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Book Review of Anthony Corbeil: *Sexing the World: Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex in Ancient Rome*

Matthew P. Loar

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mloar2@unl.edu

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ANTHONY CORBEILL. *Sexing the World: Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex in Ancient Rome*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 204 pp. Cloth, \$45.

Why is *patria* (“fatherland”) a feminine noun? How is it that *virtus* (“courage”), though etymologically linked with the masculine *vir*, is also a feminine noun? And more vexingly, what is it about a book (*liber*) that makes it masculine

instead of, say, neuter? When first-year Latin students ask these sorts of questions, our immediate impulse is to reassure them that grammatical gender is just that—grammatical. Trying to divine some underlying sexual characteristic that makes courage feminine or a book masculine is not only futile but also counter-productive to early language learning. As I tell my own students: theirs not to wonder why, theirs but to memorize.

(Un)fortunately for first-year Latin students and their teachers, Corbeill's book all but shatters the illusion of a sex/gender divide in the world of Latin grammar. Indeed, his central thesis is that grammatical gender and biological sex actually do, in some ways, correspond in the ancient Roman world. Not only that, but the correspondences between grammatical gender and biological sex, and the ways in which Roman authors exploit and/or manipulate them, directly contribute to what Corbeill describes as the "heterosexualization" of Roman culture's worldview. In other words, language—and the notion that some innate quality of biological sex inheres in every noun—allows the Romans to conceptually divide the world around them into the fixed and stable sexual categories of male and female. At issue for Corbeill is how this process works and how it evolves over time.

Written in five chapters preceded by a short introduction, the book essentially falls into two parts. With the first three chapters, Corbeill builds his case that ancient Roman authors, grammarians and lexicographers chief among them, were alert to and invested in explaining the relationship between biological sex and grammatical gender. Just as importantly, Corbeill highlights a critical historical development in grammatical gender and its role as an organizing principle for the Roman world: in archaic Rome, genders were far more fluid, and it was only through the authority of unnamed *maiores* and certain poets like Vergil that nouns acquired fixed genders. The last two chapters examine this "linguistic determinism" in action, offering a pair of case studies—on androgynous Roman gods and androgynous hermaphrodites in Rome—aimed at showing how language can simultaneously reflect and reify a heterosexualized worldview. As grammatical gender transitions from fluidity to fixity, Corbeill suggests, so too does the Romans' understanding of sex and sexuality in their own world.

The first chapter, "Roman Scholars on Grammatical Gender and Biological Sex" (12–40), painstakingly lays the groundwork for the subsequent chapters by tracking ancient scholars' ideas about grammatical gender. It forwards two related arguments that are foundational for the rest of the book: first, according to ancient Roman scholars, grammatical gender and biological sex have corresponded in some form since the moment the Latin language was created. Second, when these scholars comment on authors' unorthodox uses of grammatical gender, the primary issue tends to be less morphological and more semantic. To clarify what this means, it will be useful to cite an example from the book: on page 35, Corbeill introduces a puzzling lemma from Nonius' *De indiscretis generibus* ("On Uncertain Genders") for the masculine noun *reditus* ("return," 222.11–17). Nonius cites Vergil (*Aen.* 11.54) as evidence that the noun is masculine, which it

always is throughout Latinity. But Nonius goes on to include three other entries containing feminine nouns with this lemma: *reditio* (Varro), *regressio* (Cicero), and *reversio* (Varro). These three nouns, however, are built from three different stems, so why would Nonius list these as examples of gender variation for the masculine *reditus*? Corbeill's answer is that Nonius seems to be ascribing some masculine quality to the notion of returning, and thus Nonius expects all semantically related nouns to also be grammatically masculine.

The other primary point that emerges from the first chapter, encapsulated in the preceding example, is that those authors most likely to be excused for employing an uncommon gender are revered poets of the late Republic and early Empire. Vergil in particular seems to possess the unique power not only to bend existing rules of grammatical gender but also to rewrite those rules for future authors. This issue is taken up more fully in the book's second and third chapters, "Roman Poets on Grammatical Gender" (41–71) and "Poetic Play with Sex and Gender" (72–103). Both query how select poets can manipulate gender with impunity and why they would do so in the first place; Corbeill assembles a total of thirteen possible answers to these questions. Chapter 2 begins with eight reasons gleaned from ancient grammarians for why a Roman author would alter a word's gender: "semantic distinctions," "morphology and analogy," "they just do it," "metrical convenience," "sound," "grandeur," "Greek intertextuality," and "fluid language." It next considers the role of personification in transforming grammatical gender, and it concludes with "modern cognitive models for noun classification." Chapter 3 addresses visual personification (i.e., material evidence), before moving on to "grammatical gender as an archaizing motif" and "grammatical gender as a literary trope."

The unstated assumption underpinning these chapters is that uses of uncommon gender are both intentional and meaningful. While Corbeill is, to a certain extent, taking his cue from ancient scholars' evident obsession with grammatical gender, at times his arguments about the significance of uncommon gender cannot avoid being speculative. Consider his language in these two chapters: "I would now like to speculate" (62–63); "So let us continue to pursue the hypothesis" (63); "I would like further to speculate" (67); "I preface my own speculations" (73); "A hypothesis . . . lies ready at hand" (83). The speculation reaches its height in the third chapter, where Corbeill applies his model of *genus difficilium potius* to textual criticism.

