

Ars Erotica:

Book Review





Ars Erotica: Sex and Somaesthetics in the Classical Arts of Love

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Richard Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* ambitiously romps through history to explore the idea of sex as an artistic skill honed by study and training. Amplifying the fun are his source materials, taken from Chinese, Indian, Near Eastern, Japanese, Medieval, and Renaissance texts. While not neglecting the erotic expansiveness of bygone eras, Shusterman criticizes past sexual mores. This side of the book is sharpened by the contemporary note he begins and ends on, such as calling for broader gender concepts or for a geriatric *ars erotica* beyond pharmaceuticals. The book accords with the somaesthetics program Shusterman began decades ago. Somaesthetics draws liberally from indigenous global traditions to cultivate artistic body practices with the hope of enhancing well-being, which entails a critical search for affirming alternatives.

Shusterman is also self-critical (suggesting, for instance, that the book is informed by his own primarily heterosexual lens, or might discord with recent revelations of “deplorable sexual predatory behavior” (p. ix)). He further concedes every chapter is “worthy of book-length studies” (p. xii). He is right and his sourcing can unfortunately be narrow or truncated. Fixated somewhat on the backwardness of past societies, Shusterman offers relatively few charitable interpretations or thoughts about why prevailing sexual attitudes have changed so little, and how contemporary artistic and sexual practices might intersect with the past. But these limitations are the exchange for covering so much territory, and the book is an ample resource for its analysis as well as its range.

The first chapter aims at terminological clarification, additionally charting the book's course. Shusterman explains he uses the term *ars erotica* to designate lovemaking skills, styles, and strategies that are elevated enough to be called art. Following Dewey's characterization of aesthetic experience, Shusterman sees artistically imbued sex as encompassing a dramatic arc that “delightfully pervades the whole temporally developing process leading up to and then away from the anticipated sexual climax, even if it does not come.” (p. 6) His mission is to explore practices (arts) that cultivate such experience, discussing everything from foreplay to sexual positions, etiquette, and emotional attunement.

Pushing on, Shusterman explains that Greco-Roman thinkers overwhelmingly appreciated bodily beauty and debated the virtues of male-female vs. same-sex coupling. He also relates how sex shows up in classical cosmologies. One story has sky (Cronos) mating with earth (Gaia) to be subsequently castrated by his son (Uranus), followed by the birth of the binding force of love (Aphrodite), who emerges from a froth when the severed organ hits the sea.

These rending conflicts highlight a clash of attitudes towards sex, which Shusterman's use of Plato's *Symposium* further illustrates. The dialogue's setting is a party—a symposium—where people delight in food, drink, and debate, plus courtesans (whose musical, dancing, and conversational talents formed part of their eroticism). Characters in the dialogue aim to articulate what beauty is. One proposition is that appreciation for beauty starts with a longing for a particular exquisite body, followed by an attraction to what is common to all stunning bodies. This blossoms into an almost erotic affection for increasingly general and abstract entities until the contemplator grasps universal beauty, a pure idea untainted by materiality. So here, an initial longing for bodily contact provokes union with the disembodied ethereal. Shusterman identifies comparable patterns elsewhere. For example, while we sense things at a distance with our eyes,

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the Greeks believed that our optical system emits rays that bounce back, so that a gaze literally caresses. (Incidentally, this fits views from enactive cognitive science, even though the Greek theory is wrong in its specifics.)

The Greeks often had unenlightened views of women. Shusterman cites a speaker in Plato's *Timaeus* as asserting that cowardly men are reborn female. The speaker adds that genitalia are unreasonable and self-willed, suggesting a psychophysiological need for sex, something Shusterman notes Hippocrates advised for women to moisten the womb and promote menstrual flow. It is tempting to laud the Greeks for advocating sex as health-promoting. But Shusterman adds that the *Timaeus* presents wombs as ungovernably starved for semen, erasing female agency and supplying spurious justifications for unwanted male advances or for locking up women at home. Of course, it is simultaneously difficult to parse which views Plato agrees with since he never takes a role in his play-like books, which express multifarious positions (for example, characters in *The Republic* conclude women can rule the state).

