

The Tribadic Tradition: The Reception of an Ancient Discourse on Female Homosexuality

Thorsteinn Vilhjalmsón

*A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements of the
degree of Master of Arts by advanced study in Classical Reception in the Faculty of Arts.*

School of Humanities, September 2015, 14995 words. Supervisors: Dr. Genevieve Liveley and
Prof. Shane Butler.

Abstract

Near-continually from the 1st to the 19th centuries, the main word used for homosexual women was Greek: tribade. This word marked a discourse on female homosexuality with a defined set of tropes and characterizations, which, far from being “hidden from history”, was in wide use in the ancient world and beyond. Yet it was used only by men and the tropes associated with tribadism were all negative, describing little more than male fantasies; nowhere does a woman refer to herself as a tribade.

Yet researching tribadism yields a unique insight into the constraints of women’s sexual lives in antiquity. It reveals, by the transhistorical character of the discourse, the deep anxieties of patriarchal society about women’s sexuality; it exposes the strategies by which that society asserts control over women’s lives, and the weaknesses of those same strategies. In this manner, examining the tribadic tradition gives a powerful insight into the structures of sex and power in antiquity and beyond.

This dissertation traces the reception of the discourse of the tribade from antiquity into the Byzantine Middle Ages, starting with an excursus on Plato’s *Symposium* and its pioneering act of naming homosexual women, then moving onto the birth and flowering of the tribade in Greco-Roman literature from the 1st century on. The translation of this discourse into the Christian world is treated, where the tribade became a symbol of the pagan other, and finally the tribade is explored as the object of ancient scientific scrutiny in astrology, physiognomy and medicine.

Abbreviations used in this work

BNP: Cancik, H., Salazar, C. F. & Schneider, H. eds., 2003-2010. *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World. Antiquity*. Leiden: Brill.

DÉ: Chantraine, P. ed., 1968-1980. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*. Paris: Klincksieck.

LSJ: Liddell, H. G., Scott, R. & Jones, H. S. eds., 1996. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press.

ODB: Kazhdan, A. ed., 1991. *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

OLD: Glare, P. G. W. ed., 2012. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Abbreviations of ancient authors and their works follow the LSJ, OLD and BNP.

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Taught Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, this work is my own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of others, is indicated as such. I have identified all material in this dissertation which is not my own work through appropriate referencing and acknowledgement. Where I have quoted or otherwise incorporated material which is the work of others, I have included the source in the references. Any views expressed in the dissertation, other than referenced material, are those of the author.

SIGNED: **DATE:**

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Introduction

In the field of study of ancient sex and sexuality, female homosexuality has received scant attention compared to its male counterpart. It is usually relegated to anecdotes, footnotes or short digressional chapters in the canonical works in the field, whose main purpose is near-inevitably to explore the sexuality of men.¹ This can give the impression that there is nothing more to research – yet there was a coherent discourse in antiquity as regards what we would call female homosexuality; furthermore, this discourse not only survived the end of antiquity and bubbled beneath the surface of the Christian worlds of late antiquity and Byzantium, but had a shocking rebirth in the Renaissance, remaining in its new form the dominant way to discuss the subject until the 19th century and the birth of the lesbian. This is the discourse of the tribade.²

The tribade is as yet little explored as regards the ancient world.³ Female homosexuality in antiquity has received four monographs in recent decades; two of these are indispensable to this research.⁴ Yet their stated subject is in itself problematic in taking the modern category of homosexuality as its theme, gathering and criticising sources from the ancient world which belong together only in modern thought. This dissertation will instead research a category which the ancient world itself created and populated with examples; this category is contingent, but in no way identical, with the modern category of female homosexuality or lesbianism, as will become clear over the course of the work.⁵

¹ See the critical bibliography collected by Rabinowitz 2002, p. 24, n. 3.

² Also written “tribad”; I have chosen the more international spelling.

³ The early modern tribade has been better served; see e.g. Park 1997, Braunschneider 1999, Traub 2001, 2002, Lanser 2014.

⁴ These are Brooten 1996, a pioneering and brilliant work; Boehringer 2007, a much-needed and equally brilliant counterpoint to and re-evaluation of Brooten, characterized by structuralism. The others are Rabinowitz & Auanger 2002, a collection of essays ranging from excellent to embarrassing which focus on homosociality, women’s voices and pictorial representations, and Juan Francisco Martos Montiel’s unfortunately named *Desde Lesbos con Amor: Homosexualidad femenina en la antigüedad* (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 1996), which I was unfortunately unable to access.

⁵ Nevertheless, I will use the word “homosexuality” in this dissertation to describe same-sex attraction or sex (whether temporary or habitual), despite the danger of anachronistic thinking and the well-grounded objections of the Foucault/Halperin school of thought (see Halperin 1990, pp. 15-40). I can only point to my own experience when faced with the standard circumlocutions “homoeroticism” or “same-sex sex”: I find myself inevitably translating them back in my mind to “homosexuality”, showing the strengths of my own (and the readers’) cultural

Yet there is an obvious objection to following the ancient world's own categorization. The category in question was created by men for men; there is not a single female writer in the entire tribadic tradition, nor does any fictional, male-written woman in that tradition ever refer *to herself* as a tribade. Indeed, the tribades in our sources cannot be described as anything other than the strange creations of male sexual fantasy. What, then, can the history of the tribade tell us about real historical women and their lives?

In societies that were massively male-dominated and which kept women largely in homosocial isolation in their homes,⁶ this discourse is indicative of a widespread male anxiety about women and their desires. Among women, behind closed doors, could there be formed power structures which escaped the strictures of the patriarchy? The tribadic discourse shows the patriarchy's fears about its own weaknesses and its evaluation of women's potential transgressive power; in this respect, the tribadic discourse indicates where the open spaces and the limits within which ancient women lived lay.

Secondly, there were actual women in the ancient world who desired and had sex with women, distorted male representations notwithstanding. Any such woman would have to live with the terrifying threat of the tribadic tradition which could be mobilized against her. In this way, homosexual women's lives were shaped and moulded by this discourse, no matter its absurdities; they will have had to take care lest they be thought tribades, and so, studying the tribadic discourse, one can glimpse the conditions of their lives.

Finally the extreme longevity of this discourse makes the tribade an invaluable object of study as regards sex, sexuality and patriarchy. While discourses on male homosexuality changed with the passing of antiquity, the tribade survived into modernity; she seems to have answered the patriarchy's need for the categorization of women who slept with or desired women even through massive societal changes; exploring the reasons for this could yield insights into the transhistorical and intercultural structures of the patriarchy. This dissertation will examine the

conditioning, whose power it would be facetious of me to deny. Halperin's admonitions should be kept in mind throughout, however.

⁶ See Keuls 1993, pp. 109-10, 210-15; Rabinowitz 2002, p. 2, *passim*.

roots of this long-lived discourse in the ancient world, explore its translations into the Christian world and review its treatment in ancient science.

I will ask, then, what sources can be said to belong to the tribadic tradition? What do they have in common? In what way are they different? How did the discourse change in reception? What are its implications on the lives of ancient women? Why was the tribade conceived of as she was? In answering these questions, a picture will emerge of a well-defined cultural category with a shared set of tropes, a discourse much stronger and more transgressive than can be fitted into any footnote in the study of ancient sexuality; indeed, the time has come for it to take the centre stage.

Precursor: The *hetairistriaí* of Plato's *Symposium*

And yet, it starts with a footnote to Plato. His *Symposium* (c. 385–370 BCE) is famous for its extensive discussion and praise of male homosexuality, but it is also a founding document of *female* homosexuality – though it is mentioned only in passing, out of a structural necessity to complete an argument which is really about men, nevertheless it is the first Greek text to give homosexual women a name.⁷

This name appears in Aristophanes' speech, in which he proposes that originally humans came in sets of two; each was made out of two attached individuals, who could be two women, two men or one man and one woman (an androgyne). After these beings revolted against the gods, Zeus split them up, and ever since the split halves seek for their lost partners and find him or her in other humans of that partner's sex. This explains sexual preference.⁸ As to women who were cut off from a female partner, Aristophanes says:

Those women who were split from a woman are not especially interested in men [οὐ πάνυ... τοῖς ἀνδράσι τὸν νοῦν προσέχουσιν], but are more drawn towards women

⁷ Sappho's poetry has no such names. In the *Laws* Plato also mentions (and condemns) love between women (636a-c, 836a-e), but does not give the lovers a name. On the *Laws* and female homosexuality, see Boehringer 2007, pp. 121-41.

⁸ Pl. *Smp.* 189a-191e.

[μᾶλλον πρὸς τὰς γυναῖκας τετραμμένοι εἰσί], and the *hetairistria* spring from this stock [ἐκ τούτου τοῦ γένους γίνονται].⁹

Hetairstria is a *hapax legomenon*¹⁰ which puzzled later lexicographers and commentators. Their solution was to explain *hetairistria* as a synonym for a much better known term in their time: tribade.¹¹ One claimed that *hetairistria* was simply the Attic word for the *koine* tribade.¹² Hence, the tribade can illustrate the *hetairistria* and *vice versa*. So what can be glimpsed from Aristophanes' brief, pioneering mention of homosexual women?

First, *hetairistria* are *not* said to be identical with the mythical split women who are “not wholly drawn to men but more to women”: rather, the *hetairistria* are their descendants. These are characterized indirectly by appearing in parallel with the descendants of the other splits, whose societal reputations, unlike that of the *hetairistria*, are well-known.

These are as follows: The male splits from the androgynous original humans, who are described as “woman-lovers” [φιλογύναικές] themselves, have descendants who are “adulterers” [μοιχοί].¹³ Similarly, it seems that the female androgyne splits are “men-lovers” [φίλανδροί] themselves but have “adulteresses” [μοιχεύτρια] for descendants.¹⁴ Male-male splits have no

⁹ Pl. *Smp.* 191e. All translations in this dissertation are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁰ Though it would reappear much later with direct reference to Plato, as I will show below.

¹¹ Tim. *Lex.* s.v. ἑταιρίστρια; Phot. s.v. ἑταιρίστρια; Suid. s.v. ἑταιρίστρια; Hsch. s.v. ἑταιρίστρια, διεταρίστρια. This last word seems to be a misreading from Pl. *Smp.* 191e, as an editor of an 1833 edition of Henri Estienne's *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae*, s.v. Διεταρίστρια, proposes: “Recte Ruhnk. in Auct. corrige videtur Αἰ ἑταιρίστρια, quo voc. Plato utitur Symp. p. 191.” Brooten 1996, p. 5 views it as a term in its own right. Interestingly, Photius has two entries on ἑταιρίστρια; besides the one defining them as tribades, there is one defining them as γυναῖκες φίλιας κτώμεναι.

¹² Moer. 196.24 Bekker.

¹³ Pl. *Smp.* 191d.

¹⁴ Pl. *Smp.* 191e. This interpretation corresponds with Boehringer's (2007, p. 102). However, there are textual difficulties to be overcome. In Dover's edition (1980), the text in question reads ὅσαι αὖ γυναῖκες φίλανδροί τε καὶ μοιχεύτρια ἐκ τούτου τοῦ γένους γίνονται. On a shallow reading this implies that the original descendants are not described, but merely their descendants, standing in sharp contrast with the pattern established by the male androgyne splits and continued by the female-female splits. Similarly, this reading makes no differentiation between the φίλανδροί and the μοιχεύτρια; they belong to the same generation. However, as Dover points out (1980, p. 118), the whole sentence is ill-fitting syntactically and ἐκ τούτου τοῦ γένους γίνονται could be an interpolation. With some imaginative prowess the meaning of the sentence can be reconstructed, by parallel with the male androgyne splits, as ὅσαι αὖ γυναῖκες [τοῦ κοινοῦ τμήμα εἰσιν] φίλανδροί τε [εἰσιν] καὶ μοιχεύτρια [ἐκ τούτου τοῦ γένους γεγόνασιν], which allows parallelism with the other splits. The other possibility is that Aristophanes *willingly* makes no generational differentiation between φίλανδροί and μοιχεύτρια, which fits well

stated descendants; they are merely “fond of male lovers” [φιλερασταί] as boys and “boy-lovers” [παιδερασταί] as men.¹⁵

The descendants have negative connotations, unlike the splits; this could explain why Aristophanes removes them one step further down the family line from their double-bodied progenitors. Adulterers of both genders, and by analogy *hetairistriaí*, were seen as excessive in their sexual preferences, being unable to contain them within societally acceptable boundaries. This means that there are two categories of homoerotic women: One whose preference for women is benign, and another, the *hetairistriaí*, who are excessive in that preference and worthy of condemnation for it.

This system of splits and descendants could be devised to illuminate the strange, mythical original beings with contemporary examples and to pass judgment on the relative merits of each sexual preference: The androgyne-splits are like the adulterers and adulteresses that were the object of such debate in ancient Athens;¹⁶ the male-male splits are like the boy-loving Athenian men who comprise Aristophanes’ audience (because of whose presence, perhaps, Aristophanes refrains from mentioning any shameful descendants from their group); and finally, the female-female splits are like the *hetairistriaí*, who would then signal another well-known group in Athens at the time. Their introduction with a definite article and without explanatory remarks seem to strengthen that assumption,¹⁷ but if the *hetairistriaí* were a public concern at the time, no other extant Athenian source reflects this.

Besides these vague hints at the meaning of *hetairistriaí*, there was one explanatory recourse open to both the Greeks of later times and to modern scholars: the etymology of her name.

in with his misogynistic comedies, where women are inevitably adulterous (see e.g. *Ec.* 1-18, 225; *Th.* 491f; *Lys.* 124-44); but it is hard to explain why he would mention only descendants and not the original splits.

¹⁵ *Pl. Smp.* 191e-192e.

¹⁶ See Cohen 1991, pp. 98-170.

¹⁷ So Dover 2002, p. 225, where he ventures a guess that the *hetairistria* is “a woman who seeks “specialist” *hetairai* catering for female clients”. Kapparis 2011, p. 242 claims outright (without citing evidence) that *hetairistriaí* are “women who paid to have sex with other women”, probably influenced by Luc. *DMeretr.* 5, discussed below. Boehringer 2007, pp. 111-12 disagrees with Dover and Kapparis, theorizing that Plato coined the term to poke fun at Aristophanes’ fondness for neologisms. Dover himself had before theorized along those same lines, drawing attention to the Aristophanic neologism *laikastría* (“cocksucker”) as a possible model for *hetairistria* (1989, p. 172).

Hetairstria is a feminine agent noun formed from the stem of the verb *hetairizô*, which comes from the noun *hetairos*, “friend”, “companion”. In the feminine this word takes on an alternate meaning, *hetaira* signifying a high-class prostitute or courtesan, an object of male fantasy and fascination in the ancient world.¹⁸ Correspondingly, *hetairizô* means “to be a companion to” or to “associate with” on the one hand, and “to be a courtesan” or “to associate with courtesans” on the other.¹⁹ With the feminine agent noun suffix *-tria* added to the verbal stem, we get *hetairistria*.²⁰

If the sense of *hetairizô* here is simply “to be a courtesan”, that would make *hetairistria* a superfluous synonym of *hetaira*. *Hetairstria* is therefore likely to have been understood as “a woman who associates with courtesans”. Indeed, the lexicographer Pollux glosses her masculine counterpart, *hetairistês*, as “a man who associates excessively with courtesans”.²¹ One associates with courtesans for sex; hence, *hetairistria* implies a woman who desires sex with women. In Plato, then, we find indications of two separate traditions of female homosexuality: an unnamed, benign one, and another, the *hetairistria*, connected with excess, prostitution and adultery. These themes would be carried on into the tradition of the tribade, born five centuries after the *Symposium*.

