

## Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite"

[There are 3 parts: (1) a short introduction to Sappho, her dialect & her meter; (2) reading, translating and parsing the poem rather hastily, for the benefit of those with some Greek but not a lot; (3) some reflections on the form of the poem and how it works on us.]

From what little we know, it seems probable that Sappho was the greatest woman poet in the history of Western literature. Certainly the writers of antiquity refer to her with the highest respect: There is an epigram attributed to Plato in the *Palatine Anthology* (which I've reproduced on p. 2 of the handout), which says:

Some say the Muses are nine—but carelessly:  
For look—Sappho of Lesbos is the tenth.

She was one of the nine great lyric poets, according to the ancient canon, and certainly not the least of them. She may even be said to have invented the lyric, as we know it today. But we have to work with probabilities because only a tiny portion of Sappho's work has been preserved—one reasonably complete poem (the one I'm going to discuss tonight) and a frustrating set of fragments, some of several stanzas, some of only a few words or even letters. We have them now because they were quoted as models by ancient rhetoricians, or because they were miraculously preserved on papyrus fragments in the recently excavated ancient garbage dumps of Oxyrhynchus, in the dry climate of Egypt. Everything else has been lost. Plato, and even the Roman poets Catullus and Horace, certainly had access to much more of Sappho's work than we do; the loss must have happened later, during the period between the fourth and twelfth centuries of the Christian era. But even for Plato, Sappho was a very old writer, as much before his time as, say, George Washington was before ours. She lived in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE—after Homer and Hesiod, but long before Aeschylus or any of the other

Greek writers we read. She is “archaic” and therefore in certain ways mysterious; we should have to expect that her way of feeling and speaking will seem somewhat alien. It’s therefore even more of a miracle that the little bits of her that survive seem to speak to us so directly.

One thing that everyone seems to know about Sappho is that she was a Lesbian. In the trivial sense of the word, this is obviously true: Except for an interlude of political exile, she seems to have lived and died on the little island of Lesbos off the coast of Asia Minor. (You can find it on the dialect map on p. 2 of the handout.) The Greek she wrote and probably spoke was therefore in a different dialect from the Attic that you have studied. On the map you can see the distribution of various dialects: Doric was the Spartan dialect and also the language of the great Theban lyric poet Pindar. To achieve an effect of antiquity the Athenian dramatists often wrote their choruses in a composite language with some Doric features. Ionic, the dialect of Homer and later of Herodotus, is the one that became Attic, the Athenian dialect. Later, in a simplified form, it grew into the so-called koinē, the “common” dialect that was spoken everywhere in the Hellenized part of the Mediterranean world; the Christian Bible was written in it. Sappho’s dialect was called Aeolic. I have enumerated a few of its general features on the left there, next to the map. When we come to look at Sappho’s poem, you’ll see that many of the spellings are different. I’ve tried to give the Attic equivalents for them in two pages of grammatical notes, the handout’s last two pages.

The island of Lesbos seems to have had a certain reputation in the ancient world for the prevalence of female homosexuality. It’s not clear whether Sappho and her circle of highly cultured women friends were the reason for this reputation or whether it existed

independently. We can see an allusion to this perception of Lesbos in a poem of Anacreon, a slightly later lyric poet, which I've also put on page 2. I'll read it aloud:

[recite Greek version]

Once again pelting me with a purple ball  
Golden-haired Eros  
Invites me to play  
With the girl with fancy sandals;

But she (for she is from well-built  
Lesbos) condemns my  
Hair (for it is white) and  
Gapes after another—woman.

I especially wanted to mention this little poem because a few of its words or images are also important in Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite." One is the word dēute—dē aute, "yet again"—and another is the use of the word poikilos—"embroidered, multi-colored, various, elegant, artistic, dappled, fancy, subtle, intricately wrought"—in a compound. A third similarity is that the female identity of the loved one only appears late in the poem—here as a surprise twist, in the grammatical gender-suffix of the word "another"; in Sappho's poem only in the gender ending of the word for "unwilling" (in line 24). There is a tone of mock-epic irony here in the phrase "well-built Lesbos"—a quotation from Book IX of the *Iliad*, where Agamemnon offers to indemnify Achilles, in part with seven beautiful maidens captured on the day the Greeks took "well-built Lesbos."

I have been teasing you here by deferring what for some is the Big Question: Is it not also obviously true that Sappho was a "lesbian" in the more modern sense of the word, a woman who loved other women? Well, it has not always been acknowledged as obviously true, and the few facts we have about her life make for a complicated picture. She seems to have been married—though even this may be doubted, since the name of

her alleged husband, Kerkulas, closely resembles a form of a word for “penis.” But Sappho herself, in two of her surviving fragments, refers to having a daughter, unless she is speaking figuratively of one of her younger friends. She wrote a number of epithalamia, or wedding poems, for heterosexual marriages. There are many legends and traditions about her, such as Ovid’s story that she pined for the love of the sailor Phaon and hurled herself from the rock of Leucas. She was even accused (long after her death) of having been a prostitute. But none of these implications, some clearly false, of heterosexual or at least bisexual activity can stand against the explicit, and ardent, avowals of love for other women that we find in her snippets of poetry. Even so, without a context it’s hard to know how to take these; and there was a tradition in the male-dominated world of classical studies, at least until the nineteenth century, to assume that Sappho was a lover only of men. If the poems indicated otherwise, the texts must be corrupt, and so there was a certain amount of creative emendation of the texts to try to make Sappho’s lyrics into family entertainment. Up into the twentieth century, a few interpreters went to desperate, sophisticated lengths in claiming that the poems somehow “ventriloquize” the feelings of male lovers, or that the erotic content of Sappho’s work was merely a hyperbolic expression of sentimental friendship. (We have seen the same kind of activity at work on the sonnets of Shakespeare.) Nowadays, of course, the political climate is otherwise, and there are feminist scholars eager to find a kind of militant sisterhood in Sappho’s homoeroticism. I think we need to be a little careful here as well: In speaking of Sappho’s lesbianism, we can’t be sure that the notion of sexual preference or orientation may not be a construct that belongs to cultures far more modern than Sappho’s. Some commentators think that it is a very modern construct indeed:

