“Steel Must Seek Steel”:

An Exploration of Sapphic Modernism

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INTRODUCTION

When my high school English teacher introduced me to Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” when I was seventeen, she sparked my interest in women poets and in feminist theory. After graduation from high school, I learned about the concept of intersectional feminism, which brings to light the intersection of various systems of oppression—sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, colonialism, and so on. I became increasingly interested in the ways intersectionality determines privilege and shapes identity, and intersectional feminism has served as the defining lens for much of the writing I’ve done as an undergraduate. During my three years as an English major at the University of Nebraska, I have written countless feminist critiques for various classes, and I have worked with the intersections of gender, race, and class, but I have not yet had the opportunity to do a project focused on the intersection of female and queer identities. I also enjoyed reading the work of H.D. and Amy Lowell and was interested in learning more about the lives of these poets, as well as how their sexualities influenced their poetry, so I chose to conduct research on Sapphic (that is, regarding women who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction to other women) modernist writers and the interactions of their gender, sexualities, and bodies of work.

For time and organization’s sake, I focused my research on four Sapphic modernist writers—H.D., Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf (though other writers, like Edna St. Vincent Millay and Djuna Barnes, occasionally appeared in my research). I used Christianne Miller’s “Gender, Sexuality, and the Modernist Poem” from The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry as a jumping-off point, which directed me toward Lowell’s poetry, H.D.’s prose, and Gertrude Stein’s “Lifting Belly.” Though she was not a poet, Virginia Woolf’s name
kept popping up in the sources I consulted, so I chose to make her life and work a focal point of my research as well. After “Gender, Sexuality, and the Modernist Poem,” I turned to the UNL Libraries online catalog, which led me to two excellent resources: The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage and Lesbian Texts and Contexts. From there, I mainly followed rabbit trails—one article would mention another, which would lead me to a poem or a story, which would lead me to yet another article…and the cycle continued.

With the research I have conducted so far, I could write a good-sized paper on the intersection of gender and sexual orientation in the work of Sapphic modernist writers, as well as the impacts of these authors on modernism as a whole. Of the four writers I researched, three of them—Lowell, Stein, and Woolf—were lesbians while H.D. was bisexual. Lowell, Stein, and Woolf all saw their attraction to women as inspiration: Lowell wrote countless sonnets to her partner, Ada Russell; Stein’s story “Q.E.D.” is rooted in autobiography, and she wrote explicitly about her lesbianism in her poetry, and Woolf famously proclaimed, “Women alone stir my imagination” (cited in Herrmann). H.D., on the other hand, saw her bisexuality as a creative block, a struggle which she addresses in her poem “She Contrasts Herself with Hippolyta.” While these four women expressed—and struggled with—their sexual identities in a number of ways, all four of them exhibited courage in writing about Sapphic themes, characters, and relationships during a time when lesbianism was perverse and invisible. Furthermore, their rejection of traditional ideas about sexuality fits nicely with Ezra Pound’s modernist maxim “Make it New!”—by writing about female queer identities, Lowell, Stein, Woolf, and H.D. subverted patriarchal norms, such as heterosexuality and the idea that women who engage in and enjoy sexual acts are impure, thus redefining ideas of sexuality and gender.
In “Expatriate Sapphic Modernism: Entering Literary History,” Shari Benstock argues for a redefinition of the modernist canon “in ways that acknowledge its Sapphic elements.” She maintains that “[Virginia] Woolf’s imagination was fueled by Sapphic erotic power,” a power which also drove the work of Djuna Barnes, H.D., and Gertrude Stein. Since the publication of Lesbian Texts and Contexts in 1990, people have generally become more accepting of gay and lesbian identities, and I imagine most modernist scholars today do acknowledge the work of the aforementioned Sapphic writers as significant. (Our 402 course serves as evidence for this—we read work by H.D., Stein, Amy Lowell, and Edna St. Vincent Millay in a course designed as an overview of modernist poetry.) However, Benstock’s argument remains relevant—because of institutionalized patriarchy and homophobia, male and straight writers will always force queer female writers into the shadows. Therefore, seeking out and studying the work of these Sapphic writers remains crucial and will always require a little extra effort.


