"The Love that Dare Not Speak its Name"
Pederasty Through a Victorian Lens

Author: Katie Teeling

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Abstract:

Aspects of Greco-Roman culture have faced periods of romanticization throughout history, particularly in the Victorian era, in which popular social figures and authors shaped social practices from antiquity to counter Victorian ideals and to fit in with their view of the world, largely based on misunderstandings. One such victim was the ancient practice of pederasty, in which an older man would mentor a young boy, in order to prepare him to enter society and serve his state. To the Victorians, and author Oscar Wilde in particular, pederasty was conflated with homosexuality, and Ancient Greece and Rome labelled as homosexual utopias, as a result.

Ancient social practices and concepts that do not conform with contemporary thinking can occasionally be misrepresented by contemporary thinkers applying their own cultural values and understandings to those of the past. The result is a warped understanding and an imperfect picture of what life was like in antiquity. Such is the case for pederasty, an educational relationship through which older men guided young men into adulthood, focusing on intellectual and moral development. Two of the most well-known dialogues from antiquity, Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, emphasize the non-sexual nature of pederasty, with an emphasis on the importance of this relationship serving as intellectual and ethical guidance. In the Victorian era, however, figures like Oscar Wilde romanticized pederasty, seeing it through an extremely narrow view, largely based on select texts from specific time periods. As well, by focusing on spiritual and physical intimacy based on mutual reciprocity and physical beauty, pederasty was often conflated with homosexuality. Specifically, Wilde's 1888 fairy tale *The Happy Prince* highlights these differences by centering itself on sensual experiences. Wilde's understanding and subsequent portrayal of pederasty was shaped by his classical education, a need to challenge Victorian ideals, and the belief that the Greco-Roman world was a utopia for homosexuals. By comparing the importance of sex and reciprocity within pederastic relationships, and the role pederasty plays within society, in Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and Plato's the *Symposium* and Phaedrus, a clearer understanding is developed of how both the perceptions of and pederasty itself have changed throughout history, as well as how our own beliefs play a role.

Jennifer Larson describes pederasty as both an attraction for young men by older men, but also the sharing of societal beliefs through a mentorship.[1] Characterized as a "relationship between two unequal ... partners," pederasty served to prepare young boys for when they became citizens.[2] Over time, pederastic relationships evolved, both in what was expected of those within the relationships and the relationships themselves, a shift that is exemplified through the surviving art, poetry, and writing created throughout ancient history. As a result, how academics, researchers, and historians have come to understand pederasty largely depends on

[1] Jennifer Larson, "Pederasty and Male Homoerotic Relations," in *Greek and Roman Sexualities*, 2012, 107.
[2] Larson, "Pederasty and Male Homoerotic Relations," in Greek and Roman Sexualities, 2012, 108.

the sources they have consulted and chosen to study. Commonly, Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* have been labelled as gospel truths for how ancient Greeks approached and viewed sex, an issue labelled "a Problem in Greek Ethics" by Victorian classicist John Addington Symonds.[3] As well, many have acknowledged modern researchers' tendencies to view ancient concepts, belief systems, and social practices through the eyes of their own cultures and time periods, applying meaning and values applicable to their own lives, but not to the culture they are studying. In his article, "The Politics of Spartan Pederasty," Paul Cartledge points out that researchers view pederasty as synonymous with homosexuality, despite the fact that pederasty does not align with our modern view of homosexuality.[4] The same is true for classicists in the Victorian era, who were researching and studying ancient Greece during a heightened period of romanticization. Wilde—often regarded as one of the most famous classicists and proponents of the aesthetic movement—wrote several texts that include a homosexual "aesthete."[5]

In the Victorian era, there was no distinction between homosexuality and pederasty.[6] Instead, many Victorian writers believed that the sequence of loving a boy after teaching them was a "both intuitive and natural" progression.[7] Wood notes that famous writers of the time, including Symonds, advocated and assumed that love between two males "transcended age as well as gender taboos."[8]

Pederasty, as a result, was promoted as the "truest expression of the classical heritage" by both Symonds and Walter Pater, a professor of Classics and Philosophy at Oxford University, who would later teach and heavily influence Wilde.[9] Wilde and his academic compatriots viewed antiquity as a utopia where sexual and romantic relationships were not policed by the state. As a result, pederasty was heralded as a form of "spiritual procreation" that transcended heterosexual procreation. To Wilde, pederasty was not just about educating and mentoring a young boy. Instead, it was the culmination of love that arose out of "mutual enjoyment of philosophy and physical beauty" between the student and his teacher.[10] For example, *The Happy Prince*'s Swallow is initially in love with a "most beautiful Reed," whom he wants to love but eventually tires of, for she "has no conversation."[11] Although Reed is exceptionally beautiful, without conversation, their relationship is not fulfilling to the Swallow. However, when all of the Swallow's friends migrate to Africa, the Happy Prince's finery catches his eye, and their conversations about the world entice the Swallow to stay. Although the Swallow needs to migrate to Africa before the winter sets in, he stays with the Happy Prince. In this way, *The Happy Prince* "valorizes male-male friendship, impossible loves, and nobility that expresses itself by working against the grain of social expectation," writes Wood.[12] Mirrored in *The Happy Prince*, such themes glorify pederasty and emphasize sensual experiences and beauty. One such experience, heralded by Wilde and other aesthetes of the time as being a key part of pederasty, was physical intimacy and love, exchanged and reciprocated between the two partners of the pederastic relationship.

