



## Divided Consciousness and Female Companionship: Reconstructing Female Subjectivity on Greek Vases<sup>1</sup>

Lauren Hackworth Petersen

### Figures

Someone, I say, will remember us in the future.

Sappho <sup>2</sup>

In her critique of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, Amy Richlin makes the following observation (1992.xiv):

Foucault states early on that he sees his history as that of the desiring subject, who is male; women figure in these pages only as objects, and that rarely. . . . Insofar as this is a history of sexuality at all, it is a history of *male* sexuality, and a partial one at that. . . . I can only say that when I read these books I sense not consciousness but silence, a failure to ask where women's subjectivity was.

### [End Page 35]

The silence that Richlin describes is real. Efforts to speak about the history of sexuality are informed, or misinformed, principally by ancient and contemporary male-constructed ideology. What is muted or lost both in the ancient record and in twentieth-century discussions is the ancient female's perception of herself and her sexuality, expressed in her own voice. In fact, we generally construct our ways of seeing ancient women around the notions of the desired and the ideal. The female is an object of male erotic desire, such as a prostitute, *hetaira*,<sup>3</sup> or slave, or she is an ideal respectable woman, one who marries as a virgin, remains faithful and loyal to her husband, produces an heir for the *oikos* (household) and *polis* (city-state), participates in specific religious rites, and is industrious within her home. For different reasons, both types of women can be considered as constructions of the desired in Attic society. Although it may seem probable that the women of antiquity internalized the ideologies of the desired or the ideal imposed on them, I will argue that women could have variously experienced their own subjectivity and sexuality within the constructs of patriarchy.<sup>4</sup> Making use of feminist theory as well as ancient literary texts, I

will examine depictions of female companionship on Greek vases and explore the connections between female companionship and female subjectivity.

## Vases, Women, and Virtue

In Athenian democracy, men participated predominantly in the creation, administration, and defense of the *polis*. Women, under the authority of the household patriarch, were assigned to manage the *oikos*, which in turn provided for the *polis*.<sup>5</sup> It is important to remember here as [End Page 36] elsewhere that Greek society was segregated by gender.<sup>6</sup> Specific types of vases contain idealized images of female toil and can be seen as illustrating the constructs of this social arrangement. These types of vessels, presumably authored by men for women's use,<sup>7</sup> constituted part of the accouterments women needed to fulfill their prescribed rituals and daily activities. In separate arguments, Claude Bérard and Robert Sutton conclude that women therefore became important active consumers of vases and that the images of women on these vases must have spoken to feminine sensibilities (Bérard 1989.89 and Sutton 1992.22-32). Bérard argues that, "although produced by men, the images painted on vases transmit a much more complex vision of female realities" than "the stereotyped image [of women], created by Attic writers to contrast their women with the girls of Sparta. . . ." (1989.89).

The first vessel that Bérard discusses in recovering a "complex vision of female realities" is a black-figure lekythos in New York attributed to the Amasis Painter (fig. [1a](#), [1b](#), [1c](#)). The lekythos depicts scenes of women working in various stages of textile production, and the vessel itself would have contained perfumed oils and was of a type women owned for use in performing funerary rites. Bérard challenges both ancient descriptions and our modern conceptions which alike emphasize the tedious and mundane nature of the various tasks represented on the lekythos; he suggests that women would not surround themselves with images of these activities if they were as painfully boring as the Hellenistic texts suggest. He further notes that spinning and weaving had important associations with virtuous character in literature and religion and thus carried a "positive symbolic weight" (1989.90-91). For example, an important religious activity for select women and girls was the weaving of the peplos to be presented to Athena as part of the Panathenaia Festival, and the sense of weaving as a sacred activity may have been carried over into everyday life.<sup>8</sup> However, by [End Page 37] overlooking the fact that it was men who connected virtuous character and religion with wool-working, Bérard's analysis risks reiterating the patriarchal ideologies of antiquity. There are other dimensions to these activities, such as the opportunity for female sociability, that may also speak to female realities and sensibilities apart from the dominant constructs of female virtue.<sup>9</sup> [End Page 38]





Women were also largely responsible for carrying water from public fountain houses to their homes. The hydria, a big-bellied vessel with three handles, was the traditional item women used for fetching water and it is fitting that images of women gathering at a fountain house appear on numerous black-figure hydriai (figs. 2 and 3). <sup>10</sup> It was not only female slaves who fetched water; it seems probable that respectable women also **[End Page 39]** enjoyed the opportunity to leave the house and gather at a fountain house (Bérard 1989.95 and Fantham et al. 1994.108-09). Moreover, the task of fetching water may have had connections with feminine virtue deriving in part from religious sources. On a hydria in London, the imposing figures of Dionysus and Hermes are present while women collect water at a fountain house (fig. 2). It is thought that this image may depict the festival of the Hydrophoria, which was a religious ceremony that occurred on the second day of a three-day festival, the Anthesteria. The Anthesteria celebrated Dionysus on the first day and Hermes on the third; women participated in the water pouring ceremony on the day falling between the celebration of Dionysus and Hermes (Williams 1983.102-05). The enframing figures of Dionysus and Hermes at the fountain house seem to make visible the sequence of ceremonial events. <sup>11</sup> **[End Page 40]**



In contrast to textile production, the fetching of water brought women outside of the home and into public (male) space. The everyday task of fetching water was not always a pleasant experience, as the chorus of women in the *Lysistrata* tells us (325-35). Scenes of women at a fountain house include men "ambushing" the female gathering, perhaps to converse with or even molest the unchaperoned women (Bérard 1989.95-96 and Keuls 1985.235-40). T. B. L. Webster notes that images of men by themselves at the fountain house are extremely rare; men instead interrupt the group of women (1972.98-99). For example, one hydria in the Vatican depicts two women and a man at a fountain house within which a woman on the right fills her hydria with water while her companion waits for her (fig. 4). A man, who has been identified as a slave, reaches to touch the breast of the unsuspecting woman at the fountain (Keuls 1985.238). Eva Keuls suggests that the molested woman gestures with her right arm to protest the slave's advance (1985.237-38). It could be argued that vessels with such "ambush" scenes warned a female viewer that she was leaving the security of the private sphere to enter into the public male sphere, where such annoyances could occur. Thus, a respectable or virtuous woman would **[End Page 41]** want to go to the fountain house in the company and with the protection of several other women, as depicted in these examples (figs. 2 and 3).

Nuptial imagery constituted another important source of social ideology. Marriage was perhaps the most revered social construct of Classical Athens, for it was through the marriage of Athenian citizens that a legitimate (male) heir

could be produced for the *polis*. References to the significance of marriage appear in literature <sup>12</sup> as well as in art. Vases with scenes of bridal adornment reflect the Athenians' concern for legitimate marriage and thus procreation for both the *oikos* and the *polis*. Women were **[End Page 42]** the specific audience for these types of vessels, for women used them in daily life and in marriage rituals (Keuls 1985.106-28 and 130-32, Sutton 1992.24-33, and Williams 1983.97-103).

