The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature examines literary representations of lesbian sexuality, identities, and communities, from the medieval period to the present. In addition to providing a helpful orientation to key literary-historical periods, critical concepts, theoretical debates, and literary genres, this Companion considers the work of such well-known authors as Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Sarah Waters. Written by a host of leading critics and covering subjects as diverse as lesbian desire in the long eighteenth century and same-sex love in a postcolonial context, this Companion delivers insight into the variety of traditions that have shaped the present landscape of lesbian literature.

Jodie Medd is Associate Professor of English at Carleton University in Ottawa. She is the author of Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism (Cambridge University Press, 2012) as well as essays on queer sexuality and modernism.

A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

LESBIAN LITERATURE
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</tbody>
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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Home, Angels in America, the AIDS Quilt, Audre Lorde’s Zami, Janet Flanner’s letters, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, W.G. Sebald, and opera.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume belongs to its brilliant, responsive, patient, understanding, and relentlessly good-humored contributors. This project gave me the opportunity to work with scholars whose writing I have long admired, to reconnect with old acquaintances whose memories and sassy prose bring me great delight, and to discover scholars who are not only thoughtful and careful literary critics but also generous and gracious correspondents. What a pleasure this has been.

I thank Ray Ryan for inviting me to be involved in this project to a degree that I could not have imagined possible. Gill Plain was an early co-conspirator, and her warm and witty cross-Atlantic e-mail collaboration got things off the ground. Alicha Keddy’s early bibliographic research assistance served me well, Susan Lanser’s timely advice and corrections on the Chronology were invaluable, and Mary Newberry’s indexing expertise once again saved my sanity. Laura Doan and Valerie Traub provided invaluable support and feedback on the proposal, as did other anonymous reviewers. I am extremely grateful. Hugh Stevens, Emma Parker, Kate Thomas, and Amy Sara Carroll offered helpful and heartening advice as this volume was taking shape and Valerie Traub and Susan Lanser extended an irresistible and much appreciated invitation to attend a workshop on lesbian representation. Barbara Leckie listened, sympathized, and offered encouragement and sane advice whenever I needed it.

Finally, I give my loving and exuberant thanks, again and again, to Nick, Amelia, and Audrey: you are the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.
This very limited chronology highlights select literary works in English (primarily American and British), while noting some texts in other languages, including early sources. Dates prioritize book publication rather than composition, circulation, or serial dates. Selected historical events and political activism are also included.

Unknown
Hebrew Bible, Book of Ruth: Ruth vows her commitment to Naomi, her mother-in-law, after both are widowed: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

Bronze Age
(c. 3000–1200 BCE)
According to Homer and other classical sources, Amazons, a society of female warriors, populated the area around the Black Sea. Amazonian tales appear in literatures across the continents and centuries.

c. 610–580 BCE
Life of Sappho of Lesbos, whose nine books of lyric poetry, of which approximately 200 fragments exist, include poems expressing desire for women.

c. 8 CE
Ovid, Metamorphoses, Ninth Book, includes the story of Iphis, a girl raised as a boy, who is betrothed to Ianthe. The goddess Isis transforms Iphis into a boy so the wedding can go ahead. The tale is reworked throughout literary history.

c. 80–90
Martial, Epigrams (particularly books 1 and 7), with satirical references to tribadism, cunnilingus, and other sex acts between women.
Chronology

c. 100–115 Juvenal, Sixth Satire, “On Women,” includes orgiastic sex between women as evidence of women’s sexual excesses.

c. 165–180 Lucian, Dialogues of Hetaerae (Courtesans): comic dialogues including a confession of a courtesan’s seduction by her female friend.

Alciphron (speculated as Lucian’s contemporary), Letters, with tales of courtesans and their female friends pairing off together.

914 Byzantine scholar Arethas, in a commentary on a second-century Christian text, equates Lesbai with tribades and hetairestriai as terms for women who have sex with women.

1098–1179 Life of Hildegard of Bingen, mystic and theologian, whose writings both condemn sex between women and express her passionate devotion to a nun.


1390–1392 John Gower, Confessio Amantis (The Lover’s Confession), includes the tale of “Iphis and Ianthe,” based on Ovid’s Metamorphoses.

