

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND

**SUBVERSIVE OBSCENITY:**

THE WARREN CUP AND ROMAN UNDERSTANDINGS  
OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

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## ABSTRACT

This project seeks to address a problem in interpreting the scenes depicted on the Warren Cup: the fact that they do not fit neatly into the dominant Priapic model of understanding sexuality in the Roman world. When interpreted in the context of literary and artistic parallels, and in light of the problems of language describing sexual behaviour, the cup helps to demonstrate how the Priapic model does not adequately address the full experience of same-sex relationships in early imperial Rome. The project presents an alternative narrative that is not based on themes of violence and domination, defies single conventional meanings, and presents a minority perspective that challenges twenty-first century notions of sexuality just as it would have challenged those of its original audience.

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## I. Introduction

In 1999, the British Museum acquired a first century silver cup at a cost of £1.8 million, making it the single most expensive acquisition at the time. The cup is a silver *kantharos*, 11 cm high, and 11 cm wide at the rim, dating from the first century CE. It depicts two pairs of males, engaged in anal sex. On one side, a beardless youth is penetrating a much smaller, obviously younger, boy. On the other, another beardless youth is using a suspended strap to lower himself on to the phallus of his slightly older, bearded partner. This pair is being observed through a half-opened door by a slave boy. While explicitly sexual subject matter was often depicted in classical art, the extant representations are far more frequently of heterosexual sex acts, rather than homosexual ones. It was the relative rarity of classical depictions of male-to-male intercourse, as well as the different social mores of the early twentieth century, which were most responsible for the scandal and claims of obscenity around the Warren Cup, and which kept it unsold and undisplayed for so long.

Named for its first modern owner, Edward Perry Warren (1860–1928), an eccentric collector of ancient pederastic art, the interpretation of the cup has been coloured by understandings of homosexuality ever since it was first purchased in 1911. Warren’s biographers hint at a trip to Rome in that year to purchase a new item for his collection at a cost of £2,000.<sup>1</sup> In 1953, the Warren Cup was denied entry into the United States at when an inspecting Customs officer flagged it as imported pornography. Attempts in the late 1950s to add it to the British

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<sup>1</sup> Dyfri Williams and British Museum, *The Warren Cup*. British Museum Objects in Focus (London: British Museum Press, 2006), 25.

Museum's collection were dropped for fear that as the Archbishop of Canterbury was chair of the Board of Trustees, any discussion of its acquisition would be quickly cut off.<sup>2</sup> The cup's modern history is an interesting study in the history of public perceptions of sexuality, homosexuality, and depictions of sexual activity. The Warren Cup is far from unique among ancient artefacts, both in its sexually explicit depictions and in its depiction of same-sex partners. Although it is unique as a silver vessel, rather than a black- or red-form Greek vase, this distinction is hardly enough to justify the particular scandal and claims of obscenity that surrounded the Warren Cup for so much of the twentieth century.

This artefact needs to be repositioned in terms of how it is described. Rather than being obscene, offensive, or immoral, it is a profoundly subversive piece of art. It may challenge contemporary perspectives on appropriate sexuality, but even more importantly, it challenges our assumptions on what constituted appropriate sexual behaviour in the Roman world. Despite Dyfri Williams's claim that the cup's scenes "were not intended to be openly subversive of the regular 'phallic construction' of Roman sexual protocols,"<sup>3</sup> his own arguments about the interpretation of those scenes support the subversive, almost playful use of sexual behaviour to challenge the norms of acceptable behaviour among Romans in the first century. The Warren Cup corrects the traditional Priapic model of sexuality, adding nuance that helps interpret Roman understandings of sexual behaviour to the modern world.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Williams (2006), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Dyfri Williams, "A Cantharus from ancient Betar near Jerusalem (the so-called Warren Cup) and Roman Silver Plate," *BABESCH* 90 (2015): 169.

On the surface, Roman attitudes toward sexuality seem to fit into a straightforward system in which individuals are understood as “active” or “passive”, based on simple, precise definitions.<sup>4</sup> While the Warren Cup has been used to help illustrate Roman notions of sexuality, it is also helpful in illustrating the ways in which sexual behaviour cannot be neatly contained in a single model. It is useful precisely because it departs from the dominant model, but it does not do so in isolation. In this study, I will explore the Warren Cup’s context both from an artistic perspective and in considering literary parallels. Artistic parallels will include other Roman silver vessels, Arretine *terra sigillata*, and wall paintings preserved and uncovered at Pompeii. Literary sources will focus on the poetic, particularly with respect to Catullus and Martial, and on the provocative historical details Suetonius provides in his *Lives of the Caesars*. By demonstrating where the Warren Cup is consistent with, and where it diverges from, the Priapic model demonstrated by these examples, I hope to strengthen the argument that even when it was first crafted, it intentionally subverted traditional Roman understandings of masculine sexual behaviour and of active/passive roles.

Having established this subversive role, I will propose a narrative for interpreting the Warren Cup that accounts for the aspects in which it does not correspond to the Priapic model, and aspects in which the model might not correspond to other perceived inconsistencies in Roman sexuality. The Warren Cup is the exception that proves the Priapic rule in that it refines the model and allows it to better explain the bigger picture of sexual behaviour in the Roman world.

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<sup>4</sup> Holt Parker, “The Teratogenic Grid,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 48.

As a scholar, Parker raises difficult and unsettling issues because of his arrest and conviction for trading online child pornography. Such criminal behaviour is utterly indefensible, and tarnishes much of his work, particularly as it relates to Roman attitudes towards sex between men and boys. Nevertheless, in other areas, his scholarship is less tainted, and may still be considered (by some) to have merit, despite the particulars of its author’s personal life. While I cannot ignore his work, conscience prevents me from citing it too freely, and I will only do so where it is particularly appropriate or insightful, and always in reference to adult sexuality, rather than to pederasty.

## II. Form

The cup was originally created in five pieces, three of which are extant. The decorative outer casing attracts the most attention, but also integral to the cup are its hammered liner and cast foot. A pair of vertical handles were once attached to the sides of the casing and were probably also used to attach the liner to the casing. The handles have been lost, however, and only the liner, foot, and casing remain. While it is difficult to establish definitively that the three extant components of the cup as it was discovered were originally created together, there is no reason to suppose that they actually came from separate silver sources and were consolidated into a single vessel at some point before it was buried.

The cup currently weighs 359 g, so it is reasonable to speculate that its original weight with handles would have been about 485 g, roughly 1.5 Roman pounds, equivalent to 125 silver *denarii*.<sup>5</sup> In fact, D. Williams suggests that it was made from silver coins, probably from the late Republican period, that were melted down and cast by the artisan.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that the cup was originally one of a pair, created together, which would mean the cost of the materials alone would represent 250 *denarii*, making the pair a luxury beyond the budget of most everyday Romans, but hardly exclusive to the extreme upper crust of society.

Most of the decoration was effected by hammering the casing from the inside, a technique known as *repoussé*, with slightly more detail added through chasing on the outside. No trace of gilding remains on the cup, but comparable silver vessels of the period usually had gilded accents. Based on the level of workmanship, as well as the cost of the materials used, the Warren Cup was

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<sup>5</sup> D. Williams (2006), 38.

<sup>6</sup> D. Williams (2015), 156.

likely owned and used by an elite Roman household: not the fabulously wealthy, but a household of significant means.

Unlike the erotic scenes depicted on less-expensive Arretine ware, the wall paintings preserved at Pompeii or even Roman graffiti, the Warren Cup gives us a specific perspective of wealthy Romans' attitudes towards same-sex intercourse. As the only extant same-sex erotic depiction in silver, it gives a unique perspective. However, this perspective may be a highly biased one, and perhaps not at all to be taken as normative.

The use of silver drinking vessels among the Roman elite is demonstrated not only by the existence of the vessels themselves, but by their depiction in paintings of the period and even on other silver vessels. All the evidence points to their widespread use at the social dinner-parties known as *convivia*. The convivial nature of these meals suggests that the silver was meant to be appreciated not just for its practical use, but its artistic merit as well. The business of drinking together, in groups of under ten, was intended to facilitate the establishment of patronage relationships: 'the complex exchange of favours and obligations that is so basic to the Roman social structure.'<sup>7</sup>

An excellent example of the artistic appreciation of such vessels is found in the Hoby *skyphoi*, a pair of first-century CE silver drinking vessels unearthed in Denmark. The two cups, a matched pair, are decorated with scenes from the Trojan war. One depicts Priam negotiating the return of Hector's body from Achilles, the other scenes from the life of Philoctetes. The thematic linking of the two cups is understood as a standard practice, and guests at *convivia* most likely

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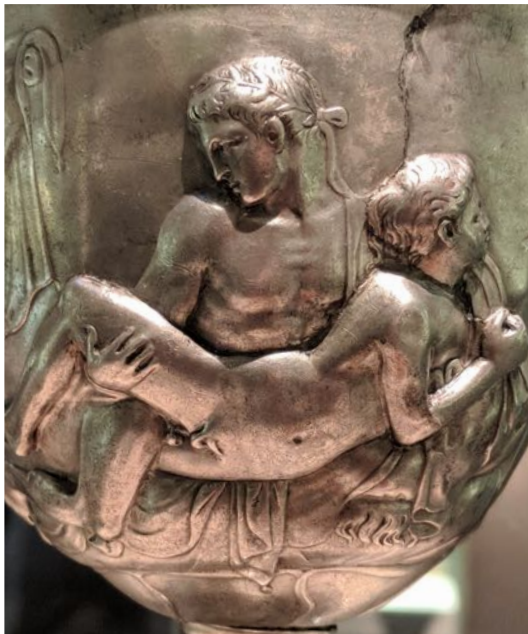
<sup>7</sup> Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40.



reflected and expounded upon the scenes depicted. Dunbabin argues that pairs, or even sets of four cups were decorated in such a way as to spark conversation among the gathered guests, and provide opportunities for a drinker to show off his wit and culture.<sup>8</sup>

### III. Figures

The decoration on the cup shows two primary scenes. On the side conventionally referred to as Side A, a *symplegma*, or sexual scene, is depicted with two male subjects being observed by a boy watching through a half-opened door. One of the males is bearded, and thus presumed to be older than his partner, who may be best described as on the edge of adulthood. Their age difference does not seem to be very great. On the other side, referred to as Side B, another *symplegma* depicts two more males. In this case, they are unobserved, and their age difference is much greater. One



1 Warren Cup, side A  
(photo: © Jonathan Rowe  
Courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum)



2 Warren Cup, side B  
(photo: © Jonathan Rowe  
Courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum)

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 66.

is clearly an adult, while the other is a pubescent boy.

