Recasting women's stories : in the poetry of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and Christina Rossetti

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CHAPTER 2

Writing about Women Poets: Recasting the Legend of Sappho

Sappho's Leap and the Death of a Woman

Madame de Staël wrote *Corinne, or Italy* inspired by the images of Sappho prevalent in Europe in her time. As Joan DeJean points out, Staël presents her heroine as a successor to Sappho (DeJean 1989, 176-86).[1] The reader is first introduced to Corinne when she is crowned poet laureate at the Capitol. On this occasion noted poets of Rome dedicate to her their verses and odes, "a pleasant combination of imagery and mythological allusions which, from Sappho's to our own, might have been addressed throughout the centuries to all women renowned for their literary talents" (Staël 1998, 24). Like Sappho, Corinne recites poetry before audiences, accompanying herself on the lyre. Dressed in white, she is described by the novel's speaker as "Domenichino's Sibyl" (23).[2] The image of a sibyl is suggestive of Sappho, who was associated with divinities of poetry, and often referred to as "the tenth muse".[3] Above all, the story ends

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[1] DeJean speculates that, "perhaps following the lead of Barthélemy/Homer, to whom she as a fledgling writer had wished to play Sappho, Staël multiplies the resemblances between Corinne and the eighteenth-century French Sappho" (DeJean 1989, 177). DeJean in another essay writes of Staël's debt to the portrayal of Sappho in a seventeenth-century writer Madeleine de Scudéry's *Le Grand Cyrus*. See Joan DeJean, "Staël's Corinne: The Novel's Other", in Szmurlo, 117-26, 121.

[2] Domenichino (1581-1641) is a painter in seventeenth-century Italy, and "Cumean Sibyl" is the most famous of his sibyl paintings. In Staël's novel, Corinne's former lover Oswald, after her death, sees this work and remembers her. "Sibyl" refers to women of ancient times who were considered to possess powers of prophecy. See the entry for "sibyl" in *OED*.

[3] In his introduction to the first English translation of Sappho's fragment "An Hymn to Venus" in *The Spectator*, number 223 (November 15, 1711), Joseph Addison mentions that Sappho was called by ancient writers "the Tenth Muse". See Joseph

with Corinne dying of unrequited love, which is clearly reminiscent of the legend of Sappho's love for Phaon.

The figure of Corinne, as well as other literary and visual images of Sappho of that period, influenced Hemans and Landon to create their own Sapphic heroines. Interest in Sappho continued into the middle and late nineteenth century, and such poets as Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Agnes Mary Robinson (1857-1944), and Michael Field also wrote poems that directly or implicitly refer to Sappho, her legend, and her works.[4]

This section considers the legend of Sappho prevalent in the nineteenth century and its significance. First I look at how fictional stories of Sappho, which are now known not to be based on historical fact, were passed down from ancient times, and what works of Sappho were known in nineteenth-century Britain. Then I consider how women poets of that time received the Sappho legend. Last, I discuss what meanings are found in literature for the theme of Sappho's leap from the rock and for the theme of a woman's death. Keeping these points in mind, I now proceed to read poems about Sappho written by Landon, Hemans and Rossetti, and examine how they represent the ancient Greek poet and a woman's death.

Sappho was widely known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the tragic poet who threw herself into the sea from the rock of Leucas. Legend has it that she fell in love with Phaon, an old boatman of Lesbos, who was rejuvenated by Aphrodite.[5] However, Sappho's

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Addison and Sir Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, vol. III (London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1726), 209.

[4] Margaret Reynolds argues that Barrett Browning wrote *Aurora Leigh* (1856) to recast Landon's Sappho figure in "The History of the Lyre". Agnes Mary Robinson's poetry, according to Reynolds, "shows clear signs that she knew [Sappho's] work through her own studies of Greek, and that she was influenced by the tone, the brevity, and the nuances in the extant works of Sappho". See Margaret Reynolds, *The Sappho History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 117-18, 129. Michael Field's collection of poems entitled *Long Ago* (1889) was written under the influence of Henry Thornton Wharton's edition of Sappho's fragmentary works (see note 6 below). Michael Field is a pseudonym for two women poets writing together, Katherine Harris Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Emma Cooper (1862-1913).

[5] Phaon's story goes as follows. When the goddess Aphrodite approached Phaon, in the disguise of an old woman, he ferried her across the water without asking for any payment. In return for his courtesy, the goddess transformed him into a young man,

love was not reciprocated, and in despair she headed to the Leucadian cliff. This was a place where desperate people made a leap into the sea to ease love's passion – a leap known as a kill-or-cure remedy for the afflictions of love. We know of at least three Greek comedies based on the episode of Sappho's leap that were written in the fourth century BC (they are not extant today), and the comic playwright Menander (342?–298?BC) described Leucas as the place where Sappho, after being spurned by Phaon, first flung herself from the cliff (Williamson, 8). The Roman poet Ovid (43BC–17?AD) portrayed Sappho before her leap in "Sappho to Phaon", one of fifteen epistolary poems in *Heroides*. Ovid's Sappho repeatedly addresses Phaon and bemoans his abandonment of her. The poem was translated into English by Alexander Pope (1688-1744) in the early eighteenth century. The image of the sorrowful Greek poet singing her last song on top of the cliff, with a lyre in her hand, spoke to people's imagination, and in the nineteenth century featured in many works by writers, painters and illustrators (Reynolds 2003, 67-73).

In reality, there is very little historical evidence available on Sappho's life. Researchers can only speculate on her biography based on her scant surviving works and a small number of references to her in antiquity. It is thought to be certain that the poet lived on the island of Lesbos from the seventh to sixth centuries BC, and performed poetry to the accompaniment of the lyre. It is speculated that, while serving as a kind of priestess to divinities, she was in charge of an academy to teach poetry and music to young women who were attracted to her talent. This cannot be verified by conclusive evidence, however, and the story of Sappho's unrequited love for Phaon and her leap is now accepted to be an outright fiction. In the late nineteenth century, the amateur classicist Henry Thornton Wharton published an edition of Sappho's works entitled *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation* (1885).[6] The book has an introduction to Sappho's life and compiles all of her poetry fragments

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with whom many women in the island of Lesbos fell in love. In some versions of the myth, Aphrodite herself fell in love with Phaon. In the fourth and third centuries BC, Phaon's story had a great deal of currency, and it was at some point conflated with Sappho's love stories. See Margaret Williamson, *Sappho's Immortal Daughters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 5-12.

[6] Henry Thornton Wharton, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation* (New York: Brentano's, 1920).

available at that time. Based on the Sappho studies that were being conducted mainly in Germany, Wharton's work revealed to the reading public the uncertainties about what had previously been considered true about Sappho's life.[7] Before this publication, people conflated, whether consciously or not, fictional legend about the ancient poet and biographical fact.

In addition, many of Sappho's works had remained obscure until the late nineteenth century. Sappho lived in an era of transition from oral to written literature. She may not have recorded her own works herself; rather, it was probably some among her audience who recorded her oral performances on papyri. The Alexandrian Library, founded around 300 BC, is said to have owned nine collections of Sappho's verses (Williamson, 1). However, as time passed, many of her works were lost, and only fragments of them remained, by way of quotations by Greek and Roman classical scholars and writers (Reynolds 2003, 14-15).

Only two of Sappho's fragments were widely known in the nineteenth century: Fragment 1, the so-called "Ode to Aphrodite", and Fragment 31, "That man seems to me" (Reynolds 2003, 111). While many of the Sappho fragments were only a few words, or short and broken passages, these two were the only works of Sappho available to readers as complete or near-complete versions (the former was thought to be complete, the latter near-complete). Joseph Addison (1672-1719) in 1711 introduced English translations of the two

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[7] Wharton revised the edition several times after its first publication in 1885. Although an amateur classicist, he acquainted British readers with the results of recent philological studies of Sappho in Germany. In some important ways Wharton's edition changed the understanding of Sappho among people in his time. (1) It made clear that the story of Sappho's unrequited love and leap from the rock was fictional. (2) By introducing all of Sappho's extant works, it let people know that most of them were fragments. (3) Wharton selected English translations and adaptations of Sappho's poetry including the ones made by Alfred Tennyson and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and introduced them to suggest rich possibilities for the creation of literature in English based on ancient fragmentary works. (4) Wharton translated love objects in Sappho's fragments using female pronouns, to quietly reveal to the larger public the aspect of homosexuality in her works. I discuss these points and consider Michael Field's *Long Ago* (1889), which was written under the influence of Wharton's edition, in "*Long Ago*: The Nineteenth-Century Sappho Studies and Michael Field", in *Literature and Science: From the Perspective of English and American Literature* (Tokyo: Eichosya Phoenix, 2010), 149-66.

fragments in *The Spectator*, and after that followed a number of translations by others. Still, there were only limited opportunities for people who did not read Greek to become familiar with other works of Sappho, at least until the publication of Wharton's edition, which compiled in one book all the extant fragments along with English translations.[8]

Many women before the twentieth century had only limited access to the Greek language, due to the lack of opportunity for advanced education. They may have read English translations of Sappho's fragments, published from time to time. But these translations had often changed the sex of the objects of love in her poems from female to male.[9] In consequence, and also due to the legend of her love for Phaon, Sappho was considered in the nineteenth century primarily as a heterosexual poet. It was, then, not so much the historically real Sappho and her works as the Sappho in legend that inspired nineteenth-century writers' and artists' portrayals of Sappho figures.