The Birth of the Tribade

The etymology of the tribade’s name is simpler than that of the *hetairistria*. It can only come from the Greek verb τρίβω, “to rub”, given another Greek feminine agent noun ending; at its most basic level, then, it means “a woman who rubs”.²² Yet this obvious explanation has its complications. We find this Greek word first in Latin and only later in Greek, despite its origin. Second, as we will see, in the entirety of the pre-modern tribadic tradition, the tribade is only described as “rubbing” another woman once – in the 10th cent. CE. The implications of the tribade’s name seem to have almost completely escaped its users. The tribade emerges in two

¹⁸ On the multifarious meanings of *hetaira* in the ancient world, which is by no means always strictly definable as the opposite of the *pornê*, see McClure 2005, pp. 6-8, 11-12, 15-17; Glazebrook 2005.

¹⁹ LSJ s.v. ἑταιρίζω.

²⁰ Dover 2002, p. 225; Halperin 2002, pp. 250-1; Gilhuly 2006, p. 285.

²¹ Poll. 6.188.

²² Brooten 1996, p. 5.

Latin texts, one mythical, one legal: Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae* and Phaedrus' *Fabulae*, which both appear in the first decades of the 1st cent. CE.²³

Children of a Drunken God: Phaedrus

Phaedrus' *Fabulae* are short stories in verse, reminiscent of Aesop, connected to one another by overarching themes. One theme is the creation of mankind by Prometheus, and more precisely where that creation went wrong:

The other asked why he (Prometheus) had created

The tribades and the soft men [*molles mares*]. The old man explained:

“That same Prometheus, who created people from clay,

Who were broken to pieces as soon as they met with ill fortune,

Having laboured all day separately creating the natural parts

That shame hides under clothing, so that he could fit them

To their bodies, was unexpectedly invited to dinner by Liber.

There he flooded his veins with much nectar

And returned home late, unsteady on his feet.

Then, his spirit half-asleep, drunken and clumsy,

He put what belongs to girls [*virginale*] on the male sex [*generi masculino*]

And the masculine members [*masculina membra*] on women [*feminis*].

Hence, nowadays, desire [*libido*] enjoys deformed [*pravo*] pleasure.”²⁴

The parallel between tribades and *molles*, men who enjoy the passive role in sex, will become familiar over the course of the dissertation. While to the modern mind what brings them together is “homosexuality”, this does in fact not describe ancient opinion: Here, the focus is not on sexual

²³ Boehringer 2007, pp. 261-2.

²⁴ Phaed. 4.16.

object choice but on *defective bodies*. Tribades and *molles* are both counted as a humorous divine mistake; deformed through neglect. But *how* are they deformed?

The poem has been traditionally interpreted as implying that the tribades were mistakenly given a penis – and by analogy, though rarely explicated, that the *molles* were given a vagina.²⁵ Hence, the tribade has a woman's body but male genitals; the *mollis* has a man's body but female genitals. Sexual preference is then in some sense visible on the body.

But, as we will see, the phallic tribade produced by this interpretation has its roots in a much later period. Boehringer has recently pointed out that Phaedrus could well mean the opposite: the tribades have a *man's* body but a *woman's* genitals and vice versa.²⁶ This fits much better in with the tribadic tradition, in which tribades are generally described as manly, but never explicitly claimed to possess a penis, though their penetrative capability is often hinted at. Similarly, the charge that *molles* have a feminine body is standard,²⁷ but rarely if ever is it claimed that they possess a vagina.

In their foundation myth, then, the tribades are characterized as a divine joke and a parallel/contrast with passive men; manly to their femininity, active to their passivity. They were not merely mythical, however: the real-world implications of the existence of such women were explored around the same time by Seneca the Elder.

The Would-Be Man: Seneca the Elder

Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae* is a teaching manual in legal rhetoric featuring unusual law cases and strategies to be used for or against the defendants involved. In recounting the case of a priestess prostitute who had killed an attempted rapist, Seneca takes some examples of how bad orators might use obscenity to plead their case, something to be avoided by good orators. One example comes from Scaurus, rhetor and consul suffect in 21 CE, who quotes with disapproval the Greek orators Hybreas (fl. c. 30 BCE) and Grandaus (unknown date) on another, very special case:

²⁵ Boehringer 2007, pp. 263-4 has a comprehensive list of sources which put forward this interpretation.

²⁶ Boehringer 2007, pp. 263-7.

²⁷ Williams 1999, pp. 125-159, cited in Boehringer 2007, p. 264.

“Hybreas,” he (Scaurus) said, “when he spoke on the case of the man [*illo*] who caught tribades in the act and killed them, started to describe the emotions of the husband, on which topic one should not move forward with shameless enquiries: “I looked first at the “man” [ἄνδρα], (to see) if there was something natural there [ἐγγεγένηται], or if it was stitched on [προσέρραπται]”. Grandaus, an equally Asiatic orator, when he spoke on the same case, said: “They would not allow adulterers to be killed because of this”, then: “but if I (*or*: they) had caught a would-be male adulterer...” [εἰ δὲ φιλάρρενα²⁸ μοιχὸν ἔλαβον...]²⁹

Where exactly lies the obscenity which Seneca and Scaurus object to? It is inquiring about the husband’s emotions during his murderous episode that is wrong, but the tribadic affair is not held to be obscene in itself – rather, it is comic. The husband’s first reaction is to look if the adulteress has a penis or “something stitched on”; this is no doubt a reference to a strap-on dildo,³⁰ with the violent image of stitching added for comic shock-effect. Dildos of this type were well-known in Greek and possibly Roman comedy and satyr plays,³¹ giving the whole legal case a twisted comedic aura. This, along with Phaedrus, is the beginning of a long tradition in which our sources focus incessantly on the doubtful existence and character of the tribade’s penetrative object.

²⁸ My reading is unorthodox; all editions I have found print the *lectio difficilior* φιλάρρενα, “fake male” here. This is a *hapax legomenon*, a compound of the extremely rare word φῆλος, “deceitful” (perhaps a cognate to the Latin *falsus*) and ἄρρην, “male”; φῆλος appears in late lexicographical works only, though a verb on the same stem, φηλώω, appears in Aeschylus, Euripides and a handful of other ancient authors (LSJ s.v. φῆλος, φηλώω; DÉ s.v. φῆλος). One ms. has a variant, φιλάρρενα (Boehring 2007, p. 269, n. 20). The two readings differ only in one having an η where the other has an ι; since in the 1st cent. BCE η and ι had become or were becoming identical in pronunciation and were frequently confused (see Allen 1987, p. 74), it is likely that φιλάρρενα was the understanding of Grandaus’ audience, no matter his intentions. Though φιλάρρην is also a *hapax*, there are dozens of compound words formed from the φιλ- stem; the only one from the φηλ- stem – βροτόφηλος - appears only in Hesychius (DÉ, s.v.). The most obvious meaning of φιλάρρην is “loving men”; however, another well attested compound word, φιλάνδριος, which is close to a synonym of φιλάρρην, can carry the meaning “loving masculine habits” (see LSJ s.v.); what is being referred to, then, is the woman whom Hybreas called “the man” and her appropriation of the masculine role of the adulterer; she is “an adulterer who longs to be a man”.

²⁹ Sen. *Controv.* 1.2.23.

³⁰ Boehring 2007, pp. 146-50 rightly points out that references to women and dildos have been grossly over-interpreted by male scholars as necessarily referring to female homosexuality; in fact that connection is made first by Hybreas in the text under discussion.

³¹ Marshall 2006, pp. 62-4.

Though the text is short, it is full of subtle implications. Scaurus introduces the defendant with the demonstrative pronoun *illo*, which indicates that he and his case are well-known.³² The tribade thus enters our sources already as a figure of some repute. Scaurus calls *both* women involved tribades, yet Hybreas had differentiated them by sexual roles. One he calls ἄνδρα, both “man” and “husband”, referring to the woman who had arrogated the role of the male adulterer and replaced the husband in the sexual act – the defendant’s wife is then the γυνή, both “woman” and “wife”. In this way Hybreas puts tribades into the active/passive sexual system prevalent in the ancient world, where the woman is supposed to be passive, the man active.³³ The tribade confuses the system: She is an active woman, a “would-be male”.

The ancient world did not possess different words for active and passive female lovers as it did for their male counterparts.³⁴ For the sake of convenience, I propose to coin a word to describe the passive partner, calling her the *tribomena*, from the passive participle of the verb which gives the tribade her name. This does not reflect ancient discursive practices, but it does reflect their way of thinking about female-female sex, as will become clear.

The word tribade appears in Scaurus’ quote only, but not in Hybreas or Grandaus. Did they use it in their speeches? Scaurus uses a Greek conjugation rather than a Latin one (*tribadas* instead of *tribades*), emphasising the word’s origins; this could hint that he took it from Hybreas’ or Grandaus’ seeming penchant for using Greek on sexual topics. Hallet has argued that Roman authors systematically Hellenized their references to female homosexuality in order to remove it from Roman reality;³⁵ this is quite likely the case here.

Seneca and his sources bring the tribade from the mythical world to the real and consider the consequences of her existence. Adultery is now possible between two women; penetration has ceased to be the exclusive domain of males. There are would-be men among them; women who take on their roles in sex. This has thrown the Roman sexual system into turmoil which is both

³² OLD s.v. *ille* A. 4.

³³ On which see Parker 1997, though I take issue with his analysis of tribadism below.

³⁴ On these different words (*vir*, ἄνηρ, ἐραστής for the active man; παιδικά, μαλθακός, κίναϊδος, ἐρόμενος, *cinaedus*, *mollis*, *pathicus* etc. for the passive) see Dover 1989, Williams 1999 *passim*.

³⁵ Hallet 1997.

amusing – as seen in the comic elements of the case – and dangerous: in the world of the tribade, two women cannot be left alone together without suspicion.

The Clitoris and the Sphinx: Martial

The figure of the manly-bodied would-be male tribade was especially prevalent in the 1st cent. CE. She came to be associated with Philaenis, an infamous female sex-manual writer. This manual is first mentioned in a number of 3rd cent. BCE sources,³⁶ and three fragments of it are extant. In one of them Philaenis identifies herself as the manual's author;³⁷ however, it is most often assumed that this is the *nom-de-plume* of an unnamed male pornographer, as indeed some of our sources hint at.³⁸

Martial (38-41 CE – 102-104 CE) is the first author to make this connection between Philaenis and tribadism, in two epigrams.³⁹ The first describes her excesses in matters of sex, food, drink and bodily training in the most grotesque terms:

Philaenis the tribade fucks boys in the ass [*pedicat*]

And more rabid [*saevior*] than a husband's⁴⁰ cock [*tentigine*]

She hews down [*dolat*]⁴¹ eleven girls a day.

She swings the ball from the hip,

Coats herself yellow with sand

³⁶ AP 7.345, 7.450; Ath. 335b-e, 457e; Plb. 12.13.12.

³⁷ P. Oxy. 2891, published by Lobel 1972, emended by Tsantsanoglou 1973 and Parker 1989.

³⁸ AP 7.345, 7.450. Boehringer 2007, pp. 275-314 is to my knowledge the only good study of Philaenis; see also Parker 1992.

³⁹ There has been a tendency to consider Martial's Philaenis as unrelated to the sex-manual writer; she is seen as a different figure by Harvey 1996, p. 89, n. 24 and is not mentioned in Maas 1938, Gow and Page 1965, Vessey 1976 and Parker 1992, all studies on Philaenis the writer. However, given Martial's knowledge of other sex-manual writers (see e.g. Mart. 12.43; 12.95), Philaenis' fame as such and the later sources connecting Philaenis the writer and tribadism (see below), Martial's choice of name can hardly be coincidental, as Boehringer 2007, pp. 310-11 points out.

⁴⁰ Butrica 2005, p. 251 claims that *sui* should be mentally supplied here, that this is Philaenis' husband and the *pueri* are that husband's slaves. This he does, apparently without irony, in an article that criticises overconjecturing in studies of Roman sexuality.

⁴¹ Interestingly, this *dolat* has a *varia lectio*, *vorat*, "devours". In the Renaissance, this was the preferred reading, which had a small effect on the literary history of female homosexuality (see Schachter forthcoming).

And without breaking sweat twirls around weights
That would leave the muscly boy-toys [*draucis*] panting.
Covered in mud from the sands of the wrestling-school
She has an oily trainer beat her back;
She does not eat or lie down before
Spewing up six pints of strong wine,
And thinks she can come right back to drinking
After stuffing her face with sixteen meatballs.
Then finally getting horny [*libidinatur*]
She does not suck cock – not manly enough!
But devours [*vorat*] girls' middles.
May the gods grant you a mind of your own, Philaenis,
Who thinks it manly to lick a cunt!⁴²

The latter epigram, however, is simplicity itself:

Tribade of the very tribades, Philaenis,
Rightly do you call the woman you fuck [*futuis*] your girlfriend [*amicam*].⁴³

The shocking opening line of the first epigram takes the tribadic confusion of the Roman sexual system even further; a woman penetrates boys⁴⁴ before moving onto a group of girls; at the end, she refuses fellatio but performs cunnilingus with gusto. She has decided – wrongly and

⁴² Mart. 7.67.

⁴³ Mart. 7.70.

⁴⁴ Which theme had been broached before by Seneca the Younger (*Ep.* 95.20-1), without calling the women in question tribades (no sex with women is mentioned, though Hallet 1997, p. 261 sees allusions to it). Martial seems to have been inspired by this theme of Seneca's and by Ovid's story of Iphis and Ianthe in writing this epigram; see Hallet 1997, pp. 261-5.

hilariously, in Martial's view – that these are the ways in which she will guard the virility for which she works so hard in the gym and the symposium. There she again exceeds all boundaries, performing athletic feats in the former and drinking and eating excessively in the latter. However, none of this makes her a true man; like Grandaus' tribade, she is "a wannabe male".

We should note that Philaenis does not have sex with women exclusively, though Martial takes her as the figurehead of tribadism; she is not "homosexual" in our modern sense of the word. Yet *bisexuality* is not the focus of the poems either; instead, it is Philaenis' ability to penetrate that is their focus. She is the subject of two verbs, *pedico*, "to fuck in the ass", and *futuo*, "to cunt-fuck", which are otherwise restricted to male subjects.⁴⁵ How does Philaenis do this? A third epigram by Martial presents that question as a riddle:

Since I never saw you, Bassa, in the company of men,
Yet a crowd of your own sex was always around you
Attending to every task, with no man at hand,
I swear, you seemed like a Lucretia to me.
But you, by God, Bassa – you were a fucker [*fututor*]!
You dare to join twin cunts together
And your monstrous desire [*prodigiosa... Venus*] imitates [*mentitur*] a man [*virum*].
You have invented a spectacle [*monstrum*] worthy of the Theban [i.e. the Spinx'] riddle:
Here, where there is no man, there is still adultery.⁴⁶

Bassa's epigram deals with a remarkably similar question as the court case cited by Seneca must have done: Is it adultery when there is no man involved? Defying all reason, there are fucked women and a male fucker [*fututor*] in an all-female company. This is said to be a spectacle [*monstrum*], a theme which we will see again in the tribadic tradition.

⁴⁵ Adams 1982, pp. 118-25.

⁴⁶ Mart. 1.90.

Boehringer maintains that since Martial does not explicitly call Bassa a tribade, she is not to be identified as one, Bassa then representing another Roman tradition about female homosexuality.⁴⁷ However, the reason that Martial does not call Bassa a tribade, unlike Philaenis, is clear: that would give away the answer to his riddle. As evidenced in Seneca's court case, adultery without men *is* possible, if one of the women is a tribade.

