

Deborah Lyons, *Dangerous Gifts. Gender and Exchange in Ancient Greece*, University of Texas Press, 2012, pp. 166, \$ 55, ISBN 9780292729674

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Deborah Lyons is an associate professor at Miami University. She has been working on gender in antiquity using literary, anthropological and ethnic sources. Lyons has an extensive knowledge of the roles of religion, institutions (such as family and marriage) and sexuality in Ancient Greece.

In *Dangerous Gifts. Gender and Exchange in Ancient Greece*, Lyons demonstrates a deep capacity for handling a large number of references and to work on all of them at the same time - as if she were intertwining many different filaments together. The intertextuality of her references is highly rich, and she uses an anthropological comparative approach in the study of ethnographic sources. The book focuses on gender in antiquity, and on how it structures many relations of exchange – most of which are *institutionalized*. In particular, the concept of *reciprocity* is central to her analysis of mythic material.

As she points out in the *Introduction* of the volume, the peculiarity of her work is in her attempt to construct an “economics of gender”, based on the «consideration of a gendered system of exchange in which women’s economic agency is ultimately as important as their objectification» (p.2). Lyons refers both to cases in which women are represented as objects and to cases in which women behave like agents of exchange. Indeed, the point of departure of her analysis is the apparently paradoxical account of women in myths as *both* gifts and gift-givers, which informs a gender ideology. Moreover, in many of Lyons’ references the participation of women in the exchange system is interpreted as *dangerous*.

In the first chapter of the book, Lyons refers to different anthropological concepts in order to analyze the Greek material in relation to kinship and exchange, such as marriage, division of labor and wealth. While doing so, she points out the existence of a gendered protocol of exchange. Indeed, she differentiates between male and female wealth, showing how Greek thought conceptualizes a gendered division of labor while distinguishing between metal and cloth gifts. Moreover, objects in myth are also coded according to the subjects these are given to as gifts, as the

author of the book points out by referring to the *Odyssey*. Lyons highlights that myths (she refers here to Hesiod and, again, to Homer) reveal how the anxiety, related to women as exchangers, as receivers of gifts and as objects of exchange, is most closely linked to the institution of marriage. By quoting Lévi-Strauss, Lyons defines marriage as the institution that implies the highest «tension between the ideology of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) of the *oikos* and the frequent necessity of importing wives from outside» (p.8).

The second chapter focuses precisely on the institution of marriage and the exchanges involved, as it implies a connection between two families. In particular, Lyons refers to Hesiod and the myth related to the creation of women, depicted by the poet as the most dangerous divine gift. The origin of women is strictly connected with the creation of the institution of marriage, and the wife's reproductive potential is seen as a sexual threat. Indeed, Pandora's *erga* are considered dangerous for the *oikos*, as she «embodies the negation of every possibility of reciprocity between husband and wife» (p.44). Lyons refers to orators (Demosthenes and Lysias) as well, to demonstrate how the Hesiodic account on women affirmed a traditional devaluation of their economic contribution to the household and, at the same time, an ambiguous idea of their economic power. The threat of women's infidelity is strictly connected to the risk of wasting the wealth of the *oikos*.

In chapter three, Lyons shifts the focus on the Trojan War and the trafficking in women. She points out that the major episodes of circulation of women in the *Iliad* (the cases of Helen, Chryseis and Briseis) are all examples of a corrupted reciprocity in homosocial relationships. Within this framework, women are, first and foremost, considered to be commodities which are interchangeable. The sacrifices of women in the Trojan War were equated with marriage, and even the famous scene of the meal shared by Priam and Achilles before the war – although it can be considered an act of *xenia* – does not imply a full restoration of reciprocity. After differentiating between three kinds of relations of exchange (generalized, balanced and negative reciprocity), Lyons highlights the failure of all institutions of reciprocity and mediation in the poem.

Moreover, in chapter four, Lyons focuses on the *Odyssey*, arguing that in the poem women are at least partially portrayed as *actors* in a gift-exchange economy. In this peacetime world scenario,

indeed, women like Helen and Penelope are allowed to enter the exchange network, and Odysseus' relationships with the main female characters of the poem are all related to this kind of connection. As Lyons points out, «Odysseus himself is fetishized, transformed into a desirable partner, like a woman, or more specifically, a bride» (p.74). Nonetheless, in several allusions, it is still possible to find a certain degree of anxiety and ambivalence when women are connected with exchange.

