

WHEN THE “TENTH MUSE” INSPIRES RAP MUSIC AND DRUMS: FROM THE POLITICAL USES OF SAPPHO’S FIGURE BY LESBIANS AND FEMINIST VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZIL *

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Abstract

The object of this article is to draw attention to a dimension of the reception of the memories around the poet Sappho and the Island of Lesbos: that represented by the political uses made by militants and feminists groups and, above all, lesbian-feminist groups. Through the presentation and commentary of two examples currently found in Brazil, that I intend to draw attention to the relevance of the analysis of this type of reception.

Keywords

Sappho of Lesbos; feminism; lesbianity; political.

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Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é chamar atenção para uma dimensão da recepção das memórias em torno da poeta Safo e da Ilha de Lesbos: aquela representada pelos usos políticos feitos por militantes e grupos feministas e, sobretudo, lésbico-feministas. Será por meio da apresentação e comentário de dois exemplos encontrados atualmente, no Brasil, que pretendo chamar atenção para a pertinência da análise dessa modalidade de recepção.

Palavras-chave

Safo de Lesbos; feminismo; lesbianidade; política.

Sappho of Lesbos: fragmented memories

I want to start this article evoking an emptiness: the space of the blank sheet with which the french feminist writer Monique Wittig and the american filmmaker Sande Zeig fill in the entry "Sappho", that composes the lexicon called *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (Wittig; Zeig, 2001 [1976]: 188.) Emptiness that I will take here as a provocation/defiance with which I searched dialogue, pointing to some interpretive suggestions likely to justify this relation between "Sappho" and the emptiness/silence, materialized by Wittig and Zeig in its unexplained entry. I take the motto of the emptiness also as an introductory resource that can lead me to an approach to the object of study that now interests me, and which is explained by the subtitle chosen for this text: "from the political uses of the figure of Sappho by lesbian and feminist voices in contemporary Brazil." These uses of which I will deal with in the second part of the article, from two examples.

An initial finding that undoubtedly justifies the association between the poet of Lesbos and the "emptiness" refers to the lack of information concerning Sappho and the Island of Lesbos, where she lived between the 7th and 6th centuries BC. As such, worth remembering in this regard that except for a few sparse references², the two most extensive biographical notes related to the author, to which they are now available, are found on a papyrus dating from the second/third century AD, and in a byzantine lexicon: *Suda*, from 9th/10th century AD. This is about, therefore, the contents produced around seven and sixteen centuries after the period during which Sappho had lived, which I reproduce below:

Περὶ Σαπφοῦς

[Σαπφῶ τὸ μὲν γένος] ἦν Λεσβία, πόλεως δὲ Μιτ[υ]λήνης, [πατὴρ δὲ Σκαμ]άνδρου, κα[τὰ δὲ τινὰς Σκα]μανδρονύ[μου· ἀδελφοὺς δ']ἔσχε τρεῖς, [Ἐρ]ίγειον καὶ Λά[ρι]χον, πρεσβύ[τατον δὲ Χάρ]αξον, ὃς πλεύσας εἰς Αἴγυπτον] Δωρίχαι τινα προσε[νεχθε]ῖς κατεδαπάνησεν εἰς ταύτην πλεῖστα. τὸν δὲ Λάριχον <νέον> ὄντα μᾶλλον ἠγάπησεν. Θυγατέρα δ'ἔσχε Κλεῖν ὁμώνυμον τῆι ἑαυτῆς μητρὶ. **κ[α]τηγόρηται δ'ὐπ'έν[ι]ω[ν] ὡς ἄτακτος οὐ[σα] τὸν τρόπον καὶ γυναικε[ράς]τρια.** τὴν δὲ μοεφὴν [εὐ]καταφρόνητος δοκεῖ γε[γον]ένα[τι κα]ὶ δυσειδεστάτη[[ν]], [τ]ὴν μὲν γὰρ ὄψιν φαιώδης [ὑ]πῆρχεν, τὸ δὲ μέγεθος μικρὰ παντελῶς. τὸ δ'αὐτὸ [συ]μβέβηκε καὶ περὶ τὸν [.....]ν ἐλάττω [..] γεγον<ότ>α [.....].ην (P. Oxy. 1800, fr. 1, col. I, 1. 16-19 e 1.19-24).

