

Tragedy, Christianity, and the Death Drive

This paper will consider the relation between self-harm, suicide and the death drive as a way of approaching antiquity and its discourse of the self. It recognizes that self-harm is a gendered and, indeed, socially constructed category, and argues that self-harm, with its most extreme form, namely, suicide, is a fascinating dark lens through which to explore discourses of the self in antiquity. Beginning from auto-compounds in Greek tragedy to express self-harm, and moving through Attis and self-castration towards Christian acts of ascetic self-violence and martyrdom, it develops five questions to explore historically and culturally changing senses of self-violence. (1) Why does nobody in antiquity ever ask the standard modern question when faced by suicide, namely, ‘why did s/he do it?’. (2) Why are Socrates and Achilles not treated as cases of self-harm or suicide? (3) How can martyrdom not be an expression of the death drive? (4) Why is the death drive crucial to Christian thinking? (5) Why are Christians forbidden to kill themselves, when martyrdom is a privileged category?

Bibliography

- Beard, M. 1994 ‘The Roman and the Foreign: The Cult of the ‘Great Mother’ in Imperial Rome’, in *Shamanism, History, and the State*, ed. N. Thomas and C. Humphrey, Ann Arbor: 164–90.
- . 2012 ‘The Cult of the “Great Mother” in Imperial Rome: the Roman and the “Foreign”’, in Brandt, J. R and Iddeng, J. eds *Greek and Roman Festivals: Content, Meaning and Practice*, Oxford: 323-365
- Boyarin, D. 1999 *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford.

- Brickman, J. 2004 'Delicate' Cutters: Gendered Self-Mutilation and Attractive Flesh in Medical Discourse', *Body and Society* 10: 87-111.
- Brown, P. 1988 *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York.
- Brubaker, R. 2017 *Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities*. Princeton.
- Burrus, V. 2004 *The Sex Lives of Saints: an Erotics of Ancient Hagiography*, Philadelphia.
- Castelli, E. 2004 *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, New York.
- Chandler, A. 2016 *Self-Injury, Medicine and Society: Authentic Bodies*, Basingstoke.
- Chaney, S. 2017 *Psyche on the Skin: a History of Self-Harm*, London.
- Clarke, M. 1999 *Flesh and Spirit in the Songs of Homer*, Oxford.
- Conybeare, C. 2002 'The Ambiguous Laughter of St Lawrence', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10: 175-202.
- Descola, P. 2013 *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans, J. Lloyd. Chicago
- Edwards, C. 1997 'Three Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and prostitution in Ancient Rome', in Hallett, J., and Skinner, M. eds *Roman Sexualities*, Princeton: 66-96
- 2007 *Death in Ancient Rome*, New Haven.
- Gardner, F. 2001 *Self-Harm: a Psychotherapeutic Approach*, Hove.
- Gill, C. 1998 *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy... the Self in Dialogue*, Oxford.
- Goldhill, S. and Greensmith E. 2020 'Gregory of Nazianzus in the Palatine Anthology: the Poetics of Christian Death', *Cambridge Classical Journal* 66: 29-69.
- Grig, L. 2004 *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, London.

- Gunderson, E. 2000 *Staging Masculinity: the Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World*, Ann Arbor.
- Habinek, T. 1997 'The Invention of Sexuality in the World-City of Rome', in T. Habinek and A. Sciesaro eds *The Roman Cultural Revolution*, Cambridge: 23-43.
- Hill, T. 2011 *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and the Self in Roman Thought and Literature*, London.
- Holmes, B. 2010 *The Symptom and the Subject: the Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece*, Princeton.
- Inckle, K. 2007 *Writing on the Body? Thinking through Gendered Embodiment and Marked Flesh*, Cambridge.
- Janan, M. 1994 '*When the Lamp is Shattered*': *Desire and Narrative in Catullus*, Carbondale, IL.
- Kelley, N. 2006 "Philosophy as Training for Death: Reading the Ancient Christian Martyr Acts as Spiritual Exercises" *Church History* 75.4: 723-47.
- Kidger, J. et al 2012 'Adolescent Self-Harm and Suicidal Thoughts in the ALSPAC Cohort: a Self-report Survey in England', *BMC Psychiatry* 12: 69.
- King, H. 1998 *Hippocrates' Woman: reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece*. London.
- Kyle, D. 1998 *Spectacles of Death*, London.
- Latham, J. 2012 "'Fabulous Clap-Trap": Roman Masculinity, the Cult of the Magna Mater, and Literary Constructions of the Galli at Rome from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity', *Journal of Religious Studies* 94: 84-122.
- Nagel, T. 1979 *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge.
- Roller, L. 1997 'The Ideology of the Eunuch Priest,' *Gender & History* 9: 542-59.

Shaw, B. 1996 'Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4.3: 269-312.

Skinner, M. 1997 'Ego mulier: the Construction of male sexuality in Catullus' in Hallett, J., and Skinner, M. eds *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton): 129-50.

Sorabji, R. 2006 *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life and Death*, Chicago.

Van Hooff, A. 1990 *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity*, London.

Viveiros de Castro, E. 2014 *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. P. Skafish. Minneapolis.

Wilson, E. 2004 *Mocked with Death: Tragic Overliving from Sophocles to Milton*, Baltimore.