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0521479347 - Foucault's Virginité: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality

Simon Goldhill

Excerpt

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I

VIRGINITY AND
GOING THE WHOLE HOG:
VIOLENCE AND THE
PROTOCOLS OF DESIRE

I've been the whole hog plenty of times. Sometimes ...
you can be happy ... and not go the whole hog. Now
and again ... you can be happy ... without going any
hog.

H. Pinter, *The Homecoming*

Imagine a symposium of young women, not of men; held not at a rich citizen's celebration of a theatrical success but in a paradise garden of soft trees and gentle breezes. Imagine this symposium led not by the ironic and satyric Socrates, but by Thecla, the tortured companion of St Paul. Imagine the *Symposium* committed not to praising desire, but to praising virginity: 'For exceeding great, awesome and worthy is Virginity.' This *Symposium* is the work of Methodius, a third-century Christian from the Aegean coast of Turkey: an eleven-book account not of 'the god, Desire', but of how 'virginity with but a bare change of letters is divinity', (*parthenia/partheia*).¹ This little-read homily may stand as an icon for the major concerns of this and subsequent chapters, though the writings I will be mobilizing in general will be of quite a different order of righteousness, their symposiums less relentlessly sober.

First of all, the fetish of virginity for both men and women becomes through the course of later antiquity a key sign of what Peter Brown has called a 'change in the perception of the body itself'.² It is not merely that 'asceticism was in the air', a topic to be traced 'in medical ... philosophical and religious terms',³ but that the relationship between the body and the self, between the self and the world, between the self and others, particularly the divine other,

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is being reformed. The connection between 'integritas' and 'sanctitas', as Augustine would put it, or between citizenship and penetration, as Foucault would put it, becomes a battleground of definition. The Greek novels which form the central texts of this study, stem from this selfsame world of conflict and demonstrate the same obsession with virginity. Although, as we will see, the relations between the novels and the society in which they were written are extremely hard to trace even in outline, their passion for chastity cannot be seen merely as a literary *topos* (despite the evident influence of New Comedy's constant staging of rape and the anxiety of virginity⁴), or as a sign of The Romance (despite the earliest novels' already fertile interest in bodily integrity). In later antiquity, virginity was a hot topic.

Secondly, Methodius' rewriting of a Platonic literary and philosophical form is testimony to the deep ambivalence that Christian intellectuals display towards the inheritance of classical culture – St Jerome says he had a terrifying nightmare in which he was flagellated before the gates of heaven for his continuing love of pagan texts: 'Ciceronianus es, non Christianus', thunders the judge, 'You are Ciceronian not Christian.'⁵ Methodius needs and embraces what he is translating and appropriating. On the one hand, this Christian in Asia Minor writing in Greek, using a model of some six hundred years earlier from a different and still powerful intellectual tradition, thus bears witness to the mingling of cultural influences in the Roman empire, that so strikingly transforms the normative articulations of self and other which are so familiar from the classical polis. (And the novels regularly transport their heroes and heroines in a grand cultural tour around the Mediterranean from Persian court to Alexandrian art gallery to Ethiopian mystery rituals ...) On the other hand, Methodius' active redrafting of Plato emphasizes the pull of the past in the very claims of the newness of his testament. The novels are similarly aware of their belated position within literary tradition. The Second Sophistic – the conventional name of the period (*circa* 50–250 CE) in which the Greek novels seem to have been written⁶ – is so called precisely because it promotes a revival of the 'sophistic' attitudes, forms and language of the classical polis. This sense of the weight of the past is seen not merely in the settings of novels in the past – the fifth-century BCE world of Thucydides,

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say, in the case of Chariton, the earliest extant novelist – but also and most importantly in the allusive layering of language and narrative. This is nowhere more evident than in *Daphnis and Chloe*, whose pastoral fiction displays and transforms the language of Theocritus, comedy, Plato, Sappho, Homer ...⁷ As with Methodius' religious tract, the significance of the erotic narratives I shall be discussing is formulated in and against a lengthy tradition of writing about desire and sexuality.

