

Sex B.C. – “The Greeks”

UK TV documentary series : 2002 : dir. Chris Salt : Channel 4 : 3 x 60 min
prod: Georgina Pye : scr: : dir.ph.:

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Radio Times listing :

“In the classical world, women’s sexuality was seen as dangerously uncontrollable. Wives were kept at home while their husbands ran riot [sic] with prostitutes and teenage boys. Homosexuality was celebrated in the heroic tales of soldiers and athletes, older men acted as mentors to youth, and Plato celebrated the superiority of love between two men. Executive producers Simon Andreae and Gil Brown. Last in the series.”

Broadcast Channel 4, Monday August 12 2002. A programme strand which purports to tell us – preposterously – about the sexual mores of the stone age and ancient Egypt cannot be taken too seriously, since nothing whatever is known of the sexual habits of either. This particular instalment, however, focused its censorious eye on the sexual predilections of ancient Greece, about which something is known and a good deal speculated. It was interesting to see how Channel 4, with the nation wrapped in a paranoid fever on the topic of paedophilia, would approach the culture which first coined that term, and more importantly paederasty, which is universally supposed to be the same thing.

The programme was half a critique of classical Athenian sexual mores – what? there were **other** cities in classical Greece? – and half a post-feminist polemic on the subjugation of women in that society, the one phenomenon supposedly an expression of the other. There was little pretense of objectivity or academic detachment, but with a sour female commentary (from Lucy Briers) and some appropriately bowdlerised illustrative footage, it proceeded to trash the social system of classical Athens, its literature and art, for the cardinal sin of *excluding women*. The exclusion of men from various arenas by modern women is not of course a sin, but the exclusion of women from *any* arena, be it a golf club or a boardroom, is an affront to human decency. Given that operating premise, no human society prior to the last couple of decades would stand up to any sort of scrutiny. The emancipation of women is a self-evident good – we all know that, don’t we?

Well, the Athenians didn’t know it. What made their culture, if not unique, certainly extraordinary, was the fact that – for reasons the programme lays out – it celebrated male comradeship and love above the conventional heterosexual model. The highest form of beauty to the Greeks was male, not female, in all of its guises. The programme did not describe it in those terms, naturally, but talked of the “body cult” of the gymnasium as an expression of male fascism. There is no reason – objectively speaking – why male beauty should **not** be celebrated above the female form, but even though two thousand years of

(patriarchal) Christian culture have revered the **female** as the sole repository of beauty, we must still repudiate the Greeks for, as it were, falling out of line.

"Greek men had a deep-seated need to control women" the charge-sheet reads, "because they possessed a boundless and therefore terrifying sexuality". Translation – the society of the Greek city state in the sixth century B.C. still had its roots in the archaic warrior culture with its code of male comradeship, arranged marriages and consequent emphasis on safeguarding the virginity of daughters and fidelity of wives. This social system would not have seemed at all strange to the Jewish patriarchs of the Old Testament, nor to the people of 18th-century feudal Japan. It is offensive to modern women, and must therefore be characterised as outlandish. The programme made no mention at all of the network of aristocratic "guest friendship" bonds which cemented trade and military alliances before and throughout the emergence of the "polis" or city state, and which is ample evidence that this male kinship code long predated Periclean Athens.

Scenes from Euripides "*The Bacchae*" are re-enacted for us, showing the Dionysian frenzies of the Theban women, or indeed, **not** showing them, to be more precise. Euripides, we are told, "played ruthlessly" on Greek men's fear of unbridled female sexuality. No mention is made of the possibility that these Bacchic revels were a survival from an earlier, matriarchal Greek culture based on divination and male sacrifice, and which persisted into classical times through the sacred oracles. Wine-crazed women ripping men to pieces as an act of propitiation to their fertility gods is not helpful to our theme of the oppressed woman, so Euripides must have been a male propagandist. (That the programme itself is *female* propagandist does not prevent it criticising *male* propagandism.) No mention is made of the reverence in Homeric tradition for the Amazons, a matriarchal warrior tribe structured along parallel lines to the masculine warrior culture, and therefore acceptable to it. Respect for the myth of the Amazons does not help our theme of disrespect for women. We'll ignore it.

Having made its case that female sexuality (which does not ejaculate) terrified Greek males – lots of shots of sullen-faced men sitting around modern Greek tavernas – and for this reason women were excluded from politics and the social life of the agora and gymnasium, the programme went on to produce its second charge: "The Greeks used to say – women for business and boys for pleasure. Ancient Greece was the first civilisation to openly embrace homosexual love."

