

“What Shall We Call Thee Then?”: Defining Femininity Outside the Male Heteronormative World in John Donne’s “Sappho to Philaenis”

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During the English Renaissance, men determined the identity and social standing of women. Manuscripts from this period that discuss gender relations and roles make this dependency clear, and, in particular, many of the essays that establish proper female conduct define respectable female behavior through a woman’s relationship to a man. For example, Robert Dod and John Cleaver state in their marital conduct book *A godly form of household government*, “... so the woman deserveth no commendation that, (as it were) contrarying her husband when he is merry, showeth herself sad, or in sadness uttereth her mirth. For as men should obey the laws of their cities, so women the manners of their husbands.”¹ Dod and Cleaver make clear that the behavior, emotions, and actions of a woman are defined by a man (in this case, her husband), and, as a result, the identity of a woman is expected to be defined and fulfilled by the man. The dependency of femininity on masculinity is further shown in Henry Smith’s *A preparative to marriage*, where he states that “the philosophers could not tell how to define a wife, but called her *the contrary to a husband*, as though nothing were so cross and contrary to a man as a wife.”² While Smith admits this is not scripture, he claims that this statement holds

nonetheless: femininity is what masculinity is not. These two declarations on women’s behavior and identity suggest the larger understanding of gender at the time: in the Renaissance, the categorization of women depended on men.

However, when Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne and ruling without a king, male anxiety began to rise, and the validity of masculine authority came to be questioned. Describing the rising masculine anxiety in England in this period, Mark Breitenberg argues that the discourse at the time regarding gender roles slowly threatened the idea of the “natural” superiority of men.³ In the late sixteenth century, this environment helped set the tone for John Donne’s elegies and, in particular, his “Sappho to Philaenis.” In most of his love elegies, Donne challenges the stability of gender identity. Diane Benet observes that in much of that work, Donne seems to provide social commentary on the rising anxiety surrounding gender roles by focusing on “sexual transgressions,” especially those that challenge male authority, as in “Jealousy,” “Change,” or “Perfume.”⁴ In his elegy “Sappho to Philaenis,” Donne challenges this stability further by producing one of the first lesbian love poems in the English language.⁵ Barbara Correll argues, similarly to Benet, that this subject is not out of character for Donne, insofar as the crisis of signification and masculine gender identity structures many of his heteroerotic poems.⁶ In this elegy, Donne presents the romantic relationship between two women, Sappho and Philaenis, and their ideal world that excludes men. Due to its subversive subject matter, the elegy was censored, highly contested, and therefore, until recently, overlooked by scholars, who have struggled to place it in the canon of a poet whose work is typically characterized by a strong and dominating masculine voice.⁷ To begin to correct this critical neglect, Stanley Fish’s analysis of “On his Mistress going to bed” can prove useful, allowing us to contextualize “Sappho to Philaenis” within Donne’s body of work. In “On his Mistress,” as Fish observes, “Masculine authority can be asserted only in relation to a firmly defined opposite. ... In order for him to be a man she must be unmistakable and essentially a woman.”⁸ Here, Fish points out two main elements present in John Donne’s elegies. First, he observes Donne’s recognition that men and women define each other through a comparative binary. Second, he notices the pervading fear that this gender identity could become unstable: without it, one’s masculine or feminine identity falls apart. Through “Sappho to Philaenis,” Donne expands on this anxiety by pushing on rigid gender categorization and by breaking the comparative binary. He does so by removing the man from the equation and centering his elegy on a homoerotic relationship between two women, leaving femininity to define itself.

In “Sappho to Philaenis,” Donne considers desire, language, and representation apart from a typical male-focused and heterosexual perspective. Donne places both Sappho and Philaenis outside the masculine-defined heteronorma-

tive world, and, as a result, the crisis of both language and representation introduced in the beginning of the elegy escalates. As they move further outside the heteronormative world, the identities of both Sappho and Philaenis slowly break down until their individual images are deconstructed, and this breakdown of representation and language in the lesbian love elegy points to the limits and failure of a male-defined heteronormative world to identify women outside of men. Through the subversion of traditional gender roles, Donne destabilizes the security of gender signification and reveals the performative and constructive nature of gender itself. The final breakdown of representation reveals the struggle for women to exist outside of a heteronormative male-centric world, ultimately bringing into question the essentialist nature of the gender binary and of heterosexuality.

