

LESBIANTIQUITY

ISSUE 6

c. 347 BC / February 2024 AD



PLATO

ARISTOKLES

LAWFUL PLEASURE?

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Plato translation, introduction, and notes © Nicole Speth 2024

Greek text from: R. G. Bury, ed., *Plato: Laws*, Volume I: Books 1–6, Loeb Classical Library 187 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926)

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THE TRANSLATOR

Nicole Speth

I have a Bachelor's degree in Classics from Hofstra University and a Master's degree in Classics from the University of Washington. My studies have focused on sexuality in antiquity, and I wrote my undergraduate thesis on female homoeroticism in the Roman Empire. I am particularly interested in depictions of sexual relationships that highlight elements of reciprocity rather than hierarchical power structures.



ΠΛΑΤΩΝ / 'ΑΡΙΣΤΟΚΛΗΣ

Plato (428/7–348/7 BCE) was an Athenian philosopher and the founder of the Academy. An adoring student of Sokrates, most of his writings are in dialogue form with Sokrates as the central character and mouthpiece for Plato's own philosophical views.

The *Laws*, Plato's final work (unfinished at the time of his death), is the only work of his in which Sokrates does not make an appearance.¹ Instead, the *Laws* has three characters – Klinias (a Cretan man), Megillos (a Spartan man), and an unnamed Athenian man who serves as Plato's mouthpiece. Throughout the dialogue, the three men attempt to come up with laws and practices which citizens should follow in order to have the most ideal city possible. Unlike Plato's *Republic*, which undertakes to establish a philosophical rule in a sort of utopia, the *Laws* is intended to be more practical and realistic, taking into account human nature and desire and how they might affect compliance.²

This passage of the *Laws* embodies a value that comes up quite often in the overall work – resistance to and temperance of pleasure.³ The argument here starts by talking about the Spartans' gymnasias and dining groups (636a–b). The Athenian claims in this passage that these places may seem helpful in promoting virtues, but they also encourage sexual deviancy, including male and female homoeroticism. Surprisingly, despite his condemnation of homosexuality, the Athenian calls it *nomimon* or *nomon* (636b), words used to express that a practice is habitual or customary, but which also has a strong connotation of lawfulness. This may be because in this text Plato is developing his own ideal new laws.

¹ Boehringer (2021) p. 105.

² Boehringer (2021) p. 105.

³ Meyer (2018).

Finally, Plato inveighs against the (homo)sexualisation of the myth of Zeus and Ganymede.

It is quite notable that Plato here presents female-female relationships in the same sentence and in comparison with male-male relationships (636c). It is exceedingly rare in antiquity to compare female homoeroticism to male homoeroticism in any way. To my knowledge, with the exception of medical and astrological texts, the only other ancient source that draws a similar comparison is the Lucianic *Erotes*.⁴ In that text, a character tries to argue against male-male relationships by saying that female homoeroticism should obviously not be allowed, so male homoeroticism should also be disallowed. The presentation of this argument, though, is intended by Lucian to be completely absurd to an ancient audience, and he ends up losing the debate in part because of the absurdity of this comparison. Plato's reference to female-female relationships is extremely brief (blink and you'll miss it), but together with his consideration of women who love women in the *Symposium*⁵ it makes him one of the ancient authors with most representation of female homosexuality.

⁴ See LESBIANTIQUITY 26.

⁵ See LESBIANTIQUITY 5.

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ROOT & BRANCH READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore

a variety of options for the text:

any variants in the original < Greek / Latin > texts
and the various possible meanings in English.

Our translations are rooted in the words
of the original text, replicating when possible

word order, root meanings of words, and
grammatical gender ($\begin{bmatrix} [n] \\ [f] \\ [m] \end{bmatrix}$) of words about people.

You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

LAWS 1.636A-D

MEGILLOS

“it is not nearly easy: for it seems the (common halls
dining groups
common meals
mess-rooms) and the
gymnasia are found well for both of these.”

ATHENIAN

“it seems certainly, (foreigners
strangers
guests), to be difficult for the (commonwealth
government
administration
polity)
to be (without controversy
indisputable) equally in both deed and word. for it
runs the risk, just as in bodies, that it is not possible to (prescribe
command)
for one body any one (practice
habit
custom), in which this same thing would
not seem to be a harm to our bodies, [636b] but also a help:



ΜΕΓΙΛΛΟΣ

Σχεδὸν οὐ ράδιον· ἀλλ' ἔοικε γὰρ τὰ τε ξυσσίτια καὶ τὰ γυμνάσια
καλῶς εὐρῆσθαι πρὸς ἀμφοτέρας.

