

# Sex and Sexism in Ancient Rome: The Crossroads of Sexual Freedom and State Oppression

## Preliminaries

- Content warning: sex + colloquial blue collar language
- Cut for time: can't talk about everything I wanted to (including Talmud)
- I will also leave out some complications and nuances
- Note: bibliography [richardcarrier.info/sexandsexismbibliography.pdf](http://richardcarrier.info/sexandsexismbibliography.pdf)
- Note: pornographic books to look at after
- Note: selling my books, happy to sign them

## Backstory

- Question that started it all: “Polyamory in Ancient Rome?”
- Definition: polyamory vs. *merely* openly non-monogamous
- = consensual, accepting, public, gender-equal, non-monogamy
- What I found: complicated by ancient sexism, prudery, and sex-policing

## Defining Sexism

- = lots of things, but for this talk, one of its aspects:
- Belief that men must be dominant and in charge +
- That women must be subservient and exist for needs & pleasure of men
- Not just in choices people make to speak or behave
- But also in how they judge.
- e.g. if think less of a man because he does something coded female
- e.g. if look down on / make fun of a woman doing something coded male

## **Penetration / Masculinity Paradigm**

- How gay sex was judged (top good / bottom bad)
- How cunnilingus was judged (giving = bottoming)
- Male freedom vs. female
- Image of men as dominant crucial to their masculinity
- Control over wombs as property
- Not just a concern of individual men, but of fathers and society
- Anxiety over purity and dominance of the Italian race, and of elite blood
- Anxiety over men losing face and being emasculated
- ...or norming that and thereby weakening race & empire by feminizing it
- Women allowed same sexual freedom as men = ranked same as whores
- Literally: codified in law and the class system
- None of this based on religion. Entirely a secular ideology.
- Honor / Shame social system (*dignitas*)
- Actual legally defined social classes

## **Transition from Republic to Empire**

- From socially enforced custom to making it law: to stop growing liberality
- *Stuprum* as sex crime: being a bottom, lesbianism, sex in public, adultery
- Adultery: adulterating a womb by having sex with a woman not your wife
  - Or a woman having sex with anyone not her husband
  - Included unmarried women
  - Included non-vaginal (suspicion of adulteration, emasculating husband.)

- Exempt from all sex crimes including adultery were...
  - Non-citizens (aliens and slaves)
  - Women and men registered with the state as whores; and pimps
  - actors and actresses; gladiators; their trainers; women owning a shop
  - These groups were automatically assigned the lowest social rank
  - They lost most privileges of citizenship, including some rights
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- Penalty for *stuprum* varied...
  - Could be fine or clubbing (dep. on status), and an official mark of *infamia*
  - Lowest ranked persons I mentioned were automatically marked with it
  - = subject to corporeal punishment (normally immune)
  - = less valued as witnesses in court
  - = couldn't represent others in court
  - = lost any upper class status and privileges you had
  - = e.g. couldn't be disgraced or defamed
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- Adultery was the worst *stuprum*...
  - Added loss of 1/2 wealth + temp. exile to island (apart from each other)
  - As well as registration as whore; ban on marrying citizens
  - Entailed total loss of social rank and its privileges
  - Death penalty for adultery introduced by Christians in the fourth century
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- Law required whores to dress in public as low rank men (dark toga)
  - Thus so were adulteresses
  - Man who didn't divorce, prosecute wife for adultery: prosecuted as pimp
  - Anyone helping a couple commit adultery: prosecuted as accomplices

- Notice though that for exempted groups:
- Though suffered lowest rank and fewest rights, you were sexually free
- Thus many women (& men) had total sexual freedom under this system
- They were simply treated unjustly as second class citizens
  - Or were already slaves
- Yet women could easily divorce, so serial monogamy available
- Could marry & divorce each lover every day
- But they anticipated that...
- First, started requiring a marriage be sincere (like green card marriages)
- Second, set an upper limit on lovers before classed as whore: 40 to 60
- More generous than actor Jeremy Renner, who said today it was 4
- So the law gave men near total sexual freedom
- As long as they stayed away from high status women exc. wife
- And didn't take it in the butt or mouth
- While it completely forbade women from having sex w. any exc. husband
- And yet the lowest class of men and women were totally free

### **Sexlives of Rome**

- And yet the Romans were in many ways more open about sexuality
- Penises were everywhere
- Herms; winged phallus chimes; priapus cock statues; dwarf apothecaries

