Response
Bernadette J. Brooten

I thank GLQ for presenting this special forum on *Love between Women* and the commentators for the time and care they have given their reviews. I am grateful for their praise of the book and for critically engaging my interpretation.

I am happy that the reviewers do not dispute the major theses of the book, which are that (1) people in the Roman world conceptualized erotic relations as occurring between two unequal partners, one active and one passive,1 and therefore sex was something that one person did to another; (2) they recognized that women could experience erotic desire for other women and could and did act on it, but they had difficulty conceptualizing erotic acts between women within the phallocentric framework dominant in their culture (“What exactly can women do with each other?”); (3) Paul and other early Christians condemned female homoeroticism with terms, concepts, and reasons similar to those used by their non-Christian neighbors; and (4) interpretations of Paul by early church writers confirm that I have not interpreted him anachronistically but have read him as his earliest readers did; they read Paul as condemning erotic relations between women as contrary to the will of God and the order of nature, according to which women were to subordinate themselves passively to men. These theses stand.

Classicism and historian of sexuality David M. Halperin values my philosophical achievement in locating, translating, and interpreting arcane and difficult material and defines *Love between Women* as a “landmark in lesbian historiography,” thereby accepting my use of the term *lesbian*, in its Byzantine sense, to classify the material that I treat. He agrees that lesbian history needs to be periodized differently from the history of male homosexuality. He argues, however, that I anachronistically import modern concepts of sexuality into my study and so demonstrate that I have failed to learn what he, Michel Foucault, and others have tried to teach the scholar.

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Response to John Boswell's A (1986): 184–215; Hays, Scripture Concerning Homo-

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needs to be periodized argues, however, that I study and so demon-

and others have tried to teach the scholarly community. He maintains that a lesbian framework is acceptable but that I have allowed it to skew my interpretation. Halperin's examples include my application of the category of sexual orientation to the ancient astrologers and my interpretations of Plato's Symposium and of the writings of Caelius Aurelianus. Proceeding from his definition of tribades and eunuchae as "masculine, phallic women who desire and sexually penetrate other women and even boys," Halperin criticizes me for overlooking their passive partner, the ancient "fem," and argues that she was not considered sexually abnormal. He is concerned that I miss the opportunity to destabilize the present; he claims that I do not recognize the strangeness of the past and thereby engage in the "spiritual exercise" of seeing our own constructions of reality as contingent.

Literary and cultural critic Ann Pellegrini appreciates the quantity and breadth of material that I have assembled; my argumentation and scholarship, which she finds meticulous and patient; my not subsuming female same-sex love under male homoeroticism; and my belief— which she finds convincing — that "the very terms with which [the early church fathers] condemned female same-sex love all too clearly represent the social arrangements of gender and class operative in the Roman world." She criticizes me for allowing my interpretations of ancient sources to become hostage to my lesbian-feminist ethical and political claims, for anachronistically defining ancient male pederasty as sexual abuse, for drawing a false dichotomy between lesbians and gay men today, for a utopian and idealized view of lesbians, for reinscribing the authority of the New Testament by spending a hundred pages interpreting it, for granting ethical priority to monogamous commitments and to love between women over sexual pleasure as a good in itself, and for assuming that all of my readers are Christian. Pellegrini is concerned that my focus on love, sacredness, and holiness will marginalize her and other thinkers like herself.

Classicalist and art historian Natalie Boymel Kampen appreciates the quantity and breadth of my evidence, as well as my "excellent English translations," my explanation of the role of power relations and of ideas of "the natural" in ancient responses to sex between women, and my delineation of Christianity's relationship to larger cultural patterns. She agrees with my argument that Roman-period hierarchical views of gender shaped ancient representations of female homoeroticism. She finds my review of current historiography generally judicious, although she is suspicious of my wish for sources on female homoeroticism written by the women involved or at least descriptive of women's behavior, as if such sources "could stabilize our picture." She values as thoughtful my treatment of texts from Christianity's cultural context and as careful and fair my exegesis of Paul, but she likes my
short discussion of visual imagery less. Kampen critiques me for placing Paul at the heart of the book, because he may have had less influence on Western society and its understandings of gender than I posit; for presenting ancient pederasty and the abuse of slaves as male; for idealizing female homoeroticism; and for focusing on marriage between women in antiquity and making sex disappear in order to persuade the contemporary churches to accept lesbians. She recognizes that I do not hide the “dirty linen” of sex between women (lustful, unloving, abusive sex) but argues that my concern with making a case to the contemporary church so constrains me that I sometimes miss textual features: some topoi are mindless repetitions or clichés or are ironic or playful. If homophobia and my (perhaps hopeless) belief that the church “could be more home for lesbians” did not constrain me, I could be “more fruitful.” Kampen envisions scholars presenting early Christianity as just one of many players and theorizing the full range of ancient representations of the erotic, from the loving to the abusive.

