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# Play in Ancient Greece

## An Interview with Simon Goldhill

Simon Goldhill is Professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge where he is a fellow of King's College; he is also the John Harvard Professor of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Cambridge. He is the director of the University of Cambridge's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities (CRASSH) and a fellow of the British Academy and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Best known to the public as a champion of the classics through interviews and lectures and in frequent appearances on television and radio, among scholars he is celebrated for his work on Greek tragedy. His *Jerusalem: City of Longing* won the Independent Publishers gold medal in History for 2009; his *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* won the 2012 Robert Lowry Patten Award for the best book on Victorian literature; and his *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* won the Runciman Award in 2013 for the best book on a Greek topic, ancient or modern. His many other books include *Foucault's Virginity: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality*; and *Love, Sex, and Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes Our Lives*. In this interview, Goldhill talks about play in ancient Greece—its importance in Greek theater and literature, philosophy and social wit, games and sports, jokes and sex, and love and family life. He both reflects upon how Greek sensibilities still flow through our contemporary hearts and considers how play helps distinguish between modern and ancient people. **Key words:** ancient play versus modern play; play in ancient Greece; theater as play; symposium as play; games and sport in ancient Greece; humor in ancient Greece; play in Greek literature; eroticism as play; violence in play

**American Journal of Play:** How did you come to be attracted to the ancient world? Did your early play experiences lead you to an interest in ancient Greece?

**Simon Goldhill:** I am the last of a generation to have had what could be called a Victorian education. Despite growing up in super-cool Hampstead in the

1960s and 1970s and going to a school that had active jazz and theater at a high level, my school still was structured intellectually around a classical ideal. I studied Latin from age nine and Greek from age ten, and we were streamed according to our ability in classics. Science was very much B stream only. Even when I did nothing else but misbehave and was threatened with expulsion, I loved Greek and studied it as if I were with an old friend. Greek has been with me since childhood.

**AJP:** Which aspects of the ancient world do you find most attractive?

**Goldhill:** I am first a philologist. I love language, how things are said, how stories get told, and seeing how language articulates the world. Second, I have become a cultural historian, first through an interest in the production of theater—how words and stories change the world. My most important work involved Greek tragedy and has moved now into the way tragedy has been read over the centuries. My scholarship ranges pretty widely to include nineteenth-century cultural and literary history, particularly dealing with the Bible and antiquity as competing models of understanding the past. I guess with two or three books in each area and articles and reviews, I could make up a tenure portfolio in Victorian studies and Jewish studies as well as the classics. But I am really a classicist—that is how I would most simply and most often describe myself.

**AJP:** How do the literature and philosophy of ancient Greece continue to influence us?

**Goldhill:** I have written a book on this question, called *Love, Sex, and Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes Our Lives*. I am fascinated by the long-lasting influence of things Greek. This for me is not a question just of literary references, or architectural columns, or even the kind of myth still alive and kicking in Disney. Rather, for me, it is the way in which fundamental aspects of our being are constructed through inherited models of which we are largely unaware. So, of course, Greek homosexuality, as it is often called, is fundamental to understanding the fantasies, projections, and practices of modernity, but equally important is the modern Western idea of a good body—still based on Greek ideals. Why do we not think that a lean, muscular, trained body is a sign of narcissism and wasted time in the gym? Platonic philosophy established the terms on which we understand the very construction of knowledge itself, and, for that matter, the complaints about and longings for democracy that dominate modern Western politics. We should not idealize the classical past, nor should we see ourselves in a

simple genealogy with it—but as Cicero said, if we fail to understand the role it continues to play in our most basic thinking, we are destined to live our lives as children.

**AJP:** Did Greek adults take pleasure in watching children at play? If so, how do we know?

**Goldhill:** There are pictures on pots of children playing and statues of children at play. One of the most charming literary portraits is of Eros—Cupid, as it were—playing dice and tricking his youthful chums. Ancient Greeks did not talk much about children playing, though, and you may have noticed that all my answers so far have assumed that play is a serious business for adults.

