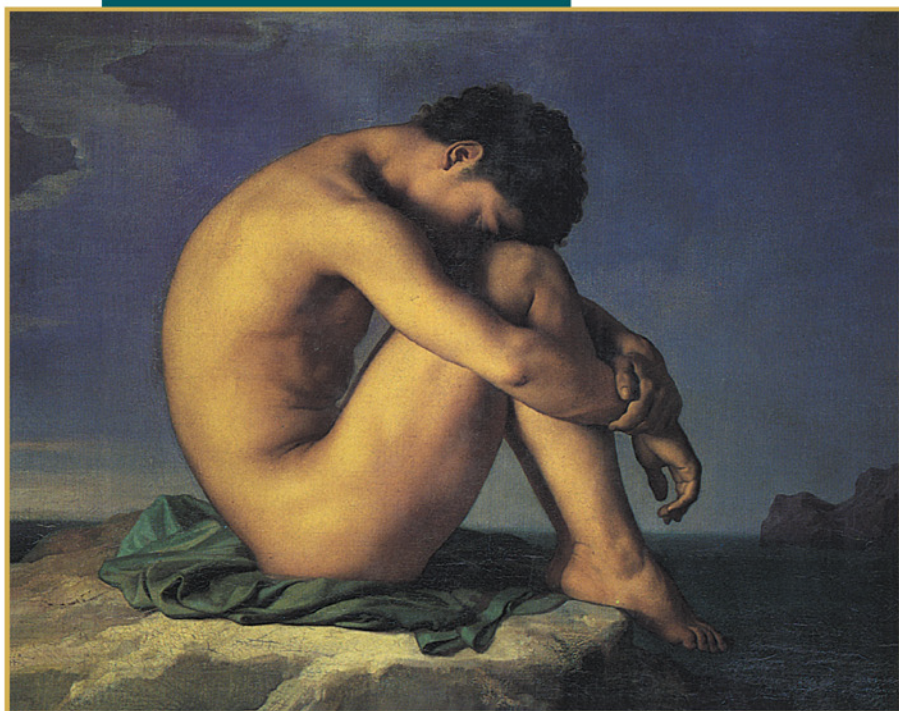


THE
SEDUCTION
OF THE
MEDITERRANEAN



WRITING, ART AND
HOMOSEXUAL
FANTASY

Robert Aldrich



**Also available as a printed book
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THE SEDUCTION OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Mediterranean was the central theme in homoerotic writing and art from the 1750s to the 1950s. Writers and artists delved into classical mythology and history for figures—such as Ganymede, Antinous, Achilles and Patroclus—through which they could portray a sexuality considered by society as a sin, an illness and a crime. Many journeyed to the south of Europe, particularly Italy, to admire the ruins of Antiquity and the paintings of the Renaissance, escape the social censure of their home countries and find sexual partners.

The lives and works of forty writers are examined, from the art historian Winckelmann in the 1700s, through Romantic poets such as Byron and Platen, to their successors drawn to the Mediterranean from across Europe, including Wilde, Isherwood and Forster. Attention is given to the works of such painters as Girodet and von Marées and the photographs of von Gloeden and List.

Robert Aldrich sets the phenomenon of homosexual interest in the Mediterranean in its social and historical context, looking at tourism, economic disparities between northern visitors and southern 'natives' and the sexual mores of southern men. He suggests that different myths replaced that of the homoerotic Mediterranean by the 1960s as gay liberation diminished the need for the legitimation of homosexuality which the classics provided and law reform lessened the need for exile.

This book brings together for the first time a study of seminal figures in homosexual culture and explains the link—fascination with the Mediterranean—which bound them together.

Robert Aldrich is Associate Professor of Economic History at the University of Sydney. His publications include *France and the South Pacific since 1940* (1993), *Gay Perspectives: Essays in Australian Gay Culture* (edited with Garry Wotherspoon, 1992) and *France's Overseas Frontier: Départements et Territoires d'Outre-Mer* (with John Connell, 1992).

THE SEDUCTION OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

Writing, art and homosexual fantasy

Robert Aldrich



London and New York

First published 1993
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Aldrich, Robert
Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing,
art and homosexual fantasy
I. Title
809.8

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Aldrich, Robert
The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, art and homosexual
fantasy/Robert Aldrich.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. European literature—History and criticism. 2. Homosexuality in literature.
 3. Mediterranean Region in literature. I. Title.
- PN721.A43 1993

809'.93321822—dc20

92—40812
CIP

ISBN 0-203-16005-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-16008-8 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-03227-X ISBN 0-415-09312-0 (pbk)

To Robert Conrad and Malcolm McKay

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PREFACE

'If you are Mediterranean, easygoing, fit, short-to-medium in height who would like to meet two, late-twenties, Anglo-Celtic guys who are fit and attractive, please write....' So reads a personal advertisement in a gay magazine published in Melbourne, Australia. Such advertisements are one way in which gay men search for sexual partners, preserving their anonymity except to those who respond to their calls, yet describing the sort of partner or the kind of sexual activity which they desire. In this case, the object of desire for the 'Anglo-Celtic' men is a 'Mediterranean' man, and they probably hope to find someone with olive skin and dark eyes and hair, who may also be muscular and hirsute. The stereotype of a man from the Mediterranean region is their sexual, and perhaps romantic, fantasy, an ideal of masculine beauty and virility.

Sexual fixation on a particular type of individual—a tall, dark and handsome man or a buxom blonde woman, for instance—is common and is not restricted to homosexuals. Interest in 'Mediterranean' men is relatively widespread in the homosexual world, and the image has a long enough and important enough history for the Mediterranean lover to be considered one of the primary homosexual symbols. That is the subject of this work.

This is a study of a specific but recurring theme in the writings and art of men considered to be homosexual and an attempt to place that theme in its historical context. I write as a historian, not as a specialist in literature or art or an expert in psychology; what interests me is tracing the origins and development of a certain type of homosexual image and setting it within the history of European society. My examples, which are far from exhaustive, are chosen primarily from English, French and German sources, but there are parallels in other cultures as well; limitations on space have made it impossible to discuss other cases. My intention is to contribute to the now burgeoning field of gay studies and to examine the connections between the history of homosexuality and the wider social and cultural history.

