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DISMANTLING A CLOBBER TEXT: AN ENGAGED CRITIQUE OF ROMANS 1:26–27

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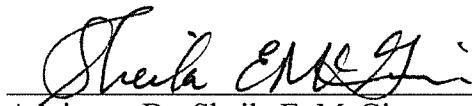
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ENGAGED CRITIQUE OF ROMANS 1:26–27

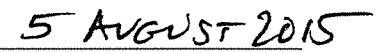
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By
Matthew Michels
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The essay of Matthew Michels is hereby accepted:

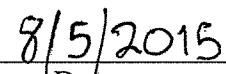


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Introduction

Few apparent references to queer sexuality appear in the Bible—a fact that may surprise some modern readers. Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, Romans 1:26–27, and, for some, Genesis 19:1–29—these six passages comprise the entirety of the Bible’s supposed consideration of persons and practices that fall beyond the ambit of a heterosexual norm. Yet a clobbering tradition has crystallized out of generations of readings of the biblical texts. In particular, this tradition does violence to persons with a queer sexuality, persons who are lesbian, bisexual, or gay, telling these persons that they are doomed to perdition, that they do not belong to the house of God, or, if they are permitted to enter, keeping them from full membership in the church, from pastorates, priesthood, and positions of authority. This tradition is still perpetuated today, perhaps most visible in the marriage arena: as recently as a few months prior to the completion of this paper, the current and former presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention issued a joint statement announcing their strictly heteronormative position on marriage,¹ and the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops decried the decision to allow gay couples the legal right to wed.² Indeed, as long as queer-bashing tradition is a living tradition, especially if it lives among the powerbrokers in the church, prophetic voices and communities, both within and outside the church, will call God’s people to repentance on account of the violence of marginalization and worse that they carry out, wittingly or no, in God’s name.

¹ See *Baptist Press*, “SBC Presidents Unite, Declare Stand on Marriage,” June 17, 2015, accessed July 6, 2015, http://www_bpnews.net/44960/sbc-presidents-unite-declare-stand-on-marriage.

² See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Supreme Court Decision on Marriage ‘A Tragic Error’ Says President of Catholic Bishops’ Conference,” June 26, 2015, accessed July 6, 2015, <http://usccb.org/news/2015/15-103.cfm>.

This paper grapples with the traditional anti-queer reading of Rom 1:26–27, which purportedly forbids Christians from entering lesbian and gay relationships in some real sense, if not entirely. I begin by sketching this traditional reading by referring to anti-queer interpretations of Rom 1:26–27 that are top hits in today’s online world; subsequently, I suggest the direction for a standard historical critique of the traditional reading by arguing for the fundamental incongruence of ancient Greco-Roman and modern Western categories of gender and sexuality. Finally, instead of establishing my own historical-critical exegesis of the text, I discuss the necessity of engaged exegesis. I perform my own engaged reading of the text by creatively entering the mind of the Roman church as they read Paul’s letter. There, I entertain the possibility that Paul’s words in Rom 1:26–27 sparked this ancient audience to condemn the androgynous priests of the goddess cults, whose wild public festivals seemed to epitomize unnatural sexual praxis. I conclude by drawing the parallel between ancient condemnation of the priests of the goddesses and contemporary churches’ ability to continue understanding and practicing Christianity in patriarchal terms—indeed, this is the reason why I focus on the praxis of the androgynous goddess priests in the first place. The key for texts like Rom 1:26–27, I suggest, lies in adopting a *tribadic* hermeneutics, which foregrounds the experience of the queer community.

A Traditional Anti-Queer Reading of Romans 1:26–

27

Of traditional anti-queer readings of the Bible, Mona West writes, “Gay and lesbian people know all too well the abuse of those who read biblical narratives as they are. Like the conquest traditions, Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26–

28, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10 have been read without the benefit of historical-critical scholarship, which indicates these texts do not address homosexuality and sexual orientation as we understand them today. Instead they have been read ‘as they are’ and used as ‘clobber texts’ that fuel hate and violence against the queer community.”³ A responsible exegete, therefore, should be prepared to adopt a critical attitude when it comes to texts that have traditionally been used to clobber queer groups into silence or worse. This critical posture can manifest in the rigors of historical investigation or the shrewd self-consciousness of more engaged approaches.

Indeed, Romans 1 was cited to me, a bisexual millennial living in a region and culture often hailed for its progressive outlook, when I came out. I was told that I had “chosen” to live “in direct disobedience to the revealed will of God” on the basis of this passage as well as a text in Leviticus. And I am far from the only victim of the traditional, queer-clobbering reading of the text. To the contrary, a keyword search using the term “Romans 1:26–27 commentary” returns top results that cite these verses as a condemnation of homosexuality, and, presumably, queer sexuality in general.⁴ The second search result links to a commentator who interprets Paul’s outline of idolatrous exchange in the pericope Rom 1:18–32 to include a condemnation of homosexuality, identifying the “degrading passions” of the women who are the subject of verse 26 as “homosexuality, a sin indubitably condemned in Scripture.”⁵ The commentator adduces

³ Mona West, “Outsiders, Aliens, and Boundary Crossers: A Queer Reading of the Hebrew Exodus,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 79.

⁴ Search performed using the Bing search engine on June 22, 2015.

⁵ Bruce Hurt, “Romans 1:26–27 Commentary,” PreceptAustin.org, last modified December 26, 2013, accessed June 22, 2015, http://www.preceptaustin.org/romans_126-27.htm.

the usual clobber texts to his case, including Gen 19:5, Lev 18:22–28, 1 Cor 6:9, and 1 Tim 1:10, along with a handful of other passages that purportedly have something to do with the topic of homosexuality in the Bible. The commentator goes on to find Rom 1:27 to contain a similar condemnation of male homosexuality. The sixth search result calls homosexuality a “perversion of sex.”⁶ The fourth search result brings up an older commentary on Romans 1 which states that the “very sin of ‘sodomy’ is here designed ... an exceeding great sin this is, contrary to nature, dishonourable to human nature, and scandalous to a people and nation among whom it prevails.... It is a sin which generally prevails where idolatry and infidelity do.”⁷ Regarding this search result, my point is somewhat more nuanced, as it is not to lambaste this commentary, which today must be considered a source from its own time. The problem is rather that a commentary such as this is uncritically appropriated by modern readers and subsequently used to clobber queers. Consider, for instance, how the website hosting this commentary praises it as “contain[ing] priceless gems of information that are found nowhere except in the ancient writings of the Jews” without a word on the originating context of the commentary.⁸

More search results could easily be listed here.

The traditional reading of Rom 1:26–27 is held up by hidebound proof-texting to bolster positions and ideas that are completely foreign to the world of the Bible no matter what evidence is presented to the contrary. This practice continues in spite of the fact that

⁶ David C. Grabbe, *Forerunner Commentary*, BibleTools.org, accessed June 22, 2015, <http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Bible.show/sVerseID/27957/eVerseID/27957>.

⁷ John Gill’s *Exposition of the Bible*, BibleStudyTools.com, accessed June 22, 2015, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/romans-1-27.html>.

⁸ BibleStudyTools.com, accessed June 22, 2015, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/>.

self-avowed and well-researched “ahistorical” programs of textual interpretation are liable, as Elizabeth Clark points out, to smuggle in an uncritical perspective, such as the assumption that “all Biblical texts speak together in relative harmony, [so] that the various books, chapters, and strata exist in communion together.”⁹ One important remedy is a good dose of historical criticism, which is sensitive to the complex historical processes that shaped all the biblical texts.

