

Queer Anachronisms: Reimagining Lesbian History in Performance

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Early queer theory scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), Teresa de Lauretis (1991) and Judith Butler (1993) advocated queer's numerous benefits for lesbian identity, representation and visibility. In 1996, however, lesbian, feminist and theatre scholar Sue-Ellen Case retracted her endorsement of queer theory claiming that 'queer has led to the term "lesbian" being evacuated' (1996: 1). The same year, Suzanna Danuta Walters posited that '[q]ueer discourse sets up a universal (male) subject, or at least a universal gay male subject, as its implicit referent' (1996: 846). Yet, nearly 20 years after Case and Walters vocalised their critiques, a significant proportion of queer scholarship continues to focus on, or draw from, male experience. Valerie Traub highlights the value of focusing on lesbian subjectivity in her chapter on performing lesbian history. She asserts that lesbianism should be placed 'centre stage – not to enforce a politics of identity, but to destabilise some long-standing theatrical conventions and to activate the queer potential of today's global audience' (2002: 38). This claim raises the stakes for the potential of 'performing lesbian' and harks back to Jill Dolan's assertion that the lesbian subject is 'the most radical position from which to subvert representation' (1988: 119). Traub locates 'queer potential' in an audience's capacity to read performances as queer; however, I am interested in extrapolating this notion further in order to interrogate the queer

potential of the lesbian subject. The centrality of the lesbian subject in Traub's work serves to challenge the 'trope of invisibility' that has surrounded discussions of lesbianism in the early modern period (2002: 36). In a similar vein, this chapter focuses on the London production of *Sappho ... in 9 fragments*, a performance that foregrounds a lesbian subject and employs a number of queer performance strategies, in order to intervene in the absence of lesbian subjectivities within queer performance scholarship.

A one-woman show, written and performed by Melbourne-based theatre-maker and scholar Jane Montgomery Griffiths, *Sappho ... in 9 fragments* charts the biography of Sappho, the 6th-century poet born on the Greek island of Lesbos, who ran an academy for unmarried girls. Only fragments of Sappho's poetry have survived and historical knowledge about her life is limited. She is, however, culturally viewed (in the West) as the 'original' lesbian, and even the terms lesbian and Sapphic are derived from her home and her name, respectively. Following a successful, albeit formative, version of the show (*Sappho*, performed at the Stork Hotel, Melbourne 2007), the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne commissioned and produced *Sappho ... in 9 fragments*, in July 2010. In 2012 the Greenwich Theatre, London, also produced the piece in collaboration with LiveCanon, a poetry ensemble, and the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) at Oxford University. *Sappho's* material origins are Australian and the subject matter Greek, yet any national specificities are absent in both the London and Melbourne productions. I suggest that the contextual shift from Australia to the UK, mitigated by Montgomery Griffiths' decontextualised script and the omission of local particularities, frames Sappho as a transcultural, transhistorical figure.

Although always performed by Montgomery Griffiths, the use of different dramaturgical devices and staging alters each production's thematic concern. The Malthouse production, for example, was lauded by critics for Marion Potts' striking staging that saw Montgomery Griffiths emerge nude from an ambrosia-filled glass tank, the liquid of which trickled out during the performance to reveal a tray of meat (Ball 2010). The tank provided the backdrop to Montgomery Griffiths' monologue, which is comprised of two narrative voices: those of Sappho and Atthis (Sappho's lover). The production stressed the enigma of Sappho, with emphasis on the continual dissection of her work by (predominantly male) scholars. The London performance, however, on which this chapter focuses, was directed by Helen Eastman and featured a reworked set, composed of mirrors and light bulbs. This new staging shifted focus onto another narrative strand emerging from the production: the interconnectedness and merging of past and present. This chapter, then, aims to do two things. Firstly, it will consider the efficacy of two strategies at work in the performance, which are linked to the foregrounding of lesbian subjectivity: queer anachronism and what I am calling reimagining. Secondly, it will consider the implications of *Sappho's* lack of engagement with the productions' temporal and material context.

