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Book Review

Pandora's Senses: The Feminine Character in the Ancient Text

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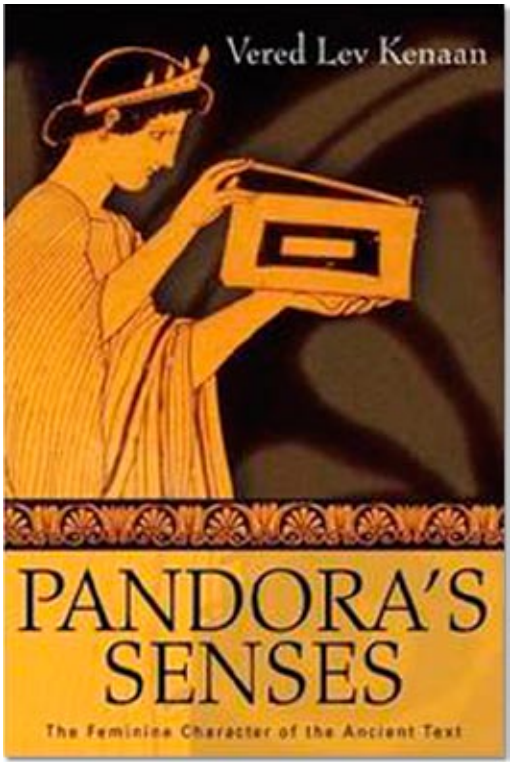

In contrast to readings of Hesiod that focus on the misogyny involved in his two characterizations of the first woman, Pandora (in *Theogony* and *Works and Days*), Kenaan seeks to show how the image of Pandora is formative for the ancient literary text. Pandora, she argues, introduces phenomenality, and in particular visuality, in its love-arousing beauty. Unlike Plato's Diotima, however, Pandora does not seek to orient eros toward a transcendent, non-sensuous beauty but functions rather within the erotic development of the cosmos from barren, primordial Eros to the interpersonal love relationships protected by Aphrodite. The elemental complementarity between Aphrodite and Pandora is worth remarking on: whereas the goddess is born from the primordial powers of sky (Ouranos) and sea, Pandora's originary elements are earth and fire. In that her form is molded from earth and resplendently adorned by Hephaistos, she is also the first work of art, and of art as *technē*; and as such, she introduces luminous visibility into the world which is, however, conjoined with the invisible dimensions of her interiority. Given that Kenaan emphasizes this interrelation of the visible and the invisible throughout, one somewhat regrets that she does not expand her philosophical references to encompass Merleau-Ponty's thematization and explorations of this interrelation.

Pandora introduces not only phenomenality but also alterity into the previously homogeneous world of men; her difference reflects at once her gender, her singularity and hidden interiority, and her being an artifice rather than part of nature. Kenaan moves beyond the feminist critiques of casting woman as Other to develop the idea (first articulated by certain feminist scholars of ancient literature, such as Nicole Loraux) that the feminine figure institutes a reciprocity or interchange between sameness and otherness. This is particularly important, as Kenaan shows,

in *Works and Days* where Hesiod has abandoned the aim of assimilating his discourse to divine utterance (the song of the Muses addressed to the gods) and has, in his myth of the Five Ages, recognized the *hybris* of the human aspiration to symbiosis with the gods. Even in the degenerate Iron Age, however, humans still cling to a form of assimilation: they are blind to the alterity or autonomy of the world. Rather than recognizing the sacredness of the primordial elements, humans now reduce them to mere materials at their disposal (such is, of course, Heidegger's argument in his 1953/54 essay, "The Question Concerning Technology"). A recognition of the world's alterity is crucial for humans to take up their abode in it in a spirit of ethical responsibility.

Although there is, one might recall, no strict similarity even among the gods (Plato, in *Phaedr*. 252b-253c, traces human differences to the particular divinity in whose train their souls followed prior to incarnation), and Kenaan notes that Hesiod rejects human homogeneity as "sheer fantasy" (p.63), sameness remains, on her analysis, nonetheless a longed-for ideal. Hesiod investigates disparity and discord paradigmatically in the fraternal relationship; but the tension between sameness and difference is also at the core of erotic experience (Kenaan links Aristophanes's poignant speech in Plato's *Symposium* to this Hesiodic thought structure). As a signifier of difference, however, Pandora does not merely bring disparity into play but implements the need to extend oneself to the Other in genuine and complex relationships.

