It is a commonplace that Sappho has been appropriated and misappropriated within and without the ancient world: from Catullus in the first century to Byron in the nineteenth, and more recently Pat Califia's lesbian history entitled *Sapphistries* (Reynolds, 2001: 363). This poet has found herself particularly prone to differing interpretations, not only because of the uniqueness of her poetry, but also because of her fragmentary and enigmatic nature. In this process, 'Sappho' has been tussled over, used and abused for personal, cultural and political purposes. Less well known perhaps was her reception in seventeenth century France – a distinct and exciting period of flux during which there was both sufficient knowledge of the texts, but also no particular established interpretation. The object of my essay will be to scrutinise the battle of competing interpretations that ensued from these particular circumstances. On the one hand, Paris's literary women pioneering the rise of the novel used Sappho as an ancient authority for female writing, erotic expression and also feminine subjectivity. On the other, certain men tried to downplay her poetic genius, and even attempted to eradicate her reputation in order to uphold the literary patriarchy. I will first consider the form of Sappho to which seventeenth-century readers in France had access – her most widely-known fragment, 31, and ancient writers' treatments of her – before proceeding to examine the leading figures on both sides of the argument: Mlle de Scudéry and Mme de La Fayette on the one, and Boileau, Racine and Molière on the other. Their lives and works will be explored to illustrate the way in which they were influenced by, and reacted against, both ancient sources and each other. Ultimately it was those closest to power who were victorious, but not before they, and what they stood for, had been fundamentally shaken.

* * * * *

Although probably less than one per cent of her work remains, only a cursory glance at her poetry reveals both her exceptional status and the dramatic, highly varied reception of Sappho both within and outside the Classical world. Her most famous poem today, and one which was available in Greek, Latin and the vernacular to seventeenth-century French readers, was Fragment 31. Beside any questions of sexuality, Sappho challenges convention in this poem by questioning the erotic power balance: most notably, through her use of the female gaze:

φαίνεταί μοι κῆνος ἴσος θέοισιν
ἔμμεν᾽ ὤνηρ, ὄττις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἆδυ φωνεί-
σας ὐπακούει
καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ᾽ ἦ μὰν

καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ᾽ ἴδω βρόχε᾽, ὤς με φώναι-
σ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ἒν ἔτ᾽ εἴκει,
ἀλλὰ κὰμ μὲν γλῶσσα <μ᾽> ἔαγε, λέπτον
δ᾽ αὔτικα χρῷ πῦρ ὐπαδεδρόμηκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ἒν ὄρημμ᾽, ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ᾽ ἄκουαι,
κὰδ δέ μ᾽ ἴδρως κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ᾽ ὀλίγω ᾽πιδεύης
φαίνομ᾽ ἔμ᾽ αὔτ[ᾳ.
ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ †καὶ πένητα†[1]

This is revolutionary because, as John Berger has argued (2008) as far back as we can examine, woman has always played a passive, objectified role, where the focus is on how she is seen, rather than what she sees. Likewise, Irigaray states, ‘Within [the logic that has dominated the west since the time of the Greeks], the gaze is particularly foreign to female eroticism’. (1985: 101). This is why Fragment 31 has provoked such varied responses over time. Although the poem initially appears to follow convention whereby a male subject desires another woman, as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the subject is, in fact, female. This shocks literary expectations: ‘The woman is a usurper, for she has displaced the male from his role as viewer in the most common literary love triangle: man sees the woman he loves in the arms of *another* man’ (DeJean, 1987: 791). This form of so-called ‘triangular desire’, in the words of René Girard, is unique in the surviving work of the Classical world, and had an immediately-varied reception. It is clear, on one hand, that her work did receive praise in ancient authors. Plato, for instance, supposedly called her the ‘Tenth Muse’ (*AP* 9.506 *cited in* Gosetti-Murray, 2006); more significantly, her 31st fragment was cited and analysed heavily in *On the Sublime*¸ a treatise on literary theory commonly attributed to ‘Longinus’. Here her poetic skill is straightforwardly celebrated, without any issue being raised with respect to her gender or

[1] He seems as fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter. Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast. For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying. But all can be endured, since . . . even a poor man . . .

