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**Female Homoeroticism in the Roman Empire: How Many Licks Does It Take
to Get to the Disruption of a Phallocentric Model of Sexuality?**

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Rogavit alter tribadas et molles mares
 quae ratio procreasset, exposuit senex:
 “Idem Prometheus, auctor vulgi fictilis
 qui, simul offendit ad fortunam, frangitur,
 naturae partes veste quas celat pudor
 cum separatim toto finxisset die,
 aptare mox ut posset corporibus suis,
 ad cenam est invitatus subito a Libero;
 ubi inrigatus multo venas nectare
 sero domum est reversus titubanti pede.
 tum semisomno corde et errore ebrio
 adplicuit virginale generi masculino,
 et masculina membra adposuit feminis.
 ita nunc libido pravo fruitur gaudio.”
 -Phaedrus, *Fabulae Aesopiae* 4.15

The other person asked, what reason had produced *tribades* and soft men. The old man explained: “The same Prometheus, originator of the common people from clay who are broken as soon as they encounter fortune. When for a whole day he had shaped separately the parts of nature, the ones which shame hides with clothing, so that he would soon be able to fasten them with their own bodies, he was suddenly invited to dinner by Liber. When he had been soaked in his veins with much nectar, he returned home at a late hour with a wavering foot. Then with a drowsy heart and with drunk error, he applied the maidenly [member] to the male type, and he applied the masculine members to women. And so now lust enjoys wicked delight.”¹

The above passage, written sometime in the 1st century,² contains one of the two earliest extant uses of the word *tribas* (plural *tribades*) and exemplifies not only the importance of gender roles in defining a person’s sexuality in antiquity, but also the high level of castigation that gender-deviants received. The Latin word *tribas* (τριβάς in Greek) comes from the Greek verb τριβειν, meaning “to rub,” and is usually used to describe a hyper-masculine, penetrative woman who has sex with other women (though there are several textual instances in which a

¹ All translations are my own (with guidance from Dr. Steven D. Smith), unless a specific translation is cited.

² All centuries are CE unless otherwise noted.

tribas penetrates men or boys). The nature of this penetration is rarely described in detail, though some authors imply or describe an artificial phallus, an extremely large clitoris, or a hermaphroditic or otherwise phallicized woman. Still, some authors refer to any woman with a sexual desire for other women as a *tribas*, the implications of which I will discuss in detail later. Though we do not know for certain whether the word was originally used by the Greeks or the Romans, Diana Swancutt makes a strong argument in her article “*Still Before Sexuality*” that the Romans coined the term and concept, intentionally from a Greek word, as a way of demonizing the Greeks as androgynous gender monsters.³ Regardless of whether her theory is correct, it is clear from all extant sources that the term *tribas* is used nearly universally with derision and contempt.

Two other important terms seem to suggest female homoerotic⁴ relationships: the Latin word *frictrix* and the Greek word ἑταιρίστρια (masculine ἑταιριστής). *Frictrix* occurs once in the 3rd century in a Christian text by Tertullian,⁵ and once in a 4th century astrological text by Hermes Trismegistus.⁶ Sandra Boehringer infers that it is synonymous with *tribas* from the latter’s use of it, though admitting that it is not possible to determine its meaning from Tertullian’s passages alone.⁷ The most famous example of the use of the term ἑταιρίστρια is in Aristophanes’ speech from Plato’s *Symposium*, when he is describing the splitting in half of the four-armed, four-legged humans in his theory on love and attraction. He explains that women

³ Diana M. Swancutt, “*Still Before Sexuality: ‘Greek’ Androgyny, the Roman Imperial Politics of Masculinity and the Roman Invention of the Tribas,*” in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. T. C. Penner and C. V. Stichele (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 11-62.

⁴ I will continuously use “homoerotic” rather than “homosexual” to avoid the modern implications associated with homosexuality. As the Greeks and Romans did not classify sexuality in the same ways we do, it is anachronistic to use terms such as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “homosexual” to describe ancient people or their relationships.

⁵ Tertullian, *Resurrection* 16.6.

⁶ Hermes Trismegistus, *Liber Hermetis Trismegisti*, 32.

⁷ Sandra Boehringer, “What is Named by the Name ‘Philaenis’: Gender, Function, and Authority of an Antonomastic Figure,” in *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World*, ed. M. Masterson, N. S. Rabinowitz, and J. Robson (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 386.

who were previously attached to other women “do not at all offer their mind to men, but very much have turned themselves to women, and the *ἑταιρίστριαι* are born from this kind” (“οὐ πάνυ αὖται τοῖς ἀνδράσι τὸν νοῦν προσέχουσιν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον πρὸς τὰς γυναῖκας τετραμμένα εἰσὶ, καὶ αἱ *ἑταιρίστριαι* ἐκ τούτου τοῦ γένους γίγνονται”).⁸ If the term was a common one for women who engaged in same-sex relationships, it is lost to us now, for there are very few other uses of it. While Plato does not seem to imply an active or passive nature with the term, instead using it for any woman who is attracted to other women, Lucian later uses the word *ἑταιρίστρια* synonymously with *tribas* to depict a masculine, penetrative woman.⁹ In addition to these uses, Pollux uses the masculine version of the word (*ἑταιριστής*) in his 2nd century dictionary entitled *Onomasticon*. In this entry, he compares the word with words such as *ἀσελγαίνων* (a man being licentious) and *μάχλος* (a lewd man), though he does not mention anything specifically about same-sex desire.¹⁰

As shown in the above passage of Phaedrus, gender-roles were of key importance for the Greeks and Romans in defining sexuality, so much so that the fable offers a physical solution (the mixing up of male and female genitals) to the problem of why certain women were *tribades* (masculine, pursuing women) and certain men were *molles* (literally meaning “soft,” widely used to depict sexually passive men). It is unclear from the passage whether *tribades* are people with female bodies who have had penises mistakenly attached to them, or whether they are people with male bodies who have had vaginas attached to them.¹¹ Either way, the poem is meant to

⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, 191e.

⁹ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 5.2.

¹⁰ Pollux, *Onomasticon*, 6.188.

¹¹ For the first interpretation, see Judith P. Hallett, “Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. P. Hallett and M.S. Skinner (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 256. For the latter interpretation, see Daniel Boyarin, “Are There Any Jews in ‘The History of Sexuality?’” in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995): 345, n. 29.

depict the feminization of sexually passive men and the masculinization of sexually active women. The ancient Greeks and Romans do not define a person's sexual orientation on the sole basis of gender. Instead, they are chiefly concerned with activity and passivity in sex: adult males are expected to take an active role, females a passive role, and anyone who deviates from this is subject, at the very least, to mockery.

Though there has been little study on the classification of female homoeroticism in the ancient world, many scholars have analyzed male same-sex relationships in Greece and Rome, and among the extensive discussions on how to define male sexuality in the classical world, Holt Parker's "Teratogenic Grid" has given us a valuable classification system for Roman sexualities. Though I disagree with the way that Parker portrays female sexuality—since he seems to base what little discussion he has of female homoeroticism on standards that are set for men rather than women—his male classification stands up to scrutiny, and is helpful in explaining the ways in which the Romans thought about sexuality in general.¹² Parker's grid is based on the activity, passivity, and genders of the sex partners, as well as the orifice (vagina, anus, or mouth) that they are using. For example, his grid shows that a man who prefers to penetrate the anus of any gender—it does not matter what gender, as long as he is taking an active role—is called a *pedicator* or *pedico*. A man who prefers to be penetrated anally, however, is called a *cinaedus* or *pathicus*, and would be chastised for this preference.¹³

If we accept Parker's grid, then we see that the classification of Roman sexuality is entirely phallocentric and thus leaves out any kind of sex that does not involve a penis. This

¹² For a discussion on Roman classification of sex, see also Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 177-245.

¹³ Holt N. Parker, "The Teratogenic Grid," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. P. Hallett and M.S. Skinner (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 47-65.

presents a problem for the Romans when trying to discuss any kind of sexual relation that does not involve a penis, and is especially apparent in their discussions of cunnilingus and female homoeroticism. Though neither of these practices fit the Roman phallogocentric model, they are still recognized and discussed—though often satirically and with great mockery. The term for a man who performs oral sex on a woman is *cunnilinctor*,¹⁴ and this kind of man is highly stigmatized. In the Roman mindset, to perform oral sex on anyone is to make oneself passive, to choose to be orally fucked by that person. According to their phallogocentric model, then, the Romans conceptualize the *cunnilinctor* as a man being orally penetrated by a woman.¹⁵

There is more contention over how the Romans classify female homoeroticism. Parker maintains that female homoeroticism is also seen as phallogocentric, and that “*tribades* practice a type of fake intercourse” in that they either use an artificial phallus or else “rub their vulvas together.”¹⁶ He does not explain how the latter activity, which is both reciprocal and lacking a phallus, is phallogocentric. Indeed, many scholars agree that the Romans intentionally masculinize the *tribas* and give her some means of penetration in order to better fit their phallogocentric model.¹⁷ Furthermore, many claim that this masculinizing (and often phallicizing) of the *tribas* serves to stigmatize active women.¹⁸ While I do not entirely disagree with either of these assessments, I argue that they are not completely inclusive of all Roman texts, but rather they take their findings mostly from satirical sources that exaggerate the characteristics of the *tribas*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁵ It is interesting to note, however, that while the men in these relationships are clearly viewed as being passive (making their female partners active), the women are not chastised in these cases for being masculine, as they are when they penetrate their partners with a phallus.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ Holt N. Parker, “The Teratogenic Grid,” 58-59; Pamela Gordon, “Lover’s Voice in *Heroides* 15,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. P. Hallett and M.S. Skinner (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 275; and Diana M. Swancutt, “*Still Before Sexuality*,” 11-61.

¹⁸ Hallett, “Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature,” 255-273; and Diana M. Swancutt, “*Still Before Sexuality*,” 11-61.

for comic effect. I also argue that the Romans themselves did not consider female homoeroticism and male homoeroticism to be related. This argument has been made by quite a few scholars, and along these lines, Boehringer succinctly states: “In the ancient world, there was no perceived equivalence of the love between men and the love between women. Similarly, when we study prescriptive or moralizing discourse, the image of the *tribas* is not the counterpart of the figure of the *kinaidos* or the *euruproktos*.”¹⁹

If we approach female homoeroticism in the same ways in which we do male homoeroticism—and more broadly, Roman concepts of sexuality—we are left with two conclusions that I think to be troublesome. The first is that there must be an active partner and a passive partner, and that the active partner must have the means of penetrating her lover.²⁰ The second is that only the woman who is defying her gender role by being an active partner should be chastised, and that the passive woman, who is fulfilling her role of being penetrated, should be accepted. It is easy to see why the first point provokes scrutiny, given that it is physically possible for women to have sex with each other without any penetration, and that reciprocity in homosexual sex between women is equally possible. That being said, it is likely that many of the Roman men writing about these relationships were unaware of these possibilities, and it is even conceivable (though I think very unlikely) that the women, too, were so engrained with a phallogentric concept of sexuality that they themselves heeded the phallogentric model. Given extant textual and artistic evidence, however, I argue that homoerotic relationships between women did not always follow a phallogentric model. I also argue that female homoeroticism was

¹⁹ The latter are both terms for a passive male lover in a homoerotic relationship; Sandra Boehringer, “Female Homoeroticism,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2014), 160-1.

²⁰ There is a possible exception to this in the practice of cunnilingus, though I will discuss later why cunnilingus (either heterosexual or homosexual) is generally troubling to the Roman classification of sexuality.

heavily criticized in Roman antiquity, and that though active, masculine female partners were surely criticized more heavily, even the passive partners were stigmatized for their same-sex relations. Through these arguments, I will show that female homoeroticism does not fit the widely-accepted model that we currently hold for homoerotic relationships in Roman antiquity and that the study of sexuality in the Greco-Roman world should therefore consider female homoeroticism differently than its male counterpart.