When approaching a question that pertains to notions of sexuality and gender in the ancient Greco-Roman world, such as the contemporary reader’s question about the identity of the men and women who are mentioned in Rom 1:26–27, utmost caution must be exercised to avoid imposing modern categories of sexuality and gender that are incongruous with the Greco-Roman context. A typical modern Western mindset on sexuality and gender might be crudely sketched as follows. Sexuality and gender comprise distinct facets of the human person. Sexuality is a person’s orientation to be sexually attracted to persons of a particular gender and is parsed in terms of a person’s own gender: straights are oriented toward persons of the opposite gender, lesbians are women who are sexually attracted to women, etc. Gender itself, however, is a personal-social construct that reflects the integration (and tension) of myriad traditions and influences—genetic, cultural, racial, familial, religious, existential, and so on—into a particular identity, such as maleness or femaleness. Perhaps the most familiar gender schema is the binary formulation of cismaleness (men whose gender corresponds to their

⁹ Elizabeth A. Clark, “History, Theology, and Context: The Analysis of Romans in Bernadette Brooten’s *Love between Women* and Francis Watson’s *Agape, Eros, Gender*,” in *Gender, Tradition and Romans: Shared Ground, Uncertain Borders*, ed. Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 199.

biological sex)/cisfemaleness (women whose gender corresponds to their biological sex).

But this obviously does not represent the only formulation of a modern gender schema, as it says nothing of transgendered persons.

In face of the Western mindset on sexuality and gender, the ancient world is a completely different question. Diana M. Swancutt illustrates as much in her essay on Roman “sexuality.”¹⁰ As her point of departure, Swancutt takes a groundbreaking earlier essay researching the concept of the *tribas* in Greco-Roman culture. There, the referent of the term *tribas* (pl. *tribades*) was argued to be females with homoerotic inclinations whom Roman elites disparaged through ideological tropes in order to paper over the reality of female homoeroticism in the empire.¹¹ Swancutt points out that this definition, while pivotal for its recognition of the ideological dimension operative in Roman elites’ use of *tribas*,¹² is deficient for its reliance on modern Western categories of sexuality and gender that do not pertain to the Roman experience of these phenomena:

The interpretive grid … that of “homoeroticism,” distorts [scholars’] results by leading them to interpret the figure [of the *tribas*] primarily as a function of the *sameness* of the participants’ sex and, by extension, as a referent to actual homoerotic women in Rome. Although the use of “homoeroticism” reflects historians’ efforts to avoid the modern discourse of “sexuality” as a description of ancient sex … the discursive category of “homoeroticism” is a similarly modern, Western substitute. Like “sexuality,” it treats the biological sex of one’s sex-partner, taxonomized on the equally modern two-sex model of the human body, as the defining feature of eroticism.¹³

¹⁰ Diana M. Swancutt, “*Still before Sexuality*: ‘Greek’ Androgyny, the Roman Imperial Politics of Masculinity and the Roman Invention of the *Tribas*,” in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

¹¹ See Judith P. Hallett, “Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 255–73.

¹² Swancutt, “*Still before Sexuality*,” 11.

¹³ Ibid., 14–15.

Swancutt complains because she perceives historians to be insufficiently sensitive to the fundamental inequivalence of ancient Greco-Roman and modern Western conceptions of the human body. The latter, as she mentions, often manifests in two basic sexes, male and female. It is precisely this distinction between different sexes that allows Western science to separate sexuality and gender as separate categories. But the model of sex and body at work in the Greco-Roman gender schema was not two-sex and egalitarian; rather, it was one-sex and hierarchical. Swancutt explains, “Pre-modern Westerners ranked bodies on a hierarchical gender spectrum of relative physical perfection (masculinity); relegated females, as the most imperfect male-bodies, to the bottom of that spectrum; and recognized the existence of ‘middling’ androgynous bodies that possessed masculine and less-perfectly masculine (that is, feminine) physical attributes.”¹⁴

What must be recognized and excluded from the interpretive grid of exegetes treating the Roman period is a conceptualization of sexuality and gender such that sexuality is understood as the gender toward which the Roman person, like the modern person, was innately oriented. To the contrary, Swancutt protests against the definition of *tribas* as a concept formulated by elite Romans out of their experience of female homoeroticism. Such a definition unjustifiably presumes that Romans consciously had an experience explicable in terms of a Western conception of sexuality—namely, a conception which is based on persons’ biological sex. This conception, however, originated in the nineteenth-century discourse of Western medical science, which introduced the notion of a biological orientation toward a particular sex, and psychology,

¹⁴ Ibid., 18–19.

which contributed the idea of the innate human drive for sexual intercourse. An important consequence of these scientific models consisted in the distillation of sexuality and gender into distinct and independent categories. What before was regarded as “gender-inversion” now came to be known as “homosexuality,” the phenomenon seen in persons who have sex with other persons of the same gender because of their innate biological drive to same-sex intercourse.¹⁵

Swancutt insists that at the heart of this category error is the uncritical assumption that Greco-Roman persons understood themselves as possessing sexual orientations independently of their gender identity. She argues that a study of sex acts in classical Greek antiquity reveals that the active/passive dichotomy of sexual roles was simply an aspect of the masculine/feminine gender paradigm—the active role of course being ascribed to masculinity, and the passive role to femininity. Similarly, she argues that investigation of Roman sexual ideology signals an even stronger conviction: an active sexual role is not merely an aspect of masculinity, nor the passive role merely a side of femininity, but rather the masculine is defined as the active, and the feminine is defined as the passive. What this leads to is the insight that, for the ancient Romans, one’s gender was constituted by the character of the sex acts in which one engaged. As Swancutt puts it, “Whether ‘active/insertive’ or ‘passive/receptive,’ sex acts in Rome were therefore gender-identifying acts.”¹⁶ Consequently, a comparison between this and modern Western ideas about sexuality and gender might be presented visually as such:

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17–18; original sentence was set in italics.

Modern Western

- Two-sex model: male and female
- Male and female bodies are biologically equal
- Multiple sexual orientations: lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and so on

Greco-Roman

- One-sex model: male
- Male bodies are superior, the perfect form of the human body; female and androgynous bodies manifest some defect
- No sexual orientations; rather, sex acts are *gender*-constitutive

A standard historical critique of the traditional reading of Rom 1:26–27, then, would take this incongruence of Greco-Roman and Western categories of sexuality and gender as its point of departure. From there, the task would be to delve more deeply into whom Paul was referring to in these verses, since they could not have been the ancient equivalent of lesbian and gay partners.¹⁷ My task, however, is different: I will engage Rom 1:26–27 from my vantage point as a member of the contemporary queer community who has been clobbered by this text.

¹⁷ A key phrase in Rom 1:26–27 is the Greek *para physin* or “unnatural” (Brooten, “Paul’s Views,” 74). Among the possible referents for this “unnatural intercourse,” Jay Michaelson lists the reversal of gender roles in sexual intercourse and the practice of pederasty. The possibility of pederasty is further supported by the Greek term *arsen* that appears in verse 27, which the NRSV translates as “men.” *Arsen* in fact is broader in scope, as a more precise translation—“male” in English—could encompass both men and boys. The Greek word for an adult man, on the other hand, is *aner* (Jay Michaelson, *God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality* [Boston: Beacon Press, 2011], 81–82). (Michaelson uses the singular *aner* to refer to adult men, but this is not correct; see Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985], 428.) Michaelson therefore suggests that Paul’s avoidance of the use of the term specific to adult men strengthens the interpretation that the referent of *para physin* in verse 27 is the practice of pederasty (*God vs. Gay?*, 81–82). This interpretation becomes even more favorable in light of the fact that the passive male sex partner—the *mollis* or the *pathicus*—was stigmatized in Rome (Swancutt, “*Still before Sexuality*,” 31–32). All this discussion, however, is preliminary and intended by way of example of how historical critique might proceed.

