One of the most lasting delights and challenges of the study of the ancient world, and of the Roman Empire in particular, is the tension between familiarity and strangeness that characterizes our many approaches to it. It is like a great building, visible from far away, at the end of a straight road that cuts across what seems to be a level plain. Only when we draw near are we brought up sharp, on the edge of a great canyon, invisible from the road, that cuts its way between us and the monument we seek. We realize that we are looking at this world from across a sheer, silent drop of two thousand years.

Antiquity is always stranger than we think. Nowhere does it prove to be more strange than where we once assumed that it was most familiar to us. We always knew that the Romans had a lot of sex. Indeed, in the opinion of our elders, they probably had a lot more than was quite good for them. We also always knew that the early Christians had an acute sense of sin. We tend to think that they had a lot more sense of sin than they should have had. Otherwise they were very like ourselves. Until recently, studies of sex in Rome and of Christianity in the Roman world were wrapped in a cocoon of false familiarity.

Only in the last generation have we realized the sheer, tingling drop of the canyon that lies between us and a world that we had previously tended to take for granted as directly available to our own categories of understanding. “Revealing Antiquity,” the Harvard University Press series edited by Glen Bowersock, has played its part in instilling in us all a healthy sense of dizziness as we peer over the edge into a
fascinating but deeply strange world. Kyle Harper’s book *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* is a scintillating contribution to this series. Not only does it measure the exact nature of the tension between the familiar and the deeply unfamiliar that lies behind our image of the sexual morality of Greeks and Romans of the Roman Empire of the classical period. It also goes on to evoke the sheer, unexpected strangeness of the very different sexual code elaborated in early Christian circles, and its sudden, largely unforeseen undermining of a very ancient social equilibrium in the two centuries that followed the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in 312. As Harper makes plain on the first page of his dense and vivid book, “Few periods of premodern history have witnessed such brisk and consequential ideological change. Sex was at the center of it all.”

Why was this so? It is a question that has often been asked in recent times. What is original in Harper’s book is his approach to the question, and the trenchancy with which he provides an answer. This answer is based on an appreciation of the real-life social structures of the classical Roman Empire and of the irrevocable changes in the public sphere brought about through the access to power of a hitherto alienated and perfectionist Christian minority in the last centuries of the empire.

But before we examine Harper’s answer in detail, it is worthwhile to conjure up some previous attempts to measure the drop of the canyon that cuts its way between us and false familiarity with the ancient world. Scholars in the field began to appreciate the strangeness of the Romans, in matters of sex as in so much else, starting in the late 1960s. To take one small but revealing example, in 1965 the Cambridge historian and sociologist Keith Hopkins showed with zest that Roman women were married off at the age of thirteen. It was an age of marriage as low as that current among girls in modern India. At a stroke, the chasm between ourselves and the ancient Romans seemed to be as great as the one that, in the uneasy imagination of Western countries, appeared, in the 1960s, to exist between themselves and the “underdeveloped” countries of the third world.

Similar vigor was displayed in France. Here the sense of intimacy with the ancient world had been fostered by a sense of continuity between Roman civilization and the Catholic Church, seen as the natural successor of all that had been great and good in Rome. Scholars looked back to the Roman Empire of the second century CE to trace a *Praeparatio Evangelica*—a “Preparation for the Gospel.” It was believed that this “preparation” could be seen at work in the rise of companionate marriage in the circles of Pliny and Plutarch, in the spread of notions of universal benevolence associated with Stoic teaching, and even in a few hesitant steps toward the “humanization” of slavery. It was claimed that Christianity inherited and made more widespread these moral advances.

In the 1970s, this comforting panorama was subjected to searching criticism. In a great book written in 1976, *Le Pain et le cirque*, Paul Veyne laid bare the exotic
idiosyncrasy of the system of public benevolence in the Greek and Roman world that earlier studies had acclaimed as the forerunner of Christian almsgiving.¹ In 1984, Michel Foucault’s Le Souci de soi insisted on the utter specificity of the moral codes of the elites of the high Roman Empire.² In neither work was Christianity in sight. The reassuringly straight road that seemed to lead from Rome to Catholic Europe ended in a vertiginous drop. The Catholicism of medieval and modern times would be reached only after the rise of an entirely new paradigm of society and of the body.

