A Diachronic Reading of Sappho fr. 16 LP[*]

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For my dear mother, Gloria

According to some recent scholarship, fr. 16 LP portrays Helen in an entirely positive light.[1] She is seen as providing "a positive example of erotic self-fulfillment" and "a justification of [the poetic speaker's] passion for Anaktoria." "Sappho's Helen ... is held up as proof that it is right to desire one thing above all others." "Helen ... acted, pursuing the thing she loved, and for that action, Sappho celebrates her." "Helen is [the poetic speaker's] revered example of … libido in action," and so on.[2] These interpretations, while in some ways divergent, all understand fr. 16 LP to rate erotic desire as the highest value and to commend Helen for doing the same. Thus they contravene earlier scholarship, most of which takes one of three views: fr. 16 LP either censures the traditional figure of Helen as she is reflected in this poem, or censures Helen's elopement, though excusing Helen herself as overwhelmed by Aphrodite, or else censures neither Helen nor her elopement but also does not commend them.[3]

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[1]References to Sappho are to Lobel and Page (LP). Translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

[2]Snyder 77; Race 19; Winkler 72; duBois 1984: 102; Bagg 75. See also duBois 1995: 115–26 and esp. 124.

[3]For the view that fr. 16 LP censures Helen, see esp. Theander, Fraenkel, and Howie. Scholars who argue that fr. 16 LP censures Helen's elopement but not Helen herself include Schadewaldt, Barkhuizen and Els, and Saake. For the interpretation that fr. 16 LP neither censures nor commends Helen or her elopement with Paris, see esp. Eisenberger, Lobel and Page, Koniaris, Calame, and Thorsen.

These positive and negative (or at best neutral) interpretations seem to mirror changes in modern attitudes toward uxorial fidelity and women's roles in relation to others. Despite their differences, however, both sets of interpretations of Helen's character and actions share a "synchronic" perspective, by which I mean that they draw on all of the poem's images without regard for their sequential deployment in time. These synchronic approaches produce monolithic readings. Such readings, whether they censure or valorize Helen, cannot accommodate what I consider to be a contradictory deployment of the Helen myth in fr. 16 LP.

There is a real desideratum in interpreting poetry such as Sappho's for "diachronic" approaches that treat images sequentially and thereby take into account the actual listening process: as the narrative unfolds the audience revises its interpretation of character and action while also anticipating what lies ahead.[4] Sappho exploits the diachrony inherent in oral performance to manipulate audience expectations. Such a tactic is by no means confined to poetry designed for oral performance. Later authors exploit the reading process to achieve effects similar to those Sappho had achieved through oral performance. Sappho's legacy thus extends to Roman authors such as Horace, in whose poetry Nietzsche identified qualities that invite diachronic and recursive interpretations:

> This mosaic of words, in which every word by sound, by position
> and by meaning, diffuses its influence to right and left and over the
> *whole* [emphasis mine]; the minimum in compass and number of
> symbols, the maximum achieved in the effectiveness of those symbols.[5]

In this paper, then, and with reference to modern reception theory, I will consider how the key terms of Sappho fr. 16 LP progressively require re-readings of the Helen parable in stanzas two and three, and at the same time anticipate themes and diction whose subsequent realization or non-realization further shapes our interpretation.[6]

First, the poem:

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[4]Stehle does not use the term diachronic, but takes an approach to fr. 16 LP, in some ways similar to the one I describe here, that also produces new results.

[5]From "Was ich an den Alten verdanke" in *Götzen-Dämmerung* (Leipzig 1889), translated at Wilkinson 4. This comment on Horatian odes would seem to apply to much of Greek as well as Latin lyric poetry.

[6]Introductions to reception theory and related approaches include: Iser 1974, 1978, 1980: 50–69; Fish 1980, 1981; Holub.

