

SAPPHIC SHARDS:
RECONSTRUCTING THE BROKEN FEMALE IDENTITY IN
NEW WOMAN FICTION THROUGH SAPPHO

by

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CH. 1 SAPPHO AND HER [NEW] GIRLS: SAPPHIC INFLUENCE ON THE NEW WOMAN

...no history of Sappho can be progressist. There is no straightforward notion of one Sappho here, leading neatly into another and so on through time. Sappho is never handed down in quite that way. Rather, she is handled here in one way. Then that version disappears, goes underground, becomes unfashionable. Other Sapphos take over – contradictions, or opposites, or reactions – but they do not necessarily have a continuous life either.

Margaret Reynolds, *The Sappho History*

Bound by a long history of controversial beliefs about her life and work, Sappho's position in the literary world has been a complicated one. Deemed a tenth Muse by Plato and considered the "Poetess" counterpart to Homer as "Poet," Sappho's name has weathered the 2600 years since she lived and wrote on the Greek island of Lesbos (Wharton 27). Prior to the nineteenth century revival of the famous Greek poet, much of what people understood about Sappho was limited, relying mostly on Ovid's "Sappho to Phaon," wherein Sappho's fate and subsequent suicide is sealed by her love for Phaon. It was during the nineteenth century that scholars and historians painstakingly strung together collections of Sappho's work from the short, transcribed fragments they were able to recover. While an incomplete body of work might otherwise be regarded as a limitation, Sappho's transcendental presence in writing and references across cultures shows that limited text has in no way diminished her influence, "flourishing even in periods when there was almost no knowledge of [her poetry]" (Williamson 4). In actuality, it seems that Sappho's fragmented poems have made her that much more infamous. Margaret Reynolds notes that "the romance of Sappho's fragments has been a part of her attraction from the earliest times" (15). Reynolds explains that it is precisely

because Sappho's work exists in fragments that Sappho is regarded, "not [as] a person" or an "oeuvre," but as a "space...for joining up the dots [and] filling in the blanks" to make "something precious out of nothing." In other words, Sappho's fragmentation is a fundamental part of her significance in literature. The "blanks" in her body of work make it a less restrictive "space" for interpretation because fragmented parts can be reconfigured or reimagined. It is for this reason that Sappho has embodied so many different versions of womanhood—from a highly regarded feminist figure to a sexually promiscuous seductress. Her controversial position as a powerful, intelligent, sexual woman has made her a pawn in disputes about a woman's place in the world for centuries.

While Sappho has certainly been used to challenge conservative notions about women, she has also been used in arguments aimed at demeaning them. Much like other influential women in history, Sappho's character and work has been repeatedly criticized and distorted by men and women that favor patriarchal structures. In her book, *The Sappho History*, Reynolds identifies numerous misrepresentations of Sappho's poetry by looking at popular translations of her work. In one particularly telling illustration, Reynolds explains that, "from Catullus on, Sappho's Fragment 31 has been imitated by male poets and revised to make the speaker of the poem male" (15). She points out that the "erasure of the feminine signature turns the poem into the conventional love triangle where two men compete for the attention of one woman," while the authentic translation is about love between two women. In *Sappho's Immortal Daughters*, Margaret Williamson explores a similar issue by comparing the different biographical accounts of Sappho and critiquing the ones that lack both evidence and credibility. For example, she

points out that Sappho's "supposed husband, not mentioned in her poetry, has a name that looks decidedly suspicious" (2). In a Byzantine encyclopedia, the entry on Sappho alleges that she had a husband, "'Cercylas from the island of Andros,' translatable as 'Prick from the Isle of Man.'" Williamson explains that this name is likely "an obscene pun dreamed up by one of the Athenian comic playwrights who... made Sappho the subject of some of their bawdy and outrageous inventions." Criticisms and satires like these date back to as early as two hundred years after her death. The heterosexualization of her voice and life compromises the integrity of Sappho's writing and alters the impact of her work. The aforementioned examples are just a couple of the ways in which Sappho has been manipulated to reinforce androcentrism.

During the 1800s, when Sappho's poetry and history was reexamined, new interpretations and translations of her work were published—the most groundbreaking being Henry Thornton Wharton's book, *Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation*, published in 1885. Wharton's work was the most extensive collection of English translations and biographical information on Sappho printed up to that point. He begins his volume by reviewing the literature already published on Sappho, remarking that the "previous complete editions of her works have been written solely by scholars for scholars" (Wharton xi). Prior to the twentieth century, men largely outnumbered women in the field of literary scholarship, so it is safe to assume that the "previous complete editions of [Sappho's] works" were not just written by scholars for scholars, but by *male* scholars for other *male* scholars. Wharton sought to expose Sappho to "those who have neither leisure nor power to read her in the tongue in which she wrote," including women (xi). His publication, then, becomes a source of power for marginalized groups that had

long been denied access to the varied biographical accounts of Sappho and translations of her work.

For Victorian women, two aspects of Wharton's text made it particularly influential. First, he raises doubts about the integrity of Ovid's "Sappho to Phaon," particularly since "no surviving poem mentions Phaon" (Williamson 9). Ovid's portrayal of Sappho's death as a result of her unrequited love for a man reinforces traditional, patriarchal ideas and reduces her to a character in a love story. Wharton asserts that "the story of Sappho's love for Phaon, and her leap from the Leucadian rock... does not seem to rest on any firm historical basis" (13). Wharton discusses this image of Sappho in detail, backing his suspicions by cross-examining evidence from various scholars and historians. To reimagine Sappho's existence without Phaon disentangles their fates and contests the idea that he was involved with her at all. Additionally, according to Susan Bernstein, "Wharton's translation restored for the first time in English the original feminine pronouns as the object of Sappho's love" (Bernstein 18). By placing emphasis on Sappho's relationship with women over men, Wharton's text posed a threat to patriarchal structures: if Sappho's power and success had nothing to do with men, couldn't Victorian women somehow emulate her example?

Paired with a rising number of female authors, Wharton's work on Sappho would lay the groundwork for the "New Woman" era of Victorian literature. Coined in 1894 by author Sarah Grand, the term "New Woman" is often regarded as the Victorian version of a feminist, though the two terms are not necessarily interchangeable. I would argue that the relationship between the two is better conceptualized as roots to a stem: New Women planted the seed and got their hands dirty so that future waves of feminism could flourish.

In their own time, the determinate identities that Victorian culture imposed on women reduced complexity and limited movement between conventional spheres—the domestic, female sphere and the public, male sphere. According to Carolyn Christensen Nelson, the New Woman argued that “the separate spheres ideology was a construct of society and culture rather than a biological mandate” (ix). While modern feminism accounts for systemic oppression and repressive social constructs, feminist philosophies in the late nineteenth century were still in the early stages of development. New Women did share “a rejection of the culturally defined feminine role,” desiring more opportunities, both economically and academically (x). However, New Women also embraced philosophies that would be deemed regressive by modern standards. For example, most of them did not celebrate women’s sexuality, believing instead in sexual “purity” for *both* men and women. Unlike contemporary feminism, being a New Woman did not require the rejection of conservative values or beliefs. Many women embraced both. For this reason, New Woman authors had to find ways to reconstruct the identities of their female characters in a way that gave them access to traditionally masculine spheres while still adhering to core Victorian principles. This meant that a Victorian woman’s actions and values were often in conflict with one another, resulting in fragmented identities.

As with Sappho, fragmentation was a pivotal part of Victorian women’s development because breaking the female identity into parts was precisely what gave them agency to reconstruct that identity. Reconstruction of the female identity often disrupted or, more radically, inverted gender roles, enabling Victorian women to move between private and public spheres. Marked by strong female characters, intimate female relationships, and discussions of society and sexuality, New Woman fiction challenged

gender norms, catalyzing a wave of feminist efforts to liberate themselves from longstanding sexist constraints. For conservative men and women, Sappho was ominous, androgynous, and sexually promiscuous— notions that have been similarly invoked in literature that criticizes New Women. This parallel between Sappho and the New Woman extends beyond criticism, though. For creative women (and men), Sappho “becomes a proper name for the Poetess,” and given her prestigious position in the literary world, she also becomes an essential influence in women’s writing (Prins 17).

It is the culmination of this early research that sparked my interest in studying “Sapphic” as a theoretical concept. Most of the scholarship written about Sappho has traditionally focused on poets and poetry as opposed to fiction—from Yopie Prins’s *Victorian Sappho* to Margaret Reynolds’s *The Sappho History*—and leading research can be broken into roughly three bodies of scholarship: Sappho as Poetess, Sappho as immoral seductress, and Sappho as lesbian. Scholarship that invokes Sappho as Poetess emphasizes the more overt aspects of her work, like poetic form, style, and content. I will not be relying on this version of Sappho for the purposes of my study. However, a foundational understanding of Sappho as seductress and Sappho as lesbian is crucial. The image of Sappho as an immoral seductress almost exclusively appears in men’s writing. Margaret Reynolds discusses male appropriation of Sappho by deconstructing the female characters in their work. She explains that the male appropriation of Sappho’s identity often “does away with the feminine altogether,” an idea that is apparent in the various deceptive translations heterosexualizing Sappho’s fragments (168). Male authors also appropriate Sappho’s “fragmentation” by projecting it onto the female body. Once fragmented, the female body can be “worked upon in discrete sections to bring about

pleasure or pain,” creating a dichotomy in which there is “one party in charge,” the man, “while the other suffers,” the woman (165). As a result, Reynolds argues, it has become “the practice of the male artist... to examine the displayed body of his subject-beloved in pieces, dissecting and anatomizing her parts,” reducing the woman to “a collection of truncated limbs and fetishized body sites” (165). Furthermore, their female characters frequently emulate “degenerate, corrupt” versions of Sappho that “enact on others the dismembering done to [them],” thus demonizing the character of both Sappho and the women that represent her (205). It is through these literary tropes and techniques that male authors attempt to manipulate Sappho’s image to reinforce a patriarchal model. The remaining body of scholarship on Sappho explores the relationship between Sappho, female sexuality, and homoeroticism. Margaret Williamson explains that Sappho’s “poetry is one of the few sources of information that exist about love between women in the ancient world,” making Sappho a “figurehead for many lesbian women” (90). Even the term “lesbian” is a nod to Sappho, who, as I mentioned earlier, is from the island of Lesbos. Within this growing body of Sapphic scholarship, what has yet to be discussed in depth is her more abstract influence on female identity and behavior in women’s fiction, beyond the scope of sexuality and poetry. My intention is not to diminish or dismiss the aforementioned scholarship; these concepts have invaluable informed and strengthened both feminist and queer theories in literature. By exploring Sappho’s literary and psychological influence in women’s fiction, I wish to develop an *additional* model for Sapphic readings, existing alongside other renderings.

As noted earlier, Reynolds asserts that Sappho can be conceptualized as a “space” for “filling in the blanks,” much like a theory is “a system of ideas intended to explain

something” (“Theory”). In other words, the same way a theory accounts for a phenomenon that would otherwise be unexplained or misunderstood, I contend that Sappho can be used to explain complex *literary* phenomena. Using a combination of feminist, queer, and psychoanalytic theories in literature, I have developed a Sapphic model that accounts for the complicated behaviors, contradictions, and representations of the female characters in New Woman fiction. In practice, this model manifests in two distinct ways: the fragmentation of the female identity and the depiction of intimate relationships between women. The fragmentation of the female identity breaks the female characters into parts, and their intimate relationships with one another reconstruct them. It is through the exploration of these Sapphic concepts that the female characters in New Woman literature are able to break free from gender constraints, thus establishing fiction as a mode for destabilizing patriarchal structures and communicating feminist ideology.

My research leans heavily on Susan Lanser’s 2014 publication, *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic*. Lanser proposes “a way of reading that knits individual writings both to discursive structures and, more speculatively, to social phenomena” (20). She explains that she is “not looking *for* what is Sapphic so much as looking *within* the Sapphic for connections to other formations” (21). I will be modeling my analysis after hers in these respects by first identifying the Sapphic language, themes, tropes, and practices in New Woman fiction; then I will identify connections between these ideas and late Victorian social phenomena. The remaining two sections in this chapter will outline my Sapphic model, detailing the theoretical framework I am using. I will demonstrate the application of this model in chapters 2 and 3 through the analysis of female characters and relationships in Amy Levy’s *Romance of a Shop* and Ella

Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*. Chapter 4 will focus on public reactions to the Sapphic, wherein satirists and journalists alike assassinate Sappho's character in a last-ditch effort to re-stabilize their androcentric hierarchy.

Fragmentation of the Female Identity

The first Sapphic concept that I will use in my literary model is the idea of "fragmentation." Sappho's fragmentation is an essential part of her cultural influence, particularly for Victorian women. Her "brokenness" destabilizes traditional gender constructs, and it is through the "breaks" and "gaps in [Sappho's] continuity" that she becomes a literary space for Victorian women to pour into ("broken"). While New Women have often been criticized as representing regressive or contradictory ideas about womanhood, according to Yopie Prins, "what is most Victorian about the... Sappho revival is, in fact, the contradictory features of this feminine figure" (7). For this reason, I argue that Sappho's "brokenness" can be used to explain the fragmented identities of the female characters in New Woman fiction. As with Sappho, it is the "breaks" and "gaps" in the fragmented identities of the female characters that enables them to move between male and female spheres, which, in turn, establishes fiction as a mode for subverting patriarchal ideology.

Sappho's fragmentation has long been appropriated by men to reinforce a gender hierarchy. Because she could be wielded to challenge gender norms, men sought to reduce Sappho's influence by demonizing both her and the female characters modeled after her. Thus, the degenerate "Sapphos" in men's fiction remained broken, "a collection of truncated limbs and fetishized body sites" (Reynolds 165). Until 1885, most Victorian women were limited to these versions of Sappho. Once published, Wharton's book gave

female authors the opportunity to reappropriate Sappho's fragmentation from men.

Margaret Reynolds explains that "Sappho herself was the first to break her body into pieces, even if she said that it was love, sexual desire, *eros* that was doing it to her" 162.

The fragmentation of Sappho's body can be seen in Fragment 31:

no: tongue breaks and thin

fire is racing under skin

and in eyes no sight and drumming

fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking

grips me all, greener than grass

I am and dead—or almost

I seem to me. (Sappho lines 9-16)

In this section of the poem, the "speaker dissects her body to produce a list of parts": tongue, skin, eyes, and ears (Reynolds 163). What is interesting is that the "pains" associated with these parts are "typically evoked in describing an embattled warrior rather than a lovesick woman." In taking "her bodily self apart," Sappho "replicates the taking apart of her mind, the layering of experiences, past and present, that complicate and enrich her representations" of both feminine and masculine qualities (2). By the end of the poem, her self-fragmentation does not lead to death, but leaves her in a transitional state of reflection: "I am and dead—or almost / I seem to me." It is when she breaks herself into parts that her identity becomes fluid and androgynous, which, in turn allows her to *recognize* herself as fragmented.

