Fantham, Foley, Kampen, Pomeroy & Shapiro, 
*Women in the Classical World.*

Ronald R. Robel
At the 1995 ISCSC meeting in Dayton, when David Wilkinson displayed his usual cornucopia of books for reviews at the next annual meeting, my eyes immediately caught sight of *Women in the Classical World*. I cheerfully snapped it up, attracted by its resplendent dust jacket and catchy title, and carted it back to Alabama with visions of all the useful knowledge to be gained from digesting its contents. Although my field is East Asian History, for many years I have been teaching a course in Comparative World Civilizations and I constantly prowl around for suitable materials to enrich this course. The course contains units on Greece and Rome. One of the items that I endeavor to touch on for each civilization in the survey concerns the role and status of women. Most standard text books provide little information on women’s contributions in the ancient world, so acquiring this gem seemed like manna from Heaven.

*Women in the Classical World* represents the collective work of five authors. According to a blurb enclosed with the book entitled: “News from Oxford University Press,” this lavishly illustrated publication “is meticulously researched and edited by leading experts in the fields of ancient history and art history, women’s studies, and Greek and Roman literature. This exciting new volume lifts the curtain on the women of ancient Greece and Rome, from slaves and prostitutes, to Athenian housewives, to Rome’s imperial family.” It offers to be “the first book on classical women to give equal weight to written texts and artistic representations, it brings together a great wealth of materials -- poetry, vase painting, legislation, medical treatises, architecture, religious and funerary art, women’s ornaments, historical epics, political speeches, even ancient coins -- to present women in the historical and cultural context of their time.” It “puts together in one volume all of the information about women that is scattered throughout the fragmented mosaic of ancient history. The book’s chronological arrangement allows the changing roles of women to unfold over a thousand year period, beginning in the eighth century B.C.E. The authors seek out and present ancient literature that preserves women’s own voices.” “Both the art and the literature highlight women’s creativity, sexuality and coming of age, marriage and child rearing, religious and public roles, and other themes.” The blurb concludes with: “Provocative, surprising, filled with examples of the rich legacy of classical art, *Women in the Classical World* is a masterly foray into the past, and an important statement on the lives of women in ancient Greece and Rome.” I remain deeply indebted to Dr. Wilkinson for having this publication announcement inserted in the book. It proved of tremendous assistance when trying to recapitulate the contents of this book! As with all too many publication notices, enthusiastically conjured up to promote sales, these statements turned out to be

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half/truth, half/hype.

In truth this book is thoughtfully constructed. Its thirteen chapters are evenly divided between Greece and Rome. I have yet to fathom the meaning of its subtitle: “Image and Text.” The beauty of the authors’ arrangement is something a bit unique for organizing materials of this nature. They first present a chapter that deals with a distinctively identified historical period which is described in more general terms. The titles of some of these chapters are revealing. “Women in Archaic Greece: Talk in Praise and Blame,” “Women in Classical Athens: Heroines and Housewives,” “The Hellenistic Period: Women in a Cosmopolitan World,” “Republican Rome I: From Marriage by Capture to Partnership in War -- the Proud Women of Early Rome,” “Republican Rome II: Women in a Wealthy Society -- Aristocratic and Working Women from the Second Century BCE,” “Women Family, and Sexuality in the Age of Augustus and the Julio-Claudians,” and “Women of the High and Later Empire: Conformity and Diversity.”

Following each of these chapters appears an EXCURSUS (except for the final chapter). The excursuses deal with more focused matters promising historical treats of greater titillation. They are entitled: “Spartan Women: Women in a Warrior Society,” “Amazon: Women in Control,” “Medicine: the ‘Proof’ of Anatomy,” “Etruscan Women,” “The ‘New Women’: Representation and Reality” and finally “The Women of Pompeii.” This arrangement is described in the Preface as being "both diachronic and synchronic: and "the excursuses are devised to present special or ‘deviant’ aspects of women in the ancient world...".

It is true that Women in the Classical World is precisely and abundantly documented. It represents a top-rate scholarly endeavor. The authors provide generous quotations from highly reputable translators. It is magnificently illustrated. Although all photographs are in black and white, they are clear, sharp and a joy to behold. Each illustration is suitably positioned in the text for ease of reference. This demonstrates the care and precision the authors devoted to the preparation of this text. And it is obvious the authors also expended tremendous effort to provide meaningful documents to buttress their explanations and arguments.

