**Annotated Text**

**ANACTORIA** [**[1]**](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F1)**by A.C. Swinburne**

τίνος αὖ τὺ πειθοῖ
μὰψ σαγηνεύσας φιλόταταϗ
Sappho. [[2]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F2)

My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes
Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs
Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound,
And my blood strengthens, and my veins abound.
I pray thee sigh not, speak not, draw not breath;
Let life burn down, and dream it is not death. [[3]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F3)
I would the sea had hidden us, the fire
(Wilt thou fear that, and fear not my desire?)
Severed the bones that bleach, the flesh that cleaves,
And let our sifted ashes drop like leaves. [[4]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F4)                                                                   10
I feel thy blood against my blood: my pain
Pains thee, and lips bruise lips, and vein stings vein. [[5]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F5)
Let fruit be crushed on fruit, let flower on flower,
Breast kindle breast, and either burn one hour. [[6]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F6)
Why wilt thou follow lesser loves? are thine
Too weak to bear these hands and lips of mine?
I charge thee for my life’s sake, O too sweet
To crush love with thy cruel faultless feet,
I charge thee keep thy lips from hers or his,
Sweetest, till theirs be sweeter than my kiss: [[7]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F7)                                                          20
Lest I too lure, a swallow for a dove,
Erotion or Erinna to my love. [[8]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F8)
I would my love could kill thee; I am satiated
With seeing the live, and fain would have thee dead.
I would earth had thy body as fruit to eat,
And no mouth but some serpent’s found thee sweet.
I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
Intense device, and superflux of pain;
Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake
Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache;                                                                     30
Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill,
Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill;
Relapse and reluctation of the breath,
Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death. [[9]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F9)
I am weary of all thy words and soft strange ways,
Of all love’s fiery nights and all his days,
And all the broken kisses salt as brine
That shuddering lips make moist with waterish wine, [[10]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F10)
And eyes the bluer for all those hidden hours
That pleasure fills with tears and feeds from flowers,                                               40
Fierce at the heart with fire that half comes through,
But all the flowerlike white stained round with blue;
The fervent underlid, and that above
Lifted with laughter or abashed with love;
Thine amorous girdle, full of thee and fair,
And leavings of the lilies [[11]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F11) in thine hair. [[12]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F12)
Yea, all sweet words of thine and all thy ways,
And all the fruit of nights and flower of days,
And stinging lips wherein the hot sweet brine
That Love was born of burns and foams like wine,                                                      50
And eyes insatiable of amorous hours,
Fervent as fire and delicate as flowers,
Coloured like night at heart, but cloven through
Like night with flame, dyed round like night with blue,
Clothed with deep eyelids under and above —
Yea, all thy beauty sickens me with love;
Thy girdle empty of thee and now not fair,
And ruinous lilies in thy languid hair. [[13]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F13)
Ah, take no thought for Love’s sake; shall this be,
And she who loves thy lover not love thee?                                                                   60
Sweet soul, sweet mouth of all that laughs and lives,
Mine is she, very mine; and she forgives. [[14]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F14)
For I beheld in sleep [[15]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F15) the light that is
In her high place in Paphos, [[16]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F16) heard the kiss
Of body and soul that mix with eager tears
And laughter stinging through the eyes and ears;
Saw Love, [[17]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F17) as burning flame from crown to feet, [[18]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F18)
Imperishable, upon her storied seat;
Clear eyelids lifted toward the north and south,
A mind of many colours, [[19]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F19) and a mouth                                                                       70
Of many tunes and kisses; and she bowed,
With all her subtle face laughing aloud,
Bowed down upon me, saying, “Who doth thee wrong,
Sappho?” [[20]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F20) but thou — thy body is the song,
Thy mouth the music; [[21]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F21) thou art more than I,
Though my voice die not till the whole world die; [[22]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F22)
Though men that hear it madden; though love weep,
Though nature change, though shame be charmed to sleep.
Ah, wilt thou slay me lest I kiss thee dead?
Yet the queen laughed from her sweet heart and said:                                              80
“Even she that flies shall follow for thy sake,
And she shall give thee gifts that would not take,
Shall kiss that would not kiss thee” (yea, kiss me)
“When thou wouldst not” [[23]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F23) — when I would not kiss thee!
Ah, more to me than all men as thou art,
Shall not my songs assuage her at the heart?
Ah, sweet to me as life seems sweet to death,
Why should her wrath fill thee with fearful breath?
