

Queering the Past(s)

A podcast with Nancy Rabinowitz, Marcus Bell, and Eleonora Colli

introduced by Claire Barnes

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Claire Barnes

Hello everybody and welcome to the APGRD Podcast. Today we're with some of the very impressive team behind the Queering the Past(s) ebook project: we're joined by Nancy Rabinowitz, Marcus Bell and Eleonora Colli. We're talking about the project which began in 2018. An enormous amount of really exciting work has gone into the process since then, and the first published ebook chapters are launching later this month. These materials are intended for use by teachers and students working in Key Stage 3/the beginning of Key Stage 4 - that's around the 11 to 15 year old age group. And with the shadow of Section 28 still looming large in the English secondary curriculum, in spite of its repeal in 2003, the project is aiming to address the ongoing lack of conversation around LGBTQ+ issues in schools with an understanding that Classics has something to offer in this regard. Their stated goal is to give teachers and young students information from antiquity that facilitate discussion, raise interesting questions and help students gain confidence in addressing critical and contentious issues. These two first chapters that are due to launch very soon are on the lesbian poet Sappho and on the Roman emperor Elagabalus, and we've been very lucky enough to have a sneak preview of them prior to recording and they're absolutely fantastic. It's a real pleasure to have you all here to discuss the work involved and where you hope to go next. So I think probably the best place to start is if each of you could just give a few words of introduction, you know, who you are, what you're doing now, and what brought you to the project.

Marcus Bell

So, hi, my name is Marcus. I am a DPhil student in Oxford working with professors Fiona Macintosh, and Felix Budelmann on choreographing tragedy, and I came to this project through I think a shared conversation between Nancy and Fiona about where to go next with the APGRD's ebooks. They had already kind of set up, and got set up and running, with two incredible free online downloadable ebooks on Agamemnon and Medea. And there was suddenly a kind of a question Nancy and I had engaged already with some work with By Jove. And it's part of like Nancy's ongoing work with people like David Bullen, on investigating the performances of ancient tragedy and queerness. And so it was suggested, from that conversation between Nancy and Fiona. What if we had an ebook that did something similar to the Medea and Agamemnon ones, but looked specifically at the queer moments, elements, characters, histories, from ancient Greece and Rome? And so that's really where it started. And it was actually kind of incredible to have all these conversations - Nancy and I would meet weekly during the first lockdown. So we would like meet on Zoom every week. And it was just really a lovely kind of like portal to have like shared

conversation. And we had all of these plans for how how much incredible work and material we could do. We had like a full lineup of, you know, every single kind of queer character and every single incredible exciting academic working on queerness that we could think about kind of like involving in the project. And so this really...we think of, I think of, as like a prototype - very much a beginning. And these two chapters on Sappho and Elagabalus, written by the incredible Cheryl Morgan and Ella Haselswerdt. So yeah, that's kind of how I came along and got involved.

Nancy Rabinowitz

What I said to Marcus, and Fiona I think, was when we were working at the time on a theatre piece which was, for me, like, the best thing that ever happened to me so far, except for meeting Marcus, and which actually was part of working on this theatre project. And I thought that this group could do outreach, that we could go to high schools and then even before lockdown, you know, people said, calm down, and this is, this is not the way it works. We don't have money to go around the country, putting on plays and running discussion groups. So I said to myself, it has to be digital - me, I am a text person. I don't do anything digital. But I was talking to Fiona and she said... that's when this whole... so I think that the point about getting to youngsters and saying that this material is relevant. And, and not in the old way of "we're looking for this direct lineage and you can feel good about being queer". But well, I mean, partly that, because, you know, we started from the point that if you discuss the *Iliad*, and you never mention that Patroclus and Achilles are lovers, or were lovers, you know, whatever word you want to use there, then you're sitting in your seat and you're queer. And you say, "Well, this is queer as stink, right?" I mean, this is... and you only find the affirmation for that on the internet. What about the classroom? So that's really where we were at. And then as we got further into it, we realised we really wanted to raise the critical questions and use this material not to be doctrinaire at all about it. But to help teach those tricky waters with some material that might seem safe, because it's farther away, and it's validated. Elagabalus was not so validated. But um, you know, so that, I mean, that was a whole process, I think, early on.