I began my own work on The Body and Society (which appeared in 1988) with that brisk new wind in my sails.³ The work of figures such as Veyne and Foucault marked for me the end of a worldly-wise complicity with the past—based on the assumption that we knew all about sex and what early Christians must have thought about it. The Body and Society was a book written to instill “a sense of salutary vertigo” about the early Christian past.

Harper’s From Shame to Sin brings its own fresh wind to the subject. For instance, in his first chapter, “The Moralities of Sex in the Roman Empire,” he firmly takes his distance from a recent tendency to minimize the role of eroticism in second-century upper-class marriage and in society in general.

Harper will have none of this. He points out that the dark picture of what Roman married sex should be like took too seriously the writings of the Stoic philosophers—a “gloomy tribe”—and of contemporary doctors, whose advice, on matters of the heart, had always been “bourgeois, and a little geriatric.” He points to very different, more full-blooded bodies of evidence. He provides a commentary of admirable warmth and humanity on the sexual codes implied in the great Greek novels of the time, especially the Leucippe and Clitophon of Achilles Tatius. He also reminds us of the obvious—the overwhelming testimony of the erotic scenes on terra-cotta lamps that reached a height of production at just the time when sex was supposed to be frosting over in Rome. Those energetic males and their plump Venuses tumbled, in innumerable positions, beside every bedside. Philosophers might advise couples to blow out the light, but

Romans not only had sex with the lamps on—they had sex in the flickering light of lamps that had images of them having sex by lamplight on them!

So do we blame the Christians for bringing down the curtain on those merry scenes? Yes, but against a background that comes as a chill reminder of the lasting strangeness of the ancient world. If one asks if women in these scenes were free persons (and even how many of the men were free, for some might be slave gigolos), the unexpected answer would be: far fewer than we would wish to think. Many of the women were slaves. The jolly free-for-all, which we like to imagine as forming a timeless human bond between us and the ancients, was based upon the existence of a vast and cruel “zone of free access” provided by the enslaved bodies of boys and girls. Slavery, “an inherently degrading institution,” was “absolutely fundamental to the social and moral
order of Roman life.”

On this topic, Harper speaks with rare authority and, given the nature of the subject, with impressive restraint. In his first book, Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425, Harper showed that the late Roman world had remained a slave society deep into Christian times. In From Shame to Sin, Harper takes us back into this world. It is one that we rather wish it had not been: “a society whose moral lineaments were sculpted by the omnipresence of slaves” and where “the flesh trade was a dominant institution.”

Harper’s book makes plain that the modern spate of works on sexuality and on the construction of gender in Roman and early Christian times, ingenious though they may be, are lightweight confections compared with this gross, ever-present fact of Roman life. We must look up from our literary games and see what is almost too big to be seen—the fact of slavery, towering above us like the trees of an immense forest of unfreedom that covered the Roman world. What mattered, in Roman law and in Roman sexual morality, had little to do with sex. It had everything to do with whose bodies could be enjoyed with impunity and whose could not be touched without elaborate formulas of consent.

The joys of sex were there for all. Harper shows how the puritanism of the Romans in relation to their own spouses has been greatly exaggerated. But the primary school of sexual endeavor remained, to an unusual degree, the bodies of slaves—along with the bodies of the poor and of prostitutes, who were all too easily sucked into the gravitational field of dishonor associated with outright slavery. Then Harper sums up his feelings: “The laws deflected lust away from the freeborn body, and slaves provided a ready outlet.”

This view could lead to a banal conclusion. Sex was shocking to the early Christians. Sex in the Roman world was intimately linked to slavery. Ergo: Christians, once they came to power after the year 312, predictably hammered the sexual codes of a society glutted on the ready availability of servile bodies and even cut away (if somewhat more tentatively than we might wish) at those parts of the slave system—such as prostitution—that fostered sexual indulgence.

But Harper realizes that this is too facile a conclusion. The excitement of his second chapter, “The Will and the World in Early Christian Sexuality,” lies in the manner in which he traces the sheer fierceness of Christian attitudes toward sexuality back to how sexual morality merged with the charged issue of freedom. Christians rethought these ideas in profound alienation from a society that took unfreedom for granted. They also dissociated themselves from a view of the cosmos that seemed to support a chill “indifference toward the brutalities accepted in the name of destiny.”

