Homo ludens at play with the songs of Sappho: Experiments in comparative reception theory, Part Five

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Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone
Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins
Online Consultant: Noel Spencer

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For example:

Homo ludens at play with the songs of Sappho: Experiments in comparative reception theory, Part Five

February 8, 2019  By Gregory Nagy

2019.02.08 | By Gregory Nagy

This posting for 2019.02.08 is Part Five of a long-term project that started with Part One at 2019.01.08 and continued since then till now. The numbering of my paragraphs here in Part Five continues from §77 of Part Four. The primary examples in Part Five here, as earlier in Part Four, come from the poetry of Catullus. In my comments on this poetry so far, I have focused on the beautiful things that the poet has to say about his lady love, named Lesbia. But now, in Part Five, things will get ugly. In due course, though, I hope to turn things around again, returning to the beautiful things that can be said about Lesbia—as also about Sappho.

"Lesbia cries for the death of her sparrow" (1620–1630). Angelo Caroselli (1585–1652).
Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Prologue: Catullus turns against Lesbia

§78. Up to now, I have avoided any bad talk about Lesbia, the poetic love-object of Catullus as poet. But the bad talk is there, as in Catullus 11, where Lesbia, who is mea puella 'my girl' at line 15 of that poem, is deliberately defamed by way of maledictions: at line 16, the poet launches into saying 'things said that are not good', non bona dicta. The defamation begins in earnest at lines 17–20, where Lesbia is pictured as having sex with as many as three hundred male lovers without loving any of them back. I draw attention to the choice of wording for what I translate as 'male lovers': at line 17 of Poem 11 here, these lovers are called moechi—a word that I understand as meaning 'adulterer' in this context. Things get worse in other poems, as in Catullus 58: there Lesbia, mentioned by that name at lines 1–2 and described at lines 2–3 as someone whom the poet once upon a time loved more than those dearest to him, even more than himself, is now pictured as a prostitute brazenly on the prowl in disreputable public spaces, line 4, and engaging there in raw sex with Rome's finest—with the 'descendants of Remus', line 5.

§79. The ugly details we have just seen are a far cry from the beautiful details we saw earlier at §67.1 and at §67.2, back in Part Four, when we were reading Catullus 5 and 7, the poet’s "kissing poems." There it was all love and kisses for the poet and Lesbia. And, as I had already started arguing even earlier, at §§53–54 and §64 in Part Three, the kissing scenes in Poems 5 and 7 of Catullus evoke comparable scenes that Catullus must have read in his text of Sappho's songs—kissing scenes that are lost to us for the most part, except for stray allusions. Details from such Sapphic scenes of furtive kissings, as I had argued even
earlier, back in Part Two, are also evoked in the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe. And similar details of
evocation are attested in other ancient texts that I analyzed all the way back in Part One. For example, I
had highlighted at §32 of Part One two such details that we find in two interrelated epigrams of Paulus
Silentiarius. One of these epigrams, as noted at §1.1, recalls ‘the soft kisses of Sappho’; and the other, at
§1.2, reminisces about the ‘luxuriant lips’ of a girl who is understood to be Sappho. But then, even while I
was dwelling on such beautiful details at §32 of Part One, I had already started to preview what I called a
dark side underlying this kind of poetry. I was already predicting what we now get to see in the present
posting, in Part Five. I was already saying that the potential for soft-core pornography in imitating the
erotic experience of such luxuriant kisses—and of the naked embraces that go with the kissing—could easily
degenerate into hard-core pornography in situations where would-be lovesick men learn to appropriate the
agency of erōs as they find it at work—I should have said at play—in the erotic world of Sappho. Such male
appropriation, as I said we would see in Part Five, could even result in a transformation of Sappho herself.
And now we do see it.

§80. I repeat here, from §32 in Part One, what I had predicted we would see in Part Five: the beloved girl
and the loving woman, who together come to life as one and the same Sappho in her songs, could be
turned into a negative example of female sexuality. Sappho could now be pictured either as a cynical
courtesan or even as a crude prostitute. Either way, she would now be ready to sell erōs to the highest
bidder.