Nay, sweet, for is she God alone? hath she
Made earth and all the centuries of the sea,                                                                  90
Taught the sun ways to travel, woven most fine
The moonbeams, shed the starbeams forth as wine,
Bound with her myrtles, beaten with her rods,
The young men and the maidens and the gods? [[24]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F24)
Have we not lips to love with, eyes for tears,
And summer and flower of women and of years?
Stars for the foot of morning, and for noon
Sunlight, and exaltation of the moon;
Waters that answer waters, fields that wear
Lilies, and languor of the Lesbian air?                                                                           100
Beyond those flying feet of fluttered doves,
Are there not other gods for other loves?
Yea, though she scourge thee, sweetest, for my sake,
Blossom not thorns and flowers not blood should break. [[25]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F25)
Ah that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed
To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast!
Ah that my mouth for Muses’ milk were fed
On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!
That with my tongue I felt them, and could taste
The faint flakes from thy bosom to the waist!                                                             110
That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet
Thy body were abolished and consumed,
And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed!
Ah, ah, thy beauty! like a beast it bites,
Stings like an adder, like an arrow smites.
Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet,
The paces and the pauses of thy feet! [[26]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F26)
Ah sweeter than all sleep or summer air
The fallen fillets fragrant from thine hair!                                                                   120
Yea, though their alien kisses do me wrong,
Sweeter thy lips than mine with all their song;
Thy shoulders whiter than a fleece of white,
And flower-sweet fingers, good to bruise or bite
As honeycomb of the inmost honey-cells,
With almond-shaped and roseleaf-coloured shells
And blood like purple blossom at the tips
Quivering; and pain made perfect in thy lips
For my sake when I hurt thee; O that I
Durst crush thee out of life with love, and die,                                                            130
Die of thy pain and my delight, and be
Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee!
Would I not plague thee dying overmuch?
Would I not hurt thee perfectly? not touch
Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright
Thine eyes with bloodlike tears and grievous light?
Strike pang from pang as note is struck from note,
Catch the sob’s middle music in thy throat,
Take thy limbs living, and new-mould with these
A lyre of many faultless agonies? [[27]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F27)                                                                              140
Feed thee with fever and famine and fine drouth,
With perfect pangs convulse thy perfect mouth,
Make thy life shudder in thee and burn afresh,
And wring thy very spirit through the flesh?
Cruel? but love makes all that love him well
As wise as heaven and crueller than hell.
Me hath love made more bitter toward thee
Than death toward man; but were I made as he
Who hath made all things to break them one by one,
If my feet trod upon the stars and sun                                                                           150
And souls of men as his have alway trod,
God knows I might be crueller than God.
For who shall change with prayers or thanksgivings
The mystery of the cruelty of things?
Or say what God above all gods and years
With offering and blood-sacrifice of tears,
With lamentation from strange lands, from graves
Where the snake pastures, from scarred mouths of slaves,
From prison, and from plunging prows of ships
Through flamelike foam of the sea’s closing lips—                                                  160
With thwartings of strange signs, and wind-blown hair
Of comets, desolating the dim air,
When darkness is made fast with seals and bars,
And fierce reluctance of disastrous stars,
Eclipse, and sound of shaken hills, and wings
Darkening, and blind inexpiable things—
With sorrow of labouring moons, and altering light
And travail of the planets of the night,
And weeping of the weary Pleiads seven,
Feeds the mute melancholy lust of heaven? [[28]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F28)                                                         170
Is not his incense bitterness, his meat
Murder? his hidden face and iron feet
Hath not man known, and felt them on their way
Threaten and trample all things and every day?
Hath he not sent us hunger? who hath cursed
Spirit and flesh with longing? filled with thirst
Their lips who cried unto him? [[29]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F29) who bade exceed
The fervid will, fall short the feeble deed,
Bade sink the spirit and the flesh aspire,
Pain animate the dust of dead desire,                                                                            180
And life yield up her flower to violent fate?
Him would I reach, him smite, him desecrate,
Pierce the cold lips of God [[30]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F30) with human breath,
And mix his immortality with death.
Why hath he made us? what had all we done
That we should live and loathe the sterile sun,
And with the moon wax paler as she wanes,
And pulse by pulse feel time grow through our veins?
Thee too the years shall cover; thou shalt be
As the rose born of one same blood with thee,                                                           190
As a song sung, as a word said, and fall
Flower-wise, and be not any more at all,
Nor any memory of thee anywhere;
For never Muse has bound above thine hair
The high Pierian flower whose graft outgrows
All summer kinship of the mortal rose
And colour of deciduous days, nor shed
Reflex and flush of heaven about thine head,
Nor reddened brows made pale by floral grief
