Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature

Rogavit alter tribadas et molles mares quae ratio procreasset. Exposuit senex: "idem Prometheus, auctor vulgi fictilis, qui simul ofiendit ad fortunam frangitur, naturae partis veste quas celat pudor cum separatum toto finxisset die aptare mox; ut posset corporibus suis, ad cenam est invitatus subito a Libero, ubi inrigatus multo venas nectar sero domum est reversus titubanti pede. Tum semismornno corde et errore ebrio implicuit virginae generi masculo et masculina membra applicuit feminis. Ita nunc libido pravo fruitur gaudio."

[Phaedrus, Fables 4.16]

[The other person asked what phenomenon had produced tribadic females and effeminate males. The old man explained: “It was the same Prometheus, molder of ordinary people from clay, who as soon as he caused trouble was reduced to unfortunate circumstances. When, working through the day, he had formed the genital parts which modesty hides—separately, so that he might soon attach them to their proper bodies—he was suddenly invited to dine by Bacchus. There, having soaked his veins in much nectar, he returned home late with staggering step. Then, owing to drowsy wits and drunken error, he wove the maiden’s part into the breed of men, and attached masculine members to women. Therefore lust now enjoys perverted pleasure.”]

Along with such tales as the fox and the grapes, the stag at the brook and the grasshopper and the owl, amid moralistic fables culled from Aesop so as to inspire laughter and caution, in a collection of stories he himself acknowledges as purely make-believe, the early Roman imperial poet Phaedrus retails the above narrative. Here Phaedrus provides an action, an explanation, for two contemporary and actual human phenomena. The first is those women to whom he refers by the plural of the noun tribas, a Latin word of Greek provenance which the Oxford Latin Dictionary defines as a “female sexual pervert, a masculine Lesbian” (and which we, in modern slang, might translate “bull dyke”). The second are men whom he calls molles mares, a phrase which I have rendered

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“effeminate males,” though the adjectives “passive” and “pathic” could also convey the sexual connotations inherent in males (as could the modern slang word “panses”). Phaedrus assigns a common aition to these two sexual phenomena by attributing the origin of both to a drunken slip-up by the mythic Greek Titan Prometheus.

To be sure, the fragmentary poem which precedes this one also apparently attributes to Prometheus the origin of another contemporary and actual human phenomenon, the female tongue; in this earlier fragment Phaedrus provides an equally implausible source (the male organ) and a similarly censorious assessment of its impact:

formavit recens
a fictione veretri linguam mulieris.
Adfinitate traxit inde obscenitas. [Fables 4.15]

[Lately he formed the tongue of woman from the molding of the male organ. From this source obscenity has attracted a bond of kinship by marriage.]

Nevertheless, the context of both poems, inasmuch as both are surrounded by avowedly fictitious representations of talking animals, does not foster the impression that either features contemporary and actual human phenomena. Indeed, by crediting the origin of tribades to a Greek figure from the remote past Phaedrus further dissociates females who engage in same-sex love from the actual and contemporary human scene. What is more, the implication that tribads actually possess male organs (presumably on their groins as well as in their mouths) serves to distance them even more from any claim to present-day Roman reality.

The following discussion will begin by surveying several portrayals of what the Romans would have called tribadism in Latin authors from the second century B.C. through the second century A.D. The aim of this survey is to establish that Phaedrus was far from alone in representing such conduct as he does: namely, as both a Greek practice, geographically and chronologically distanced from present-day Roman behavior, and as abnormal and unreal, involving the use and possession of male sexual apparatus. In the course of this survey I will maintain that the sole Latin literary representation of tribadism which neither masculinizes nor Hellenizes nor anachronizes (that is, retrojects into the past) this phenomenon does so for deliberate effect, to break with established tradition and thus make an unconventional point more forcefully. Of course, it is not only tribadism that Phaedrus associates with the Greek world and with times past: passive male homoerotic behavior receives the same treatment. But this Hellenizing and anachronizing of tribadism by Phaedrus and other
Latin authors is particularly striking since such a characterization does not seem justified by evidence from earlier Greek sources. Nor, for that matter, does the Roman literary preoccupation with masculinizing, and problematizing, this phenomenon.

For this reason, I would also like to reflect upon two particularly curious aspects of the masculinizing, Hellenizing and anachronizing tendency in these similar portrayals of tribadism by several Roman authors, and of the refusal to accept tribadism as both Roman and real that such a tendency implies. I will do so in the larger context of considering some literary and attitudinal factors which seem to underlie these similarities in representation. First, that this refusal contrasts in significant respects with the only acknowledgment of female homoeroticism as a contemporary and actual phenomenon which has been bequeathed by a classical Greek author, a nonjudgmental if mythic and fictive account of how sexual preference began in Plato’s Symposium. Second, that this refusal contrasts no less with the gradual acceptance and Romanization of male same-sex love by Latin authors and Roman culture. By comparing Roman reactions to female and male same-sex love, I am assuming that Roman thought, perhaps under the influence of the categoric constructions presented in this same passage of Plato’s Symposium, regarded each as a distinct phenomenon and the two as relatively comparable and parallel phenomena. I do so on the basis of several Latin texts. Some, since they focus on the phenomenon of female homoeroticism, are to be discussed below, such as Ovid’s rendition of the Iphis and Ianthe story, and the speech of Laronia in Juvenal’s second satire; others, which focus on male same-sex love, have been accorded special attention in studies of the Roman attitude toward male homoeroticism published during the past decade. I recognize that both classicists and modern historians have lately argued that the conceptualization of homosexual desire as a discrete phenomenon—that is, the categorization of sexual passion according to the gender of both the subject and object choice—ranks as a recent development in medical thought. Inasmuch as the medical authorities (such as Havelock Ellis) who promulgate this view of homosexual desire write extensively about classical texts and topics, I would regard ancient authors such as those we will survey as a major source of this late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific conceptualization. But let us now turn to these Roman literary texts themselves, and to the tribadic tradition they represent.

