

WHAT'S CRAWLING IN SAPPHO FR. 130

BONNIE MACLACHLAN

Ἔρος δηῦτε μ' ὁ λυσιμέλης δώνει
γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον·

Ἄτθι, σοὶ δ' ἔμεθεν μὲν ἀπήχθετο
φροντίσδην, ἐπὶ δ' Ἀνδρομέδαν πότη(ι) fr. 130 Voigt

IN THIS TWO-PART FRAGMENT¹ Sappho gives us an image of the overwhelming power of Eros, which she experiences (it would seem) with the departure of a young favourite for a rival. In describing her own vulnerability, Sappho uses the remarkable compound γλυκύπικρος, "sweet-bitter," which occurs here for the first time in extant Greek literature.² Eros is described as a sweet-bitter, irresistible creature, an ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον. An ὄρπετον (= ἐρπετόν) is, literally, a creature which crawls, or moves slowly (ἔρπειν). Given Sappho's originality in choice and application of phrase and detail in her word-pictures, she is likely to have had in mind an image more compelling than "creature," even "crawling creature," with ὄρπετον. What is it?

In several other passages in early Greek literature, ὄρπετον / ἐρπετόν refers to all creatures which are to be distinguished from human beings (e.g., *Od.* 4.418, *Alcman* 89.3 *PMG*, *Ar. Aves* 1069). Sometimes it refers to earthbound, crawling creatures like snakes, e.g., *Pindar Pyth.* 1.25 (Typhoeus), *Eur. Andr.* 269, *Theocr.* 24.57 and 29.13. On occasion these earthbound ἐρπετά are explicitly contrasted with flying creatures, πετεινά (e.g., *Hdt.* 1.140.3; cf. 4.183.4, *Theocr.* 15.118). But Semonides mentions a ἐρπετόν which can fly (13 West). It lands on the poet, who dismisses it as having "the lowliest form of life of all living creatures." This is clearly some kind of insect, a beetle (κάνθαρος) according to the Townleian scholiast on *Il.* 18.407.

¹The four lines are consecutive in MSS ADI of Hephaestion. Bergk separates them into a pair of two-line fragments (40, 41); Lobel and Page print them as two fragments (130, 131) while admitting "fortasse coniungenda sunt." Diehl (137) takes them together, and was followed by H. Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*² (Munich 1962) 208, and E.-M. Voigt, *Sappho et Alcaeus* (Amsterdam 1971). D. A. Campbell, in *Greek Lyric* 1 (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1982) 147, is uncertain.

²Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass. 1953) 60, describes the occurrence of Sappho's neologism as proof of the new awareness of the self which, in his view, characterized the poetry of the Archaic age. In verse 1353 of the *Theognidea* Eros is described as πικρὸς καὶ γλυκύς.

When the poets describe an insect capable of inflicting a wound, the distinction between the creature's earthbound or airborne nature is irrelevant. A stinging bee is called a "small winged serpent" (ὄφις . . . μικρός / πτερωτός) in the *Anacreontea* (35.10–11). Wilamowitz took the ὄρπετον of Sappho's fr. 130 to refer to an οἶστρος, the gad-fly (*Sappho und Simonides* [Berlin 1913] 55, n. 1). There was a cult of Aphrodite-οἶστρος on Paros, and Simonides mentions the οἶστρος of the love-goddess (541 PMG). But, while the gad-fly carries a sting (πικρός), it cannot be said to be in any sense γλυκύς. I propose that the creature Sappho had in mind in this poem was the bee, that creature which carried both honey and a sting, pleasure and pain.

Although the ancients tended to focus on the positive aspects of the bee—its purity, chastity, assiduous and collective work-habits, etc.,³ they were not unaware of its power to wound, as we know from legend. In Crete, where bees were credited with feeding the infant Zeus on honey,⁴ and were rewarded by the god with a change of colour "resembling bronze armour" (χαλκῷ χρυσοειδεῖ παραπλησίαν, Diodorus 5.70.5), a swarm of bees described in the same way, as "bronzed" (χαλκοειδεῖς), is said to have attacked the town of Raukos, causing such pain by their stings that the whole population had to emigrate. Like these warrior-bees, any bee affronted was something to avoid. A fragment of Pindar is included in the tale of a Cnidian named Roikos, who spoke πικρότερον to a bee. For this he was severely mutilated (frs. 165 and 252 Snell-Maehler).

