7.

Man or Woman? Cross-gendering and Individuality on Third Century Roman Sarcophagi

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When it comes to the representation of ordinary men and women on Roman sarcophagi of the second and third century the iconographic repertoire tends to be repetitive and conventional, reflecting the shared ideals of contemporary society and communal values. Individuality is rarely expressed through sarcophagus imagery, so that when unusual or distinctive images appear they can be taken to offer a rare insight into the specific wishes or concerns of particular people. One such example is the cross-gendered figure, created by applying a male or female portrait to a body of the opposite sex. I shall argue that these images were a product of the choice of individuals and, as used on sarcophagi, they reveal the fluidity of gender categories in contemporary Roman society.

The normal interpretation of cross-gendered images is that they are the unintentional results of the production process involved in carving sarcophagi.¹ Because of their repertoire of repetitive motifs sarcophagi are usually thought to be prefabricated products that were purchased from stock. According to this explanation the mismatched combination of head and body occurred because the purchaser had to take what was available when a sarcophagus was needed. The workshop would have only a limited number of sarcophagi with a predesigned motif from which the patron could choose.² So, as one of the final steps in the carving process, probably at purchase, a portrait of the dead was added to one of the protagonists in the decoration that had already been sculpted: it was during this process that a male body could be equipped with a female portrait, or vice versa. Even so, we cannot know for sure when portraits were added to the figures, since both the identity of the patron and the exact time-scale of the purchase remain uncertain.

1 Koch and Sichtermann 1982, 610; Koch 1990, especially 65–66.

2 It has, for example, been estimated that around 50 different myths were represented on sarcophagus reliefs (Koch and Sichtermann 1982. For an overview of the popularity of myths on Roman sarcophagi, see Zanker 2005). However, when we are talking about sarcophagi with figures individualised through the application of a portrait only, the number of different myths used comes down to 15.

The identity of the patron is often not revealed directly (though sometimes a name or title is stated in an inscription on the lid) but may be suggested by the portraits carved on the relief. The patron may be either the person who bought the coffin for him or herself, or a relative of the deceased. In the latter case we can be fairly certain that the commission of a sarcophagus was a family matter, since imagery and inscriptions on sarcophagi both refer to social relationships within families.³ I suggest however, that, with the exception of children's sarcophagi, the patron of a cross-gendered sarcophagus was the person who was going to be buried in the coffin. Cross-gendered figures on sarcophagi can therefore be seen as rare examples of individual wishes that are revealed in the otherwise standardised iconography of sarcophagi. However, it should be noted that whether the sarcophagus was purchased before or after the death, and whoever its patron might have been, the important issue for this discussion is that the intention of the cross-gendered image was to negotiate the *post mortem* identity of the deceased.

Sarcophagus imagery is normally centred on one, or at most two individuals; and it is primarily their identities which are constructed through the portrait figures. This happens independently of whether the choice of motif was made by the deceased themselves or by the family. In broad terms, it can therefore be said that one sarcophagus is equated with one particular person (or in some cases two), which is why I consider sarcophagus imagery to be an expression of self-representation. However, the family could, by purchasing a sarcophagus for a deceased relative, construct an identity that in the end also reflected back on the family itself; so in such cases the choice of motif is not a matter of the individual self-representation of the deceased, but of the family. Both scenarios and types of patrons are likely, and both kinds of self-representation can be found within the vast corpus of sarcophagi.

In purchasing a sarcophagus, therefore, someone had at some point made a conscious choice about its motifs. The lavish quality of sarcophagus decoration suggests that the sculpted reliefs were supposed to be gazed at, either during the funerary ritual or, as is known from various tomb buildings, afterwards when the coffin had been displayed inside the tomb. A motif that was not socially acceptable would, therefore, not have been chosen, and if the prefabricated decoration of the coffin was inappropriate it could be changed. Thus, the final appearance of the decoration can be seen as a deliberate choice of the patron.

3 As in the image popular on sarcophagi of a medallion with the bust of a man and a woman, which presumably shows a married couple, e.g. the inscription on a strigillated sarcophagus, stating that the sarcophagus was given by a man to his wife (*ASR* I, 4, cat. 186). Other kinds of family relations are found, e.g. on children's sarcophagi, where the patron most often appears to be a parent (e.g. *ASR* IV, 3, cat. 214) or grandparent (Østergaard 1996, cat. 48).

So, to return to the question of how cross-gendered images came about, there is compelling evidence that they were deliberately made. Certain sarcophagi clearly show that the sculptor chose such a representation, even when there were other options. A graphic example occurs on a sarcophagus showing a pair of busts – male and female – framed by a conch (Figure 7.1).⁴ The heads of these were roughed out in preparation for the later addition of portraits, but only one was ever finished, that of a woman which was added to the bust in male clothing. By taking the male bust as a basis for her portrait when the female one was also available, the dead woman commemorated here has deliberately displayed herself in a male sphere. In the present discussion it is of little importance whether the woman chose the image for herself or whether it was chosen for her: in both cases, the option remained of using the female bust with the roughly carved head. Whoever commissioned it, the piece still clearly shows that a woman's identity could be constructed by using metaphors that traditionally belonged to a masculine world.

Other evidence, of a more practical nature, also suggests that some cross-gendered images were deliberately chosen. For it is obvious that even drastically re-cutting a figure from one sex into another did not pose a major problem to Roman craftsmen. This is clear from a sarcophagus now in the Huntington Library and Art Gallery in San Marino, California (Figure 7.2) where a female figure was re-worked to represent a man.⁵ The dress has been shortened, and cutting marks still visible around the male portrait reveal that the original hair-style was female (though probably only roughly carved). The coffin may have been reused for a secondary burial of a man, and the figure was therefore re-carved to suit the need of this man; or it may have been the only coffin of its kind available in the workshop, and the figure was altered as it did not suit the need of the new patron. But the sarcophagi to be discussed in this article did not involve such a radical makeover as found on the Huntington sarcophagus. On these the addition of a portrait to a body of the opposite gender was chosen, as I will argue, because the figure thereby created possessed virtues that the deceased wanted to emphasise in his or her commemoration.

The cross-gendered figures on sarcophagi raise important new opportunities for gender analysis, and strengthen ideas explored in recent studies that Roman gender should be viewed as a spectrum – rather than a polar, male/female dichotomy – in the search for individual self-definition.⁶ As Eric Varner has

4 Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, inv. 196637.

5 Koch 1990.

6 See for example the study of Bassler 2008, 52 on the problem of Christian self-definition, where she says: 'Each human body comprised male and female aspects, and depending on the relative strength of these aspects each individual would be located at a specific point along the male-female axis.' Her discussion is concerned with first century

Figure 7.1: Museo Nazionale Romano delle Terme inv. 196637.

Photograph: Stine Birk, by permission of the museum

shown, even the Emperor could align himself visually with female deities through the use of portraits, despite the obvious difference in gender.⁷ By showing this, Varner makes us aware that in various media of Roman art the repertoire of figures used for portrait identities was not centred on binary oppositions; and applying this to the study of sarcophagi opens new possibilities of interpretation in regard to gender roles and self-definition. For the fact that

self-definition but she extends her argument to encompass the third century as well (55–56). See also Bartman 2002.

