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## **Sarah Parker**

Whose Muse?: Sappho, Swinburne, and Amy Lowell

Swinburne's influence on a number of modernist writers has been remarked upon in several relatively recent critical studies. For example, the modernist poets H. D. and T. S. Eliot provide the focus for comparative studies by Cassandra Laity (1996) and Thais. E. Morgan (1993). In this essay, I propose that the American modernist poet Amy Lowell (1874-1925) should be included in this list, arguing that her work exhibits a number of similarities to Swinburne's poetry.<sup>1</sup> These similarities stem from Swinburne and Lowell's shared understanding of Sappho as an important poetic precursor, muse figure, and homoerotic archetype. I argue that Sappho's influence on Swinburne and Lowell is instrumental in creating an anxiety that subsequent readers and critics 'ward off' by 'forgetting' their poetic corpuses. This results in the devaluation and neglect of both poets despite their considerable contributions to poetry.

From Robert Buchanan to T. S. Eliot, the oft-repeated narrative of Swinburne's devaluation has become a commonplace of Swinburne criticism: As Yisrael Levin has recently noted, '[c]ritics have discussed, commented on, justified, and deplored Swinburne's unpopularity for almost a century now' and 'the question of his reception has been an integral part of Swinburne studies just as Swinburne himself' (Levin 2010, 1). Similarly, critical derision of Amy Lowell simmered throughout her career and became more virulent after her death in 1925. Whilst in life Lowell confronted her detractors head-on, once dead, her critics took the opportunity to 'pounce' (Rollyson 2009, 3). One of the first to 'pounce' was Clement Wood, who, just a year after her death, sought to destroy Lowell's then formidable reputation.

Wood's biography *Amy Lowell* (1926) focused negatively on Lowell's obesity and commented obliquely that, though she was 'an impassioned singer of her own desires', her love poems 'do not word a common cry of many hearts' (Wood 1926, 173).

Wood's biography unfortunately set a precedent for further critical and biographical studies that read Lowell's poetry via her 'grotesque' corpulent physique, and her 'aberrant' desires. Perfunctory treatment in influential modernist studies, such as Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era* (1972), set the critical consensus that reduced Lowell 'to a footnote ... in the history of modern poetry' (Munich and Bradshaw 2004, xii). Despite the fact that Lowell features in important recuperative studies of female modernists in the latter decades of the twentieth century, she remains a neglected figure in comparison to her female contemporaries, not even granted a place in Bonnie Kime Scott's anthology *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) where room is found for Pound, Eliot, Lawrence, and Joyce.

Despite a number of attempts to counteract this critical neglect, scholarship on Lowell remains under-representative of the crucial role she played in constituting and defending modernist poetics. Lowell was a highly successful practitioner and impresario of the 'New Poetry' in America, using her vast wealth and influential family name to support other poets, such as H. D., Richard Aldington, and D. H. Lawrence.<sup>ii</sup> She saw three Imagist volumes through to publication between 1915-1917, and published eleven volumes of her own poetry (including three posthumous collections edited by her partner Ada Russell). Although identified with the 'Imagist' label, Lowell's work itself is highly varied, containing long narrative poems, haikus, fixed forms such as ballads, and her own invented form of polyphonic prose. Today she is best-known for the love lyrics of *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919), read by

many critics as a tribute to her relationship with Russell; Paul Lauter dubs it ‘the most fully articulated sequence of lesbian poetry between Sappho and the 1960s’ (Lauter 2004, 5).

Interestingly, both Swinburne and Lowell are now the subjects of significant reappraisal. The Swinburne Centenary Conference of 2009, along with Levin’s recent essay collection and a special edition of *Victorian Poetry*, bear testament to the fact that interest in Swinburne is in a healthier state than in previous years. Similarly, the essay collection *Amy Lowell, American Modern* (2004) instigated a particularly intense moment of Lowell scholarship (Munich and Bradshaw 2004, xxiv). Whatever the vicissitudes of their critical fortunes, existing scholarship on both Swinburne and Lowell has often focused on the important role of Sappho in their work. Swinburne declared Sappho ‘the greatest poet who ever was at all’ (Swinburne 1959-62, 4. 124) and celebrated her in poems such as ‘Anactoria’ and ‘Sapphics’ from *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866) and ‘On the Cliffs’ from *Songs of the Springtides* (1880). Sappho’s unrivalled status as a powerful muse figure in Swinburne’s body of work has been explored in detail by several critical studies.<sup>iii</sup> Similarly, scholarship on Lowell has often examined her use of Sappho, particularly in the poem ‘The Sisters’ from *What’s O’Clock* (1925, 459-461). In ‘The Sisters’, Lowell’s speaker depicts Sappho as the first of three inspiring women poets (alongside Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson), thus figuring her relationship to Sappho in the same sororal terms as Swinburne: ‘As brother and sister were we, child and bird. / Since thy first Lesbian word / Flamed on me’ (Swinburne 1904, 3. 318-19). In her influential essay, ‘Sapphistries’, Susan Gubar places Lowell within a tradition of Sapphic modernism, alongside H. D. and Renée Vivien. However, in contrast to these other poets, Gubar argues that Lowell’s poem exhibits ambivalence towards Sappho,

highlighting her ‘problematic limitations’ and ultimately rejecting her influence: ‘for all her attraction to Sappho, Lowell ... implies that the gulf between the ancient tenth muse and the modern woman poet may not be negotiable ... her older “sisters” leave her feeling “sad and self-distrustful”’ (Gubar 1984, 58-9).

