The queer I:
Ethics of authenticity and the historical voice

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This paper traces two often-fictionalised and re-examined real queer lives – Sappho and Mademoiselle Maupin – and examines the ways in which authors, biographers, poets and playwrights from the early Greeks to postmodern British writers have interpreted and reinterpreted those women.

I want to use these examples to examine the tension between the quest for an authentic portrayal of historical characters and voices, and the contemporary words put into their mouths by authors across the millennia.

But let's begin at the beginning, which is – inevitably – Sappho.

There is so little of her – fragments – that she is, in a sense, *only* interpretation. She has no whole authentic voice. Even those who read her words in Greek read reconstructions, fractured recordings of an oral tradition, and always in mere fragments. But those words still have the power to render the reader breathless:

If I meet
you suddenly, I can't

speak – my tongue is broken;
a thin flame runs under
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears
drumming, I drip with sweat;
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than
dry grass... (Barnard 1958)

She has been painted countless times, portrayed on stage, in opera, in dodgy lesbian movies. Her words have been reinterpreted by generations of poets. She is present in Madame De Stael's *Corinne*, in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, in Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, in *Xena the Warrior Princess*, and in Thelma and Louise's drive off the cliff.

It doesn't matter that we now know Sappho lived into old age, she's visible in dozens of paintings of a woman so overwhelmed with emotion she flings herself – selfless – from the cliff top; in *Carmen*, in *Turandot,* and in every Hollywood movie in which the lesbian commits suicide or turns straight in order to snaffle Ben Affleck.

But most of those Sapphos are based, not on her, but on the re-imagining of her by early writers. We know her name and we think we know what it means. But it hasn't always meant the same thing.

She started it. As Margaret Reynolds points out, Sappho created a persona for herself, which is other than herself – outside herself - someone who speaks in the first person, as Sappho, but also observes her performance of that self.

Sappho names herself, "brings herself into existence" (Reynolds 2003) and also splits that self into many roles and voices. Since her death, and possibly during her life, many others have done the same thing to her.

In Ovid's undoubtedly gorgeous lament for a lost lover, Sappho is a former lesbian now distraught and abandoned, desperately in love with the low-born and heartless ferryman, Phaon, about to fling herself from the cliff top.

...daughters of Lesbos whom I loved and
For whose love I am ashamed, stop there,
Do not come near my shell's music.
Phaon has destroyed what you once held so dear ...
He was my genius. It left with him. (Ovid 2004)

As DeJean argues: '... nowhere in Sappho's passionate cry from the heart as Ovid imagines it does he draw the line between fact and fiction; nowhere does he indicate that, in her case alone of all the characters in the *Heroides*, is he dealing with a historical rather than a legendary figure. In short, Ovid never discloses that he is presenting a fiction of Sappho, enshrining the original woman writer as a male myth.' (DeJean 1987)

Ovid converts the Sappho of history, the unconventional Muse, the Other, into something new, something undeniably splendid but bereft and perversely speechless. It is a blending of history and mythology – Phaon, after all, was Aphrodite's ferryman. The persona Sappho created – that first person 'I', that Sappho self – was now speaking someone else's words voicing someone else's fears and desires.

The Death of Sappho, Theodore Chasseriau, 1848

But Ovid's fictions of Sappho became fictions of a whole range of women in literature and in imaginative works ever since. In the absence of her own words, lost in the ninth century, it was a heterosexual

Sappho whose voice sounded throughout Europe in many languages, and was echoed by countless writers, for many hundreds of years. The other Sappho was known, notable exceptions such as John Donne wrote of a more complex character, and the word Sapphic became a slander that could be applied to any woman who forgot her place. Yet even after the 18th century discovery of more fragments of her work, and pure translations that kept the original personal pronouns, the fictions continued. The hysteric, the abandoned woman who flings herself into the sea, who falls, like Tosca; the deranged woman, nothing but fragments; the brilliant, queer, querulous voice in the wild sky.

From Ovid to Donne, from Baudelaire to Tennyson, from HD to Robert Lowell, authors attempted to create an 'authentic' Sapphic voice, often as a conscious means of asserting and validating their own voices. Just as so many of the fragments of her poems that survive are in the first person, so too, many poets and writers who followed her tried to achieve a kind of authenticity by casting their voice, as hers, in first person. They recast her into a performance of their own world view – often more about morality or politics, or philosophy, than any considered ethical framework. They cast themselves as her descendants.

Sappho herself is silenced.

