SAPPHO AND APHRODITE

Modern etymologies are rigorously controlled, scientifically accurate, and at their best uncover some facet of the cultural history of a people. Ancient etymologies are methodologically unsound, frequently fanciful, but sometimes tell us much of contemporary popular views. Modern etymologies of Aphrodite (*Der kleine Pauly*, pp. 425–26) attempt to legitimize the linguistic genealogy of the goddess, and tend to identify her with Phoenician Astarte. Ancient etymologies (F. Dümmler, *s.v.* "Aphrodite," *RE*, I.2 [1894], 2772 f.) attempted to comprehend her essence by means of linguistic equations which would legitimize her name. Generally they connected Aphrodite with foam, either literally or figuratively, but there was a dissenting minority which held that Aphrodite was she who conveyed ἀφροσύνη and rendered one ἄφρων. We find this view expressed in somewhat heavy-handed fashion by Euripides (*Troades* 990) and mechanically repeated by Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1400b24) and others (Cornutus 24; *Etym. magn.* 179. 12 ff.; Eustathius 414. 37; Cramer, *Anecd. Ox.*, I, 37. 26). I suggest that we should see a peculiarly sensitive anticipation of this etymology and of the nature of love in Sappho 1:

> ποικιλόθρον' ἀθανάτ' Ἀφρόδιτα,
> παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε
> μή μ' ἄσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
> πότνια, θῦμον.

In this poem of oscillation and uncertainty, Sappho prays to Aphrodite for release from the passionate, irrational state in which she finds herself. It is certainly natural enough that she should pray to that divinity who was responsible for her present state. Natural enough, too, that she, like Diomedes (*Il.* 5. 115–17), should interrupt her entreaty with a story of a previous instance of the goddess' intercession. But what evidence is there that Sappho etymologizes Aphrodite's name to mean something like "she who renders one ἄφρων"?

The major part of the evidence, naturally enough, comes from the poem itself and is of two sorts: prosodic and thematic. The whole poem is about Sappho's being distraught and out of her normal frame of mind and thus as a whole is appropriate to the proposed etymology. Further, Sappho explicitly refers to psychic perturbation: δάμνα ... θῦμον (3–4), μαινόλα θύμῳ (18), χαλέπαν ... μερίμναν (25–26). All of these characteristics are those of one who is ἄφρων, not in rational control of her feelings. But I think that the prosodic evidence is more powerful.

Three of the five ictus-bearing long syllables of the first line of the poem contain short vowels followed by position-making aspirated consonants, and two of them, ἀθανάτ' and Ἀφρόδιτα, contain short α. The α of ἀθανάτ' is that of the negative prefix and thus raises the expectation in the hearer's mind that the α of Ἀφρόδιτα is also the negative prefix. Can this not be accidental? Of course it can, but as Page has pointed out (*Sappho and Alcaeus*, p. 5), the adjective ἀθανάτ' applied to Aphrodite is unnecessary and rather strange. What function can it then have here? I hold that it has the function primarily, though not exclusively, of pointing to Sappho's etymologizing of the name Aphrodite.[1]

The rest of the evidence is secondary and hence supportive, not probative. There is a poem of Theognis which, though dissimilar in content to Sappho's poem, seems for some of its expression to be dependent on her. In lines 221–26 Theognis uses the word ποικίλ(α) twice, and the rare δολοπλοκίαι (226) once. ποίκιλ- occurs as the first two syllables of Sappho's poem, and δολόπλοκε appears in the second line, both as epithets of Aphrodite. Most striking for our purposes, though, is the fact that Theognis uses ἄφρων in line 223. It is possible that he had the first stanza of Sappho's poem in mind while writing his own, and if so, his use of ἄφρων supports my etymology.[2]

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1. ἀθανάτ' also has the function of pointing to the vast gulf separating the agitated Sappho from the serene (cf. ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ of 1. 14) Aphrodite. My etymology does not account for the second part of the goddess' name, but ancient etymologies and etymologists did not require that the entire name be explained. Cf. M. L. West *ad Theog.* 197.

