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HOW BEAUTIFUL IT IS
AND HOW EASILY IT CAN BE BROKEN

The Man Behind the Curtain

Who knows how classical scholarship might have evolved if Oscar Wilde had gone to grad school? Already at boarding school, and later at college, the young Oscar's mastery of both Greek and Latin was legendary. "The flowing beauty of his oral translations in class," a schoolmate later recalled to Wilde's biographer Frank Harris, "whether of Thucydides, Plato, or Virgil, was a thing not easily to be forgotten." Among the many classics prizes he carried off was his school's gold medal for Greek. (The essay subject was, perhaps prophetically, "The Fragments of the Greek Comic Poets, as edited by Meineke.") When Wilde went up to Oxford, it was on a classics scholarship; he left it with a prestigious double First in Greats. Yet when he was asked what he proposed to do after leaving, the otherwise aporetic undergraduate ("God knows," was his immediate response) was emphatic about at least one thing. "I won't be a dried-up Oxford don, anyhow," the twenty-four-year-old replied. "I'll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious."

Times have changed. As the current *siècle* lurches to its own *fin*, ambitious young classics graduates need hardly choose between philology and fame. According to a recent *New York Times Magazine* report on the

Modern Language Association convention—the annual gathering of literature professors where scholarly papers are given, job interviews are conducted, and professional contacts maintained or made—many of today’s dons aspire to an A-list world of six-figure salaries and fast-lane accessories. Some, like NYU’s Weather-Channel *Wunderkind* Andrew Ross, have publicly traded in their Harris tweed blazers for the considerably more *recherché* creations available at Comme des Garçons; others, like archaeologist Iris Love, have come to be associated less with Doric or Ionic than with columns of a more gossipy order. As you sit in your dentist’s waiting room, you can read about Professor Ross in *New York* magazine, or Cornel West in the newly hot *New Yorker*.

These, however, are merely the external symptoms of more substantive, and indeed more desirable, developments in the relations between the academy and the real world since 1878. If academics have been power-lunching along with everyone else lately, it’s because they’ve got more . . . well, power. For the first time in over a generation, professional scholars are actively participating in public life.

It is no accident that many of the scholars who do so are, like Wilde, “marginal” in some sense: women, gays, African-Americans, professors whose intellectual energies have been focused on recuperating lost or long-repressed voices from those margins. On the face of it, this agenda is more closely entwined with their personal experience than are the professional activities of those who study, say, Greek grammar or patristic church history. Over the past few years, the writings and public appearances of such scholar-stars as Catharine MacKinnon and Cornel West and Martha Nussbaum have done much to change the way we think about the potential for symbiosis between scholarship and public life. (Because she has written a lot about Plato’s *Symposium*, for instance, the last of those three testified as an expert witness in hearings on the constitutionality of Colorado’s anti-gay Proposition 2 in 1993.)

The reappearance of professional intellectuals in the public arena would appear to be a healthy corrective to the cultural ailment plaintively diagnosed by Russell Jacoby in his 1987 study *The Last Intellectuals*. In this book, Jacoby catalogs a number of factors that have contributed to the decline of vigorous and intelligent discourse in America. Among these he counts the rise of suburbia and the accompanying diffusion of urban centers of intellectual life, and of course television, which Jacoby

rightly blames for having eroded the public's critical acumen, to say nothing of overall intelligence. But for him none of these factors is more critical than the increasingly narrow restriction of serious intellectual activity over the past two generations to a highly professionalized and hence ultimately solipsistic academic elite.

Despite its sometimes frivolous accoutrements, therefore, scholarly engagement with "real" life appears to be a good thing—from whichever end of the political spectrum such engagement may come. This is true both for the scholars themselves and for the public they address. In the case of the former, the opportunity to apply sophisticated techniques and erudite insights to (as it were) a living subject helps to inoculate against what George Steiner, in an essay on the case of Sir Anthony Blunt, once referred to as *odium philologicum*, that all-too-familiar perversion of perspective that results when the objects of intellectual inquiry occlude our vision of the everyday world. (By airing his thoughts in the pages of *The New Yorker*, Steiner was practicing what he preached.) And the participation of professional intellectuals in public discussion of urgent everyday issues presumably raises the level of that discourse itself, bringing to it the expertise, erudition, and argumentative finesse expected of those who have undergone rigorous intellectual and scholarly training.

All of these developments take on a certain poignancy when you think back on the fate of poor Oscar Wilde, whose postgraduate career, viewed from the comfortable vantage point afforded by hindsight, assumes a depressingly familiar Sophoclean shape. At first, Wilde's choice of fame over philology seemed a good one: he became very famous indeed. The astonishing verbal facility that had won him all the glittering prizes at university became the weapon with which he skewered Victorian convention, thereby earning him considerable literary *kleos*. But the dazzling intellectual self-assurance gradually fermented into the deluded hubris of his libel suit, followed by the nemesis of a humiliating public defeat. (Even his wit betrayed him: his glittering, flippant responses during the trial were what destroyed his case.) Wilde was the Ajax of early literary celebrity, impaled on his own desire for fame. After the brief stint of penal servitude, he fled to Paris, where he expired in the last year of the last century, outlived by Victoria herself.

And so, despite the recent erosion of the once-rigid distinctions that

forced Wilde to choose between philology and fame—and by “fame” I mean conspicuousness within, and impact upon, the outside, public, “real” world—every now and then you’re still tempted to see in his unhappy trajectory from Magdalen to maudlin a sort of morality tale. Sometimes, it’s safer to stick to stichomythia.

I couldn’t help thinking of Wilde as I read and reread a recent book by another precociously gifted philologue who, like Wilde, came to chafe at the dried-up donnish bit, and who as a result sought an audience outside of the academy’s walls. His book is, in fact, expressly aimed at a broadly public rather than a narrowly academic audience, and toward that end was published by a trade rather than university press. Indeed, like much of Wilde’s oeuvre, this work seeks to present a devastating indictment of social and especially religious hypocrisy on the subject of human sexuality. It is a nice further coincidence that its late author was, like Wilde, charming, personable, erudite, and above all an extraordinarily gifted linguist. (His defenders invariably point to his expertise in such arcane tongues as Old Church Slavonic.) And like Wilde, he was a homosexual who suffered both personally and, according to some, professionally for it.

The book I am talking about is John Boswell’s *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*. In it, the author claims to have unearthed a medieval ecclesiastical ceremony known as the *adelphopoïêsis* which, he argues, was in fact a liturgy to be performed at (primarily male) homosexual marriages. As much today as a hundred years ago, that is the kind of claim that makes you very notorious indeed.

The tortured relationship between homosexuality and Roman Catholicism is familiar territory for Boswell’s readers—as it was, indeed, for Boswell himself. In his extremely well received 1980 study *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, published by the University of Chicago Press, Boswell shed welcome light on the early Church’s by no means straightforward attitude toward male homosexuality. Hence though he was to eventually become generally (and laudably) more cautious about the anachronistic use of words like “gay” to describe the affective states experienced by members of cultures radically different from our own, Boswell’s latest project may be seen as the next charge in

a polemic whose opening salvo was fired nearly fifteen years ago. There is little doubt, moreover, that this scholarly interest was fueled by deep personal feeling. Boswell, a homosexual, was also a devout Catholic.

In view of the undeniably powerful political uses to which the Church's institutionalized opposition to homosexuality has been put over the centuries, it was inevitable that what began as the author's personal and scholarly interest in destabilizing the theological and historical premises for the Church's position should end up serving a political purpose as well. This last consideration explains why, upon its publication in the summer of 1994, *Same-Sex Unions* won the kind of fame—and notoriety—that would have warmed even Oscar Wilde's heart. The apogee of this publicity was the triumphant citation of Boswell's book in the popular comic strip *Doonesbury*. "For 1,000 years the Church sanctioned rituals for *homosexual* marriages," declares Mark Slackmeyer, a gay character who has recently come out; he then goes on to mention the source for his information: the "new book by this Yale professor."

