

# Classic vices and virtues

Love, Sex and Tragedy  
September 24, 2004

The blurb for Simon Goldhill's *Love, Sex and Tragedy* claims that it is part Alain de Botton and part Will Hutton. This claim is as deceptive as the book's title. Love, Sex and Tragedy has the popular intellectual grace of de Botton's *How Proust Can Change Your Life*, but it is more than clever and everywhere avoids being tongue-in-cheek.

Goldhill argues for the interdependence of classical and modern Western culture, but his book is no simplistic self-help invitation to rejoin the classical world. Its ultimate lesson is subtler. From Erasmus to Freud, from Keats and Oscar Wilde to Mussolini and, albeit questionably, George W. Bush, the classical past has had many influences on modern Western culture, often simultaneously good, bad and ugly. Goldhill invites us to explore these like Oedipus, to find out where we come from, who we are and where we are going. He emphasises, again without being preachy or doom-saying, the costs of not engaging the past in an informed way. I wish more classicists would write as invitingly and honestly as Goldhill does about the humanistic values embedded in the complex history of the classical tradition. The world would be a better place.

Readers who look for love, sex and tragedy in the book will find them. It is not a classicist's version of Bill Bennett's *Book of Virtues*. There is plenty of vice and plain entertainingly weird behaviour in Goldhill.

We find out how classical notions of representations of the female body affected John Ruskin's anecdotal inability to consummate his marriage. We come to understand the cultural meaning of a winged phallic-bodied Pompeian doorbell, with its own phallus and snaky phallus-tail.

We get a look at Freud's study, at an Athenian *ostrakon* with a graffito of a Persian bowman, at the discus thrower from Leni Riefenstahl's film *Olympia*, at a Roman Christian woman's silver make-up casket with its surprising Botticelli-like *Birth of Venus* decoration, and at Quentin Metsys' portrait of Erasmus. Each of the 50 well-chosen illustrations underscores the difficulties in tracking how the Greeks and Romans have influenced us.

Goldhill takes us through the early and later Christian world's various transformations of classical notions of sexuality and physical pleasure.

Extreme concepts such as "holy virginity" and "celibacy" had to be negotiated and reconciled with, not to say compromised by, what is possible and necessary for most human beings. Clement of Alexandria may have thought that by viewing a wall painting of Aphrodite "your

eyes have whored; your sight has committed adultery". But no-nonsense holy men such as Synesius, bishop of Cyrene, declared that "God, the Law, and the holy hand of Theophilus" had joined him in holy matrimony with his wife. He refused to be separated from her or to visit her secretly like an adulterer - or, for that matter, like a young Spartan husband in conformity with Spartan eugenic theories of deprived and thereby enflamed male passion.

Prospective readers who are seduced by the title would hardly expect to find tragedy treated in a lengthy chapter on the place of Athenian dramatic festivals within the political life of an imperial state aware of its own brutal use of military force. Nor would they predict that Sophocles'

*Oedipus the King* would come up after a detailed account of how the recovery of ancient Greek material culture and the early stages of research on Indo-European languages contributed to the formation of German Aryan nationalism. Wagner, Riefenstahl, Nietzsche, Winckelmann, Lessing, Hitler and even Manfred Korfmann's excavations at Troy are all part of German political ideology. Greek tragedy and Freud are there, too.

No Greek or Roman would be so naive as to imagine that a change of title would induce Church of Christ or Southern Baptist ministers to read a book such as *Love, Sex and Tragedy*. What would they think of Erasmus'

demonstration, from textual criticism of Greek manuscripts, that the standard Latin vulgate version of the Bible was in error? Might they ponder how problematical it is to translate "logos" in St John as "word" (Latin *verbum*), or to think that any of us has access to the mind of God?

Goldhill himself might have stressed that the absence of divinely inspired "word-of-God" texts in Greek and Roman cultures sets them apart from Judaeo-Christian and Islamic cultures. And so Oedipus and Greek thinkers such as Socrates were freer to question the nature of the human condition.

Goldhill emphasises free inquiry, citizen participation and open public debate as underpinnings of a healthy democratic state. But he idealises Athenian democracy somewhat. After all, a state with a population of about 300,000 (100,000 slaves) was constructed so that about 40,000 free male citizens could exercise their civic duties. Even then, Aristophanes tells us that citizens had to be coerced by threat of fines to attend the assembly.

Nonetheless, citizens were not removed from crucial decision-making as they are in Western "representative" democracies. As Goldhill explains, every Athenian office holder had to fear being scrutinised about and fined for what he did while in office. If scrutinies (*euthunai*) were standard practice today, politicians might take time to read Aristotle and Cicero, as a

spokesperson on June 14, 2002 claimed President George Bush did. All we know for sure now is that on September 11, 2001 he was reading *My Pet Goat* .

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## **Love, Sex and Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes Our Lives**

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