

sexual orientation among human beings. The first such creatures were double beings, male-female, male-male, and female-female; to weaken their potency Zeus cut them in half, then refashioned them so that each half could find and unite with the other. The members of the androgynous pair would accomplish the act of reproduction. Deriving from a Babylonian myth reported by Berossus, this fanciful account of the cause of homosexuality shows that the ancients, aware of the phenomenon, invented an etiological legend that covered all the facts of sexual attraction, unlike the Judaic version in the book of Genesis that leaves only the proto-heterosexual pair.

Afterlife. The suppression of the homosexual element in the anthropology of Biblical Judaism later contributed to the defamation of homosexuality as "contrary to the will of the creator," but since the classical texts preserved into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance kept alive the homosexual mythology of Greco-Roman paganism, this offered an inexhaustible source of inspiration for writers and artists, and also a code by means of which tabooed and unnamable subjects could be raised with subtlety and double entendre. Although the conventional treatments of Greek and Roman mythology, especially in school texts, bowdlerized homoerotic themes, they persisted in the literature which those versed in the ancient languages were always free to consult. Allusions to heroes of homosexual love affairs were enough to suggest to the initiated the author's intent, as in the case of Whitman's *Calamus* poems; the language of Aesop conveyed the message despite Christian and then Victorian censorship. So the afterlife of the Greek myths undercut the heterosexual bias of Judeo-Christian theology, and for the sophisticated modern reader these legends revive the profoundly homoerotic ambiance of the "glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome."

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MYTHS AND FABRICATIONS

Prejudice against any human group manifests itself in stereotypes. Male homosexuals are said to be effeminate, superficial, and clannish, while lesbians are accused of being mannish, homely, and aggressive. Apart from these characterological ascriptions, however, historical study brings to light antihomosexual myths—purported true stories which are invented and propagated to validate bigotry.

Myths of Judeo-Christian Origin.

The most ancient and influential of these myths is the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 14, 18 and 19 tell of these arrogant cities and of their destruction by a rain of brimstone and fire. Over and over again, Christian statesmen and preachers have used the tale to demonstrate that if people do not renounce their wicked acts, they will go the way of Sodom and Gomorrah—whose historicity modern critical scholarship has utterly rejected and consigned to the realm of geographical legend.

According to a medieval legend, on Christmas eve, at the very moment of the Nativity of Jesus, all mankind guilty of homosexual sin died a sudden death. Unless human nature were purged of unnatural vice, the Savior could not be persuaded to assume human flesh. Although the story is often ascribed to St. Jerome in the fourth century (and in part to his contemporary, St. Augustine), in fact it cannot be traced back in manuscript sources before the Biblical Commentary of Hugh of St. Cher (about 1230–35), who claimed to have learned it from Peter the Chanter of Paris.

It may have been inspired by a Jewish midrash on the death of the Egyptians in the last of the ten plagues (Exodus 12:29). The tale reached a wide public through an uncritical compilation of saints' lives known as the *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus of Voragine (1290). For a long time no one cared to challenge this homophobic absurdity, and it was repeated by such worthies as St. Bonaventure (1221–1274), Roberto Caracciolo (1425–1495), and the Viennese preacher Abraham a Sancta Clara (1644–1709), who was apparently the last to take it seriously.

Another cluster of legends presents sodomites not as the victims of disasters but as their cause. Primitive cultures associated rainwater with the fertilizing effusions of the gods. Hence an equation of semen with rain water: if the males of a community waste their semen, the consequence will be a shortfall of rain and ensuing drought and famine. Homosexuals are the Jonahs who endanger the commonwealth; in the interest of public safety they must be eliminated, otherwise droughts and other injury to crops will follow. Then in **Byzantium** in the sixth century the Emperor Justinian proclaimed that unchecked homosexual activity provoked the wrath of God to visit earthquakes on districts where it was rampant—the superstitious echo of the Sodom legend. A millennium later folk accretions had increased the number of sodomy-caused disasters to a roster of six: earthquakes, floods, famines, plagues, Saracen incursions, and large field mice. Such superstitions might be thought safely dead, yet in 1976 the entertainer and crusading homophobe Anita Bryant produced a version of her own, alleging that droughts in Northern California had been caused by the gay mecca of **San Francisco**. And in the 1980s moralists have insisted that AIDS is the revenge of Mother Nature—or of the godhead itself—on unnatural practices.

Notions of Decadence. There are also myths about the course of universal history and the fate of nations within it.

Those do not learn from history, it is said, will be condemned to repeat it. One of the things learned from history, purportedly, is that the decline and fall of Greece and Rome were caused by their tolerance of homosexuality. More careful study of the development of these civilizations fails to substantiate this charge. The institution of **pederasty** is documented in the Greek city states almost from their inception. The training that a boy received was held to be character building in that it prepared him for service to the state. The military successes of the Greeks, especially in defending themselves against the Persians, would be unthinkable without the loyalty of male comradeship and the skills that it fostered. Only after the inception of the Hellenistic age in 323 did pederasty decline as an institution; and only after the neglect of this ancient institution did Greek civilization succumb to Roman conquest. Among the Romans themselves homosexual behavior is most clearly evident in the first and second centuries, which are generally regarded as the most flourishing period of the Empire. Only after the Christian emperors tried to repress homosexual behavior in the fourth and fifth centuries did the Western empire disintegrate and collapse in the wake of barbarian invasions. Furthermore, ancient authors themselves disagree as to whether "luxury and effeminacy" invaded Rome from the conquered provinces of Asia, or the Romans corrupted the subject peoples by introducing their lavish and ostentatious way of life to the Eastern regions of the empire. Historiography has witnessed a long debate over the causes of Rome's **decadence**, and a definitive answer has yet to be found.

