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Brown Brothers

SAPPHO: THE DIVINE LYRE

c. 612 B.C.	Born
c. 600–592 B.C.	Exile in Sicily
c. 557 B.C.	Died

The Greek society of the Archaic Age, the period between the end of the Bronze Age and the Persian Wars of the early fifth century B.C., was a rich and widespread society, bursting with creative energy. It was a society and a world dominated everywhere by a warrior aristocracy. In the fleeting moments of peace, these soldier aristocrats enjoyed a luxurious social life of which a central feature was the *symposium*—an informal gathering for eating, drinking, and entertainment. A principal part of the entertainment was a poetic competition in which successive performers vied with each other in composing and singing spontaneous verses that celebrated their warlike deeds, the offices they held or aspired to, the elements of their moral code, or the simple pleasures of food, wine, and sex.

This competition in art, as in war, "always to be best and preeminent over others"[1] was the beginning of Greek lyric poetry. We know the names and have some of the verses of a dozen or so of these warrior poets. Yet the best and most famous of the lyric poets was not a man at all, but Sappho: Plato called her the tenth muse.[2]

What we know about her life is little enough and is derived almost entirely from the fragments of her own poetry. Of the some five

[1] *Iliad* 6.208.

[2] *Ant. Palatina* 9.506.

hundred poems she wrote, only one complete poem remains. The rest we have only in bits and pieces, scattered shards of verse, or in admiring excerpts from later ancient writers. Sappho was born on the north Aegean island of Lesbos, only a few miles off the coast of the great Asiatic Kingdom of Lydia, probably in Mitylene, the principal town of the island. She almost surely belonged to the aristocracy. Her father's name, Skamandronymos, suggests the river Skamander on the plains of Troy and some ancestor who could claim kinship with the Homeric heroes who fought there. One of her brothers held the noble office of wine steward in the town hall of Mitylene. She herself moved easily in the circle of the aristocracy and was accepted by its members, like her fellow poet Alcaeus. Even the fact that her family suffered a period of exile in Sicily during her childhood may reflect the social prominence of the family, because this was a common punishment against powerful or politically dangerous nobles.

She returned from exile to Lesbos, the standing of her family unaffected by the exile, and resumed her place in Lesbian society. She was shortly married, and married well, to a wealthy merchant, Cercylas of the island of Andros. He apparently died soon after the birth of their daughter, of whom Sappho wrote:

> I have a beautiful child,
> her form like golden flowers,
> beloved Kleis whom I would not trade for all of Lydia . . .[3]

By tradition, Sappho was a small, dark, and somewhat plain woman, although that tradition is of late Roman origin. On the contrary, her contemporary and friend Alcaeus called her "violet-decked, virtuous, honey-sweet smiling Sappho."[4] The story of her death by suicide for unrequited love is clearly apocryphal.

We know almost nothing else about her, except that she was the first figure in Western literature to praise female homosexual love in her poetry and to practice it in her life.[5]

[3]*Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece,* tr. and ed. Diane J. Rayor (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 72.

[4]*Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta,* ed. Edgar Lobel and Denys Page (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 261.

[5]The universality of this interpretive view is expressed by Joan DeJean in *Fictions of Sappho, 1546–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 306: "The vision most Hellenists today seem to take for granted [is] that of a homosexual Sappho."

The Poet of Lesbian Love

A number of themes run through Sappho's poems, but the clearly predominant theme is that of female homoeroticism. This might not have been the case had a larger corpus of her work survived. She may have written more solemn choral odes or even heroic poems but, if she did, there is no trace of them. What has survived is a body of highly personal love poetry.

The context in which these poems were written was that of a *thiasos*, or religious guild or confraternity of women of which Sappho was the leader, that operated also as a kind of "school." The purpose of her school—and apparently of others, for Mitylene was famous for them—was to prepare aristocratic young girls for marriage, to cultivate their femininity, and literally to increase their value to their fathers, who could then boast to fathers of marriageable sons about their daughters' accomplishments. Sappho taught them proper deportment, style, and fashion, how to dress and bear themselves. After all, most of them were little more than children in their early teens. And, of course, she taught them to play the lyre, the cithara, the barbitos, and the pipe, and to sing and make songs—songs for the wedding eve, for the wedding night, for the convoy of the bride and groom to their couch. She probably also taught them the practices appropriate to a variety of women's cults sacred to Aphrodite or Hera. Sappho loved her students, openly and passionately, and her poems celebrate the twists and turns of that love—her appeal to Aphrodite to soften the heart of a reluctant lover, her lament over another lover who has left her, her jealousy over yet another who has chosen a different mistress, or her simple adoration of their young, unspoiled beauty.

1

> On the throne of many hues, Immortal Aphrodite,
> child of Zeus, weaving wiles—I beg you
> not to subdue my spirit, Queen,
> with pain or sorrow
>
> but come—if ever before
> having heard my voice from far away
> you listened, and leaving your father's
> golden home you came

in your chariot yoked with swift, lovely
sparrows bringing you over the dark earth
thick-feathered wings swirling down
from the sky through mid-air

arriving quickly—you, Blessed One,
with a smile on your unaging face
asking again what have I suffered
and why am I calling again

4

Some say an army of horsemen, others
say foot-soldiers, still others, a fleet,
is the fairest thing on the dark earth:
I say it is whatever one loves.

Everyone can understand this—
consider that Helen, far surpassing
the beauty of mortals, leaving behind
the best man of all,

sailed away to Troy. She had no
memory of her child or dear parents,
since she was led astray
[by Kypris] . . .
. . . .
. . . lightly
. . . reminding me now of Anaktoria
being gone,

I would rather see her lovely step
and the radiant sparkle of her face
than all the war-chariots in Lydia
and soldiers battling in shining bronze.

8

To me it seems
that man has the fortune of gods,
whoever sits beside you, and close,
who listens to you sweetly speaking
and laughing temptingly;
my heart flutters in my breast,
whenever I look quickly, for a moment—

I say nothing, my tongue broken,
a delicate fire runs under my skin,
my eyes see nothing, my ears roar,
cold sweat rushes down me,
trembling seizes me,
I am greener than grass,
to myself I seem
needing but little to die.

But all must be endured, since . . .

14

"I simply wish to die."
Weeping she left me
and said this too:
"We've suffered terribly
Sappho I leave you against my will."
I answered, go happily
and remember me,
you know how we cared for you,
if not, let me remind you
. . . the lovely times we shared.

Many crowns of violets,
roses and crocuses
. . . together you set before me
and many scented wreaths
made from blossoms
around your soft throat . . .
. . . with pure, sweet oil
. . . you anointed me,
and on a soft, gentle bed . . .
you quenched your desire . . .
. . . no holy site . . .
we left uncovered,
no grove . . . dance
. . . sound

34

What country woman bewitches your mind . . .
wrapped in country clothes . . .
not knowing how to draw her skirts around her ankles?