The Necessity of an Engaged Approach

The need for an engaged approach is precipitated by the limits of historical criticism. (By the same token, engaged approaches can always stand to benefit from solid historical research.) This is because the outcome of historical analyses is governed by the circumstances of the ancient context that is being studied. No one can say *a priori* whether or not historical investigation of a text or problem passage will arrive at a particular picture of ancient times. The strictly historical exegete cannot say in advance that the Bible will of necessity advocate for the inclusion of groups, such as the queer community, that have traditionally been oppressed by biblical discourse. For instance, who knows beforehand whom Paul might be referring to in Rom 1:26–27? Upon examination, might it not turn out that Paul is condemning a group of persons whom moderns would like to include in the church today?¹⁸ One might speculate based on the trajectory of the received text, but until the research is done, such questions will remain unanswered. An exegete who has restricted himself to historical criticism, however, would be hard pressed to articulate a full-force biblical response to historical inquiry into Rom 1:26–27 that produces unfavorable results for certain demographics in the church.

The foundation of an alternative, engaged approach to the biblical texts lies in taking account of the social location from out of which the exegete herself works and interprets. Her own historical context is *always* determinative in her interpretations of the biblical text—if not overtly, then more than likely because she is representing a well-accepted and mainstream view. Hans Georg Gadamer—and Richard J. Bernstein’s

¹⁸ The first section of the paper illustrates this: it is only *after* historical critique of the imposition of modern categories of sex and gender on ancient times that I am able to begin to reject the anti-queer reading of Rom 1:26–27.

explanation of Gadamer's work, *Truth and Method*—offer a model which is worth unfolding here, since it sheds light on the crucial role of the interpreter in the process of forming interpretations and ultimately grounds the validity of an engaged hermeneutics. The model with which Gadamer works has been dubbed the “hermeneutical circle” in the philosophy of hermeneutics. The concept of a hermeneutical circle first reached expression in the work of Martin Heidegger, and it is taken over by Gadamer in providing a non-Cartesian epistemology or account of the structure and possibility of knowledge.¹⁹

For Gadamer, the hermeneutical circle explains how understanding, or interpretation—these two epistemic processes are interchangeable—fundamentally involve the participation of the understanding subject, or the interpreter, with the object which she is trying to understand. For this paper, of course, the object of interpretation is a scriptural text. In affirming the importance of Gadamer's insight, Bernstein touches on the basic dimensions of his conception of the hermeneutical circle:

The most important consequence of Gadamer's understanding of the hermeneutical circle is that it clarifies the relation between the interpreter and what he or she seeks to understand.... We must learn the art of being responsive to works of art, texts, traditions ... that we are trying to understand. We must participate or share in them, listen to them, open ourselves to what they are saying and to the claims to truth that they make upon us. And we can accomplish this only because of the forestructures and prejudgments that are constitutive of our being. When Gadamer says that works of art, texts, or tradition “speak to us,” he is not referring to a loose, metaphorical way of “speaking” that we ourselves “project” onto the texts; rather, he is expressing what he takes to be the most fundamental ontological character of our being-in-the-world.²⁰

¹⁹ See Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 118. A rough but enduring image of a “Cartesian” epistemology consists in the scientific experiment, which is governed by a well-defined method that enables the scientist, the dispassionate subject, to manipulate his object, detached and isolated from his own worldview, to produce knowledge. For a more in-depth sketch of the Cartesian program, see Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 115–18.

²⁰ Ibid., 137.

This dense summary of the basic elements of Gadamer's hermeneutical circle may be even further distilled: responsiveness to the object of interpretation, which requires the participation of the interpreter in the world of the text, is an unavoidable task, because both the interpreter and the text are historically constituted, or constituted as particular existences in this historical epoch or moment. Each of these elements of the hermeneutical circle will be explained in greater detail in the following paragraphs, with the conclusion tying this discussion into where it began: the need for an engaged approach to texts like Rom 1:26–27.

In explaining his insistence that interpretive participation or self-involvement always informs the process of interpretation, Gadamer makes recourse to his concept of play. He begins to develop this concept, as Bernstein notes, with reference to works of art: “A work of art is not to be thought of as a self-contained and self-enclosed object ... (something *an sich* [in itself]) that stands over against a spectator.... There is a dynamic interaction or transaction between the work of art and the spectator who ‘shares’ in it.”²¹ Gadamer first illustrates this dynamism through the example of a game or children’s play. The game reveals itself not as an object under the control of the players, but rather as a happening or event that moves according to its own rhythm of to-and-fro:

Play obviously represents an order in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself.... The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus takes from him the burden of the initiative.... This is seen also in the spontaneous tendency to repetition that emerges in the player and in the constant self-renewal of play, which influences its form.²²

²¹ Ibid., 123.

²² Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 94, as quoted in Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 121.

The players of the game are absorbed into the rhythm and internal dynamism of play; they do not set the agenda once they have entered into the game, but rather respond to the exigencies of the game itself. Construed this way, play has its own being independent of the consciousness of the players, and the proper description of the relation of the players to their play is that play “reaches presentation” or is mediated through them.²³

Gadamer utilizes the example of a dramatic or musical performance to illustrate play as an independent being that nevertheless depends on the participation of the players in order to become manifest. Bernstein explains that the “original score or text needs to be understood and interpreted by those engaged in the performance. In this context we do not have any difficulty in speaking of the original score or text making claims upon the interpreter and in realizing that all interpretation involves highlighting.”²⁴ Far from erasing the text that is to be interpreted, to say that interpretation of a musical or a drama demands the creative engagement of the conductor or the director is to imply that their interpretation will be obliged to respond to the claims that the text makes upon them. For otherwise they would not be interpreting *this* text, but another text entirely! What is important, however, is to notice that Gadamer’s concept of play recognizes the ineluctable impression—designated as “highlighting” by Bernstein—that the interpreter herself leaves on the text that she interprets.

It would be well to scrutinize the nature of this “interpretive impression” more closely, because the engaged exegete not only acknowledges that she leaves such an impression on the texts with which she works, but she does so self-consciously and with a

²³ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 121.

²⁴ Ibid., 124.

definite trajectory for future interpretation and handling of the text. Gadamer sees the roots of the particular imprint created by the interpreter as consisting in her prejudices or prejudgments:

It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being.... Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us.²⁵

The interpreter cannot ignore her inherently historical constitution. From the moment that she is born into the world, she is “always already ‘thrown’ into a tradition,”²⁶ or, more accurately, multiple traditions, which offer her sometimes competing personal and social identities and the materials for further (re)construction of who she is in the world. She cannot help but possess—or be prepossessed by—any number of prejdgments about her experience, which are at first given to her by the traditions that concretize her social location. If she seeks understanding of her experience, including the texts which she consciously engages therein, she must rely on her prejdgments about that experience, about that text, to understand it at all. To think otherwise is to pretend that she has no historical rootedness in the world, no historicity. Of course Gadamer fineses his defense of the place of prejudice in all interpretive activity by acknowledging the distinction between blind prejudices and justified prejudices. Moreover, the process whereby blind prejudices are dismantled actually occurs in the encounter with the other, especially with

²⁵ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 9, in Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 127.

²⁶ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 142; emphasis removed.

“works of art, texts, and more generally what is handed down to us through tradition.”²⁷

True openness to the other—or, more precisely, to the claims made by the other upon the interpreter—allows the interpreter to “risk and test” which among her prejudgments are no more than blind prejudices.²⁸

At this point, Gadamer has provided sufficient resources to ground the validity of engaged projects of interpretation. To summarize: interpretation, including that of a religious text, fundamentally depends on the pre-judgments of the interpreter for its final shape. This is because the process of interpretation draws the interpreter up into a dialogue with the text that is able to be parsed in terms of the concept of play: once the interpreter has opened herself to the claims that might be made on her and her existing pre-judgments by the text, and, conversely, understanding that the text is automatically subject to the claims of the pre-judgments that issue from the interpreter’s own social location, interpreter and text subsequently are subsumed in a quest for meaning whose final result will depend on mutual and substantial contributions from each other. Engaged interpretation takes this basic model one step further in recognition of the fact that the text or the interpreter’s pre-judgments can be accorded more or less weight. Rather than suppress or minimize her pre-judgments so that she might bend her life around what the text has to say—this would be a preference for or foregrounding of the *text*—the engaged interpreter or exegete foregrounds *her own pre-judgments*. The engaged exegete usually makes this move, and feels justified in doing so, moreover, out of a wider and persistent experience of oppression or marginalization, as well as out of the conviction that a

²⁷ Ibid., 128.

