ROMAN SEXUALITIES

Edited by
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IN MEMORY OF

John Patrick Sullivan

WHOSE SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY
OF ROMAN SEX AND GENDER SYSTEMS PAVED
THE WAY FOR THIS COLLECTION

vitam quae faciant beatiorem,
iucundissime Martialis, haec sunt . . .
prudens simplicitas, pares amici;
convictus facilis, sine arte mensa . . .
quod sis, esse velis nihilque malis;
summum nec metuas diem nec optes.
(Martial 10.47)
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THE LOVER’S VOICE IN HEROIDES 15:

OR, WHY IS SAPPHO A MAN?

Pamela Gordon

TO THE CLASSICAL GREEKS, Sappho was “the tenth Muse,” a title that recognized not only the mythic proportions of her lyric genius, but also her unique status as a highly revered woman poet. Imperial Rome, however, seems to have had less confidence in Sappho’s womanliness. This essay examines one text in which Roman uncertainty about Sappho’s gender verges on a travesty of her erotic desire.

My text is Heroides 15 (also called the Epistula Sapphus), an elegiac poem that appears in our printed editions as the last installment of Ovid’s unanswered letters from abandoned heroines. This fictional work presents the legendary Sappho writing to her lost lover Phaon. Ovid’s Phaon is a young man who has left the Greek poet for the girls of Sicily; his Sappho is an unattractive older woman who has lost her Muse along with her lover (lines 13–14 and 195–98). Like Penelope, Dido, and the dozen other mythological authoresses of the Heroides, Sappho claims she cannot endure life without her man. In the course of her letter she reveals her intention to try the cure for unrequited love: a leap from the cliffs of Leucas (157–92).

Sappho’s letter is absent from the earliest manuscripts of the Heroides, and seems to have joined (or, as I think, rejoined) the corpus only in the twelfth or thirteenth century. Several Renaissance manuscripts assert, however, that the Sapphic epistle is doubly authentic: they present it as


I presented earlier versions of this chapter at meetings of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South (Hamilton, Ontario, 1991) and the American Philological Association (Washington, D.C., 1993), and at Texas Tech University (April 1993) for the symposium, “Foucault’s History of Sexuality: Revisions and Responses.” Acknowledgment of my work was inadvertently omitted from early printings of Margaret Williamson, Sappho’s Immortal Daughters (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 177. For their encouragement, I am grateful to the audiences at those meetings, and to Betty Banks, Amy Richlin, Harold Washington, and Kathleen Whalen. This investigation was supported by the University of Kansas Graduate Research Fund.
Ovid’s own translation into Latin of a genuine Greek text by the Lesbian poet. Although today’s readers do not take that claim literally, scholarship has focused upon the questions it suggests: Is the poem by Ovid? Does it belong with the rest of the Heroides? Does the poem translate or allude to genuine Sapphic lyrics that are now lost? This essay shifts the focus to another sort of authenticity: Does this Sappho write “like a woman”? Is the configuration of desire in this poem evocative of Sappho’s own lyrics? Or can the poem’s slant on Sappho’s erotic persona be described as Roman rather than Hellenic?

Several recent studies have drawn attention to opposing aspects of Sappho’s gender as it is constructed in Heroides 15. Kauffman argues (1986: 55–61 and passim) that the letter rejects stereotypically masculine conceptions of sexuality, and presents instead alternative, nonaggressive, feminine models for erotic desire. According to Kauffman, Ovid found his source for the language of female desire in Sappho’s authentic lyrics (61). In contrast, Lipking suggests that Ovid simply feminizes Sappho (Lipking 1988: 67–70). That is, rather than recalling Sappho’s true voice, Ovid forces the eccentric poetess to fit the mold of the archetypal forsaken woman. Thus, Ovid’s Sappho plays the role played by all other women in the Heroides (and in the literatures of many cultures), for “to be a heroine, for Ovid and his legion of followers, means being abandoned” (ibid.: xv). DeJean (1989: 64–67 and passim), like Kauffman, suggests that Ovid joins his voice with Sappho’s in order to subvert traditional male paradigms. For DeJean, the resulting persona upsets the male poetic order, but is not entirely female: behind Sappho lurks Ovid the male ventriloquist.

These three studies (Kauffman 1986, Lipking 1988, and DeJean 1989) deal with Ovid and his influence upon later (mostly nonclassical) literatures. The work of Cantarella (1988) and Hallett (1989a, reprinted in this volume) on the portrayal of female homoeroticism in a wider spectrum of Latin authors introduces another consideration: Ovid’s treatment of Sappho plays a role played by all other women in the Heroides (and in the literatures of many cultures), for “to be a heroine, for Ovid and his legion of followers, means being abandoned” (ibid.: xv). DeJean (1989: 64–67 and passim), like Kauffman, suggests that Ovid joins his voice with Sappho’s in order to subvert traditional male paradigms. For DeJean, the resulting persona upsets the male poetic order, but is not entirely female: behind Sappho lurks Ovid the male ventriloquist.

The word “lesbian” denotes, of course, a twentieth-century category (or rather, many twentieth-century categories), and I wish to call atten-
tion to some striking similarities between Ovid’s fictional Sappho and Esther Newton’s formulation without claiming that the Mythic Mannish Lesbian is necessarily a transhistorical or cross-cultural phenomenon. In fact, one point I wish to stress is that the mannish Sappho seems to be a Roman construction with few roots in the early Greek tradition. Since I do not assume that Ovidian personas are made up of universal “masculine” and “feminine” components, and since I wish to concentrate on constructions of desire in Rome, I measure Ovid’s Sappho by the rules for gendered writing provided by the other *Heroides*. That is, I attempt to compare Ovid’s Sappho not to my own conception of Woman, but to other male and female Ovidian voices. Although full discussion of the gendered writing of “the real Sappho” lies outside the realm of this chapter, I shall begin with a look at the way Sappho brings Phaon into her own lyrics.

