

Invisible, Yet Free: Sapphic Relationships in Late 19th-Century Europe

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Within the past century, Anglo-society has enforced strict sexual categories. Although in recent years there have been movements to transgress these categories, individuals are encouraged to identify with specific labels like “straight,” “gay,” & “bisexual” which are then consciously and subconsciously enforced throughout society. Meanwhile, while heterosexuality was automatically assumed in the late 1800s, sexual identities that flowed between its strict confines were much more fluid. Terms like “sapphic” and “sapphism” were introduced to describe the nature of these fluid romantic or sexual encounters between women specifically.¹ The nature of these relationships were rarely historically explored until feminist historians recently began exploring the topic, carving out niches in sapphic history along the way. One of these specialized areas is the study of the “invisible freedom” shared by many sapphics in late 19th-Century Europe, which is where this essay will be focused. In this essay I argue that sapphic expression in Europe through the late 1800s flourished through three main types of historically recognized sapphic relationships: physically and emotionally intimate friendships, “daughter-mother” sapphic relationships, and the most often discussed “invert” & cross-dressing sapphic relationship.

In order to give proper context to the historical treatment of these formerly-invisible sapphic relationships, it is important to cite a brief historiography of the subject. Prior to the 1970s, works of historical research about sapphism and lesbianism in general, let alone research about sapphism in any specific place or time period, were few and far between. When the topic was approached by historians, the research was written by men, who most often condemned the sapphic lifestyle. It seems to have been common for historians to study sapphism just to link it to other taboos and broken norms.² In fact, most of the pre-1970 studies on historical lesbianism often used the Freudian concept of phallic awe/jealousy to describe the cause behind the “inversion” these

¹ Doan, L, and J Garrity. *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007. Pg. 5-6.

² Gagnon, John H., and William Simon. *Sexual Deviance*. New York, London: Harper, 1967. Pg. 108.

women underwent.³ Some research set out to prove sapphism as a psychological disease.⁴ Others link racial stereotypes and genetic differences to burgeoning romantic relationships between women.⁵ In the 1970s, a boom of female and queer historians began to write about sapphism in many forms and settings. By 1975, a flood of books, journal submissions, and articles all about sapphism could be found and referenced. These new historians began to take a critical eye to sapphism, its expression throughout history, and the silence around it in pockets of time and geography throughout history. The majority of these were focused on Western sapphism, including the intimate relationships discussed in this essay. Research started with the study of specific people and groups, like the intimate relationships between many of the women of Llanaollen.⁶ Others wrote about the general liberation of sapphism and how other historians should give a more critical eye to the possibility of sapphic activity in the modern day and throughout history.⁷ These authors and historians laid the groundwork for their “descendents” to become much more specified in their research and to properly scaffold into the creation of whole encyclopedias of sapphic history.⁸ In the 2000s, another boom of sapphic research led to the specialization of research on sapphic relationships in late 19th-Century Europe; many of these texts can be found as references throughout this essay. Many began to explore the significance and regularity of sapphic relationships in these contexts, citing the lesbianism of even Queen Elizabeth.⁹ A significant amount of these texts focus specifically on the literary contributions of Western sapphics and how

³ Devereux, George. *The Nature of Sappho's Seizure in FR. 31 LP as Evidence of Her Inversion*. *Classical quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1970): 17–31, 1970. Pg. 17-21.

⁴ *Female Homosexuality*. *British Medical Journal* 1, no. 5640 (1969): 330–331, 1969.

⁵ Selling, Lowell S. *The Pseudo Family*. *The American journal of sociology* 37, no. 2 (1931): 247–253, 1931. Pg. 247-248

⁶ Mavor, Elizabeth. *The Ladies of Llangollen: a Study in Romantic Friendship*. London: Joseph, 1971. Pg. 12

⁷ Abbott, Sidney., and Barbara J. Love. *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman: a Liberated View of Lesbianism* 1st Stein and Day pbk. ed. New York: Stein and Day, 1973. Pg. 44

⁸ Zimmerman, Bonnie. *Encyclopedia of Lesbian and Gay Histories and Cultures*. Routledge, 1999. Print. Pg. ix.

⁹ Traub, Valerie. *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*. Cambridge University Press, 2002. Pg. 125-127.

authors often weaved sapphism into their stories overtly or subtly.¹⁰ In the past decade even, there have been numerous collections, published articles, and books detailing the sapphic relationships between women in late-19th Century Europe.

Because sapphic intimacy was societally invisible and only persecuted when it was infringing upon gender roles (i.e. women assuming masculine roles to provide for another woman), sapphic relationships were able to start and grow without the hindrance of patriarchal watch dogs. It was not until these women began to threaten the patriarchal authorities or began to express their love in a way that made them inaccessible to the men around them that they were persecuted. Any threat to the social hierarchy, including publicly expressing homoerotic desire, was severely punished in late-1800s Europe, yet these relationships still quietly proliferated.¹¹ Many sapphic relationships grew without the taboos we associate with the same sort of relationships today, erotic or otherwise. This was partly in due to the fact that sex education for women was practically unheard of in late 19th-Century Europe. Women and girls in intimate friendships would often explore differing forms of physical intimacy without knowing what they were doing would cause them to be persecuted if publicized.¹²

While it was most common for European women to be heterosexual romantic relationships in the mid to late 1800s, there were still a considerable amount of sapphic relationships. These relationships took many different forms with varying amounts of public approval. Close and intimate friendships between women were highly valued before marriage and, although they were often discouraged after marriage, continued as a respectable type of relationship between women.¹³

This is not to assume all close friendships between women and girls should be considered sapphic,

¹⁰ Lanser, Susan S. *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565–1830* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014. Pg. 299.

