VIII. Observations on Sappho's *To Aphrodite*

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I. Sappho in Dionysius

Throughout antiquity the poetry of Sappho inspired a universal chorus of praise accorded to no other poet except Homer. Often this was somewhat rhapsodic. For example, Plato wrote in his much-quoted epigram: "Some say there are only nine Muses. How careless! Lo, Sappho of Lesbos is the tenth." Solon the law-giver, on hearing one of her songs, is said to have expressed the melancholy desire simply to learn it and die. Again, Meleager of Gadara is probably best-known today for his observation in the proem to his *Garland* that her poems were "few, but roses all." But Strabo the geographer with the prosaic words *thaumaston ti chrêma*, "something wonderful," bestowed on her the best tribute, the striking simplicity of which attests to a virtually inexpressible admiration.[1]

Unfortunately, from the works which evoked such acclamation only *To Aphrodite* survives as an indisputably finished example of her art, by which we may estimate the validity of the ancient verdict. Even the so-called "Ode to Anactoria"[2] appears to be only a long fragment, for at least one stanza seems to be lost at the end. Neither, for obvious reasons, can the many papyrus fragments recovered in recent years be expected to enhance her reputation as a consummate literary artist; for the restorations and reconstructions of these faint wrecks made by Edmunds and Bowra and other scholars, however clever and welcome, are after all only poems by college professors in what they trust is the manner of Sappho, not authentic works from her pen.

The ode to Aphrodite owes its preservation to the Greco-Roman critic and historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus who, happily, quoted it in his treatise *On Composition* as an example of the "smooth" or "polished" mode of writing. Before proceeding to

[1] *Anth. Pal.* 9.506; Stobaeus, *Anth.* 29.58; *Anth. Pal.* 4.6; Strabo, 13.619.

[2] This whimsical title seems to come from Wilamowitz' *Sappho und Simonides* (Berlin 1913) 56.

a detailed study of the emotional and aesthetic qualities of the poem, it would be interesting and pertinent to see what this ancient professor of rhetoric had to say about it, and how the poem is supposed to exemplify this particular style of composition.

Dionysius' admirable work,[3] which deserves to be better known among classical scholars than it is today, is a study of word-order in Greek, its object being the investigation of how certain literary and emotional effects are achieved through the manipulation of the various sound patterns of language. It purports to deal only with what he calls "the sphere of expression" (*ho lektikos topos*), not with the "sphere of subject matter" (*ho pragmatikos topos*); for subject matter, in accordance with his method of separating form and substance, is taken to precede expression. Within the sphere of expression he discusses only the *arrangement* of words, not their selection, for selection logically precedes arrangement. Finally, in word arrangement his major interest is appropriate euphonic effect, not clarity, for clarity is taken as a matter of course by Greek writers as the desideratum of good writing.

He distinguishes three styles or modes of composition (*harmoniai*): the austere (*austêra*), the smooth (*glaphyra*), and the mixed (*eukratê*).[4] The first is represented, among others, by Aeschylus and Thucydides; the second (an ill-assorted group at first glance) by Sappho, Euripides, and Isocrates; the third by Homer, Plato, and Demosthenes.

The characteristics of the smooth style, which alone concerns us here, are the following[5]: it avoids those dissonant combinations of sounds which give the austere mode its peculiar sinewy force, namely, $\nu+\chi$ at the end and beginning of successive words, $\iota+\epsilon$ in the same syllable, also $\nu+\pi$, $\nu+\theta$, $\nu+\tau$, $\nu+\lambda$, $\sigma+\xi$, and $\nu+\kappa$. This is of singular interest to modern students of Greek, as it represents one of the few examples of a Greek writer's aesthetic response to the purely formal aspects of his own language.

