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Review of Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality*

Disciplines

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Simon Goldhill, *Foucault's Virginit*: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xiv + 194. \$49.95 (hb). ISBN 0-521-47372-1 (hb). \$14.95 (pb). ISBN 0-521-47934-7 (pb).

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I may as well say at once that this book was a disappointment. Perhaps I was expecting too much; Simon Goldhill is a cunning reader, an intelligent critic, an acute philologist, and a writer capable of turning a witty phrase. And the material itself -- both the ancient Greek novel and the history of sexuality in antiquity -- is not only rich, but seems richer with each passing day as we learn to ask the right questions of it and acquire the tools to answer them. So the combination was promising. But in the event, my expectations were not met; and what is more, in the course of writing this review I learned that the book may have already begun to have a very unfortunate effect that its author can not have intended or even foreseen, as I shall explain in due course.

First, however, the book itself. There are three longish chapters, each of them originally an installment in the Stanford Memorial Lectures that Goldhill delivered at Trinity College, Dublin in 1993 [xiii]. The first, entitled "Virginit

Here is Goldhill's announcement of the book's intended contributions:

The first and most straightforward contribution is to literary criticism and classical studies, which have largely ignored the central and marginal texts of the following chapters.... The second debate which informs these essays is the contemporary interest in the history of sexuality, or more precisely in the history of the discourse of sexuality.... The third area of debate is signalled by my title and is a subset of the previous two, namely, the specific and influential contribution to both classical studies and the history of sexuality made by Michel Foucault.

The way in which Goldhill formulates his objectives here signals the main problems I found with the book as a whole.

With respect to the first objective, Goldhill writes that "I hope what I have written will turn more readers towards the pleasures of a remarkable and underappreciated corpus"

[x]. All well and good, but it is surely disingenuous, to say the least, to represent the novel and related texts as a thoroughly neglected area just waiting for someone to show how interesting it really is. In fact, is this not exactly what Winkler accomplished more than ten years ago? And would Winkler not have been first to admit (as Goldhill signally does not: the intellectual spectrum of previous scholarship to which he refers is extremely restricted) that what he accomplished would not have been possible without the the substantial body of work -- less flashy and sometimes wrongheaded in its approach, but nevertheless essential contributions to basic understanding -- produced by scholars whom Mary Beard in her embarrassingly supercilious *TLS* review of the Dartmouth Conference volume, dismissed as "novel fans"? The renaissance in novel studies is already well under way. It is in general a good thing that these texts have begun to attract the attention of ever larger numbers of imaginative and energetic critics. But it is worrying -- especially in light of his *modus operandi* in this book, which I will discuss below -- that Goldhill wishes to represent his project as one of "making known" a group of texts that, whether they are novels or not, are no longer novelties in the pages of professional publications and have already begun finding their way into more and more graduate seminars and reading lists.

Goldhill's second aim, or rather his reformulation of it -- not the history of sexuality, but the history of the discourse of sexuality -- is also off the mark. I did not realize it at first, but the ostentatious shift from "sexuality" to "discourse" allows the reader to infer more or less everything that s/he will learn by reading the rest of the book. What I had hoped to find was a detailed discussion of how the discourse of sexuality developed in antiquity, how it changed at various times in historically significant ways, and how such developments might cautiously and tentatively be correlated with social practice. Instead I learned that the discourse of sexuality is discourse and that, as such, it is not a very reliable guide to social practice in the first place. Rather than historical documents, then, novels become merely another instantiation of referential instability. I take the point, but haven't we been around this block a couple of times before?

