

**John Addington Symonds. *A Problem in Greek Ethics*¹.
Plutarch's *Eroticus* quoted only in some footnotes? Why?²**

Pau Gilabert Barberà³
Universitat de Barcelona (University of Barcelona)

It should be recognized that, although the conferences of the International Plutarch Society always devote a section to 'Plutarch and the Classical Tradition', my contribution, such as it has been conceived, might seem both insignificant and extemporaneous. Notwithstanding, I think that I shall be capable of proving that, in a book which was pioneer and audacious in the study of the Greek pederasty in the age of Queen Victoria such as J. A. Symonds' (1840-93) *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, Plutarch's *Eroticus* could not be a minor reference for a scholar who aimed at affirming the paradoxical ethical nature of the Greek 'vice'⁴. Indeed, Symonds suggests that medical psychologists and jurists should pay attention to the fact that Greece is the sole example of a great and highly-developed civilisation not only tolerating homosexual passions but deeming them of spiritual value, and attempting to use them for the benefit of society. In his opinion, it is a phenomenon belonging to one of the most brilliant periods of human culture and, as a consequence, with regard to it both jurists and psychologists should be open-minded (1).

What does 'homosexual passions' mean in Symonds' thought? Symonds hastens to explain that in the Homeric poems, in the heroic period, no trace of this passion is found, but he adds immediately that historical Greeks already chose the friendship Achilles-Patroclus as an ideal of the masculine love. Under the protection, then, of this noble model, no one, even in the Victorian period, should be shocked by its definition:

"It was a powerful and masculine emotion, in which effeminacy had no part, and which by no means excluded the ordinary sexual feelings. Companionship in battle and the chase, in public and in private affairs of life, was the communion proposed by Achilleian friends –not luxury or the delights which feminine

¹ 1971, according to 1901 edition (but first published 1883); the number of the page or pages in parenthesis will always correspond to this edition. Symonds privately printed an edition of ten copies of his book in 1883, which was later revised and added to the first edition of Ellis' *Sexual Inversion* in 1897. In 1901 appeared the above mentioned edition of one hundred copies and bore the following subtitle: *An Enquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists*.

² This contribution was published in *The Statesman in Plutarch's Works. Volume I: Plutarch's Statesman and His Aftermath: Political, and Literary Aspects* (edited by Lukas de Blois, Jeroen Bons, Ton Kessels & Dirk M. Schenkeveld). Leiden · Boston: Brill, *Mnemosyne Supplementa*, 2004, pp. 297-307.

³ Ordinary Teacher at the *Departament de Filologia Grega de la Universitat de Barcelona* (Department of Greek Philology of the University of Barcelona), *Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes* 585, 08007 Barcelona. Telephone: 934035996; fax: 934039092; e-mail: pgilabert@ub.edu; personal web page: www.paugilabertbarbera.com

⁴ This is the term used by Clive Durham in E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, when he despises all those who are incapable of understanding the noble nature of his attachment to Maurice Hall: 'I'm a bit out of law, I grant, but it serves these people right. As long as they talk of the unspeakable vice of the Greeks they can't expect fair play' (London: Penguin Books Edition, 1972 p. 84).

attractions offered. The tie was both more spiritual and more energetic than that which bound man to woman” (3).

Nevertheless, concerning to sex, Greece is not only known as a spiritual country, so that he does not hesitate to add that very early in Greek history, boy-love, as a form of sensual passion, became a national institution. This has been proved by mythological traditions and legendary tales related both to the birth of some Greek cities and the customs of the Dorian tribes (4). After having affirmed that the prevalent opinion among the Greeks ascribed the origin of pederasty to Crete -where the legend of Zeus and Ganymede was localised⁵-, spreading from Crete to Sparta, and thence through Hellas. Symonds thinks of an oriental transmission to the Greeks of pederasty in its crudest form, since Crete, together with Cyprus, formed one of the principal links between Phoenicia and Hellas (5). In any case, Symonds’ main interest is to analyse the influence exerted by the Dorian section of the Hellenic family on the development of pederasty. He propounds a theory but, at the same time, he acknowledges that ‘the position thus stated is, unfortunately, speculative rather than demonstrable’ (18). According to his thesis, the Dorians, in their migration to Lacedaemon and Crete, brought with them the heroic pederasty. The Dorian warriors for whom the camp became their country, without sufficiency of women, inspired by the memory of Achilles and venerating their ancestor Herakles, had special opportunity for elevating comradeship to the rank of an enthusiasm:

