ARTICLES / SAGGI

SEX AND RHETORIC: AN ASSESSMENT OF ROCCO'S *ALCIBIADE*

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Sommario

L'Alcibiade *di Padre Rocco è considerato un testo pornografico. In questo saggio l'autore ri-inserisce il dialogo nella tradizione retorica e dimostra come l'opera sia l'erede di due filoni di eloquenza, entrambi facenti parte della filosofia naturale del* libertinaggio. *Il primo rientra nell'aristotelismo padovano che considerava il corpo un sistema di prove. Il secondo si collega alla teoria retorica relativa alla persuasione e ai suoi mezzi. La ricezione dell'*Alcibiade *è la storia di una serie di censure — da quella del Puritanesimo alla teoria* gay *— che illustrano la necessità di recuperare la cultura retorica per poter meglio comprendere un simile testo*.

Father Antonio Rocco (1586-1653) was born in Scurcula d'Abruzzo and now belongs to the emerging historiography of

gay literature[1], on account a single book the authorship of which was denied him until recently, *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (1652)[2].

The history of *L'Alcibiade*'s circulation is in fact an excellent example of how books from the Early Modern period, now reclaimed by gay studies, follow modes of circulation that are different from those of heterotexts — *L'Alcibiade* is a signal document to be versed to the developing field of studies in "the materiality of the book".

Until 1951 *L'Alcibiade*'s author was thought to be Ferrante Pallavicino (1615-1644), author of *La retorica delle putane* (1642) which, together with other erotic texts, brought him to the pyre in 1644 (in Avignon*).* Written in 1630, *L'Alcibiade* is published anonymously in 1652, the title page being probably fake (it gives Orange as a place of publication — Orange, not so far from papal Avignon, an ironical jab?). The book will then travel the underground of "sodomitic" literature (gaining the glory of being sometime attributed to Pietro Aretino), and its rare extant copies will become the envy of zealous bibliomaniacs until one of them, Jules Gay (*sic!*) publishes a reprint in 1862 (Paris)[3].

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[1] I have authored the entry on Rocco in the forthcoming volume edited by Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon (in press), *Who's Who in Gay and Lesbian History*, London: Routledge and correlated it to a systematic ensemble of homotexts in 16th and 17th centuries Italy and France.

[2] I refer to the scholarly edition, Antonio Rocco, *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*, a cura di Laura Coci, Roma: Salerno, 1988.

[3] I have consulted an elusive and well-annotated reprint, *Alcibiade enfant à l'école*, Louis Godbout ed., Montreal: Balzac, 1995 (reprint of the original French translation, 1866). My thanks to Mr Luc Englander, of (highly respectable) Librairie Champion, Paris, for having traced a copy from the gay Marais bookshop to a private apartment in Parisian suburbia. (This, together with the fact that the Italian scholarly version of 1988 is to be found in Roman sex shops, underscores the book's enduring *Nachleben* as sulfurous *erotica*.)

That very run was nearly destroyed following a legal injunction in 1863 and, in 1868, the French translation (Bruxelles, 1866) was also condemned in Lille to be shredded for “outrage aux bonnes moeurs”. The text however reappears in French in 1891 (Bruxelles), 1936 (Paris), Montréal (1995, reprint of 1866 edition) and, in 1982, in German (Munich) — all of them difficult to obtain, as if the long tradition which shrouds *L'Alcibiade* — a book for the Venetian “happy few” — perdures in spite of the development of technology. Interestingly, Alfred Kinsey had copies of the book.

