

Pangs of Love and Longing

Pangs of Love and Longing:
Configurations of Desire
in Premodern Literature

Edited by

Anders Cullhed, Carin Franzén,
Anders Hallengren and Mats Malm

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

ANDERS CULLHED, CARIN FRANZÉN,
ANDERS HALLENGREN AND MATS MALM

A challenge for every critical analysis of the historical manifestations of human desire is the complex relation between psychic structures, social norms, and aesthetic representations. The anthology *Pangs of Love and Longing: Configurations of Desire in Premodern Literature* tries to provide a deeper understanding of this relation by an assessment of the linguistic and artistic configurations of desire in European literature, covering a broad time span up to the seventeenth century. Although we had to draw the *non plus ultra* line at about 1650, it is our hope that these inquiries into bygone attitudes towards sexuality, pleasures and illumination (mystical or metaphysical), as represented in a variety of cultural forms, might also give fresh perspectives on our present reality.

In his classical work on Marguerite de Navarre, Lucien Febvre states that “a man from the sixteenth century must be understood not in relation to us, but to his contemporaries”. Inspired by such an assumption the authors of this volume attempt to trace or approach an *alterity* that tends to slip away from our modern horizon. Nevertheless, it is evident that knowledge about the history of desire and love might enrich our understanding of the present. Moreover, our interest in digging up the past is necessarily coloured by our own engagements, theoretical inclinations and fantasies. Consequently, another main conviction shared by the contributors to this volume would be that the *modus operandi* of history is constituted by continuities *and* discontinuities.

On closer inspection, the theoretical framework of this volume provides a combination of aesthetic, historical, and genealogical approaches, to the effect that premodern configurations of love and desire are explored from diachronic as well as synchronic perspectives. Following this line of enquiry, the authors cover a rich gamut of symbolic, sensual, aesthetic and meta-aesthetic manifestations—or explorations—of desire, taking their common basis in the learned or popular culture of antiquity and the medieval and early modern periods into account. Typically, the writers and

artists under scrutiny in this volume are studied against the backdrop of certain conflicting social norms and values characteristic of European civilization during these centuries, concerning reason and faith, tradition and innovation, *decorum* and individual expression, containment and subversion.

The humanities in recent years have seen an increasing attention towards discourses of desire, eroticism, and the body, for example, in classical Greek, medieval French or Elizabethan culture. In the wake of New Historicism, past representations of the body and of corporeal expressions have to a wide extent been assessed in terms of constructions, transgressions, self-fashioning, and rhetorical manipulations. This methodology has been especially productive within gender studies, queer studies, and cultural studies—disciplines that are all relevant to several of the authors in this volume.

Desire tends to conceptually breach the boundaries between representation, corporeality, love, eroticism, and the divine. Thus, the authors' exploration of how desire was articulated in a variety of premodern texts and conceptions cuts through the whole encyclopaedia of disciplines such as theology, rhetoric, arts, music, medicine, and philosophy. Configurations of desire can be detected in theories of the human body, of power, and of politics, as well as in speculations on grammar (Alain de Lille's allegorical work in verse and prose *The Complaint of Nature* from the late twelfth century is a famous example of the latter).

Finally the authors of this anthology want to abrogate the view of desire, still underlying widespread popular conceptions of sexuality, as a universal or ahistorical phenomenon: desire is not a timeless or unchanging category but takes its shape from constraints imposed by political, religious, aesthetic, and economic discourses. However, while one of our main hypotheses is that all versions of desire depend heavily on their historical context, they should not be reduced to the mere outcome of institutional repression. In order to steer away from such simple paradigms of cause and effect, we propose to see these configurations of desire as intricately intertwined with various epistemological paradigms and power relations. Accordingly, a number of the following articles bracket the rather narrow, modern-day conception of desire as sexuality in favour of a manifold range of notions connected to human lack and longing for love or understanding, many of them with different or even opposite significations and functions.

Premodern literary artefacts frequently articulate an ambiguous preoccupation with issues of passion and eroticism that we today tend to see in a more unequivocal way. As in literature, this multiplicity of perspectives is also evident on the stage, in liturgy or in the visual arts. That is why a

broadly intermedial outlook has been of vital importance to our aims. Images were generally considered to have a more direct impact on the human sense than texts, and there was always a possibility—or risk—of unintended interpretations on the part of the audience. The texts, performances or works of art treated in this volume all display this ambivalence to a greater or lesser extent, most explicitly in their fundamental division of desire into two apparently opposite categories, one ennobling and one destructive or immoral.

This Janus-faced configuration is observable, we argue, throughout the wide time span covered on the following pages. It ultimately derives from Plato's *Symposium*, which distinguished between two goddesses of love (one heavenly, one common or vulgar) and was subsequently rephrased in Stoicism, Neoplatonism and, in another tenor, in Augustine's promotion of divine love paired with his rejection of carnal desire, a mighty paradigm for Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. According to Augustine, bodily desires corrupt the rational human soul and prevent its liberation from the corporeal prison. During the High Middle Ages, on the other hand, the troubadours or *Minnesänger* would treat the philosophers' vulgar love in terms of (sometimes ill-fated) unrestrained passion, or *fol amour*, while they transformed heavenly love into the polyvalent *fin'amors*, or *bonus amor*. Finally, the Renaissance treatises of love would update the Neoplatonic concepts *amor divinus* versus *amor bestialis* for their own purposes.

