

Compulsory (Hetero)sexuality and Queer Virginity in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Sappho and Phao*

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Abstract: In the field of sexuality and gender studies, the topic of asexuality is often overlooked, especially in pre-modern literature. While pre-modern authors did not have access to the language that we would use today to describe this phenomenon, their understanding of the concept often manifested as a rejection of compulsory heterosexuality on the part of their characters. This study analyses two female characters from Medieval and Renaissance literature—Criseyde from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Sappho from John Lyly's *Sappho and Phao*—and argues that their refusal to enter the sexual economy of their stories until forced is representative of their struggle to resist heteronormative sexuality in favor of living in a state of queer virginity.

Many terms and concepts associated with sexuality studies sound jarringly anachronistic when applied to a premodern context. It would be inaccurate to talk about, for example, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual people living in the Middle Ages or the Early Modern period, because these are categorizations not in use at the time. Of course, historians frequently do use this modern terminology to describe the past, as it is often the easiest way to convey their arguments. The problem arises when these words are used uncritically, when they implicitly assume that the modern experience of sexuality is universal across history. This theoretical fallacy most often occurs when discussing heterosexuality and assuming that it has always been the “default” sexuality. As explained by James Schultz (2006), unreflective usage of modern terminology “fosters the belief that, while homosexuality might be a recent invention, heterosexuality is a universal given” (p. 29). This is not to say that there was no concept of accepted or “normative” sexual practices, but it is important to recognize that they did not reflect our modern understanding of normativity. In this essay, I intend to examine premodern works and characters through the lens of asexuality studies and, in particular, to discuss the pressures of what we now call “compulsory sexuality.” Critic Kristina Gupta’s 2015 article on the subject describes a present-day understanding of compulsory sexuality as “the assumption that all people are sexual” (p. 132). The same reasoning can be applied to the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods. If the “normative behavior” is to engage in sexual practices, then anyone who does not (or wishes not to) must fall outside of normative sexuality. (Lochrie, 2005). Lochrie adds:

Armed only with the heterosexual/homosexual divide and a presumption of heteronormativity, we cannot even begin to sort out such categories as Amazons, female masculinity, or even virginity (p. xv).

It is this last category that I wish to further discuss. My goal is to analyze how the main female characters in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and John Lyly’s *Sappho and Phao* interact with and react to expectations of normative (hetero)sexuality, and what role virginity and chastity play in the narrative. While unmarried, chaste characters are common in literature of all periods, they are usually treated as inhabiting a transient state: it is assumed that they will eventually enter the heterosexual marketplace as expected. However, Criseyde and Sappho make chastity an active choice that the people around them explicitly disagree with, making them transgressive and therefore important in a discussion of the role of what today we may recognize as asexuality. Virgins, says critic Sarah Salih (2001):

are removed from the heterosexual economy. [...] I will be assuming throughout this study that virginity is not a denial or rejection of sexuality, but itself a sexuality, by which I mean a culturally specific organisation of desires (pp. 9–10).

This definition, which I will also be operating within the confines of, matches our modern concept of “asexuality” quite closely. To reiterate, I am not ascribing modern terminology to people and characters whose understanding of sexuality was completely different from ours. Terms such as “asexuality” and “asexual” are here used to best represent the concepts I am discussing, but they should not be taken as an exact match. While heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality are modern ideas, the foundations for them can be found all throughout history, and their representations are what I will be analyzing. To quote critic Tison Pugh (2014), let us “consider the ways in which anti-eroticisms such as virginity and chastity alternately reinforce and subvert cultural normativity” (p. 3).

Criseyde: Succumbing to Compulsory Heterosexuality

The first three books of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* follow the title characters' courtship—or, to be more accurate, Troilus's pursuit of Criseyde, aided by her uncle Pandarus and the pressures of their society. Criseyde is a childless widow, who has been left alone and unprotected in the besieged Troy after her father's betrayal and flight from the city. Love and sex are the last things on her mind, and when Pandarus, motivated by his friendship with Troilus, goes to talk to her on his behalf, this is her first reaction to hearing that he has "good news":

"I swear," said Pandarus, "I could still tell you something to make you happy."

