

Reading Sappho

Contemporary Approaches

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EIGHT



Sappho and Her Social Context: Sense and Sensuality

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The poetic personality of Sappho and the poetic phenomenon of Sappho have proven difficult for both ancients and moderns to understand. Later generations of ancients—Greeks of the fourth century B.C.E. and thereafter, Romans, and Byzantines—were unaccustomed to supreme lyric talent in a woman who wrote about seemingly private passions. Several ancient sources thus class the late seventh-/early-sixth-century B.C.E. Sappho not among the leading male poets of her time, as the ninth great Greek lyric genius, but as tenth of the female Muses.¹ In so doing, they may have suggested that she had not earned literary stature through toil and competition, as did the men of her field (and, according to some, as had the female poet Corinna). But by calling her a Muse they ranked her an inspired and immortal figure to whom poetic self-expression and success came

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1. See *AP* 7.14, 9.66, and 9.571: “Sappho is not the ninth of men, but is inscribed as the tenth Muse among the lovely Muses” (by the second-century B.C.E. poet Antipater of Sidon), as well as *AP* 9.506 (by Plato): see also Plut. *Amal.* 18 for the view of Sappho as the tenth Muse. Various, and later, ancient sources do, however, list Sappho among the nine great Greek lyric poets—for example, Gell. *NA* 19.3 and Ath. 14.639e.

naturally.² Various works from the fourth century onward also represent Sappho as a mythic heroine, driven by her love for a younger man, Phaon, to a dramatic suicide.³

The ancients' belief in Sappho's superiority was so strong that it prevented them from ascribing to her conduct which, by the third century B.C.E., was viewed as disgraceful for a female.⁴ Although a number acknowledge the existence of rumors that she participated, physically, in homosexual activity, none lends credence to the charge. Our earliest such source, a biography from the Hellenistic period (third/second centuries B.C.E.), remarks that "she has been accused by a few of being undisciplined and sexually involved with women."⁵ In the fifteenth of Ovid's *Heroides*, a fictive epistle from Sappho to Phaon, she is portrayed as discomfited by allegations that she enjoyed erotic attachments with other women; at line 201 she complains that her love for the women of her native Lesbos has made her infamous.⁶ A scholiast to Horace (*Ep.* 1.19.28) accounts for the application of the epithet *mascula* to Sappho by asserting that she "is maligned as having been a tribade."⁷ And the first biographical entry on Sappho in the tenth-century C.E. lexicon known as the *Suda* simply states that "she was slanderously accused of shameful intimacy with certain of her female pupils."⁸

2. For the Muses' supposed ease at poetic creation, see Hes. *Theog.* 75–103. On the poetic competitions between male artists, see, for example, Hes. *Op.* 654 ff.; on the tradition of Corinna's competition with Pindar, see, e.g., Plut. *De glor. Ath.* 4.347 ff. and Paus. 9.22.3.

3. See, e.g., Men. fr. 258; Ovid *Her.* 15; Ath. 13.596b; the *Suda*, s.v. "Sappho" (β) and "Phaon." Sappho's suicidal leap is also depicted on the apse of the first-century C.E. underground basilica found in 1917 at Rome's Porta Maggiore. On Sappho's image in Greek literature of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., see also Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 174.

4. See Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 182. Dover suggests that Hellenistic attitudes toward female sexuality were influenced by those of classical Athens, which regarded the practice as a taboo subject.

5. *POxy.* XV 1800, fr. 1 col. 1.16 ff.; for its date, see Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 174.

6. Ovid *Tr.* 2.365, "Lesbia quid docuit Sappho nisi amare puellas?" though often cited as evidence for Sappho's homosexuality, probably means that Sappho taught girls to love and belongs to a tradition, discussed by Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 174–75, of Sappho as an instructor of girls.

7. Hor. *Carm.* 2.13.24–25 "querentem / Sappho puellis de popularibus," cited by Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 174, as a source for Sappho's homosexuality, merely refers to Sappho's plaintive verses about the girls of her native Lesbos and does not mention her sexual conduct as such.

8. A remark by the fourth-century C.E. Greek rhetorician Themistius (p. xiii; p. 170 D.), to the effect that Sappho lavished praise on her *paidika*, may also deserve mention (this word is a standard Greek term for the youthful beloved in a male homosexual union). Yet as Themistius is only talking about verbal expressions of passion, his statement cannot truly be regarded as testimony to Sappho's sexual habits.

The shamefulness which these writers impute to women's participation in homosexual acts apparently explains their unanimous suspension of belief where Sappho's alleged practices are concerned. Three of these sources—the Hellenistic biography, the first-century B.C.E. Ovidian epistle, and the entry in the *Suda*—concomitantly insist that Sappho's primary erotic allegiances were heterosexual, citing as evidence that she was infatuated with Phaon, was married, and had a daughter.⁹ By comparison, the homosexual liaisons attributed to the male poets of Sappho's time do not meet with similar disbelief or disapproval. A number of these same authorities refer to the homosexual involvements of Greek male lyric poets as established facts; like virtually all ancient testimony on the lives of Greek poets, they do not give the impression that male pederasty, at least for the "active" partner, was thought cause for shame.¹⁰ The *Suda*'s comment on Anacreon—"his life was spent on sexual relationships with boys and women, and on poems"—stands in sharp contrast to its words on Sappho. These ancient sources do not even entertain the notion that Sappho was, as they suggest Anacreon may have been, a well-adjusted bisexual. Rather than sanction female homosexual activity they retreat to incredulity.

Modern critics share the ancients' view of Sappho as an extraordinary individual. Yet they do not idealize her as a mythic figure but reckon her a flesh-and-blood human being. Recent scholars even assume that Sappho's homosexuality is an ascertained, or at least ascertainable, fact and try to come to terms with her homoeroticism instead of analyzing and appreciating her poetry. A 1966 essay typifies the customary approach. It claims to focus on the two special difficulties confronting students of Sappho's fragmentary remains: "the moral question" (i.e., involving "the view of Sappho as a homosexual") and the "aesthetic question" ("is Sappho worth reading?").¹¹ In a 1974 book on Greek lyric poetry, the chapter on Sappho begins by labeling as "crucial" her "relationship to her friends," examines whether the tradition of her homosexuality is a "correct inference," devotes its discussion of her most famous verses, fragment 31 Lobel-Page (L.-P.), to the obvious fact that Sappho is apparently describing her physical response to the attractions of another woman, and finally calls attention to Sappho's "disappointing aspects" while ostensibly summarizing the distinctive features of her poetry.¹²

9. *POxy.* XV, 1800 fr. 1 col. 1.14–16 alleges that she had a daughter; *Her.* 15 depicts Sappho as enraptured with Phaon and hence a converted, if not a diehard, lover of men; the *Suda* speaks of her husband, Cercylus of Andros, as well as her daughter.

10. Passive homosexual behavior by a man no longer a youth was, of course, another matter. See Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* 209 ff., on the abuse of pathics—"evidently the most risible type of homosexual"—in Greek comedy.

11. Davison, "Sappho," in *From Archilochus to Pindar* 287.

12. Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody* 101 ff.

Fragment 31 L.-P. has, of late, even undergone dissection as a clinical record of acute symptoms suffered by a "masculine lesbian" during an anxiety attack.¹³

Modern criticism of supposedly homosexual, or at least bisexual, Greek male lyric poets, however, does not reflect the same obsession with their sexual preferences to the neglect of their poetry. The same critical study of Greek lyric poetry which accords key importance to the nature of Sappho's relationship with her friends relegates the topic on Anacreon's sexual tastes to a few brief comments, and carefully scrutinizes several of his erotic fragments without agonizing over the gender of their *dramatis personae*.¹⁴ (Interestingly, the one possible reference to homosexuality in the poems of Anacreon which seems to trouble commentators most [fr. 358.5-8 Page (P.)] involves female homosexual behavior: his portrayal of a girl from Lesbos who ignores him to gape *pros allēn tina*, "after another person [or thing] of feminine gender." Several scholars have taken elaborate pains to prove that Anacreon is not characterizing the girl as homosexual in her preferences.)¹⁵ As disturbing as many moderns, nurtured on Judaeo-Christian values, find the idea of male homosexuality, they still seem less disturbed by unmistakable references to male homoeroticism than by possible allusions to its female equivalent. They are also far better able to appreciate works containing male homoeroticism as literary art.

