

Love as a Commodity: Letitia Elizabeth Landon and “Sappho”

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(I) The Reception of Sappho's Leap

The story of Sappho taking a fatal leap from the rocks of Leucas into the sea because of unrequited love for Phaon had come down from Menander's comedy through Ovid's epistle “Sappho to Phaon.” Alexander Pope's translation of Ovid's poetry in 1712 contributed to making the image of Ovidian Sappho widely known. But it was Joseph Addison's academic or pseudo-academic articles in the *Spectator*, Nos. 223, 227, and 233 in 1711 that popularized Sappho's leap throughout Britain. Addison uses the French philosopher Pierre Bayle as his authority for saying that the place of Leucas was called “Lovers-Leap” since despairing lovers leaped from there for “the Cure” to stop the pains of lost love, and that Sappho was one of the leapers. Addison as well as Bayle also remarks that Sappho did not commit suicide but took a dangerous leap fearlessly with the expectation of survival. As time went by, ideas about Sappho's leap had changed. Whereas John Addison, an English translator of Sappho's poetry in 1835, followed the view of Joseph Addison that Sappho was heterosexual and leaped to cure her heartbreak, William King added notes to his 1736 edition of *The Toast* that Sappho was “a famous Tribade,” which tarnished her reputation as the “Tenth Muse,” and that as a punishment for her homosexuality, she “killed herself at last for the Love of a Man.” As far as I know, King's text was the earliest that presumed Sappho's leap to be for the sake of suicide.

In late eighteenth century, English translators of Sappho also depicted her leap as suicide. But unlike King, they admired the heterosexual Sappho's “masculine” ability in composing poetry and her “masculine” suicide leap. In 1768, for instance, E. B. Greene distinguished clearly between other lovesick women who “peaceably” dispatched themselves “by the noose, or the river” (133) and the masculine Sappho who killed herself by leaping from a much higher precipice into the sea.

In the 1780s and 1790s, Sappho's suicide leap became a popular subject for literary works and paintings. This was probably influenced by the case of Thomas Chatterton's killing himself in 1770 and Goethe's popular novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774; first English trans. 1779). Although the attitude to suicide changed greatly from severe punishment to compassion in the eighteenth century, the debate on suicide was not monolithic. The translator of Goethe's novel (*Werter and Charlotte*, 1786), for instance, admired the similar sensibility of Chatterton and Werther: their feelings were “too fine to support the load of accumulated distress.” On the other hand, Charles Moore in *A Full Enquiry into the Subject of Suicide* (1790) criticized Werther's “voluntarily” suicide for “an ungoverned passion,” to distinguish it from Chatterton's “involuntarily” suicide for pecuniary difficulties. Sappho's suicide leap was in relation to two aspects of affliction of an unrequited lover and a poetic genius. But at the time when there

were contrary reactions to suicide for love (admiration for “too fine” a sensibility and accusation against “an ungoverned passion”), it is little wonder that Sappho's leap took on various aspects. The French Abbé Barthélmy in *Travels of Anacharsis* (1788; first English trans. 1791-92) reestimated Sappho as a great poet of sensibility, and presented her leap as a suicide for breaking away from cold Phaon on her own initiative. Drawing on Barthélmy, Mary Robinson went further in *Sappho and Phaon* (1796) to proclaim Sappho as the representative of all women poets in later ages. Robinson's Sappho repeatedly laments the death of “Sappho” (=her poetic self) while “T” (=her woman self) is held captive by love to Phaon, so that she decides to kill her woman self by bravely leaping at Leucas in order to be revived as the great “Sappho” in the future. Unlike Robinson, Robert Southey in “Sappho” (1797) portrays Sappho as still being attached to Phaon just before leaping. Southey's Sappho dies only to make Phaon regret what he has done, and to urge him to kill himself to join her in death. On the other hand, the Italian Alessandro Verri in *The Adventures of Sappho* (1782; first English trans. 1789) depicts a Sappho who is fearful of leaping because of “the timidity natural to the sex.” Verri's Sappho is consequently killed and thrown down by Venus. The French Étienne François de Lantier in *The Travels of Antenor in Greece and Asia* (1797; first English trans. 1799) also presents the fearful-leaping Sappho, and turns her leaping moment into a sublime sight that the viewers regard “with sympathetic horror.” Such a horrid, sublime scene was also the subject of paintings such as Cipriani's “Sappho Throwing Herself from the Rock” (1782).

As we moved into the nineteenth century, Lord Byron depicted Sappho as “the poet” (in the sense of a representative of poets, male or female) as well as “the lover” (in the sense of a representative of lovers, male or female). In *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (II. 39-41), Byron intentionally disregards both the name and sex of Phaon, Sappho's legendary love, to generalize her passion. While Byron resisted the current trend of heterosexualizing Sappho, women poets of the 1820s and 1830s, such as Landon and Felicia Hemans, were more interested in heterosexual Sappho singing just before her fatal leap. Their Sappho is like Corinne, Madame de Staël's heroine in a most popular novel *Corinne ou L'Italie* (1807), who sang her last song before death. Both Landon and Hemans depict their Sappho as an exemplar of a woman of genius who considers love more important than fame. However, unlike Hemans or any other writer in any time, Landon goes further to rewrite the traditional story of Sappho.

