

**ANCIENT HOMOPHOBIA:  
PREJUDICES AGAINST HOMOSEXUALITY IN CLASSICAL  
ATHENS<sup>1</sup>.**

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Artigo recebido a 25-04-2016 e aprovado a 27-10-2016

**Abstract**

The following paper discusses the problem of the alleged prejudices of the Athenian masses against homosexuality in the second half of the fifth century BC. It has been suggested that the unsympathetic perception of pederasty might have been as a result of the generally unfriendly attitudes of the so-called common people towards behaviours associated with the social elite. In what follows, I argue that there is no reason to think that homosexual desires and behaviours were limited to the upper classes; prejudices against homosexuality can hardly be taken, therefore, as a result of populist sentiments. Moreover, it seems that few or no phenomena recorded in our sources relevant to classical Athens can really be associated with homophobia as such.

**Keywords:** Homosexuality; Pederasty; Greece; Aristophanes; Class struggle; Democracy

At the beginning of my PhD studies, as a bearded young man of post-ephebic age, while hitch-hiking in Sicily I experienced what is called by classical scholars, “homoerotic courtship”.<sup>2</sup> The *erastes* happened to be a corpulent peasant, who spoke Italian with a strong Sicilian accent and drove a rusty Fiat littered with various tools, vegetable boxes and a basket

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<sup>1</sup> The following article has been written thanks to generous support of National Science Centre in Poland [grant number UMO-2013/09/B/HS2/01208]; and The Hardt Foundation for the Study of Classical Antiquity.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Lear, Cantarella 2008: 38-62.

of eggs. After a brief conversation about everyday matters, such as my destination and the purpose of my journey, the driver started revealing his intentions, asking if all the young men in my country were as beautiful as me. The hitch-hiker's etiquette requires turning all potentially abusive words from the driver into a joke so, without taking offence, I tried to change the subject. The question that followed was very much like Beazley's "up and down" iconographic type.<sup>3</sup> The driver asked if my genitals were also beautiful. Light-heartedly I explained that I found it difficult to say, since I was not gay. "Neither am I", said the driver and asked me to show him my genitals. In return he would show me his. When I started explaining that there must have been some misunderstanding, he offered me sex. Once again, I said that I was not gay and once again the driver assured me that he was not gay either. Perplexed as I was, I tried to explain my position, saying that I had a girlfriend. "But she's not here", said the *erastes*. "She's not", I said. "So she's not going to find out", he concluded.

This ethnographic account is obviously not meant to show that some survivals of Doric culture are still present in Sicily. I am also not intending to explain the phenomenon in terms of a unitary Mediterranean culture.<sup>4</sup> Its function here is to corroborate the constructivist stance, according to which, terms such as "gay", "homosexual", and "heterosexual" are but products of a specific culture and, as such, they may be highly misleading when applied to any phenomena beyond their natural habitat. In the particular case described above, the Sicilian driver acted as if he was what I would call homosexual. Yet, on the other hand, not only did he deny being gay, but he also showed no understanding of my reservations when I tried to be more explicit in order to make sure that it was not all about misinterpretation of words. This is why I found Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*<sup>5</sup> illuminating. As the scholar explains, the culture in which I grew up is quite unique in distinguishing between what are called "sexual orientations" (however, classification is much more rigid than the word "orientation" might suggest). Within this system, one must be either "heterosexual" or "homosexual" which means that a person rejects sexual contacts with partners of the same or other sex, respectively. It is true that there is always the option of being "bisexual", but it presupposes that all people who do not define themselves

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<sup>3</sup> Beazley 1947: 198-223.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Davidson 2008: 132-134.

<sup>5</sup> Halperin 1990.

as belonging to this category are confined to choice of partners of a specific sex. Thus, it is the bias of my cultural background that makes it potentially more difficult for me to cope with people without similar preconceptions.

