A scenario for exchanges of comments on a planned monograph about the ancient reception of Sappho

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:
§0. As the title of this posting for 2019.03.08 indicates, I am planning to produce a monograph about the ancient reception of Sappho, and part of the plan is to organize a system for exchanging comments about this monograph, the text of which is I think not yet ready for publication in print. In this posting, I attempt to get the conversation started by making selected comments on my own text and by inviting selected colleagues to respond with comments of their own—or on my actual text in its present form. The formatting for the comments is made possible by a new annotation tool developed by Luke Hollis and his associates. This tool makes it possible to comment on any one paragraph or on groupings of paragraphs.

§1. The text of my monograph in its present form is given below in this posting. So, the size of this posting is considerably larger than most other things I have posted in Classical Inquiries, but the actual text of the monograph is still manageably small in comparison to the size of most monographs. If I were to print out Parts One through Seven on paper, without including the illustrations, this main body of the text would still be less than fifty pages long, while the Epilogue stretches the length by only five or so further pages.

§2. The original bibliographies for Parts One through Seven and for the Epilogue have been merged into a unified Bibliography here, but I must stress that the works listed there are not at all fully representative of ongoing research about the reception of Sappho in the ancient world. So, my Bibliography for the monograph is very much a work-in-progress, which will need to be supplemented regularly. In the posted version as of now, I have already attempted a head start in making additions, indicating by way of highlights any new entries that I have added to the original bibliographies for Parts One through Seven and for the Epilogue. But the text of my monograph has up to now engaged directly with none of the listed works that are at present highlighted. So far, I have engaged only with those listed works that are not highlighted.

§3. Among the works highlighted in the Bibliography are two articles by Judith P. Hallett, neither of which I had read before she kindly sent me one of them, Hallett 2006, after she saw my posting of Part Five, 2019.02.08. In today's posting, I propose to make relevant comments on her two articles, which I found most helpful. I will abbreviate my references to these two articles as JPH 2005 and JPH 2006, and I invite JPH to make any comments she might like to make on the comments I am offering here. Also, I will...
Abbreviate my references to my own comments as GN 2019.03.08, adding the relevant paragraph-number in this post, §4.

§4. For the moment, I show the text of my comments on JPH 2005 and JPH 2006 by subdividing §4 here into §4.1 and 4.2, to be supplemented hereafter by the new format for commenting by way of the annotation tool that has now been made available to Classical Inquiries.

§4.1. JPH 2006:77–85 argues persuasively that Clodia Metelli may have been a poet in her own right. I agree with JPH when she says at p. 84 that the puella ‘girl’ who is Lesbia may be dramatized as engaging in a poetic dialogue with the ego of the male speaker in Poem 36 of Catullus, where a shift in subjectivity from a male to a female ego at lines 3–8 produces a poetic voice that could belong to a girl poet. I would only add, as I do at §§88–92 in Part 5, that such a template for a girl poet could be based ultimately on the poetics of Sappho.

§4.2. Similarly, I agree with JPH 2006:80–82 when she argues that the last three lines of Catullus 2 (7–9) and the last stanza of Catullus 51 (lines 13–16) could be seen as other examples of poetic dialogue where a ‘she’ engages with a ‘he’. But again I would add, as I do at §§2 in the Epilogue and at §§61–62 in Part Three, that the template for the persona of the girl poet could be traced all the way back to Sappho—who could be channelled by female as well as male Roman poets.

§5. Having made public one invitation, in §4, I would now also like to offer a second invitation here in §5. This time, the invitation is more general, and it has already been made, informally. I have asked an intergenerational group of seven colleagues to make comments, wherever they like, on my paragraphs in Parts One through Seven and in the Epilogue. These colleagues, some of whom have already given informal comments on some of my paragraphs, are the following Seven: Lucia Athanassaki, Ewen Bowie, Miriam Kamli, André Lardinois, Richard Martin, Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi, Timothy Power. The logistics and the scheduling of any future comments made by members of this group will I hope be a matter of ongoing negotiations between them and the editors of this project, Lia Hanhardt and Keith Stone, who will be working together with CHS Web Producer Noel Spencer.

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

2019.03.08 | By Gregory Nagy

Preface

§0. The first two words in the title of this monograph derive from an essay, Nagy 2015.10.15, where I analyzed the theorizing of Aristotle about the human propensity to imitate. I highlighted in that essay the interest that Aristotle takes in primal attempts at imitation, which go back to the earliest phases of childhood. For Aristotle, as I pointed out, childish imitation is at the root of human playfulness. It was in the context of making this point that I had first played with the pseudo-scientific term Homo ludens. In the present context, I make use of that same term again as I proceed to focus on the playfulness I find in ancient literary creations that imitate Sappho.
Part One

rewritten from 2019.01.08

Introduction

§0.1. Ancient imitations of Sappho provide valuable evidence for reconstructing the ancient reception of Sapphic songs. The imitations that I will study here—all of which are creations of male authors—will have a bearing on a theory that I hope to develop long-term. From the standpoint of this theory, we need to study comparatively—not just in linear sequence—the reception of Sappho’s songs as reflected in ancient imitations created by male authors. A high point for my argumentation in these essays will be reached in Part Two, where I get to analyze the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe. That novel, as we will see, is a playful exercise in showing how to soften the potential for hard-core pornographic appropriations of female sexuality by male imitators of Sappho. In Part Five, I will turn to some ancient examples of such negative appropriations, which will be a low point for the narrative arc of my ongoing argumentation. By contrast with such a low point, Part One here will commence with examples of would-be positive appropriations. Then, coming to the end of Part One, I will introduce at §33 my analysis, commencing in Part Two, of the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe. The text of that novel, as we will see, is a particularly valuable source for a comparative study of Sapphic imitations.

§0.2. It can be said in general that the use of a comparative method will make it possible to reconstruct more accurately both the form and the content of the original model for ancient imitations of Sappho—and this model was the whole body of Sappho’s songs. What I just said about Sappho as the original model is so obvious as to provoke someone to ask this question: why do you start your introduction with such a statement? And I should ask myself the same question, especially in view of the fact that I have learned, over the years, to be most wary of using the term “original” whenever I deal with procedures of reconstructing unattested phases of form and content.

§0.3. As we are about to see, however, my insisting on Sappho as the original model for her ancient imitators is justified in view of the existing state of affairs in Classical studies, where the ongoing interest in imitators of Sappho centers on reconstructing forward in time some kind of linear sequence of surviving imitations, proceeding sequentially from the earlier to the later imitators. And, since Classicists have access to so many texts of imitations that have survived over time while they are left with so little that survives from an original Sappho, their point of interest will naturally tend to get distracted, veering away from even the very idea of an integral body of songs attributed to Sappho. That is what I mean when I refer to the existing state of affairs in Classical studies. And that is why I propose here to move beyond the distractions that result from attempts at reconstructing forward in time some kind of a linear sequence to be found in the surviving imitations of Sappho. My methodology will combine the procedure of reconstructing forward in time with the complementary procedure of reconstructing backward as well. This way, I hope to avoid being limited to a starting point where all I have to work with are the few bits and pieces that have survived from...
an original body of songs attributed to Sappho. To say it another way: I propose to swim not only downstream, away from Sappho, but also upstream, back to the source—which is the original Sappho.

§0.4. I need to follow up with a question. In reconstructing Sappho backward as well as forward in time, what would be our target of reconstruction? Would it be an integral text of Sappho? But here we run into a big problem, which is the fact that the songmaking of Sappho is for us a moving target, since the reception and transmission of Sappho’s songs had been, in its earliest historical phases, not textual but performative.

§0.5. One example of early performative phases of Sappho’s songmaking is the channeling, so to speak, of her songs, as once performed in Lesbos around the late seventh century BCE, by way of later songs attributed to Anacreon, performing in Samos about a century later. In a detailed essay, Nagy 2007, starting at p. 226 there, I analyze such early phases in the reception and transmission of Sappho’s songmaking. A most relevant reference to the transmission of songs attributed to Sappho and Anacreon, as I will note later on in this essay, is what the stage-Socrates says about both Sappho and Anacreon in Plato’s Phaedrus 235c.

§0.6. A second example of early performative phases, also analyzed in the same essay, Nagy 2007, is the further channeling of Sappho’s and Anacreon’s songs in Athens, lasting for several more centuries—and here I include in my reckoning the songs attributed not only to Sappho and Anacreon but also to Alcaeus, a near-contemporary of Sappho. There is also a third example I analyze in that essay—one that I now find particularly relevant to my argumentation here. It has to do with the secondary role of Alcaeus and, later, of Anacreon as playful imitators of songs that should properly have been performed not by men at private symposia but by girls notionally led by Sappho herself in choral singing and dancing at public festivals.

§0.7. What I just said about playful imitations by men in the course of early performative phases in the transmission of Sappho’s songs is relevant also to later textual phases. All along in the essays I will be presenting in Parts One through Seven, we will have to keep in mind a complication that I am addressing here directly for the first time: in studying the reception and transmission of songs attributed to Sappho, we need to consider not only the primary poetics of Sappho but also the secondary poetics involved in the appropriation of her songs by playful male imitators.

§0.8. For now, in any case, I will narrow 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. The imitations I will first analyze here are based on such a relatively late starting point. At least for now, the target of reconstruction will be a text of Sappho as edited by the librarians of Alexandria in the Hellenistic era.

Two epigrams by Paulus Silentiarius

§1. In what follows, I start with one of the very latest ancient imitators of Sappho’s songs as once preserved in a textual tradition dating back to those Hellenistic times. His name is known to Classicists as Paulus Silentiarius, and he dates from the sixth century CE. I will concentrate on two of his epigrams.

§1.1a. Paulus Silentiarius in Greek Anthology 5.246:

1. μαλθακά μὲν Σαπφος τὰ φιλήματα, μαλθακά γυίων
2. πλέγματα χιονέων, μαλθακά πάντα μέλη,
3. ψυχὴ δ’ εξ ἀδόμαντος ἀπειθέος· ἥρι γὰρ ὄμων
4. ἐστὶν ἔρως στομάτων, ὄμω κτῆσθαι πορθεύνης.
5. καὶ τις ὑποταλή· τάχα τις, τάχα τούτο ταλάσσει
6. δύιναν ἀνταληθέν τῆρται εὐμορέως.

§1.1b. Here is my working translation of the original Greek text:

Soft are the kisses of Sappho, soft are the entanglements with her snow-white limbs, soft are all her tuneful parts. But her soul is made of hard adamant, resisting all persuasion. That is because the desire goes only as far as mouth-and-mouth; as for the other things, it has to do with girlhood. And who could possibly endure this any further? Someone may perhaps soon get to endure it, perhaps soon, and then, having endured, even the thirst of Tantalus he will endure handily.

§1.1c. Here is a more literal working translation, where I also highlight, within square brackets, some of the Greek words that I am translating:

1. Soft are the kisses [philēmata] of Sappho. Soft are with her limbs [guia] 2. the entanglements—with those snow-white limbs of hers. Soft are all her tuneful-parts [melē].
3. But her soul [psūkhē] is made of hard-admant, resisting-all-persuasion [a-peithēs]. That is because it goes only as far as
4. —I mean, the desire [erōs] goes only as far as—mouth-and-mouth [stomata]; as for all the other things, it [= erōs] has-to-do-with girlhood [partheniā].
5. And who could possibly endure [-tānai] this any-further [epi-]? Someone may perhaps-soon [takha] get to endure it, perhaps-soon [takha], and then, having endured [tānai],
6. even the thirst of Tantalus he will endure [tānai] handily.

(I add here later, 2019.02.08, a most relevant observation by Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi 2018:175, about the use of the word melē at line 2, which I have been translating as ‘tuneful parts’: “An extraordinary
fusion of 'Sappho's soft kisses and soft entwining of her snowy body-parts' with her 'soft melê'—the latter to be understood as a pun referring to both her limbs and her lyric songs.)

§1.2a. Paulus Silentiarius in Greek Anthology 5.236:

1. ναὶ τάχα Τανταλέης ἀχρόντα νήματα ποιήσεις
2. ἡμέτερων ἄχμεν ἐστίν ἐλαφρότερα.
3. οὐ γὰρ, ἰδαν στὸ κάλλος, ἀπείγεντο χεῖλα μίξαι
4. χεῖλει οὐ ροδίων ἄβροκες καλύκων.
5. Τάνταλος ἄκροτόκαρχος· ὑπερτέλλοντα δὲ πέτρον
6. δείδει, ἄλλα βανεῖν δεύτερον οὐ δύναται.
7. αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ ζωὸς μὲν εὰν κατατήκημαι οἴστρω,
8. ἐκ δὲ ὀλγοδρανής καὶ μόρων ἐγγύς ἔχω.

§1.2b. Here is my working translation of the original Greek text:

I swear, perhaps soon the pains of Acheron, having to do with the punishment of Tantalus, are getting lighter for him to bear than the sorrows I have. That is because he never saw your beauty and was thus never prevented from making his lips be one with your lips, which are more luxuriant than the buds of roses. I mean, Tantalus never did—the one who is shedding tears continuously. That rock hanging over him he fears, but to die a second death he is unable. As for me, I am still alive as I dissolve from the bite of the gadfly. I am drained of power and am near death.

§1.2c. Here is a more literal working translation, where I also highlight, within square brackets, some of the Greek words that I am translating:

1. I swear, perhaps soon [takha] the pains of Acheron, having to do with the punishment of Tantalus,
2. are getting lighter [for him] to bear than the sorrows [akheia] I have.
3. That is because he never saw your beauty and was thus never prevented from making his lips be one
4. with your lips, which are more luxuriant [habro-] than the buds of roses.
5. I mean, Tantalus never did—the one who is shedding tears continuously. That rock hanging over him
6. he fears, but to die a second death he is unable.
7. As for me, I am still alive as I dissolve [kata-têkesthai] from the bite of the gadfly.
8. I am drained of power and am near death.

§1.3. The eroticism that we find in these two epigrams composed by Paulus Silentiarius evokes the poetics of Sappho, and the first epigram makes this evocation explicit by actually naming her. Such eroticism is clearly an imitation of previous imitations of Sappho by previous epigrammatists. I cite here the valuable work of Angela Gosetti-Murrayjohn (2006), who has conscientiously studied what she calls the "filiation" of such imitations (p. 43). She compares the two epigrams of Paulus Silentiarius, as found in the Greek Anthology at 5.236 and at 5.246, with three similar epigrams, dating back to earlier periods, which are likewise to be found in the Greek Anthology: Rufinus at 5.14, Meleager at 5.171, and "Plato" at 5.78. Tracing our way backward in time from Paulus, who as I already noted dates from the late sixth century CE, we can see that the three other epigrammatists are all sequentially earlier, going farther and farther back in time. The case of Rufinus, the conjectured datings range from the fourth back to the first century CE (Gosetti-Murrayjohn p. 48). As for Meleager, our information is secure: he dates farther back in time, to the first century BCE. And, dating even farther back in time, back to the Hellenistic era, is an epigram by "Plato," imitator of the real Plato, who in turn may be viewed as a most distinguished imitator of Sappho in his own right (Gosetti-Murrayjohn p. 46).

§1.4. Although the work of Gosetti-Murrayjohn (2006) concentrates on the filiation of imitations while analyzing the poetics of eroticism in the two epigrams of Paulus Silentiarius, she leaves room for the possibility that some aspects of his imitations go back not only to earlier imitators of Sappho but also to Sappho herself, the textual transmission of whose songs was it seems still alive and well even in the relatively late era of Paulus, in the sixth century CE (p. 43). This possibility is central to my own argumentation as I present it here. What I will argue is that the poetry of Paulus not only imitates imitations of the songs of Sappho: it also imitates directly the songs of Sappho herself. In my overall project, not only here in Part One, I will make a similar argument also about other ancient imitations of Sappho. As I will try to show, at least some aspects of other such imitations as well—many more aspects, I think—than we might have initially expected—were based on an original text of Sappho.

§1.5. What I have just said is a formulation that is meant to accommodate a vast stretch of time during which the original text of Sappho was still preserved in its notional entirety. And my point is, the reception of Sappho during all that time—during all those centuries separating late imitators like Paulus Silentiarius in the sixth century CE from earlier imitators going all the way back to the Hellenistic era—cannot be viewed simply in a linear sequence, as if each new imitation depended on a previous imitation. Rather, as I advocated already at the beginning of this essay, we need to view comparatively the reception of Sappho's songs as reflected in imitations created by ancient authors. From a comparative point of view, any given moment of reception will have its own history of transmission, and this history will at times reveal varieties of direct as well as indirect connections with the past. My overall project, then, is a set of experiments in finding such varieties of connectedness. That is what I had in mind when I referred, in the subtitle I give for the whole project, to my experimenting with comparative reception theory.
§2. The game starts with the Greek noun φιλήμα, meaning ‘kiss’, which is derived from the verb φιλέσθαι, which in turn can mean ‘to kiss’ specifically as well as ‘to love’ generally. We find the noun φιλήμα at line 1 in the first epigram that I quoted from Paulus Silentiarius, in Greek Anthology 5.246, where we read Sapphous ... φιλήματα. At §1.1c above, I translated this wording as ‘the kisses of Sappho’, and we can see from the context of my overall translation that the original Greek text has to do with mouth-to-mouth kissing. Right away, I note a relevant observation by Gosetti-Murrayjohn (2006:51): the word for ‘kissing’ here, as she says, “evokes the linguistic lineage of the ΦΙΑ-based words of the earlier epigrams.” What she means is that we find references to kissing mouth-to-mouth also in the poetry of the earlier epigrammatists as attested in the Greek Anthology. The most salient example in the Anthology is a mouth-to-mouth φιλήμα ‘kiss’ pictured in Rufinus, 5.14—the second vowel here matches what we would expect to find in the poems of Sappho. But there is also mouth-to-mouth kissing—more specifically, lips-to-lips—in Meleager, 5.171 and in “Plato”, 5.78.

§3. I need to emphasize, however, that the kissing as pictured in the earlier epigrams of Rufinus, Meleager, and “Plato” is not connected directly to the songs of Sappho. Only the kissing that we see pictured in the later epigram of Paulus shows any direct connection to her songs. And that is because, as I will now start to argue in earnest, the ‘kisses of Sappho’ derive here from the actual songs of Sappho.

