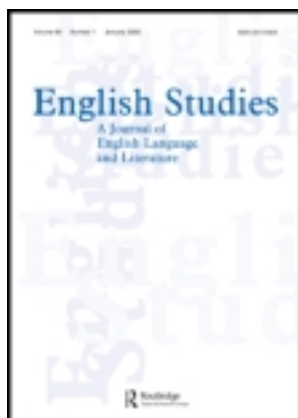


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“We Cannot Be Greek Now”: Age Difference, Corruption of Youth and the Making of *Sexual Inversion*

Jana Funke

A Problem in Greek Ethics, A Problem in Modern Ethics and “Soldier Love” indicate that John Addington Symonds responded carefully to social anxieties regarding the influence and corruption of youth and placed increasing emphasis on presenting male same-sex desire as consensual and age-consistent. Situating Symonds’s work in the social and political context of the 1880s and 1890s, the article opens up a more complex understanding of Symonds’s reception of Greece. It also offers a new reading of his collaboration with Havelock Ellis by arguing that Symonds’s insistence on age-equal and reciprocal relationships between men strongly shaped *Sexual Inversion*. This shows that concerns about age difference and ideals of equality and reciprocity began to impact debates about male same-sex desire in the late nineteenth century – earlier than is generally assumed.

In his often-cited chapter on “The Genius of Greek Art” in *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873–76), Symonds rehearses the trope of Greece’s youth when he asks: “How can we ... bridge the gulf which separates us from the Greeks? How shall we, whose souls are aged and wrinkled with the long years of humanity ... shake hands across the centuries with those young-eyed, young-limbed immortal children?”¹ Stefano Evangelista rightly argues that Symonds translates “the scholarly desire for the knowledge of the Greek past into the homoerotic desire for the adolescent male body”.² For Symonds, critical scholarship holds out the promise that the present might touch on the past, but this possibility is dependent on the critics’ ability to “regenerate ... [their] youth”.³ Thus, Symonds suggests that age difference – in the double sense of

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¹Symonds, *Greek Poets*, 363–4.

²Evangelista, “Platonic Dons”, 214.

³Symonds, *Greek Poets*, 364.

the difference between past and present, and maturity and youth – poses an obstacle to historical knowledge.

Symonds's decision to present the difficulty of knowing the Greek past in terms of cross-generational erotics is not a coincidence. In his memoirs, he concludes that it is impossible to "be Greek now",⁴ indicating the struggle involved in drawing on ancient Greece to present an affirmative understanding of male same-sex desire in the late nineteenth century. These difficulties have often been overlooked in recent scholarship, which tends to take for granted that the ideal of Victorian Hellenism provided an enabling model to articulate and defend male same-sex desire.⁵ However, as this article shows, in trying to reconcile the ideal of Greek love with the demands of the modern world, Symonds had to negotiate problematic questions of age difference and related concerns of equality, consent and the influence and corruption of youth, which have not yet received sufficient attention.

One reason this aspect of Symonds's reception of Greece has largely been neglected is that pederastic (man–boy) and homoerotic (man–man) desires often appear to be conflated in the nineteenth century.⁶ Symonds himself addresses both age-consistent and cross-generational relationships in his writings. Moreover, the eroticisation of the "beauteous boy" or "gentle youth" and the pedagogical relation between an older and younger male partner is central to many of his poems and his classical scholarship.⁷ In this sense, Symonds is associated with a wider nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movement that celebrated pederastic relations and comprises the so-called Uranian poets, including Symonds's friends Charles Kains Jackson and Edward Cracroft Lefroy, and William Johnson Cory, with whom Symonds corresponded after reading *Ionica: Poems by an Eton Master* (1858). Other celebrations of boy-love occur in the paintings of Henry Scott Tuke and Simeon Solomon, which Symonds admired, and the photographs of Wilhelm von Gloeden, which Symonds exchanged with Edmund Gosse and other male friends.⁸ Symonds himself often desired younger men; the 19-year-old Norman Moor, for instance, would take on the role of the *eromenos* in his relationship with Symonds, who was ten years older.⁹

At the same time, the age-inconsistent nature of Greek pederastic relations was the cause of considerable anxieties for Symonds. In the second half of the nineteenth century, concerns about age difference and consent together with fears about the corruption of youth were fuelled by numerous debates, focusing, for instance, on the influence of the classics on young readers, public school scandals, the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment (CLA) and the Wilde trials in 1895. Although fears concerning the

⁴Symonds, *Memoirs*, 169.

