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CHAPTER 1



Sappho: The Resurrection of a Myth

"I am the queen of Lesbians," Swinburne's Sappho proclaims in a poem by this other bard of *femmes damnées* (damned women).¹ The Greek poet Sappho, hailed as the queen of sapphism at the end of the nineteenth century, has often been reduced to little more than the representation of a sexuality, and this distortion has eventually overshadowed her historical reality. As a matter of fact, her history draws more on fictions than on facts.² Yet Sappho certainly did exist, even if the many variations on her name—Sapho, Sappho, Psappha, Psapho, even Sofa in *La Fin de Babylone / The Final Days of Babylon* by Guillaume Apollinaire (1914)—implied that the actual person remains inaccessible. Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig understood this point well, and in an attempt to forestall any appropriation of the Greek poet, the entry on Sappho in their *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1976) / *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* (1979) is simply a blank page.³

THE LEGEND OF A LIFE

We know that Sappho was born on the island of Lesbos in Greece around 620 BCE and lived there her entire life, except for some time during the dictatorship, when she went into exile in Syracuse. A daughter of wealthy aristocrats, she had three brothers. One of them, Charaxos, who was an affluent wine merchant, fell in love with a beautiful courtesan named Doricha, who was known as Rhodopis, while traveling in Egypt. He spent a great deal of his fortune on her and arranged for her freedom. Sappho refers to her in a fragment in which she criticizes her brother for this liaison. This shadowy figure would inspire a number of fin-de-siècle writers. In *Lysistrata* (1893), Maurice Donnay invented a Sappho who competes with her brother Charaxos for Rhodopis's affections.⁴ Gabriel Faure in *La Dernière journée de Sapphô / Sappho's Final Day* (1901) transforms the very same Rhodopis into a passionate lover of the poet, but the latter leaves her for Phaon eventually.

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Did Sappho actually marry a rich merchant named Cercolas, as the *Lexique de Suidas* / *Lexicon of Suidas* (tenth–eleventh century) claimed? No other document corroborates it. No other texts prove the existence of a daughter named Cléïs (which may also be the name of the poet’s mother), who is referred to as “Cléïs my sweet” in a fragment. Renée Vivien, who translated Sappho’s work in 1903, argued against “the theory of a marriage . . . almost universally adopted to make her utterly ridiculous,” adding that Athenian comics also transformed “the loving slave girl Kléïs into a legitimate daughter,” born of that marriage.⁵

It is said that as a young widow Sappho founded a school for poetry and song where the daughters of Greece’s leading families could pursue a sophisticated education. This is where she trained her disciples Andromeda and Gorgô, whose names she cited in several poems. She was said to have had fourteen pupils, among whom Telesippa, Megara, and Atthis (who later joined Andromeda’s school) are generally considered to be her favorites. According to the scholar Edith Mora, who reduced the number of pupils to eight, the most cherished ones were Atthis, Gongyla, and Anactoria, who left Sappho’s school, married, and lived far away.⁶ Anactoria is mentioned in only two poems, although traditionally it is believed that “The Ode to a Beloved” was addressed to her.

Sappho’s death, far more than her life, has given rise to the most fantastical speculation. Some claim that she died peacefully surrounded by her companions; others believe that after the torments of a tragic, unreciprocated love for a ferryman named Phaon, she committed suicide by throwing herself into the sea from the cliffs of the island of Leucas, where these events unfolded.⁷ Phaon, whose name means “luminous,” appears in one of Sappho’s odes; it is likely that he represented Apollo, whose love for Venus was the subject of this piece. Ovid was inspired by that legendary passion to imitate the poetess in his “Epistle to Phaon” (*Heroides* XV), thus ensuring his own renown.

The poet Sappho was well known throughout the classical era. Her personal morality was not disputed during her lifetime, but gradually it came to be seen as questionable, and the all-female community that she headed was transformed into a refuge for same-sex love. In the second century CE, Lucian of Samosata

mocked her in one of his satirical dialogues: "I imagine you want to speak about those women who reject men and satisfy their desires with other women, as if they themselves were men? those women one sees on Lesbos? those women, of whom Sappho is an infamous example?"⁸

SAPPHO: DID SHE "INVENT" SAPPHISM?