§4. Let me sharpen my point of view: the "linguistic lineage" of words formed with the root ΦΙΑ in the sense of 'kiss' does not depend exclusively on a chronological succession of surviving epigrams that picture mouth-to-mouth kissing. Rather, when it comes to ‘Sappho’s kisses’ as pictured in the epigram of Paulus, I will argue that the “lineage” in this case goes all the way back, directly, to the poems of Sappho’s songs, where mouth-to-mouth kisses can be seen as gifts graciously given by girls to the grateful poetic persona of Sappho herself. Such kissing, as I will soon argue, is experienced directly in an erotic world that belongs to girls, not to men—even though men, in a state of lovesickness that may be either feigned or real, may desperately desire to take part in such a world, at least vicariously.

§5. For now, however, it will suffice for me to fine-tune the term "lineage" as used by Gosetti-Murrayjohn (2006: 43, 45, 51) with reference to poetic imitations of Sappho. At one point in her work (p. 53), she herself highlights a salient example where Sappho is being directly imitated by Paulus Silentiarius. It happens at line 8 of the second epigram as I translate it at §1.2c, where we read ‘I am drained of power and am near death’—and where the ‘I’ who speaks is explicitly a man in the original Greek. This poetic trope, expressing a desperate state of lovesickness, is evidently derived from what we read at lines 15–16 of Sappho’s Song 31: τεθνόντω δ’ ἀλίγα ποιεύσεις | 16 Ψιθυμόν ἐμ’ αὐθαίρετα, which I translate ‘and a little short of death [16] do I appear to myself’. Here the ‘I’ who speaks in the original Greek is explicitly feminine, not masculine. That said, I find it relevant to quote the general formulation of Gosetti-Murrayjohn (p. 43) about the “lineage,” as she calls it, of the epigrams: “these two epigrams of Paulus,” she notes, “are not just connected by a system of filiation; the implicit object of desire in the second epigram (5.236) is also [...] as in the first epigram (5.246)—] Sappho.”

§6. Such a formulation leads me to ask: how is Sappho the “object of desire” in the two epigrams of Paulus Silentiarius? The answer, I think, has to do with the second word I now select as I continue to play the game of connecting the dots. That word is the noun ἔρως, as we see it in play at line 4 in the first of the two epigrams by Paulus, 5.246 in the Greek Anthology. In my working translation of this line, at §1.1c, I translated ἔρως as ‘desire’, in the erotic sense of the English word desire. But can we say here, without qualification, that Sappho is the object of such a ‘desire’? And, if not, then what would we say is the real object of desire?

§7. The noun ἔρως at line 4 of 5.246 is in the nominative case, ἐρως, combined with the noun παρθενία in the genitive case, παρθενίας, as we can see from the working translation of Gosetti-Murrayjohn (2006:42), she interprets the combination ἐρως...παρθενίας as ‘desire for virginity’, taking the genitive of partheniā as an objective genitive. Here is the way she translates the overall wording at lines 3–4: ‘her desire goes only as far as mouths and mouth; for the other things, it has to do with girlhood’. And I show the same alternative interpretation in my more literal translation, at §1.1c: ‘it goes only as far as [...] I mean, the desire [ἔρως] goes only as far as—mouth-and-mouth —[stomata]; as for all the other things, it [= the desire] has-to-do-with girlhood [παρθενία].’

§8. The deliberate ambiguity that I see here results from the actual combination of the word ἔρως [ἐρως] with the word παρθενία [παρθενια] at line 4 in the epigram of Paulus Silentiarius, 5.246. To bring out this ambiguity, I have translated partheniā here not as ‘virginity’ but, more simply, as ‘girlhood’. That is because this word, as we see it used in Song 114 of Sappho, for example, refers simply to the social status of girlhood, of being a girl—that is, being a girl before becoming a woman by way of having sexual intercourse with a man. Ideally, as in Song 114, the context for thus becoming a woman is the venerable old institution of marriage, where the girl as bride gets married off to a bridegroom. Thus the word partheniā, as understood in the songs of Sappho, does not presuppose anything more than simply being a
Things start getting more complicated: erōs as ‘desire’ in Plato

§9. We are now about to see a complication, which creates a deliberate ambiguity in the combination of the word erōs [ἐρῶς] with the word partheniā [παρθενία] at line 4 in the epigram of Paulus Silentiarius, 5.246.

§10. I start with the asexual. A better word here would be metasexual, by which I mean a kind of sexuality that is metaphorical and thus transcendent, celestial. In the dialogues of Plato, we see at work a metasexual kind of erōs 'desire', to be experienced by the human psūkhē or 'soul' in its longing for ultimate beauty. A shining illustration is the Recantation or Palinode performed by the stage-Socrates in the Phaedrus of Plato, 244a–257b. The performance takes the form of a stylized hymn to erōs 'sexual desire', personified as the most beautiful of gods, Eros, who leads the psūkhai 'souls' of lovers toward the ultimate light of absolute beauty. We find further illustrations in the Symposium of Plato, especially at 181b, 183e, 186a, 192d–e, 208e–209a.

§11. But then there is also the blatantly sexual kind of erōs, even in the dialogues of Plato. There is a telling example in Plato's Symposium, where we read an encomium performed by the staged figure of Agathon in honor of Eros personified. This god Eros is physical as well as spiritual—though his physical sexuality is not hard or rough but gentle, since he is said to reside inside the psūkhai or 'souls' of only those humans whose dispositions are 'soft' and thus gentle, not 'hard' and thus cruel—as we read the wording of the stage-Agathon in Symposium 195e–196e. Such a playful evocation of sexual desire, I must note already here, fits perfectly the spirit of the overall encomium of Eros as performed by the stage-Agathon, who actually describes his performance as a paidiā, a 'playing of games', when he reaches the conclusion of his encomium at Symposium 197e.

Playful references to desire in “Platonic” epigrams

§12. The ambiguous Platonic understanding of erōs as both physical and soulful has strongly influenced the epigrammatic tradition. We see this influence especially in epigrams stemming from the Hellenistic era, some of which were actually attributed to Plato. I will focus on three such “Platonic” epigrams.

§12.1a. "Plato" in Greek Anthology 5.78:

1. τὴν ψυχήν Ἀγάθωνα φιλῶν ἐπὶ χέλεσιν ἔσχον·
2. ἧλθε γὰρ ἢ τὴν ἔμεν ἀσιφημημένη.

§12.1b. Here is my working translation of the original Greek text:

1. I held back my soul as I was kissing Agathon, at the point where we were lip-to-lip.
2. That was because my soul came at me, that wretched one, as if it were about to cross over the borderline.

§12.1c. Here is a more literal working translation, where I also highlight, within square brackets, some of the Greek words that I am translating:

1. I held back my soul [psūkhē] as I was kissing [phileîn] Agathon, at the point where we were lip-to-lip.
2. That was because she [= my soul], that wretched one, came [at me] as if she [= my soul] were about to cross over the borderline.

§12.2a. "Plato" in Greek Anthology 5.79:

1. τῷ μήλῳ βαλέω σε· σύ δ' ἐ' μὲν ἔκοσια φιλείς με,
2. δεξαμένη τῆς σας παρθενιᾶς μετάδος.
3. δι' ὀρ', δ' ἀγοστό, νοεῖς, τούτ' αὖτα λαβόσα
4. σκέψαται τὴν ὄριτιν ὡς ἀληθοχρόνιος.

§12.2b. Here is my working translation of the original Greek text:

1. I am throwing this apple at you. And, if you willingly kiss me,
2. then, since you accepted it, give up to me a share in your girlhood.
3. I say this because, if you are thinking it—and I only wish it would not happen, what you are thinking—then you should accept this apple as that same thing that you are thinking,
4. and you should reflect upon the ripeness, how short-lived it is.

§12.2c. Here is a more literal working translation, where I also highlight, within square brackets, some of the Greek words that I am translating:

1. I am throwing this apple [mêlon] at you. And, if you willingly [hekousa] kiss [phileîn] me,
2. then, since you accepted it, give up to me a share in your girlhood [partheniâ].
3. I say this because, if you are thinking (noēîn) it—and I only wish it would not happen, what you are thinking—then you should accept this [apple] as that same thing [that you are thinking],
and you should reflect upon its ripeness (hōrā), how short-lived it is.

§12.3a. "Plato" in Greek Anthology 5.80:
1. μᾶλλον ἐγώ· βάλλει με φιλών α' τις, ἄλλ' ἐπινεύουν,
2. ξανθίππη· κάγιο κάι σὺ μαραινόμεθα.

§12.3b. Here is my working translation of the original Greek text:
1. I am an apple. Throwing me is someone who loves you. So, now, with your head nod "yes,"
2. O Xanthippe. Both you and I are fading.

§12.3c. Here is a more literal working translation, where I also highlight, within square brackets, some of the Greek words that I am translating:
1. I am an apple. Throwing me is someone who loves [philēîn] you. So, now, with your head nod "yes,"
2. O Xanthippe. Both you and I are fading [marainesthai].

§13. I comment at length here on the first of these three "Platonic" epigrams, Greek Anthology 5.78, as translated at §12.1c. In this epigram, the psūkē 'soul' of a male speaker is satisfying its desire—or I should say 'her desire', since the gender of this Greek noun is feminine—to kiss a man by the name of Agathon, who is meant to be seen as the stage-Agathon of Plato's Symposium. As I have already noted at §11, with reference to Plato's Symposium 195e–196e, the stage-Agathon is a playful advocate of Eros as the personified god of sexual desire, and he resides inside the psūkē or 'souls' of only those humans whose disposition is 'soft' and not 'hard'. How, then, would such a Platonic understanding of eros be relevant to the "Platonic" epigram here? The imagined kissing of and by Agathon in this epigram has already reached, from the very start, a point where one mouth has made contact with the other mouth. But now the question is, will the desire that is felt inside the psūkē of the male speaker urge him to go further, just as it has already urged him, till now, to go as far as kissing mouth-to-mouth? Will his feminized psūkē urge him to try and go all the way, sexually? If so, then it—or, better, she—will 'cross the borderline'. But, as it seems, there is to be no 'crossing' after all. It is because the male speaker has already said in the first line of the two-line epigram that he 'held back' his own psūkē. And why did he need to hold back? An ambiguous explanation follows in the second line of the two-line epigram: the male speaker says it was because his psūkē or 'soul' had come at him as if 'she' were about to 'cross the borderline'. This explanation is ambiguous because it does not say whether the 'soul' here is experiencing a physical desire for sex or a metaphorical desire for ultimate beauty. Is the 'crossing' to be understood as something sexual? Or is the 'crossing' soulful, as it were? To ask the question another way: does the 'crossing' here refer to a sexual transgression—or to a spiritual transmigration of the soul? In the end, what creates such ambiguity is the evocation here of the Platonic psūkē, which can either desire metaphorically the ultimate in beauty—or desire physically the ultimate in sexuality. The first kind of desire could be equated with Platonic love, as it were, while the second kind would be something that will get irresistibly attracted to the kind of soft-core pornography that we imagine being perfected in the encomium of Eros as performed by the stage-Agathon of Plato's Symposium.

§14. Now I comment on the second of the three "Platonic" epigrams, Greek Anthology 5.79, as translated at §12.3c. In this epigram, Platonic desire is metaphorized as a heteroerotic yearning to kiss a girl on the lips, and, in this case, the male speaker seems to be expressing a hope that the mouth-to-mouth kissing will lead the girl to go further—to go all the way, as it were, and thus to give him a share of her partheniā or 'girlhood'. Let's go all the way, he says to her, since life is short, and the ripeness of the apple, just like your ripeness, will last only for a very short time. But the question remains: does the wording of this sexual proposition mean that the speaker intends to cancel the girl's 'virginity,' in the sense of changing her from being sexually inactive to sexually active? I think not. As I have already argued at §8, with reference to the wording of Sappho, the word partheniā refers simply to the social status of girlhood—of being a girl, that is, being a girl before becoming a woman by way of having sexual intercourse with a man. So, in terms of such an argument, the Greek word partheniā as applied to the girlhood of a girl does not indicate sexual inactivity—as does the English word virginity. As we will soon see more clearly, in terms of the songs attributed to Sappho, a girl—as girl—may actually engage in sexual activity with other girls, or with women as well. Accordingly, I will continue to avoid the English word virginity as a translation of the Greek word partheniā. What I have just said, however, now leads to a new question: in a Platonic context, how can sexuality be metaphorized within the realm of partheniā as 'girlhood'? I think that the answer is simple: Platonic love includes homoerotic models for female as well as male humans. Such inclusivity can be inferred, I think, from a close reading of a text I have already highlighted: it is the hymn to Eros as performed by the stage-Socrates in the Phaedrus of Plato. But this answer leads to yet another question: what does it mean, for a male speaker to ask a girl to give up to him a share of her girlhood, as we read at line 2 of Greek Anthology 5.79? The answer to this question will need to be postponed until a later stage of my argumentation.

§15. Now I comment, briefly, on the third of the three "Platonic" epigrams, Greek Anthology 5.80, as translated at §12.3c. Here too, as in Greek Anthology 5.79, the ripeness of the apple is short-lived—just like the ripeness of the girl who is being compared to the apple. Both the apple and the girl will soon be 'fading'.
Back to Paulus Silentiarius

§16. Now I return to the context of erōs at line 4 of the epigram by Paulus Silentiarius, 5.246 in the Greek Anthology, translated at §1.1.c. I repeat here my literal translation of the first four lines:

1. Soft are the kisses [philēmata] of Sappho. Soft are with her limbs [guia] 2. the entanglements—with those snow-white limbs of hers. Soft are all her tuneful-parts [melē].
2. But her soul [psūkhē] is made of hard-adamant, resisting-all-persuasion [a-peithēs].
3. That is because it goes only as far as
4. —I mean, the desire [erōs] goes only as far as—mouth-and-mouth [stomata]; as for all the other things, it [= erōs] has-to-do-with girlhood [partheniā].

§17. Here at line 4 of 5.246, as at line 2 of the Platonic epigram, 5.79, translated at §12.3c, we find a parallel use of the Greek word partheniā in the sense of ‘girlhood’. And, here too at 5.246 as at 5.79, the spelling of the word is parallel, written in its Ionic form, partheniē. As we contemplate the parallelisms here, we now finally get to see the ambiguity built into the combining of erōs ‘desire’ with partheniā ‘girlhood’ at line 4 in the epigram of Paulus, 5.246. In the two paragraphs that follow, at §18 and at §19, I show two different interpretations.

§18. On the one hand, if we interpret the combination of erōs ‘desire’ with partheniā ‘girlhood’ to mean ‘desire for girlhood’, where the genitive of partheniā is understood as an objective genitive, then there will be a frustration of erotic desire for the male speaker here, since the psūkhē or ‘soul’ of Sappho as signaled at line 3 of the epigram will be understood to be a negative rather than a positive model of the Platonic soul. Unlike the philēmata or ‘kisses’ of Sappho, which are described at line 1 as soft, the psūkhē or ‘soul’ of Sappho at line 3 is as hard as adamant. In the hardness of her psūkhē, Sappho must be cruel in love—at least, she must be cruel to the male speaker. To be contrasted are the psūkhai ‘souls’ that we see being described as ‘soft’ in the encomium of Eros as celebrated by the stage-Agathon in the Symposium of Plato. Only those souls will be gentle, not cruel, in love. The Platonic soul of Sappho, which is as hard as adamant, would surely not allow any kissing to become anything more than a Platonic metaphor—a metaphor that in this case occludes, frustratingly, the very thought of going all the way, as it were. Such Platonic love would surely impede a sequence where lovers start off by kissing, thus engaging in the preliminaries, and then continue from there all the way to the ultimate consequent, which would be sexual intercourse. But the Platonic psūkhē of Sappho, hard as adamant, cannot be persuaded: it is a soul that is a-peithēs ‘resisting-all-persuasion’, as we read at line 3 in the epigram 5.246 of Paulus Silentiarius.

§19. On the other hand, if we interpret the combination of erōs ‘desire’ with partheniā ‘girlhood’ at line 4 of 5.246 to mean ‘desire for things having to do with girlhood’, where the genitive of partheniā is understood as a genitive of connection, then the desire becomes non-metaphorical and, thus, overtly erotic. In this case, the agency of desire will no longer be seen as a Platonic ‘soul’, a psūkhē. Rather, it can now reveal itself as a Sapphic ‘heart’, a thūmos, as we find it at work in Song 1 of Sappho. This way, erōscan now be seen as Sapphic desire, which makes Sappho herself not only the object of desire—the love object that is desired—but also the subject who desires. She can be both the girl who is loved by a woman and the woman who is loved by a girl. In earlier work, Nagy 2015 §§166–172 (plus 2017.08.28) and Nagy 2015.10.01 §§2–5, 54–56, I connect such a bivalent role of Sappho, both beloved girl and loving woman, with the etymology of the name of Sappho, which I explain as a Greek term of endearment that means something like ‘dear sister’ or even just ‘darling girl’.

‘Things having to do with girlhood’ in Song 1 of Sappho

§20. Here I quote the relevant wording in Song 1 of Sappho, which I will then compare with wording we find in the erotic epigrams I have studied so far, thus continuing playfully my ongoing game of connect-the-dots.

§20a. Sappho Song 1 lines 18–28:

18 τίνα δὴν πέθανέν ἵνα ἵππος ἐχήν ἡ γαμήλα; τίς[7], ὡς ἵππος, ἄδικος; ἵνα καὶ γὰρ οἱ φρενίτες, ταχέως διώκειν, ἵνα οἱ δὲ δώρα μὴ δέκετι, ἄλλο δὲ λύει, ἵνα οἱ δὲ μὴ φίλειν, ταχέως ψήλεις ἵνα καί ψυχή, ἵνα καὶ καθήλως ἵνα ἵππος. ἵνα ἄλλοι μὴ καὶ νόον, χαλέπαν δὲ λέον; ἵνα ἐκ κυρίων, ὅταν δὲ οἱ τέλεσαι ἵνα τὸν θυμὸν ἰμέρρει, τέλεσαι, κῦ δ’ ἀσταὶ ἵνα σύμμαχος ἔκοι.

§20b. Here is my working translation of the original Greek text, as published in earlier work (Nagy 2015.10.22):

18 "Whom am I once again this time [dēne] to persuade [peithein], 19 setting out to bring her to your love [philōtēs]? Who is doing you, 20 Sappho, wrong? 21 If for she is fleeing now, soon [takheōs] she will be pursuing. 22 If she is not taking gifts, soon she will be giving them. 23 If she does not love [philēin], soon [takheōs] she will love [philēin] 24 even against her will.” 25 Come to me even now, and free me from harsh 26 anxieties, and however many things 27 my heart [thūmos] yearns to get done, you do for me. You 28 become my ally in war.