7 Varner 2008, 188.

Figure 7.2: The man on the central relief has been recarved from a female figure. The rough tool marks on the feet show that the figure originally wore a long dress (*palla*) and shoes instead of sandals. Around the head the outline of a roughly carved area is evidence that the original figure was meant to have a female hairstyle. The Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, inv. 22.6, San Marino, California.

Photograph: Troels Myrup Kristensen, by permission of the museum.

cross-gendered images were carved on sarcophagus reliefs meant to commemorate the identities and idealised virtues of the dead shows that such images were socially acceptable. Through them we are reminded of the instability of gender categories, and can explore the role of these categories in the construction of identity.

Social Identity and Commemoration on Roman Sarcophagi

The production of sarcophagi in Rome was extensive and the choice of imagery available for personal commemoration multiple, although always within the limits of convention. On more than 650 surviving sarcophagi, the deceased is represented as one of the main characters in an episode from mythology or the 'ideal' human life; or a portrait bust, enclosed in a medallion or framed by a *parapetasma*, is carved alongside scenes alluding to (an idealised) everyday life or a mythological narrative.⁸ Images on Roman sarcophagi should be understood as analogies of human situations, such as love and desperate grief, and also of essential aspects of the life of men and women, such as their mutual relationship and the different roles they take in different social contexts.⁹ They therefore reflect social norms and ideals, and rarely illustrate professional activities or actual lived experiences.

Since the imagery of myth surrounds their portraits on the sarcophagi, the dead are directly associated with it and with the social ideals it expresses. This means that sarcophagi can be extremely informative about what virtues were considered socially desirable, either by the dead themselves or by the relatives who determined their commemoration. Furthermore, the conventional iconography of sarcophagus reliefs, so widely used amongst middle and upper class Romans at the time, shows how collective social ideals tended to dictate the popularity of a motif. Although the relative uniformity of this imagery can make it hard to discover anything about the 'individual', it also means that any deviations from the norm – such as the cross-gendered images – offer potential opportunities for further insights into a particular 'person', and into his or her characteristics and desires.

8 Birk 2009. (This unpublished PhD dissertation includes a catalogue of most of the surviving sarcophagi with portrait figures from the third century. It considers the appearance and meaning of these figures in regard to issues such as gender roles and individuality, and gives a special emphasis on how ideal identities are used in the construction of memory.)

9 For sarcophagus imagery as reflections of human situations, see Zanker and Ewald 2004. On myths on sarcophagus reliefs as analogies, see Koortbojian 1995, 9.

Looking at portrait representations of men and women in the vast corpus of sarcophagi it is possible to identify a number of regular assignments of gender categories and roles (some of which are, of course, obvious). Men are usually portrayed as magistrates,¹⁰ hunters,¹¹ mythological heroes,¹² and, in the intellectual sphere, as philosophers and poets.¹³ Female portraits are often given to mythological characters associated with physical beauty such as Rhea Silvia or Ariadne, and to human figures whose femininity is often emphasised by their off-the-shoulder drapery, which imitates images of Venus.¹⁴ Another common female figure type is the veiled woman, who appears, for instance, in nursing scenes and in scenes where she is often paired with a man, such as the *dextrarum iunctio*¹⁵ or with a learned man; the main symbolic value of these representations is probably devotion or *pietas*.¹⁶

Over time, the motifs and repertoire of figures on sarcophagi changed, some disappearing while others came into vogue.¹⁷ For instance, during the third century there was an increasing tendency to represent women as 'learned' women characterised by a scroll, which became more frequent than female images that emphasised physical beauty and devotion. The popularity of this type of the 'learned woman' may suggest that the ideals of the female had changed, and that in the late third century women were part of the intellectual scene and were on a more or less equal footing to men – in terms of funerary imagery at least.¹⁸ But when cross-gendered images of such subjects occur (that is to say, when the portrait consisted of a female head carved on to the body of a 'learned' man', as opposed to the homogenous image just mentioned), it is not sufficient to explain them as the unintended result of the production process of

10 Wrede 2001; *ASR* I, 3, 154–69.

11 For examples of hunters individualised through the use of a portrait see, *ASR* I, 2, cat. 8, 41, 28, 32, 59, 60, 65, 75, 101, 78, 104, 112, 125, 126, 128, 131, 150, 179, 180, 188, 192, 193, 204, 235, 240, 241, 246, 247; Blome 1998; Calza 1977, 225.

12 For examples of heroes individualised through the use of a portrait see, *ASR* XII, 2, cat. 65 (Adonis); *ASR* XII, 1, cat. 119, 125, 127, 131 (Achilles); *ASR* IV, 2, cat. 100 and *ASR* III, 1, cat. 103 (Hercules); *ASR* III, 3, cat. 180 (Mars).

13 Including *togatus* which often is juxtaposed with veiled women, as exemplified by a strigillated sarcophagus with a seated man and a woman (Ewald 1999a, cat. E 17). For examples of learned men individualised through the use of a portrait see, Ewald 1999a, cat. D 6, D 8, A 10, G 3, E 23; *ASR* I, 3, cat. 8.

14 For examples see, *ASR* IV, 1, cat. 46, 47, 49 and *ASR* IV, 3, cat. 214, 222 (Ariadne); *ASR* III, 2, cat. 180 (Rhea Silvia); *ASR* V, 2, 2, cat. 121, 176, 197; *ASR* I, 4, cat. 186 (naked shoulder and/or veil).

15 For examples of the veiled women see, *ASR* I, 3, cat. 6, 22, 23, 25, 35, 138; *ASR* I, 4, cat. 273.

16 *ASR* I, 3, 152–4.

17 Ewald 2005, 56.

18 Huskinson 1999; 2002.

sarcophagi, where uniform, repetitive imagery was encouraged by the needs of prefabrication.¹⁹

Interpreting the Body on Roman Sarcophagi

The body is the visual expression of a person. Combined with the way we dress, the body functions as a means of non-verbal communication that signals social concepts and constructions such as class, age, and importantly for this article, gender, where our views traditionally depend on the visual appearance of the body.²⁰ Representations of the body on sarcophagi made by Roman craftsmen for Roman customers are therefore informative about an individual's construction of self and identity, and, in this case, about how gender was perceived, lived, and tolerated.

Even before we get to identifying or interpreting a figure on a relief or a statue we register certain things about its body – whether it is male or female, naked or dressed, or young or old, for example. The face is also important. Figures on sarcophagi were provided with a generic or roughly carved head, or with an individualised portrait. Such portraits strengthen the idea that a direct, conscious choice of self-representation was made, whereby the dead are identified in terms of the particular symbolic values attached to the body.

