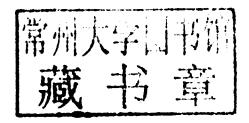
from
SHAME
to
SIN

The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity

KYLE HARPER

# From Shame to Sin

The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity



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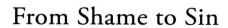


For Michelle, my amazing wife

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### Preface

This book presents an effort to summarize, between two covers, what difference Christianity made in the history of sexual morality. It does so by exploring the late classical world out of which Christianity emerged and following the story of the religion's expansion down to the age of the emperor Justinian. That is an enormous topic and this is a short book, which can only claim to draw out some of the main lines of such a complex development. This project arises out of my previous work on slavery, which left me with the sense that there was still something worthwhile to be said on a theme that has evoked some of the most exciting work of the last thirty years. From Shame to Sin tries to speak to readers generally interested in antiquity, early Christianity, and the history of sexuality, while simultaneously offering something useful to specialists, who may find more attention devoted to topics like status, demography, and law than is customarily found in narratives of intellectual history. Therein lies the essence of the argument presented in these pages: by placing the rules and regulations, and their moral assumptions, into their material context, we might emerge with a richer understanding of what the transition to a Christian sexual culture meant.



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## Introduction

From City to Cosmos

THE SEXUAL CULTURES of the classical world have been the object of unfailing interest, scholarly and otherwise. The reason for this fascination is not far to seek. Surely here, it might seem, in an age without doubt about simple pleasures, where desire was unchanneled by the narrows of sexual orientation, before guilt and penance, was an essentially different way of thinking about the morality of desire. In short, the sexual cultures of the Greeks and Romans have proven endlessly fascinating because they lie before the great watershed of Christianization. The Christian revolution in sexual morality, so the story goes, ushered in a style of sexual regulation that is less alien, more familiar. This book tries to identify and assess the changes wrought by the advent and triumph of Christianity. It moves across the late classical world, beginning in the high empire, when Christianity was no more than a faint voice in the vibrant, cacophonous world of the Roman Mediterranean, and ending in the haze of ruin and violent puritanism that characterized the reign of Justinian. Few periods of premodern history have witnessed such brisk and consequential ideological change. Sex was at the center of it all.

Over the last generation, as the history of sexuality became one of the great scholarly enterprises, the popular story in which Christianity put an end to pagan freedom with the body was exposed as a caricature, at best. In 1978 Sir Kenneth Dover published Greek Homosexuality, opening a new era in the study of ancient culture by arguing that the Greeks did not recognize permanent sexual orientation as a core feature of individual identity. In that same year, an article by Paul Veyne exploded the myth that pre-Christian sexual culture was an uninhibited garden; in his strong reformulation, the Romans were already, long before Constantine's celestial vision, pent-up pagan prudes who had sex timorously, at night, with their clothes on and the lamps off. The insights of Dover and Veyne were refined and greatly popularized in the late works of Michel Foucault, who showed that the history of sex could be about more than the changing balance of permissiveness and constraint; it could be about the categories of desire and morality, about the cultures that sustained differing visions of the human person as a sexual being. Above all, our understanding of early Christian sexuality has been revolutionized by the work of Peter Brown, whose Body and Society restored to Christian asceticism its original symbolic energy and human urgency. Brown's book inspired a whole generation of scholars by showing that the act of sexual renunciation was at the heart of a debate over the very meaning of Christianity's place in the world. The pioneers of Christian virginity, in denying the material demands the social order placed on their sexual capacity, transformed themselves into intermediaries of an otherworldly order. Acts of the flesh were burdened with a symbolism they had never known before.1

From Shame to Sin builds on the remarkable work of the last generation to reflect on the Christianization of sexual morality. It is an attempt to gather what has been learned about this great transformation, to take stock of what truly changed, and to offer an interpretation that grounds sexual morality firmly in the mechanics of ancient society. The reconstruction presented in these pages rests on four, mutually interdependent claims. The first maneuver of this book is to displace the Christianization of sex to a time rather later than it is normally thought to have taken place. The second century, it will be argued, was not careening toward a repressive future. The victory of a stern conjugal morality was not an inevitable triumph, over which Christianity simply happened to be holding the banner. The fourth century witnessed a fierce struggle, driven by the sudden advance of specifi-

cally Christian norms and prohibitions, and only toward the beginning of the fifth century did Christian values obtain a vice grip on public sexual culture. The ratification of this victory in public law was halting and, until the sixth century, incomplete and uncertain. This is a history of sex that begins by trying to sketch the specific quality of sexual life in the second-century empire and then chart the tumultuous changes of succeeding centuries down to the age of Justinian, by which time anything resembling classical eros had lost its pulse and a new order of relationships between sexual morality, public culture, and the legal regime was consolidated.