§21. At lines 18–24 here, we read words spoken to stage-Sappho by stage-Aphrodite, followed at lines 25–28 by words spoken conversely to stage-Aphrodite by stage-Sappho. In analyzing the relevance of these words to the erotic epigrams that we have already read, I start by focusing on the noun philōtēs at line 19, which I have just translated by way of the English noun ‘love’, and on the double occurrence of the verb
phileîn at line 23, translated by way of the corresponding English verb 'love'. In ancient Greek poetry, I must emphasize, the meaning of the noun philotês is usually more specific, referring to overtly sexual contact, while the verb phileîn, in prose as well as in poetry, can have the specific meaning of 'kiss' as well as the general meaning of 'love'. We have in fact seen both meanings of phileîn at work in the three "Platonic" epigrams as I translated them above: phileîn needs to be translated specifically as 'kiss' at §12.1 and at §12.2 but more generally as 'love' at §12.3. As for the noun philotês at line 19 in Song 1 of Sappho, I have so far opted for the general translation 'love', but there is room for a more specific interpretation here, 'making love'. The expression making love is in fact a particularly appropriate translation here, since, in earlier phases of English, this expression was used more generally with reference to courtship, and only in more recent phases of the language has it come to mean, prima ɹly, having sex.

§22. But now the question arises, with reference to the word philotês at line 19 in Song 1 of Sappho: who is to have sex with whom? Or, to ask the question more delicately, who is to make love with whom? Or, to put it even more delicately, who is to love whom? And there is a related question: who is the person whom Aphrodite is asked to 'persuade', peithēn, thus bringing this person to 'your love', that is, to Sappho's love? As we see from the wording of Song 1, there are details about this person that will help us find answers to such questions. As we learn from the words spoken by the stage-Aphrodite herself, this person who needs to be persuaded by Aphrodite is someone who is now running away from Sappho, someone who is now refusing to receive gifts from her, and someone who, as of now, simply does not love her. But this person, as Aphrodite foretells, will soon be running after Sappho and will soon be offering gifts to her and will soon love her. And here is where, on the basis of comparing what we read in imitations of Song One, especially in epigrams by Paulus Silentiarius and by "Plato," we may be able to interpret more specifically and less generally some details about the lovemaking. On the basis of such comparisons, to focus on a most salient detail for now, the offering of a love-gift that is meant to persuade the unspecified person 'to be loving' can be seen as the offering of an apple, and the act of love that will be given in return for that love-gift can be seen as mouth-to-mouth kissing. Unlike the Platonic psûkhē or 'soul' of Sappho, which is hard as adamant and is thus a-pethēs 'resisting-all-persuasion', as we read at line 3 in the epigram 5.246 of Paulus Silentiarius, the Sapphic thûmos or 'heart' is made ready for soft kisses, and that is because, as we read at line 18 in Song 1, the goddess Aphrodite herself is asked to 'persuade', peithēn, the beloved girl who will become, one fine day, takēhēs 'soon', the loving woman whose endearing name is Sappho.

§23. There is a measure of uncertainty built into the reassuring adverb takēhōs 'soon', which in Greek often modulates into a hopeful 'perhaps'. And the double use of takēhōs 'soon' at lines 21 and 23 in Song 1 of Sappho augments the uncertainty, adding a sense of urgency. The uncertainty of promised love is picked up by the poetry of Paulus Silentiarius in his epigram 5.246: at line 5, we see here a comparably double use of takha, and both times at §1.1c I translate this adverb as 'perhaps-soon'. The uncertainty is picked up again in that other erotic epigram where Paulus is imitating Sappho: at line 1 of 5.236, we see once again the adverb takha, and at §1.2c I translate this adverb once again as 'perhaps-soon'.

Back again to Paulus Silentiarius

§24. As we have just seen from my translation, which goes back to §1.1c, the double use of the adverb takha 'perhaps-soon' at line 5 in the epigram 5.246 of Paulus signals the uncertainties of promised love. Such uncertainties, as we will now see, lead to the sufferings of sexual frustration, exemplified by the mythological paradigm of comparable sufferings experienced by Tantalus, as narrated briefly at line 6. And the frustration is caused by the erōs of partheniā as signaled at line 4—which as we have seen can be interpreted ambiguously as either 'desire for girlhood' or 'desire having to do with girlhood'. This poetic theme of sexual frustration for the male speaker in epigram 5.246 is mirrored in epigram 5.236 of Paulus, as translated at §1.2c, and the mirroring is signaled by the use of the same adverb takha 'perhaps-soon' at line 1 of that poem. This mirroring is also signaled by way of a further narration, at lines 1–6 of epigram 5.236, about comparable frustrations experienced by Tantalus. The details there about the actual sufferings of Tantalus differ in some ways from what we read at line 6 of epigram 5.246, but the point of comparison is the same, which is, the poetic theme of sexual frustration as expressed by a male speaker.

§25. All this is not to say, not at all, that Paulus Silentiarius was poetically expressing his own personal feelings of sexual frustration in composing this pair of epigrams, 5.246 and 5.236. I should think that such expressions would have been socially incorrect for Paulus as a public ɹgure in the Byzantine Empire of the sixth century CE—in the era of the militantly Christian emperor Justinian. Rather, he was playfully expressing such feelings as experienced by poetic personae that he was imitating. On the surface, we see that these personae were male speakers, but, underneath, there was also a female persona that Paulus was imitating, and that was Sappho herself. The formal pairing of the two epigrams 5.246 and 5.236 shows that the ultimate target of imitation, not only for 5.246 but also for 5.236, was Sappho—even though we see an explicit reference to her only in 5.246. Here Paulus is following a Hellenistic convention by composing paired epigrams where one member of the pair refers explicitly to someone named or something named, while the other member refers to the same someone or something only implicitly, without naming names (there is a collection of examples in Ludwig 1963:75n44).

§26. As we have already seen, however, the imitation of Sappho by Paulus Silentiarius is mediated by his imitation of Hellenistic epigrams attributed to Plato, and it is by way of such layered imitation that the poetics of Paulus can channel Sappho, as it were, despite a shift from a first-person speaker who is female to a first-person speaker who is male. Thus a Sapphic lover who is female can shift to a Platonic lover who is male—but who can still remain playfully Sapphic. And here I return to the centerpoint of such playfulness, which can be seen as the ambiguous poetics of erōs 'desire' either for the girls of girlhood or
for the things having to do with girlhood—depending on how we interpret the genitive construction of partheniā ‘girlhood’ at line 4 in epigram 5.246 of Paulus.

§27. As we have also already seen, the wording of Paulus at line 4 of that epigram can invite a safely Platonic rethinking of ἔρως ‘desire’—provided that the genitive of partheniā ‘girlhood’ is understood as objective, as if the status of girlhood were a limitation placed on the sexuality of girls, while the reader’s thinking may remain dangerously Sapphic if that same genitive is understood instead as merely connective rather than objective— in which case the male speaker of the epigram may be sharing with his readers a lesson in love, secretly teaching them how to invade, stealthily, the erotic world of girls. But the ambiguity created by the potential understanding of an objective genitive in this poem of Paulus can protect his poetry from the appearances of soft-core pornography, even if the poet’s playfulness in referring to the ἔρως of partheniā gives his poetry a charm that mirrors the primal sensuality of Sappho’s kisses.

§28. That said, I now come to a surprisingly deeper meaning embedded in the wording that combines the noun ἔρως with the genitive of the noun partheniā at line 4 of epigram 5.246. As we will now see, there exists in the poetics of Sappho an understanding of ἔρως that actually allows for the combining of this noun with an objective genitive.

Back again to Sappho

§29. Here I quote the relevant wording in two songs of Sappho, which I will then compare with wording we find in the erotic epigrams I have studied so far, thus further continuing playfully my ongoing game of connect-the-dots.

§29.1a. Sappho Π² 25–26 = Fragment 58.25–26 ed. Voigt

1 ἔγει δὲ φιλήμμ’ ἀβρακόυναν, ... γοῦν καὶ μοι | τὸ λάμψιν ἔρως ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ κάλπον λέξις ἀρρένες σηκχε.

§29.1b. Here is my working translation of the original Greek text, as published in earlier work (Nagy 2015.10.22):

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

§29.2a. Sappho Song 16:


§29.2b. Here is my working translation of the original Greek text, as published in earlier work (Nagy 2015.10.22):

[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 [eratâi]. [5] It’s really quite easy to make this understandable [6] to everyone, this thing. You see, that woman who was by far supreme [7] 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 [...][13] [...] twisted [...] thinking [14] [...], lightly [...] think. [15] [All this] reminds me right now of Anatokia. [16] She is [not] here. [17] Oh, how I would far rather wish to see her taking a dancing step that arouses passionate love [= eratôn], [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 [...].

§30. What follows is a brief epitome of relevant arguments I developed in an earlier work, Nagy 2010:

§30.1. The two lines of Sappho Π² 25–26 come from the longer of two surviving versions of Sappho’s “song of Tithonus.” In the second line of my translation at §29.1b, I interpret the Sun as the objective genitive of ἔρως ‘love’. Such a genitive construction would be parallel to the phrase ὄτω τις ἔρατα ‘whatever one loves’ in Sappho 16, where this ‘whatever’ (16.3–4) is described as κάλλιστον ‘the most beautiful thing’ in the whole wide world (16.3), as I show in my translation at §29.2b.

§30.2. There are three things to compare with ‘the most beautiful thing’ in Song 16 of Sappho, but each one of them pales in comparison to ‘whatever’ that thing is that ‘one’ loves. These three things to be compared are three radiant visions of beauty. The first of these visions is the dazzling sight of magnificent chariots-fighters in their luminous war-chariots massing for frontal assault against their terrified enemy; the second vision is of footsoldiers on the battlefield; and the third vision is of battleships at sea (16.1–2). But none of these three radiant visions of beauty can match that ultimate brightness radiating from the
speaker's love-object, Anaktoria (16.15–16). When Anaktoria sings and dances in the chorus, the loveliness of her steps and the brilliant light you see radiating from her looks (16.17–8: ἔρασιν τε βάσμα | κάθαρσις ἡλικίου τοῦ γυναικείου) cannot be surpassed by anything in the whole wide world. That radiance of Anaktoria is now directly compared with the radiance of the luminous chariots and the other two luminous foils (16.19–20).

§30.3. According to the logic of Sappho’s poetic cosmos, nothing can surpass the radiance of the sun. So the all-surpassing radiance of ‘whatever’ it is that the speaker says she loves more than anything else in the whole wide world must be the same thing as the sun—or at least it must be a metonymic extension of the sun, such as the radiance of Anaktoria herself when she sings and dances in the chorus.

§30.4. Similarly in the Tithonos song of Sappho, which is about the tears and sorrows of dark old age, the speaker’s declared love for the sun is what turns her life into a world of radiance and beauty. As I translate at §29.1, she loves habrousun ‘luxuriance’ (Π2 25: ἕγω δὲ φιλήμμι’ ἀβροσύνναι), which is associated with the sun. In the pornos of Sappho, this association extends to the beautiful heroes Adonis and Phaon, lovers of Aphrodite and projected lovers of Sappho: they shine like the sun in their radiant attractiveness (documentation in Nagy 1990a:285 [10§18], 298 [10§29] n113), and, in the case of Adonis, he is explicitly described as (h)abros ‘luxuriant’ at line 1 in Song 140 of Sappho. (My reconstruction of Sappho’s self-involvement in myths about Adonis and Phaon goes back to an essay I first published over 45 years ago, Nagy 1973.)

§30.5. In the pornos of Sappho, then, the sun is the promise of recycling for the girl who fears the interruption of her youth by old age, for the woman who fears the termination of her life. The love or eros (ἔρως) for the sun as experienced by Sappho in the longer version of this song (Π2 26) is the converse of the love or eros (ἔρως) for Tithonos as experienced by the goddess of dawn, Eos, in the shorter version that we now call the “New Sappho” (Π1 18). As we see from the wording that survives in the shorter version, the beauty of Tithonos, who was kalos ‘beautiful’ as a neos ‘young man’ (Π1 19), will be ruined by what is described as a polion γῆς ‘gray old age’ (Π1 20), just as the speaker’s beauty has been ruined (Π1 11) by the graying of her hair (Π1 12) because of γῆς ‘old age’ (Π1 11)—after all, no human can remain agēraos ‘ageless’ forever (Π1 16). For a human to remain agēraos ‘ageless’ is ou dunaton ‘impossible’ (Π1 16). This impossibility, this adunaton, is keenly felt by the speaker as she laments her inability to dance any more—now that her knees are no longer nimble for dancing, no longer nimble like the limbs of playful fawns (Π1 13–14).

31. Having reached the end of my brief epitome, I highlight one last time here the theme of a passionate love, ἔρας, for the ultimate radiance of the sun, as translated at §29.1—which is an erotic theme that takes shape by way of an objective genitive. And I highlight also a related theme we can also see in the translation at §29.1, which is the equation of this passionate love with a further love, as expressed by the verb phileîn, for habrousuné—a noun that I translate for the moment as ‘luxuriance’. This noun is derived from the adjective habro-, which we see attested at line 4 of the erotic epigram 5.236 of Paulus Silentiarius, quoted and translated at §1.2; correspondingly, I translate this adjective as ‘luxuriant’, at least for now. The adjective describes here the lips of a girl that the speaker desires to kiss. He says that the girl’s lips, all puckered up, are more habro– ‘luxuriant’ than rosebuds. The unnamed girl in this epigram 5.236 of Paulus at §29.2 is the same as the named girl in his paired epigram 5.246 at §29.1. She is Sappho—in her erotic role as a girl.

The erotic legacy of Sappho

§32. In Part Two, we will take a second look at two erotic details that I have highlighted in Sappho’s songs—details that we have seen being imitated in the epigrammatic poetry of Paulus Silentiarius. The first detail was at §1.1—about ‘the soft kisses of Sappho’; and the second was at §1.2—about the ‘luxuriant’ lips of a girl who is understood to be Sappho. And we will start to discover a dark side underlying this kind of poetry. As we will see in Part Five, 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 in the erotic world of Sappho. Such male appropriation, as we will also see in Part Five, can even result in a transformation of Sappho herself: the beloved girl and the loving woman, who together come to life as one and the same Sappho in her songs, could then be turned into a negative example of female sexuality. Sappho could then be pictured either as a cynical courtesan or even as a crude prostitute. Either way, she would now be ready to sell ἐρόστοι the highest bidder.

§33. Here in Part One, we have so far seen mostly an absence of such negativity in the various appropriations of female sexuality by ancient male authors in their imitations of Sappho. But now, as I come to the end of Part One here, I am ready to analyze, starting in Part Two, the playful literary exercise of a male author who is channeling, in a mutedly negative as well as positive way, the female sexuality that pervades the pornos of Sappho. This literary exercise is the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe, replete with imitations inspired by the songs of Sappho.

Part Two

rewritten from 2019.01.16
§0. In Part One, I was analyzing various examples of ancient texts composed by male authors who playfully imitate Sappho by appropriating aspects of her songs in their own literary creations. Here in Part Two, I analyze further examples, and the numbering of my paragraphs continues from where I left off at the concluding paragraph §33 of Part One. As I already noted in that paragraph, Part Two of my analysis here will center on the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe, attributed to a man named Longus, who has conventionally been dated to the second century CE. His novel, as I will argue, is a playful exercise in showing how to soften the potential for hard-core pornographic appropriations of female sexuality by ancient male authors in their imitations of Sappho’s songs. In the course of my argumentation, I will at times view this ancient Greek novel through the metaphorical lens of a modern Italian film, Cinema Paradiso.

A brief introduction to the novel Daphnis and Chloe

§34.0. We know practically nothing about the historical background of this ancient Greek erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe. Yes, the work is generally described as an erotic novel, but we cannot even be sure about the accuracy of using the term novel here—or the term erotic. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the whole work is erotic in the modern sense of the term, even if the eroticism we find in it seems at first merely childish—on the surface, at least.

§34.1. The two main characters of the novel are actually still children, even if they are already on the verge of becoming lovers in the narrative, which in some ways resembles what we might call a love story. The boy’s name is Daphnis, and the girl’s is Chloe. Both the boy and the girl are aristocrats, born in the city of Mytilene in Lesbos, but they are ignorant of their origins, since both had been exposed as foundlings in the countryside soon after they were born—only to be rescued by rustic surrogate parents through the divine intervention of local nymphs aided by the pastoral god Pan himself. The two rustic couples who claim the boy and the girl as their very own son and daughter respectively display a pastoral attitude about raising the children. They send them off to the fields, where the boy and the girl spend their youthful days tending herds of goats and sheep respectively. Thus Daphnis and Chloe grow up together in the natural setting of a pastoral landscape.

§34.2. How, then, does the story of these children resemble what I called, in the previous paragraph, a love story? For the moment, I would answer the question this way: the story is all about the discovery of sex as mutually experienced by the preadult boy and by the preadult girl. In what follows, I will explain what I mean when I use the word preadult here. As I continue with my analysis, I will from here on cite passages from Daphnis and Chloe by using the abbreviation D&C.

§34.3. At the point in time when the would-be love story begins, the boy Daphnis and the girl Chloe have reached the ages of 15 and 13 respectively (D&C 1.7). But it is not their ages that make them preadult. Rather, it is the fact that, in terms of the story, they have not yet been educated about sex. Or, instead of saying sex here, let me give it a Greek name, erōs, personified as the god Eros, who as I outlined in Part One §§10–11 was viewed by the ancient Greeks as the originator of love as lovemaking. And the lovemaking could be childishly erotic, as we saw for example in the encomium of Eros as performed by the stage-Agathon in Plato’s Symposium, analyzed briefly in Part One §11. Even more blatantly, as we will soon see, the discovery of lovemaking by Daphnis and Chloe is playfully viewed as childish in the novel named after them, as if love were child’s play. Linked to such child’s play, as we will also see, is the fact that the sexuality experienced by the boy and the girl in the story is for the most part foreplay—until things get less playful, as love turns into lovesickness. But the playful childishness persists, and it has the effect of softening the potential for hard-core sexuality.

§34.4. But where do I get the metaphor of softening? It comes from Part One of my project, with reference to the songs of Sappho, which celebrate the preadult erotic world of girlhood in particular. I already showed
at §1.1 of Part One a most telling context for this metaphor: it was a poem by Paulus Silentiarius, preserved in Greek Anthology 5.246, where we read in the very first line about 'the soft kisses of Sappho'.

§34.5. And here is a related question: how is the idea of softness in the reference of Paulus to ‘the kisses of Sappho’ relevant to my now using the same idea in referring to a playful kind of childishness in Daphnis and Chloe? My intended answer to this question has already been previewed in the full wording of my thesis in the opening paragraph of Part Two here, and I now repeat that wording: this novel, I said, is a playful exercise in showing how to soften the potential for hard-core pornographic appropriations of female sexuality by ancient male authors in their imitations of Sappho’s songs.