The introduction looks at a particular example of homosexual obsession with the Mediterranean, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and an

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opera and film both inspired by that work. Chapter 1 explores sex and sexual relations in the classical world, in history, literature and philosophy, as models from Antiquity provided the central theme in later homosexual writing and art. (Readers familiar with ‘homosexuality’ in the classical world and the Renaissance may wish to go straight to the following chapter.) Chapter 2 examines the lives and works of the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the Romantic poet August von Platen; the following chapter crosses to Britain and surveys homosexual writing about the European Mediterranean, classical and more modern, from Lord Byron to E.M.Forster. In Chapter 4, the focus shifts back to continental Europe to survey a large group of Europeans whose homosexual sentiments found overt or coded representation in works on Italy and southern Europe. Chapter 5 looks at art and photography, such as homoerotic images in the works of the painters Girodet, von Marées and Solomon and the photographers von Gloeden, Day and List. The next chapter explores the social, economic and cultural context of homosexual fascination with the Mediterranean from the mid-1700s to the mid-1900s, and the final chapter looks at some more recent examples—and refutations—of the theme in the works of authors such as Christopher Isherwood and Mary Renault. The conclusion sums up the history of the myth of a homoerotic Mediterranean.

The basic hypothesis is that the image of a homoerotic Mediterranean, both classical and modern, is the major motif in the writings and art of homosexual European men from the time of the Enlightenment until the 1950s. The classical ‘model’ of ‘homosexuality’ (or, more properly, pederasty) formed the central argument in apologias for homosexuality, and the classical statue provided the archetype for male beauty and ‘homosexual’ aesthetics. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean, especially Italy, provided a destination for many homosexual authors and artists who fled their home countries. The hospitality of Italy to their interests, sexual and cultural, was closely connected to the socioeconomic conditions there. The writers and artists who lived in the Mediterranean created and perpetuated the myth of the homoerotic South, conflating ancient and modern images. However, other ‘models’ came to challenge the Mediterranean myth and ultimately triumphed over it. Nevertheless, the homoerotic Mediterranean myth was a particular view of Antiquity, the Renaissance and the modern Mediterranean transmitted from homosexual writers and artists to a wider public, and it helped fertilise more general European views of history, art and aesthetics.

This study does not try to be encyclopaedic and mention every author and artist in whose work homoeroticised references to the classical or modern Mediterranean has appeared. Over fifty figures prove the breadth and persistence of the phenomenon. The southern shore of the Mediterranean (except for occasional references to Alexandria) is not discussed. Many homosexuals sought sexual fulfilment, or experienced their

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sexual awakening, in North Africa and the Middle East, and there exists a substantial body of literature (if somewhat less art) which embodies their interests; the writings of Gide and Genet are prime examples. The Islamic world presents many similarities with the European Mediterranean—the context of ethnocentric views and colonial administration, and perhaps, as well, particular attitudes towards sexual behaviour in North Africa and the Middle East. However, an attempt to examine homosexual interest in the Islamic world could only be made cursorily here and would have taken the book too far from its central topic.

Little attention is devoted to lesbians in this book, although lesbian history and culture owe a great debt to the classical age (notably the poetry of Sappho) and some northern lesbians became expatriates in southern Europe (as witnessed by the lesbian community on Capri). But ‘Greek love’ did not hold the central place in the history of lesbians as it did in the history of homosexual men. Furthermore, lesbians were less often forced by legal persecution to flee their home countries than were homosexual men.

Many heterosexuals from northern Europe and elsewhere sought romance and sex in the Mediterranean, where their encounters took the form of visits to brothels, liaisons with local partners or lifelong unions. Southern Europe was—and is—reputed to be the place where many visiting heterosexuals shed their puritanical morals. The recollection of their adventures is present in much art, literature and film. Such heterosexual renditions, however, are not my theme.

I have emphasised the works of my chosen subjects which deal specifically with the South and, in more or less overt form, their sexual desires and pursuits. This is not meant to imply that these figures were obsessed with sex or that homosexuality necessarily provides the key to their *œuvres*. Nonetheless, in all of the figures discussed here, the attraction to the Mediterranean and to men—whether the goal was comradeship or coition—weighed heavily enough on their artistic or literary temperaments to leave a clear imprint on their novels and poems, essays and treatises, paintings and photographs. A non-sexual interpretation of their works may be legitimate, but here the focus is on the very aspects of art and literature which reflected homosexual interests or which aroused a special identification among homosexual readers or viewers.

This work owes much to the growing field of gay studies. Only in recent years has academic scholarship admitted serious interest in the history of homosexuals. Perhaps not coincidentally two important studies of homosexuality which appeared at the beginning of this wave of interest concerned Greek homosexuality and the British Uranian poets, whose allusions to the classical world were legion.¹ Yet it is only with difficulty that the study of homosexuality has established itself in mainstream research and writing. Homosexual aspects of certain historical and cultural phenomena are slighted by many writers—several books on tourists in the Mediterranean

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and on nineteenth-century attitudes towards Antiquity give less space to homosexuals than is due.²

I am grateful to a number of people who aided me in this project. If I do not list the names of many individuals who have offered useful leads and comments, it is only for fear of inadvertently omitting some who should be included. Ayling Rubin carried out research assistance at an early stage, and Lola Sharon Davidson provided immensely valuable work at a later stage. My colleague Garry Wotherspoon read various drafts attentively. Gary Simes and Paul Knobel kindly lent several publications, and Jonathan Harrison photocopied others for me in the library of Harvard University. My teacher, Rudolph Binion, as always had stimulating insights and read the manuscript perceptively. Julie Manley typed various versions, and my publishers have waited most patiently for the delivery of the final manuscript. To them, and to the various friends who gave the support and diversion without which no project, academic or otherwise, can come to fruition, I give my thanks.

Robert Aldrich

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean obsession

DEATH IN VENICE

Gustav von Aschenbach, searching for ‘a new type of hero’ with ‘an intellectual and virginal manliness’, journeys to ‘the incomparable, the fabulous, the like-nothing-else-in the world’ city of Venice, there to find a ‘half-grown lad, a masterpiece from nature’s own hand...a tender young god, emerging from the depths of sea and sky’. The hero of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, written in 1911, is a distinguished middle-aged German writer, the very model of respectability and achievement. Aschenbach is, however, self-oppressed, ‘too busy with tasks imposed upon him by his own ego and the European soul’. The sight of a southerly traveller in a cemetery gives him a ‘longing to travel’, an ‘impulse towards flight’. He decides on Venice, ostensibly to spend a quiet summer on the beach but, in fact, in an attempt to escape the regimen of his work—he admits ‘he got no joy of it’—and to break out of his self-imposed solitary existence: Aschenbach’s longing for companionship and sexual comfort is hardly apparent even to himself. Venice, with its rich history and mysterious charm and the expanse of the Lido beaches, beckons the staid German.