ο]ἰ μὲν ἰππήων στρότον οἰ δὲ πέσδων
οἰ δὲ νάων φαῖσ’ ἐπ[ὶ] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν’ ὅτ-
τω τις ἔραται·

πά]γχυ δ’ εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι   5
π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ’, ἀ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἐλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα
τὸν [πανάρι]στον

καλλ[ίποι]σ’ ἔβα ’ς Τροΐαν πλέοι[σα
κωὐδ[ὲ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων   10
πά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθη, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ’ αὔταν
]σαν

]αμπτον γὰρ [
]κούφως τ[   ]οη[ ]ν   15
]με νῦν Ἀνακτορί[ας ὀ]νέμναι-
σ’ οὐ] παρεοίσας,

τᾶ]ς ⟨κ⟩ε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα
κἀμάρυχμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω
ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κἀν ὄπλοισι
πεσδομ]άχεντας.[7]   20

Some say a company of horsemen
Is τὸ κάλλιστον upon the black earth,
Others say it is a company of infantry,
Yet others a fleet of ships, but I say it is whatever one desires.

It is very easy to make this understood
To all, since she who surpassed other humans
In beauty, Helen, deserted her husband,
A most excellent man,

And sailed off to Troy
And forgot entirely her child and parents,
But [   ]
] led her astray.

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[7]The text is that of LP, with three exceptions. I follow Campbell and Voigt in giv-
ing κἀν ὄπλοισι (19) unobelized and supplementing πεσδομ]άχεντας for
μ]άχεντας in 20. Also, I end fr. 16 LP at verse 20, as do Page, Campbell, and others.
Sublinear dots are omitted. On the extreme fragmentation of Sappho fr. 16 LP, see
especially "Sappho's Helen and the Problem of Text" in Austin.

]
] lightly [
Reminds me now of Anaktoria,
Who is absent.

I would rather see her lovely walk
And the radiant sparkle of her face
Than the Lydian chariots and infantry
In arms.

In brief, I will argue that the first "reading" of the Helen parable is prepared for by the first stanza and the beginning of the second. These verses mark the object of one's erotic desire as τὸ κάλλιστον and thus prepare the audience for a sympathetic treatment of Helen in the parable. This is to some extent realized. Further, with the completion of the parable we are invited to understand that the object of one's erotic desire supersedes all other concerns. Even so, key terms of the parable also invite a negative re-reading of Helen's actions, and consequently of the notion that the object of one's erotic desire is the highest value. These conflicting readings invited by the parable prepare in turn for positive and negative views of the poetic speaker's erotic desire for Anaktoria in the last two stanzas. Both of these views are realized, and also invite further re-readings of the parable and the poem's opening verses. By my proposed diachronic interpretation, then, fr. 16 LP validates competing judgments about the relationship of Helen and Paris, and of the poetic speaker and her lover Anakto-ria. These competing judgments, in turn, affirm and critique the notion that fulfillment of erotic desire is the highest value.

Let us now consider the poem in some detail. The first stanza ("Some say a company of horsemen Is τὸ κάλλιστον upon the black earth ... but I say it is whatever one desires") makes the point that the object of one's desire is τὸ κάλλιστον for that individual. The neuter gender of the terms κῆν᾽ and ὄττω (3–4) allows possible objects of desire to include such *things* as cavalry, infantry and ships.[8] The opening of the second stanza reveals however that the poetic speaker herself has in mind desire for another person: "It is very easy to make this [that the object of one's desire is τὸ κάλλιστον] understood To all, since she who surpassed other humans in beauty, Helen ...." The signification of ἔραται (4) thus retroactively shifts from non-erotic to erotic desire, and the

[8]See esp. Fraenkel 211 and Wills 438 on Sappho's inclusive formulation of τὸ κάλλιστον.

poetic speaker seems to oppose as a matter of personal preference the male pursuit of military κλέος with the female pursuit of erotic fulfillment.[9]

The poetic speaker next uses the Helen myth to prove her understanding of erotic desire, and at the same time this understanding prepares for a sympathetic view of Helen in the parable. Since the person whom one desires is τὸ κάλλιστον, it was natural for Helen to elope with Paris (characterized by analogy as someone she desired).[10] The remainder of the second stanza and the third then realize this sympathetic treatment of Helen, insofar as they avoid any explicit condemnation of her and even omit entirely the dire consequences of her actions for Troy—in sharp contrast with Alcaeus fr. 42 LP, which both opens and closes with the devastation Helen brings to her in-laws, their people and their city.[11]

We saw above that the signification of ἔραται (4) retroactively shifts from non-erotic to erotic desire with the introduction of the Helen parable. With the completion of the parable, we are invited again to re-read, and now expand our understanding of the poetic speaker's notion of erotic desire in the first stanza. Since Helen gave up everything else to follow Paris to Troy, we are now invited to infer that the object of one's erotic desire, in addition to being τὸ κάλλισ-τον, also supersedes all other concerns (as a result of being τὸ κάλλιστον).

