Review of Love between women: early Christian responses to female homoeroticism, by B.J. Brooten

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A writer of fables explains them as a mistake, tracing their origin to a drunken night when Prometheus created women and men with the wrong genitalia. An astrologer blames them on the same planetary configuration that produces eunuchs. A church father opines that no right-thinking person would share a cup with them, much less kiss them. Appealing to decorum, a rhetor cautions declaimers about discussing them too openly in speeches. A Lucianic character -- even in a racy dialogue -- professes shame at having to utter their name. For the women called "tribades", ancient male writers in general want to show nothing but disgust. That tradition of focused hostility, argues Bernadette Brooten in this impressive and indispensable new book, is essential background to early Christian teachings on sexuality.

If you do not know what type of women "tribades" are, no wonder. The word *tribas* (from *tribein*, "to rub" i.e. sexually) appears in Greek and Latin only a few dozen times in all, and not before the Roman empire. Take the sources mentioned above -- Phaedrus, Ptolemy, Tertullian, the elder Seneca and the (fourth century) author of the Lucianic *Amores* -- and you are well on your way through the explicit references to tribades. Add a fleeting comment by the younger Seneca, a few of Martial's epigrams, an innuendo in Lucian, and an aside in the medical writer Caelius Aurelianus' discussion of male homosexuality, and you have read practically all that can be called descriptive. Imperial astrological writers do mention tribades with some frequency, but always in the summary lists of outcomes that such-and-such a horoscope is supposed to portend. The remaining sources are for the most part equally succinct: passing statements in Artemidorus' *Dream-Book*, in a late and anonymous physiognomy manual, and by a few scholiasts of the late antique or Byzantine era. Other than Tertullian (who translates *tribas* as *frictrix*), no Christian writer mentions the *tribades* by name. But all the same it is clear that early church fathers thought they should burn in hell.

What precisely were these women doing to attract such reactions? D.M. Halperin (in *OCD* [1996] s.v. "Homosexuality") has offered a good working definition of tribadism: "the sexual penetration of women (and men) by other women, by means of either a dildo or a fantastically large clitoris". The latter mode is obviously absurd. But as Halperin notes, this ancient construct in fact is "the female same-sex sexual practice that imperial Greek and Roman writers alike singled out for comment". Now, as early as Seneca's *Controversiae*, we see a distinction between the "artificial" and "natural" tribade. The trouble for us is that no Greek or Roman writer actually describes that "natural tribade" or her activities in any real detail. Serious modern discussions of these sources have been few, basically J. Rosenbaum in his amazing (but widely ignored) *Geschichte der Lustseuche im Alterthume* (8th edition, 1921) 143-146, W. Kroll in *RE* s.v. "Lesbische Liebe" (an excellent short exposition) and J. Hallett in *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3 (1989) 209-227. Hallett's is an in-depth study but one largely confined to the evidence
of Phaedrus, the two Senecas, and Martial. For Christian attitudes, the first place to look has been John Boswell’s *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (1980), followed by his *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (1994). But those volumes have some serious flaws, as any number of reviewers have managed to show.

Now there is B[rooten], who goes toe to toe on many important issues with not just Boswell, but also Michel Foucault, Halperin and more than a few other influential scholars. A major aim of *Love Between Women* is "to understand ancient conceptualizations of female homoeroticism in the context of cultural constructions of the female" (p. 25). There B. claims her predecessors have come up short -- particularly Boswell, who "failed to explain why Roman and Greek authors employed such terms as 'monstrous', 'worthy of death', and 'contrary to nature' when writing about sexual love between women" (p. 12). B. goes further than to explore ideology. Indeed she aims to use our scraps of ancient testimony "to reconstruct the history of the women against whom these authors were reacting" (p. 25). It is always hard to piece together "realities" from polemicizing texts. But as a historian of the early church (the author holds a chair in Christian Studies at Brandeis) B. is admirably suited to the task.

