Hip Sublime

Murnaghan, Sheila

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Murnaghan, Sheila.
Hip Sublime: Beat Writers and the Classical Tradition.
The Ohio State University Press, 2017.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66753.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66753
CHAPTER 7

Sappho Comes to the Lower East Side

ED SANDERS, THE SIXTIES AVANT-GARDE, AND FICTIONS OF SAPPHO

JENNIE SKERL

Come o sacred lyre of mine! Speak out!
Gift yourself with speech. . .
—SAPPHO 118 (TRANS. IN SANDERS, “A TRIBUTE TO SAPPHO”)

Since I first translated Sappho
And memorized her meters
In Bluma Trell’s Greek Lyric Poetry class
in 1964 at NYU
I have been in love, in awe, and deepest respect
For this great great poet!
—ED SANDERS, “A TRIBUTE TO SAPPHO”

“Each age, each generation invents its own Sappho,”¹ and Beat writer Ed Sanders follows in that centuries-old tradition. An experimental writer and performer who is also a student of Greek literature, Sanders employs Sappho to authorize the New York City avant-garde culture of which he was a part in the early 1960s and that he memorialized in his short story collection, Tales of Beatnik Glory (2004). Sanders’s Sappho is an exemplum,² but rather than upholding traditional aesthetic forms or the ideology of the

1. Ellen Greene’s observation introduces a collection of essays on Sappho’s reception (1996b, 3), and similar statements have been made by several other scholars.
2. I use the term exemplum as defined by L. Hardwick (2003). She notes that exempla can involve “a mixture of artistic, verbal and political elements” and may contain a critique about contemporary matters (24).
dominant culture, the Sappho in *Tales* represents bohemian values that challenge convention: experimental art using contemporary media, frank eroticism and portrayal of the sexual body, and gender reversal that privileges the feminine as an alternative to aggressive masculinity. In constructing his countercultural Sappho, Sanders draws upon some of the biographical legends from the history of Sappho's reception, or what Joan DeJean calls the “fictions of Sappho”; in doing so, he foregrounds a reading of Sappho that is countercultural. This essay reviews the avant-garde culture in which Sanders played a major role and the history of Sappho's reception, leading to an analysis of how Sanders's poem, “Sappho on East Seventh,” constructs a Sappho for his generation.

In the early 1960s, the Lower East Side of New York City was the locus of a new bohemia of young people, such as Ed Sanders, who self-identified as “beatniks” following in the footsteps of the older Beat generation of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs. As artists began moving into this area in the late 1950s to avoid rising rents in the well-established bohemia known as Greenwich Village, they created what later became known as the East Village, a distinct avant-garde community that grew and expanded beyond the labels of Beat or beatnik. Beat poets interacted with other avant-garde poetry groups, such as the New York School and Black Mountain poets. Poets socialized with painters who had created a cooperative gallery scene on East Tenth Street and performance artists (playwrights, dancers, composers, and musicians) who created Off-Off Broadway. Underground film was born and new art forms emerged, such as the happening. Thus, from the late 1950s until the mid-1960s, the Lower East Side became a generational epicenter of avant-garde ferment. This early 1960s avant-garde was chronicled by participant observers, who described the East Side poetry scene from 1960–65 (De Loach 1972), surveyed the arts of “the new bohemia” of 1964–66 (Gruen 1966), observed “a new generation of scene-makers” congregating in the Lower East Side (Sukenick 1987, 127), and identified a “new consciousness” beginning around 1960 (Jones 1990, 126). Ed Sanders's fictionalized memoir, *Tales of Beatnik Glory* (2004), in its first two volumes, narrates the history of this arts community from 1957 to 1965 through the adventures of characters who illustrate the varied artistic and political activities taking place there. Subsequently, Sanders published a documented memoir of the 1960s entitled *Fug You* (2011).

---

3. *Tales of Beatnik Glory* consists of four volumes of short stories that were written over a period of thirty years. The stories in volume 1: 1957–62 were written in the 1970s and published in 1975. Volume 2: 1963–65 was written in the 1980s and published with volume 1 in 1990. Volume 3: 1966–67 and volume 4: 1968–69 were written in the 1990s and early 2000s. All four volumes were published in one book in 2004. All citations are from the 2004 edition.

4. A full-length critical analysis of the early 1960s arts culture is provided by Banes 1993; she identifies 1963 as the peak year, or most productive period. Banes's study is limited by her...
Like previous avant-gardes, this community sought to create an alternative culture that served as a bohemian retreat from the dominant (bourgeois) culture, as a critique of mainstream values and social structures, as a force for social change, and as a crucible for art. Like the Dadas and Surrealists before them, this avant-garde sought to erase boundaries between art and life, to create art that, in Peter Bürger’s words, could “organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” (1984, 49). The Lower East Side community was aware of its predecessors (some of whom, like Duchamp, were living in New York at the time) and built upon their achievements, but they also introduced new ideas and developed new art styles. Perhaps the most prominent characteristic of this avant-garde was the democratization of the arts (Sukenick 1987, 127; Banes 1993, 6; Bertens 1995, 5). Artists sought to create accessibility through low-cost materials or performances and an ethic of equality among artists and between artists and their audience. Thus, for example, poetry readings in bohemian cafes, such as Le Metro and the Tenth Street Coffeehouse, were egalitarian in structure, open to all with equal time to read, no censorship of material, and a nominal cost to the audience. Experimental poetry magazines, such as Ted Berrigan’s C, Sanders’s Fuck You/A Magazine of the Arts, and Diane di Prima and Le Roi Jones’s Floating Bear, were mimeographed and stapled, given away for free or at low cost. New, relatively unknown poets were published along with recognized older figures. Experimental theater works and happenings avoided expensive productions and often used found materials; typically, a collection from the audience paid the performers (equally); and sometimes the audience was involved in the performance.

