ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW....

SEXUALITY

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To Simon

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INTRODUCTION

Humans have always had sex. But look through the keyhole of the past and you will see they have not always done it in the same manner, with the same kinds of people or with the same beliefs about whether what they are doing is right or desirable. Attitudes to sex shape what happens in the bedroom and as these attitudes shift, so does sexual behaviour. In 1936, Havelock Ellis, an English sexologist, cited the case of a respectable, married woman who was a leading campaigner for chastity.

> [She] discovered through reading some pamphlets against solitary vice, that she had herself been practicing masturbation for years without knowing it. The profound anguish and hopeless despair of this woman in the face of what she believed to be the moral ruin of her whole life cannot well be described.

She realised that what she had believed was a harmless pleasure was uni-

versally condemned across Europe and the United States as a wicked act that could lead to blindness, paralysis, insanity or even death. If only she had come to this realisation 50 years later, when Western society's attitude towards masturbation had transformed almost beyond recognition. The solitary vice was now seen as medically benign and even celebrated for the way it put into practice the idea of pleasure for its own sake.

At its core, "sexuality" is an individual's experience of the erotic, an experience which is shaped by one's desires and relationships, sexual acts and identities. The woman from Ellis's anecdote clearly prided herself on having the sexuality of a respectable, heterosexual woman (that is, until she read those pamphlets). But what it meant to be a respectable, heterosexual woman in inter-war Britain will remain a mystery until we discover how that society understood sex.

This brings us to the other definition of "sexuality": the constellation of meanings that societies attach to sex. This constellation is formed at any given moment by a number of forces: the urge or injunction to reproduce, cultural expectations about how men and women should look and behave (also known as gender), and of course desire, that "insistent psychic energy which torments as much as it drives human action", as historian Jeffrey Weeks writes. Economic, social, religious and political forces shape sexuality, as do prevailing ideas about race, ethnicity and the biology of the body. Categories like "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" are invented to help organise our thinking about sexuality, as we shall see.

Historians debate when, precisely, these categories were invented. Today, Western society thinks of sexuality as a fundamental component of the psyche, one that marks individuals out as particular types of people: a homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual, for instance – identities that determine not only with whom one has sex, and how, but one's lifestyle and even character. In his seminal work *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault contended that this is a relatively recent phenomenon, as he argued the history of same-sex relations proves. During the medieval and early-modern eras, men who had sex with other men were punished for committing the forbidden act of sodomy. By contrast, their Victorian counterparts were penalised for belonging to a distinct sexual species: the "homosexual". This shift, from a society in which anyone could be charged with committing an illicit act, to one in which certain types of people were seen as predisposed to particular kinds of sexual behaviour, heralded the arrival of

an age in which sexual identity defined the self.

Foucault's thesis has been widely debated since its first outing in 1978. Many historians have rightly pointed out that identities of people living before the 19th century were fundamentally shaped by their sexuality, just not in ways that we would recognise today. Medieval people, for instance, defined themselves according to whether they were chaste or sexually active rather than homosexual or heterosexual, as historian Ruth Mazo Karras shows. Though Foucault's historical analysis is flawed, the insight underpinning it is not. Sexuality is not a fixed, biological constant: it is shaped by society as well as by the body.

The general reader interested in exploring the ever-shifting constellation of meanings orbiting around sex in the West will find in this book a brief guide. Beginning with the world of antiquity and ending with the present, it will stop at a number of way stations: among them, the gymnasiums of ancient Greece, where men seduced boys; caves occupied by Christian ascetics who strove to snuff out their lust; the fashionable drawing rooms of Georgian London, where libertines hunted for women to prey on; and the bars of Weimar Berlin, where lesbians debated the nature of their desire. A tour as short as this must speed past destinations readers might prefer to linger over, in which case, do consult the bibliography.

CHAPTER ONE

SEX AND THE CITY: ANCIENT GREECE AND ROME

Timarchos should have known better. Having squandered his inheritance on wine, gambling, flute girls and prostitutes, he began selling his body to wealthy men in order to maintain his profligate lifestyle. That Timarchos, an adult citizen of fourth-century BC Athens, a Greek city-state, would sleep with men – and for money, no less – appalled his fellow citizens. An orator named Aeschines accused Timarchos of being morally unfit to participate in the public life of the city and took him to court. Yet during the trial, Aeschines, admitting that he had had relationships with several boys himself, hastened to point out that he had slept only with youths never with men, and reminded his audience that such liaisons were perfectly legal. Evidently, Timarchos had not scandalised Athens by sleeping with members of his own sex. He had transgressed by sleeping with grown men rather than male youths.