Near the dawn of the nineteenth century, Mary Robinson (1757-1800) published a sonnet sequence entitled *Sappho and Phaon* (1796).[10] In the preface Robinson quotes an account of Sappho's life

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[8] After 1890 there were excavations of papyri and potsherds that included records of ancient Greek literature in Oxyrhynchus in Egypt and other places, and some of Sappho's fragments were discovered there. The discoveries were, however, records of the second and third centuries AD, a long time after Sappho's death. See Margaret Reynolds (2003), 8.

[9] A 1735 translation of "Ode to Aphrodite" by John Addison, for instance, rendered Sappho's lover as "a coy youth", and Francis Fawkes' 1760 translation gave her lover the name of Phaon. See Margaret Reynolds, ed. *The Sappho Companion* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 21-22. Translations of Ovid's "Sappho to Phaon" tended to leave the sex of Sappho's lovers as female, but generally speaking, the dominant image of Sappho was that of the poet who bewails her unrequited love for Phaon. See Peter Jay and Caroline Lewis, eds. *Sappho Through English Poetry* (London: Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1996), 21.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Sappho was studied in great detail by scholars in France and Germany (and finally in Britain), and some of their studies were translated into English. See Margaret Reynolds (2003), 14 and 111. Alfred Lord Tennyson knew Greek, and he and his friend Arthur Hallam were fond of reading Sappho's works when they were young. Tennyson's early poetry shows the influence of the sensuality in Sappho's fragments. See Linda H. Peterson, "Sappho and the Making of Tennysonian Lyric", *ELH* 61 (1994): 121-37, 126. Christina's brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1870 published a translation of Sappho's two fragments, entitled "One Girl: A Combination from Sappho". See Wharton, 105.

[10] Mary Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon*, rpt. of 1796 (Otley: Woodstock Books, 2000).

from a fictional ancient travelogue, *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce* (1787), written by a French writer Jean-Jacques Barthélemy (1716-95).[11] The account tells the legend of Sappho's unrequited love for Phaon and her leap from the Leucadian rock as if it were historical fact.[12] Robinson's sonnets themselves are also based on this legend. In the same preface Robinson mentions Alexander Pope's translation of Ovid's "Sappho to Phaon", and remarks: "*OVID* and *POPE* have celebrated the passion of Sappho for Phaon; but their portraits, however beautifully finished, are replete with shades, tending rather to depreciate than to adorn the Grecian Poetess" (Robinson, 18). She does not explain in any more detail about the "shades", but it seems clear that Ovid and Pope's portrayal of the distraught Sappho indeed tends to "depreciate the Grecian poetess". Hearing that her beloved Phaon is gone, Ovid and Pope's Sappho is stunned, and then consumed with rage:

> When first I heard (from whom I hardly knew)
> That you were fled, and all my joys with you,
> Like some sad statue, speechless, pale, I stood,
> Grief chill'd my breast, and stopp'd my freezing blood;
> No sigh to rise, no tear had power to flow,
> Fix'd in a stupid lethargy of woe:
> But when its way the impetuous passion found,
> I rend my tresses, and my breast I wound:
> I rave, then weep; I curse, and then complain;
> Now swell to rage, now melt in tears again.
>
> (Pope, lines 123-31)[13]

> All torn my garments, and my bosom bare,
> My woes, thy crimes, I to the world proclaim;
> Such inconsistent things are love and shame!
>
> (140-42)

[11] For more details of the travelogue, see Reynolds (2003), 109.

[12] Barthélemy himself states in the preface to his travelogue that, since it is a travel story, he has written what one can only imagine from history and what historians would never be allowed to write. See DeJean (1989), 138-40.

[13] Alexander Pope, "Sappho to Phaon, from the Fifteenth of Ovid's Epistles", in *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*, vol. 2 (BiblioBazaar, 2006), 71-77. All quotations are indicated by line numbers.

Here Sappho forgets about trying to maintain her dignity and allows herself to look miserable, with her garments torn and her bosom bare. Her "scornful brother" only doubles her humiliation: he appears with a smile, "Insults [her] woes, and triumphs in [her] tears" (135-36). There is no indication in the poem that Sappho receives sympathy, even from her close kin. She never stops her bitter complaining, and, like a bad loser, laments that Phaon did not give her even "one kind adieu" (111). While recognizing her own talent for poetry, she depreciates herself by mentioning her appearance, "what nature has in charms denied" to her (37), and highlighting the contrast to Phaon's "heavenly looks" (22).

Compared to this, Robinson's Sappho is portrayed as more dignified, although based on the same legend of unrequited love. She repeatedly calls on Phaon to come back, but her call sounds not so much like a pitiful plea from a deserted woman as an admonishment from someone superior. Instead of expressing her woes as frustration, as in Ovid and Pope's poem, she seems to sublimate her sorrow into creative strength by using powerful images such as ocean waves (Sonnet 22) and volcanic activities (Sonnet 23):

> SONNET XXII
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> WILD is the foaming Sea! The surges roar!
> And nimbly dart the livid lightnings round!
> On the rent rock the angry waves rebound;
> Ah me! the less'ning bark is seen no more!
> Along the margin of the trembling shore,
> Loud as the blast my frantic cries shall sound,
> My storm-drench'd limbs the flinty fragments wound,
> And o'er my bleeding breast the billows pour!
> Phaon! return! ye winds, O! waft the strain
> To his swift bark; ye barb'rous waves forbear!
> Taunt not the anguish of a lover's brain,
> Nor feebly emulate the soul's despair!
> For howling winds, and foaming seas, in vain
> Assail the breast, when passion rages there!
>
> (Robinson, page 60)

Robinson's work differs from Ovid/Pope's in poetic style as well. Ovid/Pope's work is written in an epistolary style, which is intended

to suit the expression of the speaker's personal emotions, usually kept out of the public eye. Their work portrays moments when Sappho feels weak and confesses that she has lost poetic inspiration:

> Alas! the Muses now no more inspire;
> Untuned my lute, and silent is my lyre.
> My languid numbers have forgot to flow,
> And fancy sinks beneath a weight of woe.
> Ye Lesbian virgins, and ye Lesbian dames,
> Themes of my verse, and objects of my flames,
> No more your groves with my glad songs shall ring,
> No more these hands shall touch the trembling string:
> My Phaon's fled, and I those arts resign;
>
> (Pope, lines 228-36)

Their Sappho sadly admits that the only tunes she can now sing are "elegies of woe":

> Love taught my tears in sadder notes to flow,
> And tuned my heart to elegies of woe, [14]
>
> (7-8)

In contrast, Robinson's Sappho chooses to sing in, to borrow Jerome McGann's phrase, "the most finished of verse forms", the Italian sonnet. The choice is an important one for Robinson, for it is "a sign of the presence of a firmly self-conscious artistic intelligence". [15] It declares that Sappho's poetic genius is not weakened even after experiencing her lover's rejection.

As we see in the cases of Ovid/Pope and Robinson, portrayals of Sappho were not all alike, and Sappho could just as well be used as a symbol of decline as of the sublime. Among the nineteenth-century women poets who took over this ambiguous image of Sappho were Letitia Landon, Felicia Hemans, and Christina Rossetti. [16] Landon

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[14] Robinson uses these two lines as the epigraph for her sonnet sequence, and this serves to highlight the difference between her representation of Sappho and Ovid/Pope's.

[15] Jerome McGann, "Mary Robinson and the Myth of Sappho", in *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 103.