Hebrew Bible scholar Ken Stone finds my interpretation of Romans (and of Leviticus) generally persuasive; describes my argument that Paul laid the foundations for later Christian condemnations of female homoeroticism as “forceful”; values the breadth of ancient sources that I assemble; sees my focus on female homoeroticism in Paul as undermining, for example, Robin Scroggs’s view that Paul mainly condemned pederasty; and is glad that I am concerned not “with freeing Paul from his homophobic interpreters but with freeing us from the assumption that what Paul believed about gender and sexuality is worthy of contemporary theological affirmation.” He recognizes my work as theological. Stone notes that I disambiguate Paul’s understanding of gender roles and that some will want to stress Galatians 3.28 (“no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”) more strongly than do I. He is disappointed by my use of “male sexual use of children,” which contrasts with my phrase “love between women” (56) and wonders whether female homoeroticism was a legitimate as egalitarian as it is represented in my work. As a gay man teaching in a seminar, Stone seems eager to work with me in becoming “subjects rather than the objects of contemporary theological and exegetical discourse” and appreciates my feminist principles, but he is concerned that I may be making collaboration between lesbians and gay men difficult or impossible by using male homoeroticism as a foil.

New Testament scholar Deirdre Good agrees with me that the authority of Paul means that Romans warrants close analysis. She values my ancient primary material on female same-sex relations, my close analysis of Paul’s treatment of “males ‘consumed with passion for one another,’” and my recognition that Paul sees same-sex sexual expression as a consequence of idolatry. We further agree that Paul probably had such relationships of women and that such relationships were normally modeled on relationships between females (as in Leviticus 18–20, and that Paul could not represent, on a pedobarbaric basis, for interpreting the law). Stone, for example, sees my concerns as insufficiently theologically gay Christians enjoy benefit from other and authority nor rely

In what follows I will focus attention on Paul, whether I have an argument to support whether my use of specific understanding of his work, whether my interpretation of Plato’s Symposium constraints deprive ethical arguments for a traditional term that I give life.

Feminist Theology, Paul, and Scriptural Authority

First a couple of specific suggestions. Good, for example, is right that a critique of creation as laid out in Genesis 1–3 and as protective option that is not necessary. I do not share Stone’s view that original sin in Romans 1.19, 21 as a concept that original sin is a mark on human life, but against the line that original sin is a mark on human life.
that Paul probably knew that women could experience and act on same-sex desire, that such relationships were probably frequently based on mutual consent and not normally modeled on male pederasty, that Romans 1.26 refers to sexual relations between females (and not to anal or oral intercourse between women and men), and that Paul condemned all forms of same-sex activity (rather than focus, for example, on pederasty). Good reclassifies as unlike one of the two options I present for interpreting nature in Romans 1—as an order of creation—arguing that Romans 1.18–32 has nothing to do with original sin. She criticizes me for being insufficiently theological. Good wants GLQ readers to know that some lesbian and gay Christians enjoy the support of the church and that they read, interpret, and benefit from other parts of Paul’s letters, neither setting aside Paul’s witness and authority nor reducing them to Romans 1.18–32.

In what follows, I will address diverse questions raised by the reviewers: how I theologically evaluate Paul’s Letter to the Romans, whether I pay too much attention to Paul, whether we should attribute sacredness and holiness to sexual love between women, what the role of sexual ethics is in Love between Women, whether I have anachronistically theorized female homoeroticism in antiquity, whether my use of terminology betrays a modern bias and precludes a proper understanding of history, whether I have presented ancient male pederasty fairly, whether the ancient world knew of erotic orientation, whether I have misinterpreted Plato’s Symposium, how I interpret ancient art, and whether ecclesiastical constraints deprive my book of playfulness. I will elaborate on the theological and ethical arguments first, but the reader may need the textual and theoretical background that I give later to grasp fully my theology and ethics.

Feminist Theology, Paul’s Letter to the Romans, and Scriptural Authority

First a couple of specific points and then a more general comment on scriptural authority: Good accepts the key elements of my interpretation of Romans 1.18–32. However, she disputes that nature in Romans 1.26–32 could refer to an order of creation as laid down in Genesis 1–3 (but she does not dispute my other interpretative option that nature could refer to the gendered nature of human beings) and claims that original sin is not present in Romans 1. Good’s criticism misses the mark. I do not speak of original sin at all in my interpretation (272–75). Instead, against the background of creation language and of echoes of Genesis 1 in Romans 1.19, 23, and 25 (which Good does not refute), I suggest that one might read contrary to nature as contrary to animal behavior or as contrary to the
priority of man over woman (cf. Paul’s interpretation of Genesis 2 in 1 Corinthians 11.8–9).

