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978-1-107-05400-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature

Edited by Jodie Medd

Excerpt

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JODIE MEDD

Lesbian Literature?: An Introduction

I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely
that sign [of lesbian] signifies.

– Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”¹

The question inevitably arises: Whatever do you mean by “lesbian literature”? For me, it recalls a wry observation by one of my favorite undergraduate English teachers twenty years ago: “Lesbian: no one can define it, but we all know what we mean when we say it.” In spite of the preceding and succeeding decades of feminist, lesbian, queer, gender, sexuality, ethnic, and postcolonial studies, in spite of the many ways in which the meanings and knowingness of sexual categorization have been undone, something of Prof V.’s paradox still resonates. Indeed, Bonnie Zimmerman’s 1981 claim that lesbian literary criticism is “plagued with the problem of definition” is, in many ways, more applicable today than ever.² Who hasn’t had a problem with lesbian definitions?

A well-defined keyword may be a worthy enterprise for a literary companion; however, such exercises also tend to be confining and regulatory. This is particularly, often painfully, true of keywords associated with identity categories. As Judith Roof writes, “Part of the lure of identity, definition becomes a critical preoccupation.”³ For many good reasons, this preoccupying problem of definition, identity, and identification is fiercely apparent with regard to “lesbian,” a sign that perpetually fails to signify in a satisfying way.⁴ The reasons for lesbian’s definitional resistance encompass the historical refusal or foreclosure of female same-sex possibilities within heteronormative and/or phallogentric representational systems or “grid[s] of cultural intelligibility”;⁵ the class, cultural, and racial assumptions and exclusions embedded in the term “lesbian”; the term’s historical specificity, variability, and often abject associations as well its arguably anachronistic (mis)applications; and the practical and pragmatic challenges of articulating intimacy between women. Indeed, any attempt to define lesbian in

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reference to love, desire, passion, eroticism, and/or sexual activity between women immediately provokes questions about how such intimacies and pleasures are understood, nuanced, and shaped within culturally and historically specific gendered and sexual systems: Can women's sexual acts, or even erotic desire, be thought outside of heteronormativity or phallocentrism? What constitutes the evidential "proof" of sexual, erotic, or affective passion between women? Within systems of representation, which some argue are constituted as/through (sexual) difference, is the representation of desire between women even possible?⁶ And what do we mean by the term "woman," anyway?

Activating and amplifying the entangled complexities of gender, sexuality, desire, race, class, affect, bodies, friendship, social organization, normativity, culture, identification, and representation, the problem of lesbian definitions dramatizes – one might say performs – the irresolvable indeterminacies of linguistic contingency and the ephemerality of experience. This introduction then promises no finished definitions, beyond recognizing how the problems and preoccupations of definition are endemic to "lesbian," particularly when sutured to "literature." Instead, I hope to acknowledge some of the implications and complications, and inclusions and exclusions, activated by the proposition of "lesbian literature," as manifest in this volume.

This *Companion* is founded on the premise that conjoining lesbian and literature generates important and productive points of departure for exploring and debating the terms in question. Embracing lesbian's definitional instability can prompt a desire to surround the term in perpetual quotation marks, simultaneously protecting and exposing its vulnerabilities, as it were. Or one might defer to Judith Bennett's helpful coinage "lesbian-like," which both "names 'lesbian' and destabilizes it," and when applied adjectivally "more to *practices* than to *persons*" evades reductive identity essentialisms.⁷ In this regard, this volume – but not necessarily all of its contributors – does not presume that lesbian and queer (or queer women) are mutually exclusive terms, but allows them to be flexible, contingent, and at times interchangeable.

An imperfect signifier, "lesbian" does, however, point to a particular person, or persona: the ancient Greek poet, Sappho of Lesbos. And indeed, "sapphist" was once a more prevalent identificatory term than "lesbian." With both her name and island home serving eponymously, Sappho figures and is a figure for the problems of definition and identification attending "lesbian literature." First off, as much as Sappho has influenced both sexual identifications and western poetics, almost nothing is known about her life. "Sappho is a figment of the modern imagination," declares Joan DeJean in

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Fictions of Sappho; any account of Sappho is necessarily “a chronicle largely of fictions and seldom of facts.”⁸