Critics such as Lillian Faderman and Angela Leighton attribute lesbian writers’ ambivalence towards Sappho to the legacy of male writers such as Swinburne and Baudelaire, who portray the Lesbian as an evil vampiric *femme fatale*. Leighton contends that ‘Swinburne violently and sadistically appropriates the voice of Sappho for his own fantasies’ (Leighton 1992, 301, *n.15*), whilst Faderman argues that the ‘horribly negative terms’ in which lesbianism is described by writers such as Vivien and Djuna Barnes are a direct result of their having been exposed to decadent representations the lesbian as ‘a fabricated fantasy image of what would most upset (and arouse) the reader’ (Faderman 1981, 265). Faderman even states that Vivien’s internalisation of Swinburne’s influence literally contributed to her death by inspiring her to drink eau de cologne, like Swinburne’s *Lesbia Brandon* (Faderman 1981, 361-2).

However, this view of Swinburne’s contribution to lesbian poetics has now been modified. Swinburne, as more recent critics have noted, enabled the lesbian writers that came after him by writing a lesbian Sappho for the first time, anticipating Henry Wharton’s English translations of Sappho’s fragments in *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* (1885) – the first translation to include the female pronouns in Sappho’s love lyrics. Elizabeth Prettejohn writes that ‘Swinburne’s Sapphic poems of the 1860s were an avowed inspiration for the researches of the amateur scholar’ Wharton, and argues that both Swinburne and the artist Simeon Solomon can be credited with moving away from Baudelaire and

Courbert's pornographic interpretations towards a more complex response to Sappho's lesbianism in relation to the notion of 'art for art's sake' (Prettejohn 2008, 120). Swinburne and Solomon's project, she states, marks 'a more important stage in the modern reconfiguration of Sappho's sexuality ... than previous scholarship has acknowledged' (120). Likewise, Catherine Maxwell asserts that: 'Swinburne's portrayal of Sappho as a lesbian can be seen as decisive in helping determine the term's modern sexual meaning' (Maxwell 2001, 182).

Critics such as Cassandra Laity have shown that Swinburne enabled modernist women writers who 'discovered in Swinburne's more fluid explorations of sexuality and gender roles a radical alternative to the modernist poetics of male desire' (Laity 1992, 218). For example, for writers such as H. D., Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* 'articulate[s] a spectrum of desires and gender-disruptions ... which were not available in the high modernist discourse of the 1920s' (Laity 1992, 228). Recalling Gubar's comment on 'the gulf between the ancient tenth muse and the modern woman poet' (Gubar 1984, 58-9), Laity states that modernist lesbian poets 'looked to Swinburne for a more recent and accessible range of poetic conventions which would concretize the "fantasy precursor" they perceived in Sappho' (236). In other words, rather than widening the gulf between modernist lesbian poets and Sappho by his supposedly misogynist/pornographic appropriation of her voice, Swinburne in fact brings them *closer* to Sappho due to *his* greater historical nearness and his own fluid enabling constructions of gender and sexuality.

The relationship I am tracing between Swinburne, Lowell and Sappho, is informed by Thais E. Morgan's conception of intertextuality between Swinburne and T. S. Eliot. Morgan appeals to Michael Riffaterre's notion of intertextuality, noting that '[Riffaterre] expands the dyad characteristic of influence study (the poem and its

source) into a triangle involving a minimum of three texts, each of which refers to a “matrix” of shared paradigm of cultural knowledge’ (Morgan 1993, 137). As Morgan explains: ‘A typical intertextual triangle consists of the present text; an earlier intertext; and an interpretant text, which is either earlier than or contemporaneous with the text in question, and which mediates between this text and its intertext’ (137). This triangular model seems particularly relevant to my exploration of the relationship between Lowell, Swinburne, and Sappho. Taking Lowell’s work as the present text, and Sappho’s fragments as the intertext, Swinburne’s oeuvre occupies the place of the interpretant text.

Diana Collecott argues that Lowell was ‘a significant presence between Swinburne’s Englishing of Sappho and H. D.’s’ (1999, 28). In contrast, the lines of influence and intertextuality between Swinburne and Lowell have hitherto received little critical attention. Fortunately, Laity’s detailed tracing of Swinburne’s influence on H. D. provides a convenient model for my enquiry into the relations between Swinburne, Lowell, and Sappho. As Collecott has shown, Sappho was an important influence on Lowell’s friends and Imagist associates, H. D. and Bryher. As Lowell could not read Greek herself, she received Sappho via H. D. and Bryher’s own experiments in emulating or translating Sapphic lyrics. As a result, the ‘Sapphic aesthetic’ can be detected in Lowell’s own work: her Imagism was influenced by ‘the short fragments of Sappho preserved in quotations by later writers’ (Snyder 1997, 126). As Laity and Collecott show, these ‘quotations by later writers’ (such as H. D. and Bryher) were themselves influenced by Swinburne’s Sapphic verses. Therefore, Lowell is part of a body of writers who accessed Sappho via Swinburne.

In some respects, the links between Swinburne and Lowell are more obvious than those between Swinburne and H. D. Like Swinburne’s, the form and subject-

matter of Lowell's work often provoked controversy; reviews of her early work were critical: 'some puzzled, some adverse or angry or openly derisive', ridiculing Lowell's 'bizarre images and weird inventions' (Gould 1975, 140). Lowell also shared Swinburne's much-discussed French influences. She was inspired by French poetic forms, particularly those used by the symbolists Verlaine and Baudelaire, and often 'read Paul Fort and Henri de Régnier aloud' (Gould 1975, 137). Due to their controversial output and their proudly-proclaimed French influences, both Swinburne and Lowell were seen as importing French 'vices'; immorality in Swinburne's case, *vers libre* in Lowell's, although she 'Americanized and adapted the terms at once' to 'unrhymed cadence' (Ribeyrol 2010, 14; Gould 1975, 139).