⁵Evangelista, "Platonic Dons", and Rosseau offer important exceptions.

⁶Kincaid, 176; D'Arch Smith, 12.

⁷Symonds, *Key of Blue*, 164.

⁸For a discussion of Symonds and von Gloeden, see Evangelista, "Aesthetic Encounters".

⁹Brady, 12; Sally Newman's article in this special journal issue indicates the considerable flexibility of cross-generational erotics, which did not necessarily have to be gendered.

corruption of youth often applied to boys and girls equally, the idealisation of the pedagogic Eros between an older and a younger male partner became increasingly problematic in this climate. Taking into account these developments allows for a more nuanced understanding of Symonds’s negotiation of ancient Greece as well as his collaboration with Havelock Ellis, which would result in *Sexual Inversion* (1897). Tracing Symonds’s engagement with topical concerns regarding age difference and the corruption of youth in the three texts he would share with Ellis, *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, *A Problem in Modern Ethics* and “Soldier Love”, which has only recently been translated into English, this article works towards viewing Symonds and Ellis as joint authors of an ethically and socially viable understanding of sexual inversion, defined as the consensual and reciprocal desire between adult men.

Even though this article focuses on a specific selection of Symonds’s classical and historical scholarship and his medico-legalistic writings, anxieties concerning age difference are evident in the different genres across which Symonds wrote about male same-sex desire, including his literary and autobiographical works. Rather than celebrate boy-love, for instance, some of his privately published poems highlight the potentially exploitative and violent nature of age-inconsistent relations. In “The Cretan Idyll”, for instance, written in the late 1860s, the older Ithocles tries to force his younger lover, Lysander, into submission with the words: “child in a strong man’s arms! / Be bruised and broken if thou wilt not yield!”¹⁰ The anxieties expressed in such texts are overdetermined and it is difficult to tease apart concerns about male same-sex desire, the physical realisation of such desire and age-inconsistent relationships more specifically. Still, Symonds’s explicit rejection of the potentially unequal and corruptive quality of cross-generational attachments discussed in this article raises awareness of the need to pay more attention to the ambivalence surrounding cross-generational erotics in his writings.

In teasing out these implications, this article also calls for a more careful engagement with questions of age difference in debates about same-sex desire in the late nineteenth century more generally. It has often been assumed that concerns about age difference only start to pose a problem to affirmative models of male same-sex relationships after the gay liberation movement in the second half of the twentieth century, when the ideal of relationships based on equality became more dominant.¹¹ While the homoerotic valorisation and patronage of younger lovers and protégés continued throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this article demonstrates that concerns about cross-generational erotics informed earlier understandings of male same-sex desire. Indeed, with regard to age difference, Symonds and Ellis should be viewed as early proponents of the equality model of male homosexuality that would eventually become hegemonic in the second half of the twentieth century.

¹⁰Cited in Venables, 180.

¹¹Halperin, *History*, 18–19.

Greek Love and the Problem of Influence

Symonds's first sustained treatise on male same-sex desire, *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, written in the early 1870s and privately printed in 1883, illustrates his concern with questions of influence and age difference. Symonds does not differentiate strictly between age-equal and age-inconsistent relationships in this text, but emphasises that regulations were in place to ensure that male same-sex relations "did not degenerate into mere licentiousness" or "wanton and illiberal passion".¹² In the discussion of Pausanias' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, Symonds stresses that the age of the younger partner was strictly defined.¹³ Pausanias differentiates between the fleeting physical love "of women as well as of youths" and the Uranian love "not [of] boys, but intelligent beings, whose reason is beginning to be developed, much about the time at which their beards begin to grow".¹⁴ Pausanias maintains further that "the love of young boys should be forbidden by law, because their future is uncertain".¹⁵ At stake is the quality of attachment between both partners, whose relationship is viewed as equal and reciprocal. In maintaining these ideals, Plato deviates from the conventional Greek Eros that enforced strict hierarchies and presented sexuality in terms of domination and submission.¹⁶ In keeping with the Platonic model of a mutual and equal relationship, Symonds's ideal of Greek love cannot be reconciled with the fleeting and purely physical lust for a boy, who is too young to benefit intellectually from the formative influence of an older partner.