The scenes likely take place indoors, as they are framed on either side by furniture and hanging fabrics, and there are no indications of flora or other outdoor elements. Side A is framed by hangings on the left side, and on the right with the doorway, which is a double door with two panels in each door. The left-hand door has been opened into the scene, and the boy is standing half behind it and half in front of the right-hand door. Side B is simply framed by the hanging fabric, which appears to be suspended from a pole or a cord. On the left of Side B, the cord extends down into the scene on an angle, and a visible hint of the top of the fabric is consistent with it having been hung over the cord, which is now sagging under its weight. By contrast, the angled cords at the right of Side B and at the left of Side A extend well below the more clearly-defined fold line at the top of the fabric (see figure 3). Perhaps in these cases, the fabric has been hung over some thicker pole which has been suspended from the cords.

To the left of each side stands a square box. The box on Side B is far more elaborately depicted, with a keyhole, and an attempt at three-quarter view has been made. Some kind of fabric has been draped

over the top or is possibly coming out of the inside of the box. The box at the right of Side A is much simpler, and mostly obscured by the couple and their bedding. On top of it stands an elaborately-depicted lyre with eleven strings, which has perhaps the greatest degree of detail on the whole cup. At the right of Side B is a pair of double pipes suspended from the ceiling, or from



3 Warren Cup, hangings between side B (left) and side A (right)

(photo: © Jonathan Rowe)

Courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum)

the same system of cords and poles that support the curtains.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the lyre, the artist has paid the most attention to the human figures on both sides of the cup. On Side A, the bearded man is reclining against a pile of cushions or folded blankets. His left shoulder is partly covered by the cloak beneath him that has been gathered and thrown over his shoulder. On his head, he wears a crown of myrtle leaves<sup>10</sup>, and his face is shown in profile, with the right side facing the viewer, and the left to his partner's back.

A beardless youth is sitting in his lap, supporting his weight by holding a hanging strap with his left arm. Another cloak, or possibly a sheet, covers his legs below the hip and has been draped over his left arm from the wrist to the shoulder. His right hand is at his hip, where the line of the sheet crosses it, and he may be holding the bearded man's hand. His buttocks are visible between the bearded man's arm and leg, and the bearded man's penis is visibly penetrating him.

The boy at the door is much smaller than either of the two figures, either due to his age, or an attempt to create perspective and the illusion of distance. That having been said, the doorway is not much larger than he is. The roundness of his face and the shortness of his hair denote youth, suggesting that he is even younger than the boy on Side B. His hair is a mass of short curls, and he is wearing an ungirded tunic with short wide sleeves that come to his elbows. His left hand is raised to hold the door, and his face is positioned close to it, as if peeking around it. Both door and boy are positioned behind the couple's extended legs.

On Side B, a youth is holding a much younger boy in his arms. His right hand is under the boy's right leg. His chest is almost completely turned towards the viewer, but he is leaning forward.

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<sup>9</sup> D. Williams suggests that both the pipes and the lyre have come from the box at the left of Side A, but this is not certain. His claim that this is a chest with its lid open (2015, 163) is not clear, nor is it clear that both scenes are taking place in the same room.

<sup>10</sup> John Pollini, "The Warren Cup: Homoerotic love and symposial rhetoric in silver," *The Art Bulletin* (1999) 41–42.



4 Warren Cup, penetrating youth, side B  
(photo: © Trustees of the British Museum)

His right knee is bent and positioned between the boy's legs, and his right leg is extended almost horizontally to the left edge of the scene. His penis is just visible, penetrating the boy's anus. The position seems strained and awkward when seen from the front, but when viewed from further to the left, it becomes more natural-looking to some.<sup>11</sup> Like the bearded man on Side A, he too is wearing a myrtle wreath, but he also has a plait of hair visible on top of his head. His face is turned away from the boy, towards the left of the scene.

The boy on Side B is lying on his side, presumably resting on his left elbow. A pile of cushions or blankets, or possibly even the curved end of a couch supports him. His right arm has crossed his body to hold either his own left hand or that of the youth (see below). As the youth's face is turned away from him, so his face is turned up and towards the right of the scene. The positions of the two bodies are rather conventional, whether the couple depicted are male-male or male-female. In such depictions, though, the couple's gazes are usually turned towards each other. On Side B of the Warren Cup, however, a note of estrangement and detachment is present.

The hairstyles of the five individuals on the cup give clues to their respective ages and statuses. The curly hair of the boy at the door marks him as a slave, but moreover as an outsider. Unlike the close-cropped or gently waved hair of the others, the boy's hair sets him apart from the classical standard of beauty. Whatever his future status will be, as he appears on the cup, he is not

<sup>11</sup> D. Williams (2015), 164. While he argues that a change in perspective affects the verisimilitude, from my own viewing, at multiple angles, it still seems that *this* youth needs a supporting strap far more than the one on Side A.

intended to be an attractive sexual partner.

The penetrated boy on Side B has quite a different appearance, though. His hair is slightly longer, giving an impression of greater age, but also of his status as a special servant. John Pollini notes that the long locks hanging down over his neck give him the feminized look of a *puer delicatus*—a “pet slave” kept particularly for his youthful attractiveness.<sup>12</sup> He also argues that the longer locks of hair at the neck of the penetrated youth on Side A also mark him as a *puer delicatus*, but this is less certain. If the boy on Side B was kept for preferential treatment as the most beloved of his master’s slaves due to his idealized youthful appearance, his size, his status, and the lack of visible pubic hair would make his age roughly twelve to thirteen years old.

We have already noted the braid of hair running along the top of the head of the youth who penetrates him. D. Williams identifies this braid as a *plochmos*, a lock of hair grown out through adolescence, then ceremonially removed and offered to a god at the transition to adulthood.<sup>13</sup> Such a hairstyle would mark him as a Greek of citizen status, but the fact that his *plochmos* had not yet been cut indicates that he is still under the age of about sixteen years old.

The penetrated youth on Side A is more enigmatic. As noted, Pollini tries to connect his hairstyle with the penetrated boy on Side B.



5 Warren Cup, penetrated youth, side A  
(photo: © Trustees of the British Museum)

<sup>12</sup> Pollini, 33–34. See also D. Williams (2015), 167 for an argument that the long locks on the Warren Cup figures are not related to the hairstyles of *pueri delicati*.

<sup>13</sup> D. Williams (2015), 165.

However, D. Williams draws a parallel to Side B's penetrating youth, claiming that he is likewise a young Greek citizen who has already cut off his *plochmos*. Such an interpretation, if correct, would place his age at seventeen or eighteen. However, the two hairstyles are notably different at the nape of the neck. The youth on Side B has his hair brushed or drawn up (figure 4), while the one on Side A has a fringe of hair that hangs lower on his neck, although not as low as the boy on Side B (figure 5).

His partner's beard is distinctively un-Roman, and may mark him as a Greek, though there are examples of Romans, particularly Nero, who have beards, so such an identification is not definite. If he is a Roman rather than a Greek, he might be part of a segment of first-century Roman society that was attracted by Greek culture, and sought to emulate its elements where they could.

#### IV. Interpretation

For Warren himself, the cup was the pride of his collection, lovingly referred to as "the Holy Grail."<sup>14</sup> Although the donation was politely declined, he had offered it to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston upon his death. It was his intention, through the collection of pederastic artefacts he had already donated to the museum, to establish a companion piece to his "Defence of Uranian Love" in which he advocated the principles of same-sex love. The love envisioned by Warren was not a modern egalitarian homosexuality, but a reclaiming of ancient pederastic relationships in which an older, more experienced *erastes* took on a younger *eromenos*, not only as a sexual partner, but also to educate and protect his protégé.

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<sup>14</sup> D. Williams (2006), 26.

In supplying the Museum of Fine Arts with such a collection, Warren intended it to be a major part of his “pederastic evangel”, the crown jewel of which was to be his silver cup.<sup>15</sup> He read it as glorifying the Roman idealized youth both as a desirable object of beauty and as an available sexual partner. For him, the cup was not at all subversive to first-century viewers, but rather as representative of their social norms. However, Warren’s cup and the rest of his collection would have been considered profoundly subversive to his early twentieth-century contemporaries, and so his promotion of pederastic art which might otherwise have been neglected, hidden, or destroyed was intended to actively subvert sensibilities and invite viewers to consider an alternative perspective of sexuality.

After Warren, the next serious interpretation of the cup is a brief paragraph in Cornelius Vermeule’s 1963 treatment of Augustan and Julio-Claudian court silver.<sup>16</sup> He imagines it as a work of political satire, not unlike a modern political cartoon. In this interpretation, several of the figures are not meant to be idealized ones, but meant to actually represent real historical figures. Side A would depict a Julio-Claudian prince being pedicated by an unnamed Greek. On Side B, Vermeule claims more specificity, noting that the faces bear a remarkable similarity to Tiberius and Drusus Jr.

Vermeule ends his brief treatment with the foregone conclusion that such a cup, with such politically-charged scenes, must have been reserved for “private viewings by a very limited, extremely sophisticated audience.” Presumably, he envisioned a wealthy patron who commissioned the cup as an indictment against the incestuous affiliations of the imperial family,

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<sup>15</sup> Jen Grove, “The Role of Roman Artefacts in E.P. Warren’s ‘Paederastic Evangel,’” in *Ancient Rome and the Construction of Modern Homosexual Identities*, ed. Jennifer Inglehart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 225.

<sup>16</sup> Cornelius Vermeule, “Augustan and Julio-Claudian Court Silver.” *Antike Kunst*, 6(1) (1963): 39.

and was only comfortable with displaying it among his closest associates, whose political sensibilities he could trust.

Vermeule's narrative attributes the most strongly subversive message to the Warren Cup, and while its suggestions of shady backroom banquets with subversive silverware are attractive, it is nonetheless the weakest narrative. It depends upon spurious positive identification of the figures and ignores the details of Greek dress and hairstyle mentioned above. He ambiguously avoids clarifying whether the Warren Cup's limited audience would have been dictated by its political or its sexual depictions. It is likely that he has projected his own cultural biases against sexual depictions onto the ancient artifact. His suggestions have been generally ignored by more recent scholarship.