Given the political climate at the time of the book's publication, you can hardly blame Slackmeyer for his enthusiasm. If they were indeed what Boswell says they were, the ecclesiastical ceremonies discussed in *Same-Sex Unions* would be considered by many to be powerful ammunition in the increasingly ugly battles about social tolerance now being fought in America. Among the liberal press and especially gay activists, it was hoped that what Boswell's publisher, Villard, calls his "sensational discovery" would, in the words of an approving *Nation* reviewer, "have a chance of intervening effectively in this debate [i.e., over gay marriage]." This fantasy of "effective intervention" is a potent one: how nice it would be for us gay men and women to go clumping down to the Senate floor, Byzantine manuscripts firmly in hand, and hurl the appropriate bits of papyrus and vellum into Senator Helms's empurpled visage. In more ways than one, it would all be Greek to him.

This makes it all the more unfortunate, both for that political project and for Boswell's posthumous reputation (he died a few months after the book's publication in 1994), that the only people who have reason to be intimidated by Boswell's ceremonies of *adelphopoiësis*—and, perhaps more important, the only people likely to use them as weapons in a political battle—are, in fact, those who have no Greek: that is, readers who lack the training and expertise necessary to evalu-

ate what are, in the end, this work's very dubious claims. For seen as a work of philology, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* is a bad book. Its arguments are weak, its methods unsound, its conclusions highly questionable. Most disturbing of all is its rhetorical stance: the complexities and ambiguities of the historical, literary, and linguistic material Boswell discusses are of a very high order indeed, and hence give the lie to his rather disingenuous assertion that no specialized scholarly training is necessary to the proper evaluation of this book. (Professional scholars have been arguing heatedly over his conclusions since the day the book appeared.) Given the author's inevitable awareness of his thesis's potential impact on a wider public discourse, his decision to target precisely those readers who have no particular expertise is alarming.

Seen, however, as a work of that other category—"fame"—*Same-Sex Unions* has been considerably more successful; even Professor Nussbaum didn't make it to *Doonesbury*. In Boswell's case, what's striking is that so obvious a philological failure should be accompanied by so great a public impact. This correlation, I think, should provoke serious discussion about the means by which intellectual celebrity is achieved and the aims to which it can be put. In the end, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* provokes questions that are far more disturbing than the "controversial" answers it claims to provide. It exemplifies the dangers inherent in careless cross-pollination of scholarship and politics, of philology and fame.



Why all the fuss? That's an easy one. Pretty much any evidence that marriages between male homosexuals were performed under the auspices of the early Church would certainly put a crimp in the Vatican's current rhetorical style. Referring to increasing debate about the legalization of same-sex marriages in (post)modern Europe and America—at the time of the present article's publication, it is on the constitutional agenda in Hawaii—Pope John Paul II denounced such unions as "a serious threat to the future of the family and society."

I should say at the outset that I characterize Boswell's book as being about "gay marriages," despite the fact that some have defended his book

from scholarly skepticism precisely on the grounds that Boswell himself carefully eschews that tendentious term in favor of the ostensibly more judicious “same-sex unions.” To do so, these defenders argue, bespeaks a praiseworthy scholarly prudence. Although it is true that Boswell himself hedges his rhetorical bets in this fashion, the overarching thrust of his arguments, his own description of the unions as celebrating “permanent romantic commitment,” the enormous quantity of material he marshals concerning both the language and diction of erotic (versus, say, agricultural) activity in the ancient world and about the history of homosexual relationships from archaic Greece to the early years of the Christian Church—all this makes it clear that what Boswell is talking about in this book is what his intended audience of nonscholars will surely understand as “gay marriages celebrated by the church.”

Indeed, when halfway through his study Boswell pauses to frame one of three “nonpolemical” questions that a responsible historian faced with the manuscripts in question might pose—“Was it a marriage?”—Boswell is, in his own words, “unequivocal”:

The answer to this question depends to a considerable extent on one’s conception of marriage, as noted in the Introduction. According to the modern conception—i.e., a permanent emotional union acknowledged in some way by the community—it was unequivocally a marriage. (p. 190)

It seems more than likely that, to Boswell’s own unequivocally modern audience, “same-sex unions” will be taken as meaning “gay marriages.” These are Boswell’s own words. If the “unions” he’s talking about here are any other than the kind of affective, mutual, primarily erotic partnerships that people today understand as constituting a marriage, then his elaborate dissertation becomes a pointless exercise. To deny this essential point, or to hide behind sophistries about the alleged neutrality of the English term “same-sex” as opposed to “gay,” is disingenuous.

At the center of Boswell’s four-hundred-page thesis about medieval gay marriages stands the text of an early Christian ceremony known as the *akolouthia* (occasionally *eukhê*), *eis adelphopoiêsin*, the “liturgy” (or “prayer”) “for the creation of brothers”—or the “creation of lovers,” depending on how figuratively you care to read the *adelpho-* (literally, “brother”) in *adel-*

phopoiêsis. (This interpretive point, to which I shall return later, is the fulcrum of Boswell's thesis.) The service has survived in various versions in a large number of manuscripts from all over Europe. These documents date to the period between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. In order to provide proper cultural context for these strange texts, however, Boswell laudably devotes nearly a third of his study to what he sees as the Greek, Roman, and late antique "background" evidence; and it is to his handling of this material (often well over a millennium older than the manuscripts themselves) that I shall devote most of my own discussion. I do so because the foundation of Boswell's argument about the meaning of the *adelphopoiêsis* ceremony is, in fact, an interlocked series of interpretations of linguistic and cultural material that is primarily classical.

Since the *adelphopoiêsis* liturgy proved to be a novelty even to a highly trained medievalist like Boswell himself, it seems appropriate to give an example here. Of those furnished in Boswell's "Appendix of Documents," the one that is most ample and that contains the greatest quantity of material that could be construed as being helpful to the author's argument is the eleventh-century manuscript known as Grottaferrata Γ. β. II. I provide it here in Boswell's own translation, along with my own bracketed transliterations of important phrases from the original Greek. (I retain the author's italicization of the rubrics of priestly activity.)

OFFICE FOR SAME-SEX UNION
(*akolouthia eis adelphopoiêsin*)

i.

The priest shall place the holy Gospel on the Gospel stand and they that are to be joined together [hoi adelphoi] place their <right> hands on it, holding lighted candles in their left hands. Then shall the priest cense them and say the following:

ii.

In peace we beseech Thee, O Lord. For heavenly peace, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

For the peace of the entire world, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

For this holy place, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That these thy servants, N. and N., be sanctified with thy spiritual benediction, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That their love [*agapê*] abide without offense or scandal all the days of their lives, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That they be granted all things needed for salvation and godly enjoyment of life everlasting, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That the Lord God grant unto them unashamed faithfulness [*pistin akataiskhynton*] <and> sincere love [*agapên anypokriton*], we beseech Thee, O Lord.

That we be saved, we beseech Thee, O Lord.

Have mercy on us, O God.

“Lord, have mercy” shall be said three times.

iii.

The priest <shall say>: Forasmuch as Thou, O Lord and Ruler, art merciful and loving [*philôn*], who didst establish humankind after thine image and likeness, who didst deem it meet that thy holy apostles Philip and Bartholomew be united [*adelphous genesthai*], bound one unto the other not by nature but by faith and the spirit. As Thou didst find thy holy martyrs Serge and Bacchus worthy to be united together [*adelphous genesthai*], bless also these thy servants, N. and N., joined together not by the bond of nature but by faith and in the mode of the spirit, granting unto them peace and love and oneness of mind [*agapên kai homonoian*]. Cleanse from their hearts every stain and impurity, and vouchsafe unto them to love one other [*sic*] without hatred and without scandal [*to agapân allêlous amisêtôs kai askandalistôs*] all the days of their lives, with the aid of the Mother of God and all thy saints, forasmuch as all glory is thine.

iv.