To turn against Lesbia is to turn against Sappho

§81. I fully expect to encounter objections to the formulation that I have just offered here. Even if Catullus
will turn against Lesbia, turning from positive love to negative hatred—turning from lover to defamer—why
should such a turnaround apply to Sappho as well? Even if Lesbia is modeled on Sappho, why should we
expect such modeling to affect Sappho negatively as well as positively? My response to such objections
would be this: the occasional defaming of Lesbia by Catullus is actually modeled on Greek poetic
precedents. If we examine the reception of Sappho in classical Greek poetry, we find traces of a traditional
poetics that played the game of defaming Sappho. That is what I will now argue: the defaming of Lesbia by
Catullus is modeled on Greek poetic traditions of defaming Sappho.

§82. In a separate article, Nagy 2007, I explored in some detail the circumstances that could lead to such a
poetics of defamation. I offer here in §82 a minimal epitome, based mostly on what I said at pp. 225–226
in that article. The context for such a poetics, as I noted there, was the ancient Greek institution of the
symposium, as exemplified already by the songs of Alcaeus, whose era is dated as contemporaneous with
the era of Sappho. Even in such an early era, the songs of Sappho could be reperformed within the context
of the symposium. More than that, these songs could also be repurposed within such a context. And here
we need to confront some basic historical facts about the symposium as an institution, viewing it in the
most general terms possible. To put it bluntly: the symposium was restricted to men and boys—except for
the participation of women or girls whose reputations could not be guaranteed in such a context. The
ancient Greek word for such women or girls is hetaira, which I will translate for the moment simply as
‘courtesan’. Such basic facts about the exclusion of respectable women and girls from symposia are
essential for understanding what eventually happened to Sappho’s character—in both the theatrical and the
moral senses of the word character. So long as the sympotic performing of songs attributed to Sappho and Alcaeus stayed within the framework of traditional festivities in their homeland of Lesbos, the more playful aspects of Sappho’s character as sung by men or boys in a sympotic context could be counterbalanced by the more serious aspects as sung by women or girls in the context of a female chorus. I use this term here in the most general way possible, referring to a female ensemble that sang and danced songs on public occasions such as festivals. (For background, I strongly recommend the pathfinding work of Claude Calame 2001.)

§83. To say it as simply as possible: the overall character of Sappho—let me call it her role—became endangered once it slipped away from its native festive environment as it had existed in Lesbos around, say, 600 BCE. And slip away it did—especially in later years, after the songs of Sappho had been exported, as it were, to Athens.

§84. I will not go into details here, since the reception of Sappho’s songs in the context of male-dominated symposia—especially in Athens—has a lengthy and complicated history, as I tried to show in the article I cited a minute ago, Nagy 2007. And, in any case, the earlier phases of that history, where the reception of Sappho’s songs needs to be studied in terms of performative traditions, have been excluded from my overall project here. As I said already at the beginning, back in Part One, §0.8, I have for now narrowed the field of vision to later phases of reception and transmission, shifting far beyond the performances of Sappho’s songs in Lesbos around the late seventh century BCE and starting instead with the text of Sappho as edited at the Library of Alexandria, founded in the late fourth century BCE. Surely the imitations of Sappho by Catullus are based on such a relatively late starting point.

§85. So the question for now is this: what kinds of Greek textual sources were available to Catullus if he really did play with Greek poetic traditions involving playful defamations of Sappho? For an answer, I will now argue that Catullus—or, more likely, the Hellenistic poets who were his predecessors—could find such traditions alive and well in the textual transmission of Athenian comedies dating from the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, which in turn drew heavily on Athenian sympotic traditions of singing the songs of Sappho.

A comic precedent for the defaming of Lesbia: the defaming of Sappho

§86. I am looking here for a word that captures what is going on poetically whenever Catullus defames Lesbia in his poetry. And I find such a word in Catullus 36, where the poet pictures himself at line 5 as having hurled savage iambic ‘iamb’ at Lesbia in some of his writings.

