

# Sensibility, Melancholia, and Subjectivity in Mary Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon*

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Number 71, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074530ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074530ar>

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Publisher(s)

Université de Montréal

ISSN

2563-2582 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rosenova, R. (2018). Sensibility, Melancholia, and Subjectivity in Mary Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon*. *Romanticism on the Net*, (71), 1–18.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1074530ar>

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## Romanticism on the Net

### Sensibility, Melancholia, and Subjectivity in Mary Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon*<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

Mary Robinson's sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon: In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets* (1796) is at once a celebration of the Greek poet's eminence, as Robinson suggests in the preface, and a commentary on the reason and sensibility dialectic that dominated the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As such, it dramatizes the conflict between reason and sensibility, which is here also associated with erotic desire, showing the repercussions that the excess of feeling has upon the self without the governing principle of reason. This essay argues that Robinson drew upon the pathology of love melancholy, as well as on sublime and gothic aesthetics, to render the state of disjointed selfhood as a personal and artistic crisis which cannot be sublimated into art, and which subsequently results in the poet's creative impasse and death. It also stresses the idea that through Sappho, Robinson aimed to represent the figure of the eighteenth-century woman writer, showing the need for a balance between reason and feeling so that desire could be transformed into artistic energy to serve a social purpose within the public sphere, addressing more universal issues of the human condition instead of focusing on private sorrows.

#### Biographical Note

Rayna Rosenova is a PhD candidate at the Department of English and American Studies, St Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia (Bulgaria), where she teaches courses in English Literature of the Eighteenth Century and English Literature of the Romantic Period. Her current research focuses on the poetry of Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson, with a particular emphasis on the representation of reason and sensibility, and the use of sublime and gothic aesthetics.

1. Mary Robinson's sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon: In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets* (1796) is central to the sonnet revival of the 1790s and to the discourse of sensibility, which monopolized the period. Robinson designed her sequence to praise the Greek poetess's sensibility and mind, which she saw as neglected by commonplace accounts of her life. But what the sonnets dramatize is the scenario when feeling escalates to formidable passion and assumes control over all faculties, thus generating an excess of sensibility that cannot be governed. This essay explores *Sappho and Phaon* in the context of the personal and artistic crisis suffered by Robinson's heroine—a woman poet based on the Greek poetess. I argue that Robinson dramatizes the pathology of love-melancholy as a crisis of subjectivity that reveals itself in the conflict between reason and feeling, generating a creative impasse, which Sappho is unable to overcome.
2. Halfway through the eighteenth century, sensibility became the leading discourse in various fields of inquiry. This tendency emerged as a response to the bigoted insistence on the individual's rationality at the expense of their feelings, provoked by the progress in the sciences. What period philosophers, writers, and poets advanced was the interdependence of feeling and reason as necessary for the cultivation of moral sense and ethics.<sup>2</sup> But the attitude towards sensibility gradually began to change, adding to the concept some negative connotations. On the one hand, sensibility came to be associated with radical revolutionary sentiments, and on the other, as Anne C. Vila remarks, it was seen as potentially hazardous because it could precipitate an excess of feeling, entailing moral and physical repercussions (1).
3. A concomitant aspect of the discourse of sensibility, along with its physical and psychological manifestations, was that of melancholy. And like all significant concepts, melancholy was also gendered. Melancholy in men was considered a mark of genius, a source of reflection and artistic creativity, in other words, a condition that ensured the expansion of the mind and that was sublimated through literary output and thus turned into cultural capital.<sup>3</sup> But when considered in relation to women, it was deemed a disease, a malady originating from repressed erotic desire that debilitated their faculties.<sup>4</sup> Writers consciously fashioned themselves as melancholy to accentuate their propensity for contemplation and self-reflection, to demonstrate their genius and render the image of the poet as a thinker and a man of feeling. As Henry M. Lloyd has written, "the persona of the knowledge-seeker was considered in terms that drew together mind and matter, thought and feeling" (2). Despite the gendered views, the close association of melancholy to sensibility allowed women to enter a discourse that authorized them to show their intellectual capacities, which were linked closely to their sensitivity (Lawlor 53). Still, this pensive mood

was juxtaposed to melancholy's other face—a malaise, which bore close affinities to despair and madness and, more often than not, ended in suicide (Sickels 48).

