. It is this that opens up the way for the exploitation...

Millet's last point makes obvious why becoming someone's client could be undesirable despite its potential advantages. It also makes perfect sense that in an agonistic culture with a strong component of shame, it was often better for all parties to downplay that a relationship was that of patronage.²⁸ This called for strategies described by Crook as *fictive friendship* and *fictive gifting*.

The similarities between *hetairai* and *fictive friends* are remarkable. In both cases someone with fewer resources enters a reciprocal relationship with a better-off person with the intention to obtain material support, on which his or her well-being or even survival depends. In both cases, the asymmetry of the relationship is obvious, but both parties nevertheless try to maintain a fiction of a more balanced reciprocity. Unlike in cases of *true* gift-giving, it is all about the goods/services exchanged; the personal bond, though stressed and exaggerated by both, plays a secondary role.

Back to Timarchus

On the assumption that male and female prostitution operated in similar ways, it becomes clear that the distinction between what Timarchus was accused of and what more noble boys did, might have been as difficult to describe as it was easy to grasp intuitively. The former kind of relationship was modelled on the latter and both were spoken of in similar terms. Apparently, both decent lovers and prostitutes accepted what was called *gifts* (*dōra*). The difference was that prostitutes were supposed to surrender their bodies in exchange for commodities for the sake of the commodities, whereas the nobler boys entered a complex play of mutual obligations of which giving and receiving gifts might have been an

²⁷ Millet 1989:16. The definition is based on a previous study by Garnsey and Saller 1987:148–159 on Roman society. On Greek patronage and its avoidance, see also Domingo Gygas 2013:45–60; 2016: esp. 35–36.

²⁸ See, e.g., Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1124b; Cic. *Off.* 2.69.

important, though not an exclusive part. What made the situation more difficult to analyse for Aeschines and his contemporaries is that just like in a ceremonial gift exchange, the increase of symbolic capital for both parties involved in a courtship depended on the value of the objects exchanged. Therefore, it seems natural that the more expensive gifts a boy received, the more he cared to make common knowledge of it, since his prestige was somehow proportional to it. The less accessible a boy was, the nobler he seemed and the more he was desired; still, the whole idea of courtship presupposes the possibility of yielding results. This means that at least some, if not most of the so-called good boys would enter into a reciprocal relationship with their lovers.²⁹ Vase paintings depicting paederastic gift-giving suggest an obvious link between accepting someone's gift and ceding to his desire.³⁰ At any rate, it is not difficult to imagine that, when an attractive boy was seen walking a new hunting dog or riding a new horse, few would doubt where it came from.³¹

Yet, it seems that many boys played this ambiguous game despite the risk of being taken as less noble than they were. Why? Perhaps because the game was not actually as risky as scholarly reconstructions would make it seem. Unfortunately, this calls for more nuanced examinations of each particular situation than scholars may afford due to the fragmentary state of our sources. Applicable here are not analytical terms of any kind, but rather culturally specific common-sense categories,³² that may differ from our own. A contemporary parallel may be illuminating. In most Western cultures, partners who enter into a long-term sexual relationship for the sake of material gain are the object of opprobrium, perhaps even more severely than straightforward prostitution. At the same time, relationships deemed perfectly acceptable and desirable do not have to be symmetrical in terms of the financial status of the partners. This means that whether or not a relationship is materially advantageous for one of the parties is not decisive for its acceptability: what really counts is not material advantage, but whether this is the motivation for someone's choice of partner. And even though social actors may have limited insight into other people's true motivations, they seldom seem to doubt whether someone's relationship is inspired by affection or whether there is something ambiguous about it. Similarly, relatives, friends, and neighbours of an ancient *eromenos* and his *erastes* might have simply known

²⁹ Boehringer and Caciagli 2015:43–45.

³⁰ For the iconography, see especially Lear and Cantarella 2008:46–64.

³¹ On the politics of reputation, see Cohen 1991: *passim*; 1995: *passim*; McClure 1999:112–157, esp.116–119. On a particular example of the use of hearsay and rumour in order to injure one's reputation provided by the Aeschines' speech against Timarchus, see Harris 1995:101–106.

³² Geertz 1973:111.

whether the two partners displayed their noble intentions in a convincing way or if the boy happened to be too *easy*, for example because he too readily accepted gifts, or from too many lovers at the same time.

