Chapter Three

The Androcentrism of Desire

Augustine's soul didn't become a mansion large enough to welcome, along with God, the women he'd loved, except for his mother (though one, perhaps, his son's mother, did remain to inhabit a small dark room). God, therefore, would never have felt fully at home as his guest.¹

Chapters 1 and 2 have argued that many parents—women's, but also men's—experiences of their children are erotic, sensual, and even sexual. On one hand, such a conclusion is an unsurprising result of feminist method: women's and some men's unheard voices speak to their experiences of their own lives in their own words. On the other hand, it embarrasses feminism's commitment to the cause of sexual justice. Feminists of all stripes have fought to uproot not just the existence but even the potential of coercion from sexual relations by excising sexuality from all relations between unequals. The idea that women take sensual or sexual pleasure in their relationships with children is threatening because it seems to replicate the very pattern of sexual domination and subordination that we are supposedly attempting to banish. To acknowledge this pleasure seems, in other words, to indicate that feminism is about gaming the system of domination and subordination rather than subverting it.

I argue that this conclusion is erroneous. Yet pointing out the error requires teasing out a delicate distinction between eroticizing and sexualizing inequality and recognizing the erotic and sexual dimensions of all relations, including those be-
tween unequals. When we try to explain exactly why maternal pleasure in relationships with children is so threatening, we must keep in mind that the still-ambivalent Western public idealization of sex between social equals is too young (at most half a century) to have set up a solid bulwark against a much longer precedent of eroticizing inequality within a social system founded on gendered power differentials. As a recent convert to sexual egalitarianism, Western culture is obligated to denounce the earlier system categorically. The bulk of this chapter will argue that it deserves denunciation as a system of domination and subordination. But this examination serves a second purpose. Like all converts, our culture has protested a bit too much in its condemnation of its former life. We must, as Christine Gudorf, Marie Fortune, and countless others have argued, eroticize equality. But our egalitarian ideals are properly eschatological, not immediate: try as we might to establish justice, differences of power rooted in age, ability, health, opportunity, and resources will be with us in any earthly life we can conjure. We must address them honestly instead of brushing them aside as temporary vestiges of an old order. Otherwise we will continue ignoring the unequal dimensions of all “egalitarian” relations. Instead, we must learn to distinguish between the unjust sexualization of domination and submission and appropriate erotic relations between unequals. Thus my task is to explain how our cultural history has poisoned our image of erotic relations between unequals, problematizing maternal-infant relations and our ethics of sexuality as a consequence. In the process, I suggest that removing eroticism and sensuality from relations between unequals is impossible. Inegalitarianism, not inequality itself, is to blame for our tendency to assume that sensual pleasure between unequals is exploitative and coercive, responsible for “programming” the less powerful person to eroticize domination and submission.

We must not be naïve about the difficulty of demonstrating this claim. As Gudorf argues, we experience sex as powerful. As Michel Foucault and Catharine MacKinnon have reminded us, in the West sexuality has been the field upon which socially approved, gendered relationships of domination and subordination have been enacted, reinforced, and symbolized. For nearly all of recorded Western history, inequality was a central criterion for the morality of sexual relationships. Western culture sexualized power; sex was always already about domination and submission; and domination and submission were always already gendered. The logical consequence is that in traditional Western sexual culture domination has been essential to male sexual arousal and satisfaction; penetrative domination and receptive submission have been undisputed elements of sexual relations; and, as we saw in chapter 2, sex has been defined in ref-

ence to dominant males’ arousal and satisfaction patterns. In addition, classical sexual morality had primarily to do with governing and directing internally generated (male) desire and with preserving the sexual actor’s status as citizen. Unsurprisingly, the force of this tradition makes it unusable as a resource for tackling maternal eroticism.

A comprehensive history of Western inequalitarian sexual traditions—child marriage, laws of consent, pederasty, incest, slavery, and concubinage—could fill (and have filled) several books. My aims are more circumspect: to signal the origins of some enduring features of our current popular sexual ethos and to identify characteristics iminal to a proper ethic of erotic relations between unequals. We rightly shy away from this heritage today, but if we are not clear precisely what we are rejecting we are likely to reproduce its features inadvertently even in egalitarian sexual ideals, never mind guidelines for parents with children (see chap. 6 for more on this danger). First, with the assistance of Bernadette Brooten, David Halperin, Thomas Hubbard, and David Konstan, I will argue that in both classical Western thought and its Christian successors the norm of erotic desire and sex between unequals carries rigidly androcentric assumptions about gender, power, pleasure, morality, and sexuality. Second, I will show how subtly classical Western Christian theologies of concupiscence and temperance reinforce problematic androcentric, individualistic patterns of moral thought, mitigating against truth relational views of desire. Third, I will argue briefly that there is no necessary connection between unequal relationships and these problematic versions of androcentrism; at the very least this uncritical equivalency leads to complacency toward egalitarian norms, norms that paradoxically can replicate androcentrism’s errors. Finally, despite Western androcentrism’s problems, it contains important salvageable ideas: a glimmer of concern in some cases for the less powerful partner’s future status, an inkling of the idea that erotic love should empower rather than dominate, and the important implication that eroticism must have existed outside the boundaries of androcentrically defined sexuality.

A brief comment on terminology is in order. In this chapter, “erotic” signifies desire for holistic union with a person (or, in the case of temperance, with a sensual good). Only in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas will it also imply desire for union with the highest good, God. Because the emblem of eros is typically sexual consummation, the discussion will slip back and forth between “erotic” and “sexual.” But the question we must keep in mind is the question of hunger for union—often sensual but not necessarily sexual—with a person of possibly different status. In addition, here “androcentrism” is shorthand for an inequalitarian vision of eroticism.
and sexual relations built around the desires, concerns, and pleasures of men who hold power over the objects of their desire, a vision in which this inequality of power is in itself eroticized and sexualized. Finally, in most of what follows I intentionally use the terms “homoerotic,” “homosexual,” “gay,” and “lesbian” sparingly, because no matter how carefully these terms are used they import contemporary connotations that cannot be presumed to fit classical Western conceptions of sexuality. The point is social position, not what we might call sexual orientation.  

1. Classical Androcentric Inequality

In the West, sex has nearly always assumed—or where this does not already exist, it has created—significant inequality between partners. In ancient Greek and Roman writings, sexual domination and subordination run along complex boundaries of what we today would call gender, economic class, and political status. We could examine other literatures, but here we actually want to understand how the powerful view egalitarian sexual relations. The ancient writings on sexual transgression have the advantage of displaying the theme of domination and subordination and its many variations as educated male authors portrayed them.  

Men of ancient Greece and Rome did not accept all sexual relations between equals, but all proper sex by definition involved a superior or “active” partner (the penetrating lover) and an inferior or “passive” partner (the penetrated beloved): the actor and the acted-upon. Free adult men—always the active partners—had sex with inferior people: women, men of lower status, or male or female adolescents. Acts that met these criteria—depending on the period and one’s class and family responsibilities—might be acceptable, questionable, or forbidden, but they counted as “natural” sex. Acts that did not meet these criteria were incomplete, fundamentally imperfect, or at least problematic, needing to be explained and limited. The two examples explored below reveal the textures of “normal” sex through the lens of the potentially or absolutely abnormal: same-sex relations.

1A. Making Relations between Men Unequal: Pederasts and Youths

In ancient Greece and Rome, sex between free men of the same status was problematic in large part because the active/passive model of sex necessitated the subordination of one of the partners, who voluntarily played the passive, effeminate complement to his partner’s active, honorable, masculine role. This inherent loss of status was shameful and debasing not to the penetrating male (who adhered to his proper “active” role) but to the passive male (who abdicated his). Two examples underlie the judgment that masculine social power was undermined not by homosexuality per se but by any sign of sexual weakness or passivity at all.

The kinaidos (Latin: ciner dus) is one example of a man whose passivity attracted derision. This case demonstrates how the virtues of self-restraint and domination united to make controlled use of desire a key marker of masculinity. According to David Halperin, the kinaidos’s problem was not that his desires were misdirected, as healthy men were assumed to desire beautiful people of either gender. It was that he lacked control over them, indiscriminately seeking physical pleasure, including promiscuous sex with women and boys, and perhaps (as special markers of his dissoluteness) even soft, feminine dress and penetration by adult men. This promiscuous passivity marked him as morally weak, or effeminate. The kinaidos was, Halperin argues, a sort of object-lesson for adult men in the consequences of giving in to desire. Receptiveness to penetration—whether proven or only suspected—was a summary symbol of this all-encompassing loss of masculine power.

These arguments find an echo in David Konstan’s analysis of the conversation between Zeus, the macho god who is unsuccessful with the ladies, and Eros, his romantic adviser, in Lucian’s Dialogues of the Gods. The brawny, tough, assertive Zeus wants women to desire him, but he repulses them. Meanwhile, effeminate men like Dionysius have no trouble winning women’s attention. However, these men resemble women also in their lack of sexual self-control, falling weakly captive to the wiles of their lovers and to their own desire to be loved. Consequently, their love relationships are symmetrical (a result Zeus desires) but more dissolute than virtuous (a result that he is reluctant to embrace). Reluctant to erode his masculinity, the badge of his superiority, by exhibiting the intimacy and vulnerability that women might find attractive, Zeus refuses to alter his macho course.

