The Victorian construction of Sappho, 1835-1914

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THE VICTORIAN CONSTRUCTION OF SAPPHO 1835-1914

An Honors Thesis

Departments of History and Classics

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ABSTRACT

Sappho was an ancient Greek lyric poet writing on the isle if Lesbos in the seventh century BC. Her original works were contained in seven books; however, only a few fragments are extant. These fragments are mainly about women and are erotic in nature. Considering the homoerotic tone of Sappho’s poetry, it is interesting that the Victorians were fascinated with her and a proliferation of biographies, artwork, plays, operas, translated poems, appeared in that era bearing her name. How did the Victorians reconcile the homoerotic tone of her poems with their own views on what was right and proper? The answer is that they constructed a version of Sappho who was the epitome of a virtuous Victorian woman.

This paper explores how the Victorians molded Sappho into a pure Victorian woman. The exploration begins by analyzing their attempts to “Vindicate” Sappho from her tarnished reputation as a promiscuous woman. The Victorians further attempted to make Sappho appear pure by widowing her and disputing all references to a husband as false. Victorian scholars also refute the story of Sappho and Phaon. Once the tarnished elements of her reputation were eliminated, the scholars portray Sappho as a schoolmistress or the leader of an Aesthetic club, which provides an appropriate career for Sappho according to Victorian mores. This paper discusses the changes that were made by Victorian translators to Sappho’s poem, “The Hymn to Aphrodite,” in order to make Sappho’s love appear virtuous. The last section discusses the paradox that arises because the term lesbian, meaning female homosexual, was coined during the late Victorian era, and the term was based on the supposed practices of Sappho. This section shows how biographers of Sappho could maintain her innocence while this term simultaneously came into use. The ultimate goal of this paper is to show how Victorian scholars molded Sappho’s biography and poetry to fit into their own values system; thereby creating Sappho, the virtuous Victorian woman.
The ancient Greek lyric poet Sappho, writing in the sixth century BC, has been lauded by many writers from antiquity to the present as the greatest woman poet of all time. Sappho’s original poems were contained in approximately seven books, which are mentioned by ancient writers; however, today only a few fragments remain. These fragments are for the most part written about women and are erotic in nature, although some are from bridal songs and epigrams. Since much of Sappho’s poetry is love poetry about her desire for women, it is interesting that the Victorians, with their strict moral codes, were fascinated with her. How did they reconcile the homoerotic tone of her poems with their own views on what was right and proper? The answer is that they constructed a Sappho that was the epitome of a virtuous Victorian woman by imposing their own morality on her and molding her and her poetry to fit this model.

**Vindicating Sappho**

The Victorian sources all agree that Sappho’s reputation was sullied by the Greek Attic comedians, writing in the fifth century BC and later. Henry Thornton Wharton, held by the Victorian scholars to be the authority on Sappho, writes:

> Seeing that six comedies are known to have been written under the title of Sappho...and that her history furnished material for at least four more, it is not strange that much of their substance should in succeeding centuries have been regarded as genuine. In a later and debased age she became a sort of stock character of the licentious drama.¹

Wharton does not mention what the comedians actually wrote about Sappho that affected her reputation because no one knows what was said in those comedies, since the texts are lost and only their titles are known. Since Sappho had a reputation for promiscuity, Wharton is blaming that bad reputation on the ancient comic playwrights, and does not believe there is any truth to the rumors about Sappho's sexuality. Consistent with the other Victorian writers on Sappho, he never mentions what the rumors are; he only states that they are of a bad nature.

The only Victorian era book that elaborates on the rumors about Sappho is the anonymous one published by George Barrie and Son in 1902. This is the only Victorian or Edwardian text that explicitly states that Sappho was rumored to be a lover of women as well as men, while the other texts do not state precisely what the rumors were even though they attempt to dispel them.

Another commonly accepted theory concerning the Lesbian poetess—perhaps the one which the name of Sappho most generally recalls to the minds of the generality of mankind—is thus formulated in a so-called Biographical Sketch, published early in the last century. Cercolas [her supposed husband] "leaving her a widow very young, she renounced all thoughts of a second marriage, but not the pleasures of love; not enduring to confine that passion to one person, which, as the ancients tell us, was too violent in her to be restrained even to one sex..."2

This quotation demonstrates that Sappho was viewed from antiquity to the eighteenth century as sexually promiscuous with both sexes. However, the Victorians believed that they were the first to question this view. Following this quotation in the book, the anonymous author quotes Wharton, who states that it was the Attic Comedians who initiated this tarnished portrayal of Sappho, but that they were wrong and Sappho was

2 Sappho: Odes, Bridal Songs, Epigrams (Philadelphia: George Barrie and Son, 1902), xiii.
really a “pure” (meaning sexually chaste) woman.³

Modern scholars believe that Sappho was married, but not necessarily widowed, and they further believe that her passion was not “restrained even to one sex.” However, this belief needs to be put into the context of the ancient Greek world. Modern scholars know that in ancient Athens and elsewhere there was a custom of pederasty among aristocratic men. Young adolescent boys were pursued by older men and then became the lovers of the older men and were initiated into society by them. In Athens, the pederastic sex was not supposed to involve penetration, but in practice there, as well as in other locations in Greece, it could. Once these youths were older and of marriageable age, they would become the dominant partners with different youths. These practices were an integral part of the social system.⁴ Consequently, practices involving women could have been similar. Aristocratic women were not allowed sex with men outside of marriage because they could become pregnant with another man’s child and their husbands would not know if they were raising other men’s children. Since sexual relations between females do not result in pregnancy, it is possible that women were able to have sexual relations with other women and it could even have been part of a social structure similar to the one for aristocratic Greek males. Sappho was an aristocratic female on the island of Lesbos, and her “pupils” were the young daughters of aristocratic families. They “studied” with Sappho until the time came for their marriage, which was

³ Ibid, xiii.

arranged. The loneliness experienced by Sappho with the loss of one of her pupils is the topic of many of Sappho’s fragments that will be explored later.

Wharton bases much of his defense of Sappho on his description of the Attic comedians. He assumes that the reader will draw the same conclusion that he drew, that because of the type of comedy being written in the fifth and fourth centuries, it was not possible that these comedians could pass on Sappho’s pure name without attaching vices to it.

The Greek comedies relating to the history of Sappho, referred to on previous pages, were all written by dramatists who belonged to what is known as the Middle Comedy, two centuries after her time (404-340 B.C.). The comedy of that period was devoted to satirizing classes of people rather than individuals, to ridiculing stock-characters, to criticising the systems and merits of philosophers and writers, to parodies of older poets, and to travesties of mythological subjects....Writers of such a character were obviously unfit to hand down unsullied a character like Sappho’s, powerful though their genius might be to make their inventions seem more true than actual history.  

Wharton attributes all of the disreputable elements of Sappho’s reputation to the Attic Comedians. He calls into question their own characters as well, stating that men with reputations for haranguing figures in literature should not be trusted. Therefore, there is no truth to the “calumnies” against Sappho.

Thomas George Johnson, another Victorian scholar, also comments on how the Attic Comedians affected Sappho:

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6 Wharton, 36.

7 Ibid., 10.
The scandal which the Attic comedians of a degenerate Athens connected with Sappho’s name interests us as much or as little now, according to our moral propensities....All opinions formed by men on women are apt to be intense and exaggerated, and most women who have presumed to help forward the progress of their sex have almost always and in all ages been uniformly misunderstood if not slandered and reviled. The favourable view of Sappho’s moral character expressed by Welcker and Müller is now generally received in England and Germany.  

Johnson goes even further than Wharton by implying that any who express interest in the portrayals of Sappho as “immoral” are immoral themselves. Furthermore, he offers an explanation of the opinions of men in ages past, stating that outstanding, intelligent women throughout history have been misrepresented by the dominant male society because society views these women as threatening and as stepping out of their proper role. This statement is not untrue; however, the portrayal of Sappho as having homoerotic tendencies has a basis in reality and was not purely conjectured by threatened men.

Mary Mills Patrick, President of Constantinople College from 1875 to 1924, an American high school for girls located in Constantinople, expresses a similar view to Wharton’s regarding the origins of Sappho’s defamed character:

She was not always understood by later writers, and it has been left to modern critics to restore to her the honourable reputation which she deserves. Her character was first definitely attacked some two hundred years after she died by the comedy writers of Athens, who were unable to understand the free and full life of the women of Lesbos two hundred years earlier, and who, putting their own interpretation upon her poems, attributed to her much that was base and questionable in her private life. At least six of these writers make her a mistress of love, intrigue, and vice, and their slanderous conception of her character was accepted for many succeeding centuries.

