

BOOK REVIEW

Mark Masterson, *Man to Man: Desire, Homosociality, and Authority in Late-Roman Manhood* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2014); 222 pp. ISBN13 978-0-8142-1268-4. RRP £41.95.

Too often desire has become so synonymous with sex that we are blind to a grey area where intense desire exists without sexual intimacy or a wish for it. When we take steps to assess desire on its own terms, it becomes apparent that it can be utilised for much more than carnal intimacy: desire can be used to express subjugation, loyalty, appreciation, and friendship. An appreciation of this broadens the ways in which desire can be utilised to study people of the past. Masterson's *Man to Man* seeks to undertake such a task and examines the use and importance of same-sex desire for elite men in a selection of late antique texts. In a boldly executed investigation on the interconnectedness of same-sex desire, power and rhetoric, Masterson provides a careful intertextual study that contributes to a much-overlooked issue in discussions of masculinity.

The book is divided into three chapters, each focusing on one ancient author and providing an intricate contextualisation and intertextual analysis of their works. The first chapter explores a sample of Emperor Julian's writings, the second chapter provides a discussion of Athanasius's *Vita Antonii* and a comparison with Athanasius's other works, and the third chapter discusses Ammianus's *Res gestae* and its desirous picture of select emperors. Masterson argues that conscious use of same-sex desire and attractiveness in these texts was part of late antique 'homosociality'. Homosociality is defined as 'a word that describes social bonds between persons of the same sex' (11).

Masterson himself demonstrates why the hour is late for the rediscovery of same-sex desire in the late Roman world, which we consider to be a period of overriding ascetic ideals and a discouragement of excessive intimacy between men. The forty page introduction stresses the complexity of the issue as Masterson proceeds to explain what he intends to do (and what he does not). Intimacy between men is problematic: the language employed by late antique authors is at times so ardently amorous that it appears oxymoronic next to disavowals and condemnations of sexual intimacy. Yet Masterson argues that these two do not need to be at odds, but rather that these men operate within a shared culture that is based on a trans-mediterranean *paideia*. Within this educated elite these men express their admiration, loyalty, dependence and love for one another with the use of subtly coded desire that intertextuality, understood by those within the *paideia*, makes evident.

Having established this core argument, the first chapter focuses on Julian. Here the aim is to show how *paideia* created a code of intertextuality for Julian's readers: it is with the use of this intertextuality that homoeroticism was conveyed. Masterson argues that Julian uses select words to depict Marcus Aurelius as desirable, such as *kallos* and *amēchanos*. By contrasting these word choices with Julian's other works, Masterson explores the loaded meanings that, if carefully analysed, convey Julian's message of desire. Furthermore, a comparison with Plato's *Symposium* and *Charmides* reinforces the subtext, as those within Julian's *paideia* would have realised. The second half of the chapter focuses on Julian's Heracleius and Julian's use of *mythos* to create the

transcendent that allows ambiguous homoeroticism to be applied. For these men, a desirous focus on same-sex attractiveness conveyed admiration and subordination to a mightier man and, through this dialogue of desire, a man sought to place himself in a favourable position within their homosocial realm.

As a counterpoint to Julian, Chapter 2 moves onto the *Vita Antonii* to examine how it ‘reflects, diverges from, and interacts with manhood and same-sex desire amongst elite men’ (95). With the ‘recreation of an *engaged* late-ancient reception’ (emphasis original, 112), Masterson examines the *paideia*-based intertextuality of VA. The black boy who tempts Antony in the desert demonstrates that if Antony were engaging in sex, he would find youths as desirable sex partners alongside women. It is clear that the boy hopes to seduce Antony into penetrating him – this interpretation, I believe, is quite correct. Masterson argues that same-sex desire has no place in *eremos* literature due to this being an intense homosocial space where desire is even more dangerous than in other *loci*. Athanasius’s *Vita* is also compared with his *Contra gentes* and *De incarnatione* to explore how Athanasius’s *lack* of homoeroticism is a tool in itself to idealise men who can go without it – inadvertently, therefore, Athanasius is providing proof of same-sex desire as a common expression of intimacy between men.