35

I loved you Atthis once long ago . . .
You seemed to me a small child and without charm.

36

Atthis, for you the thought of me has become hateful,
and you fly off to Andromeda.

37

. . . Mika
. . . but I will not allow you
. . . you chose the friendship of Penthilian women
. . . malignant, our . . .
. . . sweet song . . .
. . . soft voice . . .
. . . and high, clear-sounding . . .
. . . dewy . . .

Sappho in History

ARTHUR WEIGALL

Sappho expected her young lesbian lovers to marry and lead ordinary heterosexual lives. Indeed, she herself, as we have seen, was married and had a daughter she adored. This appears not to have been unique with Sappho but to have been characteristic of the aristocratic society to which she belonged and in which a sort of casual bisexualism was the norm of behavior for both sexes.

In fact, this tended to be the case throughout Greek history but was more marked in the Archaic Age. In this period, more than in later ones, well-born young boys, as well as girls, were usually sent from their homes to the tutelage of adults outside their families. Here the young boys were trained in deportment and taught to make poetry in *gymnasia,* not unlike the *thiasos* of Sappho for young girls. They associated with their peers and their elders in the socializing and exercises of the *gymnasia* and the drills and common meals

of their warrior bands. Like the young girls, the young boys were expected eventually to marry and establish homes. But, in the meantime, in both the *gymnasia* and the warrior bands, homosexuality was commonly accepted. It has been suggested that, because aristocratic marriages were invariably matters of property and family alliance in which the betrothed couple had little or nothing to say, they were marriages in which heterosexual attraction and romantic love played almost no role. Certainly heterosexuality played little role in the lyric poetry of the age, which celebrated homosexual love as true love.

The following selection emphasizes the bisexual nature of Sappho's emotional life. It is from her leading modern biography, the standard work on the subject, Arthur Weigall's *Sappho of Lesbos: Her Life and Times.*

Her childhood was passed . . . at a time when all the young men of Lesbos were away at the wars; and when they came rollicking back at the conclusion of peace their rough manners seem to have offended her fastidious taste, for she did not marry until, considerably later, she met the wealthy and presumably elegant young merchant from Andros. Even the cultured Alkaios evoked from her no response to his passionate love: he was too violent in his sentiments, and he drank too much—a habit which she evidently disliked, since she never sings the usual praises of the vine in her verses. In her widowhood it was towards the youth of her own sex that her heart opened, for here the extreme delicacy of her nature found a more congenial atmosphere. It is true that her brief married life had been happy, and that, as she says, her husband's rôle of lover had not been unattractive to her; but it is evident enough that the virginal, feminine grace of a girl was nearer to her ideal than either the rough masculinity or the foppish effeminacy of the average young man of her time.

There is clear evidence that, in the abstract, the male character and form could arouse her emotions; but in actuality she seems to have feared or disliked the usual masculine temperament, and to have dreaded that physical mastery of man over woman from which . . . the feminine mind so often derives a certain instinctive pleasure. She was, as Athenæus says, a thorough woman, and her verses are essentially feminine; but this does not mean that therefore she was attracted by the thorough man. On the contrary, her nature, as I read it, was one which was repelled by those qualities usually dominant in the male; and though her physical being was normal to the extent that it demanded—if seldom with overwhelming insistence—its physical completion in the uniting of the sexes, it was abnormal in its almost habitual rejection of that very union because of a dislike of the mental attitude of the generality of men towards women. In a word,

she shunned in actuality the male moved by male instinct, yet in thought shunned not the masculine as the physical completion of the feminine. . . .

In 560 B.C., when Solon was struggling in Athens against the new tyranny of his cousin Pisistratos, when at Sardis the old King Alyattes at last died and his son Crœsus became sole monarch of Lydia, Sappho was fifty-two years of age. Her black hair was touched with gray, and her face, in spite of the creams and perfumed oils which doubtless she used, was beginning to show those faint lines which are the dread of every woman's middle age. Yet her heart was young, and the fire within her passionate breast had not died down. She was bitterly conscious of her years, and the slow process of the departure of her charms was watched by her in her mirror with increasing despair. There was still left to her, however, her personal magnetism, her grace, her graciousness, her elegance, her wit, and her brains; and these qualities, together with her fame and her wealth, evidently retained for her her social leadership in Mitylene, and filled her house with her friends and admirers.

It must have been at this time that one of the men who frequented her society asked her to marry him; and it would seem that for a while she entertained the proposal with some interest, for, as I have pointed out, she was not averse to men, provided that they conformed to her exceptional requirements and approximated to her ideal. At length, however, she decided to reject the offer, for, being a woman of very clear sight, she knew that she could not much longer hold the physical love of a man, even though she might retain his admiration. She had no illusions about herself: she was growing old, and sorrowfully she realized the fact. She therefore wrote to this personage an answer in verse, part of which has been found in Egypt amongst the scraps of her published poems. It is the saddest of letters. It reads:

> If my breasts were still capable of giving suck, and my womb were able to bear children, then to another marriage-bed not with trembling feet would I come; but now on my skin age is already causing innumerable lines to go about, and Love hastens not to fly to me with his gift of pain . . . of the illustrious . . . taking for your own . . . and sing to us of her of the violet-scented breast . . .

The last sentences seem to contain her advice to him to seek a wife amongst the noble young ladies of Mytilene, and thus to be able to come to Sappho and sing to her the praises of his bride.

Yet though she declares, in one of those exquisite phrases which characterize her work, that Love with his gift of pain is in no haste any longer to come to her, it seems that there was another man who at about this time made a proposal of marriage to her. He was evidently

much younger than she; and it may well be that she had amused herself with him, not realizing that she was still capable of infatuating a young man by those brilliant qualities which sometimes in the case of famous women endure long after the summer of their life is past. Here is the surviving fragment of the verses she wrote to him: ". . . but if you love me, choose a more youthful companion of your bed, for I cannot endure to be married to a young man. I am too old."

Athenæus tells us that one of Sappho's poems was addressed to a man who was greatly admired for his good looks, and he quotes two lines from it, which read: "Stand up and look me in the face as friend to friend, and unveil the beauty that is in your eyes." These words seem to have been written to a youth who was shy of her, for they suggest a certain condescension on her part; and one imagines her, thus, greatly attracted by the handsome appearance of this young man with the beautiful eyes who, either because of his youth or his humble social standing, had bowed himself before so famous a lady. Perhaps it was this selfsame personage who, having been led on by her and allowed to become intimate with her, lost his head and asked her to marry him, thus evoking that sad cry from her: "I am too old." She could not, like the Moon-goddess, enchant him into an eternal sleep so that he might be her Endymion; she could not halt the process of her decline and be forever a part of his dreams: she knew that soon he would wake up and see her as she really was, a woman whose hair was turning gray, and this she could not endure.

