Same-Sex Unions in the Politics of Ancient History

Jeremy Cohen
University of Pennsylvania

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Same-Sex Unions in the Politics of Ancient History

Abstract
John Boswell’s *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (1994) achieved a level of popularity unusual for classical philology, arguing that the little-known and barely attested Byzantine ritual of *adelphopoiesis* was evidence of officially-condoned homosexual marriage in the early Christian world. Both devoutly Catholic and openly gay, Boswell dedicated the book to friends who had died from AIDS complications, a fate he shared later the same year. The book was critically panned, from a non-academic publisher, and marketed to a large layperson audience. Indeed, there are technical errors and perhaps fundamental biases (anachronism, Orientalism) in the work, but detractors tended toward *ad hominem*: the work’s flaws cast as personal failings rather than academic ones. The delineation between a piece being ‘bad scholarship’ and ‘not scholarship’ is a subtle act of quarantine. Considering also G.E.M. de Ste. Croix’s *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981) and Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (1987), this project examines transgressive scholars finding in classical antiquity an opportunity for sociopolitical relevance, while Classicists’ reactions have been mixed.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

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Same-Sex Unions in the Politics of Ancient History

Jeremy Cohen

Penn Humanities Forum 2015-16
Undergraduate Fellow and Chair

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Author’s Note

This has not been a well-paced, well-regulated thesis as much as a project growing in fits and starts. At worst it is a narrative exploration of a single man’s intriguing (if misguided) attempts at inciting a critique, in light of two others’. At best, it sets out on a brave new course for the evenhanded study of evidence-fabricators, *ex nihilo* interpreters.

To call it ‘final’ now is imprecise; I have spent two months succumbing to its inertia. There is so much work left to do, not least expanding the paper and solidifying its conclusions. Its proudest boast might be the bibliography, which I also (rightly) call ‘Wider Reading’. This includes the larger share of reviews, profiles, and higher-brow pop-cultural perspectives on three influential historians and their three controversial books.

The body of the paper itself contains only a handful of explicit footnotes. Given the diversity and scope of sources, a cohesive paper would have been impossible but for condensation and paraphrase. In those places where I do cite, another’s words seemed necessary, alongside or in place of my own. The result is nevertheless at an uncomfortable middle-point: several citations shy of disciplinary research; many artful turns of phrase away from fitting into the social-intellectual wheelhouse of *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic*. And yet the project’s very conceit deals with authors challenging the genre, subject, and perspective distinctions that hold scholarship separate from the salon. John Boswell’s last book featured in *TNY*’s “Talk of the Town”. A critical approach hailing from only the *academe* would seem to miss the point.

An important piece of the project has been to ask where exactly such a distinction resides. Within the Bibliography, I attempt to separate *Same-Sex Unions*’ scholarly responses from its popular ones—an act taken with many grains of salt. For instance: Daniel Mendelsohn’s lengthy and erudite repudiation, “The Man Behind the Curtain.” He has a classics PhD and published the review in Boston University’s journal, but he has never held a formal academic position and instead dedicates his public service to *The New York Review of Books*. He included “The Man Behind the Curtain” in a book, *How Beautiful It Is and How Easily It Can Be Broken* (Harper Perennial, 2008), centered on the fragility of beauty and nuance in Euripides, Henry James, and *The Truman Show*, to name a few.

Or take the brief but forceful review of Camille Paglia, professor of the humanities at University of the Arts and famous author of *Sexual Personae*, who holds a fair share of July 2016 Final Paper Submitted for Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research Fellowship
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controversial and politically sensitive views. She offers a valuable critique of *Same-Sex Unions*, approaching from the history of sexuality and medieval *mentalité*, as published in *The Washington Post*. One month later, the *Post* published several letters from its readers, one of whom took objected “to her snobbish suggestion that those of us without her academic credentials are incapable of dealing with footnotes or foreign words in a text.”

Having realized the blurring of genre inevitable in this endeavor, I was in no point of the process convinced that a well-researched, well-formatted paper would do the topic justice. Even upon applying to the Humanities Forum, I had envisioned a play. The impossibility of staging led me to think of monologues, read aloud or in silence. There was no way to proceed without giving voice to central figures; they had biases and agendas, they acted with decency. Since then, I have turned my thoughts to a podcast, with the same investigative curiosity of *RadioLab*. This would place it in the realm of journalism, not academia, but perhaps rightly so. There has not been an academic work on the subject that has not also qualified as polemic. The aim would be to report facts, interesting enough on their own, with some critical lens toward their synthesis. Boswell’s concerns were modern ones, far beyond his titular prerogative as medievalist or ancient historian. Relegating the matter to questions of historical veracity alone would do it a disservice; it may even constitute taking a side. And, as I mentioned in the “epilogue” to my presentation in March, it leaves out a serious consideration:

> Even as an aspiring ancient historian myself, trained to discern the hair’s width of plausibility between solidity and wild speculation; even as someone who turns to the appendix and can point to mistranslated Greek; I see why people were taken in. He was everything that a brilliant public professor should be. Doesn’t he, having died before the legalization of gay marriage, deserve to have had his solace in that half-true anachronism, a ritual as Byzantine as its participants?...

