

A Rebellious Mimic: Sappho's Literary Allegiance and Betrayal in Fragment 1 and 16

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Sappho's Fragment 1 and Fragment 16 are both about the feminine love and desire. This essay invents an original term "rebellious mimic", based upon Jack Winkler's theory "double consciousness", to interpret the two lyrics: "mimic" means that both lyrics, formulaically, adhere or allude to the literary norms which are frequently applied by other male authors while "rebellious" further complements that she creatively alters the conventional themes that are usually expected within such norms. For one thing, this literary contrast effectively attracts the audience's attention and highlights the individual voice of Sappho in her lyrics. For another, it also alleviates the hostility between genders—it is intended to express that both men's and women's world share some common characteristics, instead of establishing one's supremacy over the other.

Keywords: Sappho, love, gender, rebellious mimic, double consciousness

1. Introduction

Jack Winkler, within "Public and Private in Sappho's Lyrics", specifically explicates Sappho's "double consciousness"—as a woman, for one thing, Sappho is familiar with men's public culture since it is "displayed as the governing norm of social interaction in the streets" (Winkler, 1996, p. 71); for another, she also possesses women's language and manners which are marginalized as a "subculture" in the patriarchal society. Since women are in such a position of understanding both cultures, Winkler further argues that "we must diagram the circle of women's literature as a larger one which includes men's literature as one phase or compartment of women's cultural knowledge" (Winkler, 1996, p. 71).

Based upon Winkler's theory, this essay believes that Sappho's "double consciousness" leads to her capacity of the rebellious mimic within Fragment 1 and 16: "mimic" means that both lyrics, formulaically, adhere or allude to the literary norms which are frequently applied by other male authors while "rebellious" further complements that she creatively alters the conventional themes that are usually expected within such norms. This literary disjunction effectively highlights Sappho's own voice—it is intended to incorporate both men's and women's values into a united patchwork, instead of establishing one's supremacy over the other.

2. The Rebellious Mimic in Fragment 1

Numerous details in Sappho's Fragment 1 are in parallel with the Homeric texts, and the first stanza is the quintessence:

ποικιλόθρον' ἀθανάτ' Ἀφρόδιτα,
παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,
μή μ' ἄσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
πότνια, θῦμον

Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind
Child of Zeus, who twists lure, I beg you
Do not break with hard pains
O Lady, my heart (Fr. 1. 1-4; translated by Anne Carson)

Many scholars deem it a mimic of Diomedes' appeal to Athene at Book 5 of the *Iliad* that "Hear me, child of Zeus who bears the aegis, Atrytone! If ever with kindly thought you stood by my father's side in the fury of the battle, so now again show your love to me, Athene" (Homer, 1924, Book 5, Line. 115-117). In terms of the structure, as is supported by A. Cameron, it generally adheres to the traditional prayer formula (Cameron, 1939, p. 3)—such a desperate calling for the divine assistance from a wounded person is also frequently present in many other cases in the *Iliad*; for instance, when Chryses calls upon Apollo to punish the Achaeans, he begins in a similar way that "Hear me, you of the silver bow..." (Homer, 1924, Book 1, Line. 37-38). Even regarding the specific language style, it exactly resembles the Homeric description as well. For example, both enumerate the various epithets respectively of Aphrodite and Athena, including "child of Zeus" and those indicating their separate functions or images of "twisting lure" and "bearing the aegis".

Furthermore, apart from the first few verses, the other parts of the lyric also imitate the *Iliad*—Winkler considers that Sappho "models Aphrodite's descent to earth in a chariot on the descent of Athene and Hera, who are coming to help the wounded Diomedes" (Winkler, 1996, p. 68); likewise, Cameron contends that Aphrodite's smile on her deathless countenance is again Homeric, since in the *Iliad* such immortal expressions are narrated to "reassure their (the gods') worshippers" (Cameron, 1939, p. 5). In view of the conspicuous similarities throughout the lyric, it is reasonable to deduce that the parallel between Sappho's Fragment 1 and Homer's the *Iliad* should not be deemed a pure coincidence.