Democratization supported a drive toward eliminating hierarchies, both aesthetic and social. As Peter Schjeldal said in a piece about Andy Warhol, “The sixties were all about erasing boundaries” (1990, 102). The combination of materials from popular, mass culture along with the traditions of high culture—including the classics—was part of this art style, as was incorporating taboo subject matter and language, especially references to the body, sexuality, and drugs. Media and genre boundaries were also broken down by Lower East Side artists in an interdisciplinary art style that combined word and image and sound and performance and communal interaction among artists across media. Indeed, Gruen calls this bohemia “the combine generation.” Stylistically, erasure of boundaries was conducted in a spirit of play and spontaneity; thus, the work–play boundary was also challenged. Sanders captures the

focus on the performing arts; thus, Sanders is mentioned but not discussed. Diggory 2009 covers this period within a broader encyclopedia. His introduction provides a succinct overview. Kane 2003 surveys the poetry community and discusses Sanders almost solely in relation to his magazine.
principle in this passage from Tales: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, but it was our times, and we owned them with our youth, our energy, our good will, our edginess. So let’s party. . . . Poetry was a party. Work was a party. When I put out an issue of Fuck You/A Magazine of the Arts . . . that was a party. Fugs rehearsals were a party. Even demonstrations and long meetings planning the revolution” (2004, 277).

Physicality, the body as the focus of art, was also a mark of this avant-garde, especially its emphasis on the sexual body as the ground of a new aesthetic and an imagined social utopia. In his survey of the scene, Gruen devotes substantial coverage to Kerista (a commune practicing group sex), the predominance of sex in the little poetry magazines, sexual activity in underground films, the “body poetry” of the Fugs (Sanders’s folk rock band), and the nude performances of cellist Charlotte Moorman. Nudity and explicit sexuality in the performing arts and film presented the shameless sexual body as a force for liberation. Diggory has commented on the sexual energy underlying both Beat and New York School poetry in the 1960s, providing not only a basis for social and artistic freedom but also a vision of society expressed by the counterculture. In the early 1960s, much of the sexuality was projected from a largely unquestioned male—and male chauvinist—perspective; however, work by gay and female artists was prominent in the performing arts, which sometimes challenged gender borders and hierarchies.

This same bohemian community was also the home of many political activists in the antinuclear, antiwar, and civil rights movements, which in the 1960s were linked to movements for free speech, sexual liberation, and the legalization of marijuana. The political and artistic were intertwined in that many artists were also politically active or contributed their art to benefit political causes. Indeed, it is the mark of this generation that political protest was integrated into their art—in contrast to the comparative withdrawal of the earlier generation of Beats and other bohemians in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Group activity in politics and art fostered a strong sense of community, and the fusion of the aesthetic and the political created a utopian belief in the power of the avant-garde to change society by creating an alternative model: Bürger’s “new life praxis” based on art. Sanders expressed this ideal as “Goof City,” and a character in Tales writes a Goof City Manifesto, envisioning “a place of great freedom, affordability, cheap rents, adequate wages, wild times, plenty of leisure, guaranteed access to thrills and art, with streets so safe a person, man or woman, could walk naked at 4 a.m. and not be bothered or

5. Banes devotes an entire chapter to the body in the performing arts of the period.
touched” (2004, 429). (In fact, this utopia seems a literal description of the Lower East Side at the time.)

An aesthetic that celebrated the breaking of barriers or taboos, aspiring toward ecstasy through sex and drugs, and utopian dreams of social change embodied spiritual impulses. Spiritual quest had been a part of the Beat movement from the beginning. Kerouac insisted that Beat meant beatific (Kerouac 1999a), and he linked the Beats to an eclectic mix of religious traditions and American popular culture (Kerouac 1999b). This eclecticism was also prominent in Beat “second generation” bohemia. Some created new religions. Sanders’s friend and poet Al Fowler, described in Fug You, is an example: he claimed to be a member of the Free Catholic Church, wore a clerical collar, along with a large silver cross and an anarchist button on his lapel (2011, 40). He is the basis for the character Andrew Kliver in Tales who sports similar attire. The Kerista commune was also a new religion led by its founder. For some, art was religion. Poet Diane di Prima, active on the Lower East Side during this period, affirms in her memoir the community’s spiritual sense of purpose: “It wasn’t just the work, though the work was clearly blessed. Nor the rewards, which were none, as far as we knew. It was the life itself—a vocation like being a hermit or a samurai. A calling. The holiest life that was offered in our world: artist” (2001, 103). Several characters in Sanders’s Tales echo di Prima’s credo of art as a sacred vocation, and Sanders has stated that the Lower East Side in the 1960s was “a sacred zone” (Dougherty 1992, 8). Pop artists invested mass media images with religious power, such as Andy Warhol’s serial images of Marilyn Monroe and the widowed Jackie Kennedy, transforming them into sexual/maternal goddesses. The film criticism of Jonas Mekas (also an experimental film maker) often discussed the new underground films in spiritual and moral terms. At the same time, two established churches in the Village—Judson Memorial and St. Mark’s—reached out to the artistic community and provided venues for art as part of their ministry. In addition, the Catholic Worker movement, which plays a role in Tales of Beatnik Glory and Fug You, was active on the Lower East Side.