Martial's riddle is held to be worthy of one of Greece's most famous monsters, the Sphinx; the mystery of Bassa's penetrative object, the instrument by which she becomes a tribade, is an enigma like that which confronted Oedipus.⁴⁸ This enigma and the erotic search for its answer will be revealed as one of the main characteristics of the tribadic tradition. Modern scholars have done their part in this search, devoting much attention to Martial's formulation *prodigiosa Venus*, which seems to lie at the heart of the mystery.⁴⁹ Shackleton Bailey suggests that it refers to the clitoris;⁵⁰ Hallet interprets all three epigrams as maintaining that the tribade was literally phallic; she has a (pseudo-)penis with which she could penetrate.⁵¹ Brooten, following a long scholarly tradition, identifies this penis with the clitoris, and claims that the ancients believed the tribades to have clitorises so large that they could "imitate a man", become erect and penetrate.⁵² Butrica and Montiel ridicule this and claim that the instrument in question is obviously a strap-on dildo.⁵³

However, Sphinx' riddles rarely have obvious answers. As I will show below, the connection between the tribade and the phallic clitoris was made some eleven centuries after Martial and retrojected onto him and other sources in the tribadic tradition; until recently, scholarship on

⁴⁷ Boehringer 2007, pp. 330-1.

⁴⁸ This could also be a joke in itself; the answer to the riddle which the Sphinx put to Oedipus was "a man", but that is not *quite* the solution to the riddle of Bassa.

⁴⁹ As Boehringer 2007, p. 323 points out, this is a clear reference to Ovid's story of Iphis and Ianthe, where Iphis describes her own love for Ianthe as *cura... prodigiosa novaeque veneris* (*Met.* 9.727). Since this story does not fit into the tribadic tropes (though it perhaps hints in their direction), I will not discuss it here; see Boehringer's excellent chapter on it (2007, pp. 232-60).

⁵⁰ Shackleton Bailey 1993, p. 109.

⁵¹ Hallet 1997, p. 262.

⁵² Brooten 1996, pp. 49-50, 162-71; Boehringer 2007, pp. 333-4 has a list of modern scholars who have promoted this view.

⁵³ Butrica 2005, p. 253; Martos Montiel 2007, p. 24.

female homosexuality has accepted this retrojection as an interpretive model and presented it as the view of antiquity. The evidence, however, that the ancients held this view is very slight.⁵⁴

Yet both modern scholars and the ancients agree on the importance of the penetrative object. I propose that shifting the defining feature of the tribade from one particular phallic fantasy object to another is hardly a great stride forward in our knowledge of her discourse. Perhaps the focus of the tribade's reception should *not* be the identification of her penetrative instrument at all, but the examination of *why* the focus has, for thousands of years, remained firmly on the tribade's crotch; inspecting it, like the cuckolded husband in Seneca's court case, as to the nature of her penis.

The Other Symposium: Lucian

Only one text from antiquity takes tribadism⁵⁵ as its central theme and gives it a substantial treatment. This is Lucian of Samosata's 5th *Dialogue of the Courtesans* (written c. 160 CE).⁵⁶ These *Dialogues* are short, fictional talks about or between *hetairai*, mostly about topics dear to the also *hetaira*-centric New Comedy, such as pimps, jealousies, comic misunderstandings and love advice.⁵⁷ However, the fifth *Dialogue* is very much the odd one out; it is the only one to explicitly discuss sex, and very transgressive sex at that: to use anachronistic terms, it is a threesome between a prostitute, another woman and her transgender, cross-dressing wife/husband, set in the form of a satire of Plato's *Symposium*.⁵⁸

In the Platonic manner, it is a frame story: the *hetaira* Leaena is asked by her friend Clonarium about strange rumours to the effect that "Megilla, that rich woman from Lesbos, loves [ἐρᾶν] you like a man, and that you two have sex [συνεῖναι],⁵⁹ doing God knows what to each other!"

⁵⁴ Boehringer 2007, pp. 332-5 and below.

⁵⁵ Boehringer 2007, pp. 349-356 maintains that the women of *DMeretr.* 5 are not meant to represent tribades; I will argue against this below.

⁵⁶ Boehringer 2007, p. 349.

⁵⁷ Gilhuly 2006, pp. 277-8.

⁵⁸ On the connection between Pl. *Smp.* and Luc. *DMeretr.* 5, see Blondell & Boehringer 2014. Petronius' *Satyricon* similarly satirized Pl. *Smp.* and its treatment of female homosexuality, but it falls outside of the tribadic tradition and will not be treated here; on that text, see Boehringer 2007, pp. 314-21.

⁵⁹ This must be the correct meaning (see LSJ s.v. σύνειμι, II.2), not "live with each other", as MacLeod's Loeb translation (1961, p. 379) and Brooten's interpretation (1996, p. 333) have it. MacLeod seems to be bowdlerizing, but Brooten is attempting to establish the existence of female same-sex marriage in the ancient world, and so

Leaena admits this, but says she is “ashamed, because it’s not normal [ἀλλόκοτον]”. Clonarium then immediately asks the question that Martial had refused to answer: “What is it that you *do* when you have sex [συνῆτε]?” When Leaena falls silent, Clonarium gets passive-aggressive: “See? You don’t love [φιλεῖς] me. If you did, you wouldn’t hide such things from me.” This prompts Leaena to offer a contrast: “I do love [φιλῶ] you, if I love any woman. But *that woman* is terribly manly [δεινῶς ἀνδρική].”⁶⁰

As was implicit in Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium*, there is a normal and an abnormal way for women to love women. Leaena’s feelings towards Clonarium are good and proper, but the masculinity of the rich Lesbian Megilla makes her love excessive and improper. Clonarium, well versed in Plato, picks up on this division immediately: “I don’t understand what you mean - unless it could be a *hetairistria*! They say that there are women like that in Lesbos, with manly faces [ἀρρενωπούς] who refuse to submit [πάσχειν] to men, but make love [πλησιαζούσας]⁶¹ to women like they themselves were men.” Leaena agrees that it is “something like that”.

Here, Lucian creates a preliminary definition of the *hetairistria*, placing her in Lesbos, characterizing her as manly in character and aggressively active in her sexual behaviour. Except for the reference to Lesbos, which is novel,⁶² this agrees with the tribadic tropes already discussed. In this period, writers on Sappho started focusing more on her sexuality than her poetry;⁶³ this could explain the Lesbian reference. Clonarium asks Leaena to tell the whole story, creating the dialogue’s second frame. Leaena explains that Megilla the Lesbian had organized a

prefers this meaning of σύνειμι, which “was used in marriage contracts”. However, in the *Dialogue*, Megilla/Megillus is said to be married to *Demonassa*, not Leaena, and nothing in the text indicates any interest on Leaena’s part in marrying, or indeed living with, Megilla/Megillus. It is the *sex* that has Clonarium so excited and perplexed, not questions of marriage. Cameron 1998 argues against the validity of Brooten’s evidence for female same-sex marriage in antiquity; but see also Bagnall 1998.

⁶⁰ Luc. *DMeretr.* 5.1.

⁶¹ “consort with”, according to MacLeod 1961, p. 381, but see LSJ s.v. πλησιάζω, II.3. Glazebrook 2005, p. 131 notes that this verb is “the common term orators use to refer to the sexual relationship between a *hetaira* and her client”.

⁶² This is either the second or the first ancient source that connects Lesbos with female homosexuality. The earlier candidate is Anacr. 358, but that poem has been conjectured to connect Lesbos and fellatio instead (see Page 1987, p. 143; Boehringer 2007, pp. 58-66).

⁶³ See Ov. *Her.* 15.15-20, 201-3; P. Oxy. 1800 fr. 1; Porphyr. in Hor. *Epist.* 1.19.28. I will discuss Sappho and tribadism below.

drinking party along with another woman, Demonassa of Corinth (a city known for its prostitutes).⁶⁴ She is described as similarly rich and “of the same trade/art” [ὁμοτέχνος] as Megilla; what trade or art is meant is left to the reader’s imagination.⁶⁵

Leaena was taken along to play the cithara for the revellers, but when the party had ended, the drunken Megilla invited Leaena to sleep between her and Demonassa.⁶⁶ Leaena related that they started to “kiss me like men, not just with the lips but with open mouths, and they put their arms around me and squeezed my breasts.” Demonassa even bit her between kisses. Her next remarks are difficult to translate - “I had no idea what to make of it” is the closest one comes: Literally, she was *unable to make a comparison* [εἰκάσαι] between what was happening and anything else she had experienced or heard about. The all-female threesome in foreplay was unprecedented both for her and indeed for ancient literature in general.⁶⁷

Then a shocking turnaround happens. Megilla takes off her wig, revealing a shaved athlete’s head, and asks Leaena whether she has ever seen “such a beautiful young man” [καλὸν νεανίσκον]. Leaena answers that she cannot see any young man anywhere, to which Megilla replies “Do not make a woman out of me [καταθήλυνέ], for my name is Megillus and I’ve been married [γεγάμηκα] to Demonassa here for ages – she’s my wife [γυνή].”

The final word of the sentence comes as a shock.⁶⁸ In the beginning of this passage, a variety of demonstratives, participles and pronouns in the feminine gender mark Megilla out as female.⁶⁹ But when Megilla introduces herself as Megillus, all such markers disappear. Being a frame story, this revelation is framed by two instances of the verb of saying. Before the revelation, Megilla’s gender is marked by a feminine personal pronoun before the verb; after it, this verb stands alone

⁶⁴ Boehringer 2007, p. 295, n. 121.

⁶⁵ One obvious explanation, given the name and theme of Lucian’s work, is that they are both *hetairai*. On prostitution as *technê*, see e.g. D. 59.18. However, as Blondell & Boehringer 2014, p. 246 note, there is no direct evidence for this; instead, they suggest that the *technê* is the sexual technique of a *hetairistria*.

⁶⁶ Luc. *DMeretr.* 5.2.

⁶⁷ Boehringer 2010, pp. 41-2.

⁶⁸ This tactic is common in the tribadic tradition; in Martial, see e.g. *adulterium* in 1.90.10; *Philaenis* in 7.67.1 (the feminine gender of the name comes as a shock); *amicam* in 7.70.2; in Seneca the Elder προσέρραπται (“stitched on”), and γυναῖκες (“let women also...!”) in [Luc.] *Am.* 28; see below.

⁶⁹ οὔσα, αὐτή, ἀποκεκαρμένη, ἡ.

without an expressed subject. The language of the passage refuses to contradict Megillus' masculine identity. This has an extraordinary effect on the last word of the sentence, γυνή, which has the root meaning "woman", but when used by a man and modified by a possessive pronoun, means *wife*.⁷⁰

As so often, the reaction to shock is laughter. Leaena is amused by Megillus' words and starts to ask him a series of questions in a parody of the Socratic *elenchus*, trying to define him out of the ambiguity which he has created by using the Greek world's common frame of reference, myth. "So, Megillus; you were fooling us and you were really some man all the time, in the same way as Achilles when he hid among the girls,⁷¹ and you have that thing that men have [τὸ ἀνδρεῖον ἐκεῖνο] and you do [ποιεῖς]⁷² Demonassa like men do?", she asks. "No, Leaena", he answers, "I do not have that. I don't need it at all. You'll see that I have a certain method of my own [ἴδιον... τρόπον] which is much more pleasant in love-making [ὀμιλοῦντα]." Leaena attempts another myth: "But you're not a Hermaphroditus, like many people are said to be, having both parts [ἀμφότερα]"? Megillus replies: "No; on the contrary, I'm *all man* [τὸ πᾶν ἀνήρ]."⁷³

Leaena makes a final attempt, asking Megillus if he is like Tiresias, metamorphosed from one sex to the other by a god. Up until this point, the text has remained gender-ambiguous as regards

⁷⁰ Cameron 1998, pp. 138-144 objects to this view of the passage, taking many examples that show that the verb γαμέω, which has the root meaning "to marry", could quite often be nothing more than a euphemism for βινέω, "to fuck". However, this can hardly apply here. First of all, Cameron mentions but does not take into account that Demonassa is referred to as Megillus' γυνή at the end of the contested sentence, fixing the possibly ambiguous meaning of γαμέω as "to marry". Secondly, the perfect tense of the verb γαμέω is strange if the verb taken to mean "to fuck", as the perfect denotes a finished state with continuing effect. With the meaning "to marry", it implies "I had a marriage ceremony with (finished state) and now I am married to (continued effect) Demonassa". With the meaning "to fuck", the perfect is hard to read - why is Megillus telling Leaena that she "fucked Demonassa once, ages ago"? Cameron makes the case that Megillus is mainly stressing that he/she is capable of penetration. That is certainly hinted at even if the meaning is "to marry", but Lucian is obviously building up an ambiguity around that very question, not answering it straight out. Blondell & Boehringer 2014, p. 245 suggest that Lucian is deliberately playing around with the ambiguity of the verb.

⁷¹ See Stat. *Ach.* 283-396.

⁷² This use of ποιεῖω for "have sex with" is unparalleled, according to Cameron 1998, p. 143; but see Phot. s.v. Ἑρμαφρόδιτος: ἢ τὸν ἀμφότερα ἔχοντα τὰ μόρια, ἀρρένων καὶ θηλειῶν, φασίν· ἢ τὸν αἰσχροῦς καὶ ποιοῦντα καὶ πάσχοντα, where ποιεῖω obviously means "to have [active] sex with" when contrasted with πάσχω. The connections between hermaphroditism and tribadism are fascinating. The prudish ambiguity of Leaena's choice of words throughout is humorous.

⁷³ Luc. *DMeretr.* 5.3.

Megillus, but in this answer, the tension breaks and the feminine gender wins out. “No, Leaena”, he says, “I was born the same [ὁμοία, feminine] as any other woman, such as yourself. However, my mind [γνώμη] and desire [ἐπιθυμία] and everything else belongs to a man.”⁷⁴ Leaena cannot resist a joke: “And is that desire of yours *big enough* [ἰκανή]?” Megillus starts pleading: “Just give it a chance, Leaena, if you don’t believe me; you’ll soon know that there’s nothing lacking in me [ἐνδέουσάν με, feminine] that men have; I have something instead of the male part [τοῦ ἀνδρείου]. So give it a chance, you’ll see!”

Leaena is then careful to disclaim that she was not only begged but also *paid* for doing what Megillus wanted – in the end, Leaena was a *hetaira* and Megillus a client. Then “I threw my arms around her like I would around a man, and she did me [ἐποίει] and kissed me and breathed hard, and seemed to me to enjoy herself excessively [ἐς ὑπερβολήν].” The gender ambiguity is utterly broken: All pronouns are in the feminine. The reader’s interest has reached a fever pitch, and accordingly Clonarium asks “*What* did she do [ἐποίει], Leaena? *What* was “the method” [τρόπον]? Please, please tell me!” But Leaena refuses to say any more: “Do not ask for any details – it’s shameful. By the heavenly Aphrodite [μὰ τὴν οὐρανίαν], I won’t tell!”⁷⁵ So ends the dialogue.

Demonassa disappears completely as soon as Megillus takes off his wig. In that moment, the sexual encounter changes from a three-woman threesome engaged in non-penetrative foreplay to two-partner tribade-*tribomena* sex, with penetration hinted at but left in doubt. Leaena describes the first part as unprecedented, but does not shy away from describing it in detail; the latter, however, she calls shameful and refuses divulge anything about it, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps and simultaneously assuming that the reader *has* a frame of reference with which to fill those gaps. That frame is the tribadic tradition, and this kind of playful reticence to divulge information is one of its hallmarks.

⁷⁴ Boehringer 2010, p. 36 jokingly remarks that if one is not careful, one could assume that Lucian here invents the sex/gender dichotomy.

⁷⁵ Luc. *DMeretr.* 5.4.