"Now, dear uncle," she said, "tell it to us, for the love for God! Is the siege lifted then? I'm frightened to death of Greeks." (Chaucer, 2008, p. 25)

Pandarus, dismissing her legitimate concerns about the siege, replies that he brings even better news. Criseyde's priorities, however, lie firmly with survival, something that will bring her to "betray" Troilus for Diomedes in the later parts of the story. As pointed out by David Aers in his 1991 essay "Criseyde: Woman in Medieval Society",

Her fear is fully justified, her weakness is a genuine aspect of a social reality not of her own making, and her isolation is an essential part of her vulnerability. In these circumstances her only asset, her only leverage on the powerful, is her sexuality (p. 121).

Her choices are motivated by fear; if sleeping with men is going to keep her safe, she will do it. Even Chaucer tells us that "she feared dreadfully for her life, not knowing what was the best advice, for she was both a widow and alone, without any friend to whom she dared to bemoan her sorrow" (p. 4). Lacking male protection, Criseyde is in a very vulnerable position, a fact she is keenly aware of. Both Troilus and Diomedes, then, are ways for her to protect herself in an environment that is unsafe for a woman—especially a *femme sole* such as Criseyde.

But what would she actually want, removed from the life-or-death situation she is in? Not Troilus, perhaps not any man. Once Pandarus, after refusing to get to the point and tell her his "good news" for a long time, finally confesses that Troilus "loves [her] so much that, unless [she] help[s], it'll be the death of him," Criseyde reacts negatively (p. 29). First, she probes for advice to test what her uncle wants her to do and, when it becomes clear that he fully supports Troilus's suit, she starts crying:

What! Is this all the happiness and all that I was to celebrate? Is this your advice? Is this my happy situation? Is this the true fulfillment of your promise? Was this whole highly coloured story told—alas!—just for this purpose? O my lady Pallas, please look after me in this frightening situation, because I'm so bewildered, I could die! (p. 31)

It is worth noting that she specifically invokes Pallas's, or Athena's name. Athena was one of three virgin goddesses in the Greek Pantheon—together with Artemis and Hestia—and the attribute was so important to her that one of her major epithets, Athena Parthenos, means "the virgin Athena" and is what the Parthenon in Athens is named after (Montanari, 2018, p. 1586). That Criseyde prays to her is not a mistake: it is a clear indication that she does not want to participate in the sexual economy that her uncle and suitor want to impose on her.

Moreover, the relationship would mean losing her status as a *femme sole* and the relatively high degree of autonomy awarded to unwed women and widows (Aers, 1991, p. 135).

However, Criseyde is hounded and manipulated by a character who represents the pressures of society, courtly love traditions, and compulsory sexuality: her uncle Pandarus. When he tells her that Troilus is in love with her, he barely lets her get a word in edgewise while he both praises Troilus and threatens a double suicide if she does not reciprocate his feelings (p. 31). He courts Criseyde on Troilus's behalf by simply reiterating how worthy of her love he is and how both of their deaths are going to be her fault if she does not promise to at least be friendly to him. His stance on normative sexuality is made very clear when he tells Troilus that "no man or woman was ever yet begotten who wasn't disposed to suffer the heat of love, either heavenly love or else natural love" (p. 20). Through Pandarus's insistence, threats, and manipulation, Criseyde is then unwillingly slotted into the role of the Courtly Beloved.

