



[Jacques-Louis David, *Sappho and Phaon*. Oil on canvas, 1809.]

SAPPHO'S RECEPTION

How Sappho is represented during the late
Romantic and early Victorian era

REBECCA LANGENKAMP

S1042124

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Teacher who will receive this document: Valerie Meessen

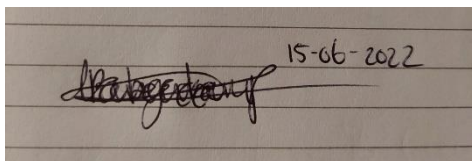
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Name of student: Rebecca Langenkamp

Student number: s1042124

Abstract

Sappho, the Great Poetess, has been a part of the literary world for a long time. It is not surprising that throughout history her image has changed over the years. Her poetry was the reason people celebrated her lyricism, but it was Ovid's *Heroides* that made her popular during the Romantic and Victorian era in England. This thesis aims to explore the reception of Sappho in the late-Romantic and early-Victorian era. This will be done by looking at the poems of Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, and Christina Rossetti. Previous research shows that there are different images of Sappho that have inspired writers through the years, however this thesis focusses on a small part of literary history with special regards to Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans. These two Romantic poets have been overlooked many times, especially in relation to each other and how their poetry influenced Rossetti. This thesis will use reception studies as a guide to analyse the poems by Landon, Hemans, and Rossetti that bear Sappho's name, and will show that their reception of Sappho changes, as they either put themselves in place of Sappho, or create a memory that was inspired by previous poetry. To the modern-day reader, however, Sappho is seen as an LGBTQ+ icon. Words like "Sapphic" and "lesbian" are part of daily discourse, and many people share their need for more Sapphic representation in media. Sappho's image goes from lyrical genius to lesbian icon, however there is still much more to be discovered about Sappho's reception through history by looking at other poets, different time periods, or works from other countries than England.

Keywords: Sappho, Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, Christina Rossetti, reception studies, Romantic, Victorian.

Table of contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	4
Chapter One: Sappho and her Changing Image.....	9
Chapter Two: Sappho and the late Romantics.....	14
Letitia Landon	14
Landon and Sappho: the Loveless Poetess.....	15
Felicia Hemans.....	19
Hemans and Sappho: the Abandoned Poetess.....	20
Chapter Three: Sappho and the Victorian Era	23
Christina Rossetti	23
Rossetti and Sappho: the Dark Poetess	25
Conclusion.....	28
Bibliography	31

Introduction

Sappho, or, as she was known throughout literary history, the Great Poetess, has been a source of inspiration for many female poets. It is thus no surprise that the late-Romantic poets Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans, as well as the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti have written poetry about Sappho. They have written poems that bear Sappho's name, which include "Sappho" (one published in 1822, and the second in 1825) by Letitia Landon, "The Last Song of Sappho" by Felicia Hemans, and "What Sappho Would Have Said Had Her Leap Cured Instead of Killing Her" by Christina Rossetti.

Although the modern-day reader sees Sappho as an iconic homoerotic figure – by using her both her name (Sapphic) and place of residence (lesbian) as a noun and adjective to describe female love – in the Romantic and Victorian era her image was less homoerotic. Sappho's image changed throughout history; she was always respected as a great poet, but it was her character in Ovid's *Heroides* that inspired Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans during the Romantic period rather than her later connotations of homoeroticism. Sappho's story in *Heroides* is one of many imitations, and these are what survived. According to Gregory Nagy, even Classic scholars have access to more imitations of Sappho's texts than the original versions.¹ The small number of poems that did survive helped keep the name of 'the Great Poetess' for Sappho.

As mentioned earlier, one of the images of Sappho is that of the Great Poetess, rather than being famous for her homoerotic status. Yopie Prins states, "Sappho becomes an ideal lyric persona, a figure that provokes the desire to reclaim an original, perhaps even originary, feminine voice."² Sappho is famed for her lyrical genius, and having that original feminine voice; Sappho is what the female poets want to become. Prins continues that "alongside the improper significations of the name, Sappho circulated as proper name for the "Poetess" in

¹ Classical Inquiries. 'A Scenario for Exchanges of Comments on a Planned Monograph about the Ancient Reception of Sappho', 8 maart 2019. <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/a-scenario-for-exchanges-of-comments-on-a-planned-monograph-about-the-ancient-reception-of-sappho/>.

² Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) p.144

Victorian women's verse.”³ Thus establishing the fact that Sappho was indeed not the homoerotic figure that the modern reader now knows her as, but mostly served as an example for other female writers. According to Prins, “popular poetesses throughout England and America were identified with a Sapphic persona that seemed to personify poetry written for the "personal" expression of "feminine" sentiment.”⁴ Sappho served as an inspiration for the female writer: she showed them that the female writer could embrace her femininity and personify this in her poetry.

Another image of Sappho is that of an abandoned, suicidal woman. This image of Sappho appears in Ovid's *Heroides*, where, after her lover left her she lost her poetic ability and eventually jumped off a cliff. This is an image that prevails in the Romantic period, which could be due to *Heroides* being translated into English in the 18th century.⁵

Lastly, there are two different images of Sappho and sexuality. During the early years, Sappho's sexuality was seen as unnatural. Melissa Mueller writes that “(...) women in ancient Greece did not have the freedom to embrace a queer identity. They were expected to marry.” It is implied that women need to marry a man, to start a family and take care of that household, which would not be possible when being with a woman. However, this image has shifted to an icon status for the lesbian community due to the feminist movement of the twentieth century.

It becomes clear that there are multiple images of Sappho throughout history: as the Great Poetess, the abandoned woman in Ovid's *Heroides*, the resented woman with the unnatural sexuality, and the one where her sexuality creates an iconic status for Sappho. As these images shift over time, and there is an increased interest in the representation of Sapphic media, the question arises; how is Sappho represented in the poems by Felicia Hemans,

³ Prins, p. 174.

