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Sappho's Queer Female History

By Tess Waxman

Abstract

Sappho was a queer woman in ancient Greece. Scholars have researched her sexuality, promiscuity, and sexual orientation, often instead of analyzing her works. Sappho's poetry provides historians a rare view into the lives of queer women in ancient Greece, shaping the largely untold female LGBTQ history. She introduces a unique viewpoint; she brings complex ideas, such as the justice of Aphrodite, active versus passive lover roles, and erotic culture. Sappho's distinctly queer poetry is important to explore in an attempt to better understand the past of more people.

Sappho's Trials, Times, and Translation

Sappho was a Greek woman in ancient times. She was born after 630 BCE and died around 570 BCE. Sappho resided in the capital city of Lesbos, Mytilene, a city known throughout the region for luxury. Throughout Sappho's life, Mytilene was embroiled in political turmoil. Disorder was common throughout Greece. Aristocratic families fought each other for power while tyranny ruled. In Sappho's city, those who held power were often overtaken by opposing factions.

Sappho performed her poetry as songs with a group of girls and an instrument called a lyre. Her poem "God-crafted product of the tortoise shell" says, "come to me; Lyre, be voluble."¹ She is credited with the invention of a variation of this instrument. This is where agreed knowledge stops and hypotheses about the nature of this group begin.

Sappho is best known in contemporary society for her poetry about female sexual attraction. "The girl adored you more than anything,/As if you were a goddess."² Aaron Poochigian makes the argument that, due to her public performances, this was condoned by society. Homosexuality was common in ancient Greece, and well documented among males in prose, poetry, music, and through iconic images on pottery. Sappho's "poetry is one of the few

sources of information that exist about love between women in the ancient world.”³ This aspect of the poet’s work has shaped her reputation for millennia. The discussion of her sexuality, usually negative, often clouds analysis of her poetry.

Female sexuality through the male gaze was confusing and contradicting in ancient Greece. Females were supposed to balance both being wild and unruly, which by controlling, men found their masculinity, while also emulating fertility. Page DuBois describes Sappho’s poetry as “one of the few texts which break the silence of women in antiquity, an instant in which women become more than the objects of man’s desire.”⁴ Sappho’s female contemporaries didn’t produce surviving works of literature, but she fought through the barriers of society to showcase her poetry. By doing so, she has given later generations a unique viewpoint on ancient Greek society: specifically, a female view. Unequal in society, little is recorded or known about women of her time, and what survives are often afterthoughts masking women as male possessions. Sappho’s works are valuable sources for history in general, and specifically of great importance to female and queer communities. Sappho, and by extension women, are of utmost importance to further study because Sappho’s poetry offers historians a rare view into the lives of queer women in ancient Greece, shaping the largely untold female LGBTQ history.

Sappho’s Writing, Words, and Work

Sappho’s work is unique among ancient sources; as poetry, it can be difficult to decipher historical context. Why did she write? How was it shared? What information does it provide about life in ancient Greece?

Historians don’t know much about Sappho’s day to day life. In poems, she mentions her three brothers and a father. Many historians link her to Greek figure Alcaeus as a male romantic partner, though no direct evidence points to this connection. Alcaeus is only thought to be her lover because they were poets at the same time in the same place, and likely because a woman never attached to a man (but linked to many women) makes some uncomfortable. Historians also hypothesize she had a daughter, named Kleis, yet many acknowledge the uncertainty of this claim. In Greek, the word *pais* means both slave and daughter. Through connotation, many have

ascertained that Sappho most likely means daughter in her poem, however, this illustrates a difficulty in translating the works of Sappho.⁵

Sappho's poetry was consolidated into nine large books after she passed away, estimated to be around 9,000 lines. In 1204, the Fourth Crusade burned Constantinople and the vast majority of her works. For centuries, historians only knew of Sappho through writing about her that was written before the thirteenth century. An 1870 excavation found fragments of poems stuffed in coffins, and ever since archaeologists have been discovering more of Sappho's poetry. Archeologists believe over ninety percent is still lost to the contemporary world. What remains is one poem in its entirety and many fragments. This contributes heavily to the difficulty of translation from language to language, and the difficulty to both analyze and comprehend meaning — when only a handful of lines are available for translation, context is lacking and significance can depend on a single word, which without context can mean one of a few (drastically different) ideas.

