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Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, Volume 60, Number 2, Fall 2019, pp. 201-226 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

ESSAY

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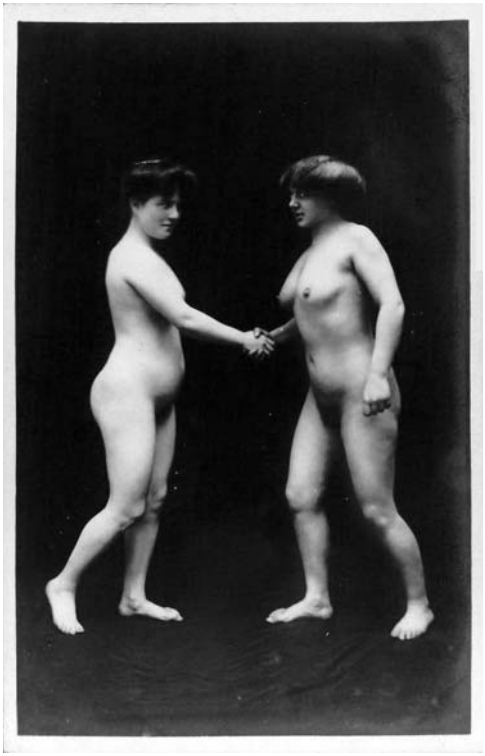


Figure 1. French Postcard, circa 1900, private collection.

"It was Olga Nethersole in quite another atmosphere than the public sees her—a healthy, air-loving woman with a mentality strong enough and broad enough to grant her healthy views upon an unhealthy subject." This description of British actress-manager Olga Nethersole appeared in the *Detroit News* on January 1, 1900. In just a few short weeks, her theatrical production of *Sapho* would explode onto the national stage, making her the most famous actress in America and culminating in her arrest for public indecency.[1] In the calm before the coming storm Nethersole is quoted as follows:

> First of all . . . we must bring ourselves to understand and admit that there

Framework 60, No. 2, Fall 2019, pp. 201–226.

> is good in everyone. This is true, I believe, of all that class of women who is held at arm's length. It is this one thing which makes these women what they are to literature and the drama. . . . For such women are human, they have hearts and souls and flesh and blood, and can suffer as much, if not more than their sisters whose lives extend but little beyond the home.[2]

What do we make of Nethersole's appeal to *sisterhood* in this preemptive defense of *Sapho*? What might this seemingly innocuous Victorian voice tell us about the meaning of Sapphic sisterhood in the era of cinema's so-called "birth"? In 1989, Teresa de Lauretis decried "the sweeping of lesbian sexuality . . . under the rug of sisterhood."[3] Yet, in the second half of the nineteenth century, sisterhood was being aggressively mobilized by Olga Nethersole, and other artists, to make public lesbian meanings that radically challenged the patriarchal family and social structures of the Victorian Era. Nethersole's call for sisterhood in the passage above activated a broader lesbian discourse of Sapphic kinship that was a crucial component of lesbian culture at the time and that I contend is central to understanding the lesbian pleasures of the silent screen.

Consider the following mid-nineteenth-century Staffordshire figurine of the prototypical star-crossed lovers *Romeo and Juliet*. Modeled on an 1846 drawing of famed American actress Charlotte Cushman playing Romeo opposite her sister Susan as Juliet, these mass-produced artifacts ostensibly commemorate the Cushman sisters' performance.[4] Lisa Merrill has persuasively read the figurines as a mark of Charlotte Cushman's *iconicity* and *respectability*. Merrill's groundbreaking work on Cushman certainly recognizes the sexual significance of what one critic in 1846 described as Cushman's "Sapphic Romeo."[5] Merrill clearly points out that the figurine records "the complexity of two women performing as . . . romantic lovers."[6] Yet, in her reading, this queer record is not just enabled by—but ultimately overdetermined by—the performers actual sisterhood that functions as evidence of Cushman's "respectability."[7] Although not specifically tied to the Staffordshire figurine, film scholar Hilary Hallett's recent reading of Cushman as the most important foremother to the "Pickford revolution" (which brought film actresses to the forefront of the popular imagination) also hinges on notions of respectability, personal virtue, and moral character.[8] Likewise, in her important volume *Girls Will Be Boys*, Laura Horak has connected the "cult following" for Cushman's Romeo to the hundreds of films featuring cross-dressed women produced during the silent era—and she too argues that such performances were "associated with wholesome entertainment."[9]

In contrast, I argue that rather than evincing Cushman's iconic respectability, the cross-dressed representation of Sapphic Sisterhood formally embodied in the figurine activates a "lurid," ripped-from-the-headlines meaning in the tradition

Figure 2 (*left*). Staffordshire figurine, Charlotte and Susan Cushman as Romeo and Juliet, circa 1852, private collection. Courtesy of Aldridges of Bath, Fine Art & Chattel Auctioneers. Figure 3 (*right*). Staffordshire figurine, The Assassination of Marat by Charlotte Corde, circa 1794, private collection.

of Staffordshire pottery during this period.[10] The popular trend of figurines embodying murderers and other scandalous personalities has been traced to the 1793 figure of "The Assassination of Marat by Charlotte Corde" [sic], but the fad for "infamous characters" only increased after the mass production of Staffordshire figures began in 1840.[11] First-hand accounts specific to the Cushman Sisters' figurine are scarce, but recent scholarship on Staffordshire figures in this period situates them in relation to "the interests of ordinary Victorians." As one account puts it, "They are folk art, made by workers for workers, rather than pieces of fine art for rich people."[12] When concerns over the propriety of the Cushman sisters' upcoming performance as lovers were raised by a friend, Cushman wrote, "a thought of indelicacy in the assumption never cross'd my mind. I see however, that a gross motive might be attributed to it and can only hope that those who know me will acquit me of an intentional immodesty."[13] Cushman's own statement clearly shows that the thought did cross her mind and was carefully considered, written about, and discussed prior to the performances. Moreover, many of the figurines have a blush that is more pronounced than that of the lithograph they are based on, suggesting both the flush of sexual arousal and the period's association of blushing with shame, love, and confusion.[14]

The Cushman Sisters' figurines were popular enough to be produced in

Figure 4. Daguerreotype, Charlotte Cushman and Matilda Hays, circa 1855, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, www.mfa.org (public domain).

several versions that are, retrospectively, invariably framed in relation to their sisterhood. Yet, we know from Merrill's work that Cushman's sister retired from the stage after her marriage in 1848 and that Cushman then played Romeo opposite at least two of her real-life lovers, Matilda Hays and Sarah Anderton.[15] The figurines are usually dated to 1852, well after these lesbian performances. In this context, the Cushman Sisters' figurines seem *designed* to activate what literary scholar Sarah Annes Brown has called "the lesbian incest effect."[16] The figurine succinctly encapsulates the fact that *sisterhood* is highly significant to lesbian visibility in this era.