⁴ Prins, p. 174.

⁵ Rainbolt, Martha. 'Their Ancient Claim: Sappho and Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century British Women's Poetry'. *The Seventeenth Century* 12, nr. 1 (1 maart 1997): 111–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.1997.10555426>.

Letitia Landon, and Christina Rossetti? Which image of Sappho do these women use for their writing, and as their inspiration?

To answer the question, this thesis will turn to reception studies in hopes to find what interpretations, translations, and reworkings of Sappho have survived. In the *Companion to Reception Studies*, Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray define ‘reception’ as follows: “By ‘receptions’ we mean the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented.”⁶ Hardwick also defines reception as the artistic or intellectual processes involved in selecting, imitating or adapting ancient works.⁷ It is important to note how the newer work, i.e. the imitation or adaptation, relates back to its source. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind the context of where this takes place, and what purpose this imitation or adaptation serves. The context is about the factors outside the ancient source and how those influence the reception. The purpose for the imitation or appropriation of the ancient source can be something political, artistic, educational, or cultural. The imitation, or adaptation, and its reception are thus influenced by these factors and how they all relate to each other.

In poetry, there are three main aspects of reception. These three aspects are receptions which create new and influential works of literature, receptions which explicitly challenge the interpretation and value attached to a particular classical text, and, what this thesis will focus on, the receptions that focus on certain episodes or figures from classical poetry and rework them. These receptions all bring their own perspective to the classical source, and apply the ideas of their own time. Readers and critics alike can thus interpret these imitations in different contexts.

John Dryden (1631-1700) translated a lot of classical works into English during his lifetime. In 1680 his *Ovid's epistles translated by several hands* was published, and in this volume he translated *Sappho to Phaon*. During the 1690's Dryden's works were regarded as the best translations, and it can thus provide the reason why *Heroides* was so popular in the upcoming centuries. Ovid's *Heroides* is in itself already a re-working of Sappho, in which the focus lies on a heterosexual love between her and Phaon. When Phaon leaves Sappho behind,

⁶ Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray. Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho*, ed. P.J. Finglass and Adrian Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) p. 1

⁷ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) p. 4

she loses both the love of her life and her ability to create songs, which ultimately leads to her jumping off a cliff. It is this re-imagining of Sappho that gains popularity throughout the Romantic and Victorian era, due to the translation in the eighteenth century.

The theory in classical reception studies will be used as a guide to analyse the poetry by Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, and Christina Rossetti. It will show how these poets have re-imagined Sappho during their lifetime. Though this thesis will mainly focus on the late-Romantic and Victorian periods, there will be some background provided on how the image of Sappho has been interpreted and re-imagined throughout history: from her lyrical genius, to being abandoned, and eventually becoming a symbol for lesbianism. The concept that this thesis will be focussing most on is the reworking, re-imagining, and interpretation of Sappho through these women writers. Sappho has been re-imagined, reworked, and interpreted in many different ways in history. Scholars like Richard Hunter and Marguerite Johnson have looked at Sappho's reception in England, whereas Cecilia Piantanida has looked into the reception of Early Modern and Modern German, Italian and Spanish Sappho's. Additionally, Barbara Goff and Katherine Harloe have looked into Sappho's reception in the modern-day Anglophone world, sharing their perspective on how Sappho is received within the twentieth century.

In the late-Romantic period, the image of the abandoned, suicidal woman is the most popular and serves as inspiration for a lot of poets. As this image is one of many interpretations of Sappho it is interesting to see how this image came about, and why it has been received with such popularity. How did these female writers view Sappho themselves? Does that correspond with one of the existing images of Sappho, or did they see her in an entirely different way?

The first chapter is an introduction into the reception and how it led to the different images that surround the figure of Sappho. It highlights the key points of these various images, and where they come from. The chapter will explore how these images work together, and how they have developed over time.

In the second chapter, the thesis will discuss how Sappho is represented in the poems by Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans. The chapter will explore how these women created their own view of Sappho, and which image of Sappho they were inspired by. Even though both Landon and Hemans used the abandoned woman as their inspiration, they differed in how they used it in their own poetry. Letitia Landon, for example, placed herself into the

poetry by using “I,” and Hemans was able to draw a parallel between her own life and Sappho’s life in *Heroides*, as they were both abandoned by a man.

In the third chapter, the thesis will discuss how Sappho is represented in Christina Rossetti’s poems. Rossetti, being inspired by Letitia Landon, has different views of Sappho. Where Landon used the image of the abandoned Sappho, Rossetti used the interpretation of Landon’s Sappho for her own poetry. Rossetti’s Sappho is more of a memory, than a direct reworking of the Sappho that Landon introduced to Rossetti.

Chapter One: Sappho and her Changing Image

To the modern reader, Sappho is a figure of women loving other women. She is seen as a queer icon, celebrating homoeroticism and females loving one another. Yet, this was not always the way people saw her. According to Harriette Andreadis, there are four different images of Sappho throughout history. Even though these images are numbered, they do overlap each other and exist in the same time periods: for the Romantics she is both the Great Poetess, but also a character who has been abandoned and hurt. The first image is one of great female poetic excellence, the great Poetess and “Plato’s Tenth Muse.” Secondly, there is the image of Sappho being the example of early “unnatural” sexuality. The third image is Sappho as a mythical figure of the suicidal abandoned woman. Lastly, there is the most recent image of Sappho as the lesbian heroine.⁸ These images tend to overlap each other and Sappho represents all of them at once; while she would be seen as the abandoned woman in Ovid’s *Heroides*, she is also the famed lyrical genius. However, some images are more prominent in different time periods, due to various circumstances. These circumstances could be a translation in English during the 18th century, or, many years later, a feminist movement in the 20th century.