Second, despite the steady progress of the last decades, there remain specific topics that have not received adequate treatment in accounts of transformation. For example, although same-sex eros has attracted a lion's share of the attention from historians, there is, astonishingly, just one reliable treatment of the legal regime governing same-sex love in the Roman period; it has had no discernible influence on the major studies of ancient sex. We will depart from it in certain details, but the greater imperative is to integrate a credible account of structure and change in the legal system into a broader narrative of the history of sex. Equally urgent is the need to reckon with prostitution. This book will try to convince the reader that prostitution is important, even central, to the history of sex. "Prostitution" is not quite the right word, and for us it might evoke a host of marginalizing connotations: furtive vice, sanitary blight, guerilla warfare between the desperate and the forces of order. In the ancient world, the flesh trade was a dominant institution, flourishing in the light of day. The sex industry was integral to the moral economy of the classical world. The circulation of pleasures, outside the nexus of matrimony, must occupy the foreground, if there is to be any hope of recapturing the texture of life in the late classical world and of experiencing the jarring gospel of Christian sexuality. Christianity gave a name to the array of sensual opportunities beyond the marriage bed: porneia, fornication. Christian spokesmen for a time promoted the belief that the dominance of porneia was the sign of a world in disorder, and then, as they accumulated power, they set out, with some diligence, to repress it. The coordinated assault on the extramarital sexual economy marks one of the more consequential revolutions in the history of sex.2

Third, the passage from classical to Christian sexual culture required new conceptions of moral agency, and the idea (and the very formula) of "free will" was born in the struggle to define the meaning of Christian sexual

morality. Greco-Roman culture, in the high empire, became profoundly aware of the embeddedness of its sexual norms in society and the consequent tensions between objective and subjective factors in the judgment of sexual acts. The early church, by contrast, developed a radical notion of individual freedom, centered around a libertarian paradigm of complete sexual agency. The Christians of the second century invent the notion of free will. In its original form, Christian "free will" was a cosmological claim—an argument about the relationship between God's justice and the individual. The Christian invention of free will was a radical innovation, and yet it cannot be understood apart from the main currents of contemporary intellectual culture. Questions of volition and force are also a privileged index to the progress of Christian sexuality in the later centuries, as Christian triumph undid naive, absolutist models of moral agency. The concern with free will remained central, but as Christianity became intermeshed with society, the discussion shifted, in revealing ways, to the actual psychology of volition and the material constraints on sexual action. The suddenness with which Augustine's distinctive understandings of divine election and human flesh could push back against centuries of Christian voluntarism reflect the new position of the church as a powerful social institution, part of rather than apart from the world. This book argues that sex was integral to the development of the concept of free will, and that the changing conceptions of the will as a moral problem trace the transformation of a rigorously austere dissent movement into the dominant culture of the Mediterranean world.

Fourth, From Shame to Sin will situate sexual morality within the material frameworks governing which erotic experiences were permissible. By insisting that the hard facts of social life actively created and constrained beliefs about the morality of bodily acts, the book departs, conceptually, from the way in which the history of ancient sexuality is often written. The study of Christianization has been colored by the widely shared view that culture is the active agent that creates sexual meaning out of inert physical material, that culture accounts for the extraordinary diversity of human behavior, and that culture is what we, as historians, find it our primary task to interpret. When sexuality is flattened into a web of meanings, a symbolic system that resides in cultural artifacts and creates moral subjects, fundamental changes introduced by Christianity are rendered invisible. Instead, culture ought to be treated as a set of values and representations of the

world that impinge on behavior, that strike real human flesh in various ways, especially by cutting across hard, structural patterns in the experience of eros. Particularly in societies that lived in the unforgiving grind of highmortality cycles, with limited technologies of reproduction, sexual morality existed within networks of power defined by law, demography, and the control of resources. Sexual morality must be seen as part of the circuitry of a sexual economy constituted by real human bodies. This book is through and through focused on *society*, on its machinery for regulating reproduction and dispensing pleasures, and on the place of sexual morality within the fabric of the social order. Seen in this light, the triumph of Christianity not only drove profound cultural change. It created a new relationship between sexual morality and society.

