Brooke Holmes
Gender: Antiquity and Its Legacy
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In *Gender: Antiquity and Its Legacy*, Brooke Holmes moves beyond anthropological or historical interest in ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality to locate the roots of the gender/sex dyad and the concept of nature that underwrites that binary. In tracing the roots of this thinking, Holmes provides a history for concepts considered natural and finds resources in antiquity for reconsidering its "seamier legacies."[1]

An associate professor of classics at Princeton University with a background in comparative literature, Holmes demonstrates a wide-ranging understanding of ancient Greek and Roman literature and philosophy, the debates about sex and gender among scholars of antiquity and among twentieth-century scholars, and debates among contemporary twentieth-century thinkers of sex and gender about how to read the ancients on sex, gender, and sexuality. The debates among ancient scholars can be summed up in this question: are the ontologies, politics, and practices of the ancients restrictive and oppressive in a way that supports a gendered hierarchy? Ancient scholars disagree over whether the problem is the ancients themselves or the way that the ancients have been construed to support oppressive gender hierarchies. While some contemporary thinkers of sex, gender, and sexuality turn to the ancients to determine how their conceptual apparatus led to these hierarchies, others argue that uncovering possibilities for thinking about nature, practice, and politics otherwise can be found in the ancients. When twentieth-century debates about sex and gender come to focus on drawing the distinction between nature and culture, and form and matter, contemporary thinkers return to the ancient Greeks and Romans to argue that those dichotomies are not so clearly distinct, that nature has a history, that sexuality and sex as the site of nature might themselves have a history, and that material might not ever appear as it has been construed in terms of pure givenness. In the context of nature, rereading the ancients opens the possibility for conceiving of matter otherwise than as the fundamental "real"

[1] From the introduction to *Women in the Ancient World,* ed. John Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), where they write, "[W]e ought not to blind ourselves to the seamier legacies [the ancients] left us…" (1).

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that we need to and can access to find the truth of identity or of a body. In the context of practice, Holmes uses the ancient texts to further the case that gender is a practice and a discourse: especially, for the Greeks, the practice of masculinity, which was an ideal that had to be achieved, which is to say, practiced. This account of Greek masculinity supports the contemporary view that gender is a performance, and a risky one at that, and its norms are constructed through discourse and the affirmation of cultural norms. But as Holmes shows, the precariousness of this practice for the ancient Greeks can point to gaps and ruptures that allow for new practices of subjectivity beyond gender hierarchies and new conceptions of sexuality beyond the rigid modern categories of heterosexual and homosexual. Finally, in the context of politics, the rereading of the ancients allows us to unseat the rigid opposition of private and public, unconscious and conscious ethical life, oppositions that have accompanied gender hierarchies, and oppositions that when challenged allow us to revisit the position of the feminine as the constitutive outside of political life. The queering of politics exemplified by figures such as Antigone and Demeter, who refuse to occupy one position and thus resist the hidden oppressions of both political institutions and family structures, opens possibilities for thinking about both singular desire and new forms of kinship and association. As Holmes notes, this project of thinking about these women figures in ancient myth and tragedy should not be restricted to a feminist project but opens the doors for a radical political project that does not rest on the opposition between the free and the necessary, the formed and the unformed, the political and the pre-political. Bringing clarity and new insight to each of these areas separately would be no easy task; traversing them in concert is formidable.

Holmes divides the book into three sections whose titles mirror the dialectical task she has set herself in the conversation between the contemporary thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality and their ancient roots and resources: "The Nature of Gender, the Gender of Nature;" "The Practice of Gender, The Gender of Practice;" "The Politics of Gender, The Gender of Politics." Given the constraints of space, I consider in detail the arguments of the first chapter where I found the most original work.

Two questions shape the first section. First, on the nature of gender, Holmes asks where sexual difference is located in ancient sources, more specifically how our ideas about sexual difference influence how we look at antiquity and how ancient writing has given the sex/gender binary a history. Second, on the gender of nature, Holmes examines the relevance of gender to ancient conceptions of nature to ask whether nature and material are more feminine to the philosophers and writers of antiquity than they are to modern writers? Holmes is taking on more than the historical project that asks how we have come to associate nature and matter more closely with the feminine; she is equally focused on discovering resources for challenging that association in ancient texts.