§34.6. At this point I must pause, since I need to head off a possible misunderstanding. It has to do with a detail we have already seen in the poetry of Paulus. As I showed at §11 in Part One, this poetry as quoted at §1.1 makes a paradoxical contrast between the softness of Sappho’s kisses and the hardness of her pšukhē or ‘soul’, which is supposedly hard as adamant. But I also showed there at §11 that this hardness is not the same kind of hardness that we find in hard-core pornography. That other kind of hardness is potentially ugly, whereas the hardness of Sappho’s pšukhē is admired for its beauty. Nevertheless, there is one thing that the two kinds of hardness do have in common, and that one thing is the pain caused by the cruelty of frustrated love. Of course there are more delicate ways to express the hardness of such frustration, and the songs of Sappho are a prime example of such expressions. But there exist also other ways—ways that can be crude, even pornographic. Even hard-core pornography, as we will see later, can at times express the pain that is caused by the hardness of frustrated love.

§35. That said, I will soon be ready here in Part Two to analyze what I will call the soft-core eroticism that we see in the novel Daphnis and Chloe. Such eroticism will be a point of comparison with what we have already seen in the songs of Sappho. But first I need to say more about my use of the terms soft-core and hard-core. Here in Part Two, I will be using these terms in a special way, by viewing the poetics of Daphnis and Chloe through the lens of a metaphor that I will name after an Italian film, Cinema Paradiso.

A brief introduction to the film Cinema Paradiso

§36. This film Cinema Paradiso, which first appeared in 1988, was directed by Giuseppe Tornatore, who was not only the director but also the co-writer of both the original story and the screenplay. The story told by this filmmaker is about a man who is a filmmaker—and about how this man actually became a filmmaker. I start with what happens toward the end of the story told by the film, where we see the main persona of the story, who is the filmmaker, in the act of privately viewing a short film—a micro-film inside the macro-film that we are already viewing. What the man sees makes his eyes fill with tears. And, the next thing we know, we get to see what he sees through his tears. The camera of the macro-film, turning away from the man’s gaze, now starts viewing for us the micro-film that he is viewing. To our surprise, this micro-film that we are now viewing inside the macro-film Cinema Paradiso consists of nothing but kissing scenes—let me refer to them, at least for the moment, in this childishly playful way. These scenes had been systematically deleted—scissored out—from an ongoing series of old full-length films that were being shown in the 1950s on the tattered screen of a provincial movie house in a small town somewhere in Sicily. The name of that movie house was Cinema Paradiso.

§37. The filmmaker reminisces. As a young boy, he was a wide-eyed apprentice to an old projectionist who had been ordered by the local parish priest to cut, from each and every incoming film being projected, all footage showing couples engaged in amorous encounters, especially in kissing scenes. The boy projectionist, as his adult self fondly remembers in flashbacks from his childhood story, used to take the greatest delight in furtively peering at every strip of deleted footage that he managed to pick up from the cutting floor. Little did the boy know that he would grow up to become a celebrated maker of films in his own right. And now, after so many years, our filmmaker has discovered that the old projectionist had secretly preserved all those forbidden kissing scenes that had been cut out of the original films, splicing all the naughty bits together into a short film that he then bequeathed, just before he died, to his unsuspecting former apprentice. And now, to his great surprise, our filmmaker finally gets to see, on a private screen, as an adult, the primal scenes that he could never have the chance to see on the public screen as a child: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AOWWTlul6Q.
A viewing of Daphnis and Chloe through the lens of Cinema Paradiso

§38. With this background in place, I will now attempt a brief overview of the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe through the metaphorical lens of Cinema Paradiso. I start with a simplistic observation. From the viewpoint of the priest in the film, the one who had mandated the cutting out of kissing scenes, there would be not much if anything left of a hypothetical film that told the story of Daphnis and Chloe, since the number of times we will catch that couple in the act of furtively kissing and hugging is almost beyond counting. From the standpoint of the adult filmmaker in Cinema Paradiso, on the other hand, each and every one of those kissing scenes in a hypothetical film version of Daphnis and Chloe could be viewed as fragments left over from some lost paradise.

§39. But here is where things get more complicated, and I hope to address the complication by supplementing the metaphor of Cinema Paradiso with another metaphor, which I derive from the off-putting protocols of film ratings, current in my own time, as promulgated by an organization that calls itself The Motion Picture Association of America:

https://www.mpaa.org/film-ratings/. Here are those ratings:

G = General Audiences: “all ages admitted”
PG = Parental Guidance Suggested
PG-13 = Parents Strongly Cautioned: “some material may be inappropriate for children under 13”
R = Restricted: “under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian”
NC-17 = Adults Only: “no one 17 and under admitted.”

Adopting these ratings too as metaphors, I would guess that the reception of the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe by the ancient world could be rated PG or, at the very worst, PG-13. Such a rating would of course be a far cry from the stem disapproval that we should expect from the priest in the film Cinema Paradiso, for whom the kissing scenes in Daphnis and Chloe would surely have earned for this novel a rating below even NC-17.

§40. Adding to my first guess, I would now also guess that almost all the scenes in Daphnis and Chloe, if they were to be visualized in the medium of film as it exists today, could pass with a rating of PG-13 or maybe R—with two major exceptions. As we are about to see, there are at least two scenes in the novel that would now have to be cut in order to keep the rating at PG-13 or even at R. Alternatively, if these two scenes were not cut, then the whole film would earn the rating NC-17—depending on how, in both cases, the mise-en-scène were to be visualized by the maker of the hypothetical film. And here is where I have reached the point where I will start to apply metaphorically the terms “soft core” and “hard core” to the sexuality that we see being depicted in the novel. Also, my metaphorical use of these two terms “soft core” and “hard core” will match respectively my metaphorical use of the ratings PG or PG-13 or even R on the one hand and NC-17 on the other.

§41.0. In what follows, then, I will briefly analyze the potential for both soft- and hard-core aspects of eroticism in Daphnis and Chloe. As we will see, the soft-core aspects will be dominant, corresponding to what we have already seen in Part One, where I highlighted the ‘soft kisses’ and the ‘luxuriant lips’ of Sappho, while the hard-core aspects will be recessive, corresponding to what we will see in Part Five, where I will highlight the negative eroticism to be found in various imitations of Sappho by male authors. In presenting my first analysis here, I will start by paraphrasing those aspects of the novel that aim at soft-core eroticism. Then I will continue with a second paraphrase of those few aspects that verge on hard-core eroticism.

First Paraphrase, the ABCs and the ABCDs of erōs in the novel Daphnis and Chloe, as lessons taught respectively by a fictional persona named Philetas and by another fictional persona named Lykainion

§41.1. Paraphrasing D&C 2.3–8... An old herdsman and pipe-player named Philetas is inspired by Eros, the personification of erōs in the sense of ‘lovemaking’, to become a teacher of lovemaking. He teaches Daphnis, a 15-year-old boy, and Chloe, a 13-year-old girl, but he goes only so far as to teach them the ABCs of lovemaking: (A) to kiss each other mouth-to-mouth, (B) to embrace each other with limbs entwined, and (C) to strip naked, lying down next to each other.

§41.2. Paraphrasing D&C 3.15–20... By contrast, a beautiful young ex-urban married woman named Lykainion becomes a teacher of lovemaking for the 15-year-old boy—and also, though only vicariously, for the 13-year-old girl. What the woman teaches the boy is how to follow up with an element D as a consequent of the sequence ABC, that is, of the ABCs of lovemaking as earlier taught by Philetas to the boy and the girl. This element D, which comes after the ABCs of kissing and hugging and lying down together naked, turns out to be primal: the D that now follows ABC is genital contact, leading to penetration. As for the experience of orgasm, there is no mention of that. In any case, the sexually experienced Lykainion teaches the boy by first doing with him what he already knew how to do with Chloe, which was the sequence ABC, but now the sequence of ABC climaxes in D, which is the act of penetration.

§41.3. Continuing my paraphrase of D&C 3.15–20... Up to now, the boy had thought he had already seen D simply by watching sheep and goats in the act of mating. But he had never yet made a mental connection between the D of human mating and the preceding sequence ABC of lovemaking. He had not yet understood that D is the consequent of the sequence ABC in lovemaking, which proves to be as easy as
ABC. He had not yet understood because all he knew so far about genital contact leading to penetration was what he had seen when he watched sheep and goats doing it. Once they do it, the deed is done. But that is not lovemaking. For lovemaking, as Lykainion teaches the boy at D&C 3.17.2, ἐρῶς must be slow and prolonged. Thus ἐρῶς a sequence of A followed by B followed by C followed by D. As Daphnis will learn later in the story, such lovemaking should ideally last all night long. That is the way adult lovers do it best.

§41.4. Continuing my paraphrase of D&C 3.15–20... But the preadult boy, Daphnis, has not yet learned about the ἐρῶς of adult lovers. The D of the ABCDs of lovemaking is for him defective. All he has learned to do so far is to make genital contact, which leads to penetration. And the boy has by now done it with an adult woman, someone whom he does not happen to love, while the someone he does love is a preadult girl.

§41.5. Concluding my paraphrase of D&C 3.15–20... What results is frustration, leading to lovesickness. The boy cannot do it with the girl—and now he does not want to do it—since he is still an immature preadult boy. He proves his immaturity by being afraid of making the preadult girl bleed if he does to her what he had done to the adult woman. That woman, Lykainion, had warned him that girls are supposed to bleed when they experience penetration for the first time. And the very thought of making his beloved girl bleed scares off the boy from even wanting to go beyond the ABCs of ἐρῶς. The desire in him makes him want to do it but the fear in him makes him not want to do it. So, the ABCDs of ἐρῶς are for him still incomplete: don't do it with the girl you love—since she is still a girl and not yet a woman. Do it only when you are a man and then you can make her a woman. Correspondingly, the boy is supposed to be made a man by making the girl a woman.

Second Paraphrase, the ABCDs of ἐρῶς, as represented by a real poet named Philetas in his own poetry—and as made to happen by the fictional persona named Lykainion in the novel Daphnis and Chloe

§42.1. In the novel Daphnis and Chloe, as we saw at §41.1 above, the fictional persona of Philetas teaches the boy and the girl about the preadult ABCs of ἐρῶς. But this teaching is merely on the surface. Underneath the surface is the real poet Philetas, whose poetry teaches not only the ABCs but also the ABCDs of ἐρῶς. That is because Lykainion, who teaches the ABCDs of ἐρῶς to Daphnis in the narrative of the novel, is a fictional persona not only in that narrative but also already in the real poetry of a real poet named Philetas, who lived in the third century BCE, predating by about half a millennium the author of Daphnis and Chloe. In that poetry, as we see from the argumentation of Ewen Bowie (1985) and of other Classicists cited by Bowie, Lykainion is a fictional creation of the poet: in the poetry of Philetas, Lykainion is his love-object.

§42.2. So, there is an adult sequence of ABCD in the erotic poetry of Philetas. And this poetry can in some cases verge on negative sexuality, including connotations of pornography. The name of Lykainion/Lukainion, meaning 'little she­wolf [lukaina]', is a case in point, since such a name conveys the idea of a prostitute or, to say it in more urban and urbane terms, of a courtesan.

§42.3. In the narrative of the novel, however, as we see at D&C 3.15, the personification of Lykainion as a prostitute is mostly covered up: she is described as a beautiful young gunaion 'little woman', urban and urbane, who had been taken away from her city and married off to a rustic old man living in the countryside, not far from where Daphnis and Chloe used to herd their flocks.

§42.4. The avoidance of personifying Lykainion directly as a prostitute extends further. As we read on, at D&C 3.18–19, we find that Lykainion has sex with the boy freely, not for any fee. Her only reward for the sex she has with Daphnis is the pleasure that she takes from engaging in sex—even if the narrative does not say explicitly whether she experienced orgasm in the course of her sexual encounter with Daphnis.

The Sapphic personality of Lykainion in the novel Daphnis and Chloe

§43. At this point, I propose to take a closer look at Lykainion as portrayed in the novel, especially at D&C 3.15.1. This young gunaion 'little woman' is beautiful, and her beauty is described by way of the adjective ἡράοιο—'ripe' or 'seasonal' (ἀρόιον). She is both urban and urbane, hailing 'from the city' (ἐξ οὐρανος)—presumably, from Mytilene—but she has been married off to an old man living in the countryside. But she is too good for that. She is too luxuriant. She loves luxury too much to be able to adjust to a rustic way of life. The adjective that I translate here as 'luxuriant' is ἀβρότερον. To translate the compressed Greek description here into English, 'she was too luxuriant [habrotero-] for rusticity' (ἀροιοιας ἄβροτηρον). This last detail that I have just highlighted, where the beautiful young woman Lykainion is portrayed as the very essence of luxuriance, is I think a direct evocation of Sappho: I return here to Part One §29.1:

Sappho Π 25–26 = Fragment 58.25–26 ed. Voigt:

ἐγὼ δὲ φαίνει μ' ἄβροτον, … τοῖς καὶ μοι | τό λαμπαδον ἔρως ἄξολος καὶ τό κάλυον λέξι λι | ὅγχε.

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

The persona of Sappho 'loves', as expressed by the verb philein, the very essence of being habro–'luxuriant', which is habrosonē 'luxuriance'. And this essence is linked here, as we saw in Part One §29.1, with erōs or passionate 'love' for the Sun personified. I find it most relevant that Eros as the god of
passionate ‘love’ is invoked in Plato’s Symposium 197d as the ‘father’ of habrotēs, that is, of being habro- ‘luxuriant’.

§44. In the song of Sappho, as I have just quoted it, her luxuriance is a sublime visualization of the erotic desire that she experiences as a woman. As for the novel Daphnis and Chloe, we find here a comparable though (at first) seemingly less sublime visualization of luxuriance in the erotic desire experienced by Lykainion—again, as a woman.

§45. But the luxuriance of Sappho can also be the luxuriance of a girl who has not yet become a woman. As I argued in Part One, the persona of Sappho can oscillate between girl and woman, woman and girl. I come back here to my argument at §31 of Part One, with reference to the adjective habro- ‘luxuriant’ at line 4 of the erotic epigram 5.236 of Paulus Silentiarius, quoted and translated at §1.2. The adjective describes there the lips of a girl whom the male speaker desires to kiss. He says that the girl’s lips, all puckered up, are more habro- ‘luxuriant’ than rosebuds. The unnamed girl in this epigram 5.236 of Paulus at §29.2 is the same as the named girl in his paired epigram 5.246 at §29.1. She is Sappho—in her erotic role as a girl.

§46. Even in the case of Lykainion, we can see in the text of Daphnis and Chloe occasional signs of her former erotic role as a girl. For example, as we already saw at D&C 3.15.1, the beauty of this young gunainoi ‘little woman’ is described by way of the adjective hōraio– ‘ripe’ (ἀπόλοι). As we saw at §12.2 in Part One, where we were reading an epigram of “Plato,” Greek Anthology 5.79, the erotic attractiveness of a Sapphic girl is a kind of beauty that comes to life in her hōrā or ‘ripeness’, which is compared in that epigram to the hōrā or ‘ripeness’ of an apple that is ready to be picked.

The Sapphic personality of Chloe in the novel Daphnis and Chloe

§47. Not only Lykainion but Chloe as well shows traces of a Sapphic role in the novel. We find a stunning example in a scene narrated at D&C 3.33.3–3.34.3, where Daphnis climbs up to the very top of an apple tree and picks the one apple that the apple pickers who were harvesting the apples failed to pick off the tree. Both the form and the content of this scene, as studied by Hannelore Segers (2017, following relevant comments by Ewen Bowie 2013:187–191), present a direct evocation of three verses from Sappho:

Sappho Song 105a:  
οἷον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἔρευθεται ἄκρωλ ἐπ’ ὑδῶι, | ἂν ἄκρωλ ἄκροτάτῳ, λελάθοντο δὲ μαλαδρόντες, | ὥ μὲν ἐκκλελάθοντ’, ἄλλ’ ὅυκ ἐδύναντ’ ἐπίκεκβαι.

Just like the sweet apple that blushed 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.

The corresponding apple in the scene at D&C 3.33.4, which is ‘the topmost one [= apple] on the topmost ones [= branches]’ (ἐν’ αὐτοῖς ἄκρως ἄκροτταυ), turns out to be the perfect apple to match the perfect Sapphic girl—who is in this case Chloe herself.

§48. The apple in this scene is described as uniquely ripened to perfection by the goddesses who personify hōrā or ‘ripeness’: they are the Hōrai, named at D&C 3.34.1. The conventional translation for these Hōrai is ‘the Seasons’. Here I focus on a most suggestive detail in the story. Chloe gets angry at Daphnis for seemingly caring more about the perfect apple than about her. The girl storms off and leaves the boy, who is meanwhile making his dangerous climb up the tree, up to the very top, in hopes of reaching the apple. Why is the girl angry? It is because she is jealous of the apple. As in the epigram of “Plato,” Greek Anthology 5.79, where the erotic beauty of a Sapphic girl comes to life in her hōrā or ‘ripeness’, matching the hōrā or ‘ripeness’ of an apple that is ready to be picked, so also in this scene from the novel, the apple to be picked by Daphnis matches perfectly the girl to be picked by him. But this perfect match becomes, by implication, a rivalry between the perfect apple and the perfect girl. That is why the girl gets jealous and angry at the boy for picking the apple. But the boy now saves the day. After he succeeds in picking the apple, he runs after Chloe and gives it to her. Daphnis now gets rewarded with a philēma ‘kiss’ from Chloe, at D&C 3.34.3. The girl’s kiss, rewarding the boy’s gift of the apple, recalls the promise of a Sapphic kiss in the epigram of “Plato,” Greek Anthology 5.79, as I analyze it at §14 in Part One.

§49. Till the end, Chloe remains the perfect Sapphic girl. What I mean is, she remains a girl till the end of the story being told in the novel about Daphnis and Chloe. Only at the end of the story, then and only then, does Chloe become a Sapphic woman, since the end coincides with her getting married to Daphnis. Her perfect Sapphic signature, as both girl and woman, is a detail we get to see not long before the marriage takes place. At D&C 3.20.2 Chloe is pictured in the act of piekein ‘plaiting’ a garland of ia ‘violets’. This picture evokes a poetic epithet designed for Sappho herself, who was called ioplokos ‘the one who plaits violets’, as we read at Fragment 384 (attributed to Alcaeus).