Sappho was a Lesbian by birth, of the city of Mytilene. Her father was Scamander or, according to some, Scamandronymus, and she had three

² David A. Campbell gathers 61 of them, which deal with the most varied subjects, under the name of "Testimonia Vitae atque Artis". Campbell (1994).

brothers, Erigyus, Larichus and Charaxus, the eldest, who sailed to Egypt and associated with one Doricha, spending large sums on her; Sappho was more fond of the young Larichus. She had a daughter Cleis, named after her own mother. **She has been accused by some of being irregular in her ways and a woman-lover.** In appearance she seems to have been contemptible and quite ugly, being dark in complexion and of very small stature. The same is true of (Alcaeus?) who was smallish... (Campbell, 1994. My emphasis)

Σαπφώ Σίμωνος, οἱ δὲ Εὐμήνου, οἱ δὲ Ἑριγυίου, οἱ δὲ Ἐκρύτου, οἱ δὲ Σήμου, οἱ δὲ Κάμωνος, οἱ δὲ Ἐτάρχου, οἱ δὲ Σκαμανδρωνόνου· μητὴρ δὲ Κλειδός· Λεσβία ἐξ Ἐρεσοῦ, λυρική, γεγονυῖα κατὰ τὴν μβ' Ὀλυμπιάδα, ὅτε καὶ Ἀλκαῖος ἦν καὶ Στησίχορος καὶ Πιττακός. ἦσαν δὲ αὐτῇ καὶ ἅ δελφοὶ τρεῖς, Λάριχος, Χάραξος, Εὐρύγιος. ἐγαμήθη δὲ ἀνδρὶ Κερκύλα πλουσιωτάτῳ, ὁρμωμένῳ ἀπὸ Ἄνδρου, καὶ θυγατέρα ἐποίησατο ἐξ αὐτοῦ, ἣ Κλεῖς ὠνομάσθη· **ἐταῖραι δὲ αὐτῆς καὶ φίλαι γεγόνασι τρεῖς Ἀθίς, Τελεσίππα, Μεγάρα· πρὸς ἃς καὶ διαβολὴν ἔσχεν αἰσχυρᾶς φιλίας.** Μαθήτριάι δὲ αὐτῆς Ἀναγόρα Μιλησία, Γογγύλα Κολοφωνία, Εὐνείκα Σαλαμνία. ἔγραψε δὲ μελῶν λυρικῶν βιβλία θ'. καὶ πρώτη πλῆκτρον εὗρεν. ἔγραψε δὲ καὶ ἐπιγράμματα καὶ ἐλεγεία καὶ ἰάμβους καὶ μονοδίας· (Suda, Σ,107)

Daughter of Simon or of Eumenus or of Erigyus or of Ecrytus or of Semus or of Camon or of Etarchus or of Scamqndronymus; her mother was Cleis; a Lesbian from Eresus, a lyric poetess; flourished in the 42nd Olympiad (612/608 B.C.), when Alcaeus, Stesichorus and Pittacus were also alive. She had three brothers, Larichus, Charaxus and Eurygius. She was married to a very wealthy man called Cercylas, who traded from Andros, and she had a daughter by him, called Cleis. **She had three companions and friends, Atthis, Telesippa and Megara, and she got a bad name for her impure friendship with them.** Her pupils were Anagora of Miletus, Gongyla of Colophon and Eunica of Salamis. She wrote nine books of lyrics poems, and she invented the plectrum. She also wrote epigrams, elegiacs, iambics and solo songs. (Campbell, 1994. My emphasis.)

Both texts include, among other information, the date and/or place where Sappho would have been born, provide names of her mother, father, siblings, daughter, husband, as well as references to her relationships with women. Data that, in addition to its questionable accuracy, does not give us any further information on the context of production of the Sapphic compositions. In any case, by the fact that, since Antiquity, Sappho has been considered a refined composer, we can presume her privileged social status. A position that largely could explain her access to an education, by which she would become a celebrated composer. A recognition to which, in addition, we can credit part of the circulation that her compositions have had throughout the centuries, and that allowed us to learn, although extremely limited, that we still have some of hers compositions today.