Why Phaon (and Not Anactoria)?

At first glance it may appear that the main strategy of *Heroides* 15 is, as Lipking suggests, to transform Sappho into an ordinary forsaken woman: like the fourteen preceding heroines, she is just another woman who has lost her particular man. Some readers may take this as a “heterosexualizing” of Sappho; others may take it as confirmation that there was no notion of fixed sexual identity in classical antiquity. In my reading, however, the elements of this Sappho’s gender are more contradictory than either of these first impressions allows.

Unlike the warriors, gods, princes, and kings lamented by Ovid’s other heroines, Phaon is hardly a hero in his own right. An elusive mythological figure who appears, like Ganymede, in Attic red figure paintings with attractive long hair, Phaon is remembered as the boatman who ferried Aphrodite (disguised as an old woman) across the sea for no fare, a deed for which he was rewarded with youth and beauty. A dim picture of this Phaon is provided by an extant fragment of Sappho’s poetry, and Sappho’s nonextant lyrics may well have been Ovid’s source of inspiration for the descriptions of Phaon’s loveliness. *Heroides* 15 is rich in Sapphic allusions, and Roman readers certainly had access to Sapphic lyrics that are lost to us now (Jacobson 1974). As Nagy (1973) and Stehle (1990) have demonstrated, our evidence suggests that some of Sappho’s lyrics treated the theme of Aphrodite’s love for Phaon, as well as the passions of other goddesses for other beautiful young mortals.

We need not assume, however, that Sappho’s allusions to lovely young men replicated the paradigms for erotic desire found in the lyrics of her male predecessors and contemporaries. Several recent interpretations of
Sappho have claimed (appropriately, in my view) that her lyrics about women stress reciprocity and mutuality, rather than the lover's desire for possession,\textsuperscript{9} and a recent essay by Stehle (1990) suggests that Sappho approaches love between women and men in an equally unconventional spirit. Rejecting the narrow confines of the traditional roles of both the dominant lover and his passive object of desire, Sappho dissolves the customary hierarchy and uses the mythic pattern of the goddesses' liaisons with young mortals to create, as Stehle puts it, “an open space for imagining unscripted sexual relations” (ibid: 108). Thus Sappho portrays what the dominant culture suppresses: “Images of the desiring woman, the sexual mother with her son, the submissive but responsive man” (106). In my reading of *Heroides* 15, I imagine Ovid recalling these Sapphic texts, in which he, too, reads the unconventional erotic images that Stehle's reading brings out. Ovid sides, however, not with Sappho but with the dominant culture.\textsuperscript{10} As I shall show below, the Ovidian Sappho usurps one of the very roles—that of the dominant *erastēs*—that the lyric Sappho declines.

Although Phaon seems to have appeared in Sappho's lyrics as the legendary favorite of Aphrodite, later generations remembered him as one of Sappho's real-life consorts. In the late fourth century B.C.E., Menander cast Phaon as Sappho's runaway lover in a (nonextant) comedy. Lacking other evidence, we may view Menander (perhaps along with other comic poets) as the main source for the outlines of the Sappho/Phaon liaison as it is presented in *Heroides* 15 (cf. Nagy 1973; Stehle 1990; Knox 1995). Thus the tradition of Sappho's love for Phaon, a tradition that implies that neither Atthis nor Anactoria (nor any of the “hundred other girls,” 19) could break Sappho's heart, predates imperial Rome and is at least as old as New Comedy. What seems to be new in *Heroides* 15, however, is the idea that Sappho's love for Phaon represents a shift tantamount to conversion. Instead of ignoring Sappho's reputation as a *gunaikerastria* (a lover, or *erastēs*, of women),\textsuperscript{11} the Ovidian poem plays up Sappho's conquest of girls as the most noteworthy aspect of her past. This leads to an interesting juxtaposition. If *Heroides* 15 is the work of the young Ovid, not only is it our oldest unobscured commentary on Sappho's homo-eroticism (as the 1924 Pauly-Wissowa article on “Lesbische Liebe” claims);\textsuperscript{12} it is also the earliest source in which she renounces her love for girls (15–20):

\[
\text{nec me Pyrrhiades Methymniadesve puellae,}
\text{nec me Lesbiadum cetera turba iuvant;}
\text{vilis Anactorie, vilis mihi candida Cydro,}
\text{non oculis grata est Atthis, ut ante, meis,}
\text{atque aliae centum quas non sine crimine amavi:}
\text{improve, multarum quod fuit, unus habes.}
\]

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The girls of Pyrrha, the girls of Methymna?

No, thank you.

None of that Lesbian crowd for me.

Anactoria? Cheap.

Ditto pale Cydro.

And Atthis, my ex?

I want her out of my sight,
along with the hundred others I loved
despite public censure.