Sappho, *Fragment 31*, Trans. David A. Campbell

sexuality. From at least the time of Catullus, however, there was a deliberate male attempt to eradicate – and silence – her voice, and indeed those of all women. In his Ode 51, Catullus carried out a near Latin translation of Fr. 31, but replaced the female subject with a male one instead. Likewise, (Pseudo-?)Ovid manipulated Sappho in his *Heroides.* In the last of these fifteen epistolary poems of resentful heroines he has Sappho writing to the young boatman Phaon, who has who left her for a younger woman. By appropriating her voice, the male poet determines her perspective, thereby undermining what Ellen Moers calls 'literary heroinism': 'to tell the woman's side of the love story in her own words' (1978: 147). Moreover, by presenting her in a conventional, irrational fashion, he reduces her to a stereotype. From being the powerful authority for women's writing, he turns her into the object of derision.

It was this strange mixture of a few fragments from the original poet, or those in translation[2], but more commonly, versions accessed through Roman writers, in particular Catullus and Ovid, which were received by the seventeenth-century French. These competing interpretations quickly became a battlefield for what 'Sappho' and more-widely 'Sapphism' could represent. The fragmentary nature (both literally and metaphorically) of what remained meant that historical accuracy was hardly relevant. As is so common in Classical reception, 'Sappho' became a product of seventeenth century cultural debates. On the one hand she could legitimise a woman's subjective expression of passion, as well as represent women's writing more generally. On the other, Sappho's fiction could be manipulated such that she might be employed as a warning to those women eager to follow her literary path. On one side of these battlelines were those pioneering the novel, primarily the preserve of female writers such as Mlle de Scudéry and Mme de La Fayette; and on the other those literary critics, poets and playwrights close to Louis XIV, such as Boileau, Racine and Molière.

* * * * *

DeJean has suggested that 'At no time in the French tradition were women writers more active than from the early seventeenth century to the early eighteenth century, and at no other period was the woman's first-person account of her passion a more viable literary commodity' (1989: 48). Long before similar changes occurred in Britain, the literary *salons* of Mme de Rambouillet and Mme de Sablé, as well as the drawing room of Mme de Scudéry, became centres for the rise of the novel, that medium through which heroines could speak openly from their perspectives. It was furthermore in this period that Sappho's own name was to become synonymous with 'the

[2] Notably Fr. 31 in *On the Sublime* of Longinus, and Fr. 1 in Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

woman writer' (Reynolds, 2001: 99). Indeed, she argues that it may have been Sappho's growing presence in the literary world that led to the desire to promote such female behaviour (1989: 44), and Girard goes so far as to call the 'triangular desire' which we observed in Fr. 31 the origin of the novel (1984).

That very Mlle de Scudéry, often known as the French Sapho[3], is perhaps most representative of those women who sought to carve out their place in literary circles, and who made extensive use of Sappho to achieve this. Her novels were extremely popular at the time of their publication (Chisholm, 1911: 487), and by seizing the reins of Sapphic fiction from Ovid, she used the poet as the heroine for a new female narrative. This is particularly clear in three of her major works. Firstly in 1641, de Scudéry published the *Lettres amoureuses de divers auteurs de ce temps* ('Love letters by various authors of those times'). At one level, these love letters appeared to adhere to established conventions, telling of people mistreated by their lovers, who later denounce them for their crimes. However, much as in Fr. 31, the reader's expectations are confounded. Instead of having the jilted lovers be women, she makes all the 'authors' men (DeJean 1989: 96-99). In this way Scudéry challenges that active-passive role placement suggested by Berger, and restores the spirit of Sappho. The following year de Scudéry produced *Les Femmes illustres ou Les Harangues héroïques*, which gave a group of illustrious women, including Sapho, the chance to defend themselves against what she saw as misrepresentations in history. DeJean notes the word *harangues* in the title, which can best be translated as a complaint 'in the sense of a remonstrance or protest', which turns the letters into attacks on the patriarchy (*ibid.*: 102). In the letter about Sappho, she encourages a young pupil, Erinne, to become a poet (Gillespie, 2021: 333). This is a clear attempt to establish Sappho as 'The Tenth Muse'; where Homer's Muse sang of 'The Wrath of Achilles' (*Il. 1.1*), Sappho sang of female liberation. Indeed, it is easy to imagine Erinne as a pseudonym for Scudéry herself. Finally, it was her most famous novel, *Artamène, ou le Grand Cyrus*, which was to contain Scudéry's fullest treatment of Sappho. Published between 1648 and 1653, this work has the last of its ten volumes entitled *L'Histoire de Sapho*, and illustrates much of what she envisioned for 'Sapphism'. One of the striking elements of this story, for instance, is its autobiographical quality. Commentators have highlighted their physical similarities and the fact that both 'Sapho' and Scudéry were orphaned at an early age and had one brother, (DeJean, 1989: 104). In this way, Scudéry equates herself with Sappho, making herself an example for future women. The two figures are also made to

