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Gay's (in) the Word(s): Sapphic Histories and Community Creation via Publications and *Arena*

Three

Perry Mayo

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Introduction

Activism can take place in innumerable forms, from organized protests to online fundraising to raising awareness through educational measures like teach-ins, walk-outs, and circulated petitions. Historically, when marginalized groups do not have the space and/or power to speak up for themselves and the injustices they experience, whether that be out of lack of safety or lack of numbers or any other possible hindrance, they turn to more elusive forms of communication and unification to disseminate messages and calls to action. Thus, publications — including but not limited to journals, magazines, or even zines— have become major tools for facilitating communication and community building, especially in regards to vulnerable groups. Through the analyzation of the 1960s lesbian publication, *Arena Three*, that circulated in the United Kingdom prior to the worldwide AIDS crisis, this paper aims to show how the modern-day sapphic (of or relating to lesbians or lesbianism) community in the United Kingdom was initially created and maintained in the face of social and legislative homophobia. Additionally, this paper will discuss how historical publications such as *Arena Three* can become foundational texts for cultural identity and referenceable resources in the current day fight for equality and recognition.

Methodology and Thesis

The research for this paper will be conducted by analyzing primary sources such as *Arena Three* excerpts and statements from the magazine's original founders, and then contextualizing the findings with secondary resources discussing the Western gay liberation movement, modern feminism, and British popular history. In examining and comparing an array of sources, including “The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives” by author and literary critic Bonnie Zimmerman and “Deviant Classics: Pulp and the Making of Lesbian Print

Culture” by American scholar and professor Stephanie Foote, and putting them in conversation and in context with one another, it becomes clear that magazines and the publishing industry were instrumental to the unification of the women-loving-women communities in the mid- to late-20th century and laid crucial groundwork for the powerful queer liberation movements that are in action today.

While there are potentially dozens of queer British publications that could have been analyzed within regards to this research question such as *Urania* (circulated from 1916 to 1940)—the potentially first lesbian periodical in the United Kingdom, published in the 1960s—and *The Pink Paper* (founded in 1987), *Arena Three* was more widely circulated. Furthermore, *Arena Three* boasts a more specifically sapphic, controversial history, and has more direct and solidified ties to the modern day movements and roots within the queer crises happening around the globe. The lesbian-specific magazine was printed at a truly divisive and pivotal time in queer history: straddling the beginning of Margaret Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister (who served as the head of state from 1979 to 1999), in a notoriously conservative era in modern British history, and predating the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, a period of Western history that both oppressed and greatly vilified the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities.

Background

Arena Three was circulated prior to any of the controversial legislation that put the queer liberation and rights (or anti-liberation and discriminatory) movements at center stage. These works of legislature include— but are certainly not limited to— the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, Section (or Clause) 28, or the AIDS epidemic. The Sexual Offences Act of 1967, put in place during *Arena Three*’s publication era, legalized homosexual acts in England and Wales, on the condition that they were consensual, committed in private, and between two men who had

both reached the minimum age of 21.¹ The monumental piece of legislation set a higher age of consent for homosexual sex acts than the age of consent for heterosexual ones (16 years old)², had an “in private clause” different from the clause geared towards heterosexual couples, did not apply to individuals enlisted in the Armed Forces or Merchant Navy, and only applied to England and Wales rather than the entire United Kingdom.³ While somewhat progressive (for its time) in its legalization of homosexual acts, it still placed harsh restrictions on the queer community. Throughout the 1980s, AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) plagued the world and was framed as a “gay” disease by the media and the government. Sometimes referred to as the “gay plague,” the public image of AIDS unfairly demonized the queer community—gay men, lesbians, and transgender women in particular. Before being labeled as AIDS, the public was warned of GRID, as the disease was originally known as Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. This initial, official name alone exemplifies the intrinsic homophobia that surrounded the disease that disproportionately affects Black people, Latinx people, people who inject drugs or share substance equipment, and children born to mothers with untreated HIV, not just queer people.⁴ The disease, which currently has no cure, can be transmitted when blood, semen and pre-seminal fluid, breast milk, and/or vaginal fluids enter the bloodstream of an HIV-negative individual through a mucous membrane, open cut or sore, or via direct injection.⁵

¹ “Sexual Offences Act 1967 - UK Parliament,” UK Parliament, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections1/sexual-offences-act-1967/>.

² “The Law and Consenting to Sex: Just the Facts,” Health For Teens, April 9, 2021, <https://www.healthforteens.co.uk/sexual-health/the-law-and-consenting-to-sex-just-the-facts-2/#:~:text=It's%20important%20to%20be%20aware,of%20consenting%20to%20sexual%20activity.>

³ “Sexual Offences Act 1967 - UK Parliament,” UK Parliament.

