



Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity, by Luc Brisson, trans. J. Lloyd, University of California Press, 2002. ISBN 0-520-23148-1 (xiv + 195, two schematic diagrams and one table.

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Lloyd's translation of Brisson's *Le sexe incertain: androgynie et hermaphroditisme dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997) makes the culmination of Brisson's twenty-year interest in the topic he defines as 'dual sexuality' accessible to a wider audience, at a time when interest in the definition and presentation of gender in the ancient world is steadily increasing. The translation itself is very good at rendering Brisson's somewhat idiosyncratic use of terminology into commendably clear English and this volume shows why Lloyd deserves Brisson's accolade that there is 'no more competent or better informed translator' (xiv) and many of the notes acknowledging the sources of translations (or Brisson's modifications to existing Loeb translations) are her additions, produced during her collaboration with Brisson.¹

¹ The confusion of terminology, especially between androgyne and hermaphrodite, is to an extent symptomatic of the area (see M. Delcourt, *Hermaphrodite: myths et rites de la bisexualité dans l'Antiquité classique* (Paris 1958) xi-xiii and 43-46. Straying from the initial definition of dual sexuality, conflating dual sexuality and bisexuality and applying Greek and Roman terminology indiscriminately to sources from either culture in the first chapter are attributable to Brisson not Lloyd.

By ‘dual sexuality’ (initially, but not subsequently, equated with ‘bi-sexuality’, p.1) Brisson means the biological possession (either simultaneously or successively) of both male and female genitalia, and usefully refers the reader to his other, preliminary, works on the topic.² Brisson states three objectives for the edition and it is in these terms that it should be judged. Firstly, he aims to present a synthesis of the ideas and development of his earlier thoughts, secondly, to provide a ‘working aid for all those interested in questions of dual sexuality’ (xiii) and, thirdly, to provide the raw material for new contributions on the topic.

Brisson addresses the first aim through reference to his other works in the notes (most usefully by expanding on the arguments here which summarise those of his 1995 work on Orphism and most annoyingly by referring to the detailed analysis of the other five divergent strands of the Teiresias myth, which are included in his 1976 work on Teiresias but not summarised here). The second and third aims are largely, though not entirely, achieved through his treatment of both main-stream and less-well-known primary source material ranging from Plato, Hesiod, Herodotus, Aristophanes, Diodorus Siculus, Ovid and Livy to Empedocles, Proclus, Phlegon of Tralles, the Caldean oracles, the Hermetic Corpus and the Nag Hammadi papyrus, most of which are treated discretely and all of which appear in the *index locorum* (p.191-5).

However, while the textual primary source material is well-covered the scope of the non-textual primary source material is completely absent and the secondary material acknowledged somewhat lacking. Brisson’s sole reference to the archaeological evidence for

² p.152. Here Brisson takes the opportunity to add his ‘Bisexualité et médiation en Grèce ancienne’ in *Bisexualité et différence des sexes* (Paris, 2000) 33-64 to the bibliography of the original French edition, which comprises: ‘*Neutrum utrumque*. La bisexualité dans l’antiquité gréco-romaine’ in *L’Androgyne* (Paris, 1990) 24-37; ‘Aspects politiques de la bisexualité. L’histoire de Polycrite (Phlegon, *De mirab.*, ch.2; Proclus, *In Remp.*, II, 115.7-15 Kroll)’ in M. B. de Boer and T. A. Edridge, *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren* (Leiden, 1978); ‘Le mythe de Tirésias: Essai d’analyse structurale’ in M. J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain* (Leiden, 1976) 55. Nevertheless, this bibliography omits Brisson’s introduction to *Orphée et l’orphisme dans l’antiquité gréco-romaine* (Aldershot, 1995) which discusses some of the underlying issues and textual relationships pertinent to Brisson’s third chapter.

images of hermaphrodites is the cover illustration of the Roman *Sleeping Hermaphrodite Borghese* sculpture in the Louvre (complete with much later buttoned mattress). Images of hermaphrodites, however, exist in a wide geographical and temporal spread across the ancient world, from fourth century BC figurine moulds in the Athenian Agora to large Hellenistic and Roman statues and such evidence is well summarised by Aileen Ajootian in her review of Brisson for *BMCR*.³ The omission of this entire area means that Brisson's aim for his volume to serve as a working aid for art historians (xiii) is doomed to failure.

