*Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 32:2, May 2023

***Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love*. By RICHARD SHUSTERMAN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. 420. $105.00 (cloth); $29.99 (paper); $24.00 (e-book)**

Ars Erotica: *Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love* is an ambitious book. Clearly sensitive to the frequently articulated plea that Occidental scholars cease to center the West as the measure of all things, Richard Shusterman considers eroticism (mostly between men and women) in a global historical perspective. This book not only discusses antiquity and the Renaissance in western Europe but also considers erotics in ancient and medieval China, India, Islamic culture, and Japan. A key term of the book is *somaesthetics*, which Shusterman defines as "the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body as a site of sensory appreciation or perception (*aesthesis*) and of creative self-fashioning in which one uses one's bodily appearance and conduct to express one's values and shape oneself" (xi).**[End Page 226]**

Chapter 1, "*Ars Erotica* and the Question of Aesthetics," speaks of ways in which an *ars erotica* can been seen through the lens of *somaesthetics*. Adopting the term *ars erotica* from Foucault, who contrasted it to *scientia sexualis*, Shusterman is interested in exploring sex as a place that not only involves stylization and sensual charm but also has an indicative relationship to the formation of the self and societal values. Shusterman makes *ars erotica* work very hard and broadens it so much that it engulfs *scientia sexualis*. As Foucault's dichotomization is reductive, this impresses me as having good aspects, especially since in (all?) the contexts in which sex and love are enjoyed, they are also analyzed and moralized.

In chapter 2, "Dialectics of Desire and Virtue: Aesthetics, Power, and Self-Cultivation in Greco-Roman Erotic Theory," Shusterman focuses on the manifold connections between the pursuit of sex and its stylization and the significance sex had for the formation of the masculine elite self. In ancient Greece, erotics had connections to art, music, dance, and feasting. It also was a thing stylized, an aestheticized delight, in the person of the cultivated courtesan, the *hetaera*, and, more earthily, in the enumeration of possible positions in sex. There is also discussion of educative pederasty and the differing things the older and younger male got from it. From there, the chapter considers the competing understandings of sexual behavior in philosophy and eventually moves forward in time to considering how it was understood in later Roman thinkers and in Roman society. Shusterman perceives less aestheticization of sexuality as we go forward in time for the most part, though the poet Ovid in his *Ars Amatoria* provides, in Shusterman's estimation, a view of erotics that avoids the sclerotic pieties that philosophy and law were increasingly offering up. This resort to Ovid is fraught, given the ludic and seemingly insincere nature of his poetry and the real possibility that this impresario of erotic subtlety is actually a rapacious, immoral, and phallic dominator. That said, his complexity is good to have in the conversation.

In "The Biblical Tradition: Desire as a Means of Production," the third chapter, Shusterman discusses the Old and New Testaments. As these texts are enormously important to Western societies and are on a collision course with the pagan materials in the previous chapter, they need to have a place. That said, as Shusterman notes, sexual behavior is more a site of anxiety and utility than of sensuality and stylization. Procreation is the main concern of sex, and it is not to be used for more than that. Even the Song of Songs, with its luxuriant eroticism, seems to lack what we find in Greece (or in, say, India). The New Testament via Paul valorizes chastity, and this is taken up and elaborated by the church fathers in the centuries to come. This vision of sex is inhospitable to aesthetic stylization, and the most rewarding way to make love or the role it can play in building character is not a concern. Shusterman also reflects some on the ways in which investments in virginity and chastity can be seen as meaningful stylizations **[End Page 227]**of body and mind. The chapter then concludes with shame and original sin in Augustine and Aquinas.

With chapter 4, "Chinese *Qi* Erotics: The Beauty of Health and the Passion for Virtue," we pass over to an older culture that had different ideas about sex. Sex had a central place, according to various handbooks, one of which, Book of Changes, dates to the ninth century BCE. Sexual pleasure is important to a man's health in particular, as, according to these handbooks, a man's energy (*yang*) is supplemented by a woman's energy (*yin*) in sex, especially if he practices *coitus reservatus*; that is, if he does not ejaculate. Indeed, it is optimal if he has sex with many women but ejaculates only now and again. He will gain physical benefits—*qi*, or vital energy—and practice self-control, something to be admired. A point that Shusterman recognizes is that the source material that underlies this chapter is almost always about the masculine point of view and is concerned with health benefits for men. It is interesting to see some real differences with Greece/ Rome in that sex *needs* to be part of life, while, at the same time, there is the obvious similarity of the predominance of the masculine point of view.

In chapter 5, "Lovemaking as Aesthetic Education: Pleasure, Play, and Knowledge in Indian Erotic Theory," Shusterman takes us to the southwest with a discussion of Indian sources, where we find what looks to be in some sense the clearest example of somaesthetics in all the cultures surveyed in this book. A feature of the Indian sources is the interleavement of self-control with sexual activity, which we can see, for example, in the Kamasutra's exhaustive presentation of various positions for sex. These sources valorize sex and believe that it is important to indulge and train all the senses. There is also a prevailing dynamic of aesthetics and theatricality, whereby sexual activity, purposefully pursued, is the enactment of roles that are consciously shaped. The person, consciously acting, not only enjoys sex but refines themselves in the process, and the ultimate goal here is leaving behind this earthly plane and its bodily pleasures for an ascetic restfulness that has put sensual pleasures in the past.