He travels by ship to Venice, then takes a gondola through the Grand Canal, past the fabulous piazza, the famous lion and the basilica of San Marco, and installs himself at the elegant Hôtel des Bains on the Lido. Among the guests, a cosmopolitan lot, are a wealthy Polish woman, her plain daughters and her beautiful son, Tadzio, whom Aschenbach spies on the beach soon after his arrival. He is instantly lovestruck; in Tadzio, ‘he told himself that what he saw was beauty’s very essence’. Aschenbach both lusts after him and worships him from afar, not daring to thrust himself upon the blond ephebe. He follows Tadzio, moons over him in the hotel restaurant, tries to concoct reasons to speak to him or his mother, but he remains paralysed by his obsession. So distraught is Aschenbach that he tries to leave Venice, but uses the excuse of misdirected luggage to return, secretly admitting that he is prolonging his stay in order to be near Tadzio. Still he

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is unable to act on his feelings, despite regular proximity to Tadzio and the boy's flirtatious smiles. The German idealises his passion, apotheosising Tadzio and seeing an imagined rivalry with Tadzio's handsome playmate for the boy's attention as a competition between classical divinities; as 'at such times it was not Tadzio whom he saw, but Hyacinthus, doomed to die because two gods were rivals for his love'. However, it is Aschenbach who is doomed; unable to fulfil his desire, the writer is driven to pathetic attempts to rejuvenate himself by having his hair dyed and his face made up. Meanwhile, rumours spread about a deadly plague infecting the city; officials deny the existence of an epidemic, but gradually tourists leave the city, and the odd medicinal smells Aschenbach notices suggest all is not well. Finally, someone warns Aschenbach to flee. Powdered and painted, feverish and panic-stricken, Aschenbach learns that the Polish family, too, are departing. He stumbles onto the beach for a last look at his idol. As Tadzio plays with his friends and glances in his direction, Aschenbach settles into a beach-chair and quietly succumbs to the cholera.¹

In 1971, Luchino Visconti made a film of *Death in Venice*; the script was written by Visconti and Nicola Badalucco and the film starred Dirk Bogarde, Silvana Mangano, Bjørn Andresen and Marisa Berenson. The 65-year-old director was famous for his pioneering neo-realistic films and the lavish historical drama 'The Leopard'. He was well known, too, as a director of plays and opera and for his work with Maria Callas. Visconti adored Mann's writings and felt a personal attachment to the story of *Death in Venice*. As a child Visconti had holidayed on the Lido with his family, and he used autobiographical elements in the film. Tadzio's mother was modelled on Visconti's own beautiful and elegant mother; 'Visconti himself said that seeing Mangano reading on the beach under large hats and parasols, a haughty profile, distant, husbandless, gave him the eerie feeling of watching his mother'. Visconti saw much of himself in Aschenbach, whom he transformed into the composer Gustav Mahler. In so doing, Visconti added his own interpretation to the story. As analysed by the novelist and film critic Alberto Moravia, in Mann's novel Aschenbach was

a middle-class intellectual of the turn of the century, not a Nietzsche or a Strindberg, and that is why the infatuation for a boy of fourteen brings about the collapse of the man's values. In other words, the drama of Aschenbach is social while Visconti's Aschenbach is intellectual. The difference is to be found in the two authors. Mann was the historian of aesthetic decadence; Visconti was a decadent aesthete who could well figure as a character of Mann's.²

Aschenbach is intellectual, while Tadzio is sensual; as Visconti explained, 'Tadzio represents a pole of attraction in Aschenbach's life, the pole of real life—the alternative to and antithesis of the rigidly intellectual world, the

“sublimated” life in which Aschenbach has sealed himself—that ends in death’.³ Visconti embroidered certain scenes, adding in performances of itinerant musicians, Aschenbach’s collapse in the streets of Venice, a flashback to a concert fiasco in Germany. Otherwise, the film follows the novel, and the medium of cinema allowed Visconti to use pictures of Venice to reflect the richness and haunting quality of the story and to foreshadow the fatal ending. Excerpts from Mahler’s powerful third and fifth symphonies sustain the atmosphere.

Two years after Visconti’s film appeared came the first performance of Benjamin Britten’s opera ‘Death in Venice’, with a libretto by Myfanwy Piper which also followed Mann’s novella. The opera, like the story, opens in a cemetery in Munich, as Aschenbach confesses that ‘self-discipline [is] my strength, routine the order of my days.... I reject the words called forth by passion.’ A traveller, ‘from beyond the Alps by his looks’, summons Aschenbach to ‘Go, travel to the South’. He sets out for the ‘ambiguous’ city of Venice and arrives in what he perceives as ‘a different world...odd, unreal, out of normal focus’. Aschenbach’s first glimpse of Tadzio, and his subsequent perceptions, are cast in a classical mould: ‘Surely the soul of Greece/Lies in that bright perfection’, he sings, and later apostrophises, ‘Ah, here comes Eros—his very self, or, again, ‘Ah, Tadzio, Eros, Ganymede’. The boy plays Olympian games and the voice of Apollo sings that ‘He who loves beauty/Worships me’. Tadzio represents not only an object of desire but, in a Platonic sense, a path towards knowledge and aesthetic appreciation of beauty. Aschenbach is caught in a trap—to possess beauty, the boy, he must effect a conversion from his bookish ways: ‘When the mind bows low before beauty...When genius leaves contemplation for the moment of reality,...Then Eros is the word.’ Tadzio, for Britten as for Mann and Visconti, represents both a flesh-and-blood object of longing and an idealisation of beauty. The first act of the opera closes as Aschenbach, in private, sings ‘I love you’.

