“Vile Effeminate Boylove”: Pederasty in Greek Culture and Aristophanes’ Attitude Concerning It

Christina Buckli

Senior Thesis
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Dr. John Mann
Dr. Matt Waters

Department of History

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ABSTRACT

Many ancient sources explained the characteristics of *pederasty* (the physical and emotional relationship between a man and boy) in ancient Greece throughout the Classical Period. Many ancient texts portrayed the approval or acceptance of pederasty among its authors and the general ancient Greek population. However, ancient Greek Old Comedy was one of the exceptions. Aristophanes, a playwright of Old Comedy, disapproved of the practice of pederasty, especially the role of the *pathic* (a male who was anally penetrated). Aristophanes addressed the topic of pederasty and whether the general public, the elite, or a combination of the two participated. Aristophanes’ comedies gave clear examples of who participated in pederasty and whether or not it was accepted. His comedies also confirmed other ancient source descriptions of pederasty. These confirmed topics dealt primarily with physical characteristics, physical acts, and gift giving.
INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greek Old Comedy was more than a form of expression or recreation for the Greeks. Scholars have found that the comedies provided crucial information about all of Greek society. The limited amount of resources available has made it virtually impossible to know ancient Greek culture with 100 percent certainty. However, remaining sources help understand it as seen in the following passage in *Wasps*:

Now all ye people attend and hear, if ye love a simple and genuine strain,  
For now our poet, with right good will, of you, spectators, must needs complain.  
Ye have wronged him much, he protests, a bard who had served you often and well before;  
Partly, indeed himself unseen, assisting others to please you more;  
With the art of a Eurycles, weird and wile, he loved to dive in a stranger’s breast,  
And pour from thence through a stranger’s lips full many a sparkling comical jest.  
And partly at length in his own true form, as he challenged his fate by himself alone,  
And the Muses whose bridled mouths he drave, were never another’s, were all his own.  
And thus he came to a height of fame which none had ever achieved before,  
Yet waxed not high in his own conceit, nor ever and arrogant mind he bore.  
He never was found in the exercise-ground corrupting the boys: he never complied  
With the suit of some dissolute knave, who loathed that the vigilant lash of the bard should chide  
His vile effeminate boylove. No! he kept to his purpose pure and high,  
That never the Muse, whom he loved to use, the villainous trade of a bawd should ply.  

This passage was from a comedy written by Aristophanes, a Greek Old Comedy playwright. Many arguments could be made about this short segment of the play. The passage was presented by the chorus and was Aristophanes’ address to the audience. In this address, he felt he had been wronged by the general public and audience when he received one of the lowest prizes awarded at a previous festival. He complained because he felt his play deserved a higher ranking. In ---

order to justify a higher ranking, Aristophanes’ listed off numerous reasons why he was a good and deserving person. An interesting reason why Aristophanes believed he was “pure and high” was because he did not participate in pederasty. Pederasty was a complex, emotional and physical relationship that involved physical attributes, economics, and even education. The description, “vile effeminate boylove” made it quite clear that Aristophanes did not like pederasty. By comparing Aristophanes’ comedies and his preference for heterosexuality with other ancient Greek sources like oratory, philosophy, history, and inscriptions, a more complete view of pederasty can be formed. This paper addresses whether or not ancient Greek society accepted pederasty, Aristophanes’ views, the participants, physical characteristics, gift giving, and education in pederast relationships.

Many scholars of ancient Greek comedy and pederasty have focused on the topic of pederasty and elitism but have not examined what other conclusions could be obtained from Aristophanes’ comments on pederasty. This paper will contribute to the belief that pederasty was associated with wealth, but it also examines other conclusions. Marguerite Johnson and Terry Ryan wrote the book *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Society and Literature* and focused their work on aspects related to how pederasty was addressed in ancient Greek literature. Like many other scholars, they commented on the acceptance of pederasty but the disapproval of the pathic and the male prostitute. Another scholar, Marilyn Skinner, the author of *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, associated pederasty with wealth and elitism. Skinner focused on the economics of pederasty and believed the elites were the only ones who could have afforded it. In many of her arguments, she used Aristophanes’ comedies to support her belief that pederasty was an elite practice. Skinner, like Johnson and Ryan, mentioned the disapproval of the male prostitute. Finally, Eva Keuls, author of *The Reign of the Phallus*, chose a different way to
address the topic. Her book discussed where pederasty originated from and how pederasty was portrayed in mythology. Many scholars’ works do not address how Aristophanes’ comedies supported assumptions about pederasty and this paper will supply some of these answers as well as add to their previous theories of pederasty being an elite practice.

SOURCES

For anyone interested in ancient texts it is very important to understand the difficulty in analyzing them, and this is due to many different reasons. First of all, scholars are limited by what ancient texts have survived over the centuries. It is also important to understand that many texts are constantly being discovered. When a document or artifact is found, it has the ability to change our perceptions as to what occurred in the past. These new artifacts force scholars to become aware that there is always the possibility that their own conclusions may have to change.

