

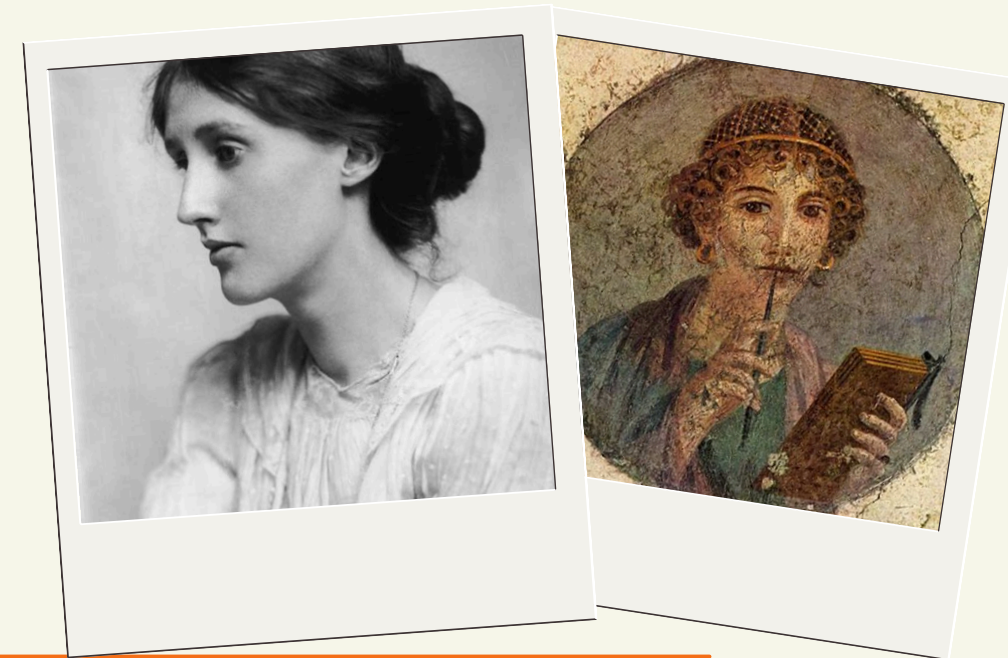
CLASSICAL RECEPTION IN QUEER READINGS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

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Taking a deep dive into one of Modernist England's greatest writers, this research looks at how Virginia Woolf's queer feminism finds a place in her bibliography via ancient Greco-Roman influences. Artists working in less accepting time periods often used the classics as a way to 'queer-code' their work. Woolf was no different, and she stands out even more as a woman who focused on female experiences of queerness and feminist reframings of traditionally male-dominated literary spaces. By closely examining the role Classics plays in Woolf's queer expressions in selected works, this work aims to support further understandings of classical influence and legacy in queer female representation. Woolf uses mostly Sappho and references to Greek literature, both via language and textual form, to 'queer' her work. The coding is subtle and mostly targeted towards readers just like herself—queer women familiar with Classics who know what to look for.



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BACKGROUND

Born in 1882, Virginia Woolf began private lessons in Greek when she was fifteen. Ancient Greek thus became a lifelong influence. In her 1920 essay 'On Not Knowing Greek', she states: 'It is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, confusion, Christianity and its consolations, of our age.' Indeed, Woolf often alluded to the Greeks in her writing, especially around themes of queerness. Although she was happily married to a man, she did have several affairs with women, most notably with Vita Sackville-West. Woolf was particularly drawn to Sappho, a female poet in Ancient Greece who wrote about her love for other women, and references to Sappho often appear in her work.

A SOCIETY (1921)

Queer in how its women step out of traditional sexual dynamics and try to reach above patriarchal socio and intellectual spaces, this short story reads very much like the *Lysistrata*, a Greek comedy by Aristophanes. Both texts deal with women refusing to have sex with men and 'the horror of bearing children to see them killed'. Sappho appears as both figure and fragment. The men in the story discuss Sappho's chastity instead of poetry, and a female character cries out for her chastity, saying 'Chastity! Chastity! Where's my chastity?', a parallel to Sappho 114's 'Virginity, virginity, where are you gone, leaving me behind?'

ORLANDO (1928)

Based on Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West, *O* follows the eponymous hero from the Elizabethan Era to Woolf's present day in 1928. Orlando has sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women, switches genders, and dresses alternatively as a man and a woman. Woolf describes a young Orlando 'standing in the midst of the yellow body of a heraldic leopard'. The leopard, a frequent motif throughout the novel, is associated with Dionysus, the Greek god of wine who, in some versions, was born a boy but raised as a girl. He is further linked to gender ambiguity through the deconstruction of gender roles in his rituals and worship. Sappho's birds continue to feature in *O*'s visual storytelling. Birds and their feathers are tied with female sexuality and gender euphoria. Orlando reminisces collecting bird feathers prior to their metamorphoses, and gathers and wears bird feathers to cheer themselves up during times of disillusionment and loneliness. Last but not least, Woolf places Orlando in Greece when they finally grow into their identity, a choice which directly ties together classical heritage and queer becoming.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN (1929)

An essay critiquing the sociopolitical conditions that lead to the absence of women in the arts, *AROO* has queer undertones when read in context with Sappho. Sappho often used flowers, violets in particular, in her love poems to other women. Woolf plays around with this connection. By mentioning 'violet-sellers' in a passage about 'the accumulation of unrecorded life' can be a woman's inspiration to create, she hints at how her own silenced queerness and love for Sackville-West drove her to write *Orlando* and hint at queerness in various other writings. There are also non-floral echoes of Sappho in the text. Using an imaged female other named Mary Carmichael, Woolf addresses the inability of women to gain recognition in her time and her hopes that the future would be kinder. 'She will be a poet...in a hundred years' time' echoes Sappho 147: 'someone will remember us, I say, even in another time.'

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE (1927)

TTL continues to show Sappho's influence in Woolf's exploration of relationships between women. Flowers and birds are only mentioned in relation to Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay—Lily's fervent admiration of Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay's gentle affection towards Lily in conjunction with Sapphic imagery give their relationship an queer undertone. After Mrs. Ramsay's death, Lily watches a family friend drop a 'wreath of violets', a distinctly Sapphic image. In *Frag. 94*, a poem about Sappho's heartbreak when her female lover leaves her, Sappho describes the 'many crowns of violets' her lover placed at her side. This sight strikes Lily with the final inspiration she needed to finish her painting. Woolf poses queer loss and resolution as the key to the completion of Lily's vision and growth. Lily's love for Mrs. Ramsay is an expression of her queer desires against the traditional. Lily loves Mrs. Ramsay as Woolf loves Sappho—both queer creatives, they find the keys to their liberation in their older female counterparts. Woolf further presents their relationship as a subverted pederasty. Although Mrs. Ramsay is the older figure with more experience to share, Lily is the one who yearns and pursues.

THE WAVES (1931)

The very structure of *TW* hints at Greek tragedy, with the entire novel being built on interweaving dialogue from the six characters it follows, similar to a classical chorus. Out of the six friends, two are distinctly 'queered': Neville and Rhoda. Neville is an explicitly gay man who finds comfort in Classics. He is obsessed with how Latin '[pronounces] the explicit' and adores Catullus, a Roman poet who wrote about his love for a young boy. Catullus's influence on Neville parallels Sappho's influence on Woolf. Rhoda's queerness returns to Woolf's intertwining of Sappho's floral imagery and female queerness. However, her inability to embrace her queerness drives her to leap off a cliff she had previously thrown 'withered, blackened violets' over. This brings to mind the (now discredited) myth of Sappho's own suicide by cliff.

Please note:

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