In her magisterial study of homosexuality in republican and Augustan Rome, Saara Lilja examines a wide range of allusions to homoeroticism in Plautine comedy, including one which she interprets as an unmistakable reference to female homosexuality at Truculentus 262. It occurs in an ad-
dress by the title character, an Athenian slave, to Astaphium, maid of the courteasan Phronesium. When this maid asks Truculentus to calm his rage, comprime sis eram, he responds with a double pun on comprime, which can mean "have forced sexual intercourse with" as well as "control"; then on era, an archaic spelling of ira, "anger," which sounds like era, mistress. In response to his punning retort—"why don't you, who've gotten into the habit, get it off with her instead, you who shamelessly pressure a country fellow into sexual disgrace" (eam quidem hercle tu, quae solita eras, comprime / impudens, quae per ridiculum rusticu suades stuprum)—the maid replies, "I said anger, not mistress"; a change of subject ensues.

Here, then, the possibility of sexual relations between women is raised but briefly, in a dramatic context involving fictional characters, as part of an insult engendered by a comic misunderstanding, albeit one which represents such behavior as customary between a sexually experienced woman and her female slave. Yet in this, our earliest extant reference to female homoeroticism in Latin literature, we see the features characteristic of later representations as well. Plautus's Astaphium and Phronesium are Athenian women; the Greek model for the Truculentus was composed and set in the first decade of the third century B.C. whereas the Truculentus is dated to the second decade of the second. In addition to the geographical and chronological distancing of this phenomenon, the attribution of it to the Greek world and an earlier point in time, we find female homoeroticism associated with masculine conduct. For the verb comprimerete, here used to accuse a slave woman of sexual relations with her mistress, as a rule describes sexual assault by males; both women are, moreover, portrayed on the comic stage by male actors and in all probability perceived by the audiences as males no less than females.

The possibility of sexual relations between women receives more extended treatment two centuries later, by the elder Seneca at Controversiae 1.2.23. This treatment also associates such conduct with both the Greek world and masculine erotic activity; so too, here Seneca dissociates tribadism from contemporary Roman reality. Seneca's discussion occurs in the context of his reflections about how to declaim publicly and with proper refinement on publicly unmentionable sexual practices. Seneca first compares the belabored and unnecessarily explicit attempt at alluding to heterosexual anal intercourse by a nameless ex-praetor with a succinct, erudite and witty allusion to the same topic by Mamercus Scaurus. Seneca then comments that Scaurus himself attributed the fault of uttering belabored, unnecessarily explicit oratorical remarks on publicly unmentionable practices to Greek declaimers. Quoting Scaurus again in illustration, Seneca relates remarks made by two such individuals, Hybreae and Grandaus, when delivering the same controversion: that about a man who caught
and killed two tribads, one his own wife, in flagrante, and was subsequently forced to speak in his own defense. The remarks which Scaurus recalled and Seneca recalls are both in Greek, even though Granda’s is quoted as having begun in Latin, only switching languages for a sexually charged punch line. This fact contrasts these remarks with those on heterosexual anal intercourse previously, since such conduct was alluded to, both tastelessly and tastefully, in Latin.

Furthermore, what both Scaurus and Seneca judge the quoteworthy treatments of this tribadic controversia joke about the masculinity of the woman taken in adultery with the man’s wife. Hybreas speaks of her as an andra, man, to be established as natural or fake. Granda’s compares her to a male adulterer. It merits emphasis as well that Seneca mentions the two tribads as a topic for controversiae, situations at some remove from routine Roman events. Topics of other controversiae which Seneca treats, for example, include “the father who was dragged from the graves of his three sons by a debauched youth, given a haircut, and forced to change his clothes and attend a wild party.”

Inasmuch as we have now discussed the earliest extant appearance in Latin literature of the word tribas itself, and as tribas is the only noun employed by Roman authors to designate women who engage in same-sex love, we might note that the word and its usage have several things in common with literary representations of tribadism. For one, tribas is a purely Greek formation, from tribei “to rub,” “to wear down.” Unlike other Latin nouns derived from this Greek verb—flagritribas, “wearer-out of whips” and ulmitribas, “wearer-out of elm rods,” tribas retains its Greek nominative ending. It is also associated with women who appropriate masculine behavior by seeking physical gratification not merely by rubbing, but by penetrating, as one would with a male organ, the orifices of other females; in such instances—such as the passage by the elder Seneca we have just discussed and Martial’s portrayal in 7.67 of a woman he accuses of male, penetrating, genital acts—it is thus somewhat of a misnomer. Curiously, too, we will see that tribas is not used by two of the three authors who depict female homoeroticism as a present-day Roman phenomenon.

But to return to our literary survey. In deference to diachronicity, I have deferred discussion of Ovid’s writings: even though they predate the elder Seneca’s Controversiae and Scaurus’ reminiscences they postdate the heyday of the declamer Hybreas, who is described by Plutarch as a contemporary of Mark Antony. Ovid has left us several representations of female homoeroticism, all involving Greeks from the past (and largely the remote, mythic past), all linking such behavior with masculine sexual activity. The most extensive occurs at Metamorphoses 9.666ff., which re-
lates the Cretan tale of the male impostor Iphis and her passion for the maiden Ianthe. Central to Ovid’s rendition of the story is a lengthy lament he has the thwarted Iphis voice. In the course of her agonizing she refers to her homoerotic desire as unprecedented and monstrous (727 prodigiosa), as a strange kind of desire from which the gods should have spared her. She proceeds to state that if the gods wanted to destroy her they should at least have given her an evil which is natural and customary (730 naturale malum saltum et de more dedisse). When establishing that this evil is neither natural nor customary Iphis even cites various zoological examples, concluding from sociobiological analysis that among all of the animals no female is smitten with love for a female. Fortunately for the pious Iphis, on the day she is to wed Ianthe she is transformed by the goddess Isis into a male. Ovid personalizes and dramatizes this transformation by addressing Iphis himself (790—91 nam quae / femina super eras, puer es).

