Appendix

Queering Alcibiades
Persius on Foucault and Halperin

You handle the people’s business?” Picture the bearded master, whom a grim dose of hemlock carried off, saying these things. “With what qualification? Speak up then, ward of great Pericles. . . .

Socrates: But if all oiled up you should be relaxing and fixing the rays of the sun in your skin, there is a stranger nearby who touches you with his elbow and bitterly spits out, “What morals! To show the people both how you weed round your cock and the hidden part of your groin, your shriveled asshole. But when you comb the balsamed wool on your cheeks, why does a shaven little worm stand out from your groin. Though five official oilers and depilators should pluck those seedlings and shake your boiled buttocks with hooked tweezers, nonetheless that hedge would not be tamed by any plow.” 1 (Persius 4.1–3, 33–41)

The fourth satire of Persius, itself a creative rereading of the Alcibiades (Miller 2005; Ramage 1974: 121–25), provides a particularly useful comparandum to Foucault’s interpretation of the Alcibiades. First, Persius himself was a Stoic as his ancient vita attests. Second, Foucault clearly indicates that he has read him (2001: 74). More significantly, Persius is a poet, a category of writer that, as Konstan notes, Foucault self-consciously excludes from his archive (Foucault 1984a: 18). Foucault privileges philosophic and scientific discourse in his reading of the ancient world just as he had in his early work on seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Europe. His reasoning, Konstan points out, is that these forms constitute the primary normalizing and orthopedic discourses that have produced the modern disciplinary subject. It stands to reason, therefore, that if one wishes to investigate whether similar forms of subjectivation existed in the ancient world, one would turn to similar forms of discourse. Yet, as Konstan observes, this may well have been a mistake: poetry played a much stronger socially regulative role in the ancient world than it does today and was

1. On the attribution of this passage to Socrates, see P. A. Miller (2005a).
arguably more important than medicine or philosophy in its impact on the lives of all but a small minority (2002). Persius’ reading of the *Alcibiades* is thus particularly important because it allows us to test both what Foucault says about ancient regimes of subjectivation and ethics, and perhaps more importantly, the philosophical and political conclusions drawn by theorists from his work.

Beyond doubt one of the most influential aspects of Foucault’s interest in the care of the self has been its impact on queer theory. His tracing of different modalities of self-relation is, as we have seen, explicitly aimed at providing new possibilities of resistance to the normalized, disciplinary subject of late capitalism and exposing the roots of that subject in a specific mode of self-relation that can be traced to the Christian confessional (1994c). The Stoic and Platonic models of the care of self offer crucial resources to all marginal groups that seek to fashion new forms of subjectivity, experience, and resistance to the dominant forms of governmentality. Nonetheless, Foucault’s claims have been subject to two forms of falsification. On the one hand, his own arguments about ancient sexual norms have been called into question. On the other, some of his most vocal advocates have drawn distorted and illegitimate claims from his work.

Foucault’s major claims, on which subsequent extrapolations have been based, are as follows. First, ancient moral philosophy contains “no trace of normalization.” It is based not upon obedience to a pre-existing law or code, but upon a self-conscious mode of shaping oneself. Consequently, the ancient mode of *khrēsis aphrodisiōn*, or the “use of pleasure,” escapes the repressive hypothesis that Foucault had attacked in volume 1 of the *History of Sexuality* (1994c: 610; 1994i: 215). If we grant the accuracy of this hypothesis, then it is clear that sexual identities such as homo- and heterosexual did not exist as such in the ancient world, but are the product of the modern sexual dispositif and the invention of sex per se as a unitary phenomenon (see our discussion of Foucault’s relation to Lacan). Foucault’s claim is not that there was no same-sex eroticism, but rather that people’s personal identities were not determined by the gender of their sexual object choice. In short, Socrates may have loved Alcibiades, but it would be absurd to say that Socrates was “gay.”

Although the details of Foucault’s reading of the ancient evidence

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3. See also Hocquenghem (1978: 36).
have been contested,5 its general thrust has given rise to a broad and important body of work. In One Hundred Years of Homosexuality (1990b) David Halperin provides a detailed exposition of Foucault’s theories and uses them for wide-ranging discussions of Greek sexual and discursive practices, as well as for a series of hard-hitting polemics against Boswell (1980) and other historians of homosexuality who do not share his strict constructionist line.6 John J. Winkler’s highly regarded The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece (1990) likewise starts from the position that sexuality (including homosexuality) is a social construction, rather than an essence. The volume of essays, Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient World (1990), edited by Halperin, Winkler, and Froma Zeitlin, discusses a variety of aspects of ancient erotic culture against a broadly Foucauldian horizon. All these works, as well as those more indirectly inspired by Foucault, such as Hallett and Skinner’s Roman Sexualities (1997), have made important contributions to our understanding of ancient erotic culture and modern sexual identities.