[16] Margaret Reynolds points out that Staël's *Corinne* had more influence on later generations than Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* did (Reynolds 2003, 109-11). Jerome

wrote "Sappho" for *The Literary Gazette* in 1822, and two years later published "The Improvisatrice" as the opening poem of *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems* (1824); the poem includes as an inset poem a short lyric called 'Sappho's Song'. Landon wrote many other poems where Sappho is not specifically named but where similar themes of unrequited love are found. She and Robinson were at times called "English Sappho".[17]

Hemans' "Sappho's Last Songs" (1831), according to the epigraph attached to the poem published in *National Lyrics and Songs for Music* (1834), was inspired by a sketch drawn by Richard Westmacott. The sketch shows Sappho sitting on a rock above the sea, neglecting her lyre; Hemans was enchanted by the beauty of the Sappho figure in resignation (Hemans 2000, 466-67). Hemans was also impressed by an "exquisite" sculpture of Sappho by John Gibson, which had been sent to her neighborhood in Wales from Rome. In a letter to a friend she admires its beauty: "There is a sort of willowy drooping in the figure which seems to express a weight of unutterable sadness, and one sinking arm holds the lyre so carelessly, that you almost fancy it will drop while you gaze …. [It] seems to speak piercingly and *sorrowfully* of the nothingness of fame, at least to woman. There was a good collection of pictures in the same house, they were almost unaccountably vulgarized in my sight by the presence of the lonely and graceful statue" (Chorley, 198). A play by Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872), entitled *Sappho* (1818), also gave Hemans inspiration. She writes in another letter that it is "one of [her]

McGann also states that, despite being "the single most important English contribution to the Sapphic tradition", Robinson's work in fact "had little influence on subsequent treatments of Sappho in *any* language" (emphasis in original; McGann 1996, 94). Nevertheless, I think that the Sapphic figure Robinson created is closer to those portrayed by our nineteenth-century women poets than the "depreciated" portrayals of Sappho by Ovid and Pope. I cannot find any evidence that Landon, Hemans, or Rossetti ever read Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon*. However, C. C. Barfoot finds affinity between Robinson's work and Rossetti's "Monna Innominata", and discusses those works, along with Mary Wroth's "A Crowne of Sonnets Dedicated to Love" and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, contending that they all have "an erotic power and sexual appeal that male sonneteers do not achieve". See C. C. Barfoot, "In This Strong Labourinth How Shall I Turn?" in *"And Never Know the Joy": Sex and the Erotic in English Poetry*, ed. C. C. Barfoot (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 223-46, 223.

[17] Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 197.

greatest favorites", and praises the work in which Sappho, before her leap, regrets that she was engaged in worldly love affairs. The play is, according to Hemans, "full of beauty, … developing itself clearly and *sorrowfully*, … through the coloring mists of imagination" (emphases in original; Chorley, 111).

Christina Rossetti wrote two poems portraying Sappho as the heroine. Although she is clearly aware of the unhappy love story of the ancient poet, one of the poems has a title that sounds like a parody of the legend: "What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her".[18] The title announces that Rossetti is ready to offer a revised version of the legend.

Why, then, did the legend of Sappho's leap inspire people in the nineteenth century so much? What poetic significances did "sorrowful" portraits of Sappho evoke in their minds? As mentioned above, the image of a woman leaping to her death has many potential meanings. It can express sorrow and despair, or a wish for liberation and peace. It may indicate surrender to society, or the decline of a woman's creativity. Seen from a historical perspective, it may signify a ritual as spectacle (Reynolds 2003, 68 and 121). In ancient times the leap from the Leucadian rock was known as a kill-or-cure remedy to ease love's passion. This tradition was derived from folk memories of a still older ritual in which criminals were pushed from the rock to propitiate the god Apollo.[19] This particular ancient significance seems still to have haunted the image of Sappho's legendary leap in nineteenth-century Britain, carrying the connotation of punishment appropriate for a person who defies the rules of society.

An example of such a connotation is found in *The Travels of Antenor in Greece and Asia* (1799), written by Étienne François de

[18] The poem was composed in 1848, but never published in her lifetime. See Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Crump (London: Louisiana State UP, 1986-1990), vol. III, 166-67, 423-24. Hereafter, Rossetti's poems are quoted from this edition, cited as *CPCR*, unless otherwise noted.

[19] Margaret Reynolds points out that, although Menander (c.342–292BC) made Sappho the first to take the leap, "he was employing poetic licence, for the legends actually tell of many others who had tried the leap". See Reynolds (2000), 71. An ancient geographer and historian Strabo (63?BC–?AD) repeated the story of Sappho's leap in *Geographica*, and the legend became closely associated with the name of Sappho. See Reynolds (2000), 71, and Yoshihiko Kutsukake, *Sappho: Poems and Life* (Tokyo: Heibon-sha, 1988), 302-03.

Lantier (1734-1826).[20] The work is a fictional travelogue, where the reader is told that it is the record of the experiences of an ancient traveler named Antenor in Greece and Asia. Lantier, following his predecessor Jean-Jacques Barthélemy (1716-1795), compares Sappho to Artemisia, the queen of Halicarnassus. Herodotus (484?–425?BC) states that Artemisia participated in the Battle of Salamis, serving as one of the shrewdest commanders of Xerxes I of Persia. Lantier adds to this story an anecdote that Artemisia was desperately in love with a young man, only to be deserted by him, and in her fury put out his eyes; afterward, she killed herself in despair, by taking a leap from the Leucadian rock (Lantier I, 247-48). The anecdote was Barthélemy's invention, and Lantier supplements the description to emphasize the affinity between Artemisia and Sappho.[21] As Joan DeJean points out, "allowing violence to impart final meaning to a classic tale of female authority in a domain usually closed to women, Barthélemy [and Lantier] issue an explicit warning about the threat to the very survival of the patriarchy that woman's invasion of the male heroic sphere poses" (DeJean 1989, 141). In so doing, the two writers suggest that, because Sappho dared to invade the male domain, thus breaking the rules of her patriarchal society, she deserved punishment. Whereas the leap from the rock taken by criminals in ancient Greek folklore was forced upon them, in this case Sappho punishes herself by voluntarily leaping to her death.

The significance of punishment may have cast a shadow over other

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[20] Étienne François de Lantier, *The Travels of Antenor in Greece and Asia: from a Greek Manuscript Found at Herculaneum: Including Some Account of Egypt*, translated from the French of E. F. Lantier, 3 vols. (London: T. N. Longman and O. Rees, 1799). The author Lantier is an apparent heir to Jean-Jacques Barthélemy, whose fictional travelogue, *Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce*, informed Mary Robinson of legends about Sappho's life. He wrote *The Travels of Antenor* less than ten years after Barthélemy published his work. Lantier's account of Sappho and Artemisia and his comparison of the two women clearly show Barthélemy's influence. See DeJean (1989), 140-41, for the stories of Sappho in Barthélemy's and Lantier's works. As for the connotation of punishment in the Sappho legend, see also Reynolds (2000), 184-88.

[21] While hearing the story of Sappho from one of the priests of Apollo, Lantier's heroes Antenor and Phanor see her stooping over Artemisia's tomb, contemplating it with great attention. Then the priest exclaims, "What a tender subject of meditation. What a similarity in their [Sappho's and Artemisia's] sensibility and fate!" (Lantier I, 251). I was able to consult only Lantier's work, and am indebted to Joan DeJean for reporting Barthélemy's influence upon him. See note 9 above.

nineteenth-century works that depicted Sappho. In Britain a number of women artists, writers and poets made their works public and – like Sappho – achieved a certain level of success. However, they were always in danger of being considered "improper women".[22] The danger may feel more real when one remembers the prevalent image of Sappho as a poet who improvised songs before audiences, an activity one could hardly expect to see women perform in British society at that time.[23] In such performances viewers can see each of the performer's physical, facial and vocal expressions, reflecting her inner emotions and agitations. It is almost certain that it was this public nature of improvisation that underlay the controversy over the woman poet who published her works: her vocation could be associated with the exposure of the female body to public view.

It is not accurate to say that all nineteenth-century women lived a passive life, repressing their desires and depending economically and mentally on others. If a woman inherited a substantial fortune, she could live on her own, independent of male relatives. Many middle-class women, however, had to depend financially on male kin, because of the limited choice of vocations open to them, such as becoming a governess. Still, a number of women in these circumstances found a way to work for society, engaging in philanthropic activities for instance, hoping to benefit those in need.[24] Some women were also energetically active as professional writers. The Sappho figure of the nineteenth century, then, made all the more impression because there were a great number of women who played an active part in society and could relate to Sappho's way of life as it is told in legend. Sappho's leap may have appeared to them to be a heroic act, for it was the consequence of her determination to pursue

[22] Jan Marsh points out that in the period the qualities thought necessary for artists to become successful were far removed from the virtues women were recommended to learn: modesty, self-effacement and altruism. Jan Marsh, "Art, Ambition and Sisterhood in the 1850s", in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr, 33-34. See also Chapter 3 of the present study.

[23] In eighteenth and nineteenth-century Italy there were poets called improvisatrice (if female) or improvisatore (if male) who improvised songs in public, but in Britain this career was not considered entirely respectable. Christina Rossetti's father Gabriel, a former improvisatore in Italy, for this reason decided to live by teaching Italian after moving to Britain. See notes 5 and 28 in Chapter 1.

