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A Review of

Stephanie Budin

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Stephanie L. Budin

Independent Scholar

slbudin@gmail.com

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Review¹

The contents of this book might best be summed up by the author's quotation: 'History, poetry, comedy, tragedy, political and legal speech, iconography: the zone of silence is truly vast.'²

To be perfectly clear from the outset, the reader will not learn much of anything about female homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome from this book, the English-language translation of the original 2007 edition, *L'Homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (Les Belles Lettres, Paris). To begin with, there are simply too few data, as Boehringer (B.) herself observed in that quotation above. I was initially quite surprised (and delighted) that a 350+ page book could even be written on the topic. It cannot. It is much better to understand this work as a very detailed study of the various data that have been used throughout Classical Studies to try to form a construct of female homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome—the bits and pieces of literature and iconography that seem to refer to this most obscure subject. So, the book's strength is that it provides background studies and a bibliography on the study of female homosexuality in Classics.

B. uses all the standard theorists, most notably Kenneth Dover, David Halperin, John J. Winkler, Bernadette Brooten, Luc Brisson, and, of course, Michel Foucault. At no point does B. ever problematise or challenge any of their hypotheses regarding ancient homosexuality, even though the theories of Dover and his non-Classically trained acolyte Foucault have for years come under considerable fire.³ Quite to the contrary, two underlying themes of B.'s book are, on the one hand, to argue in favour of the Foucauldian notion that "sexuality" did not exist in the ancient world, and with it neither hetero- nor homosexuality. Thus, B. notes in her Introduction: 'In Greco-Roman Antiquity, there was no equivalent of the modern notion of sexuality [...] In Antiquity, individuals did not have sexuality, they engaged in practices.'⁴ In other words, standard Foucault. On the other hand, B. maintains that

¹ Contents are listed at the end of this review.

² Boehringer, 2021: 143.

³ Note especially Demand, 1980; Nall, 2001; and Kapparis, 2019.

⁴ Boehringer, 2021: 13, slightly excerpted.

Graeco-Roman female-female sexual encounters did not contain any of the sub./dom. dynamics that typified (according to the Doverian-Foucauldian model) male-male sexual encounters. That is to say: Ancient Lesbianism had no butch/femme dichotomy. We shall come back to this.

The main weakness (I personally find) with the book is that it relies entirely on fiction (even the parts on iconography). I realise this is Standard Operating Procedure with Classics, but it is quite problematic when dealing with actual reality. The book is organised chronologically, starting with Archaic Greece, moving on to Classical and Hellenistic Greece, before ending with Rome. As B. points out, the chronological approach is also an organisation according to genre, as study of female homoeroticism in each age is typified by a specific genre of literature, e.g. choral poetry in Archaic Greece, elegy in Hellenistic, and so on.⁵ So, two things are clear from the outset: (1) The focus of study is fiction; and (2) B. strives, at best, to approach ancient *perceptions* of female homoeroticism rather than the reality of the topic. Specifically, *male* perceptions, because it is fiction almost exclusively written by men. Thus, we are at a double remove from the actual matter. Things may get even muddier, of course, if we consider that we are dealing with various levels of translation, which removes us even further from the core of the issue. B.'s use of the primary sources does not ameliorate this situation.

Consider, for example, her analysis of Anakreon's poem 358,⁶ wherein the speaker—an old, white-haired man—complains that a young girl from Lesbos has rejected him to go gapping after another. As B. presents it:

Once again throwing a red ball at me,
Golden-haired Eros invites me to play (συνπαίζειν)
With a girl in fancy sandals.
But she, from well-built Lesbos,
Sneers at my hair (κόμην), which is indeed white,
And she gapes at another (girl) (πρὸς δ' ἄλλην τινὰ χάσκει).⁷

The word 'another' (ἄλλην) is the crux of the matter. As B. notes, the closest feminine nominal referent in the poem would be 'hair' (κόμην), suggesting that our fancy-sandaled Lesbian is going after someone (unknown) with less white hair. However, that would not make this poem about female-female eroticism. Instead, we insert a new noun—girl—for the ἄλλην, B. claiming that the poet used the word κόμην to hint at 'κόρην' (girl).⁸ This probably works if we want to make the poem about lesbianism. But we have to want to; us, not necessarily them. I consider this a manipulation of the evidence, which is not good scholarship.

The data from Classical Greece come from a single author: Plato, with most of the focus on Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*. Thus, we have a philosopher at odds with his home culture who is writing a work of philosophical fiction in which the narrative speaker is a famous comedian. This is unlikely to produce a culturally-historically reliable case study. In B.'s defence, as noted above, the strength of the book is that it provides an extensive background of previous scholarship on the various works under study, and this section is a good introduction to this Platonic dialogue in general. However, B. then uses the material to try to support the Foucauldian notion that sexuality did not exist in the ancient world. Thus, 'Finally, we cannot find in Aristophanes' speech the establishment

⁵ Boehringer, 2021: 18.

⁶ Boehringer, 2021: 45–51.

⁷ Boehringer, 2021: 45.