Of course, the word tribade is not used in the *Dialogue*, but rather the much older word *hetairistria*. Nevertheless, it is clear that the cultural image of the tribade saturates Lucian's characterization of Megilla/Megillus.⁷⁶ In the same period, as we shall see, Ptolemy the astrologer talked about hidden and public tribades; Megilla/Megillus plays both roles, passing as a woman at first but later "shows off her conquest" – Demonassa – "as if she were her lawful wife", to use Ptolemy's formulation. The masculine character arrogated by Megillus fits in well with Seneca's "would-be man" and Martial's Philaenis, who outdoes men in their stereotypical pursuits. Like Philaenis, Megillus is said to resemble an athlete. Megillus is certainly performing what the astrologers, discussing tribades, called "the acts of men" in seducing, paying and making love to Leaena, and the connections between tribades and prostitutes fits in well with our astrological sources as well. Finally, lexicographers had already or were shortly about to publish works claiming the tribade and the *hetairistria* to be synonymous,⁷⁷ and later readers of Lucian took Megillus as a tribade.⁷⁸

Yet Lucian goes further than any previous source, teasingly almost bringing the reader to a definition of tribadism through the method of elimination. The tribade, according to Lucian, is neither a transvestite (like Achilles) nor a hermaphrodite (like Hermaphroditus) nor a metamorphosis (like Tiresias). She is something else: Physically a woman born with the desires and mind of a man, with a sexual method all her own – but right at the moment when this method is about to be revealed, Lucian pulls back. It is a model of successful pornographic writing, and the tribade's sexual method – her riddle – is the perfect pornographic object. It is purposefully never quite uncovered; the reader is to excitingly look for it, but, always maintaining the sexual tension, never quite find it.

Boehringer has argued that Lucian's goals are much more ambitious than just repeating the tribadic tropes we have seen in other authors. His account is much more playful, artful and

⁷⁶ As Boehringer admits (2007, p. 354-6), despite disagreeing with the tribadic interpretation of this text.

⁷⁷ The lexicographers' dates tend to be tentative: Timaeus is said to be born between the 1st and the 4th cent. CE and Moeris between the 2nd and the 3rd (BNP s.v.)

⁷⁸ See my chapters on Ps.-Lucian and Arethas below.

complex than anything that we have hitherto seen or will see hereafter in this research.⁷⁹ This, however, does not mean that the *Dialogue* has nothing to do with the tribade, as Boehringer has implied.⁸⁰ In playing with the tribadic tradition, Lucian gives us the most interesting version of it that has survived into our age. He pokes fun not only at the image of the tribades but of his contemporary readers who are insatiably curious about them, reflected in Clonarium's frantic, erotic questioning of Leana.⁸¹

As if to continue Lucian's joke, modern scholars are mirrored in Clonarium: they have long attempted, as with Bassa's "monstrous lust", to guess precisely what Leana refused to tell her: the details of the tribadic method. Brooten takes Megillus' reference to his "mind and desires of a man" as the heart of the matter and argues that "for Lucian sexual love between women does not originate from women's having male genitals. For Lucian, the mind seems to be the most powerful sex organ".⁸² Against Brooten, Winkler confidently claims that the method was the use of a strap-on dildo;⁸³ Gilhuly suggests the phallic, hypertrophied clitoris which later ages took to be the tribade's defining feature.⁸⁴ Younger, seemingly basing his argument on a translation, claims that Leana referred to the sex acts as "unspeakable" which "always alluded to oral sex (since it stopped one from talking)", and goes on to suggest that "Lucian is making a joke: Megilla's penis-substitute is her tongue, and the sex was cunnilingus, which was always characterized in the ancient world as "shameful."⁸⁵ In fact, Leana called it αἰσχρά, "shameful", but used no Greek word that means "unspeakable", and it is quite bold, if amusing, to claim that

⁷⁹ Boehringer 2007, pp. 349-56 and 2010, pp. 21-48.

⁸⁰ Boehringer 2007, p. 349.

⁸¹ Boehringer 2010, pp. 42-4 talks about Clonarium's function as the audience and Leana's as the writer/orator and reminds us that we need to take Leana's account with a grain of salt, always asking what she would want to divulge and what would she want to conceal from Clonarium.

⁸² Brooten 1996, pp. 52-3.

⁸³ Winkler 1990, p. 40, n.

⁸⁴ Gilhuly 2005, p. 282.

⁸⁵ Younger 2011, p. 191.

“unspeakable” *always* suggests oral sex.⁸⁶ In short, scholars have tended to focus on Megillus’ crotch.

In fact, Lucian pokes fun at this tendency. Leaena’s refusal to divulge the secret of the tribade is accompanied by an invocation of the Heavenly Aphrodite. As Blondell and Boehringer point out, this references Pausanias’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, where he differentiates between the Heavenly (Uranian) and the Common (Pandemian) loves; the former non-physical and philosophical, the latter carnal and simple.⁸⁷ The invocation serves to remind the reader, burning with a decidedly Pandemian desire to uncover the tribadic method, that according to stern Plato he should lay all such things aside.

Lucian’s satire of the Symposium does not stop there. Plato’s symposiasts had hired a flute-player, who was often a prostitute as well,⁸⁸ but decide, in the spirit of their celebration of love between males, to send her off “to play the flutes to herself or the women within”.⁸⁹ Leaena is also a musician-*hetaira*; perhaps Lucian imagined his *Dialogue* as exploring the full consequences of the symposiasts’ decision. If men renounce the love of women for that of boys or the Beautiful and send all the courtesans to the women’s chambers, what would happen? Perhaps Lucian hints that while philosophers discuss Heavenly Love in the men’s room, there could be a tribadic orgy taking place in the women’s quarters.⁹⁰

Finally, Megillus identifies himself as a “beautiful young man”; as such, he should represent the passive, sought-after boy of Plato’s symposiasts. Instead, he is an active seducer, a satirical inversion of the Platonic world-view.⁹¹ However, the influences of New Comedy are also important here; in Menander, the typical protagonist is also a young man seeking, tricking or raping women, especially *hetairai*.⁹² To top off the Platonic connection, Megillus’ name is the

⁸⁶ Younger is perhaps thinking of Winkler 1990, p. 38: “To do something unspeakable (*arrhêtopoiein*) is precisely the word for oral-genital activity”; however, Winkler means that it is the precisely the word that the *writer he was discussing*, Artemidorus, uses for oral sex.

⁸⁷ Pl. *Smp.* 180c-186d; Blondell & Boehringer 2014, pp. 248-9.

⁸⁸ Gilhuly 2009, p. 65.

⁸⁹ Pl. *Smp.* 176e.

⁹⁰ Blondell & Boehringer 2014, p. 248. Indeed, there is a vase painting depicting a nude flute-player playing for nude women; see Gilhuly 2009, p. 65.

⁹¹ Blondell & Boehringer 2014, p. 255.

⁹² See e.g. *Dysc.* 39 or the character of Moschio in the *Samia*.

same as that of the Spartan in Plato's *Laws*, which also discusses female homosexuality. In this context, Lucian's choice of the word *hetairistria* over tribade is yet another wink at the ancient author he is satirizing. Lucian was also a consummate Atticist; he may simply have felt that the word tribade was vulgar and beneath him. If Lucian did not see these two words as synonyms, it is possible that his *Dialogue* is in itself a kind of aetiological myth explaining Plato's *hetairistria* on the basis of the etymology of their name, similar to my own excursus above:⁹³ Megillus the *hetairistria* indeed "associates with courtesans" and even pays one for her favour.

It seems curious that Lucian does not render any direct judgment on tribadism, compared to the vitriol directed against it in most of our other sources. However, there are hints at a characterization of tribadism as dangerous: Leaena describes Megillus' excessive pleasure in the sexual act, and Megillus himself boasts of his method being "much more pleasant" than anything men can offer. This reminds the reader of the myth of Tiresias, mentioned in the *Dialogue*, who had spent time as both a man and a woman and so was asked by Zeus and Hera which gender had the greater enjoyment of sex. Tiresias answered that women enjoyed it much more than men and was consequently blinded by Hera and given the gift of foresight by Zeus.⁹⁴ The anxiety that tribadic sex could actually be *preferable* to sex with a man, that men cannot compete with women in the field of sexual performance, and that women would become sexually autonomous if they could, is humorously stoked by Lucian.

This short dialogue would become one of the most important links in the tribade's reception chain. A blueprint for the literary genre of "lesbian" pornography,⁹⁵ it would become one of the prime sources for the pornographic tribade in the ancient and the Early Modern worlds.⁹⁶ Its popularity already in the centuries after its writing can be glimpsed in the next text to be discussed: a dialogue by an imitator of Lucian, similarly touching upon the tribadic tradition.

⁹³ See above, p. 4.

⁹⁴ *Ov. Met.* 3.316-50.

⁹⁵ By which I mean, of course, a genre written by men for men's sexual enjoyment, having little connection with real homosexual women.

⁹⁶ E.g. in Brântome [1582-1560] 2012, loc. 2029-48, William Walsh's 1691 *A Dialogue Concerning Women* (see Lanser 2014, p. 92) and the anonymous 1749 booklet *Satan's Harvest Home* (see Lanser 2014, pp. 76).

The Monstrous Enigma: Pseudo-Lucian

The Pseudo-Lucianic *Loves* (*Amores*), the date of which is debated, but placed somewhere between the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 4th cent. CE,⁹⁷ is another Platonic frame story in dialogue form. Its theme is the relative merit of the love of boys versus the love of women. The Athenian Callicratidas advocates boys, the Corinthian Charicles women, in the style of Plato's *Laws*.⁹⁸ These cities are not chosen at random: Athens was known for her pederasty; Corinth, as we have seen, for her female prostitutes. Tribadism turns up briefly in Charicles' speech against boy-love:

If men's sexual encounters [ὁμιλῖαι] with other men are good and proper, then let women also desire [ἐράτῳσαν] each other. Well, now! You harbinger of a new era, you legislator of strange pleasures! Having thought up new ways for men's luxury [τρυφῆς], grant that same power to women, and let them have sex [ὁμιλησάτῳσαν] with each other like men do. Let them strap themselves with licentious, artificial organs [ἀσελγῶν δὲ ὀργάνων... τέχνασμα] – seedless, monstrous enigmas [τεράστιον αἴνιγμα] – and let them make love [κοιμάσθῳσαν], woman on woman, like men do! Let that word which seldom reaches our ears - I am ashamed to utter it - the name of *tribadic licentiousness* [τριβακῆς ἀσελγείας] be paraded [πομπευέτω] freely around, let every one of our women's chambers become Philaenis, disfigured [ἀσχημονοῦσα] by androgynous desires [ἕρωτας]. And how much better is it that a woman is forced [βιάζεσθαι] into male luxury [τρυφήν] than that the nobility of males is made effeminate, made into a woman?⁹⁹

Charicles' rhetorical flourishes paint tribadism as an utter abject, monstrous and mysterious, a threat to the integrity of the Greek home, whose secluded women's chambers would turn into a page from a pornographic manual if the boy-lovers' views would prevail. All this is presented as an enforced, violent change from a natural state; a theme we will see again. If men become passive and effeminate, then women will be *forced* to become masculine and active, creating

⁹⁷ Boehringer 2007, p. 295, esp. n. 119.

⁹⁸ There, an Athenian, a Cretan and a Spartan debate about, among other things, the merits of same-sex love (see above). Ps.-Lucian satirically inverts the roles: In the *Laws*, the Athenian forbids same-sex love; in the *Loves*, he advocates it.

⁹⁹ [Luc.] *Am.* 28.

their own, self-sufficient sexual society. If there is one author whom Ps.-Lucian has read in detail, it is the real Lucian, and his description of Megillus' tribadic party is no doubt on his imitator's mind when he spoke of "androgynous desires" disfiguring the women's chambers. This degradation is exemplified by Philaenis the sex-manual writer, whom Martial had described as the epitome of the tribade, showing a continuity between the Latin and the Greek way of thinking about the tribadic tradition in the Greco-Roman world.

Unusually, however, Charicles is quite clear on what, in his mind, the tribadic method consists of: the use of strap-on dildos, already mentioned in Seneca's court-case. These he describes with fantastical, gleeful disgust, stretching the rules of syntax and grammar to make his point; they are characterized in two apposite phrases, one decrying their artificial, man-made nature, the other their almost supernatural uncanniness. First, he calls them a τέχνασμα, simultaneously "implement, artefact" and "trick, artifice", with an object genitive in ὀργάνων, which are simultaneously "tools" and "organs" of the body; the dildos are trick penises, workshop genitals. Secondly and more abstractly, he calls them an enigma worthy of a monster or a prodigy; this enigma, confusingly, takes the genitive adjective ἀσπόρων, "seedless", to which a noun must be supplied – the "organs" of the previous description. Martial's monstrous riddle was "how can there be adultery with no man present?" but Ps.-Lucian's is "how can a penis emit no seed?" The answer, seemingly, is: because it is a monstrous hybrid, at once mythical and man-made.

Charicles seems, like Lucian in his *Dialogue*, to be satirizing the Platonic side-lining of male-female love for that of men and boys, a position implicit in his Athenian opponent's stance: the disfigurement of the women's chambers is a consequence of sending the symbolic flute-girl off "to play for the women within". These texts invoke an anxiety about the Greek world's practice of confining women in the house: what if, by confining them, the patriarchy is creating the very conditions it is attempting to prevent?

Those conditions are brought about by the invasion into this private space of a book, Philaenis' sex manual; by reading it, Ps.-Lucian seems to hint, women may become insatiable. Other sources

on Philaenis present similar fears.¹⁰⁰ If Megillus was right, and tribadic sex is really much more pleasurable than sex with men, then no house is safe: Women will immediately wish to turn to tribadism if they learn of its existence, through Philaenis' book. Did this book have a section on tribadism? There is no direct evidence; it is possible that Philaenis was exemplary for the tribade simply as a woman¹⁰¹ who publicly expressed herself about sex; a public persona of this kind was seen as a role for a man, an active role, and a woman with an active role when it came to sexual matters was perhaps automatically associated, in this period, with tribadism.¹⁰² However, this does not explain why none of the other sex-manual writers, most of whom were supposedly female, was connected with tribadism in this way.¹⁰³

As Boehringler notes, the tribadic comparison with which Charicles tops his speech ends up losing him the debate; the other interlocutors agree that he went too far in his subject matter and his logical fallacies.¹⁰⁴ However, bad arguments are no lesser illuminators of discourses than nuanced ones. Transmitted in one collection, Ps.-Lucian's *Loves* and Lucian's fifth *Dialogue of the Courtesans* informed later times' image of tribadism in their satiric tone and their air of fascinated repugnance.

The Defamation of Sappho: Porphyrio

Pomponius Porphyrio's name would not be much cited in classical scholarship if not for his invocation of the tribadic tradition. His early 3rd cent. CE commentary on Horace makes a connection which had an enormous influence on the reputation of the ancient world's most famous female author. Commenting on Horace's cryptic appellation *mascula Sappho*,¹⁰⁵ he theorizes that "she is masculine either because she is devoted to poetry, which is generally a

¹⁰⁰ E.g. Priap. 63, where a girl meets her "fucker" under Priapus' statue to have sex, but "goes away horny" because she had demanded more than said fucker could deliver: sex in "as many positions as Philaenis drew up". See also Justin *Apol.* 1.70.2; Clem.Al. *Protr.* 4.60.12, 61.23, where Christian authors worry about the public's destructively easy access to Philaenis.

¹⁰¹ Of course, the book was likely not written by a woman at all; see above, p. 17. However, it was readily accepted as such in antiquity, which is what matters here.

¹⁰² On women's exclusion from the public sphere, see Pomeroy 1975, pp. 79-92; see also Boehringler 2007, pp. 294-5, 306-7.

¹⁰³ On whom, see Parker 1992.

¹⁰⁴ Boehringler 2007, pp. 300-6.

