

# A Flame Fate Dares Not Move: A Sapphic Reading of Katherine Philips

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**Abstract:** This article proposes that "To Mrs. M. A. at Parting," a poem by Katherine Philips, portrays a sapphic relationship between its two characters, Orinda and Rosania, and the romantic relationship as inherently powerful and companionate. Secondary literature has broached this topic regarding Katherine Philips but has barely touched this particular poem. This article explores how the poem directly describes this relationship by examining the poem's syntax, tenses, and pronouns as well as its literary context. The idea of companionate romantic relations was relatively underground at the time; this poem's portrayal not only argues for the relationship itself but also against the heteronormativity of the time.

The 1664 poem "To Mrs. M. A. at Parting," by Katherine Philips, is explicitly a valediction to Mrs. M. A. (Mary Aubrey) – to whom the speaker refers to as Rosania – which is structured very much like most heterosexual love poems of the 17th century. It is split into 60 lines, 6 lines per each of its 10 stanzas, each of which generally have a ABABCC rhyme scheme and syllable count of 8-6-8-6-8-8. The similarity between this valedictory lyric and love poems of its age brings up a multitude of questions: Is this love? Of what kind? How is this love similar to the heterosexual one depicted in those other poems? How is it different? "To Mrs. M.

A. at Parting" is about a sapphic<sup>1</sup> relationship and the nature and importance of the love between its members, Orinda and Rosania.

Orinda and Rosania are interconnected on a spiritual, intellectual, religious, emotional, and even physical level that suggests an intense, companionate relationship. Their souls are described as "mingled" (13) and "twin souls in one" (49), and Orinda expresses "that if each [soul] would resume their own, / Alas! We know not how" (16-17). The two women are spiritually connected to such a degree that they are unable to separate their souls from one another. Their souls will "learn each

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<sup>1</sup> Sapphic, here, is used in the general women-loving-women sense. The influence of Sappho on Katherine Philips's work is significant but outside the scope of this essay. Paula Loscocco's essay "Inventing the English Sappho: Katherine Philips's Donnean Poetry" may prove elucidating on this topic for intrigued readers.

other's mind" (22), "hold intelligence" (24) – as in meet and converse – and "teach the world" (50); they intellectually stimulate each other and others around them.

Orinda also argues that "I shall weep when thou dost grieve . . . Thus still to one another tend" (29, 47), and

By my own temper I shall guess

At thy felicity,

And only like my happiness

Because it pleaseth thee. (31-34)

These lines show not only emotional connectedness but emotional support or "tend[ing]" (47). The lines "Our hearts at any time will tell / If thou or I be sick or well" claim that the members of this relationship can tell when the other is physically unwell (35-36). "Sacred sympathy [is] lent" (9) to Orinda and Rosania's relationship, which is "inspired with a flame divine" (25), which indicates that some sort of religious authority upholds their love. The later line "such is the sacred name of friend" (48) highlights the emblematic justification further and brings into question the work's usage of the word "friend," likely a resultant of a lack of other well-known and accepted terminology for intense female homosocial relationships<sup>2</sup>. All this to say this love is not only companionate, but these two are connected in so many ways that calling them "twin souls in one" (49) is a justifiable claim. The connection between Orinda and Rosania serves as an argument for the validity of their relationship.

The two women are textually and grammatically intertwined to an intense degree. There is no stanza that does not use either the first-person plural and/or both the first-person singular and the second-person singular. The first- and second-person singular pronouns are often interlocked when used, as in "But I shall weep when thou dost grieve; / Nor can I die while thou dost live" (29-30) or in "To part with thee I needs must die, / Could parting separate thee and I" (5-6). In the first example, the simultaneous structural repetition and reversal of

I (subject) will weep (verb) when you (subject) grieve (verb); / Nor can (modal verb) I (subject) die (verb) while you (subject) live (verb)

uses the first and second person in such a way that the sentences read similarly despite their distinct messages. In the second example, the poem gives "thee" and "I" physical proximity, which concisely demonstrates the closeness between Orinda and Rosania. This practice is mirrored in the last line, "ORINDA and ROSANIA" (60), which, as well as keeping the characters close, physically emphasizes the names which then highlights both the identity of the two individuals and their genders. The syntactical density of the poem further strengthens the validity of their relationship.

The first explicit mention of love serves to establish the relationship between Orinda and Rosania as romantic and/or sexual in nature in addition to the aforementioned elements of their

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say such terminology was nonexistent at the time. Margaret Cavendish's *A Blazing World* utilizes a few such terms.

relationship. Orinda states that “But neither chance nor compliment / Did element our love:” (7-8). Love is the object in this clause, and this relationship is the object throughout the stanza. This statement’s syntax suggests that this love is not something in which Orinda and Rosania have any agency, following with much of Philips’s contemporaries in the portrayal of romantic and/or sexual attraction as something uncontrollable by its participants. The comparison functions to establish the relationship as one involving romantic and/or sexual attraction similarly to a more traditional romantic and/or sexual relationship.