[24] Kathryn Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 51-94, 139-86.

her desires (to sing and to love). It is even possible that the suicidal leap was understood by some as a gesture of defiance toward society, a performance of female autonomy.

In the nineteenth century a woman's death, even apart from the Sappho legend, was repeatedly portrayed in poetry, novels and artworks. Elisabeth Bronfen, in the preface to her study *Over Her Dead Body*, points out that the theme of a woman's death can entail an unconscious desire (by men) to overcome fear of death: by watching the death of a woman as Other, a man feels that he is different from her and has the illusion of his own immortality.[25] If this is the case, a woman poet writing about a woman's death may be hovering on the edge of masochism, for she is internalizing the viewpoint of men gazing on a woman's death.

Bronfen, though, gives a subtle warning that a woman's death in poetry should not automatically be interpreted as a reflection of real life, and therefore she does not agree that the use of this theme implicitly condones real violence inflicted upon women (Bronfen, 59-60). She takes up Edgar Allan Poe's controversial statement in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), a statement that has been criticized as misogynistic: "the death … of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world".[26] Bronfen contends that Poe was not so much expressing the joy of watching a real woman's death as he was advocating more effective poetry, and suggests that his statement reflects an aesthetic where, as she puts it, "animate body" is transformed into "inanimate text". She examines the aesthetic by closely reading Poe's text.

Poe argues that "beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem", for the contemplation of the beautiful brings "the most intense, the most elevating, the most pure" pleasure to the mind (Poe, 103). And the feeling that beauty calls up in the beholder is sadness or melancholy. Then Poe asks, "of all melancholy topics what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?" and his answer is: death. And when is this most melancholy of topics most poetical? For Poe it is when death is closely connected with

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[25] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York and Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992), x-xv.

[26] Edgar Allan Poe, *Literary Theory and Criticism* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999), 105.

beauty (Poe, 105). This line of thinking leads Poe to conclude that the most poetic of all themes is the death of a beautiful woman, and he explains that it was based on this theory that he wrote the poem "The Raven" (Poe, 101-10).

Bronfen focuses on the superlative form Poe uses when he states that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic, and her thinking is as follows. The woman in a text, by dying, becomes a theme for poetry and the object of poetic representations. In other words, the inanimate body of the dead woman becomes almost comparable to an artwork, suitable to be viewed and appreciated. It follows then that the process of the woman dying can serve as a metaphor for the process of creating an artwork, and that "the death of a beautiful woman" serves as a moment of self-reference, reflecting (the creation of) the whole text in which her death is portrayed. Bronfen calls this self-referential moment "mise en abyme" (an infinite reproduction of one's image, created by standing between mirrors), and suggests that it is when the *signifiant* (the description of the dead woman) and the *signifié* (the dead woman as a real existence) are farthest separated from each other. Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) argues that the way poetic language functions is that the *signifiant* is separated from its context, from what it signifies, and is valued as the sign (message) itself.[27] Therefore, Bronfen concludes, when the death of a beautiful woman is portrayed, its supposed *signifié*, the meaning of a real woman's death, is furthest removed from the text, and as a consequence it becomes Poe's "most poetic" theme of poetry (Bronfen, 71-73).

As Bronfen suggests, the death of a woman as a theme of poetry has huge potential for producing rich poetic, or symbolic, meanings, apart from its literal meanings.[28] As she also recognizes, however, the "unsettling exchange between figural and literal meanings" seems to occur "when representations of 'femininity' and 'death' are at issue" (Bronfen, 59). That is, even if figural and literal meanings of words

[27] Roman Jakobson states that "the set … toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language". See Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", *Style in Language*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960), 350-77, 356. The message here means the verbal act or the signifiant, and does not contain its context or the signifié.

[28] In Jakobson's words, "ambiguity is an intrinsic character of any self-focused message, briefly a corollary feature of poetry". See Jakobson, 370-71.

fundamentally differ, there are moments when the two are conflated or interrelated. The death of a woman may be portrayed metaphorically, and be rendered as a melancholy and beautiful image, but it can still evoke in the reader (viewer)'s mind the sorrow and pain of a real woman. I want to suggest, therefore, that the death of a woman in poetry may reflect real emotions experienced by women (poets) when facing extremely difficult situations: suffering, anger, resignation, and resistance.

Keeping in mind these possible significances of the image of Sappho's leap and a woman's death, in the next section I will read poems by Landon, Hemans, and Christina Rossetti. The former two poets wrote about Sappho's leap based on the legend, evoking her death and the decline of women's creativity, while Rossetti imagined that Sappho survived the leap and wrote about her future. Rossetti transformed the traditional story of the Sappho legend.

Sappho's Daughters
As Portrayed by Landon, Hemans and Christina Rossetti

The opening and title poem in *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems* (1824) by Letitia Landon is a tragic story of a woman poet presented as Sappho's daughter. It retells the Sappho legend at the same time that it casts doubt upon it.[29] The heroine of the poem is an improvisatrice who lives in Florence. She is also known as a painter. Although blessed with talent and fame as an artist, she dies young of unrequited love. In this respect, she is a daughter of the Corinne character portrayed by Germaine de Staël, and of the Sappho in legend, Corinne's predecessor. The improvisatrice sings a song entitled "Sapppho's Song", and after death a portrait is made of her, which is referred to as "a Sappho" (Landon 1825, 72). The poem has an elaborate structure of narrative frames. The improvisatrice appears as the first-person speaker of the poem. Her narration incorporates pictures, lyrics and narrative poems created or performed by herself.

[29] Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *Improvisatrice; and Other Poems* by L. E. L. (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1825). Quotations from the poem "Improvisatrice" are from this edition, and indicated by page numbers.

There are several hints that the heroines in these "inset" works are also poets.[30] The improvisatrice and her heroines take brave actions for the sake of love, for instance disobeying a father's will and visiting a wizard's den, a heavily restricted area. These actions eventually lead them to ruin. They lose their creative energies and perish, and their tragic stories are handed down through the generations as legends: the legend of Sappho, or of a perishing woman poet, is infinitely repeated as in a mise en abyme.

The retelling of the Sappho legend carries the message that heterosexual love can be fatal for women. It may also remind us of the punishing aspect that haunts the legend: if a woman shows her talent in public, she will be punished for violating gendered social conventions. However, here I want to focus on the self-referential, or meta-poetical, aspect of the poem: "The Improvisatrice" is a poem about writing poetry. It repeatedly portrays a woman's death. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, a woman dying can function as a metaphor for an artwork intended to be viewed and appreciated. A woman's death may refer to the literal death of a woman, but it also has rich figural and meta-poetic meanings. It tells us much about creating and appreciating art: about writing poetry, reading poetry, and the relation between the poet and her audience. Reading "The Improvisatrice", we are led to recognize anew that legends of women poets are fictions that have been created, and passed down, by poetry audiences. Knowing this, we feel encouraged not to swallow the Sappho legend as a whole, but rather to cast doubt upon it.

Self-referential significances of the poem are revealed to the reader through changes of narrator and the act of naming and gazing on others. The main narrator of "The Improvisatrice" is the improvisatrice herself, but her lover and a total stranger both play important roles as sub-narrators. Since she dies towards the end, the epilogue of the poem features a substitute narrator, a man who calls himself a "wanderer" (Landon 1825, 70). He happens to find the place where Lorenzo, the improvisatrice's lover, lives alone, totally disheartened by her death.

This substitute narrator has no relation to the improvisatrice, and it

[30] The heroine named Leila, for instance, is described as possessing a lute, which indicates that she is a poet (Landon 1825, 18).

is by coincidence that he enters Lorenzo's residence. He is allowed to enter there because he seeks refuge from a storm. Like him, we, the readers of the poem, are outsiders to the improvisatrice's story. But we differ from him in that we know her story from the very beginning. The wanderer wonders why the master of the stately hall, still young, lives like a recluse. Inside the hall there is a display of artwork – pictures and statues. The one that impresses the wanderer most is a portrait of a beautiful woman. He cannot stop admiring it, saying to himself that she is "a priestess of Apollo", or "a Sappho" (72). The master of the hall may have painted it, or may have asked somebody to make it for him, we do not know. Apparently the woman in the portrait is dead, for beside it is a funeral urn, and a tablet carrying the inscription: "Lorenzo to his Minstrel Love" (72). We can imagine how curious the wanderer is about this woman: who is she and what is her relation to the master of the hall?

