Parthenoi to Watch Out For? Looking at Female Couples in Vase-Painting and Lyric

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The tondo of a red-figure kylix in the Metropolitan Museum attributed to the Bologna Painter (NY
06.1021.167, ARV2 908.13, Para 430) shows a striking image of two young women, one holding the other by the wrist while apparently sketching some sort of argument with her free hand. Richter and Hall (1936) saw "two women or girls...one apparently being pulled forward against her will. The unwilling one is carrying a writing tablet with a string through which a stylus is stuck, so a writing lesson may be the objective (though she seems rather big for this)." *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece* (from the Hood Museum exhibit) labels it "A School Scene with Girls," but notes that other scholars see it as depicting "hetairae" or as "a joke," because the shape indicates use at symposia, where respectable schoolgirls would not go. The hand-on-wrist gesture, and indications of movement, may remind us of depictions of dance in women's choral rituals; or we may feel it echoes a convention for representing heterosexual marriage.

We read the image differently when we take the kylix as a whole. Grouped around the exterior, six pairs of women enact gestures from what Lear and Cantarella (2008) and many others have shown is a recognized vocabulary of (male) pederastic courtship. A structure of repetition with slight variation invites us to read it as narrative; pairs strain toward becoming triangles. But Sandra Boehringer omits this kylix from her comprehensive recent study, *L'Homosexualité féminine dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine*, which argues that classical vase-painting did *not* visually represent of eroticism between women, in contrast to the literary record, to earlier vase-painting, and especially in contrast to the proliferation of red-figure male-male scenes. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, in "Excavating Women's Homoeroticism in Ancient Greece" (2002), does provide a sensitive and compelling reading, but she writes from a model of female eroticism that sees it as more diffuse, less hierarchical, less frankly sexual than the male pederastic paradigm.

In short, the kylix appears to vex the modern gaze with just the same interpretive paradoxes that have arisen in more familiar scholarship about Sappho and Alcman. My idea is that by reading back and forth between vase and lyric (with all due caveats about period and genre) we can begin to reconstruct a cultural context within which desire becomes legible. While Boehringer's argument that classical vase painting does not show women together in ways conducive to male voyeurism clearly applies, my own reading follows Rabinowitz in arguing that there is still something to see. However, I'd also note, parallel to Helene Foley's critique of Marilyn Skinner and Ellen Grene's approach to Sappho, that it's important not to sugarcoat or romanticize women's relations, and not to overstate the difference between women and men. My own reading sees the vase as, to quote Boehringer's view of Alcman's second *Partheneion*, "neither condemnation nor satire." If we take the vase as a whole, we can see, as in the *Partheneion* (*PMGF* 3), a repeated and conventional social structure of affective relationships within which an individual story of desire could become intelligible, could take meaning. And as in Sappho's *Hymn to Aphrodite* (as I read that poem), desire appears connected to power difference, in a way that is repeatable—but reversible.

In a previous publication about the 'new' Sappho, I argued that while the erotic narratives described there involve power and hierarchy, the *gender* of lover and beloved was reversible and even unimportant compared with other qualities. In general, we need to find ways to account for the possibility that men and women at times may have shared a set of tropes and a visual vocabulary about sexual and affective matters, without neglecting very real gender differences in social situation, "voice," and power.

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