

## Books & Culture

### **Preface to *Liebe zwischen Frauen: Weibliche Homoerotik in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit und im frühen Christentum***

**Revised edition and translation of *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, 2020.**

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*Editor's Note: In 2020, the German publisher LIT Verlag published a German-language edition of Bernadette J. Brooten's monumental book Love Between Women (1996). In honor of the 25th anniversary of the original monograph, The Bible & Critical Theory is pleased to publish this reflection by Brooten on the book's goals and impact, which originally appeared as the preface to the German edition. We have retained the footnote format used in the German original. We thank LIT Verlag and Brooten for allowing us to publish this lightly edited English version of the preface.*

I have been gratified to see that the main theses of this book have stood the test of time and continue to enjoy broad support. In *Love Between Women*, I argue that people in the Roman world thought of erotic relations as unequal: a dominant person penetrated a subordinate one. I also argue that people acknowledged female homoerotic desire, but that the dominant cultural framework hindered many of them from imagining what women could actually do with each other. Further, I demonstrate (1) that early Christians adopted concepts and words from surrounding cultures in their comments on female homoerotic acts; (2) that early church writers, closer to the Apostle Paul in time and culture, confirm the cultural appropriateness of my interpretation of him; and (3) that early readers of Paul saw him as condemning female homoerotic acts as contravening both God's will and nature, according to both of which women should passively submit to men.<sup>1</sup>

### **Theoretical and Methodological Considerations**

Both feminist and gender analysis imbue this book; I pose feminist questions concerning power and inequalities, and I critically examine how specific cultures within the Roman world view gender. Feminist theory, however, has developed

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<sup>1</sup> This sentence paraphrases my summary in "The *GLQ* Forum: Lesbian Historiography before the Name?" *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 4 (1998): 606, 557–630. Elizabeth A. Castelli introduced the reviews by David M. Halperin, Ann Pellegrini, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Ken Stone, and Deirdre Good, to which I responded, and which I highly recommend to the readers of this book. While these reviewers did disagree with me on some points, none of these scholars contested my main theses.

considerably since 1996. At a time of increased awareness of non-binary and transgender identities, the category “woman” is no longer as obvious as it once seemed. In the original book, I investigated texts that attest to individuals reinscribing or contesting gender. In this revised volume, I pay more attention to gender ambiguity. Similarly, intersectional feminism has become more central, although I had already incorporated some of its main insights into the 1996 volume. As an ethical framework, feminism meant and means paying special attention to marginalized and subordinated persons and groups. In the original volume, I observed that some sources associated homoerotically oriented women with prostituted women, many of whom were enslaved, but I recognize the need for more explicitly intersectional analysis of that discourse. My desire to lay the groundwork for such analysis led me to undertake subsequent research on enslaved women in early Christianity within a specifically intersectional framework.<sup>2</sup> Like all historians and scholars of literature, I write from a particular standpoint with questions important to my culture.

I do not try to construct a master discourse, a narrative that claims to grasp truth and reality, instead acknowledging that I am a participant in the middle of the fray. I try to understand from whence I speak, acknowledging that my readers can perhaps better understand what I am doing when my positionality is evident. As scholar of Coptic literature Caroline Schroeder has put it, the problem is not that one has an agenda, because all scholars do, but rather: “To what extent does the agenda lead the researcher to ignore, dismiss, or misrepresent evidence?”<sup>3</sup> In line with this, the reader will find many texts and works of art in this book that run counter to my “agenda,” and in my interpretations, I take pains to consider others’ views and to include material suitable for calling my interpretations into question.

Contemporary historians usually investigate and analyze discontinuities, explaining to readers the strangeness of the past. In this book, I explicate the many discontinuities that I see between the Roman world and contemporary cultures. Focusing only on discontinuities, however, can obscure such long-term phenomena as the androcentric nature of societies or the suffering endemic to slavery. In addition, stressing only discontinuities can be associated with historical positivism,

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., Bernadette J. Brooten, “Enslaved Women in Basil of Caesarea’s Canonical Letters: An Intersectional Analysis,” in *Doing Gender, Doing Religion*. Ed. Ute Eisen, Christine Gerber, and Angela Standhartinger. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013, 325–355; “Gender und Sklaverei in den Andreasakten,” in *Antike christliche Apokryphen: Marginalisierte Texte des frühen Christentums*, ed. Outi Lehtipuu and Silke Petersen (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2020) 142–160; “מגדר ועבדות במעשי אנדריאס” (“Gender and Slavery in the Acts of Andrew”), in *The Family in Late Antiquity: Between Kinship and Community*, ed. Uriel Simonsohn and Yaniv Fox (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2019) 133–133; “Gender and Slavery in the Acts of Andrew,” in *Bible and Women*, vol. 3.2: *Apocrypha: Early Christian Writings*, ed. Silke Petersen and Outi Lehtipuu. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature; Leiden: Brill, forthcoming; will also appear in Italian: Trapani: Il Pozzo di Giacobbe; and Spanish: Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Schroeder, “On Institutional Responsibilities and on Gender: Final thoughts on the G of Jesus[’s] Wife,” “Early Christian Monasticism in the Digital Age”; 23 June 2016, <https://earlymonasticism.org/jesus-wife/on-institutional-responsibilities-and-on-gender-final-thoughts-on-the-g-of-jesus-wife/>. I thank Anna Cwikla, University of Toronto, for this reference.

