

BOOK REVIEW

Athenian Prostitution: The Business of Sex. By EDUARDE. COHEN. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. xix + 243. Hardcover, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0190275-921.

Edward Cohen is one of the most prolific scholars working on Greek prostitution today.¹ His provocative work, however, has not attracted as much attention as it ought to,² something that should change with the publication of this important book.

In the introduction, Cohen asserts that his methodology differs from other work on Athenian prostitution in two significant ways: not only does he take a primarily economic approach to the topic, but he also studies male and female prostitutes together, rather than separately.³ After surveying debates on prostitution in the contemporary world and situating himself in the camp that finds prostitution not inherently degrading, Cohen discusses the nature and challenges of our main sources of evidence for Athenian prostitution.

In chapter 1, Cohen argues (against other scholars) that prostitution in Athens was no more looked down upon than other forms of banausic (manual) labor, and that prostitutes' connection with Aphrodite even brought the profession some esteem. He turns next to the much-discussed distinction between the low-status *pornê* and high-status *hetaira*, asserting that the difference was primarily a commercial one: that is, the *hetaira* operated independently, while the *pornê* worked under servile conditions.

¹ There are too many to list here. I will mention only three articles which, oddly enough, Cohen does not cite, even though they cover a lot of the same ground as the book: Cohen (2000), (2003), (2006).

² But cf. McGinn (2013) 84–91 (with bibliography), which offers a number of critiques of Cohen's work.

³ Scholarship on the topic of Greek prostitution took off in the 1990s, with (mostly separate) work done on male prostitutes (especially the relationship between citizenship and prostitution in Athens) and female (especially the discursive distinction between *hetaira* and *pornê*). Since then, a number of monographs, edited volumes, and articles have been written on the topic, with a focus on female prostitutes: see, most recently, Glazebrook (2015) and Glazebrook and Tsakirgis (2016).

Cohen contends in chapter 2 that because “liberal professions” (that is, jobs without an employer) were acceptable by Athenian work ethics, free people could (relatively unproblematically) serve as *hetairai*, whereas brothel work (since it involved working under an employer) was suited for slaves. He then discusses a number of prominent historical and literary *hetairai*, and notes that these women seem to prioritize reciprocity and independence over profit. This reading, however, doesn’t fully take into account the ideological work done by ancient texts, which create (to my mind) an overly rosy picture of the life of *hetairai*.

Chapter 3 challenges two common scholarly beliefs: that prostitutes were almost always foreigners and slaves, and that legislation about male prostitutes shows that this profession was disparaged. Regarding the first point, he calls attention to a number of citizen men and women described in our sources as prostitutes. However, not all of these individuals are necessarily citizens (e.g. the Plataean boy in Lys. 3), and many accusations of prostitution may simply be slander (an interpretation Cohen finds “overly simplistic”). Secondly, Cohen argues that Athenian laws against prostitutes serving as political leaders were concerned not with professional prostitutes, but with politicians who prioritized private gain over the city’s interests. The fact that prostitution itself remained legal, he argues, indicates that the institution was not entirely frowned upon.

In chapter 4, Cohen argues that prostitutes “often” provided sex pursuant to contracts, a claim based on somewhat tenuous evidence: for male prostitutes, he cites Aesch. 1 and Lys. 3; for female prostitutes, he gives examples from Roman comedy, coupled with a few Greek sources where contracts are not explicitly mentioned. He then asserts that such “prostitutional contracts” would have been legally enforceable, and that even women and slaves would have been permitted to enter into them. If there *were* such contracts, Cohen may be right about their enforceability, but unfortunately we can only speculate about their existence.

Cohen contends in chapter 5 that two laws associated with prostitution—one prohibiting the *proagōgeia* (pimping) of free women and youths, the other prohibiting *hubris* (insulting injury) against all members of society—served to protect prostitutes. He argues first that the flexibility of the *proagōgeia* law allowed prostitutes, especially free *hetairai*, maximum autonomy from pimps. He then asserts, more controversially, that Athenians would have been likely to bring *hubris* suits on behalf of injured slaves (including slave-prostitutes), and that such actions in fact were often brought (although in many of the examples he cites, the status of

the victim is not entirely clear). I agree that some prostitutes might have been protected by these measures, but we should not underestimate the sexual violence slaves nonetheless regularly faced.⁴

In chapter 6, Cohen begins by asserting that because citizen men were ideologically barred from non-agricultural work, their wives and mothers ended up playing a large role in business and commerce. He then demonstrates the prominence of women in operating brothels and acting as pimps, as well as the frequency of mother-daughter prostitution businesses. This chapter provides an excellent collection of evidence for female pimps and procurers, but there's a slight disconnect between the women discussed in the first part of the chapter (mainly citizen women making money through non-sexual commerce) and those in the second (primarily slave or freed-slave women selling sex).

Finally, in chapter 7 (the final chapter, but not a conclusion), Cohen argues, as he has in previous work, that Athens had a market economy, not an "embedded" one (that is, one enmeshed in social institutions). Market factors, he argues, allowed at least some prostitutes, especially *hetairai*, to make a good deal of money, and although a master or pimp technically owned anything belonging to a slave-prostitute, Cohen makes the important point that prostitutes often managed to reap some rewards (e.g. a subsidized lifestyle, funds for manumission, etc.) from their clients.

This book is generally well edited, though there are a handful of small typos and errors of fact.⁵ While I have quibbles with Cohen's reading of some of the evidence, this book is an excellent introduction to the topic of Athenian prostitution and will inevitably provide much fodder for discussion. It should be read by all students and scholars interested in Greek sex, law, and the economy.

DEBORAH KAMEN

University of Washington, dkamen@u.washington.edu

⁴ See also Cohen (2014), which downplays the sexual exploitation of slaves.

⁵ So, e.g., Cohen says that oligarchs took power in 413, rather than 411 (p. 26); he calls the *apophora* the amount of money that skilled slaves kept for themselves, but it's actually the amount they handed over (p. 55); in his discussion of Lys. 3, he switches the names of Simon and Theodotos (p. 166); and he employs the term *hetairios* for "male prostitute," but Greek texts never use the noun (as opposed to forms of the verb) in this way (*passim*).

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