Recent years have seen severe criticism of Halperin's work.<sup>6</sup> It has been argued that the phallogocentric principle coined by Dover and Foucault<sup>7</sup>, and presented by Halperin as the only force at work within the dynamics of Greek choice of sexual partners, is no more than a product of some modern preconceptions. According to this alleged rule of phallogocentrism, ancient Greeks cared very little for the gender of their sexual objects. What counted instead was to assume the active role/to penetrate. Being passive/penetrated, according to this principle, meant always ceding the position of power to the dominating partner. Therefore, all people who happened to be on the wrong end of the phallus shared the same fate of the politically and socially underprivileged, belonging to the vast category of non-real-male-adult-citizens which included women, boys, slaves, foreigners, male prostitutes, and pathics.<sup>8</sup>

In his polemics against such a view, Davidson<sup>9</sup> has shown that the notorious word *kinaidos* did not refer simply to males known to assume the passive role. Apparently what was essential for *kinaideia* was excessive lust and debauchery rather than any mere technical aspect of sexual activity. This valuable reassessment has unfortunately led scholars to taking positions which contrast a little too sharply with the ideas of Halperin. Hubbard, in his influential article, *Popular Perceptions of Elite Homosexuality in Classical Athens*,<sup>10</sup> suggested that the negative picture of homoerotic practices – where it is negative – has nothing to do with disgust for those being penetrated, but derives from the preconceptions of democratic circles against the elitist institution of more or less ritualised pederasty. The scholar also sustains this view in his chapter of the *Blackwell Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*.<sup>11</sup> A similar perspective has been recently favoured also by Robson.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Especially Davidson 1997: 167-182, 2008; Hubbard 1998; Vattuone 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Dover 1978; Foucault 1985.

<sup>8</sup> See also Keuls 1985: passim; Winkler 1990: 45-70. For some further examples of the misuse of the phallogocentric principle, see Davidson 2007: 101-105.

<sup>9</sup> Davidson 1997: 167-182.

<sup>10</sup> Hubbard 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Hubbard 2014. See also Hubbard 2003: 86-88.

<sup>12</sup> Although Robson (2013: 51) hedges this statement (“Hubbard might be said to overstate his case”), he goes on to say, “the overarching thesis nevertheless has the potential to be illuminating.”

Opposition has been relatively mild. For example, Lear<sup>13</sup> could not have been more diplomatic when saying, “In short, Aristophanes mocks elite pederasty, but without the intense bitterness he deploys on other topics”. More notably, Davidson in his more recent book<sup>14</sup> takes a stance which only *prima facie* seems to be distant from that of Hubbard. Within his reconstruction, the situation which was criticised by Athenians from the middle of the fifth century onwards was the commodification of elitist love which overlapped with commodification of political power. Thus, according to Davidson, venal homosexual love was perceived by the masses as threatening traditional ways of governing the city based on non-venal aristocratic loyalty. Although there is certainly much truth in it, Davidson does little justice to the fact that same sex practices might not have been confined to the higher classes and, what follows from this, that the popular perception of *eros paidikos* was not necessarily conditioned entirely, or even mostly, by preconceptions against political elites.

This indicates that the phallogocentric principle may soon be replaced in the works of some of the more dogmatic followers of scholarly fashions by the idea of class prejudices as the main or the only force shaping sexual inclinations, at least in classical Athens. In what follows, I would like to propose some amendments to this model, suggesting that, as always happens, the reality seems to be much more complex than can be described in the simple terms of a single principle.

It should be noted that the idea of democratic resistance against “aristocratic homosexuality” presupposes two considerations. First of all, something must be perceived (or constructed) as homosexuality. Secondly it must be recognised (or imagined) as being typical of the upper class.