1431 Execution of Joan of Arc, condemned by the British as a “relapsed heretic” for wearing men’s clothing, among other crimes.

1516, 1532 Ludovico Ariosto, Orlando Furioso: in Canto 25 a princess falls in love with a female warrior whom she mistakes for a man.

1590 Sir Philip Sidney, The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia: a male character’s female disguise raises the potential for, and reflections upon, female homoeroticism.

1592 John Lyly, Gallathea: two girls, disguised as boys, fall in love, each believing the other to be male. Recalling Ovid’s “Iphis and Ianthe,” Venus promises to turn one into a man so that they can marry.

1600, 1602 Shakespeare, As You Like It and Twelfth Night: comedies in which women fall in love with women in male disguise.
Such female-cross dressing characters were common on stage in the period.

1611 Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Roaring Girl*: a Jacobean comedy about Mary Frith, also known as Moll Cutpurse, a cross-dressing, swashbuckling, and gallant rogue of London’s underworld. See also the anonymously published “diary” of her life, *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith, Commonly Called Moll Cutpurse* (1662).

1633 John Donne, “Elegy: Sapho to Philaenis”: a dramatic monologue of Sapho’s longing for her female beloved.

1640 Ben Jonson, “Epigram on the Court Purcelle”: composed in 1609 and circulated privately though published only posthumously, includes one of the first English appearances of the term “tribade” in English (from the Greek, “to rub”).

1650 Andrew Marvell, “Upon Appleton House”: a country-house poem that recalls the house’s history as a convent populated by lascivious, virgin-seducing nuns.

1664, 1667 Katherine Philips, *Poems. By the Incomparable, Mrs. K.P* (unauthorized) and *Poems By the Most Deservedly Admired Mrs. Katherine Philips, the Matchless Orinda* (published posthumously), reflecting passionate female friendships with women. Others of the “romantic friendship” school include Anne Killigrew (1660–1685), Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661–1720), and Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674–1737).

1665–1666 Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur de Brantôme, posthumously published memoirs, *Vies des dames gallantes (Lives of Gallant Ladies)*: chapter 16 addresses various sexual possibilities between women.

1668 Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure*: a drama in which Lady Happy withdraws from the world of men to an all-female space only to fall in love with a princess, who is a prince in disguise.

1684–1692 Aphra Behn, love poems addressed to women (including posthumous publication).

1709 Mary Delarivier Manley, *Secret Memoirs and Manners of Several Persons of Quality, of Both Sexes. From the New*
CHRONOLOGY

**Atalantis, an Island in the Mediterranean**: a satire detailing the “excess of amity” among an all-female aristocratic society; characteristic for the period in its suggestion that Queen Anne was overly influenced by her female friendships.

1712

Alexander Pope, translation, “Sappho to Phaon,” from Ovid’s *Heroides*: Sappho’s complaint over her betrayal by the boatman Phaon includes frank references to her female beloveds. One of many new translations of and references to Sappho in the period.

1723

Jane Barker, “The Unaccountable Wife,” in *Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies*: a tale of a wife devoted to the servant who had become her husband’s mistress.

1740–1741; 1748–1748; 1753–1754

Samuel Richardson, *Pamela, Clarissa,* and *Sir Charles Grandison*: epistolary novels representing desire between women, from praising passionate female friendship to denouncing “unnatural” masculine women.

1743–1744

Anonymous, *The Entertaining Travels and Adventures of Mademoiselle de Richelieu*: the narrator and her female beloved enjoy cross-dressing adventures across Europe, then resume their female dress and settle down together.

1746

Henry Fielding, *The Female Husband*: a sensationalizing pamphlet based on the case of Mary Hamilton, arrested for impersonating a man and marrying a woman.

1748–1749

John Cleland, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, also known as *Fanny Hill*: the protagonist is initiated into her profession by her female colleague. Cleland is also attributed with the 1755 translation of *The True History and Adventures of Catharine Vizzani*, by an Italian surgeon who dissected the body of a woman who enjoyed amorous adventures with women while cross-dressing as a man.