The Victorian discourse of Sapphic sisterhood intersects with the prolonged public debates about the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill that took place in England between 1835 and 1900, as Carolyn Tate has demonstrated.[17] (The bill concerned the legality of a man marrying his dead wife's sister, raising questions about what constituted incest.) Tate calls the bill "the Victorian era's most contentious legislative" debate, and Brown suggests the dialogue surrounding the bill eroticized sisterhood within a competitive context—essentially addressing a pornographic fantasy of having "both sisters."[18] Tate and Brown each connect the public discussion of the bill to the erotically charged representations of sisterly love that scholars such as Eve Sedgwick and Terry Castle have identified

Figure 5 (*above, left*). Daguerreotype, "Two nudes standing," Félix-Jacques Antoine Moulin, circa 1850, Rubel Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).

Figure 6 (*above, right*). French postcard, circa 1900, private collection.

Figure 7 (*left*). French postcard, circa 1900, private collection.

Figure 8. Stereopticon card, "The Stereograph as an Educator—Underwood Patent Extension Cabinet in a Home Library," circa 1901, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (public domain).

in English and American novels of the period.[19] The Deceased Wife's Sister Bill was part of a larger discourse about British marriage laws that were a popular subject of Staffordshire pottery, including an entire genre known as The Marriage Act group that was produced beginning around 1823 and reproduced into the early twentieth century.[20]

Within the larger debates about marriage taking place at the time, the Cushman Sisters' figurine speaks directly to the same eroticized anxieties about sisterhood that the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill engendered. The figurine engages and undermines a conventional pornographic trope of sisterhood by suggesting that the "sisters" might prefer each other over marriage with a man. Tate makes a broad argument that an "erotic affect that characterized the Victorian family . . . offered opportunity for and protection of same-sex attachments." In this context, she offhandedly mentions that "explicit references to lesbian incest outside Victorian pornography are difficult to detect."[21] While she makes no further mention of pornography, I contend that understanding the Victorian lesbian formations of Sapphic sisterhood requires analysis that considers not only the well-known domestic ideologies of the Victorian family but also the pornographic imagination of the era.[22] Film scholar Patricia White has emphasized the importance of intertextual interpretations to lesbian representability.[23] Following White, I suggest that pornographic intertexts shaped the lesbian discourses of early cinema in ways that existing scholarship has not fully taken into account. The visual culture of the late nineteenth century was revolutionized by mass production and photography resulting in a newly flourishing pornography *industry*.[24] After around 1880, cheap

Figure 9. Reference photo, New York Evening Journal, March 22, 1900, Olga Nethersole Scrapbook, v. 1, The Robinson Locke Collection, Billy Rose Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library.

ephemeral forms of visual culture such as stereopticons and postcards allowed for the widespread availability of visual pornography to women, the working classes, and people of color, as Lisa Sigel has demonstrated.[25]

How then, did these "new" audiences overlap with the female fans that bolstered first Cushman's and then Nethersole's fame? Theatrical historian Tracey Davis has argued that nineteenth-century theatre conventions produced eroticized entertainment through intertextual iconographies that relied on references to more overtly pornographic material such as postcards. It should come as no surprise by this point that in Davis's analysis, theatrical sister acts "stand in for lesbian sex scenes."[26]

That Class of Women Who Is Held at Arms Length

I want to return to the question of the cross-class sisterhood that Olga Nethersole evokes in defense of her production of *Sapho* in 1900 within the context of the "lesbian incest effect" exemplified by Cushman's "Sapphic Romeo." Nethersole's rhetoric in the passage quoted at the outset of this paper is transparently intended to disrupt the naturalized class discourse of the late Victorian era. In contrast, its lesbian significance can be difficult for us to discern, not only because it is built

Figures 10 and 10.1. French postcards, circa 1900, private collection.

between words such as *healthy*, *Sapho*, and *sisters*, but because this radical lesbian intervention in the Victorian patriarchal status-quo activates our contemporary taboos against incest—making it so uncomfortable to recognize that it can become almost unthinkable.[27] Yet, it is only by recognizing the "lesbian incest effect" that we can understand how Nethersole's scandalous production of *Sapho* was a significant turning point in a larger lesbian cultural discourse aimed at rewriting the rules of kinship, sexual possession, and inheritance—not just financial but also cultural.