²⁸ Ibid., 128–129.

particular (tradition of) interpretation necessarily leads to a particular sort of *praxis*. Thus, communities that have been subjected to historical marginalization at the hands of pernicious scriptural interpretation stand to be *liberated* by the interpretation and praxis of engaged exegesis.

Engaging Romans 1:26–27 in Solidarity with the *Tribas*

So what might a typical engaged queer approach resemble? There is no uniform hermeneutical key here, as might be expected. Writing from the social location of a woman born in the 1930s and reared in a Christian worldview in which the only authorized voice was that of a heterosexual white male, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott recommends a strategy of reading the biblical texts from “low and outside.” She explains this terminology:

From low because my status as female was secondary and silenced in the church of my youth, where girls and women wore hats to signify our submission to male authority and where even in Bible studies we were not permitted so much as to ask a question. From outside because my lesbianism (fully recognized by age eleven) took away from me even the humblest of insider status in a community that never mentioned that kind of sin.²⁹

Mollenkott’s experience growing up has particular resonance with this paper as she relates that when she was only thirteen years old, someone—evidently aware of her sexual orientation—admonished her on the basis of Romans 1, telling her that she would be worthy of death if she were to continue to love women.³⁰ The central hermeneutical

²⁹ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, “Reading the Bible from Low and Outside: Lesbitransgay People as God’s Tricksters,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 13.

³⁰ Ibid., 14.

move in the reading strategy that Mollenkott utilizes to combat such admonishments is an emulation of biblical tricksters. This emulation highlights how queers in whom other marginalized statuses also intersect (such as being female, black, and poor) may not be afforded the opportunity to act according to the so-called absolute of coming out of the closet, whatever the cost.³¹ Mollenkott points to the paradigmatic example of Rebekah, who, according to her divinely given knowledge that her younger son Jacob was to usurp Esau's inheritance, set up an elaborate ruse so that Isaac would be tricked into bestowing upon Jacob what was the first son's by right (and privilege, to the disadvantage of other sons). Drawing a parallel to the inherent disadvantage of queer folk in contemporary, heteronormative society, Mollenkott remarks that "Rebekah's and Jacob's gaining of power through subterfuge [is] a paradigm for all queer people who are forced to disguise all or part of their reality as the price of fulfilling their vocation, their divine calling in life."³²

Elizabeth Stuart draws on the ironic posture of camp culture vis-à-vis the dominant, mainstream culture in offering another hermeneutical key that can contribute to a queer reading of the biblical text. For Stuart, the paradoxical and ultimately parodic relationship of queer camp culture to the heteronormative mainstream empowers a subversive critique of the structures that disenfranchise queer persons. The laughter of the camp becomes for her a new way for queer Christians to relate to the scriptures. Queer persons' initial experience of the Bible usually consists in coming to know the Bible as the preeminent clobber text. Camp laughter transforms this oppressive, tragic encounter

³¹ Ibid., 17.

³² Ibid., 19.

into a creative and comic interaction that breathes new life into queer Christians' relationship with the text.³³ Stuart provides an example of reader-response criticism that employs camp humor as an effective means for rereading Eph 5:21–33, since the “reading tradition in which [she] was nourished taught [her] to read this text as a magnificent theology of marriage, which took that sexual state and that state alone into the mystery of the triune God.”³⁴ She finds camp humor in this passage by leveraging one commentator’s observation that since Christian women are Christ inasmuch as they are part of the church, they are husbands and grooms by virtue of the passage’s marriage metaphor. Put bluntly, the logic of this passage that is hailed by heteronormative culture in fact envisages a “transgenderization” of women. The “incongruity of this reading with the ‘original’ reading is enough to stimulate laughter,” so that it is “funny that this passage should be read so often and so solemnly at weddings, the great ceremony of heteropatriarchy.”³⁵

As for an engaged queer reading of Rom 1:26–27, I suggest that a hermeneutical key may be found in how the ancient church of Rome might have appropriated Paul’s words. In particular, I show that this ancient audience had the option of using the words of the Bible to fuel pre-existing cultural distrust and hatred of genderqueer persons. My approach is engaged, because it stems from my experience as a member of the queer community who has been oppressed by the traditional anti-queer reading of the biblical

³³ Elizabeth Stuart, “Camping around the Canon: Humor as a Hermeneutical Tool in Queer Readings of Biblical Texts,” in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 28.

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

³⁵ Ibid.

text and vows in advance to safeguard the precious vitality of queer experience. Furthermore, I intentionally foreground experiences and phenomena to which today's queer community can relate on a fundamental level; here, I will imagine that the ancient Roman church had the potential to condemn the genderqueer praxis of the priests of the goddess cults in service to Christian ideology, to the "gospel message." Ultimately, I claim that the ancient Roman church could have legitimized a "Christian" exclusion of genderqueers from their midst, ignoring the egalitarian seed that Paul insists is part of the *true* gospel message. This willing ignorance of the truth, of course, is a route that is still very much palatable to some among the church today.

In the mind of the church in Rome, Paul's letter easily could have included a disparaging reference to genderqueer praxis in the surrounding culture. The text is embedded in a longer pericope that begins in verse 18 and ends in verse 32, which is concerned to denounce Gentile idolatry and immorality. Assuming that the pericope—and indeed the entire section from 1:18 to 3:20—reflects a genuinely Pauline position,³⁶ it may still be remarked that the character of Paul's denunciation is not altogether novel, as he either took over a similar denunciation in *Wisdom of Solomon* or else relied upon the same tradition as did *Wisdom of Solomon*.³⁷ The pericope in question reads as follows, with the verses under inspection being set in italics:

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. [19]

³⁶ See Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 359–60, for arguments to the contrary, including proposals that this section is a later interpolation or that it is actually an argument that Paul intends to undermine; these issues will not be explored here, as this paper is written to the audience that believes that Paul is responsible for 1:18–3:20, as well as the rest of the letter.

³⁷ Ibid., 356.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] Ever since the creation of the world his [*sic*] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools; [23] and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. [24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. [26] *For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, [27] and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.* [28] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. [29] They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, [30] slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.³⁸

The tone of this pericope is wholly denunciatory. Paul's point of departure in verse 18 is to single out the kind of "wickedness" which "suppresses the truth," declaring in verses 19–20 that God has revealed Godself, God's power, and God's divinity through the visible results of the act of creating the world. Thus, Paul continues on in verses 21–23 to illumine the sorry state of the Gentiles' perspective on the truth about God, pointing out how they foolishly have devoted themselves to the worship of idols fashioned after humans and animals—ironically, the very things that God has created. Verses 24–28 detail God's giving over of the Gentiles to their sinful lusts as a consequence of their

³⁸ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

idolatry, and verses 29–31 enumerate a colorful vice list detailing exactly the sort of lusts in which the Gentiles now partake. Verse 32 concludes the pericope with the comment that these idolatrous Gentiles engage in their vices without shame, and encourage others to do the same, even though they know that they “deserve to die” on account of their behavior.