4. From a psychological perspective, melancholia is generally defined as a state of despondence, indifference, obsessive fixation on a single object, and inarticulateness. It is associated with loss, or the sense of loss, which hinders one's normal being in the world. In his seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud describes melancholia as an inner split, provoked by a severed object relation, which turns the ego against itself and results in self-abnegation because of an internalization of the lost object as an other. Conversely, Julia Kristeva situates melancholia in a pre-oedipal lack of the (m)other, viewing the melancholic's experience of loss as of a primeval nature, precluding the creation of identity and positioning the self in a perpetual state of sadness (*Black Sun* 12). What is of particular interest in Kristeva's theory is her idea of artists using their melancholy to create art and sublimate their sense of irreconcilable loss by giving it form through signs, which also allows them entry into the symbolic order. Melancholics, on the other hand, embody the loss and emotions they experience, instead of transmuting them into signs (Lechte 35).
5. In writing *Sappho and Phaon* Robinson sought to dramatize the self-reflexive subjectivity of a singular mind undergoing a personal crisis, as evidenced in the Preface:

The story of the LESBIAN MUSE [. . .] presented to my imagination such a lively example of the human mind, enlightened by the most exquisite talents, yet yielding to the destructive controul of ungovernable passions, that I felt an irresistible impulse to attempt the delineation of their progress; mingling with the glowing picture of her soul, such moral reflections, as may serve to excite that pity, which, while it proves the susceptibility of the heart, arms it against the danger of indulging a too luxuriant fancy. (Robinson 149-50)<sup>5</sup>

Those "ungovernable passions" are the offspring of Sappho's love for Phaon, which gives rise to what is classifiable as love-melancholy, commonly associated with frustrated desire, despair and madness. This love-melancholy is the cause for Sappho's crisis, which manifests itself in the clash between sense and sensibility, resulting in the preponderance of the latter. Consequently, her inability to find a balance between the two prompts her to seek death as a resolution. In her rendition of Sappho as a lovelorn woman, Robinson's pathology of lovesickness seems to tally with early modern accounts of the condition, which see it as a distinct kind of melancholy. The trope, then, serves as a vehicle of representing the "moral reflections," which Robinson attempts

to delineate, on the one hand, and, on the other, to situate her critique of the excessive, destructive sensibility that was gaining ground at the end of the eighteenth century. As Jacqueline Labbe observes, the end of the eighteenth century espoused an ambivalent view of sensibility, which saw it neither as a truly positive asset nor as a truly negative one (354). Labbe suggests that there is a strain of pathological sensibility, stemming from an “emotionalized state of being,” which affects both the mind and the body: hence, “the pathology of the body and the pathology of the emotions were closely intertwined” (355). Thus, love-melancholy provided Robinson with a convenient theme to enact the mind-body dialectic within the framework of reason and passion and to show the repercussions of such an extremity of feeling for the self.

6. In her study on lovesickness (or erotic melancholy) in Renaissance literature, Lesel Dawson indicates that unlike heroic love, as the condition is called when experienced by men, with women such a condition “is a species of melancholy which can be depicted, not only as a passionate illness which degenerates into madness, but also as a spiritual and cerebral affliction,” which often cannot be sublimated due to women’s supposed “lack of reason” (93, 5). Naturally, the “disease” is contracted through the eyes and works itself through the physical and mental system of the afflicted individual (Dawson 15-16). Symptoms include mood swings, the desire for reticence and seclusion the “better to feed & follow [their] foolish imaginations” (Ferrand qtd. in Dawson 18). In his exhaustive account of the condition in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton quotes from Castilio that “The beginning, middle, end of love is nought else but sorrow, vexation, agony, torment, irksomeness, wearisomeness; so that to be squalid, ugly, miserable, solitary, discontent, dejected, to wish for death, to complain, rave, and to be peevish, are the certain signs and ordinary actions of a love-sick person” (III: 505).<sup>6</sup> Hence, Sappho’s fixation on her lovesickness and the constant idealization and eroticization of Phaon as an object of desire (as best exemplified in Sonnet X, where Robinson composes her version of the blazon, thus reversing the male-female roles of the gazing admirer and his amorous object as formulated in Renaissance poetry), along with the somatic symptoms that accompany her frustration, evoke the symptomatology of love-melancholy. By making Sappho the subject of erotic desire, Robinson reverses the traditional view of woman as an objectified mute muse of masculine desire and writes Sappho as a female subject experiencing the sense of lack. Melancholy suggests itself as a state, defined by loss, through which to explore the interiority of her Sapphic subject, ergo, woman. In this sense, Robinson’s appropriation of Sappho as “the personification of an empty figure,” as Yopie Prins’s study on the uses of the Greek poetess suggests, seeks to adumbrate period ideas about women and the woman poet in general (18, 184). Robinson uses Sappho’s

“empty figure,” then, to introduce the conflict between reason and passion, which positions the sequence in the gendered discourses of the age.