The negative reaction which female homosexuality has aroused from the Hellenistic period onward has, it would seem, caused Sappho to receive different (and increasingly inequitable) treatment from that given Greek male lyric poets. It is my view, however, that the sensual conduct in which the first-person speaker of Sappho's verses often engages with other women may not truly merit the label of "female homosexuality" at all. It is also my thesis that Sappho should not be read merely as a confessional poet who voices private feelings to the female objects of her desire. Rather, I believe that she should be regarded primarily as a poet with an important social purpose and public function: that of instilling sensual awareness and sexual self-esteem and of facilitating role adjustment in young females coming of age in a sexually segregated society. Furthermore, I believe that she should be regarded as an artist voicing sentiments which need not be her own. I should like to establish the validity of this thesis through an examination of Sappho in her social context. For such an examination demonstrates that her concerns were shared by other individuals, and entire institutions, in

13. Devereux, "The Nature of Sappho's Seizure."

14. Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody* 150 ff.

15. See, for example, in English-language publications alone, Wigodsky, "Anacreon and the Girl from Lesbos" 109; Davison, "Sappho" 247-55; West, "Melica" 205-15. See also Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 180.

the archaic and classical Greek world, and that these concerns adhere to previously established literary tradition.



Revulsion at female homosexuality has, as I have noted, largely inspired past efforts to discredit belief in Sappho's physical homoeroticism.¹⁶ Yet the view that Sappho not merely indulged in, but exhibited an exclusive preference for, homosexual acts has only gained widespread currency in the past few years. Indeed, the modern sense of the words "Sapphic" and "Lesbian" is largely responsible for popularizing the view of Sappho as an exclusive, and physically practicing, homosexual. The terms "Sapphism," "sapphist," and "sapphic" were formally introduced into English only in the last decade of the nineteenth century, when British medical authorities eagerly labeled what they judged to be psychopathological behavior exhibited by the licentious French and accepted the tradition about Sappho's sexual preferences which was accredited in fin de siècle France.¹⁷ The more colloquial word "Lesbian" has a more interesting history. In fifth-century B.C.E. Greek comedy the verb *lesbi[a]zein*, "to act like one from Lesbos," serves to denote fellatio performed by females, probably because of the renown of Sappho's island women for sensual, although apparently heterosexual, expertise.¹⁸ Both the first-century B.C.E. Roman poet Catullus and his first-century C.E. imitator Martial attribute to women whom they call "Lesbia" varied exploits of a sexual, but

16. See, for example, Robinson, *Sappho and Her Influence* 43–44, who denies with fervency that "Sappho is a woman who has given herself up to unnatural and inordinate practices which defy the moral instinct and . . . harden and petrify the soul."

17. "Sapphism," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, first appears in Billing's *National Medical Dictionary* of 1890; a June 1901 issue of the British medical journal *Lancet* noted that "Sapphism" and other vices have been treated in French but not yet in English novels. The French view of Sappho as a homosexual owes much of its popularity to the 1895 publication of Pierre Louÿs's *Songs of Bilitis*. These—closely following upon Louÿs's translation of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*—purported to be translations of an ancient Greek manuscript, the autobiography of a peasant girl who had belonged to Sappho's homosexual circle and later became a temple prostitute. They were immediately denounced as a forgery by the great scholar U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who vehemently denied the possibility of Sappho's homosexuality on the grounds that she was "an honorable lady, wife, and mother" (Wilamowitz's 1896 review was also reprinted in his *Sappho und Simonides*). Yet Wilamowitz's crusade does not seem to have convinced Marcel Proust. In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the narrator's discovery that Albertine and her girl friends are practicing homosexuals coincides with his remark that she would be "like Sappho" if she were to drown by leaping into the sea (see Kostis, "Albertine" 125–35).

18. For *lesbiazein*, see Ar. *Vesp.* 1346, *Ran.* 1308, *Ecll.* 920; cf. also Lucian *Pseudologista* 128. For the sexual image of Lesbian women, see Lucian *Dial. Meret.* 5 and Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 182–84.

never a homosexual, nature; the former in poem 51, a translation of Sappho fragment 31 L.-P., and the latter at 2.50, a pasquinade on female fellatio. According to standard reference works, the English adjective "Lesbian" denoted intensely erotic, hetero- more than homoerotic, individuals and feelings until only a few decades ago.¹⁹ But its medical and "underground" meaning, first attested in 1890, has gradually taken over as the existence of female homosexual liaisons has become more widely acknowledged among the educated, Anglo-American public.²⁰

Whatever the history of the terms may be, the prevalent modern impression that Sappho was a Lesbian, that she herself took part in homosexual practices, is not based on ancient testimony. As we have seen, the ancient sources who as much as mention Sappho's reputation for physical homoerotic involvement (the earliest of which postdates her lifetime by at least 300 years) describe this reputation as nothing more than a wholly disgraceful accusation. This denial is all the more noteworthy when compared with other comments about female homosexual relations in classical antiquity. At 191e of the *Symposium*—a work which precedes Sappho's Hellenistic biography by over a century—Plato's Aristophanes speaks matter-of-factly of women who are attracted to other women, the *hetairistriaí*: these, he claims, are halves of an originally all-female whore, and analogous to men who love other males.²¹ A poem written over 400 years later by the Roman epigrammatist Martial graphically lampoons a masculine female homosexual. In his *Life of Lycurgus*, the second-century C.E. Greek writer Plutarch ascribed homoerotic liaisons to the women of archaic Sparta, Sappho's

19. Webster's *New International Dictionary*, 3rd ed., still gives "erotic" as the chief nongeographic meaning of "Lesbian," citing "Lesbianism" in the sense of "female homosexuality" as "medical term." The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not even give a sexual meaning for the word "Lesbian." And both Klein, *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary* 418, and the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "Lesbian," still list the meaning "erotic" ahead of "Pertaining to female homosexuality."

20. See the 1976 supplement to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Lesbian": it also notes that an 1892 *Dictionary of Psychological Medicine* and James Joyce's 1922 *Ulysses* use the adjective "lesbic" for "female homosexual," no doubt because "Lesbian" carried quite different connotations at that time.

21. As Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 172, remarks, however, this is the only extant reference to female homosexuality in classic Attic literature; it is also unclear to him whether or not the word *hetairistria* "acquires a derogatory nuance from *laikastria*, 'whore.'" Although Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.E.) depicts the female title character as complimenting a Spartan woman on her physical charms, and going so far as to touch her breasts (ll. 80 ff.), he does not suggest that these or other sexually deprived women turn to one another for sexual satisfaction (rather, he has them masturbating with phallus substitutes). This would imply—as I argue below—that gestures which moderns would regard as inviting and initiating physical homosexual activity were not so viewed by the Greeks of classical times.

veritable contemporaries.²² And Lucian's *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, composed in the late second century c.e., portrays women of Corinth and Lesbos who shun intercourse with men in favor of relations with other females.²³

In addition, the surviving fragments of Sappho's poetry do not provide any decisive evidence that she participated in homosexual acts. Many of Sappho's lyrics written in the first person imply an involvement in acts of heterosexual love. It must not be forgotten, after all, that some of her poems make reference to a beloved daughter. In fragment 132 L.-P., its first-person speaker even applies to her daughter, her only child, the adjective *agapētōs*, a word used in the Homeric epics exclusively for a family's male hope and heir: "I have a lovely child, whose form is like / gold flowers. My heart's one pleasure, Cleis, for whom I'd not give all Lydia . . ." ²⁴ Yet her first-person lyrics never depict the speaker as engaging in acts of homosexual love. To be sure, a fragmentary lyric ascribed by some to Sappho (fr. 99 L.-P.) has been interpreted as containing part of a word—*olisbos*—meaning an artificial phallus. Still, even if one accepts Sappho as the author, and *olisbos* as the reading, here the poetic context fails to clarify Sappho's relationship to it, and its to Sappho.²⁵

More significantly, there are no references in Sappho's lyrics to any physiological details of female homoerotic involvement—neither when she is writing in the first person nor when she is describing the actions of other women.²⁶ To be sure, this may be nothing more than tasteful reticence, the literary counterpart of a scene on an archaic vase from Thera dated to Sappho's time (ca. 620 B.C.E.): the vase depicts two females affectionately performing the chin-chucking gesture which served as a prelude to heterosexual and homosexual lovemaking among the Greeks, and leaves the rest to the imagination.²⁷ It may well be that Sappho wrote more explicitly about

22. Mart. 7.67; Plut. *Lyc.* 18.9, which claims that "highly reputable" Spartan women engaged in love affairs with maidens in order to illustrate the omnipresence and high valuation of *erōs* in early Spartan society.