The second and final act begins with Aschenbach’s monologue bemoaning his fear of speaking with Tadzio. Embarrassed at his ‘hackneyed’ expression of love, frustrated at the one-sidedness of his feelings for the boy, he is determined to try to reconcile art and life and make the most of the ‘chance encounters, painful hopes, silent communions’ afforded by Venice. The libretto concentrates on the underside of Venice. Already in the first act, uninviting stereotypes of Italy appear—persistent merchants, pesky beggars, suspect gondoliers, egregious hotel managers, inefficient porters. Now the plague drives away tourists as the opera, literarily and musically, moves to a climax. Dionysus and Apollo sing a dialogue about the merits of beauty versus passion, and Aschenbach cries out, ‘What is reason, moral sense, what is art itself, compared to the rewards of chaos?’ The opera closes, as does the novella, with Aschenbach’s death, as Tadzio enigmatically walks ‘far out to sea’.⁴

THE ATTRACTION OF THE SOUTH FOR NORTHERN HOMOSEXUALS

In different media—literature, film and music—the image of the northern European in search of a boy’s love in southern Europe is repeated, testifying to perennial interest in Mann’s theme of tragic obsession. The homoerotic, or homosexual, nature of the tale is stark in Mann’s novella but assumes even greater relief in later renditions. It is a picture of a traditional homosexual dilemma in the period before ‘gay liberation’—the yearnings of a man whose desires make him socially deviant and who must flee to some other place to act upon them, who can hope for only momentary and episodic satisfaction and who is condemned to ostracism, criminal conviction or death. *Death in Venice* is a parable about longing and obsession and a *mise-en-scène* of the homosexual condition in a certain historical epoch, even if Aschenbach himself fails to act on his repressed desires and remains only a voyeur.

Of particular significance in the interpretations of the ‘Aschenbach phenomenon’, if it may be so labelled, are several themes, among them the socially and personally induced dissatisfaction of the main character at home, the flight and the choice of destination, that is, the European South. These works are not perfect portrayals of the magnetic attraction asserted upon latent or self-aware northern European homosexuals by the South and southerners—Tadzio is a blond Pole rather than a swarthy Italian, and his playmate Jaschiu, although also a Pole, more naturally conforms to the stereotype of the seductive Italian boy. However, the theme remains the same, and even the ambivalent relationship between Tadzio and Jaschiu suggests that Slavs as well as Germans may be freed from family and cultural restraints when they venture southwards. Venice, too, has its historical particularities which make the serene city less than a perfect symbol of the whole Mediterranean. Yet the setting and the plot, to which all three media in which the story has been told conform, is the Northern man drawn to (homosexual) romance, companionship or sex in the South. This is a paradigm of homosexual desire and a clear itinerary in European gay history.

The homoerotic aspects of the works of Mann, Visconti and Britten have made them attractive to contemporary gay men and cult items of modern gay culture. But their authors as well are well-known figures in gay history. Britten’s longtime liaison with the singer Peter Pears, for example, was public knowledge, although treated with discreet silence during their lifetimes.⁵

Mann based *Death in Venice* on a real meeting with a beautiful boy when he visited the Lido in 1911; when his own children stayed at the same Hôtel des Bains two decades later, Mann wrote to them about the importance of the episode to him and stressed the ‘ambiguous’ nature of Venice.⁶ Mann

admitted to homosexual urges in his diaries, published posthumously, and he employed classical allusions to describe youths he fancied. He commented, for instance, on a ‘Hermes-like young dandy who made an impression on me several weeks ago.... In conjunction with his slight, youthful figure, his face has a prettiness and foolishness that amounts to a nearly classical “god-like” look.’ Elsewhere in the diaries, Mann wrote about the effects the sight of another young man produced on him:

Passing the plant nursery I was pleurably smitten by the sight of a young fellow working there, a brown-haired type with a small cap on his head, very handsome, and bare to the waist. The rapture I felt at the sight of such common, everyday, and natural ‘beauty’, the contours of his chest, the swell of his biceps, made me reflect afterward on the unreal, illusionary, and aesthetic nature of such an inclination, the goal of which, it would appear, is realized in gazing and ‘admiring’. Although erotic, it requires no fulfillment at all, neither intellectually nor physically. This is likely thanks to the influence of the reality principle on the imagination; it allows the rapture, but limits it to just looking.

The statement might have been written by Aschenbach, but Mann is rationalising, for it seems that he was interested in more than ‘just looking’. In 1927 the 50-year-old writer met Klaus Heuser, the 17-year-old son of the director of the Düsseldorf art academy; Mann developed deep affection for him, invited him to visit Munich and lavished attention on him. Unfortunately, Mann destroyed his diaries from this period, but in 1935 they met again, when Heuser stopped briefly in Zurich to visit Mann. ‘Unchanged, or little changed.... Kept looking into his face and saying “My God!” He expected me to kiss him, but I did not do so; I did manage to say something loving to him before he left, however.’ This meeting came only a week after Mann had mentioned Heuser in his diary, a recollection sparked by dinner with another handsome young man:

Thought back on that time [with Heuser] and its passion, the last variation of a love that probably will not flare up again. Strange, the happy and fulfilled man of fifty—and then *finis*. Goethe’s erotic life continued into his seventies—‘always girls’. But in my case the inhibitions are probably stronger and so one wearies sooner, apart from the differences in vitality.⁷

If Mann’s homosexual inclinations were sublimated and embarrassed, Visconti’s were more open. Young Visconti, handsome, rich and noble, scion of one of Milan’s leading families, was pursued by a number of women unsuccessfully, for his interests lay elsewhere. He had several liaisons with boys in the stables which he kept, then fell deeply in love with a muscular

blond German photographer—an Italian’s Teutonic, rather than Mediterranean, passion. Throughout his life Visconti surrounded himself with young men and, according to one biographer, had an ‘immense number’ of occasional lovers as well as unrequited attachments to various heterosexual actors.⁸

There was a direct personal link between Mann and Visconti. In his early years, Visconti constantly carried with him two specially bound books, one of which was *Death in Venice* (the other was a novel by Gide). In 1951, just as Visconti was working on an opera-ballet of one of Mann’s stories, ‘Mario and the Magician’, he met Mann in Rome. The meeting was cordial, although Visconti was shy with the great writer. Mann recounted seeing an aged, painted homosexual on his way to Venice, a scene from the novella which Visconti later incorporated into the film of *Death in Venice*. Visconti may have also misunderstood Mann during their conversation to refer to Mahler, whom Mann had indeed met, and Aschenbach thus became Mahler in the film.⁹

Homosexual plots or allusions appear in other works by Visconti and Britten. Visconti directed several plays with homosexual situations, such as Marcel Achard’s ‘Adam’. His controversial production of Harold Pinter’s ‘Old Times’ focused on a lesbian relationship in the play, just as he suggested homosexual themes in ‘Salome’. One of Visconti’s best known films, ‘The Damned’, emphasises the homosexual aspect in the massacre of the SA leaders—the SS colonel, incidentally, is named Aschenbach. Britten’s opera of Melville’s novella *Billy Budd* centres on the links between a sea-captain and a handsome boy, with society condemning the sailor.