7. In *Sappho and Phaon* Robinson delineates the stages of Sappho’s lovesickness from wishful thinking through disenchantment to suicide (also noted in Behrendt 124). She attempts to represent a psychological state that disrupts the mental equilibrium of the subject, who grapples with an overwhelming excess of feeling. Sappho’s melancholy, provoked by the unrequited love for Phaon, and the actual physical loss of him as her amorous object, disrupts her unity of self. Robinson’s rendition of Sappho’s emotional state is dramatized as a crisis that overtakes her faculties and results in a failure to sublimate it, presented as a creative impasse. Thus, overwhelming passion and extreme emotion collapse the symbolic order. Love is imagined as a disease both of the body and of the mind, as “sorrow’s cank’ring worm her heart devours” (XIX. 14).
  
8. By using imagery that mirrors the self’s emotional and mental state, Robinson foregrounds a symbolic correspondence between the subject and the landscape to dramatize Sappho’s condition as a psychic conflict. The use of nature as an objective correlative serves to articulate Sappho’s emotions by providing an external image to her inner state, which is by default non-representable. Moreover, Robinson’s subject deliberately identifies with those sublime aspects of nature, which reflect her inner divisions, rather than with its tranquil pastoral scenes. Sappho’s dilemma is clearly presented in Sonnet VI, in which she asks rhetorically:

Is it to love, to fix the tender gaze,  
To hide the timid blush, and steal away;  
To shun the busy world, and waste the day  
In some rude mountain’s solitary maze?  
Is it to chant one name in ceaseless lays,  
To hear no words that other tongues can say,  
To watch the pale moon’s melancholy ray,  
To chide in fondness, and in folly praise?  
Is it to pour th’ involuntary sigh,  
To dream of bliss, and wake new pangs to prove;  
To talk, in fancy, with the speaking eye,  
Then start with jealousy, and wildly rove;  
Is it to loath the light, and wish to die?

For these I feel,—and feel that they are Love.

These suppositions not only underscore Sappho's love as a condition, whose symptoms evoke traditional accounts of it, but also recall the typical topography of melancholy loci and their wanderers: the desire for solitude, reclusive spaces, "the pale moon's melancholy ray," also the plaintive nightingale and the brooks of later sonnets. Such solitary scenes became the backdrop of much of eighteenth-century verse. However, though borrowing on conventional imagery, here the melancholy mood is not to be associated with its propensity for pensive thoughts and calm reassurance but with its negative effects on a subject, suffering the pangs of love. Later, in Sonnet XXVI, Robinson even goes on to deprecate the traditional masculinized version of melancholy musings by making Sappho banish "dull Philosophy" (1) to "a lonely bow'r," the "antique woods" and "mid-day glooms" (2, 3), and claim it only brings a "fancied rest" (4). In the circumstance of unrequited love, as Eleanor Sickels has noted, the subject's lost prospect of romantic love precipitates a melancholy which presents the destitute subject with three alternatives, either to "die of a broken heart, go mad, or commit suicide" (226). In Sappho's case, all of these three alternatives somewhat coalesce, her lovelorn heart triggering the onslaught of self-supposed madness ultimately leading to her suicide.

9. Likewise, Robinson makes use of the established conventions to underscore the reflective strain of Sappho's sensibility and at the same time to rebut the restorative power of nature's soothing scenery. The landscape in Sonnet XVI, in which Sappho rejects any hope of future reconciliation, also makes use of the topos: Sappho deems hope "more transient than the ray / That leads pale twilight to her dusky bed" (1-2). Hence, the dismal prospects of the landscape signal the hopeless prospects of Sappho's love, as she chooses "To hide, where meditation loves to dwell, / And feed my soul, with luxury of woe!" (13-14). Line 11 of the same sonnet further speaks of the "Dark bosom'd labyrinth and the thorny dell," which recall Sappho's own mental maze of psychic conflict and "the wayward wand'rings of [her] mind" (VII. 4). These are closely interpolated with her repressed desire and hopeless passion. The topography of the place seems to embody Sappho's emotional state so as to build a metaphorical extension between the feeling body and the external world. The closing couplet quoted above recalls the idea of contemplative melancholy, a state in which the poet, forlorn and brooding, seeks solitude in secluded natural surroundings and gives vent to his philosophical, metaphysical and/or religious musings. However, Robinson's Sapphic subject would, instead, luxuriate in her woe. In Sonnet XVI, Sappho would disparage hope as fictitious: it deludes "thoughtless brows" (8) with seeming joy. The use of the adjective "thoughtless" to refer to those who are lured by hope's "visionary

charms” (5) puts her in a diametrical opposition to them, hinting at her rational disparagement of such fanciful illusions. Yet the rebuke of “the cold and reas’ning breast” (8) in Sonnet XXVI underpins the necessity of a normative sensibility to be added to rationality.

