

Actualité de la recherche

Andrew LEAR and Meryl ALTMAN, “The Unspeakable Vice of the Americans”, *Iris, the Newsletter of the Lambda Classical Caucus*, Fall 2010.

Regard outre atlantique sur le livre de Sandra BOEHRINGER, *L'Homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2007) et sa réception en France.

À propos de :

M. Desgranges, *Chronique des Belles Lettres* (16 novembre 2007) : “Broutons ; genre ; pois chiches”

D. Gourevitch, compte rendu, *Latomus*, 69, 2010, pp. 223-225.

The Unspeakable Vice of the Americans

If everything is dangerous then we still have something to do.

--Foucault

Perhaps like many you have retained a vague idea that the French were more sophisticated than the rest of us, particularly with respect to sex... and to theory. Not always true, it appears, at least not where queers and/or feminism are concerned.

At first glance there is nothing about *L'homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (Les Belles Lettres, 2007), a splendidly solid work of scholarship by impeccably credentialed classicist Sandra Boehringer, that seems apt to cause a moral panic. True, the cover does show two women kissing each other rather happily, but surely this would be unexceptionable in a land where subway posters routinely show bare-naked women advertising the most ordinary household products? Under the cover can be found the first coherent survey of female-female erotic relations in Classical Antiquity, which manages, by considering each of the admittedly few sources intensively in relationship to their periods, authors, and genres, to derive an astonishing amount of information from and about them. Boehringer explodes a number of persistent myths about her topic: for instance, she shows that censorious attitudes like those of certain Roman writers (Juvenal, Martial, etc.) are not found in Greek sources before the Imperial period. Nonetheless, the book is not at all contentious in tone, nor is the work of an outsider-- while highly readable, it remains unimpeachably

philological in its careful excavation of text and context.¹ When it was published in 2007 by *Les Belles Lettres*, the publishing house known mainly for the Budé editions of Classical texts, one of us gave it a glowing review (*CW*, 103.1 [2009], 120-1) and we take this opportunity to recommend it to *Iris*' readers.

Many of the French reviews were similarly enthusiastic. But the book was also greeted by astonishingly virulent, bizarre, and — considering that one of the reviews in question appeared in a scholarly journal — unscholarly attacks which, for all the faults of American academia (and don't get us started on that), we have never seen and cannot imagine seeing in any American scholarly forum.

The first attack was the weirdest, both because of its vulgarity and blatant sexism and homophobia, and — even more — because it appeared on *Les Belles Lettres*' own on-line "Chronicle" in a column written by Michel Desgranges, the very editor who had accepted the book!² We will do our best to disentangle Desgranges' poisonous "witticisms," which involve extended chains of doubles-entendres – the effect aimed at being, presumably, Aristophanic, except that it isn't especially funny.

The first word of the Chronicle posting's title ("Broutons; genres; pois chiches," meaning, it would seem "Let us graze; genders; chickpeas")³ sets the tone. "Brouteuse" (grazer) is an offensive term for a Lesbian in French; the verbal form is sometimes extended to "brouter le gazon" (to graze on the lawn). This is perhaps close in tone to the English "rug-muncher." Desgranges starts his column by talking about the donkeys at his (country?) house grazing on "erect blades of grass" with "their agile tongues"; in short, he flirts with a level of vulgarity one hardly expects to find on a publisher's web-page, particularly in reference to one of its own publications. Lest he seem merely homophobic and not also sexist, Desgranges later in the same sentence refers to the book as "un ouvrage de dame" (a lady's book—we are meant to think of such female "accomplishments" as doily-making, piano-tinkling, and reading Greek without the accents) and, at the end of the posting, plays about with feminine forms of the words "author" and "professor" (the equivalent of calling her an "authoress" or a "professoress"), as if he had trouble accepting the existence of female authors and professors.

There is more of the same. The bulk of the column, however, is dedicated to attacking gender studies — which Desgranges says comes from Berkeley, the Ivy League (really?), and *the Village Voice* (anymore?) and which he glosses for his reader: "en français: propagande féministe" (in French: feminist propaganda). He brings up Foucault to associate him with "the celebration of fist-fucking" and goes on to say that common sense tells us that sexuality is a fact of nature and has no history. In his view, it is obvious that Greek pederasty is the same thing as modern homosexuality, merely subject to a different set of "rules, taboos, and multiple persecutions."