Debates and discussions are common among scholars of Sappho: opinions, varying hypotheses, and nuances abound when both start and end of an important poem are destroyed. Translators walk a narrow tightrope, balancing poetic flow, content, rhyme scheme, and sound changes that all come with a different language. One poetic form common in her work, named the Sapphic Stanza, has become a staple in Western poetry. It is just one of Sappho's influences on contemporary society. Margaret Williamson of Harvard University explains the difficulty of comprehending Sappho in the current era: "In the end, however, the challenge of reading Sappho is not to separate the individual from the collective, or (especially) the sexual from the social and religious, but to reunite them in ways our culture has all but forgotten."⁶

Sappho's work is both autobiographical and fictional. Lyrical poets of her time rarely wrote completely in the first person. In Sappho's poetry, first person singular pronouns abound; she also refers to figures with names, one of which is *Sappho*. It takes a deeper analysis to determine whether she is talking about herself and whether it is the past or present. This can be difficult to differentiate, especially given the fragmented nature of her works.

Sappho's poetry was often performed. A chorus of girls sang her words, danced, and played the lyre. Due to the nature of her songs, they were likely performed publicly at weddings

and events. Poem “Carpenters, raise the rafter-beam” is thought to have been performed during the *ekdosis*, or wedding ceremony. Some songs may have been performed solo, though this is less common.

Sappho is often thought to have run a school for pubescent girls, but schools don't appear in ancient Greece until late fifth century Athens, much later. Nineteenth-century scholars used a school, and the role of a schoolmistress, to domesticate Sappho. This occupation fit neatly into social life and gender roles of the 19th and 20th century, though in all likelihood Sappho's culture was hundreds of years away from schools like this, especially schools for girls. Her poetry was likely educational on the roles of women in society, though other academic ideas propose that she was the head of a religious group. Theories and discussions abound surrounding the nature of Sappho's group; it is only definitively known that she passed on knowledge and instructed choral performance.

Claude Calame studied Sappho's group through her own poetry and through a parallel to male groups of a similar nature. He theorizes that a homoromantic sexual initiation into society took place, to prepare girls for later heterosexual sex. In his comparison of the male groups and Sappho's female group, he notes that the difference in choral performances speaks to the different education for gender roles in society. A similar queer language throughout is evidence that Sappho's group's goal was aligned to the better documented male group's initiation. Other scholars state that the imbalance of power in society between males and females makes it impossible to directly translate social acts from one sex to the other. Williamson argues that because sex between men, often in symposia, was explicitly tied to power and age, the structure is unable to be modeled for women, who could not have power.⁷

Scholars say Sappho had the ability to speak to both sexes; by analogizing love with war and combining logic with the unexplainable, she had the unique ability to reach past the limits of her female contemporaries and fluently grasp the language of the patriarchy. Poem “Subtly bedizened Aphrodite,” compares the woes of romantic and sexual relationships to a battlefield. “Come, please, and in this battle/Stand at my side,” she writes.⁸

Sappho's reach into male-dominated society didn't last forever. By the end of the third century BCE, female homosexuality was seen as extremely shameful. Sappho was so well

known that no one thought she could be physically involved in such salacious behavior. Rumors existed about her sexual behavior, but a suspension of belief dominated those who wrote about her. These writers were all male. They insisted she was heterosexual, had married, and had a daughter. Naturally, male homosexual poets were not followed with the same distaste. The *Suda*, a tenth century Byzantine encyclopedia, factually represents poet Anacreon as a male who had sexual relationships with other males.

During the Roman Era, Christianity introduced a new wave of homophobia, this time geared toward male and females. Sappho's immoral reputation was furthered by the society of this time. After Sappho's standing was tarnished, she was rarely mentioned in society for the next centuries. Her work was later destroyed and her name nearly forgotten; biographies from the start of antiquity were some of the only ways she was known.