On a late fifth-century, red-figure pyxis in New York (a cylindrical container for jewelry or cosmetics, [fig. 5](#)), a naked bride bathes with a domesticated Eros as her attendant. She dresses in the company of Eros and perhaps another female, and when fully veiled she stands to listen to the marital advice of Aphrodite, who holds Eros on her lap (Sutton 1992.24). A late fifth-century loutrophoros in Boston, a vase used to carry water for marriage rituals, shows the groom leading his bride to the nuptial chamber ([fig. 6a](#)). It has been observed that the groom literally takes possession of his bride by grasping her hand and wrist (Sutton 1992.26). Female attendants stand by and send the bride off to the nuptial bed, which is visible through the partially open door ([fig. 6b](#)). Sutton demonstrates that such depictions of a bride, as she prepares herself and then is escorted to the **[End Page 43]**bridal chamber, are visual images of persuasion, in which "female sensuality has been domesticated and brought in as a kind of Peitho to persuade the Athenian bride, and possibly her groom as well, of her proper sexuality" (1992.24). What a female viewer is seeing is her "proper" sexuality as man has constructed it for the ultimate benefit of the *polis*. As she moves from the security of her home to her new residence, the bride is assured and persuaded through idealized and romanticized imagery (Sutton 1992.24-33). <sup>13</sup>



Sutton and Bérard have argued that images of women on vessels designed for women's daily use speak to a feminine sensibility and female realities, respectively (Sutton 1992.28 and Bérard 1989.89). Their arguments in turn suggest that women chose, purchased, and utilized vessels with the aforementioned images, which would have reminded them of their own experience as they completed their various tasks. At the same time, scenes of industrious and virtuous females also helped to reinforce the ideological framework of patriarchy. In other words, the pleasurable images of female toil work well with patriarchal propaganda and notions of female virtue. Perhaps Sutton said it best when he described the nuptial scenes as images of persuasion. **[End Page 44]**

## Female Companionship, Sappho, and the *Hymn to Demeter*

The use of the word *persuasion* with respect to marital imagery raises an intriguing question. Why exactly did a maiden need to be persuaded? Perhaps it was because she was leaving the security of her childhood home to live with her

new and still unfamiliar husband. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, an anonymous but presumably male-authored text from the late seventh or early sixth century B.C.E., speaks to the threat posed by marriage to the mother-daughter bond. Demeter, as we know, was completely distraught over losing her daughter, and Persephone's response to the abduction is not unlike Demeter's, as she tells her mother: "[Hades] carried me off beneath the earth in his golden chariot much against my will. And I cried out at the top of my voice" (430-31). <sup>14</sup> Her unwillingness **[End Page 45]** becomes clear when Hermes visits Hades and finds him "inside his dwelling, reclining on a bed with his shy spouse, strongly reluctant *through desire for her mother*" (342-44, my emphasis). <sup>15</sup> Persephone's mythological abduction in many ways describes historical ancient marriage customs. The maiden, as young as fourteen years old, had to leave her mother to begin a new life, with her new husband, in a new *oikos*. <sup>16</sup> In this context, the hymn, like bridal imagery on vases, ultimately persuades the audience that marriage is a "natural" institution, for even the gods abide by it.

Sappho, more or less contemporary with the *Hymn to Demeter*, is also earlier in date than the nuptial images we have examined thus far; Sappho's poetry nevertheless furnishes an important female voice that can **[End Page 46]** reveal something about the institution of marriage in ancient Greek society. For example, in the extant fragments of one poem, Sappho's speaker and her dear friend grieve when the friend must depart (fr. 94):

. . . and honestly I wish I were dead. She was leaving me with many tears and said this: "Oh what bad luck has been ours, Sappho; truly I leave you against my will." I replied to her thus: "Go and fare well and remember me, for you know how we cared for you. If not, why then I want to remind you . . . and the good times we had. You put on many wreaths of violets and roses and (crocuses?) together by my side, and around your tender neck you put many woven garlands made from flowers and . . . with much flowery perfume, fit for a queen, you anointed yourself . . . and on soft beds . . . you would satisfy your longing (for?) tender . . . . There was neither . . . nor shrine . . . from which we were absent, no grove . . . nor dance . . . sound . . . ."

The poem expresses an intense sadness over losing a close female friend. So intense is the loss that the speaker wishes she were dead rather than alive to face her sorrow. <sup>17</sup> It is likely that the speaker's friend leaves against her will to be wed according to her male guardian's arrangement. <sup>18</sup> In other words, she departs only to fulfill her societal role. In the first lines of fr. 94, the speaker requests that the bride remember her and all of the maidens who cared for her. These lines can be interpreted as a warning to the bride that she may be understood less by her new husband than she was in the Sapphic community of maidens. At the same time, Sappho's speaker assures the bride that she will not be forgotten and the last sections of the poem are **[End Page 47]** intimate reminders of their life together. Jack Winkler demonstrates that these final passages make specific, yet private, reference to past erotic experiences the maidens shared as they "explored every sacred part of the body" (1981.81-82). <sup>19</sup>

In both the *Hymn to Demeter* and Sappho's poetry fragments (frs. 94 and 31), the brides-to-be leave unwillingly and in despair, and intense sorrow also comes from Demeter's and Sappho's speakers, the ones who have been left or abandoned. All the female figures in the poems experience emotional pain as a direct result of male-constructed ideology. However, the hymn is mythological, prescriptive, and persuasive; it concludes with an assertion of the marriage contract. On the other hand, the experience of Sappho's speaker is historically realistic, and it therefore reveals her private despair over losing an intimate friend to marriage. Whereas, in the end, Persephone can revisit her mother for eight months of a year, Sappho's speaker may never see her companion again, except in her memories and poems.

Sappho's poetic fragments operate on two related levels. The poem as a whole responds to the ideology of patriarchy by lamenting the departure of a dear friend for marriage. The poem also contains veiled erotic imagery and tells us that a woman can be both the subject and the object of desire (Winkler 1981.84). The nuptial images on the wedding vessels can now be interpreted as truly persuasive, perhaps more so than Sutton had originally suggested. Sappho tells us in the voice of a female that the desire for marriage is not an inherent component of female existence. Sappho's female acquiesces to the institution of marriage, while maintaining her desire to form intimate bonds with other females. A similar sentiment is expressed in the *Hymn to Demeter*, in which Persephone seeks the companionship of her mother but continues her relationship with her husband. By the end of the hymn, it becomes clear that Persephone misses her mother and also enjoys her new husband. She ate the pomegranate ("a honey sweet food," 412), which can be interpreted as a metaphor for her sexual relations with Hades. <sup>20</sup> Because she ate the fruit, Persephone must **[End Page 48]** spend and/or desires to spend part of the year with her husband, yet Persephone's relation with her mother is maintained and even condoned. She thus spends separate parts of the year with each of her beloved companions.