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Patrick, also, does not have any real knowledge of the contents of these plays, though she attributes the "questionable" aspects of Sappho's character to them. It is interesting to note the vehemence with which she defends Sappho. I am of the opinion that, because Patrick was a Victorian woman, and also a college president, she would have been familiar with the effects of gossip and rumors relating to character in the Victorian era. A woman's reputation, especially that of a woman in the public eye, could easily be tarnished. In fact, if there were comments made by the purveyors of gossip that a woman was not morally righteous, she could count on losing her respectability and with it, her social position.

Patrick states that the misinterpretation of some of Sappho's poetry led to the view of Sappho as a lover of women. In this quotation, Patrick is referring to one of the fragments believed to have been addressed to Anaktoria, "one of her favourite pupils."¹⁰

This [fragment] has been described as a love poem, and has been cited as proof against Sappho's character by some writers, who forgot that the finished form of description of emotions was part of the profession of a Greek poet. A careful study of the lines in question shows that Sappho has been misjudged in this as well as in other poems. The words do not describe love at all, but the unhappiness occasioned by the loss of the affection of her friend was of so deep a nature that its full expression required a stronger use of the language than is at present the custom. We quote the poem in full: -- "Equal to the gods seems that man to me who sits face to face with thee, and hearkens near by to thy sweet tones and enticing laughter, which make even my heart flutter in my bosom. For whenever I look at thee but a moment my voice fails me, my tongue breaks down, and in a moment a delicate glow has suffused my skin; with my eyes, I see not, and my ears ring. Moisture pours out everywhere and trembling takes full hold of me. I am paler than grass, and I seem in my madness to lack a little of death."¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 109.

¹¹ Ibid., 109-110.
Patrick portrays Sappho’s relationship with Anaktoria as one of bosom friends. She is like Anne of Green Gables who, when she is forbidden to see Diana Barry by Mrs. Barry, goes into “the depths of despair.” Patrick maintains that contemporary readers do not understand that the Greek lyric poets were much more descriptive in their portrayals of emotions, and that what may seem erotic to a Victorian reader, was not at all erotic to an ancient Greek listener. There is some truth to this statement. Victorian writers were definitely not as descriptive of their emotions and feelings as the Greek Lyric poets were. However, the poem’s true meaning, as held by modern scholars, is that Sappho is lamenting the loss of a lover who has just been married. Sappho is explaining that she is overwhelmed with desire for the girl, while the bridegroom is not overwhelmed by the girl’s charms. The same fragment was obviously interpreted very differently in the Victorian era than it is in the modern era.

In another description of how Sappho’s poems have been misconstrued, Patrick states that Sappho wrote many bridal songs.

These songs contributed largely to the misconception which has existed regarding the character of Sappho. Many who read them do not realize their purpose, and do not understand that they were written to express the emotions of various brides and bridegrooms at their own wedding feasts.\(^{12}\)

Since a large portion of Sappho’s works do come from bridal songs, Patrick is right in stating that these were written by Sappho from the point of view of the bride or groom. However, the most “controversial” of Sappho’s poems are not bridal songs. Therefore, as much as Patrick is attempting to erase any doubt in Sappho’s character, her conclusion

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 126.
that the “misconceptions” about Sappho’s poems can be explained away by calling them bridal songs is false.

Patrick further argues her position by stating:

There is every reason to conclude that Sappho was a woman with high moral ideals. Alkaios, in addressing her, uses the epithet *agna*, which is a word that especially implied chastity. We have internal evidence in favour of her purity of character, from the ode recently discovered condemning the conduct of her brother in his love for Rhodopis. How could she have written these scathing words about his disgrace if there were stains upon her own reputation? We find a still further proof in the respect that was shown her by her fellow townsmen. The authority of the statements regarding the wide honour in which she was held cannot be questioned, and this certainly would not have been the case had there been any doubt of the uprightness of her character. Her position at the head of her school also attests the fact of the esteem she which she enjoyed. There has never been an age of the world when society was so corrupt that young women would be sent from a distance to study under a teacher who had a sullied reputation. On the contrary, the fact that a man or woman has been able to hold the position as head of an educational institution has always been considered without question a sufficient proof of integrity.¹³

Patrick begins her “proof” by asserting that Sappho was described as chaste which meant that she was morally upright. In the Victorian era the only moral option for an unmarried woman was to be chaste. According to the literature and artwork of the period, if a Victorian woman were unchaste, she would be cast out and forced into prostitution.¹⁴ Consequently, since there is no evidence that Sappho was forced into prostitution or cast out, according to Victorian standards, she must have been a pure woman. Patrick does not take into account that the meaning of “chastity” could have been different in the ancient Greek world. In Athens, women were not supposed to have sexual relations with

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¹³ Ibid., 99-100.

men outside of marriage, but there is no mention of sexual relations with women having the same stigma. Consequently, chastity could only refer to relations between men and women. However, since Patrick has already dismissed the notion of Sappho’s having any physical relations with other females, she assumes that “chastity” means that Sappho was sexually pure.

Patrick also cites the poem in which Sappho chastises her brother Charaxus as proof that Sappho was virtuous. The story goes that Charaxus was in Naucratus in Egypt in order to trade Lesbian wine, when he became infatuated with a slave/prostitute who was called either Doricha or Rhodopis. He paid a large amount of money to free her from slavery. Sappho was greatly angered by his actions and wrote a poem about it.\textsuperscript{15} However, from the poem, one cannot judge why Sappho is displeased with him. Most likely, she was angry that he had spent a large sum of money on a prostitute and dishonored the family name in that manner. Patrick believes that a woman who was carrying on with love affairs, could not presume to be angry with a family member for doing the same thing. Amelia Gere Mason, another Victorian author, agrees with Patrick, writing: “Why did she feel her brother’s disgrace so keenly if her own life was open to reproach.”\textsuperscript{16} One reason for Patrick’s and Mason’s opinions is that Victorian men were allowed to have affairs and sleep with prostitutes because it was considered a part of their nature. Conversely, women were the virtuous sex and supposed to uphold the family

\textsuperscript{15} Wharton, 4-7.

honor. Women could disapprove of the immorality of the men, but it was left up to the
women to uphold the family honor.\footnote{For information on Victorian views on sexuality and honor see Mackenzie.} Consequently, according to this model, if Sappho
had the audacity to rebuke her brother for his “natural” ardent actions, her life must have
been beyond reproach. At the end of the above quotation Patrick states that Sappho was
the leader of a school and that the fact that families sent their daughters to study with her
meant that she was a woman without slander attached to her during her lifetime.
However, Patrick’s view that Sappho did not have a bad reputation during her lifetime
may have been true, but not for the reasons that Patrick cites. Sappho may not have had a
bad reputation because it is possible that she was participating in a social system in which
older women had physical relations with younger women. If these relations were part of
a social system, or universally accepted, then as long as Sappho’s “affairs” fell within this
realm, she would have been considered morally upright by her contemporaries. Overall,
Patrick is quite vehement in her defense, especially regarding her comments about the
good reputations of school leaders. It is a matter of speculation, but could it be that her
vehemence regarding Sappho’s reputation stems from her own awareness of how easily
slanderous accusations could damage her reputation as an Edwardian woman at the head
of an institution?

Mason also discusses Sappho’s tarnished reputation and provides a “proof” for
why it is untrue:

The Attic comedians said unpleasant things about her a century after she died, and
no one lived who could dispute them….A hundred years had sufficed to dim the
incidents of her life, and left them free to invent any romance they chose. Her supposed love-affairs were a fruitful theme. That men died before she was born, or were born after she died, were impertinent details which were not held to interfere in the least with their tender relations toward her.\(^{18}\)

These love affairs that Mason refers to were mentioned in the ancient texts. Anacreon, another Greek lyric poet, was represented as one of her lovers.\(^{19}\) Wharton states that "Diphilus too, in his play Sappho, represented Archilochus and Hipponax as her lovers—for a joke, as Athenaeus prudently remarks. Neither of these, however, was a contemporary of hers, and it seems quite certain that Anacreon, who flourished fully fifty years later never set eyes on Sappho."\(^{20}\)

William Marion Reedy agrees with Wharton and Mason regarding the implausibility of these men being lovers of Sappho. However, he believes that the comic poets created these tales in order to impugn the men referred to, by linking them to a woman poet. He states as evidence that "The husband of a passionate poetess, to-day, is the butt of ridicule."\(^{21}\) Therefore, Reedy is saying that any man who is the lover of a woman poet (a woman with a career) is, and always has been, made fun of and is seen as being ruled by a woman or as not manly enough. If the comic poets cited Sappho as having many lovers in order to slander certain men, then the stories have no basis in fact and Sappho’s reputation is left un tarnished.

Reedy goes even further in defending Sappho’s honor than just disposing of the

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\(^{18}\) Mason, 31.

