



# The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830

*Susan S. Lanser*

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The period of reform, revolution, and reaction that characterized seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe also witnessed an intensified interest in lesbians. In scientific treatises and orientalist travelogues, in French court gossip and Dutch court records, in passionate verse, in the rising novel, and in cross-dressed flirtations on the English and Spanish stage, poets, playwrights, philosophers, and physicians were placing sapphic relations before the public eye.

In *The Sexuality of History*, Susan S. Lanser shows how intimacies between women became harbingers of the modern, bringing the sapphic into the mainstream of some of the most significant events in Western Europe. Ideas about female same-sex relations became a focal point for intellectual and cultural contests between authority and liberty, power and difference, desire and duty, mobility and change, order and governance. Lanser explores the ways in which a historically specific interest in lesbians intersected with, and stimulated, systemic concerns that would seem to have little to do with sexuality. Departing from the prevailing trend of queer reading whereby scholars ferret out hidden content in “closeted” texts, Lanser situates overtly erotic representations within wider spheres of interest. *The Sexuality of History* shows that just as we can understand sexuality by studying the past, so too can we understand the past by studying sexuality.

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