PHILO AND FEMALE HOMOEROTICISM

Philo's use of γυνανδρὸς and recent work on tribades

by

HOLGER SZESNAT
Pacific Theological College

According to Judith Hallett, women who had sexual relationships with other women were increasingly becoming a matter of concern to male authors in the late republican and early imperial Roman period. Citing literary evidence from Plautus, the elder and younger Seneca, Ovid, Juvenal, Martial, and the elder Pliny, she notes a frequent theme in such male (and always hostile) depictions of female homoeroticism, namely the denial of such reality in Roman society, usually by linking it with Greece and/or the distant past. After all, the most commonly used word to describe the “active” female participant in such sexual


3 Ancient perspectives on sexual intercourse consistently reflect the active—passive dichotomy: legitimate sexual roles are isomorphic with social roles. Contraventions of such behaviour are generally derided as “unnatural”, “monstrous”, etc. See for instance M.B. Skinner, “Parasites and Strange Bedfellows: a Study in Catullus’ Political Imagery”, Ramus 8 (1979) 137-152; Dover, op. cit.; A. Richlin, op. cit.; D.M. Halperin, One Hundred

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 1999 Journal for the Study of Judaism, XXX, 2
intercourse (and, at least sometimes, also the “passive” participant)⁴ was *tribades*, a noun loaned from the Greek (τριβάδες). Some authors masculinise the active partner (eg. Martial Ep. 1.90, 7.67, 7.70) not only by depicting τριβάδες in “manly” activities such as wrestling, over-eating and vomiting, but also by attributing some active, penetrative role to her sexual involvement.⁵

Further evidence of such female homoeroticism in Graeco-Roman (including Jewish) sources has recently been discussed by Bernadette Brooten.⁶ Her detailed study analyses texts in use during the early imperial Roman period, ranging from classical literature to Greek erotic spells, astrological texts, medical treatises, and dream interpretations, before she performs a detailed exegesis of the key Pauline text Rom 1:26-27, and finally analyses the reactions of the early Church fathers, from non-canonical apocalypses to St. Augustine. She concludes that Paul and the church fathers reflected a general male view in antiquity which, while recognising that female homoeroticism existed, “nearly uniformly condemn[ed] sexual love between women.”⁷ The most common reason for such hostility, Brooten argues, was the fear of gender role transgression.

In her work on ancient Jewish sources on female homoeroticism, Brooten argues, *inter alia*:⁸

That Pseudo-Phocylides and Paul both address the issue at around the same time as the Schools of Hillel and Shammai could constitute evidence that some type of rabbinic discussion goes back to the first century after all... the timing of both [Greek diaspora and rabbinic sources] coincides with increased discussion of female homoeroticism in the Roman period in comparison with earlier eras.

Brooten also maintains that Paul goes further than any other ancient Jewish source by condemning women who participate in female homoerotic acts to death (Rom 1:24-32).⁹

---

⁴ In the elder Seneca (Controversiae 1.2.23); cf. Hallett art. cit., 212-213, 223.
⁵ Hallett, art. cit., 215-216.
⁷ Brooten, op. cit., 359.
⁸ Brooten, op. cit., 70.
⁹ Op. cit., 64.—In a recent essay, James Miller argued that Rom 1:26 does not actually...
It is noteworthy, albeit hardly surprising, that Philo of Alexandria is not discussed in any detail. Philo does, of course, have much to say about sexual relations between men. However, on the face of it, there is not a single Philonic passage which directly addresses this male concern over “what women might do” with each other in such flagrant transgression of culturally defined gender roles. A possible exception has recently been noted by Roy Ward, citing Spec. 3.51, where Philo condemns the female prostitute (πόρνη). One of the reasons why Philo advocates death by stoning for her is that “she infects the souls of both men and women with licentiousness (ἀκόλουθοι)”. It is obvious why men are “infected” (ἀνακόλουθοι) by the prostitute, but why women? Ward briefly refers to Alciphron and Lucian of Samosata, where “[f]emale prostitutes [engage] in homoerotic behaviour among themselves”. Such an understanding would explain why Philo claims that women are “infected by licentiousness” as well. For according to Brooten: “From the literary standpoint, the homoerotically tinged representation of courtesans is worth of note, since that is a common theme in ancient sources.”