As for the first statement, there are some problematic nuances. It is true that as early as the works of Plato, one comes across the explicitly expressed idea of “inclinations” towards partners of the same or the other

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<sup>13</sup> Lear 2014: 113. In his most recent publication on the subject matter, Lear (2015: 129) goes a little further, suggesting that Hubbard’s idea of class prejudice as central to the perception of pederasty in classical Athens might have been a little too far-fetched. Fisher (2001: 26, n. 83) rightly, albeit only passingly in a footnote, states that Hubbard’s views are misleadingly over-simple (it should be noted, however, that his brief survey of the history of Greek homosexuality (25-36) seems extremely well balanced and reasonable). Important work has been done by Vattuone (2004: 127-154 et passim), although his lucid book remains marginalised by Anglophone authors, perhaps because of its dismissive tone.

<sup>14</sup> Davidson 2008: especially 446-465.

sex. According to the myth made up by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*,<sup>15</sup> all human beings are but halves of primordial creatures, constantly looking for their other halves. Thus, our inclinations towards partners of the same or other sex depend on our original constitution. Yet it is a separate question as to whether, in real life, these inclinations were constructed in the way that modern "sexual orientation" operates. Most probably the answer to that question must be negative. There is very little to show that a Greek male who "liked boys" avoided sexual contact with women. Quite the contrary: at least as far as having a wife and children indicates that a man is not exclusively homosexual, lots of examples of bisexual *paiderastai* may be quoted, including such figures as Socrates, Alcibiades and Sophocles.<sup>16</sup> Even more telling seems to be the alleged biography of Timarchus. In his speech against this figure, Aischines used all devices to show his victim in the most unfavourable light, and, yet, he stated that the man who indulged himself in engaging in all types of homosexual activities used to spend his money on female prostitutes (1. 42). Although this seems to be one of many stereotypical allegations and, as such, does not need to be taken very seriously, it is noteworthy that Aischines did not regard heterosexual affairs as inconsistent with homosexual ones.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> 189c-193d.

<sup>16</sup> Very few examples of men who loved other men and avoided relationships with women may be quoted; most notably the tragic poet Agathon is the exception which confirms the rule. Aristophanic jokes (Th. 29-268) at his expense make it clear that his attitude, although tolerated, was considered rather strange.

<sup>17</sup> Although Davidson in his crusade against the idea of "sexual orientation" as a modern construct (2007: 123-166) makes many valuable observations, he fails to notice that Halperin, while turning attention to the fact that the term "homosexuality" has a very brief history (thus *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*) does not actually mean that the coinage of the word brought into existence the phenomenon to which it referred, himself claims the opposite (Halperin 1990: 17: "It is not exactly my intention to argue that homosexuality, as we commonly understand it today, didn't exist before 1892. How, indeed, could it have failed to exist?"). It should be rather taken as a symbol of a cultural climate of a period in which a disturbing phenomenon was felt to deserve its own name. As long as it is really all about preferences conceived in the etymological sense of the word, I see no reason to disagree with Davidson that a form of predilection for partners of a specific gender might always have existed and probably did exist in ancient Greece. What is important for my argument and which seems to be immune to Davidson's polemic is that the idea of exclusivity immanent to modern concepts of sexual orientation was not necessarily widespread in the more distant past. According to this vision of orientation (to throw it into sharp relief), a modern homophobic person may claim that whereas a husband who betrays his wife with other women is simply immoral, one who does it with men is sick.

The other side of the coin is much more difficult to decipher. Do we know about any lovers of women who never engaged in homosexual acts or did it only under extremely unusual circumstances? As far as I can tell, there seem to be no data to that effect, at least from the classical period. What is more, we actually know very little about men who preferred women.<sup>18</sup> Certainly this silence does not need to mean very much. Fowler<sup>19</sup> goes as far as stating that the pleasure of having sex with women and especially with one's wife is not very well attested in classical sources simply because it was generally taken for granted.<sup>20</sup> Only a potential threat of being deprived of it could cause an emotional response, such as that of the men affected by the bed-strike of women in Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*. The fact that homosexual love and extramarital affairs are much more widely represented in literature and art may actually indicate that Greek authors, artists and their audience found them more interesting simply because they were less common in real life.

