The 1990s were the heyday of criticism of Donne’s verse epistle. An article or two—or a book chapter—appeared more or less every year. These lie behind the discussion of the “lesbian phallus” that Catherine Bates offers in a chapter on the poem in her 2007 book on English Renaissance poetry; it opens with the stunning assertion that Donne’s “is generally acknowledged to be the first unambiguously lesbian love poem in English” (216). Half her discussion walks back this claim, since critics of the 90s were divided between those who thought Donne successfully represented lesbian love and those for whom his overwhelmingly masculinist presence precluded that possibility. Bates finds these opposite takes as identical insofar as both credit Donne’s mastery; instead, she offers a dephallicized reading that nonetheless falls into the pattern she decries, since her Donne too exhibits mastery precisely when he “puts himself under erasure” (241). In his dismantling of phallogocentrism, Donne does not practice an “écriture feminine”; rather, femininity is inscribed as loss. Bates claims the poem as lesbian for just the reason that other critics dismissed Donne’s poem as failing to be lesbian.

Also looking back on 1990s criticism in her 2002 *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, Valerie Traub concludes her book by contesting what constitutes an early modern “lesbian voice,” a “lesbian author,” and “lesbian writing” (“lesbian” is italicized as a reminder of the distance between representation and a reality that remains to be defined).² Donne’s poem is faulted for a “homo-normativity” (342), alongside Katherine Philips’ intense poems of female friendship, inspired often by Donne’s lyrics, that, Traub claims, continues to shape understanding of lesbian desire; effacing difference in a poetics of sameness, it conveys pernicious political effects. Her critique does not mean, however, that Traub is comfortable with lesbian representations that feature masculinization (as in the classical and early modern tribade with a strap-on or an enlarged clitoris).

Donne’s poem certainly figures the relationship between Sapho and Philaenis through a rhetoric of similitude.³ Philaenis is first imagined as comparable only to herself: “thy right hand, and cheek, and eye, only / Are like thy other hand, and cheek, and eye” (23–4); Sapho depicts her relationship to Philaenis in similar terms: “My two lips, eyes, thighs, differ from thy two, / But so, as thine from one another do” (45–6). One side of Philaenis resembles the other; Sapho’s body parts match those of Philaenis. Do these likenesses preclude difference, however? In *Like Andy Warhol*, Jonathan Flatley studies impulses to likeness, likening, and liking that inform Warhol’s images, serial likenesses that display the capacity of making like and of liking everything that Flatley sees enlisted towards a queer project that expands the field of resemblance beyond differences and yet without effacing difference.⁴ His crucial point is a simple one: likeness is not sameness, identification is not a making identical

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³ I will be citing the poem from *The Poems of John Donne*, edited by Herbert J.C. Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912).
or the production of identity: “When something is like something else it means precisely that it is not the same as it” (5). If Philaenis’s right side really was identical to her left, “right” and “left” would be meaningless terms. If Sapho and Philaenis’s bodies were identical to each other’s, they no longer would be Sapho and Philaenis. Sapho’s phrasing says that: the two differ just as do Philaenis’s two eyes, lips, and thighs. They too are two, not one. The sex that is not one does not lack something, as Bates supposes; nor does similitude produce a phallic norm, as Traub claims.

Traub admits, in passing, where her discomfort with similitude could lead: “[O]ne could submit [the texts she examines] to a deconstructive reading which, by elucidating how figures undo their own logic, might transform surface monovocality into a more hermeneutically satisfying polysemy”; she declines this option, claiming that “these poems thematically invite us to concentrate on surfaces, on mirror images, on similitudes” (340). It’s the critic doing the insisting. What would happen if we were to read Donne’s poem holding in mind William Empson’s brilliant aperçu, that even the strongest claims of identity, when two terms are joined to each other by the copula, only work in one direction? “God is love” is not equivalent to “love is God,” as Empson notes.5

“Sapho to Philaenis” opens with a question, two questions: “Where is that holy fire, which Verse is said / To have? is that enchanting force decai’d?” (1–2). “That holy fire” is singular yet undefined — is it a biblical flame or Sappho burning? Where is it located — in the speaker’s passion or its loss? Is it even in her if verse possesses it, or once did? Whose enchanting power is this? Whatever it is, wherever it is to be located, remains unidentified, and the speaker herself is dislocated. That is, if there is such a thing: the relation of Art and Nature is in question in these opening lines, their powers, their creative ability. Forms of the word “work” appear three times in two lines, meaning something different each time in a sentence that begins and ends with the word “draw” that means at once to depict and to pull away,

drawing in two different directions: “Verse that draws Natures workes, from Natures law/Thee, her best worke, to her worke cannot draw” (3–4). The speaker herself is similarly divided: her tears may have put out her poetic flame, but they have not quenched her natural desire. Divided between mind and body, her memory works against itself: “Memory, / Which, both to keepe, and lose, grieves equally” (12–3). Opposites (keep and lose) equate. She and her beloved are alike apart together: “My fires have driven, thine have drawne it hence” (11) in a nowhere here on the page, in these lines.

The fire in these lines could be sapphic, the burning in Fragment 31 in which the lover is close to dead and yet alive, or in Fragment 38 that reads in Anne Carson’s translation “you burn me,” or in Fragment 48 (“you came and I was crazy for you/and you cooled my mind that burned with longing”), the epigraph that opens Page duBois’ Sappho is Burning. In Donne’s poem “Griefe discolors me./And yet I grieve the lesse, least Griefe remove/My beauty” (28–30). “Lesse, least”: the echo of the same keeps by losing more.