10. Sonnet XXI further implies Sappho’s inability to find consolation in nature: “WHY do I live to loath the cheerful day” (1), Sappho muses, intimating that “on my path no flow’rs / Imbibe the morn’s resuscitating pow’rs, / For one blank sorrow, saddens all my way!” (6-8). Her mind is fixed on her grief, the “blank sorrow” that evokes the bleakness of the melancholy state and its effects on the sufferer’s mental health, and that also “blinds” her poetic vision and precludes her communion with scenic nature. Addressing the moon in Sonnet XXIV, Sappho asks:

What can thy cool and placid eye avail,  
Where fierce despair absorbs the mental sight,  
While inbred glooms the vagrant thoughts invite,  
To tempt the gulph where howling fiends assail? (5-8)

Here the poet’s “fierce despair” is depicted as detrimental to her lucidity. The pensive aspects of the natural scene are not strong enough to detract the mind from dwelling on its predicament. The moon’s conventional role as a symbol of the respite that the poet seeks is also undermined. Sappho’s invocation addresses nature’s soothing vistas only to reject them, since “vain is ev’ry charm! and vain the hour, / That brings to madd’ning love, no soothing dream!” (9-14). Moreover, Sappho’s vision darkens as she continues to submit to her death drive, triggered by Phaon’s absence. This underlines her problematic connection with the natural world, which should otherwise serve as a conduit for inspiration:

For me no spring appears, no summers bloom,  
No Sun-beams glitter, and no altars burn!  
The mind’s dark winter of eternal gloom,  
Shews ’midst the waste a solitary urn,  
A blighted laurel, and a mould’ring tomb! (XXV. 10-14)

Ventriloquizing Sappho, Robinson brings into view the grounding force of reason, either explicitly or suggestively, and evokes it as a check to harness excessive sentiment. Though she capitalizes on women’s sensibility and intellect at the same time, the fact that Sappho realizes her inability to overcome “low desire” (I. 1) at the expense of her rational faculty, can be read as a critique on the excess of sensibility and its devastating effect on the subject. As scholars have also noted, Robinson’s Sappho is intrinsically Wertherian and resembles Charlotte Smith’s rendition of Werther in the *Elegiac Sonnets*. A parallel can thus be drawn to Smith’s poems to



emphasize the fatal outcome of a crisis should extreme sensibility take the upper hand over rationality. Like Smith's Werther, Robinson's Sappho too suffers the dichotomy between reason and passion, which disjoints her selfhood. Discussing Smith's melancholy sonnets, Elizabeth Dolan writes that reason acts as a check on Werther's death drive and its ultimate culmination in suicide. "When sensibility takes away that reason," Dolan writes, "death ensues" (249). Moreover, she argues that Smith's point was to prove the need to "temper sensibility with rational reflection." Robinson's sequence explicates this idea by openly posing the conflict between reason and feeling as a story of a psychic crisis, which consequently leads to Sappho's demise due to her inability to restore the balance between the two. Ashley Cross contends that Robinson purposefully alludes to Smith's melancholy wanderers and the loci they populate, but takes their sensibility to a "sublime level" (72). Following Smith's model of ventriloquizing Werther's voice in the *Elegiac Sonnets*, Robinson goes on to elaborate the female subjectivity of love-melancholy in the voice of the Greek poetess.

11. In Sappho's case love-melancholy inevitably leads to self-annihilation. The subject's inability to cope with absence and the surfeit of desire prompts her to first go on a quest to retrieve her amorous object and, then, having failed, she finally resolves to seek solace in death. But prior to the events that lead to Sappho's famous leap into the "Leucadian deep" (XL. 5), Sappho invokes reason as the faculty that can "each nerve rebellious bind" and "[l]ull the fierce tempest of my fev'rish soul" (VII. 1-2). Her "fev'rish soul" would later turn into her "fev'rish head" (XXXVII. 4), which stresses the psychic anguish of her overwrought mind. Reason is the only power that can stop the invasion of feeling that dims the mind and causes "mental night" (VII. 14):

Estrang'd from thee, no solace can I find,  
O'er my rapt brain, where pensive visions stole,  
Now passion reigns and stormy tumults roll —  
So the smooth Sea obeys the furious wind! (VII. 5-8)