the belief that one can establish past facts with relative certainty and that the experiences and perspectives of the author can be removed from the research so that the result is neutral and objective. In contrast, like many other feminists, womanists, and the like, I hold that the scholar and the scholar's culture are always present in their writings. In this research, I am fully present and do not claim to present an objective view, or that I can understand early Christians and the larger Roman world just as they understood themselves. Like qualitative researchers within the social sciences, however, I can recognize my own standpoint and discern how those whom I study differ from me. Such ancient Mediterranean social patterns as dominance by free men, the dominance that some women exercise over others, and forced labor, although altered over time, have not disappeared from the world and still require resistance.

On the other hand, erotic behaviors and desires, and the representations thereof, vary greatly among cultures. Readers will, for example, learn how early Christian sources compare with others in the Roman world, and how early rabbinic sources differ from early Christian ones. They will also see how greatly Roman-period conceptualizations differ from contemporary ones in the United States and in Western Europe, my own main cultural frameworks.

In this book, feminist analysis also means refraining from apologetics, whether vis-à-vis the "classical" world, or Jewish or Christian sources. Whereas there were some pockets of tolerance and even resistance to the opposition to sexual contact between women, we find a grim picture of caricature and negative responses, which the reader will find amply documented in the coming pages. Today, I would distinguish more sharply between the Roman world as a whole and early Christianity specifically. Although Roman satirists, Greek astrologers, and dream interpreters paint an ugly picture of women who initiate sexual acts with other women, these depictions do not compare in gravity with early Christian condemnations to hell. Also in contrast to such condemnations, the early rabbis actually could not even agree on whether sexual contact between women is prohibited, although rabbis writing much, much later decided that it is.

Some other scholars, however, argue that the picture is not as grim as I present it. For example, regarding the classical world and its late antique successor cultures, David Halperin believes that that the "femme," by which he means the woman seduced or "fucked" by the "butch," was considered culturally unproblematic, that is, that such texts as satirist Lucian of Samosata's *Dialogue of the Courtesans* and medical writer Caelius Aurelianus's translation of Soranos should be read as accepting of the "passive" female participant in a sexual encounter with a "masculine woman."<sup>4</sup> In somewhat parallel fashion, some scholars of the New

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<sup>4</sup> David M. Halperin, "The First Homosexuality?," in *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Juha Sihvola (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 256–57 (Halperin anachronistically applies terms from a specific period of U.S. history to these ancient Greek and Latin texts; if Halperin responds to my critique of his use of

Testament and of early Christianity argue that, properly understood, sexual encounters between females were not Paul's concern when he wrote in Romans 1:26 that "their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,"<sup>5</sup> but rather some other form of "unnatural" intercourse, such as anal or with an animal. The result is that if Paul did not condemn female homoerotic relations, then his statement cannot be used in support of church condemnation of lesbian, bisexual, or queer relations between women. Churches and scholars would thereby be spared from serious reflection on several troubling aspects of Paul's letters, and admirers of Greek and Roman openness to the erotic would need to recognize areas of intolerance. I am not implying that that is the only motivation for such interpretations, but I do note the result, welcome to some, that Paul and some ancient Mediterranean thought leaders may have had a greater tolerance of female homoerotic behavior than I have posited in this book.

Male authors' understandings of female homoerotic desires and acts do not tell us what women did or thought. I analyze ancient sources by men dynamically, arguing that male representations and condemnations of sexual acts between women point to an awareness in the Roman world that women were capable of such acts and of the relationships in which they may have taken place. Although classicist and historian Alan Cameron disputes my view that second-century C.E. astrologer Ptolemy refers to what I see as informal marriage between women, he agrees with me on this: "there can be little doubt that female couples who openly lived together were a not uncommon feature of the observant Ptolemy's everyday world."<sup>6</sup>

The sources in this book contribute to the history of women in the Roman world. They attest to (1) an awareness that some women desired other women and sought to act on their desires, (2) clitoridectomies being prescribed for women perceived as having "masculine desires," (3) some women ordering magical spells to attract another woman to them, (4) a small number of women possibly viewing a long-term relationship with another woman as a marriage, and (5) at least two named women being accused of an erotic relationship with each other at a fourth-century Egyptian monastery.<sup>7</sup>

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"butch" and "femme," he will likely write that I cannot take a joke, which is a not uncommon response to feminist criticism).