Women in the Classical World commences with an ill-advised five page untitled introductory section featuring comments on a marble stele of Mnesarete, daughter of Socrates. Although the writer states..."the stele is one of the best preserved of its type...." (p. 5) the descriptive analysis of the stele illustrates the limitations anyone encounters when attempting to utilize a single piece of art for constructing meaningful paradigms of broader application in the historical context. The stele while nicely crafted, actually reveals very little of substance. One of the two figures portrayed can not be positively identified. The inscription could be entirely formulaic, bearing nothing realistic in terms of the life of Mnesarete, who is known to us by name only through this marble memento and no other historical text. The author claims “… sometimes such inscriptions help
us to reconstruct the family tree of a woman who would be otherwise unknown to us.” Alas, nothing follows to validate this contention. “Socrates was a common name in Athens (Mnestrates’s father must have been a close contemporary of the famous philosopher) and this man is not known from other sources.” (p. 7) This simply is pure speculation! More to the point is the author’s confession: “Even a relatively undamaged grave monument such as this one may be deceptive and leave us with difficult questions that go far beyond the identity of the standing women and her function on the monument.” After reading just this much, the temptation is simply to discard this book. Fortunately, what follows is much more readable and enjoyable. And the untitled introductory section for Rome is qualitatively much superior. In truth, the book is enjoyable. It contains here and there some valuable information.

Perhaps the most valuable portions of the text, at least for me, were included in the Excursuses. For example the Excursus on “Spartan Women” contains generous descriptive material that I look forward to sharing with my students next semester. The explicit details on how marriage was achieved, what happened to children from Spartan marriages and other grim yet spicy facts will doubtless catch my students’ attention. The Excursus on “Etruscan Women” was also extremely fascinating, although I rarely have the time to devote more than five minutes to the Etruscans before dashing off to the meat of this portion of my course, which is Rome. The Excursus on “The Women of Pompeii” was slightly disappointing. I have yet to visit Italy and certainly one place I want to see is Pompeii. Friends who have been there attest it is a fabulous place. This Excursus, however, fails to capture some of the attraction others find in this extraordinary city.

After reading Women in the Classical World and while musing over what the authors presented, my first impulse was to sympathize. History has not been kind to women. The keepers, purveyors and transmitters of history in most civilizations were males. In the European Classical age, women were for the most part disenfranchised. In whatever social class they faced restrictions and enjoyed few options. They primarily were expected to produce children and attend to household chores. This constrictive status was not exclusive to the “Classical World” or peculiar to western society. Thus, the males who dominated the description and preservation of collective human activities and achievements usually concentrated on male-oriented matters. Women figures into their accounts only when some queen, lover, princess or extraordinary female did something to acquire praise or blame. The authors of this text rigorously demonstrate this circumstance. But, alas this leaves them with minimally helpful materials for reconstructing in the broadest sense a truly realistic portrait of what women’s life must have been like in the Classical World. The authors give us largely those unusual and exceptional women, worthy of praise or blame due to some rare accident of the time in which they lived. They attempt to extrapolate from such examples a
slightly expanded portrait, but this is not entirely successful.

*Women in the Classical World* is not entirely successful for several reasons, at least from the perspective of an historian. Yet I hasten to add that professional Classicists (linguists and literaturarians!!!! [Chinese is a more reasonable language when dealing with such categories]) doubtless may find this text impressive.

The book is liberally infused with lengthy quotations of Classical poetry, philosophical texts, historical documents, etc., etc., used to illustrate some points the authors wish to substantiate. In some instances these quotes actually support the narrative. All too often they only take-up space and serve no useful purpose. I observed not a single instance wherein any of the authors offered their own translation of a cited document. Rather they seemed to have combed through several centuries of famous scholars’ translations to offer English versions of pertinent texts to embellish their narrative. The end result is a qualitative mishmash.

Again from an historian’s viewpoint, *Women in the Classical World* appears to be a classical “snip and paste” job. Conceptually it promises a great deal. In actuality the authors’ preoccupation with providing quoted materials seems to have derailed them from any dedication towards an analytically comprehensive presentation of Women in the Classical World. Each chapter is reasonably entitled. Alas, the contents all too frequently focus on specific details without any critical analysis. Much of what is presented thus, is rarely “new.” It amounts to a selective repackaging of materials already available in other venues. The authors provide a generous number of “trees” but in the final analysis fail to provide any view of the “forest.”

Of minor irritation is the fact that some information provided for one identified historical period often coincides with materials included in following chapters. This suggests the identified historical periods were not well considered.

One final matter: The Excursus on “Medicine” contains the name of Lesley Dean-Jones beneath its title page. The Excursus on “Etruscan Women” also contains the name of Larissa Bonfante beneath its title page. Both of these Excursuses involve topics of tangential relevance to the book’s major concern. Yet, I wonder how come these two people are not given any notice of credit if in fact they contribute these specific chapters?

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