

Women Who Love Women:
Analysing the Poetry of Sappho and Sor Juana

Jenni Hautamäki

682285A Bachelor's Seminar and Thesis

English Philology

Faculty of Humanities

University of Oulu

Autumn 2019

Abstract

This thesis will examine two female poets, Sappho (c. 630 B.C.E. - 570 B.C.E.) and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648 - 1695) and their poetry about loving women. This thesis surrounds around close reading of a selection of translated versions of Sappho's and Sor Juana's love poems and selected biographical texts written about the writers. I will discuss the writers' backgrounds to understand their poetry better and to see how that impacted their writing. The translators of the poems have stated that the poems are autobiographical. With the basis in poetry analysis, I will examine the word choices, metaphors, themes and other factors in these poems. I will also examine similarities and differences in the poems from these writers to see how poetry about women by women has stayed the same or changed over the time period from Sappho to Sor Juana. Love poems by these writers have not been compared to before. The goal of this thesis is to give recognition to female writers, especially to female writers who consider themselves as women who love women.

Keywords: Sappho, Sor Juana, poetry, female poets, LGBT+ poets

Tiivistelmä

Tässä tutkielmassa käsitellään kahta runoilijaa, Sapfoa (630 eaa. - 570 eaa.) ja sisar Juanaa (1648-1695) ja naisten välisestä rakkaudesta kertovaa runouttaan. Keskityn englanniksi käännettyihin runoihin ja muiden tutkijoiden elämäkerrallisiin teksteihin Sapfosta ja Sisar Juanasta. Hyödynnän tietoja Sapfon ja sisar Juanan elämästä, jotta voin tutkia heidän runoistaan elämäkerrallisia piirteitä. Runojen kääntäjät ovat nimittäin todenneet, että runot kertovat runoilijoiden omasta elämästä ja tunteista. Tutkielman viitekehykset muodostavat lähiluku ja runoanalyysi. Tutkin runoista elämäkerrallisten piirteiden lisäksi sanavalintoja, metaforia, teemoja ja muita runoanalyysin avulla tarkasteltavia piirteitä. Tutkin myös Sapfon ja sisar Juanan runojen samankaltaisuuksia ja eroavaisuuksia, sillä haluan tarkastella sitä, miten naisten välisestä rakkaudesta kertova runous on pysynyt samanlaisena tai muuttunut vuosisatojen aikana Sapfon ajasta sisar Juanan aikaan. Haluan nähdä, miten avoimesti nämä runoilijat ovat pystyneet kirjoittamaan tunteistaan toisia naisia kohtaan. Sapfon ja sisar Juanan rakkausrunoja ei ole vertailtu toisiinsa aiemmin. Tutkielman tärkein tavoite on antaa tunnustusta naisrunoilijoille, varsinkin heille, jotka identifioivat naisina, jotka rakastavat naisia. Avainsanat: Sapfo, sisar Juana, runous, naisrunoilijat, LGBT+ runoilijat

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Method.....	5
3. Sappho.....	6
3.1 Sappho's background.....	6
3.2 Sappho's poetry.....	6
4. Sor Juana.....	11
4.1 Sor Juana's background.....	11
4.2 Sor Juana's poetry.....	12
5. Similarities between Sappho and Sor Juana's poems.....	15
5.1 Jealousy.....	15
5.2 Female sexuality.....	15
5.3 Having someone special.....	17
6. Differences between Sappho and Sor Juana's poems.....	20
6.1 Views of love: inferiority versus superiority.....	20
6.2 Spirituality.....	21
7. Conclusion.....	23
Works cited.....	24

1 Introduction

In this thesis, I will look into how two female writers wrote about the women they loved. Sappho (c. 630 B.C.E. – 570 B.C.E.) and Sor Juana (1648-1695) wrote about the women they admired and loved. Though born in very different times, they were trailblazers in their respective communities. Being a woman and a poet alone was a radical decision in their day and age, but to write about women romantically, was challenging the norms in society. Writing about such intimate topics, they also caused some polemic for their poems.

Since we are not taught about Mexican history or literature in northern Europe, Sor Juana is not really known here. We are, however, taught about Sappho during history and literature classes as she was important in ancient Greece and therefore to the development western culture and history. However, her love of women is rarely mentioned. I chose to use the term “Women who Love Women” in the title, because it is used as an umbrella term in the LGBT+ community about women who love women (<https://www.dictionary.com/e/acronyms/wlw/>), therefore it is fitting for this thesis as well. We do not have an official statement of Sappho’s and Sor Juana’s sexual orientation, but they are women who wrote about loving women.

It is important to acknowledge that I will examine the translations of these poems. Sappho’s poems were translated by Jim Powell and Sor Juana’s poems were translated by Joan Larkin and Jaime Manrique. Powell notes that since Sappho’s poems have been missing for hundreds of years, many of them are not full and are presented with parts missing (vii). Larkin and Manrique state that they took some liberties in the translations to get her intentions through in the translated versions as well (78).

My choices of research materials focus on Sappho and Sor Juana’s poems and earlier research of them as persons. My primary sources are *Sor Juana’s Love Poems* and *The Poetry of Sappho*. I will be looking into these poems from the perspective of queer research and poetry analysis.

Sor Juana’s Love Poems is Sor Juana’s poetry edited together by Joan Larkin and Jaime Manrique. They have also included a biography of Sor Juana in the beginning and have translated the poems from Spanish into English. The book also includes the original poems. These poems have been put together because they solely focus on the love Sor Juana yearned for.

