

Charles Halton & Saana Svärd. *Women's Writing of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Anthology of the Earliest Female Authors.* Cambridge: CUP, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-107-05205-5. Hardback. xviii + 238 pp.

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Charles Halton (St Mary's University, Twickenham, United Kingdom) and Saana Svärd (University of Helsinki, Finland) met each other at Venice International University during a series of seminars in the 2011–2012 academic year and decided to launch a project. Both acknowledged the difficulties in accessing ancient Near Eastern primary sources translated into modern languages. Consequently, both agreed on the need to provide an anthology, taking female authorship as the main criterion for the selection of texts. The result of this concern and the decision they made is the fantastic and much needed volume under review here: *Women's Writing of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Anthology of the Earliest Female Authors*. Halton and Svärd have to be congratulated for the completion of this project, which became a tangible reality in 2018.

As they state in their preface, transliterations and translations of cuneiform texts are often published in “thousands of obscure journals, monographs, and *Festschriften*” (p. xv). This makes access difficult for all scholars, but even more so for those not strictly in the field but with an interest in ancient history or women’s history, for instance. In this context, anthologies are much needed and the publication of a new one can only be celebrated. This volume includes a selection of about 100 texts originally written in Sumerian and Akkadian, the two better attested languages from ancient Mesopotamia in terms of the number of sources available and the variety of textual genres. All texts are presented in English translation, preceded by a brief introduction to contextualise them and followed by a select bibliography. The texts of the anthology are ordered in several sections in relation to six text genres, plus a brief section for works that do not fit into any of the outlined genres. The sections follow this order: scholarly documents; hymns, poems, and prayers; letters; inscriptions; oracles; and proverbs. This proposed system of classification is useful, although the authors do acknowledge the pitfalls of engaging in debate on ancient text genres (see especially pp. 29–30).

The issue of text genres and the subsequent ordering of the selected texts was not the only sensitive aspect Halton and Svärd needed to address. “Authorship” and “female” (applied to authorship) are indeed difficult, yet crucial, concepts which need to be problematized for an anthology like this one. Choosing these as axes for the anthology, Halton and Svärd face two main challenges: the applicability of these notions to ancient texts and their proper definition. With regard to their applicability, I would like to point out the idea of “controlled anachronism”

discussed by the French Historian Nicole Loraux (1943–2003).¹ The authors are well aware of the anachronism of “authorship” – and partially of “female” when considering certain gender studies third-wave proposals – but they decide to use them in order to be able to discuss certain topics. In doing so, these topics become more visible and intelligible, which is certainly positive. With regard to their definition, this issue is addressed mainly in the third chapter titled “Authorship, Agency, and Gender” (pp. 25–36). From my point of view, three statements on p. 32 are crucial to understand Halton and Svärd’s choices and to summarise some aspects of these complex definitions. Alluding to what they mean by female authors and by women’s writing as criteria to select the texts, they state: “what this anthology presents includes:

- 1) what women actually wrote (often debatable)
- 2) what ancient scribes thought women wrote or should have written
- 3) what modern scholars thought women wrote or should have written.” (p. 32)

With this proposal, Halton and Svärd show that it is as problematic to assume female authorship as to assume male authorship. This is relevant, because even now in some scholarly debates the presence and agency of men in certain arenas in Antiquity are taken for granted, while the presence and agency of women still need to be proven.² It is significant, then, that the authors acknowledge, anticipating what might be one of the main criticisms of the book, that, in fact, female authorship is always debatable. The same applies also for male authorship, thus this anthology is as subjective and useful as others.

Another possible criticism of the book that Halton and Svärd anticipate is the use of “authorship” as a category of analysis. In the volume, authorship is defined in a dual way: instrumental authorship and independent authorship. This dual definition takes as its starting point a proposal by Martti Nissinen, Professor of Old Testament Studies at the University of Helsinki, who defines prophetic agency as instrumental and as independent, thus also in a dual way (p. 28). This unfolding of the definition of “authorship” allows Halton and Svärd to overcome the restrictive definitions of authorship as an individual, voluntary and highly creative (and original) action. Such definitions are also overcome by means of theoretical stances like intertextuality when dealing with modern and contemporary texts. This framing of authorship allows Halton and Svärd to better highlight the role of women in the creation and transmission of texts, a process understood as holistic and always a work in progress.

All in all, this volume provides a useful anthology of texts of potential interest to academics of different disciplines and also beyond academia. Moreover, thanks to the three introductory chapters and the chapter of concluding remarks, the volume also addresses some debates which are welcome in the framework of ancient Near Eastern studies, where theoretical discussions are still rare. The book closes with three indexes: divine names, personal names and place names. A subject index might have been handy as well, although one might suppose that this option was probably disregarded due to the complexity involved. In any case, what has to be highlighted again is the usefulness of the book, which will be a must for all libraries devoted to the study of the past.

1 Loraux, Nicole 1993. Éloge d’anachronisme en histoire. *Le Genre Humain* 27: 23–39.

2 For a discussion on this issue that takes as a case study the supervisory positions of men and women as registered in administrative texts from the end of the third millennium BCE, see Karahashi, Fumi & Agnès García-Ventura 2016. Overseers of Textile Workers in Presargonic Lagash. *KASKAL. Rivista di storia, ambienti e culture del Vicino Oriente Antico* 13: 1–19.