> In the few times it has come up, I heard of an advisor’s experience sharing a panel with John Boswell at an academic conference. She, then newer to academia, presented dutifully on medieval rhetoric. When his turn to speak, Jeb Boswell gave the academic-conference equivalent of an “infomercial” for Same-Sex Unions, to an audience full of his fans.
Granted, such a story is not about to feature in a prominent NPR installment or on an Off-Broadway stage. There are more pressing stories than a rather obscure professional and intercollegiate controversy. It was widely disseminated, but only among those people with prior interest. No one died in connection with these events—except, of course, John Boswell himself.
Yale History Professor John Boswell produced groundbreaking social histories of religious and sexual minorities in the ancient Mediterranean and European Middle Ages. He claimed to read, write, or speak seventeen languages, including Classical Armenian and Old Church Slavonic. His 1980 book turned heads, arguing for social tolerance of homosexuality in the Middle Ages. His final book, published in 1994 by a quasi-academic division of Random House, rendered his popularity somewhat wider. *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* claimed the existence of gay marriage rituals as sanctioned by the Roman and Byzantine Churches. Later that year, John Boswell died of AIDS complications, at the age of 47.

He was not the first to mine classical antiquity toward progressive (or transgressive) social ends, but his endeavors—and their varied responses—represent something new: the entrance of identity politics into academic fields, where otherwise-detached scholars make a constant case for modern relevance. John Boswell, to the chagrin of classicists, made a compelling public case that the classics matter.

*Same-Sex Unions* serves as a point of entry to discuss interpretive communities, private and public—especially the interpersonal, reputational politics of ancient historians, classicists, and medievalists. For those who knew him, though, Boswell’s legacy is as much as teacher, public intellectual, Catholic believer, and openly gay man.
Act I: John Boswell, Same-Sex Unions, and 1994

Boswell introduces Same-Sex Unions with promise of a dangerous secret: evidence of a medieval and Byzantine ritual of adelphopoiesis. This is literally rendered “brother-making”, but in his views it was a religious, romantic, and perhaps erotic same-sex union. Also critical to his view: The Western Catholic Church later condemned the ritual and all but expunged it from the record.

An earlier book had been a dispassionate exploration of the secret deviances of famous Christian Europeans, and for the reasonable tolerance that they might have enjoyed. Another treated the religious heterogeneity of Moorish Spain during its Golden Age. Both offered novel work in an underappreciated field of medievalists, and Boswell received positive reviews. A reader of sufficient intellect, interpretive dexterity, and sexual or religious minority status might find in their larger theses some sense of heritage or solace. By contrast, in his last book’s epilogue, Boswell makes the rather more-immediate case that his work should serve the interests of those arguing for legal same-sex marriage.

Boswell constructs his argument’s backdrop with a selective walk through Greek pederasty, Nero’s wedding-theater, and a detail-driven account of late antique Christian wedding rituals. A knowledgeable reader might question the internal relevance of the evidence, or the presentation of anomalous literary or pseudo-historical references. An astute reader lacking content familiarity, however, could find each piece of evidence a compelling signal. Viewed together, they chart a plausible (and thereby attractive) course through noisy historical data. Many of the examples listed are true, if provided without precise context; at first blush, the entire book would not seem to turn on a single esoteric document.
Same-Sex Unions attracted attention almost immediately, and the second half of 1994 was tumultuous. A Los Angeles Times feature and Doonesbury comic making mention of its central claim appeared on June 8. The New York Times followed suit on June 11; a New Yorker critical comment of June 20, framed as “Beyond Stonewall: Gay Struggles, 25 Years On”; the book’s own official publication one day later; and an article in People magazine less than a full week later. No small part of the credit is deserved by Random House’s press teams, but it also goes to show wide appeal among the middlebrow media élite. Unable to accept his many interview invitations due to declining health, Boswell died only a few months later, on Christmas Eve of the same year.

Many scholars were skeptical of the book’s claims, approaching its sudden popularity with ambivalence or overt negativity. Public intellectual and gay classicist Daniel Mendelsohn wrote a definitive critique, with a not-so-generous comparison to a fame-seeking Oscar Wilde who should have gone to graduate school. In his review, “The Man Behind the Curtain”, he documents every improbable philological claim and implausible speculation, lambasting Boswell especially for marketing his book to a “non-academic audience”. The Yale professor had encouraged the reader to skip over footnotes and entire appendices of untranslated Greek which, here or there, the author had too-generously rendered. He took issue with his too-personal (if undeniable) charisma and pretension of erudition—the oft-repeated proficiency in Old Church Slavonic. Individuals held gay-wedding ceremonies on the basis of Boswell’s manuscripts, which Mendelsohn says are mis-contextualized or misconstrued or simply mistranslated. This is the source of Mendelsohn’s most acute concern. The proper and compelling communication of classical antiquity to the wider (well-read) public is his life’s work. He is one of a handful of recipients of the President’s Award of the Society for Classical Studies; his articles appear
regularly in *The New Yorker*. The Wilma’s fall 2015 production of *Antigone* found inspiration in his essay about the Boston Marathon bombing. Boswell’s sensationalism would undermine the hard work of a truer-to-fact public intellectual.

