

behavior contrary to societal expectations, but there are individual conceptions of all roles in all societies. The process of role acquisition is not mere training in automaton-like replication of fixed roles. Human beings create meaning even when they are trying to follow a social script exactly. Conceptions of what homosexual roles require vary within as well as among societies.

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### ROLFE, FREDERICK WILLIAM ("BARON CORVO"; 1860-1913)

English adventurer, novelist, and historian. Born in London as the son of a dissenting piano manufacturer, he left school at 15, then studied briefly at Oxford. He served as a tutor and made ends meet as a poorly paid hack writer. He found a number of patrons during his career, but his lifelong attempt to convince the Catholic Church—to which he had become a convert—that he had a vocation for the priesthood developed (or rather accented) a pathological state of mind that bordered on paranoia, and inevitably led to his break with it.

In 1890 he received from Caroline, the Duchess of Sforza-Cesarini, the title of Baron Corvo, and she regarded him as her adopted grandson. While working for the firm of G. W. Wilson & Co. in

London in 1893, he invented underwater photography, but with no financial gain. To the *Yellow Book* he contributed six "Stories Toto Told Me" (1898); these legends of the saints, with 26 additional ones, were printed as *In His Own Image* (1901). A work written on commission for the money, the *Chronicles of the House of Borgia* (1901), displays his curious fund of knowledge, vivid but undisciplined imagination, and considerable prose talent. His self-deluded, self-justifying, spiritual dreams of a rejected convert who became the noblest of popes furnished the material for his best work of fiction, *Hadrian the Seventh* (1904), to which he added malicious sketches of his supposed enemies. The central character, Hadrian, though endowed with Rolfe's identity, still blurs the boundaries between autobiography, while the secondary characters, all puppets manipulated as part of the drama of Hadrian, stem directly from Rolfe's experience. Although the work is remarkable for its passages of wit and erudition, it spoils its effect by yielding to anti-socialist melodrama. The last years of his life were spent as a parasite in Venice. An idealized chronicle of the period from December 1908 to July 1909, with parting shots at his enemies, is contained in *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole*, edited by A. J. A. Symons in 1934. To this subject matter Rolfe added a tender account of homosexual love, disguised as the hero Nicholas Crabbe's love for Zilda, a girl who lived and dressed as the boy Zildo.

Homosexuality, and more particularly pederasty, as subjects for literature, were much in Rolfe's mind while he was writing this work. Sometime in 1909 he had sent to the British pederast John Gambriel Nicholson a "specimen" of some ten thousand words, an experiment in formulating homosexual experiences as though they were his own. In September of the same year he began writing to an English visitor to Italy, Charles Masson Fox, a series of letters that may well be the most painful and the most erotic homosexual

correspondence in English. Readers have found in them evidence that Rolfe was a corruptor of innocent youth, an insatiable and unrepentant sodomite, or contrariwise mere begging letters concocted out of the literature of homosexuality and the author's own imagination. They in effect promise his patron the sexual services of fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boys, many of them inexperienced.

Rarely has any man left so clear an account of his own sexual nature and his passionate hunger for its fulfillment, along with the tragic evidence of its constant frustration. Rolfe's own preference was for boys sixteen to eighteen years old—the upper limit of the pederast's range of interest. But with his slender and uncertain means he simply could not pay hustlers' fees or rent suitable premises for the rendezvous. He felt real sympathy for the Venetian boys—gondoliers and the like—with whom he associated, and bitterly regretted that he could do no more for them. His failure to achieve the erotic conquests for which he longed paralleled all of the other disappointments of his life. He succeeded in nothing that he attempted, and was denied everything that he sought from the church except faith itself.

Rolfe has been the object of a cult, inspired perhaps by the fascination which the career of a pretender with equal touches of the holy and the demonic exerts on those fated to live their adventures vicariously through literature. He is a classic type of the homosexual "begging intellectual," constantly trying to live by his wits and to bask in the favor of the wealthy and powerful, yet doomed by the inner flaws of his personality to the margin of society and even of sanity. Born without the means and social position to realize his grandiose ambitions, he nevertheless left a heritage that is part of English literature.

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## ROMAN EMPERORS

Although many Roman sovereigns took their official duties seriously, others—especially in the first century of the empire—used their almost limitless powers to secure personal pleasure. Roman biographers and historians supply abundant records of their careers, including their characteristic weaknesses. The first emperors, known as Julio-Claudian, came from the family of Julius Caesar. Although no Roman emperor ever failed to marry, Edward Gibbon remarked that "of the first fifteen emperors Claudius was the only one whose taste in love was entirely correct" (heterosexual).

*Julio-Claudian Dynasty.* Julius Caesar (ca. 102–44 B.C.), notorious as "the husband of every woman and the wife of every man," prostituted himself as a teenager to the Hellenistic monarch Nicomedes of Bithynia. His grand-nephew and successor Octavian—known as Augustus when emperor from 31 B.C. to A.D. 14—was a handsome lad beloved, perhaps physically, by Cicero, although in later life his wife Livia, the sole empress, provided him with as many women as he wished. The slide of Tiberius (ruled 14–37) into debauchery in his old age, analyzed by the genius of Tacitus in his *Annals*, on the isle of Capri, from whose fatal cliffs he pushed 76 suspect senators, is embellished by Suetonius, who in his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* described the swimming pool he kept filled with his "minnows," young boys and girls he taught to swim through his ancient legs and nibble his private parts. His vicious minister Sejanus had once been a senator's catamite.

Tiberius' nephew and assassin, the mad Caligula (37–41), who made his horse consul, ripped open the womb of his sister Drusilla out of fear that the progeny might succeed him and also indulged in pederasty with the patricians Marcus Lepidus and Valerius Catullus, Mnester the Comedian, and even foreign hostages. The drooling hunchback and stutterer Claudius (41–54), who survived Caligula's