

The commodification of women in sappho's poems and fragments



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Ancient Greek poet Sappho authored poems exploring various concepts of female sexuality and romantic experience. Many of her poems and the fragments of them that remain explore the theme and experience of marriage in women's lives. While many readers would argue that the women in Sappho's poems are honored and respected through marriage, this view fails to recognize that the marriage system exists within a social system that favors men, is deeply flawed, and contributes to the commodification of women in society. In her essay, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," Gayle Rubin coins the term "the sex/gender system" in order to describe this dynamic. According to Rubin, the sex/gender system is "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (159). In our society specifically, it is the system in which women, sexual minorities, and other aspects of human personality are oppressed. Rubin argues for how this system creates a society in which women are exchanged by men through the institution of marriage and therefore commodified. Rubin's ideas on kinship and marriage further reveal the detrimental effects of the sex/gender system on female value, and her observations not only shed light on the commodification of women in modern times, but on the archetypal commodification of women that plagued ancient Greece as well.

By reading Sappho's poems through the lens of Rubin's ideas on marriage and kinship within the sex/gender system, it is possible to gain a deeper and more complete understanding of Sappho's perception of the flaws of marriage and its impact on the commodification of women in ancient Greece.

By reading Sappho's poems through Rubin's sex/gender system lens, it becomes clear that Sappho seeks to expose the subordination of women that results from marriage. In her essay, Rubin argues that marriage commodifies women because the marriage system places value not on a woman and her personal abilities, but on her kinship ties and monetary value. Rubin does not provide a concrete definition of kinship ties, arguing that they "are and do many things," and are "made up of, and reproduce, concrete forms of socially organized sexuality" (169). Kinship ties are a form of the sex/gender system that perpetuates the reproduction of the marriage system and of female commodification. Rubin argues that "marriage transactions- the gifts and material which circulate in the ceremonies making a marriage," illuminate that women's rights are "residual" to those of men (177). Rubin argues that marital transactions consist of a system in which women are the gift and men the giver, creating a dynamic in which women have no ownership over themselves. This system was clearly evident in ancient Greece, as we can deduce from Sappho's description below of a marriage ceremony. Sappho's poems reveal a system in which a woman's worth is tied to her wealth, which is a result of her kinship status. In fact, much of the marriage song depicted describes not the bride herself, but the material objects that accompany her in the marriage exchange. Sappho writes, Hector and his companions are bringing a woman / with sparkling eyes, graceful Andromache, from sacred / Thebe, / from the ever-flowing streams of Placia, in their ships / across the salt-filled sea; / and with her they also carry / many golden bracelets, purple clothing, engraved trinkets, / ivory and silver goblets too numerous to count. (72)

In Greek mythology, Andromache was viewed as the perfect wife- virtuous, domestic, and subservient. However, she also exhibits untraditional behavior for a woman, such as giving her husband advice on matters of war. In this way, Andromache and Hector's relationship is an example of a relatively untraditional marital partnership that breaks down gender barriers. Sappho, however, disregards this part of Hector and Andromache's story and simplifies Andromache's role in order to emphasize Andromache's subservience and highlight the commodification of women at play here. Sappho first describes Andromache as being brought, by " Hector and his companions," presumably a largely male group. The image of a woman " being brought" to a man by another group of men demonstrates the lack of female control in this exchange between men. The woman is the gift, and the men are gifting her. This concept of men exchanging women portrays a system in which women have no rights over themselves. Andromache is praised only for her physical beauty, as having " sparkling eyes" and being " graceful." All other descriptions of her are tied to her kin or the material objects that accompany her. She is " from sacred / Thebe," connoting that she and her kin come from a place of holiness and purity, as well as " from the ever-flowing stream of Placia," implying wealth and abundance. The description includes that Andromache is accompanied by " many gold bracelets, purple clothing, engraved trinkets / ivory and silver goblets too numerous to count." She is being brought alongside material objects that Sappho describes in rich language. The value of the marriage exchange is significantly raised by the material objects that are gifted alongside the bride, thereby reducing her personal value and implying that the exchange of women is only worthy and complete if it includes material objects of

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monetary worth. Thus, women's rights are not only more "residual than those of men," they are plainly secondary (Rubin 177). "Gold" and "purple" are colors associated with wealth, while "trinkets" and "goblets" are described in abundance. As Rubin explains, the woman is only one part of the material that circulates in a marriage ceremony. The emphasis placed on the material objects that a woman is exchanged with demonstrates that the exchange of marriage emphasizes not the woman, but the wealth that accumulates with the marriage. By examining Sappho's poems through the Rubin's lens of marriage transactions, it is clear that the poems reveal a deep dissatisfaction with the secondary role that women were assigned in ancient Greece. Through her description of the marriage procession of Hector and Andromache, Sappho demonstrates this by exposing the emphasis that marriage places on a woman's subservient role and lack of recognition for her abilities.