Tate's work on queer kinship connects the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill to other forms of queer incestuous kinship, examining how the poet Sappho's same-sex desire was rendered as a form of "mother love."[28] While the shift from Sapphic sisterhood to mother love may seem like a shift in focus, they are both part of a Victorian discourse of radical lesbian kinship. Thus, it is not surprising that following her appeal to sisterhood, when Nethersole is asked whether her play *Sapho* has a lesson in it, she responds, "Indeed it has—the regeneration of the woman through that stronger of affections, the mother-love."[29] We see a trace of audience response to this discourse on a postcard mailed between two women in 1902 with the words "with Mother's best love" scrawled below the disarmingly deadpan

photo of Nethersole. In the interview, Nethersole repeats the phrase, emphasizing it through repetition, by declaring, "Long before I ever dreamed of having the work dramatized, I knew the book backwards, and the note of mother-love in it had deeply impressed me." The discourse of mother love is taken up on other Nethersole postcards mailed between women, such as the 1903 message, "Dear Mother, I was very pleased to get PC's will write tomorrow."[30]

Now it is certainly possible to read Nethersole's references to sisterhood and mother-love in this interview, and elsewhere, within the parameters of the bourgeois Victorian cult of motherhood. However, within the larger discourse of Nethersole's "health," the figure of Sappho cited by the play's title, and even Nethersole's sly comment that she "knew the book backwards," it becomes quite clear that Nethersole is not just invoking but intervening in the Victorian family romance. She does not say "backwards and forwards," which would be the usual expression, instead she creates a linguistic hiccup that highlights and revalues the word *backwards*, which is often used to denounce prohibited forms of sexual expression such as "mother-love." Moreover, her use of "backwards" implies reading "against the grain," a meaning she expresses more directly elsewhere, as when she says, "I believe that 'Sappho' is a wonderful book, if read carefully."[31]

If we read Nethersole's invocation of "that class of women who is held at arms length" *carefully* we can see how the turn of phrase works on multiple levels to critique the romanticized tropes of Victorian brothel drama and literature in relation to the highly classed and dehumanizing sexual cultures of the era.[32] Brothel drama, and the figure of the prostitute in the arts more broadly, were "veritable obsessions" of the era.[33] The embodied metaphor of "arms length" recognizes both a vast emotionally charged distance and an intimate proximity. Her choice of words connects "high brow" dramatic and literary productions to the "cheap" entertainments of late Victorian brothel culture and pornography that were quite literally held at arms length. Arms length, after all, is not far at all, it is the length between a book and reader, a stereopticon and viewer, a postcard and receiver. It is, quite precisely, close enough to touch. Nethersole's terminology aptly describes the palpable, sexualized presence of "these women" within the bourgeois middle-class homes of their "sisters." Moreover, Nethersole is herself a woman that can be held at arm's length: her image circulated broadly, not only in the copious newspaper coverage of her career, theatrical magazines, promotional posters, and cabinet cards but also for profit and purchase as paper dolls and puppets, on teacups and candlesticks, trade cards, cigarette silks, and, of course, postcards. In the following image we see how the "respectability" discourse was received by some, with the words "Ain't she most respectable?" scrawled below her image.

Figure 11. Postcard, circa 1902, author's collection.

Figure 12. Postcard, circa 1902, author's collection.

But what does any of this theatrical history have to do with the silent screen?!

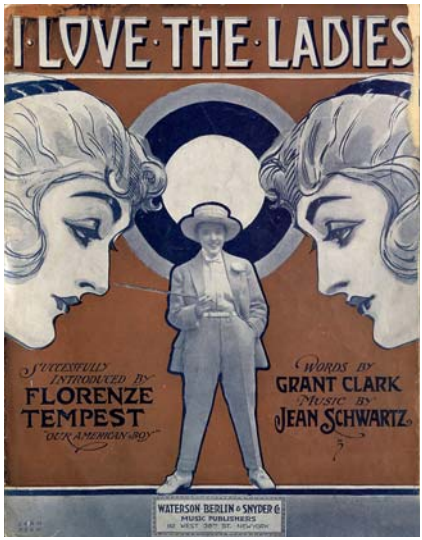
Consider the cover of the 1911 sheet music that features the popular vaudeville sister-act of *Tempest and Sunshine* (see Figure 13). The visual similarity between Tempest and Sunshine's pose and the Cushman Sisters' figurine is striking. These actual sisters known as Florenz Tempest and Marion Sunshine named themselves and their act after the sisters in a popular 1854 novel *Tempest and Sunshine* by Mary J. Holmes. *Tempest and Sunshine* was adapted for the screen at least five times between 1910 and 1916, including a 1915 Gaumont production (William F. Haddock, US, 1915) starring our Tempest and Sunshine, which appears to be lost.[34] The images that grace these sheet music covers clearly engage the Victorian discourse of Sapphic sisterhood, evoking the lesbian incest effect that was so central to both mainstream Victorian pornography and radical lesbian disruptions of the patriarchal imaginary. Moreover, these artifacts are not simply images to gaze upon but concrete invitations to *perform as* a Sapphic Romeo, Sapphic sister, or queer couple or triple while playing and singing music.[35]

It is clear that Victorian notions of sisterhood carried over into early cinema stardom and that the iconography of Sapphic sisterhood would have been *seen*

Figure 13 (*above, left*). Sheet music, "Oh You Tease," Harold Rossiter Music Co., circa 1910, Performing Gender Collection, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University (public domain).

Figure 14 (*above, right*). Sheet music, "I Live Up-Town," F. B. Haviland Publishing Company, circa 1911, private collection.

Figure 15 (*right*). Sheet music, "I Love the Ladies," Waterson, Berlin & Snyder, circa 1914, Historical Sheet Music Collections of Houghton Library and the Harvard Theatre Collection, http://id.lib.harvard.edu/alma/990146104060203941/catalog (public domain).



by audiences at the time. This significant cultural context was part of how the movies' first audiences made meaning and found pleasure in the new medium. As Susan Potter puts it, "Early cinema remediates sexual discourses already in circulation in culture and draws upon those same discourses as a ready-made epistemological framework."[36] For instance, *The Gordon Sisters Boxing* (Edison, 1901) exemplifies just the sort of "sister-act" that Davis identifies as "standing in for" lesbian sex scenes. The Edison catalogue description of the film as "a hot and

Figures 16 and 17. French postcards, circa 1900, private collection.

heavy one-round sparring exhibition" certainly supports the idea that early audiences were primed to see the sexualized lesbian content of the film.[37] The original catalogue description and later accounts both highlight the painted mise-en-scène that frames the scene. While the catalogue description promises "a very pleasing background," retrospective accounts rightly name this "pleasing background" a French garden.[38] The French Garden further sexualizes the scene through its association with France, which in the popular imagination was associated with risqué sexual pleasures including oral sex and pornography.[39] Contemporaneous public visual culture, such as postcards, make manifest the associations that many audiences would have brought to the film.

