

Chapter Seven: Putting the Roman back into romance: the subversive case of the anonymous *Teleny*

*Jennifer Ingleheart*

The Introduction to this volume outlines the frequent demonization of Roman homosexuality as lewd and basely sensual in tandem with the valorization of ‘Greek love’ as noble and sexless in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the period in which a recognisably ‘modern’ homosexual identity is usually agreed to have begun to take shape.<sup>1</sup> However, in contrast with such public apologetic attempts to disown or censure the frankly physical aspect of Roman homosexuality, it was possible in more ‘private’ contexts to embrace Rome and thereby challenge the sanitized version of homosexuality (both contemporary *and* ancient) found in other writings of the period. This chapter explores a non-canonical text of the late Victorian age which subverts contemporary responses to sex in antiquity: the anonymous pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893).<sup>2</sup> This text suggests that ‘Greek love’ can hardly be separated from sex; moreover, it turns the contemporary condemnation of Rome on its head by using Roman (rather than Greek) models to portray a loving, long-term relationship between adult males. Significantly, it does not depict a Greek-style *erastes/eromenos* relationship, the configuration in which male desire usually appears in the period.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, *Teleny* demonstrates a detailed knowledge of Roman discourse on sex and sexuality, and it uses this to challenge Roman ideas and ideals of masculine behaviour. My conclusion briefly explores a modern gay novel which perceptively responds to *Teleny's* reception of Roman homosexuality, Alan

Hollinghurst's justly acclaimed 1988 debut, *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Like much of Hollinghurst's work, this novel is deeply concerned with gay history and gay histories, and it riffs on *Teleny* and its portrait of gay men who look back to ancient Rome to see images of their own desires. It thereby effectively dramatizes the difficulties that face the would-be interpreter of Roman homosexuality, and emphasizes the inscrutability of ancient desires for modern audiences.

A brief sketch of *Teleny* and its publication history is necessary before we can move to an analysis of its subversion of contemporary responses to antiquity. The novel was published anonymously in 1893 with the title *Teleny: or The Reverse of the Medal: A Physiological Romance of To-Day* in London, in a private edition of two hundred copies by Leonard Smithers (1861-1907). Smithers, originally a Sheffield solicitor, was drawn to rare books and erotica, and this led him into partnership with the clandestine printer/ book dealer, Harold Sidney Nichols, with whom he set up the 'Erotika Biblion Society' in 1888; the 'classical' name of this imprint suggested pornography while also offering its publishers the excuse of a respectable, 'scholarly' enterprise that looked back to antiquity (compare 000 in my introduction). Smithers was thus launched on a career as one of the leading Victorian publishers of smut: Oscar Wilde described him as 'the most learned erotomaniac in Europe',<sup>4</sup> and Smithers indeed combined literary and learned interests with more prurient concerns throughout his career. For example, he himself wrote translations accompanied by erudite yet salacious notes on the sexual aspects of the *Priapeia* (Latin poems about the ancient god with the huge penis, which will be discussed below), both as sole author, and with Sir Richard Burton as his collaborator,<sup>5</sup> and he acted as publisher to Wilde after his release from prison.

Smithers had a sure instinct for publicity - for example, the 1890 edition of the *Priapeia* he produced (pseudonymously) with Burton hinted heavily at the identity of his celebrity co-author -<sup>6</sup> and his accompanying prospectus to *Teleny* sparked rumours that Oscar Wilde had written the latter work, via tantalizing reference to *Teleny*'s unnamed author as 'a man of great imagination ... the culture of ... [whose] style adds an additional piquancy and spice to the narration'.<sup>7</sup> These rumours were compounded by the 1934 account of Charles Hirsch, the owner of a London bookshop frequented by Wilde, who claimed that Wilde left a wrapped package there in 1890, to be picked up by a friend bearing Wilde's card; this man returned with the package a few days after claiming it and left it for yet another man, a process which was repeated with different actors on several occasions. Hirsch eventually opened the package, to find an untidy manuscript entitled *Teleny*, written and edited in various hands.<sup>8</sup> If Hirsch can be trusted - and the fact that his account prefaces a version of *Teleny* which he himself published as 'definitive' suggests both that he shared Smithers' gift for marketing, and that we should not give too much credence to his claims - the novel thus had multiple authors from a circle associated with Wilde. Wilde's putative involvement in the enterprise has excited much attention, and the attribution of *Teleny* to him in whole or in part continues to be debated.<sup>9</sup> The value of the novel is, however, independent of Wilde's contribution, and the present chapter has only a few observations to add to debates on its authorship and its parallels with Wilde's works. The most important of these is the strong probability that the author or authors were classically educated (as of course were many of Wilde's elite male contemporaries). Alternatively, *Teleny*'s author(s) may have engaged with antiquity through the mediating receptions discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

