

2014-2015

## INCONTINENTIA, LICENTIA, ET LIBIDO: The Juxtaposition of Morality and Sexuality during the Roman Republic

Robert Sharp

*James Madison University*

Follow this and other works at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/jmurj>

---

### Recommended Chicago Citation

Robert Sharp, "Incontinentia, Licentia et Libido: The Juxtaposition of Morality and Sexuality during the Roman Republic." *James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal* 2 (2014): 6-12.

Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/jmurj/vol2/iss1/2/>

This full issue is brought to you for free and open access by JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).

# *Incontinentia, Licentia et Libido*

The Juxtaposition of Morality and Sexuality  
during the Roman Republic



Robert Sharp

---

*Sex and sexuality are important elements of human experience but are surrounded by taboos. Roman sexuality traditionally has been viewed as licentious and obscene in nature, and seemingly incongruous with the propriety expected in an honor-shame culture. But what is often considered moral, immoral, or obscene in our modern context meant something entirely different to the Romans. This paper examines Roman sex and sexuality during the Republic period (509–27 B.C.E.) and their existence alongside traditional Roman values and customs.*

---

Sex is an important element of human existence. From the standpoint of pure reproduction and continuance of the species to the fulfillment of pleasure and personal satisfaction, sex is an essential element of human experience. The sexuality of the ancient Romans has historically been perceived as licentious in nature and focused entirely on hedonism, a belief that can be traced to early Christian polemic.<sup>1</sup> Modern perceptions of Roman sexuality reflect this stereotype.<sup>2</sup> The juxtaposition of the time-honored ideals of the Romans with their fixation on their own personal sexual gratification creates a seeming dichotomy in both thought and deed. In truth, however, Roman sexuality was complex, nuanced by context, and strongly affected by the social stratification of the Romans. It was also indicative of their honor-shame culture, as their sexuality was governed by *mos maiorum* (customs of our ancestors), placing it within the purview of traditional Roman values, as well as the Roman definition of what was moral and what was obscene.

The past three decades have seen a large amount of scholarship centered on the study of Roman sexuality and not only how it applies in their own culture, but how it compares to modern society.<sup>3</sup> The main focus of this scholarship, however, has been on sexuality and morality during the period of the Roman Empire, as there is a lot more primary source evidence available that explicitly

1 Alastair J. L. Blanshard, "Roman Vice," *Sex: Vice and Love from Antiquity to Modernity* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1-88.

2 Modern television has dedicated hours to sexualizing ancient history, with television programs such as HBO's *Rome*, or the Starz network's *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, depicting ancient sexuality as gratuitous and trashy. Films such as *Caligula* (1979) add to the portrayals of Roman decadence commonly assumed to be the reality.

3 See, for instance, Vern L. Bullough, Brenda K. Shelton, and Sarah Slavin, *The Subordinated Sex: A History of Attitudes Toward Women*, rev. ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988); John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C. - A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); John R. Clarke, *Roman Sex: 100 B.C. to A.D. 250* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003); Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Christopher A. Faraone and Laura McClure, eds., *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, Wisconsin Studies in Classics (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Thomas K. Hubbard, ed., *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*, Joan Palevsky Imprint in Classical Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Thomas A. J. McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995); Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (London: Routledge, 1998); Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Beert C. Verstraete and Vernon Provencal, *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2005). All of these sources focus on aspects of Roman sexuality in the context of the historical period, rather than trying to compare them to modern standards of decency.

details both sex and morality, and the moral position of the authors. As a consequence, expansive studies of sexuality in the Roman Republic period (509 - 27 B.C.E) are either lacking, bundled with the Roman Empire as a study of Roman sexuality in its entirety, or simply absent entirely.

The foundation for this paper was laid by Catharine Edwards' *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, which provides a great deal of research and information on the application of morality to politics and how it affected Roman society. This is supplemented by Amy Richlin's *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, which explicitly outlines Roman ideas of obscenity and immorality during the Roman Republic. Lastly, the work of John C. Clarke and his study of Roman sexual artwork in *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C. - A.D. 250* and *Roman Sex: 100 B.C. to A.D. 250* provided great insight into the Roman cultural obsession with sexuality and the standards of propriety expected of the Roman upper classes.