¹ It began as a thesis at the EHESS (École des hautes études en sciences sociales) with funding from the Fondation Thiers (Académie française – CNRS).

² The posting was also sent to the Les Belles Lettres mailing list, which has 20,000 members.

³ "Chickpeas" seem to refer to Sappho 143, which Desgranges cites, but his point is unclear.

He claims that aside from Sappho 1, all other references to female-female love in Sappho are “the fruit of the imagination,” overlooking such substantial and well-known fragments as 16 and 31. One assumes that Desgranges, the editor of a publishing house that publishes largely in the Classics and a frequent editorial collaborator of Pierre Vidal-Naquet, has some kind of Classical education, but it is hardly on display here.

But, ok, so some altercocker (en Français: vieux con) has a public fit of projectile verbal diarrhea and has to be led quietly from the room – aren't we making too much of this, especially as the post was withdrawn from Les Belles Lettres' website three days after it appeared, and the editor's column soon ceased appearing.⁴ *Le Monde* quickly published a vigorous response to the posting (12/7/07), starting with the Roland Barthes' words “la guerre contre l'intelligence...” (the war against intelligence), alongside a glowing and intelligent review by noted queer studies scholar Louis-Georges Tin. This was soon followed by similar accolades, in such places as *Le point*, *Clio* and *Les vie des idées*, which ignore the fracas and concentrate on the book's many virtues. Isn't it more dignified just to ignore this sort of attack (as supportive French colleagues have judged it best to do)? and shouldn't we be over this by now?

Well, maybe, except that Desgranges was not alone. Another very strange "review" by Prof. Danielle Gourevitch, who is a highly decorated senior historian of medicine, appeared recently in the très bien-pensant review, *Latomus* (69 [2010] 223-5). Gourevitch too makes jokes about the gender of the word “author,”⁵ and attacks gay and lesbian studies as an American import based on the "passionate exaggerations" of, among others, Froma Zeitlin. Incoherent (literally) with rage, her review willfully misunderstands the intent of the book, which she seems barely to have opened; instead she devotes over half her space to a baroquely detailed story about nineteenth-century semi-pornographic histories of syphilis in classical antiquity. Somehow Gourevitch imagines that Boehringer (as well as other authors on similar topics including Craig Williams) writes to shock and titillate the public. She refers to the book as "prétendûment scabreux" (intending to scandalize) and predicts that it won't be successful because movies and television present more daring scenes. Yet she then complains that it is boring and contains pages and pages on hypothetical questions. The logic would appear to be that two women together are by definition pornographic, thus a book which failed to satisfy the prurience of readers, but turned out to contain scholarly analysis and argument, would be a disappointment.

But logic does not seem to be Gourevitch's concern, at least not in this review. She sarcastically compliments Boehringer for her knowledge of constructionist bibliography but seems to misunderstand constructionism. She mentions nothing from the book in any detail except to complain, entirely without substantiation, that Boehringer writes imprecisely about her own (Gourevitch's) specialty, Caelius Aurelianus. She spends most of her review discussing other books, complaining for instance about Géraldine Puccini-Delbey's *La vie sexuelle à Rome*, which, in Gourevitch's view has simplistic ideas about penetration — an issue of no possible

⁴ Note too that Les Belles Lettres has since published another book by Boehringer, an anthology co-edited with Louis-Georges Tin, *Homosexualité en Grèce et à Rome*.

⁵ "Notre auteur, auteure, autrice"

relevance to Boehringer's arguments. When she does discuss Boehringer, she focuses on the cover illustration (also mentioned by Desgranges, in a particularly vulgar aside) and the blurb, which perhaps represent a large percentage of what she read. In short, we have never seen such a crude, obtuse, and unprofessional review of a scholarly book in a (prétendument) scholarly journal.

Where can this be coming from? Gourevitch herself has co-authored a not-bad book on women, but she is a bitter enemy of feminism. In praise of her own *La femme dans la Rome Antique* (Hachette, 2001), for instance, she says (21):

This is not a feminist undertaking. It does not seek to have the "provocative" or "stimulating" effect that too many American works of this type claim to have, bringing together a hard-line, methodical dogmatism with an overactive imagination. It will not be a militant book, but simply a history book, which will avoid forcing the pseudo-certainties of today onto the past.