Yet despite the centrality of these issues and the fact that these reliefs are filled with all kinds of bodily representations, the body is not often discussed in studies of sarcophagi. Even when it is (and particularly in the case of mythological scenes), discussions usually take the appearance of the bodies for granted.²¹ The general attitude towards the body-type chosen to represent the deceased is that it is determined by the subject-matter of the image. A good example is a recent study of the Hylas relief, later used as architectural decoration in the inner court of Palazzo Mattei in Rome (Figure 7. 3), which I shall discuss in greater detail below. In this image one of the nymphs abducting Hylas has a boy's portrait, yet no comment has been made on this cross-gendering. Instead, the figure of the boy-nymph has been seen as the result of a practical arrangement that made it possible for every member of the family to be included as a protagonist in the scene.²² Yet this argument could be turned

19 For discussion of cross-gendered images as an outcome of mass-production, see Huskinson 2002, 25–26; Koch 1990, 64–6.

20 Lee 2000, 114–115; Sørensen 2006, 117–119; Meskell 2000, 14.

21 On myths on sarcophagi generally, see Zanker and Ewald 2004; Koortbojian 1995; Ewald 1999b. On *vita romana* and other motifs such as philosopher and muses, see *ASR* I, 3; Ewald 1999a.

22 Zanker and Ewald 2004, 97. The frontal relief of the sarcophagus is now built into a wall in the courtyard of Palazzo Mattei, Rome.

Figure 7.3: Hylas is being abducted by two nymphs. One of the nymphs is shown as an elderly woman whereas the other is a boy. Palazzo Mattei, Rome.

Photograph: Troels Myrup Kristensen

around, to claim that the motif may have been chosen specifically because it allowed the dead boy to be associated with a female body and the particular qualities it implied. How this would work out will be examined more closely in the next section.

Seen in this light, cross-gendered images, such as this, have an effect on our understanding of gender and gender relations in the Roman world. This assumption is further strengthened by the fact that, as argued by Laqueur, in antiquity the body was imagined as a single sex, meaning that the female body possessed all the same elements as the male but placed in the wrong places.²³ The two genders were then one sex, and in medical terms this meant that the degree to which individuals had the characteristics of a man or woman depended on their relative bodily heat. As a consequence gender was not seen as a fixed binary construction, which means that the boundary between male and female was one of degree and not of kind. This ancient attitude towards the body suggests that our own perception of gender distinctions in antiquity should be more flexible, since it opens up the possibility of viewing gender as something relative and moveable. Thus, an individual's gender might be defined according to the relative strength of male and female aspects, and could even change in the course of life according to context, situation, social relations or personal experiences.

23 Laqueur 1990, 25–62.

Figure 7.4: A boy is represented in drapery that slips off his shoulder, and holding an instrument. The drapery makes an allusion to Venus whereas the instrument shows him as skilled in music. His musical abilities associate him with the world of the muses. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek inv. 854, Copenhagen.

Photograph: Stine Birk, by permission of the museum.

Cross-gendered Bodies on Roman Sarcophagi

Of the various kinds of cross-gendered images to appear, the most common consists of a male portrait applied to a female body. Sometimes this body is unambiguously presented with female features, such as curvy contours and breasts visible beneath a long dress, and sometimes even with one shoulder exposed in an allusion to the iconography of Venus (Figure 7.4).²⁴ At other times it may simply be the case that a male body is represented in such a way that it appears almost womanly (Figure 7.5).²⁵

²⁴ Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. 854. Østergaard 1996, cat. 56.

²⁵ British Museum, inv. GR 1947.7–14.8; Walker 1990, cat. 43. The ‘womanly’ male body is a not wholly unfamiliar phenomenon within Roman visual culture, e.g. male gods like Dionysos or Priapos and young men as Narcissus and Hermaphroditos all show a great deal of femininity both in their behaviour and physical appearance: Cain 1997; Oehmke 2004; Oehmke 2007. The masculine hero Hercules also became female when he changed clothes with Omphale (before they participated in a ritual honouring Bacchus): Ovid, *Fasti* II 283–358. Kampen 1996b, 242.

Figure 7.5: An effeminate representation of a man. The Endymion figure was probably re-carved from a sleeping Ariadne. British Museum inv. GR 1947.7–14.8.

Photograph: By permission of the museum.

An example of such a feminised male figure appears on a sarcophagus now in Palermo Cathedral (Figure 7.6).²⁶ The relief shows the nine Muses and the figures of two boys, who are represented rather differently. These may depict two brothers, or perhaps the same person twice over, with each figure embodying a specific gender role. Such dual representations of the same individual are not uncommon in Roman art where two figures portraying the same person but in different ways, either in the same statue group or on the same relief, can emphasise distinct aspects of the person's life and virtues.²⁷ On the Palermo sarcophagus the young man on the right end is shown as a male seated philosopher: the scroll is his link to the world of learning, and the muses are his inspiration. In contrast, the young man on the left is represented by the image of a muse: the long dress, exposed shoulder, shapely breasts, and lyre firmly link him with feminine qualities.²⁸ These two figures do not invite any categorisation according to sexual orientation; we cannot explain this choice of crossed male and female iconography by their relationship with the other portrait figures on the reliefs, nor can we at this stage draw any general

26 Palermo, Cathedral. *ASR* V, 3, cat. 68; Ewald 1999a, cat. A 13.

27 Hallett 2005, 212–15.

28 The gender of the portrait has been disputed. As one of the first commentators, Wegner pointed out that the portrait was re-cut from female to male (*ASR* V, 3, cat. 68). Fittschen 1972, 490 also thought that the portrait was of a boy, but later (1992) claimed it was of a very young girl. But there are various problems with this line of argument, e.g. to support his claim that portraits of young girls can look like boys, he cited the sarcophagus from Civit Castellana, to be discussed in detail below. In this a skeleton of a boy of about 12 years was found (Moretti 1975, 261), and there is a general agreement that the relief represents a 'boy muse' (Ewald 1999a, cat. H 2; Wrede 1981, 140, cat. 239). In his discussion, Fittschen also mistakenly emphasises the sex of the child instead of acknowledging the ambiguous gender categories in the representation of very small children.

Figure 7.6: Two brothers (or maybe it is the same boy shown twice) are shown in the sphere of the nine Muses. The boy on the right is represented in off the shoulder drapery, following the iconography of Venus. Cathedral, Palermo. Photograph: DAIR 1971.0681

conclusion from them about gender categories. But their age may be an important factor since it does seem that age can play a significant role in the choice of cross-gendered figures and, as I will also show later, androgyny seems to have been more easily permissible for boys than for adults.²⁹ I will return to the issue of cross-gendering and age below.

Not only boys could take on signifiers of femininity: men too could be represented in this way. A strigillated sarcophagus in the Capitoline Museums shows a typical pair of figures engaged in intellectual activity.³⁰ In the left corner panel is a 'learned woman',³¹ and in the right the usual male pendant, a philosopher. But despite the femininity of the woman's body, both figures have male portrait features. The similarity of the two portraits makes it likely that it is

29 For cross-gender on funerary reliefs as expressions of a sexual relationship, see Clarke 2003, 215–9 and Varner 2008, 194. On sexual ambivalence in antiquity, see also Brisson 2002.

30 Capitoline Museums, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Scala II, 15, inv. 821; Ewald 1999a, cat. F 18.

