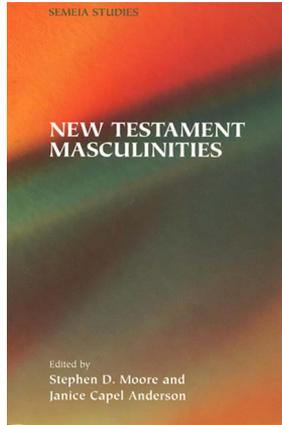


○ REVIEWING *NEW TESTAMENT MASCULINITIES*

Gillian Townsley, Otago University, Dunedin

Gillian Townsley reviews *New Testament Masculinities*, edited by Stephen D Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; 2003. Semeia Studies #45).



Anyone who hasn't already realised that masculinity is the *nouvelle cuisine* of biblical studies had better add this book to their diet and expect to be in for some tasty treats. This collection of essays from professors and doctoral students – all based in the USA with the exception of David Clines – is a carefully constructed work designed to place masculinity under the gaze of the discriminating diner and expose it as having almost nothing to do with biblical studies and yet nearly everything. Stephen Moore explains in his introduction: 'Masculinity was, at once, everywhere and nowhere in the discipline, so ubiquitous as to be ordinarily invisible, and possessed, too, of the omnipotence that omnipresence confers' (p. 1). Dragged (in style) under the spotlight, masculinity is 'outed' in such a way that it can no longer exercise its power from the shadows – it has finally become (to use Moore's words again, and to thoroughly mix my metaphors) an important fish to fry.

Conveying both the self-consciousness and self-confidence that is to be expected from any new area of research, this compilation offers the reader much. A quick scan over the menu reveals an introductory essay accompanied by a bibliography of works in the field of masculinity studies, followed by ten essays exploring the mesh between masculinity and biblical studies (with an emphasis on the gospels), and concluding with three responses, two of which are from professors of Classics. Very little has been overlooked in the preparation of this volume; it is in constant critique of itself and a reviewer might be tempted to tell the reader to peruse the introductory essay and the response essays and be done with it. However, for the sake of those readers who do not hold a copy in their hot little hands, the following comments should suffice.

The introductory essay by Stephen Moore outlines the interrelationship between masculinity, masculinism, and feminism, before delving more deeply into the crucial issue of methodology.

Four essays not included in this collection are contrasted both on how they position themselves in relation to feminism, and also on what resources have infused their analyses of masculinity (see Glancy 1994, Clines 1998, Ward 1999 and Parsons 1995). Moore explains that they have been selected for their dissimilarity to the studies in this volume (and from one another), noting that otherwise, ‘the present collection very likely conveys the impression that the study of New Testament masculinities, and early Christian masculinities more generally, is characterized by a relatively high degree of methodological and theoretical uniformity’ (p. 5). This ‘uniformity’ is typified by comparing the presentation of masculinity in a particular New Testament text with constructions of masculinity found in other ancient Mediterranean texts – ‘strategic incursions in to the neighboring field of classics’ (p. 20) are thus *de rigueur*. One gets the feeling that Moore would have preferred rather a little more ‘chalk and cheese’ in the collection, or at least is somewhat ambivalent about the merits of presenting such a unified methodological front. He closes with a caveat concerning these ‘border raids on classics’ (p. 20), warning (possibly) naïve New Testament scholars that if they are not careful, they may end up as casualties in the ‘sexuality wars’ that have recently been raging in the field of Classics. Stepping through the Foucauldian and feminist minefields is no easy task: the legacy of Foucault is enormous, yet open to the critique of erasing feminism (see Richlin 1991). Although Moore also notes that queer studies and feminist studies are not mutually exclusive enterprises, there is undoubtedly some feisty sibling rivalry going on here that the prudent biblical scholar best be aware of.

The comprehensive bibliography that follows is an excellent help for those wishing to find resources in this area. Not surprisingly (yet always disappointingly) it is dominated by North American publications. There is a handful of works from the UK, a small offering from Europe, and only a few from the entire rest of the world (the Pacific contribution being the Australian collection of essays *War/Masculinity*, and Roland Boer’s *Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door* published in the USA). Of course any list of items always sparks debate over what has been overlooked, and this bibliography is no exception. There are eleven categories listed, but who would have thought that a whole section could be devoted to the topic of ‘Eunuchs’ yet none to homosexuality?