No other artist of that time and place better exemplifies the 1960s Lower East Side avant-garde than Ed Sanders. His art was inseparable from his politics and was a form of both protest and changing consciousness. His first published poem, Poem from Jail (1963) was written in jail after Sanders’s arrest in a protest against nuclear submarines. From 1962 to 1965, Sanders was also

6. See Prothero 1991 on the Beats’ disaffection from mainstream organized religion in the postwar period, their exploration of a religious eclecticism, and radical ecumenism.
7. Publication of Poem From Jail by Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Press in 1963 gave Sanders important early recognition, linking him with the older Beat generation poets and their publisher.
an influential promoter and disseminator of avant-garde poetry through his self-published poetry magazine, *Fuck You/A Magazine of the Arts*, part of what Sanders calls the mimeograph revolution (2011, 2). The magazine also served as a manifesto for free speech issues, sexual liberation, and legalization of marijuana. The first issue was dedicated to “pacifism, unilateral disarmament, national defense thru [sic] nonviolent resistance, multilateral indiscriminate apertual conjugation, anarchism, world federalism, civil disobedience, obstructors and submarine boarders, and all those groped by J. Edgar Hoover in the silent halls of Congress” (quoted in Butterick 1983, 474). In 1964, Sanders opened the Peace Eye Bookstore on East Tenth Street, which sold small press poetry publications and provided a base for Sanders’s diverse activities—the press, art shows, rehearsal space for his rock band, work on his experimental films, political organizing, and, of course, parties. According to Butterick, “For its time, Peace Eye was as vital as Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Bookshop had been on the West Coast during the previous decade” (477).

The culmination of Sanders’s border-crossing and communal art during the 1960s was his folk-rock band, the Fugs, cofounded with Tuli Kupferberg, a pacifist anarchist who sold his poetry in the street. The name, the Fugs, refers to the euphemism that Norman Mailer was forced to use in his World War II novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, flaunting the unspoken obscenity and the censorship that the band defied. Writing their own songs, the Fugs combined music with poetry, political protest, social satire, sex comedy, and an anarchic style that usually ended performances with a Dionysian kind of happening with Sanders, in his own words, playing the role of “a modern-day American Bacchus” (2011, 393). From 1965 to 1969, the band had a cult following in New York and beyond. They also had a political role beyond protest songs, often playing to benefit the anti–Vietnam War movement or activists who had been arrested. Perhaps their most famous performance/protest was their exorcism of the Pentagon during the 1967 antiwar march in Washington, DC, described in Norman Mailer’s *Armies of the Night* (1968).

The sexual body as the site of cultural struggle was prominent in Sanders’s work of the 1960s. This aspect of his art gave him a certain notoriety as “an erotic provocateur” (Sukenick 1987, 176). Early poems, for example, were devoted to sex with animals, trees, and a goddess (Demeter). The title of his mimeographed poetry magazine announced the liberation of the four-letter word for sex. The editorial policy defined an openness with no restrictions: “Barf me your frick data, retch me in on your babble vectors, your arcanics, your spew. I’ll print anything” (Sanders 2011, 30). Sanders’s press also published several monographs that other publishers wouldn’t touch because of obscenity issues, such as William S. Burroughs’s *Roosevelt after Inauguration*
(1979). Like most rock and roll bands, the Fugs sang songs about sex, but theirs were more graphic and satirical of the genre, such as “Group Grope,” “Wet Dream Over You,” “Coca-Cola Douche.”

Sanders’s style in poetry, prose, and music employed the breakdown of hierarchies typical of the period and was very much a part of the 1960s avant-garde program of democratization and accessibility. His work playfully combined elements from popular culture, avant-garde art, and the poetic tradition going back to the ancient Greeks, producing an idiosyncratic collage of high and low culture, an interart mix of verbal and visual elements, accessible language, and his own characteristic humor made up of comic hyperbole, satire, slang, and neologisms.8 Throughout Sanders’s writing, Greek writers, history, and mythology appear as reference points, parallels, inspiration, and formal models; for at the same time that Sanders was active in the Lower East Side avant-garde, he was also studying the classics at New York University (located in Greenwich Village), completing a degree in Greek in 1964. Learning his craft as a poet and the study of the classics were parallel pursuits. From the beginning of his Greek studies and his artistic career, Sappho, in particular, had an important role. Over the years, Sanders paid homage to Sappho by translating her verses and setting them to music in his “Tribute to Sappho” and by reciting his poems accompanied by his lyre.9 In Tales of Beatnik Glory, the long narrative poem, “Sappho on East Seventh,” plays a central role in the series of autobiographical fictions set in the Lower East Side, bringing together Sanders’s veneration for Sappho and the avant-garde milieu that nurtured him as an artist.

It is not surprising that a young poet studying the classics would be inspired by Sappho, who stands at the beginning of lyric poetry in the West (seventh century BCE)—a literary progenitor who has had a profound influence on the poetic tradition for centuries. In addition to his classical studies, Sanders absorbed a Sapphic poetics derived from his Anglo-American poetic forerunners and mentors who were part of the postromantic Sapphic tradition in English poetry. The romantics privileged the lyric, and the Sapphic ode was a model of sublimity and passion for both male and female poets during


9. Beginning in 1977, Sanders began inventing electronic instruments, one of which is the pulse lyre, which he uses to accompany his poetry readings. Like Sappho and other ancient poets, Sanders partly recites and partly sings his poems. He often refers to himself as a bard. Sappho is also said to have invented a kind of lyre (Carson 2002, ix).
the nineteenth century. Subsequently, the new scholarly editions of Sappho’s fragments that appeared at the end of the nineteenth century stimulated one of the most important modernist movements in poetry: the “imagism” theorized by Ezra Pound and practiced in the early poetry of Pound, H.D., William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell, and others who wrote short, free verse poems with concentrated concrete imagery, often imitating Sapphic fragments in form. In fact, some of Pound’s and H.D.’s early imagist poems are free translations or imitations of Sappho. Imagism was influential in modern American poetry throughout the twentieth century, providing the basis for both short lyrics and long poems made up of fragmentary passages (e.g., T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Pound’s *Cantos*, William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, and Charles Olson’s *The Maximus Poems*).