Visual representations of Sappho from 1790 to 1810 show her inseparably linked to an ancient boatman named Phaon. Depictions propose that Sappho's passion for Phaon would have commenced after her relationship to a previous man (the father to Kleis). It is unclear how exactly these male connections, and that to Alcaeus, are determined. The only evidence for the husband often talked about is satirical, written some 200 years after Sappho — his name is translated to mean "Dick from the town of Manhood." Her distinction from homosexuality is made clear, though in the next decades her perceived character shifts from a happy wife to a friendly woman.

Sappho's name became a term used for gay women in the late nineteenth century — the first reference to *sapphism* in a published 1890 medical journal. This word was written with an extremely negative connotation, as homosexuality was recently classified as a disease. "Such fin de siecle words as 'sapphist' were judgmental terms, designed to convey moral disapproval and to describe what was newly regarded as pathological behavior."⁹ Writers of the 1800's tried to distance Sappho from this identity, analyzing her homoromantic relationships as friendships. These platonic bonds, deemed acceptable by society, could mask and justify her female attraction. Yet discussion of her sexual identity still overshadowed appreciation of her poetry.

In a 1918 academic article focusing on inaccurate evidence that had come to shape Sappho's reputation, William Prentice could not refrain from writing several pages on her sexual

activity — or lack thereof — with the same sex. One of Sappho's poems speaks to a female from a female and mentions satiating cravings on a soft bed, but Prentice determines, "they may have been simply friends."¹⁰ This is a clear example of how historians through time have put the importance of Sappho's sexual orientation above her poetry.

In the late twentieth century, Sappho became a symbol for the burgeoning LGBTQ rights movement. Queer women found representation in the pages of her poetry, idolizing Sappho and her female contemporaries. A book titled "Sappho Was a Right-On Woman," one of the first of its kind, provided an accepting view of lesbianism. It was published in 1972 by Sidney Abbott, which shows how Sappho is integral in queer history from ancient Greece through the U.S. rights movement.

Sappho's Sexuality, Sensuality, and Standing in Society

Because Sappho's sexuality has been intertwined with the historiography of her work, and because her sexual orientation is important to the (lack of) queer historiographical research, this section will summarize the discussion on her sexual orientation. It will not overshadow further analysis of her work but serve as common ground from which to delve deeper.

Lesbos was known through historical records for its sexuality. "During...the late eighteenth century through the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, the mention of the island of Lesbos conveyed a strong erotic message."¹¹ The island had a reputation for loose morals, scandal, and sexual passion — surely in part because of the erotic nature of Sappho's and her contemporaries' poems. In such a patriarchal society, one of the sole sources of female power is through sex. Although historically represented as men's objects, Sappho describes female lust with grace, sparks of empowerment trailing every word.

Sappho's fragments focus on female attraction: mainly, female attraction to other females. Many gay males wrote poetry in ancient times, but unlike Sappho were not singled out for their sexual orientation. Judith Hallett explains, "the negative reaction which female homosexuality has aroused from the Hellenistic period onward has, it would seem, caused Sappho to receive different (and increasingly inequitable) treatment from that given male lyric poets."¹² Sappho's poetry does not shy away from her attraction to other women. Not only does

she speak of cravings on soft beds, but Sappho's choral performances often revealed group attraction to women. In fragment "Abanthis, please pick up your lyre," the female singer or singers tell Abanthis, "Her garment (when you stole a glance)/Roused you, I'm in ecstasy."¹³

Some of Sappho's poems address attraction to males. "There is a boy, and lust/Has crushed my spirit."¹⁴ It is important to restate that not all of Sappho's poems are thought to be autobiographical. The existence of a daughter (though she could also be a slave) is widely acknowledged, which implies sexual intercourse. This combination of female and male attraction has spurred a debate through centuries that has damaged Sappho's credibility as a poet, her reputation in contemporary society and past societies, and has overshadowed her poetry. In nineteenth century art, Sappho "was regarded more as a lover than a poet...By 1900, the sexual significance of Sappho's very name had obscured her reputation as a poet."¹⁵ Sappho may have been bisexual, pansexual, or gay. Labels aren't perfect, and although the lesbian identity is named after her home, does it really matter whether or not she was exclusively attracted to females?