Therefore, that takes us to the second point that reinforces Sappho's association with the image of a blank page: the fragmented condition in which the compositions attributed to her have reached the present days. Currently, the most respected editions bring about two hundred compositions. In order to just have an idea of the size of the losses involved, it is worth remembering that the one which would be the first old edition of the poems of Sappho - organized by Alexandrines, that dates back to the 3rd century BC -, it would have been composed by nine volumes. Among which, the conjecture is that the first volume would have sixty to seventy chants - or, about 30/35 percent of what we know by now. (Côrrea apud Ragusa, 2005: 15).

Moreover, it must be pointed out that between the fragments that usually composes the modern editions, only the content of one volume is considered complete. It is called "'Ode to Aphrodite". Composition whose survival is mainly due to its indirect transmission by means of a Treaty dated from the first century BC : *The Arrangement of Words*, by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Ragusa, 2005: 262). Treaty in which Dionysius quotes the Sapphic composition to attest his appreciation and does not spares praises to the euphony and grace which its listener could enjoy. Attributes that, according to the author, would be the effect of the arrangement of words throughout the composition. Such comment is equally interesting, because it flagrantly highlights the oral mark that remained associated with the production and reception of Sapphic compositions still in the First Century BC.

Furthermore, the citation of Dionysius is an excellent example of the recognition that, since Antiquity, the compositions attributed to Sappho enjoyed. It comes to a point where we can find references in which Sappho is not only compared to no less a person than Homer³, but also listed and/or compared to the Muses, being even characterized in one of his testimonies as the "Tenth Muse"⁴.

Seen in these terms, it is not surprising that in a later treaty, dated from about a century to the one from Dionysus: the *On the Sublime* - treaty whose dating and authorship, although subject to controversy, is usually credited to (Pseudo) Longinus -, the author cites another Sapphic composition as nothing less than the model of the sublime. The appreciation is thanks to the transmission of one of the most discussed

³ *Anth. Pal* 7.15 (Campbell, 1994: 46-47); 9.26 (Waltz, 1957 : 11-12).

⁴ For Sappho compared / placed between the Muses cf.: *Anth. Pal* 7.14 (test. 27), 7.17(test. 28), Ovid, *Tristia* 2.363-5 (test. 49) 7.407 (test. 58), 9.26, 9. 571.9f. (Campbell, 1994: 26-28; 28-31; 42-43; 48-49).

fragments of the Sapphic corpus, the "Fr 31". Over the centuries, that fragment was not only the object of a hundred translations and poetic variations (Brunet, 1998), but also, although much later on, pretext for intense debates about the nature of *Eros* - and of his disruptive effects - sung by Sappho's poems (Devereux, 1970).

That said, I want to finally point to the third and last modality of silence, or best said, silencing or attempt of silencing on the above mentioned lexicon, between Sappho and the absence, namely: the poetic *mise en scène*, on some of Sappho's fragments, of a desire that, nowadays, could be identified as "homoerotic", or even "lesbian", which is able to justify the association materialized by Wittig and by Zeig. In part, the silence/silencing dates back to the ancients and, among others aspects, is pointed out by researcher Sandra Boehringer in her book *L'homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine* (2007), in which the author offers us a very specific study of the ancient discourses on the amorous and/or sexual relationships between women.

Indeed, considering the material to which we have access today, it is only at the end of the first century BC., that we find not only the first allusion, but also direct references, which leads to an assimilation of this homoeroticism enunciated in some of the fragments attributed to Sappho, to the composer herself. I refer, respectively, to an excerpt from the ode of number XIII, from Horace's second book⁵, and to two excerpts from the now celebrated XV letter that makes up the so-called *Heroides* of Ovid⁶, in which Sappho is put into scene by the poet recalling her old loves for an young women⁷. As for the association of the Island of Lesbos, or of the "lesbian women" with homoerotic practice, in turn, without Sappho being even mentioned, we will find her unequivocally⁸ only in the first century AD, in number V, *Dialects of the courtesan* (1st century AD) by Luciano - which constitutes nothing less than one of the longest passages in ancient literature dealing with the subject of sexual relations between women (Boehringer, 2007: 349-356).

