SAPPHO, FOUCAULT, AND WOMEN'S EROTICS[1]

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> What alternative to the phallus is there . . . can we discern the rudiments of another way of representing desire—woman's desire—even in the midst of patriarchal culture?

This question, raised by Jessica Benjamin in her book *The Bonds of Love*,[2] suggests a central problem in Foucault's analysis of sexuality and power relations in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1980b.85, 86). For some time now, feminist theorists have criticized Foucault on two main points: 1) his omission of the historical construction of sexuality as gender-specific and 2) his use of masculine forms of erotic practice as his model for ancient sexuality in general.[3] Foucault's presumption that models of masculine

1 I wish to thank the anonymous referee for much useful help on an earlier draft of this article. In addition, portions of this essay were delivered at "Foucault's History of Sexuality: Revisions and Responses," a symposium held at Texas Tech University in April 1993. I am grateful to David H. J. Larmour, Paul Allen Miller, and Charles Platter, the co-organizers of the symposium, for providing me with the opportunity to participate in many engaging discussions of Foucault's work and its relation to feminist thought and to current research on ancient sexuality.

2 Benjamin 1988.124. Benjamin offers a highly illuminating, feminist analysis of erotic domination. Her discussion of the relation between gender and domination demonstrates the complex intertwining of sexual and social domination. Her chapter "Women's Desire," 85–132, is especially provocative in light of the studies of representations of desire in literary discourse.

3 See the following for feminist analyses and critiques of Foucault: Balbus 1986.110–27, Bartky 1990.63–82, Butler 1990.93–110, de Lauretis 1987, Diamond and Quinby 1988, Hartsock 1990.157–75, Richlin 1991.160–79, Thornton 1991.181–93.

Arethusa 29 (1996) 1–14 © 1996 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

behavior are transferable to feminine behavior[4] valorizes the phallic mode of representation, which organizes and represents erotic relations as necessarily hierarchical and power-driven.

Foucault's failure to identify his "analytic of power" as male-specific and as inseparably linked to the larger patriarchal ideology of Greek culture is, from a feminist perspective, the most problematical aspect of his theory. In her book *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa de Lauretis points out the dangers of Foucault's gender blindness in his insistence that sexuality and power are coextensive: "But to deny gender, first of all, is to deny the social relations of gender that constitute and validate the sexual oppression of women; and second, to deny gender is to remain in 'ideology'—an ideology which is manifestly self-serving to the male-gendered subject" (de Lauretis 1987.15). The ideology that privileges the *male* as the subject and the *phallus* as the emblem of desire is present in Foucault's account of ancient Greek sexuality. This is an ideology based on an ethic and practice of domination, competition, and what Foucault himself calls a reciprocity of "gifts and services." What Foucault does not acknowledge is how the unequal complementarity of *doer* and *done to* in the homoerotic practices he describes reflects values and behaviors that are male-specific and that necessarily imply the subjection of women.

Foucault constructs a view of ancient Greek sexuality based on masculine erotics, an erotics defined by Foucault as a hierarchical relationship between an active and a passive partner.[5] Foucault, however, points out that despite the boy's role in the relationship as an "object of pleasure," his degrading position could be understood as honorable if it "involved training for manhood, social connections for the future, or a lasting friendship." In other words, the *object* of pleasure could become a *subject*—one who is in control of his pleasures—in the context of a relationship in which there was reciprocal benefit. So although the erotic relationship Foucault describes is "always inscribed in a play of power," it is, nonetheless, part of a system of exchange in which the boy's subservient position could be compensated for by the knowledge he would receive from his more experienced, dominant

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4 See Dean-Jones 1992.72–91. Dean-Jones challenges Foucault's assimilation of the female to the male model of sexuality in the medical texts, thus offering important evidence that "in the case of women the medical texts present a different sexual experience altogether."

5 See Halperin 1990.54–74, for his description and praise of Foucault's views on ancient sexuality.

partner—knowledge that would ultimately prepare the boy for his eventual place as a free man in the social and political order.