Generations of women writers wished themselves into the role of daughter-poets, of the girls sitting at Sappho's feet, the songs and the words passing between them. For H.D., living in the Paris of the early twentieth century and dressing up as a maid of Lesbos while dancing around Renee Vivien's back yard, Sappho was a mother-muse, an alter-ego, and – importantly – a queer voice, albeit codified.

Am I blind alas,
am I blind?
I too have followed her path

(*Fragment 41,* HD, 1983)

Her Sappho doesn't jump.

Even Jeanette Winterson, arguably, strives for her angry, overtly-sexual Sappho in *Art & Lies* to be a definitive voice. (Winterson 1994)

As Reynolds writes: "Sappho is always what we make of her. She may once have performed, but, ever since, others have performed her, as I am performing her now." (Reynolds 2003)

Sappho, Charles Mengin, 1877

She has been portrayed most consistently in several identifiable personae, as:

- A muse or mythic figure
- A feminist and/or lesbian icon
- A hysterical suicide
- A forlorn lover
- A fallen woman (literally)
- A passionate female friend
- A swooner
- A vamp
- An intellectual
- An artist.

If we add to that list the common portrayals of some other infamous women of Greek life, the Amazons – who are usually monsters or superheroes, or possibly sex fiends attracted to or irresistible to either gender, depending on the narrative – we have a succinct summary of the archetypes usually applied to lesbian characters in literature, and also to women who are in any way outside the norm, before the 20th century. They are still with us today.

Emma Donoghue has categorised them, in her usual non-nonsense manner, as:

- Cross-dresser (often as a female bridegroom)
- Amazon
- Passionate friends
- Rival (to the hero)
- Desperate lover/suicide
- Monster
- Devil-may care lesbian
- Icon. (Donoghue 2010)

You can see how many of those are based in Ovid's Sappho. We can now recognise that those types are clearly roles, in literature and life, performed by or projected onto countless real women and characters through the ages – in some cases quite consciously (see Butler 2006).

And this is the point, the jumping off point, if you like, at which the stories of Sappho and Mademoiselle Maupin become entwined. La Maupin (the subject of my PhD project) was born in 1673 in the household of Count d'Armagnac, one of the great nobles of France. Julie-Emilie grew up with the pages at Versailles, learning fencing and other courtly skills. She dressed as a boy. Nobody particularly cared. She became d'Armagnac's mistress, ran away with her fencing master, eloped with a young nun, tried to burn down a convent and was sentenced to death, became a star of the Paris Opera and the fabulous court of the Sun King, cross-dressed and duelled her way through a tumultuous life until she died, perhaps of a broken heart, alone in a convent at 33.

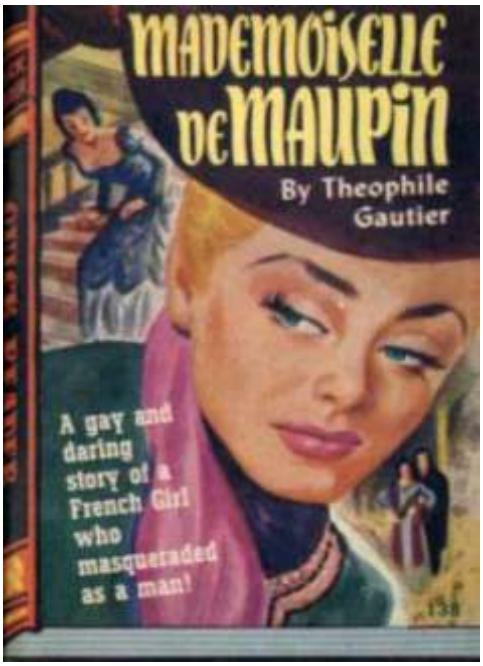
I'm not making any of that up.

As if that weren't enough, over the years since her death she has become – or rather, been made, by many generations of authors – like Sappho, a symbol of Romanticism, of erotic possibility and – the flipside – shame.

While she was, during her lifetime, a celebrity on the scale of Lady Gaga and seen as an idiosyncratic, Sapphic but not monstrous character, later portrayals of her have ranged through all of the archetypes listed by Donoghue.