In this short article, I wish to discuss three further texts in Philo which also, albeit indirectly, point to Philo’s awareness of female homoeroticism (Sacr. 100, Her. 274, Virt. 21). In each of these texts (which, to my knowledge, have not been discussed in this context before), Philo uses the rare term γυναμφόρος, which, I believe, indicates that Philo reflects the ancient male concern over tribades.

The word γυναμφόρος is extremely rare in classical literature and its meaning is not entirely clear. In Philo, γυναμφόρος always occurs refer to female homoeroticism but to heterosexual anal or oral intercourse; “The Practices of Roman 1:26: Homosexual or Heterosexual?,” Nov T 37 (1995) 1-11. See, however, Brooten’s response (op. cit., 248-249).

13 Ward, art. cit., p. 272 n. 57. The texts in Alciphron and Lucian are discussed by Brooten, op. cit., 51-54.
15 This is reflected in F.H. Colson’s Loeb Classical Library translation of Sacr. 100, in which he avoids the problem of what ἀνδρόγονος and γυναμφόρος might mean by translating both terms collectively as “those who belie their sex”. In a volume originally published five years later, however, Colson correctly understands the word γυναμφόρος in Her. 274 as a reference to “a woman who adopts masculine dress or habits”; F.H. Colson, G.H. Whitaker, Philo IV (1932) 574-575.
together with the related term ἀνδρόγυνος. The latter appears eight times in Philo’s extant writings and is always used by Philo to denote the transgression of gender boundaries by a man (and not, as in rabbinic literature as well as some Graeco-Roman writers, in respect of hermaphrodites). In Philo, the ἀνδρόγυνος refers to a man who acquires the gender characteristics of a woman, including the “passive,” penetrated role in sexual intercourse. Philo uses the term in the same sense in which he employs ἔκθηλων (e.g. Cher. 52; Spec. 3.39) or θηλαδρίας (e.g. Gig. 4; Sacr. 32). Philo consistently uses it with expressions of open hostility.

Since the word γύνανδρος occurs in three of those eight passage where ἀνδρόγυνος is used, one could take it simply as a Philonic synonym for ἀνδρόγυνος (i.e. a man or boy taking on female gender characteristics). This is indeed the sense in which other ancient Greek authors who use this term seem to employ it. A fragment from Sophocles (Fr. 963) recorded in Polybios Rhetor and Tryphon speaks of οἱ γύνανδροι, which would seem to indicate that the term was associated with men, though the lack of context makes its precise interpretation difficult. Polybios and Tryphon certainly take it as a synonym for ἀνδρόγυνος. Tryphon (196.12) quotes the fragment from Sophocles as an example of the rhetorical feature of ἐναλλαγη, where a composite word is “switched around” (hence clearly understanding γύνανδρος as a synonym for ἀνδρόγυνος). Polybios (106.9) similarly cites the same fragment as an example of σύνθεσις, implying that he understands the two words as synonyms.

A fragment from Aelianus (Fr. 290) similarly uses a masculine article with γύνανδρος (ο γύνανδρος τε καὶ μάλθων τύραννος). Finally, another

---

16 Sacr. 100; Her. 274; Somn. 1.126; Spec. 1.325, 3.38, 3.40; Verr. 21; Contempl. 60.


18 The idea that what Philo primarily objects to is the transgression of gender boundaries by the passive boys/men was first proposed, I believe, by Brooten, art. cit.

