Love and Envy: Foucault’s Greco-Roman Turn and the Sociality of Desire

by Andrew Scholtz

If Foucault’s great achievement in the study of sexuality was to explain sexual classification as a mechanism of power, his interest in what might be termed sexual self-consciousness soon convinced him that a proper history of sexuality would need to chart continuities and disconnects in the evolution of that consciousness. Hence his detour into what he calls a “hermeneutics of the self” (Foucault 1990, 6), a “genealogy” of Western sexual subjectivity stretching back to ancient times. Yet I wonder if, in taking that Greco-Roman turn, Foucault’s History of Sexuality may not paradoxically fall prey to a kind of presentism. Let me be clear. I neither question the value of that turn nor, for the most part, challenge its findings. Rather, I suggest (a) that it privileges subjectivity and (b) that in so doing, overlooks important points of difference between ancient and modern stages in the evolution of Western desire. Starting with an overview of Foucault’s famous turn, I suggest an object-oriented approach focused on ancient Mediterranean desire as a reified “matter of concern” (Latour 2004), as passion whose impact could and did register outside and between individual subjects. By way of illustration I adduce a pair of anecdotes drawn from Polemon’s Physiognomy, where desire’s fraught relationship to envy, another passion born of lack, sheds light on desire’s sociality as a matter of concern in the Roman world. For even if envy’s affinities with desire mostly lay dormant, once activated, they highlighted the capacity for wayward eros to tear at the social fabric.

Works Cited