You (one worthless male) now possess
what once belonged to a bevy of girls.¹³

Whether we accept the majority reading for line 19, non sine crimine (“not without censure”; or possibly, “not without fault”) or the variant hic sine crimine (“here without censure”; “here without fault”)—whether Sappho is alluding to being censured for loving girls, or whether she is asserting that in Lesbos loving girls is not disgraceful—the point is: she loved girls. As Palmer writes in his commentary on this line, “Little is gained by reading hic for non” (1898: 427). At any rate, “Sappho” later reveals that her reputation was indeed damaged by her love affairs (Lesbides, infamem quae me fecistis amatae, “Lesbians loved to my disgrace,” 201). Thus in the Ovidian version of Sappho’s biography, the mature Sappho has become convinced that one man is preferable to the community of women celebrated in Sappho’s lyrics, and that community has been degraded to a horde of discarded girlfriends. As DeJean writes, Ovid makes Sappho repudiate desire for women as a “youthful transgression.” When Ovid is finished with her, “deviant female sexuality has been tamed, and the female bond often presented as the inspiration for Sapphic poetic creation has been erased” (DeJean 1989: 68).

Sappho has been transported far from her original archaic Greek context, which not only valorized homoerotic passion in general (see Cantarella 1992: 81) but also nourished a tradition of women’s writing (Skinner 1993). The notion that Sappho’s love for women is shameful may be traceable to postclassical Greek origins,¹⁴ but the idea becomes full-fledged in first-century B.C.E. Rome, where female homoeroticism is, as Cantarella puts it, almost univocally considered the “worst form of female depravity” (1992: 166; for the monstrous traits assigned to tribades in Rome, see Hallett 1989a). The Roman slant on Sappho’s erotic history is also discernible in the triumphantist notion of conversion implied in her repudiation of female lovers. For contrast, consider a dictum of Foucault, which serves as a valid generalization on the classical Greek material: “The Greeks did not see love for one’s own sex and love for the other sex as opposites, as two exclusive choices, two radically different types of be-
havior” (1985: 187). In classical Greek texts, a person may have free choice between male and female lovers, “but for them this option was not referred to a dual, ambivalent, and ‘bisexual’ structure of desire” (187). The Ovidian Sappho, however, seems to view her life with Phaon and her life with the girls of Lesbos as two separate modes of existence. As in the other Roman texts cited by Hallett (1989a) and Richlin (1993b), homoerotic behavior is construed as something unnatural or peculiar at best.

Once this unnatural and “radically different” realm has been established, one can imagine the notion of escape. Thus a repudiation of female homoeroticism is implied in our ersatz Sappho’s expression of eagerness to leave Lesbos—*quid mibi cum Lesb?* (“What’s Lesbos to me?” Ov. *Her.* 15.52)—and her repeated naming of her homeland toward the end of the poem (199–202):

Vespertus, Lesbides aequoreae, nupturaque nuptaque proles,
Lesbides, Aeolia nomina dicta lyra,
Lesbides, infamem quae me fecistis amatae,
desinete ad citharas turba venire mea!

Lesbian islanders,
married, engaged,
Lesbians catalogued on my Aeolian lyre,
Lesbians loved to my disgrace:
Crowd around to hear my zither no more.

In archaic and classical Greek texts, the island of Lesbos is associated with good wine, beautiful women, and certain sexual acts, but not necessarily with female homoeroticism: verbs formed from the Greek root *lesb-*—for example, refer to oral sex, often in the context of women servicing men. As long as Greek culture did not recognize sharp divisions between people based on the gender of their sexual partners, homoeroticism—male or female—was unlikely to be associated exclusively with any particular region. In imperial Rome, as in earlier Greece, the usual vocabulary of female homoeroticism alludes neither to Lesbos nor to Sappho: the use of adjectives and verbs with the root *lesb-* to connote tribadism can be traced in Greek only as far back as the tenth century C.E., and in Latin only back to the fifteenth century. In my view, however, the general association of the island of Lesbos with female homoeroticism is another matter. Though the connection is not obvious in archaic or classical Greek texts (unless we take this to be the sense of Anacreon 358), Lesbos is explicitly called the home of female homoeroticism in Lucian’s *Dialogi meretricii* (5), a Greek text from the Roman empire (second century C.E.). It is clear that Lucian has the central *tribas* in his dialogue hail from Lesbos pre-
ciselv because Lesbos was indeed associated with female homoeroticism, at least in some contexts, in some circles. The Ovidian Sappho, I assert, belongs to this same tradition.

A character named Clonarium makes explicit the connection between Lesbos and woman-to-woman sex at the beginning of Lucian's dialogue. Clonarium's friend Leaena has just confessed that she has a new girlfriend named Megilla who is "terribly mannish" (deinōs andrike), and Clonarium responds (289):

I don't get what you mean, unless she's some sort of betairistria (a woman who consorts with women).18 They say there are women like that in Lesbos, with masculine faces, who don't want to have sex with men, but only with women, as though they themselves were men.

Leaena concedes that Clonarium has grasped the situation, and proceeds to answer more questions about her experience with her mannish lover. When Clonarium asks how sex between two women could possibly work, Leaena's answer fits in well with the portrayal of phallic tribads in the sources that Hallett (1989a) surveys: as her name implies, Megilla/us ("Big Girl"/"Big Boy") has a substitute phallus.19

Readers who are not convinced that Lucian's invention of a lesbian from Lesbos has anything to do with a broader connection between Lesbos and female homoeroticism have pointed to the fact that Megilla herself has a long-term female lover named Demonassa who is "similarly skilled" (homoteekhnos, 290), and Demonassa comes from Corinth, not Lesbos. This is an issue to which I shall return below; for now I turn to Ovid's portrayal of the masculine side of his fallen Lesbian.