Shusterman's account of Roman thought conveys similar heterogeneity. Plutarch, for instance, asserted that sex without loving desire, and the reverse, are empty, claiming erotic union is a divine gift that welds souls and is valuable independently of reproduction. Accepting pederasty (as was common), he advised it not be penetratively consummated. Seneca, by contrast, bemoaned the time wasted by amorous relationships, nonetheless accepting that relinquishing sex agitates the mind, making sustained philosophizing difficult, so resigned himself to it and the social duty to marry. At the other extreme was Ovid. He prescribed tactics for adulterous trysts and mind games. He warned not to be rough, adding that male lovers should still take what their partners deny, claiming force pleases women's excessive lusts. His female readers were told to make men feel desired, even faking passion. During sex, they should adopt positions that give favorable views, for instance, offering a rear engagement to hide stretch marks.

Shusterman notes Ovid's sexism for recommending "postures for their aesthetic appeal in the eyes of male lovers and not for the woman's own sexual satisfaction or self-admiring gaze" (p. 94). He adds that Ovid believed that "courtship and lovemaking ... are essentially other-directed, no matter how selfishly motivated." (p. 94) Clearly, little has changed: most people are still concerned about their lover's gaze, albeit women usually more so. Shusterman also elaborates a strong leaning in the classical world towards genital contact, especially male-female. Again, what has changed? A corollary question is the extent to which somaesthetic interventions might alter the situation and the value judgments involved in doing so.

Contrasting Greco-Roman thinking, Shusterman observes a near absence of *ars erotica* in ancient Judaic traditions,

which primarily cohered around reproductive imperatives. This precluded same-sex coupling. Likewise, Shusterman says intercourse was forbidden even days after menstruation because it renders conception unlikely (though blood was also deemed unclean regardless of its source). Shusterman further asserts—against common presumption—that ancient Hebrews were patrilineal and in any case concerned with family lines. This, he says, explains why the Hebrew Bible gave newlywed soldiers dispensation to not go to war for a year, lest they die childless. It explains why adulterers are put to death, and why a man must wait a month before bedding a beautiful captive: to ensure any babies are his. Shusterman adds that preserving family lines is why Lot's daughters violate the incest taboo with their drunk father when their community is destroyed (although some scholars suggest the story was composed as an insult by rivals to the tribes Lot was said to have begotten).

For Shusterman, fixation on family lines explains the edict not to lead daughters into "whoredom" (p. 108). Another problem is that prostitution "prides itself on providing sexual pleasure by highly attractive and skilled professionals outside the marital framework and with no interest in producing offspring." (p. 108) Prostitution can thereby corrupt men's preferences towards non-procreative gratification even with their spouses. Wives have comparably less opportunity to practice their sexual skills due "to labor with household chores" (p. 108), making them less enticing. Shusterman holds that reproductive logic explains why God kills Onan for enjoying his wife (and brother's widow) without ejaculating into her. He regards circumcision similarly as a "pruning of a tree ... to yield more fruit" (p. 112) that reduces male pleasure (though this is scientifically debatable). He asserts that compulsory procreation obviates the need for an "*ars erotica* to charm and please a woman into sexual engagement" (p. 104). Biblically "knowing" a woman entails no requirement of "knowing her feelings, needs, and hopes." (p. 104)

Shusterman does not forget the sexually evocative *Song of Songs*. But he claims the eroticism here is countermanded, for instance, in the Hebrew Bible's negative attitude towards nudity, which "tends to discourage the flourishing of *ars erotica*." (p. 144) He also references the Proverbs (7:15–18) tale of a woman adorning her bedroom with fine linens, tapestries, carvings, and perfumes in expectation of a sexual tryst. These efforts amount to *ars erotica*, yet Proverbs (7:23) chastises the woman as adulterous and her lover as an ox going to slaughter.