"Fragrance, Veils, and Violence: *Ars Erotica* in Islamic Culture," the sixth chapter, surveys the role eroticism plays in the number of works from the Middle Ages. These works speak against male chastity (a husband has an obligation to have sex with his wife), and, like ancient Greece, though not as much, they are open to same-sex pederasty. We also discover a franker interest in anal intercourse, M/M *or* M/F, than has been seen in the other sources. One of the sources surveyed, the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* (from around AD 1000), has much to say about speech that accompanies seduction, the act of sexual union, and the time after sex. It is something that differentiates people from animals and lends excitement, meaning, and beauty to the act. All this said, Islam, like all the general areas surveyed in this book, was broad. There were many perspectives on sex, even one of moral enlightenment from the Sufi tradition that had a man **[End Page 228]**adopt a feminine perspective in himself prior to having sex with a woman. If he did not do this, he would be no better than an animal.

In the seventh chapter, "From Romantic Refinement to Courtesan Connoisseurship: Japanese *Ars Erotica*," Shusterman focuses on courtly love in the Heian dynasty (794–1185), the pederasty (*nanshoku*) of the Buddhist monks and Samurai warriors that starts around the same time, and, lastly, Geisha culture from the much later Edo period (from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century). In Japan, there was thoroughgoing aestheticization of relations between men and women in the first and third of these milieux. There was much refined and moody indirection and an avoidance of any mention of the genitals. In the Heian period, we have a number of famous works written by women, including *The Tale of Genji*, in which love affairs are stylized to a fare-thee-well. The geishas and their clients in the later period to some extent replayed these refined scenarios from the earlier Heian period, this time in a commercial mode and with occasional self-harm: to show one's devotion one might remove a nail or even cut off a finger and send it to one's beloved. The *nanshoku* (male-love) of the monks and warriors consisted in the older man having a handsome younger man who would be trained and educated in return for his serving the older man, and this emphatically included providing sexual service in the form of anal penetration. As in the case of the geishas and their clients, fingernails or even fingers might be cut off to show sincerity of devotion. Gesture, the arts, and cultivation crowds around all three of these erotic arenas in Japanese history.

In the eighth and final chapter, "Commingling, Complexity, and Conflict: Erotic Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Europe," Shusterman surveys a great number of sources in late medieval and Renaissance Christian Europe. One of the things that these sources deal with is the generally more permissive ideas in the Islamic world, which put a great deal of pressure on Europe throughout this time. He offers up the famous Héloïse and Abelard (eleventh to twelfth century); courtly love (presented by Capellanus, twelfth century); the thoughts of Renaissance Neoplatonists (Ficino, Bruno, Castiglione, Leone Ebreo), Montaigne, and Erasmus; and courtesan culture in sixteenth-century Italy (featuring the *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, authored by a woman, Tullia d'Aragona). Besides Bruno, Leone Ebreo, and Tullia d'Aragona, the authors listed above are mostly dubious about the body and sex, wishing to sublimate desire and love so that they are far away from the body. And the ones who are less dubious surely do not make a place for the act in an Indian, Japanese, or Islamic manner. This chapter, which is full of interesting things, especially Tullia d'Aragona, is the least successful because the aesthetics that is the stated object of this book is frequently far away.

Shusterman could interrogate his sources more. Too often he takes sources that are interested in control and chastisement as transparent **[End Page 229]**presentations of realities on the ground. On page 195, for example, there is reproof in one of the Chinese sources of people who use drugs or aphrodisiacs for sex. It is of course not the kind of cultivation of sexuality that the source wants to see, but it is evidence of another perspective, another way to go about what is most certainly a cultivation or stylization of sex. This should have been followed up. I see this move of Shusterman as related to the Foucault of volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*. In those books, Foucault was beguiled in a similar fashion by ancient Greek and Roman-era sources.

Indeed, in spite of Shusterman's occasional deviations from Foucault (e.g., 150), he is loyal to Foucault's positions and strategies. This will be to many readers' tastes. I find it limiting, as it leads to an overwhelming emphasis on the masculine and mostly heterosexual point of view on eroticism (which, to be fair, Shusterman does acknowledge at points). For example, the discussion of Chinese foot-binding (178-79), a brutal aestheticization of women's bodies, is viewed only from the masculine standpoint, a position that is not sustainable after one has read Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (2016). Why not consider a woman's experience of this aestheticization and this rendering of a part of her body as erotic? Lastly, at some point, Byzantium needs to start entering these discussions that have global ambitions.

My review does not capture many aspects of this book. Shusterman understands that many of his subjects require background discussions, discussions of, say, the nature of the relevant society or theological issues, which he then provides. This book therefore is a wide-ranging accomplishment; I learned much from it. It will function well as a basis for further reflections and a springboard to future syntheses.

*Mark Masterson*

*Victoria University of Wellington*

Copyright © 2023 University of Texas Press

Next Article

[*Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* ed. by Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Kłosowska (review)](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/897316)