A claim that recurs in the writings of heterosexual observers of society is that homosexual behavior is increasing, dangerously so. This notion has been documented from so many authors over the last several centuries that it is a virtual commonplace, yet it probably reflects at most the ability of the particular author to discern the presence of homosexual activ-

ity that is not immediately evident to the outsider. The implication is that a growing number of individuals are renouncing marriage and family obligations, and that if this trend persists the end result will be race suicide, because homosexual activity is intrinsically sterile, is a form of biological "death in life." This belief ignores the well-attested fact that superfetation cannot occur in homo sapiens, which is to say that nature has already set a limit on the number of children a woman can bear: once impregnated, she cannot conceive again until she has borne the child. Where "natural" fertility prevails, and nothing is done to check the results of sexual intercourse, a very small amount of heterosexual copulation would be enough to keep the entire female population of childbearing age continuously pregnant. Of course, no modern society could tolerate such a level of fertility; in a nation where 95 percent of all children born live to maturity, this would mean that in a mere two generations the population would increase 80 times! In point of fact, the fall of the birth rate in the last hundred years can be mainly ascribed to economic factors: the economic burden and liability that a child represents in urban middle-class society, where the cost of educating a child for a future career can consume a large portion of a family's financial resources. Only a few percent of the population is exclusively homosexual—not enough to have an appreciable effect on **demography**. Subsidies and other incentives for middle-class families have not succeeded in altering the negative ratio of births to deaths, and even the pronatalist policies of the National Socialist regime yielded a marked increase in births only in rural areas. Moreover, less developed areas of the globe are today afflicted with overpopulation that in the coming decades may lead to political crises as the demand for foodstuffs and public services makes it impossible for these countries to export enough of their natural resources or products of cheap labor to service their debts to the

lending nations, while advanced countries close their doors to immigration because the market for unskilled labor is dwindling.

Homosexuals as Antisocial.

There is also the notion that homosexuals form a secret society, a **freemasonry** whose rites of initiation exclude "normal," morally righteous members of society. Gay people are alleged to prefer one another for employment and advancement and to demand sexual favors from subordinates, especially young ones, in return for furthering their careers. Further, homosexuals are purportedly "uncomfortable" in the presence of normal people and prefer to be among their own as much as possible. But homosexual circles make the contradictory observation that "closet cases" deliberately shun and reject others of their ilk as a means of protecting their own covert identity.

Myths Originated by Homosexuals. These several myth types are the creation of societies seeking to rationalize discrimination and persecution of homosexuals. Gay people themselves have propagated others. The venerable archetype is the explanation of the source of sexual orientation presented in **Plato's Symposium** positing that human beings are in reality the sundered halves of original dual persons. Those who trace their origin to a male-female combination are heterosexual, yearning for union with a member of the opposite sex, while those who derive from male-male or female-female conjunctions are male homosexuals or lesbians, respectively. While Plato is not likely to have taken it seriously, this tale has a background in a Babylonian myth of primordial human androgyny. Imagined or not, for some today **androgyny** has a renewed appeal as a solution to the problems of **gender identity**.

A more sinister myth, invented and spread only in recent decades by homosexuals, is that the word **faggot** recalls the supposed medieval practice of using male homosexuals as kindling at the

public burning of witches and heretics. There is no historical record of such a practice, and the slang use of the pejorative term faggot (originally applied to a fat, slovenly woman) cannot be traced before American English of the twentieth century. Yet the myth, which may reflect an unconscious longing for martyrdom, has now taken on a life of its own, and will be hard to eradicate, particularly as dictionaries that list the several meanings of the word are not likely to include an explicit refutation of the false etymology.

A few homosexuals cherish the belief that a majority of the members of society would prefer same-sex acts if it were not for the pressures for conformity that are deployed to prevent this result. This view seems clearly a case of projection, for there is no indication that in an erotic "free-market" situation such choices would prevail, though it may be that bisexuality of some sort would be followed by the majority. But here one is dealing with hypothetical—and unlikely—scenarios, since no society yet known has renounced its capacity for social molding by seeking to channel sexual behavior. The social sciences do not know, and are un-

likely soon to learn, how people would behave in a hypothetical free market, unaffected by external conditioning. A related phenomenon is the gossip, once particularly common among gay men, claiming this or that noted figure in public life as a secret homosexual. The underlying assumption is that such instances could be multiplied ad infinitum.

Conclusion. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment bequeathed to educated society a hope of eliminating social myths that stood in the way of human happiness. Regrettably, the expectation that such a goal could be totally achieved is probably *utopian*: new myths spring up as others fade. Myths that flourished under Christian auspices survive under the aegis of officially atheist Communist states. Yet by exposing the myths, and the processes that lead to their formation, to the light of reasoned examination, the critical scholar may seek to limit their spread and noxious effect.

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