¹¹ Zimmerman. Pg 278.

¹² Marcus, Sharon, and Sharon Marcus. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. Pg 36-38.

¹³ Marcus. Pg. 28.

in fact the majority were not. they only provided a context in which lesbian and sapphic relationships could bloom without tight scrutiny.¹⁴ These relationships, while not usual physical, could breach into erotic physicality. As stated earlier, bodily exploration was among these physical interactions, but other forms of physical intimacy were more common and did not take on an inherently sexual or romantic nature. Examples of these sorts of common physical interactions included hand holding, kissing, and holding one another, which, while again not inherently romantic, could be used and were used by those who did explore romantic relationships with intimate friends in order to express their affection.¹⁵ Though these relationships were the most common form of sapphic expression throughout Europe in the late-1800s due to their private and easily concealable nature, they do not form the whole of the sapphic experience at that place and time.

Another form of intimacy that was not uncommon for sapphics to partake is what has been labeled “mother-daughter” love. With the extreme dichotomy of gender in many late 19th-Century European areas, there was little room for women who felt any of the characteristics of men, including an attraction to women. The “unnatural masculinity” of this attraction could be offset by switching a romantic/sexual dominating relationship into a mother-daughter type relationship. This way, women could express their feelings through an approved patriarchal relationship.¹⁶ Older women in heterosexual marriages would often connect with single younger women who shared their sapphic desires. In these relationships, the younger woman, who could never truly be in public communion with her beloved, would stage dramas and events in order to affirm her claim of love on the older woman. These could include taking care of a “sick” participant, tantrum

¹⁴ Marcus. Pg. 27.

¹⁵ Vicinus, Martha. *Intimate Friends : Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Print. Pg. 68

¹⁶ Vicinus. Pg. 111.

throwing, or physical punishments. In turn the older woman, “the mother,” would still make time for the younger, “the daughter,” even with all of her own pre-existing familial duties.¹⁷ Through this dance, a significant amount of lesbian relationships were able to develop, though they were frequently cut off abruptly when the younger ended up married herself and could no longer act as the daughter figure.¹⁸

The third sapphic relationship that represents the experiences of Western sapphics in the late-1800s is the relationship between women and their cross-dressing partners. Whether or not these individuals were transgender/transsexual, cross-dressing to create a safe and intimate relationship between themselves and their partners, or a mix of either, is sometimes hard to define, so the rest of this essay will refer to these masculine-passing individuals in gender neutral terms. There are many examples of sapphics who passed as men throughout this time period to provide for and live with the women they loved. Many of these individuals’ birth sexes were not revealed until illness or death finally overtook them.¹⁹ Instead of trying to break away from traditional family roles, those who crossed-dressed to be with women decided to stay within those roles. By assuming male identities, these people cared for their partners and were able to support their household with their own male-equivalent income.²⁰ This proved to be the biggest perceived threat to patriarchal society posed by sapphics, and therefore carried the harshest punishment and ostracization for sapphics besides outright, public lesbianism though, many of the friends and family of the deceased would continue to refer to them by their chosen name and in a masculine sense.²¹ Though the motivations of the male-identities these individuals pursued varied, they found

¹⁷ Doan. Pg. 241-243.

¹⁸ Vicinus. Pg. 113-114.

¹⁹ Miller, Neil. *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Print. Pg. 71-72.

²⁰ Vicinus. Pg. 178-181.

²¹ Miller. Pg. 70.

safety and discretion with their female partners either way, making these figures popular among historians yet hard to track historically.

Although not nearly as common as heterosexual relationships, homosexual relationships have persisted throughout history, proving them to be a natural part of the human narrative. Although women had an increased freedom in exploring homosexual relationships throughout Late 19th Century Europe, it is only because of their relegation to the sidelines of history that they had the ability to do so. In being silenced, sapphic women found other ways in order to achieve freedom in admirable fashion, to the point of sapphism being an accepted-if-silent reality.²² In this context, sapphic relationships were able to spring up, the majority of which could fit into three main types of relationships: close, intimate friendships, “mother-daughter” type relationships, and relationships with women and their partners who passed as masculine. Even with this freedom, women were still often persecuted and punished for these relationships when they were not being punished for being a woman in the first place. They could not love each other publicly. They could not be assured of their relationships’ permanence. Today, many women throughout the world have those freedoms and are still persecuted, often by taboos ingrained into society’s norms themselves. Others live in a similar situation to the women in late 19th-Century Europe, invisible and ostracized for being themselves, woman or sapphic. Either way, it is integral to know that the sapphics of today and the past are a natural part of the human mosaic. By embracing sapphics today and learning from their treatment throughout history, wider society can learn to value, validate, and recognize the experience of other marginalized groups and open the door for all to be their authentic selves without unnecessary and bigoted restraint.

²² Traub. Pg. 125.