On the other side, Dr. Ralph Hexter—a prominent gay classicist, and now Provost of the University of California, San Diego—had helped Boswell in his final months and was one of his greatest advocates after death. He helped organize a conference, “John Boswell’s Medieval World”, at the 2010 meeting of the Medieval Academy, despite not being a medievalist. His words have dedicated space in *The Boswell Thesis*, a collection of essays about the work and legacy collected and edited by Matthew Kueffler, a former Yale PhD student of Boswell’s. Most interestingly, Hexter’s favorable review of *Same-Sex Unions* appears alongside Brent Shaw’s more cynical take (“A Groom of One’s Own?”) in the first chapter of Andrew Sullivan’s impossibly pop-historical *Same-Sex Marriage: Pro & Con: A Reader*. This late-nineties mass-market offering is also from Random House, featuring an improbable cast of characters: Plato, Camille Paglia, David Brooks, the Bible, Supreme Court opinions, George W. Bush, and Hannah Arendt. In 2005, American historian Jane Kamensky discussed John Boswell’s final work as a case study in her essay’s driving maxim: historians necessarily traffick in morals.¹

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¹ Kamensky 112.
Act II: Comparative Basis

Of course, Boswell was neither the first nor the only scholar to approach antiquity with an unconventional treatment. Given their similarly strong agendas, though differing fates, it might stand alongside G.E.M. de Ste Croix’ *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* and Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*.

Geoffrey Ernest Maurice de Ste. Croix—“Croicks” as he pronounced it—was born into the same British Empire as George Orwell: his birthplace Macao, his heritage Huguenot, and his immediate predecessors English missionaries. He developed acute distrusts of the Old Testament God, organized religion, Fascism, and Communism(s). Having left school at the age of fifteen to write legal copy, as a soldier he campaigned equally for Labour government and against mandatory Sunday morning prayer, for which he earned the special command, “Jews and others, fall out”. And yet, his achievement came as an excellent student at University College London, tutor at Oxford, and lucid lecturer on even the most mundane subjects—once invited to guest-teach an Accounting course and to deliver, for the first time in recording history, a compelling argument that the Greeks and Romans did not use a double-entry bookkeeping system. This feat of epigraphy is as ludicrously difficult and admirable as it is self-contained. He was lauded for a 1954 article, “The Character of the Athenian Empire”, which contended that the imperial project was far less unpopular than Thucydides made it out to be. Throughout his life, he bore endless enmity for Plato, St. Augustine, St. Paul, and Yahweh. But his favorite time was spent teaching, critiquing, and advising, eccentrically and anomalously within the Oxbridge universe. When he finally spoke with disgust about the Vietnam War and affinity for the Cultural Revolution—for Mao, even—he took his students by surprise. It was such that on publication of *Class Struggle*,
his magnum opus, Robert Parker writes, “The intellectual position in which he now found himself was a singular and isolated one. Ancient historians who lacked a theoretical and comparative perspective were henceforth liable to be stigmatized by him as mere antiquarians. But better an antiquarian than a sociologising ignoramus!”

Bernal was an erudite scholar of Chinese history in Cornell’s faculty of Government until his academic trajectory changed suddenly. Upon investigating his Jewish heritage amidst a mid-life crisis, he says he discovered, theorized, and set out to prove that the near-entirety of Greek language and culture could be reduced to Indo-European, Egyptian, and Phoenician elements. This flies in the face of the conventional model, an invasion of so-called Dorians from the Balkans into the Greek peninsula at the death knell of Mycenaean civilization. The late Bronze Age is a mysterious period, precipitating sudden and total collapse of every major geopolitical power in the eastern Mediterranean. Scholarship on the subject has progressed steadily over the past several decades, but Bernal was convinced that the chaos preceding the Greek Dark Ages could not justify the sudden appearance of a thence unknown, reading-and-writing, European ethnos. Understanding his newcomer status as an opportunity for freshness, Bernal applied his admirable skills of linguistics, historical writing, and critical theory with fervor. He published the now-infamous *Black Athena* in three separate volumes between 1987 and 2006.

The greatest criticism lobbed against Bernal and Croix is that they work toward a too-strong, over-fitted explanation. *The Class Struggle* is a grab-bag, kitchen-sink-plus of an Ancient History tome. Both have been called Weber-esque, adopting a theory of history (and historiography) that is allowed to become all-encompassing. Jacques Berlinerblau called *Black Athena* a “monument of interdisciplinarity”, such that a scholar of any humanistic or historical

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2 Parker 470.
3 See, as overview, Eric Cline’s *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*

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discipline can find something familiar in the index, perhaps even their own dissertation. One of Class Struggle’s reviewers gave up entirely on discussing Part II, other than to say it is “a kind of survey of the course of ancient history. In vulgar parlance, you name it, this book has got something about it and you can find it through the index.”

As a general principle, authors’ critiques of the academe serve to popularize their works among non-experts. Still, Croix’ work is an academic one—even if one he tried dutifully to disseminate across disciplines and cultural boundaries. Only here or there did he take up political themes, such as in a short preface to the 1993 Greek translation of Class Struggle, where he “expressed a continuing hope that a classless society would one day be created, quite unlike the fallen pseudo-Marxist tyrannies of the Soviet world.” Class Struggle earned Croix worldwide fame: translations, reprints, lecture series. Even its dissidents—and there were many—argued that its studious and compelling work would change the discipline of Ancient History; that it hasn’t quite has been attributed to the fall of the Soviet bloc soon after.