According to Carl Jung, the “androgynous represents the resolution of the anxieties and tensions of sexual difference in favour of complementarity” (“androgyny”). By definition, complementarity is a “situation in which two or more different things improve or emphasize each other’s qualities” (“complementarity”). This suggests that Sappho’s *self*-fragmentation results in a balance between masculinity and femininity that improves her character. For men, it is this image of the androgynous that threatens patriarchal structures because it challenges the notion that masculinity and femininity should remain in separate spheres. In order to maintain a hierarchical dichotomy between the sexes, the divide between masculine and feminine has to be clearly defined. This is why male appropriation of Sapphic fragmentation is aimed at distorting her androgynous features and breaking her apart, resulting in a destructive female character that deepens rather than resolves tensions of sexual difference. Sappho’s “associative description of desire and bodily debilitation” is so embedded in Western culture “that it is hard now to recognize the shock and the danger which is in an alliance between pain and desire unless it is construed as a perversion” (Reynolds 163). Male appropriation of Sappho’s fragmentation *is* a “perversion” of the “alliance between pain and desire.” However, this is not something Victorian women would necessarily have recognized in their own time, and it is something they would eventually struggle against in much of their literature.

The fragmentation of Sappho in men’s literature is a result of the same fears and restrictions imposed on Victorian women in society. It is through this parallel that I draw a connection between Sappho’s fragmentation and the fragmentation of New Woman characters in women’s fiction. This line of reasoning suggests two things: first, that New Woman characters, like Sappho, will remain fragmented under male manipulation; and

second, that New Woman characters, like Sappho, can break free from this manipulation through self-fragmentation. To form my argument, I will rely loosely on Jacques Lacan's concept of "fragmentation" and the "mirror-self." I argue that the subordination of women, either in childhood by the father or in marriage by the husband, obscures their self-identity, thus trapping them in the male-constructed "fragmentation" phase of Lacan's concept of the self. Lacanian fragmentation points "to the anatomical incompleteness characterizing... specific prematurity at birth" that is resolved when the infant recognizes itself in the "mirror" (Muller 234). However, the "patriarchal constrictions" imposed on Victorian women, both socially and politically, inhibit their ability to recognize the "mirror-self" because they do not see themselves as autonomous—as having individual identities separate from men. The misuse of Sapphic fragmentation in men's writing perpetuates this issue and leaves the female "body in bits and pieces" so that it cannot be reconciled, which results in psychological suffering, anxiety, and helplessness in women (Muller 235). This means that bodily fragmentation of women in men's writing manifests as psychological fragmentation in women's writing. Each fragment forms an "isolated or incomplete part of" of a woman's psyche, hindering her ability to make the meaningful connections necessary to recognize the oppressive nature of her position in society ("fragment"). It is only when the female character successfully invokes *self*-fragmentation that she can *begin* to move out of this stage of development and recognize the "mirror-self." The breaking apart of the self, unlike imposed fragmentation, demands that women recognize that there is an autonomous self to break.

In an article published in *Theory & Psychology* in 2010, Mariann Märtsin continues the exploration of the fragmented self by introducing the “notion of rupture to [the] conceptualization of identity” (440). He asserts that a “rupture occurs when we sense that something in our being no longer flows spontaneously” (441). In Victorian culture, a woman’s “being” is defined by men, so the spontaneous “flow” of her being is subjective, controlled by patriarchal ideas about who she should be and how she should act. A rupture for a Victorian woman, then, is an incident that disrupts the fragmented, male-constructed rendering of who she is. It is “in the moments of rupture [that] our united and backgrounded sense of being becomes foregrounded and multiple,” provoking a period of self-reflection (Märtsin 441). As with Sappho, since a Victorian woman’s sense of being is already fragmented, this period of self-reflection is characterized by recognizing her own fragmentation. In “Resilience: A Commentary on Breaking the Cycle,” author Leslie Rubin explains that one of the most vital requisites “for an individual to break out of... a cycle” is to first “become aware of and examine the predicament” (248). In other words, before a Victorian woman can reappropriate fragmentation, she must first understand fragmentation as a “predicament” in Victorian culture. The “backgrounded sense of being” in a Victorian woman is the concept of her “self” separate from men, which lies dormant, eroded away through socialization. If the “backgrounded sense of being” comes to the foreground in a moment of rupture, then a Victorian woman’s identity is suddenly the culmination of many contradictory fragmented parts, inciting the conflicting ideas about womanhood that often appear in New Woman fiction. While these contradictions have often been used to criticize the New Woman, I argue that these internal conflicts serve as milestones, moments of

rupture that demonstrate her attempt to reconcile her two identities: the one that she *is* and the one that she's been conditioned to be. These small ruptures are what form the self-fragmentation process for female characters in New Woman fiction because each rupture shifts more of the "backgrounded sense of being" to the foreground, inspiring moments of reflection that arouse doubt about their position in the feminine sphere.

Self-fragmentation allows female characters in New Woman fiction to break away from restrictive social structures built by their male counterparts, giving them agency to move between masculine and feminine spheres. Like Sappho, the New Woman character becomes the androgyne, favoring complementarity between the sexes and blurring gender lines. In practice, the smaller ruptures in the self-fragmentation process lead to internal conflicts that enable female characters to recognize their fragmentation and, subsequently, their oppression. In the midst of these smaller ruptures, there is usually a climactic break that forces the female character out of her designated sphere. It is only after this point that self-fragmentation transcends reflection and changes the female character, gradually making her more androgynous and eventually inspiring her to reject obstructive, heteronormative customs. These behaviors and occurrences are fundamental catalysts for the self-fragmentation process, which, in turn, subverts androcentric ideas about womanhood and leads to the second part of my Sapphic model: the development of intimate relationships between women.

Intimacy Between Women

Sapphic self-fragmentation through rupture is vital for two reasons: it gives female characters the opportunity to recognize and interrogate their position in Victorian culture; and it allows them to begin recovering the parts of their identities previously suppressed through social conditioning. However, self-fragmentation alone does not lead to the reconstruction or unification of the female identity—it merely starts the process by inciting self-reflection during “periods of transition” (Märtsin 441). Märtsin explains that “the transition period can... be conceived as a period of active dialogical engagements with oneself and others,” meaning that an effective transition cannot rely solely on internal reflection; it must also be external (442). Working through a rupture requires what he refers to as, “identity-dialogues,” or “sites of gathering up different facets of personal sense and collective meanings” through reflective dialogue with others. Because men needed women to be fragmented to maintain the separation of spheres, identity-dialogues with men would simply reinforce fragmentation. It is through identity-dialogues with other women that the female characters in New Woman fiction could begin to construct “a sense of identity, which links [their] past, present, and future together in a meaningful way” (445). This leads to the second Sapphic concept I will use to establish my literary model: intimacy between women. As in Sappho’s fragments, the intimate relationships between women in New Woman fiction likewise challenge restrictive gender norms. As noted earlier, Wharton’s publication of Sapphic translations reinstated her authentic female voice and pronouns, exposing the homoerotic nature of Sappho’s writing to Victorian women. For example, in Fragment 31, the male character is

simply included as a device to express the speaker's affection for the female character; he is a bridge between Sappho and the woman she loves:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close

to your sweet speaking (Sappho lines 1-4)

The male character is “equal to [the] gods” not because Sappho desires him, but because of his proximity to the actual subject of her desire: the woman across from him. It is also important to note that the only subject in the poem with a voice is the woman speaking sweetly, whereas the man silently “sits and listens.” Furthermore, because Sappho was part of a tradition of lyric poetry, it is safe to assume that this particular poem would have been “performed” by her. Reynolds explains that “the singing... would have been shared between Sappho’s girls, the voice passing from one to another” (4). The authentic “Sapphic voice,” then, is a collective female voice, a collective consciousness strung together by the women who carry her voice down to us through history. The availability of Sappho’s fragments to Victorian women meant that they, too, could carry on the Sapphic tradition in the vessel it was originally intended for: a woman. These observations suggest that Sappho “bypass[ed] male literary authority” entirely by constructing a narrative wherein the spectators, speakers, and subjects are all female (DeJean 36). With the publication of his book, Wharton redefined “Sapphic” as “literature written by women for other women.” Sappho became a literary space where “males are relegated to a peripheral... role.” A space devoid of the male gaze, opting

instead for a Sapphic one; a space where the men are silenced and the women are central, and the resulting dialogue rejects male influence altogether.

Similarly, in feminist scholarship, one motif that repeatedly emerges is the notion that patriarchal structures are maintained only as long as men are able to keep women separated. When women interact in spaces that exclude men, they are able to develop perspectives and make judgments about the world without (or at least with minimal) male influence. In her book, Susan Lanser explains that “the homoeroticism inscribed in women’s writings reappropriates the body from its legal and social status by (re)positioning the self within the one social relationship that is structurally outside male control” (128). Up until the late nineteenth century, married women in England did not have individual rights to property or money. A woman’s identity was subsumed by her husband upon marriage; her body shifted from property of the father to property of the husband. Lanser asserts that relationships between women challenge patriarchal structures because they remove men (husbands and fathers) from the equation. Without a man to absorb her identity, a woman can “reappropriate” her body. She can “reclaim [it]... for [her] own use” (“reappropriate”). While Lanser focuses on homoerotic relationships between women to demonstrate this idea, I argue that Sapphic “(re)positioning” is not restricted to sexual relationships. Lanser’s theory can also be observed in familial female relationships, like sisters, or intimate friendships between women—a hypothesis I will explore further in chapters 2 and 3. My use of “Sapphic,” then, is not exclusive to homoerotic relationships between women. I will be using Sapphic to describe intimate relationships between women that do not necessarily involve anything sexual. The intimacy I explore, like many physically intimate relationships, is

defined by mutual trust, vulnerability, open dialogue, and interdependence. By engaging in Sapphic relationships with other women, female characters in New Woman fiction can reconsider their identities and positions without male input, and, in turn, can begin to mend their fragmented identities.

Through a “collective notion of poetry,” Sappho is able to “assert her own identity within the poem” (Reynolds 4). It enables her to create a “persona other than herself who can then look at her, recognize her, name her,” so that her writing functions as a sort of mirror. If the intimate relationships between women in New Woman fiction are fortified by the Sapphic notion of a collective female identity, then so, too, is their function as a mirror. Once self-fragmentation enables the female protagonist to separate her identity from men, her relationships with other women allow her to observe the “mirror-self,” either literally, in a scene with a mirror, or figuratively in another woman. According to Lacanians, the mirror form can be understood as the inverse of fragmentation because it is a “unifying form” (Muller 237). It creates a bridge between the fragmented body and the desire for control over the body, establishing a sense of unity between the body and the self and, therefore, a sense of bodily autonomy. In practice, the intimate relationships between women invert the male gaze and establish gynocentric lines of dialogue, which, in turn, allow them to reappropriate both the feminine voice and the female identity.

While the appropriation of Sappho’s identity in men’s writing “does away with the feminine altogether,” the reappropriation of Sappho’s identity in women’s writing vitalizes the feminine. In New Woman fiction, the deconstruction of the self melds masculine and feminine spheres by subverting androcentric fragmentation, and intimate female relationships reconstruct the Victorian female identity, thus challenging

conservative ideas about a woman's place in the world. It is through these two Sapphic concepts that New Woman novelists are able to reclaim agency for their female characters. To demonstrate this Sapphic model in New Woman literature, I will first explain how self-fragmentation allows female protagonists to break free from patriarchal structures. Then I will explain how Sapphic relationships with other female characters enable the protagonists to begin the mending process, eventually allowing them to leave fragmentation and enter the mirror phase, thus creating a self that is *both* Sapphic and whole. It is through this Sapphic model that New Woman fiction becomes a mode for destabilizing patriarchal structures and communicating feminist ideology.

2. FORCED VICTORIAN PLANTS: UPROOTING MARY ERLE

She is—and she feels it instinctively—a thing apart, a kind of forced plant, a product of civilisation... It is the woman's first taste of power.

Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*

Although Ella Hepworth Dixon wrote a number of short stories, *The Story of a Modern Woman* is her only novel. Considered a New Woman novel, this narrative follows protagonist Mary Erle as she struggles against the grain of a society intent on breaking her. Following the death of her father, Mary is forced out of her home and into the working world, a notion that is likewise invoked to varying degrees in other New Woman novels. Issues with gender, oppression, class, and relationships are explored throughout the book, but there are two relationships in particular that define it: Mary's relationships with Vincent and her relationship with Alison, both of which end in tragedy. Mary's relationship with Vincent is complicated and, in some ways, volatile. Editor Steve Farmer contends that Vincent "severely limits Mary's potential" (28). Though Mary's relationship with Vincent certainly leads to heartbreak, it also tests her resilience and inspires some of the novel's most crucial developmental plot points. Mary's relationship with Alison is a different story, "bound to one another as sisters in their struggle to survive" (Farmer 31). Alison is driven, bright, and defiant. In many ways, she personifies the New Woman because she values other women and challenges oppressive cultural norms. The other notable character I will be examining is a woman that we meet only when she is ill and dying, patient Number Twenty-Seven. She was "seduced and then deserted by [Dr.] Dunlop Strange," Alison's fiancé, and her attempted suicide leads to her eventual death. Dixon's story is dark, and many of the characters' lives end in tragedy,

but it is a true testament to the struggles of women in a world that prefers them silent, helpless, and submissive. To demonstrate my Sapphic model, I will focus on Mary, Alison, and Number Twenty-Seven.

The Sapphic notion of self-fragmentation is fulfilled by the protagonist, Mary Erle, while androcentric fragmentation is epitomized in Number Twenty-Seven, a woman whose entire identity is knotted into and dependent on a man. As noted earlier, male-appropriated fragmentation creates a dichotomy in which “one party [is] in charge,” men, “while the other suffers,” women. It is only through multiple ruptures of her identity that Mary begins to recognize and reject the oppressive nature of her position in society. Conversely, Number Twenty-Seven never recognizes or contests her position in society, leaving her broken and destructive. The Sapphic relationship between Mary and Alison Ives is what enables Mary to work through her identity ruptures, facilitating the reconstruction of her identity and completing my Sapphic model. I will analyze Mary’s character first, ultimately examining the ruptures that construct her self-fragmentation. Her early ruptures reach their peak with the death of Mary’s father, an incident that forces her out of the private, feminine sphere and into the public, masculine one.