I suggest here that we rethink and explore the possibilities for woman-woman relationships in antiquity. Adrienne Rich has argued that female-female relationships can be discussed in reference to gradations of intimacy that belong to a continuum. <sup>21</sup> At one end of the spectrum of female companionship, women form important bonds with female family members and friends. At the other end is the possibility for erotic female-female experience, of which few examples have come down to us today from antiquity. The female-female relationships presented in Sappho's poetry and in the *Hymn to Demeter* suggest that these bonds were indeed an integral component of female life and can be incorporated within discussions of female subjectivity. I suggest that we begin by looking at images of female companionship as depicted particularly on privately owned vases with reference to Winkler's term "double consciousness" (1981.63-89). Winkler uses this term to describe the situation in which Greek women understood men's culture, yet men did not recognize female culture, so that

"women are in the position of knowing two cultures where men know only one" (1981.68-69). Winkler points out that Sappho's "double consciousness" is visible in her lyrics, which both conceal and reveal lesbian imagery without betraying male constructs (1981.77). Is it then possible that women also recognized their own social and sexual experience, in addition to their assigned social and sexual roles, as presented on male-authored vases? What could a woman see when she gazed at another like herself on a vase? **[End Page 49]**

## Female viewers of Greek vases reconsidered

Laura Mulvey and Ann Kaplan, in their discussions of the gendered gaze, separately demonstrate that dominance-submission structures affect how women see themselves in images, namely as passive objects of male desire or as passive observers of passive female objects of male desire (Kaplan 1983.315-20 and Mulvey 1984.361-66). As a passive object of male desire, a female constructs her sexual pleasure around her desire to be desired, rather than seeking "pleasure that comes from desire for another (a subject position)" (Kaplan 1983.315-16). Mulvey's and Kaplan's conclusions, although conceived for the medium of narrative film, can also hold true for our interpretations of women on Greek vases. <sup>22</sup> Vases were a primary vehicle of images that almost everyone had access to, much like film today. Pottery with images of women existed in the home for everyday use, in more public symposium settings, and outside of the home for daily use (e.g., fetching water) and/or ritual use. Although an image on a vase is not constructed as a narrative, as in film, the illustration nonetheless permits a viewer to construct a type of narrative based on the image. For example, representations of women found on kylixes, drinking vessels used by men in symposium settings, provided males with pictures of desirable females, whether slaves, *hetairai*, prostitutes, or even citizens' wives. As a viewer drank from a kylix at a symposium, he could imagine the pleasure he would later experience as he engaged this type of female in his sexual fantasy. Consistent with Mulvey's and Kaplan's analyses, a female viewer of the same vessel could only see herself as a passive object of male desire. To be desired, she must either play the role of the *hetaira* or prostitute, or she must play the role of the virtuous ideal woman, as defined by patriarchy. <sup>23</sup>

The images on vases, like narrative film, were capable of transmitting the dominant ideology, as discussed above concerning vases depicting representations of female virtue (figs. 1-6). With the vases that I have discussed thus far, a woman using a vessel to fulfill one of her societal roles **[End Page 50]** would view the image of another woman like herself, who also dutifully completes a domestic task in the company of other ideal women. She, the user and viewer of the vase, thus sees herself as an ideal figure of man's desire and ideology. In this reading, according to Judith Fetterley's literary construct of *immascultation*, a woman "doubles her oppression." <sup>24</sup> A female viewer, reminded of the "universal" male constructs as she engages in her task, becomes powerless in not seeing her experience articulated and thus identifies

with the male (Fetterley 1977.xiii and xx). Patrocinio Schweickart argues that a feminist reading of a male-centered literary text can permit a woman to experience her own "liberatory aspirations" (1989.27-28). That is, a female can see herself as an autonomous and desiring subject within the text, overlooking the fact that the subject is coded as male. However, this experience elicits a bifurcated response. On the one hand, this rereading allows for a "utopian moment" that would allow a female reader to experience fully her subjectivity. On the other hand, that same rereading places a female, as the subject, against herself, the object or the female in the text (Schweickart 1989.28).

This bifurcated response might also characterize how women viewed images of women on Greek vases. I argue here that it was possible for a woman of ancient Greece to liberate herself from the oppression of patriarchal constructs by actively reading her subjectivity in the images of female companionship even when, as in the images that I have discussed thus far, they depict groups of females engaged in activities that patriarchy deemed appropriate for women in Attic society. These same activities also provided the opportunity for relationships to develop among women. These friendships may have been the most important relationships that Greek women had. <sup>25</sup> As mentioned, female companionship belongs on a continuum, **[End Page 51]** ranging from friendship to sexual intimacy, and it is in reference to this continuum that I will now discuss images of female companionship on vessels that females had the opportunity to use and/or view.

The image of textile production on the above-mentioned New York lekythos depicts three pairs and one trio of women engaged in various activities (fig. 1a-c). Each pair of females performs a similar, if not complementary, task, and, perhaps significantly, each female faces her partner. For example, on the right side of the vessel, two women fold a cloth and next to them two women prepare raw material for spinning (fig. 1a). Two women stand at a loom on the front of the vessel; one moves the weft up the loom while the other seems to introduce the weft below (fig. 1b). Next to this image three women weigh the wool; one holds the scale, the other faces her and places material onto the scale, and the third figure closes the composition and gestures with both hands, perhaps as she counts out loud (fig. 1c). These scenes seem to depict virtuous women rather than slaves working within a textile workshop. Each figure wears a distinguished peplos and fillets in her hair. Moreover, the frieze on the shoulder of the vessel may have connections to religious ceremony--two groups of four females hold hands while processing to a seated, veiled goddess who holds a wreath in her left hand (see fig. 1a/b, two men on each side of the goddess separate her from the dancing girls). <sup>26</sup>The references to the ideal woman become clear with the juxtaposition of images of religious ritual and images of wool-working, which itself may have had connections with religious ceremony.

Not only are the women engaged in activities deemed proper for respectable women, but they do so with other women. Some are evidently**[End Page**



52] outside of the seclusion of their own homes, although probably within another's home. The fact that women are gathered together (albeit to fulfill their duties) should play a significant role in the interpretation of this image. I suggest that a viewer of the vessel could have seen consoling images of female companionship in addition to reminders of virtuous activities. As the *Hymn to Demeter* suggests, and from what we know about the segregated lives of Greek men and women, women could still partake in female relationships even after marriage. Sarah Pomeroy believes that spinners and weavers often sang some of Sappho's informal folk songs while working (1975.55). With these songs, women could envision the Sapphic community and reinforce the solidarity of their own female friendships. Robinette Kennedy finds that such relationships can be empowering in that women can feel stronger when they have good friendships (1986.130). The lekythos image can thus speak to female relationships and sociability, which could transform repetitive and mundane activities, such as weaving and spinning, into pleasurable and intimate gatherings. Consistent with Winkler's construct of double consciousness, within the representation of virtuous female activities, references to intense and loving female-female relationships may have been hidden from the dominant culture yet recognizable to the female viewer.