Bernal was more acutely (and perhaps proudly) aware that his advocacy against Eurocentrism put him into a lineage that included DuBois and Said. He may have wondered if Black Athena, as much as the central thesis, could expand and twist to meet the needs of radical critique. The 1989 annual meeting of the American Philological Association devoted a panel to the book’s chief arguments, reception, and implications. He was asked, or offered, to review Yaacov Shavit’s History in Black: African-Americans in Search of an Ancient Past (2001) for The American Historical Review. Mary Lefkowitz of Wellesley University wrote and co-edited two book-length critiques, Not Out of Africa and Black Athena Revisited (both 1996), the latter with Guy MacLean Rogers and featuring twenty essays from scholars of varied disciplines.

4 Crook 72.
5 Parker 474.
Bernal paused his three-volume masterwork to compose his own book-length defense, *Black Athena Writes Back*, including a chapter-length review of Lefkowitz entitled “All Not Quiet on the Wellesley Front”. Shavit (in turn) called Bernal’s response a “fascinating and informative reading, whether as a study of historical evidences and their interpretation, a methodological study, or an intellectual and cultural event.”\(^6\) There have been two documentaries about the controversy, a full-length book (Berlinerblau’s polemical *Heresy in the University*), and an out-of-left-field management case study (Riad and Jones 2015) on its professional and interpersonal dynamics, with important takeaways for race sensitivity and open-mindedness in any diverse, modern organization.

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While Croix is the only true Capital-C Classicist of the trio, Bernal the Sinologist and Boswell the medievalist both had the mix of chutzpah and naïveté to posit alternative theories of history for the glory that was Greece and grandeur that was Rome. They proposed the revelation

\(^6\) Shavit 106.  
\(^7\) Berlinerblau 4.  
\(^8\) Crook 72.
of some mystery knowledge, plus the requisite, conspiratorial cover-up. Boswell blamed the ecclesiastical monopoly over Europe’s historical record. For Croix, it was simply a lack of overlap between those who read Marx and those who study Ancient History, the fault of an overspecialized academe. Bernal’s is more insidious: The replacement of correct ‘Ancient with the an ‘Aryan Model’ of Greek ethnogenesis was the work of 19th-century German philologists whose faults included European essentialism, racism against Egyptians as Black Africans, and anti-Semitism against Phoenicians as quasi-Jews. As in Same-Sex Unions, there are also criticisms of linguistic slipperiness—as unfair for Croix to say “slave society” as Boswell to use the anachronism of “gay marriage”, and Bernal’s speculative linguistic lacking the precision of Hellenistic philology. The arguments of all three rest on interpretive work and several degrees of plausibility.

Yet, Croix and Bernal have been accepted into the realm of valid scholarly discourses. The Oxford Classical Dictionary, in all its instantiated prestige, may serve as gatekeeper of what is or is not a mainstream, recognizable discourse in the field. Croix’ Class Struggle is one of the five foundational studies for articles on “class struggle” and “Marxism and Classical Antiquity.” Bernal’s Black Athena is listed as one of many important and recognizable contributions in the literature surrounding the all-important (and rather trendy) topic of Hellenism and Hellenization. But the work of John Bowell is nowhere to be found. Instead, the frequency lines for encyclopedia inclusion run inverse to Google searches—that trusty metric of popular discourse—with interest spiking, and consistently higher, for Boswell over the past decade. Even Black Athena, finished in this century and consistently cited, is hardly competition.
**Act III: Problem & Theory**

The works of Boswell, Croix, and Bernal are already meta-textual as historiography, or histories concerning history. The introductions for all three have moments of grand soliloquy, positing the nature, function, and failings of the historian. This is front and back matter more useful in the study of rhetoric or philosophy of history than the fair and balanced framing of nonfiction. Boswell makes particular mention of his larger obligations in the introduction and epilogue. “It is not the province of the historian to direct the actions of future human beings,” he writes, “but only to reflect accurately on those of the past.”

Yet his rejection from the canon of late antiquity is not just on the grounds of being incorrect or mistaken—many have survived worse—but a severer offense, of writing history irresponsibly. Mendelsohn thought Boswell had tried a shortcut, an easier route to personal fame and public advocacy; implicitly, that he had undermined the more difficult, more valid efforts of more serious gay historians. A larger question emerges: What does it mean to say that something—someone—fails to meet standards of historical scholarship?

First, literary critique: It does not conform to genre. Historical writing uses Chicago style and appears with the seal of a well-known academic publisher. Less tangibly, we expect the writing to be impersonal, the evidence largely primary, and clear delineations between unbiased presentation of evidence, review of past literature, and well-reasoned, well-supported explanations. Of course, the expectations can change for works that are more theoretical or share qualities of biography. Boswell’s last book was from Random House and uses the first person liberally. Still, these are red flags at most.