My primary source for Sappho’s poetry is Jim Powell’s *The Poetry of Sappho: An Expanded Edition, Featuring Newly Discovered Poems* which was released in 2007. It has background information about

Sappho and most importantly, translated poems by Sappho. These poems were translated from Greek to English by Jim Powell.

From the two collections of poems, I will choose poems that are about women the poets loved. Though Sappho and Sor Juana both wrote about several subjects, I will only focus on love poems to see what is different and what is similar in these poems. I will also use the editors' findings about Sappho and Sor Juana's backgrounds as source. I will investigate the word choices, themes, metaphors and autobiographical perspectives in Sappho's and Sor Juana's poetry.

Sappho and Sor Juana's poetry have not been compared to each other before. However, there has been earlier research of their works individually. Lester has analysed the work of Sappho from the perspective of female sexuality. Lester's article is useful for this thesis, as she also noticed the same themes as I did while analysing Sappho's poetry. Ventarola, in turn, has written about stylistics in Sor Juana's poetry and about how Sor Juana's writings differed from those of other poets. Barnstone analysed the themes in Sor Juana's poetry, but he did not analyse the love poems that I will look into in this thesis. However, I found his research insightful. He had also researched Sor Juana's own life history in order to understand her poetry better, which supports reading Sor Juana's poetry as autobiographical. Barnstone also compares Sor Juana to Sappho but does not compare their works in his analysis (61).

The goal of this thesis is to give recognition to the two poets by analysing their texts written about loving women and by comparing them to one another. What has remained the same? What is different? How do their personal backgrounds affect their poems? How do their poems differ from the heteronormative view of love?

2 Method

This thesis is based on poetry analysis and the close reading of the selected poetry. I will investigate the poems by looking into metaphors, themes, word choices, repetition and other features. In this thesis, I will utilize the following poetic terms of poetry analysis in order to understand what the writers of the poems meant with their writings.

First four definitions of are retrieved from the website of Academy of American Poets (poets.org/glossary) and the last two from DiYanni.

Metaphor: Comparing something to something else.

Repetition: Repeating the same word or phrase in a poem to emphasise the theme of the poem.

Elegy: A poem that is about the narrator's sorrow and sadness. It is often written to honour someone who has passed away.

Metonymy: A word that is replaced by another word that is somewhat relatable to the original word (poets.org/glossary).

Tone: The implied attitude of the narrator in the poem.

Theme: The idea of the work, the deeper meaning of the poem.

I will also examine the autobiographical aspects of the poems to see if the writers' own background is evident in their poems. The most important feature of poetry analysis I will focus on in this thesis is the theme, as I am specifically investigating the theme of love. Through using these terms, I will examine how Sappho and Sor Juana use the poetic elements to enhance the many aspects of love in their works.

3 Sappho

3.1 Background of Sappho

Sappho was born sometime between 630 BC and 612 BC and died in 570 BC. She was born into an aristocratic family in the island of Lesbos, and she therefore had a privileged position in the ancient Greek society (Lester, 173). Her family was socially and politically active, but at the age of six, Sappho became an orphan (Powell, 43). In one of her earlier poems, Sappho had expressed a desire to be loved by a man (Lester, 173). Sappho ran an academy for young single women called The School of Muses (Lester, 174) on the Lesbos Island. Sappho is one of the most remarkable figures in the literature of ancient Greece as she was the first woman poet (Lester, 172). According to Powell, Sappho was married to a man and had a daughter with him named Kleis, but he passed away soon after their marriage (44). The husband was not mentioned in Sappho's poetry (Lester, 173). Because of her family's political activity and prominent position in the Lesbos island community, her family was threatened by peasants and the less fortunate (Lester, 173). Due to this, Sappho and her daughter were exiled three times but Sappho presumably returned to Lesbos, as she is buried there (Powell, 44).

Sappho's poetry was impactful during her time, and she was called "The Tenth Muse" by Plato (<https://poets.org/poet/sappho>). This title refers to the nine muses of ancient Greek mythology that inspired the culture and communities in their own ways in different fields and were worshipped for their intellect (<https://www.ancient.eu/muse/>). By crowning Sappho with this title, her fellow intellectuals considered her as one of the muses as well. Sappho's writings were unfortunately lost in the fire of the library of Alexandria, and only a fraction of them have survived to this day (Lester, 172). Only one poem survived completely, "Ode to Aphrodite", while 650 fragmented pieces were saved (174).

According to Powell, we actually do not know much of Sappho's background, and much of the information available is uncertain and may have been mixed with some fictional aspects through rumours and the loss of Sappho's poetry in the fire of Alexandria. Sappho also became a popular character in plays, which has impacted how valid the information we have on her is (44).

3.2 Sappho's poetry

Sappho wrote poems about what it was like to be a woman who desires love from other women. According to Powell, these poems are autobiographical, and it is therefore natural to refer to Sappho as the narrator (43).

A common theme in Sappho's poetry is writing to and about the goddesses of ancient Greek beliefs. In ancient Greece, praying to the gods in a poem was a common practice. For example, Sappho dedicates a poem to goddess Hera: "Lady Hera, gracious in all your majesty" (Sappho, henceforth SP, 7). After the narrator has addressed Hera in this way, she pleads for help from her by saying "-- O goddess, help me / as in the old days" (SP, 7), which shows that she has turned to Hera before as well. Hera is the goddess of marriage and fertility (Cartwright). This shows that Sappho's interests were in pursuing her own sexuality, rather than in traditional women's chores such as raising children and being a good wife to a man.

