

## THE JUSTICE OF APHRODITE IN SAPPHO FR. 1

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Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the earliest recorded critic of Sappho's first poem, praised it for its cohesion and smoothness of construction.<sup>1</sup> Since that time the poetic quality of the poem has not, I think, been doubted but controversy has arisen about the meaning of the poem. Much of the controversy has focused upon the penultimate stanza, verses 21–24. Recent scholarship provides us with several decades of debate about this stanza—particularly about its tone.<sup>2</sup> There has been no debate about the actual events to which the stanza alludes. It is assumed that the events are obvious. I think that this assumption is untrustworthy, and that debate about the tone of the stanza could be eliminated, or at least radically simplified, if we were to clarify our notion of what is going on in these verses.

Verses 21–24 present the words of Aphrodite to Sappho. Sappho has suffered an injustice at the hands of her beloved, and has called upon Aphrodite to alleviate the pain of this injustice. The girl with whom Sappho is in love has apparently fled from Sappho's advances, rejected her gifts and refused her love. Aphrodite therefore makes three promises or predictions to Sappho concerning the fate which lies in store for the unresponsive girl. Aphrodite says: "For in fact if she is fleeing, soon she will pursue. And if she is rejecting gifts,

<sup>1</sup>Dion. Hal. *Comp.* 173–79.

<sup>2</sup>Bibliography may be found in H. Saake, *Zur Kunst Sapphos* (Paderborn 1971) and *Sapphostudien* (Paderborn 1972); K. Stanley, "The Role of Aphrodite in Sappho Fr. 1," *GRBS* 17 (1976) 305–21. To these may be added B. Gentili, "Il 'letto insaziato' di Medea e il tema dell'*Adikia* a livello amoroso nei lirici (Saffo, Teognide) e nelle *Medea* di Euripide," *SCO* 21 (1972) 60–72; M. G. Bonnanno, "Osservazioni sul tema della 'giusta' reciprocità amorosa da Saffo ai comici," *QUCC* 10 (1973) 110–23; M. Bonaria, "Note critiche al testo di Saffo," *Humanitas* 25–26 (1973–74) 155–83; J. S. Lasso de la Vega, "La oda primera de Safo," *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica* 6 (1974) 9–93 and 7 (1974) 9–80; J. D. Marry, "Sappho and the Heroic Ideal: *ἔρωτος ἀπετή*," *Arethusa* 12 (1979) 71–92.

instead she will give them. And if she does not love, soon she will love, even if she does not want to."

Although interpreters have differed about the tone of these words of Aphrodite, they have universally agreed about the situation being described. Aphrodite is promising, it is generally held, an ideal erotic revenge in the form of a mutual reversal of the roles of lover and beloved. She is promising to reverse the situation that exists between Sappho and her beloved, to turn the tables, so that the girl who is now indifferent to Sappho will experience a change of heart and will pursue Sappho with gifts and love. This standard view is recently expressed, for example, by Sir Kenneth Dover in his book *Greek Homosexuality*. Dover says: "The other person, who now refuses gifts and flees, will not merely yield and 'grant favours' but will pursue Sappho and will herself offer gifts."<sup>3</sup>

This is a plausible interpretation, but it is not what the Greek words say. Aphrodite's statements contain no direct object. She does not say that the girl will pursue Sappho, she does not say that the girl will give gifts to Sappho, she does not say that the girl will love Sappho. She merely says that the girl will pursue, give gifts and love.<sup>4</sup> There is an interpretation of these words available to us which imposes no assumptions on the grammar and which, furthermore, is in better agreement with the traditions of Greek erotic poetry. For it is not the case generally in Greek poetry that scorned lovers pin their hopes on a mutual reversal of erotic roles. In general, forlorn lovers console themselves with a much less fantastic thought: namely, that the unresponsive beloved will one day grow up and become a lover