John Keats was also a major influence on Lowell; she collected his manuscripts and first editions and spent the final years of her life writing his biography. Interestingly, a fragment of an essay on Keats by Swinburne was actually discovered in the Amy Lowell collection at Harvard in 1949. Cecil Lang notes that the manuscript, auctioned in 1917, 'appears to have been unnoticed by Swinburne's editors and biographers' (Lang 1949, 169). We can speculate that Lowell gained satisfaction from the knowledge that she was taking up the challenge of writing on Keats that Swinburne left unfinished.<sup>iv</sup> Lowell mentioned Swinburne, often unfavourably, in a number of her own lectures; for example, criticising his 'confused and redundant imagery' (qtd. in Damon 1935, 343). However, something Swinburne and Lowell could agree on was their admiration of Sappho. Not only does Lowell place Sappho at the head of her list of 'sister' poets, she also praised her in lectures: 'the highest poetry is often the most simple. Sappho's "I loved you once, Atthis" gives us the shock of poetry and truth in one' (qtd. in Damon 1935, 446). As I shall show, Swinburne and Lowell's shared Sapphic influences affect their poetry in

interconnected ways. This Sapphic influence leads both Swinburne and Lowell to write about courtly love, linking their poetry to Sappho's fragments which emphasise the speaker's painful distance from or absence of the beloved. This pain is materialised in the form and metre of their work. Reacting to these painful qualities, critics issued remarkably similar complaints against Swinburne and Lowell's poetry, claiming they prioritised sound over sense, 'attacking' the reader with synaesthetic imagery. In order to ward off the threatening aspects of Swinburne and Lowell's verse – particularly the way in which their work troubled boundaries between the physical body and the text – critics directed their own form of critical 'abuse' at Swinburne and Lowell's poetic corpus, by attacking and insulting their physical bodies.

### **Courtly Love and Medievalism**

In his ground-breaking *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (1972), Jerome McGann draws attention to Swinburne's preoccupation with unrequited love: 'Swinburne's work is dominated from the start by a fascination with ... the theme of lost love .... Swinburne's obsession is essentially a slightly modernized ... version of the topos of the Provençal poet-lover' (McGann 1972, 216). Antony Harrison expands on Swinburne's engagement with medieval literature, discerning 'formal and thematic similarities' between Swinburne's work and troubadour poetry, demonstrating his 'deep engagement with the values and ethos of courtly love literature' (Harrison 1988, 27). From his earliest dramas *Rosamond* (1860) and *Chastelard* (1865), to his later masterpiece *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882), Swinburne engaged with the courtly love dynamic characteristic of medieval verse, defining 'passion as a source of suffering' and representing death as 'a release from, as well as a fulfilment of, both physical and spiritual passions' (Harrison 1988, 30, 33). Thematically, Lowell's work is also

rooted in the medieval courtly tradition of unrequited love for an unattainable beloved. Lowell is often characterised as a poet who highlights the domestic lesbian ‘idyll’, her contented relationship with Russell often reflected in her love lyrics. However, Lowell also wrote a series of morbid Gothic narrative poems which led to accusations that she had borrowed from Browning’s ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ (Gould, 1975, 117). Her early love lyrics, too, contain references to painful unrequited love and vampiric *femme fatales*. Faderman suggests that these love lyrics originate from the period of Lowell and Russell’s courtship in 1914, during which Lowell begged the reluctant Russell to come and live with her (Faderman, 2004, 59-60). Thus, in her love poems to Russell, Lowell presents herself as ‘imploring, apologetic, and entirely at the mercy of the beloved’ (Faderman 2004, 60). Lowell claimed that ‘she learned more about poetic composition from the manuscript of the “Eve of St. Agnes” than from any book’ (Damon 1935, 673).

Several of Lowell’s poems take place in a medieval setting with strongly Keatsian echoes. For example, in a 1914 poem entitled ‘In a Castle’ (Lowell 1955, 60-1), a courtly knight commits adultery with a lady whose husband is away fighting. The poem, written in Lowell’s invented form of ‘polyphonic’ or cadenced prose, repeatedly calls attention to its medieval setting in a refrain: ‘The wide state bed shivers beneath its velvet coverlet. Above, dim, in the smoke, a tarnished coronet gleams dully. ... The arras blows sidewise out from the wall, and then falls back again’ (60). Lowell immediately sets up a typical courtly scenario: the crusading knight has attained his ‘lady’s key, confided with much cunning, whisperingly’ (60) and they have arranged an illicit meeting in the absence of her lord: ‘Is it guilt to free a lady from her palsied lord, absent and fighting, terribly abhorred?’ (60). The knight

justifies this adultery using conventional courtly language, emphasising the purity and honour of his love:

She is so pure and whole. Only because he has her soul will she resign herself to him, for where the soul has gone, the body must be given as a sign. He takes her by the divine right of the only lover. He has sworn to fight her lord, and wed her after. Should he be overborne, she will die adoring him, forlorn, shriven by her great love. (60)

The knight's desire, collapsing metaphysical soul-union with bodily intercourse, echoes the reckless, profane desire expressed by troubadour Arnaut Daniel: 'Would I were hers in body, not in soul! and that she let me, secretly, into her bedroom! ... I'll not heed the warning of friend or uncle' (qtd. in Press 1971, 188-9). This soul/body union is also suggestive of Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes' (1819).

