By Gregory Palermo

Dover, Kenneth J.


Dover’s article offers a survey of the sexual habits of people, and how they were perceived, in Classical Greece. He begins by defining some key terms and focusing on linguistic distinctions between love (eros) and sex. He cites the centrality of stimulation by physical beauty in both types of relationships (Dover 2003: 114) and the blending of sexual, romantic, and familial love under the same terms in Greek language (Dover 2003: 115).

In a section he labels “Inhibition,” Dover complicates the now-popular binary model of sexuality for the era before the advent of Christianity—that the association of shame and guilt with sexuality was invented by Christians and that what came before was a “free, fearless, pagan sexuality” (Dover 2003: 116). I tried to clarify your sentence but I'm not sure I succeeded. He describes how the pagans were in many ways “less inhibited,” but goes on to present “data which do not fit the popular concept of a guilt-free or shame-free sexual morality” in Ancient Greece: the use of euphemisms for sexual acts (Dover 2003: 116). In addition, he later addresses the “contempt for sexual intercourse” expressed in Classical Greek philosophy (Dover 2003: 126).

Dover narrates this inhibition as a sort of symptom of the “structure of Greek society”; he cites the segregation of girls from boys as inciting a longing for the opposite sex. Dover’s language here, depicting a type of male gaze, is both essentializing and heteronormative: he impels the reader to “consider...the situation of the adolescent boy growing up in such a society,” ignoring individual differences in both attraction and gender identity (Dover 2003: 117). It is to be argued whether or not Dover’s arguments—as they deconstruct the assumption of a sexually unrestricted Ancient Greece—impose their own (interpretive) restrictions. State this more directly. If you think this is the case, say so, don't hide behind passive construction. It is possible that Dover’s conception of “Classical Greek Attitudes” to sexuality is somewhat classical.

His description of women being regarded as “irresponsible and ever ready to yield to sexual temptation” contrasts with the “asexual” depictions of women that Younger cites in his analysis of the frieze on the Parthenon. (see Figure 3). Dover, for instance, refers to Greek texts purporting that “women enjoyed sexual intercourse more intensely than men” (Dover: 2003: 121). Similarly to Younger, however, Dover argues that women were the objects in an androcentric Greek society. The offence in adultery, Dover says, was “against the man to whom she belonged, not her own feelings”; it was the implications of the act on the man’s social integrity—and his potential for future transgressions against other men— that mattered. (Dover 2003: 117-118). In his following section on prostitution, Dover uses a scene from Aristophanes’ comedy Thesmophoriazusae as a typical transaction; it is “exactly as if it were a matter of paying rent for the use of an inanimate object.” (Dover 2003: 118).

Continuing his discussion of commercial sex, Dover also continues to link the Ancient Greek man’s sexual habits to the perception of his character and societal virtue. It was not the moral implications of promiscuity itself that reflected poorly on the Ancient Greek man engaging in frequent prostitution, but that “money spent on sex was money not spent on other things...” (Dover: 2003: 119). Along these lines, it was perceived as honorable—and masculine—for a man to be able to control his desires, in contrast to a “feminine...yielding to fear, desire, and impulse” (see DeVries, 1997).

Dover moves to talking about homosexuality and reinforces the conception of the Greeks as normally bisexual (see Bremmer but please link it to Alyssa's annotation. Quoting Devereux’s 1967 article on the subject, he calls this “pseudo-homosexuality”: the Greeks, he says “saw nothing surprising in the co-existence of desire for boys and desire for girls in the same person” (Dover 2003: 122). He complicates this picture of sexual freedom, in a similar move to one earlier in the article, by describing the class and status restrictions on homosexual relationships (Dover 2003: 124). Good job with this and very effective use of links.