Mary is initially characterized by androgynous qualities in early childhood, preferring “the violent delights of miniature guns” to the “foolish, over-dressed, uninteresting tribe” of dolls (Dixon 51). However, she is swiftly socialized into her designated feminine sphere. This is indicated explicitly when Mary is just ten years old and “big, tall men... would bend down and ask her gravely if she would be their little wife” (53). Reflecting on this experience, Mary anchors the image of a bride to that of her dead mother, conceding that a bride is “a person... as imposing as that angel which nurse

said her mother had become.” The use of words like “gravely” paired with the image of her dead mother as an “imposing” angel insinuate that marriage—for a bride—is a ritual as formidable and inescapable as death. Later on in the passage, Mary considers whether she would prefer to be a bride or an angel, eventually deciding “that matters might be compromised, and that she could be a wife and have a halo too.” While the use of “compromise” might initially be construed to signify feelings of resolve or mutual cooperation, the image of a wife with a halo rebukes this notion. The image of an angelic Victorian bride was crafted and popularized by Coventry Patmore in his narrative poem, “The Angel in the House.” Published just forty years before Dixon’s novel, it is an image that New Woman writers would have known well. Patmore’s poem suggests that the ideal Victorian woman, dubbed the “angel in the house,” is “a figure needing to be protected and enshrined within the domestic sphere,” a perception that is both “confining and debilitating, as Virginia Woolf and a series of subsequent critics have argued” (Kao 118). The ideal Victorian woman is devoted, quiet, submissive and built out of patriarchal ideologies designed to reinforce the separation of masculine and feminine spheres. The parallel made between the “angel in the house” and a ten-year-old Mary accentuates tensions of sexual difference, implying that, even in childhood, she is already confined to the domestic sphere by this repressive, “imposing” image of Victorian womanhood—she just doesn’t realize it yet.

The first significant rupture in Mary’s life that breaches the fragmented, male-constructed identity imposed on her occurs after she attends her first ball at eighteen. The scene opens with an image of an eighteen-year-old girl, “fluffy hair,” “white shoulders,”

and “a little pink spot of excitement on each cheek” (Dixon 63). Set against her dainty appearance, the next passage describes Mary’s feelings as she enters the ballroom:

There is the desire of the young girl to coquet, to play with, to torture, when she first learns the all-powerful influence which she possesses by the primitive fact of her sex. With all the arrogance which belongs to personal purity, she stands on her little pedestal and looks down on mankind with a somewhat condescending smile. (Dixon 64)

This excerpt creates the illusion that Mary possesses “all-powerful influence” because of her “purity.” She can “torture” men because of the “primitive fact of her sex.” However, the image of a girl on a pedestal undercuts the empowering sentiments in this passage. Once placed on a pedestal, she becomes “an ideal rather than a real person” (“pedestal”). The girl on the pedestal invokes the same image as the bride with a halo: the “angel in the house,” an ideal Victorian woman that feigns superiority from the confines of her domestic sphere. At this point, Mary still embodies the androcentric feminine ideal because nothing has disrupted her “normal flow of functioning” (Märtsin 443). During the ball, Mary is described as pure and innocent, a “young animal at play” while the “young men... move nearer and look at her with strange eyes” (Dixon 64). Mary is their prey, broken and helpless, but without rupture, she is unable to recognize it. As long as she still personifies the quiet, submissive “angel in the house,” their predatory behaviors simply reaffirm the patriarchal ideologies that conditioned her. It is not until “the first lover emerges” that the first rupture occurs.

The timeline shifts to Mary’s reflection on her experience many years later. She admits that “he seems to have been very like all the others, [except] that he made her

suffer” (65). She describes “the horrible half-hours of torture” spent waiting for him and “the incredible surrender to the first tentative embrace, a surrender which tortured her night and day.” Her memories of him are repeatedly conflated with pain and submission, through words like “torture,” “surrender,” and “suffer.” However, it is not these notions that cause the rupture. The androcentric dichotomy imposed on Victorian women through the fragmentation of their bodies normalized their suffering. Pain does not trigger a rupture for Mary because she is still the self that she has been conditioned to be. She cannot yet recognize the conflation of desire and pain as a distortion of Sapphic tradition. It is the man’s absence that finally provokes the rupture:

During the months in which those letters from Australia grew rarer, the girl understood for the first time the helplessness, the intolerable burden which society has laid on her sex. All things must be endured with a polite smile. (Dixon 65)

His absence, physically and dialogically, disrupts her “normal flow of functioning” by isolating her. Pain at the hands of a man is normal for Victorian women, but separation from a man or masculine authority is not. Free from his influence, this rupture forces her “backgrounded sense of being” to the foreground, provoking a period of self-reflection in which she can finally recognize the oppressive, fragmented nature of her position in Victorian culture. Reflecting on this break in her psyche, she finally identifies one of the principal reasons for her “helplessness,” the “burden” of her sex: silence. This creates internal tension between the fragmented identity that accepts silent suffering and the self-fragmented identity that rejects it, thus initiating the liberating process of her self-fragmentation. She also acknowledges that her suffering is part of a systemic oppression

of her sex—the first step in breaking a cycle. Mary makes a similar observation later in the novel when she remarks that “it is because [women] suffer so that [they] have written supremely good fiction” (106). While this particular rupture does not lead to the absolute rejection of patriarchal structures in favor of androgynous ones, recognizing her position does allow Mary to interrogate the position of her sex and blur gender lines:

Had she been a boy, she was aware that she might have made an effort to break the maddening silence; have stifled her sorrow with dissipation, with travel, or hard work. As it was the trivial round of civilised feminine existence made her, in those days, almost an automaton. (Dixon 66)

This is the first time Mary overtly confronts tensions of sexual difference by reimagining herself as a boy. She reflects that she could “break the maddening silence” or stifle her pain solely through a change in sex. While being a woman requires her to endure suffering “with a polite smile,” “had she been a boy,” she could have changed her circumstances, controlled them somehow. However, as an “automaton,” she “functions according to a predetermined set of coded instructions” (“automaton”). In describing herself this way, she accentuates the helplessness mentioned in the previous passage. She cannot act, feel, or speak unless it adheres to the “predetermined... instructions” set for her as a “civilised feminine” Victorian woman. Interrogating this dichotomy muddles gender boundaries by enabling Mary to make meaningful connections where there had previously been breaks or fragments. It is through these connections that she begins to recognize the oppression of her sex, which, in turn provokes feelings of doubt and resentment about her position in the feminine sphere.

The second significant rupture in Mary's young life occurs with the death of her father. This particular rupture serves as a pivotal point in Mary's self-fragmentation because it forces her out of the domestic, feminine sphere. Just after her father's death, the narrator says that the "child who played, the girl who had danced, died too" (Dixon 69). As illustrated in the preceding passages, these two aspects of Mary's identity were associated with the "angel of the house": the bride with a halo and the girl on a pedestal. By also killing these two parts of Mary's "self," the death of the father releases Mary from the bonds of this ideal image of womanhood. In other words, Mary's identity is no longer bound to the "predetermined instructions" of the civilized, feminine "automaton." Her father's death also permits her "to make arrangements for [her] own future" (73). It gives her an opportunity to try "her luck at art" (72). Mary reflects that she "had always meant to paint some day, when her whole time should be at her own disposal." The removal of the patriarch is the sole reason Mary's time is "at her own disposal," and it is already clear that she has begun to shift between the two separate spheres. The death of the bride in a halo and the girl on the pedestal symbolizes a rejection of the feminine sphere, and Mary's pursuit of work signifies her entry into the masculine sphere. Together, these two notions subvert androcentric fragmentation because Mary is no longer helpless, trapped by her sex. Her father's death is the climactic identity rupture Mary needed to begin to recognize herself as an individual, separate from men. It is in this moment that she begins the transition from "automaton" to "autonomy."

The climactic break observed in the death of Mary's father leads to the second concept in my Sapphic model: intimacy between women. With her father out of the equation, Mary and Alison begin to develop a more intimate relationship with one

another. This is acknowledged explicitly the morning of his death: “when one chapter of her life was done that spring morning, there were two people only that she must imperatively see,” Vincent Hemming and Alison Ives (Dixon 69). It is not inconsequential that the title of the chapter immediately after the death of the father is “Alison.” Broken, the first person Mary sees is a woman. As noted earlier, male appropriation of the Sapphic often reduces or removes femininity, whereas the reappropriation of the Sapphic vitalizes the feminine, a notion that is palpable in the characterization of Alison. The narrator explains that “what attracted people at once” to Alison was her “intense womanliness, her utter absence of snobbery, her real desire to be in sympathy with her own sex” (Dixon 70). Alison is described as deeply feminine, but also gives “a frank voice to strong sentiments that otherwise might remain unsaid” (Farmer 32). As Sappho did with her girls, Alison “devote[s] herself to the task of helping young girls” (71). Alison reflects a collective notion of womanhood, marked by her desire to help and understand other women. It is with Alison that Mary engages in “identity-dialogues” that eventually enable Mary to “reappropriate [her] body from its legal and social status” as a man’s subordinate to form a more unified, gynocentric identity (Lanser 128). The identity-dialogue that best encapsulates both the concept of Sapphic space and the mending of Mary’s identity is in a conversation she and Alison have just before Alison succumbs to consumption.

An identity-dialogue is a space for “gathering up different facets of personal sense and collective meanings, through which the here-and-now... becomes generalized beyond its instance of occurrence” (Märtsin 442). In other words, in addition to assisting with the reunification of one’s own fragmented identity, the “facets of personal sense”

and “collective meanings” become permanent qualities in that person, “beyond [the dialogue’s] instance of occurrence.” For the purposes of Victorian women, the identity-dialogue “space” must also be Sapphic because androcentric dialogues deepen fragmentation rather than mend it. As described previously, a Sapphic space for women is one devoid of both the male gaze and the male voice; a space in which women are central, vocal, and seen, while the men are marginal, included only as a silent means to an end. The Sapphic space gives women an opportunity to reflect, develop perspectives, and make judgments—about themselves and their society—that are uncorrupted by masculine, patriarchal influence. The scene in which this occurs puts Mary and Alison in Alison’s bedroom. One of the girls Alison helped has just left, leaving Mary and Alison alone. Alison dozes off, and upon waking, calls to Mary:

Little Mary... Promise me that you will never, never do anything to hurt another woman... I don’t suppose for an instant that you ever would. But there come times in our lives when we can do a great deal of good, or an incalculable amount of harm. If women only used their power in the right way! If we were only united we could lead the world. But we’re not.

(Dixon 164)

Already Alison establishes a Sapphic voice, uniting the entire body of women in a collective “we.” There is no mention of men, and devoid of male influence, she asserts that, united, women “could lead the world.” She insinuates that helping other women is how Mary “can do a great deal of good,” while hurting women will do “an incalculable amount of harm.” These aspects of Alison’s dialogue are the “facets of personal sense” that Märtsin refers to in his concept of the identity-dialogue. These particular facets

collectively form an overarching sense of womanhood, so the “sense” that Alison wishes to instill in Mary through her dialogue is a “keen intuitive awareness” of womanhood and its significance (“sense”).

An identity-dialogue can only form “collective meanings” if one participant assents to the “facets of personal sense” proposed by the other. In the narrative, this means that Mary must assent to Alison, which she does. She tells Alison that “[their] time is dawning—at last” (Dixon 164). She says that “all we modern women are going to help each other, not to hinder” and “there’s a great deal to do” (Dixon 164). Mary confirms Alison’s sentiments, asserting that “women are going to help each other,” thus establishing the “collective meaning” of Alison’s discourse. It is also in this response that we see Mary’s identity mending. The suffering, helplessness, and anxiety that characterizes androcentric fragmentation has been replaced with confidence, ambition, and hope. She shows hope when she says that their “time is dawning,” implying that there is a light ahead in the darkness, a point that might end women’s suffering. The use of “we” to consent that women will “help each other” includes Mary; she no longer sees herself as powerless. The final line shows Mary’s determination to address the pain and suffering of women, acknowledging that “there’s a great deal to do.” Only one man, Dr. Dunlop Strange, is mentioned during their dialogue, and he functions as a device to express Alison’s sympathy for another woman, patient Number Twenty-Seven. Number Twenty-Seven died, “ruined” by Strange and “driven... in despair to attempt suicide,” an issue I will explore further in the next passage (Farmer 32). Following their conversation, the “very atmosphere” of the bedroom “seemed charged with feminine emotion” (165). By engaging in Sapphic dialogue, Mary and Alison reclaim the femininity previously

stripped away by male authors who appropriated Sappho: her fragmentation, voice, and identity.

If Mary epitomizes the reappropriation of Sapphic fragmentation, voice, and identity, then patient Number Twenty-Seven is her counterpart, embodying unresolved, androcentric fragmentation. Described as a “hopeless case” and a “wretched creature,” Number Twenty-Seven remains nameless except for her patient number. She is dehumanized, and the absence of a name suggests that she lacks identity, another cog in the patriarchal machine. The chapter opens in the hospital to Dr. Dunlop Strange, who has been courting Alison Ives for some time. Alison and Mary are visiting the hospital, and looking at Alison, Strange thinks that “to have this woman for his wife would be the crowning act of a brilliantly successful career” (Dixon 149). Strange is shallow and egocentric; his affection for Alison is rapacious, rooted in his selfish desire to attain higher status. Given his characterization, it does not come as a surprise that he is at fault for Number Twenty-Seven’s dire state, “a hopeless case of rapid consumption” due to a failed suicide attempt (151). Number Twenty-Seven’s identity is only understood in relation to Strange. This implies that she was never able to unknot her identity from his, locked in the psychological suffering that stems from androcentric fragmentation, namely helplessness and anxiety. As noted earlier, the breaking apart of a female character by a male character in women’s writing manifests as psychological fragmentation, distorting her qualities and provoking destructive behavior. A fragmented psyche and Strange’s abandonment is what drove Number Twenty-Seven to her ultimate destruction: suicide.