In the first twelve lines, Sappho contextualizes the elegy with the crisis of desire and the subsequent failure of language. Sappho begins the elegy by asking, “Where is that holy fire, which verse is said / To have? Is that enchanting force decayed? ... Thee, her best work, to her work cannot draw” (1-2, 4).⁹ In these lines, Sappho, an honored and esteemed Greek love poet, laments the loss of her poetic voice and her ability to use language.¹⁰ Both her status and authority as a poet emphasize the gravity and impact of this loss, and Sappho quickly identifies her desire for Philaenis as the source of this breakdown. She states, “Have my tears quenched my old poetic fire; / Why quenched they not as well, that of desire?” (5-6). In this moment, Sappho pinpoints Philaenis as the source of this loss of language.¹¹ She states that her intense need for Philaenis—as represented through her tears—“quenched” her poetic ability. In these first six lines, Sappho centers the elegy around her failure of language. Through this introduction, Donne contextualizes the elegy around a crisis of language and desire, which leads to the further breakdown of her speech.

This separation of language from desire evolves into the breakdown of representation. When speaking of her image of Philaenis, Sappho states, “Only thine image, in my heart, doth sit, / But that is wax, and fires environ it. / My fires have driven, thine have drawn it hence” (9-11). Immediately after detailing the collapse of language, the breakdown of representation does not fall far behind. Frantically, Sappho attempts to capture the beautiful image of her lost love. In these three lines, Sappho’s intense desire transforms into a raging fire. She states that just as fire changes wax, her desire melts and dismantles the remaining image she possessed of Philaenis. Sappho laments this melting image when she cries, “And I am robbed of picture, heart, and sense” (12). Her desire not only breaks down her power over language, but this “fire” also creates an unstable and intangible representation of Philaenis. This focus on the crisis of desire in the beginning of the elegy introduces Sappho’s struggle with language and signification that continues for the rest of the elegy. As Correll

argues, “‘Sappho to Philaenis’ is Donne’s crisis poem.”¹² By introducing this struggle of signification, these first twelve lines help to provide a framework of failed representation through which the rest of “Sappho to Philaenis” can be understood.

This failure of language and representation does not simply derive from desiring Philaenis: it also comes from Sappho’s inability to “place” her desire and Philaenis, as both reside outside a male-centric heteronormative world. Shortly after Sappho introduces her struggle with speech and representation, she poses a question to Philaenis that hits at the core of her crisis: “For, if we justly call each silly man / A little world, what shall we call thee then?” (19-20). Sappho confronts the belief that the ordinary man can encompass the world and serve as a representation of humankind. Noting this confrontation, H. L. Meakin observes that Sappho, by pointing to “man” as a false universal, reveals “woman’s ‘present absence’ in the ubiquitous noun [i.e., man] which supposedly refers to human ‘being.’” As a result, “Donne reveals a radical awareness of the gender politics which operate in language.”¹³ Therefore, Donne’s Sappho reveals two things when she asks Philaenis, “What shall we call thee then?” First, she reveals that Philaenis does not belong in the heteronormative masculine world, and second, that there is no language to represent Philaenis and this female experience outside heteronormative categorization. In other words, Sappho asks how, if men serve as the representation of humankind, does one define a woman who exists outside of the bounds of heteronormative masculinity. This question works to contextualize Sappho’s previous failure of language and her struggle to represent Philaenis in the first twelve lines. How can Philaenis be understood, identified, or represented when she resides outside the heteronormative world, and how can Sappho place her desire for her? Lines 19-20 reveal that Sappho’s collapse of language and representation do not simply stem from intense desire. Sappho cannot identify or represent Philaenis because she does not belong in a typical heteronormative category, and therefore heterosexual male love poetry (and language) cannot describe or identify her.