Sappho's poetry overflows with signs of the amorous relations that she may have had with her students. Because of these clues, defenders of her virtue needed to be ferociously determined to demolish, as they would put it, the conspiracy intended to sully her reputation. In 1875 one of her translators, Ernest Falconnet, weighed in by drawing a distinction between physical love and romantic friendship: Sappho loved her companions "with the passion of her elevated and sensitive soul. In her poetry she expressed her affection with all the tempestuousness of a most sincere love. This profound and elevated emotion was interpreted maliciously by her critics. . . . None of her contemporaries, in fact, accused her of those misdeeds, which were considered serious and vulgar in ancient Greece, but writers after that time have not hesitated to make such damaging accusations."⁹

Many Hellenists of the time rallied to her defense. To argue for her innocence, Alfred Croiset, in his *Histoire de la littérature grecque / History of Greek Literature* (1898) debunked myths that had been created over the centuries: she was neither a vestal virgin nor an immoral woman but, first and foremost, a poet. If she became a lesbian in his prose translation of the "Ode to Aphrodite," he explained carefully, "One must take care not to attribute acts to words, or certain turns of phrases to certain behaviors."¹⁰ Shortly afterward, in the United States, the linguist and missionary Mary Mills Patrick characterized Sappho's love for her pupils as the expression of maternal feelings.¹¹

David M. Robinson, also an American, took up the defense of the poet's morality, using a different argument: Sappho's verses were so perfectly constructed that their author could not possibly have indulged in "unnatural and debauched actions" that "throw the soul into disorder."¹² In France an amateur scholar named Joseph-

Martin Bascoul tried to resurrect the image of a “chaste Sappho” by purging her biography as well as her work of all signs of homosexuality: “We can no longer have suspicions about her chastity, which was acknowledged by Alkaios of Mytilene, her contemporary and countryman.”¹³ He explained that until the fourth century BCE Sappho was considered to be a perfectly respectable woman, but “after that time, critics began to drag her down into the mud to such an extent that eventually a second Sappho had to be recognized—one who was definitively classified as a prostitute.”¹⁴ All the evidence seems to point to the fact that Sappho’s love for other women would not have aroused condemnation in ancient Greece and that the stigmatization of homosexuality was due to the advent of Christianity.

Despite her defenders’ efforts, Sappho’s name continued to be associated with sin. Larousse’s *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle / Great Universal Dictionary of the Nineteenth Century* criticized the subterfuges that were meant to shield Sappho from rumors about her sexuality: “It is difficult to know for sure if there is any substance to the allegations of classical authors about Sappho’s immorality, especially regarding the lesbian debauchery with which she has been persistently accused. Modern literary critics, who are troubled by finding such poetic talent associated with libertine morals that are unacceptable in our society, take a marvelous way out of the dilemma: they invent two historical Sapphos.”¹⁵

“Was she a courtesan or a noble lady? Should we see her as the haughty, pure model of an impassioned muse, the way Plutarch envisioned her, comparing her to the pythoness on her tripod? Or was she a common mistress and a teacher of depraved morals?” wondered Théodore Reinach, the famous Hellenist, in 1911.¹⁶ With admirable caution, he limited his response to saying that the Greek bard had most of all wanted to make her pupils “real women.” Yet the controversy continued to rage in the first decades of the twentieth century. An article entitled “Was Sappho Sapphic?” reported on the reactions of Maurice Croiset and Anatole France, who were both scandalized by a lecture intended to exculpate Sappho that Reinach had given at the Institute de France.¹⁷ In addition, the *Courrier français*, an illustrated weekly newspaper, put the final nail in the coffin by publishing this satiric doggerel:

*Now, thanks to Reinach Théodore,
We have been introduced to a Sappho,
A Sappho no one knew,
A very prim and proper Sappho. . . .
Actually, it's a nice idea:
Sappho should be pleased
To see herself rehabilitated
By an old man with a wobbly pate.¹⁸*

Paradoxically, just when novelists began to dare to include lesbian characters in popular fiction, Hellenists and philologists were trying to popularize their version of a virtuous Sappho. Since the end of the eighteenth century, German scholars had been re-evaluating Greek antiquity by analyzing classical texts. Friedrich Gottlieb Welckler, the most influential nineteenth-century philologist studying Sappho's work, praised pederasty, which, he said, contributed to the creative genius of Greek antiquity, but he excluded Sappho's sexuality from his studies, less out of a consideration that this might damage her reputation than because he did not want his research on Socratic love to be contaminated by a female intruder.¹⁹ In France, most philologists were as conservative as their German or Anglo-Saxon colleagues, but other scholars, who were less convinced of the chaste Platonism attributed to Sappho, defended their vision of a sexualized Sappho—a lesbian in fact—and associated her with a Greek past where eye-catching splendor and sensual indulgence took precedence over a life of virtue.