Let us turn instead to the narrative, which, cast throughout in the form of a dialogue between the wealthy French businessman Camille Des Grieux and an unnamed interlocutor, has at its heart the narrative of Des Grieux' love affair with the Hungarian pianist,<sup>10</sup> René Teleny.<sup>11</sup> The pair meet at a concert of which Des Grieux' mother is one of the patrons, and at which the latter is playing, and fall in love. After Des Grieux manages to accept that '... I was born a sodomite' (70), they embark upon an affair. However, the novel ends in disaster for the lovers, as Teleny commits suicide after being discovered by his lover having sex with the latter's mother in order to pay off his debts. Although *Teleny* is usually described as 'pornographic' (and indeed contains many sexually explicit episodes involving a variety of participants and practices),<sup>12</sup> it holds out the promise of much more than a hard-on, as the narrator makes a number of provocative statements defending homosexuality which challenge contemporary social mores.<sup>13</sup>

As in the apologias discussed in this volume's Introduction, Greek material is used to validate contemporary homosexuality. Although my focus on Rome and the constraints of space preclude a lengthy discussion of this topic, the novel paints Greek homosexuality in a more highly sexualized manner than in other contemporary accounts. The novel nods towards Greece as a privileged contemporary forum for discussing male homosexuality via its use of the dialogue form, which alludes to the discussion of homosexual *eros* in numerous ancient Greek philosophical dialogues, and above all, Plato.<sup>14</sup> Such allusion is provocative: in marked contrast with Plato, *Teleny* describes homosexual acts in graphic detail.<sup>15</sup> More obvious provocation via the reception of Greek antiquity is found in Des Grieux's description of how he came to accept his sexual nature:

I read all that I could find about the love of one man for another, that loathsome crime against nature taught to us not only by the very gods themselves, but by all the greatest men of olden times, for even Minos himself seems to have sodomized Theseus. (70-71)

Des Grieux's interest in the ancient world here parallels that of real-life homosexuals of the period, who also cite classical precedents, often including 'the greatest men',<sup>16</sup> but these particular models are, to say the least, unexpected. Antiquity was understood by the Victorians to offer useful lessons,<sup>17</sup> but those lessons do not usually include sodomy, and the statement that Minos 'sodomized Theseus' is unparalleled and mischievous.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, to the painter Briancourt, Teleny and Des Grieux are a sexualized Socrates and Alcibiades (141). Furthermore, even Plato's *Symposium*, so often a reference point in contemporary discussions of homosexuality, may be 'sexed up' when Briancourt invites Des Grieux and Teleny, now lovers, to a 'symposium'.<sup>19</sup> That no women are present at this gathering is about the only thing that this symposium has in common with the one in Plato's *Symposium*,<sup>20</sup> however, for Briancourt's symposium becomes an orgy.<sup>21</sup>

While *Teleny* therefore subverts contemporary notions of 'Greek love', its relationship with Roman homosexuality and sexual discourse is both more important to the novel's design and more complex. The most obvious signalling of the significant role of the reception of Rome (albeit in conscious hybridity with Greece) is the early, programmatic reference to Hadrian (called 'Adrian' throughout) and Antinous. This occurs at the start of Des Grieux's account of his affair, which begins

with his first sight of Teleny playing the piano at a concert. Des Grieux experiences the 'strangest visions' (29), of the Alhambra, and Sodom and Gomorrah,<sup>22</sup> and, sandwiched between these, Hadrian mourning his lost beloved:

The vision changed; instead of Spain, I saw a barren land, the sun-lit sands of Egypt, wet by the sluggish Nile; where Adrian stood wailing, forlorn, disconsolate for he had lost for ever the lad he loved so well. Spell-bound by that soft music, which sharpened every sense, I now began to understand things hitherto so strange, the love the mighty monarch felt for his fair Grecian slave, Antinous, who – like unto Christ – died for his master's sake. And thereupon my blood all rushed from my heart into my head, then it coursed down, through every vein, like waves of molten lead.

Hadrian and Antinous frequently feature in other literature penned by homosexual men of the period, and indeed persist as figures in the gay imaginary for a long time afterwards,<sup>23</sup> but they are much more programmatically important in *Teleny* than simply acting as a signifier of the novel's homosexual passions or as a coded way of talking about male beauty and a contemporary homosexual love affair. The way in which these historical examples of a Roman emperor and his beloved are here described acts as a corrective to contemporary views of Roman homosexuality as base and purely physical,<sup>24</sup> emphasizing that this love persisted after death,<sup>25</sup> and caused one partner to sacrifice himself for the other (rather than, say, concentrating on the beauty of the young Antinous, the focus of many responses to this pair).<sup>26</sup> This depiction of mutual, committed love shows that Rome (at least in the shape of a

philhellene emperor and his Hellenized beloved) can provide models of romantic, male-male devotion.<sup>27</sup>

The couple also matter to the novel's plot, ultimately foreshadowing Teleny's death 'for' Des Grieux, which Teleny (who has had the same visions as Des Grieux) predicts on their first meeting (he is the first speaker in the following passage):

" '... Then afterwards came Egypt, Antinous and Adrian. You were the Emperor, I was the slave.'

"Then, musingly, he added, almost to himself: 'Who knows, perhaps I shall die for you one day!' And his features assumed that sweet resigned look which is seen on the demi-god's statues.

"I looked at him bewildered.