Sappho continues to distinguish Philaenis and her desire by discarding the conventions of male heteronormative Petrarchan poetry. As a result, the identity of Philaenis becomes more abstract and isolated, as language continues to prove to be insufficient to identify both her and Sappho’s desire for her.¹⁴ Addressing Philaenis, Sappho states,

Thou are not soft, and clear, and straight, and fair,
As down, as stars, cedars, and lilies are
But thy right hand, and cheek, and eye, only
Are like thy other hand, and cheek, and eye. (21-24)

In these lines, Sappho refers to the modes of comparison and the masculine love tropes often used in Petrarchan poetry. Throwing out these traditions, she declares that they are unable to fully capture Philaenis' beauty. This is not Sappho's only rejection of Petrarchan tropes in the elegy. In lines 15–18, Sappho undermines another trope: portraying a woman as a god-like figure. When Sappho states, “As gods, when gods to thee I do compare, / Are graced thereby,” she insinuates that even the gods cannot fully represent the beauty of Philaenis' image, as they are the ones who are honored by her comparison (16–17). Once again, language fails fully to represent the beauty of her beloved. However, the failures in both these moments are not simply the result of Philaenis' unimaginable beauty. Instead, this absence is a result of Philaenis' place outside the male heterosexual world. By referencing Petrarchan conventions—a male-centric heterosexual mode of love poetry—Sappho juxtaposes homosexual desire with heterosexual desire. By stating that the tropes of masculine heterosexual desire are insufficient, Sappho further separates her desire and Philaenis from the heteronormative world. This separation prompts an important question: what is left outside of this world? In lines 23–24, Sappho states that the only proper comparison that can be made for Philaenis is Philaenis herself. In other words, Sappho cannot find sufficient language to represent Philaenis, who is thus left to define herself. In this moment, her image begins to collapse in on itself, since there is no difference and no signification. Her identity becomes even more arbitrary than it was when she was first introduced, and, further, the need for Philaenis to rely on her own image for identification re-emphasizes the lack of language and modes of representation outside the male-centric society. As Sappho pushes Philaenis further outside categorization by dismissing the language of masculine Petrarchan love poetry, Philaenis' identity becomes vaguer and more unrecognizable.

Philaenis exists outside of the heteronormative male world, but Sappho also separates herself from it. In lines 25–26, she states, “Such was my Phao awhile, but shall be never, / As thou wast, art, and, oh, mayst thou be ever” (25–26). In these lines, Donne references Ovid's tale of Sappho and Phaon, found in the fifteenth epistle in his *Heroides*.¹⁵ In that story, Sappho throws herself off a cliff and commits suicide after her male lover Phaon rejects her.¹⁶ In line 25 of Donne's elegy, Sappho rejects the myth that she killed herself for a man, and in so doing she also casts out the myth of her heterosexual desire. In this moment, as Stella Revard observes, Sappho makes the shift from a male heterosexual-reminiscent speaker to a firmly female homosexual speaker.¹⁷ In line 26, Sappho makes it clear that her love for Philaenis is superior to her love for Phaon, stating that Phaon will never be what Philaenis is for her. She thus dispenses with her existence in the heteronormative world and makes clear that her desire cannot be defined in the framework of heterosexuality.

To reinforce their shared position outside the male heteronormative world, Sappho villainizes men, portraying them as a threat to both Philaenis and herself. When attempting to bring Philaenis back to her, she states that the “soft boy” and “[h]is chin, a thorny, hairy unevenness / Doth threaten, and some daily change possess” (31, 33–34). This villainization, here positioning the male lover as a threat to Philaenis, continues as Sappho characterizes a man's relation to a woman in terms of agriculture, ownership, and theft. She says, “Thy body is a natural paradise, / In whose self, unmanured, all pleasure lies” (35–36). Sappho suggests Philaenis already possesses perfection similar to a beautiful and untouched land, and immediately after creating this image of paradise, she presents men as threatening it.¹⁸ She asks Philaenis, why “[a]dmit the tillage of a harsh rough man?” (38). Her use of agricultural terms such as “unmanured”—meaning unfertilized—and “tillage” figures women's bodies as land that men seize and sexually “till”: dominate, compromise, and possess through pregnancy.¹⁹ Sappho further connects possession and heterosexual union when she warns, “Men leave behind them that which their sin shows, / And are as thieves traced, which rob when it snows” (39–40). By comparing men to thieves, she not presents their actions as not only dangerous but also criminal. In this passage, Sappho indicates that men and the male heteronormative world serve as a threat not only to Philaenis but also to women in general.