\(^{19}\) Wharton, 8.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 9.

rumors about male lovers. He uses quotations from Wharton as well as J. Addington Symonds and adds his own interpretations to “be fair” to Sappho. He begins by quoting Symonds’s description of Lesbian society:

“Lesbian ladies formed clubs for the cultivation of poetry and music.… Unrestrained by public opinion, and passionate for the beautiful, they cultivated their senses and emotions and developed their wildest passions.” All of which may be true in general, but not true of the poetess, though she did become, in a debased age, a sort of stock character for the licentious drama. Her infamy is a growth of many years after her death, not justified by any contemporary evidence. “The fervor of her love and the purity of her life,” says her biographer [Wharton], “and the very fact of a woman having been the leader of a school of poetry and music, could not have failed to have been misunderstood by the Greek comedians at the close of the fifth century B.C.” The society and the habits of the Aeolians at Lesbos, in Sappho’s time, as Mr. Wharton quotes from Bournouf, were in complete contrast to those of the Athenians in the period of their corruption; just as the unenviable reputation of the Lesbians was earned long after the date of Sappho. The Christian writers naturally accepted as true the plausible inventions of the Greeks themselves concerning Sappho. It is only fair to say that the best authorities, nowadays, vindicate the immortal woman.22

Reedy makes his position abundantly clear by repeating it and he maintains that there is no evidence against her character and quotes Wharton, saying that it is Sappho’s “career” that caused her to be impugned. Reedy links this to the problems facing the women of his generation, stating that the comic poets “were wont to satirize the poetess, just as we, today, satirize the New Woman.”23 “The New Woman,” a term coined at the end of the nineteenth century, was precisely the same type of woman whom Reedy believes Sappho to be; she worked outside the home, conversed with men, traveled on her own (mostly on the latest invention, the bicycle) and was educated.24 Reedy and the other Victorian

22 Reedy, 10.
23 Ibid., 6-7.
scholars feel that Sappho’s reputation was sullied because she was a woman doing
“men’s work,” and that the male comic poets lambasted her because they could not
comprehend that, just as Victorian men struggled with the “New Women” of the
Victorian era.

Victorian scholars also account for Sappho’s tarnished reputation by asserting that
Lesbian society fell into degeneracy after Sappho had died and that Sappho is
unfortunately linked with this decadent society, even though her life was pure. For
example, Wharton includes a quote from Symonds regarding the passionate writings of
Sappho.

“At first this passion blossomed into the most exquisite lyrical poetry that the
world has known: this was the flower-time of the Aeolians, their brief and
brilliant spring. But the fruit it bore was bitter and rotten. Lesbos became a
byword for corruption. The passions which for a moment had flamed into the
gorgeousness [sic] of Art, burnt their envelope of words and images, remained a
mere furnace of sensuality, from which no expression of the divine in human life
could be expected.”

Wharton maintains that this period of corruption which followed Sappho influenced how
she was represented. She, although not acting on her passions, was associated with this
lasciviousness. Again, Sappho is mistakenly maligned.

Another “proof” of Sappho’s virtuous character is her supposed rejection of
Alcaeus’s amorous advances which appears to be wholly an invention of Aristotle’s.

Mason refers to this event, stating that:

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25 Wharton, 12.

26 Greek Lyric, vol. 1, Sappho and Alcaeus, trans. by David A. Campbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
Alcaeus, her fellow-poet and rival, addresses her as “pure, sweetly smiling Sappho.” When he grows too ardent in his love, she rebukes him with gentle dignity: “Hadst thou felt desire for things good or noble, and had not thy tongue framed some evil speech, shame had not filled thine eyes, but thou hadst spoken honestly about it.”

Mason demonstrates in this quotation that Alcaeus, even though a rival of Sappho, categorizes Sappho as “pure.” Furthermore, Mason maintains that when Alcaeus makes improper advances toward Sappho, she fends him off in the manner proper for a Victorian woman. This quotation further embodies the prevailing Victorian belief that men were unable to control their sexual desires, while women were inherently virtuous and moral.

One other Victorian issue, which could have influenced the biographers of Sappho, is the view that women were unable to experience sexual pleasure. This belief was not universally held, because there was another camp, which asserted that in order to conceive, a woman had to experience orgasm. However, the belief that women were unaffected by the pleasures of the flesh was quite prevalent. One of the popular expressions of the day was “Hogamus higamus, men are polygamous/Higamous hogamous, women are monogamous”, with the added detail that “the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled by sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally.” Lady Hillingham wrote a famous statement in 1912: “I am happy now that Charles calls on my bedchamber less frequently

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27 Mason, 32.
28 Cooper, 12-14.
29 Mackenzie, 118.
than of old. As it is, I now endure but two calls a week and when I hear his step outside my door I lie down on my bed, close my eyes, open my legs, and think of England.”\(^{30}\)

With this view of women, the Victorian authors already have a proof against Sappho’s “reputation.” While Sappho may have been affected by feelings of pure and noble love, the Victorians see that as separate from the base sexual desire, which virtuous women are not plagued by. Consequently, since these authors are attempting to portray Sappho as a virtuous woman, they may not have believed that Sappho felt sexual desire.

The Victorian authors believed any rumors regarding lascivious behavior by Sappho to be untrue. All of the other generations, they believed, were under the wrong impression and the Victorians want to set the record straight. Wharton maintains that all that was written before 1816 did not attempt to do this. However, in 1816, the German scholar Welcker “published his celebrated refutation of the long-current calumnies against Sappho, Sappho vindicated from a prevailing Prejudice.”\(^{31}\) The Victorians present varying pictures of Sappho, but they all work toward eliminating all doubts about any spots on Sappho’s reputation and they attempt to present Sappho as a virtuous, intelligent Victorian woman who had been wrongly accused.

**Widowing Sappho**

In the Victorian Era, “respectable” women married at a relatively young age, thereby transferring the control over their lives from their fathers to their husbands. If a


\(^{31}\) Wharton, xii.
woman wanted to work outside of the home, it was up to her husband to decide whether or not she was allowed. Young upper class girls had virtually no freedom to move about in public, unless accompanied by a chaperone. The lot for married women was little better. In reality, upper class widows and older matrons had the most liberty to move about and take an active role in public life.\textsuperscript{32}

Since Sappho wrote poetry that was known widely and since her poetry was most likely sung in the public sphere, the Victorian scholars decided that her fame could have been possible only if she were a widow, or Lesbian society gave so much freedom to its women that Sappho did not require a husband. Patrick states that “It does not seem that Sappho’s husband played an important role in her career, and probably, judging from the lack of reference to him, he did not live long after they were married.”\textsuperscript{33} Mason agrees, writing that Sappho was “early left a widow with one fair daughter.”\textsuperscript{34} These Victorian women have most likely arrived at this conclusion because their contemporaries were not able to pursue “careers” as married women. The role for a married woman was as “angel of the house,” managing the household and raising the children.\textsuperscript{35} Having a career outside of the home was not truly possible for Victorian middle-class, since being a “homemaker” and “taking care of one’s husband” were full-time responsibilities, leaving no room for other pursuits. Aristocratic women, on the other hand, though freed from

\textsuperscript{32} This information comes from Cooper, Mackenzie, and the Oxford seminars.

\textsuperscript{33} Patrick, 93.

\textsuperscript{34} Mason, 29.

\textsuperscript{35} Cooper, 10.
such duties by servants, were still restricted by Victorian views of respectability.

Consequently, because Sappho had the time to write poetry and to associate with other women, Victorian women scholars assume that she must have been liberated by the early death of her husband.

This view is best portrayed by Lucy McDowell Millburn in one of her conjectured letters from Sappho.

...for five years my life was scarcely bearable, shut up in that little island town, hearing only the chatter of silly women, or my husband’s friends talking about the buying and selling price of fabrics and metals, while my soul longed for music and eloquence....When Cleis, I called her for my mother, was two years old, I found myself a widow, with means to go where I would....\(^\text{36}\)

This letter is purely fictional; however, it demonstrates how a Victorian woman has placed her experiences and values system onto Sappho’s life. She portrays Sappho as being “caged” while her husband is alive, unable to write her poetry and pursue her true passion. When Sappho is widowed, according to Millburn, she is freed and able to follow her dreams. Whether or not Sappho was truly widowed is not known, but these Victorian women cannot picture a Sappho with the ability to pursue her passions while simultaneously being a wife.