<sup>3</sup>K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Oxford 1978) 177. Verses 18–19 in particular are generally understood to support such an interpretation since, despite the uncertainty of the text, it is clear that these verses contain a reference to someone coming into someone's *philotata*. The various readings which have been suggested for vv 18–19 are cited and discussed by Bonaria (above, note 2). Most plausibly, these verses refer to Sappho's beloved and the fact that she is not reciprocating Sappho's love. Whether the girl once reciprocated and now refuses, or never reciprocated at all, depends on the reading of 18–19. But even if reconciliation of some kind is involved here, this need not affect the explanation of vv 21–24, for Aphrodite appears to begin a new line of thought with her question "Who is wronging you?" With this question Aphrodite passes from the specific injustice at hand to the general principle of justice that governs such cases.

<sup>4</sup>W. Schadewaldt, *Sappho* (Potsdam 1950) 89, and A. Privitera, "La Rete di Afroditè," *QUCC* 4 (1967) 47, note 44, remark on the absence of a direct object. Both assume that, if it were expressed, the object would be "you."

himself, or herself, and in the role of lover will pursue an unresponsive beloved and will come to “know what it feels like” to be rejected. Within the strict conventions of Greek homosexual Eros such a revenge is fairly certain. There are clearly defined ages of life appropriate to the roles of lover and beloved.<sup>5</sup> In the course of time the beloved will naturally and inevitably become a lover, and will almost inevitably experience rejection at least once. This idea recurs repeatedly in Greek poetry and surely reflects a common human experience.<sup>6</sup> A vivid example of it is furnished by a graffito from Stabiae:<sup>7</sup>

εἴ τις καλὸς γενόμενος  
οὐκ ἔδωκε πυγῖσαι· ἐκῖνος καλῆς  
ἐρασθεὶς μὴ τύχοι βεινήματος.

The poet Theognis expresses the same thought. Theognis says to his beloved:

αἰδέο μ', ὦ παῖ < >, διδοὺς χάριν, εἴ ποτε καὶ σὺ  
ἔξεις Κυπρογενοῦς δῶρον ἰοστεφάνου  
χρηίζων καὶ ἐπ' ἄλλον ἐλεύσεαι, ἀλλὰ σε δαίμων  
δοίῃ τῶν αὐτῶν ἀντιτυχεῖν ἐπέων. (1331–34)

This theme becomes a *topos* in Hellenistic poetry. We meet it, for instance, in the seventh Idyll of Theocritus, in an epigram attributed to Callimachus and in many poems of the *Anthology*, from which I have drawn the following two examples:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Plato, *Symp.* 183d–e, 190d–e; Alexis fr. 70 Kock; Theocr. 7.120 and Gow; *A.P.* 12.22, 31, 32, 33, 46, 176, 186, 195, 224, 228, 229; Theopompus Comicus fr. 29 Kock and Dover's comments (above, note 3) 87, note 48; Plut. *Mor.* 770b–c; P. Brandt, *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* (London 1932) 416 f.; R. Flacelière, *L'Amour en Grèce* (Paris 1960) 43–70; G. Devereux, “Greek Pseudo-Homosexuality and the ‘Greek Miracle’,” *SO* 42 (1967) 82.

<sup>6</sup>See Gow on Theocr. 7.118; Dover (above, note 3) 58; C. P. Jones, “Tange Chloen semel Arrogantem,” *HSCP* 75 (1971) 81–84; E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957) 414.

<sup>7</sup>Published by L. D'Orsi, “Un graffito di Stabia,” *PP* fasc. 120 (1968) 228–30, and cited by Jones (above, note 6) 82.