Masculinized Women in Homoerotic Relationships

Most commonly in the Roman Empire, women who sexually pursue other women are depicted as being masculinized and often phallicized. If Hallett's interpretation is correct, Phaedrus imagines *tribades* as a drunken mistake by which women are physically fixed with "masculine members," and he is not the only writer to depict *tribades* in this way. Many writers show *tribades* penetrating their lovers without detailing how they are doing so, leaving their readers to imagine for themselves the possibilities. There are several extant sources, however, that can inform the modern reader on what those possibilities may have been. The first (and I think most likely) possibility is the use of an artificial phallus, much like strap-ons are used today. In *Erotes*, a Lucianic text written sometime from the 2nd to the 4th century,²¹ two men debate over whether the love of women or the love of boys is better. While arguing against pederasty, the character Charicles states that if pederasty is tolerated, female homoeroticism must too be allowed, saying "Having strapped onto themselves objects of licentious organs made by handiwork, a monstrous mystery of barren [women], let them lie together, woman with woman,

²¹ It is unclear whether the text was written by Lucian himself or a Lucian imitator. For more discussion on the matter, see James Jope, "Interpretation and Authenticity of the Lucianic *Erotes*," in *Helios* 38.1 (2011): 103-120.

just as man” (ἀσελγῶν δὲ ὀργάνων ὑποζυγωσάμεναι τέχνασμα, ἀσπόρων τεράστιον αἴνιγμα, κοιμάσθωσαν γυνή μετὰ γυναικὸς ὡς ἀνὴρ).²² Though it is impossible to determine how frequently women used these “objects of licentious organs,” this text shows that it was clearly a possibility in the Roman mind. In addition to this, the 1st century author Seneca the Elder tells a story in his *Controversies* of a man who catches his wife in bed with another person whose gender is not immediately apparent. He quotes the husband, saying “I myself examined first the man, if he was one inborn or stitched on” (ἐγὼ δ’ ἐσκόπησα² πρότερον τὸν ἄνδρα, <εἰ>³ ἐγγεγένηται τις ἢ προσέρραπται).²³ Here too, then, we have reference to some sort of apparatus used for penetrating.

Other writers suggest, though, that these artificial devices may not always be necessary, instead depicting *tribades* as having massive clitorises capable of penetration. In his epigram on a *tribas* named Bassa, Martial refers to the woman’s *prodigiosa Venus*,²⁴ which some authors have interpreted as her “monstrous clitoris.”²⁵ Other scholars, however, suggest that this interpretation may not be valid, instead thinking it more likely that Martial is referring to Bassa’s lust rather than clitoris. James Butrica, indeed, translates the phrase as “remarkable lovemaking,” saying that there is “no evidence for *Venus* in the sense of ‘clitoris,’” but also admitting that the term *Venus* is used to mean the penis of a man in Lucretius 4.1269.²⁶ Though I agree that it is more likely that Martial is not talking about Bassa’s clitoris here, there is something to be said for translating it as such, considering that this descriptor comes directly after the statement, “you

²² Lucian, *Erotes* 28.

²³ Seneca, *Controversiae* 1.2.23.

²⁴ Martial, *Epigrams* 1.90.

²⁵ Swancutt goes even farther than this, translating it as “penis.” Though we do have reference to the word *venus* being used to describe male genitalia, this use is incredibly rare in comparison to its other meanings, and I think it highly unlikely that it is referring to a phallus here. Martial, though, may have left this intentionally ambiguous.

²⁶ James L. Butrica, “Some Myths and Anomalies in the Study of Roman Sexuality,” in *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West*, ed. Beert C. Verstraete and Vernon Provencal (Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 2005), 255.

dare to mutually join together twin cunts” (*inter se geminos audes committere cunnos*),²⁷ and that he could be describing how she does so. Supporting this theory, a translation of a medical text originally written by the Greek physician Soranus speaks of the necessary measures to take when a woman’s clitoris is of “a large uncouth size” (*horrida magnitudo*).²⁸ Not only does he recommend cutting the clitoris off, but emphasizes that the reason for doing so is not to treat any physical discomfort, but because women with a large clitoris “affected by the lust [or: erection] (typical) of men, similarly assume an appetite, and they come into Venus (i.e., with men) [only when] forced” (*ipse adfecte tentigine virorum simile appetentiam sumunt et in venerem coacte veniunt*).²⁹ This makes it clear, then, that some thought that a large clitoris meant not only an increased sex drive, but probably also an increased propensity for same-sex desire.³⁰ It is possible that certain writers, unaware of or resistant to the ways in which women actually have sex, would envisage clitorises so large that they were capable of and used for penetration.

Because there is a general silence on the topic of female homoeroticism (with the obvious exception of Sappho’s poetry) before the Roman invasion of Greece in 146 BCE, it is impossible to know for certain how the Greeks viewed female homoeroticism whilst still independent of the Romans. That being said, given the reverence that many Greek writers expressed towards Sappho and her poetry, as well as several Greek vase paintings depicting erotic scenes between women, it is likely that they were at least more tolerant than the Romans. In the 4th century BCE, however, Plato denounces all forms of homosexuality in his *Laws*, saying “It must be considered that the pleasure concerning these things seems to have been given over in accordance with

²⁷ Martial, *Epigrams* 1.90.

²⁸ Caelius Aurelianus, *Gynaecia* 112.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ It is possible that Soranus is instead referring to a desire to penetrate people of any gender. Most texts about *tribades*, however, reference a specific sexual preference towards women (though not always an exclusive one).

nature to the female nature and to the nature of males when it comes into intercourse of procreation, but [the pleasure] of men with men or [the pleasure] of women with women is contrary to nature” (έννοητέον ὅτι τῆ θηλεία καὶ τῆ τῶν ἀρρένων φύσει εἰς κοινωνίαν ἰούση τῆς γεννήσεως ἢ περὶ ταῦτα ἡδονὴ κατὰ φύσιν ἀποδεδόσθαι δοκεῖ, ἀρρένων δὲ πρὸς ἄρρένας ἢ θηλειῶν πρὸς θηλείας παρὰ φύσιν).³¹ In the early 2nd century BCE, Asclepiades too gives a possible condemnation of female homoeroticism, saying “The Samian women Bitton and Nannion will not go to the place of Aphrodite by her customs, but they desert to other things, which are not fine. Mistress Cypris, hate the ones who flee from the marriage-bed beside you” (Αἱ Σάμιαι Βιττώ καὶ Νάννιον εἰς Ἀφροδίτης/ φοιτᾶν τοῖς αὐτῆς οὐκ ἐθέλουσι νόμοις,/ εἰς δ' ἕτερ' αὐτομολοῦσιν, ἃ μὴ καλά. δεσπότι Κύπρι,/ μίσει τὰς κοίτης τῆς παρὰ σοὶ φυγάδας).³² While neither of these texts suggest a cultural distaste for female homoeroticism and the views that they express could very well have been in the minority, they at the very least show that female homoeroticism was starting to be denounced even before a strong Roman influence took hold. More importantly, neither text suggests an active or passive partner; rather, they both show and condemn a mutual and reciprocal erotic relationship between women.

Along with the fable by Phaedrus, Seneca’s *Controversies* contains one of the two oldest extant uses of the word *tribas*, in which he tells a story of a man walking in to find his wife being fucked by another woman. Upon examining the adulterer to determine that she is, indeed, a woman, he kills both her and his wife. Though Seneca refers to both women as *tribades* (rather than just the penetrative lover), he still creates an active/passive relationship between the two women. The lover is not only actively penetrating the wife when the husband finds them, but the

³¹ Plato, *Nomoi* 1.636B-C.

³² Asclepiades, *Anthologia Graeca* 5.207.

husband also describes her as an ἄνδρα, a man. Still, the rest of the passage shows that the husband does not handle the situation as he would have if he had caught his wife having sex with a man, a discrepancy that I will explore in greater detail in the next section.

Writing in the first century, Ovid includes the story of Iphis and Ianthe in his famous epic *Metamorphoses*. This story is about a woman named Iphis who was raised as a boy, after her father regretfully told her mother—still pregnant with her—to kill the child if it was not a male. Isis comes to her in a dream, however, and tells her to raise the child as a boy rather than killing her. So Iphis grows up with her father thinking that she is male, and when she becomes of marriageable age, he finds for her a beautiful bride named Ianthe, with whom Iphis is passionately in love. She knows, however, that their marriage cannot be consummated, and she, distraught, makes the following speech:

“quis me manet exitus,” inquit
 “cognita quam nulli, quam prodigiosa novaeque
 cura tenet Veneris? Si di mihi parcere vellent,
 parcere debuerant; si non, et perdere vellent,
 naturale malum saltem et de more dedissent.
 Nec vaccam vaccae, nec equas amor urit equarum:
 urit oves aries, sequitur sua femina cervum.
 Sic et aves coeunt, interque animalia cuncta
 femina femineo conrepta cupidine nulla est.
 Vellem nulla forem! Ne non tamen omnia Crete
 monstra ferat, taurum dilexit filia Solis,
 femina nempe marem: meus est furiosior illo,
 si verum profitemur, amor! Tamen illa secuta est
 spem Veneris, tamen illa dolis et imagine vaccae
 passa bovem est, et erat, qui deciperetur adulter!
 Huc licet e toto sollertia confluat orbe,
 ipse licet revolet ceratis Daedalus alis,
 quid faciet? Num me puerum de virgine doctis

artibus efficiet? num te mutabit, Ianthe?”³³

“What death waits for me,” she said, “whom concern for a new Venus possesses – a concern known by no one and monstrous? If the gods wanted to spare me, they should have spared me; if not, and they wanted to destroy me, they could at least have given me an evil natural and according to custom. Love does not inflame a cow for a cow, nor mares for mares: love inflames rams for sheep, his own doe follows the stag. Thus also the birds come together, and among all animals no female has been seized by lust for a female. I wish that I were no woman! Nevertheless, lest Crete not bear all monstrosities, the daughter of the Sun loved a bull, certainly a female and male: my love is more furious than that, if I am professing the truth! Yet that woman followed an expectation of Venus, yet she by deceptions and by the likeness of a cow experienced her bull, and it was the adulterer who was deceived! Should ingenuity from the whole world meet here, should Daedalus himself fly back with his waxed wings, what would he do? For with his learned arts will he make me a boy from a maiden? For will he change you, Ianthe?”

Despite her cynicism, however, the story does not end poorly for Iphis. After her mother prays to Isis for help, the goddess transforms Iphis into a man, and he and Ianthe properly marry.

Though Ovid himself does not pass any negative judgment on Iphis (as he does other desiring women in his poetry), he shows through her own feelings the disdain that her culture has for female homoeroticism. Iphis laments because her desire for a woman is unnatural—even more so, in her mind, than Pasiphaë’s desire for a bull. Indeed she is so engrained with the phallogocentric model that she cannot imagine any amount of ingenuity that would allow her to consummate her marriage with another woman. Thus Iphis, a female masquerading as a male and taking on a man’s role, desires a woman (as no woman should) but cannot reconcile this desire with her lack of penis. Very little attention is given to her bride-to-be, as she does not know the true sex of Iphis, but

³³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.727-44.

thinks that she is marrying a man. This story, then, seems at first glance to fit nicely into our current views of Roman sexuality: there is an emphasis on phallocentricism in sex, a shame associated with being a masculine and desiring female, and a lack of care or attention for the partner who is acting within her gender role.

The comparison that Iphis makes between her own desires and the desires of animals is not an uncommon one in antiquity, though it is not always as negative as Iphis makes it. In his book *Foucault's Virginit*y, Goldhill discusses the ancient views on animal nature versus human nature, especially in regards to sexuality. He cites several ancient texts that discuss animal and human nature, including one written by a first century author named Straton:

πᾶν ἄλογον ζῷον βινεῖ μόνον· οἱ λογικοὶ δὲ
τῶν ἄλλων ζῴων τοῦτ' ἔχομεν τὸ πλεόν,
πυγίζειν εὐρόντες. ὅσοι δὲ γυναιξὶ κρατοῦνται,
τῶν ἀλόγων ζῴων οὐδὲν ἔχουσι πλεόν.

