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# Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, Gavin Arthur, and The Circle of Sex

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## **Abstract**

Discusses Gavin Arthur's claim that Edward Carpenter told him about having sex with Whitman, and examines Carpenter's views on Whitman's sexuality; concludes that Arthur's memoir is "a truthful record of his conversations with Edward Carpenter."

## NOTES

### WALT WHITMAN, EDWARD CARPENTER, GAVIN ARTHUR, AND *THE CIRCLE OF SEX*

Unnecessary confusion surrounds a story originating with Gavin Arthur in which he states that Edward Carpenter acknowledged to him being sexual with Walt Whitman. The confusion lies not in the particulars of the story, but in how it has been passed down from Arthur to successive generations. Many have mistakenly believed that the Arthur story is documented by an oral history only, with poet Allen Ginsberg as the primary conduit, and for that reason may be unreliable. Whitman biographer Justin Kaplan, for example, describes the story as being transmitted in a version of the whispering game "Telephone," with Carpenter telling Arthur telling Neal Cassady telling Allen Ginsberg telling us.<sup>1</sup> This formulation implies that the story heard by us may bear little resemblance to that heard by Arthur; after all, that is the "moral" of the whispering game.<sup>2</sup>

What's generally been overlooked is that Gavin Arthur himself published the Whitman/Carpenter story in his book, *The Circle of Sex* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1966, 2nd edition), 128-139. In addition, Arthur's manuscript and typescript of the Carpenter chapter are in the Collections of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress as part of *The Papers of the Arthur Family* (Gavin Arthur [1901-1972], aka Chester Allan Arthur III, was the grandson of the American president). A story, then, that was considered several times removed is actually only once removed, with Arthur as the sole storyteller standing between us and Carpenter.

Arthur's story is an interesting one and is worth recapping. When he was a young man living with his wife in Ireland, Gavin Arthur traveled to England to meet Edward Carpenter, whose work he greatly admired. On that first visit, Arthur developed an immediate sexual intimacy with Carpenter. Arthur asked Carpenter if he had similarly been sexual with Whitman when visiting him in Camden. Carpenter said yes, and then discussed Whitman's sexuality in general outline. Among other things, Carpenter described Whitman as being sexually attracted to and active with both women and men. By Carpenter's telling, Whitman's sexual impulse towards women was particularly prominent in his youth (Carpenter believed Whitman's claim to have fathered children). As Whitman aged, however, he primarily expressed himself sexually with men. In particular, Carpenter claimed that ill health resulting from Whitman's hospital visits during the Civil War lessened Whitman's sexual potency, after which time he was more comfortable relating sexually to men than to women.

In his book, Arthur does not date his meeting with Carpenter, but only says that it was their first meeting, and that it occurred sometime after Arthur's marriage in the summer of 1922. My own research suggests that it occurred

sometime prior to September 8, 1923, the date of a letter from Arthur to Carpenter, in which Arthur wrote to "express to you the joy, the comfort, the awe with which meeting such a great and sweet avatar filled me."<sup>3</sup> This letter and a second one dated London, May 24, 1924,<sup>4</sup> do not provide the type of sexual detail recounted by Arthur in his 1966 memoir. However, they do reveal that Arthur was deeply moved by his meeting with Carpenter, and that he regarded him as his political and sexual mentor. In the former letter, Arthur makes reference to Whitman's influence over Carpenter and asks Carpenter to play a similar guiding role in Arthur's life. Arthur also declares to Carpenter that "I have only seen you once and yet I love you as a knight of old must have loved some human saintly confessor; as some eager pupil in Athens must have loved old Socrates; with a pure love and veneration more calming and deeply satisfying than any love I have ever felt before."

Save for the explicitly revealed sexual intimacy between Carpenter and Whitman, Carpenter's published and private views on Whitman's sexuality conform to the account given by Arthur. In "Walt Whitman's Children," for example, first published in *The Reformer* (London: February, 1902), Carpenter outlined Whitman's sexuality in this way:

Summing up then all that has been said, I gather that in his early years Walt had some *liaisons* with the fair sex; certainly one *liaison* which may have lasted several years, and which may (see the already quoted poem)<sup>5</sup> have been chiefly initiated and pressed from the lady's side; but that in his later period (after '45 or so)<sup>6</sup>—whether from a change of temperament or any other cause (certainly not from a want of attractiveness in himself)—these ceased to play a part in his life; at any rate there is no indication of them. It is clear also that throughout his life his intimacies with men were very close and ardent; and it seems possible that these, in the later period, to some extent supplied the deficiency on the other side.