The Mannish Muse

Ovid's stance is best illumined by the contrast he draws between Sappho and his other Heroides. The laments of each of Ovid's other heroines stress not passion for the absent lover, but the predicament in which he has left her. The women claim to have had limited experience of sex before the arrival (and sudden departure) of their hero; most of them describe themselves as (formerly) chaste virgins or faithful matrons. Emblematic of their sexual passivity is their habit of dwelling on their own physical appearance while ignoring the man's. They rarely mention the man's attractiveness, but frequently allude to their own physical humiliation and repeatedly draw the reader's gaze to their inert, trembling, or grief-stricken bodies (cf. Her. 3.14–15, 3.59–60, 11.3–5, 14.3). As Fredrick has argued (1991), it is as though the heroines were inviting the reader to join the mythological addressee in a voyeuristic act; in the Heroides as
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elsewhere in Ovid, a woman’s fear is beautiful (Richlin 1992c: 162). Sappho reverses the pattern: while celebrating Phaon’s godlike appearance (Her. 15.21–23, 93–95, 123–24), she rejects his gaze and insists that she has skills (artistic and sexual) that compensate for her own ugliness (31–34):

\[
\begin{align*}
si \ mihi \ difficilis \ formam \ natura \ negavit, \\
\text{ingenio formae \ fama \ repende \ meo.} \\
sim \ brevis, \ at \ nomen, \ quod \ terras \ inpleat \ omnes, \\
est \ mihi; \ mensuram \ nominis \ ipsa \ fero.
\end{align*}
\]

If spiteful nature has denied beauty to me,
balance my genius
against my looks.
I may be short, but my reputation extends
to every land:
this is my stature.

In Heroides 15 it is the male who plays the passive role; the other letters allude to the men’s heroic exploits or bold actions, and most of them quote at least a phrase or two of the men’s erotic or affectionate remarks. Unlike the other addressees—Odysseus, Jason, Hercules, et alii—Phaon provides no heroic exploits for his lover to praise or criticize. Phaon seems not to do or say anything at all; Sappho has nothing to quote except something he failed to say.20 As Verducci says: “[Phaon] has no history, no clearly delineated or (as in other poems) misunderstood character, no motives, no ambitions. Phaon is merely, and consummately, beautiful” (1985: 154).

Whereas the other heroines never describe sexual contact directly, Sappho boasts of her own sexual expertise and indulges in the most graphic descriptions of sex in the Heroides. Her memories of Phaon lead her into vanting descriptions of love play (44–50), “deep tongue kisses” (129–30), and fantasies during which she “can’t stay dry” (134). Heroides 15 presents, moreover, a Sappho who has done to Anactoria, Atthis, Cydro, and “one hundred other girls” (atque aliae centum, 19) precisely what the mythical male heroes have done to the preceding fourteen heroines. Like Aeneas, Jason, and Hercules, Sappho has discarded her old girlfriends for someone new. Ovid’s other heroines lament this sort of behavior as something peculiarly masculine. Penelope, for example, derides herself for fearing for Odysseus’s life, while he, as is usual for men (quaevestra libido est, 1.75), is probably in some stranger’s arms. Dido recognizes her fate as a repetition of what happened to Aeneas’s first wife, and she knows he has left her not just for another country, but for “yet another Dido” (et altera Dido, 7.17). Medea and Hypsipyle need not dwell on male infidelity
(although they do); they have been abandoned by the same hero. It is feminine credulity that makes women the ideal victims—as Phyllis writes, she was fooled by Demophoon’s words simply because she was a woman in love (2.65).

Phaedra, the mature stepmother in love with her young stepson, and a mythical exemplum of lechery and illicit passion, provides the closest parallel among the heroines for Sappho’s lust. Whereas our other heroines barely mention their lover’s looks, in Heroides 4 Phaedra dwells upon Hippolytus’s pleasing appearance almost as much as Sappho does upon Phaon’s. The link between Sappho and Phaedra is also brought out by Sappho’s description of herself running “like a woman possessed” (15.139) through the woods and caves, an image that recalls Phaedra’s longing (in both Ovid and Euripides) for the wild realm of the hunter Hippolytus (cf. 4.37–50 and 15.135–45). Phaedra, however, is in love for the first time (venit amor gravitus, quo serius, “The later love comes, the deeper it strikes,” 4.19), and she shrinks from describing sexual acts or fantasies. Phaedra sees her passion for Hippolytus as an egregious female vice that runs in the family—something comparable to the passion for bulls experienced by her mother Pasiphae and her ancestor Europa (4.53–66).

True parallels to Sappho’s explicit language and lecherous gaze are to be found not in the women’s letters of the Heroides, but in the male voices of Ovid’s other works and the male letter-writers in the three pairs of male/female exchange that follow the letter from Sappho in some manuscripts and in most modern editions of the Heroides. Also paralleled in the stories of male lust in other Ovidian works (where only the beautiful are raped) is Sappho’s suggestion that Phaon is so lovely that some promiscuous goddess—Aurora, Phoebe, or perhaps even Venus—might swoop down and steal him (15.87–91). Mortal Ovidian women seldom pursue men, and forcible abduction is attempted only by the occasional witch, maenad, or goddess. For men in Ovid, however, rape is a compliment paid to an attractive woman (Richlin 1992e). The only Ovidian female to trespass into this male preserve is the naiad Salmacis, who rapes the beautiful boy Hermaphroditus. As Nugent (1990) and Richlin (1992e) point out, however, Ovid treats Salmacis’s behavior as a threatening usurpation of male privilege for which punishment is swiftly exacted. Male rapists in Ovid usually enjoy their prey and move on to a new victim, but Salmacis the female ceases to exist. Her body is joined to the boy’s, and the female mind and voice disappear.

