H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Maryline G. Parca, Angeliki Tzanetou, eds. *Finding Persephone: Women's Rituals in the Ancient Mediterranean.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. xiv + 327 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34954-5; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21938-1.

Reviewed by Randall S. Howarth (Mercyhurst College)
Published on H-Women (January, 2009)
Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt

Behind the Veil

Finding Persephone has its genesis in a conference on "Women's Rituals" held at the University of Illinois in October 2002; all the papers from that meeting are here reproduced with five additions. The subtitle, *Women's Rituals in the Ancient Mediterranean*, is a bit misleading, because the volume as a whole speaks more to the ways in which the topic area is able to provide texture to our knowledge of the mostly Greek ancient world–and the limits of the relevant evidence–than it does to women's rituals per se. The collection includes fourteen essays, about half of which have accompanying illustrations, tables, etc. Each essay has endnotes, and the volume provides a unified bibliography and index.

Angeliki Tzanetou's introduction surveys the changing emphases of previous works concerned with women's rituals. She notes that these have only recently begun to garner attention apart from their treatment in overarching rubrics like "Ancient Women" and/or "Ancient Religion." She traces an arc from studies primarily interested in interpreting female ritual for its connection to fertility, through those that interpret them as fossilized remnants of a lapsed matra-focality in pre-urban cultures, through more nuanced views of ritual as part of a process of gender inscription, and, finally, to the most recent array of approaches and applications whose breadth is suggested in the present work. One such new emphasis is the emerging understanding of ritual performance, especially women's ritual performance, as acting in active partnership with male political performance. Together–goes the argument–these were crucial to the social and political stability of the ancient city. In other words, the paucity of relevant evidence does not indicate the social significance of women's ritual performance so much as it does the fact that the custodians of historical memory have traditionally been concerned with the acts of men. We might therefore ask–given the limited and problematic evidence–what questions can we legitimately ask? Or better put, for which questions might we legitimately expect answers? To what extent is it an exercise in futility to reconstruct cultural realities for which symbolism is the only evidence? What are we missing? What are we inventing? Reading culture from ritual may lead one to wonder whether one has begun "to believe," as Lewis Carroll's queen did so gleefully, "as many as six impossible things before breakfast." Tzanetou attempts both to address these issues in a general sense and to do so in a manner that provides unifying threads to the collection of essays.

As it turns out, on the whole, the volume vindicates the view of its editors that "the study of Women's rituals is a burgeoning cross-disciplinary field" (p. 23). In contrast, all such collections of essays, however diligent and ingenious the editors, have contributions that are more and less successful individually, and more and less adherent to the ostensibly unifying themes. After the introduction (part 1), the book presents four additional sections. The first of these, "Sources and Methodology," includes only one essay, "The Scandal of Women's Ritual." This teases the reader if only because it leaves mostly unrequited the implied promise of the section title. Deborah Lyons examines the frequent coupling of women's ritual with scandal, as in, for example, Aristophanes's and other Greek writers' depictions of male attempts to penetrate rituals closed to men (for the implied purpose, of course, of finding out what is going on in them). Lyons challenges the notion that the rituals were, in fact, secret and proposes instead that the *pretend* secrecy was itself an important part of gender inscription. There are, of course, significant implications for the interpretation of this sort of evidence generally, and ultimately this is Lyons's point–hence its inclusion in this section. But the lack of balancing essays on other aspects of evidentiary

problems leaves Lyons holding the bag for an editorial weakness.