Notwithstanding, the premodern configurations of desire explored in this book, while in many respects continuing this conspicuous mind-body dualism, simultaneously challenge and modify it, as testified by hagiography, the actual manipulations of *fin'amors* in romances of chivalry and troubadour lyrics, the suggestive representations of the animated body in Renaissance poetry, and the ambiguity of aesthetic or moral Baroque figurative language.

To be sure, the general pattern we want to trace from ancient Greece to Golden Age Spain might seem intricate and labyrinthine but, hopefully, our readers will perceive a set of recurrent nodes and tropes along the way. Desire frequently introduces a breach in time, dividing it into a beforehand and an afterwards: "the desire for imaginary blessings often involves the loss of present blessings" (the old Greek story teller Aesop in his fable "The Kites and the Swans", from the early sixth century BC). It is difficult to handle, and it tends to absorb its subject—or victim—in unforeseeable ways: "It is hard to fight against desire: whatever it wants it will buy at the cost of the soul" (the old Greek philosopher Heraclitus, some hundred years later). Moreover, as desire frequently is generated out of a lack (or

absence), it tends to cooperate with imagination, whereupon it frequently turns addictive and habit-forming, progressive even when hampered or shackled, as observed by Shakespeare in his comedy (or “problem play”) *All’s Well That Ends Well*, 5.3: “All impediments in fancy’s course / Are motives of more fancy”. The Spanish seventeenth-century moralist Baltasar Gracián conceptualized this insight along his own Baroque (metaphorical and paradoxical) lines: “The energy of desire promises more than the inertia of possession. The passion of desire increases with every increase of opposition” (*The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, 1647).

Last but not least, to quite a few of the writers, philosophers, and artists analysed in this volume, desire constitutes a fundamental drive in life, and some of their works stand out as virtual “desire machines”, to borrow a label from the French twentieth-century philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Consequently, where there is no desire, the realm of death appears as an imminent reality. For all his lucid warnings against unbridled desire’s perilous ways with men, Gracián knew very well that they are inevitable, because they provide a rather dreary or desolate existence with meaning or at least an illusion of content: “If there is nothing left to desire, there is everything to fear, an unhappy state of happiness. When desire dies, fear is born.” If Gracián’s intuition is true, if we virtually live by desire, this anthology hopefully presents a series of approaches to the vulnerable and multifarious human condition as it was perceived by a selection of writers and artists from long ago.

*

Even if the ancient Greeks would have experienced desire—*eros*—in much the same way as we do today, their conceptualizations of lack, love and longing were radically different from our present ways of thinking. In her chapter, Eva-Carin Gerö maps the ancient Greek notions belonging to the semantic field of desire. She looks into concepts—or sometimes rather the lack of concepts—for hetero-, homo-, or bisexuality, and even for sexuality and love itself, focusing our attention upon the ancient Greek interest in the juvenile body and persona, linguistically manifested in words such as *meirakion* or *meirax*. Gerö attempts to give a typology of the ancient Greek ideas relevant to love and desire, including the somewhat idiosyncratic terms *kinaidos* (unmanly debauchee) and *tribas* (unwomanly lesbian). In addition, Gerö presents a snapshot of later Western interpretations and representations of Greek desire: at times, “Greek love” has had the meaning of Platonic love devoid of sex, while in other periods the same term denoted male homosexual eroticism without restrictions.

This interest in cultural reception and transformation is shared by Anders Hallengren, who demonstrates the essential role played by pagan myth in the medieval and early Renaissance understanding of love. The fact that Christian ideas of love and desire had overshadowed the philosophical conceptions of *eros* and *epithumía* by no means dethroned the ancient god with the bow, whose poisonous arrows never lost their sting. In late Roman and medieval love poetry, the conception of love as a toxic syndrome survived and lived on, in love potions, philtres, which helplessly bind the lovers together, as in the great works of the high and late Middle Ages—the legends of *Tristan and Iseult* or the *Roman de la Rose*. The Spanish Baroque poet Francisco de Quevedo, in his *Canta sola a Lisi*, covets a beloved whose force of attraction is described as *venenosa*, identifying the *amada* with the *sierpe*, the Serpent proper, whose power is biblical and equivalent to Satan. In all similar cases, the bewitchment, the spell, the obsession, the folly or the inebriant served the purpose of exculpation and perfect innocence, guiltlessness. So too did the world of dreams, more indulgent than wakefulness, and accordingly dream visions, fantasy and dreamlike moods and atmospheres set their mark on tribulations and temptations as well as on the great poetry of love in premodern Christian Europe.

One of the key figures in this long and winding conceptualization of desire is Saint Augustine. In a more philosophical perspective Ola Sigurdson's chapter traces the Slovene thinker Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic concept of desire and subjectivity to Augustine, and especially Augustine's rendering of desire in his *Confessions*. The essay takes its cue from the curious silence of the Slovenian psychoanalyst and philosopher with regard to Augustine, given the position of *Confessions* in Western history of ideas and the influence of medieval thought on one of Žižek's masters, Jacques Lacan. Moreover, the common interest in desire as a disruptive force, shared by Augustine and Žižek, makes this silence remarkable, something more than sheer omission. Proceeding through an interpretation of Augustine and Žižek on desire, Sigurdson shows that their respective understandings have more in common than is allowed by Žižek's Hegelian vein or his scarce, negative comments on the ancient and medieval traditions of the production of desire. Their differences are to be found in the account of subjectivity that they give as a ground for their understanding of desire: Augustine's liturgical self, rooted in a Trinitarian God, versus Žižek's Cartesian or Schellingian disjunctive self, rooted in an absolutely free but paradoxical choice. Despite these differences, however, their descriptions of subjectivity should not be understood as mutual opposites. After a critical discussion of their respective understanding of sub-

jectivity, Sigurdson returns to the initial question, with a suggestion that Žižek's curious silence is explained by the fact that Augustine's account of desire would destabilize the neat distinction between premodern and modern which Žižek, in the tradition of Hegel, wishes to uphold.