<sup>8</sup>Theocr. 7.118; [Callim.] *Epig.* 63 Pfeiffer; *A.P.* 5.21, 27, 92, 164, 273, 280, 298; 11.73, 374; 12.35, 109, 160, 186, 193; Nonn. *D.* 16.297. Professor E. Robbins has drawn my attention to a parallel in Ovid, *Met.* 3.405. Horace, *C.* 3.26, properly interpreted, presents a scenario similar to that of Sappho fr. 1. C. P. Jones has rightly proposed (above, note 6) that Horace here prays for Chloe to fall (unhappily) in love with some third person. Jones draws upon the Hellenistic tradition to demonstrate that the typical rejected lover, having resigned his own suit, trusts the course of time to

Ἄρτι γενειάζων ὁ καλὸς καὶ στερρὸς ἐρασταῖς  
 παιδὸς ἐρᾷ Λάδων · σύντομος ἡ Νέμεσις. (A.P. 12.12)

Ἄλλ' ἱλαροῦ μετὰδος τι φιλήματος. ἔσθ' ὅτε καὶ σὺ  
 αἰτήσεις τοιάνδ' ἐξ ἐτέρων χάριτα. (A.P. 12.16.3–4)

If this line of interpretation can be applied to Sappho's poem, it considerably deepens the impact of her words, for she is not day-dreaming about imaginary reversals but looking forward to a concrete and inevitable revenge. This interpretation also gives more point to the phrase *κῶνκ ἐθέλουσα*, in verse 24. This phrase has provoked much comment and some emendation of the MSS reading.<sup>9</sup> The interpretation which I am proposing confirms the reading of the MSS on grounds of sense, for, if the beloved is to become a lover, she will naturally take on a lover's state of mind. To find oneself doing things against one's will is the perennial condition of the lover. It is an axiom of Greek love-poetry that Eros is *ἀνάγκη* for the lover but not for the beloved.<sup>10</sup> Greek lovers describe their experience as that of being coerced by a force outside oneself. In Archilochus, love is a force which "subdues" the lover (*δάμνεται*, fr. 196 W). Ibycus sees himself as an old horse compelled (*ἀέκων*) by Eros to line up for another race with love (287 *PMG*). Theognis speaks of the "compulsions" imposed on him by a boy's love, using the phrase *ἀεκούσια πολλὰ βίαια*, "many violent things that go against my will" (1343), and echoes Sappho's *κῶνκ ἐθέλουσα* with *κῶνκ ἐθέλοντος* (1342). A typical lover in the *Anthology* complains:

ἀγρεύσας ἔλκει τῇδ' ὁ βίαιος Ἔρως  
 ἐνθάδ' ὅπου τὸν παῖδα διαστείχοντ' ἐνόησα ·  
 αὐτομάτοις δ' ἄκων ποσσὶ ταχὺς φέρομαι. (A.P. 12.85.4–6)

The beloved, traditionally, does not participate in the emotions that move the lover and hence has no occasion to experience love as a

impose upon his beloved the nemesis of an unrequited passion. Cf. Horace, C. 1.25, with the parallels collected by Nisbet and Hubbard (*A Commentary on Horace: Odes I* [Oxford 1970] 289–301), especially A.P. 5.298 in which *Dikê* is asked to punish the beloved's haughtiness with grey hair and wrinkles.

<sup>9</sup>A survey of the controversy concerning *κῶνκ ἐθέλουσα* may be found in M. Bonaria (above, note 2) 159.

<sup>10</sup>On *anankê* in erotic contexts see Dover (above, note 3) 60–62; H. Schreckenburg, *Ananke. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Wortgebrauchs* (Munich 1964) 59–60; N. Loraux, "Sur la Race des Femmes et Quelques-unes de ses Tribus," *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 84, note 157; D. E. Gerber, "Varia Semonidea," *Phoenix* 33 (1979) 20–21.

coercion.<sup>11</sup> Xenophon compares the *paidika* confronting his lover's desire with a sober man watching a drunk (*Symp.* 8.21). The beloved is the cool and indifferent fulcrum of a magnetic attraction which draws the lover to itself by force.<sup>12</sup> So, if the beloved girl in Sappho's poem is to leave behind the role of beloved and take on, properly and completely, the role of lover, this will necessarily involve a coercion of her will. As lover, she will, by definition, find herself acting *καὶ ἐθέλουσα*.