In sum, *L'Alcibiade* remains a book for pornographers, ejected as it were from mainstream literature since the 18th century. Gay books do often follow that route, reduced to *curiosa* or *erotica*, protected from the authorities by a few connoisseurs yet removed by them from a larger readership. Obviously the question is: what makes a book enter the gay library? And on what criteria are such claims and reclaiming based?[4]

To begin with, the question of *L'Alcibiade*'s authorship bears witness to what was taught of “sodomitic” literature. The attribution to Pallavicino was a rather obvious choice*, L'Alcibiade* fitting indeed well in the sort of literature produced by the Academicians *Incogniti,* one of the two main Venetian academies, by and large inspired by the works of Paduan

[4] I have asked the same question and attempted a similar treatment in related essays concerning three leading figures of French Late Humanism, the first one about Blaise de Vigenère's translation of *Trois dialogues de l'amitié* (1579), Philippe-Joseph Salazar, “Herculean Lovers: Towards a History of Men's Friendship in the 17th Century”, *Thamyris. Mythmakimg from Past to Present*, 1997, 4(2): 249-266; the second on Bishop Pierre-Daniel Huet,“Huet ou l'amour des Lettres”, in M. Fumaroli, Ph.-J. Salazar et E. Bury eds., *Le Loisir Lettré à l'Age Classique*, Genève, Droz, Series Travaux du Grand Siècle, 1996, 4: 233-253; the third on François de La Mothe Le Vayer, 1997, “*Philia*: Connaissance et amitié” in Fr. Lagarde ed., *L'esprit en France au XVII^e siècle*, Tuebingen, Gunther Narr, Series Biblio 17, 101: 11-27.

philosopher Cesare Cremonini (1550-1631), who taught Rocco as well. Pallavicino, a bright young lion of the *Incogniti*, adhered to the teachings of Cremonini who, against the Aquinian reading of Aristotle (the staple food for theology), reclaimed a materialistic and irreligious version of Aristotelianism, dating back to Pomponazzi. Cremonini was one of the references for the *libertin* movement, that will, particularly in France, gain great momentum in the 17th century and with Théophile de Viau, Cyrano de Bergerac, Bishop Huet and many others count in its ranks *libertins* of the mind and of the male body as well[5]. Indeed strictures against Paduan "atheism" (as it was justly labelled by Calvin) and accusations of "Sodomy" by its enemies often ran parallel — quite rightly. The *Incogniti* had for their "prince" the dogal patrician Giovan Francesco Loredano (1607-1661), himself a *libertin* author of erotic books. For these new Aristotelians, "erotic" was often a password to mean a non-peccative, non-Christian, non-regulatory approach to sex. This also accounts for many of those *libertin* philosophers' calling themselves "medici", to underscore their physical, medical approach to matters such as sex. For that reason, "sodomitic" literature often signifies literature about matters sexual that circumvent doctrinal rules and go back to the sources, Aristotle, Hippocrates and, chiefly, Galen (in this case the aprocryphal yet influential treatise *On Sperm*, *De Spermate*). The epithet "epicurean" was also often used by their enemies to encapsulate the same notion — regardless as to whether or not the *libertins*

[5] A handy survey of *libertinage*, which bears witness to a continuing and refreshing interest shown by Italian scholarship on these matters, can be found in Cecilia Rizza, *Libertinage et littérature*, Paris/Fasano di Brindisi: Nizet/Schena, Biblioteca di Ricerca, Cultura Straniera, 65, 1996, with an excellent bibliography.

read Epicure. That their authors often put into sexual practice what they theorize about is quite certain — but “sodomitic” acts are to be seen as part of the general reassessment done by Paduan Aristotelianism regarding Nature[6].

Yet, *L'Alcibiade* is Father Rocco's as his own contemporaries knew well. Rocco who first taught philosophy at San Giorgio Maggiore convent held a Senate-endowed chair in rhetoric (1636), turning down university chairs in Padua and Pisa. His life is well documented in academic annals. One year before ending gracefully his career and life, he had the pleasure of seeing his *Alcibiade* released by an Orange publisher, after nearly twenty years of unhindered dissemination in manuscript form (1652). The “execrable, detestable, abominable Sodomitic book that ought to have been burnt with its author” (in the words of German 18th-century compilers) was not put on the *Index* (whereas one of Rocco's metaphysical treatises had been). It did create a stir, because of the crudity of its language and the correlated accusation of Rocco's being an “atheist”. Yet, one cannot infer from the elliptical signature “D.P.A.” on the title page (*i.e.* “Di Padre Antonio”, et non “Di Pietro Aretino”), that Rocco was afraid of the Inquisition (the Venetian, in this case). Anyone who was someone in the Venetian establishment was able to interpret the elliptic “D.P.A.”. Quite simply, Rocco, celebrated professor of