The other way in which the Victorian authors deal with Sappho’s husband is by disputing all references to her husband as false. They maintain that the name and idea of her husband were invented by the same comic poets aforementioned, in order to further tarnish her reputation. It cannot be disputed that Sappho wrote love poetry, even though

people may argue about whether the subjects of this poetry were male, female, or both. Therefore, writing erotic poetry about someone other than her husband would be considered adulterous. A good Christian Victorian woman was not supposed to entertain lustful thoughts about her own husband, let alone about anyone else. One prominent theme of Victorian art was that of the “disgraced woman;” one who had committed adultery or had sexual relations outside of marriage. Paintings such as Past and Present by Augustus Egg (1858) on display at Tate Britain, which portrayed the downfall of a prominent woman who had committed adultery, were intended to serve as moral teachers to the public. In this series of three paintings, the first shows the woman pleading for mercy at her husband’s feet with their two young daughters playing with a feeble house of cards nearby. The second painting shows the daughters grown up, longing for the mother they never had. The third painting portrays the guilty wife in a gutter, fully pregnant with her illegitimate child, contemplating suicide. This series is meant to show the viewer the horrible outcome awaiting a woman who commits adultery.\textsuperscript{37}

Furthermore, in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 there was a “bastardy” clause, which stated that men were omitted from any responsibility towards raising their illegitimate children, thereby laying the burden on the “immoral” women.\textsuperscript{38}

The Victorian views on adultery committed by women were strict. Therefore, to further establish Sappho as a pure woman and make sure that there can be no accusations of adultery committed by Sappho, the Victorian authors make it clear that there is no

\textsuperscript{37} On Victorian views of adultery and the disgraced woman, see: Cooper, Mackenzie, and Perkin.

\textsuperscript{38} Cooper, 26.
authoritative proof that Sappho was married. Wharton states in his memoir:

Suidas says Sappho “married one Cercolas, a man of great wealth, who sailed from Andros, and,” he adds, “she had a daughter by him, named Cleis.”...the existence of such a husband has been warmly disputed, and the name (Penifer) and that of his country (Virilia) are conjectured to have been invented in ribaldry by the Comic Poets; certainly it was against the custom of the Greeks to amass wealth in one country and go to seek a wife in a distant land.39

Wharton states that the excerpt from the Suidas, a sort of encyclopedia of the ancient world written in approximately the tenth century AD, must be false. Johnson agrees with Wharton that Cercolas never actually existed as does the anonymous book published by Barrie and Sons, which quotes Wharton outright, asserting the same conclusions.

Reedy makes the greatest link saying that the comments on Sappho’s husband were meant to create doubt about her character by the comic poets.

It has been said that Sappho was married, her husband being one Cercolas, a man of great wealth, who sailed from Andros, and that she had a daughter by him, named Cleis. This is a story invented, probably, by the comic poets, who were wont to satirize the poetess, just as we, today, satirize the New Woman. It is certain that allusions to Sappho’s husband are most satirical, conveying an indecent, not to say obscene, innuendo because of her fondness for poetical-amorous omniverousness, so to speak.40

In this passage, Reedy is stating that Sappho would have been an adulterous woman if she had been married because of her desire for others. He therefore concludes that her husband was invented by the comic poets to further degrade her reputation and that because Sappho was “pure,” she could not have been married while writing erotic or love

39 Wharton, 7.
40 Reedy, 6-7.
poetry.

If Sappho was not married, and not widowed, how was she able to carry on her role in the public sphere according to the Victorian mores? The answer is that they believed her era to be one of unprecedented freedom for women, in Greece and/or in the entire world. Most authors state that Sappho’s era and their own era are the only times in history in which women have come close to attaining the same freedoms as men. In reality, Victorian women had not attained the same freedoms as men and were very restricted in their public roles; however, these Victorian scholars put an idealistic tint on this fact. It is certain that they believed that women on ancient Lesbos had many more liberties than women had during Athens’ democratic period.

Patrick offers a second suggestion for Sappho’s ability to have a career, other than or in addition to her status as a widow:

The Lesbian women mixed freely with male society. They were free, according to the custom of their age, to frequent all parts of the island, and to pursue whatever interests they chose....It is certain that women of position in the Greek islands were relieved from much of the harder work of household management, and could give their time to music and poetry, and to long strolls through the beautiful country surrounding their primitive homes. They were as well educated as the men, and were accustomed to express their sentiments to an extent almost unknown elsewhere in the history of the Greeks.  

Patrick seems almost wistful in her description of Sappho’s “age.” In the Victorian era, and throughout history, household management has been a full-time job. Unless a woman was wealthy enough to hire servants, have slaves, or had a large enough family that the older children could help with the household work, she spent the majority of her

41 Patrick, 14-15.
time in this role. Since Sappho had the time to write poetry, and knew how to do so, Patrick has inferred that she must have been relieved from household duties, and was also highly educated.

Mason, having a feminist slant to her writings on the lives of ancient women, also sees Sappho’s age as one of unprecedented freedom for women.

It is certain...that Aeolian women had an honored place in society and literature. They formed a center of intellectual light in which the brilliant Sappho reigned supreme, and it was no unusual thing to see them at banquets and festivals with men. A well-born Athenian woman would have lost the rather illusory privileges of her position by such freedom. She was decorously ignorant and stayed at home.  \(^{42}\)

Mason contrasts the Victorian era with the way in which she believes Sappho’s era to have been. The “ideal” Victorian woman was supposed to be the “Angel of the House.”

With ignorance of sex and world affairs, she was to rely on her husband for all decisions of importance. The idea of “separate spheres” \(^{43}\) was prevalent. The prominent art critic, John Ruskin, perpetuates this idea in his work Sesame and Lilies, part II, written in 1865:

> The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation, and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest. But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle, -- and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise – wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fall from his side. \(^{44}\)

Because Mason was dealing with beliefs such as these herself, and because it was

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\(^{42}\) Mason, 31.

\(^{43}\) Cooper, 10.

\(^{44}\) Mackenzie, 100.
difficult for women in the Victorian era to have careers, they were supposed to rely on
men for such things, Mason sees the age of Sappho as one in which women did not have
these problems. If Sappho could have a writing and/or singing career then she must have
been a single woman in a society in which women had equality with men. Mason
compares the supposed freedom of Lesbian women to the confined condition of Athenian
women. The problem with Mason’s conclusions is that nobody knows whether or not
Lesbian women had these freedoms. Since the majority of Sappho’s extant fragments
concern women or family members, it is possible that Sappho could have been writing
and singing inside the women’s quarters of the house and at public weddings and
funerals, which experts know that Athenian women were not barred from attending. In
fact, wedding and funeral processions were two of the key functions for women in city
life. However, because of Mason’s agenda, attempting to prove that Sappho was able to
write and sing only because of her social freedoms and unmarried status, she ignores
those possibilities.

Thomas George Johnson also deals with this question in his book.

The question naturally arises, how came a Greek woman and in a remote island to
acquire not so much fame, for that her works among an intellectual race would in
a measure insure her, but so great an unshackled freedom without which her life’s
work would have been impossible.... Our surprise in the first place is due to our
habit of confounding all Greeks with the Athenians. The latter, as we all know,
were Ionians, and were compelled in their early migrations to leave their women
behind them. When they settled down once more after conquest, they took to
themselves wives from among the races they had conquered. Though slaves were
thus raised to the position of free women, the treatment of the latter as mere
personal property, instead of as intelligent beings capable of intellectual
companionship, continued even to the time of the Periclean dream of Panhellenic

45 The fact that women attended funerals is portrayed on numerous vase paintings.
empire; and long afterwards. Not so, however, was it among the Dorians and the Aeolians; these races carried the wives and daughters of their cradle-country with them and the free women were never a mere chattel...⁴⁶

Confusing writing style aside, Johnson asserts that Sappho was able to attain fame because of the freedom for women on Lesbos. He states that Lesbos was different from Athens in its treatment of women. It is interesting that he attributes the restricted lives of Athenian women to the past volkswanderungen or folk migrations, maintaining that the Ionians could not bring their women with them and had to marry slaves, which is the reason that their women are treated as such. Modern scholars do not attribute the lot of Athenian women to early folk migrations, but rather to the Athenian version of democracy in which one could participate only if one was a legitimately born Athenian male citizen. Since voting rights were vested in legitimacy, men wanted to be certain that they were raising their own children. Therefore, similar to the Victorians, Athenian women were confined to the home and strictly guarded in order to prevent extramarital affairs. While the evidence that Johnson uses is false, modern scholars believe that Lesbian women did have more freedom than Athenian women; however, Johnson is stating that Sappho was able to write only because of the relative freedom of Lesbian women, which is a mistaken conclusion.

Both Wharton and Reedy use the same quote from Symonds when referring to the social conditions for Lesbian women in the seventh century BC: "Aeolian women were not confined to the harem like Ionians [Athenians], or subjected to the rigorous discipline of the Spartans. While mixing freely with male society, they were highly educated, and

⁴⁶Johnson, 40.
accustomed to express their sentiments to an extent unknown elsewhere in history – until, indeed, the present time.\textsuperscript{47}

The lot for Lesbian women is portrayed in a similar fashion to Mason. These Victorian authors see a time in which men and women were equals, thereby allowing Sappho to pursue a “career” free from the constraints of society and a husband.

\textbf{Sappho and Phaon}

One story that has been attached to Sappho’s name for nearly 2000 years is the story of Sappho and Phaon. Supposedly, Sappho fell madly in love with Phaon, a horseman from Rhodes, but her love was unrequited and in a love-mad frenzy she leapt from the Leucadian rock into the sea.\textsuperscript{48} Modern scholars regard this story as false. However, in the Victorian era there appear to be two camps regarding this issue. One camp, the less scholarly and more romantic, perpetuated this story through plays, operas, and other works. Meanwhile, scholars attempted to invalidate those same stories and further vindicate Sappho’s reputation. Both opinions will be explored because both influenced how the Victorians perceived Sappho’s character.

