NEFERTITI, HYPATIA, AND SAPPHO: RECEPTION HISTORY AND WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract…………………………………………………………………………………1

Chapter 1: Introduction..2

Chapter 2: Nefertiti..5

Nefertiti: History...6

Nefertiti: Artistic Reception in Modern European Art..9

Chapter 3: Sappho...18

Sappho: History and Literary Reception...19

Sappho: Artistic Reception in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century European Art............26

Chapter 4: Hypatia..38

Hypatia: History and Literary Reception...39

Hypatia: Artistic Reception in Nineteenth Century European Art...................................44

Chapter 5: Conclusion...53

Bibliography..56

Abstract

The study of ancient women is made difficult for scholars for many reasons. Lack of sources about these women written during their lifetimes, issues of translation and interpretation, the desire to fictionalize women's stories and use them to make statements about modern issues, and the personal experiences or biases of artists and writers all affect the narratives available to scholars in the twenty-first century. This work surveys the ancient sources available to construct narratives of the lives of Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia and examine the possible problematic aspects of these sources with attention to eighteenth and nineteenth century scholarship on these sources that established the histories available to modern scholars of these three women. This work also examines the artistic reception of these women and the effects of contemporary politics, perspectives on sexuality and gender, and the artists' backgrounds in the representations of Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia in sculpture and painting from the eighteenth century into the twenty-first century.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, women have been underrepresented in the historical timeline because men have been the primary recorders. The legacies of the women who do become canonized are influenced by those that record their stories, which often leads to women being objectified within the historical record and beyond. Nefertiti (ca. 1370-1330 BCE), Sappho (ca. 630-570 BCE), and Hypatia (350-415 CE) are women from different locations and time periods across the ancient Mediterranean but have one thing in common: being objectified by those whose writings and art have made up the majority of their imprint upon the historical record. Though these women differ in many ways, the manner in which they have been used in ancient as well as modern writings and artistic representation to make a statement by predominately male authors and artists is similar. Understanding these women as people instead of symbols or figureheads allows scholars to break down their reception and recognize how new thought being applied to women such as Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia throughout history has changed modern perceptions. Through an examination of the ancient sources available to scholars and a survey of art and literature from the eighteenth century forward, scholars have been able to form understandings of how these women are perceived through modern understandings of race and colonialism, sexuality, and gender.

Reception history is a term used to describe the ways in which a source is received — meaning read, interpreted, understood, or translated — by an audience in a different time or place, or both, than when the original text was written, or the person lived. The study of reception history emerged in the field of biblical studies but the techniques used in reception history have come to be applied to texts and historical figures beyond biblical history. The reception history of a text or a historical figure over time gives scholars insight into the values of

a writer or artist in the context of the society in which they lived, and increases understanding of how the perspectives of individuals affect the perception of a figure in the consciousness of a society (Lyons). In addition to the study of a text itself, it is beneficial for scholars of reception history to analyze not only the changes in texts themselves, but the audience's response to them (Lyons). Especially in relation to figures such as Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia, the response to the works created often illustrates the influence of a society's value systems on more large-scale trends in understanding of a figure.

Nefertiti is one of the most famous queens in Egyptian history. The mystery that surrounds her and her husband Akhenaten's rule at Amarna (ca. 1352-1335 BCE) seems to have drawn many archaeologists and historians to her story, while her beauty shown in artwork by craftsmen in Amarna has attracted many others. Instead of being remembered for the role that she played in the transition of the Egyptian royal court to Amarna and worship of the Aten, Nefertiti is perceived through a lens of Western beauty standards, emphasizing her alleged beauty far more than her significant role in Egyptian history (Tyldesley 169). In modern European art, Nefertiti has been used not only to make statements on femininity, but also to approach modern issues such as colonialism and repatriation of artifacts.

Sappho has been renowned as a poet throughout history, but the discourse around her work has been clouded by judgements passed about her sexuality, even since the third century BCE (Hallett 448), when the earliest surviving biographies of Sappho were written. In the present day, the homosexual implications of her work have become a point of interest to readers, to the point that Sappho has become a stalwart of "Lesbian" Literature. Because of the way that her reputation as an artist has hinged on the perception of her relationship with the subjects of her poetry, both Sappho as a historical figure and her work as a whole have been subjected to

judgement based on the moral question of her sexuality rather than the aesthetic question of the value of her poetry. In eighteenth and nineteenth century European art, Sappho's representation has reflected not only larger trends in artistic style and societal understandings of sexuality, but also the personal lives of the artists.

Hypatia is a woman who has been objectified and sensationalized in history as a martyr. Even in accounts written soon after her death, she has been canonized in an anachronistic and embellished manner. Writings that survive from her former students such as Synesius (ca. 373-414 CE) are the most contemporary to her life, but other ancient sources such as Socrates Scholasticus (ca. 380- after 439 CE), Damascius (ca. 458- after 438 CE), and John, Bishop of Nikiu (writing ca. 680-90 CE) also give scholars insights into how she was perceived by those who were alive relatively soon after her death. Because of these sources' unreliable or biased accounts of her life, scholars have been forced to contextualize Hypatia and her story through the lens of men that wrote with ulterior motivations, often religious in nature. In representations of Hypatia in nineteenth century European art, her body takes precedence, combining the violent and the erotic to various degrees.

2. Nefertiti

Regarding ancient history, few women rival Nefertiti's (ca. 1370-1330 BCE) status as a pop culture icon. Since the discovery of the site of Akhetaten at Amarna in 1912, Nefertiti's life and image have fascinated not only scholars, but people worldwide, causing her to become a symbol of beauty and femininity in the West. Though her roles as consort to Akhenaten and priestess in the henotheistic cult of the Aten[1] mean that she played a major role in a radical change in Egyptian religious practice, Western ideals of beauty and femininity shade the way that she is perceived in the modern world (Tyldesley 169). As a woman, Nefertiti is underrepresented in the historical timeline, making it difficult for scholars to piece together a detailed narrative of her life, and her gender has continued to detrimentally affect modern understanding of her. An analysis of Nefertiti's life within historical and artistic contexts contemporary to her life in juxtaposition to trends in Western reception of Egyptian antiquity from the eighteenth century to present and modern artistic representations of Nefertiti illustrates the degree to which her symbolic status as a representation of Western ideas of beauty has overshadowed her contributions to history.

Nefertiti's reception presents a unique challenge to scholars because of the relatively recent rediscovery of Amarna. Nefertiti did not enter the consciousness of Europeans until the early twentieth century, and because of that, her artistic reception does not have as much of a legacy as other ancient women, such as Sappho or Hypatia. Though her reception has been limited to the twenty and twenty-first centuries, historical understandings of Egypt and its culture as well as the colonial history of Egypt have greatly affected how Nefertiti is perceived. Through

[1] The cult of the Aten established and adopted as the official religion of Egypt by Akhenaten during his reign. The cult promoted henotheistic worship of the Aten, a sun-disk deity that was only accessible through the royal family (Tydelsey 15).

a selective art historical analysis that considers the effects of the Orientalizing of Egypt during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the impact of Thutmose's Bust of Nefertiti (ca. 1341 BCE: Tyldesley 9) on twentieth century European identity, and three modern artistic representations of Nefertiti within the post-colonial landscape, it becomes apparent that Nefertiti's image has become separated from the context of her life.

Nefertiti: History

As is the case with many women, there are few ancient sources contemporary to Nefertiti's life that solely focus on her. The archaeological sources that do depict Nefertiti alone are iconographic and generally religious in context, compelling scholars to study Nefertiti through the lens of her association with Akhenaten as well as commissioned art depicting the royal family to further contextualize her life. Little is known about Nefertiti's parentage, but Ay, Amenhotep III's master of horse, was most likely her father (Aldred 17). She became Akhenaten's consort during his first regnal year, 1352 BCE (Tyldesley 9). From early on in Akhenaten's reign, Nefertiti took a prominent position in Egyptian religion (Williamson 181) and by regnal year two, before construction began at Amarna, she was depicted in the role of a priest in the Benben Temple at Thebes (Tyldesley 9). Her presence in Egyptian religion continued to expand after Akhenaten moved the royal court to Amarna, and the cult of the Aten became the state-endorsed religion (Tyldesley 9). The worship of the Aten through the royal family transformed Akhenaten and Nefertiti into household gods and made kingship a divine role (Aldred 68). In the position of priestess, Nefertiti not only represented the women of Egypt to the gods and goddesses, but she also embodied the Aten to those over which she and Akhenaten

ruled (Tyldesley 11). From regnal years five through sixteen, Nefertiti was portrayed often in artwork at Amarna, mainly in the context of worship (Tyldesley 10). Nefertiti disappears from the historical record around year sixteen, and though there is very little known surrounding the time or nature of her death, it is presumed that she did die as queen consort (Tyldesley 177). Though so few details are known about Nefertiti's life, through art found at Amarna, it becomes clear to scholars that she served a major role in Akhenaten's reign. The legacy of the Amarna period, especially the mystique surrounding Nefertiti, continues to fascinate people around the world, although much of the iconography of Nefertiti and Akhenaten was destroyed after their deaths (Aldred 34).