Criseyde's wishes and desires are consistently ignored by the people around her, and her own society forces her to cave into the pressure of re-entering the heterosexual economy in order to keep herself safe. But it is also her narrative role that limits and constrains her agency (Pugh, 2014, p. 25). As the noble *object* of love in a courtly romance, it is inevitable that she will fall for the noble Troilus who loves her. In Pandarus's words, "love for love is a reasonable reward" (p. 30). She has love imposed upon her and does not get to have a choice in it. Says Pugh (2014):

Emily and Criseyde frequently appear in the *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* as reflections of male desire rather than as women in their own right, with the sharp irony that they are conscripted to serve as male fantasies despite their own avowed preference for anti-eroticism. (p. 106)

Criseyde's resistance to Troilus's affections, if not Criseyde herself, is initially positioned as the main obstacle of the story. Chaucer introduces Book One with a clear statement that the story is about Troilus and his "double sorrow" so when the protagonist falls for someone who does not reciprocate, that reluctance is framed as adversarial (p. 1). It is a "problem" that Criseyde, not knowing Troilus at all, initially only promises to be friendly towards him to spare his and Pandarus's life. Shortly after, Criseyde sees Troilus in a parade and starts considering him as a potential love interest because of his noble traits and because he is interested in her, and this is presented as a solution to that problem (p. 35). It is also purely a male fantasy and another way to frame Criseyde's disinterest in a negative light. "As much as Emily and Criseyde play the role of the female beloved," says Pugh (2014), "they are also female adversaries who must be subdued because of their erotic resistance to their suitors" (p. 110).

But Criseyde does manage a small act of resistance: she bears no children for Troilus, something that Pugh (2014) calls a "queer sense of agency" (p. 111). He goes on to elaborate on this, stating that: "Men may love [her] despite [her] wishes to the contrary, yet men cannot compel [her] either to love them in return or willingly to produce the babies they might wish for [her] to bear" (p. 112). Moreover, Criseyde's supposed betrayal ultimately leads to Troilus's death and the fall of Troy, which could easily be read as karmic retribution for her treatment. Criseyde is thus located in a space of queer resistance to normative and

compulsory sexuality and, though she eventually does partially succumb to its pressures, it is clear that she does so against her wishes and better judgment.

Criseyde's widowhood represents a cultural role that she longs to keep inhabiting for the asexuality encoded in it (Pugh, 2014, p. 114). As a widow, she is free from the sexual economy and the patriarchal subjugation that wives are under. Her chastity is understood as a queer state of being in a society where the "norm" is that most people are inherently sexual. Of course, as a widow, she is no longer a virgin, but she similarly eschews eroticism until she is pressured to succumb to it. Her stated goal was "simply to live unmolested by heteroerotic desire, to preserve [her] asexuality in a homosocial environment, and to reject undesired amatory advances," according to Pugh (2014), but this wish is denied to her by the love imposed on her by Troilus and Pandarus (p. 115).

Sappho: resisting pressure and manipulation

If Criseyde is an example of a woman who, despite her aversion to eroticism, falls victim to the pressures of compulsory sexuality and manipulation, Sappho emerges victorious in her conflict with the "norm." The inciting incident of Lyly's play is Venus and Cupid scheming to make Queen Sappho and the ferryman Phao fall in love. Venus is immediately established as capricious and more than ready to toy with humans when she declares, "Sappho shall know, be she never so fair, that there is a Venus which can conquer, were she never so fortunate" (Lyly, 1991, ll. I.i.39-41). Venus—and Love by extension, since she controls Cupid—is here portrayed as a powerful and violent entity, which can and will interfere with the lives of humans as she pleases. Venus justifies her meddling with Sappho by saying that "she [is] amiable, and therefore must be pierced," which brings together the lexicons of courtly love tradition (in that Sappho is worthy of and obligated to receive and bestow love due to her "amiability") and brutality (l. I.i.52). The use of the word "pierced" is significant: it refers at once to Cupid's arrow physically striking Sappho and to the sexual act of penetration. However, the use of such a violent term belies the fact that it would not be a consensual "piercing"—and indeed it is not, as Sappho is made to fall in love with Phao due to Venus's scheming. Even Phao envisions Love as a conquering force, saying, "to yield to love is the only thing I hate," again using the vocabulary of battle and surrender (ll. II.i.131-132).

