The study of sexual behaviour and ideology in the ancient world is a comparatively recent development. For much of the field’s short life, emphasis has been on sexuality in the Greek world, and where Romans have been included it has tended to be in a Graeco-Roman context. As the editors of *Roman Sexualities* have recognised, this is unsatisfactory: in consequence, they have set out to examine sexual identity and practice in a specifically Roman context. The professed aim of the work is to explore this area through the literary evidence, hoping to stimulate interest in the topic not only among other literature specialists and social historians concerned with the Roman world, but also in the broader academic audience, especially those working in modern Mediterranean anthropology and gender studies.

The work comprises twelve essays on a wide range of topics by American and British authors, some established authorities, others more recent entrants to the field. Jonathan Walters attempts to define the ideal norm of male sexuality; Holt Parker and Catherine Edwards respectively examine literary and legal models of male sexual deviance; Anthony Corbeill presents the banquet as a threat to the norms of male sexuality; Marilyn Skinner studies the delicate boundaries of ‘male’ and ‘female’ as seen in the poetry of Catullus; Ellen Oliensis examines the relationship between client and patron, lover and beloved; David Frederick explores the place of violence toward the beloved in elegy; Amy Richlin canvasses popular medical beliefs about female bodies; Sandra Joshel raises the question of imperial semiotics in Tacitus’ portrayal of Messalina; Judith Hallett scrutinises male denials of female homoeroticism; Pamela Gordon explores Ovid’s depiction of Sappho; and Alison Keith draws links between Virgil’s Dido and the work of the female elegist
Sulpicia. A fairly lengthy introduction by Marilyn Skinner acts as a bridge between the various topics.

As the collection contains so many diverse articles, critical appraisal must necessarily be confined to the work as a whole. The study of Roman sexuality is still in the formative phase and, as yet, there are few agreed conventions in the field: something which shows through clearly in the differing approaches to, and conclusions drawn from, a comparatively small corpus of literary evidence. There is a particularly noticeable split between those contributors who seem content with the view, produced by the 'Graeco-Roman' studies, that the perceived norm of Roman society was essentially heterosexual (Keith and Hallett) and those inclined to push the alternative axis of active versus passive, suggested by Foucault, to its greatest logical extent (Walters, Parker, Skinner and Corbeill). Such ideological splits, in combination with the range of topics covered and the varied styles of the authors, make this a somewhat uneven and disjointed work. I suspect, however, that this is more of a boon than a defect. It would be a matter of concern if all the contributors toed a party line. The collection does not attempt to say the last word on any subject, but instead presents a veritable gold mine of ideas. It offers avenues for exploration, rather than definitive dead ends.

There are disappointments, however. The first is that several of the essays are effectively reprints, having been published before in one form or another (Corbeill, Skinner, Joshel and Hallett). Guilt in this matter is restricted to the more senior contributors, including both editors, which may well be a telling statement of the pressures inflicted on academic progress by promotion. Nonetheless, it is a pity that more fresh offerings could not be found. The collection also suffers from an affliction all too familiar in the sociological field: the overuse of jargon. True, there are perfectly legitimate uses of this type of language, especially in this area, in which the academic must constantly attempt to steer an even course between colloquial euphemism, obscene bluntness and surgical precision. However, there are, or
should be, two golden rules for its use: jargon must clarify, rather than obscure; and it should never be used merely to prove membership of a specific scholarly faction. Various authors offend against both these criteria at different points and to differing degrees. This is particularly annoying in a work which claims the status of an introduction to the study of gender relations in the Roman world for those who are unfamiliar with the field. Fortunately, for the most part the problem remains a nuisance, rather than a serious impediment to understanding.

These difficulties should not be allowed to overshadow the considerable academic value of the work. By bringing together the thoughts of a wide range of authors in a single volume, Roman Sexualities provides access to a growing area of research which, until recently, has tended to be the preserve of journal articles. It offers a sound (if challenging) starting point for those new to the subject and thought-provoking material for those more familiar with it. I trust it will not be the last such venture. The next might perhaps begin to explore the possibilities offered by combining literary and archaeological evidence; an approach which has proved fruitful in the Greek context.

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