After World War II, imagism continued to influence American poetry movements through the poetic line of Pound, Williams, Olson, and Allen Ginsberg; these movements were labeled Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, and Beat, and formally recognized in Donald M. Allen’s influential 1960 anthology of avant-garde poetry: *The New American Poetry* (reissued in 1982 as *The Postmoderns: The New American Poetry Revised*, which included Sanders). These were the poetic forerunners and movements that influenced the young Ed Sanders as a poet, and both Ginsberg, one of the original Beats, and Olson, once the rector of Black Mountain College, were personal mentors. Thus, Sanders’s education in contemporary poetry and his own reading of the classics complemented each other and reinforced the importance of Sappho as inspiration, forerunner, model. As a student of the classics and of modern poetry, Sanders developed a stylistic fusion of poetic traditions in his own work. Throughout his poetic career, Sanders has composed in the open forms of his mentors while also experimenting with ancient Greek meters and imitations of Greek poets.

As “A Tribute to Sappho” shows, Sanders is familiar with the scholarship on Sappho as well as the poetry. Historically, the absence of knowledge about her or her society, as well as the fragmentary remains of her poetry, drew poets and scholars in each generation to invent a Sappho for their culture, their ideals, their social agenda. Sappho has been appropriated to support the values of many a reader, a scholar, a poet, an activist, and Sanders, in “Sappho on East Seventh,” participates in a long chain of reception when he introduces

---


11. Sanders and others of his generation continued to look toward Pound’s *Cantos* as a resource for contemporary poetry. In 1967, Sanders considered it a coup to have the opportunity to publish a group of the previously unpublished cantos, 110–16.
Sappho into his bohemia. By the twentieth century, a complex and contradictory array of images, themes, and biographical fictions had been transmitted and made available to Sanders. His poem plays with these images of Sappho as well as alluding to her poetry.

Among the many contradictory “fictions of Sappho,” several that were persistent over time and influential among scholars and poets are relevant to Sanders’s poetic construction of a Sappho for his time. Most important to Sanders’s conception of Sappho is the praise in antiquity that declared that Sappho was the Tenth Muse—an epithet repeated throughout history. Other legends from antiquity that Sanders recalls are of Sappho as the heterosexual and abandoned, suicidal lover of a young man (Phaon)—a legend told by Ovid and a prominent part of her identity through the nineteenth century—and the scandalous Sappho, the lover of women whose books were burnt by both Christian and Muslim religious authorities in late antiquity.

Sanders rejects the “Victorian Sappho” of the nineteenth century who was chaste, virginal, and absorbed into an ideal of female sexual purity, but he draws on one facet of that figure—a spiritual, almost divine Sappho who could be associated with the Virgin Mary. He also draws upon another prominent nineteenth-century fiction that remained influential into the next century—that Sappho was a teacher in a school that prepared girls for marriage by teaching poetry, music, dance, and deportment—and even sexual technique. Although the girls’ school has been debunked (see Parker 1996), the idea of Sappho as a teacher persists in those contemporary critics who assert that Sappho’s poetry instructs its readers, particularly male readers, in how to feel, how to love, or how to understand female desire. Willis Barnstone’s translation of Ovid supports this view: “What did Sappho of Lesbos teach / but how to love women?” (2006, xxvi, his translation of Tristia 2.363, Testimonia 49, in Campbell 1982).


13. Contemporary scholars believe that the decline of learning from the sixth through the ninth centuries and thus neglect, rather than active destruction, led to the loss of much of Sappho’s work. See Snyder 1989, 10.


Sanders’s poem also reflects the early modern period when readers identified a lesbian Sappho who coexisted with many other versions, as diverse modernist male and female poets found inspiration in a lyric precursor who could be fashioned into a literary mother, muse, collaborator, representative of heterosexual or homosexual passion, or a modern independent woman. It was not until the end of the 1960s that second-wave feminism enabled the construction of a lesbian and feminist Sappho, which is widely accepted today. Beginning in the 1970s, Sappho became an icon for lesbians participating in the women’s liberation movement and the gay liberation movement. But in the early 1960s, the period Sanders chronicles in Tales, a sexually liberated, but not strictly lesbian, Sappho came into being: it is she who inhabits Sanders’s poem. (For Sappho as a 1960s “swinger,” see Reynolds 2000, 359.)

Finally, Sanders’s Sappho parallels some feminist scholarship that interprets Sappho as a poet who disrupts patriarchal structures and hierarchies, offering a critique of the martial world of Homer and of fifth-century Athens, which has been idealized as the pinnacle of ancient Greek culture. Like these critics, Sanders’s “Tribute” cites Sappho 16 where “what one loves” is declared to be more beautiful than troops or warships. This Sappho represents a woman-centered world that offers an alternative to patriarchal control: a realm of eros, beauty, and pleasure. Sanders also explores the gender reversal that occurs in mythology when a mortal man has sex with a goddess, which several feminist critics have detected in a pattern of allusions in Sappho’s poems to four myths about goddesses who take an active sexual role in relation to a young man: Aphrodite and Adonis, Aphrodite and Phaon, Eos and Tithonus, Selene and Endymion. These myths can be interpreted as a trope that asserts women’s autonomy and control over their sexuality.