19 Οἱ γὰρ γύνανδροι καὶ λέγειν ἡσυχκότες.
fragment from Aelianus (Fr. 10) uses the term as a proper adjective (γύναικα δραστηριότης), which is also likely to imply that γύναικα δραστηριότης is understood as a synonym for ἀνδρόγυνος. However, as in Sophocles, the lack of context makes any significant inference problematic, apart from the fact that it was obviously a derogatory term. I ignore the evidence of the Suda, which refers to the text in Aelianus, due to its late provenance.20

Presumably, the reasons why this word has not previously been taken into consideration on the subject of female homoeroticism are its rarity and its usual use as a synonym of ἀνδρόγυνος. However, I think that in Philo, γύναικα δραστηριότης is a reference to a woman who takes on male gender characteristics, as the following discussion of the Philonic passages will show.21

In Virt. 18-21, Philo uses the biblical prohibition of cross-dressing for men and women alike (Dt 22:5) as an example how “the law desires to train and exercise the soul to manliness (ἀνδρεία)” (Virt. 18). In the subsequent argument, Philo consistently explores this theme with reference to both men and women: the body shapes of men and women differ (19); their life spheres differ (domestic/public; 19). According to the law (Virt. 20-21), Philo claims,

the true man should maintain his masculinity, particularly in his clothes, which—as he always wears them by day and night—ought to have nothing to suggest unmanliness (ἀνδρεία). In the same way he trained the woman to decency of adornment and forbade her to assume the dress of a man, with the further object of guarding against the womanish man as much as the mannish woman (πόρρωθεν ὃς ἄνδρογυνος οὕτως καὶ γυνάκονδρος φυλαξάμενος).22

This explicit juxtaposition of ἀνδρόγυνος and γύναικα ἅριος, in the context of the persistent use of both men and women as examples in this discussion of the biblical prohibition, clearly suggests a conceptual

20 This selection of texts is based on search results on the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae, according to which I also cite Polybios Rhetor and Tryphon. I am extremely grateful to Mr. M. Lambert of the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa) for his assistance with the search of the TLG as well as his advice on my discussion of these passages, which saved me from some misunderstandings. 21 LSJ also indicates this distinction when they stipulate in their brief entry on γύναικα ἅριος: “2. Of a woman, virago” (sic), with reference to two of the three Philonic passages. The first part of the entry, which is, needless to say, not specifically introduced as being “of men”, states: “of doubtful sex, womanish”; textual references cite the fragments from Sophocles and Aelianus noted above.
22 Translations from Philo are adapted from Colson’s in the Loeb Classical Library.
differentiation between these two terms: that is, the terms refer to a man taking on female gender characteristics (ἀνδρόγυνος), and a woman taking on male gender characteristics (γυνανδρός).

In Sacr. 100, in the context of an argument why God ought not to be thought of in an anthropomorphic way (Sacr. 98-101), Philo writes:

Men cannot contest with women, nor women with men, in respect of those things which it befits to approach only the others. But the mannish women, if they were to emulate what is of men, or the womanish men, if they were to attempt practising what is of women, would suffer ill repute. (ἄνδρες γυνών (όυ) γυναιξίν οτάδε γυναικεῖαι ἀνδράσιν ἀμιλλήσαι τὸν περὶ ὁν μόνοις τούς εἶτεροις ἐρμόττει προσείναι ἀλλί; αἰ μὲν γυνανδρόν, εἰ ξηλώσασαν τὰ ἀνδρῶν, οἱ δὲ ἀνδρογύνον, εἰ τοὺς γυναικικὸς ἐπίθειον ἐπιτηδεύματι, δύσκλειοι ὀίσονται)

Noteworthy is the female grammatical gender of the article used with γυνανδρός. Clearly, Philo here distinguishes between what men might do and what women might do, and uses αἱ γυνανδροί and οἱ ἀνδρόγυνοι accordingly; they are not synonyms but refer to conceptually distinct categories.

In this passage, both ἀνδρόγυνος and γυνανδρός are ascribed δύσκλεια by Philo, a surprisingly mild form of condemnation. In contrast, Philo elsewhere sees the ἀνδρόγυνος as one worthy of the death penalty (Spec. 3:38). The δύσκλεια wished upon both ἀνδρόγυνος and γυνανδρός in Sacr. 100 is comparable to the complex case of a man who divorces his wife, who in turn marries another man, is divorced again (or widowed) and finally remarries the first husband (Dt 24:1-4 declares this unlawful): Philo finds the husband guilty of adultery (μοιχεία) and pimping (προσογοσεία), and states: “let him be marked by the reputation (δοξα) of (female) softness (μαλακία) and non-manhood (ἀνανδρία)” (Spec. 3.31).