The first image –the image of the great Poetess Sappho– celebrates Sappho’s lyricism. She was famed for her genius lyricism and songs. This image was celebrated by the female and male poets coming in the years after Sappho. Early woman writers looked back at the writings of Sappho, feeling inspired to write themselves. During the British Renaissance, Sappho’s work was valued for its brilliant lyricism. Her work, being so well perceived by men and women, often was paired with the work of Homer. This resulted in her receiving the name of “the Female Homer.”⁹ Amongst the female poets in England, some were nicknamed “the English Sappho,” and Letitia Landon was one of them.

⁸ Harriette Andreadis, “The Sappho Tradition” in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 18

⁹ Higgins, Charlotte. ‘Sappho: The Great Poet of the Personal’. *The Guardian*, 11 januari 2010, sec. Books.

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2010/jan/11/sappho-poetry-classics>.

The second image of Sappho is that of an “unnatural” sexuality. As Sappho was the Great Poetess and her academy was thriving, young women all over Greece flocked to Lesbos. These women were also the women with whom Sappho developed relationships, some pedagogical but others erotic. It is these relationships that created this image during her lifetime on Lesbos. In Ancient Greece, they found active and passive roles in their relationships important. In the case of Sappho, as Mueller states, she takes on the active role. Mueller writes: “The shameful and basically incomprehensible thing about lesbian affairs for the ancient reader was that they demanded that one woman take on an active role, a role that could only be properly occupied by the phallic male.”¹⁰ Though she had these relations, she still remained the Great Poetess, and people cared more for her songs than whom she loved.

The third image of Sappho is the image of a broken, suicidal woman. Her lover, Phaon, left her and as he did, so did Sappho’s ability to write lyrics. Sappho, now feeling she lost the two most important parts of her life, then committed suicide by jumping off a cliff.¹¹ According to Joan DeJean it is Sappho’s leap into the ocean that is the crucial moment that Ovid rewrites. The leap is what destroys her sexuality as it only focuses on the love of one man, rather than the love she receives from the women on her island.”¹² Ovid thus turns Sappho a heterosexual, broken woman, with a slight nod to the unnatural sexuality of the second image of Sappho in literature. However, this broken woman image rose to popularity in the 18th century and continued in the 19th century. Though this was a popular image, it is not known why this was. Marguerite Johnson argues that

“the characteristically heterosexual Sappho of the eighteenth century was not, however, without its problems and complexities. Sappho’s heterosexuality usually entailed promiscuity, a penchant for younger men, and an exaggerated passionate disposition,

¹⁰ Melissa Mueller, Sappho and Sexuality” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho*, ed. P.J. Finglass and Adrian Kelly. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) p.42

¹¹ Ovid, and Harold Isbell. “XV: Sappho to Phaon.” Essay. In *Heroides*, 155–69. London, England: Penguin Books, 2004.

¹² Joan DeJean. “Fictions of Sappho.” *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (1987): 787–805.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343528>.

with (Pseudo-?)Ovid's *Letter to Phaon*, poem 15 from the *Heroides*, the means by which artists and writers could fashion this particular Sappho."¹³

This image of the broken, passionate, left behind woman is one that returns most during the late Romantic period and also finds its way into the poems of Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans. However, according to Martha Rainbolt, the Sappho and Phaon story that was so popular during the 18th and 19th century, is "now regarded as pure fancy."¹⁴

Lastly, Sappho has turned into a queer heroine during the twentieth century. Early in the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf used the words "sapphist" or "Sapphs" to describe intimacy between women, which was highly inspired by the French language.¹⁵ The use of these words in English thus set the tone of Sappho's iconic future status. Barbara Groff and Katherine Harloe argue that at the turn of the twentieth century Sappho was claimed by numerous lesbian and feminist voices and an increase of scholarly interest when new papyrus scrolls were found with Sappho's poetry.¹⁶ New translations and editions were published with these new papyrus finds. There was a shift in the readers of Sappho as well, as Groff and Harloe argue that

"The Sappho that readers confront at the start of the twenty-first century, celebrated for her distinctively female voice, lesbian sexuality, and poetic excellence, owes a great deal to the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s and its impact both on classical scholarship (evident largely from the 1980s onwards) and broader literary and cultural receptions."¹⁷

¹³ Marguerite Johnson, "Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Sapphos in France, England, and the United States" in *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho*, ed. P.J. Finglass and Adrian Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) p. 362

¹⁴ Martha Rainbolt

¹⁵ Harriette Andreadis p. 26

¹⁶ Barbara Groff and Katherine Harloe, "Sappho in the Twentieth Century and Beyond: Anglophone Receptions" in *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho*, ed. P.J. Finglass and Adrian Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) p. 390

¹⁷ Barbara Groff & Katherine Harloe; *Cambridge Companion to Sappho*, p. 391

Up until the 1970's, Sappho was only a name and a word for women love. However, Sappho was used as an icon for the 'second-wave' feminism movement in the 1970's.¹⁸ According to Groff and Harloe the use of Sappho in a feminist movement is obvious "because Sappho's associations with desire among women were as important for the movement as her associations with women's writing and independent voice."¹⁹ Sappho's voice is now used to celebrate women, and to give other women a voice: as if she taught them herself at her academy so many years ago. Groff and Harloe continue

"Sappho is now considered a woman poet whose themes included erotic desire for women, possibly younger women, most likely within an aristocratic circle whose bonds included those of love as well as friendship, song, and joint worship of Aphrodite. Male figures are noticeably absent, whereas the 'chorus' of women and/or girls is quite prominent."²⁰

Sappho's current status is thus a mix of all of these earlier images: she is still regarded as one of the greatest poets of all time, while her fictional story as the broken and suicidal woman also survived in poetry. Groff and Harloe write "she inherits Greek poetic tradition, reworks it, and comments on political and economic concerns close to many in her society. She stands at the head of women's literary tradition."²¹ Yet, the image she is remembered most for in the twenty-first century is that of a lesbian icon, which could be because her residence and her name are used for loving females. In modern-day media, like tv-series, music and books, Sapphic representation is something that has been developing and growing (see for example Schwarz M's article on how lesbian representation has evolved throughout the years.)²² There is a need for this representation, and streaming platforms such as Netflix play into this by

¹⁸ Groff & Harloe, p. 397

¹⁹ Groff & Harloe, p. 397

²⁰ Groff & Harloe, p. 400

²¹ Groff & Harloe, p. 407

²² M, Schwartz. 'Lesbian's Representation Evolution in Mainstream Media'. Arts and Social Sciences Journal 7, nr. 4 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.4172/2151-6200.1000201>.

releasing Sapphic tv-series.²³ Even though Sappho is still the Great Poetess, she is also the voice of females loving females, she is the noun and the adjective.