31 Huskinson 1999; 2002. Another representation of a man carved with the body of a muse is found on the so called 'Plotinus sarcophagus'. The figure on the right of the central group has a female body and wears a long garment. The head is of a bearded man. The muse originally intended was transformed into a philosopher-like figure. Unlike the other cross-gendered sarcophagi treated in this article this figure does not have a portrait.

the same person who has been depicted twice.³² If so, then the man has chosen to represent himself by means of two different figure-types, both of which promote him as an intellectual although one has an obviously female body, with clearly curvaceous lines and breasts. It seems as if this choice of appearance was intentional since it would have been easy to rework the body to make it look more masculine, or, alternatively, not to finish the head with male portrait features (after all, it was very common on Roman sarcophagi to leave the head roughly prepared). But none of these options was followed. So presumably the man wanted to represent two different aspects of himself; one relating to male skills and the other to female qualities. There is a possibility that the lower part of the figure has been re-cut as the relief is low and the dress of an unusual type; if that was done, the purpose might have been to shorten the dress. But that is not certain – and even if the dress was shortened, there is still the question of why no effort was made to conceal the hips and breasts in order to make the figure appear less explicitly feminine.

Another feminine, almost sensual, representation of a man is found on the sarcophagus in the British Museum (Figure 7.5). The man has a portrait that enables us to date the sarcophagus to the first part of the third century.³³ He is represented as Endymion; but originally, before some minor re-cutting, the figure must have been a sleeping Ariadne.³⁴ The graceful femininity of the body is still apparent, especially in the round belly and slender waist.

Many pragmatic explanations can be found to account for such representations, especially where they involve some re-carving (a process that is often fraught with complicated questions); yet even so they do not change the fact that the resulting cross-gendered images were socially acceptable, and tolerated even on commemorative monuments.

All these examples show how gender categories were unstable and could be varied without transgressing the boundaries of what was socially acceptable for displays of self-representation.³⁵ They also show how the same portrait features applied to figures of different sex could display different sides of a person's identity. This raises some important questions about how differences between the sexes are interpreted, and about what that means for the understanding of gender.³⁶ But at this stage I would like to emphasise one general conclusion: that is, whatever their primary motivation, such cross-gendered figures were obviously acceptable to Roman society. It was not a moral outrage for a man

32 Ewald 1999a, 192.

33 Walker 1990, cat. 43.

34 The breasts were cut down and a penis was inserted to make him male. For discussion, see *ASR* XII, 2, 54–5.

35 Montserrat 2000.

36 Gilchrist 1999, 13.

to be depicted with a feminine body, even on monuments like these made to commemorate the dead and their social virtues.

Femininity and 'Suspect Men' in Roman Society

Archaeological literature has generally tended to view male iconography as the more privileged and power-laden, and to see the female as a metaphor of weakness. But this evaluation seems to be challenged by the evidence from antiquity. Since there are more examples of cross-gendered images with a male portrait head on a female body than there are examples of female portraits on a male body, men who assumed female physical attributes in this way cannot be seen as 'suspect'; nor should, as an opposition to suspect, the term 'virtuous' be used to describe women when they take on male attributes.³⁷ That way of thinking is part of a feminist mindset that talks about gender and gender roles in term of hierarchy and power relations.³⁸ I find it more helpful to consider that boys and men, as well as women and girls, selected their iconography, or that the imagery was chosen for them, because they wanted to express specific virtues and skills that were traditionally associated with the other sex. This view does not imply that the choice of iconography inevitably made a person more 'virtuous' or 'suspect'; but rather that the individuals concerned have chosen to mix gendered iconography in order to construct their own particular visual and social identity.³⁹

In iconography, men could take on feminine signs, not only through the physical characteristics of the body (as discussed in the last section) but also by means of attributes. For instance, a relief in the Vatican includes two possible cross-gendered figures of men, of which one alludes to the iconography of

37 Kampen 1996a, 18 explicitly uses the term 'suspect' about men with female attributes and 'virtuous' about women with male attributes. Also, Montserrat (2000, 159–61) for the female as the lowest ranking in a gender hierarchy dominated by power relations; individuals with male bodies and suggestions of femininity (including hermaphrodites or other kind of third gender) slipped several points down the scale towards *femaleness*.

38 See Gilchrist 1999, 2–3.

39 An example of how male bias has affected the interpretation of sarcophagi is provided by an image which commemorates a man through wool-working scenes (Malibu, Getty Villa, inv. 86.AA.701 Koch 1988, 24–7). He has been described as a businessman engaged with the production of wool (Koch 1988, 26; and Amedick in *ASR* I, 4, 116, cf. no. 68). But if the wool-workers and the protagonist had been women, then the interpretation would probably have been limited to household duties since wool-working was traditionally thought to be a female virtue (Kampen 1996a, 22; Dixon 2001, 117). This illustrates the obvious risk of making gender-stereotypical assumptions – seeing the wool-work for women as a domestic ideal, but for a man as an indication of larger enterprises outside the house.

Figure 7.7: The central panel shows a female bust with a portrait of a bearded man. Loculus plate. Rome, Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano inv. 9517.
Photograph: DAIR 1936.0639.

Venus through drapery which exposes a shoulder, while the other is associated with the female world by means of a mirror (Figure 7.7).⁴⁰ (In the Roman world the mirror was an object associated with women and femininity, and men who used mirrors were considered effeminate).⁴¹ The whole relief is separated into three panels: in the centre is the bust of the man with the Venus-style drapery, on the left the scene with figures and a mirror, and on the right a griffin. The portrait bust in the central panel is of a middle-aged man with curly hair and a beard. He holds a scroll in his hands, which are strong, large and masculine. But in comparison his shoulders seem slightly too small, while the outline of breasts is visible beneath the dress and his drapery has slipped from his shoulder. It is not possible that the bust was re-carved from female to male, since that would have meant enlarging the female hands, so all in all, the most likely conclusion is that this figure was originally carved as a cross-gendered image.

The left panel of this relief depicts a seated man with what appears to be a scroll in his left hand. He stretches his right hand forward and grabs the hand of another man standing in front of him. This man is dressed in a *tunica* with sleeves with a *stola* around his left arm. Two mirrors and a curtain hang from a rod in the background; and it looks as if the seated man grasps one of the mirrors, perhaps to give it to the other. The heads of the two figures have been carved with male portrait features, although the face of the standing man has been re-carved from a portrait of a woman with long loose hair to portray a short haired man. Traces of the woman's locks are still visible on the man's

40 Vatican Museum, Museo Gregoriano Profano, inv. 9517; this was once thought to be from a sarcophagus but is now believed to be a *loculus* plate.