For the church in Rome, this denunciatory rhetoric could have applied to the praxis of the androgynous priests of the goddess cults in Rome. Jeramy Townsley’s work illumines how verses 26–27 could have implied a reference to these goddess cults. He begins with the observation that verses 23–28 contain three parallel statements in which Paul links idolatry to corrupt sexual practices. These five verses, which are grammatically set apart from the sin list that follows in 29–32,³⁹ are unified by a recurrent pattern: Gentile exchange of God for idols prompts God to give the idolaters over to sexual proclivities. Verses 23–24 depict God giving idolaters over to bodily disgrace with one another since they have exchanged God in order to worship things that have been created. Verses 25–26a again show God giving idolaters over, this time to unnamed erotic passions.⁴⁰ The crucial item to notice is that the pattern in 23–24 and 25–26a could be seen by the church in Rome as recurrent in 26b–28. On the surface, these verses refer to a sexual rather than idolatrous exchange: women are seen switching natural intercourse for “unnatural” sex, and men are seen doing the same (and the men’s exchange is even more explicit, as Paul writes that the men have opted for unnatural intercourse with other men). But if these women and men are understood to be engaging in the ritual sex acts that

³⁹ Jeramy Townsley, “Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects: Romans 1:23–28,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 4 (2011): 710.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 709.

were practiced in the context of *goddess worship*,⁴¹ then here is a third instance of God giving Gentiles over (v. 28) to sexual proclivities because of their idolatry (vv. 26b–27). Indeed, verses 26b–27 could be understood as pointing to one concrete example of how the Gentiles’ idolatrous ways have devolved into sexual immorality.

To the church in Rome, this kind of idolatry would have been clearly visible in wider Greco-Roman culture. The *Magna Mater* or great mother goddess cult was prominent during the time in which Paul was on his missions. Cybele, the “Mother of the Gods,” was worshiped throughout the Roman Empire. The cult of Cybele and her consort, Attis, involved “wild, bloody, orgiastic, cathartic” worship ceremonies.⁴² Sites of worship dedicated to goddesses, such as the Ephesians’ temple to Artemis and the Corinthians’ temple to Aphrodite, appeared in many of the large cities, as did temples to Cybele and the female deities Venus and Demeter. A temple dedicated to Cybele had been constructed on Rome’s Palatine Hill by 191 BCE.⁴³

A distinctive element of goddess worship consisted in the sexual roles played by androgynous priests. Male members of Cybele’s and Artemis’s priesthood were castrated and assumed a passive role in ritualistic anal sex,⁴⁴ which defined them as androgynes according to the Roman notion of sex acts as gender-constitutive. As a matter of fact, Townsley notes that the nexus between goddess religions and androgynous priests was a long-standing one: “The historical connection between the goddess religions and gender-

⁴¹ Ibid., 710.

⁴² Anthony E. Smart, “Cybele,” in *Encyclopedia Mythica*, July 19, 1988, last modified April 25, 2005, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/c/cybele.html>.

⁴³ Townsley, “Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects,” 717.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 719.

variant priests goes back at least as far as the Sumerians in the third millennium BCE, appearing in temple records as the *gala/kalu* priest in relation to the goddess Innana.”⁴⁵ From the *gala/kalu* priests of Innana, to the *assinu* of Ishtar, to the male temple prostitutes attested in the Hebrew scriptures, historical record continuously links priests of the goddesses to castration, anal penetration, reversal of sexual roles in worship, and cross-dressing.

Roman citizens were prohibited from becoming *galli*—castrate priests of the goddess—until 101 BCE. Some restrictions on membership in the priesthood persisted until Claudius cleared these away circa 50 CE. From this time on, the state became increasingly involved in the celebration of the goddess cults. The *Archigallus* was established as a state-appointed position, and the festivals of the “Day of Blood” and Cybele’s *Megalensia* were incorporated into the official religious calendar.⁴⁶ On the Day of Blood, the initiates into the order of the *galli* made a public spectacle of castrating themselves in frenzied rituals. Lucian’s observations in the second century CE indicate that the Day of Blood festival was a primary opportunity for young men wishing to join the ranks of the *galli* to commit the act of castration. In an all too literal symbolism, these new priests exchanged their testicles for the women’s garb that concretized their identity as *galli* and non-males:

During these days they are made Galli. As the Galli sing and celebrate their orgies, frenzy falls on many of them and many who had come as mere spectators afterwards are found to have committed the great act. I will narrate what they do. Any young man who has resolved on this action, strips off his clothes, and with a loud shout bursts into the midst of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 719–21.

the crowd, and picks up a sword from a number of swords which I suppose have been kept ready for many years for this purpose. He takes it and castrates himself and then runs wild through the city, bearing in his hands what he has cut off. He casts it into any house at will, and from this house he receives women's raiment and ornaments. Thus they act during their ceremonies of castration.⁴⁷

The church in Rome would have been encouraged to repudiate the gender-defying actions of the *galli* as “non-Christian” from multiple angles. One influence toward excluding the *galli* from among their midst could have been located in Christian polemic. Hippolytus, a second-century Christian apologist, actually refers to Rom 1:26–27 in condemning the gender-changing act (i.e. castration) of the *galli* of Cybele and Attis:

For (the Naassene) says, there is the hermaphrodite man, ... [and] Attis has been emasculated, that is, he has passed over from the earthly parts of the nether world to the everlasting substance above, where, he says, there is neither female or male, but a new creature, a new man, which is hermaphrodite. As to where, however, they use the expression ‘above,’ I shall show when I come to the proper place (for treating this subject). But they assert that, by their account, they testify that Rhea is not absolutely isolated, but—for so I may say—the universal creature; and this they declare to be what is affirmed by the Word. *Wherefore also God gave them up unto vile affections; for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature.* What, however, the natural use is, according to them, we shall afterwards declare. *And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly....* For in these words which Paul has spoken they say the entire secret of theirs, and a hidden mystery of blessed pleasure, are comprised.⁴⁸

The Naassenes were a Gnostic sect who elevated Attis to a status on par with Christ. It is likely that the root of Naassene practice and belief can be traced to the cult devoted to Attis and Cybele and the *galli*'s practice of self-emasculation. Hippolytus here refers to

⁴⁷ Lucian *The Syrian Goddess*, trans. Herbert Strong (1913; repr., London: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 61, as quoted in Townsley, “Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects,” 722.

⁴⁸ Hippolytus *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.2, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5 (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1886), 49–50, as quoted in Townsley, “Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects,” 723; emphasis *sic*.

Attis's self-emasculation in order to become a "new man," that is, an androgynous being, and he sees the Naassenes holding up Attis's action as a model for gender transcendence.

According to the *Gospel of Thomas*, the Naassenes were motivated towards gender transcendence, because they believed that the unity achieved through the erasure of gender was necessary in order to enter the heavenly realm.⁴⁹ Hippolytus, of course, decisively rejects the Naassenes' strategy of transcending gender, borrowing Paul's words in Rom 1:26 to label self-emasculation as a "vile affection" (NRSV: "degrading passions") that God has given the Gentiles over to. Hippolytus may be equally concerned to arrest the growth of the popularity of castration among Christian men as an avenue to fulfill Jesus's words in Matt 19:12,⁵⁰ concerning those "who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Christian men who followed this course of action in Hippolytus's day may have been motivated by the understanding that Jesus was indicating a path better than marriage (see Matt 19:10).

It is possible that Christian polemic against the *galli* could also have been perceived in the Ethiopic version of the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Here an unnamed group of men is castigated for having "defiled" themselves "in the fashion of women":

These are worshippers of idols.... These are they which have cut their flesh as apostles of a man, and the women who were with them...and thus are the men who defiled themselves with one another in the fashion of women.... All idols, the works of men's hands, and what resembles the images of cats and lions, of reptiles and wild beasts, and the men and women who manufactured the images, shall be in chains of fire.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Townsley, "Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects," 723–24.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 724.

⁵¹ *Apocalypse of Peter*, Ethiopic fragment, in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. R. McL. Wilson, trans. Edgar Hennecke, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 676–77, as quoted in Townsley, "Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects," 712.

