

Ancient Fanfiction: A Female Potter
By Grace Blaxill

It is early in the morning. The pottery studio is filled with clusters of partially glazed amphorae and cramped tables crusted with old clay. The plastered white walls glow as the first rays of the sun illuminate the grey mist of the Dawn.

I brush my thumb against the errant smudge of black and lean in closer to the [kylix](#). I notice the cup's shallow and smooth shape as it fits perfectly in my hands. "Exactly how it should," I think to myself. My hands shaped it.

Gently now, Merope.

Holding my breath, my mouth slightly agape, I focus my every thought on the blank, black surface in one hand and the brush in my other.

Gently...

Gently, ever so gently, I press a dot of white paint onto my cup, light as a kiss.

Success!

Grinning, I try to keep my hand steady as I carefully pull my hand away to see--

"MEROPE!"

--disaster. My brush clatters to the floor as I scramble away from my workspace. From the open doorway, Xanthus strides towards me past all the other deserted tables and half-finished works in the studio.

"You are NOT allowed in the studio without supervision. It's barely morning! What exactly do you think you're doing here--" he glances down to my kylix and his eyes somehow bulge further from his face "-- and what, by Zeus, do you think you're painting?"

I open my mouth to reply "Nothing," but I think better of it. I stall for a moment, trying to come up with a lie that would justify my obvious use of paint and materials against the rules of the master potters, but I can't think of any. I take a deep breath, and then say in a rush,

"I know I wasn't supposed to but I just took some unused clay scraps. No one was using them, I swear. I am just making a kylix for myself." I see Xanthus' eyebrows raise almost to his receding hairline. I add quickly:

"I wasn't going to sell it to anyone! I am making it as an offering to Athena to help me with--umm- something."

I catch myself before I let the full truth spill out. Ever since I heard Rhesus was getting married, anger and abandonment had roiled itself in my stomach. Unable to sleep, unable to think, I started sneaking into the studio every dawn. Maybe it was gray mist sparkling in the early morning light, maybe I was projecting myself onto her myth, but I painted the story of Eos and Tithonus on the kylix. Another woman, I thought



embarrassed, chasing after a man who doesn't want her. But I wasn't about to tell Xanthus all that.

Xanthus stares at me. I stare back, trying not to acknowledge the blush I'm sure is spreading across my cheeks.

"You are making a kylix. With scraps. Of the studio's clay."

I bow my head and try to sound contrite as I recite,

"I only hope to contribute to the eminence of Parthenius"

"DON'T even try it, you..."

His speech dies in his thought as he stares at the kylix. He picks it up in both hands. My heart leaps and I almost screech at him that the paint is wet. But Xanthus leans in closer to the two figures on the underside, Eos chasing Tithonus.

"What did you say you were doing with this?"

"I'm offering it to Athena. To ... advance my skills."

After another long moment of inspecting, Xanthus puts the kylix down. He sniffs and picks at a dried speck of clay near my cup.

"Give it to Aphrodite, not Athena. You don't need help from the crafter."

Did Xanthus... just complement my work? I stare blankly at him-- surely I must have misheard him. He narrows his eyes, glaring once more, and snaps,

"Now get back to work."

He spins on his heel and heads back towards his records near the front of the studio. I sit back down and look at my kylix. Eos' sad white eyes stare at Tithonus as he runs away from her. Almost as if, in this moment, she questions whether she should be chasing a man when she can chase her dreams.

Smiling, I pick up my brush and do as Xanthus said.

Context:

There is a misconception that in the ancient world men were the only makers. Recent analyses on a woman's burial from Eleutherna on Crete showed that on the right side of her body there were notably developed muscles, while the cartilage on her knee and hip joints was worn away, leaving the bones smooth and ivory-like. Archaeologists not being able to find a comparison in the archaeological record, observed a master ceramicist who lived near the Eleutherna site. The woman potter demonstrated how she created her large vases—describing the sets of muscles used and subsequent strain experienced—and provided researchers with a comparison to her 3,000-year-old predecessor.

Read about this discovery here:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/meet-female-artisan-whose-masterful-ceramics-defied-ancient-greek-gender-norms-180970288/>