

comfortable environment that ended when his father went bankrupt and then died insane. In 1839 Melville became a ship's cabin boy and was exposed to menial squalor and brutal vice both at sea and in Liverpool. After further adventures, first on a whaling ship in the South Pacific, then in Hawaii, he returned to Boston in 1844. Extensive reading and research reinforced his experience at sea and underlies the series of novels that he wrote, beginning with *Typee* in 1846 and followed by *Redburn* (1849) and *White Jacket* (1850). But his greatest work is *Moby-Dick* (1851), the classic novel that combines seafaring and allegory into one of the masterpieces of American literature. *Moby-Dick* proved too difficult for both critics and public at the time, and his next novel, *Pierre* (1852), was inaccessible because of its psychological complexity and elaborate prose. Despite the lack of appreciation of his work, Melville continued to write prose and poetry until his death. He left *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Story* in manuscript. By that time his literary reputation had nearly vanished, and only in the twentieth century, beginning in the 1930s, was the greatness of his accomplishment realized.

The homoerotic component of Melville's writing is subtle, pervasive, and rich in symbolic overtones. It was Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, who first glimpsed this element in the work. The Hero, the ego-persona of the author, is caught between two opposing forces. One is the Captain, the superego authority figure, who represents the moral demands of Western civilization and the imperative of obedience; the other is the Dark Stranger—or later, the Handsome Sailor—who personifies a state of innocence or of uninhibited nature, replicating the myth of Tahiti inherited from the travel literature of the eighteenth century. As part of a primitive culture free of the restraints of Christian morality, the Dark Stranger embodies the allure of primitive sensuality and eroticism. The novels depict the hero's psycho-

logical progress toward opting for the Dark Stranger and rebelling against the Captain. The fulfillment of homoerotic longing is thus contingent upon rejecting the dictates of Western civilization.

Melville's work is imbued with intense sexual awareness, but couched in terms that betrayed nothing to the prudish nineteenth-century reader. There is much phallic imagery, but also a blatant association of sexuality with **friendship** and the assumption that male friendship is subversive to the social order. The masculinity of Melville's heroes is their endearing quality; it is a celebration of male bonding in its classic form, to the exclusion of the feminine. Within the American society of his time overt male homosexuality had no place; it had to be relegated to the margin of consciousness or to an exotic setting, with partners of another race and culture. The implicit sexual politics of the novels is a rejection of the norms of nineteenth-century America and an affirmation of an erotic fraternity, an alternate style of relationship between males that takes the form of a democratic union of equals.

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MERCHANT MARINE

See Seafaring.

MESOPOTAMIA

Named the "land between the two rivers," the Tigris and the Euphrates, Mesopotamia was the cradle of the earliest human civilization, where the art of writing began shortly before 3000 B.C. Here Sumer and Akkad created a culture that was already old when the golden age of Greece was just beginning. Its literary languages, Sumerian and Akkadian (Se-

mitic), were the medium of a vast corpus of texts of mythology and poetry, law and administration, religion and magic, written in the cuneiform script. The earlier phase of Mesopotamian history saw the rise of the Sumerian city-states, which was followed by the formation of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires. The later achievements of Judaea and Greece were heavily indebted to Mesopotamia for the enormous fund of science and technology that it had accumulated over the centuries, as well as for the legal and ethical lore that it bequeathed to their prophets and philosophers. What kept this contribution from being appreciated was the historical circumstance that the literary idioms of Mesopotamia became extinct, knowledge of the cuneiform writing was lost, and the horizon of the past limited to the fragments preserved in Hebrew and Greek sources. In modern times, the decipherment of Sumerian and Akkadian, and then of Hittite and Hurrian, revealed the millennia of cultural evolution that underlay the high civilizations of middle antiquity.

Basic Attitude toward Sexuality.

