

Women in Love

Wild Girls: Paris, Sappho and Art: The Lives and Loves of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks
Diana Souhami
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by Lydia Perovic

WHEN EXACTLY in the course of 20th century sexual history did we all forget that lesbianism equals glamour? At what point did the thinking about female queerness become a grave matter never to be divorced from the issues of homophobic and sexist oppression? The general mood of saturnine earnestness in lesbian studies is, fortunately, being increasingly forsaken by cultural historians like Carolyn Dinshaw, Terry Castle, Judith Halberstam, and Elspeth Probyn. Diana Souhami's latest lesbiography, *Wild Girls: Paris, Sappho and Art*, likewise adds an important title to the body of work on the *joie de vivre* side.

"At the centre of this idyll are Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks—both American, rich and grandly lesbian. They met in Paris in 1915 when they were in their forties, and their relationship lasted more than fifty years." But the Ladies of Llangollen they weren't. Barney was among the biggest seductresses of her time, who classified her affairs into liaisons, demi-liaisons and adventures, and believed that "we do not touch life except with our hearts." Brooks's elegant and ghostly paintings were to be known as, in Truman Capote's words, "the all-time ultimate gallery of famous dykes." Souhami's pages abound with oomph, wit, and lesbian camp, and with *Wild Girls'* arrival it will be even less clear how it was ever possible to write about Sapphism without writing about pleasure and art.

Granted, the poetics and practices of lesbianism are still less visible in both low and high culture than gay male sexuality. Lesbianism, or female queerness, to this day tends to figure as something unrepresentable or even inconceivable in popular culture; see bell hooks's article on *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, season four of *Six Feet Under*, the fate of Laura Innes's character on *ER*, the ending of *Boys Don't Cry*, or the general lesbophobia of *Will and Grace*. The fact that the *L-Word*, the Showcase series, is trying to overcompensate for decades of invisibility sometimes adds an inadvertent comic aspect to the show. And in literature, as Terry Castle shows in her books, there is an entire tradition of a *disappearing* lesbian. What should be of interest for the reader of contemporary fiction is the current presence of another, more sophisticated type of mediation in the writing of lesbian desire. The best known works in the English-speaking world that have any kind of lesbian content gravitate towards the fantastic or the historical: magical realism, sci-fi, fantasy, or costume dramas are de rigueur disguises for lesbians in fiction today (notably in Jeanette Winterson, Sarah Waters, and A. S. Byatt). A lesbian equivalent to Alan Hollinghurst has yet to emerge: somebody who would write about contemporary urban queer



"I could but choose to face the future alone."
Romaine in 1908 aged thirty-four.



"Natalie, the Amazon, circa 1907 in riding habit. Each morning she rode bareback in the Bois de Boulogne."

women within a mainly realist narrative framework.

If lesbian desire is still dogged by world-historical invisibility, and even if the questions of trauma and oppression are still very much alive, it should be more widely understood that lesbianism has as much to do with aesthetics as with politics—it is an artistic project before it is law reform. Souhami does a great job of reminding us of that. Most women (and men) in *Wild Girls* understand their love lives as a crucial part of their artistic oeuvre. In addition to the women-only Sapphic rituals in the garden, Barney's house on rue Jacob was famous for its literary salon. Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, Sylvia Beach, Janet Flanner, Colette, Djuna Barnes, Ida Rubinstein, Dolly Wilde, Peggy Guggenheim, Radclyffe Hall, Ezra Pound, André Gide, Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Jean Cocteau, and Rainer Maria Rilke were among the people who stopped by. Souhami's narration focuses on the liaisons of the two protagonists: the women that Barney showered with poetry and the women that Brooks painted in her Gothic portraits. The Barney-Brooks circle was a much more sexual, women-centred and international version of London's Bloomsbury group.

Very noticeable is the lightness of tone in Souhami's history and at times it may arouse suspicion. "The capacity for farce—or tragedy—in all this was great, and both possibilities constantly hover around these letters," Ruth Bernard Yeazell rightly comments about the Bloomsbury crowd in her recent *London Review of Books* piece on Lytton Strachey's correspondence. One of the simpler tripartite liaisons, consisting of Strachey himself, Dora Carrington, and her new husband Ralph Partridge, is summed up in one of his letters thusly: "The world is rather tiresome, I must say, everything at sixes and at sevens—ladies in love with buggers, and buggers in love with womanisers, and the price of coal going up too. Where will it all end?" There was even more playing with fire in the Sapphic circles of Paris. Here is a typical *Wild Girls* passage:

"The launch of this Sapphic idyll had problems. Lady Anglesey was about to divorce her transvestite husband. Freddy Manners-Sutton fell for Natalie. Natalie was enchanted with Olive—her wonderful complexion, her vibrant poetry. Renée Vivien was morbidly jealous, and Olive was in love with 'Bosie', Lord Alfred Douglas."

Souhami decidedly keeps to the vaudevillian interpretation of it all. Even the lesbian pope, Natalie Barney, occasionally has to cope with moments of obsession, jealousy, or feelings of betrayal. Yet Souhami conveys these episodes in the same gently humorous way she talks about Barney at her most Don Juanesque. The darker characters, like Renée Vivien, or Romaine Brooks herself, get a similar treatment. It is this aspect of Souhami's re-creation of the female Parisian artistic universe that steers her co-biography towards utopia. Souhami is good at convincing us that their entire lives were Sapphic gardens festooned with unlimited supplies of brilliant, artistic, and very sexual queer women living in