**AJP:** Why should knowing about play and playfulness in classical Greece matter today?

**Goldhill:** Ancient playfulness can certainly help us understand something about modernity. It can do so ideologically—there was extensive discussion in antiquity about why play and playfulness are a crucial and integral part of the relaxation that makes life bearable. It can do so by contrast, which was why ancient plays—by which I mean dramas—were a crucial part of politics and the citizens' education. Certainly modern governments could learn a great deal about the role of play in society. Play also helps us understand modernity by contrast. What are we to make of ancient Roman play—the gladiatorial games, for example? Thinking about such questions can provide a fascinating mirror for us.

**AJP:** If there were such a thing as a dictionary of Greek and Roman play, what would some of the most important entries be?

**Goldhill:** The basic language of play in Greek is from the root *paid*—which links children and playfulness—and is often used erotically, too: *paizein* (to play) and *paidia* (a game, a jest, a joke). Latin would include *ludere* (to play) and *ludus* (a game), which can add the sporting sense and the idea of deceptiveness. In Greek, play and playfulness (*paizein*) as a category can be broken down into a set of oppositions. The most common opposition falls between play (*paidia*)—or the laughable (*geloion*)—and the serious (*spoudaion*). This could include jokes, a playful character, or a humorous or ironic take on things. Leisure—its activities, principles, and purpose—is opposed to work and suffering. Drama and sport—serious activities—are set off as serious ritual time for civic activity though always also associated with pleasure, fun, and relaxation. This too is opposed to the every-

day. Although theater, games, partying, and joking were on a continuum and easily linked in Greek thinking, an abstract notion of play was not an emphatic or comprehensive idea much in evidence. To act or speak “in play” or “in jest,” however, was frequent enough.

**AJP:** Did play mean the same thing to Greeks across the whole of the Hellenic and Hellenistic periods? Do you see major changes taking place between the tenth century and the late first century BCE?

**Goldhill:** Play changes institutionally a good deal in Greek democracy and then in the Hellenistic kingdoms, in that the role of theater, for example, was fundamentally different across cultures, and the opportunities for leisure activities changed. When Rome came along, it changed again. In all of this, play was not taken to refer to children much. So, one thing we learn by this process of answering questions is that despite the etymological roots of words for play in Greece, and despite evident examples of children playing, the interest and focus in social and cultural terms was on the importance of play for adults.

**AJP:** Do the Greek synonyms for play translate easily into English?

**Goldhill:** A perfect example of the ease of translation in a highly charged circumstance is the last line of *Daphnis and Chloe*, a second-century CE novel, a very sexy and funny book. The hero and heroine get married after spending most of the novel trying and failing to have sex, a subject on which they are supremely innocent. Chloe learns on her marriage night that what had taken place before in the woods was just “play,” or “child’s play.” A very playful close.

**AJP:** Can we confidently characterize play over the vast stretches of time and place in the ancient world?

**Goldhill:** Greek culture spread over the Mediterranean. Greek was the language of the elite across the Roman Empire. As Greek culture spread, the theater and the symposium, two key sites of play in different forms, were taken as key and integral signs of Greek civilization. So there was something of a continuity of interest across time and geography within Greek communities. Homer, some education in rhetoric and philosophy, the symposium, gymnasium, the agora and a set of political expectations were all part of what it meant to be affiliated to Greek culture, at least in elite circles, from Gaul to Afghanistan.

**AJP:** Did play differ among Greeks, from city-state to city-state?

**Goldhill:** Hard to tell from our sources: Athens invented theater but it spread

quickly enough. Most Greeks partied happily and shared happily how to party. They shared jokes. In relation to play, the one group who stands out from the rest are the Spartans. Spartans did not muck about much. But they were the exception, proudly, and on their own terms. Others varied in what they thought of the taciturn, authoritarian, stable, *playless* Spartans.