In Jack Winkler's view, ancient Greek sex "was basically a way for men to establish their social identities in the intensely competitive, zero-sum formats of public culture."[6] This view of erotic relations as transactional in nature, as organized on the principles of instrumentality and exchange, subordinates all social activity, including private life, to the functions and uses of the public world. Erotic experience turns into a *commodity* that can be taken to the outside world. In his essay, "Constructionism and Ancient Greek Sex," Bruce Thornton's implicitly feminist critique of Foucault argues that "Foucault, for the most part, glosses over the vision of human nature his definition of power assumes: a social-Darwinian jungle of competition, domination, and status-consciousness, a vision that ignores affection, friendship, pity, all the other ways humans relate to one another . . ."[7] Some feminists would argue that the rationalization of erotic domination ought to be understood as *masculine*, as not merely a "function of personal power relationships," but something that is reflective of the "gendered logic" of a goods and services orientation to social and political relations in general.

A useful way to understand Foucault's model of power and to see it, not as gender-neutral, but as an extension of his male-centered view, is to approach his theory from a psychoanalytic perspective. Jessica Benjamin's analysis of gender and domination draws out many of the psychological underpinnings of erotic domination, which, I think, may help to illuminate some of the implications *for women* of Foucault's theory. Although Benjamin speaks primarily about the domination of men over women, her insights are nonetheless applicable to Foucault's dominance/submission model, and, as we will see, lead us naturally into a discussion of Sappho. Benjamin argues that privileging the phallic mode in representing desire limits desire to the level of subject-object experience, and thus doesn't allow for mutual recognition—what Benjamin calls "the intersubjective mode where two subjects meet." The father-son struggle described by Freud is, to a great extent, a prototype for the man-boy model of erotics

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6 Winkler 1990.11. Winkler's influential collection of essays on sex and gender in ancient Greece supports many of Foucault's ideas on ancient sexuality.

7 Thornton 1991.186. Thornton presents a persuasive and cogent critique of Foucault's views of sexuality. In addition, Thornton criticizes, fairly extensively, Winkler's and Halperin's interpretations of Foucault's ideas.

described by Foucault. In the father-son struggle, there is no room for the recognition of someone outside the self, since the son wants, essentially, to become the father. Benjamin likens the father-son relationship to the master-slave relationship in which "one is always up and the other down." Benjamin identifies this unequal complementarity not only as the basic pattern of domination, but also as a *masculine* mode of thought and practice that permeates all social organization. It is masculine, because, as Jane Flax observes, "culture *is* masculine, not as the effect of language but as the consequence of actual power relations to which men have far more access than women" (Flax 1990.103).

Now we can return to the original question posed at the beginning: "What alternative to the phallus is there" in representing desire? And how can we discover woman's independent desire, where not only man but also woman can be subject? The answer, I think, lies in Benjamin's concept of intersubjective experience—"that space in which the mutual recognition of subjects can compete with the reversible relationship of domination." Sappho's poetry is a powerful counterpoint to the model of power presented by Foucault. Sappho's poems, however, do not necessarily provide insight into the behaviors and erotic practices of ancient Greek or even Lesbian women. Our evidence about archaic Lesbos is too scant to draw any conclusions about seventh-century Lesbos from Sappho's poems. Moreover, we cannot assume that the status of women in Lesbian society was exactly the same as it was in fifth-century Athens. Sappho's chief value, for our purposes here, is that her poetic fragments offer an alternative erotic practice and discourse that replaces the dominant ideology and discourse of complementarity with a *mutuality* that, as Marilyn Skinner writes, "does not replicate patriarchal modes of awareness but rather affords a substitute basis for organizing female experience" (Skinner 1993.135).