The only surviving poem from Sappho's collection is "Ode to Aphrodite" (Lester, 174). In this poem, the narrator requests for help from goddess Aphrodite. Sappho starts the poem by reciting Aphrodite's honorific titles. Sappho also uses words such as "beg" and "don't hurt me", which shows that the narrator considers herself inferior to the goddess and worships her.

Artfully adorned Aphrodite, deathless
child of Zeus and weaver of wiles I beg you
please don't hurt me, don't overcome my spirit,
goddess, - -

(SP, 4)

The poem continues with advice that she would like to hear from the goddess.

If she flees you now, she will soon pursue you;
if she won't accept what you give, she'll give it;
if she doesn't love you, she'll love you soon now;
even unwilling

(SP, 4-5)

While this is what she wants to hear from the goddess, it is also advice the narrator would give a reader with trouble in love. Though it is quite demanding, saying that a woman will love another person even if she does not want to, these lines from the poem present the narrator as a hopeless romantic and would not rest until the woman was hers. Aphrodite is the goddess of sexuality, love and beauty (Cartwright), and therefore the narrator's pleading her for advice implies that Sappho was free with her sexuality and did not pray for issues that a woman in ancient Greece typically would have, such as good fortune with bearing children.

Sappho also writes about normal human beings. After reading Sappho's poems, I have noted that beauty of women is explored in Sappho's poetry quite often. This will be evident in the poems analysed in this thesis. In a fragment of a poem, Sappho simply wrote "O beautiful, O graceful girl" (28). Sappho admired women's beauty and personalities overall. In one poem, the narrator asks a lyrist to play a song dedicated to a girl she found beautiful (7-8), named Góngyla: "- - that beautiful girl: her dresses' / clinging makes you shake when you see it, and I'm / happy, - -" (8). This suggests that Góngyla is very beautiful and thus deserved to have songs written about her. The narrator's love for Góngyla is pure and not about her having power over Góngyla. However, a part of the poem is missing, we do not know what more Sappho wrote about Góngyla. The poem continues with Sappho writing that Góngyla was so beautiful that she cannot be a mortal, and that she is much more beautiful than other women named Helen and Hermíonē. In this fragmented poem, Sappho writes that she only has "hope of love" (8), meaning that she wants nothing else but love from Góngyla.

I have also noticed that Sappho uses metaphors in her poetry quite often: "Then love shook my heart like the wind that falls on / oaks in the mountains" (SP, 16). In this fragment of a poem, the narrator uses nature as a metaphor to describe what love makes her feel. By comparing love to a natural occurrence, she meant that love to her is a natural feeling. The love described in this poem, is not calm but restless, as the narrator tells that it metaphorically shook her heart. That is, her heart was not actually shaking inside her, but instead the love made her nervous and her pulse faster than usual.

Observing other women and their lives is a common theme in Sappho's poetry. It seems that Sappho wanted to document the lives of women around her, so that people in the future would know what women were like during Sappho's time. She must have also written about women because she admired what they did.

Cretan women once danced this way
on gentle feet in time
around the lovely altar, softly
treading the tender flowers of grass.

(SP, 41)

As seen here, the narrator chooses kind and loving adjectives to describe the Cretan women, such as "gentle" and "soft". Even the altar that was surrounded by these women is described as "lovely".

"Not one girl, I think, will ever look on the sunlight / of another time who has such talent as this one does" (SP. 19). In this fragmented poem, the narrator observes and admires a girl and how her beauty

appears in the sunlight. The fragment is straight forward and Sappho does not utilize poetic elements. This is a common theme in Sappho's writings. Sappho seems to have observed girls and women around her and to have been inspired to write poetry about them. This is also apparent in a fragment of a poem number 122. "A tender girl picking flowers" (SP, 31). The girl is presented as looking innocent and young to the narrator, which is why the word tender is chosen to describe her.

In a verse of a fragment of poem number 91, the narrator shares her irritation with another woman: "Never yet, O Írana, have I found / anyone more vexing than you" (SP, 21). This was uncommon in Sappho's writing: usually women were a divine gift to her. It is not described what Írana has done to Sappho, but apparently it was irritating enough for her to write about it. Sappho sees women as complex human beings, who can also be mean and bothersome. Sappho saw women as more than their appearance, unlike usually in the society.

Surprisingly, Sappho starts poem number 31 by describing a man the narrator finds attractive. The narrator even says that "he matches to gods" (11). However, the man is divine because he is able to admire a woman the narrator is attracted to, not because he is a man in a patriarchal society. The narrator described the woman's voice and laughter as "sweet" and her beauty makes the narrator speechless: "the / sweetness of your laughter: yes, that—I swear it— / sets the heart to shaking inside my breast, since / once I look at you for a moment, I can't / speak any longer" (SP, 11).

Because the narrator cannot have her, it is painful for the narrator to be attracted to the woman. The narrator says that "all must be endured" (11), which means that one must suffer in love. This is not a common theme in Sappho's poetry as, for the most part, she describes love as a happy experience. The ending is missing from that we do not know what else Sappho may have written about the woman.