[6] Literature on Renaissance homosexuality is fast becoming an area of study. Of use are, in English: Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, London: Gaymen's Press, 1982; Jonathan Goldberg, *Queering the Renaissance*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1994; Gerard Hekma ed., *The Pursuit of Sodomy: Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe*, New York: Harrington Park Press, 1989; Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros. Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. An historical study on Florentine homosexuality in the Renaissance is also in the press at the time of writing this essay.

rhetoric of the Serenissima, could not possibly sign a booklet published as a “Carnival book”, a fun book. As Venetian culture receded in the 17th century, the memory of Rocco, a minor author in spite of his attacks against Galileo, faded, as only remained a “sodomitic” book whose attribution varied with the passing of time — but always attributed to pornographers. As mentioned earlier, to be destroyed, *L'Alcibiade* had in fact to await the vigilance of the same French justice that condemned Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), for the same crime of “outrage to good moeurs” — notwithstanding the fact that both Baudelaire and Flaubert, pederasts when the fancy took them, may have well read and mused over Jules Gay's reprint. It was only in 1888 that Italian scholarship definitely secured Rocco's rights to *L'Alcibiade*.

Now, what is *L'Alcibiade*? As the title indicates, the dialogue topic is given as loving boys. It takes its theme from the fact that Socrates had been Alcibiade’s lover and teacher — as told initially by Plato in the *Symposium* and transmitted in particular by Plutarch. The common place of that divine pair, an ugly teacher with a beautiful soul and a gorgeous student with a not so beautiful soul (as Alcibiade’s dismal political life shows), became the stock and trade of “sodomitic” satires from the Renaissance. Secondly, the “Socratic dialogue” was the most traditional pedagogic tool in Renaissance rhetoric. It was in the dialogue form that most students’ manuals were written, at least in Catholic Europe[7]. Dialogues purported to imitate oral teaching (still the only norm) by reproducing or anticipating a live situation.

[7] Without wishing to labour the point, I refer to my article, “Les pouvoirs de la Fable: mythologie, littérature et tradition (1650-1725)”, *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1991, 91(6): 878-889.

Most dialogues, in which often the protagonists wore Grecian names (such as “The Lover of Honesty” for the master, “The Virgin Soul” for the student), also served to dramatize the teaching relation between master and student, which was at once conceived as an act of love and an act of metamorphosis. If teachers' manuals (as opposed to pedagogical dialogues) put such emphasis on rhetoric, and the power or seductiveness of the teacher's voice, it was because the teacher had to lead (“seduction”, in Latin) his students to the truth by making the path attractive and, at the end, by transforming, thanks to the sheer power of his questions and gentility of his eloquence, rough children into young men who, barely out of their teens, were ready to hold parliamentary, church or State offices, that required in turn the same rhetorical mastery.

An image sometime used to emblematize this teaching method was that of the female bear licking its young and giving it “form”, just as the tongue of the master licks the young soul into shape[8]. Such bodily similes abounded that struck a comparison between intellectual “formation” and sexual activity. In theory, the parallel between speech and sex had been codified by Neo-Platonic philosopher Leone Ebreo, in his *Dialoghi d'Amore*[9]. Comparisons between penis and tongue, saliva and semen, were neither scandalous nor far-fetched: they rested on the premise that the human being is made of analogies, and that, in this case, speech that helped teach also helped express desire. Analogies function in the manner of rhetorical syllogisms, enthymemes, that help draw conclusions concerning the inner

[8] Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, 1593.

[9] Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d'Amore* (1535), a cura S. Caramella, Bari: Laterza, 1929.

being. The same theory was operative in the correlated field of physiognomony[10].

This set of cultural conditions are essential to fully understand *L'Alcibiade*. They explain how Father Rocco, a professor of rhetoric and a master teacher, could write a dialogue about the art of teaching that ends on the following coda — to the delights of generations of pornographers (the translation renders the clichéd and slightly tongue-in-cheek crudity of the original):

> And, while talking to him, the horny teacher carried on screwing the pretty student. And the boy, whenever his master's dick slipped out of his tight arse, would cry out "Give it to me, more!", because he knew that this was the only way for him to become as well-accomplished a man as his master.
>
> Happy man, the master who, being slave to the desires of his gorgeous boy, reaches ecstasy.