Ovid also appears to comment upon female same-sex love in two poems about the archaic Greek poet Sappho: the first, a letter in the Heroides, implicitly associates her with the heroines of the mythic past assigned the other letters in the collection; the second, Tristia 2, discusses her among Ovid’s earlier Greek male poetic predecessors. At Heroides 15.19 his Sappho states to her male beloved Phaon that she loved many women “not without reproach” (non . . . sine crimine); later in that same poem, at 201, she refers to the women of Lesbos as “you who, having been loved, made me disgraced” (Lesbides, infamem quae me fecistis amatæ). Significantly, moreover, in line 86 she extols the young man’s physical appeal to her by terming his age “what a man is able to love” (quos vir amare potest). At Tristia 2.365, when contemplating his own punishment for writing about love, Ovid recalls Sappho among his literary antecedents, who celebrated love unscathed. While his words—quid Lesbia docuit Sappho, nisi amare puellas—may be construed as “What did Sappho of Lesbos teach if not girls to love?” they also allow the interpretation “what did she teach if not to love girls?”

Like his father the elder Seneca, Seneca the younger has left a contribution to our surviving array of Latin texts dealing with female homoeroticism (Moral Epistles 95.20.2). It, however, differs from his father’s contribution, from those of Phaedrus, Plautus and Ovid we have already considered, and from those of Martial and Juvenal we will look at shortly, in several key regards. For one thing, it occurs in a prose letter to an actual friend about contemporary Roman reality—not in verse about the Greek, or Greek mythic, past; not in an oratorical exercise attributed to Greek rhetoricians. For another, it only alludes to female same-sex love obliquely, with the assertion that certain women of the present day “even rival men in their lusts . . . although born to be passive” (virorum licentiam
acquavere vetu pati natae). and in its climactic claim that such women, “having devised so deviant a type of shamelessness, enter men” (ideo perversionem commentae genus impudicitiae viros incendit). And Seneca does not represent this form of female eroticism as in any way connected with the Greeks or with times past. Still, Seneca’s passage appears to have had a powerful impact on (or at least to have derived from other statements which exerted tremendous influence on) the representation of tribadism in Martial which we will soon examine. And Seneca’s text does place great emphasis on the masculinity of the women he describes; in Seneca’s eyes sexual conduct other than passive yielding to men, behavior which would seem to include same-sex love, is clearly and primarily associated with activity viewed as masculine, and indeed is said to transform women physically into men.

For Seneca’s claim that females in his day appropriate male sexual conduct, even the sort for which an erect penis is de rigueur, occurs in a passage during which Seneca twice observes that women now disprove a statement by the esteemed Hippocrates; namely, that their sex never loses hair or suffers from foot pain by becoming bald and gouty. At the start of this passage Seneca accuses women of conquering rather than changing their nature; at its conclusion, he remarks that “women have lost the privileges of their sex as a result of their vices, and because they have shed womanliness, they have been condemned to men’s diseases” (beneficium sexus sui vitiis perdiderunt et, quia feminam exuerant, damnatae sunt morbis virilibus). Between these two statements Seneca details the “license of men” which women have equaled through equaling the “unsuitable activities of men” (virilium incommoda aequarunt). He enumerates various instances of such behavior, among them emulating men in keeping late hours and drinking, challenging men in wrestling and carousing (et oleo et mero viros provocant), and rivaling men in vomiting and other efforts to relieve overindulgent eating (aeque invitant ingesta viscribunt per os reddunt et vinum omne vomitu remetuntur).

Three of Martial’s epigrams—1.90, 7.67 and 7.70—depict women whom he explicitly attacks as tribads. The second and third of these epigrams are about a woman whom he calls not only a tribas but “tribad of the very tribads,” and whom he calls by the Greek name of Philaenis. He describes her involvement in the Greek athletic activities of wrestling and jumping with weights; he also peppers the longer of these two poems with a series of Greek words (harpasto, handball; haphē, yellow sand; halteras, jumping weights; palaestra, wrestling ring; colyphia, meat dishes). What is more, he masculinizes Philaenis in both poems by representing her as capable of physical activities requiring a male organ. At 7.67.1 he introduces Philaenis as a tribad who analaneously penetrates boys
with a penis; he next maintains that “rather fierce with the erection of a husband” she pounds with her axe “at eleven girls daily” (1–3, pedicat pueros tribas Philaenis / et tantum saevior mariti / uides dolat in die puellas). The comic point of this poem is that Philaenis may forego fællatio because she deems it unnaturally but nonetheless has failed to achieve the level of manliness to which she aspires; after all, she performs conmilingus, which only the demented would judge manly (and the wish that she be granted a mentem puns on and implies her lack of a mentula, male organ). 14 Still, while Martial ridicules Philaenis for her false impression of what true virility in sexual etiquette entails, he also ridicules her as truly virile in body and behavior by attributing to her such male athletic activities as wrestling and jumping. In 7.70 he similarly mocks Philaenis for her inappropriate virility: there he tells her that “you rightly call a girlfriend the woman whom you penetrate vaginally with a penis” (recte, quam fœtuis, vocas amicam).