In the case of Venice, there is a ‘family tree’ of homosexual visitors to the city and of works about it with homosexual themes, not restricted to the incarnations of ‘Death in Venice’. In the early twentieth century, at the same time as Mann visited Venice, Frederick Rolfe, a homosexual English writer, lived there. Jean Lorrain and Jean Cocteau were among French tourists. In the 1890s, John Addington Symonds, an English man of letters and a homosexual, had visited Venice, admired its architectural beauties and fallen in love with a gondolier. The poet A.E.Housman also had an intimate friendship with a gondolier. In the letter Mann wrote to his children in 1932, he referred to the poet August von Platen, a Romantic homosexual who had written fourteen sonnets on Venice. (As he sails into Venice, Aschenbach thinks about Platen as the ‘melancholy and susceptible poet who had once seen the towers and turrets of his dreams rise out of these waves’.)¹⁰ ‘Travellers’ accounts dating back to the seventeenth century mention male prostitutes in Venice, just as present-day guidebooks list gay cruising places. Venice has thus long been part of a homosexual geography of the Mediterranean, a position reinforced by works associated with the Aschenbach theme.

CODED REPRESENTATIONS OF DESIRE

Homosexual desire by northerners in the Mediterranean—longing for and sometimes achieving intercourse with a Mediterranean lad—is one of the longer-lasting themes of gay culture.¹¹ There are others: images of the working-class comrade, the exotic foreigner,¹² the man in uniform, the pubescent male, the muscular athlete. All can be catalogued across national cultures and generations; the hunky homoerotic sailor, for instance, appears in Melville and Conrad, Cocteau and Genet and a stack of porn magazines. That such images permeate various levels of culture and show up in writers, artists or composers of quite different backgrounds is a tantalising point for analysis. Why has the homosexual imagination of the past, and often the present, settled on these particular images and why have they been so common in Western representations of homosexual desire?

Homosexual longing, and the portrayal of it, has been obliged to assume a greater or lesser degree of coding or outright disguise until very recent times. Western society has been uncongenial to homosexuality: for centuries law considered homosexuality a crime (sometimes punishable by life imprisonment or execution), medicine labelled it a disease, religion called it a sin, psychology analysed it as a perversion or personality disorder and general social mores castigated it as disgusting deviance. (Such attitudes have not entirely disappeared.) In these circumstances, open portrayal of homosexuality was proscribed. Even the eroticised male in art and literature conformed to strict norms. Whether for homosexual or heterosexual artists and writers, convention limited opportunities: in the visual arts, possibilities for representing the nude male were usually realised in imitations of classical statuary or paintings of St Sebastian, a loin-clothed holy-man pierced by arrows. Not all images of classical gods or Sebastian were homoerotic, let alone homosexual. But in many cases they provided vehicles for paintings evoking homosexual desire, especially since majority social attitudes forbade more direct representations. Similarly, male-bonding, comradeship and intimate friendship were sometimes, though by no means always, examples for both the writer or artist and the viewer or reader of real or latent sexual connections. Often ignored by the general public or by critics, they were certainly recognised by the initiated or interested.

The situations or images so coded were those in which male nudity, male-bonding or intimate friendships could be presented: the camaraderie of all-male boarding schools, ships or military barracks, for example, or places overseas where usual norms of deportment were relaxed or puritanical mores suspended. Displacement was a way to bend the rules, to hide 'deviant' relationships or to excuse misbehaviour. Censorship could thereby be avoided for the writer, anomalous or unconventional activities justified for the heroes. Sometimes these places and situations outlived their necessary usefulness; at the time of Visconti's film or Britten's opera,

society would have reacted less violently against overt homosexuality than at the time of Mann, but the use of old themes was a homage to earlier work and a way of giving a performance wider acceptance than if it carried a more militantly homosexual theme. Critics would applaud an opera or film such as 'Death in Venice', while they might react badly to a more brazen portrayal of pederasty. Yet to label Britten's opera or Visconti's film simply as 'gay' works is reductionist, as meaningless as calling other pieces 'straight' works. They are artistic creations with gay themes, accessible to all publics but holding special meaning for those who empathise most directly with their characters or situations.

THE 'ASCHENBACH PHENOMENON'

What makes the 'Aschenbach phenomenon' of particular interest is that various elements of 'Death in Venice' are common to the whole body of literature and art exemplifying homosexual fascination with the Mediterranean. One is the situation of the aging gentleman who visits the South. In Mann's work, Aschenbach is past his fiftieth birthday. The son of a bourgeois judiciary official, he has received a patent of nobility for his accomplishments as a novelist. Mann underlines the 'strict, decent, sparing lives' of Aschenbach's ancestors, Aschenbach's concern with the moral fibre of his fictional characters, his rigid routine and hard-working habits. Another trait is his family situation: married at a young age, Aschenbach sired a daughter but lost his wife soon afterwards, and has since lacked a partner, whether male or female. He is 'a solitary' unused to other company except for domestic servants. Such a man's sexual impulses presumably are suppressed, find satisfaction clandestinely or are confined to fantasies. Aschenbach's latent homosexual desires are initially unrevealed. Aschenbach lives in 'ignorance of his own real desires', though there are the 'forgotten feelings, precious pangs of his youth'. Some of the characteristics ascribed to him—a solitary life, his being 'not by nature robust', the manifest lack of feminine company—are ones which were often pinned on homosexuals. In short, Aschenbach is 'set up' in the story for some new romantic, emotional or sexual experience. This is a recurrent plot in works by those with homosexual inclinations: the man without a partner or trapped in an unsatisfying marital or sexual relationship summons up the willpower to search for an alternative. The heterosexual usually takes recourse to adultery or prostitutes, while the bisexual or homosexual looks for an illicit affair with another man or boy, often through trespassing over social or geographical frontiers. Novels about (and autobiographies of) gay men generally describe initiation not only into homosexuality but into a subculture; because of social attitudes towards homosexuality, they recount the rejection of expected heterosexual behaviour with whatever consequences this may entail.