Boehringer's introduction mentions Gourevitch by name, taking dignified exception to an article in *L'antiquité classique*,⁶ from which she quotes Gourevitch as saying that "it is not possible to be simultaneously a militant homosexual and a historian." We were curious enough to download this piece, and discovered that it too takes aim at Foucault⁷, Amy Richlin (who had the bad taste not to cite one of Gourevitch's own articles), Froma Zeitlin (again), the contributors to Judy Hallett and Marilyn Skinner's *Roman Sexualities*, who are guilty of "gross brutality with regard to love," and so on. The "review" ends with a homophobic cri de coeur, which seems important to cite in full. Fasten your seat belts.

It seems to me dishonourable for a historian to confuse history with politics. The history of sexuality is particularly compromised by the fight in favor of homosexuality, since it is certainly not the work of the historian to dictate the adoption of one sexual practice or another to his contemporaries. Quite the opposite: it is one of the duties of the historian not to weigh down historical research with the emotive and political burdens of the present day. But the battle in favor of the banalization of homosexuality is a protest against social reality. It calls for the destruction of society, to which the masculine/ feminine opposition is essential, for all of us live by means of these structuring symbols of which the homosexual project makes a mockery. The grandeur of Greece, and then of Rome, is to have founded Western Civilization, having understood very well that even if many types of sexual and affective relations are permissible from time to time, they are not all equally normative. A couple is the union of differences; a homosexual couple is of a different nature and nothing can be based upon it. If I may be excused for stating the obvious, a man is not a woman; a woman is not a man; a man who plays at being a woman is only playing a role, and whoever insists otherwise is stuck in make-believe. However respectable it may be, a homosexual relationship is a private matter and, like all private matters outside marriage, should not be imposed as a human right *erga omnes*. Thus in my view it is impossible to be both a militant

⁶ "La sexualité de l'Antiquité. Essai à propos de publications récentes," *Antiquité classique* 68, 1999, 331-334.

⁷ "Mais Foucault, encore qu'il fit tout pour se déviriliser, avait la grave défaut d'être un homme et ne pouvait donc aller jusqu'au bout" (But Foucault, although he did everything possible to unman himself, had the grave defect of being a man and could therefore not go all the way.)

homosexual and a historian. The program of these "colleagues" is not historical; there is in it neither concern for truth, nor prudence, nor humility, nor honesty, nor objectivity, none of the virtues toward which the historian should strive. If at least it was a question of amorous passion, one might feel some sympathy; but it is more of a political passion, perhaps in some cases to destroy contemporary society, but usually, more despicably, to make a career of academic feminism or academic homosexuality, "gay" or lesbian: this is not yet a problem in French or Belgian universities, let's try to keep it that way! I understand that by saying this I risk being deprived of my voice in this journal which I care about, and to which I have contributed for many years. At least I will be glad to have done it. For this American stance is contributing to the destruction of the very conditions of life, and hedonism is not, can never be, a basis for life or for truth.⁸

Um.... thanks for sharing. Well, it's almost a relief to see this sort of poison out in the open, isn't it, rather than to spend one's life wondering whether one is paranoid? Almost.

Now, if we may be excused from stating the obvious, to see queer and/or feminist studies as an invasive species imported from America (a "foreign fad," as people in the U.S. used to say about deconstruction) is, to say the least, underinformed--imagine queer studies without Foucault, feminism without Beauvoir?-- and unfair as well to European scholars working today. Among many important queer theorists who happen to be French we'd mention Didier Eribon, whose *Réflexions sur la question gay* (1999) has been translated by Michael Lacey as *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (Duke, 2004); Francophone readers of *Iris* might be interested in the on-line journal "Genre, sexualité & société" (<http://gss.revues.org>); and there are undoubtedly many others whose work deserves to be better known outside the hexagon. Where feminism is concerned, one of us reads a list-serv (etudesfeministes-l.simone.univ-

