Diachronic Sappho: some prolegomena

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

Diachronic Sappho: some prolegomena

In my posting for Classical Inquiries 2015.10.08, I offered my own working translations of some songs attributed to Sappho, complementing my interpretations as posted for Classical Inquiries 2015.10.01. These songs, currently known as "the newest Sappho," are part of a set of new discoveries of papyrus fragments. In my posting here for Classical Inquiries 2015.10.22, my current interpretations of the "newest Sappho" songs are integrated with my earlier interpretations of the "old Sappho" songs that I have been studying ever since the early 1970s. I am thinking here especially of my work on Songs 1, 16, 31, and 44 of Sappho. The reasons for my giving the title "Diachronic Sappho" in this posting for 2015.10.22 will be explained as I now proceed to present my essay.

§1. It was my good fortune to be invited by Boris Maslov and Rocco Rubini to a workshop that they organized on the subject of Lyric and Epic. The workshop took place at the University of Chicago on Thursday and Friday, October 15 and 16, 2015. My friend Roland Greene and I were asked to preside over the conversation dealing with Lyric on Thursday. Then, on Friday, both of us actively joined the conversation dealing with Epic; this time around, the presiders were Nandini Pandey and David Quint. On both Thursday and Friday, I concentrated on the songmaking of Sappho, especially on the songs currently known as the "newest Sappho," and, in the course of our conversations, I shared my working translations for most of these songs. These translations, as we see them published in my posting for Classical Inquiries 2015.10.08, complement the interpretations that I summarize in my posting for Classical Inquiries 2015.10.01. In the course of the conversations that were generated in Chicago, it dawned on me...
that my current interpretations of the "newest Sappho" songs need to be presented together with my earlier interpretations of the "old Sappho" songs that I have been studying ever since the early 1970s. I am thinking here especially of my work on Songs 1, 16, 31, and 44 of Sappho. My views about these songs are consistent for the most part with my newer views about the songs collectively described as the "newest Sappho." But even if these old-and-new views of mine are internally consistent, I find it difficult to reconcile them with views currently held by a number of other Classicists about Sappho. What makes my views different is that my approach to the songmaking of Sappho is diachronic as well as synchronic, whereas the corresponding approaches taken by the Classicists I have in mind are exclusively synchronic. And a big problem for these Classicists is that the various arguments generated by their various synchronic-only approaches are for the most part inconsistent with each other and cannot be mutually reconciled. I offer here merely a general critique of exclusively synchronic approaches, because my own argumentation is not meant to take aim ad homines.

§2. In building a model that I describe as a diachronic Sappho in the title, I am following the model of a diachronic Homer as developed in other projects of mine. The terms synchronic and diachronic, as I use them here in describing my approaches to Sappho as well as Homer, come from linguistics. When linguists use the word synchronic, they are thinking of a given structure as it exists in a given time and space; when they use diachronic, they are thinking of that structure as it evolves through time. From a diachronic perspective, the structure that we know as Sappho's songmaking can be viewed, I argue, as an evolving medium.

§3. That said, I now offer a working inventory of some exclusively synchronic views that I think stand in the way of achieving a coherent understanding of Sappho's songmaking. In each case, I write the given view in italic font and then I offer a diachronic counter-view in roman font. These counter-views are based on work published in relevant books and essays of mine that I list in the Bibliography below. I refer to these books or essays here simply by name (Nagy, abbreviated as N) followed by date of publication: for example, N 1974. What follows, then, is my working inventory of some exclusively synchronic views, followed by a brief write-up of diachronic counter-views:

A. Sappho wrote poems. No. There is no proof that the composition of songs by Sappho depended on the technology of writing. In N 1974 as also in the Appendix to N 1990a, I offer proof that a composition like Song 44 of Sappho was created by way of a formulaic language that is cognate with the formulaic language used in the compositions that we know as the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey. As I argue further in N 2011b:155–156, the composing and the transmission of the songs attributed to Sappho—and to Alcaeus—cannot be divorced from the performing of these songs. To put it as simply as possible: the songs of Sappho—and of Alcaeus—were meant to be performed, not read as texts. And here is one other point that I need to make already now: the compositions attributed to Sappho are not simply poems. They are songs. More on this point below, at D.

