9-1997

Review: Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres

John F. Makowski
Loyola University Chicago, jmakow1@luc.edu

Recommended Citation

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
REVIEWS

historiography, his language and style, the themes, some chronological and
historical problems, and the text of Book 6, all extensively elaborated in
the commentary. Kraus asserts that in spite of a number of first-person
statements by the narrator, Livy’s self-presentation conveys much less sense
of a particular individual than does that of other historians, notably Sallust
and Tacitus. Besides this authorial elusiveness, there is also a marked reduc-
tance to assert an historian’s authority, observed, e.g., in the author’s pausing,
often near the critical point in an episode, to introduce discrepant ac-
counts in his sources. Kraus plausibly asserts that by such deliberate abne-
gation of an authoritative voice in particular cases, combined with his ex-
traction of patterns of ethical or psychological behavior from the “facts” of
the received historical tradition, Livy moderates the reader’s continual par-
ticipation in the search for good and bad exempla.

The commentary is dense, even luxuriant (251 pages, for 50 pages of
Latin text). Major subdivisions of Book 6 are introduced by paragraphs of
chiefly rhetorical analysis. There is minimal historical annotation in the commentary
proper, which is emphatically devoted to language and rhetorical practice
and is heavily documented by abbreviated reference to the contents of the
eleven-page bibliography. To skip the notes or look only for the crutch of
the moment, however, will be to miss much of value in Kraus’ sophisti-
cated literary analysis. In her, Livy has found a true modern connoisseur.

University of Kentucky

JANE E. PHILLIPS

David Konstan. Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related

Of the many recent books generated by the revived interest in the an-
cient novel, Konstan’s is the most ambitious and the most outstanding both
for its scope and brilliance of insight. Often employing an anthropological
approach and informed by the theories of Foucault, the book makes an
important contribution to the cultural history of the ancient world. The sub-
ject is love, whose representation in the novel, argues Konstan, is unique in
all Greek literature because of its symmetry, that is, the mutuality and equality
in the relationship of hero and heroine. This stands in stark contrast to the
asymmetrical cast of erotic relationships in nearly all other genres, whether
they deal with homoerotic or heteroerotic themes. While stressing the sym-
metry of love in the novel, Konstan is also careful to point out the subtle-
ties and variations in the narratorial treatment of love from author to au-
tor. A very interesting section of the book, one in which the author dis-
plays great breadth of learning in ancient literature, is his comparison of
the novel to other genres of literature like tragedy, new comedy, mime,
pastoral, and elegy. Equally engaging is his discussion of the Greek novel’s
view of love vis-à-vis its Roman counterparts, where asymmetry is again
evident both in the pederastic themes of Petronius’ Satyricon and in the Cu-
pid and Psyche story of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses. Another welcome fea-
ture in this section of the book is Konstan’s analysis of The History of
Apollo Thessalianus King of Tyre, a fascinating narrative which deserves more fami-
larity among students of Latin literature. Rounding out the book are a dis-
cussion of the novel’s Nachleben, which includes works like Richardson’s
Pamela and Harlequin romances, and finally an insightful conclusion about
the transformation of the role of the city in the ancient world as the impet-
us for the Greek novel’s unique and symmetrical view of love.

As erudite and broad as the book is in its scope, it is always readable,
lucid, and with something to say in every chapter. It is important for the
student of Greek literature, though both the Latinist and the general comparativist
also will find much of value; and, as the Greek novel regains its place in
the classical canon, this book will be essential reading.

Loyola University of Chicago
CW 91.1 (1997)

Colin Renfrew and Ezra B. W. Zubrow (eds.). The Ancient Mind: Elements
PP. xiv, 195, incl. 54 b/w figures and 18 b/w tables. $54.95 (hb.), $19.95


What we have here are two very different orientations to the ancient mind
as it might have been expressed by ancient peoples and historically. On the
one hand, Renfrew and Zubrow have amassed a body of essays by various
authors in support of “a science of cognitive archaeology” aimed at develop-
ing both a theory and a methodology for exploring the question “about what
and in what manner . . . prehistoric people” thought. Departing from literary,
interpretative approaches, as well as those that come from a more linguistic
framework, the authors of these well-written essays persuasively argue that
an empirical approach that capitalizes on modern trends in artificial intelli-
gegence and cognitive psychology can lend substance to our knowledge of the
ancient mind. That substance, according to these authors, is available to a
cognitive archaeology that, although still in its infancy, is being designed to
scientifically study a wide array of “representations” (imagistic, spatial, tem-
poral, religious, symbolic, and comparative) from the ancient world.

On the other hand, Staten takes a little-researched topic, mourning, and
literarily traces it, from Homer to Lacan. He argues that “the dialectic of
mourning begins with the process of attachment to, or cathexis of, an ob-
ject . . . and includes all the moments of libidinal relation in general . . .
as well as all the strategies of deferral, avoidance, or transcendence that
arise in response to the threat of loss.” Thus, in Staten’s Freudian argu-
ment, “eros (as desire-in-general) will always be to some degree agitated by
the anticipation of loss.” To support this argument, he ably covers a wide
range of literary examples, beginning with Homer’s Iliad, where mourning,
he notes, is closely connected with revenge. In the Gospel of John, how-
ever, revenge is superseded by love. The problematics of sexual love are
then explored through the literature of the troubadours, a literature with
which, Staten notes, Milton was intimately acquainted. These same problematics
are finally explored with a tragical-existential look at Conrad’s Heart of
Darkness and the works of Lacan. Throughout, Staten moves easily through
the history of Western literature as he reconstitutes a poetics of mourning
that never loses sight of the problematics associated with mortal and tran-