¹⁰⁵ Hor. *Epist.* 1.19.28, 3.

masculine pursuit, or because she is defamed [*diffamatur*] as having been a tribade”.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, on a passage of Horace’s *Epodes* which discusses a certain witch and her “masculine lust”, he comments that this “refers to the fact that certain women are said to sleep with [*habere... concubitum*] women against nature and in spectacular lust [*monstrosae libidinis*], a crime for which Sappho is also ill-reputed”.¹⁰⁷ The verbal echoes with Martial are clear.

These are the *only* ancient sources which connect Sappho and tribadism,¹⁰⁸ and would serve as the catalyst of that popular connection for later times. Given Sappho’s fame as a symbol of female homosexuality, her absence from this research up to this point and beyond it may strike the reader as odd; however, it is clear that in the ancient world Sappho’s love poetry was not generally considered tribadic. After Porphyrio we first find Sappho invoked as a tribade 15th century.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps she represented another tradition: the benign homosexuality whose existence was implied by Plato.¹¹⁰

The Tribade in the Christian Tradition

The Tainted Cup: Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian

Though Paul the Apostle led the way for a number of Christian authors in condemning female homosexuality in his *Letter to the Romans*,¹¹¹ neither he nor his immediate followers used the

¹⁰⁶ Comm. in Hor. *Epist.* 1.19.28, 3: *mascula autem Sappho vel quia in poetico studio est, in quo saepius mares, vel quia tribas diffamatur fuisse.*

¹⁰⁷ Comm. in Hor. *Epod.* 5.41-2: *quod ait autem <masculae libidinis> ad id pertinet, quod dicantur quaedam mulieres habere contra naturam monstrosae libidinis concubitum cum feminis. quo crimine etiam Sappho male audiit.*

¹⁰⁸ Boehringer 2007, pp. 311-14. The Suda also mentions her “shameful friendships” with women, but does not use the word tribade (s.v. Σαπφώ α). Of course, a number of authors commented on her love for women, but did not call it tribadism; see e.g. P. Oxy. 1800, which calls her a γυναικεράστρια, a most interesting *hapax legomenon*, painting her as the female equivalent of the male *erastes*, the boy-lover, except that her objects of affection are not young girls but grown women [γυναῖκες]; this fits the remnants of her poetry, in which no age difference can be perceived between Sappho and her loves. See also Ov. *Her.* 15; Max.Tyr. 18.9.

¹⁰⁹ In Domizio Calderini’s 1474 commentary on Mart. 7.67, where he quotes Porphyrio (Calderini [1474] 1485, p. 175).

¹¹⁰ Though the dildo that appears in fr. 99 (Lobel & Page), only hesitantly ascribable to Sappho and almost without any context, sufficed one modern scholar as proof that Sappho was a tribade (!) See Boehringer 2007, p. 148, n. 29.

¹¹¹ See Brooten’s very detailed commentary on Romans 1:18-32 (1996, pp. 195-300).

word tribade.¹¹² However, Christian author Clement of Alexandria (late 2nd – early 3rd cent. CE) comes close to the tribadic tropes in a passage of his *Paedagogus*. In a diatribe against the pagans’ “luxury that confounds nature”, in which “men suffer the womanly things, and women behave like men [ἀνδρίζονται], so against nature women penetrate women and are penetrated by them [γαμούμενάι τε καὶ γαμοῦσαι].” This is “unspeakable” and “a spectacle [θεάματος]”,¹¹³ a term also used by Ps.-Lucian.

Clement’s wording for tribadic sex, using the verb γαμέω in the active and passive,¹¹⁴ is very rare. It had, however, been used in his contemporary Lucian’s *True Stories*, where he describes an all-male society on the moon, in which males are penetrated until the age of 25 and thereafter become penetrators in turn. This is reminiscent of Greek pederastic practices, except that in Lucian’s society, there are no women at all.¹¹⁵ An age-differentiation system for sex roles, so familiar in the ancient world for males, had indeed been described by Plutarch (ca. 45 – 120 CE) for women: In prehistoric Sparta, he claims, “respectable women desired maidens”.¹¹⁶ Clement, then, takes the tribade and the *tribomena* as belonging to one and the same group; a society of women who spurn male society. These women are obviously not Christians; they are a pagan other.

In the same period another early Christian writer, Tertullian, mentions tribades twice in passing, listing the pagan sinful to make a rhetorical point. Remarkably, he uses a Latin translation instead of the Greek word: *fricatrix*, from *frico*, “to rub”. As will see, the astrological tome of Hermes Trismegistus used the closely related word *fricatrix* for tribade, likely in the same period. In a discussion of whether the body can be judged for its sins since it is just a vessel for the soul, Tertullian takes the analogy of a cup which has been “infected with the breath of a *fricatrix*, a

¹¹² On the general early Christian condemnation of female homosexuality, see Brooten 1996, pp. 303-359. Later Christians, however, used the word tribade, such as Caelius Aurelianus, Arethas, John Camaterus, Tzetzes and others; see below.

¹¹³ Clem.Al. *Paed.* 3.3.21.3.

¹¹⁴ As explained above, γαμέω has the standard meaning “to marry”; Brooten 1996, pp. 332-336 argues that this meaning should apply here in light of the similar use of this verb in Lucian and Ptolemy (see below), but Cameron 1998, pp. 141-2 convincingly argues that here it is merely a euphemism for “to fuck”.

¹¹⁵ Luc. *VH* 1.22; on the rarity of the formulation, see Cameron 1998, pp. 141-2.

¹¹⁶ Plu. *Lyc.* 18.4.

eunuch-priest [*archigalli*], a gladiator or a hangman”,¹¹⁷ maintaining that such a vessel is disgusting, just like the sinful body, vessel or no. Elsewhere he laments that high-class women’s dress cannot be told apart from that of prostitutes or *frictrices*.¹¹⁸ Connecting tribades and prostitutes is a familiar tactic, likewise, astrology paralleled tribades and eunuchs. The gladiator and the hang-man are more novel, but they were both despised figures in ancient Rome; the presence of each, and by analogy that of the tribade, was a source of pollution.¹¹⁹ Both Clement and Tertullian use tribades to differentiate between the new Christian order and the old pagan one; they describe the tribade as belonging to the immoral, pagan other in their societies, a real and present danger as long as paganism survived. Accordingly, as Christian power grew, Christian writers shifted their representations of the tribade from the present to the dark pagan past.

Egyptian Tales: Synesius of Cyrene

The Christian moral use of the tribade is evident in our next author. Around 400 CE,¹²⁰ Synesius, an ambassador from Cyrene to the court of Emperor Arcadius in Constantinople, wrote an allegorical work called *Egyptians; or, On Providence*, which fictionalized the Constantinopolitan political intrigues that were bringing catastrophe upon the Eastern Roman Empire. In it, the mythical Egyptian brothers Typhos and Osiris contend for the throne of Egypt. Their characters are stark and simple: Osiris is the ideal ruler, Typhos a caricature of a tyrant.¹²¹ Synesius reserves most of his venom, however, for Typhos’ scheming wife and her sexual proclivities, which involved, among other things, *hetairistria*.¹²² In translations of Synesius, this word has been bowdlerized as “women of perverse morals” or oddly rendered as “whorish women”;¹²³ if that is Synesius’ meaning, then he would be using the word without knowledge of its prior applications,

¹¹⁷ Tert. *De Res.* 16.6.

¹¹⁸ Tert. *De Pall.* 4.9.

¹¹⁹ Brooten 1996, pp. 314-320.

¹²⁰ Cameron & Long 1993, pp. 312-16 discuss the precise dating in some detail.

¹²¹ Cameron & Long 1993, pp. 1, 143-9.

¹²² Boehringer 2007, p. 111, n. 41 points out that *hetairistria* is used in this text, but does not investigate it; Brooten 1996 does not mention the text at all in her otherwise comprehensive study. I have found no scholarly work which examines Synesius’ *hetairistria*.

¹²³ Fitzgerald 1930 translates “women of perverse morals” and “courtesans”, Cameron & Long “whorish women” or “whorish attendants” for *hetairistria* in 1.13.3 (105b-d) and 1.17.2 (112c-d). The latter translation is especially odd, since Cameron has written on ancient female homosexuality and can hardly claim ignorance: see Cameron 1998.

thinking it merely a synonym for *hetaira*. However, Synesius, though he became a Christian, was educated as a Neoplatonist;¹²⁴ he must have been quite familiar with the *Symposium* and its *hetairistria*, who are manifestly not *hetairai* pure and simple.

Typhos' unnamed wife was "ambitious to distinguish herself in the most contradictory ways", being "more feminine than women in discovering yet another luxury, in adding to her beauty, and in surrendering to her nature", yet "she was more reckless than men in applying herself to a scheme and in a daring enterprise [τολμησαι]".¹²⁵ This mixture culminates in Synesius' claim that "she had assembled women who were *hetairistria* and male clients [ἄνδρας πελάτας] to enjoy their unanimity and use them [χρησθαι] according to her natural propensities at home or elsewhere."¹²⁶ Her contradictions are visible in not only sleeping with both women and men but in taking the active role with both.

After a setback in their plans for Typhos' ascension to the throne, the couple build a luxurious water-garden with islands and hot baths to keep their minds off their ill-fortune, in which they "could strip for one another among the women and mount them [ἐπιθορνύοιντο] without restraint".¹²⁷ Whether these women are the same as the recently-mentioned *hetairistria* is unclear; again, they are passive to the active sexual attentions of both Typhos and his wife. Yet this life of luxury is not enough. Typhos' wife hatches a scheme which earns her husband the kingship. He is uninterested in the daily affairs of the state, so the citizens must have recourse to his wife: "She held court quite openly, like a brothel, and used the *hetairistria* as pimps [μαστροποῖς] for her body and her business... Whoever had intercourse with her found Typhos

¹²⁴ Cameron & Long 1993, pp. 281-90.

¹²⁵ This last word recalls Plato's description of homosexuality as a τόλμημα in *Lg.* 636b-c.

¹²⁶ Synes. *De Prov.* 1.13.3 (105b-d), transl. Cameron & Long 1993, as with the quotations that follow, with emendations: Besides the above-mentioned emendation of the translation of *hetairistria*, Cameron & Long translate πελάτας as "their hangers-on" (hangers-on of the *hetairistria*, then?) A more likely translation is "the clients [of Typhos]", who would be the ideal yes-men; their sexual use paints Typhos' wife in even darker colours. Fitzgerald, strangely, translates πελάτας as "pimps"; this is not supported by the LSJ.

¹²⁷ Synes. *De Prov.* 1.14.34 (107d). Cameron & Long prefer a different reading, seemingly because they feel that it is strange that both Typhos and his wife "mount" the women; but if one takes *hetairistria* as meaning tribade, this difficulty disappears; see Cameron & Long 1993, p. 366, n. 160.

gracious - he was tame and submissive toward the women's quarters, especially since he was grateful for their having obtained his throne for him.”¹²⁸

Synesius contrasts images: The wife’s governance is public and shameless in its injustice and in its all-female character; a woman rules and women-oriented women carry out her business and service her body – though whether it is with their own bodies or those of others is unclear. This open government is characterized as “the women’s quarters”, traditionally an enclosed space. The comparison has echoes of Ps.-Lucian: the women’s quarters have become like a public, perverse brothel, but here the brothel rules the land.¹²⁹

The Sprouting Penis: Byzantine Scholars and the Tribade

During the Byzantine Middle Ages one starts to see the tribadic tradition becoming antiquated and needing explanation and commentary by scholars. Glossing Lucian’s *Dialogue*, Arethas, bishop of Caesarea (born c. 850 CE), explained the *hetairistria* as “the same as tribades”, but then ventured an etymological explanation of the tribade’s name: “Perhaps (they are so called) because they rub against each other [συντριβεσθα].”¹³⁰ This is the first and only suggestion of rubbing as the sexual method of the tribade, despite the obvious etymology: Arethas can only propose it as a hypothetical.

Arethas tends to be dismissed as an insignificant source.¹³¹ However, he made a very interesting suggestion for a solution to the tribadic riddle in another gloss on the same text. On Leaena’s mention of Tiresias the seer, Arethas relates a story from the historian Diodorus Siculus which he claims is “about something similar”; a woman named Callo who “sprouted the male part [τὸ ἀνδρεῖον ἀναβλαστῆσαι]” in adulthood, whereupon she “revolted against the women’s chambers and wool-work, adopted men’s clothing, changed her name to Callon and became a

¹²⁸ Synes. *De Prov.* 1.17.2 (112c-d).

¹²⁹ Synesius’ depiction of a tribadic sect as a corrupt political force would resurface in early modernity, especially in the booklet *La secte anandryne, ou la nouvelle Sapho*, published just before and enjoying much popularity in the French Revolution; on this booklet and others like it, see Lanser 2014, pp. 193-221.

¹³⁰ Schol. ad Luc. *DMeretr.* 5.1 (Rabe 1906, p. 277).

¹³¹ Campbell 1998, p. 146, *passim*; Halperin 2002, p. 233.

soldier”.¹³² In fact, Arethas is conflating two stories from Diodorus about women, named Heraïs and Callo, who suddenly acquired male genitals in adulthood.

Diodorus maintains that this is not the stuff of myth; in both cases there were doctors who inspected and diagnosed the women in minute details, performing cosmetic or corrective surgery on their newly emerged penises. This is a *logos* rather than a *mythos*.¹³³ Diodorus explicitly rejects the view that Heraïs (and so presumably Callo) was a hermaphrodite,¹³⁴ as Megillus also rejected being in Lucian’s *Dialogue*. Megillus had insisted that he was “born the same as any woman”, yet had “everything a man has”; as Arethas saw it, this leaves an opening. Megillus could have been *born* a woman but sprouted a penis at a later point in his life, subsequently adopting a new, transgressive social role (“mind and desires of a man”).

As Laqueur put it, anatomy is destiny:¹³⁵ both Heraïs and Callo renounced their female roles after the emergence of the male parts, and Heraïs indeed became a soldier (though not Callo). Arethas suggests a scientific, natural explanation to the Sphinx’ riddle. Tribadism was of some interest to the bishop: On Ps.-Lucian’s *Loves* he glosses Philaenis, defining her as “a *hetairistria* and a tribade”,¹³⁶ and on the passage of Clement of Alexandria discussed above, he interprets it as being about “the disgusting [μιαρὰς] tribades, whom they also call *hetairistriai* and Lesbians [Λεσβίαι]”.¹³⁷

Also around the 10th century, the *Suda* was compiled, a massive Byzantine encyclopedia. This contained two instances of the word tribade, one using it as a synonym of *hetairistria*,¹³⁸ the

¹³² Scol. ad Luc. *DMeretr.* 5.1 (Rabe 1906, p. 277).

¹³³ Though he does admit that it may seem too strange to believe. The stories are told in D.S. 32.10-11.

¹³⁴ D.S. 32.10.4-5.

¹³⁵ Laqueur 1990, p. 25; *passim*.

¹³⁶ Scol. ad [Luc.] *Am.* 28 (Rabe 1906, p. 205). See Cameron 1998, pp. 144-49 on the story behind this scholion, which is of some importance for the study of Philaenis.

¹³⁷ Scol. ad Clem.Al. *Paed.* 3.3.21.3; cited in Cameron 1998, p. 144. This has been taken as the earliest use of the modern sense of the word lesbian (Cassio 1983; Brooten 1996, p. 337), though given Arethas’ reading of Luc. *DMeretr.* 5, which associated the island with *hetairistriai*, it has been suggested that the term does not reflect a dominant discourse but merely Arethas’ inference from that text (Cameron 1998, p. 149).