There is a preoccupation with the past within contemporary gay and lesbian scholarship. For example, scholars in Europe, Australia, Asia and the US are producing work that aims to challenge the assertion that 'the lesbian did not exist in the past' (Chesser 2008; Faderman 2001; Jennings 2007; Sang 2003; Thadani 1996; Vicinus 2004). One aim of this academic and performance work, according to Judith/Jack Halberstam, is to excavate the 'repressed archive' of non-heterosexual lives that have been 'hidden from history' (2011: 148). Theatre and performance is also participating by utilising this new historical information as source material, as

seen in Emma Donoghue's dramatisations of the 19th-century biographies of Anne Lister (*I Know My Own Heart*, Dublin, 1993) and Annie Hindle (*Ladies and Gentlemen*, Dublin, 1996), PoMo Freakshow's 'autobiography' of Radclyffe Hall (*RADCLYFFE*, New York, 2012), Lachlan Philpott's biography of Eugenia Falleni, aka Harry Crawford (*The Trouble with Harry*, Belfast 2013, Melbourne 2014 – see Campbell this volume) as well as Montgomery Griffiths's imagining of the life of Sappho (*Sappho ... in 9 fragments*, Melbourne and London 2007, 2011, 2012). Carla Freccero argues that it is unsurprising that

a lesbian modernity would want, for its pre-posterity, something called the premodern lesbian, if only, as anachronism, to hold on to the possibility that such a creature might indeed have a future beyond the present, a beyond guaranteed through historical retrospectivity. (2011: 63)

Rather than advocating a lesbian revisionist history, which Halberstam has outlined can problematically collapse identities onto one another (1998: 150), Freccero suggests that there is potential in the state of anachronism (2011: 63). The potential of anachronism, as a performance strategy that renders the lesbian subject visible, yet ensures that she remains transhistorical, is one of the key concerns of this chapter. Carolyn Dinshaw has described the drawing of connections between the past and present as 'a queer historical impulse' (Dinshaw 1999: 1). She defines this impulse as a desire 'toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now' (ibid.). *Sappho ... in 9 fragments* illustrates this impulse in practice. I posit that the use of the historical figure of Sappho as an anachronism is a form of this queer historical impulse at work,

and that the connections this anachronism facilitates are productive for challenging the apparent fixedness of lesbian identity.

Queer anachronisms

The occurrence of an anachronism in (queer) historical scholarship constitutes a significant methodological concern, especially with respect to terminology. The dominant position contends that anachronisms should be avoided in the course of accurately recording the past (Syrjämäki 2011).¹ Consequently, the term ‘anachronism’ and the charge of ‘anachronistic’ have garnered negative connotations within historical scholarship and practice (Syrjämäki 2011). Nevertheless, the editors of *The Lesbian Premodern* seek to put pressure on these adverse associations, in addition to endorsing another semantically weighted term, ‘lesbian’. They argue that ‘[t]he term lesbian is widely regarded as essentialist, historically redundant and limiting’ and ask, ‘when has using the term “lesbian” *not* been an anachronistic gesture?’ (Giffney *et al.* 2011: 1, original emphasis). This question identifies the complications of categorising historical ‘lesbian’ relationships. It implicitly draws attention to the creation of alternative labels such as ‘romantic friendships’ (Vicinus 2004: xvii) and ‘lesbian-like’ (Bennett 2000: 9) – labels pioneered by historians who are cautious with the use of a term such as ‘lesbian’ outside of its own historical context. The advent of queer epistemologies, however, has also served to render the term ‘lesbian’ anachronistic in the present. Lesbian, has become a ‘sticky sign’, to borrow Sara Ahmed’s concept, through its accrued associations with identity movements and essentialist politics (2007: 91). This has produced an assumed prescriptiveness, which stands in contrast to queer’s insistence on fluidity and anti-

essentialism, resulting in an anachronistic shadow being cast over the seemingly stagnant term 'lesbian'. Freccero's aspiration for a future 'guaranteed through historical retrospectivity' affirms that the contemporary lesbian's position is viewed as somewhat precarious in this current moment that is suspicious of identity-based subjectivities (2011: 63). Montgomery Griffiths, however, uses anachronism to challenge fixed conceptions of 'lesbian' identity.