In addition to portraying men as a threat, Sappho also discounts any need for them in her world, thus triggering the dissolution of Sappho and Philaenis into one another. After presenting men as the enemy, Sappho states, “But of our dalliance no more signs there are, / Than fishes leave in streams, or birds in air” (41–42). Sappho celebrates love between women, claiming that they can find pleasure without degradation and can love without possession.²⁰ However, Sappho's characterization of this utopia highlights the issue that has been escalating since the beginning of the elegy: how can women be identified outside the heteronormative male world? In lines 41–42, Sappho admits that the removal of men introduces an absence of signification, an inability to identify both of them. Their love cannot participate in the language of domination that characterizes masculine love poetry.²¹ In their egalitarian relationship, the gender hierarchy that normally creates difference and identity in heterosexual relationships ceases to exist. Without men, there are no “signs” of what both Sappho and Philaenis are. This statement initiates the final collapse of representation and language found in the convolution of both Philaenis' and Sappho's identities towards the conclusion of the elegy.

Due to the absence of language and representation outside of a male heteronormative world, both Philaenis' and Sappho's identities begin to collapse into each other, and the result is an arbitrary representation of themselves. In lines 1–44, Sappho continually fails to capture the beauty of Philaenis. Her

comparisons of Philaenis to the gods, to nature, to Phaon, and to men in general all fail to represent or characterize Philaenis fully. Language proves to be insufficient, just as she lamented in the beginning of the elegy. In a final attempt at description, Sappho resorts to using her own body as a method of representation for Philaenis. She states,

And oh, no more; the likeness being such,
Why should they not alike in all parts touch?
Likeness begets such strange self flattery,
That touching myself, all seems done to thee. (47-52)

In an attempt to convince Philaenis to be with her, Sappho tries to craft a sense of visual unity between the pair by equating her own body with Philaenis'. Her stress on likeness and symmetry further perpetuates the egalitarian lesbian utopia that Sappho has been building throughout the elegy. However, since Sappho uses her body to create a tangible image of Philaenis, their identities begin to falter, resulting in the fusion of their identities. By stating that the act of touching herself translates into touching Philaenis, the two women's separate identities form into one, as it "all seems done to thee" (52). While the mirror may seem to provide a desirable union, both women lose their individuality and end up with unidentifiable, indistinguishable images. Sappho understands that this union is another failed representation when she laments, "Me, in my glass, I call thee; but alas, / When I would kiss, tears dim mine eyes, and glass" (55-56). With the already unstable image of Philaenis, Sappho's own image collapses too. As Sappho laments the dissolution of Philaenis, she also laments the loss of her own identity, which results from her having tried to place Philaenis through comparison. Finally, the image she has been trying to create throughout the elegy has disappeared along with herself. Sappho mourns the loss her own identity through this method of comparison, crying out, "O cure this loving madness, and restore / Me to me; thee, my half, my all, my more" (57-58). In these two lines, Sappho recognizes that she lost her identity in attempt to represent Philaenis, and she begs to be made whole again. Ultimately, the elegy concludes with a deconstructed representation of both women, as they transform into one faulty image.

This final and arbitrary representation of both Sappho and Philaenis results from the inability of language to represent these two women fully outside the male heterosexual world. James Holstun argues that "[w]ithout the mediating domination of man, feminine identity liquifies; a woman's relation to herself and her relation to another woman are equally insignificant."²² As Holstun (together with Donne's Sappho) observes, the traditional understanding of femininity collapses without men. The lesbian eroticism present in the elegy renders the gender binary useless, as the comparative roles of masculinity and

femininity do not apply to the lovers' relationship. Since the elegy discards the framework of the gender binary, the language and representation used to understand gender, women, and femininity is insufficient. Therefore, as Sappho pushes Philaenis and herself further outside the confines of the heterosexual world, language fails them, and their identities become increasingly unidentifiable and vague until they finally collapse into one another. By going outside the bounds of the gender binary, they push the limits of language and representation, causing their identities to fall apart.