Like Paul in Rom 1:26–27, this text establishes a connection between idol worship and “defiling” sex acts as well as contains a reference to both a group of men and a group of women. If the group of men referenced are the castrate priests of the goddess—and not, say, Gentiles who are understood as having circumcised themselves under the impression that such was a condition on their Christianity (cf. Gal 5:2–6)—then the text could be seen as accusing the priests of assuming a passive, feminine role in sexual intercourse alongside their manufacture and worship of idols. Interestingly, there is no mention of sex acts committed by the women, but only that the women were “with” the men, and in this fragment “absent is any clear reference to relationships between women.”⁵²

Indeed, the mention of women here and in Romans heightens the possibility that the church in Rome perceived Paul’s meaning in verses 26–27 to be condemnatory of the praxis of the *galli*. This is due to the fact that elite Roman men had built a discourse around the figure of the *tribas* who was mentioned in the first section of the paper. Returning to Swancutt’s analysis of elite Romans’ discourse of the *tribas*, recall that the Roman gender schema is one-sex (male) and hierarchical. It is thus observed that the discourse around the *tribas* emerged as an ideological stereotyping of a *third gender* whose constitutive sex acts did not neatly align with active and penetrative masculinity or passive and receptive femininity.⁵³ Thus, the figure of the *tribas*, in the mind of the Roman male elite, is illuminated as a true androgyne.⁵⁴

⁵² Townsley, “Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects,” 712.

⁵³ Swancutt, “*Still before Sexuality*,” 18–19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 20–21.

The figure of the *tribas* occupies a prominent place in Bernadette Brooten's important collection of entries in the Greco-Roman discourse around the tribadic gender, including the perspective of the Roman elites. Although Brooten filtered these entries according to her working assumption that the subject of this discourse was homoerotic women and not androgynes, a review of the Greek and Roman authors she surveys and analyzes, conducted through the lens of the Roman elites' ideological stereotyping of the *tribas*, is important for revealing an overwhelmingly negative appraisal of tribadic sex acts.

Authors writing in Latin certainly disapproved of the sex of the *tribades*. Seneca the Elder (born circa 54 BCE) authored two main works, including a volume entitled the *Controversies* which was comprised of hypothetical legal cases.⁵⁵ One of these cases involved two *tribades*, one of whose husband discovered the pair in bed and subsequently killed them. Comments by one of Seneca's fictitious declaimers in the case imply that the murder of the adulterating *tribas* was justified precisely by virtue of the adulterer's androgynous gender.⁵⁶ Thus the lover of the murderer's wife is regarded as less worthy of forbearance and, presumably, justice, because the lover is not male.

The Latin poet Phaedrus, who died around the middle of the first century CE, gives an etiology of androgynous sex acts. For Phaedrus, women who take on an active sexual role vis-à-vis other women, as well as the men who assume the passive role in sexual intercourse, owe their proclivity to divine inebriation. Prometheus, having had too

⁵⁵ See William Seaton, "Seneca the Elder," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 211, *Ancient Roman Writers*, ed. Ward W. Briggs, 277–80 (Detroit: Gale Group, 1999).

⁵⁶ Bernadette J. Brooten, "Paul's Views on the Nature of Women and Female Homoeroticism," in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 66–67.

much to drink one evening, switched the sexual organs in his creations, giving female genitalia to men and male genitalia to women. Phaedrus comments on the god's creative mishap with a resigned tone, "Therefore lust now enjoys perverted pleasure."⁵⁷ Phaedrus's etiology of androgynous gender thus (im)moralizes androgynous practices despite his tacit recognition that *tribades* and androgynous men have no control over the form of their body—it is Prometheus, after all, who is responsible for their creation.

Martial, the renowned Roman epigrammist born circa 40 CE,⁵⁸ contributes perhaps the most graphic entry that will be found in this list of Greco-Roman literature on tribadic sex acts. Martial composed several epigrams on the *tribades*. Two of these feature Philaenis, who is supposed to exemplify the quintessential *tribas*, the "tribad of the very tribads."⁵⁹ This Philaenis frequently assaults boys and girls alike in a manner that is "quite fierce with the erection of a husband."⁶⁰ Among Philaenis's pastimes are heavy athletic activity, including being whipped, and consuming and disgorging enormous quantities of meat and wine. Bassa, the subject of another epigram by Martial, becomes a scandalous figure, because Martial has deduced that Bassa is a "fucker"—he uses the masculine *fututor*—and not the chaste woman that he once esteemed Bassa to be. And the reason that Bassa has so scandalized Martial?—Bassa initially impressed him by abstaining from sleeping with men, but Martial's approbation turns to horror as he surmises the explanation for Bassa's apparent chastity. The reason behind why Bassa is

⁵⁷ Phaedrus *Liber Fabularum* 4.16, as quoted in Brooten, "Paul's Views," 66.

⁵⁸ See William J. Dominik, "Martial," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 211, *Ancient Roman Writers*, ed. Ward W. Briggs, 173–82 (Detroit: Gale Group, 1999).

⁵⁹ Martial *Epigrammata* 7.67, 7.70, as quoted in Brooten, "Paul's Views," 67.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

always going around with other women is that Bassa is actually having sex with these women. Martial declares with disgust that Bassa's "monstrous lust imitates a man."⁶¹ Admittedly, Brooten's warning that these epigrams should not be read in isolation from the rest of Martial's oeuvre should be heeded, since "vulgar and violent language and imagery ... are typical of Martial's style."⁶² But just because his epigrams about Philaenis and Bassa do not stand out by virtue of their grotesque and vituperative language does not negate the fact that Martial *did* gear such language specifically toward the tribadic sex acts of Philaenis and Bassa and *not*, say, towards the chastity to which Bassa could have attained. The inference to be drawn is thus clear: Martial thinks of tribadic sex acts as a vice, and a positively repulsive one.

In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid (43 BCE–18 CE) tells the story of Iphis and Ianthe, who are in love and set to marry. This strange situation has arisen because her mother has hidden Iphis's gender since her birth, rearing her as a boy instead. (Iphis's mother had wanted to please her husband, whose desire was to have a boy, not a girl.) Iphis describes her quandary—the fact that she loves another woman—as "unheard of" and "monstrous." The action only moves forward when Iphis is granted her despairing wish no longer to be female, the goddess Isis transforming her into a boy.⁶³ The *Metamorphoses* thus reinforces the Roman gender hierarchy even absent explicit appearance of a *tribas*, since Iphis must be changed into a male in order to carry on as a character in Ovid's tale and,

⁶¹ Martial *Epigrammata* 1.90, as quoted in Brooten, "Paul's Views," 67.

⁶² Brooten, "Paul's Views," 67.

⁶³ Ibid., 66.

more fundamentally, as a lover of Ianthe. Masculinity—not tribadic androgyny—is highlighted as the only proper channel for intercourse with women.⁶⁴

The seed for this Roman disgust at *tribades* and passive male androgynes was not first planted by Roman culture: this they owed to the Greeks.⁶⁵ And the Greeks had a parallel discourse around the figure of the *tribas*, although the earliest entries (as collected by Brooten) appear to have a more fluid conception of the non-males who could have sex with women. That is, the assumption that either a man or a *tribas* had to be the active agent in intercourse with a passive woman was not operative in these early sources. Take, for instance, the interlocutor Aristophanes of Plato's *Symposium*, likely the earliest Greek source on sex acts involving a non-man and a woman. Aristophanes provides three separate etiologies corresponding to three respective types of sex acts: male-male, female-female, and male-female. He reasons that each type of sex act has its origin in the primordial union of two partners mirroring the gender of the partners in the contemporary sex act. Thus, male-male sex acts are explained by the primeval union of two men, female-female sex acts are rooted in the primeval union of two women, and male-female sex acts, the primeval union of a man and a woman. The disparity between this—which does not even invoke the rhetoric of tribadism⁶⁶—and later entries, which explicitly treat of tribadic sex, is noticed by Brooten, who claims that Plato has accorded

⁶⁴ Swancutt offers an alternative interpretation of the tale of Iphis and Ianthe, according to which Iphis is already a *tribas* because Iphis has exemplified the custom of men in dress, in being reared as a boy, and even in name. Regardless, the evaluation of Iphis still turns out negatively: the love of Iphis and Ianthe represents a monstrosity. “*Still before Sexuality*,” 45–48.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 57n134.

a kind of “natural” status to each type of sex act;⁶⁷ at the very least, Aristophanes’ etiologies are noteworthy for their lack of any manifest preference for male-female sex acts.