One of the most distinctive features of the new settlement at Amarna was the style of art that deviated noticeably from the traditional style of Egyptian art. The development of what has become known as the Amarna style began at Karnak, an earlier site from Amenhotep III's reign for which Akhenaten had commissioned buildings and art before the court moved to Amarna (Aldred 28). At this site, the small stone bricks used, called *talatat*, that were hewn from softer sandstone caused a distinct style to develop that transferred over to Amarna in the early period of Akhenaten's rule (Aldred 28). The new style of deeper, less detailed reliefs showed Akhenaten and Nefertiti as exaggeratedly voluptuous with elongated heads and distorted facial features. These depictions of the royal family were likely driven by Akhenaten's preferences and differed greatly from the more angular and linear style of art that preceded Akhenaten's reign (Aldred 28). The body of Akhenaten was often depicted as almost womanly, with exaggerated breasts, wide hips, and large thighs, with a pronounced stomach (Aldred 90). Nefertiti, and sometimes her daughters, were portrayed similarly, but with an emphasis on their backside and thighs, making them almost impossibly large (Aldred 101). Their faces and heads were also dramatically

altered, with gaunt features, a pronounced and drooping jaw, and an elongated forehead that sloped backward to meld with the crowns that the royal family wore (Aldred 117). Another change in the Amarna style of art is the poses of the royal family. Akhenaten and Nefertiti were often depicted as holding their hands up in worship to the Aten and being attended by their daughters. Those who were not royal were often prostrate or bent at the waist in worship (Aldred 20). These changes in position and distortion of figures were quickly adopted by fervent followers of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, but traditional art still thrived in places such as Thebes, and as early artists at Amarna disappeared from the historical record, they were replaced by more traditional artists. As newer artists arrived, the eccentricities of Amarna style art were reduced, and eventually disappeared after Akhenaten and Nefertiti's deaths (Aldred 58).

These changes were not accidental and greatly affected how the royal family was perceived by their followers during the Amarna Period. Scholars recognize the significance of the drastic change in style Amarna style art demonstrated, but there is no consensus on a theory for the cause of this change. It has been postulated that Akhenaten desired to be portrayed with androgynous features in order to be perceived as both the mother and the father of Egypt (Aldred 54). Another theory, that Akhenaten had a physical condition that was depicted in royal artwork, was popular during the twentieth century, but this theory has been largely discounted since the analysis of Akhenaten's remains (Laboury). Though there is a lack of agreement as to why Akhenaten and Nefertiti are portrayed in this manner, it is evident that there were several religious implications of this new art. The depiction of the Aten as a life-giving force that gave ankhs to the royal family contributed to the level of divinity that the royal family claimed (Aldred 47) and strengthened Akhenaten and Nefertiti's position as the bridge between the Egyptian people and the Aten. Nefertiti in particular was depicted in this concept of religious

leadership, even depicted alone in worship (Williamson 182). This was rare for an Egyptian queen and exemplifies the high status she held within the cult of the Aten (Williamson 183).

Nefertiti's representation in art has captivated many, but scholars raise concerns about the ways in which Western ideals are influencing her modern reception. An example of this is the perception of Nefertiti as a powerful figure in the hierarchy of the Egyptian royal family or a major driving force behind Akhenaten's actions (Tyldesley 87). Though as stated above, she had an influential religious role, it should be noted that this influence did not extend into politics. Western ideals tend to conflate power with importance, but this was not the case in ancient Egyptian royal hierarchies, wherein Nefertiti was honored by titles focusing on beauty and love to communicate her importance without conferring any power to her (Williamson 192). The beauty that was celebrated in Nefertiti's life has become the main component of her legacy, largely because of the Bust of Nefertiti sculpted by Thutmose before or during regnal year 12 at his workshop near the private residence of the royal family (Tyldesley 9, 30). This bust was excavated in 1912 and is now on display at the Neues Museum in Berlin (Tyldesley 20). This bust has come to be an iconic representation of feminine beauty in the West, but scholars worry that the context of Nefertiti's life is being ignored by those using her image (McDonald).

Nefertiti: Artistic Reception in Modern European Art

The Bust of Nefertiti housed in the Neues Museum in Berlin ("The Bust of Nefertiti" ÄM 21300) is an icon in Western pop culture, but throughout the twentieth century, this artifact became a cultural touchstone for the German national identity. The Bust of Nefertiti, discovered in 1912, was brought to Germany in 1920 (Staatliche Museen "Discovery and Partage"). The

discovery of the site at Amarna, along with other major archaeological excavations taking place in Egypt during this time renewed European attention to ancient Egypt (Whitehouse 158). The Egyptian Revival affected not only art and artists but the everyday person as well. Germans were fascinated with the artifacts from Amarna that were on display, and the Bust of Nefertiti was the "most precious… stone in the setting of the diadem" (Breger 291) of art in Germany. The bust's prominence became a source of pride for Germany and a symbol of its colonial prowess. Germany was never able to 'catch up' to European colonial forces such as France or Great Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but as colonial holdings of these empires began to decrease at the turn of the twentieth century, Egyptology became a new measure to prove German superiority. The display of artifacts from Amarna in Germany, especially the Bust of Nefertiti, became a symbol of Germany's prominence in the wave of excavations in Egypt during the early twentieth century. Because of this, the emergence of Nefertiti as an icon of beauty is inextricably tied with the colonialist actions and mindsets of Europeans. Beyond archaeology, the Bust of Nefertiti has continued to feature in the German political sphere. In the mid-twentieth century, it became a symbol of conservative and nationalist parties who used the Bust as a symbol of their emphasis on traditional German values, but it was also used on more mundane things such as postage stamps, and even appeared on a progressive party's campaign posters in 1999 (Breger 292).

*Figure **1.** The Bust of Nefertiti, ca. 1351–1334 BC; ÄM 23100. Image Source: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung.* https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/aegyptisches-museum-und-papyrussammlung/collection-research/bust-of-nefertiti/the-bust/.

Ancient Egypt is uniquely situated in Western perception as something that "sharply contrasts, yet is linked, with Western society" (Moser 1277). On the one hand, the ancient Egyptian world is something that many Europeans claim as the beginning of Western civilization (Moser 1277) and therefore inherently connected to Europe in Western culture. On the other hand, Egypt is perceived as something apart from European culture, something foreign. This contributes to the Orientalization of ancient Egypt, because though Europe claims a connection to Egypt, Egyptian antiquity is often represented "selectively, and generally for exotic… purposes." (Whitehouse 161). Orientalization is the perception of Eastern cultures through a

Western lens for Western purposes, and in Egypt, this phenomenon occurred through the inherently colonialist excavations of ancient Egyptian sites by Europeans, resulting in a remarkable increase of interest in ancient Egyptian culture in the consciousness of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century Westerners. Egyptomania took hold in Europe because it was a culture related enough to classical antiquity to provide a sense of familiarity while still being unusual enough to be commodified and touted as something mysterious and exotic.

Nefertiti falls into this conflict in a way that exposes her beauty as her primary feature, though there is no way to know what Nefertiti truly looked like. Ancient Egyptian art was highly stylized, in the Amarna period particularly, to achieve political and religious goals. Despite this, Nefertiti's beauty is known within the Western consciousness to be timeless, perhaps because of this intersection of the "exotic" and the "familiar" (Breger 295) in the Bust of Nefertiti. The mystery surrounding the Amarna period of Egyptian history, the idea of European "conquest of intellect" (Breger 284) in Egypt, and the massive popularity of the Bust of Nefertiti all converged to propel Nefertiti into "star status" (Breger 290). Nefertiti's position as an icon of beauty removes historical nuance, however. Details of her life and her significance aside from the aesthetic are overlooked in favor of commentary on her appearance, and in the modern period, statements on race, gender, and colonialism. Nefertiti is so well-known that she is able to be represented in art in a way that removes her from it. Her likeness may be the primary visual component, but she is not the primary focus. Rather, she is a vehicle for the viewer to grasp the true meaning of the work.

The Body of Nefertiti (2003), a bronze sculpture by Little Warsaw (András Gálik [b. 1970] and Bálint Havas [b. 1971]) is an ambitious work that physically united the Bust of Nefertiti with modern art. The Bust of Nefertiti was created by Thutmose, a craftsman employed

by the royal family at Amarna during Akhenaten's reign. Little Warsaw's sculpture, a woman's body, stands 140 centimeters tall (Bencsik 5), and a total of 187 centimeters when the bust was atop bronze sculpture. The purpose of this work was to invite the viewer to consider the "myriad issues raised by the idea of Nefertiti's body" (Fowkes and Fowkes), especially in terms of femininity. The artists and the staff at the Neues Museum were able to put the Bust of Nefertiti onto Little Warsaw's body in May of 2003 before the sculpture was exhibited in Venice. The act of connection between the bust and Little Warsaw's sculpture was filmed, and though it only lasted a few hours, was meant to be a symbolic joining of two distant parts (Bencsik 5). Viewers in Venice contemplated not only the sculpture itself but the meaning of the sculpture after its connection and subsequent separation from the Bust. The connection of the Bust of Nefertiti to Little Warsaw's work angered Egyptian artists and scholars, who believed that the museum allowing Nefertiti's bust to be placed on this contemporary statue made by two European men was an insult to Nefertiti herself and the history of Egypt as a whole (Bencsik 10). This piece sits at a remarkable intersection of what issues come of attempts to connect ancient art to the contemporary world and the right of Egyptians to have a say in what happens to Egyptian artwork and artifacts housed in museums abroad. *The Body of Nefertiti* has been criticized by Egyptians as an

> insult to Egypt's history and the defacement of the bust of Queen Nefertiti, both because the bronze body will have harmful effects on the limestone head, and may cause it to crumble, and because a naked body – on which the beautiful head was placed – would not have been accepted by any archaeologist in the world. (Bencsik 10)

As male European artists, Little Warsaw's adaptation of Nefertiti retained clear Orientalist and colonialist undertones, despite the more critical turn in terms of race and colonization that Nefertiti's reception has begun to take in the twenty-first century. Meant to be a positive

statement on the beauty and femininity of Nefertiti and the ability to connect modern art with ancient artifacts, Little Warsaw's work caused many scholars to question not only whether or not the Bust of Nefertiti should be in the Neues Museum in Germany, but if it would even be safe there (Bencsik 10).