Eleonora Colli

I'm Eleonora Colli. I'm also a DPhil student at Oxford's writing on the queer simile. I think came along in with the project around 2020, when me and Marcus were doing the 'Queer and the Classical' seminar series at Corpus, and I joined at the same time as Nicolette D'Angelo who was supposed to come today and couldn't make it at the end. But I think just Marcus had talked about this project to me. And I think at the time, it was just like, you know, everyone was sort of like dealing with the pandemic, and what we could do in pandemic times and how to connect with other queer people and queer projects during a pandemic. And I think it was a moment where me and Marcus were doing this project together. And Marcus was working with Nancy. And so they sort of like came about through all these connections of sort of finding no queerness on all these online events, and finding a way to discuss these things and make them more practical when we couldn't leave the house essentially. And I joined in a sort of more editing role. And, yeah, it has been great to work on all these things together, and sort of see the project evolve.

Nancy Rabinowitz

We had this enormous sheet of paper...two sheets...I don't know how many because Marcus was taking the notes in his usual organised fashion. And it was enormous. It was enormous. And so how to whittle it down and be more realistic so that it could actually be produced I had at that point no idea how arduous it would be. Because as I said before, I'm a text person. You write your article, you send it to the press, the journal or if it's a book... and they do the rest. But we were doing the rest. So there was nobody else but us. So we started thinking. I think initially, we were thinking about Achilles and Patroclus, and Sappho... not making it all about male homoeroticism, starting with Sappho. And then we had a talk with Arlene who was one of the... So we started adding people: Arlene Holmes Henderson, who was a consultant on education, she said, well, people really need to know how to deal with trans issues. And Cheryl Morgan, was had just done a wonderful dance through Queer Rome. And so we thought about her for Elagabalus. And of course, Ella had been in the QATC initial seminar. And so we knew Ella, and so that's where we are, but the list is still there.

Marcus Bell

So exactly. There's room for this project to kind of continue to expand and grow and shift and for other people to kind of come in and write chapters and add sections. But I guess it is also probably important at this juncture to mention, as well as Arlene Holmes Henderson, we've had an incredible group of teachers who have been consultants on the project who we've done, kind of like focus groups and work groups with. And one of those teachers, Rob Hancock, who has kind of like continued on with us and has worked kind of closely on the project. He writes in the, kind of, an introduction to the, kind of, teachers' notes, which is the first kind of PDF chapter that people will be able to download to accompany the two other PDFs exactly about what you said, Claire, at the top, about this kind of shadow of Section 28. And when we started looking at the project in 2018, it was the year after this Stonewall report had been published in 2017, which surveyed over 3700 young people and they said 40% of them reported to have never been taught anything about LGBT identities or issues in school. 76 would have never been taught about bisexual identities or issues in school and 77 reported never being taught about gender identity, or transness or trans identity in school. And now in 2021 there's a mandate for LGBTQ+ education to be a part of all the kinds of delivery in schools and so there's now a legally protected right to be taught about LGBTQ+ issues and identities on the secondary school curriculum. And so we hope that the PDFs themselves will kind of feed a part of that need as we mentioned in the lockdown context that we've all been in and working from schools and school teachers and school students have also been in a kind of like, intensified version of those same conditions in many ways. So we hope that this resource or these resources could be a start of providing a digital means of easily downloadable PDF that that teachers can work with and that students can have access to. There's loads of little links as well throughout to other resources that are already established to other places where school students and teachers can find out more. And Nicolette who, again, has done incredible work on the project but couldn't be here with us today has started work on a live and will be continually updated Google Doc, because now we are thinking collectively and work in Google Docs, which includes notes for teachers on questions that might come up as people go through those PDFs and helpful guides to some of the activities that we've included and additional resources as well to

supplement. And so yeah, in the queer mode of an ongoing project that's going to be released and will be fed by its interactions with the schools, teachers and students that we're hoping to integrate the resource with.

Nancy Rabinowitz

I want to say, from the US perspective, there is a real urgency. And I don't know if you all were there, at the launch of the Feminism and Classics conference last night - there was a 'Beyond the Binary' roundtable. And Walter Penrose spoke so eloquently about the horrible reality that is facing us, you know, in the US, and especially in education. So this will be a tough sell, but it is going to be so important. And we are hoping to release it in the fall in the US.

Eleonora Colli

I think not to make the conversation even, like heavier, I guess, but especially in what is happening in the UK now with conversion therapy and trans rights being taken away... It is, yeah, like bringing this sort of material to young people, I think it's especially important to give access to resources that are especially being continually updated. I think it's fundamental, because these courses change and things change. Politics change. And so I think, you know, the idea for the produced PDFs to be updated, and, you know, collaborative, I think it's fundamental, I don't want to say that Classics is gonna change the world and change any politics in the UK or in the US. But in terms of education, and what can bring some positive attitudes in the classrooms, I think this work is particularly important.