Certain Victorian authors working from the myth of Sappho and Phaon, attempt to portray Sappho as a naïve and innocent woman, led astray by the young cad Phaon who played her false. One such author is Estelle Anna Robinson Lewis who elaborates

\textsuperscript{47} Quoted in Wharton, 13.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 3.
on this story in her 1875 play, *Sappho: A Tragedy in Five Acts*. In this play, Sappho is portrayed as a wealthy widowed schoolteacher at a school for poetry and music. Alcaeus, the Greek lyric poet is constantly about, desperate for the love of Sappho, as are Anacreon and others, while she pines for another. She is interested in Phaon, a poor horseman, and he asks to court her. After a short while, he proposes to Sappho and she accepts, thereby making Alcaeus a mortal enemy of Phaon. Once Phaon and Sappho are wed and have retired to Sappho’s home, Phaon spots Sappho’s slave Cleoné and falls for her. Phaon woos Cleoné and convinces her to run away with him. Sappho discovers their plot, knowing the truth of the matter because of her run-in with a serpent and pleads with Phaon: “Oh Phaon! Phaon! Keep guard on thy heart! Be true -- be faithful to thy nuptual vow. The serpent is the devil who is come to thrust his hideous shape twixt thee and me.” Phaon and Cleoné receive the permission of Psistratus, the demagogue of the city, to flee together to Italy. Sappho, in a frenzy of grief, threatens Cleoné with a dagger, but then gives up hope. Phaon and Cleoné leave, but are caught by police officers. Phaon says that he still loves Sappho when she comes to see him. After she forgives him and helps free him from the police, he goes back on his word and takes Cleoné in his arms. Sappho again becomes enraged and threatens them with the dagger, but falters, throws away the dagger and tells Phaon and Cleoné that they are free to be together. Phaon then strikes Sappho. The Furies enter along with Alcaeus who slays Phaon and the Furies give Cleoné the breath of death. Sappho calls on Apollo and a halo

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50 Lewis, 74.
of light encircles her as she leaps to her death from the rock of Leucate. Then Alcaeus stabs himself in order to join Sappho. Sappho, throughout the play, is portrayed as the innocent victim, duped by the duplicitous Phaon. She is likened to a Victorian woman shown in a weaker position, used by a man who was typically not monogamous. Lewis turns Sappho into a Victorian heroine, chaste, genteel, and weak-minded, working from Victorian stereotypes and ideals. Lewis does not see Sappho’s love for Phaon as vulgar or improper; instead she makes it a point to portray Phaon as the immoral one. Lewis portrays Phaon and Sappho in this manner by stating that they were married. This marriage makes Sappho’s love affair with Phaon legitimate and proper while making Phaon seem like an even greater cad for running off with another woman. In the Victorian era, males were forgiven sexual relations outside of marriage; however, running away with a woman and deserting his wife would make a man seem unmanly and cowardly for breaking up a home and leaving a woman unprovided for. Even though the story of Sappho and Phaon is enacted in this play, the story is shaped into a story imbued with proper Victorian morality.

Other Victorian authors, while admitting the popularity of the myth of Sappho and Phaon, dismiss it as just that, a myth. Johnson is one such author, stating that:

Her connection with and unrequited love for the mystical youth Phaon, whose name is nowhere mentioned in her works, and her leap from the Leucadian rock…the two events that have so long taken hold of the popular mind, have been proved to be and are now held as myths of purely legendary origin.\footnote{Johnson, 50.}

Johnson, in stating that the myths of Sappho and Phaon are false, is showing another one
of the myths about Sappho’s love life is false, again proving that Sappho was a virtuous woman.

Wharton comments on the myth of Sappho and Phaon in his memoir:

But the fact remains that it [the myth]...was only given its present place in Ovid’s Heroic Epistles by Heinsius in 1629. Even if it be genuine, we may safely aver that in Ovid’s day it was far more difficult to estimate Sappho’s character rightly than it is now. The Romans, we can well believe, were likely to regard her in no other light than that in which she had been portrayed by the facile and unscrupulous comedians of Athens.52

Wharton maintains that the myth of Sappho and Phaon is not mentioned before Ovid wrote a poem around the beginning of the first century AD, although Wharton doubts that Ovid actually wrote it. However, if he did, Wharton maintains that Ovid invented the story, and that it is consistent with the other “calumnies” against Sappho. Therefore, Wharton equates the Sappho and Phaon story with the other myths that tarnish her reputation and by proving the story false is showing that Sappho was pure and virtuous.

Reedy agrees that the scholars, or “scientists” as he calls them, have proven the story of Sappho and Phaon false. However, he believes that it is a beautiful story and should be kept alive for that reason.

Sappho’s love for Phaon is a story that has long charmed the world. It may be found in Ovid’s Historic Epistle XV, translated by Alexander Pope. Phaon was of miraculous loveliness, but insensible to love – a reactionist probably, against the Lesbian conditions. The legend goes, (for ‘tis a legend only and much doubted, as are all beautiful stories) that he was a boatman of Mitylene, gifted with beauty by Aphrodite, so that all women fell in love with him. Sappho loved him, but he would not listen, and in despair she threw herself from the Leucadian rock into the sea. The scientists have destroyed this story, but the unscientific world will not let it die. They have guessed and argued many things, but none so pretty as

52 Wharton, 3.
this story, of hopeless longing and death.\footnote{Reedy, 12-13.}

Interestingly, Reedy does not see anything about this story to convey an improper image of Sappho. Instead, he sees it as a wonderful story which the unscholarly community in the Victorian era continued to perpetuate.

The myth of Sappho and Phaon was both adopted and rejected by the Victorian authors. Scholars tended to reject the myth as one of the many stories attached to Sappho’s name, while the unscholarly community wrote plays, poems, and operas about the myth, creating a version of Sappho as the victim of unrequited love with a typically Victorian rakish man.

**Sappho as Schoolmistress and Leader of an Aesthetic Club**

One of the few acceptable career options for virtuous Victorian women was to become teachers or governesses. At the beginning of the Victorian era, there were very few female teachers; however, as the nineteenth century progressed, and more state funded women’s schools opened, there was a greater demand for female teachers. For example, by 1900, seventy-five percent of Britain’s educators were women.\footnote{Mackenzie, 81.}

Consequently, it was easy for the Victorian biographers of Sappho to portray her as a schoolteacher, a portrayal that accounted for the presence of her “female companions,” as well as fitting Sappho into the Victorian model of the proper role for an upper class woman.
Wharton positions Sappho as a schoolmistress and the leader of an aesthetic club.

Sappho seems to have been at the centre of a society in Mitylene [the city in which Sappho lived], a kind of aesthetic club, devoted to the service of the Muses. Around her gathered maidens from even comparatively distant places, attracted by her fame, to study under her guidance all that related to poetry and music...\textsuperscript{55}

Wharton begins by placing her as the leader of an aesthetic club. What is interesting about this placement is that Wharton is writing in the midst of the Victorian Aesthetic Movement. The Aesthetic Movement in Britain was a reaction against industrialization and coined the motto “Art for Art’s Sake.” Artistic aesthetic clubs popped up everywhere for the study and enjoyment of beauty and art.\textsuperscript{56} With the Aesthetic Movement as a backdrop, Wharton, presented with the picture of a woman surrounded by a group of young girls in the interest of writing poetry, concludes that Sappho was naturally at the head of a Lesbian aesthetic club. That Sappho’s “club” was “dedicated to the service of the Muses” is correct because the muses were the patron goddesses of music, poetry, and dance among other arts and sciences. Wharton also maintains that young women came to study music and poetry under her. In order to make certain that the relationship between Sappho and her “pupils” was of the utmost decorum, Wharton quotes the ancient Greek author Athenaeus. Wharton states that Athenaeus testified “to the purity of her love for her girlfriends” stating that: “unto the pure all things are pure.”\textsuperscript{57} Even though Wharton has established that Sappho was a schoolmistress, he

\textsuperscript{55} Wharton, 23.

\textsuperscript{56} For information on the Aesthetic Movement in Britain, see: Julian Treuherz, \textit{Victorian Painting} (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1993), 131-157.

\textsuperscript{57} Wharton, 25.
attempts to leave no doubts about her honor.

Johnson sees Sappho in a similar role. He paints a picture in which Lesbian
women were able to overcome the barriers placed before them by male society.