Relationships between men of unequal social status were less susceptible to this pejorative judgment and seem to have received more social approbation (or less vilification, depending on the period). Painting with a broad brush is dangerous, because acceptance of this arrangement varied by century and geography. Because youths were subordinate to male adults in the social hierarchy, especially in the pre-Roman period a Greek youth’s discriminating sexual submission to an adult man (likely in his twenties or thirties, but perhaps older) was not considered shameful. Sexual relationships between freeborn youths and men, which could be quite public and even receive the blessings of the boys’ fathers (Hubbard records one instance of a father appointing his son’s lover as guardian in his
commit *hybris* against people who were not only fellow human beings but also fellow citizens.20

We must take care not to see this argument as pure interest in the good of youths.20 In Samuel Houser's interpretation, Dio Chrysostom's greatest fear often seems to be the *adult lover*'s moral dissolution and its effect on the polis, including the youths who will eventually make decisions for all. Thus both in Stoicism and earlier in Plato, the lover's goal is still fulfillment of his own desires; he has merely decided to desire the character-building qualities of sexual restraint more than sex.31 Indeed, as Nussbaum notes, the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus teaches that "the passions should not be moderated but extirpated."32 And, Brooten and Foucault point out, Roman-era medical writers pitched sexual reserve for both sexes as a means to virtuous self-control and health. Thus sexual reserve was still about control of self, still about sex as matter of pursuing one's own good; it is just that the good was health, not pleasure.33 The potential partner's good and the good of the relation between them were not a matter of direct consideration. Still, these approaches did imply that habitual self-interested exploitation of others harmed both the community and oneself, and it reinforced the existing case for erotic relationships between men and youths that involved deep intellectual and emotional bonds but excluded or downplayed sex.34

Thus the two limits on men's sex with boys both revolve around free men's good. First, *incipient equality* (e.g., between young adult male citizens and free boys) made a moral claim that *permanent inequality* (e.g., between men and women) did not: the responsibility not to compromise a future equal's well-being and public vocation, either directly or indirectly, through one's own selfish action. Second, succumbing to pleasure in any form compromised a free man's virtue of masculine self-discipline and thus eventually endangered his social honor.35 Later worries about physical health probably responded to the same concern indirectly. In this rather circumspect way, the later limits on pederasty support adult male sexual restraint toward adolescent boys—without, however, eroding either the preoccupation with the men's true happiness or the assumption that morally acceptable adult sex takes place between social unequals.

**III. MAKING RELATIONS BETWEEN WOMEN UNEQUAL: TRIBADES AND THEIR LOVEDS**

Even stronger evidence in favor of the thesis that acceptable sexual relations occurred only between social unequals is the classical treatment of sex between women, who were of singular (marginal) status.

In accounts possibly attributable to women, the story is mixed. The
poet Sappho's fragments at times seem to celebrate reciprocal, egalitarian love; Sappho tells a departing young lover both "you anointed me" and "you quenched your desire." But they also appear to point toward relationships between adult women and the adolescent girls they "both desire and pursue." These connections were probably, like male pederastic relationships of the period, unequal.

One other kind of source suggests the possibility of a more egalitarian female eroticism. Love spells commissioned by women. Here, ancient women's visions of their own desire for women may be faintly visible. Brooten and Christopher Faraone point out rare examples of women using *agē* (binding) spells for this purpose. But the evidence is inconclusive: the spells follow the same pattern as those commissioned by (dominant) men to attract (subordinate) women, or occasionally by courtesans or prostitutes to draw men, including wishes that the beloved experience some violent, terrible physical or mental misery that drives him or her from home and toward the person who commissioned the spell. Still, neither Brooten nor Faraone considers the spells to be firm evidence that women were taking dominant roles; the women may simply have made use of standard, available love-spell formulas. Brooten argues that the choices of the women who commissioned spells might also have reflected a complex notion of domination different from men's with which they could maneuver into a kind of equality with their only apparently passive partners, much as butch and femme lesbians did in mid-twentieth-century America.

But most classical accounts of love between women were written by men, in whose eyes sexual relations between female social equals were just as problematic as those between their male counterparts. Men's reports of adult women's purported sexual liaisons are complex and multivalent. But for us the point is this: discourse about female lovers upholds the claim that Greco-Roman men's views of sex rotated around an axis of dominant activity and subordinate passivity. Equal female pairs, like equal male pairs, or even effeminate men with female lovers, could not be visualized as proper partners. In this case, however, the problem was that by definition two women could not have sex.

Brooten argues that the classical male authorial gaze appointed an active partner, or *tribas*, and then condemned her both for supposedly aspiring to a dominant role and for failing in the attempt. Thus whereas for adult men shame arose from passivity before their own sexual desires, for adult women the opposite judgment obtained: male authors shamed the supposed active partner for her futile attempt to dominate her apparently appropriately passive female partner.

The impossibility of conceiving of equal relations was so complete that male authors assigned *tribades* one or both of two pathologies: a comprehensively masculine mind, encompassing masculine desires, tastes, and intellect; or enlarged genitals capable of penetration. The Roman poet Martial's satires declare women's purported attempt to contradict nature by assuming the active role irreverent, irrational, and futile. Sex between women is an oxymoron: either it involves only women, but it is not sex, or it is sex, but it involves a grotesque nonwoman. In one poem Martial pillories the active, macho "lesbian Philaenis," whose daily routine includes working out in gym shorts, playing ball, wrestling in the mud, "banging" eleven girls, drinking and vomiting copious amounts of wine, and eating sixteen steaks. When after all of that she's looking for a little fun she refuses oral sex with men (to effeminate) in favor of delivering oral gratification to women, an act that men would find debasing. This last act reveals her masculine bravado as a charade: she lacks the capacity to penetrate women, and worse, she gives them pleasure without receiving it herself. She fails the crucial test: she cannot manage to fulfill the masculine active sexual role properly.

In another salaciously sarcastic poem Martial attacks women with larger-than-average genital organs. Bassa, apparently a celibate woman protected from contact with men by a circle of faithful female friends and servants, is in reality a woman-loving fraud, a self-invented "freak" with a "monstrous Venus [that] counterfeits a man." He cannot imagine that she and her partners enjoy any satisfaction other than penetration and receptivity; in his view she must dominate and penetrate or the act is not sex. Indeed, one clear sign of the anxiety Greco-Roman authors felt toward a purportedly "immensely great clitoris" was the assumption that it would yield masculine "unrestrained sexual behavior"; hence the Greek physician Soranos's recommendations for clitoridectomy in the *Gynaikēia*. While the operation may not commonly have been performed, like male castration it illustrates the lengths to which the ancients were willing to go to make the point that those who had been designated sexually passive must not transgress their roles.

Classical male authors' view of women's eroticism reinforces the impression that even holding constant three of the most important factors in the ancient world's system of social hierarchy—gender, age, and social status—did not create a protected space for an accepted practice of egalitarian sexual relationships, except perhaps tacitly for some freeborn adolescent boys. For women, even without the high stakes of the honor of citizenship, there was no such thing as egalitarian coupling. Unlike boys, who could transgress into passivity before claiming full agency as adults,
women were permanently passive. If egalitarianism had been even an incipient part of the ancients' vision of sexuality, egalitarian same-sex practices should have developed widely and been broadly acknowledged. In addition, there should have been clearer evidence of acceptable nonpenetrative sex for women and role changing for adult men. Rather, sex—at least according to those men of privilege who kept records—remained overwhelmingly identified with penetrating domination and passive, receptive submission.

I. CYPHERS: CHILDREN'S SEXUALITY BEFORE PUBERTY

One question important to the current project remains puzzlingly unanswered. Although the evidence is more negative than positive, classical authors seem to have assumed that a boy eligible to be a man's lover was postpubertal. This implies but does not prove that younger children were sexually off-limits to adults. While the rise of Stoicism would have discouraged sex with children anyway—along with all forms of nonmarital sex and marital pleasure seeking—it would be surprising not to find some enthusiasm for such relations in earlier periods. Yet Plato wrote a statute permitting individuals and families to kill anyone who raped a free boy or woman, suggesting that boy rape was a problem but also that it was considered reprehensible. Still, this leaves questions. What exactly is morally repugnant about boy rape? Is it an offense against the victim? If so, in what way (status is certainly an issue, as the statute does not cover slaves)? Against his male relatives? Can the statute's language be interpolated to include girls? Why were girls not mentioned?

Foucault is not much more helpful. He traces the origins of the modern scrutiny of children's sex to the earliest periods in which the system of sexuality (in which "sex" has to do with bodies and pleasures) begins to overlay the system of alliance (in which "sex" has to do with political positioning, inheritance, etc.). This suggests that the ancients should have been relatively uninterested in children's and adolescents' sexual activities—for example, sex play among free adolescent boys—except when they impinged on alliance, as they certainly did in Greek pederasty. So far, then, Foucault's analysis fits the pattern developed here. But as one author notes sardonically, "Foucault did not do case studies of living people." Poetry, myth, spells, art, and other expressions are incontrovertible evidence of the importance of the centrality of body and pleasure to all people, enslaved and free, and around the free classes' preoccupation with alliance in their formal marital and pederastic pairings. It would be surprising to find no culture of interest in children's sexuality.