A closer reading of Sappho's poems through the lens of Rubin's ideas of kinship organization further reveals women's subordinate role in which women in marital relationships receive neither the benefits of their relationships nor the rights to themselves. One benefit of the relationship would be wealth, or at least financial autonomy. The woman receives neither of these things directly, as demonstrated by Sappho's depiction of marriage ceremonies. In her essay, Rubin details the system in which women are exchanged without any say in their own circulation. Rubin maintains that women in marriage ceremonies simply "pass from hand to hand," and as a result, leave "the ties that bind," meaning kinship ties. However, the resulting kinship ties only benefit men, usually heightening their wealth and

power. Women are “ conduits” in a system which does not benefit them and which they have no control over. It is the men who benefit from these transactions, who are “ linked” by the kinship ties that are created and for whom wealth is increased. Thus, women are commodified as gifts in order to benefit the men in their families (174). The system Rubin reveals is clearly problematic, and is emphasized in Sappho’s poems. In Sappho’s description of a marriage, the groom is praised for his bride, which he seems to have acquired through faith and luck. Sappho writes, Lucky bridegroom, / the marriage you have prayed for has come to pass / and the bride you dreamed of is yours... / Beautiful bride, / to look at you gives joy; your eyes are like honey, / love flows over your gentle face... / Aphrodite / has honoured you above all others (62). Sappho’s description of marriage from the male point of view is one in which the woman is indeed viewed as a gift. The marriage is a result of “ luck,” “ prayer,” and “ dreaming.” The woman did not have to be actively pursued; instead, it is as if he acquired her as one does a gift, confirming Rubin’s description and demonstrating that women are treated merely as pawns used to benefit men by creating kinship ties through marriage, and ultimately leading to an increase in wealth for the men involved. Additionally, the woman’s value lies in her beauty; her eyes are “ like honey,” and she has a “ gentle face.” Her value lies only in her attributes that can give men enjoyment, such as beauty and wealth, and she receives no benefit from her marital relationship.

Thus, Sappho details a system not unlike that which Rubin describes, in which “ women are the gifts” and men “ the exchange partners.” In this system, “ women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own

circulation...men...are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges,” (Rubin 174). This system, in which men receive the wealth that accompanies a married woman, creates a problematic dynamic in which women are never in any position of control over themselves, and in which their personal value is never recognized. Rubin defines the term: “‘Exchange of women’ as a shorthand for expressing that the social relations of a kinship system specify that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin” (177). One short fragment by Sappho serves as clear evidence for Rubin’s concept: “‘We give this woman away,’ / her father said” (61). The “we” represented here is most likely another party of men: brothers, uncles, cousins, and fathers who will benefit from the exchange of this female member of their family. The decision is final and explicit, for the woman has no say in the matter. She is simply an object to be given away. Women in this system are valued solely for how they can potentially benefit men, whether it be their kin or husbands. Rubin’s ideas on the exchange of marriage illuminate the meaning of Sappho’s poems by emphasizing the commodified and subordinate position of women in ancient Greece through descriptions of marriage ceremonies.

When reading Sappho’s poems and fragments, it can seem logical to view them as having a positive and even joyous outlook on marriage. After all, Sappho’s poems often contain rich descriptions of love, desire, and beauty. However, a deeper reading of her poems reveal a critical perspective on marriage that is required in order to understand the authentic experience of married women in ancient Greece. Rubin’s essay reveals ideas on the

sex/gender system that can be applied to the interpretation of Sappho's poems. Rubin argues that women are commodified because their value is placed on their kinship ties. Women in ancient Greece were commodified by this same system, in which they had no control over themselves or their relationships. Women passed through the hands of men, their value weighed by their kinship ties and beauty, attributes they could not control. Women were the gifts that men received in marriage, and men were the givers. Women were celebrated and valued only for the pleasure they brought to men, whether through their beauty or their family's wealth. Sappho's poems on marriage songs and ceremonies are evidence of this, and show the lack of control that women possessed in marital relationships. Rubin's ideas are a powerful tool in understanding the ways in which women were commodified then and now, and serve as a lens in which to interpret ancient as well as modern marital dynamics.

Bibliography:

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