⁵ Horace, *Odes*, II, 13, 24-25.

⁶ Demarchi (2012: 1), alert to the fact that: "The epistle attributed to Ovid were brought together for the first time under the title *Heroides* by Prisciano grammarian of Caesarea in the fifth century was only in 1629 that Daniel Heinsius numbered cards and Sappho's letter became known as the Letter XV. "

⁷ Ovid, *Heroides*, XV, 15-20; 201-204. For the letter analysis of "Sappho to Faon", cf. Boehringer (2007: 215-223).

⁸ See, however, the controversial discussions surrounding fragment 358 (Fr. 358 *Poetae Melici Graeci*) attributed to Anacreon (VI BC) em Boehringer (2007: 60-66).

Sandra Boehringer (Boehringer, 2007: 313) emphasizes that until at least around the second century AD, when "feminine homoeroticism" was invoked, it was not the name of the poet of Lesbos the most commonly associated with this practice, but rather that of Filenes - author/character about which we know little, but whose name is linked to the authorship of an old erotic manual (Boehringer, 2007: 275-314). So, if it is around the first century AD that we find the first occurrences⁹, in Latin, of *tribas* - one of the terms that is used in the old discourses to designate that erotic modality¹⁰ which seems to be perceived as unorthodox - is the name of the last, "Filenes", which appears most often associated with it. This is to the point that, in one of the epigrams of Martial (I AD) Filenes is characterized as "the tribadist of the tribadists" (*ipsarum tribadum tribas*)¹¹. Sappho's name, on the other hand, will only appear associated with this same term only once, in the 3rd century AD, in a commentary made to an ode of Horace¹², in which the poet is referred to as "*mascula Sappho*". Adjective that the commentator will justify by means of two hypotheses: "*mascula*", either by her talent in the poetic art, generally a man's attribute, or by her reputation as a tribas."¹³

However, despite this almost complete silence of the ancient texts and images that came to nowadays - and I would say, in part, thanks to him -, associating Sappho and the island of Lesbos with homoeroticism explicitly expressed in the feminine gender, and despite the fact that Sappho does not represent / is not represented by the ancients as the standard figure in the matter of homoeroticism, Sappho and the island of Lesbos are still today as two indispensable "lesbian" references. A brief Google search for "Island of Lesbos"/"Sappho of Lesbos", serves as a sample to reach the process of discursive production around the poet and her native island.

One of the most popular effects of such association appears in the doubling of the semantic sense of the adjective "lesbian", which is derived

⁹ PHAEDRUS, *Fables*, IV, 16; SĒNECA, *Controversiae*, I, 2, 23. Textual passages analyzed by Boehringer (2007: 261-271).

¹⁰ For a list of *tribas* occurrences, τριβάς and *fricatrix/ficatrix*, see Boehringer (2007: 272).

¹¹ MARCIAL, *Epigrams*, VII, 70. Filenis appears characterized as *tribade* also in epigram VII, 67. Both epigrams are analyzed by Boehringer (2007: 288-294). Note that Filenes appears in seven other epigrams of the author: II, 33; IR, 65; IX, 29, 40, 62; X, 22 and XII, 22 also analyzed by the author, p. 294-298. Filenes appears as a character associated with erotic relations between women (τριβακή) in a passage of the *Amores*, 27-29, attributed to Pseudo-Lucian (II-IV d.C.). For a comment on this text see Boehringer (2007: 295-306).

¹² Horace, *Épode*, I, 19, 28.