As Skinner suggests, it is from Sappho's position of marginality that she is able to construct an alternative to the phallic representation of desire. In the segregated female world of the *thiasos*, Sappho could express active female erotic desire and claim an authentic female subject position—what Teresa de Lauretis calls an "eccentric discursive position outside the male . . . monopoly of power," a "form of female subjectivity that exceeds the phallic definition" of woman as *object* or Other (de Lauretis 1990.126–27). Furthermore, de Lauretis maintains the premise that women's *difference* is not a consequence of biology, but of "their specific condition of exploitation" and gender oppression, which affords them a "position of

knowledge and struggle" that gives rise to possible alternative modes of structuring erotic discourse and practice. Thus, the Sapphic subject, because it speaks from a "place of discourse" located outside patriarchy, can construct a model of erotic relations that is, as Marilyn Skinner puts it, "bilateral and egalitarian, in marked contrast to the rigid patterns of pursuit and physical mastery inscribed into the role of the adult male *erastes*, whatever the sex of his love object" (Skinner 1993.133). The model to which Skinner refers is undeniably homoerotic. De Lauretis, as well, posits the "eccentric" female subject as one that refuses "the terms of the heterosexual contract." Indeed, in a society as male-dominated as Sappho's most likely was, one can easily see that the expression of active desire for *women as subjects* was most accessible in the context of an autonomous and homoerotic woman's culture. I believe, however, that it is possible for contemporary readers of Sappho—both men and women—to discover in Sappho's articulation of female desire an alternative to the competitive and hierarchical models of eroticism that have dominated Western culture.

II

Sappho's fragment 94 is perhaps the most vivid illustration in Sappho's poetry of mutuality and intersubjective experience and, moreover, shows how Sappho constructs erotic experience outside male assumptions about dominance and submission. Marilyn Skinner writes: "In the poetry of Sappho, semiotic analysis has uncovered an elaborate complex of coding strategies differing perceptibly from those of the dominant symbolic order . . . open, fluid . . . conspicuously nonphallic . . ." (Skinner 1993.131). In line with Eva Stehle's earlier observations about the nonhierarchical quality of Sappho's depiction of love relations (Stehle 1990), Skinner points to the ways Sappho differs from her male counterparts through her emphasis, not on competition and conquest, but on "the mutual pleasures of sexuality." Indeed, the pattern in Sappho's poems is primarily one of mutuality, with an intimacy based on the discovery of the self in the other.

One of the most striking features of Sappho's fragments is her use of apostrophe to play out the conflicts of her erotic drama. Sappho's use of apostrophe is her main device in dramatizing the experience of desire as mutual recognition. The act of apostrophe not only makes present the absent object of desire, but is also the mechanism through which the erotic subject constitutes itself. Apostrophe, for Sappho, poses the problem of the

poetic subject as a problem of the addressee's *relation* to it.[8] Sappho's poet/lover raises herself out of her paralytic, near-death state through her ability not only to evoke the presence of the beloved with vivid specificity, but also to call up her own potentiality for erotic fulfillment. That Sappho's narrator reconstitutes her fragmented self by establishing a relationship with her addressee *in the time of the apostrophe* refers us to the transforming and animating activity of the poetic voice. This interdependence of invoker and invoked[9] in Sappho's poems suggests a mode of desire that is both intersubjective and "bilateral."

Fragment 94 illustrates how Sappho's apostrophizing voice affirms the eroticism of her narrator by erasing the distinction between self and other, speaker and addressee, and creates an intimacy based, in Luce Irigaray's words, on a "nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible" (Irigaray 1991.355). Sappho's speaker doesn't fantasize about the beloved as separate from herself, as an *object* either to gaze at or describe (Stehle 1990). The speaker's erotic fulfillment comes not from making the beloved a beautiful object of contemplation, but by drawing the beloved to her by making the beloved a part of the lover's interior world of memory and imagination.[10]

τεθνάκην δ᾽ ἀδόλως θέλω·
ἄ με ψισδομένα κατελίμπανεν

πόλλα καὶ τόδ᾽ ἔειπ [
ὤιμ᾽ ὡς δεῖνα πεπ[όνθ]αμεν,
Ψάπφ᾽, ἦ μάν σ᾽ ἀέκοισ᾽ ἀπυλιμπάνω.