Figure 2. "The Body of Nefertiti" by Little Warsaw, 2003. Image Source: Little Warsaw. http://www.littlewarsaw.com/nef.fanzine.pdf

The Other Nefertiti (2016) is a piece that used the Bust of Nefertiti to make a more overt political statement. This work, by German-Iraqi artist Nora Al-Badri (b. 1984) and German Artist Jan Nikolai Nelles (b. 1980) was created by secretly scanning the Bust of Nefertiti in the Neues Museum and using the data to 3-D print several copies of the bust. The artists then gave

the data to hackers to upload the scan data online under a Creative Commons License (Hoffman) and copies of the bust that were made were donated to the American University in Cairo (McDonald) while others were buried in the desert. Through these actions, the artists aimed to allow all people access to the Bust in addition to achieving symbolic repatriation of the Bust (Hoffman). Al-Badri and Nelles' work both challenges the accessibility of art in the twenty-first century and addresses the conflict surrounding art that has been taken from colonized or formerly colonized countries. In *The Other Nefertiti*, Nefertiti becomes a symbol for the movement for repatriation, challenging the colonialist actions of the Germans in taking the Bust and keeping it at the Neues Museum. The Bust of Nefertiti is a vessel here for the artists' message.

Figure 3. "The Other Nefertiti," by Nora al-Badri and Nikolai Nelles, 2016. Image Source: Janez Janša https://www.flickr.com/photos/aksioma-org/37569082230/in/album-72157687586832000/

Julian Voss-Andreae (b. 1970) is a German artist that uses sculpture to show shifts in cultural understanding of science and the makeup of our world, creating sculptures influenced by

the principles of quantum physics (Voss-Andreae 15). His sculpture, *Quantum Nefertiti* (2016), viewed from the right angle, is easily recognizable as the Bust of Nefertiti, but because it is made of thin bronze sheets, when the sculpture is seen from the front, her image seems to disappear, no longer recognizable (Artsy). In this work, Voss-Andreae challenges the archetype of the eroticized queen that Nefertiti has come to be a figurehead of. *Quantum Nefertiti* emphasizes that though the Bust of Nefertiti is easily recognizable, knowledge of Nefertiti's life is not nearly so popular. Voss-Andreae's work calls attention to what lies between the gaps, reminding viewers that Nefertiti as a historical figure is more than just the iconic Bust of Nefertiti at the Neues Museum. Voss-Andreae's work follows a more critical shift in Nefertiti's reception taking place in the twenty-first century, as scholars and artists alike are beginning to recognize and confront the reductionistic idea of Nefertiti as an exotic icon of beauty that has been so prevalent in her representation in art and pop culture since the discovery of the Bust.

Figure 4. "Quantum Nefertiti" by Julian Voss-Andreae, 2016. Image Source: Hohmann Gallery.
https://www.artsy.net/artwork/julian-voss-andreae-quantum-nefertiti-2

Nefertiti likely did not have an abundance of political sway despite her roles as Akhenaten's consort and priestess in the worship of the Aten (Williamson 192). Little is known about her personal life, and though she is depicted often in art, it is difficult for scholars to separate her from Akhenaten as an individual. Though she was not a powerful individual, she was very important while she was alive, and Nefertiti's image as a great queen has continued to persist throughout time, in part because of the way that Western thinking has associated influence with power in ways that Egyptian society during the Late Kingdom did not. Her depiction in sculpture and relief at Amarna have drawn much attention due to their unusual qualities, but no image of her is more recognizable than the Bust of Nefertiti in Berlin. This bust has become an iconic image and is used in advertising, film, and modern art. Though this has made Nefertiti an incredibly famous figure in Egyptian history, it has reduced the understanding of Nefertiti and her life to her physical appearance. This has resulted in her use as representation for social and political movements and issues in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but the works that depict her often ignore the context of the time in which she lived and apply modern struggles or beliefs to Nefertiti. Although her image is often used in a manner that advocates for awareness and progress in terms of anticolonialism, feminism, and other revolutionary aims, Nefertiti has been ventriloquized by these artists in a way that separates her image from her life.

3: Sappho

Sappho of Lesbos (ca. 625-570 BCE) is a renowned poet, even called the tenth muse by some[2], yet there is strikingly little surviving information about her life and circumstances. Only fragments of her poetry survive, yet Sappho continues to be one of the most well-known poets in history. Modern understandings of her work have been affected by its translation and re-translation in its far-reaching popularity because of the influence of the translator's worldview on the understanding of language. Authors translating Sappho as well as those writing fictionalizations of her life employed several strategies to make sense of her life and writings — to account for the morality of her relationships with both men and women in accordance with modern understandings of sexual identity as well as to make sense of the connections between her identity as a poet and her identity as a lover. Through Sappho's enormous literary reception that spans from antiquity to the twenty-first century, her legacy has expanded far beyond the fragments of Sappho's poetry available to modern readers and the ancient sources that recorded what little biographical information about her survives.

The reflection of contemporary perspectives found in translations and fictionalizations of Sappho is also seen in her reception in paintings and sculpture. Art depicting Sappho from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides especially interesting insight into Sappho's reception through art because of critical contemporary developments in Europe surrounding the ideas of femininity and sexuality. Sappho was a figure that would have been recognizable to viewers of these paintings, but with so little information about her life available, artists came to

[2] This is seen in the epigrams of Sappho in some Hellenistic and Roman biographies, in which she is conferred the qualities of a "mortal muse" (Gosetti-Murrayjohn 24). This became a fairly standard way of representing Sappho during this time period, becoming such a convention that it became a way for writers to demonstrate their "literary sophistication" (Gosetti-Murrayjohn 24).

use Sappho's image as a vehicle for expression of their personal experiences. Through analysis of four paintings ranging from the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century and varying in style, it becomes clear that the artists' lives and perspectives on topics such as femininity and sexuality as well as their attitudes towards classical antiquity are intertwined with their representations of Sappho, affecting the way she is received by not only the artists, but the viewers of these works at the time of their creation into the twenty-first century.

Sappho: History and Literary Reception

Sappho is thought to have been born circa 625 BCE on the island of Lesbos, where she lived for much of her life in the city of Mytilene (Brooklyn Museum). From this beginning, the events of her life vary drastically between early biographies of Sappho. The entry on Sappho in the *Suda*[3] records her as having married a man in Mytilene named Kerkylas and having daughter named Kleis (Pleše 63). This differs from her representation in more informal plays soon after her death, where she is depicted as having several male lovers, becoming symbol of promiscuity in Athenian comedy (Greene 14). This also serves as a contrast to the now infamous story of her infatuation with the ferryman Phaon, for whom her unrequited love allegedly drove her to suicide around the year 570 BCE (Greene 12). This narrative of her love with Phaon began several centuries after her death and was popularized by Ovid's *Heroides* (Hallett 448). These vast discrepancies in Sappho's life and relationships reveal the potential inaccuracy of the ancient sources on her, and cause difficulties for scholars attempting to reconstruct Sappho's life.

[3] A tenth century Byzantine encyclopedia containing biographies and writings on many people and events from the ancient Mediterranean. Entries span from ancient Greece through late antiquity and this work was preserved through Medieval manuscripts.

Because of the lack of information, historians and writers have been tempted to fill the gaps, so to speak, to the detriment of modern scholars of Sappho.

Ellen Greene, author of *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*, describes the fascination that people have had with Sappho and her work as fueled by the fragmentary nature of her poetry, the lack of information on Sappho and those she interacted with, and the homoerotic undertones of her poetry (1). Sappho's work has been renowned since Antiquity, but even more pervasive than the acclaim of her poetry has been the discussion of her sexuality, Greene's third tenet of scholarship on Sappho's work (Greene 12). Often, modern readers now approach Sappho's work as Lesbian Literature, but many scholars call this perspective into question. Analyzing the fragments of Sappho through a moral question — whether she was homosexual — versus an aesthetic question — whether or not her work is worth reading — is difficult, as the two approaches have become almost inextricably intertwined in modern examination of Sappho's poetry (Hallett 449). Sappho's sexuality has become a very popular topic of scholarship and discussion within the last century, but reception of her work has included commentary on her sexuality for millennium. Throughout history and even into the present day, Sappho's poetry has taken a secondary position to speculation on her sexuality, arguably because female sexuality has historically been both a subject of suppression and fascination for men, resulting in male authors attempting to contain or explain away the supposed homoeroticism in Sappho's work.