Yet there is nothing to indicate that a preference for women, like the modern western concept of "heterosexuality", presupposed exclusivity. This, as has been noted above, is one of the more important points in the work of Halperin,<sup>21</sup> which will probably always remain open to serious doubts resulting from the overall philosophical and political stance of individuals approaching the subject matter. As Boswell<sup>22</sup> puts it, to a large extent, it is a matter of taking either a „nominalist" or a „realist" position in the discussion of sexual matters. The latter is based on the assumption that, throughout the history of human species, the central factor in the choice of sexual partners has always been that of sameness or otherness of their biological sex. The nominalists, on the other hand, assume that this principle became central to western civilisation only at some point of its history (most probably in the nineteenth century), subsequently becoming a subject for the culturally

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<sup>18</sup> In Plato's *Symposium* (191d), Aristophanes mentions the category of ἄνδρες φιλογύναικες only passingly, stating that lots of them are adulterers. Although this clearly negative picture of heterosexuals most probably does not represent what Aristophanes or Plato really thought of men who preferred women, being merely an effect of particular focalisation, it seems telling that this sexual orientation is dismissed as simply uninteresting.

<sup>19</sup> Fowler 1996.

<sup>20</sup> As one of the reviewers of this paper pointed out, the sexual attraction of women is also presupposed by many outwardly misogynistic texts, such as Semonides fr. 7, or the myth of Pandora (Hes. *Op.* 54-105). Although their authors concentrate on the alleged vices of women, the female depicted in them happen to be dangerous only thanks to their ability to attract men.

<sup>21</sup> Halperin 1990: 15-18.

<sup>22</sup> Boswell 1982-3.

determined study of other cultures. In the absence of any decisive proofs in favour of the nominalist stance in the case of classical Greece, there are three pieces of evidence that corroborate it, at least to some degree.

First of all, from the structural point of view, one might expect a sort of symmetry between the construction of male to female and male to male love. Just as homosexual lust did not exclude heterosexual unions, heterosexuality was not necessarily exclusive. Thus, one may suspect that, in the absence of female partners, many Greek, predominantly heterosexual, males engaged in homosexual acts just as the notorious *paiderastai*, at least occasionally, went with females. Secondly, the absence of clear rules forbidding extramarital contacts makes it very likely that Greek men, at least occasionally, surrendered to various temptations at times of military service,<sup>23</sup> business travel, pilgrimage, public festivals, pasturing, etc. It should be noted that these activities were not limited to the representatives of the upper classes. A merchant ship, for example, needed a crew, which would be normally composed of less well-off citizens of this or that polis, and also slaves.<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, seeing that there was no insistence on male premarital chastity, what certainly favoured adventures which had nothing to do with marital love was the fact that Greek males grew up secluded from girls and they preferably did not marry before the age of thirty.<sup>25</sup> Cheap brothels<sup>26</sup> might have been experimental fields for pubescent boys who longed for new experiences. This, however, does not exclude other ways of accumulating sexual expertise, especially by those who had fewer resources or lived outside the cities. Although Theocritus's *Idylls* are but a poetic construct created by an elite author, they may very well reflect at least some stereotypes of rustic life, in which love between boys was commonplace,<sup>27</sup> comparable perhaps to smoking cigarettes behind the bike sheds at school today. Unless Greek boys had been told that contacts with males were wrong and somehow excluded heterosexual love and marriage, there seems to have been no good reason to abhor this kind of relationship or to strictly avoid it. Indeed, the only texts in which a particular kind of sexual contact between males seem to be implicitly dissuaded, are two

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<sup>23</sup> See especially Marrou 1955: 55-67.

<sup>24</sup> See Cartledge 1998: 64 with further bibliography.

<sup>25</sup> e.g., Glazebrook, Olson 2014: 70.

<sup>26</sup> On central regulations of the prices of sexual services, see Fisher 2000: 367-368.

<sup>27</sup> See especially Theoc. 29 and 30; cf. Hunter 1996: 167-195.

Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian<sup>28</sup> treatises, in which it is only said or implied that being frequently penetrated may be addictive, and therefore (one may assume) may afflict one's 'manliness'.

Since Foucault, it has become a commonplace that describing same-sex intercourse as being "against nature" is a cultural construct,<sup>29</sup> which does little justice to phenomena observed in the animal kingdom, where various forms of homosexual behaviour are anything but unusual.<sup>30</sup> It should be admitted, however, that from the biological point of view, heterosexual copulation is essential to the survival of a species. It is probably also central to most (if not all) human cultures and was central to Greek culture, which emphasised the importance of heterosexual unions and producing legitimate offspring. However far from such an essentialist stance, if we were to describe cultures as a simple extension of the biological order, the sense of marital love would be quite obvious, but there would be little to explain why males should abstain from other forms of satisfaction. Quite naturally in case of extramarital practices, a preference would be given to those forms that may result in producing (illegitimate) offspring.<sup>31</sup> This, however, would not exclude other behaviours providing pleasure or discharge, such as auto- and homoeroticism. The nineteenth and twentieth century cultures, which accepted the former two eventualities as permissible and abhorred the latter ones, have left a skeleton in our scholarly closet. Trying to deal with the so-called shameful problem of "Greek love", scholars would investigate its origin, and they found more or less satisfactory answers, pointing to the initiation rituals of some Doric tribes as a possible source of the "fashion".<sup>32</sup> Although some forms of conduct or etiquette can be certainly taken as deriving from specific sources,<sup>33</sup> it would be misleading to talk about "homosexual" behaviours as having been "invented" by any society just as much as taking "heterosexuality" as some other people's discovery.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Arist. EN 1148b; Pr. 879b.

<sup>29</sup> Winkler 1990: 17-44.

<sup>30</sup> See Bagemihl 1999.

<sup>31</sup> See Gottschall 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Bethe 1907; Brelich 1969; Bremmer 1980; Patzer 1982. *Alternative theories: Lear* 2015: 118.

<sup>33</sup> Davidson (2007: 490-492) distinguishes between what he calls "Greek love" and "its casual, informal, less 'ethnographic' cousin." Unfortunately he only pays marginal attention to it, as if it had been only a marginal issue.

<sup>34</sup> cf. Vattuone 2004: 85-3.



This brings us closer to the central problems of this paper: whether homophobia was possible in classical Athens and, more specifically, whether the unsympathetic perception among the lower classes of elite homosexuality had anything to do with the perception of homosexuality itself. This may have been possible under the indispensable condition that homosexual behaviours were perceived as being confined to the upper classes, or being a sign of political/social aspirations or sympathies. As I argue above, seeing that the existence of same-sex practices seems less unusual than their complete suppression, it would require some explicit data to show that they were foreign to the average citizens of Athens.

Our perception of ancient Greek sexualities is unfortunately biased by the selectivity of the sources. Nevertheless the situation is far from desperate. We learn, for example, quite a lot about the pedagogic pederasty of aristocratic circles from the elegies of Theognis, whereas authorial accounts of the erotic imagery of lower classes in archaic Megara are absent from our dossier. Yet Theognis himself acknowledges that the *kakoi* were also boy-lovers. For instance, in 1. 101–4, he says:

Μηδεῖς σ' ἀνθρώπων πείσῃ κακὸν ἄνδρα φιλῆσαι,  
Κύρνε· τί δ' ἔστ' ὄφελος δειλὸς ἀνὴρ φίλος ὦν;  
οὔτ' ἂν σ' ἐκ χαλεποῦ πόνου ρύσαιτο καὶ ἄτης,  
οὔτε κεν ἐσθλὸν ἔχων τοῦ μεταδοῦν ἐθέλοι.