Claire Barnes

Yeah, you've all spoken about that necessity for for accessibility and communication. And clearly, there's a very wide transatlantic audience as well, which is extremely, extremely good to hear. But this next question is sort of a little bit more nitty gritty, I guess. It's looking at the medium through which you're distributing this. But I think, as Marcus mentioned, that's particularly crucial, especially given the evolving nature of, of hybrid learning, blended learning. So you've got an ebook format, but as PDFs. There's an accessibility for for print, though, it is worth noting, this is quite an interactive format - I really enjoyed the little rainbows that you're invited to click to open up fresh takes, and kind of interlinking pieces of information. But yeah, I was wondering if you could just speak a little bit about why you chose to present your materials in this way; you've also got some accompanying materials just for teachers. So perhaps you could explain a bit more about that and just sort of why it's put together in such a way and what you hope to achieve through that.

Marcus Bell

To start, I could say something about that shift into PDF, when we were talking with Arlene and with Rob. And after we did the kind of focus group with the teachers and also talking with Michelle Morgan, who has experience publishing digital resources, we decided it would be easier to for the resource to go through a PDF format - the ebooks sometimes can only be downloaded. And on certain devices, I think, there's sometimes that kind of restriction...that it goes through Apple. And that also with the PDF format, we wanted it to be easily printable; we wanted it to be the kind of resource so people could print off just sections that would be like an exercise to work on in classrooms, or that they could print off the whole thing. We really wanted to not

assume that everyone was always going to be able to access this on digital devices or to be using it through WiFi. But we still wanted it to have that interactive digital functionality. So I did the design for the PDFs through InDesign. And yeah, we should also thank the gracious support of the SES and the CA who have provided us with the funding for this project to allow this kind of work to happen. And so we really wanted to make sure that all three of these PDFs, so the two chapters for student focus, but also the teachers chapter, two could be easily printable, and you know can be handed out as like a handout exercise in the classroom, or taken away and held in that kind of like physical way or clicked through and when you can jump through all the links. One thing I want to say is, thanks to the APGRD. Because not only for this podcast, but also their support throughout, in the technical parts and the inspiration really to do this: big thanks.

And that that chapter idea as well as something that the APGRD employed for their Agamemnon ebook just to make sure that the chunks could be downloadable and wouldn't take up too much storage. And so that's also the reason why we have this modular approach to the teachers' note at the beginning, or introductory note at the beginning, and then two separate chapters. We also thought it would allow for development with more chapters on in the future. So we don't have to contain the whole project within one downloadable file. But in theory, as it goes on, for a number of for years into the future, other links can be added below so that people could view them as an expanding in a series of PDF files.

Claire Barnes

I love the idea of these these queer stories speaking to each other. That's fantastic. And yeah, fantastic to hear that the APGRD has been been a source of inspiration. I'm sure Fiona and Claire Kenward would be delighted to hear that. We looked at the medium; let's look at look at the message in terms of the two stories you've chosen to highlight. So you mentioned initially thinking about starting with Achilles and Patroclus and you've ended up with these two stories: Sappho and Elagabalus. Let's just talk about both of them, Let's start with Sappho, maybe. I was going say I think we can get why Sappho. But actually, no, I'd be interested in how that story started to take shape.

Nancy Rabinowitz

The way we worked was that we found people and asked them to write a chapter. So we decided on Sappho for the gender, and which is so often overlooked still, so that was an easy decision. And then of course, she's also Greek. So you know, we were thinking, well, maybe we shouldn't do Achilles, and we were already thinking maybe we shouldn't do Achilles, when Arlene said, there's a lot of problems with how to talk about transitions. So we can I think, Marcus, and I would correct me, we let Cheryl decide, right? We approached her because she'd been working on the Galli, she'd been speaking about the Galli. And then she said, "Well, actually, what about but this idea". But I think I want to go back to what I said at the beginning, which is, we don't want to present these as clear case studies, we really want to bring out the evidence and encourage these young people to be critical. And think a lot of what's happening with the internet and white supremacy in this country is, you know, this uncritical reading and reproducing of the bollocks that's out there. So that's what I want to say for starters.

Eleonora Colli

Yeah, I think in terms of the figures that we wanted to talk about...the push against the sort of nationalism, that sometimes it's to provide classics in terms of what figures we highlight when talking about queerness in the ancient world. And so in that case, we decided to start with Sappho. Also, thanks to Ella Haselswerdt's amazing work and their Deep Lez Philology talk at the seminar series, I think that was really a big source of inspiration. Because she talks so much about the gaps and fragmentation of Sappho now that could be filled in through personal forms of perception and personal identities and how text can be reshaped. And before there was a good starting point for students also to get engaged with this material and at this point, and then yes, we come back to Cheryl Morgan. I think the idea was to start with the Galli but then we moved to Elagabalus, which I think is nice. I think it will be interesting to see how the chapters will shift or will potentially be shaped or could have shifted if we were talking about communities as opposed to individuals. But I think since we're sort of still workshopping this, and starting with two figures and sort of like a template with the Sappho, what to work on with the Elagabalus and sort of figuring out what works and what not was useful. And it was definitely fundamental to talk about gender nonconforming identities, I think as well. There are hints of that in the Sappho chapters as well. And then I think there are discussed obviously with more insight in the Elagabalus chapter. So I think that was the sort of one of the main rationales behind it, I guess.