Sappho also challenges heteronormative society in her poetry. In poem number 102, she recites what a woman has said to her mother about having feelings for women instead of men: " "Sweet mother, I can't weave my web / overcome with longing for a boy / because of slender Aphrodite"" (SP, 26). The narrator of this poem has told her mother that because she was attracted to women, like goddess Aphrodite, she cannot force herself to find men attractive. As women were expected to become wives to men and mothers to children, a woman sharing her feelings towards women was against expectations for women and could have put her into danger. By sharing the woman's story, Sappho showed support to her understanding her feelings. Lester points out that "[g]ender is a very recent concept for the understanding of individual development and of male/female exchanges in sexual and nonsexual spheres" (175—176), which indicates that Sappho's sharing the woman's story shows that

she was aware of the heteronormative gender expectations that especially women faced with. Sappho's writings were in this sense ahead of her time.

Sappho examined people from the perspective of how they made her feel in her poetry. She observed what they did, admired them for it and was inspired to write poems about them. Sappho used kind adjectives in her poetry to describe women around her. She found women beautiful, but also multidimensional human beings. Sappho was also aware of her impact on girls' and women's lives, and this is evident in her poems. She was also aware of the pressures that women were put under in the heteronormative society. These aspects are what made Sappho impactful and controversial in her society and after her death as well.

4 Sor Juana

4.1 Background of Sor Juana

According to Academy of American Poets, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (born Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez) was born sometime between 1648 and 1651 in San Miguel Neplantla, Mexico. Juana was born as an illegitimate child: her mother was of a mixed-race Creole background, her father was a white, Spanish soldier and the parents were never married. Juana was interested in reading from a young age and wrote her first poem at the age of eight. As a teenager, she studied Greek logic independently and taught Latin to other kids.

At the age of 16, Juana became a servant to the wife of Mexico's viceroy. Viceroy was the person who was the leader of the country when the king in power could not be. This acknowledgement was remarkable in young Juana's life. The couple was so impressed with Juana's intellect that a year later, her intelligence was tested in front of a panel of scholars. After succeeding, Juana became known for her intellect and beauty throughout Mexico. At the age of 21, she became a nun because she was passionate about learning, and the only way for women to be educated was to become a nun (<https://poets.org/poet/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz>). From then on, she adapted the title Sor Juana de la Cruz – Sister Juana of the Cross in English – as is the tradition for nuns. Since she identified herself with this title, I will refer to her as Sor Juana in my thesis.

In the convent, Sor Juana was able to study music, philosophy and natural sciences. She was intelligent but because she was outspoken about her opinions, she was often a target of criticism. Because Sor Juana was passionate about learning, she often wrote non-religious texts in which she talked about women's right to education. Because of her outspoken writing, the Mexican church silenced her by evicting her from the abbey and making her sell all her books and musical instruments. Sor Juana also had to give up poetry and other ways of writing as a penance (<https://poets.org/poet/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz>).

Sor Juana died in 1695 of the plague (<https://poets.org/poet/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz>). Her works were released in Spain for the first time after her passing in 1689 by the vicereine's suggestion, and they were so successful that two more volumes of her writings were released later (Howe, 158). She also was called "The Tenth Muse" by scholars of the time (Howe, 158). According to Larkin and Manrique, Sor Juana was not as celebrated in Mexico as in Spain. Sor Juana's works were hidden for centuries, until they were rescued in the 20th century by women scholars (9). She has then become an important figure in Latin American, especially Mexican, history (Larkin and Manrique, 9). However, many scholars ignored and even denied that Sor Juana wrote about women romantically (Barnstone,

67). According to the Academy of American Poets, Sor Juana never married and did not have children (<https://poets.org/poet/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz>).

4.2 Sor Juana's poetry

Sor Juana's poetry in *Sor Juana's Love Poems*, put together by Larkin and Manrique, are all about women she loved. Since Sor Juana was a nun, it can be assumed that some of these poems might just be her fantasies about women rather than her reciting what happened between her and a lover. Larkin and Manrique imply that these poems are autobiographical (10), meaning that these poems are about Sor Juana's personal feelings. I will therefore refer to Sor Juana as the narrator of the poems. The poems are rather explicit and erotic, and Sor Juana did not restrict herself when it came to describing her desires. I will also refer to the writer as Sor Juana instead of referring to her by her last name, as that is how other researchers refer to her as well.

Barnstone has stated that Sor Juana's love poems "need no explanatory justification. The love poems are powerful and should not be overread contextually to the point of their losing autonomous, artistic being" (65). While this is a valid point, there is no harm in investigating what Sor Juana wrote about women and what her words could mean. Acknowledging a female poet's feelings towards women does not take away from the power of the poems.

Ventarola mentions that it is common for Sor Juana to write several poems about the same characters. Ventarola calls this serialization (319). For example, Sor Juana had written four poems about Laura, a woman she admired (Sor Juana, henceforth SJ, 67, 71, 73, 75). Three of these poems are presented to be read together as they tell a story about Sor Juana's feelings towards Laura. Sor Juana's adoration of Laura starts with the narrator saying, "Divine Laura, my life was always yours / and always will be yours" (SJ, 67). The narrator puts Laura on a pedestal, rather than presenting their love as being equal to one another.