With splendid shadow from that lordlier leaf. [[31]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F31)                                                     200
Yea, thou shalt be forgotten like spilt wine,
Except these kisses of my lips on thine
Brand them with immortality; but me—
Men shall not see bright fire nor hear the sea,
Nor mix their hearts with music, nor behold
Cast forth of heaven, with feet of awful gold
And plumeless wings that make the bright air blind,
Lightning, with thunder for a hound behind
Hunting through fields unfurrowed and unsown,
But in the light and laughter, in the moan                                                                   210
And music, and in grasp of lip and hand
And shudder of water that makes felt on land
The immeasurable tremor of all the sea,
Memories shall mix and metaphors of me. [[32]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F32)
Like me shall be the shuddering calm of night,
When all the winds of the world for pure delight
Close lips that quiver and fold up wings that ache;
When nightingales are louder for love’s sake,
And leaves tremble like lute-strings or like fire;
Like me the one star swooning with desire                                                                  220
Even at the cold lips of the sleepless moon, [[33]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F33)
As I at thine; like me the waste white noon,
Burnt through with barren sunlight; and like me
The land-stream and the tide-stream in the sea.
I am sick with time as these with ebb and flow,
And by the yearning in my veins I know
The yearning sound of waters; and mine eyes
Burn as that beamless fire which fills the skies
With troubled stars and travailing things of flame;
And in my heart the grief consuming them                                                                 230
Labours, and in my veins the thirst of these,
And all the summer travail of the trees
And all the winter sickness; and the earth,
Filled full with deadly works of death and birth,
Sore spent with hungry lusts of birth and death,
Has pain like mine in her divided breath;
Her spring of leaves is barren, and her fruit
Ashes; her boughs are burdened, and her root
Fibrous and gnarled with poison; underneath
Serpents have gnawn it through with tortuous teeth                                              240
Made sharp upon the bones of all the dead,
And wild birds rend her branches overhead.
These, woven as raiment for his word and thought,
These hath God made, and me as these, and wrought
Song, and hath lit it at my lips; and me
Earth shall not gather though she feed on thee. [[34]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F34)
As a shed tear shalt thou be shed; but I—
Lo, earth may labour, men live long and die,
Years change and stars, and the high God devise
New things, and old things wane before his eyes                                                      250
Who wields and wrecks them, being more strong than they—
But, having made me, me he shall not slay. [[35]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F35)
Nor slay nor satiate, like those herds of his
Who laugh and live a little, and their kiss
Contents them, and their loves are swift and sweet,
And sure death grasps and gains them with slow feet,
Love they or hate they, strive or bow their knees—
And all these end; he hath his will of these.
Yea, but albeit he slay me, hating me—
Albeit he hide me in the deep dear sea [[36]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F36)                                                                   260
And cover me with cool wan foam, and ease
This soul of mine as any soul of these,
And give me water and great sweet waves, and make
The very sea’s name lordlier for my sake,
The whole sea sweeter — albeit I die indeed
And hide myself and sleep and no man heed,
Of me the high God hath not all his will. [[37]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F37)
Blossom of branches, and on each high hill
Clear air and wind, and under in clamorous vales
Fierce noises of the fiery nightingales,                                                                         270
Buds burning in the sudden spring like fire,
The wan washed sand and the waves’ vain desire,
Sails seen like blown white flowers at sea, and words
That bring tears swiftest, and long notes of birds
Violently singing till the whole world sings—
I Sappho shall be one with all these things,
With all high things for ever; and my face
Seen once, my songs once heard in a strange place,
Cleave to men’s lives, and waste the days thereof
With gladness and much sadness and long love. [[38]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F38)                                                 280
Yea, they shall say, earth’s womb has borne in vain
New things, and never this best thing again;
Borne days and men, borne fruits and wars and wine,
Seasons and songs, but no song more like mine.
And they shall know me as ye who have known me here,
Last year when I loved Atthis[[39]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/%22%20%5Cl%20%22F39), and this year
When I love thee; and they shall praise me, and say
She hath all time as all we have our day,
Shall she not live and have her will” — even I?
Yea, though thou diest, I say I shall not die. [[40]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F40),                                                        290
For these shall give me of their souls, shall give
Life, and the days and loves wherewith I live,
Shall quicken me with loving, fill with breath,
Save me and serve me, strive for me with death.
Alas, that neither moon nor snow nor dew
Nor all cold things can purge me wholly through,
Assuage me nor allay me nor appease,
Till supreme sleep shall bring me bloodless ease;
Till time wax faint in all his periods;
Till fate undo the bondage of the gods,                                                                         300
And lay, to slake and satiate me all through,
Lotus and Lethe on my lips like dew,
And shed around and over and under me
Thick darkness and the insuperable sea. [[41]](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#F41)