B.'s centerpiece is a detailed analysis of Paul's *Letter to the Romans* 1:26ff ("... Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural ... [a long list of transgressions follows] ... those who practice such things deserve to die"). B. interprets it as an explicit condemnation of female homoeroticism, and tries to explain Paul's words especially in the context of what she argues to be contemporary Roman attitudes toward sexual love between women. B. has published on that vexing Paul passage before, most notably in a 25 page article in a composite volume a dozen years back. In the interim so have almost forty other scholars, to judge from B.'s annotated bibliography on the question (pp. 363-372). B.'s renewed discussion of Paul now fills more than a quarter of this 400-page book. In truth, what *Love Between Women* really is about is "to provide readers with a solid basis for interpreting Paul's teaching on homoeroticism" and furthermore "for bringing that interpretation into church and public policy debates about lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals" (pp. 192-193). So we get a lot of modern comparanda as well.

In brief, B. argues that "throughout Western history we find the male creators of culture and of ideology wavering between assuming that sexual relations between women do not exist at all -- indeed cannot exist -- and imagining that if they do, then the women must be capable of penetration" (p. 190). As for that notion, "this focus on penetration as the principal sexual image led to a simplistic view of female erotic behavior and a complex view of the erotic choices of free men" (p. 49). In the Roman imperial era, B. maintains, the phenomenon of female same-sex love received increased attention and (before long) broad societal recognition. But why the hostility? In ancient Mediterranean concepts of sexuality "active and passive define what it means to be masculine/feminine" (p. 125; cf. 157 n. 43). If a female plays the penetrating (i.e. active) part, she transgresses those fundamental categories. Such a woman acts "contrary to nature". But so too, it appears, if a woman allows herself to be penetrated by another woman. The logic is skewed, but B. argues that just goes to show "female homoeroticism did not fit neatly into ancient understandings of sexual relationships as essentially asymmetrical" (p. 76).

Most of the twelve chapters of *Love Between Women* are devoted to filling out that picture of Roman-era notions of female homoeroticism. This model -- which I must leave to others to critique in detail -- has (for the most part) the advantage of some good textual evidence to recommend it. But B. also argues that the views of Paul and later church fathers on sex between women were not all that far off from those of non-Christian authors. To make her point, B. manages to pull in some quite recondite
sources for female homoeroticism from the Greek, Roman and Jewish worlds (all thankfully indexed at pp. 395-407). As it turns out, B. can offer no non-Christian author who judges homoerotic women "worthy of death" or of savage punishments in the underworld. That of course has implications for the acceptance of B.'s overarching thesis. But all the same, for the Greeks and Romans B. has collected some indisputably grim material.

In Chapter II, B. surveys the harsh attitudes toward female same-sex love in "élite" Greek and Latin authors. Here B. accepts unhesitatingly the view of Judith Hallett that elite Latin writers employed a consistent literary technique to deny outright the existence of tribades among Roman citizen women, namely one of "masculinization", "hellenization" and "anachronization" (pp. 43, 50). The texts B. surveys without a doubt "masculinize" the tribades -- how could they not? What "hellenization" we find, however, seems no more than a function of a general Roman tendency to use Greek terms for sexual matters. Celsus (6.18.1) explicitly describes that habit, which one can easily document for countless other practices unconnected with female homoeroticism. To take an example at random, Ausonius (Epigr. 85) actually spells out Greek leichei (dicere me Latinum non decet opprobium) when reviling a certain Eunus for "what you do". Conversely, the god in the Priapea (3.9-10) half-apologizes for "speaking Latin" when he uses the verb paedicare. And the "anachronism" argument is no less easy to buy. For instance, in Phaedrus' aetiological fable (4.16), B. observes that "a tribas possesses a phallus, given her ... in the distant past, far removed from the Roman present" (p. 45-46). True, but the point of such tales is precisely to explain the origin of a contemporary survival. Phaedrus makes that point quite clear for the tribade (ita nunc libido pravo fruitur gaudio): the nunc is absolutely at odds with "anachronization". B. also notes that, alongside the alleged "denial" response, "other ancient authors describe the threat of female homoeroticism as one very close to home" (p. 50). So with all this obsessive emphasis on the tribades, would it not be more useful to exchange Hallett's framework of "the denial of Roman reality" -- a phrase by which she sought to encompass not just those supposed distancing techniques but also the silly anatomical descriptions -- for "the affirmation of unreality"?

