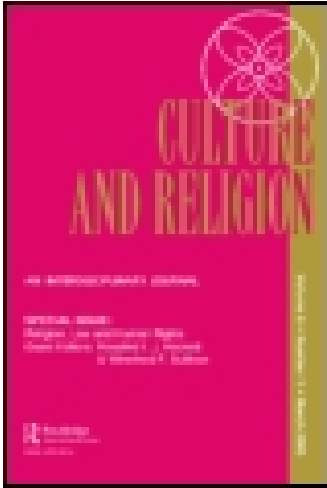


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Bona Dea and the cults of Roman women

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BOOK REVIEW

Bona Dea and the cults of Roman women, Attilio Mastrocinque, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014, 209 pp., €52 (pbk), ISBN 978-3-515-10752-5

The history of ancient Roman women is a story substantially drawn up *in absentia*: with the exception of relatively few epigraphical documents, we have no access whatsoever to their own testimony. Epistemologically, women were considered *Unreliable Witnesses*, as Ross Shepard Kraemer entitled her recent book (2011). The entire history of ancient Roman feminine religiosity, in particular, has been controlled, recorded and inscribed in a documentary masculine continuity. We know very little about feminine cults, and everything we know is filtered by elite male authors writing for wealthy male readers, in the interest of their social privileges and political power.

Against this backdrop, the publication of a new book concerning the exclusively feminine cult of Bona Dea, the ‘Good Goddess’ primarily known thanks to the socio-political scandal that in 62 B.C.E. involved Publius Clodius Pulcher and Pompeia, Caesar’s wife, should be welcomed with interest and curiosity. Preceded only by Hendrik H.J. Brouwer’s masterly *Bona Dea: The Sources and a Description of the Cult* (1989), the new volume by Attilio Mastrocinque (Università degli Studi di Verona, Italy) – hosted in the *Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge* book series edited by Pedro Barceló, Peter Riemer, Jörg Rüpke and John Scheid – is comprehensively dedicated to *Bona Dea and the Cults of Roman Women*.

The core concept of the book resides in the reconstructed history of women’s ritual ‘sexual union or love affairs with a god [which] were thought to be necessary and beneficial’ for brides and young girls alike (p. 13). The main form that this sexual intercourse assumed is rape, which is presented as one of the chief theological and political scaffoldings of the ancient Roman *mentalité* (p. 17). Thus rape, a ‘primitive form of sex’ (p. 154) ritually regimented, was violently offered to the male gods as a positive ‘breach’ (p. 30) into the sacred which in turn granted the continuing source of fertility and wine (pp. 13, 30, 52). Bona Dea, also known as Fauna in some mythological variants (wife of mythic Latin king Faunus, she was raped and killed after the refusal of a sexual intercourse), is considered the centre of this reconstruction. She was, as Mastrocinque states, the *alter ego* of Roman women, who foreshadowed a (better) life after death through an eschatogamy (p. 73) for her devotees. As tentative evidence for the belief in an afterlife, the author presents a Dionysiac interpretation of the iconography which adorned some Imperial sarcophagi (pp. 39–50; 70–74).

Overall, the proposed mythological reconstruction supports the conflation of a huge number of female deities with the character of Bona Dea (pp. 118f., 143),

while creatively filling in the gaps of the known sources. Mastrocinque's understanding of the Bona Dea cult as a bridal ritual is, for example, not attested elsewhere (p. 61) and neither is the link he ascribes to Bona Dea and a fictional Bacchic sexual fertility ritual (p. 49). Since 'social functions precede myths' and require rituals (p. 86), Mastrocinque claims that Roman young girl initiations (documentarily unattested) involved either the collection of menstrual blood (p. 145) or defloration perhaps sexually led by an old woman disguised as a male god (p. 29), via a phallus contained in a box (p. 60), or using snakes (p. 62), maybe with sexually inactive (or active?) men as spectators (pp. 52f., 94). As a comparative support, Mastrocinque recalls the Medieval *jus primae noctis* (pp. 18 ff.) and modern day ethnographic Pacific feminine rituals (pp. 191ff.). The volume remains nonetheless ambiguous whether the ritual penetration was real or symbolic (p. 24), but appears to be inclined towards the first option (pp. 17, 21, 86f., 107).

Before that rite of passage, just as in Johann Heinrich Füssli's 1781 oil painting entitled *The Nightmare*, Roman girls were being told that they would have been raped by gods or 'fecundating divine ancestor[s]' in 'erotic dreams' (p. 152) to ensure the fertility of their families. If refuted, 'disappointed' male gods might have harshly punished them (pp. 27, 29, 86, 105ff., 152). Mythographically, Hercules acted as a major 'fecundator' and a 'raper' (like Faunus), but during the Bona Dea festival he played the part of a 'protector' (p. 107). Thereupon, Clodius' presence during the Bona Dea cult held in 62 B.C. E. is hypothetically presented as the mythological staging of *Hercules musarum* (pp. 54, 94ff.) which, by the way, triggered the subsequent scandal. The whole mythico-ritual complex is ascribed to an 'educational cycle for Roman girls' (p. 190), similar to those ethnographically attested in Oceania (pp. 190ff.) and in Africa (p. 194).

To the reader's bewilderment, some of the evidence underpinning the whole set of speculations is merely plausible, while other is controversial or lacking (pp. 21, 81). Word limit imposes no digression on topics such as historico-religious frameworks, ethnographic comparisons, different spatio-temporal levels or the theologico-political explanation of Clodius' scandal. Suffice it to say here that Mastrocinque frankly admits that 'no author clarifies if and how the myth of the rape was recalled or even enacted during the ceremonies' (p. 51), while the hypothetical afterlife beliefs recovered in the cult of Bona Dea remain highly disputed. As a matter of fact, the underlying mythico-theological justification hinges *a priori* on the existence of a coherently paradigmatic mythico-ritual model of Bona Dea – *de facto* built *ex novo* (pp. 118f.) – whereas cutting-edge research in cognitive historiography shows that in Roman cults, like the one devoted to Bona Dea, there was hardly a perfect, pre-packaged theology. Moreover, no effort is made to contextualise rape as a masculine, mythocratic fantasy projected by the dominant onto the subordinate, as an institutionalised weapon in masculine social competition, or merely as a violent crime. While the concept and the practice of rape are certainly central to Roman masculine

ideology, Mastrocinque overlooks the fact that the so-called *jus primæ noctis* in its European, literary form is a later Medieval invention motivated by social displays of power. Finally, the study of past defloration rituals – when carefully assessed as trustworthy – may even reserve comparatively interesting premises, but the ethnographic accounts of South Pacific sexual customs Mastrocinque cites have been, and still are, extensively challenged and debated.

From a methodological point of view, Mastrocinque's interpretation is problematic for the following reasons: first, it downplays the current consensus recalled at the inception of this review. It is somehow discomfiting and naive to find him saying that 'Roman women did not *tend* to write history' (p. 150, emphasis added). Second, his interpretation disregards the poststructuralist toolbox (pp. 99f.), consequently belittling the entangled relationship between social constraints, political power and sexual control in androcentric societies.

If retrieved as the old, overarching and *sui generis passe-partout*, religion may become a confusing element in historiographical research. Indeed, Mastrocinque's book scores high in imaginative connections and phenomenological originality, but it fails to provide the necessary epistemic warrant for most of its assertions. This is unfortunate because some interesting ideas would have definitely benefited from a more critical assessment. As immortalized by Carl Sagan, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence which, in this case, is still missing.

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