The final chapter provides an analysis of Ammianus’s *Res gestae* and how expressions of same-sex desire are used to comment on emperors’ behaviour. Masterson argues that by using words such as *mollis*, *tener*, *pateo*, Ammianus wishes to criticise Constantius for being enticed by a desire to be penetrated. Ammianus views the emperor as an entity that is above the *mores* of men and as such must portray a detached civility in all that he does, including sexual urges. Constantius, however, promotes his superiority by labelling himself as *aeternitas*, yet fails, in Ammianus’s view, to live up to this role, as the hints of sexual debauchery suggest. By a careful consideration of the lexicon, Masterson cross-references words to construct Ammianus’s intentions for his *paideia*-cultured audience to take away from the text. This work is meticulous, even if Masterson’s argumentation fails to be entirely convincing.

Masterson’s study would benefit from further elaboration on some of its hypotheses. The desire that can be found in the sources analysed, it is argued, relies on a commonly shared understanding of the physical pleasure of same-sex encounters. This is as intriguing as it is problematic. If these texts subtly hint at a reality and utilise sexual satisfaction and release to convey desire, then from what context did these men find this real-life counterpart in their worlds, or was it only imaginary? Are we dealing with solely literary and educated word play or is there in the background an unrestrictive market for sex that some men continued to utilise in the fourth century? Furthermore, Masterson’s discussion of types of men, the *vir* and the *cinaedus*, would benefit from the consideration that *cinaedi*, even if eager to be receptive in anal sex, could just as easily seduce another man’s wife (26), as comprehensively demonstrated by Williams in his 1999 *Roman Homosexuality*.

In his conclusion Masterson rightly points out the importance of his study: the topic of male desire is and has been overlooked. The paradox of sexually renouncing, anti-hedonistic Christian scholars being enamoured with one another is inconvenient, and perhaps even incomprehensible to some. The ardent expressions of same-sex desire in the late Roman world are foreign to our own culture and as such we may want to explain

them away or simply ignore them. In this sense, Masterson provides us with a much-needed confrontation of these paradoxes by demonstrating that these discourses of desire cannot be overlooked, but rather should be incorporated into discussions of masculinity. As Antony's black devil boy in the desert demonstrates, desire should never be understood solely as heterosexual in discussions of the past (or the present). Considerations for and an appreciation of same-sex desire should always accompany those who study relations between and amongst the sexes.

This is not an entry-level work, and those familiar with Masterson's main themes will have to pay careful attention to follow Masterson's argumentation, which at times lapses from clarity to obscurity ('The enlivening effects of corporeality direct the mind to value understood, through the power of paradox, as transcendent of corporeality' (65), for instance). The book is accompanied by thorough indices, which include every secondary author referenced, which certainly makes life easier for scholars primarily concerned in finding out which segment of their own work has been quoted, and if this has been done with accuracy.

There will also be those who will argue that Masterson is reading into the texts too much – a criticism which he acknowledges himself in the introduction. Yet even if Masterson has not unearthed a whole truth, he has contributed to our comprehension of a partial one: his work shows how elite men regarded each other with an appreciative desire that played with and drew from the realm of sexual intimacy. This can be found in political paradigms but also in ascetic and religious ones, where we may think they are even more ill-fitting. However, this desire may go a long way in giving insight into the emotionally intense relationships that many men had.

Masterson's work poses a fresh challenge to the fields of late antique identity, society and gender. Masterson has demonstrated his use of the worthwhile concept of homosociality, and the research done here will help in the inclusion of same-sex desire in future studies of men. Masterson demonstrates convincingly that by studying the intertextuality of a work, we can find further meanings that otherwise we may miss. However, the interplay of non-physical yet sexual desire cannot operate without touching points that the intended audience could relate to and perceive for themselves. There is a further element here of how homosocial desire functioned outside the literary acrobatics of educated men. If these texts operate by relying on the reality or acknowledged benefits of same-sex sexual pleasure, as indeed they must, then the question remains as to where this reality was to be found in an increasingly self-denying, ascetic world. Furthermore, we must reflect on what this seeming gap suggests of relationships between men, physical and/or emotional, in the late Roman world.

Ulriika Vihervalli, Cardiff University
VihervalliA@cardiff.ac.uk