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A second theme concerns the object of the roving homosexual's obsessions: a young man from a different milieu, a working-class boy, a foreigner or someone encountered outside the hero's usual circles. In *Death in Venice*, the aristocratic Tadzio is on a similar social level with Aschenbach, but he is Polish, not German, and the meeting takes place abroad. He is an adolescent on the cusp of manhood, a direct allusion to classical Greek pederasty: an unequal, but in principle educative and mutually beneficial relationship between adult and ephebe. He is fair of face and body: 'Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the lad's perfect beauty.' The model of beauty is Hellenic: 'His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture—pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity.' Indeed, Aschenbach seems incapable of thinking about Tadzio without the justification of classical allusion: longing and lust must be papered over with culture. Scarcely an extended description of Tadzio passes without a reference to Antiquity. His 'was the head of Eros, with the yellowish bloom of Parian marble'. Even more explicitly, Tadzio emerges from the water 'virginally pure and austere, with dripping locks, beautiful as a tender young god, emerging from the depths of sea and sky, outrunning the element—it conjured up mythologies, it was like a primeval legend, handed down from the beginning of time, of the birth of form, of the origin of the gods'. He is the opposite of the swarthy peasant boy to whom others might be attracted but, in each case, the archetype of beauty is classical, however, and Mediterranean boys are inevitably seen to be descendants of this prototype and the exemplars of ancient standards of beauty. At the same time, the alterity of the foreign boy is a source for his attraction; he is different, exotic, more of an ideal—or perhaps just more accessible. The besotted visitor is enraptured by every trait of his beloved, physical, to be sure, but also moral or cultural: for Mann's Aschenbach, 'Tadzio's foreign birth raised his speech to music'.

Just as the ideal lover is a beautiful young man, so the ideal relationship between man and boy is a replication of the Greek model, posited on the assumption that physical love is the way to spiritual love and that love leads to knowledge. Hence the almost pedantic quotations from Plato in Mann's tale and the elevation of Tadzio above mundane and vulgar beauty to the Platonic *idea* (in the Greek sense): Tadzio is the 'essence' of beauty. The perfect relationship is not necessarily a lifelong monogamous attachment of man and boy, a relationship between equals in age and social status or a homosexual imitation of heterosexual marriage; it is more attuned to the ancient model. (It remains pointedly unclear, however, whether Aschenbach desires casual sex, an affair, long-term commitment or something more ethereal.)

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The historical relationship between the northern European and the Mediterranean is necessarily unequal and, often, doomed. Holidays end, voyages conclude and lovers must separate. Linguistic and cultural divides loom. Distinct differences in income and social status appear. A lover is incapable of establishing contact with his beloved; Aschenbach can only play voyeur and yearn chastely for Tadzio, never able to possess him, too afraid even to speak with him, much less seduce him. In other cases, affection and sex are bought, directly or indirectly, with money or gifts. Sexual and social exploitation are sometimes present, and a bargain must be struck between the two parties. There may be much kindness, but frequently there is a measure of brutality. (Aschenbach thinks Tadzio is unhealthy and will not live long, but he does not 'try to account for the pleasure the idea gave him'.) Such relationships could not win the approval of society or measure up to the standards to which heterosexual relationships aspired, or to which moralists said they should. The very fact of homosexuality makes respectability impossible, and the nature of travel or expatriation adds to the inconstancy. At the end lies the spectre of separation when the tour finishes, of dishonour or worse if the liaison is discovered, or (as for Aschenbach) apocalyptic death.

Yet another characteristic is the ambivalent feeling authors held about the South, both its lands and its peoples. In the Venice of Mann's Aschenbach, there are wonderful works of architecture, beautiful beaches, mysterious churches, a 'voluptuousness of sight and sound'. But there is also the 'hateful sultriness in the streets', the sirocco which 'excites and enervates at once', the disorienting confusion of canals and alleyways, the garishness and bad construction of houses, the lowlife, the epidemic. Italians are an unsavoury lot. On the sailing-ship which takes Aschenbach to Venice, the captain is likened to a goat-bearded circus-director and one sailor is hunchbacked; the sanitary inspector, the model of Italian public servants, arrives late to clear the boat. Gondoliers quarrel in 'harsh, incoherent tones'; the boatsman who takes Aschenbach to his hotel is unlicensed, has a brutish face and, the German thinks, could extort or kill him. Another gondolier, 'in league with various lace-makers and glassblowers, did his best to persuade his fare to pause, look, and be tempted to buy'. Fruit-sellers purvey rotten strawberries, the hotel manager is obsequious, the barber 'oily'. Beggars roam everywhere. The minstrel belongs 'to the race of Neapolitan jesters, half bully, half comedian, brutal, blustering, an unpleasant customer, and entertaining to the last degree'. He is snub-nosed, his face shows the stigma of vice and defiance, he is badly dressed, he sings trivial songs, then begs for remuneration, he waves his arms about and makes 'antic gestures'. He, just like all the Venetians ranging from city fathers to hotel servants, lies about the cholera which threatens the city. As the singer departs, he sticks out his tongue at the hotel guests, a symbol of hatred for their wealth and pretension. The portrait of the Italians is negative, and Venice itself gets

mixed reviews. Ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance are underlying motifs in much writing about the Mediterranean, coexisting with admiration, enjoyment and idolisation.