Because Number Twenty-Seven was never able to work through her ruptures and reconstruct her identity, she remained broken, emblematic of the fate of women that do

not adhere to the the Sapphic model. She is even referred to as a “martyr of civilisation” by Alison (160). After Alison finds out about Strange’s part in Number Twenty-Seven’s death, she agonizes over her suffering: “If I had only known her earlier... I might have been her friend; I might have saved her from—.” This sentiment stresses the value of female relationships, suggesting that, through Alison, Number Twenty-Seven could have been saved. Furthermore, Number Twenty-Seven’s anonymity indicates that she could have been anyone, any woman without the “personal sense” that Alison or Mary found through self-fragmentation and their relationship with one another. In a dark twist of fate, as if to deepen the impact of Number Twenty-Seven’s story, Alison “contracts consumption from this dying young girl while attempting to comfort her,” “another casualty of Dunlop Strange’s crass heartlessness” (Farmer 32). If Alison had met Number Twenty-Seven before meeting Dr. Dunlop Strange, then perhaps *both* of their lives could have been saved. Alison and Number Twenty-Seven’s relationship in Dixon’s novel highlights the importance of self-fragmentation and intimate female relationships by providing a tragic antithetical narrative to Mary’s.

For Mary, Alison’s death represents another climactic rupture. However, Alison is no longer there for Mary to confide in. This complicates her circumstances because she is now forced to go it alone. It is during an interaction with Vincent at the end of the novel that the resilience of Mary’s identity is tested. Throughout the narrative, Vincent and Mary’s relationship is matted with tensions of sexual difference. Much of Mary’s heartache is the result of Vincent placing work, status, and personal success ahead of her. After asking Mary to promise herself to him, he leaves for a year to travel, only to abandon “her to marry a coarse and vulgar woman whose father can aid him in his

attempts to advance in politics” (Farmer 28). In many of their interactions, Mary’s relationship with Vincent is portrayed as if it imprisons her. Early on, she describes their connection as an “inexorable chain which nature forges” binding her to him (Dixon 82). His hands around her wrists “felt like links of iron,” and she could taste “the helplessness of woman, the inborn feeling of subjection to a stronger will, inherited through generations of submissive feminine intelligences.” The days just after Vincent’s departure are also telling. Mary finds herself in poor health, afflicted by a “feminine backache” (98). Vincent, however, writes to Mary that his “health has vastly improved since [his] departure from England.” Mary, restricted by the limitations of her sex, is unable to travel as Vincent does; she cannot, as she observed earlier in the novel, “stifle her sorrow... with travel” (66). Their relationship is more of a burden to Mary, despite her affection for Vincent—a sentiment that is particularly palpable when he chooses to leave her for someone else. While these interactions were certainly demoralizing for Mary, most of them occurred prior to the various identity-dialogues she and Alison shared.

Mary’s identity development and devotion to Alison is tested during her final interaction with Vincent. Already married with a daughter, Vincent goes to see Mary. He tells her how miserable his life is, and turns to Mary for comfort, calling her his “own little girl” and asking that she give him his “little bit of happiness” (182). It is not until he tells Mary that their affair will not hurt anyone that she breaks away from him and boldly retorts: “You’re not hurting anyone—but me! You’re hurting me—me! You’re doing your best to make me a miserable woman.” Rather than submit to his advances, Mary confronts Vincent. Sobbing, he tells her that he cannot return to his miserable life. He

tells Mary that he's going to leave his family and go somewhere, imploring her to go with him. Listening, Mary is already resigned to the fact that she will never leave with him: "she knew, even as he spoke, that this was the end of everything" (183). After listening to his pleas a moment longer, Mary finally interjects again:

Vincent... I can't do it. I can't, I can't—not even for you! Don't torture me, for God's sake. It is not that I mind what people would say—that's nothing. It isn't that I don't love you. I have always loved you—but it's the other woman—your wife. I can't, I won't, deliberately injure another woman. Think how she would suffer! Oh, the torture of women's lives... All we modern women mean to help each other now. We have a bad enough time as it is... We often talked it all over, Alison and I. You don't know the good she did in her life... You will go away... You will go back—to your little daughter? (184)

It is in this moment that the fragments of Mary's identity, through all of her turmoil and pain, begin to mend. She is not concerned about her reputation, as many conventional Victorian women were, and she is still honest, admitting that she loves him. She subverts patriarchal ideology by fighting the "inborn feeling of subjection to a stronger will" and rejecting Vincent. She rejects him in favor of womanhood; in favor of a collective Sapphic consciousness that binds women together, including his wife. Mary's loyalties still lie with Alison, even after her death. Though Mary finds herself caught in a system of oppression "inherited through generations of submissive female intelligences," this interaction seems to give hope to the next generation of women, typified by her affection for Vincent's daughter.

This moment seems to be Mary's final rupture in the novel. It is the peak representation of her self-fragmentation, ultimately united by her devotion to other women, a notion that is confirmed in the final chapter of the novel. In her bedroom, Mary catches sight of herself in the mirror. Looking into the glass, "a woman looked back at her with reproachful, haunting eyes... and [tonight] the woman looked at her appealingly" (188). It is while looking the mirror that Mary has a final internal conflict. She reflects that, "for a long time now," "she had had a strange sense of dual individuality." There is a dialogue between Mary's two selves: the one that wishes to reject women and choose Vincent, and the self that she is now, a resilient woman connected to a greater Sapphic consciousness. The dialogue is painful for Mary, as her other self threatens her with eternal suffering and loneliness, and for a moment it seems as if Mary might succumb to the pain. She wonders why she, without a person in the world, should still go on, but her dark thoughts transition into thoughts about her father. She reflects on the final line in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's, "Ulysses" and says it out loud:

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (Tennyson Line 70)

She continues, repeating more lines from the poem "deliberately, as she walked into the little study, pulled up the blind, and raised the sash" (Dixon 189). Invoking a line from Tennyson, Mary chooses to persevere. Like Ulysses, Mary "refuses to accept a gentle death," opting instead "to battle life out to the end" (Brooke 3). She seems to recognize that "one comes alive... in a struggle against death." Returning to her study, she sifts through "papers for the chapter of her novel" until she inadvertently finds a picture of Vincent. She decides to burn it. She lights it "twice with matches, and it caught for a minute, and then went out with a sudden little puff... so she gathered up all his letter...

and laid them under the photograph” (Dixon 190). It finally catches and then she exclaims, “Ah! now he burned.” In burning his body, Mary can finally break free from the “links of iron” that once bound them together. As suggested by her interaction with “the first lover” earlier in the novel, in order to be fully free from Vincent, she needed to be free from him physically *and* dialogically. It is only then that she could separate herself from him and reflect. The burning of the picture and the letters satisfy this notion. The final scene in the novel finds Mary at her father’s grave, again reading Tennyson’s final line from “Ulysses,” which she had engraved on her father’s headstone. Because the climactic rupture inciting Mary’s shift out of the domestic sphere was in her father’s death, this scene suggests a sort of rebirth. This time, however, she is free from Vincent. Standing by her father’s grave in springtime, Mary reflects that “nature, who never ceases, who never rests, was once again at her work of re-creation” (Dixon 191). This reflection seems reminiscent of several of Mary’s pivotal moments in the novel. “Nature,” which had once seemed a burden to Mary because of her sex, is now “at her work of re-creation.” This passage suggests perseverance, renewal, and perhaps that—as Mary once remarked to Alison—her “time is dawning” as a New Woman.

Through the application of my Sapphic model, it is clear that self-fragmentation and intimate female relationships enable Mary to overcome adversity, despite the countless obstacles she faces simply because of her position as a woman in Victorian society. She eventually escapes androcentric fragmentation, finally reaching a unified, Sapphic mirror-self. Mary’s triumphant persistence, despite the death of her father and her rejection of Vincent, destabilizes patriarchal structures. Like Sappho, Mary manages to endure in a culture that repeatedly tries to break her apart—perhaps in spite of it. Her

relationship with Alison communicates gynocentric ideology by invoking a Sapphic voice, a collective female consciousness that does not discriminate: mothers, wives, daughters, friends, and even unnamed women that we do not, maybe will not ever know. Dixon's novel, then, becomes a mode for communicating feminist ideology to her readers. She invites them into the collective "we" with Alison and Mary, thus emboldening Victorian women to "do a great deal of good" and support one another.

3. THROUGH A SAPPHIC LENS: REFOCUSING GERTRUDE'S IDENTITY

*She was paying the penalty, which her sex always pays one way or
another, for her struggles for strength and independence. She was denied,
she told herself with a touch of rueful humour, the gracious feminine
privilege of changing her mind.*

Amy Levy, *The Romance of a Shop*

Most modern scholarship concerning Amy Levy focuses on her poetry. Often described as overtly controversial, Levy's poetry explores female sexuality and reexamines women in history through a more critical lens. For example, Levy's poem, "Xantippe," is "spoken by the widow of Socrates on her deathbed" (Hughes 329). In most historical records, Xantippe is regarded as a "shrew," "an irritable, rude, aggressive, complaining woman." Levy's poem reimagines Xantippe's life from her own perspective, reinstating a feminine lens and a female voice. In an article published in *The Englishwoman's Review*, the author acknowledges how bold Levy is for attempting to, "in the face of popular verdict of centuries, invest [Xantippe] with a character totally foreign to that which has been assigned to her" (R.L.K 357). By reconstructing Xantippe's story, Levy's poem offers a gynocentric counter-narrative that confronts "traditional representations of the biblical 'fallen' woman" and challenges patriarchal constructions of the female identity (Bernstein 18). Furthermore, according to Susan Bernstein, "Levy [also] evocatively imagines the complexities of same-sex desire in several lyric poems"—such as "London in July" and "The Dream." Collectively, Levy's poetry subverts traditional Victorian ideas about womanhood and raises doubts about their place in history. It seems unusual, then, that her fiction would adhere to conventional ideas regarding historical figures like Sappho or Victorian notions

concerning separate spheres and female sexuality. However, by the conclusion of Levy's novel, *The Romance of a Shop*, the overarching ideas are seemingly clear: regardless of work and ambition, New Women, like all other Victorian women, are bound by domesticity, purity, and marriage.

The Romance of a Shop is a novel about a group of sisters: Fanny, Lucy, Gertrude, and Phyllis Lorimer. The story opens with the death of their father—an incident that casts the girls out of their childhood home and into the working world. While this particular concept is typical in New Woman novels, the rest of the narrative seems regressive by modern (and even New Woman) standards. In the epilogue, all of the sisters have married, and the novel concludes with hasty descriptions of their orthodox lifestyles, suggesting that marriage and childbearing inevitably conclude a woman's life. The only characters left unmarried are Phyllis, who dies, and Fred, a male character. These values are typical of the nineteenth century: women may be allowed some freedom through philanthropy and trivial sorts of jobs or hobbies, but all roads inescapably converge at marriage. If women rebel against these “virtuous” restrictions, as in the case of Phyllis, it will lead to their demise. While a thin study of the plot and the novel's more obvious themes would reveal no contradictions to this reading of the novel, the application of my Sapphic model proves Levy's narrative is more complex. To demonstrate this, I will focus on three female characters: Phyllis, Gertrude, and Conny.

Much like her poetry, Levy's fiction is saturated with allusions to historical figures, popular literature, and biblical stories. The application of my Sapphic model in *The Romance of a Shop* will be rooted in the deconstruction of these allusions. Like Mary in *The Story of a Modern Woman*, the protagonist in Levy's narrative, Gertrude, is able to

successfully achieve self-fragmentation. Unlike Mary, however, Gertrude has significant identity-dialogues with multiple women in her life, namely one of her sisters, Phyllis, and her best friend, Constance Devonshire. Gertrude (Gerty) is a writer, regarded as strong and intelligent by the people that know her. Phyllis, the youngest sister, is beautiful, stubborn, and naïve. Constance (Conny) is thoughtful and devoutly supportive of Gertrude, often coming to Gerty's defense in conversations or offering her support in times of need. It is through her relationships with Conny and Phyllis that Gerty is able to reconstruct her identity. However, Gertrude's relationship with Phyllis is complicated. Unlike the other women in the narrative, Phyllis is vibrant, spirited, and sexual, so a surface reading of the text might suggest that Phyllis's death is antifeminist—punishment for her sexual transgressions in a society intent on repressing female sexuality. While Phyllis is responsible for catalyzing much of Gertrude's progress, she is actually a regressive character. Despite her seemingly progressive qualities, Phyllis remains broken—unable to separate her identity from men. Through the deconstruction of various allusions in the text, I will ultimately argue that Gertrude fulfills my Sapphic model whereas Phyllis's character, though controversial, epitomizes androcentric fragmentation. This means that Phyllis's death is tragic, but it is not antifeminist. I will analyze Gertrude's character first, and then I will examine her relationships with Conny and Phyllis.

The novel opens with the death of the Lorimer girls' father—the first rupture. The death of their father forces the girls out of their home, the domestic sphere, and into the male-dominated working world. Once they “are all grouped” to discuss their situation, “there is nothing left but for Lucy to focus [them]” so that Gertrude can “unfold [her]

plans” (Levy 53). This passage overtly establishes the gaze as feminine because Lucy is the one to “focus” them. It also places Gertrude in a matriarchal position of authority. She assumes the position of the traditional Victorian father, determining what is best for her sisters and deciding how to handle their situation. The loss of the patriarch, then, creates a Sapphic space free from male influence wherein the girls can reflect on their circumstances and move between feminine and masculine roles. As the matriarch, Gertrude proposes the girls open a photography studio—an idea which Fanny, the eldest, traditional sister, opposes. Lucy describes Fan as old-fashioned, a woman stuck in “the period when young ladies played the harp, wore ringlets, and went into hysterics.” Like Number Twenty-Seven, Fan is still fragmented by male influence, unable to form the meaningful connections necessary to recognize her own oppression:

There was no standing up in a fair fight and having it out with [Fan]; you might as soon fight a featherbed... [She] would go back to the very point from which she had started, with that terrible obstinacy of the weak.

(Levy 56)

Fan is “obstinate” because she is “weak,” meaning she “stubbornly refuses to change [her] opinion” not because of logic or strength, but because she is still restricted by her helplessness as a traditional Victorian woman (“obstinate”). Conversely, Gertrude’s attitudes begin to show progress. She says they will consult their family lawyer, Mr. Grimshaw, about the photography studio, “not for his advice... but to arrange any transaction for [them]” (Levy 55). She does not want his input; she simply wants to use him to conduct business. As noted earlier, “males are relegated to a peripheral... role” in Sapphic spaces. By regarding Mr. Grimshaw as a means to an end rather than as a central

figure, Gerty adheres to this Sapphic notion. Still, Gerty's progress is fleeting. The death of her father is not the climactic rupture Gertrude needs to break herself apart and escape the feminine sphere.