⁴ “HIV and AIDS - Causes,” NHS Choices (NHS), accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.uppertootingsurgery.nhs.uk/conditions/hiv-and-aids/causes/>.

⁵ “How Is HIV Transmitted?,” HIV.gov, January 26, 2021, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/about-hiv-and-aids/how-is-hiv-transmitted.>

Due to the various ways and fluids through which HIV/AIDS can be transmitted and contracted, it was bigoted, ignorant, and targeted to label the virus solely as a virus contracted and passed along within the LGBTQ+ community.

By the end of 1984, there were 108 confirmed AIDS cases and 46 deaths in the United Kingdom, and just a year later in 1985, there were more than 20,000 cases worldwide.⁶ Following the peak of the AIDS epidemic, Section 28, in place from 1988 to 2003, prohibited the “promotion of homosexuality” by local authorities and was introduced by the Conservative government under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.⁷ The law, partially inspired by the 1980s children’s book called *Jenny Lives With Eric and Martin* written about different types of family relationships, specifically prohibited promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material.⁸ Given the state of queer acceptance and its various forms of (il)legalization before, during, and after the circulation of *Arena Three*, *Arena Three* pushed the boundaries of what was legally allowed and socially accepted in Britain at the time. Its existence and popularity relative to the queer and publication circles proves the strength and resistance of the sapphic community and the potential impact of publications as a form of protest and community-building.

Following World War II, a lesbian subculture simultaneously bloomed in the United Kingdom and the United States centered around a particular set of bars and clubs—such as The Gateways Club in Chelsea, London, Julius’ in Greenwich Village in New York City, New York,

⁶ Suyin Haynes, “‘It’s a Sin’: History of 1980s Aid Crisis, Impact on Present,” *Time* (*Time*, February 15, 2021), <https://time.com/5939522/its-a-sin-history-hiv-transphobia/>.

⁷ Harvey Day, “Section 28: What Was It and How Did It Affect LGBT+ People?,” *BBC Three* (*BBC*, November 1, 2019), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/cacc0b40-c3a4-473b-86cc-11863c0b3f30>.

⁸ “Local Government Act 1988,” *Legislation.gov.uk* (Queen's Printer of Acts of Parliament), accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28/enacted>.

and Mona's 440 Club in San Francisco, California— known within the queer community.⁹ Modern accounts of the lesbian subculture suggest that “lesbians and homosexual men mingled with a wider population of prostitutes, drug dealers and criminals in this underworld”¹⁰ and it is known that the social networks and relationships that emerged from the subculture were predominantly via word of mouth communication.¹¹ This group of sapphic women, joined together through shared specialized slang, unique self-identification methods and friends of friends, formed an exclusive, protective community of shared sympathy and support of those ostracized by the heterosexual and/or cisgendered society.¹²

With communication occurring only in whispers at handpicked bars and late-night clubs, the sapphic community in the United Kingdom prior to 1964 was small, invisible, and silenced. In the spring of 1964, the first issue of *Arena Three* was published.¹³ Conceptualized by Esme Langley, Cynthia Reid, Julia Switsur, and Patricia Dunkley, the women set out to create the first periodical specifically targeted towards lesbians in Britain.¹⁴ The four founding members all hailed from middle-class, professional backgrounds and thus, *Arena Three* was initially mostly advertised in middle-class publications such as the *New Statesman*, a British political and cultural magazine founded in 1913. However, later in its publication, the magazine consciously worked to reflect a more inclusive and expansive outlook on the lesbian identity, addressing a

⁹ Rebecca Jennings, “The Gateways Club and the Emergence of a Post-Second World War Lesbian Subculture,” *Social History* 31, no. 2 (2006): pp. 206-225, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020600562959>, 207.

¹⁰ Jennings, “The Gateways Club and the Emergence of a Post-Second World War Lesbian Subculture,” 209.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 216.

¹² *Ibid*, 207.

¹³ Steven Dryden, “Arena Three: Britain's First Lesbian Magazine,” British Library, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.bl.uk/lgbtq-histories/articles/arena-three-britains-first-lesbian-magazine>.