Her age was a torment to her, but, knowing that her malady could not be cured, she faced the situation boldly. When her girls called her the fairest of women, the sweetest player upon the lyre, she wrote to them frankly telling them that to praise her now that her prime was past was to cast a slight upon the Muses. The fragments of a poem of hers to this effect have been found, but only the ends of the lines have survived, the beginnings having been torn away; yet even so we can get the sense of it by the aid of the words which I have placed in brackets, and which will serve to make the theme intelligible.

> [*You dishonor*] the good gifts [*of the Muses*], children, [*when you say*] . . . 'dear [*Sappho*], . . . player of the clear, sweet lyre' . . . [*for*] . . . my skin with age is [*lined, and turned is*] my hair from its blackness . . . nor do my legs speed about [*as formerly when we used to dance*] like the little fawns. But who can cure it? . . . It is not possible. [*As surely as night follows*] the rose-armed dawn, [*and darkness*] . . . speeds [*to the ends*] of the earth, [*Death*] overtakes [*us; and as Death would not restore*] the beloved wife [*of Orpheus to him, so every*] woman who dies he expects [*to keep prisoner, though he should*] let her follow [*her rescuer*]. . . .

Her occasional interest in men did not deflect her thoughts from her *hetæræ*. These girls still came to her from far and near, and her

delight in them, if not as great as formerly, was still considerable. "Toward you, my beautiful ones, this mind of mine will not change," she wrote; and perhaps to this period of her life may be attributed the line: "To-day for my *hetæræ* these songs right well will I sing." She still was enthralled by the beauty of the young girls of Lesbos whom she met, or whom she saw as she took her daily walks in fields or woods; and thus she begins a poem: "I saw one day gathering flowers a very dainty little girl. . . ."

There is some reason to suppose that she had a serious illness at this time. . . .

It may be that, as a result of this serious illness, she was obliged to send her *hetæræ* away, for there is a scrap of a poem of hers which seems to have been written as a farewell to them. Again part of each of the surviving lines is lost, and a guess at the missing words (given here in brackets) has had to be made. The fragment reads:

> . . . [*To them*] I replied: "Gentle [*ladies*], you will ever remember [*till you are old*] our life together in [*the splendor*] of your youth. For [*many things*] both [*pure*] and beautiful we then did [*together*]. And now that [*you depart hence, love*] wrings [*my heart*]. . . ."

In the old days she had been torn by jealousy at the thought that a girl whom she loved should transfer her affections elsewhere; but now, that magnanimity which is middle age's great compensation, enabled her to contemplate such an eventuality without pain. Thus she could write to one of her *hetæræ:* "May you sleep in the bosom of a tender companion . . ."

The word "companion" is the feminine *hetæra,* "girlfriend"; and it is characteristic of Sappho's outlook that though she might lose her heart from time to time to a male lover, she could wish to one of her own sex no greater happiness than that she might experience the tenderness of a feminine comradeship. . . .

She was tired, I dare say, of the presence of these girls in her house now that she was no longer young enough to be the absolute mistress of their emotional life. Her house had gradually become a sort of institute, almost an Academy for Young Ladies; for as her years increased there must have been a tendency in her *hetæræ,* her comrades, to become merely pupils and protégées. In the lines written when she was ill, she spoke of the unseemliness of mourning "in a house that serves the Muses," *en moisopolo oikia;* but *oikia* is not merely "a house"—it means a group of buildings, the word being sometimes used, in fact, to signify a palace or headquarters. Thus one pictures it now as a villa surrounded by guest-houses, work-rooms, and other out-buildings—a school, in fact, over which she presided; and it is not difficult to imagine her as becoming suddenly tired of her responsibilities, and as being overwhelmed by the desire to shake herself free of the whole thing. There were still left to her, she must have felt, a few years in which her heart's emotions would animate a body not yet wholly bereft of its attractions, there were still a few years left for love and for love's excitement; and it may have been in this spirit of adventure that she turned her no longer fettered attention to the search for that happiness which a creative artist always looks for, and seldom finds, outside his work. . . .

In 557 B.C., Sappho must have been fifty-five years old, and is to be pictured as a small, dark-skinned woman, upon whose face the signs of age were almost, but not quite, concealed by the perfection of her toilet, whose smile still retained its enchantment and whose eyes reflected the undying fires of her heart. Her figure, one may suppose, had preserved its shapeliness and grace by reason of the care she had always given it in her capacity as a dancer and as a model of deportment; and in her clothes and general turnout there was now, no doubt, as always, that daintiness and *chic* which was characteristic of her. . . .

Now in Mitylene at this time there happened to live a certain young sailor, Phaon by name, who was the master of a small sailing-ship which plied for hire between Lesbos and the mainland of Asia Minor. Suidas says that he was a very beautiful young man, and that many women were in love with him; and, indeed, Ælian tells us that in the end he was caught in adultery with another man's wife and was murdered. . . .

History does not tell us how Sappho made the acquaintance of this handsome young sailor; but one can imagine her finding reason to hire his ship, and, on some warm summer's night, under the stars or by the light of the moon, drawing him into conversation as she sat by his side at the helm. We know only that she fell in love with him to a degree almost of madness, and that, as Ovid said of her in words very probably taken from one of her own poems, she seemed to be burnt up by her passion for him as when a field of ripened corn is attacked by flames driven onwards by the wind. This was indeed the harvest-time of her life, and in the fires of love was consumed all that her years had brought to perfection. . . .

Only for a little while her dream lasted; and then her lover grew tired of her, or felt that he was unable to cope with her fever. . . . There was a ship in the harbor about to sail with merchandise for Sicily; and upon it Phaon secretly took his departure from Lesbos without bidding farewell to Sappho. One can hardly blame him; and, in view of the peculiar circumstances of the case, he may well have believed that he was acting in her best interests in taking himself out of her life. . . .

At last, being unable to endure a life bereft of his presence, she made up her mind to follow him to Sicily. There was nothing here in Lesbos to keep her: her *hetæræ* were disbanded, she hated her brother, her daughter could not understand, her friends despised her. A

lonely old age faced her; and even her Muse had forsaken her. She therefore boarded a vessel which, I suppose, was bound for Corinth; for there she would be able to find a ship which would carry her by the usual Corfu-route to southern Italy and thence to Sicily. She could have had no definite plans: her only purpose was to reach the land whither Phaon had gone, and there to search for him, and, having found him, to bring him once more into her arms.