Perhaps one of the first mentions of Sappho and her sexuality as it relates to homosexuality was within the *Oxyrhyncus Papyri*, a collection of fragmentary manuscripts, including a biographical segment on Sappho (XV, 1800 fr. 1 col.1.16 ff). This biography describes accusations against Sappho of being "sexually involved with women" and describes

her as “undisciplined” (Hallett 448), implying the author’s negative perception of the alleged homosexual relationships. This, coupled with later antique sources such as the *Suda* describe the homosexual relationships that Sappho was thought to have had with other women on Lesbos as mere accusations or rumors (Hallett 449). Ancient Greek society did not tolerate same-sex relationships between women, despite similar relationships between two men being comparatively more accepted (Hallett 450). An example of this is the poet Anacreon (ca. 582-485 BCE). He also has an entry in the *Suda*, and it describes his relationships with “boys” using much more neutral language — a departure from the pointed language in Sappho’s entry, in which conduct between two women is regarded as “shameful” (Hallett 451). The difference in perception of male and female homosexuality contributes to the objectification of Sappho’s sexuality by prioritizing it, whether to condemn or to minimize, rather than her work itself, unlike those that biographed Anacreon.

The discussion of Sappho’s homosexuality began during the antique period but has continued since that time. Her work has long been questioned in its merit due to the supposed homoeroticism contained within by men throughout history, and this aspect of her work has been controversial to readers throughout history. In the present day, Sappho has become an icon of feminine homosexuality across Western culture (Greene 12). The terms “lesbian” and “Sapphic” both originated from Sappho and began being used in the late 19th century to denote a female having homosexual relations (Hallett 452). The relatively new use of these words that have incredible popularity illustrates Sappho’s status as a symbol for homosexual women, an enormous difference from the men whose writings attempted to pass off Sappho’s alleged homosexuality as mere rumors and accusations to preserve her reputation.

Though in the present, the undertones of homoeroticism in Sappho's work are viewed in a neutral or even positive manner, it was not so in earlier modern history. The early Catholic church is rumored to have destroyed publications of Sappho's work in several instances, such as the account of Cardan in 1550 describing a public burning of Sappho's work by Gregory Nazianzen in 380 CE (Reynolds 161). A similar accusation by Joseph Scaliger describes Sappho's works being burned both in Rome and Constantinople at the orders of Pope Gregory VII (Reynolds 163). These accounts are merely theories as to why so little of Sappho's work has survived the Dark Ages, but still may reflect the attitude of the early Christian Church towards both polytheism and homosexuality in literature (Pleše 71). Translations of her work have also been affected by those endeavoring to underemphasize the presence of homoeroticism in Sapphic verse. Translators, mostly men, reflected the general attitude of the time, by infusing their translations with beliefs on female sexuality, femininity, and propriety according to the standards of their time (Greene 32). It was not always an intentional change, as perspectives and social context often subconsciously affect the perception of language, but translations influenced by the translator's own biases have affected how Sappho is read throughout time as these poems are translated and retranslated. An example of this is the translation of Sappho's fragment 31 by John Hall in 1652 compared to that of Ambrose Phillips from 1711 (Greene 58). These two translations, though of the same fragment, differ immensely. The fourth stanza in particular is quite different. Hall's translation reads:

> Cold sweats and tremblings so invade
> That like a wither'd flower I fade
> So that my life being almost lostI seem a Ghost" (Greene 55).

In contrast, the fourth stanza of Phillips' translation reads:

"In Dewy damps by Limbs were chill'd

My Blood with gentle Horrours thrill'd

My feeble Pulse forgot to pla

I fainted, sunk, and dy'd away" (Greene 57).

These two stanzas, though ending the same way, hardly contain the same figures of speech. These two translations illustrate that the perception of language and understanding of poetry is fluid, and therefore changes each time it is examined.

Sappho's poetry has remained incredibly popular throughout history, and she has become synonymous with the lesbian community. Throughout time, the reception of her work by men has led to twists in translation and comprehension of her work. Early biographers attempted to separate Sappho from the allegations of homosexuality attributed to her in an effort to preserve her position as a revered poet, despite male homosexuality being tolerated and even accepted during the time that she lived in Ancient Greece. Men during the early modern period used several methods to attempt to remove homoerotic implications from the fragments of Sappho's poetry, including utilizing translation to underemphasize references deemed as homosexual, openly denouncing her and her work, and even allegedly destroying it (Pleše 71). Though in modern times Sappho and homosexuality have become incredibly intertwined, many men through several time periods worked diligently to separate the two.

Sappho's reception in the classical period so interested scholars and writers from the Renaissance through the early twentieth century that a genre emerged that would become known as the Fictions of Sappho (Greene 9). These fictions invent, or draw from the inventions of previous authors, details of Sappho's life and poetry in order to create a sensationalized and extraordinary account of her life. These fictions have differed by author and time period in

content as well as how Sappho's identity as a poet is juxtaposed to that of a lover (Greene 14). There is no shortage of contradictory accounts of Sappho's life from the classical period, as Sappho is said to have a husband, brothers, a child, several lovers, close female friends who may have been lovers, and more (Hallett 447). Reconciling Sappho's reputation as a great poetess with her multitude of alleged lovers has led authors who are attempting to reconstruct Sappho's life to use three general strategies (Greene 14).

The first is duplication, in which authors separate Sappho into two separate women: Sappho the poet, and Sappho the prostitute. This was a popular strategy in Ancient Greece and Rome, and the earliest known example of this is from the third century BCE, found in the work of Nymphodorus. Sappho is also canonized this way in the aforementioned biography included in the *Suda* (Pleše 72). This separation of Sappho's persona as a poet and her persona as a rather promiscuous lover allowed her reputation as a great poet and the "tenth muse" to be protected. The allegations of homosexual conduct are therefore able to be ascribed to the Promiscuous Sappho rather than that of the Great Poet Sappho, ensuring that her work was able to be read and studied within the realm of propriety (Pleše 72). Duplication further objectified Sappho because male authors chose to separate Sappho's deeds according to their belief of what was moral or proper for a woman to do. It was meant to protect Sappho's reputation as a poet, but overall, it has altered her life and legacy to conform to the authors' standards of acceptable femininity by choosing to attribute all of the actions that were believed to be morally unacceptable to the Promiscuous Sappho in order to protect their version of the Great Poetess.

The second strategy used in the fictionalization of Sappho is narrativization. With this method, writers employed fiction and a lengthened timeline in order to fit all of the accounts of Sappho into one lifetime (Greene 17). This was done famously in Ovid's *Heroides* 15, written as

an epistle from Sappho to Phaon. In this fictionalized letter, Sappho renounces the "throng of Lesbian daughters", as a thing of the past, and aims to show her love for Phaon though he is unfaithful (Showerman). Ovid's writings in the *Heroides* inspired many authors in the seventeenth century, who often dismissed accusations of Sappho's homosexuality as rumors and lies. This strategy underemphasizes Sappho's status as a poet by writing her to be a representation of tragic, unrequited love rather than separating her into multiple people to keep her reputation pure (Greene 18). Sappho became molded into a character archetype, and by reducing her life to be merely a love story, her art becomes an accessory to her love affair, assigning her value because of her interactions with a man, rather than because of the merit of her art (Hallett 448).

Lastly, condensation is a strategy that became popular during the nineteenth century. This approach embraced the extreme differences found within Sappho's canon and she became a representation of the tortured artist (Greene 20). Sappho was written to be a poet first, striving for a spiritual perfection that could only be found through her death, driving her to throw herself off of the cliffs at Leucas. This approach emphasizes her beautiful poetry, but shows it as borne through a soul in turmoil (Greene 21). Condensation is less superficial than the previous two strategies discussed above, but by framing her supposed suicide as a fit of passion or the fruit of a struggle to become perfect, her poetry is used by authors such as Lamartine and Leopardi to show her as a woman with a tumultuous soul who uses her poetry as a means to induce Phaon to return her love (Greene 21, 22). This approach, though it shows a willingness to understand Sappho as both a lover and a poet, ascribes to her the conflict between lover and poet that the authors themselves were perhaps struggling with.

Sappho's history and literary reception from the classical period through the nineteenth century has varied greatly in the approach to understanding Sappho and her life, but one thing that has been central to the literary reception of Sappho has been men (Greene 4). Throughout history, men have been the primary figures in the fictionalization of Sappho, and through this fiction, appropriate her to reflect their standards of feminine sexuality and societal standards of propriety (Hallet 455). In *Rereading Sappho*, Greene asserts that "each generation invents its own Sappho" (3), as each author's approach to Sappho has become a reflection of societal values in relation to femininity and same-sex relationships between women. These authors all have interpreted Sappho and her life through the lens of their personal experiences, allowing them to inject their own views of women and how they should act into their version of Sappho. Because of this, Sappho's fictionalization becomes a vehicle of objectification.

Sappho: Artistic Reception in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century European Art

From the eighteenth century into the nineteenth, Sappho's reception in art changed in congruence with the development of modern concepts of femininity, identity, and sexuality. Sappho was a persona used by women to express ideas of femininity and the place of women in art and academia in the eighteenth century as the Neoclassical era dawned. As understandings of social roles, including homosexuality, changed throughout the nineteenth century due to industrialization and major societal change (Weeks 212), modern perceptions of sexuality were applied to classical historical and mythological figures that did not conform to Victorian ideals of

heterosexuality in art (Evangelista). The selected artworks encompass Neoclassical[4] works from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Pre-Raphaelite[5] work from the mid nineteenth century, and Academicist[6] work from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. These works illustrate Sapphos that reflect the artists' interaction with their world, be that through experiences of being a woman in a field dominated by men, exploring new ideas of psychology and eroticism, coming to terms with sexuality through representing modern ideas of queerness in classical subject matter, or representations of classical Antiquity that challenge the Neoclassical traditions that came before it.

