

Sapphic modernities - sexuality, women, and national culture

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Sapphic Modernities

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1928: Sapphic Modernity and the Sexuality of History

Radclyffe Hall, The Well of Loneliness 1928, rpt.

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As its coin-flipping title suggests, my book The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic, 1565-1830, pursues the premise that we can read sexual representations for the more-than-sexual questions they engage; it asks not so much what reading emergent modernity can tell us about sexuality, but how sexuality can help us to read emergent modernity. But this aspect of modernism, with its extension into an ambivalent primitivism, has eighteenth-century antecedents recognizable, for example, in the associations of sexuality with the South Seas. They display their modernity or their resistance to modernity.

1928: Sapphic Modernity and the Sexuality of History

In The Sexuality of History, I show the ways in which modernity figures as a trope within sapphic representations themselves: from the late sixteenth through the late eighteenth century, female-female intimacies get presented as a sign of the new or the newly pervasive, whether for good or for ill. Across divergent conceptions of both the sapphic and the modern, these scholars recognize a sea change in the cultural visibility of lesbianism in the wake of epistemic transformations wrought by the fin de siècle and especially by the Great War.

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One might speculate, then, that in modernism the lesbian stands in for challenges to the mythology of the stable and heteronormative nation-state. Given these class dynamics, it is no surprise that the sapphic modernity represented in the 1928 works is also dependent, and usually silently dependent, on white privilege.

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Most of the 1928 narratives, along with many others in the broader temporality of sapphic modernity, also cast themselves as picaresque, though usually in a privileged-class context, as I will discuss below.

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In associating sexuality with privileged, mobile, international communities, the lesbian narratives of 1928 narrow the rough-and-tumble class inclusiveness and the dramatic cross-class affiliations that figure prominently in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century representations of the sapphic. Through goods, they indicate their relationship to one another and also accent their relationship to the spirit of the times. Since the turn of this century alone, at least a dozen scholars have explored the conjunction between modernism, or the modernity that underwrote it, and an intensified literary investment in female same-sex desire.

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In this same spirit, I ask what we can learn from the literature of 1928 about the significance of sexuality to overarching social, political, economic, and cultural formations of high modernity.

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