Images of women gathered at fountain houses, appearing on many hydriai, are self-referential in that women, as they used these vessels to fetch water, could see images of other women completing the same task (figs. 2 and 3). As mentioned earlier, historical women carrying these hydriai to and from the fountain house could associate their task with domestic virtue. On the hydria in London, the framing figures of Dionysus on the left and Hermes on the right, as references to religious rites, also reinforced patriarchal notions of female propriety (fig. 2). A female-centered reading would connect this task not only with domestic virtue but also with the opportunity for female sociability. As depicted on a hydria in the Vatican, women pair off and gesture as they converse with each other in a lively manner (fig. 3). Only one woman stands alone, to fill her hydria at a fountain. The group of women do not only represent "protection in numbers" as they enter the public (male) space; the group is also a sign for female friendship, sociability, and companionship. The women create an environment in which they appear to talk and laugh freely. The images of companionship could thus evoke for the female viewer a range of possible meanings, from the comfort of friendship to the more intense feelings of love and affection. **[End Page 53]**

Images of female bathers appear on a number of vessels that cannot necessarily be linked to a female domain.

However, these illustrations are worth discussing because if a female viewer had the opportunity to view these images, her response might have been very different from that of a male viewer. On a red-figure stamnos in Boston, three nude female bathers stand around a large basin (fig. 7). The figure



on the left bends slightly over the basin as she attends to her bathing ritual. She nevertheless gazes at the woman standing upright in the center, who gestures with a strigil in her right hand as she converses with her female friend. The two of them can be described as sharing a moment of intimacy as they gaze, talk, and bathe together. The female bather on the right turns away from the other two bathers after finishing her bath; she faces an attendant who will **[End Page 54]** proffer her a wrap and perfume (the vessel held in the attendant's right hand probably contained perfumed oil). While she waits for the attendant, she continues to grasp the side of the wash basin with her left hand in a manner that still connects her to the realm of intimacy shared by the other two bathers. A red-figure krater in Bari also depicts three female bathers in a similar setting ([fig. 8](#)). The woman on the left is turned away from the viewer as she gracefully reaches to clean her back with a strigil. The bather in the center actively attends to her cleaning ritual, as the figure on the right pours water from a hydria into the basin. A small perfume lekythos hangs on the wall behind the bathers. Three other nude female bathers, appearing on a red-figure stamnos in Florence, have taken the opportunity to share a moment of gaiety and revelry as they bathe ([fig. 9](#)). The three young females interact with one other as they gather around the wash basin in dance-action poses. With their lively gestures, it can be said that the women thoroughly enjoy the company of the others. **[End Page 55]**

Based on the number of bathers present and the more permanent nature of the basin itself, Sutton suggests that the setting for these types of images is a public bath rather than a private domestic space, whereas Bérard argues that these types of images represent young women gathered to bathe in a domestic setting, possibly within a courtyard as the column suggests (Sutton 1992.23-24 and Bérard 1989.92-93).<sup>27</sup> The identification of the location remains disputable. What is perhaps more relevant is Sutton's argument against the traditional assertions which connect all pre-Hellenistic **[End Page 56]** depictions of nude females to *hetairai*;<sup>28</sup> Sutton cites the example of the nude bride bathing in preparation for her wedding as a case in point (fig. 5). He also suggests that vessels such as the ones here under discussion were intended to be seen by a respectable female audience, and that the vessels themselves may have been designed for use in a bath setting (Sutton 1992.23-25). His interpretation is significant because it allows us to consider that a historical woman viewing the bathing females could rediscover her own subjectivity in the image of female companionship as she herself gathered with other women in an intimate setting of a bath. In other words, the image could serve as a visual reminder of her own experience.

The historical female figure, however, was not completely removed from the constraints of patriarchy. As she saw herself depicted bathing with other women, she also saw a woman (herself?) either holding a hydria or pouring water into a basin with a hydria (figs. 8 and 9). This image of a hydria, which has penetrated the female private space, may have subtly reminded a female viewer of her domestic and virtuous duty. More-over, the other side of the Bari krater depicts

two reveling youths; this image may be a reference to the symposium or male space, which suggests that the intended audience may have been male. <sup>29</sup> The vessel itself, a krater, would have been suitable for the mixing of wine and water as was done in antiquity. Perhaps the revelry of the youths symbolizes the wine and the bathing of the females symbolizes the water to be mixed in the krater. It is also possible that such a vessel could have been used in a domestic sphere for bathing as Sutton suggests (1992.24). Thus, the depicted women either could serve as passive objects of male desire (e.g., prostitutes and *hetairai*), especially when viewed within the context of a symposium setting, or, if viewed by a female, they could reflect the female's own experience of bathing in a social, yet intimate, setting. Whether the image was viewed by a man or a woman, the fact that the women are depicted nude allows for an erotic interpretation. **[End Page 57]**



Another image connecting female companionship with bathing appears on an Attic black-figure amphora in Rome. The scene is outdoors, seemingly free from the constraints of civic life ([fig. 10](#)). The opposite side of the amphora contains references to wine making (a seated Dionysus and satyrs making wine); <sup>30</sup> these references allude to the purpose of the amphora, namely to store liquids, including wine. It is therefore likely that this vessel belongs to a symposium setting, a predominantly male sphere. For the male spectator the nude female bathers, or nymphs, become objects of his desire, perhaps stand-ins for the prostitute or *hetaira* he may enjoy later in the evening. He assumes the role of a voyeur, gazing at females who may believe that they bathe only in the presence and security of other women.

Although the amphora may ultimately belong to a masculine domain, women, perhaps respectable as well as prostitutes, would have had opportunities to view this image and others similar to it (amphorae were not **[End Page 58]** exclusively utilized in a symposium setting--they could store liquids such as wine or oil in a more domestic sphere as well). Women passively gazing at the image could see themselves, or their mythical counterparts, depicted simply as objects of male desire. An active reading of the female bathers would emphasize how female sociability is here removed from and literally outside of the *polis* and placed within a natural and idyllic environment. <sup>31</sup> The only reference to civilization is the built diving platform in the center of the scene (Bérard 1989.93). Yet, instead of occupying a constructed space, the women bathe in an open one with their clothes, sponges, and perfumed-oil flacons hanging freely and haphazardly in the trees. They clean themselves on the banks of the spring and one enjoys a swim. Of the four women on the platform, two below and two above, three look at each other, perhaps engaging in a brief conversation.

These three figures occupy an important and almost distinct position within this image. They pause and gaze at one another in a manner similar to the two

women in figure 7. Fragments of Sappho's poem may add another level of meaning to this type of image (fr. 23).

. . . (hoped?) . . . of love . . . (for when) I look at you face to face, (not even) Hermione (seems to be) like you, and to compare you to golden-haired Helen (is not unseemly) . . . mortal women; and be assured, by your . . . (you) would (free?) me from all my cares . . . (dewy) banks . . . to stay awake all night . . .

