



Sappho in the role of leader

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Sappho in the role of leader

February 17, 2017 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy](#)Comments off [Edit This](#)

2017.02.17 | By Gregory Nagy

On the island of Lesbos, the voice of Sappho once had the authority to speak for the whole community in her role as leader of a chorus that sings and dances in the act of worshipping the goddess Hera.

[\[Essay continues here...\]](#)

Detail of drawing by Glynnis Fawkes.

This online essay is a preview of a more formal version, to appear in a volume edited by Sarah Brown Ferrario and Norman B. Sandridge, *A Companion to Leadership in the Greco-Roman World* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell).

Introduction

§1. This essay elaborates on an idea: that Sappho can be viewed as a choral personality. In the course of developing a working definition of this term choral personality, I will argue that Sappho “plays the role of a prima donna” in choral performances by girls and/or women. In such a role, I will argue further, the persona of Sappho speaks not only for girls and women in choruses but also for the whole community, which in this case can be viewed as the entire population of her native island of Lesbos—a place to which I will refer hereafter in a defamiliarizing way by using its Modern Greek name, Lesbos. What is it, I ask, that authorizes Sappho to “play the role of a prima donna” in her songs? For an answer, I will focus on those of her songs that were once sung and danced by choruses of women or girls inside a sacred precinct of the goddess Hera, located at an ancient site in Lesbos that was once called Messon, meaning the ‘middle ground’ of the island. In this context, the answer to my own question becomes most compelling: as a prima donna of singing and dancing women or girls inside the sacred precinct of Hera, I will argue, Sappho can be viewed as a priestess of the goddess. In the context of the sanctuary or sacred precinct over which the goddess Hera presided at Messon, such a role of Sappho as priestess of the goddess would make her a leading figure in Lesbos, since Hera was the primary divinity of that island—a divinity so important that she ranked in some ways even higher than her divine consort, Zeus himself. As priestess of Hera, then, Sappho could be viewed as high priestess of the whole island. Such a role for Sappho, however, is hardly the only role she plays in her songs. As my essay proceeds, we will see that Sappho plays many different roles in her songs.

§2. If you read a random sampling of other publications about the relatively few surviving fragments of songs attributed to this woman named Sappho, who is conventionally thought to have lived in Lesbos around 600 BCE, you may encounter a world quite different from the one I am trying to describe here.

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§3. According to one school of thought, for example, it is enough to say that Sappho was a woman who wrote poems for her readers to read. In my essay here, by contrast, I argue that the surviving texts attributed to Sappho derive from compositions that were meant to be performed, instead of being read, and that these compositions had once come alive in the form of songs that were sung and danced. The singing and dancing, I further argue, would be in most cases performed originally by a *choros* ‘chorus’, which is by definition a group that sings and dances.

§4. According to another school of thought, Sappho could have composed her songs for performance, yes, but the essential thing about these songs would have been the act of composition itself, to be viewed primarily as a self-expression of Sappho, who would be speaking about her own life and times. We see here a scenario for imagining some kind of an autobiographical Sappho. By contrast, I argue that the composition of Sappho’s songs cannot be divorced from the performance of these songs. Such performance, I further argue, is to be viewed primarily as a self-expression of the community as represented by Sappho.

§5. For those who think that Sappho wrote her poems for her readers to read, the very first sentence of my first paragraph could invite incomprehension—and perhaps even a reluctance to follow my argument any further. For them, when I speak of Sappho as a choral personality, my argumentation could stop dead in its tracks right then and there, before it even got off the ground.

§6. As for those who think that the compositions of Sappho need to be viewed as a self-expression of Sappho, they could stay around long enough to see my argument take off but then lose interest soon thereafter. Once again, the idea of Sappho as a choral personality could invite incomprehension. Why? Because it would be easy to let such an idea recede and give way to a basic—and I think inadequate—assumption: that Sappho, in saying whatever she says, is engaged in an act of self-expression about her own life and times. Once again, we see here a scenario for imagining some kind of an autobiographical Sappho.