To be sure, Martial does not distance Philaenis and her homoerotic conduct from contemporary Rome by portraying her as a figure from, or even by linking her conduct with, an earlier point in time. Yet he does link the addressee of 1.90, one Bassa, with the remote past while Hellenizing and masculinizing her as well. He begins this poem by claiming to this woman that he had earlier and mistakenly interpreted her lack of male and crowd of female intimates as proof of her similarity to the legendary Roman female moral paradigm Lucretia. But the truth, he adds, is a different matter: “you, o evil deed, Bassa, were a fœtitor [male who fucks: a female fucker is a fœttrix]. 15 You dare to join two cunts [unni] together, and your monstrous [prodigiosa] lust imitates a male.” Consequently, Martial rejects this early Roman model for Bassa and asseverates that she has devised (q commenta eis) a monstrous phenomenon worthy of that great, mythic Greek, sexually portentous riddle, the Theban enigma.

Still, Martial represents both Philaenis and Bassa as individuals with whom he is personally acquainted, and as alive and functioning in the urban scene of his day. His description of Philaenis in 7.67 shares several similarities with the younger Seneca’s passage about the conspicuous masculinization of some women in Seneca’s own time, i.e. the generation prior to his own. These similarities, again, seem to reflect Martial’s familiarity with Seneca’s text, or at least with a tradition on which Seneca also draws. For as Seneca asserts that such women et oleo et mero viros provocant, Martial details Philaenis’ whipping by the oiled coach in the wrestling ring and imbibing seven meros deunces. As Seneca speaks of these women’s vomiting wine and food with aequa vomitu remetiuntur, Martial notes that Philaenis vomuit. As Seneca remarks upon their rivaling men in libido (libidine vero ne maribus quidem cedant), Martial observes that
Philaeis libidinarius by refusing fellatio as parum virile. Seneca’s claim that such women perversum commentac genus is also recalled by Martial’s statement in 1.90.9 that Bassa commenta es dignum monstrum. And if Seneca’s language and motifs in a prose epistle are being echoed and evoked by Martial in hendecasyllabic and elegiac epigrams, it may well be because Seneca—like Martial and unlike the other authors we have discussed so far—treats female homoeroticism as a present-day phenomenon, and thus provides a more suitable literary model than other authors on this score.

I say this because Martial would appear to be drawing on Ovid as well, with whom he also shares a view of female homoeroticism as Greek behavior, identified if not restricted to mythic times. After all, he uses the same unusual word for Bassa—prodigiosa—in 1.90 that Ovid has Iphis apply to her passion at *Metamorphoses* 9.727. Similarly, he adopts a tone toward Bassa (with such words as monstrum and fæcius) reminiscent of that in Iphis’ speech. Admittedly, Iphis’ revulsion at female homoerotic passion must not be confused with a view of Ovid himself. Indeed, Ovid’s narrative displays immense sympathy with Iphis’ plight, a sympathy contrasting to Iphis’ own self-condemnation and negative view of female homoeroticism. As a matter of fact, the transformation of Iphis from human female to human male stands out conspicuously among the changes undergone by characters in the *Metamorphoses*. Here Ovid does not resolve a painful human dilemma in his typical fashion, by turning this particular human into a vegetable, mineral or subspecies of animal. Rather, Ovid accords Iphis’ story an unusually happy ending—inasmuch as Iphis, unlike many others in the *Metamorphoses*, need not relinquish her living human identity and even improves upon the one the gods have created for her. Nevertheless, Martial’s evocation of Iphis’ condemnatory attitude toward female homoeroticism, rather than Ovid’s more sympathetic viewpoint, is best explained by the fact that Martial, like Iphis, is dealing with female homoeroticism as a present and real phenomenon.

Martial is, moreover, himself evoked by a subsequent literary representation of tribads as a present and real phenomenon, lines 36–55 of Juvenal’s second satire. Juvenal assigns these lines, a sarcastic and contemptuous attack on male pathics, to a Roman woman named Laronia. She is portrayed as bristling at one particular male pathetic for his hypocritical invocation of earlier Roman marriage and adultery law, and as initially responding to this hypocrite in kind—with a string of allusions to things Roman and respectable. In lines 38–39 she puns on Cicero’s o tempora, o mores (felicia tempora, quae te moribus opponunt); she then speaks of Rome as at last acquiring decency (39 habeat iam Roma pudorem); she subsequently calls this fraudulent pathetic a third Cato (40 tertius e caelo cecidit Cato); she finally urges that he invoke the Lex Scantinia instead (43–44). Juvenal
next has this Laronia compare the entire female sex favorably to the entire male sex on two grounds. First, she alleges that male pathics—molles, the same term as that used by Phaedrus—have no female counterparts save in one major and abominable respect. Unlike such men as Hispo, who physically suffers from reciprocal fellatio with young males, Roman women do not perform oral sex on one another (47–50 non erit ullam / exemplum in nostro tam detestabile sexu. / Tedia non lambit Cluviam nec Flora Catullam: / Hispo subit iuvenes et morbo palpit utroque). Laronia then claims that women do not enter the prestigious Roman male field of law but limit their masculine endeavors to wrestling and meat eating, and that in small numbers (51–53 numquid nos aquis causas, civilia iura / novimus aut ullo strepitu fora vestra movemus? / lactantur paucae, comedunt colyphia paucae). Men, she contends by way of contrast, outdo even the celebrated Greek female wool workers in undertaking that feminine occupation (54–56).