Another recurring problem with ancient sources is some texts are found in a horrible condition. Due to conditions such as being buried for centuries, many of the documents that have been discovered are missing small parts and sections as well as having a word here and there missing from the sentence. In order to make sense of the documents, scholars have done their best to try and decipher what the missing word(s) may have been, and they do this by examining the context of the work. While this is a useful strategy and may provide the correct wording, there is no definite way of determining exactly what was written. An obvious consequence of using this method of supplying a word(s) in the text is that the translator may very easily misrepresent what the original meaning of the text was.
How ancient texts are translated may also cause the original meaning of documents to be misrepresented. Ancient languages, like ancient Greek, are no longer spoken causing translators to decipher words differently. Translators generally agree on the meaning of words, but the slightest difference in a translation can change the meaning of the document. An example of this is at the beginning of the book the *Iliad*. One translator deciphered the first word as rage. The word rage has a very strong connotation, as its meaning is in the moment and full of anger. A different translator then deciphered the word as anger. The word anger does not have as much expression as rage. The first word of the Iliad is the main theme throughout the book, and depending on the translation it could change the meaning of the book.²

Another issue when translating ancient Greek sources is the occurrence of author bias. Historians today acknowledge that when documenting history it is virtually impossible for anyone to completely rid themselves of biases. Since present day historians still have a problem eliminating all of their biases, ancient Greek documents must have had them as well. This was because many ancient authors wanted to advance their own views and beliefs. Even ancient Greek Old Comedy contained examples of author bias. Aristophanes was partially biased in his comedies when he continually insulted Cleon, a famous leader of Classical Athens, because Cleon had offended him early in his career.³ In general, there is very little information available about the authors of many ancient Greek texts. It is not until more evidence is found that scholars will know more about ancient authors to observe their biases.

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ANCIENT GREEK OLD COMEDY

Comedy is a type of drama which shows action as something close to real life but in a light, laughable way. Comedy in ancient Greece needed to amuse its audience, and ancient Greek comic playwrights achieved this by producing humor through the portrayal of recognized and accepted aspects of society. They were most likely accepted ideals of the Greeks, but they were exaggerated features of their social roles, somewhat similar to a caricature.\(^4\) The timeline of Old Comedy is a modern construction and scholars generally agree that it existed from 486-400 BCE. The evidence that exists from this time period came in the form of Aristophanes’ plays, as well as very small fragments from other playwrights. In general, Old Comedy had more insults and contained many more political topics than Middle and New Comedy that followed. Some of these insults involved the topic of pederasty which will be addressed in the second half of the paper.\(^5\)

There are many features that distinguished ancient Greek Old Comedy from all other types of comedy. Both the *parabasis* and the chorus were two common features in Old Comedy, and both played an important part in how information was delivered to the audience. The chorus was used as a way to speak directly to the audience, and it was a form of interaction used to keep the audience interested. The chorus also presented the *parabasis* to the audience. The *parabasis* was delivered in the middle of the comedy and was used as an address to the audience on behalf of the poet.\(^6\) The parabasis was one of the most important parts of Aristophanes’ plays, and it


allowed him to address the main purpose of his comedies. The parabasis also allowed him to address other topics he felt the audience needed to hear. Aristophanes’ comedy, *Clouds*, had an example of the use of the parabasis to address additional topics other than the main focus of the play. The main focus of *Clouds* was to point out the problem with the new type of education in Athens, and the need to return to older ways of life. He spoke of the corruption and evil of the new educators, but it was in the parabasis that Aristophanes mentioned Cleon, an Athenian political leader. Politics was not a theme of the play, but Aristophanes wanted to associate the “new” way of life that was evil and corrupting with Cleon and his leadership of Athens. The portrayal of Cleon as corrupt and evil was seen throughout almost all of Aristophanes’ comedies.7

The costumes the actors wore were also very distinctive in Old Comedy. In order to make an impact on the audience and to fulfill the role of the caricatures the playwrights were trying to portray, the costumes were very wild and often over exaggerated. Depending on the comedy’s topic, actors wore phalluses and huge padding of the stomach and posterior. These costumes were used to create amusement among the audience because of how excessive and exaggerated they were.8

The type of people included in the audience of Old Comedy made an impact as to what was portrayed in the comedies. The comedies were under government sponsorship which allowed all citizens to attend.9 Roughly 15,000 Athenian citizens, all of which were at least eighteen years old and male, attended the comedies, which was roughly about half of the citizen

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As T.B.L. Webster, a historian of ancient Greek comedy stated, “Because comedy was not produced as a private performance but as a public festival, the history of Greek comedy forms part of the general history of Greek thought and ideals as known from other works of literature and art.” Social preferences were able to be discussed because the audience contained citizens of varying status. If the topic was not a widely held belief, then many men in the audience would not find it as funny or as amusing.

Aristophanes’ plays are the only complete comedies left, because only a few lines from other playwrights remain in existence. Fortunately, many of Aristophanes’ comedies have stayed complete. Some of his comedies that were found whole were the Acharnians, Knights, Clouds, Wasps, The Peace, The Birds, Lysistrata, Thersmophoriazusae, Frogs, and Wealth. He won numerous medals and obtained first place in competitions for different comedies which demonstrated he was at least fairly popular among the people. Some of his comedies that took first place included Knights, Acharnians, and Frogs.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MALE-MALE SEXUALITY AND PEDERASTY

Ancient Greek Old Comedy discussed the topic of pederasty, an ancient Greek practice that involved sex. To understand the practice of pederasty, a distinction must be made between homosexuality, male-male sexuality, and pederasty. “Most people believed race was a natural thing during slavery but is now known as a social construct. The same thing can be said for sex,

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12 Norwood, Greek Comedy, 203.
as it is currently seen as a natural thing. Sex is however progressing towards social construction.”¹³ The view of sexuality as a social construct is a belief that some scholars have begun to take.¹⁴ Evidence of social construction is beginning to be seen in even the language used to describe sexuality. Today, in the twenty-first century, most people would describe homosexuality as a sexual relationship between two males. However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that this term was created by Karoly Maria Benkert, a German psychologist who used it to describe the type of sexual relationship between two men.¹⁵ Another idea that is associated with the term “homosexuality” is that it refers to strictly a physical experience of pleasure and desire of a purely sexual nature. This is another modern idea that was created between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁶ However, using this terminology would be incorrect when referring to the ancient Greeks’ practice of sexual relationships between males. This is because ancient Greeks had a drastically different idea of what male relationships were and what they represented. Ancient Greeks did not view sex as heterosexual or homosexual, and this is why when referring to these relationships they should be spoken of as male-male sexuality. There was also regional variation in Greece about the different ways it could be practiced.