He goes on to arrange the tonal elements of the Greek language in a descending hierarchy of euphonic value.[6] Of the vowels the long α is proclaimed the most euphonious, followed by η, ω, υ,

[3] See *Dion. of Hal. On Literary Criticism*, edited by W. Rhys Roberts (London 1910).
[4] *De comp.* 21.
[5] *Ibid.* 23.
[6] *Ibid.* 14. This may seem arbitrary but probably represents an old tradition in the schools of rhetoric.

ι, o, and ϵ in that order. Of the semi-vowels the descending order is λ, μ, ν, ρ, σ (ζ, ξ, ψ are double semi-vowels). Of these λ is sweetest, ρ is rough and noble, μ and ν are like horns, while σ is pronounced disagreeable, "for a rational being like man should not hiss." Finally, of the mute letters three are smooth: κ, π, τ; three rough: θ, ϕ, χ; and three in between: β, γ, δ.

The smooth style also employs its appropriate rhythm. In connection with his discussion of the various feet[7] he remarks that the trochee is softer (*malakôteros*) and less noble than the iamb; the dactyl is impressive and beautiful; the spondee is stately. These feet, of course, are regarded as the elements of the Sapphic meter, perfectly exemplified in the poem under discussion.

In further attempting to capture and express the illusive quality of Sappho's style he remarks that the smooth mode "demands free movement in its diction, it requires words to come sweeping along one on top of another . . . like the onflow of a never-resting stream. It tries to give the effect of one continuous utterance . . . the style resembles finely woven stuffs or pictures in which the lights melt insensibly into the shadows. It requires that all its words shall be melodious, smooth, soft as a maiden's face."[8] Surely the effect of Sappho's style has never been so accurately nor so lovingly described. Further, it is to Dionysius' credit that he delicately refrains from subjecting the poem to the letter by letter dissection which Homer and Thucydides undergo, but satisfies himself with noting that the poem exhibits a minimum of dissonances, and these of the most inconsequential sort.[9] In each line we find the most agreeable sounds prevailing, α, η, λ, μ, ν, ρ. Here, to be sure, Sappho's language was a great advantage to her, for Aeolic is the softest and most voluptuous of the Greek dialects, the long α predominating and initial aspirates eschewed. No line "hisses," despite the strong sibilancy of the Greek tongue. And though the poem gives the required effect of a single swift utterance, yet the periods are of moderate length, symmetrical, and such as can be accommodated to a single breath. Finally, a reading of the poem aloud will corroborate his opinion that much of the verbal charm of the writing lies in what he terms "the smooth cohesion of the joints."

[7] *Ibid.* 17.
[8] *Ibid.* 23.5. Robert's translation.
[9] *Ibid.* For example, line 7 shows $\nu+\lambda$ in juxtaposition.

So much for the ancient setting of the ode. It is to be noted that Dionysius' criticism consists of wholly formal analysis, illuminating the aspect of Greek literature which is most obscure today, namely, the purely sensuous properties of ancient poetry. If he treats Sappho merely as a species of rhetoric, it must be remembered that he has limited himself to that particular topic. His preoccupation with what may appear to be superficialities seems strange only if we forget that all ancient literature was by and large an *oral* art, and a craft that could be taught. From this point of view even Thucydides is treated as a species of music. Hence, the element of interpretation, which plays so large a role in modern criticism, lies outside his province. He is less a literary critic than a teacher of composition, with such severely exquisite standards that even great stylists like Plato and Thucydides are forced to undergo correction and improvement.

II. The Sphere of Subject Matter

The invocation to Aphrodite follows the immemorial scheme of the prayer[10] for divine help, many examples of which are familiar to readers of Homer.[11] The particular divinity is addressed in a series of flattering epithets, attention is called to other occasions when divine aid was solicited and granted, and the god is besought to do likewise now. Very often such a prayer includes a reminder of some service rendered by the supplicant, to whom the divinity is under obligation,[12] but no such element appears in Sappho's prayer.