ANOTHER PRAYER FOR SAME-SEX UNION
(*eukhê hetera eis adelphopoiêsin*)

O Lord our God, who didst grant unto us all those things necessary for salvation and didst bid us to love one another

[*agapân allêlous*] and to forgive each other our failings, bless and consecrate, kind Lord and lover of good, these thy servants who love each other with a love of the spirit [*pneumatikêi agapêi heautous agapêsantas*] and have come into this thy holy church to be blessed and consecrated. Grant unto them unashamed fidelity [and] sincere love [*agapê*], and as Thou didst vouchsafe unto thy holy disciples and apostles thy peace and love [*agapên*], bestow <them> also on these, O Christ our God, affording to them all those things needed for salvation and life eternal. For Thou art the light [and] the truth and thine is the glory.

v.

Then shall they kiss the holy Gospel and the priest and one another, and conclude [apoluetai]:

ECCLESIASTICAL CANON OF MARRIAGE
OF THE PATRIARCH METHODIUS

[*Kanôn ekklesiastikos epi gamou, poiêma Methodiou patriarkhou*]

O Lord our God, the designer of love [*agapê*] and author of peace and disposer of thine own providence, who didst make two into one and hast given us one to another, who hast [seen fit?] to bless all things pure and timeless, send Thou now down from heaven thy right hand full of grace and loving kindness over these thy servants who have come before Thee and given their right hands as a lawful token of union and the bond of marriage [*episynoikêsian kai syndesmon gamou*]. Sanctify and fill them with thy mercies. And wrapping the pair in every grace and in divine and spiritual radiance, gladden them in the expectation of thy mercies. Perfect their union [*synapheian*] by bestowing upon them peace and love and harmony [*agapên kai homonoian*], and deem them worthy of the imposition and consecration of the crowns, through the prayers of her that conceived Thee in power and truth; and those of all thy saints, now and forever.

VI.

And after this prayer the priest shall lift the crowns and dismiss them [apoluei autous].

This, then, is the ceremony of “same-sex union.”

In beginning his discussion, Boswell describes this ritual as being swathed in mystery and even, perhaps, in danger. His own study of it, he informs us in the Preface, “was undertaken as the result of a notice about a ceremony of same-sex union sent to me by a correspondent who prefers not to be named.” The hint at an urgent desire for anonymity provides a nice, John Grisham-y touch sadly absent from most scholarly prose; but the dark intimation that these rites were unknown to scholars is misleading. Since the end of the nineteenth century, when Giovanni Tomassia studied the ceremony, and into the twentieth when it was taken up again by Paul Koschaker, the *adelphopoiêsis* has been known to scholars. They have argued that the ceremonies celebrated some kind of “ritualized” friendship along the lines of a blood-brotherhood—a formalized relationship for which the parallels from ancient Mediterranean cultures, as the title of Gabriel Herman’s 1987 study *Ritualized Friendship in the Greek City* suggests, are as numerous and well attested as are the competing parallels, drawn from the context of ancient sexual and erotic conventions, that Boswell adduces in support of his own argument. And indeed, nothing in the first four sections of this text (which closely resembles the entirety of the other examples Boswell gives) provides sufficient support for Boswell’s “gay marriage” reading of the *adelphopoiêsis* over and above the less controversial and better-supported readings. The emphasis on peace, mutual Christian love, *agapê*, and aversion to scandal conform to any number of nonerotic interpretations—for example, that the ceremonies formalized alliances or reconciliations between heads of households or perhaps clans.

But few would contest the stunning and controversial force of the Grottaferrata manuscript’s fifth part, which is indisputably a liturgy of Christian marriage, and indeed even of the sixth, with its reference to the traditional crowns of the Orthodox wedding service. On the force of this single document, as it appears in Boswell’s Appendix, the case for gay marriage would seem to be incontrovertible.

The problem is that this is not, in fact, a single document: the fifth and sixth parts are almost certainly *not* part of the *adelphopoiêsis* ceremony. Rather, these appear to be the first two parts of an entirely separate, bona fide marriage ceremony—one of various kinship-related rituals that appear to have been collected in this and other of the various manuscripts in which the *adelphopoiêsis* liturgy appears. And here we come to the first example of what turns out to be a pattern of methodological and argumentative sins, both of commission and omission, on Boswell's part. Among these are a presentation of the evidence that is so tendentious as to be misleading; a highly selective use of anomalous or unrepresentative evidence to support key premises of the arguments; and a pervasive failure to account adequately for nuance and context in citing original sources. Subtending all of these is a rhetorical strategy whose disingenuousness verges on fraud, given the popularizing aims of Boswell's book: and here I refer to Boswell's self-serving deployment of notes and ancillary scholarship, the overall effect of which is to suppress information crucial to the proper interpretation of the arguments presented in the text itself.

Boswell previews his ostensibly harmless footnoting strategy in an introductory admonition to his readers:

[A]lthough composing the pages that follow has required mastery of many different specialties (other than arcane languages), many readers may not be interested in the technical niceties of liturgical development or the details of moral and civil laws regarding marital status. *The text has been aimed, therefore, at readers with no particular expertise in any of the specialties that have undergirded the research*; all technical materials have been relegated to the notes, which will be of value to specialists *but can generally be skipped by other readers*. (p. xxx; emphases mine)

The author goes on to suggest that whole chapters may indeed be skipped by all except those interested in what he dismisses as “liturgical niceties”—the kind of stuff that is, he self-deprecatingly hints, “perhaps not fascinating for the general reader.” I stress here, and shall emphasize again, how at the very outset of this study Boswell insinuates into his (general) audience's mind the notion that his copious footnotes will

deal with mere technicalities (he uses the words twice): that is, arcane fodder for the abstruse activity of “experts” and “specialists.”

With this in mind, then, let us turn to the author’s discussion of the Grottaferrata text. At the end of Part IV of Grottaferrata Γ. β. II, a line is drawn across the page following the Greek word *apoluetai*—that is, after the sentence that Boswell translates as “Then they shall kiss the holy Gospel and the priest and one another, and conclude.” This scribal line is a fairly standard indication that what follows constitutes a separate text, and hence in this case strongly suggests in itself that Patriarch Methodius’s Ecclesiastical Canon of Marriage is not, in fact, related to the *adelphopoiêsis* at all. That this is in fact the case seems to be supported by the use of the verb *apoluô* here, which generally marks the conclusion of liturgies from this period—as indeed it does in every other *adelphopoiêsis* ceremony provided by Boswell in which that word appears.

But not for Boswell, who instead tries to get around both the scribal line and the *apolusis* formula in a number of ingenious ways. The first of these involves a clever rearrangement of the text, at least for the benefit of his Greekless readers. In the Greek text, the closing instruction to kiss the Bible and the priest appears, as I have said, as the *last* line of section IV—that is, the last section of the *adelphopoiêsis*. But in Boswell’s English translation—the one, of course, that the book’s intended audience must consult—the author *transposes this line so that it appears to be the first line of section V*—that is, Methodius’s marriage canon. In so doing Boswell slyly creates one seamless ceremony where in the original there were almost certainly two. (This presentation is helped along by Boswell’s misleading insertion of an anachronistic colon following the word “conclude” at the end of the line in question, as if the word’s function was to announce what was to follow, rather than to conclude what preceded it.)

Still, Boswell seems to be aware that his decision to conjoin these two texts, based on a desire to demonstrate that *adelphopoiêsis* was a true marriage ceremony, requires more than a quick scissors-and-glue job. His self-justification takes the form of a lengthy footnote to the English translation that is filled with untranslated (even untransliterated) Greek. He begins by pointing out that there are occasional cases in which the scribal line usually drawn between separate texts has been

drawn in error. And in order to justify appending an entire matrimonial service *after* the *apolusis*—the closing formula—that ends Part IV of the *adelphopoiêsis*, Boswell notes that the *apolusis* was occasionally accompanied by certain “final acts” or further prayers. This is indeed true, as Boswell’s citations of various learned definitions of the *apolusis* indicate. (Brightman: “the conclusion of an office and the formula with which it is concluded”; *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*: “a formula pronounced at the end of a liturgical service or sometimes of one of its parts.”) According to Boswell, the matrimonial service should be considered such a “formula.”