¹⁴ “Under the entry “sexualit,” the Oxford English Dictionary Online lists four related definitions: first, “the quality of being sexual or having sex”; second, “possession of sexual powers, or capability of sexual feelings”; third, “recognition of or preoccupation with what is sexual”; and, finally, “appearance distinctive of sex.” In current academic parlance, however, the word is often employed in a more theoretical sense to denote the meanings place upon human sexual physiology, sexual sensations, and sexual behavior within a particular community, “the cultural interpretation of the human body’s erogenous zones and sexual capacities”. The last definition of “sexuality” has emerged only very recently, and, in gaining recognition, has acquired a troubled history.” Skinner, Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture, 3.


The ideas and beliefs that ancient Greek men had created about women may account for some of the reasons why pederasty existed. One common occurrence was some males considered members of the opposite sex, “inferior beings lacking all education and refinement, good for nothing but to ensure posterity.”

A somewhat similar belittling belief about women was created when ancient Greeks decided on what was considered the Greek ideal of beauty. The Greek ideal of beauty was the young, male body. It was seen as the “most beautiful thing,” which lessened the importance of the female body. Overall, Greek males varied in what gender they were most physically and emotionally attracted to. Some men were physically attracted only to men, some were attracted to both men and women, and others were attracted only to women.

A few different types of male-male sexuality were practiced in Greece. Men participated in adult male-male sexuality, in which both men usually acted as a pathic. A pathic was a male, boy or adult, who was penetrated by another man. The act of penetration caused the male to be looked down upon by other Athenian citizens because a pathic had lower status in society. Men also participated in being prostitutes, who were looked down upon even more than a pathic, because it combined the pathic’s role with the acceptance of money for sex. Male-male sexuality that is most commonly addressed by scholars is between an adult male and a young boy. This was known as *paiderasteia*, which meant “the love of boys”. The “love of boys” included both physical and non-physical aspects upon which they built their relationship. The English word used to describe this physical, intellectual, and emotional relationship between a man and boy is known as pederasty.

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Ancient Greek society was full of varying personalities and opinions on a variety of topics, and pederasty was no exception. There were groups that accepted and even preferred pederasty. There were others that could tolerate the practice, but disliked the pathic’s role. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there were the groups of people that did not accept pederasty at all.

Some men in ancient Greece believed pederasty was an acceptable activity and that it should be used with frequency. It seems the elite were the main people who participated in pederasty and were the ones who supported it. Other groups of people who supported pederasty were philosophers and men who regularly attended the gymnasia. Plutarch’s *Moralia* stated, “But you will see it [love of boys] plain and unaffected in philosophical schools or I suppose in the gymnasium and wrestling-schools, in the hunt for boys, with a shrill and noble call, urging to virtue the boys worthy of its concern.”

There was also a group of philosophers called the Cyrenaics who believed there was absolutely nothing wrong with pederasty and that sexual gratification was of the utmost importance whether it was with a man or a woman. They believed that all people should use others for sexual gratification, and the physical enjoyment of beautiful boys made life worth living. Their views were expressed by Theodorus, a representative of the Cyrenaic school who stated, “He is useful for sexual intercourse . . . Therefore if someone uses sexual intercourse insofar as it is useful, he doesn’t err; nor if someone should use beauty insofar as it is useful, will

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20 Plutarch *Moralia* 751.4.
The approval of pederasty was also portrayed by Theocritus when he stated that throughout Greece there were festivals that may have glorified boyish and youthful beauty. At the Megara, the Spring Festival, Diocleia was celebrated and contests were held in which boys and youths kissed each other.\textsuperscript{22}

There were other groups in ancient Greece who did not participate in pederasty but accepted that other people liked it and they tolerated the pederast relationship. Some of these Greeks did not agree with the free reign of pederasty, and there were laws put into place to prevent it from spreading. In Athens, a body of laws was created and attempted to restrict the spread of pederasty. While it attempted to prevent it from spreading, it was not meant to eliminate the pederast relationships that were already taking place. It was a common occurrence that pederasts attended the gymnasia in order to obtain a lover and these laws simply aimed to keep male lovers out of schools and exercising arenas.\textsuperscript{23} Another law that prevented the spread of pederasty in Athens made men who instructed boys in choral dancing be at least forty years old.\textsuperscript{24}

As demonstrated in the previous paragraph, some philosophers preferred pederasty, but there were other philosophers who did not condone it. Even though they did not condone it, their groups still allowed pederasts to join. Two influential philosophers who did not participate in pederasty but accepted pederasts were Plato and Socrates.\textsuperscript{25} In Plato’s \textit{Symposium}, various men’s speeches portrayed pederasts as being part of their drinking party. Socrates believed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Hubbard, \textit{Homosexuality in Greece and Rome}, 265.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Theocrites xii 30.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Flaceliere, \textit{Love in Ancient Greece}, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Aeschines 1.9-11.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Socrates was a classical Greek Athenian philosopher who lived during the time of Aristophanes. Plato was Socrates’ student.
\end{itemize}
pederasty was a corrupting activity and the sexual aspect of the relationship ruined the educational component. At one point, Socrates compared a male lover’s desire for a boy to a piglet’s desire to rub against stones to receive sexual gratification. While he did not participate in pederasty, he was known to associate with many other men that were pederasts, especially pederast philosophers.