There is a book in the Navy Library entitled *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*; its publication date is 1990. It is of course true that Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* seems to isolate three separate species of lovers, and to give a comic account of their origins; but this may be part of the mythic concreteness of the tale. It is embarrassing to have to say it, but we don't know very fully what it meant to Sappho to be a lover of women. (Peter Green's *Laughter of Aphrodite* is a wonderful historical novel about Sappho, by a very eminent classical scholar, that gives a fascinating imaginative construction of what Sappho's life may have been like. It's in our library—I recommend it to you.)

The claim was often made, especially in the Renaissance, that it was Sappho's so-called immorality that caused the deliberate and systematic destruction of the texts of the poems, at the hands of the Christian clergy during the Middle Ages. But there could have been many other reasons for their loss. Lyric poetry has far less prestige than other kinds of texts, and in an age of scarcity such slender productions may have seemed less edifying and less worth the considerable effort of recopying. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity of the archaic language, especially the dialectal difference, may have played a role. It is the case that most of the early lyric poets survive only in fragmentary form. As one scholar comments, "It is not so much the loss of a classical author's work that requires explanation as its survival." [M. Williamson, *Sappho's Immortal Daughters*, p.41, my emphasis] Having said all this, I still think it is generally true that the male poets, even very ancient ones, by and large suffered a less drastic fate than Sappho. If you look at her collected "works," it's a slightly eerie feeling to see a few Greek letters, beginnings or

endings of words or lines, positioned on a page and surrounded by reams of commentary, conjecture and emendation.

The only poem that has not required such restoration is the one we're about to read, identified by number as "Fr. 1" and usually known as the "Hymn, or Prayer, to Aphrodite." It was probably the first one in the first of the nine books of poems that Sappho is said to have written. All the poems of the first book seem to have been in a meter now called the Sapphic stanza, since Sappho made it famous—though it was probably invented by Alcaeus, a slightly older male contemporary poet, also from Lesbos, who seems to have been a sort of friendly enemy of Sappho's. Before I read the poem, I want you to have the meter in your ear, and for that purpose you should now turn to page 3 of the handout. Here I've given the scansion of the Sapphic stanza, at the top, in longs and shorts. The "x"'s are anceps syllables—they can be either long or short. The cadence of the stanza will sound something like this, in Morse code:

Dah di dah dah / dah di di dah/ di dah dah (3 times)  
Dah di di dah dah.

Like many of the lyric meters, this one is built around one or more instances of a foot called a "choriamb"—dah di di dah, long short short long—in the center of the line, with varying other stuff at the beginning of the line and at the end. Meters like this are known as "Aeolic meters," after the dialect of Sappho and Alcaeus. Notice too that I've given two alternative ways to write the stanza: The first and more traditional way is the way I've typed out Sappho's poem and also the English ones, arranged in groups of four lines, of which three are metrically identical: three so-called Sapphic hendecasyllables, eleven-syllable lines, followed by a short five-syllable line called an "adonic." But some metrical scholars have thought that the third and fourth lines are so closely related, and

the fourth so short, that we should join them together and consider the stanza as only three lines—two hendecasyllables followed by a third line of sixteen syllables. That is the second notated version at the top of handout page #3. I apologize for getting a bit technical here; as I will try to claim later, there is at least one interpretive issue in the poem that may be affected by this graphical or typographical question.

All these taxonomic details will not help to get the pattern of the meter into your ear. For that purpose, I am going to read some English sapphics. But bear in mind that strictly speaking, there are no sapphics in English. English metered poetry is accentual-syllabic, made of an arrangement of stresses and a number of syllables (whatever “stress” may be), while Greek poetry is quantitative, an arrangement of longs and shorts (rather than stressed and unstressed), with the longs pronounced about twice as long as the shorts. Incidentally, the syllables we normally stress in pronouncing a Greek work in prose—that is, the syllables marked by accents—were in poetry indicated by pitch variation: a fifth up for an acute accent, a fifth or some smaller interval down for a grave, and up-and-back-down on the same syllable for a circumflex—all of this sort of polyphonically counterpointing the variations in quantity. If you have ever heard Mr. David recite Homer, you know what this sounds like; I can’t do it. I’ll now read the page 3 excerpt from Swinburne (the Turnbull at the bottom is just for fun); in doing so I’ll try to exaggerate a bit and make the meter sound almost quantitative.

**[Read Swinburne aloud.]**

Now with that pattern in your head, let’s turn to Sappho, on the first page of the handout. Let me read it:

**[Read Sappho aloud, in Greek and then in English.]**

I'll recite it again at the end of my talk, so we can try to put the poem back together. It's crucial to get a sense of the delicacy of the sound. This was proverbially one of the most beautiful-sounding poems, and it's mostly to that fact that we owe its preservation:

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek literary critic who lived at about the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus, included it whole in one of his books as an illustration of how sounds fit beautifully together.

Now I am going to go very quickly through the grammar of the poem, parsing frantically to try to show how we get from the left column to the right. You should refer to the last two pages of notes. Since the handout is not stapled, you can pull them out and glance at them while looking mostly at page 1.

