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An Interview with Sandra Boehringer on the Occasion of the Monograph, Female Homosexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome (London: Routledge, 2021)

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A Short Profile of the Author

Sandra Boehringer is a historian and philologist at the University of Strasbourg (France). Her work focuses on archaic Greek poetry and the construction of sexual categories in antiquity, with particular reference to the thought of Michel Foucault.

She is the author of *La sexualité antique, une histoire moderne* (Paris: EPEL Éditions, 2025); the English translation of the work is forthcoming. She has also written numerous articles and coedited several scholarly collections, including *Après Les Aveux de la chair. Généalogie du sujet chez Michel Foucault* (Paris: EPEL Éditions, 2020; with Laurie Laufer) and *Foucault, Sexuality, Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2022; with Daniele Lorenzini). She is also the French translator, with Nadine Picard, of several classic works on ancient sexuality, including John Winkler's *The Constraints of Desire* and the anthology *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (edited by Zeitlin, Winkler and Halperin).



* The volume is the English translation of *L'Homosexualité féminine en Grèce et à Rome*, with a preface from David Halperin (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2007), with a second preface.

Your work bridges the fields of literature, material culture, and queer theory. How did this interdisciplinary approach lead to insights that a single-disciplinary study might have missed?

SB | To me, it seems necessary to approach the broad subject of "sexuality" by using an interdisciplinary method. "Sexuality" is actually a contemporary discursive apparatus to which we ourselves are bound, as Foucault showed in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality, The Will to Knowledge*, in 1976. Actions only have meaning within a discourse and a system of norms and values. The art, images, and poetic creations about love and eroticism are part of this discourse. In ancient times, there was a different regime, that of *aphrodisia*, which did not link people's identities as closely to sexual practices as in the 20th century (with the affirmation of the categories of homosexuality vs. heterosexuality). Thinking about the existence of less fixed categories and admitting the possibility of fluidity – as in the poetry of Sappho, for example – is also possible thanks to the contribution of queer theory.

Sappho is often romanticised as a 'lesbian icon'. How did you balance her symbolic cultural status with the historical realities of female homoeroticism in antiquity and/or ancient Lesbos?

SB | This is a very interesting question because, in fact, Sappho of Lesbos was not a "lesbian" in the modern sense of the term, i.e. belonging to a category of people perceived by society as "different" or "unusual" based on the gender of the person they love. Sappho was famous in ancient times because of her talent and the beauty of her songs: most of her poems speak of *eros*, a burning eros between one woman and another, but in a context where feeling this eros did not make people "homosexual." At the same time, this is not to contest the creativity of LGBTQI+ cultures that have sought and found figures of identification for contemporary contexts of oppression and discrimination. In any case, these forms of queer reappropriation will always seem more appropriate to me than "heterosexualising" Sappho's poetry, as some philologists have done, even erasing the feminine form of a personal pronoun in their translation.

To return to a similar angle, scholars often debate applying terms like 'lesbian' to antiquity. How can one negotiate modern queer frameworks while avoiding anachronism?

SB | The term "lesbian," like "heterosexuality" or "homosexuality," is in fact an anachronism. The latter two were invented by the classificatory discourse of nineteenth-century *scientia sexualis*, which distinguished between normal and abnormal, healthy and pathological, thereby creating categories of people defined according to their sexual behaviour. This discursive apparatus did not exist in ancient times. Yet as we indeed first approach distant societies through our language, we should therefore consider the categories in our study as *heuristic* categories, destined to disappear as we advance into foreign territory, like anthropologists in the field who gradually understand that a culture must be understood in its entirety and admit that certain terms and concepts that seem self-evident to us do not exist for others: it is also and above all a question of ceasing to look for invariants and considering "sexuality" a transhistorical given.

Has your critique of patriarchal frameworks in Classical Studies sparked pushback from the scholarly community? How can you respond to such critiques?

