

LEVIN-RICHARDSON, SARAH. *THE BROTHEL OF POMPEII: SEX, CLASS, AND GENDER AT THE MARGINS OF ROMAN SOCIETY*. CAMBRIDGE, UK, AND NEW YORK, NY: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2019. 243 P. ISBN: 978-1-108-49687-2

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Sarah Levin-Richardson, Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of Washington, Seattle, brings to light in her most recent book, titled *The brothel of Pompeii: sex, class, and gender at the margins of Roman Society* (2019), a thorough and detailed research on multiple aspects related to the famous brothel at Pompeii (VII.12.18-20). Receiving around 455 visitors every single hour in an average day of touristic visit, this brothel has been inspiring an equally expressive academic interest, especially due to graffiti found on site. It is this academic interest that Levin-Richardson proposes to re-examine, expand, and re-evaluate, taking into account not only these graffiti but also the brothel's spatial configuration, the material findings unearthed inside it, and its visual representations (frescoes). This investigation, which could be rightfully qualified as comprehensive, recovers the experience of clients seeking for sex (but not only), of female prostitutes subverting their exploitation into self-promoting agency, and of male prostitutes searching to delay their degrading aging out.

The book is composed of an Introduction, and two following parts. The first part (chapters one to five), approaches the brothel from an archaeological perspective, dealing with the building's physical aspects and describing its spatial configuration, its excavation, reconstruction, and conservation. The second part (chapters six to eight), has an approach closer to the social history of those who worked or passed by the brothel. Furthermore, the book is also composed by two appendices: Appendix A, which reproduces some excerpts from the 1862 original journal of excavations; and Appendix B, which lists all graffiti mentioned throughout the book, their location and proposed translations.

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The research starts with a general introduction where the author describes the space that will be the object of her analysis and also the theoretical and methodological frameworks that will guide her inquiry. The main object of her analysis is the only Pompeian building that can be rightfully characterized as a “purpose-built brothel”, according to the author. Buried in 79 CE and unearthed in 1862, the structure has suffered a series of restoration and reconstruction interventions between 1907 and 1909 (when the upper floor is reconstructed), in 1950 (after partial destruction caused by allied bombing during the Second World War), and between 2004 and 2006. Except for some debatable elements, such as the balcony’s width and the window’s location on the upper floor, the structure conserves, according to Levin-Richardson, great fidelity to what would have been its original configuration.

The author defines her theoretical and methodological framework pointing out what can be considered as a brothel. The definition of a brothel is given following the works of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill and Thomas McGinn, as she declares. According to the first author, an edification can be classified as a brothel if it possesses: beds made of masonry in small-sized rooms; sexually explicit frescoes; and a cluster of erotically explicit graffiti. According to the second author, a brothel was characterized, furthermore, as an edification whose primary economic activity was sexual labor and it should also be capable of lodging multiple sex workers, simultaneously. In such terms, as Levin-Richardson concludes, the only purpose-built brothel in Pompeii was the one located at VII.12.18-20.

Brothels, therefore, as the author argues, were quite exceptional, uncommon spaces, given that clients could search for sexual services elsewhere. Hence, she questions why exactly – being the brothel an exceptional space and, above all, existing the possibility of seeking for sexual services elsewhere and in different occasions – clients would look for that place, then. The hypothesis she will explore throughout the book is that clients looked for the brothel aiming to have a fictional, temporary experience of class and normative masculinity. When entering the brothel, men coming from different social levels could experience for a moment (and for a price) habits that imitated the lives of men from higher social levels, and thus reaffirm temporarily their masculinity. That is, the brothel sold not only sex, but also leisure and normative masculinity. In order to prove her hypothesis along the following chapters, the author defends approaching the brothel on its own terms, on its completeness, and not

how it is usually done, reading it exclusively through the perspective of literary texts (although Levin-Richardson also mentions them).

Chapter one, then, explores the brothel's architecture. After describing it, the author points out similarities between this structure and others from the same historical context, like utilitarian spaces at the House of Menander (I.10.4). Similarities concerning spaces and furniture from the brothel and other aristocratic houses would be evidence that the former provided an experience less hostile and grim than modern tourists might imagine today. Instead, given those similarities, visiting the brothel on its original context, according to Levin-Richardson, would be a possible way to access some aspects belonging to upper-class Pompeian world otherwise inaccessible, like the House of Menander. Similarly, clients entering from doorway 18, for example, would be exposed to eight frescoes, before which they could stand and carefully gaze at, as if they were at an aristocratic, richly decorated house. In sum, brothel's physical structure itself, partially similar to aristocratic houses, would have been intentionally built in order to provide an experience of high-status fantasy, enabling clients from different social levels to set up, even for a moment, a normative, aristocratic fiction of masculinity.

Chapter two deals with all material findings unearthed during the 1862 excavation. Those findings have received scarce attention on researches about the brothel, according to Levin-Richardson. All different objects would be evidence for different services offered at the brothel, like bodily care and feeding, that confirm that the brothel was a space where one could go for having a set of experiences, as proposed by Levin-Richardson, and not just sex. By sharing a meal with a local prostitute, ordinary men could experiment situations like those elite men had in their banquets: sharing drinks and confidence, and chatting with courtesans.

