

CHAPTER SIX

The Legacy

This is not a history of lust, nor even of ideas about lust. But, leaping forward, we should remind ourselves of the pervasive legacy of the Christian attitude to the body and its sexuality. Thomas Aquinas routinely characterizes marital intercourse in terms that include *immunditia* or filth, *macula* or stain, *foetidas* or foulness, *turpitude* or vileness, and *ignominia* or disgrace.³⁵ He also speaks in terms of degeneracy, disease (*morbus*), and corruption. Marriage is not so much a good in itself as a remedy for the worse things that come otherwise: such things as fornication, masturbation, and bestiality.

Naturally it is a short step from disgust at the sexual act itself to disgust at women for inciting it, for receiving the foul male seed, for inciting men to take part in the whole teeming, liquid,

swampy business. Aquinas struggles with this, noting that Aristotle himself had said that the female is a misbegotten male, but is unable to follow him all the way, since the Christian God could not have created anything imperfect. Anxious not to depart too far, however, he follows Aristotle in holding that women only arise because humid south winds and frequent downpours produce human beings with a greater water content.³⁶ He also held that women are more sexually incontinent than men.³⁷ The medieval church found it hard to shake off the Aristotelian view that woman was an imperfect or incomplete man, merely a kind of passive flowerpot for growing active male seed (although around the same time a Frenchman, one Guillaume d'Auvergne, cheekily raised the implications: if woman is an imperfect man, it follows that man is a perfect woman, and therefore a rather more suitable target for male as well as female lust).³⁸

But there is an upside, and Aquinas falls short of the excesses of Anthony and Jerome. His aim was the synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology, and the central Aristotelian idea in this branch of moral philosophy is what is natural for man. Virtue consists in acting in accordance with nature, vice in departing from it. This may seem an unpromising bedfellow for the sexual attitudes we have just described. But the synthesis comes from Augustine, again when we remember the Fall. Nature is not what we find by looking around us now. It is the way things



Figure 1. Joseph Heintz the Elder (1564–1609), *Aristotle and Phyllis*. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest. Photo: Andras Razso



Figure 2. Sandro Botticelli (1444/5–1510), *Venus and Mars*. © National Gallery, London.

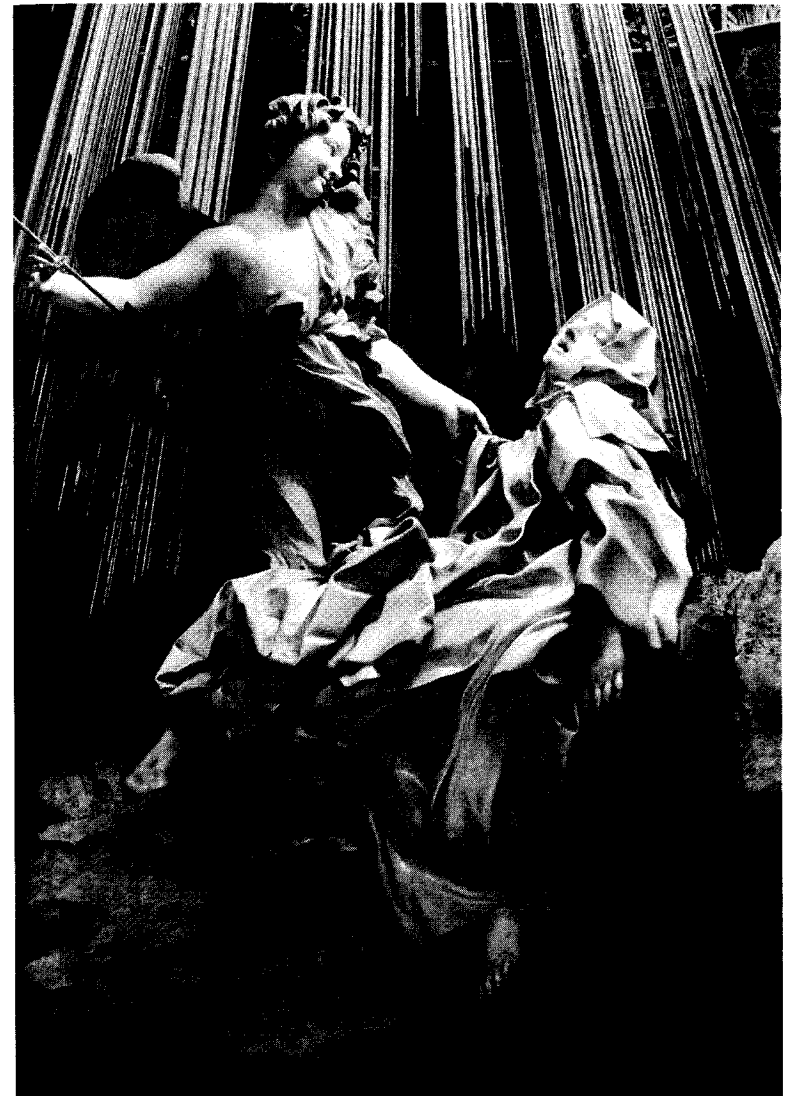
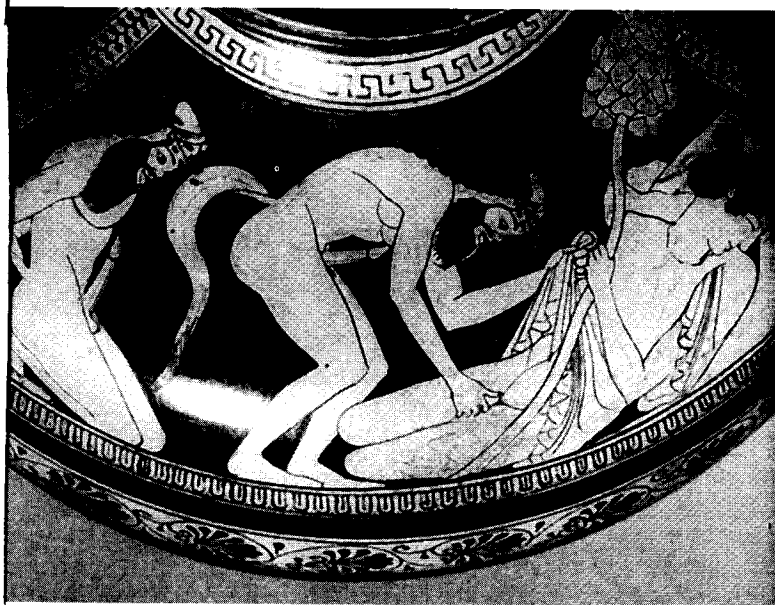