**AJP:** Did Greek boys and girls play differently? And did they play in distinctive places?

**Goldhill:** Girls and boys both learned to sing and dance in choruses, which is a form of play, though one close to education and ritual. Girls talked of hanging around together with “playmates.” And we know about ancient dolls and toys. But in the usual run of ancient evidence, we know much more about boys, who might, as with Cyrus in Herodotus’s *Histories*, play at government or at war in childish games in the street. Girls were not allowed at the gymnasium or the Olympic games, and good girls did not go to the symposium. Most modern scholars think women did not attend the theater either. So generally, the institutional spaces associated with the ludic and citizen relaxation were gendered as male. There are several texts written by men that imagine female playful space—usually as sexual lubricious, alcohol fuelled, smutty gossiping circles.

**AJP:** Did some play cut across what we might think of as divisions of class or status?

**Goldhill:** In Athens, citizenship was opposed to slavery. Slaves did not play. Democracy supposed a certain equality among citizens. Now, obviously dinner parties and the like had their class base. But there was no real institutional equivalent of sport for gentlemen or sport for thugs. Boxing and the like were as upper class as theater. I suppose horse racing or chariot racing depended on having the money to train and maintain teams and remained an elite sport of princes or would-be princes. But watching it was pretty general.

**AJP:** How were slaves used in play? Were they playthings or playmates or both?

**Goldhill:** In general, slaves were machines for use. Prostitutes might be used in symposia—the occasions of male revelry and debate—but that is not what is usually regarded as games.

**AJP:** During the Hellenic period, was play associated with civic ritual or religious observance? Were these public events different from ordinary play?

**Goldhill:** In democracy, in Athens, our best evidence shows that there were social institutions of cultural and political importance—the theater that was

both religious and political (what we would call civic) and the games that were state occasions (such as the Olympics, the biennial Nemean Games, and the Panathenaic Games). The gymnasia were local and used by specific cadres of people. So there was quite an institutional framework. This is all in contrast to throwing dice in a pub, other forms of gambling, and other individual or informal group events. The growth of the state is the growth of state institutions for leisure as much as for productivity, war, and politics.

**AJP:** Did play mean the same thing to Greeks as it did to Romans?

**Goldhill:** Romans do not dance. Romans do gladiators. Romans do gambling. Romans do hunting in the Colosseum. Roman jokes kill people. Mary Beard thinks the Romans invented the joke (which is not true but is a good strapline for her book). I am a Hellenist: I prefer nice drinking parties, theater, and singing and dancing. Romans thought Greek play was gay—and then looked to the Greeks when they found themselves desperate for their cultural capital. Greeks were openmouthed at Roman vulgarity and violence and then joined in anyway. And this is one way to say that the practices of cultural self-definition and assimilation between Greece and Rome can be articulated through contrasting and competing ideas of play.

**AJP:** Did ancient authors regard play as a serious subject for reflection? Did they celebrate play's benefits or warn about its dangers?

**Goldhill:** The ancients discussed play extensively, talking about how to behave at a symposium, what theater meant, or what the role of nonwork—leisure—was in society. They discussed it philosophically, in comedy, and in casual remarks. A host of moralists considered the danger and necessity of humor, for example, and what constituted acceptable playfulness in social discourse. And their discussions were picked up by hundreds of later writers. Aristotle's definition of wit as "civilized outrageous violence" has been hugely influential. The language in which play was debated, and especially the nature of humor, was set by Greek philosophy, just as the first extended discussion of the value and purpose of social life in the city was by Plato.

**AJP:** Tell us a bit about play and the Greek symposium.

**Goldhill:** The symposium was a drinking party of men in which playfulness was central—in conversation: wit, songs, and stories; in ritualized games: throwing wine lees at target cups (*kottabos*); sexually: erotic pickups between men and of girls for use; and in drama: Xenophon, for example, describing an erotic dance professionally performed at a symposium. The symposium also often featured a professional jester. We have ancient Greek cups with

humorous images on them: joke cups that show false feet to fill with twice as much wine, say, or cups bearing a penis and testicles instead of the usual foot (“Here grab this...”). So at every level of practice and discussion, the symposium was about play. There are handbooks laying out suitable examples of questions and discussions for the occasion.

