

## A REACTION TO TSAGARAKIS' DISCUSSION OF SAPPHO FR. 31

In his recent monograph<sup>1)</sup> professor Tsagarakis (henceforth T.) had discussed Sappho 31 briefly: after having attacked Devereux<sup>2)</sup> for elaborating the case of a full-blown homosexuality, and after having adduced a few parallels from Greek folk poetry of the more recent past and the present, T. had suggested that the situation behind Sappho 31 is as follows: "Two girls grow up together or they become friends early in their lives. What happens if some day [...] both girls realize they love the same man but one of them succeeds in winning him?"<sup>3)</sup> And he had promised that in a separate paper he was going to discuss Sappho 31 at length<sup>3)</sup>. In *Rb. Mus.* 122 (1979) 97-118 this paper has now been published. Neither in his book nor in his article T. has convinced me of the correctness of his interpretation of Sappho 31, and I thank the editor of the *Museum* for allowing me to state my problems here.

In his article T. fulfils his promise by quoting extensively from Greek folk poetry. I am much impressed by the beauty and the poignancy of these poems. In all of them a girl-speaker<sup>4)</sup> gives utterance to feelings of sorrow, worry, jealousy, physical

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1) *Self-expression in early Greek lyric, iambic and elegiac poetry*, Wiesbaden 1977. My review of this monography has been published in *Mnem.* 33 (1980) 182-187. - For this contribution to *Rb. Mus.* I acknowledge the generous help of my friend and colleague Dr. A.M. van Erp Taalamn Kip.

2) G. Devereux, 'The Nature of Sappho's Seizure in fr. 31 as Evidence for Her Inversion', *Class. Quart.* n.s. 20 (1970), 17-31.

3) The quotation is taken from pp. 75-76, the promise is done on p. 74, n. 28.

4) In the song to which T. attaches most importance (many of Sappho's symptoms recur there) the text (*Passow, Pop. carm. Graec. rec.* p. 411, n° 532b, printed in T.'s article on p. 111) does not allow any safe conclusion as to the sex of either speaker or addressee. T. is aware of this but comments: "That the feelings expressed concern lovers of opposite sex is certain, though textual evidence is lacking: homosexuality is not a theme of Greek folk song." (p. 112) This is a very dogmatic kind of discussion. Perhaps T. and his informants can be relied upon as far as Greek folk poetry is concerned, but I question the dogmatic way in which T. compares folk poetry and Sappho. In this case certainly "comparaison n'est pas raison".

misery: psychosomatic reactions associated with unrequited heterosexual love. Not being a neo-hellenist, I am willing to admit that T. is completely right in his interpretation of these poems. But the deduction he makes from these folk songs to Sappho 31 is in my view a *non sequitur*. Even if one grants that Sappho's poetry has certain qualities in common with folk songs (uncomplicated emotions uttered directly, frequent references to concrete every day objects, such as flowers, garments etc.), and even if one shares the conviction that "Greek poetry continued to be composed uninterruptedly from the end of the ancient world to the present day"<sup>5</sup>), it does *not* follow that, if feelings of love-lorn women in recent Greek folk songs are expressed in terms comparable with those found in Sappho 31, the cause of these feelings in the folk poems is identical with the cause in Sappho's poem.

T. maintains (less strongly in his article than in his book) that the emotional breakdown in Sappho's poem is due to the fact that the speaker "does not enjoy what the other (girl, JMB) does: the company of a man which leads, for the Greek girl, to matrimony – her life dream since ancient times"<sup>6</sup>). I for one think that T.'s phrases "the Greek girl" and "since ancient times" are illuminating of his view: he assumes that there is an unbroken cultural continuity between 600 B.C. and 1980 A.D.: τὸ ἐθνος indeed. But apart from this, his explanation of the emotions expressed in Sappho's poem is in direct contrast to what the text offers: "Your sweet speech and irresistible laughter makes my heart panic – when I see you ever so briefly, I cannot speak any more etc.". In the folk songs adduced by T. it is evident that the "I" is at a loss because she is deserted, abandoned or neglected by the "You" (= the heterosexual lover). In Sappho's poem nothing of this kind is said; but rather: "he seems to me godlike (and thus, by implication more than human) as he is sitting there quietly sustaining your sweet presence for a while – I myself am unable to sustain it even for a moment and seem to myself on the brink of death".