However, waiting in the chamber, the knight learns that he is not the only man to receive the lady's favour: 'Christ's Death! It is no storm which makes those little chuckling sounds ... it is his dear lady, kissing and clasping someone!' (60). The second part of the poem cuts to a grim scene, the violent outcome of the knight's discovery of his lady in bed with a page: 'On the velvet coverlet lie two bodies, stripped and fair in the cold grey air. ... At each side of the bed, on the floor, is a head. A man's on this side, a woman's on that, and the red blood oozes along the rush mat' (61). After committing this vengeful double-murder, the knight has killed himself, as we learn from the later reference to 'three corpses ... growing cold' (61). The knight has left notes on the bodies, addressed to the absent lord on his return. The lady's reads:

Most noble Lord: Your wife's misdeeds are as a double-stranded necklace of beads. But I have engaged that, on your return, she shall welcome you here. She will not spurn your love as before, you have still the best part of her. Her blood was red, her body white, they will both be here for your delight. The soul inside was a lump of dirt, I have rid you of that with a spurt of my sword point. Good luck to your pleasure. She will be quite complaisant, my friend, I wager. (61)

The unhinged, sadistic tone of this note, inviting the lady's husband to gain 'pleasure' from her dead body, coupled with the knight's phallic reference to 'the spurt of my sword point', implies that he himself may have committed necrophiliac acts on the corpse before ending his own life.

Combining courtly love with perverse, destructive desire, 'In a Castle' shares similarities with Swinburne's 'The Leper' (Swinburne 1904, 1. 119-24; 2000, 95-100). Unlike the courtly knight, however, Swinburne's lowly scribe can only watch the beloved from afar:

I served her in a royal house;  
     I served her wine and curious meat,  
 For will to kiss between her brows,  
     I had no heart to sleep or eat. (lines 5-8)

Though not the object of his lady's affections, the scribe takes part in the courtly scenario by enabling secret meetings with a knight: 'I remember that sundawn / I

brought him by a privy way / Out at her lattice' (lines 29-31). Therefore, like the lady, the knight and the page of 'In a Castle', 'The Leper' depicts an entangled love triangle and the perilous secrecy of an illicit courtly rendezvous.

Despite her meetings with the knight, the Lady proclaims herself 'clean and whole of shame' (line 38), recalling Lowell's knight's view of the lady as 'so pure and whole' (Lowell 1955, 60). According to the logic of courtly love, conventional morality can be overcome by the law of passion. However, as with the lady of 'In a Castle', the beloved's active sexual desire contributes to her downfall:

Yea, he inside whose grasp all night  
 Her fervent body leapt or lay.  
 Stained with sharp kisses red and white,  
 Found her a plague to spurn away. (lines 65-8)

The above suggests that the leprous plague that afflicts the lady can be linked to her sexual transgression with the knight: he 'stains' her body with rash-like marks and 'finds' her a plague – the knight's horror implies his own culpability for this (possibly venereal) disease. The connection between disease and sin is assumed by the villagers who 'cast her forth for a base thing/ ... seeing how God had wrought/ This curse to plague her' (lines 51-4). Even the scribe connects 'her body of love' with her physical illness (line 48). The lady's position, lying beneath the knight recalls the knight of 'In a Castle', who remembers 'leap[ing] to cover' his lady 'when she holds out her arms' (Lowell 1955, 60). Lowell's knight also describes the beloved's body as 'white and red', combining her deathly pallor with her spilt blood; in both poems, this encodes a virginal purity tainted with sexuality. As in knight's note, the conclusion to 'The

Leper' contains suggestions of necrophilia: 'Her hair, half grey half ruined gold, / Thrills me and burns me in kissing it./ ... she is dead now, and shame put by' (lines 103-4). In both poems, courtly love is thus connected to unnatural or perverse desire.

Narrative poems aside, in Lowell's love lyrics, Lowell's beloveds are at best, indifferent, at worst, fatal. For example, in the poem 'Absence' (1914), the speaker imagines her heart as a cup, which fills with her own blood when her lover appears: 'When you come, it brims/ Red and trembling with blood, / Heart's blood for your drinking; / To fill your mouth with love/ And the bittersweet taste of a soul' (Lowell, 1955, 41). These lines echo Sappho's famous description of eros as 'bittersweet' in 'Fragment 130' (Campbell 1994, 147), an implacable force combining pleasure and pain. This fragment provides the opening line of Swinburne's 'Anactoria': 'My life is bitter with thy love' (Swinburne 1904, 1. 57; 2000, 47). The vampiric Sappho uses images of blood to describe erotic commingling and the pulsing rhythm of poetry: 'I feel thy blood against my blood: my pain/ Pains thee' (line 12). However, this passion becomes a painful surfeit of pleasure, as Sappho longs to consume and destroy Anactoria entirely:

That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat  
Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet  
Thy body were abolished and consumed,  
And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed! (lines 111-14)

A comparable desire for total consumption/merging with the beloved is seen in the eucharistic imagery of Lowell's 'In Excelsis' (1925):

I drink your lips,  
 I eat the whiteness of your hands and feet.  
 My mouth is open,  
 As a new jar I am empty and open.  
 Like white water are you who fill the cup of my mouth.

(Lowell 1955, 444)

This wish for erotic consummation in death is characteristic of chivalric discourses. For example, in Swinburne's 'Satia te Sanguine' (1904, 1. 86-8; 2000, 70-2), the speaker is drained by the beloved: 'You suck with a sleepy red lip / The wet red wounds in his heart. / You thrill as his pulses dwindle, / You brighten and warm as he bleeds' (lines 59-62). Similarly, in Lowell's poem 'A Gift' (1914), the speaker gives herself to the beloved in the form of words in 'little jars', knowing that this unrequited love will ultimately be fatal: 'When I shall have given you the last one, / You will have the whole of me, / But I shall be dead' (Lowell 1955, 41).