§86a. Text of Catullus 36, the first ten and the last five lines:

1. annales Volusi, cacata carta,
2. votum solvite pro mea puella.
3. nam sanctae Veneri Cupidinique
4. vovit, si sibi restutus essem
dessemque truces vibrare iambos,
6. electissima pessimi poetae
7. scripta tardipedi deo daturam
8. infelicibus ustulanda lignis.
9. et hoc pessima se puella vidit
10. iocose lepide vovere divis.
...
16. acceptum face redditumque votum,
17. si non illepidum neque invenustum est.
18. at vos interea venite in ignem,
19. pleni ruris et infacetiarum
20. annales Volusi, cacata carta.

§86b. Working translation of Catullus 36, the first ten and the last five lines:

1. You annals of Volusius, you poopy roll of papyrus,
2. Fulfil the vow made on behalf of my girl [puella].
3. I say this because she, praying to holy Venus and to Cupid
4. made a vow: that if I ever got to be restored to her
5. and I would thus stop hurling savage iambic ‘iamb’ at her,
6. then the choicest things belonging to that worst of all poets,
7. I mean, his writings [scripta], would be gifted by her to the lame-footed god [of fire] 8. to be burned by fire burning on the polluted fuel [of the writings].
9. And this was seen by that worst of all girls
10. as a jesting and delicate way of making a vow to the divinities.
11–15. [Here the poet reinvokes Venus, thus transforming the girl’s paraphrased vow into his own quoted vow.] 16. [So, I pray to you, Venus,] make this vow something that is accepted and rendered [as mine],
17. if it is not indelicate and not unlovely.
18. As for you, [you writings of Volusius,] come on into the fire,
19. full of infelicities and of “country” that you are,
20. you annals of Volusius, you poopy roll of papyrus.

§87. At lines 1–10 here, the poet playfully reports how Lesbia, to whom he still refers as mea puella ‘my girl’, reacts to ‘writings’ of his that defame her. The reaction takes the form of a prayer, containing a vow. The girl prays to Venus and Cupid, asking those divinities to grant her a favor in return for a vow that she
will now make. The favor to be performed by Venus and Cupid is this: restore to me Catullus as my lover, line 4, and thus make him stop hurling those savage iambic 'iambs' of his against me, line 5. Lesbia's wording is playfully reported by the first-person speaker, the poet, in the form of his own third-person wording. Let me now reword the vow of Lesbia by repeating the vow—this time, as reported by Catullus: I, Catullus, say that she prays to Venus and Cupid that they must restore me as her lover—and thus they will make me stop hurling those savage iambics of mine against her. Here the male appropriation of the girl's wording puts the 'I' of the male poet in control of the girl's prayer. So, now, it is up to the poet: will I stop hurling those iambics at her, or will I not stop? But what is the vow that is built into the girl's prayer? She vows that if Venus and Cupid do not manage to force Catullus to stop hurling those iambics at her, which would mean that he would be restored to her as her lover, then she would throw into the fire in the fireplace, lines 7–8, the 'choicest writings of the worst of poets', electissima pessimi poetae | scripta, lines 6–7. And who would be that 'worst of poets'? From the girl's point of view, that poet would be Catullus, who is a very bad and very naughty poet for having defamed her. But the poet, as we read on at lines 9–10, claims to see through it all: he describes the girl's vow as an artifact that was created 'in a jesting and delicate way', iocose lepide, line 10. And she knows it: we read at lines 9–11 that she 'has seen herself' in the act of creating this jesting and delicate artifact of a vow. In other words, she pictures herself in the very act of performing her artistic creation of a vow. And, since this vow threatens the burning of the poet's poetry—at least, those parts of his poetry that defame Lesbia—the poet retaliates in reaction to the earlier reference, at line 6, to 'the worst of poets'—to the pessimus poetas. Now, at line 8, the poet refers to Lesbia as the 'worst of girls'—the pessima...puella. Lesbia is oh-so-naughty, just as Catullus is oh-so-naughty.