Sappho, after having fallen in love with Phao, also falls ill. It is a clear reference to the medieval concept of the "disease of love" which, according to Mary France Wack (1990), includes "idealization of the love object, preoccupation, depression, insomnia, erratic moods, and social withdrawal" as recognized symptoms "within a system of shared beliefs and symbolic conventions" (pp. xii–xiii). Sappho, like Troilus and many others before her, is befallen by an incurable disease brought by "a strange desire" (l. III.iii.7). However, where the cure for lovesickness in medieval tradition is requited love, for Sappho it is its absence. She is greatly distressed by her condition, and tells herself to "resist it, [...] whilst it is yet tender" and that "this shall be written on thy tomb, that, though thy love were greater than wisdom could endure, yet thine honor was such as love could not violate" (ll. III.iii.104-105, 119-122). Her infatuation with Phao is a source of shame for her, both because of the difference in rank and because of her reticence to sully her honor.

As a queen, she is expected to take a husband and have children, but Sappho refuses to do either, which is what prompts Venus to sic Cupid on her in the first place. She is a “Virgin Queen,” a parallel that would not have been lost on Elizabethan audiences. Like many other dramatic characters before her, Sappho is an allegory for Queen Elizabeth and, in particular, her virginity. Lyly frames her as both the Courtly Beloved and the virgin, which is a juxtaposition that Elizabeth herself embodied with her metaphor of virginity (Jankowski, 2000, p. 13). Sappho, unlike many other such characters, is allowed to fully resist marriage and the expected heteroeroticism when she is released from the love spell. This could be read as a fully realized version of Elizabeth’s ideals about virginity. Sappho, despite literal godly intervention, stays true to her rank and her honor. Indeed, she gains the status of lady of love at the end of the play—a chaste lady of love, which is an oxymoron to rival Elizabeth’s virgin Courtly Beloved but serves to accentuate the contrast between character and real-world reference.

Said godly interference is as close to the most literal representation of compulsory sexuality as one can get. Through Cupid, Venus tries to force Sappho to adhere to expectations of normativity and heteroeroticism, just because she is “fair” and “amiable.” But these expectations seem to be almost nothing more than an obligation, even in the play, rather than a good thing to want or force. Says critic Andy Kesson (2017):

Every representation of heterosexuality in *Sappho and Phao* is miserable and disastrous. Indeed, Venus first proposes forcing Sappho to fall in love in the same speech which makes clear her own marital status makes her (and everyone around her) profoundly unhappy.

Venus’s capricious meddling reads almost as misdirected revenge. She complains that “It came by lot, not love, that [she] was linked with him,” and yet attempts to push the same “lot” onto Sappho and Phao (ll. I.i.32-33). In fact, she describes her forcing Sappho to fall in love as “yok[ing] the neck that yet never bowed” (ll. I.i.37-38). She feels slighted that Sappho has never been in love, and sets out to rectify that. Or, in other words, she sets out to force sexuality on someone uninterested in, at the very least, heteroeroticism. This is similar to Troilus’s experiences at the beginning of *Troilus and Criseyde*: he is introduced as a proud young knight who, despite his nobility of birth and spirit, scorns love. He states:

I've heard tell, by God, of your way of life, you lovers, and your foolish observances, and what an effort people have in obtaining love and what uncertainties in keeping it—and when your prey is lost, misery and suffering! O true fools, you are silly and blind! There's not one of you that can take warning from another's example.
(Chaucer, p. 6)

He mocks and derides lovers and, in doing so, angers the God of Love, who strikes him with an arrow to make him susceptible to it, as Venus does to Sappho and Phao through Cupid. Love appears here personified as an enslaving figure, whose power is unmatched even by the most powerful among people. But, as Kesson puts it, “Sappho overcomes this attempt to enforce her to fall in love, marry or have sex, to submit to a compulsory and normative sexuality.” Once she is free of the spell, she berates Venus for her immodesty and impulsiveness that cause her to stray from the path of honor:

You are not worthy to be the lady of love, that yield so often to the impressions of love. Immodest Venus, that to satisfy the unbridled thoughts of thy heart transgresses so far from the stay of thine honour! (ll. V.ii.64-66)

Sappho even supplants her as the goddess of love when Cupid decides to take her side rather than Venus's. Cured of her love of Phao, she declares:

