



antae



L-Università
ta' Malta

COVER IMAGE: Detail from ‘Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene’ (1864), watercolour on paper, Simeon Solomon.

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antae (ISSN 2523-2126) is an international refereed journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism, and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy, and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.

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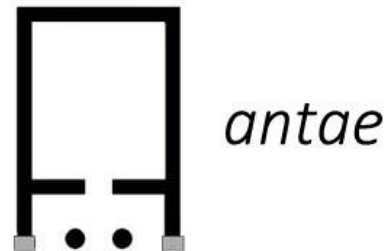
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Editorial

Aaron Aquilina, Elsa Fiott

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Editorial

Aaron Aquilina, Elsa Fiott

Lancaster University, University of Malta

Simeon Solomon's painting, here used metonymically for the contents of this issue, is highly intriguing. Sappho, adorned with the laurel, leans on and tightly embraces Erinna, a fellow Hellenic poet. Their figures are paralleled: two birds above them (presumably, some form of dove) face each other, beak to beak. Next to Erinna, a goat, turned away. Next to the doves, a lonesome blackbird or crow. At their feet, some stray flowers and petals, presumably blown with the wind but nonetheless a mystery; after all, the plant life behind the two women shows no signs—or even capabilities—of blooming.

Simeon Solomon's painting: Solomon's life has been of recent interest to art historians, gender scholars, and followers of period-specific controversy. His talents and exhibitions are now quite well detailed, and so are his connections with several noteworthy contemporaries, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Oscar Browning, Walter Pater, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Despite Solomon's long and complicated (and likely sexual) friendship with the latter, Swinburne—along with most of Solomon's other friends—abandoned the Anglo-Jewish artist to his downfall when he was arrested in London, in 1873, and accused of “the abominable crime of buggery”.¹ In 1874, Solomon was once again arrested, this time in Paris, and charged with “obscene touching”. While Solomon's ‘family did not completely abandon him’ (some consolation, at least), ‘[t]he Royal Academy and other art galleries all stopped displaying his works’, and Solomon was ‘reduced to a life of penury, and he even worked for a while as a pavement artist’.² Subsequent to his arrests, Solomon lived a life of alcoholism, asylum- and shelter-residing, trite commissions, and match-selling (somewhat speculatively, drug addiction, too) and died from complications related to his vices.

Solomon thus began life as a prodigy with a promising career (he was the youngest artist to exhibit at the Royal Academy, at eighteen)³ and as an associate of the Pre-Raphaelites (‘the spoilt darling of a group of sophisticates’, as Alfred Werner puts it) but ended up peddling his drawings, ‘unshaven, bent, a nullity in the eyes of the world’.⁴ Studios, clothes, and money were given to him in aid, but Solomon never regained his glory.

Here used metonymically for the contents of this issue: Contents as detailed below, page 9.

On metonymy, which can be summarily defined as ‘a transfer of names between objects which are related to one another extrinsically and simply’, articulating ‘the enterprise of combining

¹ In Britain, the penalty for sodomy (whether private or public, whether consenting or not) was capital punishment. This was enforced from 1538 up to 1861, just twelve years before Solomon's charge.

² William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 77-78.

³ Solomon also exhibited ‘drawings in commercial galleries in London from the age of fifteen’. Colin Cruise, ‘Pre-Raphaelite Drawing’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. by Elizabeth Prettejohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 47-61, p. 58.

⁴ Alfred Werner, ‘The Sad Ballad of Simeon Solomon’, *The Kenyon Review*, 22(3) (1960), 393-407 (pp. 399 and 403).

our objects of thoughts into larger wholes': what happens when parts are subsumed into wholes?⁵

Solomon, at the age of thirty-three, was arrested 'in a public urinal along with George Roberts, a sixty-year-old stableman'; in Paris, also while cruising at a urinal, his fellow criminal at the time was 'Raphael-Maximilien Dumont, a nineteen-year-old wine clerk, who went by the name of Henri Lefranc'.⁶

"Several noteworthy contemporaries", it was earlier stated; this would imply that Roberts and Dumont are merely accidental by virtue of not leaving their marks on history (whether polished or stained). The courts reflect this: in London, Solomon was fined 100 pounds but Roberts eighteen months of hard labour; in Paris, while both Solomon and Dumont were fined sixteen francs, Solomon was sentenced to three months' prison time but Dumont to six. As Carolyn Conroy suggests, 'Solomon was able to avoid a custodial sentence [in London, at least] probably because of his social status and close family connections with one of the wealthiest Jewish families in London'.⁷

What is left invisible in the representational enterprise of metonymy? There are invisibilities within invisibilities.

