

Part I

Roman Vice

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, a number of still-shocked Manhattan inhabitants attempted to escape the horrors that haunted them through recourse to fantasy. For one night, a ‘sprawling loft in the Garment District’ became ancient Rome as Palagia, the self-proclaimed ‘queen of tasteful debauchery’ held Caligula’s Ball, an invitation-only orgy (Corrin and Moore 2002). The guests, all professional and under 40, dressed in sheer chiffon togas and indulged in threesomes, four-somes, wife-swapping, and light bondage. There was even a floorshow in which Palagia, surrounded by male assistants dressed as Roman legionaries, demonstrated the use of various sex toys and rode a tall, black, leather bench called ‘Caligula’s Horse’, after Incitatus, the horse made a senator by Caligula. Later Palagia was replaced by two performers called ‘Caligula’ and ‘Drusilla’ (the name of Caligula’s sister with whom he supposedly had an incestuous affair) who proceeded to give a demonstration of various positions of lovemaking.

Caligula’s Ball has been diagnosed as part of the phenomenon known as ‘terror sex’ – hard, casual, non-procreative sex as an alternative response to the threat of devastation. As one sex therapist put it, ‘party all night because you don’t know when the party is going to end’. Another located its origins in a primeval urge for survival and companionship, ‘in times of upheaval and terror, people look for confirmation of life, and there’s no more obvious antidote to death than sex. It’s a way of saying: “I’m functioning, I’m alive and I’m not alone”.’ Moments of crisis show us at our most instinctual. When people needed to imagine pleasure at its most decadent and debauched, their reflex was to reach out to Rome.

Rome has been described as a ‘pornotopia’ (Nisbet 2009: 150), ‘an ideal setting for the activities described in pornographic literature’ (*OED*), and even the most cursory survey of catalogs of pornographic film titles will reveal no end of classically themed erotica. Thus, films such as *Private Gladiator Parts 1–3* (2001–2) compete with *Roma* (2007, ‘Ambition, Power, Lust, a thrilling trilogy’) and *Serenity’s Roman Orgy* (2001, ‘Let the games begin’) for the straight market; and for

the gay market, there are titles such as *Caligula and his Boys* or *Mansize – Marc Anthony* (2003). The latter film won a pornographic film award for ‘Best Supporting Actor’ (FICEB 2003) and was nominated in the categories of ‘Best Art Direction’ and ‘Best Sex Comedy’ (2004 GAYVN Awards). The blurb on the back of the DVD gives a good indication of the film’s contents. It promises a world of imperial decadence and lust. Egypt is falling apart and the only way that Queen Cleopatra can restore peace to the kingdom is through marriage to the Roman general Marc Anthony. Unfortunately for poor Cleopatra, Marc Anthony turns out to be gay and there then ensues a homosexual romp through the Egyptian court. The queen is left frustrated, but the eunuchs seem to have enjoyed themselves.

Mansize – Marc Anthony follows in a long tradition of locating cinematic gay sex in Roman dress. For example, in the 1950s and 60s, physique movie mogul Richard Fontaine produced short black and white films such as *Ben Hurry* (c.1960) and *The Captives* (c.1959). These films are typical of the soft-porn gay films produced between the 1940s and 60s by film companies such as Apollo and Zenith. In *Ben Hurry* (the name is a play on ‘Ben Hur’) muscled men in Roman-style costumes and posing pouches strike poses and feel each other up. The conceit of the film is that these men are extras on the filming of *Ben Hur*. At the end, before anything too explicit can happen, the men are called back onto set; the shout of ‘Ben Hurry’ giving the title of the film. In contrast, *The Captives* is set in Rome itself and features a Roman official who inflicts homoerotic tortures on two men accused of spying. Eventually their refusal to talk and their obvious devotion to each other cause the official to free them. Stills from the film show athletic models with buff bodies, sporting the skimpiest of Roman-style kilts.