The poem ends at the very moment the wanderer reads the inscription. Because of this, we may feel eager to tell him the whole story as we know it. It may be natural to suppose that Lorenzo will tell the story to him because he is on the spot. However, Lorenzo "has no words" due to extreme sorrow (71). We now start to recollect the improvisatrice's story. She met and fell in love with Lorenzo. He also loved her. However, he had to leave her because he was already engaged to his childhood friend Iante. The improvisatrice did not know why he left. Heartbroken, she wasted away day by day. After Iante died of an illness, Lorenzo returned to the improvisatrice to confess his love to her. But it was too late. The improvisatrice was on her deathbed, and she passed away in his arms. After her death Lorenzo withdrew from society, and lived a lonely life in his stately hall. The wanderer arrived in Lorenzo's hall and saw this situation. After observing Lorenzo and his residence for a while, he now stands in front of the portrait of the improvisatrice. This is the end of the poem, and time seems to stop here. He is waiting for something – for somebody to start telling him the story of this beautiful dead woman.

However, just as we are about to tell him the story, we realize something important: *we do not know the name* of the improvisatrice. Is it possible to tell her story without knowing her name? While reading the poem, we may not care whether we know her name or not. The names of the characters are not always introduced when they first

appear on the scene. Therefore, we may expect that the name of the improvisatrice will be revealed to us sooner or later. However, by the end of the poem, we have been informed only of the phrase used for her in the inscription: "Minstrel Love". Why does the poem fail to tell us her name? What does this secrecy imply?

In "The Improvisatrice" the act of calling a person's name prefigures possessing him or her as an artwork. The person who is called by his or her name eventually dies and becomes an artwork to be appreciated. The day after meeting Lorenzo for the first time, without knowing his name, the improvisatrice as usual spends the daytime in a gallery, making a drawing of one of the statues there. Then someone tells her Lorenzo's name, and mentions that he happens to be in the building. In her rapture, she repeats his name three times, hoping to "own his name":

> Lorenzo! – when next morning came
> For the first time I heard thy name!
> Lorenzo! – how each ear-pulse drank
> The more than music of that tone!
> Lorenzo! – *how I sighed that name,*
> *As breathing it, made it mine own!*
>
> (empahsis added; Landon 1825, 33)

The improvisatrice starts to search for him in the building, leaving her sketch unfinished. She wants to possess not just his name but also himself. Finally finding him, she calls his name again and fully enjoys the happiness of being close to him. Lorenzo is more worthwhile to gaze on than the gallery's beautiful statues of "saint, nymph, or muse" (33). Lorenzo is an unrivalled artwork for the improvisatrice.

Later, at a masked ball held in a gorgeous hall, the improvisatrice performs a song before an audience that includes Lorenzo. After the performance, hearing applause, she looks around and sees him hurrying away. She starts to look for him again, calling his name (43). When she finds him, she gazes on his beautiful appearance:

> He leant beside a pedestal.
> The glorious brow, of Parian stone,
> Of the Antinous, by his side,

Was not more noble than his own!
They were alike: he had the same
Thick-clustering curls the Romans wore –
The fixed and melancholy eye –
The smile which passed like lightning o'er
The curved lip. We did not speak,
… …

(44-45)

The improvisatrice appreciates Lorenzo, comparing him to the statue of Antinous beside him, as if he were one of the statues displayed in the hall. She seems to be trying to make him into an artwork of her own.

In attempting to make Lorenzo her possession, the improvisatrice stands in a dominant position, for the creator of an artwork has the power to control it. However, Lorenzo does not let her keep controlling him for long. He gazes back on her, calls her name, and hurries away without giving any reason. By this behavior, he in turn starts to control the improvisatrice psychologically:

I saw a youth beside me kneel;
I heard my name in music steal;
I felt my hand trembling in his; –
Another moment, and his kiss
Had burnt upon it; when, like thought
So swift it past, my hand was thrown
Away, as if in sudden pain,
Lorenzo like a dream had flown!

(45)

The improvisatrice and Lorenzo alternately stand in a dominant position over each other. After this seesaw game Lorenzo leaves her once and for all (it seems to her), and the improvisatrice starts to decline. Later on, she dies in Lorenzo's arms, being gazed upon by him. After death she is made into a portrait to become his possession: an object to be gazed upon and appreciated.

Lorenzo himself does not completely evade being an object to be gazed upon. While holding the dying improvisatrice, he tells how he was obliged to leave her and marry Iante, for whom he feels only a brotherly love. Here he becomes a storyteller himself, his first-person

story, entitled Lorenzo's History, being inserted into the improvisatrice's first-person narration (64-68). After narrating his own story and watching the improvisatrice die, Lorenzo ceases to speak: he has "no words" (71). This process indicates that he becomes a poet to tell this one story, only to lose his power as a poet. The epilogue presents Lorenzo again as an artwork – as a man who has a brow "beautiful as sculpture". He is not dead, but is described as half-dead: he is "pale like age", and his brow is "wan as Grief's corroded page" (70). Landon gives to a man poet the same fate as a woman poet: the fate of dying as an artwork after being called his or her name, gazed upon and losing creativity.

Many characters in "The Improvisatrice" share a similar fate. Leila, the heroine of an inset poem entitled A Moorish Romance, falls in love with an Italian man, a captive of her father's. After secretly setting him free, she boards a ship with him to avoid a marriage forced by her father. However, she and the Italian man die as victims of a shipwreck. Leila's drowned body is washed up on the shore, and is gazed upon and appreciated by a fisherman who happens to pass by:

> Nearer the fisher drew. He saw
> The dark hair of the Moorish maid,
> Like a veil, floating o'er the breast
> Where tenderly her head was laid: –
> And yet her lover's arm was placed
> Clasping around the graceful waist;
> But then he marked the youth's black curls
> Were dripping wet with foam and blood;
> And that the maiden's tresses dark
> Were heavy with the briny flood!
> Woe for the wind! – woe for the wave!
> They sleep the slumber of the grave!
>
> (21)

The lovers' tragic death is commemorated by local people, and made into a legend passed down orally from generation to generation:

> They buried them beneath that tree;
> It long had been a sacred spot.
> Soon it was planted round with flowers

By many who had not forgot;
… …
And called the place "The Maiden's Cove," –
That she who perished in the sea
Might thus be kept in memory.

(21-22)

In another inset poem called The Charmed Cup, the heroine Ida is distraught after being deserted by her lover Julian. She is described as if she were dead. Her blood is frozen in her heart, and she stands like "a cold white statue". Her long black hair falls over her like "a funeral pall", and she is "the tomb of her own youth, and breath, and bloom" (29). She visits a wizard's den, and obtains a drug to recover the lost heart of the unfaithful lover (31). She brings back the drug and succeeds in having Julian take it, but it turns out to be a deadly poison. Ida stands stunned, unable to do anything but watch him die.

The heroine in Leades and Cydippe, yet another inset poem, suffers "a grief that wastes the heart, / Like mildew on a tulip's dyes" (52): her fiancé Leades does not return from his visit to his homeland. Cydippe's decline is described in detail. After death she is buried under the shade of a cypress tree, which then withers and stands bare, the leaves having fallen. However, when Leades finally returns and kisses the tree, it starts to bloom beautifully. Leades remains close to Cydippe's grave until he dies, when the tree again withers, this time forever. After narrating the story, the speaker of the inset poem exclaims, "a thing of wonder and of perishing!" (57) This exclamation intimates that she does not so much lament the deaths of unhappy lovers as observe them as a curious spectacle to view. In these inset poems we see the immanence of the gazing eye, or the attitude of viewing death as a curiosity, something to appreciate. If naming the characters and portraying their deaths are a metaphor for the improvisatrice's creation of artworks, the dead characters are her artworks. And these artworks are in a sense possessed by the improvisatrice and her audiences. The improvisatrice possesses them as her own works, and her audiences also possess them in the sense that they can remember the stories and pass them on to the next generation, as a kind of literary legacy.

When the improvisatrice dies in the end, she becomes an artwork; this is the poem's self-referential moment. Landon must know the

name of the improvisatrice, because she is her creator. Even if she does not have a name for her, she is at least entitled to name the improvisatrice whenever she wishes. Lorenzo also knows her name: we know this because the improvisatrice hears her name called by him.[31] Accordingly, both Landon and Lorenzo can possess the dead improvisatrice: she is Landon's artwork, and she is made into a portrait that is one of Lorenzo's possessions. In contrast, we the readers cannot possess the improvisatrice as our artwork because we do not know her name. Therefore, we cannot tell her story to the next generation: we cannot pass on to others something that we do not own. And because we cannot hand down the story, it cannot become a legend. "The Improvisatrice" prevents us from telling others the heroine's story, exactly when we are willing to do so.