Is highly intriguing: An opinionated statement which holds, at the very least, in that *Sappho and Erinna* is a painting of two non-heterosexual women depicted by a non-heterosexual man in as staunchly heterosexual a society as was Victorian England.

Solomon's other paintings—several of them oriented towards Jewish customs and rituals, especially his earlier works—were often seen as intriguing in terms of being "completely unlike anything else that was being done at this time" due to their "strange, sad, exotic, alien" "atmosphere", and, as Thaïs E. Morgan suggests, 'Solomon's awareness of his doubly marginal position as a Jew and a homosexual may be part of both the sadness and the so-called strangeness in his illustrations of Judaic topics'.⁸

His *Sappho and Erinna* was heavily influenced by Swinburne's (then highly controversial) dramatic monologue *Anactoria*, and 'Solomon found in Swinburne's enthusiasm for the subject of lesbianism a novel opportunity for representing same-sex desire in a publicly acceptable form',⁹ where sapphism was digestible only 'under the guise of classical respectability'.¹⁰

Sappho, adorned with the laurel, leans on and tightly embraces Erinna, a fellow Hellenic poet: Let us leave to one side Swinburne's influence on Solomon's perceptions of eroticism, heavily shaded by de Sade and reflected in Sappho's 'aggressive embrace' as she 'grimaces

⁵ Hugh Bredin, 'Metonymy', *Poetics Today*, 5(1) (1984), 45-58 (p. 57).

⁶ Peniston, p. 78.

⁷ Carolyn Conroy, 'Mingling with the Ungodly: Simeon Solomon in Queer Victorian London', in *Sex, Time and Place: Queer Histories of London, c. 1850 to the Present*, ed. by Simon Avery and Katherine M. Graham (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 185-202, p. 188. Conroy also offers a counter-narrative to the "tragic" second half of Solomon's life, describing it instead as one free from the shackles of middle-class elitism and morality.

⁸ Thaïs E. Morgan, 'Perverse Male Bodies: Simeon Solomon and Algernon Charles Swinburne', in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, ed. by Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 61-85, p. 65. Morgan is here quoting F. Reid, *Illustrators of the 1860s* (London: Farber and Gwyer, 1928).

⁹ Morgan, p. 66.

¹⁰ Ivan Crozier, 'Sexuality', in *A Companion to Nineteenth Century Europe, 1789-1914*, ed. by Stefan Berger (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 382-397, p. 386.

with desire’, all while Erinna ‘tries to delay the dominant woman [...] by putting her right knee up between them’.¹¹

The pairing is historically inaccurate. Erinna was not from Lesbos (Sappho’s home) but rather from Téos (or even, potentially, other cities), and separated also by a couple of centuries.¹² This is impossible love to the nth degree: impossible to represent without the disguise of intellectual elitism, almost but not quite evading cultural censorship; impossible because it is same-sex love; impossible because Sappho and Erinna could never have met to love.

It is from Sappho’s name and birthplace, respectively, that we gain the synonyms of sapphism and lesbianism. Erinna, though much less renowned and admired, is also a great poet—too good, in fact, to be a woman (another supposed impossibility).¹³

Here is Aphrodite, speaking to Sappho, promising her love returned at all costs, even if Solomon’s Erinna puts her knee up in resistance:

“If she flees you now, she will soon pursue you; | If she won’t accept what you give, she’ll give it | if she doesn’t love you, she’ll love you soon now, | even unwilling”.¹⁴

But Erinna merely continues to meditate on a portrait of beautiful Agatharchis:

‘This portrait was made with delicate hands: Prometheus my good friend, | there are people with skills equal to yours too. | Anyway, if whoever drew this girl so-true-to-life, | had added speech, Agatharchis would be complete’.¹⁵

Sappho replies, dejected:

‘You have forgotten me | or else you love another more than me’.¹⁶

Their figures are paralleled: two birds above them (presumably, some form of dove) face each other, beak to beak: The doves: the pinnacle of the pyramid that Solomon constructs.

