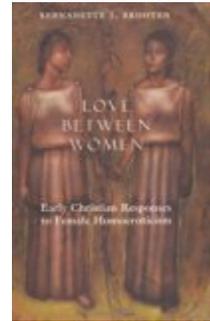


# H-Net Reviews

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**Bernadette J. Brooten.** *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. xxii + 412 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-07591-4.

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## 'Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural'

Bernadette Brooten, in *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, examines a remarkable range of source material in order to explore the attitudes of ancient and early Christian culture towards homoerotic relations between women. A thorough work of scholarship, *Love Between Women* is perhaps the most comprehensive work on the subject of female homoeroticism before the early modern period and is groundbreaking in its scope and originality.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part of the book focuses primarily on texts revealing the existence of female homoerotic relationships and the attitudes towards them. Brooten uses a variety of sources to demonstrate that from "classical Greece through the Roman period (there was) an increasing awareness of sexual love between women, nearly always combined with rejection of such love" (p. 70). Her research reveals that there were a number of terms in use to describe women who loved other women, including "tribade," "Lesbia," "fricatrix," and "virago," and that these terms were derogatory. Scholars in antiquity seemed unable to conceptualize female same-sex relations within the same framework as relations between men or pederastic relations between men and boys, in which one partner was assumed to be the penetrator and one was penetrated. The resulting confusion caused ancient authors to account for the lesbian phenomenon in a number of ways. Some placed women in the phallogocentric economy by assuming that penetration was involved, either with an enlarged clitoris or with a dildo. In such

an interpretation, the penetrator was designated as having become like a man, but further confusion arose regarding the designation of the "passive" partner. Some authors regarded her behaviour as more womanly, and thus less deserving of derogation, whereas others saw both women as equally transgressive of acceptable sexual relations (pp. 6-7).

In a section on Greek erotic spells from Egypt, Brooten reveals that women used erotic spells to attract other women. The women's own voices are largely invisible in these texts, because women usually would have commissioned the spells. Brooten concludes that the spells examined are indicative of women having used the traditional, heterosexual form of spell-making in homoerotic relations. The erotic spells, each of which sought to bind another person against their will to the person commissioning the spell, reveal the existence of a number of women who desired erotic connection with other women and who were able to locate scribes willing to write the spells to achieve this goal.

One would not ordinarily expect to find Joan Nestle quoted in a book on the ancient and early Christian periods, yet Brooten uses Nestle to illustrate the difficulty involved in reading the cultural meanings of ancient gender and sexual roles. Nestle's argument that late twentieth-century interpretations of the 1950s butch-fem relationship as a replication of heterosexuality are a mis-reading is used in Brooten's work to demonstrate that the violent imagery of erotic spells is easily misinterpreted within

the modern cultural context (p. 8). The spells are replete with images of physical violence and slavery, both of which were part of the literary traditions of spell-making and, indeed, of the real world in which the spells were made. Brooten doubts that the violent imagery should be taken literally, and further argues that the women petitioners may have had little choice over the actual wording of the spells, especially if they themselves were illiterate.

Brooten also examines astrological texts, which accounted for homoerotic attractions by determining that people were subject to the feminine or masculine influences of planets. Many of the early astrologers, including Ptolemy, assigned the planets genders and gendered characteristics. A change in planetary gender could cause a reversal of “normal” gendered behaviour in humans. Brooten argues that Ptolemy’s system casts heterosexuality as “anything but a given” (p. 125), yet it is clear that heterosexuality was regarded as the norm from which humans deviate. Astrologers “believed that configurations of the stars created a broad range of sexual inclinations and orientations....Nevertheless, they regularly employed terminology that indicated strong disapproval and even disgust at women becoming masculine and men becoming effeminate, terms such as ‘impure,’ ‘licentious,’ and ‘lustful’ ” (p. 140).

The entire second section of the book is devoted to a comprehensive study of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, perhaps the most influential text in European history (apart from Leviticus) on the subject of same-sex relationships. Brooten mentions a number of cases in which the Letter to the Romans has been used in subsequent centuries, including our own, to argue against the legitimacy of same-sex relationships. The second section of *Love Between Women* is devoted to a close study of Rom 1:26 in relation to the other parts of the Letter and in relation to other contemporary works. Brooten contends that Rom 1:26, in which Paul states that “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,” refers to women being either naturally passive or unnaturally active in sexual and other aspects of life (p. 216). Natural intercourse, in the ancient and early Christian worlds, was the act of a dominant person penetrating a subordinate and passive one.

Brooten concludes that early Christian attitudes towards female homoeroticism were built upon an earlier antipathy towards relations between women as *para physin*, or contrary to nature. Paul and other early Chris-

tians regarded their world as gendered, each gender having appropriate characteristics. Deviation from those assigned characteristics was against nature and against the natural order of God’s creation. Using examples from the writings of the church fathers from the second through the fifth centuries, Brooten argues that early Christian authorities continued the first-century interpretations of Rom 1:26 that homoerotic behaviour was contrary to natural law and thus worthy of death.

Brooten disagrees with those scholars who have argued, following Foucault, that homosexuality, as an inherent or defining characteristic of an individual, arose only after the nineteenth century (p. 361). Brooten contends that her research reveals a category of persons held to have a long-term or even life-long homoerotic orientation. On this point she may be stretching a little: while her evidence clearly shows that there were categories to define and delineate the homoerotically-inclined, as there would be in later centuries, she is unable to show that these categories were used by the people thus described as self-constructs, that they held the sorts of identity characteristics that would later predominate in sexual orientation, or that people formed communities based on them. She does, however, make an important challenge to the Foucauldian argument that homosexuality was not medicalized until the nineteenth century. Brooten’s analysis of ancient medical texts clearly shows that homoeroticism was pathologized and was treated with a variety of medical treatments, including clitoridectomies in the case of women.

Few scholars have provided as much evidence of female same-sex relationships in antiquity and early Christian culture as has Brooten in *Love Between Women*. Brooten particularly acknowledges the work of John Boswell in bringing to light a number of sources on female homoeroticism. It is Boswell’s work to which Brooten’s is most similar, in that both scholars have sought to demonstrate the existence of same-sex relationships in ancient and early Christian societies. Boswell has, however, been criticized by classicists and historians for his methodology and his conclusions. In particular, his *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* met with criticism because of his tendency to make grand claims on less evidence than is usually desirable. It is not this point on which Brooten criticizes Boswell, however. She rightly points out that Boswell failed, in both of his major works on early homoerotic relationships, to employ a gender analysis (pp. 11-13). Because of this failure, Boswell did not appreciate that his claim in *Same-Sex Unions* that the early Christian church did not neces-

sarily condemn homosexuality is not true for women. Brooten's evidence demonstrates that the view of female same-sex relationships was overwhelmingly negative.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of Brooten's book is her provision not only of the results of her own research, but also of a comprehensive overview of the major works in her field, discussing each scholar's interpretation of individual texts in depth and demonstrating in detail the reasons for her agreement or disagreement with each. Such an approach benefits not only scholars of antiquity and early Christianity, but also any reader less familiar with the period and the relevant scholarship. This makes *Love*

*Between Women* a work tremendously useful to expert and lay audience alike. Despite its length, its abundant quoting and documentation of primary and secondary sources, and its scholarly subject, *Love Between Women* is one of the most informative, accessible and interesting works this reader has examined in the field of ancient history.

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