¹³ *Commentun in Horati Epistulas*, I, 19, 28, 3. My translation.

from the toponym "Lesbos". Such adjective, once restricted itself to designating a woman born on the island, would also in the late 19th century qualify women who maintained erotic relations with other women. What will derive even, and in several languages, the noun "lesbianism" - used to refer more precisely to homosexuality when practiced by women, and which is currently declined in Brazil, especially on the contexts of social movements, in the forms of "lesbianity", "lesbianhood".

As I have tried to suggest in the title, what I propose here is to comment on two contemporary examples which attest to the veracity of this association between Sappho, Lesbos Island and lesboerotism, linked to precise political guidelines. I will deal first with the name of the poet and her native island found in the lyrics of an independent black lesbian feminist rapper from São Paulo, named Luana Hansen. My second point will be the choice of the poet's name to designate a group of black, lesbian and bisexual percussionists from Ceará, called "Sappho's Drums".

Sappho and the Island of Lesbos: contemporary inspirations

The choice of the two "cases" mentioned above is justified since both are tremendous examples of the political power from which fragments of memories can be invested, through uses whose objectives are quite clear, and for which the ends justify the means, without disguises. But not only. I was struck by the fact that these performances, these voices, have in common - with each other and with Sapphic poetics - the fact that they subscribe to a musical universe whose vocal and/or rhythmic cadences are created by women. Statements that today, however - far from the context in which the Sapphic compositions would have been carried out¹⁴ - are politically empowered within and from a perspective of lesbian-feminist-anti-racist social movements.

In the case of the rap "Les Queens", composed by Luana Hansen in cooperation with Dory de Oliveira and Tiely Queen, it is clearly noticeable its inscription in a political effort that proposes the intercession of several agendas: feminist, anti-racist, and class movements, as well as struggles waged by LGBT movements from the late 1980s onwards, and reinforced, most of all, in the 1990s. Actions linked to an effort of affirmation and visibility of gay identities and, to a lesser extent, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual (Facchini, 2003).

¹⁴ For an example of comparative analysis between the Sapphic songs and contemporary musical productions, see Calame, 2015: 69-92.

However, it is necessary to point out the fact that I will keep a brief commentary on part of the lyrics¹⁵: that which composes its third moment, which I reproduce below:

My Labrys' ax, will stay in memory
making you understand a little of our history
of the Island of Lesbos, the poetess Sappho,
I am Salzikrum, the Male daughter
raised to fight against lesbophobia
today we are many warriors in this rush
intolerant of all types of racism
if you're going to fight, let me fight for you
front-line crossing all of the cities

bringing visibility to lesbians
a women that loves another woman
and deserves respect because she knows what she wants
my cocked mind causes terrorism
I'm about to end the sexism
sassy and dragging the crowd
if you want you can call me the "dyke"
our cry spreads in the form of art
where prejudice prevails we enter debate
of all places feeling our roguery
the army is in favor of freedom. (My emphasis)

In these two stanzas, written and sung by Luana Hansen, the emphasis on the question of lesbian visibility or "dyke", linked to the struggle against lesbophobia, racism and sexism, is clearly shown. From the beginning, the rapper uses the strategy of reinforcing a memory, seeking to hear a bit of a story qualified by the possessive adjective declined in the feminine plural "our". It will be thus, through the evocation of references/symbols, and for various reasons, historically bounded and renamed as "lesbian emblems" - the "ax of Labrys"¹⁶, the island of Lesbos

¹⁵ The lyrics were kindly sent to me by Luana Hansen herself. The song is fully available on <https://soundcloud.com/les-queens/les-queens>. Accessed on Nov 19th 2017.

¹⁶ Greek term λάβρος, which means ax. In the entry of Labrys, Magazine of Feminist Studies, we find the following explanation: "Labrys in Greek means "double blade, double ax. A gun or instrument, was used by the peoples of the Amazon. From the depths of human history, around 7000/6500 BC, in the plateaus of Anatolia - Turkey today - in Çatal Huyuk, (perhaps the first recorded human cluster), the image of the double blade was associated with the cults of the feminine, images of the Goddess, creator of all things." Available at: <https://www.labrys.net.br/labrys26/labrysbr.html>. Access: November 19, 2017.

and the poetess Sappho, as well as the figure of the "Salzikrum"¹⁷ - that this voice seeks at the same time to legitimize their struggles and urge women to act as true contemporary warriors in the struggle for greater freedom and respect.