Sarah Basiani in Julie, Chevalier de Maupin (TV series)

Perhaps the most famous use of her name and the idea of her, was Gautier's controversial 1835 novel, in which a cavalier known as Theodore is revealed to be the cross-dressing *Mademoiselle de Maupin* of the title – named Madeleine – the ephemeral lover of the pompous narrator d'Albert as well as his mistress Rosette. Gender is a literal and metaphorical performance, a masquerade: doubly so, for Madeleine dressed as Theodore plays Rosalind dressed as Ganymede in a performance of *As You Like It*. The narrative, as it happens, has nothing to do with the story of the real Julie Maupin – her name, her sexuality and androgynous beauty serve as the starting point for Gautier's imagination and experimentation. He used her story as a means of conveying his radical views on aesthetics and gender. He didn't pretend otherwise. (Gautier 1951)

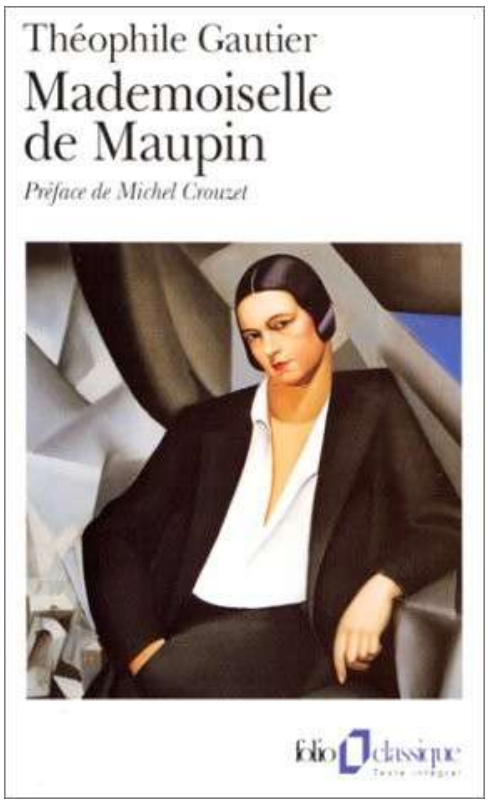


Gautier's novel was one of the original Fatal Books, often banned: it and its subject became an emblem of Decadence, of Art for Art's Sake, of the fallen woman, forbidden sexuality, the classical beauty, the

sin of the Greeks, of perfection or monstrosity, the sort of thing that happened on the Continent – depending on each writer's point of view – but the book's aesthetic and political inheritance sounds through Romanticism, Modernism and Feminism.

La Maupin became an international symbol of queerness and after the publication of Gautier's version, dozens of pseudo-biographical pieces appeared, telling the "true story" of the real Mademoiselle Maupin, whose life, now linked to that of Sappho, titillated and appalled.

I would argue that in many cases our contemporary understandings of those archetypes listed by Donoghue are based in portrayals of that one, remarkable woman – or rather two, as her persona has been, at various times, confused or enmeshed with Sappho's.



But this is not just a trawl through history for blokes who got it wrong. I acknowledge that many of them, from Ovid to Aubrey Beardsley and possibly even Ben Affleck, created the Sappho or La Maupin they could comprehend as a result of their own world view and their own ethical framework. In trying to create a voice they believe (and the concept of belief is important here) to be authentic, they create a character they can understand, a voice they can render onto page or screen.

Still, it's clear that what we think we know of Sappho, what we know, without realising it, of Mademoiselle Maupin, what we see as contemporary lesbian identity and what we read in portrayals of queer women in literature, has more to do with the conscious ethical approaches or unconscious projections of generations of authors than the real lives of women in history.

Let's look at it from a different angle. As a child of the 1960s, I hit university in the years when the groovy 70s were turning into the right-on 80s and feminism was reclaiming everything it could get its hands on – especially Sappho.

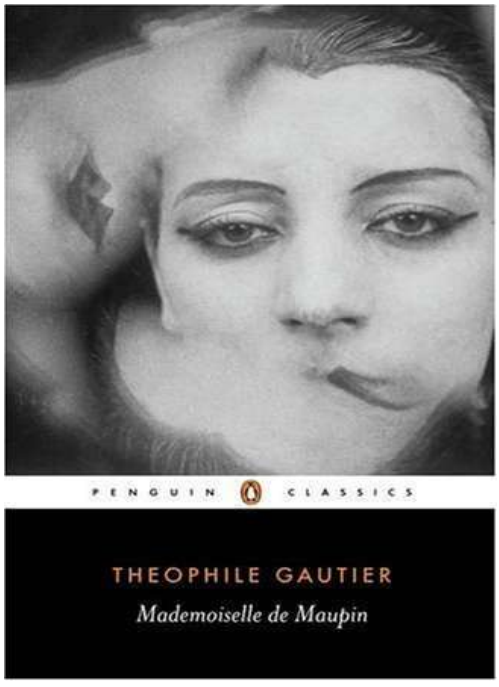
One of the methods used by feminist and lesbian writers during those heady days was to rediscover women they – we – adored, and hope that some claim to them could be made. Sappho was a right on woman. A lesbian. Wouldn't have looked twice at Phaon. Don't be absurd.

