

Sapphistries

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Sapphistries

A Global History of Love between Women

Leila J. Rupp



UBCPress · Vancouver · Toronto

Published in Canada by UBC Press
The University of British Columbia
2029 West Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
604-822-5959 / Fax: 604-822-6083
www.ubcpress.ca

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Rupp, Leila J., 1950–
Sapphistries : a global history of love between women / Leila J. Rupp.
(Sexuality studies, ISSN 1706–9947)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978–0–7748–1782–0
1. Lesbianism—History. 2. Lesbians—History.
I. Title. II. Series: Sexuality studies series
HQ75.S.R87 2009a 306.76'6309 C2009-904199-5

This book is printed on acid-free paper, and its binding materials are chosen for strength and durability. We strive to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the greatest extent possible in publishing our books.

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Verta, again

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Preface

WHEN I HAVE told people, over the past couple of years, that I was writing a short, accessible, synthetic global history of love between women from the beginning of time to the present, they often laughed or rolled their eyes. I understand why—it is an insanely ambitious project. So I am especially grateful for the confidence of Michael Kimmel and Suzanna Walters, editors of the *Intersections* series, and Ilene Kalish, executive editor at New York University Press, that I could pull this off.

The idea for this book emerged from a course called “Sapphistries” that I developed at the University of California, Santa Barbara—or maybe it was the other way around. Having returned to my original academic home in women’s studies, I decided to shift my focus from a comparative angle on male and female same-sex sexuality to a concentration on desire, love, and sex between women. It has been an adventure, and I am grateful for the students in my “Sapphistries” classes for their enthusiasm for the subject, their perceptive questions, and helping me to think about things in new ways. I am also thankful for the work of my colleagues in the Department of Feminist Studies—Jacqueline Bobo, Eileen Boris, Grace Chang, Barbara Herr Harthorn, Ellie Hernández, Mireille Miller-Young, Laury Oaks, and Barbara Tomlinson—all of whom, in vastly different ways, have opened my eyes to new ways of looking at teaching and scholarship. My chair and friend, Eileen Boris, has been particularly supportive. And I could not have gone on without the wonderful work of our Feminist Studies staff, Lou Anne Lockwood, Christina Toy, and Blanca Nuila. Lou Anne, in particular, has shared lunches, coffees, heart-to-heart talks, and dog-sitting for Phoebe.

Of course this book could not have been written without the amazing scholarship—far more than I thought when I set out to write—of so many fine scholars. The notes and references track their contributions, but I want to name a few here whose work I have used especially extensively: Evelyn Blackwood, Bernadette Brooten, Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol, Lillian Faderman, Marti Lybeck, Jacqueline Murray, Gregory

Pflugfelder, Tze-lan Sang, Valerie Traub, Ruth Vanita, Martha Vicinus, and Saskia Wieringa. Thank you for making this book possible. It goes without saying that the mistakes—and how could there not be many in a project of this scope—are mine alone.

I would also like to thank a number of scholars, students, and friends who suggested books or articles, sent me unpublished or newly published work, answered frantic queries, or just provided reassurance that I was not entirely overlooking something important. These include Ken Andrien, April Bible, Kerstin Bronner, Elise Chenier, Laura Doan, Cameron Duder, Stephanie Gilmore, Carrie Hamilton, Danielle Hidalgo, Marti Lybeck, Mark McLelland, José Ramos-Rebollo, Erika Rappaport, Jens Rydström, Birgitte Søland, Zeb Tortorici, Valerie Traub, and Martha Vicinus. Lachelle Hannickel and Suzanne Braswell translated the caption for figure 14, for which I am very grateful.

In the midst of writing this book, I was heartened by the reception of my talk at the Women's History Workshop at Ohio State, my former home. The enthusiasm and support of my former colleagues—and not only my dear friends and women's historians Susan Hartmann and Birgitte Søland—meant so much. I doubt that I ever would have attempted to write a global history without having been part of the world history group at Ohio State, so I thank them as well. I am also grateful for the comments of Tom Laqueur and audience members at the session where I talked about this project at the American Historical Association conference in 2009. Having finished the book, I had the pleasure of speaking at the University of Connecticut, where I benefited from the questions and comments of colleagues from history and sociology.

At New York University Press, Aiden Amos provided valuable advice on the illustrations. Despina Papazoglou Gimbel managed the production process efficiently, and Andrew Katz did a careful job of copyediting. My friend Kate Weigand, a scholar in her own right, produced a beautiful index.

I could not have completed this project without the financial support of the UC Santa Barbara Academic Senate and the Division of Social Sciences and the incredible resources of the University of California libraries, especially the interlibrary loan department. Melvin Oliver, Dean of Social Sciences, provided research support, a job as Associate Dean to occupy my free time, and the kind of encouragement, friendship, and laughter that one does not always associate with the title "dean." Lisa Leitz has been the most astonishingly creative research assistant, working magic on a regular

basis. I don't know how she does it, but I could not have survived without her help.

I am also indebted to Lisa Duggan and Arlene Stein (the formerly anonymous reviewers of the book proposal), Ruth Vanita and a still-anonymous reviewer of the manuscript, and other anonymous readers who provided both criticism and support in the process of my final career review in the endlessly bureaucratic University of California system. John D'Emilio, Estelle Freedman, Joanne Meyerowitz, and Joan W. Scott read parts of the manuscript and wrote letters in support of a fellowship proposal, for which I am very grateful, even though I didn't get the fellowship. Later, Joanne, Birgitte Sølund, and Verta Taylor read the whole thing solely out of friendship (and more, in Verta's case). All the comments and suggestions from these generous colleagues proved challenging and helped greatly to improve the manuscript. There were many moments when I wondered why I had taken on such a foolhardy project, and Birgitte especially buoyed me when I needed it most.

Phoebe was with me through almost every minute of work on this book. She didn't help at all, but her devotion goes a long way.

And then there is Verta, to whom I dedicate this book. For thirty years, she has worked and played with me, inspired me with her brilliance, and loved me through good times and bad. When we first met, we used to joke about being sure to leave behind evidence of our relationship so no future historian could say we were just good friends. In a way, that is what set me on the path of writing *Sapphistries*. Verta, I can't imagine my life without you.

Introduction

Sap·phis·tries \ˈsaf-əs-trēs\ *n* : Histories and stories of female same-sex desire, love, and sexuality, after Sappho, sixth century BCE poet of Lesbos.

