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# Classical Influences in Amy Levy's "Xantippe": Why the Ancient World Helped a Victorian Woman and Queer Identity Find a Voice

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## **Abstract**

This paper consists of looking at the historical context in which Amy Levy produced her work, specifically her poem "Xantippe." Using popular influences in gender and queer theory, I assert that the ancient world in which Levy was writing about helped create her voice that was unique for the Victorian period, as women's voices in poetry at the time were often silenced. I focus on Amy Levy being a woman that did not fit into the typical Victorian woman mold as a possibly queer Jewish woman. I also focus on Amy Levy's interpretation of the lesser-known historical figure, Xantippe, the often-shrewd wife of ancient philosopher Socrates. Levy gives a voice to a woman who had been portrayed in awfully negative terms. Not only is this sentiment way ahead of Levy's time, but she creates a symbiotic relationship with her portrayal of Xantippe in which each woman helps the other find their voice.

*Keywords:* Philosophy, Xantippe, Socrates, Classics, Victorian, Gender Studies, Identity, Queer, Amy Levy, Victorian Poetry

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Not unlike any other period of literature, the Victorian period saw fewer women poets and writers in popular culture than wealthy white men, whether this was due to not having

enough money to pursue an education or because they were simply women. The few that gained popularity often had some type of formal education, allowed to them because they were born into a family of wealth, which was uncommon for any woman at the time. Often in their studies, women turned to Latin and the classics in order to be more knowledgeable and relatable to the masses who actively recognized classical culture (Lake 244). These studies of ancient languages and history often leaked in their creative works. Amy Levy was no different. While studying classics at Brighton High School, a school for women, she wrote "Xantippe," a poem in the perspective of Socrates' wife of the same name (244). Through Xantippe as a speaker in the poem, Levy shows a woman, much like herself, losing her voice and enthusiasm due to perpetuated gender roles that existed in Ancient Greece and continued to exist in the Victorian period through which Levy lived. Amy Levy opened up the sphere for women and other minorities whose voices have often been forgotten or not written about all together. Quite ironically, by writing this poem about being forgotten, Levy immortalized her voice and will not be the very thing she was writing about, being forgotten. I assert that Levy's studies of classics helped form not only the poem of "Xantippe" but also helped form a space where women and others can express their innermost desires, something entirely understood and accepted by most male writers. "Xantippe" is a critical piece for looking at gendered expectations in the Victorian period, even if the poem deals directly with the classics rather than the society in which Levy lived.

The poem opens with Xantippe on her death bed while she looks back on her life. In regard to her feelings about death, Xantippe says, "All weighted with a passive wonderment, / Waiteth and watcheth, waiteth for the dawn" (Levy lines 6-7). Essentially, it can be read that

Xantippe is waiting for death to happen, as one often does on their deathbed. When stuck in a situation where happiness cannot be found, there is often no fear of death, a life that can be better than the one in which they currently find themselves. Readers know this directly when Xantippe says, “My soul which yearned for knowledge” (line 38). According to Carolyn Lake, “the writing of prose (rather than poetry), it has been noted of lesbian fiction that it often exhibits an otherworldliness” (249). What Lake continues to argue is that Levy often has her speakers and characters live in these liminal spaces because being in between places is better and safer than being on one side or another. In “Xantippe,” we see this as Xantippe is dying. She is no longer living or wanting to live in this world, but she is not quite in the other one, whatever that might be. She is safe in this place. Even if you do not read Xantippe as a queer figure, both being a lesbian and a woman would have been incredibly oppressive, especially as we find out that Xantippe never quite got the knowledge she yearned for.

Xantippe’s words about death greatly resemble that of Greek poet Sappho. When Sappho says, “Someone, I tell you, in another time will remember us,” one cannot help but think about the Xantippe that Levy has created in this poem, and possibly the Xantippe that existed, though we will never know because she was not well-documented. This is significant because Levy would have read and understood Sappho and this notion of “another lifetime” where things might be better or different all together because of her studies. This Greek (and I might add, queer) sentiment has been brought forth in “Xantippe,” and generally, the rest of Levy’s poetry. Xantippe goes on to call this quest for knowledge “eager longings” (Levy, line 31), again relating back to Sappho and the general Greek sentiment of longing for something, like possibly unacceptable queer relationships, beyond the daily life.

Most notably when it comes to classical influences, Socrates' ideas still seeped into Victorian culture. Many people were reading his work and translating it because a sudden interest in Greek culture and philosophy had rebirthed again in response to Victorian culture, hence why many women began studying the classics for a leg up against their popular male counterpart. Because of this, a lot of his ideas started to spread around again and find their way into popular Victorian culture (Hughes). Some scholars even argue that Socrates could be compared to Christ (Hughes). Socrates' death being one of martyrdom would have resonated with Christians at the time. Levy, by taking on the voice of Xantippe, attempts to show how his ideas still are prevalent. Through a rather "emotional," though actually normal, fit of anger, Xantippe throws wineskin at Socrates when he mentions the fragileness of women. "A sudden flame, a merciful fury sent / To save me; with both angry hands I flung / The skin upon the marble..." (Levy, lines 212-16). This act was seen as defiance in both the classical and Victorian era, amongst many other things. Xantippe ultimately pays the price for her outburst, and for being a woman, by living a rather meaningless life. Levy herself defies many societal norms for women prevalent in Victorian culture like Xantippe. Not only does she receive a level of education, but she gets published as a poet and a writer. It is also suspected in several letters that she authored that she was queer, often commenting about and focusing on women's physical traits (Lake 244).

