

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF LESBIAN OPPRESSION:
OR, IF LESBIANISM IS SO GROOVY, HOW COME EVERYONE HATES US?**

This is the part about Heaven that has never been told. After the Fall of Satan (and as he fell, Lucifer uttered a loud cry, heard from one End of Forever-and-no-end to the other), all the Angels, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagitarius, Capricornus, Aquarius, Pisces, all, all gathered together, so close they were not recognizable, one from the other. And not nine Months later, there was heard under the Dome of Heaven a great Crowing, and from the Midst, an Egg, as incredible as a thing forgotten, fell to Earth, and striking, split and hatched, and from out of it stepped one saying "Pardon me, I must be going!" And this was the first woman born with a Difference.

After this the Angels parted, and on the face of each was the Mother look.

Why was that?

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Ladies Almanack
by Djuna Barnes (1928)

It is very difficult to try to construct an accurate picture of lesbian oppression or even of the existence of lesbians throughout history. Even the most progressive history books would have us believe that Sappho and Gertrude Stein were the only lesbians that ever existed. Our information must be drawn from literature, the bible, ancient law, and our fragmented knowledge of "people's" history.

If we look at the history of women's oppression and lesbian oppression, we can see that anti-homosexuality is determined by the need to control the people, to establish "order" in the form of the nuclear family, and to procreate.

The earliest information we have dates back to about 1750B.C. Homosexuality not only existed but was accepted (at least as a religious rite) throughout the world. Most cultures worshipped a female deity at this time. What we must understand now is how and why these attitudes changed, the reasons presented at different points in history for the oppression of gay people, and the basis of that oppression today.

It is important to discuss Greek and Roman society because they are seen as models of progressive thought on the subject of homosexuality. They are also used as a basis for attacks on homosexuality to show that it is a product of decadence. The basis of Greek homosexuality was sexism. Men loved men because women were seen as inferior. Homosexuality and woman-hating were institutionalized in Greece between the 12th and 7th centuries B.C. because of the need to build a strong military elite in which a man's first allegiance would be to his brother soldiers. The center of the military movement was Sparta but its ideas quickly spread throughout the rest of the country. Wives were considered "necessary" only because they bore children and looked after the home. In the 6th century B.C., the poet Palladas wrote:

"Marriage brings a man only two happy days. The day he takes his bride to bed, and the day he lays her in her grave."

Woman-hating rose to such a degree that it may have been necessary to pass a law making marriage compulsory, for the sake of procreation. Homosexuality based on woman-hating, in a society based on slavery and sexism, can hardly be called progressive.

The first written anti-gay laws and attitudes that we know of are in the Old Testament and came directly from the rise of patriarchy. They came from the need to enlarge the Hebrew population, as well as its desire to differentiate itself from the so-called "pagan" (Goddess Worship) cults which accepted homosexuality. Hebrew law developed the first absolute prohibitions against homosexuality and bestiality in the western world.

"Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with woman kind: it is abomination. Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith; neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto; it is confusion."

Leviticus 18:22-23

This is the law that lays the basis for all other laws regarding homosexuality and it is the first time a religious rationale is presented to justify anti-gay actions.

The voice of Sappho gave us the first recorded writings of a woman in the western world, the first homosexual voice of Greek society, and the first romantic literature. Because Lesbos was an island, it had not been as militarized as the Greek mainland. This gave women a small measure of freedom

~~Handwritten scribbles and signatures~~ (5)

and created the conditions which allowed Sappho to write her epic poetry. Sappho wrote more than 12,000 lines of poetry, only 700 of which still exist, many of these being fragments. It is generally believed that early Christian zealots destroyed most of her work and around 380 A.D. Saint Gregory ordered her books burned, calling her a "lewd nymphomaniac." By 1072, Pope Gregory VII had most of her remaining works destroyed.

↓ With the rise of feudalism, the power of the Church was consolidated. Because "power" was determined by ownership of land (and the Church was the largest single landowner in Europe), religious law soon became common law as well. The Church created a rigidly structured society dependent on Catholicism to define all social relationships and the limits of mobility. One of the ways the Church established its control was by labeling anything that threatened its power as heresy.

Under feudalism, women worked in the home and on the land leased to the peasants. Men worked on the land owned by the lord/church and served in the army. Feudal society required more people to work the land so the church encouraged sex for procreation. Although all sex was considered sinful, procreative sex between married men and women was less so. Because homosexuality can never be procreative, and can only be for pleasure, it was not only sinful but heresy punishable by death.