23. Luc. *Dial. Meret.* 5.

24. For *agapētōs* in Homer, see *Il.* 6.401 and *Od.* 2.365; 4.727, 817; 5.18. See in this connection also frs. 121 (to a male lover, and in the first person), 112, 115 L.-P.

25. On this fragment, *POxy.* 2291, see Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* 144–45, and Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody* 269–70. For the use of an *olisbos* in other sexual acts, see Pomeroy, *Goddesses* pl. 12; Hipponax fr. 92 and Petron. *Sat.* 132; Boardman, *Athenian Red-Figure Vases* pl. 99, view 1.

26. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 175–76, would maintain that fr. 94.21–23 L.-P.—"And on soft beds tender you expelled desire"—refers to the female addressee's satisfying either Sappho's or her own desire through bodily contact; the expression "to expel desire" is, however, too vague to permit a definitive interpretation and, in any event, not physiologically explicit.

27. See Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 173. The vase is also discussed by Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 243, and depicted in Richter, *Kōurai* pl. VIIIc. Its scene stands in contrast to that of an Attic

her own, and others', participation in homosexual acts in verses which have been accidentally, or even deliberately, lost. So, too, the surviving lyrics may contain implicit, or euphemistic, allusions to specific homosexual practices which readers today, ignorant of what sexual connotations certain words carried to an ancient Greek audience, have been unable, or unwilling, to perceive.²⁸ But from the evidence we do have we can only conclude that she did not represent herself in her verses as having expressed homosexual feelings physically.

Nevertheless, when writing in the first person, Sappho does evince a "lover's passion" toward other women and give utterance to strong homosexual feelings. In fragment 31 L.-P., for example, Sappho depicts herself as responding to a female friend's charms with violent physical reactions—"My tongue freezes silent and stiff, light flame trickles under my skin, I no longer see with my eyes, my ears whirring." Later classical authors, moreover, drew on these verses when delineating the symptoms not only of overpowering (heterosexual) passion, but of fear, drunkenness, and epilepsy as well.²⁹ In other lyrics, too, the speaker, presumably Sappho herself, is portrayed as sensually attracted and aroused by other women. Most notable of these is fragment 49 L.-P., addressing a woman named Atthis. Its speaker states: "I adored you, once in the past, when you seemed to me to be a small, graceless child." Fragment 96 L.-P., which avows desire for Atthis, and fragment 1 L.-P., the hymn to Aphrodite, merit note in this context as well.³⁰

It is poems of this sort which lead her modern readers to surmise that Sappho must have actually engaged in physical relationships with the women she found sensually appealing, or might as well have done so if she in actuality did not. The psychoanalytical and biographical orientation of recent literary criticism encourages such a conclusion by its tendency to regard the impulses that artists reveal in their work as essentially identical

red-figure cup by Apollodorus, dated ca. 500 B.C.E. and pictured in Boardman and La Rocca, *Eros in Greece* 110. This portrays two naked women, one of whom, on her knees, fingers the genital area of her standing companion. These women are, however, thought to be *hetairai* (courtesans) preparing for a celebration with men by anointing one another with perfume; La Rocca finds it unlikely that the scene depicts an erotic relationship between the women (since there are no other examples of this in Attic vase painting) but likely that such relationships existed in a society with such rigid sexual segregation.

28. See Russo's review of Kirkwood, "Reading the Greek Lyric Poets," and Lanata, "Sul linguaggio amoroso" 65-66.

29. For the adaptation of these symptoms to other contexts, by later authors, see Catull. 51 and Lucr. 3.154-56, 476-79, 487-91.

30. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 176 n. 10, however, points out that the one phrase in fr. 1 L.-P. indicating the beloved's sex as female is at variance with the usages of Sappho's dialect. Several textual emendations designed to restore linguistic normality would in fact remove the feminine ending.

with their realization in behavior, be they acknowledged by or unknown to the individual.³¹ This supposition is also fostered by contemporary notions about male and female sexual behavior. For in our society, we assume that men who express sensual appreciation for women desire (or at least would not object to) physical involvement with them. Furthermore, we are conditioned to view as unfeminine any woman who openly expresses sensual attraction for another human being; she is taking the "sexual initiative" and behaving as only men are supposed to. Indeed, when that object of allure is a woman, as in Sappho's poems, the aggressive female is considered doubly masculine.

Our modern Western social and sexual categories and expectations, however, differ considerably from those of Sappho's milieu. Archaic Greek society was for the most part sexually segregated. A well-born young girl, so far as we can tell, had little contact with males before and after marriage. A bride simply accepted the spouse, often a stranger, her father selected for her.³² After marriage, a woman in this (as in later periods of Greek) society was excluded from the worldly pursuits which occupied most of her husband's time and life; her sexual charms and needs were, it would seem, neglected and often feared by him.³³ Thus she could hardly have expected her husband's esteem and devotion to sustain her emotionally. Even the union of Hector and Andromache, who were celebrated in early and later Greek literature as the model married couple, is depicted as a highly asymmetrical and rather unaffectionate relationship, in which she is bound to him by dependency more than anything else and chastised for the merest show of independence.³⁴ The archaic and classical Greeks, however, do not appear to have accorded the state of matrimony or the sexual role of wife much social prestige or respect. Marriage itself was viewed simply

31. Many ancient Greeks and Romans seem to have adopted this approach as well. Although Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* employs it in jest when characterizing the playwrights Euripides and Agathon as misogynist and transvestite, respectively, others—such as St. Jerome (on Lucretius's poisoning by a love philter)—do so seriously. For ancient biography in general, see Fairweather, "Fiction in the Biographies."

32. Consider, for example, Hesiod's account of Helen's wooing (frs. 199 and 200 Merkelbach-West) and the absence of Agariste, daughter of Cleisthenes of Sicyon, from Herodotus's account of her betrothal at 6.126-30.

33. The exclusion of archaic Greek women from men's activities is emphasized by Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 178; Arthur, "Early Greece" 43; and Lefkowitz, "Critical Stereotypes" 33-34. For the attitudes voiced by men in archaic Greece toward wives' sexuality, see, for example, Semonides' "Essay on Women," esp. ll. 48-49, 53-54, and 90-91, and Hes. *Op.* 373-75, 695-705; see also the discussion in Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 49.