The love-goddess is addressed as one of the great Olympians. She is the Homeric daughter of Zeus, not the more primitive sea-born goddess of Hesiod. She sits on a splendid richly ornamented throne. Although her epithet *poikilothronos* does not appear in Homer,[13] the word is suitable to Aphrodite here, for it suggests a connotation of cunning artistry, which finds an unconscious echo in *doloploka*.

Thus Sappho begins her prayer: "Deathless Aphrodite, weaver of wiles, mistress, I entreat you, do not *break* my heart (or spirit)

[10] That this is no ritual cult-prayer has been well established by Wilamowitz (above, note 2) 42.

[11] As in *Iliad* 5.115.

[12] *Iliad* 1.37.

[13] But cf. *chrysothronos Hêrê* everywhere.

with *pain* and *anguish*." The words in question are far richer and subtler in suggestiveness than the traditional translation would indicate, and the reader should let his mind play beneath the surface of them in order to be fully sensible of the delicate counterpoint of her word-weaving, as the strands of her song "melt insensibly" into one another. The word *damna* means literally *to tame*, said of some wild beast, and this is picked up in line 18 by *mainolai* (mad), where it is surely no accident that *thymos* is repeated. It also very commonly denotes *overpower in war*, an idea which is musically recapitulated in the closing stanza in *symmachos*, *ally in war*, *comrade in arms*. Here *thymos* again appears, certainly by design. The word *onia*, signifying mental distress in general, is used to designate a feeling of being vexed or upset. However, *asê* seems to be a more specific mood-word for which English lacks a precise equivalent. Interestingly enough, Wilamomitz remarks in his discussion of the poem that German also lacks a word to render the Greek. He suggests that "altes Franzoesisch hat an *ennui* ein schoenes Aequivalent."[14] The English word *ennui* in the sense of "boredom" does not quite hit the mark. The Greek has a sense of "surfeit" or "nausea," almost physical, combined with the notion of being emotionally "fed up," "jaded," "tired of it all." This is reinforced by the deliberate three-fold repetition of *dêute*, "this time" or "now again." Sappho's mood is a mixture of passionate longing and the tired realization of the endless repetitiveness of the experience.

"Come, Aphrodite, if ever (si quando) you heard my voice in the past. . . ." Here begins the lovely description of the descent of the love-goddess on some previous occasion or occasions in answer to the same appeal. This may be called the fantasy section of the poem, the nature and significance of which will be discussed later. On that other occasion, Sappho recalls, immediately on catching her suppliant voice from afar, Aphrodite yoked up her golden chariot and left Zeus' palace. Scholars are divided on whether the word *golden* should be taken with chariot or palace (or "house"), but it is best put with chariot, for Aphrodite was associated with gold from the most ancient times, and Sappho herself in another place calls her "gold-crowned."[15]

[14] *Sappho und Simonides* 45.

[15] E. Lobel and D. Page, *Poetarum Lesbiorum fragmenta* (Oxford 1955) 33.

Her chariot was drawn by fair fleet sparrows.... Why sparrows (*strouthoi*)? How is it possible that lovely golden Aphrodite, the great goddess of smiling rapture, should be conveyed about by creatures so inappropriate to her Olympian splendor as the dirty little chirpers of our city streets? Indeed, this seeming paradox has proved such a distressing notion to scores of critics and translators of Sappho that they have transformed her birds into more "poetical" swans and doves.

The word actually means *sparrow* (passer domesticus), and occasionally any small nameless fowl. Now, to be sure, certain birds of the pigeon family were sacred to various divinities as, for example, the cooing turtle-dove (*trygôn*), which was sacred to Aphrodite, probably as a symbol of love and trembling innocence. The same was true of the *peleia*, a word known from epic times. Without doubt these birds haunted the great temples just as they roost today about our public buildings. But since they were distinctly identified by name, it is incredible that Sappho should have called them sparrows.