**[10-15 minutes of grammatical explication]**

The first thing I want to observe is that even apart from its meter, the poem has a traditional structure or form—the form of a prayer. There are three parts to a prayer, which have been called the “Invocation,” the “Sanction,” and the “Entreaty.” [Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, pp. 200-201.] In the invocation, the god is ceremoniously addressed by several appropriate names, sometimes standard epithets, listing the god's deeds, powers or customary features. Why enumerate several names or aspects of the same deity? Perhaps a god's different aspects are a little like avatars or *personae*—Zeus the god of the thunderbolts may not be quite the same person as *Zeus Xenios*, the god who protects hosts and guests. Apollo the god of the lyre may be distinct from Apollo the patron of medicine, or Apollo the slayer of the Python, or the prophetic Apollo. In order to induce the god to respond, perhaps we need to address her in the appropriate way, or the way she wants to be addressed. Like a conjuror or magician, the speaker of the



prayer needs to be a literalist about the correct verbal form of the spell or conjuration—to call something by its correct name is to have power over it. What name is correct may depend on the circumstances of the prayer, and the services sought for—which suggests that at some point we should look carefully at the epithets here applied to Aphrodite: “dapple-throned,” “child of Zeus,” “weaver of wiles.” Some of these seem puzzling or dubiously appropriate—I’ll return to this later. But for now we can say that structurally the invocation comes at the proper place: It occupies the first stanza.

The sanction, the second part of a traditional prayer, motivates the god to respond by reminding her of benefits received or given. The supplicant might refer to a previous life of piety, of sacrifices made to this deity, temples built or offerings brought. (An example of this is the prayer of the priest Chryses at the beginning of *Iliad I*.) Or the prayer might promise some such thing to be done in the future. In the present case, the speaker of Sappho’s poem (whom we will also call “Sappho”) reminds Aphrodite not of past favors received from Sappho but of past services rendered to her. There are many analogous instances of this practice: Achilles’ prayer to Zeus for the success of Patroclus in *Iliad XVI*; the Chorus’s prayer to Apollo in the Parodos of *Oedipus the King*; and especially a passage in *Iliad V*, in the “Diomedea” or *aristeia* of Diomedes, which I want to quote, since we be concerned with it again later. Diomedes prays to Athena as follows:

“Listen to me, aegis-bearing offspring of Zeus, unwearied one,  
If ever you also stood by my father with good intent  
In destructive battle, now also be my friend, Athena:  
Grant it to me to take this man, that he come to the thrust of my spear,  
Who shot me beforehand and now boasts of it, and says that I shall not  
Long behold the shining light of the sun.”

[V.115-120; my emphasis]

We see here the same kind of Sanction as in Sappho's poem: the god is reminded of past benefactions. It seems that like Aristotle's great-souled man, the goddess prefers not to be reminded of her indebtedness to others, but rather of other people's debts to her. But apart from flattery, does Aphrodite's past service to Sappho obligate her, Aphrodite, in some way? Even in the flashback at the center of the poem, the goddess humorously and ironically uses the repeated word *dēute*—"yet again"—indicating that even that time was far from the first. "All right, Sappho, who is it this time? You've found Miss Right again? What am I supposed to do for you now?" Notice that the tone of mock exasperation does not prevent the goddess from promising the total and speedy fulfillment of Sappho's desires. But of course, what is recounted in the flashback is already past. That was last time—Now, at the time of the prayer-poem, it seems that her desires have changed yet again. Sappho ironically portrays her own frailty and fickleness, the Protean character of her successive infatuations. The Sanction part of the prayer occupies the middle five stanzas; the largest part of the poem is a vista of a past in which Sappho sought and prayed to the goddess again and again.

The Entreaty in the last stanza is straightforward: "As you helped me before, so also help me now." *Elthe moi kai nun*, "come to me now again," picks up the word *elthe* from the beginning of the previous section (line 5, as well as line 8). The word *thumos* is also repeated from the first stanza, circling back to the beginning; so is the reference to care or pain. In Sappho's case the request, "Whatever my heart yearns to have accomplished, accomplish it," is very general—not so much a request for a blank check as an acknowledgement that the goddess already knows her innermost desires. Given this

knowledge, why does Aphrodite ask Sappho the series of questions that begins at the end of the fourth stanza? This is another problem to which I shall return.

If we look now at how the poem partitions itself to fit into the structure of a prayer—invocation, sanction, entreaty—we see that there are breaks after the first and before the last stanza. This 1-5-1 structure suggests that the poem is in a form dearly loved by the Greek lyricists, a ring composition—a circle that recurs upon itself, symmetrically organized around a central point. What here is the central point? As I have typed the poem, in four-line stanzas, it has an even number of lines, and the center is at the break between lines 14 and 15. But if we consider the sapphic stanza as a three-line stanza, with the short adonic considered as an extension of the third line, then there is an odd number of lines and therefore a unique middle line: meidiaisais' athanatōi prosōpōi, “smiling with your immortal countenance”—line 14 as it is printed here. Around this central hinge of the poem—either the line itself or the space after it—the middle five-stanza section breaks evenly into two pieces: the first describing Aphrodite’s descent from heaven, the second recounting her speech to Sappho. The poem’s circularity lies not only in a return to its beginning point (both structural and situational), but in an almost visual symmetrical arrangement around a center. Circularity might imply recurrence—Sappho’s amatory predicament has happened many times in just this way. But symmetry also implies a divine kind of order.

Though I’m not normally so much of a numerologist as to look always at the numerically central location, line, page, stanza or whatever, in this case I think it important that the central image of the poem is that haunting and marvelous line, meidiaisais' athanatōi prosōpōi, “smiling with your immortal countenance.” Aphrodite

is conventionally a smiling or laughing goddess—the Homeric epithet for her is often philommeidēs, “smile-loving” or “laughter-loving.” But this picture goes beyond convention. It is a portrayal of what in Greek statuary and painting is sometimes called the “archaic smile,” mysterious, curiously mirthless and clinical, somehow focused inward or elsewhere, not necessarily in the least sympathy with the person smiled at. To illustrate, here is a picture, probably of the head of the goddess Artemis, from the museum at Delphi. **[show picture]** I want to claim that the tone of Sappho’s poem depends on this central mystery. Aphrodite—weaver of wiles, figure of poikilia, complexity, elegant multiplicity or perhaps duplicity—Aphrodite has something to hide.

