

## The Trajectory of Desire in the Fulfillment of Grace

In LP 16.2-4, Sappho set forth her standards with the claim that “On the black earth the most beautiful, I say, is whatever one desires.” In her longest extant poem, LP 1.26-27, Sappho associated the feelings of desire with a sense of teleology when she asked Aphrodite, the goddess of love to “bring to fulfillment” what her “heart desires to have fulfilled.” What she desired, according to Greene (1996.244), are “reciprocal movements...in which she and her beloved both participate in the process of giving and receiving, loving and being loved....a circularity of desire.” This paper will examine the constellation of terms for desire and fulfillment as they incorporate reciprocated pleasures and provide a paradigm of values throughout Sappho’s poems. The poems represent how the desire of one individual for another found fulfillment in the delight reciprocated by the beloved. For this interpretation of mutuality and reciprocity occasioned by desire, I shall focus on and develop a context for understanding Sappho’s use of the Greek word for “grace,” charis. This word, with its cognates (e.g. LP 22.14 and 96.5), can “convey simultaneously the social aspect of *reciprocity* as well as the personal aspect of *pleasure*” (cf. Nagy. 1979.37.13n2). The appropriateness of desire as enhancing reciprocal pleasures and leading to a sense of fulfillment can be attested in the associations between telos and its cognates (as specified in LP 1.26-27), which relate to what Alexander Mourelatos (1970.30-31) describes as an ‘accomplishing,’ a “consummating,” and “perfecting ” that “depend on a logical paradigm of...a circle, band, bond.”

The poems to be discussed represent Sappho’s experience as both lover and beloved. They project a coherent and comprehensive view of loving relationships and the interrelationship between desire and reciprocity as experienced in the grace-filled experiences other individuals shared as well. Included are both the interactions between women and between a bride and

groom in marriage, the relationship traditionally conceived as the end or fulfillment of human desire. In addition, the poet represents how erotic longing moves a person to realize how reciprocated love can create fulfillment that makes the lovers comparable to the gods and can even transcend the powers of death.

The personalization of concepts like desire, fulfillment, and the reciprocity of grace, constitute a framework that makes sense of what might seem at first a set of mostly fragmentary poems. Desire in its full force is in one sense painful and self-annihilating--it reveals our failure to be self-sufficient, what we think of as independence. But this force can also drive us to a fuller realization of ourselves: what we lack, we can appreciate in others; this appreciation makes possible in turn an appreciation of ourselves appreciating others and having others reciprocate in kind.

Sappho's poems detail the pleasures and pains of human experience; they praise or criticize different attitudes and ways of acting and they address, in short, questions about what constitutes a worthwhile life. Although not presented as a systematic argument, the topics of character and quality of life correlate with philosophical explorations (cf, Meyer on ancient Greek philosophers). The present essay examines how concepts studied separately in the past can be drawn together for a unified understanding and builds on earlier analyses (as for example, by duBois, Foley, Greene 2009, Pender, and Zellner). It also adds to work that has been done on the performative aspects of her poetry (i.a. Stehle and Yatromanolakis) as it investigates what there was that drew continued attention to what Sappho had to say and how her statements, whether in complete poems or brief fragments, convey, when taken together, a coherent account that touches on the deep desires and questions that keep memory ever alive, ever questing, ever seeking gratification and resolution.

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