Like the younger Seneca, Juvenal does not employ the word tribas or even explicitly mention female same-sex love in this discussion of what he regards as sexual deviance. That he is dealing with such female behavior must be inferred: from his emphasis on passive male homoerotic behavior in comparing the two sexes, from his references to female wrestlers and meat eaters in a clear evocation of Martial’s tribadic poem 7.67. Yet Laronia’s remarks by no means disavow female homoerotic activity altogether—merely mutual oral gratification of the sort she judges revolting in males. In this regard, then, Juvenal evidently has Laronia challenge Martial’s assertion in 7.67 that a woman like Philaenis would “eat girls’ middles” and “think cummilingus manly.” Furthermore, Juvenal’s challenge to Martial involves having Laronia respond to Martial not only in kind, but in Martial’s own words: by denying that women as a sex—even, apparently, those of homoerotic inclination—act as men do save in two endeavors; by defining those endeavors as precisely those linked by Martial with Philaenis while stressing—through the repetition of paucae in 53—that only a few women behave in this way; by employing Martial’s own and unusual term colyphia to describe, and implicitly defend, such atypical female behavior.17 We should note as well that with the exception of colyphia, Juvenal differs from Martial in avoiding Greek words in this defense of all females, even the homoerotically inclined, as superior to all males, and as superior because of disgraceful conduct by some men who engage in same-sex love. Juvenal even stresses how thoroughly Roman Laronia’s frame of reference is in the language and context of her remarks, which defend all female, and denounce certain aspects of male, sexuality. Indeed, whatever Greek terms and allusions appear in Laronia’s speech occur in descriptions of male behavior.
Similarly, in this passage Juvenal does not ascribe any sexual masculinity to females, even to those who take up manly pursuits. Rather, he pointedly dissociates women from what Laronia deems disgraceful in men. Although he, like Phaedrus, "feminizes" male pathics, through Laronia's remark that they reel of perfume and surpass women at woolworking, his dissociation of all women from pathic males sharply distinguishes this passage from Phaedrus' earlier portrayal of *tribades* and *molles mares* as equivalent: indeed, Juvenal seems to contrast male and female same-sex love generally, as well as to the detriment of the former.

Juvenal's treatment of tribadism, then, only resembles Martial's explicit representation (and the younger Seneca's implicit representation) in its contemporary Roman setting and concern with everyday reality. It additionally differs from all of the earlier Roman depictions of female heteroeroticism which we have surveyed save that of the younger Seneca in its failure to Hellenize such conduct. No less anomalous is Juvenal's defense of and toleration for such behavior, behavior condemned outright by Martial, the younger Seneca and Phaedrus, portrayed as tragic by Ovid and comic by Plautus. For it not only represents a major break with the other extant Latin literary representations of tribadism but also a complete departure from the way in which Juvenal and Martial usually handle similar subjects. We should recall W. S. Anderson's important essay contrasting Martial's distinctive approach to that of Juvenal, an essay which embarks from two texts comparable to Martial 7.67 and Juvenal 2.47-53 in that the Juvenal passage wittily reworks material from an earlier, witty epigram by Martial. Anderson concludes that Martial's professed air of *lascivia*, saucy playfulness of a basically tolerant sort, operates in full agreement with his wit: both seek above all to inspire laughter, laughter shared with the poet in relaxed amorality. By way of contrast, Juvenal customarily blends what wit he evinces with anger, *indignatio*: his wit and anger operate together in their harsh, often extreme, moralizing about Rome's Hellenized degradation to demand from the reader a complex response which accords some credence to the moralistic criticism voiced.18

Nevertheless, it is not Juvenal but Martial who condemns female heteroeroticism in savage if witty tones. It is Martial, too, who intolerantly and unplayfully characterizes Philaenius and Bassa as Greek and extremely degenerate in their behavior. It is Juvenal who, albeit through the ironic characterization of Laronia, defends and displays witty tolerance toward all female sexual activity, tribadism included; such an attitude is not only absent in Martial, but in other earlier Latin literary tribadic representation. Despite his penchant for wit, Juvenal notes for laughs only the inappropriate masculine and nonerotic conduct of a few women. Why have Juvenal and Martial reversed their usual literary and attitudinal

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stances? Why, for that matter, has Juvenal broken so completely with the earlier literary tradition of tribadic representation?

It warrants emphasis, of course, that Juvenal only addresses the topic of tribads obliquely, through implicit contrast with male conduct and by intertextual allusion. It merits note as well that Laronia's speech does voice sarcastic if not saeva indignatio at male pathics: the acerbic tone and moralizing position Anderson regards as quintessentially Juvenalian permeates this poem, but with male pathics rather than female homosexuals as their target. I would, therefore, consider Juvenal's anomalous treatment of female homoeroticism as a form of what J. P. Sullivan has labeled "literary opportunism," as the inconsistent and unexpected abandonment of a traditional literary stance in the service of a more immediate literary aim. Such literarily opportunistic writing reminds us that Juvenal's indignation can vary with the individual speaker and that the moralism voiced by the speaker is itself relative and rhetorical: a moralism so bent on discrediting the phenomenon under attack as to sanction other discreditable practices—if such a strategy strengthens the attack in question.

Furthermore, I would maintain that Juvenal's literary opportunism here is made possible by, and itself confirms, the strength and influence of a literary tradition which as a rule masculinizes, and usually Hellenizes, and more often than not anachronizes the phenomenon of tribadism. In other words, I would argue that this literary tradition is strong, and recognized, enough to permit Juvenal to make an effective point by dispensing with it. In fact, Juvenal pays further homage to, and further establishes the power of, this tradition, this topos, by evoking Martial, who in turn evokes the younger Seneca and Ovid. I would go so far as to contend that this tradition itself conditions its participants and perpetuators to represent tribadism as they do, that over time it created its own momentum and power.