Clarke's interpretation of the cup makes the strongest case for its subversive nature. Although he is well aware of the Priapic model of sexuality, he persistently uses the term "lovemaking" instead of more clinical terms to describe sexual intercourse. This is meant as an attempt to connect human motivations to figures from the ancient world and to make them more intelligible to a modern audience, but it is not without its difficulties. The term "lovemaking" carries connotations of reciprocity that are difficult to ignore. The Priapic model emphasizes sex as being an act that one person performs upon another, rather than the two-way street of mutual pleasure.<sup>17</sup> Clarke challenges this notion by crafting a narrative for interpretation in which previously-unrecognized voices from pathic subcultures catch the attention of modern audiences with their similarities to modern notions of homosexuality.

As the first modern scholar to give the Warren Cup serious attention, and probably the first

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<sup>17</sup> Walters, 30.



person to refer to it as “the Warren Cup” in print,<sup>18</sup> Clarke’s interpretation has set the tone for many subsequent interpreters. At the heart of his comments on the cup is the apparent equality between the figures on Side A. Literary sources usually describe a penetrated male as either a figure of scorn and derision (and thus not an equal) or a beloved idealized youth (who, by virtue of his age, is also not an equal). The two descriptions appear to be mutually exclusive, so we are forced to decide in which category to place the penetrated male on Side A of the Warren Cup. Clarke points out that the artist has taken pains to portray both active and passive partners as equally idealized and attractive, and to portray them as equally attracted to the other.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he makes this argument about both sides of the cup, highlighting the mutual tenderness evident in both male pairs. Clarke reads the sexuality depicted on the Warren Cup as more than just a “one-way street.” In fact, with his interpretation, it could be appropriate to speak, not just of lovemaking, but of “couples” or “sexual *partners*” in the sense of individuals not just engaged in socially-defined roles, but with genuine emotional investment in each other and a relationship.

Gathering evidence to substantiate such claims is difficult, though, so Clarke stresses the importance of contextualizing the cup with such questions as “Who paid for it? Who made it? Who looked at it, and in what circumstances?” He intends such questions to help preserve the interpreter’s objectivity and prevent projecting modern perspectives and biases onto an ancient artefact.<sup>20</sup> In earlier work, he considered the suspended strap on Side A as evidence that the space in which that couple were making love was equipped for that purpose, perhaps as a brothel.<sup>21</sup> However, more recently he has embraced a more subversive interpretation and argued that the cup

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<sup>18</sup> D. Williams (2015), 188n11.

<sup>19</sup> Clarke (1993), 284.

<sup>20</sup> Clarke (2005), 273.

<sup>21</sup> Clarke (1993), 293.

was commissioned by an elite Roman man who appreciated the reciprocal experience of both penetrating and being penetrated. He also notes that without knowing the cultural proscriptions of such a coupling, a modern viewer could easily interpret the depiction as ‘modern gay sex: reciprocal sex between adult men.’<sup>22</sup>

Such a narrative, reconstructing the motives for commissioning the Warren Cup in the first place, is attractive in that it accounts for the supposedly problematic elements of Side A by attributing them to a minority perspective. If the cup appears inconsistent with traditional sexual roles, this is because its original owner and user did not completely conform to those roles. However, Clarke does not elaborate on the contrast between the more commonplace scene on Side B and the subversive one on Side A. If the original owner enjoyed looking at scenes of near-equals engaged in reciprocal lovemaking, why did he not commission a scene in which the roles were reversed on the other side, and the bearded male became the penetrated partner?

In contrast to Clarke’s interpretation, Pollini stresses the Greek elements in the cup to shift the focus away from any suggestion of transgression in Side A. His argument is that the Warren Cup compares and contrasts two distinct styles of same-sex penetration.<sup>23</sup> In fact, he creates a narrative arc for the cup’s figures, ranging through the full range of experiences a slave boy might encounter. In this narrative, all three boys—the two being pedicated and the one at the doors—are slaves, representing various stages of development in a *puer delicatus*.

On Side A, the slave boy at the door represents a complete neophyte in sexual matters. Whether he has come upon the couple on the bed by accident or design, his role in the scene is as an observer. His status as a slave is obvious from his short curly locks, his ungirded tunic, and the

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<sup>22</sup> Clarke (2005), 293.

<sup>23</sup> Pollini, 37.

lack of a *bullā*, or amulet denoting him as a freeborn boy. He has begun his education and preparation for his role by watching the couplings of others, and in this case, he has been given the opportunity to observe a much older, more experienced slave pleasuring his master.

The pedicated boy on Side B represents a slave who has progressed beyond the stage of purely theoretical education, and now is gaining practical experience. His age is likely twelve or thirteen. Unlike the boy at the door, he has reached puberty and has reached the stage of development where he is most attractive to the men of his society as a passive partner. Accordingly, his role is purely passive. Pedication is something being done *to* him.

This is in contrast to the penetrated youth on Side A. Pollini puts his age at seventeen to eighteen, and suggests that his far more active role in the sexual act indicates that he has reached the peak of his sexual skills or “tricks of the trade”. In this coupling, his role is far more active. Rather than being pedicated, it would be more appropriate to speak of him ceveting upon his partner. He is reaching the end of the period in which he would physically be a desirable partner, but his skills are at their peak. He is also valuable as an instructive example for the boy at the door.

Pollini’s narrative is a neat one, in which both scenes are connected by the observing boy. He will one day become the boy on Side B, and then the one on Side A. Moreover, Butrica adds a level to this narrative, suggesting that the pairs on Side A and Side B are the same couple, at different stages of their lives and relationship.<sup>24</sup> The boys actually being penetrated, however, are a contrast of forms and techniques. This interpretation says that a Roman man must choose between youth or experience. Giving higher preference to one entails sacrificing the other. Pollini’s suggestion that demonstrating this contrast was the Warren Cup’s artistic purpose—to invite guests

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<sup>24</sup> Butrica (2005), 237.

at a banquet to speculate upon which of the two attributes was more preferable in a male sexual partner.

Pollini's is the most thoroughly-developed interpretation, but it is not without its weaknesses. He avoids any hint of subversion by presupposing a reading of Side A in which the penetrated boy is fully grown, but not the same age or status of his bearded penetrator. In doing this he cites Clarke, claiming a precedent dating back to sixth-century Attic vases in which adult men could be distinguished from older boys by their beards.<sup>25</sup> Yet Clarke also cites examples of Greek vases in which couples are presented as near-equals without using a beard to differentiate them.<sup>26</sup> In short, while there is elegance in Pollini's "education of a sex-slave" narrative, it tends to deny or ignore the subversive edge of Side A.

D. Williams has produced some of the most detailed analysis of the Warren Cup, but he fails to provide an interpreting narrative with the scope of either Clarke or Pollini. He cites the musical instruments as indicators of the Greek context of the scenes. They are instruments requiring some proficiency, though, and are not ones that would have been played by the individuals depicted.<sup>27</sup> Instead, they are set-pieces, marking the scene as occurring in Greek society, and thus not subject to Roman mores. He further points to the Greek hairstyles on the figures: the man's beard, the braided plait on the penetrating youth, and the boy's long locks, as evidence that these are Greeks and not Romans.<sup>28</sup>

However, his argument is weak here. He argues that the penetrated male on Side A is a Greek and a citizen, based on evidence that is not present, but *absent*. The *plochmos* that the youth

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<sup>25</sup> Pollini, 29 n81.

<sup>26</sup> Clarke (1998), 86.

<sup>27</sup> D. Williams (2015), 167.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

on Side B is wearing is a sign that he is a Greek, and has not yet reached the rite of passage in which this plait would have been offered to the gods. However, Williams' assumption that the penetrated male on Side A has already cut his off begs the question, presupposing that he is a Greek who would have grown one out in the first place. While he correctly argues, as noted above, that first-century Roman men did not normally wear beards, in the same breath he concedes that bearded depictions of Nero and Domitian are indications of a growing trend of philhellenism in Roman society.

His argument that the scene on Side A was "not intended to be openly subversive of the regular 'phallic construction' of Roman sexual protocols," depends on the clear identification of the figures as Greek. Williams presents a persuasive argument, but not an unambiguous one. The penetrated figure may be a Greek who has cut off his *plachmos*; alternatively, he may simply be a Roman man. The penetrating figure may be a bearded Greek, or he may be a Roman who has grown a beard to mimic Greek style. The lyre in the background might be an indicator of undepicted Greek musicians who could have played it as part of the entertainment at a Greek *symposium*. Alternatively, it could simply be one of the trappings of Greek society that a philhellenic Roman would have adopted, like his Greek beard. Williams' own claim that the Warren Cup is a Roman artefact decorated with Greek scenes establishes a scenario in which the Side A may be interpreted as Romans dressed up as Greeks.

## V. Roman Sexual Preference and the Priapic Model

Before addressing the interpretation of the scenes, we must first consider the first-century Roman social expectations around sexuality, so that we can see how the Warren Cup conforms to and departs from them. It can be easy to misinterpret descriptions of sexual behaviour in the ancient world, particularly if we apply modern prejudices and assumptions to the social realities of another society and culture. It would be misguided to project a Puritanical antipathy towards sexuality onto Greco-Roman society; a strong tradition among both Greeks and Romans was unabashedly frank in the way it described and depicted sexual acts. In the Roman sexual arena, sexual relationships were hardly restricted to married couples, and were not pursued simply for the sake of procreation. Within certain limits, a man could choose to enjoy relationships with both women and other men.

Yet these limits make it equally anachronistic to assume a degree of sexual freedom comparable to that seen in modern society. Roman men were the primary sexual agents; a woman's role was understood to be that of a passive recipient.<sup>29</sup> However, while a Roman man exercised more freedom than a woman in his sexual adventures, he was still expected to conform to a number of socially-established norms, both with opposite-sex and same-sex partners.<sup>30</sup> These norms dictated not just *what* he could do and *with whom*, but also *how often* and how enthusiastically; too much preoccupation with sex was considered a sign of "softness", and an indication of a defect in masculinity.

Many descriptions of Roman sexual expectations centre on the god Priapus. Amy Richlin

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<sup>29</sup> So much so that "to take the woman's role" (*muliebria pati*) would become a byword for any act in which a male was penetrated rather than being the penetrator. cf. Jonathan Walters, "Invading the Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought," in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>30</sup> Craig Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17–19.

identifies him as “at the center of the whole complex of Roman sexual humor.”<sup>31</sup> Craig Williams cites him as “something like the patron saint or mascot of Roman machismo.”<sup>32</sup> Yet John Clarke points out that for all his significance in helping to understand Roman models of sexual behaviour, Priapus is “unlike the beautiful Olympians, a homely, rustic deity than one can laugh at.”<sup>33</sup> Priapus is at one and the same time a representation of both the dominance and aggression in Roman sexuality and of the tensions and double standards at play. Perhaps it is these tensions that make Priapus such an effective model. On one level, he makes sexual behaviour easily understood, but on another, more subtle level, he challenges easy assumptions, and encourages a deeper reflection, on the parts of both ancient and modern observers.