I shall simply call attention to the evocation of the "island of Lesbos" and the "poetess Sappho", which appears in the third verse of the first stanza mentioned above. Here, I emphasize a use that makes a political option of re-updating not only one of the innumerable memories associated with the poet of Lesbos - that of a Sappho lover of women - but who does it through a vocal, rhythmic and corporal performance enunciated in the feminine gender. Form of enunciation that, consciously or not, to some extent, echoes what is conjectured to be the form of communication of Sapphic compositions in Antiquity.

The group "Tambores de Safo", in turn, has been active since 2010, and its activities were initially linked to the militant group LAMCE - Freedom of Love among women in Ceará (2004)¹⁸. Group, which, in the words of its members, is:

[...] a musical group, which seeks through music and art, to contribute to feminist critical thinking and the empowerment of women, aimed at combating sexism, racism and homophobia and the most diverse capitalist oppressions¹⁹.

The simple choice of her name, which evokes the poet of Lesbos, might be enough for including it in this article, considering that she makes of Sappho a precursor-legitimizing figure of a group of percussion that advocates the love between women. However, the group's own activities, which include: open discussions, workshops for the production of percussion instruments and musical performances, in my view, makes it an active part of a sort of double refresher of memories attributed to Sappho. Memories that include, among other things: the creation of an instrument (the "plectrum"²⁰), the direction of a kind of group / school for young women, lesbian practices (possibly with some of the young

¹⁷ This term comes from the Code of Hammurabi, which seems to refer to the priestesses and can be translated as "daughters / woman-male / male". The term is used to refer to those who might have one or more wives and who were entitled to inheritance and property similar to those of men.

¹⁸ The LAMCE group was initially titled LANCE, acronym for "Lesbians Operating in Ceará". However, the name change reflects the fact that many of the female participants did not consider themselves lesbians, since they also maintained hetero-affective and heterosexual relations (Oliveira, 2015).

¹⁹ Available at: <https://pt-br.facebook.com/pg/batucadatamboresdesafo/about/>. Access on: Nov 19th 2017.

²⁰ Cf. supra: Suda, Σ,107.

women in the group) and composition of some chants in which a homoerotic desire is expressed. That said, it is worth highlighting the justifications presented by the components themselves to explain the choice of the name of Sappho.

In a brief presentation of the group and its activities, which can be found on the website of the organization "Articulation of Brazilian women", it is possible to read:

The name "Sappho's Drums", which was unanimously chosen by the participants of the group, is a reference to the Greek poetess and intellectual Sappho, known for making politics through art. In its history it is to the foundation of a School of Arts for girls that was place of many love scenes between her and her disciples. Because Sappho has lived all her life in cities on the island of Lesbos, today women who relate affectively-sexually with other women are known as lesbians.²¹

In addition, I also present the transcription of an excerpt from a speech by one of the members of the "Tambores", who in a documentary about the group appears explaining such choice in terms similar to those presented in the above quote:

The name "Sappho's Drums", it arises in the collective labor. We wanted to put something that identified that there were the drums, that there are the drummings, right, that there is this Afro, Brazilian, Northeastern thing. But we also wanted another name that represented this lesbian issue. So we started thinking about Sappho, right? Sappho is a Greek poetess, right, from Greece, a poetess and philosopher, who taught love among women on the island of Lesbos, and from there comes the name "lesbians" as well. So we decided to pay homage to Sappho, and it was "Sappho's Drums". But we think of several names, we think of "Sapatuque", of "Lesbian Drums", "Feminist Batuque", "Feminist Drums", but something that strongly identified us. And what identifies us strongly are the drums and the discussions that permeate about Sappho. (0:32 - 1:49)²²

Arguments that allow me to affirm that it was a process of sharing memories in fragments about Sappho and her home island, among the members of the group, that allowed them to choose the name of the poet as the most appropriate to accompany the noun "drums". The poet of Lesbos appears, then, as a reference that seems to be understood as being able to condense the attributes that correspond, more precisely, to the project of political-artistic performance envisioned by the group since its

²¹ Available at: <http://articulacaodemulheres.org.br/tambores-de-safo/>. Access on: Nov 19th 2017.

