
With undergraduate courses on women in the ancient world blossoming left, right and centre, a broad new work like this is most welcome. _Reading Roman Women_ is a collection of self-contained essays, some of which revisit with a new spirit territory already familiar to students of women in Roman society, while others strike out for new ground. The basic format divides the work into three parts. Part I (chs.1-2) deals with the theoretical issues and allows Dixon to set out her own position clearly and in some detail. Parts II and III then put those theories into practice. Part II (chs.3-5), entitled ‘Reading the Female Body’, sees Dixon apply techniques of narrative analysis, as well as feminist and post-modern approaches to the construction of sexuality, to ancient material. Part III (chs.6-9), ‘Reading the Public Face: Social and Economic Roles’ considers the available sources on women’s status and economic function and considers how legal requirements and conventional ideas might have affected women’s daily lives.

Dixon’s main aim in producing this work seems to be to apply a restraining hand to an increasingly vigorous field of research. The preface opens with a statement of her guiding principles: (1) all ancient texts need to be read in new ways; (2) the genre of a text will heavily influence both what is included and what is omitted; and (3) all ancient portrayals of women are projections of ideologies not circumstantial descriptions. A clear declaration of the author’s agenda is always welcome, but I have to confess that, on first reading, the third principle sounded like a recipe for academic wrist-slashing all round. Part I does tend to reinforce that impression. Chapter 1 takes a long and decidedly cool look at both the internal and external influences on scholarship in this field. Chapter 2 establishes in some detail the undeniable theoretical problems inherent in the process of extracting women’s stories from literary and documentary genres produced by, and often for, men. Fortunately, Dixon is simply plying her audience with all the bad news first. Having made her point—that understanding women in Roman society is a much more difficult and delicate process than is usually acknowledged and that modern expectations of women are just as much of an impediment as ancient biases—she actually applies her guiding principles in a fairly positive manner. Since I have mainly approached the subject of women in the
Roman world through the door of socio-economic history, I find this point easiest to demonstrate in relation to Part III.

Part III certainly does cover areas in which Dixon clearly feels that academic positivism and basic human optimism have pushed scholars to extremes in the attempt to solve intractable problems. Chapter 8 ("Women’s Work: Perceptions of Public and Private") is particularly downbeat. In it Dixon argues that theories drawn from depictions of women at work in literary, epigraphic and archaeological material are of extreme fragility and that there are insuperable barriers to meaningful exploration of this area. Frequently, however, Dixon is willing to acknowledge the existence of light (albeit sometimes feeble) at the end of the tunnel. Chapter 7 ("Profits and Patronage") sounds a much more positive note in concluding that social class was as much a factor as gender in determining female participation in patronage and capital investment. Here Dixon seems confident that although the sources are skewed, they are skewed in reasonably predictable ways and that such biases can be taken into account by scholars.

Dixon’s overall message is not that the study of women in Roman society (and in the ancient world more generally) is impossible, but that it is difficult and fraught with problems, some of which we simply cannot solve. She is not advocating the abandonment of the subject, but she does counsel caution and a downgrading of expectations. In case I have made this work sound a little too solemn, I should emphasise that Reading Roman Women is also an interesting and engaging work. However, despite Dixon’s lucid prose style, this is not an ideal book for beginners, presenting as it does some fairly complex arguments using sophisticated theory. Nonetheless, Part I, at least, still represents an important resource for those new to the field, because it lays out potential problems and possible solutions so clearly and in such detail. Readers new to this area will probably find themselves wanting to find out more about the theoretical bases of Dixon’s work, but the extensive bibliography should facilitate this. For those more familiar with the field, Dixon makes a case that is worthy of serious attention and that should provoke considerable thought.

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