After these two tasty entrees, we move on to sample the main courses. Half of these concern the gospels – more if you include Rose D’Angelo’s piece on ‘Imperial Masculinity and Christian Asceticism’, which examines Luke-Acts along with the Pastorals and *The Shepherd of Hermas*. This is not unexpected; while feminists have long scoured the floor of the gospels alongside their Syro-Phoenician sister, looking for crumbs of evidence out of which to make meals, the androcentricity of the gospels is fruit ripe for the picking. The rest of the collection includes another essay on the Pastorals, two connected with Paul and one on Revelation. The paucity of material examining masculinity in the Pauline epistles is an interesting matter, and one not confined to this particular collection of essays. New Testament scholars may have been slower to try this new fare, but once enticed they tend to feast in the gospels.

At this point a little more comment needs to be made regarding the practice of reading early Christian texts against the backdrop of Greco-Roman literature. Seen most easily in the work presented here on the Jesus portrayed in the gospels, it becomes clear that Jesus as a Palestinian Jew is ‘out’ and Jesus as a somewhat conflicted, but generally ideal Greco-Roman male is ‘in’. Of course, the essays in this collection are not simply that naïve in their presentation of Jesus (or of the gospel authors’ christologies), but overall one wonders when some of the Historical Jesus

questers will take issue with this (oh so familiar) tendency to remove the characters of the New Testament from their Jewish environment. This is an issue raised in the response essay by Maud Gleason, who comments that, 'Jesus' original auditors had read no Aeschylus or Seneca. How much more Hellenized were the next few Christian generations?' (p. 327).

When we consider David Clines' essay on 'Paul, The Invisible Man', a similar issue arises. This is the sixth in a series of essays over the last few years where Clines has analysed the ways in which masculinity is constructed in various male figures in the Bible. Using the typology of JA Doyle (1989), Clines has explored the ways in which five elements characteristic of modern Western masculinity are also inscribed in the biblical texts. Although in his article on David, Clines acknowledges that 'different societies write different scripts for their men' and that it is therefore 'a priori likely that maleness in the modern West does not closely resemble maleness in ancient Israel' (Clines 1995, p. 215), each of the male characters he examines do in fact emerge as fitting this construction of ideal (western) masculinity. He states in this article on Paul, that this list of five key elements is proving to be 'remarkably cross-cultural' (p. 182), and perhaps it is, but I also fear that such homogeneity is potentially dangerous. Paul's masculinity is described by Clines as 'pretty normal' (p. 192), yet such erasure of cultural diversity and lack of attention given to the power dynamics operating within cultures to create what is 'normal' leaves a dissatisfied taste in the mouth of this reader, in any case.

Unlike Clines, Diana Swancutt has no qualms about getting in up to her elbows amongst the ideological matrices that slip and slide around the Mediterranean basin in her examination of 'The Disease of Effemination' (Romans 1.18-2.16). Based on her reading of patristic writers, Swancutt argues that Romans 1.26-27 is a biting censure of gender-transgressive sex, rather than a condemnation of homosexuality as is usually understood. Her argument rests on the idea that Paul is aiming his criticism at his rivals in Rome, the Stoicized Roman judges (2.1), who 'touted natural living, proclaimed themselves perfect ruler-judges, and judged the behaviour of others, all the while engaging in 'unnatural', effeminizing sex' (p. 193). Although I am uncertain that this is an accurate claim to make about the identity of 'the judges' – a position most modern commentators have rejected in favour of a Jewish identity – her discussion on what constituted 'unnatural' sex is, dare I say, stimulating. She argues, contra Brooten (1996) for example, that Rom 1.26 is not a reference to female homosexual sex, but instead a condemnation of excessive desire; as for the men, their condemnation rests on their sexual and sociopolitical effemination, rather than some modern understanding of homosexuality.