" 'Oh! you think I am mad, but I am not, I am only stating facts. You did not feel that you were Adrian, simply because you are not accustomed to such visions; doubtless all this will be clearer to you some day; as for me, there is, you must know, Asiatic blood in my veins, and -'<sup>28</sup>

References to Hadrian and Antinous recur ominously throughout the novel, warning that this love affair will not have a happy ending.<sup>29</sup>

Although Hadrian and Antinous are figures from Roman history, one element of their initial description perhaps at first sight better fits a Greek homosexual model, and furthermore does not map on to the situation in *Teleny*: Antinous' characterization as a 'lad' evokes the pederasty most strongly associated with Greece in the period (an association here strengthened by Antinous' description as Hadrian's 'Grecian slave');

albeit reference to slavery more strongly suggests *Roman* sexual practices), and which belies the similar ages of Teleny and Des Grieux.<sup>30</sup> However, I suggest that the most important aspect to the characterization of Des Grieux and Teleny as emperor and slave is the asymmetrical power relations it implies between the novel's lovers. Their relationship does not initially appear to fit an emperor-slave model; indeed, Teleny (Antinous/ the slave in the vision) has an erotic power derived from the fact that he is more sexually experienced than Des Grieux, who has never encountered love or sex with a man before meeting Teleny.<sup>31</sup> But eventually, the difference in the social status of the lovers inherent in the Hadrian/ Antinous equation becomes clear,<sup>32</sup> as Teleny commits suicide after being caught in the act by his wealthy lover in an extreme attempt to pay off his debts.<sup>33</sup> Teleny thereby fulfils his initial prediction to Des Grieux, and the reader finally makes full, devastating sense of the relevance of the romantic notion of dying for the sake of one's lover contained in the novel's Hadrian-Antinous equation.

As part of its indebtedness to Rome, *Teleny* also makes several allusions to Roman portrayals of the phallus during which it deploys language which uses the Roman discourse of sex to valorize both Roman love and sexual encounters between Des Grieux and Teleny. Although one might expect considerable attention to be paid to the phallus in gay pornography, there is no need for reference to *ancient* portrayals of the phallus. That the novel employs multiple references to Rome looks back to the unabashed presence of the phallus in everyday life in ancient Rome, as well as to a specifically Roman fascination with outsized members, which contrasts with the Greek aesthetic preference for a small penis.<sup>34</sup> Many of the novel's phallic references mention the god Priapus. Although it can be hard to distinguish between the influence



of Greece and Rome in references to Priapus, who was worshipped in both cultures, the god seems to have played a bigger role in Roman culture,<sup>35</sup> and several references in *Teleny* occur in tandem with other references to Rome and sex. That the novel's evocations of Priapus are developed with further references to ancient Rome is one element that sets it apart from other pornographic novels of the late Victorian period,<sup>36</sup> in which 'Priapus' is a conventional term, a euphemism for the penis.<sup>37</sup>

*Teleny's* more extended and explicitly *Roman* references to Priapus occur in the first, lengthy sex scenes between Des Grieux and Teleny:

But my lips were eager to taste his phallus - an organ which might have served as a model for the huge idol in the temple of Priapus, or over the doors of the Pompeian brothels,<sup>38</sup> only that at the sight of this wingless god most men would have -<sup>39</sup> as many did - discarded women for the love of their fellow-men. (118-19)

Note that enthusiasm for the phallus is here tendentiously linked with Roman *exclusive* male-male love and with abandoning relations with women, mirroring Des Grieux' erotic career within the novel.<sup>40</sup> Later in the extended sex scene, we read of Teleny seating Camille on a stool in order to 'ride' on him, as he is penetrated by him:

... [kneeling] down to say his prayers to Priapus – which was, after all, a more dainty bit to kiss than the old Pope's gouty toe – and having bathed and tickled the little god with his tongue, he got a straddle over me. As he had already lost his maidenhead long ago, my rod entered far more easily in him than his had

done in me, nor did I give him the pain that I had felt, although my tool is of no mean size.

He stretched his hole open, the tip entered, he moved a little, half the phallus was plunged in; he pressed down, lifted himself up, then came down again; after one or two strokes the whole turgid column was lodged within his body. When he was well impaled he put his arms round my neck, and hugged and kissed me.

" 'Do you regret having given yourself to me?' he asked, pressing me convulsively as if afraid to lose me.

"My penis, which seemed to wish to give its own answer, wriggled within his body. I looked deep into his eyes.

" 'Do you think it would have been pleasanter to be now lying in the slush of the river?'

"He shuddered and kissed me, then eagerly – 'How can you think of such horrible things just now; it is a real blasphemy to the Mysian god.'