For Symonds, the cultural excellence of ancient Greece offered proof of the positive formative influence of the Platonic Eros. However, he was also aware that the translation of this model of Greek love into the present day was fraught with difficulties. Indeed, the affirmation of cross-generational relationships would become increasingly problematic following the negative response to the English university reform in the middle of the nineteenth century. Not only did ancient Greece present a challenge to Victorian religious and sexual morals, but the teaching of the classics – particularly in the intimate tutorial system at Oxford, where Symonds himself had studied under Benjamin Jowett – also seemed to imitate the pedagogic Eros, potentially encouraging young and receptive students to develop same-sex desires.¹⁷ These anxieties were corroborated by rumours surrounding "improper" relationships between teachers and students at public schools and universities. Symonds himself was implicated in Charles John Vaughan's departure from Harrow in 1859 and was accused of an "Arcadian" relationship with a chorister boy at Oxford in 1862.¹⁸ At the same time, John Barrow, the Principal of St Edmund Hall, was forced to retire and scandals

¹²Symonds, *Greek Ethics*, 8 and 22.

¹³Symonds uses Benjamin Jowett's translation of the *Symposium*.

¹⁴Symonds, *Greek Ethics*, 33.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Halperin, "Plato", 63.

¹⁷Dowling, 67–77; Evangelista, "Platonic Dons", 218–25.

¹⁸Rosseau.

surrounding William Johnson Cory and Oscar Browning at Eton and Walter Pater at Oxford followed in the 1870s.¹⁹

Symonds struggled with the topical question of whether same-sex desire was necessarily inborn or congenital or whether it could be the result of influence or seduction. In *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, he suggests that foreign Oriental influences facilitated the development of male same-sex desire in Greece. Here, Greece once again takes on the role of the younger partner who is either led astray by an older foreign influence or can use this influence to better himself. Symonds also repeatedly questioned whether the classics could encourage young readers to develop same-sex desires, as his 1889 letter to Jowett indicates, in which he argues that Plato should not be taught to young students.²⁰ Phyllis Grosskurth maintains that "Symonds was quite unconcerned about the effect of Greek literature on young men", because he was convinced that same-sex desire was congenital.²¹ This does not explain, however, why Symonds would repeat similar warnings about the influence of the classics in *A Problem in Modern Ethics* and write to Norman Moor in 1886 to inquire about the impact the Greek classics had had on his life.²² The question of influence is also discussed at length in the memoirs, where Symonds comments on his own sexual development, explaining that his discovery of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* offered a language and a model of identification that allowed him to "form ... himself ... into a literary being with an absorbing passion for persons of his own sex".²³ This shows that Symonds's understanding of the causation of same-sex desire goes beyond a straightforward congenital explanation that leaves no room for the force of influence.

In 1877, Symonds's own classical scholarship was presented as a corruptive influence on England's youth by Richard St John Tyrwhitt in his article "The Greek Spirit in Modern Literature" in *The Contemporary Review*. In his discussion of Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets*, Tyrwhitt points specifically to "the divine youths whose beauties he [Symonds] appreciates so thoroughly".²⁴ Tyrwhitt is particularly concerned with the impact of Greek literature on young readers, "the Anglo-Christian lads of the present day",²⁵ who can easily be influenced by those aspects of Greek culture that "went frequently against nature".²⁶ Together with the wider debates surrounding the influence of the classics on young readers, Tyrwhitt's attack proved to Symonds that it was becoming increasingly difficult to affirm the ideal of Greek love, as the pedagogic Eros was conflated with the corruption of youth.

¹⁹See Rosseau on Barrow; Kaplan, 102–65, on Cory and Browning; and Inman on Pater.

²⁰See Evangelista, "Platonic Dons", for a discussion of Symonds and Jowett.

²¹Grosskurth, 268.

²²Moor's reply is reproduced in the *Memoirs*, 295–7.

²³*Ibid.*, 282.

²⁴Tyrwhitt, 558.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*, 557.

A Problem in Modern Ethics and the Labouchère Amendment

A Problem in Modern Ethics, written in 1889 and printed privately in 1891, directly responds to the growing anxieties concerning influence and corruption. The more explicit engagement with questions of age difference needs to be read against the background of the moral panic of the 1880s and 1890s. The final two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed increased fears regarding the sexual exploitation of the young and the age of consent. Initially, these worries were not centred specifically on male same-sex desire, but were rather concerned with the perceived problem of “male lust” more generally.²⁷ W. T. Stead’s highly influential “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon”, a series of articles on child abuse and prostitution in London’s underworld, published in *The Pall Mall Gazette* in July 1885, was primarily focused on the sexual exploitation of girls. However, Stead also exposed that boys were abducted or forced to sell themselves to men in the streets of London. At the beginning of his third instalment, for instance, Stead writes that there are not only girls of 11 or 12 “who are leading immoral lives”, but also “boys of the same age who pursue the same dreadful calling”.²⁸ Both girls and boys were seen as potential victims of sexual exploitation.