THE LESBIAN POET Sappho, whatever her erotic history, bequeathed both her name and her place of residence to the phenomenon of desire, love, and sex between women. Her iconic image as a lover of women has transcended the boundaries of history and geography, bestowing on women who desire women the labels *Sapphic* and *lesbian*. Because the term *Sapphic* has a longer and more widespread history than *lesbian*, I have named this book *Sapphistries*, an invented word, although not an entirely original one, to embrace all the diverse manifestations of women and “social males” with women’s bodies who desired, loved, made love to, formed relationships with, and married other women.¹ *Sapphism* is a name that stuck through the centuries, and not only in the European tradition. An eleventh-century poet in Muslim Spain earned the moniker “the Arab Sappho.”² A Japanese loan word, *saffuo*, coined in the 1900s, refers to female same-sex sexuality.³ A Chinese critic in 1925 translated one of Sappho’s fragments into Chinese, pointing out that women’s same-sex love is called “sapphism.”⁴ A conference in Melbourne, Australia, in 1995, organized by lesbians from minority ethnic and racial backgrounds, took the title “Sappho Was a Wog Grrrl.”⁵ How impossible it is to disassociate Sappho from her legacy is suggested by the fact that, in 2008, a Greek court dismissed the request of three residents of Lesbos for a ban on the use of the word *lesbian* for anyone other than inhabitants of the Aegean isle.⁶

The only term that has a broader historical reach, if not the same poetics, is *tribadism*, from the Greek and Latin words meaning “to rub,” in its numerous linguistic variations. The Arabic terms *sahq*, *sihâq*, and *musâhaqa* are all derived from the verbal root *s-h-q*, meaning “to pound,

bruise, efface, or render something soft,” sometimes translated as “rubbing.”⁷ In Hebrew, the term for women who have sex with other women is *mēsallelet*, meaning “to rub.”⁸ Female same-sex behavior in Chinese is called *mojingzi*, “rubbing mirrors” or “mirror-grinding.”⁹ The word in Swahili for a lesbian is *msagaji*, which means “a grinder.”¹⁰ In Urdu and related languages, the terms for female same-sex sexual activity—*Chapat*, *Chapti*, and *chapatbazi*—are all related to flatness or flattening.¹¹ *Tortilleras* is the term used to refer to lesbians in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America.¹² A French dictionary from 1690 defined a *tribade* as “a shameless woman enamored of one of her own sex” and finished off the definition with the simple statement “Sappho was a tribade.”¹³ An English pamphlet from 1734 blamed Sappho for introducing “a new Sort of Sin, call’d the *Flats*.”¹⁴ So I suppose my title might have more global reach if it were called “Tribadie” or “Rubbing through Time,” but both lack, in my opinion, the elegance of “Sapphistries.” In the interest of elegance, too, my subtitle (and sometimes text) intends “love” to cover desire and sex as well, and “women” to include those with female bodies who might not have identified as women.

It is, I must admit, an audacious undertaking to tackle desire, love, and sexuality across such vast expanses of time and space. On the one hand, the enormous variety of ways that women have come together in societies ranging from ancient China, India, and the Mediterranean world to contemporary Thailand, Mexico, and South Africa can only support the social constructionist perspective on sexuality that insists on the impact of societal structures and concepts in shaping the ways that people experience desire, have sex, form relationships, and think about themselves. On the other hand, the very act of putting between two covers such a wide range of ways that women have loved one another raises the danger that we think of them all in one large category.

Some scholars, for political reasons, insist on that category being called *lesbian*, even if that was not a term or concept embraced by a particular society.¹⁵ Adrienne Rich in 1981 famously introduced the concepts of *lesbian existence* and the *lesbian continuum* to embrace a wide range of woman-bonding behaviors characterized primarily by resistance to male domination.¹⁶ Since then, debates have raged on about what qualifies a woman as a lesbian throughout history and across cultures.¹⁷ Taking off from Rich and following her emphasis on autonomy from male control, medieval historian Judith Bennett argues for the term *lesbian-like*, which she uses to describe a range of medieval European women. She tells, for example, of two different convents that housed women who fit her concept. One

was founded by a widow in Ferrara who put together her dowry with contributions from other women to buy property and establish a community that she managed to keep out from under male Church authority for almost twenty years. She and her companions lived together, devoting themselves to religion and good works, and when she died, she named another woman her heir, with the obligation to maintain the community in the same form. With the language of piety, she created a life independent of the control of men, whether husbands or Church authorities. The other convent was in Montpellier and housed former prostitutes who were old, repentant, or moving away from prostitution to marriage. They were not cloistered and had only minor religious duties. In neither case is there any evidence of same-sex desire or sexual behavior, but that is precisely Bennett's point: that, in the first case, the desire for independence from men is "lesbian-like" and that, in the second, the long historical connection between prostitution and same-sex love is suggestive.¹⁸

I understand the appeal both of boldly claiming visibility where it barely exists by embracing the term *lesbian* and of keeping the association while recognizing the differences between contemporary lesbians and what Bennett would call "lesbian-like" women of the past. But I have chosen a different path. Too broad use of the term *lesbian*, I think, downplays the differences among women, especially when the concept and identity of lesbian is available and women choose not to embrace it, as occurs in many parts of the world today where a transnationally available lesbian identity is known but women who desire women have different ways to think about themselves. So I choose to use a term that does not apply to women themselves but to their histories and stories. And, unlike Bennett, I am not willing to consider women who sought independence from men and women who sought the privileges of men, if they did not also give some hint of desire or love for women, as part of sapphistries.

The question of whether sex matters in determining who is part of "lesbian" or "lesbian-like" history has been much debated. This issue came to the fore particularly in the context of romantic friendships, the passionate and socially acceptable ties between women in the nineteenth century that first came to attention in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's classic article "The Female World of Love and Ritual."¹⁹ Then Lillian Faderman, in her pioneering book *Surpassing the Love of Men*, connected romantic friendship to contemporary lesbian feminism while arguing that most romantic friends "probably did not have sexual relationships."²⁰ Whether or not romantic friends—or other women who expressed passionate love for each

other—engaged in sexual acts is a question that increasingly aroused fierce debate in the context of the feminist “sex wars,” a struggle born in the 1980s over emphasizing the pleasure as opposed to the danger of sexuality. The most recent studies of romantic friendship, by Martha Vicinus and Sharon Marcus, leave no doubt about the erotic and sexual aspects of at least some of these relationships.²¹ In the ongoing debate about how much sex matters, I come down firmly on the side of the centrality of sexual desire, erotic love, and/or sexual behavior in thinking about which women in the past and present are part of this story.

But of course the difficult question is, what counts as desire, love, and sex? Are expressions that sound to our modern ears like desire actually that? Can we tell erotic love from nonerotic friendship? Is genital activity necessary to a sexual act? Is genital activity always a sexual act? These latter questions are especially difficult. Having read about the caressing of breasts between two African American women in the mid-nineteenth century and European and U.S. romantic friends kissing and hugging and lying with heads in laps, my students in one class, having been asked what counts as sex, thought they knew where to draw the line: what they called “tongue action” in kissing and “below the waist action” in caressing counts as sex; anything else does not. But such a definition, though clearly making sense to twenty-first-century U.S. college students, cannot stand up to the girls and women in Lesotho who French kiss, rub one another’s labias to stretch and beautify them, and even engage in cunnilingus but who insist that it is not sexual because there is no penis. Nor can it stand up to !Kung San girls, who likewise engage in sexual play but are not sure what it means, asking, “Can two vaginas screw?”²² So what looks very much like sexual activity to us may not be understood that way, and what may not seem to cross whatever line we imagine divides foreplay from sex may in fact very much count as sex to the women involved. And all the same uncertainty applies to what counts as desire and what counts as erotic love.