But on its face, the poem both as a traditional prayer and as a ring composition projects an orderliness and formal coherence emblematic of benevolent gods and of a cosmos that humans can control, or at least comfortably inhabit. The goddess is unearthly in her deathlessness, beauty and splendor—the elegance of her throne, the emphasis on goldenness, the rapidity with which she arrives; but the speaker of the poem is not obviously overawed by her coming. There is perhaps a touch of humor in the picture of the sparrows frantically beating their little wings in order to draw her chariot: Sparrows were proverbially associated with lust and procreation, but they are not a kingly or powerful species. (In the more traditional iconology of Aphrodite’s chariot, she is drawn by doves.) And when the goddess does arrive, she seems to speak to the vulnerable, hapless “Sappho” in a tone of affection and intimacy, blended perhaps with a certain amused contempt, but still basically reassuring.

The unusual informality of this epiphany might remind us of Athena’s meeting with Odysseus in *Odyssey XIII*, just after he arrives in Ithaca. Not recognizing the

goddess in her disguise, Odysseus spins one of his cunning cover stories about who he is and what he is doing there. Homer goes on:

So he spoke, but the goddess, grey-eyed Athena, smiled,  
And caressed him with her hand, and she took the form of a woman,  
Beautiful and tall, and well-versed in splendid works,  
And she addressed him, and spoke winged words:  
“He would be a sly one, and a great scoundrel, who got past you  
In any kind of wiles [*doloisi*], even if a god should oppose you.  
You wretch, dapple-minded [*poikilomēta*]! You were not about  
To leave off your wiles [*dolōn*] and deceits, even though you are here in  
your own land,  
Nor your thievish stories, that are second nature to you.  
But come, let us talk no more of these things, since we both  
Are skilled in slyness—you by far the best among mortals  
In counsel and in tale-telling, I among all the gods  
Am famed for intelligence and slyness...”  
[XIII.287-299]

In response, Odysseus reminds Athena of her past kindness and reproaches her for recent neglect, and then entreats her to help him again.

Aphrodite’s bantering with Sappho in our poem reminds us of this episode in a number of ways, but especially in this: Just as Athena and Odysseus are bound together by a certain common character, so are Aphrodite and Sappho. Aphrodite is the patron and inspiration of lovers, and Sappho portrays herself as the lover *par excellence*—one who lives only to love, and who is thus utterly at the goddess’s disposal. Perhaps Aphrodite alludes to this in her slightly sarcastic question, “Who, Sappho, is wronging you? [*adikēei*]” This might mean not only “Who is your new beloved?”—using the language of injustice or aggression to describe the effect of the girl’s beauty—but also “Have I been unjust to you? Have I not given you what you asked for before, and will you not get what you deserve of me now?” The justice that Aphrodite will restore is expressed in the symmetry of the phrasing of these lines in the next-to-last stanza:

και γαρ αι φευγει, ταχεως διωξει·  
αι δε δωρα μη δεκετ', αλλα δωσει·  
αι δε μη φιλει, ταχεως φιλησει  
κω'υκ εθελοισα.

For if now she flees, soon she will pursue;  
If she does not take gifts, rather she will give them;  
If she does not love, soon she will love  
Even though unwilling.

The smoothness and balance of these lines might seem to express Sappho's own comic self-forgiveness; in making the goddess grant her all that she desires, she transcends the imprisonment in that desire of the trembling, vulnerable lover she depicts herself as. She can see herself as the goddess sees her, and grant herself absolution.

● \* \* \* \* \*

So far I've been dwelling on the comic aspects of the poem, not only in the narrow sense of "humorous," but also in the sense of "having a happy ending." If tragedies end in death, frustration and the fall of cities, comedies end in marriage, integration, reconciliation, the image of gratified desire. But to the degree that we see the poem only in this way, we may lose that sense of the goddess's mystery figured forth in the poem's central line. Perhaps we should go back and enumerate, not the familiar, intimate and reassuring qualities of this epiphany, but the strange and disquieting ones.

As I intimated earlier, some of the epithets used in the invocation of the goddess are incongruous and surprising. It is not necessarily odd in itself to find Aphrodite associated with poikilia—a sort of gorgeous piedness or variability, as we've seen.

The first word of the poem is altered, however, when it is associated with doloploke, “wile-weaving,” in line 2. The image of artisanship (specifically embroidery) carried by the word poikilos, is caught up again in the idea of weaving; but here artifice is connected with deception. (Weaving, by the way, is often in Greek literature a metaphor for the poet’s art specifically; compare the idea of a “rhapsode,” a stitcher of songs.) Perhaps it is the possibility of deception that caused some scribes to copy, not poikilothron, “dapple-throned,” but poikilophron, “dapple-minded.” As we saw in the *Odyssey* passage, Odysseus is described in similar terms—poikilometis is one of the standard epithets for him. These terms would clearly be more appropriate if applied not to Aphrodite but to Athena, Odysseus’ patron, who is also associated with weaving and the useful arts. (Remember the story of Arachne.) Athena is also a warlike goddess, as we see in the *Iliad*; Aphrodite, on the other hand, is pointedly shown to be of little value as a fighter. In the passage I quoted from earlier, the Diomedea in *Iliad V*, Aphrodite is attacked and wounded by the Achaean hero Diomedes, with the explicit approval of Athena. When she comes back to her father Zeus to complain, Aphrodite is told:

“Not to you, my child, are given the works of war;  
You must rather take your part in the yearful affairs of marriages—  
Let all these other things be the business of swift Ares and Athena.”