"Thereupon he began to ride a Priapean race with masterly skill; from an amble he went on to a trot, then to a gallop, lifting himself on the tips of his toes, and coming down again quicker and quicker. ... (126)

This is even more interesting for our purposes. The language suggests learned allusion to a phenomenon noted in the Introduction to Leonard Smithers' anonymous 1888 translation of Latin poems about Priapus, the anonymous *Priapeia*:

St Augustine informs us that it was considered by the Roman ladies as a very proper and pious custom to require young brides to seat themselves upon the

monstrous and obscene member of Priapus: and Lactantius says, 'Shall I speak of that *Mutinus*, upon the extremity of which brides are accustomed to seat themselves in order that the God may appear to have been the first to receive the sacrifice of their modesty?'<sup>41</sup>

It is likely that the authors of *Teleny* utilized information contained in Smithers' recently published translation of the *Priapeia*, given its obvious appeal to homosexual men, and the fact that *Teleny* itself was first published by none other than Leonard Smithers. Our novel indeed alludes to the *precise* practice which Smithers notes: the reference to Teleny seating himself on Des Grieux' 'Priapus' in combination with references to the loss of 'maidenhead' (i.e. anal virginity) evokes the connection of Priapus with new brides in Roman culture. It therefore suggests that the first anal penetration of the former by the latter can be taken as a sanctifying a marriage between Teleny and Des Grieux; *Teleny* thereby reinscribes a heterosexual Roman marriage custom in a homosexual sex scene. It may thus respond to allusions to marriages between men in ancient Rome;<sup>42</sup> such ancient allusions are hostile, largely because men are seen as 'feminized' and thus shamed by taking on the role of 'bride' in such unions, whereas here a male-male marriage is valorized, as our sex scene shows both partners play insertive *and* receptive roles in a reciprocal relationship that threatens the masculinity of neither. Through these references to Priapus, Rome therefore provides an example of a society in which the pleasures of sex and in particular of a huge phallus are celebrated, not downplayed or censured: it appears as a 'sex positive' society, in marked contrast with other receptions of antiquity of the period; cf. Introduction at 000. Furthermore, Roman ideas about masculinity are

subverted by reference to specifically Roman marriage customs, which are used to commend a modern day union between two men.

The final aspect of the novel's use of Rome which I wish to probe involves even more learned engagement with Roman sexual practices and the vocabulary used to describe them, as it incorporates punning on the etymology of a Latin word frequently (although not exclusively) denoting homosexual acts. In the first sex scene between Teleny and Des Grieux, the latter performs fellatio on the former, producing a mutual orgasm, and then Des Grieux says:

"A short space of rest – I cannot tell how long, intensity not being measured by Time's sedate pace – and then I felt his nerveless penis re-awaken from its sleep, and press against my face; it was evidently trying to find my mouth, just like a greedy but gluttoned baby even in its sleep hold firms the nipple of its mother's breast simply for the pleasure of having it in its mouth. (120)

During the mutual oral stimulation that ensues, Des Grieux claims:

... I sucked his phallus quicker and quicker; I drew it like a teat ... (120)

The close juxtaposition of the similes comparing the penis with a teat, and of a baby sucking its mother's breast in the context of a penis being inserted in the mouth, I suggest, alludes to the etymology of the Latin word *irrumare*, 'to mouth-fuck', which has the literal meaning of 'to put in (*in*) the *ruma/ rumis* (teat)'.<sup>43</sup> Admittedly, the conceptualization of the penis as having a teat and even the likening of fellatio to a

baby's suckling occur in other cultures than ancient Rome (although the concept is foreign to ancient Greece); so Freud (1910) makes the latter comparison to explain the liking of some individuals (women and 'passive homosexuals') for performing fellatio.<sup>44</sup> Yet Freud's monograph – the first published work aside from *Teleny* to make this connection in discussing modern sexual practices, to my knowledge – postdates *Teleny*. The most likely source for *Teleny*'s allusion to this Latin etymology, given the link between Smithers and the publication of *Teleny* already noted, is the anonymous translation of Forberg's *Manual of Classical Erotology*,<sup>45</sup> published by Leonard Smithers in 1887, just six years before *Teleny*, which notes: 'To put the member in erection into some one's mouth is called to irrumate, a word, which in its proper sense means to give the breast'.<sup>46</sup> If I am correct that the authors of *Teleny* are deploying in this scene distinctively *Roman* sexual ideas and vocabulary (albeit not exclusively *homosexual* ones), it is noteworthy that this example of reception subtly overturns and critiques Roman ideas about masculinity and normative male sexual behaviour in a way that has implications for Roman homosexuality. For *irrumare* and its cognates form part of a specifically Roman conceptualization of sex, which focuses on and valorizes the so-called 'active' role of the male penetrator in oral sex, while presenting the penetrated partner as shamed insofar as they are rendered 'passive' and thus feminized by the same act.<sup>47</sup> However, in this scene, both male partners are, in the terms of Roman sexual discourse, simultaneously 'active' and 'passive', penetrator and penetrated.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, although Des Grieux describes himself as sucking Teleny's penis like a teat, the slightly earlier comparison of the penis seeking the breast to the baby's mouth clinging to the breast *reverses* the direction of the Latin concept. Or, to put it another way, Roman notions of active and passive behaviour, and the respective roles of the penetrative and penetrated partner,

are here disrupted, with the penis equivalent to the baby's needy mouth, whereas the mouth is presented as the comforting and pleasuring *ruma* or teat, which the Roman concept of *irrumatio* had clearly identified with the role of the *penis* in this sexual act. The novel therefore subverts Rome's rigid cultural prejudices about appropriate masculine sexual roles by presenting us with a disruptive, coded reference to the etymology of *irrumatio* in a scene in which *both* men penetrate their partner's mouth with their penis, while simultaneously using their own mouths to stimulate their partner's penis, suggesting that men can, without shame and with a great deal of enjoyment, be both 'active' and 'passive' simultaneously in sexual terms.