**Text courtesy of**[**The Algernon Charles Swinburne Project**](http://swinburnearchive.indiana.edu/swinburne/view#docId=swinburne/acs0000001-01-i010.xml;query=;brand=swinburne)**.**

**Footnotes:**

[1.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF1) One occurrence of the name “Anactoria” occurs in Sappho 16 (brackets representing illegible text):

“] reminded me now of Anaktoria
who is gone” (Carson fr. 16).

It is difficult to tell where Anactoria is in relation to the speaker, but if we interpret the poem as taking place at the end of a relationship, then the lack of her presence makes her all the more unreachable and, by extension, desirable.

[2.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF2) Swinburne’s deconstruction of a line in Sappho 1. According to Kenneth Haynes, Swinburne’s version of the line reads “Whose love have you caught in vain by persuasion?” (Haynes 133). Sappho’s original verse can be translated as, “Whom should I persuade (now again) /to lead you back into her love?” (Carson fr. 1)

[3.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF3) According to David Cook in “The Content and Meaning of Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria,’

“The division of flesh and spirit figured in lines 2-3 is a metaphor for death to which Sappho will have frequent recourse. As we shall see, however, she does not believe in a dichotomy between body and soul in the sense that one might exist independently of the other. They exist for Sappho, rather, as interrelated parts of her self in the continuous present of her being-in-the-world” (Cook 81).

[4.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF4) Swinburne’s use of “our” in describing the “sifted ashes” seems to imply a melding of the two bodies of Sappho and Anactoria in death (a theme that will be further explored later in the poem). This particular line seems to allude to how, according to the Iliad, the remains of Patroklos and Achilles will rest mixed together in a golden vase, as explained in Gregory Nagy’s *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (Nagy 8.7).

[5.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF5) Edmund Gosse’s “The First Draft of Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria’” describes the appearance of these lines in Swinburne’s manuscript:

“A sort of frenzy takes the poet’s pen, and at the side of the paper, in lines that slope more and more rapidly downwards, and in such a stumbling and trembling hand that they are with great difficulty to be spelt out, are interpolated the line[s 10-12]” (Gosse 273).

