



Queering the Classics

by Cheryl Morgan

The study of gender and sexuality in historical time periods is fraught with difficulty. Even when written sources exist, and quite often they don't, it can be hard to tease out the subtle nuances of cultural identities that ancient writers may have been trying to convey. For the Classical world written sources abound, but almost all of them have been produced by elite males who often subscribed wholeheartedly to the strongly patriarchal traditions of their cultures. Worse still, scholarship based on these sources has also traditionally been produced by elite males who often subscribed wholeheartedly, not just to patriarchal views, but to deeply moralistic attitudes towards gender and sexuality produced by 19th Century Europe.¹ Thankfully we are now starting to see Classicists addressing these issues. Such work sits at the very heart of current debates about what Classics should be and who it is for.

There have, in the past, been numerous attempts to study sexuality in the Classical world, and there is absolutely no doubt that same-sex relationships did occur in both Greek and Roman society. However, the way in which they were understood by those societies appears to have been very different to the construction of gay and lesbian lifestyles that we are used to today. The fashion for pederasty in Greece, and the Roman obsession about who was penetrating whom, don't fully map onto our modern understanding of the gay man.

One of the reasons that such mappings don't work is that both sexuality and gender are social constructs; and are strongly inter-related. How one understands both one's sexuality and gender depends very much on the social environment in which one has grown up. In modern times we have the phenomenon of people who identify as "men who have sex with men", but who vehemently reject the label of "gay". Equally people raised in Two Spirit traditions in North America, or hijra traditions in India, or Fa'afafine traditions in Samoa, may reject the Western concept of the transsexual as being a foreign and inappropriate classification.

To understand the ancient world properly, therefore, I believe that it is necessary to look at queerness as a whole. Understandings of sexuality interact on various levels, and we have to try to understand how the ancients contextualised such issues. Just as same-sex relationships existed in the ancient world, it is absolutely clear that a variety of approaches to social gender also existed. Modern, Western labels such as "gay" and "transsexual" might be inappropriate, but wider umbrella terms such as trans and queer certainly are not.

This work is increasingly important now because of the rise of anti-trans extremism in our world. So-called "gender-critical" activists hold that all ancient cultures had an understanding

¹ For example, HW and FG Fowler, in their 1905 translation of the works of Lucian of Samosata, entirely omitted section V of *The Dialogues of the Courtesans*, the one that features the cross-dressing woman from Lesbos who wishes to be known as Megillos. Even in the 2004 Penguin Classics edition, Keith Sidwell mutters about, "the unsatisfactory nature of deviant sexual practices." See also my two-part article. Part 1 is [here](https://writewhereithurts.net/2017/10/18/roman-historians-unreliable-narrators/) (<https://writewhereithurts.net/2017/10/18/roman-historians-unreliable-narrators/>). Part 2 is [here](https://writewhereithurts.net/2017/10/25/roman-historians-unreliable-narrators-part-2-of-2/) (<https://writewhereithurts.net/2017/10/25/roman-historians-unreliable-narrators-part-2-of-2/>)

of gender that mapped precisely onto a biological construction of sex that was invented in 19th Century Europe. This “fact” is then used to justify claims that modern trans identities are made up; and can be summarily dismissed as fantasies.

Attempts to understand issues of gender variance in the ancient world are not new. One potentially ground-breaking book was *TransAntiquity*.² While this contained a number of fascinating papers, it was clear to me on reading it that few of the contributors had much understanding of modern-day trans people. While you can't map modern identities one-to-one onto ancient ones, you can't draw parallels between them without understanding both sides of that comparison. There were times when reading *TransAntiquity* that it felt similar to someone having written a book that purported to examine modern trans culture, but which spent most of the time discussing men cross-dressing at Halloween or for stag parties.

I was therefore delighted to discover *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World*.³ This book grew out of a discussion panel on “Gender B(l)ending in Ancient Greek and Roman Culture and Society” held at the annual conference of the Classical Association of Canada in Toronto in 2015. Allison Surtees realised that a book needed to be written, but that as Classicists she and her colleagues were poorly equipped for understanding questions of gender. She therefore recruited, as co-editor, her friend Jennifer Dyer, who is a professor of Gender Studies. By jointly editing the volume, Surtees and Dyer intended to assure that all contributions to the book were sound in both their understanding of the Classical world and of gender.

It should be noted that the trans community, much like many other marginalised groups, puts much store in the nostrum, “nothing about us without us.” None of the contributors to the book publicly identify as trans in any way. This does not necessarily mean that none of them do so privately. Discrimination against trans people is rife in all aspects of life, including academia, and early career academics may be reluctant to out themselves. In the last year or two I have noticed a significantly number of young Classicists coming out as trans, and I hope to one day see a volume of this type written primarily by trans people. For now, however, the Surtees and Dyer book is as good as it gets, and that is very good indeed.