B. Sappho is a historical person, to be dated around 600 BCE, who intended her songs for other historical persons who are named or unnamed in the wording of these songs. Before we can speak of the historicity of Sappho, we must first ask ourselves this all-important question: for whom were her songs intended? The answer, as I argue in N 2015a, is that Sappho’s songs were originally "intended" for all the people of Lesbos. So, these songs are "intended" not only for family, not only for some inner circle of women and girls, not only for some sub-group of people who are participating in a specific event. And I view the concept of "intention" diachronically here, not only synchronically. The persons to whom Sappho speaks in her songs become personae or—let’s say it more simply—characters in the world of these songs, just as Sappho by virtue of speaking (1) to these characters and (2) about these characters and (3) about herself becomes a character in her own right. The ancient Greek word for the functioning of personalities or personae or characters in the world of song is mimēsis, as I argue with specific reference to Sappho in Classical Inquiries 2015.10.01. A more extended argument, with reference to Greek songmaking in general, is made in N 2013b.

C. The occasion for the songs of Sappho can be determined by whatever the words of these songs have to say about the world of Sappho. No. As I argue in N 1993, 1994–1995a, 1994–1995b, 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2015a, the occasion for each of the songs was determined by the historical circumstances that shaped the traditions of performing the songs, and these circumstances changed over time.

D. The medium of Sappho, in the performance of her songs, was (1) choral or (2) sympotic or (3) "concertizing." From a diachronic and a historical point of view, as I argue especially in N 2007b, 2010, 2015a, all three of these media fit the songmaking of Sappho. From an exclusively synchronic point of view, on the other hand, Classicists are sometimes forced to choose, depending on the context that they are reading: it is as if the songs of Sappho must be only choral or only sympotic or only "concertizing."

E. The personality of Sappho shows that she is a woman who loves girls. Here we see an overly narrow typing of Sappho as represented by the words of her songs. The songs of Sappho, I will argue in the postings that follow this one, reveal a kaleidoscope of female personae. She can be a middle-aged woman or even an old woman, but she can also be a young girl. She can be a woman who loves girls, or a girl who loves another girl or is loved by other girls or by women. She can behave in a wide variety of ways, ranging from the...
statedness shown by a priestess of the goddess Hera all the way to the frivolities of a
courtesan who enchant men who hear songs sung at their drinking parties. She
can also be a loving or a scolding sister, as I argued in N 2015a. She can even show her
love of boys, as I argued in N 1973, where I reconstructed what must have been Sappho’s
poetic declaration of an erotic desire for a radiant young hero named Phoas.

In preparation for the postings ahead, I offer here my working translations of some songs of Sappho that I
studied in N 2013 (hereafter abbreviated as H24H):

1) from Song 44 of Sappho (“The Wedding of Hector and Andromache”)

|4| τὸς τ’ ἄλλος Ἀλκαίος [-][.]Ι.Ϲ.Ε.ιαν κλέος ἀφριτον | 15 Ἐκτωρ καὶ συνέπαυσθαι[ποι] ἄγοις ἑλικιώτιδα
|4| ἔθησα ἐξ ἑρεὶς Πλακίας τ’ ά...[.].Ἀυ | 17 ἄβραν Ἀνδρομάχαν ἐνι ναύσιν ἐπ’ ἀλμυρῶν | 8
|4| πότνων—πόλλα δ’ (ἐλι)ματα χρώμα κάμματα | 9 πορφύρ[α] καταγι[τ...]να, ποικιλ’ ἄθυματα, | 10 ἀργύρῳ τ’ ἄνδρ[...]θωμ[ποτ]ραίσαν Κάλλεσεν.
|4| ὑπό τ’ ἀνδρόμαχου πάτ[...]φιλον | 112 φάμα δ’ Ἰλαθα κατό πόλιν αὐραχόρων φιλος | 11 έστιν’ ἴθιδα σατινα[ν]ς ὑπ’
|4| ἐνθρύμβος ἄγον αἰμνώνοι, ἐν[...]βαίνε δ’ πᾶς ὅλος | 115 γυναῖκων τ’ ἐμα παρθένικα[ν]
|4| τ’...[.]σφώνῳ, ἱκελο[θείον[.]] | 122 [... ] ἄγον ἀμόλ[...]κτοι[ν] ἡμῶν ἐν ἱπτο[ν]
|4| [κράτεις | 125 καὶ ψ[...]φο[ψήφο] | 129 δ’ ἀρα

