

FOREWORD

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IN RECENT YEARS, one of the most fruitful areas of inquiry into the life, thought, and culture of ancient Greece has been the study of that elusive figure-concept called Eros and the specific nature and extent of erotic experience. The Greeks themselves divinized carnal desire in the figure of Eros, attesting to the enduring power of this most essential of human instincts. For them, Eros, as configured in literature and art, in myth as in cult, in drama as in philosophy, is claimed to be universal, holding sway over all of nature, and to have irresistible appeal, even to the gods themselves. In most versions, he is the child of the goddess Aphrodite; in others, he arises with the first stirrings of creation; while in the famous, but idiosyncratic, myth attributed to Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, he is the child of Poros (Resources) and Penia (Poverty), by nature neither mortal nor immortal but always oscillating between a condition of plenitude (life) and loss (death). From the archaic period through the classical and Hellenistic ages and down to the end of antiquity, the Greeks never ceased their explorations into the physiology and psychology of desire. Recording endless and varying encounters with the power of Eros through storytelling, dramatic enactments, personal lyrics, visual imagery, and theoretical speculation, they also transmitted to the Western imagination the powerful idea that their version of a universal Eros was indeed universal.

In our contemporary climate of research, however, where mystery has yielded to demystification, universals have given way to historical specificities, and the claims of nature are ascribed rather to notions of cultural constructs, social institutions, and discursive practices that change and diversify over time, the investigation of Eros has taken a different turn. We look now to Eros as a historically and culturally conditioned set of rules, ideas, images, fantasies, norms, and practices. The emphasis falls on difference rather than on perceived affinities or continuity of influence. The Greeks are not "us," they are "other"; and Eros, above all, can serve as the ultimate proof of the conviction that every culture determines its own variety of meanings for "nature," its own shifting representations of the human body, its own perceptions of sex and gender, and above all, its own historical psychology and social expectations.

In this enterprise, Claude Calame's expertise is indisputable. In his two-volume study of choruses of girls in archaic Greece (*Les choeurs*

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de jeunes filles en Grèce archaïque), published a little more than twenty years ago (1977) and now available in English translation (1997), Calame produced a pioneering work in myth, cult, poetics, and social practices, which for the first time demonstrated the significance of feminine initiations into adulthood and revealed the fundamental significance of Eros in the acculturation of the young. This work became indispensable reading. He continued to take the lead in the field, both in a volume he edited in Italian, *L'Amore in Grecia* (1983, 4th ed. 1988), which further defined the parameters of inquiry, and even more, in numerous essays of his own which pertain in whole or in part to questions of ancient Greek sexual attitudes and concepts.

While a great deal of work has been produced on these topics in recent years, including the last two volumes of Foucault's investigation of the "history of sexuality," Calame's contribution to the subject of Eros in this small but authoritative book represents the sum of his thinking over a number of years. The voice is distinctive and it is magisterial. It bears the hallmarks of his unusual combination of skills that joins philological acumen with an anthropological point of view. The erudition is prodigious, in full control of primary sources, secondary literature, and theoretical issues. Yet in its selection and organization of a vast amount of disparate material into a lucid but complex whole, the book is easily accessible to any reader, both the specialist and non-specialist, at whatever level of guidance and information is desired.

Calame begins rightly with a semantic study of Eros as well as its mythic and cultural framework before setting out to look more historically at the differences between archaic and classical Greece, with strong attention to differences of modes of expression and their respective social venues. Calame persuasively argues that Eros is first of all rooted in the literary and pictorial genres, which give a variety of expression to concepts of Eros, which in his view are the "inventions" of poets and painters that left an enduring mark on future developments. Eros, as he puts it, is both a divine figure and a physiology of desire, with certain symptoms and certain modes of action which operate in a network of social relations. Poetry (and its performance on dictated occasions) was itself an institution in its own right and played a major role in Greek civic life. Thus, starting from poetry and iconography and their symbolic values, Calame marks his intention to specify a history of Eros that is dependent on its institutional roles—in ritual celebrations, in educational practices of an initiatory type, in a variety of social settings, in the Dionysiac theater of tragedy and comedy, as well as in real and imagined topographies of space (e.g., meadows, mountains, and gardens)—to conclude finally with an attestation of the central significance of the power of Eros in cosmology, philosophy, and mystic speculations.