An anachronism, in itself, can be viewed as inherently queer. It fits into current formulations of queer temporality, which challenge conventional conceptions of time and advocate a move away from linear timelines; the temporal flux that typifies an anachronism defies 'straight' linearity (Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2005). An anachronism in performance facilitates an interaction between past and present, and has the potential to challenge the fixedness of identity labels, such as lesbian. I use the phrase 'queer anachronism' to foreground the queerness of anachronism, and draw on Elizabeth Freeman's concept of 'temporal drag' to provide a useful critical lens for considering the efficacy of the anachronistic figure in this production. Freeman suggests that 'drag' can be thought of as a temporal phenomenon, citing the example of 'the gravitational pull that "lesbian" sometimes seems to exert upon "queer"' (2000: 728). This pull of one shared political outlook upon another can create what Freeman describes as a 'bind', which is the complication of not wanting to renounce a history such as feminism or lesbian feminism 'even as we move away from identity politics' (ibid.).

Sappho ... in 9 fragments is segmented into nine sections; Sappho speaks during the odd-numbered fragments, recounting her history, while Atthis (Sappho's lover) recounts her love affair with a modern Sappho in the even

fragments.³ The London set is composed of nine identical framed mirrors on wheels, placed below nine identical light bulbs. The staging tracks the linear development of the play, one light bulb for each fragment. As the production progresses, it becomes apparent that the modern Sappho of whom Atthis speaks is not the same Sappho that addresses the audience in the odd fragments. Yet, conversely, it is suggested that they are parts of one whole. This co-presence is key for facilitating connections between the past and present (in Freeman's terms the 'pull' of the past on the present). In the first instance, Montgomery Griffiths drags the historical figure into the present in the choice to 'put on' the character of Sappho in the odd fragments. By embodying historical Sappho, Montgomery Griffiths uses a literal form of temporal drag to perform historiography; an act that assigns value and legacy to Sappho's past. Secondly, the dual presence of the modern and the historical implies that different connections can be found across the pair. The connections with historical Sappho, however, rely on how anachronistic she appears to the audience. In the performance, there is a clear difference in the voices of Atthis and Sappho, yet both speak in contemporary prose. To ensure that she does not appear outdated, the production chose not to allot a period style of speech to historical Sappho. This strategy collapses the temporal distance between historical and modern Sappho, resulting in a queer anachronism which, although technically out of time, does not seem out of date. Again, this asserts that the historical is of use to the present and, arguably, implies that there is still a place for 'lesbian' within queer's preoccupation with fluidity.

Importantly, however, in *Time Binds* Freeman suggests that temporal drag should aim to illuminate the porousness of temporality rather than rendering the past

fully present. In her discussion of Frankenstein's monster she illustrates how an historiographic practice can illuminate this porousness:

the past takes [the] form of something already fragmented, 'split,' and decaying, to which the present and future are somehow porous in an analog way, and for which bodies are both metaphor and medium. In this sense the body is not a 'body' at all but a figure for relations between bodies past and present. (2010: 116)

Rather than utilise the temporal distance between the past and the present simply to explore Sappho's historical biography, Montgomery Griffiths uses her body as a tool to facilitate the co-presence of the past and the present. Modern Sappho is afforded an ephemeral presence through the body of Atthis, who is the medium through which the audience come to know her. Atthis also serves as the filter through which parallels are drawn between both modern and historical figures of Sappho. This ensures that modern Sappho is not physically present and if, as outlined previously, both figures are parts of the whole, then consequently the 'complete' figure of Sappho is unable to be fully present.