## Studies of sexuality in the Roman Republic period are either lacking ... or absent entirely

Unfortunately, all of these works suffer from the same issues in regard to the focus that they place upon sexuality during the Roman Empire rather than the Roman Republic. The authors, however, provide enough detail and analysis in their interpretations of Republic-

era sexuality to allow an extrapolation of how the sexual attitudes of the Romans of the Late Republic/Empire were related to the societal norms and expectations of the Roman Republic period, and how they were directly connected to the system of social stratification that governed all Roman relationships and interactions.

### Stratification

Rome itself was a strongly hierarchical and class-conscious society, with social class determining one's economic and political opportunities, as well as legal rights and benefits. The gulf between the upper class and the lower class in the Republic was large and quite difficult, but not impossible, to surmount. The main criterion for success was wealth. It took a substantial amount of *dives* (riches) to enable any form of social mobility, and even then, there was no guarantee of ascension. For the Romans, it was not enough to be wealthy; one had to be perceived as wealthy in order for wealth to have any social meaning or value.

A key component of Roman society, in fact the entire foundation of Roman class relations, was the patron-client system. The system, as employed by the Romans, further exacerbated the divide between upper and lower classes. Operating as a system of mutual obligations, it bound together the upper and lower social classes into a cohesive

whole that allowed Roman society to function as it did.

Patrons belonged to a higher class than clients and as a result were strategically placed to take advantage of their relationship with the lower classes. The patron was expected to provide resources to aid his client, such as employment, support in legal matters, or even invitations for meals. In return for general assistance and hospitality, the client was expected to support the patron in all ways that were required, creating a relationship built upon a foundation of entitlements and obligations. This was not always a mutually beneficial relationship, however, as the system of obligation caused strife within Roman society.

The honor-shame culture practiced by the Romans (appearances being just as important, if not more important, than actual social standing and reputation) was an indication of the prominence that was placed upon maintaining the appearance of prudence and decorum, more so than actually being prudent and decorous. Over time, complex and nuanced roles and expectations of the different social classes developed, creating a strict hierarchy that influenced all aspects of Roman society, including sex and sexuality.

With this deep hierarchy in place, it was quite easy for the upper class to exploit the lower classes in all ways. It was also extraordinarily easy for someone in another's debt to be taken advantage of sexually,<sup>4</sup> especially if the client was a former slave. It was perfectly legal for a patron to continue a sexual relationship with a freedman who began in servitude. While this exploitation eventually led to societal reform, the entrenchment of the patron-client system within Roman society continued to marginalize the lower classes.

The stratification of Roman society made it quite simple for Romans to gain sexual fulfillment and gratification from those of lower social standing. For male Romans, sexual dominance was gained through the act of penetration, with the passive partner immediately classified as inferior. It was expected and socially acceptable for a freeborn Roman man to want sex with both female and male partners, so long as he took the penetrative role.<sup>5</sup> There was no stigma at all attached to an elite adult male inserting his penis into any orifice of another, so long as that person was of inferior status.<sup>6</sup>

During the Republic, a Roman citizen's *libertas* (political liberty) was defined in part by the right to preserve his body from physical compulsion, including both

corporal punishment and sexual abuse.<sup>7</sup> Roman elite males, however, who enjoyed or actively sought out being penetrated, were branded as *cinaedi* (passive homosexuals) and were forbidden to vote, nor could they represent themselves in a court of law. They were effectively outcasts from Roman society.<sup>8</sup> Women and slaves were automatically considered to be the inferior partner, and it was in poor form for either to administer to their own sexual gratification. Slaves were seen as nothing more than property, and as a result, their masters used them at will to fulfill whatever desires they felt entitled to.<sup>9</sup> The Romans viewed this treatment of social inferiors as perfectly acceptable behavior. Their actions were not only just and within their rights, but were also viewed as being completely moral within the context of their hierarchical social structure.