“These circumstances, by bringing the virtues of sympathy with the weak, tenderness for the beautiful, protection for the young, together with corresponding qualities of gratitude, self-devotion and admiring attachment...may have tended to cement unions between man and man no less firm than that of marriage... Fighting and foraging in company” (17)⁶.

Furthermore, Symonds does not deny the existence of forms of masculine love, which in his opinion are not honourable⁷. Therefore, one could think that he goes back on the above mentioned ethical nature of the Hellenic pederasty, but, as seen before, pederasty in Hellas assumed precisely Hellenic characteristics, and it cannot be confounded with any merely Asiatic form of luxury (5). Indeed, there are two forms of masculine passion, a noble one and a base one⁸, just in the same way that there are also a Uranic and a Pandemic Eros –and there are two Aphrodites as well. The aim of *A Problem in Greek Ethics* is clearly as pedagogic as apologetic, so that Symonds hastens once more to emphasize that ‘with the baser form of paderastia I shall have little to do in this essay’ (7) and that he will write on the ‘Greek Love’ (8) understood as ‘a passionate and enthusiastic attachment subsisting between man and youth, recognized by society and protected by opinion, which, though it was not free from sensuality, did not degenerate into mere licentiousness’ (8).

⁵ This is the exact reference given by Symonds: ‘*Laws*. I. 636. Cp. *Timaeus*, quoted by Ath., p. 602. Servius. *ad. Aen.* X. 325’ (4).

⁶ See as well p. 62.

⁷ His theories, of course, should be contrasted now with a classic on Greek homosexuality such as K. J. Dover’s *Greek Homosexuality* (1978), but also with Buffière, F., (1980); Dowling, L., (1994); Flacelière, R., (1971); Halperin, D., (1990); Marrou, H. I., (1948), and Sergeant, B., (1984).

⁸ The proof is found by Symonds in ‘*Max. Tyr. Dissert*, IX’ (7).

Notice that, from this second part of a same definition, that previous reference to the ‘delights which feminine attractions offered’ as well as to the nature ‘more spiritual and more energetic’ which makes the homosexual love preferable to the conjugal one has completely disappeared. It is useless saying that this is a positive change, but I should like to remark on the biased Philology with which Symonds –perhaps unconsciously– analyses and takes advantage of some Greek texts such as Plutarch’s *Eroticus*. In fact, he has not still quoted it, but the traditional and arbitrary binomials luxury-woman and spirituality-man are much similar to those ones belonging to the Protogenes’ brutal *apologia pro pederastic love* that should be remembered now:

‘In a normal state one’s desire for bread and meat is moderate, yet sufficient; but abnormal indulgence of this desire creates the vicious habit called gluttony and gormandizing. In just the same way there normally exists in men and women a need for the pleasure derived from each other; but when the impulse that derives us to this goal is so vigorous and powerful that it becomes torrential and almost out of control (πολλὴν καὶ δυσκάθεκτον), it is a mistake to give the name Love to it. Love, in fact, it is that attaches himself to a young and talented soul (εὐφροῦς καὶ νέας) and through friendship (διὰ φιλίας) brings it to a state of virtue (ἀρετὴν); but the appetite (ἐπιθυμία) for women we are speaking of, however well it turns out, has for net gain only an accrual of pleasure in the enjoyment of a ripe physical beauty (ἀπόλαυσιν ὥρας καὶ σώματος) ... The object of desire is, in fact, pleasure and enjoyment (ἡδονὴ καὶ ἀπόλαυσις); while Love, if he loses the hope of inspiring friendship, has no wish to remain cultivating a deficient plant which has come to its prime, if the plant cannot yield the proper fruit of character to produce friendship and virtue (φιλίαν καὶ ἀρετὴν). If, however, such a passion (πάθος) must also be called Love, let it at least be qualified as an effeminate and bastard love (θηλιν καὶ νόθον), that takes its exercise in the women’s quarters as bastards do in the Cynosarges... there is only one genuine Love, the love of boys (παιδικός). It is not ‘flashing with desire’, as Anacreont says of the love of maidens, or ‘drenched with unguents, shining bright’. No, its aspects is simple and unspoiled (λιτὸν... καὶ ἄθροπτον). You will see it in schools of philosophy (ἐν σχολαῖς φιλοσόφοις), or perhaps in the gymnasia and palaestrae (γυμνάσια καὶ παλαίστρας), searching for young men whom it cheers on with a clear and noble cry to the pursuit of virtue when they are found worthy of its attention. But that other lax and housebound love (ύγρον... καὶ οἰκουρόν), that spends its time in the bosoms and beds of women (ἐν κόλποις... καὶ κλινίδιοις), ever pursuing a soft life (τὰ μαλθακά), enervated amid pleasure devoid of manliness and friendship and inspiration (ἡδοναῖς ἀνάνδροις καὶ ἀφίλοις καὶ ἀνενοουσιάζουσι), it should be proscribed, as in fact Solon did proscribe it. He forbade slaves to make love to boys or to have a rubdown, but he did not restrict their intercourse with women. For friendship (φιλία) is a beautiful and courteous relationship (καλὸν καὶ ἀστεῖον), but mere pleasure (ἡδονή) is base and unworthy of a free man (κοινὸν καὶ ἀνελεύθερον). For this reason also it is not gentlemanly or urbane to make love to slave boys: such a love is mere copulation, like the love of women’⁹.

⁹ 750C-751B. Translated into English by W. C. Helmbold. Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969. All the

Nowadays very few dare to put on the same level homosexuality and effeminacy. Consequently, the image of a Victorian homosexual such as Symonds appearing completely fascinated by the strong virility of the Greek Love -to the extent of seeing himself as a reflection of it and feeling protected by it- is as credible as logical. He despises the *malachía* but accepts undoubtedly this noble love defended by Protogenes, which is simple, unspoiled, hostile to the gynaeceum and capable of creating virtue by means of friendship. In this simple way, furthermore, he does not look suspicious to society about connivance with that quota of femininity that nowadays can be perfectly assumed by any man. And the suspicion, which caused that previous quotation, was certainly rhetorical, since, after having read all sorts of texts –coming from Greek tragedy, comedy, poetry, philosophy, etcetera- which make him maintain: a) the existence among the Greeks of a code of honour, distinguishing the noble form from the baser forms of pederasty, b) the decided preference of male over female love, and c) the belief in the possibility of permanent affection between pederastic friends, etcetera presents repeatedly the sociological reasons for such a preference:

“It is sufficient for the present purpose to remember that free Athenian women were comparatively uneducated and uninteresting... While men transacted business and enjoyed life in public, their wives and daughters stayed in the seclusion of the household... They were treated throughout their lives as minors by the law... marriages at Athens were usually matches of arrangement between the fathers of the bride and the bridegroom, and that the motives which induced a man to marry were less the desire for companionship than the natural wish for children and a sense of duty to the country. Demosthenes, in his speech against Naera, declares: ‘We have courtesans for our pleasures, concubines for the requirements of the body, and wives for the procreation of lawful issue’. If he had been speaking at a drinking-party, instead of before a jury, he might have added, ‘and young men for intellectual companions’ (33) (and, close to ‘country’, there is the number 1 of the footnote which says: ‘See the curious passages in Plato, *Symp.*, p. 192, Plutarch, *Erot.*, p. 751; and Lucian, *Amores*, c. 38’),¹⁰.

Consequently, Symonds has certainly read the *apologia pro pederasty*. A *lógos*, which is highly misogynist, defended by Protogenes in Plutarch’s *Eroticus*, and, besides, this is the dialogue that all over *A Problem in Greek Ethics* provides him with several noble examples of heroic masculine love. Such as Herakles whose love stories always exhibit martial comradeship (10)¹¹; Antileon of Metapontum, fighting against tyranny because of his attachment to a handsome boy (12)¹²; Epaminondas who loved two young men, Asopicus and Cephisodorus, the latter dying with him at Mantinea and

quotations in English of Plutarch’s *Eroticus* will correspond to this edition. See as well p. 57 when he refers to Lucianus’ *Amores* in which Callicratides propounds a very similar theory. He insists on the same idea with regard to Greek Art on page 66.

