

Chapter One

Introduction

Sappho's poetry has been the subject of much scholarship and speculation from antiquity up to the present day. Various theories about her role in society, poetic voice and persona, and sexual orientation have been suggested among classicists, poets, and feminist scholars, yet she and her work remain elusive. Much remains to be understood, not least because many of these studies have applied post-classical concepts and models to the anomalous fact and nature of her poetry.¹ In particular, the subject of women's relationships in Sappho deserves both greater attention and a more nuanced approach. Both female friendships and female sexual or erotic relationships are central features of her poetry. While scholarship has examined some of the different features of female relationships in Sappho's work,² further study of their context, the forms that they took, and their meaning to the women who participated in them, is needed. My aim in this

¹ By anomalous fact, I mean the following: her sex (i.e., female), the quantity and quality of her poetry, and her lasting reputation in antiquity as one of the great poets of Greece.

² See, e.g., Ellen Greene, Eva Stehle, Claude Calame, and Judith Hallett.

thesis is to understand these female relationships in terms of archaic and ancient Greek culture, drawing on what is known about women's religion and oral poetry instead of using post-antique models that project modern constructs and institutions onto ancient attitudes and behaviors. I will argue here that female religious rituals offered Greek women opportunities for important, meaningful relationships and activities, and that they provide a crucial context for the female relationships found in Sappho's poetry.³

Sappho's life

Little is known of Sappho's biography. What has been pieced together from ancient sources as well as from Sappho's own work is still largely speculative, and only a few things can be said for certain. She was born some time around 630 BCE on the island of Lesbos in Greece (Campbell 260). She and her family are said to have been from either the city of Mytilene or Eressos (Rayor and Lardinois 4). Like many archaic Greeks, she lived in a sexually segregated society (P.A. Miller 1994: 89), in which space, time, and social roles were strongly gendered. Most scholars agree that Sappho must have been an aristocrat,⁴ and many claim that she was from an extremely wealthy, politically important family—perhaps one of the ruling families of Lesbos.⁵ She was clearly well educated in the works of both her literary predecessors and contemporaries, and had the financial, social, and material resources to become a poet. As part of an elite family, she would have had access to writing materials, tutors or teachers, and important works like

³ By "meaningful," I mean friendships that are important in a woman's life rather than, say, casual acquaintances.

⁴ See Davenport 8, Reynolds 20.

⁵ See A. Miller (1996) 51.

the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁶ Such tools would have been essential for her to compose such a great amount of high-quality poetry, even in an oral society like archaic Lesbos, where the population was largely illiterate and the primary means of communication was verbal (Reynolds 16). Like her contemporary Alcaeus, Sappho composed in her native Aeolic dialect and in a variety of meters (Rayor 18). She is best known, however, for using in her lyric poems what is referred to today as the 4-line “Sapphic stanza” (Campbell 264).

Though the subject is highly debated among scholars,⁷ Sappho would almost certainly have been married, and it is likely that she had a child with her husband. It would have been nearly impossible for a citizen woman, especially an elite, politically important citizen woman, in archaic Greece to avoid marriage. To do so would have been to violate her civic duty and to undermine the interests of the *polis*. It is possible, however, that Sappho’s husband died when she was still young and that she lived the remainder of her life as a widow. Perhaps she simply did not take an interest in writing about her spouse, since it seems he did not interfere with her poetry or her relationships with other women. While most information about Sappho’s husband is speculation, one thing that is almost certain is that her husband’s name was not actually Kerkylas of Andros. This rather comedic name is a fabrication derived from a later comedy about Sappho (Rayor and Lardinois 4); her husband’s real name is not stated in any extant fragments. A daughter named Kleis is mentioned in a few fragments of her poetry, as are two brothers, Larichos and Charaxos.⁸

⁶ Her familiarity with Homeric texts is obvious from her engagement with them in poems 16 and 44. See also Reynolds 16.

⁷ See Reynolds 4.

⁸ See fragments 98b and 132, as well as the new fragment, “The Brothers”—though scholars disagree if this was actually written by Sappho.

Sappho was famous and beloved even in her own time, and thereafter throughout antiquity. There are references to Sappho and her works in several ancient sources, as well as celebrations of her and her poetry in art, on coins, and in ancient plays (Reynolds 69). Her poetry was widely performed and circulated orally in ritual, marriage, and festival contexts (Bennett 347). Her epithalamia were written for and performed at wedding ceremonies, and a great deal, if not all, of her lyric poems were probably performed locally. There is some controversy over the nature of the performance of Sappho's poetry. Some argue that the intimate nature of her poetry suggests it was meant for small, private performances only,⁹ while others maintain that Sappho led standing choruses of young women who performed her poems to a large public audience.¹⁰ The reality probably lies somewhere in between. Sappho's poetry was certainly meant for public performance, but was probably performed by Sappho herself or by informal groups or choruses of Sappho's companions instead of by an organized chorus of young girls.¹¹

Problems in Understanding Sappho

Several issues arise when it comes to understanding Sappho's poetry, her person, and the context in which she lived and wrote. One problem is the fragmentary nature of her corpus. Only one whole poem and around 40 fragments survive from what originally were nine books compiled and kept at the library of Alexandria (Campbell 261). Because

⁹ See Parker 1996a.