One other issue that I should raise before diving into the contents is the question of the use of Queer Theory. Obviously one cannot understand queerness without it, but Queer Theory is often very provocative. In creating a queer reading of an historical artefact or incident, it is not necessary to show that people from the past identified as queer. It is sufficient to view the subject through a queer lens, and to show that a queer reading is possible. This is rather different from a traditional historical analysis where a degree of objective proof is generally expected. It is therefore necessary to exercise some caution in using all of the papers within the book as evidence for the existence of trans-like identities in the ancient world. However, some do definitely provide such evidence.

The issue of proof is addressed directly by Surtees and Dyer in their informative Introduction to the volume. One of the tasks this section has to accomplish is explain the methodologies taken from Queer Theory to a Classicist audience. Some of the papers in the book rely on abductive reasoning, a common technique in Queer Theory. Whereas *inductive* reasoning

² *TransAntiquity: Cross-Dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World*, Domitilla Campanile, Filippo Carlà-Uhink, Margherita Facella, Routledge 2017.

³ *Exploring Gender Diversity in the Ancient World*, Allison Surtees, Jennifer Dyer, Edinburgh University Press, 2020.

proceeds from known facts and deduces a conclusion, *abductive* reasoning looks for the most likely explanation for an observation, even though no directly-linked facts might exist to support it. Abductive reasoning is a useful way of dealing with situations where the written evidence might be biased or coded.

A good example of this technique is the paper on Hermaphroditus. Typically modern historians tend to view this character as either a joke, or as having shock value. This in itself is abductive reasoning because there is no firm proof that this is how Romans viewed Hermaphroditus. The “facts” on which it is based are primarily the disgust and ridicule generally felt for trans bodies by a modern cisgender audience. But is this a likely explanation? In her paper, Linnea Åshede argues convincingly for a much more accepting and queer view.

The Introduction also takes a look at queerness in the Olympian Pantheon. Surtees and Dyer point out that Athena is generally portrayed as asexual and in masculine-gender dress. She also associates primarily with male mortals, though not as a lover. In contrast Dionysus is often shown with a very feminine appearance – beardless, pale-skinned and long-haired. He associates primarily with women; and is respectful to them in marked contrast to his philandering rapist father, Zeus.

The book contains a mix of papers covering widely different topics. It begins by looking at how Classical philosophy and medicine viewed gender. This alone should be sufficient to give the lie to the idea that the Classical world saw gender solely in terms of “biological sex”.

Where the ancients were very much aware of biology is in the existence of some types of intersex people. It was a known and observed fact that some young people apparently grew up as girls only to transform into boys during puberty. The ancients didn’t have the scientific tools to explain this the way we can,⁴ and therefore they were obliged to accept the mutability of gender. Several papers look at the way this issue is portrayed and explained in Classical literature.

Other papers look at how trans people are portrayed in Classical literature. Apuleius, in *The Golden Ass*, provides us with a portrait of the socially and medically transitioned followers of Cybele that portrays them as sex-mad drag queens. Lucian, in the *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, has a character whom we would recognise as a trans man. In both cases these male satirists poke fun at trans characters in much the same way as comedians might do today, but in doing so they attest to the existence of the people they are mocking. Cybele’s castrated priestesses, the galli, are well attested in many other ancient sources, most of which are more respectful of them than Apuleius is. There is rather less evidence for same-sex attraction among women in Roman times, so Lucian’s hyper-butch Megilos might simply be exaggeration for comic effect. On the other hand, the fact that he had Megilos hail from the island of Lesbos suggests that even among Romans the island had a reputation for a certain type of woman; and perhaps that those of Sappho’s poems that have not survived were a good deal more explicit than those that have.

No coverage of trans people in antiquity can be complete without a look at the notoriously queer teenage emperor, Elagabalus. Jussi Rantala’s paper considers the same historical records used by Martijn Icks in his recent biography,⁵ but takes a far more sympathetic view of the young emperor’s understanding of gender.

⁴ We understand it as 5-alpha-reductase deficiency, a form of insensitivity to testosterone.

⁵ *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor*, Martijn Icks, I.B.Tauris, 2013.

One other paper I would like to single out is Denise Eileen McCosky's examination of the character of Artemesia of Harlicanassus. In it she sets out to examine ancient views of gender by contrasting the portrayal of Artemisia in Herodotus with the markedly different modern version in the film, *300: Rise of an Empire*. If any proof were required of different approaches to gender in modern and ancient times, we need only point at how a respectful treatment by Herodotus morphed into a sexualised, misogynist portrait at the hands of Hollywood.

I don't have space to cover all of the papers in detail, and in some cases lack sufficient familiarity with the source material to engage properly with them. I did, however, find all the papers both interesting and respectful of the gender diversity that they set out to study. In the absence of a work by trans-identified scholars, this is an excellent contribution to the field.

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