§7. The question is: who is the self in the self-expressions of Sappho? Although the answer, I think, has to do primarily with the idea of a choral personality as I indicated already in the first paragraph, I will postpone for the moment my developing this idea any further here. Instead, I will address the question in a more basic way, that is, in terms of a poetic personality. If we apply this more basic idea, it seems obvious that the self in the self-expressions of Sappho is primarily a poetic personality and only secondarily a historical person whom we hope to find hiding behind the poetic persona.

§8. To view Sappho this way is commonsensical for students of poetry in general, who need to view any poet primarily as an expression of the poetry created by the poet. Poets don’t just express themselves: more than that, they are destined to become expressions of their own poetry.

§9. But how does this view of poetry—or of song, for that matter—help us come to terms with the idea of Sappho as a choral personality? Before this question can be answered, more needs to be said about Sappho as a poetic personality.

Mimesis as imitation or representation in poetry and song

§10. Here is where I find it most helpful to apply a term used by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. For him, the creation of poetry and song is a process of *mīmēsis*, hereafter spelled simply as *mimesis*, which we can translate as ‘imitation’ or, more loosely, ‘representation’. The art of the verbal arts that we know as poetry and song can imitate or represent. This understanding of poetry and song as imitation or representation is in line, so far, with the idea of Sappho as a poetic personality.

§11. For Aristotle, as he says in *Poetics* 1448b4–24, imitation is part of human nature, and it is basically playful. I have published an essay on this topic in [Classical Inquiries 2015.10.15](#), and I offer here a brief epitome of what I say there about Aristotle’s relevant formulation in the *Poetics*:

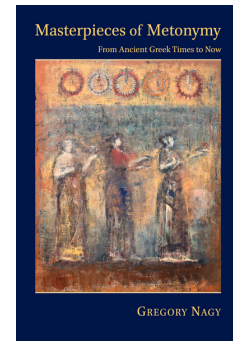
From Aristotle’s point of view, the human capacity for imitation is inborn, and humans start imitating as soon as they are born. Since humans imitate from childhood onward, and since children are playful when they imitate, it follows that human adults are in some way reverting to this atavistic playfulness when they too imitate. Such an idea is captured by Johan Huizinga in the title of his book *Homo ludens* (1938).

§12. So, if we think of Sappho as a poetic personality, then we can go on to say, in terms of Aristotle’s understanding of *mimesis*, that her words in her poetry and song are imitating or representing a personality—whether that personality belongs to Sappho herself or to some other person who is being represented in her poetry and song.

Mimesis as re-enactment in poetry and song

§13. The process of *mimesis*, then, can be understood as imitation or representation—if we think of poetry and song only in terms of composing poems or songs. As I have argued in my work on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, however, a more accurate understanding of *mimesis* is ‘re-enactment’—if we think of poetry and song also in terms of performing poems or songs. I quote here the relevant testimony of Aristotle himself:

ἐποποιία δὴ καὶ ἡ τῆς τραγωδίας ποιήσις ἐπι δὲ κωμῳδία καὶ ἡ διθυραμβοποιητικὴ καὶ τῆς 1447a.15
αὐλητικῆς ἢ πλειστη καὶ κιθαριστικῆς πάσαι τυγχάνουσιν οὐσαι μιμήσεις τὸ σύνολον.



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So, the composition of epic [epopoiā = the poiēsis of epos] and the composition [poiēsis] of tragedy [tragōidiā], as well as comedy [kōmōidiā] and the poetic craft [poiētikē (tekhnē)] of the dithyramb [dithyrambos] and most sorts of crafts related to the reed [aulos] and the lyre [kitharā]—all of these crafts, as it happens, are instances of re-enactment [mīmēsis plural], taken as a whole.