In the *Liber Priapeorum*, the god stands guard over his garden, warning intruders of the penalties they face if they are caught.

*Femina si furtum faciet mihi virve puerve,  
haec cunnum, caput hic, praebeat ille nates.*<sup>34</sup>

If a woman, a man, or a boy should steal from me,  
she'd be offering me her cunt, he his head, and the last his buttocks.

The implication is that with his enormous phallus, Priapus could threaten punishment on men, women, and boys indiscriminately, and Roman men were afforded similar liberty in putting their own less-priapic members to use. This model of sexuality is of necessity aggressive and highly dependant upon differentials of power and social status.

A perfect example of this kind of aggressive sexuality is seen in the cuckolded husband's

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<sup>31</sup> Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 58.

<sup>32</sup> C. Williams, 18.

<sup>33</sup> John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art 100 BC–AD 250*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 48.

<sup>34</sup> *Liber Priapeorum*, Apud Weidmannos, 1871. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044085217958> (Accessed at 6 November 2017), 22. Except where noted, all translations are my own.

option to anally penetrate an adulterer, implied in Martial 2.49:

*Uxorem nolo Telesinam ducere. Quare?  
Moecha est. Sed pueris dat Telesina. Volo.*

I don't want to marry Telesina. Why not? Because she's an adulteress.  
But Telesina has affairs with boys? Okay then, I want her!

Here the speaker admits that his reluctance to take a wife with such a reputation for unchastity can be easily overruled by the opportunity to exact his revenge upon her lovers. The joke is that Telesina is not to be desired for her own merits, but for the ready supply of youths she will attract, who can be penetrated with impunity when they have been caught in the act.<sup>35</sup> The fact that these boys will be the victims of anal rape rather than consensual partners is telling. For Romans, the sexual act was not seen as a two-way, but a one-way street. Telesina's would-be husband is simply interested in penetrating boys; he is not looking for a relationship. Penetration in this case is clearly an expression of dominance.



6 Warren Cup, penetrated boy, side B  
(photo: © Trustees of the British Museum)

Side B of the Warren Cup fits with this model to a point. The difference in age and size between the two figures is immediately apparent. The scene does not appear to be one of aggression, but the youth is clearly the dominant figure. The act of penetrating the boy is a sign of superiority. One small detail might subtly change the interpretation of the scene, though. The boy's right hand is clasping another hand (or at least another thumb) but it is not clear whether it is his

<sup>35</sup> C. Williams, 26.



own or the penetrating youth's. If it is his own, perhaps it is a display of pain and discomfort, which would tend towards a purely domination-based interpretation. However, if he is clutching the youth's hand, as D. Williams suggests,<sup>36</sup> this may be a hint of intimacy between the two.

In all likelihood, the boy is in fact clutching the youth's hand, rather than his own, based on the size of the thumb clasped between his own thumb and forefinger. This gesture of intimacy is not enough to significantly change the theme of dominance on Side B, but it does add nuance to it. This is a scene of sexuality based on clear active and passive roles, perfectly acceptable by Roman standards. The theme of dominance is a key one, but not the only theme present in this depiction. The slightest hint of intimacy is enough to suggest that the Priapic model is not the only appropriate lens through which to interpret Side B of the Warren Cup.

If such is the case for Side B, how much more for Side A. The beardless youth lowering himself onto his partner's penis is clearly the one being penetrated and taking the passive role, but he is anything but passive. He is approximately the same size as his partner, and only the beard, or lack thereof, differentiates the two with respect to age. It is much harder to view the bearded youth as the dominant figure in the scene. If anything, he must work to keep from being crushed by his partner. With respect to their age, social status, and physical positions, the figures on Side A make for a non-traditional Roman depiction of same-sex activity. The Priapic model is not sufficient to interpret the scene, and we will need either a new model, or a more subtly nuanced one to explain it.

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<sup>36</sup> D. Williams (2015), 164.

## VI. The Problem of Vocabulary

Scholarly consensus maintains that “hetero-“ and “homosexuality” are not only the wrong terms to use in discussing Roman sexual activity, but even the wrong *categories*. In the Roman world, culturally-appropriate sexual activity was determined by the social status of each of the participants and their respective roles in the act itself. While modern Western cultural assumptions classify sexual identities with respect to the sex of the partner (in which case available options include same-sex, opposite-sex, or either sex indiscriminately), Roman sexual identities were defined by whether a participant was an active *agent* in the sexual act, or a passive *recipient*. Where categories are confused, it can be difficult for a modern reader to appreciate the distinction between sexual acts and roles.

For example, modern English might speak of “oral sex” which is a blanket expression referring to any oral stimulation of the genitals. As a descriptor, it is remarkably imprecise, since it does not specify whether the genitals in question are male or female. The use of the term *fellatio* (as opposed to *cunnilingus*) identifies the genitals as male, but says nothing about whether the other partner is male or female, nor about what they are doing.

As in English, Latin makes no special distinction between a male or female mouth in this case, but it does have vocabulary for the role that the other partner plays. The complementary verbs *fellare* and *irrumare* describe the same sexual act, but from different perspectives. *Fellatio* describes, as in English, a “passive” partner *taking* a man's penis into the mouth, and thus can be described as the passive perspective. *Irrumatio*, on the other hand, can be described from the active perspective, as *putting* one's penis into someone's mouth. The fact that as an expression, “*irrumatio*” does not have the same level of English currency as “*fellatio*” can lead to difficulties

in translating the verb *irrumare*, ranging from the slightly obscure (“to give suck”), to the prudishly so (“other activities”).<sup>37</sup>

The connotations of these two verbs slightly complicates the situation. A *fellator/fellatrix* is someone who performs fellatio, but is not necessarily someone who has been irrumated. While *irrumatio* often implied forcible penetration of a passive partner, *fellatio* might be a willing act performed by the passive. Adams differentiates the two by suggesting that while a man who was irrumated was generally seen as suffering shame and humiliation at the hands of an enemy, a female prostitute’s skill at fellatio well might be cause for praise and good reputation.<sup>38</sup> Thus in Martial 3.82, despite Zoilus’s appalling insolence that so enrages him, the poet complains that he cannot even exact vengeance by means of irrumation—Zoilus cannot be irrumated, since he fellates.<sup>39</sup> We begin to see the problems of using the terms “active” and “passive” partner, since a *fellator*, despite the fact that he is actively *doing* something to another man’s penis, is still subject to disgrace as a “passive” partner.

It is in the description of anal penetration that the problems of vocabulary come more into focus, particularly as they relate to the Warren cup. While the Latin term *pedicare* denotes the act of penetrating another’s anus, and *pedicari* the act of *being* penetrated, there is no such widely-used expression for the action of *actively* using one’s anus to stimulate someone’s penis—no analogy to *fellare*. Thus we can say that the boy on Side B of the Warren Cup is being “pedicated” but what of the beardless youth on Side A? He is clearly being penetrated, but the active role he

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<sup>37</sup> Compare Shackleton Bailey’s translation (1993) to Ker’s (1947) of Martial 2.83. In some epigrams, Ker declined even to translate the “pornographic” Latin into English, instead printing it in Italian!

<sup>38</sup> J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, (London: Duckworth, 1982), 127, 131.

<sup>39</sup> Martial, *Epigrams* 3.82.33–34: *hos malchionis patimur improbi fastus, // nec vindicari, Rufe, possumus: fellat.*

seems to be taking make it difficult to describe this sexual act as something that is simply *happening to him*.

The verb *cevere* is occasionally used (as in Martial 3.95.13) to describe the movements that a passive male might make while being penetrated, but its use is hardly widespread.<sup>40</sup> In fact, it is more likely that *cevere* was originally a non-sexual verb that was adapted for sexual use.<sup>41</sup> It seems that while Romans might have had many opportunities to talk about oral or anal penetration (*irrumare* and *pedicare*), as well as someone who was penetrated (*pathicus*) and even who enjoyed it (*cinaedus*), there was less opportunity to talk about someone who took an active role in his own anal penetration. Perhaps the very idea was too shameful or unusual to even need its own vocabulary, but as the Warren Cup shows, it was not unthinkable.

## VII. The Problem of Status

The importance of role rather than choice of partner in establishing sexual mores makes the label “homosexual” inappropriate to discussions of Roman sexuality, but so too does the importance of status. If we take it for granted that a normative Roman male would always choose to be the penetrating partner, it is equally important to consider what kinds of partners he chooses to penetrate.

Women were considered appropriate objects of penetration, whether vaginally, anally, or orally. However, sexual contact with another man’s wife was illicit, since adultery would be considered an offence, not against the wife herself, but against her as her husband’s property.

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<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Shackleton Bailey hardly knows what to do with the expression, rendering *pulchre ceves* as “you agitate your bottom to admiration”.

<sup>41</sup> James L. Butrica, “Criso and ceueo,” *Glotta; Zeitschrift Für Griechische Und Lateinische Sprache...*, 82 (2006): 35. By this argument, the more contemporary expression ‘to twerk’ might be the closest parallel.

While adulterous relationships were commonplace, the standards of acceptable behaviour created a setting in which the choice of female sexual partners was usually restricted to one's own wife, or to a prostitute (as discussed below).

The choice of male partners offered more freedom of selection, but again within certain limits. Preference was generally given to youth, and to smooth, hairless partners, but in an oft-cited example, Plautus warns a young man, "As long as you keep yourself away from married women, widows, virgins, youth, and freeborn boys, love whoever you want."<sup>42</sup> Some of these forbidden partners, such as married women and virgins, were protected by their feminine status. They would have been considered as part of the household of and under the protection of their husbands or fathers, and an offence against their *pudicitia* could be a serious affront to the men responsible for them. Freeborn boys were protected by their status as potential Roman citizens. Such a boy might not yet be mature to the point of being able to protect himself from unwanted penetration, yet was at the point of being most attractive to adult men. For a man to take advantage of his youth and vulnerability would be an affront to the very notion of citizenship, which was understood to protect Romans against unwanted assault.