At best, these are tenuous arguments. To pin a radical textual claim on a fervent hope that scribal error took place is ludicrous, and hardly qualifies as rigorous scholarly methodology. In addition, the entire Methodian marriage service constitutes much more than a mere “formula or closing prayer.” (The *ODB*’s “sometimes one of its parts” is, moreover, every bit as shaky a ground for Boswell’s case as are his devout hopes for a scribal goof.) Indeed, in the examples that Boswell himself provides, the “final acts” and formulae that he posits as valid analogues for the matrimonial service consist of no more than a valedictory kissing of the Bible, the priest, and the participants of the ceremony. A kiss on the cheek may be quite continental, but it’s neither as lengthy nor as substantial a parallel as what Boswell needs to justify his appendage of the marriage rite to the *adelphopoiêsis* in his presentation of Grottaferrata Γ. β. II.

The real problem, though, is that a general audience has absolutely no way of knowing any of this. Aside from the fact that he or she has, in any case, been warned off the notes to begin with, and hence will accept Boswell’s extremely tendentious presentation here at face value, the interested nonspecialist reader who takes the trouble to go through the Grottaferrata text in English cannot evaluate Boswell’s argument about, say, the content of those final acts, because Boswell leaves the descriptions of them in the original Greek—a peculiar choice, given that this is, after all, the “Appendix of Translations.” If Boswell really intends his notes primarily for the specialist, why bother appending this Greek-filled, two-page-long note to the *English* text? The polyglot scholarship stuffed under the English translation makes for an impressive-looking footnote that indeed lives up to the author’s scarifying description, but

it's not going to be all that much use to those most likely to consult these translations in the first place: the Greekless readers at whom the book is aimed.

Here it is worth remarking that there is, in fact, a footnote that much more straightforwardly acknowledges the problems with Boswell's organization of the manuscript. In it, the author articulates very clearly the twinned possibilities that this [i.e., the *apolusis* concluding part IV] is the closing rubric of this ceremony and that therefore "the following prayer is separate." But this note, oddly enough, is appended to the *Greek* text, and hence occurs in a section destined to remain safely outside the general reader's field of vision.



The convenient cutting-and-pasting and the self-serving deployment of notes vis-à-vis text that you get in the case of the Grottaferrata manuscripts are the most egregious examples of an unfortunate tendency on the author's part to prefer (and proffer) the tendentious, when the judicious is what's called for. Perhaps because they are less easy to manhandle without attracting attention, his discussion of his Greek and Roman sources often resorts to subtler tactics in order to alchemize the arcane, technical dross of *adelphopoiêsis* into the political gold of gay marriage. These come under the rubric of evidentiary abuses, and they pervade his discussion of classical material.

Boswell's idiosyncratic interpretation of the *adelphopoiêsis* ceremony as an open, sanctioned rite of "gay marriage" depends on two lines of argument. First, he wants to demonstrate that the *adelphos* in *adelphopoiêsis* would have been most naturally understood figuratively, as "lover," rather than literally, as "brother." (This is indeed one possible sense of the word in certain contexts.) And to bolster this claim, he needs to show that the kind of homosexual relationship allegedly celebrated in the *adelphopoiêsis*—i.e., a loving, reciprocal, socially accepted affective bond—was in fact part of a long-standing tradition in Mediterranean culture dating back to classical Greece, rather than being some kind of aberrant blip on the socioerotic screen of late antique and early medi-

eval culture. This is why the first third of Boswell's book is devoted to detailed discussions of both erotic vocabulary and erotic institutions; without them, his argument crashes and burns.

When all is said and done, however, it is on the brother/lover ambivalence that Boswell's thesis depends. After all, if the official title of the ceremony were something with less potential for ambiguity—the *symmakhopoiêsis* (“creation of military allies”), say, or for that matter the *kinaidopoiêsis* (“creation of sissies”)—there would hardly be any need for lengthy interpretive exegeses in the first place. And in his first chapter, “The Vocabulary of Love and Marriage,” Boswell laudably sets the interpretive stage by calling attention to the dangers inherent in walking the “excruciatingly fine line” between “providing too much or too little specificity” in translating ancient words and concepts.

But the discussion that follows seems intended to muddy the lexical waters precisely so that his own slippery readings will appear no more or no less approximate than any other in a semantic field that he constantly portrays as being hopelessly prone to inexactitude. “Many ancient and modern tongues,” he writes, “fail to distinguish in any neat way between ‘friend’ and ‘lover.’” “Fail” here is sly. What clarifies the differences between literal and figurative usages is, of course, context: but throughout *Same-Sex Unions*, the only context that Boswell recognizes is a homoerotic one. His repeated suggestions that our classical sources are characterized by a pervasive inability to sort the literal from the figurative merely serve to justify his own unwillingness to distinguish between “brother” and “lover.”

Boswell's sometimes willful indifference to context becomes apparent when he attempts to bolster his claim about lexical confusion by using the example of the classical Greek word *hetairos*. According to conventional scholarship, the masculine form of this noun denotes “companion”; by classical times, however, the feminine form seems to have assumed the almost exclusively figurative meaning of “courtesan.” To those who accept that Greek society was characterized by strict separation of the sexes, this etymological evolution makes sense: the only women who would have been available to mix freely with men as their “companions” would have been prostitutes. But not for Boswell, who hints that this traditional construction of the word is an instance of homophobia on the part of a repressive scholarly tradition:

For classical Greek, for example, it is conventional (especially in societies marked by extreme antipathy to homosexual feelings and behavior) to render [*hetairos*] as “companion” and [*hetaira*] as “courtesan” or “lover,” although the basic meanings of the two words are the same, and there is every reason to believe (especially about classical Athens) that there was little distinction in the nature of the relationships in the two cases. (p. 4)

Everything in this paragraph that follows the word “although”—which is to say, the part that is characteristic of Boswell’s readings throughout his book—is mere assertion. (And rhetorically speaking, that first parenthetical aside amounts to little more than coercion.) The basic meaning of the English word *bottom* is “the underside of something,” but that won’t get you very far if you hear your gay friend wondering whether that cute guy he met at the gym is a “bottom”—that is, gay slang for someone who tends to be the passive, receptive partner during intercourse. The great weight of our evidence indicates that there is in fact very *little* reason to believe that we should eroticize masculine *hetairos* on analogy with *hetaira* (or de-eroticize *hetaira*, for that matter); the nature of the two relationships to which Boswell here alludes was quite different. Classical Greek has perfectly good words to describe male homosexuals as erotic subjects (*erastês*, *erômenos*, *paidika*, etc.) and does not need to resort to code words like *hetairos*. But you can’t tell any of this to Boswell, because he’s too busy spotting same-sex eros lurking behind every linguistic palm. Indeed, you’d never guess from his remarks here that according to more conventional scholarship, a clearly erotic sense of the masculine *hetairos* occurs only twice in the entire classical Greek corpus. But then, why *would* you, a well-intentioned and liberal-minded reader, want to guess as much—and in so doing reveal your “extreme antipathy to homosexual feelings”?

Boswell then goes on to declare that the semantic slippage that is “most significant” for his own argument is “the use of sibling designations for romantic partners, of either gender.” Characteristically, he begins by offering a flawed English analogy for this alleged confusion. “‘Brother’ and ‘brotherhood,’ ” he remarks, “have often had sexual or romantic overtones in modern English during the last two centuries.” Whose modern English? Boswell’s examples are hardly

representative: he cites lyrics of Walt Whitman and Elton John (in the pop song “Daniel”). More questionably still, the author then goes on to intimate that “brother” does in fact mean “sexual partner” in the argot of today’s gay community. This is simply wrong, and grossly misleading. Gay men do not use “brother” to mean “lover.” The author’s so-called evidence for such usage is wrenched from a quite specific context—the personal ads in popular gay publications—where “younger brother” or “kid brother” typically refer to specific physical (and occasionally psychological) types. But it’s ludicrous to suggest that these are synonymous with “sexual partner” in everyday speech among gay men. They’re not—or at least, no more than “redheaded professional” or “cuddly, overeducated mensch” are among straights.