The poem's opening verses, in sum, promote a sympathetic evaluation of Helen's elopement that is to some extent realized in the second and third stanzas, which also mark the object of one's erotic desire as the highest value. Yet several key terms used to introduce the actual parable in the second stanza invite another reading of Helen's act. While not ultimately excluding a positive evaluation, these terms nevertheless elicit blame from the audience by contrasting Helen's behavior with the social conventions of uxorial fidelity. For Sappho's Helen not only leaves, but abandons (καλλ[ίποι]σ' 9) her husband. He is described, moreover, by a morally evaluative term ([πανάρι]στον 8) that casts him in a positive light, in direct contrast to the manner in which Helen is herself introduced (6–7 ἀ … πόλυ περσκέθοισα / κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων).[12] Further,

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[9]See Rissman 34–38 on the company of horsemen and infantry, and the fleet of ships as undoubtedly alluding to Homer.

[10]The poem already shows a shift of perspective in referring to Helen as preeminent in beauty and then using her as a judge of beauty. See esp. Stehle 222.

[11]See esp. Howie 221–22, Barner 221, and Fredricksmeyer 100–4 for more on the negative treatment of Helen in Alcaeus fr. 42 LP.

[12]For the reconstruction of [πανάρι]στον (8), see Lobel and Page. Austin 58 thinks that "the best of men" or "the best of husbands" (ἄνδρα … [πανάρι]στον)

Helen abandons her husband for the sake of a man who would have been notorious to Sappho's audience for falling short of the standards of behavior required by the heroic code: as Helen says of Paris in the *Iliad*, "Would that I were married to a better man, one who could recognize the indignation (νέμεσις) and considerable shame (αἴσχεα) of men" (6.350–53). It is important to observe in this context that in fr. 16 LP Sappho makes no attempt to reverse this preexisting and largely negative characterization of Paris.

In abandoning also her own child and parents, Helen obviously violates the most basic responsibilities borne by an adult woman in ancient Greece. Further, Sappho's Helen not only abandons but also forgets entirely her child and parents (10–11 οὐδὲ ... πά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθη).[13] She thus contrasts negatively with Helen in Homer, to whom fr. 16.7–11 LP most likely allude:

> ὡς ὄφελεν θάνατός μοι ἀδεῖν κακὸς ὁππότε δεῦρο
> υἱέϊ σῷ ἑπόμην, θάλαμον γνωτούς τε λιποῦσα
> παῖδά τε τηλυγέτην καὶ ὁμηλικίην ἐρατεινήν. (*Il*. 3.173–75)

> Would that evil death had pleased me when to this place I followed your [Priam's] son, leaving behind my bedroom and kin and child and lovely friendships.[14]

The fact that fr. 16 LP characterizes Helen's desertion as an act of forgetting may be of further significance: a recent study of the *Odyssey* has shown that forgetfulness is regularly associated in Archaic Greek thought with the loss of the social conventions that govern civilized Greek behavior, while memory is associated with a return to Greek civilization in a literal and figurative sense.[15]

Negative terminology continues in line 11 with Sappho's use of παράγαγε to say that some force, generally agreed by scholars to be Eros or Aphrodite,

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does not fit Menelaus. But poets certainly have this kind of latitude in portraying their characters, and the superlative [πανάρι]στον contributes to Sappho's poetic rhetoric in this ode—the contrast between the superlatives (κάλλιστον/[πανάρι]στον) reinforces the partly negative undertone of the parable.

[13]duBois 1984: 96 argues that μνα- of ἐμνάσθη plays on the etymological connection between the roots μαν- and μαιν-, thereby suggesting madness in Helen's forgetfulness of her parents and child.

[14]See Rissman 41 and Race 24, and compare *Il*. 3.139–40.