Every unreasoning animal just screws; but we have reason
And excel the other animals in this:
We have discovered buggery. All who are ruled by women
Have no more going for them than the unreasoning beasts.³⁴

Here, then, male homoeroticism at least is shown as “man’s triumph over the beasts, over nature,”³⁵ rather than a cause for shame due to unnaturalness. Indeed, in the Roman mind—more especially in Ovid—there is a clear hierarchy of beings. Pintabone cites an early episode in *Metamorphoses* to explain this hierarchy, in which animals are described as being less divine than humans, whereas gods are obviously more divine.³⁶ If she were male, then, it would be

³⁴ Straton, *Anthologia Graeca* 12.22, trans. Simon Goldhill in *Foucault's Virginit*y (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995), 63.

³⁵ Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginit*y (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995), 63.

³⁶ Diane T. Pintabone, “Ovid’s Iphis and Ianthe: When Girls Won’t Be Girls,” in *Among Women: From the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World*, ed. Nancy S. Rabinowitz and Lisa Auanger (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 260.

inappropriate and inaccurate for Iphis to compare her own desire to that of animals, for she would be considered more highly evolved than animals and therefore not a slave to nature. As a female, though, her point is never shown to be wrong, and the resolution in her story comes from her eventually being turned into a man, rather than accepting her transcendence of “nature.” Women, then, do not get the same luxury of defending their homoerotic desires as Straton shows men having. Indeed, with the preoccupation of procreation in Augustan Rome, it is a woman’s duty to obey the nature of the female body: to be penetrated and impregnated by men.

In the second century, Martial writes three epigrams detailing women who engage in homoerotic relationships. In his first book of epigrams, he writes the following poem to a woman named Bassa:

Quod numquam maribus iunctam te, Bassa, videbam
 Quodque tibi moechum fabula nulla dabat,
 Omne sed officium circa te semper obibat
 Turba tui sexus, non adeunte viro,
 Esse videbaris, fateor, Lucretia nobis:
 At tu, pro facinus, Bassa, fututor eras.
 Inter se geminos audes committere cunnos
 Mentiturque virum prodigiosa Venus.
 Commenta es dignum Thebano aenigmate monstrum,
 Hic ubi vir non est, ut sit adulterium.³⁷

Because I never saw you joined with men, Bassa, and because no story gave to you an adulterer, but a crowd of your own sex surrounding you was always attending each duty, not with a man attending, you seemed to us to be, I admit, a Lucretia.³⁸ But you, for your evil deed, Bassa, were a fucker. You dare to mutually join together twin cunts and your unnatural “Venus” feigns a man. You have invented a monstrosity worthy of the Theban riddle: Where here there is no man, there is adultery.

³⁷ Martial, *Epigrams* 1.90.

³⁸ A famously chaste woman, whose rape was said to have caused the end of the Roman monarchy.

Though Martial never explicitly calls Bassa a *tribas* in this epigram, he certainly depicts her as such. Firstly, he calls her a *fututor*, or a “fucker,” which Parker lists as an active man who vaginally penetrates a woman.³⁹ It is highly unusual for a woman to be described in this way, and emphasizes the active role that Bassa plays in her sexual relationships. He also refers to her *prodigiosa Venus*. As noted above, there is some disagreement as to what “Venus” means in this context, with some translating it as “clitoris” or even “penis” (a translation which I myself find highly unlikely), and some taking it to mean her sex drive. Though these translations have different implications, they both imply the masculinity of Bassa. Either she is so masculine that she biologically resembles a male with her overly large clitoris, or she has such a strong desire for sex that she rivals men. Lastly, she has solved the “Theban riddle” by providing women with a means of adultery that does not include a biological male. At first glance, Bassa has taken the role of *fututor*, rivaling men either anatomically or with her “prodigious” sex drive, and adulterating women just like men. She seems to fit nicely, then, into the phallogocentric model of Roman sexuality. There is, however, language of reciprocity in the epigram which calls into question just how active and phallicized Bassa really is. I will discuss this at greater lengths in my next section.

Martial’s portrayal of Bassa in this poem is clearly negative. Though Butrica claims that the poem displays no animosity towards female homoeroticism and is rather about Martial “as a failed diviner who rectifies his error,”⁴⁰ the language used in the poem (as well as the general invective nature of Martial’s poetry) shows this to be an unlikely conclusion. Butrica claims that the words *monstrum* and *prodigiosa* are not, in fact, negative, but only express the strangeness of

³⁹ Parker, “The Teratogenic Grid,” 49.

⁴⁰ James L. Butrica, “Some Myths and Anomalies in the Study of Roman Sexuality,” 254.

the problem that Martial is faced with.⁴¹ He neglects to discuss the word *facinus*, however, which has no connotation of strangeness, and instead is often used to mean “crime.” He also neglects to mention the use of the word *audes* (meaning “you dare”), which Martial would not have used if Bassa was doing something socially acceptable. Thus this poem is one of many pieces of writing that displays the stigmatization of female homoeroticism in the Roman Empire.

In his seventh book of epigrams, Martial writes two poems about a woman named Philaenis. The first has much to say about Philaenis, though nothing good:

Pedicat pueros tribas Philaenis
 et tentigine saevior mariti
 undenas dolat in die puellas.
 harpasto quoque subligata ludit,
 et flavescit haphe, gravesque draucis
 halteras facili rotat lacerto,
 et putri lutulenta de palaestra
 uncti verberere vapulat magistri:
 nec cenat prius aut recumbit ante
 quam septem vomuit meros deunces;
 ad quos fas sibi tunc putat redire,
 cum colophia sedecim comedit.
 post haec omnia cum libidinatur,
 non fellat (putat hoc parum virile),
 sed plane medias vorat puellas.
 di mentem tibi dent tuam, Philaeni,
 cunnum lingere quae putas virile.⁴²

Philaenis the *tribas* anally fucks boys and, more raging than the lust of a husband, she bangs eleven girls in a day. Having been fastened,⁴³ she also plays with a ball, and she becomes yellow in the sand, and she swings heavy weights with a more easy arm than athletes, and muddy from the putrid *palaestra* she is beaten with a flog by an oiled instructor: And she neither dines nor reclines before she has

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Martial, *Epigrams* 7.67.

⁴³ Probably with some kind of loincloth or belt.

vomited seven *deunces*⁴⁴ of undiluted wine; to which she thinks it right for her to return afterwards, when she eats sixteen pieces of meat. After all these things, when she gratifies lust, she does not suck dick (she thinks that this is not manly enough), but she wholly devours the middles of girls. May the gods give your mind to you, Phillaenis, you who think that licking cunt is manly.

It is very unlikely that Martial is speaking in this poem about a real woman whom he knows, and as Boehringer states in her article about the name Phillaenis, “The same name does not designate a specific person, who existed and whom Martial had met, but it very often refers, as various commentators have noticed, to a large group of individuals afflicted with the same faults or behaving in the same manner.”⁴⁵ Martial writes this poem, then, not to mock a specific person, but to satirize the figure of the *tribas*, displaying and exaggerating all of her stereotypes. For him, the *tribas* is an active and penetrative woman who desires to be hyper-masculine, but being a woman, does not understand the nuances of masculinity. She plays at masculinity by penetrating both boys and girls, playing sports, eating an abundance of meats, and over-drinking. She knows enough about masculinity to know that she should not fellate men, but unknowingly makes herself passive and disgusting by performing oral sex on women. Additionally, she most likely exercises wearing some sort of clothing, as suggested by the participle *subligata*. At this time period in Rome, however, some textual evidence suggests that Romans exercised completely naked, as the Greeks did.⁴⁶ Elsewhere, in fact, Martial states to a matron “The gymnasium, the warm baths, and the stadium are in this part: retreat. We are being undressed: refrain to look at the naked men” (*gymnasium, thermae, stadium est hac parte: recede./ exuimur:*

⁴⁴ About 6 pints, according to Shackleton-Bailey, in Martial, *Epigrams* trans. D. R. Shackleton-Bailey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 133.

⁴⁵ Sandra Boehringer, “What is Named by the Name ‘Phillaenis’: Gender, Function, and Authority of an Antonomastic Figure,” 382.

⁴⁶ Jason König (2005) 171 argues that the Romans did not approve of exercising naked, though his argument applies more to the Republic than the Empire. Indeed, he states that it is “not at all clear how long Roman resistance to that Greek custom lasted.” For discussion on nudity existing in Roman athletics, see Nigel B. Crowther in “Nudity and Morality: Athletics in Italy,” *The Classical Journal* 76.2 (1980): 119–123.

nudos parce videre viros).⁴⁷ However much Philaenis tries to assert her masculinity by being a proficient athlete, she falls short of her goal by not exercising like a true Roman man. Though she attempts to fit herself into both a culturally and sexually masculine (and phallic) role, she fails, blurring the phallogentric lines between activity and passivity, between masculinity and femininity.

Martial's second epigram about Philaenis is much shorter and more direct, but still worth examining: "*Tribas* of the very *tribades*, Philaenis, rightly, the girl whom you fuck, you call your girlfriend" (*Ipsarum tribadum tribas, Philaeni, / Recte, quam futuis, vocas amicam*).⁴⁸ Here, Philaenis is not portrayed as being falsely masculine or as a woman playing at something that she cannot be. She is called by the same name and title (*tribas*) as the woman in the previous epigram, but this time, there is no indication that she is performing masculinity in the wrong way. Indeed, she vaginally fucks a woman rather than performing cunnilingus on her, and she labels her as her girlfriend, or mistress, just as many Roman poets do with their lovers. More importantly than her actions is Martial's assessment that she does this *recte*, or "rightly." Though he is by no means passing a positive moral judgment on Philaenis, he agrees that she and her lover perform the roles of a man and his girlfriend, and can thus be labeled as such.

Also living in the second century, Lucian writes *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, in which he shares several fictional stories of ἑταῖραι (a kind of high-class prostitute common in Ancient Greece). Amongst them, he writes a dialogue between two courtesans named Clonarium and Leaena, the latter of whom tells a story about a female client named Megilla, and her wife Demonassa. Clonarium starts the dialogue by questioning Leaena about the rumors she has been

⁴⁷ Martial, *Epigrams* 3.68.3-4.

⁴⁸ Martial, *Epigrams* 7.70.

hearing that a wealthy woman from Lesbos has enlisted the services of Leaena. After Leaena confirms this (though immediately expressing shame about the entire affair), Clonarium tries to ascertain the details of their relationship, asking “By the one rearing children, what is the act, or what does the woman want? And what do you even accomplish, whenever you are together?” (Πρὸς τῆς κουροτρόφου τί τὸ πρᾶγμα, ἢ τί βούλεται ἡ γυνή; τί δὲ καὶ πράττετε, ὅταν συνῆτε;)⁴⁹ Clonarium takes an attitude typical of a Roman male here, utterly baffled by how sex can occur without a penis. By writing this, Lucian is both recognizing the phallogocentrism of Roman sex and the rarity with which female homoeroticism is discussed, while still acknowledging (through his very writing of the dialogue) that female homoeroticism does exist, and that women can have sex without a penis involved.