"Witchcraft" (possession by the devil) was the most serious heresy. Lesbianism was considered one of the effects of possession by the devil. During the Middle Ages (600-1400) and later, there were over 9,000,000 women burned as "witches." These women were teachers, students, healers, or women who, at a time when the family was being consolidated, did not accept the proscribed roles for women. Many were lesbians. (The term "faggot," as a slur on gay men, was coined at this time. A faggot was a bunch of twigs tied together and used to kindle a fire. During witch burnings, groups of gay men were tied together and burned as well.)

The organized persecution of "witches" officially began in 1484 when Pope Innocent VIII named two Dominican monks, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, as Inquisitors and asked them to define witchcraft and to standardize trial procedures and sentencing. Kramer and Sprenger wrote a text called the Malleus Malefactorum (Hammer Against Evil Doers). It became Catholic theology and law. Witchcraft was a women's crime. (The ratio of women to men burned as witches is estimated at anywhere from 20 to 1, to 100 to 1, and these are conservative estimates.) Witches were accused of flying, having carnal relations with

Satan, injuring cattle, causing hailstorms and tempests, causing illness and epidemics, bewitching men, changing men and themselves into animals, changing animals into people, committing cannibalism and murder, and stealing male genitals:

"... and what then is to be thought of those witches who collect male organs, as many as 20 or 30 members together, and put them in a bird's nest or shut them in a box, where they move themselves like living members and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many as is a matter of common report."

Malleus Malefactorum

Reading this, it becomes easier to understand how the Church ruled the people and institutionalized woman-hating and anti-gay attitudes. There is no writing about lesbianism between the time of Sappho and the 15th century because the depth of gay oppression made it too dangerous to write or the writing which did exist was destroyed by the Church.

In 1533, the church law became part of English common law. This law clearly shows the medieval equation of "sin" and "crime."

"Forasmuch as there is not yet sufficient and condign punishment appointed and limited by the due course of the Laws of this Realm, for the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery committed with manking or beast: It may therefore please the King's Highness, with the assent of his Lords spiritual and temporal, and the commons of this present Parliament assembled,... that the same offense be henceforth adjudged Felony... and the offenders being hereof convict... shall suffer such pains of death and losses as Felons be accustomed to doe according to the order of the Common-laws of this Realm...."

From first English statute, 1533

This statute became the basis of all the laws written about homosexuality, including the present-day statutes. The original statute of North Carolina, written in 1837, reads:

"Any person who shall commit the abominable and detestable crime against nature, not to be named among Christians, with either manking or beast, shall be adjudged guilty of a felony, and shall suffer death without the benefit of clergy."

Amidst all this repression and gloom, we can still find that lesbianism existed and was written about. Between the 12th and 16th centuries, most of the literature came from the church.

However, in 1531, an Italian writer, Aristo, wrote Orlando Furioso, a novel about an amazon woman. Although the novel has lesbian content, it is because the woman who falls in love with the amazon believes her to be a man. In 1580, Sir Phillip Sidney wrote Arcadia, the first lesbian love story in English literature. Due to consorship, the book was not published until a decade after it was written. This book has clear lesbian content but the high moral tone of the church and sin are still present:

"No, no, you cannot help me: Sinne must be the mother and shame the daughter of my affection... It is the impossibilitie that doth torment me: for unlawful desires are punished after the effect of enjoying, but impossible desires are punished by desire itself.... O my Zelmane,....I am wholly given over to thee."

From this point on, lesbians in literature are so frequent that only a few examples can be given for each century. In 1611, Middleton and Dekker's Roaring Girl appeared, telling the story of a woman who was a transvestite who vows that she will never marry and spends her life righting wrongs done to women. Jauan Perez de Montalban's La Monja Alferes (1626) is the true story of Catalina de Erauso, a Basque woman who posed as a soldier. After the publication of the book, Erauso was given permission by Pope Urban VIII to continue wearing men's clothes, a capital offense at the time. A book published in 1655, Lives of Gallant Ladies by Brantome, implies that lesbianism was taken for granted, at least among women of the French court. Queen Christina, who was forced to leave the Swedish throne because she was a lesbian and refused to marry, lived openly in Paris between 1670 and 1680.