Novelists followed their lead. *Sappho* by Jean Richepin (1884), *Sappho de Lesbos / Sappho of Lesbos* by Maurice Morel (1902), *Sappho* by Nonce Casanova (1905), *Sappho la lesbienne / Sappho the Lesbian* by Anne Minvielle (1923), and *Sappho, la passionnante, la passionnée / Sappho the Fascinating, the Passionate* by Édouard Romilly (1931) all demonstrate a compelling interest in the subject that was shared by playwrights of the time as well.²⁰

As early as 1847, Émile Deschanel had argued that Sappho was a courtesan. Indeed, her presence in the fin-de-siècle imagination owed a great deal to this teacher of Greek, who believed there were two Sapphos, one a simple musician, a lyre player, and the other a poet, but both of them were courtesans. He claimed that "Sappho's

creative genius arises from her passion” and that her poetry, which was “born of passion,” “is not at all fictional.” To prove his theory, Deschanel published an annotated translation of seventy-nine poetic fragments by Sappho, of which her two odes were the best preserved. This iconoclastic, even delusional, effort reorientated the image of the poet, which definitely shifted from chastity to sexuality and from scholarly erudition to popular fiction.²¹

After that time, Sappho was no longer described as a wealthy noble lady, a talented poet, the charming headmistress of a school of poetry. A less restrained image of life in Lesbos was popularized: “wit and beauty were nurtured everywhere,” “the poetry depicted the debauchery,” and “art with its prestige shielded so much corruption,” Deschanel explained.²² Following his lead, Sappho’s persona became a slave to any number of passions, sometimes throwing herself into her students’ arms and sometimes into Phaon’s embrace, and thus the handsome heartthrob of Ovid’s fable once again regained a place of honor. A courtesan who was trained in poetry, a female poet who loved women, or both at the same time, Sappho was still shrouded in mystery.

Gradually, she began to inspire visual artists. In 1864 Simeon Solomon made Sappho’s feelings toward one of her disciples explicit, but he did so tastefully, without overstepping the boundaries of conventional morality. His *Sappho and Erinna in the Garden at Mytilene* shows the poet in an idyllic setting, with a young Greek woman whom she embraces tenderly. Nearby on her left are a lyre and an open scroll (see plate I). This hybrid vision of a lesbian lover and the woman poet of sapphism became more ambiguous at the turn of the century. “Shall I play you a little male melody?” asks a mischievous Sappho, dressed in exotic Greek garb, as sketched by Lucien Métivet in 1896. The woman’s hands are plucking the strings of a harp whose frame is decorated with a man’s head; his noble Greek profile contrasts with his natty Parisian clothes, hence conflating past and present (fig. 1.1).

The motif of the musician was repeated but had various interpretations. The French painter Gustav-Adolf Mossa depicted the Greek poet with a bare and bejeweled body like a courtesan in a 1907 watercolor (see plate II). She is playing the zither while in the background naked women embrace passionately. The setting, how-

ever, resembles Rome in the decadent era more than it does ancient Greece; moreover, a few verses from Epistle XV of the *Heroides* by the Latin poet Ovid are written below the picture. The following year, using the same title, *Sappho*, he transported the poet to the present day, in the shape of a sapphic couple, drawn in typically Symbolist style. The two female lovers are locked in an embrace, in a landscape whose colors and foliage resemble those of Mytilene. Not only is the poetess transposed into modernity here, but she also embodies her symbolic resurrection in the world of the Belle Époque, where women interpreted and discussed Sappho's excesses and love affairs.