Leaena responds that “the woman is terribly manly” (ἡ γυνὴ δὲ δεινῶς ἀνδρική ἐστίν),⁵⁰ and Clonarium suggests that she might be like the women in Lesbos, who look masculine and only have sex with other women. Leaena then recounts the story of her first sexual encounter with Megilla and Demonassa. After playing music at a drinking party for them (as was common for ἐταῖραι), “Megilla said ‘Come indeed, Leaena, for already it is fine to go to bed, lie down here between the two of us’ (Ἄγε δὴ, ἔφη, ὦ Λέαινα, ἡ Μέγιλλα, κοιμᾶσθαι γὰρ ἤδη καλόν, ἐνταῦθα κάθειυδε μεθ’ ἡμῶν μέση ἀμφοτέρων).⁵¹ She continues the story:

Ἐφίλουν με τὸ πρῶτον ὥσπερ οἱ ἄνδρες, οὐκ αὐτὸ μόνον προσαρμόζουσαι τὰ χεῖλη, ἀλλ’ ὑπανοίγουσαι τὸ στόμα, καὶ περιέβαλλον καὶ τοὺς μαστοὺς ἔθλιβον· ἡ Δημόνασσα δὲ καὶ ἔδακνε μεταξὺ καταφιλοῦσα· ἐγὼ δὲ οὐκ εἶχον εἰκάσαι ὅ τι τὸ πρᾶγμα εἶη. χρόνω δὲ ἡ Μέγιλλα ὑπόθερμος ἤδη οὖσα τὴν μὲν πηνήκην ἀφείλετο τῆς κεφαλῆς, ἐπέκειτο δὲ πάνυ ὁμοία καὶ προσφυῆς, καὶ ἐν χρόνῳ ὥφθη αὐτὴ καθάπερ οἱ σφόδρα ἀνδρώδεις τῶν ἀθλητῶν ἀποκεκαρμένη· καὶ ἐγὼ ἐταράχθην

⁴⁹ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 5.1.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 5.2.

ἰδοῦσα. ἡ δέ, ὦ Λέαινα, φησίν, ἐώρακας ἤδη οὕτω καλὸν νεανίσκον; Ἄλλ' οὐχ ὀρῶ, ἔφην, ἐνταῦθα νεανίσκον, ὦ Μέγιλλα. Μὴ καταθήλυνέ με, ἔφη, Μέγιλλος γὰρ ἐγὼ λέγομαι καὶ γεγάμηκα πρόπαλαι ταύτην τὴν Δημόνασσαν, καὶ ἔστιν ἐμὴ γυνή.⁵²

First they kissed me just as men, not only fitting closely their same lips, but opening their mouth, and they embraced me and they squeezed my breasts; and Demonassa even bit me while kissing me; and I myself could not guess what the act was. And in time, Megilla already being somewhat hot took away the wig from her head, and it was resting upon [her head] very much like [real hair] and [as if] attached by growth, and she herself was seen shorn close to the skin just like the exceedingly manly ones of the athletes; and I myself was troubled seeing this. But she said “O Leæna, before this, have you seen such a fine young man?” I said “But I do not see a young man here, O Megilla. “Do not make me womanish,” she said, “For I say that I am Megillus and I have married long ago this woman Demonassa, and she is my wife.”

Leæna takes this to mean that Megilla is anatomically male, and suggests several ways that this could be possible. Megilla, however, assures her that she has no penis and was born a woman, saying “I do not have that; but I do not altogether need it; you will see that I have intercourse in my own much more pleasant way” (Ἐκεῖνο μὲν, ἔφη, ὦ Λέαινα, οὐκ ἔχω· δέομαι δὲ οὐδὲ πάνυ αὐτοῦ· ἴδιον δὲ τινα τρόπον ἠδίω παρὰ πολὺ ὀμιλοῦντα ὄψει με)⁵³ and “Certainly not, Leæna, but I was born just like you other women, but my mind and my desire and all other things are of a man for me” (Οὐκουν, ὦ Λέαινα, ἔφη, ἀλλὰ ἐγεννήθην μὲν ὁμοία ταῖς ἄλλαις ὑμῖν, ἡ γνώμη δὲ καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία καὶ τᾶλλα πάντα ἀνδρός ἐστί μοι).⁵⁴ She does, however, imply that she uses some kind of artificial phallus, saying “for I have something (that I use) instead of the thing of a man” (ἔχω γὰρ τι ἀντὶ τοῦ ἀνδρείου).⁵⁵ The reader never gets to learn about this substitute or her “more pleasant way,” however, for when Clonarium asks Leæna to explain, she replies “Do not

⁵² Ibid., 5.3.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 5.4.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

examine the things closely, for they are causing shame; and so by the one dwelling in heaven I would not say” (Μὴ ἀνάκρινε ἀκριβῶς, αἰσχρὰ γάρ· ὥστε μὰ τὴν οὐρανίαν οὐκ ἂν εἶποιμι).⁵⁶

Though both Leana and Clonarium express confusion about the act of female-female sex and the existence of women who pursue it, Clonarium does immediately draw a parallel to the women of Lesbos, showing that she does indeed have a cultural standard for this kind of activity. Lucian again is simultaneously expressing the enigma of female homoeroticism and acknowledging the existence and stereotypes of it: as much as people may want to deny the reality of female-female sex, they know it occurs and have even developed a standard for it. Megilla fits this standard well. She does absolutely everything in a masculine way: her kisses are manly, her head is shaven, she refers to herself as a man and asks to be called by a man’s name, and she even has a wife. Indeed, in our culture, we would be more likely to categorize her as a transgender man than a lesbian. Assuming that her “more pleasant way” involves penetration of some kind (which is a probable assumption, given the evidence in the text as well as the phallogocentric ideology of the time period), Megilla, at least, fits the phallogocentric model as closely as someone who is not anatomically male is able to. As for Leana and Demonassa, I will discuss their relationship with gender roles in the next section.

Though Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Courtesans* has little commentary on the morality or social appropriateness of female homoeroticism (apart from the shame that Leana displays), the Lucianic *Erotes* leaves a much stronger impression against female-female sex. As stated above, the character Charicles uses female homoeroticism to explain why pederasty is repugnant, saying the following:

⁵⁶ Ibid.

ὥστ' εἰ <ή> μὲν καὶ ὑμῖν ἀρέσκειν δύναται, πρὸς ἀλλήλους δὴ ἡμεῖς ἀποτειχισώμεθα, εἰ δὲ τοῖς ἄρρεσιν εὐπρεπεῖς αἰ μετὰ ἀρρένων ὁμιλῖαι, πρὸς τὸ λοιπὸν ἐράτωσαν ἀλλήλων καὶ γυναῖκες. ἄγε νῦν, ὦ νεώτερε χρόνε καὶ τῶν ξένων ἡδονῶν νομοθέτα, καινὰς ὁδοὺς ἄρρενος τρυφῆς ἐπινοήσας χάρισαι τὴν ἴσην ἐξουσίαν καὶ γυναιξίν, καὶ ἀλλήλαις ὁμιλησάτωσαν ὡς ἄνδρες· ἀσελγῶν δὲ ὀργάνων ὑποζυγωσάμεναι τέχνασμα, ἀσπόρων τεράστιον αἰνιγμα, κοιμάσθωσαν γυνὴ μετὰ γυναικὸς ὡς ἀνήρ· τὸ δὲ εἰς ἀκοὴν σπανίως ἦκον ὄνομα—αἰσχύνομαι καὶ λέγειν—τῆς τριβακῆς ἀσελγείας ἀνέδην πομπευέτω. πᾶσα δ' ἡμῶν ἢ γυναικωνίτις ἔστω Φιλαίνις ἀνδρογύνους ἔρωτας ἀσχημονοῦσα. καὶ πόσω κρεῖττον εἰς ἄρρενα τρυφὴν βιάζεσθαι γυναῖκα ἢ τὸ γενναῖον ἀνδρῶν εἰς γυναῖκα θηλύνεσθαι;⁵⁷

And so if [Aphrodite] is able to please even you, let we ourselves wall ourselves off from each other, but if the intercourses of males with males are acceptable, hereafter let women also love each other. Come now, O younger time and lawmaker of strange pleasures, having contrived unusual passages for male wantonness, give freely the equal power to even women, and let them consort with each other as men; and having strapped onto themselves objects of licentious organs made by handiwork, a monstrous mystery of barren [women], let them lie together, woman with woman, just as man. And the name rarely having come into hearing—I am ashamed even to say it—the licentiousness of a *tribas*,⁵⁸ let it parade ostentatiously. And let each apartment of our women be Philaenis, behaving unseemly with respect to androgynous lusts. And how much better that women be forced into male wantonness than that the nobility of men be made effeminate regarding a woman?

Unlike the mostly satirical and light-hearted literary texts that I have examined up to this point, this text shows the serious disdain that people in the Roman world had for female homoeroticism, and especially for penetrative women.⁵⁹ Though Charicles is acknowledging the existence of such women (something that few authors ever did), he is treating them with the highest contempt. His feelings go beyond mere mockery, and he expresses shame at even

⁵⁷ Lucian, *Erotes* 28.

⁵⁸ The author of this text does not use the typical Greek τριβάς, but rather uses the genitive form of τριβακός, which literally means “rubbed woman.”

⁵⁹ Butrica disagrees with this assessment, saying that because the argument is actually about pederasty, it is “not a comment on lesbianism per se.” The argument, though, had to come from somewhere, and I see no reason for the author to have included it if it had not been true to Greco-Roman culture.

mentioning tribadism.⁶⁰ Though he ultimately states for the purpose of his argument that it is better for a woman to become masculine than a man to become feminine, he is clearly more personally affronted by female homoeroticism than he is by pederasty; after all, he can at least speak openly about the latter without expressing shame. His argument, too, is meant to shock his opposition. The mere suggestion that female-female sex could be comparable to the long-standing tradition of pederasty should call into question the validity and morality of that tradition. Sandra Boehringer says the following about the comparison: “The logic is as follows: the more horrifying is the picture, the stronger will be the rejection of this kind of sexual relations, and the more convincing his discourse. But Charicles loses his bet. No one in his audience could possibly accept his first implication, postulating a common category of relations between men and relations between women.”⁶¹ His attempt, therefore, to compare lustful, penetrative, and masculine women to those involved in pederasty fails: the two subjects are too different to have validity, and Charicles loses his argument.

Up until this point, I have exclusively examined sources that aim to either satirize or provide moral commentary on female homoeroticism. While these sources are undoubtedly useful in understanding a culture, they all by their very natures have to be biased, and so usually exaggerate the characteristics of the people about whom they are writing. It is important, therefore, to also examine less biased sources. In the case of female homoeroticism, astrological and medical texts are both helpful.⁶² Because the discussion for both has the possibility of being quite

⁶⁰ Here, too, we have a possible explanation for the scarcity of extant texts with references to *tribades*.

⁶¹ Sandra Boehringer, “What is Named by the Name ‘Philaenis’: Gender, Function, and Authority of an Antonomastic Figure,” 385.

⁶² Artistic representation is also incredibly important and helpful, but requires too much discussion for this paper. For exploration of Greco-Roman art as it relates to female homoeroticism, see Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996); John R. Clarke, “Sexuality and Visual Representation,” in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K.

extensive, however, I have chosen one passage for each that is more-or-less representative of its respective field.⁶³

Astrological texts were quite common in classical antiquity, and many of them sought to explain why people sometimes acted outside of their ascribed gender roles and preferred certain kinds of sex. Among the authors of these texts was Ptolemy, a second century writer and famous astrologer, astronomer, and mathematician. Most famously, he authored *Tetrabiblos*, a text “which enjoyed comparable popularity for a number of centuries,”⁶⁴ in which he briefly discusses female homoeroticism in a section entitled (not insignificantly) “Concerning Sufferings of the Soul” (Περὶ παθῶν ψυχικῶν). Already, then, we see that though he views female homoeroticism as something uncontrollable, as something determined by the planets and the stars, this does not preclude an expression of negativity. Women who desire other women are suffering in their very souls. Furthermore, he speaks of sexuality in terms of what is “natural” (κατὰ φύσιν), where men are active and women are passive. Anything that deviates from this, however, is “contrary to nature” (παρὰ φύσιν): quite a value judgement, considering that this all, in Ptolemy’s mind, occurs naturally by the movement of the planets.

Ptolemy writes specifically about *tribades* in his section on sufferings of the soul, saying:

ἐὰν δὲ καὶ ὁ τοῦ Ἄρεως ἢ καὶ ὁ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ἦτοι ὀπότερος ἢ καὶ ἀμφότεροι ὄσιν ἡρρενωμένοι, οἱ μὲν ἄνδρες πρὸς τὰς κατὰ φύσιν συνουσίας γίνονται καταφερεῖς καὶ μοιχικοὶ καὶ ἀκόρεστοι καὶ ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ πρόχειροι πρὸς τε τὰ αἰσχρὰ καὶ τὰ παράνομα τῶν ἀφροδισίων· αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες πρὸς τὰς παρὰ φύσιν ὁμιλίας λάγναι καὶ ῥιψόφθαλμοι καὶ αἱ καλούμεναι τριβάδες· διατιθέασι δὲ θηλείας, ἀνδρῶν ἔργα ἐπιτελοῦσαι. κἂν μὲν μόνος ὁ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ἡρρενωμένος

Hubbard (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2014); and John R. Clarke and Michael Larvey, *Roman Sex: 100 B.C. to 250 A.D.* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003).

