

BOOK REVIEW

How Women Became Poets: A Gender History of Greek Literature. By EMILY HAUSER. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. xvii + 354. Hardback, \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-20107-8.

Emily Hauser's monograph contains a series of resolutely feminist analyses of the gendered ideology of Greek poetics. Its consistent focus, across a trajectory extending from archaic epic to Hellenistic epigram, is on the terminology of authorship, i.e. "poet-terms" and associated vocabulary, and its aim is to expose how pervasively "masculinized" – both socially and grammatically – were the authorial paradigms of Greek culture. But this asymmetry, she contends, stimulated female writers, in a tradition whose figurehead was Sappho, to create their own gendered counter-images. While the book pursues its agenda through a number of avowedly "provocative" readings, some of its arguments are marred by a tendency to stretch the implications of individual passages and to generalize from partial evidence.

From Hauser's perspective, Telemachus's notorious silencing of Penelope in *Odyssey* 1 is symptomatic of men's larger control of song, singing and language in a culture where the term ἀοιδός, "singer/bard," is allegedly imprinted with masculinist assumptions (notwithstanding a Muse ἀοιδός in Alcman). Even so, Hauser herself toys with the idea that the ἀοιδοί at *Iliad* 24.720 may retrospectively include Andromache, Hecuba and Helen, who lead the laments that follow. She also maintains that Helen's weaving of war-images in *Iliad* 3 and her self-consciousness as a future object of song in Book 6 represent challenges to masculine song. For Hauser, the gendered credentials of male bards are not compromised by their affiliation to female Muses: the Muses themselves are an object of self-interested manipulation by male poets. But in deeming Hesiod's Muses "voiceless" because unable to perform directly for humans, Hauser ignores the imperatives at *Theogony* 105 ff., which identify the Muses with Hesiod's poem itself; subtler consideration of the Muses' metonymic status is desirable. The book's boldest archaic reading involves the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, where Hermes' evisceration of a tortoise shell to make a lyre is decoded

as a disturbing rape analogy. Related but perplexing is the treatment of the opening of Pindar, *Pythian* 1, as “neutralizing the dangerous femininity of the lyre” (76-7) – neutralizing, because a neuter noun is placed in apposition to the feminine noun φόρμιγξ; a glaring case of Hauser’s sometimes perverse interpretation of the significance of grammatical gender (not to mention the gratuitous notion of “danger”).

Less contentious, for the most part, are chapters on Aristophanes and Plato. The former includes reflections on Agathon’s familiar “gender-bending” poetics in *Thesmophoriazusae* (where, however, the suggestion of an “accidental” feminine noun, *poiētis*, supposedly “heard” in πο(ι)ῆτις, at line 151, entails nonsensical syntax) and on the imagery of male authorial pregnancy at *Clouds* 530-1. Both those things form links with a discussion of Plato’s Diotima, where Hauser misses the opportunity to explore this shadowy figure as Socrates’ feminine *alter ego* but rightly sees her as partly subversive of exclusive male discourse. Most of the Plato chapter is concerned with the *Republic*’s silencing of female voices in poetry and its quest for a new philosophical poetics that escapes conventional masculinity. Hauser draws attention to some variant terminology for poets/poetry in *Republic* Books 2-3, but her assertion in this context that the noun *poiētēs* is “simply no longer fit for purpose” (127) is baffling, especially given her own statistics for its copious, continued use throughout the dialogues.

Hauser’s book follows a steady path towards the ultimate destination of women’s “own” poetics, developed in reaction against the dominant masculinist tradition. Topics addressed along the way include a set of Euripidean passages in which ἀοιδός is predicated (metaphorically) of females, the chorus’s complex complaint about misogynistic male poetry at *Medea* 421-30 and Herodotus’s reference to Sappho as μουσοποιός, “music-maker” (Hauser’s rendering), rather than *poiētēs* (misleadingly called “new” terminology at this date; Hauser herself acknowledges traces of it as early as Solon and Theognis). To say that before Herodotus Sappho had “never” been given a poet-term by men is an empty claim, since we do not have a single earlier reference to her; and the attempt to detect subtle belittlement in μουσοποιός itself, as an alleged downgrading of Sappho’s own μοισόπολος, amounts to a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion. Something similar applies to Hauser’s negative readings of ostensibly laudatory references to Sappho in Hellenistic male poetry. Just one example: Antipater of Sidon’s epigrammatic complaint that the Fates did not grant actual immortality to Sappho, to match the immortality of her songs, is somehow made to indicate “the ultimate inadequacy of women’s poetry” (213)!

In the final part of the book, Hauser examines Sappho's own work, together with Hellenistic authors like Nossis who looked back to her as their supreme poetic model, as a source of authentically female responses to what she sees as the "anxiety of authorship" imposed on Greek women by the male tradition. Sappho's implicit self-description as *μοισόπολος*, for instance, is taken to express an "intimacy" with the Muses supposedly lacking in that tradition, while maternal imagery for creativity contests the more possessive imagery of paternity employed by male poets. Female poets could also use existing masculine tropes as a "mask," and/or could reclaim and redefine, as Nossis did, the female identity built into traditional motifs such as the nightingale-as-singer (on which Pauline LeVen's *Music and Metamorphosis in Graeco-Roman Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2021) might have been cited).

Hauser's book is striking in both range and detail; I have touched on only a few prominent points. If it occasionally carries provocation to excess, it nonetheless deserves to be widely read by literary Hellenists. It is also well-produced: I noticed only a smattering of misprints in the footnoted Greek.

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