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9 See the Appendix for an in-depth example and commentary from *Same-Sex Unions.*
10 Boswell 281-2.
Second, positivist critique: It lacks historical veracity. Are the results true and conclusions well-reasoned? Admittedly, so much academic work involves interpretation of limited sources, felt most acutely in ancient studies. The ultimate debates are ones over plausibility, Occam’s razor in abstract. Interested scholars make up a sufficiently insular community that someone is questioning something always, but there exists sufficient consensus any one time in order to publish textbooks. An approach privileging truth works most of the time, while still allowing for fundamental questions. But it risks discounting a lot of groundbreaking research in early stages: preliminary work that goes against or away from a consensus. It might even take someone of sufficient self-esteem, charisma, and intellectual stubbornness to push through a tendentious conceit to publication.

Third, normative critique: It is not a model for emulation. What is the quality of scholarship, as an act performed by a scholar? A historian can be right without really writing “good” history, or she can deliver ambitious-if-unlikely speculations while still contributing “good” work to the field, by having combed through disorganized archives of kept copious records of her assumptions. Within tight-knit interpretive communities, however, assessing to any extent the quality of another’s scholarship—that is to say, how well a scholar does their day-job—can seem (or be) personal. Reviewers lean especially hard on the normative category when the insights do not appear reasonable, credible, or illuminating. It determines whether to thank a scholar for their dedicated service, despite minute lapses, or to reject the entire worth of a scholastic enterprise. Mary Lefkowitz concluded Not Out of Africa with the observation, “Appealing mythologies about the past bring satisfaction in the short run, but in the end they damage the very cause they are intended to promote.”

11 Lefkowitz 155.
Boswell’s perceived failure was a combination of all three, but with heaviest weighting in the second and third. He intentionally chose less-plausible explanations, an argument runs, because they served personal ends. But other normative responses are more generous, few rivalling Mendelsohn’s sense of disappointment and betrayal. Boswell’s work, despite his more slippery claims, disseminated pleasantly among medieval scholars who appreciated his attempt. The Yale professor and department chair had jump-started important discourses in a discipline with less-rigid norms; he served on the board of the Medieval Academy of America. The organization has a Dissertation Grant in his name, for which the citation states: “He was a pioneer in two fields that developed significantly over the past two decades: the study of Christian-Muslim-Jewish relations, especially in the Iberian peninsula, and GLBT studies. His scholarly legacy is found not only in his four monographs, but in the many students, both undergraduate and graduate, who followed him into the profession.”

To the latter end, his alma mater also remembers not only his “groundbreaking research” but also his “dedication to teaching”. The College of William & Mary invites visiting professors and funds research stipends for the “John Boswell Initiative” (including a Memorial Lecture), aiming broadly “to promote innovative, interdisciplinary scholarship on the cultural, economic, political, and policy dimensions” of LGBT communities in the U.S. and around the world. Lacking the same institutional knowledge, and perhaps to their own detriment, the rather more-established disciplines of Classics and (Ancient) History had less need, appreciation, or forgiveness for one such as him.

Outside the academe, many in LGBT communities still hold high regard for Boswell. He wrote and published on sexual minorities when such work was still unprecedented, politically

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difficult, and cordoned off in a few ‘safe’ disciplines. Granted, he has also lost some esteem, having disagreed publicly with Foucault and maintained an anachronistic and increasingly outdated notion of homosexual identity. His contributions to critical theory are limited, but he figures in the rolls of prominent, out gays, and as a victim of the AIDS crisis. One of the more moving profiles comes from the Yale AIDS Memorial Project, an online roster of the university’s deceased students, faculty, and alumni. If ever one needed proof of Boswell’s inimitable charm and compassion, it is there:

During my week in New Haven I witnessed Jeb once again brilliantly and miraculously holding court from his hospital room at the Yale infirmary, reciting lines from My Cousin Vinny and singing Cause I’m a Blond from Earth Girls Are Easy. While I was there, his father, Colonel Boswell, saluted Jeb’s courage, the newly-installed President of Yale, Richard Levin, cried freely, a devoted graduate student visited daily, people regularly drifted in to thank Jeb for helping them through a crisis, and a young barber who came to the infirmary room to give Jeb a haircut moved us to tears when he refused payment.13

One of the most compelling features of Boswell’s story is his personal stake, his charisma of authenticity. I postulate that the academic reception of Same-Sex Unions differed from Black Athena and Class Struggle because of Boswell’s proclaimed identity politics, enabled by an enviable and magnetic persona. All three authors had overt, moralizing messages; but Boswell’s also had an explicit call-to-action, in which he was an interested party. Many classicists dream of bringing the ancients further into contemporary discourse, to edify the modern world in Greek and Latin. The case of John Boswell adds a significant caveat: It is only good for moderns to read, care, and think about antiquity so long as it is true.


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Appendix: Same-Sex Unions Front & Back Matter

The preface, introduction, and epilogue stand apart from the actual argument of Same-Sex Unions, offering substance only as direct rhetoric. Boswell appeals to his reader, preparing them for the presentation ahead and then offering an exit interview, easing the presumed shock. A close reading of some excerpts from these sections is of particular interest here because Boswell was such a charismatic figure, even in writing. More important, several statements glean his larger views on historians, history-writing, and the limits of conventional evidence.

