

Sappho fr. 1: A New interpretation

LOUKAS PAPADIMITROPOULOS*

University of Athens, Athens, Greece

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

My purpose in this article is to propose a new reading of Sappho fr. 1 by suggesting that the poetic “I”, in fact, intends to rupture her ties with the past and to break her previous erotic habits by asking from the goddess of love to assist her in a relationship that will prove to be permanent and stable this time instead of her multiple and rather casual affairs that had thus far predominated in her love life.

KEYWORDS

Sappho, Aphrodite, love, rupture

Ποικιλόθρον' ἀθανάτ' Ἀφρόδιτα,
παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,
μή μ' ἄσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
4 πόντια, θῦμον,

ἀλλὰ τυῖδ' ἔλθ', αἶ ποτα κατέρωτα
τάς ἑμας αὐδας αἰοῖσα πῆλοι
ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα
8 χρύσιον ἦλθες

* Corresponding author. E-mail: lpapadim@phil.uoa.gr

- 12 ἄρμ' ὑπασδεύξαισα· κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον
ὥκεες στρουῖθοι περὶ γᾶς μελαίνας
πύκνα δίνεντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνω αἴθε-
ρος διὰ μέσσω·
- 16 αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο· σὺ δ', ὦ μάκαιρα,
μειδίασας' ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ
ἦρε' ὅττι δηῦτε πέπονθα κῶττι
δηῦτε κάλημμι
- 20 κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γενέσθαι
μαινόλαι θύμῳ· τίνα δηῦτε πείθω
.. σάγην ἐς σὺν φιλότατα; τίς σ', ὦ
Ψάφ', ἀδίκησι;
- 24 καὶ γὰρ αἱ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,
αἱ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει,
αἱ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει
κῶκ ἐθέλοισα.
- 28 ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λῦσον
ἐκ μερίμναν, ὅσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι
θῦμος ἱμέρρει, τέλεσον, σὺ δ' αὐτα
σύμμαχος ἔσσο.¹

Immortal Aphrodite, you who gains her throne with guile, child of Zeus, wile-weaver, I beseech you, do not overwhelm, mistress, my soul with surfeit and distress, but hither come, if ever at another time hearing my voice from afar you heeded, and leaving the golden house of your father you came, yoking your golden chariot; beautiful, swift sparrows led you around the black earth whirling their wings fast from the sky's ether through mid-air; quickly they arrived; and you, o blessed one, smiling on your immortal face, asked me what I had suffered again and why I was calling you again and what I was most wanting to happen for me in my mad heart; whom again shall I persuade to come to your love? Who, Sappho, wrongs you? For if she flees, soon she will pursue, and if she does not receive gifts, she will give, and if she does not love, soon she will love, even if she does not want to. Come to me now too, release me from harsh care, fulfill as many things as my soul desires to fulfill, and you yourself be my ally.

Numerous studies have been devoted to this poem of Sappho and yet, despite their partial diversities, nearly all of them comply to a common interpretative thread: the poetess has once again fallen in love and requests from her divine patron to offer her assistance in bending the will of her object of desire, as she had done in the past.² This view implies that her present

¹The text is that of VOIGT (1971). All translations are mine.

²A notable exception is RIVIER (1967), who believes that the “injustice” committed by the girl referred to by Aphrodite is the fact that she had abandoned Sappho’s circle of friends. Cf. CALAME (1977) 368–369. On the other hand, GIACOMELLI (1980) makes the interesting claim that verses 21–24 of the poem imply that the revenge of Aphrodite consists of the fact that the pursued girl will be eventually cast into the role of the pursuer and that her love for another person (not identical to Sappho) will remain unrequited. However, I believe that the double use of ταχέως (21 and 23) encourages us to think that this other person is none other than Sappho. Finally, SCHLESIER (2016) 376 suggests that Sappho’s present request is different from those of the past and possibly involves immortality.