τὰν δ᾽ ἔγω τάδ᾽ ἀμειβόμαν·
χαίροισ᾽ ἔρχεο κἄμεθεν
μέμναισ̣ῷ, οἶσθα γὰρ ὤς σε πεδήπομεν·

8 See Culler 1981.136–54. Culler's chapter "Apostrophe" is one of the most important and influential studies of the use of poetic apostrophe, and has drawn attention to its importance as a poetic device.

9 See Bergren's illuminating article on apostrophe and invocation, 1982.83–108. Bergren's analysis of "sacred" apostrophe is extremely helpful in understanding Sappho's use of it in her poems.

10 See two other useful discussions of fragment 94: McEvilley 1971 and Burnett 1983.

αἰ δὲ μή, ἀλλά σ' ἔγω θέλω
ὄμναισαι[...(.)] [..(.)]..αι
..[ ] καὶ κάλ' ἐπάσχομεν·

πό[λλοις γὰρ στεφάν]οις ἴων
καὶ βρ[όδων]κίων τ' ὔμοι
κα..[ ] πὰρ ἔμοι περεθήκαο

καὶ πό[λλαις ὐπα]θύμιδας
πλέκ[ταις ἀμφ' ἀ]πάλαι δέραι
ἀνθέων .[ ] πεποημμέναις

καὶ π.....[ ]. μύρωι
βρενθείωι.[ ]ρυ[..]ν
ἐξαλείψαο κα[ὶ βασ]ιληίωι,

καὶ στρώμν[αν ἐ]πὶ μολθάκαν
ἀπάλαν πα.[ ]...ων
ἐξίης πόθο[ν] νίδων

κωὔτε τις [ ]..τι
ἶρον οὐδυ[ ]
ἔπλετ' ὄππ[οθεν ἄμ]μες ἀπέσκομεν,

οὐκ ἄλσος.[ ].ρος
]ψοφος
]...οιδιαι

Honestly, I wish I were dead.
Weeping she left with many tears,

And said, "Oh what terrible things
we endured. Sappho, truly,
against my will I leave you."

And I answered: "Go, be
happy, and remember me;
For you know how we cared for you.

And if not, then I want
to remind you . . . of the wonderful
things we shared.

For many wreaths of violets and
roses . . .
you put on by my side,

And many woven garlands
fashioned of flowers,
you tied round your soft neck,

And with rich myrrh,
fit for a queen,
you anointed . . .

And on a soft bed,
tenderly,
you satisfied your desire.

And there was
no sacred place
from which we were absent,

no grove,
no dance,
no sound . . .”[11]

The fragment opens with the speaker in the characteristically helpless, despairing condition of the lover. As in fr. 31, where the pain of the present moment leads the speaker to say she is almost dying, here the speaker’s expression of a wish to die also occurs in a dramatic present. The stark wish to die is expressed baldly, without the embellishment of poetic images. The use of the word *adolôs* (honestly or frankly) initiates a conversational diction and a tone that accentuate the extent to which the speaker is bound up in the contingencies of circumstance. *Adolôs* also has the sense of both guilelessness and artlessness, which emphasizes the contrast between real life and its transformation through art. Although the real situation is fraught with pain, the world that will be conjured by the speaker’s poetic voice, not expressed *adolôs*, but filtered through memory and shaped by imagination and art, is entirely blissful. While the impulse toward death here conveys the awareness of limitation and human imper-

11 The Greek text of fragment 94 comes from Lobel and Page 1955. The English translation of the poem is my own.

fection, it also expresses a desire to put an end to the transience of circumstance and to preserve the memory of perfect erotic union.