Teasing open the space between sex and gender in the ancients, particularly in texts by the Greeks, Holmes begins by asking what it means in the ancient sources to have the body of a man or a woman, noting that the body is fluidly sexed in the medical literature of the Hippocratic corpus. Certain attributes that showed one to be a man secured the privileges of a citizen, but were deemed deeply pathological when they appeared in a woman's body. Holmes cites Mark Griffith's work on woman in Hesiod to show that even

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the term, *gynē*, which we translate as woman, is more about the role of a woman as wife in contrast to *parthenos*, or unmarried virgin,[2] which suggests that the category of "woman" for the Greeks was not as clear as we sometimes suppose (24). That the category of sex is as fluid as that of gender is evidenced in Greek New Comedy's assumption that the spectators understood women in democratic Athens to fall into two camps: those who could produce future citizens and those who could not. This division says more about women's cultural and social relation to Athens than to their biologically organized bodies, which shows how for the Greeks the body was not interpreted separately from cultural and social concerns of the community.

Holmes resists seeing ancient concepts of gender through the lens of the one-sex (there is one sex and the other sex is a mutilation of it)/two-sexes (there are two orders of beings) debate that rests on opposing ancients to moderns and thus prolongs the contemporary binary of sex and gender. Holmes recounts the one-sex/two-sexes debate to show how both ancient views upset the easy opposition between gender and sex, culture and nature. Hesiod maintained that there are two *genē*--each sex has a body particular to it, while Aristotle and later Galen have been understood to maintain that there is one sex and the other is a deviation from it. Aristotle maintains that the mutilation that becomes woman develops from being too cold, which makes the womb wander, marking the fluidity of the body, which can become differently sexed in the right (or wrong) material environment (43-44). This fluidity of matter, Holmes notes, makes Aristotle less an essentialist than he is taken to be. Not only does he have a fluid sense of material, but also a history, a story of how this material has become this material. It is true that although a man can lose the heat that makes him masculine, a woman can never become hot enough to be a man. So there is some fixity, but Holmes questions whether it has been overemphasized and the fluidity ignored. If different material conditions make woman woman and man man, Aristotle's account suggests that some material is more material than others, that matter may be subservient to matter, and that the categories and principles that structure his physical account may themselves be more fluid than commentators have allowed.

Holmes asks us to consider which differences matter, how they come to matter, and whether there is a strict division between metaphysical meaning, which stands in for cultural meaning in our examination of the ancients, and the natural or physical. She demarcates the fixity and fluidity in both the physical and cultural, which prove to be intermingled. By providing a history of the sex/gender binary, Holmes argues that this structure is not a given or necessary analytical apparatus encouraging us to reconsider its sedimentation in our thinking. Holmes shows how rereading the ancients displaces the gender/sex binary, and she warns readers away from importing our conception of this binary into ancient thinking.

The dynamic among the physical, metaphysical, and cultural in Holmes's discussion of the nature of gender in the ancients returns in the section on the gender of nature, which centers on the Greek philosophers' thematization of matter. Holmes acknowledges the

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[2] Mark Griffith, "Antigone and Her Sister(s): Embodying Women in Greek Tragedy," in *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voice in Greek Literature and Society*, ed. André Lardinois and Laura McClure (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 117-36.