Such intertextual meaning-making is frequently described as "coded" and understood as available only to "sophisticated" audiences who are "in the know." Yet, the democratization of pornography that Sigel documents in the second half of the nineteenth century, which coincided with the rise of the mass female audience, strongly suggests that this highly classed and gendered understanding of early intertextuality has been overstated. Such meanings were a part of the visual vernacular of the era—available to and consumed pleasurably by diverse mainstream audiences.

The lesbian legibility of Sapphic sisterhood extends throughout the silent

Figure 18. Publicity photograph, The Duncan Sisters, undated, circa 1900–1920, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (public domain).

Figure 19. Lobby card, *Orphans of the Storm*, circa 1921, Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

film era, which is densely populated with cinematic sisters acts that activate these associations by design—from variety acts such as The Gordon Sisters and Tempest and Sunshine to the movie stardom built around the sisterhood of The Duncan Sisters or Lillian and Dorothy Gish.[40] Indeed, it is the remnants of this once mainstream cultural idiom that are on display in the hub-bub of recent "click-bait" articles such as the not-to-be-missed GIF bedazzled "'Orphans of the Storm': Watch the Film That Sparked Hollywood's First Incest Rumor."[41] The article is part of a flurry of internet chatter inspired by a recent episode of the popular podcast *You Must Remember This* that purports to "fact check" queer experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger's 1959 book, *Hollywood Babylon*, in which he wryly asks, "Was Lillian Gish Dorothy's lover?"[42] Leaving aside for the moment the question of re-reading Anger in relation to the post-2016 paradigm of "fake

Figure 20. Lucille La Verne and Lillian Gish in *Orphans of the Storm*, 1921, IMDb photo gallery.

news," the pop-critical consensus online is decisively that Anger's rumor mill is "bonkers," or, in the one-word response of an online commentator, "Pulleeeze."[43]

Yet, such adamant dismissals fail to engage the lesbian visuality of *Orphans of the Storm* as a part of a larger visual culture. The offhand insistence with which such dismissals are made highlights the difficulty of breaching the incest taboo in our contemporary culture, even among "sophisticated" cinephile audiences. Such kneejerk responses individualize and erase the larger cultural discourse of Sapphic sisterhood. Current culture typically performs this dismissal in one of two ways: either by focusing on whether there is any "truth" to the rumor (while simultaneously refusing to actually consider such a possibility; "Bushwha," they say instead, dismissing any memory of the rumors as rubbish) or by placing the "blame" for the sexualization of poor, pure sisterhood on Griffith's pedophilic gaze.[44] In both cases, the Victorian iconography of Sapphic sisterhood, which structures *Orphans of the Storm* and remains apparent enough to confound contemporary audiences, is rendered unthinkable and unhistoricized.[45]

In contrast to these current pop-cultural dismissals, in one of the founding texts of feminist film criticism, Molly Haskell writes, "Sisters Lillian and Dorothy Gish kiss each other passionately on the lips, a gesture which transmutes sexuality into a social form that can be accepted as family affection, *but that goes quite beyond it*."[46] Indeed, it is the multiple lingering, trembling, passionate kisses between the sisters that cry out to contemporary audiences for queer analysis.[47] In 1921, viewers would have also understood the film's multiple other lesbian signifiers that work by design to engage the discourse of Sapphic sisterhood. In addition to the controversial kisses, the intertextual meanings the film prominently employs include the mise-en-scène of the French Garden reminiscent of *The Gordon Sister's Boxing,* and "the lesbian mirror effect" produced by the sisters' identical dress and frequently mirrored blocking.[48] The discourse of mother-love is also invoked alongside Sapphic sisterhood, with the wicked character of "Mother Frochard"

Figure 21. Albumen photo, stock card, circa 1870–1890, private collection.

played by Lucille La Verne, whose intermittent moustache appears to be an experiment in the subliminal use of montage.[49] Significantly, the film's happy ending takes place in the French garden, with the two sisters framed together—and their male love interests are decidedly framed out.[50] As Virginia Wright Wexman puts it, "The Gish sisters' kiss in *Orphans of the Storm* signals a moment in which the Hollywood cinema embraces an alternative image of passion that American women of 1921 had open to them."[51]

While *Orphans of the Storm* is a far cry from the radical lesbian interventions made by artists such as Cushman and Nethersole, the iconography being deployed is cut from the same cloth.[52] Sapphic sisterhood was a mainstream visual and narrative motif that still resonated widely with the mass audience of 1921. While the changes in sexual mores that characterize the early twentieth century occurred unevenly, one might definitively mark the death of Sapphic sisterhood as a mainstream Victorian paradigm with the infamous 1933 murder case of the Papin Sisters. After these actual sister-lovers violently murdered their employers, Sapphic sisterhood arguably became too disturbing to the social order to provide the multiple mainstream visual pleasures it had during the Victorian era.[53]

In her groundbreaking work on lesbian film history, Susan Potter highlights the critical juggernaut of lesbian film studies, writing, "What most persistently shadows any such history is the need to rectify the 'problem' of lesbian representation: invisibility."[54] I contend that at the turn of the twentieth century, the

Figure 22. Cigar Box Label, circa 1900, private collection.

Figure 23. French postcard, circa 1900, private collection.

problem of invisibility exists in direct relation to the hypervisiblity of lesbian acts in what Steven Marcus has famously called the "pornotopia" of the Victorian era. When confronted with the disappearing act known as lesbian history, contemporary scholarship frequently explains "lesbian invisibility" in terms of "cover" or "deniability." I suggest that understanding lesbian discourse in relation to the Sapphic pornographic representations so common during the era enables us to see the degree to which any such invisibility or "deniability" was produced in relation to an overwhelming abundance of visibility and *plausibility*.