I myself will be the queen of love. I will direct these arrows with better aim and conquer mine own affections with greater modesty. Venus' heart shall flame, and her love be as common as her craft. (ll. V.ii.28-31)

The play ends with modesty and chastity triumphing over love and lust, and reason winning over uncontrolled desire. Sappho is able to resist her royal expectations, and the gods' interference and maintain her chastity and autonomy. In fact, she rises above her initial status and gains the ability to better direct Cupid's love arrows. Specifically, she declares love to be "a toy made for ladies, and I will keep it only for ladies," which implies that her replacing Venus as the goddess of love will be beneficial for women in the sexual economy (ll. V.iii.104-105).

Sappho's continued and passionate rejection of imposed eroticism can very easily be read as her struggle against compulsory sexuality—a struggle which she wins. In an unusual twist for Elizabethan comedies, there is no wedding at the end of the play (Jankowski, 2000, p. 14). Sappho retires in the now-entirely homosocial environment of her court after having triumphed over Venus and her machinations. It can be read as a queer ending in more than one sense: firstly, her line about love being a toy only for ladies references the historical Sappho's well-documented attraction to women; secondly, Sappho's status as a virgin is, itself, a queer space. As convents were not an option for women who wished to remain virgins in Early Modern Protestant society, virginity was considered an inherently transient state. Virgin characters are, for the most part, daughters who will trade that virginity for a husband (Jankowski, 2000, pp. 115–116). Says critic Jankowski (2000):

Any early modern Protestant virgin who chose unduly to prolong her virginity—or especially to adopt it as a permanent condition—had no place in the sex/gender system. She was a queer virgin and occupied an officially unnamed position that was both dissident and highly resistant (p. 113).

Sappho, however, rejects this pre-established path and is presented as neither a daughter nor a wife—subject to no man in her life and therefore transgressive and queer.

Conclusion

Both Criseyde and Sappho are examples of what Jankowski (2000) defines as "queer virgins." Of Jeanne d'Arc, she says:

[She] did not model the diffident young virgin who was destined to be married and lead a quiet life producing children and ensuring a husband's inheritance. She represented everything no respectable or acceptable woman should be. As a perpetual virgin, she was easily viewed as a monster. But she was worse than that. She was queer (p. 4).

For these two characters, chastity is neither motivated by religion nor a result of a lack of suitors. It is an active choice for both of them to eschew heteroeroticism, and it is a choice that the people around them do not agree with. If they did, if they saw nothing wrong or

unnatural with Criseyde and Sappho's chastity, then that chastity would not be transgressive in the way that it is. The reactions of the worlds they inhabit tell us that Criseyde and Sappho fall outside of the norm, outside of the expectations laid for them: they are queer, and constantly challenged because of that. In fiction as in real life, it is easier to see the presence of something transgressive—such as homoeroticism—than the absence of normative behavior. But when that absence is constantly questioned and challenged by the people who witness it, it is brought to light and can be examined more closely, as I have done throughout this study.

The expected life trajectory for women—both in Chaucer's Middle Ages and Lyly's Early Modern Period—was that they would eventually take a husband and mother children. But characters like Criseyde and Sappho represent resistance to the norm, even if only one of the two is successful. Criseyde, though ultimately succumbing to normative pressures, is, at least in part, avenged through Troilus's death, and gets to escape the destruction of Troy—which is depicted as having little regard for women and their agency. Sappho, on the other hand, manages to escape male attention completely, be it through chastity or homoeroticism. Jankowski (2000) states that virgins, “by resisting men, are not only rejecting the sexual economy but are essentially opting out of the patriarchy,” which is a transgressive state to occupy (p. 6). Sappho and Criseyde are both under the pressure of compulsory (hetero)sexuality, normative sexuality, and a patriarchal society they both wish to escape. However, where Criseyde is ultimately unable to escape Troilus's advances and succumbs to their pressure, Sappho rejects the imposition of heteroeroticism in favor of either chastity or sexual relationships with women.

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