In a serialization of poems under the title "I Beg You, Señora", Sor Juana describes a love where she felt inferior to the one she loves. The translator has left "señora" in the English version of the poem instead of translating it. However, it is apparent from the poems that the narrator enjoys the feeling of inferiority. The narrator feels connected to señora in her soul: "I saw you in my soul / In my soul, I spoke to you" (25). By repeating the phrase "in my soul", Sor Juana emphasised how close the narrator feels to this woman. Later, the narrator says "My strict mistress / now that I've said it / you want me to be wretched / I'd be grateful if you mocked me" (SJ, 29). Any type of attention is acceptable to the narrator, especially from someone with a superior status in society. Sor Juana is desperate to be loved. No one taught Sor Juana that love is not about hurting others but treating each

other with respect and kindness, which is apparent in this serialization of poems. This series also proves Ventarola's examination of Sor Juana writing several poems about one individual.

However, in the end of this series of poems, Sor Juana took a stand and defended herself. The narrator of this poem states

These are my feelings –
there's no other way to say it.
You know what I'm not saying.
And you know why I'm silent.

(SJ, 31)

In this passage, the narrator is confident in herself. The narrator confronts the woman she loves, because the woman knows what the narrator feels for her. This stance is very rare in Sor Juana's poetry. Confronting someone who was in a higher class was uncommon at the time, therefore Sor Juana challenged heteronormative view of love while also questioning society's class division by loving a woman of a higher status than her.

In a poem, which is a part of the collection "Inez, I have to Gloat: You're gorgeous", the narrator of the poem describes the beauty of a woman named Inez and her feelings for Inez. I would like to note that in the original Spanish version of this poem (SJ, 54), Inez is written as Inés. The narrator of the poem says,

Inez, I have to gloat: you're gorgeous
And you love me. All this
pleasure – I'll never be the same.
When you are jealous, I'm a trembling thread,

(SJ, 55)

The narrator makes Inez nervous and the narrator enjoys it. Here the jealousy was other way around: Inez was jealous of the narrator, and it makes the narrator feel scared yet loved. This is not a common theme in Sor Juana's poetry, as she is often the nervous one. The initial focus on what Sor Juana loved about Inez is her appearance, as Sor Juana says "you're gorgeous / And you love me" (55). By only focusing on Inez's outer appearance, it comes off as surface-level love. This is how men often write about women in history in heteronormative manner. Women were not allowed to be anything else but accessories for men, so Sor Juana writing about another woman in this manner is her

challenging gender roles. She is also challenging how society views people of her background; she was considered of a lower status in society, but she herself was confident in herself.

Sor Juana then describes the many ways in which being in love with Inez was hurtful. The narrator says, “When you’re angry with me, I can’t breathe. / When you go out, I lie awake at night.” (SJ, 55). While the narrator would have died if she had actually not breathed, therefore “I can’t breathe” is a metaphor to how Inez made the narrator feel. The narrator then dismisses her own difficult feelings with “Still, Inez, none of this really matters”, (SJ, 55) and then continues to describe sexual activities she would have liked to explore with Inez through metaphors. The narrator says, “Just take me to bed, where I like it, / with my wineskin and your succulent worm” (SJ, 55). In this passage, the narrator describes the sexual activities the narrator wishes to have fulfilled with Inez. Sor Juana uses the metonymy of wineskin to describe her genitalia. This shows that no matter what kind of feelings, negative or positive, they had for each other, the most important aspect of their relationship was fulfilling each other’s sexual desires. In this poem, it is evident that Sor Juana’s romantic feelings towards Inez were surface-level and based on her own sexual desires. However, she does not speak about Inez in a degrading manner, as often men do when it comes to writing about women exploring sexuality. In the poem, Sor Juana suggests pursuing activities they both found pleasing, instead of being violent towards Inez (55).

In many of Sor Juana’s poems, it is evident that when it came to love, Sor Juana did not have much self-confidence. She wanted to be loved, even if it hurt her. Her poems show toxic type of love that was based on desire, rather than true emotions towards a person. Larkin and Manrique state that much of Sor Juana’s love poems are based on how society was divided into classes by wealth (77). Usually in Sor Juana’s poetry, the narrator is the one in the role of servant. Sor Juana saw herself as a servant to God since she was a nun and being born out of wedlock from an interracial affair, she has always been looked down on and shunned away from society. It is not a surprise that even in love, where most would expect to be cherished, she still thought of herself as the less worthy one. In one poem, Sor Juana writes “I just wanted you to see my heart!” (SJ, 39). This makes the narrator sound desperate for being loved for who she was, even though most of the time Sor Juana did not see her worthy of it. In Sor Juana’s poetry, love is not really a happy emotion.

5 Similarities between Sappho and Sor Juana's poems

Since love is a human emotion, it is expected that some features of it remain the same through time. This is also apparent in Sor Juana's and Sappho's poetry. Another connection between Sappho and Sor Juana is that they wrote about loving women when this was not acceptable in heteronormative society. In this chapter, I will examine such similarities between the writers' works. What virtues have stayed the same regarding writing about love poems?

5.1 Jealousy

Jealousy is a common theme in love poems, and it is apparent in both Sappho and Sor Juana's poems. In Sappho's poem number 31, the narrator describes watching a woman being adored by a man and being jealous that he got to admire her publicly, while the narrator has to do it from afar (11). The narrator describes the feeling by using metaphors: "I'm greener than the / grass is and appear to myself to be little short of dying." (SP, 11). Jealousy is often metaphorically compared to the colour of green, just as Sappho had done here. The narrator wishes she could also admire the same woman as publicly as the man did but because she could not do so, she describes the feeling as painful as death. Since the narrator is jealous of the man being able to admire the woman, perhaps she is also jealous of having the power that comes along with being a man.

