



## Rocco, Antonio (1586-1653)

by Hubert Kennedy

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Italian rhetorician and philosopher Antonio Rocco is author of an early classic of pederastic literature, *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (Alcibiades the Schoolboy), which was written in 1630 and published anonymously in 1652. The work became famous as an example of pornography and of "sodomitic" literature, but it contains serious scholarship, and may well have been intended to be at once a genuine (though outrageous) defense of pederasty, a Carnavalesque satire, and a work of pornography.

Antonio Rocco was born in Scurzola (Abruzzi, Italy) in 1586. After studying theology and philosophy in Rome, Perugia, and Padua, he settled in Venice. He became a friar and taught philosophy at San Giorgio Maggiore monastery.

As an Aristotelian, he attacked Galileo's mathematical "Platonism" in 1633--and received a rude reply from Galileo. In 1634, as a member of the Accademia degli Incogniti (Academy of the Unknowns), Rocco gave a lecture on love in all of its manifestations--from love between parents and their children, to physical love and love of one's country and God--and brought them all under one formula, "Love is a pure interest": basically each person loves only himself. It appears to be in connection with Rocco's membership in the Accademia degli Incogniti that he wrote his carnivalesque *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*.

In 1636 the city of Venice named Rocco its official teacher of rhetoric and moral philosophy. He died in Venice in 1653.

Rocco is now best known as the author of *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*. It was, however, for many years thought to be the work of Pietro Aretino and, later, of Ferrante Pallavicino. It was only in 1888 that its true authorship was established.

*L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* became widely known through a new edition in 1862 and a French translation in 1866. The pioneering homosexual theorist and emancipationist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs knew the book in the French translation. He noted in 1868 that it was a "curious book that in addition to deterring frivolities contains much important scientific information." Sir Richard Burton also quoted widely from the French translation in his famous "Terminal Essay" to his own translation of *Thousand Nights and a Night* (1888).

The novel is set in Athens and takes the form of a dialogue between the teacher Philotimos ("loving honors") and the boy Alcibiades, presumably the child who would become the historical general and friend of Socrates. It begins with a glowing description of the boy's physical charms, from head to foot, with broad hints of hidden delights, which his teacher finds irresistible.

While ostensibly set in ancient Greece, the dialogue that follows also includes Roman mythology, and the moral arguments almost all relate to Christian teaching. Philotimos makes it clear from the beginning that his goal is penetration. How he proceeds to attain that goal is the subject of the book, for the boy places obstacles in his path. Not that the boy is entirely reluctant, but he has doubts and questions that he wants answered first.

The various objections are answered in different ways. Alcibiades says, "First, this is a vice abominated by nature; they say it is against nature." That this act was "against nature" had already been discussed over a century earlier, but Rocco gives the charge an original solution with a clever linguistic twist, as Philotimos replies: "First, that this is a vice against nature is a ridiculous allusion spread by the statesmen. Since in women the flower [i.e., anus] is placed against, i.e., on the opposite side, to the fig [i.e., vagina], which is called nature, they say the use of it is opposed to nature."

One argument that particularly impressed nineteenth-century readers was Philotimos's answer to Alcibiades' question, "Without using either women or boys, do you not have a means of extinguishing the flames of love with your own hands--without expense, without trouble, without submitting to anyone?"

In a long speech in response, Philotimos compares masturbation unfavorably with the contact of a beloved person. He concludes, "Satisfaction with the loved one present so sweetens the spirit that without fatigue or becoming limp it refreshes and contents us, repaying us for the movement and arousal. That other, however, deprived of the most beautiful and genuine object, leaves us tired and exhausted. We should not exchange boys for it. As I have said, when used in moderation they bring us cheerfulness and health. Hence one of our most famous physicians has written: *Usus et amplexus pueri bene temperatus, salutaris medicina* [The enjoyment and embrace of a boy, when enjoyed in moderation, is a health-giving medicine]."

Ulrichs, Burton, and others took this report of "one of our most famous physicians" at face value, but this canard is a sheer invention of Antonio Rocco, as Wolfram Setz has pointed out, and may provide a clue to the author's satiric or parodic intent.

When the teacher's arguments become more and more persuasive, the boy assures him that he is listening attentively. But when the teacher says, "To work then, my sweetest! Experience will teach you more than will lectures and arguments," the boy becomes a bit of a tease and replies: "It is certainly my wish, but I fear that when you no longer need to convince me, you will become less explicit in your discourse, and your lessons will become less interesting. Therefore continue with your arguments, and don't be concerned about the rest."

The teacher's final argument is that the sperm of a man improves a boy's intellect. "A boy who wishes to be the equal of his master has no other way than this. I don't deny that the semen of any man, given that it is adequately warm and temperate, benefits the brain of a boy, but the benefit is greater when the man is noble and distinguished."

Now the boy is completely convinced. He says, "Now then, dearest teacher, it is the desire for true learning, more than anything else, that inclines me to your pleasure. You see me ready to content your every longing." At this point, the student lifts his robe, and the master attains his goal.

The book concludes: "How they continued their pleasures and their loving caresses is what you will find in a second part, even more lascivious." But the second part apparently never appeared.

*L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* needs to be seen in various contexts. As a "Carnival book," it may have been intended as a playful satire, its outrageousness finding an excuse in the excesses of Carnival. Moreover, inasmuch as the book may have been written specifically for fellow members of the Accademia degli Incogniti, it may have been intended as a witty parody of academic discourse, a playful exercise intended to amuse rather than to be taken seriously.

As a satire, its targets may have included the pedagogical practices of the time, especially the use of the Socratic dialogue to instill learning and to reinforce the teacher-student relationship. It may also have been intended as both a parody of and a contribution to the tradition of Renaissance sodomitical satires. It has

also been seen as a satire on Machiavelli's doctrine of expediency.

Although the outraged condemnation of the book by censors over the years may strike the modern reader as entirely overblown, it may be that *L'Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* was also consciously intended as a work of pornography. The wit of the arguments and the recondite allusions notwithstanding, the graphic depiction of forbidden sexual acts may have been powerfully arousing to an audience whose reading habits were vigilantly--but not always successfully--policed by censors.

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### **About the Author**

**Hubert Kennedy** has published in several fields and several languages. Among his books is a biography of the German pioneer of gay liberation, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. He has also translated the gay novels of John Henry Mackay.