"Roman poets satirized tribades, while physicians attempted to cure them" (p. 190). That "tribadism" was in fact an ancient medical diagnosis is B.'s argument in Chapter V (pp. 143-173). B. singles out two pieces of conflicting evidence to make her case. The first is a passage in the (fifth century AD) medical writer Caelius Aurelianus, from his Latin translation of Soranus' (lost) work On Chronic Diseases. In an aside (4.9.132) Caelius compares male pathics (molles mares) to "the women who are called tribades". In this comparison he reveals that he considers tribades to have a mental disease -- but one from which they can be freed or at least temporarily relieved. Despite some demonstrable interventions by Caelius in this very passage, B. confidently ascribes all the main thought to Soranus himself. That apparently includes talk of "divine providence" ordaining male and female sex roles (see p. 149 with 148 n. 13 and 150 n. 19). What B. concludes from all this is that Soranus established "an enduring and influential view of tribades as women who suffer from a chronic disease of the soul that the physician should treat by mind control." (p. 146).

B.'s second item is the apparent contents of Soranus' chapter "Concerning an Immensely Great Clitoris and Clitoridectomy" in his Gynaikeia IV, as reconstructed from Caelius Aurelianus and two other later works. B. shows "the clitoridectomy texts assume that an overly large clitoris is a penis-like organ, capable of an erection" (p. 168). The trouble is that Caelius -- on B.'s reading -- says this makes women less eager for intercourse (i.e. with men), while the two other authorities (Mustio and Paul of Aegina) assert the opposite. None of the three translators says a word about tribades in relation to the
clitoridectomy procedure, which has led at least one scholar recently to dispute its relevance to that construct (p. 24). However B. asserts it must refer to tribadism by process of elimination (p. 160 "specifically, [the clitoridectomy texts] speak of these women as capable of taking on the active, penetrative role"). But as B. herself notes, it is odd in light of that first passage -- which incidentally said nothing about the clitoris -- that here "Soranos advises a bodily treatment, namely surgery, for women who behave like men" (p. 170). All the same, B. does not make too much of the contradiction (p. 170): "a culture that cannot tolerate female assertiveness in sexual matters will probably try to control female homoerotic behavior by whatever means...." Elsewhere B. refers to that contradiction as evidence of actual "medical debates about the etiology of the disease of male passivity and female bisexuality" (p. 346).

To my mind that medical chapter is the least convincing in the book. First, the problems of distinguishing "Soranus", "Soranian" and "Pseudo-Soranus" from texts such as Caelius are notoriously difficult. It seems that Caelius will even put Christian notions directly in the mouth of Soranus, if it serves his rhetorical purpose: see now A.E. Hanson and M.H. Green in ANRW II 37.1 (1995) pp. 970-981, esp. p. 980 on Chronic Diseases 4.9 itself. There is no guarantee against that aside on tribades being Caelius' own "contribution" to the discussion of molles mares. Indeed, it is quite likely to be intrusive -- given the nature of that section of the Chronic Diseases, which conspicuously reflects the temper of Caelius' times.