II. GREEK NOVELS

Greek romantic fantasies of the first through third centuries CE at first seem to contradict the case I have been building for the egalitarianism of Western views of sexuality. David Konstan demonstrates that the stories all involve an adolescent boy and girl who simultaneously fall in love with one another. But instead of following the traditional gendered script—boy pursues, girl acquiesces—both fall prey to the debilitating power of eros and pine away in seclusion until they are connected in the nick of time by collaborators who discover their distress. After the consummation of mutual sexual desire, external forces separate them, and their love undergoes a trial by temptation to inferior relationships. But both resist these challenges, and they are reunited to live happily ever after.

On one level, the stories challenged the reigning ideas that negotiations carried out to the political and economic advantages of male guardians are the strongest foundation for marital fidelity and happiness, and that spontaneous eruptions of eros characterize illicit, temporary, "recreational" liaisons. The perfect symmetry of the relationships is astonishing: both boys and girls exhibit and mirror masculine and feminine traits throughout. Konstan implies in addition that because the novels' version of eros includes and maps to sexual desire, identity of desire and affective self-assertion imply equality in sexual performance. Finally, both boys and girls reject Stoic visions of virtue. Erotic self-mastery has no place in their internal relationship. Thus if there is a dimorphism of gender and power, Konstan argues, it runs not between but through the characters: a superior (masculine) reasoned fidelity and the inferior (feminine) passions that it governs and, in this case, indulges selectively.

But the reader knows that although the characters are temporary de facto equals in alternating indulgence and effeminate passivity, they will be unequal—and therefore more appropriately paired—in adulthood when the boy assumes the responsibilities of a citizen. This is the converse of the Greek case against pederastic relationships with high-status boys. Whereas otherwise acceptable egalitarian sex between currently unequal males raises concerns because it endangers their future equality, otherwise problematic egalitarian romance between currently equal adolescent boys and girls is accepted because of the partners' incipient inequality.

In addition, as Konstan recognizes, the novels contain all the ingredients of fantasy romance: typically both boy and girl are free of all the social connections that might force them to enact traditional roles. The plot is an excuse for escapism, not a model for reality. The novels do make room for the idea that "the ideal of personal love as the basis of the fam-
ily flourishes where the conditions of social life are fluid"—which they were, comparatively, in the early centuries of the Common Era. But this should not, he warns, imply that parental authority over children’s marriages or the equation of activity with masculinity and passivity with femininity disappeared. The fantasy of symmetrical romantic marriage could not become a reality without egalitarian social structures, or at least without a credible movement to create them.

One further point deserves to be made here. Reciprocity of desire and pleasure may entail egalitarian symmetry, but it is far more likely to produce only an illusion of relative powerlessness in the dominant partner that allows him (or her) to imagine that the partners stand on equal footing. In Konstan’s novels, each partner is simultaneously lover and beloved, and in the same way. But Hubbard’s claims about reciprocal pedestrian affection do not achieve this level of symmetry. Rather, the only power the boys hold is power the men grant. In Greek accounts the adult lover often bemoans his emotional helplessness before his attraction to a beautiful free youth, indicating that the youth has power only within the boundaries of the relationship the man seeks. In the Roman period, when pederastic relations more typically occurred between free men and slaves, slaves exercised a similar, limited emotional power over masters. Unequal partners experience the “same” relationship differently. Reciprocated affection does not imply that the desire and love that the subordinate returns to the superior is of the same type that he receives; men both desired boys and desired to be desired by them, and boys retained only the right to return love or withhold it. Nor does it imply that the subordinate partner has the power to define the relationship.

Throughout Western history men have reported feeling helplessly enthralled by their desires for women, and by their desires to be desired; and women with little other leverage have manipulated these desires to gain a measure of power within relationships. These maneuvers prove, if anything, not that the partners’ statuses have equalized or that their love is similar, but that the partners remain profoundly unequal, that the subordinate can martial no other kind of influence, that the desires and affections traveling between the partners are not of the same quality. Reciprocation does not imply symmetry or equality.

II. Dangers of Concupiscence

Even as Common Era Greek and Roman texts increasingly curtailed physical pleasure in favor of moral self-perfection, their ethics of sexual desire and power remained driven by a model of control and dominance. Although (despite some attention to women's pleasure in marriage) this model also assumed women's social subordination to men, continuing the ideal of inequality in sexual relations, the primary point here is that the “problem of sexuality” remained governing one's insistent genital passions—an inadequate and thoroughly androcentric, individualistic approach.

III. Paul and Marriage as Remedy

Early Christian texts embrace this model. In Paul’s vision, men and women need equally to prepare spiritually for Christ’s imminent return. This expected event governs Paul’s primary ethic of sexuality in 1 Corinthians (7:29–31). He prefers that the unmarried avoid marriage (1 Cor 7:8) because marriage distracts men and women alike from their devotion to God (1 Cor 7:8, 32–35). On the other hand, he would prefer that they marry than risk illicit intercourse (1 Cor 7:9, 36). The clear implication is that while marriage causes spiritually distracting “distress in this life” (1 Cor 7:28), fornication jeopardizes one’s holiness even more. In this eschatological context, marriage protects moral and spiritual growth by acceptably channeling outsized sexual desire.

The most egalitarian, other-directed dicta in the text are also variations on the theme of control of personal desire: Paul’s declaration that the husband’s body belongs to the wife sexually in the same way that the wife’s body belongs to the husband (1 Cor 7:4) and his warning not to deprive each other of sex more than briefly (1 Cor 7:5). This pair of instructions acknowledges women’s desire as well as men’s and encourages spouses to allow each other disciplined relief of otherwise dangerous sexual tension “by way of concession” (1 Cor 7:6). But Paul’s declarations about mutual ownership, however inspiring, do not make spouses equal either socially or ecclesiastically. Nor, notably, do they make sex good or move off the self-control model; sex should be avoided if possible (1 Cor 7:6–7).

The model of individual self-mastery continues in a different mode in Romans 1, in Paul’s condemnation of same-sex relations. The language of desire—often, in Countryman’s and Brooten’s opinions, mistranslated as “lust”—that Paul pairs with the discussion of unnatural relations signals that Paul is criticizing either misdirected or excessive passion or both. Paul is not crafting a new argument against same-sex relations here; the phrase “exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural” (Rom 1:26) assumes that his audience already considers male-female intercourse the norm and variations as deviant. Rather, his point is that misdirection and deviance of all kinds—unnatural relations, covetousness, malice, rebelliousness, and a host of other sins—are all consequences of a fundamental refusal to
acknowledge and honor the God one already knows. Unlike the unwelcome residuum of heterosexual desire that remains in the loins, these sins are products of idolatry.

Both the new insight that “unnatural” sins of the senses are symptoms of spiritual illness and the spiritually egalitarian sexual ethic of 1 Corinthians 7 signal extensions beyond the “self-mastery over male arousal” model inherited from the classical era. Still, Paul’s androcentrism is clearly indicated in his assumption that only the act of intercourse “counts” as sexual activity; the ability to refrain from this act divides the continent from those who need the medicine of marriage. Yet Paul sets this spiritual egalitarianism within a firm social and ecclesiastical hierarchy. The husband has authority over the wife not just in the pseudo-Pauline letters but even in 1 Corinthians (11:3–16): “Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Cor 11:3 NRSV). And 1 Corinthians 7:36–38 breaks the even-handed rhythm of even the apparent egalitarianism of the rest of 1 Corinthians 7. Paul advises betrothed men to base their decisions whether to marry on their own degree of sexual self-control; there is no suggestion that their fiancées’ hopes or sexual needs should play any role in a common decision.

As the hold of imminent eschatological expectation weakened, theologians like the second-century Clement of Alexandria cemented Paul’s act-centered ethic of sexuality by declaring that the purpose of marriage was not mere release of desire but procreation; now sex was even more clearly one discrete, particular “act.” In addition, Clement’s Aristotelian biology (which envisioned the sperm as seed) guaranteed an androcentric focus on male arousal and release. Clement’s root theological argument, like Paul’s, is spiritually egalitarian: despite their inherently unequal social status, men and women share the same human nature, spiritual ends, and capacities for virtue. But because men produced the seed by which God perpetuated humanity, men were responsible for ensuring that this divine legacy was planted in the proper places (their wives’ fertile uteri). He demanded modesty and self-control in relationships with wives, in particular eschewing sex during pregnancy.

Despite this new procreative vision, however, Clement preserved the classical focus on personal virtue. Apparently addressing men only, he called for “absolutely uncompromising control over the organs beneath the stomach” and decried the enervating consequences of sexual activity. Echoing Stoicism, he railed, “It is unmistakably sinful to give in to sexual pleasure or to become inflamed by our lusts or to be excessively aroused by our unreasonable desires or to desire to dishonor oneself.”