It is important to note that although there was a lot of writing about lesbians, there was also a basic formula to all the stories: there were never happy endings for lesbian lovers and usually a man came along and won the heart of the "real" woman, who had merely been led astray by the "terrible" lesbian. An example of this is L'Espoin Anglais, which appeared in Paris in 1777 and 1778 in eleven volumes. These volumes contained writings from several authors. A series of letters describes the life of a young woman who enters a "house" in Paris to be trained as a lesbian prostitute. However, a man, disguised as a woman, gets into the house and steals the young woman's heart. This writing formula enabled people to write and publish books about lesbians without threatening the Church/State's definitions of sin and crime. This also meant that basic attitudes about lesbians remained unchanged, although homosexuality was now considered "moral depravity" rather than possession by the devil. The Church and State still considered lesbianism "The abominable and detestable crime against nature, not to be named among Christians."

In 1788, Mary Wollstonecraft, an early feminist who later wrote Vindication of the Rights of Women, wrote Mary, a Fiction. It is significant because it is the first book that we know of on lesbianism written by a woman and because it is autobiographical.

With the rise of capitalism, we see science replacing religion as the rationale for gay oppression. The Protestant Ethic said there was such a thing as individual control - one could no longer attribute everything to "divine" causes. Superstitions about possession by the devil and moral depravity gave way to scientific theories of "illness." We can see a first glimpse of the inversion theory in Theophile Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin, published in 1835. This book also gives us the first image of lesbians that created the stereotype seen today. Maupin is described as: tall, broad-shouldered, flat-chested, and slim-hipped. She is an athlete, a horsewoman, and a fencer. Maupin describes herself as "of a third sex, one that has as yet no name above or below." It is said that George Sand (Lucile A.D. Dudevant), a woman writer living in Paris at the time, was the model for Maupin.

Science institutionalized the already existing attitudes about women and gay people by taking them out of the realm of religion/superstition and making them "scientific fact." The inversion theory, simply stated, said that homosexuality was biologically determined rather than a result of possession by the devil or moral depravity. Gay people, it said, are born with a female body and a male mind or vice versa; hence, gay people are "sick" in the medical sense of the word. This theory had both a reactionary and a progressive following. Catulle Mendes presented what he called a "case study" about a lesbian in 1890. According to Mendes, lesbianism is hereditary and leads one down the path to drug addiction, syphilis, hysterical convulsions, fevers, suicide, child desertion, husband abandonment, and orgies.

A progressive side of the inversion theory said that because one is born an "invert," one must be pitied and not oppressed. In 1928, Radclyffe Hall's Well of Loneliness was published as a plea in defense of lesbianism. The book was not out for six weeks before it was banned in England. James Douglas, editor of the Sunday Express wrote:

"In order to prevent the contamination and corruption of English fiction it is the duty of the critic to make it impossible for any other novelist to repeat this outrage.... this novel is not fit to be sold by any bookseller or to be borrowed from any library."

Radclyffe Hall said in her defense:

"I wrote the book from a deep sense of duty. I am proud indeed, to have taken up my pen in defense of those who

are utterly defenseless, who being from birth a people set apart in accordance with some hidden scheme of Nature, need all the help that society can give them."

The book was banned in England but in September, 1928 it was published in France and copies were sent to England. On orders from the Home Secretary, these copies were burned whenever found. In November, 1928, Sir Charles Biron wrote an order calling Well of Loneliness an "obscene libel" and ordering all copies destroyed with payment of 20 guineas in each case.

The book fared little better in New York. 865 copies were seized from the publisher's office by the Vice Squad. However in April, 1929, a U.S. court ruled that the book was not obscene. It was not until years later that the book was actually published in England. Today, the Well of Loneliness is considered one of the classics of lesbian literature.

There are numerous other writers, mostly women, who wrote with unclear or masculine gender (or in the case of Emily Dickinson, her poems written to women were altered after her death) so as to be able to publish their work. Many of these women were lesbians: Louise Labe, George Sand, George Elliot (Mary Ann Evans), Emily Bronte, Margaret Fuller, Michael Field (pseudonym for Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) and Emily Dickinson.

↓ The inversion theory continued to be accepted until Freud proposed that homosexuality was not biologically determined but was rather a result of childhood development and family relationships. He put forward the theory that it was a psychological illness which could and should be cured. The institution of psychology has become the "scientific" rationale for the oppression of gay people.



We shall enjoy it

As for him who finds
fault; may silliness
and sorrow take him!

Sappho