As discussed in the previous section, the Sappho legend was created by later writers, with disregard for historical fact. The writers who knew Sappho's name made up fictions about her love and death, appropriating her fame. The legend was passed down to nineteenth-century Britain. Since Sappho was widely recognized as the forerunner of women poets, her legend was easily identified with the fate of women poets in general. The legend was told over and over again, as if to strengthen the stereotype of the woman poet. "The Improvisatrice" casts doubt upon this stereotype, and implicitly proposes that we stop endlessly passing on the conventional story. The poem is a deconstructive story, in the sense that it tells, while prohibiting us from telling, the legend of Sappho and women poets.

Like "The Improvisatrice", Hemans' "Properzia Rossi" in *Records of Woman and Other Poems* (1828) is a self-referential poem (meta-poem) that sings of women poets and of the relation between the woman poet and her audience.[32] The poem is a dramatic monologue having an intricate Chinese-box structure: the woman poet, Hemans, writes a poem about a woman artist, Properzia Rossi, who in the poem creates a statue of a Greek mythological heroine, Ariadne. The stories underlying these three women, whether real or mythological, can be

[31] The improvisatrice says when she sees Lorenzo, "I heard my name in music steal" (Landon 1825, 45).

[32] "Properzia Rossi", in Hemans (2000), 351-56. Quotations from the poem are from this edition, and indicated by line numbers.

considered as variations on the Sappho legend.

The speaker of the poem is modeled on a real woman artist who lived in Renaissance Bologna, 1490-1530. Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), often called the father of art history, in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568) introduces her as a sculptor endowed with the talents of poetry and music as well. In Vasari's descriptions of Rossi we see a retelling of the Sappho legend: the story of a woman artist's unhappy love and early death.[33] Vasari describes how Rossi suffered unrequited love for a young man, and thinking of him completed a graceful panel of Potiphar's wife, who appears in the Old Testament. In the panel "Rossi carved Potiphar's wife who, having fallen in love with Joseph and almost desperate after so many entreaties to him, finally takes off her clothes before him with a womanly grace that is more than admirable" (Vasari, 341). It is considered doubtful if all of Vasari's descriptions are true to what we now call historical fact (Vasari, "Introduction", xiii). Therefore, the anecdote of Rossi's love and her panel may be fictional. It is not known if Hemans read Vasari directly. Natalie Harris Bluestone suspects that "[Hemans] may have known from a wider tradition, if not directly from reading Vasari, that Properzia was said to have put her own experience of rejection in love into her work".[34] It is highly possible that Hemans' direct inspiration was a painting by a French painter, Louis Ducis (1775-1847) (Bluestone, 50). In Ducis's painting, Rossi is portrayed as offering her beloved a relief of Ariadne as her last work. There is, again, no evidence about Rossi truly having created such a relief. [35]

What the heroine creates as her last work in "Properzia Rossi" is not a relief, but a statue of Ariadne. The Greek myth of Ariadne is known to have many variants, but most of them agree that she is abandoned by her lover.[36] Ariadne, a daughter of the Cretan King

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[33] Giorgio Vasari, "The Life of Madonna Properzia de' Rossi", in *The Lives of the Artists* (1568), trans. by Julia Conaway Bondenella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford UP: 1998), 339-44, 50.

[34] Natalie Harris Bluestone, "The Female Gaze: Women's Interpretations of the Life and Work of Properzia de' Rossi, Renaissance Sculptor", in *Double Vision: Perspectives on Gender and the Visual Art*, ed. Natalie Harris Bluestone (London: Associates University Presses, 1995), 38-66, 50.

[35] For Hemans' interest in Ducis's works, see also note 1 to "Properzia Rossi" in Hemans (2000), 355.

[36] For variants of Ariadne's legend, see William Hansen, *Ariadne's Thread: A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature* (New York: Cornell UP, 2002),

Minos, falls in love with Theseus, who comes as one of those to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. After helping him to slay the monster and escape the labyrinth, she leaves Crete with him. However, when they get to the isle of Naxos Theseus deserts her there. Since what happens to Ariadne afterwards varies depending on different versions of the myth, the theme of death from unrequited love may not always apply. Still, Ariadne is a heroine similar to the legendary Sappho, in that they experience abandonment by their lovers. [37] Hemans' Rossi sympathizes with Ariadne as an abandoned woman, and creates the statue as her (Rossi's) own double. Since Rossi creates it, hoping that it will "speak" with "a sweet … voice of song" (Hemans 2000, lines 45-51), we understand that she means to equate Ariadne with a poet like herself.

Hemans also experienced "abandonment" in her lifetime, in her case twice. When she was in her teens her father left for Quebec, "on business", never to return. It is said that this got the family (his wife and six children) into financial difficulties. Then Hemans married a navy captain, Alfred Hemans. However, before their fifth son was born, he departed for Rome, never to return, and ceased to support his wife and sons. It has not been clearly explained why he left. He may have abandoned Hemans, or there may have been a private agreement between the two.[38] We cannot be sure how far these experiences are reflected in Hemans' works. Still, even to the eye of readers unaware of her biography, the suggestion is clear that there are certain correspondences among Hemans, Rossi, and Ariadne, through the

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Ovid's *Heroide* is a collection of fifteen fictional epistles in the form of verse, which are supposed to have been written by mythological women to the lovers who abandoned them. The tenth epistolary poem is "Ariadne to Theseus", while the fifteenth is "Sappho to Phaon". See Ovid, *Heroides*, trans. Harold Isbell (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

[37] Kari Lokke points out that in nineteenth-century Europe the myth of Ariadne / Sappho / Corinne was often found in the works of Romantic poets, where women poets were occasionally represented as deserted women. See Kari Lokke, "Poetry as Self-Consumption – Women Writers and Their Audiences in British and German Romanticism", in *Romantic Poetry*, ed. Angela Esterhammer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 2002), 94.

[38] See "Chronology" in Hemans (2000), xxxiii-xl, Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 9, and Peter W. Trinder, *Mrs Hemans – Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: U. of Wales P, 1984), 14.

Chinese-box structure in which a woman poet sings of a woman poet who sings of a woman poet. "Properzia Rossi" shows how women artists are caught up in an infinite cycle of self-reference, singing perpetually of a woman artist, her abandonment and death.

In addition to this cycle of self-reference, "Properzia Rossi" tells of the relation between the poet and her audience: it is a relation of "gift-exchange", in which they are expected to give and receive gifts to and from each other. Rossi creates her last work as a gift for her viewers. What she expects to receive from them in exchange for her "love" and "strife" is sympathy. The epigraph placed at the top of the poem talks about this gift-exchange:

> – Tell me no more, no more
> Of my soul's lofty gifts! Are they not vain
> To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?
> Have I not lov'd, and striven, and fail'd to bind
> One true heart unto me, whereon my own
> Might find a resting-place, a home for all
> Its burden of affections? I depart,
> Unknown, tho' Fame goes with me; I must leave
> The earth unknown. Yet it may be that death
> Shall give my name a power to win such tears
> As would have made life precious.
>
> (epigraph to "Properzia Rossi")

The speaker of the epigraph asserts that her "soul's lofty gifts" are "vain". For although she has striven to exert her talents (gifts given to her), and made artistic contributions (her gifts given to viewers), she cannot obtain "one true heart to me". She is hugely disappointed that both her talents and her efforts have gone unrewarded.

However, in the final few lines the speaker states that when she dies, her name might produce tears in her loved one(s). In other words, she hopes that, by offering her death as a gift to viewers, she will receive sympathy from them. In the field of cultural anthropology the idea that gifts are never free and the giver of a gift is supposed to receive a return is referred to as the theory of gift-exchange.[39] In

[39] One of the forerunners of studies of gift-exchange is *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* by Marcel Mauss (1872-1950). The essay was first published in 1923-24, and was later translated into English in book form. I

sociology, abstract and subjective matters such as respect and love, which are usually not considered economic assets, can also be regarded as objects of exchange.[40] The system of gift-exchange does not always work as one might expect. There is no guarantee that the gift-giver will always receive a satisfactory return gift. The speaker of the epigraph, who complains that her "soul's lofty gifts" are "vain", already realizes this. Still, she indicates her willingness to offer her death as a gift of last resort.[41] The main text of "Properzia Rossi" explores in more detail this idea of death as a gift, while the tone of the epigraph is predominantly one of negation, disappointment and resignation.

Who, then, is the speaker of the negative-sounding epigraph? Is it the poet Hemans, or is it the speaker of the monologue, Properzia Rossi? It is difficult to decide, since no clue is given. Helen Luu, in her study examining the poem as a dramatic monologue, calls this

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refer to the English translation by W.D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990), and the Japanese translation by Toru Arichi (Tokyo: Keiso Shobo, 1962).

[40] See, for instance, Peter Michael Blau (1918-2002), *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964). I refer to its 1974 Japanese translation by Juichi Aiba (Tokyo: Shinyosya, 1976). As for the concept of giving death as a gift, see Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), *The Gift of Death* (1999). I refer to its Japanese translation by Koji Hirose and Yoshio Hayashi (Tokyo: Chikuma syobo, 2002).

