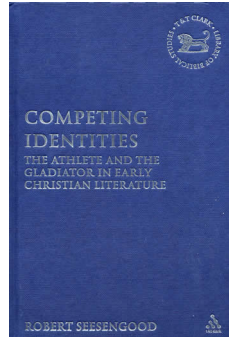


○ REVIEW OF ROBERT SEESNGOOD, *COMPETING IDENTITIES: THE ATHLETE AND THE GLADIATOR IN EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE*

(NEW YORK: T & T CLARK, 2006)

Joseph A. Marchal, Ball State University



It seems only fitting that a review of a semi-autobiographical work on autobiographical criticism in early Christian studies should begin with a confession (though, hopefully, if impossibly, disconnected from anything Augustinian). I must confess I have often found the insertion of the autobiographical reflection or anecdote in scholarship as tending toward the self-involved, the irrelevant, or the distracting. At best, they might provide some additional context or critical reflection that could, in the end, heighten the reader's engagement with the author or argument. [I have further thoughts about the construction of the 'I' in the genre of the academic review, but that is perhaps best left for another time and context.] Despite these qualms, though, the work at hand drew my attention because of its focus on the construction of the subject in/of early Christianities through the figures of the athlete and the gladiator and my previous appreciative encounters with the work of its author and his frequent collaborator, Jennifer Koosed.

Seesngood's study is a revision of a 2004 Ph.D. dissertation at Drew University, and the influence of his committee (Stephen Moore, Virginia Burrus, and Jeffrey Staley) is evident throughout. Yet, a story of its origins cannot end there, as previous elements of its contents, including especially chapter 2, appeared in venues like this very journal (*The Bible and Critical Theory* 1:2 (2005)), where I must again confess (what *would* Foucault say about this?) that it appeared alongside my own contribution on the topics of mutuality, suffering, and sacrifice in Pauline letters and in feminist sexual ethics. It seems, then, that I have run alongside some of these arguments more than intermittently.

The work opens with a helpful introduction ('Three Epiphanies: On Autobiography and Athleticism in the Literature of the Early Roman Empire,' pp. 1–19) that nicely contextualizes the work within classical scholarship on the suffering self, the ancient origins of autobiography, the limits and possibilities of autobiographical criticism, and the role of the athletic image in self-construction for a series of ancient contexts. Whatever concerns I initially harbored about auto-

biography's function in the work were allayed by the aptly coordinated focus on ancient autobiographical discourse alongside more contemporary, critical theoretical reflections. Seesengood convinces that an autobiographical criticism that is 'truly both autobiographical and critical' (8) would maintain relevance by stressing the pervasive persuasive operation of the autobiographic.

The shift to the substance of the work, though, finds the reader in a series of often too brief chapters, beginning with the aforementioned, revised second chapter on 'Hybridity and the Rhetoric of Endurance: Paul's Athletic Metaphors' (pp. 20–34). Indeed, the relative brevity of the work as a whole ('clocking in' at just over a hundred pages) likely contributes to its readable, even breezy, quality; yet many elements of its argumentation want for greater explication. In the case of this chapter, the suggestion that Paul is constructing communal identity as part of his own self-construction is insightful. However, Seesengood's presentation suffers by not spinning out the significance of such insights for texts like 1 Corinthians and Philippians or for his conception of this 'new, communal, hybrid, identity' (34).

The third chapter ('Running with Endurance: An Autobiographical Reading of Hebrews 12:1–13,' pp. 35–48) begins with the first of many autobiographical vignettes about the author's own physical training in endurance sports. Primed for such interventions, I initially found the device of sandwiching such vignettes within intermittent exegetical observations compelling, if only because both seem loosely connected in terms of certain masculinely disciplined activities. Still, as a reviewing reader, this looseness presents obstacles for understanding how precisely Hebrews is 're-manning Jesus' (46). Seesengood seems to be pushing the reader to stretch but, in straining to make the connections ourselves, the thoughts and limbs become overextended, where our trainer-writer could have made some of the steeplechase jumps clearer and more manageable for us. Here, the aforementioned brevity and the punishing autobiography conspire to keep the argument from demonstrating convincingly how Hebrews functions as compensatory resistance to, rather than internalized reinforcement of, abusively gendered conditions.