⁶³ For a more complete discussion, see Brooten, who has a section of her book devoted to each.

⁶⁴ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 124.

ἢ, λάθρα καὶ οὐκ ἀναφανδόν· ἐὰν δὲ καὶ ὁ τοῦ Ἄρεως, ἀντικρυς ὥστε ἐνίοτε καὶ νομίμας ὥσπερ γυναῖκας τὰς διατιθεμένας ἀναδεικνύειν.⁶⁵

But if also either or both the one of Ares or even the one of Aphrodite truly have become masculine, the men become inclined toward natural intercourses and become adulterous and insatiate and in every due measure ready for both the disgraceful and the lawless things of sexual pleasures; but women [become] lustful toward intercourses contrary to nature and casting their eyes about and they are called *tribades*; and they manage females, accomplishing the deeds of men. And if the one of Aphrodite alone has become masculine, they do this secretly and not openly; but if also the one of Ares has become masculine, they do this openly so that sometimes even managing them like lawful wives they display them.

The actual planets involved varies among astrological texts, and is not entirely important to this discussion. More important is the language that Ptolemy uses to describe *tribades*. He states straightaway that these women are unnatural (and therefore active), but more significantly he specifies the gender to which they are attracted. They are not only active women, they are active *specifically with other women*. It is not beyond reason that they could take an active role in sex with men, as we have seen through our analysis of cunnilingus and our reading of Martial's poem about Phillaenis, who anally penetrates boys. Still, they specifically "deal with females" (διατιθέασι θηλείας) and sometimes even mark them as their "wives" (γυναῖκας). Being a *tribas*, then, is not solely about activity or masculinization, but also about a woman's specific sexual desire for women.

Unfortunately, we do not have nearly as many medical texts concerning female homoeroticism as we do astrological texts, with most of our sources being later translations of original works (which are now lost) by a physician named Soranus in the early second century. The main translator of his work is Caelius Aurelianus, who was writing in the fifth century, and

⁶⁵ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 3.14.171-2.

though we do not have the original text for comparison, scholars believe that his work was accurate and meticulous.⁶⁶ In his translation of a text entitled *On Chronic Disease*, Caelius Aurelianus writes about effeminate men and compares them to *tribades*:

Est enim, ut Soranus ait, malignae ac foedissimae mentis passio. Nam sicut feminae tribades appellatae, quod utramque venerem exercent, mulieribus magis quam viris misceri festinant et easdem invidentia paene virile sectantur, et cum passione fuerint desertae seu temporaliter relevatae, ea quaerunt aliis obicere quae pati noscuntur iuvamini humilitate duplici sexu confectam, velut frequenter ebrietate corruptae in novas libidinis formas erumpentes, consuetudine turpi nutritae, sui sexus iniuriis gaudent: sic illi comparatione talium animi passione iactari noscuntur. Nam neque ulla curatio corporis depellendae passionis causa recte putatur adhibenda, sed potius animus coercendus qui tanta peccatorum labe vexatur.⁶⁷

For, as Soranus says, it is a passion of a wicked and very filthy mind. For just as women called *tribades*, because they practice each Venus, they hasten to mix with women more than with men and they pursue the same [women?] with almost masculine jealousy, and when they have been deserted by or temporarily relieved of their passion, (they seek to subject others to what they learn that a woman composed of double sex experiences by means of an humiliating aid),⁶⁸ as if frequently corrupted by drunkenness, breaking out into new forms of lust, nourished by their shameful habit, they rejoice in the affronts of their own sex: thus those minds of such men (pathics) in comparison learn to toss about in passion. For it is incorrect to think that any treatment of the body should be applied for the sake of expelling passion, but rather the mind should be restrained which is vexed by so great a defect of sins.

Similar to the other texts that we have seen, Soranus describes *tribades* as being masculine, active, and lustful. He also notes that they have a preference (though not necessarily

⁶⁶ Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 147n11.

⁶⁷ Caelius Aurelianus, *On Chronic Diseases* 4.9.

⁶⁸ *ea quaerunt aliis obicere quae pati noscuntur iuvamini humilitate duplici sexu confectam*; the text is probably corrupt. Drabkin notes: "Text and meaning are unclear. Perhaps 'in (or to overcome) their degradation they seek to blame others for their affliction; then plagued by double sexuality, etc.' But *ea...noscuntur* may refer to renewed (heterosexual?) promiscuity." For a summary of the problem and various conjectures, see Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 152-155.

an exclusive one) for women. He does not suggest, as astrological texts from the same time period do, that this affliction is natural and faultless. Rather, he claims that effeminacy of men and tribadism of women come from a “wicked and very filthy mind” (*malignae ac foedissimae mentis*), and that there is no physical cure, but “but rather the mind should be restrained which is vexed by so great a defect of sins.” Thus Soranus not only entirely places the blame on those engaging in these behaviors, but he is also suggesting that the problem must be “restrained” (*sed potius animus coercendus qui tanta peccatorum labe vexatur*). For him, any sexual deviation from accepted gender roles is a disease, and must be cured.

Both the astrological text of Ptolemy and the medical text of Caelius Aurelianus appeal to an archetype for female homoeroticism familiar from the literary texts we have already examined. The literary texts show nearly universally at least one woman who has masculinized herself, who actively pursues other women, who is lustful, who is penetrative, and who has at least a preference for women over men. The same themes are present in Ptolemy and Caelius Aurelianus. This shows that the archetype and disapproval for female homoeroticism displayed by authors such as Martial and Lucian was cultural and not solely a function of literature. Though these women may have been used as a light-hearted form of humor, this was only made possible by the deeply engrained disdain for female homoeroticism (and more especially active, penetrative women) in the Roman Empire.

The Question of Cunnilingus

As I have previously suggested, the practice of cunnilingus, whether it was performed by a male or female, provides somewhat of a problem in classifying sexuality within the Roman model. It is unquestionable that the Romans had a very negative view of those who performed

oral sex (whether fellatio or cunnilingus), considering it to be a specifically dirty act.⁶⁹ The problem comes in defining activity and passivity in oral sex. In our culture, we typically think of a person giving oral sex as being active (since they are performing the action), and the person receiving oral sex as the passive partner. Strictly speaking, this is not how the Romans thought. For them, activity meant masculinity and passivity meant femininity, and since it was certainly not masculine to defile your mouth with the genitals of another, performing oral sex could not be seen as active. Rather, Parker and Williams agree that fellatio, at least, was seen as a man actively penetrating the mouth of his partner.⁷⁰ Parker draws an equivalence between fellatio and cunnilingus, saying “for a man to give oral sex is for him to be passive with respect to his mouth, and the disgrace is the same whether he is servicing a man or a woman.”⁷¹ Williams, however, goes beyond this, suggesting that the stigma was even greater for cunnilingus than it was for fellatio,⁷² and offering the following explanation:

Cunnilingi befouled [men’s] mouths and subjugated themselves to another just as did those who performed fellatio, but whereas in an act of fellatio there was at least one man doing what he ought to do (dominating another with his phallus, which was being given the respect it deserved), in an act of cunnilinctus the phallus was extraneous, and it was a woman’s sexual organ that was the focus of attention.⁷³

This, I think, partially explains why cunnilingus in particular is so difficult for the Romans to classify. Not only is there no phallus involved in the act—making it contrary to the typical

⁶⁹ Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 218-9.

⁷⁰ Parker, “The Teratogenic Grid,” 53 and Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 218.

⁷¹ Parker, “The Teratogenic Grid,” 52.

⁷² Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 220.

⁷³ Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 223.

Roman classification for sex acts—but it focuses solely on female pleasure, which is usually secondary to male pleasure, or at least on the same level as it.

Defining a giver of oral sex as the passive partner, though allowing us (and the Romans) to fit oral sex more easily into the Roman model of sexuality, is somewhat over-simplifying the issue. Parker remarks on this problem, saying:

First, while the anus and vagina are thought of primarily as passive (mere receptacles for action), the mouth is problematic, a difficulty of conceptualization again shown in the language itself. Passive oral sex (*irrumari*) has the active counterpart of sucking (*fellare*, Adams 1982: 130-34). Thus, for the Romans, oral intercourse crosses classificatory boundaries. Disturbingly, it is both active and passive. Oral sex, however greatly desired, is already constructed as an anomalous activity.⁷⁴

Thus the Roman view of oral sex is not only incredibly negative, but also somewhat confused. They must reconcile, within their model of activity and passivity, the idea that a person must be passive if they are being penetrated in any way, with the fact that the person being penetrated here is also the one performing action. The Romans seem to alleviate this confusion with pure mockery for any man who chooses to perform oral sex on a person of any gender. If he has any amount of activity in the matter, it only makes his actions more deplorable, because he is actively choosing this shameful and passive form of sex.

Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence of cunnilingus in female homoerotic relationships to judge whether its portrayal differs significantly from a man's performance of cunnilingus. We cannot know, therefore, whether it was more accepted for a woman to perform cunnilingus than a man, since this woman would be taking on a passive role, as she is supposed

⁷⁴ Parker, "The Teratogenic Grid," 50.

to. There is some evidence to suggest, though, that this is not the case. In book two of his *Satires*, Juvenal condemns effeminate men through his character Laronia, having her say “There will not be any example in our sex so detestable. Media does not lick Cluvia nor Flora Catulla. Hipso submits to young men and grows pale with disease both ways” (*non erit ullum / exemplum in nostro tam detestabile sexu. / Media non lambit Cluviam nec Flora Catullam: / Hispo subit iuvenes et morbo pallet utroque*).⁷⁵ Laronia, here, is specifically condemning the act of same-sex oral intercourse, saying that men fellate each other, whereas women do not “lick” each other. It is unlikely that she is wholly correct in this assertion, considering that oral sex was somewhat widely performed and discussed, and that one of the very few artistic depictions of female-female sex that we have from the Roman Empire includes a woman performing oral sex on another woman.⁷⁶ Rather, what we can ascertain from this source is that it was indeed stigmatized for women to perform cunnilingus. It is a point of pride for Laronia that women do not commit this action: that they do not sink so low as to perform oral sex on a member of their own gender, as men do.

Quite interestingly, Laronia is not only speaking against cunnilingus, but suggesting that a woman who performs cunnilingus is masculine and therefore active. In this discussion, she is specifically speaking about the maintenance of appropriate gender roles. She mentions that some few women may enjoy wrestling and meat-eating, but the men whom she is speaking to weave wool⁷⁷ more nimbly than Arachne, “the kind of thing that the horrid concubine does as she sits on the block” (*horrida quale facit residens in codice paelex*).⁷⁸ Her conversation about oral sex is

⁷⁵ Juvenal, *Satura* 2.47-50.

⁷⁶ John R. Clarke and Michael Larvey, *Roman Sex*, 130-132.

⁷⁷ A traditional job for the women of a household.

⁷⁸ Juvenal, *Satura* 2.57. Laronia’s imagery here is unclear. Edward U. Courtney, *Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal* (London: The Athlone Press, 2013), 109 notes that in Roman society, female slaves were often made the

an analogy between two gender-deviant acts: cunnilingus, which women (to their credit) do not perform, and fellatio, which men do perform. If she did not consider cunnilingus to be an act that defies gender roles, it would have no place in this conversation. Since a woman is supposed to be passive, and she is using women not performing cunnilingus as a comparison to men who do perform fellatio, then it stands to reason that she sees the former as women being active.