The argument hinged on personal virtue and social honor, not on just or loving relations:

Anyone who does sin, for example by fornication, wrongs not so much his neighbor but himself by the very act of fornicating; he decidedly becomes more immoral and loses the right to respect. Chaste wives—although they were enjoined for the sake of virtue to serve God and their husbands, not their husbands alone—and who were God’s ready, receptive helpers in this endeavor, subservient not merely to God’s procreative plan, but to men’s procreative vocation. A woman who refused to be thus acted upon defied not only her husband but God as well.

In particular, the insistent gendering of sexual power and pleasure evident even in spiritual egalitarians like Paul and Clement is symptomatic of the Western tendency to separate women into three groups: virtuously continent asexual virgins, dangerous and tempting highly sexed prostitutes, and the problematic mothers—unlike Christ’s mother, Mary, obviously sexually active but filled with self-sacrificing maternal virtue. Once Western Christian culture installed procreation as the proper meaning of sex, clinching penetration as the definition of “the sex act,” women’s desire for pleasure became even more irrelevant to the moral goodness of sex. Unlike men, women could become parents without seeking or receiving genital pleasure, more like (asexual) virgins in their view of sex than like (hypersexual) whores. Armed with the putative capacity to want sex only for the sake of maternity, they are viewed as possessing only safe motherly touch—unless they admit to desiring adult sexual pleasure. The price of admitting to such desire is the possible loss of maternal virtue.

III. AUGUSTINE

It is possible that no single author has more profoundly influenced Western ethics in general, and Western ethics of sexuality in particular, than Augustine of Hippo. Augustine’s basic vision of sin and salvation pervaded Catholicism through the influence of Thomas Aquinas and Protestantism first and especially through Martin Luther. Augustine struggled mightily to find a middle road between pessimistic, world-denying Manicheanism—which taught that all matter was evil—and optimistic Pelagianism—which held that human beings were free to recognize and choose the good. His solution was a good, divinely created world inhabited by people who, try as they might, could choose goods only wrongly. Of the many consequences of the strategy, two are highly relevant to us.
The first is its implication for the shape of the moral life: earthly existence is an ongoing struggle in the will between two movements of desire, two different versions of desire for the good: on one hand for created goods in themselves, and on the other for the source of all created goods, the one Good, God. Although grace can form a person’s life into a coherent narrative (this is one of the organizing principles of Augustine’s Confessions and the point of his discussion of memory), from the experiential perspective life is a series of conflicted, discrete, doomed choices for created goods and for the acts that follow from these choices. Hence, what preoccupies Augustine are individual acts and the way in which they illustrate our reluctance to choose the true good we know. In the Confessions, he beates himself for crying at his mother’s death, stealing pears with a gang of boys, and loving his friends too much. His sexual ethics too continue the Western tradition of the detailed interrogation of individual acts and internally arising attractions and intentions. And, as we have seen, an act-centered, individualistic ethic is friendly to a narrow, androcentric, arousal-and-satisfaction view of sexuality.

The second important implication has to do with what it means to choose evil inevitably. Although concupiscence usually makes its appearance as shorthand for original sin, its basic meaning is neutral: human beings are attracted to goods. Augustine believes that the soul will be satisfied only when safely and serenely united with what it loves, that only the changeless and eternal good (God) can bring about this permanent state of happiness; and that union with God, once available in paradise, can occur only in heaven. In the meantime, we are separated longingly from God and surrounded by the attractions of God’s good creations. These goods ignite our concupiscence (and consequently compromise our reason, which is aligned with our true Good). The trouble is not that we desire them—they are goods God creates for our welfare—but that we desire them wrongly—not as stepping stones to get us closer to God, who is our true happiness, but as ends in themselves. Nearly identical laments pepper the Confessions: “[G]ood though they are, they are of the lowest order of good, and if we are too much tempted by them we abandon those higher and better things, your truth, your law, and you yourself, O Lord our God.” Because we do not understand that they cannot bring happiness (or sometimes because we do understand this), our desires for them constantly frustrate and disappoint us. Thus a pattern of erotic attraction—reason-crippling arousal and attempted satisfaction—is Augustine’s paradigm of sin.

We must not lose sight of the degree to which, for Augustine, improper desire for lower goods tarnishes all human actions. Still, the implications of this theology for sexual ethics in particular are great. Because desires for good things disturb the reasoning will in sex more sorely than at any other time, sexual sins are especially dangerous, mainly to the actor; and especially personal; and especially concerned with self-examination, its companion self-doubt, and self-discipline. Except that our admirable continence should not subject our spouses to too much temptation, Augustine’s ideal is sexual self-mastery with continence as its goal—this despite the fact that he considers marriage in itself and marital procreation as divinely ordained goods.

Nussbaum argues that the earthly experience of conflict, distance, and longing that follow from desire are logically necessary to Augustine’s theology: they create openings for God’s grace to break through at God’s whim or wisdom, producing rare, notable moments of clarity and peace. According to Augustine, although the senses constantly receive evidence of God’s benevolence and grandeur, sensual pleasure itself is not enjoined. It is theoretically possible, if not easy, to eat a piece of aged cheddar with pure gratitude for its nutritive value, for the sake of the life it supports. Yet, it is self-evident to reason that we must risk the pleasure of eating: the alternative to eating unvirtuously is dying.

For Augustine sex is unlike eating. Not only is sex not necessary to one’s earthly life, but engaging in it without indulging in improper pleasure is impossible. In most of his writings the whole structure of the act is problematic, requiring (of men, anyway) that they give in to carnal desire. Earthly marriage cannot manage the (good) desire for procreation without making direct, limited use of this (bad) concupiscence of the flesh, which is a product of original sin and lusts after all kinds of prohibited objects: “[O]riginal sin is something . . . which marriage . . . finds already a fact and uses it well when it does not do with it whatever it likes, but only what is permitted.” He hypothesizes that in paradise, by contrast, either the concupiscence of the flesh did not exist and sex would have been a rational execution of the decision to procreate, or else the desires of the flesh existed but would have aligned themselves with reason, producing no battle in the will.

Which of these speculative possibilities one chooses makes every difference for the way in which one interprets androcentric sexual desire and pleasure. Augustine’s own intractable theological connection between sexual desire and original sin supports the no-concupiscence view. In addition, the subsequent moral tradition grasped this first version. Thus the idea that sex could involve pure, proper sensuality aligned with reason remained a nearly unexplored suggestion.

Finally, Augustine’s window on the spiritual life is internal struggle and self-cultivation, typically symbolized by the different temptations that women and his male friends set before him. This autobiographical
Aquinas's treatment of sensual pleasures in his "Treatise on Fortitude and Temperance" is a classic example of such an absence.¹⁰⁷

Thomas Aquinas discusses all the desires and pleasures of touch under the virtue of temperance.¹⁰⁸

Pleasure . . . is so much the greater according as it results from a more natural operation. Now to animals the most natural operations are those which preserve the nature of the individual by means of meat and drink, and the nature of the species by the union of the sexes. Hence temperance is properly about pleasures of meat and drink and sexual pleasures. Now these pleasures result from the sense of touch. Wherefore it follows that temperance is about pleasures of touch.¹⁰⁹

In a move that makes sociobiology look old hat, Thomas's thirteenth-century argument for temperance acknowledges and accepts that the things that are most essential to our basic self-preservation are also fundamentally physically enjoyable. It also cautions that rational measures of good health, local custom, and other factors set different limits on that legitimate enjoyment in different circumstances.¹¹⁰

However, Thomas's treatment of sex diverges importantly from his treatment of food and drink. For Thomas food and drink are about my body's health. The good effects they are intended to produce limit both my intake and my enjoyment. For example, if I am temperate I avoid overeating and epicureanism, but I also avoid intentional undereating and revulsion toward food.¹¹¹ By contrast, chastity—the part of temperance that addresses sexual pleasure—is about my rational use of sexual desire and pleasure in intercourse to promote the health of the whole human community through procreation. Thus—again—its focus is intercourse. The discipline of finding the personal happy medium between "too much" and "too little" sex makes less sense, because there is no "too little": as only the married may reproduce, for many or even most, chastity means abstinence from all sexual activity.¹¹²

Under the headings of "purity" and "lust" Thomas addresses only touch that is usually preparatory to intercourse: looking (touching with the eyes), kissing, and erotic touching.¹¹³ The absence of the vast majority of pleasurable touch from his treatment is curious. Everyday, nongenital sensuality does not register in the structure of the treatise or even in the objections, where Thomas customarily and doggedly explains why phenomena and beliefs that might seem relevant to a discussion are actually unimportant. Two conclusions are possible: sexual touching includes all touch, so separate discussion of nonsexual touch is unnecessary; or nonsexual touch exists but is unnecessary to species or personal survival,
and the pleasurability of nonsexual touch is morally irrelevant. Neither approach helps us understand the daily interactions that compose most of our relationships.