Whatever the limit fixed by men to the expansion of the female intellect among
the Aeolians, we know that the Aeolian women of Lesbos broke through all
restraint and formed for themselves independent societies.... These societies or
clubs were a special feature of the Lesbian cities during the age of Sappho.... We
thus find Sappho at the prime of life 'encircled by her Lesbian sisterhood,' the
centre of a literary club, most of the members of which were her pupils in the
technical portion of her art.⁵⁸

Johnson states that Sappho was the leader of a sort of literary salon tutoring young
women in the art of poetry. The formation of literary societies was an activity in which
the upper class ladies of the Victorian era participated. Therefore, Johnson makes the
inference that because Sappho was writing for and about other women, she must have
been at the head of a literary society. Interestingly, he sees Sappho's age as one in which
women were able to break free of the bonds imposed on them by men in the particular
locale of Lesbos.

Patrick holds similar beliefs to Wharton and Johnson. Patrick also places Sappho
at the head of a literary society and aesthetic club "dedicated to the service of the
muses;"⁵⁹ however, her version even more resembles a Victorian school for women.

Her school may be characterized as one of the first literary salons, and its aim was
to combine harmony and beauty in expression of thought.... It is evident that the
dark-eyed sylphs who came to Sappho to be taught formed a kind of aesthetic
club, and that they received instruction which qualified them to appear in festivals
sacred to the gods. They were also taught to be graceful in appearance and

⁵⁸ Johnson, 42-44.
⁵⁹ Patrick, 103.
manner, and to compose music and poetry.60

Following the other Victorian authors, Patrick places Sappho in the acceptable role of schoolmistress and leader of a "literary salon," also stating that Sappho's salon was one of the first. Again, the society is portrayed as an "aesthetic club," in which poetry is written for the enjoyment of its beauty. Patrick's statement about the girls being trained by Sappho to participate in the cult religious activities of the city is most likely true.

Modern scholars believe that the women associated with Sappho were initiated through her into the cult rituals of Lesbos.61 Furthermore, other scholars state that Sappho may have composed the songs for the girls to sing at these festivals for such goddesses as Aphrodite and Artemis, similar to Alcman's Partheneia (girls' songs) composed for the girl choruses in Sparta in the late seventh century BC.62 Interestingly, Alcman's poetry also hints at love between women. Patrick maintains that the girls learned manners and proper deportment befitting a lady. Whether or not the girls learned these skills is purely conjecture; however, Patrick's version recalls unmistakably the lessons in deportment taught at Victorian women's colleges in the Victorian era. There is a fragment of Sappho's that supports Patrick's statement. The quotation is from Plutarch's Dialogue on Love, stating that, "Addressing a girl who was still too young for marriage Sappho says, 'You seem to me a small, graceless child.'"63 This fragment suggests that in order to be

60 Ibid., 103-105.
61 Calame, 113-124.
63 Greek Lyric, vol. 1, 95.
considered a woman ready for marriage, a young girl had to be instructed to be graceful.

Consequently, Patrick could be close to the truth in her judgment about the girls learning
grace from Sappho. Modern scholars assert that the girls were learning to be graceful,
participate in cult rituals, and to worship Aphrodite in order to prepare them for marriage.
Patrick and the other Victorian scholars maintain that the girls were learning the art of
poetry so that they could become poets themselves and while the girls most likely
married upon leaving Sappho, the Victorians do not connect the school or literary society
with preparation for marriage.

Furthering the “literary salon” or girls’ college models, Patrick again discusses the
poems of Sappho that have caused controversy. Patrick writes: “It was part of Sappho’s
profession, as the head of her school, to write poetry and to teach her pupils how to
compose, and such poems were perhaps intended to serve as models in giving a concrete
expression to the deeper emotions.” 64 This statement clearly demonstrates that Patrick
gives Sappho a “career” or “profession” as the leader of a school in the Victorian sense in
order to explain away the spots on Sappho’s reputation.

Milburn fully expresses the Victorian construct of Sappho as a schoolmistress:

My mother no longer opposes my teaching; she cannot herself see the reason for
women learning aught else but housework and needlework, but since I am
determined to write and play and sing, she takes pride that so many maidens come
to learn the art of poetry from me.... I have my school in our own beautiful
garden now. This is a great joy to me, for I feel that I am helping my friends to a
larger life. My brothers still object to my work; they are sensitive to what the city
thinks, for it is said that I am unfitting the girls for wives.... If men of our day
misunderstand us, I have no fear but that in days to come the men who live

64 Patrick, 111.
hereafter shall praise us.\textsuperscript{65}

This conjectured letter voices almost all of the criticisms that Victorian women who attempted to pursue a career faced. Milburn has Sappho say that poetry is not for women, the only thing that a woman should learn is how to manage a home and be the “Angel of the House.” Furthermore, Sappho is giving her “pupils” the means to a life outside of just household management through the teaching of poetry, giving the girls a “profession,” which made the girls not as eligible as wives according to Milburn.

Milburn makes Sappho appear as a Victorian woman. Whereas modern scholars believe that Sappho was outfitting the “maidens” for marriage, Milburn states that “the city” thought that Sappho’s instruction made them unsuitable. One of the great derisions of the “New Woman” in the Victorian era was to portray her as a spinster and masculine, content to be surrounded by her books and without a husband or need of a husband. Placing Sappho in the role of a “New Woman,” automatically made Sappho susceptible to criticism from men and society in general. The criticism, the Victorians contend, came in the form of Sappho’s tarnished reputation, which can be explained away according to the picture of Sappho that they portray.

One author who presents a slightly different picture of Sappho is Mason. She de-emphasizes the schoolmistress scenario and instead focuses on “Sappho and the First Women’s Club.”\textsuperscript{66} Because of her feminist slant, she sees in Sappho a woman who greatly furthered the position of women in the ancient world. Mason writes:

\textsuperscript{65} Milburn, 44-45.

\textsuperscript{66} Mason, 27.
She was the leader of an intellectual movement among women that was without a parallel in classic times. We may greet her as not only the first of women poets, but as the founder of the first “woman’s club” known to us. It is not certain that it had either a constitution or by-laws, and it discussed poetry and esthetics instead of science and social economics.... The women who came to Sappho from the isles of the Aegean and the far hills of Greece seem to have been more intent upon writing poems than talking about them. There is no trace of brilliant conversation, or critical papers, or gathered sheaves of the knowledge that comes so freely under our own hand. Unfortunately, there was no secretary in this primitive club to take notes for posterity....She was a musician as well as a poet, and trained many of the maidens for singing in sacred festivals, as well as the arts of poetry and manners. When they married, she wrote their bridal odes.67

Mason portrays Sappho and her companions as a more “primitive” form of Mason’s contemporary women’s clubs. Mason uses the lack of critical papers as evidence for the society’s primitive nature. However, she applauds Sappho for leading an “intellectual movement among women.” Sappho wrote beautiful poetry, but there is no evidence that she believed herself to be part of an intellectual movement. The difference between the Victorian clubs that Mason discusses and Sappho’s club is that the Victorian societies spent their time analyzing the works of other writers, not composing their own works. While Mason’s view of Sappho’s group as the first women’s club is not entirely accurate, her description at the end of the quotation is in line with what modern scholars believe about Sappho. She states that Sappho taught the girls to perform in “sacred festivals” and modern scholars agree with that assessment.68 Mason further maintains that Sappho taught the girls poetry and manners while modern scholars agree that she taught them poetry and how to become graceful women. Lastly, Mason writes that Sappho composed

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67 Ibid., 38-40.
68 Calame, 113-124.
the girls’ bridal odes when they married, which modern scholars also maintain.\textsuperscript{69} Mason further states that the fragments of Sappho are important for study by Victorian women. She discusses the hints of “wisdom, satire, and criticism,”\textsuperscript{70} that can be teased out of Sappho’s fragments.

They are of interest in showing us that the women of ages ago had the same aspirations that we have to-day, together with the same faults, the same virtues, and the same grieves, though they had not yet learned to moralize their sensations or intellectualize their passions.\textsuperscript{71}

Mason places Sappho into a Victorian world view. Women in the Victorian era had certain aspirations and faults arising from the Victorian social construct. According to this social construct, women should aspire to be virtuous wives and mothers, sacrificing their wants and needs in order to care for their husbands and their children. Nothing remains from Lesbos in the sixth century BC that provides a complete picture of the expectations placed by men on women. If Lesbos was like Athens a few centuries later, women were expected to marry around the age of fourteen and learn to weave and to manage the slave-run household.\textsuperscript{72} While women may have had similar expectations placed on them in the Victorian era and Sappho’s era, Mason’s argument is problematic regarding her statement about virtues. The ancient Greeks believed that women were insatiably lustful, while men were more reasonable about sexual matters. In Hesiod’s


\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 42.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

*Works and Days*, a farmer’s almanac of sorts, written (no earlier that 800BC and no later than 600BC\(^73\)) just before the time of Sappho, he makes it obvious that he views women as naturally adulterous and untrustworthy.