**AJP:** Which Greek authors were especially playful? How did they expect to be received?

**Goldhill:** In fact there were many. Obviously, the great comic playwright Aristophanes was playful at every level. And his plays were hugely successful before the large audiences of the theater festival. Linguistically—in terms of story line, sexual license, imaginative freedom, and punning—these are monuments of playfulness and celebrated as such. From the other end of the spectrum, *Daphnis and Chloe*, the novel I mentioned, is very playful about sexual knowledge. A German critic in the nineteenth century famously called such ancient novels, “foul, hypocritical sophistication.” In fact they are about play and about how you can move erotically between play and seriousness. Both authors wrote about how their audiences received them: laughter, amusement, mock seriousness, and pleasure were the responses they expected.

**AJP:** Was Greek philosophy itself playful?

**Goldhill:** Plato wrote dialogues that star Socrates, the master of irony. They are often very funny and ludic in their argumentation. One of his most influential dialogues is *Symposium*, set at a symposium, a discussion of sexual desire that involves mythic stories, a bit of gossip, some wild fantasy, and a drunken gate crasher. So yes, at the beginning, Greek philosophy is very playful. It gets much less so as things go on—schools formed, educational institutions built up, and so forth. Later, writers like Lucian write hilarious dialogues about why philosophers are jerks—they are too serious, hypocritical, and boring.

**AJP:** Did ancient Greeks ever appeal to fair play?

**Goldhill:** Cheating—deceit—was certainly present in games. In Greek literary works, Odysseus is often accused of cheating. When and where deceit and cheating is allowed was a long discussion in antiquity. There were many stories in which one character gets the better of another by sleight of hand, bending the rules, or some devious stratagem, only to be followed by advice to play straight. Winning, in general, was winning.

**AJP:** So, how did trickery figure in Greek notions of play?

**Goldhill:** Trickery and deceit were fully part of play, whether we mean sports (how to win) or theater. Deception was a constant theme of tragedy and comedy and a constant worry of moralists that theater itself was deceptive. Deceit factored into erotics—where the Greeks thought we are all as self-deceptive and conniving in the search for kisses. For them, deception and play went together to such a degree that I would say they found the two areas of thought to be intimately connected.

**AJP:** Did Greek authors link play to affection or associate play with erotic delight?

**Goldhill:** Play and eroticism were everywhere. A standard word for flirting was *paizein* or *sumpaizein*, literally, to play or play together. The standard term for a lover (male) could be *pais* (boy), which linked to *paizein* rather easily. But sport was a serious business too, and not much love lost there. When Alcibiades wants to seduce Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, he does suggest wrestling as something they could share—their oiled, naked bodies linked. Playfulness as a form of leisure was consistently linked to pleasure and nowhere more forcefully than in the erotic sphere.

**AJP:** Were the Greek gods playful? Did that make them childlike, in any sense?

**Goldhill:** Yes, the Greek gods play; mostly Aphrodite, who was described as “loving laughter” as one of her standard epithets. Hermes is a bit of a lad too. But most of this play is at the expense of humans. “They play with them for their sport.” Eros is childlike because he is a child. But otherwise malicious sport and general fun were things that adults do. Given the ancient Greek example, we might do well to ask ourselves: Why should play necessarily be childlike?

**AJP:** Are the heroes in Homeric epic poetry more like predators than players?

**Goldhill:** The games of the *Iliad* and the partying of the *Odyssey* are paradigmatic models of play. The funeral games of Patroclus that appear in the *Iliad* portray the world of sport as a release from and contrast with battle: here men compete physically but the consequences are not mortal. It is the archetypal scene of what men do when they are not fighting. Perhaps the most famous archaic image that appears on pottery is of Achilles and Ajax playing dice before battle—a poignant reminder of the chances of life, a symbol of the threat of the randomness of death in battle, and a symbol of what winning and losing mean to men. The *Odyssey* depicts the feast of the Phaeacians, which included singing, dancing, and storytelling, as a great release for Odysseus on his return home. It became the model of the importance of leisure and its proper conduct in a civilized society. But yes,

predator is a better term, though even predators need their down time.