The public moral outcry provoked by “The Maiden Tribute” is often seen as one of the key factors behind the implementation of the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act (CLA), which raised the age of consent for girls from 13 to 16. Included in the bill was the Labouchère Amendment, named after MP Henry Labouchère, which targeted same-sex relations between men in public and private. Because the Labouchère Amendment was not concerned with age difference, it has been read as an unrelated and incongruous addition to a separate bill. However, it has also been suggested that the Labouchère Amendment was intimately related to the CLA in that it sought to deal with concerns regarding the sexual exploitation of boys and adolescents. Since Labouchère admitted that the clause was inspired by the French penal code, which protected children and adolescents but did not criminalise consensual same-sex acts in private, Montgomery Hyde maintains that he “must have had in mind primarily the corruption of youth”.²⁹ Similarly, Louise Jackson concludes “the outlawing of gross indecency in 1885 must have been an attempt to deal with the perceived problem of boys aged 14–18 who were picked up by adult men”.³⁰ Whereas earlier sodomy laws had not differentiated between consensual and non-consensual sex acts, the CLA legally framed male same-sex desire as an expression of male lust that could corrupt and sexually exploit England’s youth.

A Problem in Modern Ethics was written in direct response to the Labouchère Amendment and engages explicitly with debates concerning age difference and corruption. Early on in the treatise, Symonds seeks to deflate “the common belief that boys

²⁷ Marshall, 139; Weeks, 213–14.

²⁸ Stead, 10.

²⁹ Hyde, 155.

³⁰ Jackson, 105–6.

under age are specially liable to corruption".³¹ Strategically drawing on the gender bias that puts greater emphasis on the sexual exploitation of girls, he argues that "the manners of London after dark",³² which had been exposed by Stead's reports, prove that girls are at far greater danger of being abused than boys. Therefore, Symonds suggests, it is illogical to support an excessively rigid piece of legislation like the Labouchère Amendment that goes far beyond tackling the comparatively negligible problem of sexual corruption of boys. To provide a legal alternative, Symonds looks to the French Code Napoléon and the Italian penal code, which "punish violence, protect minors, and provide for the maintenance of public decency. Within these limitations, they recognise the right of adults to deal as they chose with their persons."³³ Throughout the text, Symonds insists that only public, non-consensual or age-inconsistent relationships need to be punished by the law. Thus, age difference becomes one of the primary concerns in his negotiation of male same-sex desire.

Questions of age also come to determine the very classification of different types of sexual inverts, to use Symonds and Ellis's preferred terminology. Symonds is strongly influenced by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who shared the desire to clarify that Greek love did not entail the love of boys, but young men.³⁴ This preoccupation with age difference is reflected in Ulrichs's classificatory scheme, which Symonds adopts. Symonds differentiates between Mannlings, who are attracted to effeminate males and boys; Weiblings, who "prefer powerful adults of an ultra-masculine stamp"; and the Zwischen-Urning or Mittel-Urning, who is drawn to "healthy young men in the bloom of adolescence, between nineteen and twenty".³⁵ In his memoirs, Symonds identifies as a Mittel-Urning, who is drawn to "the male sex during the period of adolescence and early manhood; [and] who is not marked either by an effeminate passion for robust adults [Weibling] or by a predilection for young boys [Mannling]".³⁶ In *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, Symonds seeks to differentiate further between the man who desires adults and younger men, and the "depraved debauchee who abuses boys".³⁷ This point is reinforced when Symonds translates and summarises Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* to argue that "inasmuch as they [inverted men] always prefer adults, they are in no sense specially dangerous to boys".³⁸ Symonds proceeds to insist on "a distinction between Urnings in whom sexual inversion is congenital, and old debauchees or half-idiotic individuals, who are in the habit of misusing boys".³⁹ Thus, congenital inversion is strictly set apart from a more generalised perversion of the male sexual instinct expressed in the abuse of boys.

³¹Symonds, *Modern Ethics*, 14.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., 129.

³⁴Matzner, 80.

³⁵Symonds, *Modern Ethics*, 87.

³⁶Symonds, *Memoirs*, 65.

³⁷Symonds, *Modern Ethics*, 15.

³⁸Ibid., 110.

³⁹Ibid.