Section 2, "Gender and Agency," has at least two strong essays. Barbara Goff, in "Improvising on the Athenian Stage: Women's Ritual Practice in Drama," interprets women's ritual as a "dialectical experience" since women were at once both "subjects and objects" of ritual; it simultaneously "governs women ... [even as it] offers them autonomy" (pp. 80-81). She argues that the apparent autonomy granted women through female ritual existed only within the parameters established by an overall social mandate. The dynamics of the mandate were visible, argues Goff, in drama. Here, women's rituals were commonly portrayed as the means by which dysfunctional society can be–and therefore must be–rebalanced. It should be noted, as does Goff, that her argument is largely a recap of previously published work. In the same section, and in the same vein, is Vassiliki Panoussi's "Threat and Hope: Women's Rituals in Civil War." Panoussi explores the use by ancient writers of the notion ritual perversion as a metaphor for civil discord. This look at Vergil, Lucan, and Statius, with clear implications for a wider application in Roman historiography, locates examples in which female centered rituals were distorted in the overall context of civil discord, and, subsequently and logically, in which the restoration of concord was clearly linked to the restoration of proper ritual performance by women. Although not expressly treated by Panoussi, such historical events as the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BCE and the penetration of the Bo Dea cult in Caesar's house represent obvious examples in which this linkage existed in ostensibly "historical" writing. We may thus extend Panoussi's thesis and consequently locate the historical writing of the ancients more properly as a subgenre of literature to whose rules and conventions historical writing is beholden. As someone whose work is primarily concerned with ancient historiography, this is a welcome insight.

Of the remaining two sections, the last, "Appropriations and Adaptations," is the stronger and the strongest overall. At least four of the five essays are quite good. They adhere, more than less, to the promise of the section title. I single out for special praise Maryline G. Parca's "Worshipping Demeter in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt." Here, Parca tests the correlation of evolving Demeter rituals with Egypt's passage from Hellenistic to Roman influence. Ultimately, although there are patterns of portability, mostly of imagery, across Egyptian, Greek, and Roman cultural lines, this was not indicative of a significant syncretistic trend. Demeter was always worshipped as a Greek qua Greek cult whose particular popularity in Egypt probably resulted from its resonation with a culture accustomed to provide more autonomy for women. This is a somewhat counterintuitive conclusion generally, but it seems to confirm what we thought we knew about cultural compartmentalization in Egypt. One quickly appreciates Parca's mastery of a wide array of evidence across multiple language contexts, and her argument is thorough and persuasive. From the same section, Lauren Caldwell's contribution, "*Nuptiarum Sollemnia*: Girls' Transition to Marriage in the Roman Jurists," stands out. She presents a case in which custom seems to confute ritual, rather than be signified by it. Caldwell shows clearly that Roman marriage law did not seem especially concerned with marriage rituals as a meaningful legal threshold, and that cohabitation patterns of betrothed couples varied widely irrespective of those rituals. Also, in the same section, Kathy L. Gaca's provocative essay, "Early Christian Antipathy toward the Greek 'Women Gods,"' identifies particular Christian hostility toward pagan women's rituals as a central element in an overall strategy designed to transform "Greek religiosity into a new religious sphere" (p. 286). It is a well-placed argument, especially with the foundation provided by the contributions of Goff and Panoussi, in that the arguments made in those contexts suggest that such a strategy could not only have been effective, but also could have been consciously and explicitly understood by those intent on its implementation.

The "Performance" section (section 3) is the weakest overall. The intended rationale of this section seems to be not performance, as in performance on stage, but rather the performance of the rituals themselves, qua rituals, or ritual as perhaps more loosely defined as acts repeated according to formulae (as in song and magic). But only the most tortured reasoning could rationalize putting these three particular contributions in one section. The grouping certainly acts to the detriment of the third (and best) of the three essays, Eva Stehle's "Thesmoporia and Eleusininian Mysteries: The Fascination of Women's Secret Ritual." This is individually a solid effort and well worth the read. Stehle makes an interesting presentation of the argument that the Athenian mysteries were a kind of male co-optation of the (female) mysteries implicit in the Thesmophoria. Of the remaining two contributions in this section, Andromache Karonika's "Folksongs as Ritual Acts: The Case of Work Songs" is the weakest in the volume.

I can certainly recommend the essays I have mentioned specifically and a few of the others as readings appropriate especially to graduate students and others across various disciplines who may be interested in see-

ing how gender theories are being used in exciting new ways and as a source of appropriate bibliography. The book, as a whole, is a good representation of the potential of the study of women's rituals as a medium for relocating women to the center of ancient society from their long relegation at the edge. Although the structure of the book suffers somewhat from the intention of the editors to include all contributions made at the initial conference in 2002 and from the somewhat forced rationales of the groupings, the collection is well worth the read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Randall S. Howarth. Review of Parca, Maryline G.; Tzanetou, Angeliki, eds, *Finding Persephone: Women's Rituals in the Ancient Mediterranean.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23764

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.