It is sometimes said that she really intended the word to designate swans. This peculiar idea is based on the opinion that *strouthos* could be used generically to mean any large bird. For instance, Denys Page maintains quite seriously that unless the word was so used he cannot understand how the ostrich came to be called *strouthokamêlos*, unless it was a joke.[16] Indeed, it may well have been. But it is more probable that the word was simply a picturesque folk-term, essentially no more ludicrous than, say, bullfrog is in English. Furthermore, the ostrich was also called *ho megas strouthos*, which is tautological if the noun designates any large bird. Now it is common knowledge that the swan is an ancient erotic symbol, but it is absurd to suggest that Sappho did not know the Greek word for it.

Aphrodite's connection with the sparrow has an easy explanation. Noted for lechery and fecundity, it symbolized sexual fertility, thus suggesting an important aspect of her function.[17] Moreover, both Homer and Herodotus allude to its notorious habit of nesting in the temples.[18] But apart from all this, the sparrows of Aphrodite make an artlessly charming picture.

[16] D. L. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford 1955) 8.
[17] Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (Baltimore 1955); Athenaeus 391.
[18] *Iliad* 1.311; Herodotus 1.159.

Perhaps it is more than coincidence that centuries later the Roman Sappho, Catullus, wrote elegies to the pet sparrow of the woman he called Lesbia.

So, in her golden sparrow-drawn chariot—a passage of poignant contrasts—Aphrodite, flying from heaven through the radiant intervening ether, arrived almost instantly on the dark earth, on her deathless face a smile of indulgence, understanding, and perhaps a little impatience, to ask her wretched suppliant what her trouble was this time and what most she longed for in her mad heart. Aphrodite's happily chosen phrase, *mainolai thymôi*, properly means driven wild, wholly possessed with a Bacchic frenzy. What did her Maenad heart desire?

At this point the goddess is represented in the mode of direct address. If the papyrus reading is correct,[19] so that *aps* is the first word of this line, then the right sense has to do with reconciliation, not pursuit of some new attachment. If *peithô* is read as subjunctive, Aphrodite asks, "Whom this time am I to persuade to take you back into her heart's love? Who is wronging you, Sappho?"

She goes on to assure her hapless friend, "If she is running away, you can be sure that she will soon be running after you; if she refuses your gifts, before long she herself will be giving them; if she loves you not, presently she *will* love, even against her will."

This superb stanza is the climax of the poem. Its effectiveness lies in its "curiosa felicitas," a lucent simplicity so seemingly effortless as to touch the limits of art, the words being common colloquial Greek ordered into the perfect expression of every lover's wish-fulfillment. The sound pattern, to use Dionysius' technique, shows eleven α's, six ω's, and only five "rough" consonants, the lines rhyming in η-sounding syllables and the play

[19] For a discussion of the whole vexed question of the true reading of the 19th line see Wilamowitz, *Sappho und Simonides* 47; Page (above, note 16) 9; Lobel, *Oxyrh. Pap.*, XXI.2; Kamerbeek, "Sapphica," *Mnemosyne* (series 4) 9.97. The papyrus reading must be close to the real one but unfortunately cannot be construed without some emendation. Kamerbeek tries and indeed construes it *three* ways, but none is convincing. Page's emendation of *sagên* to *tagên* is most unsatisfactory, as the expression "to be re-appointed" or "to be re-stationed" in one's friendship seems awkward for Sappho, or anyone else, for that matter. It seems best, until more evidence is available, to follow Lobel's suggestion and change the possessive adjective to the third person. This, of course, is to assume that *agên* represents the infinitive of *agô*. The sense of reconciliation is quite consistent with the subject matter of most of Sappho's poems, which seem to deal largely with the sentimental comings and goings of her friends.

of consonants hitting the golden mean between dissonance and mellifluousness.