Aristotle Poetics 1447a8–16

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§14. What Aristotle has done here is to list all the major genres of poetry and song as they existed in Athens at that time, that is, in the fourth century BCE. And there is a most remarkable fact to be noted about all the genres that he lists. The poetry and the songs belonging to these genres were actually performed competitively in the ritual context of the two most important festivals of the city-state of Athens, which were the Panathenaia and the City Dionysia. That is to say, all these genres of verbal art involved forms of composition that became actualized in performance at the two major Athenian festivals I have just mentioned. There is much more that needs to be said about such actualization-in-performance, but for the moment I will merely refer to the further analysis I offer in [Classical Inquiries 2015.11.27](#), also in HC 3§§70–71.

§15. The fact that all the genres of ancient Greek poetry and song in the Athens of Aristotle were performative is relevant to the idea of mimesis as 're-enactment'. To clarify this point, I start with a newer and easier idea for us to grasp, which is, the idea of acting as an actor acts. The fact is, to perform a poem or a song is to act it as an actor would act it. To put it another way: to perform a poem or a song is to play the role assigned to the performer of that poem or song. I justify using the term play the role here in view of Aristotle's understanding of mimesis as a fundamentally playful human activity. And here we may start to see the relevance of this understanding to what I already said in the first paragraph of my essay, where I used the expression play the role in referring to the personality of Sappho.

§16. But how do we connect the simpler idea of acting as an actor acts to the more complex and older idea of re-enacting? Here we need to go beyond Aristotle and to rethink the question in terms of anthropology. Let us consider what happens when a poem or song is used in sacralized contexts that anthropologists describe in terms of ritual, as in the case of festivals in traditional societies. In such situations, the acting is not just an act of acting: now the acting is also an act of re-enacting. To put it another way, what is re-enacted in the world of ritual is something that already exists in the world of myth.

§17. Such a mentality of re-enactment is most evident in the first and the second of the genres listed by Aristotle in his Poetics, that is, in epic and in tragedy as performed respectively at the festivals of the Panathenaia and the City Dionysia. The roles that are played by the performers, including the role of the master narrator in the case of epic, are re-enactments of personalities that existed in myth. For example, the actor who plays the role of Oedipus in the Oedipus Tyrannos of Sophocles is a re-enactment of Oedipus as a figure in myth; even the 'I' who is the rhapsode saying 'tell me, Muse' at the start of the Odyssey can be viewed as a re-enactment—in this case, of the prehistoric poet Homer himself as a figure in myth.

§18. To cite a more obvious example from epic: when the rhapsode who plays the role of Homer quotes Hector speaking to Andromache and when he quotes Andromache speaking to Hector, he is re-enacting the personalities of Hector and Andromache by way of playing their roles. Such is the power of mimesis in its older sense of re-enactment.

Mimesis in the context of choral song

§19. Among all the genres of poetry and song as analyzed by Aristotle in his Poetics, the most evident example of mimesis in the context of choral song is tragedy, where the khoros 'chorus' re-enacts, by way of singing and dancing, whatever was said and done in the world of myth. The re-enactment happens, of course, in a ritual context that exists in the world of reality, and that context is primarily the festival of the City Dionysia, where rival choruses compete with each other in re-enacting—together with the main actors of tragedy—the world of myth as a frame of reference for the world of reality.

§20. In a separate work on choral mimesis, centering on the Delian Maidens in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, I emphasized the mimetic power of the chorus in performance (as signaled by the verb mīmēisthai at line 163 of the Hymn), arguing that mimesis as performed by a chorus was in some ways even more versatile than mimesis as performed by a soloist (Nagy 2013). As I argued further in that work, there is an astounding variety to be found in the power of the chorus to re-enact, to imitate, to represent different kinds of persons or places or things. I find it most relevant to quote here my analysis of examples from the songmaking of Pindar, who flourished in the fifth century BCE (Nagy 2013:245):