Another early Greek source is illustrative because its commentaries provide evidence of an evolution in later Greek discourse toward a denunciation of tribadic sex acts. Asclepiades of Samos was a Greek epigrammist who wrote primarily circa 285 BCE.⁶⁸ In the third century BCE, he wrote an epigram that tells the story of two women named Bitto and Nannion. These women reject the laws of Aphrodite, instead choosing to love each other. This prompts Asclepiades to invoke Aphrodite’s hatred towards them—an outlook that already carries a more decided preference for male-female sex acts than that found in Plato’s *Symposium*. Most interesting, however, is a later commentator’s clarification that Asclepiades is denouncing Bitto and Nannion as *tribades*.⁶⁹ Thus the commentator infuses his interpretation of Asclepiades’s epigram with a negative discourse around the figure of the *tribas* that, while perhaps latent, is nevertheless not articulated by Asclepiades himself. Presumably, then, this discourse has grown up and taken root in the Greek culture of the commentator in the time since Asclepiades first composed his epigram.

Indeed, this discourse is evident in the Greek writers of the Roman period. Lucian of Samosata, second-century CE Greek author of the *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, includes a dialogue that involves a sexual encounter between Megilla and Demonassa.

⁶⁷ Brooten, “Paul’s Views,” 65.

⁶⁸ See F. A. Wright, *The Poets of the Greek Anthology* (London: George Routledge and Sons, n.d.), 3ff.

⁶⁹ Brooten, “Paul’s Views,” 65–66.

Although Swancutt points out that the rhetoric of tribadism does not explicitly figure in the dialogue,⁷⁰ if Brooten is correct in interpreting Lucian, then Megilla is portrayed as a *tribas*. Megilla claims truly to be called by the masculine name Megillus. Megilla wears a short haircut and hides the cut with a wig, and avers to be in possession of a substitute for a penis. Leaena, the character through whom Lucian narrates this episode, is made to be ashamed of the intercourse between Megilla and Demonassa, to the extent that she refuses to describe in detail the nature of their sex acts.⁷¹ The readers of the dialogue, who identify with Leaena as an observer of the sexual encounter of Megilla and Demonassa, are therefore also supposed to feel her shame and indignation at this tribadic sex.

Writings such as those of Plutarch, a Roman philosopher who lived circa 45–120 CE, do not militate against the Roman and Greek disapproval of the figure of the *tribas* and the passive male androgyne, even though they appear at first to support androgynous sex acts. In writing about the Sparta of yore, he approves of the practice of man-boy couplings for the benefits that this practice confers upon the boys' education.⁷² What keeps Plutarch's positive assessment of ancient Spartan man-boy sex acts perfectly in tune with the Roman understanding of the mature *vir*, the Roman citizen-male, is that the Spartan analogue is assumed to hold a purely active sexual role. Indeed, *pedicators* were

⁷⁰ Swancutt, "Still before Sexuality," 58–59.

⁷¹ Brooten, "Paul's Views," 69.

⁷² Ibid.

Roman citizen-males who assumed the active role in sex acts with boys, while the latter, because they were not yet men, did not transgress their sex-gender identity.⁷³

In all these Greco-Roman authors, it is important to notice an ideological dimension. For elite Roman *viri* constructed the androgynous figure of the *tribas* as an ideological stereotype to propagandize against what they perceived to be the political threat represented by the growing power of the Roman matrons. This propaganda had roots in the days of the early republic, during the culture's empire-building phase from the third century to the first century BCE. Of this period, Swancutt writes, "Roman elites redefined the ethnic element of the Greek meaning of the androgyne as a 'foreign gender-freak (*teras*), resignifying it as a non-Roman monstrosity of nature—transforming a Greek definition into a means of Roman ethnic self-definition over against the peoples (including the Greeks) that the Romans were fighting."⁷⁴ Elite Roman men converted initial Greek disapproval of the *tribas*, as detailed above in the discussion of Asclepiades of Samos, his commentators, and Lucian of Samosata, into a symbol of the Greeks' and other foreign people's own monstrosity as a means of managing and bounding Roman ethnic identity. The category of androgyny accrued not just the meaning of a less-than-perfect gender but also the connotation of the empire-eroding threat of ethnic miscegenation, so that the visibility of androgynes in Rome portended imminent ruin at the hands of foreign powers. This sometimes drove Romans to extreme measures, as in

⁷³ Swancutt, "Still before Sexuality," 17. Plutarch's positive appraisal of woman-girl sex acts is more of a puzzle, because only a male or a *tribas* could take up an active sexual role in the Roman mind. Perhaps it is an exception to the rule, allowed because of its historical distance from contemporary Rome—Brooten issues a similar caution about assuming that Plutarch's assessment of "ancient Spartan customs" has any bearing on his potential approval of those same customs in his own day (69). In any event, more research on this point is required.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 23; emphasis removed.

the case of the public burning of androgynes living in proximity to the city, which Diodorus recorded.⁷⁵

Roman suspicion of the Cybele cult shows that stereotyping of androgynes out of an ideology of empire persisted into the Common Era. As mentioned earlier, *viri* were forbidden from joining the ranks of the *galli* up until the time of Claudius. “A variety of Roman authors also decried the castration of the Galli,” Swancutt states, “calling them *semimares*, *semiviri* and ‘*nec viri nec feminae*'; criticizing them for religious insanity; and linking this madness with their foreign origin, the Gallus river in Phrygia.”⁷⁶ In this excoriation of the practice of the *galli*, androgyny is once again confined to the category of the foreign and thus doubly removed from the notion of the *vir*, who is male and Roman.

Swancutt notes how the notion of the *vir* explicitly functioned as a symbol of the Roman imperial project: “Romans uniquely marked the body of the Roman *vir* with the anxieties of empire. Romans overtly identified physical inviolability and a *huge* penetrating phallus with Roman male imperial power. Hence, the *vir* was and had to remain *the* ideological sign of Roman inconquerability—the impenetrable penetrator, he who could not be invaded.”⁷⁷ This symbol of the status of the empire, compensating for the anxiety of elite Roman *viri* with an enormous phallus, also operated to marginalize Roman androgynes. The passive male androgyne—the *mollis* or the *pathicus*—was heavily stigmatized, and the active female androgyne, the *tribas*, was so ideologically

⁷⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 31; emphasis *sic*.

repulsive as to be a contradiction in terms: “The penetrative-*femina* was not just an oxymoron, h/e was ideologically unnamable. The idea of the penetrative-wo/man—who by the standards of the one-body model climbed the gender hierarchy and made herself a man—was so unacceptable that it could not even be named as a Roman possibility.”⁷⁸