Methodius' praise of virginity has a didactic import. Indeed, while Methodius' work replays the form of Plato's dialogues by having the symposium of women relayed by a certain Gregorion to a certain Euboulion⁸ (both female), it also returns at the end of the dialogue to the framing scene (unlike Plato's work) so that Gregorion and Euboulion can finally discuss and underline the conclusion to be drawn from the speeches (as if trying to avoid the openness so carefully cultivated by Plato). Where Plato famously inscribes himself as absent from the dialogue around Socrates' death-bed ('Plato was ill ...'), Gregorion in an authorizing gesture tells us in the final pages that Methodius, absent inevitably from the maidens' symposium, none the less learnt precisely what has just been recounted from the hostess of the symposium herself (293). How desire is (to be) taught is a repeated concern of this book: what is the strategic place of erotic narrative in the discourse of desire and how is it to be negotiated? Although the use of prose narratives to construct a telling lesson is a fundamental part of Christian tradition with the gospels, the martyr acts, and the saints' lives (as it is of the Jewish tradition of Midrash), for Peter Brown and Michel Foucault it is primarily the homiletic texts of philosophy and theology that offer a view of the policed world of sexual relations. The novels, however, not merely adopt and adapt the language of teaching and the structures of didacticism for their erotic narratives, but also in the very production of 'histoires d'amour' constitute a (normative) site of engagement for the readers' understanding of how desire works. My discussion of erotic narrative is to explore what is telling about desire. Whose story is being laid out when you read a love story?

A central term in this erotic discourse is *sophrosune*, which is regularly translated as 'self-control', 'chastity', 'temperance', 'con-

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tinence'. This polyvalent expression of proper attitudes has a long and recently much-discussed history.⁹ For the classical city, it implies a political, moral and sexual control over the destabilizing forces of desire (for sex, food, drink, power . . .). So particularly for the female subject, *sophrosune* is associated with a chastity that is indicative of a female's proper place within the patriarchal household and the polis. For the ancient moralists it becomes the defining characteristic of the proper role of the citizen. For Methodius' Marcella it is paradigmatically a sexual continence, a control of desire, that is but a step towards the commitment to virginity: in the proper order of things the move should be made by Christians from a resistance to transgression 'to *sophrosune* and from *sophrosune* to virginity, from where, by learning to despise the flesh, they fearlessly reach a haven in the calm waters of incorruptibility' (1.18). As we will see, the link between *sophrosune*, sexual corruption and sexual purity is repeatedly made in the novel, though without necessarily rehearsing the passage towards the blissful harbours of religious purity that Methodius' Marcella requires. The realignment of the care for the flesh that is characteristic of later antiquity brings with it a realignment and a new contestation of the senses of *sophrosune*, an ideological matrix in which the novel also plays a significant role.

Methodius' Gregorion and Euboulion end by agreeing ('Aye, by *Sophrosune*!') that it is 'better to maintain virginity without experiencing desire than to be able to control one's desire' (*Epilogue* 293). The onset, control and negotiation of desire between a young male and a young female, both as yet untouched by sexual contact, is the motivating force of the plotting of the best-known novel, Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*. Indeed, so untainted are the young shepherd and shepherdess, Daphnis and Chloe, that they are represented as knowing nothing at all about desire, not even the name or word, Eros. It is this novel of the invention or discovery of desire that will provide the focus of this first chapter. Where Christian apologetics are so concerned with man's fall from an innocent state in the garden (and in some radical cases with a hope to destroy this fallen world by a militant abstention from the lures of the flesh), *Daphnis and Chloe* (which, it had better be said, shows no knowledge not merely of Christianity but also, it seems, even of Roman culture) establishes a

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quite different fiction of innocence – a pastoral landscape, an enchanting prose style, rich in sophisticated naivety, and a world where pirates are undone by a shepherdess's pipe, and a ruined flower garden is a most violent scene of destruction.