Implicit indications of amorous female-to-female interactions in the novel Daphnis and Chloe

§50. Something is off, however, about Sapphic imitations in the novel about Daphnis and Chloe. In the poetics of Sappho, as I argued in Part One, girlhood is a phase of life when female sexuality is expressed primarily by way of amorous interactions between girls or between girls and women. But the novel shows no such interactions involving Chloe, who is the idealized Sapphic girl in the story. Or, at least, such interactions are not made explicit in the novel. That is what I mean when I say that something is off here. Still, as we will see, there are implicit indications of amorous female-to-female interactions.
§51. Here I must address a significant problem we have in finding such indications. The problem is, the implicitness of female-to-female sexuality is masked by conventions of male appropriation. We have seen this kind of masking all along, as for example, in the very first two poems I analyzed in Part One, at §1.1 and at §1.2. These poems, epigrams of Paulus Silentiarius in Greek Anthology 5.246 and 5.236, evoke the songs of Sappho by arousing erotic thoughts about the mouth-to-mouth kisses of rosy lips or about the body-to-body intertwinings of snow-white limbs, but these evocations mask the female-to-female sexuality by creating male-to-female substitutions, where a male author imagines himself as a replacement of Sappho-as-woman or even of Sappho-as-girl. As for the novel Daphnis and Chloe, what we see here is that the male author imagines his male character, Daphnis, as a replacement of Sappho-as-woman. A striking example is a scene in D&C 1.17.4, where the sexual frustration experienced by Daphnis in his love for Chloe makes his face turn ‘paler than grass at summertime’ (χλωρότερον τὸ πρόσωπον ἦν πόας θερινῆς): in this case, both the form and the content evoke directly lines 14–15 in Song 31 of Sappho, where the female speaker expresses her sexual frustration as she gazes at the beauty of a girl and says, ‘I am paler than grass’ (χλωροτέρα δὲ ποία ἔμμι).

§52. In the novel Daphnis and Chloe, there are also situations where the persona of Daphnis seems to be replacing not Sappho-as-woman but Sappho-as-girl. A case in point, I think, is the seduction scene at the edge of the forest, where the luxuriant woman Lykainion had a sexual encounter with the boy Daphnis: this encounter between the woman and the boy could be seen as a replacement of a corresponding sexual encounter between a Sapphic woman and a Sapphic girl, where the woman performs an erotic initiation for the girl and thus prepares her for the ABCDs, as it were, of marriage, which will then transform the girl into a woman. Such a scenario would help explain a cryptic but playful remark at the very end of the novel, where the storyteller tells what happened after the wedding of the happy couple:

D&C 4.40.3

Δάφνις δὲ καὶ Χλόη γυμνοὶ συγκατακλιθέντες περιέβαλλον ἀλλήλους καὶ κατεψίλουν, ἁγρυπνήσαντες τῆς νυκτὸς ὄσον οὐδὲ γλαύκες· καὶ ἔδρασε τι Δάφνις ὃν αὐτὸν ἑπαίδευσε Λυκαίιον, καὶ τότε Χλόη πρώτον ἔμαθεν ὅτι τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς ὑλῆς γινόμενα ἦν ποιμένων παῖγνια.

And then Daphnis and Chloe got naked and lay down together; they embraced each other and kissed, and they kept awake all night long, longer than even owls could stay awake. And Daphnis did one of those things that Lykainion had taught. Then it was that Chloe, for the very first time, learned that the things that happened at the edge of the forest were shepherds’ play (paignia).

Part Three
rewritten from 2019.01.25

§0. The numbering of my paragraphs here in Part Three continues from where I left off at the concluding paragraph §52 of Part Two, which had continued from where I had left off at the concluding paragraph §33 of Part One. In Part Three, as in Parts Two and One, I analyze examples of ancient texts composed by male authors who playfully imitate Sappho by appropriating aspects of her songs in their own literary creations. The primary examples in Part Three here come from the poetry of Catullus.
Prologue: comparing the “kissing poems” of Catullus with mentions of kissing in the songmaking of Sappho

§53. I start Part Three by offering some compressed comments on Poems 5 and 7 of Catullus, the so-called "kissing poems." Both of these poems create a poetic impression about kisses that are being exchanged between a pair of lovers. The two lovers are (1) a self-staged Catullus, who speaks as 'I' in the first person, and (2) a staged puella or 'girl' named Lesbia, who is spoken to as 'you' in the second-person. Their kisses, says the first-person 'I' of Catullus to the second-person 'you' of Lesbia, are so many and so frequent that they are simply beyond counting. That is the poetic impression being created—even though there is a feigned attempt, in both poems, to arrive at a fixed count of kisses. I argue here in Part Three that a comparable impression is created in the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe. As we already saw in Part Two, the boy and the girl in the story are constantly exchanging kisses with each other—every possible chance they get. There is always a desire for more kisses: as Daphnis says at 1.18.1: καὶ ὅμως πάλιν φιλῆσαι θέλω 'and yet, I want [thelô] to kiss [phileîn] again [palin]'. There is always a desire for just one more kiss, one more time, followed interminably by a desire for just one more time. With reference to the seemingly interminable kissing that goes on between Daphnis and Chloe, I already argued in Part Two that the poetics of the kiss in the erotic novel about those two lovers can be traced back to Sappho. And now I make a parallel argument here in Part Three with reference to the interminable kissing between the pair of lovers in Catullus 5 and 7: in these two poems as well, the poetics of the kiss can be traced back to Sappho.

§54. But such kissing in the songs of Sappho, as I argued in Part One, especially at §22, can be homoerotic, as in the case of Sappho’s Song 1, where the verb φιλῆσαι refers not just to loving in general between two female personae but also, more specifically, to their kissing each other. How, then, do we explain the heterosexual transformation of the Sapphic kiss both in the poems of Catullus and in the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe? In Part One at §0.2 and §32 leading up to Part Two at §§50–52, I was already shaping an answer to this kind of question, formulating what I called a poetics of male appropriation.

Reviewing some male appropriations of Sappho in the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe

§55. The narrative of Daphnis and Chloe shows a variety of substitutions or replacements for female personae who would be engaged in various scenarios of lovemaking in the songs of Sappho. I review here two examples of such replacement—the details can be found at §§50–52 of Part Two. In one scenario, Chloe in the Sapphic persona of a beloved girl gets continuously kissed by Daphnis in the persona of a lovesick boy, who replaces the Sapphic persona of a lovesick woman. And the kisses of the boy are gladly reciprocated by the Sapphic girl. In another scenario, Daphnis in the persona of a sexually inexperienced boy replaces the Sapphic persona of a sexually inexperienced girl who could get initiated into the heterosexual world of married life by way of a premarital homosexual encounter with the Sapphic persona of a lovesick woman. And the sexual advances of the woman are in this case welcomed by the boy.

§56. The Sapphic persona of such a lovesick woman, I must add, could also be engaged in heterosexual scenarios. A most telling example is the love professed by the persona of Sappho for a mythological figure:
he is a radiantly beautiful solar boy named Phaon, as I mentioned already in Part One at §30.4.

§57. Similarly, the Sapphic persona of a lovesick girl is ripe for heterosexual as well as homosexual feelings. Either way, what matters most to her is the privacy or even secrecy of her sexuality. The Sapphic girl is by convention secretive about her sexual feelings. And we see reflexes of such secretiveness throughout the story of Daphnis and Chloe. At 1.17.1, for example, Chloe hides her pothos or ‘longing’ to kiss Daphnis on the mouth, preferring this boy to the rival boy Dorkon. Then, at 1.13.2–1.14.4, she keeps hidden the lovesickness she feels after she sees, for the first time, the boy Daphnis bathing naked. And then, at a still later point in the story, 1.31.2, her embarrassment prevents her from telling Daphnis that she had kissed Dorkon on the lips when that boy, dying, had begged her to give him the favor of a first kiss as his dying wish. But the question remains about all these girlish secrets: how do we even know about them? My answer is, we see here another case of male appropriation: the narrator, who declares his male identity at the beginning of his story, proceeds to tell this story by consistently appropriating the secret thoughts of a sexually awakened girl.

§58. Having reviewed such male appropriations of Sapphic thoughts in the novel Daphnis and Chloe, I conclude with the most telling example of them all. It happens at 1.27.1, where Daphnis tells Chloe a love story about a lovesick girl who once upon a time underwent a metamorphosis into a prototypical bird—the phatta or ‘mourning dove’. This story within the story of the novel is told in a special way, since the novel refers to the actual telling of this love story as thruleîn ‘things that are told’, where the speech-act of ‘telling’ is expressed by way of the verb thruleîn, usually translated condescendingly as ‘chatter’. Such a translation blurs the significance of this word as the formal marker of a special genre of speaking that is characteristic of girls or women. As I have shown in a separate project, at §§5 of Nagy 2015.10.01, this word thruleîn is used in the poetic diction of Sappho (as at line 5 of the newly-discovered “Brothers Song”) to indicate the telling of something, by way of what can best be described here as girl talk. In the context of Daphnis and Chloe 1.27.1, Daphnis is starting to perform here the love story about Phatta the Dove by saying, in effect, ‘I will tell, you, girl, the story of a girl…’ (‘Ἡ νορθένος, νορθένη, οὐδὲ καλή…’). A more literal translation would be: ‘Once upon a time, girl, there was a girl so beautiful…’. Here we see the ultimate degree of male appropriation: Daphnis as the male speaker who tells the story within the story of the novel talks like a girl to a girl because he is now talking girl talk, and he can talk girl talk because, at this moment of talking, he actually thinks like a girl. And of course the novelist as the storyteller who tells the story told by Daphnis is in his own right talking the same kind of girl talk by way of his own telling of the love story.

A poetics of male appropriation in the “Lesbia poems” of Catullus

§59. Having examined how Sappho gets appropriated by a male author in the erotic novel Daphnis and Chloe, I now compare the male appropriation of Sappho in the “Lesbia poems” of Catullus. A subset of these poems are Catullus 5 and 7, the so-called “kissing poems,” which I have already introduced at the beginning of Part Three here. But now I extend my analysis to all the “Lesbia poems” of Catullus, that is, to all the poems that involve—either directly or indirectly—a puella or ‘girl’ named Lesbia. The groundwork for such an extended argument was originally published in a separate essay, Nagy 2018.12.13, where I concentrated on Poem 2 of Catullus. I now plan to integrate the relevant parts of what I argue in that separate essay into the overall argumentation that I have undertaken here in Part Three of my inquiries into the ancient reception of Sappho. In what follows, then, I rewrite what I wrote at §§0.3–0.5 in Nagy 2018.12.13 in such a way as to fit my argumentation in what follows at §§60–62.

§60 [via §0.3]. Essential for the male appropriation of Sappho in the “Lesbia poems” of Catullus is the name Lesbia itself. The ‘she’ who is Lesbia is Sappho herself, the woman—a girl—from the island of Lesbos or Lesvos, as the name is pronounced in Modern Greek. And the most telling context for this name of Lesbia is Poem 51 of Catullus, which matches closely Song 31 of Sappho in both form and content —so much so that his Poem 51 has at times been viewed as a “translation” of her Song 31. For a working translation of Sappho’s Song 31, I refer to text number 4 in Nagy 2015.10.22.

§61 [via §0.4]. To say that Poem 51 of Catullus is a “translation” of Song 31 of Sappho would be misleading, however. That is because we can see in the poem of Catullus a radical rearrangement of the roles that had played out in the corresponding song of Sappho. Here is what I mean. When the ‘I’ in Poem 51 of Catullus invokes at line 7 the girl in that song as Lesbia, what happens is that the subjectivity of Catullus in his Poem 51 becomes interchangeable with the subjectivity of Sappho in her Song 31. And this interchangeability leads to a change in roles: by contrast with the subjective female ‘I’ of Song 31, who is attracted to a female ‘you’ as a love-object in that song, the subjective male ‘I’ of Poem 51 is attracted not to that same female ‘you’ of Song 31 but rather to the subjective female ‘I’ who is Sappho herself. The girl to whom Catullus is attracted in Poem 51 is not the girl to whom Sappho is attracted in Song 31. Rather, the girl has now become Sappho herself. That girl is Lesbia, for now. But Catullus is ultimately in love not with Sappho but with the songs of Sappho. This is how he can supposedly feel the same feelings that Sappho feels. This is how he can love things that a girl loves—while loving the girl as well. The point I am making here—that Catullus taps into the imagined feelings of the girl she loves—is elaborated in the essay I cited earlier, Nagy 2018.12.13, with specific reference to Poem 2 of Catullus, one of the two “sparrow poems.”

§62 [via §0.5]. Thus the life of Lesbia—as the girl from Lesbos—derives primarily from the songs of Sappho and of her imitators, and only secondarily from love affairs experienced in the “real” world of the poet himself. Whatever happens in “real life” between the poet and his would-be girl-friend is subordinated to whatever happens in the poetic life of girl-Sappho as channeled by her would-be boy-friend Catullus.
Seeking origins for the male appropriations of Sappho

§63. I doubt that such a poetics of appropriating Sappho could be traced back to any single male poet as some sort of originator. And, in any case, such an originator could not have been Catullus, who dates from the middle of the first century BCE. We have seen in Part Two that the songs of Sappho were already being appropriated by the poet Philetas of Cos, dating from the fourth into the third century BCE, who is credited by literary historians as one of the most influential originators of Hellenistic poetry. We have also seen that Philetas as an imitator of Sappho was a model for the author of Daphnis and Chloe in his own imitations—even if this later author, dating from the second century CE, also had direct access to the text of Sappho’s songs.

§64. So now the question is: was Philetas of Cos or some other such Greek poet a model for the appropriation of Sappho by Catullus in his Poems 5 and 7? I will attempt to deal with this question in Part Four of my overall project. For now, I simply close Part 3 by mentioning one relevant detail about the poetics of Philetas as channeled by the author of Daphnis and Chloe: at 2.5.1 in that erotic novel, as Tim Whitmarsh has noticed (2005:145n2), the poet’s lessons about mouth-to-mouth kissing as expressed by the verb phileîn are linked with his name, as if Philētās were an agent noun that had actually meant ‘the kisser’.

Part Four

The numbering of my paragraphs here in Part Four continues from §64 of Part Three, which had continued from §51 of Part Two, which had continued from §33 of Part One. In Part Four, as in Parts Three and Two and One, I analyze examples of ancient texts composed by male authors who playfully imitate Sappho by appropriating aspects of her songs in their own literary creations. The primary examples in Part Four here, as earlier in Part Three, come from the poetry of Catullus.
Prologue: mediated as well as unmediated appropriations of Sappho by Catullus

§65. I start Part Four here with Poems 5 and 7 of Catullus, the so-called “kissing poems” that I introduced in Part Three, where I laid the groundwork for my primary argument, which is, that these poems are male appropriations of songs that can be traced all the way back to Sappho. There are complications, however, as I indicated at §§63–64 in Part Three, where I started to develop a secondary argument: that Catullus was following earlier Greek intermediaries in pursuing the poetics of such male appropriation. Catullus could appropriate Sappho indirectly as well as directly, since he could imitate previous imitators of Sappho. Thus we need to look for mediated as well as unmediated appropriations of Sappho by Catullus.

§66. In what follows I comment on some mediated appropriations that I have noticed in the “kissing poems,” Catullus 5 and 7. To make my commentary easier, I first show the Latin texts of these poems, followed by my working translations.

Two poems: Catullus 5 and 7

§67.1. Catullus 5

1 vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus,
2 rumoresque senum severiorum
3 omnes unius aestimemus assis!
4 soles occidere et redire possunt;
5 nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux,
6 nox est perpetua una dormienda.
7 da mi basia mille, deinde centum,
8 dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,
9 deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum;
10 dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,
11 conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,
12 aut ne quis malus invidere possit
13 cum tantum sciatur esse basiorum.

1 Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love,
2 As for such rumors as old men spread, who are more severe than others,
3 for all such, let us set a value of one single unit—a single penny!
4 Suns that set can be followed by suns that rise again,
5 but for us, once that one single brief light has set,
6 there is one single continuous night for us to sleep through.
7 Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
8 then another thousand, then a second hundred,
then yet another thousand, then a hundred;
then, when we have made many thousands,
we will scramble them, so we won't know for sure how many,
and so no evil man may give them the stink-eye,
once he knows for sure that there are so many kisses.

§67.2. Catullus 7

1    quaeris quot mihi basiationes
2    tuae Lesbia sint satis superque
3    quam magnus numerus Libyssae harenae
4    lasarpiciferis iacet Cyrenis
5    oraclum Iovis inter aestuosi
6    et Batti veteris sacrum sepulcrum
7    aut quam sidera cum tacet nox
8    furtivos hominum vident amores
9    tam te basia multa basiare
10    vesano satis et super Catullo est
11    quae nec pernumerare curiosi
12    possint nec mala fascinare lingua

1    You ask how many, for me, kissings
2    with you, Lesbia, would be enough and more than enough.
3    Well, as big a number as the number of Libyan grains of sand
4    that lie out there in the land famous for the plant silphium, in the land of Cyrene,
5    between the oracle of Jupiter, with his heat-waves,
6    and the sacred tomb of ancient Battus,
7    or as many as the number of stars that, when the night is silent,
8    see the sneaky things that mortals do, their acts of love
9    —that is how kissing you that many kisses
10    is to be enough and more than enough for that insane man, for Catullus.
11    And these things could not be counted from beginning to end by men who are concerned
12    about such things,
13    no, they would not be able to count them, or to put a hex on them with an evil tongue.

Some comments on Poems 5 and 7 of Catullus

§68. I introduce my comments by returning to my question at §64 in Part Three: so, was Philetas of Cos or
some other such Greek poet a model for appropriations of Sappho by Catullus in his Poems 5 and 7, the so-called “kissing poems”? My answer is divided into three parts, which I organize in the form of three specific comments:

§68.1. In the case of Philetas, we have as of now so little that survives of this poet’s poetry that there is no
way for me to be certain that his poetics of appropriating Sappho, so visible in the text of
Daphnis and Chloe, also influenced Catullus. It is just a guess for me to say that the poetics of Philetas may well have
influenced the poetics of Catullus.