The Mesopotamian attitude toward sexuality lacked the religious and philosophical inhibitions which Judaism and Hellenic thought were to develop, and it had not even begun to cultivate the ascetic ideal that came to flower in Christianity. Moreover, one of the principal divinities of Mesopotamia, Inanna/Ishtar, was the goddess of love in all the senses of the term. Nearly all of what survives in regard to homosexuality pertains specifically to relations between men, which are attested from the beginning of the third millennium. A depiction of anal intercourse shows the receptor kneeling while drinking through a straw, perhaps a scene of an orgy in a tavern. It is paralleled by a tableau in which a woman takes the passive role. There are also lead figurines from the end of the second millennium depicting amorous encounters between males.

Literary sources include oneiric texts devoted to erotic dreams in which

the subject has intercourse with males: a god, a king, a notable, another man's son, a young man, a child, his own father-in-law, even a corpse. The manner in which the material is codified does not allow the modern investigator to derive much information, although several passages insist on the youth of the partner, hence on the pederastic character of their relationship. There are also divination texts in which the sexual happenings of everyday life are the basis for prognostication; a small number presuppose a male partner, who may be either an equal in social rank, a professional prostitute, or a slave belonging to the household. The homosexual activity is nowhere reprovved, and does not even incur the stigma of "pollution," as may result from sexual contact with a woman.

Laws. The Middle Assyrian laws contain a provision that penalizes the active partner who has forcibly sodomized his equal by prescribing that he be anally penetrated and then castrated, in strict accordance with the *lex talionis*. The preceding article in this text deals with the false accusation of repeated passive anal intercourse, treated as analogous to the slanderous charge that one's wife has engaged in prostitution. The stigma in both cases would have attached to the passive partner trafficking in his or her body. The passive role in the homosexual relationship is assimilated to the woman's in the heterosexual one.

Prostitution. Mesopotamian society did possess its class of professional male prostitutes, the *assinnu*, the *kulu'u*, and the *kurgarru*, some specified as being young, who performed various functions in the sphere of entertainment and religious liturgy. In the former capacity, they played musical instruments, sang and danced, and may even have performed pantomimes or dramatic pieces; in the latter, they officiated at ceremonies in honor of Ishtar, sometimes in the costume of the opposite sex, sometimes in erotic rites for the pleasure of the worshipper.

They are clearly associated with female devotees of Ishtar, whose role as hierodules is abundantly attested in the cuneiform literature. In one text the *assinnu* is overpowered by a desire to be penetrated by other males, while in others the physical charm of the subject is stressed. On the other hand, the androgyne of later Greek art and mythology was unknown to the Mesopotamians. That these hierodules could be bisexual and father children emerges from passages that allude to their children, with no suggestion that these were merely adopted. However, the *assinnu* might also be a eunuch, a "half male" in the language of the texts, which further equate him with a "broken vessel."

The appearance and behavior of the male prostitute were markedly effeminate: one of the emblems that he carried was the spindle, the symbol par excellence of women's labor; in one cuneiform text the term *nas pilaqqi*, "spindle-bearer" immediately follows *assinnu* and *kurgarru*, an affinity that sheds light on David's imprecation in II Samuel 3:29 ("one holding the spindle"). Certain of them had feminine names, and the guilds of male and female prostitutes at times included persons of the opposite sex from that of virtually all the others. The male might even serve as the lover of a woman, so that no strict line of demarcation was observed. There is even an astrological text in which the outcome of a given juxtaposition of the planets is that "Men will install *kurgarru* in their homes, and the latter will bear them children."

The attitude of contemporary Mesopotamian society toward these male prostitutes was ambivalent at best; even if they played a necessary role in its civilization, as individuals they were marginalized and subjected to intense contempt. In the Akkadian version of the Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World, Ereshkigal burdens Asushu-namir (and through him, all his imitators in the future), with a great curse that afflicts him with a pitiful exist-

tence, exposed to every mishap, and banished to the very fringe of the social space occupied by the denizens of the city. Others who shared this marginality were the "ecstasies," the eccentrics, and the insane. As "men transformed into women," male prostitutes were stigmatized even when they performed in the cult of Ishtar.

