

Close reading sappho  
and the treatment of  
feminine desire.



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When contemplating Sappho's illumination of the role of the woman in Ancient Greek society in her poetry, it is equitable to concede that there is an underlying tone of patriarchal oppression woven throughout; in which femininity is reduced to isolation, with the Sapphic lyric as its one remaining spokesperson. The oppression of the female voice seems to manifest itself into a loathing introspection, with the body acting as a form of agent for destruction; internally combusting itself into resentment and heartbreak.

Katz's conclusion that Greek society is largely characterized as being a "men's club" (514) is thus important to consider when reading Sappho's fragments, specifically those in which the female voice is confronted with - as Sappho refers to as - 'that fellow'. However, Sappho's depiction of this patriarchal overture, seems starkly distorted when interpreting her own preoccupation with feminine dynamism and divinity; bolstering the idea that women themselves are the fundamental power source for masculine dominance. In the opening verse of Sappho's fragment, the concentration placed upon the male figure as the competitor against the poem's persona for the affections of the object of desire is sheerly embellished with feminine power. Greene claims that contemporary readers have the opportunity to view feminine desire as an alternative to the 'competitive and hierarchical models of eroticism that have dominated Western culture' (5), but this view can be largely counteracted with the persona's reaction to seeing the object of their desire with another. Sappho's poetic voice seems to begrudgingly describe the man as 'god's double, couched with you', which seemingly indicates that the competitive speaker considers the man only to be powerful because he is in the presence of her beloved's splendor. These godlike

insinuations relating to the clout of the male sex, does ultimately imply that femininity exudes the desirability of a goddess, which in the wider context of Sappho's poetry, likely alludes to Aphrodite as the feminine goddess of love and sex. The role of Aphrodite, although not specifically as a facet in this fragment, can be seen to have a somewhat bittersweet relationship with women in society; in that, whilst she grants them the power of desirability, the antithesis of this results in the sobering result of the isolation felt by the fragment's voice. In this sense, men cease to realize their dominance without the female counterpart and arguably utilize their 'warm manner' and 'inviting laughter' as a means to further bolster the superiority of masculinity, making them appear as 'god's double' in the face of onlooking and repressed feminism.

The introspective nature of Sappho's poetic voice in the fragment in question does appear to further exude the repression of feminine desire, with the body viewed as a Hell-like prison in which the speaker's emotions ravage at her insides; becoming increasingly more violent as the fragment progresses. The persona's tongue is 'shattered' as she observes and contemplates her unrequited and seemingly erotic affections, leaving her voiceless in a society in which sensual relationships with women are only to be enjoyed by men; thus further fattening masculinity's superiority. The loss of voice also serves to pillow the encapsulation of the isolation of feminine desire and when aligning this to Mendelson's interpretation that the speaker is left in 'a kind of interior echo chamber', the introspective loathing can be seen to sprout from a yearning for sensual experiences. Thus, the speaker's reversion to inverting into her own biological make-up is likely to be a desperate attempt

to fester an experience that she cannot enjoy with the object of her affections. In her eyes, that prize has been stolen by man, which thus brings Greene's contention back to the forefront of thought, in that in actuality - as opposed to Greene's line of thought - the male dominative monopoly in Western culture was still of strong prominence in Ancient Greece, and Sappho's poetry does in fact illuminate this. The isolation of the speaker brings to mind the image of life underneath a bell jar, in which the sole company of the persona reduces her to feelings of worthlessness in a man's world.

When considering Sappho's fragment in a more contemporary context, Plath's poem *Lesbos*, and her depiction of the angst brought about by feminine desire, which causes 'hate up to my neck, thick, thick' (52. 64-66) again reveals a sheer parallel to Sappho's bodily assassination on the senses. Plath expands on this, calling the woman in *Lesbos* a 'blood-loving bat' (53. 80) and when contemplating the role of Sappho's poetic persona it may be argued that the object of desire is in fact a form of poison to the speaker. Thus, the Sapphic illustration of feminine relationships in fact sets flowing an underlying tone of tragedy; the persona looks on at her beloved, and the 'gauzy flame runs radiating under [her] skin', which in turn reveals the candid emotional pain brought about by feminine desire. In light of Plath's moronic presentation of female relationships, Sappho's fragment may be considered to be the denotation of female suffering in a patriarchal society. Mendelson calls the fragment a 'reaction shot', which highlights the very dominant Sapphic theme of intimacy, and when using this as a lens to objectify Sappho's fragment we can see the internal effects of unattainable

desire, in that it stunts all ability to function. As the speaker's emotional stability deteriorates, so does their bodily functions and the introspective nature intensifies. Ironically, as the fragment progresses, it becomes more and more concerned with the persona as opposed to the object of desire or the man she is spending time with, which fundamentally poses the question of whether or not the source of the speaker's pain stems from their beloved, or the general conventions of longing and isolation as a woman.

## **Works Cited**

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