One wonders also why Caelius should stand alone in his translation of that second passage from Soranus' Gynaikeia, on the effects of a large clitoris. When Caelius says women with this condition acquire a similar appetite for sex as men and in venerem coacte veniant, B. takes it that such women "approach sexual intercourse (i.e. with men) only under duress". The logic is hard to follow. But if we take coacte here as "swiftly" (cf. Chronic Diseases 2.10.75 leviter atque coacte), Caelius falls fully in line with his fellow translators Mustio and Paul of Aegina. To reconstruct Soranus' original rationale for clitoridectomy, we might turn to yet another late medical writer, the sixth century physician Aetius (whom B. discusses on pp. 169f). Aetius explains that the constant rubbing of the clitoris against a woman's garments "stimulates a desire for intercourse". What B. cites of Aetius in fact suggests that he is drawing on the same basic tradition as the 'Soranic' authors. Compare Aetius' observation that an overly large clitoris PROF SUNOUSIelan O(RMH=N E)PEGEI/REI with Paulus' statement that the women in question PROF SUNOUSIelan O(RMW=SIN (p. 169 n. 68 with 165 n. 60), or the description of the (horrible) procedure itself. In sum, B. has no good reason to assert that "later medical texts explicitly connect the selective clitoridectomy with female homoeroticism" (p. 25). The issue seems to be simply hypersexuality in general, as Hanson has argued (see her remarks cited in B.'s p. 166 n. 62).

Before leaving the doctors, I should say that Caelius Aurelianus' usage of tribades is not far removed from B.'s own definition of the term in this book. Faced with a multiplicity of ancient descriptions (see the summary roster at p. 76) -- none of course very illuminating -- B. in a way takes the lowest common denominator by defining tribades (merely) as "women who actively seek sexual relations with other women" (p. 144).

Elsewhere B. is even more all-encompassing: "women transgressing the social norms for what constitutes proper female behavior and behaving like men" (p. 337). In a word, for B. tribas means "culturally masculine" (p. 123). B. even suggests that "perhaps we should translate tribas as 'lesbian'" (p. 7), at least in what seems to be the medieval sense of the word: a 'woman who behaves like a man' (i.e. usurps a male cultural role) and 'is oriented toward female companions for sex'" (p. 17). B. thinks "no one has yet demonstrated a decisive developmental break that would require us to speak of tribades for antiquity and Lesbianai for the Middle Ages" (p. 23). So it is conceivable, argues B.,
that homoerotic women in antiquity even referred to themselves as 'tribades': Christians, Jews and followers of Isis were also accused of horrible things in antiquity -- yet still used those names (p. 7).

Now, it does seem that our later (i.e. after AD 400) sources do often use tribas in the same generic sense as Caelius. But in the (?fourth century) pseudo-Lucianic Amores 28 the term can still be described as a rarely mentioned obscenity, and the sense that it was all about penetration is very much alive. Earlier writers offer no good counter-examples. The absence of the actual word tribas in higher-status classical genres and all the church writers (even Tertullian resorts to frictrix) also tells against the validity of B.'s definition for the Roman era, not to mention tribas as a term of self-reference.

It unfortunately comes as no real surprise to learn that there was a long tradition on "Sappho the tribade", which B. outlines in a particularly informative section of her Chapter II. But here B. goes so far as to say that "discrediting the intellectual achievements of Sappho by attacking her sexual life may have contributed to the loss of nearly all Sappho's writings, plus other women associated with her" (p. 38). For B., the tribadic slur "served to discredit [Sappho] among women and thereby to limit women's intellectual and creative role models" (p. 360). Yet there is an important piece of evidence from Roman Egypt (not cited by B.) that may help us avoid this depressing hypothesis. In November of the year AD 130 one Julia Balbilla -- the last descendant of the Seleucid kingdom of Commagene -- travelled to Egyptian Thebes as a member of the emperor Hadrian's touring party. There on the famous "Colossus of Memnon" she prominently carved in the archaic Lesbian dialect a cheeky poem in which she provocatively casts herself as Sappho and the "lovely" empress Sabina as one of her circle: for the text, see A. and E. Bernand, Les inscriptions grecques et latines du Colosse de Memnon (1960) no. 30 (and cf. 31). If one is going to argue that Sappho was "discredited" as a role model in this general period, Balbilla's inscription -- carved into one of the most famous pieces of stone in the ancient world -- is a formidable obstacle.