Nothing is known of her journey by way of the islands of Chios and Andros to the eastern port of Corinth; but the misery and anxiety of it may be imagined. From the western port of Corinth she sailed on in another vessel, and so came at length to the southern end of the island of Leucas which lay just to the north of Ithaca and Cephallenia, and some fifty miles south of Corfu whence the crossing to Italy was to be made; and it was here in Leucas, at the famous Leucadian Cliff which rises sheer out of the sea in a narrow promontory like a monstrous wall of white stone, that her destiny was accomplished.

The ship had put in near this headland to obtain fresh water or provisions; and Sappho, it would seem, had walked up onto the grassy top of these white cliffs, perhaps to visit a little shrine of Apollo which stood there, and at which she might offer a prayer to that god who, as the patron of music, had always been revered by her. . . . Now . . . she stood before the shrine of Apollo, looking down the white precipices to the surging sea far below. At any rate, the idea of suicide suddenly entered her head, and took possession of her overwrought thoughts. . . .

She was seized with panic. In a frenzy of terror and despair, she made the quick decision to kill herself, and, running like a mad thing across the grass, she flung herself from the cliff's dizzy edge, and fell to her death in the blue waters far below.

A few fragmentary lines of a poem written by Alkaios have survived which, I think, may have reference to the death of Sappho whom once he had loved; for he appears to have outlived her, since in another verse he speaks of himself as a white-haired old man. These fragments read:

> . . . Misfortune . . . me, a woman miserable, me a sharer in all sorrows . . . house . . . unhappy destiny . . . disgrace . . . for the incurable decline of life is at hand. But panic springs up in the terror-stricken breast of the hart . . . madness . . . ruin . . . the cold sea-waves. . . .

Sappho's broken body was eventually recovered from the sea, and was cremated, her ashes being carried back to Mitylene for burial. . . .

Sappho as Poet and Woman

JANE MCINTOSH SNYDER

Much of the contemporary revisionist scholarship on Sappho and her age has come out of the women's movement, which tends to see her as a champion of women's rights in a society that granted few rights to women. An antifeminism was, indeed, a major current of Greek social history. In the otherwise enlightened golden age of Greek culture in fifth-century Athens, for example, women were kept in virtually haremlike seclusion; had almost no standing in the courts, even with regard to their own property; and (at least respectable women) were barred from participation in most of the cultural activities of this most cultured of cities.

It has been argued that this generally inferior status of women had been less oppressive in the Archaic Age, at the courts and in the entertainments of Archaic society. It is an argument based almost entirely on Sappho's case and, indeed, it may have been true in her case. On the other hand, it may be equally true that Sappho's eminence as a poet made her case a special one. It is certainly true that other sources reflect, for this period of Greek history as for later ones, not only an inferior but a despised status for women. The misanthropic poet Hesiod, who flourished about 700 B.C., pronounced women "a great pain for mortals." And Sappho's near contemporary, the poet Semonides of Amorgos, who wrote in about the middle of the seventh century B.C., was even more condemnatory, saying at the end of his poem on women:

> Yes, this is the worst plague Zeus has made—women; if they seem to be some use to him who has them, it is to him especially that they prove a plague. The man who lives with a woman never goes through all his day in cheerfulness. . . .[6]

The work from which the following selection is taken, Jane McIntosh Snyder, *The Woman and the Lyre: Women Writers in Classical Greece and Rome,* is part of an excellent series of books of feminist criticism devoted to uncovering "a neglected female tradition along with a heretofore hidden history of the literary dialogue between men and women."[7] Snyder not only manifests an identity with this tradition, she brings to her work the status of a respected classical scholar. As far as

[6]*Females of the Species: Semonides on Women,* ed. and tr. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Park Ridge, N.J.: Noyes Press, 1975), p. 54.

[7]Foreword, p. x.

Sappho is concerned, her work updates the scholarship of such books as the older biography by Weigall, excerpted above. She stays much closer to the text of Sappho's poems, arguing persuasively that these fragments alone are a valid guide to the poet's life as to her work. And, though she admits in passing the bisexual nature of Sappho's emotional life, she emphasizes the lesbian character of both her work and her life, taking it as the main line of interpretation.

Our understanding of Sappho might perhaps be deepened if we had the kind of sources of information about the society in which she lived that we do for the writers who worked in fifth-century Athens—extensive inscriptions, the remains of everyday utensils, pictures of daily life on vase paintings, and literary sources encompassing many different aspects of Athenian customs. In contrast, what we know of Archaic Lesbos comes primarily from the fragments of her two most famous poets—Sappho and Alcaeus. Any claims about the social customs of the island in the seventh and sixth centuries not based on these two sources are either mere conjectures or deductions based on knowledge of Greek society in other times and places, which may or may not bear any relationship to the Lesbos of Sappho's day. Nevertheless, Sappho's own accomplishments as a poet, and also the kind of world that she describes, do at least suggest that the women of Lesbos (or at any rate, those of the aristocracy) "enjoyed a freedom found elsewhere only in Sparta and an opportunity for self-development without parallel in Greek history."[8]

What do the ancient biographers have to say of Sappho herself? Here we must be wary of certain recently established characteristics of ancient biographies of writers, especially poets. Such ancient "lives" are generally likely to preserve more fiction than fact, drawing as they do on the authors' own works as though they were autobiographical statements and on unreliable sources such as comedy. In addition, ancient biographies of poets display suspiciously uniform characteristics, often conforming to a pattern involving anecdotes of a miraculous nature, the notion of the isolation of the writer from society (often via exile), and accounts of an unusual or violent manner of death.[9] Keeping these tendencies in mind, we may reduce the possibly accurate biographical data about Sappho to the following details.

Sappho's name, which she herself mentions in the "Hymn to Aphrodite," was, properly, Psappho. Her parents were Skamandronymos

[8]P. N. Ure, "The Outer Greek World in the Sixth Century," in *Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 4:99.