The poem moves from a wish to die in the present to the speaker's narration of a conversation in the past between herself and her departing lover. The drama of separation unfolds as we hear their distinct voices shift back and forth in responsion to one another. The speaker's direct recollection of the time of departure locates both the narrator and the woman who is leaving in a temporal sequence of events in which they are each distinct characters within the narrative reported by the speaker. The use of the descriptive, rather than the vocative mode, here preserves the sense of separateness between the two lovers. The separateness is reinforced by the parallel structure of the first four stanzas that all end in verbs that function in responsion to one another.

The speaker's request in line eight that the woman *remember* (farewell; go and remember me) draws the poem away from the dramatic portrayal of the woman leaving to the more inward situation of remembering. And although we are still in the narrative frame, the speaker's verbal imperatives to the woman (go and remember) begin to move the poem closer to direct address and away from the temporality of narrative. The phrases *deina peponthamen* (we endured terrible things) in line four and *kal' epaschomen* (we experienced wonderful things) in line eleven sum up the contrary perspectives of the speaker and her beloved, and focus the emotional tension of the poem. The woman sees the relationship only in light of the immediate reality of separation and loss, while the speaker sees it from the perspective of her interior world of memory.

In stanza four, the pattern of shifting voices changes as the speaker's own point of view and poetic voice take over. The speaker's assertion at line nine that she will remind her beloved if she doesn't remember focuses attention on the poetic voice and its ability to activate the past and make it come alive in the present. The word *thelô* (I wish) at the end of line nine, expressing the speaker's wish to remind her departing lover about their past happiness, echoes the speaker's earlier wish to die in the opening line of the fragment. The repetition of *thelô* in the parallel contexts of death and memory suggests the active transformative power of the poetic voice as it replaces the will to die with the will to create.

In fact, it doesn't seem to matter whether the woman remembers or not. *Ai de mê* (and if not), at the beginning of the fourth stanza, conjoined to the emphatic *ego thelô* (I wish) suggests a negation of narrative temporality by making the evocativeness of the speaker's apostrophizing

voice the central issue. At line eight, the speaker's clearly delineated voice offering her beloved an abstract consolation about how great the past was gives way to the dissolution of both their voices in the evocation of past erotic fulfillment. Beginning at line twelve, the speaker's private world and voice (beyond the public, ritualized voice in the opening exchange), surge up and take over, as is evident in the extension of the narrator's speech which destroys the balance in the first three stanzas. Stanza four also brings about a transition to a more remote time and introduces a use of language that abounds in poetic images.

The picture in stanzas five through ten is one of blissful satisfaction. As against the clearly delineated voices and personalities of earlier stanzas, here the individual voices of the lovers are lost in the aura of sensations and erotic stimulation. The softness of the objects described contributes to the impression that boundaries of person, object, and place break down as everything dissolves into a totality of sensation. This atmosphere of sensual stimulation, however, does not seem to be placed in any actual environment; rather, the images of flowers, soft couches, perfumes, the shrine, and the grove all have a generalizing force that suggests remoteness from the world.[12] Even the long series of flower images seems to function in isolation from nature, and does not seem to refer to any specific ritual function or purpose except for the sensual enjoyment of the lovers. What is emphasized about the flowers is the way they are artfully fashioned into beautiful garlands for the lovers to wear.

But in spite of the speaker's rapt absorption in the woman whose presence she invokes, there is no emphasis on describing the woman *independent* of the effect she has on the narrator herself, or separate from the atmosphere their shared erotic experience generates. In the last two stanzas of the fragment, the sense of fullness expressed in the repetition of negatives that negate the lovers' absence at the shrine and the grove contrasts with the emptiness implicit in the earlier verbs of abandonment and departure. The negation of place to denote presence implies that it is the mutual experience of the two lovers that gives form to the world, and suggests a mutual presence that is at once everywhere and nowhere. The implication is that place comes alive only in the presence of the other. The distinction of self and other dissolves in the space that contains the lovers—

12 See Stigers (Stehle) 1977.83–102 for an engaging discussion of Sappho's use of flower imagery in an erotic context.

an intersubjective space characterized by the emotional attunement of shared desire.