Then there is the problem of evidence. Given the long history at play here and the extremely limited literacy of women, testimony from the mouths or pens of women is very rare until modern times. So most of the evidence we have through the centuries comes from men: their prohibitions, their reports, their literature, their art, their imaginings, their pornography, their court cases. Here and there the views of women themselves can be gleaned, and I have tried mightily to make use of the creative research of scholars who have listened and heard the voices of women, even if we need to acknowledge that the context and filtering of such

voices mean that they are in reality representations rather than some fundamental truth about experience. We also have to assume that the representations, both textual and visual, created by men tell us something about the possibilities of love and sex between women in different societies.

But I recognize that any decision about where to draw the lines—who is in and who is out in a history of love between women—is tricky. Perhaps most problematic is my inclusion of female-bodied individuals who did not or do not consider themselves women, even if they did not or do not consider themselves men. Judith Halberstam develops the concept of “perverse presentism” to suggest that “what we do not know for sure today about the relationship between masculinity and lesbianism, we cannot know for sure about historical relations between same-sex desire and female masculinities.”²³ Because we often do not know what such individuals themselves thought about their gender and sexuality, and because the act of female bodies having sex together was often what the authorities saw as most important, I include them here, being careful not to assume either that they were transgendered in a contemporary sense or that they were like female-gendered women who desired or had sex with other female-gendered women.

Although most of my sources are conventional historical ones, I am also taking liberties by using some literary texts not as historical sources but as ways to help us imagine answers to questions that cannot be addressed with existing evidence. These are texts that reflect their own time and place while portraying another. So, for example, I use Erica Jong’s *Sappho’s Leap: A Novel*, which reflects contemporary thinking about the fluidity of sexual identities, to engage with the historical Sappho’s sexuality; a short story by Sara Maitland, “The Burning Times,” to think about the possibilities of witchcraft accusations and love between women; and, in the riskiest historical move of all, Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet*, a novel about a contemporary British biracial transgendered musician, to imagine what the wives of women who secretly crossed the gender line through past centuries might have thought. I am aware of the conceptual risks posed by such a strategy, but I believe that the advantages outweigh the danger of contributing to a vision of transhistorical sameness.²⁴ And I am inspired by Monique Wittig, who wrote in *Les Guérillères*, “Make an effort to remember. Or failing that, invent.”²⁵ These literary texts, as imaginative interpretations, remind us that historical scholarship, too, although based on evidence, is also an act of interpretation.

Sapphistries not only brings together extremely scattered and disconnected research on a wide range of phenomena but also, I hope,

contributes to ongoing discussions about the nature of sexuality across time and place. Certainly the range of ways that women have come together makes clear that how women act on their desires, what kinds of acts they engage in and with whom, what kinds of meanings they attribute to those desires and acts, how they think about the relationship between love and sexuality, whether they think of sexuality as having meaning for identities, whether they form communities with people with like desires—all of these are shaped by the societies in which they live.

At the same time, however, we must confront the persistence of certain patterns in the history of female same-sex sexuality, particularly the role of female masculinity and the eroticization of friendship. That is, we find very different societies shaping erotic relationships between women in quite similar ways. Here it is useful to remember that anthropologist Carole Vance, in a classic article on social constructionism, pointed out that recognizing ways that societies construct sexuality differently does not mean that there are never similarities.²⁶ Making a similar point, literary scholar Valerie Traub confronts the question of why certain ways that women loved women in the past seem so familiar despite very different social contexts. She proposes a new way of thinking about the sense of “uncanny familiarity” that strikes us so often in thinking about women’s relationships with women in different times and places. To simplify a complex argument, she suggests that there are certain overarching ways that desire, sex, and love between women have been understood and enacted across time and that those understandings and definitions appear, disappear, and reappear at different points.²⁷ What she calls “cycles of salience” account for our sense that, for example, medieval nuns in love are like nineteenth-century romantic friends. It is Traub’s hope that such a perspective will make possible “a transnational history of lesbianism” across time; it is my hope that *Sapphistries* makes a start in that direction, even though that is not the description I would use.²⁸

The ways that love between women has been understood, I suggest, include the following: that a woman who desires other women is *masculine*, that her *body marks her as different from other women*, that she is *wanton*, that she is *deprived of access to men*, and that she *hates men*. These understandings emerge in different conceptions across history and cultures, as we shall see in encountering manly women, female husbands, butches, and Thai *toms*, all embodying masculinity; hermaphrodites and women with enlarged clitorises, whose bodies mark them; wanton women, including those from Lesbos, witches, prostitutes, and aristocratic tribades;

secluded women, nuns, and schoolgirls, all presumably deprived of men; and man haters such as Amazons and lesbian feminists. At some points in time, in some places, one or another conception holds sway. That is why we can make transhistorical comparisons without assuming some essentialist “lesbian” that can be found everywhere.

But these are just the ways that women who love women have been understood from the outside. What about their own conceptions, their own understandings of who they are? This is where the two persistent forms of relationships come into play: masculine-feminine attraction, in which gender difference is eroticized, and eroticized friendship, in which sameness shapes desire. As we move throughout time and around the globe, we find these two patterns appearing and reappearing.

The existing works that have tried to encompass a global history of same-sex sexuality, based mostly on the history of men, have constructed three or four basic categories of relationships: those differentiated by age, those differentiated by gender, sometimes those differentiated by class or race, and those not differentiated in any of these ways. That last category tends to be the most rare and the most modern.²⁹ These categories have less resonance in the history of female same-sex sexuality. Cross-generational relationships, though not entirely missing, are not as central, and the eroticization of racial/ethnic and class difference that has been identified for men has little counterpart among women. Nondifferentiated relationships seem to be much more common.

David Halperin, in his provocative book *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, suggests that it may be, because of male dominance and female subordination, that “the history of lesbianism exists in a different relation to time . . . from the history of male homosexuality.”³⁰ Much of the history of male same-sex sexuality is shaped by elite men’s privilege to penetrate social inferiors, including boys, women, slaves, servants, and lower-class men, as long as they also fulfilled their familial responsibilities to marry and beget heirs. We need to ask, how has women’s relative lack of privilege and lack of access to public space shaped an entirely different story? Likewise, the part men play in sexual acts, as inserters or what I like to call enclosers, plays a central role in how they are perceived, with those who wielded their penises privileged over those who enclosed those penises. The story for women is different: whereas masculine women who penetrated their lovers with penislike objects tended to arouse particular horror in some places, sexual role is less important, as the persistent image of mutual rubbing attests. And the emphasis on transformation when

elite men could no longer penetrate any of their social inferiors without consequences for their normality and masculinity has no counterpart in the history of women. I hope to show, then, how the different trajectories of female as compared to male same-sex love and desire transform our understanding of the history of sexualities.