[3] The most common spelling in seventeenth-century France was with one 'p'. I will use this form when referring to Scudéry's nickname and to her characters.

share personality traits. Goldberg has demonstrated that Sapho and her lover Phaon's relationship is not a marriage, and indeed Sapho declares that marriage is 'unending slavery' (2018: 45); Scudéry herself was never married. The author even has Sapho writing some prose, thus implying that she was her novelistic predecessor. Finally, Sapho is an articulation of the dreams that Scudéry, the French Sapho, had herself. Sapho wants to escape to 'Permesse', a place where she can love freely, write freely and where the unusual can coexist. One of the most telling features of the *Histoire* is the rigour that went into it; every detail of the work was based on ancient commentaries on Sapho (DeJean, 1989: 103-4). Such attention demonstrates how she aspired to produce something more than a novel; by simultaneously being her biographer, Scudéry completely revolutionised the French conception of Sappho (Gillespie, 2021), and made her a legitimate literary predecessor.

An equally powerful figure in this Sapphic movement was Madame de La Fayette. An analysis of her life reveals striking similarities to the biography and ideals of Scudéry. Whilst she did marry, she soon separated herself from her husband, and led the life of a 'single' woman; if Scudéry's Sapho complains of the slavery of marriage, La Fayette broke those bonds. She embarked instead on an active social life with another man in Paris, leaving her husband behind. Furthermore, she was a frequent attendee at, amongst other *salons*, the drawing room of Scudéry, who indeed mentions La Fayette in several of her letters (Larimore de Lara, 1994: 64-69). Such a life is the embodiment of the intellectual, and partially sexual, freedom that women of a certain milieu could access at this time, as well as of what Sappho came to represent for these women.

An exploration of her most famous work, *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), reveals more of the themes discussed by Scudéry and by Sappho herself. Most obviously, *La Princesse* is a work where a woman articulates feminine passions through the voice of female characters, a form of expression previously thought impossible. Moreover, the heroine shows many of the virtues and independence evident in the *Histoire* of Scudéry. Indeed, Odette Virmaux calls the Princess 'un personnage impensable, déplacé, venu d'ailleurs...en somme une créature trop idéale et parfaite pour le monde corrompu de la Cour'[4] (1981: 49) Likewise, the desire to escape to 'Permesse' finds a counterpart in *La Princesse* through the theme of 'repos', a term implying the 'the basic need of the human spirit to escape the stress of life' (Mc Neill, 1993: 26). Mme de Clèves leaves the court during the novel and takes refuge in her country house where she can find independence and brood on her passion for M. de Nemours. Finally, perhaps the most 'Sapphic' motif that

[4] 'an unimaginable, misplaced character, having come from somewhere else…in short a too idealised and perfect creature for the corrupt world of the court', my translation.

appears continually in the novel is the 'gaze'. So central is this idea that de Pree states at the beginning of her essay: '*La Princesse de Clèves*, c'est l'histoire du regard'[5] (1994: 145). Sappho was extraordinary because she wrote poetry where the female character looked, instead of was looked at. A similar tension between erotic subject and object is evident in La Fayette's novel. At the start, the princess cannot help but be subjugated by the male gaze: 'dévorée des yeux de M. De Clèves, de Nemours, et du chevalier de Guise, prise entre leur rivalité, elle demeure comme un bel objet, figée dans son impuissance.'[6]. As the narrative progresses however, the princess learns to rise and take up the 'erotic reins'. One way of doing this is by retreating from the Court to her country house at Coulommiers, that 'other place' so desired by Scudéry's Sapho. But like the real Sappho, she can also take control by becoming the amorous subject, being the gazer rather than the gazed upon. This action is played out in one of the book's most famous moments. Set in her pavilion, the princess is at first depicted as a conventional amorous object; M. de Nemours watches her secretly from outside the building. However, in much the same way as in Fr. 31, the reader is deceived. The princess soon moves to a big table on which lies a portrait of M. de Nemours; 'elle s'assit et se mit à regarder ce portrait avec une attention et une rêverie que la passion seule peut donner'[7]. She uses the intensity of her gaze (*une attention et une reverie*), to completely shift the power balance, and break out of her objectivity (DeJean 1988: 41-43). By becoming the 'gazer', both Sappho and the Princess remove the shackles of the patriarchy and take control, a political as well as a literary statement.