Chapter III, an involved discussion of some homoerotic spells from Roman Egypt, finds B. just a bit less pessimistic. These spell tablets B. considers "the most tangible evidence we have about women who desired other women" (p. 105), despite their rigid formulaic aspect (even in the most detailed the scribe did not bother to decline the names of the relevant parties). B. goes on to suggest that "the modern reader may find it striking that the religion of these spells does not prohibit sexual love between women, and its [chthonic] deities express no disapproval of it" (p. 112; cf. 80). For this reader, it is hardly a relief to find that a woman was secure in asking Pluto, Anubis and a corpse-daemon to help her attract another woman! Nor is it easy to believe, with B., that forcing a victim to love for "five months" in one spell or "unceasingly" in another suggests in itself any sort of permanent living arrangement.

One of the few other respites B. offers from ancient homophobia in Love Between Women is Plutarch's mention (obiter) of love between women and girls in Lycurgus' old Sparta (Lyc. 18.4, on which see pp. 50 -- but B. is mistaken to think the whole citation quoted refers to females -- and 350). Another is an enigmatic Augustan funerary urn with two freedwomen clasping hands, which B. takes as possible evidence for a "common living arrangement" (p. 334 with 59f). Indeed throughout this book B. takes the references (mostly in highly polemical sources such as astrologers and church fathers) to women "appointing wives", "marrying other women" and the like as "intriguing hints" of an actual "societal institution" (p. 139). In short, for B. "the ancient references to woman-woman marriage suggest the existence of female homoerotic relationships that enjoyed some level of tolerance" (p. 335). To me these particular passages seem simply to caricature egregiously "shameless" behavior, and as such are
no doubt quite exaggerated. Public displays of this sort consistently attract the more virulent condemnation, as B. herself notes (pp. 121, 134, etc.). To make the case for tolerance, one might do better to search for descriptions of romantic friendships. B. does have a valuable short discussion of the evidence for "special friendships among early Christian women" (at p. 351 n. 205). But the investigation might be extended to Roman-period literature. One immediately thinks of Fortunata and Scintilla at Satyricon 67 (not mentioned by B.). These women manage to drink, gossip, embrace and kiss -- though in consequence one of them does fall victim to a nasty prank.

For the Roman world, B. is at her most illuminating on the popular (or to use her term, "nonelite") sources. Consider B.'s lucid treatment of the astrologers (Chapter IV, pp. 115-141). When seeking to sort out attitudes toward sexuality in the Roman empire, few since Kroll have thought of turning to Ptolemy's Tetrabiblos or the Anthologies of Vettius Valens. But these astrological works of the second centuries AD (and there are many other later ones like them) have much to say on the desirable and undesirable effects of particular horoscopes -- of course providing for us valuable insight into contemporary social assumptions, as B. rightly notes. Graphic astrological predictions (often dire) of the nature of an individual's sexual life abound. For instance, Ptolemy pronounces as a general maxim (Tetr. 3.14.8) that under a bad planetary configuration "women exceed their natural state, men their unnatural state". In a worst-case astrological situation, this might mean the birth of "men who have lost their genitals or the so-called tribades" (Tetr. 4.5.16). This is just one of many passages which shows that for the astrological writers female masculinization corresponds to male feminization (cf. p. 129). B. also makes a very important point -- against David Halperin and others -- that "the astrological sources demonstrate the existence in the Roman world of the concept of a lifelong erotic orientation" (p. 140; cf. 242f).

