

**Marilyn J. Skinner.** *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005. xxxvi + 343 pp. \$38.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-631-23234-6.



**Reviewed by** M. M. Adjarian

**Published on** H-Histsex (August, 2006)

To what extent can observers of twenty-first-century America understand and define sexuality according to literary, philosophic, religious, artistic and juridical discourses on the erotic produced by earlier western cultures, specifically those of pre-Christian Greece and Rome? Recent debates on sexuality—its impact on legislation and social policy; its relationship to gender/gender roles and morality; and its status and place, especially in the public sphere—have numerous discursive precedents in the ancient Mediterranean world. However, as Marilyn Skinner, Professor of Classics at the University of Arizona, argues in *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, any similarities between ideas voiced in the distant past and those voiced now are problematic given the differences that necessarily arise from dissimilar social and historical conditions. What is analogous is not necessarily identical, especially when the comparison involves entities as fluid as human sexuality and as variable as culture.

Skinner's book represents the culmination of well over thirty years of research on gender and sexuality in ancient western cultures among such

eminent scholars as Sarah Pomeroy (*Goddesses, Wives, Whores and Slaves*, 1975); K.J. Dover (*Greek Homosexuality*, 1978); Michel Foucault (*The History of Sexuality*, vols. 2 and 3, 1986 and 1988); and Eva Cantarella (*Bisexuality in the Ancient World*, 1992). What sets *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* apart from these and similar studies is the comprehensive coverage it offers of a subject that, despite its currency in other academic contexts, has only just come into its own within a discipline often seen as narrow and conservative. Written specifically to introduce undergraduates and non-specialists to the study of gender and sexuality in ancient Greece and Rome, this most lively and engaging of texts represents a rarity in academic discussion: discursive eloquence that is as accessible as it is culturally relevant.

For Skinner, gender and sexuality are social constructions dependent on time and place for meaning. Starting from the period in Greek history when Greece was a pre-literate agricultural society, Skinner examines how the Greeks represented male and female sexuality through the

various gods they worshipped. Sexual beliefs were intimately associated with religion, since it was religious cults that celebrated human and earthly fertility as represented by female deities such as Demeter, goddess of the harvest. Skinner argues that it was epic poems by Homer and Hesiod that helped circulate ideas pertaining to gender and sexuality across Greece, since the poems themselves emerged out of an oral storytelling tradition. Not only did they offer rudimentary explanations of the sexual/biological differences between the sexes (female insatiability vs. male restraint); through their depictions of divine and mortal women--Aphrodite, Hera and Helen of Troy--they also promulgated ideas pertaining to the danger and inexorable power of female sexuality. And while the heterosexual drive to reproduce is a good and necessary thing, uncontrolled desire (eros), of the kind that drove Paris to abduct Helen from a stable household (*oikos*) and precipitated the Trojan War, has harmful consequences within a civilized context.

In the age of Homer, the roles of men and women, and the place of heterosexuality in society were well delineated. This is not the case, however, for homosexuality. While the loving friendship between the Iliad heroes Achilles and Patroclus suggests an acceptance of male homoeroticism, it offers no clues as to how pederasty, the homoerotic bonding that occurred between mature men and the adolescent males they introduced into Greek society, would become an institutionalized practice across Greece. Skinner refrains from speculation here, as she does elsewhere in the text when there are inadequate data to explain a complex cultural phenomenon. Instead, she examines how the lyric poetry written after the passing of the Homeric age points to the importance of single-sex communal gatherings called symposiums, where participants would share in song, dance and the (homoerotic) expressions of desire that were central to pederastic practice. Many scholarly explanations regarding the origins of pederasty exist: that it was based in

earlier coming-of-age rituals where older males trained boys in the ways of manhood; or that it developed from a need to limit births during a period of population explosion after 800 BCE. In keeping with her stated aim to assume an objective and non-judgmental stance throughout the book, however, Skinner presents hypotheses without siding with any one of them.