Preface

We begin with an unnamed correspondent, whose identity Boswell will not disclose, having brought the version of the adelphopoiesis ritual to his attention. But there is a delay to revelation:

In the meantime, many professional obligations (being chair of several departments, including the largest one, at the university where I teach),

Yale and its History Department, as a Harvard student might say she attends school “in Boston”;

completing another book that has already languished on my desk,

The Kindness of Strangers (1988), a well-received scholarly work of medieval social history; his implication that Same-Sex Unions is a more worthwhile project is an argument a fortiori,

the deaths of many close friends from AIDS,

A significant inclusion, one of which Mendelsohn is especially wary,

and several major computer disasters have all steadily impeded my progress and prevented completion of the book I had intended to finish at least five years ago.

Major computer disasters: the most universal, relatable experience of professionals and academics in the early 1990’s (let alone the 2010’s).

The unnamed correspondent brought to my attention a version of the ceremony published in Jacques Goar’s Euchologion,

That is, a footnote to a Greek statement halfway through book, an “ersatz version”,

for which there was no adequate bibliographic help or manuscript identification.
The mystery unfolds, bit by bit: an unnamed colleague; a scrap of ritualistic history outside the bibliographic record; an obscurity strengthened in comparison to a familiar reference to a book with which few are familiar.

To track down manuscript versions, I began at the western end of Europe (the British Library) and worked my way east, summer by summer, library by library. It took me several years to come across manuscript versions of the ceremony (I found none in the British Library), and the first ones I encountered could have been viewed as ceremonies solemnizing special friendships.

These are the Paris manuscripts, and we’re now being sent to a table of provenances, edited Greek texts, and Boswell’s personal translations. The versions in the British Library lack any indications of the ceremony, and the first ones “could have been viewed” as special friendship or blood-brotherhood only. The natural questions for the reader: What’s not in the British Library? If they could have been viewed that way, how are they in truth? Meanwhile, Boswell is traveling adventurer, moving through Continental Europe but also threads of apparent deception:

At first I felt discouraged by this, and decided that Goar had misinterpreted or misrepresented Italian documents he had seen; it was not until years later that I discovered he had in fact done so, but in a direction opposite to that one I had first suspected.

That is, opposite to how Boswell, the certified skeptic, had first expected. The mystery deepens; what did he expect, and what did he find?

The next summer when I got to Italy I discovered many versions of the ceremony that were obviously the same-sex equivalent of a medieval heterosexual marriage ceremony (though not necessarily a precise equivalent of its modern descendants).

Obviously: he knew it when he saw it. It couldn’t have been a precise equivalent of modern-day homosexuality—rather impossible for such a thing to have existed—but it would be a parallel, obvious enough for a well-trained ancient historian. He would have no choice of interpretation after having seen it; to read through, around, or over it would be an act of self-deception.

Only then did it occur to me how remarkable it was that there should not have been a ceremony solemnizing or hallowing friendship in the religion of the teacher who described friendship as the highest love.

We might turn to a footnote on page 194, when Boswell discusses Greek words for “friend” and “love” as used by Jesus in the New Testament. Boswell, writing for a layperson audience but also writing an academic book, uses roundabout way to mention the teachings of Christ—if you get it, you feel pretty smart for having gotten it. And Boswell’s discover solves a problem we
didn’t realize we had: it makes more sense for there to have been this ritual than for there to not have been.

*In retrospect, and considering how much distortion and censorship of the ceremony I have discovered, I wonder if the Paris versions represent simplified (or even bowdlerized) medieval versions of the ceremony of union.*

That would be a convenient hypothesis, and (to his credit) a common one for explaining manuscript deviations. But this relationship could go either way—there’s not yet any compelling reason why the Paris versions are the bowdlerized, rather than the Italian versions, other than the latter being much more difficult to find.

*In any event, I publish them here so that readers can judge for themselves.*

Published in Ancient Greek (or Old Church Slavonic) with Boswell’s personal translations. How likely are the readers of this book to be ones who can judge for themselves?

*Over the years, I have often spoken publicly about the ceremony and its ramifications. I now doubt that this was a wise decision, but at the time I felt an obligation to share information about the discovery. At least one of these addresses was published; several were videotaped and sold or distributed without my authorization.*

Boswell had been spreading the good word, but perhaps the good word should have remained a secret until its time (and its prophet) were right. Yet it was so compelling, even in impure form, that it just had to get out, without his authorization. More generously: The book was surrounded by pitched argument before its publication and lost the chance to be judged on its own, cover-to-cover merits.

*This is particularly unfortunate because over the decade I have been assembling the material, my opinions on various aspects of it have evolved and changed, as is inevitably the case in any long scholarly project. Many people may have been misled in minor ways by what I said at earliest stages of my research, since these informal presentations on work in progress were widely disseminated and quoted.*

The reader feels at once thrust into the phenomenon, without Boswell giving too much credit to the controversy. The book has been work in progress; it is now in its corrected and perfected form.

*Partly as a result of these developments, a number of critics have offered critiques of or disagreements with a work that did not yet exist. Such comments are to informed criticism and disagreement what the modern American vulgarism “preboarding” is to boarding a plane.*
Boswell leaves open the partial possibility that they critiqued or disagreed not as a result of these developments. Does he mean the ambitious thesis? Or the litigiousness of academics? Did we mention that this was written for a layperson audience? The reader is likely well-educated, and they have some appreciation for clever writing, but they might not have detailed knowledge of or allegiance to this or any academic discipline.