Other groups in ancient Greece did not agree with any aspect of pederasty. Numerous ancient Greek sources including oratory documents, philosophical works, and comedy indicated the dislike of pederasty. One group of philosophers really despised pederasty, and they were called the Cynics. They were a diverse group but were most commonly seen as roaming popular philosophers and street preachers that were usually homeless. Their teachings consisted of the belief that luxury and frivolousness was a waste and life needed to be lived with the bare minimum. Because the Cynics believed living with little money was necessary for life, the main reason the Cynics disapproved of pederasty was because it was associated with the elite. The Cynic, Diogenes, believed pederasty made life worse for a man and that no one should participate. His dislike of pederasty was portrayed when he stated, “To a youth who complained about the crowd of men who annoyed him, Diogenes said, ‘Stop displaying the signs of one who takes the passive role.’ When he saw a young man acting like a woman, he said, ‘Aren’t you ashamed of planning something worse for yourself than Nature did? For she made you a man, and you are forcing yourself to be a woman’.”

Greek oratory was similar to Old Comedy because it catered to the commoners of ancient Greece and did not approve of pederasty. In order to understand the connection between

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26 Xenophon *Memorabilia* 1.2.29-31.


pederasty and the general public’s attitudes toward it, the ancient Greek justice system must be explained. The ancient Greek justice system was different compared to the current United State’s justice system. In ancient Greek trials, defendants had to create a case for themselves. Also, the prosecutor was allowed to slander the defendant’s name in order to persuade the jury, which was comprised of 500 to 1,000 Athenian men. In many cases, the prosecutor slandered the man’s name by implying the defendant was involved in pederasty, and it did not matter if it was the truth or a lie.29 The following court case demonstrated that being associated with pederasty in a trial could negatively affect the outcome for the defendant. In this specific court case, the defendant admitted to his participation in pederasty and stated he was foolish to have been in love with a young boy. He proceeded to ask the jury not to take this into consideration when they determined his case.30

Last, but certainly not least, Aristophanes’ comedies must be examined to see how pederasty was discussed in Old Comedy. When Aristophanes’ mentioned pederasty in his comedies, it was always described as or associated with things that were negative. *Wasps* associated pederasty with being vile and effeminate, both of which were not acceptable in Athenian society. Again, Aristophanes wrote about his disapproval of pederasty when he stated he refused to comply with the men who wanted poets and writers to emulate pederasty.31 He continued to associate pederasty with words like corrupt and evil throughout his other plays.32

Aristophanes’ comedy, *Frogs*, contained a large discussion on the sexual hierarchy in ancient Greece. This may not have been a 100 percent accurate portrayal of the real sexual

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29 Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 118-121.

30 Lysias *Against Simon* 1-26, 44, 47-48.

31 Aristophanes, *Five Comedies of Aristophanes*, 258.

32 Aristophanes, *Four Plays of Aristophanes*, 54-56.
hierarchy of ancient Greece. However, there is a high probability it was the sexual hierarchy used at the time, because it was presented to a large group of Athenian citizens. Also, praising heterosexuality over pederasty was seen in other sources that catered to the general population like Greek oratory. In either case, Aristophanes created a hierarchy of sexual practices he believed to be correct that started at the most acceptable sexual practice and led to the least acceptable sexual practice. The sexual hierarchy was written into the discussion between Dionysus and Heracles:

DIONYSUS: An on the ship’s deck I was sitting there and reading Euripides’ Andromeda, when all at once a sudden yearning stuck me to the very heart.
HERACLES: How large was it?
DIONYSUS: Quite small, only the size of Molon.
HERACLES: For a woman?
DIONYSUS: No, not that.
HERACLES: A boy then?
DIONYSUS: Not at all.
HERACLES: For a Man?
DIONYSUS: Oh, go on!
HERACLES: Was it for Cleisthenes?
DIONYSUS: Don’t make fun of me, brother, this yearning is consuming me, wearing me away.33

The placement of the words in the dialogue allowed for the conclusion that the most commonly practiced and accepted sexual activity was offered first, and was heterosexuality. After it was known that Dionysus did not yearn for a woman, Heracles asked whether or not the yearning was for a boy. The yearning for the boy would be the form of pederasty because Dionysus was an adult, male god. The third and even less accepted type of sexual practice was the pathic.

There was a great difference in the ancient Greeks view of pederasty compared to their view of the pathic. The reason was because there were different levels of status that were

33 Aristophanes, Four Plays of Aristophanes, 236-237.
associated with each of these sexual activities. There were two different roles in the male-male sexual relationship. The first was the role of the penetrator who was the lover. The penetrator was associated with masculinity, higher social status, and adulthood. The penetrator also had the dominating role which allowed for him to gain more power and higher status in the relationship. The second role was the penetrated, also known as the pathic. The penetrated male was associated with femininity, lower social status, and youth. It was unacceptable for both the boy who submitted as well as the man who submitted; however, there was a difference in status between the two. It was slightly more acceptable for the boy who submitted. A boy was not yet a “man” because he had not turned eighteen, the age of an Athenian citizen. A boy in Classical Greece had a low status like women and slaves so if the boy submitted he did not have much status to lose. When the boy eventually became a “man” he would be granted higher status. However, a man was considered a citizen and had already achieved a higher status. If the man submitted to being penetrated he would lose his status and not be able to gain it back. This is why pederasty was more acceptable than the role of the pathic in Aristophanes’ sexual hierarchy.

Finally, when Heracles asked if Dionysus’ yearning was for Cleisthenes, the response was meant to produce laughter. Cleisthenes was a well-known participant of adult male-male sexuality during Aristophanes’ time who often dressed in a womanly way. This comment was meant to demonstrate how unacceptable and comedic it was to sexually desire an effeminate man, because they were seen as, “half-men, who by their feminine behavior and gestures, by

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36 Aristophanes, *Four Plays of Aristophanes*, 22. Cleisthenes’ status as an effeminate can also be observed in another of Aristophanes’ comedies, the *Clouds*. The clouds would take the shape of the different objects and people they observed. It was after observing Cleisthenes that the clouds took the shape of women, which showed that Cleisthenes was womanly and effeminate.
painting their face and other tricks of the toilet, incurred general contempt.”

