

BOOK REVIEW

The Gift in Antiquity. Edited by MICHAEL L. SATLOW. Malden, MA; Oxford: Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. Pp. xii + 255. \$109.95. ISBN 978-1-444-35024-1.

Although reciprocity and gift-giving are well-studied phenomena, this thematic volume both sheds new light on Marcel Mauss' famed essay, *The Gift* (first published in *L'année sociologique*, 1923-1924), and makes considerable progress in studies of gift-giving in the ancient Mediterranean world. The essays are generally of high quality and they provide the reader with much food for thought.

There are several contributions that have a theoretical focus. In the introduction Michael Satlow addresses three important characteristics of the gift: that context matters, that the gift is not random, and that the practice of gift-giving is "socially productive." For me, the thought-provoking section of the introduction is Satlow's assertion that our willful misrecognition of gifts, based on our desire to pretend that they are not transactions, is useful. We would live in a much bleaker world, I think, if we were not willing to pull the wool over our eyes on a daily basis as to the social and psychological function of gifts.

Marcel Hénaff provides a theoretical chapter on ceremonial gift-giving. He wants to move away from a Maussian understanding of gifts in terms of goods to gifts "in terms of symbols of a commitment between partners" (15), and this is a useful gesture. Hénaff asserts that the terms *dosis* and *antidosis* refer to ceremonial gift-giving and that *kharis* works within a segregated sphere that denotes unilateral graciousness, but he should provide citations to support these assertions, since they are problematic.¹ Hénaff is helpful when he remarks, "the thing given binds the two parties primarily by bearing witness that the bond has been accepted (20)." Gift-giving, then, is not about goods but about pact-formation.

In a productive essay, Zebra Crook examines problems with applying Mauss' findings to Greco-Roman society. Given his studies on more egalitarian cultures, Mauss did not develop a model that fits comfortably with societies, such

¹ On *kharis* in epinician poetry, for example, see L. Kurke, *The Traffic In Praise* (Ithaca 1991) 85-239.

as those of the Greeks and Romans, that were highly stratified by social status. By paying greater attention to social privilege, however, we observe that the language of friendship among members of discrete social groups masks the reality of inequality behind such relationships.

The role of gifts among discrete social classes is further studied by Marc Gygas, who focuses on the manner in which gifts “create and support relationships of power dominance in the Greek world” (47). He argues that aristocratic gift-giving in archaic Greece provided willful subordination in non-elites, since non-elites had nothing else to offer in requital. Gygas thereafter provides an excellent historical typology on the changing nature of gifts in the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Beate Wagner-Hasel argues that the *phernai* of the Solonian marriage law (cf. Plutarch *Vit. Sol.* 20.4) are female bride gifts offered in cloth and that they were used in reciprocation to male wedding gifts. Wagner-Hasel’s essay, then, can be read in relation to the other essays on status in this volume, since Wagner-Hasel’s argument leads to the conclusion that females reciprocate in marriage contracts more fully than previously recognized.

There are three contributions on gifts in literary and erotic contexts in Greco-Roman culture. Neil Coffee argues that the Romans opted out of gift exchange within the domestic sphere because they recognized problems inherent in the practice of gift exchange in public life. Coffee offers a rich reading of Ovid’s *Amores* 1.10, in which he sees the elegiac lover using the Roman domestic ideal of no-gifts-between-husband-and-wife as a discursive tool to critique the “greedy” *puella*’s desire for material goods. After arguing that *kharis* and *philia* normatively elicit emotional and moral obligations, David Konstan turns to Menander’s/Terence’s *Eunuch* to see how the tension between purchased sex and emotional attachment is problematized through the *hetaira*, Thais. Konstan compellingly argues that the conclusion of the play exposes as a problem the idea that genuine affection can arise in a relationship where a woman such as Thais is commodified. After tracing bibliophilic impulses and the connections between books and status through the Hellenistic world, Sarah Stroup turns to examine the book in late Republican culture. She notes how authors such as Cicero and Catullus construct the book as a *munus* and thereby position it within the matrix of reciprocity. For Roman elites, a book was never just a book, when given as a gift, but a phenomenon crafted to respond to particular social needs among equals and non-equals alike.

There are two problematic chapters on gifts and mortuary practice. In the first chapter on mortuary practice, Nicola Lewis addresses Roman grave goods in

relation to “the gift,” arguing that Mauss’ concept of the gift does not fit well, since there are no living people to reciprocate the grave goods offered. Lewis argues that we should move from Mauss’ idea of the gift to Bourdieu’s ideas of symbolic and social capital, when thinking through Roman grave goods. For Lewis, the grave good is not offered to construct bonds of reciprocity with the dead but rather to construct status among the living. Lewis is overly restrictive, however, in thinking that no Romans believed they were communicating with the dead in a meaningful way. We would do best to think through grave goods in relation to their significations both among the living and among the dead. Furthermore, much would be gained by considering what people are telling themselves about themselves when they provide grave goods to the dead. In the second chapter on mortuary practice, Karen Stern examines graffiti from the Beth She’arim necropolis, arguing that the graffiti are offered as gifts for the dead. The chapter has some helpful suggestions, but Stern’s thesis too is not without its problems. It is not clear that all the graffiti Stern examines are offered for the dead rather than intended for the consumption of the living (see, for example, Stern’s comments on the placement of graffiti for the visibility of the living, 141). Stern’s chapter, then, is based on a *petitio principii*.

There are three contributions to Judaic studies. Gregg Gardner provides an excellent discussion of gifts that were offered as loans to the poor in Early Rabbinic Judaism. Through such loans, poor people were able to save face in a society that would otherwise judge them negatively for not being economically independent. Anne Gudme argues that the vow in the Hebrew Bible should be understood within the context of gift exchange. Giving gifts to the gods is not a commercial relationship, but rather “an invested social practice that aims at either establishing or maintaining a positive and durable relation between deity and worshipper” (195). Examining texts from *Leviticus Rabbah*, Galit Hasan-Rokem addresses the relationship between the gift of sacrifice and sacerdotal giving in late-rabbinic tales and the socio-cultural motivations for interlinking these seemingly discrete phenomena.

There are two contributions to Christian studies. Daniel Caner argues that the Christian “blessing” was an example of disinterested religious gift-giving. He studies blessings with alms, offerings, and fruit-bearings and concludes that the blessing was a genuine gift in the sense that it “imposed no obligation on its receiver to reciprocate or make a return” (29). Ilana Silber describes Peter Brown’s thoughts, as discernible from his writings, on the gift. She notes that Brown places

Christian concepts of gift-giving within their contemporary political structures. Brown, accordingly, moves away from Mauss' understanding of the gift as a phenomenon that largely elides differences of historical context in favor of a more historically contextualized approach to the gift.

This volume makes a substantial contribution both to contextualized readings of the gift in the ancient Mediterranean world as well as to theoretical and methodological discussions of the gift in the wake of Mauss. It is a particular pleasure to see that the book has a broad cultural focus, intertwining essays from Classicists as well as essays from professors of Religious Studies. Satlow has impeccably edited the volume: there are few typographical errors; there are suggestions for further reading at the end of each essay; and there are helpful indices.

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