Boswell’s analogies from English are, therefore, hardly cogent—unfortunately, the one respect in which they do in fact parallel his arguments about other languages. But they do get him to the bottom of the slippery slope that ends in his assertion “that the nouns most commonly translated from Greek (ἀδελφός), Latin (*frater*), or Slavic (брат) are similar”—i.e., similarly ambiguous with respect to potential erotic overtones. Indeed, it’s somehow appropriate that when the author concludes that the supposedly erotic connotations of English “brother” in the gay subculture are “closely related to the imperial Latin usage of the word ‘brother,’ ” it turns out that his evidence for the erotic potential of the Latin, *frater*, comes from literary or lyric sources as stylized in their way as is the Whitman and Elton John material.

For this discussion, Boswell depends primarily on Petronius’s *Satyricon*. Citing Circe’s attempted seduction of Encolpius at *Satyricon* 127 (“You’ve clearly got a ‘brother’—I wasn’t too bashful to ask, you see—so what’s to stop you from ‘adopting’ a ‘sister’ as well?”), he asserts on the basis of this that *frater* is “manifestly . . . a technical term for long-standing homosexual partner” in Roman culture (67). This passage, he says, “implies” that *frater* was “widely understood in the Roman world to denote a permanent partner in a homosexual relationship.” Although the author of *Same-Sex Unions* goes out of his way to admire Petronius’s “sharp ear for quotidian speech,” he neglects to indicate how precarious it might be to base far-ranging claims about popular Roman mores and argot on a single line from a work whose author (Nero’s *arbiter elegantiarum*, for Heaven’s sake) belonged to the rarified Roman *beau monde*.

The nonliterary evidence for Boswell's claim that the words *brother* and *sister* were "common terms of endearment for heterosexual spouses in ancient Mediterranean societies" turns out to be equally problematic. To support his point about the eroticization of sibling terminology in Roman poetry, Boswell cites papyri from Hellenistic Egypt. But the very ancient cultural traditions of brother-sister incest make the use of Egyptian material problematic, to say the least, especially as the basis for sweeping statements about the "ancient Mediterranean." Indeed, when the author cites the historian Keith Hopkins on the prevalence of *sister* as a term of endearment used by Egyptian husbands of their wives, he fails to mention that the thrust of Hopkins's article is that there was in fact real sibling incest going on in Roman Egypt, perhaps because this information might weaken the force of Boswell's own linguistic interpretations, which forever shun the literal in favor of the figurative. This is not to say that Hopkins is necessarily right (or wrong); the debate about sibling incest in Greco-Roman Egypt is an ongoing and fierce one. But it's a typical omission on Boswell's part. (Indeed, he often allows bibliographical trees to obscure the argumentative forest. For example, he cites snippets of Susan Treggiari's thoroughgoing study of Roman marriage, but you'd never guess from them that her overarching conclusion is that mutual affect and the procreation of offspring were vital elements of that institution, which Boswell insists on portraying as a mere "property arrangement.")

Ah well. Why quibble over secondary sources like Hopkins and Treggiari when you can support your claims about Latin usage in the first century A.D. with a footnote about the Old Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, composed two thousand years earlier? This Boswell does—just one example of the astonishing methodological free association that continually mars this book. In this scholar's approach to world literature, pretty much everything turns out to be about same-sex unions, and he's hardly shy about sharing that insight with you. For Boswell, the phrase *ambo fratres* ("both brothers"), as used by the theologian Tertullian at the end of the second century A.D., is "strongly reminiscent" of the phrase *fortunati ambo* ("fortunate pair!"), used by the pagan Vergil to describe the lovers Nisus and Euryalus in Book 9 of the *Aeneid*, written two hundred years earlier, because each contain the Latin word *ambo*, "both." This is the kind of thing that gives pedantry a bad name;

you may as well say that Tertullian's *fratres* are the literary antecedents of the eponymous sibling in the American pop tune "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother," simply because both are about brothers. But then, why bother, when Boswell himself goes on to suggest as much? This isn't scholarship, it's Rorschach. Blotches like that one turn up on too many of *Same-Sex Unions's* pages.

As you sputter through Boswell's attempts to demonstrate that *frater* was essentially interchangeable with *amator* for the early Christian clerics who first concocted the same-sex unions, you can't help thinking that, even if he's right about all the *frater* stuff, it's still a pretty oblique line of argument. The oldest manuscripts in which the *adelphopoiësis* is transmitted were written in Greek by Greek speakers; the later Latin and Old Church Slavonic versions are merely translations. (Boswell is right to omit them from his appendices here.) I suppose that Boswell's inclusion of the *frater* stuff is meant to establish a context of pervasive brother/lover confusion throughout the ancient Mediterranean, but what he really needs is incontrovertible evidence for extensive and commonplace use of the Greek word *adelphos* to mean "lover"—and in everyday, rather than highly specialized, contexts. Come to think of it, even that may not be enough. The assumption that allows Boswell's conclusion to be properly drawn is that the word *adelphos* would have *superseded* any other word for "lover" in the minds of the Greek speakers who first wrote down the *adelphopoiësis* ceremony. But Boswell can't, in fact, reliably demonstrate this, and so all of the carefully rigged dissertations about the erotic, figurative potential of *frater* and *soror* turn out to be window dressing.

Here again, it's worth noting that Boswell suppresses a pesky bit of information by sticking it in a thicket of thorny notes. There, he observes that postclassical Greek *adelphos* lacked a clearly erotic sense, which in fact had to be supplied by the transliterated Latin *frater* (in a special poetic sense, as his example from the *Greek Anthology* indicates). If it is "inescapably" clear that *adelphos* would have been widely understood as meaning "lover" to those who invented and later transcribed the *adelphopoiësis* ceremony (as Boswell goes on to claim), then why the need to borrow from Latin?

This contortion of the Greek and Latin tongues turns out to be only the first storey, as it were, of a wobbly argumentative structure. Here is its blueprint:

The ceremony discussed [i.e., *adelphopoiêsis*] is titled and uses phrases that could be translated “become brothers,” or “make brotherhood” . . . and one approach would be to render them this way, “literally.” But if, as seems inescapably clear . . . the meanings of the nouns to contemporaries were “lover,” and “form an erotic union,” respectively, then “brother” and “make brothers” are seriously misleading and inaccurate translations for English readers. (p. 19)

Note again the slippery rhetorical slope: the denigration of any nonerotic sense of *adelphos* to a “literalness” that the author has taken considerable pains to show is insufficient; the tendentious aside about the “inescapable” truth of what are, in fact, merely his own premises; the logically flawed progress by which a potential connotation becomes, finally, always and absolutely denotative.

Boswell’s discussion of the language and diction of “same-sex” *eros* is meant to be grounded in a far-reaching demonstration that the social context for the equation Brother=Lover was a venerated tradition of institutionalized homosexual unions in Greek and Roman culture. It is from this cultural source, he argues, that *adelphopoiêsis* flowed—the liturgical celebration of a reciprocal, mutual affect between loving male couples that was first publicly celebrated in pagan antiquity.