Throughout his career Goldhill has written as a poststructuralist in a basically deconstructive mode. This approach worked exceptionally well in his first book on the *Oresteia*, traditionally a temple of fixed and immanent meanings that had become so familiar as to cry out for challenge of some kind on almost any terms at all. To help destabilize our assumptions about a central shrine within the *temenos* of high classicism was an important contribution. Turning the same critical tools to the study of multivocality in Hellenistic poetry involved less resistance to the the rhetoric of the material itself but instead a salubrious counterforce to the dominant critical trend by which Hellenistic poetry is regarded as a form of metaliterary debate in which fixed opinions are proposed and then argued over in verse "treatises" spoken by the authoritative voices of individual scholar-poets. In the book under review, Goldhill remains interested in the referential gaps and slippages that inevitably exist between word and thing; but it was Winkler, as noted above, who in his book on Apuleius showed the way towards reading novels as texts that confront the reader with hermeneutic problems of the sort that Goldhill has studied in tragedy and Hellenistic poetry, even more explicitly than in those genres. Since *Auctor & Actor*, however, there has indeed been a tendency (in which Winkler himself was a notable participant) to read ancient novels as evidence for various kinds of social history, especially the history of sexuality. Goldhill would like to get in on this conversation but at the same time use discursive analysis to point out certain problems with the social historians' approach:

I want to explore how difficult it is to move through such writing towards cultural practice. If the literary critic seems to be interested mostly in how

sexuality is written about, and the historian in the social practice of antiquity, I hope that what I have to say about the difficulty of reading the writings of the past and the range of relevant material will provide at least a provocation for the standard methods of producing historical accounts of ancient sexuality [113].

The point is however, that Goldhill's readings have nothing to do with the difficulty of moving from "*such* writings" to cultural practice; his observations about indeterminacy of meaning and referential regress are not specific to the discursive system of the novel, or that of the philosophical dialogue, or that of homiletic texts, but apply equally to all forms of literature; consequently, the readings offered this book are, as one might expect, not necessarily or obviously wrong, but also not very informative. It is perfectly clear to those laboring to read the novelistic literature of antiquity as evidence for lived reality that the process is far from straightforward: otherwise we would not have the radical disagreement over fundamental issues that now prevails. In the end, Goldhill's critique amounts to a blanket observation that it is difficult to derive unambiguous meanings from any form of literature, and the novel is no exception. It escapes me how this insight could be considered new or helpful.

Finally, Foucault. Though accorded in this book a measure of the respect that many classicists have begrudged him, Foucault actually fares worse at Goldhill's hands than at those of certain declared enemies by serving as a perpetual straw man who can keep being set up and knocked down, over and over again. It is well known that Foucault's work on antiquity is seriously flawed, but also that it contains fundamental insights of an originality and promise too great to be ignored. It is however less for his specific contributions to the analysis of individual witnesses to the ancient discourse on sexuality that one values Foucault's work -- on such points many others, particularly the pioneering K. J. Dover, are much more reliable guides -- but rather for the way in which it deals with traditional issues in intellectual history, such as the highly problematic concept of periodization, and for its innovative approach to the definition of subjects for historical inquiry, such as sexuality itself. It seems to me that the essential question to ask is whether Foucault's proposal of antiquity as a discrete epoch in the history of sexuality in fact makes sense. To be fair, Goldhill in his third chapter spends some time in this neighborhood, but he never gets around to articulating the problem clearly or addressing it in these terms. Instead he performs close-readings of several texts that had provided Foucault with evidence to support his own argument -- and, since these texts, like all texts, are subject to the same rules of slippery indeterminacy that beset all forms of discourse, their meaning turns out, not surprisingly, to be just a bit less certain than Foucault (and others working in a Foucauldian vein, notably Peter Brown and David Konstan) actually realized. Thus, we learn again, writing social history from texts is a difficult business. Of course, one might argue that we probably do not yet know enough about "ancient sexuality" to be able to use it as a means of getting purchase on Foucault's attractive but famously problematic doctrine of historical epochs dominated by a totalizing *epistême* or *mentalité*. But it does seem to me that, whatever else may be said of Goldhill's engagement with Foucault, it does not measurably advance our understanding of these issues.

