

THE BODY IN ANTIQUITY

GHERCHANOC (F.), WYLER (S.) (edd.) *Corps en morceaux. Démembrer et recomposer les corps dans l'Antiquité classique*. Pp. 174, ill. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020. Paper, €22. ISBN: 978-2-7535-7923-1.

In their introduction, the editors of this fascinating volume quote Empedocles' famous cosmological fragments (fr. 57–61 Burnet, p. 13): in the beginning, individual body parts, heads, arms and eyes, wandered the earth in hope of uniting; many of the initial unions resulted in strange hybrids, such as oxen with human heads, or vice versa, and creatures that were neither male nor female. This description, as the editors note, provokes an 'undeniable uneasiness', 'un indéniable malaise' (my translations from the French) in the modern reader, as it would have done in the ancient one, for we expect bodies to be coherent, not a jumble of disparate parts. Probing beyond the discomfort, the volume asks the question of how ancient societies (mainly those of the Greeks and Romans, with some insights into La Tène and Achaemenid cultures) perceived the unity of the human body. While the question is not entirely new, this work demonstrates that, by bringing various disciplines and approaches together, a whole can become more than the sum of its parts, a point made in the epilogue.

The volume is divided into two sections, the first focuses on dismemberment, the second on the composition and re-composition of bodies. L. Chazalon opens the first section with a study of depictions of dismembered and mutilated bodies on Greek vases, which are rare, especially when compared to literary descriptions. She shows that, except for the body of Medusa, mutilated bodies represented on vases are male but have no link to procreation (p. 37), whether the dismembered person died too young (Troilos) or whether they are purposefully represented without their sexual organs (Pentheus). The material examined is rich, and there are numerous astute observations,

for instance that the representation of pouring blood on the Euphronios Krater resembles that of strips worn by victorious athletes, depicted for instance on a plate by Epikteos (Paris, Louvre G7) – representations of blood can be ornamental and allude to the ‘good death’ (pp. 25–7).

The second short essay, by F. Frontisi, also examines representations on Greek vases, focusing on the story of Acteon, who was attacked, and eventually devoured, by his dogs. Frontisi notes that Greek painters depicted the moment of the attack, but not that of the dismemberment of Acteon. This, she argues, is to be expected, since meat consumption is not normally shown on Greek vases. Like Chazalon, Frontisi stresses that ancient myths about human dismembering and devouring focus on male bodies: ‘On y rencontre des petits Poucets mais pas de Chaperon Rouge’ ‘We encounter Little Thumblings [in Greek myths] but no Red Riding Hoods’ (p. 48). This essay also includes a welcome element of reception, as it examines two modern representations of the myth of Acteon, by Berlinde de Bruyckere (2012) and Christophe Curien (no date given) respectively.

Moving from the history of art to bioarchaeology, É. Rousseau offers a summary of recent research on the practice of post-mortem dismemberment of human bodies at French La Tène sites. She argues that the evidence points to a lack of aversion for decomposing bodies on the parts of the Gauls, for both the newly dead and those in an advanced state of decomposition were dismembered. The current evidence does not allow scholars to offer definitive conclusions as to the reasons for this practice: are we dealing with a denial of normal burial rites or with a preparation of bodies before inhumation?

In the final essay of the first section, Y. Muller surveys the Greek evidence relating to punishments by amputation of bodily extremities. He first examines the

occurrences of the words *akrōtēriasmōs* (noun: ‘amputation’) and *akrōtēriazō* (verb: ‘to amputate’), which only appear late in Greek literature. While modern scholarship considers these words to be legal terms referring to types of punishment, Muller shows that they have a broader meaning, and relate to amputations in a variety of contexts, including surgery and circumcision of the prepuce. Second, Muller examines Greek literary descriptions of amputations before the appearance of the words *akrōtēriasmōs* and *akrōtēriazō*. He argues that the Greeks considered the practice of amputating extremities to be a barbarian, and more particularly Persian, type of punishment, although he notes that there are some rare episodes in which the Greeks themselves amputated extremities, in particular the mutilation of the Herms.

The second section of the volume, shorter even though it includes more essays than the first, deals with the unity of the body. F. Bourbon examines a few rare instances where the Hippocratic gynaecological treatises mention the ‘whole of the body’ (*holon to sōma*), a phrase sometimes used in conjunction with *hē anthropos* (‘the female human being’). She shows that the phrase occurs in descriptions of treatments for sterility, which are often very long and uncomfortable, and serves as a reminder to the medical practitioners that they must not lose sight of their whole patient when they focus on her bodily parts, and in particular on the genital parts.