Final remarks

We know of terms of reproach or verbal abuse, such as *euryproktos* (e.g., Ar. *Nub.* 1083; *wide arse*), *chaunoproktos* (e.g., Ar. *Ach.* 103; *gaping arse*), or *lakkoproktos* (e.g., Ar. *Nub.* 1330; *cistern-arse*) which indicate a strong conceptual link between moral depravity and being penetrated (in a literal or figurative sense).³³ From within the phallogocentric paradigm, the link seems perfectly natural: those penetrated are to be despised, whereas those who penetrate thereby prove their manliness. To Thomas Hubbard the link does not pose a serious interpretive problem either, even when rejecting the phallogocentric principle: it is not so much anal penetration itself as it is homosexuality³⁴ in general that was frowned upon by middle- and lower-class Athenians: a homosexual could be called an *euryproktos* regardless of the role assumed in the sexual act; sexual roles were interchangeable.

Unfortunately, things are never that simple. Some boys believed or suspected to have taken a passive role were still regarded to be noble, others not. Technical matters, like a distinction between anal and intercrural penetration, could hardly have been decisive for one's public image, given that sexual acts were in the main confined to intimate spaces.³⁵ Apparently, Greeks did not think of males as either *virgins* or having been penetrated at least once. Instead, some boys were regarded as noble and others as *easy* (with probably a whole spectrum in between). Reputation was formed not on the basis of some technical aspect of sexual practice but on general conduct, willingness, and the ability to play the courtship game according to accepted rules: to reject and accept gifts with dignity, to show gratitude, and to reciprocate in such a way that it would not be confused with payment and trade. The contemporaries of Aristophanes and Aeschines may have not codified the rules of good behaviour (which culture

³³ For a thorough study of the ramifications of the moral and political sense of these terms of abuse, see Worman 2015:208–230; also Henderson 1991:110; Rademaker 2003:114–125; Ormand 2009:61–63.

³⁴ Unlike many other scholars, Hubbard uses the term *homosexuality* rather than, e.g., *homoeroticism*.

³⁵ Admittedly, it is not impossible that ancient Greeks engaged in erotic practices while being witnessed, as might be deduced from graphic vase depictions of orgies; see especially Hubbard 2022:43–70. It must remain moot whether such depictions reflect reality rather than phantasies tailored for the Etruscan market; see, e.g., Sutton 1992:8.

actually does?),³⁶ but were nonetheless very sensitive to all aspects of misconduct and breaking the unspecified code. What is more, in spite of their respective comic and rhetoric biases, Aristophanes and Aeschines can be taken as credible witnesses to the fact that even the most basic uses of the body, such as how one sat or walked, could become markers of debauchery.³⁷ This is hardly surprising: contemporary societies are equally alert to signs of sexually provocative behaviour, even if it is not always easy to tell which are meaningful and in what way.

Although the gradual growth of a money-based economy was apparently perceived as threatening to traditional values and reciprocal relationships, that does not necessarily make it responsible for the demise of Greek homoeroticism during the classical period.³⁸ A commodification of love, after all, does not have to result from the use of a currency. It is simply easier to think of in categories of money because, unlike other goods, money is the only material produced primarily for the purpose of trade exchange. Thus, it easily becomes a symbol of venal love, the existence of which no doubt predates it. Even more striking is that there seems to be no good reason to think that Greek homoeroticism, also in its noblest, traditional form, underwent any kind of crisis in the 5th and 4th centuries. On the contrary, the concern shown by Aristophanes, Aeschines, and Plato seems to indicate that by the later classical period its protocols were still commonly recognized, and its purity was clearly a matter of concern, indications of how seriously it was regarded. Thus, being a passive partner in a homoerotic relationship could be either ennobling or debasing, depending on who did it with whom and in what circumstances.

Given that the opposition between noble and ignoble love was a matter of very subtle nuances, it should not be surprising that poets and forensic speakers manipulated these categories in ways that suited their comic or rhetorical agenda.³⁹ This certainly makes the whole picture fuzzy, but should at any rate not

³⁶ Malinowski 1926:13, on a different though similar context, observes: ‘No native, however intelligent, can formulate this state of affairs in a general abstract manner, or present it as a sociological theory, yet everyone is well aware of its existence and in each concrete case he can foresee the consequences’.

³⁷ Aeschin. *Or.* 3.189 states that, just like an athlete may be recognized by his bodily vigour, so a prostitute is betrayed by his shameful ways. Even though tempting to dismiss this statement as unmotivated apart from the speaker’s hostile attitude, it obviously sounded reasonable to an Athenian audience. The *agōn* between Good and Bad Argument in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (961–999) contains a whole catalogue of gestures thought of as characteristic for demure and shameless boys.

³⁸ For the diachrony of homoeroticism in ancient Greece, see Lear 2015:115–136, with further bibliography.

³⁹ Examples of allegations of prostitution in surviving speeches abound, as indicated by

be taken as evidence of a generally hostile view of homoerotic love. After all, a man's grumbling about his female partner's erotic misconduct should not be understood as an index of existence of a common prejudice against heterosexuality.

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