Sappho and her historical reception play an important role in Tales of Beatnik Glory, as Sanders seeks to preserve the 1960s bohemia that he helped to create. In paying tribute to his generation, Sanders sought to ground his work and his vision of a bohemian community within a historical context that links the transitory art world that existed for a few years to traditions spanning centuries or millennia. Thus, in Tales, he claims precursors in the work

---


of earlier activists, prior avant-gardes, and great writers of the past, especially the ancient Greeks. The stories in *Tales of Beatnik Glory* frequently allude to Greek divinities, philosophers, historians, and literature. A beatnik's mother-in-law who delivers care packages to the “underground” beatnik couple is a modern-day Demeter; a beautiful woman who disrobes in public is compared to Pryne; two artist friends refer to each other as Apo and Dio (Apollo and Dionysus); the Celestial Freakbeam Orchestra subscribes to the philosophy of Plotinus—these are just a few of the numerous classical reference points that Sanders weaves throughout the work, merging the high and the low and transforming both. However, one classical reference goes beyond brief allusions or comparisons: “Sappho on East Seventh,” a story in verse that Sanders calls a “sho-sto-po,” or short story poem. Significantly, the story about Sappho appears near the center of volume 2, the volume that narrates the years 1963–65, the peak years of the Lower East Side avant-garde. Sappho plays the role of the muse that validates the Lower East Side bohemian subculture and Sanders’s personal commitment to its aesthetics and ethics.

Sanders chooses Sappho as the bohemian muse, not only because of his admiration for her poetry and his own poetic vocation but because Sappho can be aligned with an art that employs the sexual body as site of cultural change, with erotic pleasure as a source of creativity, and a politics of pacifism and sharing abundance. As feminist critics have pointed out, Sappho’s woman-centered world offers an alternative to socially prescribed masculinity and patriarchal dominance. From Sanders’s perspective, these characteristics can legitimate bohemia’s hedonism and the avant-garde’s critique of male-dominated bourgeois culture and American militarism. For Sanders, Sappho’s poetry offers not just an escape from repressive social structures, but a reconstruction of the self and society based on alternative values. Sappho’s antipatriarchal poetry also supports Sanders’s pacifist politics. Sanders, like other scholars, has cited Sappho 16 to support the thesis that Sappho represents a challenge to Homer and martial values:

... poets are sometimes fascinated with bellicosity,  
but you won’t find much talk of war in the  
shreds of Sappho  
but rather the melodies of love, tenderness, family,  
party, arousal, longing, sadness, and fun.  
(“Tribute to Sappho” 4)

The Sappho in opposition to Homer is thus an attractive precursor for Sanders, the pacifist antiwar poet, who concludes *Tales of Beatnik Glory* with a song
expressing the idealistic hope of his generation: “We are going to change the world without spilling a drop of blood” (2004, 766).

In “Sappho on East Seventh,” Sappho appears in a vision to John Barrett, a bohemian poet and graduate student in classics (one of Sanders’s alter egos in Tales) and, as his muse, she proceeds to educate him in art, eros, and an ethic of compassion. The Sappho who appears to Barrett is a supernatural being who is a constructed from several spiritual traditions, consistent with the eclectic spirituality of the Lower East Side. In the introduction to Tales, Sanders calls “Sappho on East Seventh” a ghost story that traces the religious yearnings of John Barrett, reflecting the spiritual hunger of the era (2004, 5). As a ghost of the ancient poet who acts as a spirit guide in the poem, Sappho reflects one kind of supernatural being—one which refers to the Divine Comedy in which Virgil leads Dante on a spiritual journey, a comparison made explicit at one point in the poem, creating a parallel in which an ancient poet guides a modern one. Sanders’s Sappho is also a muse whom John Barrett has “called down” with a song accompanied by his homemade lyre, recalling Sappho’s reputation as the Tenth Muse, the originator of lyric poetry and herself the inventor of a lyre. Barrett’s invocation to Sappho alludes to several of Sappho’s poems. He imitates the classical form of an invocation to a deity illustrated by Sappho herself in Sappho 1 (often called “Hymn to Aphrodite”), describes Sappho’s milieu, paralleling the strategy or spell in Sappho 2 (“Hither to me from Krete”), and quotes Sappho 118: “Come my sacred lyre / make yourself sing” (Sanders’s translation within the poem). Thus, Barrett’s song invoking Sappho puts him in a position parallel to Sappho requesting the presence of Aphrodite, therefore implying that Sappho herself is a goddess of love, as well as a poetic muse. A muse is a goddess, and Sappho makes an awe-inspiring appearance through a rip in the sky, scattering kernels of grain, and accompanied by the chirping of birds. Finally, after the ancient Greek Sappho leaves Barrett, she reappears to him later in the story in the form of a weeping woman reminiscent of the mater dolorosa, one of the images of the Virgin Mary, recalling the maternal aspect of the poet’s muse. Thus, Sanders’s Sappho is a hybrid construct drawn from Greek, Roman, and medieval sources, pagan and Christian, literary and folk images, but all pointing to female divine inspiration and authority, and reflecting the eclecticism of bohemian spiritual concepts.