**AJP:** Scholars often call Hellenic Greek culture “agonistic,” emphasizing competition and individual victory. Did ancient Greece ever promote cooperative, team, or partner play?

**Goldhill:** Greek society was undoubtedly agonistic. But, first of all, especially within battle, the Greeks saw cooperation as crucial. It was not just that a ship was only as efficient as the cooperation among its crew members, but also they sank or swam as a collective. So, too, with the military: the hoplite phalanx was only as strong as its weakest member, and its battle-line soldiers stood and fell as a unit. Thus, much training was indeed cooperative. Dancing, for example, in the chorus was collaborative and collective—and was both leisure and a preparation for battle. Choral singing was a major part of festivals. Much of the singing at the symposia consisted of rousing drinking songs to be belted out together. Leisure often focused its moral discourse on the relation between individual excellence and group ethics. There was a great deal of practice and discussion of group activity—the ethics and practice of democracy was precisely the ethics and practice of collaboration. Many teams trained together and played together to compete against other teams. Hence, tribal competitions between choirs of fifty men (and, sometimes, of fifty boys) took place at the Athenian festival of Dionysus. That is, the festival required a thousand individuals each year to train collaboratively for competition.

**AJP:** Are there instances in Greek literature of parents or children expressing playful affection for one another?

**Goldhill:** Although there is much talk of parent-child relations that assumes both love and affective ties of other registers, there is not much playful affection between parents and children in Greek literature. It is easy to discover good-humored fondness between adult lovers but not between parents and children. In the *Odyssey*, for example, Telemachus and his father Odysseus spend time together yet do not reveal much playful warmth. Aphrodite and her son Eros do express a kind of lighthearted affection: the goddess, who loves to laugh, scolds, mocks, and gets into a fight with Eros. But that might be a special case because, in general, in Greek tragedy, you find more violence and hatred in family relations and, in comedy, more buffeting and complaining.

**AJP:** What did Greeks think adults gained from play and children gained from play? What did they think they gained from playing together?

**Goldhill:** Play for adults was crucial: the positive effects included social harmony, relaxation from the pressures of life, pleasure, and social bonding. This could also tip into religious ritual and institutions of cultural politics. There are not so many examples of adults playing with children or privileging such play. Texts often point to play as training, learning, and the like. There was not so much play for play's sake. Greek authors often mention toys, however. Play for children was not discussed as an issue in itself but was largely taken for granted, except when something special happened. And here I think again of the tale told by the historian Herodotus, who relates how, as a child, the future Cyrus the Great (whose real identity has been concealed) inadvertently reveals his kingly nature by his actions in a childish game of thrones.

**AJP:** Was either the Greek or Roman concept of play close to the meaning that we give the word?

**Goldhill:** Both Greek and Roman notions of play have been formative for modern notions. Neither was simply coextensive, and both had closer links to religious and political rituals. Neither had quite the sense of frivolity and triviality associated with a post-Christian, postindustrial sense of duty and work.

**AJP:** Does looking at play help us understand basic differences between modern people and the people of the Hellenic and Hellenistic periods?

**Goldhill:** I think that this is one of the hardest questions to pin down. I think that there are plenty of areas that we could call play in antiquity that seem to us to be both familiar and profoundly alienating—comedy is one obvious one. The sense that laughter *at* someone was sweet and was usual is something most moderns disavow (even or especially when it is evidently the case). Similarly, the fact that rape is a standard device of Roman comedy is very hard for moderns to view as normal or good. Physical violence—like psychological violence—is avidly disavowed by modernity, even when slapstick is okay. We do not mind harmless harm, for example, harm without deliberate agency, where antiquity found it easier, it seems, to laugh at a slave's physical humiliation. The question really is this: do these examples—and many could be given—show no more than that different cultures have different senses of humor and by extension different senses of play? Or do they show that the organization of play itself is wholly different and betoken a different sense of the ordering of social and psychological life? Typically, I think that the truth here would need a great deal of nuance and research.