If Hebrew traditions neglected *ars erotica*, then early Christianity promoted what Shusterman might have called *ars ascetica*. His examples are both funny and disturbing. There is Cassian's advice for humble dress and a belt of dead skin at the waist to contain a monk's lascivious loins. Or Tertullian's observation that unveiled females suffer visual

penetration, comparable to rape. He makes women complicit because of the “concupiscence of non-concealment” (p. 130). Clement concurs, charging exposed beauty snares men.¹ Theologians generally esteem virginity as an exercise of self-control and renunciation of the world to get closer to God. The Gospel of Matthew equates mere lust to adultery, and there Jesus advises (metaphorically, one hopes) that people rip out their eyes to avoid temptation. Christian thinkers promoted the Platonic idea that the soul’s hidden beauty exceeds anything outward and advocated keeping the senses undefiled by sin. Luxurious adornments fettered the wearers and the gazes of others.

While praising celibacy, early Christians deemed it better to wed than burn (in the dual sense of heated fornication and roasting in hell). Shusterman observes that even married sex was restrictive. Clement reprimanded intercourse after pregnancy as sinful and injurious. Advising that infrequency intensifies delight, he went on to prohibit certain sexual positions and confined intercourse to the darkness of night, which reduces visual pleasures and tactile options, as Shusterman notes. Augustine implied the preferability of the missionary position (as we now call it), which Shusterman says gives “the man greater freedom of movement and control than the woman.” (p. 147) Same-sex coupling was prohibited, and heterosexual oral and anal pleasure discouraged, on procreative grounds. Augustine also speculated that in a pre-fallen state, intercourse would have been calm and rational, so pregnancy would have been possible without loss of the wife’s “maidenhead” (p. 144).

While it is hard to disagree that early Judaism and Christianity were sexually backward, Shusterman’s analyses belabor certain points (for example, edicts against letting daughters become prostitutes or public nakedness), without mentioning that contemporary mores still largely align with these tenets. Shusterman also rehearses the commonplace that Eve is an afterthought made from Adam’s rib and that her wantonness got humankind ejected from Eden. Most have heard this before and the attack would be more interesting if balanced with greater charitability. For instance, could the story not at least partly be an allegory for the painful fall from childhood that coincides with increased moral understanding, awareness of mortality, and sexual capacity?

Unlike Christianity, Islam greatly values sensuality, a point Shusterman emphasizes. One can see this in Islamic concepts of the afterlife, which contrast with both the Arabian Desert and austere Christian visions. The Quran pictures paradise or Jannah—meaning “garden”—as full

of fruit trees, spouses, and flowing rivers of water, milk, honey, and wine (2:25, 47:15). Islam condoned polygamy, although it broke with Judaic law by allowing no more than four wives, also mandating that husbands treat them justly or equally (4:3). The Quran rejects original sin and permits divorce. Shusterman notes some standpoints (Shia but not Sunni) allowed for temporary marriages (for sex), albeit with rules ensuring that men would take responsibility for any offspring. Early Islam is noteworthy for granting women property rights and inheritance, although the amounts given were usually less than for men, who were legally obliged to support unwed female family members. A similar responsibility is imposed by the Quran on grooms, who must give brides remuneration (4:4), kept even in the event of divorce.

Islam also departs from its Abrahamic predecessors in sanctioning non-procreative sex. Shusterman cites al-Ghazali as asserting that while intercourse is forbidden during menstruation, other forms of erotic play are not. The Quran condones a variety of sexual postures when it says a man may go to a wife as he goes to his field, tilling as he pleases (2:223). Shusterman notes coitus interruptus was allowed. Because sex for pleasure was an accepted part of marriage, refusing a husband was foreign. Shusterman indicates this by quoting a hadith (though he labels it as Quran) that reads: “If a woman spends the night forsaking her husband’s bed, the Angels will curse her.” (p. 257) A corollary is that while the Quran expressly forbids same-sex coupling, the rule does not follow from its non-procreative nature since Islam condones other erotic activities for pleasure alone.

Shusterman attends extensively to the tenth century *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* and fifteenth century *Perfumed Garden*, which are more properly Arab than Islamic. He quotes the latter to assert: “a woman enjoys a man who gives and takes his pleasure slowly, with gentle breast and heavy haunches, a man of size whose penis reaches deep within her vagina, to stretch her and to fill her, a man who is slow to come and quick to arousal again.” (p. 263) He also cites passages on circumcision, cleanliness, ideal penises, and erogenous zones. Shusterman additionally describes debates about whether men find “anal sex (with males or females) more pleasurable than vaginal” or “boys superior to ... women” (pp. 260–261), albeit without referencing sources.