<sup>5</sup> E.g., James Miller, "The Practices of Romans 1:26. Homosexual or Heterosexual?" *Novum Testamentum* 37 (1995): 1-11.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Cameron, "Love (and Marriage) Between Women," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 39 (1998): 156.

<sup>7</sup> Shenute (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> C.), Canon 3: Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 37-38, 197. Shenute, Canon 4; Dwight Wayne Young, *Coptic Manuscripts from the White Monastery: Works of Shenute*, *Mitteilungen aus der Papyrussammlung der österreichischen Nationalbibliothek* (Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer), n.s. 22 (Vienna: Hollinek Brothers, 1993): 91-113 and plates 31-42; Terry G. Wilfong, "'Friendship and Physical Desire': The Discourse of Female Homoeroticism in Fifth Century CE Egypt," in *Among Women: From the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World*, ed. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Lisa Auanger (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2002): 310, 304-329.

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Sources that the lower strata of society in the ancient Mediterranean created and read are integral to my analysis. These include the New Testament; second- and third-century Christian apocalypses; such astrological texts as that by Vettius Valens, who plied his astrological trade on the streets; Egyptian love spells in colloquial Greek; and midwife handbooks. In this book, I examine elite and popular sources side by side, which enables a fuller vision of the Roman world. Scholars of classical literature normally focus on literature and not history, indeed on literature written by the educated and not on texts written and read by ordinary people.<sup>8</sup>

Jewish and Christian texts are fully integrated into my discussion of Roman-period sources from the surrounding cultures. This means that, in addition to Greek and Latin sources, I also discuss Hebrew, Aramaic, and Coptic ones.<sup>9</sup> There may well be sources on female homoerotic desires and acts in Syriac and Armenian, including among the many Armenian translations of texts no longer extant in Greek; I hope that Syriac and Armenian specialists will undertake this related research.

Unfortunately, recent authors of longer commentaries on Paul's letter to the community in Rome have not, on the whole, caught up with the research on female homoerotic desire and acts, gender analysis, and Romans 1:24–27 and 32. Robert Jewett, however, provides a remarkable counter-example.<sup>10</sup> He seriously engages not only my work, but also that of a number of other New Testament scholars and classicists, as well as quite a number of primary sources. Jewett not only thoroughly discusses ancient texts and their contemporary interpreters for a better historical understanding of Paul; he also uses his research results to raise judicious questions concerning how today's Christians might better respond to Paul. In other longer, male-authored commentaries on Romans that cite scholars on these verses, a

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<sup>8</sup> For example, David M. Halperin engages only a part of my book, expressing an explicit disinterest in the Christian sources, although he does examine the less literary astrological and medical sources. Within the non-Christian, non-Jewish parts, Halperin does not engage me on sources that may provide evidence for social history, specifically, the magical spells that document some women's interest in attracting other women to themselves; on the clitoridectomy performed on adult women; or on the question of relationships between women that some women apparently called "marriage," albeit not in any legal sense. Because of his exclusion of early Christianity, ancient Judaism, and social history, Halperin is not in a position to evaluate the theses of the book as a whole (Halperin, "Lesbian Historiography," 159–178). See also Sandra Boehringer, who writes that the "pagan" part of my book (i.e., Part I), "focuses on para-literary sources (medical and astrological texts, dream interpretation, or magical papyri), and only a quarter of the pages are dedicated to Greek and Roman literary sources" (Boehringer, *L'homosexualité*, 24). In her own book, she does not treat these "para-literary" sources, nor any that are Jewish or Christian, even when written in Greek or Latin.

<sup>9</sup> Given the possibilities of collaboration and of asking specialists to explain texts in their area, I was surprised to see Alan Cameron write of my hypothesis of informal marriages between women, "her case rests essentially on four Greek texts: Lucian, Clement of Alexandria, the romance-writer Iamblichus, and the mathematician and astrologer Ptolemy" (Cameron, "Love," 137–38, 137–56). I actually also include an early rabbinic Hebrew text, the *Sifra*. The *Sifra's* use of an unambiguous term for "to marry" undercuts Cameron's main argument. In this case, using both Greek and Hebrew demonstrates the value of working across languages.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, with the assistance of Roy D. Kotansky (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 172–81 (on Rom 1:26–27). Daniel Patte, *Romans: Three Exegetical Interpretations and the History of Interpretation*, Vol. 1 *Romans 1:1–32* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 117–118, 175, 211–212, 328, also closely engages my work.