41 Sinn 1991, 48.

shoulders, and the *stola* and the mirror add to his appearance of femininity. This scene has been variously interpreted as depicting a shop, or a cult, or a *dextrarum iunctio*,⁴² but several questions remain to be answered. Why did this woman (whose original portrait was re-cut as the man's) have long hair in the first place? Roman women always wore their hair up, and I know of no other example where portrait figures have loose hair. On the other hand servants, captives, and grieving women were depicted with long, loose hair, as was Eve in early Christian art (as a sinner in opposition to the modest and pious Mary, who is represented on sarcophagi with her hair tucked away under a veil).⁴³

Another explanation of the long hair might be that this is an image of an actor, which might also explain why the figure wears a *stola*.⁴⁴ Yet most actors were men, while this figure seems originally to have been a woman, and, unlike most other images of actors, it also has portrait features. A useful comparison may be with the depiction of actors on the grave relief of a boy named Flavius where they are engaged in a drama about the Muses, perhaps staged for his funeral.⁴⁵ These do not have portrait features but are cross-gendered since four of them are dressed as Muses – two wear long robes belted just below the breast; one has a mask with a full beard that contrasts with his feminine dress and long, curly wig; and the fourth, also with a full-length robe, could be Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, or possibly a poet. (Flavius himself is represented with a scroll like a poet or some other learned figure, but he also wears a *bullā*, which shows that he was still a child.)⁴⁶ The Ostia *loculus* relief lacks any reference to the theatre (even in the minimal form of a mask or some other theatre prop) which is yet another reason for rejecting a theatrical explanation. A more positive suggestion is that, its images might be intended to represent one and the

42 Sinn 1991, cat. 21; *ASR* I, 4, cat. 285.

43 An example of the first is the servant with a cup behind the *pandurium* playing woman on the sarcophagus of Caecilius Vallianus: Rome, Museo Gregoriano Profano (see below). For the grieving woman found on a deathbed see a sarcophagus from the Louvre: Inv. Ma 319. *ASR* I, 4, cat. 115. For young women with loose hair e.g. on *Ara Pacis*: Polaschek 1972, 147.

44 For cross-gendering of actors see also a statuette from Rome which has been interpreted as a representation of an actor (Savarese 2007, 79). The generic face is round and soft like the face of a woman (or young man), and the hair is piled up. The figure is veiled, and wears a *pallia*, and long dress, through which the telling outline of the body can be seen. What appeared to be a woman, is now shown as a man. The breast is flat, the waist unemphasised. The torso appears to be somewhat quadrilateral and no effort has been made to conceal the genitals. On the contrary the rather pronounced outline of the male organ is being emphasised by the tight-fitting garment. The sculpture shows a female character performed by a male actor.

45 Rome, Museo della Villa Doria Pamphilj, inv. 162. Calza 1977, cat. 137; Savarese 2007, 104.

46 On the *bullā*, see Harlow and Laurence 2002, 40, 67.

same man by the two different figures – the man standing with a mirror, and the man whose portrait has been carved on the bust; in both cases, an effort seems to have been made to represent the man with female attributes. If so this relief is the most explicit example of a person whose gender is not couched in the binary gender categories.

Four sarcophagi – two for adults and two for boys – decorated with death-bed scenes further strengthen the fact that it could be acceptable to add male portraits to female bodies.⁴⁷ These show the deceased reclining on a bed surrounded by various attendants; on the two sarcophagi made for adults, these are servants waiting at the deathbed, while on the two made for boys they are mourners. The two dead men wear long dresses, with outlines of breasts visible underneath. On one sarcophagus the man lifts his arm above his head in a graceful gesture, emphasising the intrinsic femininity of the figure. On the other the man is depicted with a female body surrounded by ‘soft domestic qualities’,⁴⁸ symbolised, for instance, by the children playing beneath the couch (Figure 7.8). This lid of this sarcophagus bears an inscription saying that it belonged to P. Caecilius Vallianus, a 63-year old military man.⁴⁹ From a modern perspective it is almost impossible not to be intrigued as to why this military man chose to depict himself on his funeral monument in this way, as a reclining figure with a female body. As for the two boys, they are shown on their deathbed wearing robes that expose their shoulders as a sign of feminine beauty, and in the company of the nine muses who cluster around them. This allusion to literary and musical abilities connects these two examples with other sarcophagi that depict boys as muses – a theme that has been interpreted as referring to the life course of a child (see below).

Two more examples that strengthen the claim that feminine attributes could be used for male iconography without making the men ‘suspect’ are two sarcophagi dedicated to adolescents. One is a sarcophagus dedicated to a youth aged 17 years, four months and 21 days.⁵⁰ He was of equestrian rank and was commemorated by his father. Yet his portrait was carved on a female bust with *palla* and breasts, showing that this very masculine background did not prevent the use of a female body for his self-representation. The other example is a Season sarcophagus in the Vatican, where the portrait features suggest that the

47 Adults: Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, inv. 9538/9539 (*ASR* I, 4, cat. 286) and Carrara (*ASR* I, 4, pl. 4,5). Boys: Museo Nazionale Romano delle Terme, inv. 535 and Stuttgart, Württembergisches Landesmuseum, inv. Arch 6318.

48 Huskinson 1996, 26.

49 Whether the lid belongs to the sarcophagus or not has been discussed, but the argument that variation in the size of the lid compared to the chest is not enough to reject the possibility that the two pieces belong together (since this is relatively common for Roman sarcophagi).

50 Museo Nazionale Romano inv. 113227. Guiliano 1985, 234–37; Ewald 1999a, cat. I 1.

Figure 7.8: The reclining man is shown with a female body with breasts, and with drapery that slips off one shoulder. Rome, Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano inv. 9538/9539. Photograph: DAIR 1990.0413.

subject is an adolescent.⁵¹ This portrait is carved on the body of a ‘learned woman’ (as revealed by the figure’s curving outline and long dress).

Femininity taken on by male characters is also found among mythological figures such as Narcissus, or gods such as Apollo and Dionysus who also crossed the line between the two sexes.⁵² They assumed many female characteristics in both their behaviour and iconography. Yet even so, their figures continued to be used as a basis for images commemorating young men whose personal portraits were added. For example, a sarcophagus, now at Hearst Castle, shows Apollo among the muses (Figure 7.9).⁵³ The long dress covering most of the feet, the curves of the body, and the emphatic waist make his figure appear effeminate, while the lyre which he holds is often shown played by women on ‘intellectual’ sarcophagi (while men have a scroll), and by muses in other scenes.⁵⁴ Yet combined with this rather effeminate representation of Apollo is the realistic portrait of a young man.

From all these examples it may be deduced that the feminine possessed its own specific virtues, which could be combined with masculinity – even within a

51 Vatican Museum, Cortile Ottagono 879: *ASR* V, 4, no.90; Koch 1990, 65–7; Fittschen 1992, note 20.

52 Seneca describes Dionysus as someone who was not ashamed to act with femininity: *Hercules Furens*, 472–6.

53 Hearst Castle, California, inv 529-9-414.

54 Examples are *ASR* V, 3, cat. 25, 47, 48, 68 (here Figure 7.3); *ASR* V, 3, 80, 138, 160, 162, 184, 188, 193.

Figure 7.9: Apollo among the Muses. He is shown with a slender waist and a long dress, and his posture recalls representations of the Muses. Hearst Castle inv. 529-9-414. Photograph: Stine Birk. Published by permission of Hearst Castle®/California State Parks.

male body – without crossing the bounds of acceptability. They all show that, in a third century funerary context, to be depicted with feminine physical characteristics made neither boys nor men ‘suspect’ characters.