The book's title, From Shame to Sin, reflects the argument that Christianity transformed the very order of relationships between sexual morality and social reproduction. It is worth pausing to reflect on what is meant and, just as importantly, not meant by this frame. The claim advanced here is not that there was a sea change in the language of sexual morality. Shame and sin, to be sure, both have a real grounding in the classical tongues. The language of sin is narrowly confined—peccare and its derivatives in Latin, hamartein and its relatives in Greek. The idiom of shame, by contrast, and the closely related concept of honor, is more diffuse but no less powerful, in both Latin and Greek. In Latin, the notion of shame was centered around a cluster of words including pudicitia (sexual modesty) and its opposite impudicitia (sexual immodesty), as well as the more concretized states of being, honestas (social respectability) and infamia (dishonor). In Greek, sophrosyne was used to denote both a virtue (self-control) and the possession of sexual respectability. Shame was expressed as aischynē—an act which brought dishonor on the actor, or the emotional experience of moral failure. Aidōs drew closer to the individual's "sense of shame," both positively, in the proper respect for others' opinions that evoked honorable behavior (similar to the Latin pudor), or negatively as the embarrassment that follows upon misconduct. In Greek the more concrete states of honor and dishonor were expressed by time and atimia, respectively. The triumph of Christian sexual morality was, as far as these terms are concerned, linguistically neutral. The vocabulary of sin was as familiar to pre-Christian moralities (especially Stoicism) as it was to ecclesiastical authorities. Dio Chrysostom, for instance, could refer to the unlawful violation of women and boys as "sins." And

Christian authors will exuberantly deploy the language, and sanctions, of "shame" in their campaign to repress sin.<sup>3</sup>

If the argument suggested by the title, From Shame to Sin, is not about linguistic transformation, neither is it about a shift from external social judgment to an internal, psychologizing morality (such a book might be called From Shame to Guilt). It is true that, by our period, "sin," in both Latin and Greek, has the full sense of "moral transgression," with a strong sense of culpability that must necessarily look inward for a blameworthy faculty. But the mistake would be to imagine that the cluster of terms governing the idea of "shame" was somehow exclusively external. Shame, in the Greco-Roman culture of the high empire, shuttled between external judgment and internal affect; its very nature lay in the inseparable connection between the two. Robert Kaster's definition of pudor perfectly captures its essence: "a displeasure with oneself caused by vulnerability to just criticism of a socially diminishing sort." In other words, shame was an emotion or emotional state experienced by an individual because of the potentially valid disapproval of the moral community. For instance, a Latin encyclopedist of the high empire recorded a philosopher's definition of pudor and aischynē alike as "fear of justified reproach." Shame, in the Roman Empire, was necessarily an interpersonal concept, dependent on the potential judgment of the moral community.4

The demands of honor and shame also varied in the expectations they placed on the individual, according to the individual's place within the moral community. Herein lies the internal logic of shame as a moral sanction. Shame is not only a regulative emotion that mediates between the individual's self-surveillance and the community's power to render moral judgment; shame governs the moral expectations immanent in the structure of the moral community itself. Shame was a profoundly social concept, mediated always by gender and status. In the sexual life of the Roman Empire, it would be impossible to overstate the decisive influence of social position in the determination of sexual boundaries. Slavery, absolutely fundamental to the social and moral order of Roman life, gave sharp meaning to the concepts of honor and shame; slavery is an inherently degrading institution, which by its very nature deprives the slave of direct, individual access to social honor. "Slaves had no sense of pudor at all, perhaps because they were not usually conceived as having an interior ethical life, and certainly because they could not suffer social diminution." The free, by contrast, and

especially the wellborn, were thought to embody social honor and to exhibit a finely wrought sense of shame proper to their station in life.<sup>5</sup>

The moral expectations inhering in the dynamics of shame were generated by the social order. As a result, the real tension in the moral world of the Romans was not between the internal and the external dimensions of shame, but rather between the subjective and the objective qualities of shame. Honor and shame were both states of mind and states of being-moral qualities and social conditions. Nowhere is this clearer than in the sexual field. Pudicitia, derived from pudor, described the quality of sexual modesty. It meant something different in the case of men and women, free persons and slaves (for whom it had virtually no meaning). As we will explore in Chapter 1, it implied, simultaneously, both the intentional, mental state of sexual propriety and the objective state of bodily sexual integrity. Sōphrosynē covered a similar range in Greek, differing in the case of men and women, and pointing both to a mentally virtuous condition and an objective state. What is notable about the moralizing literature of the Roman period is a heightened awareness of this duality. Greek and Roman authors will contrive elaborate scenarios testing the fundamental assumption that status and behavior cohere. The culture of the high empire, in short, became acutely sensitive to the deep interconnection of external and internal dimensions of moral behavior; the literate classes became sensible to the fact that what we are—our desires, our limits, our moral awareness—is given to us by the world.6

