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## BOOK REVIEW

**Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), ISBN: 978-0674660014.**

Kyle Harper's principal question in *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* is whether the rise of Christianity within the Roman Empire represented a distinct rupture in the history of sexual morality, or whether it was part of a more gradual transition that was already under way. In a subtle analysis of a rich array of material and textual evidence, from erotic lamps to Roman and early Christian romances, he convincingly argues in favor of a Christian rupture. In the introduction, he highlights the book's four major claims, the first three of which are crystal clear, to show that: 1) the Christian transformation of sexual morality occurred later than the second century; 2) two heretofore neglected topics—the legal regime governing homosexuality and the role of prostitution in the sexual life of late Antiquity—are essential to understanding whether or not Christianity represented a rupture; and that 3) attention must be paid to the evolving Christian conception of free will as a basis of its new sexual morality, as opposed to the prevailing classical belief in the power of destiny in controlling events. The fourth claim, founded on a distinction between "culture" and "society," remains vague, and, after having completed the book, I wondered why the fourth did not rather stake a claim to the value of literary texts and fiction as evidence for changes in sexual mores, since two of the book's four chapters are dominated by analyses of Roman and Christian romances.

No matter. A bullet-pointed list of general points cannot encapsulate the brilliance of this book, which deserves to be read in full and appreciated for its careful argumentation and elegant writing. As a medievalist with an interest in the history of morality across periods, I feel it provides a vivid portrait of private life in late Antiquity, with profound implications for subsequent centuries. Harper briefly takes issue with Foucault's claim in *The Care of the Self* that interest in homosexuality had withered by the second century, attributing Foucault's conclusion to the fact that his benchmark was Ancient Greece. He claims to the contrary that when examined on its own terms, homosexuality is alive and well in the second century, albeit subject to restrictions and contradictions and subsumed by conjugal love. Here he emphasizes the importance of the slave system in both Greece and Rome, pointing out that slaves were considered unrestrictedly open to sexual abuse. For free adult men, homosexual relations were not permitted with free boys, whereas choosing slaves as partners posed no legal or moral problem. The other major re-

striction was that adult men were not permitted to occupy the passive position, indicating that the greatest concern was not sex between two men *per se*, as it would be under the Christian regime, but maintaining strict codes of masculinity. As Harper sums it up, one of his main goals is to counteract “the bizarre notion, which is still sometimes expressed, that same-sex eros was, materially and ideologically, on the wane by the second century” (36).

In my reading, there are three outstanding aspects of this book. The first is its epistemological acumen, its argument that while the same elements of sexual life might appear in both pre-Christian and Christian times, these elements rested on a totally different foundational logic, and so what may have seemed to be continuous was actually a rupture when considered from the perspective of the foundation. The second, related aspect involves shifts in the foundational logic that occurred with the rise in dominance of Christianity, the three main ones being, first, the Christian espousal of the concept of free will in the midst of a Roman society in which most believed that destiny or fate controlled events; second, the Christian tendency to judge actions from a cosmological perspective involving an afterlife, as opposed to the earthly, pragmatic perspective of the Romans; and third, the Christian focus on the gender of the participant in the sexual act, as opposed to the Roman focus on the act itself, as well as on the social status of the participants (whether enslaved or free).

Roman and Christian attitudes toward marriage offer an excellent example of this epistemological approach. While both Romans and Christians promoted marriage, they did so for very different reasons and with very different attitudes. As Harper convincingly shows, while the Romans encouraged marriage for the practical purpose of promoting reproduction and the perpetuation of the social order, the Christians espoused marriage as the next best thing for those who were too weak to abstain from sex altogether, which was posited as the ideal. The Romans were devoted to earthly concerns, whereas the Christian ideal of chastity was geared toward assuring salvation in the afterlife. This logic explains the book’s title:

The legacy of Christianity lies in the dissolution of an ancient system where status and social reproduction scripted the terms of sexual morality...Shame is a social concept, instantiated in human emotions; sin is a theological concept. They represent different categories of moral sanction. That is the point: the transition from a late classical to a Christian sexual morality marked a paradigm shift, a quantum leap to a new foundational logic of sexual ethics, in which the cosmos replaced the city as the framework of morality (8-9).

