

Lucian's Megilla/us: Rethinking Gender, Agency, and Same-Sex Relationships
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In Holt Parker's influential article "The Teratogenic Grid," he claims that Roman sexuality was "a structuralist's dream," breaking down every sexual act into a neat active vs. passive grid. In so doing, he misidentifies the prostitute as a sexually active "monster" and fails to make a distinction between this figure and the *tribas*, or female homosexual, who alone in the ancient literary tradition is represented as abnormal and masculine in her sexual behavior. This paper looks primarily at Dialogue V in the second century Greek satirist Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, which includes both a lesbian and courtesan character. The literary coexistence of these two seemingly distinct female figures, who have thus far been analyzed separately in classical scholarship, allows for a reevaluation of the assumptions about female sexual roles and male perceptions of each. More specifically, the attribution of erotic language to the lesbian figure, juxtaposed with the easily persuadable nature and controlled speech of the courtesan (altogether lacking in vulgarity), reiterates the lesbian figure's representation as masculine and sexually *active*, and the courtesan as sexually *passive*.

Male anxieties about sexually active *tribades* are ubiquitous in literary sources where such gender-deviant women are portrayed as abnormal and voracious—particularly those of Ovid, Plautus, and Martial. Turning to the literary representation of courtesans, however, we see that they exhibit psychological complexity and reserved (passive) speech lacking in the suggestive qualities that are so characteristic of the speech of *tribades*. In Xenophon, Roman New Comedy and in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*, courtesan characters are similarly elevated in the text and attributed direct speech. Their psychological complexity and exercised restraint continue to be emphasized here, further contradicting the claim that prostitutes are sexually active "monsters," and accentuating the richness and predominate admiration of these figures. An additional indication of the courtesan's misidentification as "monster" is the fact that they are granted the capacity to give and receive affection, and are often the object of much devotion, rather than a mere object in exchange for sex.

However, the simplistic notion that the courtesan demonstrates passivity in sexual practice stands in contrast to her autonomous agency, which consequently presents a more complex figure than the limited identification based solely on sexuality. The courtesans discussed in this paper are explicitly characterized as, or encouraged to cultivate, the traits of male philosophers—more specifically, the act of restraint and the art of conversation. These male qualities attributed to the courtesan confirm a distinction between sexual habits and psychological disposition, for they grant her agency, but at the same time her ultimate aim in employing these traits is to resume her passive sexual role. Thus, we see that the courtesan is neither normal by social conventions, nor abnormal in sexual practice; she rejects an identification based on sexuality alone, and further challenges the concept of such categorization altogether.