There are also mentions of jealousy from another person. In a poem about Inez, Sor Juana also mentioned that she enjoyed when Inez was jealous of her (SJ, 55). In this passage of the poem, the jealousy did not feel bad but rather something enjoyable for Sor Juana. However, even though Sor Juana enjoys Inez being jealous of her, Sor Juana does not care how Inez treats her, as long as Inez acknowledges Sor Juana's existence. In this poem, the narrator is desperate for Inez's love: "and when you flirt in front of me, I die" (SJ, 55), which metaphorically describes how painful jealousy is.

Comparing jealousy to a feeling like death is visible in both Sappho and Sor Juana's poems. For them, loving and admiring women was painful and yet worth it, as the women they admired were so beautiful to them and could have fulfilled their sexual and romantic desires.

5.2 Female sexuality

In ancient Greek writing, women's sexuality was usually introduced as a dangerous feature, but in Sappho's poems, it was normalised (Lester, 177). For example, Sappho writes "I will let my body / flow like water over the gentle cushions" (SP, 16), showing that she allowed herself to feel sexual desire and was not embarrassed by it. In poem number 48, the narrator confesses to a person "You

came, and I was mad to have you: / your breath cooled my heart that was burning with desire” (SP, 17). The narrator describes her desire to have someone by metaphorically saying that it is burning her heart, and only being with this person will relieve the pain. Sappho tried to re-define female sexuality in her poetry, and according to Lester, these poems helped women to feel empowered and free from patriarchal society’s expectations for women (179).

Female sexuality was still a taboo in 1600s Mexico as well. Especially sexual desire of women by women was seen as outright wrong. However, Sor Juana did not care for that since many of her poems include explicit descriptions of her sexual desires. In the poem titled “Don’t go, My Darling, I don’t want this to end yet”, the narrator talks about being insulted by a lover for leaving her after having intercourse. “Why make love to me, then leave? / Why mock me?” (SJ, 35). In many poems, Sor Juana focuses only on fulfilling her sexual desires, but when someone did only that without romantic feelings and then leaves, she feels hurt. The repetition of the question word “why” emphasises the pain the narrator feels.

These poems show that Sor Juana was proud of who she was and was not afraid to show her sexual desires towards women, even if she was a nun. She still saw herself as a woman with feelings, rather than merely a faithful servant to God who had no emotions of her own outside of religion. This was a very modern take on being a woman, because at the time women were either possessions of their fathers or husbands and they were only considered as being faithful servants to the men in their lives and to God. Ventarola has also stated that the erotic themes in Sor Juana’s poetry were considered “undoubtedly scandalous” (317). According to Ventarola, it was common for Sor Juana to discuss “taboos that aren’t thematized in traditional - - love poetry” (314). That was part of the reason why Sor Juana’s texts were hidden by the Mexican Church, as they were too sinful. According to Barnstone, “Juana was also to suffer criticism from the Church for the erotic implications and religious impropriety of her profane poems as well as for the very activity of her writings, their publication, and her intellectual investigations” (62).

Sor Juana’s writings regarding sexuality are more explicit and descriptive than Sappho’s, at least in the poems I analysed. Overall, however, writing about sexuality has been looked down on. While Sor Juana felt free to describe her sexuality in the poetry, the attitude towards this topic has not changed from when Sappho wrote about desiring women.

5.3 Having someone special

It was typical of Sor Juana to dedicate several poems to one person. For example, Sor Juana admired señora, Inez and Laura and wanted to write about them more than once. These poems have been put together and they present the story arc of their loves.

Señora must have held a high status in society, since the narrator of poems about her calls her by a honorific title. Being publicly in señora's company would have been a way for Sor Juana to be accepted in society.

Señora's name was not published. By calling her "señora", Sor Juana shows that she respected her status in society and realised that they could have been in trouble if their relationship was revealed. The narrator of the poem does not seem comfortable enough to share her name, meaning they are not comfortable to be out as a couple.

Oh how I went up in flames
in your lovely Sun!
Hungry for the bait,
I forgot the danger.

(SJ, 27)

Sor Juana uses the Sun as a metaphor to señora's beauty and describes being so in love with her that she is metaphorically on fire. Obviously she is not in flames, but the feelings she has for her metaphorically feels like being aflame. The narrator of the poem is aware that being in love with señora is dangerous, considering they are of different statues in society. However, the narrator chooses señora over being safe. This shows that señora and Sor Juana shared a deep companionship, besides of the class difference.

Inez seemed to be personally closer to Sor Juana than señora. In a poem called "Inez, when someone calls you a bitch", the narrator praises Inez for how she behaved, when someone mistreats her.

You have a dirty mouth: you love to use it:
once you start. no magpie can compete.
You're louder than a string of firecrackers.
You thrive on noise, you love to make a stink.

(SJ, 59)

Inez loudly defends herself, and the narrator compares her talking voice to two loud things: a bird ("a magpie") and explosions ("a string of firecrackers"). Inez was a confident woman, unlike Sor Juana

who admired her. This shows that Inez and Sor Juana shared a close relationship where they could be honest with each other.