*May no mortal man persuade thee, Cyrnus, to love a bad man; what advantage is a friend from among the baser sort? He would neither save thee from sore trouble and ruin, nor wish to share with thee any good thing he had. (Edmonds).*

The prejudice against the new elite members is as palpable here as it is in many other loci of the *Corpus Theognideum*. Homoerotic inclinations do not seem to serve as a focal point for Theognis's class identity. Quite the contrary. The poetic persona of the aristocrat shows much concern regarding the possible seduction of a boy by one of the *kakoi*, who would not provide as stable a support for the youth as an upper class partner would.

A little closer to the *vox populi* is the voice of Aeschylus, whose fragments of *Myrmidones* (fr. 135, 136 TGF) are among the most often quoted passages of ancient homoerotic literature. The poet explicitly refers to strictly non-platonic love between Achilles and Patroclus. An objection here is that the poet, as well as the heroes of his tragedy, belonged to the upper classes.

Yet, on the other hand, there can be little doubt that most of Aeschylus's spectators were ordinary people and the poet himself was a spokesman of the democratic Athenian ideology. Apparently, there was nothing incorrect or unpleasant in addressing the idea of homoeroticism and reporting some technical details of intercourse even in the solemn context of tragic poetry.<sup>35</sup>

Most relevant seem to be the passages from Aristophanes. Although this poet by no means can be called a radical democrat,<sup>36</sup> his comedies certainly were meant to appeal to the tastes of ordinary people. The three Aristophanic passages quoted by Dover to demonstrate that "pederasty was positively valued by the comic poet and his audience, merely one sexual taste among many" (as Hubbard epitomises it)<sup>37</sup> have been quite unjustly dismissed by Hubbard.

In his phallic song, Dicaeopolis (*Ach.* 265) addresses the divine *phalles*, calling him *μοιχέ, παιδεραστά* (*adulterer; lover of boys*). Hubbard rightly stated that the former address casts some shadow on the latter one, seeing that adultery was taken very seriously by Athenians. Unfortunately, he failed to notice how the humour of the passage works. *Phalles* is praised for his access to pleasures either forbidden or difficult to achieve for ordinary people at least on a daily basis and therefore even more desirable. The fact that adultery in real life was generally perceived as outrageous does not mean that, within the topsy-turvy world of comic fantasy, it could not be treated as appealing. The plot of *Birds*, for example, centres on the sacrilegious idea of depriving the gods of sacrificial smoke. Outrageous as it would have been in reality, on the comic stage, it becomes a witty device in the hands of two Athenians who wanted to get out of everyday trouble. Thus, the moral implications of adultery and pederasty in the passage seem to be neutralised by the comic context. On one hand, it is true that the more praiseworthy these acts become in the comedy, the less acceptable they might have been in real life. Yet, the passage presupposes a specific taste, according to which, lust for male and female seemed equally natural, and, *a fortiori*, none of the preferences was to be taken as repulsive.

Why access to attractive boys was limited results from another Aristophanic passage, in which Euelpides, in a rather impressionistic way, describes an ideal world (*Av.* 137–42):

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<sup>35</sup> See also similar passages by Solon, the symbolic Father of Athenian democracy (16 G.P. = 25 West with the commentary of Noussia-Fantuzzi (2010: ad loc.))

<sup>36</sup> Carrière 1979: 41-50; Henderson 1990; Ober, Strauss: 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Dover 1978: 135-137. Hubbard 1998: 54.

Ὅπου ξυναντῶν μοι ταδί τις μέμψεται  
ὥσπερ ἀδικηθεῖς παιδὸς ὠραίου πατήρ·  
«Καλῶς γέ μου τὸν υἱόν, ὃ στυλβωνίδη,  
εὐρῶν ἀπιόντ' ἀπὸ γυμνασίου λελουμένον  
οὐκ ἔκυσας, οὐ προσεῖπας, οὐ προσηγάγους,  
οὐκ ὠρχιπέδισας, ὧν ἐμοὶ πατρικὸς φίλος.»