The potential treachery of women as participants of a network of exchange emerges at the highest level in Attic tragedy in the 5th century. In chapter five, Lyons focuses on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Sophocles' *Trachiniai* to show how in the tragic genre, «any exchange with a woman, whether she is virtuous or not, ends up being fatal» (p.5), in particular when it involves husband and wife. Both in Klytemnestra's and in Deianeira's cases, the deadly exchanges Lyons analyses are related to a crisis in a marriage relationship (adultery) and are due to a negative reciprocity. In the language of the *Agamemnon*, there are several examples of a confusion of gendered codes of exchange, and, particularly, in the character of the unfaithful wife, a perversion of the traditional gender roles. On the one hand, Klytemnestra deliberately perverts the idea of woman's work by killing her husband with an unwearable garment, using textile (traditionally coded as female wealth) in an unwomanly act. On the other hand, Heracles' wife violates the unwritten norm «that a woman should not accept gifts from a man to whom she is not married» (p.83) and overturns the categories of inside and outside that govern the *oikos*. Thus, by accepting Nessos' gift and by donating a poisoned robe - again female wealth – to her husband, Deianeira violates codes and eventually kills herself with a masculine form of violence. Tragedy demonstrates how «the fear of female reciprocity is ultimately the fear of female agency» (p.90).

Lastly, in chapter six Lyons focuses on sibling relationships, showing how in tragedies the brother-sister dyad is usually seen as a positive relationship of mutual support, as opposed to the usual interpretation of the husband-wife one. Indeed, by analyzing the circulation of objects in this context, Lyons points out how sisters often use textile wealth to strengthen instead of betray their allegiances. Nevertheless, in the mythological material there are also some examples of sibling relations that are «interrupted or subverted precisely by the intervention of erotic desire» (p.100), as with Medea. In this case, Lyons refers both to

the erotic desire for a lover who comes from outside the *oikos*, and to the incestuous desire. Athenian marriage laws reveal a great concern about the woman's foreign status in the family, while sibling relationships somehow evoke «the fantasy that exchange can be avoided, that self-sufficiency is an attainable ideal» (p.5). In the examples of Orestes' sisters, Elektra and Iphigeneia, what Lyons calls the “regressive fantasy” of a world in which a brother does not have to separate from his sister as she gets married, finds a correspondence with the actual exchange system. Instead, in Antigone's case the incestuous origin of her sibling relationship has a fatal outcome: she chooses her brother over her husband, but her desire for sibling intimacy leads to death.

In the last chapter of the book, Lyons concludes by referring to the concept of *charis*, which she translates as “reciprocity”. This idea, that «renders both the favor given and the gratitude felt in return» (p.110) is strictly connected with *xenia*, which can be translated as “hospitality” and which is a hereditary institutional relationship that passes through the male line. It also involves guest-gifts (*xeneia*). Therefore, *charis* is an «ideology» (p.111) that objectifies women and characterizes relationships of reciprocity between men. Nonetheless, women can express a desire for beauty as well, and this is precisely what threatened the ideal of the *autarkeia* of the *oikos*, according to many tragedies. Sibling relationships were thus mostly seen as positive inasmuch as this kind of reciprocity took place outside the “*charis* economy” related to marriage, which means that the self-sufficiency of the *oikos* was not compromised.

As I have already said, Lyons' book is a very useful tool to understand gender ideology in Ancient Greece, as it analyses women's role within the system of the circulation of objects and the gift-giving reciprocity. Lyons refers to anthropological concepts from a comparative perspective, but she does not forget to frame the historical and institutional context of the literary and religious material she analyzes. Nevertheless, it is sometimes difficult to retrace the connection within such a diverse amount of sources, inasmuch as Lyons compares mythological material with religious and ethnographic references. It could have been useful to clarify some of the choices she made in using the comparative anthropological method. Moreover, Lyons refers to concepts as agency and reciprocity related to women in antiquity, but she does not problematize these terms. Indeed, as Kirk Ormand points out

in the book *Exchange and the Maiden. Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy*, the Greek tragedy staged a *foreclosure* of women's voices, and the idea of women as active participants in an exchange economy was actually a mystification of the fact that the poets were always men and that they *spoke for* the female characters portrayed in their plays. Indeed, women were not allowed to speak in any public contexts (including courtrooms, assemblies and theatres). Therefore, when dramas staged powerful female characters, there was no real female voice behind that representation. While referring to a gender ideology, Lyons could have pointed out the necessity of challenging this mystification, which is, I believe, a challenge she herself took very seriously by writing this book.

Bibliography

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