This porousness is key to illustrating how temporal drag is present in the creation of identity. As the narrative becomes more complex, through the weaving of Sappho's verse into the playtext's prose, the audience is invited to see how Atthis is interrupted by and bound to the past:

And the full moon rose

My teeth are chattering

And the woman stood

I ache for her; I yearn for her.

Around the altar

And it's freezing but I'm sweating as I look at her

And she comes to me now. Her damp cashmere coat brushes on my naked flesh. Those perfect, manicured fingers reach out and touch my breast, my nipple, red nails tracing the circles of the moon. And then move further...

Soft mound, moist with dew

Further still Truly, I am close to death...

And Aphrodite's golden cup ... sweet nectar.

I spread my legs for you on synthetic fibre pillows. (Montgomery Griffiths 2010: 21, original emphasis)

In this sex scene between Atthis and modern Sappho, described by Atthis in Fragment Six, direct quotations from Sappho's poetry are interspaced between Atthis' memory of her seduction. The inclusion of Montgomery Griffiths's 'free translation' of Sappho's poetry, which makes up '25–30 per cent of the play' introduces the

‘authentic’ voice of Sappho (Montgomery Griffiths 2010: xxxiv), in direct contrast to the contemporary prose of Atthis and historical Sappho. Further quotations intersperse Atthis’ monologue as she details the turbulent ending of her love affair with the modern Sappho. In performance, the narrative voices begin to merge; it is less clear which words are Atthis’ and which are Sappho’s poetry in performance. Montgomery Griffiths makes no attempt to offer a separation. Positioning Sappho’s poetry alongside an historical reimagination and contemporary interpretation during the moments of emotional/sexual climax creates a sense of the repetition of history: cycles of romance and break-ups that continually occur, feelings of lust and loss that are communal. Not only does this facilitate further connections between the past and the present, but it also implies that collective identity, such as ‘lesbian’, is continually constructed by history.

The connection between history and identity in the play is also used to destabilise what is often held as the essence of lesbian identity in popular discourse: the belief that lesbians only have sex with women. Charlotte Aston touches on this core notion of lesbian identity when she writes,

Once upon a time in the good old days, after Stonewall, but before Madonna, there was a thing called a lesbian. She wore dungarees and clumpy boots, had cropped hair, didn’t wear make-up, and never NEVER slept with men because to do so was treason. (1996: 158)

Although this description of ‘a lesbian’ is both comically dated and clichéd, it does explicitly portray how having male sexual partners has been viewed as the ultimate taboo in certain lesbian communities. While lesbians are no longer expected to fit into

the mould outlined by Aston, a general assumption still remains that lesbians will only have sexual encounters with women.<xen>⁴</xen> This idea is first challenged when historical Sappho acknowledges her marriage to Croesus stating, ‘Wife/Improbable I know, but we all have to make compromises [...] We had a little understanding: he had his boys, I had my girls ... /But of course we did our duty’ (2010: 10). The term ‘duty’ is evocative of a requirement rather than an active choice and serves subliminally to suggest that the relationship is the product of social necessity rather than love or desire. Later in the piece, however, this is further complicated when historical Sappho lists some of her former lovers:

I had them all you know. Or rather they had me. Or rather, they thought they had me ... Rough, tough, Greeks and aspirational Romans ... hairy sweaty men [...] Solon-Athenian, father of the legal system, [...] And Plato, so sensitive, such a serious young man, [...] And occasionally, that special one ... the special, secret tryst ... my narcissistic fuck ... like looking at myself in a mirror, only with a dick ... Catullus[...] All these lovers, who had the privilege of thinking they had me intact. Not my preference but better than nothing. Lie back and think of Lesbos. (2010: 17–18)