[6.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF6) Cook interprets Sappho’s yearning for sadism as “the desire to literally break down the barriers of the flesh and achieve a sanguinary confluence of organic tissue with the other…  More specifically, however, Sappho’s yearning for a total interpenetration of bodies may be interpreted as a powerful impulse toward sexual fulfillment” (Cook 81-82).

[7.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF7) “Kiss” is one of the most repeated words in the poem, used twenty times ([Voyant](http://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=89ca7d3644fb67d4e34b5e18b33912ad" \t "_blank)). It is the beginning of two people joining together, to which the natural extensions are sex and (to Sappho) sadism. The overuse of this word, combined with some of the other more frequently used words (“love” and “sweet,” for instance, both used eighteen times ([Voyant](http://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=89ca7d3644fb67d4e34b5e18b33912ad" \t "_blank))) serve to romanticize a poem that is otherwise very violent in nature.

[8.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF8) In “‘Erotion,’ ‘Anactoria,’ and the Sapphic Passion,” Greenberg explains that “Erinna belongs properly to history, and, as a fledgling poet of Lesbos, to the Sapphic canon; but Erotion has existence solely in Swinburne’s pages” (Greenberg 79).

[9.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF9) In another example of Swinburne overtaken by frenzy during his writing, Gosse describes the “breathless interlude of six couplets, scribbled with extreme violence” (Gosse 274).

[10.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF10) In his interpretation of these few lines, Cook starts off by explaining that “In line 37 one pair of lips is said to produce “broken kisses salt as brine” which another pair of lips “make moist with waterish wine,”and the diverse nature of these two fluids is not explained by the circumstance that they issue from separate mouths” (Cook 83). Looking ahead, he notes the presence of a “girdle,” which he takes as “the binding cincture of [Sappho’s] own arms encircling Anactoria” (Cook 84). Thus, Cook finishes, “In my reading, then, this splendidly evocative description of “all love’s fiery nights” emerges as a pattern of veiled allusions to cunnilinguic orgasm” (Cook 84).

For Swinburne, , this passionate monologue is an example of his bucking of the trends of Victorian society by taking a seemingly private, unseemly thing (homoerotic desire) and making it public— even beautiful.

[11.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF11) Lilies are mentioned several times in “Anactoria,” typically with Anactoria wearing them in her hair. According to Mandy Kirby in *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion*, “to many Victorians the Madonna [lily] represented ideal womanhood, and to compare a woman to a lily, or to adorn her with lilies, was to pay her the highest compliment: like Mary, she is supreme amongst women” (Kirby 63).

However, whereas the Virgin Mary is considered supreme for her purity and other virginal, motherly qualities, Sappho’s depiction of Anactoria in Swinburne’s poem focuses almost entirely on her physicality. By assigning the purity of the lily to Anactoria (and, by extension, Sappho), Swinburne subverts Victorian expectations and their definition of what makes a “supreme” woman.

[12.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF12) Sappho mentions “crowns / of blooming flowers” in one of her fragments (Carson fr. 98A). She also mentions “crowns of violets / and roses” and “woven garlands / made of flowers” in another (Carson fr. 94).

[13.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF13) In Greek culture, “the undoing of a woman’s hair, caused by the undoing of her *krēdemnon* [hair binding], produces… an Aphrodisiac effect. So long as a woman’s *krēdemnon* is in place, her sexuality is under control just as her hair is under control. When the *krēdemnon* is out of place, however, her sexuality threatens to get out of control” (Nagy 3.20).

The languid, or loose, hair in “Anactoria,” then, can be taken as a sign of a lack of sexual and emotional restraint on the part of Anactoria. This parallels the lack of restraint exhibited by the narrator of the poem, who makes many allusions to Anactoria’s body and sexuality.

[14.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF14) Cook explains, “This address to Anactoria states the first part of the argument which is elaborated in the dream vision. It may be rendered: “Aphrodite sanctions our liaison because I, Sappho, am under that goddess’ protection, having propitiated her with song” (Cook 85).

[15.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF15) Haynes notes the similarity here between this line and Sappho 134 (Haynes 133), which reads, “I conversed with you in a dream/Kryprogenia” (Carson 134).