Brisson's notes referring to items of bibliography (predominantly composed of commentaries and works in French) on particular aspects of the topic are clearly intended to supplement the volume's bibliography. The bibliography itself (p.183-4) consists of eight volumes by Cantarella, Delcourt, Herdt, Loraux, Wyke (ed.) and Zeitlin 'that relate specifically to dual sexuality' (p.183), although this is somewhat of an overstatement. Unfortunately, Brisson's approach to matters of bibliography means that many valuable works are not acknowledged, both on wider areas (e.g. Greek and Eastern religion) and narrower ones (e.g. ancient medical responses to hermaphroditism), as well as the specific topic.⁴ A surprising omission, given the purpose of translating Brisson, is of references to available translations of some French scholarship to which Brisson refers (e.g. P. Wissing's 1995

³ A. Ajootian,

⁴ M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic elements in Greek poetry and myth* (Oxford, 1997), *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford 1983), *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford, 1971); R. Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: deformity and disability in the Graeco-Roman world* (London, 1995) for his discussion of hypospadias – the formation of a rudimentary male organ in a previously female child at age 13-14 – in *FGrH* 257 F36.6 and Diod. 32.10.2-9 and 32.11, which connects directly with Brisson's first chapter but considers the phenomenon in an entirely different way; E. J. Ament, 'Aspects of Androgyny in Classical Greece' in *Woman's Power, Man's Game: essays on Classical antiquity in honour of Joy K. King* (Wauconda, Il. 1993) 1-31, which addresses the male-female interdependence of mind and body through the Jungian Archetype of Androgyny as the collective unconscious and through consideration of 1) 'Creation Myth', 2) 'The Gods', 3) 'Mortals' (discussing rituals, surgery and cross-dressing), 4) 'Legend', which makes use of Brisson's work on Tiresias.

translation of N. Loraux, *Les expériences de Tiresias: Le féminin et l'homme grec* (Paris, 1990) for Princeton University Press). This is a regrettable consequence of Brisson's stated preference for disengagement from the scholarly field: 'I have never taken part in any debate on the subject or put forward any argument defending it or attacking any position related to it' (xiii): which means that he does not take into account the way that scholars, like Loraux and Ament, have made use of his own work, something which should have formed part of the process of reformulation.

Within the volume itself, Brisson treats the topic in four chapters, each of which is subdivided into further sections, these chapters are: 1) 'Monsters', 2) 'Dual Sexuality and Homosexuality', 3) 'Archetypes' and 4) 'Mediators'. Brisson starts, as many scholars of the French school do, from a structuralist interpretation of the ancient world, in that he perceives it as affirming identity and organising reality through classificatory opposites but also has an undisclosed debt to Jung and Suger.⁵ The binary opposite Brisson identifies as most important in ancient society is that of male and female and this identification is the foundation upon which Brisson's thesis builds.

1) 'Monsters': defines dual sexuality as a radical mutation, with which no life is possible, and consequently identifies both the androgyne and the hermaphrodite as shameful. However, in turning to the identification of this phenomenon as a 'Prodigy' Brisson overemphasises the importance of Phlegon of Tralles as a source, confuses terms appropriate to Greek and Roman contexts and by directly paralleling accounts from the Roman Republican period and Asia Minor Greece seeks to extend the role of dual sexed individual as prodigy to mainland Classical Greece on no evidence – a grave methodological error. In

⁵ Androgyny for Jung is an Archetype of the collective unconscious, and he considers that the human psyche itself is androgynous; Jung laments the split in consciousness and polarity in the modern mind whereby we have lost a sense of wholeness. Jung's views on androgyny, often given under the term 'hermaphrodite' are widespread throughout his writings, e.g. 'Psychology and Alchemy' in *Collected Works 12* (Princeton 1968). Androgyny for Suger is 'the shifting back and forth from the constellated opposites': J. Suger, *Androgyny: toward a new theory of sexuality* (New York 1976) 271.

further exploring androgynes/hermaphrodites as ‘An Error of Nature’, Brisson considers the way in which a woman can become a man and the role of ‘cruel’ surgical assistance in resolving this problem and providing the individual with a place in society, concluding that these individuals are not a portent and not examples of ‘true bisexuality’ – here inconsistently using his own terminology. In turning to the issue of these individuals as ‘A Phenomenon’ he continues to engage with women who become men at the point of getting married, linking this to puberty and again defining this as a medical rather than a superstitious attitude.