In a section emphasizing violence, Shusterman asserts “Islam” comes from “*aslama*,” meaning “surrendered or submitted” (p. 262), but the word also relates to *salaam* and *shalom*, for “peace.” He cites the Quran’s wartime advice to kill unbelievers (2:191), yet the sura immediately goes on to tell adherents to stop killing if enemies cease their aggression (2:93). Such contrasting patterns pervade the Quran. One part (24:6–7) instructs Muslims to accept a man’s testimony against his wife, but adjacent verses state that her denial trumps his accusations (24:8–9). Similarly, unfaithfulness is harshly punished only if four reliable witnesses

¹ The Christian tradition has more than one figure named Clement and Shusterman only disambiguates when he is speaking of Clement of Alexandria a few pages after the above-referenced discussion (though one can determine the identity from the work Shusterman cites).

testify to observing illicit penetration (24:4), a practically unobtainable evidentiary standard that did not apply to rape accusations (so the implication was to not brutally punish even while morally condemning adulterers). Although certain Quran passages may make some readers uneasy, violence pervades Abrahamic scripture, with Joshua (6:22–25) recounting Israelites killing children (6:22–25); or sparing only virgins (Numbers 31:17); or the New Testament telling how a couple was killed for donating only a portion of their money (Acts 5:1–10).

Like the Hebrew Bible, Islam allowed concubinage and enslavement, especially of enemy captives, but Shusterman adds that “Muhammad preferred wives to concubines and favored virgins over nonvirgins.” (p. 274) Given marriage ought to be consummated, this presents a slight paradox (Muhammad did not even always marry virgins). Shusterman’s assertion that Muslims vanquished “superior cultures” (p. 253) might raise an eyebrow. Does he mean cultures with palaces and refined written literature? Europeans thought themselves above Indigenous Americans for similar reasons, neglecting the latter’s advanced achievements in crop domestication, philosophy, and more. Likewise, rather than designating Islamic culture as “derivative” (p. 250), Shusterman might have highlighted that Muslims, like every society, both absorbed and transmitted conventions. He later classifies Japanese culture as similarly derivative, and places it on the “far eastern border of the civilized world” (p. 288), which is problematic for those beyond this coastal frontier.

Shusterman’s subsequent entertaining exposition of Chinese eroticism introduces female and male principles of *yin* and *yang*; the bodily regions from which men suck female *yin* energies; how returning to the same woman drains her energy and zaps the man; how switching partners during intercourse vitalizes male health; and how withholding *yang* essence (not ejaculating) while absorbing *yin* secretions ensures immortality if done enough. Orgasms energetically deplete women, another reason for multiple and young partners since female *yin* and the health benefits it bestows on males dissipate with age.

Shusterman explains that medical and spiritual dimensions entwine in Chinese thinking. Intercourse itself was a heavenly mingling of *yin* and *yang*, and foreplay an important step in aligning harmonies. Watery *yin* was said to quench fiery *yang*, and properly executed and frequent couplings cultivated a male’s vital spirit-substance or *qi*. Men were warned that the unexercised jade stock (penis) “dies in its lair” (p. 164), and while same-sex coupling was permitted, ejaculation in such cases was strongly discouraged (because it would squander life essence). A man prized having the skill to repeatedly bring a woman to orgasm, less for her sake than to draw vital energy from the jade gate (vagina) and other areas. Certain attributes were prized in females: youth, fine features, silky hair,

an elevated “bore hole,” and copious vitalizing secretions, plus relative inexperience (so their energies weren’t already depleted). Chinese erotology explained the ins and outs of sex in elaborate detail, partly to ensure harmonizing and that males did not exhaust themselves before females.