The heart and center of the work is quite properly the institutional role of Eros—how Eros actually “works” in the society of the aristocratic and later democratic polis, divided between homoerotic and heterosexual relations. In the world of men, Eros functions particularly in its pederastic manifestations in the two social contexts in which men and boys interact: the symposium, or private banquet, on the one hand, and the palaestra or gymnasium, on the other. Both contexts are viewed in their educational aspects for integrating future citizens into the polis (and its public space, the agora) and for regulating modes of behavior and proper erotic etiquette. Calame acutely distinguishes between male companionship and its pedagogical emphasis on politics, masculine civic and social qualities, ethical maxims concerning fidelity, justice, or wealth and its female counterpart (known to us mainly through Sappho), where the aim is not to establish enduring bonds of companionship (or *philotês*) as the basis for a future political group but rather to lead the adolescent girl to the *philotês* of conjugal relations and to her domestic and ritual roles in the city.

Thus, in the world of women, Calame takes up the household or *oikos* as the obvious venue for addressing the erotic roles of women as girls, brides, and adult wives, with the exception of the *hetaira* (or female companion), who is present at male banquets and who participates in the proceedings as both an erotic object and a skilled performer of music and dance. In a few deft pages, Calame gives the best single outline of the problem of the often misunderstood role of the *hetaira*, which oscillates between that of a close and beloved companion (*philê*) and a common prostitute (*pornê*) rented for the occasion, and he gives much more latitude to the representation of women at banquets and the functions they perform in the erotic life of the city. Precisely because Eros and Aphrodite are central to women’s rites of passage from maiden to wife, Calame’s analysis of the problematics of sexuality in conjugal relations, starting with the courtship and the wedding, gives a balanced and often corrective account of an ideology of Eros that has more recently stressed (perhaps to an extreme) the incompatibilities of maternity and sexuality in marriage and the severe disequilibrium between husbands and wives. Marriage is as much an affair of men, after all, as it is of women.

Yet if Calame demonstrates a “normative” view of ordinary sexual relations and the decorum of family life in the institutions of the city, he is cognizant too of the negative side, especially as manifested through the cult of Dionysos, particularly in the theater, whether with comedy and its bawdy licentiousness or with tragedy and its entire range of erotic images and attitudes in their associations with sacrifice, death, and entry into states of madness and destruction. In these “contesta-

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tions of Eros,” as he calls them, Calame well understands the dual role of Dionysos, both as an agent who integrates instinctual life into the city and, more often, as an instigator of erotic madness and transgression, who affords the context for articulating what is more ordinarily repressed in the course of civic life.

If I have singled out this section of the book for more detailed summary, I have done so because Calame’s general view, arrived at with meticulous attention to texts, images, and historical data, insists finally that Eros is to be understood as a vital principle of organization and education, representing the force of reproduction through erotic desire in both biological and social terms. While myth and ideology about the dangers of Eros reveal the anxieties of sexuality, perceived as a power struggle for control over others and over oneself, Calame emphasizes the integrative function of Eros as an essential component of social and civic life. It is but a short step to the transformation of this role into a key element of philosophical training, especially in Plato.

In a book of this size, there are obviously omissions and abridgments. The focus is on the archaic and classical eras, which means that the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman culture of later periods, when the polis no longer operates with the same kind of central authority over its citizens, is not treated in systematic detail. Moreover, his interest, as I have emphasized, lies in the functional, not the dysfunctional, aspects of a system of desire and the control, even tyranny, this system exercises over social relations. Calame also does not engage in the heated debates undertaken in feminist or gay studies. Yet the book is truly instructive in the largest sense of the word; its arguments are subtle and well-founded, and its variety of materials, including the choice of notable texts for analysis (e.g., Homer, the lyric poets, tragedy and comedy, and Plato), brings the discussion into the heart of classical culture. Above all, I know of no other work that supplies this range of information in such a brief and readable form. I venture to say that it will readily become a standard in the field.