Like Martial’s Phaenesis (see Hallett 1989a: 215), Ovid’s Sappho may even have a masculine body. When she writes to Phaon of her dreams about him, she breaks off her description with ulteriora pudet narrare, sed omnia fiunt, / et iuvat, et siccae non licet esse mihi (“I’m embarrassed to say
more, but it all happens, and it feels so good, and I can’t stay dry,” 15.133–34). Various copyists and editors have been unsure what to make of sicca (“dry”), but I follow Palmer (1898), who writes in his apparatus criticus spuria sed certa lectio, “Dirty but the right reading.” Elsewhere sicca clearly describes a woman who is unresponsive or unaroused (cf. Mart. 11.16.8, 81.2), and the sexual sense is at least implicit in Ovid’s odi quae praebet quia sit praebere necesse, / siccaque de lana cogitat ipsa sua, “I hate a woman who submits out of duty, while frigidly (sicca) thinking about her knitting” (Ars Am. 2.685–86).21 Thus, according to the language of erotic elegy, Sappho describes herself in vocabulary technically appropriate for a woman. The context crosses over into male territory, however: because she “can’t stay dry” precisely at the climax of her fantasy (just before she wakes up), it is clear, as Verducci says, that Sappho has had a “wet dream.”22 Thus it seems that in Rome Sappho, like other tribades, has acquired a phallus.

All this masculinity is of course incompatible (in Ovid’s scenario) with the surest emblem of womanhood: mother love. Sappho’s daughter Kleis holds a firm place in the biographical tradition; Sappho mentions her three times in the extant fragments alone.23 One reference is especially lovely “despite obscurity and corruption” (Page 1955: 131).

I have a beautiful child, her form
like golden flowers, beloved Kleis,
whom I would not trade for all of Lydia
or lovely... 24

To Ovid’s Sappho, however, Kleis is a burden: et tamquam desint, quae me sine fine fatigent, / accumulat curas filia parva meas, (“And as if all this weren’t enough to wear me out, I have a little daughter to top off my worries,” 15.69–70). One suspects that Ovid’s Sappho would gladly give up Kleis to get Phaon back. She grieves for Phaon as though she has lost a son (115–16); when her brother Charaxas witnesses her lamentations, he (indulging in an intertextual rejoinder)25 reproaches her for forgetting her real maternal obligations: quid dolet haec? certe filia vivit! (“What’s wrong with her? Surely her daughter still lives!” 120).

The Mythic Mannish Lesbian

From her lecherous gaze and her faithless treatment of women, to her apparent membrum virile, the Ovidian Sappho fits Ovid’s mold for men. Thus Ovid’s portrayal of Sappho anticipates a familiar modern description of lesbianism, according to which the lesbian has no sexuality of her own, but simply acts out a charade of male sexuality. The early work of
Luce Irigaray exposes this masculinizing of the lesbian in twentieth-century thought as one aspect of Freud's inability to describe women as anything but deficient men. According to Freudian theory, "The instincts that lead the homosexual woman to choose an object for her satisfaction are, necessarily, 'male' instincts" (Irigaray 1985a: 99). Thus, punning on l'homme, Irigaray asserts that because Freudian analysis maps no separate realm for the lesbian, it allows only for female homophobia, not female homosexuality.

Wittig (1980: 108) puts it another way: "When thought by the straight mind, homosexuality is nothing but heterosexuality." As in the ideology Wittig describes, so in Heroides 15: the Lesbian apes the Man. Wittig's literary works suggest a world of other options, and when Wittig concludes her essay "The Straight Mind" with the statement, "Lesbians are not women" (ibid.: 110), she writes of "Man" and "Woman" as political (rather than biological) concepts. Thus she envisions the lesbian as a woman freed from obligatory social relationships to Man. Wittig's lesbian has a woman's body, but conforms to the role of neither Woman nor Man (cf. Wittig 1981).

Ovid's scheme is not so flexible. His lesbian resembles instead Stephen Gordon, the trousered hero(ine) of Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness. As Newton (1984) points out, Hall could have developed her character along the lines of the feminine lesbians in (for example) the novels of Colette, but Hall and her contemporaries had other beliefs: "The 'womanly' lesbian contradicted the convictions that sexual desire must be male and that a feminine woman's object of desire must be a man." Thus Mary, the object of Stephen Gordon's affections, is a shadowy and inconsistent figure. Her lesbian liaison makes her less than a woman, but her passivity, youth, and prettiness prevent her from being a "lesbian." Hallett (1989a) points to a similar phenomenon in the depiction of female homoeroticism in Roman literature: while the model for female homoerotic behavior seems to require a passive recipient, Roman writers could not imagine her.

Why Is Phaon a Boy?

Sappho's repeated references to Phaon's good looks, her allusions to her long history of sexual exploits, her bold descriptions of lovemaking, and her acceptance of the notion that to rape is to flatter are among the subtler aspects of Sappho's machismo. Ovid's Sappho is so masculine that when she chooses a man, she chooses a boy. Or rather, as she puts it, she selects a pretty youth (of all the heroes in the Heroides, only Phaon is formosus) who is at that delectable stage of pubescence: o nec adhuc iuvenis,
nec iam puer, utilis aetas, / o decus atque aevi gloria magna tui, “Not yet a man but no longer a boy, a useful age, / glory of your generation, paradigm of your time” (93–94). Here the Roman vantage point for this view of Sappho emerges more fully. In pursuing a pretty boy, Sappho conforms to the Greek stylistics of male sexual behavior as formulated by Dover (1978) and Foucault (1985): men pursue not other men, but boys (or women, or slaves). A man’s partner, whether male or female, submits. Thus Sappho entreats Phaon to resume his passive role: *buc ades inque sinus, formose, relabere nostros! / non ut ames oro, verum ut amere sinas,* “Glide back to my arms, O beautiful, / not to love but to let yourself be loved” (95–96).