The range of the mimesis performed by the chorus in Pindar's compositions extends far beyond the individual persona of the poet-director and the collective persona of the chorus as a chorus. For example, in the case of victory odes composed by Pindar and by other contemporary poets such as Simonides and Bacchylides, the speaking 'I' of the chorus is most conventionally figured as a kōmos, that is, as a group of festive revelers. And this same speaking 'I' of the chorus or stylized kōmos can also make a mimesis of everyone and anyone who may be relevant to the act of praising the victor. The speaking characters, as it were, who take shape in the process of mimesis by the kōmos in a victory ode include such varied figures as (1) the poet himself in the role of the laudator or giver of praise, (2) the victorious athlete in the role of the laudandus or receiver of praise, (3) ancestors of the laudandus, and (4) heroes whose deeds in myth are praised along with the deeds of the laudandus.

Sappho as a choral personality

§21. The poetics of Sappho, as I have been arguing since 1990, reveal her to be a choral personality, that is, someone who performs as a leader in a dancing as well as singing group known as a khoros 'chorus'.^[1]

§22. In another separate work (Nagy 2015.10.01), I applied the idea of Sappho as a choral personality to those of her songs where she seems to be speaking for the whole community of Lesbos by virtue of being the leader of a chorus comprised of women and girls. These songs, as I argued, were performed in honor of the goddess Hera inside the sacred precinct of that goddess at Messon, located in the center of the island. Here I focus on one particular role that is played by Sappho in that particular context: as the prima donna of a chorus, she is re-enacting, I now argue, the role of a priestess of Hera.

§23. I quote here a key passage, followed by my own translation:

... |₅ ἀλλ' αἶ θρούληθθα Χάραξον ἔλθῃν |₆ νᾶϊ κύν πληῖαι. τὰ μέν οἴομαι Ζεὺς |₇ οἶδε κύμπαντές τε θεοί·
cè ᾧού χρῆ |₈ ταῦτα νόησθαι, |₉ ἀλλὰ καὶ πέμπην ἔμε καὶ κέλεσθαι |₁₀ πόλλα λίσσεσθαι βασιλῆαν Ἥραν
|₁₁ ἐξίκεσθαι τειδε σᾶν ἄγοντα |₁₂ νᾶα Χάραξον |₁₃ κάμμ' ἐπεύρην ἀρτῆμεας. τὰ δ' ἄλλα |₁₄ πάντα
δαιμόνεσιν ἐπιτρόπωμεν· |₁₅ εὔδιαι γὰρ ἐκ μεγάλαν ἀήτην |₁₆ αἶψα πέλονται. |₁₇ τῶν κε βόλληται
βασίλευς Ὀλύμπω |₁₈ δαίμον' ἐκ πόνων ἐπάρωγον ἦδη |₁₉ περτρόπων, κῆνοι μάκαρες πέλονται |₂₀ καὶ
πολύολβοι· |₂₁ κάμμες, αἶ κε εἰς κεφάλων ἀέρρη |₂₂ Λάριχος καὶ δὴ ποτ' ἄνηρ γένηται, |₂₃ καὶ μάλ' ἐκ
πόλλαν βαρυθυμία κεν |₂₄ αἶψα λύθειμεν.

... |₅ But you are always saying, in a chattering way [thrulēin], that Kharaxos will come |₆ in a ship
full of goods. These things I think Zeus |₇ knows, and so also do all the gods. But you shouldn't have
|₈ these things on your mind. |₉ Instead, send [pempēin] me off and instruct [kelesthai] me |₁₀ to
implore [lissesthai] Queen Hera over and over again [polla] |₁₁ that he should come back here
[tuide] bringing back [agein] safely |₁₂ his ship, I mean **Kharaxos**, |₁₃ and that he should find us
unharmed. As for everything else, |₁₄ let us leave it to the superhuman powers [daimones], |₁₅ since
bright skies after great storms |₁₆ can happen **quickly**. |₁₇ Those mortals, whoever they are, |₁₈
whom the king of Olympus wishes |₁₈ to rescue from their pains [ponoi] by sending as a long-awaited
helper a superhuman force [daimōn] |₁₉ to steer them away from such pains—those mortals are
blessed [makares] |₂₀ and have great bliss [olbos]. |₂₁ We too, if he ever gets to lift his head up high,
|₂₂ I mean, Larikhos, and finally mans up, |₂₃ will get past the many cares that weigh heavily on our
heart, |₂₄ breaking free from them just as **quickly**.