However, reciprocity is a feature of pederastic relationships that has not remained consistent. To Plato, for example, the older man or mentor received sexual gratification from the young man that was not reciprocated.[13] In a conventional Athenian pederastic relationship, the younger man was not expected or supposed to experience pleasure or desire, as the basis of the relationship was not sensuality or sexual gratification.[14] Contrary to the beliefs of Victorian scholars, for the ancient Greeks, sexuality was not considered to be a

[3] David M. Halperin, "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity," *Classical Antiquity 5*, no. 1 (April 1, 1986): 60–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/25010839, 61.
[4] Paul Cartledge, "The Politics of Spartan Pederasty," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 27 (1981): 17–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0068673500004296, 17.
[5] Naomi Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales," *Marvels & Tales* 16, no. 2 (2002): 156–70, https://doi.org/10.1353/mat.2002.0029, 157.
[6] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 157.
[7] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 158.
[8] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 158.
[9] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 158-159.
[10] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 158.
[11] Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales Wilde* (The Floating Press, 2008), 6.
[12] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 166-167.
[13] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 163.
[14] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 163.

defining trait or characteristic of pederasty.[15] Instead, pederastic relationships—and sexual relationships, more broadly—were based on power dynamics between two partners. In the ancient world, the defining distinction between two sexual partners was placed on those who had control over their body and those who did not.[16] The person who had control over their body thus controlled their partner's as well, making them the dominant partner within that sexual relationship.[17] Described as "a monopoly of eros," the youth was expected to fully submit to their partner through penetration.[18] Because penetration was a form of dominance, if the youth wanted to be honourable, they were not meant to find enjoyment or gratification in any capacity. In Plato's Phaedrus, for example, Socrates discusses how two lovers hold influence over each other's souls, both positively and negatively. If the dominant partner showed good faith and kindness to his lover, the submissive partner was expected to act in kind. In his speech, Socrates explains how the younger partner is "naturally friendly" toward his attendant, and allows him to enter "into his company."[19] This demonstrates the belief that, out of gratitude and affection alone, the younger man was expected to fully submit to his partners' advances. As well, the idea of reciprocity extended to the notion that no man penetrates and is penetrated at the same stage in his life. As a result, there were limitations placed on pederastic relationships to prevent both partners from receiving and giving "pleasure ... at the same time and to the same degree."[20] However, to Victorian advocates of pederasty, mutual satisfaction and benefit was necessary and vital, through sensual, spiritual, and physical means. Emulated by Wilde in both his writings and his life, reciprocity was a necessary feature of pederastic relationships, differentiating his beliefs from that of Plato and other writers in antiquity. According to Wood, Wilde sought out both "sexual and literary tributes from troops of ardent youths" in pursuit of mutual pleasure.[21] Wilde's pursuit of mutual pleasure marks the most striking difference between his version of pederasty and that of Plato.

In *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that the beloved receives "every attention as one equal to the gods."[22] According to Wood, Victorian writers interpreted this literally, believing that a pederastic relationship, if involving a sexual component, "raises the youth to the level of a god."[23] To Symonds, Pater, and Wilde, this was a model meant to be physically emulated. However, Plato staunchly believed that there should be no sexual relations within pederasty. Socrates adds that there is a shame in having sex with an erastes, or the older partner.[24] However, Plato does not outright condemn the presence or addition of sex in pederastic relationships. While describing the two lovers, Socrates says that they both feel a sense of love and yearning for each other, but that they "[think] it to be not love, but friendship."[25] However, in the *Symposium*—written five years later—Plato says that "loving young boys" should be illegal.[26] To Plato, these relationships are wasteful, since there is no telling what a boy's character "in both soul and body" will be when he reaches adulthood.[27] Plato did not take issue with two males having sex with each other, but with having sex in a dishonourable way. In antiquity, pederastic relationships required there to be a mentorship component, where the older partner taught the youth the skills and beliefs necessary to enter society. Because love and sex were not required, many philosophers—including Plato—felt that these could hinder the success of the pederastic relationship.