Walt's attitude in "Leaves of Grass" towards men or women is, as I have already remarked, singularly uniform. Both sexes seem to come equally within the scope of his love. And there is a passage in Pete Doyle's already quoted interview, which curiously corroborates this. Pete probably never read "Leaves of Grass," or took much account of it; but he gives the following from his own observation: "Towards women generally Walt had a good way—he very easily attracted them. But he did that with men, too. And it was an irresistible attraction. I've had many tell me—men and women. He had an easy gentle way—the same for all, no matter who they were, or what their sex."

Whether this large attitude towards sex, this embrace which seems to reach equally to the male and the female, indicates a higher development of humanity than we are accustomed to—a type super-virile, and so far above the ordinary man and woman that it looks upon both with equal eyes; or whether it merely indicates a personal peculiarity; this and many other questions collateral to the subject I have not touched upon. It has not been my object in making these remarks to enter into any vague speculations, but rather to limit myself to a few conclusions which seemed clear and obvious and fairly demonstrable.

This article created a sensation among Whitman's associates because it was the first to publicize Whitman's own claims to paternity. In particular, Carpenter quoted that portion of the August 19, 1890, Whitman letter to John Addington Symonds in which Whitman asserted he had fathered six chil-

dren. Correspondence between Carpenter and Horace Traubel surrounding the publication of this article also sheds interesting light on Carpenter's views. Originally, Carpenter intended to publish the article in America (possibly in Horace Traubel's *Conservator*), but Traubel was not comfortable with this plan. In a December 27, 1901, letter to Carpenter, Traubel acknowledged that "Walt frequently in his later years made allusions to the fact of his fatherhood."<sup>7</sup> However, Traubel felt duty-bound to Whitman not to reveal any details because of Whitman's fear that individuals still living could be hurt by such revelations. Carpenter responded in a January 7, 1902, letter, agreeing that it would be inappropriate for Traubel "to mention any names or personalities, or particulars wh. might lead to identification" of Whitman's children. However, Carpenter advised that "I think it is a kind of duty to the public (& even to Walt himself) to assist in making the general story of his life known; and that *such important facts as his fatherhood &c ought not to be suppressed.*" Traubel returned Carpenter's article which, as noted, was published in England.

A few years later, in 1905, Carpenter and Traubel debated whether Traubel should publish, as part of the Whitman diary that became *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, the full August 19, 1890, letter from Whitman to Symonds in which Whitman not only made his paternity claim, as described above, but also disavowed Symonds' Greek construction of the Calamus poems. The latter aspect of the letter was particularly troublesome to Carpenter since he knew it would be regarded as a condemnation of homosexuality by Whitman. Carpenter weighed the options in an August 7, 1905, letter, to Traubel, and came down on the side of publication. Carpenter writes, "It is a difficult question about the letters of Symonds & Whitman on the *Calamus* subject. Tho' I have not seen Symonds' letter of query, I guess it was a little ill-judged, & that it threw upon W. the incubus so to speak of defending himself from accusations, & therefore caused W. to write less freely than he else might have done. In these ways the publication of the letters will possibly convey false impressions." Carpenter continues, "On the other hand there is further material in W's letter, about his children, which is valuable—& which I suppose is correct—tho' Eldridge & others of course deny its correctness."

Carpenter's *Some Friends of Walt Whitman: A Study in Sex-Psychology* (1924), deals with Whitman's sexual attraction to men in a straightforward manner. Carpenter states unequivocally, "There is no doubt in my mind that Walt Whitman was before all a lover of the Male. His thoughts turned towards Men first and foremost, and it is no good disguising that fact."<sup>8</sup>

Did Carpenter ever admit explicitly in writing to having been sexual with Whitman during their visits together in Camden and Philadelphia? Although Carpenter's *Days with Walt Whitman* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1906) portrays a loving friendship, it is not sexually explicit (nor could it have been published had it been). In private correspondence written from America during the 1877, visit, Carpenter employs language that could be construed as suggestive of a sexual friendship (particularly in light of the Arthur memoir), although the language again is not explicitly sexual. The following excerpt is from a June 20, 1877, letter to an English friend, "Benjamin" (aka Isabella