THE BATTLE OF THE TRANSLATORS

Like Sappho's life, her work has been the subject of much speculation fostered by a number of translations that were accompanied by commentaries. For a long time, a handful of Hellenist scholars could examine only a few strophes that had survived destruction by inquisitors. Indeed, much of Sappho's work disappeared in the flames of two autos-da-fé, one in 380 CE and another in 1073 CE. Only two complete odes survived, "The Ode to Aphrodite" and "The Ode to the Beloved," both of which describe the painful symptoms of love.²³ Along with these two poems, a number of fragments remained whose brevity sometimes makes any attempt at interpretation impossible. These fragments were, for more than a century, the only trace of a poetic work estimated at having once totaled several thousand verses, which were considered to be sublime in their day, to such a degree that Plato was moved to call Sappho the Tenth Muse.²⁴

Several important translations sparked renewed interest in Sappho's work. In 1681 Madame Le Fèvre Dacier produced the first prose translation in French, which was published under the title *Poésies d'Anacréon et de Sappho, traduites en françois / Poetry of Anacreon and Sappho Translated into French*. She was the daughter of a pastor and amateur philologist who had been intrigued by Sappho's work and, with a certain open-mindedness, her sexuality as well. Madame Le Fèvre Dacier took up her father's research, but her version emphasized the poet's heterosexuality. A half century later,

the German scholar Christian Wolff collected fragments by Sappho that had been scattered far and wide in Greek language grammars and manuals of versification; he then produced a Latin translation.

It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the German Theodor Bergk, who was inspired by this work, published all Sappho's fragments that had been unearthed by scholars (109 of them, to be exact) with his own commentaries in his *Anthologia lyrica* (1854). He made Sappho a lesbian right at the start by using a female pronoun in his translation of "The Ode to Aphrodite," in which the poet mourns the loss of her beloved. This book, which was reprinted with new material up to the end of the nineteenth century, became a model for the next generation of scholars. The best-known of these scholars was Henry Thornton Wharton, an amateur Hellenist who would popularize Sappho's writing in a book with an ambitious title: *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation* (1885). It was enriched with a beautiful frontispiece—an engraving showing a detail from Lawrence Alma-Tadema's famous painting *Sappho and Alceus* (1881). In fact, the dismembered body of the poetess, whose face had been cut out and put in a medallion, mimicked the fragmented state of her poetry, atomized and endlessly reshaped (fig. 1.2). As Yopie Prins pointed out: "Implicit in these 'renderings' is the rendering of Sappho as well. Wharton's book simultaneously composes a portrait of the woman poet and presents her as a decomposing text."²⁵ In spite or because of its aesthetic of fragmentation, this collection went through several editions. "Renée Vivien used this precious anthology as a guide for her French translation of Sappho; it became her bedside reading and the source for her pagan inspiration in many of her future books," Natalie Clifford Barney, "the Amazon," later revealed in her memoir *Souvenirs indiscrets / Indiscreet Memories*.²⁶

The first translation to appear in France at the turn of the century was by André Lebey, *Poésies de Sappho: Traduites en entier pour la première fois / Sappho's Poems: Translated for the First Time in Their Entirety* (1895), a tasteful, slim volume published in only 265 copies. This Greek scholar was a friend of Pierre Louÿs, to whom it was dedicated, and here, for the first time, French readers were exposed to the fragments that Bergk had published forty years earlier. Lebey was less forthright than Bergk had been about the poet's homo-



FIGURE 1.2

Frontispiece to *Sappho* by Henry Thornton Wharton (1885).

sexuality, however, especially in "The Ode to Aphrodite," where he substituted a male pronoun. Nevertheless, Lebey acknowledged Baudelaire as a major influence on his work and cited his poem "Lesbos" repeatedly, as if to deny his own responsibility and yet still give credibility to his project. "Sappho does not need justification. . . . A truly powerful being has the right to ignore ordinary rules. If her morals were shameful, the blame must be put on her unattainable ideals."²⁷ Lebey congratulated himself for presenting all of Sappho's fragments and gave a backhanded slap to contemporary writers in the process: "Never before have our readers, till now deprived, had access to a complete translation. This is because most of the fragments are only one line long. . . . Nevertheless, in our humble opinion, that single line is often more meaningful than a hundred others hastily scribbled down by contemporary writers. Thus, not a single one of Sappho's fragments has been omitted here."²⁸

This scholarly translation did not change at all the traditional image of a "respectable" Sappho. Still, its precision and elegance attracted Jean de Tinan's attention, and he praised the author in his review in the *Mercur de France*: "We must thank writers who . . . make an effort to bring to life those lovely blossoms that heretofore we encountered only as dried flowers pressed between the pages of dictionaries. . . . Certainly the literal method moves us more by bringing to light so many fragile charms than the heavy-handed paraphrases of 'Collections.' . . . M. Lebey's translation is impressive when we compare its accuracy and style to those of its predecessors."²⁹ No trace of subversion is visible in this account. We have come a long way from the lyricism and ferocity that Baudelaire brought to his version of Sappho.