C. 1749

Anonymous, *The Sappho-an. An Heroic Poem, of Three Cantos*: a satiric portrayal of Sappho arguing for, and demonstrating, the pleasures of female same-sex activities to the goddesses of Olympus.

1755

Charlotte Charke, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Charlotte Charke*: an autobiography featuring Charke’s cross-dressing,
both on stage as an actor and off stage as “Mr. Brown” with her companion, “Mrs. Brown.”

1762    Sarah Scott, *Millenium Hall*: a privileged community of women choose friendship and charity work over marriage.

Elizabeth Carter, *Poems on Several Occasions*, with poems addressed to female friends, by a bluestocking feminist.

1778    Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby elope to a village in Wales. As the “Ladies of Llangollen,” their shared life for the next fifty years (recorded in their journals and letters) was a model of romantic friendship that attracted famous visitors and poetic tributes.

1789    The height of pamphlet attacks on Marie-Antoinette, with accusations of sapphic relations.

1796    Anna Seward, *Llangollen Vale, Inscribed to the Right Honourable Lady Eleanor Butler, and Miss Ponsonby*, celebrating the “sacred friendship” of the Ladies of Llangollen. Seward’s other poetry reference her own passionate female friendships.

Denis Diderot, *La Religieuse (The Nun)*: a lascivious Mother Superior preys on a young inmate in this anticlerical novel.

1801    Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda*, includes a satirical portrait of Harriot Freke, whose overtures to the novel’s heroine ostensibly contrast with Belinda’s own female romantic friendships.

1810    Marianne Woods and Jane Pirie, headmistresses of a girls’ boarding school, sue Dame Helen Cumming Gordon for libel in Edinburgh for accusing them of lewd and indecent sexual behavior.

1816    Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Christabel”: the eponymous heroine spends a vaguely guilt-inducing night in the arms of the eerily seductive Geraldine.

1817–1836    Anne Lister, selected diaries (published posthumously in 1980s and 1990s): coded passages record Lister’s sexual liaisons with various women.

Chronology

1835  Honoré de Balzac, La Fille aux yeux d’or (The Girl with the Golden Eyes): a man falls in love with a girl kept by a jealous female lover.

Théophile Gautier, Mademoiselle de Maupin: the heroine, disguised as a man, attracts the love of a male artist and his mistress.

1851  Emily Dickinson writes the first of many erotically charged verses addressed to “She” and sends impassioned letters and poetry to her sister-in-law and former schoolmate, Susan Gilbert Dickinson.

1857  Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du mal (Flowers of Evil), with influential sapphic poems.

Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit: Miss Wade, a minor but perversely drawn character, establishes a temporary partnership with, and disturbing influence over, the lowerclass Tattycoram.

1862  Christina Rossetti, “Goblin Market”: a provocatively homo-erotic and didactically devout endorsement of passionate heroic sister-love.

1866  Algernon Charles Swinburne, Poems and Ballads, with lesbian-tinged verses and “Anactoria,” a dramatic monologue by Sappho to her lover. Swinburne’s unfinished novel Lesbia Brandon (1864–1867) is also suggestively sapphic.


1872  Sheridan LeFanu, Carmilla: archetypal lesbian vampire thriller, recalling Coleridge’s “Christabel.”


1880  Émile Zola, Nana, best-known of Zola’s naturalist-realism, features sapphic prostitutes and a lesbian bar. More lesbian-prostitute moral squalor follows in Guy de Maupassant’s 1881 short story, “Paul’s Mistress.”

1884  Katherine Harris Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper publish their first work under the collective name Michael Field.
**Chronology**

1886  Henry James, *The Bostonians*: a feminist’s passion for her talented protégée is thwarted by her virile cousin from the South.

1894  Pierre Louÿs, *Chansons de Bilitis* (*The Songs of Bilitis*): erotic prose vignettes purportedly by a member of Sappho’s female circle, but actually composed by Louÿs. Angelina Weld Grimké writes her earliest love letters to women. Her poetry was anthologized in the Harlem Renaissance, but most of her (same-sex) love lyrics were unpublished during her life.