Foucault is not the only scholar who is accorded such treatment. In citing previous studies Goldhill is careful to signal whose work he approves and whose he does not. In the end, however, both friend and foe receive more or less the same treatment: all of them, to the extent that they have attempted to construct arguments that lead to actual results, have failed in Goldhill's view to see just how radically unstable and resistant to interpretation these texts really are. Thus the bulk of his argument is taken up with

summarizing and then exposing what he sees as the weaknesses of previous scholars' work. Unfortunately, when all is said and done, all previous work shares the same weakness, a tendency to draw more or less definite conclusions instead of celebrating indeterminacy, and this is where it falls down. I found this aspect of the book both tiresome and at times embarrassing. Chapter 1, for instance, could not possibly have been written without the benefit of Froma Zeitlin's dazzling and carefully articulated analysis of *Daphnis and Chloe* in *Before Sexuality*. In fact, it is not clear to me that Goldhill really adds significantly to Zeitlin's reading; working with the same material and making the same basic observations about it, he restates the case in a way that slightly emphasizes the text's capacity to elicit both prurient and puritanical responses, makes a few quick observations about the disorienting effect thereby achieved, and passes on to the next subject. Zeitlin praises Goldhill's book on the dust jacket; so perhaps it is out of place for me to complain about the treatment she receives. But to me, Goldhill's use of her and of many other scholars' work throughout this book marks *Foucault's Virginity* as a quite derivative study that adds very little to what nevertheless has been and remains a very interesting discussion.

I do not know what the general reception of this book will be, but as I mentioned at the beginning of this review there has already been some indication of the unhappy effect - quite unintended by the author, I am sure -- that it could have. In a *CP* review article surveying recent work on the novel, J. R. Morgan notes that, compared with other scholars,

Simon Goldhill is more radical. In his view Foucault fundamentally misread the "ludic" nature of the fictional text, the subversive humor with which these works ironize their own and others' "philosophy": the novels do not speak for themselves, but open up sites of negotiation where constructions of the self can be played with. The intellectual strength and sheer fun of Goldhill's book are undeniable, but my sense is that it is swimming against a changed tide. The novels are not just ludic or self-consciously problematic or even (as Foucault read them) straightforwardly descriptive: they are in a real sense seriously didactic. The dynamics of this didacticism are only just beginning to be explored.

Morgan goes on to herald the birth of a "new positivism" in novel studies, dismissing the recent tendency to read the ancient novel through the deliberately chosen lens of one or another "ideological frameworks" as "our equivalent of minimalist music and post-modern architecture, not altogether unconnected with the cultural and political dislocation of the eighties." He continues:

I suppose what I am saying is that the Winklerian project, which was after all just a drop in a tide running through the Humanities, was (for all its humaneness and intelligence) the product of historical forces too large to see close-up. Now perhaps times are on the move again and, with a change of power in the U.S. and the British Tory party shambling towards a richly deserved electoral oblivion, we are fumbling to rediscover lost certainties out of our disillusion.

Morgan is probably in a better position than I to take bets on the prospect that we will see another Labour government in our lifetime. I do not believe that one's interest in whether this happens or not determines or is determined by the methods by which one thinks the novel will most profitably be studied. The faint praise with which Morgan damns Goldhill's effort is perhaps all the book really deserves. I have tried instead, however, to explain more fully than I might have done just what I think is wrong with

the book because I am concerned that others, like Morgan, will draw mistaken conclusions about the larger project that they believe it represents. Morgan's suggestion that there has been no real theoretical advance in novel studies since Winkler's *Auctor & Actor* is not correct at all; and I strongly disagree with Morgan that the theory craze that Winkler created was useful only for drawing more attention and energy to the novel, energy that should now be transferred from theoretical to neopositivist work. If useful positivist work is done -- like Stephens and Winkler's edition of the Greek novel fragments, for instance -- I will be among the first to welcome it. And it should go without saying that a good deal of older work in this vein retains its value. But it seems to me a simple fact that the best recent work on the novel, Greek or Roman, has resulted from a reorientation of theoretical perspective clearly and rigorously articulated and applied. It does not follow that a book making large theoretical promises on which it cannot deliver should cause anyone to abandon the whole project. It is not done well here, but it can be and has been done much, much better.