34. Homer *Il.* 6.369-493 is the *locus classicus* on Hector and Andromache. For Sappho's poetic glorification of Hector's and Andromache's nuptials, see fr. 44 L.-P.; for Stesichorus's, see Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 257; for Euripides' less idealized portrayal of their marriage, see his *Andr.* 222-27.

as a socioeconomic (and sometimes political) institution,³⁵ necessary for the orderly transfer of property and for the perpetuation and strengthening of family and state; it was not deemed necessary for either partner's emotional well-being. Archaic Greek social institutions attempted to undermine, and archaic Greek poets to disparage, the bonds of marriage.³⁶ Significantly, the only writer of the archaic and classical periods who delights in the details of marriage rites for their own sake, and who in fact regards the marital union as an important and equal source of pleasure to bridegroom as well as bride, is Sappho. Fragment 115 L.-P., for example, celebrates a bridegroom's sensual beauty: "To what, O beloved bridegroom, should I properly liken you? I should liken you most closely to a slender sapling." Fragment 141b L.-P. describes prayers for "nothing but blessings" to the bridegroom.³⁷

Sappho's wedding poems, moreover, indicate that the female members of her milieu were profoundly concerned with their physical desirability as brides and the prospect of losing their maidenhood.³⁸ The nuptial ceremonies she represents in her lyrics focus on the bride's sexual initiation and its attendant joys. Yet these young women could not have received sexual attentions from their suitors or hoped to find emotional gratification within marriage itself. They could only have turned to other women to become sensually aware, in order to perform adequately in the role to which their society assigned them and to find the sexual validation that could satisfy their needs. Women were the sole individuals with whom they socialized and by whom they were socialized. Other women would also have experienced feelings identical with those of a young woman and been more sensitized to her concerns. In this perspective Sappho's sensually expressive verses may be viewed as an institutional force in and a reflection of her social setting—a social vehicle for imparting sensual awareness, and sexual self-esteem, to

35. On the function of marriage in archaic Greek society, see Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* 67–68, 71–72, 197–200, 212–13; and Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 33–42.

36. See Pomeroy's discussion of the epiclerate in Athens, a product of Solon's sixth-century B.C.E. legislation (*Goddesses* 60–62). The Spartans' practice of wife sharing, allowing a wife who has borne children for her husband to produce offspring for another, childless, man as well—described by Plut. *Lyc.* 15 and Xen. *Lac.* 1.4—deserves mention in this context too. For the disparagement of marriage by poets of this period, see, e.g., Archil. fr. 80, Semon. "Essay on Women" 96–114, and Hes. *Theog.* 602–12; for an opposing view, see Hippon. fr. 81.

37. See also frs. 27, 30, 44, 110, 111, 112, 113, 116, 117, 141 L.-P., all formally identified as wedding poems.

38. On maidenhood, see the fragments cited in n. 37 above and frs. 104a, 104c, 197, 114 L.-P.; also Catull. 62.38–44 (another Sapphic echo). Fr. 114 is, in fact, an address to maidenhood: "Maidenhood, maidenhood, where do you go when you leave me? I will never come back to you, no longer come back."

women on the threshold of marriage and maturity.³⁹ For in the male sector of archaic and classical Greek society, as well as among females in various Greek locales, an array of sociocultural institutions, including the production and performance of highly personalized poetry, appears to have served this precise function.

Admittedly, the behavior and culture of males and females in the sexual apartheid of archaic and classical Greece were very different. The cultural pursuits esteemed by the upper-class Greeks of preclassical and classical times were exclusively male ones: warfare, politics, athletics, worship of the great male deities, art, even the quest for wisdom.⁴⁰ These activities, which were formally organized and conducted in accordance with well-defined rules, operated as elaborate and prestigious social institutions. They provided competitive situations for a man to surpass others and achieve the recognition by which he would be known as *agathos*, superior. Along with shrewdness, skill at speaking, strength, and stamina, these institutions put to the test sensual attractiveness, being *kalos*.⁴¹ As virtually all of Greek art from the archaic and classical periods attests, a young man's appearance often determined how other men judged him, whether as an athlete, citizen of his *polis*, artistic inspiration, or intellectual protégé.⁴² To be sure, observers or judges may have often complimented a young male on his physical beauty in order to advertise their desire for a physical relationship. Short-lived physical liaisons between older men and youths were a socially sanctioned and much-documented phenomenon in the upper classes, one which thrived to some extent because of women's lowly social state and exclusion from men's affairs. For a young male such a relationship gave emotional satisfaction and the narcissistic gratification of being appreciated as an equal sexual partner.⁴³ But publicly voiced sensual appreciation of a handsome youth might mean no more than would approbation of his calisthenic or cognitive talents.

39. The argument to follow agrees—in many of its points—with the views of Merkelbach, "Sappho und ihr Kreis." However, I also attempt to consider the psychological purposes served by Sappho's poetry (as well as its "institutional" nature), to delineate the role of physical beauty in her milieu, and to confront the problems of poetic personality and personalism as they relate to her work.

40. For "male institutions" in Greek society, and an analysis of how the Greek "zero-sum game" contest system—in which the rewards had to come from one's competitors—worked in determining athletic, religious, military, political, and artistic success, see Gouldner, *Enter Plato* 12–13, 40–64. See also the discussion of Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 71–74.

41. See the discussion of Licht [Brandt], *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* 428–30.

42. See, for example, Theog. 933–38; Pind. *Ol.* 8.19, 9.94, 10.99–105; *Ar. Nub.* 972–78; Plato *Chrm.* 157a4 ff. For Greek male physical narcissism, see Gouldner, *Enter Plato* 41–42, and Slater, *The Glory of Hera* 33–35.

43. See Dover, "Eros and Nomos" 31–42, and "Classical Greek Attitudes" 59–73.

Throughout ancient Greece festivals glorified the beauty of boys simply as a religious and aesthetic ideal,⁴⁴ the period in which Sappho lived also began to pay artistic homage to the youthful male nude figure.⁴⁵ In their victory odes, poets such as Pindar and Bacchylides extol the comeliness of a victorious competitor at the great games as matter-of-factly as they do his lineage or agility; in fragment 108, an encomium to the youth Theoxenus, Pindar claims to react strongly—"melting like bee-stung wax"—to the physical presence of young males.⁴⁶ Yet these religious, aesthetic, and poetic tributes cannot be interpreted as "sexual overtures"; rather, they seem to be conventional public gestures intended to enhance the aesthetic appeal of their objects in a culture which placed a high premium on male physical beauty. Greek men of the archaic and classical periods seem to have observed a distinction between sensual appreciation and sexual appetite, as is perhaps best illustrated by Plato's portrayal of Socrates. At 155d3-4 of the *Charmides*, Socrates makes no bones about his immediate response to the physical attractions of this young disciple—"I caught a glimpse of what was inside his clothes, and caught on fire." But, notwithstanding this and other Platonic dialogues in which Socrates enthusiastically remarks upon the beauty of other young men, Plato characterizes Socrates as refusing to succumb to (homo)sexual temptation and as actively dissuading other males from engaging in physical relations with desirable young men.⁴⁷

It only stands to reason, therefore, that Greek society would have similarly institutionalized the sensual education and affirmation of upper-class young women. Since women's social value and contribution were defined mainly in physical, sexual terms, and since daughters were as a rule less educated than sons (their acculturation period terminated upon their marriage and hence considerably earlier than that of men),⁴⁸ it also stands to reason that

44. Cf. Ath. 13.565f-556a, 609f; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1099a; Theophr. fr. 111.

45. For the development of Greek sculpture, see the article by Richter, s.v. "Sculpture, Greek," in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

46. Cf. Bacchyl. 9 Snell 27 ff. and the passages of Pindar cited in n. 42 above. The Athenian vases with *kalos* inscriptions, dating from the mid-sixth century B.C.E. and praising the beauty of a particular boy, also deserve consideration in this context: only rarely is the youth praised known to be a favorite of the vase painter himself. See Robinson and Fluck, *Greek Love-Names* 3, who remark, "that the admiration for a beautiful youth must often have been city-wide and not merely the personal feeling of a single individual is also attested by the multitude of his admirers in many cases, to which the *kalos* inscriptions bear witness."

47. See Alcibiades' testimony to Socrates' self-restraint at *Sym.* 216d-219d and Socrates' own speeches at *Phdr.* 238d-241d, 244a-257b; see also the discussions of Grube, *Plato's Thought* 90-119, and Wender, "Plato, Misogynist" 75-90.

48. That ancient Greek women generally were wed soon after puberty to men of about thirty and that Spartan women's marriage (to men of their own age) when they were in their late teens is anomalous find support in Hes. *Op.* 665 ff.; Xen. *Oec.* 7.5, *Ath.* 56.7; Arist. *Pol.* 1335a28.