Premodern desire is variegated, and in Dante's *Comedy* it appears under three main aspects, expressed in a rich gamut of words. It could be articulated as an erotic urge, still—even after death—besetting the unhappy lovers punished in Hell's second circle. Their great mistake was to have made "reason subject to desire". Nevertheless, the most genuinely Dantesque version of desire is perhaps the longing for knowledge which is one of the main forces behind the *Comedy* itself. Dante is eager to learn, and that is why—or at least partly why—he makes his journey through the beyond. He is an explorer of a realm never before charted or mapped by any living human being. Thirdly, Dante includes several levels of communication in his work. Quite a few of the dead souls, lost in Hell, long for news from earthly life, and others burst with a need to express their frustration, aggressions or hatred in the presence of a living being. This desire for contact or even interaction holds sway throughout Paradise, where the animated lights dance, twinkle and sing in their yearning to communicate their state of being, their identities and their messages to the overwhelmed pilgrim. In his article on Dante, Anders Cullhed shows how all these manifestations of desire in the *Comedy* cooperate to establish a view of man as essentially an offspring of the Neoplatonic Eros, reformulated for Christian purposes by Augustine. The usual scholastic distinctions (between reason and faith, or between knowledge and revelation) are still valid but prove insufficient to understand the work's uninterrupted emphasis on concepts such as *disio*, *disire* or *ardore*.

Nowadays, the *Secretum* is one of the most widely read texts by Petrarch. Still, the interpretations of this autobiographical work are surprisingly uniform. The fictive dialogue between Augustine and Francis of Assisi, in the presence of the silent figure of Truth, is usually read as a *psychomachia*, an internalized battle between the author's own contrasting viewpoints. In "Thorn in the Flesh: Pain and Poetry in Petrarch's *Secretum*," Unn Falkeid argues that the discussions of lust, pain and salvation may be related to a broader contemporary context: Francis' exposure of his weakness is an imitation of Christ in which customary boundaries between vices and virtues disappear, and where thinking is reconnected to bodily experiences. The thorn in the flesh, warned of by Augustine in the middle of the text, is not only a reminder of life, of the existence of the individual body within the limits of time and space. The pain is also a transcending experience, which connects the individual to the universal and the human

to the divine. In this way *Secretum* may be read as a dialogue between conflicting theologies of the fourteenth century—between an Augustinian dualism and a Franciscan aesthetics. Moreover, Falkeid maintains that the dialogue touches on profound questions concerning the epistemology of pain, that would be part of a European discourse in the centuries to come.

One of the more salient features of the medieval discourse on the relation between desire and virtue is the transformation of the object of desire into configurations of idealization and debasement, as is made clear in Petrarch's *Secretum*: "I think that love can be called either the most loathsome passion or the noblest deed, depending on what is loved", making clear that the former kind of love is tied to an immoral (*infamis*) woman while the latter is dedicated to the rare (*rarus*) model of a virtuous woman (*specimen virtutis*). Furthermore, when female writers change the object of desire into a subject, one can observe that this divided configuration is maintained but critically assessed. By looking closer at the configuration of courtly love in works by Christine de Pizan and Marguerite de Navarre, Carin Franzén argues in her study on the division of love and feminine desire, that medieval and early modern women writers redefine the legacy of courtly love in ways that serve their own purposes in the interplay of power relations. Franzén makes use of Foucault's description of a historical event (such as women's emergence on the literary scene) as a "reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it", showing that this reversal becomes a specific strategy in works by premodern female writers.

Johanna Vernqvist takes the gender perspective one step further by focusing on the Neoplatonic philosophy of love. In his *Commento* (1486) the Florentine philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola strongly disagrees with his master—the most influential of all Renaissance Neoplatonic thinkers, Marsilio Ficino—on the notion that ideal love could admit erotic desire between men. A few years later the Portuguese poet and philosopher Leone Ebreo wrote his *Dialoghi d'amore* (c. 1510), where this kind of love—the dominating Renaissance version of Eros—seemed to have turned exclusively heterosexual. Consequently, woman has a more central and active role to play in Ebreo's seminal work. Moreover, Vernqvist focuses on the performances of love in Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (published posthumously in 1558). She shows how Marguerite appropriates the Neoplatonic philosophy through a powerful and repeated construction of heterosexuality. This is exemplified by a closer look at novella 47, where the *devisant* Dagoucin tells the story of a *parfaicte amytié* between two men. This perfect relationship is challenged when one of them marries

a woman. The men's conflicting desires demonstrate how the categories of love, gender and sexuality are put under stress in these short stories.

Where early modern England is concerned, Marcus Nordlund examines in his chapter, "Divisive Desires in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*," a re-working of Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, written by William Shakespeare in collaboration with the up-and-coming dramatist John Fletcher. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (c. 1613) was possibly the last play that Shakespeare ever wrote. It has previously been interpreted in terms of a conflict between love and reason; between sexual and non-sexual love; between love and friendship; or between friendship and marriage. Nordlund explores the play's insistent concern with love as something *divisive* and *divisible*. Shakespeare and Fletcher, he argues, remind their audience repeatedly of love's tendency not only to join people together, but also to divide them from each other and from themselves. The dramatists also explore the tendency of human beings to conceptualize or experience love in quasi-mathematical terms as something that can be divided up, counted, or measured. What unites these two strands of dramatic inquiry, the article argues, is a fearful suspicion that love might not be the synergetic, renewable life force we would like it to be, but more like a desperate zero-sum game based on limited resources. One reason why the play can be so disconcerting and hard to act is that this erosive drive towards disillusionment comes up forcefully against, and seriously undermines, a tragicomic structure that moves inexorably towards social integration and cohesion, much like in the so-called problem plays.