Later in the same episode, Athena is shown arming herself, yoking up her chariot and venturing forth to confront Ares, who is fighting on the side of the Trojans. If Sappho is in some way alluding to the Diomedea, she deliberately conflates the roles of the goddesses by portraying Aphrodite as a warrior, using words like damna, “to conquer,” and summachos, “ally”; introducing military images like the yoking of the chariot in the

third stanza and the mention of fleeing and pursuing in the sixth; referring to her own thumos as mainolā, full of the rage or wrath, mēnis, “mania,” that is the first word and subject of the *Iliad*, using epic diction in such phrases as gās melainās—“the black earth”—to evoke the Homeric poems as a presence in the back of the reader’s mind. On the other hand, we could point to another, contradictory tradition about Aphrodite. In *Iliad XIV*, Hera comes to Aphrodite to get help in her plan to distract Zeus’s attention. She does not share all of her intentions, since Aphrodite is rooting for the enemy Trojans. As Homer tells it:

Then with wiles in mind Lady Hera addressed her:  
 “Give me now affection and longing [himeron], with which you  
 Conquer [damnā] all immortals and mortal men...”

[XIV.197-99]

The word used for “conquer” is damnā, as in Sappho’s poem. Another illustration is given by the Chorus in the Third Stasimon of the *Antigone* (admittedly written much later):

Eros unconquered in battle, Eros who seizes all possessions,  
 Who sleeps in the soft cheeks of a maiden,  
 Who roams far beyond the sea, or to wild dwelling-places,  
 There is no refuge from you, not for the immortals  
 Nor for men, creatures of a day. Whoever has you runs mad,  
 You turn the minds of just men to injustice and outrage.  
 You hold this fight and wrangling of brothers here.  
 Longing proclaims its victory in the eyes of the blessed bride,  
 And sits from the beginning beside the great ordinances.  
 For the goddess Aphrodite, with whom none can fight, takes her sport.

[lines 781-799, emphasis mine]

So is Aphrodite the most warlike or the least warlike of the gods? Why even speak of love in the terminology of war? After centuries of lyric poems addressing the beloved as “my sweet foe,” using the imagery of conquest or the taking of a fortified city, we might



not even think the coupling of love and war is unusual; the convention is so well-worn. Yet the two seem antithetical: Love generates life and war destroys it. But like Ares and Aphrodite in the minstrel's poem in the *Odyssey*, the two are naturally, almost inevitably coupled together: war as the highest excellence of the male and love as the highest excellence of the female.

Sappho explores this question in one of her most famous fragments, which goes like this:

Some say a host of horsemen, some footsoldiers,  
Some say a fleet of ships is the fairest thing  
On the black earth; but I say  
It is whatever one loves.

And it is very easy to make this  
Understood by everyone: She who surpassed  
By far all humans in beauty, Helen,  
Leaving the best

Man of all, went sailing to Troy,  
And did not remember her child  
Nor her dear parents in the least,  
But she was led off the path...

Here the text becomes just a few chopped-up letters, too few to conjecture what comes next. But then the poem seems to end this way:

And remembering Anactoria, who is not here,  
  
I would rather see her lovely walk  
And the shining sparkle of her face  
Than the Lydian chariots and  
Full-armored infantry.

[Fr. 16]

Here Sappho is using a form now called a “priamel,” which first enumerates a list of things others may choose, and then continues, “But I say...” In setting up such a comparison as a contest between the beauties of war and of love, she seems to be questioning the traditional value of warlike manhood, aretē, as the highest form of excellence. The private world of individual passions and relations, from which women are not excluded, can afford a higher value than the public, heroic world of Achilles and Hector. Mischievously, Sappho offers a carefully-chosen, loaded example of the power and value of love: Helen, whose voluntary elopement with Paris causes the expedition to Troy. In this way, it seems that the Greek and Trojan heroes who fight for her are made into involuntary witnesses to the truth of Sappho’s contention. Yet this poem does not cite the love of Menelaus for Helen, but rather Helen’s own love, whose object is not even named. Love produces in Helen a kind of mēnis, a rage or frenzy which causes her to forget and to behave irrationally; yet Sappho, the speaker of the poem, is remembering, not forgetting her absent beloved. There is a double consciousness here, similar to what we see of Sappho’s self-portrayal in the “Hymn to Aphrodite.” If a choice between love and war is a choice between public and private, the privateness of individual choice is bound to incline to the side of love. But in the hymn, we get more than a private and individual affirmation of feeling: We get a quasi-epic or mock-epic, externalized portrayal of Sappho’s love-passion, using the Homeric device of the god’s descent from heaven. It’s not clear to us whether the poet Sappho actually thought she had experienced such an epiphany, or whether she is consciously using it as a metaphor of some kind. But in making the goddess publicly visible, through the act of telling, she allows us to see herself, Sappho, not just through her own eyes, but as seen by another.

In the process, we can also view Aphrodite in a more balanced way—not just from the perspective of Sappho’s desperate need.

Sappho’s prayer makes Aphrodite into a complex and problematic figure. When she is asked to become Sappho’s summachos, “fellow-fighter” or “ally,” how are we supposed to feel. According to one strand of Homeric allusion and tradition, Aphrodite is of little value as a fighter or an ally; she is too weak, the most womanly and least warlike of the gods. But we have seen that according to another way of looking at her, she may be too strong and too universal a force to be confined in a personal alliance. She embodies the raw power that can send wise men into a frenzy and make the just do injustice, than can make even Zeus inattentive, and enslave gods and men alike. When Sappho asks for her aid as an ally, she cites past times when the goddess has come to her rescue; Aphrodite even seems already to know what is in Sappho’s heart, whom she longs for and what she most wants. But there is good reason for this: It must be the case that the goddess has not invariably been Sappho’s ally in the past. Who but Aphrodite herself could have inspired Sappho with her present wretched, unrequited passion?