Holstun argues that this collapse of identity and the failure of lesbian love explain and perpetuate the silence around lesbianism in the Renaissance.²³ He claims that while Donne presents a rather sympathetic view of lesbianism, the poet masters lesbian eroticism by subordinating it to a patriarchal understanding of language and the world. Holstun argues that this subordination occurs through Sappho's failure to create a love poem with a language not mediated by men, and this failure amounts to the censorship of the female voice, a way of neutralizing the threat of women to the patriarchy—it represents the overall victory of patriarchal ideals. Yet other readings are possible. Indeed, Elizabeth Harvey's discussion of Donne's appropriation of the fifteenth epistle from *Heroides*, taken alongside Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, helps to explain how the deconstruction and failure of language, representation, and identity in the poem act to destabilize the construction of gender and patriarchal authority rather than affirm it.

Many scholars, including both Holstun and Harvey, have treated the subject matter and form of Donne's "Sappho to Philaenis" as a direct response to Ovid's "Sappho to Phaon." As noted above, Ovid's Sappho commits suicide by throwing herself off a cliff when her male lover Phaon rejects her.²⁴ In Ovid's story, Sappho details the failure of her poetic ability and vehemently dismisses her lesbian past, thus transforming herself into a heterosexual woman.²⁵ Unlike Ovid, Donne portrays a lesbian woman who seeks to establish her own agency and her relationship with another woman away from male influence.²⁶ Donne's Sappho strives to create a utopian female eroticism and a new language to describe that experience. While the appropriation of female voices has served historically as a way to censor and silence women, the way in which Donne positions Sappho results in something different. Throughout the elegy, Donne has subtracted male influence, not only by centering the elegy on a lesbian Sappho but also by dismissing male Petrarchan ideals and by positing men as a threat to the lovers' utopian union. Paula Blank argues that this dismissal of male influence is not related to sexuality and gender at all. She claims that Donne does not question lesbian desire in this elegy; rather he challenges homo-erotics, the method (popular among Donne's contemporaries) of creating sexual identities through comparison in order to avoid loss or change.²⁷ However, Donne's

decision to portray Sappho as a lesbian woman, which contrasts with Ovid's portrayal, proves otherwise. Even if Donne is not directly responding to Ovid, but rather attempting in some way to access the Greek poet herself, one idea still holds true: by making a point of Sappho's sexuality, Donne places gender and sexuality at the forefront of the elegy. Donne's use of a lesbian female voice makes his subtraction of the male influence not simply a critique of Petrarchism and his contemporaries, as Blank claims. Rather, it prompts questions about gender signification and essentialist notions about sexuality.

Harvey expands on this point, arguing that Donne's ventriloquism of the female voice "continually subverts the ontological security of a text, its discrete historical boundaries, and its status as self-contained property, the phenomenon of transvestite phonocentrism."²⁸ While Holstun claims that Donne silences the lesbian voice, Harvey argues that this "ventriloquistic cross-dressing" destabilizes gender signification and allows for a marginalized voice to come forward. In "Sappho to Philaenis," Donne transgresses the laws of gender by taking on the female voice. Harvey argues that this sexual transgression separates the author from the voice, destabilizing not only authorship generally but male authorship in particular. This borrowing of the lesbian female voice undermines male authorial power over the text, which ultimately works to dismantle phallogocentrism itself.²⁹ This instability of authorial identity caused by assuming the lesbian female voice augments the challenge to the essentialist notion of gender that Sappho introduces in the elegy. As shown above, Sappho disregards the rules of signification as they relate to gender. She repeatedly questions the conventions of the male-defined world as she rejects Phaon, male love tropes, and men in general. Diane Benet confirms this challenge when she states that man's superfluous status in the paradise Sappho constructs seems to be questioning conventionalized roles of gender.³⁰ In questioning the fixed roles of gender, both Donne's and Sappho's identities are deconstructive. The loss of Donne's masculine authorial identity (when he transgresses the laws of gender) mirrors the way in which Sappho and Philaenis lose their identities when they commit their sexual transgression by rejecting the male-defined heteronormative world. Harvey's observation about Donne's use of the female voice undermines Holstun's conclusion about the victory of patriarchal ideals in "Sappho to Philaenis." Donne's use of the female voice does not silence Sappho, as Ovid had done. Instead, Donne uses the lesbian voice to subvert and destabilize the security of gender signification, which allows for new identities and questions to arise by breaking the normal categorization gender roles prescribe. Therefore, the failure of language and representation in Donne's love elegy need not indicate the censorship of the female voice, as Holstun argues. Rather, this "ventriloquistic cross-dressing" permits a critique of the restrictive

nature of gender essentialism and highlights the need for a new language to describe those who fall outside traditional categories.