The tritest association with birds is freedom. The doves are not caged. Let us not forget that women (and female sexuality) in Victorian England were often symbolised by the caged songbird: ‘the cage could stand for love, in which the man or woman (as bird) is trapped. The cage could also be a picture of the female organ, the bird meaning virginity; let the bird escape and you have the loss of virginity’.¹⁷ The Victorian woman is the ‘pet par excellence’; their

¹¹ Morgan, p. 67.

¹² See ‘The Tate Gallery 1980-82: Illustrated Catalogue of Acquisitions’, London, 1984.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/solomon-sappho-and-erinna-in-a-garden-at-mytilene-t03063> [accessed 1 May 2020].

¹³ ‘The general perception that literature of quality was by men led to the modern denial that Erinna, one of the most famous female writers in antiquity, was a woman’. I.M. Plant, ‘Introduction’, in *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology*, ed. by I.M. Plant (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), pp. 1-9, p. 2 (see also ‘Erinna’, pp. 48-52, p. 49). Here Plant is talking about M.L. West’s argument in ‘Erinna’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 25 (1997), 101-15.

¹⁴ Sappho, [LP1], in *The Poetry of Sappho*, trans. by Jim Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 3-4, p. 4

¹⁵ Erinna, Untitled Epigram, in *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome*, p. 51

¹⁶ Sappho, [LP129], in *The Poetry of Sappho*, p. 32.

¹⁷ Elaine Shefer, ‘The “Bird in the Cage” in the History of Sexuality’, Sir John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1(3) (1991), 446-480 (p. 448). See also Elaine Shefer, *Birds, Cages and Women in Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

fashions are 'likened to bird imagery (the crinoline, for example, was called "a cage")'; sexual euphemisms suggested that men desired "'to bird" a woman'.¹⁸

Solomon's doves evidence no sign of sadism; there is only representation and metonymy, a transfer of meaning from one pair to the other which cannot be equated without dividend. One dove does not constrict the other. Doves are not necessarily classical. Meanings are left out.

Next to Erinna, a goat, turned away. Next to the doves, a lonesome blackbird or crow: There seems to be no place for the third in the intertwining of the two; the blackbird (which might be a voyeur) and the goat (which busies itself with the foliage) are also left out. The third party—that which is beyond the dichotomy of acceptable love—is relegated to the side, the margin.

Gilbert Herdt argues that 'we must not reduce the richness and significance of divergent sex/gender categories and roles to a one-dimensional ideology of sexual dimorphism or to the residual category of homosexuality'.¹⁹ Herdt is right. However, Herdt's volume (focussing on hermaphroditism as that which blurs boundaries and dichotomies) collectively proposes an alternative in the form of "the third"—a concept only achieved through problematising the cultural hierarchy of sexual categories rather than demonstrating the aporetic openness within their conceptual structure.²⁰ A blurring or reversal of boundaries, no matter how successful, still from the outset asserts the very existence of such boundaries. Even as the hermaphrodite defies the impermeability between the masculine and the feminine, the barriers of conceptual identity are still continuously re-assembled around them in a discursive attempt at controlling the anomalous and inconclusive.

What do the blackbird and the goat do; or, what does the animal do? Does it remind us that there will always be those parts which cannot be subsumed into the whole? That one can never conclusively be one thing or another, that metonymy ignores the anomalous, that no easy transferral is possible?

Perhaps the blackbird only watches and the goat only eats.