The goddess asks Sappho to say who it is that has wronged her, offered her injustice. The temptation is to think that Aphrodite will restore justice and set things right. But it is a strange “justice” that remedies one desperate, unrequited longing by inspiring another. There is a grim twist in the last line of the sixth stanza: After promising Sappho fulfillment, that she shall no longer woo but be wooed instead, the goddess shows her raw power and sheer indifference to human preferences in the short phrase k’ouk etheloisa, “even though unwilling.” Note that the participle is negated here with ouk and not mē; there is no dispute of the fact that the beloved girl is now unwilling.

But she will be made to love, even though it is against her will. Perhaps there is a veiled threat her, directed at Sappho: What the goddess can do to another, in Sappho's interest, can also be done—has already been done—to Sappho herself. What is more, if we look closely at Aphrodite's promises, we notice that she nowhere indicates specifically that Sappho will be the object of her beloved's love. "If now she flees, soon she will pursue"—but whom she will pursue, we are not told. This could be a sort of wild justice: To take retribution for Sappho's pain by causing its object to pine for some third person. To some lovers, this sort of revenge might be a comfort; but if in her raging heart Sappho most wants a happy ending—mutuality, fulfillment, the gratification of her love-passion—then it is not altogether clear that she will receive it. The goddess's oracular, equivocating reply leaves open the possibility that Sappho will be betrayed by her "ally." It may be the goddess herself who is "wronging" Sappho. The Aphrodite we see here reminds us of the goddess of *Iliad* III, who with harsh threats forces the unwilling Helen to do her bidding and wait on the pleasures of Alexandros [III.390-420]. The reason she is an unreliable ally in wars of love is that she always fights on both sides, or in the interests of love itself. She is no respecter of persons—Athena may help her favorites, Diomedes and Odysseus, but Sappho's Aphrodite beguiles and afflicts her favorites, like Helen. As a goddess she is less like a person than like a natural force; you cannot expect her not to do her will.

I am not claiming that this negative, disquieting reading of the figure of Aphrodite is the truer, deeper reality, behind the appearance of beneficence. The calm, orderly, powerful yet intimate affect, mixed with humor, that we first found in the poem is really there. The poem holds together both sets of feelings and possibilities, reminding us that

there is no self-knowledge without confusion and the experience of complexity. The smile of the goddess expresses a kind of equipoise or ambiguity. She hides herself, not because she has a decided malevolence or even indifference toward our desires, but rather because she insists on withholding herself from finite human knowledge. She will do what she will do; we are thrown back on our own ignorance and mortal limitation.

These are the wiles that Aphrodite weaves; this is the meaning of her archaic smile at the heart of this great poem. But perhaps Sappho too is a weaver of wiles: In putting herself into the poem, in showing us her self-knowledge and her distance from the blindness of her own passion, she gains a kind of power even over her mistress, benefactor and tormentor. Like Aphrodite, she displays poikilia and fights on both sides at once, portraying her naked passion and yet ironizing it into art. And she too seems to wear an inscrutable smile, daring us to pluck out the heart of her mystery.

**[Recite the poem in Greek once again.]**

— υ — υ | — υ υ — | υ — — ( 3 + times )  
 — υ υ — —

(1)

Sappho 1

ποικιλόθρον' ἀθανάτ' Ἀφρόδιτα,  
 παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,  
 μή μ' ἄσσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,  
 πότνια, θυῆμον,

Dapple-throned, deathless Aphrodite,  
 Child of Zeus, weaver of wiles, I beseech you,  
 Do not with cares and pains oppress,  
 Lady, my heart,

ἀλλὰ τυῖδ' ἔλθ', αἶ ποτα κ' ἀτέρωτα  
 τὰς ἔμας ἀύδας αἰίοισα πήλοι,  
 ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα  
 χρύσιον ἦλθες

But come here; if ever at another time,  
 Hearing my cries from far away,  
 You heeded them, and leaving the  
 [ ] home of your father,  
 [Golden] you came,

ἄρμ' ὑπασδεύξαισα: κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον  
 ὠκεες στρουῖθοι περὶ γὰς μελαίνας  
 πύκνα δίνεντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνωίθε-  
 ρος διὰ μέσσω,

Yoking up your [ ] chariot. Fair swift  
 Sparrows drew you over the black earth,  
 Thickly beating their wings from heaven,  
 Through the middle air,

αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο· σὺ δ' ὦ μάκαιρα,  
 μειδιαίσαισ' ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ  
 ἦρε' ὅτι δηῦτε πέπονθα κῶττι  
 δηῦτε κἀλημι,

And at once they arrived. But you, O  
 Blessed One,  
 Smiling with your immortal face,  
 Asked what again I was suffering and why  
 Again I called you,

κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γενεσθαι  
 μαινόλα θυμῷ· τίνα δηῦτε πείθω  
 ἄψ' σ' ἄγην ἐς Ψάν φιλότατα; τίς σ', ὦ  
 Ψάπφ', ἀδικήει;

And what I most want to befall me  
 In my raging heart. "Whom must I again  
 persuade  
 To take you back again into her friendship? Who,  
 Sappho, is wronging you?"

καὶ γὰρ αἶ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει·  
 αἶ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει·  
 αἶ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει  
 κῶκ ἐθέλοισα.

For if now she flees, soon she will pursue;  
 If she does not take gifts, soon she will  
 give them;  
 If she does not love, soon she will love  
 Even if unwilling."

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λῦσον  
 ἐκ μεριμνᾶν, ὅσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι  
 θυμὸς ἱμέρρει, τελεσον· σὺ δ' αὐτὰ  
 σύμμαχος ἔσσο.