Literary Aspects. Quite different was the role of the homoerotic in the encounter of the hero Gilgamesh with the companion of his adventures, Enkidu. Here the analogy with the Achilles-Patroclus relationship in the *Iliad* is striking. If the institutionalized pederasty of the golden age of Hellenic civilization had not yet come into being, still the homosexual element entered spontaneously into friendship between males, and was not suppressed or condemned by their peers. It could even rival a heterosexual attachment, as when Gilgamesh spurns Ishtar's advances. Male bonding was superior to marriage in a society where the sexes were rigidly segregated in private life and loyalty on the battlefield was a vital element of comradeship. Recent investigators have discovered subtle patterns of erotic double-entendre in the original texts of the epic of Gilgamesh, one of the first classics of world literature. That such effusions of sexual feeling should have been present in historical liaisons, such as between David and Jonathan, is therefore only natural.

If love in the explicit sense is but rarely mentioned in Mesopotamian texts, the same intensity of feeling that occurs today could not have been alien to the hearts of men who lived four thousand years ago. In a series of prayers to accord divine favor to amorous attachment, one is concerned with "the love of a man for a man." No religious condemnation or taboo in any way analogous to the one in Judaism and Christianity has ever been found in the sources for modern knowledge of the land between the two rivers—texts that have the advantage of being contemporary and authentic, not copies made (or censored) by scribes of later cen-

turies who cherished a wholly different moral code.

Of lesbianism the Mesopotamian literature has virtually nothing to say: there is but a single mention of a homosexual relationship between two women in the thousands of cuneiform texts uncovered and deciphered since the mid-nineteenth century. This may be explained partly by the fact that the scribes who composed and transcribed the tablets were male, and partly by the circumstance that women's lives were private and outside the concern of male society. The lone exception is an astrological prognosis that "women will be coupled," which reveals that such practices were not unknown, and need not even have been rare.

Conclusion. Mesopotamian records attest that at the dawn of Near Eastern civilization, homosexual activity was, if not glorified, at least accepted as a part of everyday life alongside its heterosexual counterpart, and while the passive-effeminate male prostitute was stigmatized, the heroic component of male love was recognized and celebrated in literature of true verbal art. No ascetic tendencies in Mesopotamian religion cast their shadow over the erotic bond between males, and Ishtar, the goddess of love, gave her blessing to homosexual and heterosexual adorners alike.

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METASTASIO (ASSUMED NAME OF PIETRO TRAPASSI; 1698-1782)

Italian poet and opera librettist.

Hearing the ten-year-old lad improvising poems to a street crowd, an aristocratic literary critic, Gian Vincenzo Gravina, adopted the son of a Roman grocer. Gravina hellenized Trapassi to Metastasio and gave his young protégé, whom he made his heir adoptive, a fine education, but when the strain of competing with the leading *improvvisatori* in Italy nearly wrecked the ambitious boy's health, he sent his beloved protégé to rest quietly by the sea in Calabria.

In 1718 Gravina died, bequeathing a fortune to Metastasio, who had become an abbé. Having squandered his legacy in a mere two years, he had to apprentice himself to a Neapolitan lawyer. In 1721 he composed a serenata, *Gli Orti Esperidi*, at the request of the viceroy, to celebrate the birthday of the Empress of Austria. The Roman prima donna Marianna Benti-Bulgarelli (known as "La Romanina" [1684-1734]), who had played the leading role in the serenata, took Metastasio into her house where he long resided (together with her husband), and eventually moved in his parents and siblings. La Romanina persuaded him to abandon the law and to devote himself to music. Through La Romanina he came to know the leading composers: Porpora, Hasse, Pergolesi, Alessandro Scarlatti, Vinci, Leo, Durante, and Marcello—all of whom later set his libretti to music, and singers, with one of whom, the castrato Carlo Broschi (better known as Farinelli; 1705-1782), he may have had an affair. His 26 somewhat conventional melodramas (1723-1771), based on heterosexual love stories from classical mythology and history influenced by the seventeenth-century French theatre, often had absurd plots and little concern for historical accuracy. Yet when set to music, particularly of the Venetian school which was then eclipsing