¹³⁸ Suid. s.v. Ἐταιρίστριαι.

other in an entry on dildos, which explains that these had been (note the past tense)¹³⁹ used by "Milesian women; similarly, tribades and fouldoers [αἰσχουργοί]; they were also used by widowed women."¹⁴⁰ The "fouldoers" are no doubt masturbating women. The Milesians were known for making dildos,¹⁴¹ and the connection between strap-on dildos and tribadism is familiar. However, including widows in this group is interesting; the very Byzantine worry about widows' sexual transgressions also shows up in our next source.

Two centuries after Arethas and the Suda, another Byzantine scholar, John Tzetzes (c. 1110 – 1180 CE), mentioned tribades in his commentary on Hesiod's *Works and Days*. On Hesiod's disturbing recommended age disparity between bride and bridegroom, he remarks "in my opinion, these girls should marry different men from those he recommends. By joining them with these much older men, he all but recommends that they commit disgrace [ἀφουβρικέναι] in bed with them. For only a small time will pass before the men will be weak from old age, but the girls, having reached the bloom of their youth - it is from these conditions that the manly tribade is born¹⁴² - will plot against [μηχανήσονται] their husbands."¹⁴³ Women turn into dangerous tribades due to lack of male sexual attention, according to Tzetzes, like the widows of the Suda turning to dildos. Perhaps he is also echoing Lucian and Ps.-Lucian: If left to their own devices by widowhood, women will free themselves from male sexual control and instead form relationships among themselves. Ancient medical writers did express concerns that lack of sex turned women manly, though they did not claim that she became a tribade:¹⁴⁴ that is Tzetzes' own innovation.

Tzetzes then mentions *hetairistriaí* in his commentary on Aristophanes' *Clouds*. He describes how Socrates was justly tried by the Athenians because of his abnormality and describes his oddities

¹³⁹ This tendency in the Christian world to imply that transgressive sexuality belongs to the pagan past can also be seen in Caelius Aurelianus in his chapter on *molles* (TP 4.9.131) whom *Graeci malthacos vocaverunt* (note the past tense), *quos quidem esse nullus facile virorum credit* (note the present tense).

¹⁴⁰ Suid. s.v. Ὀλισβος. The entry is based on schol. ad Ar. *Lys.* 109-10, but the scholiast does not mention tribades.

¹⁴¹ Ar. *Lys.* 109-10.

¹⁴² There is a *varia lectio*: ὁ πόθος αὐταῖς γενήσεται, "their desire will give birth to the manly tribade". This, however, makes μηχανήσονται ungrammatical. See Gaisford 1820, p. 312.

¹⁴³ Tz. ad Hes. *Op.* 693 in Gaisford 1820, p. 312.

¹⁴⁴ Hanson 1990, p. 312, n. 19 has a list of ancient medical sources.

and his poverty: “yet even living in such straits, he still had two wives cohabiting the same small house: Xanthippe and Myrto, of whom the former was a *hetairistria*, the latter his legal wife.¹⁴⁵ He would watch these argue with each other while offering a laugh every once in a while.”¹⁴⁶ The characterization of Xanthippe as a *hetairistria* is found only here. As Bicknell has pointed out, Tzetzes’ information is derived ultimately from Aristoxenus, a pupil of Aristotle (*fl.* 335 BCE). Fragments of his hostile writings on Socrates were preserved by Porphyry but those were subsequently lost; we possess only quotations from Porphyry in some late antique authors. Two of these report that Aristoxenus called Xanthippe κοινοτέραν,¹⁴⁷ literally “too common”, with discernible sexual innuendo.¹⁴⁸ Tzetzes either interpreted this himself as a reference to homosexuality or picked up that reference from another text now lost. These many stages between the original accusation and Tzetzes’ interpretation of it should warn us against taking this as a common belief.¹⁴⁹ Tzetzes no doubt knew the word *hetairistria* from Plato, thereby furnishing a connection between Socrates and female homosexuality. Tzetzes is perhaps attempting to explain why Plato was concerned with it in the first place. It is interesting in this context to recall Socrates’ dismissal of Xanthippe from his bedside in the *Phaedo*¹⁵⁰ and the stories about their strained relations;¹⁵¹ perhaps Tzetzes imagined, like he had claimed regarding old men’s young wives, that Xanthippe was a tribade due to lack of sexual attention.

The Double Venus: Tribades in Greek Science

The Long Life of the Astrological Tribade

Besides her appearance in fiction, morality tales and a law case, the tribade was often invoked in ancient scientific writing. She appears by far the most often in astrology. This does not mean that the tribade is mostly an astrological phenomenon;¹⁵² astrological texts are technical and

¹⁴⁵ On Myrto and the tradition of Socrates’ two wives (or, according to Fitton, one wife (Myrto) and one concubine (Xanthippe), see Fitton 1970.

¹⁴⁶ Tz. hypothesis ad Ar. *Nu.* in Holwerda 1960, pp. 367-8, col. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Aristox. fr. 54 = Cyril. *Adv. Jul.* 6.186; Theod. *Gr. aff.* 12.174, cited in Bicknell 1974, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ Bicknell 1974, p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ Ignoring all this, Bicknell jumps to the conclusion that “Aristoxenos himself, then, is likely to have described Xanthippe as ἑταιρίστρια” (1974, p. 2).

¹⁵⁰ Pl. *Phd.* 60.

¹⁵¹ See e.g. X. *Mem.* 2.2.7, *Smp.* 2.10; D.L. 2.36-7.

¹⁵² As Boehringer implies (2007, p. 272).

traditional and often reproduce each other's findings *verbatim*. Hence, the tribade appeared there as a rule. One of the mainstays of astrology is the explanation of phenomena that is considered to be at odds with the natural order; transgressive sexuality, such as tribadism, fell neatly into that category.

The Acts of Men: Dorotheus of Sidon

The earliest astrologer who mentions tribadism is Dorotheus of Sidon (fl. 25-75 CE)¹⁵³ in his *Carmen Astrologicum*, a very influential work in astrology.¹⁵⁴ Fragments remain of the text's original Greek, but we have an extensive Arabic translation. The Greek once speaks of an extremely complex astrological formation which makes women tribades;¹⁵⁵ likewise, the Arabic discusses homosexual women using the term *sahāqa*,¹⁵⁶ which comes from verb "to rub", just like the tribade.¹⁵⁷ The Greek no doubt had tribade where the Arabic has *sahāqa*. Dorotheus, then, is our earliest user of the word in Greek, some decades at least after its appearance in Latin.

These tribades are said to "do in women the acts of men" – a phrase that nearly every later astrologer repeats¹⁵⁸ – and are presented variously as an analogue to male passives, to men who are uninterested in sex with women or to men who lose their property due to their love for their wives, all depending on the stars' positions. These are all men who have lost their masculine prerogatives in some way; sexual dominance over others and control of the household. The stars also make one's sexual preferences more open or more secret. Grouped together with tribades are adulterous women, women who are sex-crazed or "harlots",¹⁵⁹ all groups considered exemplars of excess of sexual appetite.¹⁶⁰ It is clear that tribadism was not considered antithetical

¹⁵³ As calculated from his horoscopes by Pingree, cited in Brooten 1996, p. 119.

¹⁵⁴ Brooten 1996, pp. 119-20.

¹⁵⁵ Dorotheus. Fr. II 26.66, p. 366, 8-12 in Pingree 1976. This particular formation involves Venus, the Moon, Mars and Mercury in a variety of positions.

¹⁵⁶ Brooten 1996, p. 120, n. 16.

¹⁵⁷ Sahar 2009, p. 216. It should be stated that I do not know Arabic; my knowledge of Arabic terms and texts is second-hand.

¹⁵⁸ Besides the astrologers cited below, the phrase appears in Heph. 1.1.118 and Vett.Val. 2.17, and similar formations appear in Firm. 1.147.16, 7.25.1. These astrologers add little to what the others say, so I will not treat them separately; they parallel tribadism with male passives in anal and oral sex, sterile men, prostitutes and incestuous women. See Brooten 1996, pp. 128-30, 132-9.

¹⁵⁹ To use Pingree's translation (1976, p. 230). *Hetaira* was probably the Greek original; prostitution is discussed in this context by many other astrologers.

¹⁶⁰ Dorotheus. II 7-9; Pingree 1976, pp. 206-7; see also Brooten 1996, pp. 120-3.

to sexual passion for men (that is, “homosexual” in contrast to “heterosexual”); a very small astrological variation stands between the two.

Laborious Love: Manetho

Manetho (between 1st and 4th cent. CE)¹⁶¹ was an Egyptian astrologer and writer of a treatise in verse called *Apotelesmatica*. He mentions “tribades who perform deeds after the manner of men [ἀνδρόστροφα]”¹⁶² and a woman “who accomplished the deeds of men [ἀνδρῶν ἔργα] by sleeping with [συνευνάζοῦσα] a woman”.¹⁶³ Most remarkably, he waxes poetic about stars which “force [ἀναγκάζουσι] women to enjoy [τέρπεσθαι] manly deeds [ἀρσενικοῖς ἔργοισιν] – a great spectacle [μεγὰ θαῦμα]! In their madness for women [γυναίμανέες γὰρ ἐοῦσαι], they labour to couple [γαμέουσιν]¹⁶⁴ in their laborious love [ἀργαλέως ... ἐς ἀργαλήν φιλότητα].”¹⁶⁵

Manetho’s verse writing seems to force him into more expressive phrasings than the otherwise formulaic prose astrologers used: the stars *force* women into sex with other women, a theme we know from Ps.-Lucian; as there and in Clement, it is a spectacle, encapsulating men’s anxious position of being both fascinated by and fearful of tribadism. The tribades’ love-making, however, is difficult to accomplish; in Manetho’s imagination, the lack of a penetrative object makes their passions all but impossible to fulfil.

Diseases of the Soul: Ptolemy

Claudius Ptolemy of Alexandria, in his *Tetrabiblos* (2nd cent. CE), treats female homosexuality in a chapter called “On Diseases [παθῶν] of the Soul”.¹⁶⁶ Ptolemy explains that “the women who lust after unnatural [παρὰ φύσιν] sex, cast their eyes about (for it) and are called tribades, have sex [διατιθέασιν] with women, performing the deeds of men [ἀνδρῶν ἔργα ἐπιτελοῦσαι]. If Venus

¹⁶¹ On his dates, see Brooten 1996, p. 123.

¹⁶² Man. 4.358. “After the manner of men” is the LSJ translation (LSJ s.v. ἀνδρόστροφος). The word appears only in Manetho. ἀνδρόστροφα ἔργα parallels ἀνδρῶν ἔργα or *viriles actus* in the other astrologers (Brooten 1996, p. 123, n. 32), but it is still an interesting turn of phrase in itself. Does it mean “acts which twist and turn in the manner of a man”, referring to sexual method? Does it mean “acts turned towards men”, as in imitating them, or “acts which turn one into a man”, meaning that performing them makes the performer manly?

¹⁶³ Man. 5.216.

¹⁶⁴ Or “marry”: yet again, however, as Cameron 1998, pp. 138-144 shows, γαμέω was often nothing more than a euphemism for βινέω, “to fuck”.

¹⁶⁵ Man. 1.31, cited in Cumont 1937, p. 182, n. 1. Strangely, Brooten does not quote or comment on this passage of Manetho, despite often citing this very footnote in Cumont.

¹⁶⁶ Ptol. *Tetr.* 3.14.

alone is made masculine, (they do this) in secret, not publicly. If Mars is also made masculine, (they) sometimes (do this) openly, so that they show off [ἀναδεικνύειν] their conquests [διατιθεμένας] as if they were their lawful wives [νομίμας ὡσπερ γυναῖκας].”¹⁶⁷ As we have seen, the themes of secret female-female relations and of women treating their female lovers as wives were explored in that same century by Lucian.

Ptolemy reserves the name tribade for active, searching and seducing women, but their partners are merely called διατιθέμεναι, “women who are acted upon”.¹⁶⁸ This is the passive participle of the verb Ptolemy uses for the sexual act; women who are sexually attracted to men are referred to with that same verbal form.¹⁶⁹ The *tribomena* is distinguished from the tribade, but is not grouped together with her; to Ptolemy, the *tribomena* is passive in the same way as any non-tribadic woman.¹⁷⁰

Like in Dorotheus, this condition can be more or less severe depending on the stars. Discussing marriage, Ptolemy mentions stars which make people “show completely off [ἀναδεικνύουσι] the diseases (of the soul) and bring them forward to public places”, while a closely related constellation of stars produces people “with hidden diseases or sterile women or people with no orifices [ἀτρήτους]”.¹⁷¹ With Mars thrown into the mix, the constellation produces “castrates or tribades”.¹⁷² The astral closeness of the inability to have sex with tribadism is remarkable.

Latin Translations: the *crissatrix* and the *fricatix* of Hermes Trismegistus

The astrological work which goes under the name of the god Hermes Trismegistus was compiled in the 7th cent. CE and contains material as old as the 2nd cent. BCE. It is therefore difficult to

¹⁶⁷ Ptol. *Tetr.* 3.14.171.

¹⁶⁸ See LSJ s.v. διατίθημι B. 6, b. This grammatical meaning, referring to the active and the passive voice, is the best fit for its use here, which is quite idiosyncratic.

¹⁶⁹ Brooten 1996, pp. 126-7.

¹⁷⁰ Brooten 1996, p. 126 finds a break in the male passive/tribade parallelism in the male passive’s social exclusion compared to the tribade’s striving for marriage and therefore social recognition. However, as Cameron 1998, pp. 149-50 points out, Brooten conspicuously drops the word ὡσπερ (“as if”) in her paraphrasing of the passage, hiding Ptolemy’s irony and scorn. He surely imagines that these tribades live publicly and shamelessly; however, female-female marriage is referred to as a transgression not yet reached, but which threatens to become the next step.

¹⁷¹ On lack of orifices at birth, see also D.S. 32.11.

¹⁷² Ptol. *Tetr.* 4.5.187 = Heph.Astr. 2.21.19.

localize the work or date individual passages, though two of the three passages that mention tribadism must be older than the 4th cent. CE.¹⁷³ It has been preserved in a Latin translation that, unusually, uses Latin terms for the tribade – a word which most Latin authors preferred to transliterate rather than translate: According to Hermes Trismegistus, when Venus is in a certain position, a female child “becomes a *crissatrix* or a *fricatrix* and is loved [*diligitur*] by women who are *fricatrices*.”¹⁷⁴

Fricatrix, like Tertullian’s *fricatrix*, is a direct etymological translation of tribade, from the verb *frico*, “to rub” – like the Arabic *saḥāqa*. However, the second word, *crissatrix*, is a *hapax legomenon*.¹⁷⁵ Brooten takes it as a synonym for *fricatrix* and translates it as “thruster”.¹⁷⁶ However, *crissatrix* stems from *criso*, “to move the haunches as in coitus”,¹⁷⁷ a verb used only of the *passive woman’s* movements during sex.¹⁷⁸ The word, then, cannot carry any connotations of thrusting or penetration. It appears twice in Hermes Trismegistus; another passage talks about male passives [*cinaedi*] and “women who are like sisters, yet they are sterile and *crissatrices*”.¹⁷⁹

As we have seen, in astrology the same stars can cause a woman to either become a tribade or a woman crazed for sex with men; *crissatrix* and *fricatrix* could be meant to be such a pairing. Hermes’ second mention of *crissatrices*, however, seems to be a kind of riddle: it hints at something different. The women live like sisters, but are not; they are sterile, yet sexually active. The solution could be that in this case they “move their haunches” with each other instead of with men; hence their sterility. Remarkably, the *fricatrix/crissatrix* will be loved by *other fricatrices* – this stands in direct contrast to Ptolemy’s clear distinction between the tribade and

¹⁷³ Brooten 1996, p. 130, n. 52. This *terminus ante quem* applies to chapters 27 and 32, quoted below; chapter 25, also quoted, cannot be dated with any certainty.