The sonnet dramatizes Sappho's psychic unrest, turning it into a theatre of excessive sensibility. The images of sea and wind in line 8, as well as the symbolic objectification of passion as "stormy tumults" in line 7, reinforce the power of passion (symbolized by the "furious wind") over reason ("the smooth Sea"). The "pensive visions," which contemplation would have borne, have been forestalled by the surplus of ungoverned feeling. Excess of passion breeds pestilence: it makes "each thought in wild disorder stray" (IV. 2), while pleasure "In sweet, but pois'nous fetters, holds the mind" (V. 14). Passion is imagined as a disease which overrides reason and enslaves all mental faculties—"Around thy [reason's] throne destructive tumults rise, / And hell-fraught

jealousies, thy rights invade” (XI. 11-12). Though in the clutches of destructive passion, and despite her insistence on her supposed madness, Sappho seems to be aware of the devastating effect the affections have on the totality of self when sensibility is taken to an extreme. Such a reflection destabilizes the idea of the self’s complete loss of sense. But despite this knowledge, Sappho fails to act upon it and instead remains grounded in her longing for and pursuit of an object of desire that cannot be attained and would remain a perpetual absence. Therefore, Sappho’s realization of her inaptitude to deal with “tyrant passion” (III. 14) and her obsessive infatuation with Phaon aggravate her grief and lead her to consider suicide as the only possible solution. This implies that every emotion taken to an extreme and not tempered by rationality has a devastating effect on the unity of self.

12. As I have suggested, in order to represent Sappho’s crisis Robinson uses natural locales as objective correlatives to indicate the subject’s rupture. Elizabeth Fay has argued that they constitute “inscapes” that represent externalized mental states (214). Ashley Cross has also recently commented that these landscapes serve as “psychological metaphor[s]” (72). As such, they create an alterity that articulates Sappho’s disintegrated sense of self. For example, the “heaving gulf” (9) of Sonnet XL signifies at once the geological formation and the idea of the inner self as a chasm, pointing to the ocean below the cliffs and evoking Sappho’s restless breast at the same time:

O’er the Leucadian deep, a dazzling beam  
Shed the bland light of empyrean day!  
But soon transparent shadows veil’d each ray,  
While mystic visions sprang athwart the gleam!  
Now to the heaving gulf they seem’d to bend,  
And now across the sphery regions glide; (XL. 5-10)

The turbulence of the elements in the following sonnet, i.e. the tempestuous sea, lightnings, and winds, articulates Sappho’s rage and frustration:

WILD is the foaming Sea! The surges roar!  
And nimbly dart the livid lightnings round!  
On the rent rock the angry waves rebound;  
.....  
.....  
Along the margin of the trembling shore,  
Loud as the blast my frantic cries shall sound,

My storm-drench'd limbs the flinty fragments wound,  
And o'er my bleeding breast the billows pour! (XXII. 1-8)

Despite the fear that the sublime would normally provoke in the subject, Robinson's Sappho is not a victim of the might of the elements but of her own passions. As the quoted sonnet suggests, Sappho openly defies the waves and gives away a sense of superiority over the sublimity of nature: "ye barb'rous waves forbear! / Taunt not the anguish of a lover's brain" (10-11), and rebukes the elements for emulating "the soul's despair" (12). Robinson's Sapphic subject rejects the power of nature to conquer her, "For howling winds, and foaming seas, in vain / Assail the breast, when passion rages there!" (13-14)—this serves to prove that nothing external to the self holds greater danger than the horrors of being. The sublime is engaged only to be short-circuited: the process of arriving at some transcendental experience in recoil from the terror that sublime scenes are supposed to inspire is thwarted. Resolved to meet her death, the subject purposefully delights in the place "where circling whirlwinds rise, / Where threat'ning clouds in sable grandeur lour; / Where the blast yells, the liquid columns pour, / And madd'ning billows combat with the skies!" (XLI. 1-4). Nature is a screen on which her emotional state is projected rather than an apparently experienced reality: thus it does not allow Sappho to attain a heightened awareness with which to restore the ego's control over itself and reinstitute the command of reason. Sappho is at sea: she cannot redeem her imagination via nature as Wordsworth does in the Simplon Pass.

