

Malin Grahn-Wilder

*Gender and Sexuality in Stoic Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018 (ISBN: 978-3-319-53694-1)

*Reviewed by David O'Hara, 2019*

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Quote:

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In the popular imagination and in vernacular usage, stoic people are hypermasculine, immune to passion, aloof from the world, and unconcerned with gender, sexuality, and embodied relationships. The persistence of these popular caricatures of an ancient school of thought is one excellent reason to teach classical Greek and Roman stoicism: to counter this view of stoicism with a reminder that the ancient Stoics who form one branch of Platonism's family tree were concerned with being fully human. We don't need to pretend that ancient Stoics had it all figured out, or even that they were correct, but we

can learn a good deal from watching them contemplate dogmatic inherited views about bodies, minds, gender, sex, and sexuality.

Even in philosophy courses, too often we reduce Stoicism to a few granular pieces of Epictetus, Seneca, or Marcus Aurelius that seem to emphasize the solitary male leader as master of his fate; and too infrequently do we take the time to read Musonius Rufus's claims that women should do philosophy, that every human body is equally worth educating and capable of excellence, and that teachers of philosophy are members of a community of shared practices and experience.

Malin Grahn-Wilder's *Gender and Sexuality in Stoic Philosophy* is an excellent book that provides an even better reason to teach the ancient Stoics. Grahn-Wilder has provided a comprehensive, detailed, and clear overview of Stoic views of the body, eros, and sexuality. Since the Stoic approach to philosophy assumes that all topics worth considering are related, the book helpfully relates Stoic views of gender and sexuality to every other topic the Stoics considered, including ethics, political life, education, and commerce. The result is a readable, scholarly book that serves as a fairly comprehensive introduction to Stoicism, using questions about sexuality and gender as the lens through which everything else is considered.

The book is chiefly about the ancient Stoics, but it is also about the history of interpretation and reception of the Stoics. Grahn-Wilder does not dwell for long on earlier receptions of Stoic philosophy, but quickly brings us to the present time. Beginning with the background of Stoicism in Zeno of Citium, Plato, and Aristotle, Grahn-Wilder is much more attentive to the recent scholarship of Martha Nussbaum, Julia Annas,

Gretchen Reydam-Schils, and Michel Foucault, among many others. It is worth noting that one difficulty in writing about gender and sexuality in historical context is the way the vocabulary has changed over the centuries. Grahn-Wilder acknowledges that although the ancient texts don't give us a clear sense of how the ancient Stoics understood the terms we use today, they nevertheless were concerned with "biology, hygiene, and clothing, as well as education and social life," adding that the ancient Stoics "discuss gender as not only natural or biological (in the sense of what many contemporary thinkers understand as 'sex') but importantly as socially and culturally constructed . . ." (7).

Part of the genius of this book is its organization and the way its structure can easily serve a wide range of audiences. On the broad scale, the book is divided into three parts that consider Stoic views of the body and the mythological and prescientific construction of gender; character and education as they relate to gender and sexuality; and the ethical life of the community, including friendship, marriage, social institutions, and family life. In the first part, Grahn-Wilder shows how Stoic views of gender and sexuality grow out of a cultural context. This includes a nice examination of the well-known role of myth in Plato's writings, as well as the way those stories play out in the early development of scientific and medical discussions of our bodies, reproduction, and our passions. The second part focuses on questions of character and education, in a rich and detailed way that goes far beyond the usual discussions of Stoicism that inform popular caricatures of Stoics. All of this is brilliant, but one section is especially good: on Musonius Rufus and the education of women. Although it would be simply anachronistic to portray Musonius as a contemporary feminist, he nevertheless stands out among his peers in offering a clear and rational argument that education in his age has socially built, irrational barriers to the

education of women. (It is perhaps instructive that Musonius is one of the least known of the ancient Stoics; his arguments are inconvenient for any age or culture that chooses not to educate women as philosophers.) The third part considers the social utopias of both major strands of ancient Stoicism, regarding them as thought experiments by which the relevance of the cultivation of philosophy across society--regardless of age or gender--could be seen.

One other element of the organization of the book deserves mention: although the book hangs together very well as a whole, each chapter also stands alone, ending with its own appendix of references to the ancient Stoics and its own bibliography of contemporary scholarship. The effect of this structure is that the book's smooth prose, helpful organization, and well-written history of ideas welcome a cover-to-cover reading; and at the same time, each chapter invites the scholar to dwell for a long time in that chapter, and the chapter's appendix and bibliography reward and affirm further reading. This is a book that students in philosophy, classics, history, literature, sociology, and religious studies could read, and each would find it useful and enjoyable.

Malin Grahn-Wilder has done a huge favor to all of us who teach ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. *Gender and Sexuality in Stoic Philosophy* is a detailed and well-organized resource for researchers; it's a clear and concise introduction to ancient Stoicism's major texts; and it's a fecund and thought-provoking addition to contemporary conversations. This last point seems especially germane at a time when classical studies are being appropriated by parties whose interests appear to be chauvinistic, ethnocentric, and reactionary, not driven by scholarship or the pursuit of the kind of wisdom that leads to mutual flourishing. The treatment of female classicists on social media like Mary

Beard and Sarah Bond over the last few years is a reminder that the ancient texts of any culture can be wielded as weapons by those who don't care about depth or context.

And of course, Stoicism has always been concerned with context and community. Stoicism takes its name from the stoa, a public place of commerce and of political life. Stoic ethics are always situated in the community. The way the ancient Stoics considered gender and sexuality is a reminder that these are not merely private matters; the bodily life is connected to the political and commercial life of a community. It was true in the ancient world, and it remains true today.

Malin Grahn-Wilder's new book is a helpful and clear resource for examining the ways ancient Greek and Roman Stoics considered those relationships, and, in the same way, it's a great way of connecting that element of philosophical history to our own times. The aim Grahn-Wilder lays out in the introduction--and which I think this book achieves--deserves the last word: "I hope that the reader of this study, whether interested primarily in Ancient thinking or the philosophy of gender and sexuality, will find it useful not only in enhancing understanding of the Stoic views but also in facilitating a critical rethinking of present-day conceptions, as well as our ways of approaching Ancient philosophical texts." (5)