¹⁰ See as well pages 51, 53-54, and 68-69.

¹¹ In a footnote: ‘Plutarch, *Eroticus*, cap. XVII, p. 761, 40, Reiske’ (761E).

¹² In fact, this is the only time Symonds quotes Plutarch’s *Eroticus* not in a footnote but in the text; he says: ‘In order to illustrate the haughty temper of Greek lovers, the same author, in his *Erotic Dialogue*, records the names of Antileon of Metapontum, who braved a tyrant in the cause of a boy he loved (Cap. XVI, p. 760 21)’ (12) (760C).

being buried close to him (20)¹³, or one of the sons of Niobe in Sophocles' play who, after having been shot and being about to die, calls for help no other ally than his lover (29)¹⁴, etcetera. Concerning all these examples and adopting his language we could affirm that 'effeminacy had no part'. But it also true that, although Symonds says nothing about it –which would confirm his biased reading- Plutarch adds many other instances of feminine heroic love. That is to say, great feminine attachments to their husbands such as the story of the Galatian Camma who died in order to revenge on Sinorix for having killed her husband Sinatus¹⁵, or the story of Empone whom the emperor Vespasianus ordered to execute on account of having continued to live with his husband, Civilis, who stirred up a revolt against him in Gaul¹⁶, or the well-known instance of Alcestis¹⁷.

Therefore, the influence of Protogenes' words can be detected in Symonds' abhorrence of what he considers 'effeminate love'¹⁸ as well as in his appreciating the nature 'more spiritual and more energetic' of masculine love. But, on the other hand, he must not be conscious of the logical consequences of such a view. Indeed, if only the pederastic love is a true one, since it is a noble feeling which is peculiar to free citizens who attempt to 'hunt' boys for the cause of virtue, we should conclude that, as far Protogenes is concerned, the conjugal love, which is necessary for 'producing children', is not a noble passion –which in its turn means that it is unnatural (*parà phýsin*) and should be even considered illegal (*parà nómon*). It is true that Protogenes seems not to speak about Ethics but he distinguishes the noble masculine love from the base one, and nobleness is firm and lives in masculine areas where body-strength is cultivated: gymnasia and palaestrae, as well as mind-strength: schools of philosophy. Masculine bodies and minds are strong –Protogenes *dicit*-, unlike feminine bodies which are soft and smooth. Consequently, the features of masculine anatomy become the means by which the ethical nobleness is defined, just in the same way the feminine features, after having been capriciously stigmatized, become synonymous in their turn of ethical and moral softness. Did Symonds notice that Western Culture has 'sexualised' Ethics or, even worse, has 'masculinized' it, when it is obvious that Ethics has no gender? I do not think so, since the Victorian exaltation of women, who are seen as honourable wives and mothers –bearing in mind the instance of Queen Victoria-, prevents men from discovering in them an old-century intellectual vice: misogyny.

At any rate, given that he believes in the singularity of the Greek Love, as well as in its ethical nature and sociological value, it is logical that Symonds uses Plutarch's *Eroticus* in order to provide examples with which a true virile experience of masculine love –his experience, in the end, besides the conjugal one¹⁹- can be illustrated.

¹³ 761D.

¹⁴ 760D.

¹⁵ 768B-D.

¹⁶ 770D-771E. Only at the end of his study Symonds warns the readers of the fact that 'it does not follow from the facts which I have discussed that, either at Athens or at Sparta, women were excluded from an important position at home... The women of Sophocles and Euripides, and the noble ladies described by Plutarch warn us to be cautious in our conclusions on this topic' (64).

¹⁷ 761F.

¹⁸ As on the pages 35-36 regarding Lucianus' *Amores*.

¹⁹ See e.g.: Grosskurth, P., (1964 y 1984).