The popularity of both writers is testimony to the extraordinary and ground-breaking nature of their works. Scudéry's writings, for instance, were quickly translated into English, Spanish, Italian, German and Arabic (Stanford, 2011), and readers of La Fayette's novels outside of Paris had to wait months to receive copies (*Gallica*). One of the most influential women of the time, the Marquise de Sévigné, wrote of *La Princesse de Clèves*: 'Elle ne sera pas sitôt oubliée. C'est un petit livre que Barbin nous a donné depuis deux jours, qui me paroît une des plus charmantes choses que j'aie jamais lues'[8]. On the flip side, their success and influence were also demonstrated by the stirring backlash that they received.

[5] '*The Princesse de Clèves*, it's the story about the gaze', my translation.
[6] 'Consumed by the eyes of M. De Clèves, of Nemours, and of the knight de Guise, seized within their rivalry, she lives as a beautiful object, fixed in her impotence', R 148, my translation.
[7] 'She sat down and took to watching this portrait with an attention and a dreaminess that passion only could give', my translation.
[8] 'She will not be forgotten so soon. It's a little book that Barbin gave us two days ago, which seems to me one of the most charming things I have ever read', ref., my translation.

* * * * *

Revolutions provoke reactions, and the literary battle of the seventeenth century was no exception. As the *salons* of Paris, and their novelistic outputs flourished, certain figures, realising that a new female literary output put the patriarchy in fundamental danger, attempted ‘simply to eradicate that female primacy’ (DeJean, 1989: 47). Indeed, it would take the entire careers of some men to achieve their destruction. At the height of this rebound were three friends, all the more dangerous for their proximity to the king: Boileau, Racine and Molière. I shall explore these figures in turn, and consider how they employed their particular authorities – literary theory, tragedy and comedy respectively – to attempt to eradicate Sapphic literary ascendancy.

Boileau[9]’s first explicit, and most famous denunciation of the novel – the female and therefore Sapphic genre – is in a satire named the *Dialogue sur les héros de roman* (1664-5). Although the name suggests a discussion of heroes, the longest section is devoted to a parody and dismissal of Scudéry’s heroines. So violent is his work that at its end, Boileau stages a ritual killing; her creations are first 'stripped' (*dépouillés*) of their deceptive clothing, 'whipped' (*abondamment fustigués*) and then plunged 'head-first' into 'the deepest path of the river Lethe' (218). 'The mountains of ridiculous paper on which their stories are written' are tossed in after them: ‘Scudéry’s punishment for her crimes against the (literary) state’ (*ibid.*: 111-112). In 1674 Boileau reignited his effort when he published a translation for *On the Sublime* by ‘Longinus’. As mentioned earlier, ‘Longinus’ discusses Sappho in a fair and positive manner (DeJean, 1987: 798). Boileau’s treatment of the treatise, on the other hand, is a clear effort to dismantle this. In his translation of the ode itself, Boileau plays down some of the most powerful imagery, changing ‘greener than grass’ to ‘pâle’ (pale), and ‘a cold sweat’ to a ‘frisson’ (shiver). Furthermore, he dwells heavily in his commentary on the fact that the woman is ‘mad’, further reducing the work’s literary effect and the woman’s literary authority (*ibid.*: 798-800). Although some contemporaries, such as Tanneguy Le Fèvre and Charles Perrault denounced his treatment of ‘Longinus’ and Sappho (1989: 94), the good favour that he enjoyed from the Roi Soleil, having been made his historiographer in 1677, gave him immense power, a power that was ultimately to stamp out this nascent Sapphic female authority.