Aside from the minimal coordinates of time and place – Sappho lived on the island of Lesbos at the turn of the seventh to sixth century BCE – her literary achievements and reputation are the most reliable “facts” on which scholars agree. As “the most highly regarded woman poet of Greek and Roman antiquity,” Sappho wrote lyric poetry – songs accompanied by a lyre – that was collected by scholars in Alexandria centuries after her death; of this, little has survived, and almost exclusively in fragments.⁹ Those fragments that express desire for women have earned Sappho a central place within lesbian and literary history. Leila Rupp’s *Sapphistries*, for example, takes the facts and fictions of Sappho as touchstones for a “global history of love between women.”¹⁰ Sappho’s central place at the very origins of “western civilization” not only bound together “lesbian” and “literature” early in history but also rendered Sappho an appealing figure for modern appropriation by an otherwise marginalized sexual identity. Yet, such ancient high cultural affiliations also signal the problematic limitations of “lesbian,” as referencing an exclusive, Eurocentric, western, normative, liberal humanist, enlightenment, rarified, and privileged – Sappho was an aristocrat, after all – subject position.¹¹

Taken together, Sappho’s various manifestations – as a venerated poet whose lyric voice expressed desire for women, and as an elusive assemblage of literary fragments and scholarly conjecture, including speculations that she led “a kind of community or school for girls” aimed at their personal and cultural development¹² – all inform and influence her association with a modern sexual identity category. Ultimately, however, it is all that we do *not* know about Sappho that makes her such a canny and uncanny namesake. Her literary-historical presence, to risk critical cliché, constitutes an irretrievable absence, opening up an imaginative portal for speculation and projection, whereby Sappho the Lesbian becomes the lesbian Sappho.

Rupp emphasizes Sappho’s *poetic* identity as particularly appealing for lesbian identification: “It is because of the power of Sappho’s songs – not to mention her lonely voice in the record of women desiring women in ancient worlds – that she has played such a central part in the story of love between women.”¹³ Sappho’s voice, however, is equally central to the story of literary history. An originator of the western lyric, Sappho and her poetry not only articulated individual desire but also shaped the very idea of an “individual form of identity.”¹⁴ The “magnificent ruins” of her “fragmentary corpus” and her enduring reputation as *the* lyric Poetess constitute her as a perpetually fascinating “obscure object of desire, forever out of reach” for centuries of readers and writers who have recorded, recollected, translated, reread,

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and rewritten Sappho and her works in their own image.¹⁵ In this way, I would reiterate that Sappho effects the very convergence of lesbian with literature, mapping scenes of reading and writing onto desire and identification, whether sexual, literary, or otherwise. It is to such literary scenes – of reading, writing, and critique – that I wish to turn in order to engage the question of lesbian literature.

Scenes of Reading

Literary reading and writing help form, foster, and complicate not only understandings of affective-erotic relations but also various minority identities; lesbian literature is not unique in this regard. However, lesbianism's romance with the literary manifests in particularly fascinating ways, perhaps because passions between women may challenge – or sometimes oddly facilitate – heteronormative romance plots and other narrative conventions, love poetry, and even the lyric form (in spite of Sappho's place there). Meanwhile, the literary often attracts queer readers whose private sense of gender and/or sexual difference compels them toward textual companions.¹⁶

Certainly, compelling “scenes of reading” – from literary discoveries to thwarted library researches – abound in autobiographical accounts of modern lesbian identification.¹⁷ Science fiction writer Joanna Russ recalls that in spite of “a lot of very frustrating research” as a 1950s teenager, her “literary-cultural education on the subject of lesbianism” was extremely limited. Although she knew about *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), “to get that you had to go to the locked room in the college library and explain why you wanted it – a requirement that effectively prevented me from getting within a mile of it.” Conversely, Russ notes the canonical male writers whose queer work was “right there on the open library shelves,” and whose sexuality was an accepted open secret, versus the American female writers – Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Emily Dickinson, H.D., Amy Lowell – whose queerness, at the time, simply “wasn't.” Furthermore, Russ adds pointedly, “Lesbian writers of color, like Angelina Weld Grimké, didn't even exist.”¹⁸ Similarly, anthropologist and gender/sexual theorist Gayle Rubin recounts her dismay when, as a “brand-new baby dyke” in 1970, she found the card catalog of her undergraduate university library sadly lacking entries under “lesbian” – prompting her to undertake a lesbian bibliography for her senior thesis, a project surreptitiously enabled by the occasional “discreet reference librarian quietly whispering” research suggestions to her.¹⁹

Decades earlier, the “germ” for Jeannette Foster's groundbreaking *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956) was “implanted” when she was an undergraduate, circa 1916. Although no stranger to passionate female