Within this context, lesbian cultural production and strategies of representation that have been understood in relation to invisibility, fear, and shame are better understood as calculated expressions of radical Victorian lesbianism. The familiar frameworks of deniability or invisibility spay the radical, in-your-face critiques of patriarchal Victorian kinship being made through incestuous discourses at this time. The common recourse to invisibility misunderstands the way iconic artists such as Cushman and Nethersole were actively engaging and critiquing the popular culture of their time, including the conventions and iconographies of the exploding Victorian pornography industry. Histories such as these disappear

Figure 24. Reference photo, *Phil-for-Short* (US, Oscar Apfel, 1919), Library of Congress, Record No. 30437.

the taboo-breaking irony, humor, and eroticism that is such an important part of lesbian cultural history and that is where much of the power of their artistic innovations and interventions lie. If we insist on reading such evidence in terms of *respectability*, sentimentality, or "cover," the denial is ours—not theirs—it is a *disavowal* of the evidence that perpetuates cycles of erasure and gives credence to the idea that the lesbian is always in danger, whether of physical violence, social censure, or historical erasure.

As her high-profile indictment indicates, Nethersole's calls for a cross-class Sapphic Sisterhood and her appeals to "the mother-love" in her interpretations of "these women" deeply provoked and unsettled the artistic and moral conventions of the day—and *excited throngs of Sapho crazed women along the way*.[55]

In the months before Nethersole's acquittal in the trial that came to be known as "the Sapho Affair," the first of some twenty-odd cinematic odes, adaptations, parodies, and remakes of Nethersole's *Sapho* appeared onscreen. The phenomenon then denigrated as "the Sapho plague," which I name Sapphic Cinemania!, is one of the many mainstream lesbian iconographies, interventions, and invitations of the silent film era. Sapphically structured films saturate this period, from the iconic *The May Irwin Kiss* (Edison, 1896) to the swansong of the Sapphic era,

Figure 25 (*above*). Publicity photograph, Pauline Frederick in *Sapho* (US, Hugh Ford, 1917), author's collection.

Figure 26 (*right*). Poster, Olga Nethersole's *Sapho*, Courier Litho. Co., circa 1900, Library of Congress Theatrical Poster Collection (public domain).

Inspiration (Clarence Brown, MGM, 1931).[56] Prior to the advent of the Production Code Administration, the "hectic heritage from Olga Nethersole" and its impact on mainstream cinema was widely known.[57] As one critic put it in 1917, "Sapho. What memories that single word brings. Olga Nethersole . . . the three minute kiss, the police interference, and all that. Then 'Sapho,' with Pauline Frederick! What a combination!"[58]

The contested lesbianized discourses of early cinema include a wide array of texts that engage with each other and the popular culture of the day; there is no one unified meaning among them. However, as a body of texts they represent a significant international discourse on lesbian sexuality, female authorship, and public voice. When revisited within the Sapphic context of the precinematic Victorian lesbian culture of mother-love, the previously mentioned assertion by Hilary Hallett that Charlotte Cushman is the *foremother* of the Pickford

revolution takes on new valence. The cultural inheritance of mother-love, Sapphic sisterhood, and queer kinship more broadly, transforms and denaturalizes our understanding of the so-called "birth of cinema." The many "sister acts" that were so prominent in early film culture remind us of the polymorphous pleasures of that queer reproduction known as cinema.

Kiki Loveday is a visual artist whose work has been exhibited in venues from The Coney Island Film Festival in Brooklyn, New York, to The Virginia Scott Galleries of American Art at The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in Los Angeles. She is currently completing her dissertation *Sapphic Cinemania! Female Authorship, Queer Desires and the Birth of Cinema* at the University of California Santa Cruz. A version of this paper was presented at The Eye International Conference: "Sisters"/Women and the Silent Screen 10. The author wishes to thank Shelley Stamp, Drake Stutesman, Susan Potter, and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their feedback, which has improved this paper and will help shape the future development of this project.

NOTES

1. Nethersole was already a successful actress known for her provocative interpretations of transgressive women by 1900. The furor over her trial, remembered as "the Sapho affair," is well documented in histories of theatrical censorship in the twentieth century. However, the significance of her lesbian provocation with *Sapho* has been largely unrecognized. Likewise, while Nethersole has been noted in film history, the impact of her Sapphic stardom on the emerging medium—and pop culture more broadly—has largely been lost to history. The larger project of which this paper is a part traces and analyzes this history. On Nethersole's *Sapho* see Katie N. Johnson, *Sisters in Sin: Brothel Drama in America, 1900–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). On Nethersole in relation to film history, see Linda Williams, "Of Kisses and Ellipses: The Long Adolescence of American Movies," in *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 28; and Charles Musser, "The May Irwin Kiss: Performance and the Beginnings of Cinema," in *Visual Delights Two: Exhibition and Reception*, ed. Vanessa Toulmin and Simon Popple (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Publishing, 2005), 104.
2. Author unknown, "Defends Sapho," *Detroit News* (January 1, 1900), Olga Nethersole Scrapbook, v. 1, The Robinson Locke Collection, Billy Rose Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library. The article's awkward invocation of a "private, healthy" Nethersole speaks to the longstanding speculation surrounding Nethersole's private life and sexuality. The "defense" is positioned under the weight of four headlines that emphasize Nethersole's

embattled voice and pedagogical stance, "Defends "Sapho": Olga Nethersole says it's not an Immoral Play: Her Scarlet Women Roles All Teach Good Lessons: The Great Emotional Actress Talks of Her Art and Plays."