The sexual hierarchy of heterosexuality, pederasty, the pathetic, and the effeminate was seen in all of Aristophanes’ plays, and it supported other ancient sources when they suggested the majority of Greece, especially Athens, did not condone pederasty or any of its practices. In the following section, the topics of who participated, physical characteristics, gift giving, and education, demonstrate Aristophanes’ preference for heterosexuality over pederasty and other male-male sexual practices.

PEDERASTY AND ARISTOPHANES’ PEDERASTY

As demonstrated in the previous section, Aristophanes did not prefer pederasty and many of his comedies stated this belief. There were many different groups in ancient Greece that viewed pederasty differently and comparing ancient Greek oratory, philosophy, history, and inscriptions to Aristophanes’ comedies allows for a more complete view of what pederasty was and how it was viewed among ancient Greeks. In many instances, Aristophanes’ comedies supported the claims of what activities pederasts participated in, and his comedies supported other ancient author’s comments on what were the physical characteristics of the pederast. Aristophanes’ comedies also provided evidence that did not support other ancient author’s texts like whether gift giving was appropriate and whether Socrates was a pederast. Almost all of his plays made some sort of reference to pederasty, and it was discussed in his comedies Clouds, Frogs, Knights, Wealth, and Wasps. Analyzing the commonalities and differences between ancient Greek sources and Aristophanes creates a more accurate view of pederasty in ancient Greece.

37 Licht, Sexual Life in Ancient Greece, 493.
Participants

What groups of men participated in the act of pederasty is still a commonly debated question among scholars. Some believe that pederasty was a feature of the upper class. People included in upper class Athenian society were intellectuals, politicians, and military leaders. Other scholars believe that pederasty was widespread among the general public as well as practiced by the elites.\(^\text{38}\) However, most documents and artifacts contained evidence that supported the belief that pederasty was present mainly among the upper classes of ancient Greece. Plutarch’s *Lycurgus* demonstrated that it was the “distinguished men” who were usually of some sort of wealth and status that started to associate with the boys who had reached the age of twelve.\(^\text{39}\) Aristophanes’ comedies supported this idea that pederasty was a practice that only involved the elites. In the comedy *Wasps*, Aristophanes mentioned that he never obeyed the men who tried to force poets and writers to portray pederasty favorably.\(^\text{40}\) This implied that the men who wanted pederasty portrayed positively were wealthy and established if they had the power to influence some comedians and poets. Aristophanes also supplied more evidence to support the notion that pederasty was an elite practice. His comedy, *Clouds*, suggested that it was the judges, poets, and demagogues who were taught as boys in pederasty.\(^\text{41}\) These labels in ancient Greece were considered prestigious and usually allowed for the accumulation of wealth,


\(^{39}\) Plutarch *Lycurgus* 17.1.

\(^{40}\) Aristophanes, *Five Comedies of Aristophanes*, 258.

especially the demagogues.\textsuperscript{42} A final example of Aristophanes’ portrayal of pederasty as an elite practice was discussed in \textit{Wealth}. \textit{Wealth} stated that some of the items a beloved asked for would have been impossible for a commoner to supply. A pack of hounds and a thoroughbred horse were items only the Greek elite would have been able to purchase.\textsuperscript{43} While there is the possibility that the general population partook in pederasty, there is no concrete evidence that supports this idea.\textsuperscript{44}

**Physical Aspects of Pederasty**

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\textsuperscript{42} A demagogue was a political leader who sought support by appealing to popular desires and prejudices.


\textsuperscript{44} Finley, \textit{The Ancient Greeks}, 147.
It is difficult to know exactly what type of sexual practices were common and what feelings were supposed to be associated with it. One belief is the beloved was not to feel pleasure from the sexual contact but was supposed to participate only to show his gratitude and friendship for the elderly man. Aristophanes’ comment in the *Clouds* can be used to support this statement. In the play there was a discussion between the just and the unjust argument where it mentioned that having a radish inserted in the anus was the worst thing imaginable, and it was used as a punishment for adulterers. However, pederasty’s sexual relations were not always anal sex, and sometimes intercrural sex was used. Intercrural sex was when the older man would rub his penis between a boy’s thighs while both were standing. This form of sexual activity was depicted in numerous vase paintings and seen in the picture above. Vase paintings also had depictions that have led some scholars to believe that the beloved also received sexual gratification. Depicted in the vase painting below, is a young boy who is having his genitals fondled by an older lover which could result in him being sexually gratified.


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45 Aristophanes, *Four Plays of Aristophanes*, 54-56.

In order to understand how a pederast relationship worked, it is necessary to examine the physical characteristics of both the man and the boy to describe what compelled some men into these relationships and what could be gained out of them. The lover, the elderly man, in the relationship was usually between twenty-five and forty years old.\textsuperscript{47} It was unusual that men over the age of forty would stay in pederast relationships, but a small percentage of men did.\textsuperscript{48} Age was the main physical characteristic that set lovers apart, because the lover was much older than the beloved. The young boy was usually between the age of twelve and seventeen which was when they were viewed as most beautiful by lovers.\textsuperscript{49} Most commonly, pederasty stopped after the age of seventeen. \textit{Greek Anthology}, a collection of poems and epigrams that covered Classical Greece, gave an example of what lovers thought of the beloved at different ages. It stated, “In the Prime of a twelve-year-old boy I take the utmost delight. One of thirteen, however, is even more desirable. He who is fourteen is an even sweeter bloom of the Loves. More delightful is he not far from the beginning of his fifteenth,” and the most desired age of the beloved was next, “The sixteenth year is the property of the gods.” The disapproval of older boys was seen when the author stated, “The seventeenth is not for me to seek, but Zeus. But if anyone has a craving for one even older, he no longer sports, but is now in need, and answers him back.”\textsuperscript{50} This demonstrated that if a man desired a boy past the age of seventeen, it was unacceptable because it was no longer something that was for the child, but was because the man “needed” to be with a young boy. The reason the age of eighteen was the cut off for boys in

\textsuperscript{47} Flaceliere, \textit{Love in Ancient Greece}, 69.