It is well known that beside the flowering literary production of early modern England, the period saw a widespread severe mistrust and critique of poetry. However, there are more facets to this sceptical current than the ones usually pointed out. In "Linguistic Desire and the Moral Iconography of Language in Early Modern England", Mats Malm identifies one aspect of the antipoetic sentiment that is easily overlooked, since it in essence concerns notions of rhetoric and language rather than of poetry. What is common to most discussions on the dangers of poetry is that they focus on content: poetry in itself consumes time that could have been used for better things, but above all it is considered mendacious, setting forth bad examples of persons who let their passions dominate them et cetera. Certainly, these aspects are the most obvious ones, but they should be supplemented with a view of the dangers not of content but of language itself. Such dangers concern the problem of linguistic desire, the urge for hedonistic sensations not of the body proper, but of language. This aspect is much less debated in the material—but the reason may be that it was taken for granted at the time, in ways not obvious to the modern scholar.

Configurations of desire are often tied to corporeal expressions. In many ways, sighing is a signal typical of premodern times. Texts from Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the early modern period abound with interjections such as, in the case of Latin, *vae! heu! proh!* In sixteenth and seventeenth century devotional literature, one finds a particular kind of prayers called sighs (*suspiria*). In the pastoral novel, intense sighing, accompanied by blushing and tears, is an idealized expression of erotic desire. Diverse physiological and medical peculiarities of breathing were treated in books of physiognomy. Sighs were also discussed in several academic disciplines dealing with the emulation and dissemination of feelings: homiletics, rhetoric and poetics—as well as in art forms like painting and the opera. Despite their importance in past discourses, sighs have not received due attention in historical research. In her chapter on “Sighs of Desire: Passionate Breathing in Medieval and Early Modern Literature,” Kristiina Savin investigates sighing from both a theoretical and a performative perspective, pointing out time-specific strategies for mobilizing psychological resources and manipulating bodily expressions. In the broad repertoire of sighs, those of longing and of love—both heavenly and earthly—are explored.

In the mid twelfth century, the so-called Komnenian novels were written in Constantinople. They were composed as careful but independent imitations of the ancient novels written many centuries earlier by Achilles Tatius and Heliodoros. By the early sixteenth century, both ancient and Byzantine novels were printed and distributed from Venice, the city where many Greek manuscripts ended up after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The novels by Heliodoros and Tatius were now read as stylistic models along with Homer and Virgil, but the destiny of the Byzantine novels in Western Europe is less well known. They were printed, spread and translated into a number of languages from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, but their reception and influence have not yet been studied. Ingela Nilsson, in her contribution “In Response to Charming Passions: Erotic Readings of a Byzantine Novel”, analyses a series of early modern translations into French of the Byzantine twelfth-century novel, *Hysmine and Hysminias*. Taking as her point of departure the concepts “discourse of desire” and “erotics of reading”, Nilsson wishes to show how the successive translators of the text (as readers and interpreters) often act on their literary imagination, influenced by cultural and literary values of their own time. The original text’s implicit eroticism—however subtle—thus has an effect on its readers: an effect which may turn out to be crucial, since it results in new discourses of desire, depending on the individual desire (textual and perhaps also sexual) of the translator. A Greek novel of the

twelfth century may in this way be turned into a libertine novel of the eighteenth century, and then later into something rather different. It is a question of how the reader responds to the “charming passions” of the text.

The essay of Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed treats the sexual and spiritual configurations of desire found in the hagiographical works of Hrotsvith (c. 935–1002), canoness at the monastery of Gandersheim. Her work consists of eight saintly legends elaborately framed by various paratexts in which the author comments on her work. The plot typically centres on a beautiful virgin who arouses desire in others, a desire, however, characterized as deranged, carnal, ugly, unlawful and vain. But the virgin remains pious through her even stronger and sweet desire for God, becoming even more appealing. In this way desire becomes the driving force of the narrative that sets the events in motion. Schottenius Cullhed argues that the configurations of desire—often represented as a burning sensation that sets its subject on fire—constitute a fundamental part of the poetics, ethics and narrative construction of Hrotsvith’s legends. It has previously been suggested that the “passionate language” of the legends expresses the “inner need” of the poet, but Schottenius Cullhed rejects this hypothesis. Hrotsvith’s language in fact seems vital to her literary strategy of authorizing and transferring the legends of her cycle into a “high style” hagiography, by which she addresses and empowers the Ottonian aristocracy of the late tenth century.

In his chapter on “The Rhetoric of Desire,” Ulf Malm undertakes a study of the premodern erotic *genus demonstrativum*, with a focus on what traditional rhetoric used to call *descriptio feminae*. The texts illustrating this *descriptio* are drawn mainly from medieval secular Latin songs, especially the *Carmina Burana*, Occitan and Galician-Portuguese troubadour poetry, a specimen of Old French *fabliau* (the description of Roseite in “Trubert”), and, finally, the erotic portrait of the princess Carmesina in the Valencian knight Joanot Martorell’s romance *Tirant lo Blanc*. Like many scholars Malm insists on the importance of Ovid to medieval authors, not only to those writing in Latin but also to vernacular poets, primarily the troubadours. He also views the *descriptiones puellae* in “Trubert” and *Tirant lo Blanc* as parts of the Ovidian tradition within the grammar and rhetoric of the seven *artes liberales* taught in Western schools since Antiquity. The *fabliaux* were to a great extent composed by clerics, but this is not the case of Joanot Martorell, who was a warrior and knight. However, the very fact that he was literate in the vernacular (*Tirant lo Blanc* was written in the Valencian variety of Catalan) does at least point to a certain familiarity with the Latin of the *trivium*.