2) ‘Dual Sexuality and Homosexuality’: presents passive homosexuals and butch women as androgynes and interestingly focuses on rites of passage which involve cross-dressing and fictional battles as defining the transition to from youth to warrior or maiden to wife-and-mother. This is a fascinating area to introduce and one that is worthy of further investigation, which has begun to be undertaken but Brisson does not acknowledge any of the work that has already been done.⁶

The examination of ‘Hermaphroditus according to Ovid’ is one of the longer sections of the volume – mainly because of the reproduction of four pages of Ovidian quotation. Brisson presents Ovid *Metamorphoses* 4.285-388 as the first *aition* for passive homosexuality, locating the adolescent male in the grey area between male and female. Other mythological examples of sex change are considered in this context (Tiresias, male to female; Sithou, male to female; Hermaphroditus, male to both male and female; Mestra, female to male in two cases; Iphis, female to male; Cainis, female to male to Phoenix), enabling Brisson to reach the conclusion that the exaggerated femininity observed in the category of *puer* implies a individual who is sexually neuter but effeminate.

‘Masculinty and Feminity in Greece and Rome’ is predicated on the observation that a girl is not a woman until she is married and a boy not a man until he is a warrior. Thus the social identity of an individual depends on role play and lack of marriage gives rise to the ‘warrior woman’ (a category which must include the undiscussed Amazons), as

⁶ E.g. J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin, ‘Heracles: the Super-Male and the Feminine’ in D. M. Halperin, J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Before Sexuality: the construction of erotic experience in the ancient Greek world* (Princeton 1989) and the discussion in M. Arthur Katz, ‘Sexuality and the Body in Ancient Greece’, *Métis* 4 (1989), 155-79.

well as the insult of ‘androgyny’ as applied to men (attributed by Brisson to Pl. *Symp.* 189e, and demonstrated by comedy’s treatment of Cleonymus).

‘Homosexuality in Greece and Rome’ associates homosexuality with dual sexuality (though it is not under Brisson’s own definition) because of the inversion of gender roles entailed by homosexuality. Brisson opines (without evidence) that female homosexuality was frowned upon and that active female homosexuals were described as men and transvestites, despite the fact that cunnilingus is not categorised as a manly activity in sources from Greek iambus and old comedy – in fact performing this act effeminises men. Brisson’s discussion of Agathon as a transvestite male homosexual does not take into account the fact that Agathon is engaged in a mimetic activity, essentially a deception, which is categorised in Greek thought as inherently feminine, which means that Aristophanes is more likely to be physicalising this aspect of poetic mimesis rather than presenting a true homosexual (regardless of Agathon’s known sexual preferences).⁷

3) ‘Archetypes’: Brisson’s analysis of ‘dual sexuality’ as a manifestation of anatomy, religion and metaphysics takes place in the state of indistinction which exists between the two opposing poles of masculinity and femininity, or, according to Brisson, before these opposites became fully articulated and differentiated. In this place Brisson finds the origins of the cosmos through ‘Archetypes’ (not Jungian Archetypes, but primordial beings which Brisson defines as simultaneously possessing both genders but having disrupted reproductive processes – reproducing asexually or incestuously) and

⁷ For a discussion of the feminine aspect of speech see A. Bergen, ‘Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought’, *Arethusa* 16 (1983) 69-95, on the extension of this to the *technē* of rhetoric see E. R. O’Kell, ‘“Female” Rhetoric: *Peitho* and *Pharmaka*’, in *University College Cork Postgraduate Conference Proceedings 1999*: www.ucc.ie/acad/classics/pg-conferences/1999/okell.html. For a discussion of the idea that cross-dressing supplements rather than displaces masculinity, especially for poets as mimetic artists, see F. Frontisi-Ducroux and F. Lissarrague, ‘Ambiguity in the “Anacreontic” Vases: a Dionysiac enquiry’ in D. M. Halperin, J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Before Sexuality: the construction of erotic experience in the ancient Greek world* (Princeton 1989).