The perpetuation of Gerty's helplessness, anxiety, and suffering as a fragmented Victorian woman is apparent in the next chapter when "action, or thoughts concerned with plans of action... become for the moment impossible to her" (58). She is still "anxious," and her position as a woman is still "a burden for her young strength" (59). The death of her father merely shook Gerty's being at the foundations, "hurt [it] at the vital roots." It is safe to assume that the "foundation" of Gerty's being is built on patriarchal principles. As a woman in Victorian England, Gerty has been culturally conditioned to recognize separate spheres and remain in the feminine one. That being said, her father's death *did* damage the "vital roots" of that foundation, thus provoking the first rupture in her self-fragmentation. It is following this scene that Gerty has her first significant identity-dialogue with Conny. Conny parallels Gerty to the biblical image of Rachel weeping, seen in both Jeremiah 31:15 and Matthew 2:17-18. The deconstruction of this allusion paired with an analysis of Conny and Gerty's interaction reveals the meaning of their exchange.

The scene places Conny and Gerty alone in Gerty's bedroom. Conny finds Gertrude throwing various manuscripts and pages of writing into the trash. Seeing Gertrude discarding all of her work, Conny exclaims, "My dear Gertrude, what's this? Rachel weeping among her children?" (60). Her allusion is to a passage in the bible that first appears in a section of the Book of Jeremiah called the Book of Consolation (Jeremiah 30-34). Jeremiah's prophecies were meant to achieve two tasks: first, "tearing

down and destroying,” and second, “building and planting,” much like my Sapphic model seeks to fragment and rebuild the female identity (Margalit 630). Although Jeremiah’s prophecy about Rachel originates in the Book of Consolation, it is not fulfilled until the same passage reemerges in the New Testament. In Matthew 2:17-18, “Rachel is still crying, because despite what Jeremiah’s poem indicates, she is not comforted... and God’s answer to this lament is not immediate” (Doane 9). In other words, the first task, breaking apart, commences in Jeremiah, and the second task, rebuilding, is not fulfilled until the infancy narrative begins. Fifteen biblical books separate the Book of Jeremiah and the Gospel of Matthew. The path from one to the other is filled with destruction, resistance, and divine dialogues between God and his prophets—a notion that resembles the development of my Sapphic model, which involves fragmentation, repeated ruptures, conflict, and identity-dialogues. The first appearance of Rachel weeping in the bible is characterized by suffering and brokenness:

Thus said the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.

(The King James Version of the Bible, Jeremiah 31:15)

As the speaker, Conny becomes the prophet sharing the word of God. Gertrude is Rachel, and the “children” she weeps for are her manuscripts. In Jeremiah, “Rachel is presented as the symbolic mother of a nation: defeated, exiled, and suffering” (Doane 7). She is the “victim of her father’s manipulation” and initially infertile, much like Gertrude suffers under patriarchal control, unable to publish, or “birth,” her writing into Victorian society. As a young prophet, Jeremiah “almost single-handedly established Rachel... as the

lamenting matriarch of all Jews, a Mary-like figure” (Margalit 630). He uses Rachel to “preach for a united empire.” If Conny is Jeremiah, then Conny’s identity-dialogue with Gertrude is what establishes Gertrude’s position as the “lamenting matriarch” for *her* marginalized group: women.

The “empire,” or authority, in Victorian culture is the patriarchy, which maintains power through the absolute separation of masculine and feminine spheres. Gertrude, then, becomes the “symbolic mother” of a united front—a merging of masculine and feminine spheres that resolves tensions of sexual difference. However, as long as men exercise control over women in literature through the taking apart of their bodies, the figurative “womb” in which Gertrude’s writing develops can still be “worked upon... to bring about pleasure or pain” (Reynolds 165). This, in turn, reinforces the dichotomy that places the man in charge “while [the woman] suffers.” Since the bodily fragmentation of female characters in men’s writing manifests as psychological fragmentation in women’s writing, Gerty’s “womb” is not biological, but psychological. Her “womb,” then, can be understood as her psyche, the “product... of cultural forces... [forming] a collective experience within the cultural whole” (Showalter 197). If a woman remains broken, the “cultural forces” that form her psyche will be exclusively androcentric, so in order for Gerty to reclaim her womb, she must first reappropriate her body through self-fragmentation.

Furthermore, God assures Rachel that “her children will [eventually] return from a foreign land,” offering hope that “God will respond to the basic needs of life... [specifically] freedom from oppression” (Doane 8). By loosening the patriarchal grip on her psyche, Gerty’s self-fragmentation will ultimately enable her to nurture her writing

and free herself from oppression. In a study examining the relationship between fiction and transformative learning, authors Chad Hoggan and Patricia Cranton found that fiction “opened readers’ eyes to new perspectives and... prompted critical reflection” (20). However, if female writers are not included in popular literature, the “perspectives” and “critical reflections” readers form will be based on androcentric ideas about the world. Women’s writing, then, can be understood as the manifestation and expression of a gynocentric voice. This means that Gertrude’s manuscripts are a metaphor for *her* authentic voice, and it is only when she breaks free from male influence that she can embrace and express that voice. It is here that the connection between writing and freedom from oppression is explicitly identified, suggesting, as I have previously argued, that self-fragmentation establishes women’s fiction as a mode for subverting patriarchal ideology. This, however, illustrates only the first task in both Jeremiah’s prophecy and my Sapphic model.

After Conny alludes to Rachel weeping, she “cast[s] herself down by the side of [Gertrude], and put[s] her arms caressingly around her,” an image that is similarly evoked just after God offers Rachel hope for her children (Levy 60). The following passage, Jeremiah 31:22, is also the final mention of Rachel in the Book of Jeremiah: “How long wilt thou go about, O thou backsliding daughter? for the LORD hath created a new thing in the earth, A woman shall compass a man.” Rachel is the “backsliding daughter,” weeping despite God’s comforting words, and the creation of a “new thing” on earth implies a break in its natural order. The image of a woman encompassing a man is reminiscent of a mother and son. The mother that breaks the natural order of the bible is the Virgin Mary—biologically, as a virgin mother, and philosophically, as the mother of

the son of God. This means that the final reason God gives Rachel to sooth her tears is the promise of Mary and her son, Jesus, who will together permit the safe return of Rachel's children and heal her pain. The conflation of this image with the image of Conny and Gerty similarly implies a break in the natural order of Levy's novel. Despite Conny's interjection, Gerty refuses to be comforted and continues stubbornly discarding her work. Conny's embrace of Gerty alters the promise of resolve, though. The image becomes that of a woman encompassing a woman, implying that an intimate relationship between two women is what will reconcile Gerty's brokenness. Once deconstructed, the allusion Conny makes to the Book of Jeremiah accounts for both aspects of my Sapphic model: self-fragmentation *and* reconstruction of the identity through intimate female relationships. However, neither aspect is fully realized in this allusion alone—it merely forms the foundation.

Sitting on the floor with Gerty, Conny extends this metaphor further, referencing the second appearance of the biblical image of Rachel: "Gerty, what is the meaning of this massacre of the innocents?" (Levy 60). The "massacre" refers to the death of Gerty's writing, and the "innocents" are all of the female characters that inevitably perish with it. Since Gerty has not yet achieved self-fragmentation, she is still inclined to conform to patriarchal ideology. This means that the "massacre" does not reflect *her* rejection of her writing, but the patriarchal suppression of it. In the bible, the "massacre of the innocents" is an allusion to the murders of "an unknown number of... infants" sanctioned by Herod, "the vassal king of the Roman Empire" (Park 482). He authorized the genocide "in [an] effort to kill Jesus as a potential threat to his power." This act of violence precedes—perhaps provokes—the repeated use of the passage with Rachel weeping. Set against

such an unnerving backdrop, “Rachel’s cry is now more vividly heard as [she mourns] all the slaughtered infants and their bereaved mothers.” In its second appearance, the passage is just slightly different:

Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by [Jeremiah] the prophet,
saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and
great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be
comforted, because they are not.

(The King James Version of the Bible, Matthew 2:17-18)

Here, it is explicitly acknowledged that Jeremiah’s prophecy about Rachel will be fulfilled in the Gospel of Matthew, and, “because justice has not [yet] been served, Rachel will scream and mourn and cry out... until there is accountability” (Berger 46). Rachel’s weeping “dismantles the architecture of apathy,” and her voice becomes a voice for the “powerless people [that] are often forgotten, suppressed, and neglected in historiography” (Park 482). Likewise, Gertrude becomes a voice for the “powerless,” which, in her case, are women. This parallel lays the groundwork for the creation of a collective Sapphic voice, beginning with Gertrude’s relationship with Conny. As the symbolic “lamenting matriarch,” weeping for her own writing implies that Gerty weeps for *all* of the female voices that have been “massacred” by violent men in order to maintain the hierarchal positioning of the sexes. In this respect, Conny’s allusion to Rachel also serves as commentary on abusive power dynamics through the “extreme form of injustice” enacted by Herod (Park 474).

In Victorian culture, Herod personifies the androcentric abuse of power aimed at keeping women broken through the assassination of their writing, which, in turn, silences

gynocentric voices. The triumph of one “child,” Christ, can undo the entire imperial structure the same way that one woman’s voice, Rachel’s, can “pierce the male world of power, of slaughter, and of divine favor” (Wainwright 467). This intersection merges the images of Rachel and Christ to form one androgynous figure that fulfills Jeremiah’s prophecy and subverts oppressive practices by breaking “the cycle of violence perpetuated by [their] opponents” (Doane 13). Likewise, Sappho’s androgyny subverts oppressive and destructive *patriarchal* practices. Gertrude, then, through the Sapphic reunification of her identity, becomes both Rachel and Christ, which ultimately permits her entry into the mirror phase. At this point in the text, Gerty only embodies Rachel, but the perseverance of her self-fragmentation paired with intimate female relationships will eventually enable her to embody Christ. According to Sébastien Doane, “violence is an important rhetorical element used to subvert empirical ideology” molded by oppressive politics (5). The violent nature of Herod’s massacre, then, seems to foreshadow the climactic rupture that finalizes Gerty’s self-fragmentation: the loss of her baby sister, Phyllis.

Phyllis, unlike Gertrude, is not able to separate her identity from men. Of the sisters, Phyllis is by far the most overtly sexual, wearing risqué dresses and flirting with older men. Boiled down to the image of a “liberal, sexual creature,” I can see how her death might be viewed as moral justice for her sexual transgressions. However, the complexity of Phyllis’s character begets a counter-narrative, one that I will argue forms a much stronger case. In accordance with my Sapphic model, for a female character to effectively attain a unified version of the self, she must first break herself apart, and then reconstruct her identity through intimate relationships with other women. Phyllis

certainly has progressive moments following the various ruptures in her life. For example, following the death of their father, Phyllis is content leaving their childhood home—eager to use the newfound freedom to travel into public spaces. She is also supportive of Gerty's business proposal from the beginning, regardless of the risk, and she undoubtedly challenges conservative notions about female sexuality. What ultimately obstructs Phyllis's character development is her superficial perception of womanhood and her insolent opinions of women—both notions which inhibit her ability to develop intimate relationships with other female characters. Without these relationships, Phyllis is unable to form the meaningful connections necessary to recognize her own oppression, further impeding her ability to identify toxicity in abusive men. The fatal fragmentation of Phyllis's character is evocatively demonstrated in her relationship with Sidney Darrell, a thirty-seven-year-old artist that Gerty loathes.

Like the biblical image of Herod, Sidney Darrell's character is emblematic of toxic, patriarchal culture in Victorian England. He is egocentric, arrogant, and hard-boiled, often provoking distress or unease in female characters in the novel. He is first introduced to the narrative in "a letter [he wrote] containing an order [for the Lorimers] to photograph a picture in [his] studio at St. John's Wood" (Levy 103). The girls do not know much about him initially, only that he is "distinguished" and "clever" with an affinity for extravagance. It is not until Gertrude visits his home that a fuller scope of his character is revealed. Darrell's house is described as lavish, adorned with tiger-skins, Venetian lanterns, and Spanish leather. The air in the house is "heavy with the scent of tuberose," a flower that signifies "dangerous pleasures" (107). The deliberate inclusion of "tuberose" is indicative of Darrell's eventual function in Levy's narrative. When

Gertrude meets Darrell, she is disconcerted by his cold stare. She wonders “what there [was] in this man’s gaze that made her, all at once, feel old and awkward, ridiculous and dowdy; that made her long to snatch up her heavy camera and flee from his presence never to return.” This passage explicitly establishes an androcentric “gaze,” subsequently isolating the impact such an oppressive gaze has on women. Ordinarily characterized as composed and intelligent, Darrell’s presence renders Gertrude “awkward” and “ridiculous.” His gaze is harsh, inspiring fear in Gertrude who, at this point in the novel, has begun to develop a more grounded sense of self. When Gerty returns to her sisters, she describes Darrell as “odious,” to which Phyllis retorts, “I found him quite polite” (110). Unable to recognize her own broken perception of the world, Phyllis cannot distinguish between Darrell’s toxicity and his charm. Gerty also describes Darrell as the kind of man that, “if a woman were talking to him [about] the motions of the heavenly bodies, he would be thinking all the time of the shape of her ankles.” In other words, if a woman spoke to him about spiritual matters, Darrell would still resort to examining her “displayed body... in pieces,” “a collection of truncated limbs and fetishized body sites” (Reynolds 165). This observation reinforces the concept of androcentric fragmentation. In literature, men project Sappho’s fragmentation onto the female body to reinforce power dynamics, a concept that is evident in Gertrude’s interpretation of Darrell. He does not value a woman’s opinion enough to see her as anything other than “truncated limbs.” This particular example shows obvious progress in Gerty’s character. Since she has begun the process of self-fragmentation, Gertrude is more attuned to the oppressive behaviors of men and, as a result, more adept at recognizing her own objectification. Phyllis, on the other hand, is ignorant to it.

Other than a few progressive moments, Phyllis's views on womanhood are largely regressive. She does not trust the opinions of other women, and she frequently demoralizes them with degrading remarks. For example, in a conversation with her sisters and Conny, Phyllis says that Gerty is "quite wrong... about Mr. Darrell," asserting that "he is very nice, and great fun" (Levy 117). Conny attempts to mediate the conversation, saying that Darrell "looks... as though he meant to have the best of everything," and modestly suggests that "a great many of [them] mean that." Gertrude unequivocally disagrees. She says "not... by trampling over the bodies of other people." When they all begin to snicker at her response, she poses a question: How "can one be expected to think well of a person who makes one feel like a strong-minded clown?" Gerty remains skeptical of Darrell's character, arguing that he gets the "best of everything" by "trampling over the bodies of other people." Likewise, Herod attempts to maintain power by exterminating those that threaten it. Within the context of Victorian culture, this comment suggests that Darrell, like other violent men, maintains power through the destruction of the powerless, women. This implies that Gerty's resistance to Darrell is, by extension, a resistance to oppressive, patriarchal practices. Her observation provokes a "critical" remark from Phyllis. She mockingly states that the "only thing [she doesn't] like about [Darrell]... is his eye... with heavy lids, and... puffy bags underneath" (118). Instead of taking Gertrude's observation into consideration, Phyllis disregards it. Her sarcastic comment is paradoxically reminiscent of Gertrude's thoughts on Darrell's oppressive gaze. Gertrude realizes that Darrell's gaze is domineering and objectifying, whereas Phyllis is oblivious to it. Just as Gerty's resistance to Darrell denotes her resistance to oppression, Phyllis's *acceptance* of Darrell signifies her submission to

patriarchal subjugation. The most telling illustration of Phyllis's toxic relationship with Darrell transpires when he endeavors to paint a portrait of her.