---

19. In an email interview with the author (Skerl 2014), Sanders stated that the casting of seeds was important to his view of Sappho as a spirit since grain always seemed central to ancient Greek spirituality and religion, as in the myths of Demeter and Persephone. Birds are yoked to Aphrodite’s chariot in Sappho 1.
By choosing Sappho as the presiding spirit of the avant-garde, Sanders identifies a precursor who stands at the beginning of lyric poetry in the West, linking the 1960s avant-garde with a long poetic tradition and ancient cultural authority. But by making Sappho a goddess, a divine force, he goes even further in valorizing the art of bohemia as the overarching goal and ultimate value. His character John Barrett’s passionate devotion to art is a commitment that is a life-changing, world-changing spiritual vocation to him and his peers. Barrett’s dedication had previously been established in volume 1 of Tales where he is described as enmeshed in the Lower East Side community, devoted to the “holy books” of his poetic mentors, and ready to record moments of inspiration in his notebook. In the brief prologue to “Sappho on East Seventh,” we are told that he has created a shrine to Sappho in his apartment, with pictures of her, copies of tattered papyri containing her poetry, and his translations. At the same time as Sappho elevates Barrett’s vocation by her presence, she descends to the decidedly shabby milieu of Barrett’s apartment in an old tenement, with its mattress on the floor, splattered candles in chianti bottles, a nail for a clothes hanger, a shelf holding a hodgepodge collection of well-marked books, and a homemade lyre constructed from found materials in the neighborhood. This is literally a “comedown” for a goddess, typical of Sanders’s style in the poem of comically merging the high with the low. The effect of this erasure of hierarchy is both to invest the ordinary, even the tawdry, with an aura of transcendence and, at the same time, to make the goddess a quotidian being. Furthermore, in his hybrid experimentation with forms, Sanders, the author, also embeds Sappho in a modern free verse poem that combines narrative and lyric, words and images. Drawings that function as illustrations are part of the poem, and one of the visual images is a portrait of Sappho, thus enclosing her picture in the work.

Upon her appearance in Barrett’s “beatnik pad,” Sappho proceeds to act as a teacher and guide—in art, sexual technique, and compassion. Thus, Sanders draws upon the tradition of Sappho as a teacher of the male lyric poet. Sappho’s first teaching concerns Barrett’s artistic ambitions. Although her authority derives from tradition and the high status of the classics, she does not endorse imitation of traditional forms or established poets; rather, she authorizes the art of Barrett’s generation by playing on Barrett’s lyre rather than her own, by commending his collection of books by his contemporaries, by praising his translations as “better than Byron’s” (256), and by recommending

---

20. The image is a profile bust of Sappho accompanied by a lyre and a bee, and enclosed in an oval. Sanders stated in an interview with the author that this image was taken from the Loeb Classical Library edition of Greek Lyric Poets, which he had used in his undergraduate class on Greek lyric poetry, taught by Bluma Trell.
that he find a “Muse for your age” (257). She declares that this modern muse is Retentia, Muse of the Retained Image, that is, of film, photography, and recordings, which were very much a part of the Lower East Side avant-garde and Sanders's own multimedia experiments: “yours is the era / of captured sunlight / & oxide-dappled tape / Retentia / catches the beauteous flow” (258). She urges Barrett to pray to Retentia, “for each muse aids / in her measure / and the task / is to know / the mix of the muses’ gifts / in your lines” (259). Sappho says she longs to hear the maidens singing in Mitylene (“if only / I could hear / their image again!” 259, my italics), wishing that a recording existed and thereby approving new art using modern technology. Her song at this point recalls Sappho’s poems of memory and longing (Sappho 94 and 96). Retentia, the new muse, herself appears in the poem: “forth stepped Retentia / in a blue-black gown / crackling on its surface with / tiny jiggle-jagglies of lightning” (259–60).

Sappho’s next lesson is about eros, as she takes it upon herself to teach John Barrett to satisfy a woman through oral sex, first preparing his body with scented oil and unguents familiar from Sappho’s poetry. (Retentia assists by providing the oils.) “How can you think / a woman like Louise / would love you?” she asks (260), since he has no oils in his cupboard and no skill as a lover. (Louise Adams, a painter introduced in volume 1, is a woman Barrett is longing for.) Her erotic desire for women is not denied in the poem: “Don’t you make it only with, uh, gunaike?” asks Barrett (264). Several lyrical passages describe her sensual attraction toward women, but the poem emphasizes an eroticism beyond the heterosexual/homosexual binary with its comically epic description of oral sex. Sanders’s use of plant imagery to represent female genitalia parallels such imagery in Sappho’s poetry: flowers, apples, other fruits, and plants. The difference between Sappho’s symbolism and Sanders’s explicit comparison between the lithops and the clitoris is the difference between traditional sexual imagery (such as rosebuds or other flowers, pearls or other gems, a landscape that represents the female body) and the 1960s pursuit of sexual and literary freedom that included an openness to talking and writing about sex.
In constructing a Sappho who teaches sexual technique to John Barrett, Sanders reprises one strand of biographical speculation in the long history of Sappho’s reception—Sappho the teacher. He literalizes this theory of Sappho’s reception in his hyperbolic and comic style, as Sappho instructs Barrett in how to perform oral sex. Sanders’s Sappho is definitely not the chaste, virginial poetess or Victorian schoolmistress, but a frankly sexual being who has no prudery about sexuality, and like Sanders himself gives important value to sexual expression. Her sexuality is not scandalous, but shameless in the positive sense of the 1960s avant-garde. The poem focuses on a sexual act that blurs the line between heterosexual and homosexual, and whose purpose is pleasure, not procreation, reflecting the sexual freedom of the early 1960s and the art that explored a variety of sexual acts and sexualities. Furthermore, in “Sappho on East Seventh,” Sappho is herself a divinity representing both eros and poetry, and she links poetry and sexuality very literally, as she makes sexual knowledge a prerequisite for poetry: “Every bard must have / its perfect knowledge,” she says (262). This Sappho is not the abandoned female victim of unrequited love for a man, but a dominant partner. Sexually, Barrett acts as Sappho’s acolyte who submits to her instructions, a gender reversal, recalling the Greek myths about goddesses and mortals that appear in Sappho’s fragments. Traditional male sexual dominance is replaced by mutuality, implying a broader cultural adjustment.24