[16.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF16) The ancient Greeks considered Paphos to be the domain of Aphrodite, as referenced in The Odyssey: “As soon as they were free they scampered off, Ares to Thrace and laughter-loving Aphrodite to Cyprus and to Paphos, where is her grove and her altar fragrant with burnt offerings” (Homer 8.8).

[17.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF17) To better understand the following lines, it is important to note that “lesbian ‘love’ is consistently referred to by the masculine pronoun and always uncapitalized, as opposed to the feminine ‘Love’ who is, of course, Aphrodite, goddess of heterosexual coitus” (Cook 84).

[18.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF18) Comparisons can between these lines and sections of Sappho 31, the second and third stanzas of which is produced here:

and lovely laughing — oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

The full poem shows “the epiphany of the bride, whose identity fuses with that of Aphrodite at the moment of her wedding. And, in still another sense, what is shown in Song 31 is the epiphany of the speaking ‘I’ who identifies with Aphrodite by virtue of vicariously identifying with the ‘you’ of the bride who is Aphrodite at this very moment” (Nagy 5.84).

The fusing of bodies in this sublime moment is paralleled by the speaker in Swinburne’s poem, who wishes to fuse with Anactoria. For instance, Swinburne writes:

…O that I
Durst crush thee out of life with love, and die,
Die of thy pain and my delight, and be
Mixed with thy blood and molten into thee! (Swinburne 129 – 132).

Sappho is ultimately unable to attain a physical reconciliation with Anactoria– she is denied the perfection that she seeks, just as artists are denied perfection in their own works yet continue to strive for it.

[19.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF19) This parallels Sappho 1 (Haynes 133), which refers to Aphrodite as she “of the spangled mind” (Carson fr. 1).

[20.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF20) Haynes notes that this is a direct translation of a line in Sappho 1 (Haynes 133):

“Who, O
Sappho, is wronging you?” (Carson fr. 1).

[21.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF21) According to Cook, “The equation of Anactoria’s body with song is an ominous portent of the black rage soon to follow, wherein Anactoria’s limbs will be emblematically dislocated into ‘A lyre of many faultless agonies’ [line 140]. Here, however, the metaphor represents the ultimate prostration of the poetess before the love object” (Cook 86).

[22.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF22) Greenberg argues that “such expectation of universality becomes the poet’s release from despair and the basis of her final triumph” (Greenberg 83).

This refers to the poem’s end and the speaker’s apparent death. Only then is she able to find respite from the desires tormenting her.

[23.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF23) Compare this, as Haynes does, to the 6th stanza of Sappho 1 (Haynes 133):

For if she feels, soon she will pursue.
If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them.
If she does not love, soon she will love
even unwilling (Carson fr. 1).

[24.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF24) Gosse says, “In the first draft [the ‘Bound with her myrtles’ couplet was] destroyed with a whirling movement of the pen, so that it looks as if a dust-storm involved it. Written with frenzied violence, almost perpendicularly, the draft then presents a couplet… for which a place is now found immediately before the ‘Bound with her myrtles’ couplet (Gosse 275).

[25.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF25) Cook says that,

“This couplet has the generally unrecognized effect of mitigating the cruelty of lines 105-140 by lending it metaphoric significance. Anactoria has violated her relationship with Sappho and transgressed the lesbian rule, but Sappho, we are to understand, does not seek blood-revenge for the offense. Rather, she hopes that Aphrodite will impose upon Anactoria only enough penitential suffering to return the sinner to the fold; and she infers that, should such a rectification be granted, the pain of the scourging which restores Anactoria to her arms ( ‘thorns’ and ‘blood’ ) will be transmuted into sexual pleasure (‘Blossom” and “flower’)” (Cook 87).

[26.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF26) The beauty of Anactoria dancing is taken from Sappho. Carson translates part of one fragment as,

I would rather see her lovely step
and the motion of light on her face
than chariots of Lydians or ranks
of footsoldiers in arms (Carson fr. 16).