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attachments, Foster claims she was baffled by a student “morals case” involving two girls “obsessed with each other.”²⁰ Her “utter incomprehensibility of the issue at stake” and “mortifying ignorance” drove her to the college library, inaugurating her “extended search” into literary representations of desire between women, conducted over a peripatetic career as a librarian, including a post at Alfred Kinsey’s Institute for Sex Research.²¹ Appropriately, in a foreword to Foster’s recent biography, Lillian Faderman describes her own “spectacular revelation” while a closeted graduate student in 1962 upon inadvertently discovering Foster’s book on a reading room shelf. “Seduced” by a book she furtively read in stolen moments in situ, Faderman figures *Sex Variant Women* as an object of obsessive erotic desire – a “secret love” of hidden “guilty pleasures” – and intimates that this illicit affair inspired her own future as a lesbian literary historian.²²

Similar library encounters appear in oral histories of working-class butches like Sandy Kern who recounts first hearing the word “lesbian” as a teenager in 1945: “I ran to the library ... and looked up the word *lesbian* and I felt so proud of myself because it talked about the Isle of Lesbos and it mentioned something about Radclyffe Hall who wrote something called *The Well of Loneliness*, which I took out that very same day and read and reread and reread.”²³ Doris Lunden, Kern’s contemporary, recalls a different affective reaction to the same inaugural library visit: “I went to the library to do the research that I think has been done by so many lesbians throughout history. From that time I realized that I should be quiet about my feelings.” Reading, however, also enables Lunden’s collective awareness: “[A]fter that ... I found *The Well of Loneliness* at the drugstore bookrack – of course, I went back to that bookrack, I haunted it, and I found other books.... Before that time I had no inkling how many lesbians there might be.”²⁴ In *Word Is Out*, based on the 1977 documentary of American coming-out stories, septuagenarian Elsa similarly recalls hearing about Sappho in 1915: “I went to the library, found writings about her and translations of her fragments, and immediately became interested ... I started to hear about some literature that would lead me to some knowledge about myself and other people like me.”²⁵

Fittingly, in the acclaimed graphic memoir, *Fun Home* (2006) – examined by Heike Bauer in Chapter 14 – Alison Bechdel represents her coming out at the close of 1979 as a scene of reading: pictured as a college student reading *Word Is Out* (and specifically Elsa’s story) while standing at a bookshelf, Bechdel recalls the “afternoon I realized, in the campus bookstore, that I was a Lesbian.”²⁶ She signals her subsequent sexual identity exploration through a growing stack of books in her dormitory room, including titles by Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, Rita Mae Brown, Jane Rule, and Jill Johnston. Constituting a self-directed “independent reading” course, these

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volumes are also Bechdel's first queer companions.²⁷ Before finding her first girlfriend or gay campus group, she is pictured reading alone, but in good literary company, while eating, in bed, smoking a hookah, and leisurely masturbating, one hand holding a book, the other down her pants.²⁸

Bechdel's proliferating scenes of reading at the cusp of the 1980s signals a turn toward greater literary awareness and resources inaugurated by identity-based political movements. New presses, publications, bookstores, literary reading events, and journals formed a literary culture contributing to the establishment, maintenance, diversification, and contestation of feminist, lesbian, and queer politics, identities, and communities. In this volume, Sandra K. Soto's parsing of the specific contexts, collaborations, consciousness-raising, and publication processes that shaped women of color feminism; Amy Sara Carroll's inspired discussion of the paraliterary; and Monica B. Pearl's survey of lesbian memoirs all reflect on this conjunction of literature, life, and the politics of the personal in this period.

Within this context, Barbara Smith noted in 1977 how a symbiosis of politics and the literary had shaped white American feminist scholarship, including, to a degree, lesbian criticism: "[T]he existence of a feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women's studies, which focused at the beginning almost entirely upon investigations of literature."²⁹ A comparable context, Smith observes, did not exist for black feminist critics: "There is no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women's experience through studying our history, literature, and culture ... there is not a developed body of Black feminist political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of Black women's art."³⁰ Closing her discussion by emphasizing how identificatory reading fosters more livable lives, Smith intimates the motivation behind her own critical and editorial career:

I want to express how much easier both my waking and sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that would tell me something specific about my life. One book based in Black feminist and Black lesbian experience.... Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the Black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better now to live, but how to dream.³¹

Similarly, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa conceived their ground-breaking anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981, 1983), as "concentrated on relations *between women*" and a "positive affirmation of the commitment of women of color to our *own* feminism."³² "Written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch," its dynamic literary composition both

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explores and enacts feminist difference and community through writings on the interflows of race, class, and sexuality: “We are a family who first only knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality.”³³ Intended as a “revolutionary tool” for a broad readership, *This Bridge*, as elaborated by Sandra K. Soto in Chapter 3 and Amy Sara Carroll in Chapter 12, has continuously informed, inspired, and transformed scenes of feminist, lesbian, and queer reading and writing, including women of color and queer of color critique.³⁴