At their feet, some stray flowers and petals, presumably blown with the wind but nonetheless a mystery: It is almost as if they are shed by Erinna herself, so closely do they match the colour of her chiton. Yes, it would be valid to see these stranded flowers as metonymies for homeless, marginal love. Gayle Marie Seymour acknowledges this (describing *Sappho and Erinna* as "'one of the artist's most outspoken and open allusion[s] to homosexuality'") and links the flowers to Solomon's *In The Temple of Venus* (1863; below);²¹ the shed blossoms, Morgan adds, 'resonate with the subject of passionate but sorrowful love between members of the same sex, safely set within a distant, partly mythologized past, and portrayed within the classicizing iconography familiar in Victorian art of the 1860s'.²²

¹⁸ Shefer, 'The "Bird in the Cage"', p. 468.

¹⁹ Gilbert Herdt, 'Preface', in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. by Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), pp. 11-20, p. 17

²⁰ Cf. '[T]he third type of aporia, the impossible, the antinomy, or the contradiction, is a nonpassage because its elementary milieu does not allow for something that could be called passage, step, [...] displacement [...]. There is no more path [...]. The impasse itself would be impossible'. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 21.

²¹ Gayle Marie Seymour, 'The Life and Work of Simeon Solomon (1840-1905)', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, 1986, p. 95, as quoted in Morgan, p. 66.

²² Morgan, p. 66.



An equally valid response, however, is that these are impossible flowers; they are surrounded by plants that show no inclination to bloom. They should not be there; they do not fit. Something has been metonymised.

After all, the plant life behind the two women shows no signs—or even capabilities—of blooming: Let us return to Solomon:

His arrest in Paris demonstrates that Solomon, similar to many other men involved in the subculture, did not stop, after his first encounter with the police, searching for sex in those areas of London or Paris where he was most likely to encounter other men with similar sexual interests.²³

Had he reformed and given up heavy drinking, had he worked hard, society might have forgiven him and after some years rewarded him with a membership in the Royal Academy and perhaps even with a professorship. But Solomon wanted to be free to follow his impulses.²⁴

It is resistance, even when there seems no other option, that forges the way forwards. A reluctance to reform, to be silent—as seen in the #MeToo or Black Lives Matter movements. The articles in this issue, centred around the theme of literature and gender, all resist by incorporating the invisible, the marginal, the abject, the metonymised back into discourse.

²³ Peniston, p. 78.

²⁴ Werner, p. 401.

This issue opens with Jasmine Bajada's 'Mothers, Daughters, and Damaged Legs: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Elena Ferrante's *Neopolitan Novels* and Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*', which draws upon Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject to investigate the troubling and troubled inheritance of female genealogy. Bajada looks at the porousness of the mother/daughter body, psyche, and context: in short, a female subjectivity that is not restrained to the self. Like Sappho and Erinna—and like Solomon, later—the protagonists of the novel resist a patriarchal society that constricts roles and identities into acceptable forms, and this caging of birds is here manifested, at least in part, through a shared symbolic-literal limp. Resistance and the blooming of impossibility comes from an incorporation of prescribed otherness into one's body, transforming disability and subjectivity alike; the daughter overcomes matrophobia and in this way 'willingly accepts her mother living inside her' and recaptures motherhood as resistance rather than restriction.

Following this, Lynne Deboeck's 'The Culinary Coding of Gender Construction: Simplicity Rhetoric in Cookbooks from the Little Blue Book Series' analyses the rhetoric of simplicity in American food preparation manuals of the 1920s and 30s. Once more, the woman is caged, both in terms of role as well as place: this time, the middle-class kitchen. Deboeck complicates the language of simplicity used in several cookbooks in order to demonstrate the gendered reverence of the domestic, and how 'it is the woman who is selected as needing the process of cooking to be simplified', rather than the man—it is, after all, for the man's pleasure that the house is kept. Deboeck also repeatedly returns to the historical and social contexts of the target audience, in this way seeing invisibilities within invisibilities; women who were financially impoverished, or those who were non-white, often escaped even the distorting gaze of patriarchy (in other words, those in the position of Roberts or Dumont). As Deboeck proposes, an examination into past rhetoric enables us to identify similar measures taken on today.

Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh's article—"This was the 'I'm male and you're female' territory": Inserting Gender into the Historical-Political Binary in Anna Burns's *Milkman*'—also, at one point, touches upon the gendered problematics of cooking. When one of the male characters of Burns's somewhat claustrophobic Northern Irish community becomes interested in cooking, he becomes 'the source of deep concern': for to be a chef meant, quite obviously, that one was homosexual. Ní Éigeartaigh uses this as 'one of the many examples Burns gives of the danger inherent in this unquestioning acceptance of constructed truths', and throughout the article Ní Éigeartaigh expands on and examines 'the privileging of the political conflict' while simultaneously 'deconstructing linguistic constructs in order to reveal widespread collusion in the silencing of women'. This article examines borders and barriers: geo-political, gendered, corporeal, linguistic; the milkman—the novel's threatening figure, mirroring waves of political oppression and totalitarianism—is not aestheticised in his power to define and constrict (as is Sappho in Solomon's painting). Rather, his sexual incursions and linguistic domination are revealed by Ní Éigeartaigh for what they are: gestures of male power that attempt to place the dove in its cage.

Elizabeth Woock's article 'Permission for Brutality' explores medieval simulacra in five contemporary comic book series (*Rat Queens*, *Heathen*, *1062: Witch Hunter Angela*, *Northlanders*, and *Black Road*) in order to analyse the relations of depicted violence with gender and female sexuality, and this while more broadly asking the question of 'how history can be used to legitimise ideology'. Woock's article spans differentiations of violence (namely, *vis* and *violentia*), the bidirectional shaping of past and present (whether in terms of aesthetics,

representation, or gender politics), female collectives (such as covens or nunneries), and the genealogical inheritance of queer and female narratives. Ultimately, Woock’s article spans fantasy and reality in seeing historic evidence shored up in favour of (as opposed to against, as with Solomon’s *Sappho and Erinna*) contemporary ideology that ‘nurture outdated ideologies through the guise of “heritage”’.

The last academic article of this issue is Nizar Zouidi’s ‘The Technique of the Play-within-the-Play and the Empowerment of Female Audiences in *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, which looks at the complicated interplay between audience and stage, especially in those instances when actors become themselves the audience of dramatic performance. Noting how ‘[f]emale characters, in particular, tend to make some of the most pertinent comments on the performance[s]’ (that is, ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ and ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’), Zouidi demonstrates how female characters in Shakespeare are given their opportunity to resist their prescribed silence, “singing” not from the cage but rather of its critique. This interrogation of normative sociality and cultural stereotyping allows Gertrude and Hippolyta, among others, to challenge the hegemony that attempts to silence them and break the framing narratives that attempt to constrain them.

Closing this issue is a selection of creative work by John Martin. Three poems (‘The Performance’, ‘More than Animals’, and ‘Mix and Match’), followed by extracts from a long poem sequence (*All This Fuss*), explore the imbrications of sex, sexuality, and gendered performance through distinct voices, from the wistful to the frustrated to the comic. Two plays follow the poems, with the first being ‘Ars Fingendi’, a humorous dramatic piece that transports the reader to a morning in the life of Michelangelo, frustrated by the Church and by a young, lascivious model who relentlessly demands his breakfast. The second, ‘You Are Certain Who You Are’, presents us with a more ominous and ambiguous figure in the form of Dave, a man in his forties who looms over the other characters with a Pinteresque presence, and whose motives and means of sexual domination remain determinedly inconclusive.

What has been left out here from Solomon’s *Sappho and Erinna*, where in every sense they interact impossibly in the garden of Lesbos’s capital city?

It is the lyre, the scroll, and the statue holding out its palm, outwards, as if in generous openness. It is Solomon’s reminder that *poiesis* always blooms from the margin, the forgotten; not the place where the eye is directed to but rather the space that must be searched out. The articles and writings within this issue all, in their own ways, generously hold out their hands and allow the parts to be more visible than the whole—and, in so doing, remind us to resist the levelling totalitarianism of Western patriarchal thought.



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