Figure 3. Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Cornaro Chapel,



4. Attic red-figure kalpis representing two satyrs near a sleeping maenad. (ca. 500 B.C.)
 © Musée des Antiquités, Rouen (François Dugué).



Figure 5. Guido Reni (1575–1642), detail from *Susannah and the Elders*.
 © National Gallery, London.



Figure 6. John Everett Millais (1829–1896), *Ophelia*, 1852.
Tate Gallery, London. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

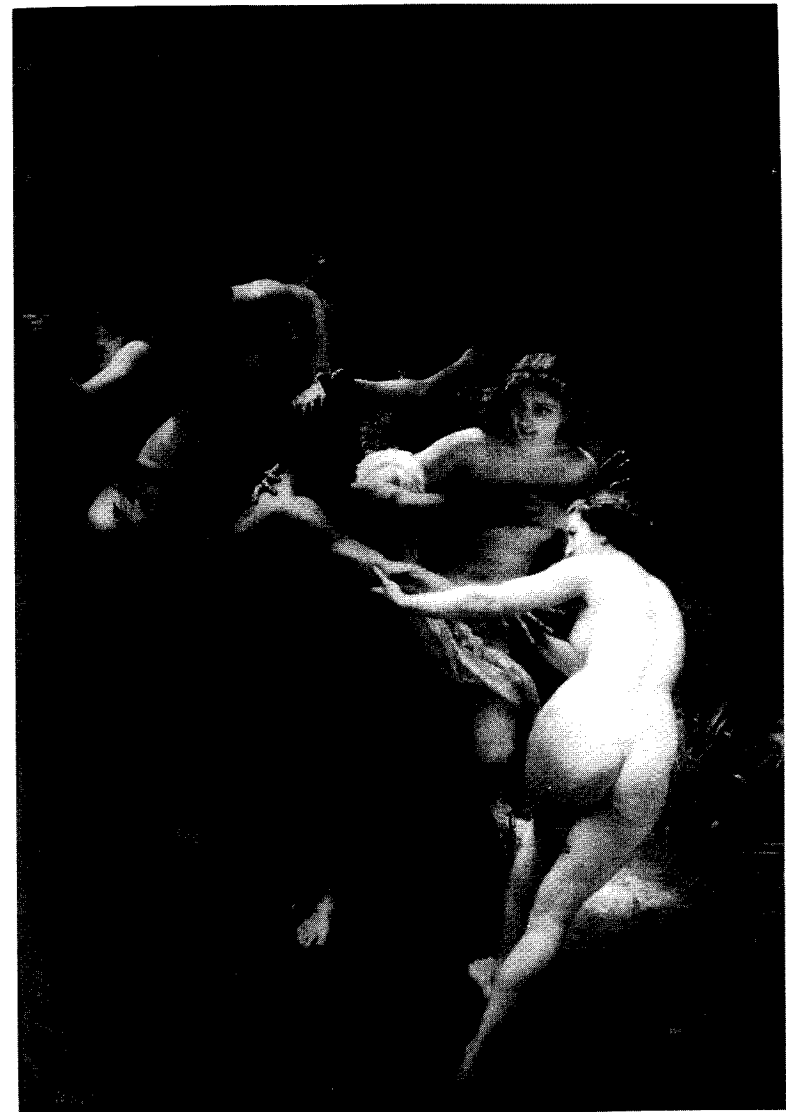


Figure 7. Adolphe-William Bouguereau (1825–1905), *Nymphs and Satyr*, 1873.
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. 1955.658.