Jessica Benjamin sees woman's sexual grounding in intersubjective space as her solution to the problem that woman's desire is not localized in space, not linked to phallic activity and its representations (Benjamin 1988.130):

> When the sexual self is represented by the sensual capacities of the whole body, when the totality of space between, outside, and within our bodies becomes the site of pleasure, then desire escapes the borders of the imperial phallus and resides on the shores of endless worlds.

Indeed, in Sappho's fragment the interior space inhabited by the two lovers expands outward to the seemingly endless spaces of groves, shrines, and dances. Sappho offers a dimension of desire in which it is possible to envision a synthesis of subjectivity and femininity, and, perhaps more importantly, to imagine erotic relations *in general* outside an ethic of competition and domination.

Foucault's failure to see the structures of domination and the discourses that produce sexuality as gendered reflects a male-centered perspective that takes patriarchy for granted, and construes sexuality as male. Isaac Balbus' essay in the book *Feminism as Critique* offers a critique of Foucault that, I believe, gets to the heart of some of the problems with Foucault's theory (Balbus 1986.120):

> His gender-neutral assumption of a will to power (over others) that informs True Discourses and the technologies with which they are allied transforms what has in fact been a disproportionately *male* into a generically human orientation.

The slippage from the desiring male subject to the human subject in Foucault's work denies female subjectivity and women's erotics altogether. As Amy Richlin observes, the fact that women figure "only as objects" in Foucault's work implicates Foucault himself in the phallocentric views of his ancient sources (Richlin 1991). Foucault's conclusion that "we must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power" shows the extent to

which Foucault's ideas about sexuality are invested in the totalizing power of patriarchal discourse. By not identifying his hierarchical and power-driven model of (ancient Greek) sexuality *as gendered*, Foucault fails to acknowledge the exclusion of women from public culture and the implications of that exclusion for the history of sexuality.

Foucault's erasure of women from his history of ancient sexuality leaves out, I believe, not only women's oppression, but also "the missing half of the Greco-Roman gender dialectic" (Skinner 1993.138). That missing half is not *merely* the lived experiences of ancient women and the woman's voice in ancient literature. What Foucault leaves out is a view that speaks from an eccentric "place of discourse," a view that offers a countervailing perspective to a highly competitive patriarchal social order. Indeed, Foucault's model of ancient homoerotic relations overlooks the effect Sappho's poetry may have had in forming alternative images of eroticism in the culture as a whole.[13] As Marilyn Skinner puts it (Skinner 1993.136):

> But we should not forget that Sappho's songs would not have gained fame in the wider world, or eventually circulated as written texts, had they not offered something to men as well as women. . . . Consequently, as we learn from ancient critical pronouncements, anecdotal evidence, and visual representations of the poet as icon, male listeners and readers cherished Sappho's works as a socially permissible escape from the strict constraints of masculinity. . . . Greco-Roman males benefited from the opportunity afforded by Sappho's texts to enact a woman's part, if only in play, and so to enter imaginatively into states of awareness foreign to them.

Considering that Sappho's poetry, although outside cultural norms, was preserved and enshrined within the literary tradition, it is curious that Foucault omits any mention of Sappho in his discussion of ancient Greek erotics. Moreover, Foucault's omission of Sappho in his history of ancient

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13 In Plato's *Phaedrus*, in the context of critiquing a speech of Lysias on love, Socrates tells Phaedrus that he can learn more from "the beautiful Sappho" (*Phaedrus* 235C-4).

sexuality excludes from consideration the alternate model of intersubjective erotic relations Sappho's poetry offers. Despite Foucault's illuminating insights about the mechanics of power in social relations, his lack of concern for Sappho's poetry as a cultural factor in Greek conceptions of *eros* blinds him to what the "woman's part" can teach about ancient sexuality or sexuality in general. Moreover, by ignoring what a woman-centered perspective may contribute to an understanding of eroticism, Foucault perpetuates androcentric ways of thinking that can write women out of history and imagine erotics without woman's desire.

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