2. I am indebted to John Van Sickle for drawing my attention to the Theognis passage.

There is in the text tradition of Sappho's poem the variant reading ποικιλόφρον for the first word (cf. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus*, pp. 4–5, for details) which of course contains the element -φρων "mind." I do not claim that this reading is to be preferred, but I should argue that it does at least suggest that some ancients agreed with my etymology in this poem. It is possible that Sappho did indeed write ποικιλόφρον, and if she did, that would seem to clinch the etymology of Aphrodite.

Alcaeus, her contemporary and compatriot, used it in one of his poems (D 11. 7 L.-P.), so the word was definitely available for Sappho had she wanted it.

I think that all the above indicates that Sappho regarded Aphrodite actually and etymologically as the goddess who deprives one of one's wits.[3]

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3. Z. Phillip Ambrose has made the following interesting observation. Ancient authors were acutely conscious of sound and sound symbolism and hence would avoid potentially distorting etymologies and symbols. Had Sappho, therefore, *not* wanted to suggest the proposed etymology, she would have been at some pains not to point to it by her choice of words. A negative point, perhaps, but one that to me seems to make excellent sense and carry considerable weight.

TRIMALCHIO'S GAME (PETRONIUS 33)

"... permittetis tamen finiri lusum." sequebatur puer cum tabula terebinthina et crystallinis tesseris, notavique rem omnium delicatissimam. pro calculis enim albis ac nigris aureos argenteosque habebat denarios. interim dum ille omnium textorum dicta inter lusum consumit ...
textorum *H et editores*, testorum *L Memm.*, tesserariorum?

Since the game involves the use of dice (*tesserae*) as well as counters (*calculi*), it must be the *duodecim scripta*, which resembled backgammon, rather than the *latrunculorum ludus*, which was more like draughts or checkers.[1] Trimalchio is not, as he claims, seriously resuming an interrupted contest. No opponent is present or ever was, even behind the scenes, and it is doubtful that the "Twelve-Line Game" could have been played as a solitaire, though that is evidently Trimalchio's pretense. As so often in the *Cena*, he is merely putting on an act to impress his guests, throwing the dice, moving the counters on the board, and muttering certain "sayings."

Editors still print *textorum*, though it has never been satisfactorily explained. Why would Trimalchio "use up all the weavers' sayings," that is, by either cursing or telling little stories, as it seems that weavers did to relieve the tedium of their work? Again,

"sayings of all weaves" or kinds, from an assumed nominative *textum*, is vague and pointless.

Is it rash to suggest that the word needs emendation and can be reasonably emended? The scribe who copied the remote mutual ancestor of H (the famous manuscript from Trau in Dalmatia, saec. xv) and of L and Memm. (two groups of manuscripts) may first have written *tesseris* in full and then, soon reaching *tesserariorum*, he may have abbreviated it to something like *tessorum*.[2] Everyone who has collated Latin manuscripts knows that this was a common scribal practice: a somewhat unusual word was written in full at its first occurrence and if it or its cognate soon recurred this was more or less abbreviated. An example may be cited from the first page of the *Cena* in H: *trimalchio* is written twice (p. 206, lines 4, 19) but it soon becomes *tmalchio* with the suprascript *i* denoting *ri* (lines 21, 23, 34). There is reason to believe that *testorum* (L Memm.) is actually closer to the authentic reading than *textorum* (H), as this manuscript sometimes exhibits -*x*- for -*s*- or -*ss*-: *odixeam*, *sextercium*, *sexcenta*.[3] The word *tesserarius*, "dice-player," is probably evidenced in Ammianus 28. 4. 21,

1. See my note in *TAPA*, XCVIII (1967), 325–26, with the references.

2. Perhaps *tessaor(um)* with a small suprascript *e* and *i* to indicate the syllables -*er*- and -*ri*-, respectively. Both of these

signs appear in H, as can be seen in Stephen Gaselee's facsimile edition (Cambridge, 1915).

3. See p. 206, line 42; 207, 11; 209, 28; 212, 40; 213, 3 and 12; 216, 18; 218, 8, ed. Gaselee.