13. Sappho's melancholy triggers an acute sense of urgency and alienation from nature. Sappho willingly shuns the tranquility of the natural world, as her despair deepens:

Phaon is false! be dim, ye orient Skies,  
And let black Erebus succeed your ray;  
Let clashing thunders roll, and lightnings play;  
Phaon is false! and hopeless Sappho dies! (XXXV. 5-8)

She forfeits the placid sky and invokes the horrific manifestations of nature instead, because it is only through them that she can temporarily come to grips with the otherness that is within her, and possibly achieve a fictive sense of unity. Her emotional state has affected the way her physical gaze perceives of the material world: her "sick'ning sight" is the result of "the mental night" that is her mind, obscured by the onslaught of passion. Sonnet VII aptly illustrates Sappho's relation to nature and her inability to find joy in it. In order to show Sappho's loss of poetic vision, Robinson adopts the trope of gazing outwards, which also works metaphorically to signal the gradual blindness and disturbance of the mind's eye—a metaphor which the couplet reveals explicitly:

All nature fades before my sick'ning sight:

For what bright scene can fancy's eye explore,  
'Midst dreary labyrinths of mental night? (VII. 12-14)

Having lost the ability to rejoice in nature's beauties due to her melancholy, Sappho is only able to perceive of it in a way that mirrors the rupture of her inner world.

14. Because of her love-melancholy, Sappho loses the capacity to compose lyrical verse due to her suffering and dejection, and the surrender of joy at the hands of love and "low desire." Her creative impasse is conveyed through the abandonment and ineffectiveness of her Lyre—the instrument associated with inspiration and poetry, here read as a metonymic signifier for Sappho's poetics:

Mute, on the ground my Lyre neglected lies,  
The Muse forgot, and lost the melting lay;  
My down-cast looks, my faltering lips betray,  
That stung by hopeless passion,—Sappho dies! (IV. 5-8)

The lines suggest Sappho's waned interest in anything else but her lovesickness and the lack of inspiration it has provoked, along with her unfitness to compose. Instead of attempting to reclaim her voice, she is suffering from inhibited erotic desire imagined as living death. Sappho also denounces any other means to distract her mind from her melancholy state—"Vain is the poet's theme, the sculptor's art" (VIII. 6)—as she would do again later on: "WEAK is the sophistry, and vain the art / That whispers patience to the mind's despair! / That bids reflection bathe the wounds of care" (XXVIII. 1-3), now rejecting reflection as an agency to overcome her distress. There seems to be no remedy for Sappho's indisposition but a total submission to her lovesickness. Sonnet XIX further emphasizes Sappho's loss of poetic powers and provides a description of melancholy symptomatology:

On the bleak rock your frantic minstrel stands,  
Each task forgot, save that, to sigh and weep;  
In vain the strings her burning fingers sweep,  
No more her touch, the Grecian Lyre commands! (XIX. 5-8)

Frantic and unable to subdue her destructive passions, the woman poet is enthralled by her suffering, which stultifies her poetic expression. This idea of her wild frenzy is sustained by the image of Sappho here being shown as a "frantic minstrel" mounted "On the bleak rock" and its mirror image of the crying Vulture, positioned on a rock in Sonnet XLI (8). In Sonnet XXII, Sappho identifies her "frantic cries" (6) with a "strain" (9), which paradoxically suggests her

discordant poetics. In this light, Daniel Robinson and Ashley Cross also mark Sappho down as “creatively debilitated” (136) and as “[a] figure of poetic failure” (72).

15. Towards the climatic suicide, the imagery grows more gothic and gloomy, emphasizing the horrors of disintegrated selfhood, and the subject’s wish for death. The use of gothic motifs in Sonnet XXXVI, for example, replicates Sappho’s angst: her mind, just as the “bow’rs” is “haunted” by restless thoughts (1); her despair gradually turns obsessive, while her passionate yearnings infect her brain like the “enchanted streams” and “pois’nous flow’rs” (3, 4). The towering “barren mountain” (5) evokes her sense of blighted prospects, while the lonesome “spirit of the desert” (7) and the “lurid horrors” of “the fateful hours” (8) suggest the gothic rendition of inner terrors. Yet these frightful scenes do not instill fear but are desired instead; it is “goaded frenzy” that has seized Sappho’s “shrinking brain” (9). The threat of madness comes from within, not from an external agent. Sappho’s brain shrinks not as a reaction to external horrors, but to the psychological torment that disrupts the stability of the self. Determined to put an end to her suffering, Sappho even defamiliarizes her own body, as she imagines it ravished by the waves, “OH! can’st thou bear to see this faded frame, / Deform’d and mangled by the rocky deep” (XLII. 1-2): in this way she projects her own alterity outside herself.
16. In Sonnet XLIII, Sappho finally meets her death. Robinson uses Sappho’s suicide to reinstate reason’s place and level a final critique on excessive passion: “So shall this glowing, palpitating soul, / Welcome returning Reason’s placid beam, / While o’er my breast the waves Lethean roll” (9-11). Adopting the prospect view, Sappho gazes only to find “The world receding from my pensive eyes” (2). The imagery corresponds to the event it describes: “the last stream of living lustre dies” as she prepares for her leap. But the sonnet ends on an optimistic tone, hinting at the promise for poetic fame. The final lines assert the return of visionary powers along with the return of reason, concluding that “Then shall my Lyre disdain love’s dread control, / And loftier passions, prompt the loftier theme!” (XLIII. 13-14). As Judith Pascoe’s footnote indicates, the lines are suggestive given the ancient myth that once unfortunate lovers used to hurl themselves from the Leucadian Cliffs, hoping to get cured from their love throes should they survive the leap (Robinson 178). Hence, the possibility of a marriage between reason and passion still lingers. However, for Sappho, death is not the ultimate termination to existence, but instead grants immortality through the consecration of her poetry.