The sexual culture of ancient Greece and Rome was very different from our own. Statues of Priapus, the Greek god of fertility most frequently

depicted with an enormous, erect phallus, guarded the gates of Athenian estates. Inside wealthy Roman homes, frescoes of copulating couples adorned living-room walls, while vases decorated with sexually explicit scenes were owned by commoners and wealthy alike. The unabashed frankness with which the Greeks and Romans incorporated erotic images into their public lives reflected their view of desire. In itself, it was nothing to be ashamed of. Desire was a powerful energy that moved through every human, just as it moved through the beasts and the gods, linking them all together in one chain of being.

Properly harnessed by reason and self-restraint, desire was regarded as a positive force. It was celebrated for ensuring the survival of civilisation at fertility festivals like Liberalia, held in honour of Roman boys who had ejaculated for the first time. Though sex was closely associated with procreation, the two were not synonymous; sex could be had for the pleasure of it, and not just between men and women. Mortals emulated Zeus, the Greek deity who openly consorted with his handsome male cupbearer, Ganymede, even though he had a wife. Not only was it acceptable for desire to flow between men; at times, it was actively encouraged. Plato, an Athenian philosopher, believed that devotion to a boy was one step on a man's journey to a nobler love of wisdom and truth. Harmodius and Aristogiton, heroes who died liberating Athens from a tyrant, were feted throughout the ancient world for their love for each other and their city.

Sometimes, though, the callous god of desire, Eros, threatened to overpower the reason of his victims by shooting one too many arrows into their hearts. That's what happened to Timarchos. His lust rendered him a slave to his pleasures. This was not how an upstanding Athenian citizen was supposed to behave. Athenian society evaluated conduct based on whether it was honourable or shameful. Men of honour disciplined their desires by exercising *enkrateia*, or self-control. In classical Athens, which had become a democracy by the fifth century BC, this quality was embodied by the hoplite. A courageous citizen-soldier, the hoplite was "stronger than himself", as a popular saying had it, because he successfully subdued his lusts for food, drink and sex. Just as the hoplite ruled victorious over his animal appetites, he was expected to control the women and slaves in his household, assert his dominance over his fellow citizens in the forum, and triumph over the Persians on the battlefield. In Athenian society, which was strictly hierarchical and relentlessly competitive, the hoplite staked his

Harmodius and Aristogiton, Greek lovers whose devotion to each other was celebrated throughout the world of antiquity

claim to status by prevailing over his social subordinates. But he could not rule over others until he could first govern himself.

This ideal of masculinity, which the Athenians shared with the Romans, shaped a man's sexual conduct. He was expected to aggressively demonstrate his superiority over others in the bedroom just as he did in the household, the forum and the battlefield. He did so by physically penetrating his social inferiors, a category that included women and non-citizen men – slaves, for instance. Because women were defined in opposition to men – they were sexually passive while men were active – it was considered normal for women to be penetrated and natural for them to enjoy it. But for a man to take pleasure in playing the passive was deeply transgressive because it meant relinquishing control of his body to another, like a woman would. In his speech denouncing Timarchos, Aeschines gravely insults him by describing him as "this man with a man's body, but who has sinned womanly sins". Effeminate men such as Timarchos represented the polar opposite of the hoplite: they were branded *kinaidoi*, men who inspired fear and revulsion because they relished being sexually penetrated.

It would be easy to assume that Timarchos was homosexual but the ancients did not think about sexual identity as we do today. In fact, sexual orientation was of minor consideration to the Greeks and Romans, who assumed that most men were interested in both men and women. Because sexual relations mirrored social relations, what mattered was not whether one's partner was male or female but whether the role one played during sex was that of the social superior or inferior. Julius Caesar was roundly mocked for his relationship with Nicomedes, king of Bithynia, not because he was sleeping with a man but because, it was rumoured, he played the passive, feminine role. In surrendering his body to a man, Caesar – like Timarchos, 300 years before him – had acted like a slave or woman, not a leader of men. As Caesar's soldiers gleefully chanted at the triumph honouring his conquest of Gaul, "Caesar conquered Gaul; Nicomedes, Caesar".

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If Timarchos had slept with boys rather than adult men, he would not have provoked such scorn. In Athens, boys were inferior to men, so it was legally, morally and socially acceptable for the latter to have sex with the former. In