

ROLAND BETANCOURT, *Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender and Race in the Middle Ages*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2020. 288 pp.; 8 color ill.; 50 b/w ill. – ISBN 978-0-691-21088-9 (\$35)

• MARK MASTERSON, Te Herenga Waka/Victoria University of Wellington (mark.masterson@vuw.ac.nz)

Byzantine Intersectionality: Sexuality, Gender and Race in the Middle Ages begins with a well-chosen discussion of representations, texts and images, of Mary of Egypt. In the context of this discussion, BETANCOURT (henceforth B) characterizes his book as concerned with “non-normative sexual practices and sexual consent,” on the one hand, and “transmasculine gender presentation and constructions of race based on skin color,” on the other (p. 2). All these things are present Mary’s life. A reader will also note the presence of terms of the moment in discussions of sex and gender in our postmodern world. This is repeated throughout the book, with similar terms appearing, such as “slut-shaming,” “cis-gender,” “transgender man,” “deadnaming,” “(non-)normative desire,” “queer,” “genderqueer,” “white privilege,” etc. This reflects B’s decision to discuss Byzantine phenomena in terms that will be familiar to readers experiencing the world of sex and gender now. B is guided by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s famous theory of intersectionality that says people’s identities are constituted via interlocking categories of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. B’s idea clearly is to be true to the political ambitions of intersectionality that wishes to provide enabling analyses of oppression to aid the oppressed. And so, B searches for and highlights those who were oppressed in various ways in Byzantium, i.e., women, eunuchs, transgender monks, racialized others, those who felt same-gender desire, and what the nature of their oppressions were.

In Chapter 1, “The Virgin’s Consent,” B makes a series of readings of the Annunciation in both images and text. The point he makes is that a change over the centuries emerged in Byzantium around women’s agency in sex. Whereas in older representations of the Annunciation, Mary is only informed that she will give birth to Jesus, in Byzantine times her consent increasingly is sought. Her agency is allowed for. The chapter also considers evolving attitudes toward rape and consent visible in histories, law, and manuscripts of scripture. This chapter is compelling reading that shows the way Byzantium was changing. It demonstrates historical difference, and a connection to now via a concern with consent.

The second chapter, “Slut-Shaming an Empress,” takes the *Secret History* of Procopius as its central text, and the invectival presentation of Empress Theodora in it, to think about women’s sexuality at all levels of society in the sixth century. The focus is on the ways in which women’s sexuality was a locus of shame. B also discusses the prevalence of knowledge of abortion and contraception in law, church writings, and medical texts. The too-free and shameful, in Procopius’ opinion, sexuality of women had need of abortion and contraception. Reports of them always associates them with lower class women. But B persuasively suggests that abortion and contraception were surely practiced by elite Byzantine women, and they are things that do not make it into the histories. B also feels that there was an inchoate and ambivalent feeling abroad in the empire that women ultimately did have the right to choose to carry a foetus to term. Lastly, B associates the mutilation of men accused of pederasty by Justinian with slut-shaming also. All the topics in this chapter are related to sexual shame, and they hold together well on this basis.

“Transgender Lives” is chapter three and features a number of figures that B suggests are best viewed as transgender. There are women who became transgender eunuch-men in monasteries, whom B ties back to Thecla and Perpetua. A woman who became male was transcending femininity, which was lower status and more embodied. So this was a positive thing. But at the same time, it was a site of ambivalence, since in scripture and canon law cross-dressing was prohibited. B also discusses the story, preserved in writings from the middle centuries of Byzantium, of Emperor Elagabalus wanting doctors to make a vagina on his (and B says “her” here) body. B proposes that this surgery is well thought of as “gender-affirming.” B also asserts that eunuchs are irremediably feminized by castration and are therefore to be regarded as genderqueer (p. 109). Byzantium was also a place where nonbinary and gender-fluid identity could be found, and B suggests that Michael Psellos was non-binary, using they/them to refer to him.

Chapter 4, “Queer Sensations,” centers on representations of the story of Doubting Thomas who needed physical confirmation that it was Jesus himself come back to life (he stuck his finger into the hole in Jesus’ side). The metaphors of this scene, which is about the faith that Thomas should have had about the Resurrection, are sexy. This chapter for the most part discusses the role the texts and images of this story played in a monastic context. The chapter also has a polemical edge. B takes scholarship as a whole to task for having an emphasis, where desire between men is con-

cerned, that is too cisgender and too carnal:

Medieval history not only has done far too little to grapple with same-gender desire in a way inclusive of a variety of gender identities as well as intimate practices but also has all but erased and ignored asexual subjectivities. (p. 130)

The solution B suggests is using a concept of “queer desire” that can embrace carnalities desired by cisgender and transgender Byzantines and even the asexual yearning of the monastery, in which desire, transcended *and* sublimated, lives on. This chapter trades on the dichotomy between the mind (=masculine) and body (=feminine) which B reads trenchantly into the monastic context, and even into perception itself, with the aim of showing that they are best described as queer. The discussion of queering perception was difficult.