This understanding of Donne's ventriloquism as well as Sappho's own subversive identity can be further understood in light of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which explores the performative nature of gender, arguing that gender identity is sustained through the performative suggestions that constitute its reality.³¹ The expectations for gender identity are determined by society and pressed upon people, and only through reiterative performance does essentialist gender identity take shape. As part of this study, Butler explores the effect of subverting such performances through drag. "In imitating gender," she writes, "drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency."³² Butler observes that when men mimic the cultural ideal of femininity, they reveal the constructed and performative nature of gender itself. In other words, through subversion, they unveil gender's construction. In the same way, Donne's ventriloquism of Sappho reveals gender's constructed nature. By using the female voice, Donne destabilizes the security of gender signification and male authorial power, as Harvey suggests. This idea also helps to explain the inner workings of the elegy itself. Sappho breaks the social performance meant to show femininity in women, and by doing so, she disrupts the world around her. Sappho's act of breaking the performative expectations for her gender thus matches what Butler calls the proliferation of "gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality."³³ As a result, the language and representation defined by those conventions of gender no longer apply. For this reason, when both Sappho and Philaenis break their performative expectations, they also lose the language previously used to identify them. This subversion of the traditional gender binary initiates the deconstruction of their defined identities. Since they exist outside categorization, the language and representation of those categories no longer apply, and their identity begins to unravel. Therefore, the breakdown of feminine identity in "Sappho to Philaenis" does not reveal the triumph of patriarchal ideals, as Holstun argues. Rather, the breakdown of language and representation reveals the limits of the performative gender identity that the patriarchy requires of both men and women. Ultimately, in "Sappho to Philaenis," both Sappho and Donne highlight the performative nature of gender to reveal the constructed nature of gender expectations and the need for new language and representation to emerge.

Ultimately, this failure of representation signifies that women cannot exist outside the male-centric heteronormative world. This failure is reminiscent of the Lacanian idea that "the woman does not exist" and that women are "not-all," as they hold no universality.³⁴ In response to this notion, French feminist Luce Irigaray claims that "the female all will come," thus promising the

emancipation of women from men.³⁵ In the same way, “Sappho to Philaenis” suggests emancipation—or at least performs an attempt of it. In the elegy, Donne both embraces and confronts male anxiety by creating a world in which gender roles are subverted and men are unnecessary. While this world ultimately collapses in a crisis of language and representation, Donne showcases the opportunity for the “female-all” to one day come, just as Irigaray suggests. Irigaray concludes her essay by commenting on the crisis of female language and representation: “If we (women) don’t invent a language, if we don’t find our body’s language, its gestures will be too few to accompany our story.”³⁶ “Sappho to Philaenis” begins and ends with a crisis of representation. Sappho laments her inability to identify Philaenis as both language and images fail her, and she then pinpoints the source of this failure in the inability of the male heteronormative world to represent their experience. As a result, she tries to use her own body—to create her “own body’s language,” as Irigaray puts it—in order to represent their own experience and being separate from men. However, her body is not enough. Sappho does not have the “gestures” or “language” to tell her story. The crisis of language and representation escalates, and Sappho and Philaenis only define each other by themselves, producing a collapsed image of both women. Their inability to define themselves separately from men shows the need to create linguistic gestures of the body that resist existing categorization. By exploring the issue of female language and representation outside the realm of men, Donne questions the power of categorization and challenges the ways in which masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality are defined, understood, and normalized.

