

The Classical Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CAR>

Additional services for *The Classical Review*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



MORE SEX IN ATHENS. . J. Robson *Sex and Sexuality in Classical Athens*. Pp. xxiv + 311, ills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. Paper, £24.99 (Cased, £80). ISBN: 978-0-7486-3414-9 (978-0-7486-3413-2 hbk).

Kirk Ormand

The Classical Review / *FirstView* Article / July 2014, pp 1 - 3
DOI: 10.1017/S0009840X14001267, Published online: 23 June 2014

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0009840X14001267

How to cite this article:

Kirk Ormand *The Classical Review*, Available on CJO 2014 doi:10.1017/S0009840X14001267

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

MORE SEX IN ATHENS

ROBSON (J.) *Sex and Sexuality in Classical Athens*. Pp. xxiv + 311, ills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. Paper, £24.99 (Cased, £80). ISBN: 978-0-7486-3414-9 (978-0-7486-3413-2 hbk).

doi:10.1017/S0009840X14001267

R.'s entry in the 'Debates and Documents in Ancient History' series from Edinburgh University Press takes on an ideal subject. Few topics are as inherently interesting as sex, and few areas of inquiry have spurred more heated debate among scholars, particularly in the last 30 years. In many ways, R.'s book is a splendid addition to these ongoing discussions. Indeed, the 144 pages that make up the 'debates' section of the book constitute the single best discussion of Athenian sexual life currently available for non-experts. Though there is little in this volume that can lay claim to originality, R.'s eye for detail is keen, his explanations of complex scholarly disputes are sure-footed and incisive, and his awareness of the ancient contexts of the evidence is exemplary.

The 'Debates and Documents' series consists of volumes that comprise roughly 50% scholarly discussion about the topic and 50% primary sources (that is, translated texts and reproduced images) that have been used as evidence for differing interpretations. The book falls into two halves, with all the 'documents' at the back, arranged alphabetically by authors' name. One strength of this volume is its limited scope: R. deals only with Athens, and focuses on the fifth and fourth centuries – though he calls on archaic lyric and the Greek Anthology for evidence on a few issues.

R. warns in his preface that Athens is 'alien territory, and visitors must tread carefully', when it comes to sex, and he is adept at teasing out the ways in which the ancient Athenians thought differently from most inhabitants of the modern West. In a series of densely argued chapters, relying on literary evidence (especially comedy, including many fragments of middle and new comedy), legal oratory, philosophical texts and vase painting, R. covers the legal and social restrictions surrounding marriage (Chapter 1); same-sex relationships (Chapter 2); the practice of prostitution (Chapter 3); legal questions of adultery and rape (Chapter 4); and a hodgepodge of subjects related to 'beauty, sexual attractiveness, fantasy and taboo' (Chapter 5).

There are many strong points in this overview, and in the interests of space I will highlight only a few. R.'s discussion of marriage as an institution is terrific, covering everything from citizenship requirements, inheritance, dowries and widowhood to relations with courtesans. Most of this, of course, has little to do with sex or sexuality. Marriage is important for this book not so much as a site of sex as an institution that regulated sexual access, especially for women. R.'s discussion of adultery and rape is similarly stimulating. R. swiftly shows that our notion of 'adultery' does not map neatly onto the ancient concept of *moicheia*, and the difference signals not only different priorities, but a different way of thinking altogether. The central concern in Athens is not a violation of the *moichos*' marriage bond (or, necessarily, that of the woman involved, since one could commit *moicheia* with an unmarried woman), but rather, the sexual violation of a woman who is subject to another man's guardianship (*kyrieia*). In the same vein, R. is skilful in showing that, although certain acts of sexual violation that we would call rape could be prosecuted in the Athenian courts, the Athenian legal system had no discrete category of crime that corresponds to our notion of 'rape'. Though some texts acknowledge a woman's consent (or lack of it), there is no legal evidence in Classical Athens for a sexual crime defined

primarily by the non-consent of a woman. To grasp these fundamental differences in legal definition is to come directly to terms with serious limitations on women's status as subjects under the law in Classical Athens.

R.'s summary of disputes regarding same-sex desire is also adept, though here I found some reasons to quibble. R. takes a carefully balanced approach, threading a neutral line between the 'constructionist' and 'essentialist' camps in what has come to be known as the 'sexuality wars' in Classics. Though he discusses the differences between the Athenians' conception of sexual norms and our own clearly and elegantly, in places R. seems to believe that this is a debate about the *cause* (i.e. biological or cultural) of homoerotic behaviour, rather than about the cultural *significance* of that behaviour (see especially the top of p. 60). The central point of Foucauldian analysis is not that 'human sexual behavior is shaped . . . by prevailing cultural norms' (p. 60) (though that is also true), but that the very idea of 'sexuality' is possible because of a relatively new form of psychiatric and legal discourse that constitutes the subjects of desire as specific types of individuals. In this context, it is worth noting that Foucault would not have considered himself a 'constructionist', and rigorously avoided speculating on what the causes of homoerotic desire were and are.

I note one significant omission: though he is sensitive to questions concerning women's status and experience elsewhere, in Chapter 2 R. has almost nothing to say about female homoerotic relationships. The evidence here is almost non-existent. But R. cites Theognis, Anacreon and Semonides for various points; a discussion of Sappho would not have been out of place, and his treatment of Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* could have gone further than it does. R. does not seem to know S. Boehringer's *L'Homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (2007). This is unfortunate, as a summary of her densely argued chapter on Plato would have been a real service to R.'s Anglophone readers.

I have some criticisms regarding the form of the book. As one reads the 'debates', R. refers to the 'documents' by author's name and a letter assigned to that passage (e.g. 'Aeschines A'); he suggests that one can read the documents 'as they are encountered in Part I of the book or, alternatively, to review them later' (p. xx). In practice, I found it so distracting to keep turning to the back of the book to review a document that I gave up doing so. Occasionally this matters, because citations are given in passing, sometimes without adequate context or in a way that is misleading. A few examples: R.'s citation of the bee-woman from Semonides' poem 7 as an example of a 'mutually pleasurable union' (i.e. sexually) (p. 23) seems a stretch. Herodotus 2.131–2 is cited as an example of a woman's extreme sense of shame over being raped, but only the reader who consults the primary source at the back will realise that she was raped by her father (p. 103); and at p. 132 he cites Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* 854–7 as an example of a boy flirting when that text is discussing a wife.

Finally, the arrangement of the book is said to be conceived so that readers can 'judge how convincing the arguments are, and enter into the debates themselves' (series editors' preface, p. xvii). But many of the documents are so heavily excerpted that I doubt that the desired result has been achieved. Aeschines' *Against Timarchus* is one of the longest excerpts at 9 pages, broken up into snippets to support individual points. For comparison, the already heavily excerpted version in Hubbard's *Homosexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2003) is 22 pages, with numerous notes. [Demosthenes] *Against Neaira* has been cut here to 4 pages, as compared with the 12 pages in Lefkowitz and Fant's *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (1992). Though they have been well chosen and carefully translated, the 'documents' here are too brief to use this book as a sourcebook with

accompanying essays. The decision to list them alphabetically by author's name rather than by genre or chronologically does not help matters.

Criticisms notwithstanding, this book is successful and a pleasure to read. R. is to be congratulated for discussions of great clarity on difficult topics. I recommend this book to novices and scholars alike for its sensitive treatment of sources and brilliant condensation of complex scholarly debates.

Oberlin College

KIRK ORMAND
kormand@oberlin.edu