These themes reappear in the life and works of other homosexual figures drawn southwards. The stock-in-trade of both a certain homosexual culture and a homosexual 'lifestyle' of a particular time and milieu serve as artistic tropes and correspond to the exigencies of homosexual life. Certainly each story possesses its idiosyncrasies. Particularly obvious in Mann's work is the theme of longing and death, which those who have taken his book as a point of departure for their own work have not seen fit to reverse into a happy ending. Mann's view of homosexual desire in the story—which may have coincided with his own experience—is a traditional homophobic interpretation. The man's desire for the boy cannot be fulfilled; it turns Aschenbach into a made-up clown, a ridiculous figure spurned by society and solitary in his passion. Desire mingles with fear and sometimes (as in Aschenbach's nightmare late in the story) with an atavistic recrudescence of Dionysian savagery. Aschenbach's repressed passion is linked with crime, vice and pathology; it is sickly and dangerous. Homosexual desire forms part of a wider network of deviance which infects the southern climes from even more decadent regions, spreading like pestilence: 'professional vice was rampant, displaying excesses heretofore unknown and only at home much farther south and in the east.' As well as being a foreign, criminal malady, homosexuality is a sign of degeneracy—some nineteenth-century sexologists argued thus, and Mann's Aschenbach, thinking of his peers, wonders, 'What, indeed, would they have said to his entire life, that varied to the point of degeneracy from theirs?' The portrait of homosexual desire is far from complimentary in Mann's *Death in Venice*, and the homosexual is condemned to sterility in his unrequited passion. Other, later writers and artists were less hard on their characters and on themselves.

THE INFLUENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF *DEATH IN VENICE*

The connection between art and life appears clearly in the story of Aschenbach and in the real situations on which Mann based the work—Aschenbach himself proclaims, 'Personally speaking, too, art heightens life'. Mann's encounter in Venice metamorphosed into literature as almost a documentary study of a certain historical homosexuality. That story has become part of the compendium of 'gay literature', transformed into an opera and a film by artists with personal interests in the themes it introduced. The account of painful longing, self-defeating obsession and impossible love has held special resonance in a subculture long marked by social interdiction and, until recent years, self-embarrassment. The appeal of

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the sexy young man, handsome as a god, continues to excite the libido as a collectively articulated pattern in the gay psyche. But *Death in Venice* in its various versions also has an important place in general Western culture: it is one of the best-known representations of homosexuality, but the emotions it limns are not limited to a minority. The import of the Aschenbach story into the mainstream of European letters, cinema and opera gives evidence of the capacity of homoerotic or homosexual works to fertilise general culture; surely some of the most familiar contemporary images of Venice come from Mann's novella and Visconti's film. The subculture thus forms an important presence in a wider cultural inheritance.

Mann's *Death in Venice* was published just two years before the outbreak of the First World War. It reflected an era when leisured and cultured Europeans travelled to elegant resorts in the South, sure of their social position, wealth and political privileges. Soon the war, and then other events of the twentieth century, disrupted that life and brought into question those certainties. Within one or two generations, even educated readers would not be conversant with the classical allusions in Mann's work. At the same time, the writings of sexual analysts, notably Freud, articulated new views on the origins and expression of sexual desires. Life did not immediately change for homosexuals—far from it—and the lure of the Mediterranean by no means disappeared. Yet by the mid-twentieth century, the cultural and social context were different. Mann's novel, therefore, came towards the end of a period, stretching back to at least the 1700s, during which a number of European writers and artists had been attracted to the classical and contemporary Mediterranean with mixed motives, both cultural and homosexual; the mixture of these motives provided inspiration for their works. Imbued with the lore of Antiquity, disposing of time and money for travel, they made a circuit around the Greek and Roman monuments, sometimes forayed into the Islamic civilisation of North Africa, and often settled for long sojourns on Capri or Sicily or in Venice or Rome. They made a pilgrimage southwards to find culture; they also wanted to find boys: they usually found both. Many of these writers and artists played a large role in forming general European ideas on such subjects as classical art, Renaissance history and contemporary Italy. Mann's portrayal of Venice and the works which took their inspiration from *Death in Venice* are prime examples of a sexual and literary odyssey.

SEX AND SOCIETY IN THE EUROPEAN MEDITERRANEAN

Greek, Roman and Renaissance

THE STUDY OF 'HOMOSEXUALITY'

Gay studies, or the study of homosexuality, is a relatively new field, but it has attracted increasing interest and produced research with implications outside its specialised province.¹ Scholars from various disciplines have been drawn to gay studies, and cross-fertilisation of methodologies and the use of different sources have led to new theories about homosexuality, homosociality and homoeroticism, as well as insights into the general subject of sex and society.² The ancient world provides a particularly significant domain for such studies, since Antiquity is considered the fount of Western civilisation and because of the permutations of sexual and affectational relationships which were the norm in classical Athens and Rome. Among the varieties in sexual behaviour characteristic of classical culture was a widely practised and socially acceptable type of 'homosexuality'.³

The study of homosexuality was until very recent times taboo. According to an eminent contemporary scholar of the ancient world, the author of a pioneering study of *Greek Homosexuality*, Kenneth Dover: 'I know of no topic in classical studies on which a scholar's normal ability to perceive differences and draw inferences is so easily impaired.' Many writers displayed embarrassed ambivalence on the subject, caught between 'a combination of love of Athens [mixed] with hatred of homosexuality'; some were outright homophobes.⁴ A number ignored sex, especially 'homosexuality', altogether, while others explained it away as purely 'Platonic love' without physical expression. Particularly in the prudish nineteenth century, teachers skipped over indelicate passages in classical texts, and publishers printed versions suitably expurgated of sexual references.⁵ Yet the sexual practices of the Greeks and Romans were well known both to specialists and, to a certain extent, to students, as the classics provided the basis for a gentleman's education at Oxford and Cambridge, at the Sorbonne and at German universities. Classical 'homosexuality' was especially evident to educated men who were themselves attracted to their own sex, and to writers, artists and

composers who used Greek antecedents as a justification for what others regarded as perversion.

Sources for the study of Greek same-sex relationships are numerous. Of the 20,000 Greek vases now known, about 200 are decorated with erotic scenes, many of which are homoerotic. Greek statuary provides insight into Greek concepts of masculinity and male beauty. Works such as the *Iliad* recount famous 'love stories' between males, such as Zeus and Ganymede and Achilles and Patroclus. A large body of Greek poetry speaks of the love of men for boys. Philosophical dialogues, notably Plato's *Symposium*, treat sex and love. Legal texts survive, including the prosecution speech in the trial of Timarchos for homosexual prostitution. So do graffiti scratched on the walls of temples and gymnasia.