⁸ "Il me semble que c'est un déshonneur pour un historien que de confondre histoire et politique. L'histoire de la sexualité est particulièrement compromise avec la lutte en faveur de l'homosexualité, alors que ce n'est certainement pas le travail de l'historien que de dicter à ses contemporains l'adoption de telle ou telle conduite sexuelle. C'est au contraire un des devoirs de l'historien de ne pas investir la recherche historique des charges affectives et politiques de son présent. Or le combat en faveur de la banalisation de l'homosexualité est de revendiquer la destruction de la société, où l'opposition entre le masculin et le féminin est essentielle, car chacun vit de symboles structurants que la revendication homosexuelle ridiculise. La grandeur de la Grèce puis de Rome est d'avoir fondé la société occidentale, en ayant bien compris que même si plusieurs types de relation sexuelle ou affective sont transitoirement admissibles, ils ne sont pas également normatifs. Un couple est une union de différences ; un couple homosexuel est d'une autre nature et ne saurait être fondateur. On me pardonnera des évidences ; un homme n'est pas une femme ; une femme n'est pas un homme ; un homme qui joue la femme ne joue qu'un rôle, et quiconque affirme le contraire s'enferme dans un simulacre. Si respectable qu'elle soit, une relation homosexuelle est une affaire privée qui, comme toute affaire privée hormis le mariage, ne s'impose pas *erga omnes*. Donc il n'est pas possible à mes yeux d'être à la fois homosexuel militant et historien. Le programme de ces "collègues" n'est pas historique ; on ne trouve ni souci de vérité ni prudence ni humilité ni honnêteté ni objectivité, aucune des vertus auxquelles doit tendre l'historien. Si encore il s'agissait de passion amoureuse, on pourrait avoir quelque indulgence ; mais il s'agit plutôt d'une sorte de passion politique, peut-être dans certains cas pour détruire la société actuelle, mais plus basiquement en général pour faire carrière dans le féminisme ou l'homosexualité universitaires, "gaie" ou lesbienne : ce n'est pas un problème pour l'université française ou belge ; essayons de nous en garder ! Je comprends que je risque en disant cela d'être privée de ma parole en cette revue que j'aime et à laquelle je collabore depuis des années. Au moins je serai content de l'avoir fait. Car cette prise de position américaine contribue à détruire les conditions même de la vie, et l'hédonisme n'est pas, ne sera jamais, fondateur de vie ou de vrai."

tlse2.fr) which certainly gives the impression that women's studies is alive and well and that French feminism (the real kind) continues to flourish and to develop in new directions, without waiting for instructions from California or New York. As far as classics is concerned, Boehringer's work is certainly informed by the work of John Winkler, whose *Constraints of Desire* she translated into French, and Halperin, who has written a helpful and supportive preface to her book. But her work is equally informed by such French authorities as Luc Brisson (whom she thanks for directing her thesis), Claude Calame, and Nicole Loraux, as well as by the very British Kenneth Dover. Fingerpointing at the Americans seems utterly inappropriate given the highly fruitful interchanges apropos of vasepainting, drama, ritual, and really everything else, that began under structuralism and continue today.

Now, there's nothing new about nationalist rhetoric being mobilized out of thin air to police sexual boundaries: think of syphilis, the "French disease" or the "English pox" depending on where you were standing (the microbes presumably didn't care); or think for that matter of "Persian" decadence. But one had vaguely felt that Classics in the twenty-first century was more cosmopolitan than other fields, or at least that it ought to be. Even Gourevitch herself, it would appear from Google, has deigned to be a visitor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, which was still in New Jersey the last time we looked.

Boehringer's book suggests that the newly aggressive attacks of Juvenal and Martial reflected the greater public presence and economic influence (if not power) that Roman women were actually beginning to have. Working by analogy, one could spin the would-be Juvenalisms of Desgranges and Gourevitch as signs that the French intellectual establishment is in fact increasingly open to a plurality of sexualities and methodologies, to a degree that Old Oligarchs find threatening. One could at least hope that's right. And undoubtedly Boehringer's critics have had to embarrass themselves by descending to this level of childish incoherent pique precisely because the book is so thoroughly professional, and so very excellent. But we can't agree that it is better not to respond to this sort of thing. The attacks on Sandra Boehringer are attacks on all of us. And turning the other cheek to bullying merely licenses it to continue.

So while it hardly seems fair to blame Sandra Boehringer's book on San Francisco, it does seem right for American queer classicists to receive it warmly – and we hope readers of *Iris* will do so.

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