### **Sappho and Courtly Love**

Such courtly love has its origins in Sappho, who repeatedly takes unrequited desire as her theme. For example, her famous 'Ode to Aphrodite' (Fragment 1) entreats the goddess to help her win the love of an indifferent woman. The poem concludes with Aphrodite promising Sappho: 'If she runs away, soon she shall pursue; if she does not accept gifts, why, she will give them instead; and if she does not love, soon she shall love even against her will' (Campbell 1994, 55). Fragment 31 voices a similarly unrequited desire, as, from across the room, the speaker watches her beloved talking with a man: 'He seems as fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you

and listens to your sweet voice and lovely laughter' (Campbell 1994, 79). Due to the frequency of this theme in Sappho's verse, Page duBois has defined the Sapphic aesthetic as an 'aesthetic of distance' and unattainability, valuing 'the absent object of desire' (duBois 1995, 53).

This absence and unattainability has painful physical effects on the speaker, as seen in Fragment 31: 'my tongue is 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' (Campbell 1994, 81). This physical reaction to desire is also frequently seen in troubadour verse. For example, Jaufré Rudel's depiction of the effects of desire clearly echoes Sappho's Fragment 31: 'I am stricken by joy which slays me, and by a pang of love which ravishes my flesh, whence will my body waste away; and never ... from any blow did I so languish' (qtd. in Press 1971, 34-5).<sup>v</sup> Jaime Hovey argues that the unrequited desire depicted in both Sappho's lyrics and European courtly love poetry offered twentieth-century lesbian poets an enabling literary tradition, by transforming the thwarted aspects of homoerotic longing into a heroic lesbian chivalry. By rewriting 'sterility' as exalted, spiritualised desire and encoding the dangers inherent in homoerotic love in its tragic, violent plots, courtly love models permitted a simultaneous confirmation and denial of desire for lesbian writers such as Lowell, making 'a degraded love honourable' (Hovey 2004, 81). In arguing that the courtly love tradition was 'flexible enough to sustain carnal superstructures built on its ethereal Platonic foundation', Harrison also suggests how the courtly love model could appeal to homoerotically-inclined writers (1988, 34).

As Karla Jay (1988) has shown, Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien drew their dynamic of courtly love from Sappho, with one performing the role of unattainable

lady, the other the suppliant page. These roles feature in Vivien's *A Woman Appeared to Me* (1904), when one of the characters imagines herself reincarnated in Ancient Lesbos:

I was only a sullen and awkward child when an older playmate took me to the temple where Psappha was invoking the Goddess. I heard the Ode to Aphrodite. [...] Psappha cared nothing for me. But I loved her, and when later I developed the body of a woman, my sobs of desire were directed toward her. (Vivien 1982, 8)

For Vivien, the pain of unrequited love is linked to Sappho, who is incomparable and unapproachable artistically and sexually. Swinburne figured his relationship to Sappho in similar terms of unbridgeable distance, writing of his Sapphic imitations: “‘It is as near as I can come; and no man can come close to her’” (Swinburne 2000, 407). Harrison shows that Swinburne advocated ‘an attitude of aloof submission and reverence before a female idol’ (Harrison 1988, 27). However, Yopie Prins argues this was a ‘self-reviling pose’ from which Swinburne derived pleasure; in this ‘scenario of domination and submission’ Swinburne is ‘only too eager to give [Sappho] the upper hand’ (Prins 1999, 122-3).

Lowell experiences a similar distance in ‘The Sisters’ as the speaker longs to observe Sappho: ‘Just to watch the crisp sea sunshine playing on her hair/ And listen, thinking all the while ‘twas she/ Who spoke’ (Lowell 1955, 459). As Gubar observes: Lowell does not actually *speak* to Sappho directly (Gubar 1984, 58). In her love lyrics, the beloved’s presence is also consistently invoked through her distance/absence; for example, in ‘The Taxi’: ‘The lamps of the city prick my eyes /

So that I can no longer see your face. /Why should I leave you to wound myself upon the sharp edges of the night?' (Lowell 1955, 43). This poem recalls Sappho's Fragment 16 in which she is reminded of 'Anactoria who is not here' (Campbell 1994, 67). Just as Anactoria's presence is marked through her absence, Lowell's love lyrics also transform 'the pain of separation into an eloquent tribute to the beauty of desire' (Hovey 2004, 81). This painful desire serves not only as a sign of courtly love and Sapphic influence, but is also reproduced in the formal properties of both Swinburne and Lowell's work.

### **Sado-masochistic Sappho and the pleasures and pains of form**

Formally, Lowell's poems (with the exception of the haikus) are seldom 'clean', sparse and classical, despite the strict dictates of Imagism. Her poems were considered by some 'excessive': in a letter to Lowell (14 November 1916), D. H. Lawrence criticised Lowell's poetry as 'pure sensation without concepts', while Louis Untermeyer claimed that her work is 'best in its portrayal of colors and sounds, of physical perceptions rather than the reactions of emotional experience' (Lawrence 1985, 50; Untermeyer 1930, 231). Alice Corbin Henderson criticised Lowell's 'spiritual poverty, the manufactured stage-passion, the continuous external glitter with no depth beneath, the monotony of style ... [and] the endless emphasis on form' (Corbin Henderson 1919, 166). As Melissa Bradshaw notes, '[t]his charge of paying attention only to surfaces, of an excess of detail belying a paucity of content' resembles Robert Buchanan's criticisms of Swinburne and 'the Fleshly School of Poetry' (Bradshaw 2000, para. 2). In his 1866 review of *Poems and Ballads*, Buchanan claimed, 'Absolute passion is there none; elaborate attempts at thick colouring supply the place of passion' (Buchanan in Hyder 1970, 32). Maxwell argues

that this attitude towards Swinburne persists into the early twentieth century, in a different form: 'If early critics were bothered by the content of these poems, later critics ... defended themselves against the verse by claiming there was nothing there; Swinburne's sonorous lyricism and metrical fluency were deemed by his detractors to be all sound and precious little sense' (Maxwell 2006, 8). This attitude is epitomised in T. S. Eliot's criticisms of Swinburne in his 1920 essay 'Swinburne as Poet': Eliot rejects Victorian moral objections to Swinburne's verse, only to assert a different kind of 'morbidly', one 'not of human feeling but of language' and claims that 'his meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning' (Eliot 1920b, 149).