3. Teresa de Lauretis, "Film and the Visible," in *How Do I Look?,* ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 258. For a useful gloss on the rhetoric of sisterhood in relation to women's movements since the nineteenth century see Helen Davies, "Uncomfortable Connections? Conjoined Sisterhood in Contemporary Women's Writing," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 8, no. 3, (2014).
4. This drawing by Margaret Gilles was published in *The People's Journal* in 1846. See Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 121.
5. Merrill, 111, 124, 287.
6. Merrill, 246. While Merrill considers "the various ways such images were or were not rendered legible to different audiences," she concludes that the figurine "demonstrates how Charlotte's Romeo was accepted and commodified as standard theatre memorabilia in the mid-nineteenth century."
7. Merrill, 112.
8. Hilary A. Hallett, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 29.
9. Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians, and American Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 8.
10. Hunter Oatman-Stanford, "Murder and Mayhem in Miniature: The Lurid Side of Staffordshire Figurines," *Collectors Weekly*, August 22, 2013, accessed August 2, 2019, https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/the-lurid-side-of-staffordshire-figurines/.
11. Michael Wright, *Reader's Digest Treasures in Your Home* (Exeter: David & Charles Publishers, 1993), 54.
12. The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, *Heroes and Villians: Stories from Staffordshire Figures* (2014), 1, Kindle.
13. Merrill, 112.
14. Samuel Johnson, "Blush (verb)," in *A Dictionary of the English Language: A Digital Edition of the 1755 Classic by Samuel Johnson* (last modified 2014), ed. Brandi Besalke, accessed September 12, 2019, https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/blush-verb/. See also Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: White and Sheffield, 1841), 95.
15. Lisa Merrill, "Charlotte Cushman," in *Great Shakespeareans, Volume 7*, ed. Gail Marshall (Continuum International: New York, 2011), 151.
16. Sarah Annes Brown, "The Double Taboo: Lesbian Incest in the Nineteenth Century," in *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 11, 135–154. On the metaphor of sisterhood in relation to lesbian history, see Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends:*

Women Who Loved Women (1778–1928), xxvi. Citing Carol Lasser, Vicinus writes, "The widespread use of the sororal metaphor may have been cover for something more intimate." See Carol Lasser, "'Let us be sisters evermore': The Sororal Model of Nineteenth-Century Female Friendship," *Signs* 14 (1998): 164–65. Nonetheless, Vicinus argues the sister metaphor "was not commonly used by women when they wanted to indicate something deeper than an equal friendship."

17. Carolyn Tate, "Lesbian Incest as Queer Kinship: Michael Field and the Erotic Middle-Class Victorian Family," *Victorian Review* 39, no. 2, Special Issue: Extending Families (Fall 2013): 181–199.
18. Sarah Annes Brown, *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 9. Sisters, including one named Charlotte, feature prominently in the paradigmatic Victorian pornographic novel *My Secret Life* (anonymous, 1888). As Brown puts it, the narrator is "continually consort[ing] with pairs of contrasting sisters, including "when he meets the sister of his first love, Charlotte, whom he desires to possess 'as much for her resemblance to Charlotte, as for herself. . ." (107). In another instance, writing about "The Romance of Lust" (1873–1876), in which a male character "initiates" his two sisters into sexual experience, Brown writes that the lesbian scenes performed for the brother and his friend, subordinated the sisters "possible mutual pleasure . . . to the enjoyment they give their audience both within and without the text."
19. It should be noted that Tate's work contextualizes the actually incestuous relationship of lesbian poets Katherine Bradly and Edith Cooper, an aunt-niece couple who wrote together under the name Michael Fields. Tate significantly takes on the critical avoidance of actual incest in the literature on Fields. My interest is in the way that Michael Fields and their most famous poems took part in the *au courant* lesbian Sapphic revival of the period, which connected the ancient poet Sappho to Victorian Sapphism. On the everyday erotics of sister-love in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, see Vicinus, xxvi; George Haggerty, *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 73–87, cited in Vicinus; Eve Sedgwick, "Jane Austin and the Masturbating Girl," *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 114; *Terry Castle*, "*Sister-Sister*," *London Review of Books*, August 2, 1995. See also Susan S. Lanser, "Sisters in Love," *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). Lanser's chapter considers an earlier period (1788–1830) pointing to a longer history and persistent paradigm. See also Yopie Prin, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
20. For a concise history of the UK marriage acts of 1753 and 1836, see "Relationships: The Law of Marriage," UK Parliament website, accessed September 13, 2019, https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/lawofmarriage-/. For one take on the humor in The New Marriage Act group of Staffordshire figurines, see Hunter Oatman-Stanford (cited above, fn 10).

21. Tate, 185. Brown makes a similar claim regarding pornography, but *does* consider the place of lesbian incest in pornography, as mentioned in footnote 16 above. See Brown, 136, 143.
22. For a foundational take on the Victorian pornographic imagination, see Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* [1964] (New York: Routledge, 2017).
23. Patricia White, "Nazimova's Veils: Salome at the intersection of Film Histories," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 60–87; see also *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
24. Kelly Denis, *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 5–9, 212, 282–3.
25. Lisa Z. Sigel, "Filth in the Wrong People's Hands: Postcards and the Expansion of Pornography in Britain and the Atlantic World, 1880–1914," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2000). See also Tracy C. Davis, "The Actress in Victorian Pornography," *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 3, (Oct 1989): 312. Davis specifically cites postcards depicting "intergenerational lesbianism."
26. Tracy C. Davis, "The Actress in Victorian Pornography," *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 3, (Oct 1989): 305.
27. However, as scholars such as Tate have demonstrated, incest, like other sexual practices and taboos, is a historically specific construction, and then, as now, incest played a prominent role in pornographic representations.
28. Tate, 182. See also Martha Vicinus, "'A Strenuous Pleasure': Daughter-Mother Love," in *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
29. Author unknown, "Defends Sapho," *Detroit News* (January 1, 1900), Olga Nethersole Scrapbook, v. 1, The Robinson Locke Collection, Billy Rose Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library.
30. Postcard, circa 1903, author's collection.
31. Author unknown, "A Strong Play Promised: Olga Nethersole Discusses Clyde Fitch's 'Sappho'" [sic], *Brooklyn Eagle* (June 11, 1899), Olga Nethersole Scrapbook, v. 1, The Robinson Locke Collection, Billy Rose Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library.
32. See Katie N. Johnson, *Brothel Drama in America, 1900–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
33. On brothel drama in progressive era America, see Johnson, 2006. See also Gretchen Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers: Discourses of Same-Sex Desire from Nineteenth-Century France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).
34. The Internet Movie Database lists the following titles: *Tempest and Sunshine* (Thanhauser, US, 1910); *Tempest and Sunshine* (Società Anonima Ambrosio, IT, 1913); *Tempest and Sunshine* (Frank Hall Crane, IMP, US, 1914); *Tempest and Sunshine* (William F. Haddock, Gaumont,

US, 1915); *Tempest and Sunshine* (Warren Hughes and Carlton King, US, 1916). The AFI Catalogue includes only the 1910 and 1916 titles. While the original novel is beyond the scope of this analysis, it raises interesting questions about the racialization of sisterhood within the context of American history.