Sappho Inspired by Love (1775) by Angelica Kauffmann (1741-1807) is an early Neoclassical representation of Sappho and is significant because it was done by a woman in the male-dominated academic and historic style of painting. Kauffmann's painting is an early embodiment of the Neoclassical style, anticipating an era of art inspired by Greco-Roman antiquity that would extend into the nineteenth century. In her painting *Sappho Inspired by Love*, Sappho is seated and in animated conversation with Cupid, who stands behind her, while she is writing her "Ode to Aphrodite." In this painting, Sappho is clothed in white with one breast bare, draped in blue. Sappho is accompanied by Cupid as an inspiration rather than in association with a lover, indicating Kauffmann's focus on Sappho in her identity as a poetess rather than a lover. Though love is the subject of the poem that Sappho is composing, she is not acting on account of

[4] The Neoclassical style began in the late eighteenth century and its popularity lasted through the early nineteenth century, particularly in Western Europe. Neoclassicism emphasized balance and symmetry of composition and sought to replicate the classical forms and subjects that were seen as ideal.

[5] The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of artists in the mid-to-late nineteenth century who sought to reject Neoclassical artistic ideals and paint in a style heavily inspired by Medieval art. Pre-Raphaelite subject matter was often legendary, biblical, or classical in nature.

[6] Academic (or Academicist) artists were generally students of or former students of the French and English Royal Academies of Art and painted in the style favored by the Academies. This style was often perceived as more traditional compared to more "avant-garde" movements of the nineteenth century such as the Pre-Raphaelite style or the Impressionist movement (Rosenfeld).

a specific lover, but a hypothetical one. To further illustrate this, Cupid's arrows are cast aside as he converses with Sappho. Kauffmann's Sappho is an active one, composing poetry and conversing with a god.

Sappho Inspired by Love is perhaps more than just an image of Sappho. There are many similarities in facial features and shape of the head between Kauffmann's Sappho and her self-portraits, and her position as a painter in the academic field in addition to her tumultuous experiences with romance may have encouraged her to paint herself as Sappho (Tomory 275). Kauffmann was born in Switzerland and began training as a painter under her father. She was already painting commission works and travelling across Europe in her teens, and during her mid-twenties, she moved to London ("Angelica Kauffmann"), where this painting was produced. Sappho's "Ode to Aphrodite" is an appeal for help from the goddess of love, and Kauffmann — known by the time of this painting for her bigamous marriage and many lovers — might have been driven to paint herself as Sappho entreating Aphrodite and Cupid for help in love (Tomory 275). In addition to the romantic aspect of motivation for Kauffmann to create this possible self-portrait, it is possible that Kauffmann is using Sappho to express her experiences as a woman within the field of academic painting. As a painter that began at a young age and received training few women were afforded, Kauffmann was in a unique position, and perhaps sought a way relate to a woman in a similarly unique situation. "[T]he use of symbolic or allegorical personifications of women" (Perry 49), in this case Sappho was a way for Kauffmann to make statements that she could not have made otherwise in a way that would be accepted by other academic painters due to its classical subject matter. This painting is therefore an illustration of the tendency for Sappho's image and life to be used by women to express things about sexuality

or creativity that would not have been well-received when represented through contemporary subjects.

Figure 5. "Sappho Inspired by Love" by Angelica Kauffman, 1775. Image Source: Wikimedia Commons, Ringling Museum. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sappho_Inspired_by_Love_by_Angelica_Kauffmann.jpg.

Another Neoclassical work, *Sappho and Phaon* (1809) by Jacques Louis David (1748-1825), takes a different approach to the representation of Sappho. This painting shows Sappho both as a lover and a poet, illustrating the beginning of the connection of the two versions of Sappho that occurred during the nineteenth century. David's work shows Sappho being surprised by her lover Phaon, (Goldhill 72), with imagery reflecting the amorous scene, such as the two doves on the windowsill. Sappho's head is being held by Phaon as she relinquishes her lyre to Cupid, demonstrating some of the tension between her identity as a poet and as a lover. David's

Cupid illustrates the connection that love has to her poetry. As he takes Sappho's lyre, according to David, he begins to play Sappho's "Ode to Aphrodite" (Goldhill 72). The peaceful scene depicted in this work is at odds with the tragic end of her love story — instead of showing her on the cliffs of Leucas, David chose to depict Sappho and Phaon happy and in love. Despite this tranquil scene, Sappho and Phaon's direct gaze out at the audience is unsettling, especially Sappho's expression. She appears almost inebriated, a vast difference in comparison to Kauffmann's alert and animated Sappho. This look, in combination with the viewer's knowledge of Sappho's imminent death as she commits suicide after discovering that her love for Phaon is unrequited, makes the painting more troubling than at first glance.

David, a prominent French Neoclassicist and former revolutionary, painted this near the end of the duration of his time as First Painter for Napoleon Bonaparte, from 1804 to 1810 ("Jacques-Louis David"). David's pre-revolutionary work, beginning in the 1770s, often dealt with classical subject matter, and he returned to this during the first quarter of the nineteenth century after his period of revolutionary and imperial works. *Sappho and Phaon* was a relatively early work in David's return to classical subjects, as many of his later works concerning classical history and mythology were created during his residency in Brussels that began in 1816, following his banishment after the restoration of King Louis XVIII to the throne ("Jacques-Louis David"). The denser, more naturalistic forms in this work indicate David's more serious approach to mythological subjects that emphasized accuracy (Johnson 243-244), but despite his emphasis on accuracy in his prior Neoclassical paintings, David's post-revolutionary mythic paintings tended to focus on "psychology, eroticism, and aesthetics" (Johnson 246). Instead of approaching classical subjects from an archaeological standpoint, David pivoted to an emotional one. The tumultuous revolutionary period in the 1790s and first decade of the nineteenth century

in which David produced political works such as *The Death of Marat* (1793) and the paintings commissioned by Napoleon Bonaparte informed his style in his classical paintings done after the French Revolution ("Jacques-Louis David"). David's shift in emphasis from the accuracy that characterized the Neoclassical era to a more emotional and interrogative style that sought to depict more than just the scenes as recorded in myths or history and represent what the characters and people may have been thinking or feeling is a possible explanation for the aforementioned disconcerting quality of *Sappho and Phaon*. David's painting is therefore not only a unique depiction of a blissful scene between Sappho and Phaon as lovers, but a reflection of changes that occurred in David's life due to French politics that may have driven him to diverge from his previous, stately subject matter in favor of a new, more experimental interpretation of the Neoclassicist style.

Figure 6. "Sappho and Phaon" by Jacques-Louis David, 1809. Image Source: The State Hermitage Museum. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/solomon-sappho-and-erinna-in-a-garden-at-mytilene-t03063.

Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene (1864) by Simeon Solomon (1840-1905) is a Pre-Raphaelite work that demonstrates the beginning of the exploration of Sappho with homosexuality as an identity, rather than just a part of it. Though Solomon's watercolor explores early nuances of homosexuality, his Sappho works "against the tendency, in receptions of Sappho from their time onward, to reduce her poetic greatness to a mere matter of sexual proclivity, or to secure her lesbian identity at the expense of her genius." (Prettejohn 104). Solomon's Sappho, on the right, embraces Erinna, on the left, who appears to be drawing her face away from Sappho's, yet leaning her shoulders inward. Sappho is pictured with her poetry

and her lyre and is crowned with laurel, illustrating her accomplishments in poetry. There is a pair of doves behind the two women, and myrtle branches extend from the pedestal beside them as roses litter the floor. All of these things are meant to invoke love as symbols of Aphrodite, whose statue watches over the scene from the pedestal (Prettejohn 116). The doves echo those seen on the windowsill in Jacques-Louis David's work, and the parallels in symbolism found between the paintings by David and by Solomon, though Sappho's partner is a man in the former and a woman in the latter, exemplifies Solomon's unique and modern view on homosexuality as something not only on par with heterosexuality, but something that "goes beyond heterosexuality and the trappings of middle-class propriety" (Evangelista).

Solomon's work, then, reflects not a historically accurate version of Sappho, but a conscious representation of modernity interacting with antiquity as Solomon makes Sappho personal to him. Solomon was arrested in 1873 for "homosexual offenses" (Fowles), and *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* illustrates the ways in which artists might insert themselves into paintings to express, like Kauffmann, feelings and experiences that might not have otherwise been accepted by their contemporaries. Both artists use Sappho, and by extension classical Antiquity, as a guise to allow for the discussion of things considered improper. Erinna is thought to have lived during the fourth century BCE, which would have precluded her from any interaction with Sappho, yet the two are often compared as famed classical women poets (Barnard 207). This deliberate anachronism in Solomon's work removes the possibility that this work is a faithful reproduction of history, laying bare Solomon's own thoughts about Sappho, antiquity, and homosexuality (Evangelista). To further illustrate Solomon's personal involvement in this scene, he leaves his mark in this work in several ways. On Sappho's lyre, there are two snakes curled around each other. Solomon often used two intertwined snakes to

sign his paintings, and here they are a way for him to “inhabit” (Evangelista) the painting. He also signed his name as initials carved into the stone pedestal. Instead of using the Latin alphabet though, he used Greek. Using *sigma sigma* as his signature allowed Solomon to insert himself into the scene in a second manner, increasing his proximity to his subject matter, and by extension, homosexuality (Evangelista).