However, Plutarch is far away from the Platonic exaltation of philosophical pederasty²⁰ and, although his dialogue presents once more a Platonic understanding of love²¹, it is also certain that it was written between the end of the first century and the beginning of the second one, so that Aristotelian Logics cannot be forgotten. Indeed, Plutarch's main interest is to demonstrate the incoherence consisting in assigning *éros kai philía* to pederastic love, when both men and women have the same virtue and, as a consequence, absurd discriminations must not be admitted. In fact, Plutarch gives preference to the values of conjugal love to those ones of pederasty, which means that his *Eroticus* contains much more information than that quoted by Symonds in the footnotes. Or, in other words: although he maintains that 'with the base form of pederastia I shall have little to do in this essay', Plutarch, who does not show such a tendency to distinguish the noble love from the base one, denounces as well the most miserable aspects of pederasty –i. e. he does not hide them- in order to be impartial. Indeed, the advocates of conjugal love in Plutarch's *Eroticus* to whom Symonds pays little attention maintain that: a) the masculine love is also soft and effeminate²²; b) pursues pleasure²³; c) implies *hýbris*²⁴; d) causes terrible vengeance²⁵; e) is inconstant²⁶ and f) its incontinences are even worse than those of feminine love²⁷.

The impartial use of Plutarch's *Eroticus* as a source of information thinking of a study on the Greek Love demanded that all these doubts about its ethical nature were enumerated. Symonds may have thought that the fact of admitting the existence of 'base forms of pederastia' exempts him from giving more details, but it is quite evident that Plutarch's aim is to correct both the unfair and illogical assignment of *éros kai philía* to pederasty. He does not speak, of course, about the social relegation of women using the terms that are peculiar to the contemporary Sociology, but he does regret their intellectual relegation. He already thinks of them as educators of society, since their virtue (*areté*) –such as it was already affirmed with by Cynicism and Stoicism-, and we should bear in mind now that virtue is in Plutarch's time, and long time ago, a science to be learnt and taught –and obviously talent is essential. The logical aim is, then, to transform *gyné* into a true intellectual interlocutor and comrade of men, both in search of common wealth and educating the young citizens. This is his thesis:

'So it is ridiculous to maintain that women have no participation in virtue. What need is there to discuss their prudence and intelligence, or their loyalty and justice, when many women have exhibited a daring and great-hearted courage which is truly masculine? And to declare that their nature is noble in all other relationships and then to censure It as being unsuitable for friendship alone, that is surely a strange procedure. They are, in fact, fond of their children and their husbands; their affections are like a rich soil ready to receive the germ of friendship; and beneath it all is a layer of seductive grace'²⁸.

²⁰ Although Symonds thinks that such an exaltation corresponds in fact to Socrates (48).

²¹ See p. e., p.765B.

²² 751E.

²³ 752A.

²⁴ 768E.

²⁵ 768F.

²⁶ 770B.

²⁷ 769B.

²⁸ 769B-D.

Plutarch does not compromise about what Symonds would consider ‘circumstances’; on the contrary, he takes up the intellectual challenge of returning to women and to the love and friendship they offer the dignity of which they were always worthy. As far as he is concerned and according to his Platonic view of love, both men and women generate *éros*; the trails of the soul can be followed both in masculine and feminine bodies, and both men and women arouse those beautiful and sacred reminiscences –the Platonic *anámnēsis*- which lead human beings, once again with their wings, towards the divine Beauty:

‘In the play, the pleasure-lover is asked whether *To women more than men is he inclined?* And he answers *Where there is beauty, he is ambidextrous...* it is no less true that the noble lover of beauty engages in love wherever he sees excellence and splendid natural endowment without regard for any difference in physiological detail... too will not the lover of human beauty be fairly and equably disposed toward both sexes, instead of supposing that males and females are as different in the matter of love as they are in their clothes?... they say that beauty is the ‘flower of virtue’; yet it would be absurd to deny that the female produces that flower or gives a ‘presentation’ of a ‘natural bent for virtue’²⁹.