Transformative scenes of reading also populate Anglo-American lesbian literature predating the lesbian/feminist/queer moment. In *The Well of Loneliness*, that lone lesbian novel on drugstore bookracks and library shelves in the 1940s and 1950s, the invert protagonist Stephen Gordon melodramatically discovers the “answer to the riddle of her unwanted being” in a locked bookcase in her deceased father’s library when she finds her name, written in her father’s hand, in the margins of a sexology book.³⁵ Such textbook legibility contrasts with the metaphors of queer female inscrutability in other novels from the period, such as Nella Larsen’s 1929 *Passing*. In a story ostensibly about racial passing in which the high stakes of reading racial difference may well facilitate intense female homoeroticism while allowing such desires to pass by unread, the central character continuously confronts her *inability* to read the characters and situations around her, and, in particular, her own queerly raced desires, identifications, and actions.

Published the same year, Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, with its now famous consideration of the phrase “Chloe liked Olivia” – addressed by Madelyn Detloff in Chapter 9 – reflects on the possibilities and challenges facing modern women writers addressing relations between women. Obliquely referencing the climate of suspicion following *The Well of Loneliness* obscenity trial, while also noting women’s characteristic self-surveillance, Woolf advises that such “unattempted” representations require a writer “to devise some entirely new combination of her resources.”³⁶ “The only way ... to do it,” she cautions, “would be to talk of something else, looking steadily out of the window, and thus note, not with a pencil, in a notebook, but in the shortest of shorthand, in words that are hardly syllabled yet” women’s unrecorded experiences and intimacies.³⁷ Modern writing about relations between women, Woolf suggests, and Larsen demonstrates, must remain sufficiently unreadable.

The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature addresses the challenges and complexities of reading and interpreting both past and present literary representations of attachments between women, given radically different historical and historiographical constructions of sexuality (Carla

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Freccero, Chapter 1; Karma Lochrie, Chapter 5); theoretical debates over gender and sexual definitions (Annamarie Jagose, Chapter 2); critical and complex analyses of difference and power that resist pigeonholing identities and desires (Sandra K. Soto, Chapter 3; Amy Sara Carroll, Chapter 12); issues of historical, linguistic, and cultural translation and the constitution of sexuality and gender through and within national, imperial, diasporic, and global dynamics of power (Shamira A. Meghani, Chapter 4); changing state politics (Susan S. Lanser, Chapter 6); anxieties about scandal or censorship (Caroline Gonda, Chapter 7; Madelyn Detloff, Chapter 9); generic disruptions and narrative refusals (Gonda and Monica B. Pearl, Chapter 11); unconventional poetic tropes to convey same-sex desire and identificatory complexities (Kate Thomas, Chapter 8, and Carroll); new discourses of sexual deviance (Detloff); questions of authorship (Kaye Mitchell, Chapter 10); paraliterary work/life conjunctions (Carroll); the histories of concealment, suppression, and literary obfuscation of lesbian lives and attachments (Pearl); the relation between popular culture and lesbian (sub)cultural representation (Mitchell, and Heike Bauer, Chapter 14); and even the apparent delesbianization of contemporary “post-lesbian” fiction (Emma Parker, Chapter 13).

As these chapters attest, whether “reading between the lines,” “reading against the grain,” or even “just reading,”³⁸ what qualifies as lesbian literature is often a matter of interpretation (but not relativism): not just what we read, but *how* we read. As Prof. V. would suggest when I was an undergraduate, if we “put on our lesbian reading glasses,” even familiar texts come into another kind of focus. We see this in Barbara Smith’s influential 1977 reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* as an “exceedingly lesbian novel” for its focus on an erotically charged Black female friendship and its “consistently critical stance” toward “heterosexual institutions,” including its title character’s “inexplicable ... nonconformity” to heteronormative expectations;³⁹ in Adrienne Rich’s concept of the “lesbian continuum”;⁴⁰ and in the continuously evolving and intersecting modes of queer/feminist/lesbian/trans reading that take up and reconsider how we read desires, identities, and relationality between bodies variously gendered as female. The question of lesbian literature is, foremost, a question of reading practices.