Don’t let a sashaying female pull the wool over your eyes
With her flirtatious lies. She’s fishing for your barn.
Trust a woman and you’d as well trust a thief.\(^74\)

The second line can be interpreted two ways. One, women are only after a man’s money or two, women are only after sex. Either way one interprets the lines, Hesiod’s view of women appears very different from the Victorian’s. As previously mentioned, the Victorians viewed sexuality conversely from the ancient Greeks, believing that women were the virtuous ones, untroubled by sexual feeling while men were unable to control their passions. Consequently, according to the differing social constructs, women throughout history have not always had the same virtues.

Mason states that the women of Sappho’s time “had not yet learned to moralize their sensations or intellectualize their passions.”\(^75\) Mason implies that the women of Sappho’s age were more primitive intellectually than the Victorians, they were lower on the evolutionary ladder so to speak. Modern scholars do not believe that there is a difference between modern humans and ancient humans. The fact that Sappho did not “moralize” her sensations was because her society had different morals than Victorian

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\(^75\) Mason, 42.
society. Victorian society, with its strict moral code, made it impossible not to moralize sensations or passions.

Victorian scholars constructed a Sappho who had a profession as a schoolteacher and who was also the leader of an aesthetic club. They placed Sappho in a role that was considered appropriate for a Victorian woman. By portraying Sappho in this manner, they were able to further explain why Sappho wrote poetry about women, thereby explaining away the tarnished elements of Sappho’s reputation. They were able to make Sappho appear as a virtuous Victorian woman.

The Hymn to Aphrodite

The “Hymn to Aphrodite” is the only complete extant poem of Sappho’s. The poem is very intricate and begins with Sappho’s call to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, for help. The poem has Aphrodite ask Sappho what the matter is and explains how she will help Sappho. The poem concludes with Sappho again asking for Aphrodite’s aid. The controversial section of this poem is the section in which Aphrodite explains to Sappho how she will help her. The controversy is over the fact that Sappho was writing about her unrequited love for another woman. The closest translation possible to the original poem is this:

Ornate-throned immortal Aphrodite, wile-weaving daughter of Zeus, I entreat you: do not overpower my heart mistress, with ache and anguish, but come here, if ever in the past you have heard my voice from afar and acquiesced and came, leaving your father’s golden house, with chariot yoked: beautiful swift sparrows whirring fast-beating wings brought you above the dark earth down from heaven
through the mid-air, and soon they arrived; and you, blessed one, with a smile on
your immortal face asked what was the matter with me this time and why I was
calling this time and what in my maddened heart I most wished to happen for
myself: 'Whom am I to persuade this time to lead you back to her love: Who
wrongs you, Sappho? If she runs away, soon she shall pursue; if she does not
accept gifts, why, she shall give them instead; and if she does not love, soon she
shall love even against her will.' Come to me now again and deliver me from my
oppressive anxieties; fulfil all that my heart longs to fulfil, and you yourself be
my fellow-fighter.  

In this poem it is blatantly obvious that Sappho wants her feelings of love for a woman to
be returned. However, the Victorian authors maintain that Sappho was virtuous and pure
and that the "calumnies" against her are untrue. Therefore, how did they deal with this
poem? The answer to this question is that they altered the words to this poem to keep
Sappho's reputation untarnished.

Wharton collected many of the different translations of Sappho's poetry in his
memoir. Of the "Hymn to Aphrodite" or "Venus" (the Roman term for Aphrodite) he
collected eight translations, including his own, ranging from 1711 to 1883. His
translation is the most direct of all the Victorian authors. He, unlike many other
Victorian translators, does leave the subject of Sappho's love as "she." However,
Wharton lessens the intensity of Sappho's love, making her love seem like a close
friendship rather than romantic love. The line that differs is: "For if she flies she shall
soon follow..."  

By using the word follow instead of pursue, Wharton lessens the
feelings of desire contained in the original poem, which allows him to explain away the
"calumnies" against Sappho as a misunderstanding.

76 Greek Lyric, 53-55.
77 Wharton, 48.
The other translations, which Wharton includes, have attempted to replicate the "Sapphic" metre contained in the original Aeolic Greek. Furthermore, every other translator except the last translates "she" as "he," thereby entirely altering the subject of the poem. For example, Edwin Arnold translates the controversial lines as this in 1869.

"Who is it wrongs thee? Tell me who refuses
"Thee, vainly sighing."
"Be it who it may be, he that flies shall follow;
"He that rejects gifts, he shall bring thee many;
"He that hates now shall love thee dearly, madly—
"Aye, though thou wouldst not."

Arnold changes the subject from "she" to "he" in order to make Sappho's love virtuous and pure. His last line, instead of saying "even though unwillingly" he makes it seem as though Sappho would not want him (the subject) to return her love. Instead of saying that the subject of Sappho's poem, even though unwilling, will return Sappho's love with Aphrodite's help, Arnold says that the subject will now pursue Sappho even though Sappho will then be unwilling to have his affections. Arnold thus makes Sappho seem even more proper because, though she loves this man, if Aphrodite would help to make the man love Sappho, Sappho would then be freed from her affections and able to withstand his advances.

T. W. Higginson in his 1871 translation, portrays the same lines of the "Hymn to Aphrodite" in a similar way. He also translates the subject of Sappho's love to "he" as well as altering the last line of the stanza in question.

"Oh my poor Sappho!
"Though now he flies, ere long shall he pursue thee;

78 Quoted in Ibid., 54.
"Fearing thy gifts, he too in turn shall bring them;
‘Loveless to-day, to morrow he shall woo thee,
“Though thou shouldst spurn him.”"\textsuperscript{79}

Higginson, aside from changing the subject of the poem from male to female, also changes the last line of the stanza. Aphrodite in this translation now acts as moral teacher, saying that she will help Sappho and make the man of Sappho’s desire return Sappho’s affections. However, she tells Sappho that if she makes him love her, Sappho should reject his advances. Similarly to Arnold, Higginson alters the lines to make Sappho fit into the Victorian ideals of how she should behave in this situation. As a Victorian woman, she should reject the man’s advances and leave her virtue intact.

Moreton John Walhouse translated the “Hymn to Aphrodite” for \textit{Gentleman’s Magazine} in 1877. Walhouse, like Arnold and Higginson, changes the subject of Sappho’s desire from female to male; however, he does not alter the last line of the stanza to make a moral statement.

"Who thy love now is it that ill requiteth
Sappho? and who thee and thy tender yearning
Wrongfully slighteth?
Though now he fly, quickly he shall pursue thee—
Scorns he thy gifts? Soon he shall freely offer—
Loves he not? Soon, even wert thou unwilling,
Love shall he proffer."\textsuperscript{80}

Walhouse, like the other translator’s mentioned, aside from Wharton, changes “she” to “he” in order to make Sappho’s love appear pure. In the last line, Walhouse alters it so that Aphrodite will make the man love Sappho so much that even if Sappho were then

\textsuperscript{79} Quoted in Ibid., 55.

\textsuperscript{80} Quoted in Ibid., 56-57.
unwilling, the man will still pursue her. Walhouse does not make the same moral
statement as Higginson and Arnold, however, he leaves Sappho the option of rejecting
the man’s advances open for Sappho.

J. Addington Symonds’s translation from 1883 is the only other translation aside
from Wharton’s that does not alter the gender of the subject of Sappho’s affections.

Must persuasion lure to thy love, and who now,
    Sappho, hath wronged thee?
Yea, for though she flies, she shall quickly chase thee;
Yea, though gifts she spurns, she shall soon bestow them;
Yea, though now she loves not, she soon shall love thee,
    Yea, though she will not!\(^\text{81}\)

Surprisingly, Symonds is the only Victorian translator who seems to capture the true
nature of Sappho’s love. He may be one of the few, if not the only Victorian author who
does not attempt to fit Sappho into the “proper” role for a Victorian woman.

John Henry Wright translates the object of Sappho’s love as male rather than
female. He also changes the last line to the stanza, making it appear that when Aphrodite
grants Sappho’s wish and makes the “youth” court Sappho, Sappho will scold him and
reject him.

What end my frenzied thoughts pursue—
For what youth I spread anew
My amorous nets—“Who, Sappho, who
    Hath done thee wrong?
What though he fly, he’ll soon return—
Still press thy gifts, though now he spurn;
Heed not his coldness—soon he’ll burn,
    E’en though thou chide.”\(^\text{82}\)

\(^{81}\) Quoted in Ibid., 58.

\(^{82}\) John Henry Wright, \textit{Masterpieces of Greek Literature} (Boston, New York, Chicago: Houghton, Mifflin
and Company, 1902), 56.
In his zeal for rhyme, Wright changes the words a great deal. He emphasizes Sappho’s love for a youth, most likely referring to Phaon. Wright also makes it seem as though Sappho has driven him away and with Venus’ help, he will return, not necessarily pursue. Wright maintains that Sappho should continue attempting to give the youth gifts even though he rejects them now. Wright also makes Venus tell Sappho that she should not be bothered by the youth’s lack of feeling, for soon he will have feelings toward Sappho, even though Sappho will then spurn him. Consequently, Wright’s translation, in its attempt at poeticism along with an attempt to make Sappho appear more virtuous, does not make much sense. Wright’s version is also the farthest from the original.

