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Review of M. Lee, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece*

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Mireille M. Lee, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xvi, 365. ISBN 9781107055360. \$99.00.

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[Preview](#)

The increased scholarly attention to clothing, textiles, and accessories is visible in a number of collected volumes, a research center in Copenhagen, and several dissertations in progress, but more than a century has passed since the publication of a monograph devoted specifically to Greek dress. Mireille Lee fills this lacuna with an inclusive study that explores Greek garments by contextualizing them in relationship to the bodies that wore them and the situations when they were worn. This approach places Greek dress into a contemporary theoretical framework, in dialogue with the wider field of dress scholarship across disciplines.

The book is organized into seven chapters, bookended by a short introduction and an even shorter conclusion. Chapter 1 opens with a history of scholarship and lays out the author's methodology. Lee follows the definition of dress set by Roach-Higgins and Eicher: "an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body" (21).¹ For this reason, the body is central to the study, as reflected in about half of the chapter titles: 2. "Bodies in Ancient Greece," 3. "Body Modification," and 6. "The Body as Dress." Lee's ultimate goal is "to reconstruct the experience of the dressed body in ancient Greece" (31). In addition to an overview of the most common garments and accessories that most readers will be expecting, odors, tattoos, and nudity are among the other subjects covered. These are all set into a wider framework of uses, modifications, representations, and receptions by viewers.

The chronological scope is limited to the archaic and classical periods. Evidence from other times is included when the author feels it is especially useful, but she is typically very careful when doing so. If testimony for some dress practice comes from a much later time period, Lee says so clearly. This is a sensible compromise; the evidence is so patchy it would be too limiting to cut out everything that does not strictly fall within the parameters proposed. All varieties of visual, textual, and archaeological evidence are included, depending on the particular topic at hand (e.g., the discussion of how nude bodies were portrayed is heavily art historical, while the role of dress in ritual and funerary contexts skews more epigraphical). Although material from all over Greece is cited, examples from Athens are naturally the most prevalent. The breadth of Lee's research is staggering. Extensive references and commentary are generally relegated to endnotes to keep the text moving, but they hold a richness not to be missed. Her work makes use of topics as disparate as the role of Barbie dolls (255, n.54) and pubic lice in Roman Britain (264-5, n.212).

After the chapter on historiography and theory, the organization proceeds from interior to exterior, starting from the body itself and concluding with the clothed body in social situations.

Chapter 2 examines the ancient Greek view of the body and the identities ascribed to different bodies. Lee structures this inquiry by levels of idealness; the young, free, male body is contrasted with female bodies, old bodies, slave bodies, and various intersections of more than one characteristic (i.e., old male bodies or young free female bodies). This classification system is the basis for the following chapters, as dress was “an essential means of constructing, maintaining, and negotiating these categories” (33). Chapter 3 covers body modification, “[t]he first ‘layer’ of dress” (3). Care of the body through diet, exercise, and bathing (*diaita*); perfumes and cosmetics; and removing or arranging hair on various places on the body are all modifications practiced by the Greeks. Tattoos and circumcision, in contrast, were known to the Greeks, but marked those living among them as other than Greek. Lee next turns to garments (Chapter 4) and accessories (Chapter 5). The garments are organized by the proximity to the body (underwear, tunic, himation). Information about who is known to have worn which items is highlighted, showing just how many dress items were gendered. The chapter also includes information on the nature of our evidence, the manufacture of textiles, and the storage of clothing. Accessories make up the final layer of dress: clothing fasteners, belts, veils, shoes, crowns, jewelry, and even hand-held parasols and money bags. In all these chapters, topics and subtopics are addressed in short, clear sections. Complicated issues are covered in greater depth (e.g., the transition between Dorian and Ionian dress), but the treatment of each topic is not exhaustive; copious endnotes supplement the text for the interested reader.