And why could this possibility not be named? The threat by Roman matrons to the power of the *viri* was too close for comfort, too near to becoming a reality. Changes to regulations around marriage and divorce allowed affluent Roman women greater latitude with respect to their wealth. Furthermore, Roman matrons had solidified their grip on certain channels of political influence, especially the avenue to power mediated by cultus; once more, the goddess cults are significant to this discussion, as they are seen here as sites of power through gender-defying acts: “In the religious arena Roman matrons not only participated in the gender-bending Bona Dea rituals, but helped to found the Roman Cybele/Magna Mater cult. The matron Claudia Quinta was credited with establishing this cult on the Palatine and becoming the first Roman priestess of the Magna Mater; many matrons followed her lead.”⁷⁹ The capacity of matrons’ solidification of political power to unnerve the elite *viri* was compounded by the fact that they represented the class of persons closest to the *viri* themselves, who occupied the apex of the Roman gender schema. Thus, concern over the growing power of Roman matrons led the *viri* to paint them with the stereotype of the *tribas*, tapping into ideological techniques of ethnic differentiation by linking matrons’ political influence to

⁷⁸ Ibid., 32; emphasis removed.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 36.

the subversive and effeminating influence of “Greek” cultus, including the cult of the *Magna Mater*.⁸⁰

The predominant discourse that has emerged from a review of pertinent Greco-Roman literature, therefore, is one of moral censure and disgust: tribadic androgynes are characterized literally and figuratively as perverts and monsters, as divine foul ups. Moreover, this discourse was ideological in character, shoring up the Roman imperial project. This ideological character could fit easily with the ideological thrust of Paul’s rhetoric in Romans 1. Of course, unlike Roman elites, Paul was unconcerned with the effeminization of the empire or the activity of Roman matrons. But he was driven to propagate that gospel which had been revealed to him through Christ (see Gal 1:11–12). And his ambiguous condemnation of unnatural intercourse could easily have been filled in by the Roman church as a denunciation of the ritual sex acts performed among the priesthoods of the goddess cults, which to Christian ideology would seem to be unchecked idolatry. Any among the church who had occasion to witness the goings-on of the Day of Blood would be confronted with the searing images of self-castration and frenzy, thus cementing the logic of Paul’s gospel ideology. That is, the ancient Roman church could have seen in the praxis of the androgynous *galli* the dire need for the truth of Paul’s message: the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16).⁸¹

One final influence that could have directed the Roman church to condemn the praxis of the *galli* consists in the Hebrew scriptures. In particular, it is possible that the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 32–33.

⁸¹ Cf. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans*, 361: “1:16–17 [is] the thesis for the entire section, 3:21–23 the repetition and expansion of that thesis.”

church may have appropriated the purity logic of the Mosaic law, especially since Jewish sources roughly contemporary to Paul's letter mirror the gendered logic of the Roman elite. *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides*, a diasporic work dated by its translator to between circa 30 BCE–40 CE, contains the injunction, "Let not women imitate the sexual role ... of men."⁸² The *Sentences* also interdict long male hair and male hair-braiding, and they stipulate that adequate precautions must be taken to ward off sexual advances to beautiful boys and virginal girls.⁸³ Perhaps the only distinctive aspect of the *Sentences* is their rejection of not only tribadic sex and other gender-defying activities but also their repudiation of pederasty—a mark of their Jewish, and not Roman or Greek, authorship.

A rabbinical commentary entitled *Sifra*, which compiles sayings that originated from before circa 220 CE, interprets Lev 18:3:

Scripture teaches, "You shall not walk in [the Egyptians' and Canaanites'] statutes" (Lev. 18:3).... And what did they do? A man married a man and a woman a woman, and a man married a woman and her daughter, and a woman was married to two men.⁸⁴

This commentary is interesting for its expansion of the original content of Leviticus. Although Lev 18:3 begins a list of activities that have been forbidden to the Israelites, including the proscription of "l[ying] with a man as with a woman," there is not a similar proscription of women taking up an active sexual role.

Indeed, the ancient Roman church may have fused the logic of ancient Israel's purity laws embedded in Leviticus with Greco-Roman gender norms. The people of

⁸² *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides*, trans. P. W. Van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1978), line 192, pp. 225–257, as quoted in Brooten, "Paul's Views," 64.

⁸³ Brooten, "Paul's Views," 65.

⁸⁴ Translation by Brooten, "Paul's Views," 64; see A. H. Weiss, ed., *Sifra*, (Vienna: Schlossberg, 1862), on Lev. 18:3 (Aharei Mot, Parasha 9).

ancient Israel articulated a clear schema of the world in which different categories, “classifications for animals, peoples, sacrificial victims, priests, and women,” were kept visibly separate.⁸⁵ Among the Hebrew scriptures, two texts—one in Leviticus 18, and the other in Leviticus 20—refer to sexual intercourse between an active male penetrator and a passive male recipient. These texts, motivated by an understanding of the special place of the Israelites before God, underline the Israelites’ need to remain separate in their situation of Babylonian exile, the period during which they were composed. Priestly writers emphasizing the purity of visible categories thus incorporated gender role distinctions into their purity law schema⁸⁶—and the ones who were marginalized as a result of this ideological move were, unsurprisingly, the androgynous, passive men who lay “with a male as with a woman” (Lev 18:22).

Conclusion: Foregrounding the Tribadic in Approaching Romans 1:26–27

In my reading of Rom 1:26–27, I have been careful to highlight how this text *could* have been received by the church in Rome as a condemnation of the genderqueer praxis of the goddess priests and their tribadic companions while holding back from actually ascribing this view to the ancient church. My chief point rather is to gesture to parallel situations in the contemporary church. In approaching texts like Rom 1:26–27, I

⁸⁵ Brooten, “Paul’s Views,” 72.

⁸⁶ Gwen B. Sayler, “Beyond the Biblical Impasse: Homosexuality through the Lens of Theological Anthropology,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 82–83. David Frederickson would disagree with Sayler and claim that for Paul, this is a moral issue about the need for self-discipline, not a desire to preserve the purity laws of ancient Israel. But this ignores the deeper point of compatibility that the purity laws have with Greco-Roman gender norms: the exclusion of the androgynous passive male for the maintenance of a particular ideology. “A Friendly, Hellenic Response to Professor Sayler,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 93.

suggest that an important hermeneutical key to the passage is the ideological dimension operative in the ancient plight of the *tribades*, the *galli*, and other genderqueer groups. Today, readings of potential clobber texts ought intentionally to counteract any Christian-ideological move to exclude queer persons by engaging from the start the history and experience of the queer community. The fact that the androgynous *galli* may have suffered from an oppressive ideological reading by the ancient Roman church should resonate with modern readers who are sensitive to the specific plight of genderqueer persons and, indeed, the entire queer community in a church that largely operates according to patriarchal and male-female binary terms. Thus, contemporary readers of verses 26 and 27 ought to “foreground the tribadic,” as it were.

In sum, contemporary queer identities, such as the categories “gay” and “lesbian,” were not available to Paul’s audience from their first century Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts.⁸⁷ But in reading Rom 1:26–27, the ancient church in Rome could have condemned the genderqueer praxis of the priests of the goddess cults as an ideological expedient: the already marginated *galli* could have served to illustrate in colorful terms Paul’s broader point about idolatry and the Gentiles’ need for God’s salvation. Townsley observes that the practice of the *galli* in goddess cults may have been perceived as a quest for transcendence.⁸⁸ This may have been unknown to the ancient church, if it castigated the practice—or maybe even beyond the scope of its *caritas*. But where the ancient church may have made a misstep, today’s churches would do well to remember the baptismal formula that Paul chose to include in his letter to the Galatians: “As many of

⁸⁷ Cf. Townsley, “Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects,” 708.

⁸⁸ See Townsley’s discussion of the Naassenes, “Paul, the Goddess Religions, and Queer Sects,” 722ff.

you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:27–28). The distinctions imposed by human culture and society—and exploited by patriarchal hegemony—cannot be sources of marginalization in the church. Today, therefore, Christian recognition of genderqueer praxis as a site of authentic transcendence and movement into the divine, alongside the genuine and loving relationships shared among the queer community, lesbian, gay, or bisexual, will go a long way towards furthering the reign of God on earth.

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