Premodern painters and sculptors were struggling with similar problems as philosophers and poets in regard to bodily desires. But what should we do with a concept like desire when it comes to the interpretation of images? It is not a motif of the kind that iconography has been engaged in. In “Mastering Desires: Images of Love, Lust and Want in Fourteenth-Century Vadstena,” Mia Åkestam focuses on the ambivalent relationship between bodily desires and the religious desire for God, highlighting the complex connection between text and image. Scholars in the fields of image rhetoric, semiotics and reception theories have addressed a number of problems within this field in the last few decades. Following their example, Åkestam emphasizes the beholder’s perspective and the historical context. Her point of departure is Saint Birgitta of Sweden’s *Revelations*. Birgitta embraced the conviction that the individual’s spiritual efforts to overcome desire were an intellectual and physical struggle. To master temptation was one side of the coin; the other was how to visualize the sublime desire for beauty and salvation. Birgitta had various reasons for pondering these issues, not only from her own private perspective, but also because her *Revelations* formed the basis of an international monastic order.

Petrarch, Birgitta’s great contemporary, is well known for his life-long wrestling with the problem of an obvious incompatibility between being a good and virtuous Christian on the one hand, and displaying a desire for human love—or for ancient and pagan ideas—on the other. In what way could it be justifiable for a Christian to strive for other goals than spiritual ones? What about the desire for carnal pleasures and worldly things? Among ancient philosophers there are numerous examples of a renunciation of any kind of pleasures as well as an outspoken accentuation of the importance of virtue. Yet the differences between these philosophers and their medieval Christian successors are very obvious. Petrarch was among the first to express agony over this dilemma but there were many to follow. Soon it became a common theme among humanists. In his chapter, “Petrarch on Desire and Virtue,” Erland Sellberg looks more closely at the ways in which Petrarch dealt with the problem of desire and virtue.

In her chapter “Erotic Desire, Spiritual Yearning, Narrative Drive” Sofie Kluge discusses Teresa of Ávila’s “aesthetic Christology” as it unfolds in her *Vida* (1562, published 1588). To be more precise, Kluge analyses the autobiography’s reconciliation of transcendental spirituality and worldly sensuality through a daring yet delicate development of Christian theological aesthetics into an at once highly spiritual and deeply sensual kind of writing. Teresa’s autobiography is based on an allegorical view of flesh and of words—the “body” of language—as mystical images of the divine

and, concretely, on the mediation of the spiritual and the sensual through the development of an idiosyncratic religious-cum-aesthetic idiom. This Teresian discourse is traditional in its basic concepts (e.g. in its exposition of the stages of mystical life) and conventional in the choice of motifs (the limits of language and of human perception; “from sinner to saint”; humility), but innovative in the choice of rhetoric (extreme eroticization of religious discourse; use of *cancionero* metaphors) and in the radicalism of its Christology (hyper-devotion to its “sacred Humanity”). To the extent that this aesthetic Christology is characterized by an arguably extreme interpretation of the already quite eroticized rhetoric of the Christian mystical tradition, it is traditional in essence yet imbued with a sensibility that may be qualified as modern: even if the *Vida* essentially remains within the confines of the Christian allegorical worldview that fostered it, it does take the eroticism contained in the concept of *unio mystica* to new and as yet unseen heights.

In “Sex and the Self: Simon Forman, Subjectivity and Erotic Dreams in Early Modern England” Per Sivefors proposes a new reading of the physician and astrologist Simon Forman’s dream of Queen Elizabeth, recorded in 1597. While previous criticism has examined this dream for its political implications and its connections to other literary texts, Sivefors contextualizes it from the point of view of early modern dream theory and subjectivity. His basic argument is that Forman’s dream both invests dreams with predictive value and anticipates a more distinctly modern, individualizing, anti-metaphysical tendency in dream interpretation. This is crucially reinforced by an emphasis on sexuality—male, hetero, “normal”—as a defining characteristic of the individual. Forman’s dream is in line with a general tendency for dreams to lose in epistemological prestige in the seventeenth century—a tendency that increasingly puts the emphasis on the individual’s inner life rather than on implications of angelic messages or general predictions of the future. What is more, the individual’s sexuality and sexual orientation are at the focus of this change, thus in important ways foreshadowing later developments in, e.g., Freudian psychoanalysis. Sivefors hence maps a complex series of changes in attitudes to dream interpretation as well as to sexuality in the early modern period.

By a simultaneous re-contextualization and re-actualization of these representations of human desire, the contributors to *Pangs of Love and Longing* have looked into the past not only in its own right but as a way of problematizing present stereotypes and conceptions. Exploring articulations of *eros*, *cupido* or *fin’amors* in their historical specificity is an undertaking that is likely to produce new perspectives on contemporary notions of love and eroticism, which are often taken for granted—if not considered

absolute or universal. Hence, our continuing interest in ancient, medieval and early modern configurations of desire is, when all is said and done, an attempt to understand ourselves and our present state of being.