In the case of Greece, this argument must necessarily take the form of debunking what has become the prevailing view that male homosexual relationships in Greece were structured according to a clear-cut hierarchical distinction between the attitude of the lover, or *erastês*, and that of his younger beloved, the *erômenos* or, more colloquially, *paidika*. Now it is surely true, as Boswell and others (such as John Winkler and Kenneth De Vries) have argued, that the strict hierarchization of Eros in classical culture, like other Greek social institutions such as the seclusion of women, was likely to have been more “rhetorical” than both ancient accounts and modern interpretations of them often give credit for. But Boswell’s own discussion of relevant texts hardly justifies his impatient dismissal of what he calls the “arch, stylized, and misleading view of Greek homosexuality” advanced by many contemporary scholars,

as a “shallow misreading of ‘popular’ literature.” Hence, for example, the fact that even the ancients were unsure as to whether Achilles or Patroclus was the *erastês* in that particular relationship does not necessarily support the author’s claim that “it is probably wrong to imagine that ‘lover’ and ‘beloved’ were clearly defined positions or roles.” You could just as well argue that the fact that ancient writers were willing to devote time and energy to pondering this question suggests that such roles were in fact institutionalized—to the extent that who was on top was something worth knowing in the first place.

Boswell tends to support his assertions about Greek cultural institutions with references to important (if often unrepresentative) texts that are, as often as not, given without their proper context. Hence, for example, his liberal and rather sentimental use of the *Symposium*, which according to him provides a clear demonstration that Greek same-sex love was as completely reciprocal as the (alleged) medieval same-sex unions that were (he alleges) its cultural descendants. The proof, he argues, is in the fact that in this work, both *eros* and *philia*, “desire” (erotic) and “friendship” (unerotic), could be used to describe a single relationship:

In describing one of the most famous same-sex couples of the ancient world—Harmodius and Aristogeiton, whose enduring and exclusive love was thought to have brought about the institution of Attic democracy—he [Plato] uses both [*erôs*] and [*philia*] (182C). (p. 78, n. 122)

He then goes on to translate a line of the *Symposium* that refers to Aristogeiton’s *eros* and Harmodius’s *philia*; and elsewhere reiterates the fact that Plato used within a single sentence both *eros* and *philia* for the same relationship as proof that the two words were synonymous. But his subsequent acknowledgment (relegated to a footnote) that “the phrasing could be taken to suggest that the two men had quite different sorts of feelings for each other”—i.e., Aristogeiton felt *eros*, erotic desire, whereas Harmodius felt *philia*, nonerotic affection—gives little indication of the extent to which the passage he cites here could, in fact, be construed as ideal support for the “arch, stylized, and misleading” view of Greek homosexuality that he elsewhere denigrates. The

Athenian tradition was that Aristogeiton was the *erastês* of Harmodius: so Thucydides, in his account of the tyrannicides' plot (6.54). Aristogeiton's *eros* is thus hardly interchangeable with Harmodius's *philia* in an affective dynamic characterized by a perfect reciprocity of loving friendship, as Boswell would have it. If anything, each of the emotions described in this passage conforms with great precision to the Greek schematization of homosexual affect described by Dover in his edition of the *Symposium*: "The more mature male, motivated by *eros*, pursues, and the younger, if he yields, is motivated by affection, gratitude and admiration" (Dover, p. 4).

I should add that throughout his discussion of the *Symposium* and other texts, Boswell neglects to consider any potential interpretive ramifications of speaker and context—for example, that there might be a grain of self-interest in the opinions expressed by the *erastês* Pausanias, or by the comic poet Aristophanes, in *Symposium*. Here as elsewhere, he merely cites a given passage as an example of "what Plato thinks," regardless of speaker or of dramatic, philosophical, or ideological context. Given that Plato's discourse about love retains considerable cultural authority not merely in the West in general but, perhaps more important for many readers of *Same-Sex Unions*, in gay culture particularly, this is careless.

But the selective and ultimately self-interested nature of Boswell's use of classical sources is most apparent in his discussion of what he asserts was a tradition of "formal [homosexual] unions" in ancient Rome. These, he declares, were "publicly recognized relationships entailing some change in status for one or both parties, comparable in this sense to heterosexual marriage"; he goes on to make the claim that such relationships occasionally used "the customs and forms of heterosexual marriage."

Incredibly, the sole piece of evidence adduced in favor of this outrageous claim consists of a satiric epigram of the first-century A.D. satirist Martial, in which the writer describes a male-male "wedding" (12.42). "Such unions," the author of *Same-Sex Unions* asserts, "were not always private." That "always" is a good demonstration of a typically Boswellian one-two argumentative punch: the slippery slope followed by begging the question. For "always" slyly alchemizes a single (alleged) instance into a widespread social practice; and in making this highly

tendentious insinuation (that private wedding ceremonies between men in fact *regularly* took place) the premise for an even broader conclusion (i.e., that such unions were in fact often *public*), Boswell is, in effect, assuming what he needs to prove.

This questionable reasoning is buttressed by some rather casual methodology. Boswell's discussion of what he insists were formal public marriages between men in ancient Rome treats Martial's verses (and, later, Juvenal's) as if they were straight reportage rather than acidic satire; once again, he rips literary evidence out of its proper generic and historical context in order to score his same-sex points. You'd never guess that Martial ran with, and wrote for, a café society crowd with whom John Q. Roman is unlikely to have hobnobbed. Not for the first time, Boswell here makes a methodological error that J. P. Sullivan, in an article that Boswell himself, oddly enough, cites, succinctly characterized: "We cannot easily distinguish," Sullivan wrote, "in Martial or his audience, between what is reality, i.e., common sexual facts or practices, and what is desired or feared, sometimes even repressed. . . ." In order to realize one particular fantasy of happily-ever-after, boy-boy weddings in ancient Rome, Boswell keeps adducing supporting material that is highly unrepresentative.

Most questionable of all, perhaps, is the historical evidence used to demonstrate that gay marriage ceremonies weren't "always" private: an account of a feast at which Nero married a freedman eunuch called, delightfully, Pythagoras. Here as always, the author provides an impressive-looking footnote: Suetonius, Dio Cassius, and especially Tacitus are all cited ("generally a very reliable source," Boswell approvingly notes of the last). But you can't help wondering why, if Tacitus is so reliable, Boswell doesn't quote the historian's introduction to this narrative—the bit where Tacitus disapprovingly recalls Nero's feast as a prime example of the excess and depravity (*luxus, prodigientia*) of the decadent imperial court. Using Nero's sozzled antics as evidence for the assertion that marriage ceremonies between gay Roman men were regularly and publicly held is intellectually dishonest and philologically irresponsible. It's like relying on *Town and Country's* coverage of Truman Capote's 1966 Black and White Ball as the basis for generalizations about the lives of gay white men before

Stonewall. This stuff wouldn't pass in an undergraduate paper, and it shouldn't have passed here.

Such are the bases for Boswell's claims about the classical background for *adelphopoiêsis*. It is unfortunate that this inadequate discussion of classical material turns out to be a rich preparation for what follows; for in treating the ceremonies themselves in their medieval context, the author of *Same-Sex Unions* merely reiterates the skewed linguistic and cultural analyses that are by now all too familiar. In his discussion of premodern Christian Europe, the author again insists on a pervasive failure to distinguish between the literal and the figurative—in this case, between “the chaste, charitable sense in which all Christians addressed each other as siblings, and the erotic, marital sense” (134). But his evidence for the claim that “the conjugal implications of the words in question, *frater* and *soror*, ‘brother’ and ‘sister,’ were not absent” from liturgical contexts turns out to be little more than idiosyncratic readings that once again beg rather than answer the important questions.