The tenses used in this poem demonstrate that this women-loving-women relationship is future-oriented and enduring. Only one stanza in the poem, lines 7-12, primarily uses past tense, utilizing both past passive voice, “was lent” (9), and preterite, “did element” (8), and it does not even complete the stanza before slipping back into present tense with “still fears” (12). The other stanzas use mixtures of present, future, conditional, and one instance of present perfect with “I have examined” (1). Only one of these stanzas, the aforementioned 7-12, does not use a future or conditional tense, as even “To part with thee I needs must die” (5) would be converted into modern, colloquial English as something approximating “To part with you I would need to die” (forgoing meter and poetic language)<sup>3</sup>. Orinda’s outlook towards the future suggests that her and

Rosania’s bond is a committed relationship with enduring plans for said future and that their relationship will endure.

Throughout the poem, Orinda develops an optimistic view of the future of her relationship communicated through the poem’s attitude towards her separation from Rosania. The title of the poem, “To Mrs. M.A. at Parting,” begins by stating the occasion is an occasion of separation. In the first stanza of the poem, Orinda claims that “To part with thee I needs must die” (5), and that death would be the only thing that could ever “separate thee and I” (6). This thought continues as “(That friendship... still fears a wound from time or fate)” (12). In these stanzas, Orinda posits that the relationship will not last beyond death and that it needs to fear time. Further in the poem, she begins chipping away at that idea. In line 30, she expresses “Nor can I die while thou dost live.” The idea that Orinda cannot die until Rosania does proves a degree of resilience to “time or fate” (12). The development away from the concept of parting reaches its extreme at the end of the poem where Orinda claims that “Our lives together too, shall end” (54) and “A dew shall rest upon our tomb” (55), stating that they will die together and be buried together. This change in attitude shows this love developing throughout the poem to become unpartable.

The inseparable love between Orinda and Rosania is sufficient to break structural and cultural convention. This love can “teach

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<sup>3</sup> “Thou” and “thee” were the informal second-person pronouns at the time, whereas “you” was the formal second-person pronoun. Russ McDonald explores some implications of this distinction in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare* (7).

the world new love, / Redeem the age and sex, and show / A flame fate dares not move:" (50-52), even violating the basic ABABCC rhyme scheme of this poem with "love" and "move". These established conventions are bending to this "new love" (50), even the pseudo-religious belief in fate. This is not a self-indulgent power trip that is invoked; the poem pushes in the direction of significant societal change. The "twin souls in one" (49) use this opportunity to educate the world, to "redeem the age and sex" (51), and to demonstrate to the world that this strong concept of companionate love can overcome fate. Even after they die,

A dew shall dwell upon our tomb  
Of such a quality  
That fighting armies, thither come,  
Shall reconciled be. (55-58)

According to the speaker, the love of these two women is so moving that, even after death, it stops wars; this quality was especially relevant in the poem's own time as it was published first in 1664, 5 years after the end of the English Civil War. This is an idealistic goal, but one that, if achieved, would inspire social change for centuries to come.

The relationship between Orinda and Rosania in this poem is framed as superior to the traditional, heterosexual relationships of the time. In other 17th century poetry of

Katherine Philips's contemporaries, like Donne, love was depicted as a painful experience. Paula Loscocco claims that, when Philips engages with Donnean verse, that

The dream of union and specular discourse haunts even these verses, however, giving her allusions to Donne powerful negative connotations: when she invokes him to describe female relationship, there is a desperate edge to her verse, and when she uses him to describe female union, there is manifest tension and strain. (62)

However, the only pain in "To Mrs. M. A. at Parting" is that of parting, with Orinda and Rosania delighting in the act of love. The lack of pain in the love of Orinda and Rosania indicates their relationship is, at minimum, more pleasant for those who partake.

Katherine Philips's poem portrays the sapphic relationship between Orinda and Rosania and expresses the value of such a strong romantic relationship. This seventeenth-century poem, through its depiction of a sapphic love, endorsed companionate romance before this idea was commonplace. Philips adopted this now-traditional expectation in a queer context long before it emerged in heteronormative culture, and her poem argues against the culture of its time by arguing for the superiority of this romance.

## Bibliography

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- Philips, Katherine. "To Mrs. M.A. at Parting." In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 10th ed., *The Sixteenth Century And The Early Seventeenth Century*. Vol. B. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, George Logan, and Katharine E. Maus. 2018.

## Additional Reading

- Cavendish, Margaret. "The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World." In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 10th ed, *The Sixteenth Century And The Early Seventeenth Century*. Vol. B. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, George Logan, and Katharine E. Maus. 2018.
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