[15]Cook 51, 57–59, 61.

misled Helen.[16] This element of compulsion would seem to cast Helen as victim, in agreement with the characterization of love-struck figures throughout much of Greek and Roman literature and especially lyric poetry. And yet it should be observed, with respect to this last point, that Archaic Greek literature commonly uses divine will to rationalize human error without in the process exonerating the agent of responsibility.[17] Word order in the second and third stanzas corroborates the negative undertone conveyed by word choice. Helen's act of sailing to Troy (ἔβα 'ς Τροΐαν πλέοι[σα) in line 9 is framed by her act of abandonment ([τὸ]ν ἄνδρα / τὸν [πανάρι]στον καλλ[ίποι]σ') in the final verses of the second stanza, and by her total forgetfulness (κωὐδ[ὲ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων / πά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθη) in lines 10–11.

As Howie points out, the Helen parable also invokes the injunction often found in archaic literature against rejecting the Near for the Far.[18] In itself the statement that Helen went to Troy merely follows the tradition reflected in Homer (although Sappho could certainly have drawn from other traditions current in the archaic period according to which Helen never went to Troy).[19] Rather than simply following this tradition, however, the poetic speaker brackets the statement that Helen went to Troy with terms ([πανάρι]στον and οὐδὲ … πά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθη) that give the physical distance between Greece and Troy a potentially "moral" significance. Sappho fr. 16 thus implies that Helen forsook both advantage and obligation—advantage because Menelaus was [πανάρι]στον, and her own obligation since the verb μιμνήσκομαι expresses the notion "to be mindful of an obligation," in this case the traditional obligation of a mother for her child and a daughter for her parents (whom Sappho calls φῖλοι in line 10 to stress the point).[20] In support of Howie's overall reading of this passage, I

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[16]On παράγαγε in Sappho fr. 16 LP, see esp. Most 16 n. 32. Howie 216 observes that "παράγαγ(ε) belongs to a class of verbs used of superior powers when they mislead mortals." See further Pucci 16–18.

[17]On "double motivation," especially in Homer, see Lesky; Nilsson; Chantraine 77; Dodds 17; Calhoun 24–25; Grube 74.

[18]Howie 215–17.

[19]See Fredricksmeyer, esp. 108–19.

[20]The same theme is seen at *Pyth.* 3.8–37, where Pindar says about the Boeotian girl Coronis, who slept with a stranger from Arcadia while already pregnant by Apollo, "There exists among mortals a most vain breed, the sort of person who disgraces what belongs to his own country and gazes at what is far away, chasing after wind-borne things with unfulfillable hopes." See Young and Hubbard (ch. 1 with

would add that the poetic speaker underlines the injunction against rejecting the Near for the Far by piling up three verbs in a single verse that emphasize her departure: καλλ[ίποι]σ᾽, ἔβα, and πλέοι[σα (9).

So far, I have considered the following points. First, that the opening verses mark the object of one's (preferably) erotic desire as τὸ κάλλιστον. This notion of erotic desire prepares for a sympathetic evaluation of Helen which the parable allows us to maintain largely through its failure to condemn her actions or even to mention their social consequences. Next, that with the completion of the parable we can also infer that the object of one's erotic desire, in addition to being τὸ κάλλιστον, supersedes all other concerns. Third, that key terms starting in the final verses of the second stanza, the word order of these terms, and their injunction against rejecting the Near for the Far also invite a negative assessment of Helen's actions. And finally, that this negative assessment invites a critical re-reading of the positive treatment of erotic desire in the opening verses, as well as in the parable. I would suggest that while Sappho's poetic speaker ranks fulfillment of erotic desire above all other values, Sappho herself indicates that such valuation can involve conflicting results. Such results are revealed in the Helen parable, and will characterize the poetic speaker's relationship with Anaktoria in the last two stanzas.

We have noted that the parable's negative assessment of Helen invites a critical re-reading of the poetic speaker's positive evaluation of erotic desire in the first three stanzas. At the same time, the combined positive and negative elements of the Helen parable prepare for a contrast in the final two stanzas between the pleasurable and painful aspects of the poetic speaker's relationship with Anaktoria. Before turning to this contrast, however, let us make another observation. With the identification in the last two stanzas of the poetic speaker's lover as a woman, the audience is again invited to revisit the first stanza's treatment of erotic desire. The poetic speaker opposes as a matter of personal preference the male pursuit of military κλέος with the female pursuit of erotic fulfillment, including with another woman.[21]

Let us now turn to the contrast in the final two stanzas between the pleasurable and painful aspects of the poetic speaker's relationship with Anaktoria. The focus of the parable on those whom Helen abandoned alerts us to the signifi-

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further references) for extended examinations of the rejection of the Near for the Far in *Pyth*. 3.