The last passage is perhaps less important as evidence for Philo’s use of the word. On the face of it, Her. 274 clearly juxtaposes the terms (ἀνδρόγυνος ἢ γυνανδρός), which would be an indication that a conceptual differentiation is implied. The context, however, does not seem to allow for the introduction of the γυνανδρός:

It is when the mind (νοῦς) which has come down from heaven, though it be fast bound in the constraints of the body, nevertheless is not lured by any of them to embrace like a womanish man or mannish woman (ἀνδρόγυνος ἢ γυνανδρός) the pleasant-seeming evils, but holding to its own nature of true manhood (μείνας δὲ ἐπὶ τῆς ἑαυτοῦ φύσεως ἀνήρ ὄντος) has the strength to be victor instead of victim in the wrestling-bout.
In terms of Philo’s argument, the use of γυναικός is not only unnecessary but irksome: it is out of character for Philo to use a “female concept” to make a point about νοῦς (note how the mind holds “to its own nature of true manhood”); using ἄνδρομονος by itself would have been much more to the point. With regard to the use of the word γυναικός in this passage, Colson wrote in the appendix to his Loeb translation:

This addition is strange. In the other two places recorded, where Philo uses the word, it is as here coupled with ἄνδρομονος, but in contrast with it of a woman who adopts masculine dress or habits—an idea which is quite alien here.

Colson therefore conjectures that ἢ γυναικός is an interpolation.

Regardless of whether we follow Colson’s proposal, the first two passages certainly point to an understanding of γυναικός which is decidedly not synonymous with ἄνδρομονος but conceptually distinct from it. It is of course debatable how precisely Philo filled this term γυναικός, beyond stating that Philo used it to denote a woman who transgressed her culturally assigned gender role. For Philo, as I said, the ἄνδρομονος was a person who displayed “female” gender characteristics, which often included the “passive,” penetrated role in sexual intercourse (that is, sex with another man, who performed the “active,” penetrating role). In Philo’s terms, the γυναικός as the “female counterpart” of the ἄνδρομονος could be understood as a woman who, apart from other gender role transgressions, usurped the “active,” penetrating role with (1) a man or (2) another woman, or (3) both. It is nevertheless most likely that Philo refers to female homoeroticism. This would leave intact one part of the standard ancient male characterisation of sexual intercourse, in which Philo by and large participated—involving an active, penetrating, social superior (by definition male) with a passive, penetrated, social inferior (similarly, the ἄνδρομονος, who is at least penetrated by a male as his active partner—which, in Philo’s view, does not

---


24 Colson, op. cit., 574-575.

absolve either one from this terrible act against nature; *Spec.* 3.37ff.). A woman who took an "active" role in sexual intercourse with a *male* is likely to have brought about much stronger condemnation from Philo.\(^{26}\)

It is not possible to determine precisely what Philo found so outrageous about such women. Although he always uses γόνανδρος together with the "male counterpart," the ἀνδρόγυνος, we may assume (following Brooten's study) that Philo's reasons for despising them differed. However, since he is very concerned about the "proper place" of women in the social hierarchy,\(^{27}\) it is likely that he feared that these women "usurped" the active role destined for men only.

**Abstract**

This article investigates Philo's use of the rare term γόνανδρος in the context of Hallett's and Brooten's work on ancient male writers' concern over female homoeroticism in the early Principate. In contrast to other classical Greek sources, which seem to use the term as a synonym of ἀνδρόγυνος, Philo appears to use γόνανδρος to refer to women who usurp the (sexual) role preserved for men. Philo, like Paul and Ps.-Phocylides, confirms that the increasing male concern about female homoeroticism in early Judaism occurs not only as late as rabbinic literature but clearly has its roots as far back as the first century CE.

\(^{26}\) Such a case is presupposed, for instance, in Martial's invective in *Ep.* 7.67, 70, although the satirical, exaggerating context must not be underestimated; see J.P. Hallett, "Female Homoeroticism," 215-222, and B. Brooten, *op. cit.*, 7, 46-47.