



Women in the Liberal Arts Tradition with Christine Perrin

Lecture 9: Sappho

Outline:

Sappho

- Sappho is a classical writer.
- Sappho was born around 615 BCE on Lesbos.
- She is the most famous lyric poet of Greece.
- We only have a little bit of her work.
- She is remarkably modern in her poetry and interests.

Speculation

- Speculation about her biography and poems is high.
- Much of her work is in fragments.
- Her work had originally been collected into 9 volumes around the 3rd century.
- Only one full poem survives, but she was known as a great poet of antiquity.
- Plato called her the tenth muse.
- Her image was on coins and statuary.
- She is credited with inventing Sapphic meter.
- Despite our lack of access to her work she is revered as one of the greatest lyric poets of any age.
- This dichotomy – great fame and little extant work – serves to create a great deal of speculation.
- Many of the 200 fragments now in our possession consist only of isolated words, compounding the difficulties of interpretation already made acute by our lack of knowledge about their cultural context.

Poetry for Sappho

- All of the poetry at this point was oral and communal.
- The Greek people would experience poetry during feasting and liturgical celebration.

Lyric poetry

- Lyric poetry was sung with a lyre accompanying it.
- Unlike epic poetry written by Homer that recounts heroic stories that impact nations and cultures.
- For the ancient Greeks, lyric poetry had a precise technical meaning: Verse that was accompanied by a lyre, cithara, or barbitos.
- Because such works were typically sung, it was also known as melic poetry.



- The lyre or melic poet was distinguished from the writer of plays (although Athenian drama included choral odes, in lyric form), the writer of trochaic and iambic verses (which were recited), the writer of elegies (accompanied by the flute, rather than the lyre) and the writer of epic.
- The scholars of Hellenistic Alexandria created a canon of nine lyric poets deemed especially worthy of critical study. These archaic and classical musician-poets included Sappho, Alcaeus, Anacreon, and Pindar.
- The lyric is one of three broad categories of poetry in classical antiquity, along with drama and epic.
 - Drama is considered a form of poetry because both tragedy and comedy were written in verse in ancient Greece.
 - Culturally, Greek lyric is the product of the political, social, and intellectual milieu of the Greek polis (city-state).
- Much of Greek lyric is occasional poetry, composed for public or private performance by a soloist or chorus to mark particular occasions.
 - The symposium (“drinking party”) was one setting in which lyric poems were performed. “Lyric” was sometimes sung to the accompaniment of either a string instrument (particularly the lyre or kithara) or a wind instrument (most often the reed pipe called aulos).
- Whether the accompaniment was a string or wind instrument, the term for such accompanied lyric was melic poetry (from the Greek word for “song” melos).
 - Lyric could also be sung without any instrumental accompaniment.

Lyric evolution

- Originally a composition was meant for musical accompaniment.
- The term refers to a short poem in which the poet, the poet’s persona, or another speaker expresses persona feelings.
- People observe the potentially subversive primacy of the individual consciousness and the validity of its opinions and impulses.
- Sappho’s emphasis on emotion, on subjective experience, and on the individual marks a stark contrast between her work and epic, liturgical, or dramatic poetry of the period.
- Much earlier poetry had been liturgical, ceremonial or courtly: in various ways emphatically public. But much of Sappho’s work is intimate and putatively private, addressed to specific women or to her friends; and her tone of colloquial familiarity anticipates medieval and modern practice.
- Just as the troubadours recorded the names of friends and enemies with meticulous precision and modern poets often insist on the paradoxical importance of ephemera, Sappho’s tests assume an immediate net of circumstance and imply that only through the particular can the universal be manifested.
- Unlike earlier singers, who had memorized the values and ideology of a whole social group while remaining themselves in anonymity, the lyricists,



Sappho prominent among them, found the truest most significant material in individual experience.