Sanders constructs a twentieth-century Sappho whose eroticism is celebrated, in contrast to the many times in the reception history in which her sexuality was condemned or repressed. This modern Sappho specifically reflects the sexual revolution of the early 1960s, a time of sexual freedom for both the women and men of the Lower East Side in the post-pill, pre-AIDS era, and before second-wave feminism criticized the sexist assumptions of sexual liberation. What is important about this Sappho’s sexuality is openness about the enjoyment of sexual pleasure and the freedom to portray the sexual body that was very much a part of the art of the Lower East Side. This pleasure-seeking Sappho affirms the hedonism of the 1960s portrayed in Tales of Beatnik Glory and that Sanders later defended in an interview: “We have to be hedonistic in a good part of our lives; otherwise, why live? . . . There’s that double life-track of having fun while working for a better world” (Horvath 1999, 24). There is also a connection to the poetry of Sappho herself, which is often cited as a model for passionate intensity, sensuality, sensuous imagery, and the sublime. Several Sapphic fragments portray eros as a powerful force

to be honored: “Eros shook my being / as a wind / down a mountain / shakes the oak trees” (Sappho 47; trans. Sanders 2001, 8).

After their sexual union, Sappho acts as a spirit guide to other times and places, thereby providing another form of instruction, leading next to a lesson of compassion. She first takes Barrett to visit Emma Hardy in 1911, the estranged wife of the writer Thomas Hardy who has retreated to live in her attic boudoir while her husband corrects proofs in his study with his mistress. Sappho orders Barrett to relieve Emma’s excruciating back pain with an oil from Mytilene—the erotic unguent transformed into a healing salve. In this episode, Sappho acts compassionately toward an abandoned woman rather than representing the abandoned woman herself; here, Sanders has transposed one of the most persistent “fictions of Sappho,” her supposed unrequited love for the younger Phaon and her suicidal despair, to another figure—Emma Hardy.

Thus, Sappho does not suffer negative consequences from her frank erotic expression, but represents the positive power of eros and sympathy between women. Eased of her pain, Emma is able to feed the birds at her window, a compelling image of female nurture and a link to Sappho’s kernels and the birds at the beginning of the poem. This maternal fertility imagery is associated with ancient female goddesses and foreshadows Sappho’s final appearance in the poem.

Before Sappho leaves Barrett, she transports him to an underground place, another motif from classical mythology: “a site of steam & fire” that reminds Barrett of Dante’s hell with Sappho as his Virgil (268). Here Sappho becomes less a deity than a ghostly mortal who accepts her death and the loss of most of her poetry. Sanders’s poem refers to the legends about the destruction of Sappho’s poetry through wars and religious riots. Sappho has taken Barrett to the baths of Alexandria after the Muslim conquest, where papyrus books are being burned to heat the water—including some of the books of Sappho. Sappho calmly accepts the destruction of her poetry and slips into the bath with other women, returning to a women’s society such as she enjoyed in her life and luxuriating in the sensual pleasure of the bath, a fitting farewell, but also a reminder of the piecemeal remains of Sappho’s poems, that the Sappho we know is made up of fragments and she herself is mute—unknown. Barrett sees the last word of a page of Sappho burn—a play on Byron’s oft-repeated phrase, “burning Sappho” (from Don Juan), here referring to burning books,

25. Hardy was an admirer of Sappho. He experimented with Sapphic meter, and after his wife died, he wrote memory poems about her that could be called Sapphic. Sanders’s poem focuses sympathetically upon Emma, not Thomas Hardy.

26. Sanders explained the linking of the seeds in the poem in an interview with the author.
not burning passion. Sappho accepts the end of her poetry in her farewell to Barrett, which quotes the inscription on Keats’s tombstone:

And now it is time
For ashes and chars
To come to the
mixolydian mode
Some poets’ words
are written on water\textsuperscript{27}
Others make flame
To make it moil.

(270)

The poem has several conclusions in addition to Sappho’s disappearance in the bath. First, there is a series of comic deflations, typical of Sanders’s pattern throughout Tales of undercutting elevated ideals with scruffy reality, grandiose ambition with comic pratfalls. In an attempt to save a piece of a Sappho papyrus, Barrett slips in the bath and “wakes up” in his apartment, clutching a silver knob from a papyrus roll. He and Consuela, a classmate and a secret witness to his vision, fall into each other’s arms, both overwhelmed with the experience that has brought them together. It is implied that John has sex with his next-door neighbor who is wearing a homemade chiton and peplos sewn from Lower East Side fabrics, including Ukrainian embroidery trim, common on bohemian blouses at the time, and dirty from kneeling on the fire escape. Thus, Barrett returns to his life embedded in bohemia. Friends mock his story, and he is unable to sing Sappho down again.

