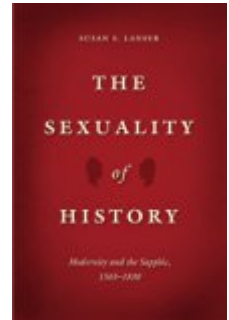


**Susan S. Lanser.** *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830.*  
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Susan S. Lanser's *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830* is a magisterial study of representations of sapphism across European society from the mid-sixteenth to the early nineteenth century. From this broad-ranging perspective she argues that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed an intensified cultural interest in the sapphic—an interest, indeed, which was disproportionate to the small social threat actually posed by sapphism. Reflecting on this dissonance, Lanser suggests that concerns with sapphic desire in this period should be understood within the broader historical context of widespread social change. “Rather as gay marriage has become in recent years a charged site for concerns vaster than gays or marriage,” she claims, “intimacies between women became entangled with contexts about authority and liberty, power and difference, desire and duty, mobility and change, order and governance” (p. 2). Sapphism, in short, represented a testing ground for the limit points of modernity. This conclusion leads Lanser to the central theoretical contention

of her book: that sexuality is a useful category of historical analysis in the same way as gender and that therefore, rather than seeking to understand sexuality through the study of history, we can read history through the prism of sexuality.

Gender, like sexuality, is at the heart of Lanser's theoretical approach. Critiquing Michel Foucault and queer historians for the elision of the lesbian in the broader field of the history of sexuality, *The Sexuality of History* places sapphism at the center and asserts that lesbians must be studied independently from gay men as patriarchal dominance has shaped female experience very differently from male. Lesbian historians will no doubt welcome these renewed calls for queer theorists and historians to be more sensitive to gender in their work. However, in moving away from queer scholars' usual search for “hidden” queer meanings in texts toward a concern with explicitly sapphic narratives, Lanser has shifted her focus toward the analysis of texts pro-

duced largely by male authors, indicating largely male concerns with social change.

*The Sexuality of History* begins by mapping “sapphic modernity” in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, arguing that this period witnessed the most intense preoccupation with the sapphic since Roman times. Sapphic representations functioned as “harbingers of social concerns about mobility, change, and incipient leveling” (p.39), indicating the centrality of women’s role as a social anchor and the depth of fears about a destabilizing of social organization. This concern with change was evidenced, Lanser asserts, in a textual preoccupation with the possible causes of sapphism, from unexpected bodily change to circumstance, inclination, and contagion. In raising the possibility of the unimaginable circumstance of women living without men, sapphic texts of this period provided a means of articulating broader social fears about a breakdown in the clear social hierarchies of premodern society.

Through the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Lanser suggests that sapphic themes were increasingly linked with concerns about the state and the body politic. Texts often represented sapphic desire as a disruptive force which resulted from and in the destruction of paternal authority, patriarchal structures, and established hierarchies. Concerns with a disruption of social hierarchies continued, but many texts focused specifically on the political sphere, utilizing sapphic themes to explore possibilities of political leveling, as in the English “New Ballad” (1708), which attributed to sapphic motives Queen Anne’s decision to replace her Whig friend Sarah Jennings Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, with the lower-born Tory Abigail Hill Masham. While the texts of this period were authored by men, from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, the entrance of elite women into print resulted in the production of erotic writings which may

have functioned as a means of articulating class-specific protofeminist arguments.

Chapter 5, focusing on narrative texts of the long eighteenth century, makes the startling claim that “the history of the (‘rising’ European) novel can be read as a sapphic plot” (p. 147). Complicating conventional presumptions that the rising novel was centrally concerned with the assertion of heteronormative and domestic themes, Lanser suggests that the sapphic figured as a disruptive force in the narrative, opening up subversive possibilities and acting as a sign and agent of discontent.

The final, revolutionary, decades of the eighteenth century saw female intimacies become associated with fears about power and secrecy. In a political context of secret societies and exclusive clubs, pamphlets, newspapers, and scurrilous poems made public claims about the associations and affiliations of women. Texts of the 1770s and 1780s frequently utilized themes of sapphic intimacy to explore utopian and dystopian fantasies, but as this trope became more closely associated with counterrevolution in the 1790s, its usefulness declined. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Lanser asserts, explicit textual references to the sapphic significantly declined, coinciding with a restabilizing of the social order.

Lanser supports her arguments through the detailed analysis of a breathtaking array of sapphic texts, from representations of cross-dressing and female same-sex attraction in late sixteenth-century English and Spanish theater to eighteenth-century novels and scurrilous French poems in the age of revolution. However, the detailed focus on multiple texts, taken up at times without a plot summary and frequently without contextualizing information about the author or cultural context from which the text emerged, can at times be bewildering. Eschewing analysis of the reasons underlying a text’s production, the number of copies and distribution routes it followed, and the nature of readers’ responses to it on the

grounds that such details can be difficult to trace, Lanser utilizes instead the concept of “confluence” to explore common underlying factors that may have prompted the emergence of sapphic phenomena simultaneously in different cultural contexts and geographical locations. “In shifting attention from textual surfaces to contextual depths,” Lanser claims, “confluence almost inevitably anchors textual study to its larger social, political, economic, religious, and/or cultural environment,” albeit “more speculatively” (p. 20). It is the speculative nature of this endeavor, however, and the absence of detailed discussion of the larger historical context, that leaves the reader feeling curiously ungrounded, and unable to interpret the historical significance of the material being presented.

In her *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality, and Women’s Experience of Modern War*, Laura Doan draws attention to the disciplinary gulf that divides practitioners of the history of sexuality, from the centrality of empirical research in the practice of “professional history” to the rather different theoretical investments of queer and literary critics. Susan Lanser’s *The Sexuality of History* perfectly exemplifies this conundrum. A meticulous and impressive work of historical literary criticism, *The Sexuality of History* will undoubtedly provide queer theorists and historians with much to reflect on, but may leave the “professional historian” with more questions than answers.

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