1895  John Wesley Cahart, *Norma Trist, or Pure Carbon: A Story of the Inversion of the Sexes*: a young woman in Texas is tried for the attempted murder of her recently engaged female lover; inspired by Alice Mitchell’s 1892 jealousy-murder of her female beloved.

1896  Willa Cather, “Tommy the Unsentimental,” whose protagonist is one of Cather’s queerest female characters.

c. 1898  Pauline Tarn moves from England to Paris, renaming herself Renée Vivien to mark her “rebirth” as a writer and sapphist.

1913–1927  Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*): multivolume autobiographical fiction, with sapphic scenes and characters, including the narrator’s unrequited object of desire, Albertine.

1915  D.H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, with its sapphic swimming scene in the chapter “Shame,” is suppressed as obscene. Lawrence later pens *The Fox* (1923), in which a soldier returning from the war disrupts the domestic partnership of two women struggling to run a farm.


1917  Clemence Dane (Winifred Ashton), *Regiment of Women*: a dangerously manipulative girls’ school headmistress sets her sights on a young teacher.
Chronology

1919
Amy Lowell, *Pictures of the Floating World*, includes some of Lowell’s most explicit lesbian lyrics, inspired by her relationship with Ada Russell.

1920–1930
Blues songs performed by Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Gladys Bentley, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, Bessie Jackson, and Monette Moore include explicit or implicit lesbian references.

1920
Vita Sackville-West, best known for her relationship with Virginia Woolf, writes a memoir of her tumultuous affair with Violet Trefusis, published posthumously in Nigel Nicolson’s *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973).


Sigmund Freud, English translation of *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman*.

1921
H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), whose poetry includes reworkings of Sappho, writes *Paint It Today*, one of three autobiographical novels addressing her relationships with both women and men, unpublished during her life.

A proposal to add “acts of gross indecency between women” to British criminal law is defeated in the House of Lords.

1923
A Broadway performance of Sholem Asch’s *God of Vengeance* (*Got fun nekome, 1907*), about a Polish girl who falls in love with a prostitute, is shut down as obscene.

1925
Janet Flanner, a key figure among expatriate sapphic modernists in Paris, publishes her first “Letter from Paris” in the *New Yorker*.

1927
Elizabeth Bowen, *The Hotel*: Bowen’s debut novel features a young woman’s intense crush on an older woman.

1928

Virgin Woolf, *Orlando*: a fantasy biography of Woolf’s erstwhile lover, Vita Sackville-West. Much of Woolf’s writing has been read in light of her same-sex interests.
Chronology

Djuna Barnes, *Ladies Almanack*: a playful satire and celebration of Paris’s expatriate sapphic community.

Compton Mackenzie, *Extraordinary Women*: a satire of sapphic escapades on the vacation island of Sirène (Capri).

1929

Natalie Clifford Barney, *Aventures de l’esprit* (*Adventures of the Mind*): memoirs by the American heiress whose Paris salon, featured in Barnes’s *Ladies Almanack*, was a literary and sapphic hub.


1932

Sidonie Gabrielle Colette, *Le Pur et l’impur* (*The Pure and the Impure*): reflections on varieties of sexual love, with portraits of lesbian love including Renée Vivien and the Ladies of Llangollen.

1933

Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, celebrating Stein’s Parisian home with Toklas as a center of literary and artistic activity. Stein’s oeuvre, particularly unpublished or posthumously published writing, explicitly addresses lesbian relationships and desire.

1934

Lillian Hellman, *The Children’s Hour*: a drama based on the Pirie-Woods case, in which a schoolgirl accuses the female co-owners of a boarding school of inappropriate relations.

1934


Henry Handel Richardson (Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson), *The End of Childhood*: a short story collection with lesbian content. *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910) is also noteworthy for its boarding schoolgirl romantic friendships.

1936


Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show*: a British woman falls in love with her husband’s Parisian mistress during the 1848 Revolution.