petition to Aphrodite is merely a link in a chain of similar invocations that took place in the past and that, judging from the deity's playful and, perhaps, mildly condescending smile, will in all probability go on in the future. My purpose in this article is to challenge this line of interpretation by suggesting that the poetic "I", in fact, intends to rupture her ties with the past and to break her previous erotic habits by asking from the goddess of love to assist her in a relationship that will prove to be permanent and stable this time instead of her multiple and rather casual affairs that had thus far predominated in her love life. After all, Aphrodite was known in antiquity to have two "faces": one more carnal and licentious and another one more spiritual and exclusive. Therefore, if my argument is valid, Sappho's poem is a quite interesting and unconventional variation of a cletic hymn, an example of how a mortal is subtly trying to actually manipulate a god in granting to her a favor that will alter the very nature of the deity's constant influence.

The key to this alternative meaning is actually provided by a word in the first stanza which has been constantly and consistently misinterpreted or overlooked by the majority of scholiasts and translators alike. ἄσαιοσι (3) is invariably mistakenly considered to be semantically tautologous to the next noun, ὀνείαιοσι, and taken to mean "sorrows", "pain" or "heartache". However, the primary meaning of the word is actually more relevant to the notion of saturation, to being filled with something and, consequently, feeling fed up with it.³ Therefore, ὀνείαιοσι is the unpleasant feeling accompanying saturation, but not quite identical to it. By using the plural number Sappho refers to the numerous instances that Aphrodite has fulfilled her prayers, compelling, thus, the poetess' objects of desire to reciprocate her passion. However, it is precisely this total responsiveness on the part of the loved one that creates, in its turn, the eventual disinterest of the poetic "I"; after all, we usually desire either what we cannot have or that which we do not possess entirely. And it is this recurrent pattern of first falling in love and subsequently losing interest, when this love is fulfilled after the deity's drastic intervention, that creates a vicious circle from which Sappho wishes to escape.

This interpretation imposes a different structure to the customary cletic hymn, whose form Sappho here exploits for her artistic aims.⁴ In particular, the Sanction (*hypomnêmê*), where the credentials of the mortal are established through the reference to the services that the god has already provided to the devotee, has a different content than the Invocation, that is the formal opening, and the concluding Entreaty. In this respect, it would be more useful to divide the poem to two different temporal levels, the past (containing the Sanction) and the present (featuring the Invocation and the Entreaty).⁵ This structure underlines the fact that Sappho's current petition is intended to initiate a break in the form of relationship that has so far associated her with her protective goddess. And this rupture is, almost cryptically, denoted by

³See *LSJ* s.v. ἄση with verbal parallels. Cf. *PAGE* (1955) 6, *CASTLE* (1958) 70, *BURNETT* (1983) 252 n. 60. Interestingly enough, this knowledge has not affected those scholars' interpretation of the poem. A derivative verb from the same word appears in one of Sappho's newly found fragments which has been entitled "Kypriis Song". I believe that scholars should seriously consider the possibility that the poetess also refers there to the experience of erotic saturation, a notion which alters radically the interpretations given so far to this fragment. This is especially true, if we accept Obbink's reconstruction (πῶς κε δὴ τις οὐ θαμέως ἄσαιτο/Κύπρι, δέσποιν', ὅτινα [δ]ή φίλ[ησι,]/[κωῦ] θέλοι μάλιστα πάθαν χάλ[ασσαι;] etc.). See *OBINK* (2016) 26–27 and 33.

⁴On this structure, see *BOWRA* (1961) 200.

⁵Cf. *STEHLE* (2009) 121.



the vagueness of the poetess' concluding request, which gives us the impression that what she asks for from Aphrodite is a secret meant to be kept between the deity and the poetic "I".⁶ However, there are certain verbal indications, strategically and subtly employed and placed by Sappho, which can lead us to surmise what precisely the content of this secretive request is.