Despite a wealth of information, most Greek 'homosexuality' was neglected by scholars who thought it not to be an appropriate subject for investigation; among the few who were interested during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as John Addington Symonds, were homosexuals as well as Philhellenes.⁶ Not until 1907 did an academic scholar of the classical world, a German named Bethe, publish an in-depth study of Greek same-sex relationships; it appeared in an obscure journal.⁷ At about the same time, periodicals connected with the emerging homosexual emancipation movement, especially Magnus Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, included contributions on 'Greek love'. But the subject remained controversial. Paul Brandt, who wrote on various aspects of classical love and sex for Hirschfeld's review, generally used a pseudonym, and his *Beiträge zur Antiken Erotik*, published in 1924, contained a page opposite the frontispiece bearing the warning: 'PRIVATE IMPRESSION, this work may be distributed only to librarians, academics, and collectors.' Brandt's work nevertheless represented a significant advance in understanding the sex life of the ancients, and the translation of his *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* in 1932 was one of the few serious treatments of the subject in English.⁸ Over fifty years later, critics hailed Dover's 1978 work on Greek homosexuality, but some of their phrases—about 'provocative conclusions' on a subject 'which needed to be exposed to the light of day' by a scholar 'who treats the subject without prejudice either way' and who 'presents facts that can no longer be ignored'⁹—betray squeamishness with the theme. In the last fifteen years, as studies of family life, sexuality, private life and homosexuality have become more widely accepted, works on Greek sexuality and Greek pederasty have multiplied; more is now known about sex life in Antiquity than ever before.¹⁰

Consensus holds that emotional and physical relationships between persons of the same sex flourished in ancient Greece, although they were constrained by various regulations and social mores. In particular, sexual relationships between men and adolescent boys—pederasty—were considered a vital aspect of Greek life, permitted by law and lauded in poetry

and philosophy. Such relationships, and sexuality in general, were very much embedded in Greek conceptions of education and social initiation, the status of women, dichotomies between fully fledged citizens and those deprived of political rights, exchanges between the gods and men, and the canon of 'classical' beauty. Without an understanding of the sociohistorical context of pederasty, it is easy to imagine, as did generations of homophilic and homophobic observers, that pederasty was only spiritual and idealised love, a disgraceful stigma on Greek life or a rationalisation of and antecedent for modern homosexual life.

EROTIC LIFE IN ANCIENT GREECE

So different were classical Greek conceptions of erotic life from contemporary views that it may be unjust to think of Greek eroticism in the modern category of 'sexuality' and certainly in terms of the modern polarities of homosexuality and heterosexuality.¹¹ Ancient erotic life responded to individual and collective demands in a society free of the commandments and the very categories imposed by Judeo-Christian ethics. Concerns that later became obsessions, such as the premium placed on sexual abstinence or continence, the importance of pre-marital virginity, enforced heterosexuality, monogamous and indissoluble unions and the intention that sexual activity be pursued only for procreative purposes, did not constrain Greek appreciation of erotic pleasure.

Greek society in fifth-century Athens allowed, indeed encouraged, various modes of sexual expression, which were not considered contradictory. Tradition expected men and women at some stage in their lives to contract heterosexual unions and beget children; a married couple's primary responsibility belonged to each other and to their offspring. But Greek society also permitted 'homosexual' unions and tolerated prostitution and 'deviant' sexualities, that is, sexual behaviour which did not conform to standard practice.

Of particular pertinence is Greek pederasty. In classical Greek society throughout the Hellenic world, a man who had reached early adulthood had a temporary but sometimes years-long liaison with an adolescent boy. The older partner, the *erastes*, initiated the courtship, bestowed presents on his younger friend and was his recognised mentor. The younger partner, the *eromenos*, played a complementary role, receiving gifts and attention from the *erastes* for the duration of the relationship. Later, the *eromenos* became an *erastes*, taking younger partners of his own but ultimately marrying and fathering children. The length of any partnership varied, and partners often remained close after the end of their sexual relationship, with friendship (*philia*) replacing sexual attraction (*eros*). The ages of the partners varied. The *erastes*, generally a man in his twenties, was occasionally much older. The

eromenos was usually in his early teens,¹² and the rule of thumb was that the first appearance of his beard ended his status as *eromenos*—the razor severed the bond, it was said.

The relationship between *erastai* and *eromenoi* served various functions in Greek society and its significance probably changed over the course of Greek history. Three phases in the history of pederasty emerge in Attica. Among aristocrats during the archaic age, pederasty formed part of an initiatory ritual common in European cultures and across Indo-European and other civilisations. The function of pederasty was to provide rituals of induction into adulthood and to contribute to the education and upbringing of the youth. The older man provided the model for the younger and presented him gifts which marked his passage into adult life: a suit of armour which fitted him out as a warrior, a bull for sacrifice to the gods and a goblet which symbolised admission to banquets and other ceremonies. In the second period and particularly in some regions of Greece, the relationship lost much of its symbolic initiatory connotations and became more closely connected to the teaching of manly skills, above all the hunt. Finally, by Athens' golden age, pederasty had become generalised among the free population and it was primarily an erotic relationship aimed at sexual satisfaction.¹³ These different functions, however, melded together and were not exclusive.¹⁴

Pederasty was definitely a sexual relationship, although some later observers tried to downplay or deny this aspect of Greek love. Literature and painting describe physical relations between a man and an adolescent. The *erastes* was always, in theory, the dominant partner and the *eromenos* the receptive one. The *erastes* achieved orgasm through anal or intercrural intercourse—inserting his penis between the boy's thighs. The passive *eromenos*, at least in principle, showed little sexual interest and did not necessarily achieve orgasm.¹⁵ The roles were not reversible and a mature man lost status if he took the passive role. This strict usage, according to David Halperin, was based on the general Greek view of sex as something performed by one person on another (whether male or female) rather than as a mutually participatory act.¹⁶

The basic division in Greek sexual practice indeed was between active and passive roles. Greek sex was extraordinarily phallicentric: 'It revolved around who had the phallus, was defined by what was done with the phallus, and was polarized by the distribution of phallic pleasure.'¹⁷ The adult man, who possessed the all-powerful phallus, reaped the benefits, and his sexual partner, whether a young man or a woman, was supposed to satisfy that pleasure. Polarity of sexual action, and the attributes which it represented, was crucial for the Greeks, and Halperin suggests that even assimilating the roles of *erastes* and *eromenos* into a relationship labelled 'homosexuality' would have struck ancient Greeks as 'no less bizarre than to classify a burglar as an "active criminal", his victim as a "passive criminal", and the two of them