During a private viewing of his studio, Darrell confides in one of the Lorimers' friends, Frank, that he wants to paint a portrait of Phyllis as Cressida. Scholarship on Cressida is generally divided into "two warring camps that... *seem* radically opposed," however, "both... share a common perspective and language that produce a disturbing vision of a woman as passive creation of her patriarchal culture" (Tiffany 44). Cressida is either "wanton" or "victim," and "both notions result from and recreate the idea of Cressida as a creature formed by male perceptions and values." The group Phyllis is sorted into is inconsequential because both groups, wanton and victim, inexorably reinforce female subjectivity. Frank expresses unconcealed disapproval of Darrell's concept for the painting, but Darrell decides he is going to solicit Phyllis anyway. He approaches Gertrude about his proposition first. Gerty attempts to suppress "the signs of her dislike to the scheme," however, she still meets Darrell's gaze "almost with open defiance" (131). The communication between the two of them in this scene solidifies the "inevitable antipathy" between them: "the strife of the woman who demands respect, with the man who refuses to grant it" (Levy 131). Darrell's continual objectification of Gerty and her sisters deepens the divide between gender spheres and intensifies the tension between the two. At this point in the text, Gerty eventually concedes to Darrell's request. Because she has not completed the self-fragmentation process, her resistance to patriarchal ideologies is limited to internal conflict and reflection. She recognizes her oppression and has begun to think and behave defiantly, but she is not yet willing to *act* on that defiance. This particular interaction merely primes Gertrude for the final rupture

in her self-fragmentation, a break which occurs as a direct result of Darrell's cavalier treatment of Phyllis.

Once Phyllis accepts Darrell's proposal, the breakdown of her fragile psyche begins. Earlier in the chapter, during his conversation with Frank, Darrell described a very specific image of Shakespeare's Cressida for his project:

It is Cressida, before her fall, I want; as she stands at the street corner with Pandarus, waiting for the Trojan heroes to pass, don't you know? Half ironical, half wistful; with the light of that little *tender* for Troilus just beginning to dawn in her eyes. She would be the very thing for it.

(Levy 130)

This particular scene precedes Cressida's eventual infidelity. Here, she is still in an uncorrupted, pensive state of shy desire for Troilus. Cressida "becomes a creature of [Troilus's] fevered imagination, created from sexual desire, or in the play's terms, from will and appetite" (Hodgson 52). Troilus's view of Cressida is ravenous and objectifying, much like Darrell's view of women. Like Cressida, Phyllis's character is not definitively framed as "either innocent female victim or knowing temptress," hence the conflicting ideas surrounding her character (Bernstein 40). However, as Grace Tiffany notes, either image produces the same results. Ultimately, both Phyllis and Cressida "affirm the... limiting male-scripted role of frail, wanton woman" (45). Darrell's decision to paint Phyllis in this particular state quite literally locks her into the broken, helpless position of Cressida "before her fall." It restricts movement and complexity in the same way the Victorian feminine sphere does. The image of Phyllis as Cressida is "cruelly oppressive, morally crippling, and fundamentally false," however, it does offer Phyllis "an escape

from the responsibility of self-invention” (53). In other words, by embodying this archetype, Phyllis avoids self-invention and, as a result, her identity remains broken, knotted up in the patriarchal construction of what a woman *should* be. Phyllis visits Darrell’s studio alone for weeks while he is in the process of completing her portrait. The damage this does to Phyllis is not immediately apparent to Gertrude and her sisters. It is only when Phyllis finally coerces Gertrude into attending another social event at his house that Gerty begins to recognize the change in her sister’s demeanor.

Observing Phyllis in Darrell’s presence, Gertrude finally notices how toxic the relationship between them has become. She observes a “restless, discontented light” in Phyllis’s eyes and a “half-weary recklessness in her pose” (Levy 151). During the party, Darrell eventually tells Phyllis that he will not be able to finish her portrait because he is going to Paris for several months on business. As in the case of patient Number Twenty-Seven, Phyllis’s destruction is merely hastened by Darrell’s abandonment. Gertrude finds “Phyllis standing by herself...pale to the lips, with brilliant, meaningless eyes” (153). Darrell’s rejection renders Phyllis’s gaze “meaningless” because she only understands her identity in relation to him. In the following weeks, Gertrude reflects that “it [is] sufficiently clear that [Darrell] had... [injected] a subtle poison into [Phyllis’s veins]” (159). Gertrude’s use of “poison” in this passage is reminiscent of the toxicity she recognized in Darrell during their first interaction. Since no one succeeded in dislodging Phyllis from Darrell’s grip, his poisonous virility is the “substance” that will ultimately cause “the illness [and] death” of Gerty’s baby sister (“poison”). At this point, Phyllis’s psychological fragmentation begins to distort her qualities, eventually triggering her erratic behavior:

Since the night of the [event]... a change, in every respect for the worse, had crept over [Phyllis]. The buoyancy, which had been one of her chief charms, had deserted her. She was languid, restless, bored, and more utterly idle than ever... [and] the moodiness of her moments of depression distressed [her sisters] beyond measure.

In this passage, it is clear that Phyllis's state of mind is deteriorating rapidly. Her optimism "desert[s] her" and she becomes "languid," experiencing repeated "moments of depression." Phyllis is helpless and anxious, trapped in the psychological suffering provoked by Darrell's fragmentation. She "openly proclaim[s] that she [is] only awaiting" the first person that comes along, "to make her escape." Unable to reconstruct her identity, she becomes reliant on others to define her sense of self. However, because she does not form any meaningful relationships with women, the "others" that define her are all men. This is why Phyllis goes back to Darrell when he returns from Paris—heedless of her abuse, brokenness, and suffering.

The buildup of Gertrude's anger toward Darrell on behalf of her baby sister reaches its climactic rupture when Phyllis leaves her sisters to be with him. Gerty returns home one night to a note from Phyllis. In the note, Phyllis tells her that she will not be returning home because she is marrying Darrell, though he is already married, and moving to Italy. In a state of shock, Gertrude reflects that "she had known it... from the first moment... she... looked upon Darrell's face," yet she "stood by powerless, paralyzed, while this thing approached" (168). Despite her instinctive aversion to Darrell, she was previously unwilling to intervene, still partially bound by the "powerless," restrictive nature of her sex. The combination of Gertrude's severe shock and her

devotion to protecting Phyllis is what finally dislodges Gerty's identity from the helpless, male-constructed rendering of who she should be. Unlike her former interactions with oppressive men, she does not have a moment of hesitation; she goes to Darrell's house immediately. Once there, Gertrude does not wait for Darrell to permit her entrance; she simply walks through the front door—actively breaking down the barrier put in place to lock her out. She finds Phyllis standing by a table in Darrell's studio:

[A] beautiful wanton in a loose, trailing garment... white and lustrous as a pearl; Phyllis with her brown hair turned to gold in the light of the lamp swung above her; Phyllis, with diamonds on the slender fingers, that played with a cluster of bloom-covered grapes. (171)

Framed in Gertrude's gaze, this picturesque image of Phyllis resembles the painting of Cressida that Darrell described. In the late eighteenth century, a notable British artist, Thomas Kirk, painted the same scene from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Act 1, Scene 2 (see Appendix). In the painting, Cressida wears a white, "loose, trailing garment" like the one Gerty observes on Phyllis. Both women are shown brighter against their backdrop, with "hair turned to gold in the light." This final image of Phyllis fortifies the binding between her and Cressida, thus sealing her fate as both wanton and victim—a "passive creation of her patriarchal culture" (Tiffany 44). All of the loathing and anger Gertrude harbored for Darrell since the day she first went to his studio came to fruition when she saw this image of her sister. Just as Gertrude predicted, Darrell is a cruel man that reduces women to a sum of their parts. Entombed in his unfinished painting, Phyllis is reduced to "a collection of truncated limbs," permanently broken and fated to suffer. Phyllis's decision to return to Darrell signifies her regression to the oppressive, frail

figure that Darrell created the moment he decided to paint her. Phyllis has already been poisoned, and her destruction is inevitable. Gertrude cannot protect her anymore; all she can do is take her home.

After recovering from the distress of seeing her sister, Gertrude becomes Rachel for the second time: the lamenting matriarch crying out for justice on behalf of the powerless, who, in this case, is Phyllis. Rachel's weeping is "more vividly heard" in the Gospel of Matthew because she has gone so long without consolation and the circumstances are more unnerving. The same is true for Gertrude. Through self-fragmentation, Gertrude has loosened the patriarchal grip on her psyche, enabling her to externalize emotions that had long been suppressed. Combined with the pain of losing her sister to Darrell, the "storm" in Gertrude's heart, "which had been silently gathering, was growing ready to burst" (Levy 171). In a "white heat of fury," Gerty finally enters the room. Jumping to his feet, Darrell's face is "livid with passion" as he glares at Gertrude "in rage and hatred." However, Gertrude is no longer intimidated by his oppressive gaze:

Gertrude met his glance with eyes that glowed with a passion yet fiercer than his own. Elements, long smouldering, had blazed forth at last... Then with a curious elation, a mighty throb of what was almost joy, Gertrude knew that she, not he... was the stronger of the two. (Levy 172)

In this moment, Gerty's fury finally "blaze[s] forth" and pierces "the male world of power" (Wainwright 467). She breaks out of the silent, feminine sphere and seizes control of the vocal, public sphere, finding that she is actually stronger than Darrell. Their heated interaction in this scene is as pivotal to Levy's narrative as Rachel's voice was following Herod's "massacre of the innocents" in the bible. Although neither Rachel nor

Gertrude can save the “innocent ones” in their situations, they *are* able to break “the cycle of violence perpetuated by [their] opponents” (Doane 13). Following Gertrude’s forceful intrusion, Darrell retreats, lowering his eyes and speaking in a “languid” voice. Gerty demands that he let her sister return home with her, and Darrell does not intervene. His abusive power dynamics no longer control Gertrude, and she recovers some agency over her circumstances. Gertrude’s success during their confrontation breaks the natural order of the the narrative by inverting their positions in their respective traditional spheres—she is vocal while he is quiet, and she advances while he retreats. Furthermore, leaving Darrell’s home, Gertrude “put[s] her strong desperate grasp about Phyllis,” and “half carries her sister from the room” (Levy 173). Gertrude embraces Phyllis the same way Conny embraced Gertrude at the start of the novel. However, this time, it fulfills part of the prophecy: Gertrude breaks the natural order of the patriarchy and carries her sister home, despite Darrell’s protests. It is following this rupture that an identity-dialogue between Phyllis and Gerty finally occurs.

Gertrude’s identity-dialogue with Phyllis prompts the most significant development in the mending of Gerty’s identity. In the days that followed Gertrude and Darrell’s conflict, Phyllis became ill. Already characterized as frail and sickly, Phyllis’s exposure to the miserable, frigid weather the night they left Darrell’s “hastened an end which had long been inevitable” (Levy 174). Gertrude was racked with guilt, believing that she was at fault for her younger sister’s physical state. For a moment, it seems as though Gerty’s guilt will impede the progress she has made. However, her identity-dialogue with Phyllis changes things. As noted earlier, an identity-dialogue is a Sapphic space for “gathering up different facets of personal sense and collective meanings” that,

in turn, assist in the development of well-reasoned, enduring beliefs. They enable the female characters in New Woman literature to work through the ruptures in their self-fragmentation so they can mend their identities. The scene in which this particular dialogue occurs finds Gertrude sitting by Phyllis's bed in the sick-room. Phyllis calls to Gertrude:

Don't be sorry [for me]. I have never been a nice person... Gerty, you have always been so good to me; this last week as well... but you have never forgiven me. You know that is the truth... And there is something I should wish to tell you. I am glad you came and fetched me away. The very moment I saw your angry, white face... I was glad... I was frightened, but I was glad. (Levy 177)

There is no mention of Darrell, and devoid of his influence, Phyllis expresses love and appreciation for her sister—a sentiment Phyllis had not expressed at all since meeting Darrell. She absolves Gerty of her guilt, telling her not to be sorry and insisting that, although she was “frightened,” she is “glad” Gertrude carried her away. Phyllis's statement resembles a verse from The First Epistle of Peter that discusses suffering, righteousness, and fear: “if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled” (*The King James Version of the Bible*, 1 Peter 3:14). Because Gertrude is “good” to Phyllis, Phyllis's return to her makes the suffering she experienced righteous, whereas with Darrell, her anguish was unjust and abusive. Now Phyllis does not need to be afraid; despite her suffering, she can finally be “glad.” In this instance, Gertrude becomes Christ, saving Phyllis from brokenness and abuse. After all of the anxiety Gertrude suffered worrying for Phyllis's wellbeing, Phyllis's affection

toward Gerty begins to heal her. The narrator says that “[Gertrude’s] heart, which had been frozen within her, melted,” and “in an agony of love, of remorse, she stretched out her arms, while her sobs came... and gathered [Phyllis] to her breast” (Levy 177).

Phyllis’s statement incites a moment of catharsis in Gertrude. Gerty is finally able to release the repressed emotions that have been weighing on her “frozen” heart throughout the narrative—guilt, anxiety, worry, love, and remorse. For the first time, Gertrude feels some relief and the fragments of her identity begin to mend. The image of Gerty stretching out her arms and embracing Phyllis also resembles an interaction between Christ and Peter. In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter walks out to meet Jesus where he stands on the water. Afraid, Peter begins to lose faith and starts to sink, but Jesus “immediately... stretched forth his hand, and caught him” (*The King James Version of the Bible*, Matthew 14:31). Phyllis has lost faith in Gertrude’s ability to forgive her, but Gertrude immediately “stretched forth her arms... and gathered [Phyllis] to her breast.” Gertrude catches Phyllis, and Phyllis’s sentiments become an affirmation for Gerty, validating her decision to break out of her traditional sphere.