Figure 7. "Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene" by Simeon Solomon, 1864. Image Source: Tate Galleries. [*https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/solomon-sappho-and-erinna-in-a-garden-at-mytilene-t03063*](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/solomon-sappho-and-erinna-in-a-garden-at-mytilene-t03063)*.*

Sappho (1877) by Auguste Charles Mengin (1853-1933), relatively obscure Academic artist (Goldhill 70), is a departure from the previous works selected for analysis. Mengin’s Sappho is much darker and brooding, creating an alternative version of Greek antiquity from the Neoclassical era that preceded him (Goldhill 70). This painting shows Sappho standing on a cliff

at dusk, presumably before she throws herself off because of her unrequited love for Phaon. She is directly facing the viewer, clothed in a sheer black piece of cloth, with both of her breasts bare. Though she is facing forward, she does not make eye contact with the viewer, rather, she is looking in the viewer's direction, with her eyes slightly downcast, "contemplating death and love" (Goldhill 70), while her lyre hangs in her hand carelessly. Her despondent body language, despairing gaze, the cloudy and dusky background, and gloomy color palette all give the painting a decidedly dark mood, even if the viewer is unaware of what happens next. This Sappho is not the creative, romantic Sappho that Neoclassical painters seemed to favor, but instead is represented as the "physical embodiment of dangerous passion" (Goldhill 70). In Mengin's work, she is not a lover or a poet, and her suicide is not romantic or idealized. *Sappho* is dark and morose, an illustration of the consequences of an illicit affair as the two birds that have been consistent symbols in paintings of Sappho with romantic connotations fly away from Sappho towards the horizon.

Mengin's work depicts Sappho alone, something unique to the other works selected for this analysis. This is significant because so much of her reception has been focused on who she was associated with, be it her romantic relationship with Phaon or other men, or her romantic relationships with women. Her body, whether uncovered or seen through her sheer garment, is on full display for the viewer, though the moment that Mengin chose to represent is decidedly unerotic compared to David or Solomon's paintings. Because of this, Mengin's *Sappho* creates a juxtaposition between the erotic and the tragic, something that is consistent throughout Sappho's reception, especially in the nineteenth century. Sappho's femininity is contrasted with her prowess as a poet, a continuation of the struggle to reconcile Sappho's two identities, even in the late nineteenth century. Alone, Sappho's body is infinitely more erotic than when she is

accompanied by others, be it gods or lovers, even if Mengin's work depicts a moment before tragedy.

Figure 8. "Sappho" by Auguste Charles Mengin, 1877. Image Source: Art UK, Manchester Art Gallery. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/solomon-sappho-and-erinna-in-a-garden-at-mytilene-t03063.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sappho's reception shifted critically in response to the origins of modern understandings of homosexuality. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Sappho remained heterosexual, and there was still tension between her identities as a poet and a lover, as demonstrated by David's work. Kauffmann's work also demonstrated Sappho's use as an expression of identity for academic women. In the mid-

nineteenth century, Solomon's work represents an early illustration of Sappho as homosexual in the modern sense, while in the late nineteenth century, Mengin favored a darker, more visually suggestive representation of Sappho in contrast to the idealized Neoclassical versions. Sappho's popularity and reputation as a poet attracted many artists to her, each representing her in a different way according to the artists' experiences. Sappho's femininity and homosexuality in particular were drawing points for many eighteenth and nineteenth century artists, something that has remained true in the present day.

4: Hypatia

Hypatia of Alexandria (ca. 350-415 CE) was a famed philosopher and mathematician living in Alexandria, Egypt.[7] Though she was a prolific scholar, even the earliest biographies of Hypatia focus primarily on her murder, making it difficult to construct a full narrative of Hypatia's life and accomplishments. By the nineteenth century, Hypatia had come to be known as a Christian martyr, in part due to the popularization of Charles Kingsley's novel *Hypatia or New Foes with an Old Face* (1853), and the intersection of politics and religion in her death has resulted in the use of her story as an allegorical representation of political or religious conflicts on several occasions. While the idea of Hypatia as a martyr gained popularity in nineteenth century Europe, an alternative view of Hypatia as the embodiment of a woman dedicated to secular learning in a society that rejected these values was adopted by women in higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mills 246). Hypatia has therefore come to personify two seemingly contradictory ideals in the modern era. The bias that is apparent even in early biographical sources for Hypatia presents challenges for scholars, and her literary reception in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries exemplifies the consequences of the narrativization of historical figures as two incompatible versions of Hypatia arose.

Hypatia's representation in nineteenth century art focuses primarily on Hypatia as a martyr, as informed by Kingsley's *Hypatia*. An analysis of three works of late-nineteenth century European art that were directly inspired by Kingsley's *Hypatia* illustrates the effect of literature on the representations of historical figures in art and the connections that emerge between classical antiquity and modernity through allegory. The three selected works explore nineteenth

[7] From the year 30 BCE until the seventh century CE, Egypt was ruled by the Roman empire. After the Christianization of Rome and the division of the Roman Empire into the Western and Eastern Roman Empires in the early fourth century CE, ancient Egyptian cultural practices had nearly ceased to exist (Van de Mieroop 324).

century perspectives on femininity and the female body in various ways, demonstrating the rapidly changing ideals of the nineteenth century and the role of religion in Victorian society.

Hypatia: History and Literary Reception

Hypatia's education in Alexandria was given by her father Theon (ca. 335-405 CE), a famed mathematician that wrote commentaries on works by many famous mathematicians, including proofs for Euclid's *Elements* (c. 300 BCE: O'Connor). He ensured that Hypatia was educated in mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, and other sciences, and she was very proficient in those fields. Hypatia and Theon wrote commentaries on works by prominent mathematicians together, but Hypatia also wrote her own commentaries on many works, such as Diophantus' *Arithmetica* (Damascius, as given in the *Suda*), of which few survive. In addition to writing on mathematics, Hypatia was a prominent philosopher in the city of Alexandria. Belonging to the Neoplatonist movement, she subscribed to polytheistic beliefs that were becoming less common as Christianization began in Roman Egypt (Mark). Though Hypatia's polytheistic beliefs were met with disapprobation by many Christians in Alexandria, her primarily Christian students and lecture attendees thought highly of her, and she was very popular (Grout). She was remarked by Socrates Scholasticus in his *Ecclesiastical History* (ca. 440 CE) as having confidence among large groups of men and great "self-possession and ease of manner" (VII.15). She was also greatly admired by her students, for example, Synesius of Cyrene (ca. 373-413 CE). Synesius wrote her many letters, calling her "mother, sister, teacher, and withal benefactress" (Ep. 10), and requesting her advice on several occasions. Her lectures given in public and outside of her home were quite popular and drew large crowds (Damascius, as given in the *Suda*). In addition to the respect that she commanded in the academic sphere of Alexandria, she was incredibly

influential in politics. She was most notably a close counsel to Orestes, who was serving as the Roman prefect of Alexandria in 415. The Archbishop Cyril was a political rival of Orestes, and Hypatia became caught in the middle of this conflict, eventually leading to her death (Mark).

Though the circumstances of Hypatia's grisly death are fairly well agreed upon by ancient sources, the motive of the mob that dragged her from her chariot, beat her to death, and burned her in a Christian church differs greatly between the ancient biographers of Hypatia (Grant 15). Socrates Scholasticus wrote in his *Ecclesiastical History* that Hypatia was targeted by Cyril because of her closeness to Orestes (VII.15). He framed her death as a detriment to Cyril's reputation and the Church's as a whole, declaring that "nothing can be farther from the spirit of Christianity" (VII.15) than the violence and upheaval surrounding Hypatia's murder. The *Suda* contains a preserved portion of the *Life of Isidore* by Damascius (ca. 530 CE),[8] which includes an account of Hypatia's death. In Damascius' work, Hypatia's murder is said to have been motivated by Cyril's jealousy of the crowds that Hypatia's public lectures drew. Damascius stated that Cyril "plotted" her death after seeing a large crowd outside of her house seeking to hear her speak (Damascius, as given in the *Suda*). In contrast to Socrates Scholasticus and Damascius' narratives of political and personal rivalry, John, Bishop of Nikiu, took a religious approach. In his *Chronicle* (late 7th c. CE) he argued that Hypatia was a pagan that "beguiled many people through her Satanic wiles" (LXXXIV.87) and accused her of causing Orestes to stray away from Christianity. He also blamed the Jewish people of Alexandria for provoking the mob that killed Hypatia, saying that the "Jews arose and wickedly massacred the Christians and shed the blood of many, guiltless though they were" (LXXXIV.97).

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[8] Damascius' *Life of Isidore* is not considered by scholars to be historically accurate because of many anachronisms. Damascius claims that Isidore, the biography's subject, was married to Hypatia, but he was most likely born after Hypatia's death, and therefore could not have been her husband (Grout).

