

Henriette Harich-Schwarzbauer, Cédric Scheidegger Lämmle (eds.)

Gender Studies in den Altertumswissenschaften

Women and Objects in Antiquity

IPHIS

Beiträge  
zur altertumswissenschaftlichen Genderforschung

Herausgegeben von  
Barbara Feichtinger, Therese Fuhrer, Christine Walde  
und Georg Wöhrle

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Cédric Scheidegger Lämmle (eds.)**

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## Introduction

Henriette Harich-Schwarzbauer and Cédric Scheidegger Lämmle

Objects, inanimate things as well as living beings and people,<sup>1</sup> have not just recently come into the focus of literary studies. Objects have always played an important, indeed often decisive, role in literary interpretation, be it on account of their symbolic value, their aesthetic or economic value – or conversely on account of the fact that they have been forgotten, neglected or destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Ancient literature is fundamentally about things and their ‘fate’ – weapons, statues, fabrics, jewellery or indeed the papyrus scrolls on which texts were written. Not infrequently, ancient literature foregrounds items as inconspicuous as swaddling clothes.<sup>3</sup>

Ekphrases, in particular, have been afforded much scholarly attention. Centred on the description of individual objects, they play a key role in different literary genres or even constitute a genre of their own. Scholarship on ekphrases, however, has almost exclusively focused on the significance and symbolism of the described objects – rather than the objects themselves. A comparable case is that of *technopaignia* and figure poems, intricate forms of refined small-scale poetry, which draw on techniques from weaving and textile work. While much scholarship has focused on the ways in which such poems *reflect* on their own materiality, their materiality itself – and thus their own ‘object status’ – has found surprisingly little interest. Instead, the focus is primarily on the playfulness of such poems or on the ways in which they mediate the interactions between text and image. Both examples speak to general tendencies that have characterised the literary study of objects: more often than not, objects in literature have been understood in relation to their immediate context and effectively reduced to the functions they fulfil therein.

By contrast, recent historical scholarship has addressed the relationships between objects and their uses in a way which no longer focuses on individual events, but instead delineates a broader framework of interaction. Thus, the politics of barter and gift exchange – a field of research which is far from exhausted – is increasingly seen in the context of networks of social interaction.<sup>4</sup>

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1 In what follows, we subsume both inanimate and living entities, including the ‘object status’ of a human being *per se*, under the notion of ‘object’.

2 On destroyed or insignificant objects (‘Kram’, i. e. ‘stuff’) see Orlando 1993, 5. Orlando emphatically treats objects that are not defined by usefulness and functionality. Cf. the contribution of Federica Bessone in this volume.

3 For example, the ribbons and woven cloth of inferior quality – a ‘sampler’ (*ekdidagma*) – which Creusa presents as evidence in Euripides’ *Ion*. See Martin 2016, 141–145.

4 Wagner-Hasel 2000 (English version 2020) was pioneering. On the broad topic of textiles see, e. g., Harich-Schwarzbauer 2016; Nosch/Wagner-Hasel 2019.

Recent trends in literary and cultural studies go beyond such established paradigms and have opened up a new horizon of research questions. Indeed, a number of quite different paths have been explored, which is testament to the potential and dynamism of a theory still very much in the making. It is not always a matter of fundamentally questioning the status of the object. The emerging field of object epistemology, for example, explores how a plurality of ‘object identities’ emerge which in turn inform the ways in which the objects are used. Such an epistemological approach does not seek to anthropomorphise objects; it seeks to draw attention to the ‘things’ in literature rather than just the ‘actors’ who use them. This is to ensure that the interpretation of literature does not lose sight of its ‘objects’ of study.<sup>5</sup>

A second strand of research postulates that things lead a social life of their own and sets itself the task of reconstructing their ‘biographies’.<sup>6</sup> This raises a different set of questions, in particular if and how objects produce narrative, and how their presence conditions individual literary genres. Objects drive narratives forward, and they crucially contribute to the emotional economies that underpin them. They induce emotions and, above all, desire.<sup>7</sup> Seen in this way, objects acquire their own agency, becoming actors who initiate, control, foster, impede or disrupt relations. While the application of this paradigm to literary studies has initially focused on drama with its objects on stage as well as behind the stage,<sup>8</sup> it is now recognised that the approach is more widely applicable and that in principle no genre should be excluded. A central tenet of ‘object biography’ is that rigid subject-object oppositions must be questioned and challenged. Moreover, the focused interest attracted by objects (curiosity, desire etc.) is recognised as a heuristically valuable criterion of analysis.

The well-established research network EuGeStA has set itself the goal of advancing and refining ‘Gender Studies in Antiquity’. *Women and Objects* contributes to this ongoing endeavour by opening up a field in which the relations, and intersections, between ‘gender’ and other categories of literary and cultural study come into view. *Women and Objects* encompasses both questions that relate to sociology, religious studies, or philosophy, and those that focus more immediately on material culture.

The first aim of the conference, of which we here present the proceedings, was to test the validity of this current research paradigm, particularly when applied to the study of antiquity. The contributions, which are united in their ambition to open up

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5 E. g., Hahn 2015; Hilgert/Hofmann/Simon 2018 (and more particularly Schwindt 2018, 299–301).

6 Appadurai 1986 was a seminal contribution.

7 Instructive for this approach is, e. g., Brooks 1993 who focused on the curiosity about a specific object, the female body, as a central motif in modern literature.

8 See, e. g., Mueller 2016 who departed from traditional views of intertextuality to argue that intertextuality was extended beyond “purely verbal artifice”, arguing that theatre does not favour words over things. On the objects of tragedy see also the contributions of Therese Fuhrer and Kate Cook in this volume.