

## BOOK REVIEW

*Sex and Sexuality in Classical Athens*. By JAMES ROBSON. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. Pp. xxiv + 311. Paperback, \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-748-63414-9.

*Sex and Sexuality in Classical Athens* forms part of Edinburgh's series, "Debates and Documents in Ancient History," and fulfills the series' aim of providing "up-to-date and accessible accounts of the historical issues and problems" raised by its topic. In the series' appealing structure, each volume first lays out the "debates," then the "documents," keyed to the debates by a user-friendly system of cross-referencing. James Robson's contribution divides the debates into five sections: "sexual unions," mainly marriage; same-sex relationships; prostitution; adultery and rape; and "beauty, sexual attractiveness, fantasy and taboo." Robson limits the book's scope to Athens, 479-323 BC (xix).

Lucid and well-written, the book targets the needs of an undergraduate class in the history of sexuality. It is nicely produced, with 32 crisp illustrations of Attic vases, and few typos. The "debates" sections invite the assignment of short papers: Robson laces his narrative with open-ended questions; scholarly debates are presented simply; he indicates which documents pertain to the issues at hand. Documents, in lively new translations, range from the now-canonical in this subfield (selections from Aeschines, *Against Timarchus*, [Demosthenes] *Against Neaera*, Lysias, *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*, Plato) to rarely-discussed fragments of comedy. The narrative includes useful glosses, like the well-illustrated explanation of "red-figure" (45); there is a five-page glossary, and a simple timeline. The bibliography is not only up-to-date, but also retrospective.

It is interesting to see what Robson, who began publishing in 1997, makes of forty years of scholarship on ancient sexuality, a field which for at least its first thirty years was highly political. He picks up with K. J. Dover's 1973 *Arethusa* article and Eva Keuls' *Reign of the Phallus* (1985), deals only briefly with Michel Foucault, and otherwise casts a wide net, though he shows an unsurprising interest in the thread of argument from Dover to David Halperin and Jack Winkler to Thomas K. Hubbard to James Davidson. Robson's expertise on Aristophanes makes for a

well-rounded view of Athens.<sup>1</sup> He defines himself as a “social historian” (xix) and he does historicize, making sure, for example, that readers understand the changes in content in the images on Attic vases over time.

The counterintuitive decision to start a book on sexuality with a technical section on Athenian marriage provides a useful matrix, especially since the sexual lives of husbands and wives usually receive such short shrift in the scholarship on ancient sexuality, as if marriage were inherently asexual. The book has an unusually good section on male prostitution (82–84), a topic too often ignored or treated as unrelated to female prostitution; here, the two are at least juxtaposed. The narrative is thoughtful; still, historians of this time and place have had a hard time not getting pulled into the point of view of the Athenian citizen male, and Robson, despite his resistance, at times succumbs. Instructors should beware of more serious blind spots.

First of all, it is distressing, ten years after Page duBois’ *Slaves and Other Objects* (2003), to find an overview of Athenian sex that does not consider slavery as a structural element in the sex/gender system. DuBois’ ideas are pertinent to every section of this book, but *Slaves* is not even in the bibliography (nor is her 1988 *Sowing the Body*, which should have been all over the section on marriage).<sup>2</sup> Robson regrets that we cannot know more about the sex lives of slaves, but even from his own sources he could say much more than he does: “our sources are also silent on the subject of sexual abuse” (144), but the story about Sophocles “stealing a kiss” from a boy slave is presented as a form of “homoerotic flirting” (48; cf. 131). Nothing is said about the connections between war, rape of captives, and prostitution, although Pausanias’s account of the rape of women captives in 279 BCE is among the documents; here Kathy Gaca’s work should be made known to students.<sup>3</sup> Slaves are integrated into the narrative only in the section on prostitution.

The discussion of *kinaidoi* is put off (57–59) until after it is needed (50), so that what *kinaidoi* do becomes conflated with pederasty, and Robson is needlessly vague about the social/sexual identity of men tagged with this label. There is a long

<sup>1</sup> James Robson, *Aristophanes: An Introduction* (London: Duckworth, 2009); *Humour, Obscenity and Aristophanes* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2006); numerous articles.

<sup>2</sup> Page duBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); *Slaves and Other Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Also conspicuous by its absence: Virginia J. Hunter, *Policing Athens: Social Control in the Attic Lawsuits, 420-320 B.C.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), which treats slavery as integral to gender relations in the Athenian household.

<sup>3</sup> Kathy L. Gaca, “Telling the Girls from the Boys and Children: Interpreting Παιδες in the Sexual Violence of Populace-Ravaging Ancient Warfare,” *JCS* 35-36 (2010-11): 85-109.

record in the history of sexuality of ignoring the “sissy,” even (for Athens) denying that such males existed; calling the *kinaidos* a “scare figure”—an idea that goes back to Winkler—does not help. These sexual agents need to constitute part of the system, especially in a book aimed at students. The discussion of the constructionism vs. essentialism debates of the 1990s (59–63)—so useful for students now—oversimplifies essentialism by omitting reference to the Kinsey scale, leaving essentialists looking inexplicably ignorant.

