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Scholarly research on ancient Greek dress is a sensitive matter. As a topic, it is very promising, allowing one to come close – literally and metaphorically – to the people of a distant past, to their private passions and public self-fashioning. But at the same time the evidence demands a careful methodology: Almost no physical remains of actual garments have survived, except for more durable accessories like metal pins, whereas textual sources provide rich but extremely diverse information, from descriptions of the range and high quality of textiles in the Homeric poetry, to anecdotal remarks by Herodotus and other contemporary historians, to lists of the types of garments dedicated in sanctuaries. For a long time, the study of Greek dress focused on the reconstruction of the types of garments worn by men and women, their drapery and materials, and their evolution over time. Over the last two or three decades, however, other aspects came to the fore: techniques of production, trade, intercultural exchange and the social dimension of the uses of the highly versatile Greek dress practice. This is the point where Mireille Lee starts. The unpretentious title of her monograph encapsulates two particular claims: the book is not just about clothing but about dress and body, and both together are investigated with regard to their social functions.

Chapter One stands out from the rest of the book and is divided into two parts. Lee first gives a succinct and very readable overview of the history of research, emphasising that the more recent, heightened interest in ancient dress has resulted in a greater focus on specific issues and thus did not contribute to moving this field away from the margins of Classical scholarship. She then examines modern dress theory and its applicability for studies of ancient Greek civilization. Lee’s review of a wide range of sociological texts from the late 19th century to the present day does not however provide the foundation for the development of a new fully-fledged theoretical approach. Instead, the outcome of her discussion is rather pragmatic and based on common sense, namely that everything that shapes a person’s appearance, from head-dress to footwear, from the naked to the fully clothed body, must be taken into consideration, and that taken together, all these things have has the capacity to forge the social identity of that person. The innumerable forms and modifications of body and dress are to be seen as „social practice“ and „as a coherent system of nonverbal communication“ (p. 1).

The remaining six chapters seek to demonstrate the validity and fruitfulness of this approach. Lee’s clear and straightforward headings (see below) are indicative of a well-structured book. Its content, however, is almost impossible to summarize. She adopts a more encyclopaedic rather than analytical approach by presenting her material in a long sequence of sections or paragraphs which cover virtually everything of importance related to the subject in question and which therefore can be read independently of each other. Though very informative, for a German reader this at times gives rise to the somewhat irritating impression that one is working through a series of entries in a *Realenzyklopädie*, providing well-researched examples of scholarly erudition, taking into account all relevant ancient sources and all pertinent modern literature.

Let me highlight a few points. Chapter Two („Bodies“) revolves around the notion that the male body in Greek culture represents the norm whereas the female body – starting with Pandora, Hesiod’s „beautiful evil“ – was seen as a sort of problematic counterpart whose main purpose was to produce healthy children. Chapter Three describes the practice of „Body-modifications“ for both sexes, which were just as varied then as they are today, and include everything from dealing with hair (head, facial, body, pubes), the use of scents, the appropriate diet for an athletic physique, to tattoos. The chapter on „Garments“ carefully summarizes our knowledge to-date, which, despite the long tradition of
research on this field, still leaves many fundamental questions unanswered, precisely because it is very hard to reconcile the diverse literary sources and the rich pictorial evidence. Chapter Five looks at the endless varieties of „Accessories“ and is the most detailed – and fragmented – of the book, whereas Chapter Six on „The body as dress“ reviews the interesting and controversial discussion on the difference between „nudity“ and „nakedness“: the positive experience of self-confident presentation of one’s unclothed body as opposed to the negative feeling of unwanted or forced exposure in the presence of others. Finally, Chapter Seven deals with „The social context of dress“ throughout all stages of the wearer’s life and also looks at the role of clothing in specific social contexts, such as „religion and ritual“ (pp. 214–224), in order to describe how the choice of garments contributed to forging personal identity.

But how does the personality of the author come into play? Although Lee is not „theorizing“ in the usual sense of the word and does not pursue a specific argument throughout the book, she implicitly presents a special perspective on the subject. Since, as she assumes, men and male bodies in ancient Greek culture constituted the norm whereas women and their bodies were seen as inferior, and even impure, she expects this opposition to be reflected in the highly modifiable surfaces of body and dress. With a sort of mildly feminist approach, Lee unveils numerous forms of ideological or social control by men over women. To give a few examples: the regulation of their diet and use of cosmetics; „control over women’s hair [which] demonstrates control over women’s sexuality“ (p. 81); the same motivation might, as Lee suggests, have been behind the re-introduction of the severe peplos in the early Classical era. The character of the book as a „synthetic study“ (p. 232) impedes a thorough discussion of this notion, which at times appears to be too strongly inspired by the situation in ‘traditional’ societies of our time. That the famous Knidia by Praxiteles, the first fully naked Greek statue of Aphrodite, celebrates female sexuality and that even „a homoerotic response is possible“ (p. 189) is a challenging idea but again, without a detailed reasoning it will hardly convince many readers.

The book definitely has great merit, but also evident limitations. Organized primarily as a companion, the work will benefit all those interested in ancient Greek dress and its social aspects, scholars and students alike. But I would like to address two issues that deserve more attention in future research: history and aesthetics. With few exceptions, the evidence which serves as the basis for the book spans the early sixth to the late fourth century B.C. or, in conventional terms, the high archaic to the late classical period. Lee makes clear that it was not her intention to write a history of Greek dress; but I would have expected her to at least give an outline of a social history of dress and body in the Greek world. Although a number of historical changes are described, for example the alternating preferences for certain types of garments, an essentialist approach prevails. The issue of aesthetics is first and foremost a methodological one. An important source for the reconstruction of Greek garments and their use is the visual evidence of statues, reliefs, vase paintings and other media. Lee is well aware of the fact that such images are not to be seen as „illustrations“ of the practice of Greek dress but rather as „renderings“ which in one way or another accentuate or interpret the figure or scene represented. This also seems to be one of the reasons why she hesitates to embark on a journey towards a detailed history of Greek dress. However, when discussing individual aspects she repeatedly relies in an almost literal manner on this very body of evidence, despite her general scepticism towards the „historicity“ of images, and in particular of the depictions on vases. This leads to another critical aspect of the book. Although a Classical archaeologist by training, Lee seems to be reluctant to concede that the archaeological evidence has its own and specific explanatory power. The notion that women were generally seen as the inferior sex is unquestionably supported by the written sources, but when one looks at the character of extant archaeological remains, both visual and material, one suspects that this is not the entire story. The many splendid archaic female statues (korai), the countless depictions of beautiful women on vases, the Greek obsession
– generally speaking – with female beauty, dressed and undressed, strongly suggests that there was, parallel to the idea of the ‘ideal man’, also something akin to admiration and respect for women, and that this aspect of social identity might even have been a prerequisite for the extraordinarily rich range of dress in ancient Greek society. In short: Lee’s great erudition did not leave much space for the sensuous quality of Greek dress and the ability of women to fill them with life. But this is perhaps another story.