CHAPTER FOUR

Stiff Upper Lips

Perhaps partly in reaction to Plato's high-mindedness, at least one subsequent Greek school of philosophy was more matter-of-fact about lust. The Cynics ("dog philosophers") thought too much song and dance was made about the whole thing. Diogenes thought that sex was most conveniently dealt with by masturbation, which is easier than relying on other people: as Oscar Wilde later said, "cleaner, more efficient, and you meet a better class of person."[21] But Diogenes took the further shocking step of arguing that no shame attached to the act, and hence no shame attached to doing it in public, which he promptly illustrated by repeated street performances. Rising to the challenge, Diogenes' pupil Crates and his wife Hipparchia are credibly reported to have copulated first

on the steps of the temple as they got married, and thereafter repeatedly and happily in public.

Although it is a digression, it is pleasant to record that centuries later Saint Augustine, quite capable of swallowing miracles in other contexts, rejected this account:

> It is true that there is a story that Diogenes once made an exhibition of himself by putting this theory into practice, because he imagined that his school of philosophy would gain more publicity if its indecency were more startlingly impressed on the memory of mankind. However, the Cynics did not continue this practice, and modesty, which makes men feel shame before their fellows, prevailed over error—the mistaken idea that men should make it their ambition to resemble dogs.
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> Hence I am inclined to think that even Diogenes himself, and the others about whom this story is told, merely went through the motions of lying together before the eyes of men who had no means of knowing what was really going on under the philosopher's cloak.[22]

In a delicious further twist the seventeenth-century skeptic, Pierre Bayle, in turn quoted yet another philosopher, La Mothe le Vayer, criticizing Augustine for this lack of faith:

> How could so great a man allow himself the Liberty of diving into those Cynical Secrets? How could St. Augustine's Hand lift up Diogenes's Cloak, to let us see some motions, which shame (tho' that Philosopher Profest to have none) Made him hide with his own Cloak?[23]

Bayle pursues the issue. Diogenes might have argued, he says, that if it is lawful to know one's wife, then it is lawful to know her in public. But this, he replies, is a wretched sophism, for there are things which are good or evil according to time and place and circumstance. However, he allows that this does not settle the question whether we are obliged to be ashamed of doing the deed in public. If it were an offense against nature, then we might expect that animals, "which so faithfully follow the Instincts of Nature," would "seek Shades and dark Recesses for the work of Multiplication," which we know is not the case. And in any case, many people in the Indies propagate in the eyes of all the world. If we reply that this is all very well for barbarous nations, but not for civilized ones, then we have to reflect that barbarous nations have departed less from the paths of nature than others, like ourselves, who have put themselves under "the Arbitrary Yoke of Customs, and the Opinion of [their] Fellow-Citizens."

Bayle finds he cannot think of an argument against Diogenes and Crates, and turns to lamenting the infirmities of human

reason, which is "wavering and supple, and which turns every way like a Weather-Cock." For just look how the Cynics make use of it to justify their abominable impudence! But he still doesn't let the matter go, since even if the Cynics were "incivil, ill-bred, and ill Observers of Fashions," this should not make them criminals. Nor can he find that the moral philosophers of the church, the casuists, have ever found reason in scripture for a condemnation of their actions.

After enjoying himself thoroughly by failing to find a decent argument against indecency, Bayle bows out, admitting that some might think the whole thing rather indelicate. But he defends himself with the standard argument of tabloid editors and other purveyors of stuff designed to tickle us with the pleasures of feeling shocked: "I desire the Reader to observe, that when infamous Actions are but faintly represented, they do not so strongly produce the Horror and Indignation they deserve." Quite right.

We look at shame later. But returning to our theme, in the Graeco-Roman world the next calamity to befall lust was the emergence of Stoicism (although Bayle laments at the very end of his discussion that in spite of the Stoics having very sublime ideals of morality, they nevertheless did not disapprove of the "beastly obscenities" of Diogenes).

The Stoic motto in general is "Do not disturb": to live well we must avoid being carried away by unruly eruptions into the

life of reason. Emotions that threaten self-control, such as panic, or anger, or grief, or lust, are the enemies, but Stoic self-command enables us to overcome them. Returning to Plato's image, the Stoic charioteer pretty much starves his horses to death, aiming, like a Buddhist, at a life free from care and concern, a life of stark insensibility. At least, he certainly starves the black horse. It is not so clear what happens to the white one: in the *Phaedrus,* it seemed to represent a sense of shame and honor, and certainly by the Roman period the Stoics were well developed in that direction. It is no accident that the Stoics anticipated nineteenth-century British empire builders with their stiff upper lips. Both had to be careful of their public personas. In each case the dignity of office and the decorum of its occupants demanded an inner control and outward signs of it, a visible gravity showing that the possessor is above the reach of mere happenstance.

Above all, proper decorum includes suppressing any disturbance such as might accompany the desire for pleasure. Indeed for the Roman philosopher and statesman Seneca, whose motto was "nothing for pleasure's sake," the overcoming of sexual pleasure was the crucial step:

> if you consider sexual desire to have been given to man, not for the gratification of pleasure, but for the continuation of the

> human race, when once you have escaped the violence of this secret destruction implanted in your very vitals, every other desire will pass you by unharmed. Reason lays low the vices not one by one, but all together.[24]

That is from a letter to his mother Helvia, but there is no reason to think that he was being coy.

The problematic nature of sex also infected Roman natural history. For some reason Pliny the Elder hit upon the elephant as the symbol of sexual propriety, crediting the pachyderm with every possible virtue: sense of honor, righteousness, conscientiousness, and above all a distinct sense of shame: "Out of shame elephants copulate only in hidden places. . . . Afterwards they bathe in a river. Nor is there any adultery among them, nor cruel battles for the females."[25] Anticipating a little, we might note that medieval writers embellished the legend with further details. A thirteenth-century manuscript describes the elephant as possessing no desire for sexual intercourse, in this serving as a symbol for Adam and Eve before the Fall, "knowing no evil, no natural desire, no sexual relationship." Konrad von Megenberg compared the frivolous morals of those animals that "live for their lust without divine worship" with the sobriety of the elephants, who copulate only to generate offspring, and Albertus Magnus declared that after giving birth, the female refrained from intercourse for three years.[26] Pliny had only given them two years, but three is more impressive, and with divine worship thrown in it becomes quite sublime.