[9]See Janet A. Fairweather, "Biographies of Ancient Writers," *Ancient Society* 5 (1974): 231–75 and Mary R. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

and Kleis, of Mytilene on Lesbos, and she had three brothers: Erigyios, about whom nothing is known; Charaxos, who had business connections with Egypt; and Larichos, whose government service on the council (*prytaneion*) in Mytilene suggests that the family was aristocratic. She was married to Kerkylas of Andros, who is never mentioned in any of the extant fragments of her poetry, and she may have had a daughter, named after her own mother (Kleis), who appears to be mentioned in two fragments (the crucial word in one of them, "pais," can mean either "daughter" or simply "child," "girl"). The husband is often assumed by twentieth-century scholars to be fictitious (either, on the one hand, because the homoerotic nature of some of Sappho's poetry is assumed to preclude a husband or, on the other, because she is claimed to be too pure and virginal to have married!); nevertheless, there is no good reason to doubt the report of his existence. Two other details emerge. She was born just at the close of the seventh century, perhaps about 610 B.C., and at some point during a period of political unrest on Lesbos, she is supposed to have taken refuge for a while in faraway Sicily.[10]

Besides these biographical details—all, it must be remembered, drawn from sources much later than Sappho herself and therefore open to question—we have one reference to her among the fragments of poetry written by her contemporary compatriot, Alcaeus: "O weaver of violets, holy, sweet-smiling Sappho. . . ."[11] The first word of the fragment, "ioplok'," is often translated as "lady of the violet hair" on the basis of a later use of the word, but in view of the widespread use of weaving imagery in Greek literature to refer to the creative process of making song, it seem preferable to keep to the literal meaning of the word and suppose that Alcaeus is complimenting Sappho in a metaphorical way on her divine abilities as a poet, not on her hairdo.[12] At any rate, the fragment suggests Alcaeus' admiration and respect for his fellow Lesbian.

When we leave this bare outline, we quickly find ourselves in the realm of legend. The most famous tale about Sappho, which seems to have gotten its start sometime at least two centuries after her life, concerns her death-leap from the White Rock of Leukas (off the

[10]For summaries of the biographical tradition (and, in some cases, uncritical acceptance of it), see W. Aly, "Sappho," in *Real-Encylopädie der Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft* and Wilhelm Schmid and Otto Stählin, *Geschichte der Griechischen Literatur* (Munich: Beck, 1929), 1:417–29.

[11]Alcaeus, Z 61, in *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, ed. Edgar Lobel and Denys Page (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). The adjective that I have translated as *holy* ("*agnos*") also carries the sense of "pure."

[12]See Jane McIntosh Snyder, "The Web of Song: Weaving Imagery in Homer and the Lyric Poets," *Classical Journal* 76 (1981): 193–96 and Denys Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 296 n. 2.

west coast of the Greek mainland) into the sea in pursuit of a handsome ferryman named Phaon, with whom she was supposed to have fallen passionately in love.[13] Now Phaon is clearly a mythological figure; the ancients told stories of his transformation—via the application of a magic salve—from an old man into an attractive youth with whom Aphrodite herself fell in love, subsequently hiding him in a bed of lettuce so that no rival could find him. The leap off Cape Leukas also has mythological analogies; the same story is told, for example, of Aphrodite leaping off the cliffs out of love for another youth, Adonis.[14]

If Sappho mentioned Phaon in her poetry, it was probably in some metaphorical or mythological context (perhaps in connection with the longing for regained youth), which may then eventually have given rise to the pseudobiographical tale of her lover's leap.[15] . . . Only in recent years have the fragments of Sappho begun to be read again for what they actually say rather than for what the reader would like them to say. The same scholarly approach that has led to an enlightened understanding of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women poets needs to be applied to women writers of the more distant past. What Adrienne Rich has said of Emily Dickinson, for example, pertains equally well to several of the writers in [*The Woman and the Lyre*], particularly Sappho: "We will understand Emily Dickinson better, read her poetry more perceptively, when Freudian imputation of scandal and aberrance in women's love for women has been supplanted by a more informed, less misogynistic attitude toward women's experience with each other."[16] . . .

The following poem, usually called the "Hymn to Aphrodite," is written in imitation of the standard form of a Greek prayer, in which the deity is first addressed and identified, reminded of a past relationship with the speaker, and then called upon to perform some service, in this case to aid in the fulfillment of some unspecified pursuit by Sappho on the battlefield of love.

[13]My interpretation owes much to Gregory Nagy, "Phaethon, Sappho's Phaon, and the White Rocks of Leukas," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 77 (1973): 137–77.

[14]The motif of the bed of lettuce found in the Aphrodite-Phaon story also appears in some versions of the Aphrodite-Adonis story. See Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology* (Sussex: Harvester, 1977) 67–71, who points out that the Greeks connected lettuce with impotence.

[15]There is some evidence that Sappho did mention Phaon; cf. fragment 211, in *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta,* ed. Edgar Lobel and Denys Page (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

[16]Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 163. See also Mary R. Lefkowitz, "Critical Stereotypes and the Poetry of Sappho," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 14 (1973): 113–23.

1

O immortal Aphrodite of the many-colored throne,
child of Zeus, weaver of wiles, I beseech you,
do not overwhelm me in my heart
with anguish and pain, O Mistress,

But come hither, if ever at another time
hearing my cries from afar
you heeded them, and leaving the home of your father
came, yoking your golden

Chariot: beautiful, swift sparrows
drew you above the black earth
whirling their wings thick and fast,
from heaven's ether through mid-air.

Suddenly they had arrived; but you, O Blessed Lady,
with a smile on your immortal face,
asked what I had suffered again and
why I was calling again

And what I was most wanting to happen for me
in my frenzied heart: "Whom again shall I persuade
to come back into friendship with you? Who,
O Sappho, does you injustice?

"For if indeed she flees, soon will she pursue,
and though she receives not your gifts, she will give them,
and if she loves not now, soon she will love,
even against her will."

Come to me now also, release me from
harsh cares; accomplish as many things as my heart desires
to accomplish; and you yourself
be my fellow soldier.[17]

One of the characteristics of Sappho as a writer is her ability to adapt traditional forms (such as the prayer) to suit her own pur-

[17]My translations of Sappho throughout this chapter are based on the Greek text in a standard edition, *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta,* ed. Edgar Lobel and Denys Page (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). The translations are numbered according to this edition as well. I use ellipses to indicate where gaps in the text occur and square brackets to show where I have added words to fill out the sense. For excellent summaries of recent scholarly articles on Sappho's poetry, see Douglas E. Gerber, "Studies in Greek Lyric Poetry: 1967–1975," *Classical World* 70 (1976): 106–15. On the importance of recognizing the fragmentary nature of most Greek lyric, see W. R. Johnson, *The Idea of Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 24–26.

poses. In the case of the "Hymn to Aphrodite," the goddess' presence is made remarkably vivid through the central description—which occupies all but the first and last stanzas of the poem—of her "epiphany" at some time in the past. The report of the goddess' words within the description, first indirectly and then directly (through quotation), not only pays tribute to Aphrodite's wonderful power but also implies, through the repetition of the word "again," that she has exerted that power on Sappho's behalf many times in the still more distant past. Oddly, then, the poem continually moves backwards into the past, and yet the vividness of the description evokes the image of the goddess as a real force in the immediate present, who is being called upon to assist Sappho now. Whether the piece was actually offered up as a prayer is dubious, especially in view of the artfulness in emphasizing the past relationship by making it occupy the bulk of the poem, but we can be certain, on the basis of the treatment of the gods in Archaic literature and art, that Aphrodite is no literary nicety, no symbol of some abstract notion of love: she is a real and potent force in Sappho's world. While we need not approach the poem with the sort of literalmindedness that would assume that it refers to an actual day in the poet's life, the sheer power of the description, with the emphasis on the swiftness of Aphrodite's descent, precludes the recent assumptions that the goddess is merely Sappho's projection of herself or that the poet is using the figure of Aphrodite as a device for lighthearted self-mockery.[18] Aphrodite's smile (in the fourth stanza) is the smile of power and benevolence and serenity (like the so-called Archaic smile on statues of the period), not of humor or amusement or derision.