(2) "Sappho," Poetic Sketches. Second Series—Sketch the First (*Literary Gazette* 276[May 1822]: 282)

...She was one
Whose lyre the spirit of sweet song had hung
With myrtle and with laurel; on whose head
Genius had shed his starry glories...
"...transcripts of woman's loving heart
And woman's disappointment...."

1 She leant upon her harp, and thousands looked
On her in love and wonder—thousands knelt
And worshipp'd in her presence—burning tears,
And words that died in utterance, and a pause
Of breathless, agitated eagerness,
First gave the full heart's homage: then came forth
A shout that rose to heaven, and the hills,
The distant valleys, all rang with the name
of the Æolian SAPPHO—every heart
10 Found in itself some echo to her song.
Low notes of love—hopes beautiful and fresh,
And some gone by for ever—glorious dreams,
High aspirations, those thrice gentle thoughts
That dwell upon the absent and the dead,
Were breathing in her music—and these are
Chords every bosom vibrates to. But she
Upon whose brow the laurel crown is placed,
Her colour's varying with deep emotion—
There is a softer blush than conscious pride
20 Upon her cheek, and in that tremulous smile
Is all a woman's timid tenderness:
Her eye is on a Youth, and other days
And young warm feelings have rushed on her soul
With all their former influence,—thoughts that slept
Cold, calm as death, have wakened to new life—
Whole years' existence have passed in that glance...
She had once lived in very early days:
That was a thing gone by: one had called forth
The music of her soul: he loved her too,
30 But not as she did—she was unto him
As a young bird, whose early flight he trained,
Whose first wild songs were sweet, for he had taught
Those songs—but she looked up to him with all
Youth's deep and passionate idolatry:
Love was her heart's sole universe—he was

To her, Hope, Genius, Energy, the God
Her inmost spirit worshipped—in whose smile
Was all e'en minstrel pride held precious; praise
Was prized but as the echo of his own.
40 But other times and other feelings came:
Hope is love's element, and love with her
Sickened of its own vanity.... She lived
Mid bright realities and brighter dreams,
Those strange but exquisite imaginings
That tinge with such sweet colours minstrel thoughts;
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.
Her first love never wholly lost its power,
50 But, like rich incense shed, although no trace
Was of its visible presence, yet its sweetness
Mingled with every feeling, and it gave
That soft and melancholy tenderness
Which was the magic of her song... That Youth
Who knelt before her was so like the shape
That haunted her spring dreams—the same dark eyes,
Whose light had once been as the light of heaven! —
Others breathed winning flatteries—she turned
A careless hearing—but when PHAON spoke,
60 Her heart beat quicker, and the crimson light
Upon her cheek gave a most tender answer...
She loved with all the ardour of a heart
Which loves but in itself: her life had passed
Amid the grand creations of the thought:
Love was to her a vision—it was now
Heightened into devotion... But a soul
So gifted and so passionate as her's
Will seek companionship in vain, and find
Its feelings solitary.... PHAON soon
70 Forget the fondness of his Lesbian maid;
And SAPPHO knew that talents, riches, fame,
May not soothe slighted love, ---
---There is a dark rock looks on the blue sea;
'Twas there love's last song echoed—there She sleeps,
Whose lyre was crowned with laurel, and whose name
Will be remembered long as Love or Song
Are sacred—the devoted SAPPHO!

(3) “Sappho’s Song” (*The Improvisatrice* [5th ed.1825],10-11)

Farewell, my lute!—and would that I
Had never waked thy burning chords!
Poison has been upon thy sigh,
And fever has breathed in thy words.

Yet wherefore, wherefore should I blame
Thy power, thy spell, my gentlest lute!
I should have been the wretch I am,
Had every cord of thine been mute.

It was my evil star above,
Not my sweet lute, that wrought me wrong;
It was not song that taught me love,
But it was love that taught me song.

If song be past, and hope undone,
And pulse, and head, and heart, are flame;
It is thy work, thou faithless one!
But, no!—I will not name thy name!

Sun-god! Lute, wreath are vowed to thee!
Long be their light upon my grave—
My glorious grave—yon deep blue sea:
I shall sleep calm beneath its wave!

(4) *The Improvisatrice* (5th ed., 1825), 64-65

I loved him as young Genius loves,
When its own wild and radiant heaven
Of starry thought burns with the light,
The love, the life, by passion given.
I loves him, too, as woman loves—
Reckless of sorrow, sin, or scorn:

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