At the time this was published, it seemed as if nothing more would be added to scholarly and literary studies inspired by Sappho, but in 1896 archaeological digs in Egypt turned up more poems that had been transcribed and preserved on all sorts of objects. The next year, south of Cairo, previously unknown fragments were deciphered on tattered bits of papyrus lining the interior of sarcophagi. These discoveries reignited scholarly research, and English and German philologists began to report on their archaeological finds. It took several years for these new finds to be discussed by French

scholars, and it was only in 1902 that Théodore Reinach announced “news of the latest literary discoveries of the Berlin Museum” to his Hellenist colleagues, especially the “new fragments by Sappho”:

There are several fragments of poems by Sappho, acquired in 1896, damaged fragments, difficult to analyze, with many discouraging gaps, but nevertheless, poems by Sappho! . . . This time it is . . . a parchment that surprises us the most, a shred of a very late codex, sixth or seventh century CE . . . Indeed, on the eve of the Arab conquest, there were still scribes in Egypt who could copy, without understanding, not merely one poem by Sappho, but probably an entire book. Does not this news give us a good reason to hope that one day by a stroke of luck all the works by the Tenth Muse will be brought to light?³⁰

Well aware of the exceptional nature of this latest discovery, Reinach, a professor at the Collège de France, analyzed the unpublished fragments and published them in a translation with annotations under the titles “Ode to an Absent Beloved” and “For Mnasidika.” He was not, however, the only one who wanted to stitch together the tattered shreds of Sappho’s lost work. In 1866 C. Poupillier had already drafted a short verse play called *Une Ode de Sappho / An Ode from Sappho*, based on the discovery of a manuscript with thirty odes by the poet. Only two were quoted, but that was enough to persuade the young Hermia to burn this “hateful book” of “flaming verses” in which the “intoxication of evil” could be discerned.³¹ In a similar vein, in 1910 Natalie Clifford Barney wrote a dramatic poem, “Ambiguity,” in which, after Sappho’s death, her disciples find poems inspired by her agonizing love for the young Timas.³²

The Greek muse’s work continued to provide inspiration for writers. Some reworked her poetry, whereas others used Sappho as a model, as Catullus or Horace had, and produced free adaptations that ranged from exegesis to plagiarism.³³ In less than half a century, more than a dozen “combinations from Sappho” gave new life to the historical figure.³⁴ After a heavy-handed effort by Amédée de Césena in *Les Belles pécheresses / The Lovely Sinners* (1865), the

great and talented English poet Algernon Swinburne produced *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Others followed their lead: George Moore ("Sappho," in *Pagan Poems*, 1881),³⁵ Jean Richepin (*Sapphô*, 1884), Maurice Thompson ("To Sappho," in *Poems*, 1892), Maurice Donnay (*Lysistrata*, 1893), Pierre Louÿs (*Les Chansons de Bilitis / The Songs of Bilitis*, 1895), Armand Dubarry (*Les Invertis / The Inverts*, 1896), Valère Gille (*La Cithare / The Zither*, 1897), Prosper Castanier (*Les Amants de Lesbos / The Lovers of Lesbos*, 1900), Renée Vivien (*Sappho*, 1903), and Natalie Clifford Barney (*Actes et entr'actes / Acts and Intermissions*, 1910).