The other evidence that it is not socially appropriate for women to perform cunnilingus is Martial 7.67, which I have already explored. In this epigram, Martial mocks Philaenis for both her masculinity and her performance of cunnilingus, with the punch line of the poem being that, though she tries to make herself masculine and therefore refuses to fellate, she ultimately (and unwittingly) makes herself passive through her performance of cunnilingus. In his discussion on oral sex, Parker analyzes Philaenis, saying “In her twisted logic, says Martial, this leaves only tribadism (a parody of vaginal intercourse), attempts at anal violation of boys, and oral sex, cunnilingus. What Philaenis fails to realize is that cunnilingus is equally passive, equally an act of being penetrated.”⁷⁹ Though I think Parker has the right idea here, I would disagree with his assertion that cunnilingus is “equally passive.” Rather, I think it has been shown to be simultaneously active *and* passive, at least when it is performed by women. Both Laronia and Philaenis find some amount of masculinity and activity in the act, and though Philaenis is mocked for this conclusion, she had to have gotten the idea from somewhere. The fact that the women receiving cunnilingus from other women are not given any extended consideration in these texts, and that passive women in homoerotic relationships are never talked about in detail

mistresses of their owners, and the matron of the house would sometimes punish the slaves for this. Courtney claims that the *codex* (block) here is “corresponding to a ball and chain.” He also notes that “the point of the line is obscure; the wording does not suggest, as the context demands, delicate work, and seems rather to lessen than to emphasize the effeminacy of the men.”

⁷⁹ Parker, “The Teratogenic Grid,” 52-3.

without even more detail about their active lovers, suggests that the woman receiving cunnilingus is not, strictly speaking, the active partner. This has to mean that the woman giving cunnilingus is not entirely the passive partner. Rather, female homoeroticism when it includes cunnilingus *does not fit into a phallogentric model*. The dichotomy between active and passive becomes more fluid in this particular sex act, troubling the Roman model of sex.

The Shame of the Passive Partner

Part of the Roman model of sexuality, or at least how we currently interpret that model, is that only a person acting outside of his or her gender role in a sexual relationship should be stigmatized. Thus a man fucking another man is not stigmatized, because he is still the active partner. The gender of the person whom he is fucking does not matter to his morality or social status. If there is any animosity towards him at all, it is because he is enabling a Roman man to be effeminate, but even this judgment is rare. It stands to reason, then, that women who are the passive partners of *tribades* should not be stigmatized, since they are performing the role appropriate to their gender. This, however, is not always the case. Instead, there are several instances of female homoerotic relationships being especially shameful for everyone involved, and the passive lovers themselves expressing shame within their narrative.

The first instance of female homoeroticism being especially shameful is in Seneca the Elder's *Controversies*. I have already examined briefly the active partner in this scene, but it is the husband's reaction that I am interested in now. Though we never get to hear the perspective of the wife who was being fucked by a *tribas*, we can see through her husband that she was performing a socially unacceptable action, even beyond adultery. When he first walks in to see two *tribades* (one of whom was his wife) on his bed, he must examine his wife's lover to

determine her sex. The text describes this as a “shameful investigation” (*inhonesta inquisitio*),⁸⁰ and Swancutt elaborates on this by saying, “In fact, the *tribas* triply emasculated the husband. Not only did a demi-man bed his wife, but the husband had to inspect the *tribas* to see whether h/e was hermaphroditic and then he had to report his findings to other men—not a good day at all for the husband!”⁸¹ If this was a male adulterer, the husband would have only been emasculated due to his wife being bedded by another man, but extra shame is added to him due to the fact that the penetrator was a woman. If the relationship between these two women truly followed the Roman system of activity/passivity, the experience for the husband and wife should not have been any different than with a male adulterer: only the active *tribas* should experience the shame and stigma of committing a strange sex act, because she is the only one defying her gender role. That is, however, not the case. The husband is especially shamed by the gender of his wife’s adulterer.

Because his shame comes from the action of his wife and not by any cause of his own, we must assume that the wife, the true culprit, also experiences this shame. Like the stigma of her husband, the stigma of the wife is twofold: she not only committed adultery—a shameful act in itself—she committed adultery with another woman. While her shame seemingly derives from the dishonor which she brought to her husband, it is worsened by the gender of her partner, even though she herself is still performing her proper gender role. If activity and passivity were the only defining factors in female homoerotic relationships, neither she nor her husband would experience this added shame.

⁸⁰ Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae*, 1.2.23.

⁸¹ Swancutt, “*Still Before Sexuality*,” 52.

The context of this account in Seneca's *Controversies* is a discussion of the morality and legality of killing an adulterer. The characters bring this specific case up as an example of a time when it is appropriate to kill the adulterer, versus if the husband had caught his wife with a man, in which case he should not be allowed to kill that man. The character Grandaus says: "For that reason they would not allow [a man] to kill an adulterer"; then "But if I had caught a pseudo-male adulterer . . ." (*'non ideo occidi adulteros [non] paterentur,' dixit: εἰ δὲ φιλόαρρενα μοιχὸν ἔλαβον*).⁸² This once again shows that there is more to female homoerotic relationships than activity versus passivity. The debaters create a clear difference from a wife who is adulterated by a man and a wife who is adulterated by a woman. Thus, even though this relationship follows the phallogocentric model in that it has a clearly active and clearly passive partner, it is not only the active partner—the woman defying her gender role—who is treated as a deviant. Her passive lover is shamed for her actions through the shame of her husband, and both her and her lover are killed for their affair—made morally sound only by the fact that her lover was a female instead of a male.

Perhaps the most obvious expression of shame from a passive female partner in a homoerotic relationship comes from Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*. The layout of the story enables Leaena's expression of shame more than most other accounts of female homoeroticism, because she herself, as a passive partner, is recounting the story and can thus include her own feelings. As such, she not only expresses confusion over Megilla's character, but expresses shame in her own role in the relationship. When her fellow courtesan Clonarium asks if it is true that a female has taken her as lover, Leaena responds "It is true, O Clonarium,

⁸² Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae*, 1.2.23.

but I am ashamed, for it is strange”⁸³ (Ἀληθῆ, ὃ Κλωνάριον· αἰσχύνομαι δέ, ἀλλόκοτον γάρ τι ἔστι).⁸⁴ The dialogue ends with Clonarium asking for details on how Megilla fucked Leaena, but Leaena refuses to give these details, saying that they are “causing shame” (αἰσχρά). It is possible that Lucian leaves these details out simply because he himself does not know how women have sex with each other. Haley presents this option when she asks, “How much *did* Lucian know? We cannot escape the fact that this is a *man* in a male-dominated and male-oriented culture writing about women loving other women.”⁸⁵ Regardless of his motive for not including details, however, it is still significant that he justifies this exclusion with Leaena’s shame. If this were a male homoerotic relationship, the active partner would have absolutely no reason to be ashamed of his relationship. He is behaving in the way that he should be by being active and penetrative, and so the gender of his lover is insignificant. This does not seem to be the case with Leaena and Megilla. In the Roman model of sexuality, Megilla should clearly be stigmatized. She is a woman, meant by nature to be passive in sex, but she is defying this role by behaving in a masculine way and penetrating other women. Leaena, however, is a completely passive partner. There is nothing in the passage to suggest that she is at all active in the relationship, and is clearly the penetrated partner. All of the action—the kissing, the groping, and (presumably) the penetration—happens to Leaena, and not by her. Indeed, Megilla even courts her like a man would court a woman, giving her a necklace and a dress.⁸⁶ Since she is performing her gender role correctly, then, she should not be criticized within what we think is the Roman model. And yet she feels shame for her actions, for the unusual relationship that she is a part of. Her feelings of shame should confuse how we view

⁸³ This is a somewhat conservative translation, given that the word can also mean ‘monstrous.’

⁸⁴ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 5.1.

⁸⁵ Shelley P. Haley, “Lucian’s ‘Leaena and Clonarium’: Voyeurism or a Challenge to Assumptions?,” in *Among Women: From the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World*, ed. Nancy S. Rabinowitz and Lisa Auanger (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) 299.

⁸⁶ Lucian, *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 5.4.

Roman sexuality, for within our current model, she has no reason to feel ashamed. This story, then, is either an anomaly, or else it is evidence that the Roman model of sexuality which we currently accept is not applicable to female same-sex relationships.

Though she does not express shame at any point, Demonassa's character also confuses the Roman model of sex, in that she is shown being both active and passive. Though she is not given much attention in the dialogue—typical of a passive partner—Megilla describes Demonassa as her wife (καὶ ἔστιν ἐμὴ γυνή).⁸⁷ Leaena then asks: “and you even have that thing of a man and you do to Demonassa the very things that men do?” (καὶ τὸ ἀνδρεῖον ἐκεῖνο ἔχεις καὶ ποιεῖς τὴν Δημόνασσαν ἄπερ οἱ ἄνδρες;).⁸⁸ Though Megilla denies that she has a penis, the very question implies an understanding that Demonassa is the passive partner in her relationship with Megilla. Demonassa's relationship with Megilla, then, like Leaena's, fits the dichotomy of phallocentricism. Each pairing has one active partner who is masculine, and one passive partner who is feminine. Demonassa, though, is not solely feminine, nor is she solely passive. Indeed, in her relationship with Leaena, Demonassa takes an active role. Leaena states that both Megilla and Demonassa kissed her “just as men” (ὥσπερ οἱ ἄνδρες), and specifically notes Demonassa's activity, saying “and Demonassa even bit me while kissing me” (ἡ Δημόνασσα δὲ καὶ ἔδακνε μεταξὺ καταφιλοῦσα). Demonassa, then, blurs the lines between active and passive, performing both roles. Rather than portraying Megilla as the sole active partner, Lucian chooses to include a character who *disrupts the active/passive model*. Though he may be doing this in order to intentionally make this account even stranger than it already would be with its discussion of

⁸⁷ Ibid., 5.3.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

female homoeroticism, it is also possible that he is showing that female homoeroticism in general is in a realm outside of normal sexual classifications.

It is possible, though, that Leaena is wrong in her assumption that Demonassa plays the passive partner with Megilla, since Megilla neither confirms nor denies this point. Indeed, early on, Leaena describes Demonassa as “practicing the same craft” as Megilla (αὐτὴ καὶ ὁμότεχνος οὔσα τῇ Μεγίλλῃ) which very well could be an allusion to Demonassa’s sexual preferences. If this is the case, it is even more disturbing to the Roman phallogocentric model than the idea that Demonassa could be a passive partner with Megilla, but an active partner with Leaena. If Demonassa also prefers activity, then the marriage between Demonassa and Megilla has *two active partners*, a concept unheard of in Roman sexuality. This does not mean, though, that it is an unreasonable assumption. I will show in my next section several examples of reciprocity in female homoerotic relationships that show that female-female relationships did not always follow the active/passive model.

Though I have already discussed the shame and negativity that Iphis expresses in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, I did so previously with the assumption that Iphis, as someone raised as a boy and expected to play a man’s role in her marriage with Ianthe, is the masculine and active partner. While this assumption is not, strictly speaking, incorrect, there are several lines in the poem that suggest her femininity and passivity. I argue, therefore, that Iphis is an androgynous figure, both masculine/active and feminine/passive, and further that her shame does not come from her defiance of gender roles, but from her homoerotic attraction.

The first evidence of Iphis's androgyny comes from her very name, in which her mother rejoiced "because it was common,⁸⁹ and with it she would not deceive anyone"⁹⁰ (*quod commune foret, nec quemquam falleret illo*).⁹¹ Shortly after, Ovid writes: "Her style of dress was that of a boy; her face – whether you were to give it to a boy or a girl, each had been beautiful (*cultus erat pueri; facies, quam sive puellae, / sive dares puero, fuerat formosus uterque*).⁹² Her gender, then, cannot be determined by her face, but is beautiful regardless. In addition to this, though her father thinks she is a boy, he promises to betroth her at thirteen years old,⁹³ an age more typical for marriage of girls than boys.⁹⁴ She is masculine enough to convince everyone around her, including her own father and her bride-to-be, that she is a man, and therefore must have some masculine traits. Yet when she is ultimately transformed into a man, Ovid describes her in the following way:

Sequitur comes Iphis euntem,
 quam solita est, maiore gradu, nec candor in ore
 permanet, et vires augentur, et acrior ipse est
 vultus, et incomptis brevior mensura capillis,
 plusque vigoris adest, habuit quam femina. Nam quae
 femina nuper eras, puer es!⁹⁵

And the companion Iphis follows her as she goes, with a greater step than she was accustomed to, and fairness does not persist on her face, and her strength increases, and her face itself is sharper, and the measure of her disheveled hair is shorter, and more of vigor is present than she had as a girl. For you who were recently a girl, are a boy!