Unstable Bodies: Women and Male Iconography

The use of the word ‘suspect’ to designate men with feminine attributes illustrates a tendency in archaeological interpretation to see the feminine as secondary to the masculine.⁵⁵ But the concept of gender in the Roman world was not only about being either male or female; it varied according to period, social class, age, status, and ethnicity.⁵⁶ Literary evidence has established a picture of elite Roman ideals which is often reflected in the figural representations of sarcophagi – though sometimes rather differently. But some do not appear at all: good examples are images of wool-working and of the woman as mother and wife, both of which are well known metaphors for the

⁵⁵ For this attitude towards Roman men using female iconography, see note 37.

⁵⁶ Clarke 1998, 278–79; Montserrat 2000, 164.

conduct of an ideal woman.⁵⁷ It is therefore important not to see Roman women as a static, uniform category: wool-working seems to originate as an ideal in literary sources of the first century BC and first century AD, and does therefore not reflect attitudes towards women in the third century.⁵⁸ The ideal woman as a mother is another image that appears only very rarely on sarcophagi of this date.⁵⁹ This is striking, as sarcophagi are supposed to convey the ideal identity of the deceased. The value of sarcophagus imagery as evidence for the perception of gender, sex and femininity is therefore high, since visually it illustrates contemporary ideals different from those which appear in literary sources, and suggests that in third century Rome the 'learned woman' takes precedence over all other types of female ideals. So, to get a more nuanced picture of third century gender ideals overall, the literary sources, most often written by men, need to be supplemented with evidence from the archaeological record, where, at least in the case of sarcophagi, women's voices are also present.

Representations of women dressed in male clothing and involved in what are usually considered to be socially important male activities can help us to new ways of seeing gender. They make illuminating contrasts with the uniform imagery of female social identity that prevail on Roman sarcophagi, and offer glimpses of individuality at the micro-level of the specific commemorations. Two examples occur on lion hunt sarcophagi of the canonical type, one of which is now at Nieborow, Poland, and the other (fragmentary) at S. Sebastiano in Rome; on both of these the central hunter has feminine features and hairstyle, rather than a male portrait (Figure 7.10).⁶⁰ On the Nieborow sarcophagus this 'huntress' is clearly accompanied by *Virtus* (and this was probably also the case on the other example, where traces of her spear may be seen across the huntress's gesticulating arm). The masculine qualities which *Virtus* personifies are reinforced by the 'male' environment of the episode, with the attacking lion, and the hunters with their horses and dogs. Yet there is no doubt about the femininity of the 'huntresses'. Although the face of the figure on the Nieborow sarcophagus is carved without much refinement, it has a small mouth and chin and round cheeks. The arrangement of her hair is also clear:

57 For wool-working as a female ideal, see for example Lovén 1998; Dixon 2001, 117, 119–22; Allison 2006, 5, 7.

58 An example of a study where Roman women are seen as a universal category is Lovén 1998. She emphasises wool-working as a female ideal in general. On women's virtues, deeds, and roles in Roman society based on written evidence from the first century BC and into the second century AD, see Shelton 1988/1989, 291–306.

59 For the ideal of Roman womanhood as closely tied to the women's role in the family, see Kampen 1996a, especially p. 13; Clark 1993, 13–21, 94–5.

60 Both sarcophagi date to the late third century. Nieborow Castle, Arcadia, inv. Nb 2723, Poland; Mikocki 1995, cat. 58; Rome, S. Sebastiano ASR I, 2, cat. 150; Huskinson 2002, 26. On the canonical type of lion hunt sarcophagi, see ASR I, 2.

combed from the forehead and backwards into locks, and wound in plaits from the neck, it represents a popular third century fashion for women.⁶¹

That these two sarcophagi were carved with the same image of a female hunter, and in the same period, makes it unlikely that this was the unintentional outcome of some craftsman's action. Rather, the women who chose this image have deliberately shown themselves within a male environment in order to illustrate specific components of their identity. After all, if they had wanted a female role model, they could have chosen a mythological figure such as Diana or Artemis or the personification of *Virtus* herself (present on both sarcophagi), who would have proved a perfect vehicle for them to signal their strength as a woman. But instead, these women chose to express themselves through the body of a man and through male iconography. It is the male *virtus* in the primary role of the huntsman that was their ideal, and their own biological sex seems to have been no hindrance to the use of this iconography.

These visual examples of bodily representation, as a means of constructing female identity, seem to be related to ideas expressed by the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry (c. 234 – c. 305) when he wrote that in order for a woman to become a philosopher, she should banish from her soul everything womanly, as if she were enclosed in the body of a man.⁶² Porphyry's statement is of course a metaphor, and the images of the female huntresses can be seen as a visual equivalent. In these representations the women were literally enclosed in a body of a man, and they have become huntsmen, with all the strength and virtues that this role implies. By representing themselves in this guise these women associated themselves with particular virtues that they held personally important, even though these were generally regarded in society as characterising men.

This pattern can be illustrated by further examples where female portraits were added to male figures. For instance on a strigillated sarcophagus, which has a scene of a lion killing a deer at each corner, the central bust has a female portrait carved on a male body.⁶³ On another example a woman is represented as a *togatus* bust.⁶⁴ Both these female portraits were probably created by re-carving of a bust that originally was intended for a man. These representations should be seen in the light of the popular motif of the 'learned woman'; its frequent use

61 Bergmann 1977, 180–200, cf. end of third century hairstyles.

62 Rousseau 1995, 118. The idea is also commonly found in early Christian writing, see Bassler 2008, 53–7.

63 Tarragona, Museu Paleocristiano, inv. MNAT (P) 53. See *ASR* VI, 1, cat. 365. Cf. similar sarcophagus Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano Rome, inv. 124745, also with female head on a bust identified as male (Sapelli in Giuliano 1985, cat. 1,1).

64 *ASR* V, 4, cat. 60 (Tutzing, season sarcophagus).

Figure 7.10: On this relief the lion hunter is depicted with a female hairstyle, with the hair combed backwards from the forehead and plaits fastened around her head. Nieborow inv. NB 2723 MNW, Arcadia, Poland. Photograph: Stine Birk.

on sarcophagi resulted in the occurrence of more or less generic 'learned' bodies, which would explain the appearance of these figures.

If there may be some doubt as to whether cross-gendered bodies were deliberately chosen in these last two cases of 'learned women', the choice appears explicit on two other sarcophagi which have female portraits on male bodies. The imagery of these sarcophagi offered the possibility of applying the female portrait to a female body, but both the deceased women used the male figure as the basis for her self-representation. The first example has already been mentioned briefly (Figure 7.1): it shows a central conch with busts prepared for both a male and a female portrait.⁶⁵ Generally such a pair is interpreted as a married couple, and on such sarcophagi the male bust usually has a scroll, while the woman often puts one arm around his neck and the other on his chest. Through the scroll and gestures, each figure possesses its own qualities, but the composition also expresses a hierarchy of gender roles since it looks as if the woman wants to demonstrate her support for her husband. On this example, the male figure, and not the female, has been chosen to represent the woman. By taking on the qualities that were intended for a male figure, the deceased woman is making an explicit statement. Perhaps she intended to show that she held priority of rank (which was usually symbolised by the man posed in front of his supportive wife), or that she possessed the intellectual knowledge represented by the learned figure with the scroll. But whatever the intentions behind the choice, it seems clear that using a Venus-like female figure type did not appeal to this woman.