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view established by Luce Irigaray that Greek metaphysics grounds itself on the material principle while simultaneously devaluing it, making all *logos* dependent knowingly or not on mother-matter.[3] Aristotle appears forced to acknowledge that the female plays a necessary and significant role in the generation of human life even though he wants to privilege the contribution of the father, thus he maintains that the female contributes only generative matter (59). Like Aristotle, Plato acknowledges, while attempting to manage, the cultural association of women with fertility, as certain readings of both his *Symposium* and *Timaeus* suggest. Plato's *Timaeus,* where the *khōra* is the material that gives without getting, has become a battleground text for the debate over the status of material in the ancient Greeks. Along the same lines as Irigaray, Julia Kristeva argues that metaphysics emerges through the *khōra,* which can thus serve as the site for a rival feminist ontology or ethics.[4]

Judith Butler rejects the approach that criticizes the Greeks for making material the forgotten ontological ground of being, questioning the identification of the feminine and the maternal with the constitutive outside, a position she associates most closely with Irigaray.[5] Butler is concerned with the uncritical identification of the outside and the non-thematizable materiality with the feminine. She argues that the gendering of matter is a product of metaphysics itself, and she insists that it is a mistake to accept the one moment in the *Timaeus* where Plato adopts the terms of sexual reproduction to structure the relation among form, matter, and the world of things as that which secures and perpetuates a constitutive violation of the feminine (67). Butler's critique is part of her repudiation of the category of Woman around which traditional feminism had been organized. Arguing against these essentialist underpinnings of the category of Woman and specifically the idea that sexual difference is rooted in the body, Butler takes up the work of Monique Wittig, who argues that the idea of the sexed body is a cultural fiction designed to naturalize heterosexual norms. Butler challenges the alignment of the feminine with matter, as much in the critical feminist readings of Plato and Aristotle as in Plato and Aristotle themselves, to dislodge the proprietary claim of the feminine on the position of the excluded Other in Western metaphysics. Butler insists that Plato's cosmogony produces a whole range of excluded Others that come to be identified in ancient Greek philosophy with materiality, including slaves, children, and animals. Butler continues to see Plato's representation of his ontological triad in reproductive terms as significant, and she sees the *Timaeus*'s heterosexual dyad as a point of resistance in its own right insofar as the dyad's oppositional logic can be pressed open to reveal the wider range of gender positions that it hides (69). Butler's main aim is to undercut the legitimacy of the material body as the bedrock of gender identity (70).

In rehearsing Butler's critique of those who accuse Aristotle and Plato of associating the feminine with material, thereby hiding the truth of the ontological bedrock of substance or being, Holmes shows how the feminist reading that characterizes matter as the

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[3] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).
[4] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language,* trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
[5] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

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forgotten feminine principle presupposes that ontological truth is rooted in material, a position that reinscribes the gender/sex dyad that operates as the culture/nature, constructed/true dyad and thus reinscribes the site of truth as the site of biology. Butler challenges the view that gender or sex is a truth that is out there, and she argues that these strategies of reading the Greeks only reinscribe that point, making the feminine the site of biological truth. Instead, Butler maintains, we need to expose the sexed body as an effect of the cultural and political dynamics of gender.

Holmes finds further support for this return to theorizations of nature and biology in the work of the New Materialists,[6] whose project is focused not only on dismantling truth claims made on behalf of the nature of sex by extending the domain of culture, but also by seeking a different understanding of nature. Instead of ceding nature to the sex wars and abandoning it to win the war for gender, Holmes advocates recasting nature so that it doesn't have the essentialist force it has been supposed to have. While the New Materialists suggest we leave the ancients behind to develop a nonessentialist view of nature, Holmes argues that the past matters and cannot be simply abandoned. She maintains that we still need a better understanding of where our concepts of matter and the body come from if we want to maximize the radical potential of the natural sciences. Inherent in that project, Holmes argues, is seeing ourselves as both creatures of nature and naturally cultural agents, an insight that requires the critical distance afforded by the practice of history. Second, Holmes argues that the newfound critical energy of matter conceptualized as flux invests the dynamics of flux and fixity with renewed potential. The properties that led the ancients to reject materiality are precisely what can make matter productive for us and thus show material to be not the hidden but the explicit, central ground of nature. Holmes mentions Gilles Deleuze and Michael Serres[7] as thinkers who have taken up the ancients "not only to know where we've come from but to get outside our present selves and imagine the future afresh" (75).