The *lex Scantinia* is well-attested, but poorly understood by modern scholars. It likely refers to legislation protecting the vulnerable from *stuprum*, or unwanted penetration.<sup>43</sup> Such a law had two effects. On one hand, it highlighted the importance of maintaining the *pudicitia* of the freeborn young, both male and female, as a protected commodity.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, it established a lower class of individuals who were not so protected, and limited a Roman man's

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<sup>42</sup> Plautus, *Curculio*, 1.37–38.

<sup>43</sup> C. Williams, 131.

<sup>44</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 81.

choice of licit partners to those lower classes. Here we see distinction between the Greek and Roman pederastic traditions. Greeks could court citizen boys, who were free to receive the advances and favours of older men, after an appropriate show of modesty. In contrast, a Roman's male partner, as a slave or a freedman, had much less status, and was by definition, more vulnerable.<sup>45</sup>

The question of status is a significant one for interpreting the Warren Cup. If the depiction on Side A conforms to the traditional Priapic model, we must interpret the penetrated male as being from the lower, penetrable classes: a slave or freedman, a foreigner, or even a male prostitute. This interpretation is somewhat at odds with the artist's apparent depiction of both males as similar in size, age, and dignity. Yet if we conclude from the visual cues that they are closer to equals, the depiction becomes one of a more transgressive act. Perhaps the bearded man is performing the Priapic script through the aggressive, possibly vengeful, forceful penetration of the other. If so, why would he not take a more active role, and why would the artist have added such touches of intimacy? Perhaps the transgression is on the part of the penetrated man, who has sacrificed the dignity of his status as a freeborn male citizen, for the sake of fulfilling a desire to be penetrated—a desire that the Priapic model would deem perverse and unmanly. Perhaps there are other considerations that establish that this is not meant to be a depiction of two Roman male citizens, and thus not governed by Roman standards. An equally likely scenario is that we have not adequately reconstructed Roman standards of sexual propriety. If so, the Warren Cup may be helpful in recognizing the more subtle nuances of Roman sexuality.

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Manwell, "Gender and Masculinity," in *A Companion to Catullus*, ed. Marilyn B. Skinner, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 118.

### VIII. Artistic Parallels

When considering its artistic context, it is better to speak of analogues rather than parallels to the Warren Cup. The Warren Cup's precious material, quality of workmanship, and homoerotic subject matter seem to place it in a category by itself, and this has led some to question its authenticity.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the cup is not *sui generis*, but simply the sole extant example of Roman homoerotic silver as a distinct form. Following Clarke, it is helpful to consider these other forms as signposts that help deduce an artistic context in which actual parallels—other homoerotic silver *symplegmata*—might have been created. A number of analogues help develop this context, including wall paintings in both private and public spaces at Pompeii, homoerotic *symplegmata* in less-expensive Arretine ware, and other decorated silver vessels, showing both erotic and non-erotic scenes.

Unlike the decoration of silver and terracotta vessels, which could conceivably be used in different parts of the house, or could be sold and so find new use in a new household, Roman wall paintings were created to be viewed in a specific location and context.<sup>47</sup> The examples uncovered in Pompeii nevertheless help establish a context for symplegmatic art, attesting to its presence at home and in public settings. They establish that scenes of both male-female and male-male sexual activity were commonly found not just in silver conversation pieces for elaborate dinner parties, but also in everyday Roman life.

A useful example was discovered in room 43 of the House of the Centenary.<sup>48</sup> Centrally located on the north wall, the scene depicts a woman squatting above a man, with her legs spread

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<sup>46</sup> D. Williams (2015), 185.

<sup>47</sup> Clarke (1998), 145.

<sup>48</sup> Clarke (1993), 289.

to receive his penis in her vagina (Figure 7). The man is reclining on a couch with his left arm bent to support the weight of his torso. He appears to be fully naked, while the woman seems to be wearing only a breastband, and an armband on her upper left arm.

Although it is a male-female scene instead of male-male, this painting from the House of the Centenary makes a helpful comparison to the Warren Cup. The woman's squatting position mean that her knees are bent rather than sitting in her partner's lap, and she supports her weight by putting her hands on her knees rather than holding onto a strap, but she is otherwise in a similar position to the penetrated man on Side A. Both are being penetrated, but they are also clearly the active partner in the scene. In the



7 Wall painting, House of the Centenary, Room 43, north wall. (photo: Wolfgang Rieger [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons)

woman's case, the verb used to describe her action would be *crisare* as opposed to *cevere*.<sup>49</sup> The man on the House of the Centenary wall is reaching forward to touch the woman with his right hand. It appears that he is resting his hand on her back, but the deteriorated condition of the painting makes it impossible to be certain. As on the Warren Cup, architectural elements present in the painting show that it is an indoor scene.

What is more, there is a dark rectangular shape on the wall above and to the left of the couple. This is often interpreted as a *tabella*, one of the many little pictures that could be found on

<sup>49</sup> Butrica (2006), 25.



the walls of Roman houses. However, Pollini notes that there are no signs of cords that such a *tabella* would have hung from, and finds intriguing parallels with the 13 inch square window in the wall connecting Room 43 with the anteroom through which one would have had to come in order to reach it.<sup>50</sup> Too small and too high up to be useful as a serving window or to provide light or air in the room, he suggests that it was used as a “voyeur window” through which the sexual adventures going on in the room could be observed. If this is so, it might also be a subtle parallel to the boy watching the couple on the Warren Cup.

Despite the unconventional position of the couple, there is nothing to suggest that those who used this room would have marked this particular image out for special attention, compared to the room’s other central images. Rather than commanding pride of place on the wall directly opposite the entrance, it is on the left-hand wall, with a corresponding male-female scene, this time with the woman facing the man, on the right-hand. Both these scenes are centrally located on the walls, framed by other pictures. Room 43 was evidently used for having sex, but it was not the only use of the room. It is secluded from the rest of the house, but as Clarke points out, the fact that Roman notions of ‘privacy’ and presence of servants throughout the house, even in rooms where their masters had sex, mean that we should not project our own notions of what constitutes a private, convenient place for lovers to meet.<sup>51</sup> Yet the *symplegmata*, which in earlier times would have been more discreetly displayed in the upper section of a well-appointed bedroom, had by this point migrated to more central locations on the wall, inviting viewers to appreciate the depictions.

The example from the House of the Centenary is one of a sexually-explicit depiction in full view of guests or members of the household, but other Pompeian scenes were even more publicly

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<sup>50</sup> Pollini, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Clarke (1998), 163.

displayed. An unfortunate modern tendency in interpreting the public sexual scenes in Pompeii has been to treat buildings in which they have been found as places where sex was bought and sold. However, such a liberal interpretation would mean that the small town of Pompeii had more brothels per capita than the whole city of Rome.<sup>52</sup> Numbers range between '35 or more' to just one.<sup>53</sup> The one undisputed brothel was decorated with erotic art intended to raise the tone of the establishment.<sup>54</sup> Other erotic scenes were depicted in other public buildings, though, including the Suburban Baths. One of the rooms in the bath complex featured a series of sixteen sexual vignettes, eight of which are extant. Unlike the paintings found in the bedrooms of public homes, these scenes are placed in a high-traffic area—the *apodyterium*, or changing room, where a steady stream of both male and female patrons would have passed through to remove and store their clothing as they availed of the facility. It was hardly a room for having sex.

In contrast to those who interpret these images as advertisements for sexual services or even a pictorial “menu”, the excavator Luciana Jacobelli claims that they are something much more mundane: a memory aid to help patrons remember where they left their clothes.<sup>55</sup> It is not unusual to find phallic or erotic scenes in bathhouses. Representations of phalluses would have been understood to confer a degree of protection from evil influences upon naked patrons while they were particularly vulnerable.<sup>56</sup> In establishing a context for the Warren Cup, we have already

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<sup>52</sup> John R. Clarke, “Look Who’s Laughing at Sex: Men and Women Viewers in the *Apodyterium* of the Suburban Baths at Pompeii,” in *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power, and the Body*, ed. David Fredrick, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 151.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas A.J. McGinn, “Pompeian Brothels and Social History”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Supplementary Series; No. 47. (Portsmouth, R.I.: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2002), 7. In contrast to Clarke’s single-brothel theory, McGinn takes seriously “the possibility that not all brothels in Pompeii have been identified,” but also concedes that the presence of erotic art is hardly enough alone to identify a building as a place where sex was bought and sold. (McGinn, 10)

<sup>54</sup> Clarke (1998), 202.

<sup>55</sup> Roger Ling, review of *Le pitture erotiche delle Terme Suburbane di Pompei* by Luciana Jacobelli, *The Classical Review* 46, no. 2 (1996): 390.

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Johns, *Sex or Symbol? Erotic Images of Greece and Rome*, (New York, Routledge, 1982), 64.



**6** Wall painting in Suburban Baths, Pompeii  
 (photo: Wolfgang Rieger [Public domain], via  
 Wikimedia Commons)

seen in the case of private homes how Roman attitudes were more relaxed than our own about erotic artwork. Now, in the case of public buildings, we are reminded that the use of such art, though erotic in its subject matter, was not necessarily meant to arouse erotic desires in its viewers.

One of the vignettes from the Suburban Baths may be helpful in establishing the social context in which the Warren Cup was interpreted by its first-century viewers and users. On the wall below each scene is an oblique depiction of a numbered box or basket, most likely corresponding to the boxes in which patrons would deposit their clothing. Since the depicted boxes are numbered, we can establish an order in which the vignettes were meant to be viewed, and appreciate the humour in the increasingly outlandish scenes.

Earlier scenes depict a series of couples, both male-female and female-female, engaging in vaginal and oral sex in a variety of positions. By the sixth scene (Figure 6), a third figure has been added. Here a woman kneels on all fours on a bed, being penetrated by a man kneeling behind her. However, he himself is being anally penetrated by the man behind him. There are a number of ways to interpret this scene, but one thing is clear. The conventions of the series of paintings make it clear that there are two men and one woman: the men are depicted in dark tones while the women are depicted in light ones. However the scene is interpreted—whether any or all of the figures are patrons of a brothel or have otherwise found themselves in a situation in which they can fulfil some sexual fantasy—the man in the middle is singled out as an object of special shame and derision—

the butt of the joke, as it were.