whose place in myth is to function as a source of ethics. These beings, in which ‘all contraries coincide’, ultimately reproduce by subdividing to yield ‘the distinctions that govern reality as we know it in our daily experience’ (p.114) and thereby create the world and Brisson links this to Empedoclean cosmology. Brisson shows that the motif of creation through splitting is common to the doctrines/ideologies of Plato (specifically as represented by Aristophanes’ Androgyne in the *Symposium*), Orphism, Gnosticism, the Caldean oracles, the Hermetic corpus, and the myth of the Phoenix and this is the best developed and most persuasive section (also the longest at 43 pages).

Brisson finds his first example in ‘Aristophanes’ myth’ of the androgyne in Plato’s *Symposium* and identifies mankind (the result of a splitting of a male/female androgyne) as lunar and prone to adultery through the individuals’ quest to find their ‘other half’. The examination of Orphism also has dual sexuality as the key to cosmology and this section is essentially a reprise of Brisson’s 1995 work on Orphism. In turning to Gnosticism, the Chaldean oracles and the Hermetic corpus Brisson seeks to demonstrate links between Greek thought and other ideologies

‘not by a direct borrowing but rather by a dependence upon analogous needs: a desire to ensure one’s personal salvation in a definite and quasi-automatic fashion, through a knowledge of esoteric doctrines and by reference to one and the same intellectual base, characterised by an expansive syncretism within which Greek thought, while remaining pre-dominant, underwent a number of foreign influences, mainly Egyptian, Iranian and Jewish’ (p100).

Brisson concludes this section with an examination of the myth of the Phoenix, which has the most tenuous link to his central topic in this section, by virtue of the fact that its dual sexuality has to be adduced from the fact of its self-perpetuation, and although dual sexuality is a factor in the Phoenix’s previous life as Cainis, as discussed by Brisson in the previous chapter, this means that the Phoenix cannot be perceived as a primordial being who contributes to the creation of the world itself.

4) ‘Mediators’: as a section is a product of Brisson’s structuralist approach because ‘[i]n order to establish a relation between the opposites that form a couple it is necessary to participate in both poles of that couple’ (p115). Strangely though, ‘mediators’ are not androgynes or

hermaphrodites, who mentally or physically participate in both masculinity and femininity concurrently, but instead individuals who are successively male and female. Tiresias is Brisson's key example and serves to link the possession of successive genders with the possession of knowledge and immortality (usually the preserve of the gods). However, to fully understand Brisson's argument here the reader needs to refer to Brisson's 1976 work on Tiresias. In this chapter Brisson follows Canterella when delineating Greek male views of female sexual enjoyment (that women are animal and unable/unwilling to submit to the control of men), which may be true, but it is a delineation which overlooks the view espoused by Aristotle that female orgasm is necessary for conception and, therefore, a desirable goal for a husband.⁸ Tiresias' ambiguous status (overlapping malevolence and beneficence) is extended by Brisson to the animals connected with him in myth: the mouse, mole, snake, hyena, badger (based on speculation and Grégoire only), and mongoose/shrew/weasel.

In conclusion, Brisson's attempt to extract coherence from the material contained in different sources from different places and periods faces distinct methodological challenges and these are not always surmounted: the best sections are those based around a text, or texts that are linked by more than their subject matter. Brisson's most significant achievement, however, is the compilation of so many diverse texts on this subject in one place. While scholars may not agree with the conclusions Brisson draws from these sources, his conclusions do serve as a strong stimulus to reconsider the issues involved in addressing this material and in attempting to define Greek and Roman attitudes towards hermaphroditism, androgyny, effeminacy, transvestism and the transgendered and the development of those attitudes. Thus, the volume fulfils Brisson's own aims in that it does provide a 'working aid for all those interested in questions of dual sexuality' (xiii) and the raw material for new contributions on the topic.

⁸ Further on female orgasm and reproduction, with bibliography, see M. Arthur Katz, 'Sexuality and the Body in Ancient Greece', *Métis* 4 (1989), 174 and, at greater length, T. Lacquer, 'Orgasm, Generation and the Politics of Reproductive Biology', *Representations* 14 (1986), 1-41.