The fourth chapter's application of autobiography to various pseudo-Pauline letters has clear potential (in 'Contending for the Faith in Paul's Absence: Combat Sports, Gladiators, and Pauline Identity in the Disputed Pauline Epistles,' pp. 49–65), yet the problems that plague the previous chapters persist. The explication of the gladiator is justifiably dependent on Carlin Barton's previous work, if less clearly centered around some apparently 'ambiguous blending' of athletic and military metaphors. [For the ancients, these activities are so often interconnected that the mere fact of their blending or combination seems mostly unremarkable.] The autobiographic excerpts of the fifth chapter ('Jesus' Nikes: Competitions (and Conquest) in the Apocalypse of John,' pp. 66–84) are significantly less effectively connected to the arc of the chapter's argument. As a result, the chapter mostly resets the spectacle of Chris Frilingos' readings of the arena and mimes Moore's mimetic reading of Revelation without following up on the notion of the gladiator as a hybrid and ambiguously gendered figure.

The sixth chapter ('*APELYTHĒSAN*: Perpetua, Blandina, and the Literary Description of Martyrdom as Athletic Triumph in Early Christian Proto-Hagiography,' pp. 85–109) charts the shift of the metaphor into performance, as female gladiators inhabit the arena creating a 'third space' of hybridized gender. Here, Seesengood ironically redeploys Homi Bhabha in a manner more sophisticated about gender than Bhabha's own valorized theoretical work. For the author, Perpetua enacts a resistance only through her manly transformation, even as the editor of 'her' autobiographical narrative compensates with descriptions of genteel modesty. The monograph

ends with its own modest concluding chapter ('Conclusion: On Autobiography and Athleticism,' pp. 110–115), reflecting on pain and the fashioning of the self.

For all the promise and stimulation of the work, I receive Seesengood's writing with some reservations. For example, if gender is such a key element in the construction of the athlete and gladiator, why not make more extensive use of feminist, queer, and/or gender-critical work? Bhabha's theories feature prominently in several chapters, yet the limits of his insights in terms of gender have been oft-noted, especially in light of Judith Butler's singular contributions to the concept of gendered performativity and parody. Indeed, in a work reflecting on women 'in drag' (like Blandina or Perpetua), one might expect engagement with Butler or even Judith Halberstam. Such (often autobiographically-inflected) writing might help us consider whether the masculine can ever be mimicked critically by Paul, Perpetua, or Robert, in either the past or the present.

It was precisely this critical element of autobiographical criticism that was often either missing or unconvincing. As I noted above, the reflections often left the analysis one step short, only hinting at where a critique of the enduring self might lead. Some of this might be a function of the number of texts under consideration or the brevity of the individual chapters and the work as a whole. Certainly, these features likely contributed to the relative accessibility of the text, for which I am deeply appreciative, especially as too many of our works are burdened by ponderous obfuscation. I also salute any effort to challenge the expectations of the complacent reader/consumer of texts.

Yet, my disappointment rose the further we traveled from Seesengood's starting line, as too many ideas were taken up and left under-examined. In such a space, the reader might be prone to increasing levels of resentment at the autobiographical interludes, especially as they become less clearly connected to incision or illumination (a fault Seesengood's advisor Moore mostly conquers in his own autobiographical asides). Where the author interrupts and disrupts, he might be teasing and tantalizing the reader. Still, for a reviewer who might otherwise recognize a runner's reflection in Seesengood's self, when the anticipation of fuller explication is left unfulfilled, it is as though we are still running the race.

At one point the author admits: 'I guess, then, like my running, there are limits to what I can do in my writing. There is, it would seem, always some limit to endurance' (48). But, for my part, I had hoped Seesengood would hang on for just one more lap. Could he answer whether all overlaps operate as 'hybrids?' Could he make clearer critical connections between textual analysis and autobiography? Given my own experience as a distance runner of a distinctly un-masculine sort in a butchy boys' school environ, I wondered whether the contemporary American athlete would come under inspection for the hyper-masculine militarized incarnation of patriotic fervor that now travels transnationally. Certainly the elitism, imperialism, and sexism of such contexts could resonate with those of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

I was pleased that the work manages to raise (or perhaps inspire) such lines of questioning, even as it often did not provide substantive answers. The chapters read as a series of commendable beginnings, but for all that training of author and audience, one would hope for more of the ephemeral 'runner's high' alongside the manifest 'burn' of expended energy and straining muscles, if only of the intellectual variety.