Therefore, in the case of both Lowell *and* Swinburne, their innovative use of form and rhythm is seen to disguise an underlying shallowness. Indeed one reviewer noted that while Lowell's 'virtues are her own ... her faults are the faults of Swinburne; namely a prodigality of poetic energy which is not richness but confusion' (qtd. in Bradshaw 2000, para. 1). Harriet Monroe associates this poetic energy with physical pain, writing that '[Lowell] delights in the rush and clatter of sounds, in the kaleidoscopic glitter of colors', and notes that 'In a few poems in the imagist anthologies ... one's ears and eyes feel fairly battered' (Monroe 1926, 81). This reaction recalls Prins's chapter on Swinburne's 'Sapphic Sublime', in which she argues that he conceived of Sappho's rhythms as beatings inflicted on his body. Prins links this to Swinburne's painful public school education in classical metre, his flagellant writings and the images of Sappho as schoolmistress. Swinburne thus casts Sappho in the role of 'singing mistress ... who teaches Swinburne the striking power of her poetry by forcing him to submit to its rhythm' (Prins 1999, 122). Poems such as 'Anactoria' dramatise this 'Sapphic scene of instruction', as Anactoria's limbs become a lyre on which Sappho cruelly plays: 'Would I not hurt thee perfectly? ... /

Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note, ... / Take thy limbs living and new-mould with these / A lyre of many faultless agonies?' (Swinburne 1904, 1. 61; 2000, 51). Swinburne also associates the sublime power of the sea with this disciplining rhythm, drawing yet another connection with Sappho, whose body ends up in the sea after she leaps from the Leucadian cliffs.

Swinburne experimented with recreating Sapphic form, transforming Greek lyric rhythms into English metre, most notably in the poem 'Sapphics' (1904, 1. 204-7; 2000, 163-5). Prins notes that these Sapphic metres can only be seen, not heard 'for Sappho's song can only be made 'visible' by the conversion of rhythm into a metrical pattern ... a written form that appeals to the eye instead of the ear' (Prins 1999, 145). For Swinburne therefore, Sappho becomes 'the embodiment of a rhythm that ... increasingly turns into an abstract metrical principle' (120). Lowell, too, experimented with Sapphic form; as Adrienne Munich observes, poems such as 'The Letter', 'Opal', and 'A Spring of Rosemary' (all 1919) alternate long and shortlines, creating a visual resemblance to Sapphic stanzas (Munich 2004, 16). Several critics have noted how Sappho's lyrics were a key inspiration for the Imagist group – not only for Lowell, but also for H. D., Richard Aldington and Ezra Pound (Collecott 1999, 103-34). In addition, Lowell's experimentation with spare Japanese forms drew on the brevity and concentration of image associated with Sappho's fragments. But whilst Swinburne sees Sappho in terms of strict rhythm, Lowell emphasises 'the apparent freedom with which Sappho was able to let her poetic imagination soar' appreciating 'the robust eroticism, expressed without restraints ... that permeates the songs of Sappho' (Snyder 1997, 128). This is illustrated by her description of Sappho in 'The Sisters', in which she is contrasted with Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Sapho could fly her impulses like bright  
 Balloons tip-tilting to a morning air  
 And write about it. Mrs. Browning's heart  
 was squeezed in stiff conventions. So she lay  
 Stretched upon a sofa, reading Greek  
 And speculating, as I must suppose,  
 In just this way on Sapho. (Lowell 1955, 459)

Ultimately both Swinburne and Lowell make use of Sappho as the poet who represents the poetry *they* want to write. Prins suggests that we consider Swinburne's use of Sappho in terms of a 'highly self-conscious nineteenth-century discourse on metre' (Prins 1999, 155). In contrast, Lowell utilised Sappho to promote free verse, insisting that rhythm and cadence were the heart of Sappho's *and* modernist practice; as she explains, '[i]f the modern movement in poetry could be defined in a sentence, the truest thing which could be said of it ... would be that it is a movement to restore the audible quality to poetry' (Lowell 1930, 23). In this way, Lowell could be said to be attempting to reverse Swinburne's Sapphic alchemy, turning poetry from strict English metre to be appreciated on the page, back into cadenced song to be performed aloud.

Lowell's 'polyphonic prose', was based on 'the rhythm of the speaking voice' (qtd. in Thacker 2004, 107). Lowell conceived of this form in terms of 'tides' and 'waves' of differing sound effects. But, whilst for Lowell such fluidity suggested freedom and sensuality, for Swinburne it represented the strictly rhythmical patterns of nature: '[Swinburne's] sea is a fluid and formless mass given structure by the rhythms of the waves and the tides and the coast's outlines' (Walsh 2010, 51). Thus,

Lowell rejects Swinburne's version of strict Sapphic metre, projecting this onto Barrett Browning, whose 'heart' (and poetry) is 'squeezed in stiff conventions'.