Yet the three latest contributors to this tradition all break with their predecessors in acknowledging tribadism as a present and actual contemporary phenomenon rather than a literary notion out of earlier Greek culture. Two of these—the younger Seneca and Martial—nonetheless resemble the Hellenizing and anachronizing Phaedrus by portraying such behavior in a completely unrealistic fashion: as involving physical acts not only culturally associated with men but actually necessitating the possession of a male organ. How do we account for this denial of biological reality, of anatomical plausibility? And can this denial of biological reality illuminate the parallel denial of tribadism as a contemporary Roman phenomenon?

The younger Seneca's assertion that women, though "born to be passive," even rival men in their lust, would seem to have special relevance
here. So would two learned Roman explanations, by the elder Pliny at *Natural History* 7.23 and Aulus Gellius quoting him at *Notes Atticae* 9.4.12ff., of a mythic Greek story: this tale, alluded to by Vergil and related at length by Ovid, resembles the story of Iphis in that its protagonist—the maiden Caenis—was also transformed physically into a male. Both Pliny and Gellius regard such a transformation as altogether plausible; Pliny even retails, and Gellius quotes him as retailing, four actual episodes which render this female-to-male metamorphosis “no fiction.” And what about these episodes? The first supposedly took place in an Italian town, but did so on the authority of annalistic records rather than eyewitness accounts, far earlier (in 171 B.C.) than the other incidents and at some distance from Rome. Two of the other changes—by individuals Lucius Mucianus claimed to have seen—are located in the Greek world, at Argos and Smyrna respectively. The fourth—whom Pliny himself inspected—concerns a citizen of a Greekly-named town, Thysdrus, in North Africa. In other words, these descriptions of what purport to be actual occurrences represent “masculinization” as having taken place either long ago or in a Hellenic far away, and thus resemble our representations of fictive and even real tribadism. The woman who became a man in Argos is, moreover, said to have been wed to a man before her sex change and marriage to a woman; the individual Pliny actually met—like the legendary Iphis—is said to have become a man on her wedding day. Noteworthy, too, is that both Pliny and Gellius describe these changes in the context of discussing hermaphrodites, women who are also men and vice-versa, and their present-day employment as sources of sexual pleasure.

It would appear, then, that these female-to-male sex changes interest these two authorities in part because they illuminate, justify and render more comprehensible the sexual involvements of women with other ostensible women. Several aspects of Pliny’s and Gellius’ accounts would suggest as much: the similarities between these Hellenizing and anachronizing representations of biologically masculinized females and our Latin literary descriptions of tribads; the resemblances between one of the scenarios related by Pliny and Gellius and the plot of Ovid’s lengthy reflections on same-sex love; the context in which these four cases are reported—a discussion of the erotic pleasures offered by partners of the same sex. It would appear that Roman authorities were similarly eager to deny the essential femininity of those women who themselves denied what the younger Seneca would have called their “natural” passivity by engaging in male-free sexual acts. As Seneca accuses such women of rivaling the lust of males, so our Roman sources attribute male activities and apparatus to such women. This widely held Roman notion that fe-
male homocroticism could not be expressed without masculine sexual parts and practices is, of course, itself a denial of biological and social reality. After all, the Roman use of tribas, a term from a Greek word meaning "to rub," itself acknowledges that women were capable of providing mutual pleasure by friction alone. Such purveyors of the tribadic tradition as Martial themselves acknowledge—through references to the clitoris and to cummilingus—that female sexual pleasure did not demand penile penetration. The "true stories" of sex changes reported by Pliny and Gellius may not have been true and certainly were not common occurrences. But it was evidently easier for Roman males who wrote about tribadism to deny the actual and avow the unlikely than to abandon assumptions about how, according to biological nature and Roman culture, women ought to behave.

I am disconcerted by two further aspects, mentioned earlier, of this Roman denial of cultural reality—namely, that tribadism did go on in the Rome and among the Romans of the classical period—and of this Roman denial of biological realism—namely, that tribads can give one another pleasure without male organs and that women do not possess male organs. The first is that the Roman effort to associate tribadism with masculine and earlier Greek conduct finds little support in our surviving classical Greek texts. Only one reference to same-sex love as a contemporary and actual phenomenon survives, in Aristophanes' speech at 190ff. of Plato's Symposium. There the diversity of human sexual attraction is explained by a fantastic tale, that all human beings have descended from primitive bisectees belonging to three original sexes: the androgynous, the all-female and the all-male wholes. A drive to seek one's missing half, says Plato's Aristophanes, initially sparked erotic desire in those bisectees and continues to do so in their descendants. Plato's description starts with those who descend from the androgynous wholes: men who love women, including adulterers, and women who love men, including adulteresses. He then identifies women descended from all-female wholes as those who do not pay attention to men but are attracted to other women, terming the hetairistria of this type. Last, he claims that halves of an all-male whole pursue males and include the best and most manly young men, who enter public life, become lovers of boys, and only marry and sire children under compulsion of custom. While Plato's Aristophanes may not regard the hetairistria—women who love other women—as highly as he does men who love other men, he says nothing negative about this group; by way of contrast, he emphasizes the presence of adulterers among descendants of androgynous wholes. More significant, he does not liken these women to men.

Second, it warrants emphasis that this Roman literary representation
of female same-sex love as alien or earlier Greek behavior can claim a patent parallel in republican Roman references to male same-sex love as a Greek import. Such references include Polybius 31.25, which lists love affairs between Roman young men and youths among manifestations of “Greek licentiousness,” and Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.70, in which pederasty is said to have originated in Greek gymnasia, and 3.58, which describes a young man surrounded by lovers “in the fashion of Greece.”