\textsuperscript{48} Lysias \textit{Against Simon} 1-26, 44, 47-48.

\textsuperscript{49} Plutarch \textit{Lycurgus} 17.1.

\textsuperscript{50} Straton \textit{Greek Anthology} 12.4.
Pederasty was because at that age, males were considered citizens. As discussed earlier, at that age it was not socially acceptable for male citizens to participate as the pathic, the penetrated man, in a relationship.

Another reason pederasty ended when the boy reached the age of eighteen was because many lovers did not prefer the look of puberty and manhood on a boy. Around the age of sixteen, most Greek boys started going through puberty and displayed the signs of it, a beard. Most lovers preferred the effeminate look, and as soon as the beard showed on the boy’s face, many pederast relationships ended. Aristophanes’ comedies supported the idea that lovers liked the effeminate look because of the numerous references to youthful boys. *Wealth* demonstrated the youthful look in the statement, “Ah, that’s only the young pros, not the young gentlemen. A young gentleman never asks for money.”

The boys were also seen as “beautiful” by their lovers and many of these boys were physically in shape. One of the main reasons the boys were so beautiful was many of them were constantly involved with exercise routines in the gymnasia.

Some boys who eventually became the object of desire of an elderly man would spend almost three-fourths of their day in the gymnasium.\textsuperscript{51} There was a great deal of evidence to prove that the gymnasium was a place to find a beloved. In Plutarch’s \textit{Erotikos}, the champion of heterosexual love made exclamations about the pederast who entered the gymnasium to view the games in which the boys participated naked.\textsuperscript{52} Aristophanes’ comedies also provided evidence of the use of gymnasium by males involved in pederasty. This was found in Aristophanes’ address to the audience in the parabasis of \textit{Wasps}. Aristophanes found it necessary to prove his pureness and goodness through his exclamation that he, “was never found in the exercise-ground, corrupting the boys.”\textsuperscript{53} The attendance at the gymnasia allowed for the boys to become physically “beautiful” according to the lovers. Numerous fragments allow for the understanding that the boys were seen as beautiful. A fragment by Solon compared the beauty of boys with the flowers of spring. Numerous vases have also been found that have inscriptions on them, like the boy is beautiful.\textsuperscript{54} Graffiti from Athens also portrayed the beauty of boys. These inscriptions were dated to roughly the sixth century through the fifth century BCE and stated, “Arisemus is beautiful, Polytime is a whore,” as well as, “Lysitheus says that he loves Micion especially of the men in the city, for he is courageous,” and another one stated, “Archias is beautiful.”\textsuperscript{55}

Another physical characteristic of a boy in a pederast relationship was common of only the boys who participated in anal sex. Not many other ancient sources stated the physical markings after having continuous anal sex, but it is medically acknowledged that a boy being


\textsuperscript{52} Plutarch \textit{Erotikos} 751.F.

\textsuperscript{53} Aristophanes, \textit{Five Comedies}, 258.

\textsuperscript{54} Licht, \textit{Sexual Life in Ancient Greece}, 429.

\textsuperscript{55} Graffiti from Athens= IG1.2921-26.
anally penetrated would cause a physical marking. While Aristophanes may have simply been trying to make a point about the pathetic in *Clouds*, he may have also been making a statement about what some pathics looked like. He pointed out that males who participated in pederasty were once wide-assed and therefore they will always be wide-assed. “Wide-assed” could possibly have referred to the physical characteristic of the pathetic.

Gift Giving

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The lover in a pederast relationship went to many extremes to persuade the young boy to become involved with him. The lover followed the beloved everywhere and spent nights outside his house and serenaded him. Lovers also provided numerous gifts to a beloved to capture their love. These gifts included fruit, bags of knuckle bones, cocks, hares, dogs, and painted vases.

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56 Aristophanes, *Four Plays of Aristophanes*, 54-56.
Not only did they offer gifts, but they also showed their love through different actions which included composing verses and songs, carving their names on doors and trees, and hanging up garland like religious offerings on the boy’s porch. They also carved their love and desire for a boy on other objects like stones. One such stone was found at the Acropolis in Athens and dated to the fifth century BCE. It stated, “Lysitheos declares that he loves Mikion more than all the other boys in the city, for he is courageous.”\(^{57}\) The sheer amount of money and time that would have been spent in wooing a young boy to love an older man meant that pederasty was most likely an activity of the elite.\(^{58}\)

Aristophanes described the practices of the lover who supplied the boy with different gifts to show his affection. *Wealth* showed Aristophanes’ dislike of gift giving among pederasts. Aristophanes disapproved of prostitution and the following passage in *Wealth*, demonstrated the connection between pederasty and prostitution:

**CARION:** Same with the boys: they turn down men who really love them and go where the gold is.

**CHREMYLUS:** Ah, that’s only the young pros, not the young gentlemen. A young gentleman never asks for money.

**CARION:** Then what does he ask for?

**CHREMYLUS:** Well, maybe a thoroughbred horse or a pack of hounds.

**CARION:** That’s probably because they’re ashamed to ask right out for money, so they flavour their vice with a respectable name.\(^{59}\)

In this case it was the thoroughbred horse and the pack of hounds that would have been given as a gift to the boy. It should be noticed however, that these specific gifts may have been overly exaggerated by Aristophanes to prove his point. This is because a pack of hounds and a

\(^{57}\) Graffiti from Athens= IG 1.2921-26.