In order for the two girls to form “collective meanings” through their identity-dialogue, one girl needs to assent to the “facets of personal sense” proposed by the other. In this case, Gertrude needs to assent to Phyllis. Gerty’s response is poignant: “Oh, Phyllis, oh, my child; who am I to forgive you? Is it a question of forgiveness between us? Oh, Phyllis, my little Phyllis, have you forgotten how I love you?” In this passage, Gertrude affirms Phyllis’s sentiments. Her response resembles the second half of the aforementioned verse, Matthew 14:31: “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” Jesus poses this as a rhetorical question: if Peter has faith in Jesus, for what

reason should he have doubts? His question implies that Peter should have known he was protected all along. The questions in Gertrude's testament emphasize a similar point: Phyllis should never have doubted Gertrude's capacity for forgiveness and love. She forgives Phyllis, transforming her pain and suffering into absolution. By forgiving one another, they create a "collective meaning" for their discourse: absolution and healing develop out of intimate relationships with women. The exchange between the two sisters is what allows Gertrude to fully embrace not just masculinity, but femininity. Throughout the narrative, Gerty is often restricted by her resistance to what she is feeling. She is plagued with doubts about her emotions and her choices, hence her hesitance to confront Darrell. This moment marks Gerty's liberation from the suffering, anxiety, and helplessness that results from androcentric fragmentation. Her identity-dialogue with Phyllis is the affirmation Gerty needs to trust her instincts and have confidence in herself and her decisions. Shortly after Phyllis's funeral, the final rupture in the novel, Gertrude finds herself standing in their photography studio, just a few days from the anniversary of their father's death. Gerty's experience with Phyllis provokes both the peak rupture and the vital healing that she needs before she can enter the mirror phase.

The chapter in which the mirror scene occurs opens with an epigraph of the same verse that resembled Gertrude and Phyllis's identity-dialogue: Matthew 14:31. As noted earlier, in order for Gertrude to enter the mirror phase, she needs to embody both Rachel *and* Christ. During her interaction with Phyllis, Gertrude became Christ, and the inclusion of this epigraph at her moment of reunification signifies the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy. The mirror scene begins with Gertrude's self-reflection. She thinks about the "rapid succession of events" that occurred since her father's death, reflecting

that the result often places people in “new spheres” (Levy 186). This concept parallels Sapphic self-fragmentation: a series of ruptures that allow movement between the two traditional Victorian spheres. She further reflects that there is usually at least one person who, “after the storm is over, finds himself stranded and desolate, no further advanced on his journey than before.” The “waters [have not] drowned him,” but he is “shattered, and weary with the struggle,” “permanently disabled for further travelling.” In the narrative, Phyllis is this “desolate” character. She does not drown because Gertrude carries her home and embraces her. However, Phyllis’s death does leave her “permanently disabled from further travelling.” Breaking this train of thought, Gertrude’s rises suddenly, “walking across the room to the mirror.” Rather than remaining bogged down in her “desolate” metaphor, she finds the faith to “walk across the water,” so to speak. Looking in the mirror, she thinks about Lucy Snowe’s words in Charlotte Brontë’s novel, *Villette*:

I saw myself in the glass, in my mourning dress, a faded, hollow-eyed vision. Yet I thought little of the wan spectacle. [The blight, I believed, was chiefly external:] I still felt life at life’s sources. (Brontë 37)

In this passage, Lucy has just been called a “worn-out creature.” Despite her appearance, Lucy believes that the “blight” is external. Her afflictions and tribulations are not a part of who she is, and she still feels “the capacity for growth... and continual change” (“life”). In the same way, Gertrude’s affliction, androcentric fragmentation, is no longer internalized. Looking in the mirror, she recognizes herself as a woman with the “capacity for growth” and “change” because her identity is no longer broken. After looking in the mirror, her attitude changes. Gertrude “knew that one day she would be up again, fighting

the old fight, not only for existence, but for happiness itself,” reflecting that “much, indeed, lay behind her, but there was still the greater part of her life to be lived.”

Gertrude does not feel helpless or disheartened anymore. Now that she has reclaimed agency over her body, identity, and voice, she finally has a sense of unity and, therefore, a sense of bodily autonomy. She is no longer living to exist; she is hopeful, and she knows that there is a “greater part of her life to be lived.” As Rachel, she broke out of the oppressive feminine sphere, and as Christ she saved her sister and, in turn, herself. Because she is the “lamenting matriarch” for women, Gertrude’s voice becomes a collective voice for all women whose voices have been silenced: her fight is their fight, and her salvation is their salvation. In this respect, Levy’s narrative subverts patriarchal norms *and* communicates feminist ideology through its female characters.

As I noted earlier, other than the controversy surrounding Phyllis’s character, the primary criticism that scholars have about *The Romance of a Shop* concerns the final chapter and the epilogue. In the final scenes of the novel, all of the sisters end up married, and two of the sisters have children. Critics argue that the orthodox ending of Levy’s novel seems rushed and regressive compared to the rest of the plot. However, focusing on Gertrude in particular, I argue that her marriage at the end of the novel is actually a part of her progress. Gertrude ends up marrying Lord Watergate—a widowed man that she worked with earlier in the novel. Throughout the narrative, Gertrude is consumed by work. Between taking care of her sisters and running their photography business, she never finds time for herself, nor does she pursue any relationships. She and Lord Watergate interact on quite a few occasions, often in a work setting and sometimes at social gatherings. Neither of them explicitly express interest in one another, though Lord

Watergate does look out for Gertrude. For example, he goes with her to Darrell's house when she gets Phyllis, but he respects Gertrude's request when she asks him to wait outside. Just after the mirror scene, Lord Watergate drops by the Lorimers' photography studio. During his conversation with Gertrude, Lord Watergate startles her with a blunt statement concerning her wellbeing:

Miss Lorimer, first of all you must do something to get well. You will break down altogether if you don't... you have been looking after everybody else; doing everybody's work, bearing everybody's troubles.

[Who will keep the keeper]? (Levy 187)

Prior to her identity-dialogue with Phyllis, Gertrude did look after everyone else, "doing everybody's work" and "bearing everybody's troubles." She cares deeply for her sisters, largely at her own expense. After spending the majority of the novel suppressing her feelings and mistrusting herself, Gertrude breaks down during her conversation with Phyllis. Letting go of the anxiety and agony she harbored on everyone's behalf is the reason Gerty leaves self-fragmentation for the mirror phase. Lord Watergate's concern for her is valid, and he does not push anymore than that. Disconcerted by his affection, Gerty "rose involuntarily" and "stood rather helplessly before him." She felt "confused" and "distrustful of herself"—afraid because "closer human relations" had so long brought her "unutterable, unending" sorrow. In this moment, she seems to regress into her old, uncertain self again. Sensing this, Lord Watergate asks her whether he had come too soon, to which she replies, "oh, it is too soon, too soon." Once he leaves, Gertrude sinks into self-doubt. She wonders whether happiness is possible for her and suppresses her

feelings once again. By rejecting Lord Watergate, Gertrude is actually backsliding in her progression as a character.

At the start of the final chapter, Gerty sits alone in the studio. Conny mailed Gertrude a letter announcing her engagement, and Gertrude notes that “her own plans for the present were vague” (Levy 190). She thinks about Lord Watergate, worrying about what he must think of her. She reflects on her own feelings about him:

Oh, if only she could tell him that it was... the greatness of what he offered that made her... reject [him]... She had told him not to return and he had taken her at her word. She was paying the penalty, which her sex always pays one way or another, for her struggles for strength and independence. She was denied, she told herself with a touch of rueful humour, the gracious feminine privilege of changing her mind.
(Levy 192).

The internal conflict Gertrude experiences is the result of an inversion of the traditional spheres. As a woman that wants “strength and independence,” Gerty lets her fear overwhelm her affection for Lord Watergate. Her friends “labeled her a strong-minded woman,” which, ironically, altered rather than removed the confines of her social sphere. The social barriers around the “strong-minded woman” denied her femininity—a fate that seems equally debilitating for Gertrude now. As the “symbolic mother” of a united front, Gerty is meant to meld the gender spheres, not break off into a separate one with new strings attached. In the midst of her heartache, Lord Watergate returns. Gertrude tells him that she “was afraid” because she has “suffered very much.” The moment they reconnect, Gerty experiences another moment of catharsis. She embraces her emotions and “all that

was good and great and beautiful [in life] gathered new meaning and became the sole realities” (192). She notes that her “photography... has not been crowded out by domestic duties,” implying that she finds balance. Rather than choosing one sphere or the other, Gertrude embraces both. If feminism truly recognizes equality of the sexes and appreciates both femininity and masculinity, it would be hypocritical to diminish Gertrude’s character for how she feels.

Amy Levy’s protagonist, Gertrude, is no less progressive than Dixon’s Mary Erle. By breaking herself apart and rebuilding her identity through intimate relationships with other women, Gertrude attains the Sapphic mirror-self. It is for this reason that she is able to reflect and make decisions that defy patriarchal norms. In moments of rupture, Gertrude’s doubts about her position in society destabilize androcentric structures, enabling her to move between masculine and feminine spheres. Her relationships with her sisters and Constance give her a Sapphic space to communicate feminist ideology. As Rachel weeping, Gerty cries out on behalf of all women. She points out injustices and inconsistencies in her culture, thus challenging the systemic oppression of women in Victorian society. Because fiction opens “readers’ eyes to new perspectives” and prompts “critical reflection,” Amy Levy’s defiant characters become representatives of real Victorian women. They can see themselves in Gertrude, Conny, and Phyllis the same way Gerty sees herself in Charlotte Brontë’s Lucy Snowe. In a way, my Sapphic model extends to the intimate relationships between fictional female characters and the women that read their stories as well. Much like Sappho influenced New Woman writers, the fiction, plays, and poetry written by women have resonated with readers for generations. From the medieval *trobairitz* to writers like Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf,

and Toni Morrison, the female voice in women's fiction and poetry has been a pivotal part of social change. They inspire us and alter our perception of a woman's place in the world. They are the voices of the "powerless," crying out to expose injustices and inconsistencies the same way that Gertrude Lorimer and Mary Erle do. Unfortunately, when the resistance narratives by women writers begin to flicker, there is always someone looking to snuff out the flame. Critics and satirists came crawling out of the woodwork in an attempt to assassinate Sappho's character when she was revived in the late nineteenth century. Because of her radical influence on female writers, Sappho became a threat to patriarchal structures. In the following chapter, I will examine public reactions to the Sapphic by looking at several excerpts pulled from late nineteenth-century periodicals.

4. SAPPHIC ASSASSINATION: WHEN JOURNALISTS WEAPONIZE SAPPHO

The deadness is the great point in which Sappho has the call on them all.

*Tell [the female poetesses] that if they can catch up with her on the
deadness, nobody will ask anything more of them.*

“Sappho’s Record,” Puck

In the early 1880s, discussions of Sappho and the New Woman often came in the form of criticism because strong, sexual women were regarded as problematic, “a moral cancer” scourging civilized society. One critic asserted that the New Woman, “with her head full of... ‘ologies and ‘isms, with sex-problems and heredity,” had lost her sense of “humour” so that her novels were merely “pamphlets, sermons, or treatises in disguise” (Stutfield 241). He describes their writing as “pathological,” a sign of a “decaying race,” that is, “as a rule, robustly ungrammatical.” Scathing reviews like this one were not uncommon since Sappho and the New Woman alike challenged conservative ideologies. As noted earlier, Wharton’s 1885 publication of Sappho’s biography and translations destabilized the Victorian hierarchy—much like New Woman writers subverted conservative notions about women through fiction, poetry, and journalism. The resurgence and re-identification of Sappho motivated female readers and writers, like Levy and Dixon, to create fictional worlds that gave female characters agency. The perception that women “were crossing gender lines and rejecting what was supposedly natural” created anxiety among conservative circles (Nelson ix). This “fear of deviance” is “obvious in many articles that appeared in periodicals during the 1890s.” To preserve patriarchal standards, men needed to diffuse any dissenting voices that could further dismantle their power over women, and satire became their frontline of attack. In Victorian periodicals, “satire served as an instrument of sociopolitical protest but also as

a reinforcement of class, imperialist, and antifeminist ideologies” (O’Cinneide). The nineteenth-century satire concerning Sappho was largely aimed at reinforcing separate spheres through antifeminist caricatures and disparaging articles. Because the New Woman was conflated with Sappho, satirists’ assassination of Sappho’s character was, by extension, an assassination of the New Woman. These articles served as a final, desperate effort to re-stabilize male-dominated societal normativity. In this chapter, I will analyze Sapphic assassination by examining three satirical articles from nineteenth-century periodicals, namely *Puck* and *Punch*. I will first examine an article that satirizes the New Woman directly. Analyzing this article before the two articles attacking Sappho will provide context for the criticisms and methods used by authors in Sapphic assassination.

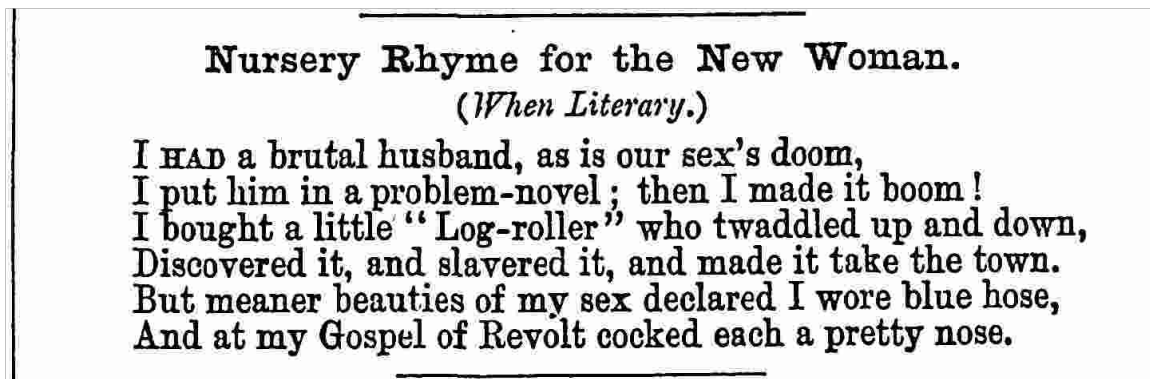


Figure 1. “Nursery Rhyme for the New Woman” *Punch*, 1895

In this “Nursery Rhyme,” the author pigeonholes the New Woman character using several stereotypes (See Figure 1). First, they attack New Women by ridiculing one of their more popular genres of writing: the “problem-novel.” The problem-novel refers to a narrative that addresses social issues like gender, race, or class; *The Romance of a Shop* and *The Story of a Modern Woman* are prime examples of this genre. Here, the author portrays the problem-novel as a petty response to a “brutal husband,” diminishing the

female writer's credibility and glossing over the "brutal husband." By extension, the author attacks the entire body of problem-novels, insinuating that it should not be considered a respectable genre. The subject in the rhyme also buys a "log-roller," satisfying the stereotype of the New Woman as mannish. Log-rollers are tools used by lumberjacks, and logrolling eventually became a sport; either way the term is intended, the implications within the context of Victorian culture are masculine. After complaining that the "meaner beauties" ridiculed her, the speaker references the groups of women that would protest on behalf of women's suffrage, "the revolting daughters." The "Gospel of Revolt," then, refers to her proclamations about their movement. However, the second half of the line says that she "cocked each a pretty nose," meaning that she "cocked a snook" at the other girls. This is a term for a "gesture formed by holding the thumb to the tip of the nose and spreading the fingers... [or] wagging the fingers" ("cocking a snook"). References to this gesture were "relatively common in England in the 19th century, almost always referring to schoolboys." Asserting that a woman would do something so juvenile and boyish at what should be considered an important event suggests that the event must not be so important after all. The image of the New Woman that the author creates is childish, insolent, and insignificant. The use of the nursery rhyme as the literary form merely heightens the impact of the author's ridicule.