In fact, the dialogue which precedes this final scene, can be summed up by the idea of penetration, by tongue and penis. Using the well-worn simile that speaking is inseminating with words, the teacher Filotimo (The Lover of Virtue) wants to stick his tongue down young Alcibiade's throat (repeating Apollo's sacral spitting) and then his cock ("cazzo") up his bum (imitating generation, in this case, generation of ideas). Both are metaphors for teaching, saliva and sperm being analogous to speech and knowledge. In Aristotelian terms, there are in fact

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[10] Stemming from the fundamental treatise by Giambattista Della Porta, *Physiognomonia humana* (Latin ed., 1586). I have worked on the French translation, *La physiognomonie humaine*, trans. by Rault, Rouen: J. et D. Berthelin, 1660. The very best up-to-date study on the impact of pseudo-aristotelian physiognomony onto European literature of the "Baroque" age, is to be found in Patrick Dandrey, *La fabrique des Fables*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1991, chapter IV, together with a bibliography.

three types of generation, analogous of one another: sexual generation, artistic generation and generation by speech.

However, Filotimo cannot be granted his wish readily. The whole point of the dialogue is that he has to persuade Alcibiade to consent, he must become his pupils' “slave”. The dialogue is then a sparring match between the master and the pupil, an exchange of arguments apparently about kissing and fucking boys — in reality about what education is all about. Indeed, as the *disputatio* progresses, the student acquires mastery of the art of speaking, gaining the same rank as his master, being then ready to move on in life. As a reward for such excellent tuition, he will offer his mouth and his derrière to his master — that is, he will acknowledge the pleasure of learning. This is how the dialogue really operates, in non-rhetorical terms.

Indeed, the rhetorical issue that arises is that *L'Alcibiade* presents the interesting case of a dialogue aimed not so much at conveying information, like in most pedagogic manuals of the period, as to realize an end which is not pedagogic or cognitive, but pragmatic. The dialogue presented here utilises rhetoric in order to tell us about the powers of rhetoric. The underlying question of this “erotics” of discourse is firmly laid out by Aristotle. It concerns the notion of “end” in persuasive speech. In Aristotle's view one has to distinguish between the given end of an oratory act and its guiding end. The given end is achieved when the audience has been persuaded, and translates words into impelled actions. Speech is here considered as a movement which must complete itself by exhausting itself in the listeners' being persuaded by the orator's speech an acting upon it — a *kinesis*. However the guiding end of a speech is only achieved

when the orator has found the ascribed means of persuasion and made an argument according to the rules of the art. The guiding end is complete when it has achieved the form rhetoric ascribes to manifesting the evidence of one's intentions. The given end is the *kinesis* of a speech, the guiding end is its *energeia*.

The *Alcibiade* is a neat, and rare, example of a dialogic treatise which dramatizes the often obscured relation between *kinesis, energeia* and the status of fiction (in rhetoric).

I say “obscured” because most “Baroque” pedagogic treatises that have adopted the dialogue form, give a fiction of both *kinesis* and *energeia*. By fiction I mean, in rhetorical theory, inherited from Aristotle and reworked by the Second Sophistic as well as the Roman school, a *plasma*, that is a literary fiction, or a *scenario* for reality. Such treatises are scenarios of pedagogic relationships, imagined by school regents or seminary masters out of and towards real situations, yet designed for captive audiences (the scholars) that need not be persuaded at all (as they have to listen and act as if they are persuaded). It is not for nothing that a very common setting for such dialogues is a promenade through the college halls or gardens, or imaginary neo-classical galleries. The promenade, with its pedagogic stations at artefacts, panoramas, images — that are erected as many ecphrases —, sets out in advance the progress of the scholars towards the aim, learning “virtue” (in modern terminology, how to live “out there”). The *kinesis* is scaled in advance, and accepted as naturally leading, step by step, to the scholars' accepting the master's views, and moving on with life. It is a fiction of a *kinesis*.