Though Penelope J. Engelbrecht’s “‘Lifting Belly is a Language’: The Postmodern Lesbian Subject” discusses lesbian relationships in postmodernism, many
aspects of her argument apply to the lesbian relationships depicted in modernist poetry. She asserts that postmodernist lesbian texts “present an alternative literary mode, an alteration of patriarchal literary conventions.” This “alternative literary mode” is also present in the work of Sapphic modernists, who subvert traditional ideas about gender and sexuality.

In her piece, Engelbrecht explores the power dynamics in lesbian relationships and in lesbian texts. While “one lesbian may exercise greater (social) power than the other,” Engelbrecht argues, “if each is stripped of patriarchal distinctions (e.g., gender, class, race), those selves are ontologically identical.” I found Engelbrecht’s exploration of power helpful while reading Gertrude Stein’s “Q.E.D.,” in which the imbalance of power between the three main characters is largely due to the “patriarchal distinction” of class rather than gender.


H.D.’s “She Contrasts Herself with Hippolyta” draws from Greek mythology and depicts a speaker who reflects on Hippolyta’s hatred of Theseus, her struggle to love their son Hippolytus, and her eventual devotion to Artemis. The poem can be read as an exploration of bisexuality: the speaker states that “steel must seek steel,” suggesting that Hippolyta is meant to be with Artemis, but she also notes the spark of “sword against flint” when Hippolyta and Theseus clash. When she returns to Artemis, Hippolyta prays, “strength of white beach, / rock of mountain land, / forever to you, Artemis, dedicate.” While the poem is not as explicit as, say, Gertrude Stein’s “Lifting Belly” in its
illustration of Sapphic sexuality, the poem clearly depicts the devotion of one woman to another.


The Poetry Foundation’s “H.D.” is a biography of Imagist poet Hilda Doolittle (H.D.). The article is more in-depth than the short biography of H.D. in The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry and provides more information on H.D.’s personal life, in particular her struggle with her bisexuality as a creative block. The Poetry Foundation also pointed me toward H.D.’s poems “Phaedra,” “She Contrasts Herself with Hippolyta,” and “She Rebu...
sexually and aesthetically.” While some of her major works (Mrs. Dalloway, Orlando) depict lesbian characters and relationships, Woolf’s personal attractions and emotional attachments are, for the most part, not present in her writing.


David Leon Higdon’s article offers a broad overview of the homophobia of modernism in addition to information about queer modernist writers and texts. Interestingly, though not surprisingly given the time period, the number of significant queer modernist writers is greater than “the number of works addressing same-sex themes, depicting gay and lesbian characters, or exploring the relationships between these individuals and their societies.” Identity often plays a crucial role and has a significant presence in art, but when one’s identity is taboo, exploring and expressing it through art becomes difficult, even dangerous. The article made me want to seek out those few works that address gay and lesbian relationships and examine the themes of identity and sexuality within them.


In her book The Formation of 20th Century Queer Autobiography, Georgia Johnston looks at the autobiographical works of modernist writers Vita Sackville-West,
Virginia Woolf, H.D., and Gertrude Stein. Her introduction “Queering the Text” explores the idea that lesbian “autobiographies undermine the connections patriarchy makes between identity and sexuality, and they redefine both sexuality and identity.” Furthermore, she argues that “modernist lesbian writers manipulated discourse in order to express lesbianism, despite its label of perversion and invisibility.” While all art is political in one way or another, writing explicitly about lesbian characters and relationships subverts the norms of a patriarchal, heterosexual-centric society. Johnston’s idea that these Sapphic modernists “manipulated discourse” and “[redefined] both sexuality and identity” connects well with the “Make it New” aspect of modernism we studied in class, which was nice to keep in mind as I conducted my research.


Like Anne Hermann’s biography of Virginia Woolf, Carolyn Leste Law’s piece on Imagist poet Amy Lowell offers insight into Lowell’s life and work, providing a more in-depth look at her sexuality than the biography in our Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry. Unapologetic in her appearance and her depiction of erotic lesbianism in her poetry, Lowell’s work was often “dismissed on personal bases—her gender, her size, her sexuality, her personal style.” Law’s article excellently depicts the intersections of Lowell’s gender, her sexuality, and her work.