This rejection of Victorian prosody is characteristic of modernist poets more generally, who viewed such 'regulation of rhythm ... [as] an unnatural and mechanical imposition of meter' (Prins 1999, 172). Swinburne's imagery was also criticised by modernists, with Lowell referring to 'the Swinburne of confused and redundant imagery' (qtd. in Damon, 1935, 343). Charlotte Ribeyrol points out that Swinburne's synaesthetic imagery contributed to accusations of his 'fleshliness', indicating 'a loss of control over the senses, once again paradoxically contained within a rigid form' (Ribeyrol 2010, 113). These synaesthetic 'attacks' threateningly blurred the boundaries between self and other, thus 'pass[ing] on the burden of sensitivity in that they assault their readers with multiple stimuli' (Maxwell 2001, 196).

Despite her own criticisms, Lowell became accused of the same 'sins' as Swinburne. Polyphonic prose was itself 'very much a synaesthetic experience' arranging 'the visual elements of language in a painterly composition' (Thacker 2004, 116). As a result, Lowell's detractors complained that she assaulted the senses with overwrought imagery, mixed metaphors, and attacks of sound, at the expense of distinct images and clearly defined subject-matter. Harriet Monroe's complaint that when reading the pyrotechnic Lowell 'one's ears and eyes feel fairly battered' (Monroe 1926, 81) recalls a character in Swinburne's novel *Lesbia Brandon* who complains that 'things in verse hurt one' (Swinburne 1952, 148). Therefore the pleasure and pain connected to Sappho was played out in the form and imagery of both Swinburne and Lowell's work. Their poetry, assaulting the senses through rhythmical form and synaesthetic images, disrupts the boundary between the body and

the text, and is thus linked to the pain of unrequited Sapphic desire. Ultimately, criticism of the pain inflicted by their verses was projected onto their physical appearance, thus marking their bodies as sites of abuse.

### **Critical Abuse and the Poet's Body**

In my opening, I noted that Lowell and Swinburne have both been critically marginalised. This can be attributed, in part, to the way both poets have been unfairly caricatured in biographical and critical studies of their work that often exhibit a fixation with their physical abnormalities. For example, Lowell's obesity led her to be called the 'hippopoetess' by her modernist peers, whilst Swinburne's slight build and red hair attracted the ridicule of Max Beerbohm and Edmund Gosse in diminishing caricatures and written portraits which describe his body in terms of effeminacy (Bradshaw 2004, 171; Prins 1999, 156-62; Maxwell 2006, 4-7). In both cases, criticism of the body becomes virtually indistinguishable from criticism of the work, creating stereotypes that unfortunately endure to this day. Referring to T. S. Eliot's influential criticisms of Swinburne, Thais E. Morgan remarks that Eliot particularly feared Swinburne as he exemplifies the 'perfect' poet, scholar, and critic, representing 'a rival to Eliot in all three of these roles' (Morgan 1993, 142). Eliot's fear of Swinburne recalls Harold Bloom's Oedipal theories of father/son poetic rivalry. However, Cassandra Laity, in her work on H. D. and Swinburne, suggests that Eliot's attitude is based on the male modernists' fear of 'feminisation' at the hands of the previous literary movement. She argues that, '[c]ontrary to Harold Bloom's Oedipal model of father-son combat, male modernists appear to have perceived their Romantic precursors as insidiously possessive "foremothers", whose influence threatened to feminise both their psyches and their art' (Laity 1992, 219).

Depictions of Swinburne as weak and feminine – ‘long-ringed, flippant-lipped, down-cheeked, amorous-lidded’ in the words of Buchanan – imply that he is a castrated figure, an impotent and sexless servant to a dominant female power: ‘utterly and miserably lost to the Muses’ (Buchanan in Hyder 1970, 32). Maxwell suggests that poetic law itself can be understood as ‘the law of the mother’, represented by Sappho and the muses, a law that Swinburne submitted himself to; as she asserts, ‘Swinburne’s honouring of female power is undisguised ... the female principle is dominant in his work’ (Maxwell 2001, 191, 181). The fact that Swinburne openly admitted his ultimate poetic inspiration was female – a female of ambiguous sexuality, at that – and celebrated her repeatedly, only intensifies the anxiety that his influence might feminise, corrupt, and possess the virile modernist.

Swinburne’s slight form appears to have allowed his critics to take his work equally lightly. I suggest we can understand Amy Lowell as a kind of inverted Swinburne, a female whose immense bulk contributed to her critical neglect. As Munich and Bradshaw observe, Lowell’s poetic achievements have been eclipsed by an emphasis on her physical appearance and eccentric behaviour: ‘It is her corpulence and her love of cigars (not her considerable literary contributions) that have kept Amy Lowell in literary memory’ (Munich and Bradshaw 2004, xxiii). Lowell was famously attacked by Pound for ‘taking over’ the Imagist movement; Pound then dismissed the movement as ‘Amygisme’. Repeatedly, Pound criticises the ‘mushy technique’ and ‘general floppiness’ of Lowell’s poetry in terms that suggest the fluidity and softness associated with the female body (qtd. in Bradshaw 2004, 172). Testifying to Pound’s repugnance toward Lowell’s body, Collecott writes that Pound saw himself as ‘the first line of defence against ‘Amy’ and ‘slop’ (Collecott 1999, 163). The threatening

liquidity Pound perceived in Lowell links her to Swinburne's vision of the sea, associated with the feminine power he connected to Sappho.

