Lover’s Legends: The Gay Greek Myths

by Andrew Calimach
New Rochelle: Haiduk Press 2002
reviewed by Keith Matthews

Greek font help for Macs

And the Greeks had a word for it...

Παιδεραστεια (‘pederasty’, ‘fancying youths’) was a central feature of Greek civilisation, earning it a reputation from which it has still not fully recovered. ‘The unspeakable vice of the Greeks’ (as E M Forster made a fictional professor describe it in Maurice) has been the object of ridicule, opprobrium, censorship and innuendo since we first hear of it in Classical Greece. While many contemporary gay men think of Ancient Greece as an idyllic time for unbridled homosexual behaviour, the truth (as ever) is much more complex and - dare I say it? - interesting.

The study of male homosexuality in Ancient Greece only began in the 1970s, particularly following the publication of Kenneth Dover’s Greek Homosexuality in 1978. This book helped to strip away many of the misconceptions about same-sex love in the Classical world that had grown up during the nineteenth century and that were becoming commonplace with the growth of the Gay Liberation movement from the late 1960s. What Dover sought to demonstrate was that in Classical Athens, there was an institutionalised form of same-sex behaviour, whereby an older man (the ἐραστής, ‘desirer’) is inflamed with passion for a youth (the ἐρομένος, ‘the desired’) and eases his path into full adult life. He suggested that this almost ritualised ‘education’ of the youth might have deeper roots in a Primitive Indo-European initiation rite that has left traces in other cultures.

Whilst Dover’s work remains the starting point for any exploration of sexuality in the ancient world, the study of the history of sexuality has moved on since his day. Sexuality is now seen as something that is socially constructed, that has little to do with biological imperatives and it is in this light that Greek παιδεραστεια is now interpreted. I am unconvinced by many aspects of social constructivism, particularly in the light of genetic and genealogical studies that are beginning to suggest that male homosexual behaviour, at least, has a biological component, but this is not an argument central to Calimach’s book.

Andrew Calimach has set out to rectify what he sees as a major omission in the way we read Greek myths: that there is “scant, if any, mention of male love” (page 118), despite the common perception that they are full of such stories. He points out that many of the stories dealing with παιδεραστεια survive only as “fragments, occasionally conflicting ones, scattered throughout surviving ancient texts” (page 118) and accordingly sets out to reconstruct the original forms of those stories. Using the hints from authors as widely-spaced in time as Homer (perhaps seventh century BCE) and Stobaeus (fifth century CE), he attempts the difficult task of giving shape to narratives that are only alluded to by the ancient authors, who had no need to spell out all the details that were familiar enough to their audiences.

He focuses on nine stories (Tantalus, Pelops, Laius & Chrysippus, Zeus & Ganymede, Heracles & Hylas, Orpheus, Apollo & Hyacinthus, Narcissus and Achilles & Patroclus), interspersing them with extracts from the dialogue Erotes wrongly attributed to Lucian of Samosata. The sources for each story are detailed in the critical notes; in the notes to the story of Zeus and Ganymede, most of the original sources are quoted in full “to better illustrate
the process by which all the present stories were restored" (page 134).

Some of the stories are familiar enough. The tale of Zeus and Ganymede has inspired writers since the anonymous seventh-century author of the so-called ‘Homeric Hymns’, while Achilles and Patroclus are familiar from the Iliad (and it must be mentioned that theirs is an example of something other than παιδεραστεια, as Achilles is the younger of the two but the dominant partner, something that gave Classical commentators a bit of a problem). The story of Narcissus is a good example of how a story can be given a new dimension by bringing out the homoerotic aspects. In an Afterword to the book, Heather Peterson quotes Bernard Evslin’s version of the story (from Heroes, Gods and Monsters of the Greek Myths, Evslin 1967) in which Narcissus sees a beautiful face “like a girl’s” and silently alters the gender of the reflection so that he reaches out “to touch her” (page 115). Calimach does no such thing. For him, the reflection that startles Narcissus is of “the most gorgeous guy he had ever seen” (page 96).

Other stories are less well known, or, at least, their homoerotic content is generally overlooked. In the story of Tantalus, for instance, little is usually made of how the king’s son is transformed from a plain youth to a beautiful one after Zeus restores the sacrificed child and is then abducted by the aroused Poseidon. The love of Heracles (Latinised by Calimach to Hercules) for Hylas has a curious historical parallel in the love of Hadrian for Antinous, but is something that the musclebound hero of the television series is unlikely to experience in front of a teenage male audience.

The stories are given a new twist through Calimach’s reconstructive approach, which not only pieces together the surviving fragments but also amplifies them with details not in the originals. In some ways, it reminds me of Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare: the outline of the story is there in the original, but many of the details that we often feel we deserve are missing, so the author adds them. It is probably important to do this today, in a society where the Greek myths are no longer widely known, and where education and television often aim to show how people in the past were “just like us” whilst glossing over the essential strangeness of other cultures.

The decision to include passages from pseudo-Lucian of Samosata’s Erotes almost as a refrain between groups of stories was, I think, a good one. It shows that παιδεραστεια was a contentious issue, even in the ancient world. It brings in false arguments that still have resonances today (animals don’t engage in homosexual acts, youths are debauched into homosexuality, that only love for women can endure) and highlights the ancient world’s horror of lesbianism. Calimach points out (page 120) that the history of lesbianism has been so well suppressed, that we are in no position to attempt anything like the retelling of stories dealing with female homosexuality (if any even existed). The poetry of Sappho, for instance, was highly regarded and well known in the ancient world and it was deliberate suppression in the Middle Ages, when Pope Gregory VII ordered the burning of her works, that means we now possess only fragments.

Calimach retells the stories without prurience and without shame. He presents male love as an entirely natural part of the Greek world and as something that gives no cause for concern, which is surely how they were originally told. Darker elements - such as the tearing of Orpheus limb from limb by the Thracian women - are not portrayed as an effect of homophobia, but of sins such as jealousy. Treating παιδεραστεια as a natural phenomenon in this way is important to set the stories in their historical context, and Calimach does it well.

That said, some parts of the book grate, especially the colloquialisms that occasionally appear, especially when set against conventional Graecisms such as “tawny-winged son of the Thracian North Wind” (page 67). For instance, when Dione learns that her son has been sacrificed, she is told that “the gods had divvied up the morsels” (page 16). It is as if Calimach cannot decide whether to be contemporary and chatty or formal and Homeric. The numbering of lines appears somewhat pretentious and even slightly dishonest, as if we are
reading a Loeb-style translation of genuine ancient texts. And why do we have Hercules, rather than Heracles, when we have Zeus, not Jupiter?

These are picky little points, though. It is a valuable exercise to restore stories that have not just been forgotten, but actively suppressed (no Classical Greek plays on homoerotic themes survive, although we know that they existed, such as Aeschylus's Myrmidons) and it helps to enrich our understanding of Classical Greek culture. These are stories that were familiar in the ancient world and they deserve their place in the history of western literature and thought.

Bibliography


Keith Matthews

Keith Matthews has been Senior Archaeologist for Chester City Council's Archaeological Service for the past thirteen years. He also lectures at Chester College of Higher Education, where he developed the (relatively new) Combined Honours programme in archaeology. His research interests include the archaeology of sexuality, the archaeology of subcultures (the subject of his PhD thesis, about to be submitted), the Iron Age/Roman interface and Late Antiquity.

Keith Matthews can be contacted at: kmatthews@lunet.ac.uk

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