Yet this fiction of innocence which informs *Daphnis and Chloe* is manipulated so knowingly, so scandalously even, that the novel's status as founding text in the history of pastoral romance has provoked in the modern era a startling range of response – from wry amusement at the series of misprisions that constitutes literary tradition, through admiration for its 'sober portrait of naivety', to disgust at what Rohde famously called 'the revolting, hypocritical sophistication' of the work.¹⁰ The fiction of the natural, innocent state of the protagonists, Daphnis and Chloe, produces a narrative of ignorance and education focused on what Tony Tanner, following Lacan, terms 'The Whence of Desire' – which Tanner glosses grandly as 'necessarily a central topic of all literature'.¹¹ If the history of the novel is a history of the 'complex, devious and diverse manifestations' of 'the diffuse genesis of desire',¹² *Daphnis and Chloe*, at the outset of that tradition, offers the representation of an erotic relationship which does not even know the word 'desire', so that the genesis of desire in nature – in all senses of the phrase – may be held up to view and reflection. That Daphnis and Chloe find themselves performing a series of actions fully recognized in the ancient world as the highly conventional gestures of socialized courtship, inevitably raises a set of questions about the natural and the conventional in desire. When on the one hand Daphnis and Chloe know naturally to pelt each other with apples – that most conventional behaviour of the ancient wooing shepherd; and when on the other hand Daphnis and Chloe have to be taught that most natural of acts, sexual intercourse – and it takes four books and several types of lesson to complete the education – the boundaries of what is natural and what is conventional with regard to desire are provocatively problematized. (And as many sets of quotation marks as is thought fit can be placed around my uses of the terms 'natural', 'conventional' 'knows' etc.) As Froma Zeitlin has recently written of the erotic entanglements of Daphnis and Chloe: 'conventions are rooted in nature – or is it the other way round? – that nature (or more accurately our perceptions of it) is deeply conventional'.¹³

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This necessary *double-take* is played out time and again in the twists and turns of Longus' tale.

It is the proem of the work, however, that first establishes the relationship between the erotic text and *sophrosune* as being of particular importance. The narrator, while hunting (an activity often associated as a practice and an image system with amorous pursuit) on Lesbos (an island whose tradition of erotic poetry is celebrated and much echoed in the novel), visits a grove (a locus of often surprising erotic encounters away from the city) sacred to the Nymphs (the sponsors and tutelary spirits of (particularly pastoral) desire). There, he views a painting, dedicated to the Nymphs, of a Love Story (*tuchen erotiken*). The painting, he observes, is 'more pleasurable' (*terpnoteron*) even than the lovely scene of the grove – a characteristically sophistic evaluation of art (*techne*) over and against unadorned nature. As the narrator observes with wonder the scenes of the painting, which he describes as *panta erotika*, 'all the love-story stuff', a 'longing' (*pothos*) comes over him to rival the art of painting in the art of prose (*antigrapsai tēi graphēi*). Seeing erotic art produces longing, here to compete in artistic production: Longus playfully manipulates not merely the association of painting and writing that goes back at least and most famously to the dictum of Simonides ('painting is silent poetry, poetry painting that speaks'), but also the specifically Hellenistic accounts of the feelings stimulated by erotic fictions/paintings, together with the equally Hellenistic sense of generic, agonistic interplay and artistic competition.¹⁴ With the help of an interpreter of the image, he thus offers the four books of *Daphnis and Chloe* as a 'dedication to Eros, the Nymphs, and Pan' and as a 'a pleasurable possession (*ktēma terpson*) for all mankind'. Thucydides famously called his History a *ktēma es aei*, 'a possession for all time'. Longus' allusion to the historian here is not merely to set up a wryly self-deprecating or ironically grandiose association of the novel with the grandest and most austere of classical prose works, but also to place emphasis on the adjective, *terpson*, 'pleasurable'. This thoroughly un-Thucydidean aim of pleasure¹⁵ marks a rhetorical self-positioning with regard to what is a 'focal point for historiographical dispute throughout the Hellenistic period'¹⁶ – the theoretical opposition between the 'pleasurable' (and 'the mythic') on the one hand, and 'the useful' (and the

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researched) on the other. It also, however, recalls the lure of Gorgias' sophistic rhetoric (who declares programmatically that there is no pleasure (*terpsis*) in telling people who know, what they know); and Gorgias in turn recalls the Homeric 'pleasure' in poetry, a scene of delight which also provokes the Platonic attacks on the ability of rhetoric and poetry *merely* to pleasure its audience.¹⁷ *Terpnon*, in other words, points towards the contested relations of (im)proper pleasure between a text and an audience. The term *terpnon* here, then, picks up the 'pleasure' of the picture in the promise of the 'pleasure' of the novel itself, but it also looks forward, as we will see, both to its repeated use in the narrative of Daphnis' search for sexual knowledge (where the pleasurable and the useful overlap . . .), and also and directly, in its provocative sense of how a work of literature might affect its audience, to the concluding lines of the proem, which I give here in Thornley's translation, as redrafted by Edmonds in the Loeb edition:

and a delightful possession even for all men. For this will cure him that is sick, and rouse him that is in the dumps; one that has loved, it will remember of it; one that has not, it will instruct. For there was never any yet that wholly could escape love, and never shall there be, never so long as beauty shall be, never so long as eyes can see. But help me that God to write the passions of others; and while I write, keep me in my own right wits.*