It is hardly surprising that *Teleny*, a privately and anonymously published pornographic novel, has the freedom to approach sex between men in the ancient world from a very different perspective from the more public and apologetic works of the early gay activists of the same period, not least insofar as it prefers to celebrate rather than censure the lewd aspects of Rome and its sexual practices. There is simply not the same need for *Teleny* to take an assimilationist approach and view Greece and Rome through the prism of contemporary morality, and *Teleny* therefore provides a refreshing alternative approach towards Roman sex and homosexuality, presenting Rome as a positive exemplar, albeit one which is not immune from critique, whose vocabulary can be revisited to emphasize sexually equal roles and mutually pleasuring and pleasurable actions between two men in love.

The more limited and limiting late Victorian view of the obscenity inherent in Roman portrayals of sex has persisted to the modern age, however, as Rome continues to be

stereotyped as a 'pornotopia': see Introduction 000. It is still far from common to find a more nuanced and complex approach, like that of *Teleny*, which engages seriously with Rome's discourse of sex, looking to it for a model of a committed, long-term, and loving relationship between two men. However, a subtle and thoughtful response to the history of Rome's queer reception, and a meditation on what is at stake in such reception, is found in Alan Hollinghurst's 1988 *The Swimming-Pool Library*.

Hollinghurst dramatizes the reception of Rome, in texts such as *Teleny*, as a 'sex positive' society. This is well illustrated in a passage during which the aged Charles Nantwich shows the younger narrator, William Beckwith, the remains of the Roman baths tucked away in the basement of his London house:<sup>49</sup>

The walls, which were plastered and painted cream, had a continuous frieze running round, which, being above head height, looked tastefully classical at a glance but, like the library over-door, were homosexual parodies when inspected close to. ...

'This little bit of the baths is all that's left to show how all those lusty young Romans went leaping about. Imagine all those naked legionaries in here ...?'

I did not have to look far to do so. The scenes around the walls were as graphic an imagining as Petronius could have come up with.<sup>50</sup> 'I think your friend has given us his impression,' I said.

'Eh? Oh, Henderson's pictures, yes.' He laughed hollowly. 'They're a trifle embarrassing, I'm afraid – when eggheads come to look at the floor, you know. They think they're going to get caught up in an orgy.' We both looked

at the section nearest us, where a gleaming slave was towelling down his master's buttocks. In front of them two mighty warriors were wrestling, with legs apart, and bull-like genitals swinging between them. 'Quite amusing though, too, *n'est-ce pas?*' He looked down pointedly at my crotch. 'They used to fairly *turn me on*. ...' (92-3, 94; emphasis original).

These pornographic modern pictures depicting Roman sex scenes recall the images that Briancourt displays at his symposium in *Teleny*:

... the walls were all covered with pictures of the most lascivious nature; for the general's son, who was very rich, painted mostly for his own delight. ...

In some of his imitations of the libidinous Pompeian encaustics he had tried to fathom the secrets of a bygone art. (143)

However, at this point in *Teleny's* narrative, Des Grieux' interlocutor interrupts his 'digression' on Briancourt's paintings; we never learn any *specifics* of Briancourt's Pompeian sex scenes.<sup>51</sup> Hollinghurst therefore fills in the tantalizing gap found in *Teleny*, making concrete the scenes left to the imagination in the earlier novel, and demonstrating how Roman homosexuality is reimagined as a semi-private, masturbatory fantasy.

However, Hollinghurst recognizes that Rome is not merely a pornotopia onto which modern gay men can project back their desires; the frieze's images are homosexual 'parodies', a description which reflects the distance between Rome and the modern pornographic staples of legionaries together in the bathhouse, master and slave, group/ voyeuristic sex, and well-endowed, masculine soldiers (compare



Blanshard's chapter in this volume). Furthermore, like the authors of *Teleny*, Hollinghurst acknowledges the possibility of love between men in Rome – something that gets downplayed as a result of the modern focus on *sex* in Rome – at the same time as he depicts the difficulties that face the modern interpreter of Rome, when his narrator turns to the actual ancient Roman mosaic that decorates the baths:

... to the right, and above, the upper parts of two figures could be seen, the one in front turning to the one behind with open, choric mouth as they dissolved into the nothingness beyond the broken edge of the pavement. ...

