
In Sexual Ambivalence Luc Brisson offers a discussion of different aspects and manifestations of dual sexuality, a term that he defines as the ‘simultaneous or successive possession of both sexes by a single individual’ (1). The study consists of a short introduction, four chapters, each of which is devoted to a text or issue as an entry point to an examination of broader concepts, and a brief concluding section. The work is clearly aimed at a general readership. Brisson does not include an extensive bibliography on the topics covered in the book; much of the recent useful work, especially theoretically informed scholarship, on gender and sexuality in the ancient world is conspicuously absent. I do not mean this as a reproach, but rather as an indication of the intended audience and purpose of the book.

Chapter 1, ‘Monsters,’ treats the evidence for inter-sexed individuals (i.e. babies born with ambiguous genitalia) and the cultural responses to this phenomenon. Brisson notes that there is a shift in the way in which these ‘abnormal’ children were perceived. In the Republic dual-sexed infants were interpreted as dangerous portents, requiring elaborate purification ceremonies. Livy recounts sixteen such births in Rome and other parts of Italy from 209 to 92 BCE, a period fraught with wars and various political and social crises. By the time of
the early Empire, however, hermaphrodites were no longer regarded as monsters who had to be eliminated for the public good, but rather as aberrations in nature. Diodorus Siculus, for example, tells of cases that were resolved through surgery, while Pliny the Elder cites stories of ‘miraculous’ sex changes. In all of these tales, the re-gendering that takes place always results in a male body. I would have liked to have seen Brisson explore the implications of this fact. How do these stories work with, and reinforce, ancient medical treatises that depict the male body as the normative model and the female body as an imperfect, derivative form?

In the second chapter, ‘Dual Sexuality and Homosexuality,’ Brisson argues that passive homosexuals and homosexual women who behaved as men were assimilated to androgynes. Central to his discussion is Ovid’s tale of Hermaphroditus and Salamacis (Metamorphoses 4.285-399), a myth that he interprets as an action for passive homosexuality. The logic seems to be: since the categories of active and passive are gendered as masculine and feminine, all males who are described as molles—Hermaphroditus asks that all males who enter the spring become soft (mollescat)—must be passive homosexuals. Moreover, in notes 12 and 18 (p. 166), Brisson suggests that a widely attested meaning for mollis is ‘passivity in masculine homosexual relations,’ citing as evidence passages that are far from unambiguous. This conflation of effeminacy with passivity is imprecise. To be sure, there is some semantic overlap but the two categories are not identical, evidenced by the fact that notorious womanizers and adulterers were also accused of mollitia (e.g. Mark Antony). As Craig Williams asserts in Roman Homosexuality (Oxford, 1999), ‘being penetrated was not the only practice that could brand a man effeminate, and a man who was cast in the role of the insertive partner... could still be liable to an accusation of effeminacy’ (125). Here Brisson’s analysis would have benefited from consulting studies on ancient masculinity, e.g. Maud Gleason’s Making Men (Princeton, 1995), Marilyn Skinner’s 1993 article ‘Ego Mulier’, reprinted in Roman Sexualities (eds. Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner, Princeton, 1997), 129-50, as well as Catherine Edwards’ The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome (Cambridge, 1993). A more fruitful avenue for Brisson to pursue would have been a consideration of how the myth of Hermaphroditus plays with anxieties about the failure to make the transition from the
culturally constructed femininity of adolescence to the status of adult *vir*. The chapter concludes with a cursory overview of the protocols of same sex relations. While Brisson’s discussion of the negative literary portrayal of same sex relations among women is persuasive, it is hardly original, since Judy Hallett (‘Female Homoeroticism and the Denial of Roman Reality in Latin Literature,’ reprinted in *Roman Sexualities*, 255-73) and Bernadette Brooten, *Love Between Women* (Chicago, 1996), have made similar arguments, using the same passages as evidence.

In the third and best chapter, ‘Archetypes,’ Brisson examines mythological prototypes who played a crucial role in creation narratives. He considers possible parallels between the globe shaped beings in Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium* and the primordial beings in Orphism, the *Chaldean Oracles*, Gnosticism and the *Hermetic Corpus*. The simultaneous dual sexuality of these figures ‘expresses the total coincidence of opposites that characterizes the origin of all things’ (72). Through this discussion Brisson beautifully demonstrates the paradoxical nature of dual sexuality in the ancient imagination: although it was perceived as monstrous in that it was threatening to the social order, it was also profoundly alluring since it represented the promise of fusion. Aristophanes’ speech, in which the spliced beings languish for their other half, makes literal this desire. Brisson rightly interprets the yearning that these beings experience as a longing for a lost state, an originary unity free from any differentiation (between the sexes and between human and divine). While social institutions (marriage, family) depend upon a clearly delineated sexual difference, on the mythic level the origins of the universe itself are rooted in dual sexuality.

The final chapter, ‘Mediators,’ treats Tiresias, a figure who experienced dual sexuality successively and thus functioned as a mediator. Brisson discusses the various versions of the Tiresias myth and then goes on to give a survey of the various animals that were associated with the seer and, more generally, the themes of dual sexuality, divination, and blindness.

There is much to recommend in *Sexual Ambivalence*. Although specialists (particularly those well versed in queer and gender studies)
may not find all of the analyses in the book terribly illuminating, Brisson’s compilation of the relevant ancient sources, his presentation of the comparative material in chapter three and his introductory survey of ‘homosexuality’ in antiquity provide a useful starting point for scholars interested in the issue of dual sexuality in the ancient world.

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*It is with regret that Prudentia has learned of the untimely death of Shilpa Raval on May 23rd 2004 after a short illness. We extend our sympathy to her family, friends and colleagues.*

*Editor.*