35. Florence/Florenz Tempest was being billed as one of the leaders in her profession and "the most fascinating boy in vaudeville, noted for her work with Tempest and Sunshine" in the publicity surrounding her move into motion pictures at the height of her popularity around 1915. See "Lewis J. Selznick, "How to Make Money," *Motion Picture News* 11, no. 15, 4; "Gleichman's Broadway Comedy Stars Prove Winners," *Motion Picture News* 11, no. 15, 50; a publicity photo in the same issue shows her alone in drag with the caption, "Florence Tempest, the vaudeville favorite, now enrolled among the world comedy stars, producing comedies for the world film corporation," 60. As late as 1925, innuendo-filled articles continued to frame Tempest in relation to her previous sister act. See Author unknown, "Celebrated Sister Team Off Boards," *The Washington Post* (February 15, 1925), F12. "Theatrical history records no better known or better liked sister team than Tempest and Sunshine. Some years ago these famous girls separated professionally and went different ways. . . . In vaudeville Miss Tempest has increased her vogue by varying her activities. She has been seen alone and with various associates. Her present partnership is the result of another well-known team who decided to follow separate professional paths. Dickinson and Deagon carved a niche for themselves . . . Mr. Dickinson is now with Miss Tempest. . . . The new association is a very happy one for all concerned. Their offering is called "Rain Beau" by Claude W. Bostock." The best secondary source I have found on Tempest is Gillian M. Roger, *Just One of the Boys: Female to Male Cross-Dressing on the American Variety Stage* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2018) 179–181.
36. Potter, 2019, 5.
37. The sexualized meaning of "hot" to mean "sexually aroused" in this common idiom dates to around 1500. "Hot and heavy," *Dictionary.com*, accessed September 2, 2019, *https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hot--and--heavy*. See also Samuel Johnson, "Hot," *Dictionary*, 8th ed. (London: 1799), pages unnumbered. Johnson's second definition is "lustful; lewd," citing Shakespeare. The film and the Edison catalogue description are available online at the Library of Congress, accessed September 9, 2019: https://www.loc.gov/item/96514927/ .
38. For instance, see Binnie Klein, *Blows to the Head* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), 13. For one account of the sexual aesthetics of gardens see Carole Fabricant, "Binding and Dressing Nature's Loose Tresses: The Ideology of Augustan Landscape Design," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 8, ed. Roseann Runte (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 109–135.
39. See Jonathon Green, "French," *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, Digital Edition, 2019, accessed September 5, 2019, *https://greensdictofslang.com/entry/yc6bpji*. On public gardens in relation to lesbian cruising in nineteenth-century Paris, see Lowry Martin, "Nymphomaniacs and Polymorphic Monsters: Imagining Lesbianism in Nineteenth-century France," paper presentation, *Queer History Conference*, San Francisco State University, June 18, 2019.

40. To be clear, not every instance of actual sisterhood can be read in terms of Sapphic sisterhood. For instance, I have seen little evidence that supports such a reading in relation to Mary and Lotte Pickford. While The Duncan Sisters were not as closely associated with *movie*-stardom as other sister acts, the ongoing remediation of their stage shows associated them with moving images, from *Topsy and Eva* (Del Lord, US, 1927) to the early music videos known as "soundies" produced in the early 1940s. On *Topsy and Eva*, see Shelley Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015) 223–227; on Uncle Tom's Cabin and "soundies," see Stephen Railton's website, "Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture," University of Virginia, accessed September 9, 2019, *http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/onstage/films/cameos/hollywood.html*; on lesbianism and race, see Jocyln Buckner, "The Duncan Sister's Performance of Race and Gender," *Popular Entertainment Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 55–72; and Abby Manzella, "Broadway Melody and the Lesbian Plot," 2001, accessed September 9, 2019, *http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Manzella/broadwaymelody/broadwaymelody.html*. Both Buckner and Manzella cite Anthony Slide on Rosetta Duncan's lesbianism: Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 144. On *movie* stardom, see Richard Cordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).
41. Meghan O'Keefe, "'Orphans of the Storm': Watch the Film That Sparked Hollywood's First Incest Rumor," *Decider* (February 6, 2019), accessed September 9, 2019, *https://decider.com/2019/02/06/orphans-of-the-storm-prime-video/*. See also the reposting and comments on *https://www.nitrateville.com/viewtopic.php?t=27770*.
42. Karina Longworth, "D. W. Griffith, The Gish Sisters and the Origin of 'Hollywood Babylon'" (Fake News: Fact Checking Hollywood Babylon Episode 1," You Must Remember This (July 2, 2018), accessed September 9, 2019, http://www.youmustrememberthispodcast.com/episodes/2018/6/26/dw-griffith-the-gish-sisters-and-the-origin-of-hollywood-babylon-fake-news-fact-checking-hollywood-babylon-episode-1/ .
43. "Bonkers" is O'Keefe's word, while "Pulleeeze" is drawn from the comments on Nitrateville. There are more nuanced responses online as well, including accounts that precede the recent rumpus. For example, consider the following exchange:

    > Laughing Gravy: "The Gish sisters were from Ohio, not far from where I lived. My father told me, many years ago (before the BABYLON book, which my father wouldn't have read anyway) that there were rumors that the two sisters had also been lovers. Where he got that from I don't know, but apparently it was talked about." Rodney Sauer replies: "And I doubt the story as well, but I have heard it from audience members occasionally. One gay man told me—regarding Lillian—'Of course she was gay! You learn that when you get your membership card!'" See "Lesbian rumors about the Gish sisters?", Narkive: Newsgroup Archive, accessed September 9, 2019, *https://alt.movies.silent.narkive.com/z6UHuaac/lesbian-rumors-about-the-gish-sisters*.
44. For a cultural rather than individualized take on the "pedophilic gaze," see Gaylyn Studlar, "Oh, 'Doll Divine': Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze," *Camera Obscura*

16 no. 3 (2001): 196–227.