*A place where the father of an attractive boy would meet me and complain to me like this, as if I'd done him wrong: "A fine thing you did to my son, old sparkler! You met him coming away from the gymnasium after bathing, and you didn't kiss him, you didn't greet him, you didn't draw him close, you didn't finger his balls – and you an old family friend of mine!" (Sommerstein)*

The comic hero, as Hubbard<sup>38</sup> observes, “presents an image here not of Athens as it was, but of a counter-Athens where the reverse of normal expectations occurred. Normally, fathers would rebuke friends for making advances on their sons; in Peisthetaerus’s imaginary utopia, fathers rebuke friends for not doing so”. Indeed, there are other sources to show that Athenian parents took steps in order to protect their sons from seduction.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the situation described here very closely resembles typical scenes of homoerotic courtship known from vase paintings. However little we know about the relationship between these representations and real life, there can be no doubt that Euelpides depicts a real erotic fantasy fostered by painters and their customers a few decades before Aristophanes. Thus, Euelpides’s words represent a socially unacceptable parody of an apparently widely recognised model of sexual fantasies. As often happens, one person’s erotic dreams are the nightmare of the parents of the person who is dreamt about. A typical real-life father of a potential *eromenos* presupposed by the Euelpides’s words would rebuke his friend for touching his son’s genitals in a public place, but probably not because he was homophobic. Similarly, in the modern world, a person who does not abhor heterosexuality would not like their underage daughter to have sex with a family friend on a lawn in front of her school.

What the passage shows is certainly not, as Hubbard suggests, a popular prejudice against homoeroticism in general or the homoeroticism of the higher classes. What may be taken at face value as a serious inconsistency resulting from the fact that the Euelpides’s fantasy might have seemed

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<sup>38</sup> Hubbard 1998: 55.

<sup>39</sup> Davidson 2008: 68-71.

outrageous and tempting at the same time, may very well result from a tension between various perspectives immanent not only to the culture but also to individuals. A single man could have been an *erastes*, a former *eromenos*, and the father of someone else's potential *eromenos* at the same time. The position he would take in contacts with his beloved was obviously different from his attitudes towards his son. To make things even more complicated, we should bear in mind that someone's son was never courted by a "potential *erastes*". In real life, the roles were played by real people. It would be interesting, for example, to know what Phaedrus's father said when he found out that his charming son had been seen walking outside the city side by side with barefoot Socrates.

Finally, we shall turn our attention to the widely discussed *agon* between the Stronger and the Weaker Argument in *Clouds* (889–1104). In their comic discussion on models of education, the former presents a traditional approach, according to which, young men were to focus on physical exercise, shaping their bodies and spirit in a way that, in modern times, came to be conceived as typically Greek. Although in the picture thus painted some hints of eroticism are palpable, it is far from obscene. Quite clearly the positive evaluation of the old school of education results from the statement that the men brought up in the traditional way were those who won at Marathon. On the other hand, the proposition of the Weaker Argument is to follow pleasures. His opponent says that, in this way, the boys will only become physically deformed erotomaniacs with no respect for traditional values; the Weaker, instead of denying it, replies blatantly that there is nothing wrong with debauchery.

According to Hubbard's interesting and very unusual reading of the passage, the Stronger "is a figure of pretence and hypocrisy, who presumes to be a morally respectable old-style educator, but is, beneath the surface, sexually obsessed and corrupt. The Weaker Logic [...] makes no attempt to conceal his sexual turpitude, but openly justifies it".<sup>40</sup> This interpretation might have been right if it were true that ordinary Athenians were homophobic and that the Stronger Argument praising modest, yet attractive, boys was meant to be perceived as perverted or lustful. There is, however, very little in the text to indicate that the softly erotic description of those who fought at Marathon (986) was thought of as outrageous.

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<sup>40</sup> Hubbard 1998: 57.

