

Sex in Antiquity. Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World. Edited by Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and James Robson. Routledge: London and New York 2015. 567 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-51941-0 (hbk) and ISBN 978-1-315-74791-0 (ebk)

As the editors say *sex is a complicated term, because it is something an individual might “be” or “have” or “do”... Sex, gender and sexuality are terms that lie in complex relationships with one another and are sometimes even in conflict with one another.* Thus trying to understand these terms and their implications even in the modern world is a tough job, how well the words sex, gender and sexuality apply to antiquity remains a live question.

The historical moments that were chosen for the study of this book have been defined temporary as the ancient periods and spatiality of the Near East, Greece and Rome. The volume is made up by thirty essays that seek to intervene in existing debates or open up new areas of study.

All of the essays have been divided into three main sections, depending on geographical and chronological affiliation, Part I – *the Ancient Near East*, Part II – *Archaic, classical and Hellenistic Greece*, and Part III – *Republican, imperial and late-ancient Rome*. The essays thus form the chapters of the volume.

Taken as a whole, the chapters that form Part I, on the *Ancient Near East*, examine the issues of gendered roles and the limits of normalized sexual behavior in a variety of Near Eastern cultures. Chapter I is based on the essay of Susan Ackerman where she examines the nature of magical rituals in women’s reproductive magic from ancient Israel, furthermore the opinion of the male Hebrew writers from the Bible on these rituals.

The second chapter, based on the essay of Stephanie Lynn Budin, looks at the complementary roles of females and males regarding fertility and reproduction in ancient Anatolia, Levant, Egypt and Mesopotamia. One of the main ideas discussed in the chapter being that the ability of generating life was seen in those old societies as a masculine rather than a feminine trait.

Elna K. Solvang examines the use of rape as a strategy when reading the third chapter, drawing out parallels between the role played by rape in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and Absalom’s decision to sexually violate his father’s, King David, concubines.

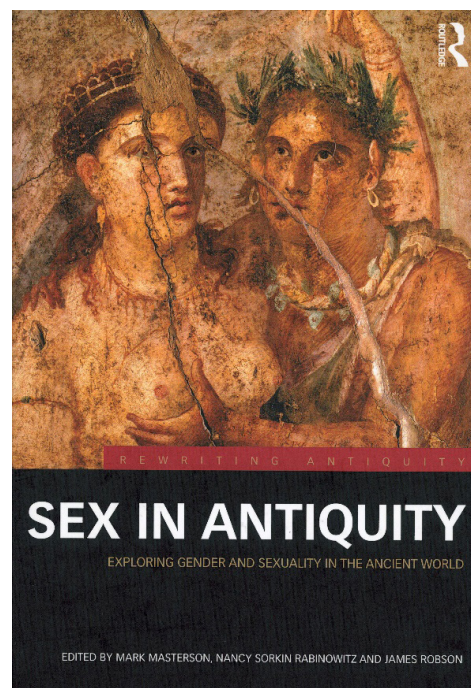
In Chapter IV, by Roland Boer, is presented a study about the paraphilias, sex beyond that with living human beings, examining the practices that written laws and rituals reveal. He uncovers not only prohibition of bestiality and necrophilia in the Ancient Near East but also presents some cases of relaxed attitudes towards acts of such kind.

On the other hand, Gwendolyn Leick looks in Chapter V at the issue of age and sex in Sumerian and Akkadian sources, demonstrating that neither old age nor extreme youth provided barriers to sex in ancient Mesopotamia.

The second part of the book, entitled *Archaic, classical and Hellenistic Greece*, meets a number of key areas in the study of ancient gender and sexuality, most notable being pederasty and same-sex relationships,

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prostitution, sexual ethics, the construction of gender, rape.

Chapter VI is based on the essay of Alastair Blanshard, who re-examines the evidence for same-sex orgies between males in ancient Athens. He argues that the orgies were seen as far from desirable being used to regulate normative sexual experience.

Following this chapter, Andrew Lear tackles same-sex relationships in Chapter VII where he scrutinizes the idea that pederasty was “problematized” in ancient Greek culture. His view is that what scholars have observed until now is an essentially classical Athenian phenomenon, and that in other areas pederasty is idealized in an almost unquestioning way.

The eighth chapter, by Walter Duvall Penrose Jr. is based on the same theme of homoerotic scenes, mostly on the iconography of the Tomb of the Diver. These scenes point to a homonormativity to pederast male relationship in ancient Poseidonia, the author suggesting that Orphic rites included pederast or other homoerotic behavior.

Chapter IX by Allison Glazebrook, features pederast relationships especially the eroticized figures of boys and prostitutes in the context of the symposium. His study demonstrates that these two figures are often compared in poetry and art, the female prostitute often used as a negative model compared with the boy in terms of ethical and erotic behavior.