I ... strolled reflectively along to where the two boys ran, as Charles saw it, towards the water. Or perhaps they were already standing in water, lapping round their long-eroded legs. They were intensely poignant. Seen close to, their curves were revealed as pinked, stepped edges, their moving forms made up of tiny, featureless squares. The boy in full-face had his mouth open in pleasure, or as an indication that he was speaking, but it also gave a strong impression of pain. It was at once too crude and too complex to be analysed properly. It reminded me of the face of Eve expelled from Paradise in Masaccio's fresco. But at the same time it was not like it at all; it could have been a mask of pagan joy. The second young man, following closely behind, leaning forward as if he might indeed be wading through water, was in profile, and expressed nothing but attention to his fellow. What did he see there, I wondered – a mundane greeting or the ecstasy which I read into it? That it was merely a fragment compounded and rarified its engima. (94)

Are the two swimming boys depicted in the mosaic lovers, as Beckwith assumes?<sup>52</sup>

Are they even swimming? Hollinghurst here recognizes and dramatizes the complexity of interpreting texts that are separated from us by thousands of years, particularly when desire intrudes – whether that is the desire of the Romans themselves, or perhaps only the self-interested desires of their modern interpreters.

We can never see Roman homosexuality and homosexual texts whole: they remain fragmentary for us whether they are literally so (as in the case of many material remains of antiquity, and novels such as Petronius' *Satyrical*, namechecked as an example of pornographic outrageousness just before this passage, but perhaps also as an example of a frustratingly incomplete work) or simply because as moderns we find it hard to read the codes of a lost, pagan culture. As Hollinghurst recognizes, unlike so many others who have looked back to ancient Rome, our response to Roman homosexuality can never be simple and unbiased, a direct response to *res ipsa*, but is always necessarily mediated through our feelings about our own sexual identities and their place in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> See pages **000**.

<sup>2</sup> Although *Teleny* predates the publication of the apologetic texts by Ives and Carpenter considered in the Introduction, my discussion of its *response* to contemporary receptions of antiquity is not anachronistic, insofar as these works emerged from a wider intellectual climate (see pages **000** on earlier, influential treatments of ancient homosexuality); furthermore, several German works on Greek homosexuality had already been published, and even translated into English: e.g. Müller (1830); cf. Introduction, n. **000**.

<sup>3</sup> That both lovers are *adults* suggests a Roman - rather than Greek (pederastic) - model: Williams (2010) 84-90.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Reginald Turner, 10 August 1897: Holland/ Hart-Davis (2000) 631. For Smithers' career, see Mendes (1993) 16-23; Nelson (2011).

<sup>5</sup> See Anon. (1888) and Burton/ Smithers (1890), a revised edition adding Burton's verse translations to Smithers' prose versions and notes; Burton and Smithers also

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jointly published a similar edition of Catullus, Burton/ Smithers (1894). For Burton's most important contribution to the history of homosexuality (his 1885-6 'Terminal Essay' on 'pederasty'), see pages 000 of this volume; I am currently preparing studies on Burton and Smithers' classical collaborations and their contributions to the history of homosexuality.

<sup>6</sup> See Nelson (2011) 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> Mendes (1993) 252; cf. *ibid.* 253. Cf. Gray/ Keep (2006) 193.

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch (1934) 7.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Roditi (1976) 166-73, Gray/ Keep (2006) 194-5, Boyd (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Teleny's nationality may allude to the Hungarian-Austrian Karl Maria Benkert/ 'Kertbeny', who coined in 1869 the term 'homosexuality'; however, Kertbeny's work was not widely known, nor was the term widespread in English until later: Boswell (1981) 42, n. 4. See also my note 28 below.

<sup>11</sup> Although the novel opens with Des Grieux' unnamed interlocutor asking him for the story of how he met Teleny, this narrative is interrupted by Des Grieux' relation of his broader erotic history, including early liaisons with women. On bisexual combinations in *Teleny* and other *fin-de-siècle* pornography, see Waugh (1996) 295.

<sup>12</sup> Reade (1970) 49 dismissively brands Teleny 'scarcely more than a pornographic compilation ... following the formulae set out for such productions in the nineteenth century'; however, he does note that it is 'redeemed' as the 'one English novel until then in which the main story was concerned with homosexuality at its fullest extent.' Persuasively, Lutz (2008) argues that *Teleny* 'is both smut and a work of art'.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. at 70-71, 87-8, 110, 160; cf. Cohen (1987) 804-5. *Teleny*'s challenge to contemporary morality disproves Marcus (1964) 230 (whose study of Victorian

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pornography ignores *Teleny*): ‘At best, pornography may be subversive in the sense that it reveals the discrepancy which exists in society between openly professed ideals and secretly harbored wishes or secretly practised vices – it may act indirectly to “unmask” society’s official version of itself. It never, to my knowledge, is capable of taking the next step of subversion: it cannot supply a vision that either transcends or translates what passes for current reality.’

<sup>14</sup> For the links between Plato, dialogue, and male-male love, see Sturges (2005) 3 and passim. The dialogue is a highly unusual form in nineteenth century fiction, although it is paralleled in Oscar Wilde's 1889 *The Portrait of Mr W. H.* (as well as his essays, *The Decay of Lying* and *The Critic as Artist*, published in 1889 and 1890, respectively): for links between the narrative structures of *Teleny* and the former work, see Cohen (1996) 210-11. The dialogue also has a long history in pornography, stretching back to Pietro Aretino: Kearney (1982) 29. Gray/ Keep (2006) 198 view the dialogue form as a model for the novel’s putative collective authorship.