### Morality, Immorality, and Self-Indulgence

Sociologically, morality can be viewed as determined by the society and culture in which one lives. To truly understand the impact that morality has on a society, one

needs to examine notions of morality entirely within their historical and social context. To the Romans, morality was not inherent to each individual, but was instead a product of the external influences of art, ritual, literature, and music.<sup>10</sup>

## Morality can be viewed as determined by the society and culture in which one lives

Michel Foucault writes in *The Use of Pleasure* that morality is “a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches, and so forth . . .”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to write that morality also refers to “the real behaviors of individuals in relation to the rules and manners that are recommended to them.”<sup>12</sup>

As an honor-shame culture, the Romans sought to maintain the appearance of propriety at all times; as such, morality was very important and was the subject of intense scrutiny and debate. Roman *mores* (moral values) were derived from their ancestors. The *mores* of those who lived in Rome were guided, taught, and regulated in a variety of linking ways.<sup>13</sup> As Edwards observes, “Morality and manliness [were considered to be] the distinguishing features of Rome.”<sup>14</sup> Discipline, obedience,

7 McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*, 326.

8 Ibid.

9 Elaine Fantham, *Roman Readings: Roman Response to Greek Literature from Plautus to Statius and Quintilian* (New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 128.

10 Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, 17.

11 Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Random House, 1990), 25.

12 Ibid.

13 Langlands, *Sexual Morality*, 17.

14 Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, 20.

4 Liv. VIII.28.

5 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 225.

6 Clarke, *Roman Sex*, 118.

bravery, tenacity, and frugality were all characteristics that a morally sound Roman was expected to uphold. The term *mos* (the singular form of *mores*) is often used in texts to describe “both customs and morals,” with *maiorum* often affixed at the end.<sup>15</sup> The *mos maiorum* (customs of our ancestors) was customary in nature, but carried greater weight than even written law and was the central core of Roman traditionalism. The soundness of a Roman’s actions was held up to the *mos maiorum* to be weighed and judged. The end result was a system of interlocking values that guided Roman behavior in multiple ways and determined what was and was not socially and morally acceptable in their lives.

The same standards were applied as to what could be said for the definition and context of what was considered immoral. Immorality as it is defined in a modern context has no Roman equivalent.<sup>16</sup> The closest comparison is actions that result in *pudor*, a sense of shame and shamefulness. There is a tendency of ancient authors, regardless of when they were writing, to bemoan the loss of traditional moral values,<sup>17</sup> but exactly what constituted shamefulness in Roman society is vastly different when compared to modern society. Roman morality, in essence, was concentrated almost entirely on the elite upper classes and was largely concerned with avarice and excessive self-indulgence. The Roman moralists of the late Republic found the vices of the lower classes to be uninteresting<sup>18</sup> and instead focused on the rampant self-indulgence of the upper classes. In fact, “the criticism of immorality was constructed by Romans themselves as a characteristically Roman activity.”<sup>19</sup>

Self-indulgence in itself was not necessarily frowned upon by the Romans as entirely immoral. Cicero speaks in defense of his former student (and political rival) M. Caelius Rufus as to what constitutes acceptable self-indulgence based on youthful exuberance and what truly could be considered to be excessive.<sup>20</sup> True self-indulgence—as the excesses of M. Antonius and Cleopatra exemplified,<sup>21</sup> or the example of Sulla’s soldiers, who were so corrupted by their stay in Asia that they roamed the land to satisfy their palates and engaged in wanton acts of debauchery<sup>22</sup>—was often castigated by other Romans. Sallust, in *Catiline’s War*, attributes many acts of callousness and debauchery to Catiline,<sup>23</sup> using him to epitomize the decline of traditional Roman morality. According to Cicero, Catiline thrived in

excess, and the “vices of lust raged in him.”<sup>24</sup> Cicero leveled further criticisms against Catiline, describing him as being so depraved that his sleepless nights were the product of his sexual enormities and evil deeds.<sup>25</sup>