THE PROTO-LESBIAN

The contemporary interest in her poetry should not overshadow the fact that Sappho was stigmatized by many fin-de-siècle writers and categorized as sexually perverse, especially by illustrators who associated her with the notoriously promiscuous Messalina. Alméry Lobel-Riche highlighted this image of depravity in the cover illustration for Nonce Casanova's *Sappho* in 1905 (fig. 1.3), but it was Félicien Rops, more than anyone else, who captured the Decadent modernity of the sapphic myth at the end of the nineteenth century, while anticipating, even mocking, the archaeological fever around it. An undated erotic engraving with the title *Sappho: Bas-relief trouvé à Herculanum / Sappho: A Bas-Relief Found at Herculaneum* crudely demonstrated this reenvisioning of the poet. Stripped of her individuality and unrecognizable, Sappho is merely one half of an unnamed sapphic couple, nothing more than a fornicating body without a face. The only remaining vestige of the poetic figure is the symbol of the lyre, drawn to resemble a gigantic, obscene vulva, presiding over the couple's embrace (fig. 1.4).

During this time, other writers who were either moralists or libertines or both simultaneously tried to reconstruct Sappho's life. More interested in the lover than the poet, they would guarantee her status as the stereotype of the lesbian. The "savage and powerful courtesan" depicted by Jean Lorrain in a poem was transformed by Gabriel Faure into a virago.³⁶ Faure described her as "the very picture of a vice-intoxicated slut," but he also stripped her of seductive power by making her ugly.³⁷

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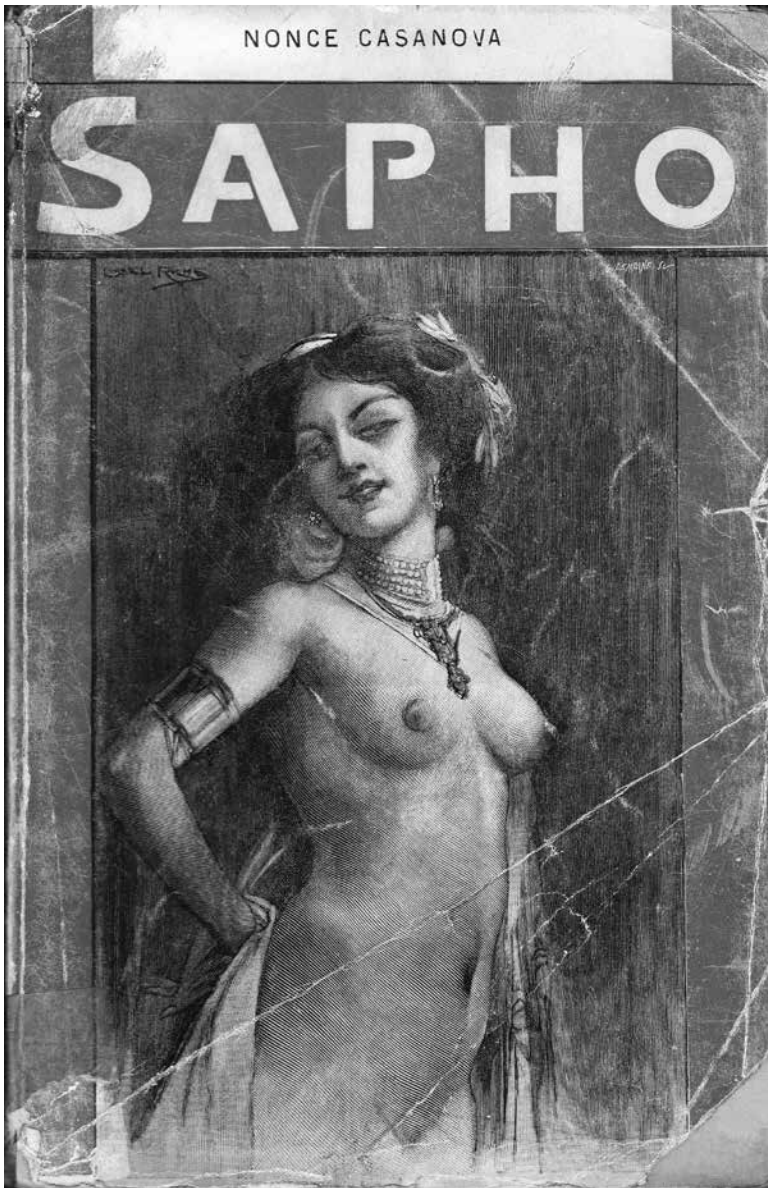


FIGURE 1.3

Cover by Alméry Lobel-Riche for *Sapho* by Nonce Casanova (1905).