One argument that Holmes does not investigate is whether Aristotle's metaphysics itself relies on a hierarchical binary that supports a gendered hierarchy. Charlotte Witt argues that Aristotle's hylomorphism rests on supposing that within a composite, one part is active and the other passive.[8] Emanuela Bianchi argues that not only the hylomorphism, but also Aristotle's conception of actuality and potentiality, which is often taken to solve some of the unity issues of the hylomorphism and thus to transcend it, is a hierarchical couplet that can be mapped onto gender.[9] Neither Witt nor Bianchi argues that truth is in

[6] Among others, see Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28 (2003): 801-31; Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).
[7] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense,* trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Michael Serres, *The Birth of Physics,* trans. Jack Hawkes (Manchester, UK: Clinamen Press, 2000).
[8] Charlotte Witt, "Form and Normativity in Aristotle: A Feminist Perspective," in *Feminist Essays on Aristotle*, ed. Cynthia Freeland (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1998), 118-37.
[9] Emanuela Bianchi, "Aristotelian *Dunamis* and Sexual Difference: An Analysis of *Andunamia* and *Dunamis* in *Metaphysics* Theta." *Philosophy Today* SPEP Supplement (2007): 89-97 and Bianchi, *The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter in the Aristotelian Cosmos* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

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the matter, as it seems to be for Irigaray, but rather that for Aristotle, the metaphysics of hylomorphism and actuality and potentiality divides what is between the active and passive, the formed and unformed, the forming and the formed, and by extension, the masculine and the feminine. In the critiques of both hylomorphism and actuality, the most striking problem is that nature seems still to be thought as a *technē*, where form imposes on material and actuality manifests potentiality. Such a view seems to divest Aristotle of the possibility of thinking about a nature that grounds itself, self-moving and self-generating, of material that holds within itself the capacity to reach its end, and thus is not a tyrannical imposition of form on an unformed material.

To this critique, Holmes could apply her methodology of rereading ancient thinkers to consider whether Aristotle's principles are as rigidly distinct as his feminist critics argue. She could ask not only whether material is ever pure material or pure necessity but also whether form can be thought about without material, or if instead, even as Aristotle twists and contrives to suggest otherwise, he has to describe the formal element in generation in terms of its materiality, so that there is a matter to sperm, which is to say, a matter to the formal principle, and at the same time a form to the material principle because menses has a defining form. If the demarcating lines are blurred, then whether material is imposing on form in generation or vice versa is not quite so clear. Holmes's focus on the possibilities in Aristotle's text as a fertile ground for thinking about this matrix of ancient sources and contemporary gender problems is provocative. I think she is right to suggest that on some of these issues, the problem is in the reading of Aristotle, which might be challenged by putting Aristotle in the context of the Hippocratic corpus and other thinkers of sex, kinds, and species, such as Galen. But by overlooking some of the important challenges to Aristotle, Holmes may leave unanswered some of the most incriminatory charges against him on the topic of gender hierarchy. She is right to prompt the reader of Aristotle "to hold together the idea of fixity *and* the idea of fluidity" (44), but more work needs to be done to show that fluidity has its own value and is not merely the problem that form, actuality, or the *telos* needs to go to work on to maintain and control and master it.

The work that Holmes does in this first section--presenting the questions and the conflicts of reading the ancients, elaborating the insight won from contemporary debates, and then returning to the ancients with renewed and careful efforts to push the reading further than the contemporary literature on both sex and gender and the ancients has accomplished--is repeated in the second and third sections with similarly fecund results. Holmes challenges the reader not to reach final conclusions about the ancients based on our decisions about the meaning of the gender/sex debates or on the meaning of the ancients texts in light of those debates. Instead, thinking again about the relation of the natural to the cultural in the ancient texts and in contemporary concerns can allow the ancient texts to contribute to the contemporary conversations about the emancipatory possibilities in the concepts of nature, practice, and politics. There is no doubt by the book's end that looking with new eyes at the gender/sex debates can open again the possibilities that these ancient texts might have and that they can help us think about these issues anew. As Holmes writes and her book makes clear, "The potential to learn from them further has not yet been exhausted" (183).

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