1940

Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and later *The Member of the Wedding* (1946): appealing tomboy
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<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Jane Bowles, <em>Two Serious Ladies</em>, one of whom leaves her husband after falling in love with a female prostitute.</td>
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<td>1944</td>
<td>Mary Renault, <em>The Friendly Young Ladies</em>, about an unstated but apparent lesbian partnership.</td>
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<td>1949</td>
<td>Olivia (Dorothy Strachey), <em>Olivia</em>: an autobiographical novel that includes Olivia’s obsessive crush on the headmistress of a French boarding school.</td>
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<td>1951</td>
<td>Poet Elizabeth Bishop travels to Brazil, where she falls in love with Lota de Macedo Soares. Bishop later forms a partnership with Alice Methfessel. Bishop’s subtle and restrained published poetry has been read in relation to her lesbianism; recently published archival material conveys more of her private life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Claire Morgan (Patricia Highsmith), <em>The Price of Salt</em>: the well-known crime writer's only explicitly lesbian novel – with a notably happy ending – published under a pseudonym.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First issue of *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review*, the magazine of the lesbian homophile group, *The Daughters of Bilitis*. |
| 1964 | Violette Leduc, *La Bâtarde*: an autobiographical French best seller featuring schoolgirl affairs, the raciest of which was originally omitted and later issued separately as *Thérèse and Isabelle*.  
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<td>1965</td>
<td>May Sarton, <em>Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing</em>: the prolific writer’s first novelization of an explicitly lesbian relationship.</td>
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<td>1968</td>
<td>Muriel Rukeyser, <em>The Speed of Light</em>: poetry reflecting Rukeyser’s increasingly woman-identified personal politics.</td>
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<td>1969</td>
<td>Monique Wittig, <em>Les Guérillères</em>, and later <em>Le Corps lesbien</em> (1973): experimental works of linguistic, literary and political feminist/lesbian revolution. Patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village, protest a police raid, leading to three days of riots; considered a turning point in the gay rights movement. Betty Friedan, president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), purportedly declares lesbianism the “lavender menace” for feminism. Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activists Alliance established in New York City. GLF London is founded the following year. Committee for Homosexual Equality formed in Britain.</td>
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Chronology

1973
- Naiad Press, specializing in literature by and about lesbians, founded by Barbara Grier and Donna McBride.
- The American Psychiatric Association removes homosexuality from its list of disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

1974

1976
- Bertha Harris, *Lover*: a postmodern lesbian narrative.
- First issue of *Sinister Wisdom: A Multicultural Lesbian Literary and Art Journal*.

1977
- M. F. Beal *Angel Dance*, considered the first lesbian feminist crime novel.
- Bertha Harris and Emily Sisley, *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*.

1979

1980

C. 1980
- Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, founded by the collective energy of Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and Cherrie Moraga.

1981
- Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*: a key
feminist intervention on intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

Nancy Garden, *Annie on My Mind*: a teen lesbian romance with a happy ending, considered a first in Young Adult fiction.
Wisconsin becomes the first state in the United States to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation.


1983  Alison Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic strip is launched, running until 2008.
Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*: a multi-genre collection on being a Chicana lesbian.

1984  Katherine V. Forrest, *Amateur City*: the first of the Kate Delafield Mysteries, featuring the first lesbian professional police detective.
Firebrand Books, feminist and lesbian publishing house, founded by Nancy Bereano.


**Chronology**


Section 28 of the Local Government Bill in the United Kingdom, banning the “promotion” of homosexuality by local authorities. It is repealed in Scotland (2000) and England (2003) after ongoing protest.

1989

Lambda Literary Awards established. Dorothy Allison’s *Trash* wins for Lesbian Fiction.


Denmark becomes the first country to legally recognize same-sex civil unions.

1990

Queer Nation, a multicultural direct-action group, founded in New York City.

Academic conference organized by Teresa de Lauretis institutionalizes the term “queer theory.”

1991


1992


Lesbian Avengers, a direct action group, founded in New York City.

1993


First Dyke March, organized by the Lesbian Avengers, on the eve of the Lesbian and Gay March on Washington.

U.S. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy issued regarding lesbians and gays in the military.

1994

Emma Donoghue, *Stir-Fry*: a debut novel by Irish(-Canadian) writer whose novels often address female same-sex relations.

1996

Ann-Marie MacDonald, *Fall on Your Knees*: a celebrated debut novel by the Canadian playwright, features a 1920s New York interracial lesbian romance.

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