'All men' are subcategorized according to their experience of desire, and the book's effects are listed according to those experiences of desire. The novel is offered first as a panacea for the sickness and depression of desire – the common trope of love as malady; second, the tale promotes knowledge, reminding one who has experienced desire, and the 'one that has not [experienced desire] it will instruct' – the proclaimed didacticism of this erotic narrative. The reason why (*gar*) 'all men' are categorized according to desire, however, is that desire afflicts all men: 'no-one has escaped or will escape desire'. This will be the case 'as long as beauty exists and eyes see'. As the narrator has been prompted to write by a view of what is beautiful, so, as long as eyes by seeing prove the source of desire

* κτῆμα δὲ τερπνὸν πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις, ὃ καὶ νοσοῦντα ἰάσεται καὶ λυπούμενον παραμυθήσεται, τὸν ἐρασθέντα ἀναμνήσει, τὸν οὐκ ἐρασθέντα παιδεύσει. πάντως γὰρ οὐδεὶς ἔρωτα ἔφυγεν ἢ φεύξεται, μέχρι ἂν κάλλος ἦ καὶ ὀφθαλμοὶ βλέπωσιν. ἡμῖν δὲ ὁ θεὸς παράσχοι σωφρονουσι τὰ τῶν ἄλλων γράφειν.

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(and we will discuss how this is worked out for Chloe shortly), desire will be ineluctable. Everyone is subject to desire, and this narrative tells of the education of Daphnis and Chloe in part at least to be educational with regard to desire. This claim of a propaedeutic function, however, leads directly in the final sentence of the poem to a prophylactic prayer. The author hopes to keep his writing free of the desire that threatens self-control. He prays for *sophrosune* . . . As the pleasure of the beautiful picture prompted 'longing' in him, and as he offers the text as a 'pleasurable possession', so now he hopes to write of others' affairs without losing his cool. Writing about desire has its risks . . . The self-awareness of the dangers of self-implication here seems particularly instructive (as teachers and critics of this teaching manual – will, may, should – have found out). As the poem after its generalizations about all men moves for the first time into the first person plural, one question raised is to what degree and in what ways the prophylactic prayer of the author for self-control is programmatic for us readers of this educational text. How do self-control and self-awareness or self-implication interact in this didactic text of (innocents) learning about desire?

To explore this sense of (self-)control over the fictions of desire I will turn first to two especially relevant scenes, namely, the onset of desire in Chloe, and the scene in which Daphnis is taught by a married woman about penetrative sexual intercourse. In both cases, I will be concerned to analyse how the narrative's display of innocence together with its claims to teach on the one hand, and its worry about *sophrosune* on the other, work to implicate the reader in a particularly telling dynamic of self-control and pleasure. From these two paradigmatic scenes of desire, education and erotics, I will move to engage explicitly with one of the most adept blendings of Foucauldian theory and classical scholarship, namely, Jack Winkler's *The Constraints of Desire*, a book which has made it harder than ever to treat the novels' treatments of sexuality simply as trivial entertainment or light humour. Indeed, this book's discussion of *Daphnis and Chloe* establishes a remarkable account not merely of what the lesson taught by this erotic fiction is, but also of the relation between the pleasures of the text and the politics of reading. As this radical exegete and translator analyses in particular the role of the exegetes of desire within the novel, the question of what it is

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to read and write (of) desire will emerge in a particular and striking form – as I attempt to trace how the history of the discourse of desire is informed by the dynamics of reading erotic narrative. How does writing about Longus' narrative of desire become enmeshed in the strategies of self-control and the lures of self-implication?