This fire might be Virgilian. In the song sung by Alphesiboeus in the eighth eclogue, hoping by it to enchant his beloved Daphnis to return to him, he makes an image that melts like wax and blazes. “Onely thine image, in my heart doth fit,/But that is waxe, and fires environ it,” Donne’s Sapho says (9–10). Onely, only, singly. In Virgil, when the wax simulacrum burns, Daphnis appears. Or is it not Daphnis but an image, a phantasm of the poet’s mind that is seen? Sapho looking in the mirror, seeing herself, seeing Philaenis as herself, sees her “loving madnesse” (57). Imaginary identification. Likeness.

Virgilian male same-sex desire resonates in Donne’s lesbian poem; male–male desire in his verse letters to R.W. is imagined as the commingling of their female muses. Does cross-gender identification only further male same-sex desire? In “Sapho to Philaenis,” as Lynn Maxwell has shown, it is just when the question of comparison becomes explicit that the microcosm/macrocosm trope that is used often in the Songs and Sonets to assert male power (more often than not hollowly) and sexual difference appears: “if we justly call each silly man/A little world,
What shall we call thee than?” (19–20). The negations that follow might seem to debase Phileanis, “Thou art not soft, and cleare, and strait, and faire,/ As Down, as Stars, Cedars, and Lilies are” (21–2), but in refusing to make her fit the analogies, the poem makes her comparable only to herself, an analogy herself. Moreover, it is precisely at this moment, when she is incomparable to anyone but herself, that Sapho makes a comparison — to her previous male lover: “Such was my Phao awhile” (25); and to herself: to her idolatrous worshipers “I am such” (28). Where does likeness stop? What does it delimit?

Philaenis is not one of the beloved girls named in any extant fragment of Sappho’s. Elizabeth Harvey notes that the names Sappho and Philaenis are coupled in the Pseudo-Lucian’s Amores, when a male speaker advocates the propriety of female–female love on the model of male–male intercourse: “Let them strap to themselves cunningly contrived instruments of lechery...let our women’s chambers emulate Philaenis, disgracing themselves with Sapphic amours.”7 Harvey builds on a brief note by D.C. Allen that investigated Donne’s sources for the name Philaenis and its joining with Sappho.8 A tribade in Martial is named Philaenis; she names an author of an ars erotica in the Greek Anthology. In fact, the name “Philaenis” appears often in Martial’s epigrams, frequently as a byword for an undesirable woman (e.g. 3.33, 4.65, 12.22). Once she is a wife who promises her husband a blowjob when he returns home (9.40). In 7.70, she is said to outtribade tribadery (“Rubber of all


8 See D.C. Allen, “Donne’s ‘Sappho to Philaenis,” English Language Notes 1, no. 3 (March 1964): 188–91.
girl-rubbers,” the Loeb translation opens);9 all her girl friends are girls she fucks. Epigram 7.67 presents her as a weightlifter who hangs out with gymnasts; she screws boys and performs cunnilingus; only cock-sucking is off bounds for her. She doesn’t find it sufficiently virile.

When critics take Donne’s Sapho’s comparisons literally, they ignore the resonances her lover’s name may carry. Once Sapho compares Philaenis to Phaon, she imagines her making love to “some soft boy” (31), something Philaenis does in Martial 7.67 (“Philaenis the bullyke buggers boys,” the poem begins in Gillian Spraggs’s online translation),10 and warns her against submitting to “the tillage of a harsh rough man” (38); this seems unlikely given her literary past; or maybe not. In the epitaph she speaks in the *Greek Anthology*, she claims she has been misidentified as the author of a book offensive to women for its sexual content (7.450; cf. 7.345).

*    *    *

Thy body is a naturall *Paradise*,
In whose selfe, unmanur’d, all pleasure lies,
Nor needs *perfection*; why shouldst thou than
Admit the tillage of a harsh rough man?
Men leave behinde them that which their sin showes,
And are as theeves trac’d, which rob when it snows.
But of our dallyance no more signes there are,
Then *fishes* leave in streames, or *Birds* in aire. (35–42)

Defending Philaenis against man-handling, Sapho describes their sexual dalliance as untraceable, natural but not procreative, feminine but not womanly (marriage “perfects” girls and makes them women, man-possessed). Extraordinary in lines that resonate with the placelessness and tracelessness said to

prove lesbian invisibility is the fact that these lines seem to be recalled later in the seventeenth century; by Aphra Behn in “To the Fair Clarinda, who made love to me, imagined more than woman,” when she imagines their love-making as innocent; in the Essay of Dramatic Poesy, as Grierson notes, Donne’s figure is “doubtless the source of Dryden’s figurative description of Jonson’s thefts from the Ancients; ‘You track him everywhere in their snow’” (2:91). What do fish leave in water, birds in the air? When does the difference between art and nature become moot? If “strange” unions of those unlike are what procreation mandates, so too “Likenesse begets such strange selfe flatterie / That touching my selfe, all seems done to thee” (51–2). Masturbating, she imagines herself as her, or she imagines herself doing Donne, or “done to thee.” “I am another,” Donne’s poem seems to say; the more alike, the more likeness proliferates: “my halfe, my all, my more” (58). “When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more.” Wishing to be her does not preclude being oneself (no self, no likeness to another). What is more than all?

A string of comparisons ends the poem:

So may thy cheekes red outweare scarlet dye,
And their white, whitenesse of the Galaxy,
So may thy mighty, amazing beauty move
Envy in all women, and in all men, love,
And so be change, and sickness, farre from thee,
As thou by comming neere, keepst them from me. (59–64)

Coming near, being far, likeness is maintained, the likeness of things and persons — of bodies and images, of persons and worlds — not alike.