Yet we don’t need X-rated films to confirm Rome’s status as a ‘pornotopia’. Any visit to Pompeii will show you that when tourists think Rome, they think sex. Pompeii has many attractions, but the one that is on every visitor’s list is the brothel. If you haven’t been to the brothel, then you haven’t visited Pompeii. Its reopening to the public in 2006 was trumpeted around the world. Fascination with the brothel has existed ever since it was first excavated in 1862. Mark Twain describes his visit there, mentioning that ‘it was the only building in Pompeii in which no woman is allowed to enter’ and that the pictures ‘no pen could have the hardihood to describe’ (Twain 1869: 247). In their study of tourists’ attitudes to Pompeii’s brothel, Fisher and Langlands (2009) discuss the way in which the guides’ and tourists’ own preconceptions about Rome combine to create a notion of Pompeii as a place free from sexual repression and bodily hang-ups. Often this construction has an element of wish fulfillment as Pompeii ‘is used as a stick to beat contemporary moral conservatism’ (180). Confirming the notion of the centrality of the brothel to the life of this town is the re-conceptualization of the various phalloi dotted around the city as ‘signs pointing the way to the brothel’. This fantasy about the function of these phallic markers, perpetuated by numerous modern tour guides, extends, at least, as far back as the start of the nineteenth

century. Everywhere the tourist wanders in Pompeii, they seem to be directed back to a brothel.

In this section, I want to examine how Rome's status as a 'pornotopia' was achieved. It is easy to see this eroticization of Rome as the perpetuation of a Christian technique that sought to denigrate pagan practice by associating it with sin, especially bodily sexual sin. Once attitudes to the body and sex became a marker that distinguished Christian from non-Christian, it was inevitable that stories of corrupt sex would be ascribed to opponents. In focusing so much on sex, Christians were following in a substantial tradition. Attitudes to sex had long been one of the ways by which religious groups had differentiated themselves from their neighbors. This discourse on the lasciviousness of ancient Rome in contrast to a chaste Christianity can be traced back at least as far as the second century AD.

This discourse has a tendency to reassert itself at times of crisis. Whenever kingdoms or empires feel threatened, moralizing discourse tends to increase. It is the flip-side of 'terror sex', an apotropaic invocation of lost virtue. A clear example is the anxiety felt in Britain about the potential fall of her empire. Here the parallels with Rome felt uncomfortably close and the stories about Roman depravity played to an audience worried about contemporary morals. Sexy Rome simultaneously horrified and tantalized audiences.

Yet, fantasies do not appear out of thin air. Rather, they are grafted onto pre-existent sturdy stock. They need a secure foundation for support and nourishment. Often the stuff of fantasy is not intrinsically or intentionally erotic. It is striking how often markers of seemingly sober, chaste authority are transformed into objects of sexual fetish. Sex shops, for example, do a roaring trade in eroticized versions of uniforms of firemen, nurses, and male and female police officers. Here the aura of respectable authority gives their sexualized counterparts a charge of illicit, subversive thrill. Power rarely operates straightforwardly and the eroticization of power and its accoutrements is one of western culture's more distinctive features.

It is not just aesthetics that are co-opted for fantastic purposes. Fantasy constructs complex scenarios out of snatches of dialogue, poetic motifs, comic exaggeration, historical events, programmatic ideological dictates, and heartfelt shouts of protest. It extends, confounds, inverts, stylizes, and stereotypes this material. Yet always at its heart exists a grain of the non-fantastic, a trace of a place that is prior to the fantasy.

In the following discussion, I want to highlight the aspects of Roman antiquity that helped secure it as the locus of the West's sexual fantasies. Roman attitudes towards bodily display, its frank discussion of sex especially within genres of vituperative exchange, its occasional, but nevertheless marked collocations of sex and religious practice, and finally its gossip culture and the stories it told about emperors, all helped fuel erotic discourse. By looking at each of these elements in turn, I want to catalog the features that made Roman antiquity such an efficient vehicle for the expression of desire.

Each section begins with a pivotal moment or important case study that helps to articulate the themes that I want to pursue in the discussion. In keeping with the focus on unmediated reception, these case studies are often juxtaposed with the classical material that proves their inspiration. Throughout the discussion of these elements, the aim remains the elucidation of the narrative function of the material within the context of a history of ideas. I want to strip the classical material down to its essence to see what features have proved most productive in the formulation of sexual fantasy. Often these aspects are best revealed by analyzing a classical motif through a series of genres or receptions, each moment helping to reveal the reason for the efficacy of the motif in furthering sexual discourse.