In these fragments, Sappho's speaker gazes at or recalls in her mind's eye another female and delights in her beauty by comparing it to the famous beauty of Hermione and Helen. She seems to look at her female companion with desire, knowing perhaps that it is her beauty that will free the speaker from her cares. Moreover, in another fragment, Sappho seems to link desire with gazing at a female companion.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps a female viewer of the **[End Page 59]** amphora image (and others like it) would see herself as a bather among other companions, free from the constraints of patriarchy and, on another level, as a participant in the Sapphic community, with specific reference to the three figures who turn to each other ("when I look at you face to face"). Thus, women become both the object *and* subject of desire in a more erotic sense. The same interpretation could also hold true for the images of bathers, as suggested above.

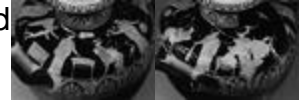


Scholars have traditionally associated images of women playing music, reading, and dancing with the literary pursuits of *hetairai* and less often with the activities of respectable women (figs. 11 a/b and 12). Dyfri Williams has pointed out the difficulties in trying to establish the identity of women shown on these vessels, suggesting that it is unlikely that images of women playing music and reading poetry "show ordinary housewives, whose education can, at best, have risen little above the ability to make lists or keep accounts" (Williams 1983.100). Likewise, Williams argues that a representation of two nude dancing women in the presence of an instructor (madam) most likely represents *hetaira* learning to dance, since, for Williams, respectable women are not usually shown naked (fig. 12; 1983.97-99). **[End Page 60]** Upon seeing vessels with these types of imagery, a male viewer might indeed wish to read *hetairai*, since these women were objects of his desire, but the matter may not be so clear.

Williams' interpretation overlooks the context and function of these vessels. Both images appear on hydriai, vessels used predominantly by women. What did they (family women or *hetairai*) see when they carried these types of vessels about? I believe that respectable women could have been reminded of the time, before they were married, when their companions were exclusively females. Equally important, women might have been reminded of the sociability they experience as married women undertaking domestic tasks such as fetching water. *Hetairai* viewers might likewise have recalled past and present female

relationships. While performing professionally for men, *hetairai* were nonetheless typically in the company of other women in daily life.

Sappho's well-known poems could have also encouraged a female to recall her own experiences of female companionship, past and ongoing. Marilyn Skinner has argued that the women of antiquity would have had good access to the poetry of Sappho because the lyric tradition itself was [End Page 61] intended for oral transmission and/or performance for an audience.<sup>33</sup> Women "storytellers," Skinner suggests, were largely responsible for preserving the oral traditions of Sappho, for it was through Sapphic poetry sung in female communities ("those into which she [a historical woman] was born and those she would join upon her marriage") that women could experience and articulate their many female-female relationships and thus make livable the demands of patriarchal culture (1993.135).<sup>34</sup> Several images of women playing lyres and reading poetry suggest that at least some women had opportunities to participate in intellectual activities within the privacy of female domestic space.<sup>35</sup> For example, along the [End Page 62] shoulder of a red-figure hydria in London (fig. 11a/11b), with no image below, several women are shown gathered in a private space to play instruments and sing. Most of the women hold lyres, while two of them are playing. One standing figure holds an open scroll and reads its contents, poetry, to another standing woman, who gazes at the reader (this section is partially damaged).<sup>36</sup> The whole image, consisting of women and the mythical, flying figure of Eros, who perhaps signifies various levels of female love in this otherwise all-female setting, is reminiscent of the Sapphic community in which music and singing were important parts of a young woman's education.



Sappho herself, probably an instructor in poetry, music, and dance, records aspects of music-making in her poetry. She summons her lyre so that she may speak, "Come, divine lyre, speak to me and find yourself a voice" (fr. 118). Moreover, Sappho takes pleasure in singing to her female audience, "I shall now sing these songs beautifully to delight my companions" (fr. 160), and also links singing with desire in one poem, ". . . I bid you Abanthis, take (your lyre?) and sing of Gongyla, while desire once again flies around you, the lovely one--for her dress excited you when you saw it; and I rejoice. . . ." (fr. 22). As mentioned above, the image of music-making and singing takes place in the private world of women, making an implicit reference to female community (fig. 11a/b). I suggest that it was through the bonds of female companionship that women could experience their own subjectivity and sexuality (perhaps in singing Sappho's erotic poetry) outside of the constraints of patriarchy.

Likewise, the nude female dancers who revel around a fully clad instructor could also bring to mind images of dancing in Sappho's poetry (fig. 12). Often Sappho calls upon the dancing Graces and music-making Muses with invocations such as, "Hither now, tender Graces and lovely-haired Muses" (fr. 128). Since dancing and singing were important components of a young

maiden's education (Fantham et al. 1994.12-19), a historical woman, upon viewing the hydria as she carried it to and from the **[End Page 63]** fountain house, could envision herself as one among other females as she learned the arts of singing and dancing. Although this image admittedly depicts women rather than maidens dancing before an instructor, the scene nevertheless occurs only in the company of females. In this sense, the image might evoke memories of female companionship within a Sapphic community of maidens, and the image could also refer to historic groups of women gathering for pleasure in the privacy of their quarters later in life (Fantham et al. 1994.106).

The images of females on the above-mentioned hydriai, whether of *hetairai* or respectable women, have connections with the life-style of Sappho and her companions (figs. 11a/b and 12). <sup>37</sup> Dover notes that female participants in music and poetry might constitute a "'sub-culture' in which women and girls received from their own sex what segregation and monogamy denied them" (1978.18). In other words, literary pursuits were not exclusively associated with *hetairai*. The community of females provided education, but was also filled with female love. The female viewer of such scenes could therefore affirm her past and present experiences of female sociability, ranging from friendship to possibly a more erotic Sapphic love.

To my knowledge, only three images of overt female-female erotic love exist in the artistic record. <sup>38</sup> The virtual lack of visual evidence of an erotically lesbian existence seems to suggest Greek society's difficulty in imagining, much less portraying, female-female erotic love, precisely because that love is outside of the passive-active and procreative constructs. <sup>39</sup> Moreover, the silencing of the female's voice in general prohibits **[End Page 64]** a recognition of female-female love. It is also possible that the relative absence of lesbian love in ancient literary discourse simply reveals a disinterest in lesbian relations, so long as they did not interfere with heterosexual relations or hinder procreation for the benefit of the *polis*. <sup>40</sup>