Greek female institutions would have focused far more intensively than their male counterparts on fostering sensual consciousness and confidence. The better known and more accessible ancient Greek sources seem more interested in criticizing the “gossiping” networks and domestic associations of married women and express apprehension about women’s socializing and sharing sexual knowledge with one another. The seventh-century B.C.E. poet Semonides’ “Essay on Women” praises the type of wife who “takes no pleasure in sitting among women when they talk about sexual matters”; a speech delivered by the self-reproachful Hermione in Euripides’ *Andromache* castigates other women whose gatherings corrupted her personally, and endanger the domestic tranquility of all husbands, with their “Siren talk”; Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Ecclesiazusae* caricature women’s groups as composed of wives excessively interested in sex and drink, and consequently as threatening to marriage.⁴⁹ Yet positive portrayals of other ancient Greek female institutions survive as well—portrayals which provide evidence that these institutions supplied well-born women with the same sort of sensual enlightenment and self-validation which Greek men of their class derived from their associations, and did so without either undermining Greek male society or challenging its view of women’s place.

Most prominent among these institutions are, of course, female religious cults. Those which featured the worship of a female divinity often concerned themselves with different aspects of women’s experience and its correspondences in nature. Hera, for example, was associated with matrimony, maternity, and the fertility of domestic flora and fauna; Artemis with human childbirth and the fecundity of wild creatures.⁵⁰ One of Hera’s holy festivals, held on Sappho’s native Lesbos, was devoted to a female beauty contest and, like similar celebrations elsewhere, was comparable to the festivals which glorified male beauty.⁵¹ By emphasizing and placing a competitive value on young women’s physical appearance, these contests served the

See also Plutarch’s insistence, at *Lyc.* 15.4, that Spartan brides were “never small and of tender years, but in their full bloom and ripeness,” as if to underline their uniqueness among Greek women. On the nature and limitations of women’s formal education throughout Greece, see Plato *Leg.* 805d6–806c7.

49. Semon. “Essay on Women” 90–91; Eur. *Andr.* 930 ff. For Aristophanes’ portrayal of women’s groups, see Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 103–5 (my translation of *Thesm.* 383–413, 497–519), 112–14. On women’s groups in archaic Greek society, and their parallelism with men’s groups, see also Merkelbach, “Sappho und ihr Kreis” 2–3.

50. On the various cults of Hera and Artemis in archaic and classical Greece, see Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* 1:2075–87, 2098–104 (on the *hieros gamos*); 1:559–94.

51. See Alc. fr. 130.32–35 L.-P., as well as a scholiast to *Il.* 9.129; Hesychius, s.v. “*pylaïdes*”; Ath. 13.609 ff.; *AP* 9.189; and Theophr. fr. 111 for these contests.

specific purpose of bolstering women's pride in their looks. Furthermore, marriage preparations and ceremonies, which seemed to have prefigured, or reenacted, the nuptials of each female participant, were organized into an institution of their own, one that allowed all to share, vicariously, the attention bestowed upon the bride.⁵²

In addition, Greek lyric poetry for and by women also appears to have functioned as a type of institution. Like all ancient Greek lyric verse, monodic (i.e., lyric ostensibly for solo performance) and choral, it directs itself at a public; a recent critic has sensibly questioned the applicability to early Greek monody of "the modern sensibility that understands the 'lyric' poem as the essence of personal expression, the private voice that is meant not so much to be heard as overheard."⁵³ From what one may determine, archaic Greek "women's poetry" spoke to females committed to the same goals, and conditioned by the same experiences,⁵⁴ glorifying both the sensual charms of women and those aspects of their lifestyle which they found sensually gratifying and charming. What remains of Greek "women's" poetry—poems by females such as Sappho and Corinna, poems for females such as Alcman's maiden songs—celebrates, in strikingly affirmative fashion, not only female beauty but also the loveliness of nature and all things divine, the pleasures residing in day-to-day living, the emotional rewards deriving from close companionship.

In this context, the role of Sappho herself as a "sensual consciousness-raiser" falls within a common and culturally important tradition in archaic and classical Greece.⁵⁵ Like Sappho, male lyric poets and plastic artists routinely exalt the beauty of the human form, sharing her conception of physical and sensual graces as a reflection of divine favor which contribute to earthly fulfillment. Furthermore, Sappho's subject matter and manner of self-expression in one major respect more closely resemble those of sculptors and vase painters than those of other male poets. Her female subjects are mostly defined by, and limited to, their physical being and states of emotion;

52. See Sappho frs. 29, 44-31, 51 L.-P.; Pind. *Pyth.* 3.17 ff.

53. Russo, "Reading the Greek Lyric Poets" 709.

54. See *ibid.*, 720-23. Evidence indicating that Greek female lyric poets directed their work at, and chiefly gained recognition from, female audiences includes Sappho frs. 150 and 160 L.-P., Corinna fr. 65, Pausanias's allegation at 2.20.8 that the female poet Telesilla was "of high repute among women," and the fact that Sappho's poems generally feature women as their addressees.

55. To be sure, "consciousness-raising" is a new concept and coinage, associated primarily with the heightening of political awareness; I would, however, argue that receptiveness to and cultivation of physical beauty were no less valued in and by the males and females of various archaic and classical Greek milieux than is political awareness among educated members of Western society today.

they are not immortalized, as are the subjects of male poetry, for glory achieved by doing. The nature of Sappho's material in fact helps explain her frequent emphasis on visual appearance and human feelings.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, to communicate the beauty of what she portrays, especially when writing in the first person, she must verbalize what may be construed as her personal judgment, feelings, and passions, and thereby render herself vulnerable to misconstruction. For such statements may be determined merely, and primarily, by the exigencies of her material. One should not, therefore, assume that Sappho's poems in the first person are autobiographical, even if our ancient authorities on Sappho's life often do just that.⁵⁷ A distinction between Sappho and her poetic persona may well often exist, as it so often exists in the verses of her male poetic colleagues.⁵⁸

That Sappho's verses were basically intended as public, rather than personal, statements, that they aimed at instilling sensual awareness and sexual self-esteem in young women, and that even those written in the first person may not express her own feelings seem more obvious if we consider other examples of poetry from a similar social and cultural milieu written in the generation prior to hers. The maiden songs of Alcman, a Spartan male poet of the mid-seventh century B.C.E.,⁵⁹ were composed for delivery by a chorus of young unmarried women in a sexually segregated society which, like Sappho's Lesbos, apparently encouraged greater sensual expressiveness for females than did other societies in ancient Greece.⁶⁰ One of these maiden songs, fragment 3 P, written in the feminine first-person singular, though

56. Sappho's concern with the visual—expressed through the reiteration of verbs of seeing and an emphasis on the visual aspects of entities—is best illustrated by such fragments as 16 (contrasting what some think *to be* most beautiful with what she would most want to *see*), 17, 23, 31, and 96 L.-P; concern with other senses is, however, no less prominent (cf. the auditory emphasis of frs. 1.7–12, 44.20 ff.; the emphasis on scent in fr. 2). One might also regard Greek statues of lovely maidens, *korai*, as in certain respects analogous to Sappho's poetic portrayals of comely young women. The first such statue, predating Sappho's poems by half a century, was dedicated to the goddess Artemis by a woman, Nikandrē (most later ones seem to have male dedicators). Unlike similar statues of young men, *korai* are always draped; their charms, moreover, are delineated decorously and subtly (see the discussions of Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 47, and Richter, *Korai*).

57. See Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 173, 179; cf. also Lefkowitz, "Critical Stereotypes" 29.

58. On the distinction between poet and persona in archaic Greek lyric, see Dover, "The Poetry of Archilochus" 206, and Lanata, "Sul linguaggio amoroso" 65–66.

59. For Alcman's dates, see Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 192–93. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 181, would follow West's dating of Alcman to Sappho's own time (late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E.).