17. Though Robinson offers a narrative of female subjectivity grounded in desire, this narrative seems restrictive, since love and passion, and Sappho's fixation on these, reveal the limitations of a subjectivity based solely on feeling. Robinson's rendition of Sappho's "moral reflections" is centered predominantly on her romantic love and does not reach outside the self. The rejection of reason and reflection only proves their necessity as governing principles. The couplet of the conclusive Sonnet XLIV reasserts Robinson's stance that one should "more than mortal raptures claim, / The brightest planet of th' ETERNAL SPHERE!" (13-14). It is lofty feelings, not base desire, that elevate the soul to the heights of insight and poetic genius. In her role as the voice of the opening and closing sonnets, Robinson shows the capacity of sensibility to open avenues to sympathy and to moral reflection: both personal, albeit flawed, in Sappho, and collective—Robinson's reference to "the miseries of man" (I. 10) and "the dark scroll of human destiny" (XLIV. 7). Sappho, as the sequence shows, has refused, or at least proves unable, to relinquish her "low desire" for the "lofty passions" which would have enabled her to compose the "lofty themes" had she embraced "Reason's placid beam." Erotic desire profanes the mind, making it occupy itself with barren lamentations and lovelorn concerns rather than aspire to elevated thoughts and humanitarian zeal. Hence, Sappho's love-melancholy mars her poetic capacity and her ability to elevate her passion to that "bliss supreme that kindles fancy's fire" (I. 2). As the introductory sonnet suggests, in order for the mind to be poetically productive, it has to temper the surge of all-consuming passion: "Well may the mind, with tuneful numbers grac'd, / To Fame's immortal attributes aspire, / Above the treach'rous spells of low desire, / That wound the sense, by vulgar joys debas'd" (I. 5-8). This gives destructive passion a socio-cultural turn. Likewise, one might recall Kant's concept of the passions, according to which passions are germinated in the faculty of desire, and "Since passions can be paired with the calmest reflection, it is easy to see that they are not thoughtless, like affects, or stormy and transitory; rather, they take root and can even co-exist with rationalizing" (*Anthropology* 165). And the faculty of desire is, moreover, linked to the will and one's moral system and ethical choices. Though passions could be "evil" and morally dubious, with the intervention of reason one can elevate the lower faculty of desire, that is, desire as the result of one's being affected by external stimuli, to a higher one, or "something from ourselves independently of objects" (*Lectures* 48) since desire can spark off one's enthusiasm to achieve an end in view. One might even conjure Blake's dictum in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that desire could be used as a driving force, but in order for it not to turn destructive, it should co-exist in a dialectical relationship with reason: "Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy" (34). What is needed is a concurrence of both faculties, not a dominant rule of one over the other.

