

BOOK REVIEW

Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World. By ANISEK. STRONG. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 304. Hardcover, \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-10714-875-8.

Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World examines the fluidity and mutability of the labels “wife” (*matrona*) and “whore” (*meretrix*), which Roman men used for women who variously upheld and subverted elite male constructions of appropriate gender behavior. Despite what the title might suggest, Strong’s book is not about sex work. Rather, Strong investigates *meretrix* as a form of abuse against women perceived as socially and morally transgressive. Therefore, except in cases where a woman actually exchanges sex for money, wherein the word “prostitute” is preferred, Strong translates *meretrix* as “whore,” a word that conveys social stigma and moral opprobrium regardless of the validity of implied accusations of sexual activity. Strong argues that Roman male authors generally present a clear, absolute division between good and bad women—the former being loyal, brave, hardworking, devoted to one man, the latter being unrooted, greedy and self-focused, a group Roman men tended to label “whores.” Strong’s study complicates these rigid categorizations, filling in the gap between the poles of wife and whore by exploring evidence of more dynamic classifications of normative and transgressive female behavior in the ancient sources.

Chapters 1 and 2 explore norms of Roman female morality, and the means by which elite male discourse reproduces them. Strong analyzes the stereotypical good wife, identifying loyalty (to husband, family, social hierarchy and state) as the determinant factor of female virtue, an analysis supported by the tropes of the wicked whore (greedy, stingy and selfish) and the good prostitute, who is ever generous and loyal, and who abandons self-interest—and sometimes even her lover—in favor of the Roman social order.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Strong analyzes women who defy easy categorization, thus revealing the inadequacy of the wife-whore binary. Citing influential courtesans and concubines, powerful elite *matronae*, and non-elite female workers, Strong demonstrates how the *meretrix* label developed as a term of gendered invective.

Chapters 5–7 place various classes of women within Roman social fabric, challenging common assumptions of both ancient authors and modern scholars in strictly dividing wives and whores. Strong argues that wall paintings of sexual activity do not necessarily indicate prostitution, but may present the ideal, loyal wife in appropriate, passionate desire for her husband. Strong maintains that a prostitute's *infamia* stems from offering service in exchange for money, not sexual opprobrium, and that in general, infamous women were not socially segregated, even at many religious festivals. She also investigates the role religion plays in moral and social categorization of women.

In Chapter 8, Strong concludes that the label “whore” remained a dynamic moral category in the post-Roman world, focused on virtue and vice rather than sexual activity. The book includes two appendices. First, a translation of the Allia Potestas epitaph (*CIL* VI.37965 = *CLE* 1998.L), which largely reproduces that of Lefkowitz and Fant.¹ Following this is a discussion of transgressive women in the Hebrew Bible, where prominent, politically powerful women generally escape the whore label, suggesting that the association of female disloyalty and prostitution in “Western” culture is mainly the product of Roman discourse on gender.

Strong's central argument is consistent throughout, but her separation of elite women identified in the sources as “merely” *adulterae* from those characterized as *meretrix*-like is unconvincing. Her suggestion that authors writing during the principate tended to treat imperial concubines better than elite *matronae* fails to persuade, especially in her analysis of the relationship between Nero's concubine, Acte, and his mother, Agrippina. Strong seems to overstate reports of Acte's loyalty to Nero, asserting that Tacitus praised Acte for contributing to the cost of Nero's funeral (though the *Annals* break off before Nero's death), and that Acte paid the 200,000 HS out of her own purse, despite Suetonius' silence on the matter (*Nero* 50.1).

There appear to be a few citation errors. Strong cites Claudius' celebration of games (Suet. *Claud.* 21) as evidence against prostitutes being used as political pawns in the Republic (69). She cites a passage of *Annals* 12.20, where Claudius ponders war against Bosporan Mithridates, as evidence for Livia and Agrippina being “unfeminine” (111). Her account of Commodus' concubine intervening in the

¹Lefkowitz, Mary and Maureen Fant (2005). *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*. 3rd Edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 19-20

pardon of condemned Christians on Sardinia is confusing, because she cites Hippolytus but omits a crucial passage clarifying exactly who was pardoned by whom and when (90).

The foregoing notwithstanding, Strong's challenge of the rigidity of the whore-wife dichotomy in both Roman literature and in modern scholarship is most welcome. Her claim that the *meretrix* label and accusations of *meretrix*-like behavior are categorizations of feminine vice, focused primarily on a woman's perceived disloyalty, is convincing and well supported. In short, this book is likely to prove to be a valuable contribution to ongoing discussions not only of women in Roman society, but the construction and reproduction of discourses about them.

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