preference for citing male over female scholars, and White over scholars of color is apparent.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, see, for example, Elizabeth A. Castelli's commentary on Romans.<sup>12</sup>

## Reflections on Terminology

In writing this book, I took great pains to historicize ancient terminology and conceptualizations of the erotic, and today, I would do so even more emphatically. I did not and do not claim that there existed a female homoerotic *identity*, because identity is itself a modern category. On the basis of medical and astrological texts, I wrote that some people had a deterministic view of erotic orientation, including such culturally charged delineations as active versus passive and foreign versus native. Today, I would more explicitly spell out the differences between contemporary concepts of sexual orientation and identity and ancient Mediterranean determinisms. I would also be more careful not to create the impression that there was an overarching conceptualization of female homoeroticism that included sexual relations between women, women's sexual desire for other women, and sexual love between women, and I thank David Halperin for his critique on this point.<sup>13</sup>

Although some classicists, New Testament scholars, and others apply the terms "lesbian" or "homosexuality" to ancient sources, in my textual interpretations, I leave the ancient terms untranslated, so as not to fix their meaning anachronistically.<sup>14</sup> My original Introduction used the term "lesbian" in its tenth-

<sup>11</sup> See Sara Parks, "'The Brooten Phenomenon': Moving Women from the Margins in Second-Temple and New Testament Scholarship," *The Bible and Critical Theory* 15 (2019): 46–64. For examples, see, e.g., Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 217–19, who cites only male scholars; Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 95–103, who cites only male scholars, except for citing my book once on a minor point; Walter Klaiber, *Der Römerbrief* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2009), 35–38, who cites just one male author and does not discuss women's ideas. Romano Penna, *Lettera ai Romani: I. Rom 1–5: Introduzione, versione, commento* (Bologna: Dehonano, 2004), 192–98, cites another female scholar and two of my publications; he engages the ancient sources on female homoerotic desire or behavior to a certain extent.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Romans," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 272–300.

<sup>13</sup> David M. Halperin, "The First Homosexuality?," in *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Juha Sihvola (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 238.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., "Lesbian": Kenneth Dover, "Two Women of Samos," in *The Sleep of Reason: Erotic Experience and Sexual Ethics in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Juha Sihvola (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 222–28; Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie, *Revised Supplement*, s.v. τριβᾶς; Dominic Montserrat, *Sex and Society in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 158–61 (part of a section on "homosexuality"); "Homosexuality": Sandra Boehringer, *L'homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2007), 25–28; quotation on p. 27, who does, however, adequately explain that with "homosexual relations" or "homosexuality," she simply means "sexual relations between persons of the same sex" but is not designating a category of persons who regard themselves as sharing a culture and (political and legal) demands" ("relations homosexuelles' ...'l'homosexualité' ...'relations sexuelles

century Byzantine sense. Since Halperin has misrepresented that use of “lesbian” as anachronistic, to avoid confusion I have deleted those uses from the section in which I explain why I did not use the term “lesbian” in the body of the book.<sup>15</sup> Nor do I apply the term “homosexuality” to antiquity.

## Further Research

In upcoming publications, I address in more detail the responses to *Love Between Women*, examine additional ancient sources on the topic of this book, and ask what ancient sources on marriage between women (on which two new sources have recently come to light) might have meant. Research by other scholars on the topics and texts addressed in this book continues apace, which bodes well for the progress of scholarly work on these subjects. I hope that some of this book’s present readers will also further our knowledge of erotic relations and gender dynamics among Christians, Jews, and indeed all ethnic and religious groups in the ancient Mediterranean world. Such deeper knowledge can help to create sexual justice in the present and will contribute toward a fuller understanding of ancient Mediterranean societies as a whole.



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entre personnes de même sexe’ et non comme désignant une catégorie de personnes se reconnaissant comme telles et qui ont une culture et des revendications communes”); Craig Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); “Butch” and “femme”: Halperin, “The First Homosexuality?,” 257, 229–68; David Pingree, ed. and trans., *Dorothei Sidonii Carmen Astrologicum* (Leipzig: Teubner, 197): 206, translates the Arabic word *saḥāqa*, which is likely a translation of the underlying Greek word τριβάς in *Carmen Astrologicum* 2.7.6; and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> David M. Halperin misrepresents me when he claims that I wrote about “ancient lesbians” and “lesbianism,” repeating the term several times when I wrote it for the purpose of disclaiming it in the body of the book, and claiming that it is the focus of the book; “The First Homosexuality?,” 235, 236, 237, 239, 244, 245, 251, and 257.