Two vases show scenes of female-female courtship and seem to employ a pictorial language used elsewhere for depicting male-male and male-female courtship and erotica. An archaic plate in Thera contains a representation of two elaborately dressed females facing one another **(fig. 13)**. The woman on the left extends her left hand to touch her companion's chin, a gesture of erotic desire that is well documented in heterosexual as well as male-male courtship scenes. <sup>41</sup> Both women hold garlands, which also have connections with male-male courtship <sup>42</sup> and, as we have seen, can be associated with marriage ceremonies (Keuls 1985.fig. 92a [Beazley *PARA* 66]). We know from Sappho's poetry (fr. 94), cited earlier, that garlands played an important role in the memory of an erotic female-female relationship ("you put on many wreaths of violets and roses and [crocuses?] together by my side, and round your tender neck you put many woven garlands. . ."). The possibility therefore exists that the two women shown on the Theran plate court each other



and mutually exchange garland love gifts. In other words, the image seems to show two females who overtly share an erotic love in which both women are subject and object of desire. Another expression of erotic love between females appears on an Apulian **[End Page 65]** pelike in Taranto dated to 350 B.C.E. ([fig. 14](#)).<sup>43</sup> One female is seated and the other stands before her as they gaze at each other. Both hold garlands, probably love gifts, in their hands. This image is distinguished from the Thera plate in that the seated female touches the other's breast and not her chin. Keuls states that this gesture is a "stereotyped feature denoting 'seduction'" (1985.85). In fact, in heterosexual love scenes, a male touching the breast of his female companion seems to have erotic import; these gestures are typically shown as part of the festivities of a symposium.<sup>44</sup> From a Sapphic point of view, touching breasts may demonstrate **[End Page 66]** erotic love between two females, if we can infer that both the addressee and the companion are female in the following fragment: "may you sleep on the bosom of your tender companion" (fr. 126).<sup>45</sup>



Finally, the interior of a red-figure kylix by Apollodoros in Tarquinia contains a representation of two nude females ([fig. 15](#)). One **[End Page 67]** figure stands and holds in her left hand a container for perfumed oil. The other woman kneels on the floor and touches the leg and genitals of the first. The women are often identified as prostitutes because of their nakedness, and the prominent display of the perfume jar suggests that one is perfuming the other for her meeting with a man (Keuls 1985.85).<sup>46</sup> The setting of the two figures within a symposium kylix would then seem appropriate, for the male viewer would see the object of his desire preparing for him. In contrast, Dover and Kilmer believe that the one figure titillates the other (Dover 1978.173 and Kilmer 1993.25-28). Both of these interpretations **[End Page 68]** can be accurate. When the one perfumes or anoints the other's genitals, the potential for erotic stimulation is evident. I am reminded here of Winkler's interpretation of Sappho's fragment, "They do say that once upon a time Leda found an egg hidden in the hyacinth" (trans. Winkler 1981.fr. 166). In accord with Winkler's "double consciousness," Sappho uses the language of the dominant culture and continues to communicate to other women in their own language; therefore, for Winkler, it is possible that the discovered egg makes reference to the "hidden" clitoris (1981.80-81). The image in the kylix can also employ dual languages. As mentioned, a male viewer would see the object of his desire preparing for him. The female viewer could understand that the kneeling figure would certainly "discover" her companion's clitoris (egg) as she perfumed her companion's genitals. Moreover, Winkler argues that "desire and touching occur together as two aspects of the same experience: touching is touching-with-desire, desire is desire-with-touching" (1981.81). Although these women may ultimately be subject to a man's desires, here they are shown in an intimate setting touching and perhaps desiring one another.

## Conclusion

The question of whether all of the male-produced images of female companionship discussed in this essay were actually intended to speak to women remains unanswerable. However, these images and many others like them have traditionally been studied in relationship to a woman's place in patriarchal society. Even if the vases were not designed specifically for a female audience, both men and women may have been satisfied with the images produced. I have argued that the women of antiquity may have seen and identified with something very different than did the male audience.<sup>47</sup> A female viewer could see herself actively participating in one of her potentially many female-female relationships as she engaged in various activities which took place among female companions, but which were usually for the benefit of the *oikos* or *polis*. **[End Page 69]**

John Boswell notes that there were fewer boundaries in ancient societies between "friendship" and "romance" (erotic love) than in modern society (1980.47). The continuum of female companionship fits well with Boswell's observation. We can talk about the images of women together as showing paragons of virtuous behavior or as representations of the desired, and we can also talk about them in terms of female companionship, including erotic female-female love. This is not to deny that a woman might have desired to choose a male to be her companion. What Sappho's poetry and the *Hymn to Demeter* show us is that a woman could experience "bisexual oscillation" at various points in her life in choosing between her female companions and a husband (Foley 1994.129-31 and Hirsch 1989.101-03). Sappho's fragment, "I do not know what to do; I am of two minds" (fr. 51) might be understood as reflecting the divided nature of a female's subjectivity. Thus, the representations of female companionship, like Sappho's poetry, may speak to the possibilities and the existence of the "impossible" female-female love. Within a spectrum of possible interpretations, the visual and poetic imagery of female companionship could momentarily free a woman from the ideology and constraints of patriarchy. It is admittedly difficult to find an ancient female voice and female consciousness, yet, while we lack extensive evidence, the task is not impossible. Within the very images that portray patriarchal ideology, there is also the possibility of recovering female subjectivity.<sup>48</sup>

*The University of Texas at Austin*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>. There are a number of individuals to whom I am indebted for their support and advice. I would like to express my warmest thanks to John R. Clarke and Barbara Goff for their insightful criticisms and continued support. This essay also benefited from the criticisms of Jenifer Neils and an anonymous *Arethusa* reader. I also thank Stephen Petersen for his willingness to discuss my ideas and suggest revisions and Penelope Davies for reading a late version of this essay.



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2. Campbell 1982.fr. 147. Unless otherwise indicated, the translation of Sappho's poetry I have used is Campbell and the fragments will be cited according to Campbell's numbering system.

3. A *hetaira* is different from a prostitute in that she is financially supported by a man for the purpose of entertainment and companionship, including sexual relations, over a period a time.

4. Patriarchy, as the term is used in this essay, refers to dominant, male-constructed ideology, which places women's activities within the domestic sphere and men's responsibilities in the public and civic sector and which asserts that this social arrangement is not constructed but is indeed natural. With this arrangement, men formed the codes of social behavior, while women, for the most part, were "silenced." Bella Zweig notes how classical scholarship upholds these ideals and even displays "a willful blindness to potential interpretations of the evidence that diverge from models familiar within Western (patriarchal) constructs" (1993.147-49). In other words, the discourse today continues to uphold the ideologies of antiquity without attempting to define a female voice.

5. See Zweig 1993.167-69 for a discussion of the dynamic and complementary roles of the *oikos* and *polis*.

6. Walker 1983 discusses the segregation of women within the house. It has also been noted that images of a husband and wife shown together after their wedding are extremely rare. Instead women and men are depicted separately in their respective roles and spaces (Fantham et al. 1994.103).

7. We can assume that the vases under discussion here are male-authored. Our only evidence for a woman working in a potter's workshop is an image on the shoulder of a hydria attributed to the Leningrad Painter. Among the many male vase painters in this workshop, one woman is shown decorating the volutes of a large krater (Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup>571.73; illustrated in Bron and Lissarrague 1989.fig. 1).

8. Other scholars have suggested that the weaving of the peplos may in fact be shown on this lekythos (Barber 1992.103-17 and Neils 1992.17, 23-24, and 194, n. 17). I thank Jenifer Neils for bringing this to my attention. Moreover, the goddess Athena, with the epithet Ergane or Athena the Worker, had associations with working the wool. Bérard also cites the virtue of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*. Penelope wove all day and then undid her weaving at night to keep her suitors at bay (1989.90-91).