- Sex in public was disgraceful
- But paintings of sex in public were not
- And no sex act was forbidden to be publicly displayed in art
- Gay and straight sex on tableware, home walls, street signs, statues
- Including fucking a goat (garden statue at Pompeii)
- Bisexual MMF threeways (guy on guy on girl from behind)
- Fully bisexual fourways (guy on guy, fellated by girl, eaten out by girl)
- Use & display of dildos and strap-ons.
  - Usually of red leather: booming industry, women commonly procured
  - So much evidence of women pegging men (and each other) = pop
- Pompeii bathhouse paintings: humor vs. realism (biokntics, modrn porn)
- Real joke is people really do these things.
- Cunnilingus, blow jobs, double & triple penetration, all positions & groups
- All regarded as laughably disgusting, but well known people did them
- Anal sex was very popular...
  - Tavern in Pompeii, vestibule for shift hooker
  - Above bed is painting of man having anal sex with her.
  - Written in Latin above that is command: "Put it in slowly."
- Evidence in art and literature of group sex important:
  - because gets closer to evidence for polyamory
  - It's at least open multi-partner sex
  - Though most would involve prostitutes, some evidence free persons too

## The Problem of Consent

- Key to the definition of polyamory is consensual
- And that's a problem when looking for it in the Roman Empire...
- Even allowing degrees of consent, most sex in antiquity not consensual
- Three problems in descending worseness, esp. for women and boys...
  
- **First:** even free women and men could find themselves in situations
- e.g. effectively had to marry, often limited say as to whom
- no such thing in law as marital rape
- lower classed parents could pimp freeborn kids
- young men who need to accept well placed lovers for advancement
- women who turn to prostitution because no other options
- Although we know picking up willing girls at festivals was possible, etc.
  
- **Second:** age of consent was twelve
- Although it appears mostly sexual activity started at 14
- (women typically married at that age or not far from)
- But it wasn't *stuprum* unless they were under 12
- Even having sex with a slave under age was a sex crime
- And teen boys & girls were granted more autonomy than now
- But no one anguished over mental competence of teenagers to consent
- And slaves had no choice
- So normalized, just a thing boys and girls developed skills to cope with
- Many maybe pursued their sexual autonomy at that young age, but still

- **Third:** slaves.
- Sex trafficking and sex slavery were normal and ubiquitous
- In fact a fundamental part of the economy and social system.
- slave brothels: full time sex shops vs. *ergastereia*
- using and gifting private slaves for sex was normal
- men frequently did, both slaveboys and slavegirls (legally)
- evidence women of the house did sometimes too (illegally)
- Slaves slightly better off than America (rights, incl. limited marriage)
- Slaves could autonomously have sex with each other
- Evidence of lifelong loving relationships between slave & master
- Including women with female slaves (discuss the theatrical play?)
- And triads (both MFM and FMF).
- But we can't know how consensual these were; lines blurred anyway
- When all three violations of consent are considered
- (Pressured sex, underage sex, and sex slavery)
- even in the best fantasy possibility, it's still 99% horror

## **Prostitution**

- Prostitution was legal (just stigmatized)
- Not all prostitutes were slaves
- Nor only source for legal consensual lovers (all *infamis* and aliens)
- Exempt from all sex crime laws = opportunity for sexual freedoms
- Best off were women with means to become educated
- And market themselves as an upper class courtesan

- Evidence had a lot of choice, autonomy, & power in their lives
- Constrained by vulnerability & need to secure a living
- They pursued wealthy men, hopefully who didn't beat them
- Whether the men were married or not did not socially or legally matter
- Whether street walkers, brothel workers, or courtesans:
  - remember men and boys also in these roles
  - since gay sex was normal, accepted and common
  - And law created demand for legal bottoms
- Also evidence of women as customers, for both male & female hookers
- Most commonly these would be women exempt from sex laws
- Since for other women it was illegal, so risk of blackmail
- Safer to pursue illegal liaisons outside such a public and shady system
- Plenty of evidence they did
- And men were keenly aware and terrified of this
- (( Read page 80 of *Roman Sexualities* ))

### **Jealousy in Multiple Partner Relationships**

- Another requirement of polyamory is not just consent, but acceptance.
- And evidence for that is hard to find
- even when we see open multi-partner relationships
- The difference between accepting vs. putting up with.
- Evidence fairly pervasive:
  - Most women did not like their husband's sexual freedom; tolerated it
  - Men in love with courtesans whom they knew had other lovers, same



