

Queer Youth on Classics: A Survey

This paper serves to synthesize and present data I collected in a survey about the impact and importance of Classical history and mythology on queer youth today. The survey, distributed via social media in June of 2018, particularly examined which aspects of Classics are meaningful to queer youth, and the importance of discussing queerness in the classroom. The survey garnered over two-thousand responses, one-thousand of which are analyzed in this paper, as filtered by age and survey-completion rate. Queer youth evidently identify with Classics, and as my research indicates, feel by-and-large inadequately served by the academy. I mean to diagnose this problem and suggest preliminary solutions.

The association of queer peoples with Classical Studies spans centuries. In this paper, I first contextualize my research participants within a timeline of queer Classics, spanning from the 1500s until the present. Classics is inseparable with the way sexualities and gender-nonconformities have been articulated over the ages; I reflect on the use of terms like Ganymede (first recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary in 1558), lesbian (1732), and sapphist (1789). In addition, I briefly refer to the Uranians, Wilde and Woolf, the literary circle of Natalie Clifford Barney, queer groups formed in the fifties as compiled by Amy Richlin in her essay *Eros Unchained*, and The Daughters of Bilitis. Even contemporary symbols of queerness, namely the capital lambda and the Minoan Labyris, draw inspiration from the ancients. Whether or not my research participants are aware of it, they are part of a well-established tradition of aligning one's queerness with Classics, and the significant identification with Classics they report in my survey should be considered with that tradition in mind.

After this contextualization, I dive into my survey. I first describe methodology, the fact that I here quantify ‘youth’ by focusing on participants under the age of 27, how the survey was spread (Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and a few listservs), and further areas of interest that could be pursued with this data set. I specifically analyze the responses to these two questions from my survey; “are there specific historical/mythological figures or stories that hold special meaning for you as an LGBTQ+ person?”, and “in what ways do representations of ancient LGBTQ+ figures/stories matter to you in the classroom?” From there, I establish the primary recurring themes I found within my dataset: a fear of temporariness, a longing for a queer legacy, an opposition to erasure and omission, and a desire for validation in the classroom.

Research participants speak to anxieties of feeling culturally temporary. They describe the visibility of queer figures in Classics classes as providing something of a temporal anchor, something to prove that they are not the result of a cultural trend, something that came about in the 70s and could potentially vanish once more. Likewise, they want an inheritance, a cultural legacy of sorts. The fact that gods and heroes experienced same-gender attraction and had complicated, nuanced gender expressions is a source of interest and relief. If culturally powerful characters and historically impactful people were queer, participants express that they themselves, as queer people, could also be lastingly important.

Participants also consistently speak about the academy, describing it as a space where ancient queerness is erased by omission. Students with professors who completely ignore or else circumvent discussions on the queerness of figures like Sappho, Achilles, and Alexander report feelings of isolation and unsafety in that classroom. This is not

only received as a sanitization, an erasure of themselves within the classroom space, but also as an affront to them as young scholars. Students with professors who engage in these conversations, however, express comfort and feelings of validation, as well as an increased interest in the subject at large.

The fact that the bulk of research participants cite major gods, world-changing military leaders, famous poets, and epic heroes as being deeply important to them as queer people tells me that the gap between teacher and student is not tricky to bridge. The figures who matter to queer youth commonly appear on most introductory syllabi. Actively acknowledging and discussing the queer aspects of these figures and characters could make Classics a more equitable space, and could make the academy a better home for queer youth who already possess a meaningful interest in antiquity.

Bibliography

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