45. Anger's intentionally scandalous inscription of Sapphic sisterhood into film history's popular memory is probably best considered a queer artist's retrospective marking of an endangered historical discourse rather than rumor or "fake news." *Hollywood Babylon* was after all published in the wake of a highly repressive cultural moment when *pulp* played a significant role in lesbian visibility.
46. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54–55; Abigail Lauren Salerno has noted that Haskell ignores the *lesbian* aspect of the incestuous kisses; see Abigail Lauren Salerno, "The Blind Heroine in Cinema History: Film and the Not-Visual," Dissertation, Duke University, 2007, 99.
47. While online commentators and critics are correct in pointing out the variable and changing cultural norms regarding kissing, pop-historical accounts of cultural change are often used inaccurately to deny the erotic and sexual aspect of kisses between women in the nineteenth century. The kisses of Sapphic sisterhood need to be analyzed in relation to other queer cinematic kisses. In addition to Horak, see Chris Straayer, "The Paradoxical Bivalent Kiss," *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 54; Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Colorline: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 57. For a 1901 taxonomy of kisses that includes the observation, "I have often heard young girls say to a lady they had kissed amorously: 'Your kisses taste so nice,'" see Kristoffer Nyrop, *The Kiss and Its History* (London: Sands & Co., 1901), 186, accessed September 9, 2019, *https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Kiss_and_its_History/Chapter_8*.
48. The specificity of the French setting is particularly significant in relation to the narrative of the French revolution, a moment marked by aggressive rumors of Marie Antoinette's Sapphism that were circulated widely as part of revolutionary propaganda aimed at aristocratic debauchery. See Elizabeth Colwill, "Pass as a Woman, Act Like a Man: Marie-Antoinette as Tribade in the Pornography of the French Revolution," *Homosexuality in Modern France*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 54–73. On the lesbian mirror effect, see, Olu Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles: Radical Narcissism and the Trope of the Lesbian Doppelgangers," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 17 (2013): 348; and Barbara Creed, "Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys, and Tarts," in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, ed. Grosz and Probyn (London: Routledge, 1995), 86. To trace the lesbian mirror effect back to lesbian cultural practice rather than misogynistic cultural tropes, see Vicinus, 9–10. Vicinus describes how "insistent women could be about signaling their same sex desires" in the nineteenth century, "when dressing alike was the visible sign of a successful female marriage." Indeed, she describes the matching woolen suits that Charlotte Cushman had made for herself and her lover Eliza Cook.
49. I have not yet found any other considerations of Mother Frochard's moustache montage, though I fully expect to, given Griffith's prominence in film scholarship. Mother Frochard is a character in the play and novel the film is based upon (*Les Deux Orphelines/The Two Orphans,*

Adolphe d'Ennery and Eugéne Cormon, 1874). A Mother Frochard also appears in "A Very Low Restaurant in Paris," which was published in Charles Dicken's *All the Year Round* and *The New York Times*, both in 1875. I have not yet been able to trace the relationship between these texts. In "A Very Low Restaurant in Paris," Mother Frochard is described as having a "grisly moustache!" Griffith/La Verne's Mother Frochard strikingly resembles images of Cushman in one of her most famous female roles as the gypsy *Meg* Merrilees in *Guy Mannering*. At least one website has decided that La Verne's "sexuality" is "lesbian." See https://www.famousfix.com/topic/lucille-la-verne/wiki.

50. This ending prefigures that of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953) that Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca famously read as a lesbian coupling. See Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-Text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," in Patricia Erens Issues in *Feminist Film Criticism*. Virginia Wright Wexman makes a similar case about the ending of *Orphans* in *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 63–65. For an interesting take on the "trembling," in *Orphans*, see Daniel Siegel, "Griffith, Dickens, and the Politics of Composure," *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (March 2009): 375–389.
51. Wexman, 65. Wexman points out that it was Lillian Gish who recommended *Two Orphans* to Griffith for their final collaboration, which in Wexman's analysis represents a new more egalitarian relationship between the two artists.
52. In a preliminary answer to the question asked by one of the anonymous reviewers of this essay: *What is the relationship between the mainstream and the radical?* I would argue that Cushman and Nethersole were both mainstream and radical, meaning that their work significantly challenged and changed the popular culture of their time.
53. The Papin Sisters' case inspired Jean Genet's play *Les Bonnes/ The Maids* (1947) as well as other fictionalizations. On Nancy Meckler's exquisite 1994 film, see Jill A. Mackey, "Lesbians in This House: *Sister My Sister* and Lesbian Subjectivity," *Essays in Film and the Humanities* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 34–45.
54. Susan Margaret Potter, "Queer Timing: The Emergence of Lesbian Representation in Early Cinema," PhD Dissertation (University of Auckland, 2012), 15.
55. Author unknown, "Sapho-Crazed Women Throng to See the Nethersole Play," *New York World* (February 18, 1900), Olga Nethersole Scrapbook, v. 1, The Robinson Locke Collection, Billy Rose Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library.
56. Kiki Loveday, "Outing Olga," paper presented at *Film and History*, Milwaukee, 2016. *The May Irwin Kiss* (Edison, 1896) and the later stag film *Sappho's Kiss* (Lubin, 1900) both engage Nethersole's transgressive lesbian sexuality.
57. Julian Johnson, rev. of *Sapho*, "The Shadow Stage," *Photoplay* 11, no 6 (May 1917): 89.
58. Fred, "Film Reviews: Sapho," *Variety* (March 1917): 35.