To many historians and scholars over the years, it has, as evidenced by Hallett, Stein, and Prentice in the timeline above. Hallett shows that those who study Sappho are often preoccupied with her sexuality — in the past erasing it, currently getting comfortable to it — instead of analyzing her poetry.¹⁶ This is a result of the patriarchal, heteronormative Western world. Taking away from the studies of Sappho's poetry detracts from her importance and fails to provide meaning to productive discussions about the meaning of her work. On the other hand, historians as a collective cannot ignore it altogether, as Sappho is one of the few female voices heard through time, and is integral in piecing together what life looked like in ancient Greece.

Sappho's Marginalization, Mindset, and Men

Culturally, Christianity's views on homosexuality were widely accepted in Western society until recently. The general public refrained from even mentioning what was known as a disease, sin, or crime, while scholars refrained from digging into what was commonly thought of as an inhumane vice. Homosexuality was rarely talked about in society during the early to

mid-1900s, and gay people were shunned and discarded from social circles. Research about the topic was few and far between.

In the 1960s, Donald J. West published a scientific book titled simply, “Homosexuality.” The same decade brought biologist Alfred Kinsey’s research about sex to light, including the Kinsey scale, a six section spectrum from homosexuality to heterosexuality. Since then, although often looked down upon by society, research on the history of homosexuality and same-sex sexual behavior has become ever more expansive, accessible, and specialized. Over the past decade or so, many research universities are opening Queer Studies departments. However, much of the historical research to date is focused solely on male homosexuality.¹⁷ It is more accessible, as males were more often than not the group writing their society’s historical documents. Over the decades, the majority of historians researching this topic have been predominantly male. This is why Sappho is critical to the expansion of queer studies.

The documentation of female life in the ancient world is severely lacking. Women were not allowed access to academic education or political power, so all prose about the time comes from a male viewpoint. Male historiographers of the early twentieth century took this at face value, exploring male life in detail but only adding women as an afterthought — and often as male objects. Kenneth J. Dover was one of the first to research Greek homosexuality but did so in a male-centric form. He provides one chapter at the end, more of an epilogue, that looks into female sexuality and touches on Sappho. DuBois recalls that when she read Michel Foucault, another pioneer of the sexuality field, she believed when he said “persons” he referred to all of the society — until Foucault said each possessed a wife. From male prose, we only gain socially accepted male behavior, not the full story. The accepted behavior included homosexuality at symposia, a political gathering of males. An older male would initiate a younger one through sex, after singing and socializing. More specific traditions and customs varied throughout the regions, but parallels have been made to the queer female sexual behavior of the time. “Women’s invisibility (in vases and symposia) simply reflects, as usual, their invisibility in the public, male-dominated world. On the contrary, the fact that men did not stop at merely singing about love strongly suggests that girls did not either.”¹⁸

Page DuBois uses Sappho's poetry as evidence to prove Foucault's narrow narrative incorrect. Women were not simply objects of submission, but sexual beings in their own right. "Sappho is absent from the history of sexuality, as from many other histories, in part because she is a woman, because she writes about sex between women and about female desire... She is the truly heterogeneous, beneath the homogeneous, against which the homogeneous is forcibly asserted. Her desire is asymmetrical to that of the male subject and incompatible with the reputed passivity of the female object."¹⁹ It is this heterogeneous viewpoint that is so necessary to disrupt the elite male single story.

Female sexuality in ancient Greece was complicated. First, it involved fertility. Bearing male citizens was critical and sometimes religiously connected to the harvest. Religious celebrations were also often connected to fertility and the harvest, and some restricted participants to solely women. These female festivals were thought to be a freeing experience for women, away from the restraints of patriarchal society. Records of these gatherings are slim, as men were usually the ones to record such events in writing but were not allowed. Historians believe that festivals varied throughout Greece, possibly included sexual activity among women, and were a rare source of empowerment. In Lesbos, the Adonia festival was celebrated casually, and men weren't completely excluded.²⁰

Second, males were taught to control female sexuality. There is a disconnection between the concept of control and the ideas Sappho (who, we must recognize, is just one woman) presents. Studies combining, comparing, and contrasting these varying accounts may provide a clearer picture of female queer sexuality in ancient Greece. Currently, the research is sorely lacking. Williams acknowledges the lack of primary sources written by women but explains the problems with trying to extrapolate true information about females from male prose. First, relations to the structure of power are very different between the sexes and lead to very different social implications. Second, prose often prescribes sexual activity instead of just describing it.