§88. Because the male poet stays in control of what the girl is saying in Poem 36 of Catullus, her artful vow gets redirected. At line 16, the original vow of the girl to Venus is reappropriated as the vow of the poet himself. He is poetically praying, at line 17, that the goddess will consider this repurposed artifact of a vow, which has become his own vow, to be non inlepidum neque invenustum 'not indelicate and not unlovely'. To be thrown into the fire in the fireplace, at line 18, are no longer the writings of Catullus that show him in the act of defaming Lesbia but, as a substitute, the writings of a poet named Volusius. The annales 'annals' of that poet, as our poet vilifies them at lines 1 and 20, are written on a carta 'papyrus roll' that is cacata 'poopy'.

§89. Here the carta or 'roll of papyrus' has been reused as a roll of toilet paper, if I may say it that way. This is why, I think, the carta is cacata. And I translate cacata here as 'poopy', avoiding the conventional pseudo-macho rendition chosen by some modern translators, which is 'shitty'. I do so because I think that the poet is comically appropriating baby talk into his own poetic diction, imitating what is imagined to be the baby talk of Lesbia when she is praying her own prayer to Venus. Such baby talk is an infantilized form of the kind of girl talk that we can find occasionally in the songs Sappho. I have studied in other projects the poetics of baby talk and girl talk, and, for now, I refer to the brief analysis I offer at §§55–56 of Nagy 2015.10.01. I will return to this topic in a later posting, where I will analyze the poetics of infantilizing girl talk in terms of what I will call the Betty Boop syndrome.

§90. Having noted the comic aspects of Catullus 36, where the poet paraphrases the vow of Lesbia and then turns it into his own vow, thus saving his poetry from the fate of being burned in the fireplace, I now highlight the word iambi 'iambs' at line 5 of this poem. This word iambi, or iamboi in Greek, is conventionally used with reference to a poetics of defamation. As I will now argue, the use of this word iambi here is a pointed reference to a poetic tradition that goes back to Athenian comedy. A poet of "New Comedy" named Diphilus of Sinope, a contemporary of Menander, who flourished in the fourth and early third century BCE, created a play by the title of Sappho (Σάφω), in which the archaic Greek poets Archilochus and Hipponax were represented as erastoi 'lovers' of Sappho (F 71 K-A via Athenaeus 13.599c–d); and we see comparable representations of Alcaeus and Anacreon, again as lovers of Sappho (via Athenaeus at 13.599c–d; also in the poetry of Hermesianax of Colophon, dating from the third century BCE: Leontion, F 7 in Collectanea Alexandrina). I highlight here the comic roles of Archilochus and Hipponax as rival lovers of Sappho, since these two archaic Greek poets are the most visible representatives of a form of poetic defamation—by way of ridicule that was formally known as the iambos or 'iamb'.

§91. Just as Archilochus and Hipponax, masters of iamb, were rival lovers of Sappho in the comedy of Diphilus, so also Catullus and Calvus, as I suggested in Part Four at §§76–77, were rival lovers of Lesbia—in their own poetry. I return here to the playful question I asked in Part Four at §77: was Calvus too trying to appropriate the girl from Lesbos as his very own Lesbia? And Calvus may not have been the only one. Maybe there were as many as three hundred others, in the fervid poetic imagination of Catullus.

§92. I focus for the moment, however, on Calvus as the main poetic rival of Catullus for the affections of Lesbia. Of relevance, I think, is a fragment from another comedy about Sappho. The title of this comedy as well as Sappho (Σάφω)—and this Sappho was created by Antiphanes of Athens, who dates from the first half of the fourth century BCE. In the relevant fragment from Antiphanes (F 194 K-A), we find a riddle in play, where a pregnant city is pictured as giving birth to babies—who are interpreted as rhetores 'public speakers' (line 7 of F 194). Here I am reminded of Calvus the public speaker, whose political career is amply documented in the work of Plessis 1896. And public speaking is this man's negotium, his 'business'—but he also plays at being otiosi 'at leisure' together with his poetic rival, as we saw at line 1 in Poem 50 of Catullus. My guess is that Calvus is somehow directly involved not only in Poem 50 but also in Poem 51 of Catullus, as I argued at §75 in Part Three: thus Calvus may well be the godlike ille, 'that one', at line 1 of Poem 51—the one who cannot stop looking at Lesbia and who cannot stop listening to her, lines 3–4, as she is 'laughing sweetly', dulce ridentem at line 5, in her amused response to the undivided attention she is getting from this ardent admirer.
Sappho as a survivor of poetic defamations