Similarly, the recourse to a battery of rhetorical techniques by the knowing regent is but the produce of such a fiction: to begin with, the treatises are fictitious dialogues — real rhetoric cannot operate in terms of a *plasma* but only in terms of this or that *act* of oratory. Being fictitious they invent an audience, responsive or restive, yet managed by the writer to his own ends. The guiding end no longer resides in the inventiveness of the orator but it lies in the selection by the writer, who posits himself as an orator — which he is not — of select means of persuasion — more often than not brisk "socratic" exchanges and the abuse of metaphors and images, in brief the simulation of logical arguments (reduced to their smallest part: images and examples) and the "literary" effects of elocution (the abuse of metaphors)[11]. The real, "life", means towards persuasion — *logos, pathos, ethos* — are constricted. The result is a simulation of *energeia*. The problem is that, in both instances, no exchange has taken place at all between scholars and master.

What *L'Alcibiade* does, is to explode the complacency of such mock-acts of persuasion by introducing within the dialogue a pragmatic dimension — sex.

The dialogue still enfolds within fiction, but the upsetting factor is in that *L'Alcibiade* makes the resolution of the dialogue the very core of the dialogue itself. In other words, as the dialogue is about the master having to convince his pupil of giving him his body, the dialogue no longer hinges on a master showing his student "the right way" but on the master having to show that by showing the right way (how to argue about love) the

[11] On the pedagogics of the "culture of voice" in the period, see Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *Le culte de la voix au XVIIe siècle. Formes esthétiques de la parole à l'âge de l'imprimé*, Paris, Champion, Series Lumière classique, 4, 1995, Part 1 and Part 2.

student has to pay a price. In pedagogic treatises there never any price attached to the resolution of the dialogue. Here the price is built within the dialogue. An exchange takes place: speech against sex. As a result *L'Alcibiade* dramatizes, as potently as a fictitious persuasion can, the powers of rhetoric. This is why, I believe, the text is erotic: it links speech to body, and the acquisition of rhetorical powers to the acceptation of the reality of power. And this works in both ways, as the master, in such conditions, has to find all means of persuasion. *Kinesis* and *energeia* are being fulfilled.

However, one could throw back the argument: is it possible that Rocco used the Socratic dialogue genre and the cultural common places that sustain it, to *really* write a pornographic and pederastic text? However, in proposing this retort one should not take at face value elements that seem to sustain it. Indeed, the Carnivalesque timing may explain that Rocco, a Venetian, wanted to have fun, in the well established traditions of "sodomitic satires" (from Antonio Vignale's *Cazzaria* to numerous 18th century poems) at the expense of his own profession. He chose to lampoon tediously repetitive Jesuitic manuals by releasing a booklet for a more "popular" use, inscribing his own profession in the spirit of Carnival. Second, the reception of the text is no indication of its "true" pederastic will: the violence of attacks suffered by *L'Alcibiade* in the 18th-Century simply bears witness to the decadence of Renaissance teaching codes and came mainly from later Protestant scholars for whom the rhetorical culture under which Rocco flourished had lost their meaning — what was left was the bare sodomitic signified. This cultural change in fact explains

why *L'Alcibiade* passed into underground pornographic literature — a turn of events that would have amused Rocco and comforted him in the hypocrisy of religion may it be revealed (most 18th-Century censors were Germanic moral zealots) or "natural" (any Rousseauist who believed in the child a-sexual purity and innocence could hardly stomach Alcibiade's clever retorts and counter-strategies of seductions onto his own master, let alone his sexual awareness).

Either way — pederasty disguised in scholarship, or scholarship disguised in pederasty — *L'Alcibiade* is a benchmark in the rhetorical historiography of gay studies. It raises the question of the cultural reception of homosexual texts and of the processes of obfuscation that take place both then and now. It highlights the growing need from the part of gay studies to realize the importance of estranged cultural forms — here, rhetoric — so as not to compound past moralistic censure with modern textual bigotry.

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