As though forgetting her own gender, Sappho explicitly equates her passion with a masculine drive: *quid mirum, si me primae lanuginis aetas / abstulit, atque anni grus vir amare potest?* “But it’s no wonder his peach fuzz blew me away: / a guy can really fall for a boy that age” (85–86). Sappho suspects one “real man” in particular of having a weakness for Phaon’s type: Mars (god of war) would go for him if he ever saw him (92). Or he would have, if he had seen him soon enough. Apparently Sappho has failed to notice that Phaon the *erōmenos* has begun to grow up the way Greek boys must. Hence his shift from Sappho (the older, more experienced *erasīs*) to pretty girls. Here Phaedra provides a telling contrast to Sappho’s erotic desire: even when Phaedra calls herself (wishfully) a girl, she refers to Hippolytus as an adult (*puella* and *vir*, 4.2). She admires not prettiness, but masculinity: his strength, his disheveled hair, the dust on his face (4.77–83). Phaedra is explicit about her preference: *sint procul a nobis iuvnes ut femina compti! / fine colo modico forma virilis amat,* “Keep youths primped like women out of my sight! / Male beauty should be nurtured in moderation” (4.75–76).

The implied requirement—that a couple can have only one active, virile partner, and that the other must be passive (and preferably young and pretty)—is also met by Lucian’s female pairs in *Dialogi meretricii* (5). Returning to that text, we find that our “informant” Leaena has reluctantly consented to let Megilla make love to her. Significantly, Leaena herself seems to be neither mannish nor particularly interested in women. The main reason she gives for her compliance is that Megilla begs her, and follows up with some ladylike gifts: a necklace and a fine linen dress (292). As for Demonassa, Megilla’s regular partner: although the dialogue at first suggests that Demonassa is just like Megilla (having “the same accomplishments,” 290), once the three are in bed it turns out that Demonassa is Megilla’s “wife” (*gune*, 291). Demonassa has none of the masculine attributes of Megilla, who gives herself the masculine name “Megillus,” has a shaved head, and has “the mind, the desire, and everything else of a man” (291–92). Demonassa’s status as the “wife” explains
why Demonassa is not from Lesbos. It is not a case of tribadism being attributed to both Lesbos and Corinth,28 a coupling that would indeed undermine any claim that imperial Rome regarded Lesbos as the home of female homoeroticism. Rather, as the passive, more feminine partner in a female couple, Demonassa is not herself completely a tribas, but an inhabitant of that unmapped territory of the tribad’s lover (see Hallett 1989a: 223, on this phenomenon in the Latin sources).

As Hallett (1989a) demonstrates, there are few Latin texts that do not attempt to masculinize, anachronize, and Hellenize women who engage in homeroctic activity. Thus, the attribution of boy-love to the Greek Sappho fits the pattern (in some Roman circles) of disowning homoeroticism by naming it “Greek” (MacMullen 1982). The conception of homoerotic desire in Heroides 15 is Hellenic only on the surface, however. As Foucault put it (1985: 192), “The Greeks could not imagine that a man might need a different nature—an ‘other’ nature—in order to love a man.”29 It seems that the Roman imagination suspected that a different nature was in fact required, especially if a woman were to love a woman (a possibility the Greek sources cited by Foucault usually avoid). In the Roman conception, this different nature runs so deep that the Roman tribad cannot convert or go straight simply by choosing a partner of the opposite sex. In fact, the tribad’s object choice seems to be viewed as a symptom of her masculine makeup, rather than the essential core of her tribadism. Martial’s Philaenis does not become normal when she turns from girls and has sex with a boy (7.67.1). Instead, contrary to the Foucauldian notion that the ancients had no concept of fixed sexual types,10 Philaenis, like Sappho, is out of bounds wherever she goes.

Snyder mentions the difficulties some modern readers have in reconciling Sappho’s wedding songs with the love poetry Sappho addressed to other women and judiciously concludes:

> In the absence of any independent concrete evidence about the social structures of sixth-century Lesbos, all that can be said with certainty is that for whatever reasons, Sappho herself evidently did not regard marriage and lesbianism as mutually exclusive. In Sappho’s world, there is room for coexistence. (1989: 32–33)

For the imperial Roman audience, as for a legion of modern readers, the Greek tradition that counted men and women among Sappho’s lovers is problematic, and peaceful coexistence is impossible. According to Roman (il)logic, Sappho’s problematic sexuality was in need of comic resolution. The Ovidian Sappho, as a notorious lover of women, must have a masculine nature. This “other” nature is so integral to her character that, although she may turn her gaze to a male, Sappho must remain, absurdly, a hom/m/osexual.
Epilogue: A Glimpse of the Roman Lesbian

In her recent essay about *cinaedi*—Roman men who desired to be penetrated by men—Amy Richlin writes that “a historian might doubt their very existence, attested as it is only by hostile sources.” She puts forth the possibility, however, that the history of the *cinaedus* may one day be retrieved from the silence, and “the hostility of the sources be considered as a fact of these men’s lives” (Richlin 1993b: 524). Can the same be said of the *tribas*? Despite the implicit denials in the Roman sources that these women even existed in Rome, and despite the “Roman denial of biological realism” inherent in the phallic behavior attributed to the *tribas* (Hallett 1989a: 222), can these texts accord us a glimpse of Roman women who loved women? Can we someday retrieve these women from the shadows?