⁸ Boehringer, 2021: 49.

of a category grouping together “homosexual” practices, as opposed to “heterosexual practices,” or a category for “homosexual” or “heterosexual” individuals.⁹ Granted, the previous ten pages did reveal men who were sexually attracted to men, women who were sexually attracted to women, and men and women who were sexually attracted to each other—basically: Gay, Lesbian, and Straight (all that Aristophanes seems to be missing is Bi characters). B’s arguments can become a bit strained.

This is especially the case with data that do not actually pertain to female homoeroticism. Anakreon’s poem was one such example. Another is B’s analysis (in the section on the Hellenistic period) of Asclepiades’ epigram V.207:

αἱ Σάμιαι Βιττῶ καὶ Νάννιον εἰς Ἀφροδίτης
φοιτᾶν τοῖς αὐτῆς οὐκ ἐθέλουσι νόμοις,
εἰς δ’ ἔτερ’ αὐτομολοῦσιν, ἃ μὴ καλὰ. δεσπότη Κύπρι,
μίσει τὰς κοίτης τῆς παρὰ σοὶ φυγάδας

The Samian women, Bitto and Nannion, do not wish to frequent the realms of Aphrodite in accordance with her laws, but they desert to other practices which are not appropriate. Mistress Kypris, abhor these fugitives from your bed. (B’s translation)¹⁰

Even B. admits that:

The poem certainly provides no proof that Ego considers the two women to be in a relationship with one another, but two points cast doubt on Halperin’s [2000/2002] analysis. First, Ego introduces Bitto and Nannion at the same time, both women come from the same place, and the article and adjective αἱ Σάμιαι, common to both proper nouns, establish a tight connection between the women.¹¹

Again, the modern reader must struggle to place a lesbian interpretation into the text. Rather than calling out previous scholars for doing just this (as did Halperin in the reference), B. builds upon that analysis, using the Asclepiades’ epigram to argue that ‘we can identify two consistent features in Greek discourse: the absence of moral condemnation of same-sex female relations as such, and the absence of differentiation between partners.’¹² Except that Asclepiades clearly claims that the supposedly lesbian relationship between Bitto and Nannion consists of actions that are, quote, ‘μὴ καλὰ,’ (not good). And the speaker asks Aphrodite to hate them for it. This certainly sounds like moral condemnation. In reality, we have no idea what Bitto and Nannion were doing, so it is hardly surprising that there is also no differentiation between the two Samians.

But this latter point feeds into B’s established aim of demonstrating that, just as ‘homosexuality’ did not exist in Antiquity, neither did ‘gender’ distinctions amongst lesbians, i.e. the butch/femme divide. As B. observes, “The distinction between partners based on the active/passive model and the accusations of masculinisation that will be prevalent later are not *topoi* of classical Greek discourse on sex between women.”¹³ Granted, that ‘discourse’ is so minimal that not much of anything can be prevalent in it unless we revert to the Doverian-Foucauldian paradigm, which applies, at best, to males.

⁹ Boehringer, 2021: 93.

¹⁰ Boehringer, 2021: 159.

¹¹ Boehringer, 2021: 175.

¹² Boehringer, 2021: 186.

¹³ Boehringer, 2021: 155.

This aim probably accounts for the strangest bit of organisation in the book: the relegation of Lucian's fifth *Dialogue of the Courtesans* to the Epilogue at the end of the work. This dialogue, I had thought, was one of those absolutely standard texts for approaching ancient female homoeroticism, with one female *hetaira* explaining to another how a woman (who identifies as masculine) prefers sex with women. This text is right up there with Plato's *Symposium* when it comes to ancient homosexuality studies. It is also one of the very few places in the book where B. gives a complete translation of the text in question (except for the short poems discussed above).

The problem seems to be that the direct presentation of a masculine(ised) woman who specifically prefers sex with other women to the exclusion of men goes against B.'s two themes: (1) there was no homosexuality (per Foucault); and (2) that (non-existent) homosexuality did not lead to gender distinctions. Except that Megilla is pretty obviously both homosexual and profoundly butch ('Call me Megillos. Demonassa here is my wife.'). B. explains this by arguing that 'we are in a position to interpret what Laeina says about Megilla, not as common views or deep beliefs about such women that were held by the Ancients of this period, but rather as a summary of all the clichés—identified as such—that were circulating on the subject in the second century CE.'¹⁴ So, 'clichés' but not 'common views.' Maybe it is up to the reader to figure out the difference.