Good criticizes me for not responding theologically to Richard B. Hayes’s argument that homosexuality constitutes a refusal to honor God as Creator; she maintains that I criticize Hayes only for his failure to question the gender arrangements of Paul and his culture (245n). Rather than classify myself as historical and Good as theological, I see us as representing different understandings of theology. As a feminist theologian, I classify alleged female inferiority and the call for female subordination as theological issues. Hayes glorifies “sexual distinctions . . . fundamental to God’s creative design” and endeavors to base his sexual ethics on them. Any understanding of creation based on female inferiority and the call for female subordination requires critique. Mine goes to the heart of Hayes’s theology of creation by exposing it as implicated in unjust social arrangements.

I agree with Good that church people and our culture as a whole need to know about and listen to the Pauline interpretations of Christian lesbian priests and ministers, and I applaud her work and her courage. Would that we had the Pauline interpretations and the theologies of Christian lesbians through the ages, for they would enrich our view of Christianity. Romans 1.26–27 is one of the reasons that the churches silenced these voices. As Stone recognizes, I make a move unusual in Christian history but nonetheless deeply theological, namely, to grant authority to lesbian, gay, and bisexual interpreters of Paul. In this spirit I encourage Good and other lesbian Christians to create new lesbian readings and appropriations of Paul.

In this work, however, I insist on a new understanding of scriptural authority. I believe that we should all study seriously the classical texts of our respective traditions (and also of one another’s), for they contain the wisdom of our spiritual ancestors. At the same time, if Christians specifically do not alter traditional understandings of scriptural authority, we will continue to make the grave moral and intellectual errors of past centuries, such as supporting slavery and enforcing, through physical violence and other means, the strict subordination of free women and children; squelching scientific research, especially in astronomy and in paleontology; persecuting Jews as having Christ’s blood on their hands; and discriminating against lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons by, to name but one way, imprisoning them. If we do not take a radically altered stance toward the Bible, we may find that Christians in the future will support slavery once again, turning to the same texts that Christians used before the Civil War to justify it. I urge an adult stance toward the Bible; we must approach it as ethically reflective and intellectually rigorous and honest persons. Without clear moral and intellectual values, we cannot.

Stone recognizes the compatibility of Florence’s understanding of the woman as a bearer of God and my book as having “a mode of conceptualization that suggests . . . the possibility of feminist evaluative ethics as intellectual values.” I look forward to working with her to help Christians take charge of the dialogue on gender and sexuality in our society and in the Christian church. In a way, this book can contribute to this task by helping people understand that the nonreligious persons general religious academics and intellectuals need a knowledge of what may be the rights and perspectives in the church.
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Stone recognizes the compatibility of my approach with that of Elisabeth Schüssler

Fiorenza, for whom understanding the biblical text in its own context is necessary

but not sufficient for feminist theological hermeneutics. We must also critically

evaluate the biblical text. This critical evaluation is part of scholarship and must

be subject to rigorous peer review. Thus I disagree with Kampen's description of

my book as having "a modern function that extends beyond scholarship." Stone

conceptualizes engaged scholarship as scholarship. In that light, he recognizes my

feminist evaluative ethics as theological scholarship.

I look forward to working with Good, Stone, and others to articulate the values

that will help Christians decide how to hear and to benefit from biblical, tradi-

tional, and contemporary voices. Good has taken an important first step by call-

ing on Christians neither to gloss over passages condemnatory of same-sex

relations nor to grant them supreme authority, but rather to "juxtapose Romans 1

with other parts of scripture, and with the lived experience of gay and lesbian

people as part of the community of Christ."

I agree with this approach. With Love between Women I have provided reasons for decentering Romans 1. Without such reasons, we would have Scripture and experience simply lined up in a row, with no way to assess specific scriptural passages or human experiences.

Stone perceptively identifies the category of Christians most likely to be moved by my theological evaluation, namely, "Christians who accept gender equality in theory but consider same-sex eroticism incompatible with contemporary Christian practice." Because early Christian condemnations of erotic love between

women are based on notions of female passivity and subordination, they are detri-

mental to all women. If those of us who teach in universities collaborate with and

support the scholarship in constructive theology and ethics by our colleagues who

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to exclude non-Christians when I write, “If church people and policy makers continue to base church and social policy on the priority of heterosexual marriage over love between women, we will be perpetuating ancient traditions” (361—62). I mean “we as a society,” not “we Christians.” (There are obviously non-Christian policy makers.) With this book I work to enable a broad range of people in our culture, not just Christians, to interpret the New Testament authoritatively.