Because of the disavowal of reality that Hallett’s article spells out, and because of the comparative scarcity of the sources, in the case of the Roman lesbian we are even worse off than we are with the *cinaedi*. I would hazard to suggest, however, that one way to find a material lesbian beneath the surface of our hostile sources would be to approach the tribad’s allegedly masculine form with new sets of assumptions. In this essay, I have adduced Irigaray’s hom/mosexual and Newton’s Mythic Mannish Lesbian in order to expose the ludicrous side of a phallic conception of sex that imagined that “sex could only occur in the presence of an imperial and imperious penis” (Newton 1984: 561). Newton begins her essay by asking whether the mannish lesbian could be a male pornographic fantasy, but ends it by asserting that the notion needs to be challenged “not because it doesn’t exist, but because it is not the only possibility.” She asks: “Why should we as feminists deplore or deny the existence of masculine women or effeminate men? Are we not against assigning specific psychological or social traits to a particular biology?” (ibid.: 575). Newton’s questions point toward one way I might temper my approach, but Wittig’s claim that the lesbian is neither woman nor man suggests an even more productive angle (Wittig 1981).

As Newton observes, historical portrayals of mannish lesbians may sometimes be inspired by actual women who adopt traditionally “masculine” garb or behavior. But what if one were to describe these women as “gender-rebellious” rather than masculine? Ann Ferguson, who is optimistic that lesbian theorists can develop a notion of lesbian culture that is not “so narrow as to exclude us from any authentic lesbian history before the nineteenth century,” suggests in a recent essay the potential gains such a change in vocabulary may offer (1991: 138). Objecting to what she sees as an ahistorical bent in Wittig’s theorizing, Ferguson outlines an
“approach to thinking of lesbian cultures as potential cultures of resistance within historically specific patriarchal cultures” (1990: 84). Thus we might conjecture that the Mythic Mannish Lesbian is likely to appear (in historically specific forms) when a dominant culture perceives female homoerotic behavior as an unseemly usurpation of the privileged role of the male. With this formulation in mind, we can imagine the masculinized lesbians of the Roman texts not as monsters or fools (as their creators intended), but as dauntless rebels. Despite its efforts to assert that such creatures cannot exist, the dominant culture has left us a promising glimpse of the women who challenged the very notion of Roman womanhood.

Turning back to Heroides 15, we might find something redemptive after all in the Roman stereotyping of Sappho. The association of Sappho with Rome’s negative view of female homoeroticism may debase “the tenth Muse,” but when turned on its head, the Sappho/tribas connection brings to the Roman lesbian the notions of intellect, creativity, and the capacity for full erotic expression. Because the authenticity of the poem is not assured, we cannot be completely secure in assigning this development to the age of Augustus. My own view is that the similarities between the portrayals of homoeroticism in this text and in the texts discussed by Hallett make the Ovidian Sappho look quite at home in first-century Rome. Lucian’s second-century reference to lesbianism in Lesbos may convince others, however, that our text belongs instead to an era slightly later in the Roman empire.

Scholars who regard Heroides 15 as inauthentic point to various apparently anomalous turns of phrase and metrical patterns, but stress in particular the fact that Sappho’s epistle is missing from the earliest (ninth-or tenth-century) manuscripts of Ovid’s Heroides (Tarrant 1981). There is evidence, however, that these manuscripts belong to a separate tradition that had excised “Sappho to Phaon,” jumping from the fourteenth epistle to what is now known as Heroides 16. Some thirteenth-century anthologies, whose archetype may be as old as the manuscripts that omit Sappho, preserve excerpts of the Heroides; and when they quote “Sappho to Phaon,” the poem appears right between excerpts of Heroides 14 and 16 (Palmer 1898: 422). With Palmer, I take this as “striking confirmation” that the Sapphic epistle belongs with the rest of the Heroides, and that the fifteenth slot is indeed Sappho’s rightful place, poised as she is between the penultimate lonely heroine and Ovid’s three pairs of male/female correspondents.

To my mind this excision bears comparison to the fate of Sappho’s own lyrics. W. R. Johnson has written recently:

The legends about the burnings of Sappho’s poems are, doubtless, mostly legends merely. But where, in matters such as these, there is smoke, there is usually some fire, even if it is essentially symbolic. If Gregory VII did in fact
burn her poems publicly in 1073, his act—it was more than a gesture—was hardly intended to get rid of her for good and all, since he was doubtless not silly enough to think that he was destroying the only remaining copies of the Poetess from Hell; rather, lacking an Index, he was sending a message, to his contemporaries and to the future, about this evil and the other poetic evils of whom she herself was symbolic.

My suspicion is that despite her repudiation of the Lesbian girls, “Sappho’s” frank acknowledgment of her love for women ultimately led to the judgment that Sappho had no place in the authoritative catalogue of womankind that forms the *Heroides*. Like Ovid, she was exiled. Like the original Sappho, she was suppressed. A few centuries later, when readers had begun to long anew for the voice of the tenth Muse, Ovid’s poem was given a second life, and its eager readers were promised that this was the real thing.