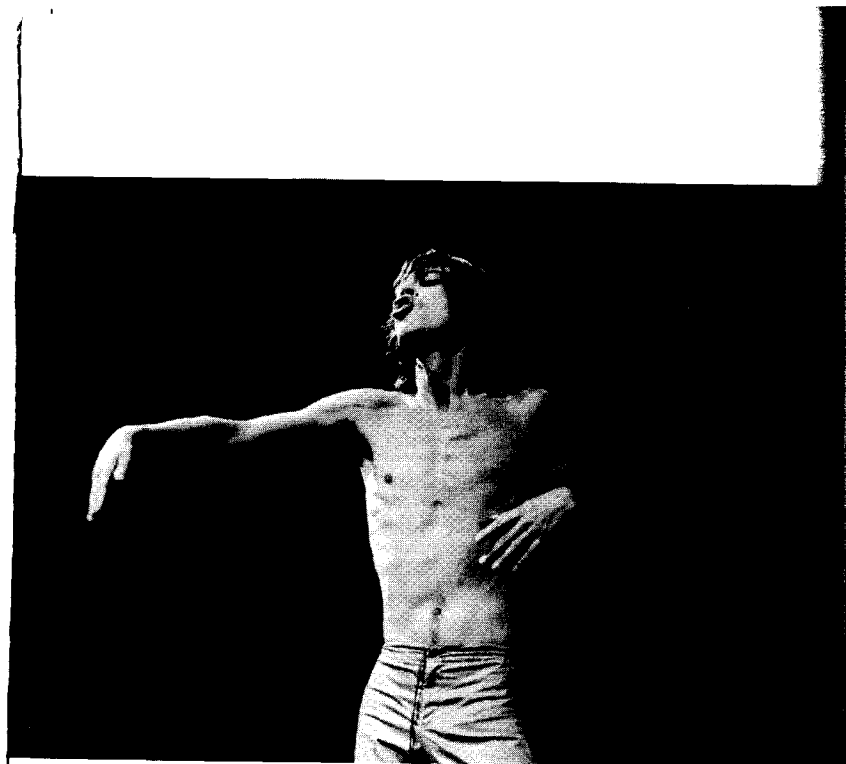


Figure 8. *Mick Jagger*. Steve Wood/Getty Images.

would have been if Adam and Eve had not sinned, unleashing lust into the human world. But what is natural is also what is in accord with reason, and this gives Aquinas a fairly benign attitude to matrimonial activities, provided of course that they are something in the nature of a handshake, and above all done under the guidance of reason. So for Aquinas, "Chastity takes its name from the fact that reason 'chastises' concupiscence, which, like a child, needs curbing, as the philosopher [Aristotle] states."³⁹

Is copulation, then, a sin? In his measured way Aquinas says:

A sin, in human acts, is that which is against the order of reason. Now the order of reason consists in its ordering everything to its end in a fitting manner. Wherefore it is no sin if one, by the dictate of reason, makes use of certain things in a fitting manner and order for the end to which they are adapted, provided this end be something truly good. Now just as the preservation of the bodily nature of one individual is a true good, so, too, is the preservation of the nature of the human species a very great good. And just as the use of food is directed to the preservation of life in the individual, so is the use of venereal acts directed to the preservation of the whole human race.⁴⁰

In a rare lapse from his usual good sense, the great philosopher David Hume said that generally speaking, the errors in theology

are dangerous and those in philosophy merely ridiculous. As the modern philosopher Daniel Dennett has put it, you do not have to take out insurance indemnity against getting a philosophical idea wrong. Yet it is almost impossible to exaggerate the effect of this simple combination of thoughts about lust, restraint, reason, and what is natural. The entire Catholic doctrine of birth control depends upon it.

Following through the history, the strictest prohibition on nonprocreative sex soon became central to Christian doctrine. In the emperor Charles V's penal code of 1532, the use of contraceptive devices became a capital offense. Sodomy, incidentally, became a Christian vice only as late as the eleventh century. The biblical vice of Sodom and Gomorrah was probably the lack of hospitality to strangers, rather than any particular sexual practice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

What Nature Intended

We pause to reflect here on the argument that sex is for procreation, and hence that any sexual activity or desire that does not have reproduction as its aim is immoral. Here, philosophy can come to the rescue. The dry way of doing it would be through teasing out various different senses of "natural," and then worrying quite how the move works from what is there, in nature, and what ought to be there, in human activities. The quick way of realizing that something must be wrong is through humor.

The novelist and playwright Michael Frayn, himself trained in philosophy in Cambridge, nicely parodied the argument some years ago when the Roman Catholic Church was debating the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which ended up reaffirming the