From reading these astrological texts, it also appears these authors thought the "natural" tribade not so common, but all the same a very real physical phenomenon. Other sources from Ptolemy's general era such as the Dream-Book of Artemidorus (which B. discusses in Chapter VI, pp. 175-186) attest to the spell this type of tribade had on the popular imagination. His assessment is inevitably also negative. "In Artemidorus' eyes, female penetration is not real penetration, and female homoeroticism is a pale and futile imitation of male sexual behavior" (p. 186). As such, it was "unnatural" -- so much so that Artemidorus compares it to intercourse with a deity, corpse or animal (p. 183).

B. rightly stresses that "the social attitudes found in Artemidorus are not his individual creation, but rather representative of broader cultural streams" (p. 177). So B. seems on the mark in her contention (explored in Chapters VII-XI) that Paul (in Rom. 1:26f), the apocalyptic literature, and the early church fathers all pick up (in varying degrees) on these non-Christian images and concepts. Pagan and Christian authors alike share "the active/passive distinction, the natural versus the unnatural, female subordination, lack of focus on procreation in the condemnation of female homoeroticism ... and a struggle to fit female homoeroticism within an asymmetrical phallocentric construction of sexuality" (p. 193). B. tepidly offers that "early Christian writers differed in one important respect from many of their contemporaries: they more frequently classified female and male homoeroticism together" (p. 355). But one really has to add -- in spite of B.'s massive cumulative argument -- that only Christians want homoerotic women to die and burn in hell. And that in spite of the fact (as B. emphasizes on p. 194) that there is no statement of Jesus on the topic.

B.'s energetic collection of so many relevant ancient passages (usually cited in both the original and English translation) is in itself a major achievement. She goes far beyond Hallett and comes up with material unknown even to Kroll and Boswell. In truth, B.
might have offered us even a bit more. Surely relevant is the *Mesotribas* that Blaesus of Capri produced for the south Italian stage (Athenaeus III 111 C). We get a discussion of Juvenal 6.306-311 (p. 48) but not the equally relevant lines that soon follow (6.320-323). Add to that Eusebius' salacious description of homoerotic activity in the precinct of Venus at Aphaca, a wild "school for vice" where the women are said to engage in "lawless [paranomoi] couplings, marriage-stealing associations, unspeakable and abominable acts" (Life of Constantine 3.55.3, with Rosenbaum's discussion in his Geschichte p. 181). Consider perhaps also Zeno's description (Tract. 1.3.2) of the goddess Cybele as an *anus turpis atque amatrix* (?= *tribas*) worshipped by castrated Galli. And (much later) there is Tzetzes' scholion to Hesiod *WD* 693, where he warns that young wives of older men are particularly prone to tribadic activity. There is also the grammarian Moeris, who offers the intriguing item (s.v. *hetairistria*) that *tribas* was avoided in the Attic dialect. Incidentally, the diatribe of Dio Chrysostom (Orat. XXXIII) against the (male homoerotic) "snorting disease" of Tarsus -- just a generation or so after Paul -- seems quite relevant to Rom. 1:26f, as Rosenbaum (Geschichte p. 129) recognized. So the "urban center" B. tentatively suggests (pp. 261f) Paul had in mind in composing this passage may not have been Rome but instead his hometown.

Additional items on female homoeroticism may well emerge if one goes searching for "tribade" synonyms. As Brooten keenly observes, in the astrology world Firmicus Maternus uses *virago* (pp. 5, 133f), Ptolemy *erastes* [sic!] (p. 127), and Hermes Trismegistos *crissatrix* (p. 131). For others, B. notes, "masculine desires' is a code word for *tribades*" (p. 25). She then suggests that this is the background to Horace's *mascula Sappho* (Epist. 1.19) and the *mascula libido* of the witch Folia (Epodes 5.42) (pp. 34f). B. is surely right here, and she has the scholia to Horace on her side.

