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review of:

Emjel Eyben, Christian Laes, Toon van Houdt,
Amor-Roma. Liefde en erotiek in Rome, (Davidsfonds) Leuven 2003;
 279 p.; Eur 24,50; ISBN 90 5826 203 0

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 2004, 828-30 [2005]

Judging by the ever increasing number of general studies and monographs on Roman culture at large and Roman literature in particular, Roman antiquity continues to fascinate modern readers and scholars. The ancient written sources themselves are continually made available through new editions and translations. Recent decades have even witnessed a proper surge of modern translations into Dutch.

Some of these studies of Roman antiquity may now be conveniently approached by means of a new publication in Dutch by three scholars from Leuven university. It offers a synthesis of contemporary insights into 'love and eroticism in Rome', illustrating its theories by means of numerous translated fragments from texts.

One may wonder how 'love and eroticism in Rome' could be of special interest to readers of this journal. However, the editors have somewhat extended the common definition of 'love' so as to include in this volume a section on family relations in Rome, in a first major part dealing with 'Parents and children' (p. 13-95). The second and third parts of the book are concerned with, respectively, 'Love, sex and gender' (p.97-174) and 'Marriage and family' (p.175-253). Notes, bibliography, and indexes conclude the volume.

In books of this type, ancient sources are usually printed within the context of a scholarly analysis, but here things have been arranged differently: each of the three parts consists of an introductory essay about the subject in question, followed by a choice of translated sources. This splitting up of essays and translations seems a felicitous choice. It enables a novice reader to be prepared for the ancient testimonies, while it allows the advanced reader to easily pick whatever he or she wishes to read.

Another praiseworthy feature of this volume is its attention for the early Christian period. 'Ancient Rome' is not restricted to 'classical Rome', but covers the whole of Roman culture until the early Middle Ages. Many pagan ideas have been developed and transmitted until modern times because they have somehow been included in Christian thinking.

The middle section of the book, on 'Love, sex, and gender' by Toon van Houdt is no doubt its best part, but since it concerns matters other than education, I will not enter into this in detail. Rather, it seems worthwhile briefly to examine the subjects covered in the first section on 'Parents and children'.

Its introduction by Christian Laes opens with a provocative 'trial' of Roman antiquity's basic attitudes towards children: a 'plaintiff' first argues that Roman culture shows a terrible lack of concern for children, what with parents hardly showing interest in education, a formal school system being virtually non-existent, and scenes of violence and brutality being ubiquitous even in daily life. Next, a 'defendant' pleads the opposite case, showing how the Romans greatly cared for their children, for instance by trying to find good nannies, how they grieved for lost young children, and how they actually developed a school system, even if it was accessible only to a relatively small group, as it has been in most periods and cultures other than ours. Of course, the contrast between both stands serves as a starting point for a more balanced view of things, where both differences and similarities between the Romans and ourselves can be highlighted. The Romans were neither brutal barbarians in their thinking about children and education, nor the very opposite.

Laes presents the reader with some facts about Roman demography (mortality and fertility), suggesting that early death must have been a widespread phenomenon, and with a general portrait of daily life in Roman times. Next he highlights Roman attitudes to children, with paragraphs on collective mourning, the role of slaves in education, and the notion of an elite. Sections on the rather curious Roman phenomenon of 'darlings' (child pets) (*delicia* or *pueri delicati*), kept by the wealthy, and of child labour, further testify to the importance of children in the Roman world. A final paragraph discusses the impact of Christianity on the life of children. According to Laes, the most important changes concern the gradual disappearance of accepted forms of paedophilia (notably the *delicia* just mentioned), and the increasing focus on living in the family circle. The translated sources include fragments from ancient historiography, medicine, philosophy, and literature.

A book such as this does not intend to open up new areas of research but rather to give a synthesis of recent scholarly work. In this sense, it may be considered a success. In brief, the reader is given a survey of general topics relative to Roman education, as well as, for that matter, love and marriage life.

Some critical remarks, however, would seem in order. I do not wish to refer to omissions of particular issues, something which is, perhaps, unavoidable in any anthology. However, there is a problem with the choice of fragments: Christian texts sometimes threaten to dominate the material to the expense of available 'pagan' material. It is rather surprising to find the 4th century Greek (!) Church father John Chrysostom as the ancient author with the greatest number of fragments in this book, whereas nothing has been included from say, Catullus or Virgil -- not the least among Roman poets. In the section on education the Christian element is perhaps not too dominant, but throughout the book one cannot help feeling a certain lack of balance in this respect.

About the method of translation, it may be observed that E. Eyben has newly translated the majority of fragments, even where modern, good Dutch translations were readily available. It is difficult to see the reasons for such a choice, particularly since Eyben's style does not quite bring out the liveliness and different styles of the originals. For instance, sections from the poets Horace, Maximianus, and Lucan have been translated in prose without further comment, although published translations are available for the first and second. Yet, to non-Dutch readers, these considerations about translation will probably be of less concern.

To sum up, the book presents a helpful introduction to the subjects of Roman education, sexuality, and marriage life. It does not contain revolutionary insights or theories, but rather offers a synthesis of scholarly work done in the last few decades. Some caution seems due with respect to the focus on Christian thinking, but as a whole, the book offers readers sufficient material to form their own opinion on Roman attitudes towards children.
