



Can Sappho be freed from receivership? Part One

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Classical Inquiries

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Can Sappho be freed from receivership? Part One

JULY 19, 2021 | By Gregory Nagy

2021.07.19 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In this essay, I make a distinction between, on the one hand, what I describe as a receivership of Sappho in the world of Classics today and, on the other hand, the variegated reception of Sappho in the world of ancient Greek song culture. In making such a distinction, I repeat a term I once used—only once ever before in *Classical Inquiries* (Nagy 2015.12.31, linked [here](#))—and I did so with reference both to Song 1 of Sappho and to Ode 4.1 of Horace. That term was “a poetics of repetition,” which I redeploy here as a way of conceptualizing the ancient reception of Sappho, to be contrasted with today’s receivership of her songs. I will say more about my use of the term “receivership” as my argumentation proceeds, but for now I concentrate on the contrasted term “reception,” which I use in the context of describing situations in the ancient world where the songs of Sappho could be reperformed. One such situation is actually exemplified in Song 1 of Sappho, as I have argued more than once in *Classical Inquiries* (I said it best, I think, in the essay listed in the Bibliography as Nagy 2015.11.05, linked [here](#)). The repetition itself is signaled in two ways by the song. First, there is the adverb *dēute* (δῆυτε), meaning ‘once again *this* time’, which is used three times in this song with reference to the onset, ‘once again *this* time’, of passionate love. And, second, there is the adjective *poikiló-thronos*, which is the first word of the song and which, as I interpret this adjective, describes the goddess Aphrodite herself as ‘wearing [a dress decorated with] pattern-woven flowers’. For those who experience love, the love itself as personified by the goddess of love is limitlessly varied, each time love happens, just as the wording of Sappho pictures a limitless variety of flowers that are pattern-woven on the exterior of Aphrodite’s dress. This exteriorization of flowers is matched by the interiorization of love felt inside the heart of the one in love. A comparable pattern of exteriorization is visible in the vase painting I have chosen as the cover image for this essay. We see pictured here the goddess Aphrodite,

accompanied by the boy Himeros, who is sexual desire personified, and she is shown wrapped in a *himation* decorated with floral patterns.



Silver kantharos with gilded decoration: Aphrodite (shown with Himeros), wrapped in a *himation* decorated with floral patterns. Late 5th century BCE, Vassil Bojkov collection,

§1. My view of Sappho's reception, which I trace forward in time by starting from the ancient world—starting, that is, from as far back as possible, even as far back as the era generally posited by classicists as a historical setting for the life and times of this figure named Sappho—differs from an alternative view espoused by those who use the word “reception” only in terms of post-ancient responses to the verbal arts of the ancient world. It is in the context of this difference in views that I can explain my use of the word “receivership.” I contrast this word with “reception” because those who use this other word in a restricted way, excluding the past, tend to disregard the idea that Sappho's songs were traditionally reperformed in the ancient world, and that such traditions of reperformance need to be reconciled with the textual transmission of these songs in the classical period of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

§2. I start by noting that I sympathize with the motives of those who think that some kind of receivership is needed for the study of Sappho's songs. These motives can be understood, I think, as a reaction—whether it is conscious or unconscious—to a sense of loss, enormous loss. I too sense that loss, which I will now try to describe in my own way.

§3. One of the all-time worst disasters, to my way of thinking, that has ever befallen the world of what is now called world literature has been the fact—a freakish case of historical contingencies—that the textual transmission of the songs of Sappho, curated at the Library of Alexandria in the era that followed the founding of that library in the early third century BCE, did not survive into the Renaissance, by contrast with other Greek classics like, say, the victory odes of Pindar. No corpus of texts stemming from the scrolls or ‘books’ of Sappho as edited by the Alexandrians has survived. Instead, all we have left are (1) sparse quotations from her songs in ancient sources and (2) fragments of her songs written on papyri dug up in Egypt over many years since the nineteenth century of our era—and, to make things even worse, some of the papyrological finds have involved ethically questionable modes of acquisition.

§4. So, the poetic body of Sappho, transmitted in the textual corpus of her songs, is broken and cannot, it seems, ever be brought back to life—unless some future generation is destined to reap the harvest of some miraculous new find that will revive the corpus in its entirety or at least near-entirety.

§5. For the moment, however, the body cannot be reintegrated, so that the countless hundreds of classicists who have over so many years curated the bits and pieces of a once-integral corpus could merely make their attempts at reconstructing a body that still awaits resurrection. I admit that I am one of those classicists who have made such attempts—my first attempt was published almost half a century ago (Nagy 1973).

§6. But all such attempts run the risk of embarking on an exercise in receivership—to use the word I used in the title of this essay—and the problem is that such receivership is hotly contested. In the field of Classics as it exists in my time, “nobody owns Sappho.” The expression I just used is borrowed from a friend of mine, Neel Smith, who once said “nobody owns Plato” in a moment of exasperation while debating with philosophers of today. I remember thinking to myself at the time: here we have a complete or near-complete corpus of an ancient author, Plato, and yet I so agree with Neel, as I thought further, that there is no single authorized gatekeeper for understanding Plato today. Nor should we expect ever to authorize such a philosopher king. But then why, so I thought even further, should we expect to achieve some unified understanding of Sappho, whose poor beautiful poetic body is so fragmented?

§7. With these thoughts in mind, I propose to offer some counter-views to views on Sappho that I have been reading in a book bearing the title *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho*, edited by P. J. Finglass and Adrian Kelly (2021). Such counter-views are intended not as criticisms of views expressed by individual authors of individual chapters in the book but rather as comments that can be weighed against other comments. My views, wherever I might disagree with contrasting views, may in the long run be worse and not better, and I need to assure my readers that I resolutely think that I do not “own” Sappho any more than anyone else does. So, my *modus operandi*, to ensure my avoidance of disagreeing in ways that may seem *ad hominem*, is therefore simply to cite, one by one, any given page in any given chapter of the *Companion to Sappho* where I have a comment to offer. This way, by looking up the chapters as listed in my Bibliography, readers are free to consult the sources I cited and thus make their own comparisons of the views presented on given pages of the *Companion* with the different views that I present here.

§8. Here in Part One, I confine myself to one such pairing of different views:

Companion to Sappho Chapter 20 p. 280: The epithet *poikiló-thronos* of Aphrodite in Song 1 line 1 of Sappho is translated there as ‘elaborately throned’. For my counter-view, I cite the discussion I have offered above, supplemented by fuller discussion in Nagy 2020.12.31, linked [here](#).

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