Public or Private

- Scholars disagree on whether she wrote for public choral performance or spoke as a singular person privately.
 - It appears that much of her work could have been created for an occasion (such as a wedding).
 - Her family was involved in politics, and she was publically influential.
- Sappho's texts often seem to assume an immediate circumstance and imply that only through the particular can the universal be manifested.
 - This contributes to the force of the individual voice but also has created confusion about what the role of liturgical, ceremonial, and courtly was in relation to her work.

Heroic vs. relational emphasis

- In several poems we see the poet applying selectivity in her choice of heroic material in non-heroic settings, however: we are not encouraged to recall the scene from Iliad 5 in which Aphrodite is wounded when she attempts to help her son, and the mocking and chastisement she incurs for meddling in warfare (327-430).
 - Sappho imports the emotional strength from epic scenes without heroic display: the bonds of relationship, including those with a goddess, are uppermost.
 - Herodotus adds that Sappho chastised her brother at some length in her poetry after his return. This form of public poetic criticism with a corrective force is consistent with the tradition that Sappho composed iambic verse.

Occasional and religious?

- Fragment 15 also contains a prayer to Aphrodite to address the problem of Charaxus. This time the goddess is asked to deal harshly with Doricha and to ensure that the woman not flaunt her successes with Charaxus on a second occasion. Once again, we may ask whether these two songs were actual prayers. They could have been composed by Sappho and presented publicly at a temple, perhaps offering to secure some success.
- This is in the category of Iamb.
- Some are quick to assert that she emphasizes, "In a way little known in archaic and traditional societies, the potentially subversive primacy of the individual consciousness and the validity of its opinions and impulses". And while the individual voice is strong and relatable in her work, there is a great deal of scholarship that suggests she composed for public and even liturgical occasions as well.
- Her work, though perhaps composed in writing, was meant to be performed orally. Many of her texts suggest that she adhered, consciously or not, to the



view that poetry was a form of magic and that, by manipulating language, one could also manipulate the reality that it described. Her poems of praise and blame contributed to the development of the epideictic, the most distinctly literary of the rhetorical types.

- Epideictic: Of or pertaining to rhetoric of ceremony, declamation, and demonstration, most often the rhetoric of funerals and other formal events. One of the three branches or “species” of rhetoric as outlined by Aristotle.

Fragment 31

- Fragment 31 is preserved in *On the Sublime* (circa 1st century CE), whose author, Longinus, cites it as an example of the attainment of great sublimity by skillful arrangement of content.
- He notes great passion, the accuracy of observation, and the felicitous combination of detail. But for all her metrical complexity and innovation, for all the vowel-rich melody of her verse, it is the content that has fascinated her readers; for all their dazzling craft, the poems are repeatedly praised as spontaneous, simple, direct, and honest (Poetry Foundation).
- Reception
 - Many poets have imitated her (including Catullus and Sidney) and her appeal has lasted throughout the centuries but the Romantic poets Byron, Tennyson, Shelley as translated this Fragment 31.
 - Throughout literary history poets as vastly different as Ezra Pound, TS Eliot, Anne Carson, all have alluded to or imitated her.
 - In the last 70 years there has been a surge of interest in her work, partly for its erotic and homoerotic interest.
 - From *The Classical Tradition*, edited by Anthony Grafton
 - At the turn of the 20th century Sappho’s corpus was increased by the excavation of ancient papyrus texts, mainly in Egypt and dating from the early centuries CE, which included several important new poems. These rediscovered scraps, often literally tattered at the edges but all the more hauntingly evocative for it, made an impression on early Modernist poets, especially Ezra Pound, whose 1916 poem “Papyrus” wittily renders a recently published fragment (95):
 - Spring.....
Too long.....
Gongula.....
 - This poem’s minimalism and its use of lacunae as an expressive device have continued to influence Sappho translations to the present day.
 - Her work has its own deep resonance because of its skill, and it also mates each age with an interest with each age.