Much has been written on whether the goddess' past service centered on problems of unrequited love or estrangement or infidelity. But as far as the poem itself is concerned, the question is moot; the emphasis is not on the nature of the discrepancy between Sappho and her woman friend but on Aphrodite's absolute power to transform the situation: to change flight into pursuit, refusal into desire, rejection into love. . . .

31

He seems to me to be like the gods
—whatever man sits opposite you
and close by hears you
talking sweetly

[18]For the former view, see Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 108; for the latter, Page 16. Tilmar Krischer ("Sapphos Ode an Aphrodite," *Hermes* 96 [1968]: 1–14) rightly concludes that Aphrodite is presented as offering real—if more psychological than pragmatic—help.

And laughing charmingly; which
makes the heart within my breast take flight;
for the instant I look upon you, I cannot anymore
speak one word,

But in silence my tongue is broken, a fine
fire at once runs under my skin,
with my eyes I see not one thing, my ears
buzz,

Cold sweat covers me, trembling
seizes my whole body, I am more moist than grass;
I seem to be little short
of dying. . . .

But all must be ventured. . . .

The man of the opening line has been magnified in importance ever since the publication in 1913 of a book on Sappho by the German scholar Wilamowitz. He was an enormously influential scholar, and rightly so, but his blindness with respect to Sappho has profoundly distorted the modern view of her and particularly of this poem. To paraphrase his interpretation: The woman sits opposite a man and jokes and laughs with him. Who can he be other than her bridegroom? The wedding guests enter, and Sappho takes up the barbitos[19] and sings a song similar to the ones she has composed for the weddings of so many of her pupils. This time she sings of her passionate love for the bride. But, contrary to the remark in the *Suda* about Sappho's 'shameful friendships,' this love is completely honorable because she is not embarrassed to mention it openly and because she sings of it in the context of a wedding.[20] So Wilamowitz "proves"—by mere assertion—that 31 is a wedding song! And thus Sappho's homoeroticism is diluted and placed into a context which offers no offense to Victorian morality. (Interestingly, homoeroticism in male Greek writers like Solon or Theognis does not seem to have provoked the same kind of prudishness among Victorian scholars.)

The absurdity of Wilamowitz' explanation of 31 has been amply noted in recent years and the obvious pointed out—that a wedding song must have chiefly to do with the bride and groom, not with the speaker's passion for one of them.[21] Yet the wedding-song theory persists. . . .

One of the reasons that the wedding-song theory has continued to

[19]A many-stringed musical instrument similar to the lyre.—Ed.

[20]Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, 58–59.

[21]Page, 30–33.

enjoy so much acceptance is that some scholars felt it necessary to explain the man of the opening line. As recently as 1977, an attempt was made to suggest that the man is the object of attention not only of the presumed "bride," but even of the speaker of the poem: "Two girls grow up together or they become friends early in their lives. What happens if some day one of them is attracted to a man and must as a result desert her friend? What happens if both girls realize they love the same man but one of them succeeds in winning him?"[22] Few scholars seem to be aware—as Catullus and "Longinus" were—that the man (*whatever* man) is simply not important in the poem except as part of the background for the poem's setting and as a foil for the exposition of the speaker's feelings. He is calmly "godlike" in response to the woman's sweet talk and charming laugh, whereas the speaker, in the same situation, is instantly struck dumb.

Some critics, while not necessarily subscribing to the wedding-song theory, nevertheless continue to attribute undue importance to the man by assuming that the poem is about jealousy. This interpretation, which rests on the supposition that the "which" of the first line of stanza 2 refers to the sight of the man and woman together, is contradicted by the third line of the stanza ("for the instant I look upon you . . . ," the "you" in the Greek clearly being singular). Also the remainder of the fragment clearly indicates that the speaker is describing her reaction upon seeing the woman. Hence the "which" in question must refer to the woman's talk and laughter, not to the sight of some tête-à-tête that provokes in the speaker an attack of jealousy, or even more absurdly, a homosexual "anxiety attack."[23] The heart of the poem is a description not of jealousy or anxiety but of overwhelming passion.

We might also usefully take note of the female language of the song. For example, the emphasis in the description of the woman is on her activity, not on specific physical characteristics (height, hair color, etc.). Instead, the speaker focuses on the woman's speaking and laughing, much in the same way that the narrator of 16 (see below) calls to her mind Anaktoria's "lovely walk and the bright sparkle of her face." In addition, the detailed, introspective picture of the narrator's feelings on seeing and hearing the beloved woman, concludes—just before the narrator's illusion of near-death—with

[22]Odysseus Tsagarakis, *Self-Expression in Early Greek Lyric, Elegiac, and Iambic Poetry* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1977), 75–76.

[23]George Devereux, "The Nature of Sappho's Seizure in Fr. 31 LP as Evidence of Her Inversion," *Classical Quarterly* 20 (1970): 27–34; for opposing views, see M. Marcovich, "Sappho: Fr. 31: Anxiety Attack or Love Declaration?," *Classical Quarterly* 22 (1972): 19–32 and G. L. Koniaris, "On Sappho, Fr. 31 (L.-P.)," *Philologus* 112 (1968): 173–86. The interpretation presented here owes much to Mary R. Lefkowitz, "Critical Stereotypes."

a comparison drawn from nature. The speaker is "chlorotera de poias," "paler" or "moister" than grass. (The phrase is usually translated as "greener than grass" by those who want to read the poem as one about envy and jealousy.) In Greek the adjective *chloros* is often used of young shoots, and also describes wood, honey, and the pale yellow-green band in the spectrum of a rainbow. Thus the word is connected with youth and life—not the death seemingly experienced by the speaker in the very next line. The death is only apparent, as emphasized in the opening word of line 16, "I seem. . . ." Far from being an absurd exaggeration, as many have taken the phrase, "chlorotera de poias" anchors the speaker's experience firmly in the natural world, a world of freshness, growth, and moisture. Just as nature quickens with the advent of spring, so the speaker quickens even as she seems to die.[24]

16

Some say that the most beautiful thing
upon the black earth is an army of horsemen;
others, of infantry, still others, of ships;
but I say it is what one loves.