The word choice is of particular note, as it ensures that these liaisons cannot be written off as further duty, but rather are encounters that she enjoys, even with the admission that they are not her preference. Selina Busby and Stephen Farrier, in their discussion of fluid identity in the work of Sarah Kane, cite journalist and gay activist Chris Woods (1995: 31) who states that ‘[q]ueer is now a generic term for a generation of homosexual men and woman who revel in opposition[....] A central conviction is that homosexual identity is self-constructed. Therefore, why not

reinvent?’ (2007: 144). The performance draws attention to Sappho’s cultural position through self-imposed titles such as the original ‘lesbian pin-up’ and mother to ‘the daughters of Lesbos’(2010: 8). As such, a reinvention of ‘lesbian’ occurs with the detailing of Sappho’s sexual history. Traub has stated that ‘one of the aims of queer historiography should be to deconstruct modern identity categories, indeed, to insist on all identity as unstable, contradictory and in flux’; the choice here to incorporate a list of male sexual partners destabilises the core notion of lesbian identity (2007: 136). Historical Sappho, then, demonstrates that lesbian identity is not as coherent as the present may make it appear. Using the ‘original’ lesbian to foreground this incoherence suggests that perhaps it is time to reimagine the idea of ‘being’ a lesbian, in relation to the in/stability of sexual preference and more broadly.

Reimagining history: An alternative lesbian

methodology

The creation of gay and lesbian histories has been fraught with challenges resulting in many queer historical scholars championing, as Elizabeth Freeman summarises, ‘eclectic, idiosyncratic, and transient archives including performances, gossip, found objects and methods (or anti-methods) that rely on counter-intuitive juxtapositions of events or materials’ (2007: 162). In trying to document and account for the history of contemporary lesbian performance in London (UK), my doctoral research draws on performance listings, reviews and interviews; although all performance histories are necessarily partial, lesbian performance history has not been formally archived or extensively researched and, therefore, is particularly incomplete. Significantly, the poetry of Sappho is also not whole, nor indeed is Sappho’s own history, which has

been fragmented and subject to numerous revisions over time. *Sappho ... in 9 fragments* explores the continually revised history of Sappho and exploits the lack of historical certainty about Sappho's life by reimagining her past. Linda Garber's recent scholarship focuses on a number of novels and films which 'need to imagine what the traditional historical records refuse to provide' (2011: 190). She identifies that the creation of lesbian fictions has been a common solution to a lack of historical evidence and postulates their creation results from a need for 'the possibility of ourselves or those "like" ourselves in the past' (ibid.). Not only is Sappho herself, as Montgomery Griffiths exclaims in the performance, 'a great big gaping HOLE' (2010: 8), but she also typifies the lack of a complete or 'whole' past available for lesbians. Reimagining historiographies, then, is an alternative methodology for the recovery of lesbian history when a formal historical archive is absent.

The production, however, is self-reflexive about its own role in creating yet another historiography of Sappho in order to negate the constant risk that Montgomery Griffiths's representation become *the* representation of Sappho. For instance, at various points in the production, Montgomery Griffiths situates mirrors around her body causing the reflection to fragment and multiply. Although in one sense Sappho may appear whole, the multiple reflections very literally draw attention to Sappho's fragmentation. The mirrors are also spun to reveal a chalkboard upon which Sappho educates us on her academic history, a makeshift tracking map which charts her exile from Lesbos, and pin board of the remaining fragments of poetry, which are torn off to reveal a mosaic of Sappho. The back of these mirrors highlight the construction of Sappho's own history and how she has been built up from minute fragments to create a whole. Any connections felt towards Sappho, then, are framed only as connections with fragments of her constructed identity. This provides

recognition of similarities but, importantly, also the impossibility of complete identification with the past.