Although both Cicero and Sallust hold Catiline up as the primary example of excessive self-indulgence, it is significant to note the biases that both men have in regard to L. Sergius Catilina in the primary sources. Cicero had a personal hatred for Catiline, and used his role in stopping Catiline’s alleged conspiracy to overthrow the Republic as his prime political achievement.<sup>26</sup> Sallust, on the other hand, was primarily focused on what he viewed to be the moral decline of Rome, and thus emphasized anything that supported this worldview. His primary source for the portrayal of Catiline in *The Conspiracy of Catiline* was how Cicero described Catiline in *On Your Consulship*,<sup>27</sup> and he provides no evidence for his own opinion of Catiline. However, rather than simply dismissing the criticism as the result of bias and personal dislike, it is important to note the fact that the charge of self-indulgence was leveled against someone as an attack on his character; to be accused

of excessive self-indulgence was in effect a mark of an individual’s importance and moral standing.

Luxury and sexual immorality are closely associated in Roman historical writing.<sup>28</sup> Polybius, in his *Histories*, linked excessive self-indulgence and sexuality in his attack on what he considered to be the acts of moral turpitude that were developing in Rome, with “this eruption of self-indulgence among the young men that many paid a talent for a boy bought for sexual gratification and many paid three hundred drachmas for a jar of caviar.”<sup>29</sup> Sexual depravity, or proclivities that went against the standard practices of the period, were also ripe for invective. In Roman society, the ideal-sized phallus was small, and the wrong size was large.<sup>30</sup> When Roman authors wished to accuse a person of enjoying excess, they commonly charged him with liking, or preferring, large penises.<sup>31</sup>

The policing of morality and concern with self-indulgence and excess was of paramount importance to the Romans, so much so that they created a position to ensure proper enforcement of their *mores*, that of the *censores* (censors). The decision to devote a political position, the highest ranking position in the *cursus honorum* (course of offices), to regulating moral character reveals the high

## Immorality as it is defined in a modern context has no Roman equivalent

15 Ibid., 4.

16 Ibid., 3.

17 Liv. XXXIX.6, Plb. XXXI.25, and Sal. Cat. X.

18 Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality*, 24.

19 Ibid., 2.

20 Cic. Cael. XLIV.

21 Macrobian Sat. III.17.

22 Sal. Cat. XIII.

23 Sal. Cat. XX.

24 Cic. Cael. (trans. Yonge) V.

25 Cic. Catil. II.

26 Ibid.

27 L. A. McKay, “Sallust’s ‘Catiline’: Date and Purpose,” *Phoenix* 16, no. 13 (Autumn 1962): 183.

28 Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality*, 6.

29 Plb. XXXI.25

30 Clarke, *Roman Sex*, 111.

31 Ibid., 112.

significance that the Romans placed on morality. *Censores* had the responsibility of maintaining the *mos maiorum*<sup>32</sup> and developed over time the power to exclude people from the official census based on their own judgment of a person's moral character. *Censores* could also impose censure on the offending party for whatever reason they decided, and entered it as such in public record as the *subscriptio censorialis* (censorial subscription).<sup>33</sup>

The *ensores* devoted their attention to the regulation of public morals and the castigation of vices,<sup>34</sup> with the *regimen morem* (the keeping of public morals) being the second most important branch of a censor's duties.<sup>35</sup> The Romans were willingly complicit, however, in extending the authority of the *ensores* beyond their initial conceit, allowing them to become the "overseer and guardian of everything that took place in the homes," even in the bedroom.<sup>36</sup> As much as the Romans were concerned with it, they believed that "no one should be left to his own ways and desires without being subject to inspection and review . . ."<sup>37</sup>

The Roman obsession with appearances and upholding *mos maiorum* creates a seeming dichotomy between the behavior expected from those in an honor-shame culture and the general fixation on personal indulgence and fulfillment. Immorality was a foreign concept to the ancient Romans; they were concerned with maintaining the appearance of propriety rather than with denying themselves sexual gratification and the exploration of vices. Excessive self-indulgence was frowned upon as not exemplifying the true characteristics of the proper Roman. Sexual activities were regulated by the *mos maiorum* and were considered to be ordinary aspects of Roman society. Acts that were daily behaviors for the Romans could be considered unusual, immoral, or even obscene in a different cultural framework.