These three contradictory accounts of the reasoning behind Hypatia's murder illustrate the struggle that historians face when attempting to fully understand Hypatia's life. Though the esteem and respect that she commanded from many Alexandrians is widely agreed upon, the difference in accounts regarding her murder paired with a lack of surviving sources contemporary to Hypatia's lifetime make it difficult for scholars to draw sure conclusions on the life of Hypatia. This difficulty is explicated by understanding that none of the men that authored these surviving sources wrote with the goal of preserving knowledge of Hypatia's life and accomplishments (Watts 193). Socrates Scholasticus' *Ecclesiastical History* was written as a history of the Church, and he was quite critical of clergymen such as Cyril in his writing. His account of Hypatia's life served as context to describe her death and how it reflected poorly on Cyril and the Church (Watts 194). Similarly, Damascius — reportedly a polytheist himself — in his *Life of Isidore* describes Hypatia as an influential philosopher but her story is given as an example describe the shame that her death brought upon Cyril and bolster his criticisms of Alexandrian Christians. John, Bishop of Nikiu's *Chronicle* was written as a more favorable history of the church, and by describing Hypatia as a willful "unbeliever" (LXXXIV.87) and threat to the integrity of Christianity in Alexandria, he makes a statement against paganism as well as Judaism, therefore promoting the Church. Because none of these men were writing with the express intention of recording the accomplishments of Hypatia during her lifetime, her life takes a secondary position to her grisly murder and the possible motives for it as soon as twenty-five years after her death.

Hypatia continued to be recorded in religious histories through the medieval period and early modernity. Special interest in Hypatia's story arose amidst a religious and philosophical conflict between two men involved in England's Anglican Church during the early eighteenth

century (Watts 196). William Whiston, a scholar and theologian, and Henry Sacheverell, a conservative clergyman, held conflicting theological beliefs,[9] and as a result in their disagreement, Sacheverell attempted to have Whiston barred from services at St. Andrews church in Holborn (Watts 197). In response to this conflict, John Toland, an Irish scholar who was very critical of the structure of the Christian Church, compared Sacheverell's intolerance of Whiston to the mob that killed Hypatia in his *Tetradymus*, published in 1720 (Watts 198), a work that surveyed the ancient accounts of Hypatia's life discussed above and combined them into one narrative. Though Toland's work combined the several fragmentary accounts on the life of Hypatia in order to give a fuller interpretation of it, Toland's goal was not simply to contribute to the scholarship on Hypatia's life; in *Tetradymus*, the murder of Hypatia serves as an allegory to illustrate Toland's opinion that the intolerance of the Christian church and its hierarchical structure that caused free thinkers such as Hypatia and Whiston to be persecuted (Watts 206). In addition to the use of her life as a mode of comparison, in Toland's praise of Hypatia's accomplishments and harsh criticism of Cyril, he explicitly mentions her beauty, describing Hypatia as a "most beautiful Lady (for such we are assured Hypatia was)" (Toland). This assurance though, has little basis. No image of Hypatia contemporary to her life survives, and though ancient sources describe her as beautiful, there is no way to be sure because they did not write during her lifetime (Grant 11). Toland's writing operates on the assumption that because she was a celebrated woman, she must be beautiful. Toland's writing garnered a response by Thomas Lewis, an Anglican writer. He takes the opposite position, characterizing Hypatia as an "Impudent School-Mistress", and defending Cyril. Because of his favorable opinion of the

[9] William Whiston was a self-described Eusebian, believing that Jesus Christ, though the son of God, was not eternal in the same way that God was. Henry Sacheverell was a clergyman with strong ties to the Tory party, and even incited riots that resulted in the burning of Presbyterian churches several years earlier, in 1710 (Watts 197).

Anglican clergy, it is by extension a defense of Sacheverell as well (Watts 201). Toland and Lewis' eighteenth-century writings on Hypatia each provided a valuable account of Hypatia's life, these authors transfigured her into a character by using her life to make statements on their opinions of the Anglican clergy and the role of women in eighteenth-century society.

As in the case of Sappho, lack of information can lead to authors transforming ancient women into fictionalized characters rather than people. Even in early accounts of Hypatia's life, her achievements became secondary to her death, in part because the intersection of religion and politics that lead to the end of her life was a unique circumstance that affected how she was recorded in history. Ancient accounts of Hypatia varied in the reason for her inclusion in their writings. In the case of Socrates Scholasticus and Damascius, her death was used to criticize the actions of the Church and of the Archbishop Cyril, while John of Nikiu's writing made an example out of a pagan that interfered with the influence of Christianity (Watts 195). From these early sources, interest in Hypatia increased when those involved in a religious conflict in England evoked Hypatia and her death to discuss the tolerance of the Anglican church during the early eighteenth century. This resulted in a detailed biography of Hypatia written by John Toland, but the interest in Hypatia's life as a person died out soon after this controversy, until it was revived during the nineteenth century (Watts 206). Charles Kingsley's 1853 novel, *Hypatia or New Foes with an Old Face*, was a great success in both Great Britain and the United States, and the revival of Hypatia's image during the late nineteenth century converged with the stereotypes of the New Woman and Girton Girl (Mills 248). These educated women began to use Hypatia as a symbol for their entrance into higher education, and though this was meant as a representation of progress, Hypatia remained a character or symbol, rather than a person. From the fifth century through the nineteenth century, interest in Hypatia rose and fell through time,

but the way that her story was used primarily as a means of comparison to a situation happening at that current time or as a symbol for a stereotypical group of people remained constant. As is with the case of many ancient women, Hypatia's story has only been recorded with the intention of preserving her in relation to men critical in her life, such as Cyril, Orestes, or even her father Theon. Because so little is known about her life previous to the conflict that led to her murder, she becomes a puppet, ventriloquized to sit the argument of those who use her.

Hypatia: Artistic Reception in Nineteenth Century European Art

In nineteenth-century European art, Hypatia occupied a unique space. By the Victorian era, the narrative of Hypatia as a Christian martyr had become prevalent. In the nineteenth century, art and literature discussing female martyrs was popular (Moran 477), because through art with female martyrs as a subject, artists were able to represent "transgressive" (Moran 478) topics within a religious context. In artistic representations of Hypatia, the focus on bodily pain and violence is evident, aligning with the trend of other nineteenth-century depictions of female martyrs. Hypatia's body itself is the focal point of multiple works, and even in works where her body is not displayed to the viewer, it is clear that Hypatia faces violence and death. Through an understanding of Hypatia's life influenced strongly by Charles Kingsley's novel *Hypatia or New Foes with an Old Face* (1853), Hypatia was represented through art in ways that explored the alignment of death and eroticism in the female martyr's body and the role of women in both ancient and modern society.

Hypatia's popularity during the Victorian era began with the publication of *Hypatia or New Foes with an Old Face* by Charles Kingsley in 1853 (Grant 15). This publication, a fictionalized narrative of Hypatia's life and death, was part of a popular genre of antique

historical fiction that emerged during the nineteenth century. These fictionalized versions of ancient historical events and classical myths were often used as allegories to discuss topics that neared the edge of the Victorian limits of propriety, or to make commentary on society or religion (Mills 242). Kingsley's *Hypatia* was clearly meant to be a method of connecting antiquity with current events, as suggested in the title. Kingsley's version of Hypatia's story was "violently" (Goldhill 32) anti-Catholic and used the early Church as a stand-in for contemporary Catholics. The cruelty, aggression, and excesses that characterized the Christian mob that murdered Hypatia were criticisms Kingsley aimed to level at modern Catholics (Goldhill 203-206). The critique of Catholics served to support Kingsley's ideals of Protestantism, anti-Catholicism, and British national identity as values inextricable from one another (Uffelman 96). This work brought Hypatia back into the European modern conscience through its immense popularity, but his fictionalization of Hypatia's story influenced the manner in which she was represented.

Hypatia by Charles William Mitchell (1854-1903) is a painting done in 1885 that was directly influenced by Charles Kingsley's novel (Goldhill 32). Mitchell, an English painter strongly associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement, is relatively obscure. In Mitchell's painting, Hypatia is depicted as a martyr, just moments before her death at the hands of the Christian mob. She is completely nude, using her hair to cover her as she leans against the altar of a church. She gazes out, presumably to the mob, with her arm outstretched upwards as a possible appeal to God. Kingsley's novel suggests that Hypatia might have converted just before death, and Hypatia's hand reaching upward above the altar might be a reference to this, or this gesture may also serve as a reminder to the mob that God is watching them as they commit this act (Moran 481). Hypatia's nudity at the moment just before her death is striking. Visually, her

pale skin and the altar that she leans upon are sharply contrasted by the dark and shadowed background. Her chest is lit almost unnaturally, drawing more attention to her bare breasts. At this time, there was heated discourse about the morality of nudity in art, and this painting drew criticism at the time of its exhibition because of the representation of a nude martyr (Mills 255). Though Hypatia's body is exposed, its muscularity and the covering her hair provides perhaps serve to de-eroticize the image (Goldhill 32), yet the knowledge that she faces sexual assault imminently makes Hypatia's nudity uncomfortable — not because of the female body, but because of the violence that she is about to experience.

Mitchell's work depicts a moment just before her murder, but Hypatia is far from a stereotypical damsel in distress. Mitchell invites the viewer to see Hypatia through a new lens of femininity, in which she is not weak or feeble, and instead demonstrates "strength of body and character" (Moran 481) before the mob, even at the moment of her death. She gazes out at the mob sadly and almost disappointedly, a reflection of Kingsley's novel in which it is made clear that Hypatia, even when facing the mob, had "not a stain of fear" (Kingsley 409) in her eyes. This representation of Hypatia puts her in a strange position characteristic of many female martyrs, in which a sort of double perception emerges. This painting evokes empathy from viewers because of the sexual violence and murder that she faces, but also admiration because of her moral righteousness (Moran 480). Hypatia's nudity reminds the audience of feminine suffering but directs the audience's focus away from the impending violence and centers Hypatia — or Kingsley's version of Hypatia — in the image.

