

BOOK REVIEW

The Brothel of Pompeii: Sex, Class, and Gender at the Margins of Roman Society. By SARAH LEVIN-RICHARDSON. Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xx + 243. Hardback, \$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-49687-2.

As Sarah Levin-Richardson reminds us in her introduction, Pompeii's "purpose-built" brothel is a major tourist attraction, possibly the most visited site in the whole area, and its potential value to ancient social historians is significant. It is remarkable, therefore, that the building has not been methodically investigated up until now. Her volume responds to this need by offering a systematic analysis of the material evidence and then extrapolating from it to the lived experiences of clients and sex workers, female and male. Levin-Richardson's account of the physical remains is exemplary, scrupulously documented and accessible even to those with no background in archaeology. Although her sociological conclusions are more speculative, they attempt to answer vital questions about the services available to clients, clients' interactions with staff and the brothel's relationship to the wider community.

The five chapters that constitute the first part of the book deal respectively with the architecture of the ground floor, the objects found there, the graffiti, the erotic frescoes above the door lintels and the plan and likely function of the upper floor. Some of these features, notably the graffiti and frescoes, have attracted much scholarly comment, well summarized in the text and notes. The relatively few recovered artifacts, on the other hand, are now lost or destroyed and survive only as entries in handwritten archival documents. They were just common household items, but they convey information about daily life in the brothel and the author has done scholarship a service in tracking them down and interpreting them. As for the upper floor, Levin-Richardson notes that it was physically detached from the brothel and accessed through a separate entrance, and that it had a different layout and decorative scheme. She surmises that it may have had no connection with prostitution, serving instead as inexpensive rental property.

From the material evidence Levin-Richardson draws one salient conclusion. The purpose-built brothel was not merely a place for quick sex. Rather, it offered its low-status clients, free and enslaved, opportunities for corollary activities, including drinking and socializing with workers. In discussing its ambiance, she consequently takes issue with the established view that draws a stark contrast between the frescoes' illustrations of elite lovemaking in luxurious boudoirs and the grim reality of the cubicles with their masonry platforms. On the contrary, she argues, both the pictorial settings and the normative acts in which the heterosexual couples engage were designed to facilitate desire by evoking "the very real, attainable offerings ... that were made available to clients of any status with a little money" (77). Intuitively that seems a more probable explanation of the pictures' function.

In the second half of her study, Levin-Richardson tries to reconstruct the subjectivities of those who frequented and staffed the brothel. Apart from the physical pleasures offered, male clients would have received psychological gratification from exercising masculinity and boasting about it (as the graffiti evince) and by forming quasi-affective relationships with personnel. The latter claim is somewhat problematic, as it rests largely on one piece of evidence, a perfume or cosmetics vial that may have been a lover's gift. Female prostitutes, in turn, were exploited not only sexually but emotionally, since part of their labor would have involved making themselves agreeable by admiring customers' prowess and showing interest in their lives. However, Levin-Richardson also suggests possible strategies by which these women reframed their sexual objectification: for example, they themselves may have been responsible for graffiti (such as *Fortunata fellat*, CIL 4.2275) which converted ostensible slurs into proclamations of female agency (120–121). I would like to be more sanguine about that notion, but I'm afraid it strikes me as wishful thinking.

Based on certain graffiti, scholars have hypothesized that a handful of male prostitutes worked in the brothel. Levin-Richardson accepts that inference. She rightly draws attention to their vulnerability as immature youths whose attractiveness to other males was short-lived. Noting that all the frescoes illustrating sex involve a man and a woman, she contends that they were further marginalized by the brothel's decorative features. If boys were on the staff, the absence of any painting of male-male activity does seem odd: unlike taboo sexual acts, intercourse with boys was as unproblematic an artistic motif as heterosexual congress. Like their female counterparts, these adolescents doubtless forged close relationships with customers in order to gain economic benefits or better their status; in addition, Levin-Richardson observes, they could threaten clients with penetration, and one

graffito addressed to a money-paying customer (*CIL* 4.2254 Add. p. 216), accompanied by a sketched phallus, appears to do so.

In a concluding chapter, the author draws together her findings and discusses their implications for such social phenomena as the brothel's place within the urban landscape, its relationship to other establishments selling physical comforts and the economic feasibility of its business model; the evident blurring of status boundaries for both clients and workers; the paradoxical situation of the prostitute, exploited both physically and emotionally but arguably capable of expressing subjectivity and agency; and the parallels between Roman and Greek prostitution. The excavation history of the building with its material finds is supplied in one useful appendix; a second lists all graffiti by *CIL* number and provides a transcription or graphic description, English translation, location and cross-references to names found elsewhere in the brothel.

With this definitive publication, Levin-Richardson makes a lasting contribution to our knowledge of ancient prostitution and to ancient social history in general.

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