60. Spartan men (according to Plut. *Lyc.* 14 ff.) resided with one another in military barracks until the age of thirty, with the result that not only maidens but women in their first decade of marriage lived apart from their male contemporaries. For Spartan women's (physical) education and sexual image, see Redfield, "The Women of Sparta" 148–49.

clearly recited by a group of young females, appears to have been performed in honor of the goddess Hera; it pays homage to the physical allure, and the responses it evokes, of a woman, Astymeloisa. The speakers compare her to a shooting star, golden sprig, and tender down; they refer to her as “causing longing which loosens the limbs” and casting “glances more melting than sleep and death.”⁶¹ A distinguished commentator on these lyrics, which were discovered only in the 1950s, has the distinct impression “that the whole company is in love” with Astymeloisa.⁶² Yet critics for two decades have veered away from facing the poem’s female “homosexual” sentiments, obviously because the author was a man,⁶³ and have either dissociated him personally from these lyric statements or maintained that he was voicing his *own* passion for Astymeloisa. Resemblances between this and Sappho’s verses largely pass unnoticed, resemblances which include actual, uncommon words. These lyrics call to mind Sappho’s “limb-loosening love makes me tremble—bittersweet, irresistible, surreptitious” (fr. 130 L.-P.) and “now she stands out among the Lydian women like the rosy-fingered moon, after the sun has set, surpassing all the stars” (fr. 96.6–9 L.-P.).⁶⁴ They suggest that Alcman’s maiden songs may have influenced Sappho’s “personal” poems and at least belong to the same literary tradition.

Alcman’s other, longer and better known, maiden song (fr. 1 P.) is presumably connected with a festival of (Artemis) Orthria, Spartan goddess of fertility and vegetation⁶⁵ who, like Hera, was thought to preside over a girl’s transition to married life. Here several female chorus members acclaim, in both first-person singular and first-person plural verb forms, one another’s outstanding physical qualities graphically and lavishly; here, too, they avow, in sexually charged language, an emotional investment in each other.⁶⁶ A recent article has used parallels from Sappho’s wedding songs to argue, persuasively, that this poem was also meant as an epithalamium, a marriage

61. Ll. 61–81 of this fragment are translated, and the problems they pose discussed, by Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 179–80.

62. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 32.

63. Lanata, “Sul linguaggio amoroso” 73–74, is a notable exception; she has recently been joined by Griffiths, “Alcman’s Partheniaion” 59 ff., which does not deal with fr. 3 P. but with its longer sister, discussed below.

64. *Lusimelēs*, “limb-loosening,” found in both Alcman fr. 3 P. and Sappho fr. 130 L.-P., appears but twice in the Homeric epics (*Od.* 20.57, 23.343).

65. Although Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 51 ff., and Griffiths, “Alcman’s Partheniaion” 24 ff., maintain that the song concerns (the Spartan) Helen in her role as goddess of unmarried maidens, and Gentili, “Il partenio” 65–66, argues that Orthria is Aphrodite.

66. On the sexual connotations of the language in this fragment, see, among others, Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 272; Gentili, “Il partenio” 60 ff.; Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 180 (on the disputed *teirein* in l. 77); Nagy, “The Symbols of Greek Lyric” 000–00.

hymn, delivered by girls whose own nuptials are imminent to honor the wedding of another "fellow debutante."⁶⁷ Should this be the case, these verses may have even influenced Sappho's renowned choral wedding poems. Its tone and content at least allow us to infer that many of Sappho's fragments thought to be personal, autobiographical statements might in fact be part of public, if not marriage, hymns sung by other females. Fragment 82 L.-P., "Mnasidika, of fairer form than soft Gyrinno," and fr. 16 L.-P., which praises Anactoria's step and face as more desirable than the armaments of Lydia, are but two examples of such fragments.⁶⁸ They recall passages from Alcman's poem in which the girls receive individual compliments on their attractive features: "The streaming hair of my kinswoman Hagesichora blooms like pure gold; her face, like silver—but what can I say openly?" (ll. 51–56), or "Abundance of purple dye does not suffice as aid, nor the all-golden, many-hued snake bracelet, nor the Lydian headpiece, glorious divine offering of softly glancing young girls, nor the hair of Nanno, nor Areta with godlike beauty, nor Sylakis nor Cleesiserá" (ll. 64–72). Furthermore, Sappho's comparisons between beautiful young women in such fragments as 82 and 96 L.-P.—which suggest that the "agonistic" nature of male Greek culture to some extent permeated women's institutions as well—also have parallels in this poem by Alcman.⁶⁹

Scholars in the past, both Greek literary critics and ancient social historians, have ignored the similarities between Alcman's maiden songs and Sappho's lyrics, largely because they regard the former as choral, public works by a serious male artist, the latter as personal, privately voiced statements by an eccentric female. Even Sappho's verses known to be choral epithalamia are frequently dismissed as overrepresented among her fragments, as exaggerated in importance for such undistinguished poetry.⁷⁰ Yet recent literary scholarship arguing that even Sappho's apparently monodic

67. Griffiths, "Alcman's Partheniaion" 11 ff., notes, for example, that in lines 64 ff. the maidens are said to wear purple and gold, which traditionally belonged to a young woman's dowry. That fr. 3 P. concludes with Astymeloisa's appearance in "male society" ("receiving honor among the army . . . cherished by the populace"; 13–15) suggests that it may have marked a *début*, if not a wedding, too. And Plutarch's statement that young men attended the performance of maiden songs (*Lyc.* 14.4) may imply that they served to introduce marriageable young women to men.

68. See the discussion of this latter poem, which employs as its paradigm Helen (leaving her husband and kin at Sparta, and sailing to Troy), by duBois, "Sappho and Helen" 79–82.

69. In fr. 16 L.-P., however, Sappho transcends the question of encouraging competition among *people* in order to define "the most beautiful *thing* on earth."

70. So Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody* 102, 104–23, 138; his attitude is criticized by Russo, "Reading the Greek Lyric Poets" 718–23. Kirkwood, moreover, does not deal with Alcman in his volume on Greek lyric, judging him a "choral" poet and of no major relevance to "monodists" such as Sappho.

lyrics were designed to be presented—perhaps by more than one person—at some sort of cultic ceremony, and recent studies in women’s social history, which have likened the role of women in archaic Lesbos to that of women in archaic Sparta, provide further reasons for considering the work of Alcman and Sappho together.⁷¹ And the knowledge that Alcman’s maiden songs were written by a man who played no part in the actual performance of his lyrics has crucial implications for an understanding of Sappho, a member, and perhaps a follower, of Alcman’s literary tradition. For the fact that Alcman’s maiden songs, although written in the first person, probably do not express his personal feelings for the girls they portray but merely purport to represent those of their speakers argues for a similar distinction between Sappho and the emotions expressed in her poems. After all, the fact that Alcman’s Sparta promoted the display of intimate appreciation for female beauty in public, to the extent that it was “scripted” by artists who did not personally engage in the display, and assigned high value to these testimonials (doubtless because they made women better able to accept their socially and sexually defined role) suggests that Sappho’s Lesbos did the same. No evidence indicates that Sappho was any more involved with the women whose charms she praises in her lyrics than was Alcman with Astymeloisa or Hagesichora. No evidence, that is, despite later attempts to make sense of her sensually expressive verses, out of their social and literary context.⁷²

Sappho’s homosexual image may, of course be an accurate one. The emotional intensity of Sappho’s poems, the *erōs*, passionate love, which figures prominently in her verses but barely in Alcman’s maiden songs,⁷³ certainly allows the possibility that Sappho did engage in homosexual acts as a private person. So, too, the women portrayed in Sappho’s verses, and in Alcman’s maiden songs, may well have expressed their homosexual sentiments physically. But whether or not she or they did so may not be germane to a basic understanding of Sappho as a creative individual, of the literary tradition in which she worked, or of her role in her society.

71. For example, Russo, “Reading the Greek Lyric Poets”; Merkelbach, “Sappho und ihr Kreis”; Segal, “Eros and Incantation” 70–73; Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 55–56.

72. In order to discourage such attempts, in fact, the early-second-century C.E. poet Strato of Sardis concluded his poems, all of which praise the physical allure of young boys, and many of which are written in the first person, with the following disclaimer (*AP* 12.25B): “Perhaps in the future, someone, hearing these frivolous verses of mine, will imagine these pains of passion to have been all my own. But I’m forever writing compositions for others who love boys, since some god gave me this gift.”