²³ Nicole Hill. 'Netflix's First Kill Raises the Stakes for Representation', 12 juni 2022.
<https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/netflix-first-kill-representation-felicia-henerson-showrunner-interview/>.

Chapter Two: Sappho and the late Romantics

The late Romantic era saw the rise of two female poets who shook the literary world: Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans. Where Hemans wrote about “domestic affections” and the moral value of altruism and empathy, Landon focussed on thwarted romantic love.”²⁴ Their poetry on Sappho, therefore, was also very different in meaning. This chapter will explore who these women were, and how their poetry represented the Great Poetess Sappho.

Letitia Landon

Letitia Elizabeth Landon was born in 1802 – and her literary birth took place in 1821. In that year, poems signed with just the letter ‘L’ started to appear in the *Literary Gazette*. In upcoming years, this ‘L’ was replaced with ‘L.E.L.’²⁵ Readers were intrigued by this mysterious poet and wondered who this person was, and the only hint the reader received was a footnote from the editor stating that the author was “a lady yet in her teens.”²⁶ When Letitia published her book *The Impoverastrice* in 1824, she revealed herself to the public.²⁷

Landon had built up quite the reputation during her lifetime, which Lucasta Miller explains as “a welter of salacious speculation about her private life.”²⁸ Letitia lived in a room above a girl’s school during her career. Letitia’s private life was tumultuous, she married when she was well into her thirties and had -supposedly- three illegitimate children with the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, William Jerdan. Though Jerdan was married and had a family of his own, he was interested in Landon’s poetry and being her mentor. Letitia, in turn, developed feelings for this man.

Letitia’s death, much like the start of her career, was shrouded in mystery. She died in October 1838, three months after she got married to the British governor, George Maclean. In these months, she sailed with her husband to Cape Coast Castle, a big trading fort in West-

²⁴ Lucasta Miller, *L.E.L The Lost Life and Scandalous Death of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, the Celebrated “female Byron”* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2019) p. 16

²⁵ Miller, p. 26

²⁶ Miller, p. 26

²⁷ Miller, p. 43

²⁸ Miller, p. 21

Africa that we now know as Ghana. Letitia's body was found at Cape Cope Castle with a bottle of prussic acid next to her, which led to believe that she had committed suicide. However, there had been no signs of her feeling depressed. The story changed from a presumed suicide, to being murdered by one of the indigenous women in Africa, to the murder being orchestrated by her husband. Until this day, the cause of her death remains unknown.

During her career, which spanned from 1821 until 1838, Landon published six collections of poems, three novels, and through annuals another ten collections of poems. At the high of her career, Letitia received the nickname 'the English Sappho,' where Sappho refers to "The Great Poetess," famed for her genius and lyrics. This nickname was given to Landon when she gained fame and people found her poetry as good as that of Sappho. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, her poems stopped appearing in anthologies, erasing her from the English literary world.

Landon and Sappho: the Loveless Poetess

Letitia Landon uses Sappho as a parallel to her own life. Much like Sappho, Letitia faced a form of unrequited love, as she fell for William Jerdan, Jerdan never could be fully hers unless he would divorce his wife which he never did. In the 1822 poem "Sappho," published in the Literary Gazette, Landon reworks the image of Sappho as the woman in love with a man. She uses the story of Sappho and Phaon as Ovid wrote it and makes it her own. One way of doing this is by using a bird simile. Elizabeth Miller argues that Letitia wrote this poem with her poetry mentor, Jerdan, in mind and that through the bird simile, Letitia shows the relation between her and her mentor:²⁹

*"(...) he loved her too,
But not as she did—she was unto him
As a young bird, whose early flight he trained,
Whose first wild song were sweet, for he had taught
Those songs—but she looked up to him with all*

²⁹ Miller, p. 84

Youth's deep and passionate idolatry:

Love was her heart's sole universe—he was

To her, Hope, Genius, Energy, the God.” (Landon, lines 31-38.)

In this poem, Miller argues, Sappho's lover, Phaon, is replaced by Landon's poetry mentor. Miller continues that “in their own personal mythology, she was the songbird and Jerdan her trainer,” further establishing that Landon was writing about their relationship. Aside from the bird simile, Letitia also touched upon the fact that she was much younger than him by writing “but she looked up to him with all youth's deep and passionate idolatry.” This then shows that Letitia used the hopeful image of Sappho, when she is desperately in love with a man, that we also see in Ovid's *Sappho to Phaon*, before Phaon leaves.

In the 1825 poem “Sappho,” Landon again writes about wings. As established before, Letitia uses a simile of a bird to describe her relationship with Jerdan. By using the words “Hope's bright wings” in the following poem, she again talks about their relationship. “She loved! again her ardent soul was buoy'd / On Hope's bright wings, above life's dreary void.” (Landon, lines 29-30) The wings in this poem refer back to the bird of the first Sappho poem, and as Jerdan was the one who published Landon's poetry, he signifies hope for her career. In this reworking of Sappho, Letitia puts herself in place of Sappho, but only focussing on the love Sappho had for one man.