The first one is the triple repetition of the word *θυμός* ("soul": 4, 18 and 27). The question we should ask ourselves is how exactly is Sappho's soul "subdued" by multiple instances of saturation and sorrows? The answer is provided by the second recurrence of the noun in the Sanction, where she herself characterizes her soul as "frenzied" (*μαινόλαι*, 18). Her heart's madness clearly consists in falling continuously in love and asking for Aphrodite's assistance, as is manifested by the triple repetition of the adverb "again" in the goddess' own words (*δηῦτε*, 15, 16 and 18). However, the third and final recurrence of the word appears in quite a different context. The verbs *ἠέρρει* and *τέλεσον* ("desire" and "fulfill", 26–27) carry more spiritual undertones than the adjective *μαινόλαι* ("mad"),⁷ supporting, thus, my claim that Sappho's present petition is not identical to her previous entreaties to the goddess. And the content of this petition is more clarified when we wonder why the ode closes with the rather unusual and peculiar word "ally" (*σύμμαχος*, 28) attributed to the goddess. Certain scholars have asserted that this term, imported from the realm of combat, is meant to suggest that for the Lesbian poetess Eros has an equal significance and weight to the one attributed by men to battle,⁸ but I think that a much more convincing interpretation would be to consider that Sappho has come to realize that all the help that Aphrodite has so willingly offered to her during the past was not in her best interest, that, in essence, she acted as an enemy, while now, by entreating her to assist her in the fruition of a much more spiritual (and may we add permanent?) relationship, the goddess will actually act as a real ally. If Sappho's concern was to keep receiving Aphrodite's assistance exactly as she had during the past, then she would not have applied the pronoun *αὐτά* ("you yourself") in line 27, but the adverb *αὔτε* ("again"), proposed by Purgold, but not accepted in most editions of the text.

Another key word that strongly differentiates Sappho's present request is the significant word *λῦσον* ("release", 25), which is often applied to the dissolution of spells. It has already been pointed out by several scholars that the sixth stanza, where Aphrodite explains to Sappho the precise action that she will undertake in order to curb her beloved's erotic unwillingness and reverse the roles, is actually the verbal enactment of a spell.⁹ What most commentators have failed to notice is that Aphrodite's spell is cast not only on Sappho's various objects of desire, but also on the poetess herself. For, as Page keenly notices, the revenge that the deity professes to her devotee involves not merely the beloved's immediate erotic acquiescence, but also the poetess'

⁶See also WEST (1970) 308.

⁷One of the meanings of the verb *τελέω* provided by LSJ is "initiate in the mysteries". The spiritual undertones of the word *ἠερος* are best elucidated in Plato's *Phaedrus* 251. Some of the symptoms of the Platonic lover – especially the unusual warmth he feels and his frenzy – are strikingly similar to the symptoms experienced by the poetic "I" in Sappho's fr. 31, symptoms evoked by the woman's *ἠέροεν* laughter. Of the six occurrences of words derived from *ἠερος* in Sappho's extant poetic corpus five of them carry a meaning which potentially pertains to an elevated form of love or desire (fr. 31. 5; 96. 16; 112. 4, 136; 137. 3).

⁸MARRY (1979) 80–81. See also RISSMAN (1983) 9–10, SVENBRO (1984) 71, DU BOIS (1995) 9.

⁹See SEGAL (1974) 149, BURNETT (1983) 254–255, WINKLER (1990) 173, PETROPOULOS (1993), THOMAS (1999) 8, JOHNSON (2007) 94–95.



eventual loss of interest, since she will then be the one to run away, to deny the gifts offered and to refuse her love.¹⁰ Erotic saturation unavoidably brings about disinterest. And, as Sappho herself has already informed us, this is a recurrent pattern, which keeps her confined in a seemingly ever-lasting circle of seeking love, experiencing complete erotic gratification and then seeking another love. It is this repeated process that renders the poetess a truly faithful devotee of Aphrodite. This is the reason why the goddess of love is always willing and prompt in offering her her aid. But this is also the cause of Sappho's present distress. By using the highly significant verb λῦσον, then, Sappho implicitly expresses to the goddess her desire to break out of this vicious circle and find true erotic fulfillment, something which can only be accomplished if Aphrodite dissolves her spells. In this context, the χαλέπαν μερίμναν ("harsh care") in lines 25–26 refers us, of course, back to the previously mentioned ἄσσαισι and ὀνίαισι (3).¹¹