After this examination of dress, the body is then uncovered in Chapter 6, whose point of departure is Larissa Bonfante’s concept of nudity as “costume.” This chapter offers a fresh consideration of the unusual way Greeks treated nudity, the difference between “naked” and “nude,” types of nudity (e.g., athletic vs. civic) and who was shown nude. An attention to degrees of nudity highlights the importance of the arrangement and rearrangement of garments—dress was not static, but lived. Although the focus is on that lived experience, the nature of our sources demands attention to the ways in which clothing was perceived or represented in art. Lee is careful to distinguish between representation and reality and draws attention to the problems inherent in the ways we access ancient dress. Representations of dress and undress are featured more in this chapter than elsewhere in the volume; for some objects, such as the Aphrodite of Knidos, the connection to a lived experience of dress may be less obvious, but they are valuable for painting a larger picture of how Greeks thought about undress. The final chapter, “The Social Contexts of Dress,” selects a number of social settings (coming of age events, religious festivals, funerals, etc.) to examine how dress works in the public sphere. Since it draws so heavily on the groundwork of the previous chapters, some of the details repeat, but the material is reorganized with a different focus; for example, an earlier chapter surveyed swaddling clothes (97) as a close-to-the-body garment categorized with other undergarments, but here (199) they are positioned within a trajectory of clothing appropriate to one’s stage of life (i.e., baby clothes). The focus is on extraordinary occasions like weddings; I would enjoy seeing what Lee could do with a more mundane context, e.g., how various people might have interacted as clothed persons day-to-day on a visit to the Agora. The decision to end with social context after beginning with the body is both successful and thought provoking. Making the wearer of the clothes the focus emphasizes agency. Instead of treating Greek dress as something experienced primarily from the viewers’ standpoint, this subtle shift to the wearer reveals more fully the extraordinarily layered and complicated system of communication that dress can be.

Lee’s method locates the study of Greek dress within the discourse that is occurring in other fields, particularly the social sciences, and shows that many aspects of dress theory can be applied to non-living cultures. The book is intended for a wide audience with hopes for scholarly cross-fertilization. Some classicists will find there is more explanation of features of the ancient world than they require, but they will appreciate the extraordinarily lucid and engaging writing, especially in Lee’s treatment of theoretical approaches; Chapter 1 should

become a model for how to distill difficult concepts clearly. All Greek is transliterated, and quotations from ancient sources are presented in idiomatic English translation. The text is remarkably free from errors. The accessibility of the book occasionally means that breadth trumps depth. For example, the extraordinary short section on the body in mythology only discusses Hesiod's Pandora story (34-5). The simplifications of Greek and Latin terminology in the main text may be distracting to pedants, but trickier lexical examinations can all be found in the endnotes. The modern terminology, on the other hand—dress, accessories, adornment—is thoroughly defined and discussed up front, which will surely improve communication among the scholars working in this area.

The text is supplemented by copious black and white images, many of which do double (or even triple) duty by standing as illustrations for multiple dress items. The pictures are usually clear and large enough for their purpose; when smaller details were less clear, I found it easy to locate another version of the object online, thanks to the thorough image captions.²

Lee pulls together a variety of topics with sophistication. This book will hold special appeal for anyone working on dress, Greek art, gender, or the history of classical scholarship, but so much ground is covered that any reader will find something of interest. It achieves approachability without succumbing to superficiality and is a pleasure to read. It will become a resource for reimagining Greek dress (and perhaps even ancient dress more generally), and I look forward to the new work it will spark over the next century.

Notes:

^{1.} quoting M. E. Roach-Higgins and J. B. Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing Research Journal* 10.4 (1992): 1.

^{2.} For example, the gemstone of Fig. 5.14 is both an accessory and a depiction of dress and accessories. It is further cited in a note about "garment weights" (273, n.50); the marking in question is barely visible in the reproduced photograph, but it took less than a minute for me to find an image online that allowed me to increase the size to examine it more closely.

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