It is especially unfortunate that Thomas fails to mention nurturing touch, for this kind of touch could have bridged the inconsistent logics of eating and drinking on one hand, and genital sex on the other. The patterns of temperate eating and drinking—balancing attraction and revulsion, too-muchness and too-littleness, adjustment to specific circumstances—are all keenly relevant to touch. In addition, transferring these patterns from personal disciplines of eating and drinking to relations with intimate others subtly transforms them by taking them out of my self; suddenly the calibration includes not just rationally using my own pleasure in given circumstances but balancing my pleasure and another’s, my need and another’s. This outward motion would help correct the self-developmental, “individualistic conception of the moral project” into which Thomistic ethics too easily falls. It would be wrong to lay Thomas’s omission exclusively at the feet of his gender and his celibate vocation, and it would be unfair to expect him to anticipate the twenty-first-century discovery (discussed in chap. 5) that touch is a fundamental need for infants and a thing without which adults cannot “be becomingly.” But combined with his preoccupation with intercourse, this complete lack of attention to everyday sensuality suggests that androcentrism is again at least partly to blame.

IV. Conclusion

This last point brings us to an essential but so far unacknowledged dimension of gendered sexual power: the high status of Greek and Roman philosophers and influential citizens and of later Christian writers (a biblically canonized leader of the early church; permanently influential bishop-theologians; and Roman Catholicism’s most prominent doctor of the Church) permitted them to install their de facto views and experiences of sexuality as the de jure measure of public morals. The Roman Catholic penitential tradition, which put celibate male theologians’ texts in the hands of celibate male confessors, added another layer of authoritative masculine interpretation to their conclusions. Hence we have a paradigm-setting tradition of sexual ethics reflecting a narrow slice of privileged masculine experience and concerned with dominating or deploying powerful, sometimes threatening, “unreasonable” desires. Contradictory or complementary experience did not have the same bully pulpit, especially if it belonged to women; the legacies of the female mystics and visionaries discussed in chapter 2 were much more circumspect. Consequently, there is little historical theoretical foothold for serious moral reflection on erotic, nongenital touch between either equals or unequals. It is either invisible and morally irrelevant or else incipiently sexual and morally suspect. Thus we receive no explicit guidance for evaluating parental sensuality.

In addition, the currently available alternative—recent Western sexual egalitarianism—has rightly condemned the damaging tendencies of the old system: that erotic “relations” between unequals are actually governed by the individualistic pleasure, power, and virtue of the more powerful person; that they use penetration (whether for pleasure or procreation) or its threat to enact that superiority physically and symbolically; that they hide the more powerful person’s power from him in the subjective impression of vulnerability before the genuinely vulnerable beloved; that they objectify less powerful others; that they focus narrowly on a cycle of intense, dangerously irrational attraction-desire-release; that they endanger virtue by compromising reason; that they problematize the pleasure potentially experienced by the socially inferior “object,” whether a Greek youth or a Christian wife; that they install standards of gender, age, and status dominance authoritatively in culture and law. From this point of view, erotic relations between unequals seem to entail all the abuses that a liberal, rights-based culture aims to uproot.

In contrast, Western egalitarian ideals of pleasure are built on the premise that if we can accomplish social and legal equality, exploitation will be eradicated, eroticism will be purified of its associations with domination and submission, and power analyses of sex will be unnecessary. On this logic the moral distinction between sex and gentler eroticism becomes irrelevant because we are freed from all the violations we associate with unequal relations: the tension between pleasure and virtue adjusts itself; all mutually agreed behavior between equals is good and free of real and symbolic danger; mutuality protects against objectification; relaxed and intense pleasures are morally equivalent; abuse in the seeking of mutual pleasure is impossible; and egalitarian cultural standards for sexuality and touch join forces with legal norms.

Unfortunately, the logic that leads us rightly to condemn the violence and inadequacy of Western egalitarian sexual ethics has two important flaws: erotic attraction to the pleasures of human touch between equals does not logically, necessarily entail all the benefits that supposedly flow from it, and eroticism between unequals does not logically, necessarily entail all the abuses that have historically accompanied it. Western egalitarian sexuality theoretically forbids exploitation, but it is vulnerable to privation.
(between consenting adults, anything goes), self-deceptive ignorance of genuine inequalities, and an almost commercial ethic of erotic exchange. United to the Freudian pansexuality explored in chapter 4, egalitarianism too tends to reduce all eroticism to genital sexuality. In sum, by resting prematurely on our egalitarian laurels we make ourselves vulnerable to the familiar dangers of selfishness, dishonesty, objectification, and reductionism that egalitarianism seeks to hide.

In contrast, although Western inegalitarian models of sexuality eroticize and reinforce the marginalization of the less powerful and the self-cultivation of the more powerful, their honesty about desire and about the inequalities of status that desire inevitably traverses are essential ingredients for any erotic ethic of inequality. Despite their thoroughgoing misogyny, Augustine’s and Thomas’s theologies are fundamentally erotic, driven by desire for the good. Their self-absorbed ruminations on concupiscence and virtue may distract them from questions of justice, but they do ask necessary questions about desire: when what is generally good for us and others is also enjoyable, how do we avoid self-deceptively justifying our own pleasure at the expense of our good, another’s good, or the good of a relationship or a community? How do we develop habits that enable us to see what is at stake in every opportunity for touch?  

Paul’s opinion that we sometimes have obligations to respond to others’ needs for sexual touch may have broader applications to touch generally. Augustine’s query about the possibility of truly good fleshly desire offers intriguing possibilities, especially as he complicates the “lower versus higher good” vision of concupiscence, declaring that his greatest good is not an object at all but is instead a sustaining power: “God is the Life of the life of my soul.”  

And although Thomas slots seduction, rape, adultery, fornication, and incest under the category of lust rather than injustice, questions of interpersonal justice and communal relations do come—however awkwardly—into his analysis. Even Clement and the Greek pederasts provide a hint: recognition of diverse social status and power (differences of age, health, and ability that remain with us always) is qualified by a strong claim about ontological equality that privileges the interests of less powerful persons. Clement may have drawn too-sweeping conclusions about the social consequences of women’s ability to bear children, but he insisted that men and women were spiritual equals. Well-regarded Greek pederasts remembered that their boy-lovers needed to arrive at adult citizenship well schooled and with their reputations intact, and that if they themselves were not wise and virtuous they were unattractive lovers for such boys. None of these moments of vision was powerful enough to overturn the inegalitarian sexuality of its host culture, but all provide hints toward a subtler treatment of eroticism in relations between unequals.

Despite these occasional insights, however, Western androcentric, inegalitarian accounts of sexuality contain essential flaws that must be overcome if we are to develop an honest ethic of parental eroticism. They have treated the erotic experiences of less powerful partners (usually women and male youths) ambivalently, rendering them either morally irrelevant (because not sexual) or morally problematic (because unnecessary for male pleasure or for reproduction). On the contrary, a proper ethic of erotic relationship must envision infants and children as full partners in sensual relations rather than as objects of sensual pleasure. In addition, because it makes no real distinction between sexuality and eroticism, and in particular between the sexualization of domination and submission and the inevitable erotic potential of all human relations, the Western androcentric ethic misses the opportunity to describe erotic touch morally.

Its replacement fares no better. Just as Western culture began to idealize secular sexuality and to acknowledge sensuality more generally, it also reduced all of sensuality, desire, love, and attraction to genital sexuality, making serious discussion of broadly passionate sensuality impossible. One symbolic indicator of this move is the new language adopted by the Roman Catholic Church, an institution that has been slow to shed androcentric, inegalitarian visions of sexuality. The Roman Catholic Catechism now declares that “sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.” Even for Rome, all desire for companionship is sexual.

This apparently sudden transformation of ordinary eroticism from near-invisibility to full-blown genital sexuality creates another set of problems for the interpretation of erotic relations between unequals, problems we must solve in order to address parental eroticism adequately. Clues to the difficulties but also to some solutions lie in an exploration of our Western Freudian heritage.
Chivers, "A Brief Review," 380–387. Chivers suggests a number of hypothetical explanations for the surprising distinction between male and female arousal: among others, men's conscious suppression of desire, and volunteer bias caused by the tendency of women sex study volunteers to be less inhibited sexually than the general population.


But the well-known use of rape as a tool of intimidation in men's prisons indicates that in certain situations men too are visibly aroused. See, for instance, Wayne S. Wooden and Jay Parker, Men behind Bars: Sexual Exploitation in Prisons (New York: DaCapo Press, 1983).

Diamond, Sexual Fluidity, 203; on the idea summarized here and their implications, 204–239.

Diamond, Sexual Fluidity, 227–230; quotation at 227.

Evidence of women's nearly instantaneous physiological, apparently involuntary response to sexual stimuli (Chivers, "A Brief Review," 380–384) would seem to reinforce this point, although as we have seen physiological arousal does not imply psychological arousal.

Edel Spector Posen, "Something Borrowed: How Mutual Influences among Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Straights Changed Women's Lives and Psychoanalytic Theory," Annual of Psychoanalysis 32 (2004): 93–94. In this sense alone the fear that the public acceptability of, say, gay and lesbian marriage will increase the number of people living as gay and lesbians is realistic. If one's same-sex desire is mirrored in the surrounding culture, labeling and embracing it is less difficult than if it is not.