Come to me now again, and free me from  
 harsh  
 Care, and whatever my heart yearns to  
 Achieve for myself, achieve it; and you be  
 Yourself my ally.

WELL-BUILT LESBOS

σφαίρη δὴντέ με πορφυρῆ  
βάλλον, χρυσοκόμησ Ἔρωσ  
νήνι ποικιλοσαμβάλω  
συμπαίξειν προκαλείται·

Once again pelting me with a purple ball,  
Golden-haired Eros  
Summons me to play  
With the girl with fancy sandals.

ἡ δ' (ἐστὶν γὰρ ἀπ' εὐκτίτου  
Λέσβου) τὴν μὲν ἐμὴν κόμην  
(λευκὴ γάρ) καταμέμφεται,  
πρὸς δ' ἄλλην τινὰ χάσκει.

But she (for she is from well-built  
Lesbos) condemns my  
Hair (for it is white) and  
Gapes after another— woman.

— Anacreon, # 358

ἐννέα τὰς Μούσας φασὶν τινες· ὡς οὐκ ὀλιγῶρασ·  
ἦνίδε καὶ Σαπφῶ Λεσβόθεν ἡ δεκάτη.

Some say the Muses are nine— but carelessly:  
For look— Sappho of Lesbos is the tenth.

—Palatine Anthology 9.506, attributed to Plato

A FEW FEATURES OF THE  
LESBIAN (AEOLIC)  
DIALECT:

- accent is recessive— except in prepositions and a few other short words
- no rough breathings
- digamma is used— "w" sound
- some endings different: e.g. καλέω becomes κάλημι
- many vowel sounds different— "α" sounds predominant.

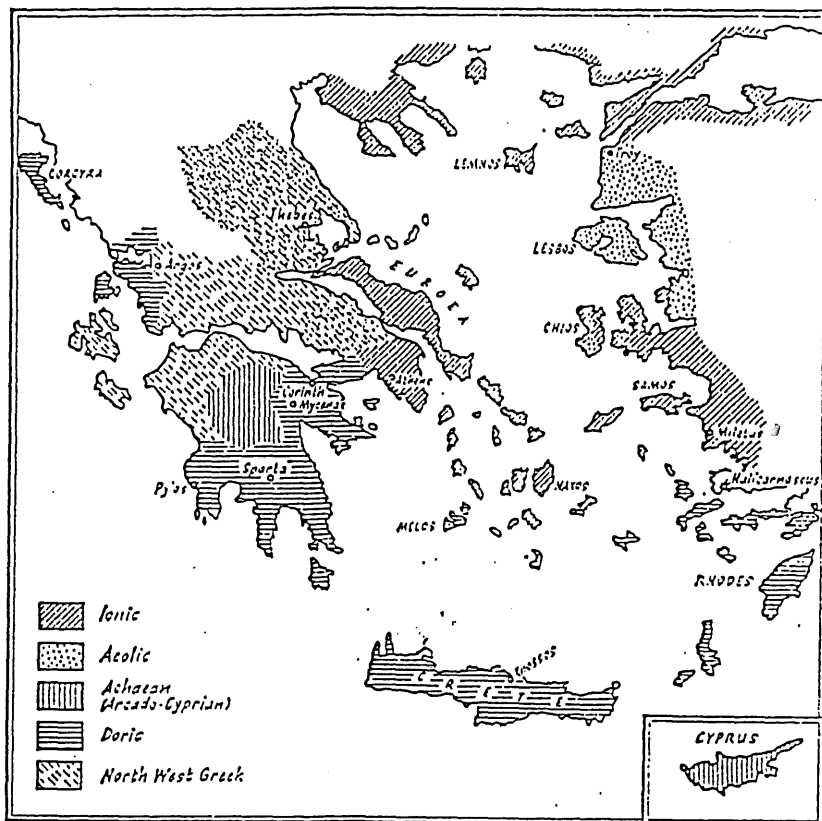


Fig. 4. The Distribution of the Greek Dialects in the Alfabetic Period

THE ENGLISH SAPPHIC

Meter: \_ U \_ x | \_ U U \_ | U \_ \_ (3 times)

\_ U U \_ \_

or: \_ U \_ x | \_ U U \_ | U \_ \_ (2 times)

\_ U \_ x | \_ U U \_ | U \_ x : \_ U U \_ \_

From "Sapphics," by A.C. Swinburne:

...Then to me so lying awake a vision  
Came without sleep over the seas and touched me,  
Softly touched mine eyelids and lips; and I too,  
Full of the vision,

Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,  
Saw the hair unbound and the feet unsandalled  
Shine as fire of sunset on western waters;  
Saw the reluctant

Feet, the straining plumes of the doves that drew her,  
Looking always, looking with necks reverted,  
Back to Lesbos, back to the hills whereunder  
Shone Mitylene... (&c.)

Necrolalia (Lines for a friend who had asked me to translate a stanza of Sappho)

Since I sent the message that only Swinburne  
Could compose in English a Sapphic stanza  
Graceful, subtle, charming enough to call a  
Worthy translation,

I have felt insidious change suffusing  
All my being; greener I grow than grass is;  
From the grass the sinuous S's slither,  
Sidewardly, slewing--

Soft they slide in sibilant susurration,  
M's and L's in languid embrace renewing  
Melancholy moans of commiseration  
Lost rhymes are ruing.

Paper now and pen they pervade and plunder,  
Lilting, melting, murmuring, lisping, cooing,  
While I watch, and wearily whisp'ring, wonder,  
"What am I doing?"

Could he have been wrong about all the rivers,  
Proserpine and peace and alliteration?  
Has he lost his Eden, condemned to suffer  
Reincarnation?

--Lucy Turnbull



## Notes to Sappho 1

ποικιλόθρον[ε]-- case is vocative. from ποικίλος + θρόνος, "throne." Some editors emend to ποικιλόθρον'.