In “Sappho's Song” Landon again reflects upon her relationship with Jerdan. Jerdan was Letitia's mentor who, even though Letitia already had written poetry, taught her more about it: “It was not song that taught me love / But it was love that taught me song.” (Landon, lines 11-12) It becomes clear that these songs, which, according to Miller was a word Landon liked using better than “poem” to describe her poetry,³⁰ were a means of giving small hints of the relationship Letitia and Jerdan had.

Aside from the unrequited love that both Sappho and Landon faced, Yopie Prins argues that Letitia's life can “be read as a repetition of Sappho's fate.” Prins goes beyond just the unrequited love, by comparing the fall of Sappho to the fall of Landon's career.³¹ In her first Sappho poem, Landon writes:

³⁰ Miller, p. 31

³¹ Prins, p. 199

“And Fame, like sunlight, was upon her path;

And strangers heard her name, and eyes that never

Had looked on SAPPHO, yet had wept with her.” (Landon, lines 48-50)

She remarks on how strangers heard her name, but that eyes had never looked at Sappho, which is a direct comment on her “L.E.L” persona. Most readers of the *Literary Gazette* had no idea who this “L.E.L” was, yet she was on her way to fame with her poetry.

However, it seemed that Landon was quite confident in her writing, as her second Sappho poem demonstrates: “She had a dangerous gift, though genius be / All this earth boasts of immortality” (Landon, lines 15-16) It may not seem as if Letitia places herself as Sappho in this poem, yet a few lines below this she writes about “bright Hope’s wings,” (Landon, line 30) which again relates back to her relationship with Jerdan. These lines show her confidence in her own talent, and her desire to be just as a great poetess as Sappho was.

Landon thus replaced the image of Sappho to one of her own, drawing parallels to their lives through language. Miller notes that Landon’s poetry was mostly expressed in first person, which made the reader wonder if her poetry was a reflection of her true self.³² As shown by the bird simile in the 1822 poem “Sappho,” there is a clear relation between the world she created for Sappho and the real world where Letitia loved her mentor. She, as a young girl, looked up to a man with power and who could help her with her poetry, which becomes apparent in the lines “As a young bird, whose early flight he trained.” (Landon, line 39)

In the 1824 book, *“The Improvisatrice,”* the poem “Sappho’s Song” appears. This is the second poem Landon wrote about Sappho, but it is different in the writing style. Whereas in “Sappho,” Landon uses third-person pronouns, in this poem the first lines already have Letitia placing herself as Sappho by using first person pronouns. “Farewell , my lute!—and would that I /Had never waked thy burning chords!” (Landon, lines 1-2) This poem describes the fall of Sappho, but also comments on aspects of Letitia’s own life. One of these comments is on her reputation, in the following lines: “I should have been the wretch I am / Had every chord of thine been mute.” (Landon, lines 7-8) Letitia’s public life shone through her poetry, as Virginia Blain points out how Landon represents another aspect of Sappho. “Sappho's problem, as represented by Landon, is the inevitable loss of love suffered by a woman who

³² Miller, p. 39

exhibits her genius in public.”³³ Thus, Landon blames being in the public eye, and having quite the scandalous reputation, for having trouble in her own love life.

Landon thus used Sappho as a mask, to hide behind a character while writing about the things in her life that she struggled with. However, she could not say these things without risking her writing career, so a mask was needed. Landon found Sappho, and placed herself in the poetry, without the reader noticing.

³³ Virginia Blain, “Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Eliza Mary Hamilton, and the Genealogy of the Victorian Poetess.” *Victorian Poetry* 33, no. 1 (1995) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002517> p. 42

Felicia Hemans

Felicia Hemans, born Felicia Dorothea Browne, married Captain Alfred Hemans at eighteen years old. Over the span of six years, they had five sons, but shortly before the birth of their last son Captain Hemans left for Italy. He never returned to Felicia and their sons and left them without money³⁴, which forced Hemans to get creative to be able to provide for her children. She had already published poetry at age of 14, marking the beginning of her writing career. This early period of her writing, from 1808 until 1823, consisted of writing about what she knew, such as the war with France and what that meant for her family. As Stephen C. Behrendt notes on Hemans's popularity in the early years of her career is the fact that some poems exhibit more masculine influences:

“What seems to have won male critics' particular approbation was the extent to which poems like *Modem Greece* conformed more to elements of the masculinist poetic and aesthetic than to those of the feminine.”³⁵

Her poetry dealt with masculine themes, such as the war and Hellenistic influences, something her male contemporaries were all too familiar with. Yet, her poetic style shifted to a more feminine style, after her husband left. Anne K. Mellor states that “Hemans situated herself and her poetry wholly within the category of feminine domesticity.”³⁶ It celebrates domestic affairs, the beauty of maternal love, and the loyalty of a woman to her husband.³⁷ Hemans, unlike Landon, wrote about her own experiences and carried it through in her public life as well. In public, Hemans presented herself as the suffering, neglected wife after her husband left her.³⁸

The domesticity in her poetry was especially evident during the middle period of Hemans's career between 1823 and 1830. During this time, Felicia also started publishing her poetry in America, Ireland and Scotland. Her most famous poem, *Casabianca*, was published

³⁴ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993) p. 132-133

³⁵ Stephen C. Behrendt, “‘Certainly not a Female Pen’: Felicia Hemans's Early Public Reception” in *Felicia Hemans Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001) p. 99

³⁶ Mellor, p. 124

³⁷ Mellor, p. 124.

³⁸ Mellor, p. 134

in 1826 and appeared on the curriculum in Britain and the British colonies for school-going children.³⁹

During her career, Hemans published twenty volumes of poetry and had nearly four hundred poems published in magazines and annuals, which was a market that grew in popularity during the 1820s. She was the most read female poet during these times.

The final period of Felicia's career is 1830-35, in which she turned to religious inspiration and suffered from tuberculosis.