<sup>15</sup> Compare how (Pseudo) Lucian's *Erotes* parodied (and 'sexed up') Greek philosophical discussion of *eros* in a dialogue wherein partisan advocates of pederasty and heterosexual love advance the merits of their preferences: e.g. Foucault (1986) 211-27, Halperin (2002) 89-103.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. my n. 2 in the introduction on how gay men find themselves in literature, a theme of especial interest to Wilde: see e.g. Koestenbaum (1990). The anonymous reader for the Press aptly notes that this passage is shot through with Wildean irony: its defence of homosexuality via the 'greatest men of olden times' comes straight from Wilde's courtroom script, but is immediately shot down with the bathos of graphic sexual description.

<sup>17</sup> E.g. Betts (1971) 150-1.

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<sup>18</sup> A single ancient source, Athenaeus 13.77, records that, according to Zenis of Chios, Minos ‘loved’ Theseus.

<sup>19</sup> 141-2; the status of Briancourt and Teleny as artists acts as a coded homosexual reference. *Teleny's* sexualization of Plato's *Symposium* is anticipated in the episode of the Pergamene boy in Petronius, *Sat.* 85-87, which naughtily rewrites the chaste night that Socrates and Alcibiades spend together (see e.g. Dimundo (1983)), and in Antonio Rocco's classic seventeenth century pornographic homosexual dialogue, *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (one of the novels which Hirsch claimed he was asked to provide for Wilde (Hirsch (1934) 6): on this dialogue, see Sturges 2005, 131-9).

<sup>20</sup> Teleny insists that women are never invited to such gatherings when Des Grieux mistakes a cross-dressing man for a woman: 145. Contrast the Platonic symposiasts, who send away a flute girl (*Symp.* 176e) to discuss *eros*.

<sup>21</sup> This symposium encodes Victorian ideas about Roman decadence (see Introduction, page 000): the decor includes imitations of ‘libidinous Pompeian encaustics’ (143: see further above), and orgies are associated with Rome: Blanshard (2010) xiii. Blanshard, however, rather overstates his case, claiming that ‘the key signifier of the sexuality of Rome has come to be the orgy’; polymorphous perversity may better fit the bill, as this volume shows.

<sup>22</sup> That is, of Moorish Spain, and (biblical) cities of the East: Gray/ Keep (2006) 197-8 discuss *Teleny's* linking of homosexuality with the Orient, as an arena for free sexual experimentation; cf. Introduction 000.

<sup>23</sup> Waters (1995); Blanshard (2010) 52, 110-13, esp. 113 for Antinous in *Teleny* and ‘the cult of Antinous’ among contemporaries with homosexual leanings, including Oscar Wilde. Antinous often appears in Wilde's fiction, frequently in references to his immortalization in sculpture: e.g. his face is *the* motif of ‘late Greek sculpture’ in the

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1890/91 *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: Wilde (2011) 84. I look forward to *Hadrian*, the second opera by gay singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright, due to premiere in 2018.

<sup>24</sup> See Introduction at 000.

<sup>25</sup> Teleny and Des Grieux swear eternal, exclusive love for each other just after they have contemplated mutual suicide by drowning, and Des Grieux recalls his vision of Antinous (112).

<sup>26</sup> Waters (1995).

<sup>27</sup> Although Antinous' characterization as Hadrian's 'Grecian slave' and a 'lad' somewhat collapses the Greek/ Roman distinction, and evocation of Egypt adds an orientaling element (see my nn. 22 and 28), the novel's explicit presentation of Hadrian/ Antinous as emperor/ slave presents this couple as *Roman*, and distinct from Greek man/ boy couples, where the boy will grow up into an adult citizen. For Antinous as a 'Greek' figure, who must nevertheless be understood in Roman terms, see Vout (2007) 67-8.

<sup>28</sup> 38. Teleny's 'Asiatic' nationality evokes both Antinous and the Victorian orientaling discourse of homosexuality (see too note 10 above); see Montserrat 1998, 176-8 for the confusion of Greece and the East in eroticized responses to the mummy portraits which were found at Fayum, Egypt and exhibited in London in 1888, and the possible inspiration that these might have provided for Oscar Wilde.

<sup>29</sup> See my n. 25; at 136 there is confusion over which of the two looks like an 'antique cameo' of Antinous' head on a ring which Des Grieux gives Teleny, and Antinous' appearance here reflects the way in which Hadrian turned his dead beloved into an art object: Vout (2007) 52-135.

<sup>30</sup> For sex between adult males in Rome, see my n. 3. Gray/ Keep (2006) 201-2 discuss *Teleny*'s treatment of 'desire based on sameness', a model for male-male

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desire that starts to replace preferences for Hellenizing pederastic relationships around the turn of the nineteenth century: Sedgwick (1992) 242.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Teleny tells Briancourt before bringing Des Grieux to his symposium, ‘Camille ... is but a neophyte in the Priapean creed’ (142).

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Waters' novel *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), in the absence of a comparable lesbian text to *Teleny* which dates from the period itself, imagines a Victorian lesbian subculture, and emphasizes the master/ slave power-dynamic intrinsic to identifications with Hadrian/ Antinous when her protagonist, Nancy, poses as Antinous for a Sapphic symposium hosted by the woman who keeps her as a servant for sexual purposes: Waters (1998) 308-16.

