

BOOK REVIEW

The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden: Religion at the Roman Street Corner. By HARRIET I. FLOWER. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii + 394. Hardcover, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-691-17500-3.

As the most thorough and modern treatment of the *lares* to date, Flower's book examines the identity and characteristics of these deities, their roles as "gods of place," the many spaces dedicated to them in households and neighborhoods and the ways in which Romans of varying gender and social status cultivated them. Drawing upon a wide array of sources, ranging from antiquarian debates about the *lares* to paintings and inscriptions, Flower reconstructs the cult of the *lares* in Rome while also examining Pompeii and Delos as comparative case studies. This well-organized and comprehensive study is divided into four main parts, focusing on the nature of the *lares*, places associated with these deities, celebrations for them and their role in Augustan religious reform.

In Part 1, "*Lar(es) / Genius* and *Juno / Snake(s)*," Flower discusses the characteristics of the *lares*, arguing for the theory that they were "gods of place" rather than for the leading alternative that they were spirits of deceased ancestors. Important literary case studies in this section include Plautus's *Aulularia* as the only instance of a *lar* in a speaking role, Cato's descriptions of how both the *vilicus* and *vilica* cultivated the *lar* on a farm, and an exacting philological study of the term *lar* in Latin literature. The latter section is complemented by a detailed appendix cataloguing different categories of usage for *lar* (in the singular and/or plural in poetry and prose authors, plus adjective pairings). By providing this thorough and precise catalogue, Flower has compiled a useful set of data, laying the foundation for additional research on the *lares* in Latin literature. An examination of representative paintings and statues complements the survey of literary evidence, further illustrating the characteristics of the *lares* along with the accompanying snakes, Juno and *genius*.

The introductory section to Part 2 ("Shrines for *Lares* in Rome") discusses brides' dedications to the *lares familiares* of their new households and to the *lares* at neighborhood crossroads, illustrating the importance of the deities as gods of

transition associated with both family and neighborhood life. Then, making a clever comparison with a bride leaving the house, Flower proclaims that the book will “step out into the street” (85) to examine spaces for the *lares* in the city. While discussing spaces for different *lares*, she makes the insightful argument that the temple to the *lares permarini* extended the role of the *lares* from gods of place to gods of the sea. Her treatment of Roman *compita* (shrines at the crossroads) exposes gaps in the evidence and includes critical evaluation of theories regarding topographical sites that have been proposed as candidates for *compita*. Pompeii furnishes a case study for a city that complements the limited archaeological record for *compita* in Rome but features distinct iconography and lacks the *lares augusti*. Flower concludes this section by arguing against syncretism of different types of *lares*.

Part 3, “Celebrating *Lares*,” discusses the Compitalia festival, a midwinter celebration of the *lares*, within the broader context of neighborhood networks and centers of political activity. Flower emphasizes the communal nature of the festival, which brought together neighbors of varying gender and social status at the crossroads. Her discussion of the custom of hanging gendered woolen dolls representing free persons and woolen balls representing slaves at the *compita* includes insightful consideration of the different implications of this ritual. It illustrated the neighborhood population while making visual distinctions based on gender and social status. Delos furnishes a complementary study for how paintings depicting the Compitalia outside of the houses of Italians, along with inscriptions commemorating slave and freedman *kompetaliastai*, functioned as expressions of ethnic identity. A section on political activity at the crossroads includes discussion of how neighborhood politics impacted episodes from Roman republican history, demonstrating the influence of neighborhood networks.

In Part 4, “Augustus and *Lares Augusti*,” Flower offers an informed and updated treatment of the *lares* within the context of Augustan religious innovation. A discussion of Augustus’s practice of using the yearly *stips* (financial offering) to erect statues in individual neighborhoods is a useful treatment of a comparatively understudied topic, providing valuable context for imperial innovation at the crossroads. In her discussion of the crossroads, Flower argues that the *lares augusti* were not strictly Augustus’s household *lares*, but that he shared an epithet with them. She makes a bold and well-reasoned case against worship of the *genius* of Augustus at the *compita*, dismissing it as “a phantom of early twentieth-century classical scholarship” (310).

Flower's precise analysis of a wide variety of philological and archaeological evidence, complemented by fresh perspectives on the primary sources and secondary scholarship, make this book broadly useful. Excerpts can be assigned to supplement the information about the *lares* that is presented in textbooks and to stimulate discussion about Augustan religious reforms. The book nicely complements studies that discuss how women (Schultz 2006; DiLuzio 2016) and slaves (Bodel 2009) cultivated the *lares*.¹ Photos and color plates highlighting details of visual evidence are also useful for teaching. One of the greatest strengths of the book is that it illustrates how prevalent the *lares* were in Roman life, and this makes it relevant for a variety of topics relating to Roman social and cultural history. This insightful and very well-researched volume, dedicated to the memory of Flower's former teacher, will no doubt continue to drive future work on this topic.

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¹ Schultz, Celia E. *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006; DiLuzio, Meghan J. *A Place at the Altar: Priestesses in Republican Rome*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2016; Bodel, John. "Cicero's Minerva, *Penates*, and the Mother of the *Lares*. An Outline of Roman Domestic Religion." In *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity: Contextual and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by John Bodel and Saul M. Olyan, 248–75. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.