

**S.D. Smith, *Greek Epigram and Byzantine Culture: Gender, Desire, and Denial in the Age of Justinian*. Cambridge, 2019. ISBN 978-1-108-48023-9**

This book provides a fresh examination of Greek poetic culture in the sixth century, with close readings of Greek epigram of the Justinian age. Smith aims to elucidate how the *Cycle* of Agathias was embedded within late Roman and early Byzantine culture, with all its complexities and contradictions. His approach builds upon the work of Peter Bell, who has rightly pointed out the “extreme cultural complexity” of the eastern Roman Empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, using traditional philological methods to trace the ideological intersectionality that these classicizing epigrams display within the ambient Christian culture of Byzantium, rather than simply writing these poems off as opaque expressions of the classical *paideia* of the elite. Smith’s study makes use of Judith Butler’s performative gender theory to show just how much gender identities can be subverted, or inverted, in a culture combining the classical *paideia* of the elite and the Christian asceticism imposed by governing figures. On Smith’s reading, the cultural elite expressed in epigram their desire to test the limits of severe asceticism and complete indulgence of one’s desires. The *Cycle* poets of Agathias become masterful at playing at the limits of accepted cultural norms and behavior.

In the first chapter, titled “Food and Wine”, Smith addresses the first book of Agathias’ *Cycle*. The epigrams studied are all related to testing the limits of the physical male body. Symposiasts are stuffed to the breaking point with food and wine, while at the same time they imagine themselves as slave-cooks who satisfy their masters’ every need. These men are delineated and characterized by allusions to both classical and Christian texts; they are comedic *personae*, drawn from Old Comedy, who seek pleasure at the limits of Byzantine culture and society. Smith does a good job of elucidating older texts with which these epigrams interact; but he also clearly explores what the textual dynamics of these poems mean for the epigrammatists themselves and their world. Masculinity is defined as knowing Christian asceticism, on the one hand, and attempting to subvert those Christian expectations, on the other.

The relationship between master and slave resurfaces and becomes the focus of Smith’s second chapter, titled “An Erotic Geography”. The epigrams examined in this chapter all refer to the fetishization of dominance and submission. The Emperor appears as the ultimate masculine authority, the conqueror whom no one may resist. Agathias’ own patron Theodoros is invited to set in motion the rapturous dancing of the poets, whose epigrams he has collected. The male body is imagined as unable to meet the expectations that only the Emperor can fulfil, and so is subverted into a feminized version of itself, which reinforces the accepted social limits of expression within early Byzantine culture. The Emperor’s dominion and the extent to which it determines the social milieu becomes the focus of Smith’s third chapter, titled “Urban Pleasures”. The elite men of Agathias’ *Cycle* are given free rein to experience the

delights on offer in Constantinople, the Emperor's city. In a masculine world of domination, the lesser men, in comparison to the Emperor, find that they can abandon all restraint and give in to their every desire. Smith aptly draws attention to the mosquito net theme; for both Paul Silentiarios and Agathias, the mosquito net is the symbol of urban luxury and indolence which the elite man possesses. At the same time the net's eunuch-like quality (by guarding the bed of its master, a function only performed by eunuch slaves) gives its master the fantasy of king-like power, even though it also draws attention to its master's porousness.

The tension between the male body and its feminized, impotent version is the focus of Smith's fourth chapter, titled "Phallic Creatures". Here, the ithyphallic creatures of myth, Pan, Priapos, and the satyrs of Dionysos, all figure prominently. The themes and motifs which surface here are used by the Byzantine epigrammatists as a symbolic vocabulary for exploring contemporary reconfigurations of masculinity. Smith goes a bit further when he proposes that this symbolic vocabulary is also used for reconsidering the complex relationship between art and desire. The discourse of the identity and limits of masculinity is further explored in Smith's fifth chapter, titled "Classical Women". Once again classical mythology provides the archetypal symbols which help facilitate the discussion of gender roles. Smith does a good job of tracing the influences of the *Cycle* poets, from Hellenistic writers to the Christian writers of the *Lives* of the saints. He illustrates the ways these models are used by early Byzantine epigrammatists to explore the limits of what it means to be a woman. In the final, sixth chapter, titled "Thieving Aphrodite", this feminine elusiveness is given agency and is described as a thief, which provides an opportunity to test the limits of masculinity.

Throughout the book, Smith proposes that, with all their desire to test the limits of erotic build-up and release, by exploring the entire spectrum of gender and fantasizing about taking up the roles and identities found there, the poets of Agathias' *Cycle* want to be other. In fact, they want to be all forms of other, because they see in it a release from their own identity and role within 6<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine culture. Their poems are therefore not just about showcasing their prowess in classical *paideia*; they fantasize about an ecstatic release from normative masculinity. Their epigrams explore various themes and fantasies not accessible to the heteronormative masculinity they were to uphold within their public social context. In sum, this book reads as a piece of sober and serious scholarship, offering a fresh take on the epigrammatic poetry of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Against the dominant view that the erotic epigrams of the 6<sup>th</sup> century are mere literary exercises, Smith treats them on their own terms as literary expressions of real personal and social tensions. It will be essential reading for anyone interested in these fascinating poems.

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