

***JOHN ADDINGTON
SYMONDS***

***A PROBLEM
IN GREEK
ETHICS***

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John Addington Symonds

A Problem in Greek Ethics

Being an inquiry into the phenomenon of sexual inversion, addressed especially to medical psychologists and jurists

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PREFACE.

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THE following treatise on Greek Love was written in the year 1873, when my mind was occupied with my *Studies of Greek Poets*. I printed ten copies of it privately in 1883. It was only when I read the Terminal Essay appended by Sir Richard Burton to his translation of the *Arabian Nights* in 1886, that I became aware of M. H. E. Meier's article on Pæderastie (Ersch and Gruber's *Encyclopædie*, Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1837). My treatise, therefore, is a wholly independent production. This makes Meier's agreement (in Section 7 of his article) with the theory I have set forth in Section X. regarding the North Hellenic origin of Greek Love, and its Dorian character, the more remarkable. That two students, working separately upon the same mass of material, should have arrived at similar conclusions upon this point strongly confirms the probability of the hypothesis.

J. A. SYMONDS.

A PROBLEM IN GREEK ETHICS.

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I.

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FOR the student of sexual inversion, ancient Greece offers a wide field for observation and reflection. Its importance

has hitherto been underrated by medical and legal writers on the subject, who do not seem to be aware that here alone in history have we the example of a great and highly-developed race not only tolerating homosexual passions, but deeming them of spiritual value, and attempting to utilise them for the benefit of society. Here, also, through the copious stores of literature at our disposal, we can arrive at something definite regarding the various forms assumed by these passions, when allowed free scope for development in the midst of refined and intellectual civilisation. What the Greeks called *paiderastia*, or boy-love, was a phenomenon of one of the most brilliant periods of human culture, in one of the most highly organised and nobly active nations. It is the feature by which Greek social life is most sharply distinguished from that of any other people approaching the Hellenes in moral or mental distinction. To trace the history of so remarkable a custom in their several communities, and to ascertain, so far as this is possible, the ethical feeling of the Greeks upon this subject, must be of service to the scientific psychologist. It enables him to approach the subject from another point of view than that usually adopted by modern jurists, psychiatrists, writers on forensic medicine.

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The first fact which the student has to notice is that in the Homeric poems a modern reader finds no trace of this passion. It is true that Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad*, is distinguished by his friendship for Patroclus no less

emphatically than Odysseus, the hero of the *Odyssey*, by lifelong attachment to Penelope, and Hector by love for Andromache. But in the delineation of the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus there is nothing which indicates the passionate relation of the lover and the beloved, as they were afterwards recognised in Greek society. This is the more remarkable because the love of Achilles for Patroclus added, in a later age of Greek history, an almost religious sanction of the martial form of paiderastia. In like manner the friendship of Idomeneus for Meriones, and that of Achilles, after the death of Patroclus, for Antilochus, were treated by the later Greeks as paiderastic. Yet, inasmuch as Homer gives no warrant for this interpretation of the tales in question, we are justified in concluding that homosexual relations were not prominent in the so-called heroic age of Greece. Had it formed a distinct feature of the society depicted in the Homeric poems, there is no reason to suppose that their authors would have abstained from delineating it. We shall see that Pindar, Æschylus and Sophocles, the poets of an age when paiderastia was prevalent, spoke unreservedly upon the subject.

Impartial study of the *Iliad* leads us to the belief that the Greeks of the historic period interpreted the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus in accordance with subsequently developed customs. The Homeric poems were the Bible of the Greeks, and formed the staple of their education; nor did they scruple to wrest the sense of the original, reading, like modern Bibliolaters, the sentiments and passions of a later age into the text. Of this process a good example is afforded by Æschines in the oration against Timarchus.

While discussing this very question of the love of Achilles, he says: "He, indeed, conceals their love, and does not give its proper name to the affection between them, judging that the extremity of their fondness would be intelligible to instructed men among his audience." As an instance the orator proceeds to quote the passage in which Achilles laments that he will not be able to fulfil his promise to Menoëtius by bringing Patroclus home to Opus. He is here clearly introducing the sentiments of an Athenian hoplite who had taken the boy he loved to Syracuse and seen him slain there.

Homer stood in a double relation to the historical Greeks. On the one hand, he determined their development by the influence of his ideal characters. On the other, he underwent from them interpretations which varied with the spirit of each successive century. He created the national temperament, but received in turn the influx of new thoughts and emotions occurring in the course of its expansion. It is, therefore, highly important, on the threshold of this inquiry, to determine the nature of that Achilleian friendship to which the panegyrists and apologists of the custom make such frequent reference.