§68.2. But there is no guessing needed about another model for Catullus: I have in mind here Callimachus
of Cyrene, whose lifetime extends from the late fourth to the mid third century BCE. It is well known to
Classicsists, on the basis of a wide variety of allusions made by Catullus to the poetry of Callimachus, that
this particular Hellenistic poet, who was a near-contemporary of Philetas, had a profound influence on the
Roman poet. And while I cannot as of now find a case where we could see Callimachus himself in the act of
appropriating Sappho directly, I think I have found at least one case where Catullus alludes to both
Callimachus and Sappho simultaneously, and such an allusion suggests to me the possibility that Catullus is
alluding there, indirectly, to an appropriation of Sappho by Callimachus. The case I have in mind is at the
first six lines of Catullus 7, where the limitless number of kisses that the speaking persona of Catullus says
he desires from his Lesbia is compared to the grains of sand in the Libyan desert, comparably limitless in
number. The vast sandy desert is then explicitly described in those lines as the hinterland of the Greek city
of Cyrene, which as I noted a moment ago was the birthplace of Callimachus.

§68.3. It may be relevant, with regard to the poetic trope of counting kisses, that Fragment 554 of
Callimachus refers to a counting of kisses up to seven—in what seems to be a mock-sacral context. But
there is a more immediately relevant detail to compare at this point. Closer to home, there is a near-contemporary of the Roman poet, the Greek poet Philodemus of Gadara, dated to the mid first century BCE, who in one of his epigrams, Greek Anthology 9.570 (re-edited as Epigram 3 in the edition of Sider 1997?), engages at line 7 in the poetic trope of alluding to the bureaucratic language of accountants in calculating the length of time it would take for lovers to sleep together even after death—and this length of time is described playfully as an eternity. We see a parallel trope at work at line 11 in Poem 5 of Catullus, where the Roman poet’s wording likewise alludes to the bureaucratic language of accountants: here the playful challenge for bureaucrats is to calculate the number of kisses it will take for lovers to satisfy their incessant desire for lovemaking before death, given that death will become an eternal night for sleeping, as we see in the poet’s earlier wording at line 6 of Poem 5, nox est perpetua una dormienda ‘there is one single continuous night [for us] to sleep through’.

§68.4. But there is no guessing, so to speak, about another model for Catullus: I have in mind here Callimachus
of Cyrene, whose lifetime extends from the late fourth to the mid third century BCE. It is well known to
Classicsists, on the basis of a wide variety of allusions made by Catullus to the poetry of Callimachus, that
this particular Hellenistic poet, who was a near-contemporary of Philetas, had a profound influence on the
Roman poet. And while I cannot as of now find a case where we could see Callimachus himself in the act of
appropriating Sappho directly, I think I have found at least one case where Catullus alludes to both
Callimachus and Sappho simultaneously, and such an allusion suggests to me the possibility that Catullus is
alluding there, indirectly, to an appropriation of Sappho by Callimachus. The case I have in mind is at the
first six lines of Catullus 7, where the limitless number of kisses that the speaking persona of Catullus says
he desires from his Lesbia is compared to the grains of sand in the Libyan desert, comparably limitless in
number. The vast sandy desert is then explicitly described in those lines as the hinterland of the Greek city
of Cyrene, which as I noted a moment ago was the birthplace of Callimachus.

§68.5. Several letters of the Greek poet Philodemus of Gadara, dated to the mid first century BCE, who in one of his epigrams, Greek Anthology 9.570 (re-edited as Epigram 3 in the edition of Sider 1997?), engages at line 7 in the poetic trope of alluding to the bureaucratic language of accountants in calculating the length of time it would take for lovers to sleep together even after death—and this length of time is described playfully as an eternity. We see a parallel trope at work at line 11 in Poem 5 of Catullus, where the Roman poet’s wording likewise alludes to the bureaucratic language of accountants: here the playful challenge for bureaucrats is to calculate the number of kisses it will take for lovers to satisfy their incessant desire for lovemaking before death, given that death will become an eternal night for sleeping, as we see in the poet’s earlier wording at line 6 of Poem 5, nox est perpetua una dormienda ‘there is one single continuous night [for us] to sleep through’.

§68.6. But there is no guessing, so to speak, about another model for Catullus: I have in mind here Callimachus
of Cyrene, whose lifetime extends from the late fourth to the mid third century BCE. It is well known to
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this particular Hellenistic poet, who was a near-contemporary of Philetas, had a profound influence on the
Roman poet. And while I cannot as of now find a case where we could see Callimachus himself in the act of
appropriating Sappho directly, I think I have found at least one case where Catullus alludes to both
Callimachus and Sappho simultaneously, and such an allusion suggests to me the possibility that Catullus is
alluding there, indirectly, to an appropriation of Sappho by Callimachus. The case I have in mind is at the
first six lines of Catullus 7, where the limitless number of kisses that the speaking persona of Catullus says
he desires from his Lesbia is compared to the grains of sand in the Libyan desert, comparably limitless in
number. The vast sandy desert is then explicitly described in those lines as the hinterland of the Greek city
of Cyrene, which as I noted a moment ago was the birthplace of Callimachus.
§69. Having gone through three specific comments in my three-part answer to the question I posed at §68, I now offer, as a conclusion, this general comment: the Roman poet Catullus not only appropriates directly the Greek poetics of Sappho, but he also appropriates indirectly the poetics of intermediate Greek poets who were already appropriating the poetics of Sappho.

Transition: looking for examples where Catullus appropriates Sappho directly in his “Lesbia poems”

§70. In the “kissing poems” of Catullus, as I already argued in Part Three, the poetics of male appropriation can be traced back to a basic pattern of substitution. In my reconstruction of this pattern, the ‘I’ of Catullus as the first-person male speaker in these poems is substituted for the ‘I’ of a first-person female speaker in the songs of Sappho. In those songs, such a speaker would represent a love-sick woman who declares her desire to kiss incessantly a beloved girl. So, in the two “kissing poems” of Catullus, I think we see a direct appropriation from Sappho’s songs about kissing. But the problem is, and has been all along, that such Sapphic songs are barely attested in what little survives today from the ancient textual tradition of Sappho—except for the muted reference to kissing as a sign of loving in Song One of Sappho. An explicit kissing scene in the songs of Sappho would of course be our ideal example here of direct appropriation, but, in the absence of such an example, I will now have to look elsewhere. And I think that there is such an example. I have in mind Song 31 of Sappho, which we see being directly appropriated by Catullus in his Poem 51. I have already started analyzing this masterpiece of a poem at §§59–62 in Part Three, but now I propose to go deeper. I will start with the Latin text, followed by a working translation, and then I will continue with the Greek text of the primary model for this poem, Song 31 of Sappho, followed again by a working translation.

Poem 51 of Catullus and Song 31 of Sappho

§71.1. Poem 51 of Catullus:

1  ille mi par essedeo videtur,
2   ille, si fas est, superare divos,
3–4  qui sedens adversus identidem te | spectat et audit
5  dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis
6  eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,
7–8  Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi |...
9  lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
10  flamma demanat, sonitu suopte
11–12 tintinant aures, gemina teguntur | lumina nocte
13  otiun, Catulle, tibi molestum est:
14  otiun et reges prius et beatas | perdidit urbes.

§71.2. Song 31 of Sappho, [the first] sixteen lines:

1  χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίαc
2  ἐγλεσίμοπτοι καὶ ἐμ' ὄνη, ὅττις ἐνάντιος τοι | 3 ἐσφαίρει καὶ πλάσιον
4  ἅδο φωνῆ-|ας ὑποκοίτησεν ἰς καὶ γελαιοσι ζῆρεον, τὸ μ"μῦ ἑνός καὶ ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπάθαις, ῥγ ἡ ἦ τὶς σφαίρα ἰς μὲ φῶνα-|ας. οὐδό' ἐν ἔτι εἴκει, ἐν κάκῳ κάμ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔγγε λέπον | 5 ἐν δ' οὔτικα χρῶ πὸ ὑπαδέδρομεν, καὶ ὑποτάσσει δ' οὐδό' ἐν ὁρμήμ', ἐπιρόδο-15σαι δ' ὀκανα, | 6 καὶ δὲ μ' ἵδρος κακλέεται τρόμοις καὶ 14 παίσαν ἔραι, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποιαc |...
7  ἐμμεν' ὑποτάσσει μ' ὑπερκαὶ ὑποτάσσεις | 8 ὑμμίν' ἐμ' αὐτής.

1  He appears [phainetai] to me, that one, equal to the gods [isos theosisin], | 2 that man who, facing you | 3 is seated and, and up close, that sweet voice of yours | 4 he listens to, | 5 and how you laugh a laugh that brings desire. Why, it just | 6 makes my heart flutter within my breast. | 7 You see, the moment I look at you, right then, for me | 8 to make any sound at all won’t work anymore. | 9 My tongue has a breakdown and a delicate | 10—all of a sudden—fire rushes under my skin. | 11 With my eyes I see not a thing, and there is a roar | 12 my ears make. | 13 Sweat pours down me and a trembling | 14 seizes all of me; paler than grass | 15 am I, and a little short of death | 16 do I appear [phainomai] to myself. 

[...]
Some appropriations in Poem 51 of Catullus from Song 31 of Sappho

§72. To begin, I review here the analysis §§59–62 in Part Three. As we saw there, the Latin Poem 51 of Catullus appropriates the second-person 'you' of the Sapphic girl in the Greek Song 31 of Sappho, making this girl the love-object of the first-person 'I' of Catullus in the Latin poem. Meanwhile, as we also saw, the male persona of Catullus now replaces the first-person 'I' of the Sapphic woman in the Greek song. What remains a constant that is shared by the Latin poem with the Greek song is the second-person Sapphic girl, who is appropriated as Lesbia in the poem of Catullus.

§73. In Part Three, we have seen that this Lesbia in other poems of Catullus is visualized as the puella or 'girl' from Lesbos. But we will see later, in Part Five, that there are still other poems of Catullus where this Lesbia can also be seen as the mulier or 'woman' from Lesbos, and, as we will also see in Part Five, the relationship between the man and the mulier will be different from the relationship between the man and the puella. Such a differentiation between girl and woman in the poetics of Catullus will be different from a potential girl-woman merger that is ongoing in the poetics of Sappho, whose very name can apply, as I argued at §§50–52 of Part Two and at §§55–58 of Part Three, either to the girl-phase or to the woman-phase of female sexuality.

§74. For now, however, I concentrate not on the second-person girl, whom Poem 51 and Song 31 have in common, nor even on the first-person man of Poem 51 and the first-person woman of Song 31, but rather on the third-person man who is foregrounded in Poem 51 as well as in Song 31. Who is 'that man'?

Poem 50 of Catullus, correlated with his Poem 51

§75. In Song 31 of Sappho, as I have argued in Nagy 2013:§§37–48, the third-person character or persona who is 'that man' can be seen as a generic bridegroom on the occasion of a generic wedding, and his attention is dominated by the second-person girl who is about to become a woman by getting married off to him. In Poem 51, by contrast, 'that man' is a literary rival of Catullus. He is a fellow poet who, like Catullus, is trying to appropriate the girl from Lesbos as the primary love-object of his own poetry. Here I agree—at least in part—with the interpretation of Elizabeth Marie Young (2015:176; also p.120 and p. 222n19), who builds on an earlier interpretation of David Wray (2003:97–98): in her view, 'that man' in Poem 51 is Gaius Licinius Macer Calvus, a friend of Catullus. In another poem, Poem 50 of Catullus, our poet actually pictures Calvus by name as a dear friend with whom Catullus is playing, literally playing, on a sympotic occasion. The two friends are shown in the act of playfully composing poetry together while drinking together, playfully trading verses back and forth with each other. These two friends, who are also poetic rivals, share otium or 'luxuriance' with each other, in that they share the luxury of having free time, leisure, to 'play', ludere, at the game of composing luxuriant poetry together: the two of them are otiosi, 'luxuriant-in-leisure', and this description evokes the 'luxuriance' of otium, which we saw in play when we were reading that other poem of Catullus, Poem 51. Such a ludic program of playfully appropriation is signaled by the verb ludere 'play' at lines 2 and 5 of Catullus 50, while the programmatic luxuriance that is shared by the two friends who become rivals-in-poetry is signaled by the adjective otiosi at line 1, which I translate as 'luxuriant-in-leisure'. I now quote the whole poem, followed by a working translation.

Catullus Poem 50

1   hesterno, Licini, die otiosi
2   multum lusimus in meis tabellis,
3   ut convenerat esse delicatos:
4   scribens versiculos uterque nostrum
5   ludebat numero modo hoc modo illoc,
6   reddens mutua per iocum atque vinum.
7   atque illinc abii tuo lepore
8   incensus, Licini, facetiisque,
9   ut nec me miserum cibus iuvaret
10  nec somnus tegeret quiete ocellos,
11  sed toto indomitus furore lecto
12  versarer, cupiens videre lucem,
13  ut tecum loquerer simulque ut essem.
14  At defessa labore membra postquam
15  semimortua lectulo iacebant,
16  hoc, iucunde, tibi poema feci,
17  ex quo perspiceres meum dolorem.
18  nunc audax cave sis, precesque nostras,
19  oramus, cave despuas, ocelle,
20  ne poenas Nemesis reposcat a te.
21  est vemens dea: laedere hanc caveto.

1   Yesterday, Licinius, while we were luxuriant-in-leisure [otiosi],
2   we played [ludere], a lot, on my writing-tablets,
3   as it had been agreed, for us to be luxuriant [delicati].
4   Each one of us, writing our dear little lines of poetry,
5   was playing [ludere] now with this meter, now with that one,
6   trading lines with each other in merriment [iocus] attended by wine.
7   And after I left from there, by your charm
8   all inflamed, Licinius, and by your displays of wit,
no food could please me any more
nor could sleep shut down my dear little eyes with peace and quiet,
but, losing control in my total frenzy, all over the bed
I was tossing and turning, longing to see the light of day,
so that I could talk with you and just be with you.
But once my tired limbs, after all that agonizing,
were finally lying still, half-dead, on my dear little bed,
I made it, O my delightful one, I made this poem for you,
from which you might figure out my pain 

But now don't be too daring, and, when it comes to our prayers at my end,
we pray to you, don't spit on them, dear little eye of mine that you are,
because, if you're not careful, Nemesis might demand penalties from you.

We see here, I think, a primal moment for a Homo ludens, or, better, for two Homines ludentes. They are at play, in the act of appropriating Sappho in friendly competition. In light of the fact that Calvus was a prominent public figure in his time (as we see from the testimonia collected by Plessis 1896), it has been observed (most eloquently, by Segal 2007) that the use of the word otiosi in Poem 50 of Catullus, with reference to the involvement of Calvus with our poet and with our poet’s poetics of otium, is playfully ironic, since the luxury or luxuriance of having free time would take Calvus away from ‘business’, which is negotium, the negation of otium. I also find it ironic that Calvus had a special way of referring to his own style in making poetry. As we learn from the reportage of Aulus Gellius, Attic Nights 9.12.10, Calvus in his poems developed an idiosyncratic use of the term laboriosus, ‘laborious’, which should be the opposite of ‘leisurely’ but which is instead an index of this rival poet’s own way of embracing the poetics of otium as Catullus calls it in his Poem 51. And such a poetics of otium, as I have argued in a separate project (Nagy 1990a §§18–19), derives ultimately from the poetics of (h)abrosune ‘luxuriance’ in the songs of Sappho. Back in Part Two §§43–45, I already analyzed the poetic implications of that Greek word in Sappho Π²25–26 = Fragment 58.25–26.

The closure for my Part Four here is not really a closure. Rather, I simply stop for the moment by playfully asking an open-ended question that is relevant to the poetic appropriation of Sappho by Catullus. The question is this: was Calvus a rival of Catullus in the poetics of male appropriation? Or, to ask the question another way: was Calvus too trying to appropriate the girl from Lesbos as his very own Lesbia?

Part Five

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.

Prologue: Catullus turns against Lesbia

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 here 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 iambi 'iambs' 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. voxit, si sibi restitus essem
5. desissemque truces vibrare iambos,
6. electissima pessimi poetae
7. scripta tardipedi deo daturam
8. et hoc pessima se puella vidit
9. infelicibus ustulanda lignis.
10. iocose lepide vovere divis.
...
16. acceptum fac 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 iambs [iambi] 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 deities 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 iamb ‘lambs’ 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 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’, electissimia 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’, loco ludendo. And then, he says, we read at lines 9–11 that she ‘hurls it: in 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 poeta. Now, at line 8, the poet refers to Lesbia as ‘the worst of girls’—the pessimam 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 inlepudium 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 anales ‘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 Nagy2015.10.01. I will return to this topic in another project, 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 ‘lambs’ at line 5 of this poem. This word iamb, or iamboi in Greek, is conventionally used with reference to a poetics of defamation. As I will now argue, the use of this word iamb 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 (Ζωνπᾶ), in which the archaic Greek poets Archilochus and Hipponax were represented as erastai ‘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 iambics or ‘iamb’.

§91. Just as Archilochus and Hipponax, masters of lamb, 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 was Sappho (Σαπφώ)—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 rētores ‘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 illē, ‘that one’, at line 1 of Poem 51, who cannot stop looking at Lesbia and listening to her, lines 3–4, as she ‘laughs sweetly’, line 5, in a most 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 ἄδυ φωνεῖ|ϲαc ‘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 symposia. 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.
Part Six

rewritten from 2019.02.22

§0. The numbering of my paragraphs here in Part Six continues from §95 of Part Five. In Part Six, I concentrate once again on the poetry of Catullus, which has been my main preoccupation in the course of this overall project ever since §53 in Part Three. This time, over forty paragraphs later, I hope to tie up some of the many loose ends that I have made for myself in pursuing the questions I face in studying the reception of Sappho by Catullus.

Clodia Metelli, the first or second daughter of the patrician Appius Claudius Pulcher and Caecilia Metella Balearica. Engraving from Promptuarium Iconum Insigniorum, published by Guillaume Rouillé (Lyon, 1553). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§96. I now ask—following my best guess—the most immediate question that could be asked by those who are already familiar with the poetry of Catullus: Is the Lesbia of Catullus a cover, you could say, for a real person, namely, Clodia Metelli?

§97. To begin my answer to this question, I start with what I personally think is a certainty. Although I have consistently argued so far that the Lesbia of Catullus was modeled on Sappho as a poetic persona that was shaped by the poetics we see at work in the surviving songs of Sappho, I am certain that Lesbia was at the same time modeled also on a "real-life" Roman woman—just as Catullus himself was a "real-life" Roman man, not only a poetic persona. That real woman's real name was Clodia, isometric with the poetic name Lesbia. Known short-hand as Clodia Metelli, she was the wife of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer, and she was one of the three sisters of Publius Clodius Pulcher, who was Tribune of the People in 58 BCE. For me a most helpful guide has been a relevant book by Marilyn B. Skinner, Clodia Metelli: The Tribune's Sister (2011). As Skinner notes in Chapter 7 of her book, there exists an allusion in Poem 79 of Catullus to (1) the Tribune Clodius and to (2) his sister Clodia. The wording at lines 1–2 in this poem refers to (1) a man named 'Lesbius' who is ostentatiously described as pulcher 'pretty', matching the real name of Publius Clodius Pulcher and (2) Lesbia, who is said here to prefer as her lover the pretty boy Lesbius, not Catullus.