Sappho, Brothers Song

§24. This song is referring to a festival, indicated by way of the word pempein 'send', which conveys the idea of organizing a sacred **procession** that culminates in a festival that is celebrated at the precinct of a divinity. In this case, the festival is sacred to Hera, and Sappho is pictured as readying herself to lead a **procession** that will be heading off for the festival. Leslie Kurke 2015 agrees with this interpretation, referring to my comments in Nagy 2015 §§37–38 on the word pempein in the sense of 'organize a procession'. Comparing a passage from the Electra of Euripides with reference to the festival of Hera at Argos (lines 167–174), I argue in Nagy 2015 §§42–44 that the Brothers Song features the speaking persona of Sappho as a choral leader who wishes to be sent in a **procession** to the sacred precinct at Messon, where a festival of the goddess Hera will be celebrated, just as the same speaking persona of Sappho in Song 9 wishes that her mother should find the means for her to celebrate this festival:

... |₂ πάμπαν οὐκ ἔχη[σθαι νόθην δυνάμην,] |₃ [μ]ᾶτερ, ἐόρταν |₄ [φαιδί]μαν ὦραι τέλε[σαι;
τὸ δ' ἐστί] |₅ [χάρμ' ἐ]παιμέρων

... Don't you have the resources for me to be able, Mother, to celebrate [telein] at the
right season [ōrā] the festival [eortā], which is a delight [kharma] for [us] mortals,
creatures of the day that we are?

Sappho Song 9 (text as restored by West 2014)

§25. The choral essence of the performance that is represented in the Brothers Song is likewise evident in another song of Sappho that has now been supplemented by newly-found fragments:

|₁ πλάσιον δὴ μ[.....]...οἰς' α[...]_ω |₂ πότνι' Ἥρα, σὰ χ[αρίε]σς' ἐόρτ[α] |₃ τὰν ἀράταν Ἀτρείδαί ηῶσαν
|₄ τοί βασιλῆες, |₅ ἐκτελέσαντες μ[εγά]λοισ ἀέθλοισ [] |₆ πρῶτα μὲν πῆρ Εἵ[λιον]· ἄψερων δέ [] |₇
τειδ' ἀπορμάθεν[τες, δ]ῶρον γὰρ εὔρη[ν] |₈ οὐκ ἐδ[ύναντο], |₉ πρὶν σὲ καὶ Δί' ἀντ[ίσαιον] ηἰδέσθην |₁₀
καὶ Θυῶνακ ἱμε[ρόντα] παῖδα· |₁₁ νῦν δὲ κ[αί.....] |₁₂ κατὰ τὸ πάλ[αιον] |₁₃ ἄγνα καὶ
κα[.....] ὄχλος |₁₄ παρθέ[νων..... γ]υναικῶν |₁₅ ἀμφις[.....] |₁₆ μετρ' ὀλ[ολύγα].

|₁ Close by, ..., |₂ O Queen [potnia] Hera, ... your [...] festival [eortā], |₃ which, vowed-in-prayer
[arāsthai], the Sons of Atreus did arrange [poiein] |₄ for you, [2] kings that they were, |₅ after first
having completed [ek-telein] great labors [aethloi], |₆ around Troy, and, next [apseron], |₇ after
having set forth to come here [tuide], since finding the way |₈ was not possible for them |₉ until they
would approach you (Hera) and Zeus lord of suppliants [antiaos] |₁₀ and (Dionysus) the lovely son of
Thyone. |₁₁ And now [nun de] we are arranging [poiein] [the festival], |₁₂ in accordance with the
ancient way [...] |₁₃ holy [agna] and [...] a throng [okhlos] |₁₄ of girls [parthenoi] [...] and women
[gunaikes] |₁₅ on either side ... |₁₆ the measured sound of ululation [ololūgā].