Perhaps the woman wanted to be penetrated by a pathic man who was himself being penetrated. Perhaps the man on the left wanted to penetrate a pathic who was also penetrating someone else. Perhaps the man in the middle wanted to both penetrate and be penetrated, but even if he has engaged both a male and female prostitute to service him, there is no way in which he escapes the shame of being penetrated by another man. However the three people got themselves into this three-way *symplegma*, it is significant to note that the man on the left is holding the hand of the man in the middle. Comparable to the sign of tenderness between the two men on Side A of the Warren Cup, this scene is a reminder that even in a scene intended to display scorn and domination, there can still be an element of intimacy in sexual representation. The painting at once reinforces the Priapic model, while at the same time highlighting its ambiguity, and is an excellent counterpart to the Warren Cup.

The model privileges the Priapic male as one who is the penetrator without being penetrated himself. But it would be inaccurate to think simply in terms of penetrator and penetrated. The pathic may be best understood as a male whose preference is to be penetrated, and the *cinaedus* as one who fails to live up to Priapic standards (with respect to penetration or other gender roles), but neither of these categories precludes either the pathic or the *cinaedus* himself playing a penetrating role, either with a woman or with another man.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, the penetrated man on Side A of the Warren Cup need not be understood as always penetrated, but never penetrating. However, it is not the simple act of penetration, but the state of being unpenetrated that defines status and dominance in the Priapic script.

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<sup>57</sup> C. Williams, 197.

Leaving the realm of private and public wall art, we can also establish context for the Warren Cup by looking to other decorated cups. More affordable than costly silver cups was a wide range of decorated terracotta vessels known as Arretine ware. Originally produced at Arretium (now Arezzo), the style of such pieces grew immensely popular and was soon found and copied throughout the Roman empire and even in parts beyond. A potter could easily and inexpensively create an Arretine cup or bowl by pressing clay into an already-fired mold, which had the reverse relief designs cut or stamped into them. Such a process allowed pieces that mimicked the style and design of elite tableware to be mass-produced for customers with more modest budgets.<sup>58</sup>

Examples of Arretine ware demonstrate that just like the elite members of society, those with more affordable tastes were also fond of using vessels decorated with erotic scenes. One bowl fragment (also from Warren's collection, Figure 9) depicts a man pedicating an adolescent male in a scene comparable to Side B of the Warren cup. The positions of the partners are similar to their silver counterparts, but more tenderness and intimacy is evident. Unlike the Warren Cup, which has both figures facing in opposite directions, the Arretine fragment has them locked in each other's gaze. The youth also reaches back to grasp the man's arm.



**9** Arretine bowl fragment  
(photo: Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)  
<http://www.mfa.org>

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<sup>58</sup> Johns, 124.

This scene reworks a conventional male-female one, which displays the body of the penetrated figure to its greatest advantage, while replacing female physical features with male ones.<sup>59</sup> Creators and users of Arretine ware would have seen the figures of males and females who were being penetrated as interchangeable, as evidenced by another fragment decorated with alternating male-female and male-male *symplegmata*.<sup>60</sup> In so far as a context for elite silver vessels can be deduced from Arretine examples, such parallels support Pollini's suggestion that the Warren Cup's lost mate could have featured male-female scenes.

In 1930, a large cache of silver was discovered wrapped in cloth and placed in a wooden crate in the cellar of the House of the Menander at Pompeii. Containing 118 separate pieces of varying ages, this find represents the silver service of a wealthy Roman family, and a larger cache of silver than all the other hoards (except that of the Boscoreale Villa) put together.<sup>61</sup> Significantly, though, the inclusion of household items alongside more valuable items suggests both that this cellar was not the ordinary storage place for any of these items, and that the cache was hoarded well before the final eruption of Vesuvius.<sup>62</sup> A pair of silver cups are significant in that they demonstrate that Romans decorated not only their homes but also their drinking vessels with erotic scenes. The cups at the House of the Menander, like the Warren Cup, each feature a pair of figures on both sides, but in this case, the depictions are of a male-female couple, understood to represent Mars and Venus.<sup>63</sup> Drawing on the example of the Menander cups, Pollini argues that decorated

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<sup>59</sup> John R. Clarke, "The Warren Cup and the Contexts for Representations of Male-to-Male Lovemaking in Augustan and Early Julio-Claudian Art." *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 2 (1993): 284.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 282

<sup>61</sup> Penelope M. Allison, *Pompeian Households: An Analysis of the Material Culture*, Monograph 42 (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, 2004), 23.

<sup>62</sup> Allison, 182.

<sup>63</sup> Clarke (1998), 68.

silver drinking cups were normally produced in pairs, and that the scenes on each side, and indeed each cup, were meant to interpret the other.<sup>64</sup>

### IX. Literary Parallels

Turning from artistic to literary parallels, we find a study in contrasts in Catullus. His poems demonstrate and explore the distinctions between Roman understandings of masculinity and femininity, of softness and toughness. It can be hard to decide whether it is more profitable to consider Catullus for his masculine persona or the elements of the feminine that he projects. Nevertheless, despite the tensions, his work is still an excellent source of examples to demonstrate the Priapic model.

Perhaps most famously, Catullus unleashes a fierce volley of obscenity against his companions (or rivals) Furius and Aurelius in poem 16, in a style worthy of Priapus himself:

*Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,  
Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,  
qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,  
quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum.*<sup>65</sup>

I'll fuck your asses and your faces,  
Aurelius the pathic and Furius the cinaedus,  
since you reckon that because my little verses  
are rather soft, I'm also less than a man.

Aurelius and Furius have cast aspersions on Catullus, not for any real sexual misdoing on his part, but because his poetry is “rather soft”. Here they expose a great Roman prejudice in matters sexual—not a distaste for those who choose same-sex partners, but for those who prefer to be penetrated.

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<sup>64</sup> Pollini, 21.

<sup>65</sup> Catullus, 16.1–4.

Catullus has been attacked, not because of his sexual adventures, but because of the way he has presented himself in his behaviour and lyric style. Romans are understood to have been consciously aware of a number of social cues that might have gained someone a reputation for softness—too much attention to one’s appearance, for example, or a preference for foreign, especially Greek, styles. Although there were other senses in which a man could be “soft” that were not sexual, this was the usual connotation.<sup>66</sup> A man wearing his clothes too loosely girded was considered to be overly obsessed with sex. Presumably he wore his clothes loose so that he could hop into bed at a moment’s notice. Popular prejudice had it that an over-sexed man could be spotted by his baldness, and a man who publicly scratched his head drew attention to his real or imagined baldness. If he scratched with one finger, this was understood as a sign that he was a pathic, whose sexual preference was to be penetrated.

To the Roman popular imagination, it was only a short series of steps from softness to unhealthy obsession with sex to preferring to take a sexually passive role. Furius and Aurelius, claiming that his poetry is too “soft”, jump to the apparently logical conclusion that Catullus himself must be *parum pudicum*, that is to say, “hardly unpenetrated.” *Pudicitia* may be understood to mean not just general modesty and willingness to adhere to the social norms of propriety, but also the ability to “protect oneself from penetration by another man.”<sup>67</sup> In the Priapic world that Catullus lived and wrote in, *mollitia* would have been understood as another way of saying “wanting to be penetrated” while *impudicus*, or even *parum pudicum*, of saying “having been penetrated.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Boswell, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 350.

<sup>68</sup> James Uden, “Impersonating Priapus”. *American Journal of Philology* 128, no. 1 (2007): 15.



At issue is the insinuation that his verses reveal more about his character than he might have intended. As we shall see, the question of reading the poetic voice of Catullus is an issue of interpretation that has vexed his modern audiences just as much as his contemporaries. In the face of their allegations, Catullus responds according to the Priapic script, with threats of sexual violence that would publicly dishonour his companions. They insinuate that he is *parum pudicum*—barely chaste—but he ups the ante, accusing them of being a *pathicus* and a *cinaedus*—offensive slurs comparable to being called a “faggot” in modern society. C. Williams explicitly rejects this comparison as a *technical* comparison, claiming that *cinaedus* represents a category that is essentially untranslatable.<sup>69</sup> However, as an offensive slur, the analogy is fair enough for the purposes of invective, assuming that we keep in mind that *cinaedus* and *pathicus* refer to a person’s choice of sexual role, rather than to sexual orientation.<sup>70</sup> To avenge his slighted reputation, Catullus threatens to show how tough he is by pedicating and irrumating them both. Here we see most clearly the aggressive, dominating, Priapic sexual emphasis coming to the fore.

What did Catullus write to attract such allegations? According to poem 16, it was his references to “many thousand kisses”, most likely in poem 5, where he celebrates his love with Lesbia. Alternatively, it may have been the “three hundred thousand kisses” shared with Juventius in poem 48. Perhaps his verses were judged too “soft” because they were love poems and not heroic epics; perhaps because they spoke of simply of kissing and not of anything more explicit, as Catullus was certainly capable of doing in other poems. Either way, at least to these two contemporaries, they were deemed transgressive. In some of his poems, Catullus does not seem to

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<sup>69</sup> C. Williams, 6.

<sup>70</sup> cf. James L. Butrica, “Some Myths and Anomalies in the Study of Roman Sexuality,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 49 (2005): 223.

measure up to established gender norms, and now he must react with hyper-masculine Priapic aggression.

It seems strange to think, though, that it should be poems about kisses that attract negative attention for Catullus. At the end of poem 11, he compares his heart, which he claims Lesbia has broken, to a flower struck by a plough.

*Nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,  
qui illius culpa cecidit veluti prati  
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam  
tactus aratro est.*<sup>71</sup>

Let her not look back upon my love, like she did before,  
which has fallen by her own fault,  
like a flower in the farthest field  
once it has been touched by a passing plough.

By a modern standard, it is a less-than-masculine image, but Catullus will not shrink from bearing the image of a lover unmanned, perhaps metaphorically castrated, by Lesbia's rejection. As he writes of Ariadne in poem 64, standing at the seashore calling curses after the departing Theseus, it is not hard to imagine Catullus's identification with the feminine character. He claims to be similarly abandoned by the heartless Lesbia, and in a significant departure from traditional Roman masculinity, allows himself the softness of tears and lamentations.

And yet in poem 37 he takes up the Priapic persona again. Seeing the drinking-house that Lesbia's newest lover frequents, he heaps invectives upon it and its patrons:

*An, continenter quod sedetis insulsi  
centum (an ducenti?) non putatis ausurum  
me una ducentos irrumare sessores?  
Atqui putate: namque totius vobis  
frontem tabernae sopionibus scribam*<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Catullus, 11.21–24.

<sup>72</sup> Catullus, 37.6–10.

Or do you think that because you hundred  
 (or is it two hundred?) fools are seated in a row  
 I wouldn't dare to irrumate all two hundred sitters at once?  
 Just think: I will draw dicks all over the front of your tavern.

