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Gillian Clark, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-styles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. Pp. 155. \$35.00. ISBN 0-19-814675-2.

This little gem of a book (a mere 141 pages of text and an extensive bibliography of recent work) is a delight to read and leaves one wanting more. Much of the recent explosion of scholarship on Roman women concentrates on the late republic and early empire. Clark chooses instead to examine the lives of women in the third to the late sixth century AD or rather "the ways in which women's lives are perceived, interpreted and (if possible) regulated in terms of leading

ideas, priorities, assumptions, and interests" (p. 2). As she recognizes, the sources, pagan and patristic, are "daunting" in quantity and the period itself complicated by the range of time and space covered—not to mention the difficult question of the relationship of pre-Christian to Christian culture.

C. sets herself a simple but challenging task: "to give some basic information on women's lives in late antiquity and to make a start on answering some basic questions: to what extent could women choose what to do? What social, practical, or legal constraints limited their choices? What options were available besides (or within) marriage and housekeeping? What was housekeeping like/ what level of education or health care was available? What conduct and ideals were women taught to admire?" (p. 1). The difficulty of the task of 'reading' ancient material about women leads her to view her efforts as constructing "a patchwork, piecing together scraps of material for a different purpose and to a different effect from that intended by their original makers" (p. 4). She also modestly sees the work as a "patchwork" in another sense since she says that she has not read all of the immense amount of surviving material on women in late antiquity.

After a brief introduction C. attempts to answer the questions she raised in the introduction (see above) in five chapters: Law and Morality; Tolerance; Prohibition and Protection; Health; Domesticity and Asceticism and Being Female. In a short conclusion ("edges" since a patchwork can have no conclusion) she tentatively suggests that there were some practical gains for women in the late antique period: Christianity allowed some women for the first time the option to reject marriage and childbearing in order to devote themselves to God. Still Christianity operated within assumptions held for centuries about female inferiority and weakness. And in some cases Christianity could be more disparaging of femaleness.

The first two chapters use law codes as source material for women's lives: principally the Theodosian code and the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*. C. moves the reader through a welter of evidence to draw some conclusions about "the general conditions under which women lived, what they were thought to be like, how they were protected or restricted, and how opinions differed" (p. 13). Of special interest here is the frequent divergence between the law of the state and higher demands of Christian teaching and the ways in which this disjunction may have affected women's lives. Two major consequences of this disjunction were restrictions in female consent for divorce and the removal of legal impediments to celibacy.

C. is aware of how slippery legal evidence can be. Nevertheless, her survey of examples of law affecting women isolates some general information about women's lives and how these lives were affected by the principle of protection for women and the belief in female weakness. On the whole though, these two chapters disappoint, perhaps because the task is too immense or there are too many unknowns about how legal codes relate to reality.

Chapters on Health and Domesticity and Asceticism are more satisfactory, whether because the sources (medical and material) are easier to evaluate or we are in the realm of the more familiar. Clark is at her best in making sense out of great amount of medical material on female anatomy, medical skills, fertility,

virginity and so on. Here she has the benefit of important work already done by scholars like Riddle, Hanson and others but that should not detract from her own deft handling of a vast range of sources.

Especially insightful is a section on clothing as language and a close examination of the remarkable mosaic image of Theodora from the church of San Vitale, Ravenna. Here C. describes a method of analysis and applies it with felicitous results to show how Theodora's presentation is consciously similar to that of Justinian but also different from his. A range of evidence from Christian sources proves her point that women's dress tells us much about male expectations for female roles and behavior.

The chapter, *On Being Female*, is perhaps the best in the book. Patristic sources are examined on the nature of women and the way women should live and compared with the views of non-Christian philosophers. C. raises important questions for which we do not have answers: "Did women internalize the perceptions of themselves as weak and inferior beings? Were these assertions simply, 'protocols', things people felt they had to maintain in public, whether they really knew about competent women? How many people were seriously concerned about whether women had the same reasoning power as men, or were made, like men, in the image of God?" (p. 120). She concludes with the sobering observation that "the Christian claim that men and women are spiritually equal had no more practical consequences than the philosophical claim that women can manifest the same virtues as men" (p. 140).

With a task of this scope there are bound to be problems: one might quibble, for example, at the lack of a theoretical framework or approach or the tendency to terse statement that raises more questions than it answers. At some places in the text (especially the first two chapters) one gets the impression that the patchwork is sometimes all too literally that: anecdotal information about the rich and highborn assembled to make a point. Despite these problems C. has done a tremendous service in stitching together a fascinating patchwork of facts and ideas: lifeways of ancient women, really. Important too that she recognizes that she has left room for other configurations and interpretations, perhaps even a tightly woven tapestry of women's lives.

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