Despite its foregrounding, then, of lesbian subjectivity, this self-reflexive reimagining facilitates an unfinishedness that allows the representations of Sappho to maintain their queerness. Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon have called for ‘acts of queering that would suspend the assurance that the only modes of knowing the past are either those that regard the past as wholly other or those that can assimilate it to a present assumed identical to itself’ (2005: 1616). The queer anachronism utilised in Montgomery Griffiths’s piece works to present a new way of knowing the past. The two narrative voices of Sappho are representative of the various identities that have been rewritten of and for Sappho over time. Therefore, from the outset, Sappho is queered through Montgomery Griffiths’s move to present a literalised embodiment of the fragments of poetry that exist rather than presenting Sappho as an intact entity. In presenting various narrative voices and two strands of identity, history and love affair, which are all attached to the same base, the piece ensures that Sappho remains queer in the sense that Nikki Sullivan articulates, as ‘in the process of ambiguous (un) becoming’ (2003: iii).

Decontextualising Sappho

Sappho ... in 9 fragments affirms Sappho’s position as the ‘original’ lesbian and frames her as a transcultural, transhistorical figure. The reimagining of a historical European lesbian poet, however, within a production materially produced in Australia is worth reflection. In the introduction to the published playtext, Montgomery Griffiths acknowledges that *Sappho* ‘is compounded by its role in a larger academic

research project, 'Staging Sappho: towards a new methodology of performance reception' (2010: xv). This project, funded by the Australian Research Council, makes use of Montgomery Griffiths's research specialisms (classics and translation) and subsequently illuminates the pragmatic rationale behind the choice of protagonist. There are, then, sets of conditions surrounding this production that make Sappho an attractive figure to explore.⁵

Australian playtexts such as *The Trouble with Harry* (Philpott 2014) and *Historia* (Janaczewska 1997) have managed to foreground female same-sex desire and embed local specificities; *Sappho ... in 9 fragments*' impulse, however, is towards the trans-geographical. Although this results in the removal of local specificity, there are benefits to focusing on a dominant figure in a decontextualised mode. In this instance, it offers the opportunity to challenge some central assumptions regarding lesbian identity, and this decontextualised figure of Sappho enables connections to be made across time and cultures. Traub has posited that a focus on the lesbian subject can 'profitably pressure how female characters are represented and erotic desire thematized' (2002: 39). The stripping out of cultural specifics in *Sappho ... in 9 fragments* ensures a foregrounding of the lesbian subject, and its queer potential. In Fragment Seven, historical Sappho discusses how her homeland has become synonymous with 'women who love women' and proclaims 'orientation replaces location' (2010: 23). This sentiment neatly encapsulates the London production of *Sappho ... in 9 fragments*. Local specifics are elided in favour of placing sexual orientation and identity centre stage, a move that subsequently allows the assumptions surrounding lesbian identities to be productively challenged.

<en-group type="endnotes">

<en><label>1</label> ‘Anachronism’ is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘anything which was proper to a former age, but is [...] out of harmony with the present’.</en>

<en><label>2</label> Despite positing that an anachronism is fundamentally queer, ‘queer anachronism’ places some distance between the aforementioned negative connotations that surround anachronism and the term’s queer potential.</en>

<en><label>3</label> For the purpose of this analysis, these voices will be discussed as ‘historical Sappho’ and ‘modern Sappho’ in order to eliminate confusion over which fragment of identity is being considered.</en>

<en><label>4</label> This view is not outdated. In May 2012 *DIVA* (the monthly glossy magazine for lesbians and bi women in the UK) ran an article, ‘Are You Guy-Curious?’, which detailed the stigma attached to gay women who sleep with men and the difficulties they face in retaining the label lesbian. *DIVA* also highlighted that the unwillingness to discuss this idea has even resulted in a lack of terminology for this sexual fluidity, which *DIVA* have named ‘guy-curiosity’.

<en><label>5</label> The London production was also performed as part of the Performing Sappho conference, jointly organised by Monash University, the APGRD and Oxford University in 2012.</en>

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