In addition to sorting women according to their medicinal potency, only wealthy men had the luxury of multiple young partners in the form of wives or concubines. Brothels provided a supplement, fusing music and dancing with eroticism. While paralleling the Greco-Roman world, Shusterman asserts that the focus here was less strictly on visual beauty. He adds that Chinese etymology shows overlap between beauty and succulent food. Shusterman applauds this, noting that eating and sex both involve delightful inner feelings and haptic contact, also orienting toward health. Furthermore, a complex dish is not tasty because of its ingredients individually but because of their intermingling. Shusterman sees Chinese *ars erotica* similarly. Expressing the point idealistically (since he has catalogued myriad physical features disqualifying female lovers), he states: “Great sex does not require beautiful lovers but rather creates them.” (p. 181)

Though engaging and informative, Shusterman’s account of Chinese *ars erotica* leans heavily on a relatively small number of curated anthologies, some of mixed quality. While he remarks on the progressive sides of founding texts, this is passed over quickly. The *Daodejing* is decidedly profeminine and softens gender binaries by suggesting that all particulars—including humans—harmonize feminine and masculine principles. Confucianism lauds harmony as a social good, and Shusterman notes this influence on Chinese *ars erotica*, correctly adding, however, that “harmony” often meant stifling hierarchies that privileged males and encouraged demureness in females. But Confucianism had liberating sides too. It advocated that government positions be awarded by merit, not birthright, and encouraged healthy intersubjective awareness. At the same time, Shusterman nicely contrasts Western and Chinese metaphysics. He observes that whereas Westerners debated whether monism or pluralism is true, Chinese thinkers accepted both all along. To paraphrase Shusterman, the *Daodejing* presents an ineffably singular and hence monistic *Dao*. But this sustains the irreducible and expansive plurality of *yin* and *yang*.

To the south of China, ancient India was immensely diverse, birthing many of its own religions and cradling foreign ones. Then (as now), India was both conservative and permissive. Shusterman, for example, identifies prohibitions against sex during menstruation or rules forbidding ejaculating anywhere other than the vagina, along with horrendous punishments for adultery, especially between classes. Yet simultaneously, erotic manuals made allowance for same-sex coupling, oral pleasure, and more besides.

Shusterman contends Indian *ars erotica* was playful (contra Chinese, Hebrew, and Christian traditions that focused on health or procreation). The *Ananga Ranga* compared men and women to musical instruments, each gender playing on the other during sex. The *Kamasutra* classified lovers according to genital size. It suggested equal-sized couplings were optimal. Yet Shusterman writes that the book made provisions for uneven pairings to achieve “better friction and to improve penetrating movement in the lovers’ genitals.” (p. 228) The *Kamasutra* recognized that men tend to orgasm quickly, losing performative power. The text accordingly recommended methods for helping women climax first. Shusterman adds that Indian erotology suggests small amounts of pain (for example, from scratching) can elevate pleasure, just as contrasting spices elevate flavor. Here, he returns to a Deweyan notion of the aesthetic, writing that contrary sensations engender “an exciting drama of conflict overcome in the melting unity of mutual orgasm.” (p. 232)

While Buddhism originated in India, it spread through China and into Japan. Other Chinese innovations entered the island state (often through Korea) to be creatively transformed there. Among these were written characters, legal structures, architecture, sculpture, painting, medicine, fashion, fragrance arts, and courting etiquette. Music was a part of the latter and emphasized in Confucian education. Japan also had its own indigenous religions, with Shinto prominent, plus creation myths that saw its volcanic geography as products of erotic coupling.

Shusterman begins his discussion of Japanese lovemaking by looking at the Heian dynasty (794–1185). Within the courtly culture of Heian elites, sex was not openly mentioned, partly out of Confucian shyness. Targets of male affection were themselves highly educated (the period had prominent female authors such as Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon). Women expected equal refinement from suitors. This meant, for example, skill in calligraphy, with the where-withal to select good paper and scent it. Courtly rituals had other complexities, such as meeting through “the separating medium of curtains” in what Shusterman characterizes as “a seductive play of presence and absence.” (pp. 294–295) As Shusterman imagines, a woman hidden behind a screen might pluck her koto while uttering poetry and letting her perfume waft to her suitor. Here, as Shusterman writes again in Deweyan terms, “the erotic high point [was] not the momentary climax of coital orgasm. The most precious and interesting aesthetic values of love [was] instead in the narrative tissue of the affair, particularly ... with respect to the starting and ending points.” (p. 297)