Another person Sor Juana wrote series of poems about is Laura. One of them is presented on its own, and the rest are presented together under the title “Elegy”. Since elegy means a poem in which the narrator expresses sorrow, it is obvious that Laura made Sor Juana feel sad. “Elegy” has a dedication to “On the Death of the Most Excellent Señora the Marquise of Mancera”, meaning it is a poem written to grieve a loss of an important person. In the poem “Divine Laura, My Life Was Always Yours”, Sor Juana explains Laura’s death. “I applaud her audacity: / she’s lost an empire; / now her power’s yours. / Through you, I’m free” (SJ, 67). The “she” the narrator refers to is death and in the poem the narrator is talking to Laura. To Sor Juana, Laura was more powerful than death. The third poem in “Elegy” is Sor Juana’s final farewell to Laura: “Once I wanted only to enjoy you, / wanted eyes only to see you. / Now I use them for weeping” (SJ, 75).

Sappho wrote about women generally or about a few different persons. Based on the poems I have examined, Góngyla was someone special to her, as Sappho wrote two poems to her. In the poems, Sappho praises Góngyla’s beauty and shares her deepest secrets to her. Sappho’s initial focus was on Góngyla’s beauty.

Please Abánthis, your Sappho calls you:
won’t you take your Lydian lyre and play
another song to Góngyla while desire still
flutters your heart-strings
for that girl, that beautiful girl

(SP, 7-8)

According to the narrator, Góngyla is admired by many people. In this poem, Sappho teases a person named Abánthis for being attracted to Góngyla, whilst simultaneously the narrator admires Góngyla as well.

Sappho recites to Góngyla in poem number 95 about her will to die. The narrator shares what she has asked from a god. “I - - have no pleasure being above the ground” (SP, 23). Sappho was a prominent public figure and would have not shared personal issues with someone she did not know personally. “I said - - a desire to die takes hold of me” (23). Though Sappho was originally only focused on Góngyla’s beauty, poem number 95 showed that Sappho trusted Góngyla and wanted to share her

fears with her as well. This poem shows that Sappho and Góngyla connected with each other deeply. However, there might be even more poems dedicated to Góngyla since many of the poems are fragmented.

6 Differences in Sappho and Sor Juana's poems

Though love poems have remained popular through time, obviously different individuals will feel differently when it comes to loving another individual. One's background obviously impacts how they personally experience emotions; if there has been a lack of compassion in one's life, it can lead them to not be able to be compassionate towards others. Similarly, if one is in a high position in society and you are used to being admired, love comes more naturally.

6.1 Views of love: inferiority versus superiority

Sappho's poems celebrate the beauty of women and loving women. She talks about love in a kind manner and admired the women she wrote her poems about. Sappho also says in her poem that she loves women's delicacy the most in the world: "But delicacy, that's what I love, and this love / has made of the sun's brightness and beauty my fortune" (SP, 20). This means that her love for other women was not generally painful. In poem 49, then narrator shares her feelings towards someone in a very straight-forward manner: "I was in love with you Attis, a long time ago. / To me you seemed a little girl, and not too graceful" (SP, 17). In this poem, Sappho enforces her superior status when it came to loving someone else by comparing the person to "a little girl", instead of an adult.

In a fragment of a poem, the narrator shares that "toward you beautiful girls my thoughts / never alter" (13), which means that her love for specific girls and women, whether it was platonic or romantic, is everlasting. By calling these women "girls", the narrator puts herself above them. She sees them as young, naïve girls whom she could teach something about life, while she saw herself as a mature, wise woman. This shows quite a deep connection and attachment towards the girls she spoke of. According to Lester, the women were infatuated by Sappho's "strong, independent personality and - - her poetry" (180), therefore the feelings must have been mutual. Punishment and being mistreated were not part of Sappho's love poems.

To Sor Juana, punishment and pain were always part of being in love, and she always considered herself as the inferior one when it came to her lovers and infatuation towards women. Even though she could have been proud of how intelligent she was, that did not matter when she was in love with someone. The inferiority that Sor Juana felt is visible in her poems through word choices. For example, she uses words and phrases such as "beg", "please forgive me" (SJ, 25) and "And if I'm guilty for trying / punish me" (SJ, 29). These words have negative connotations. The narrator asked for punishment for loving someone.

This difference must have been because of their social status in their respective societies. Sappho was an aristocrat, Sor Juana was an illegitimate daughter and of mixed-race background. Sappho was looked up to in her community, Sor Juana was looked down on in the society (<https://poets.org/poet/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz>). Larkin and Manrique discussed this theme in Sor Juana's poetry by stating, "Images of relationships based on the roles of servant and master, serf and feudal lord, were not merely metaphors to her" (77). Sor Juana was treated poorly by other people for a long time, therefore it reflects in her poetry as well. This is present in Sor Juana's poem collection "I beg you, señora" (SJ, 24). Sor Juana calls this love interest by an honorary name, instead of the person's own name. The only time Sappho wrote from an inferior point of view is when she wrote to the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece.

6.2 Spirituality

An interesting difference between Sappho and Sor Juana's poems is that some of Sappho's poems are dedicated to Greek goddesses like Aphrodite, Hera and Dika, while Sor Juana did not mention her faith in her poetry. Worshipping their gods in poetry was common in ancient Greece, as it was a way to say thank you to the divine beings for their talent of writing. Sappho's admiration for women also included supernatural beings as well. The love she had for these goddesses was different, however. She was writing it from a worshipper's perspective; it was not romantic love, but rather worshipping type of love.

In the poem "Ode to Aphrodite", Sappho showed that she knew Aphrodite's story and powers by heart, therefore she was a devoted worshipper.