It is completely easy to make this
intelligible to everyone; for the woman
who far surpassed all mortals in beauty,
Helen, left her most brave husband

And sailed off to Troy, nor did she
remember at all her child
or her dear parents; but [the Cyprian]
led her away. . . .

[All of which] has now reminded me
of Anaktoria, who is not here.

Her lovely walk and the bright sparkle of her face
I would rather look upon than
all the Lydian chariots
and full-armed infantry. [*This may be the end of the poem.*]

[24]On the association of love and death in Sappho, see D. D. Boedeker, "Sappho and Acheron," in *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. W. Knox*, ed. Glen W. Bowersock, Walter Burkert, and Michael C. J. Putnam (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 40–52. On *chloros*, see Eleanor Irwin, *Colour Terms in Greek Poetry* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), 31–78.

Fragment 16, whose cyclical structure through the military references at the beginning and end of the fragment suggests that it may be a nearly complete poem, illustrates Sappho's ability to interweave the personal with the mythological, as well as the abstract with the concrete. The underlying form of the piece is one found in many Greek and Roman poems: the catalog, or more specifically, the priamel, in which a list of items is presented, followed by a concluding statement which somehow ties the items together.[25] In this instance, three items are presented as potentially "the most beautiful thing upon the black earth"; then all are rejected in favor of the speaker's assertion that the most beautiful thing is "what one loves." This generalization is then illustrated both through the allusion to Helen, who left her home in Sparta to accompany the object of her desire, Paris, back to Troy, and through the speaker's similar longing for the one she loves, Anaktoria.

The poem's conclusion, with its return to military imagery and the implicit comparison between Anaktoria's appearance and the splendor of the military display, strikes at least one critic as "a little fanciful."[26] But physical beauty is elsewhere in Archaic poetry expressed in terms of motion and brightness (as in Alkman's poems) rather than mere static shape. The military imagery of the poem reinforces Sappho's definition of Anaktoria's beauty; it is the movement of her body and the brightness of her facial expression that the speaker calls to her mind, not static qualities like shape or size or coloring. Thus there is nothing particularly odd in the speaker's statement that she would much prefer to behold Anaktoria's "lovely walk" and "bright sparkle" than watch the movement of troops and the gleam of their weaponry. In effect, the poem both accepts and rejects the splendor of military might; it is beautiful—but it is nothing when set against the splendor of the person one loves.

Some scholars have searched for stark logic in the poem's examples and, finding it wanting, have criticized the song as too loosely tied together. After all, they say, how does the fact that Helen left her husband and child and went off to Troy prove the narrator's thesis that what is most beautiful is what one loves?[27] If we look for association of ideas and images, rather than strict logic, however,

[25]See William H. Race, *The Classical Priamel from Homer to Boethius, Mnemosyne.* suppl. 74 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982).

[26]Page, 57.

[27]See, for example, Gary Wills, "The Sapphic 'Umvertung aller Werte,' " *American Journal of Philology* 88 (1967): 434–42. Cf. Page, 53: "The sequence of thought might have been clearer." In the view of Jack Winkler, "there is a charming parody of logical argumentation in these stanzas" ("Gardens of Nymphs: Public and Private in Sappho's Lyrics," *Women's Studies* 8 [1981]: 74).

we can see the poem as highly coherent. The emphasis of the song is on the concept of "kalliston" (line 3)—the power of whatever is "most beautiful," and Helen, as the most beautiful woman in the world, is the supreme exemplum of "kallos" (line 7, the corresponding line in the next stanza). Although the gap in the text of stanza 4 prevents us from seeing the exact connection, it appears to be the thought of Helen that reminds the narrator of the absent Anaktoria (lines 15–16). Even if Helen represents par excellence what is "most beautiful," to the narrator the most beautiful thing in the world is the sight of Anaktoria. And again through association and implication, the epic-scale naval expedition and displays of military might connected with the abduction of Helen pale in significance to the splendor of one face—the face that by the narrator's standard is the most beautiful.

Thus the myth of Helen, while it does not "prove" the thesis of the song, incorporates all of the elements of the catalog—ships, foot soldiers, cavalry, and an object of love, Helen herself—and at the same time provides the poem with a foil for the speaker's own redefinition of "to kalliston." The most beautiful thing in the world is not Helen, but Anaktoria, who represents for the narrator "what one loves." Beauty is defined not in a cosmic way in mythical terms, but in a particular way in terms of a single individual's perception. Through that perception, the myth of Helen has been transformed, for Helen is no longer a passive object of others' attentions. Like the narrator, who actively seeks the sight of Anaktoria, Helen evidently chooses to leave behind her husband and forget her child and parents. Just as the narrator seeks Anaktoria, so Helen here seeks her voyage to Troy to be with Paris.[28]

94

. . . .

"Honestly, I wish I were dead!"
Weeping many tears she left me,

Saying this as well:
"Oh, what dreadful things have happened to us,
Sappho! I don't want to leave you!"

I answered her:
"Go with my blessings, and remember me,
for you know how we cherished you.

[28]On Sappho's emphasis on the active choices made by Helen, see Page DuBois, "Sappho and Helen," *Arethusa* 11 (1978): 89–99.

"But if you have [forgotten], I want
to remind you . . .
of the beautiful things that happened to us:

"Close by my side you put around yourself
[many wreaths] of violets and roses and saffron. . . .

"And many woven garlands
made from flowers . . .
around your tender neck,

"And . . . with costly royal
myrrh . . .
you anointed . . . ,

"And on a soft bed
. . . tender . . .
you satisfied your desire. . . .

"Nor was there any . . .
nor any holy . . .
from which we were away,

. . . nor grove. . . ."

Fragment 94, although badly mutilated, contains enough detail to reveal the more calmly sensual side of Sappho's poetry. Known to modern readers only since its publication at the turn of the century, it is a description of past intimacy recalled—rather than passion experienced in the present tense, as in 31, previously discussed. Like 31, however, this piece was also subjected to Wilamowitz' purifying interpretations, though fortunately with less impact on succeeding views of the fragment than in the case of his so-called marriage song. Wilamowitz read the poem as follows (to paraphrase his German). Sappho will perform the song for her pupils, to tell them how her feelings are hurt when her pupils go off into the world and forget their teacher. The poem reveals to us what her circle of girls delighted in—picking flowers, dressing up, and sleeping sweetly when they were tired out from dancing. Sappho's school trained aristocratic girls in the value of good manners. No doubt the food was plentiful, though I have no proof of that.[29]

Despite the very sensual language and setting of the poem (the garlands, the anointing of bodies with perfumed oil, cushions, a bed, etc.), Wilamowitz chose to render the obvious sexual undertones of

[29]Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, 51.