Where female homoerotic bonding is concerned, Skinner's analysis is sketchier than the one she offers on male homoeroticism. Such thinness stems largely from the lack of reliable information about female-female patterns of bonding. She points to fragments of literary and historical evidence that suggests how, in certain parts of Greece, females of different ages came together in choral groups to practice songs for religious festivals. As the young girls in the group learned about music, they also learned about sexuality from older women, thereby easing the transition from virginity to married life. Skinner suggests that one reason so little documentation exists is that Greek men of the post-Homeric Archaic period did not regard female homoeroticism as a significant subject of discourse, perhaps because pair bonding between women was not seen as a threat to the stability of the larger community. Another possible reason--that genital activity between women was not deemed sexual--underlies the hotly debated "penetration model" of Greek sexuality that Skinner highlights--but also questions--in her discussion.[1] The dominance/passivity paradigm speaks neither to the diffuseness of female eroticism, nor to the other ways in which males might have expressed sexuality in homoerotic unions.

With the rise of the city-state (the polis) in archaic Greece, social organization, which until that time had been oligarchical, became more egalitarian. From Skinner's constructionist/cultural materialist perspective, sexuality was deeply implicated in Greek culture--literature, art, philosophy, politics--with patterns of sexual behavior reflecting predominant social and political ideologies.

The shift towards democracy made anything associated with the aristocratic element--such as the symposium--suspect. Pederasty thus became a point of contestation between elites (who saw the practice as embodying courage and heroism) and non-elites (who saw pederasty as a remnant of oligarchic corruption). Since democratic ideology was premised on the rational regulation of self and society, sexual conduct became the object of state surveillance. Lineages needed to be maintained, so heterosexual unions assumed great importance. Fifth-century Athenian comedies celebrated marriage and mocked pederasty; yet, as Skinner shows, tragedies which were sponsored by the state, revealed the old anxiety that the same long-term heterosexual unions that fostered stable households were prey to the destabilizing effects--as manifested in jealousy, incest and adultery--of eros.

The onset of social unrest and armed conflict across Greece after the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) ushered in an era when the emphasis on heterosexuality became steadily more pronounced. Medically focused inquiries by Aristotle and others into sexual difference and meditations by newly formed philosophical groups--Cynics, Stoics, Epicureans--on sexual ethics increased. Skinner notes how women came to be seen more like men, albeit (according to Aristotle) defective ones since they had less self-restraint than men. As a result, they could move about more freely outside the bounds of the *oikos*, which, while liberating for women, created gender-role tensions within marriage. Heterosexual marital sex was now praised even more than before, since it meant procreation; sexual activities, whether heterosexual or homosexual were now seen as taboo. Despite the new morality, Skinner points out that courtesans (*hetaera*) often received sympathetic portrayals in the literature, especially in the comedies of one prominent Athenian playwright, Menander. She reads this phenomenon as indicative of the deep social crisis in Greece and of cultural alienation in Athens, which perhaps identi-

fied itself as being as much an outsider figure as the *hetaera* themselves. The latter had gone from being the most powerful city-state in the fifth century BCE to a much-weakened, socially fragmented shadow of its former self, at the mercy of the ascendant Macedonians, who eventually conquered all of Greece under Philip II.

One of the great strengths of Skinner's approach to the subject of ancient sexualities (and another way in which she sets herself apart from the scholars who have preceded her) is how she integrates a variety of different cultural products in her analysis. Much of what she examines is textual, but a great deal of her evidence is artistic and archaeological. Attic pottery from 600 to 400 BCE not only reveals modes of sexual expression but also seems to chart the waning interest in pederasty and waxing interest in heterosexual relationships, as chronicled by textual sources. With its emphasis on the female form, especially the female nude, the sculptural record suggests increased interest in women as both subjects of discourse and social subjects; this is particularly true of sculpture produced during the Hellenistic period following the Macedonian conquest of Greece. Now that groupings (such as the kinship networks and symposiums) and civic institutions (such as the gymnasium)--no longer defined Greek society, greater emphasis was placed on relationships, especially between men and women. A new poetic preoccupation with romantic heterosexual love (and thus women, since most well-known poets were male) emerged in the literature of the era. Youths at the center of homosexual devotional poetry were now regarded much like women: as objects of individual desire rather than subjects in need of socialization and schooling in citizenship. As female nudes celebrated the beauty--as well as the seductive power and danger--of the feminine form, they also revealed the need patriarchal culture had for women.

