



# Song 44 of Sappho and the Role of Women in the Making of Epic

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# *Classical Inquiries*

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## Song 44 of Sappho and the Role of Women in the Making of Epic

February 27, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy, H24H

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§1. In H24H, Hour 4§15–20, I analyze Song 44 of Sappho, which narrates a scene that has no parallel in the Homeric Iliad. This scene centers on the wedding of Hector and Andromache. At H24H 4§20, I formulate this “take-away” from that analysis: “Song 44 of Sappho is an example of epic as refracted in women’s songmaking [...]”



Detail from Attic krater painted by the Brygos painter, 480–470 BCE. Line drawing by Valerie Woelfel.

§1. In [H24H](#), Hour 4§15–20, I analyze Song 44 of Sappho, which narrates a scene that has no parallel in the Homeric Iliad. This scene centers on the wedding of Hector and Andromache. At H24H 4§20, I formulate this “take-away” from that analysis: “Song 44 of Sappho is an example of [epic as refracted in women’s songmaking traditions](#).” And I simply give a reference there to an earlier analysis that I had attempted, in a book entitled [Homeric Questions](#) (Nagy 1996). [The hyperlink directs to an open access version of the book on the CHS website.]

§2. I now think that the reference I gave in H24H was too brief, too fleeting. I did not fully do justice to a very important point that needs to be made. And the point is, [women’s songmaking traditions can be very different, in both form and content, from men’s songmaking traditions](#).

§3. I can do no better than quote from [Homeric Questions](#) (Nagy 1996:56–57), where I focus on the realities of epic songmaking in India today:

In the course of [surveying the phenomenon of] occasionality in the living epic traditions of India, we may note in passing that epic, as a form of public activity, is performed almost exclusively by male singers (Blackburn and Flueckiger 1989:9). The rarely found exceptions, however, are particularly revealing. For background to the case about to be cited, we may note that the Ahir caste of Uttar Pradesh appropriates an epic known as the Lorik-Candā (Flueckiger 1989 [hereafter abbreviated “F.”] p. 36); this epic “helps to maintain the Ahirs’ image of themselves as a warrior caste (F. p. 41).” “It is primarily Ahirs who sponsor performances at occasions such as weddings and the birth of a child. The Lorik-Candā epic is also sung at various festivals, during the harvest season, and at village or town fairs (F. p. 37).” In Chhattisgarh, the corresponding epic is called Candainī, and it is with the background of reference to this tradition that we turn to an exceptional case of performance by women. The researcher reports as follows: “One night as I was recording an elderly Gond (tribal) woman singing a variety of narrative songs, she began singing about the wedding of the epic heroine and her first husband. But the woman did not consider this to be Candainī singing (F. p. 40).” The narrative content in fact corresponds to Candainī, but the form is different: a distinct rāg ‘tune’ and style (F. p. 40). In this case, we find a striking ancient Greek parallel in Sappho [Song] 44, the so-called “Wedding of Hector and Andromache”: this song, composed in a meter that is cognate with but distinct from the epic dactylic hexameter, deals in a non-epic manner with themes that are

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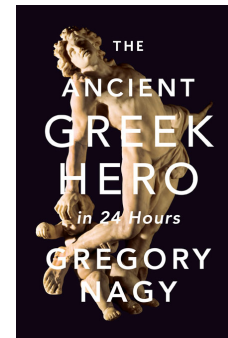
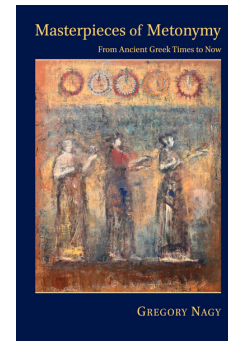
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otherwise characteristic of epic (Nagy 1974:118–139). We have here a particularly striking example of the effects of a given occasion on the very nature of epic composition. Just as the song of Sappho about the Wedding of Hector and Andromache is exceptional in the history of Greek literature, so also the song of the elderly Gond woman proved to be exceptional in one particular researcher’s survey of living Indian oral epic traditions. It may well be worth asking whether this discovery about women’s traditions in India would have been possible if the researcher in this case, Joyce Flueckiger, did not happen to be a woman. The question is whether a woman researcher would be deemed by her women informants to be more suitable for the reception of distinctly women’s traditions.



§4. The answer to the question I posed here is, obviously, yes. Later on, I had the good fortune of following up with this researcher, [Joyce Flueckiger](#), whom I persuaded to publish a whole book on the subject of “gender and genre” in the living oral traditions of India (Flueckiger 1996 in the bibliography below). I am proud to have served as the general editor of the Cornell University Press series in which this book was published.

§5. In general, the research of Joyce Flueckiger raises many other important questions of great relevance to the nature of epic as “a comprehensive totality.” In an online article entitled “[The Epic Hero](#)” (Nagy, 2006), I focus on this notion of epic as a notional totality, and I quote here my relevant comments:

§40. A typological comparandum for the notion of epic as a comprehensive totality is the case of heroic epics and dramas at festivals in latter-day India: the measure of totality in the performing of these epics and dramas is determined by the ideologies of the festivals that serve as the historical contexts for such performances (Nagy 1999:28). Impartial observers of actual performances of epics at festivals in latter-day India have found that there are various different ways of imagining and realizing a notional totality for these epics (Flueckiger 1996:133–134). There are even cases of differences determined by gender: when women instead of men sing the “same” epic, observers have found differences in form (meter, melody, phraseology) and even in content (Flueckiger 1989:36–40; Nagy 1996:56–57, as quoted above). There are close parallels to be found in the songs of Sappho about epic heroes like Hector and Andromache (Sappho [Song] 44; again, comments by Nagy 1996:57). Still, despite all the variables, the actual notion of epic as a totality remains a constant.

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