In comparison to other depictions of Anactoria’s beauty, the beauty of her dance and step is relatively mild and non-sexual. However, Sappho quickly escalates to talking about Anactoria’s “kisses,” her “lips,” “shoulders whiter than a fleece of white,” and “flower-sweet fingers, good to bruise or bite.” This climax (and other examples in the poem of similar structuring) parallels the escalating nature of desire.

[27.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF27) Cook explains the violence of these lines: “Ultimately, Sappho wants to stop being Sappho, but she has not yet recognized that to achieve this goal would mean, simply and utterly, to stop being. Instead, she still hopes to accomplish transference of the self, without its negation, through sexual union with the other; and the intensity of her aspiration requires proportionately violent expression” (Cook 88).

The desires that Swinburne examines, then, are twofold: Sappho’s bodily desire for Anactoria, and Sappho’s desire to escape her desire by melding with Anactoria. However, Swinburne argues that these wants are one and the same. Both are unattainable, as evidenced by Sappho’s eventual acquiescence to death.

[28.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF28) Cook states that Swinburne was influenced not only by Sappho, but by Pope and Ovid. However, he says that Swinburne takes his monologue a step further:

“The deformity, impotence and perversion which prevent sexual congress ( and, therefore, generative love ) in these poems are all indications of a disruptive presence in the universe; and when Swinburne identifies it as ‘the mute melancholy lust of heaven,’ he has only made explicit what is implied in Pope and Ovid: that the speakers owe their unmitigated torment not to faithless lovers but to the implacably cruel creator of love himself, not to the finite objects of their desire but to the archetypal condition of desiring” (Cook 80).

Through Sappho, then, Swinburne is able to explore the questions of why certain impulses and desires were considered perverse by Victorians when it is God who endowed them with such feelings in the first place.

[29.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF29) Swinburne plays with the knowledge that such a relationship between Anactoria and Sappho would be expressly forbidden by the mores of Victorian society— it would be seen as perverse or grotesque. Here, the thirst and hunger represents Sappho’s “unattainable sexual relationship with Anactoria” and, by extension, “the archetypal condition of desire itself” (Cook 77).

In her original poetry, Sappho echoes these themes. For instance:

“as the steeple reddens on a high branch
high on the highest branch and the apple pickers forgot—
no, not forgot: were unable to reach” (Carson fr. 105A).

The apple on the branch is unattainable, as is Sappho’s relationship with Anactoria in Swinburne’s poetry.

[30.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF30) This repeated call to God is a sign of Swinburne’s own identity within the poem— instead of an evocation to a god in the Greek pantheon, as one might expect from Sappho, we see a call to Swinburne’s “Victorian” God.

[31.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF31) These lines serve as an expansion of Sappho 55 (Haynes 133):

“Dead you will lie and never memory of you
will there be nor desire into the aftertime— for you do not
share in the roses
of Pieria, but invisible too in Hades’s house
you will go your way among dim shapes. Having been breathed out” (Carson fr. 55).

Pieria refers to “the birthplace of the muses; the works of the muses — music, dance, poetry, learning, culture— are symbolized by their roses” (Carson 368). In this poem, Sappho notes that the woman has not “shared” in those roses (has not dabbled in the arts) and therefore has left nothing to be remembered by.

[32.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF32) Continuing the above interpretation of Sappho 55, unlike Anactoria, Sappho has produced beautiful poetry which will allow her to be remembered long after she has died. It is, in effect, her immortality.

[33.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF33) Haynes postulates that this section of the text “conflates the moon and the sleepless speaker of one of the most famous fragments, though now denied by many to Sappho” (Haynes 133). The fragment in question is Sappho 168B, which Carson translates as,

“Moon has set
and Pleiades: middle
night, the hour goes by,
alone I lie” (Carson fr. 168B).

[34.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF34) The list of comparisons in this passage account for a large spike in the poem’s use of the word “like” towards the end of the poem:

Document Terms in “Anactoria” ([Voyant](http://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=89ca7d3644fb67d4e34b5e18b33912ad" \t "_blank)).