Scenes of Writing

Not only scenes and modes of reading but also scenes of writing and becoming a writer are central to questions of lesbian literature. *The Well of Loneliness*, as an overstated example, links Stephen’s gender/sexual difference with her writing career. The narrative culminates with Stephen’s

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agonized self-sacrificing mission to represent, in fiction, the suffering of all sexual minorities, metafictionally suggesting that *The Well's* readers are holding in their hands the very book that Stephen was ordained to write. Published the same year as *The Well*, Woolf's *Orlando* – a fantasy biography of Woolf's erstwhile lover, the author Vita Sackville-West – follows the life of an aspiring poet over several centuries, through a spontaneous gender change, and toward public success as a modern woman writer. The long poem that Orlando struggles to write throughout English literary history prompts a telling scene of “lesbian-like” writing. As a woman, Orlando hastily satisfies the Victorian compulsion to marry and then returns to the business of literary composition. However, her poetic comparison of “hanging cups of fritillaries” to “Egyptian girls,” prompts the censorious spirit of the age, “reading over her shoulder” to interrupt: “– girls? Are girls necessary?” The ensuing passage conveys the precariousness of the female writer as well as the closeted lesbian and/or transgendered subject, noting Orlando's “dexterous” ability to “pass” examination, by concealing the “highly contraband” “contents of her mind,” like a traveler smuggling cigars by a customs officer.⁴¹ By the latter part of the twentieth century, the most compelling voices associated with out lesbian or queer women's literature, such as Dorothy Allison, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde, attest to scenes of writing as harrowing, dangerous, and necessary acts of becoming, survival, and resistance.⁴²

Of course, lesbian literature is not limited to modern lesbian or queer female writers (however we might identify them as such). What Susan S. Lanser calls “sapphic representation” in Chapter 6 became increasingly popular among male and female writers in the early modern period. Terry Castle's anthology *The Literature of Lesbianism* sees the sixteenth century as marking a “dramatic shift in attention” whereby “female same-sex love has become more and more visible as a Western cultural preoccupation.”⁴³ Referencing the impact of “subtle, broad-based changes in Western European social life associated with modernization,” particularly regarding women's autonomy, Castle also notes how “various literary developments,” including new translations of classical writings, like Sappho's fragments, “brought female homosexuality back into view.”⁴⁴ These new and renewed scenes of reading bred paralleled scenes of writing: early modern rediscoveries of Sappho, later followed by publications of new fragments and translations, inspired writing not only by sapphic-identified female writers but also by male writers for whom Sappho “has always been the object of a complex set of identifications, anxieties, projections, and fantasies ... the one who seems to hold the key, as it were, to poetry itself.”⁴⁵ Such literary invocations of Sappho are variously and richly addressed in this volume by

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Carla Freccero, Susan S. Lanser, Caroline Gonda, Kate Thomas, and Amy Sara Carroll.

The sapphic in general also informs myriad scenes of writing regardless of the writer's sexual profile, where "the lesbian" might function as a figure of impossible allure, erotic speculation, social marginalization, idealized similitude, grotesque glamour, political critique, outlaw or unfulfilled desire, temporary disruption, or any other compelling poetic abstraction. Subsequently, Castle claims that within western literature "virtually every author of note since the Renaissance has written something, somewhere, touching on the subject of love between women."⁴⁶ The *perception* of lesbian literary scarcity, Castle argues, is a result of previous academic disregard, not a lack of a literary archive: "[W]hile same-sex eros has been a recurrent topic of fantasy and exploration in imaginative literature at least since classical antiquity ... scholarly recognition of this fact has been almost entirely wanting until our own time."⁴⁷

Scenes of Critique

Early efforts to assert lesbian literature's *longue durée* in the face of scholarly oversight took the form of bibliographic surveys such as *Sex Variant Women* (1956) by Foster; *The Lesbian in Literature: A Bibliography* (1967, with several editions following) by Gene Damon (pen name of Barbara Grier, editor of *The Ladder* and co-founder of Naiad Press); and *Lesbian Images* (1975) by novelist Jane Rule. This early work, like much early feminist criticism, tended to focus on middle-class white literary representations; however, by the 1970s and 1980s, some of the most foundational and influential Anglo-American lesbian/queer feminist literature and criticism grew out of and was sharply attuned to racial and class dynamics and identifications, as Sandra K. Soto and Amy Sara Carroll discuss in this volume.

Indeed, the "scholarly recognition" of lesbian literature "in our own time" rests largely on the academic institutionalization of identity studies or, in Robyn Wiegman's phrase, "identity knowledges" "that have emerged as a consequence of the rise of identity as a social force in the twentieth century."⁴⁸ The lesbian, as Annamarie Jagose discusses in Chapter 2, figures in differing and telling ways in the "field imaginaries" of a number of identity knowledges. Women's studies, feminist theory, lesbian and gay studies, trans studies, and queer studies and theory have variously addressed, avoided, embraced, rejected, centralized, or marginalized the lesbian in their analyses of gender and sexuality. Meanwhile, contemporary scholarship on