Figure 9. "Hypatia" by Charles William Mitchell, 1885. Image Source: Art UK, Laing Art Gallery. https://www.bukowskis.com/en/auctions/613/372-julius-kronberg-hypatia.

Hypatia (1889) by Julius Kronberg (1850-1921) is another work done in the height of the popularity of Kingsley's *Hypatia,* yet contrasts both Mitchell's and Belt's works in two main ways. In Kronberg's work, Hypatia is not nude like Mitchell or Belts' works, and is not yet affected by violence. She is dressed in a white garment and draped in off-white fabric, has neatly done hair, and is adorned with brooches, earrings, a bracelet. Hypatia is shown looking out of a window alarmedly, gazing out on the mob that approaches on the road below, carrying a cross as they advance towards her. She is seemingly interrupted from her scholarly work, holding a quill

and scroll in hand. The more typical components of works based on classical subjects, such as the bust, scrolls, what is likely a laurel tree, and frescoed walls are given a darker tone by Hypatia's distressed, but not quite frightened, expression and the mob that is presumably advancing from the church in the background.

This painting, completed as a private commission, was done in the final year of Kronberg's twelve-year residency in Rome. During this residency, Kronberg's style became more "austere" than his previous, more decorative style, and increasingly focused on historical and biblical subject matter (Gunnarsson). His rendition of Hypatia's death follows this trend, as he chose to depict an inherently less emotional scene that Mitchell or Belt, but the details of this work provide vivid insight into her story upon further examination. Hypatia's facial expression, as noted above, is alarmed and almost sad, but just as in Mitchell's work, she does not appear afraid. Her left hand is clenched into a fist, indicating frustration, and her body language suggests that she is preparing to stand up and take action. The fresco on the wall behind her is also interesting. It depicts a warrior shielding a nude woman with a makeshift covering tied around her and aiming a spear at an unseen adversary. This could be a reflection of Hypatia's imminent situation and a representation of protection that she did not have as she faced the mob alone. The mob approaches Hypatia on the road, emerging from the distant church and carrying crosses. The church itself is in the style of a classical temple with a simple cross on top, demonstrating the newness of Christianity in Alexandrian society, and the bystanders that kneel as the procession passes them illustrate Hypatia's aloneness in facing the mob. Though Kronberg's *Hypatia* takes an indirect approach to the representation of Hypatia's death, the finer details of his work inform the viewer of the impending danger Hypatia faces and create an ominous mood, despite the bright color palette and verdant landscape in the background.

Figure 10. "Hypatia" by Julius Kronberg, 1889. Image Source: Bukowskis. https://www.bukowskis.com/en/auctions/613/372-julius-kronberg-hypatia.

Hypatia (1882) by Richard Belt (1851-1920) is a sculpture that represents Hypatia in the style of a classical nude, with an emphasis on the ideal body and balance of composition (Sorabella). Though Mitchell's version of Hypatia was also nude, Belt's sculpture is much more erotic. Her clothing is pooled around her feet while she holds her hair back, seemingly unashamed of her position. This is a somewhat grotesque portrayal of the same moment that Mitchell's *Hypatia* depicts, as Belt's version goes further in "juxtaposing… the sensuous, the erotic, the vulnerable and the violent" (Mills 259). This Hypatia is not the morally righteous woman depicted in Mitchell's painting but is a more sexualized version of Kingsley's Hypatia.

In accordance with the passage Mitchell references, her arm remains raised in an appeal to God, but instead of gazing out at her murderers, Hypatia gazes up and away from them. If this work was not titled *Hypatia*, there would be no indication that the woman Belt sculpted is just a moment from violent murder. Hypatia's face does not express fear, but her features do not encapsulate the "shame and indignation" (Kingsley 409) that Kingsley alleges that she felt at this moment.

Though this sculpture was created as a private commission and was not exhibited, *Hypatia* was brought into the public eye in an unconventional way. In 1882, Belt brought suit against Charles Lawes for libel. Lawes wrote an article alleging that Belt, who had formerly worked in his studio during the 1870s, did not produce his own works, and that Belt's assistants were the true creators of Belt's sculptures (Singh). In this trial, it was demanded that Belt sculpt a replica of one of his works under supervision to prove that his work was his own, and the courts ruled that Belt's work was his own. This ruling resulted in several appeals, and because Lawes was not able to pay the damages awarded to Belt, both men declared bankruptcy ("Richard Belt"). During this trial, several of Belt's works were brought into the courtroom as evidence, including a plaster model of *Hypatia.* The sculpture's size and nudity meant that it dominated the courtroom and was the subject of several jokes (Mills 260-261), illustrating the effect that nudity had in Victorian society, even if displayed as classical subject matter. The men in the courtroom regarded *Hypatia* as within "the boundaries of acceptable viewing" (Mills 260), but it still was thought to have an erotic quality, as comments that facetiously suggest that the judge might be distracted by the sculpture suggest. Belt's *Hypatia*, as a classicized nude, inhabits the edge Victorian acceptability, but just as in Mitchell's painting, the sexual assault and murder

that Belt's Hypatia is yet to endure creates an unpleasant association of eroticism and violence that had become characteristic of Hypatia's reception in nineteenth century art.

Figure 11. "Hypatia" by Richard Belt, 1882. Image Source: Drapers' Hall London. https://www.bukowskis.com/en/auctions/613/372-julius-kronberg-hypatia.

In the Victorian consciousness, Hypatia's story hinged on her death. Charles Kingsley's novel enjoyed immense success, and though this novel brought Hypatia back into the minds of the public, Kingsley's *Hypatia* explored modern problems through the fictionalization of a classical subject. Because of this, the artwork that was inspired by Kingsley's *Hypatia* is inherently affected by this allegorical retelling of Hypatia's story. The changing position of women in nineteenth century Europe is explored through this art, and just as modern topics were

discussed within these artworks, several of these works were used in debates of contemporary issues, both in the press and in the courtroom. Though Hypatia's story had been treated with religious or political biases since antiquity, her life and her death became inextricably tied to modernity in the nineteenth century.

5: Conclusion

Through the exploration of the lives of Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia, it becomes clear that ancient women are often removed from their historical context and used by others to make statements reflecting their modern values or perspectives. This often happens in times of social and political change as figures of the past are used as a comparison to or representation of current issues, as can be seen from the eighteenth century into the present day. Because for most ancient women we have very little record of their actual life and achievements in history, women such as Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia become vessels for others to use. Nefertiti has become a symbol for feminine beauty, repatriation of artifacts, and race and gender relations in the twenty-first century, and her depictions in modern art have little to do with her life in context as the queen of Egypt and priestess of the cult of the Aten. Sappho has become a symbol of female homosexuality, but there are so many conflicting accounts of Sappho's life, both ancient and modern, that it is impossible to know what her life was like in reality. In eighteenth and nineteenth century art, painters sought to represent their own life experiences through Sappho's story, and she was rarely depicted alone, as artists sought to reconcile Sappho's identities as a lover and as a poet. Hypatia, though an incredibly successful philosopher during her life in Alexandria, has been remembered in literature and art for her brutal murder and its implications for Roman politics and the ancient Church far more than her contributions to scholarship in Alexandria, and has been used in her literary reception to serve as an allegory for various social and religious conflicts. In her artistic representation, nineteenth century artists explored female martyrdom through Hypatia's death, and sought to reconcile her femininity, her morality, and her murder through their art. Though these women differ in time period and place, they fit into a pattern of reception that gives these ancient women more representation in art and literature,

something that is arguably positive. However, this representation often dissociates these women from their real lives, creating figureheads that artists and authors speak through, rather than allowing their stories to speak for themselves.

There is a resulting disparity in the reception of ancient men and ancient women. Men such as Hammurabi (r. ca. 1792-1750 BCE), Alexander the Great (r. ca. 336-323 BCE), and Julius Caesar (r. 46-44 BCE) have become icons in ancient history, yet scholarship on these men has constructed understandings of these men as complex individuals. Though these men have endured an oversimplification of their lives that focuses on their main, symbolic achievements, the reasons behind this distillation differ greatly from the limitations that scholars face when studying ancient women. There are fewer opportunities for scholars to understand women such as Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia as individuals because of the lack of sources available. There are few to no surviving primary or early secondary sources that give insight into the personalities or motivations of these women, and the primary sources that do survive were often created with political or religious motivations, whether those sources are state-commissioned pieces of art or a biography of a polytheist written by a clergyman. On the other hand, famous men of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East are able to be discussed with the understanding that most people will have at least some background knowledge of them, but beyond the stereotypes discussed in this work, Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia are much less likely to be known beyond their names. It is imperative that scholarship on ancient women consciously works to recognize and deconstruct the effects of Western Orientalist and patriarchal value systems on the scholarly and artistic reception of women such as Nefertiti, Sappho, and Hypatia. Scholars of the reception of ancient women should seek to improve our understanding of their lives and disseminate

awareness of these women within their historical context in order to understand them on their own terms.

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