No one could possibly have known what would be said in this study, even by paying close attention to lecture or videotapes of the work as it developed.

The mystery comes full circle. No one can possibly know what the book would or should say until they have read it. Boswell is an enigma and his scholarly work is the cypher. Or, he may think that his written account will be more persuasive than a talk or synopsis of the evidence.

Over the dozen years I have worked on the project I have amassed an enormous debt to many individuals, only a few of whom I will remember to thank. First and foremost, I am forever indebted to James Meehan, whose timely intervention rescued the project at many junctures where, without his cheerful and unstinting assistance, I would have abandoned it. This help involved not only his laboriously transferring the contents of disks from one operating system to another during several computer disasters, but even making long trips to photograph manuscripts I needed to consult but could not see myself.

That is, there is a lot of evidence behind this book, and many people involved in its acquisition and curation. Most are still to come, even as he has promised to only remember “a few”, implying an army of supporting actors who would now seem complicit with at least the veracity of their particular consultation.

In an equally practical way Elizabeth Archibald provided assistance of the most direct kind while I was conducting research in Italy, Jerone Hart offered practical support of crucial kinds in the United States, and John S. Morgan has faithfully contributed for years to the research expenses for the project.

Boswell emphasizes, in addition to a trip to Europe, the year-after-year costs. The book is to be understood and appreciated as the culmination of a long-term, multifaceted, resource-intensive endeavor.

For pointers, bits of information, or advice about how to translate I am grateful to...

A list of names is included, not necessary for inclusion here,

And, above all, to Ralph Hexter,

UCSD Provost, former President of Hampshire College, and gay classics scholar,
on whom I have always relied as my most attentive and helpful critic, and who has rendered timely and generous assistance at every stage of the writing.

We have another list of names who can indirectly ensure (if not exactly testify) to the accuracy of Boswell’s translations, insofar as they contributed advice or recommendations here or there.

In the end, of course, responsibility for everything said in the pages that follow is mine alone.

The book is intertwined inextricably with its creator. A less generous reviewer reads Boswell’s call for personality cult.

Introduction

After introducing notions of anachronism and cultural relativism, loosely, to explain that same-sex behavior was then far less despised than in the modern catechism. In essence, Boswell problematizes our approach to sexuality in the ancient, medieval, and Christian worlds.

Normally the task of a historian is to piece together an account of what happened from the available sources, offer some analysis of the causes and effects involved, and present his or her findings in the most accessible form to readers or students.

This will not be the last time Boswell offers sweeping statements about the responsibilities of the historian. He offers his own view on his academic niche cum literary genre, as a device to frame his spurning of it:

In a case like the present one, for the reasons adduced above, this task is enormously more complicated, because many readers, rather than being eager for the information to be thus gathered and relayed, will be inclined to resist it.

The inclinations to resist the book’s evidence is automatic, implying that an acceptance of its conclusions may require time and higher-order judgment. Criticism appears easier, more instinctive, going with the grain—or the tide:

Practicing the normal skills of the historian in such circumstances becomes extremely difficult, perhaps counterproductive—rather like attempting to perfect the breast stroke against a riptide. It has been a struggle for the writer not to overcompensate by weighting arguments in favor of what will seem intuitively unlikely to most readers; it has been his aim simply to present the largest possible amount of evidence for the most reasonable inferences.
Boswell does seem genuine in his belief that writing and reading this book are both harder than for, say, a biography of George Washington. There are evidential, frame-of-reference, and time-distance problems—already fragmented material is even harder to put in unfamiliar contexts. Presenting “the largest possible amount of evidence” is a noble attempt, if done honestly. There comes a point, however, where only the scholar who has spent several (funded) years reading and synthesizing can draw “the most reasonable inferences” from the whole corpus; otherwise, as in public-opinion surveys, order and style of presentation can have huge biasing effects.

Speculation has been kept to a minimum, although many questions remain unanswered by the sources.

To fill those gaps, what does Boswell offer? We are likely to see preponderances of evidence, “most reasonable inferences”, and the “minimum” speculation to fill unanswered gaps—Boswell has carefully justified the necessity of all three given the difficulty of the subject. Presumably Boswell offers qualifications and competing alternatives in sections of lesser certainty. But we also know that Boswell has, from the outset, a belief and an agenda. Are we likely to see these argumentative features in an order that supports or casts doubt upon his personal conclusion? Claim, evidence, inference, exception, concession, synthesis—this is a hallmark of persuasive rhetoric, known to every classically trained litigator and high-school debater.

I offer a synopsis of the next section, in lieu of lengthy inclusion: Boswell offers a brief discussion of the discrepancy between male and female homosexuality, and he recognizes that there are sexist tendencies privileging male-male relationships—such will, after all, be the almost exclusive focus of his book. But he also makes the curious claim that modern anthropologists find female-interested female behavior noteworthy to an extent that is (in his view) disproportionate. Most ancient literature is biased toward relations between men; most modern sociological or Orientalist biases emphasize those between women. If understood correctly, Boswell’s intent here is to provide a double defense: there is both a lack of source material with which to discuss female homosexuality (though it certainly existed) and an implicit conditioning of his readers such that they would expect a large treatment of its existence (though it certainly existed).