- Ironically these lovesick men in same position as wives:
  - courtesans taking many lovers was legal (as for husbands)
  - and the social norm (as for husbands)
  - and they had no power over these women (as of husbands)
- Men of means: some courtesans into love contracts of exclusive access
- Some contracts were joint (e.g. two men openly shared)
- Evidence of continued constant anxiety their courtesan was cheating
- These variations of men loving courtesans is another proximation to poly
- Not entirely consensual (courtesans had some but not total autonomy)
- Not entirely accepting (these men didn't like sharing)
- But still at least open and agreed to by all parties
- And both the men and the women had the same freedom
- The evidence might be skewed however.
- We don't get to hear from any of these courtesans themselves
- Much less a large enough number of them to see the range of feelings
- (Almost all literature written by women destroyed)
- We only hear from elite males, and only a super small select number
- And that selection made by medieval Christians
- These losses are significant because:
  - Was pre-Roman free love literature, including written by women
  - And though known in Roman times, no defenders preserved
  - But because same Christian bias that destroyed books themselves?
  - No time to survey this pre-Roman evidence, but you can ask in Q&A

## So Where Was Polyamory?

- So by now we know:
- All men had freedom to have multiple lovers (socially & legally)
- But only the lowest socially ranked women had the same freedom
- And this was a huge barrier to forming polyamorous relationships
- We know many men did allow their female lovers to have many partners
- (and probably this was true of male lovers and courtesans as well)
- But it appears they didn't like it
- And being mostly with courtesans...
- genuine consent and love are hard to ascertain from this distance
- But at least this shows gender equal public & allowed multiple partnering
- (as opposed to secret cheating, which of course everyone was doing)
  
- Polyamory could also exist by violating the law in private.
- And we won't hear much about that.
- But one near example is illuminating.
- Lucian of Samosata wrote a satirical *Dialogue of the Courtesans*
- Sounds too realistic for fantasy, like convo jotted down while overhearing
- In one of these convos, what appears to be...
- transgenderism
- and a couple hiring a female hooker to play with together
- whom they appear to have genuinely adored
- plausibly represents biologically assigned woman living, identifying man
- not merely so as to legally marry her female lover and be a public couple
- but also for what are described as sincerely identifying with the gender

- (we have other examples of transgender people in Ancient Rome
- usually being made fun of, but that tells you they existed)
- But as evidence of something getting closer to polyamory...
- couple regularly hired their favorite hooker for threeways in their home
- and took good care of her
- hooker just did it because she was paid to, and she thought it was weird
- So still not a triad
- But at least a glimpse of sexual sharing between loving partners
  
- Is that the best we have?
- Well, no.
- We have two pieces of evidence
- suggesting genuine polyamorous relationships did sometimes exist.
- We can't tell how commonly, however.
  
- The first piece of evidence:
- Many elite women exploited the loophole in the adultery laws
- by registering as prostitutes, not to be prostitutes,
- but just to be free to openly have multiple lovers
- (possibly even lesbian lovers, because no longer a crime)
- In fact so many were starting to do this,
- that decades later another emperor closed the loophole
- and made it illegal for anyone of the upper classes to register
- This tells us a couple of things:
- a lot of elite women wanted multiple lovers,
- and were exercising their autonomy to acquire that right,

- even by sacrificing many other rights to obtain it,
  - so it must have been very important to them;
  - And moreover, this had to be public.
  - So these women were advertising that they wanted multiple lovers
  - which means any men who then sought them out, must have known this
  - and thus many must have been okay with it
  - Not necessarily, as we see with the men reluctantly sharing courtesans
  - But remember that evidence is skewed
  - We would most want to hear from these women and their lovers.
  - But they have no surviving voice.
  - Nothing any of them wrote, poetry or prose, was preserved
  - So all we have is that tantalizing hint of something going on
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- The last bit of evidence we have,
  - is the best we have of polyamory being a thing.
  - And that's because it's the only time
  - we actually get to hear from them (a poly triad just outside Rome)
  - Note: they aren't from the elite, but the middle class
  - technically the bottom class, but wealthy enough to own their own shop
  - and buy expensive stone epitaphs for each other's graves
  - The two percent elite were really only policing each other's sexuality,
  - for reasons of masculine dignity and control of elite wombs
  - Sex crimes were policed because of proximity to power and rivalry for it
  - but the remaining tens of millions were either not governed by these laws
  - or could easily ignore them because no incentive to enforce them.

- And here we have evidence of that.
- An epitaph at Ostia appears to describe a polyamorous triad
- of a woman sharing two bi-male lovers,
- her husband and a male live-in friend.
- ((Read section from *Roman Sex*))
- What we appear to be looking at here is:
- a woman, a citizen, who owned her own shop
- and who was thus exempt from all sex crime laws,
- taking two lovers who also evidently loved each other,
- while they worked in her shop to support their family unit,
- and they lived this way until death.

After all the destruction of evidence of two thousand years, we are lucky enough to hear the voice of one poly triad in Roman times. Statistically, they must represent thousands of others.