To support his point about sibling vocabulary, for example, the author cites Justinian's *Novel 133.3*, a rule prohibiting women from entering male religious space “even if he should call himself her brother, or she his sister” (*nec si quis forte frater esse dicatur, aut soror*) (135). For Boswell this rule demonstrates that “even in this ecclesiastical context, the phrase [*sic*] ‘sister’ . . . suggested distinct disapproval” (135)—disapproval, presumably, because of what Boswell alleges are the word's inevitably conjugal and erotic implications. Yet the phrasing of the rule surely derives its force from an assumption of a wholly *nonerotic* sense of *frater* and *soror* (whether literal or, as is here more likely, in the figurative sense applied to the inhabitants of monastic communities): the sense seems clearly to be that the woman is to be prevented from entering “even if she claims to be *merely* a sister, or he claims to be *merely* a brother”: for the author of this rule, the sibling terms were unequivocally innocent words that might successfully provide a cover for not-so-innocent goings on. Only a fairly deaf interpretive ear could take evidence such as this to support the extraordinary claim that “the countererotic”—which is of course to say *literal*—“sense of ‘brother’ was largely unknown in the premodern Christian world, because *all*

relationships were expected to be chaste in the sense of subordinating desire to responsibility” (24). This is a bit like saying that the literal sense of the word “brother” is unknown in urban African-American communities today, because young black men often refer to one another as “brother.” Context is everything.

Boswell then proceeds to an oddly insubstantial treatment of the late antique and early medieval sociosexual context for his *adelphopoiêsis* ceremonies. This discussion is as wobbly as his discussion of homoerotic relationships in the classical period. When he provides a detailed description of early Christian ambivalence about sexuality in marriage, it is only to promote a portrait of marriage in the Middle Ages as being largely unconcerned with procreation—an arch, stylized, and misleading model if ever there was one. And all this serves to justify yet another careless tumble down the logical slope: he argues that because celibacy was endorsed by the Church in a way that was unthinkable in classical times (and his evidence for classical attitudes about celibacy is a note remarking that the number of vestal virgins was low), then it stands to reason that nonprocreative—and hence eventually same-sex—unions would have been endorsed with equal vigor:

Given what has already been adduced about the veneration of same-sex pairs (especially military saints) in the early church, and a corresponding ambivalence about heterosexual matrimony, it is hardly surprising that there should have been a Christian ceremony solemnizing same-sex unions. (p. 180f.)

What, you may ask, has already been adduced about the veneration of same-sex pairs? Little more than Boswell’s own hints that the early Christian martyrs Saints Serge and Bacchus were . . . *comme ça*. And how do we know? Well, they call each other “brother,” and by now we all know what *that* means. (The circularity of Boswell’s argumentation here leaves you a bit dizzy.) Then there’s the fact that the parading of the pair through the streets “recalls,” as Boswell puts it, one of the penalties for homosexual acts—although one that even Boswell admits postdated the historical date of the saints’ martyrdom (and which, moreover, was not unique to those being punished for sodomy). Finally, the Greek word used in the account of their martyrdom to de-

scribe their affection for each other, *syndesmos* or “bond,” is also used in the New Testament in the phrase *syndesmos adikias*, “bond of iniquity” (i.e., sodomy). Boswell exclaims over what he sees as the “fascinating association” between these two instances of *syndesmos*, but for his readers it’s merely another example of the author’s penchant for free association—a demonstration of the “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother” variety. Such is the evidence that Boswell keeps “adducing”; but more often than not, it’s induction rather than adduction.

The author’s refusal to acknowledge the validity of any interpretive or sociological contexts other than homoerotic ones results in the addition of a third argumentative fallacy to his repertoire: the straw man. Ignoring the ritualized-friendship tradition, he addresses himself to demolishing what he calls the “least controversial” interpretation of the ceremony, i.e., that it was an ecclesiastical formalization of some kind of “spiritual fraternity.” But of course the “least controversial” interpretation is the one scholars have advanced for over a century: that the *adelphopoiësis* was created to solemnify alliances between heads of households or to formalize reconciliations between mutually distrustful members of opposing clans. (As the historian Brent Shaw pointed out in his negative *New Republic* review of Boswell’s book, the ceremony’s emphasis on the right to asylum and safe conduct surely supports such an interpretation.) Here as so often, Boswell ignores the evidence that doesn’t suit him. Instead, he brandishes his famous erudition and plunges it deep into the heart of . . . a straw man.

The straw man isn’t the only fantastical creature you’re liable to run across as you travel down the twisty argumentative road leading to Boswell’s conclusion that the *adelphopoiësis* was a medieval gay wedding service. It’s a journey filled with scary-looking beasts: philological lions and methodological tigers and plain old logical bears. And at the end of the road is the wizard himself. But even as his smoke-wreathed illusions of church-sanctioned gay marriages materialize before his awestruck readers’ eyes, you realize that he’s working the controls furiously, way down there in the footnotes where no one can see him. He’s the man behind the curtain. Unfortunately, given the explosive political potential of this particular scholarly conjuring act, the author’s introductory admonition to ignore the methods by which he achieves his impressive-looking results is deeply troubling, to say the least. “Pay no attention

to the man behind the curtain!" he may cry; but if you look closely enough, you realize you're being conned.

How could this have happened?

At the time of his death a few months after *Same-Sex Unions* first appeared, Boswell had secured the highest honors attainable in the academy: author of several learned tomes, A. Whitney Griswold Professor of History at Yale, chairman of his department—the university's largest, as he himself reminds us in his Preface. These are very distinguished credentials. How could the scholar who earned them have produced a work characterized by such obvious and egregious flaws? On first examination, pretty much any explanatory road you take leads to an unpleasant destination. Either you know that Nero's wedding wasn't a shindig typical of Roman social life but you cite it anyway, thereby violating what you, as a trained historian, surely know to be the standards for scholarly use of historical evidence; or you *don't* know that Nero's shenanigans were atypical, which is of course just as bad if you happen to be writing a book that is largely based on evidence from ancient Rome. There's just no way out.

Yet *Same-Sex Unions* owes its failure to a deeper and more disturbing lapse, one that brings us back to our Wildean allegory about the dangers of forsaking philology for fame. For it was clearly the latter that seduced Boswell away from the former; to his credit he did not yield his virtue easily. Despite its frequent recourse to the dubious tactics I have already described, *Same-Sex Unions* occasionally bears witness to a troubled scholarly conscience. "It is not the province of the historian to direct the actions of future human beings," Boswell rightly observes in closing, "but only to reflect accurately on those of the past" (281). But this observation is accompanied by a more typical tendentiousness, as when, a few lines earlier, the historian refers to his thesis as "historical facts" whose "social, moral, and political significance is arguable, but considerable." Arguable but considerable? Such uneasy juxtapositions bespeak a conflict that is surely understandable in a scholar who was at once a gay man and a devout Catholic. How could he not have wished to find the philologue's equivalent of the magic potion, an authentic text that would effortlessly reconcile those two ostensibly incompatible as-

pects of his own identity—that would, as he himself put it, allow people to “incorporate [homosexual desire] into a Christian life-style”? It is indeed possible to see *Same-Sex Unions*, along with its predecessor, as the professional expression of what was surely a fervent personal wish.

But this is precisely the problem. The failure of Boswell’s book on so many intellectual and scholarly grounds forces us to question the extent to which the standards of scholarship can comfortably accommodate the exigencies of a private—or political—vision. In the case of *Same-Sex Unions*, this question is especially critical because the tensions between scholarly standards and personal goals become exacerbated when the latter happen to serve the interest of a much larger political agenda shared by millions who, unlike the professional scholar, are unlikely to feel burdened by the exacting standards of a “particular expertise.” Unfortunately, this audience is likely to attach as much importance to, say, Boswell’s prefatory announcement that many of his close friends died of AIDS, as to his less rhetorical utterances about material that is actually relevant to his argument.

Indeed, it is Boswell’s attempt to go over the heads of expert readers that makes it that much more difficult to justify his work. In a heated attack on Brent Shaw and his negative appraisal of *Same-Sex Unions*, the classicist Ralph Hexter argued that it was inappropriate for Shaw to pass judgment on certain of Boswell’s arguments in the first place. Shaw, he declared, is neither an expert on early Christian liturgy nor on matters medieval, as was Boswell; Shaw’s knowledge of Greek, he went on—all-important for an evaluation of Boswell’s critical linguistic claims—is bound to be rooted in classical rather than medieval training. This credential-checking was accompanied by a boastful reference to Boswell’s great linguistic expertise, even in such arcane tongues as Old Church Slavonic.