The paradox that Aphrodite personifies for the poetess, that is the fact that she is both perceived as a kind of enemy that hinders her erotic fulfillment and that she is the only force who can extract her from this perceived stalemate, is mirrored in the contradictory epithets applied for her in the Invocation; while the goddess is referred to by the standard adjective "revered" (πότνια, 4), Sappho does not hesitate to call her also "weaver of wiles" (δολόπλακε, 2) and ποικιλόθρον' (1). It is as if she knows that the nature of their relationship allows her such an unusual degree of intimacy. Especially the adjective that opens the ode has, I believe, a meaning that graphically describes the special power of Aphrodite: ποικιλόθρον' should not be so much associated with magic garbs and embroidered charms,¹² but should rather be taken to suggest right from the outset that the power that the goddess of love wields, her "throne" that is to say, is gained and preserved by guile.¹³ It is this precise meaning that does not render the following adjective (ἄθανάτ', "immortal" 1) redundant;¹⁴ when this adjective reappears in the Sanction to describe Aphrodite's face (ἄθανάτῳ προσώπῳ, 14), we now know the real implication of her smile: the goddess smiles because she knows that Sappho's reason for calling her is just another one of those instances that will keep her indefinitely under her sway, while the adjective μάκαιρα ("blessed", 13) denotes that the deity herself is detached and finds herself out of this ever-lasting circle of human passions that she instigates. The poetess will continue falling in love, asking for the deity's help and, when her love will be requited, she will once again reach the point of saturation and seek a novel erotic experience. This is the reason why I believe that the most suitable emendation for lines 18–19 has been proposed by Van Bennekom (τίνα δηῦτε Πείθων/ αἶσ' ἄγην ἐς σὰν φιλότατα; "Whose turn it is this time to be led by Peitho to your love?").¹⁵

¹⁰PAGE (1955) 14–15. For a different interpretation of the passage involved, see BEATTIE (1957) 321, KONIARIS (1965), CAMPBELL (1967) 266, GERBER (1970) 165, Mc EVILLEY (2008) 153.

¹¹GERBER (1970) 165.

¹²As BOLLING (1958), PUTNAM (1960–61), LAWLER (1960–61), BURNETT (1983) 250, RISSMAN (1983) 4, SVENBRO (1984) 59, PETROPOULOS (1993) 53, NAGY (1996) 101, Mc EVILLEY (2008) 151 suggest. For a different view, see RENEHAN (1984).

¹³See also CASTLE (1958) 69, GERBER (1970) 162, KIRKWOOD (1974) 248.

¹⁴On the other hand, PACK (1974) asserts that its primary function is to point to Sappho's etymologizing of the name Aphrodite ('she who renders one ἄφρων'). Cf. WINKLER (1990) 171.

¹⁵VAN BENNEKOM (1972). SLINGS' (1988) emendation (τίνα δηῦτε Πείθων/φᾶς ἄγην ἐς σὰν φιλότατα; 'Who is it this time whom you ask Peitho to bring to loving you') is also possible.



The emphasis is here put on a novel erotic affair, on a new object of desire, not on some girl who has betrayed Sappho's affection and deserted her.

But if the petition of the present is intended to initiate a break from the past, if the two temporal levels are so different, what is the precise nature of their juxtaposition, what is their connection, apart from the fact that the past constitutes a foil to the present? Their actual point of contact is that the goddess has heard in the past Sappho's request and has responded immediately (5–7). The stress is laid on the verb ἐκλῦες ("you heeded"), not on the similarity of the erotic situations. On the other hand, the contrast between Zeus' golden palace,¹⁶ which Aphrodite leaves in order to come to the poetess' aid, and the "black earth", that she visits, underlines the importance that the goddess attaches to her relationship with Sappho; she considers her such a faithful worshiper of hers that even when she hears her calling from "afar" (πήλοι, 6), she arrives with her chariot drawn by sparrows¹⁷ "immediately" (αἰψα, 13). The two adverbs, thus, reinforce the intimacy of the relationship forged between deity and devotee and emphasize Aphrodite's responsiveness. And it is precisely this responsiveness that Sappho here attempts to exploit to her benefit by skillfully using a principle of persuasion which has been relatively recently termed as "commitment and consistency".¹⁸ By reminding Aphrodite that she had intervened many times in the past in her favor, Sappho thinks that she is more likely to convince her to offer her help right now (καὶ νῦν, 25), *even though* her request is different and changes the very nature of their relationship. Thus, with this ode we have at our disposal an interesting specimen where a mortal actually attempts to manipulate a god for her own ends.