Indeed, it may be especially appropriate that we find tribadism linked with witchcraft, for really both seem to belong to the realm of the fantastic. Once we leave aside that intrusive Caelius Aurelianus passage, we see the medical writers have absolutely nothing to say on the subject of "tribades". (And that despite the fact they can talk in plain prose about the most graphic sexual matters -- see e.g. Galen XII 249 K.) This is a valuable clue -- one corroborated by the type of sources where we do find it (declamation, satire, astrology and other pseudo-scientific manuals, church polemic) -- that the educated elite did not believe the phenomenon (at least in the "natural" form) to exist.

By way of proof, thumb through Rosenbaum. There one quickly finds that the same sources that give us "natural tribades" offer a lot of similar malarky. For example, there are in satire a host of sexually transmitted diseases that Rosenbaum notes show up in no medical text. None of the various diseases satirists associate with oral sex -- bad breath, tooth ache, hoarseness, paralysis of the tongue, etc. -- rate a mention in medical authors, still less a treatment. Nor does a single doctor worry about pederasty causing the tumor known as *ficus* (Geschichte pp. 120-125, 220-232, 244-249). This in itself should caution us against using satire to read Soranus, as B. in effect does. For there is no basis to assume close correlation between "popular" and "educated" sexual beliefs. That emerges clearly e.g. from Pliny's dismissive discussion (NH 10.32) of the "vulgar" misconception that ravens copulate with their mouths -- which of course does not stop Martial (14.74) from exploiting the notion (Geschichte p. 235). And even in B.'s "nonelite" sources, tribades consistently represent an extreme. Here one gets the impression that folks only worried about the natural sort, which they considered a very rare phenomenon, and somewhat of a *prodigium* when it did occur.

For this reader, *Love Between Women* succeeds in its main argument, "that Paul condemns sexual relations between women as 'unnatural' because he shares the widely
The book as a whole marks a real advance in its field, and shows the dividends that can flow from first-hand acquaintance with a wide range of ancient sources. More often than not, B.'s detailed individual interpretations of the Greek and Roman evidence are compelling or at least reasonable. Only a few of her major arguments seem unacceptably tendentious. And B.'s lucid introductory sketches of the ancient subgenres relevant to her study (magical papyri, physiognomic handbooks, etc.) are in themselves fully worth the price of this well-produced volume. But after reading all the evidence that B. has collected, it is still difficult to conclude that all that many in antiquity saw female same-sex love as much of an issue. Significantly, in B.'s centerpiece of Romans 1:18-32 Paul mentions women's "unnatural" intercourse only as part of a long catalogue of sexual and social behaviors. And that list is apparently meant to set up the much larger argument of 2:1-3:20, on the relative moral conditions of Jews and Gentiles.  

I might raise one last question, not specifically addressed by B. Where did that bizarre notion of the tribade come from in the first place? To trace the development of the construct is not easy, but the evidence collected in B.'s own book offers a starting point: the sex manual ascribed to 'Philainis'. B. notes that Martial and Ps.-Lucian both bring the name 'Philainis' into connection with tribadic activity (p. 46 n. 58). And on that latter text, the scholiast explains 'Philainis' as a woman whom an Athenian comic poet Philocrates ridiculed "as a hetairistria and tribade" (p. 55 n. 119). B.'s explanation is that "Philainis, reported to have written a book on sexual positions, symbolizes the public shame of the tribades: a woman writing about sex" (p. 55). But one wonders whether that pornographic book -- known even in antiquity as a forgery by the Athenian sophist Polycrates -- itself featured a tribade of the artificial or even "natural" variety. At any rate, the character of "Philaenis the tribade" soon seems to have made it to the stage, in Athens and perhaps far beyond (remember Blaesus' Mesotribas). Once introduced, the notion of the tribade took on a life of its own -- though I would argue not for all.

NOTES

1. I should admit that I discuss this not particularly well-known inscription in an article in CW (forthcoming), "The Poets Julia Balbilla and Damo at the Colossus of Memnon".

2. I thank Dr. June Phelps and also Prof. Brent Shaw for discussing the Christian material in B.'s book with me; they are however in no way to be held responsible for any particulars of this review.