But Hexter’s attack on Shaw’s credentials inevitably leads you to question Boswell’s own credentials—the ones that actually matter, rather than the arcane fluencies that merely serve as rhetorical passementerie. For if you accept Hexter’s argument that Shaw’s discussion of late antiquity and the early Christian Church is handicapped by the fact that he was trained as a classicist rather than as a medievalist, then what do you do about Boswell himself—a medievalist who bases his radical claims on a lengthy discussion of classical culture, literature, sexual and social

institutions, and history? The extent of Boswell's methodological and interpretive errors in dealing with classical material makes it increasingly difficult, even for other gay scholars like myself, to dismiss doubts about his scholarship merely as instances of "institutional homophobia."

Much more significant is the way that Hexter's backfired defense provides the basis for an even broader and unfortunately more devastating critique of Boswell's book. For if Shaw's alleged lack of expertise in medieval matters makes him unfit to judge Boswell's book, how on earth are Boswell's intended nonspecialist readers supposed to judge Boswell's book? The answer is that they can't, and the results have been depressingly predictable across the board.

Some examples. In an admiring 1994 "Talk of the Town" piece commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, a gay *New Yorker* editor staunchly defended Boswell, lavishly praising his "erudition," "scholarly acumen," and "linguistic dexterity." (This last was followed by a suitably awed reference to Old Church Slavonic.) In a letter protesting a brief and critical review of the book that I contributed to the gay monthly *OUT*, a reader duly described himself as being "awed by the extensive erudition of the still youthful John Boswell." But awe does not make for critical readers—something Boswell knew, and something borne out in my correspondent's closing remark. "Boswell's text admittedly is heavy with copious footnotes," he went on, "[but] the author stated [that] readers can skip the technical footnotes included for others." (But as we have seen, Boswell often hides the potential objections to his arguments in those very footnotes.) And then there's the Washington, D.C., gay couple who, inspired by *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, were married using the *adelphopoiësis* ceremony. You can only be thankful that Boswell chose not to write about human sacrifice.

You can't blame these people, of course. Between the rhetorical sleight of hand and the august-looking footnotes, how could they *not* be duped? As depressing as these uncritical endorsements of Boswell's thesis may be, they do serve to demonstrate the effectiveness of his approach. And they make it clear that, until the audience for the classics journal *Dioniso* outnumbers the audience for *Doonesbury*, tendentious attempts to mainstream complex and technical material in a way that produces such results must remain a questionable strategy.

Less easy to excuse than the deluded D.C. duo (who, for all we know, have unwittingly pledged to be well-behaved clan leaders, till death them do part), is the endorsement of Boswell's book by people who should in fact know better. There is little point getting flustered by heated opposition to and feverish denunciations of Boswell's book from right-wing political and religious groups, who clearly have a vested interest in resisting his thesis. But what does invite concern is the readiness with which some scholars and journalists of a more liberal temperament have knowingly suppressed discussion of the work's intellectual failings in order to promote what they see as its broader political agenda. Or, in the case of Boswell's publisher, to promote sales of a controversial book about a "hot" topic. (It's interesting to wonder why *Same-Sex Unions* wasn't brought out by an academic press: and whatever the answer to that question may be, it's not an appealing one.)

An example. To review Boswell's book, *The Nation* found a gay graduate student in comparative literature who readily acknowledged to me, when I contacted him about his review, that he is "not an expert at all in any of the fields that Boswell is." What appears to have won him the assignment was, instead, his journalistic expertise in writing about "sexuality and cultural politics." (Small wonder that his review gratefully acknowledges Boswell's inclusion of the Appendix of Translations: "general readers won't have to worry about brushing up on"—what else?—"their Old Church Slavonic.") Yet even with this stacked critical deck, *The Nation* couldn't necessarily produce a winning hand for Boswell. "My review really didn't reflect how critical I was of the book," the reviewer told me. But you'd never guess as much from the finished review; it's a rave. *The Nation's* respectful review reflects its writer's conviction that Boswell's book should be defended from the "slanted treatment" he felt it was receiving in the popular press. If abandoning your intellectual standards to advance a political agenda isn't slanted, it would be nice to know what is. But then, that's what *Same-Sex Unions* is all about.

In the era of the culture wars, the politicization of scholarship by both left and right is hardly news. But the failure thus far on the part of liberal and, especially, gay intellectuals to respond with an appropriately

vigorous and public skepticism to Boswell's questionable methods and tendentious conclusions is, I think, particularly distressing—not least because it leaves the liberals embarrassingly vulnerable. This silence is partly a matter of strategy—an interest in, say, promoting the work of once-silenced “marginal” voices such as those of openly gay intellectuals—but it is also a product of ideology: that is, a resistance to invoking certain standards of intellectual or aesthetic quality that is the legacy of a commitment to eradicate oppressive hierarchies and to demystify claims to authority.

It is one thing to acknowledge that we are all of us, scholars, critics, philosophers, implicated in the social, political, and historical contexts we inhabit; that realization has precipitated considerable soul-searching on the part of Boswell's fellow historians more than most. But it is entirely another matter to make this insight the basis for a wholesale abandonment of what one historian called the “noble dream”: a common standard of methodological and argumentative scrupulousness, if not actually some elusive “objectivity,” in historical, critical, and philological enquiry. Writing in 1934, Theodore Clarke Smith cautioned that

a growing number of writers discard impartiality on the ground that it is uninteresting, or contrary to social beliefs, or uninteresting, or inferior to a bold social philosophy.

It may be that another fifty years will see the end of an era in historiography, the final extinction of a noble dream, and history, save as an instrument of entertainment, or of social control will not be permitted to exist.

Although Smith was writing at a moment when egregious distortions of history for the purposes of “social control” were already being committed by both left and right, his chronological estimate was depressingly accurate. In their potential for wreaking far-ranging epistemological and methodological damage, the various fashionable “posts”—structuralism, modernism, whatever—have far exceeded anything Smith could have imagined, even in the era of Soviet jurisprudence or Nazi medicine.

This is precisely why the “noble dream” is even more indispensable for the left today than it is to right-wing intellectuals (who have successfully hijacked contemporary discussion of academic and aesthetic

standards). The overt politicization of science and scholarship in favor of a “bold social philosophy” has, as we know, always been a *totalitarian* project. Now more than ever, when much of what the left values is in danger, liberal thinkers have, if anything, an even greater investment in espousing the impartial forms and rigorous standards of logical and reasonable debate, rather than constructing jerry-built appeals to dubious authority in order to support some foregone ideological conclusion—or indeed merely to vent political frustrations. (“Conservative religious groups deserve to be riled,” one Boswell supporter wrote in response to my *OUT* review. “They have dominated Western culture and thought far too long.”)

All this is why Boswell’s defenders are as troubling as his book. In slavishly championing an ostensibly liberal (because gay-friendly) agenda—and in suppressing potentially contrarian voices—they have come to resemble their own ideological enemy. You keep hoping someone on the left will notice this and say something; but so far, the silence on the party line has been deafening.

The list of gifted and prolific *littérateurs* who have been torn between the desire for seriousness and the desire to make it is a long one. Oscar Wilde is on it; as it happens, our Roman satirist, Martial, is on it, too. Indeed, the Latin poet’s ill use at the hands of the author of *Same-Sex Unions* is not only representative of this particular book’s shortcomings but stands, perhaps, as a symbol of the risks involved when Philology flirts with Fame. To the former, it always looks like a harmless enough fling; but the latter is a great seducer. That much, at least, we can safely glean from the classical past. On learning of Martial’s death, a saddened friend summed up his career: *At non erunt aeterna quae scripsit: non erunt fortasse, ille tamen scripsit tamquam essent futura*. “You will say that his writings were not immortal,” Pliny wrote to Cornelius Priscus. “Perhaps they weren’t. But he wrote them as if they would be.”

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