

Pornographic Desire: The Moral-Psychology of Ancient Sex Work

Sex work came to represent a nexus of negative ideas including exploitation, subordination, and emasculation. While Athenian sources of the 4th c. BCE indicate this nexus only affected sex workers and their handlers by the 1st c. CE, the stigma of sex work was thought to afflict even the clientele of sex workers. Priscilla K. Coleman roundly denigrates clients as models of incontinent, insatiate servility to sexual desire. Seneca decries the loss of *pudor* necessitated by such incontinent unions (*Con.* 6.7; *Vit. beat.* 7.7.3) and describes the home and hearth of *voluptas* as the brothel (*Vit. beat.* 7.7.3). Musonius Ruffinus touts an Augustan line arguing only procreative sex with one's wife demonstrates virtuous temperance (*Fr.* 12.29-34). Dio Chrysostom goes a step further maintaining that brothel-keeping must be strictly prohibited by levying fines and care must be taken to protect the disenfranchised and enslaved from frenzied and intemperate men (*Or.* 7.134-38). All these arguments build on the assumption that sex work is representative of incontinence (ἀκρασία) and intemperance (ἀκολασία).

It is in this context that Christianity germinates. Early Christians, like Paul, were deeply concerned with extirpating πορνεία (Martin 2006). The precise denotation of this term has been the cause for considerable controversy. Gaca (2003), based on her reading of the Septuagint, proposed that Paul's concern, dissimilar to Stoic thinking, is over non-procreative idolatrous exogamy. This definition, however, is overdrawn and does not pan out in the broader Pauline corpus. More recently, Harper (2012; 2013) has argued that this term indicates sexual intercourse with a woman of debased status. Glancy (2015), however, meticulously dismantles his proposal focusing on the sexual use of slaves among ancient Jews and Christians. Both Gaca and Harper function under untenable assumptions about “discontinuity” and “uniqueness”—a critical concern of Smith (1990)—between early Christians and their Greek and Roman contemporaries,

as has been persuasively argued by Wheeler-Reed (2017). On the contrary, Wheeler-Reed *et alii* (2018) have demonstrated that πορνεία could be committed between husband and wife.

All these proposals suffer the same fatal flaws. First, definitions have proceeded synchronically. While scholars have often noted that πορνεία in the Classical period simply denoted “the practice of selling oneself as a sex worker,” most scrutiny has focused on ancient Judaism and earliest Christianity. This analysis, though marking changes over time, treats each period (or cultural subgroup) synchronically. Little attention has been given to how πορνεία developed to include much broader connotations. Subsequently, scholars have reproduced a second flaw, interrogating πορνεία in modern terms of *disoriented* desire—asking what activities fall under the category—instead of in ancient terms of *inordinate* desire. To ask what sexual acts πορνεία denotes tacitly assumes that some sexual acts are *always and necessarily* permissible while other sexual acts are *always and necessarily* impermissible.

Greek and Roman moralist, however, were concerned to prevent sexual desire from exceeding acceptable levels (Nussbaum 1994). In short, any sexual act could be censured *if done at the behest of runaway desiderative passion*. Therefore, I offer a conceptual, diachronic analysis of the πορν- word group that attempts to explain how πορνεία was transformed from the realm of sexual sale to that of sexual excess. First, I show how stereotypes, prejudices, and stigmas attached to sex workers and their clients shift in 1st c. CE. During this period, πορνεία became a metonym for ἀκρασία or ἀκολασία with respect to sexual desire. Second, I argue that Paul exhibits this same prejudice against sex workers and their clients, and further, that Paul—like Seneca, Musonius, and Dio— conceptually links πορνεία and ἀκρασία. From this I conclude that, for Paul, πορνεία denoted a system of moral-psychology in which sex work was synonymous with inordinate, uncontrolled sexual desire.

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