¹⁷⁴ *Liber Hermetis Trismegisti* 32, cited and translated in Brooten 1996, pp. 130-1. Brooten most unusually does not cite the Latin: *crissatrix sive fricatrix fit et a fricatricibus mulieribus diligitur*.

¹⁷⁵ At least in the ancient world; it appears again in 1425 in Italian Renaissance poet Panormita’s *Hermaphroditus* II.37, but there it refers to a prostitute in a brothel, with no homoerotic connotations.

¹⁷⁶ Brooten 1996, p. 131.

¹⁷⁷ OLD s.v. *criso*.

¹⁷⁸ Adams 1982, pp. 136-8.

¹⁷⁹ *Liber Hermetis Trismegisti* 25: *mulieres tanquam sorores, steriles tamen et crissatrices*. I am following Cumont’s emendation of the nonsensical *trissatrices* to *crissatrices* (1937, p. 183, n. 2). Brooten translates differently and, I believe, inaccurately “women who are, shall we say, sterile sisters, yet also *crissatrices*” (1996, p. 131, n. 56).

the *tribomena*. Like in Scaurus, the same word is used for both the active and the passive sexual role.

However, seeing as the *crissatrix* must signify the *passive* woman *only*, possibly Hermes here creates a neologism for the *tribomena*, made clearer by joining it with the traditional but ineffective term used for both the active and the passive partner. The passage would then imply: “she will become a *crissatrix* – or, (if you will), a (passive) *fricatix* - who is loved by (active) *fricatrices*.” All this must remain conjectural, however.

Finally, a third passage of Hermes’ work claims that a woman born under certain stars “will be incestuous and exceedingly common or a public prostitute [*meretrix publica*] and she will perform shameless things in life, having intercourse with other women or concubines [*concupinis*] in the same way as a man.”¹⁸⁰ Though the connection to incest, public sexuality and prostitution is familiar, this is the first mention of concubines, pushing even further the tribades’ associations with masculinity.

Wretched Life: John Camaterus

Interestingly, astrology and the astrological tribade did not die out with the passing of classical antiquity and the rise of Christianity. In an obscure Byzantine mid-12th cent. CE *Introduction to Astrology* in verse by one John Camaterus,¹⁸¹ he explains that when Virgo is in a certain position, men will be “useless and sleep with men”, but a woman “will be a tribade and have a wretched life, approaching women and performing the deeds of men.”¹⁸² In astrology, then, the tribade was an essential tradition, stretching chronologically from the 1st to the 12th cent. CE and geographically all over the Roman world: Dorotheus was from modern-day Lebanon, Ptolemy from Egypt, Camaterus from Constantinople. In all these places and through all this time, astrologers expected their readers to know and be fascinated by the tribade.

¹⁸⁰ *Liber Hermetis Trismegisti* 27, cited and translated in Brooten 1996, pp. 131-2, n. 58.

¹⁸¹ On whom, see ODB s.v. Kamateros, John.

¹⁸² Johannes Camaterus, *Introductio in astronomiam* vv. 849-52:

Εἰς δὲ τὸ <μεσεμβόλημα,> λέγω δὲ τῆς Παρθένου,
εἰ ἔσται ἀνὴρ, ἀπρόκοπος, συνερχόμενος ἀνδρας·
εἰ δὲ γυνή, τριβάς ἐστι καὶ μοχθηρὸν πρὸς βίον,
προσερχομένη γυναιξὶν ἀνδρῶν ἔργα τελοῦσα.

Like Web-Footed Birds: Physiognomy

Physiognomy is the (pseudo-)science of judging a man's character by his face or features, popular in the ancient world and sporadically revived up to modern times. Note "a *man's* character": women are rarely discussed by ancient physiognomists, though effeminacy is a common topic – in men. In physiognomy, both sexes possess masculine and feminine traits, with the feminine portrayed as bad and the masculine as good.¹⁸³ Two physiognomic treatises mention female homosexuality. A 4th century CE anonymous Latin *Treatise on Physiognomy* relates the judgments of Ps.-Aristotle's *Physiognomies* on the appearance of men who chase after women versus those who chase after boys:

He says that men who are devoted [*deditos*] to women are those who have a small and dry penis, those with a penis which stands straight even when it is not erect and those with a face very much like a woman's and a body that looks feminine. However, those who are devoted to males [*masculis*] have a virile face and body and one sparkling bright eye.¹⁸⁴

Men who prefer males have much more positive characteristics than those who prefer women; the body type of these men corresponds to their sexual object choice, and in physiognomy, virility is positive and femininity negative. Then, to strengthen the results, the physiognomist ascribes to Ps.-Aristotle a comparison with women's sexual preferences which is not found in his extant fragments:¹⁸⁵

The same goes for women, he says; women who sleep with [*coire*] women are feminine in appearance, but the women who correspond more to masculine looks are more drawn [*magis deditas*] to males [*masculis*] <and are called "manly" [ἀρρενικὰ]>.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ André 1981, pp. 17-19; Gleason 1990, pp. 381-2.

¹⁸⁴ Anon. *De Physiognomonía Liber 85* (André 1981, pp. 117-18).

¹⁸⁵ Boehringer 2007, pp. 338-9.

¹⁸⁶ Anon. *De Physiognomonía Liber 85* (André 1981, p. 118). The textual difficulties of this passage have gone unremarked by scholars, even as they translate it wildly differently. Brooten translates "women who have sex with women whose appearance is feminine, but who are more devoted to masculine women, who correspond more to a masculine type of appearance, <who are called 'masculine'>" (1996, p. 56). Boehringer 2007, p. 338 translates: "Il en va de même aussi, dit-il, pour les femmes: celles de type féminin couchent avec les femmes, mais celles qui correspondent plutôt au type viril recherchent plutôt les hommes". My translation mostly agrees with

This stands in marked contrast with the tribadic tradition, where it is the tribade that is manly. One should note, however, that the passage has verbal echoes of Plato's *Symposium*,¹⁸⁷ where the manliest of men chase boys and women split from an all-female original beings desire women. The contradiction of the tribadic tradition perhaps comes from letting the male model override any existing model for women; since one's looks are mirrored in one's object choice, since manliness is superior to femininity, and since it is bad that women sleep with women, it is the tribades who must be feminine and women who sleep with men masculine. This implies that a woman was never immune from an accusation of tribadism, no matter her looks or comportment.

All women lay under suspicion, but physiognomy claimed to have the expertise to detect which ones were truly affected. The second physiognomic treatise explains how. It is by an unnamed Byzantine writer, writing in the name and style of the famous physiognomist Polemon. The passage under discussion seems to be his own addition rather than anything based on the real Polemon's model,¹⁸⁸ reflecting the continuing interest in tribades in Byzantium. Discussing the "signs of lovers" and the difficulties of physiognomic interpretation of them, he goes on to claim: "Women who are *hetairistria*, womanlike [γυναικώδεις], lovers of men [φίλανδροι] or unclean are those whose legs are stout around the ankle and whose toes are close-fitted together, like web-footed birds, and those whose head is shaped like a bowl."¹⁸⁹ He then goes on to describe eunuchs.

This passage uses two rare words from Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*: *hetairistria* and φίλανδροι, "men-loving". Though different kinds of humans in Plato, here they share the same

Boehrer's, though Brooten's is indeed possible due to the extreme uncertainties of the Latin. It works in favour of Boehrer's interpretation that it is in parallel with the previously mentioned men; Brooten's does not parallel it and so is odd in the context. She takes the passage to describe the *objects* of women's desire, which is tempting, since in the tribadic tradition, as we have seen, it is masculine women who are drawn to women, while here they are drawn to men.

¹⁸⁷ The physiognomist's *magis deditas* seems to echo Plato's μάλλον... τετραμμένοι εἰσὶ (*Smp.* 191e). A similar formation is found in Cael.Aur. *TP* 4.9.131; see below.

¹⁸⁸ André 1981, p. 30.

¹⁸⁹ Ps.-Polem.Phgn. 83: Γυναικες ἑταιρίστριαι, γυναικώδεις, φίλανδροι, ἀκάθαρτοι, αἷς αἰ κνήμαι περὶ τὸ σφυρὸν παχεῖται καὶ οἱ δάκτυλοι τῶν ποδῶν μικρὸν ἀπεσχισμένοι, ὥσπερ τοῖς στεγανόποσι τῶν ὀρνίθων, καὶ αἷς σκαφοειδῆς ὁ περιδρομος τῆς κεφαλῆς.

physical characteristics. As we have seen, astrology similarly paralleled tribades and women who love men to an excess, and some astrologers spoke of hidden tribades. Physiognomy has a solution to that problem: tribades can be detected through careful study of their head and feet¹⁹⁰ – though, conveniently for the physiognomist, the same features can accommodate a wide range of opposed traits.

The oddness of physiognomy's characterizations of female homosexuality could stem from its androcentric focus. In a similar fashion, Artemidorus' dream analysis (2nd cent. CE) described women's dreams of sleeping with women with precisely the same terms as he used for the sex-dreams of men: Women "penetrate" [περραίνει] women and so gain mastery of them, like men do.¹⁹¹ These branches of Greek science were perhaps not fully equipped to deal with women; when they did, they had to be fitted into a discourse designed for men, even if it meant overriding existing traditions such as tribadism.

Both Kinds of Venus – Caelius Aurelianus

One branch of ancient science, however, did concern itself seriously with women, their desires and their bodies: medicine.¹⁹² Surprisingly, we have only one example of an ancient medical writer discussing tribades, though such writers would be used to define her in the Early Modern world; the story of the tribade in the medical sciences is perhaps the strangest in all of the tribadic tradition.

The writer is the Numidian doctor Caelius Aurelianus (5th cent. CE?) in his *On Chronic Diseases*, a Latin translation/adaptation of a medical work of the Ephesian doctor Soranus (2nd cent. CE).¹⁹³ In a familiar pattern, Caelius mentions tribades only to draw a comparison with and illustrate the

¹⁹⁰ There is a story of a famous physiognomist who could detect even the most hidden *kinaidos* by his cough; see Gleason 1990, p. 407.

¹⁹¹ Artem. 1.80; see Brooten 1996, pp. 175-186; Winkler 1990, pp. 23-44.

¹⁹² Generally on medicine and women, see Hanson 1990.

¹⁹³ Brooten 1996, pp. 143-50 takes Caelius' work as a faithful translation; Boehringer 2007, pp. 339-41 is more reticent and insists that Caelius' words and views cannot be securely dated any earlier than Caelius' own times. Since this study does not limit itself to classical antiquity, the question whether Caelius' text indicates earlier views or not matters little.

male disease of “softness” [*mollitia*], that is, taking pleasure in the passive role in sex. This he classifies as a mental disorder of the most serious kind.¹⁹⁴ Caelius comments:

(The soft men [*molles*] are) just like the women called tribades, in that they are held to exercise both kinds of desire [*utranque Venerem*]. The tribades rush to have sex [*misceri*] with women in preference to men [*mulieribus magis quam viris*] and chase those same women with an envy that is almost virile, and when this disease [*passione*] leaves them, or they are temporarily relieved of it, then they seek to offer [*obiicere*] others what they are known for suffering [*pati*], †a humiliating succour for their double sexuality [*duplici sexu*]†, just like so often women who have been corrupted by drunkenness, bursting into new forms of desire, nourished by disgusting habits, rejoice in outraging [*iniuriis*] their own sex. So, by comparison with such creatures [*talium*], the soft men are acknowledged to be afflicted by a disease [*passione*] of the mind.¹⁹⁵

The text is corrupt and often hard to translate.¹⁹⁶ The parallelism with male passives is familiar, as are the themes of performing the acts of men (the virile, envious chasing of beloveds), drunkenness (as in Philaenis’ revels and Lucian’s tribadic party) and sexual licence in general. However, there are points that are more unique. The phrasings “both kinds of desire [*utranque Venerem*]” and “double sexuality” [*duplici sexu*] stand out, echoing Ovid’s description of Tiresias

¹⁹⁴ Cael.Aur. TP 4.9.131-2. The edition I use is Drabkin 1950.

¹⁹⁵ Cael.Aur. TP 4.9.132-3.

¹⁹⁶ My translation diverges from Brooten’s (1997, p. 150) and Gourevitch’s (quoted in Boehringer 2007, p. 340). Neither makes space for the subjunctive in *exerceant*, which in a causal sentence with *quod* implies that Caelius’ information is second-hand or doubtful. They take the subject of *exerceant* as the tribades only, but it must refer to both the tribades and the *molles* – the causal sentence is explaining *how* they are similar, as I make clear below. Brooten (citing Schrijvers) takes *quod... exerceant* with *appellatae*, taking it to explain the etymology of the tribade’s name; this I wholly disagree with. Brooten translates *aliis obiicere* “to accuse others”, which is possible but doubtful; Gourevitch translates “inspirer aux autres”, which is closer to my interpretation; see below. In the last part of the passage (*velut... gaudent*) I take *velut* as modifying *gaudent*, they as modifying the participles (*corruptae, erumpentes*); on my interpretation, this is a comparison between tribades and licentious women in general, concurring with the ancient misogynistic tropes that women under the influence of alcohol were shameless and sexually uncontrollable (see e.g. Pl. *Lg.* 8.838a-b; Gell. 10.23; Luc. *DMeretr.* 5). Finally, the passage between the daggers is seriously corrupt and can only be tentatively translated; Brooten has a review of proposed emendations (1997, pp. 152-7), but no solution is in sight; my translation is an attempt to fit together the words that are actually in the editions (the mss. for Caelius are lost) instead of devising new ones, but the syntax is pure conjecture.

as knowing “both kinds of desire” [*utraque Venus*].¹⁹⁷ This has been taken to mean “sex with both genders”, making the tribades and the *molles* “bisexual”,¹⁹⁸ but in fact Caelius explicitly claims otherwise. Discussing the origins of the tribades and the *molles*, giving a scientific version of what Phaedrus had described with a myth, Caelius cites Parmenides’ theory of the double seed, male and female, which mix together in conception. Caelius maintains that if the active principles [*virtutes*; literally “manlinesses”] of the two seeds form into one, then this “generates a desire [*voluntatem*] appropriate to (the child’s) sex [*sexui*].” If these principles do not mix along with the seed, then “an appetite [*adpetentia*] for both kinds of Venus hounds [*sequatur*] the children.”¹⁹⁹

This appetite could yet be thought to mean “desire for both genders” if Caelius did not go on to describe the different stages of the disease. In the bloom of the *molles*’ lives “their twin desire [*libido*] for luxury is divided, with their mind at one time excited by activity [*faciendo*] and at another by passivity [*patiendo*].”²⁰⁰ This is contrasted with the condition of old men and young boys who are afflicted by the disease but lack the sexual potency to be active – and so are wholly passive. This Caelius describes as the most severe condition of *mollitia* – strict *passivity*, rather than strict *homosexuality*. An all-passive *mollis* or an all-active tribade is a rare and unusual thing.

So, the two desires are *activity and passivity*, not sex with women and sex with men; the “desire appropriate to one’s sex” is active if male, passive if female.²⁰¹ The tribades and *molles* as not necessarily *exclusively* active and passive respectively, but are united by their tendency to desire *both* passive *and* active sex. *Mollitia* and tribadism are defined by the adherence, partial or more rarely total, to the inappropriate sexual role. The gender of the sexual partner is irrelevant in this context and so not mentioned at all. Hence, it is not *bisexuality* that is described as a mental

¹⁹⁷ Ov. *Met.* 3.323.

¹⁹⁸ Halperin 1990, p. 23; Brooten 1996, p. 151; Brooten cites Schrijvers’ opinion that *utraque Venus* is “Liebe mit beiden Geschlechtern”; Drabkin 1950, p. 901, n. 4 suggests it refers to “heterosexual and homosexual love”; Williams 1999, p. 213.