¹⁴ Molly Saxby, “The First Lesbian Magazine: Arena Three,” GlitterBeam Radio, May 1, 2021, <https://www.glitterbeam.co.uk/2021/05/01/the-first-lesbian-magazine-arena-three/>.

wider scope of the sapphic community.¹⁵ The name of the magazine, *Arena Three*, signified the intention of giving subscribers a “special forum, platform, or ‘arena’ in which to meet a dozen times a year.”¹⁶ The periodical’s audience was made up of mostly middle-class lesbian women, but was also read by bisexual people, gay men, and professionals interested in homosexuality.¹⁷ Given the precarious state of homosexual acceptance and legality, initially, the founders required married women to obtain written consent from their husbands as part of their subscription requests.¹⁸ The magazine was circulated to private subscribers free of charge and used existing queer networks as well as promotion from the first lesbian magazine in the United States to be distributed nationally, *The Ladder*; among other publications to gain more readers.¹⁹

In its first two years of printing, the magazine “voic[ed] the Lesbian’s point of view, serving as a bridge between the homosexual woman and the (officially) heterosexual public”²⁰ and aimed to “conduct and to collaborate in research into the homosexual condition, especially as it concerns women; and to disseminate information and items of interest to ... all those genuinely in quest of enlightenment about what has been called ‘the misty, unmapped world of feminine homosexuality’”²¹ including—but not limited to—universities, scientists, poets, and professors. Throughout its time in circulation, the magazine provided a safe and supportive forum for each reader to share their reactions to “hostile media representations of lesbianism”²²

¹⁵ Rebecca Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71* (Manchester etc.: Manchester University Press, 2013), 137.

¹⁶ Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71*, 136.

¹⁷ Saxby, “The First Lesbian Magazine: Arena Three.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Joanna O'Brien, “On the Cusp of Change: Lesbian Voices from the 1960s,” Glasgow Women's Library, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/explore-the-library-and-archive/lgbtq-collections-online-resource/on-the-cusp-of-change-lesbian-voices-from-the-1960s/>.

²⁰ Giorgia Succi, “Arena Three: Lesbians Do It Better,” Glasgow Women's Library, April 25, 2017, <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2017/04/24/arena-three-lesbians-do-it-better/>.

²¹ Dryden, “Arena Three: Britain’s First Lesbian Magazine.”

²² Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71*, 149.

and to connect with one another in the community. *Arena Three* performed an important function for its readers from the outset, in providing a supportive forum in which they could share their reactions to such hostile media representations of lesbianism. For many readers, *Arena Three* was the means by which they first made contact with other sapphic, with the letters page allowing lesbians to contact one another across the nation, within their hometowns, and anywhere in between.²³ The magazine featured book reviews, pieces on lesbian history, and even “engaged with contemporaneous issues in psychoanalysis and religion,” allowing gay women to better understand and elaborate on their identities and social circumstances.²⁴

The social function of *Arena Three* was just as impactful as the pamphlet itself. Readers demanded meetings and events from its onset, and the first meeting took place at the Shakespeare’s Head pub on Carnaby Street in May 1964. The meetings were held monthly and were partially for educational discussion and partially for casual socialization.²⁵ However, within these meetings, evidence suggests that there grew a class-based hostility towards butch lesbians.²⁶ Prior to and during the 1960s, middle-class lesbians “employed discretion as a strategy to live without stigma in homophobic environments” and unfortunately at times, distanced themselves from butch lesbians who were regarded as highly visible lesbians and located “firmly within the working class.”²⁷

²³ Ibid, 155.

²⁴ O'Brien, “On the Cusp of Change: Lesbian Voices from the 1960s,” Glasgow Women's Library, accessed April 6, 2022. <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/explore-the-library-and-archive/lgbtq-collections-online-resource/on-the-cusp-of-change-lesbian-voices-from-the-1960s/>.

²⁵ Dryden, “Arena Three: Britain’s First Lesbian Magazine.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Alix Genter, “Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Butch-Femme Fashion and Queer Legibility in New York City, 1945–1969,” *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 3 (2016): pp. 604-631, <https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.42.3.0604>, 620.

The final issue of *Arena Three* was published in July of 1971, with the end of the magazine largely chalking up to administrative and financial conflicts.²⁸ Even though the circulation of *Arena Three* was quaint — totalling between 400 and 450 subscriptions in mid-1965 and only reaching 600 subscribers at most by April 1971²⁹ — The impact of the seemingly negligible, short-lived magazine cannot be overstated and should by no means be overlooked.