At two places in the Catullan corpus where the manuscript traditions disagree (62.64 and 63.5), Corbeill argues for readings that privilege the uncommon gender over the common one. The latter case, examined on page 94, pushes the limits of plausibility. To be fair, Corbeill anticipates this very criticism: "At the risk of adding an element to his poem that Catullus did not intend" (94). As he acknowledges, the line in question, which describes Attis' self-castration with a piece of flint, is already highly problematic; it is most commonly printed as: *devolvit* [or *devolsit*] . . . *acutō sibi pondera silice* ("He rolled off [or tore off] the weights [i.e., his testicles] from himself with a sharp flint," 94). Corbeill's interest

is the noun *silex* (“flint”), which he had previously discussed in chapter 2 in order to exemplify Vergil’s poetic authority (47–49): Vergil universally employs *silex* as a feminine noun, whereas in earlier usage it is exclusively masculine. Servius’ commentary, Corbeill points out, not only confirms this but also underscores how transformative Vergil’s gender play was: “Almost everyone used to speak of *silex* in the masculine; that’s the form that both Varro and Lucretius use. Yet Vergil’s authority is so great that we’ve become convinced that we should also speak of *silex* in the feminine” (Serv. *Aen.* 8.233, 47). With the Catullan line in chapter 3, however, Corbeill suddenly changes course, proposing to emend *acutō . . . silice* to *acutā . . . silice*, thereby crediting Catullus with the first feminine use of *silex*. Passing over the fact that this directly contradicts Corbeill’s argument that Vergil inaugurated the feminine use of *silex*—an argument supported both by Servius and by Corbeill’s survey of extant Latin literature—the emendation is highly dubious from a text-critical perspective. Despite the problems with the line’s transmission, *acuto* is perhaps the one word that all of the manuscripts agree on; tellingly, Mynors devotes no attention to it in the apparatus of his *OCT* of Catullus’ poems. Only one editor—not cited by Corbeill—has ever suggested a feminized form of *silex*, and even then *acuto* becomes *acutae*, not *acutā* (*devolsit ictu acutae sibi pondera silicis*; Heyse 1855). Nonetheless, Corbeill prefers the feminine *acutā* because it reinforces the “poem’s theme of slippage between genders” (94) and because it “lends an air of archaic solemnity” (95), with the latter justification recalling Corbeill’s earlier claim that fluid gender is associated with archaic Rome, and thus uses of uncommon gender can function as an archaizing motif. Be that as it may, this simply seems like wishful thinking—manufacturing gender play where it is neither attested nor necessary.

The book’s last two chapters, “Androgynous Gods in Archaic Rome” (104–42) and “The Prodigious Hermaphrodite” (143–69), make the leap from text to culture. The former chapter argues that the movement in grammatical gender from fluidity to fixity mirrors a similar transformation in Romans’ ideas about their gods. Corbeill devotes the bulk of the chapter to the phenomenon of “divine androgyny,” a concept that encompasses two categories of Roman deities: single gods with androgynous sexual characteristics (e.g., Pales), and male/female divine pairs (e.g., Faunus/Fauna; an appendix at the end of the chapter lists all such known pairs, with sources and bibliography). Corbeill’s argument is most clearly expressed through two case studies: first, he traces how the Genius, once a tutelary deity for both sexes, becomes affiliated almost solely with men around the time of the Augustan age, while the female-specific Iuno emerges to fill the void for women. Second, he details how the pair Liber and Libera, who originally represented the male and female procreative capacities, respectively, cease to act in consort as Liber becomes more fully syncretized with Dionysus and Libera is subordinated or ignored entirely. The narrative is by now familiar: early sexual uncertainty surrounding the gods and their domains of influence dissipates as the gods’ roles concretize and become increasingly heterosexualized.

A similar historical development underlies the final chapter, which takes as

its subject the human hermaphrodite and changing attitudes about it during the transition from Republic to Empire. In the early and middle Republic, as Livy recounts, hermaphrodites were *prodigia* that signified a rupture in the *pax deorum*; their ambiguous sexual status, in other words, betokened their sacred character. By the early Empire, however, Romans no longer considered hermaphrodites portentous, and thus their androgyny suddenly proved more problematic. The jurists, in particular, found themselves wrestling with the question of which legal rights intersex individuals ought to receive—whether they should be treated as men or women. As Corbeill summarizes: “the androgyne now presents not a mystery to ponder, but a biological puzzle that is able to offer one, and only one, correct solution” (167).

Upon first reading this book, I found myself skeptical that a cultural worldview could be extrapolated from a grammatical oddity—especially when that worldview is being mediated through the antiquarian and lexicographic projects of authors like Varro and Nonius. In addition, the argument at times felt like a house of cards, liable to collapse if a reader should take issue with any one of its many pieces. In revisiting the book for this review, however, I have found myself more swayed by Corbeill’s thesis. In part this is because the book is so meticulously argued; owing to Corbeill’s consistent signposting, the various stages of his argument, though numerous, are easy to follow and logically connected. But in part this is also because Corbeill so effectively interweaves ancient and modern comparanda to help frame and contextualize his claims. Indeed, it is difficult to assign a name to Corbeill’s methodology in this book, which only speaks to the breadth of its scholarly ambition; what he is doing is not just philology, but also linguistic anthropology. In the end, even if Corbeill occasionally pushes the evidence beyond what it seems capable of supporting, his conclusions are no less powerful for how we might understand the role of language in articulating a heterosexualized (and heteronormative) worldview.

MATTHEW P. LOAR

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN
e-mail: mloar2@unl.edu