In the context of textuality (for which, to repeat, Pandora's figure is formative), Kenaan distinguishes between a "poetics of marriage" that characterizes the didactic text, such as Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (with its boorish censure of feminine adornment), and a "poetics of eros" that allows for the reader's initiative or participation and is characteristic of philosophical texts such as the *Symposium*.

In contrast to the customary thematization of Socrates's maieutics, Kenaan links his philosophical practice to the *hetaira*'s art of love. With reference to his conversation, in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, with the courtesan Theodote, she notes that the latter's non-mimetic art of self-presentation and erotic fascination has its source in self-knowledge and in an understanding of eros as oriented toward a beauty refractory to possession. Not only the Platonic figure of Socrates, but also his *logoi*, Kenaan points out (with reference to the *Symposium*) are marked by the duality between outer appearance and inner beauty, so that he reverses the duality that characterizes Pandora as a *kalon kakon* (a "beautiful evil"). Kenaan's point that the Platonic text thus presents itself (and textuality as such) as non-transparent and non-delimited in its meaning will, however, need to be examined more fully with regard to Plato's censure of writing in the *Phaedrus*. He argues there, after all, that the written text cannot provoke or engage in a living interchange with the reader, and that it constitutes a potion that fosters forgetfulness rather than stimulating *anamnēsis*. In the Platonic dialogue, moreover, this censure of writing functions within the wider context of an examination of rhetoric and, indeed, of textuality that cannot be bracketed in an effort to characterize the Platonic text.

Prominent among the gifts with which Pandora is endowed is that of language; she is

in fact, according to Kenaan, an expert rhetorician. Although woman's speech has traditionally been marginalized and silenced, the Roman poet Ovid makes it, she argues, the mark of his own textuality, thereby positioning his erotodidactic discourse in opposition to a characterization of the Roman love elegy as effeminate or "soft" (*mollis*) and lightweight (*laevis*). He acknowledges Sappho, in particular, as an inspiration for his own *Musa proterva* or "shameless Muse" (even if her Roman identification as *lascivia* obscures certain important aspects of her poetic *persona*). Unlike Sappho, however, Ovid, on Kenaan's analysis, treats love as an essentially language-dependent or textual phenomenon, so that his discourse shifts from an expressive to a metalinguistic modality. Addressing the question of the palinodic relationship between his *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedia Amoris*, Kenaan shows convincingly that his narrative structure is autobiographical, transformational, and cyclical, rather than tracing out a conversional itinerary. The artful cultivation of love and its renunciation as a disabling sickness are not, for him, mutually exclusive, and neither stage or attitude is privileged over the other.

Contradiction, ambiguity, and incoherence are, Kenaan argues, the marks of "a woman's language" valorized as such by Ovid. In this context, she notes that "Ovid includes violence as a requisite component of the seducer's repertoire" (p. 149). She examines the mythical thought structure that traces the emergence of a woman's voice and subjectivity to her sexual initiation, often by the violent act of rape (Persephone being the paradigmatic example). The violated girl's voice, however, is considered "incoherent and unreliable" in view of her supposedly ambivalent attitude toward rape (p. 151). Although Kenaan calls this mythical logic "dangerously familiar" (p. 149), her discussion of it would, in this reviewer's opinion, benefit from a sharper critical edge.

In her highly original and sensitively written final chapter, "Pandora's Tears," Kenaan examines the intimate relationship between femininity, the art of weaving, textuality, and corporeality. The figural weaver (such as Philomela or Helen) in particular imbues her textile with the singularity, the pain, and the bodily dimension of her experience, so that -- moving from textile to text – the *logos* cannot be abstracted from the density and opacity of the *mythos*. The feminine metaphors and aspects of textuality, symbolized by the figure of Pandora but disvalued in antiquity are, Kenaan concludes, essential to the formation and rich complexity of the ancient (and ultimately of any) text. One wonders nonetheless why these aspects must continue to be characterized as feminine. In the Homeric text, which Kenaan beautifully analyzes, Odysseus' weeping like a woman as he listens to the Phaeacian bard – and indeed like a Trojan captive dragged away from the corpse of her husband into slavery – does indeed mediate an alternative and complementary reading response to the masculine *ethos* of the *Iliad*. However, if indeed "death, absence, loss of world, and mourning provide the horizons within which the feminine voice has traditionally reached out for the possibility of articulation and expressivity" (p.170), these horizons are ultimately horizons of human experience as such. Perhaps then, while recognizing the importance of the feminine figure and voice for giving expression to these forms of experience within the

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patriarchal tradition, a binary characterization that continues to mark their expression as feminine can and should now be called into question.