Another major goal of this book is to undermine a Western-dominated narrative of progress and to join the voices of scholars who have argued for a complex understanding of the ways that local and global identities interact in the contemporary world.³¹ The historical sources are much more numerous for Europe and the United States and for modern history, so there is no way to provide a balanced account with regard to coverage. But I have worked hard to locate scholarship on every part of the world and, more important, to avoid a narrative of triumphal progress based on the Western tradition. This is not to deny how much the successes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer movements, where they have flourished, have changed the world for the better. But a global view makes clear, for example, that emergence into public, so important in the story of same-sex sexuality in the Western world, is not everywhere significant; that desire and love between women can flourish within heterosexual social arrangements; and that the emergence of a lesbian identity—the focus of so much of the scholarship on the history of female same-sex sexuality—is a minor part of the story of sapphistries. A global view also reveals the persistent inclination to blame others—people from other countries or class or racial others within a society—for sexual desires and behaviors denounced as deviant.

Beginning with an imagined prehistory and moving around the globe, this book provides a uniquely sweeping and global view of female same-sex love and sexuality.³² Chapter 2 deals with mythical prehistories of woman-only societies and theories of the origins of human societies, as well as creation stories and myths from diverse cultural contexts that engage with the possibilities of female same-sex love. Chapter 3 ranges across Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Inca, and Aztec civilizations, providing context for the better-known histories of Greek and Roman cultures, including Sappho of Lesbos. Then, in chapter 4, I move across a long stretch of time, considering the traditions of the great world religions and then exploring women's relationships in sex-segregated spaces such as monasteries and polygynous households, women mystics and witches, and women caught in the act of having sex with other women. Chapter 5 turns to institutionalized cross-gender or third-gender phenomena in

Native American, Indian, and Balkan societies; “female husbands” who, as social males, married women in some African societies; and women who secretly crossed the gender line and married women in early modern European societies and later in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Chapter 6 explores the emergence of nascent communities: the beginnings of urban groups of women (the “roaring girls” of London, the “randy women” of Amsterdam, women in brothels and prisons), aristocratic European women accused of tribadism, marriage resistance movements in China, portrayals of love between women in Urdu poetry, and the emergence of romantic friendship among women across Europe and the United States. In chapter 7, I explore, in the context of different words applied to women who had sex with other women, the emergence of the concept of the *lesbian*, its spread from the European sexologists to China and Japan, and the complicated responses of women around the world, who sometimes acknowledged and sometimes rejected and sometimes ignored a potential new identity. Chapter 8 treats cultures and communities of women who, sometimes deliberately and sometimes not, made love between women public. Beginning with communities of schoolgirls in Europe, the United States, China, and Japan, I turn to feminist communities; the private-yet-public world of the Paris salon of Natalie Barney; the lesbian commercial establishments that emerged in New York, Paris, and Berlin in the 1920s and in other places in the 1950s; and the growth and spread of lesbian publications and organizations from the 1920s on. Chapter 9 considers the wide range of ways that women in the contemporary world have continued to love women, from finding one another in sex-segregated spaces to falling in love with co-wives to marrying one another legally to crossing the gender line to embracing masculine-feminine pairings to falling in love with their friends—in fact, every way that women in the past found to express their desire and love. The conclusion reviews this sprawling history and returns to the question of how a consideration of sapphistries revises our understanding of the global history of same-sex sexuality.

So *Sapphistries* is the story of goddesses and Amazons, Sappho and the Arab Sappho, nuns and witches, manly women and female husbands, roaring girls and aristocratic tribades, sworn sisters and sweet *doganas*, schoolgirls in love and Parisian salonnières, German girlfriends and butches and fems, mummies and babies, *toms* and *dees*, *tombois* and *mati*. But let us begin at the beginning by wondering whether sex between women might have existed in the earliest human societies.

In the Beginning

(40,000–1200 BCE)

HERE IS ONE imagined beginning, not of the world but of human society:

In the beginning of time, there were only women, bearers of two unbroken X chromosomes. They reproduced through parthenogenesis, a process that occurs elsewhere in the natural world, in which females give birth without contact with males. And human—that is, female—society was a wonder to behold. Then some disease or bombardment of radiation from the sun damaged one healthy X chromosome, chopping off the right lower leg and creating a mutant, man. This was the beginning of the end for a glorious lost civilization in which women were at first the only and then the superior and dominant sex. For the mutation that brought men into the world began a long process that culminated in the triumph of a men’s revolution—and the beginning of recorded history. The revolution was so complete that it wiped out almost all memory of the earlier great civilization. But hints remain: myths of Atlantis and other lost worlds, the complexity of ancient languages compared to modern ones, ancient maps that depict parts of the world with inexplicable accuracy, and the earliest origin stories in which the world is created by a goddess. The peaceful, matriarchal, utopian world of the women—“the first sex”—gave way to the brutality of the mutants, as women, who chose their sexual partners, turned to meat-eating men, whose dietary habits increased both their overall body size and the heft of their organs of reproduction. Thus, the fall of woman came through the pull of a metaphorical, not literal, snake.

This is the tale spun by Elizabeth Gould Davis in a provocative—dare I say outrageous?—book first published in 1971, in the context of the resurgence of U.S. feminism.¹ It is a counternarrative to the biblical tale of Adam and Eve, offering man-created-through-a-genetic-mutation-from-woman as an alternative to woman-created-from-the-rib-of-man. Davis says nary a word about sex between women, but her tale opens up the

possibility of a sort of 1970s-style lesbian commune lost in the mists of time.

That possibility is taken up with gusto in another imaginative and equally provocative account of the origins of human society. In *Lesbian Origins*, lesbian feminist sociologist Susan Cavin boldly proclaims that, since we cannot ever know what the earliest society was like, her theory is as good any other foisted on us by what she calls “patriscientists” (defined in her glossary as “scientists who are apologists for patriarchy”).² Based loosely on primate behavior, creation myths, and (in truth) wishful thinking, Cavin depicts a “gynosociety” composed of women and their children, with males after adolescence fewer in number and consigned to some unspecified place outside society proper. Sex between women is a central part of gynosociety since it fosters cooperation, says Cavin. Heterosexuality is not unknown, so women do have sex with the extrasocietal males, but it is neither exclusive nor preferred. Because of sex segregation and the predominance of women, asexuality and what Cavin calls “bisex” and “homosex” are prevalent.