The next essay, by C. Baroin and Gherchanoc, also deals with the female body, suggesting that ancient texts depict female beauty, unlike male beauty, as a composite of beautiful parts: hair, face (itself parcelled out: eyes, cheeks, face), neck, hands and arms, feet and ankles feature most prominently (p. 123). Female beauty is an assemblage in which colour plays an important role – in English we could say that the female body is always ‘made up’, for it is always composite, and even when it is not adorned with artificial cosmetics, it appears as if painted. Further, this composite beauty

often serves as a point of comparison for the perfection of a rhetorical argument.

Returning to Attic vases, F. Lissarrague briefly examines representations of soldiers' panoplies, showing that the warrior's body is a constructed one, which combines actual flesh and bones and a 'second skin' in the form of his armour. In scenes of battles, representations of parts of the panoply serve to draw attention to the warrior's absence, his death and deconstruction; while, in departure scenes, depictions of a helmet and shield placed on the floor point to the progressive construction of the warrior's body.

Finally, E. Rosso turns to neo-Attic art produced between the second century BCE and the first century CE, focusing on procession scenes and Pasitelian monumental sculptures. She shows that neo-Attic art used stock figures and bodily parts, combined in an infinity of ways, to create human 'hybrids', which at times push the boundary of the plausible.

This is an extremely rich volume, which adds much to the scholarship on the ancient body. Here I would like to focus on two threads that run through the volume. The first is that of the gendered body. In ancient literature and art it is the male body – usually the young male body – that is dismembered, the unity of which is violently destroyed. The female body, on the other hand, is composite, artificial, never quite complete – there is no cohesion to be shattered, even though the female body is so often the locus of violence. There is scope here for using this reflection on the fragmentation of the female body in a study of votive bodily parts, since there are many preserved ancient examples of female bodily organs, especially breasts and uteruses. In the epilogue, the editors mention their wish to turn to the study of anatomical votives in the future; in the meantime, see J. Draycott and E.J. Graham (edd.), *Bodies of Evidence: Ancient Anatomical Votives Past, Present, Future* (2017) and J. Hughes, *Votive Body*

Parts in Greek and Roman Religion (2017). It is also worth noting that, in a context where the female body was seen as mostly fragmented, Hippocratic practitioners might have been quite innovative in insisting that a female patient's *entire* body required attention. This was not the only area in which they were original, for unlike other ancient authors, they did not see womanhood as a deviation from a male standard, observable mainly at the level of the genitals (the so-called 'one sex model'), but rather something that was inscribed throughout a woman's body, including her very flesh; see primarily the studies of H. King (*Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* [1998]; *The One-Sex Body on Trial: the Classical and Early Modern Evidence* [2013]).

The second thread I would like to pick up is that of a *corpus*, a body of work, which is perhaps less immediately visible in the volume. Rosso alone explicitly plays on the notion of an iconographic *corpus* and its links with the human body (p. 142), but most essays extol the benefits of studying series, *corpora* of sources, both taking them in their entirety and focusing on their parts. This made me reflect on ancient habits of describing objects and literary compositions in anthropomorphic terms, for example vases have necks and bellies; verses have feet; collections of texts are bodies. These analogies are then retrojected on to the human body, for example the uterus is seen as a jar, with a neck and a belly; the female body is compared to a literary creation.

The volume is beautifully produced, especially considering its affordable price. It includes numerous illustrations in black and white. Some (at 1/8 page) are a little small to read, but I feel it was the right choice to include them, as it is easier to use these images for quick reference than to search online databases while reading. The bibliographies to most essays are extremely thorough, although a few authors opted for a more selective approach. Some indexes would have been a bonus, but their absence

is mediated by the excellent essay summaries in the introduction.

This work will appeal to all historians of the ancient body and to historians of Greek and Roman art, especially those interested in Attic vases. All essays are clearly written and accessible to those who read French, since all Greek and Latin passages are translated, and Greek terms or phrases are for the most part transliterated or kept to a minimum.

The editors have done an excellent job at pushing us beyond uneasiness – and I must stress that some essays were hard to read, in the sense that the material was of a sensitive nature – and making us reflect on the cohesion and fragmentation of the body in antiquity.

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