Shusterman next ponders the pederastic conventions of Buddhist monks and samurai. He asserts one reason that such practices arose was that women were unavailable to monks. Samurai found themselves in a similar position when stationed away from wives, concerned about scandals

that might ensue from unintended pregnancies. The practice was grounded in a tradition of older masters transmitting knowledge to younger disciples. Since youths rapidly mature, monks soon experienced separation, illustrating the painful nature of absent pleasures. This might help them overcome earthly attachments, including sexual ones. Disciples in turn were meant to learn about compassion, duty, loyalty, and forbearance, more so because they sometimes tolerated uncomfortable forms of intercourse. Shusterman adds that in samurai contexts, sex was a small part of the equation (and did not necessarily occur), with the main focus on cultivating combat skills and social virtues, as well as elegance and stylishness.

Shusterman identifies a third variety of Japanese *ars erotica* in the Edo period (1603–1867), known for its Kabuki drama and refined female entertainers, fueled by economic growth and an emerging merchant class, plus an influx of samurai patrons in cities. As in the upper echelons of China, wealthy Japanese men were rarely in need of orgasmic satisfaction (given that they already had many wives and concubines). They were more interested in the erotic interplay of dance, music, calligraphy, tea ceremony, poetry, incense, and conversation, partly as a way of satisfying and developing their own refinement. Shusterman claims that sex was at best a secondary aspect of the “intricately sophisticated tissue of aesthetic codes and rituals” (p. 309)

Shusterman finally moves on to Medieval and Renaissance traditions of European *ars erotica*. In many ways, this elaborates on previous discussions of Judeo-Christian traditions, though the geographical locations considered are different.

In terms of sexual mores, Shusterman shows conventions ran the gamut from repetitions of early Christianity to the libertine. Straddling the middle is Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, which mingles religious restraint with a rationally measured eroticism. Among Castiglione’s advice is that a kiss is made spiritual when “the rational lover ... treats the mouth as the channel for words expressing the soul.” (p. 361) Leone’s *Dialogues of Love* is also moderate, mixing Plato’s ideas and Abrahamic teachings with some Aristotle, coming off like a spicier version of Plutarch. Erasmus offers much more severe advice about Christian lovemaking for procreative purposes. At the other extreme, Shusterman describes Montaigne advocating adulterous trysts, “even for older men like himself who have lost much of their capacity for sex but not yet their taste for its pleasures” (p. 376). One of Montaigne’s solutions was to deploy literary vehicles to enhance imagination and anticipation. Aretino, who Shusterman characterizes as an “avowed same-sex sodomite,” wrote bawdy stories, including one about a mother teaching her daughter the “whore’s trade.” (p. 385) The tale contains graphic details about intimate relations as well as practical advice about flattery, seduction, and gift

extraction. Shusterman also discusses d'Aragona. A precursor to modern feminism, her work argued that women's intellect matches men's and that sexual feelings are uncontrollable and blameless (with the exception of pederasty, which she condemned).

Though Shusterman's *Ars Erotica* has some brittle points, its ambitious breadth combined with its fine-grained analysis makes it vital reading. These traits also introduce a necessary degree of controversy (which Shusterman himself suggests he grappled with in the preface). It likewise means that this review has been able to address just a sliver of the book's total content. Shusterman's work remains highly informative and provocative to both experts and educated laypeople. The book's accessibility is enhanced by the fact that every chapter conveys a relatively self-contained cultural history, yet cumulatively builds into a larger narrative about what our predecessors have said about sexuality and how they have framed it as art. *Ars Erotica* is an excellent

choice for readers interested in sexuality and its history from cross-cultural perspectives as well as those wishing to know more about comparative philosophy. Those interested in art, aesthetics, and especially somaesthetics are also likely to find it an extremely worthwhile read. *Ars Erotica*, in short, can be recommended as an extensively researched, accessible, and multifaceted book.

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