I agree with T.'s view that Devereux is wrong in so far as he is judging the poem as a report written by a clear-headed patient and taking the text as proof for a specific type of jealousy

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5) A statement quoted from Trypanis' *Medieval and Modern Greek Poetry* by Tsagarakis on p. 107 of his article.

6) p. 117.

felt by a lesbian when a man takes her beloved girl away from her. But in his manifest eagerness to remove the blame of "practising lesbianism" from Sappho, T. goes too far in virtually denying that the "I" in fr. 31 is overwhelmed by the effects of her tender feelings *for this girl*.

There are a number of minor points in T.' article on which I disagree with him; most of them are directly related to the issue at stake here. I list my objections according to the pages of T.' article.

p. 98. T.' explanation of *ὄττις* boils down to bluntly stating that *ὄττις* = *ὄς*. But T. does less than justice to Page (*S. & A.*, 20), for Page gives as the first possible interpretation that *ὄττις* might be taken as slightly coloured with a consecutive (and thus causal) sense: (that man seems to me godlike) as one of the kind to sit, because he sits. T. omits referring to this.

p. 98, n. 7. T. criticizes Page's interpretation of Sappho 16,3 and observes: "But *ἔφαται* may be subjunctive, and this verb, even assuming it is indicative, expresses a personal, subjunctive, fact as opposed to the objective fact *ισδάνει* in the frg. under discussion". There is no doubt that *ἔφαται* is a subjunctive: "die Länge ist metrisch gesichert" (Eva-Maria Hamm, *Gramm. zu S. & A.* § 252). – And "a subjunctive fact": is there such a thing? There are only (necessarily subjective) statements presented in the indicative or in the subjunctive mode.

p. 99. The crucial point of lines 1–5 of Sappho's poem is not "the man's presence and its effect upon the girl", as T. puts it, but the effect of the girl's sweet talk and laughter upon the man, how he *ισδάνει* and *ὑπακούει*.

p. 100. T. says on the Sappho-passage (22,14) adduced by Page to elucidate his (erotic) interpretation of *ἐπτόαισεν*: "But this is obviously an entirely different context (etc.)". Not at all obvious: the papyrus is here so mutilated that the context can hardly be determined; in so far as the remains allow any guess at all, it *may* just as well refer to the emotional disturbance caused by an erotic experience.

p. 100. As for the Alcaeus-passage (283,3), T. "the subject of the verb is Eros, and there can be no ambiguity". However, he is not at all happy with this concession, and proceeds searching for counter-parallels elsewhere. But he should have been wary about the precise form of his con-

cession: the text of Alcaeus gives no clue as to the subject of ἐπτόαισεν; this *may* be Eros (or Aphrodite, as Voigt prefers) but could also be Paris, or his external appearance. p. 102. T. presents us with some subjective speculation about the situation described by the poem and deduces from it that in the clause ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω, the verbal form is used to denote a snapshot action (aor.) repeated several times (conj. iter.); he tries to illuminate this usage (in n. 23) by a reference to *Iliad* B 34, T 26 etc. But in this Homeric formula εἶπω undeniably points to the immediate future; the clause is not at all iterative.

p. 104. T. concludes his discussion of ἐπτόαισεν by saying that "this is a negative emotional disturbance, not a response to love". But falling in love or being in love can very well be considered as, and be described in terms of, a negative emotional disturbance. This is in fact the point of Sappho's poem.

p. 131. T. has to admit that "the man appears not to be the real cause of the woman's suffering. The girl must have deserted her, if desertion is the issue". *What* is the meaning of this last sentence? "X must be the case, if X is at all to the point"? An evasive sentence if ever there was one. At any rate, T. takes it that desertion *is* the case. Sappho's poem neither says she is deserted, nor that she feels herself that way.

p. 114. All of a sudden it appears to be crucial for T. to know whether the speaker of fr. 31 is an adult woman or a teenager. There is of course no real possibility of finding an answer to this question. T. simply takes it that the speaker is a young girl, and speculates about the "aspects of love" one can discern between two young girls whose mutual attachment is threatened by the fact that one of them is to marry a man. He says at the end (p. 117): "The psychosomatic reaction does not as such – this point must be emphasized – prove any homosexual anxiety. The feelings expressed abound in Greek love songs". Sappho should not have been explained, "helped" or "defended" in this way.