Skinner's integrative approach to the evidence she uses extends to the way she also dis-

cusses the cultures of Greece and Rome. Too often, classical studies tend to separate antiquity into two distinct eras, Greek and Roman, and to suggest that neither culture was aware of the other until Carthage fell to the Romans and Rome decided to look around for other realms to conquer. Although her book is itself divided along cultural lines, with the first six chapters on Greece and the second four on Rome, Skinner emphasizes that Rome not only knew of but was influenced by Greek art and religion from at least the sixth century BCE on. Of course, for her particular study, it is consideration of differences between Greek and Roman models of sexuality and gender that binds the two segments of the text together. Although similar in terms of the basic dominance/submission paradigms that underlie patterns of sexual behavior and in how each culture was essentially patriarchal, both are ultimately quite different.

Picking up her discussion of Roman culture around the time of Hellenic decline during the late third century BCE, Skinner shows that for the Romans, the nature of sexual (power) relations were determined more by class and rank than by the mere fact of being male and adult; Roman culture was generally more socially stratified than that of the Greeks. In Greece, an adult man could, regardless of social standing, lay claim to dominance over women, youths and non-citizens. In Rome, a male typically had to come from the better classes in order to be considered a citizen; only then could he assume the dominant (penetrating) role in sexual relations and seek protection under the law against violation and physical abuse. And although adult males of any rank were legally prohibited from homoerotic relations with citizen youths, they could still, if financially able, engage the sexual services of male slaves or prostitutes. Skinner argues that it is this tight connection between sex and social standing that helps to account for the preponderance of phallic imagery in Roman literature and art: the phallus was the

ultimate metaphor for what would become one of Rome's great obsessions--power.

One of the great strengths of *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* is the precision of Skinner's analysis, especially where concepts are concerned. In her discussion of male homosexual practices in ancient Rome, Skinner makes it very clear that Roman male-youth relationships were pederastic. In Greece, pederasty was deeply implicated in the making of male citizens and thus in the institutions that fostered citizenship itself; as such, it made specific moral and ethical demands on both participants. It follows that any references in Latin art or literature to male homoerotic love is part of what Rome borrowed from Greece, but did not actively integrate into its own social structures. As Skinner sees it, celebrations of male-male relationships were part of artistic artifice that sought to make more palatable what in essence were little more than sexual transactions. If anything, such renderings pointed more to the essentially materialistic nature of Roman culture, a nature that intensified as wealth from foreign conquests filled Roman coffers and helped build what later became a rapacious imperial appetite for expansion and control.

Skinner's precise handling of concepts is matched by an equal precision in her discussion of the interpretational issues that inevitably arise when dealing with translations and translated texts. Her careful treatment of meaning is evident from the outset. In her introduction she cites a 1993 Colorado court case, *Evans v. Romer*, in which the plaintiffs sought to invalidate a state constitutional amendment that denied citizens protected status on the basis of sexual orientation. Moral philosopher John Finnis, arguing in defense of the amendment, stated that all of the greatest Greek philosophers--Socrates, Aristotle and especially Plato--had condemned homosexuality. Part of the way in which the classicist Martha Nussbaum rebutted Finnis's claim was with the observation that it was a biased translation of Plato's

*Laws* that had allowed him to misread philosophic attitudes. The translated version of the *Laws* used by Finnis had appeared in 1926, a time when homosexuality was considered far more shameful than in the 1990s. In other words, the cultural homophobia of the period was itself translated along with what Plato had written about same-sex love. If he had written about the dangers of homosexuality, it had been with an eye to showing that homosexual behavior was a particularly potent source of physical stimulation. And for Plato, sensual overindulgence (of any kind) inevitably threatened the cultivation of reason.