If Boileau sought to destroy the female literary voice in theory, Racine carried it into practice. His knowledge of Sappho through ‘Longinus’ can be immediately recognised from the

[9] Literary critic and historiographer to Louis XIV

influence she had on his tragedies. Indeed, perhaps the most famous lines of his most well-known work, *Phèdre* – Phèdre's admission of her love for Hippolyte – were soon recognised by the Baron de Longpierre (1684: 375) to be a near copy of Fr. 31:

Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue;
Un trouble s'éleva dans mon âme éperdue;
Mes yeux ne voyaient plus, je ne pouvais parler;
Je sentis tout mon corps et transir et brûler.[10]

Just as Ovid had before him, Racine appropriated the female voice and so eliminated Sappho's [and hence female] authority. A particularly telling element of Racine's use of Sappho was that he excluded those elements of the poem that were denounced by Boileau. We know that Racine had access to 'Longinus' in the original Greek, but he nevertheless chose to 'improve' her words and displace her legitimacy as a literary parent (DeJean, 1987: 800). It also comes as no surprise that Ovid had a dramatic influence on *Phèdre*; whilst many commentators point out the clear importance of the *herois* Phaedra in the play, Joan DeJean has convincingly demonstrated the 15th epistle of the *Heroides* as Racine's primary aid. She explains that Ovid's Sappho gives a vivid portrayal of the distraught woman, and more particularly the dangers of female passion. Likewise, it can be argued that both Ovid's Sappho and Racine's *Phèdre* are distinctly subjective in their desire, whilst Phaon and Hippolyte respectively play the passive role; both heroines are then punished for such male expression. (800-804). The intertextuality of Racine's *Phèdre* turns the play into a cautionary tale about the dangers of giving too much literary and erotic power to women. By the eighteenth century, Racine became the authoritative voice of both Ovid and Sappho, bringing order back to the male dominance of female desire, and destroying what the novel had represented.

Molière, one of the most famous French writers of any time, also openly ridiculed the concept of women's writing and hence its Sapphic influence. On the 18th November 1659, he premiered his play *Les Précieuses ridicules* at the Théâtre du Petit-Bourbon. 'Précieuse' was the word for the type of literary woman that had become increasingly prominent in the second half of the seventeenth century, and epitomised by figures such as Scudéry and La Fayette. That he chose this subject matter, and the extent of the play's success, is testimony to the reception that this would have on contemporary audiences (Forestier and Bourqui, 2010). It is significant that he

[10] Racine *Phèdre*, Act I, scene III: 'I look'd, alternately turn'd pale and blush'd /To see him, and my soul grew all distraught;/ A mist obscured my vision, and my voice / Falter'd, my blood ran cold, then burn'd like fire;', trans. Boswell 2008.

chose a similar subject for one of his most well-known works, *Les Femmes Savantes*. A satire on female education and female literature, this comedy mentions Scudéry explicitly as an object of his derision. Equally telling is the fact that the main antagonist of the plot is a caricature of Charles Cotin, one of the primary adversaries of Nicolas Boileau. The determination with which Moliere chased this subject suggests a patriarchy that felt under threat. The play had an immediate and lasting success (Touchard 1962), and helped to remove any credibility from the literary woman in the eyes of court. Although commentators could not help but admit to the extraordinary artistry of the novels produced in the seventeenth century, their reception was later minimal when compared to that of the works of Racine and Molière. While these two titans have dominated the canon for the last three centuries, there have been only rare glimpses of their female counterparts. These men's efforts clearly paid off, and they distorted (and potentially destroyed) Sappho with them.

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It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that Sappho began again to be taken seriously in France when writers such as 'Michael Field' and Renée Vivien used her as a lesbian voice, and some have even argued that it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that female literary influence in France was the same as in the Grand Siècle (DeJean 1989). The various efforts to harness Sappho in the seventeenth century demonstrate something more general concerning not only this poet, but the wider study of classical reception. Our conception of Classical literature is flexible; we can mould and reconfigure works so that they suit the interests of our particular time. In this way, the works of Sappho, and indeed of any Classical writer, are at once a product not only of the ancient world but also of that period, and each new reader can thus pump new oxygen into the lifeblood of Classical study, a phenomenon which might explain the enduring interest of the discipline. It might easily be argued that the pattern of Sappho's different receptions in continues to be played out today. Her depiction as a 'historical lesbian icon', for instance, can be easily deconstructed through demonstrating the ambiguous sexuality of her poems (Mueller, 2021), and so her modern interpretation might be just as flawed as any. Just as in seventeenth century, she continues to be used and abused by modern writers.

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