The interpretation I am proposing also mitigates a certain harshness of transition between the fifth and sixth stanzas which has been criticized by commentators on the poem.<sup>13</sup> The fifth stanza ends with an emphatic request from Aphrodite for the identity of the unjust beloved. "Who is it who is wronging you?" Aphrodite asks Sappho. This question is never answered. Instead we pass immediately to the sixth stanza and its series of predictions about the future of the beloved. The connective is *καὶ γάρ*, which permits a translation "for in fact if she is fleeing, soon she will pursue" etc.<sup>14</sup> This transition becomes easier if we understand Aphrodite as putting forward, not a specific programme of revenge tailored to Sappho, but a general theory of lover's justice. For, in the latter case, Aphrodite's line of thought may be seen to be something like "Who is it who is wronging you? Well, whoever it is, you are absurd to worry about it, for in fact if she is now fleeing, soon she will pursue, etc." In other words, the ellipse of an answer to Aphrodite's question *τίς σ' ἀδικήει*; is deliberate: a deliberate dramatization of the universal law of justice on which lovers can rely as surely as they can rely on the passage of time. Aphrodite's words imply that, from the point of view of justice, it does not matter who the unjust girl is: in time everybody grows too old to be pursued. "Brigitte Bardot will never be sixty," said Brigitte Bardot in an interview with *Time* magazine in 1974. In

<sup>11</sup>"In a homosexual relationship . . . the eromenos is not expected to reciprocate the eros of the erastes." Dover (above, note 3) 52.

<sup>12</sup>Sappho's fr. 31 is perhaps the clearest evocation in literature of this situation. Ibycus takes for granted that his beloved is unaware of and indifferent to the effect he is having (360 *PMG*). Plato gives us several images of a beautiful young man as the cool centre of a magnetic field of attention in a room of men, e.g., *Charm.* 154c–155e; *Euth.* 274c. Sophocles may be comparing the beloved to a lodestone in fr. 886 Pearson (cf. *A.P.* 12.152). See also Dover (above, note 3) 55–56 and the comments of Hermann Fränkel, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy* (trans. Willis and Hadas, New York and London 1973) 524, on the "force-field of love."

<sup>13</sup>A. Cameron, "Sappho and Aphrodite," *HTR* 57 (1964) 238.

<sup>14</sup>J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford 1954) 108–9.

making this statement Mlle Bardot was referring not, I think, to the likelihood of a tragedy in her fifty-ninth year but rather to the fact that the persona or role called "Brigitte Bardot" would not be compatible with sixty years of life. Similarly in the Greek context, no one can play the beloved forever. That is part of the justice of Aphrodite.

Aphrodite's tone, then, is one of brisk and reassuring dismissal, as the goddess of love disclaims the possibility that Sappho's beloved, no matter who she is, will remain an object of desire forever. Controversy about the tone of the poem was stirred in 1955 with Sir Denys Page's imputation of irony to this passage.<sup>15</sup> Aphrodite speaks in tones of amused reproof, Page felt, smiling at Sappho "as a mother with a troublesome child," while Sappho reports the words and smile of the goddess "not without amusement at her own expense." Page further insisted that in Greek it is impossible *διώκειν* an object which does not *φεύγειν*.<sup>16</sup> He therefore took verse 21 to predict that the beloved girl would pursue Sappho whereupon Sappho would run away. Since Sappho herself is the narrator of Aphrodite's words, this puts the poet in the position of praying passionately for an object which, at the same time, she declares she will reject. The nimble psychology of such an attitude is, in Page's view, an example of the "remarkable detachment" with which Sappho manages her own emotions, a detachment which dictates the amused irony of Aphrodite's tone and the unserious mood of the whole poem. This interpretation of the poem's tone, and the controversy aroused by it, have been based on a misunderstanding of the events of stanza six. Once we have adjusted our notion of who is chasing whom in verses 21–24, the possibility of irony becomes irrelevant.