Mixing bowls and cups …

… holy | λίβανος τ’; | 
Pálma | ἄλματες | ἐλεύθερον διὸ προενέχεσθαι[ν] | ἐντάντες δ’ ἀνδρές ἔπιρον ἱπλον ἀνάλοις 133 Ἀθών ὀντί κακά ἑκατονταῖων ζωλήρων, 134 ἑκέννην δ’ Ἐκτορα

κληρονόμας θεοεικέλος.[ν] 55

|4| ... and the rest of Asia ... imperishable glory [kleos apthhtolon] | 15 Hector and his
|4| comrades [sun-] (h)etairoi | 14 from holy Thebe and ...
|4| Plakia, they led her, the lovely Andromache 17 in ships over the salty 18 sea. Many
|4| golden bracelets and purple 19 robes ... intricately worked ornaments, 20 countless silver
cups and ivory. 11 Thus he spoke. And the dear father quickly stood up. 12 And the news
reached the dear ones throughout the broad city. 13 And the Trojans yoked to smooth-
running carriages 14 the mules. And the whole ensemble climbed on, 15 all the women
and maidens 16 21 looking just like the gods [ikeloi theoi] 22 ... holy 123 set forth into
Troy ... And the sweet song of the pipe mixed ... 125 And the sound of the cymbals, and
then the maidens 126 sang a sacred song, and all the way to the sky 127 traveled the
wondrous echo ... 129 And everywhere through the streets ... 129 Mixing bowls and cups ...

And myrrh and cassia and frankincense were mingled. 131 And the older women cried
out eleu. 132 Meanwhile all the men sang out a lovely high-pitched song, 133 calling on
Apollo Paán, the far-shooter, master of playing beautifully on the lyre. 134 And they sang
the song of Hector and Andromache, both looking just like the gods [theoeikelo].

Sappho Song 44.4–34 55

2) testimonium from Himerius

Himerius (Orations 9.16) says:

Σαπφῆς ἤρα μῆλο μὲν ἐκῆκαι τὸν κόρην, […] τὸν νυμφιὸν τὸ Ἀχιλλῆς παρομοίωσά καὶ
eis τάτον άγαγεν τῷ ἤρωι τὸν νεανίσκον τοὺς πρόβραζον.

Sappho compared the girl to an apple […] she compared the bridegroom to Achilles, and
likened the young men’s deeds to the hero’s.

Sappho Fragment 105b 56

3) Song 115

τιμὶς κ’ ὃ φίλῃ γάμβρε, κόλας ἐκάκος; | ὁποιαὶ βραδνίναι σε μιλεῖστ’ ἐκάκος.

To what shall I liken you, dear bridegroom, to make the likeness beautiful? | To a tender
seedling, I liken you to that most of all.

Sappho Song 115 57

4) Song 31

|1| φαίνεται μοι κλήσις θείων Κλ’ ἐμεν’ ἄνηρ, ὅτις ἐναντίος τοι | 13 ιδών καὶ πλούσιον | 14 ἄλματα ἤλθον, πόροιοι 
|1| φωνεῖ-κλεος ὑπακούει | 15 καὶ γελαῖσας ἤλθοι, τὸ μ’ ἦ μὲν | 16 καρδία ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπίπονον, | 17 ὡς γὰρ ἐς κ’ ιδάμ βρόχες ὡς μὲ 
|1| φωνεῖ-κλεος | 18 ὡς ἐν ἑτ’ εἰκε, 19 ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲν γλάσα ἐγεν λέπτον | 21 δ’ οὔτικα χρώ ὑπὸ ψάθεροπομέρικην, | 21 ὑπάττες δ’ οὔτ’ ἐν ὑρμὶ, ἐπιρρόη-
|1| 12οι καὶ δ’ ἀκουσι, 13 δ’ δὲ τὸν ἄλος ψάρχος 