9. See Winkler 1990.188-209 for a discussion of women's experience in exclusively female festivals. Also see Zweig 1993.153-71 for the important contribution that Native American, gynocentric perspectives can offer to the study of women in ancient societies.

10. It is possible that the appearance, at the end of the sixth century, of the many black-figure hydriai with images of women at fountain houses commemorates a contemporary event, the completion of the Enneakrounos (a nine-spouted fountain house built in the southeast corner of the Agora in Athens). However, the representations of women gathered at a fountain house continue on later red-figure vases and may reflect a general increasing interest in depicting scenes from everyday life on pottery. See Pedley 1987.66-68, 76-77, and 79, n. 22.

[11](#). There were also fertility rituals that involved women carrying water (Keuls 1985.232-40).

[12](#). In Aeschylus' trilogy *The Oresteia*, Orestes' pardon established that marriage was to be recognized as *the* social contract and was to supersede all other relations, including those of blood.

[13](#). Sutton argues this point through an analysis of changes in vase imagery over two centuries. His provocative essay suggests that the shift from copulation scenes to idealized and romanticized images of marriage reflects a change in targeted audience--Athenian women. These women may have communicated with the vase producers and thus this change of imagery reflects women's participation in the production process (1992.3-35). Nevertheless, the images continue to represent the constructs of patriarchy.

[14](#). Trans. Foley 1994.

[15](#). Trans. Foley 1994.

[16](#). The institution of marriage did not sever entirely the mother-daughter bond. Mothers were present to assist their daughters during childbirth, and a connection persisted between a daughter's old and new *oikos* through her dowry.

[17](#). According to Campbell's translation, Sappho's speaker wishes she were dead. However, it is also possible that the speaker of these words is the departing friend. See Campbell 1982.fr. 94, n. 1. Burnett 1983.290-300 offers a convincing argument that favors the friend as the speaker of these words.

[18](#). These fragments can be compared to another work by Sappho (fr. 31). In this work, it seems that the speaker again laments her friend's departure for marriage to "the man who sits opposite you" (See Winkler 1981.73-76). The speaker's extreme emotions for her friend induce involuntary physical responses: "it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped . . . I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum . . . and it seems to me that I am little short of dying." For a discussion of similar sentiments expressed by the poet Erinna in the fourth century B.C.E., see Arthur 1977.72.

[19](#). This poem is not the only one that contains erotic imagery. Winkler 1981.77-84 discusses several Sapphic lyrics of this nature.

[20](#). Foley notes that "Persephone becomes, by eating it (the pomegranate), symbolically committed both socially and sexually to her future husband" (1994.56-57 and 108). Also see Arthur 1994.236-37 for her discussion of Persephone's willingness to eat the pomegranate and thus concede to sexual relations with Hades.

[21](#). I do not wholly ascribe to Rich's argument. She conceptualizes *all* female relationships and bonds with reference to a "lesbian continuum," within which some female-female relationships may be more erotically lesbian than others. Rich's argument is admittedly coercive in that she expands the meaning of "lesbian" to meet her own agenda. However, she does make the point that women share many intimate experiences and relations with other women, from the maternal bond to the many relationships a woman can experience later in life (1983.192-99). Similarly, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's research documents various gradations of female intimacy as seen in letters written between female companions (lovers, and mothers and daughters) in nineteenth-century America. In these letters, women often wrote (intentionally or not) with a

language similar to Sappho's when expressing the sorrow and loneliness one felt when another left to be married (1975.1-29).

[22](#). For other applications of film theory in classics, see Fredrick 1995 and Robin 1993.

[23](#). In his classic assessment of the female as an object of male desire, John Berger states, "One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at . . . Thus she turns herself into an object--and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (1972.47).

[24](#). As seen in Schweickart 1989.26-27.

[25](#). Robinette Kennedy, in her study of present-day Greek women, determined that women-women friendships are unlike women-men relationships in that they are loving, intense, and supportive. Because males and females spend most of their time in separate spheres, as in ancient Greek society, female-female friendships develop, thereby providing an environment within which women can share their most intimate thoughts and feelings. In the words of one Greek woman, "I am not close to him (her husband) like I am to my friend" (Kennedy 1986.130-31). Also see McManus 1990.232. She believes that for Athenian women, "there was life after marriage, and Athenian women may have found emotional support in each other . . ." Furthermore, a study of female relationships in American Indian culture demonstrates that opportunities for the continuation of female companionship after marriage existed, as in ancient Greece, because married women spent much of their time in the company of other married women performing rituals and/or daily tasks similar to those of antiquity (Allen 1989.112-17). Allen also notes that American Indian women often formed intimate and spiritual as well as erotic relations with other women. In other words, women in the companionship of other women form relations variously along a continuum. Although all female-female relationships may not be considered lesbian in the way Rich has argued, the possibility of erotic relationships nonetheless exists, and may even be likely, given the relative isolation in which women lived in Greek society. This notion is recognized by a sixteenth-century writer who notes that "wherever the women are kept secluded, and have not their entire liberty, this practice (lesbianism) doth greatly prevail" (Brantôme 1933.130).

[26](#). I thank Jenifer Neils for bringing this interpretation to my attention (Neils 1992.17 and 194, n. 17). In contrast, Keuls has suggested that this scene shows a seated, veiled bride (rather than a goddess) and should be compared to Keuls 1985.fig. 92a in which a bride extends a wreath in a similar manner as she arrives at her new house (Beazley *PARA* 66). With either interpretation of the shoulder image, it still remains that respectable, possibly aristocratic, women are shown spinning and weaving below.

[27](#). Bérard also argues that the women are bathing after engaging in athletic exercise and that they are therefore enjoying activities similar to those of men. He bases his argument on the fact that the women clean themselves with strigils, instruments typically used by male athletes, and that the women have muscular bodies. However, K. J. Dover demonstrates that muscular female bodies do not always signify exercise. He cites examples in which "male and female bodies are distinguishable only by the presence or absence of the breasts and the external genitals" (1978.70-71). It is therefore possible that the women represented are respectable, non-athletic, women as Sutton suggests.

[28](#). The traditional reasons for identifying nude women as *hetairai* include statements such as, "we look in vain for scenes of respectable women washing: respectable women, like goddesses, should not be seen naked nor shown naked," Williams 1983.99. It should be noted

that among the many Greek vases that have come down to us, only a relatively small number contain images of nude women.

[29](#). Beazley ARV2 236.4 for the Bari krater. The other side of the Florence stamnos depicting the "dancing" female bathers also shows a male space. Two nude youths perform athletics (fighting) in the presence of an adult clothed male (instructor?) (Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup> 296.6).

[30](#). Beazley PARA 146.8ter.