Research

Arena Three, despite being a relatively short-lived publication, has left many lasting impacts on both the lesbian community in the United Kingdom and the modern queer community at large. The magazine aided the creation of the modern lesbian identity, social acceptance of lesbians in Britain by debunking myths and normalizing lesbian existence, and brought queer studies into the mainstream British eye. The creation of the lesbian identity prior to the 1980s relied heavily on promoting a “respectable and palatable verison of the lesbian identity and in many ways served assimilationist aims.”³⁰ According to Cynthia Reid, one of *Arena Three*’s founding members and supposedly the only surviving member of the Minorities Research Group (the first organization to openly advocate the interests of lesbians in the United Kingdom, founded in 1963), the assimilation to heterosexual culture and promotion of a digestible,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71*, 137.

³⁰ Saxby, “The First Lesbian Magazine: *Arena Three*.”

non-threatening lesbian created by *Arena Three* allowed marginalized voices space to share stories and be heard for the first time.³¹

Beyond creating space for lesbian voices in an activist sense, the magazine also provided a space for subscribers to communicate with one another and build a tightknit women-loving-women community. Committee members of *Arena Three* reported that they had been “inundated with requests for information, help, and advice from all sorts of people including lesbians or ‘women who fearfully suspect themselves of being lesbian.’”³² According to authors Helen Spandler and Sarah Carr, the magazine strategy intentionally engaged in “socially respectable forms of activism.”³³ The committee decided to take an “assimilationist approach” to *Arena Three* in order to promote a more “elastic and inclusive” view of sexuality that normalized and included lesbianism. In the absence of a larger, collaborative lesbian community, media representations of lesbianism were essential in shaping women’s views of their sexuality and self-identity as well as society’s attitudes towards lesbians. *Arena Three* took negative views of lesbianism head-on, publicly criticizing the media for hostile or ignorant writing and promoting positive portrayals of lesbianism and homosexual individuals.³⁴

Arena Three also brought queer studies into mainstream scientific and social discussions. In engaging with and debunking pathologized and medicalized understandings of homosexuality, *Arena Three* contributors hoped to increase knowledge and understanding of the lesbian identity. Further, the magazine aimed to largely improve the public image of lesbians while quashing

³¹ Katherine A. Hubbard, “Lesbian Community and Activism in Britain 1940s–1970s: An Interview with Cynthia Reid,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, November 1, 2021, pp. 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1996098>, 1.

³² Hubbard, “Lesbian Community and Activism in Britain 1940s–1970s: An Interview with Cynthia Reid,” 12.

³³ Helen Spandler and Sarah Carr, “A History of Lesbian Politics and the Psy Professions,” *Feminism & Psychology* 31, no. 1 (August 2020): pp. 119-139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353520969297>, 123.

³⁴ Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71*, 149.

myths and misconceptions of lesbianism. The magazine collaborated with some supportive psychological professors, produced scathing reviews of books that misrepresented or medicalized lesbianism,³⁵ and even at one point used Rorschach inkblot tests to show that “lesbians were no more neurotic than heterosexual women and might even have positive psychological characteristics (such as independence).”³⁶ Through engaging scientifically with sapphic misconceptions, *Arena Three* began to normalize and politicize the lesbian sexuality and identity, shed light on the intersectionality of the LGBTQ+ community and laid groundwork for the gay liberation, feminist, and queer acceptance movements that would change the world after *Arena Three* went out of circulation.

Conclusion

Arguably, *Arena Three*'s biggest contribution to lesbian liberation, queer acceptance, and feminism is the foundation that it laid for the modern day movements. For example, despite married lesbians and lesbian mothers being a niche, often invisible minority at the time, the magazine still explored their identities and questioned societal standards and pressures placed on women regarding marriage and motherhood. As stated by author Steven Dryden, these pieces published by the magazine “often generated discussion that would later be magnified by the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the early 1970s.”³⁷ Cynthia Reid, mentioned earlier in this paper, became a member of the splinter group Kenric (sprung from the Minority Research Group) that aimed to be more democratic than its predecessor and provide greater social opportunities for lesbians. Kenric, a social group for lesbian women, is now the longest running

³⁵ Spandler and Carr, “A History of Lesbian Politics and the Psy Professions,” *Feminism & Psychology* 31, no. 1, 125.

³⁶ Ibid, 124.