§98. The defaming innuendo about brother-sister incest here is matched by a vitriolic verbal assault aimed personally at the real Clodia Metelli by Cicero himself in the text of his speech Defense of Caelius, delivered in the year 56 BCE in defense of a colorful personality by the name of Marcus Caelius Rufus. Cicero defames Clodia from the very start of his speech, referring to her as a meretrix 'prostitute' already in section 1 of the speech. Especially vitriolic are sections 30–38 of his text. At a later point, I will quote and translate a most revealing passage in section 36, where Cicero indulges himself in imagining an incestuous scene involving Clodia and her brother Clodius Pulcher, former Tribune of the People.

§99. For me, a reference in Poem 79 of Catullus to Clodia Metelli paired with her brother the Tribune in the guise of Lesbia paired with her pretty boy Lesbius would seem just as "real" as the undisguised reference made by Catullus elsewhere, in his Poem 49, to Marcus Tullius Cicero himself. (For some preliminary comments about Catullus 49, I refer to Wray 2001:45n29, with bibliography).
§100. At line 2 of Catullus 49, the poet calls out to Cicero in the vocative case, Marce Tulli, having playfully addressed him already at line 1 as a most eloquent nepos ‘descendant’ of Romulus. Then Catullus goes on to say that he gives too many thanks, and that such thanks come from Catullus as the very worst of all poets, being the worst in the same way that Cicero is the very best of all patrons. And why does Cicero deserve thanks? I think it is because Cicero is a potential patron for Catullus as poet. But, in terms of this poet’s own poetics, Catullus is surely thinking of himself not as the worst of poets but rather as the very best of poets—just as Cicero, inversely, would turn out to be the very worst of patrons for a poet like our Catullus. That is what I think is implied about Cicero by the playful wording of Catullus.

§101. What I have just said about Catullus 49, I should admit right away, is hardly new: many before me have said similar things. Of lasting value, I think, is the relevant interpretation by Daniel Selden (1992:464–466), who shows that this poem can be read as an exercise in disguised sarcasm. Where I differ somewhat with others, however, is that I see a pointed contrast between what Catullus says to Cicero in his Poem 49 and what he says to Calvus in his Poem 50, which is the very next poem we read in the surviving collection of the poet’s poems. I have quoted and analyzed that poem at §§75–79 in Part Four.

§102. My point is, Gaius Licinius Macer Calvus the orator must have been a patron of sorts for Catullus as poet, but Marcus Tullius Cicero the orator missed his chance to become a comparable sort of patron. To put it another way, Cicero’s fame in public life could have become a source of reciprocal fame for Catullus—but only if Cicero had become the sort of patron that Calvus became for the poet in Poem 50 of Catullus. As orators, Calvus as well as Cicero were prominent figures in the public world of Rome. In such a world of high-stakes negotium, Calvus would have been considered a rival of Cicero. But here is the difference: by contrast with Cicero, Calvus would be a far better patron for Catullus. And that is at least partly because Calvus would be more than a patron: as we read in Poem 50, he seems to have become a congenial friend to Catullus. Even more than that, Calvus was for Catullus a friendly rival as a poet—so much so that the love-object of Calvus in his own poetry could have been the same Lesbia who so preoccupies Catullus in Poem 51, as I also argued at §§75–79 in Part Four.

§103. By contrast with Calvus, then, Cicero does not quite seem to measure up, somehow. And I could go a bit further. This self-made nepos ‘descendant’ of Romulus, as Cicero is described playfully at line 1 in Poem 49 of Catullus, may not have measured up all that well as a match for Lesbia either—let me call her Lesbia, for the moment, not Clodia. Cicero may not have been all that worthy of Lesbia even at her worst, as when we see her pictured as some common prostitute who is caught in the act of servicing, in public places, the nepotes ‘descendants’ of Remus, as they are described at line 5 in Poem 58 of Catullus.

§104. For Cicero as a public figure, of course, the challenges of measuring up have to be viewed in terms of a different role. If he is to measure up to Calvus, he must do so not as some rival lover of Lesbia but as a rival poet—rivaling not only Catullus but also Calvus as a rival of Catullus. To become a patron of Catullus, Cicero would have to measure up as a poet.

§105. It remains to ask, however, whether this formulation is borne out by the realities of literary patronage in the era of Cicero. After quite a bit of reading around in my attempts to grasp what experts know for sure about the historical complexities of patronage in this era, I come away from the whole experience with a sense of anxiety. That is because I feel out of my depth in dealing with all the bits and pieces of evidence to be gleaned from relevant ancient texts, especially from the writings of Cicero. And my anxieties are heightened when I read some of the fierce debates that can flare up among classicists who study such writings, as we see for example by comparing the arguments we find in the book Cicero, Catullus, and a Society of Patrons, by Sarah Culpepper Stroup (2010), and in the review of that book, by James Zetzel (2011). That said, however, I find some comfort in an overall impression that I take away from my readings: it all boils down to some fairly simple-minded protocols of reciprocity between poet and patron—the kinds of protocols I have studied in my work on early Greek poetry, as in Nagy 2017.09.08.

§106. I return here to my formulation about Cicero: he would have to measure up as a poet if he were to become a patron of Catullus the poet. Yes, he would have to measure up, but the poetry of Catullus finds him wanting, as we see from the disguised sarcasm that is built into Poem 49 of this poet. I like the way Sarah Stroup paraphrases what she thinks Catullus is really saying to Cicero in Poem 49: “Marcus, don’t quit your day job.” In other words, the non-job of having the otium or ‘leisure’ to compose poetry after your daytime work is finished does not at all suit you. You do not measure up to doing what Calvus was doing in Poem 50 of Catullus. Calvus was composing his own poetry in the company of Catullus while our poet was composing—who knows?—his Poem 51. No, dear Cicero, you should stick to your day job of public affairs, which is the negotium of orators.

§107. But Cicero still wants to be a rival of poets. He dearly wants to be poetic. Even in his public speeches, which are his day job, we could call it, he will channel poetics. My favorite example is in his Defense of Caelius, delivered in 56 BCE. Although Cicero addresses Clodia directly at some points in the text of this speech, there are other points where he shifts gears and addresses her indirectly by ventriloquizing two very different kinds of talking characters.

§107.1. The first of these two characters appears at sections 33–35 of the speech. He is staged as a stern and most censorious old man, imagined as a ghost from the hoary past. He is perhaps the most venerable of all of Clodia’s distinguished ancestors. He is Appius Claudius Caecus, who had once been Censor of Rome, in 312 BCE. This ghastly ancestor, channeled by Cicero the ventriloquist, is about to put into words his oh-so censorious disapproval of his degenerate descendant Clodia, who is at this very moment pictured in the amorous company of her middle-class lover Caelius. It is a good thing, Cicero remarks wryly at section 33, that this honorable ancestor, true to his cognomen Caecus, meaning ‘blind’, was truly blind.
It is a good thing because, this way, the censorious old man can mercifully be spared from actually having to cast an eye on the sexual escapades of Clodia.

§107.2. Next, at section 36 of the speech, we see the second of the two talking characters. He is none other than Clodia’s youngest brother, Clodius, the former Tribune of the People. In this case, Cicero starts the staging of this character by imagining how Clodius must have looked when he was still a young boy. There he is, just a kid afraid of the dark and trying to escape the terrors of the night. The next thing you know, this pusio ‘little guy’ sneaks into the bed of his older sister, where the two of them comfort each other by engaging in pillow talk and beyond. The boy complains to Big Sister how jealous he is of her latest boyfriend. He is not like us swells. Why can’t you keep it in the family? You must be crazy to go out with him.

§107.3. Here I quote the relevant text directly. I start at the point where Cicero tells Clodia that he is about to shift gears, replacing the talking character of the censorious old man with an altogether different kind of talking character—someone who will be much more compatible with Clodia.

from Cicero Defense of Caelius 36:

Sin autem urbanius me agere mavis, sic agam tecum; removebo illum senem durum ac paene agrestem; ex his igitur tuis sumam aliquem ac potissimum minimum fratrem, qui est in isto genere urbanissimus; qui te amat plurimum, qui propter nescio quam, credo, timiditatem et nocturnos quosdam inanes metus tecum semper pusio cum maiore sorore cubitavit. Eum putato tecum loqui: “quid tumultuaris, soror? quid insanis? ...”

But if you [= Clodia] prefer that I [= Cicero] handle things in a more city-smart [urbanus] way, here is how I will deal with you. I will take out that old man—so rough around the edges and almost rustic—and then, I will pick instead someone belonging to the group we have right here. This someone, most preferably, is your youngest brother, who, when it comes to that kind of thing, is the most city-smart [urbanus] of them all. Why, he loves you more than anyone else. And, for whatever reason—I guess because of some kind of fearfulness, because of some empty terrors of the night—the little guy [pusio] would get into bed with you, his older sister. One can imagine him speaking to you this way: “Why are you so upset, sister? Why are you acting so crazy?...”

§107.4. This furtively intimate moment shared by Clodia and Clodius, as pruriently imagined by Cicero, reminds me of the countless secret moments of lovemaking evoked in the two “kissing poems” of Catullus, Poems 5 and 7. At lines 1–3 of Poem 5, the furtively kissing couple try to ignore the stern disapproval of censorious old men. But there the disapproval is not blind, and that is why the number of kisses has to be hidden, to avoid the evil eye of envy, as expressed by the verb in-viderat at line 12 of Poem 5. This evil eye is also at work in the verb fascinare ‘cast a spell’ at line 12 of Poem 7. This verb here, as we read on at line 12, drives the malicious tongues of those who envious the pleasures of secret kisses that are beyond counting. But the countlessness of such kisses can be matched only by the countlessness of the stars that ‘see’;

vident, line 8, all the furtive loves of mortals.

§108. I think that Cicero, in his comic staging of Clodia and Clodius as a naughty pair of infantilized lovers, is showing off here his knowledge of poetics—the poetics of Sappho herself. I further think that he seems to have in mind those songs of Sappho where the speaker stages herself as speaking with empathy to one or another of her own brothers, occasionally expressing to them her empathy with their various and sundry sexual needs. To introduce what I have to say about such poetics, I refer to my essay Nagy 2015.10.01, starting at §4, where I also highlight my explanation of the name Sappho as actually meaning ‘sister’.

§109. If I am right in seeing here an allusion made by Cicero himself to the poetics of Sappho, then it might also be right for me to see Lesbia as a poetic character who fits the real Clodia Metelli not only in the poetry of Catullus but even in the would-be poetic thinking of Cicero. Thinking poetic thoughts, our orator has seized an opportunity to show off his familiarity with the songs of Sappho herself.

§110. In the Latin texts that have survived from the ancient world, the earliest overt reference to Clodia Metelli as the real woman who appeared in the guise of Lesbia in the poems of Catullus is found in section 10 of the so-called Apologia of Apuleius, who flourished in the second century CE. What seems to go mostly unnoted about this passage is that, at an earlier point, in section 9 of the Apologia, Apuleius is saying that Sappho, to whom he refers simply as ‘the woman from Lesbos’, Lesbia, should be considered an acceptable model for erotic poetry, just as his own poetry addressed to pretty boys should be considered such a model. From the context of the references made by Apuleius here, it is clear that the eroticism of the poetry that he defends is not to be considered obscene. But here is a relevant question: why, then, is there so much obscenity attached to Lesbia in some poems of Catullus? Is it because of the obscenity that sticks like glue to the historical referent, Clodia? Or is it because of something that is inherent in poetics involving women where such poetics are appropriated by men? I will address such questions in Part Seven.
Part Seven

rewritten from 2019.03.01

§0. The numbering of my paragraphs in Part Seven continues from §110 of Part Six. In Part Seven here, I attempt to round out my findings, as of now, about the reception of Sappho’s songs in the ancient world. Most if not all of these findings, I must emphasize, are not as yet certain, but they can point the way, I hope, to eventual certainties.

Some positive aspects of my findings so far

§111. In my search for traces of ancient imitations and appropriations based on Sappho’s songs, I have found examples leading to some new angles for thinking about her songs—even about those songs of hers that are not directly attested. At least we can appreciate such unattested songs indirectly as we marvel at the beauty of the imitations and appropriations. That is all I mean when I speak of the positive aspects of my findings so far.

§112. Most of my new angles have come from reconstructions of Sapphic form and content as embedded in two textual sources, which I analyzed going backward in time. The first of these two was the erotic novel
Daphnis and Chloe, dating from the second century CE, and the second was the poetry of Catullus, dating from the middle of the first century BCE.

§113. In the case of both these sources, one composed in prose and the other in poetry, I noted a recurrent pattern that I highlighted here once again: male authors of such prose and poetry tended to heterosexualize various homoerotic themes that they found in Sappho's songs. (In her analysis of Catullus 70, a poem that we have not considered here, the term "heterosexualize" is used in a comparable way by Elizabeth Marie Young 2015:194–195; in this case, the Greek model is Callimachus Epigram 25 = Greek Anthology 5.6, which is about male rather than female homoeroticism.)

§114. That said, however, I should not fail to emphasize that there are also heteroerotic themes to be found in Sappho's songs. A case in point is the youthful male love-object Phaon, lover of Aphrodite and projected lover of Sappho, as mentioned, in passing, at §30.4 of my Part One with reference to Nagy 1990a:285 [10§18] n51. (My own reconstruction of Sappho's self-involvement in the myth about Phaon, who is imagined as her lover, goes back to an essay I first published over 45 years ago, Nagy 1973, rewritten in Nagy 1990b.) The reception of such a sexualized pairing of Phaon and Sappho in the songs of Sappho comes to life in Heroides 15, a poem canonically attributed to Ovid (though his authorship has often been disputed). For a most perceptive analysis of this poem as a morphologically accurate adaptation of erotic visualizations derived ultimately from Sappho, I recommend the essay of Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi 2018. Such visualizations in the ancient verbal arts, I should add, obviously became an inspiration for the kinds of romanticized images that I show here in Part Seven.

Some negative aspects of my findings so far

§115. Wherever the male appropriations of Sappho's poetries seem beautiful and pleasurable to us as modern readers, the sexuality that often pervades such appropriations can seem comparably beautiful and pleasurable, yes, as for example in Catullus 5 and 7, the so-called "kissing poems." But what about the ugly moments of sexuality that we also find in the poetry of Catullus? My answer to this question will point to some negative aspects of my findings so far.

§116. When I say "ugly," I am thinking here especially of those moments when the speaker of a given poem of Catullus, self-dramatized as the poet himself, deliberately defames Lesbia in her role as a would-be stand-in for Sappho. The most striking examples of such defamation are those poems of Catullus, already noted, where he represents Lesbia as a self-degrading prostitute. But my findings concerning such defamation are negative not because I think that such sexual defamation is ugly. I find ugliness here, yes, but my negative finding is not about the ugliness itself. Rather, my concern here has to do with the simple fact that the evidence we have concerning the actual poetics of sexual defamation in the ancient world is so meagerly attested.

§117. There is a danger, then, that the surviving evidence, meager as it is, will be ignored. And the ignoring of this evidence can then lead classicists to infer—too narrowly in some ways, I think—that the ugliness of sexually defaming a woman was simply a fact of life that has to be accepted by us moderns as a pervasive social pathology experienced in ancient times by men in their relationships with women. In terms of such an inference, Catullus himself could be suspected of suffering from such a social pathology—either in any real-life relationship with the so-called Lesbia in her role as a would-be stand-in for a vacillating girlfriend named Clodia Metelli or, more distantly, in his poetic relationship with Sappho as a model of female sexuality that he, the poet himself, could view negatively as well as positively. Either way, or both ways, the occasionally vitriolic words of Catullus about women would merely be symptomatic of his being a man and not a woman. Such an inference, however, as I already said, is I think too narrow in some ways.

Rethinking the poetics of defamation

§118. I favor instead a more general inference, which is, that the negative as well as the positive aspects of poems by Catullus about Lesbia, both the ugly and the beautiful aspects, stem ultimately from—what to call it?—a poetics of humanity, not only of manhood. Vitriolic song or poetry can be performed by women, not only by men. I cite as an elegant illustration the book of John Petropoulos 1994 on the poetics of sexual defamation as performed by women in traditional Greek song culture both past and present.

§119. Here I interrupt for a moment the flow of my argument, since I need to address an incidental question about the ugliness we find in the very act of sexual defamation: is this ugliness really ugly only to us as representatives of our own modernity? I would answer such a question by asserting that modernity is not really all that useful a criterion for determining what seems either ugly or beautiful. I cannot presume that modernity will help me understand humanistic universals, since I consider our own sense of what is modern—or ancient, for that matter—to be a matter of historical contingencies.
§120. That said, I will now argue that the relative meagerness of evidence we have for the poetics of defaming a woman like Sappho should not prevent us from attempting at least a general explanation of such poetics. Even on the basis of what little evidence we have, I can say for sure that the poetics of defaming either Sappho or any stand-in for Sappho derives from a broader kind of poetics, one that does not make neat distinctions between the defaming of women by men on one side and, on the other side, the defaming of men by men—or even the defaming of women by other women. That poetic tradition is comedy—especially as it flourished during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE in Athens. A most perceptive analysis of the evidence for the reception of Sappho in comedy is the commentary by Peponi 2002:28–31 and 2018:175n23, with further bibliography, including Yatromanolakis 2007:293–312. At §§90–92 of Part Five, I have further comments on the reception of Sappho in comedy.

§121. Also, at §90, I comment in general on earlier poetic traditions of defamation as exemplified by what are called in Greek/Latin the iamboi/iambi of Archilochus, whose poetic persona is actually paired in later poetic traditions of comedy with the poetic persona of Sappho.

§122. The poetic persona of Archilochus is relevant in another way as well. Just as Sappho can be defamed in the poetry of comedy, so also the women known as the Lykambides 'daughters of Lykambes' are defamed in the earlier poetry of Archilochus. Elsewhere in Classical Inquiries, I have made extensive comments on this earlier kind of poetic defamation in ancient Greek song culture:

—2018.06.06. "Picturing Archilochus as a cult hero."
—2018.06.30. "Sacred Space as a frame for lyric occasions: The case of the Mnesiepes Inscription and other possible cases."
—2018.07.06. "Erotic desecration and sacralization in Greek myth and ritual."