[31](#). A vase by the Andokides Painter contains another image of women bathing and/or swimming outdoors and can be discussed in terms similar to the amphora image (Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup> 4.13; illustrated in Kilmer 1993.R8). I thank Jenifer Neils for bringing this image to my attention.

[32](#). See fr. 31. As discussed earlier, this fragment seems to be about the physical responses that Sappho's speaker feels when her friend departs for marriage. In one section the speaker laments, "For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak . . ." In other words, upon gazing at her companion, the speaker expresses grief over losing her because she desires to sustain relations with her.

[33](#). Skinner 1993.131-38. She, like Williams, believes that most women were unable to read. Also see Cole 1981.223-27. She argues that scenes depicting women reading may be idealized. However, she allows that reading might have been an activity available to a "limited number of women."

[34](#). See Skinner 1993.125-44 for an important analysis of how Sappho's poetry is a woman-specific discourse for "women-among-themselves." Also see Stehle 1981.45-61.

[35](#). For discussions favoring ancient women as capable of reading, see Fantham et al. 1994.101-06 and Immerwahr 1964.24-28. Mary Barnard suggests that the fact that female poets existed indicates that young women were indeed educated in music and poetry (1958.101). As seen in Pomeroy 1977.53 and n.17, Aristotle wrote that children were taught writing and the musical arts, including poetry, playing musical instruments, and dancing (*Pol.* 8.2.1337b3). Also see Marrou 1956.33-35. Marrou notes that the educative value of music for women continued throughout the Classical period.

[36](#). See Immerwahr 1964.18 for his conclusion that the women shown read poetry from the scrolls rather than musical notes. Williams notes that a comparable image also appears on another hydria in which a woman reading a scroll has the name "Sappho" inscribed next to her (1983.100 and Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup> 1060.145).

[37](#). Sutton 1992.28, 30-31 also links Sappho with images of women on Greek vases.

[38](#). Kilmer 1993.26-30, 86, 97-99 cites three other examples of *possible* female-female erotica that vary in gradations of intimacy--R73 (Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup> 32.4 [Pezzino Group]); R152 (Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup> 85.1 [Pedieus Painter]); and R141.3. Kilmer's work adds to our understanding of female-female relationships; he studies the accessories in various scenes to determine the erotic import of the images.

[39](#). Plato is the only classical author who writes about female-female love (Halperin 1990.136-37). In the debate on love in Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes argues that lesbian erotic love can exist. He suggests that long ago all beings were split in half so that now each half desires to be with its other half. For Aristophanes, "women who are halves of a female whole

direct their affections towards women and pay little attention to men; Lesbians belong to this category" (trans. Hamilton 1951.191c). His argumentation is important because he suggests that the two halves seek one another to become whole again through *reciprocal* desire, which is outside of the conventional active-passive construct for male-male love (Halperin 1990.131-37). However, Diotima then suggests that procreation, either physical or spiritual, is the purpose of love. Her explanation condones heterosexual as well as male-male love. The former love is for physical reproduction and the latter procreates spiritual beauty (trans. Hamilton 1951.205e-07b). Since female love belongs in the realm of physical desire, women, in general, cannot experience spiritual beauty and truth. Female-female erotic love therefore seems to be a non-existent love. For a more complete analysis of erotic love in Plato's *Symposium*, see Halperin 1990.113-51. See also Dover, who locates female-female erotic desire within the constructs of pederasty. He argues that lesbian courtship, as Sappho presents it in her poetry, is similar to the institution of pederasty, and he thus places female-female love in the active-passive domain (1978.171-84). Cantarella 1992.91-93 notes that women who loved other women were called *tribades*, dangerous and uncontrollable women. The implication is that loving female-female relationships were unnatural within the constructs of Greek society.

[40](#). To my knowledge, there were no ancient laws *prohibiting* female-female relationships. See also Simons 1994 for her discussion of female-female relationships during the Italian Renaissance.

[41](#). Dover 1978.91-100 and 173. For pictorial examples, see Dover 1978.CE33, B65 (Beazley ABV 109.28), and B271 (Beazley ABV 315.3 [Painter of Cambridge 47]). Also see Clarke 1991.96-97.

[42](#). Dover 1978.91-100. For illustrations, see Dover 1978.B271 (Beazley ABV 315.3 [Painter of Cambridge 47]) and B502.

[43](#). Although Apulia is in southern Italy, and was not officially a Greek colony, it was nonetheless heavily influenced by the Greeks.

[44](#). A stamnos by the Smikros Painter shows a man and a woman reclining at a banquet. He reaches to touch her breast (Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup> 20.1; illustrated in Durand, Frontisi-Ducroux, and Lissarrague 1989.fig. 174). Another example appears on a cup by the Nikosthenes Painter or his workshop. Here an excited youth fondles a woman's breast (Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup> 132; illustrated in Kilmer 1993.R223,B). The interior of a kylix by the Gales Painter or his workshop also illustrates an ithyphallic youth touching his companion's breast (Beazley ARV<sup>2</sup> 36; illustrated in Dover 1978.R82 and Kilmer 1993.R82). Also see Kilmer 1993.26-27 for a quick discussion of the importance of breasts in constructions of female sexuality.

[45](#). The physical nature of female-female relationships, that is the touching of breasts, is also depicted in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, in which Lysistrata exclaims to Lampito, "See here's a neck and breast; how firm and lusty!" After being fondled, Lampito responds, "Wow, but ye pradd me like a fatted calf" (trans. Rogers 1979.82-89). Of course this text is male-authored and is meant to incite laughter (see Zweig 1992.73-81). In contrast, the Apulian pelike, although presumably also male-authored and therefore depicting a male view of female-female sexual conduct, perhaps presents a more sympathetic version of female-female courtship and erotica.

[46](#). Although Keuls 1985 and Kilmer 1993.25-28 suggest that one woman perfumes the other, scholars have argued that this scene depicts the process of female depilation, in which the kneeling figure applies a soothing ointment after depilation (Descouedres 1981.10 and Davies 1987.243-45). Whether this is a scene of perfuming or anointing after depilation, both interpretations ultimately assume that one woman prepares the other to be an object of male

desire. Also see Kilmer 1982.104-12 and Kilmer 1993.133-59 for his analysis of the practice of depilation and its connection with erotica.

47. These dual ways of seeing are in many ways similar to the marketing strategies used today by advertisers wishing to capture segments of the gay and lesbian markets as well as the heterosexual market. Advertisers promote this notion of duality in an advertisement encoded with homosexual subtexts or subcultural codes that the heterosexual audience may not perceive. Thus both markets are reached without revealing the advertisers' aim. See Clark 1993.186-201. However, we do not know what the vase painters of ancient Athens intended.

48. I have recently become aware of a new publication on Sappho that is important and provocative for its treatment of Sappho's fragments--Page duBois, *Sappho is Burning*(Chicago 1995). Dubois analyzes several of Sappho's fragments to reassess Sappho's role in her all-female community and society at large, while also reconsidering Sappho within the history of sexuality. I regret not being able to incorporate this study in my essay, but would like to acknowledge its importance to this field of study.

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