What happens to this world? The patriarchal revolution that Davis envisages resulting from women’s poor selection of mates comes for Cavin when the first woman relents and lets her son remain inside once he is grown and then takes him as a lover, incest taboos not being in force in this world. With that first misstep, the utopian world of gynosociety starts to come tumbling down, with men eventually taking charge of women’s sexuality and reproductive abilities and creating the world that we know all too well. Cavin thus reverses the judgment associated with nineteenth-century evolutionary theories that posited woman-dominated societies and unrestricted sexual encounters at the beginning of human society and then triumphal progress toward a patriarchal social structure.³ Her tale has echoes in the Chicana feminist reinterpretation of the Aztec myth of Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess. Coyolxauhqui tries to kill her mother, who is pregnant with Huitzilopochtli, the war god, but he bursts from his mother’s womb, dismembers his sister, and flings her head into the sky, where it becomes the moon. In the feminist telling, Coyolxauhqui is not a murderous daughter but, rather, is making a valiant attempt to save the world from war, slavery, and imperialism—from the consequences of male domination.⁴

The newest addition to the genre of alternative creation myths comes from novelist and Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing, who tells a tale prompted, she says, by a “scientific article” arguing that “the basic and primal human stock was probably female,” with males “a kind of cosmic

afterthought.”⁵ The story is framed by the ruminations of a male historian in ancient Rome, who tells us, “In Rome now, a sect—the Christians—insist that the first female was brought forth from the body of a male. Very suspect stuff, I think. Some male invented that—the exact opposite of the truth.”⁶

In Lessing’s imagined world, the first humans were the Clefts, females who reproduced without males, “impregnated by a fertilizing wind, or a wave that carried fertility in its substance.”⁷ As in Davis’s tale, there is no sex between women here. They mutilate, kill, or abandon the occasional malformed offspring, known as a Monster, born with a “clutch of protruding flesh there in front where they had smooth flesh, a neat slit, fringed with soft hair.”⁸ But the abandoned Squirts, as they come to be called, do not die, but are rescued by eagles and raised elsewhere. And in Lessing’s tale, the Clefts and the Squirts find one another, as they seemingly are destined to do. The Squirts, who lack the knack of giving life, are “tormented by the demands of their maleness” and “driven by powerful instincts,” until they find Clefts who, seeing their hunger, have sex with them (and clean their huts to boot).⁹ In Lessing’s telling, heterosexuality is inevitable. Eventually the Clefts can no longer reproduce without encountering the Squirts’ “tubes,” and the old ways die out. Again, the rest we know.

Admittedly this is all rather far-fetched, but why not imagine an alternative to heterosexual origins? Why not parthenogenesis or homosexuality? Since we do not know anything about sexual behavior at the beginning of human society, why should we assume that same-sex sexuality was taboo? Are there any hints that sex between women may have existed in the beginning?

The problem is, of course, that creation myths and other stories that explain the way the world is mirror the societies of their creators, just as the tales I have just described are spun within particular political contexts. So it is not surprising that most of them take a heterosexual shape, as in the Adam and Eve version, with a god or some gods and a man and a woman and eventually a child. Still, the fact that it is women who give birth to children, and that the role of men and sexual intercourse in paternity was not always understood, means that some stories give a starring role to a female figure.

Take, for example, creation stories that feature a goddess in the beginning. There are scholars who argue that originally goddesses created and ruled the world and that the emergence of god-centered religions represented a kind of heavenly male revolution mirroring what went on

in the material world. Thus, feminist scholar Merlin Stone, in her 1976 book *When God Was a Woman*, unearths goddess religions of the ancient Mediterranean world and argues that the Bible represents a conspiracy to rewrite history and slander the goddess, resulting as well in the increasing societal subordination of women.¹⁰ All that talk of honoring no other gods referred, Stone argues, to the goddess, whose primary symbol, the serpent, comes to play such a diabolical role in the biblical version of the fall of man and woman.

More dispassionate scholars agree that the stature of goddesses declined over time, perhaps as men began to conquer rather than stand in awe of the forces of nature. So what can we make of the history of goddess worship? At a time when the link between heterosexual intercourse and the birth of children was unknown, it would not be surprising for women to have been viewed as the creators of life. Mothers would also have the only evident connection to the children they bore. In such societies, both goddess worship and matrilineal descent would make sense. Whether such representations mean anything about the status of women, much less the possibilities of female same-sex sexuality, is another question altogether. Marija Gimbutas, an archaeologist who has written extensively about goddess worship, argues that the civilization of the goddess was peaceful and egalitarian—in short, the kind of paradise that both Elizabeth Gould Davis and Susan Cavin depict.¹¹ Needless to say, such a conclusion is controversial.¹²

Even advocates of the goddess as a victim of a patriarchal revolution most often point to her heterosexuality, for she tends to take a young male god, sometimes her son, as lover or husband, and that male figure (shades of Susan Cavin's account) takes over to become the primary deity. Still, it is worth noting that myths do not all feature a heterosexual version of creation. In a Kamia (Native American) origin tale, White Woman bears many children not conceived by a man.¹³ Another Native American creation myth, from the Hopi, describes nothing but water and two goddesses, both named Huruing Wuhti, in the beginning of the world. They lived in the ocean, one in the east and one in the west, and they created land between the seas. When the sun called attention to the fact that there were no living things on the new land, they made a bird to fly over and view the land, then all sorts of animals, and finally a woman (first) and then a man.¹⁴

Ancient Indian texts also include stories of births unconnected to heterosexuality. A common tale, according to scholars Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, involves a deity providing some kind of magic food or drink



Figure 1. An image of the “dual feminine.” Devikapuram (city of the Goddess), Tamil Nadu, fifth to seventh centuries CE. From Gita Thadani, *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (London: Cassell, 1996).

that results in birth. In one case, King Saudyumni drank the water intended for his wife and gave birth from his thigh. In another, two women split what was meant for one and gave birth to half a child each. Taking a different form, a story about Aruna, god of dawn, has him assuming the form of a woman to attend an all-female celebration where women danced naked. In his female body, he sleeps with two women and gives birth to a child by each.¹⁵ In a manner reminiscent of Merlin Stone, Indian feminist scholar Gita Thadani reads the classic Sanskrit texts to argue that the existence of an older matriarchal society has been covered up, although hints can be discerned of “dual feminine” deities in the *Rig Ved* (4000–1500 BCE). (See figure 1 for an example of this kind of representation.)

In contrast to the emphasis on gods and goddesses as consorts, dual feminine deities could be lovers, mothers, or sisters. Images such as the

following suggest the possibility of same-sex eroticism: “from the bosom of the mountain, desirous and content, two mares, like two bright cows as mothers licking, caressing and kissing.”¹⁶ In a Japanese tale, Ama no Uzume (the Alarming Heavenly Female) makes sunlight return to the Earth by coaxing the Sun Goddess Amaterasu out of her cave by revealing her breasts and lifting her skirt to just below her genitals.¹⁷ What if such stories reflect the existence of fluid sexualities? What if goddess-worshipping societies facilitated women’s love for other women? Can we glean any hints of such a possibility?