But I would start from the assumption that play does have some similar lineaments in antiquity and today. Play's key associations with pleasure, release from everyday pressure, social harmony, and ways of making social ties, seem to me to be as current today as then. But the specific areas covered by notions of play (and work) in antiquity, the absence of a Protestant work ethic, the lack of an industrial construction of work, and the different gendering and politicization of ideas of work also mean that the very lineaments of what is included in and comprehended by play must also be significantly different across such a stretch of time and space.

**AJP:** Would ancient Greeks find anything familiar in modern play? What would strike them as most outlandish?

**Goldhill:** Greeks of the fifth century BCE would find some of our attitudes profoundly confused: our double standards on gambling, for example. They would certainly comprehend formal games and big-crowd events. They would get chess and board games—all familiar from antiquity. An obsession with ball games is not usual in antiquity, and, no doubt, cricket would confuse even an American, let alone an ancient Greek. Golf? Tennis? Definitely outlandish. What fifth-century Athenians would find odd would certainly include women's sports: they knew about them, in at least the imagination, from Sparta, but thought such things either ridiculous, disgusting, or perverted. They would also find our insistence that most sports were played by lower-class people distinctly weird. If it were a good thing, why would not everyone do it? They knew about sport celebrities, great bodies, and ugly boxers. And, of course, there is little in theater not tried in Athens. However, I know of no example in antiquity of a children's party, play time as a specific portion of the day, play school, a playpen, or a moral anxiety about the play of the working class. I cannot imagine any cultured civilization that would not find much of what is on television outlandish to the point of bafflement and despair, especially when put under the rubric of play.

**AJP:** Do our notions of fair play have any precedent in ancient Greece? Would the Greeks have expected evenhandedness in play the way we do?

**Goldhill:** Ancient Greeks did not privilege fair play, I think. They did have a great deal to say about social justice and about treating people correctly in social situations. From paying back debts to receiving guests hospitably, there is much that speaks to the ideals of decency captured in the essentially nineteenth-century ideal of "play up and play the game." There were certain

rules in all games. But I think, most of the time, ancient Greeks would take the opportunity to get ahead if they could.

**AJP:** Does the word “play” carry different meanings in various contemporary languages?

**Goldhill:** I am not sufficiently adept in modern languages to know for sure. But I have not had a problem, working comfortably enough in French, German, and Italian, moving between ideas of play in antiquity and modernity, especially in my subject of ancient theater.

**AJP:** Would ancient Greeks laugh at our jokes? Are we still laughing at theirs?

**Goldhill:** Humor is one of the most radically transitional, temporal, and local of all epiphenomena of society. We do not laugh at the jokes of our parents or our neighbors, for all the boasts of a new globalization. It is extraordinarily hard to know what ancients found funny, even when they tell us and even in their comedies. But Aristophanes can still be really good fun. The Cambridge production of *Frogs* two years ago, in a modern theater and professionally produced, was genuinely hilarious and joyous—even though it was performed in ancient Greek. I suspect, though, that it would not have made any sense to an Athenian of even a hundred years ago—or made them laugh. *Lysistrata*’s stage-prop phallus still gets big laughs, though. In fact, just the sight of the exaggerated phalluses in Aristophanes’s plays regularly doubles up audiences today. Alcohol jokes still work, too. There are other plays, especially Roman ones, that leave me cold—but *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, the modern adaptation of Plautus’s comedies, is one way in which we can fantasize comfortably about finding antiquity funny still. There is an ancient Greek joke book—the *Philogelos*—and almost all of it is beyond unfunny. And the ancient Greek novel by Achilles Tatius, *Cleitophon and Leucippe*, makes me laugh even though I have read it many times before.