ἄθᾶνατ[ε]-- also vocative

δολόπλοκε-- vocative, from δόλος, "guile, trick" + πλέκω, "weave"

ἄσαισι-- from ἄση, -ης, "care, distress." Here in dative pl. with added ι.

ᾠονία-- (= Attic ἄνία) "pain, grief," also in dat. pl.

δαμνάω--tame, subdue, conquer, oppress

πότνια-- "mistress, lady"

θῦμος-- =Attic θυμός

τυίδ[ε]-- "here, hither"

ἔλθ[ε]-- aorist imperative of ἔρχομαι

αἶ ποτα = εἶ ποτε

κάτέρωτα = καὶ ἑτέρωτα (ἑτέρωτα, "at another time")

ἔμας (= ἐμάς)-- "my" in acc. pl.

αὔδας (= αὐδάς)-- from αὐδή, "voice, cry"

αἰοῖσα (= αἰούσα) -- progressive active participle, fem. nom. sing. of αἶω, "hear"

πήλοι = Attic τηλόυ, "far off"

ἔκλυες-- As opposed to αἶω in the previous line, κλύω means not only "to hear," but "to heed." The two words share αὔδας as direct object.

πάτρος δόμον-- "the house of your father"; object of λίποισα

λίποισα= λιπούσα. Aorist fem. nom. sing. participle of λείπω, "to leave"

χρύσιον-- Translators disagree about whether this acc. sing. adjective, meaning "gold," should be taken as masc., modifying δόμον, or as neut., modifying ἄρμα. My solution is "both and neither"; it's so closely linked with ἦλθες, "you came," that its force seems to me adverbial.

ἄρμα = ἄρμα, neut. acc., "chariot," object of ὑπασδεύξαισα.

ὑπασδεύξαισα = ὑποζεύξασα, aorist fem. nom. particip. of ὑποζεύγνυμι, "to yoke up."

ἄγον= ἦγον, from ἄγω.

ᾠκεες = ᾠκεις, mac. nom. pl. from ᾠκός, "swift"

στροῦθοι-- plural of στροῦθος, "sparrow."

περί-- here = υπέρ

γάς= γῆς, "earth," in genitive with περί

μελαίνας-- "black," modifies γάς.

πύκνα-- "thick"; here the neut. acc. pl. is adverbial, modifying δίννεντες

δίννεντες-- masc. nom. pl. of participle of δίννημι (=δινέω), "to whirl, beat."

πτέρ[α]-- "wings," in acc., object of δίννεντες.

ἀπ' οὐρανῶϊθερος διὰ μέσσω= ἀπ' οὐράνου αἴθερος διὰ μέσου. ἀπ' οὐράνου-- "from heaven."

αἴθερος διὰ μέσου-- "through the middle air."

αἶψα-- adv., "suddenly, immediately."

ἐξίκοντο-- 3rd pers. pl. aorist of ἐξικνέομαι = ἀφικνέομαι, "to arrive."

μάκαιρα-- fem. vocative of μακάριος, "blessed, blissful, happy."  
 μειδίασαι[α]-- =μειδίησασα, aorist fem. participle of μειδιάω, "smile"  
 πρόσωπον-- "face, countenance"  
 ἦρε[ο]- -aorist 2nd person sing. of ἔρομαι, "ask"  
 ὅτι= ὅ τι, "what"  
 δηῦτε= δὴ αὖτε, "yet again"  
 πέπονθα-- 1st person sing. perfect of πάσχω, "suffer"  
 κώττι = καὶ ὅτι, "and why"  
 κάλημμι = καλέω, "call"

κώττι= καὶ ὅ τι, "and what"  
 μάλιστα-- "most"  
 θέλω= ἐθέλω, "want"  
 γένεσθαι-- aorist infinitive of γίγνομαι, "come to be, happen"  
 μαινόλα-- "raging, frenzied." In dative; gender is masculine-- modifies θύμω  
 τίνα-- "whom"  
 πείθω-- Here a deliberative subjunctive: "Whom am I to persuade..."  
 ἄψ σ' ἄγην εἰς Φάν φιλότατα-- The text is apparently corrupt; this reading includes editorial emendations. For example, the Mss. read σὰν, not Φὰν. In the text given here, ἄψ is "again," σ' ἄγην= σε + ἄγειν, εἰς Φαν φιλότατα-- "into her friendship."

Ψάπφ[οι]- - vocative of "Sappho"  
 ἀδικῆει= αδικεῖ, 3rd. sing. indic., "to do injustice, harm, wrong."

αἰ= εἰ, "if"  
 ταχέως-- "swiftly, quickly, soon"  
 διώξει-- 3rd sing. future of διώκω, "to pursue, follow, prosecute"  
 δέκεται[αι] = δέχεται, "accept, receive."  
 ἀλλὰ-- here adverbial: "rather, on the contrary"  
 δώσει-- 3rd sing fut. of δίδωμι, "give"  
 φίλει = φιλεῖ  
 κούκ = καὶ οὐκ. καί is here an intensifier: "even"  
 εθέλοισα= ἐθέλουσα, "wanting, willing."

χαλέπαν...μερίμναν-- These are genitive plurals, in an Aeolic form. μέριμνα-- "care, anxiety"  
 λύσον-- aorist imperative of a familiar verb. Implied object is με.  
 ὅσσα (= ἅτα or ἅτινα ) "whatever"  
 τέλεσαι= τελέσαι. aorist infinitive of τελέω, "complete, accomplish." In the next line, τέλεσον is aorist imperative of the same verb.  
 ἰμέρρει= ἰμείρει, "desires, yearns for"  
 αὐτά = αὐτή  
 σύμμαχος-- "ally, fellow fighter, comrade in arms"  
 ἔσσο-- 2nd person sing. imperative of εἰμι.