By emphasizing the New Woman's negative stereotypes, the author of the "Nursery Rhyme" perpetuates negative views surrounding the New Woman movement. As noted earlier, the same sort of approach is used in attacks on Sappho. For example, descriptions of the New Woman as androgynous, mannish, unqualified, and insignificant are likewise used in Sapphic satire. The following two articles illustrate this notion.

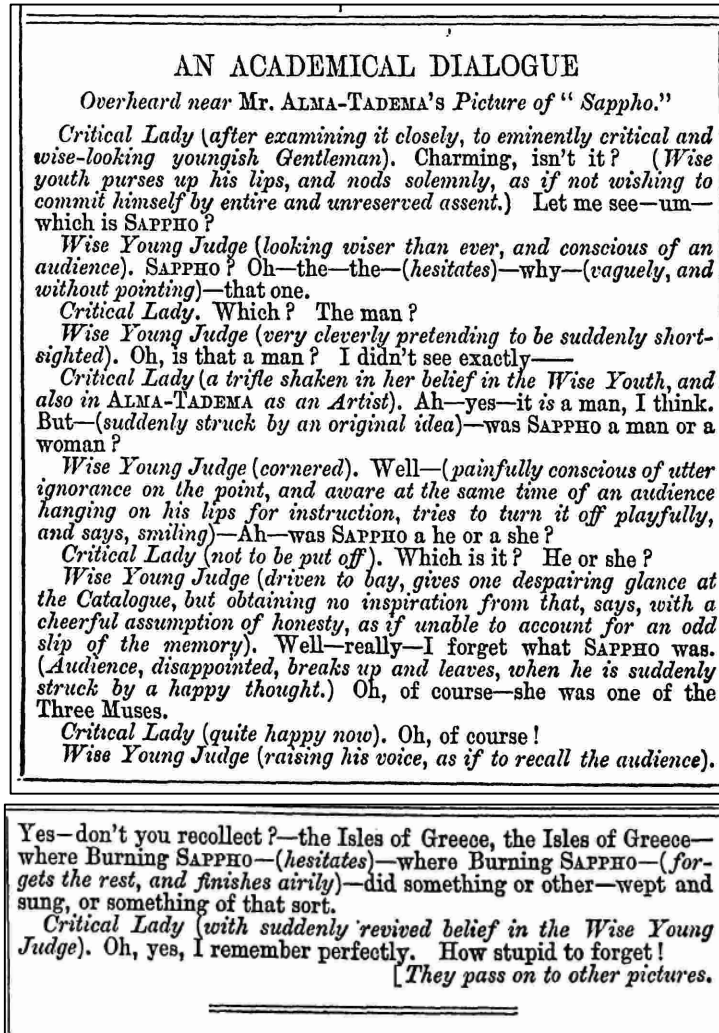


Figure 2. "An Academical Dialogue" *Punch*, May 1881

In "An Academical Dialogue," a "Critical Lady" and a "Wise Young Judge" discuss whether Sappho was a man or a woman (See Figure 2). Their conversation emphasizes Sappho's androgyny the same way the author of the "Nursery Rhyme" labels the New Woman boyish. Particularly vicious critics of the New Woman called her "the desexualized half-man," an "athletic, cigar-smoking gender invert" that was unfeminine and mannish (Farmer 13). The implication here is that autonomy, intelligence, and notoriety are facets of the masculine domain, and if a woman desires or possesses these qualities, she *must* be less of a woman. Despite Sappho's fame, the Wise Young Judge

cannot seem to remember the basis for her success. Considering her status during the Victorian era, his ignorance suggests indifference, as though she is not *worth* remembering. He eventually incorrectly identifies her as a “Muse” that “wept and sung or something” (226). This oversight depreciates her significance in history, implying that, despite her influence, the fact that she is a woman somehow makes her less memorable. Constructing Sappho as an insignificant, androgynous figure mirrors many satirical New Woman sketches circulating around the same time, and it binds Sappho to these women. By placing them in the same category, the article essentially asserts that New Women are also unfeminine and will, like Sappho, be insignificant and forgotten.

A satirical article in *Puck* uses a similar approach (See Figure 3). It is framed as a response to Annette G., a “young lady” that inquires about Semiramis. According to Greek mythology, Semiramis was the daughter of a goddess and a king who, after her father’s death, “ruled for many years and became one of the founders of Babylon” (“Semiramis”). A queen and a conqueror, she holds a significant place in historical legend. However, *instead* of discussing Semiramis, the author discusses Sappho. This suggests that the two women are interchangeable, despite existing hundreds of years apart and leading different lives. The entire article asserts that the value Sappho possesses relies entirely on the fact that she is dead; nothing else about her or Semiramis’s life and influence is mentioned. The speaker insists that “there isn’t an editor in this country who doesn’t love Sappho for being dead,” and “there isn’t an editor who doesn’t wish that the rest of the female poetesses would emulate her bright example” (197). The speaker then instructs Annette to relay this information to any aspiring female poets in her life: like Sappho and Semiramis, creative young women are better off dead.

SAPPHO'S RECORD.

ANNETTE G.—You're the young lady who wanted to know who Semiramis was, are you? Well, Annette, we will tell you all about Sappho.

Sappho was a poetess. She was a female poetess. She is now dead, among other things. All that is left of her now in this great throbbing universe, sparkling and palpitating with myriad forms of life and happiness, is her deadness. But there is enough of that left to last her a long while yet. She will never need be any deader than she is now. If she stays as dead as she is now she will stand a good chance alongside of any other corpse on the shining roll of history. Every year adds to the grim solidity of her deadness.

And, O Annette G., if you could only realize on what a pinnacle of superiority to all living female poetesses her deadness places her! We can realize it. The living female poetesses are always with us. But Sappho, dear, gentle, considerate Sappho, is dead. There isn't an editor in this country who doesn't love Sappho for being dead. There isn't an editor who doesn't wish that the rest of the female poetesses would emulate her bright example.

If you know any female poetesses, Annette G., just put them on to this beautiful quality of Sappho's. Tell them they needn't mind about building fine poems. That is a side issue. The deadness is the great point in which Sappho has the call on them all. Tell them that if they can catch up with her on the deadness, nobody will ask anything more of them.

Never forget, Annette G., that we love Sappho for her deadness.

Figure 3. "Sappho's Record" *Puck*, 1884

Similar to the article in *Punch*, this article creates a binding relationship between modern young women and powerful women in history in a destructive way. As illustrated in my previous chapters, New Woman authors frequently invoked images of powerful women to strengthen their female characters or reinforce feminist ideology; Amy Levy was particularly keen on this method in both her poetry and fiction. The impact of her revisions to longstanding views of powerful women in history is succinctly summarized in a review of Levy's "Xantippe." The author of the review proclaims that all women "feel the correctness of Miss Levy's divination of the true character of Xantippe, and turn at once from the man-made estimate to hers" ("In Memoriam" 8). The author

acknowledges that the story itself is “man-made,” implying that the original account was projected through a strictly masculine lens. By stating that women “turn at once” from the “man-made” rendering of Xantippe to Levy’s account of her “true character,” the author is validating the “woman-made” version. The author of “Sappho’s Record,” on the other hand, distorts this approach so that the connection between historical women and modern women is disgraceful rather than empowering. By ridiculing powerful women in history and paralleling them to creative young writers, satirical articles sought to discourage female readers from joining New Women in their pursuit for equality, thus reinforcing the patriarchal power structures already in place.

The aforementioned articles attempted to keep Sappho’s identity broken in an effort to deepen separation between gender spheres. As noted in chapter one, male writers frequently appropriated Sapphic fragmentation, producing “degenerate, corrupt” versions of her in an effort to demonize the character of *both* Sappho and the women that emulate her (Reynolds 205). Manipulating her image reinforced the patriarchal structures that Wharton’s publication disrupted—the objective being that if men could reduce the impact of Wharton’s publication, perhaps they could reduce the resistance provoked by the New Woman movement. Diabolizing powerful women like Sappho and Semiramis was intended to discourage modern young women from admiring them, which would, in turn, inhibit their ability to develop a collective Sapphic voice. Journalistic efforts to constrain Sappho’s influence were clearly futile, though, since her image as an intellectual, representative woman remained intact well into the twentieth century and even now.

Although satire is often wielded as a weapon against the powerful, the examples discussed here reveal that much of it was also used to reinforce oppressive ideology. In

an attempt to diminish the progression of New Woman feminist philosophies, nineteenth-century journalists attacked their credibility, ridiculed their beliefs, and demeaned the powerful women they admired, like Sappho—all this in an effort to preserve the “good ol’ days” of what they considered to be civilized men and women. Victorian politics were largely rooted in traditional religious values that also happened to be deeply antifeminist. An article published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1895 explicitly expresses these sentiments:

In artistic and ethical matters most people are still what Mr. Grant Allen contemptuously calls “average Philistines”—and long may they remain so. In other words, they adhere to the old-fashioned ideas of social order and decency. At the same time, our age like every other, has its ugly features and its special dangers that threaten it... Yet I cannot help thinking that Dr. Nordau’s charge of “degeneration” ... as a malady peculiar to our time is justified by the facts... It is a bad sign when people grow proud of their diseases, especially if the disease is one which, if left unchecked, will poison the springs of national life.

(Stutfield 241)

The expression “average Philistines,” usually meant as an insult, refers to people “who are hostile or indifferent to culture and the arts” (“philistine”). However, the author, Hugh Stutfield, suggests that it is something men and women should embrace because it indicates adherence to “old-fashioned ideas of social order and decency.” He also validates Nordau’s philosophy which asserted that “nineteenth-century sophisticated society... placed an intolerable stress on the human body and mind,” and he believed that

“modern art and thought were the effect of this gathering burden” (Pick 17). In other words, Nordau considered the “radical” ideas produced in the art and writing of decadents and New Women alike to be a disease in Victorian society. As such, Nordau advocated for regressive policies and censorship in an attempt to combat what he considered widespread immorality and uncivilized behavior. Stutfield argues that Nordau’s concept of “degeneration” *is* particularly relevant in his own time, asserting that artists and intellectuals have grown “proud of their diseases.” Furthermore, he says that degenerates like decadents and New Women will, “if left unchecked,” “poison the springs of national life.” The “diseases” that afflicted New Women consisted of views that they should not be restricted to the feminine sphere; that they should be regarded as equals and given opportunities in work, politics, and other public spaces. The Victorian “national life” Stutfield refers to is patriarchal, almost exclusively prioritizing men and *their* needs; this implies that the poisonous philosophies of New Women would dissolve those patriarchal structures, hence the fearful, aggressive backlash that progressive women inspired in conservative men.

By embracing Sapphic fragmentation and a collective Sapphic voice regardless of ridicule, New Women writers were able to create female characters that reject the “national life” excluding and oppressing them. It is clear from the previous articles that their feat was not an easy one. New Women were fighting against a culture that had for so long conditioned them to believe that their position in the domestic sphere was natural, facilitated not socially or politically, but biologically and morally because of their sex. It is why so much of their writing is plagued with conflicting ideas about their place in the world. There is so much scrutiny and criticism leveraged against Victorian women, but

their efforts are what laid the groundwork for the more radical waves of feminism thereafter. Modern readers, and even scholars, have a tendency to hold women in history to standards formed long after their time. I asserted in chapter one that the relationship between New Women and modern feminism is better conceptualized as roots to a stem. I wholeheartedly believe this to be true, and it is not limited to New Women. Feminism is layered and complicated, but in order to understand modern feminism, I think it is vital that we understand and respect its roots—and those roots run deep. There are so many subliminal prejudices imbedded in our culture, and you cannot remove the weed by cutting it at the stem. Even now, we are seeing a regression in feminist efforts. There is an “anti-feminist” movement spearheaded by strong, independent women, and this movement begets a critical question: why, after centuries of instability and oppression, would modern women fight for something so retrogressive? I’m certain isolating a diagnosis for such a complex issue would not be an easy task. However, I think it is interesting to note the similarities between the treatment of progressive women in Victorian England and the treatment of modern feminists. For example, the same way Sappho and the New Woman were destructively caricatured in their own time, modern feminists are often depicted by journalists as vulgar, aggressive, hypersexual, man-hating fanatics. Ironically, many modern women, like Victorian women, have accepted this distorted image of the feminist without question. It seems we are losing sight of the collective Sapphic identity that binds us to the generations of women that came before us. Through the development of my Sapphic model, I hope to establish a distinctive foothold within the growing body of scholarship on women’s literature and Sapphic studies—an

intertextual approach with the potential to help future scholars examine and explain the dissonance that afflicts modern feminism and the feminists that came before us.

APPENDIX SECTION

Troilus & Cressida, Act 1, Scene 2

Kirk, Thomas. *Troilus & Cressida, Act 1, Scene 2*. 1800, London, England.

Description from “Shakespeare Gallery (Small Series)” by John and Josiah Boydell,

The British Museum: On a street, Cressida leans against the plinth of a large urn with

relief decoration, speaking with Pandarus beside her in feathered turban and cloak,

pointing to Troilus and soldiers as they ride past beyond at left. Etching and Engraving.



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