

## BOOK REVIEWS

EXPLORING GENDER DIVERSITY IN THE ANCIENT WORLD. By Allison Surtees and Jennifer Dyer. UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 264 p.

The volume *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World* challenges the heteronormative, cisgendered and masculinist readings of the ancient world by using queer, feminist and transgender studies to open up conversations about our understanding of gender diversity in classical and contemporary society. It attempts to trace and identify the varied intersections of gender identity, expression, roles, sex and sexuality with factors such as race, ethnicity, class and socio-political milieu in the Greco-Roman world. Along with re-reading popular figures of antiquity, the volume also investigates the presence of gender-diverse and transgender people, marginalised due to the politics of representation. The essays critically analyse and reinterpret classical texts, literature and material culture. The authors avoid homogenising, essentializing or universalising gender identities.

The editors Allison Surtees and Jennifer Dyer analyse the Olympian Gods Athena and Dionysus in the introduction. Athena, the goddess of strategic warfare, is assigned female at birth but assumes a male identity by opting for masculine gender expression and roles through her actions, comportment and clothing. Dionysus has an ambivalent shifting gender identity, alternating and blending male and female roles and performances. Such instances of gender fluidity among fundamental figures of the Greco-Roman world challenge and destabilize social constructions of power and hierarchy.

The volume is divided into four sections consisting of essays focussing on specific but overlapping and interconnected aspects of gender diversity. The first section titled "Gender Construction" begins with Walter Penrose discussing "female masculinity and male femininity" by establishing courage, boldness and intelligence as markers of gender diversity in the ancient world. The terms '*androgynous*' and '*kinaidos*' were often used pejoratively to refer to men who lacked courage or 'feminine men' and intersex or male-to-female transgender persons like the Enarees who were said to have the 'female disease.' The women who demonstrated courage and intelligence were seen as an anomaly and called 'masculine women' (not equated with lesbianism), like Clytemnestra, who ruled Argos in Agamemnon's absence and sought revenge on him.

Tyson Sukava's essay focuses on ancient physicians' interest in the physiognomy of the body. To simplify their understanding, they considered bodies as constituted by different proportions of fluids (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile), which resulted in a spectrum of human natures between maleness and femaleness. A person's gender identity was also determined by the blending of secretions contributed by each parent in varying degrees. While such theories were influenced by socio-cultural power dynamics of gender construction, they also simultaneously acknowledged the overlapping of the male and female anatomies. Anna Uhlig reinterprets and reflects on the 'crafted' body of Pandora

by analysing her “birth by hammer.” She reads Pandora’s composite body as a combination of ‘nature’ and ‘artifice,’ which is ‘organic’ and ‘constructed’ at the same time, thus, opening up our existing understanding of corporeal boundaries. The last essay of this section by Kelly Shannon-Henderson analyses ‘real-life’ incidents of sex change where women spontaneously transitioned into men and subsequently began performing male gender roles in society. Shannon-Henderson proceeds to reveal the ancient understanding of gender categories as either male (superior) or female, where a transformed person has to belong to either of these categories instead of an intermediate one.

The second section’s thematic focus is on gender fluidity. The first two essays analyse the figure of Hermaphroditus. Linnea Åshede utilises Karen Barad’s posthumanist theory to reinterpret the visual representations of Hermaphroditus where ze is ‘surprised’ by the discovery of hir genitals. Hermaphroditus is perceived as “youthfully androgynous” and gender-fluid, at times “more or less woman, boy, both and neither to individual viewers” (Åshede 90). Peter Kelly analyses the fusion of the bodies of Hermaphroditus and the nymph Salmacis in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in a way that destabilizes gendered corporeal distinctions, ontological and epistemological boundaries, along with the notion of a fixed cosmological and human evolution.