One imaginative tale is spun by novelist Anita Diamant, who creates from the Old Testament story of Dinah, daughter of Jacob, in the Book of Genesis, a fascinating tale of love and lust. In Diamant’s novel *The Red Tent*, she seems to suggest a connection between goddess worship and indifference to men, if nothing more.¹⁸ Jacob, who worships the god who demands that all others be put aside, takes four sisters as wives. Zilpah, who is devoted to the Queen of Heaven and sees herself as “the keeper of the mysteries of the red tent,” where women gather once a month to bleed, is the only one uninterested in sex with Jacob.¹⁹ She turns white when she learns that she is to be given to him. She puts off going to his bed and tells her niece Dinah that she considers it a duty and that she never expects to enjoy it. She bears twin sons and never sleeps with Jacob again.

The story embroiders the argument of Merlin Stone, for the women defend the old ways and “the great mother, who goes by many names, but who is in danger of being forgotten.”²⁰ In the red tent, women not only bleed together at the time of the new moon; they also initiate girls in menstruating for the first time by opening their wombs with an image of the goddess. The wives of Jacob contrast their ritual, which ensures that a girl’s first blood “goes back to the womb of Inanna, to the dust that formed the first man and the first woman,” to the fate of women who worship the jealous god, who “have set aside the Opening, which is the sacred business of women, and permit men to display their daughters’ bloody sheets.”²¹ It is only a story, of course.

Cavin sets great store in tales of all-female societies in different places around the world. There are, of course, most famous of all, the Amazons. They come down to us as a nation of women warriors, described by Aeschylus as “the warring Amazons, men-haters” who lived in the vicinity of the Black Sea in what is now Turkey.²² What fascinated the Greeks about them was their military prowess and the fact that they lived without men, reportedly seeking out males in neighboring societies once a year in order

to conceive children. If the Amazons bore sons, they either gave them to the men who fathered them or, shades of the Clefs, mutilated or killed them. Greek sources suggest that the Amazons thrived during the Bronze Age (3000–1200 BCE). Homer, in the first text to report on them, calls them “the equal of men.”²³ Later texts mention a lost epic recounting the story of the Amazon queen Penthesilea fighting with Achilles, who kills her and then falls in love with (or in some versions has sex with) her corpse. Hesiod describes Hercules defeating the Amazons, and Diodorus of Sicily, writing in the first century BCE, has Hercules slaughtering almost all the Amazons and then raping their commander, Melanippe, and giving Antiope, a princess, to Theseus as a reward. Theseus took Antiope back to Athens as his concubine, and when the remnants of the Amazon nation attacked Athens to rescue her, Antiope fought against them. Diodorus also tells of an Amazon named Thalestris, who approached Alexander the Great with a proposal that they together conceive a girl child. They made love and hunted lions for thirteen days, but Thalestris died without giving birth to the superchild sure to emerge from such a union.

From the late seventh century BCE, the Amazons appear in Athenian art (for an example of a Greek statue, see figure 2), and then Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, tells the most extensive tale about them. According to Herodotus, the Greeks defeated the Amazons in battle and sailed away with them as slaves. Somewhere in the Black Sea, the Amazons staged a successful revolt but, not knowing how to sail, ran the ships aground. On land once again, the Amazons found horses, tamed them, and began to fight the local population of Scythian men. The Scythians, amazed to find that their enemies were women, decided to court rather than battle them, and in this they succeeded.²⁴ The Amazons settled down with the Scythian men but clung to their traditions of riding, hunting, and fighting.

Later in the fifth century BCE, Pseudo-Hippocrates reported that the Amazons cauterized the right breast of girls in infancy so that they would be better archers and dislocated the joints of male children “so that the male race might not conspire against the female race.”²⁵ The Amazons rode and fought and did not have sex until they had killed three enemies. A slightly different story comes from the pen of a writer in the late third century CE, called Justin, who has the Amazons settling near the Black Sea with their husbands, who were then killed off in battle. The women began to seek out men for the sole purpose of conceiving, murdered their sons, and burned off the right breasts of their daughters. Under their queens Marpesia and Lampedo, they conquered much of Europe and Asia.



Figure 2. Greek statue of an Amazon. From Dietrich von Bothmer, *Amazons in Greek Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

Stories about Amazons, according to Cavin, can be found from northern Africa to eastern Europe to central Asia to India, China, and Mongolia.²⁶ Diodorus of Sicily claimed that, prior to the Amazons living around the Black Sea, there were warlike North African women who were “greatly admired for their manly vigor.”²⁷ A society of women who burned off their breasts and remained virgins while they fought and took on male roles lived on an island and conquered the surrounding peoples. Under their queen, Myrina, they founded cities, including Mitylene on Lesbos. These are the women known as the “Libyan” or “Black” Amazons. One recent study cites a slew of reports from around the world: Ibrahim Ibn Jaqûb, an Arab writer in the tenth century CE, reported on a city of Amazons in

central Europe; an Indian historian in the twelfth century told of an eighth-century king encountering an Amazon society; Chinese chronicles located Amazons near Tibet and on the east side of the Caspian Sea; and Marco Polo spun tales of an island of women in the Indian Ocean, between India and East Africa.²⁸ European explorers in the sixteenth century and beyond reported Amazons in Latin America and Africa, which suggests to Cavin that female-dominated societies survived for a long time in some places. A sixteenth-century Spanish text describes “an island called California, very close to the Earthly Paradise, inhabited by Black women without a single man among them.”²⁹ A 1967 book tellingly titled *Our Primitive Contemporaries* describes “the far-famed Dahomean ‘Amazons’” as “the shock troops of the army, the best disciplined and most redoubtable warriors.”³⁰ The British explorer Richard Burton witnessed the women soldiers of Dahomey, who fought against the French in the colonial wars at the end of the nineteenth century.³¹ The Amazon warriors were reportedly not allowed to marry or have children but had courtesans available for sexual purposes.³²

Stories reminiscent of those about the Amazons emerge in Tamil folk tales still popular in rural India.³³ Societies of women flourish in *Alliyaras-animalai*, a woman-centered ballad about the “kingdom of Alli,” the heroine of the tale. Although the story says nothing about sex between women in this all-female land, it does make clear that women were strong, able to fight, and uninterested in men. Arjuna, a prince and hero in other tales, in this story falls hopelessly in love with Alli and sets out to force her to marry him. She is, however, determined never to marry and is guarded by women warriors and surrounded by women who administer the city, advise her, and serve as priests, executioners, hunters, and friends. Even her elephants are all female. Although Arjuna uses devious and magical powers to rape, impregnate, capture, and finally marry Alli, she eventually returns to her kingdom, where she teaches the son that she bears to take revenge on his father. Sanskrit texts, too, refer to an Amazonian kingdom known as *Strirajya*, a matriarchal country where, according to the *Kamasutra*, “dildos are much employed.”³⁴

Note that in all these stories, stretched across centuries, the most important characteristic of the Amazons is their military prowess, which links them to masculinity, a theme we shall encounter again and again. But what about sexuality? Most of the tales emphasize the Amazons’ virginity in combination with their control of their own sexuality and their refusal to stick with one man: when they want to reproduce, they seek out men and for the most part do not settle down with them. It is also worth

noting that “virginity” can be assumed to refer to lack of sexual interaction with men. Fear of female-controlled and unrestrained sexuality is the not-very-sub subtext, and the conquering or taming of the Amazons reassures the men relating and absorbing the tales that all will be right in the end.