73. For example, at Sappho frs. 15.12, 16.4, 17.47, 49 L.-P.; Alcman fr. 1 P. merely speaks of *erata* Ianthemis at line 76 and uses the verb *eraō*, “to desire passionately,” in the context of aiming to please a goddess.

NINE



Romantic Sensuality, Poetic Sense: A Response to Hallett on Sappho

Eva Stehle

Sappho is, as Judith Hallett observes, a difficult poet to write about. Sappho seems straightforward, personal, honest—"confessional," in Hallett's term. But any lyric poet writing in the first person requires a special critical attitude. One must keep in mind that the "I" of a poem is not necessary the "I" of the poet at all. The poet may put into another's mouth words he or she would not speak *in propria persona*. The "I" may be generalized, as in folksong,¹ or a poet may be writing with a specifically personal voice, as Sappho does when she uses her own name in a poem, but describing events that did not necessarily ever take place. The description of events is the poet's setting (like a stage set) for the play of emotions which he or she wishes to expose. The original emotions themselves must have their stimulus in the poet's experience, but the process of clarifying them requires the poet to refine, transform, extrapolate experience imaginatively, perhaps beyond recognition.

This tantalizing paradox—what looks most like a window into the life of the poet may be least true to the events of that life—is enormously complicated in Sappho's case by the fact that she seems to espouse lesbianism. Many react first to this, which they feel compelled to deny, denounce, celebrate, or somehow judge. They then read the poetry accordingly. On the other hand, those who do try first to distinguish poet from persona seem faced with a confused choice of explaining away the eroticism or discussing Sappho's putative "psychopathology." Hallett is absolutely right that the issue of homosexuality intrudes on, if it does not dominate, almost every discussion of Sappho in a way that does not happen with male poets. Hallett's

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1. See Tsagarakis, *Self-Expression in Early Greek Lyric*, for discussion of the problem.

article suggests an approach that, trying to avoid all of these traps, has some good claims to consideration. Her idea of using Greek male treatment of young men and Alcman's two maiden songs as converging context for Sappho is very suggestive. I do have disagreements with her over both her method of argument and her conclusions.

First, I think Hallett underestimates the real complexity of the question of Sappho's poetic persona. If Sappho's purpose was sexual affirmation of young women preparatory to marriage, questions of the interaction of the persona with the public arise. Was Sappho's stance of lover designed to fit with a ritual role played by the actual woman? Or could erotic admiration via poetry be effective if the author dissociated herself from it? If the poetry was treated as coming not from Sappho but from the community, would the strong personal focus and introspective quality not be subversive to the communal solidarity of praise? Would Sappho's reiterated wish to die not appear ill-omened in a public celebratory setting, a rite of passage? In short, Hallett's discussion of the Greek social structure makes the possibility of institutionalized affirmation of girls appear most plausible, but she still must show that Sappho's poetry fits the bill, appearances to the contrary. Detaching the persona from the poet does not make it automatically an impersonal or communal voice, as Hallett seems to assume. Nor does this view of Sappho illuminate the artistry of the poems at all, throw light on, for example, the interconnected themes of beauty and absence, or the tendency to displace the sensuality of the desired woman onto the surroundings.

With respect to evidence for lesbian practice in Sappho's poetry, Hallett argues that Sappho never pictures the speaker as engaging in acts of homosexual love or mentions physiological details, and that "many of Sappho's lyrics written in the first person imply an involvement in acts of heterosexual love" (131). The last line of 94 Lobel-Page (L.-P.) she dismisses as "too vague" to be definite evidence. The point Hallett is making is that the text of Sappho's poems will not support any great insistence that Sappho was a practicing homosexual lover, which is true. Yet Hallett falls into the biographical trap herself with the remark that many lyrics imply heterosexual love. She seems to assume that indications of sexual activity (or lack of them) will be biographical, even if nothing else is, an assumption which leads Hallett to write as though all the fragments were equally good indicators of Sappho's personal sexuality. In fact, the "many" fragments must be mainly the scraps of wedding hymns and bits of "folksong" (e.g., 102 L.-P.), in which the persona, the "I" of the poem, is communal or generalized, as well as the references to Cleis, Sappho's daughter. None of the major fragments, in which the persona is some manifestation of the poet, breathes a hint of sexual interest in a man. The points to be made, it seems to me, are two. First, Sappho's

sexual activity, whatever it was, was integrated with the institution of marriage (which may not have been sexually very demanding).² Second, we must pay attention to the direction of erotic intensity of Sappho's persona, that is, consider the emotional reality of the poems, without trying to deduce anything about the restriction or range of her enjoyment of sexual activity—and without attributing psychological abnormality or social maladjustment to her.

I think one implicit purpose of Hallett's whole paper is to combat the general supposition that Sappho was emotionally abnormal. Certainly the standard picture of Sappho is of a woman falling unreservedly in love with a girl, being crushed at the girl's departure, falling unreservedly for the next girl, who will also depart, becoming ever more exhausted but never more intelligent in her loving.³ Hallett's answer is to say that Sappho's poetry has an institutional erotic function but not private emotional reality. The idea should, rather, be met head on. Sappho was "abnormal," perhaps, in being unusually open to romantic impulse, unusually aware of the human urge for union and the inevitable separateness. When she wished to explore and clarify these impulses through poetry she chose female homosexual love as the vehicle because lesbian love offered the most receptive setting for romantic eros. Escape to a realm of beauty, illusion of perfect union, inevitability of parting: these could be expressed through union with another woman because such love was separate from daily domestic life with a husband; because the other woman could seem to match, reflect, make the emotional connection far more easily than a man; and because separation, if only by virtue of the inevitability of marriage, was inevitable. The poems of absence and longing need not record—each and every one—a parting or failure in love.⁴ By placing her persona in such settings Sappho could explore the interacting realities of psychological openness to and distance from a lover. Sappho must have known enough of both the romantic yearning for transcendent union and the different quality of lesbian intimacy from heterosexual intimacy to create a romantic, alternate female world.

Before looking at 94 L.-P. in this light, let me say that I disagree with Hallett over the way in which the Greek disposition to praise young men should be taken. I think she is right in seeing that the admiration is an

2. Plutarch (*Sol.* 20.3) over 700 years later suggests that a man should make love to his wife three times a month because it eases marital tensions. The passage is cited and discussed by Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 87.

3. Detailed exposition of this view is given in Schadewaldt, *Sappho*. See also Bagg, "Love, Ceremony, and Daydream," who suggests that Sappho suffered from guilt.

4. The same reasoning as is typically applied to Sappho would, if applied to Emily Dickinson, conclude that she had died frequently.

important validation of a youth at puberty and is directed at the whole personality, not just the young man's looks. It makes a good analogy with what Sappho's effect on young women around her may have been. But the praise of young men was undeniably based on sexual attraction.⁵ That does not mean that everyone who admired a youth felt the immediate urge to possess him sexually. But it is misleading in emphasis to say, as Hallett does (135), that "sensual appreciation of handsome youth might mean *no more than* approbation of his calisthenic or cognitive talents" (italics mine). For the reason why other qualities could be expressed through language of sexual appreciation is that sexual attractiveness in a young man was highly valued. Desire to possess a young man was socially acceptable. Therefore even those who had no designs on a young man could praise, for example, intellectual capacities via the powerful medium of sexual evaluation.

Likewise, validation of one woman by another in sexual terms must have relied on the social acceptability of one woman as object of sexual interest on the part of another. People in general are, if anything, too little inclined to distinguish between a person's statement of sexual attraction to a forbidden group and that person's likelihood of acting on it. So Sappho's poetic expressions of desire and love would have aroused hostility, not affirmation, if they were directed at a group with whom physical expression of desire was ruled out by the society.