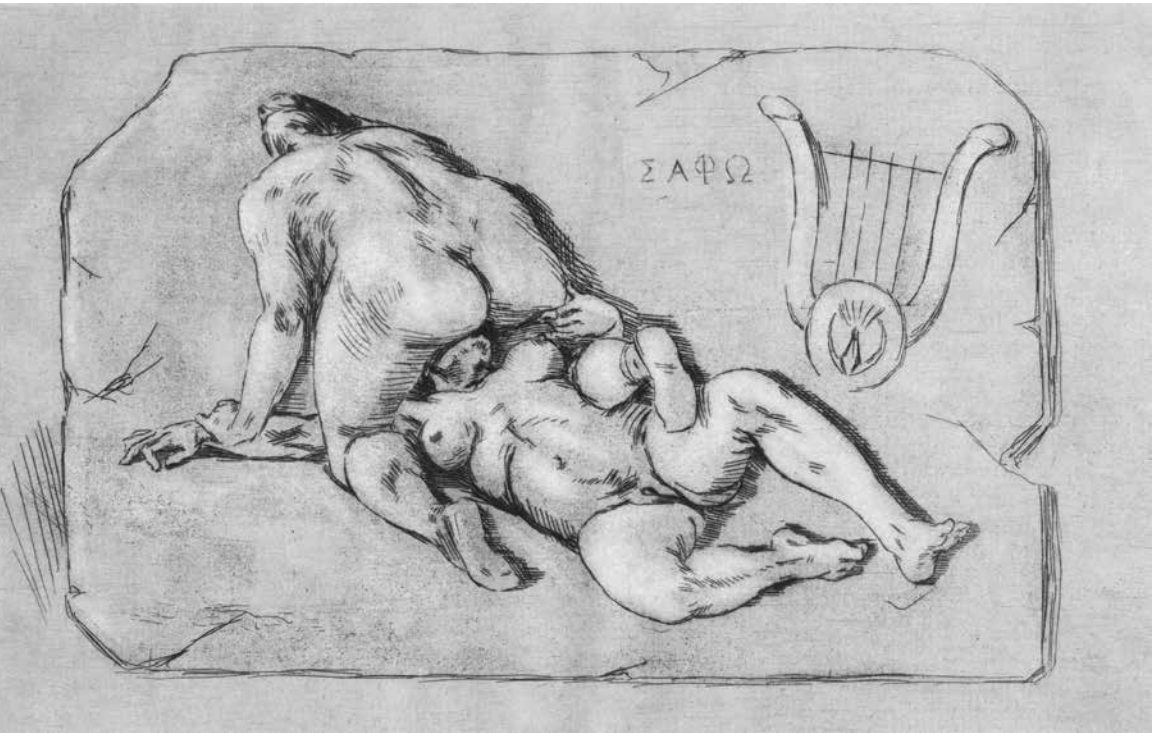


FIGURE 1.4

*Sappho: Bas-relief trouvé à Herculaneum / Sappho:
A Bas-Relief Found at Herculaneum, engraving
by Félicien Rops (n.d.). Collection Musée Félicien
Rops, Province de Namur.*

It was the corrupting Sappho, the incarnation of homosexual temptation, who made her way into social novels, or *romans de mœurs*. More than one heroine followed her bad example, such as the protagonist of *Mademoiselle Tantale* (1884). After reading *Histoire de Sappho / The Story of Sappho*, she falls into a voluptuous sleep during which “she imagined ancient times and their overheated passions”;³⁸ the next day she yields to a girlfriend’s attempt at seduction. “Sappho lives again in every woman. All that is needed is the occasion and she will rule. A woman must submit to her entrancing, cajoling, and enticing commands,” another author fulminated, pretending to be on the side of virtue.³⁹ The demonic poet had followers as distant as Mount Olympus—one of Auguste Germain’s “Paradises”—where she seduced Minerva.⁴⁰ And the fictional actress Jo d’Huzer, after exchanging an ardent kiss with her partner while performing in “Sappho’s Final Night,” is afflicted with lesbian love, which leads to her downfall as a “desexed” person. *Les Désexués / The Unsexed* was the title of this popular novel published in 1924 in which Sappho is an amorphous but crucial point of reference.⁴¹ Ironically, the more attention philologists paid to Sappho, the more she became a fantasy or a pretext for a character claimed by both scholarship and popular imagery.