

## Sappho off the Pedestal: Lesbos as the *Lesbian Nation* and the Daughters of Bilitis

Though a poet from antiquity, Sappho's name is commonly referenced among Lesbian and Queer groups of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Scholars have noted how Sappho's poetry and its receptions have been important representation for LGBTQ+ (Pleše 2018) and how Sappho specifically is not just representation for LGBTQ+ communities, but in particular a political vessel for advocacy of said communities (Hallett 1979). However, it is important to note how scholars have yet to thoroughly address how Sappho is not merely a vessel for LGBTQ+ politics, but specifically an ideological orienting figure for lesbian separatism. It is important to recognize the implications when placing a classical and ancient individual like Sappho into this ideological positionality. Sappho, understood as the statically representative figure of ancient lesbianism, became a model and even a worshiped goddess for the lesbian separatist movement. The problem with lesbian separatism lies in its ideological precarity, which can serve as the basis for discrimination against those outside of the white cisgender-women-loving-cisgender-women category (what they idealize as Sapphic lesbians). Aligning the emergence of a 'lesbian nation' with Sappho not only uplifts the development of a state or nation surrounding something nuanced like lesbianism, or sexuality, but also gives its leaders room to enact transphobic and bio-essentialist rules for one's admission. Therefore, it is important to investigate the implications of Sappho's constructed positionality within LGBTQ+ movements in the past, as well as in the present as they develop.

The lesbian separatist movement was and is an ideology for lesbians to live completely isolated from all men as well as any heterosexual women, with the movement gaining popularity in the mid-twentieth century. It was the proposed intention of this movement to curate not just a group but a nation of lesbian women, a nation designed specifically as a response to the discrimination and hatred felt by lesbians both in the public and private sphere. Scholar H. J. E. Champion writes, "In a reappropriation of a traditional 'nation,' as one uniting citizens within a 'common fatherland,'

nineteenth-century emulations of Sappho united women writers under some form of ‘common motherland,’ with the poet as the ‘founding-mother’” (Champion 10). Sappho’s understood lifestyle—her perceived isolation from men and her ‘feminine’ commune—is an inspiration and a goal for lesbian separatists. For example, the Daughters of Bilitis, a group in San Francisco in the 1950s that praised Sappho as a type of lesbian goddess, was designed to allow lesbians to meet each other at a time when lesbian groups would face violence in public. While the group was inclusive and fruitful for some, others, especially trans women, have cited very dangerous trans-exclusionary rhetoric that came from the members of this group. These groups resulted in the creation of TERF ideology, Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism, which is still practiced today. Sappho’s name is attached to this exclusionary belief due to her reception through these groups.

It is my goal in this project to challenge and identify the ways the classical canon is being used as a tool for violence against marginalized members of the LGBTQ+ community. In a larger context, this project can be used to identify the issues of using Classics and antiquity as ‘proof’ of identity/orientation, and what sorts of institutions are validated when participating in this practice (Haselswerdt 437). Similarly, I will argue that minoritized individuals, such as lesbians and the LGBTQ+ community broadly, cannot and should not resort back to minoritizing models of being to protect themselves. Instead of crafting essentialist and discriminatory groups around a static historical figure who cannot speak for herself (such as Sappho), lesbians should and can be inspired by antique literature to create long lasting and inclusive environments of being.

#### Works Cited

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