This use of congenital arguments needs to be understood as part of a wider strategy to defend same-sex desire against accusations of corruption. Symonds was highly critical of continental sexology, primarily because of hereditary explanations that associated inversion with inherited disease and degeneration.⁴⁰ Still, throughout *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, Symonds draws on congenital arguments to set apart the consensual desire between age-equal partners from the depraved and corruptive lust characterising radically age-inconsistent relationships. He also uses congenital explanations to argue that same-sex desire cannot be transmitted as a result of influence. Thus, for instance, he seeks to deflate fears regarding the corruption of boys in English schools by stating that parents “know very well what goes on” in Eton and Harrow and only allow their sons to attend, because they believe that boys “will return to their congenital instincts”.⁴¹

This heightened concern with age difference is also reflected in Symonds’s later reception of Greece, as he increasingly insists on reading Greek love as age-consistent. In his treatise on “Soldier Love”, which explores same-sex desire for soldiers and lower-class men, Symonds continues to draw on Greek martial ethics, but avoids passages eroticising the figure of the boy that can still be found in *A Problem in Greek Ethics*. Symonds is also careful to emphasise that the Dorians only condoned relationships between adults and young men old enough to enter into military service and clarifies that “the lover is never just a child but always a youth” in Plato’s dialogues.⁴² This heightened emphasis on the maturity of both partners is also evident in Symonds’s important late essay “The Dantesque and Platonic Ideals of Love” from *In the Key of Blue* (1893), which offers a rereading of the Platonic Eros in more overtly physical terms.⁴³ Whereas *A Problem in Greek Ethics* still defined Greek love as the relationship between “man and youth”,⁴⁴ Symonds now asserts, “Platonic love, in the true sense of that phrase, was the affection of a man for a man”.⁴⁵ These changes to his reading of Greek love show that Symonds responded to growing concerns with age difference, influence and corruption, primarily by arguing that same-sex desire in the modern world is congenital.

Nevertheless, Symonds also discusses acquired same-sex desire again and again in *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, often using the very same rhetoric of corruption he tries to discredit elsewhere. For instance, he insists on asking, “how far ... instincts are capable of being communicated by contagion” and emphasises that the prepubescent individual is open to influences that might result in sexuality “be[ing] perverted into a false channel”.⁴⁶ This insistent return to questions of influence has to do with the fact

⁴⁰Bristow.

⁴¹Ibid., 103.

⁴²Symonds, “Soldier Love”, n.15.

⁴³Dowling, 128.

⁴⁴Symonds, *Greek Ethics*, 8.

⁴⁵Symonds, *Key of Blue*, 61.

⁴⁶Symonds, *Modern Ethics*, 28 and 44.

that Symonds held conflicting views about the causes of same-sex desire. More importantly, he believed same-sex desire in ancient Greece to have been acquired rather than congenital. Ultimately, heredity could not, as Joseph Bristow has argued, be reconciled with Symonds's understanding of Greek love, which was very much "the product of a particular cultural environment, except this time the acquired habit was in the name of moral health, not vicious injury".⁴⁷ The language of corruption that pervades *A Problem in Modern Ethics* and powerfully disrupts Symonds's own liberationist argument shows that it was no longer possible to reach back to ancient Greece, a culture that encouraged same-sex desire, without being implicated in the anxieties surrounding age difference in the late nineteenth century. Symonds's self-defeatist awareness of the "foregone futility of any plan of action" is a response to this moral climate in which Greek love could only be construed in terms of corruption.⁴⁸

Editing *Sexual Inversion*

The problems Symonds encountered when trying to negotiate Greek love would also influence his collaboration with Havelock Ellis, which has been widely discussed.⁴⁹ After Symonds's death in 1893, Ellis was left with the task of editing *Sexual Inversion* for publication. The first edition, published in German in 1896, contained Symonds's *A Problem in Greek Ethics* and "Soldier Love". In the first English edition, published the following year, Ellis delegated Symonds's treatise on ancient Greece to an appendix and omitted "Soldier Love". After Symonds's literary executor, Horatio Forbes Brown, had bought up and destroyed almost all copies of this first edition, Ellis brought out the second English edition the same year. This time, Symonds was not named as co-author on the title page and his main contributions were excised.