Even after Hemans's death, she remained popular for many years: between 1835 and 1920 collections of her poems were published.⁴⁰ Yet, somewhere after 1920, she was forgotten and disappeared from the English literary canon.

Hemans and Sappho: the Abandoned Poetess

One of the major themes in Felicia Hemans' poetry is the suffering of women, so for Felicia to write about the abandoned and suicidal Sappho is a logical step. The image that Ovid has created of Sappho shows a suffering woman, something that Hemans knows too well. She, too, is a woman who suffers due to a man leaving her behind. Unlike Sappho, Hemans kept her lyrical voice and kept writing to support her family.

Felicia's "The Last Song of Sappho," published in 1831," came with a note printed above the poem, describing the picture that inspired it. The note reads,

"Suggested by a beautiful sketch, the design of the younger Westmacott. It represents Sappho sitting on a rock above the sea, with her lyre cast at her feet. There is a desolate grace about the whole figure, which seems penetrated with the feeling of utter abandonment." (Hemans, headnote.)

³⁹ Marlon B. Ross, foreword to Felicia Hemans Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melynck (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), xix

⁴⁰ Sweet, Nanora and Melnyk, Julie. Introduction to Felicia Hemans Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melynck (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001), p. 1

The poem was printed without the picture in question, thus it is questionable if Hemans was actually inspired by just the picture. By starting the second sentence with “it,” which can refer to the picture or the poem that followed the note, Hemans keeps the reader guessing where the inspiration came from. Regardless of whether Hemans got inspired by the picture or Ovid’s story of Sappho, she focuses on one major theme within the story, namely suffering.

In the poem, Hemans reworks Sappho in the same way as Landon did before her: She places herself into the shoes of Sappho and writes in the first person. However, where the tone of Landon’s poetry is one of desperation and love, Hemans’ tone is full of despair and suffering. The first stanza of the poem already shows the reader this, as Sappho turns towards the sea and desperately cries out:

“SOUND on, thou dark unslumbering sea!

My dirge is in thy moan;

My spirit finds response in thee,

To its own ceaseless cry—‘Alone, alone!’” (Hemans, lines 1-4)

The first line has the word “dark” and the exclamation point suggests some degree of despair. The poem sketches an image of Sappho standing atop the cliff, playing into Ovid’s story of Sappho and Phaon and enhancing one aspect of this story: the suffering of Sappho. The second line of the poem shows that the sea responds to the cries of Sappho, “my dirge is in thy moan,” (Hemans, line 2) creating a second character in this poem. This poem is about Sappho, but also about the sea that can give Sappho the peace she desperately seeks, as illustrated by in the last line of the second stanza, “And say, dark waters! will ye give me peace?” (Hemans, line 8)

The poem comes to, for Sappho, a satisfying conclusion, as she would find peace amongst the waves after jumping off the cliff.

“I, with this winged nature fraught,

These visions wildly free,

This boundless love, this fiery thought—

Alone I come—oh! give me peace, dark sea!” (Hemans, lines 37-40)

The concluding line, where the “oh!” breaks the sentence, is filled with the tone of despair that runs throughout the poem. It also suggests that Sappho jumped, right after asking the dark sea for peace, which is arguably the best ending for Sappho in this instance.

Though this image of the suicidal Sappho is an image that has been seen again and again due to Ovid’s *Sappho to Phaon*, Hemans does make Sappho her own character. She draws a line between the suffering of her own life and that of Sappho.

Chapter Three: Sappho and the Victorian Era

This chapter will focus on Christina Rossetti and her representation of Sappho. Rossetti wrote two poems that bear Sappho's name, though never having read anything by Sappho herself. Rossetti's inspiration came from the female poets before her, namely Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans. This chapter will also look at how these female writers inspired Rossetti to write about Sappho.

Christina Rossetti

Christina Rossetti, born on December 5th 1830 in London, was the youngest of four children. Christina and her siblings, Maria, William, and Dante, were raised in a loving, and religious, family home near Regent's Park. The children were brought up with colouring books, rhyming schemes for learning numbers and animals, and other games that served educational purposes.⁴¹ Though her father wrote himself, it was her mother's love for literature that was passed onto the children⁴²: all children published literary works.

Christina wrote her first poem at eleven years old, and presented it to her mother as a birthday gift in 1842,⁴³ and at age thirteen, she produced her first long fantasy poem.⁴⁴ This poem showed the talent that Christina possessed. At age 14, she wrote *Hope in Grief*, a poem that followed years of depression after her father suffered from several health issues, and her self-loathing after herself being ill. She continued to write, establishing her role as the poet of the family.

While Christina was growing up, both Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon were the female poets to look out for in the 1830's and 1840's (even though Landon had passed away in 1838, her poetry was still read posthumously.) The biggest influence on her early poetry was Hemans,⁴⁵ who still produced work during the 1840's. Christina's first published work

⁴¹ Jan Marsh. *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) p. 10-11

⁴² Marsh, p. 38

⁴³ Marsh, p. 49

⁴⁴ Marsh, p 62

⁴⁵ Marsh, p. 96

was *Verses*, which was published by her grandfather in 1847.⁴⁶ It contained four poems and was received with much praise, even though it was published privately. This publication did find its way outside the family, thus making it the first literary work to be formally published for Christina. At age 17, she had two poems published in a national newspaper, thanks to her brother Dante.⁴⁷ When the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood published their own magazine, *The Germ*, they picked a few of Christina's poems to print in their first and second number.