    [21]The gender of the terms κῆν᾽ and ὄττω (3–4) allows possible objects of desire to include not only things as well as persons, as noted above, but also persons of either sex.

cance in the penultimate stanza of Anaktoria's absence (16 οὐ] παρεοίσας) for the poetic speaker, who is analogous to Menelaus, while Anaktoria parallels Helen.[22] Just as Menelaus longed for Helen who was absent from Sparta, the poetic speaker longs for the absent Anaktoria.[23] The very word *Anaktoria* would seem to mark the alignment of the poetic speaker with Menelaus and Anaktoria with Helen: the name is an adjectival form of ἄναξ (lord, master), namely ἀνακτόριος.[24] Criticism of the passage has failed to exploit the implication of Anaktoria's name that she pursues her own path without reference to the poetic speaker, just as Helen did without taking Menelaus into account.

Positive elements of the parable, in contrast, prepare for pleasurable aspects of the relationship between the poetic speaker and Anaktoria in the final stanza. The erotic (in this case specifically sensory) aspect of the poetic speaker's desire for Anaktoria is highlighted by her wish in lines 17–18 to see Anaktoria's "lovely walk And the radiant sparkle of her face" (ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα / κἀμάρυχμα λάμπρον ... προσώπω).[25] The poetic speaker is thereby realigned with Helen, in that she finds herself subject to the physical charms of Anaktoria, just as Helen was subject to those of Paris.

As prepared for by the parable, then, the last two stanzas invite conflicting views about erotic desire. The penultimate stanza stresses the pain that erotic desire can cause. In the process it also reaffirms that part of the parable which critiques the notion that the object of one's erotic desire is the highest value. The last stanza, on the other hand, reaffirms the parable's positive treatment of erotic desire by stressing the pleasure it can induce. The poetic speaker thus concludes by reinforcing her own proposition concerning desire in the first three stanzas. At the same time, by placing the poetic speaker in the position of both

[22]As far as I am aware, Bagg 68–69 and Merkelbach esp. 13–14 are the only scholars to have equated the poetic speaker with Menelaus, and Bagg 68–69, 75 the only one to have equated the poetic speaker with Helen (see below) as well as Menelaus.

[23]Howie 222 understands Sappho to omit mention of Paris' name (as far as we know) partly because he and Anaktoria are parallel figures and Sappho wants to ensure that her "feelings [for Anaktoria] are not made parallel to those of a woman to a man." Stehle 223 writes: "The result of eliding mention of Paris is that the relationship between Helen and Paris remains unspecified, the phallus unlocated, the hierarchy [of conventional, heterosexual relationships] suspended." I would also suggest that Sappho, by omitting the name of Paris as well as that of the person(s) because of whom Anaktoria is absent, encourages us to equate the two women.

[24]See Snyder 69.

[25]See Stehle 222–25 on the poetic speaker's gaze and female subjectivity.

Menelaus and Helen vis-à-vis Anaktoria, the last two stanzas together reveal τὸ κάλλιστον as a much more complex perception than it initially appeared to be. Erotic desire induces pleasure, but is also revealed to cause pain even for the listener who is willing to reject social norms in its favor.

Fr. 16 LP's closure (19–20 "the Lydian chariots and infantry In arms") invites a final, ironic (re)view of the opposition between erotic desire and other more conventional values associated with epic in the first stanza (as opposed to values associated with marriage in the parable). The Trojan War, caused by one woman's experience of τὸ κάλλιστον, created the opportunity for the Lydians of fr. 16 LP's final verses—as participants in the war—to realize their own personal enjoyment of τὸ κάλλιστον. In addition, while the language of the first stanza allows possible objects of desire to include things associated with war, the poetic speaker herself clearly prefers erotic desire for another woman. In the process, she valorizes not only love poetry, but also erotic relationships between women, at the expense of epic. Yet Sappho does this by means of the woman "responsible" for the Trojan War and hence also for the Trojan cycle of war poetry.

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