Because of Ellis's editorial decisions, his collaboration with Symonds has often been read in antagonistic terms. Wayne Koestenbaum argues that Ellis "unmanned a literary father, and ensured his own full possession of *Sexual Inversion*".⁵⁰ He suggests further that Ellis was keen to reinforce his scientific authority and suppress the literary quality of Symonds's work. Ellis's letters show that he did have concerns regarding the "idealistic and literary aspects" of Symonds's writing and felt it was more suitable to "adopt a rather austere style ... appealing to the reason rather than to the emotions".⁵¹ The view of Ellis as a man of science radically opposed to literary writing, however, does not do justice to his own complex understanding and strategic use of science.⁵² Moreover, it remains unclear what precisely is meant by the literary and emotional quality of Symonds's work. Bristow rightly argues that Symonds and Ellis's collaboration

⁴⁷Bristow, 91.

⁴⁸Binkley, 81.

⁴⁹See, for instance, Bristow; Crozier; Grosskurth, 284–94; Koestenbaum.

⁵⁰Koestenbaum, 44.

⁵¹Ellis to Symonds, 19 February 1893, Havelock Ellis Misc. ADD 70524. British Library, London.

⁵²Nottingham, 170.

cannot be understood without focusing on Symonds's understanding of history and the use of ancient Greece. According to Bristow, Ellis could not accept Symonds's appeal to ancient Greek customs, which served to challenge sexological models of inversion by highlighting that "cultural forces influence the shaping of homosexual desire".⁵³ Perpetuating the image of Ellis as Symonds's castrator, Bristow concludes that Ellis "discards [Symonds's] history and uphold[s] heredity".⁵⁴

However, Ellis was not opposed to the use of history. In his letters to Symonds, he initially encourages the inclusion of historical data, his only concern being the reaction of their readers, for instance, when it comes to mentioning Shakespeare in a list of historical inverts, which might "arouse the fury of devout Shakespeareans".⁵⁵ Moreover, Ellis was open to non-hereditary readings of same-sex desire.⁵⁶ Discussing Greek love with Symonds, he compares ancient Greece to Eskimo societies, in which the child is "brought up by its parents to sex.[ual] inversion".⁵⁷ The comparison between the ancient Greeks and Eskimos offends Symonds's belief in the unique cultural value of Greece. Still, both co-authors would agree that Greek love was acquired rather than congenital and could therefore not easily inform an understanding of inversion in the modern world, which Ellis defines as "a fundamental – usually, it is probable, inborn – perversion of the sexual instinct, rendering the individual organically abnormal".⁵⁸ This scientific and pathological rhetoric must not obscure the fact that Ellis shared Symonds's liberationist aims. Indeed, it was the desire to challenge the Labouchère Amendment and to oppose negative social views of inversion that facilitated their collaboration in the first place. Ellis did not simply wish to write a respectable scientific study of inversion, but he also sought to argue against the criminalisation of same-sex desire in England.

Similar to Symonds in *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, Ellis would use congenital logic in *Sexual Inversion* to achieve this aim and work against fears of corruption and sexual exploitation. Challenging Albert von Schrenck-Notzing's concept of suggestion, according to which same-sex desire is the result of influence and seduction, Ellis maintains that "[t]he seed of suggestion can only develop when it falls on a suitable soil".⁵⁹ Like Symonds, Ellis also seeks to associate inversion with equal and reciprocal relationships between consenting adults. Thus, in the conclusion, he calls for an amendment to the English law, arguing that "if two male persons, who have reached years of discretion, consent together to perform some act of sexual intimacy in private, no indecency has been committed".⁶⁰ Instead of reading Ellis's congenital model of inversion as

⁵³Bristow, 87.

⁵⁴Ibid., 94. See Crozier, 83–6, for an important critical discussion of Bristow and Koestenbaum's views.

⁵⁵Ellis to Symonds, 3 March 1893, Havelock Ellis Misc. ADD 70524. British Library, London.

⁵⁶Ellis discusses ancient Greece and other historical periods in the first chapter of *Sexual Inversion*, demonstrating his interest in the uses of historical data and acquired forms of same-sex desire.

⁵⁷Ellis to Symonds, 1 July 1892, Havelock Ellis Misc. ADD 70524. British Library, London.

⁵⁸Ellis and Symonds, *Sexual Inversion*, 113.

⁵⁹Ibid., 185.

⁶⁰Ibid., 218.

indicative of his ignorance regarding the use of history or the possibility of acquired same-sex desire, it should be viewed in strategic terms. In this sense, the use of congenital arguments in *Sexual Inversion* is strikingly similar to *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, especially in the emphasis on age-consistent, equal and reciprocal same-sex relationships.