³⁷ Dryden, “Arena Three: Britain’s First Lesbian Magazine.”

lesbian organization in Britain and is widely considered pivotal in the history of British lesbian liberation alongside the Minority Research Group (MRG.)³⁸ Similarly, known author and professor Alison Oram suggests that *Arena Three* and the MRG had all the characteristics of a progressive new social movement and “created an innovative lesbian politics well before the appearance of Gay Liberation.”³⁹ After *Arena Three* closed its doors, a new lesbian feminist publication rose to prominence. Beginning in April 1972 and running for nine years until 1981, just under a year after *Arena Three* stopped publishing new issues, United Kingdom-born *Sappho* continued to publish narratives that kept in line with the gay and women’s liberation movements that *Arena Three* had pioneered.⁴⁰ *Sappho* capitalized on the lesbian desire to organize autonomously alongside the women’s and gay liberation movements and represented the union of the various 1970s liberation politics.⁴¹ According to Spalder and Carr, *Sappho* supposedly picked up where *Arena Three* had left off, “involving some of same people, such as Diana Chapman, but was more explicitly feminist and closely aligned with the Women’s Liberation Movement.”⁴²

Arena Three undeniably aided the progress of lesbian acceptance in society and the modern LGBTQ+ and feminist movements, largely in part due to its publication format. As written by author Bonnie Zimmerman, “lesbian resistance lies in correct naming; thus our power flows from language, vision, and culture. By controlling and defining images and ideas, lesbians

³⁸ Hubbard, “Lesbian Community and Activism in Britain 1940s–1970s: An Interview with Cynthia Reid,” 12.

³⁹ Spandler and Carr, “A History of Lesbian Politics and the Psy Professions,” *Feminism & Psychology* 31, no. 1, 133.

⁴⁰ Dryden, “Arena Three: Britain’s First Lesbian Magazine.”

⁴¹ Spandler and Carr, “A History of Lesbian Politics and the Psy Professions,” *Feminism & Psychology* 31, no. 1, 129.

⁴² *Ibid*, 129.

are able to ‘reconstitute the world.’”⁴³ In an age of silence, oppression, and ignorance, physical publications, written accounts, and word of mouth became the most effective move of being heard. Through speaking out in *Arena Three*, the British lesbian and women loving women community were able to form an identity for themselves, pull together a supportive community, and debunk myths that harm lesbians and mislead the opinions of the public.

The pioneering magazine aimed to change public attitudes towards lesbianism through promoting scientific research and educating the media with proven facts, accredited studies, and personal narratives. *Arena Three* became a public forum that allowed lesbians to write of the real lesbian experience for a larger audience. It promoted alternative, more accurate representations of the medicalized and mystified Lesbian while influencing the collective lesbian identity and lesbian community. Cynthia Reid herself argues that “gay liberation was on its way regardless, but it is clear that the work she put in especially in the 1960s made those efforts from the 1970s at the very least, more possible.”⁴⁴ In this view, *Arena Three* can be seen as “anticipating the concerns of subsequent Gay Liberation politics.”⁴⁵ Publications like *Arena Three* and *Sappho* helped shape the queer movement through the use of publication, and laid the scene for other popular publications such as *Out Magazine*, *The Advocate*, *PinkNews*, and even *Playboy Magazine*. Publications have always been integral to the queer fight for rights, acceptance, and acknowledgement, and *Arena Three* only underscores this integrity.

Further Research

⁴³ Bonnie Zimmerman, “The Politics of Transliteration: Lesbian Personal Narratives,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (1984): pp. 663-682, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494092>, 672.

⁴⁴ Hubbard, “Lesbian Community and Activism in Britain 1940s–1970s: An Interview with Cynthia Reid,” 15.

⁴⁵ Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71*, 166.

Given the timeline and scope of this research project, I was not able to analyze *Arena Three* and its long-term affects on lesbian liberation, communication, and community to its fullest extent. As this paper exemplifies, publications and magazine distribution can have massive impacts on real world issues such as LGBTQ+ acceptance and legalization. This paper mentions other queer publications such as *Urania* and *Sappho*. If time had allowed, I ideally would have analyzed all three British publications, *Urania*, *Arena Three*, and *Sappho*, in comparison with each other, comparing and contrasting their individual and collective legal and social impacts and implications over the 20th and 21st centuries.

It would be interesting to track queer European legislature in time with the various publications to see if a correlation or causation affect appears at any given time. While this paper discusses just British queer media and laws, it would be negligent to ignore the state of lesbian life and rights in Europe in relation to the United Kingdom pre- and post-Brexit. Despite the magazines going out of circulation prior to the United Kingdom separating from the European Union, lasting effects of publication circulation and community creation could have been felt by the lesbian and women-loving-women communities across the United Kingdom and Europe even past the British withdrawal from the European Union.

Given more time and more resources, I would love to embark on a long-term project analyzing the larger impact of lesbian and queer publications in the United Kingdom and the European Union throughout the last two centuries. I predict that, if that research is done, my original thesis would only be further proven: that magazines and the publishing industry are instrumental to the unification of the modern lesbian and women-loving-women communities and laid crucial groundwork for the powerful queer liberation movements that are in action today.

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