Why does Aphrodite add "even against her will?" Page's interpretation is that the beloved is unwilling because in her wisdom she realizes that tomorrow Sappho herself will be fleeing.[20] But this is to read more into it than is necessary in the context. Rather the *power* of Aphrodite is the point here. Few gods have withstood this power, and no mortals, not even the pure Hippolytus, for "the will of the goddess Aphrodite is unconquerable."

The closing stanza, very much in the manner of a thematic recapitulation in music, repeats the thought of the opening invocation: ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν = ἀλλὰ τυίδ' ἔλθ'; χαλέπαν μερίμναν = ὄττι πέπονθα. The little everyday word *lyson* (loosen) is exactly right, for its several connotations enrich the central idea which no single English word can render in the same way. Often it meant to *release* or *ransom a war-captive*, as is evidenced from its use in the opening page of the *Iliad*. Sappho has supplicated (*lissomai*) the goddess not to "subdue" her, i.e., make her a war-captive. It also signified *assuage* or *calm*, a sense suggested by the wished for abatement of *oniai*. Furthermore, one must read in the word the common meaning of *unyoke*, which recalls *damna* in its primitive sense of *yoking in marriage* (*damar* = spouse). Finally, *lyô* meant to untie a bond or break a chain. Sappho is an enchained prisoner of overmastering cares, but Aphrodite her *symmachos* (comrade-in-arms) will release her and accomplish her heart's desire, just as she has in the past, and presumably will in the days to come.

III. Servitor of Love

As a personal lyric utterance the prayer to Aphrodite raises some pertinent questions about Sappho herself. Who, precisely, is Aphrodite? What is her significance in Sappho's emotional and artistic life? What is the nature of the experience described in the poem as an epiphany of the goddess? Though the remains of the poetess' works are pathetically scanty, enough survives to justify some provisional answers.

It is certainly safe to say that Aphrodite commands a prominent position in the works of Sappho; she mentions her at least a score

[20] *Sappho and Alcaeus* 15.

of times in the extant fragments. It is also safe to say that the goddess was worshipped in Lesbos. But whether Sappho stood in any official relation to her as a priestess devoted to her service in some religious organization or cult, no one can say. None of the surviving fragments appears to be part of a ritualistic or ceremonial hymn.

Moreover, the belief that Sappho presided over some sort of academy or finishing school where girls in honor of Aphrodite religiously practised the arts of song, dance, and love—a fancy still promulgated as historical fact by many teachers and scholars —seems to be pure myth, based on little more than the remark of Suidas that she had disciples.[21] Socrates too had disciples but operated no school. Of course, it was said in antiquity that the art of love practised by both was the same, Charmides and Phaedrus playing the same roles in this respect as Atthis and Anactoria.[22] There is only a superficial resemblance. Both were captivated by the beauty of young persons whom they sometimes lost to rival craftsmen and teachers. But whereas Socrates and his friends were engaged in the search for knowledge, Eros being the inspiring principle, Sappho and her graceful circle cultivated their Aeolian sensibilities, indulged freely their love of sensuous beauty, and expressed their personal loves and hates in a concentrated flame of lyric splendor unparalleled in Greek literature. Sappho was no intellectual nor Aphrodite an abstract principle.

The love-goddess was a real deity, faithful friend, conventional symbol and, in a sense, Sappho herself. As a throned Olympian she had her temples, altars, statues, worshippers, etc., and a mythology expressive of her powers and functions. Her descent from Olympus symbolizes the yearning of earth for love, in other words, sex and fertility: rain falls from heaven and impregnates Earth, who bears fruits and herbs, and this is the work of Aphrodite.[23] Sappho unquestionably believed in her on this religio-mythological level, but also as a personal deity who could and would appear on earth to her supplicant worshippers.