It is hard to determine which is the true Catullus—the broken flower or the fiercely jealous ex-lover; the gentle poet writing about kisses or the aggressive hyper-masculine braggart. Which of the two is a mere performance, or are they both? Referring to the allegations of “softness” that prompted poem 16, Elizabeth Manwell points out that “the poet suggests that performing *mollitia* (for example, in the poems where he mentions the hundreds of kisses) is not evidence that one is soft. Is a poetic performance of hardness, then, proof that one is a *durus vir*?”<sup>73</sup> It is likely that with his quick and playful wit, as Catullus adopted the hyper-masculine, socially acceptable persona in poem 16, he was perfectly aware of the double standard at work. His perceived toughness here, as in other poems, is no more an indication of his true character than his perceived softness elsewhere. Yet the toughness will go unnoticed in his society, since that is what his contemporaries are prepared to recognize as appropriate behaviour. Catullus is perhaps keenly aware of the internal contradictions in the traditional Priapic model, and is playing with social expectations in the hopes of drawing attention to them.

As alluded to in the sections on sexual preference and vocabulary, Martial's epigrams frequently refer to the dynamics of sexual relationships in first-century Rome. In doing so, he often adheres to the established Priapic model, as in the aggressive treatment of Zoilus in 3.82 or of Telesina's lovers in 2.49. In other places, however, a note of ambiguity slips in. In 4.42, he begins rhapsodizing on the qualities of the ideal *puer delicatus*:

*Si quis forte mihi possit praestare roganti  
 audi, quem puerum, Flacce, rogare velim.*

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<sup>73</sup> Manwell, 121.

*Niliacis primum puer hic nascatur in oris:  
nequitas tellus scit dare nulla magis.  
sit nive candidior...*<sup>74</sup>

If someone could grant my wish,  
listen, Flaccus, what kind of boy I'd want to ask for.  
First, let the boy be born in the Nile region:  
no soil knows better how to grant depravity.  
May he be whiter than snow...

He continues to describe the ideal boy's eyes, hair, forehead, nose, and lips, but then shifts away from describing a presumably passive partner:

*saepe et nolentem cogat nolitque volentem,  
liberior domino saepe sit ille suo;*<sup>75</sup>

May he often force me when I'm unwilling and refuse me when I am,  
and may he himself be freer than his master;

Without explicitly saying so, he suggests that he is not looking to penetrate such a "boy-toy", but to be penetrated by him.<sup>76</sup> The irony in the epigram is no doubt intentional, as Martial will use a similar effect in other places.

In 2.62, poking fun at the dandyish Labienus, he agrees that everyone knows that he plucks the hair from his chest, legs, and arms and similarly clips his pubic hair short, all for the sake of his girlfriend, but then he playfully asks who Labienus is plucking his anus for. In another epigram, he pretends to sympathize with Carisianus:

*Multis iam, Lupe, posse se dies  
pedicare negat Carisianus.*

<sup>74</sup> Martial, *Epigrams* 4.42.1–5.

<sup>75</sup> Martial, *Epigrams* 4.42.11–12.

<sup>76</sup> An alternative reading of the epigram might turn it around on Flaccus, who the poet supposes will be quick to point out (in lines 15–16) that such a boy sounds remarkably like his own Amazonicus was. Flaccus, already lamenting the loss of such a beauty, may be tricked into admitting that he also enjoyed being penetrated by him! In either case, the reversal of roles remains the same.

*causam cum modo quaereret sodales,  
ventrem dixit habere se solutum.*<sup>77</sup>

Hey Lupus, for many days now,  
Carisianus has claimed that he can't pedicate.  
When his friends just asked why not,  
he said he had loose bowels.

Clearly, Carisianus's affliction has left him not unable pedicate, but to *be* pedicated. On one hand, we have a man making every attempt to perform the typical masculine role—that is to be the active penetrator. On the other hand, when caught off guard, or in a moment of affliction, he reveals himself to be the passive partner.

Martial claimed that his epigrams were directed at types of people rather than at specific individuals, so the example of Carisianus does not necessarily signify a real person who was tricked into admitting his pathic preference. Instead, Martial may be pointing to a general prejudice that soft Roman men, hidden in the crowd, were putting on a show of acceptable dominant masculinity according to the Priapic script, but were in fact degenerate pathics. The modern analogy of the closeted homosexual might be most appropriate here, with the caveat that what scandalizes Martial and his audience is not a man's preference when it comes to the sex of his partner, but his preference for the role.

In a similar vein, his taunting of Labienus, rather than being directed at a specific acquaintance of his, is better understood as a commentary on foppish, effeminate Romans in general. Martial is suggesting that while they claim to be taking pride in their appearance for the sake of attracting women, they also leave themselves vulnerable to speculation about their involvement with men and about whether they are penetrating or being penetrated. Perhaps the

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<sup>77</sup> Martial, *Epigrams* 11.88

imagined Labienus may be legitimately fastidious about his appearance and enjoys a smooth, hairless look all over. His personal grooming may have nothing to do with his sexual exploits or attractiveness. But his argument that he does so for the sake of a woman cannot apply to the hair on his anus, which would be more indicative of trying to please another man. Martial may in fact be making a statement about his abilities to pick out pathics in a crowd—his first-century “gaydar”, as it were.

One more epigram brings the point home.

*Mentula cum doleat puero, tibi, Naeuole, culus,  
non sum diuinus, sed scio quid facias.*<sup>78</sup>

Since the boy’s dick hurts, Naevolus and so does your ass,  
I’m not psychic, but I know what you’re doing.

Naevolus is being pedicated by his slave, instead of the other way around. Two significant points arise from this situation. One is the recurring theme in Martial that men who otherwise seem to be performing to the Priapic script are secretly (or not so secretly) transgressing the social expectations concerning sexuality. The other is in the “*scio quid facias*”—I know what you’re doing. Martial’s criticism of Naevolus is not that he is a closeted pathic, but that he is a rather shameless one.

Like the Carisianus figure complaining of his loose bowels, as soon as Naevolus lets it be known that his anus is sore, there is no need for guesswork. Martial points out that no one needs to be a *diuinus* or to have any particular skill at fortune-telling to recognize why it hurts, and the boy with the sore penis is the final proof of his transgression. These are more overt and explicit examples of signs of softness and effeminacy, like the head-scratchings and loose tunics noted

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<sup>78</sup> Martial, *Epigrams* 3.71

above. We read in Martial that men who chose to be penetrated rather than penetrating were publicly visible in Roman society, if you knew what to look for.

If being a passive sexual partner carried such a social stigma in the Roman world, would Labienus and Carisianus not take greater pains to cover up their actions? Or was it not as stigmatized as Martial would have us believe, and are his own tauntings directed at a more strait-laced Roman mindset, that was all too ready to watch the crowds for transgressions against conventions that were becoming less and less applicable to the society around them? Martial can be a reliable source concerning the observable fact that overt (or covert) pathic citizens could be found in Roman society, or concerning popular opinions of Romans who might behave in this way. But his satiric style makes it more difficult to read him reliably on both questions.

Nevertheless, Martial's perspectives and the ambiguities that they raise can easily be applied to the interpretation of the Warren Cup. They relate to questions we have already had to acknowledge. Is the penetrated male on Side A a transgressive figure—an apparent adult citizen who does not conform to the Priapic model of sexual behaviour? Or were sexual norms so deeply entrenched in Roman society that it would have been unthinkable for a first-century Roman to see him as an equal to his active partner? The literary context from Martial, like that from Catullus, demonstrates that Roman society was far from monolithic. Alongside those who conformed perfectly to the Priapic model, there were others who attempted to present a public appearance of conformity, while their own private lives adhered to a different script. Others may have shamelessly flaunted social conventions, and may have been targets of shame and ridicule for their transgression. In so far as the modern understanding of how Romans viewed sexuality is based upon these literary sources, it does not yet provide enough scope to help us understand a Roman's reaction to the scenes depicted on the Warren Cup.

Suetonius' reports of the Caesars' sexual adventures may be problematic in some respects, since it can be difficult to determine whether to describe his work as history or biography. It has been long recognized that his inattention to essential details of both genres makes him no better a biographer than an historian.<sup>79</sup> His *Caesares* is best understood as a reflection on imperial authority, borrowing elements of both history and biography to advance his argument. Despite the difficulty of assigning a category to his work, it is still significant as a literary source. He provides many examples of the kinds of gossip that circulated about the first twelve Caesars, giving his readers a clear indication of the way that Romans talked and wrote about sex.

In previous scholarly generations, it was easy to transfer contemporary prejudices onto Suetonius' assessments of the Caesars, and thus to assume he unequivocally condemned homosexuality.<sup>80</sup> Yet the sex of an emperor's partners is just one thread in a tapestry of cruelty, excess, adultery, and incest. In the *Caesares*, Claudius and Galba's preference in partners make them the closest approximations to hetero- and homosexuality, respectively.<sup>81</sup> However, for Suetonius, these are not criteria which make them automatically good or bad emperors: if anything, Claudius is the worst of the "good" and Galba is the best of the "bad" ones.

Far more reprehensible, in Suetonius' eyes, are the stories of imperial "passivity," and in this respect, his treatment of sexuality fits into the Priapic model. At the tamer end of the spectrum of scandalous Caesars is Julius Caesar, who was reported to be "every woman's man, and every man's woman".<sup>82</sup> He retells the rumour (while acknowledging that it likely came from Mark

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<sup>79</sup> John C. Rolfe, "Suetonius and his Biographies." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 52, no. 209 (April 1913): 214.

<sup>80</sup> cf. Barry Baldwin, *Suetonius*, (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1983), 503–4

<sup>81</sup> Parker, 55–6.

<sup>82</sup> Suetonius, *Jul.* 52.3.



Antony and is of questionable reliability) that Augustus had submitted to *stuprum* in order to secure his own adoption by Julius Caesar and ultimate succession.<sup>83</sup>

*Stuprum* is one of Suetonius' favourite expressions to cover a multitude of sins: an all-purpose accusation, implying some sexual shame committed upon a Roman citizen. Generally, the shame is understood to be anal penetration, committed upon a freeborn citizen. Sexual advances towards slaves, prostitutes, or other inferiors were legal behaviour, but an assault on a freeborn citizen could be prosecuted as an offence against the concept of citizenship itself.