## Obscenity

Similar to immorality, there is no true equivalent for the Romans in regard to obscenity. In a modern context, the word *obscenity* comprises "explicitly sexual literature, visual arts, dress, and actions."<sup>38</sup> For the Romans, the idea of obscenity was familiar, even if their definition and practical application of it differ from more modern versions. Decorum went a long way toward defining what was officially *obscenum* (obscene) and what could be counted as artistic expression. For the Romans of the Republic, true moral character was of utmost importance. It was an extension of the *mos maiorum*, to uphold the values and sheer fortitude of those who came

before. The term *obscenum* itself had a strong religious connotation to it, indicating omen, and this association may have promoted the special treatment of sexual material in Latin literature.<sup>39</sup> Yet, despite the religious connotation, the Romans viewed morality as being more associated with politics than with religion.<sup>40</sup>

To the Romans, sex and sexuality were not strictly taboo subjects, but they still had certain connotations associated with them. These undertones were rooted in the concept of *decor*, as well as simple hygiene. The human genitalia, both male and female (but especially female), were perceived as being foul, a sentiment that pervaded the majority of Roman sexual humor.<sup>41</sup> Female genitalia are almost always described as disgusting—squashy and foul in texture and constitution, hairy or depilated, salty, and rank.<sup>42</sup> Roman sexuality was phallicentric,<sup>43</sup> and as such, the phallus could often be identified as a threatening weapon<sup>44</sup> or as an impotent tool,<sup>45</sup> often for comedic effect. In Latin, there are approximately one hundred and twenty euphemisms and metaphors for the penis.<sup>46</sup> In accordance with these definitions, anything related to intercourse was treated very differently than other forms of artistic expression.

## Similar to immorality, there is no true equivalent for the Romans in regard to obscenity

It was this feeling and treatment—that the material was particularly special and noteworthy—that generated the convention of *apologia* (apology) in poetry and a series of strictures on decorum in prose.<sup>47</sup> *Apologiae* were disclaimers that defended the author, reassuring the reader that he had sound morals, regardless of how obscene the subject matter of the work at hand.<sup>48</sup> There was also varying importance placed on the use of language in literature versus oration; prose and poetry were more acceptable places to find sexual content, whereas an orator (public speaker) had to "choose his words carefully,"<sup>49</sup> often using formal language and an unwillingness to be direct in his accusations.<sup>50</sup>

Language was how Romans established their worth; public speaking and political office were both well respected institutions. As such, the *os* (mouth) was an integral aspect of Roman fastidiousness. The mouth, as far as the Romans were concerned, was vital to life. It was how sustenance

32 Cic. Leg. III.3.

33 Liv. XXXIX.42.

34 Liv. XXIV.18.

35 Liv. IV.8.

36 DH. XX.3.

37 Plut. Cat. Ma. (trans. Perrin) XVI.1-2.

38 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 1.

39 Ibid., 2.

40 Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality*, 31.

41 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 26.

42 Ibid.

43 Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 84.

44 Catul. LCVII.21.

45 Ov. Am. III.7.

46 David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 106.

47 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 2.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 13.