The other example occurs on a strigillated sarcophagus of the popular 'five panel' design (whereby three figured scenes are separated by two panels of fluting).⁶⁶ The centre shows a philosopher seated reading to a Muse, the left panel a 'learned woman', and the right a standing philosopher. The seated philosopher is carved with a portrait head of a woman, unmistakable because of her hairstyle.⁶⁷ Confirmation that it was an explicit choice of cross-gendering comes from the fact that the 'learned woman' on the left panel was left with a roughly carved head while the standing philosopher on the right panel was finished, again with female portrait features. So, if cross-gendering was not socially acceptable the female learned figure would have been chosen for self-representation instead of the figures of the two male philosophers.

65 See note 4 above.

66 Ostia, Museo, inv. 48277. It was found in a hypogeum together with two other sarcophagi with portrait figures, Baldassarre 1991/92.

67 Another example representing a female philosopher is a strigillated sarcophagus from Palazzo Lazzaroni, Rome (*ASR* V, 4, Cat. 181). On women and intellectuality in third century, see Huskinson 1999; 2002.

Boys will be Boys? Age and the Instability of Gender

The majority of all cross-gendered images are of boys, and are likely to represent a relationship between age and gender connected with the life course of a child. This is particularly interesting for current debates since the individual and the life course have recently received much scholarly attention, as have Roman childhood and the representation of children.⁶⁸

These deceased boys are often represented with the Muses. Sometimes they are actually portrayed as one of the nine, wearing her appropriate dress and attributes and flanked by the other eight, in the frieze composition typical of the Muse sarcophagi which were so popular in the third century.⁶⁹ Similar representations of boys dressed like Muses or 'learned women' also occur on sarcophagi, which have portraits set in a central medallion or in front of a *parapetasma*, and evoke ideas of intellectual culture.⁷⁰ The high percentage of cross-gendered images which depict a boy or youth as a Muse or some other intellectual female figure suggests that greater gender flexibility was allowed in the representation of children than of adults. It is known from other societies that the sex of a child was perceived as neither male nor female, but undefined, until fixed by the occurrence of a certain 'rite de passage', or by a socially significant relationship such as marriage or childbirth. Images of children on sarcophagi show how this progression was possible in Roman society too.⁷¹ Some visual representations of very small children in Roman funerary art do not make a clear distinction between boys and girls, as can be seen on a sarcophagus commemorating two babies, where their round and fleshy faces makes it hard to distinguish their sex; this ambivalence may have been intentional.⁷² This suggests that these cross-gendered images of boy-Muses may be seen as representing some relationship between gender and a particular stage in an individual's life course – which in this case is shown by the presence of the Muses to be a formative stage connected with education and learning.⁷³

A Muse sarcophagus from the second century, now in Civit Castellana, is a very early example of sarcophagi that have a figure with portrait features.⁷⁴ It too

68 Huskinson 1996; Dimas 1998; Harlow and Laurence 2002; Rawson 2003; Backe-Dahmen 2003; 2008; Huskinson 2005 and 2007; Sigismund-Nielsen 2007; Cohen and Rutter 2007.

69 *ASR* V, 3; Huskinson 1996, 38–40; 2007, 336.

70 Examples of both types will be provided below.

71 Strathern 1992, 66; Srensen 2006, 119

72 Koch and Sichtermann 1982, ill. 297. Another example of this is a sarcophagus lid with a reclining child with a female body and a portrait of a boy. Museo Capitolini, inv. 329. Sichtermann and Koch 1975, cat. 68, plate 165.

73 Gilchrist 2004, 142–160; Huskinson 2005, 102.

74 Civit Castellana, Forte Sangallo, inv. 59646.

has a cross-gendered image of a boy dressed like a Muse, and we know from the skeleton found in it, that the sex of the deceased corresponded to the sex of the portrait.⁷⁵ The boy holds a lyre – normally the attribute of Terpsichore or Erato – and is placed among the other eight Muses, so that visually he has become one of the nine muses; his body is quite feminine, with clearly visible breasts. This is a very direct way of projecting the virtues of the Muses on to the boy.⁷⁶

On at least another three sarcophagi a dead boy is shown accepted into the company of the Muses. One shows him as the central figure in their gathering, with four Muses on each side of him, and a mask placed on a pedestal at his feet.⁷⁷ Yet even though this time he is actually depicted as a male philosopher, he may still be regarded as a ‘stand in’ for the ninth Muse or, in symbolic terms, he has become the ninth Muse. This shows yet again that the boy-Muses should not be seen as ‘effeminate’ representations, but as embodying the special virtues and characteristics of the intellectual life which transcend human gender.

The second example that further emphasises the instability of gender in the sphere of the Muses is a sarcophagus that is now known only through a drawing in the Dal Pozzo-Albani volumes.⁷⁸ Nine figures are displayed, under five arches. It appears to have been important for the craftsman to accommodate this number (synonymous to the nine Muses) as he had to compromise the symmetry of the composition to do so, so that the second arch contains only one figure instead of the normal two. All of the figures represent Muses apart from the male poet with portrait features which dominates the centre. Although it is difficult to decide from the drawing whether this is a boy or a man, he has been described on the sarcophagus as a *young poet*.⁷⁹

Apart from the sarcophagi already discussed (Figures 7.4 and 7.6) a third and last example of a boy-poet among eight Muses is a sarcophagus in Verona.⁸⁰ The portrait, though badly damaged, is of a boy. His hair has an unusual appearance, rendered by horizontal lines, but this time he has the characteristics of the Muse Calliope, with his hips twisted in a sinuous pose. Here again he takes the place of the ninth Muse – even though he does not have the identifying feathers on his head – and he embodies her virtues.

Other sarcophagi use cross-gendered images of children to make more general points about age. A *clipeus* sarcophagus of a boy aged one year and 30 days, dedicated by his parents to their ‘most sweet’ son is an example of how the

75 Moretti 1975, 261; Huskinson 1996, cat. 5.1; Wrede 1981, cat. 239. Fittschen 1972 argues that the portrait is of a girl, see note 28 above.

76 Huskinson 2007, 336; Wrede 1981, 140–41.

77 Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, inv. 205250. See ASR V, 3, cat. 23.