From Shame to Sin, then, reconstructs a transformation in the deep logic of sexual morality, in which the theological conception of sin came to override and to reshape an ancient sexual culture rooted in power and social reproduction. The specific prohibitions introduced by Christianity—such as the proscription of all same-sex love and the flat condemnation of prostitution—were part of this transformation. But even where the rules of conduct remained the same (such as the nearly unchanging expectations placed on respectable women), the sanctions of morality decisively shifted. The legacy of Christianity lies in the dissolution of an ancient system where status and social reproduction scripted the terms of sexual morality. The concept of sin, and its twin, free will, entailed what Nietzsche called "eine Metaphysik des Henkers," a metaphysics of the hangman, which is foundationally distinct from the social metaphysics of pre-Christian sexual morality. Shame is a social concept, instantiated in human emotions; sin is a

theological concept. They represent different categories of moral sanction. That is the point: the transition from a late classical to a Christian sexual morality marked a paradigm shift, a quantum leap to a new foundational logic of sexual ethics, in which the cosmos replaced the city as the framework of morality.<sup>7</sup>

The logic, rather than the language, of sexual morality changed in the period we are exploring. A signal example of this change underlies a legal reform that might be taken as an inflection point in the transition described in this book (and which is explored in great detail in Chapter 3). In AD 428 the Christian emperor Theodosius II enacted a law banning the use of coercion in the sex industry. The law wished to repress the prostitution of slaves, daughters, and other vulnerable members of society, which was anything but a marginal part of the classical sexual order. The moral foundations of the law were, there can be no doubt, Christian. The law advertised the will to prevent "the necessity of sinning." The language of sexual sin is totally alien to Roman law and symbolizes the diffusion of a new pattern of moral reasoning. The complete, violent exploitation of women without any claim to civic protection was simply, as a problem in its own right, invisible in a culture whose moral foundations were immanent in the logic of social reproduction. The law of 428 was the first salvo in an enduring crusade against coercive procurement that the Christian emperors of the next century would carry out. Yet only ten years after the initial enactment, the laws returned immediately to the venerable language of shame, claiming to defend the pudicitia of women who, in the more ancient logic of sexual shame, had no claim to such a quality. In other words, the new logic could prevail even within an old language. So, throughout, we must try to peer behind language—whether the Greek novelists' clever manipulation of words like shame or virginity, or the efforts of Christian lawyers and litterateurs to convey radical ideas in traditional dialects—into the logic of moral command.

Chapter 1 sketches a portrait of sexual life in the heyday of Roman power, from the later first to the early third century. As in any portrait, the angles are carefully chosen, and necessarily selective. We must try, insofar as possible, to recapture the erotic values of the second century as a period in its own right. Here was a Mediterranean society, huddled into little towns that were at once primitive and unusually wealthy. It was a society whose moral lineaments were sculpted by the omnipresence of slaves and by the

rigid stratifications of law. A particular feature of the frame used here must be noted: one canvas suffices for both the Latin and the Greek parts of the empire. This choice is a calculated gambit, not just dictated by the necessity of space but more deliberately by the belief that the institutions of army, the webs of commerce, the intimate ties of intermarriage, the syncretism of law, and a shared intellectual culture melded the Greek and Latin elements of the empire into a whole that is not homogeneous but at least capable of representation as a single, complex organism. As far as possible, the authorities of the second century are asked to present themselves. In part this is done because they are so rich and vivid. In part it is done to counterbalance the widespread idea that the Roman Empire was on a trajectory away from sexual freedom and erotic frankness. Above all, the aim in Chapter 1 is to describe the world in which Christian sexual morality took shape, to recapture something of its richness, its chaos, its vitality.

This presentation employs an eclectic armory of sources: law and literature, scientific treatises and moralizing tracts, even a glance at the ubiquitous erotic art of the Roman Empire. The mélange is deliberate, for it helps us resist the temptation to ascribe supremacy to any one witness or class of witnesses. There will be no doubting, however, which type of informant is accorded a measure of favoritism: the novelist. The history of the ancient novel is effectively coterminous with the four centuries of Roman Empire. Rarely in history are great genres of literature born, and when they are, it surely signals a significant cultural juncture. The novels are tales of eros; they are dedicated to the power of eros and celebrate its divine power. A heady synthesis of comedy, love poetry, travel literature, and philosophy, the novels are the quintessential cultural expression of a civilization with a mature tradition of speculation on human sexual experience. At the same time, the novels are breathtakingly unique creations whose narrative intricacy allowed their authors to explore, slowly and with a new sympathy, the contours of the soul experiencing eros. On the whole, the romances strike a tone of wry conservatism. These stories are the product of a confident and assertive aristocracy, capable of believing that the world could be redeemed through social reproduction. But it is too much to declare the novels simple propaganda. Their authors are too alert to the unruly power of eros, too eager to portray the sinuous routes to conjugal love to be trying to put over something as bland as a point. In particular, Chapter 1 lets Leucippe and Clitophon, a romance written in the second century by an author named