Concerning "Sappho Schoolmistress"

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Holt N. Parker's "Sappho Schoolmistress" *[TAPA* 103: 309-51] is a step backward in the difficult reconstruction, with scarce materials, of the historical conditions which made possible the poetry of Sappho. His 'new paradigm' of the 'private poet' is an updated version of Denis Page's forty years back in *Sappho and Alcaeus,* in which Sappho becomes a playful London hostess with a penchant for her women friends. But Sappho's poetry is public and social, not private. The fragments do not "point to a woman in love with women of her own generation"; they make it unmistakeably clear that she was a paederast. As with Alcman's maiden songs, we must face honestly a certain type of sexual segregation which permits the expression of amorous bonding of or for unmarried girls. It is this openness in regard to homosexuality within a society whose continuity, like any, is based on heterosexual fulfillment which must be accounted for. What made it possible for a woman to become a pre–eminent poet in sixth–century Hellas? What made it possible for her to express publicly her passion for girls, her pain at their loss in marriage?

Sappho's feeling could not have been expressed openly unless it had been socially sanctioned, nor socially sanctioned unless religiously sanctioned. To separate Sappho from religion, as Parker does, is to take her out of her own society. Her hymn to Aphrodite is for public performance before a cult statue. We have to explain why a public hymn could be composed and sung asking the goddess of love to bring a girl to requite Sappho's desire. There is no sense that what is being asked for is forbidden. There is no sense that the speaker is oppressed by male domination or defying male proscription. There is no hint of rebellion or 'liberation,' but rather the unargued assumption of social practice backed by religious belief, the belief that the goddess can and should bring the girl to Sappho's embrace. Such a belief has nothing in common with the current sexual scene in which Parker attempts to read Sappho.

From the variety of girls as objects in the other poems, we would know what the Hymn to Aphrodite makes clear in the goddess' question ("Who now, who this time, who is your new love?"): these are temporary bondings, not long–term associations with mature women. One love replaces another. Page makes this playful, but it is expressive of a series, as in Diotima's first rung in the ladder, one boy replacing another. Five times (27, 49, 122, 132, 155 Loeb)

Sappho uses the generic term for a girl or boy love, *pais*, twice without name, once with Athis, once of Kleis, once with a patronymic. (Note that the patronymic modifies *pais*, which should not then be read as daughter a second time.) LSJ tendentiously omits this significance of *pais* and tries to exclude its possibility by contrasting *pais* and *paidion*. This double meaning, child or darling, still obtains in modern Greek.

Sappho, then, has clearly identified the age group in which her loves bloomed. (If we have dispensed with Sappho's Comic husband, it is time to dismiss the putative daughter he is said to have sired, from whose name a mother's has been extrapolated. Kleis is another love.) As in Alcman, this love is given public poetic voice, and hence in its society is acceptable. In the nature of things, we are not in a position to define the type or limits set for its physical expression, but without lending support to the school of 'innocence,' it should be borne in mind that such youthful love–making is under restraints that do not apply to adult Lesbianism: these girls enter marriage as virgins, as, in fact, *pais* (113).

Like its parallel, male paederasty, this love–making must serve a social end, in this case, by the separation of the sexes at adolescence, the preservation of female virginity for marriage. But for the period of segregation there is no proscription of amorous fulfillment. The segregation is temporary, relations, if intense, evanescent, and from Sappho's point of view destined for pain. Hence the emphasis on recollection, past love, or the pinpointing of the moment of passage of the beloved into male possession. For the separation of the sexes is not only temporary; it is subordinated to heterosexual completion, and the woman who mourns the loss of love in marriage is called on to compose wedding hymns. Nor are these 'private'; they are the public celebration of the bonding of exogamous families or clans, sometimes, in Sappho's case, families from widely separated cities.

But we have not only to explain the public expression of Sappho's love, but her emergence as a great woman poet. That should force us to review the status of women in Mytilene; the individual poet, her function and status, can not be read apart from that of the women of her society. And that generic woman–status can not be separated from the centrality of the worship of divinity in female form. One major barrier to our understanding of Sappho is our larger refusal to see how deeply religious equality of the sexes ran in Greece. We cannot grasp Sappho, woman as poet, apart from the centrality of goddess worship, the function of women in that worship, and also the attitude of men towards women derived from this social function, woman supervision of the attendance on cult practice, procession, song, correct ritual act. There

must have been a rare degree of sexual cultural equality in Lesbos for Sappho to emerge, flourish, and acquire preeminence as poet throughout Hellas. Her preeminence can not be explained by describing her as a poet like any poet going about her business of composing poems to or about her friends.

To become a poet Sappho had to be trained, in expression and composition, and we would most naturally suppose that such training was that of other aristocratic Mytilenean girls. As a poet, then, *she is both product and purveyor of education.* Parker errs grievously in reducing the role of poet in Hellas to that of the individual nineteenth– or twentieth–century writer with no social role or function.

Poetry, its composition and performance, *is* education for the Greeks. We must dispense with any notion of formal schooling, of academies, of diplomas. Beyond the primary level, education is the transmission of skills from one generation to the next, and for all craft or social practice by chosen exemplars of each special skill. The same holds true for knowing the myths and codes of one's society, its 'history,' 'religion,' one's place in the world. For Archaic Greece, poetry is the medium of the transmission of such information, and, before the rise of sophists and philosophers, the poet is the teacher par excellence. As practicing poet, Sappho in Greek terms is *ipso facto* schoolmistress. There is, of course, no school, only the group of girls selected for this year's festivals, weddings, poetic contests. No one enrolls, no one graduates, but for a season, or several, young trained women provide the verbal/musical support and knowledge of the Muses for the society. It may be, as the Suda and one ancient critic (214b) tell us, that Sappho's fame as poet had spread to attract girls from Colophon and Miletus as her students, though most usually such training would have been local and family governed.

Cult is not coterie, marriages are not 'private,' a poet is a civic representative of the Muses, and a woman poet is the link in the transmission via women of a society's musical/verbal heritage, and so *per forza* a teacher.