Sappho's Importance, Influence, and Impact

Sappho's poetry has the ability to illuminate a new viewpoint. She shows that women were not the puppets of masculinity, concerned only with bearing sons and taking care of the

home. Sappho challenges the ideas that have been widely accepted for centuries by unapologetically describing her sexual desires, her romantic troubles, and her deep thinking.

There is much to glean from her poetry, and only the first layers have been uncovered. Anne Carson, Williamson, and Greene have launched into an exploration of the roles of lover and beloved in ancient Greece.

Anne Carson, noted scholar on Sappho, provides a fresh take on popularly debated poem Sappho I. In one version of translation, Aphrodite tells a recently rejected Sappho, “For if in fact she is fleeing, soon she will pursue. And if she is rejecting gifts, instead she will give them. And if she does not love, soon she will love, even if she does not want to.”²¹ Translators have historically taken these lines to mean that Sappho’s lover will in time reciprocate her love, pursuing Sappho. Carson provides a different significance: that of the justice of Aphrodite. She explains that the Greek grammar holds no direct tie to Sappho — Aphrodite simply says she will pursue, give, and love. As this lover grows older, time will be Sappho’s revenge. The girl will change from the role of beloved to the role of active lover, likely of another girl. This new girl will likely be younger, as the roles would mirror male lovers of the time. Carson states that in ancient Greece, no one can play the passive role, be the beloved, forever. Time takes revenge and in this reversal of roles lies Aphrodite’s justice.

Plutarch of ancient Greece, in his afterthought on women in society, wrote that sexual female roles mirror that of males in symposia.²² This is reflected again, and supported with evidence, in Carson’s analysis. Williamson proposes the unlikelihood of this translation, as women don’t have the same power in society as men, power in politics, or goals. She reports that recent studies show sexuality is not fundamental part of identity, and that sexual roles are social constructs.

Ellen Greene disagrees with these roles, believing woman played equal and reciprocal roles in relationships. “I think the real significance of the lack of direct objects (of fleeing, pursuing, and loving) in these lines is that Sappho is suggesting that neither she nor her beloved are *objects* of each other’s love,” she says.²³

In Sappho’s other works, the justice of Aphrodite can be seen working in the background. “...Off in Sardis” explains this role reversal throughout life. Sappho starts by telling how “the girl

adored you more than anything,” the subject taking place of the beloved.²⁴ Yet, as she grows older, “Often on long walks she commemorates/How tender Atthis was./Her fortune eats at her inconsistent thoughts...”²⁵ Her future perhaps involves the role of active lover, aging, and loss of beauty. She will no longer be touched by the tender Atthis, but participate in the dominant role of the relationship.

“You will have memories” has a stanza detailing the subject as beloved: “I loved you once, years ago, Atthis,/When your flower was in place./You seemed a gawky girl then, artless,/Without grace,”²⁶ and one detailing the subject as she has transitioned to the role of active lover: “And now, all in a flutter, chase/After Andromeda.”²⁷

Another interesting relationship in Sappho is that in poem “That fellow strikes me as god’s double,” where Sappho writes “Laughter — the revelation flutters/My ventricles, my sternum and stomach.”²⁸ She objectifies the lover versus the beloved, uncommon in antiquity. This poem also ties to her legacy, as Sappho was the first to use physical ailments to describe the feelings of attraction.