### Notes

2. Cf., e.g., Horace’s reference to *mascula Sappho* (“virile Sappho,” *Epist.* 1.19.28), a passage that certainly alludes to the issue of gendered writing, even if it does not comment upon Sappho’s sexuality per se. The Greece/Rome dichotomy is, of course, not always clear-cut; there is much variation between regions and periods, and Sappho’s lyrics about women had already become problematic in Hellenistic society. Cf. Dover 1978: 182.
3. The following are two of the many manuscript headings listed by Dörrie (1971: 313) with my own translations: *epistula Saphos vatis ad phaonem amatorem suum quae ab Ovidio translata fuit de graeco in latinum*, “A letter from Sappho the poet to Phaon her lover, which was translated by Ovid from Greek to Latin”; and *Saphos Lesbiae poete opusculum sequitur*, “The following is a minor work of the Lesbian poet Sappho.”
4. Although I do not consider the attribution to Ovid a settled issue, in this essay for convenience I will refer to our author as “Ovid.” For some arguments against authenticity (with bibliography), see Tarrant 1981, and Knox 1995: 12–14; see also Reynolds 1983: 272–73. On Sapphic allusions and parodies, see the chapters on Sappho in Jacobson 1974 and Verducci 1985.
5. See Hallett 1989a on the term *tribas* (plural: *tribades*), which is a Roman borrowing from the Greek.
7. This method can be justified even if the epistle is not Ovid’s, as it was clearly composed as a companion piece to the other *Heroides*.
8. Cf. Dover (1978: 78), who cautions that, although long hair is often associated with youthful *erōmenoi*, it does not necessarily have this connotation.

10. DeJean writes of the Ovidian Sappho's "acceptance of the superiority of an ars amatoria much like Ovid's over that which she had formerly preached" (1989: 68).

11. See POxy. 1800 fr. 1 col. i.16f., which says that some people call Sappho a gammaikerastria, a "(female) erastês of women"; cited by Dover (1978: 174). Dover speculates that the writer may have been following a Hellenistic source.

12. Kroll 1924. Other authorities agree that our earliest extant references to Sappho's homoeroticism date to the Augustan age, even if they do not consider Her. 15 as the first example. Dover cites Hor. Carm. 2.13.5 and Ov. Tr. 2.365 as our earliest commentaries on "Sappho's eros for her own sex" (1978: 174), and Jocelyn cites Hor. Epist. 1.19.28 and Epod. 5.41, along with Her. 15 and later works such as Mart. 7.69.9–10 and 10.35.15–16 (1980: 48 n. 66).

13. This and all other translations of the Heroïdes in this essay are by Stanley Lombardo and Pamela Gordon (Lombardo and Gordon, n.d.). Pyrrha and Methymna (15) are towns on Lesbos.

14. Welcker ([1816] 1845) "freed Sappho from a prevailing prejudice" (as his title asserts) by identifying Attic comedy as the source of stories about her liaisons with women. More recent scholarship, however, has stressed that the comic Sappho seems to have engaged in excessive sexual activity with men. Cf. Lardinois 1989.


17. Dover cites Anac. fr. 358 as an archaic text in which there appears prima facie to be an association between the island Lesbos and female homosexuality, but cautions that the text may suggest simply that the women of Lesbos were associated with erotic license (Dover 1978: 183–84).

18. On betairistriae, see Hallett 1989a: 222. The translations of Lucian are my own.

19. Clonarium is eager to know all about the mechanics, but Leaena's punch line leaves us wondering whether to imagine an olisbos (a dildo) or an enlarged clitoris: "Don't press for details; it's an ugly story. So, by Aphrodite, I won't tell you!" (Lucian Dial. Meret. 292).

20. In a flippant allusion to Catull. 8, Ovid's Sappho says that she wishes Phaon had at least bid her farewell: si modo dixisses "Lesbi puella, vale!", "If only you had said, 'Girl of Lesbos, goodbye!'" (100).

21. Tarrant (1981: 146) argues that sica in the Ars means "sober" or "temperate," and that the explicitly sexual connotation of the word does not appear before Martial.

22. Verducci (1985: 166), who earlier translates lines 133–34 as "I hesitate to say what happens next, but it all happens, / there's no choice, just joy, and I'm inundated with it" (130). Verducci does not discuss Sappho's masculinity explicitly,
and she may understand the text to refer to female ejaculation, which is possible if we consider the mechanics of reproduction as presented in ancient Hippocratic texts. See A. E. Hanson 1990: 314.

23. DuBois (1995: 148) questions the modern tendency to assume that Kleis is Sappho’s daughter and suggests that the relationship may be more erotic than modern readers have assumed. See Hallett 1982 for earlier attempts to dislodge Kleis from the biographical tradition.


25. In several of Sappho’s poems, Charaxas is upbraided or lamented for his involvement in an unseemly love affair.

26. As many critics of Foucault have pointed out, Foucault’s scheme is based on philosophical texts, and does not take into account the very different picture presented by, e.g., the comedies of Aristophanes. For my purposes here, this is not a problem; the scheme Ovid parodies is the stereotypical model of the Greek elite.

27. Or does she have a taste for overripe boys? On the ideal age for a boy to leave his lover, see Foucault 1985, esp. 199–201. One example Foucault cites is Pl. Prt. 309a, where the razor that shaves the boy’s first beard must also cut his ties to his lover.

28. Pace Dover (1978: 183). Instead, Corinth’s reputation as a center for female prostitution highlights Demonassa’s role as the receptive feminine partner.

29. See Foucault (1985: 190): “A man who preferred paidika did not think of himself as being ‘different’ from those who pursued women.” Cf. “The Greeks did not see love for one’s own sex and love for the other sex as opposites, as two exclusive choices, two radically different types of behavior. The dividing lines did not follow that kind of boundary” (187).


31. Against the idea that “butch” women are imitation men, see Butler’s remarks on butch/femme identities (1990: esp. 123 and 137).

32. Cf. Cantarella (1992: 170): “In the Roman imagination, female homosexuality could only mean an attempt by a woman to replace a man, and an attempt by another woman to derive from homosexual intercourse, quite unnaturally, the pleasure which only men were able to confer.”

33. From the foreword to Rayor 1991: xvii.

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