Two negatively charged words used by Roman authors to describe male pederasts—*pathicus* and *cinaedus*—are, like *tribas*, adopted from the Greek as well. But as Roman time went by, Latin authors increasingly portrayed male same-sex love as common in the contemporary Roman elite milieu of their audience, and as familiar to and tolerated by these readers. Most of these authors—Catullus, Tibullus, Ovid—furnish literary and imaginative treatments rather than documentary reportage about actual incidents.

Still, elite Roman culture had so completely absorbed and accepted pederasty by the time of Juvenal that the contemporary Greek author Plutarch, in a Greek narrative, uses a Latin word, *deliciae*, presumably for want of a good Greek equivalent, in describing a homoerotically desirable boy favored by the Roman moralistic emperor Augustus. Martial not only waxes rhapsodic about a host of beloved boys but even seems to flatter the emperor Domitian by extolling the charms of his particular boy favorite. Some Roman authors, of course, such as Phaedrus and Juvenal, provide negative and feminizing representations of mature men who inappropriately assumed the passive role in homoerotic liaisons. There is, however, a clear distinction drawn by Latin authors between active, penetrating and passive, penetrated participants in male same-sex love. It is accompanied by the recognition that individuals who adopted the active role did not customarily adopt the passive and acquire the opprobrium attached to its improper assumption. Curiously, and by way of contrast, our Roman sources on female same-sex love both attach opprobrium to active, masculine behavior and fail to make clear distinctions between active and passive tribadic partners: indeed, the elder Seneca seems to use the word *tribades* for both. Clearly these Latin literary sources, and the culture they come from, did not sort out, systematize and rank their thoughts and feelings about the phenomenon of tribadism in the way that they did their reactions to male same-sex love, much less integrate tribadism into their cultural milieu. To them, female homoeroticism was an undifferentiated, unassimilated conglomeration of alien and unnatural Greek behaviors, which did not really take place in their own milieu or—if it did occur—did so in a completely unrealistic way.

Further investigation into why these Roman sources failed to accept and
tolerate female homoeroticism as they did male same-sex love is needed. So is investigation into why so many Roman authors deny tribadism as a cultural and physical reality.29 We should, though, recognize that such denial was by no means limited to the phenomenon of tribadism. The emperor Augustus succeeded in convincing a great many Romans to deny that he had instituted a monarchy.30 Such denials seem to involve other activities in which Roman women participated: research on the Latin literary representation of male and female friendship has led me to conclude that, contrary to all kinds of evidence, several major Roman writers denied that men and women were friends.31 That Roman authors were perfectly capable of deluding themselves, and their audiences, is significant in itself: this capacity for self-deception also warrants study, and theorizing about, as a general cultural phenomenon. This capacity makes it all the more understandable that we moderns have such difficulty in distinguishing the prescriptive and ideal from the descriptive and actual in our Roman sources. In particular, it compounds the difficulty that feminist scholars such as myself have in recovering Roman women—since practically nothing written by women themselves survives, and since the evidence we have from men blurs the prescriptive and descriptive. But it reminds us that we must look within as well as beyond our literary evidence to understand both Roman literature and Roman reality better: by surveying representations of a given notion or practice in several literary genres, fictional and nonfictional; by focusing on anomalous as well as typical representations.

Notes

Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Ottawa, Emory University, Yale University and George Washington University. The Berkshire Conference version, “Autonomy as Anomaly: Roman, and postclassical Greek, reactions to female homoerotic expression,” and much of the material which it included, has been cited by Bernadette J. Brooten, “Paul’s Views on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism,” in Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality, eds. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret Miles (Boston, 1985), 66ff. I would like to thank David Halperin, Barry Baldwin, Amy Richlin, Marilyn Skinner and the anonymous referee for their comments and suggestions.

1 Oxford Latin Dictionary, ed. P. W. Glare (Oxford, 1968), 1971. The revised (1968) edition of the Loeb Classical Library Martial, Epigrams I translates tribas in 7.67.1 as “Lesbian.” I have not, however, used this term as the English equivalent of tribas in this paper, since—as I hope my discussion will establish—the connotations of Latin tribas are both far more limited and far more negative than those of English “Lesbian.”

2 For mollis in the sense of “effeminate,” the diminutive molliculus (used to characterize “unmanly” poetry in Catullus 16) and the noun mollitia (used for pathetic behavior by Tacitus, for example, at Annales 15.49), see the Oxford Latin Dictionary, 1127–29.
3 For example, Cicero, _In Catilinam_ 2.8 and _Tuscans Disputations_ 4.70ff.; Livy 39.13.10–11, all of which are discussed by S. Lilja, _Homosexuality in Republican and Augustan Rome, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum_ 74 (1983). Other recent studies focusing on Roman representations of male homoeroticism include J. Boswell, _Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century_ (Chicago, 1980) and R. MacMullen, "Roman Attitudes to Greek Love," _Historia_ 31 (1982): 484–502.

4 See, for example, David Halperin, "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality," _Diervitis_ 16, no. 2 (1986): 34–45 and George Chauncey, Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," _Salmagundi_ 58–59 (1982–83): 114 ff.; Chauncey notes (134 n. 56) the use of Greek evidence not only by Ellis, but also by J. H. Coriat, James Kiernan and Douglas McMurtrie, the last two in discussions of female homosexuality.

5 Lilja, 28 and 32. In the latter Lilja notes that Plautus reverses the customary homosexual insult to males—which charges them with passive behavior—by charging the maid with active "masculine" behavior. Lilja additionally observes that both _Epistulae_ 400 and _Persa_ 227 may be interpreted as allusions to female homoerotic conduct, but neither unambiguously so.

6 For the date of the Tusculans, see Cicero, _De Senectute_ 14, which attributes both the Tusculans and the _Pseudokos_ to Plautus' old age. As the latter is known to have been written in 191 B.C. and Plautus is known to have died in the late 180s, a date in the early 180s seems likely. The date of the Greek model is inferred from lines 91–92 and 530–31, which refer to historical events in the early 290s.