Deflation, however, is followed by another apparition that concludes the poem—Sappho as a maternal figure, another image of female divinity and another aspect of the muse. Barrett has an unexpected vision of Sappho for a second time near the St. Nicholas Carpatho-Russian church situated on Tenth Street in the heart of the bohemian district and a well-known landmark. Decked with Russian crosses, icons, and jewels (related to the Eastern rite church and the Ukrainian ethnic community of the Lower East Side), a weeping woman briefly appears in the street outside the church and is immediately identified by Barrett as Sappho. The vision appears without warning, utters a gnomic “you’ll cry too,” and disappears (274). A weeping woman associated with a sacred site is reminiscent of a facet of Mariology—the sorrowful mother (mater dolorosa) who relieves suffering through her own pain and

\textsuperscript{27} Keats, a Sapphic poet of the English romantic movement, requested these words on his gravestone: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” The grave also displays the image of a lyre.
empathy, a female spiritual resource that can also be found in ancient Middle Eastern fertility goddesses. Indeed, in a later story in volume 2, this apparition reappears and is identified as the “Carpathian Mother” (in “Cynthia,” Sanders 2004, 322). The merger of Sappho and a mother goddess—never specifically identified as Mary—recalls the nineteenth-century conflation of the poet and the Virgin as exemplars of feminine authority, autonomy, and spirituality. Certainly, a maternal figure of compassion is an image that supports Sanders’s political positions on ending war, sharing abundance, and peaceful change. There could also be an autobiographical element in Sanders’s vision of Sappho as a maternal deity. He first decided to study the classics in college because his mother, who died when he was in high school, had told him that a gentleman knows Greek and Latin. He was introduced to Sappho by the noted teacher, Bluma Trell. He met his wife in Greek class, and their daughter was born in 1964.

Sappho, the exalted female poet, also serves to recognize the women of bohemia as equal participants and representatives of bohemian values. The story-poem about Sappho introduces a cluster of stories at the center of volume 2 focused on strong female characters, for it is in this volume that Sanders purposefully emphasizes the women artists and activists who were very much part of the scene, but who were often overshadowed by men in a sexist era. This point was raised by Sanders in several interviews in which he regretted the chauvinism of the era and discussed the increased attention to women characters in volume 2. (See especially interviews with Horvath 1999 and Dougherty 1992.) Beginning in volume 2, Sanders restores women’s historical presence and continues to integrate them into the group story throughout the next two volumes. This strategy reflects the time that volume 2 was written—the 1980s—after the cultural impact of second-wave feminism—and acknowledges Sappho as a precursor for women artists.

In “Sappho on East Seventh,” Ed Sanders has created what Jane McIntosh Snyder calls a “productive fiction” (1997, 79). A seventh-century-bce poet known only through her fragmentary texts is reconstructed as the muse of the early 1960s Lower East Side avant-garde. Just as bohemians choose a mode of living that functions as a critique of the dominant social order, so Sanders’s choice of

28. Sanders has stated in an email to the author, “From a long study of Sappho fragments, I sensed that there was a mater dolorosa aspect to her, and thus the vision Barrett had.” See Warner 1983 and Pelikan 1996 for the mater dolorosa of Mariology.

29. The New York Times obituary for Professor Trell (Thomas 1997) stated that her “unbridled enthusiasm brought ancient Greece alive to a generation of New York University students.”
a female literary ancestor provides a source of alternative aesthetic and social values. Sappho lends her authority and status to a community of artists who created a counterculture that challenged the dominant culture: she endorses experimental art using new technology, the sexual body as an empowering creative force, and an ethic of compassion that opposes war. By “coming down” to John Barrett, Sappho participates in the collapsing of hierarchies that promotes equality, fusing the sacred with the everyday. Sanders also associates Sappho with female divinity, which is another countercultural move in a male-dominated society. The female goddesses Aphrodite, Demeter, the Muses, Mary (technically not a goddess, but nevertheless a spiritual authority) sanction bohemian alternatives to conventional middle-class mores and Cold War militarism—such alternatives as hedonism, eroticism, artistic freedom, compassion, equality, and sharing abundance. Sanders employs Sappho as an exemplum, but one which reverses that classical strategy: first, by using Sappho as a challenge to traditional values rather than to support authority, and, second, by telling a new story about Sappho, whereby Sanders invents rather than recalls the precedent.

As Hardwick has pointed out, modern appropriations of classical texts or motifs not only reflect contemporary contexts but also provide new perspectives on classical sources (2003, 4). In creating a countercultural Sappho, Sanders foregrounds the countercultural aspects of Sappho’s poetry: poetry of eroticism, pleasure, and beauty in a woman-centered world can offer a critique both of our own culture and of the patriarchal society of ancient Greece. In presenting Sappho as a goddess, Sanders also foregrounds a submerged or subordinated tradition of female spiritual authority that points toward alternative religious concepts that can be the basis for social change. The goddesses of antiquity are alien to our contemporary modes of thought, but, for that very reason, they can pose a radical challenge.

Sanders’s Sappho is also a bricolage of many “fictions of Sappho” from the past, the multiple aspects of Sappho in stories that have been told about her over time. As Sanders manipulates the legend, the reader realizes that Sappho herself has become a myth that can be selectively repeated and revised within different cultural contexts. Sanders’s poem treats Sappho’s reception history as a resource for new configurations—a paradigm according to Hardwick (2003, 90)—emphasizing that our knowledge of Sappho is filtered through successive reinterpretations. Whereas much of the scholarship on Sappho’s reception history has focused on discrediting these fictions, Sanders’s story about Sappho illuminates their positive role as “mediating texts” (112) that transmit Sappho to successive generations.
Bibliography