To my own knowledge, the axiom "a woman for necessity, but a boy for pleasure" is of Arabic origin, not Greek, but we'll let that pass. Post-Krafft Ebbing terms such as "homosexuality", or indeed "bisexuality" are entirely meaningless in the context of the pre-Christian world, where such distinctions did not exist. Greek men would have sex with youths, boys, or women – not necessarily in that order – without any thought that it defined their nature, or brought their masculinity into doubt. The programme, needless to say, did not express it in those terms. The reverence for the male physique, the preference for male companionship, the celebration of the beauty of boys above that of women – all of this was a conspiracy to marginalise women and render them socially irrelevant. The positive aspects of that social system were not discussed at all. There can **be** no positive aspects to gender apartheid – the programme takes this another given.

Surveying the legends of Achilles and Patroklos, Harmodios and Aristogeiton (but omitting mention of the gods, many of whom had mortal boy-friends) it is suggested that these were non-sexual comradeships (though of course there's not a scrap of evidence to support that conclusion), a heroic ideal which later became debased as what the programme calls "a gay mafia". When the Sacred Band of Thebes (an elite force of paired warriors sworn to defend one another to the death) was finally obliterated in 338 BC by Alexander at the Battle of Chaeronea, we're told, there was great scandal when it became clear these men and youths had also enjoyed one another's carnal favours. I've no idea what source this suggestion is drawn from, but Thebes was famous for bugging boys long before Alexander came to Chaeronea. His own father, Philip II, acquired the habit there when held hostage as a youth.

"Although there were no laws against anal sex" we're told – **now** we're getting to the nitty-gritty – most vase illustrations depict intercrural sex, therefore this was the preferred mode. This also is not true, there are vase illustrations enough showing boys receiving, or preparing to receive, the male member anally, but contemporary prejudices discourage museums from placing these exhibits on public display. What's more, an innate prejudice among historians against the *idea* of socially-acceptable sodomy makes them root about for scraps of evidence to show it did not take place. "Sexual relations with very young children were not tolerated, but boys were considered consenting adults as soon as they reached puberty." Again, this is to apply modern analyses to an alien culture where they do not belong. Boys (in any case of the landed citizenry) went through various gradations of social elevation from the small child, through the ephebe, to the fully-enfranchised citizen. Puberty, 2500 years ago, might not have occurred till the mid to late teens, if indeed they had any concept of the term. Boys – looking at the evidence of those same vase illustrations we were being shown before – were engaging in sex with men from around 12 or 13, not 16 or 17.

While we're being told of the symposia (dinner and erudite conversation) at which older men might court attractive boys and youths from their own social class, the re-enacted scenes show us gay men in their mid-twenties eyeing one another lustfully. The programme flatly sidesteps showing us the reality it is busy describing. It tells us of "boys" and "older men", and shows us same-age couples. This is not only prudery (for fear of "inciting paedophilia") but academically dishonest. The one defining factor of Greek male companionship was age differentiation. Contemporary gays, with their age-stratified culture, would not have been accepted by the Greeks at all. Harmodios and Aristogeiton, Achilles and Patroklos, Herakles and Iolaos, were lovers only *because* one was a man and the other a boy. It is the essence of the pedagogical eros – that a boy will learn best from, and strive hardest to please, a man whom he loves and loves him. But under the carpet goes **that** strand of thought – too dangerous to mention in the current climate. The word "paederasty" is not mentioned once. It is replaced – anachronistically – with the safer word "homosexuality" (which is quite OK now, you see). Paederasty is of course a subset of homosexuality – or vice versa, to be more exact. The one was accepted in Greek times and the other not. Today the other is accepted and the former universally despised. But it is not the place of academics and historians to doctor the past in deference to the prejudices of the present.

Hurrying on from the distressing business of men chatting up pretty boys at the dinner couch while the wife ate her humble repast alone, the programme turned to the hetairas, or high-class whores, who enjoyed somewhat greater independence and social status than most wives. In particular it tells us of one Phryne, who modelled for Praxiteles' famous statue of Aphrodite. "In ancient Greece prostitution was legal, the prices were fixed by the state, and prostitutes were taxed." We are shown the ruins of the Kerameikos, outside the city precincts, where humbler prostitutes – male and female – would ply their trade. But the hetaira (equivalent to the latterday geisha or courtesan) could become extremely wealthy and influential, conversing with men on more equal terms. The nude statue of Phryne/Aphrodite, the programme goes on to suggest, was something of a breakthrough in celebrating female sexuality and beauty against the oppressive male norm. It was the first fragile shoot, we're led to believe, of heterosexual love in a world of boy-chasing chauvinists. Preposterous nonsense of course, but it plays to incipient anti-homosexual prejudice in the audience, and implies that heterosexual courtship in some way elevates the female to more equal status with the male, a proposition which the following two thousand years of – grimly heterosexual – history would disprove beyond any possibility of argument.