Posen, "Something Borrowed," 82.

Diamond's final chapter implies the same for more fluid notions of female sexuality; see Sexual Fluidity, 235–259.

Ross, Extravagant Affections, 69.


This phenomenon is not particular to sex and sexuality; it applies to pain, illness, and other apparent concrete, real experiences.


See Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, trans. and with an intro by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1965). Embodied experience was particularly important to discussions around contraception, even when (as in the Catholic case) it yielded no changes in content. Contemporary Catholic sexual norms, as we have noted, rely heavily on the quality of embodied relationship. Currently, gay and lesbian experiences are influencing sexual mores.

Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 12.

Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 20.


1 Denise Levertov, "For the Asking," This Great Unknowning: Last Poems (New York: New Directions, 2000), 4.

Michel Foucault argues that we began moving toward an egalitarian ideal in the seventeenth century. See Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 106–107. Yet not until the birth control movement and psychology both found high degrees of popular acceptance can we really say that sexual egalitarianism was installed as a popular ideal. Even now, its status is insecure. Sexual violence educator Marie Fortune argues, for instance, that even today "the widely accepted 'romantic love ideal' requires a dominant-subordinate


9 In this sense my argument is at cross-purposes with my sources. Hubbard and Broozen in particular argue for the existence of significant same-sex counter cultures of sexuality in the periods they study. My point is precisely that these are counter cultures, that they existed within and defiance of prevailing cultures of sexual domination and subordination.

10 Women's (and other men's, and adolescents') descriptions of physical relations tend to be fragmentary or secondhand; with the exception of Sappho's well-known fragments, many educated women's accounts tend to survive only as implied arguments in others' diatribes against their lost writings. So although we can assume that the subordinate social standing of this now-silenced majority profoundly colored their views of genitality, gender relationship, and many other categories relevant to what we are calling "sex," we cannot know precisely what they thought about it. See, for instance, Thomas K. Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Early Documents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 16.


12 This does not mean that adult men of equal status never had sexual relationships, but it may mean that these relationships were more highly questionable than others and so had to be defended. A central thesis of Hubbard's *Homosexuality* (p. 6, 10–12); that men of equal status did have sexual relationships in both the Greek and Roman periods, and even within pederastic relationships power relations may have been more equal than they appear. But most of the mentioned cases of pairs that may have alternated the active/passive roles between themselves appear to have been youths (for hints on how sexual symmetry might have functioned for male youths, see Konstan on male-female adolescent pairs below), or pederasts and youths who continued their relationships into the youths' adulthood. Hubbard cites a few Greek cases of "pederasty" involving postadolescents, including one in which the beloved appears to have been older than his lover (120). Most of his examples of same-age male sexual liaisons involve relationships between youths or young men. He mentions Socrates' quip, "youth delights youth" (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 240, reproduced in Hubbard, *Homosexuality*, 5, 214–215), but the context is as likely to imply the attraction of friendship as of sex. A large proportion of the iconographic examples of same-age pairs that he analyzes appears to involve youths (Hubbard, *Homosexuality*, 18–20)—leading to the question whether perhaps a variant of the attitude "boys will be boys" excepted boys, but not men, from the general rule about active/passive sexual pairings (see also Foucault, *A History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, 194). Hubbard also does not claim that these cases were typical, only that they demonstrate some fluidity in age boundaries. And yet Hubbard's title suggests that he is invested in finding traces of egalitarian same-sex relations in ancient materials. Foucault is slightly more optimistic about the acceptability of same-age adult male relations (A *History of Sexuality*, 2: 193–194). Still, if our concern is the governing ideology of the period, egalitarianism in sexual relations seems still to have been the norm.


27 See the excerpts of Plato's *Laws* reproduced in Hubbard, *Homosexuality*, 251–259. See also Daniel Boyarin, "What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Platonic Love?"


29 Houser, “Eros and Aphrodite,” 344–347. Hubbard believes that frequent depiction of man-boy frontal, heterosexual intercourse on vases also indicates the man’s recognition of the boy as his iniquitous equal and voluntary partner (10–11). However, if vases were commissioned by or for adult lovers, we cannot trust them entirely; they would have had an interest in depicting beloveds as loyal participants in much the same way that publishers courted sexually dominant men portraying willingly submissive partners in contemporary soft porn and erotica.

30 David Cohen notes an Athenian consensus that a man could commit ἱβρία against another, but the person against whom he committed it was not morally culpable unless he or she consented. So the morals of the youth were not necessary in question. However, if acquiescence to an ἴδρυς act was voluntary, then the object of the act was guilty of ἱβρία as well—against himself or herself. See David Cohen, “Consent and Sexual Relations in Classical Athens,” in Consent and Coercion in Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993), 5–16. It is not clear in Cohen’s treatment whether the standards of shame and acquiescence were objective or subjective. If the latter, the beloved would be required to depicter the lover’s possibly complex intentions, as acquiescing to same-hybrist sex with a superior was not morally repugnant.

31 Plato advises men to have sex in moderation and only in appropriately procreative relationships, gaining physical and moral strength from a “victory over pleasure.” See Laws 566D–D, 535E–536A, in Hubbard, Homosexuality, 311–349. Foucault points out that for the Greeks a man’s inability to control his desires, whether for boys or for women, was disqualifying (History of Sexuality, 2: 187).


34 See, for example, Hubbard, Homosexuality, 15.

35 For instance, in his Symposium Xenophon notes that a boy who is “bought” for his physical beauty will rightly disdain his buyer as a mere custome, not esteem him as a companion who honors his spirit. See Symposium 8.17–23, reproduced in Hubbard, Homosexuality, 216–217.


37 In addition, certain depictions of female pairs of similar ages in erotically suggestive poses are sometimes cited as evidence of sexual relationships between women of equal status. But unfortunately the activities the images depict are unclear (for example, hygiene or masturbation?). And it is also unclear (just as it is unclear in similar depictions of male-male sex on plates and cups) whether the images depict typical, actual relationships or were simply meant to inspire erotic fantasies at drinking parties. Here again, we cannot be sure how the images or the activities they represent would have been received. For examples, see the unpaginated illustrations in Hubbard, Homosexuality; and Broonen, Love between Women.

38 On the use of ἱβρία for women, see Christopher Faraone, Ancient Greek Love Magic (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 25–26, 78. Gendered power reversal makes some sense on the part of prostitutes and courtesans, who were seeking to exert power over customers.

39 Broonen, Love between Women, 76; implied in Faraone, Ancient Greek Love Magic, 48.

40 Broonen, Love between Women, 103–105. See also Christopher Faraone, “Agents and Victims: Constructions of Gender and Desire in Ancient Greek Love Magic,” in The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Julia Stinhula (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 400–428. Faraone suggests that the randomness of these spells (and spells by men to attract men) does not necessarily indicate that same-sex sexual relationships were rare. In a highly sex-segregated society men and women seeking romantic connections with others of the same sex would have more natural social access to them than to opposite-sex love interests, and therefore less need of “drawing” spells to create opportunities for meeting (Faraone, Ancient Greek Love Magic, 148).

41 On the problem of predominantly male authorship, see Hubbard, Homosexuality, 16; and Broonen, Love between Women, 16. Hubbard notes that Plutarch reports female pederasty in Sparta and that some of Sappho’s poetry may also suggest pairings of adult women with adolescent girls (Homosexuality, 16–17); Broonen concurs (Love between Women, 30) and notes that Plutarch and Ovid both reported Sappho’s love for girls (Love between Women, 35–36). Neither author finds conclusive evidence for female-female pederasty, however. Broonen cites the later warnings of the Christian Egyptian abbot Shenute of Atripe (fourth-fifth century CE) to female monastics against touching or saying the name of girls, etc., although Broonen implies that furtive fussiness, rather than long-term connections resembling ancient pederasty, were Shenute’s concern. See Broonen, Love between Women, 348–349.

42 It is possible that the women themselves envisioned it this way as well, but we have no way of knowing this.

43 Although Broonen cites one example of the term τριβάς (pl. τριβάδες) applied to a pair of women lovers in Seneca’s Controversies (Controversies, 1.23, in Hubbard, Homosexuality, 188–189) and a contested reference in Asclepiades (Broonen, Love between Women, 42–44), Halperin argues that the overwhelming textual silence on the partners of τριβάδες suggests that the name was rarely or never applied to them and that they were thought of as appropriately passive (“The First Homosexuality?” 355–357), just as male pederasts were thought of as appropriately active.

44 Broonen, Love between Women, passim. Although David M. Halperin severely undercuts Broonen’s claims about the uniqueness of a number of her arguments, especially her application of the contemporary term “female homoeroticism” to some Greco-Roman and Roman female relationships, he upholds her central thesis that the active-passive polarity is essential to analysis of ancient writings on sexuality (Halperin, “The First Homosexuality?”).

45 Broonen, Love between Women, chap. 5. Hubbard notes that the literature of early imperial Rome is the first real Roman recognition of female-female relationships, and it is almost unfailingly hostile toward them (Homosexuality, 185).