SB | Yes, indeed, some colleagues in the field of classical studies in France, in particular, have been very critical of work on issues of sexuality. Things are changing slowly. I have been the target of

discriminatory comments. Still, I understand that this is also, implicitly (if I may say so!), proof of the importance of this work and the accuracy of Foucault's analyses of the modern sexuality apparatus. Why, indeed, is there so much contemporary contention when we are working on temporally removed ancient texts? It is because sexuality plays a normative role that goes beyond the question of sexual practice. This intertwining of the present and the past in the approach of researchers working on these issues interests me: it is the subject of the study I have just published with EPEL: *La sexualité antique, une histoire moderne* (2025), which will soon be published in English under the title: *Ancient sexuality: A Modern History*.

Which aspect of reconstructing silenced histories – literary analysis, challenging heteronormative frameworks, material culture – felt most personally fulfilling?

SB | I really enjoyed rereading Plato's *Symposium* – such a well-known work! – and focusing my analysis on the little-explored question of *hetairistria* (the name given by Aristophanes' character to certain halves of the female sphere cut in two). It gave me great pleasure to put forward new hypotheses about a world-famous and widely studied text and to draw the attention of leading Plato scholars to an aspect they had not noticed before. I owe a great deal to Luc Brisson, a Plato scholar and translator of his works, who encouraged me to continue my analysis of Aristophanes' speech.

Were there any discoveries in your research that fundamentally shifted your approach or interpretation?

SB | What profoundly changed my approach were studies that primarily deployed a method and did not take the definition of "sexuality" for granted. The work of John Winkler was decisive for me, as was that of David Halperin.

With hindsight, is there a source, case study, argument, or process you wish you had included or approached differently?

SB | I would have liked to broaden the chronological and geographical scope of my study to include magical papyri. In this vast corpus produced in Egypt until the 5th century CE, there are at least three erotic charms relating to women in contexts of seduction. Much work has been done on these documents since then: it is now a challenge for me to write a scientific article on eros between women in these papyri and defixiones.

Did any specific location (e.g. archives, library, a French café) profoundly influence your writing or thinking?

SB | There is a place that has played a major role for me, but it is not a physical place: it is the website of the publishing house EPEL dedicated to the collection called 'Les grands classiques de l'érotologie moderne' (The Great Classics of Modern Erotology)¹. It brings together authors from diverse backgrounds to explore fascinating topics that delve into the question of *eros* throughout the ages. The collection, to quote its director, psychoanalyst Jean Allouch, "aims to open up a critical debate between gay and lesbian fields and the Freudian field. The hope is that we will be able to define a little more precisely what 'the works of Aphrodite' consist of". The collection includes works (translated into French) by John Winkler, David Halperin, Maud Gleason, as well as Gayle Rubin and Judith

¹ The collection is accessible here: <https://epel-edition.fr/product-tag/les-grands-classiques-de-lerotologie-moderne/>

Butler, works on Italy, the Arab world, and the Marais district of Paris, Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani. In the early 2000s, this collection was a magical place where one could encounter so many great figures, so many major intellectuals in the field of queer studies, made accessible to readers through French translations and new prefaces. The Lacanian school of psychoanalysis ELP, which supports this publishing house, has done much to support new approaches to sexual and gender issues, in conjunction with Foucauldian thought.

On a more personal level, if not a classicist, what path might you have pursued?

SB | Music is a valuable resource for my work, especially for the ancient world, where texts are merely traces of danced and sung performances. I think that if I hadn't been a classicist, I would have liked to find a job in contact with art and artists, particularly musicians of Eastern or experimental music. I am thinking of the creations of my friend, composer and pianist Jérôme Bertier,² and my friends Léo Fabre-Cartier,³ a lotar player, and Etienne Gruel,⁴ a percussionist and zarb player: all three have been involved in my university courses to demonstrate to students, in an ethnopoetic dimension, the importance of musical performance in conveying emotions as well as in structuring a society. Not being a musician myself, I think I would have particularly enjoyed being the artistic agent for the group Ouled El Bled.⁵

² A freely accessible list of the artist's music is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/@jeromebertier758/playlists>.

³ For the personal page of the artist, see here: <https://www.leofabrecartier.com/>.

⁴ The artist's personal page is accessible here: <https://www.instagram.com/etiennegruel/?hl=en>.

⁵ The music group Ouled El Bled's music is accessible here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbWLhk8avX-VC1ZsU5yNr7g>.