Ford?).<sup>9</sup> Writing from Mrs. Gilchrist's home in Philadelphia, where Carpenter has been lodging with Whitman, Carpenter effuses:

I write from the abode of the Gods. I wrote to you at the beginning of my tour from this place, but Olympus seemed too high to scale then, and I went away sad (though happy inside as a Ford would say!) I went to Niagara and sat by it, gaining strength from its splendour, for four days; then I went down the Hudson and on to Boston, and visited Emerson, Holmes and the rest, and now at the last I have come back here. And he seems to tower higher & more splendid than ever. And he has taken me to himself.

The expression "to take," as a reference to marriage or cohabitation, has origins as early as the thirteenth century, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Although to take someone in marriage implies a sexual union, the OED dates its first known use as a sexual metaphor to 1915 in D.H. Lawrence's *Rainbow*. (Lawrence, as it happens, was a friend and protégé of Carpenter.)

In this 1877 letter from America, Carpenter is both serious and playful. He signs the letter, "Caleb," apparently identifying himself with the Old Testament figure who scouted out the Promised Land for Moses and the Israelites. Democratic and egalitarian America was Carpenter's promised land, inhabited, like Caleb's Canaan, by superhumans. Carpenter regarded the homosexual (or homogenic as he preferred to call it) capacity as a superhuman trait. Following K.H. Ulrichs, Carpenter referred to those with this capacity as "Uranians," from Uranos, meaning heaven.<sup>10</sup>

What conclusions can be drawn from all of this? At the very least, it has been proven that Gavin Arthur's memoir is authentically his own recollection of a visit that he actually made to Edward Carpenter. It has also been shown that Carpenter's published and private comments concerning Whitman's sexuality are consistent with those reported by Arthur in his memoir. Given this substantiation of relevant aspects of the Arthur memoir, it seems reasonable to accept the Arthur memoir in its entirety, including the reported claim made by Carpenter that he was sexual with Walt Whitman, as a truthful record of Arthur's conversations with Edward Carpenter.

*Washington Friends of Walt Whitman*

MARTIN G. MURRAY

#### NOTES

1 Justin Kaplan, "The Biographer's Problem" in Geoffrey M. Sill, editor, *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street: A Centennial Collection* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 25-26.

2 An early draft of this paper was provided to Jonathan Katz who references it in his discussion of Whitman and Carpenter found in *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 386n.1.

3 This letter is in "The Papers of Edward Carpenter, 1844-1929," in the Sheffield Archives, Sheffield Libraries and Information Services, Sheffield, England, MSS 271/187. The correspondent is incorrectly identified as "Chislet A. Arthur."

4 Edward Carpenter Papers, Sheffield Archives, MSS. 386/1-430.

5 Earlier in the article, Carpenter had cited Whitman's poem, "Once I Passed Through a Populous City," as probable autobiographical evidence of Whitman's sexual involvement with a woman. Scholars have subsequently speculated that the original object of Whitman's affection in this poem was a man, rather than a woman (see Jerome Loving, "Emory Holloway and the Quest for Whitman's 'Manhood,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 11 [Summer 1993], 3, 4).

6 In subsequent reprintings of this article, Carpenter corrected this to read, "after the age of forty-five or so." See Edward Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman, With Some Notes on His Life and Work* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1921), 150-151. Reprint of the second edition, December 1906; first edition published May 1906.

7 The 1901-1902 and 1905 correspondence between Carpenter and Traubel are found in the "Papers of Horace L. and Anne Montgomery Traubel," Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

8 Edward Carpenter, *Some Friends of Walt Whitman: A Study in Sex-Psychology* (Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Library Editions, 1977), 14. Reprint of the 1924 edition printed for the *British Society for the Study of Sex Psychology* by J. E. Francis, London.

9 The letter is addressed to "Benjamin," and sent in an envelope addressed to Carpenter's friend, Miss Isabella O. Ford, of Adel Grange, near Leeds, England. Ohio Wesleyan University, Special Collections.

10 Edward Carpenter, "The Intermediate Sex," in Edward Carpenter, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: Sex* (London: GMP Publishers, Ltd., 1984), 190, 191. Essay originally published in Edward Carpenter, *Love's Coming-of-Age* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1906).