Prospects for a synthesis of findings about the ancient reception of Sappho

§123. The immediately preceding paragraph here in Part Seven, §122, has taken me further back in time, well beyond the chronological frame of the seven parts just concluded. In Parts One through Seven, I have concentrated on relatively later periods in the course of my studying the reception of Sappho, starting only with the Hellenistic era and moving forward in time from there. Before I attempt a synthesis of my findings so far, I propose to stop for now and ask for comments from colleagues who study the reception of Sappho in the Hellenistic era and further ahead in time. Of special interest to me will be their views concerning imitations and appropriations of Sappho in the novel Daphnis and Chloe and in the poetry of Catullus. I hope to invite comments specific to any of the paragraphs numbered §§1–122 as contained in Parts One through Seven, which I hope to turn into an electronic monograph. Concurrently, I also hope to invite comments on the paragraphs I have written in Nagy 2018.12.13 and 2019.02.14, which I will consolidate as an Epilogue for the projected monograph.
Epilogue: some further rewritings

rewritten from 2018.12.13

§0. This epilogue for my monograph begins with a rewriting of Nagy 2018.12.13, an essay that focused on the reception of Sappho in Poem 2 of Catullus. I wrote that original essay before I went on to write seven more essays, which are Parts One through Seven in my monograph here, about the overall reception of Sappho in the ancient world, starting with the Hellenistic period. In rewriting my original essay here about the reception of Sappho in Poem 2 of Catullus, I will not attempt to restate the various relevant points I have made along the way in the course of writing my subsequent seven essays. Also, I will be sparing with secondary bibliography. In the original version of my essay as rewritten here, I had already noted the vast buildup of such bibliography documenting countless interpretations of “Catullus Two”—as classicists normally call this poem. I continue to struggle under the weight, looking for ways to break free by simply expressing the delight I experience whenever I re-read Catullus 2.

E§0. The poem: Catullus Two (2 and 2b), with working translation by GN

1. passer, deliciae meae puellae,
2. quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere,
3. cui primum digitum dare appetenti,
4. et acris solet incitare morsus
5. cum desiderio meo nitenti,
E§1. Introduction: what does Poem 2 of Catullus have to do with Sappho?

E§1.1. Invoked at line 1 of Catullus 2—and then re-invoked at line 9 by way of ring composition—is a passer or 'sparrow', beloved pet of a puella 'girl'. And this invocation of the sparrow by Catullus is an evocation of Sappho. As we see in Song 1 of Sappho, line 10, the chariot of Aphrodite is harnessed to strouthoi 'sparrows'. We see these randy little birds bringing the goddess of erotic desire to Sappho, whose words at line 1 of Song 1 had invoked Aphrodite, asking the divinity to make her presence felt. I offer a working translation of Sappho's Song 1 at text number 5 in Nagy 2015.10.22.

E§1.2. The sparrow in Catullus Two belongs to a girl whose name we know from the poet's related poems. She is Lesbia. The name of the girl, like her playful relationship with a sparrow, evokes Sappho, that woman from Lesbos. Or, for the moment, let us think of Sappho as the girl from Lesbos, to match the puella of Catullus.

E§1.3. A most telling context for this girl named Lesbia is Poem 51 of Catullus, which matches closely Song 31 of Sappho in both form and content—so much so that his Poem 51 has at times been viewed as a "translation" of her Song 31. For a working translation of Sappho's Song 31, I refer to text number 4 in Nagy 2015.10.22.

E§1.4. To say that Poem 51 of Catullus is a "translation" of Song 31 of Sappho would be misleading, however. That is because we can see in the poem of Catullus a radical rearrangement of the roles that had played out in the corresponding song of Sappho. Here is what I mean. When the 'I' in Poem 51 of Catullus invokes at line 7 the girl in that song as Lesbia, what happens is that the subjectivity of Catullus in his Poem 51 becomes interchangeable with the subjectivity of Sappho in her Song 31. And this interchangeability leads to a change in roles: by contrast with the subjective female 'I' of Song 31, who is attracted to a female 'you' as a love-object in that song, the subjective male 'I' of Poem 51 is attracted not to that same female 'you' of Song 31 but rather to the subjective female 'I' who is Sappho herself. The girl to whom Catullus is attracted in Poem 51 is not the girl to whom Sappho is attracted in Song 31. Rather, the girl has now become Sappho herself. That girl is Lesbia, for now. But Catullus is ultimately in love not with Sappho but with the songs of Sappho. This is how he can supposedly feel the same feelings that Sappho feels. This is how he can love things that a girl loves—while loving the girl as well.

E§1.5. In terms of the formulation I have just presented in my brief overview of Catullus 51, the life of Lesbia—as the girl from Lesbos—derives primarily from the songs of Sappho and of her imitators, and only secondarily from love affairs experienced in the "real" world of the poet himself. Whatever happens in "real life" between the poet and his would-be girl-friend is subordinated to whatever happens in the poetic life of the girl-Sappho as channeled by her would-be boy-friend Catullus.

E§1.6. What we see happening in Catullus 51 happens also, I argue, in Catullus 2. Here too, I propose, we see a "translation" from an original song of Sappho. Here too, the subjective male 'I' of Catullus becomes interchangeable with the subjective female 'I' of Sappho herself. Here too, in Catullus 2 just as in Catullus 51, the poet is saying that he feels the same feelings that the girl feels. He can love the same things that the girl loves—while loving the girl as well. This is why, when he sees the girl playing with a RANDY little bird that gives her such delight—though this delight comes with some measure of pain—the 'I' of Catullus yearns to have the same playful relationship with that same source of delight. But such a relationship, in terms of my argument, could work only if there had already existed for Catullus a song by Sappho picturing Sappho herself in a tender moment shared with her own little pet of a sparrow. In Catullus 2, we see the girl extending a teasing finger toward her skittish little bird, coaxing him to hop on—but first the sparrow pecks at her, somewhat hurtfully. So, for my argument to work, I need to posit the pre-existence of a song by Sappho herself about her own pet sparrow. In this hypothetical song, lost to us, we would see her too in the act of coaxing her peckish little bird into perching on her delicate finger. Such a song, I argue, would still have existed in the era of the Roman poet Catullus, for whom the sparrow of Lesbia in Poem 2 would
have been modeled on a sparrow that belonged once upon a time to the poetic world of Sappho herself. And, I further argue, the dead sparrow that we see being mourned later, in Poem 3 of Catullus, belongs to that same poetic world of Sappho's own songs. There too, I see the possibility of a "translation" from an original song of Sappho.

E§2. A small comment on an expression of delight in what is beautiful

E§2.1. Many who have written about Catullus 2 think that the last three lines, 11–13, do not belong to the poem. That is the idea behind the nomenclature "Catullus 2b" for these three lines. But I agree with those like Stephen Harrison (2003) who argue for the unity of all 13 lines—though my interpretation is different.

E§2.2. The linchpin, I think, for the unity of Poem 2 is the expression gratum est at line 11, which I translate this way: 'it is a-thing-of-beauty-and-pleasure'. I propose that the precedent for such an expression is the Greek adjective kharíeis/kharíen, as used for example at line 3 in Song 112 of Sappho. The song there is addressing the bridegroom at a wedding: σοὶ χάριεν μὲν ἔδος. I interpret the wording this way: 'the way you look is a-thing-of-beauty-and-pleasure [kharíen]'. Comparable is the wording in Iliad 3.169, where Priam is praising the looks of Agamemnon as seen from afar: καλὸν δ' οὖν ἑγὼν οὐ ποι.didon ὀφθαλμοῖσιν 'something so beautiful I have never yet seen with my eyes'. Such a substantivized usage of the adjective is also evident at line 3 in song 16 of Sappho, where κάλλιστον refers to 'the most beautiful thing in the world'—which is neither the sight of massed charioteers driving their chariots or of infantry in battle array, line 1, nor the sight of proud ships sailing over the seas, line 2, but, rather, it is that one single thing, κῆν(o), that you happen to love passionately, line 4. I offer a working translation of Sappho's Song 16 at text number 6 in Nagy 2015.10.22. It is that kind of love, I think, that we see in play at line 11 of Catullus 2. Once again, the poet senses the same kind of beauty and pleasure that was sensed by Sappho, that girl from Lesbos.
E§3. A small comment on an iconic effect

E§3.1. If I am right that Catullus Two is based on a song of Sappho, now lost, then we should expect to see in this poem of Catullus other features that are typical of Sappho’s poetics. One such feature, as I will argue here, is what I call iconicity, that is, the creation of an iconic effect. The terminology stems ultimately from the linguist Roman Jakobson (1960).

E§3.2. The first place where I said something in print about the subject of iconicity was at p. 45 in Nagy 1974, Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter, with reference to the expression ἀλλὰ κὰμ μὲν γλῶσσα ἐαγε ‘but my tongue has broken down’ at line 9 of Song 31 of Sappho. There is an iconic effect, I argued, in the hiatus between γλῶσσα (γλῶσσα) ‘tongue’ and ἐαγε (ἔαγε) ‘has broken down’. Again I refer to my working translation of Sappho’s Song 31 at text number 4 in Nagy 2015.10.22. For further analysis of the iconic effect here, I refer to my comments at p. 58 notes 67 and 68 in Nagy 1996 and at pp. 71–72 in Nagy 2009. For now, however, I offer simply a short epitome from the second of these comments: The term hiatus, in the original Latin, conveys the idea of gagging. In the original Greek at line 9 of Sappho’s Song 31, the wording γλῶσσα ἐαγε (γλῶσσα ἐαγε) ‘(my) tongue has broken down’ contains a hiatus: the sequencing of the short final vowel -a of γλῶσσα ‘tongue’ followed by the short initial vowel e- of ἐαγε ‘has broken down’ produces a negative acoustic effect. Technically, this effect is a hiatus, that is, a gagging. The sequencing has produced a non-sequencing. The negative acoustic effect of gagging has produced an interruption in the flow of language, in the flow of the music of the language. Such an interruption, such a hiatus, is ordinarily avoided in traditional Greek songmaking and poetry. But this is no ordinary hiatus here. That is because the breaking of regularity by way of interrupting the flow of the music is an intended effect. The sensation of a break is actually intended in the music of the language. The music has a breakdown, and the language expresses that breakdown with a word that actually means ‘break’ or ‘break down’. In the song of Sappho, then, what you see in your imagination when you hear the word that means ‘break down’ is what you hear as the music actually breaks down. The effect is onomatopoetic. Or, to say it again by way of the term used by Roman Jakobson (1960), an iconic effect is being created here by the language. And such an effect is not only linguistic. It is also musical.

E§3.3. I now propose that there exists a comparable example of iconicity in Catullus 2. It happens near the beginning of the poem, where the pet sparrow is pictured in the act of pecking at the finger of the girl. At line 3, we read primum digitum dare appetenti, which I translated above as ‘to offer the tip of her finger [to you] as you open wide for it’. My translation ‘open wide’ with reference to the pecking beak of the bird is an attempt to convey the iconic effect that we see being created here, I think. The prospect of an open beak that is ready to close down and bite the tip of the girl’s finger is conveyed by the word-initial vowel a of appetenti. The vowel a is the most open of all vowels, and here it is followed by a bilabial consonant p, which requires the closure of the upper and lower lips. As linguists have shown, such a combination of open vowel followed by a bilabial consonant is often used in languages, whether they are related or unrelated to each other, as an onomatopoetic representation of an open orifice that will close down and thus bite on or ingest or even swallow something edible. Examples include Danish haps, Dutch hap, German hamm or mampf, Hungarian hamm, Romanian hap, Latvian am, Estonian amps, Turkish ham, Thai ngap or ngam, and so on. Another parallel is yum in English, once we consider the actual pronunciation of the vowel in
that expression. In the combination primum digittum dare appetenti, it is the final vowel –e of dare that gets swallowed by the initial vowel a- of appetenti in a process known to grammarians as elision, which is of course a mechanism that cancels hiatus. So, I propose that the Latin “appetite verb” appetere, which can mean ‘seek to ingest’, is being used here iconically—but also playfully, since the beak of a little bird will of course not swallow but will merely peck at the teasing fingertip of the girl from Lesbos.

(The following two paragraphs are additions, dating from 2019.03.03.)

E§3.4. I see a comparable iconic effect at line 6 in Poem 5 of Catullus, where we read:

nox est perpetua una dormienda

‘there is one single continuous night for us to sleep through’.

The eliding of the final –a of perpetua ‘continuous’ into the initial u- of una ‘one single’ is a re-enactment of the meaning that is being expressed here: that one single eternal night is perpetuuna, where the sequence –uu– re-enacts the continuity of the sound –u–, bridging any interruption between the two words perpetua and una.

E§3.5. Another example of iconicity in the poetry of Catullus can be found in his Poem 51. Here the poet is imitating the iconic effect of hiatus at line 5 in Song 31 of Sappho (both the Latin and the Greek texts, with translations, can be viewed together at §71.1 and §71.2 in Nagy 2019.01.31). In Song 31 of Sappho, as we have already seen, a breakdown of the tongue is signaled by way of a hiatus between the short final vowel of glōssa ‘tongue’ and the short initial vowel of ēāgē ‘has broken down’, creating a gap in the flow of the song. In Poem 51 of Catullus, by contrast, the poet has invented another kind of iconicity. In place of a hiatus between two short vowels, he creates a wider gap: where we expect to find line 8 in his poem, he omits this line altogether, so that the second stanza of his Poem 51 is deprived of any rhythmical closure. (The rhythm we are expecting at line 8, – uu –x, is known to metricians as the Adonic clausula.) Modern editors generally assume that the omission of line 8 in the transmitted text is a scribal corruption, but I think that the gap here was created by the poet himself. After the speaker says at lines 6–7 nam simul te, Lesbia, aspexi ‘for as soon as you, Lesbia, have come into my view…’, he follows up with this wording: nihil est super mi | … ‘there is nothing left for me to | …’. We were expecting ‘there is nothing left for me to | say…’, but there is nothing for him to say. He is speechless, numbed into silence. The next line, which is line 9, explains: lingua sed torpet ‘but my tongue is numb’.

E§4. Musings about a scene pictured by the Achilles Painter

rewritten from 2019.02.14

§0. On the cover of a posting of mine for Classical Inquiries, Nagy 2019.01.31, we see a facsimile of a picture painted on an Attic white-ground lekythos, dated somewhere around 440–430 BCE, by an artist who is known to art historians as the Achilles Painter. In that posting, which was all about Sappho, I never explained why I chose that picture for the cover. But now I offer an explanation, which will require a broader view: that is why the facsimile for the illustration here is in three parts: the part on our right is the same picture I showed in the posting I mentioned, but the part in the middle “zooms out,” showing the whole scene that is being pictured—not just a part of the scene, as before—and then the part on our left shows a picturing that I have not shown before.
Attic white-ground lekythos, 440–430 BCE, by the Achilles Painter. Image at left via Flickr, under a CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 license. Image at right via Wikimedia Commons.
E§4.1. The overall scene, as we can best view it by way of the “zoom-in,” shows a female figure, who is generally thought to be a Muse, in the act of playing a lyre. The rock on which the would-be Muse is seated bears the inscription ΗΛΙΚΟΝ, which would have been pronounced Helikon. So, the would-be Muse on our right is seated on top of Mount Helicon, a sacred place that is frequented by the Muses—as every Classicist knows. And it is generally assumed that the other female figure, on our left, is another Muse.

E§4.2. I suggest, however, that the would-be Muse on our right is Sappho. As we see from a variety of ancient sources, including two epigrams attributed to Plato, Greek Anthology 9.506.1–2 and 9.571.6–7, Sappho was conventionally described as ‘the tenth Muse‘; the same description applies in two epigrams by Antipater of Sidon (second half of the second century BCE), in Greek Anthology 7.14.1–2 and 9.66.1–2; another epigrammatist, Dioscorides (second half of the third century BCE), in Greek Anthology 7.407.1–4, not only equates Sappho with the Muses but also connects her with two sacred places frequented by the goddesses—both Mount Helicon and the heights of Pieria, a mountain range dominated by Mount Olympus. Yet another epigrammatist, Antipater of Thessalonike (late first century BCE and early first century CE), makes the same connection in Greek Anthology 9.26.1–4. Finally, Himerius (fourth century CE) in Oration 46.44–46 says that Sappho in her songs—as well as Pindar—pictured Mount Helicon as a sacred place frequented by the Muses together with Apollo.

E§4.3. If the female figure to our right is Sappho, then who would be the corresponding female figure to our left? I suggest that she is the goddess of love and sexuality, Aphrodite. For this suggestion to be successful, however, there are at least two preconditions that would have to be met. First, the small bird that we see positioned between the would-be Sappho to our right and the would-be Aphrodite to our left would have to be a sparrow. And, second, such a sparrow would have existed in one or more songs of Sappho, playing the role of her beloved pet.

E§4.4. I address the second precondition first. In another essay for Classical Inquiries, Nagy 2018.12.13, I have argued for the existence of such a pet sparrow in the songs of Sappho. In terms of my argument, this
little bird later became the model for the pet sparrow of Lesbia, who is a poetic stand-in for Sappho in Poems 2 and 3 of the Roman poet Catullus.

§4.5. And now I address the first precondition. The question is, can we say that the little bird that we find pictured between the would-be Sappho on our right and the would-be Aphrodite on our left is really a sparrow? I asked a number of colleagues and friends, and I did not get a unanimous answer. For now, however, I am persuaded by the expert opinion I was given by my friend Amy Edith Johnson, who writes, 2019.02.10:

"I believe that the bird is a female House Sparrow. They've been around for at least 15,000 years, and are native to the Mediterranean Basin. From what I have been reading, the House Sparrow was sacred to Aphrodite."

§4.6. As we look to the surviving songs of Sappho, we can see clearly in her Song 1 the connectedness of the goddess Aphrodite with sparrows. These sexually hyperactive little birds are pictured in that song as drawing the chariot of the goddess and transporting her from the heavens all the way down to earth, where they touch ground at the very spot where Sappho pictures herself as performing her song.

§4.7. Elsewhere in the songs of Sappho, in terms of my argument, there existed a singular sparrow who became her beloved pet. And such a pet is pictured, I suggest, in the scene painted by the Achilles Painter.

§4.8. Granted, the little bird we see in the painting may seem not little enough for a sparrow if we view it in proportion to the delicate little bare feet of the two ladies on either side. But I contend that if you painted the bird any smaller, it would be much too small to be viewed effectively within the visual composition of the overall scene.

Bibliography


Comments are closed.

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