Chapter three refers to the materiality of graffiti found over the brothel's walls, reconstituting their physical distribution and the multisensory experience implicated in the act of writing them. Even though the complete number of graffiti given by the author differs throughout the book (on the map at page 50 there are 134 graffiti, while at the Appendix B, 142), their analysis is possibly the most important contribution given by this research. Levin-Richardson not only accurately interprets them according to their original spatial relation, but also situates each graffito amongst its original cacophony of multiple, overlaid messages. Each graffito is interpreted, therefore, in the spatial and discursive relation with the others. The very act of selecting the content and place of the writing, as Levin-Richardson

points out, was a multisensory experience and could involve climbing masonry beds, for example. Brothel's walls functioned, then, as a communitarian message board, whose writings could craft particular personas, left notes, or send messages to friends.

Chapter four analyzes the eight frescoes found in the brothel's hallway, numbered from I to VIII. As Levin-Richardson points out, all frescoes are composed of scenes that would not contravene sexual practices that Romans considered acceptable. Indeed, there is not a single scene with *fellatio*, *irrumatio*, or any other similar acts (quite the opposite of what could be found, for example, in the frescoes at the Suburban Baths, object of intense historiographical debates). This choice for representation affirming widely accepted features from Roman sexual *mores* would help to construct the fantasy clients were looking for, since they would not be exposed to sexual demeaning, unwanted representations. Even frescoes, then, helped to construct the male experience the brothel was built to provide.

Chapter five examines the building's upper floor. Levin-Richardson starts reviewing different interpretations given to explain the upper floor's use: lodging for prostitutes who worked in the floor below; pimp's housing; brothel for the richer; among others. However, looking close to spatial dispositions, Levin-Richardson concludes that the upper floor was an independent space in relation to the brothel below and also had different functions. These functions, indeed, could be multiple, from hosting temporary visitor to permanent tenancy of families.

Chapter six explores the brothel's clientele. As Levin-Richardson shows, determining clients' social statuses and ethnicities is not as simple as some would think. Still, she concludes that, given the lower prices for services offered there, the brothel could be attended by clients from a broad social spectrum, from slaves to freeborn, from Pompeians to outsiders. These lower prices, indeed, permitted men from subaltern origins fantasize an upper class experience, as previously mentioned.

Chapter seven recovers female prostitute's experiences. As some graffiti point out, it is possible that at least some female prostitutes working at the brothel were freeborn or freedwomen. Their exploitation, as interestingly showed by the author, was not only through sex, but also through emotional labor. Female prostitutes, then, not only gave themselves away for money, but they also took part in their clients' construction process of leisure and masculinity. Getting involved in this type of emotional labor provided female prostitutes with privileged possibility to construct agency for themselves, turning their clients into objects. A client looking to

establish emotional relations with a female prostitute, then, could be used by her as a supplier of little gifts, such as perfumes (whose little bottles are attested among the brothel's material findings). On the other hand, female prostitutes could not only leave messages boasting their clients through graffiti – thus encouraging them to return –, but they could also craft their own, complex personas. Female prostitution, as Levin-Richardson shows, could thus permit the creation of particular identities and feminine agency, turning exploitation into self-promotion.

The eight and last chapter examines the lives of male prostitutes. These men's lives were in many aspects very similar to the lives of female prostitutes. They also had to provide emotional labor, in addition to sexual labor, and they also had small opportunities for agency, similarly transforming their exploitation into self-promotion. Two differences existed between male and female prostitutes, however: first, aging out among men was more troublesome than among women, making them seek different ways of delaying the growth of bodily hair, for example; second, male prostitutes, because they were able to penetrate, had additional ways of coercion and defense against misbehaved clients.

A conclusion and two appendices, A and B, close the book. In the conclusion, Levin-Richardson summarizes the main aspects she dealt with throughout the book: the brothel relation with other spaces in the Pompeian context; the blurring of social categories, like those of prostitutes and courtesans, treated more rigidly by contemporary historiography than by the ancient evidences; the transformation of exploitation contexts into the possibility for agency. Appendix A transcribes some excerpts from the 1862 excavation diary, and Appendix B is a list of graffiti found inside the brothel (although the counting, as we said above, differs throughout the book).

Providing a summarized exposition for the Sarah Levin-Richardson's book *The brothel of Pompeii: sex, class, and gender at the margins of Roman Society* (2019), I intended to demonstrate, chapter by chapter, the most important elements in the author's research. Combining different approaches – archaeological, architectural, epigraphic, literary, social –, Levin-Richardson provides an interpretation that can be rightfully qualified as comprehensive, offering a thorough, original re-evaluation not only for one of the most visited places in the archaeological site of Pompeii, but also for the lives of those clients, female and male prostitutes that were there – at the margins of Roman Society.

Reference

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