

Wine-pour the Nectar: Poetesses, Pleasure, and the Female Gaze

The Archaic and Classical Greek symposium is an institution that provides a space for men to indulge in various pleasures and engage with each other in an equalizing and educative communal setting. However, there are certainly those who were not elite male citizens participating at symposia in various capacities, including women, and more specifically those categorized as *hetairai*. These women are often viewed as ancillary figures in the sympotic space, passively working behind the scenes and eroticized strictly through the male gaze. This paper seeks to shift the perspective of experience in the symposium to that of *hetairai* by investigating how these women may have engaged with sympotic poetry, particularly those verses that are attributed to a female author.

Building upon Ewan Bowie's work (2016), this paper briefly establishes Sappho as a sympotic author, demonstrating that the erotic themes, vivid sensorial imagery, drinking references, and performative repetition of some of her fragments can be well situated in the sympotic space (for example, fr. 2, fr. 22, fr. 31). Like Alcaeus, Anacreon, and Theognis, Sappho invites the listener to engage with her poetic persona, which resonates with the female listener in dynamic and fluid ways. This paper also considers the intriguing yet brief verses attributed to Praxilla as well as a scholia reference that describes her as a drinking songstress (Ar. *Vesp.* 1236 ff.). Her work although extremely fragmentary, presents more evidence for female artistry and poetic authority in communal drinking settings.

The concepts of the female gaze, largely developed in feminist film theory by Zoe Dirse based on Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze, and gender performativity from Judith Butler's work, allow me to reorient the erotic and pleasurable experiences from the male

symposiast to the perspective of the *hetaira*. This shift to the female gaze contrasts with Bowie's assessment, who posits that Sappho's verses were meant to arouse male symposiasts and heighten their sexual desire (2016). Through these frameworks, I consider how a *hetaira* might be affected upon hearing sympotic poetry, particularly that which comes from the authoritative voice of the poetess, who ostensibly shares some common ground with other women who participate at sympotic events.

If we have an authoritative female voice attributed to composing such sympotic poetry, how do their poetic personas speak to the female experience in a communal drinking space? How might the personal first person and the multi-sensorial qualities of a Sapphic verse resonate with participating women in a convivial setting? With this in mind, how might *hetairai* have experienced this poetry in a way that complicates objectivity and agency within this space? That is to say, might a *hetaira* voyeuristically experience "the Other," something that is typically explored with male participants, as she vacillates between being the objectified and becoming the objectifier upon hearing the erotically charged verses. Her listenership may even lend herself to an experience of becoming "masculinized" as she subverts both normative and idealized feminine behaviors. Thus, through her own set of experiences, the *hetaira* exercises a sort of agency in the male-dominated symposium. The female gaze and gender performativity allow us to start to refocus the perspective and better understand different experiences within this space.

Works Cited

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