50 Cic. Phil. II.44-47.

entered the body; it was how they spoke to one another (which was especially important in regards to a political career), and how they greeted each other (Romans often kissed each other in greeting). Since kissing and public bathing were common elements of Roman culture, fear of contamination of the *os* was of primary concern.<sup>51</sup> Combined with the common perception of genitalia as being disgusting, the strongest insult that could be leveled at a Roman was that of the *os impurum*—the unclean mouth that is the result of oral intercourse.<sup>52</sup>

This charge allowed for the creation of the Latin equivalent of “four-letter words,” and an association of ideas of staining, wrongdoing, and ugliness with most sexual concepts.<sup>53</sup> These words were often said to be exciting or seductive.<sup>54</sup> The great *oratores* of the Republic, such as Cicero, went out of their way to avoid such language, sidestepping words or conjunctions that would produce a double meaning where none was intended.<sup>55</sup> The writings of Cicero provide evidence that it is the “context or location that can determine whether or not a word or activity is perceived as being obscene.”<sup>56</sup> For instance, Cicero says it is a terrible gaffe for a man to flatulate, but in the baths it is more than acceptable to parade around entirely naked.<sup>57</sup> It was the context that continued to influence Roman behavior as it directly impacted the societal attitudes towards acts and actions relating to sexuality.

Catullus,<sup>58</sup> a renowned poet of the late Republic period, made explicit sexuality and crude invective into major components of his poetry.<sup>59</sup> The opening line of his poem, *Carmen* 16, *pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo* (“I will sodomize you and face-fuck you”), is evocative of the provocative intent toward its subjects, Aurelius<sup>60</sup> and Furius,<sup>61</sup> two of Catullus’ contemporaries with whom he had a personal relationship. The text of the poem is Catullus’ defense against his friends’ charges that his poetry—and thus he—was effeminate. He refutes these charges by invoking a crude masculinity in support of his argument. The poem itself acts as an *apologia*, emphasizing that only the poet himself is required to be moral, but it is in no way necessary for his work to be so.<sup>62</sup>

## What was obscene and what was artistic expression encompassed a wide scope

In defending himself, however, Catullus advocates for the anal and oral rape of his friends, behaviors that would be considered entirely obscene by modern standards. This was done purely in jest, yet still indicated the retaining of one’s virility, if not an increase in his portrayed masculinity. Catullus is acting as the aggressor in this poem, in which the context of the act is dependent on the traditional stratification of Roman societal roles. Forcing someone to be a receptacle for oral sex was evidence of a man’s virility. A man was not compromised by his penetration of another man. In actuality, his manhood status was bolstered.<sup>63</sup> The Romans did not view male on male penetration as being out of the ordinary, nor was it evidence of effeminacy, so long as one was in the dominant position.

What was obscene and what was artistic expression encompassed a wide scope. The Roman concept of obscenity was based upon the idea that certain words and actions were restricted from certain situations and the association of ideas with the “staining” effect of sexual intercourse and sexuality.<sup>64</sup> Specific elements of human sexuality, such as genitalia, were considered to be dirty and unpleasant, granting anything dealing with them the classification of *obscenum*. Other acts, such as *pedicare* (sodomy) or *irrumare* (“face-fucking”), were entirely dependent on the context of the behavior and the perpetrators (who was passive and who was dominant) to gauge the level of obscenity or inappropriateness. These context-specific distinctions support the idea of the complex nature of Roman sexuality during the Republic period, which cannot be easily categorized as simply decadent or immoral.

## Conclusion

Contrary to popular modern belief, Roman sexuality during the Republic was not focused entirely on hedonism for the sake of hedonism. Instead, Roman sexuality was a variable and complex construct that cannot be easily defined as belonging simply to one category or another. Although the ancient Romans viewed sex and sexuality as fluid, with personal gratification at its core, it was still governed by the rules and requirements of the *mos maiorum*, the guiding principles of Roman tradition and morality.

The permeation in Roman society of the patron-client system and the strict hierarchy that they participated in directly influenced Roman sexuality and sexual roles. Specific acts and behaviors were automatically stigmatized depending on the status of each participant, and societal standing was at stake if these behaviors fell outside of the traditional social norms. Sexual acts performed by

51 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 27.