For a scholar who, as Symonds, intends to explain the nobleness of the Greek Love to his contemporary Victorians, considering it equal to conjugal love and even reasoning the fact that in Greece pederasty was really appreciated, the reference to Plutarch’s *Eroticus*, where precisely both pederastic and conjugal love were compared, was inevitable. Why does he leave unmentioned, then, his main thesis? Why does he quote Plutarch’s *Eroticus* only in some footnotes and, after having left it aside, does he insist on the logical pre-eminence of masculine love, a sort of logic that was already called in question in the Antiquity? Nobody calls precisely in question Symonds’ intellectual value and his nobleness is evident if the memoirs of his secret homosexual life are read with open mind. Why, therefore, does *A Problem in Greek Ethics* show such a biased philology? In my opinion, as in the case of Clive Durham in E. M. Forster’s *Maurice*, Symonds reads with such an enthusiasm and emotion the examples of noble and unselfish masculine love, which are one of the legacies of Antiquity appearing in excellent literary texts, that he renders with romanticism to its remembrance and indulgent analysis –since those noble instances are, furthermore, ancient esteemed models of his contemporary personal experience.

Indeed, his case does show the tendency to use Greece in order to sanction personal experiences. Shelley had said in the end: ‘We are all Greeks’³⁰ and Symonds proclaimed that all civilized nations were ‘colonies of Hellas’³¹. Notwithstanding, the decadence of the Hellenic dream during the twentieth century together with the brilliant results of the Social Sciences made it clear that, concerning to the Greeks, pederasty was the result of social circumstances but not of a true sexual identity. Symonds wrote precisely on the Greek ‘circumstances’ which transformed women into ‘uneducated and uninteresting’ human beings. He also understood the incoherence of an education-system, such as the contemporary British one, which was based on boarding schools and colleges where Plato’s dialogues were read and explained, apostatizing, however, from the homoerotic content of his philosophy. Indeed, these boarding schools and colleges were in fact

²⁹ 767A-B.

³⁰ *Hellas*, preface.

³¹ Symonds, J. A., (1876) 2, 383.

masculine worlds in many aspects perfectly comparable to the Greek ones and, as a consequence, love-stories among students or among teachers and students were not infrequent³². Does Symonds complain about the Victorian relegation of women, a true one although they were ‘adored’ both as mothers and as august and honourable beings?³³ Not explicitly, since those ‘circumstances’, if we bear in mind Charlotte Barlett’s words in E. M. Fortser’s *A Room with a View*, seem certainly immovable:

“It was not that ladies were inferior to men; it was that they were different. Their mission was to inspire others to achievement rather than to achieve themselves. Indirectly, by means of tact and a spotless name, a lady could accomplish much. But if she rushed into the fray herself she would be first censured, then despised, and finally ignored... There is much that is immortal in this medieval lady. The dragons have gone, and so have the knights, but still she lingers in our midst. She reigned in many an early Victorian castle, and was queen of much early Victorian song. It is sweet to pay her honour when has cooked our dinner well... Men, declaring that she inspires them to it, move joyfully over the surface, having the most delightful meetings with other men, happy, not because they are masculine, but because they are alive”³⁴.

Nevertheless, it is quite sure that Symonds is conscious of the fact that, if women’s education and social status –both in Ancient Greece and Contemporary England- had been a different one, he would have had in his turn a much better conjugal experience. At any rate, the aim of *A Problem in Greek Ethics* does not correspond to the one of Plutarch’s *Eroticus*³⁵. To sum up: Symonds, as many others before and after him, discovered that, in difficult and risky times when homosexuality was despised and considered as a sin, a psychological disorder or a crime punished by law, he had the opportunity of explaining, understanding, and redeeming himself by presenting the Greek model. And having such a great opportunity the strict rules of Philology are relegated, in my opinion from an intellectual exercise that is much more naive than a severe contemporary critic –and this is not my case- might guess.

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³² See, e. g., Cruzalegui, P., (2002) 448-465.

³³ On Victorian women, see e. g.: Hellerstein, E. O., (1981); Castero, S. P., (1982), and Lewis, J., (1991).

³⁴ London: Penguin Books Edition (1990) 60-61.

³⁵ Véase Holliday, P. J. y Kemp, J. (2000) 81-101 y 55-61.

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