This is the second grand theme in Harper’s book. From Saint Paul onward, the great issues of sex and freedom were brought together in Christian circles like the enriched
ore of an atomic device. For Paul, *porneia*—fornication—meant a lot more than premarital fooling around. It was a brooding metonym, “enriched” by an entire spectrum of associations. It stood for mankind’s rebellion against God. And this primal rebellion was shown most clearly in the topsy-turvy sexual freedom ascribed first by Jews and then by Christians to the non-Christian world.

But then, what was true freedom? Freedom also was a mighty metonym, of which the freedom to decide one’s sexual fate was only one, highly “enriched” part. Above all, it meant “freedom” from “the world.” And by “the world” Christians meant, bluntly, the Roman society of their own times, where unfreedom was shown in its darkest light by the trading and sexual abuse of unfree bodies. It no longer mattered, to Christians, with whose bodies, from which social categories, and in what manner sex might happen. From Paul onward, for Christians, there was right sex—sex between spouses for the production of children; wrong sex—sex outside marriage; and abhorrent sex—sex between same-sex partners. Wrong sex of any kind was a sin. And a sin was a sin. It was not a social faux pas, deemed an outrage in one situation and accepted in another.

Seldom has so great a simplification been imposed on a complex society. The unexpected victory of Christian norms in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries was so thorough that any alternative ordering of moral frontiers within a society became unthinkable. The intricacies of a status-based morality still require patient reconstruction by modern historians of Rome, like the bones of some flamboyant creature of the Jurassic age. The Christian victory was one that caused a chasm to open up between ourselves and the ancient world.

So what happens next? Harper’s third chapter, “Church, Society, and Sex in the Age of Triumph,” unfolds with the chilling inevitability of an endgame. Harper, in effect, brings public power back into the history of late Roman sex. Here we are no longer confronted with a free-floating evolution of moral sentiment. We march to the pace of imperial laws enacted under Christian emperors. In 390, male prostitutes were publicly burned in Rome; in 438, the abolition of prostitution was proposed (or, at least, the abolition of the taxes previously raised from prostitution, thereby removing the state’s investment in the flesh trade). We end with “the haze of ruin and violent puritanism that characterized the reign of Justinian,” who became emperor in 527.

In Constantinople, in the 540s and again in 559, edicts designed to “cure the disease” of same-sex love circulated in a city burned out by the bubonic plague, along with
grim processions of mutilated offenders. Away from the solemn tread of the laws, the battle for a new sexual code was fought out “parish by parish,” aided by “the megaphone of public preaching.” When we go down “into the trenches of Christianization” with a preacher such as John Chrysostom, in late-fourth-century Antioch and Constantinople, what we hear is the voice of a bruise, denouncing same-sex love in an unparalleled “spasm of hatred.” Faced by outbursts such as these, we are tempted to think that, when it came to issues of sexual morality, the revolution in popular communication that we associate with the rise of the Christian sermon in late antiquity all too often placed the megaphone in the hands of bullies and loudmouths.

But it may be more complicated than this. How were such sermons heard? Here I am less convinced than Harper that the effects of so much public hectoring were as instant and as chilling as the speakers might have wished. We study the messages that went out over the megaphone. Volume after volume, the collected sermons of the Fathers of the Church line the shelves of our libraries. But we know next to nothing of the earphones through which average Christians listened to these messages. It is quite possible that the good Christian mothers and fathers of Antioch and Constantinople left the basilica unpersuaded, or that they scrambled the message to fit their own views.

They were like the good bourgeois of fifteenth-century Siena, who would listen for hours to San Bernardino of Siena as he preached against homosexuals (with even more vehemence and circumstantiality than did Chrysostom) but remained convinced that, whatever the preacher said, it was still better for their boys to chase boys than to mess with the virginity of girls of their own class. Chrysostom was a man of great humanity when it came to preaching on the care of the poor and the reception of repentant sinners. Perhaps he had to shout so loud on sexual issues in order to be heard at all.

Altogether, preachers had to persuade large congregations to accept an ideology that had been “for centuries the possession of a small, strident band of vociferous dissenters.” Even in the days before Constantine’s conversion early in the fourth century, the sense of being members of a privileged minority unraveled easily. We have become increasingly skeptical whether early Christians were ever, in fact, “a small, strident band.” Early Christians did not spend their entire time being early Christians. The brilliant recent study by Éric Rebillard, Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE, has pointed out that the current image of early Christians as a compact group, committed to a single definition of “Christian-ness,” is greatly exaggerated.

