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# THE DYKES OF ANTIQUITY

*New scholarship shows that lesbianism was known—and denounced—by early Christian writers*

by Gip Plaster

**B**ernadette J. Brooten's book *Love Between Women* got someone's attention—it earned the 1997 Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Studies and an award from the American Academy of Religion—but it was ignored by much of the lesbian and gay media.

Its subject matter, though, has been ignored and misunderstood for centuries.

The central argument of the book, whose full

was deemed "contrary to nature." From this, she says, the biblical writer Paul concluded that homosexual sex was unnatural. We can conclude, then, that if those roles are removed, the condemnation fades away too.

Brooten says her book is an important addition to four fields of study. First, her work contributes to ancient history in general because of the number of previously untranslated and never-before-collected sources she presents. Second, the evidence she uses to support her conclusion that lesbian love was condemned by the early church creates a tapestry of documentation that is woven into women's history.

"[My book] contributes to women's history by documenting the existence of woman-woman marriage, of the brutal surgical procedure of selective clitoridectomy for women who displayed 'masculine desires,' and of women seeking out magical practitioners to help them attract other women," Brooten says.

She points out that her work also provides much new research on the history of sexuality: "by analyzing the differences between the cultural conceptualizations of female and male homoeroticism in antiquity, by documenting the

concept of a long-term or lifelong erotic orientation in ancient astrology and ancient medicine, by demonstrating that 19th-century medical writers were not the first to classify homoerotic behavior as diseased, by analyzing the interplay between ancient religious views and understandings of sexual behavior, and by delineating the gendered character of Roman-period understandings of the erotic."

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for many readers, the book contributes to New Testament Bible studies by clarifying that the condemnation of homosexuals in the early church involved societal beliefs

of the period about gender roles, and by providing a new background for current discussions about same-sex love.

As you can guess, the news for lesbians in the ancient world wasn't good.

"Medical writers prescribed mind control and clitoridectomy to control female homoeroticism," Brooten says. "Astrologers described it as caused by the stars and yet nevertheless unnatural and impure. Early Christians called sexual love between women unnatural and deserving of death, imagined that women engaged in such love would suffer horrific tortures in hell, and warned nuns against it."

But at least there was news, according to Brooten, and not the void that many scholars think existed. And when we remove the ancient cultural rules, the news for lesbian Christians today seems even better.

Brooten's work, like much research about women, has been ignored to some degree. But to miss it is to miss an important piece of the puzzle, rooted in the ancient world, from which we assemble the modern lesbian and gay community.

*Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* by Bernadette J. Brooten. University of Chicago Press, 1996; \$34.95 cloth.

## Books

title is *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, is that both Christian and non-Christian writers in the Roman world were aware of sexual love between women, and nearly all rejected it. Christians and non-Christians alike condemned woman-to-woman love because they believed that women were by nature passive and should subordinate themselves to men.

So what does this mean to us?

Many of today's scholars believe that lesbian orientation and relationships were unknown to ancient writers. If lesbian love was condemned, though, it must not have been unknown. That means that some current scholars are wrong, but it also means much more.

In 1980, John Boswell's book *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* laid much of the framework for gay Christian studies. Today writers like Mark Jordan, who wrote *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, attempt to correct and expand Boswell's work. Little, though, is published about how lesbian women were viewed in the early Christian church. That is perhaps in part because many scholars believe that early thinkers considered sex

to be about physical penetration. Since women are incapable of penetrating each other according to that line of thought, scholars conclude that woman-to-woman sex was not identified in ancient cultures.

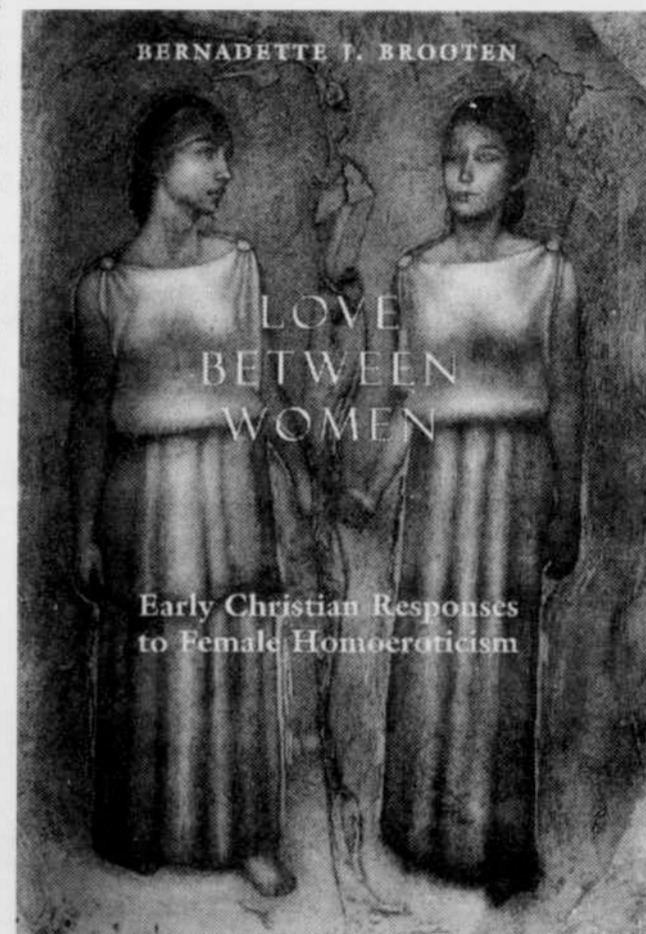
Brooten's book re-examines this argument and suggests that not only did early Roman thinkers know about women who were sexually attracted to women, but that they condemned these women in their writing.

This rejection, she says, is a result of ancient active/passive sexual roles.

"Roman-period writers presented as normative those sexual relations that represent a human social hierarchy. They saw every sexual pairing as including one active and one passive partner, regardless of gender, although culturally they correlated gender with these categories: masculine as active and feminine as passive," Brooten says. "Males could be either active or passive... whereas females were always supposed to be passive."

To further clarify her point, Brooten said in an interview, "Roman-period writers sometimes accepted sexual love between males, especially when such relations were unequal, such as between a free-citizen male and a male slave or an older man and a youth. In such relations, the natural social hierarchy was preserved."

If people violated this hierarchy, their behavior



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