
The jacket of Kathy Gaca’s *The Making of Fornication* promises a provocative read, and this Gaca certainly delivers. Gaca’s book is a surprisingly broad exploration of the sexual protocols of Plato, Stoics, Pythagoreans, the Septuagint, the apostle Paul, Philo of Alexandria, Tatian, Clement of Alexandria, and the lesser-known second-century Christian Epiphanes. Gaca sets herself in opposition to Michel Foucault’s works on sex in antiquity, which she reads as advocating (with some caveats) a basic continuity between the sexual codes of Greco-Roman philosophers and those of early Christians. Gaca’s thesis is that there was a ‘sharp difference between Christian and Greek sexual morality’ (293); Christian sexual rules were not related to philosophical concerns but were based on the Septuagint—the main source for the sexual ethics of Paul and second-century Christian writers. Although the latter clothed their ideas in philosophical language, a ‘strongly religious rationale’ separates early Christian sexual reforms from those of Greeks and Romans (6).

The book is divided into three main parts. The first treats Greek philosophical sexual reforms. Through an examination of Plato’s writings (primarily the *Republic* and the *Laws*), Gaca argues that Plato advocated different eugenic plans that regulate procreation so as to breed out irrational sexual desire, which she sees (contra David Halperin and Martha Nussbaum) as very distinct from ‘Platonic eros proper’ (37-8). Gaca’s treatment of the Stoics focuses on the early Stoics, and she points out that Foucault and other scholars have allowed the later figures Seneca and Musonius Rufus to speak for Stoics more generally. She argues that while the early Stoics wanted to eliminate *eros* as popularly conceived (i.e. as a divine force compelling sexual relations of dominance and submission), they valorized a different form of *eros*, characterized by sexual didactism between sages and *prokoptontes*. She contends further that for these Stoics, ‘women and men alike are among the wise, and the sagacious friendship they share with one another continues to include sexual relations’ after the *prokoptontes* become sages (91). This vision stands in contrast to the sexual restrictions of
Musonius and Seneca, whom Gaca considers ‘ascetic Pythagoreans in Stoic clothing, at least with regard to their sexual ethics’ (115). She finds such a characterization appropriate because Seneca and Musonius would limit sexual activity exclusively to reproductive ends, a position that she argues is uniquely Pythagorean and that should be distinguished from a more general valuing of procreation that does not limit sexual activity solely to that purpose.

The second major section treats the sexual programs of the Septuagint and Paul. Gaca approaches this material from two angles. First, she crafts from the books of the Pentateuch a notion of *porneia* as sexual rebellion against God. The Septuagint authors prohibited God’s chosen people from sexual activity implicated in the worship of foreign gods, what she terms ‘sexual apostasy’ or ‘other-theistic sexual activity’, as well as sexual acts considered ‘abominations’ (*bdelugmata*). The apostle Paul, who drew upon and intensified these rules, tried to extend this ‘monotheistic sexual obedience’ to gentile lands (143-5). The second angle deals with metaphors of the *porne* in the Prophets and Paul. Gaca emphasizes throughout that Paul’s sexual protocols are rooted in the Septuagint and not in Greco-Roman philosophical tenets. The second section closes with a chapter on Philo, whom Gaca argues combines the Septuagint with Platonic, Stoic and Pythagorean sexual principles to yield his unique sexual ethic.

The final portion of the book concerns second-century Christian authors. Gaca compares Tatian, who promoted complete sexual abstinence, to Clement of Alexandria, who combined and adapted the sexual protocols of Plato, the Pythagoreans, and the Septuagint to yield an uncomfortable position advocating both procreationism and the elimination of sexual desire. Finally, Gaca shows that Epiphanes, known by fragments preserved in Clement, proposed a communal Christian society, of which a sexual communalism reminiscent of that of the early Stoics was an important part.

Only a cursory evaluation of this wide-ranging work is possible in this forum. Although close scrutiny of these sexual rules is a welcome development, Gaca does not make a compelling case for her thesis. While specialists in Hellenistic philosophy, on the apostle Paul, and on the church fathers will all quibble with certain aspects of Gaca’s
interpretations of the evidence in each category (e.g. the highly essentialized and idealized ‘Stoicism’ from which Seneca and Musonius are seen to deviate), there are some ‘big picture’ difficulties with her comparative approach, particularly her arguments about language in the Septuagint and Paul.

Since key terms are common to the sexual protocols of biblical and non-biblical authors (for instance, both the Stoics and Paul condemn sexual epithumia), Gaca grounds her argument for ‘discontinuity’ between early Christian writers (especially Paul) and the Greek and Roman philosophers in a sharp dichotomy between usual meanings of the terms like fornication in these texts. Rather, she generates a kind of ‘concept’ of fornication from a pastiche of passages, most of which do not contain the term fornication (forms of the term fornication in fact occur only twice in the Pentateuch, at Genesis 38:24 and Numbers 14:33; forms of fornication occur marginally more often—ten times). James Barr has shown that this type of ‘conceptual’ approach to generating meaning is highly misleading on the basis of the principles of modern semantics (The Semantics of Biblical Language [Oxford University Press, 1961]).

And even if one were to accept Gaca’s strictly ‘biblical’ concepts of fornication, et. al. from the Septuagint, reading Paul’s words only in terms of those concepts to the exclusion of other meanings is also a dubious procedure. For example, Gaca writes that Paul’s ‘conception’ of epithumia ‘is grounded in his Greek biblical background,’ and that ‘Paul gives no indication of using or even knowing epithumia in the Platonic or Stoic philosophical senses’ (157). Such may or may not be the case, but in the social act of communication, all language is polyvalent, as Mikhail Bakhtin has shown (Speech Genres and Other Late Essays [University of Texas Press, 1986]). Thus, when Gaca poses questions in terms of whether or not Paul ‘historically drew upon’ this or that philosophy (e.g. 12, n. 32) or when she endorses the view that ‘Hellenistic philosophy contributes nothing of substance to New Testament sexual principles’ (14, n. 38), she skirts the possibility (or
better, the probability) that Paul’s language (and, for that matter, the language of the Septuagint) participated simultaneously in the discourses of both the synagogue and the philosophical soapbox. There are certainly aspects of Paul’s thought that philosophers would have found ridiculous or repugnant. Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine that the urban heads of households to whom Paul wrote did not hear strong echoes of Greco-Roman moral exhortation in Paul’s sexual rules.

While this ambitious project comes up short in defending its bold thesis, The Making of Fornication should generate a good deal of interesting debate on an exceptionally wide range of topics. In that sense (which is ultimately the more important), the book is a success.

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