Page DuBois analyzes Sappho’s poetry using a queer, feminist lens in her book, directly taking from Sappho and relating to the queer experience. “In all honesty, I want to die” finishes by reminding a past lover of the memories shared. Sappho writes “Of glossy curls with myrrh — lavish infusions/In queenly quantities — then on a bed/Prepared with fleecy sheets and yielding cushions,/Sated your craving...”²⁹ When reading these words in Greek and translating them to English, DuBois describes something more than simply the combination of letters. She writes of implicit femininity, tenderness, softness, and delicacy.³⁰

Sappho provides her readers with inside access to the lives of women in Lesbos. Not only is the content vastly different from male prose, so is the method, which provides historians with intimate information about her lifestyle.

Erotic culture was a big part of life in ancient Greece, and social status was directly related to beauty and its presentation. Sappho explores symbols and themes of beauty throughout her poetry, often equating youth to desire and floral nature to beauty. Brides were highly sought after and needed to be deemed desirable, which is an area in which Sappho’s school may have trained girls.

Out of the female Olympians central to ancient Greek religion, three of the four have sexual identities that are nonexistent or tied only to fertility. Aphrodite stands out as a strong, sexual goddess who steps outside of traditional gender roles, and was worshipped and addressed by Sappho in many of her poems. Williamson states, “to present Aphrodite as a paradigm and patron to a female audience, therefore, was to offer them an unusually empowering image of their own sexuality.”³¹ Aphrodite pursued sex with mortal men, a power relationship usually reserved for male Olympians. Yet, this shows itself again as Sappho represents women as active lovers in her poetry. This is unique in Greek literature but Sappho shows it may not be uncommon in daily life through her poetry, which represents the voices of many women.

Sappho had the freedom to create music incredibly different from that of the men of her time in part because females were not counted as citizens. She was not bound by stringent rules and was able to use imagination to create art unique from that of the single story that has perpetuated Western education.

Sappho’s poetry is important to analyze for further historical understanding. Historians cannot fully know the past from only one side, and Sappho is a marginalized viewpoint. History is important in many contexts: Sappho also provides empowerment in contemporary culture.

Conclusion: Sappho’s Feminism, Fluidity, and Future

There is still more to extract from the rich words of Sappho’s poetry. Research cannot halt, discussions cannot fizzle out, and historiography cannot continue to ignore her voice. We might not come to clear answers about Sappho’s life and times, but each step helps in working to shape our approach to historiographical sexuality and gender exploration, which in turn impacts today’s patriarchal and heteronormative societies.

Sappho has made her own legacy in poetry, through common use of the Sapphic stanza, how *The Pierian Spring* is now used as symbol for wisdom, and how she started the analogy of romantic troubles to physical ailments.

Sappho’s poetry offers historians a rare view into the lives of queer women in ancient Greece, helping to shape the largely untold female LGBTQ history. The future must contain more research with broader perspectives. As we move forward into discussion on the meaning of

Sappho's work it is necessary to separate discussion of her sexuality from appreciation and analyzation of her poetry, except when they distinctly overlap. In my research, I came across many sources exploring the intricacies of sexual orientation, sexual activity, and social context, yet a rare few added to this complex interaction. Homophobia abounds, and those who are not uncomfortable with her orientation sometimes try to diminish it. However, Sappho's sexual orientation is important: the number of female writers who write about female attraction to other females is practically nonexistent in ancient manuscripts. Historians must balance the clear and academic theses surrounding her work with the social and complicated influence of her sexuality. Sappho can contribute not only to our understanding of the ancient Greek world, but also to the heavily theorized concepts of sexuality, gender, femininity, and masculinity. Gender is a social construct, yet the binary that persists in contemporary society has permeated most every aspect of life. Fluid sexuality is a popular social debate as many grapple ideas of pansexuality and polysexuality. Sappho is a multi-faceted queer figure that falls into places on these spectrums that make many uncomfortable, and it is important to explore these identities through past time and space.

Sappho is an incredible feminist figure to read, learn from, and discuss in today's social and political climate. She is a primary source of female history and queer history; she is perhaps the only female queer writer of her time whose work has survived to this day. Exploration of her work is important on an individual level, but is also essential to youth in school. Queer education and history is a growing curriculum around the United States: what might Sappho offer such a class?

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