Let me set the first scene in a context. *Eros*, desire, says the narrator, enflames the young couple by the following device (1.11). Daphnis has fallen into an animal trap and been rescued (1.12); Chloe helps wash him clean (1.13). She has been much taken by the delicacy of his flesh and by the impression his beauty makes on her. She sees him play the pipes and thinks it must be his playing that produces the impression of attractiveness that she feels. We pick up the story as she tries a control experiment – by getting him to wash again and to be touched by her again to test her response (1.13):

Then she asked him if he would come again to the bath, and when she persuaded him, watched him at it; and as she watched, put out her hand and touched him; and before she went home had praised his beauty, and that praise was the beginning of love.*
Edmonds/Thornley

This time of washing, then, she praises him – *epainesasa* – and, the narrator concludes, this praise was the 'beginning of desire', the *erotos arche*. Since this is the most explicit statement of 'the whence of desire', I want to dwell very briefly on this phrase and I have two points I wish to make. The first is this. In terms of the expected narratives of desire that Longus so carefully manipulates in this novel,¹⁸ the origin of desire is a well-known problem. 'Tell me, Moon, whence came my desire' is the refrain of Simaetha's lament in Theocritus' famous second *Idyll*, for example; and the parentage of the god of desire is, precisely, a standard question of debate at least since Plato's *Symposium*.¹⁹ The usual moment of the onset of desire is sight. (So the desire to write the novel comes from seeing a picture, and desire, in the proem, is said to be inescapable 'so long as eyes can see'.) Lust at first sight is a *topos* of erotic experience in Greek poetry. Particularly the sight of a naked youth. Now, Chloe has, of course, spent many days with Daphnis, so it is not exactly 'first sight' that counts here, so much as the moment of viewing at the

* ἔπεισε δὲ αὐτὸν καὶ λούσασθαι πάλιν καὶ λουόμενον εἶδε καὶ ἰδουσα ἤψατο, καὶ ἀπῆλθε πάλιν ἐπαινέσασα, καὶ ὁ ἔπαινος ἦν ἔρωτος ἀρχή.

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bath itself. It is when he stands in the spring and washes that 'it seemed to Chloe as she viewed him that Daphnis was beautiful'.* As Odysseus rises from the bath beautified by the goddess Athene to be an object of amazement to Nausicaa or Penelope, so here for the observing, gazing²⁰ girl it is only now from the bath that Daphnis seems *kalos*: the echo of the archetypal inscription of a Greek male's wonder or boast of triumph – *kalos ho pais* – points towards an attack of *eros*, as the text refuses recognition of such an attack to the girl. Indeed, 'because he did not seem beautiful before, she thought that the bath was the source (*aition*) of the beauty'. The narrator, with his ironic twist of the Homeric narrative of beautification by bathing, sets the 'literary awareness' of the sophisticated reader against the 'innocent feelings' of the girl in the pursuit of an explanation of glamorous beauty. Chloe goes further than Nausicaa, however. For she washes Daphnis, and is much taken by the softness of his skin, as her other senses are gradually involved: 'So she secretly touched herself often, testing to see if she were more delicate.'[†] Longus with a recession of voyeuristic representation offers to the reader's view the beautiful girl touching herself as she watches the beautiful boy washing ... From this scene, Chloe suffers one effect: the wish (*epithumein*) to see Daphnis washing again. The word *eros* again does not occur as Chloe's feelings are described as a wish, or appetite (*epithumein* is often opposed to *eran* in the moralists, as 'appetite/lust' to 'love / higher feeling'). The next day as they pasture their flocks, Daphnis plays his pipes. Chloe again looks at him attentively (*heōra*) and listens (as her hearing joins her sight and touch) and again *edokei kalos*, 'he seemed beautiful', and this time she thinks that the 'music-making was the cause (*aitian*) of his beauty'. In Greek culture, even in Plato's Utopias, the training in nobility – in how to be a *kalos kagathos*, a 'gentleman' – always included music, dance and poetry. As with the wry treatment of Homeric beautification, however, any association between 'music' and being *kalos* is here reduced to the misprision of the shepherdess' aetiology. It is after these synaesthetic perceptions of beauty that the sight of the naked body and the touching of the delicate flesh are carefully rehearsed and repeated at Chloe's request.

* ἔδοκεϊ τῇ Χλόῃ θεωμένη καλὸς ὁ Δάφνις.

† ὥστε λαθοῦσα ἑαυτῆς ἤψατο πολλάκις, εἰ τρυφερωτέρα εἶη πειρωμένη.