The question whether the poem records a *real* visitation of Aphrodite, an epiphany like Christ's to Paul, has been discussed

[21] For this idea I am indebted to Page (above, note 16) 110–12.
[22] Max. Tyr. 796.
[23] Aeschylus, *Danaids*, fr. 44.

by various critics. It is an idle question. Of course she really appeared, but what is "real?" Sappho could visualize or dream without being thought a victim of chronic hallucinations. There is a dream quality about the descent of Aphrodite inherent in the myth itself; Sappho too, like the earth, yearned for love.

She frequently represents herself in conversation with gods and goddesses, especially with Aphrodite.[24] In one fragment she invokes her presence at a temple grove; in another she speaks of having conversed with the goddess in a dream.[25] Of course, the dream conversation may be a conventional poetic device, since dreams from oldest times were considered the natural medium of communication between gods and men, according to the epic poets,[26] but on the other hand the reality of the dream experience should by no means be discounted. Fragment 63 appears to be addressed to "dream and the sweet god of sleep." The prayer to Aphrodite resembles a dream or reverie in so far as it seems to represent the realization of an erotic wish. It also refers to previous conversations with the goddess.

In fragment 159 Aphrodite addresses Sappho with the beautiful phrase σύ τε κἄμος θεράπων Ἔρος (thou and my servitor Love).[27] This seems to indicate that Sappho viewed herself, along with Eros, as servant and attendant of Aphrodite. But the word *therapôn* meant servant in a restricted sense. It defined the type of relationship existing between Achilles and Patroclus. It had a noble sense. Patroclus was the *therapôn* of Achilles, his loving comrade-in-arms (*symmachos*), his devoted servant, free though lower in rank, while Achilles was his god, mentor, friend, and something of a father. In the same way Sappho is Aphrodite's lover and attendant, ally in battle, and squire in her service. Like Achilles Aphrodite is the idolized teacher-lover who impatiently but fondly scolds her vexatious companion: "What is the matter with you this time?" But Sappho on her part can also upbraid Aphrodite, without fear of losing her devotion, blaming her for every calamity and frustration that harasses her love-life.[28] Perhaps Aphrodite ought to be understood here as

[24] Lobel and Page (above, note 15) 65, 133.

[25] *Ibid.* 2, 134.

[26] *Iliad* 2.6 ff.

[27] Quoted by Max. Tyr. 18: λέγει που καὶ Σαπφοῖ ἡ Ἀφροδίτη ἐν ἄσματι. For *therapôn* in an honorable sense cf. Pindar, *Pythian* 4.287.

[28] Lobel and Page (above, note 15) 22, 102.

the heavenly Hetaira who, according to Apollodorus, was worshipped as the goddess of bonds between friends, male or female.[29]

Thus Aphrodite, playing many roles, is the matrix of Sappho's life and art. But she plays still another role. She is a kind of projection of Sappho's idealized self, the unconscious personification of the self-critical reflective faculty of her personality which stands aside and views with amused detachment the appetitive element of her nature with its endless flux of miscellaneous attachments and sudden desperate infatuations. It smiles with Olympian sophistication and says, this is not *really* serious.

Sappho apparently liked to approach her theme indirectly, that is, she liked to record obliquely a present experience by depiction, in reminiscence or reverie, of a similar or seemingly identical experience in the past. Hence her fondness for the remembered action in which she plays an active part, or the recollected dialogue in which she depicts herself in conversation with her friends or with gods.[30] This is an interesting and typically sophisticated Greek technique.

The ode to Aphrodite is almost entirely a description of a remembered experience (perhaps "remembered" in imagination), against which the present example is set and observed. Each particular experience of this sort, however disturbing and apparently unique, is in actuality evanescent and deceptive. Addressing herself through the soft-frozen smiling lips of the love-goddess, Sappho makes Aphrodite express the wisdom of long experience, i.e., her own, that this anguish has happened before and will surely happen again, that the woes and joys of particular loves are vain and transient as the generations of leaves, and that only Love itself remains, deathless, golden, and ever smiling.

[29] Athenaeus 13.571c.

[30] Lobel and Page (above, note 15) 94, 95, 134.