Indeed, students and instructors in today’s academy also need a much better treatment of forced sex than they get here, for the constant stream of related current events must be dealt with in the classroom. Robson’s presentation of scholarly debates, aimed at neutrality as part of the book’s mandate, winds up oversimplifying feminism as well as essentialism. In two debates (86, on prostitution; 105–106, on rape), “feminism” is positioned as one extreme point of view, represented by Eva Keuls and Kristina Passman (Robson misspells both her first and last name). He comments, “Doubtless not all scholars would wholeheartedly endorse these feminist analyses” (106); in that sentence, the word “feminist” needs to be moved up to modify “scholars,” for feminism incorporates a range of positions, as clearly laid out in at least one book Robson cites himself, although others that address this issue do not appear here.<sup>4</sup> At these points, no mention is made of the scholars whose work Robson likes and often cites who would certainly identify themselves as feminists (Allison Glazebrook, Madeleine Henry, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz). In the section on rape, no sense is given of the history of rape as a feminist issue. The contrast is drawn between Athens and “the modern west” when “we” take rape very seriously, but in fact this seriousness does not predate Second Wave feminism, while the legal concept of “sexual harassment” starts with Catharine MacKinnon; no credit is given, and the record is distorted.

The desire to find agency for female prostitutes results in overly cheery conclusions like calling Nicarete an “entrepreneur” (89); Nicarete was a freed slave who bought and prostituted seven little girls (*Against Neaera* 59.18). It is time we were done with what might be called the Gigi-fication of ancient prostitution (now

<sup>4</sup> Cited: Amy Richlin (ed.), *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Not cited: Barbara F. McManus, *Classics and Feminism: Gendering the Classics* (New York: Twayne, 1997); Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin (eds.), *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (London: Routledge, 1993); or, among many varieties of feminism, Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (eds.), *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

justified by the work of Edward Cohen, given equal time here, 88–89). The book presents plentiful evidence for the sexual use of what are now considered children, generally slaves (esp. Metagenes fr. 4 KA, explicit), without drawing attention to this as a problem, as it does with Athenian attitudes towards rape. In my experience students pick up on this issue and are disturbed by it, and a book like this needs to address it.

The decision to use the terms “lesbian” and “homosexual” to indicate same-sex sex (38) runs into trouble after page 60, as these terms are rejected as having any bearing on antiquity. In any case, “lesbian” sex takes up a half-paragraph (64–65), with regrets that we do not know more about it in classical Athens. This is where the book’s purported time-frame and locus come to grief. Robson includes among his documents excerpts from Homer, Semonides, Ibycus, Anacreon, Menander (five pages’ worth), Pausanias (an undated anecdote), and, very oddly, “Greek Anthology”—one poem each by Rufinus and Strato, with no indication of their date, just a statement that the Greek Anthology goes “from the seventh century BC to the Byzantine era” (197). But both poets are Neronian at the earliest, and neither poem relates to classical Athens. Sappho, however, although she does appear here (like these other non-Athenian and/or non-classical texts), is limited to two poems, vs. twelve pages of Plato and eight of *Against Timarchus*. The Gortyn Code, with its explicit valuation of rape of or by slaves as opposed to the rape of or by free persons, is mentioned but not included in the documents or index; Nossis (c. 300 BCE) is omitted altogether. There are three pages’ worth of Plutarch, but not the section from the Life of Lycurgus on “female pederasty” in Sparta, mentioned in the “debates” section (64). So the temporal/local limits will stretch for some issues, but not for others.

As usual, there is almost total silence on Rome, never mind other ancient comparanda, leading to silly questions: “Is the idea that penetration is synonymous with power in fact a concept that scholars have imported from the modern world into an ancient setting?” (62, citing Davidson). No, not to a reader of *Catullus*; or, really, to a reader of *Acharnians*. So on “the differences between ancient and modern attitudes towards sex,” a big difference is that “When the crime that we would recognise as rape is described in ancient sources, however, the unwillingness of the victim is mentioned only rarely” (102); here “ancient” clearly means “Greek,” or what about Lucretia? What about Terence Eunuchus? Not that I would accept that vocabulary like *biazesthai* and *hybris* (103) have nothing to do with the absence of consent, a claim that at least needs better justification than it

gets here. One of many instances from Robson's own documents: "she runs towards us, alone and crying, pulling her hair out," an onstage eyewitness description of a young girl who has just been raped (214, from Menander's *Epitrepontes*).

Also among the missing: medical texts, notably Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals*, although the documents section includes four pages of Aristotle; invective, treated as a genre or topos, although there is plenty of invective here.

Minor points: all verse is translated into prose, misleading for students; no sources are given for the documents, students being left to find the full texts for themselves as best they can, although they are urged to do so (274); some translations use British slang which will be opaque to US students: "slings his hook" (159), "smartish" (159, 217), "willy" (165); "bog" (toilet, 171); "todger" (171); "rent-boy" (passim); "whitter" (217); "over the moon" (225). On a more elevated level, some compound nouns with "cum" on the model of "construction-cum-penetration" (66) seem liable to misunderstanding in a US classroom.

Overall, *Sex and Sexuality in Classical Athens* makes a good, if flawed, invitation to further study. At \$40, though, it seems unlikely to find ready classroom adoption in the US, when for \$42 students could have Hubbard's comprehensive sourcebook, or for \$27 Lefkowitz and Fant, or for \$17 *If Not, Winter*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Carson (trans.), *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (New York: Vintage, 2003); Thomas K. Hubbard (ed.), *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (eds.), *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 3rd ed., 2005).