"exies potho[n]" ("you satisfied your desire") with the bland phrase "you stilled your need for rest," a need that he takes to have been brought on by excessive dancing. (Notice that what is left of the poem itself makes no mention at all of dancing, much less of plentiful food.) The other fragments in which Sappho uses the word *pothos* (desire) establish clearly that the word is erotic.

More recent interpretations generally acknowledge the sensual aspect of the poem even if the subject matter is sometimes played down with descriptions such as a "long list of girlish pleasures."[30] But some scholars seem to have pursued Wilamowitz' notion of "hurt feelings" by assigning the opening line of the fragment (at least one line is missing from the poem's beginning) to the speaker. Since quotation marks were not used in ancient Greek texts, the line could be assigned either to the speaker or to the other woman. Scholars who attribute the line to the speaker see the whole piece as a sort of confessional lament of an anguished Sappho who wishes she were dead. Burnett has recently shown in detail that it is more reasonable to assume that the first extant line should be assigned to the departed friend, whose youthful tendency towards exaggerated language reveals an "affectionately melodramatic" kind of person whose "raw emotion" is set against Sappho's own "perfected meditation." As Burnett demonstrates, Sappho's memory of the bed of lovemaking and of fulfilled desire "has taken from blunt objects and fleeting sensations their enduring essence."[31] The poem, then, is hardly a "confession," but rather a recapturing of past pleasures through memory, by which the "dreadful things" mentioned by the girl—that is, the impending separation—are transformed into Sappho's "beautiful things" beginning in stanza 4.

The imagery in the second half of the fragment is worthy of May Sarton: violets, roses, and saffron (a type of crocus with purple flowers). The female associations of flowers in Sappho's poetry are well established through references in other fragments to a woman who is like a mountain hyacinth trampled by shepherds (105c), the roses around Aphrodite's temple (2), the many-flowered fields in Lydia where Atthis' departed friend roams (96, line 11), the wreaths of

[30]Page, 83.

[31]Anne Burnett, "Desire and Memory (Sappho Frag. 94)," *Classical Philology* 74 (1979): 25; she notes (26 n. 37) that "it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the scholarly determination to discover a miserable woman behind Sappho's poems is connected with the scholarly recognition of the nature of the love she refers to. The unexpressed reasoning seems to be unnatural, therefore unhappy." Burnett expands her ideas on the role of memory in Sappho's songs in general in *Three Archaic Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 277–313. On the importance of the memory of past intimacies in fragment 94, see also Eva Stehle Stigers, "Sappho's Private World," *Women's Studies* 8 (1981): 54–56.

flowers worn by the yellow-haired girl of 98, and the golden flowers connected with Kleis (132). The predominance of such flower imagery in Sappho is all the more striking when we note its rarity in her compatriot, Alcaeus, whose favorite imagery involves the sea. The anthological list here in Sappho 94 is filled out by further references to natural beauty in the form of myrrh, a resin produced by certain trees and shrubs, and the grove alluded to (line 27) as the fragment breaks off. Just as the departed woman in 96 (another poem concerned with the theme of separation . . .) is described through a simile involving the moon, flowery fields, the sea, and dew, so here the past relationship between the two women is depicted through recollection and recreation of their mutual enjoyment of especially sensuous aspects of nature—her flowers and her exotic perfumes. Like 96, this fragment, too, is primarily concerned with private human emotions set within the context of selected aspects of the natural environment.

Review and Study Questions

1. How do Sappho's poems reflect the warrior aristocracy to which she belonged?
2. Speculate on why homosexuality was so prevalent and widely accepted in ancient Greek society.
3. In your opinion, is her lesbianism the main interpretive framework for explaining Sappho?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The definitive text of Sappho's work is that established by Denys Page and Edgar Lobel (eds.), *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 [1955]). But this is a scholar's edition, with the text in Greek and the apparatus in Latin. Denys Page, however, in his *Sappho and Alcaeus: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979 [1955]), does present his text, but it is not a complete translation: the Greek is reproduced and then the text is paraphrased in prose lines. There are several other editions and translations available. The most authoritative, besides Page and Lobel, is the four-volume *Greek Lyric* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). I have chosen to use for this chapter the latest and one of the best modern translations, by Diane J. Rayor, *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991). There are a number of other popular, rather than scholarly, editions, including *The Songs of Sappho in English Translation by Many Poets* (Mt. Vernon, N.Y.: Peter Pauper Press, 1942), *Sappho: A New Translation* by Mary Barnard, foreword by Dudley Fitts (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), and *The Poems of Sappho,* ed. Suzy Q. Groden (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966). Her individual poems have been collected or anthologized in dozens of collections, such as *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, n.d.), *The Greek Poets,* ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Modern Library, 1953), and *Greek Lyric Poetry,* ed. and tr. Willis Barnstone (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

The only comprehensive biography of Sappho in English is Arthur Weigall, *Sappho of Lesbos: Her Life and Times* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1933), excerpted for this chapter. But there are a number of works that deal primarily with her poetry and, to some extent, with Sappho and the setting in which she wrote. Anthony J. Podlecki, *The Early Greek Poets and Their Time* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984) is a capable critical survey that includes a brief but perceptive chapter on Sappho. A similar work is Anne Pippin Burnett, *Three Archaic Poets: Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983). J. A. Davison, *From Archilochus to Pindar: Papers on Greek Literature of the Archaic Period* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968) is a collection of learned papers containing one on Sappho that can be read with some profit though it is somewhat technical. In Richard Jenkyns, *Three Classical Poets: Sappho, Catullus, and Juvenal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), in the portion of the book dealing with Sappho, one finds a close reading of all her extant verse and, secondarily, some interpretation of her poetry, less of her biography. One of the standard works of interpretation is C. M. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry from Alcman to Simonides,* 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

Judy Grahn, *The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition* (San Francisco: Spinsters, Ink., 1985) is not really about Sappho the poet or the historical personality but about Sappho as the first in a long line of lesbian poets who, in the view of the author, have always formed a special part of an underground community. Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Heroines and Hysterics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) contains two chapters on Sappho in a book essentially about women poets, much like the preceding book, but less focused on lesbianism.

For the historical setting, an indispensable book is K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), the standard work on its subject. More specific period histories are Chester G. Starr, *The Origins of Greek Civilization 1100–650 B.C.* (New York: Knopf, 1961), Anthony Snodgrass, *Archaic Greece: The Age of Experiment* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1980), and Michael Grant, *The Rise of the Greeks* (New York: Collier, 1987).

More general histories are the brief and lucid A. R. Burn, *The Warring States of Greece: From Their Rise to the Roman Conquest* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) and Carol G. Thomas, *The Earliest Civilizations: Ancient Greece and the Near East, 3000–200 B.C.* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), a modest little book especially designed for undergraduate students.