⁸⁹ Not referring to its frequency of use, but to the fact that it is a name that can be used for any gender.

⁹⁰ Meaning that she could openly use the name without having to resort to deceit.

⁹¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 9.710.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 9.712-3.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 9.714.

⁹⁴ Diane T. Pintabone, "Ovid's Iphis and Ianthe," 276.

⁹⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 9.786-91.

So even though she is originally masculine enough to fool those around her, she must not be entirely masculine, because she gains more masculine traits when Isis transforms her into a boy. She has spent the first thirteen years of her life in a state of androgyny, but rather than not passing as either male or female, she plays well the role of both. The ability to be an active sexual partner seems to be the only thing that Iphis is lacking for her portrayal of either gender in her erotic longing for Ianthe, something that she is both aware of and devastated by. Iphis's greatest wish is to be able to wed Ianthe and consummate their marriage. She does not care how this is done, but is convinced that an active partner—specifically one with a penis—is required. Though she, in many ways, is the man in their relationship, she is indifferent to which of them is the phallicized and thus active partner. She states in her lament:

huc licet ex toto sollertia confluat orbe,
 ipse licet revolet ceratis Daedalus alis,
 quid faciet? num me puerum de virgine doctis
 artibus efficiet? num te mutabit, Ianthe?⁹⁶

Should ingenuity from the whole world meet here, should Daedalus himself fly back with his waxed wings, what would he do? For with his learned arts will he make me a boy from a maiden? For will he change you, Ianthe?

Iphis here expresses a complete indifference towards which one of them becomes anatomically male, as long as they are able to have sex. She herself displays here that she has no preference towards passivity or activity, expressing both options equally.

To review, Iphis, by loving Ianthe, has the desire of a man. By not actively pursuing Ianthe, she has the behavior of a woman. She has no preference for either activity or passivity, so long as she is able to have sex with the object of her desire. She is androgynous in her physical

⁹⁶ Ovid, "*Metamorphoses*," 9.741-4.

appearance: able to convince others that she is either a girl or a boy. She is masculine enough to convince others that she is male, but she lacks the walk, strength, hair, and color of a man. Her father thinks that she is male, but still promises to betroth her at an age more appropriate for girls. Iphis, then, is truly androgynous, playing simultaneously a feminine (passive) role and masculine (active) role.

Though Iphis's androgyny is significant in itself, it also means that when Iphis is expressing her shame and negativity toward her desires for another woman, she is doing so partially as a passive partner. In addition to this, she is shamed not by her transgression of gender-norms, but instead by her same-sex desire. Pintabone compares Iphis to other desiring women in *Metamorphoses*, remarking on the rarity of a positive outcome for these women (in contrast to Iphis, who through her transformation is enabled to marry the woman she loves). She explains this contrast by saying that Iphis "differs greatly from these other women who express sexual desire because Iphis simply does nothing. Unlike Byblis,⁹⁷ Iphis does not talk herself into pursuing her love, into acting on her desire. Passive, she ultimately leaves the whole matter to her mother and to the goddess Isis."⁹⁸ Because she is not "acting on her desire," then, and because she has no means of being sexually active, Iphis is passive in her relationship with Ianthe.⁹⁹ Therefore, when she calls her love "monstrous" (*prodigiosa*) and "known by nobody" (*cognita nulli*),¹⁰⁰ she is not referring to her putatively unnatural desire to be active or penetrative, but instead to the fact that

⁹⁷ In the story directly preceding that of Iphis, Byblis falls in love with her brother, actively pursues him, and after he runs away to escape her, she dies in pursuit of him and is turned into a fountain.

⁹⁸ Pintabone, "Ovid's Iphis and Ianthe," 274-5.

⁹⁹ It is worth noting that Ianthe is also passive, and so there are two passive partners in this relationship. This is only somewhat significant, however, since Ovid depicts this as an impossible relationship, and the lovers are not truly together until one of them is made active.

¹⁰⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 9.727.

she, a woman, is attracted to another woman. This point is emphasized by her comparison of her own sexual desire to that of animals in the natural world:

nec vaccam vaccae, nec equas amor urit equarum:
urit oves aries, sequitur sua femina cervum.
sic et aves coeunt, interque animalia cuncta
femina femineo conrepta cupidine nulla est.¹⁰¹

Love does not inflame a cow for a cow, nor mares for mares: love inflames rams for sheep, his own doe follows the stag. Thus also the birds come together, and among all animals no female has been seized by lust for a female.

The animal world, like Iphis, has no standard of gender or how it relates to activity or passivity. Rather in Iphis's mind, it is not a social standard but nature itself that dictates their sexual activity, and thus should dictate hers as well. She is distraught and ashamed because she believes that her love defies natural law, and is therefore monstrous. In fact, she is more upset that she *is unable* to properly defy her gender roles and make herself an active partner. One could argue that she does not see feminine roles as being her gender (since she was raised as a boy), and therefore does not think that being an active partner would be a defiance. This, however, is made unlikely by Iphis saying later: "see what you were born, unless you also deceive yourself, and seek what is right, and love that which you should as a woman" (*quid sis nata, vide, nisi te quoque decipis ipsam, / et pete quod fas est, et ama quod femina debes!*).¹⁰² Iphis identifies herself as a woman: she has not "deceived herself" about her gender identity. She should not, then, yearn to be active, and if she is to express any shame at all within the Roman model of sexuality, it should be for her masculinity and desire to be active, and not for simply being attracted to a woman.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 9.731-734.

¹⁰² Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 9.747-8.

Reciprocity and Sexual Equality in Female Homoeroticism

While most depictions of female homoeroticism include a clearly active/penetrative partner and a clearly passive/penetrated partner, fitting into the Roman phallogentric model, there are several depictions with language that hints at a sexual reciprocity between the partners. This is a highly unusual way to show sex within a phallogentric model, where the language most frequently shows activity. Often (but not always) these depictions of reciprocity are subtle, and are built into an active/passive relationship. Take, for example, the text by Seneca the Elder that I previously examined. In this passage, there is clearly an active penetrator and a passive penetrated partner, seemingly fitting a phallogentric model of activity and passivity. Seneca, however, uses the term *tribades* to describe both women,¹⁰³ subtly equating them for their shared same-sex experience. This is significant, considering that the words in Parker's grid that describe certain kinds of sex are never the same for the active and passive partners.¹⁰⁴ This reciprocity is evidence that female homoeroticism does not fit the Roman model of sex as we currently see it.

Although most depictions of *tribades* are hyper-masculine and penetrative, the very word comes from the Greek word meaning "to rub," suggesting that the Romans did indeed conceive of a kind of sex which did not include penetration. Swancutt claims that "it appears that the Romans did not take the figure of the *tribas* over from the Greeks, but invented the *tribas* whole cloth as a 'gender-monstrous Greek penetrator' from the Greek verb *tribein*, which merely means 'to rub.'"¹⁰⁵ If her claim is correct, though, then why did the Romans choose a Greek word that implied a kind of sex-act separate from penetration? Rather, I suggest that female

¹⁰³ Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 1.2.23.

¹⁰⁴ Parker, "The Teratogenic Grid," 49.

¹⁰⁵ Diana M. Swancutt, "Still Before Sexuality," 56.

homoeroticism, while having aspects of masculinity and penetration, falls outside of a phallogocentric, penetrative model.

Once again, I turn to the story of Iphis and Ianthe, this time to show the equality between the two characters. Unlike a typical Roman relationship, where one partner holds more power than the other, Iphis and Ianthe are depicted as being equals. Pintabone states the following about the issue of reciprocity: “The love of Iphis and Ianthe is characterized by mutuality and equality, two ingredients normally lacking in most of the heteroerotic stories Ovid relates, and more importantly, lacking in the Roman sexual ideology, which establishes a hierarchy of sexual activity (penetrator) over passivity (penetrated).”¹⁰⁶ Her theory of mutuality and equality is evidenced by the following passage:

par aetas, par forma fuit, primasque magistris
 accipere artes, elementa aetatis, ab isdem.
 hinc amor ambarum tetigit rude pectus, et aequum
 vulnus utrique dedit, sed erat fiducia dispar.¹⁰⁷

She was equal in age, equal in form, and from the same teachers they received their first arts, the basic principles of their age. Hence love touched the young heart of both, and gave both an equal wound, but the confidence was unequal.

Though Iphis and Ianthe do not have a reciprocal sexual relationship (because they have no sexual relationship at all), they have a completely equal relationship in every other way. Neither one of them holds power over the other, and other than Iphis’s anxiety about her gender problem, they are both equally happy to be wed. The emphasis that Ovid places on their equality overturns the normal hierarchy that exists in the Roman model of sexuality.

¹⁰⁶ Pintabone, “Ovid’s Iphis and Ianthe,” 179-180.

¹⁰⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 9.718-21.

I turn now to Martial 1.90, his epigram about Bassa. Once again, Bassa is clearly an active and penetrative woman, with her “monstrous Venus” that “feigns a man” (*Mentiturque virum prodigiosa Venus*),¹⁰⁸ but Martial also says to her: “You dare to mutually join together twin cunts” (*Inter se geminos audes committere cunnos*).¹⁰⁹ It is possible that Martial is simply speaking figuratively, and that Bassa and her lovers are not actually touching vulvas. His use of the phrase *inter se*, however, suggests that whatever they are doing, they are actively doing it together. It is worth noting, too, that Bassa is unlike the other penetrative women whom we have seen, in that she does not have any outwardly masculine characteristics other than her lust and sexual activity. She is so feminine, in fact, that Martial originally assumed that she was an incredibly chaste woman, and did not suspect her of tribadism. Her femininity, then, may supply further evidence of her willingness for a reciprocal homoerotic relationship.

The Lucianic *Erotes* also conflates a depiction of penetrative women with language of reciprocity. Though Charicles speaks of women who have “strapped onto themselves objects made by handiwork of licentious organs” (ἀσελγῶν δὲ ὀργάνων ὑποζυγώσασθαι τέχνασμα),¹¹⁰ he also says, “Hereafter let women also love each other” (πρὸς τὸ λοιπὸν ἐράτωσαν ἀλλήλων καὶ γυναῖκες).¹¹¹ The implied reciprocity here is, admittedly, somewhat lessened by the fact that Charicles is comparing these relationships to those of men, which do follow the active/passive model and do not have reciprocity. Still, it is worth noting the use of the word ἀλλήλων (each other), which implies an equality in the proposed relationship.

¹⁰⁸ Martial, *Epigrams* 1.90.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Lucian, *Erotes* 28.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

The last text that implies sexual reciprocity between women is one that has no clear active or passive partner. The account was written by Juvenal in his *Satires*, and is about two women who defile the altar of Chastity:

i nunc et dubita qua sorbeat aera sanna
 Tullia, quid dicat notae collactea Maurae,
 Maura Pudicitiae veterem cum praeterit aram,
 noctibus hic ponunt lecticas, micturiunt hic
 effigiemque deae longis siphonibus implent
 inque vices equitant ac nullo teste moventur.¹¹²

Go now and consider how Tullia sucks in air with a sneer, what the foster-sister of famous Maura says, when Maura passes by the long-standing altar of Chastity, they place their litters here in the nights, here they have to urinate and they fill up the image of the goddess with long jets and in turns they ride [each other] and they move with no witness.

