

ARISTOCRATIC VICE, HOMOSEXUALITY AS

Little meaningful study has been accomplished on class differences in the incidence of homosexual behavior. The findings of the first Kinsey Report (1948), which appeared to show greater prevalence of homosexuality among the less educated, must be disregarded in as much as this cohort in the Kinsey survey had a disproportionate number of prisoners.

If data are lacking, stereotypes have flourished—in particular the notion that homosexual behavior is more prevalent among the upper classes. This perception accords with the broader working-class belief that the upper classes are over-educated, effete, and effeminate.

The notion of homosexuality as a distinctively aristocratic vice has a considerable history. In the seventeenth century Sir Edward Coke attributed the origin of sodomy to "pride, excess of diet, idleness and contempt of the poor." The noted English jurist was in fact offering a variation on the prophet Ezekiel (16:49). This accusation reflects the perennial truism that wealth, idleness, and lust tend to go together—a cluster summed up in the Latin term *luxuria*. Sometimes the view is expressed that the confirmed debauchee, having run through virtually the whole gamut of sexual sins, turns to sodomy as a last resort to revive his jaded appetite.

A forerunner of this thought complex appears in the comedies of Aristophanes (ca. 450–385 B.C.), who satirized the pederastic foibles of Athenian politicians and dandies. In the first century of our era, the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria regarded Sodom as the archetype of the link between homosexuality and luxury: "The inhabitants owed this extreme licence to the never-failing lavishness of their sources of wealth. . . . Incapable of bearing such satiety, plunging like cattle, they threw off from their necks the law of nature and applied themselves to deep drinking of strong liquor and dainty feeding and forbidden forms of intercourse."

The scholastic theologian Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) held that the vice of sodomy was "more common in persons of high station than in humble persons." This impression reflects in part the greater visibility of the doings of the privileged, and also the fact that, through their status or influence, the nobility could frequently escape with a reprimand for the commission of crimes which were subject to capital punishment when committed by commoners. This aspect of class justice has fueled social envy, leading to the demand on the part of the straitlaced middle class that the aristocracy be disciplined and required, for its part, to adhere to the narrow canons of petty bourgeois morality.

In England the claim that homosexuality was an aristocratic weakness fell together with the prejudice that it was ultimately of foreign derivation; the fondness of the noble lords for the Grand Tour of the continent brought them into contact with the vice which they then conveyed to England, where it was supposedly not native. A curious episode of this phase of British social history was the Macaroni Club, an association of cosmopolites formed in London about 1760 to banquet on that then-rare food. Their foppish, extravagant dress was regarded as bordering on transvestism. This fashion explains an otherwise mysterious allusion in an American song of the period: "Yankee Doodle came to town/upon a little pony;/ he stuck a feather in his hat/and called it macaroni" (1767). The colonial hero's attempt to play the exquisite exposed him to the danger of ridicule as a milktoast—or worse.

The stereotype of aristocratic vice has a sequel in the early twentieth-century Marxist notion that the purported increase of homosexuality in modern industrial states stems from the decadence of capitalism; in this view the workers fortunately remain psychologically healthy and thus untainted by the debilitating proclivity. In the Krupp and von Moltke-

Eulenburg scandals in Germany in 1903–08, journalists of the socialist press did their best to inflame their readership against the unnatural vices of the aristocracy, which were bringing the nation to the brink of ruin.

During the late nineteenth century, homosexual vanguard writers such as Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds advanced an opposing thesis. They held that it was precisely the fact that homosexual contacts tended to link the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, that made them suited to advancing democracy and the social integration of previously antagonistic classes. Class and homosexuality are sensitive issues for modern society, and the zone of their intersection is fraught with emotion.

See also *Working Class, Eroticism of*.

Wayne R. Dynes

ARISTOPHANES (CA. 450–CA. 385 B.C.)

The greatest of the comic playwrights of ancient Athens. Aristophanes composed a series of plays performed between 427 and 388 B.C. The texts of eleven comedies have survived, together with fragments from others. Little is known of his life other than what can be learned from the plays, which reveal a much-read and educated personality, fond of nature and of country life, and conservative by inclination.

His plays satirize contemporary Athenian society, with a verbal dexterity and wordplay that are difficult to convey in translation. The object of his wit is often the real or alleged effeminacy, passive homosexuality, or prostitution of the male characters—failings if not vices in the eyes of his fellow Athenians—in which the resources of Attic colloquial speech are exploited to the full. Aristophanes gives effeminate men feminine names, Sostrate instead of Sostratos, Cleonyme instead of Cleonymos (*Clouds*, 678, 680), or uses

nicknames that allude to their “swishy” gestures and manner of walking, and especially the feminine dress which they affected. Similarly reproached are boys who sell their bodies for gifts or payment. In the *Plutus*, 153, a character declares: “And they say that the boys do this very thing, not for their lovers, but for the sake of money. Not the better types, but the catamites, since the better types do not ask for money.”

The positive side of Greek pederasty is mentioned only in passing: the praise of boyish beauty, the wall inscriptions with the boy’s name and the word *kalos*, “handsome,” and the memory of the heroism of the past inspired by male comradeship and fidelity. The world of lust and venality which the comedians depict is the baser side of Greek pederasty, not the nobler, though it is the aristocrat who is depicted as the boy-lover par excellence. The allusions and innuendoes in regard to the institution are legion. An element of jealousy is present, provoked by the preference which a boy would naturally show to a nobleman over a middle-class burgher, but the significant phenomenon is the role which pederasty played in the life of the upper class in the Golden Age of Athens. Nowhere do the plays suggest that an Athenian gentleman would find intercourse with a handsome boy anything but agreeable, and even the opportunity to scrutinize boyish beauty is a source of delight (*Wasps*, 568).

The ideal cherished by the conservative Aristophanes is the smooth-skinned, muscular, shy, serious boy of the past, not the avaricious hustler or effeminate youth of the present. There is a longing for values that have been lost or submerged in the Athens of the playwright’s own day. So while humor is an essential component of the treatment of homosexuality in Aristophanes, it serves to set in relief the idealized *paidēasteia* that served an educational function in Greek civilization; never does Aristophanes express indignation or disgust at the institution,