



A PROBLEM IN GREEK ETHICS

JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS

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A PROBLEM IN GREEK ETHICS

BEING AN INQUIRY INTO THE PHENOMENON OF SEXUAL
INVERSION ADDRESSED ESPECIALLY TO MEDICAL
PSYCHOLOGISTS AND JURISTS

BY
JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS

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imagination by its unique æthetic charm is abundantly illustrated in the passages which I have quoted above from the *Charmides* of Plato and Xenophon's *Symposium*. An expressive Greek phrase, "Youths in their prime of adolescence, but not distinguished by a special beauty," recognises the persuasive influence, separate from that of true beauty, which belongs to a certain period of masculine growth. The very evanescence of this "bloom of youth" made it in Greek eyes desirable, since nothing more clearly characterises the poetic myths which adumbrate their special sensibility than the pathos of a blossom that must fade. When distinction of feature and symmetry of form were added to this charm of youthfulness, the Greeks admitted, as true artists are obliged to do, that the male body displays harmonies of proportion and melodies of outline more comprehensive, more indicative of strength expressed in terms of grace, than that of women.¹ I guard myself against saying—more seductive to the senses, more soft, more delicate, more undulating.

The superiority of male beauty does not consist in these attractions, but in the symmetrical development of all the qualities of the human frame, the complete organisation of the body as the supreme instrument of vital energy. In the bloom of adolescence the elements of feminine grace, suggested rather than expressed, are combined with virility to produce a perfection which is lacking to the mature and adult excellence of either sex. The Greek lover, if I am right in the idea which I have formed of him, sought less to stimulate desire by the contemplation of sensual charms than to attune his spirit with the spectacle of strength at rest in suavity. He admired the chastened lines, the figure slight but sinewy, the limbs well-knit and flexible, the small head set upon broad shoulders, the keen eyes, the austere reins, and the elastic movement of a youth made vigorous by exercise.

Physical perfection of this kind suggested to his fancy all that he loved best in moral qualities. Hardihood, self-discipline, alertness of

¹ The following passage may be extracted from a letter of Winckelmann (see Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 162): "As it is confessedly the beauty of man which is to be conceived under one general idea, so I have noticed that those who are observant of beauty only in women, and are moved little or not at all by the beauty of men, seldom have an impartial, vital, inborn instinct for beauty in art. To such persons the beauty of Greek art will ever seem wanting, because its supreme beauty is rather male than female." To this I think we ought to add that, while it is true that "the supreme beauty of Greek art is rather male than female," this is due not so much to any passion of the Greeks for male beauty as to the fact that the male body exhibits a higher organisation of the human form than the female.

