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## Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

103 Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho Elizabeth Prettejohn • I have striven to cast my spirit into the mould of hers, to express and represent not the poem but the poet. Swinburne, *Notes on Poems and Reviews* Everyone knows one fact about Sappho: that she desired other women. As Glenn Most puts it, “For [twentieth-century] culture, Sappho is first of all the emblem of female homosexuality ... and secondarily the author of a small number of surviving poems and fragments” (12). But, as Most demonstrates, Sappho became the “emblem of female homosexuality” very late in the history of her reception—2.5 millennia after her death, in fact. This development coincides, unsurprisingly, with the increasing tendency in the nineteenth century to configure homosexuality as an identity, rather than just a sexual practice. In this context, too, there is nothing surprising about the fascination with Sappho in the work of the young painter Simeon Solomon or in that of his friend, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, in the 1860s, when both men were exploring their own unconventional sexual identities. Thus, the first part of my argument is straightforward: the Sappho of Solomon and Swinburne marks a crucial moment in the emergence of the modern image of Sappho as lesbian, as well as in the history of modern artistic and literary constructions of

homosexuality. This much has been readily acknowledged in the extensive recent scholarship on Sappho's reception.<sup>1</sup> But I want to make a more ambitious argument, and one that depends on the much longer, and more various, history of Sappho's reception, beginning with the numerous ancient testimonia. Sappho's lovers include not only the many women addressed in her poems, but also a variety of male poets, including Alcaeus, Archilochus, and Anacreon, as well as a local ferryman called Phaon;<sup>2</sup> according to a Byzantine encyclopedia, she was married to a man called Cercylas of Andros, although we might take that legend with a pinch of salt, since the name translates as "Prick from the Isle of Man";<sup>3</sup> she is also the greatest woman poet of antiquity, comparable among women poets to Homer among men, while Plato calls her the "tenth muse," the only mortal one.<sup>4</sup> Receptions since the Renaissance take Victorian review • Volume 34 Number 2 104 up all of these biographical snippets, and invent more—for example, a political Sappho who joins with Alcaeus to oppose the Lesbian tyrant Pittacus and a pedagogical Sappho who runs the ancient equivalent of a ladies' seminary.<sup>5</sup> These multifarious and sometimes incompatible Sapphos also gave rise to theories that there must have been two Sapphos: the one a poet, the other a prostitute, or courtesan, or common lyre-player (Most 15–16). And indeed there is some sense to this, at least as regards the traditions that have come down to us. We have inherited on the one hand a biographical Sappho of outrageous sexuality (whether hetero-, homo-, or polymorphous) and on the other hand a literary Sappho fit to rank with the greatest poets of history. Only at the rarest of intervals do the two Sapphos come together—first, perhaps, in Catullus, the poet whom Swinburne hailed as brother, whose poem 51 is a sensitive Latin translation of the poem by Sappho now known as her fragment 31 (and Catullus gives the name "Lesbia" to his own "docta puella," his learned mistress); then in the Greek orations of the second-century Platonic philosopher Maximus of Tyre, who sees Sappho's desire for women as a fully fledged version of the ideal love of Socrates;<sup>6</sup> and powerfully in the treatise *On the Sublime*, by the author traditionally called Longinus, of which more below. My argument is that the Sappho of Swinburne and Solomon marks another moment of this kind, one in which Sappho the poet and Sappho the lover become indivisible. The two Englishmen accomplish this in a way very much in keeping with their nineteenth-century context by making Sappho a lesbian in the new sense of homosexual identity. At the same time, though, they work against the tendency, in receptions of Sappho from their time onward, to reduce her poetic greatness to a mere matter of sexual...

# Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho

ELIZABETH PRETTEJOHN



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to express and represent not the poem but the poet.*

*Swinburne, Notes on Poems and Reviews*

EVERYONE KNOWS one fact about Sappho: that she desired other women. As Glenn Most puts it, "For [twentieth-century] culture, Sappho is first of all the emblem of female homosexuality ... and secondarily the author of a small number of surviving poems and fragments" (12). But, as Most demonstrates, Sappho became the "emblem of female homosexuality" very late in the history of her reception—2.5 millennia after her death, in fact. This development coincides, unsurprisingly, with the increasing tendency in the nineteenth century to configure homosexuality as an identity, rather than just a sexual practice. In this context, too, there is nothing surprising about the fascination with Sappho in the work of the young painter Simon Solomon or in that of his friend, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, in the 1860s, when both men were exploring their own unconventional sexual identities. Thus, the first part of my argument is straightforward: the Sappho of Solomon and Swinburne marks a crucial moment in the emergence of the modern image of Sappho as lesbian, as well as in the history of modern artistic and literary constructions of homosexuality. This much has been readily acknowledged in the extensive recent scholarship on Sappho's reception.<sup>1</sup> But I want to make a more ambitious argument, and one that depends on the much longer, and more various, history of Sappho's reception, beginning with the numerous ancient testimonia. Sappho's lovers include not only the many women addressed in her poems, but also a variety of male poets, including Alcaeus, Archilochus, and Anacreon, as well as a local ferryman called Phaon;<sup>2</sup> according to a Byzantine encyclopedia, she was married to a man called Cercylas of Andros, although we might take that legend with a pinch of salt, since the name translates as "Prick from the Isle of Man";<sup>3</sup> she is also the greatest woman poet of antiquity, comparable among women poets to Homer among men, while Plato calls her the "tenth muse," the only mortal one.<sup>4</sup> Receptions since the Renaissance take





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