78 Vermeule 1960, cat. 14, fig. 14.

79 ASR V, 3, 91.

80 Museo Maffeiiano, Verona, ASR V, 3, cat. 227.

same iconography could be used for both sexes to show that the child had not reached puberty.⁸¹ The boy's portrait has been applied to a female bust with breasts. This sarcophagus can be dated to the end of the third century because of the hair carved straight across the top of the forehead.⁸² Another example of the acceptability of boys' portraits on female bodies is found in what is probably a representation of a father and a son on a strigillated sarcophagus.⁸³ This was decorated with a central medallion containing a male and a female bust, but the male bust is carved with a portrait of a man whereas the female is carved with what seems to be a portrait of a boy. As already described, such representations of a couple in a medallion were usually intended for a man and wife, and show the woman putting her arm around the man. But in this particular case it is the man who supports the female bust by putting her in front of the composition and leaning his arm on her shoulder. This change of iconography, combined with the fact that the female bust has the portrait head of a child, shows that the social role of children of such young age was different from that of adolescents and adults; and the iconography explicitly tells us that the child died so young that it was still under the protection of its father.

Another two sarcophagi, this time with Christian motifs, show how the use of female bodies did not affect the idealised aspect of a boy's commemoration. One is a boy's portrait carved on to a female bust in a medallion; in the other case the portrait is applied to a female *orans* figure.⁸⁴ None of the examples mentioned has been interpreted as representing a girl, but that this imagery of sex-gender relations could be turned the other way around is illustrated by a sarcophagus without an individualised figure.⁸⁵ Octavia Paulina was six years, four months and five days when she died, and was represented on her sarcophagus as a victorious girl athlete, using imagery of male athletic contests. In the centre of the relief she is depicted in triumph, crowning herself with a wreath with one hand and holding a palm branch in the other. On the left end of the relief she is seen with two boys pouring oil on her body, while on the right end she is shown wrestling with girls among boys. This image of a girl who fights and competes is unusual on sarcophagi, and must be read as a conscious way of illustrating particular aspects of her life and personality, as well as the

81 London, British Museum, inv. GR 1896.6–19.5. See Walker 1990, cat. 36; Huskinson 1996, cat. 9.36.

82 Walker 1990, cat. 36.

83 Rome, Palazzo Corsetti-Podocattari, *ASR* VI, 1, cat. 97.

84 Rome, Capitoline Museum, Sala II, inv. 70. See *Rep.* I, cat. 811. The sarcophagus with a boy's portrait carved on the bust of a female *Orans* is in Liebieghaus, inv. 1505, see Bol 1983, cat. 96.

85 *ASR* I, 4, cat. 67; Huskinson 2007, 338. A sarcophagus with a dedication to Publia Aelia Proba depicts the girl with a very 'boyish' look. That she is a girl is shown by the plait piled up from her forehead and pulled backwards: Stuart Jones 1968, 78–9.

sense of triumph that her father Octavius wanted to convey in her commemoration.

Yet further testimony that changing gender was less problematic for pre-adult figures can be found in the Hylas sarcophagus, briefly discussed above (Figure 7.3). As we saw, the scene depicts the abduction of Hylas by the nymphs, and Hercules and the Argonaut Polyphemus who are searching for him. Hylas and the nymph on his right have preserved their original portraits (the rest are modern restorations).⁸⁶ Hylas has the portrait of a middle-aged man resembling Gallienus. The nymph has the portrait features, not of a girl as would have been appropriate to the body, but of a boy with short hair and a soft, round face: the near-naked female body was obviously no deterrent to the addition of a male portrait.⁸⁷ The cross-gendered appearance of this figure is likely to be connected with the young age of the boy who had probably not survived to attain the toga of manhood, *toga virilis*, which could mean that his gender, in terms of social roles, could still be at a formative stage.⁸⁸ Because of the differences in age of the man represented as Hylas and the boy-nymph it is possibly one of the very rare examples of a representation of a parent and a child, and it may illustrate some particular virtue divined through their mutual relationship.

Just as the representation of boys as muses could be explained by their particular stage of personal and cultural development⁸⁹ so too these other cross-gendered images of children might be concerned with their age or place in the life course, as in terms of rites of passage for example.⁹⁰ If so, they may be evidence for the claim that people could be thought of as crossing from one gender to another at certain points in life.⁹¹

Conclusion

To look for a single explanation, such as sexuality or social status, of the occurrence of cross-gendered images is fruitless. Instead, each case needs to be considered on its own terms. Common to them all is the individual's decision to use a cross-gendered image to evoke specific virtues. As a consequence, the images become visual examples of how gender and identity could be

86 The relief was once thought to represent a family, but close examination shows that, for example, the faces of Hercules and Polyphemus are modern, connected with an extensive restoration of the reliefs from Palazzo Mattei in the 16th century.

87 Zanker and Ewald 2004, 97.

88 On the *toga virilis*, see Harlow and Laurence 2002, 67–9.

89 Huskinson 1999, 195.

90 Gilchrist 1999, 94–100

91 Fowler 2004, 44.

constructed. Here the cross-gendered figures are interpreted as expressions of individuality, but the fact that such images were tolerated on funerary memorials broadens the argument to include some wider social values. For their use on commemorative monuments, where ideal identities are constructed, explicitly shows that this was a socially acceptable way of expressing virtues. With their cross-gendered imagery, these sarcophagi are thus an informative source for understanding the way gender was lived and perceived in Roman society, and they show that it was neither fixed nor stable: age had an impact on gender roles as well as qualities, appearance, occupation, virtues and skills.⁹²

In his book on representations of lovemaking in the Roman world John R. Clarke argued that 'in matters of sex – the Romans were not at all like us.'⁹³ This idea should stretch to our perception of gender roles as well. The spectrum of gender roles from which the Romans could draw both actions and identity was, as shown here, broader than the usual male/female dichotomy. I will not suggest the existence of a third gender category in Roman society, as has been done in the study of other cultures, but according to the cross-gendered images on sarcophagi, gender roles could vary according to the activity performed (a point illustrated by the female lion hunters, for instance), or through the knowledge gained (as seen when boys represented muses).⁹⁴ These cross-gendered images seem to be a reasonable basis for suggesting that gender categories in Roman society should be seen as flexible and as offering many possibilities for constructing identity.⁹⁵ Furthermore, they show that the female had virtue in itself, and that by taking on attributes of women, men did not become 'suspect'.⁹⁶ Instead, the concept of gender becomes a process of interpreting the body, of giving it cultural form,⁹⁷ and in this way masculinity could be applied to a female body, as well as femininity to a male.⁹⁸ This way of perceiving genders brings us near to understanding what is illustrated visually on the sarcophagi discussed here. Cross-gendering does not cancel out the categories male and female, but instead creates a situation in which the dead could evoke

92 Herdt 1994.

93 Clarke 1998, 275.

94 For studies in 'third gender' see Fowler 2004, 44; Joyce 2004, 88; Gilchrist 1999, 59–64. For both historical and anthropological studies in third genders, see Herdt 1994.

95 Also biology speaks against this categorisation into either male or female, as both hormones and genetic sex vary greatly, Gilchrist 1999, 57–8, Meskell 1999, 73.

96 See also Varner 2008 for feminine features in the representation of men in Roman imperial art. A portrait statue of a man from Tunis shows that this was an attitude that reached further than Rome. The man is represented with the iconography of the female personification of Tyche. Bianchi Bandinelli 1971, 218, fig. 202.

97 Butler 1986, 36.

98 Butler 1990, 6.

specific qualities or virtues for their commemoration and present themselves to society in their own personal terms.

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