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The ideal of character in Homer was what the Greeks called heroic; what we should call chivalrous. Young men studied the *Iliad* as our ancestors studied the Arthurian romances, finding there a pattern of conduct raised almost too high above the realities of common life for imitation, yet

stimulative of enthusiasm and exciting to the fancy. Foremost among the paragons of heroic virtue stood Achilles, the splendour of whose achievements in the Trojan war was only equalled by the pathos of his friendship. The love for slain Patroclus broke his mood of sullen anger, and converted his brooding sense of wrong into a lively thirst for vengeance. Hector, the slayer of Patroclus, had to be slain by Achilles, the comrade of Patroclus. No one can read the *Iliad* without observing that its action virtually turns upon the conquest which the passion of friendship gains over the passion of resentment in the breast of the chief actor. This the Greek students of Homer were not slow to see; and they not unnaturally selected the friendship of Achilles for their ideal of manly love. It was a powerful and masculine emotion, in which effeminacy had no part, and which by no means excluded the ordinary sexual feelings. Companionship in battle and the chase, in public and in private affairs of life, was the communion proposed by Achilleian friends—not luxury or the delights which feminine attractions offered. The tie was both more spiritual and more energetic than that which bound man to woman. Such was the type of comradeship delineated by Homer; and such, in spite of the modifications suggested by later poets, was the conception retained by the Greeks of this heroic friendship. Even Æschines, in the place above quoted, lays stress upon the mutual loyalty of Achilles and Patroclus as the strongest bond of their affection: "regarding, I suppose, their loyalty and mutual goodwill as the most touching feature of their love."[\[1\]](#)

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Thus the tale of Achilles and Patroclus sanctioned among the Greeks a form of masculine love, which, though afterwards connected with paiderastia properly so-called, we are justified in describing as heroic, and in regarding as one of the highest products of their emotional life. It will be seen, when we come to deal with the historical manifestations of this passion, that the heroic love which took its name from Homer's Achilles existed as an ideal rather than an actual reality. This, however, is equally the case with Christianity and chivalry. The facts of feudal history fall below the high conception which hovered like a dream above the knights and ladies of the Middle Ages; nor has the spirit of the Gospel been realised, in fact, by the most Christian nations. Still we are not on that account debarred from speaking of both chivalry and Christianity as potent and effective forces.

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Homer, then, knew nothing of paiderastia, though the *Iliad* contained the first and noblest legend of heroic friendship. Very early, however, in Greek history boy-love, as a form of sensual passion, became a national institution. This is proved abundantly by mythological traditions of great antiquity, by legendary tales connected with the founding of Greek cities, and by the primitive customs of the Dorian tribes. The question remains how paiderastia

originated among the Greeks, and whether it was introduced or indigenous.

The Greeks themselves speculated on this subject, but they arrived at no one definite conclusion. Herodotus asserts that the Persians learned the habit, in its vicious form, from the Greeks;[\[2\]](#) but, even supposing this assertion to be correct, we are not justified in assuming the same of all barbarians who were neighbours of the Greeks; since we know from the Jewish records and from Assyrian inscriptions that the Oriental nations were addicted to this as well as other species of sensuality. Moreover, it might with some strain on language be maintained that Herodotus, in the passage above referred to, did not allude to boy-love in general, but to the peculiarly Hellenic form of it which I shall afterwards attempt to characterise.

A prevalent opinion among the Greeks ascribed the origin of paiderastia to Crete; and it was here that the legend of Zeus and Ganymede was localised.[\[3\]](#) "The Cretans," says Plato,[\[4\]](#) "are always accused of having invented the story of Ganymede and Zeus, which is designed to justify themselves in the enjoyment of such pleasures by the practice of the god whom they believe to have been their lawgiver."

In another passage,[\[5\]](#) Plato speaks of the custom that prevailed before the time of Laius—in terms which show his detestation of a vice that had gone far toward corrupting Greek society. This sentence indicates the second theory of the later Greeks upon this topic. They thought that Laius, the father of Œdipus, was the first to practise *Hybris*, or lawless lust, in this form, by the rape committed on

Chrysippus, the son of Pelops.[6] To this crime of Laius, the Scholiast to the *Seven against Thebes* attributes all the evils which afterwards befell the royal house of Thebes, and Euripides made it the subject of a tragedy. In another but less prevalent Saga the introduction of paiderastia is ascribed to Orpheus.

It is clear from these conflicting theories that the Greeks themselves had no trustworthy tradition on the subject. Nothing, therefore, but speculative conjecture is left for the modern investigator. If we need in such a matter to seek further than the primal instincts of human nature, we may suggest that, like the orgiastic rites of the later Hellenic cultus, paiderastia in its crudest form was transmitted to the Greeks from the East. Its prevalence in Crete, which, together with Cyprus, formed one of the principal links between Phœnicia and Hellas proper, favours this view. Paiderastia would, on this hypothesis, like the worship of the Paphian and Corinthian Aphrodite, have to be regarded as in part an Oriental importation.[7] Yet, if we adopt any such solution of the problem, we must not forget that in this, as in all similar cases, whatever the Greeks received from adjacent nations, they distinguished with the qualities of their own personality. Paiderastia in Hellas assumed Hellenic characteristics, and cannot be confounded with any merely Asiatic form of luxury. In the tenth section of this Essay I shall return to the problem, and advance my own conjecture as to the part played by the Dorians in the development of paiderastia into a custom.

It is enough for the present to remark that, however introduced, the vice of boy-love, as distinguished from