Fictional Xantippe's anger could be one shared with Levy. She says, "But swiftly in my bosom there uprose / A sudden flame, a merciful fury sent / To save me" (lines 215-17). The poem's anger is one of longing, longing for Xantippe to have knowledge and longing for Levy to go beyond her identity in her time, both as a Jewish and a possibly queer woman. Levy ventures

to show Xantippe having anger, a normal human emotion, which is often not seen in depictions of women, and if it is, it is likely to be highly exaggerated and dramatic. This tiny unknown figure that will eventually be forgotten is angry—angry at Socrates, angry at society, and angry at unfairness—much like Levy would be as she had to leave her formal education and not get the recognition as a writer and poet that other men often got. Luckily, Levy was able to use the education she did receive and eventually get recognized for work. It can also be noted that throughout history anger could often be led to social and political change as it was a more assertive form of protest (Harrington). This anger that Levy wrote through Xantippe is one of protest, though a silent and safer one.

On the other hand, readers might view Xantippe as a feminist figure whose anger against Socrates stands for all women. It is easy to forget or overlook Xantippe's relationship with her maids in the poem. Xantippe says, "What cared I for the merry mockeries / Of other maidens sitting at the loom?" (Levy, lines 33-34). Xantippe is acting differently than what she seems to be preaching. This mentality that is present among women in higher class alienates other women and allows for further oppression to step in. "Even exceptional women participate in misogyny. When men sit around and talk, they produce high discourse while women at the loom just make idle chatter." (Harrington). This insinuates that dialogues between women cannot have any intellectual value compared to dialogues that men produce. Women's discussions are not valuable to the human experience. Harrington also argues that Levy created this hypocrisy on purpose, and that she would have been aware of this distinction pertaining to women in upper classes who benefited more from perpetuated misogyny. I believe that this distinction was created for an audience of Victorian women who would have

been more likely to relate to the maids rather than Xantippe, the wife of a well-known philosopher. Also likely, Victorian women might have taken pity of Xantippe because she was left to provide when Socrates should have been one to do so. He chose to discourse on what it means to be mortal instead of participating in the traditional act men, husbands, and fathers, are typically known for: providing for one's family.

Readers, and specifically women, of the Victorian era would notice what Hughes call sliding into the role of "subordinate wife." Because Xantippe does not get to fulfill her wish for knowledge, it can be assumed that she ultimately submitted herself to the role of loving wife, though the audience would also know Xantippe's reputation of shrewdness, a final resistance to this lifestyle. This common lifestyle choice for women might have left a large impression on reader's minds. They might have realized that no matter how hard you fight against roles already put forth by society, you will likely end up in that role regardless. This is something that women would relate to in both the Victorian period and the classical period.

To draw in more on her audience, Levy uses a strong logos appeal in the scene where Xantippe lashed out on Socrates' rant on feminine minds. "By all great powers around us! can it be / That we poor women are empirical? / That gods who fashioned us did strive to make / Beings too fine, too subtly delicate" (Levy, lines 180-83). This argument is solid for her audience because the same principle can be applied to Christianity and Judaism, which would have been incredibly relevant in the Victorian period. Though Xantippe is referring to the Greek gods, the principle remains that if a god made a woman to be less than their male counterparts, then why do they have the same mental capacity to think the same as some great male philosopher? Amy Levy herself is questioning this by writing this poem. Not all fine literary minds belong to men.

Other than overtly feminist themes in “Xantippe,” Levy also has hints of same-sex desire, as shown more explicitly in some of her other works. The mention of fruit or flowers can often indicate something forbidden but yet wanted, like Eve eating a forbidden fruit (Lake 250). Xantippe says, “Of early summers, with their light and shade, / Their blossom-hopes, whose fruit was never ripe” (Levy, lines 110-11). In the context of the poem, fruit can be an indicator of youth, specifically when Xantippe was still hopeful about learning before marrying Socrates. However, this presence of fruit was deliberately put there by Levy, someone who would know the implications of a fruit being a symbol for same-sex desire through her studies. It would make sense that something like fruit would be queer-coded in the Victorian period especially as the common population would not understand these subtle hints. It was a little nod towards homosexuality without putting oneself into danger and obscurity, something that inevitably happened to Levy anyway as she did not fit into traditional molds for women at the time (Lake 241).

Harrington argues that Xantippe would not have been invited to Socrates’ parties and would hear rumors of her husband through the grapevine. She would have often been deliberately left out of Socrates’ life. This contributes nicely into queer theory as she is being explicitly excluded and labeled “other than,” whether as a woman or because of her sexuality.

Because of Levy’s careful crafting of this version of Xantippe, readers see a more well-rounded Xantippe than history would have made her. She carries multiple traits in the poem rather than just her well-known shrewdness: “idealism, spousal love, and embitterment” (Hughes). The imagery of light towards the end of her life, stated at the beginning of the poem, creates a cycle to continue—the cycle of women not achieving their desires in a male-focused

society. Because Amy Levy was a Jewish woman in a heavily Christian society, someone who also does not fit into a more traditional mold, Xantippe worked as an outlet to show the isolation Amy Levy could have felt. In a way, classical figures gave Amy Levy a voice, but Amy Levy gave a voice to a classical woman.

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