The final segment recounted changes in Athenian social custom during the ascendancy of Alexander the Great who, the programme alleges, "brought an end to democracy". It suggested that Athenian men, stripped of their political power and the impetus for social networking, turned more to their wives and discovered a greater respect for womenfolk. Again, no evidence whatsoever is offered to support such a conclusion. I haven't read that Alexander set up tyrants to rule in Athens, as Sparta and Thebes had done earlier, and since

he was far away in Persia and India for the brief remainder of his life, perhaps it's unfair to hold him responsible for any supposed change in Athenian marital affairs. But we're approaching our conclusion now, and there's no time to be wasted on evidence. With the rise of Rome, we're told, much was borrowed from Athenian attitudes and culture. The matriarch in Augustan Rome was a more highly respected figure than the wives of classical Athens, and this was thanks in substantial part to Phryne's posing nude for the statue of Aphrodite, supplanting homosociality with heterosociality, homoeroticism with the form we all know and love today. The Romans, nevertheless, carried some of the diseases of Greek culture forward in their empire-building, among them the subordination of the woman in marriage, and if that legacy is still with us today, the programme says, it was bequeathed to us, along with their aqueducts and roads, by the Romans.

I wasn't aware that the Romans built many aqueducts in China, India, or the Americas, yet women did not enjoy any higher status in those lands, and marital arrangements there were not dissimilar to the Greeks and Romans. Women held a subordinate status in the ancient world. It's a fact of history. Whether one feels that was a Bad Thing or not, it is pointless to castigate the past for it, any more than for slavery, on which the Greek civilisation flourished, and which barely rates a passing mention here.

The programme's central theses, it seems to me, were not only unproven, but tendentious and offensive. A society based on "homosexual" love is inferior to one based on heterosexuality. Preference for the fellowship of one's own sex is an expression of hatred – or at least fear – of women. One nude female statue in Athens counted for more, historically speaking, than all the thousands of nude male statues there. Athenian concerns about racial purity (on which grounds their women were largely excluded from social affairs) were a form of fascism. There is something disturbing about eroticism in all-male social contexts, but something liberating about eroticism in all-female social contexts. All of these value judgments were implicit in the argumentation.

Experts interviewed in the programme were Prof. James Davidson (historian, Warwick University), Dr Sue Blundell (author, "Women in Greece"), Prof. Paula Pelman (classicist, University of Texas), Dr Anthony C Grayling (Birkbeck College London), Nancy Bookidist (classicist, Athens) and Lucia Nixon (archaeologist, Oxford University). They were not responsible for the slanting of the programme of course, but their interpretations too were often distorted by contemporary thinking, and insufficiently dispassionate.

What we need from our historians is **truthfulness** to the past – in its values as much as its works – not a shameless kowtowing to contemporary political trends and sensibilities. We need them to evaluate the past with appropriate academic rigour, not re-interpret it to please present day hegemonies. Modern historians who massage the female ego as this programme seeks to do are no better than those Roman historians who would sing the virtues of whatever emperor was in power, and doctor the past record accordingly.

I've commented on this programme at considerable length, because its whole outlook betrays a suspicion prevalent in women of homosocial institutions per se – but only male ones. The systematic eradication of the culture of boyhood is one of this archive's major themes, and I believe it can be traced directly to that same suspicion of male-only institutions or relationships. It's deeply ironic to hear this programme censure Athenian culture – one transmitted from men to boys – as arising from a profound mistrust of the female sex, when it's a profound mistrust of the *male* sex in contemporary society which is endeavouring to exclude men from the whole process of acculturating kids, specifically boys.

In other words, by dismantling all the boundaries of gender in childhood and early adolescence – at least, so far as the girls are concerned – there is no longer a perceived need for boys to socialise predominantly with men (and learn a lot of unfortunate attitudes in the process). By destroying the concept of “boyhood”, as distinct from “childhood”, women hope to nip patriarchy in the bud, and fashion male behaviour according to their own precepts instead. This process is already well under way. It may be a forlorn experiment in social engineering, but also a decidedly harmful one. In any case, by clinging on to childhood as their private fiefdom, women merely perpetuate one of the central myths of all patriarchal cultures.

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