46 On the masculinization of the intellect of the tribus, see Broonen, Love between Women, chap. 2.

47 Martial 7.67 in Hubbard, Homosexuality, 455–456. Martial sarcastically rejoins, “May the gods give you back your brain, Philaelus/If you think it’s macho to lick cunt.” In another couplet he sneers, “You rightly call the woman you fuck your ‘girlfriend,’” implying that Philaelus’s partner does indeed take the feminine submissive role (Martial 7.70 in Hubbard, Homosexuality, 450).
Marital 1:0 in Hubbard, Homosexuality, 425.

40 Brockett, Love between Women, 162–168. There was also an important difference: castrating male Roman slaves was widely seen as furthering the masters' moral depravity, whereas castrating women was seen as a means to preserve their moral reputation (and probably family reputation).

45 Foucault makes a version of this argument in History of Sexuality, 2: 188–193. Questions about homosexuality and bisexuality make little sense in the Greco-Roman context precisely because free women, slaves of either gender, and boys fell into the same class: passive social inferiors of free men.


54 Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, 57.

56 Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, 3–8 and passim.

58 It is difficult to know, however, what this means when the pair is heterosexual. It may imply mutual pleasure, but it probably also implies penetration, which may be consistent under a stoic version of marital sexuality but does not necessarily imply equal status. See Konstan, "Enacting Eros," 362; idem, Sexual Symmetry, 38, 43.

59 Its more limited role is enabling the hero and heroine to fend off unattractive external asymmetrical loves in favor of their exclusive, still very physical, mutual union, though not necessarily to eschew transitory sexual liaisons as strategic means to that end. See Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, 31–34, 42, 52.

59 Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, 34–35.

60 Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, 231.

61 Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, 230.

62 Konstan, Sexual Symmetry, chap. 5.

63 One might compare the early centuries of the Common Era to the postwar period in the United States, which for nuclear families was characterized by romantic marriage, increasing suburban independence from extended family, and reassertion of internal hierarchy. Here, too, "symmetrical" romance between persons of equal social status failed to produce an ideal of sexual social equality and in fact could exist only to the degree that the partners managed to evade or ignore their responsibilities to a still-asymmetrical social reality.

64 See chapter 6 of this volume for more on this tendency.

65 Hubbard, Homosexuality, 11–12.

66 Hubbard, Homosexuality, 13.

67 As Hubbard admits, Aristotle notes this; see Hubbard, Homosexuality, 12.

68 Brockett argues that, particularly with respect to relationships between same-sex pairs, Paul’s axiomy is impurity: transgressions of “natural” boundaries that endanger: all individuals involved but also the community by giving free rein to desire; as we have seen in Paul’s kindred Musonius, the goal is to govern or overcome desire. Brockett, Love between Women, 231–238.

69 The contrast with Musonius is not absolute; for instance, Paul realizes that Christians married to non-Christian Jews or Gentiles have proper and genuine concerns for their spouses’ welfare (e.g., 1 Cor 7:1–16).

70 The husband has authority over the wife not just in the pseudo-Pauline letters—which unarguably express the sentiments of some early communities, if not of Paul himself—but even in 1 Corinthians (11:3–10): “Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Cor 11:3, New Revised

Standard Version [NRSV]). The inequity of power extends to the choice to marry. On one hand, Paul advises virgins of both genders to remain unmarried if they can spare themselves the distractions of marriage (1 Cor 7:25–28), but on the other he tells men to marry if they cannot control themselves (1 Cor 7:36); presumably betrothed women are already under a man’s authority and will marry, or not, as men’s will.

L. William Countryman, among others, demonstrates how Paul’s use of marriage metaphors to describe the relationship between God and the Church reveals Paul’s egalitarian vision of human marriage. In a second letter to the same community, Paul paces God in the role of a rightfully jealous husband and the Church in the role of the possibly deviant betrothed bride, tempted to run her own chance for a good marriage by allowing herself to be distracted by lesser suitors and offending her future husband (2 Cor 11:1–4; L. William Countryman, Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983], 194). The bride is subordinate to the bridge, even owes him her very existence, and in this sense is his property. In addition, Countryman argues, Paul presents all of the sexual violations in 1 Corinthians including incest (a son living with his father’s wife, 1 Cor 5:1) as violations of a male authority’s sexual property: a father’s, a master’s, a husband’s, and ultimately—God’s (Countryman, Dirt, Greed, and Sex, 196–214). In the inexact example Countryman cites, Paul castigates a subordinate for “taking” a woman who belongs or has belonged to his father (197–198). Brockett suggests that first-century men may have thought themselves denied future “possessions” when women took female lovers; see Love between Women, 260. She notes that incest violates Levitical purity codes as well, defiling and endangering the whole community (292–293). The only exception is women’s ownership of their husband’s sexual bodies. However, in the Pauline view it is so difficult for a man to violate his female “owner” without also violating another man (a husband, father, or master) that even this case fits the male ownership rubric.

71 Countryman, Dirt, Greed, and Sex, 111–112; Brockett, Love between Women, 237. Countryman suggests that Paul may be proposing greed or covetousness, vices of excessive domination, as the disorienting effect that bears fruit in same-sex pleasure and a multitude of other sins. This personal disorder had important communal implications. Brockett and Countryman see Paul’s rejection as inspired by Levitical ideas of impurity, in which people or objects migrate out of their proper categories, threatening the whole community by creating confusing anomalies and upsetting hierarchies (Brockett, Love between Women, 234–237), or by making the community unclean, dishonored, or impure in a ritual sense (Countryman, Dirt, Greed, and Sex, 111–113.). These meanings continued to influence Christian attitudes, but current Christian moral thought reflects them less.

In addition, although parallelism implies that the phrase “their women exchanged nuptial relations for unnatural” refers to homosexual acts, the passage does not actually explain whether women committed these acts with other women or with men (Rom 1:26).


73 This first point yields the strongest Christian argument against homosexuality, but the argument does not prove the evilness of homosexual relations; rather, it relies falsely on this premise. It also implies that the evil consequences of turning one’s back on God are thoroughgoing, so that homosexual relations will be found only in the company of marked wickedness, evil, covetousness, and deceit. Experience to the contrary would weaken Paul’s argument.

74 Note that this passage raises Christological questions we cannot address here: it implies that Christ is really and not just metaphorically inferior to God.

75 It could be argued that the brief advice to widows in 1 Corinthians 7:39–40 completes
the symmetry, but Paul addresses widows in general, not widows who, through be- 
trothal, are already committed to a relationship of mutual care.
www.earlychristianwritings.com/clement.html. Clement notes a second virtue of mar-
mriage: wives are more patient caretakers of ill husbands: "a wife's care and the astuteness of her constancy appear to exceed the endurance of all other relations and friends, as much as to exceed them in sympathy; and most of all, she takes kindly to patient watch-
ing." Clement also argued that women should strive (and succeed) in equanimity and virtue even if mistreated (Stromata 4.3.0).

Martha Nussbaum argues that first-century Roman Stoic Musonius Rufus takes 
a similar tack: men and women are spiritual equals and even philosophically equals and 
should receive the same educations and advantages. But even this equality serves men's 
dominance over women (well-educated women serve their husbands and families 
more humbly and eagerly, doing "without shrinking, things that many think suited to 
slaves"). Men should try to earn their superiority over women by exceeding them in 
virtue, avoiding sexual misconduct at least in part to this end. See Martha C. Nuss-
baum, "The Incomplete Feminism of Musonius Rufus, Platonist, Stoic, and Roman," in 
The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome, ed. 
Martha C. Nussbaum and Julia Sibrava (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 
283–326. The texts analyzed are included in an appendix.

77 Brooien, Love between Women, 328; Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogus, book 1, chap. 4; 
Stromata 4.8. In addition, David Hunter argues that Clement distinguishes three kinds 
of desire: hormê, a morally neutral attraction that can become either epilepsy, which 
tends toward excess, disorder, and irrationality or areôs, which is rational and natural. 
David G. Hunter, "The Language of Desire: Clement of Alexandria's Transformation of 

78 Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator, trans. Simon P. Wood, C.P. (New York: 

79 Clement, Christ the Educator, 2.10 97 (p. 174), 92–93 (pp. 179–171).
80 Clement, Christ the Educator, 2.10 90 (p. 160).
81 Clement, Christ the Educator, 2.10 94 (pp. 172–171).
82 Clement, Christ the Educator, 2.10 102 (p. 178).
83 Clement, Christ the Educator, 2.10 100 (p. 176), emphasis added.
84 Clement, Christ the Educator, 2.10 109 (p. 84).

85 Brooien, Love between Women, 323–328. Flouting this purpose of sex in same-sex 
unions would seem to have been an equal-opportunity sin: women refused seed, 
whether they took active or passive roles sexually, and men either intentionally 
scattered it where it could not grow, or received it wrongly. Both men and women 
removed themselves from God's service as procreators, perverting sex's good purpose. 
Thus Clement's thought has egalitarian potential, but Brooien argues that active/ 
passive gender polarities made all women who had sex with women (who implicitly 
refused their subordinate role by refusing to have sex with men), and passive men (who 
abdicated their proper dominant role) more frequent targets of attack than active men 
in same-sex relationships, who had at least not abandoned their active roles (333–335). 
Women were to serve and obey their husbands, to preserve themselves from adultery 
(involving the nurturing of wrong seed) by remaining safely at home, and to endure 
abuse without rebellion (327); see Clement, Stromata 2.23 and 4.8, on wife's submission 
and preservation of virtue.