[41] It is pointed out that gift-exchange involves some kind of loss or destruction. A Japanese cultural anthropologist Shinichi Nakazawa, in his study of gift-exchange, states that "consumption involved in gift-exchange is another name for destruction". According to him, since ancient times human beings have "taken chances to make a large-scale consumption of the wealth they obtain by hunting and production activities, on occasions such as religious festivals and constructions of magnificent buildings" (my translation). An extreme example of such destruction is seen in the case of potlatch, a custom of indigenous peoples in North America. In potlatch, people try to consume, at one time, much of the wealth they have accumulated over a long period of time, by giving gifts to others. They also smash, or fling into the sea, precious treasures before the eyes of a large crowd. More dramatic examples include human sacrifices offered to God on religious festivals. What awaits these human sacrifices is not just destruction but their own death.

Such destruction happens in our daily life as well, on a small scale, Nakazawa points out. Every time we give a store clerk some money from our wallet to buy something, we lose part of our power. However, when receiving a product in exchange for the loss, we experience the joy of owning something new and worthwhile to us. Behind the pleasure of consumption lies this unconscious urge for destruction and even for death. See Shinichi Nakazawa, *Symmetrical Anthropology* (Tokyo: Kodansya, 2004, text in Japanese), 235-40. Marcel Mauss explains potlatch in detail in *The Gift*.

unidentified speaker "a voice of culture". In view of our discussion of the epigraph above, what Luu calls a voice of culture can be explained as the conventional literary assumption that women artists are destined to die unrewarded. This assumption must be internalized, in some way or other, in the minds of the poet Hemans and her heroine Rossi. For as long as they are part of the society they live in, they cannot be completely free of culturally inscribed ideas. Luu rightly contends that in "Properzia Rossi" the self of the speaker Rossi is formed and dramatized through the conflict in her mind between resistance and submission to the "voice of culture".[42]

In the epigraph the voice of culture is performed by way of the frequent use of negative words and phrases, such as "no more", "vain", "fail", "burden", and "unknown". The main text of the poem starts by resisting this voice. The speaker Rossi uses positive expressions, as if to deny the series of negations in the epigraph, and speaks of her hopes:

> ONE dream of passion and of beauty more!
> And in its bright fulfillment let me pour
> My soul away! Let earth retain a trace
> Of that which lit my being, tho' its race
> Might have been loftier far. – Yet one more dream!
> From my deep spirit one victorious gleam
> Ere I depart! For thee alone, for thee!
>
> (lines 1-7)

In contrast to the epigraph speaker, who regards her talents and works as "vain", Rossi means to leave hers as the sign of "triumph" (8) and "something immortal" (10). With this hope in mind, she addresses her own spirit:

> While thou – Awake! not yet within me die,
> Under the burden and the agony
> Of this vain tenderness – my spirit, wake!
> Ev'n for thy sorrowful affection's sake,

[42] Helen Luu argues that the narration does not express Rossi's self as something that already exists but rather shows the process of Rossi's self being formed through the act of her speech. See Helen Luu, "'Impossible Speech': 19th-century Women Poets and the Dramatic Monologue" (Doctoral Dissertation, Queen's University, Canada, 2008), 89.

> Live! in thy work breathe out! – that he may yet
> Feeling sad mastery there, perchance regret
> Thine unrequited gift.
>
> (19-25)

The repetition of vigorous words such as "awake" and "live" indicates that the speaker wants to overcome the fate of dying unrewarded, a fate culturally assigned to women artists. Further, when Rossi hopes that her beloved will see her work and regret that her talents went unrewarded, it is implied that he represents other viewers of the work. Her wish, then, is directed not towards just one man, but implicitly towards a much wider circle of people: Rossi wants to win lasting appreciation from society.

In the second stanza Rossi starts to work on a statue of Ariadne. Addressing the statue, "the deserted by the lonely sea" (46), she asks it to speak of her love and grief when it is viewed by the public. The statue is presented as Rossi's substitute, her spokesperson:

> Speak to him, lorn one, deeply, mournfully,
> Of all my love and grief! Oh! could I throw
> Into thy frame a voice, a sweet, and low,
> And thrilling voice of song! – when he came nigh,
> To send the passion of its melody
> *Thro' his pierced bosom* – on its tones to bear
> My life's deep feeling as the southern air
> Wafts the faint myrtle's breath, – to rise, to swell,
> To sink away in accents of farewell,
> *Winning but one, one gush of tears, whose flow*
> *Surely my parted spirit yet might know,*
> If love be strong as death!
>
> (emphases added, 48-59)

She wants the statue to sing in "sweet, low and thrilling voice" and to elicit a "gush of tears" from the "bosom" of her beloved. The imagery of piercing the bosom carries an ominous association between gushing tears and gushing blood. This makes us sense that Rossi's longing for sympathy is mixed with murderous desire. Her artwork now represents a woman bearing a grudge against viewers who do not return a proper reward. It is a vengeful spirit who demands death from them, by offering her own death.

Rossi in the third stanza laments that she is creating an artwork filled with these thoughts of death: "Oh! I might have given / Birth to creations of far nobler thought, / I might have kindled, with the fire of heaven, / Things not of such as die!" (62-65) However, she has no other choice, for she has been "too much alone", unable to find comfort on earth (65-71). Death to Rossi means to be a "triumph" in the sense that it liberates her from suffering on earth (72-75), and it is literally her very last means to resist society.

But is it really a triumph? In the last stanza Rossi's mind wavers. She feels weak and states with resignation that "the world will see little" of the significance of resistance she has put into the statue of Ariadne (75-76). Rossi knows that the statue will gain fame. However, it will be viewed only as a work that tells the same conventional story of a woman dying unrewarded: Rossi's Ariadne is, after all, "sad, deep, and unrepaid" (105-6). So much so that, even if Rossi succeeds in leaving her name to the world as the creator of the statue, the fame will be only a "mockery" (77) and "worthless" (81). This is how Rossi gradually takes on the voice of culture spoken in the epigraph, the voice of negation:

> Never, oh! never more! Where'er I move,
> The shadow of this broken-hearted love
> Is on me and around! …
>
> (93-95)

After fully portraying Rossi's conflict, the poem reaches its last stanza. It ends in a tone of serene resignation, as if the storm is over. This quietness may appear to show that Rossi eventually surrenders to the voice of culture. However, towards the final lines the poem gives us a glimpse of how Rossi hopes to leave in the audience's mind the remaining embers of her resistance, as "a deep thrill", even after the poem is over:

> Yet I leave my name –
> As a deep thrill may linger on the lyre
> When its full chords are hush'd – awhile to live,
> And one day haply in thy heart revive
> Sad thoughts of me: – I leave it, with a sound,
> A spell o'er memory, mournfully profound –

> I leave it, on my country's air to dwell, –
> Say proudly yet – "*'Twas hers who lov'd me well!"*
> (emphasis in original, 121-28)

Here we recall Rossi's resistance to the voice of culture in the second stanza, in which the statue of Ariadne was described as a dangerous gift from Rossi to its viewers. When Rossi completes it, she will be dying. The statue, then, stands as an incarnation of the dead Rossi, and is offered to viewers as a gift of death. The statue will have Rossi's voice, and since it is modeled on Adriane, the song it sings will be that of the conventional Sappho legend. It is dangerous for viewers to hear the song, though. For it may "pierce" their bosom, bringing them to ruin. Since the relation of Rossi, the statue of Ariadne and its viewers corresponds to that of Hemans, the poem "Properzia Rossi" and its readers, Rossi's warning to the viewers manifests itself as a warning to us from Hemans. We receive an indirect message from Hemans through Rossi's monologue: do not listen to and pass on stories about dying women artists to the next generation, for if you do, you will suffer revenge from those dead women. What we need to hear, she implicitly tells us, is not an unrewarded woman's tragic story but her voice of resistance.

Landon prohibits us from handing down the Sappho legend, and Hemans likewise warns us against doing so. Christina Rossetti, taking over their awareness of the Sappho legend, visibly struggles to revise the conventional story of women poets. In her revision, Sappho's goal is changed from death to sleep, and to life-after-death beyond sleep. The imagery of sleep apparently comes from a doctrine in Christian premillenarianism, which had much influence upon Rossetti in her teens: Soul Sleep. This is a belief that after death we are not immediately welcomed to heaven but instead our souls enter a state of sleep to wait for the Last Judgment Day. When the day comes, we will live a life-after-death in heaven.[43] Rossetti uses this imagery to make a quiet but drastic revision of the traditional portrayal of women poets

[43] John O. Waller, "Christ's Second Coming: Christina Rossetti and the Premillennialist", *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 73 (1969): 465-82, and Tomoko Takiguchi, "Soul Sleep in Christina Rossetti's 'Dream Land': Premillenarianism and Analogy", in *Themes and Methods: Reading English and American Literature*, ed. Zensuke Taira (Sapporo: Hokkaido UP, 1994), 163-76.

as inanimate artworks, and of the related conventional story of unrewarded women artists.