Despite Sappho’s earlier assertion that she will live on through metaphor, the similes in this extended passage are just that: similes. Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor notes the significance of this difference in “Metaphorical ‘Indiscretion’ and Literary Survival in Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria’ when she says that, “Sappho’s romantic crisis, in other words, expresses itself as a Romantic crisis in language.” (Wagner-Lawlor 925). Perfection, to Sappho, is the true connection between two ideals. Yet, even in language, she must settle for the incompleteness of simile.

[35.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF35) “The extravagant rhetoric here tries to lift Sappho out of the physical to some sublimely creative but entirely narcissistic place where the poet takes on even God” (Wagner-Lawlor 925).

[36.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF36) The idea of Sappho being hidden by God in death is an interesting one. Swinburne assumes that the reader is aware of the scarcity of Sappho’s poems. God (i.e. nature) has hidden Sappho, just not in the way she had expected.

[37.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF37) Wagner-Lawlor goes on to say, “God may favor her as a unique existence (“Yea, they shall say, earth’s womb has borne in vain / New things, and never this best thing [her song] again” [lines 281-2]), but God can only preserve that uniqueness by never satiating her. She sees herself as eternally yearning, imperfect. While all other lovers will live, love, and die as “he hath his will” (line 258), Sappho argues that “Of me the high God hath not all his will” (line 267), for she, through her immortal words, “shall be one with all these things, / With all high things for ever … / … /I say I shall not die” (lines 276-90). Endless yearning keeps Sappho writing and thus immortal. Sappho’s own idealism (aswell as, standing outside the poem a moment, the idealism of Romantic authority of the artist) is exposed as a kind of ruse” (Wagner-Lawlor 926).

Just as Sappho is unable to be completely satiated in her desire with Anactoria, so, too, is she thwarted in this: her metaphorical desire (as in, her desire for metaphor) to become God. The poet, for all that he creates, can never approach the perfection of the Creator.

[38.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF38) Except even in this, Sappho is thwarted:

“‘Sappho’ is the great original whose work has been almost entirely lost, recalling the textual medium’s vulnerability to the possible damage, distortion, or, in this case, near erasure that can occur over time. Sappho existed to Swinburne, as still to us, primarily through translation and interpretation, through the voices of others, not her own” (Wagner-Lawlor 927).

Swinburne is well aware of this discrepancy between Sappho’s claim to immortality and the fact that her works have been, for the most part, lost to us. Once again, Sappho has failed to achieve that for which she is longing.

[39.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF39) Atthis is referenced in Sappho 131:

“Atthis, to you it has become hateful
to think of me and you fly to Andromeda” (Carson fr. 131).

He is also referenced in fr. 8, 49, 96 (Carson 361).

[40.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF40) According to Nagy, the Greeks had a very specific idea regarding this type of everlasting glory, or “kleos” (in the original Greek), particularly for the heroes of Greek epics, such as the Iliad: “The Greek word *kleos*, which translates here as ‘glory’, conventionally refers to the glory of song, while *aphthiton* or ‘imperishable’ evokes the idea of a vitality that animates the universe. The hero’s glory in song, then, unlike the hero, will never die” (Nagy 0.43).

Nagy argues that “such an idea of a *kleos* or poetic ‘glory’ that is *aphthiton* or ‘imperishable’ forever can be found not only in epic poetry. It can be found also in lyric poetry” (Nagy 4.2). An example of this occurs in Sappho 44, when Sappho mentions “an imperishable fame [kleos aphthiton]” (Carson fr. 44).

Sappho earns this imperishable fame each time her poems are recited, and it is only because Anactoria is mentioned in her songs that she, too, is remembered.

[41.](https://annotatedanactoria.wordpress.com/annotatedtext/#refF41) This alludes to Sappho’s supposed suicide (Haynes 133), but is also similar to a stanza in one of her fragments:

“but a kind of yearning has hold of me— to die
and look upon the dewy lotus banks
of Acheron” (Carson fr. 95).

Gosse notes that it did not seem as though Swinburne originally intended for these lines to close out the poem (Gosse 275).