9 _Controversiae_ 4.1, _Pater a sepeulis: est a luxurioso raptus_; for the tendency of the themes of declamation, even those in Seneca's collection, "to stray far from reality," see Winterbottom, xii–xiii, who, while conceding that "genuine parallels in Roman law exist for many of the laws on which the themes are based," notes "the fact remains that declamation could have been far nearer to reality than it was."

10 Although Adams discusses a wide variety of Greek words used to describe sexual activity and apparatus in Latin, he does not consider the etymology and connotations of _tribus_. For _flagrunieth_ , see Plautus, _Pseudokos_ 137; for _ulmitritha_ , Plautus, _Persa_ 279. Both are masculine nouns of the Latin first declension for frequent victims of fogging.

11 _Antony_ 24.5; see also Strabo, 660 on Hybræa's defense of his city in 36 B.C.

12 Scholars have long debated over whether or not _Hermes_ 15 is genuinely Ovidian and whether or not it in fact belongs among the _Heroides_. For the debate generally, see the bibliography provided by E. J. Kenney in _The Age of Augustus_ , vol. II of _The Cambridge History of Classical Literature_ (Cambridge, 1982), 208; for the view that the poem is by Ovid but does not belong among the _Heroides_ see A. R. Baca, "Ovid's Epistle from Sappho to Phoön (_Hermes_ 15)," _Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association_ 102 (1971): 20ff. It merits note that some texts of this poem—for example, the second edition (1977) of the Loeb Classical Library volume—would substitute _his_ for _non_ in line 19 and thus read this line as stating "whom I loved here to my reproach."

13 In connection with Martial's portrayal of Philaesia here, it perhaps warrants mention that in a paper delivered on February 15, 1989 at the University of Maryland, College Park entitled "The Meaning of Jewish Hellenism," Tessa Rajak observed that the gymnasmium and athletic activities are represented in _Maccabees_ as institutions not only central to, but also symbolic of, Greek culture.

14 It is possible that the name Philaesia itself is also a (bilingual) pun—on the Greek _phi_ -
love, and the Latin amns; although Martial does not use amns for the "fundamental opening" elsewhere, it is so employed by Phaedrus, for example, at 4.19.19 (in a poem following shortly after his verses on the genesis of tribads).

Indeed, Martial himself uses fatutrix at 11.22.4 and 11.61.10.

For the rare word prodigiosa, see the Oxford Latin Dictionary, 1472. It lists no attestation earlier than the passage at Metamorphoses 9.

For the problematic nature of colyphia, which the scholiast on this passage interprets as a word for the male organ, see Adams, 49-50.


J. P. Sullivan, The Satyricon of Petronius: A Literary Study (Bloomington, Ind. and London, 1968), 267ff. As F. Zeitlin has observed in "Petronius as Paradox: Anarchy and Literary Integrity", TAPA 102 (1971): 645, Sullivan primarily employs this phrase for Petronius' capaci, which moves "from style to style as a display of technical virtuosity and wit"; nevertheless, attitudinal as well as stylistic changes may be included in this form of literary display.


For Martial's ridicule of the clitoris, see 3.72.6; for his condemnation of castrating see 1.77, 2.84, 3.81 and 96, 4.43, 7.95, 11.47 and 61, 12.59 and 85. As Chauncey points out, these turn-of-the-century medical authorities also assumed that "female invert" "simply could not be women" and therefore possessed "structural cellular elements of the opposite sex" (such as excessive hair growth, unusually large clitorises and menstrual irregularities).

As Brooten notes, 65-66, Plato's late Laws 636b-c outlaw--as "contrary to nature"--sexual relations between members of the same sex, male or female, in its blueprint for an ideal city; this proscription, however, is not only brief and prescriptive but also at variance with other evidence for the widespread acceptance of pederasty in the Greece of Plato's day. Brooten additionally mentions a Hellenistic epigram, Anthologia Latina 5.206, which alludes to the defiance of Aphrodite's laws and the embrace of "not beautiful practices" by two Samian women; while this poem may be construed as referring, in a negative fashion, to tribalism, its date and opacity disqualify it as solid evidence for classical Greek disapproval of such conduct.

On these passages see also MacMullen, 485-86 and Lilja, 121ff.

For these terms, see MacMullen, 486; Adams, 190 and 194; Lilja, 22, 26, and 56-57.

On these portrayals, which include Catullus 15, 16, 21, 23, 24, 40, 48, 81 and 99 and Tibullus 1.4, 8 and 9 as well as Ovid, Amores 1.1.20 and 1.8, 34 and 68, see, for example, the discussions of Lilja, 51-85 and A. E. Richlin, The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor (New Haven and London, 1983), 114-16, 119, 121 and 141-42.

Plutarch, Antony 59.4.

Martial 9.11-13, 13.36, discussed by Boswell, 67.

See the discussions of Lilja, 130 and 135, and Richlin, 220-26.

In the original version of this paper, quoted by Brooten, 68, I suggested that "this male preoccupation with physical masculinity and particularly penis possession, as a necessary component of female sexual autonomy and homoeroticism, and this characterization of such female sexual conduct as distanced and non-Roman, seems to reflect an effort to describe such female behavior in symbolic language, as an imaginary super-deviation from the limits of prescribed female sexuality explicable to Roman males only in male terms." I argued that "whereas Roman men passed beyond the passive sexual stage during which they could be penetrated by another male when they reached their early twenties, Roman women were to remain in the passive role throughout their adult lives. The easiest way to understand women's rejection of the passive
sexual role was to imagine that they, like the men, had passed on to the next stage," which involved "penetrating behavior."