²² Documentary available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLmVEG_yByU. Access on: Nov 19th 2017.

creation, and especially in what concerns an specific issue: lesbianity. From the two examples presented above, it is undoubtedly a deliberate political use of the historical figure of Sappho and the Island of Lesbos with which we come here. Therefore, I have endeavored to present, although briefly, a territory in my view still little explored by those who devoted themselves to the study of the receptions of the fragments of Sappho and the resignification of the scattered memories of the poet and her island.

In fact, unlike literary circles and endless academic debates, in which for years and even today a kind of "great debate" circulates that opposes those who broadly defend or are bothered/offended by the possibility of thinking in a Sappho of Lesbos as a "lesbian" in contemporary terms; some feminist voices, especially lesbian-feminists, usually appropriate and affirm, unashamedly, the power that the reading of a Lesbian Sappho of Lesbos contained. I propose, thus, to conclude this article with a few considerations on this debate.

Political lesbian Sappho

It was most likely in the hope of helping to put an end to the real quarrel about the "sexual orientation" of the Lesbos poet that, in his 1989 article entitled "Lesbian Sappho and Sappho of Lesbos", André Lardinois was categorical in stating:

In fact, this is a pointless question, even if by modern standards, Sappho should have been considered lesbian, her experience must have been very different, living, as she lived, in a different era with different notions and types of sexuality (Lardinois, 1995: 50).

Considering the material we have nowadays, in fact it seems to me to be at least reckless for any researcher to affirm or to disprove whether Sappho the composer had affective and/or erotic experiences with the young girls in a pedagogical framework, or even with other women. What we have, I endorse, are songs attributed to the poet, among whom some put on the scene a "homoerotic" voice - as well as some of the compositions attributed to Alcman (7th century BC) -, revealing the social existence of this homoeroticism that, in the case of Sappho, is textually explicit in the feminine without any negative connotation (Calame, 1996).

Moreover, it is always indispensable to emphasize that in ancient Greek and Roman, we find no equivalent for our notions of "sexuality", nor for those of "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" (Boehringer & Brisson,

2003: 199). Thus, Sappho can not really be "lesbian", since the existence of "sexual orientation" did not even make sense in the context in which she lived.

However, I believe it is pertinent to point out once more that this issue is meaningful, especially in the nineteenth century, largely - though certainly not only -, the emergence of the notion of "sexuality", as well as of those that would be their variable modalities. Thus, in this context, a latent phobia emerges in the speeches of some philologists concerned, among other things, with defending the poet of Lesbos from the fame of being a "homosexual", a "tribadist." An opposition that seeks to operate, to a great extent, as an opposite discourse in the face of the flourishing of literary circles in English and French literature dating back at least to the seventeenth century, in which the "Sapphic" theme emerged, sometimes Sappho herself was accused or praised for her "Sapphism"²³.

In any case, it is an indisputable fact that Sappho was constituted and represent one of the rare voices enunciated in the feminine or, still, by its homoerotic content (Marks, 1979: 356). These are certainly echoes of the positive uses that many feminists and lesbians make of Sappho in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, not hesitating to appropriate politically of the historical voids around the figure of the poet and her island, in order to legitimize their political positions and identities.

It is in this sense, as we shall see in Monique Wittig's own work - and far beyond the silence that she and Zeig materialize in the blank page of the entry mentioned at the beginning of this text - that the lesbian and feminist voices also act and that are produced today in Brazil, and for whom the reading of Sappho as undeniably lesbian is invested with an explicitly political character. This rereading, as I have tried to defend here, also deserves our attention.

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²³ The nominal form "Sapphism" arises in the late nineteenth century with the unequivocal connotation of "homoeroticism in the feminine", as be it in the European literary universe, or in dedicated medical treatises

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