Nevertheless, despite the allegiance to the prayer conventions in the *Iliad*, the object of prayer here is a complete betrayal of the typical Homeric elements—rather than the military victory, which would be deemed the source of *τιμή* among the Iliadic heroes, what Sappho is calling for here is the justice of love and desire. This is extremely unusual in that the theme of love and desire, represented by Aphrodite, is marginalized in the *Iliad*, as is indicated by Diomedes' telling Aphrodite not to intervene with the military affairs. But in Fragment 1, paradoxically, Sappho applies Diomedes' prayer style to pray for something despised by Diomedes.

In view of that the Homeric texts are well-accepted in the ancient Greek society, for one thing, Sappho herself must be clearly aware that she is both alluding to and rebel against Homer; for another, she must also be conscious that her readers/listeners would easily feel it as well. In other words, by applying the evident literary disjunction, Sappho wants people to know that she is deliberate. In this sense, she would attract more attention to

her own special voice in this lyric and would further show that there must be some special purpose of her rebellious alteration.

3. The Rebellious Mimic in Fragment 16

The aforementioned disjunction also appears in Sappho's Fragment 16, and it achieves a similar literary effect of highlighting her distinction and uniqueness from other authors.

Fragment 16 begins with Sappho's numeration of various objects that would be deemed "the most beautiful" by different people, such as "an army of horse" "an army on foot" and "an army of ships" (Sappho, 2002, Fragment 16, Line. 1-2). Then, she offers her own answer "what you love", which is in stark contrast with all the other ones.

On the one hand, this structure is a typical rhetorical device called "priamel" which is frequently applied throughout the ancient Greek literature. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines that priamel consists of two basic parts, namely the foil and the climax— "the function of the foil is to introduce and highlight the climactic term by enumerating or summarizing a number of other instances that then yield (with varying degrees of contrast or analogy) to the particular point of interest or importance" (Doak & Race, 2012, pp. 1107-1108). Although, as is pointed out by William H. Race, the term "priamel" is a modern invention and initially "referred specifically to a minor poetic genre composed primarily in German from the 12th to the 16th centuries" (Race, 1982, p. 1), the actual formula of it can indeed be traced back to the time even much earlier than Sappho, and scholars often anachronistically use it to the studies of classical poetry. In other words, "priamel" the name might be unknown to the ancient authors themselves, but it really exists within their texts. For instance, Race contends that Homer uses it for many cases within the *Iliad* and *Odysseys* (Race, 1982, pp. 31-42). Moreover, it is also used by many lyric poets, such as Alcman, Archilocus, Tyrtaeus etc., the quintessence of which occurs in lines 92-99 of Alcman's *Partheneion* that "the trace-horse steers the yoke-horses and chariot, the helmsman steers the ship, and Hagesichora steers and leads the Chorus" (Race, 1982, p. 54). Therefore, the beginning of Fragment 16 in a priamel style is by no means Sappho's original creation.

On the other hand, however, this traditional literary formula enables Sappho to express her untraditional ideas. As is mentioned above, priamel possesses the special characteristic of rendering A (called climax) in contrast to B or Bs (called foil). Sappho takes advantage of this kind of structure to distinguish her climactic answer to "what is the most beautiful" from other foils. Specifically, she emphasizes her individual ideas by applying distinct styles of pronouns as the subjects:

οἱ μὲν ἰππῶν στρότον, οἱ δὲ πέσδων,
οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖς' ἐπὶ γᾶν μέλαιναν,
ἔμμεναι κάλλιστον, ἐγὼ δὲ κῆν' ὅτ-
τῷ τις ἔραται

Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot
And some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing
on the black earth. But I say it is
what you love (Fr.16. 1-4; translated by Anne Carson)

It is noteworthy that, in terms of those claiming something in the battlefield as the best, she merely uses the same definite article “οἱ” integrated by the particles “μὲν” and “δὲ”. This connotes that what is emphasized here is not the people that are claiming (the repetitive word before “μὲν” or “δὲ”) but the things are claimed (the different words after “μὲν” or “δὲ”). By contrast, when it comes to “I”, the nominative pronoun “ἐγὼ”, which is only used for emphasis of the subject, is present. It would leave the audience with a deep impression that “I” stand out from the crowd and “my answer” deserves attention.