Nonetheless, it is largely in Halperin’s later work that Foucault’s ethics have been read as a specific program for the creation of a queer identity (Dean 2003: 239; Halperin 1995: 107). In his Saint Foucault, Halperin argues that the destabilization of normative sexual identities leads to the possibility of a utopian politics based on the invention of new modes of self-relation founded upon radical sexual practices such as sadomasochism and fistfucking. “The shattering force of intense bodily pleasure, detached from its exclusive localization in the genitals and regionalized throughout various zones of the body, decenters the subject and disarticulates the psychic and bodily integrity of the self to which a sexual identity has become attached” (1995: 96–97).7 Self-transformation and self-fashioning are political acts in which the most intimate of personal practices strikes a blow against an oppressive heteronormative culture. On this view, the care of the self is seen to


6. Constructionism argues that gender and sexual identities are social constructs rather than natural and universal. The Foucauldian position that sees sex itself as a discursive construct clearly falls within this camp.

7. As Eribon notes, Halperin seems to accept all of J. Miller’s most sensationalistic depictions of Foucault’s private life but changes the valences from negative to positive. The problem, he observes, is not whether or not Foucault performed this or that sex act, but what happens when his vast and complex life’s work is reduced to an allegory of those acts (Eribon 1994: 49–54).
underwrite everything, from piercing, to gay body builders, to “shopping for the right outfit” (1995: 32, 115–18). It is hard to argue that drag queens and leather bars do not represent a transgression of, and hence a challenge to, the dominant culture of compulsive heterosexuality, but it is quite another to see these phenomena as the necessary, or even desirable, consequences of Foucault’s reading of the *Alcibiades* and its *Nachleben*.

While Foucault certainly viewed a return to the culture of the self as a means of resistance to the normalizing disciplinary culture he saw at the heart of modernity (Kremer-Marietti 1985: 278–79), it is at best reductive to reduce Foucault’s complex and variegated reading of the Platonic enterprise to a fashion statement (“shopping for the right outfit”), however politically charged that statement may be. Such an interpretation fails to do justice to the specificity and nuance of his reading, to his engagement with the Socratic dialectic as a means of shaping the soul. It also fails to acknowledge the overdetermined dialogic situation in which that reading transpired. If Foucault’s study of ancient philosophy was in part inspired by a desire to provide a new set of tools to fashion queer and other resistant forms of identity, it was also equally designed as a response to the work of Deleuze, Derrida, and Lacan, and as an archeology of the subject per se.

Finally, as the passages from Persius quoted above makes clear, Foucault overstated the case when he declared that there was no trace of normalization in ancient philosophical discourse. We know that sexual encounters between males at Rome, while certainly permitted in some cases and not regulated along the same axes as they would be in modern societies, were nonetheless subject to both legal and moral restrictions, and that the penalties for soldiers who violated those strictures and fraternized with one another, could include death (Grimal 1986: 103–6; Edwards 1993: 75, 188–89; Nippel 1995: 11; Corbeill 1996: 145; Walters 1997; Parker 1997). Indeed, in our second quoted excerpt from Persius, we have Socrates, or a figure meant to recall him, attacking Alcibiades for precisely the kind of fashion statement that Halperin seems to read Foucault and the Stoics as underwriting. Alcibiades in this poem is portrayed as a young effeminate who exposes himself to the public both politically and erotically, and thus effectively disqualifies himself from any claim to political power. His practice of anal depilation is stigmatized precisely as inviting penetration and degradation. It represents not the care for the self, but a care for one’s possessions. Alcibiades in Persius’ poem has clearly not learned the distinction between the leather cutter and his tools. He is neglecting his
soul, and thus as the opening lines of the poem make clear, just like the
opening of the Platonic dialogue, has no right to presume to handle the
affairs of the state. Nor, despite his caustic wit, was Persius an isolated
crank. Neither for the Socrates of the Alcibiades nor for the Stoic Per-
sius could the care of the self be found in shopping for the right outfit
or fistfucking.

Of course, Foucault’s position is more complex than it is often given
credit to be, even by (or especially by) his most ardent admirers. Despite
the occasional incautious statement, he clearly rejected any simplistic
contrast between ancient tolerance and modern repression (Gros 2001:
503; Nehamas 1998: 178). He explicitly recognized that in the imperial
period the sexual act was viewed as a time of profound danger, not free-
dom (1984b: 135), and that Greek sexual ethics, far from constituting a
model, were fraught with anxiety (witness Socrates’ daimôn forbidding
him to approach Alcibiades until he was on the cusp of maturity) and
predicated on necessary asymmetries of power between the pursuer and
pursued, the lover and the beloved, the penetrator and the penetrated
(Foucault 1994c: 614; 1984a: 56; Gros 2001: 512–13; Konstan 1994:
116, 121; Macey 1993: 458, 468; Kremer-Marietti 1985: 256). The
genealogy of the modern subject may well have created new possibili-
ties of resistance to our dominant forms of subjectivation, but neither
did it create models to be emulated nor did it authorize (let alone
mandate) specific behaviors (Veyne 1997: 226). Only the tough work
of self-reflection and the rigors of philosophical dialogue, undertaken
in the context of profound affection, could lead to the discovery of
the soul and the fashioning of a self that one found beautiful and
authentic. It is in this labor of unflinching examination that the real
nucleus of resistance and the real urgency of Foucault’s reading of
ancient philosophy can be found.