[15] Sandra Boehringer and Stefano Caciagli, "The Age of Love: Gender and Erotic Reciprocity in Archaic Greece," *Clio*, no. 42 (December 31, 2015): 25, https://doi.org/10.4000/cliowgh.1021.
[16] Boehringer and Caciagli, "The Age of Love: Gender and Erotic Reciprocity in Archaic Greece," 26.
[17] Boehringer and Caciagli, "The Age of Love: Gender and Erotic Reciprocity in Archaic Greece," 27.
[18] Halperin, "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity," *Classical Antiquity* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 1986): 66, https://doi.org/10.2307/25010839.
[19] Plato. *Phaedrus, in Lysis. Symposium. Phaedrus*, ed. and trans. Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, Loeb Classical Library 166 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 483, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL166/2022/volume.xml.
[20] Halperin, "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity," 65.
[21] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 160.
[22] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 441.
[23] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 158.
[24] Larson, "Pederasty and Male Homoerotic Relations," 118.
[25] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 445.
[26] Plato. *Symposium, in Lysis. Symposium*. Phaedrus, ed. and trans. Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, Loeb Classical Library 166 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 173, https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL166/2022/volume.xml.
[27] Plato, *Symposium*, 173.

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Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* are Socratic dialogues, meant to comment on philosophical and moral issues of the time. Wilde's children's literature was written in a similar way, meant to subtly convey Wilde's beliefs to his audience.[28] While Wilde maintained the mentorship component of pederastic relationships, *The Happy Prince* focuses on elements of love, adoration, and physical sensation, weaving in themes consistent with children's literature at the time. When Wilde was writing *The Happy Prince*, Victorian society was enamoured with childhood. Writers, artists, and philosophers romanticized adolescence, writing works encouraging children to stay away from adulthood as long as possible. As a result, these artists "produced a newly sensual romantic child through books directed toward children."[29] Wilde wrote literature that fulfilled the same purpose of classic pederasty—both sought to teach children

the values of the day. However, the values encouraged by Wilde were in direct violation of those held by society and mirrored in contemporary children's literature. Instead of showing children how to enter society and become model citizens, he wrote fairy tales that rejected societal values, and as a result, society altogether. At the time, fairy tales sought to teach children practical skills, like being rational, pious, and self-controlled—beliefs and ideals held up and taught through pederasty, and echoed throughout the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Instead, Wilde's literature encouraged children to reject adulthood, and embrace aspects of being a child that they would later lose, including playtime and "joyous anarchy." [30] The joyous anarchy perpetrated in his stories helped cement the exploration of forbidden objects of desire. To Wilde, these forbidden objects were other men and boys—things that society told him he could not have. As well, Wilde's stories and fairy tales end in destruction and devastation, a feature unique to his style of children's literature, since, at the time, fairy tales ended with happy endings. A hallmark of Wilde's writing is that tragedy befalls the main characters. In his fairy tales, however, these characters are typically those willing to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs. At the end of *The Happy Prince*, the Swallow realizes that he has stayed too long, but that he "would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well." He asks the Happy Prince if he can kiss him on the hand as a final goodbye. In response, the Happy Prince asks the Swallow to kiss him on the lips, because the love they both feel is so strong. As the Swallow kisses the Prince, he dies, falling to the Prince's feet. Simultaneously, the Happy Prince's "leaden heart [snaps] right in two." When Mayor walks past the Happy Prince the next day, he is disgusted by how "shabby" the Prince looks, and orders the statue to be melted down and re-used elsewhere. When they melt the statue, the Prince's heart refuses to disintegrate, so it is thrown in the garbage alongside the Swallow's body. This demonstrates the hard contrast between the adults and the Happy Prince, and what they value most—wealth or love. Wood writes that the "resonant characters are those who love and are willing to cut short their own lives and possibilities to remain true to that love." Wilde hoped to encourage children to maintain their adolescence and continue to move through life with a child's perspective, while simultaneously empowering them to be willing to sacrifice themselves for the forbidden things they desire. Wilde tells his readers that the goal of life is sensory experience, not morality—a key difference between his writing, and that of both his modern and ancient counterparts. Wilde embodied these beliefs in both his texts and his life, living as an ardent supporter of a forbidden act, and ultimately glorifying pederasty as a result. The inclusion of pederasty in his literature served as critique of society regulating the relationships that meant the most to him. However, this understanding fails to consider that Plato and other ancient writers upheld pederasty as a means to control and regulate incoming and current members of society.

Wilde's understanding and portrayal of pederasty was based on a combination of misunderstandings and romanticizations of ancient Greek culture, and the application of said misunderstandings into his own life, contemporary culture, and literary works. The result is a skewed depiction of pederasty that seeks to honour the ancient practice, while displaying a far-removed version that has more differences than similarities. By comparing Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and Plato's *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, focusing on key elements such as reciprocity, sex, and the purpose of these works, we can begin to understand why such a practice has evolved so frequently, both in actuality and in its portrayal in literature. As well, a clearer picture can be drawn as to how contemporary values can influence our study and understanding of ancient cultures.

[28] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 161.
[29] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 159.
[30] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 159.
[31] Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales Wilde* (The Floating Press, 2008), 18.
[32] Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales Wilde* (The Floating Press, 2008), 19.
[33] Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales Wilde* (The Floating Press, 2008), 19.
[34] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 164.
[35] Wood, "Creating the Sensual Child," 163.

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