The book’s third outstanding feature is its use of the genre of romance across the period as a barometer for measuring the evolution of the Christian concept of free will and of the transformation in sexual mores, most prominently in terms of attitudes towards chastity and eroticism. Harper’s approach to romance recalls Frederic Jameson’s in *The Political Unconscious*, published in 1982, which posited that because the romance genre is characterized by the persistence of a deep structure, that is, certain defining formal elements--most prominently, the battle between good and evil and the couple’s confrontation with a series of adventures and obstacles before their

marriage—departures from this template can be interpreted as symptoms of historical change or conflict, elements that the writer must alter if his text is to remain relevant and entertaining to a new kind of audience. As Jameson puts it, “it is the possibility of such a reading which in turn allows us to grasp the text as a socially symbolic act, as the ideological—but formal and immanent—response to a historical dilemma.”<sup>1</sup> While citing Northrop Frye rather than Jameson, Harper brilliantly makes use of this technique to demonstrate how Roman romances produce a narrative world in which events are governed by fate; the chastity of the free female protagonist is preserved despite being threatened (this threat to female chastity being the main source of suspense, for if the female protagonist were to be violated before her marriage, she would lose her social status and no longer be marriageable); and finally, the power of eros is affirmed. Considered in relation to Jameson’s approach, in Harper’s analyses Christian romances pulsate with analyzable historical symptoms. Here, the chaste heroine of the Roman romance is replaced by her polar opposite: the figure of the repentant prostitute. Harper argues that this substitution in the place of the female protagonist indicates a significant transvaluation of values: rather than affirm chastity before marriage, chastity being a sign of social nobility for Roman women, the Christian romance instead affirms the possibility of redemption for sinners from all social strata, as indicated by the fact that even the “worst of the worst,” a female prostitute, can obtain absolution and eternal salvation. Whereas in Roman romances the enforcement of chastity for women does not extend to men (who occasionally engage in homosexual practices), in Christian tales, chastity is enforced for both men and women. For the Romans, the romance affirmed the power of eros and celebrated marriage as a means of reproducing the earthly social order, while for the Christians, the desired end of the romance is earthly death and eternal salvation.

Another of the book’s key points may be mentioned in this context. If Harper insists upon the rupture wrought upon sexual morality in late Antiquity by the rise of Christianity, he also emphasizes a second crucial rupture, this one within the history of Christianity itself, that divided Christianity before and after its ascension as the majority religion of the Roman Empire. This rupture is key because prior to this ascension, it was possible for Christianity to represent itself as a religion standing apart from the world; afterwards, it would have to invent a new position for itself as a religion embedded within the world. This new position within an imperfect world encouraged Christianity to, for example, promote penance rather than purity, a strategy embodied in the archetypal figure of the reformed and forgiven prostitute, as well as to find ways to make marriage acceptable, if still a step below abstention.

While *From Shame to Sin* only mentions Foucault three times, it goes a long way to shedding detailed light on the momentous change ushered into sexual morality by the emergence and eventual institutionalization of Christianity within late Antiquity. In his extensive work on late Antiquity and early Christianity, Foucault often oscillates, positing continuities while holding

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 139.

onto the conclusion that Christianity did introduce a fundamental rupture into pagan sexual ethics, and then proceeding to undermine that claim by positing more continuities. Harper's study, through its analyses of new kinds of evidence and through its attention to slavery and prostitution, convincingly makes the case that we must view the effect of Christianity on pagan sexual ethics as a definitive rupture. In a footnote in his introduction to a recent issue of *Foucault Studies* dedicated to "Foucault's Rome," editor Richard Allston notes that "Foucault's early death robbed us of the final Christian volume of *The History of Sexuality*," but that Harper's *From Shame to Sin* "could also be re-imagined as the final volume of the sequence."<sup>2</sup> While a fully adequate assessment of this claim would involve a much more extensive discussion of how Harper's concerns do or do not depart from Foucault's, and of where Foucault's thought on Christianity was leading at the time of his death, it is undeniable that this book offers a convincing and clarifying discussion of the transformation of sexual morality at this crucial juncture in Western history.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Allston, "Introduction: Foucault's Rome," Special Issue on Foucault and Roman Antiquity, *Foucault Studies* 22 (January 2017): 14 and 14 n. 28.