*

This book is the outcome of the Swedish academic network “Configurations of Desire in Premodern Literature” 2010–12. The network gathered eighteen scholars from Sweden, Norway and Denmark with the purpose of detecting, analysing and comparing certain typical or otherwise instructive literary (and artistic) expressions of desire in premodern Europe, from Classical Antiquity to the seventeenth century. This interdisciplinary project was sponsored by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, an independent foundation with the goal of promoting and supporting research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The Foundation also financed the language editing process, which was performed by Alan Crozier.

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF DESIRE

THE CONFIGURATIONS OF ANCIENT GREEK DESIRE

EVA-CARIN GERÖ

We may assume that the Ancient Greeks, men and women, young and old, experienced desire, love and passion more or less in the same way as we do today. However, as many have observed after having studied art, literature and other cultural manifestations of the Ancient Greeks, there seem to have been quite a few differences, as far as their ways of conceptualizing these matters are concerned,¹ as well as to how they defined ideals and norms connected with love and sexuality.² This article, which will deal with these matters in broad outline, has as its main purpose the introduction of a typology of “Greek love” by means of a more than hitherto explicit definition of the concepts of relevance to this topic, such as they are manifested through the Greek language and literature. Also the often quite vivid *Nachleben* of Ancient Greek Eros in terms of later times’ interpretations and often idealizations will be touched upon.

As is well known, the Greeks were early with their expressions of what later times have considered to be the very essence of being a human being—our joys, fears, our being caught in the “labyrinth of here and now” with all its pleasures, pains and sorrows. Their literary treatment of love and desire is no exception to this: here we often feel that essentially nothing has changed between then and now. A good illustration is the following epigram attributed to the philosopher Plato, where the (probably) first kiss of the “ego” of the text (presumably the author) and his beloved, Agathon, is at issue: “When I kissed Agathon, I did not let my heart pass my lips. For my poor soul had reared and wished to leave me for him.” Nonetheless, there are also important alterations, at least as regards habits, social conventions and attitudes, between the Greeks and us. In terms of expression of passion, the text below, written by the English writer William Hazlitt (1778–1830), is indeed very similar to Ancient Greek poetry, most closely to that of Sappho:

I was stung by scorpions; my flesh crawled; I was choked with rage; her
scorn scorched me like flames; her air (her heavenly air) withdrawn from

me, stifled me, and left me gasping for breath and being. [...] my feelings were marble; my blood was of molten lead; my thoughts on fire.

(*Liber Amoris*, Part III)

When Eros is expressed so passionately in ancient Greek texts, the object of the sentiment is often of the same sex as the person in love.³ And he (or she) is regularly much younger than the person in love.

The pederasty of the Ancient Greeks has by later readers and interpreters of their texts, where this trait is often very obvious, sometimes been “overlooked”, i.e. explained as unphysical Platonic love or even ignored or denied.⁴ More generally, the attitudes to and interpretations of Greek homosexuality have also varied through time. Indeed, “Greek love” could be seen as an illustration of how ethical and aesthetic values of later times colour and determine the understanding of cultural artefacts of older times—how norms are social constructions and not naturally given, therefore not *per se* “good” or “bad”.⁵ Generations of classicists, school teachers, authors and other interpreters of Ancient Greek culture defined male homosexual pederasty rather prudently as “pedagogical Love”—a kind of passionate mentorship typically prevailing between an (older) “teacher” and a (younger) “pupil”. The classicist Paul Brandt (1875–1929), sometimes writing under the pseudonym Hans Licht, went a bit further, however. Not only was he quite explicit about the physical side of Greek pederasty—he even described it (here following Bethe⁶) as the very source of Greek love poetry and of the high quality of the cultural achievements of the Greeks more generally.⁷ Quite interesting in this context is Brandt’s view of ancient Greek eroticism as something “generically” (or conceptually) different from our way of thinking about such matters.⁸

Another classicist, Kenneth Dover, and, in his footsteps, Michel Foucault, rather interpreted Greek homosexuality in terms of the roles of an “active” (penetrating) lover, *erastês*, relating to a “passive” (penetrated) beloved, *erômenos*. It has been argued that this interpretation reminded (perhaps too much) of tendencies and ideals within gay culture in the 1970s. James Davidson, on the other hand, makes a “radical reappraisal of Greek homosexual love”, almost turning back, as it seems, to the older type of interpretation focusing on (mostly) nonsexual relationships, which he looks upon as an expression of “homobesottedness” (men’s all-pervading fascination with other men).⁹

Turning to the concepts of Greek desire, many scholars, especially in the footsteps of Foucault, have observed a lack of certain concepts that have been important to modern thinking about love and sexuality. In Ancient Greek there is simply no other denomination of sexuality than *erôs*,

which covers a much wider semantic field than the corresponding English word.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Ancient Greeks had no words and maybe no concepts, which is more interesting, for hetero-, homo- and bisexuality or for pederast sexual orientation, although some literary examples seems to point in another direction, for example, the following epigrams from Book XII (the *Musa Puerilis*) of *The Greek Anthology*:

Drink deep, boy-lover. Bacchus, bringer of | Oblivion, will soothe your
hopeless love (*sou floga tan filopaida*). | Drink deep, and as you drain the
wine-filled bowl, | Purge the bitter anguish from your soul.

(Meleager, Hine XLIX)

The love of women leaves me cold; desire | For men, though, scorches me
with coals of fire (*pursoi arsenes* [...]). | As women are the weaker sex, my
yen | Is stronger, warmer, more intense for men.

