

## BOOK REVIEW

*Women of Substance in Homeric Epic: Objects, Gender, Agency.* By LILAH GRACE CANEVARO. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 336. Hardback, \$95.00. ISBN: 9780198826309

In *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic*, the author, Lilah Grace Canevaro, investigates Homeric women and the value of their interaction with objects. The book consists of five chapters, a short introduction and an epilogue.

The author seems to share the enthusiasm of the New Materialisms about objects, on which she builds, in a cautious way, a framework that could best work for the Homeric world. She argues that Homeric women who are described both as producers and users of objects, don't merely express, but, most importantly, get to negotiate agency through objects. She thus understands objects more as "indexes" to human agency (Gell)<sup>1</sup> than as fully agentive (see e.g. Latour; Bennett)<sup>2</sup>.

In the first chapter, "How far are we from a hot bath," the author explains why she chooses Gender Theory and New Materialisms to explain Homeric women's "material" agency: As the author puts it: "This book combines Gender Theory (women as objects) with New Materialism (women and objects)" (128). The traditional objectification/commodification of women is thus contrasted in a way to a female agency traced in women's relationship with objects. The author avoids a neo-materialist reading of gender, as one would have expected. Indeed, the results would have been very exciting and provocative if she had attempted to work with Marxism or material feminism which, for instance, discuss female re/production of objects and female labor.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as the category gender in

<sup>1</sup> Gell, A. (1998), *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> Latour, B. (1996), 'On Actor-Network Theory: A few clarifications', *Soziale Welt* 47.4: 369–81; Bennett, J. (2010), *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC.

<sup>3</sup> See among others Rahman, M. and Witz, A. (2003), 'What really matters? The elusive quality of the material in feminist thought', *Feminist Theory* 4: 243–261; Hennessey, R. & Ingraham, C. (eds) (1997), *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women's Lives*, New York and

the book is viewed only from a sociological perspective, it excludes the materiality, the fleshiness of the female body, onto which new materialisms turn and that could have again supplemented the author's argument on the social agency of matter/object/body;<sup>4</sup> for instance, women in the Homeric world appear to lack, as Helen Monsacré argues,<sup>5</sup> almost entirely, physical substance; this could mean that objects work as prosthetic necessities to Homeric women's absent bodies. This is not meant to slight what is an interesting book, one which got me thinking along such lines in the first place.

Chapters 2, 4 and 5 discuss female agency as the outcome of the use of object and production. The second chapter, entitled "The politics of objects," engages with cases of female agency embedded mainly in the process of object-production which is followed by their circulation outside the *oikos*; the outdoor activity of objects causes a non-*oikos* related female agency which, as the author argues, "problematizes the distinction made by Hector between the female, domestic, indoor sphere and the male outside sphere of warfare" (107). In Chapter 4, "Beyond the Veil," the author turns to memory as related to female made objects; she highlights its limitation- women's objects are perishable through time- in contrast to male and divine made artefacts which enjoy a certain durability and thus serve memory in a more successful way (e.g. tombs and poetry; *ambrota heimata*, the aegis); however, as the author puts it, "not even the immortals feel secure in the longevity of their objects" (235 on the Achaean wall built by Poseidon). In the last chapter of the book, "Uncontainable things," the author studies objects and their meaning outside the Homeric world, in the Hesiodic corpus; what is of interest here is the intertextuality of the jar, in particular, Zeus's jars in the *Iliad* and the *pithos* of Pandora in Hesiod.

Chapter 3, "Object-Oriented Odysseus," focuses on the figure of technological Odysseus, which supplements his profile as a man of words. According to the author, in the face of Odysseus τέκτων, the female and male way of producing and

London: Routledge; Hughes, A. & Witz, A. (1997), 'Feminism and the Matter of Bodies: From de Beauvoir to Butler', *Body & Society* 3(1): 47-60.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Barad, K. (2003), 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of how Matter Comes to Matter', *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(3): 801-831.

<sup>5</sup> Monsacré, H. (2018), *The Tears of Achilles* (trans. N. J. Snead. Introduction by Richard P. Martin. Hellenic Studies Series 75; or. *Les larmes d'Achille: le héros, la femme et la souffrance dans la poésie d'Homère*, préface de P. Vidal-Naquet. Paris, Albin Michel, 1984). Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, part 2 ([http://nrs.harvard.edu/um3:hul.ebook:CHS\\_MonsacreH.The\\_Tears\\_of\\_Achilles.2018](http://nrs.harvard.edu/um3:hul.ebook:CHS_MonsacreH.The_Tears_of_Achilles.2018)).

interacting with objects come together: As the women's favorite, Odysseus' involvement with their material products may lead to his objectification and entrapment (raft, veil, wand, *pharmaka*), with the exception of Arete's chest which sets him free, i.e. it sends him back to Ithaca. At the same time, however, Odysseus' production and repurposing of objects (see e.g. the olive-wood stake, *skeptron*) is shaped according to his own needs and shifting identity (beggar, king, husband, lover etc). In the Epilogue, the author reminds the audience that her approach to female "material" agency is merely a poetological reading of objects and, thus, of female, material agency.

On the whole, scholars of Homer, women in antiquity and material culture may find the book worthy of their attention. The book is well produced and forms a densely argued work; yet, occasionally, I wish it had been written in a plainer way. The author needs to "hold the hand" of the readers or else they will be lost in a discussion that deals with Homeric women, Homeric men, gods, which then turns to Hesiod's world of objects and finishes with a warning that objects, women, men and gods in archaic epic poetry are part of an intelligent poetic design.

MARIA GEROLEMOU

*University of Exeter*, M.Gerolemou@exeter.ac.uk