\(^{58}\) Flaceliere, *Love in Ancient Greece*, 72.

thoroughbred horse were like an expensive sports car in today’s society. As seen earlier, many of the gifts that were given required wealth, but not such an extreme amount of wealth. Aristophanes meant that these boys accepted these gifts instead of money so they could keep a respectable name for themselves.

The comedy, *Frogs*, included the statement that, “Then mud and slime and ever-flowing dung, and lying there in it, whoever wronged a stranger or a guest on earth, or made love to a boy and didn’t pay him for it, whoever beat his mother up or hit his father on the jaw.”\(^6^0\) This quotation was in reference to the type of people in the worst part of the underworld. This statement supported two different ideas in reference to gift giving in ancient Greek pederasty. The first argument is made from the statement about making love to a boy and not paying for it which referred to the practice of prostitution. This meant that it was the men who did not pay for their male prostitutes that were associated with the low lives in the underworld. This quotation however, comes from the character Heracles, who was an untrustworthy character in this comedy. His character was full of trickery and was seen as selfish in his previous dealings with people in the underworld. Because he was not a credible character, his acceptance of prostitution was meant to be seen negatively. Another way to interpret this quotation was from the reference to pederasty and gift giving. Aristophanes clearly believed pederasty and gift giving was a form of prostitution. This meant that untrustworthy, terrible Heracles’ approval of pederasty and gift giving was meant to show only despicable men approved it.

\(^{60}\) Aristophanes, *Four Plays of Aristophanes*, 243.
Education and Pederasty

The education of the beloved was used in pederasty for a number of reasons. First of all, the boy had to show he had a nobler interest in the pederast relationship other than simply engaging in sexual behavior. Ancient Greeks highly disapproved of pederasty if it was only a sexual relationship because of its close resemblance to prostitution. If there was not an intellectual or friendship aspect, the relationship would be giving gifts and money to a boy for the purpose of having sex with him. The following quotation provided evidence of the desire for an intellectual and friendship based activity, but it does contain problems. First of all, Plutarch lived and wrote hundreds of years after Aristophanes, which may cause problems with reliability. However, he wrote many influential historical works that have helped scholars understand more about ancient Greek history, which makes his works important in this paper. Another problematic issue with this quotation was that it dealt with Lycurgus, who was a Spartan ruler. While, this paper deals with all of ancient Greece, it has a more centralized focus on Athens where Aristophanes lived and wrote his comedies. However, this quotation demonstrated that education in pederasty was involved in Sparta and other city-states in Greece, as well as Athens. The Plutarch Lycurgus passage stated,

The older men also turned their attention to them, making more frequent visits to their places of exercise and being present when the boys sparred and joked with one another. And they did this not as an afterthought, but because they truly believed that they were all in some way the fathers, teachers, and governors of all of the boys.  

This quotation demonstrated that pederast relationships took on a nurturing, friendship basis. Fathers, teachers, and governors of the time only wanted to improve their own Greek city-state

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61 Plutarch Lycurgus 17.1.
society and it was this idea that spurred many of the pederast relationships. Aristophanes agreed with the view that pederasty was used to educate boys when he stated, “all men including judges, poets, and demagogues were once taught as a boy in pederasty.” 62

In pederast relationships, the lover used education as a form of persuading young boys to become involved. Boys involved in pederasty were able to obtain a more well-rounded education. A primary education was the most common type of schooling available to boys in Athens and after primary education, some wanted to proceed into secondary education. There were a few different ways to receive a secondary education and one of these ways was pederasty. Primary education consisted of reading, writing, calculating, music, and gymnasia, and some boys felt that this was insufficient for what they hoped to aspire to. These boys needed the secondary education supplied by pederasty to excel even further in the world, which lead many of them into different avenues in life. 63

Another reason why intellect was involved in pederasty was not addressed until recently. Some scholars now see the use and implementation of education as an excuse for the pederast to prevent a backlash against him and his sexual exploits. They claimed they were doing the boy, as well as Greek society, a favor by educating the youth. This allowed them to claim the main focus of the relationship was excellence in character and beauty.

Another reason why intellect was involved in pederasty was because even though most males were heterosexual, many men believed women were incapable of high intellect, duty, service, and honor. The lacking belief of women’s ability to obtain knowledge caused older males to attach to young boys and these friendships grew into pederasty. 64 However, some of

these friendships and mentor-mentee relationships were strictly friendly, and they did not involve a sexual relationship.

There was ample evidence of older men strictly being educators and mentors to the young boys. One of these educators in question was the famous Socrates. Present day scholars as well as ancient authors who believed, and still believe, Socrates was involved in education and pederasty. For example, Socrates was commonly seen in the presence of young boys, which was a common occurrence for an educator, but while in the presence of these boys he attended the gymnasia and on occasion was even known to wrestle with them. He also created a new type of education that questioned ancient Greek traditions, and that caused many to fear him because it was something unfamiliar. These were some of the reasons why ancient and present day people believed Socrates was involved in pederasty. The other view is that Socrates was only involved in education, and he thought the physical aspect of pederasty was despicable. Aristophanes agreed with the view that Socrates was not a pederast.

It is important to understand that Socrates never wrote a single thing in his life because he did not believe in writing. Therefore, all of the information about him was found in other author’s writings. Plato’s Symposium showed that while Socrates spent much of his time with young, beautiful boys he did not participate or believe in engaging in sexual contact as seen in the following statement presented by Alcibiades:

Your view of Socrates is of someone who fancies attractive men, spends all his time with them, finds them irresistible—and you know how hopelessly ignorant and uncertain he is…Open him up and he’s a model of restraint; you wouldn’t believe it, my dear fellow-drinkers…And on a fantastic stroke of luck, which had given me the chance to satisfy

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64 Hibler, Life and Learning in Ancient Athens, 28.