The final and fifth chapter, “The Ethiopian Eunuch,” is a lengthy and interesting analysis of the Ethiopian eunuch who appears in the Menologion of Basil II. It is a highly persuasive analysis of the image, down to the use of color and paint strokes (see pp. 186–187), to show ways in which the Menologian is not indulging in anything racist. This conclusion is bolstered by comparison to other images in the Menologion and still other images elsewhere and by reference to texts. This analysis is done in the service of thinking through the place of difference perceptible at the level of skin color (“colorism”) in Byzantium. B’s conclusion is that what we may call racism was sometimes present in the medieval empire, but not always. The image in the Menologion has work to do, given the association with darkness and evil in monastic literature from late antiquity, which is ever able to translate into racist rejection of persons who have dark skin. There is also the hypersexualization of persons with dark skin in this earlier literature too. This eunuch is a figure in which the major concerns of B, “gender identity, sexuality, and racial identity all intersect” (p. 195).

The Epilogue muses on the journey of the book. The various figures presented in the volume would have “actively challenged Byzantine culture to confront its privilege and entitlement” (p. 205). At the same time, though, B sees evidence that Byzantium did not depend as much as the medieval West did on the ostracizing of minorities. B also forthrightly asserts that his use of terms such as “marginalization, oppression and intersectionality” is matter of methodology and not anachronism (p. 207). To dismiss such terms and investigations that use them is “to be complicit with oppression” now (p. 207). Making his political investments overt (as he does

elsewhere), B believes that revelation of intersections of oppression in gender, sexuality and race in the past is a necessary prolegomenon to a more just future: “Our past must be intersectional before our future can ever be” (p. 208).

Now to speak in general terms. I see this book as successful in setting out to do what it aimed to do. Almost always clear-eyed (the discussion of queer perception, in contrast, was somewhat challenging), this book leverages B’s considerable art-historical acumen to analyze many images (as well as relevant texts) from late antiquity until late in the empire. Particularly strong are the discussion of the evolving importance and broad ranging significance of Mary’s consent to become Mother of God and the tour-de-force presentation of semantics recoverable from the Ethiopian eunuch in the Menologian of Basil II. B’s unflinching embrace of anachronism (if I may say so) in the service of getting around occlusions and prejudices in the source material may not suit all tastes. But B’s enthusiastic choice of anachronism in terminology and analytical structures must be measured against what they accomplish. And they accomplish a lot, highlighting historical difference between Byzantium and now, and Byzantium and antiquity. They also enable identification of similarities. This approach also enables B to speak persuasively on ways in which the upper classes at Byzantium could finesse and avoid things that oppressed the lower classes (see, e.g., p. 15).

I have some reservations but they don’t seriously vitiate the value of B’s work. I am not convinced that Psellos should be regarded as non-binary, though B does raise some questions. I will have to sit with this and read more Psellos. I also don’t agree with the assertion that eunuchs are invariably gender-queer and effeminized. Charges of effeminacy are what we read in invective situations. When all the men are getting along, all the men, eunuch and non-eunuch, are all man in the sources. Here for example is Psellos’ own description of Basil the Parakoimomenos from *Chronographia* 1.3:

This man (*aner/άνήρ*) had the greatest degree of authority/greatest reputation in the Empire of the Romans, according to the loftiness of his intellect, the sheer mass of his body and a form suitable for a ruler...

This is not a description of an effeminate gender-queer male. He is called a man and the figure he cuts is impressive. There are more examples of this about Basil and still others to be found. I think the place of the eunuch is one that alternates between a masculinity held pretty well and, when things

go sour, a manhood questioned with charges of effeminacy and the rest. Lastly, and writing as a scholar who believes it is important to discuss actual sex and sexual desire between men in the sources, I found the labelling of the term “same-sex desire” as transphobic provocative (p. 127: “the assumptions underlying the category of ‘same-sex desire’ are fundamentally transphobic...”). While I understand that an emphasis on same-sex desire, with its attention to body morphology, will erase transmen, I submit that the erasure is temporary and strategic. There is nothing to stop the scholar from considering, as B does, the ways trans and same-gender desire work in men’s spaces. To insist so strongly on same-gender desire as the lens and to disparage same-sex desire at the same time, is to erase specific sexual acts at the very least, and these are acts that have hardly been over discussed in the scholarship on the Byzantine Empire, to put it mildly. Indeed sublimation of bodily desire and the erasure of male genital specificity make discussion of actual sex difficult and aid the homophobic project of saying that expressions of carnal desire are nothing but metaphor. There is much to discuss here.

But I will end on an unadulterated positive note. B has provided many routes toward considering marginalized figures in the empire and frequently knits together evidence in compelling and delightful ways. I learned much from this book and it made me think. I particularly appreciate the hard work he has done with trans. I will be grateful for it going forward.

Keywords

Byzantine empire; gender; sexuality