The ability to respond to concerns about age difference and the corruption of youth was even more important for Ellis, since he was editing *Sexual Inversion* in the immediate wake of the Wilde trials, which had produced the image of Wilde as a corruptor of youth. Wilde’s love letters to Lord Alfred Douglas, which were read out in court, evoke the ideal of boy-love, calling Douglas “my own boy” and comparing him to Hyacinthus, the youthful lover of Apollo.⁶¹ In keeping with the pretence that Douglas’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, had confronted Wilde to save his son, the prosecution emphasised Wilde’s corruptive influence on the younger Douglas. Moreover, the critical discussion of Wilde’s literary works focused on their corruptive influence on a young readership. What was on trial at the Old Bailey in 1895 was not the erotic attachment of two adult men, but rather the exploitative relationship between an older man and a younger partner.⁶² In this climate, a congenital model of inversion was ever more necessary to work against the fear of influence and corruption.

At the same time, the use of ancient Greece became increasingly problematic. Although Symonds died before the Wilde trials, his negotiation of Greek love in *A Problem in Modern Ethics* and “Soldier Love” indicates his awareness that cross-generational erotics could not support an affirmative view of same-sex desire. Wilde famously defended himself using the rhetoric of boy-love, but even though his speech elicited applause from the audience, his defence was ultimately unsuccessful. Symonds’s suspicion that it was no longer possible to justify and defend same-sex desire in terms of an idealised cross-generational Eros proved to be correct. Ellis’s decision to annex and finally omit Symonds’s treatise on Greek love from *Sexual Inversion* cannot be understood without taking into account that the celebration of ancient Greece could only be injurious to a book seeking to defend same-sex desire. That the comparatively early *A Problem in Greek Ethics* did not yet differentiate clearly between age-consistent and age-inconsistent relationships would have made its inclusion even more problematic. Since Symonds had anticipated such problems surrounding the reception of ancient Greece, Ellis’s editorial decisions are very much in line with his co-author’s ideas and interests.⁶³

⁶¹Quoted in Holland, 33.

⁶²For more on Wilde and the corruption of youth, see, for instance, Foldy, 103–16; Kaplan 232–42; Marshall, 141.

⁶³Age difference is addressed explicitly in Josiah Flynt Willard’s “Homosexuality Among Tramps”, which appears in the appendix of all editions of *Sexual Inversion*. Ellis’s decision to include this brief study of same-sex attachments between tramps and hoboes, in which the seduction of boys by older men is discussed at length, can be explained by the fact that Willard focuses on the United States and states explicitly that sexual inversion among tramps is rare in England and Germany. Therefore, Willard’s observations offer useful cross-cultural evidence of various forms of same-sex desire while not interfering with Ellis and Symonds’s shared wish to demonstrate the health of the English invert and argue for the decriminalisation of inversion in England specifically.

“Soldier Love” and the Problem of Class Difference

If Symonds was aware of the problem posited by ancient Greece, why did he send *A Problem in Greek Ethics* to Ellis in the first place? And why did Ellis decide to cut Symonds’s “Soldier Love”, which carefully avoided cross-generational erotics? Symonds never gave up on the idea that ancient Greece could continue to hold meaning in the present day. In January 1891, he discusses the relevance of the Greek classics with Henry Graham Dakyns in several letters. Although pessimistic at first, Symonds finds reason for hope in his reading of Walt Whitman and believes that a fresh development is “ready to leap forth in the due time of the Spirit”,⁶⁴ which will open up new possibilities of interpersonal relations between men. Symonds’s negotiation of ancient Greece towards the end of his life involved a more overt rejection of cross-generational erotics and an embrace of adult relationships between men of different class backgrounds. Appropriating Whitman’s “democratic enthusiasm”, Symonds stresses that erotic attachments between men can enable individuals to reach across class divides and bring them “into close and profitable sympathy with [other] human beings”, thus facilitating the emergence of a modern democratic society.⁶⁵

Symonds hoped that this new model of “comradeship, the enthusiasm which binds man to man in fervent love” would serve the purpose of “[e]liminating the classical associations of corruption”.⁶⁶ However, he underestimated that class difference, too, would incite fears of corruption.⁶⁷ The Dublin Castle and Cleveland Street scandals of 1884 and 1889 together with the debates surrounding the Labouchère Amendment had drawn attention to the fact that it was often lower-class boys and men that were sexually exploited. Rent boys were accused of being interested in financial gain, but newspaper reports tended to put the blame on the older party, so that “it was adult men rather than youths who were identified as sexually predatory”.⁶⁸ The appearance of the rent boys who testified against Wilde during the trials further reinforced the idea that male same-sex desire was the result of an emotional and economic exploitation of the young. Thus, increasingly, earlier concerns regarding the corruption of boys and young men at public schools and university started to be projected onto the figure of the lower-class boy, who had to sell his body for money.