Though Christina never married, James Collinson, one of the Pre-Raphaelite Brethren, proposed to her in 1848. However, in 1850 they broke off their engagement due to Collinson reverting back to Catholicism. During this engagement, Christina wrote *What Sappho would have said had her leap cured her instead of killing her*. This poem, as Jan Marsh argues, has a touch of Landon, but has little to do with Sappho herself.⁴⁸ While Christina wrote of Sappho, she barely knew what it stood for. Marsh argues that it is unlikely that Christina had been reading Sappho. Marsh explains that this is due to Classical scholarship being not popular, and Sappho's surviving verses were not widely read. However, "her [Sappho's] reputation as 'the tenth Muse' made her a symbolic figure, both as the woman poet of unhappy love (...) and as a name commonly bestowed on any woman with literary gifts."⁴⁹ It is striking that Christina chose the rose as her emblem, as a popular interest of the Victorian era was flower symbolism, and the rose was a flower sacred to Sappho.⁵⁰

Due to Christina falling ill in her teens, she struggled with her health during her lifetime. The breakdown she suffered also kept haunting her, and feelings of depression never left her. In her poetry, she turned to religion and dark themes to cope with these feelings.

In 1859, Christina wrote a poem that was later titled *Goblin Market*. It later appeared in 1862 as a part of the collection *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, which was met with raving reviews. After a few years, the volume began to become profitable, and Christina's

⁴⁶ Marsh, p. 105

⁴⁷ Marsh, p. 122-123

⁴⁸ Marsh, p. 138

⁴⁹ Marsh, p. 94

⁵⁰ Marsh, p. 101

publisher, Macmillan, wanted to publish a second volume.⁵¹ This volume, *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, was eventually published in 1866.

Christina struggled with her health all her life, and passed away in 1894, at age 64. She never married, nor had any children, but she left behind a great legacy in the form of her poetry.

Rossetti and Sappho: the Dark Poetess

Christina Rossetti's poetry was known for its dark tones, which stems from her depression during her early teenage years. Though her earlier work was influenced by the work of Hemans, Christina's poems on Sappho were much more influenced by Landon. Though she adopted Hemans' desperate voice in her first Sappho poem, Landon's desire to be away from the public eye shines through both Sappho poems.

The first poem on Sappho that Rossetti wrote was simply called "Sappho," written in 1845. The poem itself has nothing to do with Sappho, as Rossetti most likely only got her information of Sappho by reading Landon's interpretation. This poem does not name Sappho, nor uses other symbols that are closely related to Sappho. According to Yopie Prins, Christina creates "the memory of "a Sappho" that is a perpetual deferral, or forgetting, of the proper name."⁵²

The opening lines are a desperate call for death, something that is in line with Hemans' interpretation of Sappho, rather than that of Landon:

*"I sigh at day-dawn, and I sigh
When the dull day is passing by,
I sigh at evening, and again
I sigh when night brings sleep to men."* (Rossetti, lines 1-4)

The act of sighing repeatedly sets the desperate tone of voice in this poem. Christina struggles with the days to pass, as she was battling her depression. The poem continues,

*"Oh! It were better far to die
Than thus for ever mourn and sigh,*

⁵¹ Marsh, p. 422

⁵² Prins, p. 207

And in death's dreamless sleep to be

Unconscious that none weep for me," (Rossetti, lines 5-8)

These lines again use the act of sighing. Rossetti writes she does not want to go on like this and wants to be dead. Sappho, in *Sappho to Phaon*, commits suicide to get rid of the pain of her lover leaving her. Though Christina does not take inspiration from that story directly, it still represents the suicidal figure that Ovid created.

The poem continues and the influence of Landon becomes slowly apparent. One of Landon's fears was to be remembered for her –quite scandalous– public life. The same fear is first seen in line eight: "Unconscious that none weep for me," (Rossetti, line 8) where Christina already acknowledges that she does not want to know about people not crying for her. She already says no-one will, yet she continues in lines ten and eleven: "Forgetful of forgetfulness, / Resting from pain and care and sorrow." (Rossetti, lines 10-11). She does not mind being forgotten: it will give her peace. The last two lines of the poem, "Living unloved, to die unknown, / Unwept, untended and alone," (Rossetti, lines 13-14) again show that she is quite desperate for being unknown in death. Though Christina strayed far from the Ovid story of Sappho, she still remains close to what both Hemans and Landon adapted Sappho: Sappho is still represented as the suicidal woman, but she no longer craves fame or even love. She just wants the pain to end.

A year after the first Sappho poem, Christina wrote "What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her." The title already shows that she strayed from Ovid's story again, and ignores the big dramatic conclusion of *Sappho to Phaon*. However, the opening lines of this poem are what Ovid's story is about: "Love, Love, that having found a heart / And left it, leav'st it desolate." (Rossetti, line 1-2) Christina does take the theme of love lost to heart in this poem, and even begs the lover to come back in the last lines of the first stanza, "O blessed Love, return, return." (Rossetti, line 5). Much like in "Sappho," (1846) Rossetti does not name Sappho, nor uses the symbols associated with Sappho in this poem either: it is through the title that she informs whom this poem is about.

This poem also strays from both Hemans and Landon. Though it is a cry for a lost lover to come back, the tone is less desperate than in "Sappho," and there is no sign of wanting to be forgotten. Instead, it only describes the flowers that Sappho would use around her veil if her lover ever returns. (Rossetti, lines 10-18) It can be argued that Christina put

herself in the shoes of Sappho, as she wrote this poem while her fiancé was away, but she did not love Collinson the same way as Sappho loved Phaon.

In the final two stanzas, Rossetti addresses the pain Sappho feels more directly. The last line of the penultimate stanza reads “I must go forth and bear my pain.” (Rossetti, line 60). This is a glimpse of the pained Sappho, whose decision to not jump off the cliff might haunt her forever. She may not have died, but that does mean her suffering continues. Sappho acknowledges this in the opening line of the final stanza.

*“Must bear my pain, till Love shall turn
To me in pity and come back.
His footsteps left a smouldering track
When he went forth, that still doth burn.
Oh come again, thou pain divine,
Fill me and make me wholly thine.”* (Rossetti, lines 61-68)

She knows that she will not be without pain unless her lover comes back, but until he does, her pain is what keeps her going. Rossetti thus embraces the pained, abandoned woman that is Sappho but never makes her suicidal. It is quite a change in the character, as it is such a well-known aspect of Sappho.