Simon Goldhill carries on the study of prostitution in Chapter X, trying to figure out whether a history of prostitution can be established. Moreover, he explores the diverse ways in which different societies are organized, questioning the extent of the term “prostitution” over a range of phenomena from different eras and locations.

In the case of Chapter XI, Claude Calame writes about the figure of Helen in Greek melic poetry, exploring how different forms of lyric poetry construct gender identities and erotic relationships, which have an impact on the formation of social and gender relations. Coming next is Chapter XII by Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz with the study of Electra in tragedy, variously portrayed as a marginal figure, ambiguous in gender and resistant to those in power, a site where heterosexual norms are re-imposed.

More studies on ancient texts are those of Monica S. Cyrino, in Chapter XIII where she explores the violent ways that Eros is depicted in the play, the lover’s body being depicted as vulnerable to violation. In Chapter XIV, Dorota Dutsch centers around the concept of “dog marriage”, a playful term that denotes a partnership between individuals entitled to make free choices. Getting to a more secret part, Sheila Murnaghan exposes the narratives from Greek literature which feature the exposure of sexual secrets in the boundaries of Chapter XV.

From Chapter XVI we engage the main subject of rape in ancient Greece. Kathy L. Gaca looks at the use of rape in times of war, exploring the consequences of this sexual and physical violence against women by ancient armies. Edward M. Harris’s essay, seen as Chapter XVII, brings important information to the discussion, proving that the consent of women in ancient Greece had a big impact on the decisions made by men. Athenian literature reveals that men did in fact pay attention to when women said “yes” or “no”. The last chapter from this part, number XVIII, is represented by

the essay of James Robson. He examines the representation of rape in Old Comedy, arguing that the ancient passages display rape as an uncomplicated sexual act and an ability to degrade and harm the victim.

The third and last part of the volume is *Republican, imperial and late-ancient Rome* where the themes of same-sex relationships, Roman manliness and unmanliness, the gendered reception of female figures and sexual ethics in late antiquity are met.

Thus Chapter XIX by Matthew Fox deals with the problem of homoeroticism while Chapter XX by Amy Richlin meets the problem of same-sex desires. In her conclusion slave boys alongside free boys were the most common desire for sex in Rome.

A different kind of same-sex activities are discussed in Chapter XXI by Sandra Boehringer. She analyzed the erotic manual *Peri Aphrodision* by Philaenis and demonstrates that the author’s sex raises complex questions about authorship and sexual knowledge in antiquity, attitudes towards prostitution and female homoeroticism. The presentation of female sexuality is continued in the next chapter by Hunter H. Gardner, who uses the notion of “monstrous-feminine” to explore the use of thematic use of threatening aspects of feminine sexuality.

Manliness in Rome is another big discussion of this volume, Judith P. Hallett examines the portrait made by Suetonius of Emperor Tiberius’ “erectile dysfunction”. The author goes further by making links with similar scenarios described by other ancient authors and by exploring the way in which Tiberius predecessors, Julius and Augustus Caesars, presented their sexual inadequacies publicly. Kelly Olson shows in Chapter XXIV that the occasional adoption of Greek costumes by Roman men had not only the formation of cultural identity but also on the construction of gender and sexual personality.

Chapter XXV by Deborah Kamen and Sarah Levin-Richardson revisits the topic of penetrated males through a study of literature and graffiti while Chapter XXVI by Craig Williams turns to the Latin vocabulary of unmanly men for his essay.

The final chapters of Part III are focused on the later antiquity, Barbara K. Gold writes about the III century Christian martyr Perpetua and how later male editors sought to reframe the narrative that Perpetua wrote before her execution. Steve D. Smith’s essay, Chapter XXVIII, says about the VI century Agathias of Mirne and Paul the Silentiary. These poets, who write at a time when same-sex sexual activities had been banned by emperor Justinian, sublimate these desires by forming a triangle of love in which the relationship of two men is intensified by their mutual relationship with a woman.

Daniel Boyarin considers in his essay that relations between male Talmudic scholars, one married to the sister of another. From his point of view non-carnal relations between men have more privilege that carnal ones between man and wife. Chapter XXX by Mark Masterson, is trying to present a late platonic philosophy in works from the IV century thus suggesting a possible connection to late ancient notions of elite manhood.

Thus the book is about sex, as refracted through

the lenses of 30 essays, a collection that takes gender and sexuality in all the richness that these terms possess. All thou full of interesting facts and ideas, when you think of any activity bounded by the term sex, images are the most powerful tools of representation.

It is very hard to sum up a volume of essays as wide-ranging as this one, the fact that it has been done in harmonious way shows the balance and masterwork that has been put in place. Readers may pick and choose what interest them most from these essays and the simple fact that some ideas may stimulate further thoughts will please the authors.