In fact, Sappho's answer “ὅττω τις ἔραται (whatever someone loves)” is indeed extremely unique. Conventionally, the climax of the priamel would be something attached great importance to—for instance, Homer's priamel in Book 2 of the *Iliad* is to highlight Odysseus' excellent rhetorical ability of successfully stopping Thersites' abusing Agamemnon, which is certainly a praiseworthy virtue among the Achaeans—“Surely, Odysseus has before this performed good deeds without number as leader in good counsel and setting battle in array, but now is this deed far the best that he has performed among the Argives” (Homer, 1924, Book 2, Line. 272-273). Nevertheless, the climax of Sappho's priamel is about “love and desire”. Similar to the analysis of Fragment 1, this topic is barred from the patriarchal society. Furthermore, Sappho's even offers more rebellious examples for this topic in the following stanzas of Fragment 16: different from Homer's Helen that is depicted to feel regret for her abandonment of her fatherland, Sappho's Helen in Stanza 2 and 3 completely dismisses her husband, her children, and her dear parents—it seems that Sappho validates Helen's desire to be with Pairs, which is usually deemed a shameful guilt in the men's world.

4. Rebellion Leading to Reconciliation

In section 2 and 3, this essay explicates how Sappho makes her voice evident by the rebellious mimic. In this part, I will go deeper into the profound meaning of her voice and the purpose of her rebellion. Generally, Sappho's thematical rebellion against some literary conventions is not to establish a new female supremacy. Instead, what is intended in Fragment 1 and 16 is to achieve the reconciliation between the men's and women's world—this is the real purpose of Sappho's rebellious voice.

In terms of Fragment 1, Anne Giacomelli points out the popular misunderstanding of Aphrodite's statement in the penultimate stanza:

καὶ γὰρ αἱ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,
αἱ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει,
αἱ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει
κῶνικ ἐθέλοισα.

For if she flees, soon she will pursue
If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them
If she does not love, soon she will love
Even unwilling (Fr.1.21-24; translated by Anne Carson)

Many scholars, including some translators, thinks Aphrodite is promising “to reverse the situation that exists between Sappho and her beloved... so that the girl who is now indifferent to Sappho will experience a change of heart and will pursue Sappho with gifts and love” (Giacomelli, 1980, p. 136)—for instance, Luo Luo, a famous Chinese literary translator, translates “ταχέως διώξει” “ἀλλὰ δώσει” “ταχέως φιλήσει” respectively into “she will

pursue *you*” “*she* will give gifts to *you*” and “*she* will love *you*” (Luo, 2017, pp. 143-144). However, as is contended by Giacomelli, within the original Greek text, there is in fact no specific object for the verb “*διώξει*” “*δώσει*” and “*φιλήσει*”. Therefore, we should not restrict this stanza to the relationship merely between Sappho and her beloved. Rather, it should be interpreted as the general theory between girls that the one being loved, now indifferent to her lover, will one day become a lover herself and suffer from the same experience of failing to get the response from her beloved one (Giacomelli, 1980, pp. 136-137). This kind of reversal of identification is the justice of love promised by Aphrodite.

Giacomelli has already deepened the impact of Sappho's words to a more universal content. However, it could be further universalized. If we look back upon the scene of Diomedes' appeal to Athene that Sappho alludes to, we can find that it is still about the reversal of identification—Diomedes is calling for Athene to turn his enemy from the winner into the loser. In fact, the whole story of the *Iliad* is about the constant reversal of identification in men's world (under the will of the gods)—those who do not show due respect to others will not gain due respect (Agamemnon-Achilles); those who are killing will be killed later (Hector); those who rob others of their properties will be robbed in return (Paris). Just as the justice of love, something that is specially treasured by men, like honour and wealth, realizes its justice in the same way. Sappho's rebellious voice of highlighting the theme of love and desire is no more than a complementary argument that the so-called feminine topic, which is ignored by men, also shares the universal law of reversal. In this sense, Sappho implies a common point for both men's and women's world.