This does not necessarily entail Sappho trying to disengage herself entirely from the influence of Aphrodite. As has been noted above, Aphrodite was known in Greek antiquity to have two sides: a carnal and libidinous one and a more spiritual. Pausanias in Plato's *Symposium* distinguishes between Aphrodite *Pandemos* and Aphrodite *Ourania* respectively (180c ff.).¹⁹ Thus, Sappho in this Ode essentially asks the goddess to show her the latter side; she does not

¹⁶There is some controversy whether χρύσιον ("golden") defines δόμον or ἄρμ' ("house" or "chariot", 7–9). In favor of the first possibility are CAMPBELL (1967) 265, SKIADAS (1981) 119, DE VRIES-SLINGS (1991) 405, HUTCHINSON (2001) 153. In favor of the second, see PAGE (1955) 7, CASTLE (1958) 70. Personally, I agree with GERBER (1970) 164 and RISSMAN (1983) 3 that it can modify both nouns. As far as the mention of Zeus is concerned, it seems to me that Aphrodite is purposefully called by Sappho παῖ Διός ("child of Zeus", 2) because, in the context of Sappho's invocation and assumption of a beneficent deity, she must be seen to be part of a functioning Olympian order, not a primordial chaotic force that defies its laws.

¹⁷I cannot discern any comical intention on the part of the poetess regarding this feature, as ZELLNER (2008) does. See also ZELLNER (2010) 24–25. I am more inclined to accept the more traditional notion that sparrows were chosen to draw Aphrodite's chariot because they were notorious for wantonness, as PAGE (1955) 7–8, CASTLE (1958) 70 and GERBER (1970) 164 note.

¹⁸See CIALDINI (1993) 57–113.

¹⁹Be it noted that Pausanias actually maintains that Aphrodite *Ourania* does not partake in the feminine, but exclusively in the male and refers to the love for young boys. However, I think that this concept can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to the love between women as well. I am aware that the comparison of Sappho's poem to Plato's dialogue might seem anachronistic, but we cannot preclude the possibility that Pausanias draws from earlier literary sources which have not been preserved. Particularly relevant is Pausanias' claim that those people who pursue eros ouranios intend to "spend their entire lives together and to live together in common" (181d).



ask her seclusion from the realm of erotic emotions, but merely the capacity to control them.²⁰ The abandonment of the sphere of Aphrodite *Pandemos* for that of Aphrodite *Ourania* could mean a sublimation of love, especially if we take into consideration that Pausanias in Plato's dialogue associates the former with meanness and with the love of the body alone as opposed to the love of the soul, which is linked with Aphrodite *Ourania*. Sappho, then, thinks that now is the time for her to seek a more permanent union, a union through which she can experience erotic fulfillment. It seems to me that her aim is to be faithful to someone considered by her as an ideal, eternal, unique lover reciprocating her sentiments. However, there is no trace in the text that she has already found this person. And if Sappho should succeed in what she asks Aphrodite for, this would essentially be her "last love poem", at least in the classical sense of the term and as evidenced in the other poems of "burning Sappho". Such an untypical poem would be really a perfect introduction for a book of poetry comprising the traditional collection of Sappho's works.²¹

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²⁰Also relevant, in this respect, is the chorus' wish in the first stasimon of Euripides' *Hippolytus* that Eros comes to them not in full force but in moderation (μηδ' ἄρρωθμος ἔλθοις, 529).

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