Christians were not locked into a single identity. Like other Romans, they were happy to wear many hats, of which their religious identity was only one among many. It was their leaders who wished to lock them into a single, intransigent identity. They did not always succeed. When we read the sermons of Augustine, we can often hear a grating noise, as his message ground its keel against barely hidden sandbanks of reluctance.
or, even, confident alternative interpretations of what it was to be a Christian.

But these hesitations do not affect the overall direction of Harper’s argument. They merely delimit the speed with which an unchallenged code of public Christian values emerged and the completeness with which it was enforced. For what Harper has done with this peremptory material is remarkable. He has imposed a firm narrative structure, based on the progress of the laws, on the history of sex in late antiquity. He has achieved his professed aim: “To integrate a credible account of structure and change in the legal system into a broader narrative of the history of sex.”

At the risk of being personal, let me measure the debt that we all will owe to this book. When I completed my *Body and Society* in 1988, I was very conscious of what it lacked: a coherent narrative of the evolution of public attitudes toward sex as the Roman world changed from a pagan to a Christian society. In my preface, I made plain the reason for this lacuna. It was a simple one: the books were not there. The study of late Roman family law and of the development of late Roman notions of public morality, shared by Christians and pagans alike, had only just begun. Now things have changed. I wish that I had had a book as clear, as cogent, and as intellectually responsible as Harper’s *From Shame to Sin* before me when I began to write on similar topics in the early 1980s, some third of a century ago. One can only envy the good fortune of those who can now embark on their own work with such a book in hand.

But what is the long-term meaning of this great change? Harper spells it out in his last chapter, “Revolutionizing Romance in the Late Classical World.” It is a searching comparison between the novel of Achilles Tatius, in the second century, and the flamboyant legends of converted prostitutes that appeared in the sixth century. Harper does not see the change between the two ages as exemplifying a growing hatred of the body. Rather, in the Christian legends of conversion, we are faced with daring explorations of the power of the will. These are bodies that have become all will. They had fallen through their own free will. They returned to God also from their own free will. Pure wills, they were as detached from nature as they were from the constraints of society. Their bodies were as dried out and featureless as the desert sands and the rock-strewn wadis to which they had retreated. Their sexual attributes were flattened, even when nude. They belonged only to themselves and to God. They no longer belonged to society or to nature. These were bodies freed from the *cosmos* itself.

Nothing could be more different from the worldview of Achilles Tatius. For his heroes and heroines, sex is less about the will than about the great chain of being that linked humans to the gods and to the stars. Sex was the moment when human beings allowed themselves to sink back into the embrace of a universe into which their own bodies had been ingeniously woven. They would draw on the life-giving energies of a vast world. Sex was the gift of ever-present gods. Like wine, itself the gift of the god Dionysos, sex filled the body with “an immanent divine force, and the wash of its warm energy was experienced as a communion” with the divine.
To bring this heady elixir into the marriage bed itself was risky, precisely because it was so closely linked to divine powers beyond the social self. Yet our novelist dared to do just this. He presents a cosmos where the feral power of eros is harnessed by marriage, not dampened by it [where the marriage bed—naughty lamps and all!—lies] on an indistinct border between wild nature and human civilization.

Never again, in Europe, would the person in love be seen as so open to a vast and half-tamed world. In Christian late antiquity, the will won out over the cosmos. When love returned, in the courtly lovers of *amour courtois* and the German *Minnesänger*, we find bodies without the gods. Except for their vulnerability to the thin rays of the planets (known through astrological works that were continuous with late antiquity), there is little sense that they derived their love from the refulgent energy of cosmic powers. They are their wills. And beautiful wills they are, polished thin with *courtoisie*. “The Cave of Lovers” described, in around 1210 CE, by Gottfried von Strassburg in his *Tristan*, is a cave of smooth, translucent walls—simplicity, integrity; and in the bed itself—a bed of pure crystal—the couple find transparency.⁶

It is with these long-term contrasts in mind that we can now return to look over the precipice again, to view with clearer eyes one of the most momentous changes ever to have occurred in the history of the ancient world.

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4 Cambridge University Press, 2011.

