STILL BEFORE SEXUALITY:  
“GREEK” ANDROGYNY, THE ROMAN IMPERIAL POLITICS OF MASCULINITY AND THE ROMAN INVENTION OF THE TRIBAS

Diana M. Swancutt

In his Epigrams, Martial censures a certain Bassa for not being a Lucretia—a model Roman matron (1.90). Bassa is rather a fututor ("male fucker"), a “counterfeit man” who “joins cunts” with h/is “monstrous ‘penis.’” Likewise, in the Elder Seneca’s Controversies, Greek orators describe a husband who caught his wife and another tribas in flagrante, upon which he had to inspect “the man” to see how he had penetrated her. In her pivotal essay, “Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature,” Judith Hallett highlighted the rhetorical techniques of hellenization, anachronization and phallicization operative in such Latin depictions of the tribas. She argued that elite Roman men from Plautus to Juvenal employed these tropes to deny that Roman women were in fact tribades, whom she defined as homoerotic women. Hallett’s recognition of the ideological character of these portraits remains a crucial advance in the study of the tribas, for it leads us to pose several as yet unanswered questions regarding the impact of Roman imperialism on the figure. Why, for example, did the Romans use a Greek word (tribas) to describe them? Why did they treat tribades as Greek gender-monsters while Greeks merely mocked the purported equivalent, hetairistria, as burly, low-class courtesans? Why in the Roman period is there only one extant depiction of a woman penetrating another woman, while

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2 Unless I indicate otherwise, all translations are taken from the LCL series. This particular translation is my own.


4 Ibid., 259.
scenes of *hetairai* stroking and sucking dildos are common in Greek vase-painting.\(^5\) Finally, why did the term *tribas* first appear only with the beginning of the Roman Empire?

In this essay I propose that the *tribas* was a Roman ideological invention, an imperial stereotype of androgynous Greek gender-monsters enervating the empire, which Roman *viri* deployed rhetorically to control their most powerful inferiors, Roman matrons and Greeks. To make this case I argue that 1) the Roman ideology of tribadism deals with the perceived threat of physical gender transformation and 2) the interethnic and imperial dynamics of Roman gender ideology are central to the meaning of the term. On the first point, I emphasize that Roman gender ideology assumed the existence of the hermaphrodite or androgyne, a body-form or gender identified by h/is possession of masculine (penis) and feminine (vagina) physical traits, h/is transformation from one gender to the other or h/is body-flux between masculine and feminine forms.\(^6\) Elite Romans, who treated intercourse as a sociopolitical act of penetration (masculine) or submission (feminine) that helped to define a subject’s gender, also typically assumed that gender-deviant sex acts could transform one into an androgyne. Finally, Roman imperial gender ideology portrayed androgyny as a foreign gender monstrosity that evidenced disease in the Roman body and portended social upheaval and interethnic war. Read in light of these concerns about androgyny, the Latin emphasis on the phallicization of the *tribas* paints the figure as an androgynous gender-monster (*teras*/*monstrum*) or prodigy (*teras*/*prodigium*) defined by the physical, social and imperial effects of h/is gender-liminal activity as a sexual penetrator. The *tribas* did not depict a woman derided for

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\(^6\) Because English lacks pronouns for genders other than male and female, I refer to the *tribas* by splitting nouns and pronouns (e.g., “wo/man,” “s/he,” “h/is” and “h/er”).