Because most people in our culture do not recognize the extent of Christianity’s influence on our laws concerning sexuality, I want to spell out why all citizens need to understand the New Testament. Pellegrini and Kampen believe that Paul plays an unwarranted role in _Love between Women_, and Halperin states that he “could not care less about... Paul’s Letter to the Romans.” I appreciate that Jews and other non-Christians may perceive a book of which I devote one-quarter to Paul as a skewed representation of the Roman world. I openly concede to Kampen that if church people were not among my intended readers or if Christianity had not so deeply influenced our laws, I would have structured the book differently. But Paul’s Letter to the Romans, alongside Leviticus, has provided the conceptual framework for sodomy laws and for other public policies concerning same-sex sexual acts. Sodomy laws in the United States, both historically and in the present, explicitly echo Paul’s condemnation of same-sex sexual relations as unnatural in Romans 1.26–27. In _Boevers v. Hardwick_, the 1986 case in which the United States Supreme Court upheld Georgia’s sodomy statute, both sides underscored the religious character of sodomy laws. The state of Georgia specifically invoked Leviticus, Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Thomas Aquinas, and the status of sodomy as a heresy during the Middle Ages (when ecclesiastical courts meted out the death penalty for it) to justify its statute. In his concurring opinion Chief Justice Warren E. Burger observed, “Condemnation of those practices is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards.” In his dissenting opinion Associate Justice Harry A. Blackmun noted, “The theological nature of the origin of Anglo-American antisodomy statutes is patent.” Sodomy itself derives from the name of the biblical city Sodom, and, since the term was created to denote a specific heresy, we should not be surprised today to read in Arizona’s statute the phrases “the infamous crime against nature” and “unnatural manner,” in Florida’s statute “unnatural act,” in Idaho’s statute “the infamous crime against nature” (in Idaho, my home state, it brings a five-year minimum prison sentence), in Louisiana’s statute “unnatural carnal copulation;” in Mississippi’s statute “the detestable and abominable crime against nature” (note the dual allusion to Romans 1.26–27 and Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13 (“abomination”)), in North Carolina’s statute “the crin inable and detestable Romans and Leviticus) bears testimony to Paul hope to enable an infor policies that affect us al

Sacredness and Holiness

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inable and detestable crime against nature" (again, note the dual allusion to

Romans and Leviticus). The phrase against nature derives from Romans 1 and

bears testimony to Paul's impact on Western culture. With my analysis of Paul, I

hope to enable an informed citizenry to debate these religiously based laws and

policies that affect us all.

Sacredness and Holiness

Pellegrini expresses distress at my vision of a world in which "we acknowledge the

sacredness and holiness of a woman expressing her love for another woman"

(362). In the first place, sacredness and holiness are in no way limited to Christ-

tianity. I myself have been touched to learn of a Muslim acquaintance praying to

Allah to help her find a partner and by friends who find in Goddess rituals power

for affirming sexual love between women. No, I do not take the sex out of love.

Throughout the book I state that it is a book about sex. By "expressing her love" I

mean "sexually expressing her love." I have no way of, and I have no interest in,

policing "sacredness and holiness." I want to put forth a vision for religious peo-

ple; Stone correctly identifies me as having a theological aim. If people do not

believe in the sacred or the holy, they may not experience the erotic as sacred or

holy. Pellegrini is right to warn all of us against marginalizing sex that the partici-

pants do not experience as sacred or holy. Therefore we need to promote both re-

ligious freedom and freedom for the nonreligious.

But if some women insist that sex is thoroughly mundane and should not

be theologized, erotic experiences may awaken in others an awareness of the

sacred. Reuven Kimelman suggests that one may be able to "experience the erotic

as holy without prior ideological commitment to the holy" and that perhaps "the

experience of the sacred is what generates the theoretical possibility [of belief in

the sacred]."10 Some women experience erotic love with another woman as a

source of strength, as being in right relationship with what is most important in

the universe. If we acknowledge the sacredness and holiness of a woman erotically

expressing her love for another woman, we will think of the divine differently. We

will be able to imagine an Aphrodite whose laws allow such erotic expression (in

contrast to the Aphrodite envisioned by the Hellenistic poet Asclepiades) or a God

of Jesus Christ who does not deem such persons deserving of death. Ultimately, I

am not surprised that the most explicitly theological statement in the book,

namely this sentence about sacredness and holiness, has drawn the greatest atten-

tion and ire. Seeing the sacred in sexual love between women profoundly chal-
lenges a culture historically shaped by views of female inferiority and by the religious persecution of persons engaging in same-sex sexual acts.