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NOTES

- 1 Robert Dod and John Cleaver, *A godly form of household government*, in *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook: Constructions of Femininity in England*, ed. Kate Aughterson (London: Routledge, 1995), 81.
- 2 Henry Smith, *A preparative to marriage*, in *Renaissance Woman*, ed. Aughterson, 83. For further examples, see Juan Luis Vives, *The instruction of a Christian woman*, and William Gouge, *Of domestical duties*, in *Renaissance Woman*, ed. Aughterson, 69–74 and 88–95, respectively.
- 3 Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.
- 4 Diana Trevino Benet, “Sexual Transgression in Donne’s Elegies,” *Modern Philology* 92.1 (1994): 27.

- 5 While there was an awareness of gay men in the Renaissance, women lacked the freedom to establish a subculture in which lesbian identity could form. This inability to create this identity explains the lack of literary accounts of lesbianism. James Holstun, “Will you Rent our Ancient Love Asunder?: Lesbian Elegy in Donne, Marvell, and Milton,” *ELH* 54.4 (1987): 835, notes that since literature is a fraternal order, “we tend to find more accounts of men loving women or other men than of women loving each other.”
- 6 Barbara Correll, “Symbolic Economies and Zero-Sum Erotics: Donne’s ‘Sappho to Philaenis,’” *ELH* 62.3 (1995): 489.
- 7 Many of John Donne’s elegies were censored in the late Tudor and early Stuart periods. “The Anagram,” “To his Mistress going to bed,” “The Bracelet,” “Love’s Progress,” “His Parting from her,” and “Sappho to Philaenis” were censored in part or in whole due to sexually explicit language. Ted-Larry Pebworth, “The Early Censorship of John Donne’s Elegies and ‘Sappho to Philaenis’ in Manuscript and Print,” *Text* 13 (2000): 193–201, explores how each instance of censorship strove to alter Donne’s work to make it conform to the norms of Renaissance England. In the case of “Sappho to Philaenis,” which was published with the full volume of Donne’s work in 1633, a section was censored (lines 51–54), thus transforming the poem from a lesbian love elegy into (as Pebworth says) an elegy about “idealized friendship between two women” (200). The elegy continued to be censored or dismissed well into the twentieth century, as many scholars—most famously Helen Gardner—believed that the subject matter, style, and voice were too out of character to belong in Donne’s canon. It was not until scholarship until the 1980s that “Sappho to Philaenis” began to receive proper attention. Recent critics have embraced the elegy and have argued that it provides further insight to Donne’s view of sexuality and gender roles. See Stella Revard, “The Sapphic Voice in Donne’s ‘Sappho to Philaenis,’” in *Renaissance Discourses of Desire*, eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), esp. 63–64.
- 8 Stanley Fish, “Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne and Verbal Power,” in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth Harvey and Katharine Maus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 233.
- 9 All quotations from Donne (cited parenthetically by line numbers) are from *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Penguin Classics, 1977).
- 10 Sappho was a prolific Grecian female poet who lived from 630 BCE to 580 BCE. Her lyric poetry consisted of passionate love poems addressed to young women. She was revered by ancient commentators as equal to Homer, and Plato referred to her as the “Tenth Muse.” However, we only have fragments of her work, as the open lesbian desire depicted in her writings led them to be burned by the bishop of Constantinople in about 380 CE. See Shelley A. Thrasher, “Sappho,” in *Dictionary of World Biography: The Ancient World* (1998), 1–2.
- 11 The only information on Philaenis comes from epigrams in the *Greek Anthology*, where she is found at the center of a debate of disputed authorship. Her name was connected with what Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (London: Routledge, 1995), 125–126, calls an “erotic guidebook that furnished its readers with explicit information about diverse sexual practices and positions.” Harvey argues that Donne’s selection of her as the love object comes from the facts that both women wrote erotic works, that both were thought to be immoral and licentious, and that the sexuality of both prompted questioning about authorship.
- 12 Correll, “Symbolic Economies,” 93.
- 13 H. L. Meakin, *John Donne’s Articulations of the Feminine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 12.
- 14 As Donald Guss, *John Donne, Petrarchist: Italianate Conceits and Love Theory in The Songs and Sonnets* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), 18, puts it, Petrarchan poetry

is characterized by “fantastic arguments, emotional extravagance, and peregrine comparisons.” In the sixteenth century, this mode of poetry became popular among male poets throughout Europe. Petrarchan poetry usually consists of a male-centered narrative in which the main character chooses love as his way of life. There are many tropes and themes that make up this tradition, such as the initiation of love, complaining against a woman’s stubborn will, grieving the end of a love, an elegy of a woman’s death, or the renunciation of love. See further Guss, *Donne, Petrarchist*, 49–50.