Pound's criticisms of Lowell's work recall what Leslie Heywood has defined as the 'anorexic aesthetic' of modernism. She writes that '[i]n both the high modernist artist and the anorexic there is a rejection and a will to eliminate the feminine ... to shape the "base material" into a "higher," masculine form' (Heywood 1996, 61). Therefore, the modernist emphasis on 'hardness, paring down, and reducing the poetic body can be read as a corollary for the ... reduction or elimination of the female body' (101). Following Heywood's theory, one could suggest that Lowell threatened to overwhelm, squash, and spill all over Pound's neatly chiselled Imagism with her boundary-dissolving excess, performed in her poetic experimentation and embodied in her obesity. Like the Swinburnian female that Buchanan denounces as a 'large-limbed, sterile creature' (qtd. in Prins 1999, 159), Lowell's size also disrupts boundaries of gender and sexuality. Surveying depictions of Lowell's body, Bradshaw writes that 'fat female bodies evade easy classification, destabilize categories, invite paradox. They are at once pathetic and threatening, weak and overpowering. Overwhelmingly feminine, with their exaggerated secondary sexual characteristics, they are, at the same time, perceived as disconcertingly masculine in their bulk' (Bradshaw 2004, 179). Alison Pease has shown that Swinburne's poetry embodied the same boundary-defying qualities; threatening to 'destabilize the socially constructed norms of male and female behaviour', the 'unrestrained and repetitive sexuality of the poems exacts a transgression by which all passions and all people become the same, and that sameness is reflected ... in a bestial, sensual chaos that tends to collapse constructed taxonomies' (Pease 1997, 43, 45). A similar fear of boundary-defying chaos is certainly suggested by a letter that Pound wrote to Margaret Anderson (22

April 1921), betraying his fear that Lowell would overwhelm, smother and possess him. He asks: 'Ought one to be distracted, ought one to be asked to address that perpetual mother's meeting, ... that cradle of on-coming Amys???' (qtd. in Munich and Bradshaw 2004, xiv). Pound's image of monstrous maternity and the threat of engulfment by multiple Amys, suggest that the violent, anxious reactions Lowell elicited in the male modernists link her to those other overwhelming poetic 'foremothers': Swinburne and Sappho.

To conclude, this chapter has suggested a number of ways in which Sappho, Swinburne and Lowell are connected. Drawing on Michael Riffaterre and Thais E. Morgan's concept of intertextuality, I have shown how these three poets form a triangular 'matrix' of complex cultural cross-influences (Morgan 1993, 137). In particular, this chapter has demonstrated how Amy Lowell's response to Sappho is mediated by Swinburne's earlier versions of the 'Tenth Muse'. As a result of this intertextual influence, both Swinburne and Lowell connect Sapphic desire to medieval courtly love, figuring such desire in terms of distance and unattainability. They embody this painful separation through the Sapphic form of 'suffering meter' (Prins 1999, 140). This formal experimentation and use of synaesthesia threatens boundaries between physical bodies and bodies of poetry, leading to similar criticism of both poets that attacks their physical bodies and their bodies of poetry as threateningly feminine and queer. Understanding the importance of Sappho to Swinburne and Lowell – not just as a lesbian icon but as a courtly lover and formal experimenter – leads to greater understanding of their own strange, complex poetic bodies, and why they have elicited such derision and fear.

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<sup>i</sup> Amy Lowell's early collections are, *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass* (1912) and *Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds* (1914). In 1915, she became the editor of the anthology series *Some Imagist Poets*. Despite periods of long illness, which began in 1916, Lowell published six more volumes of poems (including Chinese and Japanese translations), two more Imagist anthologies, critical studies, and a two-volume biography of Keats (1925). She died of a stroke in May 1925. Three more volumes of her poetry were published posthumously, edited by Ada Dwyer Russell. The first of these, *What's O' Clock* (1925), won the Pulitzer Prize in 1926.

<sup>ii</sup> 'The New Poetry' encompasses various kinds of modernist experimentation practised by American poets in the early twentieth century, including direct treatment of the image (as opposed to rhetorical flourishes), *vers libre* or 'free verse', and unconventional punctuation. This kind of poetic experimentation was resisted as bogus, obscure, or even immoral by many American readers. For Amy Lowell's role in promoting the 'New Poetry', see Marek 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> Zonana (1990) emphasises Sappho's role as Swinburne's muse, and his understanding of her as a spiritual 'sister'; Morgan (1984, 1992) explores Swinburne's utilisation of the lesbian body to voice alternative masculinities; Similarly Dellamora (1990) argues that Swinburne's Sapphic poems embody a complex male homoerotic/queer desire; Prins (1999) focuses on Swinburne's use of strict Sapphic metre in relation to his flagellant fantasies; Maxwell (2001) examines Sappho as a powerful feminine force in Swinburne's work and the source of his blurring of boundaries of gender and sexuality.

<sup>iv</sup> Swinburne was commissioned to write the essay on Keats for *The English Poets Series*, as Lowell would have known from her copy of Swinburne's letters. Lowell owned *The Letters of A. C. Swinburne, edited by Edmund Gosse and T. J. Wise* (New

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York: John Lane, 1919). The letter to Edmund Gosse (dated 6 October 1879) in which Swinburne agrees to undertake the Keats essay is found in Lowell's copy of the letters (Swinburne 1919, 2. 37) and in Lang's later edition (Swinburne 1959-62, 4. 100-1).

Swinburne briefly met Lowell's ancestor, the poet James Russell Lowell (Letter to E. C. Stedman, 4 April 1882; this meeting is recounted in Swinburne 1919, 2. 102-3, and in Swinburne 1959-62, 4. 264-5).

<sup>v</sup> Though it is difficult to posit a direct influence of Sappho on Rudel, fragment 31 was one of the few Sappho poems to survive in near-complete form from antiquity through the medieval period, via citation by other writers. It was included in Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* (copied into manuscript form during the tenth century) and was adapted by the Roman poet Catullus (in his poem 51; see Higgins 1996). Ovid's *Heroides* also famously recounts Sappho's love for Phaon, so we can expect medieval writers such as Petrarch, Boccaccio and Chaucer, who read and admired Ovid (see Ziolkowski 2005 25-6), to associate Sappho with courtly or unrequited love.