If the interpretation of these verses which I have put forward is tenable, it adds a dimension to Sappho's conception of erotic justice. The dimension is time. Sappho imagines that time itself, given the nature of things, will enact the justice of Aphrodite upon the unjust beloved *ταχέως* . . . *ταχέως*. The idea that time is the enactor of justice is not an unfamiliar one in archaic and early classical thought. It is implied in the Aeschylean notion of a family curse, as well as in

<sup>15</sup>D. L. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford 1955) 12–18.

<sup>16</sup>There has been nearly universal objection to Page's restriction of the meaning of *διώκειν*. See, e.g., G. L. Koniaris, "On Sappho I," *Philologus* 109 (1965) 30–38; T. Krischer, "Sapphos Ode an Aphrodite," *Hermes* 96 (1968) 1–14; K. Stanley (above, note 2) 316 f.

Hesiod's belief that justice and injustice are rewarded by natural occurrences like plague, famine or the birth of children. Pindar tells us that *βία δὲ καὶ μέγανυχον ἔσφαλεν ἐν χρόνῳ* (P. 8.15). Solon summons the Earth to witness his justice *ἐν δίκῃ χρόνου* (36.3 W). Anaximander speaks of the order of the universe in terms of *dikê* which is judged *κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν* (DK B 1). Sappho's assumption, that justice is an enactment of time in erotic contexts, fits in with the belief of other archaic poets that justice is in general so enacted. Her language emphasizes, especially by repetition of the adverbs *δηῦτε* (15, 16, 18) and *ταχέως* (21, 23), the rhythm of time which orders erotic experience, creating and recreating the same impasse (*δηῦτε*) and ever proposing the same consolation (*ταχέως*).

The question remains, what difference does this interpretation make to the sense of Sappho's poem as a whole? The poem begins and ends with a request that Aphrodite release Sappho from the pain, grief and anxiety that she feels as a rejected lover. Aphrodite's words in verses 21–24 presumably address themselves in some way to this request. How do they do so?

Aphrodite is reassuring Sappho that her anguish over this particular girl is almost at an end. It is a commonplace of homosexual relations between men in the Greek tradition that the lover's desire fades sharply as soon as the boy's beard begins to grow. Plutarch cites a dictum of Bion the sophist to the effect that the beard making its appearance on the face of the beloved "liberates the lover from the tyranny of Eros."<sup>17</sup> It is plausible that there were parallel sentiments among Greek women who engaged in homosexual relationships, and that Sappho could expect to be liberated from her desire for this particular girl as soon as the girl became obviously too old to play the role of beloved. Aphrodite's words in verses 21–24, then, are a promise to Sappho of release from erotic tyranny. Her promise is based on the principle of her justice. If we have interpreted it correctly, this is an eternal principle which can be relied on as confidently as can the fact that time passes and young people grow old and lovers love without return, *δηῦτε . . . δηῦτε . . . δηῦτε*.

The reinterpretation here proposed for the sixth stanza of Sappho's first poem permits clarification of the text, grammar, syntax, choice of words, tone and overall sense, as well as integrating the stanza

<sup>17</sup>Plut. *Mor.* 770b–c. See also Pindar, *O.* 1.67–71; Theognis 1327–28; Plato, *Symp.* 183d–e; *Protag.* 309a; *A.P.* 11.36, 51; 12.22, 26, 27, 30, 39, 41, 174, 191, 215; Dover (above, note 3) 86.

much more satisfactorily with the rest of the poem, and integrating the poem more satisfactorily with the traditions of Greek erotic verse and with archaic currents of thought on the subject of justice. The poem is seen to unfold unironically on one plane of sentiment and expression in a way which vindicates the assessment of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and undercuts modern controversies about irony. Sappho is saying exactly what she means, no less, no more. She is not praying to Aphrodite for a reconciliation with her beloved. She is praying for justice.