(Anonymous, Hine XVII)

Unhappy pederasts (Gr. *paidofilai*), cease your insane | Exertions! All your
hopes are mad. As vain | As dredging up sea-water on dry land | or num-
bering the grains of desert sand | Is a yen for boys (Gr. *paidôn stergein
pothon*), whose indiscreet | Charms are to mortals and immortals sweet. |
Just look at me! My efforts heretofore | Have all been emptied on the arid
shore.

(Anonymous, Hine CXLV)

It has been quite convincingly argued, however, that such expressions of erotic direction are rather indications of “taste” and “preference”, comparable to that of food and drink (in terms of desire: *epithymiai* of the same kind), i.e. not indications of sexual identity, perceived as such.

Nevertheless, there are in Ancient Greek concepts and expressions belonging to the semantic field of desire and ready to be interpreted in their literary context—which is not always an easy task. It is often the Old Comedy that affords the most interesting approach to Greek desire, providing a keyhole to “real life” as well as a checklist of established values. Here are some concepts of interest, if we want to understand the configurations of “Greek love” (the translations are approximate) in its historical context:

- 1) *erôs* “love”, “desire”
- 2) *erastês* “lover”
- 3) *erômenos* “(male) beloved”
- 4) *kinaidos* “(unmanly) debauchee”, “lewd fellow”
- 5) *tribas* “(mannish) lesbian” (from *tribô* “rub”)
- 6) *meirax/meirakion* “juvenile being”

- 7) *sôfrosynê* “soundness of mind”, “moderation”, “self-control”
- 8) *hybris* “wantonness”, “wanton violence or insolence”, “lewdness” (opp. to *sôfrosynê*)
- 9) *akolasia* “licentiousness”, “intemperance”
- 10) *aidôs* “respect for the feeling/opinion of others for one’s own behaviour/conscience”, “shame”, “sobriety”, “moderation”
- 11) *nemesis* “distribution of what is due”, “retribution”, “righteous anger aroused by injustice”

Erôs, “desire”, is a rather general concept used with direction towards various objects but always defined through a lack of the person or the thing desired.¹¹ Ancient Greek erotic desire and “love” has a component that separates it from ours, at least normatively, i.e. an accepted and, as far as values are concerned, fairly unproblematic lack of reciprocity. This feature is adequately illustrated by the well-known anecdote recorded by Plutarch where a man is teased because the woman he makes love to is not interested in him. The man’s answer is: “When I eat fish at a tavern, I also do not care what the fish thinks of me”.

The concepts of *erastês* and *erômenos*, as well as that of *kinaidos*, are closely related, albeit in opposite terms. At least normatively and as an ideal, an *erastês* is always active, a “hunter”, but also a “sucker” in his relationship to a same-gendered, generally much younger, *erômenos*, “beloved”. Related to this norm, the concept of *anterôs*—“love in return”—is of a certain interest. Ideally, the *erômenos* should not feel or at least not show signs of *anterôs* when approached by the *erastês*.

However, if we want to understand ancient Greek sexual desire in a more thorough way, beyond ideals and norms, we have to allow for both a definition of concepts, *stricto dicto*, which gives an understanding of the normative “mode of life” as well as intersections of concept, which help us understand the Greeks’ real, sometimes normatively transgressing, and at the same time “everydayish” sexuality. This objective concerns mainly concepts 1–6, whereas concepts 7–10 are most interesting in terms of lack or abundance, especially in comedy, which as already been mentioned is especially revealing of the “real life” sexual mores of the ancient Greeks as well as of their norms and social conventions.

If we now allow for an intersection between the two concepts *erastês* and *erômenos*, or maybe between *erastês* and *kinaidos*, we get a “mixed” concept with a denotation in the fictional world of Aristophanes’ comedies according to the norms surrounding sexuality in ancient Greece, i.e. as a set of grown-up, bearded and sexually “offensive” men, on the surface “penetrators” and “predators”, who in a homosexual relationship, behind the surface of “decorum”, enjoy playing the weaker sex, including being

anally penetrated. To be sure, if we assume that only “unmixed” denotations through intersection of concepts are valid to the Ancient Greek mentality and lifestyle, much of the jokes of the Old Greek comedy would not make any sense at all. The following two examples from Aristophanes can serve as a demonstration:

And I hear that Cleisthenes' son | is in the graveyard, plucking | his arse-hole (Gr. *prôkton tillein*) and tearing his cheeks; | all bent over (Gr. *eng-kekyfôs*), beating his head, wailing and weeping | for Humpus of Wankton (Gr. *Sebinon* [...] *Anaflystios*), whoever that may be.¹²

(*Frogs*, 422 f.)

And Callias, we are told, | that son of Hippocoitus (Gr. *ton Hippookinou*) | fights at sea (Gr. *naumachein*) in a lionskin made of pussy (Gr. *kysthon le-ontên enêmnenon*).¹³

(*Frogs*, 425 f.)

The concept of a *kinaidos* poses a somewhat special problem. What is actually an (unmanly) debauchee—or rather—what did this concept denote for the ancient Greeks? Do we have a comparable concept with a comparable denotation today or is the understanding of the *kinaidos* only possible to us through guesses and approximation, i.e., are we dealing with a conceptual (and denotational) “extinct species”?