52 Ibid., 26.

53 Ibid., 2.

54 Ov. Am. III.7.

55 Cic. Fam. IX.22.

56 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 23.

57 Cic. Fam. IX.22.

58 Gaius Valerius Catullus (ca. 84 – 54 B.C.E.).

59 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 1.

60 This friend of Catullus cannot be identified with any certainty. Current historical conjecture leans towards Marcus Aurelius Cotta, elected *praetor* in 54 B.C.E.; however, this is unsubstantiated and is purely speculation.

61 Marcus Furius Bibaculus (103 BCE - ?), a first century poet who had an affair with Juventius, one of Catullus’ lovers.

62 Catul. XVI.5-6.

63 Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 181.

64 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*, 30.

the Romans were neither inherently moral nor immoral. It was the context that was crucial to the acceptance of specific sexual behaviors to the Romans, with male virility and masculinity dependent on pursuing the dominant role in sexual acts. Freeborn males who willingly assumed the passive role were considered to be shameful and were labeled and stigmatized accordingly.

Appearances were exceedingly important to the Romans, and it was expected that sexual behaviors and activities comply with the societal standards of the time. Anything that fell outside this range of acceptable behavior was immediately branded as being in excess, or was a source of *pudor* that could be wielded against a person, usually for political gain. Because context was also important, Roman sexuality was governed not only by the *mos maiorum*, but also by social stratification. The social stratification that was employed in administering what was acceptable and moral in regards to sexuality was rigidly defined and directly influenced Roman sexual *mores* into adhering to this stringency. Anything outside of this stern definition was categorized as being excessive, and excess led to chastisement, *pudor*, and the stigma of obscenity.

Although the Romans enjoyed the pursuit of physical pleasure and viewed sex and sexuality as a “gift from the Gods,”<sup>65</sup> there were strict rules and criteria that had to be followed for it to be considered acceptable and morally appropriate. These rules and criteria, when emphasized alongside the *mos maiorum* and Roman societal norms, expose as false the modern perception of Roman sexuality as being focused on hedonism and excess.

Modern standards of propriety and morality simply cannot be applied to the Romans in regard to sex and sexuality. The seeming dichotomy is only created when they are directly compared to modern societal values and attitudes towards sex and sexuality, and the definitions of morality and obscenity that we impose on them. When examined in the context of their culture and their adherence to an honor-shame society and its requirements, Roman sexual behaviors are both logical and appropriately administered.

## Bibliography

### I. Primary Sources

Catullus, *Poems*  
Cicero, *Against Catiline*  
Cicero, *For Marcus Caelius*  
Cicero, *Letters to Friends*  
Cicero, *On the Laws*  
Cicero, *Philippics*  
Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*  
Livy, *The History of Rome*  
Macrobius, *Saturnalia*  
Ovid, *Amores*  
Plutarch, *Cato Minor*  
Polybius, *Histories*  
Sallust, *The Conspiracy of Catiline*

### II. Secondary Sources

Blanshard, Alastair J. L. *Sex: Vice and Love from Antiquity to Modernity*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2010.

Clarke, John R. *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C. – A.D. 250*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

———. *Roman Sex: 100 B.C. – A.D. 250*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003.

Edwards, Catharine. *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Fantham, Elaine. *Roman Readings: Roman Response to Greek Literature from Plautus to Statius and Quintilian*. New York: De Gruyter, 2011.

Foucault, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure*. 1st Vintage Books ed. Vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Random House, 1990.

Langlands, Rebecca. *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Mattingly, David J. *Imperialism, Power, and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

McGinn, Thomas A. J. *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

McKay, L. A. “Sallust’s ‘Catiline’: Date and Purpose.” *Phoenix* 16, no. 13 (Autumn 1962): 183.

Richlin, Amy. *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

Williams, Craig A. *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

First page image: *Ares e Aphrodite*, from Pompeii, in the Museo archeologico nazionale di Napoli. In the public domain.

<sup>65</sup> Clarke, *Roman Sex*, 15.