**Sexual Ethics**

I have several criteria for sexual ethics, but the central one is consent. The criterion of age is derived from that of consent. I want to help create the conditions under which people engage in sexual relations only when they consent fully. I was distressed to find that consent as a criterion is marginal or lacking in many ancient texts concerning erotic acts, including Leviticus, Philo of Alexandria, and Romans. Pellegrini puts forth an alternative to my feminist ethical framework, namely, a framework that holds “sexual pleasure as a good” even when the parties have no affective ties to each other or to one another. People today use ancient texts as a basis for their ethics. May we assess their ethical value? Pellegrini provides no way to evaluate ancient texts. She states that she is not "dissmissing the ideal of consent." I applaud her concession. But she quickly adds that "the modern category of consent" is unsuited for Greek and Roman pederasty. This is precisely my point. Ancient systems of sexual ethics that included the acceptance of pederasty or the culpability of the boy partner cannot provide a proper ethical basis for contemporary societies, which rightly see consent as a central category for sexual ethics. In contrast, Philo of Alexandria, for example, stressed the culpability of the passive boy partner without asking whether he had consented or could consent.11 I ask Pellegrini whether she would evaluate erotic contacts between slave owners and their slaves, or whether she views such contacts as morally neutral. Further, is informed consent possible at any age in all cultures? Or is there an age below which a child cannot fully consent to erotic encounters?

Consent as a category is foreign both to the world of ancient pederasty and to most of its ancient detractors. For this and other reasons these ancient texts provide an inadequate basis for contemporary sexual ethics. In line with Good's theological approach, we must supplement such texts with other sources, including the experiences of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons.

**Theorizing the History of Ancient Mediterranean Female Sexuality**

Halperin's—and, in a slightly different way, Pellegrini's—central criticism of my book is anachronism: in their opinion, I fall prey in it to viewing female homoeroticism as stable throughout history and in failing to recognize that the ancients did not see sexual acts, sexual relations, sexual desire, and sexual love as equiva-
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lent to one another. Thus Halperin and Pellegrini argue that, whereas we might take female homoeroticism to include sexual acts, relations, desire, and love, the ancients did not assume that a given act implied desire or love.

An area of ancient erotic life that supports Halperin's insight is classical Greek male pederasty. According to the official ideology, the younger male was not to display desire for the older male, and certainly not a desire to be anusally penetrated. In line with this ideology, some Greek vase paintings depict the younger male looking disinterestedly into the distance while the older male, standing face to face with him, achieves an orgasm by rubbing his penis against the inside of the younger male's upper thighs ("intercrural" sex). The older male may offer the younger male gifts in exchange for this sexual gratification, both of which the younger male is free to refuse. This is what Halperin and Pellegrini mean when they draw attention to the careful scripting of pederasty and the phallocentric protocols.

Through the lens of classical Greek male pederasty, Halperin (and, to a lesser extent, Pellegrini) views Roman-period female homoeroticism. In his view, just as classical Greek culture evaluated the active older male as normal, so too Roman-period persons must have viewed the fem in a homoerotic coupling as normal. They only had difficulty with gender inversion, that is, with the "phallic woman," or tribas, who penetrated the fem or even boys. The tribas did not conform to the phallocentric protocols, because women are not supposed to penetrate anyone. But the fem did conform, because she did not penetrate anyone. For Halperin, then, the ancients viewed male homoerotic acts as problematic only when the receptive partner desired to be penetrated (unless he was, for example, a slave, about whose desires no one was concerned anyway). For an adult, male citizen to desire to be penetrated was a gross violation of the phallocentric protocols. But males who observed these protocols by engaging in pederastic relations in which the younger male had no desire (or feigned disinterest) broke no rules of etiquette and posed no social threat. In Halperin's view, female couples too could observe these protocols; female homoerotic behavior was unproblematic, at least for the passive partner, who did not pursue another woman but simply allowed herself to be seduced by a phallic woman.

The model of classical Greek male pederasty helps us understand why Halperin is so intent on seeing only one of the two women in a homoerotic coupling as a tribas and why he uses the term "phallic woman," whereas even those ancient texts that mention penetration present the penetrating object either as a clitoris or vaguely as something else. (Kampen insightfully comments that the sources are remarkably nonvisual.) For Halperin, one of the women must be phallic because