Rebecca Begum-Lees explores gender fluidity in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* through the character of Iphis, who desires to marry Ianthe. Iphis is assigned female at birth, raised as a boy, and ultimately transformed into a man in order to marry a woman. Begum-Lees argues that Iphis undergoes a transformation of ‘social gender’ (outward and performative markers of gender) rather than ‘biological sex,’ indicating that hir metamorphosis remains unresolved. Ze resists binary gender classification both before and after hir transformation. This section ends with Jussi Rantala’s analysis of Emperor Elagabalus’ portrayals in the historical accounts of Cassius Dio and Herodian. The Emperor’s ‘controversial’ religious activities and gender expression make Herodian see him as an exotic Easterner who painted his face with make-up, engaged in “laughable rituals and wore only the most expensive clothing and jewellery” (Rantala 121). Unlike Herodian, Cassius Dio condemns Elagabalus for his transgression of gender identity, which he saw as unbecoming of a true Roman.

The third section explores transgender identities in the ancient world. Dalida Agri takes up the themes of gender ambiguity, gender liminality and moral reasoning through the figure of personified Virtus in Statius’ *Thebaid* and Silius’ *Punica*. Since Statius and Silius are contemporaries, Agri engages in cross-reading passages from the two works to determine how one may have elaborated on the other. In the next essay, Lisa Hughes analyses the ancient visual depictions of Omphale and Hercules in Pompeian Dionysian Theatre Gardens. The theatrically staged presence of the cross-dressed pair near or in the garden areas honoured the gender-fluid deity, Dionysus. Through performative gender blending and reversal, this pair subverted conventional social and gender roles in domestic and public spheres.

Evelyn Adkins highlights the ‘politics of representation’ through the transgender identity of the priests of the Syrian Goddess in Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*. Adkins juxtaposes the narrator Lucius’s derogatory description of the priests using male grammatical forms with the priests’ own identification as female using female grammatical forms. While the priests use direct speech to assert a shared feminine gender identity, Lucius denies and misgenders their transwomen identity by reading their gender expression as proof of effeminacy. The final essay of this section by Rowan Emily Ash analyses the intersections of sex, gender, identity, class and ethnicity in Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Courtesans*. The

character Megillos is assigned female at birth but identifies as male and easily passes off as Megilla (female) in public. To understand his blurred gender identity, Ash interrogates his identity in the light of gender dysphoria, which is defined as “the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender” ([American Psychiatric Association] 2013: 451).

The fourth section consists of three essays focussing on female masculinity. Brian P. Sowers and Kimberly Passaro evaluate sexuality in the early Christian sacred texts. They examine Thecla’s ‘allusive and elusive gender’ through biblical intertextual connections with Mary of Bethany’s veneration at Jesus’ feet and Ruth’s seduction of Boaz. Thecla is a cross-dressing apostolic leader who abandons domestic obligations, adopts ‘masculine’ traits, crosses the *oikos* and travels in the public sphere. Her fluid, plural and nuanced sexual identity enables her to become an idealised disciple.

Mary Deminion examines a trio of women orators who transgressed gender boundaries by entering the male space of the Roman courtroom and effectively employing rhetoric and public oratory that otherwise excluded women. Valerius Maximus describes the orator Maesia as an *androgyne*, condemns Gaia Afrania as a monster and praises Hortensia as the living image of her illustrious father. Public speech is related to self-representation, power and patriarchal political dominance. Thus, by speaking on their own behalf, these gender non-conforming figures triggered male anxiety and Roman morality. The volume comes to an end with Denise Eileen McCoskey’s insightful comparison of Artemisia’s portrayals in Herodotus’ *Histories* and Zack Snyder’s film *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014). Herodotus represents her as a ‘woman fighting,’ who is outside the codes of Greek femininity and applauds her courage, *andreia* (manliness), autonomy and ‘wondrous’ subjectivity along with her cunning escape at the end. The film, on the other hand, creates a narrative of rape-revenge and racial otherness before casting Artemisia as an extremely violent villain to be hated by the audience. Here, it is the male protagonist who offers her an escape that she refuses, choosing a bold death in combat instead.

The volume reveals that classical Greco-Roman history is “the history of all genders” that includes gender fluid, non-binary, intersex, transgender, gender bending and blending identities (Surtees and Dyer 2). The figures discussed in these essays subvert and bend gender expectations by separating maleness and femaleness from masculinity and femininity. These ambiguous gender identities have faced various forms of subjugation, violence, objectification and erasure. Thus, by exploring varied forms of gender expression, gender identity, assigned sex, perceived sex and physical sex, the volume alters our understanding of gender diversity in the ancient as well as the contemporary world.

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