18. Sappho's inability to use language to sublimate her melancholy precludes her participation in the symbolic order. Sappho's failure to moderate her passions through rationality, and turn them intellectual, bars the possibility of her sensibility serving a higher, social, purpose.<sup>7</sup> It also prevents her from reaching that high "Sky-born VIRTUE" (XLIV. 9) which grants the "wreaths of Fame" (11). Writing at a time when the public sphere was dominated by androcentric bias against women's participation in intellectual matters, Robinson saw literature as the means that allowed them to penetrate the social structure and demonstrate what she classified as their "mental pre-eminence." Moreover, in her *Letter to the Women of England* (1799), she encourages women's intellectual pursuits and exercise of "rational wisdom," which would "confirm the intuitive immortality of the soul, and give them that genuine glow of conscious virtue which will grace them to posterity" (84). What Robinson seems to suggest is that passion in the literary woman should be balanced by reason and thus elevated to a higher state, so as to serve a humanitarian purpose ensuring a bonding of shared experience, and, in the case of *Sappho and Phaon*, transcended via poetry, which "with godlike pow'rs" shall "calm the miseries of man" (I. 9-10). As she has it in the Preface to the sonnets, "poetry has the power to raise, so has it also the magic to refine" (Robinson 146). In this light, Ashley Cross has observed that Robinson's concept of the woman writer is one, "whose genius combines the mental strength of reason and "exquisite sensibility" (55). This idea of the female philosopher was also promulgated by Mary Hays, another radically-minded writer, who saw the interrelatedness between reason and sensibility as yielding an especial type of "philosophical" female subjectivity (Wallace 66).<sup>8</sup> Women's genius and literary output, then, are founded on the balanced collaboration between reason and feeling.
19. Though Robinson dramatizes the conflict between reason and passion to give meaning to Sappho's death and to stress that she was aware of the necessity to strike a balance between the two, she seems to deconstruct her own agenda by underscoring her heroine's inability to assert her self-control, surrendering instead to a final consummation of her loss through suicide. In the concluding sonnet, as Daniel Robinson has noted, Robinson aims to distance herself from her Sapphic subject in order to show her superiority over the "mortal raptures" that have brought Sappho down (135). *Sappho and Phaon* seems designed not only to praise Sappho, the renowned Greek poetess, but also Robinson herself as a distanced, but empathizing, observer, who has managed to rationalize her sensibility and use it as a source of creative potential, so as to valorize her poetic abilities. Her command of the "legitimate" Petrarchan sonnet, "so seldom attempted in the English language" (Robinson 144) contrasts Sappho's inability to give her emotional experience a lyrical form.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the idea of excessive sensibility and creative impasse

experienced on the part of Sappho is set against Robinson's deft handling of form, allusions to Ovid's and Pope's source texts, and conscious application of the vocabulary of sensibility and love-melancholy as a literary topos (see also D. Robinson 2011, 134-135; Bakscheider 346-347). Though obviously giving expression to her grief, Sappho is nevertheless creatively ineffectual. Robinson gives her voice but still denies her agency—a privilege she grants herself to manifest her own empowerment. Robinson imagines, even performs, the lovesick Sappho, but does not become her, as the framing sonnets demonstrate. The sequence shows the threat of psychic instability, posed by the failure to strike a balance between reason and desire, and implies the struggle involved in maintaining such a synthesis. What Robinson seeks to formulate in *Sappho and Phaon* is that for literary women the best policy resides in a balanced synthesis between sensibility and reason, which should ensure greater self-control, yield greater insight, polish their poetic acumen, and allow participation in the public sphere to fulfill a collective purpose.



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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Tim Fulford for his invaluable help and comments on the draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> As Ann Jessie Van Sant has succinctly formulated it, sensibility denoted “*an organic sensitivity dependent on brain and nerves and underlying a) delicate moral and aesthetic perception; b) acuteness of feeling, both emotional and physical; and c) susceptibility to delicate passionate arousal. Though belonging to all, greater degrees of delicacy of sensibility—often to a point of fragility—are characteristic of women and upper classes. Excessive delicacy or acuteness of feeling produces an impaired or diseased state*” (1; italics in the original). Also see, G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Cult of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*; Ildiko Csengei, *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century*.

<sup>3</sup> See Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature*, and Clark Lawlor, “Fashionable Melancholy”.

<sup>4</sup> For early accounts of melancholy, see, for example, George Cheyne’s 1733 *The English Malady, Or a Treatise of Nervous Diseases of All Kinds*; Jacques Ferrand’s 1640 *Erotomania: Or, A Treatise Discoursing of the Essence, Causes, Symptomes, Prognosticks, and Cure of Love, Or Erotique Melancholy*, translated by Edmund Chilmead; Timothie Bright’s 1586 *A Treatise of Melancholie*.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon* are taken from Judith Pascoe’s edition, *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, 144-180.

<sup>6</sup> Writing on the pathologies of melancholy in the first part of the book, Burton remarks that in women melancholy results mostly in inarticulateness and madness, due to their inhibited desires: “Many of them cannot tell how to express themselves in words, or how it holds them, what ails them, you cannot understand them, or well tell what to make of their sayings; so far gone sometimes, so stupefied and distracted, they think themselves bewitched, they are in despair” (I: 252).

<sup>7</sup> This idea seems to echo Wollstonecraft’s premise in her first *Vindication* that there are “emotions that reason deepens, and justly terms the feelings of *humanity*” (54).

<sup>8</sup> Discussing Hays’s novels, Miriam Wallace has pointed out that Hays’s female characters “are thinking, rational beings whose highly developed sensibility exists in dynamic tension with reason as they struggle to understand and control their circumstances, choices, and actions” (66).

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Robinson has commented that Robinson’s formal aptitude manifests in her handling of the Petrarchan form, whereby she infers that “worthy poets maintain control of their passions just as they do of their forms, and so through formal discipline, they earn fame” (2011, 135).