¹⁹⁹ Cael. *Aur. TP* 4.9.134-5.

²⁰⁰ Cael. *Aur. TP* 4.9.137.

²⁰¹ Generally on this topic, see Parker 1992.

disease; indeed, double desire is *preferable* to a single desire, so long as it is the wrong one for one's sex.

Having established this, we can perhaps explain Caelius' remark that tribades in remission "seek to offer others what they are known for suffering [*pati*]". *Pati* here points not only to passivity but to the disease [*passio*] they suffer from; Caelius seems to mean that the tribades are sexually active with women when the disease runs rampant, but in remission turn their previous symptoms around, becoming passive and offering their bodies to others. This could of course mean that they have sex with men, but one must remember that even in remission they are still classified as tribades – though now *passive* ones. Could this be the *tribomena*, the active tribade's rarely mentioned partner?

In the analogous passage on *molles*, Caelius says that when they attempt to turn their back on passivity, they go overboard in trying to prove their masculinity; they "do [*faciunt*] more than befits manliness [*virtuti*], and involve themselves in greater transgressions [*peccata*]"²⁰² The use of the verb *faciunt* here implies the active sexual role; the *molles* invert their previous behaviour, becoming excessively active.²⁰³ Yet again the gender of the sexual object of the *molles* is not mentioned. There are sources which claim that *cinaedi*, stereotypes of male passives, slept with married women, committing adultery,²⁰⁴ but Caelius could also mean that a *mollis* in remission took on the active sexual role with males in a way that broke the societal norms.

Caelius is adamant that this is a mental disease rather than a physical one. The other sects of ancient medicine, he says, claim that the condition is congenital and hereditary, but he himself does not agree. In any case, all believe that the disease is one of humans' own making, not a natural phenomenon.²⁰⁵ The condition can be treated only by "coercing the mind" [*animus*

²⁰² Cael.Aur. TP 4.9.132.

²⁰³ This would seem to fly in the face of the ancient world's general characterization of the male penetrator as healthy (and go against Halperin's take on this passage (1990, pp. 23-5); but one should note that Caelius probably writes in the 5th century when Christianity had become the Roman state religion; the use of the word *peccata* here could well imply Christian influence (though the word was, of course, in use before the rise of Christianity; see Brooten 1996, p. 148, n. 13). It is not known whether Caelius was a Christian or not.

²⁰⁴ Williams 1999, pp. 206-9.

²⁰⁵ Cael.Aur. TP 4.9.135-6.

coercendus], for “no one has brought this bodily itch [*pruriens corpus*] under control [*correxit*] by behaving like a woman [*feminando*]²⁰⁶ or mitigated it by touching a man’s penis”.²⁰⁷ The disease will not be treated by giving in to one’s desires nor by acting in opposition to them; a tribade cannot just have passive sex to be cured of her active desires, nor the *mollis mutatis mutandis*. A disease of the soul cannot be cured by bodily means.

The Excessive Clitoris and the Tribade

Yet, since the early modern period, tribadism has been generally taken to have a bodily component, and this opinion is attributed especially to Greek medical texts. Though this passage of Caelius is the only such text to mention tribades, four others have become just as widely read as regards the tribade. These are similar passages from four different medical writers discussing morbidly large clitorises and how to cut them off – a procedure known as clitoridectomy in medical parlance, female genital mutilation in modern terms. According to most scholars who have studied the tribade, the ancients believed these penis-like clitorises could be used to penetrate other women, thus creating a real phallic tribade, usurping the male prerogative of penetration and threatening the foundations of the patriarchal order.²⁰⁸

However, as scholars in the last few decades have pointed out,²⁰⁹ the texts in question do *not* in fact mention female homosexuality at all. Three are translations or adaptations of a lost chapter of Soranus’ *Gynaecia*, called “Concerning an Immensely Great Clitoris and Clitoridectomy”.²¹⁰ Mustio (possibly from North Africa, fl. around 500 CE), in his influential version of the *Gynaecia*,²¹¹ describes the condition thus:

²⁰⁶ Lewis & Short charmingly translate this verb as “to pollute one’s self”.

²⁰⁷ Cael.Aur. *TP* 4.9.133.

²⁰⁸ An exhaustive list of the many scholars, from the 18th century to the 20th, who have maintained this view can be found in Martos Montiel 2007, p. 13, n. 68.

²⁰⁹ Park 1997, p. 176; Butrica 2005, p. 246-62 (though he only looks at a few of the relevant sources); Boehringer 2007, pp. 333-47, Martos Montiel 2007.

²¹⁰ The chapter name was preserved though the chapter itself was lost; see Brooten 1996, p. 163.

²¹¹ BNP s.v. Mustio.

A large "nymph" (i.e. clitoris) is a symptom of deformity [*turpitudinis*]. Some even assert that the flesh [*pulpam*] itself becomes erect, like in men, and seems to seek sexual use [*usum coitus*].²¹²

Caelius Aurelianus also translated the *Gynaecia*; his version of the passage under discussion, is as follows:

An excessive size attends some clitorises, brings women into disorder [*confundit*] by the hideousness [*feditate*] of their parts and, as many recount, they themselves, furnished with [*adfecte*]²¹³ an erection [*tentigine*], adopt an appetite [*adpetentia*] similar to that of men and have sex compulsively [*coacte*].²¹⁴

We have seen Caelius' definition of men's appetite as the active sexual role; possessing it would seem to connect these women with tribades. In that light, Brooten takes *coacte* to mean "unwillingly" here, implying that the women refused to sleep with men due to their homoerotic desires,²¹⁵ but that would contradict both Mustio and the last adaptation of Soranus by Paul of Aegina (7th cent. CE):

In some women the clitoris grows to an excessive size and enters into the impropriety of dishonour [ἀπρέπειαν αἰσχύνης]. According to some reports, some women become erect [ὀρθιάζουσιν] because of this part, just like men, and rush to have sex.²¹⁶

Rushing to have sex instead of any unwillingness, the wording reminds one of Caelius' similarly rushing tribades; yet the tribade's name is not mentioned by Paul and the pathological lust driving these women has no defined object; the women are hypersexual, but are not claimed to be homosexual.²¹⁷ This is further confirmed by a passage of Aëtius of Amida, a Christian physician writing in the 6th cent. CE:

²¹² Mustio 2.76; cited in Brooten 1996, p. 163, n. 58.

²¹³ On this translation, see OLD s.v. *affectus*², 1.

²¹⁴ Cael.Aur. *Gyn.* 2.112; cited in Brooten 1996, p. 164, n. 59. Note that this text uses Medieval Latin spelling, *e* replacing *ae* and *oe*.

²¹⁵ Brooten 1996, pp. 164-5, n. 59.

²¹⁶ Paul.Aeg. 9.1; cited in Brooten 1996, p. 165, n. 60.

²¹⁷ Cf. Brooten 1996, pp. 162-73.

(The clitoris) grows in size and is increased to excess in certain women, becoming a deformity and a source of shame [ἀπρέπειαν καὶ αἰσχύνην].²¹⁸ Furthermore, its continual rubbing [παρατριβόμενον] against the clothes irritates it [ἐρεθίζει], and this stimulates the appetite [ὄρμηγν] for sexual intercourse. On this account, it seemed proper to the Egyptians to remove it before it became greatly enlarged, especially at that time when the girls were about to be married.²¹⁹

Aëtius locates the source of the problem not in being sexually excited *by women* but in the clitoris coming into contact with one's clothes; this causes hypersexuality, but none of the authors state that it manifests itself in the clitoris' penetrative use. The roots of that fantasy are seemingly to be found in an error of translation. The Greek doctors mentioned above were read and adopted by the Arab medical writers Albucasis and Avicenna (both 10th – 11th cent. CE), the leading medical authorities of the Middle Ages. They posited no connection between the clitoris and homosexuality in their original works.²²⁰ Avicenna's *Liber Canonis*, however, treated the overgrown clitoris and a pathological vaginal outgrowth together:

In the mouth of the uterus an excess of flesh can grow, whose shape is such that it appears there is something like a penis on the woman, which impedes sexual congress, and it can come to the point of creating something like copulation in the woman; or perhaps this is a large clitoris.²²¹

When it came to translate this passage into Latin, Gerard de Sabloneta (13th century CE) either misunderstood Avicenna or took some liberties; instead of the outgrowth "impeding" sex, it "is stirred up in sexual intercourse" [*commovens sub coitu*], and instead of Avicenna's unclear "creating... copulation", Gerard extrapolates:

²¹⁸ Note that Paul of Aegina uses a very similar turn of phrase, having evidently read Aëtius.

²¹⁹ Aët. 16.105, cited and translated by Knight 2001, p. 327.

²²⁰ Knight 2001, p. 324, Martos Montiel 2007, p. 16-19.

²²¹ Unfortunately I do not know Arabic and must rely on Martos Montiel 2007, p. 18: "Puede nacer en la boca del útero un exceso de carne, de forma que aparece sobre la mujer algo como el pene que impide el coito, pudiendo ocurrir que llegue a generar en la mujer algo parecido a la cópula, o bien que eso sea un clitoris enorme." This is a literal translation of Avicenna's Arabic by Dr. Concepción Vázquez de Benito.

Sometimes it (the outgrowth) reaches the point that she (the woman) does [*faciat*] with women similar things [*simile quod*] as are done [*fit*] to them when one has sex with them [*cum quibus coitur*]. And sometimes this is a large clitoris [*batharum*].²²²

Gerard invents a connection between Avicenna's vaginal outgrowth and female homosexuality and holds that outgrowth and the clitoris to be near-interchangeable. They eventually merged: writing around 1550, Gabriele Fallopius drew together what would become standard medical knowledge in the Renaissance and beyond:

Avicenna ... mentions a certain part which is situated in the female genitalia, which he calls penis [*virga*] or *albathara*. This part Albucasis calls "erection" [*tentiginem*], which sometimes tends to reach such a size that the women who possess it have sex with other women [*coeant cum aliis*] as if they were men. The Greeks called this part clitoris [*κλητορίδα*]...²²³

No outgrowth anymore; the clitoris, with its modern (though ancient) name, had come to define the homosexual woman.²²⁴ Twenty years later, the Parisian doctor Ambroise Paré named this woman with a word recently reborn in France: tribade.²²⁵

Conclusion

The strange history of the early modern tribade is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I hope to have shown that she drew on a powerful ancient discourse, prominent in popular authors of fiction and on law, indispensable to astrology and subject to medicinal scrutiny. She held antiquity's interest from the 1st to the 12th centuries CE, from Rome to Syria to Numidia;

²²² Avicenna 1507, Lib. III, fen. xxi, tr. 1, chap. 22, p. 377v: *Et quandoque advenit ei ut faciat cum mulieribus simile quod fit eis cum quibus coitur. Et quandoque est illud batharum magnum*. Cited with transcription errors (in the section quoted here, *coitus* instead of *coitur*) in Lochrie 2005, p. 79-80 and correspondingly badly translated.

Batharum is a Latin transcription of the Arabic word for clitoris (Lochrie 2005, p. 82; Martos Montiel 2007, p. 18).

²²³ From his *Observationes anatomicae*, cited in Andreadis 1996, p. 114. On the date of writing, see Park 1997, p. 177.

²²⁴ Martos Montiel 2007, p. 15 attaches much importance to the 1285 writings of William of Saliceto in this context, but in fact William merely quotes Gerard de Sabloneta's Avicenna.

²²⁵ On Paré, see Park 1997, pp. 171-7; on the emergence of the tribade in France (first mentioned in French in Henri Estienne's 1566 *Apologie pour Hérodote*), see Bonnet 1997, pp. 149-50.

throughout all this time and all these places, she was loosely defined but had some broadly common features.

Tribadism was considered a mental affliction, yet the women affected were held to have a recognizable body type, usually masculine. The main symptom was the desire to take the active sexual role in addition to women's normative passive role; secondarily to that in importance is the fact that the objects of her desire tended to be women. The strength of this desire varied from one period to another; sometimes it was hidden, sometimes out in the open, sometimes the tribades were wholly passive, sometimes wholly active. In describing tribadic coitus, the tribade's name was sometimes used for both the active and the passive partner, sometimes only for the active. On the former model, there are hints that it was conceived of as a tribade in an active state sleeping with a passive tribade in remission; on the latter model, the tribade was perhaps pictured a seducer of healthy women.

The tribade's most loosely defined feature was her sexual method. This was often wilfully presented as a riddle to be guessed by the tribade's male audience, who were amused and aroused by it; sometimes, however, the method was stated outright to be the use of a strap-on dildo, fitting in well with accusations that the tribade was a would-be man, an impostor among her sex. Like the strap-on-wielding comic actors of the ancient world, she was a figure of fun and arousal for the men who created her, yet she also speaks to a deep anxiety on their part.

I suggest that this anxiety lies in Greek, Roman and Byzantine men's fear of the homosocial world of women from which they were excluded. A suspicion that this constituted a fault in the patriarchal protocols they had built underlies their fantasies of a woman who could play two sexual roles, hide in their midst and offer their women sex that was more pleasurable than they knew how to perform themselves. Whether created by divine mistake, malignant stars, a perverse sex-manual or a bad mixture of semen, tribades were a threat to the order of things.

Through these fears, we gain a glimpse into the male-imposed parameters of female agency in antiquity. A woman will have had to avoid any and all sexual behaviour with men that could be construed as active, as it could be held to imply the mental affliction of tribadism. This would throw suspicion on a woman's membership of any and all female homosocial communities such

as that which traditionally existed within the household; she could to corrupt it by changing an otherwise structurally sexless situation (all-passive, non-active) into a very sexual situation (one active, one or many passives). Just avoiding giving these signs, however, was not necessarily enough. According to astrology, tribades could hide their affliction; according to physiognomy and medicine, even feminine characteristics and passivity could perversely point to tribadism; the threat of the tribadic tradition always loomed over ancient women.

This is not to say that female homosexuality was impracticable in antiquity. Of course, women did desire and sleep with other women in the ancient world; it seems obvious that there were ways to do this without being identified as a tribade. It is on activity and passivity, that is, on penetration, that the whole definition of tribadism hinges. If penetration was avoided or, when practiced with dildos, successfully hidden, and proper appearances kept up in the company of men, female homosexual relationships must have been possible without attracting male opprobrium. After all, men in the ancient world *wanted* women to be enclosed together. Even presented with the threat of the tribade, the sexual tropes associated with her were simply too narrow and phallogocentric to effectively police sexual relationships between women. In that respect, tribadism must have been a failed strategy.

Indeed, there are some small hints that there was a different tradition in the ancient world, one little discussed. Plato is non-judgmental towards women who prefer female company; Lucian's three-women threesome is presented in a very different manner than the tribadic sex which follows it. Sappho was celebrated for her love-poetry, which encapsulates this different model of female homosexual desire: authored by a woman, unconcerned with the active/passive model and patriarchal power structures, it is unlike the tribadic tradition in every way. Perhaps a distinction can be created between the Sapphic and the tribadic traditions as regards female homosexuality in the ancient world, a distinction that the ancients mostly respected themselves – aside from one 3rd century scholiast, whose example would be followed in Early Modernity, when men subsumed the Sapphic under the tribadic; a process which would make an interesting study in itself.

Yet such a study would require new methods. Modern scholarly approaches to tribadism have tended to adopt the characterizations of antiquity too readily. The constant gaze they have cast between the tribade's legs indeed reflects the ancient discourse, but does little to promote our knowledge. Instead, we should take that gaze as an object of scholarly inquiry in itself, as a vital part of an ever-continuing tradition. In accepting the challenge of the ancients' riddles, scholars participate in that tradition and promote it, rather than criticise it. I hope to have avoided this ancient trap and that any future studies on this vastly underexplored subject will do the same.

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