Is there evidence that Amazons, whether in history or myth, were lovers of women? The ancient sources seem to be silent on this question, despite the knowledge of such possibilities. A strange little book published in 1972 that purports to pull together all the ancient sources on the Amazons in order to create a narrative of the rise and fall of the Libyan Amazons, followed by the fuller story of the Amazons of Asia Minor, speculates about their sexual practices. If, the author asserts, they did without men most of the time, “we must confront as our sum an erotic practice rarely if ever associated with them.” He goes on: “Since purity and celibacy are hardly to be credited to women so vitally conscious of their bodies, female homosexuality must be the explanation for the gratification of their impulses and for the success of their military operations.”³⁵ He has no evidence but cannot picture successful warriors going without sex. So he imagines: “Away from combat their concern would be with the suppleness of their muscles and the shape of the legs of the companion with whom they would bed that night.”³⁶

Others, less focused on Amazonian appreciation of a beautiful leg, offer bits and pieces of evidence. A German author who argues, Cavin-like, that Amazon societies were the remnants of original matriarchal societies trying their best to survive in an increasingly patriarchal world refers to the existence of vulva-shaped monuments in likely Amazon locations.³⁷ According to Cavin, a passage from a sixteenth-century explorer who traveled down the Amazon River observed, “There are some Indian women who determined to remain chaste; these have no commerce with men in any manner, nor would they consent to it even if refusal meant death . . . ; each has a woman to serve her, to whom she says she is married and they treat each other and speak with each other as man and wife.”³⁸ Such an account connects with the phenomenon of gender crossing that we shall encounter later in Native American and other societies and ties it to same-sex sexuality. The only other reference I have found comes from Richard Burton, who says that the Amazons in Dahomey in the nineteenth century preferred “the peculiarities of the Tenth Muse,” a reference to Sappho and her assumed proclivities.³⁹ Why, then, have Amazons come to have such an association with female same-sex love? Is it their sexual freedom and independence from men?

For a moment, let us turn to the wonderfully imaginative portrayal of ancient Amazon society in novelist Erica Jong's *Sappho's Leap*.⁴⁰ Sappho, about whom more later, meets up with the Amazons on the island of Crete, one of the places associated with goddess worship and the prominence of women. Sappho, her loyal slave Praxinoa, and her trusted friend Aesop (of the fables) begin to explore the island, only to look up at the sound of horses' hooves to see a one-breasted girl on horseback, wearing silver chain mail. She is Penthesilea, named after the great queen, and she and her companion warriors take the three prisoner. Aesop becomes their stud—Penthesilea explains that they rescue female infants exposed on hilltops from throughout the Greek world but also capture men to give them babies and that they have ways of giving birth only to girl babies. Sounding like Elizabeth Gould Davis, or a 1970s lesbian feminist tract, Penthesilea announces that men are a different species and that the Amazons have no need for them. Praxinoa, who as a baby had herself been abandoned and taken into slavery and who loved and had sex with Sappho, is enchanted with the Amazons and chooses to stay among them.

When the Amazons discover Sappho's identity, they rejoice, for their goddess had promised that the great poet and singer would come to them. Antiope, the Amazon queen, welcomes Sappho with a feast and announces that the goddess had brought them together so that the singer from Lesbos could write a history of the Amazons that would counter all the slanders that had been told about them. Sappho is distraught, not knowing how to write on command and disgusted by the relentlessly rosy history the Amazons begin to recount to her. While she struggles to write what the queen has commanded, she finds that the young Amazons have discovered the sailors from her ship and are experiencing forbidden love and lust. When the maidens are taken prisoner by Antiope and sentenced to death, Sappho forges ahead with her epic of goodness and beauty in order to save the erring Amazon maidens.

Eventually Sappho succeeds in convincing the queen to let them all go, and, saying a sad farewell to Praxinoa and setting to sea once again, she learns from the refugee Amazons that their world was not all it seemed. In reality, the Amazons kill or abandon male infants, just as other Greek societies do away with girl babies. Sappho wonders if anywhere "peace and justice could exist between the sexes." She worries that everywhere "men dominate women or women get even by dominating men" and that "two sexes seem to be a recipe for grief and warfare." Her Amazon informant, infatuated at the moment with an Egyptian sailor, replies, "Then

we should invent *more* sexes—just to confuse everyone! That will solve the problem! . . . Let's have men with breasts and women with phalli!"⁴¹ In this way, Jong makes the story of the Amazons reverberate with contemporary queer worlds of gender and sexual fluidity. Later, when Sappho pays a visit to Hades, she encounters the Amazon queen Antiope, who accuses her of corrupting the Amazons with her ideas of justice. "Now they nurse their boys instead of throwing them to the wolves. They suckle their own doom!" she says, sounding very much like Susan Cavin. "It will come to no good. Their own sons will overthrow them!"⁴²

Sappho's Leap takes the ancient tales about the Amazons as a starting point, and what Jong creates from a twenty-first-century perspective is a world in which sexuality is fluid. The Amazons are lovers of women, but the young maidens who run off with Sappho's crew also delight in men. In that sense, her depiction accords with what we know about the sensibilities of the ancient Mediterranean world. That the Amazons lived (mostly) without men evoked images of independent sexuality and female power, something that, as we shall see, did not sit well with Athenian men. Scholars have treated the Amazon stories alternatively as fact, as a reflection of the older goddess-worshipping societies, and as a psychological projection of men's need to separate from their mothers.⁴³ Although there is no historical evidence that the Amazons as an independent female society existed, despite graves of women buried with their weapons, the stories about them and the power of their image for women who loved women throughout the centuries tell us something important about conceptions of women and women's sexuality.