In fr. 130 Sappho describes her experience of the ὄρπετον Eros with the verb δόναι. If she had in mind the image of a bee-Eros, is this verb appropriate? δονεῖν means, in the first instance, "to shake about," "to whirl," as a strong wind tosses about the trees and their leaves (Bacch. 5.61). δονεῖν can also mean "to drive about," and is used of the οἶστρος that drives about the cattle at *Od.* 22.30. The verb came to be used for the agitation induced by passion or by worries which stir up the θυμός. In addition to the Sappho passage, LSJ cite among their examples *Ar. Ec.* 954, Pindar *Pyth.* 4.219 (Medea, whirling with passion for Jason), Bacch. 1.179 and fr. 12.1, Bion fr. 6.5. When the senses are aroused by a scent, for example (Mnesim. 4.60), or by music (Alciph. fr. 6), δονεῖν is used. Herodotus uses the verb to describe the general stirring up of the troops in Asia mobilizing under Darius (ἡ Ἀσίη ἐδονέετο ἐπὶ τρία ἔτα, 7.1.2). An epic fragment of Choerilus is clearly parallel, describing the busy movement of Xerxes' troops with

³E.g., *Purity*: Arist. *HA* 9.40.18, Varro *RR* 3.16.6, Pliny *HN* 11.25. The ancient cult of Artemis of Ephesos, a bee-goddess whose priestesses were called μέλισσαι, was surrounded with restrictions of purity in diet and sexual relations (Paus. 8.13.7, *Ar. Frogs* 1283). *Chastity*: Columella 9.14.3, Aelian *NA* 5.11, Plutarch *Prec. Coni.* 144 d–e, Pliny *HN* 11.44. *Hard-working*: Vergil *G.* 4.158, Varro *RR* 3.16.4, Seneca *Ep.* 121.22, Pliny *HN* 11.11.

⁴Vergil *G.* 4.152, Columella 9.2.3 ff., Boios in *Antonin. Lib.* 19.

the same form of the verb, ἔδονεῖτο, and explicitly likening this to bees swarming (πολυμήνοισι μελίσσαις, *Supp. Hellen.* 318). Both passages recall *Il.* 2.85 ff., where the host leaving the assembly is likened to clustering bees. δονεῖν refers to this same agitated buzzing of bees in *H. Hymn* 4.563: the bee-prophetesses, if denied their honey, give false prophecies and then buzz around one another (ψεύδονται δὴ ἔπειτα δι' ἀλλήλων δονέουσαι). δόνει, then, could serve Sappho's purposes in two ways in fr. 130: it could express her personal turbulence (like the afflicted Medea in *Pyth.* 4.219), and it could describe the constant irritation of the assiduous, buzzing bee-Eros.

Another (more explicit) bee-fragment of Sappho's preserves some marvelous assonance: μήτε μοι μέλι μήτε μέλισσα (fr. 146 Voigt). This remarkable parade of liquids did not originate with Sappho. We know from the Augustan grammarian Trypho (*Trop.* 25) that the expression was proverbial, but found in her work (παρά Σαφοῖ). From the epitomator Diogenianus (6.58) we learn that the proverb was applied to "those who were not willing to experience something good along with something horrible" (ἐπὶ τῶν μὴ βουλομένων παθεῖν τι ἀγαθὸν μετὰ ἀπενκτοῦ). A variant of this explanation comes from Gregorius Cyprius (3.4), who describes the proverb as referring to those who "refuse to experience something good because of the danger residing in it." Sappho, we suspect, is rejecting the bee's sweetness (μέλι) because of the concomitant sting (μέλισσα). She is rejecting γλυκύπικρος Ἔρος.

In Hellenistic poetry, the sweet-bitter image of the bee is a favourite *topos* for describing the pleasurable pain experienced in love.⁵ Here the emphasis shifts to the bee's sting, its κέντρον, which with a single prick infects its victim with the sweet torment of unfulfilled desire. Meleager (*AP* 5.163) describes the κέντρον Ἐρωτος, which bears both γλυκύ and πικρόν. The nature of the experience is revealed by a bee who lights on the skin of the beloved Heliodora. The bee is addressed as φιλέραστε, "lover-loving": a prick from its sting transforms one into a lover. The bee, having given its sting to Eros, in turn acquires some of the characteristics of the love-god. She loses the chastity associated with her in cult and legend, and becomes the bearer of desire.⁶ In another poem from the Anthology the jealous lover tells the

⁵This paradoxical feeling found throughout Greek literature is the subject of an elegant study by A. Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton 1986). The painful-pleasurable stimulation of love is also described in the *Greek Anthology* as a "scratching" (κνίσματα) by desire (7.219), or as the bite of mosquitoes (5.151). Bee-love is, however, the most frequently used image. See, for example, 5.163, 12.81, 12.126 and 12.154. On Eros as a bee, see C. G. Brown's review of C. Calame, *Alcman: Fragmenta* (*Phoenix* 40 [1986] 343-347, at 347).