Similar to Shari Benstock’s “Expatriate Sapphic Modernism,” Heather Love’s “Introduction: Modernism at Night” tackles the subject of “marginal modernisms,” focusing on what she calls “queer modernism.” Love argues that modernism as a whole consists of many sub-movements—smaller, “marginal” modernisms such as queer modernism, female modernism, and African-American modernism. By dividing modernism into these smaller groups, Love’s piece helped me look at queer modernism as its own genre. While the topic of “queer modernism” is still far broader than my research on Sapphic modernism, it still allows for a much more focused approach to modernism than the broad overview style of our course.


I used Christianne Miller’s “Gender, Sexuality, and the Modernist Poem,” which was one of the materials we read in class, as a springboard for my research portfolio. The article provides a broad overview of female modernism and queer modernism, and it directed me toward the work of H.D., Amy Lowell, and Gertrude Stein.


“Lifting Belly” is a long poem in which Gertrude Stein writes explicitly about lesbianism. The poem reads like a conversation between two (female) lovers, perhaps
lying in bed. The romantic and sexual attraction between the two women in the poem is undeniable: “Kiss my lips. She did,” the speaker writes, “Kiss my lips again she did. / Kiss my lips over and over and over again she did.” Unlike most of the Stein poems we read in class, “Lifting Belly” explicitly depicts a lesbian relationship, which is significant. The poem not only reveals that Stein’s sexual orientation influenced her writing, but it also challenges traditional views of sexuality by depicting sexual attraction between two women.


While “Q.E.D.” is a short story rather than a poem, I have included it in my bibliography because it provides excellent insight into Gertrude Stein’s personal life. Her “coming out story,” “Q.E.D.” is the autobiographical tale of Adele (Stein), a young woman who falls in love with another woman named Helen. Helen seduces Adele but ultimately leaves her for Mable, a wealthy woman who uses her money and passion to dominate Adele. Based purely on content, the story is extraordinary. Written in 1903 but not published until 1950, “Q.E.D.” centers on the lives and the relationships of the three aforementioned women, who interact with each other in explicitly romantic and sexual ways. The story features no male characters—it is clearly written for women, and, more specifically, for Sapphic women. It reveals Stein’s willingness to write openly about her sexuality, as well as her beginnings of experimentation with radical subject matter characteristic of modernism.

Georgina Taylor’s *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers 1913-1946* identifies and discusses a “public sphere” consisting of H.D. and other modernist women authors who interacted with one another. The book serves as a reminder that the modernist movement wasn’t a linear succession from one writer to another; rather, these authors were living and working at the same time, often corresponding with one another. Furthermore, *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers* demonstrates that these modernist women worked together, whether intentionally or not, to give each other voice and to get each other’s work out in the world. Woman-run publications like *Poetry* and the *Little Review* provided platforms for female poets—such as Amy Lowell and H.D.—to publish their writing, as well as spaces for these female writers to experiment with form, technique, and the depiction of sexuality.
CONCLUSION

In crafting my research portfolio, I was able to seek out and discover information on a topic that interests me while learning more about the research process. My research on Sapphic modernism allowed me to learn about the lives of several modernist writers whose work I admire, which is always a pleasure for me. Though writing openly about one’s sexuality always takes courage and a willingness to be vulnerable, I was particularly struck by the bravery of these women to express their Sapphic identities when lesbianism was seen as a disease, as perversion, or not seen at all. The project also introduced me to queer theory, with which I was not previously familiar. I knew queer scholarly work existed, but I had not yet had the chance to read or analyze queer critique before this project. I hope to learn more about queer theory, and perhaps write a little of it, as I finish up my English major.

Surprisingly, this was the first major research project I have been required to do in an English class, so a good portion of my time spent on this project was dedicated to figuring out how to actually conduct research on a literary topic. If I’m being completely honest, I should have started the project sooner—I wasn’t prepared for the “snowball effect” which took place as one source directed me to two more, which each led me to four more sources, which each pointed me to six sources, and so on. Once I got going with my research, I found it difficult to stop. Nevertheless, I feel good about the sources I have compiled and am satisfied with my finished portfolio. In addition to academic sources, my research introduced me to a number of poems, novels, and nonfiction works that I would like to read for my own personal enjoyment, so now my “to-read” list is considerably longer.