Marcus Bell

And especially in in that second chapter on Elagabalus we were really keen on working with Rob and with Cheryl to ask questions about you know, how do queer people in history get represented by kind of dominant sources? How can we start to build up, like Nancy was saying, kind of a critical language for critiquing or pulling apart some of those... maybe scaremongering or fearmongering narratives that like, operate around gender non conforming people...gender non conforming identities. And yeah, Eleonora, I really love that 'what if' proposition. What if, you know, in another iteration this would be about communities rather than individuals. And I think that we really want to speak to the open potential for, even in the classroom, exploration for some of these questions to be picked up. And so each chapter has a set of key questions at the top for people to look through, students to look through, when they engage with the work. There's also concluding questions to each chapter that will guide on to further research and work. And the teachers' resource, an updated Google Doc, are ways of kind of finding and developing more resources as a kind of, as a community working with these these texts too.

Nancy Rabinowitz

I would add in there that one of the very important issues for us as scholars is this was meant to be approachable. We have to keep thinking about the language. The kids are smart, but you know, the vocabulary is, I think, really, you know...so we were very glad to have the advice of teachers, both in the UK in the US to make it clear, which is very helpful to us. You tend to get, you know, every important idea is surrounded by other garbage..! And so these had to be, you know, right on. And I think in the future, we will have a chapter coming, we have it in preparation, on the Amazons, so we don't have anybody commissioned to write on Achilles and

Patroclus - definitely the US people think that there's a lot of interest. And that would be, you know, important, but maybe we will think of something less canonical, we have time. But if you're interested write to us.

Marcus Bell

On that note on communication...on clarity of communication. One of the other things we did as part of the process of the book, and that hopefully will be evident. In some key moments both chapters speak to artists and creatives who were working with, or in relationship with these kind of figures, kind of the the musical song/dance elements of Sappho's work, but also the kind of queer proliferation of Elagabalus online through spaces like Deviant Art. So you'll see in the book, those rainbow buttons that are kind of invitations to new perspectives, often invite, or lead the reader into a space where it's work by an artist, or a series of artists who are engaging with this, and we have some beautiful work and in both chapters that speaks to that.

Nancy Rabinowitz

And that leads me to another desire we had, which I don't know how well, we handled it, because the issues of multiculturalism are very live in actually in both texts. Because modern day Lesbos is situated right in the middle of a refugee crisis. And Elagabalus, his family tree is multicultural. And in a way, that was an opening for us to be more intentionally intersectional and not say, "oh, all queers are white", which is certainly a problem in the stereotyping.

Claire Barnes

Some of the intertextual material you've all mentioned, is, I think, worth drawing back to. So both chapters have this enormous wealth of intertext and receptions within them. And Marcus, you mentioned going into DeviantArt, and bits and bobs from from all over the internet that might be dealing with these subjects in slightly unusual or atypical ways. I was wondering if for any of you personally, you'd found something come up as a result of the chapters that you found particularly interesting that you'd encourage readers to go and look at. I noticed you've got clips from performances, for instance... you've got a Neil Gaiman comic, which I've had never actually encountered before, in the Elagabalus chapter. What would you encourage people to go and look for?

Eleonora Colli

I think, personally for me, like, what I'm gonna look for... I think, like, this is also something that I learnt. As mentioned in our talk, the Deep Lez Philology... but we have some talk in the chapter about the use of hashtags like #sapphic on all sorts of social media like from Tumblr, Instagram, TikTok.. I think there is an incredible community online of LGBTQ teens that discuss these topics and talk about their identities in very new ways. And it's very interesting, you know, I wouldn't I wouldn't say... sorry, maybe I should rephrase it. I wouldn't say "go look for it this thing". I'm just going to just say it's an interesting discourse that is happening in regards to queer identity and I find that very fascinating. You know, a deep dive on Tumblr on the Sapphic tag was interesting because actually, you know, there is actually not much about Sappho as an author - it's just a synonym on Tumblr. It's a synonym for lesbian art and women loving women art. And so there is a wealth of artists. Online,

they use these sorts of hashtags in very different ways from the ways Classicists understand them so that's something that I noted, I guess, when working with this.