This leaves us with an important question: is the content of the "shared" virtues 
(self-control, courage, patience, and the like) really exactly the same when practiced 
by a dominant husband and a subervient wife? When masculine and feminine ideals are 
radically different, what does it mean to speak of equality in spirit and virtue?

86 Estella V. Welldon captures this division nicely in her classic work, Mother, Madonna,

Where: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood (London: Free Association Books, 
1988).

87 On the question of women's pleasure, see also Mary D. Pellauer, "The Moral Signif-
cance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women's Sexuality," 
Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 9, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Fall 1993): 161–182; and Patricia 
Beattie Jung, "Sexual Pleasure: A Roman Catholic Perspective on Women's Delight," 
Theology and Sexuality 12 (March 2000): 26–47.

88 Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, trans. and with an intro. by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New 
York: Penguin, 1961). Martha Nussbaum writes that for Augustine, "every deed one 
has ever committed is a deed for which one is going to be judged by God"; hence the 
importance of memory and introspection. See Martha C. Nussbaum, "Augustine and 
Dante on the Ascend of Love," in The Augustinian Tradition, ed. Gretchen B. Mathews, 
Philosophical Traditions Series, ed. Pamela Oksenberg Rosny (Berkeley: University of 
California Press, 1999), 69.

Robert Bernasconi argues that Augustine's take on the divided will is a product of 
his context: the decision to convert, once made, became a decision about when 
convert, because at the moment of conversion one was suddenly held to Christian 
moreals that one dreaded adopting. Only grace could bring the two impulses into 
harmony. See At War with Oneself: Augustine's Phenomenology of the Will 
in the Confessions, in Eros and Eros: Contributions to a Hermeneutical Phenomenology: Liber 
Amicorum for Adrian Penderack, ed. Paul van Tongeren, Paul Sars, Chris Bremmer, and 

It can be argued that the act-centeredness of the Confessions is pedagogical only: 
Augustine analyses acts to get at a perduring state of sinful blindness. However, his writings 
on sexual sin are preoccupied with individual acts: whether in this moment procreation 
or lust is driving intention. In addition, the consequence of his pedagogy—which 
concerns us here—is a tendency to dissect individual acts.

89 See Nussbaum, "Augustine and Dante," 72–73.
90 Augustine of Hippo, "The Good of Marriage," chap. 9, in St. Augustine on Marriage and 
Sexuality, ed. Elizabeth Clark, Selections from the Fathers of the Church, 1 (Washington, 
DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 11.

91 Augustine of Hippo, Confessions ii.15 (trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin); see also, for example, ii.6, 
iii.8; iv.7, 13, 13; v.11; vi.9.

Although Augustine's sexual misadventures preoccupy him heavily, the theft of pears, 
not sex, is the paradigmatic example of sin in chapter ii of the Confessions—perhaps 
partly because it illustrates so nicely how inchoate and strange the goods we pursue are 
(here, camaraderie in rebelliousness)

See also Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English 
Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Library of Christian Classics, 1941 [New 
York: Benziger Brothers, 1941]), I–II 2a:3 (hereafter ST). "Now the inordinateess 
of the other powers of the soul consists chiefly in their turning inordinately to mutable 
good; which inordinateess may be called by the general name of concupiscence. Hence 
original sin is concupiscence, materially, but privation of original justice, formally. . . . 
Since, in man, the concupiscible power is naturally governed by reason, the act of 
concupiscence is so far natural to man, as it is in accord with the order of reason; while, in 
so far as it trespasses beyond the bounds of reason, it is, for a man, contrary to reason."

92 Augustine of Hippo, "Good of Marriage," chapter 6–9, in St. Augustine on Marriage and 
Sexuality, 50–52.

See Augustine of Hippo, Confessions x.31 (trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin) on the need to keep 
neither too slack nor too firm a rein on the appetites.

The logical consequence is that women would sin more in enjoying or desiring sex, 
because their pleasure is not essential to the goodness of the act.
Augustine of Hippo, "Against Julian," book 6, chap. 14, in St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality, edited by Elizabeth Clark, Selections from the Fathers of the Church, 1 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 100. On good and bad desires, see "The Good of Marriage," chapter 1, in St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality, 43. See also chap. 3, p 45: Human beings in theory can manage "a kind of genuine and friendly union of the one ruling and the other obeying" without making use of concupiscence of the flesh, because sex is not integral to the good of marriage if the partners are continent.


Augustine, Confessions i.x (trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin).

Augustine, Confessions i.x (trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin).


On this tendency generally in Catholic theology and practice, see Denise Starkey, "The Shame That Lingers: A Survivor-Informed Critique of Sin-Talk" (Ph.D diss., Loyola University [Chicago], 2007), chap. 3.

Gilbert Meillassier argues that Augustine's parallels between food and sex miss the good of human communion in both; the pleasures of food and sex are as much relational as they are sensual or life-preserving. See "Sweet Necessities: Food, Sex, and Saint Augustine," Journal of Religious Ethics 29, no. 1 (2001): 7–18.

See Thomas Aquinas, ST, suppl. q. 49, a.1.
Now there is a less reason incidental to the union of man and woman, both because the reason is carried away entirely on account of the vehemence of the pleasure, so that it is unable to understand anything at the same time, as the philosopher says (Ehics, vii, 11); and again because of the tribulation of the flesh which such persons have to suffer from solicitudes for temporal things (1 Cor. 7:28).

Consequently the choice of this union cannot be made ordinate except by certain compensations whereby that same union is righted, and these are the goods which excuse marriage and make it right.

Thomas Aquinas, ST-II-II q. 123–179.


Thomas Aquinas, ST-II-II q. 141.4.

See Thomas Aquinas, ST-II-II q. 141.6: "Now all the pleasurable objects that are at man's disposal, are directed to some necessity of this life as to their end. Wherefore temperance takes the need of this life, as the rule of the pleasurable objects of which it makes use, and uses them only for as much as the need of this life requires"; this includes not just absolute necessities but also "something without which x thing cannot be becomingly." See also Cates, "Virtue of Temperance," 325–327.

Deficiency can exist only inmarriage: refusal to pay the marital debt (Thomas is less enthusiastic about marital continence than Augustine), or total avoidance of procreation.

Thomas points out that social and cultural customs often permit "a kiss, caress, or touch" to be carried out "without lustful pleasure" and that these are morally blameless but also apparently morally irrelevant. His only concern is that these actions may be taken for the purpose of lustful pleasure. See Thomas Aquinas, ST-II-II q. 151.4, 154.4.

Andre Guindon, Moral Development, Ethics, and Faith (Ottawa: Novalis, 1992), 150.

Thomas Aquinas, ST-II-II q. 141.6.


Augustine of Hippo, Confessions x.6 (trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin). Martha Nussbaum argues that Augustine in the end accepts desire and longing as part of the fabric of this earthly life and admits that the Platonic goal of perfect freedom from desire and emotion can be fulfilled only in the next (Nussbaum, "Augustine and Dante").

See Thomas Aquinas, ST-II-II 154. Thomas often sees the injustice as falling at least in part on a woman's male relatives (he usually assumes the aggressor is male). Incest in this period implied forbidden relations generally, not (as today) primarily violation of a minor child by a parent. He also championed the rights of children to decide for themselves whether to make religious or marital vows, and whom to marry. The options for all, but especially for girls, were likely to be limited in fact, but the theoretical freedom of self-disposal was important. See Cristina L. H. Traina, "A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood," in The Child in Christian Thought, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 103–137.


Notes to Chapter 4

3 Gardella, Innocent Ecstasy.
4 Gardella, Innocent Ecstasy, 3. 160. As we will see in chapter 8, Augustine was in fact attempting to rid himself of preoccupations that stood in the way of his love for God; he believed that only God, not he alone, could cleanse his sin.
5 Gardella, Innocent Ecstasy, 10–11: the point about sex as original sin's means of transmission being Augustinian inheritance is mine, not Gardella's, although Gardella notes that Sylvester Graham picked up the theme in the nineteenth century (47).
7 See also Barbara Etliert Andolsen, review of Innocent Ecstasy by Peter Gardella, Sex Roles 15, nos. 1–2 (July 1986): 129–121.
9 As David Mazuko McCarthy argues, for instance, both conservative and liberal Catholic authors claim today that marriage maximizes "passion, emotional investment, personal happiness, novelty, technique, and frequency," all markers of a redeemed sexuality. David Mazuko McCarthy, "Feudality: Sex and Social Reproduction," in Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 91–92. Andolsen reminds us, however, that this official ethic of sex positivism remained largely theoretical; it was not transmitted widely to ordinary Christians (review of Innocent Ecstasy).