Sappho Song 17.1-16

§26. Here it is made explicit that the festival, ongoing while the speaker is speaking, is in honor of the goddess Hera. I describe the situation this way in Nagy 2015 §51:

Although the first line of Song 17 here is too fragmentary to be understood for sure, the next line makes it clear that the persona of Sappho is praying to Hera herself, speaking to her about the eortā 'festival' (2: ἐόρτ[α]) that is being arranged in honor of the goddess. The speaking Sappho goes on to say that the festival that 'we' in the present are arranging (11: νόημεν), as 'we' offer supplications to Hera, is being arranged 'in accordance with the ancient way' (12: κατ τὸ πάλ[αιον]) of arranging the festival, just as the heroes of the past had arranged it (3: ἠόησαν). In these contexts, I am translating the word ποιεῖν 'make' in the specific sense of 'arrange', with reference to the observance of a ritual. I find in Thucydides (2.15.2) a striking parallel in wording: 'and the Athenians, continuing what he [= Theseus] started, even now arrange [ποιεῖν] for the goddess [= Athena], at public expense, the festival [heortē] named the Sunoikia' (καὶ ξυνοικία ἐξ ἐκείνου Ἀθηναῖοι ἔτι καὶ νῦν τῆ θεῶ ἐορτῆν δημοτελεῖ ποιοῦσιν).

§27. I follow up here by epitomizing what I argue in Nagy 2015 §35. Most relevant is the wording in the Brothers Song: πέμπην ἔμε καὶ κέλεσθαι |₁₀ πόλλα λιττεσθαι βασιλῆσαν Ἥραν 'send [pemphein] me off and instruct [kelesthai] me |₁₀ to implore [lissesthai] Queen Hera over and over again [polla]'. I understand such an act of instructing someone to do something as a choral act, and I interpret the relation between the instructor and the instructee as a choral relationship between a woman in the role of a mother and a girl in the role of a daughter. The woman chorally authorizes the girl. And such a choral relationship is formalized in the distinction between gunaikes 'women' and parthenoi 'girls' at the end of Song 17 of Sappho. This song refers explicitly to a choral performance at the sacred precinct of the goddess Hera on the occasion of her festival, which is called an eortā. As I argued further in Nagy 2015, the occasion of Song 17 marks the performance of Sappho herself as the prima donna who leads the choral singing and dancing at the festival of Hera. As the prima donna, she is the main celebrant, as marked by the programmatic use of the verb ποιεῖν at line 11 of this song in the sense of 'celebrate a festival'.

§28. In the light of these details as I have collected them here, I conclude that one of the many roles of Sappho as a choral personality has to do with the goddess Hera. For the moment, I describe this role as service in honor of the goddess. An appropriate single word, I think, for this role is priestess.

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Notes

[1] I first used this expression choral personality in PH (Nagy 1990) 370 = 12§60, with reference to Calame 1977:367-377 (also 126-127). See also Nagy 2015§25; also Lardinois 1996 and the remarks of Calame 2009:5. Also Ferrari 2014:17.

[2] West 2014:4 suggests that we read $\eta\theta\eta\kappa\alpha\nu\ \tau\omicron\iota$, not $\eta\theta\eta\kappa\alpha\nu\ \tau\omicron\iota$. But I defend the accentuation preserved in the new papyrus, $\tau\omicron\iota$. This reading $\tau\omicron\iota$ (in the new P.GC inv. 105 fr. 2) differs from the reading

τοι (PSI 123 and P.Oxy. 1231). As I argue, we see here an emphatic use of the pronoun, 'for you', not an enclitic use.

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