The Colorado amendment was eventually overturned in 1996, and a Texas law that criminalized homosexual sodomy was similarly struck down in 2003. The apparent liberalization of social and juridical attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States does not extend as far as marriage, however. Still circulating in Congress (despite two Senate defeats since 2004) is the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment—a sterner version of the Defense of Marriage Act signed into law in 1996—that would outlaw any domestic union not between a man and a woman.[2] Interestingly, the Imperial Rome described by Skinner in the final two chapters of her book also had a conservative bias towards heterosexual marriage. Although Rome did not attempt to transform that bias into anti-gay marriage legislation, as American agitators are attempting to do at the moment, influential schools of thought—in particular, Roman Stoicism—propounded the idea that marriage between men and women was both necessary and natural.

The similarity between Imperial Rome and twenty-first-century America goes beyond attitudes towards heterosexual union. In Rome, the age of emperors brought with it rampant paranoia, especially among the senatorial class. Public spectacles of torture abounded to keep a large and ever-growing slave population under control. Upper-class Roman women became more socially

visible and assumed what Skinner calls quasi-public responsibilities; and as this took place, satirists such as Martial and Lucian mercilessly mocked strong women in their writings, portraying them as tribades or power-usurping phallic females. Like Rome in its day, the United States is the world's major superpower, and as such it is often the target of international hostility and accusations of torturing those who might be plotting against it. American women, though very active in the public sphere, operate in what Susan Faludi might call a climate of backlash that opposes further social and political advance. Skinner suggests that the climate of political uncertainty that characterized Imperial Rome gave rise to a deep cultural anxiety, and that such fearfulness led Romans to view marriage between men and women, not just as a way to secure economic/dynastic privilege, but also as much-needed emotional support in turbulent times. Following Skinner's line of thought, if the United States currently seeks to sanction only those unions between men and women, it may be part of a larger attempt to preserve and strengthen national stability in a troubled world.

Although *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* is exceptionally well documented and carefully researched, the intensity of its focus on the two major cultures of the ancient Mediterranean leaves out consideration of the other cultures (such as Jewish, Syrian and Egyptian) that made up this world. Also, in its effort to be objective about the material and its relationship to our modern cultural situation, it avoids the sticky issue of whether the Judaeo-Christian codes of sexuality that have influenced America and the modern West mark a break from Greco-Roman sexual principles, or merely extend them. The text can only remark that the relationship is complicated and point to other commentators, most notably Michel Foucault, who could not adequately resolve the question in the course of their analyses. Despite these minor weaknesses, Skinner has written an intelligent text that not only illumi-

nates its subject matter, but also shows the importance of reading culture within its context and using history to understand our own times rather than to define them.

#### Notes

[1]. K.J. Dover and Michel Foucault laid the foundations for this model in, respectively, *Greek Homosexuality* (London: Duckworth, 1978) and *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure* (1986) and vol. 3, *The Care of the Self* (1988). Others who came afterwards--most notably, David Halperin, John Winkler and David Cohen--formulated paradigms out of Dover and Foucault's seminal analyses: according to Skinner, it is Halperin's formulation that holds the most sway in current debates on sexuality in ancient Greece. See Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Winkler's *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Cohen's *Law, Sexuality and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). There is a useful survey of the development of this paradigm in James Davidson, "Dover, Foucault and Greek homosexuality: Penetration and the truth of sex", *Past and Present*, no. 170 (2001): pp. 3-51

[2]. In 2004, proponents of the Defense of Marriage Act--which critics charge is unconstitutional for a number of reasons, including the fact that it violates the Equal Protection Clause--proposed that DOMA become an actual amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In its latest incarnation as the Federal Marriage Amendment, DOMA has been defeated twice in the Senate: once in 2004 and again in early June, 2006. However, since the proposed amendment did receive just enough votes to keep it under consideration, the House of Representatives is set to debate the issue again in July. See especially Laurie Kellman's article, "Senate Rejects Gay Marriage Amendment", 6 June 2006, in the "Recent Top Headlines" section of the

DOMA watch website (<http://www.domawatch.org/>).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex>

**Citation:** M. M. Adjarian. Review of Skinner, Marilyn J. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12102>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.