Let us now look at 94 L.-P., the poem which may refer to actual homosexual activity.⁶ The poem opens (after a missing line), "Really, I wish to die; weeping she left me." The next three stanzas record a conversation in which Sappho comforts the distraught girl. The comfort turns into a reminiscence of the good things they shared, of which four stanzas are occupied by one occasion: "you adorned yourself with flowers at my side, you put round yourself garlands of flowers, you anointed yourself with oil, on a soft bed you expelled desire" (to paraphrase). The atmosphere is one of segregation in sensuous surroundings. With each stanza the focus is more directly on the body of the other woman. The first contains no mention of it (unless in a lacuna in the text). In the second stanza Sappho refers to her "tender neck." In the third the woman anoints herself (typically done while nude after a bath).⁷ And in the fourth she expels longing (someone else's longing,

5. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, makes this clear, though, as he also points out (53–54), strict decorum seems to have inhibited public discussion of actual lovemaking. The same would likely be true for Sappho.

6. See Hallett 131 n. 26. For an excellent discussion of the poem see McEvilly, "Sappho, Fragment 94."

7. See *Il.* 14.170–72; *Od.* 6.224–28; *h. Hom. Ven.* 61–63. In the first and third passages lovemaking follows. In the second Nausicaa becomes interested in Odysseus as a potential husband.

according to the verb form). The whole movement of the recollection is toward erotic culmination.

In these four stanzas Sappho's only reference to herself is the "at my side" of line 14, though the detail implies that Sappho pictures herself as present throughout. The concentration is entirely on the sensuousness of the other woman. Its effect could be sexual affirmation of the addressee, and Sappho may have intended, among other things, to create that effect. But there is an artistic reason for focus on the other woman through the four stanzas. Sappho is dramatizing her (or rather her persona's) complete openness to the other woman, her loss of self-consciousness in absorption with the other. Yet this is now memory, and the other woman does not share it. The unity previously so complete is now suddenly, irretrievably dissolved. The persona's (not the poet's) wish to die is a wish to halt the flux, preserve the perfect moment of emotional fusing with another.

Keeping the romantic quality of 94 L.-P. in mind, we can consider Sappho in comparison with Alcman's two maiden songs (1 and 3 Page [P.]). Alcman's tone is similar to Sappho's in some ways, but Hallett's discussion skirted the essential difference that Alcman's poems refer to their own context, a celebration and an appeal to the gods. And the method of praise is different. Alcman draws on the standard imagery of praise found in Homer and applied to both men and women. His picture of human, including erotic, interactions is male. Sappho avoids both. Her imagery and description of personal dynamics differentiate the female from the male.

The most prevalent image in Alcman's first maiden song is of the horse. Four times a girl is compared with a horse, a particular breed of horses, or a trace-horse (ll. 47, 50, 59, 92). In one instance our lack of information about breeds means that we do not catch the point of a comparison: a girl compared in beauty with Agido is a Colaxaeon horse running against an Ibenian. There may be a ritual reason for the emphasis on horses; they seem to have figured in the worship of Ortheia.⁸ But the references to breeds clearly come from the area of male interest in breeding and racing horses. The image has a tradition in literature also. Paris is compared with a horse in *Iliad* 6.506-11. Ibycus compares himself with a prizewinning racehorse in a love poem (287 P.). Anacreon uses the image for a girl whom he threatens to ride (417 P.). Sappho, in the extant fragments, never uses any such comparison for a woman. When horses do appear in her poetry they are associated with men, implicitly dissociated from women. In the priamel 16 L.-P., for instance, Sappho chooses "what one loves" as most beautiful rather

8. See Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 203, ad l. 48.

than an army of horsemen. In 2 L.-P. a "horse-pasturing meadow" is located within the bounds of a shrine where it will not be open to pasturing animals.⁹ A late reference to Sappho's wedding hymns says she compared the grooms to prizewinning horses, the brides to the delicacy of roses (117a L.-P.).

In Alcman's second maiden song Astymeloisa is compared with a "golden shoot" (l. 68). The image of a shoot or sapling is found in the *Iliad* (18.56) of Achilles and in the *Odyssey* (6.163) of Nausicaa. The term is similar to one Sappho herself uses in a wedding hymn to describe the groom (115 L.-P.). But Sappho does not use it of a woman. Instead we find comparisons of women to fruit or flowers. In a wedding hymn a woman is an apple high on a tree (105a L.-P.). Sappho's daughter has an appearance like golden flowers (132 L.-P.).¹⁰

Again, Alcman compares Agido to the light of the sun in the first maiden song (l. 41). Connection with the ceremony is possible; it took place before sunrise. But there are Homeric parallels: Hera's seductive veil is white like the sun (*Il.* 14.185); Achilles in armor is like the shining sun (*Il.* 19.398). And in both Alcman's songs girls are compared with stars. The image in 3 P. is the more elaborate: Astymeloisa is "like some shining star in flight through the heavens" (ll. 66-67). The star image is used in the *Iliad* of men; Athena is compared with a shooting star (*Il.* 4.75-77).¹¹ Both sun and star have the masculine gender in Greek. Sappho uses neither image, but twice compares a woman with the moon eclipsing the surrounding stars (34, 96 L.-P.). The moon is female in gender and a goddess in mythology. Sappho, I think, consciously wished to connect women with the mysterious rhythms of the moon as separate from the sharp, bright male world of sun and stars. We owe the preservation of one of these fragments to the commentator who noted the contrast with a passage of the *Iliad*.¹²

But Sappho's images for women's appearance are few, despite her emphasis on vision. Similes are noticeably more frequent in the wedding-hymn fragments, particularly for men. A groom is like Ares or Achilles (105b, 111 L.-P.), or has a honeyed face (112 L.-P.). The disproportion may be accidental, but perhaps Sappho is less concerned to provide praise of the woman

9. See my article, "Retreat from the Male" 92.

10. The comparison of men with flowers was traditional but often as an indication of youth or pathos: see *Il.* 8.306-8; Theog. 1348 West (W.).

11. *Il.* 22.26-31, Achilles; *Il.* 11.62-64, Hector. The point of the comparison is usually visual. But Astyanax is said to be "like a lovely star" (*Il.* 6.40) in a simile called unique. See Scott, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile* 68.

12. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 273, ad 34 L.-P. The image of moon eclipsing stars is thought to be traditional but does not show up earlier than Sappho. The moon is never used in a comparison with a person in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. In *h. Hom. Ven.* 88-90 the effect of a necklace on Aphrodite's breasts is compared with the moon.

on whom she turns her attention than to explore the effect of that woman's presence or absence. Description implies separation between observer and observed. For Sappho another woman's presence rather generates a sensuous environment, figured as flowers, fabric, perfume, sacred precinct, which encloses them both, erasing the separation.

Alcman has the chorus in 1 P. talk of fighting, probably because they are competing with another chorus. Alcman's chorus thinks of it as a battle, one in which they denigrate their own ability to prevail without the aid of the leader, who commands their obedience (ll. 92-95). In 3 P. the chorus describes Astymeloisa, perhaps the leader, in passionate terms but describes her as not answering. Later, as the fragment tails off, the chorus says, "I would become a suppliant of hers" (l. 81). Male assumptions about competition and about dominance and submission have determined the form of erotic expression: love and beauty are contests. Sappho does not picture love relations as domination by one partner over the other. In 94 and 96 L.-P. desire is mutual. In 1 L.-P., the only combative love poem, either Sappho or the other woman is free to initiate the relationship. Dover notices the difference from the style of male homosexual relations but does not pursue the subject.¹³

Finally, Astymeloisa in Alcman 3 P. is known to the army and is a darling of the people (ll. 73-74), while Sappho's encounter with or fantasy of a desired woman is always in an environment isolated from men (except in 31 L.-P.).

Detailed comparison of Alcman with Sappho illuminates Sappho's special romantic quality. Alcman's girls are imagistically and ceremonially integrated with the whole Spartan culture, participating in its values. Sappho used the special conditions of lesbian love to create an alternative world in which male values, those same values which denied Greek women an outlet for erotic fantasy, are not dominant, and within which mutual desire, rapture, and separateness can be explored as female experience.

13. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* 177. On male competitiveness, see the works cited in Hallett 135 nn. 40, 42.