This is a complicated, tightly packed, and (I think) significant detail in Boswell’s larger methodological discussion. He qualifies his points with external attributions, explaining the flaws of intuition via ancient limitations and modern biases. We can’t know as much as we should; we expect to know differently from how we ought.

He furthers the complicatedness, now with mention of the language barrier(s):

The project has been further complicated by the fact that, although composing the pages that follow has required mastery of many different specialties (other than arcane

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Jeremy Cohen, C’17, University of Pennsylvania
languages), many readers may not be interested in the technical niceties of liturgical development or the details of moral and civil laws regarding marital status. The text has been aimed, therefore, at readers with no particular expertise in any of the specialties that have undergirded the research; all technical materials have been relegated to notes, which will be of value to specialists but can generally be skipped by other readers. Some whole chapters may be too specific for those with limited interest in the history of nuptial liturgy: the material in Chapter 6, for example, has been deliberately set apart as a separate discussion, of interest to those specifically concerned about liturgical niceties but perhaps not fascinating for the general reader. Those who find it uninteresting may well skip it without losing the thread of the study.

Epilogue

After Boswell’s active presentation of evidence and inference, the agency now lies in the questions and answers themselves:

Although many questions remain about same-sex unions in premodern Europe, much has also emerged with reasonable clarity.

And the list of facts, self-evident:

Such unions, in various forms, were widespread in the ancient world, where heterosexual matrimony tended to be viewed as a dynastic or business arrangement, and love in such arrangements, where it occurred, arose following the coupling. Ordinary men and women were more likely to invest feelings the twentieth century would call “romantic” in same-sex relationships, either passionate friendships or more structured and institutional unions, as exemplified by the recognized couples of Crete or Scythia, the swearing of perpetual love among the Greeks, and the social phenomenon and legal stratagem of “brotherhood” among the Romans.

This is a capitulation of the book’s central thesis, but it reads as a casual list of anecdotes, texts, and conclusions—with no sharp distinction drawn between these.

In many ways from a contemporary point of view, the most pressing questions addressed by this work is probably whether the Christian ceremony of same-sex union functioned in the past as “gay marriage ceremony.”

Boswell here reveals slightly more than he has allowed until now: The “most pressing” questions of the work are of modern sociopolitical relevance, the “contemporary point of view” euphemizing the popular discourse into which Boswell had surely entered.

It is clear that it did, although, as has been demonstrated at length, the nature and purposes of every sort of marriage have varied widely over time.
He offers a clear answer, an implicit confirmation of the book’s central thesis both in veracity and also in weight. Again, Boswell clarifies the uncertain nature of claims made until this point:

Such are the historical facts.

Assumptions, inferences, and conclusions (of varying feasibility) are now named “historical facts”.

Their social, moral, and political significance is arguable, but considerable. Even persons who argue that same-sex couples should now have the right to contract marriage like anyone else are apt to view such unions as an exotic indulgence of our time, a novel experiment in a liberal society. And many people—both homosexual and heterosexual—argue that same-sex couples should not undertake traditional relationships similar to heterosexual matrimony.

Boswell cannot control how the reader reacts to the facts here presented, nor what paradigm shifts he might think to undergo. He has rounded off the chronological structure of the book, the one which thrusts his postulate from the medieval to the mid-90s. Now finishes the narrative structure, with another mysterious visitor:

While I was preparing this study, I received a visit from a well-known prelate, who remarked to me that heterosexual matrimony had become such a ragged institution in the second half of the twentieth century that it hardly constituted a useful model for same-sex couples, who might better devise something entirely new.

This is the anecdote that leads into Boswell’s big finish. The next section is best read straight-through, but special mention is owed to his crucial phrase—“the province of the historian”—which might lead his admirers to stretch his legacy, and his critics to defend their territorial borders.

I replied that I had not composed the same-sex union ceremony that seems to parallel heterosexual marriage, but only discovered it, and felt it my duty as a historian to share it. In this connection I offer as a concluding observation that whatever significance the ceremony might (or might not) have for persons living at this juncture of history, its greatest importance lies, along with all the other forms of same-sex union known in premodern Europe, in its role in European history. It is not the province of the historian to direct the actions of future human beings, but only to reflect accurately on those of the past. “Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations: being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have done, in some sort we are still,” observed C. S. Lewis in a related context.

The related context is an important image from Lewis’ 1936 book The Allegory of Love. It is a study of allegorical treatments of love in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. It bears
remembering that Lewis was a chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge as well as a beloved writer, Christian, and public intellectual. Mendelsohn finds more in common between Boswell and Wilde than the truly successful scholar-authors. But, concluding his work on the unremembered past, Boswell’s view is toward the present and future:

*Recognizing that many—probably most—earlier Western societies institutionalized some form of romantic same-sex union gives us a much more accurate view of the immense variety of human romantic relationships and social responses to them than does the prudish pretense that such “unmentionable” things never happened.*
Bibliography & Wider Reading


**Background on John Boswell**

**Scholarly Responses to Same-Sex Unions**

**Popular Responses to Same-Sex Unions**
Evidence of Adelphopoiesis

Historicizing Homosexuality

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Background for Black Athena

Responses to Black Athena

On the Controversy


**Background for Class Struggle**


**Responses to Class Struggle**