- 15 Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 118
- 16 Scholars have understood Donne’s use of the Sapphic voice as borrowed from Ovid’s fifteenth epistle “Sappho to Phaon” in the *Heroides*, a collection of letters centered around women who write to lovers who had abandoned them (Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 119). In his epistle, Ovid presents Sappho as a straight, desperate, and suicidal woman who yearns for the attention a young man named Phaon, who continually rejects her until she feels pushed to take her own life. In her suffering, Ovid’s Sappho loses her ability to write and speak, and she laments the loss of the poetic skill and power she once possessed (Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 121). In addition, Ovid’s Sappho resists her lesbian past by chastising her previous female attraction in favor of her now heterosexual attraction. See Janel Mueller, “Lesbian Erotics: The Utopian Trope of Donne’s ‘Sappho to Philaenis,’” in *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: Haworth Press, 1992), 106.
- 17 Revard, “Sapphic Voice,” 68.
- 18 Benet, “Sexual Transgression,” 23.
- 19 Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 131.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Holstun, “Lesbian Elegy,” 840 (see above, n. 5, for full citation).
- 22 *Ibid.*, 843.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 846–847.
- 24 Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 118. See too Revard, “Sapphic Voice,” 67.
- 25 Many scholars have understood Ovid’s use of the Sapphic voice as a way to subordinate Sappho’s own voice to his own. Harvey and Mueller argue that by taking away her poetic voice, lesbian identity, and ultimately her life in his epistle, Ovid creates a distorted vision of Sappho and feminine desire. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 124, argues that his characterization ultimately turns Sappho into a parody of the female voice, ultimately offering Sappho’s own poetic voice for comic scrutiny.
- 26 Mueller, “Lesbian Erotics,” 104.
- 27 Paula Blank, “Comparing Sappho to Philaenis: John Donne’s ‘Homopoetics,’” *PMLA* 110.3 (1995): 364
- 28 Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 133.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Benet, “Sexual Transgression,” 25.
- 31 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1990), 285.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 193.
- 34 Luce Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” tr. Carolyn Burke, *Signs* 6.1 (1980): 75 n. 12.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 76.

The Farcical Suicide: Stoicism and the *Satyricon*

Carl Teegerstrom

Stoicism was one of the most popular philosophies in the Roman Empire, with practitioners ranging from the freedman Epictetus to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Reflecting this popularity, the courtier-author Petronius (d. c. 66) alludes to and satirizes stoicism, and particularly the stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger (d. 65), in his novel the *Satyricon*.¹ Hunting for such allusions, for example, Sarah Ruden suggests that the freedman Maecenatianus from Trimalchio’s dinner could be a reference to the aesthete Maecenas discussed in one of Seneca’s letters.² Petronius’ irony makes it difficult to determine his opinions with any certainty, but his depiction of suicide, a practice acceptable and at times revered under stoicism, suggests his skepticism regarding the nobility of this philosophical system. Indeed, the *Satyricon* critiques stoicism by using exaggeration and bathetic circumstances to reveal the performativity of suicide and stoicism more generally.

In stoic philosophy, suicide was (as Ruden puts it) “a religious act, one signifying the ultimate transcendence of the human will over circumstance,” and, for a stoic, a greater crime than taking one’s life would be “*acting as if life mattered*.”³ In his sixty-fifth letter, for example, Seneca wrote of the body as nothing more than “a chain set around [his] liberty,” restricting his “free spirit,” and he maintained that his “flesh will never force [him] to suffer fear or adopt a pretense unworthy of a good man.” Instead, he would “break off association with it” (65.21–22).⁴ Some writers praised these suicides. Pliny the Younger wrote of Arria stabbing herself to convince her husband Caecina Paetus to do the same after a failed rebellion against the Emperor Claudius. According to Pliny, after stabbing herself, she reassured her husband, “It does not hurt,