Conclusion

This chapter will summarise the key findings that have been presented in relation to the research question. It will review these findings, and the limitations that come with it. This chapter will also tackle opportunities for future research into the reception of Sappho throughout history.

The reception of Sappho knows four different images: Sappho as the lyrical genius and the “Tenth Muse,” Sappho and her love for women and unnatural sexuality, Sappho as the abandoned and suicidal woman in Ovid’s *Sappho to Phaon* and, lastly, a modern version where Sappho is seen as the lesbian icon and a symbol for the LGBTQ+ community. Though these images overlap each other throughout history, there are some clear periods where certain images are more popular than another.

Sappho was regarded as “the Great Poetess,” and named the female Homer. She was famed for her lyricism and her academy on her home island of Lesbos inspired many young women to start studying the art of poetry. This image lived on for a long time, but the women flocking to the academy also sparked a second image of Sappho; namely that of unnatural sexuality. Sappho wrote about the women at her academy as lovers, and close intimate friends. The poems discussing female love are also the reason that Sappho is now regarded as an icon in the LGBTQ+ community. However, the image that has been discussed most in this thesis is one that rose to fame due to Ovid’s *Sappho to Phaon*. Here, Ovid turns the genius Sappho into a broken woman after her lover left her, and as he did, her lyrical voice disappears too. The pain of losing both her lover and her voice, she eventually jumps off a cliff.

During the Romantic and early-Victorian era, the image of the abandoned and suicidal Sappho was the most popular. This refers back to the English translation of Ovid’s *Heroides*, which features *Sappho to Phaon*. This translation then served as an inspiration to many (female) poets, who used Sappho and this tragic story to write poems. Both Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans used this image as inspiration for their own poetry. Though both poets had vastly different lives – Landon having a very scandalous reputation, and Hemans was regarded as homely – they found a way to put themselves into the poems they wrote about Sappho. Landon used Sappho to share her disdain towards fame, her public life and what that did to her. Hemans, like Sappho in *Heroides*, was abandoned by a man and used that as a parallel between herself and Sappho.

These poems written during the Romantic era served, in turn, as inspiration for poets in the Victorian era. This means that the reworking of Sappho by Ovid has been translated into English, and then was re-imagined through poetry again and again. Christina Rossetti read the poems of Landon and Hemans, and used their image of Sappho for her own poetry. Though she was heavily inspired by Landon and Hemans, her poetry on Sappho remains vague. It is only through the titles – “Sappho” and “What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her” – that Rossetti lets her readers know who this poem is about. There are no other symbols of Sappho present in the poems either, nor any other indications that these poems represent Sappho. Rossetti purely uses the image of Sappho that she knew through poetry, rather than the Sappho figure from Ovid’s story or Sappho’s actual poetry, and creates a nameless memory of the Sappho figure.

These images of Sappho have survived in history, and have been adapted many times through the years. Though all these images still survive today, it is the lesbian icon to the LGBTQ+ community that has the biggest influence on modern-day society. Words like “lesbian” and “Sapphic” are used on a daily basis to describe women loving women, and are used in a multitude of different types of media.

However, there might be representational problems when it comes to Sappho and the poets that this thesis discusses. As this thesis only discusses Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, and Christina Rossetti, who were all active in a relatively short time span, there are some issues to address. These poets can never fully reflect the society that they lived in, simply because society is not entirely made up of women. Therefore, a study into other poets who wrote about Sappho in different time periods and wrote from a different gendered perspective could bring up new aspects of the reception of Sappho.

Secondly, Christina Rossetti managed to survive in the literary canon, whereas Landon and Hemans did not. They were overshadowed by the big six, male, Romantic poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats) and did not get the same treatment as these men. It would be worthwhile for future research to look into why exactly Landon and Hemans disappeared from the literary world.

Additionally, interpretation can be influenced by ties to a specific place. The interpretation of Sappho might differ in different countries, cities, and environments. Both Landon and Rossetti were raised in London, but also spent a lot of time in the country during summer. Hemans, however, moved from Liverpool to Wales, and eventually ended up in

Dublin. In their personal lives, Hemans and Rossetti learned many languages, an opportunity that Landon never got. Their views on language thus differed, and could be the explanation of their different styles. Rossetti, during her lifetime, struggled with health and battled illnesses since being a teen, which resulted in her having a breakdown and suffering from depression. Studying the influence of a specific place, whether than be a physical place or a mental place, could give more insight into how certain figures are reworked to represent the poet in question.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the interpretations of Sappho that Landon, Hemans, and Rossetti created are shaped by personal experience rather than societal ideas. These women writers, in some way, have similarities between their own life and Ovid's Sappho. Hemans and Sappho were both left by their lover, causing them distress and the image of being abandoned. Though, where Sappho eventually committed suicide, Hemans took to her poetry to provide for her sons and regained control over the situation. Landon was burdened by her public life and it led to not having love in her life. Sappho had known love, but he had left her behind. Landon knew only unrequited love, where she loved her mentor but he could not love her back in the same way. Rossetti, in turn, had no interest in love, even if she had been engaged to be married for a period of time, she never married. Yet, she knew the pain of suffering: her depression and ill health made her long for death, something that Sappho did find. It would be interesting to do a study into how these experiences can influence the reception of Sappho.

Sappho thus has seen many different poems in which she features, whether that be as a lyrical genius, an abandoned and suicidal woman, or an icon to the LGBTQ+ community. She remains one of the most iconic Classical Greek figures, whose name and birthplace are adopted into languages all across the world. Even if most of Sappho's poetry has not survived, her name has made up for it, along with the poems that *did* survive. Additionally, the poems in which she features, as either just the title or a reimagined persona, have been popularised and are still well-known. However, with all these images, reworkings and different interpretations, it might just be waiting for what comes next for the Great Sappho of Lesbos.

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