Ritual and Religion



- She worshipped in the cult of Aphrodite and there are many who believe her poems were used in worship.
- The body of marriage songs, now only a few fragments, can be read as public, ceremonial affirmations of Eros. Alternatively, the hymn to Aphrodite (poem 1), while belonging to a familiar poetic form, can also strike readers as a personal and private outcry, more than a pious religious utterance.

Wedding Songs

- Sappho's wedding songs and her ritual songs which appear to be closely tied to festival events were likely sung by a group of women, and therefore could be classed as "choral."
- Sappho's non-ritual songs were likely composed for solo performance, but does this oblige us to classify them as "private," while the other songs are "public?" If Sappho sang her songs in the first instance to a group of women it is highly likely that the women would memorize them and repeat them in other contexts, further complicating the question of just what constitutes a "private" and what a "public" song.
- The oral nature of the performance and transmission of Sappho's songs, which would persist in women's circles long after the advent of literacy, allowed her verses to be shared, interpreted and repeated at will by her audience. Sappho's words do not seem intended to reflect the author's unique subjective position, and at times an ambiguity of voice or situation appears to be embedded in her poetic style.

Public or private

- Was Sappho a revolutionary, or was she simply following a tradition of women poets?
- We have no surviving texts from any female predecessors, but we can surmise that in the women's quarters, where spinning songs or lullabies were sung, or at women's religious festivals where women sang and danced, the music could well have originated with women.
- The "voice" of the lyrics could be a personal one, but its message would be drawn from shared experiences of women.
- A list of female poets was compiled during the Roman period (Anth. Pal. 9.26), which may have relied upon an Alexandrian collection of earlier women poets.
- Whether or not Sappho joined a tradition of women poets, she clearly started one, for Erinna and Nossis, who composed verses during the Hellenistic period, saw themselves or were regarded as her successors.

Ritual (cont.)

- Several of her songs contain references to rituals, and the goddess Aphrodite figures in many of them. This raises the significant question whether we are to assume that much of Sappho's work was actually composed for and



performed at ritual events, or whether these cult activities simply inspired the form and content of her songs, which could be performed in non-ritual contexts.

- The tendency to try to categorize her poems as either sacred or secular is not appropriate, for in the Archaic Greek world the sacred was a dimension of all life, including sexual passion.

Themes

- There are many themes in Sappho's work:
 - Lovesickness
 - Uncertainty
 - Sleeplessness
 - Bondage
 - Slavery
- A whole range of strong emotional expression occupies her poems:
 - Hostility
 - Aggressiveness
 - Jealousy
 - Awe before beauty
 - Longing
 - Loss
 - Grief over lost love

Occasions and Relationships that inspired poems

- Weddings, religious ceremony, poetic sisterhood, motherhood, friendship, erotic love
- There is evidence that suggests she was a teacher of girls.

Poems and comments

- Epithalamium, [Happy Bridegroom], translated by AE Houseman
 - This poem rhymes in couplets in English.
 - This poem celebrates the happy occasion of marriage.
 - This poem is public and ceremonial.
- Fragment 1, translated by Gilliam Spraggs
 - This poem is in free/open verse.
 - This poem is addressed to Aphrodite.
 - Sappho is calling on Aphrodite to bring back a love.
 - The battle is between the beloved and the beloved who has left.
- Fragment 95
- Fragment 58 (a)
 - Here we have an interesting mixing of the Greek idea of muses and that of the human old age and aging.
- Poem XII, translated by Bliss Carmen
 - This is the address of a goddess and the goddess speaking back.
 - "Love is the ache of a wound in beauty's side."



- She got human emotion so right.
- One Girl, translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti
- Charaxos and Larichos, translated by William Logan
 - There is humor her.
 - She is showing some irreverence for the gods.
 - She refers to the Iliad dismissively.
 - Iambic was a chastising, cursing kind of poem.

Christine reads from The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics

- This explains the difference between what we mean by lyric poetry and what Sappho meant.

Poem 1, translated by John Frederick Nims

Sappho has been relevant to each age.