Symonds knew that his relationships with working-class men could be understood either in terms of “democratic comradeship or sexual exploitation”.⁶⁹ For this reason, he is keen to highlight in “Soldier Love” that same-sex desire in lower-class men is natural, since they have not been exposed to classical literature and other possibly corruptive influences. He also takes into account that soldiers already sell their

⁶⁴Symonds, *Letters*, 544.

⁶⁵Symonds, *Memoirs*, 189.

⁶⁶Symonds, *Modern Ethics*, 124.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Jackson, 104. See also Marshall, 138–9.

⁶⁹Robertson, 156.

bodies “as cannon fodder” and might “feel no qualms in selling them again as fodder for erotic inclinations”.⁷⁰ Financial favours could facilitate the initial emergence of a relationship between two men, but Symonds maintains that the ensuing friendship would be mutually beneficial for both partners and operate on a more idealistic level. In his attempt to reconcile the eroticisation of lower-class men with ideals of equality and reciprocity, Symonds did not fully realise that class difference, just like age difference, rendered problematic an understanding of consensual same-sex desire. Moreover, Symonds’s conceptualisation of the Platonic Eros in terms of class difference continued to point to the fact that same-sex desire was acquired rather than congenital. His modern ideal of a comradely Greek love was not only meant to help inverted men to “rehabilitate those outcast instincts”,⁷¹ but “democratic chivalry” was also understood as a more general way of life, allowing men to relate to other men irrespective of their inborn inclinations.⁷²

Whether the focus lay on age difference or class difference, however, the appeal to Greek love would have weakened the force of the congenital argument presented in *Sexual Inversion*. Ellis discusses openly that same-sex desire often operates across class boundaries, but, in the conclusion, describes “the invert who ... take[s] his pleasure with a soldier or a policeman” as base and vulgar and states that this form of behaviour should not be protected under the law.⁷³ Ellis’s decision to omit Symonds’s contributions and publish *Sexual Inversion* under his name alone was undoubtedly based on a variety of factors, including pressure from Symonds’s family and executor, Horatio Forbes Brown, as well as concerns regarding Symonds’s style and reputation as a literary scholar. However, the collaboration between Symonds and Ellis cannot be understood without taking into account that Greek love, whether it idealised age or class difference, had become associated with corruption. Symonds himself acknowledged this problem and tried to negotiate his reading of ancient Greece accordingly. Since it was Symonds and Ellis’s shared aim to present a book that would challenge perceived notions of same-sex desire and help to decriminalise inversion, Ellis was very much acting in accord with Symonds’s interests when he restricted the discussion of Greek love in *Sexual Inversion*. Thus, Symonds and Ellis shared the struggle to negotiate age difference and class difference in a bid to counter fears of corruption. In doing so, they jointly sought to construct a socially viable model of inversion understood as a natural and consensual form of desire between two adult men.

Ultimately, Symonds and Ellis also failed to anticipate fully the force of anxieties surrounding the corruption of youth. Despite Ellis’s editorial decisions, the second English edition of *Sexual Inversion* was banned in 1898 and its publisher, George Bedborough, was charged with “publishing an improper book ... with the intention

⁷⁰Symonds, “Soldier Love”, 9.

⁷¹Symonds, *Modern Ethics*, 124.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ellis and Symonds, *Sexual Inversion*, 222.

of corrupting the morals of her Majesty's subjects".⁷⁴ The scandal surrounding the Bedborough trial focused on the impact sexological materials would have on young readers.⁷⁵ Symonds and Ellis were justified in expecting that fears of corruption would necessarily play a central role in the way *Sexual Inversion* was received by the English public, but they possibly underestimated that sexological knowledge, too, would come to be viewed as having a corruptive influence on England's youth. Nevertheless, Ellis and Symonds's collaboration indicates that ideals of equality and reciprocity, specifically with regard to age difference, were already at the heart of a self-consciously affirmative and liberationist debates about male same-sex desire in the late nineteenth century.

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⁷⁴*Standard*, 8 June 1898, 4.

⁷⁵The December 1898 issue of *The Adult*, the journal Bedborough had edited before his arrest, provides an excellent overview of these debates.

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