This history of Amazon tales and creation stories from around the world suggests that, notwithstanding the relative silence on the subject, female same-sex love could have existed from the beginning. Think of the possibilities of the Talmudic tale of Lilith, Adam's first wife, a figure rehabilitated by Jewish feminists.⁴⁴ A female demon of the night who poses a threat to uncircumsized male infants and men sleeping alone in houses, the figure of Lilith came into Hebrew tradition from Mesopotamia. Lilith refused to lie beneath Adam during sex, insisting that they were equals because both had been created by God from dust. Resisting Adam's attempts to overpower her, Lilith speaks the name of God and flies out of the Garden and through the air to the Red Sea, a place populated by lascivious demons. Although Lilith's promiscuity there results in the birth of demons, and she later comes back to seduce Adam, what if that was not the only sexual misconduct in which she engaged?

A less speculative possibility for the existence of female same-sex love in ancient tales can be found in Plato's telling of a myth that he attributed to Aristophanes in *The Symposium*.⁴⁵ According to Aristophanes via Plato, human beings originally had four arms, four legs, two faces, and two sets of genitals: they were like two people glued back to back. Some were male, some were female, and some were mixed, both male and female. At some point they annoyed Zeus, so he cut them in two to punish them. At first they clung to their lost halves, paying no attention to eating, and when one half died, they sought out another of the same sex as the dead half. So Zeus took pity and invented sexual intercourse to assuage their longings. As a result, men feel desire for either a lost male or a lost female half, and likewise some women are attracted to men, some to other women. Here, at last, is a tale that places love between women at the beginning.

But of course by the time Plato told this story, we are well into recorded history, and, as we shall see, the world in which he lived was well aware of love between women as well as love between men. The goddesses of Greek mythology are not traditional wives and mothers—Hera alone, the wife of Zeus, is married, and she is hardly a model of contented domesticity.⁴⁶ Artemis, the goddess worshipped by the Amazons, is a solitary hunter who shuns contact with men. She is a virgin in the Amazonian sense of owning her sexuality, for stories about her reveal her erotic attachments to the nymphs who were her companions in the forest. Kallisto, a beautiful nymph who was Artemis's favorite, caught the eye of Zeus, who knew she would not be interested in a man. So he disguised himself as Artemis, and Kallisto responded to his advances until he gave himself away and had his way with her. But that Kallisto had welcomed Artemis as a lover is telling.⁴⁷ Aphrodite, too, the goddess of love (and of Sappho), celebrates love-making of whatever kind, as long as it brings mutual pleasure. So we can see in Greek mythology the reflection of a society knowledgeable about and open to diverse kinds of sexual desires.

But these are all stories: is there any evidence of how women might have lived and loved before recorded history? One possibility comes from Bronze Age frescoes preserved by a volcanic eruption in 1625 BCE in a settlement called Akrotiri on an island in the Aegean Sea. Like other representations from Minoan Crete, long known for the prominence of women, the wall paintings give centrality to female figures, depicting them in different age groups marked by size and costume and hairstyle. Women are also associated in the paintings with the cultivation and use

of saffron, which has important medicinal qualities, particularly for eyesight. The markings of the eyes seem to suggest that females and the youngest boy child had clear eyesight, whereas the other male figures did not. One scholar interprets these frescoes in a highly speculative way as depicting a homosocial world in which women had high status, attended to their bodies and those of the children, and engaged in initiatory practices that may have involved homoeroticism, although there is no depiction of anything we would call sexual.⁴⁸ It is a vision of a world in which women's connection to plants and healing and their centrality in the community meant that they were valued rather than dominated, and in which their communal rituals may have involved erotic elements so common in initiations.

A final way to think about the earliest societies is to look at societies with subsistence economies, social structures based on kinship, and no formal state structure, assuming that there may be some relationship between the form of such societies and attitudes about sexuality. What can we learn about love between women in kinship-structured societies? Not much, as it turns out. We know a great deal about male same-sex behavior but precious little about that of females.

Anthropologist Evelyn Blackwood argues that sexual relations between women in societies based on kinship groups are shaped by women's economic contributions and social status. Among the Azande in Africa, for example, wives controlled the produce from plots of land they received from their husbands and sometimes after fulfilling their wifely responsibilities formed sexual relationships with other women, often co-wives. They may even have partaken in a ritual that formed a permanent bond, with domestic and trade consequences for the community as a whole. A ritual practice known as *bagburu* marked intimate ties between married women and could be followed by lovemaking.⁴⁹ Relationships among co-wives may have existed in other polygynous African societies, including the Nupe, the Hausa, and the Nyakyusa.⁵⁰

In other kinship-based societies, childhood and adolescent same-sex sexuality was acceptable, sometimes as part of initiation rituals. In !Kung San society in southern Africa, girls took part in sexual play with one another.⁵¹ In central Australia, Aranda girl cross-cousins who would, by the customs of kinship, later become sisters-in-law had sex using an artificial penis, and even when grown they might have sex by "tickling the clitoris with the finger" and then engaging in tribadism.⁵² Initiation schools for adolescent girls in Dahomey taught exercises to thicken the genitals, which

might lead to sexual activities that did not earn reproach.⁵³ Where sexuality is valued, rather than repressed, sex play among children, whether heterosexual or same-sex, does not seem to be a problem.

What this scanty evidence suggests (aside from the fact that male anthropologists have tended not to be interested in or have access to women) is that there is no good reason to assume that the earliest human societies would have forbidden or even had negative ideas about sex between women.

We can never know what really happened in the beginning, but what all these stories—myths from early civilizations as well as contemporary imaginings—tell us is that thinking about sexuality at the origins of human society is profoundly shaped by the social and political context of the spinner of the tale. We shall see that goddesses and Amazons, like Sappho, thread their way through the centuries of sapphistries, suggesting how important imagined beginnings have been.

And why not imagine alternatives to what Adrienne Rich called “compulsory heterosexuality?”⁵⁴ Here is a fanciful origin tale:

In the beginning, the great goddesses gave birth to everything living, all of the flowers and trees and plants, all of the fish and birds and insects, all of the animals that swim or fly or crawl or walk. To some they gave their most precious gift, the ability to give birth to beings like themselves. To others they gave a supporting role. Each being they created had a special part to play in the world, and none was meant to rule over all others. Among all the richness of the world, they created people. Although they differed a bit from one another in color and hair texture and size, and they came with various configurations of body parts, their differences were less important than their similarities. They lived on land and breathed air, they took a long time to reproduce and become self-sufficient, and they had a great capacity for sexual pleasure, a gift the goddesses had bestowed on them. They found what they needed to eat to sustain themselves in the world that the goddesses had created, and they honored the goddesses by creating beautiful things and inventing fanciful tales and making pleasure in diverse ways with their bodies. And every time they created beauty or understanding or pleasure, of whatever kind, the goddesses smiled.

And that is where this myth will end, because we know too well what happened, even if we do not know why. Why should sex between women not have existed in the beginning? That is the question we need to ask, even if we can never find evidence that it did. For asking opens up the possibility of viewing differently what we do know about the past.