Landon's and Hemans' Sappho figures take pleasure in dying while being gazed upon by their beloved, and expect to be remembered after death.[44] Their death scenes entail physical and emotional gestures, as if to make them unforgettable. In contrast, Rossetti's Sappho wishes to die (or sleep) alone, and does not care if people remember her or not. Accordingly, descriptions of grand gestures are replaced by a quiet tone of dreamless sleep:

> Oh! it were better far to die
> Than thus for ever mourn and sigh,
> And in death's dreamless sleep to be
> Unconscious that none weep for me;
> Eased from my weight of heaviness,
> Forgetful of forgetfulness,
> Resting from pain and care and sorrow
> Thro' the long night that knows no morrow;
> Living unloved, to die unknown,
> Unwept, untended and alone.[45]
>
> ("Sappho", lines 5-14)

The speaker of the short lyric "Song" also says that it is not important to her to be remembered after death:

> When I am dead, my dearest,
> Sing no sad songs for me;
> Plant thou no roses at my head,
> Nor shady cypress tree:
> Be the green grass above me
> With showers and dewdrops wet;
> And if thou wilt, remember,
> And if thou wilt, forget.[46]

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[44] Sappho's leap is portrayed literally as a public spectacle in Lantier's work: "With sympathetic horror we beheld her raising her hands and eyes to heaven, and advancing with rapid step to the edge of the rock, whence she threw herself into the dreadful abyss …. The clamors and terrors of the spectators now found vent, and the swimmers plunged into the sea in search of her". (Lantier I, 262)

[45] The poem was composed in 1846, and printed in *Verses: Dedicated to Her Mother* (London: privately printed at G. Polidori's, 1847). See "Sappho", in *CPCR*, vol. III, 81-82, 392.

(lines 1-8)

Since Rossetti's Sappho wishes to die alone, it is necessary for her to survive the dramatic leap. In "What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her", it is indeed assumed that Sappho survived the leap.[47] However, this Sappho is not happy about having survived, for her passionate love has now been "cured". Despite all her past pain and sorrow, she wants to get back her lost passion, and repeatedly implores it, the personified Love, to "return" to her:

> Love, Love, that having found a heart
> And left it, leav'st it desolate; -
> Love, Love, that art more strong than Hate,
> More lasting and more full of art; -
> O blessed Love, return, return,
> Brighten the flame that needs must burn.
>
> (lines 1-6)

Rossetti's Sappho prefers to live on and bear the pain of love. When she calls love "pain divine" (65), and prays with words reminiscent of Holy Communion, "Fill me and make me wholly thine" (66), it is hinted that her earthly love for a man (Phaon) is mingled with, or transformed into, Christian love for God. As Margaret Linley states in "Lyric's Drama and Sappho's Conversion", Rossetti's Sappho has committed "her most revolutionary act of all – religious conversion".[48] Rossetti's Sappho does not die. As if having received, and responding to, Landon's and Hemans' messages of prohibition and warning, Rossetti stops telling the conventional story of dying women poets. What story of women, then, does Rossetti mean to write? One poem that gives us a clue to this question is "Reflection", which has been discussed by researchers studying Sappho poems

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[46] "Song", in *CPCR*, vol. I, 58. The poem was composed in 1848 and published in 1862.

[47] "What Sappho would have said had her leap cured instead of killing her", in *CPCR*, vol. III, 166-68, 423-24.

[48] Margaret Linley, "Lyric's Drama and Sappho's Conversions", Ch.1 in "'Truly A Poetess, and A Good One': Christina Rossetti and the Category of the Poetess", Doctoral Dissertation (Queen's University, Canada, 1995), 95.

written by women poets.[49]

Like Landon's "The Improvisatrice" and Hemans' "Properzia Rossi", "Reflection" is a self-referential poem about writing poetry.[50] The poem starts with a description of a woman sitting in a room. The speaker of the poem watches her through the window, from outside of the room. The woman herself watches something beyond the window, moving her eyes around restlessly:

> Gazing through her chamber window
> Sits my soul's dear soul;
> Looking northward, looking southward,
> Looking to the goal,
> Looking back without control. –
>
> (lines 1-5)

Sitting behind the window, she is like a portrait of a woman inside a frame, or a reflection of the speaker inside a mirror frame. Her eyes are not fixed on any single object, and one does not know what she is thinking. She would not answer any of the speaker's questions.

What is the relationship between the woman and the speaker of the poem? One researcher thinks that the speaker is a man who loves the woman by the window, for he addresses her as "beloved" and "my soul's dear soul" (Leighton, 62). Another researcher thinks that the speaker is a woman, and the woman by the window is the speaker's mirror reflection, that is, her double (Reynolds 2003, 115-16). I think that both these readings are possible. It is also possible to think that the woman by the window is the speaker's artwork (a portrait in a frame). In sum, "Reflection" is a poem in which the speaker, whether male or female, speaks to his or her beloved, and behind this surface meaning, the female speaker actually tells of a woman as a reflection of herself. By presenting this reflection as the speaker's artwork, Rossetti writes a self-referential poem featuring a woman poet (the speaker) trying to write a poem about a woman as her double.

The image of creating an artwork is, again, combined with the

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[49] "Reflection", in *CPCR*, vol. III, 266-68, 464-65. The poem was composed in 1857, and first published in 1896. The title of the poem is originally in double quotes, as if to show that the poem has a frame structure.

[50] Angela Leighton suggests that Rossetti in "Reflection" writes in courtly love fashion, following the style of Landon's "The Improvisatrice" (Leighton, 62).

image of death. The speaker says that when the woman by the window dies, she will give her "a stately burial" befitting a queen, and have a statue made of her:

I will give her a stately burial,
  Tho', when she lies dead:
For dear memory of the past time,
  Of her royal head,
  Of the much I strove and said.

I will give her a stately burial,
  Willow branches bent:
Have her carved in alabaster,
  As she dreamed and leant
  While I wondered what she meant.

(46-55)

Similar to the experience of the characters in Landon's "The Improvisatrice", the woman by the window is gazed upon by the speaker, dies, and is made into a statue. The way the speaker portrays the woman by the window functions as a metaphor for the way a woman artist creates an artwork. There is a suggestion that the woman by the window herself is an artist, since she seems to be gazing upon a variety of objects, as if to find a source of inspiration.

The speaker has strewn flowers on the path for the woman by the window, and keeps asking her what is in her mind:

Who can guess or read the spirit
  Shrined within her eyes,
Part a longing, part a languor,
  Part a mere surprise,
  While slow mists do rise and rise? –

Is it love she looks and longs for;
  Is it rest or peace;
Is it slumber self-forgetful
  In its utter ease;
  Is it one or all of these?

(16-25)

Answer me, O self-forgetful –

Or of what beside? –
Is it day dream of a maiden,
Vision of a bride,
Is it knowledge, love, or pride?

(31-35)

Artworks are something that the artist has to create on her own. Nobody can create them in her place. The poet therefore has to keep asking herself questions about what she can write, what she wants to write. Such self-questioning is presented in "Reflection" as the speaker addressing ardent questions to the woman by the window. When the poet writes about a woman poet, how should she portray her? What should she be portrayed as longing for? Is it "love", "rest" or "peace"? Is it "self-forgetful slumber" or "utter ease"? Is it a "day dream of a maiden" or a "vision of a bride", such as was cherished by Sappho figures in conventional stories, who long for love only to be abandoned? Or is it "knowledge", "love", or "pride", such as would be possessed by a good poet?

But the woman by the window does not answer. The speaker's painful lament, "I have wasted might and wisdom, / Wasted night and day: / Deaf she dreams to all I say" (38-40), indicates that she is in trouble: no matter how hard she works, she cannot write poetry that satisfies her. Before, women poets had only to portray women who longed for earthly love. And, following the traditional Sappho story, they could only portray them as dying of unrequited love. However, Rossetti stopped telling the same old Sappho legend. She is still thinking about exactly what kind of woman she wants to portray inside the "frame" of her artworks (her poetry). This process of creation requires serious self-questioning. I suggest that "Reflection" is a poem that conveys the struggle Rossetti feels is inevitable when women poets write about women and about women writing poetry.

In Part III of this study I will consider in detail how Rossetti tries to rewrite the conventional Sappho story to offer different portrayals of women.