Like the Gospels, the Pastoral epistles seem a natural place to explore the formation of early Christian constructs of masculinity, replete as they are with instructions on proper conduct for anyone seeking to be a 'man of God' (1 Tim 6.11, 2 Tim 3.17). This compilation offers two articles which investigate the gender ideologies articulated in these letters. In the first, Jennifer Glancy considers how 'the Pastoral Epistles codify a protocol of proper Christian masculinity consistent with coeval pagan articulations of masculinity' (p. 237), while also recognising the complicating factor of contested masculinities which existed in this same milieu. In the second, Rose D'Angelo reflects on how early Christian constructions of masculinity involve a dialectic of both accommodation and resistance, with the alternative ascetic position rejected as antithetical to the imperial 'family values' permeating the politics of the day.

The last course on the main menu is Chris Frilingo's 'Sexing the Lamb', a visual feast befitting a discussion based in the book of Revelation. Focusing on the 'the Lamb that was slain' (Rev

13.8), and using the Greek erotic novel *Daphnis and Chloe* as a departure point, Frilingo explores how the components of penetration and gaze – central to Roman sexuality – ensure the lamb is both ‘feminized and masculinized’ (p. 299). As we have seen with Moore’s work on masculinity and the Book of Revelation, there is considerable capacity for indulging one’s appetite in apocalyptic cuisine (Moore 1996, 2001).

And so at last we come to the dessert menu (always my favourite) – the three response essays with which this compilation closes. We have already mentioned that two are by classicists, Page duBois and Maud Gleason, and that many of their comments articulately express the concerns that an astute reader may have identified. But it is the third and final essay that leaves the sweetest taste in my mouth by far – Jeffrey Staley’s ‘Manhood and New Testament Studies after September 11’. Despite its overt Americanism, with its yet another reminder that this collection has its gaze firmly on the navel of that beast called the USA, I found it moving reading. I am the mother of a daughter, not the father of a son, but I still felt a surge of parental protective pride when I read his description of telling the burning Bush, “‘You can’t have my son; this dusky-shaped jewel of masculinity”. So much of him is his own, so much of him is mine – and this *homoousios* that is us seems only vaguely formed and molded by the canon’ (p. 335). Coming full circle to Moore’s opening observation/critique of this collection as being too homologous, it is refreshing indeed to read something from the autobiographical critical approach.

It was a relief however, to read in Staley’s critique of this collection a desire for some sort of hermeneutical framework on which to hang these readings; as a Christian feminist at heart I have to admit to a certain amount of squirming when I read approximately 300 pages reminding me just how masculine the New Testament is. As Nancy Wilson once said, I find myself wrestling with the text, ‘locked in a lifelong ‘lover’s quarrel’ with this book’ wanting it to produce a blessing (Wilson 1995, p. 73). But perhaps a collection such as this is just the first step; this is still *nouvelle cuisine* after all, and exposure of the masculine meat on the menu is no small thing.

REFERENCES

- Brooten, Bernadette J. *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; 1996.
- Clines, DJA. ‘David the man: the construction of masculinity in the Hebrew Bible’. In: *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press; 1995. pp. 212–243. (JSOT Supplements 205.)
- Clines, DJA. ‘*Ecce Vir*, or, gendering the Son of Man’. In Epstein, J; Straub, K, editors. *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*. New York: Routledge; 1998. pp. 352–375.
- Doyle, JA. *The Male Experience*. 2nd ed. Dubuque, Iowa: William C Brown; 1989.
- Glancy, Jennifer. ‘Unveiling masculinity: the construction of gender in Mark 6:17-29’. *Biblical Interpretation* 1994;2:34–50.
- Moore, Stephen. *God’s Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible*. New York: Routledge; 1996.
- Moore, Stephen. *God’s Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press; 2001.
- Parsons, Mikeal. ‘Hand in hand: autobiographical reflections on Luke 15’. *Semeia* 1995;72:125–152.
- Richlin, Amy. ‘Zeus and Metis: Foucault, feminism, classics’. *Helios* 1991;18:160–180.
- Ward, Graham. ‘The displaced body of Jesus Christ’. In: Millbank, John; Pickstock, Catherine; Ward, Graham, editors. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. New York: Routledge; 1999. pp. 163–181.
- Wilson, Nancy. *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus and the Bible*. San Francisco: Harper Collins; 1995.