<sup>33</sup> That Teleny commits suicide ‘for’ Des Grieux may allude to rumours that Antinous killed himself to prolong Hadrian’s life: Aurelius Victor, *Caes.* 14.7-9; Vout (2007) 54-7.

<sup>34</sup> Williams (2010) 86-91; Hubbard (2003) 96, n. 33.

<sup>35</sup> Heinze (2006).

<sup>36</sup> *Teleny*’s learned play with Roman sexual vocabulary and ideas is also unparalleled in (predominantly) heterosexual Victorian pornographic novels, which largely contain brief, conventional classical references. Cf. *My Secret Life* (c. 1880) and its ‘saturnalia of cunt’ (4.57); its narrator feels like a ‘Paris’ in a brothel (6.210), a sexually driven woman is ‘not a Messalina quite’ (10.108), and a male sodomite ‘Hylas’ (10.168); likewise, *The Romance of Lust* (1873) talks of (e.g.) ‘sacrificing to holy Mother Venus in both our orifices’ (2.74) and of the narrator presenting his penis ‘at the entrance of the more secret temple of Venus’ (2.141). Conversely, in the (largely) homosexual *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881), ‘Jack Saul’ has an ‘Adonis-like’ figure (1.8), and we learn that ‘Since Nero had his mother, and Caligula fucked



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his horse, I believe that incest, sodomy, and bestiality have been fashionable vices' (2.100); this novel's concluding short essays on sodomy and tribadism (2.107-122) are the most extended and interesting use of antiquity in such parallel texts; constraints of space preclude an examination of these essays, on which I am preparing a separate study: Ingleheart (forthcoming).

<sup>37</sup> For example, '... [I] at last withdrew my softened priapus from the paphian temple' (*My Secret Life*, 7.28), '... so that her eyes might be gratified to the full with the sight of the priapean glory. ... withdrawing my priapus from her soft hand ...' (*My Secret Life*, 9.72), and '... a priapus nearly ten inches long, very thick ...' (*The Sins of the Cities* ... 1.14). Marcus (1964) 58, dismisses 'period' references to 'Venus and Priapus' as 'tinsel paraphrases and ... dead euphemisms'; this description fits the classicizing tendency elsewhere in Victorian pornography, but is far from apt for *Teleny*.

<sup>38</sup> The connection of Priapus with both the temple *and* the brothel alludes to Richard Payne Knight's notorious 1786 *A Discourse On The Worship Of Priapus*; Knight (1786) 23 notes that horrified Christians believed Priapus' image 'more fit to be placed in a brothel than a temple'. For Victorian phallicism and prurient interest in Priapus, see Sigel (2002) 72-4.

<sup>39</sup> 'Wingless' god points to other, winged representations (of both *Eros* and winged phalli) but surely also hints at the 'Pandemic', physical aspect to this love, as opposed to the 'Uranian', heavenly *eros* espoused by many with homosexual leanings in the period: see my Introduction to this volume at 000.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Des Grieux' justification of his erotic career: '... Paphian girls in the great days of Rome were but too often discarded for pretty little boys' (71). For the (few)

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references in Roman literature to men with a proclivity toward or exclusive interest in homosexual sex, see Williams (2010) 183-91; Des Grieux overstates exclusive homosexuality in Rome.

<sup>41</sup> Anon. (1888) xviii-xix.

<sup>42</sup> Williams (2010) 279-86; the assimilation with marriage that I argue for fits well with Des Grieux' comment: 'In fact, had our union been blessed by the Church, it could not have been a closer one.' (160).

<sup>43</sup> Adams (1982) 126. This etymologizing is unparalleled in Victorian pornography, although *My Secret Life* deploys the otherwise unattested verb 'irruminate' for fellatio between men (10.256). Kendrick (1987) 44 detects a Catullan influence on this vocabulary: 'given ... [the narrator's] skittish attitude towards homosexual encounters, it ... seems likely that the scornful, demeaning connotations of *irrumare* were on his mind'; contrast *Teleny*'s positive use of this vocabulary. On *Teleny*'s innovative sexual lexicon, see Lutz (2008).

<sup>44</sup> Freud (1910) 23.

<sup>45</sup> Blanshard (2010) 52-4.

<sup>46</sup> Forberg (1887) 3.72.

<sup>47</sup> Williams (2010) 178-9; Adams (1982) 125-30.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, both are also mother *and* baby.

<sup>49</sup> Compare Hollinghurst (1988) 84, where Nantwich's library is decorated with 'classical figures ... exaggerated phalluses protruded ... from toga and tunic'; this is less specifically *Roman*.

<sup>50</sup> For Petronius' importance in depictions of homosexuality in English fiction, see Introduction **000**; for the Petronian orgy, *Sat.* 19-25. For Petronius as a shorthand for pornography, see Endres' chapter in this volume.

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<sup>51</sup> For homosexual responses to Pompeii, see the chapter by Levin-Richardson in this volume.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Cleminson (2009) 250-3.