⁶Even the wax of the bee can be drawn into the love-experience of poets. Pindar, catching sight of the supple limbs of a youth "melts," like beeswax "stung" (δαχθείς) by the hot rays of the sun (fr. 123 Snell-Maehler). Pindar goes on to say that Peitho and Charis dwell in the beloved. These two powers frequently occur together when poets speak of love or of persuasive words. In another fragment (fr. 152 Snell-Maehler)

Love-bee to stop its buzzing and to stay away from the very pure, "untilled" (ἀκηροτάτου) skin of his beloved. Further, he threatens the creature with a reciprocal sting, for the lover, too, possesses a κέντρον (Strato, *AP* 12.249). The bee in Eros is attracted to the pure smooth skin of the young beloved, as it had always been to pure, untilled (ἀκήρατον) gardens (Eur. *Hipp.* 77).

The lover-loving bee can sting Love itself. One of the best-known Hellenistic portraits of Eros is that of the boy Love-god getting stung as he steals honeycombs. A poem attributed variously to Theocritus, Moschus, and Bion (Theocr. 19) describes the boy running to Aphrodite, greatly agitated by the pain inflicted by such a small creature. His mother reminds him that he too, though small, has great powers to wound. This vignette is a variant on the image found in poem 35 of the *Anacreontea*, where Eros is pricked by a bee (the ὄφις . . . μικρός / περρωτός, above, 96), which he disturbs as he sleeps among the roses.⁷ The image captured the imagination of Cranach, who painted no fewer than eight versions of the scene, many with a Latin version of Theocritus 19 in the upper left hand corner.

Sappho had no such means of retaliation; her wounding ὄρεκτον was ἀμήχανον. The identification of her crawling creature with the bee is, of course, less explicit than the Hellenistic vignettes. This could be the unhappy result of its fragmentary context or the happy outcome of a richer, because allusive, poetic image. It is, I think, justified in either case.

Sappho may have anticipated the later poets in the second distich. Atthis, she tells us, "flies" (πότηι) to Sappho's rival, Andromeda. Flying is regularly used by the Greek poets to indicate the instantaneous and swift response to Love.⁸ Eros, like his arrows, is winged, in keeping with his power to act swiftly and arbitrarily and to generate in others the desire to "fly" to a beloved. Socrates, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, cites a "Homeric" pun in which the gods re-name Eros "Pteros" because of his feather-producing force (διὰ περοφότον' ἀνάγκην, 252c).⁹ In Anacreon (378 *PMG*) the poet-lover

Pindar speaks of his voice as "sweeter than bee fashioned wax" μελίσσοτεύκτων κηρίων ἐμὰ γλυκερώτερος ὁμφά). This may well contain a Pindaric pun. The configuration of bees / sweetness / eros presented in the single-line fragment would be underscored by the unmistakable sound of ἔρως in γλυκερώτερος.

⁷Cf. Goethe's beautiful poem "Heidenröslein," where the boy picks a rosebud, getting "stung" in the process by the rose, which warns him "Ich steche dich, / Dass du ewig denkst an mich, / Und ich will's nicht leiden." It is possible that this poem has erotic overtones.

⁸In Sappho's fr. 22 Voigt πόθος "flew round and round" (ἀμφιπόταται) Gongyla as she caught sight of the dress of a beloved.

⁹The Hellenistic poets complained of the winged power of Eros, but realized that Desire without wings was even more painful, for it could not be dislodged. Cutting the swift wings of Desire is a sorry victory, for one only yokes the longing to one's heart (*AP* 5.179.5-8). Love can always seem to fly to a lover, but seems to have absolutely no strength to fly away (*AP* 5.212.5-6). This sentiment was imitated by Propertius in 2.12.

sprouts wings and flies because of Eros, to overcome a reluctant beloved. Has the young Atthis become a bee herself, carrying the sting to Sappho's rival? If so, the poet's bitter helpless state has the sweet compensation of retaliation.¹⁰

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
LONDON, ONTARIO N6A 3K9

The swift trajectory of Eros' winged power is readily transferred to his (winged) arrows (AP 5.198.5–6). These poems from the *Greek Anthology* are all by Meleager, who was clearly familiar with a text of Sappho, for he included her in his list of contributors, and headed 6.269 ὡς Σαπφῶς, probably exercising some doubt about the accuracy of the ascription. See A. S. F. Gow, *The Greek Anthology, Sources and Ascriptions* (Oxford 1958, *JHS* Supp. 9) 33; A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page, *The Greek Anthology* (Cambridge 1965) 597; D. L. Page, *Further Greek Epigrams* (Cambridge 1981) 127–128.

¹⁰I am grateful to Emmet Robbins and Christopher Brown, who read an earlier draft of this article and offered useful suggestions.