Rather than have one active partner and one passive partner, these women both perform both roles. There is still an implication of penetration in that they are “riding” (*equitant*)¹¹³ each other, but they “take it in turns” (*in vices*), each alternating between the active gender-defiant role and the passive gender-appropriate role. Not only does this disrupt a phallogentric model according to which one’s status is based on whether one is an active or passive partner, but it shows that this kind of relationship was possible in the minds of the Romans, opening up similar possibilities for other texts. Do we finally have a hint as to how Demonassa can be the “wife” of a female lover and still engage actively in sexual relations? Could she, too, be like these women? We cannot say for certain, but we know from this passage that the idea is at the very least not unthinkable within Roman culture.

¹¹² Juvenal, *Satura* 6.306-11.

¹¹³ The verb *equito* is commonly used in the context of sex in Latin literature, and implies an active/passive relationship where one partner is the ‘horse’ and the other is the ‘rider.’ For more information on the usage of the word *equito*, see J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 166.

Allusions to Female Homoeroticism in Heterosexual Relationships

As we have seen, female homoeroticism blurs the lines between masculinity and femininity, between activity and passivity. This is further shown in two passages that allude to female homoeroticism in their depiction of a female who actively pursues a (most likely passive) male. The first of these is by Ovid, in which he writes a letter from the perspective of Sappho to her boy lover Phaon. Sappho is obviously not known for her love of men, a fact that Ovid does not ignore in this letter:

nec me Pyrrhiades Methymniadesve puellae,
 nec me Lesbiadum cetera turba iuvant.
 vilis Anactorie, vilis mihi candida Cydro;
 non oculis grata est Atthis, ut ante, meis,
 atque aliae centum, quas hic sine crimine amavi;¹¹⁴
 inprobe, multarum quod fuit, unus habes.¹¹⁵

Neither the girls of Pyrrha nor the ones of Methymna, nor the remaining crowd of Lesbian women delight me. Anactorie is worthless, fair Cydro is worthless to me; Atthis is not pleasing to my eyes, as before, nor the hundred other girls, whom I loved here without censure; Cruel one, [the love] which was for many girls, you alone have.

Ovid, then, is framing Sappho's love for Phaon against the background of her previous love for girls, reminding his audience that this particular desire breaks the norm for her. Indeed, Sappho does not love Phaon at the same time as she desires women, but instead rejects her desire for

¹¹⁴ This is a variant on the more common reading: "*quas non sine crimine amavi*," meaning "whom I loved not without censure." Ovid also writes in line 201: "Lesbians, you who made me disgraceful by love" (*Lesbides, infamem quae me fecistis amatae*), making this variant unlikely. If the majority reading is correct, then note the negativity in Sappho's language about her affairs with women. Ovid suggests that she faces social stigma for her homoeroticism. There is, however, no text contemporary with Sappho that suggests that she faced censure for her relationships, and this could be Ovid projecting the views of the Roman world on an author that was writing some 600 years before his time.

¹¹⁵ Ovid., *Heroides* 15.15-9.

women in her pursuit of the young man. In Ovid's mind, though, she has maintained her homoerotic tendencies: she is still the active pursuer of her lover, even if her lover is male.¹¹⁶

Gordon explores the ways in which Ovid makes Sappho a masculine and active figure. She sums up her argument, saying: "Sappho's repeated references to Phaon's good looks, her allusions to her long history of sexual exploits, her bold descriptions of lovemaking, and her acceptance of the notion that to rape is to flatter are among the subtler aspects of Sappho's machismo. Ovid's Sappho is so masculine that when she chooses a man, she chooses a boy."¹¹⁷ She ultimately fails in her activity, however, because after a seemingly loving relationship with Phaon, he leaves her. Distraught by her spurned love, she plots her own death, planning to throw herself from the Leucadian cliffs.¹¹⁸

Like many of the texts that we have seen, this representation of Sappho is filled with confusion over gender roles and sexual activity. Sappho, known for her love of women, falls in love with a boy whom she actively but ineffectively pursues. Her relationship with him resembles that of a Greek pederastic relationship, with the obvious major difference that Sappho is a woman, not meant by nature to actively pursue anyone. She defies her gender role first by having sex with women, and later by attempting to be the active partner in a relationship with a male. Her heterosexual relationship is framed by her homoerotic tendencies, confusing the Roman model of sex even more so than a *tribas* who fucks women: In this relationship, *no one* is performing the appropriate gender role. Sappho, a female, is the active partner, while Phaon, a male, is the passive

¹¹⁶ It is important to note that the activity of Sappho in regards to both the maidens and Phaon in this poem is seemingly an invention of Ovid. Sappho's poetry, though showing an amount of active desire, is filled with language of reciprocity. For evidence of this, see Pamela Gordon, "Lover's Voice in *Heroides* 15," 290n9.

¹¹⁷ Pamela Gordon, "The Lover's Voice in *Heroides* 15," 284.

¹¹⁸ Ovid, *Heroides* 15.171-182.

partner. Once again then, Ovid uses a female homoerotic figure to blur the lines of gender and sexuality roles.

The second heterosexual but gender-deviant text is a fictional letter written by Alciphron, portraying a girl named Glaucippe writing a letter to her mother. In the letter, Glaucippe writes that she no longer wants to marry the man to whom she is promised, but rather has fallen in love with a man whom she first saw dressed as a woman at the Oschophoria festival.¹¹⁹ She writes to her mother: “Either I will mingle with this man, or having mimicked the Lesbian Sappho, not from the rocks of Leucadia, but from the jutting rocks of the Peiraeus I will throw myself into the wave.” (ἢ τούτῳ μιγήσομαι ἢ τὴν Λεσβίαν μιμησαμένη Σαπφῶ οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς Λευκάδος πέτρας, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ τῶν Πειραϊκῶν προβόλων ἐμαυτὴν εἰς τὸ κλυδώνιον ὄσω).¹²⁰ The reference to Sappho, a woman notorious for her love of women, combined with the fact that the boy was cross-dressing when Glaucippe first saw him, is clearly reminiscent of female homoeroticism. Further, Glaucippe seems to be taking an active, desiring role in this text. She states that she “will mingle with this man,” defying her duty as a woman to marry the man whom she is betrothed to, and instead actively pursuing a different man. In the next letter, her mother responds “that which is right for a girl to be ashamed, you have shaved off the modesty from your countenance” (δέον αἰσχύνεσθαι κορικῶς, ἀπέξεσας τὴν αἰδῶ τοῦ προσώπου).¹²¹ Her mother, then, sees her pursuit as unfeminine and immodest.

¹¹⁹ Alciphron, *Letters of Fishermen* 11.1-3. In their notes to their translation of this text, Benner and Fobes explain this festival, saying “In this festival there was a procession headed by two young Athenians of distinguished family, wearing women’s dress and carrying ὠσχοί (vine-branches loaded with grapes). *The Letters of Alciphron Aelian, and Philostratus*, trans. A.R. Benner and F.H. Fobes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 62.

¹²⁰ Alciphron, *Letters of Fishermen* 11.4.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 12.2.

Though the letter of Glaucippe shows a yearning for a heterosexual relationship, there are clear allusions to female homoeroticism, and this can help to inform us on views of women in same-sex relationships. Like *tribades*, Glaucippe disregards her passivity and modesty in active pursuit of a partner. She blurs the lines of gender, and the reader has to wonder how this relationship will work if it comes to pass. Will Glaucippe resume a passive role once she has reached her goal? Will she be happy to be dominated, as long as it is by the man of her choice? If these things are true, then why is she more attracted to a man who is depicted as being feminine (and is indeed dressed as a woman), and why does she choose to compare herself to a Sappho who takes an active role in her relationship with a boy? While there are no obvious answers to any of these questions, the fact that the letters allow us to ask them is significant. Like so many of the texts that clearly depict female homoerotic relationships, this text troubles the concept of appropriate gender roles and questions what it means to be an active female.

Conclusion

The current studies of Roman sexuality revolve around two main points: firstly, that the Romans always thought of sex in a phallogocentric way, with the penetrator being the masculine/active partner and the penetrated being the feminine/passive partner, and secondly that only those who deviated from their ascribed gender roles were culturally stigmatized. Though these guidelines apply nicely to heteroerotic partners and male homoerotic partners, the Roman depiction of female homoeroticism often deviates from these norms. While penetration is almost always shown, even in female homoerotic relationships, it does not always preclude a single active partner, and indeed there are several texts that show varying amounts of reciprocity within these relationships. In addition to this, female homoeroticism is nearly universally chastised, and while

the penetrative/masculine partner is usually given the most negative attention, several texts admonish both the active and passive partners, and show the passive partner as deeply shameful of her homoerotic relationship.

Despite the fact that much of the current academic discourse concerning Roman female homoeroticism centers on this same model of sexuality, the Romans did not depict female homoeroticism in the same ways that they did male homoeroticism. There are several pieces of textual evidence that suggest that those living during the Roman Empire, indeed, generally opposed any discourse which compared female and male homoeroticism. Though Charicles tries to treat male and female homoeroticism as parallels in the Lucianic *Erotes*, his opposition finds this point absurd, thinking that the two have nothing to do with each other. Iphis, too, is justified in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in basing her negativity towards her attraction to a woman on the absence of same-sex intercourse in the animal world, though this argument would not have worked for someone admonishing male homoeroticism. In all of the texts that I have examined, there are only three which compare male and female homoeroticism: Plato's *Laws*, the Lucianic *Erotes*, and Soranus's *On Chronic Disease*. While Plato exists well before the Roman Empire and does not, therefore, fit this particular discussion, the latter of the two texts only compare female and male homoeroticism as a way of admonishing male homoeroticism. Seemingly, then, the only justification in the Roman mind for a comparison between male and female homoeroticism is as a rhetorical technique in emphasizing how unnatural and disgusting male homoeroticism is. It is therefore anachronistic for modern scholars to analyze male and female homoeroticism in the Roman Empire in the same ways and by the same guidelines.

Brooten says the following about the asymmetry of sexual classification:

But in spite of the presence of sexual love between women in Roman society, Plautus, Ovid, Seneca the Elder, Phaedrus, Martial, and Juvenal represented it as distant from their society in one or more ways. In contrast, Roman authors displayed some tolerance toward those homoerotic males of their own society who played the active role, although they expressed considerable disdain toward passive citizen males, while expecting male slaves to endure penetration. This differing treatment of female and male homoeroticism is based upon a fundamental asymmetry between the feminine and masculine sexual roles of free persons that we can document throughout the Roman world and will see throughout this book: the permanent passivity expected of women contrasted with the understanding that free men might penetrate either females or males or even be penetrated themselves. This focus on penetration as the principal sexual image led to a simplistic view of female erotic behavior and a complex view of the erotic choices of free men.¹²²

Though she makes an interesting point, I would question if this is the only possible explanation for the asymmetry. Rather, I think it is possible that the Romans knew very well that penetration was not the only means of sex (as evidenced by the meaning of the word *tribas*), but because of their discomfort with the idea that women can experience pleasure without a phallus involved, they phallicized homoerotic women (while still depicting them as transgressing the lines between activity and passivity) and depicted sex between women as unnatural and shameful, discouraging women from partaking of same-sex relationships. There is little, of course, to substantiate this theory, or any other theory about why the Romans were particularly negative toward female homoeroticism. It is only clear that this negativity was present, and that they showed female homoeroticism in a very different way than any other kind of sex.

There has been surprisingly little research done on female homoeroticism in any period of antiquity, though the field of study is certainly growing. Unfortunately, much of the research that has been done up to this point tries to force female homoeroticism into the Roman sexual model that we use to classify other kinds of relationships. This attempt is, at best, limiting, and at worst,

¹²² Brooten, *Love Between Women*, 56-7.

completely inaccurate. Further research must be done on female homoerotic relationships in ancient literature and art, preferably with a more nuanced view on issues such as activity versus passivity and the transgressions of gender roles. Perhaps if we start to look at these relationships with a clean slate, resisting the urge to compare them with male homoeroticism, we can start to understand the motives behind the Roman's denunciation of these practices, and evaluate why the female homoerotic relationship looks so different than every other kind of relationship in the Roman world.

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