καθάπερ τὸν τὸν καρδίαν ἐφ’ ἑμῖν Φαίνομ’ ἔμ’ αὕτη-
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<td>1 You with pattern-woven flowers, immortal Aphrodite, 2 child of Zeus, weaver of wiles, I implore you, 3 do not dominate with hurts and pain, 4 Mistress, my heart! 5 But come here [tuide], if ever at any other time 6 hearing my voice from afar, 7 you needed me, and leaving the palace of your father, 8 golden, you came, 9 having harnessed the chariot; and you were carried along by beautiful</td>
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<td>1 Some say a massing of chariots and their drivers, some say of footsoldiers, 2 some say of ships, if you think of everything that exists on the surface of this black earth, 3 is the most beautiful thing of them all. But I say it is that one thing 4 that anyone passionately loves [erētai]. 5 It’s really quite easy to make this understandable 6 to everyone, this thing. You see, that woman who was by far supreme in beauty among all mortals, Helen, 8 she […] left her best of all husbands, 9 him she left behind and sailed to Troy, 10 caring not about her daughter and her dear parents, 11 not caring at all. She was swept along […] 15 [All this] reminds me right now of Anaktoria. 16 She is [not] here. 17 Oh, how I would far rather seeing her to give her a dancing step that arouses passionate love [= eratōn], 18 and to see the luminous radiance from the look of her face 19 than to see those chariots of the Lydians and the footsoldiers in their armor 20 as they fight in battle […].</td>
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7) Sappho Π²

ἔγω δὲ φίλημα' ἀβροσύνα, ... τοῦ λόγου τροποὶ καὶ μοι | τὸ λόγῳ τροποὺ ἀλήλιο καὶ τὸ κάλον λέξις

But I love delicacy [(h)abrosunē] [...] this, | and passionate love [erōs] for the Sun has won for me its radiance and beauty.

Sappho F 58.25–26 V = Π² 25–26

8) Sappho Song 105a

οἶον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρευθεὶ τὰ ἀκρωτίων, | ἀκρόν ἀκριτῶι, λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρῶται, | οὐδὲ ἔδυναι ἐπίκεθαι.

Just like the sweet apple that blushes on top of a branch, | the topmost apple on the topmost branch. It has eluded the notice of the apple pickers. | Oh, but no. It's not that they haven't noticed it. They just couldn't reach it.

Sappho Song 105a

9) Sappho (PMG Fragmentum Adespotum 976)

δέδυκε μὲν ἀσέλαν | καὶ Πληϊάδες, μέει δὲ | νύκτες, παρὰ δ’ ὀρῶν· | ἔγω δὲ μόνα καθεύδω

The moon has set beneath the horizon | And the Pleiades as well. It is the middle of the | Night, over and over. Time [(h)ōrā] goes by. | But I sleep alone.

Sappho PMG Fragmentum Adespotum 976

Bibliography


The mother, so sad it is, of the very best": The lament of Thetis in Iliad 18

Homoludens in the world of ancient Greek verbal art


Notes

1 See especially Nagy 2013.


3 On diachronic as distinct from historical perspectives, see Nagy 2011a.

4 In this transcription, the sign "[...]" is not meant to indicate the number of letters that are missing: it is merely a short-hand indication of lacunae.

5 H24H Hour 4 Text D.

6 H24H Hour 4 Text E.

7 H24H Hour 4 Text F.

8 H24H Hour 5 Text E.

9 On the reading βαῑϲʾἀγην at line 19, see Nagy 1996a:98n34.

10 H24H Hour 5 Text F.

11 Here is a transliteration of the first stanza: oi menippiōn stroton oi de pesdōn | o de nāōn phais' epi gān melainan | emmenai kalliston egō de kēn' oτ|t|o tis erātai.

12 In the papyrus fragment, the negative 'not' is not visible, but its restoration is supported by editors.

13 H24H Hour 5 Text H.

14 H24H Hour 5 Text I. On the reading ἔρως ἄξια instead of ἔρος τῶξια, see Nagy 2010. In terms of the first reading, ἔρως ἄξια, the Sun is the objective genitive of ἔρως, 'passionate love'. In terms of the second reading, ἔρος τῶξια, the translation would be ... 'Passionate love [ἐρōς] has won for me the radiance and beauty of the Sun'.

15 H24H Hour 5 Text J.

16 For background: when the moon-goddess Selene sets beneath the horizon, she goes to sleep with her lover Endymion. For a persuasive demonstration that this song should be attributed to Sappho, see Clay 2011.

Tags: diachronic, Sappho

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