§93. Despite all the ugly poetic defamations that are sporadically directed at Lesbia in the poetry of Catullus, her beautiful self is what prevails—not only in this poet’s poetry but even in the reception of his poetry. A shining example is the reference we read in the work of a later Roman poet, Horace’s Odes 1.22.23: ‘I will love’ (amabo), the poet declares, a girl named Lalage, and this beloved girl, onomatopoetically singing la-la-la, is described here at line 23 as dulce ridentem ‘laughing sweetly’. So, this beloved girl is like Lesbia, as she appears in Poem 51 of Catullus, line 5: Lesbia too is described there as dulce ridentem ‘laughing sweetly’. But the beloved girl of Horace is also like the girl in Song 31 of Sappho, lines 3–4, who is described as ἄδυν νευσίαν ‘talking sweetly’ to her ardent admirer. That is because, in the next line of Horace, Odes 1.22.24, the poet signals a direct reception of Sappho by describing his beloved girl as dulce loquentem, ‘talking sweetly’, just as we see the girl being described at lines 3–4 of Sappho’s Song 31. By contrast, in the previous line of Horace, Odes 1.22.23, the poet had already signaled an indirect reception of Sappho by way of Catullus, who at line 5 of his Poem 51 had described Lesbia as dulce ridentem ‘laughing sweetly’, not dulce loquentem ‘talking sweetly’. As one critic has put it (Young 2015:177), Horace here “builds a rare homage to his otherwise unacknowledged Roman precursor into his truncated rendition.”

§94. We see from such references to Sappho’s songs that the beauty of her persona does in fact survive the threat of poetic defamations that occasionally come her way from Hellenistic transmissions of Athenian comedies. But why was there a threat in the first place? An answer can be found by taking a second look at the reception and transmission of Sappho’s songs in the context of classical and even preclassical symposia. It was the traditions of singing the songs of Sappho at symposia that fueled the potential for negative views of Sapphic sexuality. And that was because, as I already noted at §82, the symposium was restricted to men and boys—except for the participation of women or girls whose reputations could not be guaranteed in such a context. The ancient Greek word for such women or girls, as I also already noted, was hetaira, which I translated simply as ‘courtesan’. And such courtesans could be not only erotic playthings for the men attending the symposia: they could also be the favored performers of playful songs. And here we have the answer we are looking for: courtesans, because of their social vulnerability, could be defamed—even those courtesans who were most favored as performers of songs.

§95. But all this is not quite the same thing as saying that the songs of Sappho originated from the context of performances by courtesans at symposia, as some critics tend to view such songs (I cite here the spirited arguments of Schlesier 2013, which cannot be ignored). Rather, as I indicated at §82, I view the context of performance at symposia as separate from other contexts, such as occasions of choral singing and dancing at festivals. That said, however, I agree with those critics who argue that the performance of Sappho’s songs by courtesans at symposia was a most favored context for the reception and transmission of these songs (Peponi 2018, especially p. 175, with further bibliography). In such a context, men could not only admire but also love these songs—and they could even fall in love, on and off, with the women or girls who sang them.

Bibliography


Musings about a scene pictured by the Achilles Painter

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Tags: Antiphanes of Athens, Archilochus, Calvus, Catullus, Catullus 11, Catullus 36, Catullus 5, Catullus 50, Catullus 51, Catullus 58, Catullus 7, Daphnis and Chloe, Diphilus of Sinope, Hipponax, Horace, Lesbia, Sappho, Symposium

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