Likewise, Fragment 16, which is also about love and desire, expresses the similar voice. It is noteworthy that, in Sappho's own answer to the question “what is the most beautiful”—“*ὅττω τις ἔραται* (whatever someone loves)”, the nominative pronoun is turned into the indefinite “*τις*”, which means the specific subject of “desire” is not that important. Also, even the concrete object of “desire” is put aside as well. What matters here is only “*ἔραται*”, namely the process of the desire itself, regardless of who desires and what is desired.

Therefore, when it comes to Sappho's Helen whose image seemingly rebels against the Homeric one, it is not necessary to care about Helen's identity and to consider whether her behaviour of leaving her fatherland is right or not. We only need to know that she is making her own choice. In this sense, all the cases mentioned within Fragment 16, whether it is about the masculine love of warfare or the feminine love for Anaktoria, are the same in that “all valuation is an act of desire” (Winkler, 1996, p. 74). As is contended by Rosenmeyer, “Sappho does not kill her forefather, she invites him to live on in her own poetic frame. Her allusions in fr.16 are not gestures of hostility but rather acknowledgements of the complexity of the story, the dense fabric of tapestry” (Rosenmeyer, 1997, p. 145).

Furthermore, if we continue to link Sappho's view of love and desire in Fragment 16 with that in Fragment 1, we can find the tension between desire and possession. In Fragment 1, when the girl previously loved by others take on the role of the lover herself, she will love “even unwilling” (*κῶνικ ἐθέλοισα*)—it is exactly the strong coercion of love. As is stated by Giacomelli, “it is an axiom of Greek love-poetry that Eros is *ἀνάγκη* for the lover but not for the beloved. Greek lovers describe their experience as that of being coerced by a force outside oneself”, and people's pain of love derives from the unsatisfaction to the coercion or, in other words, the failure to possess what they love (Giacomelli, 1980, p. 138).

Such coercion is also the motivation of the Iliadic heroes' actions: they are eager for all the things related to warfare that are mentioned in Fragment 16, because by the help of them they can possess their desired honour and wealth. In the *Iliad*, heroes' determination and valour in the battlefield, usually, are narrated to result from the divine intervention—the gods often secretly penetrate an idea into someone's mind or directly appear in front of him to give him courage, for example, Diomedes is encouraged by Athene to fight against the trojans and even the goddess Aphrodite. According to M.M. Willcock, metaphorically, it can be interpreted in this way: when confronted with something beyond explanation, like suddenly being brave, people would attribute it to the divine intervention, and it can be deemed an "externalization of an inner motivation" (Willcock, 1999, p. 406). Therefore, men's desire to win and to possess the military spoils, just like the love in Sappho's Fragment 1, is so strong that can also be compared to a magical force "outside oneself". The gods would make women eager for the possession of what they desire "κῶὺκ ἐθέλοισα", and they will also force men to possess what they desire "κῶὺκ ἐθέλοισα". In this sense, both genders experience the similar power of coercion, and the tension between desire and possession is universal.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is not paradoxical that Sappho, in Fragment 1 and 16, simultaneously exhibits her allegiance to and rebellion against the conventions. For one thing, such a literary contrast effectively attracts the audience's attention and highlights her individual voice in the lyrics. For another, by imitating some traditional formula but altering some elements from her own perspective, Sappho alleviates the hostility between genders and expresses that both men's and women's world share some common characteristics—they are all pursuing something, regardless of the concrete objects of pursuit, and they are both overwhelmed by the strong coercion to possess what they love, once their desires are simulated; also, during the process of pursuit, both of them would experience the reversal of identification, and this is not tailored to any specific gender but a universal law of justice.

The argument of this essay conforms to the theory of Sappho's "double consciousness": her adherence or allusion to the male conventions indicates that she clearly understands the men's values; based upon it, she can further offer her rebellious alteration from the feminine perspective and endeavour to integrate both genders in some more universal sense. This inspires us that, compared to the dominant group who only cares about their own ideological system, the minority one can consider something in more ways; therefore, they are also more likely to be the one that realizes the reconciliation.

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