ΑΘΗΝΑΙΟΣ

Ἔοικε δῆτα, ὧ ξένοι, χαλεπὸν εἶναι τὸ περὶ τὰς πολιτείας
ἀναμφισβητήτως ὁμοίως ἔργῳ καὶ λόγῳ γίνεσθαι. κινδυνεύει γάρ,
καθάπερ ἐν τοῖς σώμασιν, οὐ δυνατὸν εἶναι προστάξει τι πρὸς ἐν
σῶμα ἐν ἐπιτήδευμα, ἐν ᾧ οὐκ ἂν φανείη ταύτῳ τοῦτο τὰ μὲν
βλάπτον τὰ ἡμῶν σώματα, [636β] δὲ καὶ ὠφελούην·

NOTES

636a *the dining groups / common meals / mess-rooms / common halls and the gymnasia*: Spartan men were required to belong to a dining group of mixed social class. These groups helped to equalize society and form bonds between men who would fight together. The gymnasia were places where men exercised together naked. Whether he is correct or not, Plato here is likely under the impression that these dining groups and gymnasia encouraged homosexuality. For more information, see Powell (2002).

636a *both of these*: courage/manliness and moderation/self-control, topics which the Athenian has proposed.

whereas both these gymnasia and $\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{common halls} \\ \text{dining groups} \\ \text{common meals} \\ \text{mess-rooms} \end{array} \right)$ in many other ways now help the $\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{city} \\ \text{polis} \\ \text{community} \end{array} \right)$, as to $\langle \text{uprisings} \rangle$ $\langle \text{factions} \rangle$ they're difficult: the children of Miletos and Boeotia and Thourioi $\langle \text{show} \rangle$ $\langle \text{prove} \rangle$ this. and indeed, $\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{even if} \\ \text{though being} \\ \text{though it seems} \end{array} \right) \left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{long-standingly} \\ \text{, of old,} \\ \text{a long-standing} \\ \text{an old} \end{array} \right\rangle \left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{customary} \\ \text{lawful} \\ \text{custom} \\ \text{law} \end{array} \right\rangle$, it seems } this $\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{practice} \\ \text{habit} \\ \text{custom} \end{array} \right)$ has utterly $\langle \text{destroyed} \rangle$ $\langle \text{corrupted} \rangle$ the pleasures according to nature about $\langle \text{things sacred to Aphrodite} \rangle$ ^{sex} not only of $\langle \text{humans} \rangle$ $\langle \text{people} \rangle$ but also of beasts. and for these things someone would $\langle \text{find as the cause} \rangle$ $\langle \text{blame} \rangle$ your $\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{cities} \\ \text{poleis} \\ \text{communities} \end{array} \right)$ firstly and [636c] however many of the others very much $\langle \text{cling to} \rangle$ $\langle \text{engage in} \rangle$ the gymnasia:



ἐπεὶ καὶ τὰ γυμνάσια ταῦτα καὶ τὰ ξυσσίτια πολλὰ μὲν ἄλλα νῦν ὠφελεῖ τὰς πόλεις, πρὸς δὲ τὰς στάσεις χαλεπά· δηλοῦσι δὲ Μιλησίων καὶ Βοιωτῶν καὶ Θουρίων παῖδες. καὶ δὴ καὶ $\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{πάλαι ἂν νόμιμον} \\ \text{—πάλαι ὄν νόμιμον—} \\ \text{παλαιὸν νόμον} \end{array} \right)$ δοκεῖ τοῦτο τὸ ἐπιτήδευμα καὶ $\langle \text{τὰς} \rangle$ κατὰ φύσιν $\langle \text{τὰς} \rangle$ περὶ τὰ ἀφροδίσια ἡδονὰς οὐ μόνον ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ καὶ θηρίων διεφθαρκεῖναι. καὶ τούτων τὰς ὑμετέρας πόλεις πρῶτας ἂν τις αἰτιῶτο καὶ [636ε] ὅσαι τῶν ἄλλων μάλιστα ἄπτονται τῶν γυμνασίων·

636b *polis/city/community*: at this time, Greece was not a unified country but instead a collection of poleis, or city-states. Each polis had its own laws, government, and culture separate from any other polis in Greece.

636b *Miletos and Boeotia and Thourioi*: the cities Miletus, Thebes (in Boeotia), and Thuri were known in Plato's time for their civil strife (Meyer 2015 p. 142).