Otherwise, the chapter on the Roman Period (Chapter 3) leaves the reader in the same epistemological quagmire as much of the Greek materials, as B. herself entitles the chapter 'The Roman Period: From Mythical Fiction to Satire.' We already tend to think of myths as fictional, so what to make of the double fictitiousness of this section? As with Classical Greece, the data on fictional myths come primarily from one author, Ovid, both in his *Heroides* (mainly on Sappho) and the *Metamorphoses*. Here the reader comes across—for the third time—an analysis of the myth of Kallisto/Callisto, first discussed completely anachronistically in the Archaic Greek chapter, then in the Hellenistic section, and now, yet again, in the Roman materials. In every instance what is relevant is not that some kind of lesbian interaction takes place—it is always quite clear that this is a rape tale involving Kallisto/Callisto and Zeus—but that in a minor version of the myth, perhaps introduced by the playwright Amphis at the end of the fourth century BCE and definitely played up by Ovid (who, just as a reminder, was banished by Augustus for 'impropriety'), Kallisto/Callisto did not reject the advances of the presumed Artemis. Is this an expression of lesbian desire? Perhaps, but this is not the issue. Appreciating the wispy quality of the evidence that is, again, best portrayed in Ovid, B. sees in this narrative not female desire of any kind but a reinforcement of sexual power dynamics:

Within the poet's unfolding spectrum of possibilities, there appears for a brief instant, as if subliminally, the fleeting but nevertheless clear image of love between women. And if the image disappears so quickly, it is so that its absence from the historical world Ovid and his readers inhabited [...] may be justified. My claim is not that in Rome not a single woman was involved in an amorous or sexual relationship with another woman, nor that no one ever discussed the subject, but that, in the *carmen perpetuum*, the world Ovid wishes to present is a world where this type of love does not exist.¹⁵

Other than denying the existence of lesbianism, the Roman mythic material is heavily involved in the somewhat unrelated matter of non-binary sex/gender, looking at the tales of Iphis and Leukippos,

¹⁴ Boehringer, 2021: 338.

¹⁵ Boehringer, 2021: 212.

where lesbian desire takes place only because the female object of the desire is mistaken for, and then becomes, a boy. Again, B. takes this as evidence that, for Ovid and Rome in general, ‘an asymmetry between partners is necessary for the sexual union to take place.’¹⁶ Rather than a study of ancient female homoeroticism, the discourse reverts to an upholding of Foucauldian theory side-by-side with the argument that ancient lesbianism, involving no metamorphoses of sex or gender, was innately, and unacceptably, egalitarian.

The masculinised lesbian—the *tribas*—appears only briefly (fifteen pages) in a purely satiric context as an introduction to the female pornographer Philaenis. Sadly, this is as close to a female voice as we have heard since the time of Sappho. But what we mostly hear are male-authored condemnations of this embodiment of all that is hated in the female sex, especially in the vitriol of Martial’s epigrams, and arguments about male homoeroticism in Lucian’s *Erotes*. Rather than evidence for female homoeroticism, we are left with the mirage of a fabricated *tribas* to use as the grist in the milling of some topics relevant to men.

The Conclusion drops one squarely amid modern Queer Theory, in the realms of Foucault and Butler. This is especially so in the section *An Ancient Gender System: The Anachronism of Binarity*, where B. notes of ‘societies that have invented heterosexuality and homosexuality’ that:

The idea of a norm based on the alignment of sex and gender and the construction of a gender binary, as formulated in studies concerned with contemporary Western societies, is a legitimate one, but it cannot be applied indiscriminately to all societies: in Greece and Rome, the polarity of gender groups together different social and cultural characteristics, and it cannot be assimilated to our highly contemporary division into “masculine” and “feminine.” These poles do not define the ideal alignment between cultural representation and biological sex [...]¹⁷

B. is referring to what is now called intersectionality, of course, but it should not over-complicate and completely undo the study of ancient sex, gender, and sexuality. The ancients understood that class and ethnic identities (*inter alia*) existed, but Hesiod could still insist that the ‘race of female women’ (*Theogony* 590: γένος ἐστὶ γυναικῶν θηλυτεράων) derived from a completely different source than males. Queer Theory allows us to ask interesting questions of ancient evidence, but we should not inflict our modern *desiderata* onto the ancient world.

Boehringer clearly realises what she is up against in trying to write a book on female homosexuality in ancient Greece and Rome. The data simply are not there, as is often pointed out, for example:

‘When it comes to love and sexuality, a deafening silence surrounds relations between women in several literary genres (for instance, in comedy) and in iconography.’¹⁸

or

‘Female characters who have sex with women are scarce in Greek and Roman literature.’¹⁹

¹⁶ Boehringer, 2021: 241.

¹⁷ Boehringer, 2021: 342.

¹⁸ Boehringer, 2021: 126.

¹⁹ Boehringer, 2021: 296.

The lesbian world is a world without men, and the vast majority of our sources from and about the ancient world come from men. A 350-page book on the topic is impossible. We then move on to the next best thing: a book on perceptions of lesbianism as presented in literary (and, minimally, iconographic) sources. But even here we have far fewer sources than B. presents. Much of her data does not pertain at all to female homoeroticism (this is especially the case with the iconography) or is at best tangential. What this book is, then, is a dense study of texts and images that have been used over the past century in the attempt to study Graeco-Roman lesbianism, with a useful history of scholarship and an up-to-date bibliography. Boehringer presents her own interpretations of the data, in addition to the extensive background information. I must admit that I generally disagree with these interpretations—such is the nature of scholarship. Others may undoubtedly find them more convincing. If one is going to study ancient homosexuality—assuming one accepts the existence thereof—this is a more than worthwhile reference book.

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