Interestingly, while Suetonius tells of Valerius Catullus' public claims of having committed *stuprum* against Caligula, he also reports the rumours of "*mutuum stuprum*" between the emperor and Marcus Lepidus, Mnester the comedian, and certain foreign hostages.<sup>84</sup> The question of mutual *stuprum* is perhaps more morally suspect than the ordinary suggestion of the emperor being used for someone else's gratification, as Nero was by his freedman Doryphorus.<sup>85</sup> Presumably, this shame is mutual because each partner takes turns to penetrate the other, and the allegation is meant to be an attack on both.<sup>86</sup> Langlands believes that the accusation carries an extra level of shame, as if it were more degrading to have been penetrated by someone who had been already penetrated himself, as it were by "damaged goods".<sup>87</sup> There is something more at play here, though, in that such a situation does not have a single "active" or "passive" partner.

Suetonius' treatment of the emperors' sexuality conforms to the Priapic model's rules, in that sexual behaviour is treated as a form of aggression, an action that is generally committed *by*

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<sup>83</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 68.1.

<sup>84</sup> Suetonius, *Cal.* 36.1.

<sup>85</sup> Suetonius, *Ner.* 29.1.

<sup>86</sup> Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84.

<sup>87</sup> Langlands, 355.

one person (a male) upon another (whether male or female). However, the problem of *mutuum stuprum* presents a situation, like that depicted on the Warren Cup, in which the roles are not so clear cut. Mutual penetration seems to confer a degree of shame on both parties, not just from the give-and-take nature of the action, but also from the defiance of clearly-defined social conventions. *Mutuum stuprum* stretches the Priapic model's ability to define appropriate sexual behaviour, and at least by Suetonius' time, exposes the need for a more nuanced model.

Moreover, Suetonius' treatment of Galba raises an interesting point. He claims that Galba's particular preference was for *exoleti*<sup>88</sup>—a term that has been inconsistently interpreted. Boswell describes them as male prostitutes who were specifically hired to penetrate their clients,<sup>89</sup> whereas C. Williams argues that they were defined by their age—specifically, by being past adolescence—rather than by their sexual role.<sup>90</sup> They may have regularly taken either penetrating or penetrated roles, and indeed, may even have changed roles from one partner to another or from one encounter to another. As adults, though, they are contrasted with *pueri*—a term that could include actual adolescents and slaves and prostitutes as *figurative* boys.

Galba's preference, as noted by Suetonius, seems to be unique in that he is the only case in Roman history of a man with a sexual preference for adult males.<sup>91</sup> It is implied that with these men, Galba himself was the penetrating partner, and so Suetonius does not seem to be making any moral commentary upon his character. However, an example of a man seeking to penetrate another adult male is a clear parallel to the scene on Side A of the Warren Cup. Butrica identifies the

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<sup>88</sup> Suetonius, *Gal.* 22.1

<sup>89</sup> Boswell, 79.

<sup>90</sup> C. Williams, 92.

<sup>91</sup> Parker, 56.

penetrated male on Side A not as an equal, but as an *exoletus*—a slave who has been penetrated in the past, however infrequently, by the bearded male, and thus of lower status, preserving the Priapic ideals of Roman society.<sup>92</sup>

## X. An Alternative Interpretation

We have exposed the weaknesses of the traditional Priapic model and demonstrated the ways in which it cannot adequately interpret the Warren Cup. It remains to reconstruct a narrative for interpretation. Such a narrative must answer the fundamental question for interpreters: is the cup consistent with, or in contrast to popular conceptions of sexual behaviour in the first century? Thus, does the Warren Cup reinforce our modern reconstructions of Roman sexuality, or challenge them and invite us to reconsider better models?

The modern interpretations thus considered have many strengths, but none of them fully account for the tension raised by Side A, and the disconnects between how Roman men were expected to act and how they actually behaved. However, the ambiguity that Williams cannot overcome might be the key to its interpretation. The Warren Cup's imagery is exquisitely playful in its social commentary. Perhaps it was intended to defy a single conventional "meaning". As an artistic object meant to be enjoyed, it carries deeper layers of meaning that are unlocked with further contemplation and reflection.

For example, the pederastic scene between a youth and a boy on Side B appears to be straightforward and unexceptional on the surface. Yet closer inspection challenges that assumption. While the figures seem detached and dispassionate, the boy's gesture of intimacy in

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<sup>92</sup> Butrica (2005), 237.

holding the youth's hand brings a touch of humanity to the scene. These are representations of people and not merely idealized forms. The cup itself provides no details about the nature of their relationship, beyond that of a freeborn citizen and his *puer delicatus*. The addition of such a subtle detail is a reminder to the cup's ancient and modern viewers that whatever else it may be, the sexual act cannot simply be an abstract concept. Such a reading of Side B is congruent with Pollini's narrative of symposial guests waxing poetic on the topic of lovemaking, inspired by the images on the cup.

In contrast to Side B, which presents a conventional image and invites deeper reflection, Side A presents a more unconventional scene and invites the viewer to reconcile it with his or her received notions of appropriate sexuality. Admittedly, different eras would use different criteria for defining "a more unconventional scene." During the earlier part of the cup's modern history, both scenes would have been considered scandalous, due to their depiction of male-male sexual intercourse. In the twenty-first century, the problem of child sexual exploitation will certainly make Side B more disturbing for many modern viewers. For a first-century viewer, though, or a modern one attempting to view it with a first-century mindset, Side A raises a series of questions about the younger, penetrated man.

The beauty and dignity of the penetrated adult on the Warren Cup is not fully congruous with popular bias against pathic individuals in Roman day to day life. The cup, however, presents an alternative script to the Priapic one, and offers an insight into Roman perspectives in which penetrated adults were not objects of scorn, in which being the passive partner was not a role to be vigorously avoided, or in which sexual penetration could be reciprocal.

Such perspectives would by no means have been predominant ones. They may not even have been particularly widespread ones. Richlin and Clarke have sought to identify subculture

elements in Roman society. Whether we should best describe such a subculture as gay, following Clarke, or pathic, following Richlin, we have seen distinctive elements in both art and literature that demonstrate that the Priapic model of sexuality was not monolithic and that there was room for deviations from the norm. Clarke rightly points out that in order for images of sexual deviation to have any currency, there must have been an iconography that would allow such deviations to be clearly represented.<sup>93</sup> The Warren Cup can best be read as an artefact from such a minority perspective—a perspective not well represented amongst our reconstructions of Roman society, but valuable in that it challenges our own assumptions, just as it would have challenged the assumptions of its original first-century audience.

The Warren Cup invites us to consider the sexual behavior of elite Romans not just in terms of violence and dominance, but in terms of tenderness and even reciprocity. While there is a danger in interpreting the sexualities of the ancient world exclusively in contemporary terms, there can be a parallel danger in thinking of them in categories that are wholly foreign and incompatible with our own notions. This is an artefact that stands in contrast to the prevailing Priapic script, but it does so in parallel to other exceptions and apparent inconsistencies. It reminds us that sex is never a simple matter to interpret—either now or in the early Roman Empire.

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<sup>93</sup> Clarke (2005), 296

### **Appendix: A Subversive Banquet**

Consider a hypothetical Roman guest arriving at a banquet and seeing the Warren Cup for the first time. Initially, the problems of age and status cause him to question whether Side A is a defensible scene or something more subversive. Closer inspection reveals that the figures are not Romans but Greek citizens, and perhaps, as D. Williams suggests, such an identification takes away his initial scruples. However, this does not completely solve the problem. Greek pederastic *symplegmata* do not generally depict anal penetration, but rather a face-to-face, non-penetrative intercrural sex.<sup>94</sup> Our Roman guest is familiar enough with the notion of “Greek love” to understand that sexual relationships between adult Greek citizens were commonplace, but this is a novel depiction of two Greeks making love like a Roman and his slave.

For a more modern analogy, consider a hypothetical modern North American arriving at a dinner party and finding that the centerpiece on the table is a reproduction of the Warren Cup, available from the British Museum gift shop. Initially, the unexpected appearance of sexually explicit imagery causes him to question whether the cup is art, or something in poorer taste. He recognizes it as a reproduction of an ancient artifact, which takes away his initial scruples, but does not completely solve the problem. Our modern guest understands that Roman audiences were more comfortable with sexual depictions in everyday life, and that pederastic relationships between men and adolescent boys were commonplace, but the cup still leaves him uncomfortable. The argument that Greeks and Romans saw the world differently will only go so far, since by modern standards, one side of the cup would be considered child pornography.

As we return to our Roman guest, we find him struggling with the same cultural disconnect,

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<sup>94</sup> Clarke (1993), 284.

although to a lesser degree. As he considers Side A of the cup, he encounters social attitudes toward sexuality that are not his own. The gap between Greek and Roman society is not as great as between Roman and North American, but there is still a sense of contrast. He has to consider Greek custom through his Roman social lenses, and the first thing that he considers is that the traditional Priapic model of sexuality is not suitable for interpreting what he sees on this cup. He may not refer to it as “the Priapic model,” but the more he thinks about the popular perception of sexuality in the culture around him, the more unsatisfactory it seems.

He thinks of the poetry of Catullus with its aggressively dominant model of sexuality. The sexual threats against Furius and Aurelius represent something different from the affection directed towards Juventius. Catullus may have the same urgency of desire to penetrate Furius and Juventius, but one desire is driven by a craving for dominance, the other by a craving for intimacy. As the Roman guest viewing the Warren Cup considers the tender gesture of the beardless man holding his lover’s hand, he concedes that sometimes sex is about more than an act of dominance. Such a concession may be the first step to resolving the inconsistencies in the Priapic model that Catullus so playfully engaged with.

The evening wears on, and enabled by the wine and the convivial atmosphere, our guest and his companions expound upon this and similar themes.<sup>95</sup> Some conversations are sparked by the Warren Cup, others by its mate. However, like all good things, the banquet must inevitably come to an end, and our hypothetical guest must return to the world outside. His reflection on the

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<sup>95</sup> By the time the Warren Cup was buried near ancient Bethther in the province of Judea, it would be far too soon for our hypothetical guest to reflect on the issues raised by Suetonius and Martial’s treatments of sexual material (as many as forty years too soon for Martial, and as many as fifty for Suetonius). Modern viewers must do their own reflection on Martial’s distaste for pathics and on Suetonius’s reports of *mutuum stuprum* in the imperial house and of Galba’s fondness for *exoleti*.

cup has provided him with some brief flashes of insight, but it is impossible to predict whether these will produce any lasting change of attitude or behaviour on his part. Such is the nature of the truly subversive: it is not always revolutionary, producing vast paradigm shifts, but can also be far more discreet, gently contributing to slower, more incremental changes in perspective.



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