636b *πάλαι ὄν νόμιμον / πάλαι ἄν νόμιμον / παλαιὸν νόμον*; *being long-standingly/, of old, customary/lawful // if long-standingly/, of old, customary/lawful // a long-standing/old custom/law*: Bury's (1926) version; Boeckh's emendation; the manuscripts' reading.

636b *νόμιμον / νόμον*; *customary/lawful / custom/law*: while this word can be used to express that a practice is habitual or customary, it also has a strong connotation of lawfulness. This may seem like a surprising choice of words here for Plato, given his condemnation of these sexual practices. Although in a text where Plato is developing his own ideal laws, seemingly because the current Athenian laws are unsatisfactory to him, perhaps lawfulness is not a good thing.

636b <τάς>: the diamond brackets indicate that this word was omitted from the manuscript and has been added by the editor.

636b [τάς]: the square brackets indicate that this word was once in the manuscript but is now missing and has been restored by the editor.

636b *utterly destroyed/corrupted*: in the Greek, this verb is delayed to the end of the sentence to heighten its effect.

and whether ($\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{playing} \\ \text{jesting} \\ \text{being childish} \end{array} \right)$ or being $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{earnest} \\ \text{serious} \end{array} \right\rangle$ it is necessary to $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{consider} \\ \text{have in mind} \end{array} \right\rangle$ such things, one must $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{consider} \\ \text{have in mind} \end{array} \right\rangle$ that to the female nature and to the nature of males, when it comes into $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{intercourse} \\ \text{communion} \end{array} \right\rangle$ of $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{procreation} \\ \text{production} \end{array} \right\rangle$, the pleasure about these things, in accordance with nature, seems to have been $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{assigned} \\ \text{given over} \end{array} \right\rangle$, but [the pleasure] of men with men or of women with women is contrary to nature and there is a $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{bold} \\ \text{daring} \end{array} \right\rangle$ act of the first ones [doing this] because of their $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{lack of self-control} \\ \text{debility} \end{array} \right\rangle$ of pleasure. and we all indeed $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{denounce} \\ \text{accuse} \end{array} \right\rangle$ the Cretans about the $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{tale} \\ \text{myth} \end{array} \right\rangle$ of Ganymede [636d], since they $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{made up the story of} \\ \text{word-created} \end{array} \right\rangle$ these things: since the laws were believed to be made for them by Zeus, they added this $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{tale} \\ \text{myth} \end{array} \right\rangle$ about Zeus, so that indeed following the god they may also $\left\langle \begin{array}{c} \text{reap} \\ \text{enjoy} \end{array} \right\rangle$ such pleasure.



καὶ εἴτε παίζοντα εἴτε σπουδάζοντα ἐννοεῖν δεῖ τὰ τοιαῦτα, ἐννοητέον ὅτι τῆ θηλείᾳ καὶ τῆ τῶν ἀρρένων φύσει εἰς κοινωνίαν ἰούση τῆς γεννήσεως ἢ περὶ ταῦτα ἡδονὴ κατὰ φύσιν ἀποδεδοῦσθαι δοκεῖ, ἀρρένων δὲ πρὸς ἄρρένας ἢ θηλειῶν πρὸς θηλείας παρὰ φύσιν καὶ τῶν πρώτων τὸ τόλμημα εἶναι δι' ἀκράτειαν ἡδονῆς. Πάντες δὲ δὴ Κρητῶν τὸν περὶ τὸν Γανυμήδη μῦθον [636δ] κατηγοροῦμεν, ὡς λογοποιησάντων τούτων· ἐπειδὴ παρὰ Διὸς αὐτοῖς οἱ νόμοι πεπιστευμένοι ἦσαν γεγονέναι, τοῦτον τὸν μῦθον προστεθεικέναι κατὰ τοῦ Διός, ἵνα ἐπόμενοι δὴ τῷ θεῷ καρπῶνται καὶ ταύτην τὴν ἡδονήν.

636c of *women with women*: the crucial phrase.

636c–d *denounce/accuse the Cretans about the tale/myth of Ganymede ... they added this tale/myth about Zeus*: in Greek mythology, Ganymede was a young and beautiful young man from Troy. Zeus, seeing Ganymede's beauty, became infatuated with him and sent an eagle to abduct him and bring him to Mount Olympus. Once on Olympus, Zeus made Ganymede his personal cup-bearer, and there is an implied sexual relationship between them. In the version of this myth that appears in Homer, there is no overt sexual element to Zeus and Ganymede's relationship. Later versions of the myth introduce the sexual element, which Plato blames on the Cretans.



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