I understand it – it spoke to me, in the early 80s, and I was as susceptible to an Amelia Earhart poster as the next woman. But it was clearly an act of overcompensation. Virginia Woolf, we were told, never loved poor Leonard. She only had eyes for Vita, who of course didn't love Harold either. Katherine Hepburn's relationship with Spencer Tracey was just a cover for her affair with Dietrich. Or Garbo. Or possibly Billie Jean King. We weren't too fussy, really. Bisexuals didn't exist, or were only going through a phase – they were written out of their own narratives just as Sappho's female lovers had been written out of her life by Ovid.

Although that process unveiled many women's lives that had been hidden, it was what Judith Bennett calls the 'the naive search for past heroines plucked out of historical context and reclaimed for presentist uses' (Bennett 2000).

But isn't it similar to the process undertaken by the male painters of Napoleonic France who converted Phaon into a Greek god?

The act of imagining might be informed by a considered ethical framework or political viewpoint, or it might source its information from an organic or inherited morality. Combine that with a quest for a sense of historical authenticity, and you have a very complex equation.



There's an accepted wisdom that writers of historical fiction have an ethical obligation to strive towards some ideal state of authenticity. At the very least, biographers, historians and creators of fiction portrayals of historical figures have a responsibility to research and present the facts, and reveal when fiction or speculation is operating in the spaces between. That doesn't make it authentic – just more ethical.

Clearly that's not what happened in the case of these two women, and their reputations, and the myriad characters based on them, have suffered limitations, if not defamation, ever since.

It is the irony that underpins historical fiction: that we as writers try to construct a world that will be read as authentic by the reader, even if we know better than anyone else that it can't possibly be so.

But what we really do, is to imagine the past in the context of the present, and the voices we speak are our own. Just like Ovid. Take Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, a coming out novel like *Rubyfruit Jungle* in fancy dress, in which characters' actions and perspectives are those of the 1990s, not the pre-Freudian 1880s.

It's not just about creating queer voices, either. I'm thinking, for example, of the ventriloquism of Peter Carey in *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, the immersion of Sarah Waters in *The Night Watch*, and Kate Grenville's attempt with *The Secret River* to recreate a colonial world. All striving for authenticity, all making a claim to speak in the voice of the historical past, something Grenville once described as being "as close as we are going to get to what it was actually like" (Sullivan, 2005).

As Inga Clendinnan wrote during the debate that followed the publication of *The Secret River*: 'Historical novelists spend time getting the material setting right, but then, misled by their confidence in their novelist's gift of empathetic imagination, they sometimes project back into that carefully constructed material setting contemporary assumptions and current obsessions.' (Clendinnen 2006)

Characters from the past are always the Other, no matter how much we may wish otherwise.

So if we accept that authenticity does not and need not exist, and that our world view influences the worlds we create, what are the ethical possibilities open to us, to avoid rendering the past invisible or painting out the parts we don't like?

Kolve suggests: 'We have little choice but to acknowledge our modernity, admit our interest in the past is always (and by no means illegitimately) born of present concern.' (Kolve 1998)

Catherine Spaak in the 1966 film by Mauro Bolognini

If we acknowledge the impact of our own ethics and politics in our writing and the voices we give our characters, we can make conscious ethical and creative decisions about how we do what we do, and be transparent about those decisions.

Our options include:

- Work outside the idea of authenticity, and outside time, as Jeanette Winterson does with her version of Sappho in *Art and Lies* and, arguably, as Gautier did, and as I am attempting to do.
- Create an ahistorical realism, which may include subversion as well as ventriloquism of contemporary sensibility, as Sarah Waters does in *The Night Watch*.
- Treasure, reconfigure and reassemble, perhaps in fragments, as HD did.
- Acknowledge the question and the ethical approaches or confusion of previous portrayals, in a metafictional sense, as Jane Montgomery Griffiths did in her recent play, *Sappho ... in Nine Fragments*
- Go completely silly with it (*Xena, Warrior Princess*)
- Hope nobody notices.

Let's finish with Jeanette Winterson's conscious/self-conscious deconstructed reconstruction of Sappho's voice:

Piece by piece the fragments are returned: the body, the work, the love, the life. What can be known about me? What I say? What I do? What I have written? And which is true? That is, which is truer? Memory. My licensed inventions. Not all of the fragments return.
(Winterson 1994)

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