On the assumption that the more common interpretation of the passage is correct<sup>41</sup> and that the Stronger Argument shows that which was considered to be right, whereas the Weaker proposes a deviation from ideals, the two contrasted variants of sexuality (or actually the positive model and its hyperbolic antithesis) can tell us how *eros paidikos* was perceived by the masses. In this light, any general statement such as “middle and lower class Athenians were against homosexuality” can only be misleading, as they do not do justice to the fact that, apparently, an average Athenian male would either recognise the desires of homosexual comic characters as his own or at least take them to represent someone else’s perfectly normal taste.

Although such a conclusion may seem very old-fashioned, what was frowned upon quite clearly was not an erotic desire for boys, but lack of measure in it, as well as in other pleasures. The debauchery defended by the Weaker Argument may be described in Aristotelian terms as a deviation from a golden middle towards an extreme. It seems reasonable to suppose that such a model, based on a scalar opposition rather than a strictly privative one, is suitable for a description of the dynamics of desire. There is no contradiction between the generally positive connotations of boy-love and the negative perception of something that was called shamelessness.

It is a commonplace that Aristophanic comedy depicts a society in state of constant conflict.<sup>42</sup> In the *Clouds* this domestic cold war is present in various ways: the main hero, Strepsiades, represents old-fashioned rustic simplicity, whereas his son, Pheidippides, follows a more recherché way of life typical of urban “golden” youths. The former dreams of driving goats from the pasture (71), the latter is interested in breeding racing horses. This opposition between the old and new, rustic and urban, overlaps with that between aristocratic lineages and ordinary people, seeing that Pheidippides is said to be born from a union between his simpleton father and a daughter of some Megacles, clearly meant to have belonged to a higher class.<sup>43</sup>

As it must have been in real life, so also in the comedy are various layers of personal identity quite inseparable. The economic aspect is clearly connected to the political one and both affect the way of life in terms of aspirations, ideas of pleasure, etc. The opposition between aristocracy and common people in democratic Athens, especially in times of war against

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<sup>41</sup> More traditional readings: Lear, Cantarella 2008: 20-21; Marianetti 1992: 37-40.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Whitman 1964: 59-166.

<sup>43</sup> Sommerstein 1982: 161.

oligarchic Sparta, was certainly one of the most delicate matters. A conflict within a family or a simple difference in the way people dressed could be very easily taken as a projection of politically subversive sympathies (which indeed happens in *Wasps* 477 where an untrimmed beard is taken as a sign of philo-Spartan inclinations). Nevertheless, the question remains if the political conflict between Athens and Sparta, and the class antagonism in Athens were really meant to be central to *Clouds* or any other comedy by Aristophanes, or just secondary to a conflict much more closely related to the sphere of everyday life experience. At least in case of *Strepsiades*, it seems clear that he abhorred horse-breeding because it was expensive as well as useless, and not because it was antidemocratic.

The case of sexual appetites in the comedy seems even clearer. As has been said, according to Hubbard, Athenian masses did not sympathise with *paidērastai*, taking their sexual taste (to avoid the word “orientation”) as a sign of their antidemocratic inclinations. Yet there is no passage to show that Aristophanes criticised someone’s desire for boys because it might have been a sign of political sympathies. If anything is really depicted as a form of deprived behaviour, it is debauchery in various senses of this word. It involves drunkenness, gambling, gluttony, as well as excessive sexual desire, both for males and females. The whole complex of vice was obviously perceived as more typical for the wealthy rather than poor people,<sup>44</sup> which does not mean that an inclination towards any of these pleasures was seen as outrageous. We do not hear, for example, of anyone who starved him or herself to death simply because they abhorred gluttony. Similarly, although notorious drunkards were frowned upon, ordinary people did not abstain from wine. By the same token, from the fact that excessive lust for males, females or both was considered a serious vice, it does not follow that anyone abhorred sex with boys or women as such. Thus, while it would be imprudent to say that homoeroticism had nothing to do with politics in classical Athens, the points of contact between the two spheres seem to be rather incidental.

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<sup>44</sup> See especially Davidson 1993.

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