Interestingly, Patrick, the most fervent defender of Sappho’s character, translates the subject of Sappho’s love as the original “she.” However, Patrick alters other words in order to make Sappho’s love seem maternal or of a bosom friend type, instead of physical desire.

If she flees, soon shall she follow;
and if she takes not gifts, she yet shall give. If she loves not, quickly shall she love, even though unwillingly.83

Because Patrick, like Wharton, changes pursue to follow, she makes Sappho appear to have a motherly love for this girl, as though Sappho is attempting to win the girl over to her group. Patrick attempts to make Sappho appear to be a virtuous woman by Victorian standards. However, if Sappho were truly attempting to only win the girl over to her as a friend or teacher, she would not be calling on Aphrodite, the goddess of romantic and

83 Patrick, 132.
sensual love, for help.

The Victorian translators, aside from Symonds, alter the words on Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite" in order to make Sappho's love appear virtuous and pure, and to make Sappho fit into the mold of a proper Victorian woman. The translators that translate the subject of Sappho's love as she tend to change the verb from pursue to follow, thereby making Sappho's love seem innocent. The other translators change the pronoun from "she" to "he," which ensures that Sappho's love is appropriate, some even alter the last line in the stanza. They attempt to state that once the man returns Sappho's love, she will not succumb to his desires and will keep her virtue intact. One way or another, the Victorian translators alter Sappho's poetry to make her appear chaste and virtuous by Victorian standards.

**The Great Paradox**

The great paradox when dealing with Sappho and the Victorian era is that while all of the scholars mentioned in this paper were proclaiming Sappho's virtuous character, a certain term came into use by scientists and psychologists. This term was lesbian. The Oxford English Dictionary defines lesbian as:

> [after the alleged practice of Sappho, the poetess of Lesbos; cf. SAPPHIC a. and sb., SAPPHISM.] Of a woman: homosexual, characterized by a sexual interest in other women. Also, of or pertaining to homosexual relations between women.\(^8^4\)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* also notes the term's first use in an 1890 medical

dictionary. If the term came into use during the 1890s and stemmed from "the alleged practices of Sappho," how could her Victorian biographers continue to maintain that Sappho had a clean reputation? The answer to this question is that the physicians and psychologists were not a part of the mainstream public and the term came into use for specialists only. They did not advertise their views to the general public. The general public rarely mentioned sexual relations even within the proper boundary of marriage. Consequently, the biographers of Sappho could be maintaining that the "calumnies" against Sappho were false while the physicians were beginning to use the term lesbian or Sapphic to denote female homosexuality.

The only Victorian biographer that even hints at the use of this term is Reedy. Reedy states of Sappho that:

Lesbos is only known because of her; known to poets and readers of poetry, and, shame to say, to specialists in moral degeneration, as distinguishing certain perversities that flourish only in highly civilized communities.85

Reedy’s dislike for the scientists who use the term lesbian is blatantly obvious. He does not actually mention what the "perversities" are that the term is supposed to denote. Therefore, he does not believe that the term has any true relation to Sappho’s life and practices. Furthermore, he states that the aforementioned "perversities" are only found in "highly civilized communities," and as mentioned by Mason earlier, Sappho’s society was believed to be more primitive than Victorian society. Consequently, according to Reedy, Sappho could not have been "a lesbian" since degeneracies such as that do not

85 Reedy, 8.
occur in a primitive society like hers.

Another reason that the term lesbian did not spread to the general public and a reason why Sappho’s biographers can acquit her of this “offense” is because the Victorians did not believe that female homosexual relations were possible. Interestingly, legislation due to be passed in 1885 attempted to “criminalize” all homosexual relations, including a clause regarding those between women. However, “Queen Victoria declared them impossible, whereupon the clause was omitted — a joke that serves to underline a common, and commonly welcomed ignorance...”\textsuperscript{86} If the Queen herself thought lesbian relationships to be “impossible,” it can be construed that a majority of the public was under the same impression. Therefore, the terms lesbian and Sapphic were left to the “scientists” while the biographers of Sappho maintained her virtue and innocence.

\textbf{Conclusion: Sappho: the Virtuous Victorian Woman}

The Sappho who emerges from the Victorian biographies and translations is a woman who is beyond compare. According to the Victorians, Sappho was one of the greatest poets in the history of the world. Unfortunately, this great poetess from the seventh century BC reached the Victorian era with “calumnies” attached to her name. The Victorian biographers of Sappho attempt to vindicate Sappho from the malicious gossip, which most attribute to the plays of Greek Attic comedians of the fifth century BC. Scholars of Sappho explain that all women throughout history who have attempted

\textsuperscript{86} Mackenzie, 123.
to step out of their assigned roles and have careers have been the victims of slander by men. Women in the Victorian era were maligned for having "professions" outside of the home, exemplified by the caricatures of the "New Woman." The biographers cite as evidence of Sappho's virtuous nature, Sappho's anger at her brother's immoral behavior and Sappho's rebuke of Alcaeus' amorous advances. The conclusion reached by these biographers is that Sappho's life was beyond reproach.

Sappho's biographers maintain that, like Victorian women, Sappho was able to have a career only because she was either widowed, or without a husband. The Victorian authors dispel any evidence of Sappho having a husband because that would make her love poetry of an adulterous nature and adultery committed by women was considered one of the most grievous offenses women could make in the Victorian era. Consequently, Sappho could not have had a living husband, scorning to the Victorians, if she were a virtuous woman. Therefore, she must have been the product of a society involving exceptional freedom for women, which allowed her to write, sing, and play her lyre.

Victorian playwrights appropriated the story of Sappho and Phaon; however, these playwrights kept her virtue intact by having Sappho and Phaon marry before he rejects her love. Their marriage made her love affair and subsequent despair at Phaon's perfidy legitimate according to Victorian mores. Victorian scholars, on the other hand, dismiss the story as a myth thereby removing another story that could be construed as improper by Victorian standards from Sappho's biography.

The Victorian scholars explained that Sappho's poetry about women and her
circle of female companions were a result of her position as a schoolmistress or the leader of an aesthetic club, both appropriate environs for a virtuous Victorian woman. In this role, Sappho instructed the young women in poetry, music, grace, and manners, just as at Victorian women's colleges. She had to deal with some slander from men, because of her high position and gender, which led to her tarnished reputation. The Victorian scholars all support this schoolteacher version of Sappho, placing her into an appropriate role for a Victorian woman.

Sappho's poems, especially her "Hymn to Aphrodite" were altered by Victorian translators in order to make her appear pure and virtuous according to Victorian standards. Either the object of Sappho's love was changed from female to male, or, if left as female, the words were changed to make Sappho's love appear as a close friendship. Again, Sappho's reputation is left untarnished.

The word "lesbian" did originate because of Sappho's association with love for women and this term first came into use in the 1890s. However, the term was used only by scientists and physicians and the average person did not believe that lesbian relations were even possible. Following this line of reasoning, Sappho's reputation is vindicated.

The Victorian biographers of Sappho constructed a version of Sappho in which all questions regarding Sappho's virtue were eliminated. She was either a widow or unmarried. She held a position as a schoolmistress or as the head of an aesthetic club in which she taught girls the art of poetry. The story about Sappho and Phaon is untrue. She describes feelings of love in her poetry, but these poems were used for demonstration
purposes in her classes, so their subject matter must not be taken seriously. If Sappho did write about women, it was because of her close ties of friendship with these girls, not sexual desire, as some would believe. This is the picture of the Victorian version of Sappho. This Victorian construct of Sappho was the epitome of the ideal Victorian woman.
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A short but useful work covering Sappho’s life. His writing style is rather backhanded and confusing.


A silly play that nonetheless perpetuates the myth of Sappho and Phaon, but would not win any awards for historical accuracy.


Contains some interesting insights into Sappho’s life. The work does have a feminine bias.


Interesting work of pure fiction. Demonstrates a Victorian woman’s portrayal of what she thought Sappho dealt with and felt on an everyday basis.


An extensive book which provided a great deal of information. She was a bit overzealous when it came to defending Sappho’s honor and had a bias toward women who were the head’s of institutions, perhaps because of her own position as President of Constantinople College.


A brief work which provided some helpful information.

A very helpful work because it includes every ancient commentary written on Sappho, direct translations of every fragment, as well as from where the fragment came.


A brief work that provided some helpful information.


An invaluable work. By far the best and most extensive scholarship I found on Sappho from the Victorian period. Wharton gave in-depth explanations about how he constructed Sappho’s biography. Furthermore, Wharton included the best translations of Sappho’s poems from the Victorian period, many of which are only available in his book, which was a great resource for me.


Secondary Sources