Skinner even argues that a *kinaidos* has never existed—in other words: that it is a generic concept with an empty set as its denotation.¹⁴ Semantically expressed, this would mean that *kinaidoi* belong to the same category as unicorns and *tragelafoi* (“goat-stags”). In terms of comedy and humour an empty set of *kinaidoi* as the denotation of the concept in question would most probably be quite useless. Skinner compares the Greek *kinaidoi* with modern vampires, seen as a denotationally unreal, fictional “empty set” category created in order to scare (and *de facto* fascinate). It is, however, in the intersection between the denotation of a concept such as *kinaidos* (in its extreme version) and that of *erastês* (“active lover”) or simply *anêr* (“(real) man”) that the humour takes place—and this is because the intersection has a reference in real life. For the concept of *tribas*, a similar analysis would probably be possible.

To sum up, in my view the semantic field(s) of Greek love and sexual desire, between norm and praxis, may be most properly understood by combining concepts such as the above-mentioned 1–6 as well as using the denotational categories of sets/classes and, finally, relations between sets/classes such as intersection, overlapping, inclusion and exclusion. In addition, of great relevance to love and sexuality as well as to all other

areas of Greek mentality and lifestyle, concepts 7–11 should also be allowed to play a distinctive role in the definitions of the concepts of “erotics” as well as in determining their denotational status in terms of “real world” or (various types of) “possible worlds”. *Eros*, *erastês*, *erômenos*, *kinaidos*, *tribas* and *meirax/meirakion* defined in their most “pure” (or “strict”) way, where the other concepts contribute to the definition in their due or expected measure, may, in the extreme case, not have had any real-world denotation at all. That would lead us to the conclusion that “Greek love” was supposed to be unreciprocal and oriented towards a same-sex, much younger object, but aside from “decorum” and ideals it was probably something quite different (reciprocal, oriented towards the “wrong” type of object, etc.). This would, *ex hypothesi*, leave us with (a) “possible world” denotations without (b) “real world” denotations, which in their turn may be most properly understood as sets in intersection. Without any relevance to the real world, again, the concept of e.g. the *kinaidos* would hardly be possible to understand, nor be of any use in the joke-making of comedy. It is (a) the “real life” intersection between *erastai/andres* and *kinaidoi* and (b) the existence of “pure” or “extreme” concepts without “real world” denotation which make jokes about *kinaidoi* funny. Again, it would hardly be perceived as funny in e.g. *Clouds* (v. 1099 f.) that the majority of the (male) audience is referred to as *eurypôrktôi* (“wide-arsed”, i.e. pathics),¹⁵ if none of the men present had ever (or even *often*, which is what is implied), at least in his youth but probably even as an adult, been penetrated anally (and enjoyed it).

The importance of “ethical” concepts for the culture of Ancient Greece, such as those of 7–11 above, should never be overestimated—love and sexuality are no exceptions to this. Indeed, Greek tragedy as well as the jokes of Old Comedy cannot be properly understood without them. In *Peace* v. 289 ff., for example, the fun is, as it seems, about a person’s lack of *aidôs* and, probably also, of *sôfrosynê*:

Now may I sing the ode that Datis made, | The ode he sang in ecstasy at noon, | “Eh, sirs, I feel pleasure (*hêdomai*), and I gladden myself (*chairômai*), and make myself merry (*keufrainômai*)”.¹⁶

Also, in the well-known (and very funny) *lêkythion* passage in *Frogs* (1198–1248), where Euripides’ solemn prologues, and thereby their heroes, are ridiculed through the repeated addition of the phrase *lêkythion apôlese(n)* (“he lost his little bottle of oil”), it can be argued that the joke is crucially about lack of *sôfrosynê* (cf. Gerö and Johnsson 2002).

Furthermore, in Greek love epigrams we find the thought of Nemesis being a central one, above all as a “punishment” for arrogant, beautiful

young *erômenoi*, who one day will grow up to hairy, no longer attractive men “past their prime”:

A peach was Heraclitus when—don’t scoff!—| Still Heraclitus; now he’s
past his prime | His hairy hide puts all assailants off. | On your cheeks (Gr.
gloutois, lit. ‘buttocks’) too the curse (Gr. *Nemesis*) will come in time.
(Meleager, Hine XXXIII)

And where we find *nemesis*, needless to say, the concept of *hybris* is usually close at hand:

Somebody said when snubbed, “is Damon so beautiful he doesn’t say
hello? Time will exact revenge when, bye and bye, Grown hairy, he greets
men who won’t reply.”
(Diocles, Hine XXXV)

In discussions of the history and lifestyle of Greek (and Roman) Antiquity it is not uncommon that modern interpretations include some kind of judgement, however brief or implied, of the phenomena discussed, in terms of “good” or “bad” with reference to our contemporary ideals. Aside from usually being anachronistic, such viewpoints tend to hide the real value, to my mind, of historical studies—that what makes them, with Thucydides’ words, a *ktêma eis aiei* (“a possession of all times”), viz. the lesson that it is essentially human to conceptualize and idealize in different ways at different times, not least in the domain of Eros.

Notes

¹ Much of value for the reader interested in the concepts of sexuality, and more generally of obscenity, is found in empirical and language-oriented studies such as Jeffrey Henderson’s seminal work *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* [1975] (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). For a detailed discussion of the concept of Eros, cf. James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007). A semantically explicit analysis of the conceptual “map” of Greek sexuality is presented in Eva-Carin Gerö, *Grekisk Eros: Det antika Greklands syn på kärlek och erotik* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, forthcoming).

² Norms and ideals surrounding love and sexuality in Ancient Greece have hitherto been more thoroughly treated than the concepts, “the way of grasping and mapping”, of this semantic field. Much about norms and ideals, aesthetics etc. may be studied in the pictorial material of Greek vase paintings, cf. Andrew Lear and Eva