Nancy Rabinowitz 25:30

I, of course, learn so much from the research of Eleonora. But I do think that it is a very rich resource. And I wonder whether it's a mistake to think that these students aren't already out there. But if they're not, then this will introduce them to a community as well as a way of thinking about classics... it will introduce them to a community, which they may not find because they're living in a small town. So I think that'll be a great service. And I originally started thinking about, "Oh, well, what vase paintings do I know?" And man was I educated!

Marcus Bell 26:08

If possible, I just wanted to pull out two artworks that we include within the PDFs. One of them was a discovery and one of them was actually a work that we commissioned as part of our making the PDFs. And so the one we discovered was this short film of Elagabalus directed by Xanthe Dobbie. And we use images of that in the chapter and also link to their website. It looks like an incredible short film, exploring queerness, queer community, gender nonconformity... I haven't actually got a chance to like see the kind of full film yet; I'm really hungry for for a screening of it to be put up somewhere, or to see a screening link. And I think that would be incredible. And then the other piece was a dance piece made by Susanna Dye and Farrell Cox, which is a response to fragment 31 with a reading by SJ Brady. Susanna and Farrell are both incredible movement artists. And so you know, a real kind of pleasure to be a part of that process. And an SJ is an incredible poet and playwright. And so yeah, I really recommend checking those people out. And having a look at their work as an extension of the things that they did for the for the ebook.

Nancy Rabinowitz 27:22

That's another example of the organic way in which this has developed because Marcus and I had both worked with Susanna and SJ with By Jove, and we wanted to link the two projects, and this was... It's fabulous, really, and so moving, I do think, but I don't want to highlight it at the expense of all the other wonderful pop outs - they really do pop right out!

Claire Barnes 27:49

In terms of incorporating the chapters into the classroom, I'm aware that you're you've kind of created this with the idea that there might be teachers using this who don't have classical subjects, specifically in the timetable. But there is, as I understand it, still plenty of scope for these to be introduced. How might a teacher listening, who does want to, incorporate the materials? What if their school doesn't offer traditional classical subjects? How might they go about working with that?

Marcus Bell 28:16

So we thought, specifically for subjects that are not classics, and this, this ebook might be incorporated into sexual health education lessons, PHSE lessons, but could also work for English history, drama, and you know, Pride Month is coming up, and students are finishing their exams or finishing coming back from their revision sessions...and maybe there's this window where something on LGBTQ history might

want to be incorporated into a lesson. So I think those are the kind of spaces that the queer PDFs might be useful for in terms of how to go about doing it. I think that the live Google Doc is an incredible resource and kind of like a guide into the material. We've also at the end of each chapter listed some very short resources, podcasts and websites that will just give a little bit more historical information or information on the figures, but we wanted to make sure that they were as self contained and intertextual as possible. So these resources don't require a degree in classics or an extensive relationship with Greek and Roman myth, or kind of like history. They are kind of like invitations into a kind of a way of doing, of teaching this material and there are those guides that are up on the Google Drive and also listed resources throughout.

Nancy Rabinowitz

I think they would be suitable in an English class on poetry because the Sappho chapter definitely raises issue about about language and I also think that they may not be exactly self-contained, but they are if you want to change something in your English class that is queer friendly. This is an opportunity. If you're not, they're not; not every English teacher is going to be interested. Certainly not every history class on Rome is going to be interested. But if they are, I think that that does not require them to be specialists at all.

Claire Barnes

You mentioned being part of a broader community with this project, and also some of the forthcoming chapters that are already starting to percolate. So if someone listening wanted to get involved, where would you encourage them to go? How can they get involved either to to access the chapters or to be part of the project?

Nancy Rabinowitz

Well, I check my email all the time. nrabinow@hamilton.edu.

Marcus Bell

So I would just say also agreeing with Nancy, I think the best thing to do would be to contact one of us via email, get in touch, you know, we can we can chat to you about the process and the project and any ideas you might have for for a further chapter. And also, any questions about the resources and how to kind of use them or ways to use them. And I think, just you know, a drop us an email. We're all very friendly!

Claire Barnes

Thank you so much, all three of you. And sorry not to have had Nicolette in the room as well. It's been a huge pleasure to hear more about the project. I'm so excited for everybody else to be able to get access to these chapters. And it doesn't sound like this conversation is going to disappear anytime soon! You've clearly got a lot to say and a lot of amazing work to do. So who knows, we might have you back very soon to discuss further iterations of the project. Thank you so much for joining us.