Artfully adorned Aphrodite, deathless
child of Zeus and weaver of wiles I beg you
please don't hurt me, don't overcome my spirit,
goddess, with longing,

(SP, 3)

Sappho admired Aphrodite but simultaneously feared her. She was dependent on Aphrodite's powers in love and sexuality in order to have love she desired in her life. To Sappho, being a devoted follower of Aphrodite and other goddesses was equal to being a good person.

Sappho did not write about male gods in her poetry often. Her faithfulness was towards goddesses, because only they could fulfil her hunger for love from other women with their special powers. The male gods did not offer what Sappho needed in her life, nor did the men in her own life. It seems that Sappho had a special connection to women, whether they were divine beings or not. The only time Sappho mentions a god in her poetry was when she begged death from god Hermes (SP, 23). The narrator in the poem 95 tells Góngyla that god Hermes appeared to her and the narrator asked him to relief her from “being above the ground” (SP, 23), by which the narrator meant dying. While a male god could not have helped Sappho while being alive, they could have helped her in afterlife.

Meanwhile, Sor Juana’s poems are only towards women she knows. It is important to note that though Sor Juana was a nun she rarely mentioned God and her personal beliefs in her writings about women. There is only one woman she describes to be a divine being, Laura (SJ, 67), but otherwise she does not mention her religion when discussing her love for different women. The narrator calls Laura divine because she had passed away and according to the narrator Laura had gone to heaven. Sor Juana also mentions seeing señora as a divine being for being of a higher status. “Though I saw you as a goddess / in my dream you were a human” (SJ, 27). By calling Señora a human, Sor Juana takes back calling señora a divine being, reinforces her personal belief and realises that there is only one God for her to worship.

Because Sor Juana does not mention her faith in her poetry, it could mean that she was writing about her own desires as Juana Inés, instead of as Sor Juana the Nun. In Sappho’s poetry, love is something that was given from a goddess as a prize for worship, while in Sor Juana’s poetry it is a human feeling that is separate from her faith. This is how they individually viewed faith and love for women, rather than a generic view of all of love poetry and faith.

7 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined poems written by Sappho and Sor Juana. I have analysed love poems written by Sappho and Sor Juana and I have found similarities and differences between their poems. There are similarities in their poetry of being jealous, of being loyal to individuals and pursuing their own sexuality. However, love also meant different things to them; to Sappho it was a celebration, to Sor Juana it was to be in an inferior position and put the love interest on a pedestal instead of being equal to one another. To Sappho, faith was an important aspect of love, however, it was not to Sor Juana.

It should be noted that though Sor Juana treated herself poorly when it came to love, she knew she had strong opinions and was intelligent when it came to her education. She had a strong self-esteem, but that did not reflect in her personal life. Sappho was from a wealthy background and a confident woman, but that did not stop her from feeling upset at times when it came to love. This shows that they were both very human and decided to share their thoughts, their vulnerability, with others.

All in all, both poets' works show that the human need and desire for love has not changed over time. That is what Sappho's and Sor Juana's poems were in their core about; wanting to love, wanting to be loved.

Both poets have been called The Tenth Muse of their time. This means that they both had a large impact on their communities and the world beyond their deaths. But what make Sappho and Sor Juana impactful is, however, not their divine intellect, but their bravery to discuss feelings and matters that were considered controversial in their societies. They just also happened to be in love with many women.

Works cited

Primary Sources

Sappho. *The Poetry of Sappho: An Expanded Edition, Featuring Newly Discovered Poems*. 3-42. Poems translated by Powell, Jim. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Web.

Sor Juana/Cruz, Juana Ines de la. *Sor Juana's Love Poems: Poemas De Amor*. 22-75. Poems translated by Joan Larkin and Jaime Manrique. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

Secondary Sources

Academy of American Poets. *About Sappho*. Retrieved from poets.org/Sappho in October 2019.

Academy of American Poets. *About Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. Retrieved from poets.org/sor-juana-ines-de-la-cruz in October 2019.

Academy of American Poets. *Glossary of Poetic Terms*. Retrieved from poets.org/glossary on 25 November 2019.

Barnstone, Willis. *Six Masters of the Spanish Sonnet: Essays and Translations*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993. Web.

Carwright, Mark. *Hera*. Retrieved from www.ancient.eu/Hera/ on 27 November, 2019.

Cartwright, Mark. *Aphrodite*. Retrieved from www.ancient.eu/Aphrodite/ on 27 November, 2019.

DiYanni, Robert. *Glossary of Poetic Terms*. Published by McGraw-Hill Educational Holdings, LLC. Retrieved from http://highered.mheducation.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html on 25 November 2019.

Howe, Elizabeth Teresa. *Education and Women in the Early Modern Hispanic World*. Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co, 2008. Web.

Larkin, Joan and Manrique, Jaime. *Sor Juana's Love Poems: Poemas de Amor*. 9–11 and 77–80. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. Print.

Lester, Eva P. Sappho of Lesbos: The Complexity of Female Sexuality. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry: A Topical Journal for Mental Health Professionals*, 22:2, 170–181, 2002. DOI: [10.1080/07351692209348981](https://doi.org/10.1080/07351692209348981)

Powell, Jim. *The Poetry of Sappho: An Expanded Edition, Featuring Newly Discovered Poems*. Pages vii and 43-47. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Web.

Ventarola, Barbara. The Dramatization of Lyric Poetry in the Works of Sor Juana Ine's De La Cruz. *Romance Notes*. 311-323. 2018. DOI: 10.1353/rmc.2018.0030.