65 Licht, Sexual Life in Ancient Greece, 455.
Socrates, and be the recipient, in return, of all his knowledge. I had, I may say, an extremely high opinion of my own looks.

That was my plan, so I did what I had never done up to then—I sent away my attendant, and took to seeing him on my own. You see, I’m going to tell you the whole truth, so listen carefully, and you tell them, Socrates, if I get anything wrong. Well gentlemen, I started seeing him—just the two of us—and I thought he would start talking to me as lovers do to their boyfriends when they’re alone together. I was very excited. But nothing like that happened at all. He spent the day talking to me as usual, and then left. I invited him to the gymnasion with me, and exercised with him there, thinking I might make some progress that way. So he exercised and wrestled with me, often completely on our own, and (needless to say) it got me nowhere at all. When that turned out to be no good, I thought I’d better make a pretty determined assault on the man, and not give up, now that I’d started. I wanted to find out what the trouble was. So I asked him to dinner, just like a lover with designs on his boyfriend.  

Alcibiades continued to state that after a dinner date and spending the night with Socrates, nothing happened sexually between the two:

I spent the whole night with him, remarkable, superhuman being that he is—still telling the truth, Socrates, you can’t deny it—but he was more than equal to my advances. He rejected them, laughed at my good looks, and treated them with contempt; and I must admit that, as far as looks went, I thought I was quite something, members of the jury. (I call you that, since I’m accusing Socrates of contempt.) In short, I promise you faithfully, I fell asleep, and when I woke up in the morning I’d slept with Socrates all night, but absolutely nothing had happened. It was just like sleeping with one’s father or elder brother.

This passage provided sufficient evidence that Socrates refused to participate in pederasty with Alcibiades. However, the source, Plato, must be examined to determine his reliability. Plato was a student of Socrates and because he followed him for most of his life, he would not have wanted to cast Socrates in a negative light. While this may or may not have been a misrepresentation by Plato, there is no definite way to know whether or not he partook in pederasty. Another issue when referring to this speech is how it was recounted. It was not until

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66 Plato Symposium 216A-218.

67 Plato Symposium 219A-219E.
years later that a man, who had not even been at the drinking party but heard about it from a
guest, retold the story.

Aristophanes’ comedies shed some light onto the issue of whether or not Socrates was
involved in pederasty. Aristophanes’ comedy the Clouds’ main focus was on a more
fictionalized Socrates. While this Socrates character was a fictional element, he was meant to
portray the real life Socrates. In Clouds, Aristophanes accused Socrates of being a sophist,
accepting money for his teachings, as well as being a follower and believer in the “earthly ways.”
These three accusations were seen as negative features in ancient Greece and almost all other
ancient documents stated that Socrates was not involved in any of them. Aristophanes greatly
disliked pederasty and if Socrates had been a participant, it would have been likely that
Aristophanes would have commented on it at one point in the comedy. Because Aristophanes
did not state Socrates was a pederast in the comedy Clouds, he helped determine that Socrates
was probably not involved in pederasty.

CONCLUSION

Aristophanes’ felt that pederasty was not an acceptable practice and that ancient Greeks
should not participate in it. Overall, his beliefs can be summed up in one phrase, “vile
effeminate boylove.” He felt that it was a vile practice because of its associations with elitism
and snobbishness. He mentioned pederasty’s association with money in his comedy Wealth
through the discussion of the thoroughbred horse and the hounds. Wasps mentioned it was only
the wealthy and influential men that tried to force poets and comics into praising pederasty, and
Clouds discussed the people that were involved in pederasty which included the judges, poets,
and demagogues, which almost always were somewhat wealthy. Effeminate fit into Aristophanes’ view on pederasty and was demonstrated in his sexual hierarchy. It was clear Aristophanes did not like pederasty because he placed it after heterosexuality, but it was clear Aristophanes thought there were worse types of sexual practices that males participated in which were the pathic and the effeminate. Aristophanes may have created the hierarchy to demonstrate the real Athenian sexual hierarchy, and by associating “boylove” with the word effeminate was just another way to demonstrate how much he disliked pederasty.

The views Aristophanes held created a better understanding of pederasty in ancient Greece, because it supported other ancient sources on some topics and provided new contrary evidence to others. Aristophanes views supported other sources that stated the numerous physical characteristics of the lover and the beloved that included the boy was between twelve and seventeen years of age, the lover’s belief in the boy’s beauty, and fondling of the genitalia. His views also supported other ancient sources that stated pederasts went to great lengths to win over a beloved, and lovers supplied boys with gifts. While some ancient sources felt that gift giving was an appropriate way to win a boy’s love, Aristophanes created a more complete picture when he associated gift giving with prostitution and that it was not acceptable. Aristophanes also mentioned that pederasts provided boys with an education, and this was mentioned in other sources like philosophical works and historical records. The famous philosopher, Socrates, was often associated and believed to have been a pederast, but Aristophanes’ comedy, Clouds, allowed for the conclusion that this was not true. Finally, the most controversial topic even to this day is who was involved in pederasty. Many ancient sources, especially ancient philosophical texts, stated that both the elites and the general Greek population participated in pederasty. Other ancient sources, like Greek oratory, stated that
Pedestas was an elite practice and the general population was not involved. Aristophanes’ comedies supported Greek oratory’s description of pederasty and believed it was practiced by the elite. Overall, Aristophanes’ comedies are an important source when trying to understand pederasty in ancient Greece.
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