¹⁰ See Bennett 1994.

¹¹ See Parker and Bennett. See also Andre Lardinois (1996a) 150-172. Lardinois argues that at least some, if not all of Sappho's poetry was choral (151).

since what we have is “like all of Greek art...in ruins” (Davenport 10), it is difficult to determine the context of many of the fragments, or to conjecture what might have come before or after the surviving pieces. There is, moreover, a significant lack of recorded historical evidence for archaic Lesbos, and for archaic Greece in general. Some information can be gained from archaic artwork, but unlike classical Athens, which left abundant literary and historical texts, archaic Lesbos transmitted most information orally, so recorded texts are scarce (Reynolds 16). Much of what we know about popular religious traditions, social norms, and oral poetic performances of the time is gleaned from later sources, written decades and sometimes centuries afterward.¹² These post-archaic sources present scholars with the issue of historical bias and inaccuracy, and cannot be trusted to provide a clear picture of Sappho’s society.

It is thus particularly challenging to know anything for certain about women’s daily lives in archaic Greece, or about their relationships or interactions. Sappho’s poetry is in fact one of the key sources that gives us some information on women’s lives in this period. Classical Athenian texts—our largest source of written evidence near to Sappho’s time, besides the poetry of other archaic male poets like Alcman—excludes women from the historical record or represents them in a way that is more ideological than realistic. Some information exists on women’s religious rituals in classical Athens that can be plausibly applied to archaic Lesbos,¹³ as does information on the oral poetic traditions of

¹² Examples: the *Suda* (a 10th century CE Byzantine encyclopedia) and Ovid’s *Heroides*. Rayor and Lardinois note that the first explicit statements about female homoeroticism in Sappho are from the Hellenistic and Roman period, and these sources strongly condemn the practice; earlier testimonia portray Sappho as sexually attracted to men (5).

¹³ See Goff, Dillon, and Kraemer

the time.¹⁴ Official sources from antiquity, however, tend to exclude women or to present them with such bias and suspicion that it is nearly impossible to get an accurate understanding of women's lives and daily activities, far less their thoughts, feelings, and private relationships.

Most scholarship on Sappho falls into three main categories: transmission and reception, analysis of poetic voice and style, and analysis of themes. Scholars such as Joan DeJean, Page duBois, and Yopie Prins have examined various traditions of reception from Antiquity, to Victorian England, to 20th century France, while authors like Paul Allen Miller, Andre Lardinois, and Jack Winkler have discussed whether Sappho's poetry and poetic voice should be considered "communal and paradigmatic" (P.A. Miller 1994: 89) or "personal and subjective" (Winkler 1996a: 109). Eva Stehle is one of the primary scholars who has explored the theme of women's relationships in Sappho, particularly in her response to Hallett (1996a), who examines the evidence for and reception of Sappho's homosexuality both in antiquity and today. Stehle argues that while it is true that there is nothing in Sappho's poems that insists she herself practiced homosexual love (144), still, in her poetry, Sappho explores the effect of women's presence and absence and creates an image of homosexual love relationships in which there is mutual desire (149) and validation of that desire through physical expression (146).

Anachronistic models for understanding Sappho

¹⁴ See Calame, Greene 2005, P.A. Miller.

Scholars of Sappho have a tendency to try to categorize or label her, so as to understand her in terms that are familiar to the modern mind. Such work frequently attempts to “explain” Sappho and especially her social role and relationships with women according to anachronistic models that erroneously project modern biases onto the past. Of the many examples of this phenomenon, I mention only a few. Around 200 CE, for example, Roman poets, uncomfortable with Sappho’s homoeroticism, propagated a theory of “the two Sapphos” (Reynolds 74). The first evidence of this theory is found in Aelian’s *Historical Miscellanies* (c. 200 CE), where he writes that in archaic Lesbos there was another woman named Sappho who was not a poet, but a courtesan (Reynolds 74). The *Suda* takes this distinction as fact, identifying one Sappho as a lyric poet who wrote nine books of poems and who had an “impure friendship” with some of her female companions, and another who was a lyre-player who committed suicide after falling in love with a young man Phaon (Reynolds 74). This theory demonstrates the desire of scholars, even in antiquity, to make sense of Sappho according to their own cultural values, preconceived notions, and familiar models of women’s behavior.

In the 1970s, the psychologist George Devereux interpreted Sappho’s fragment 31 in psychoanalytic terms, claiming that in this fragment, Sappho exhibits signs of an anxiety attack that are indicative of the “*abnormal* nature” of her love and “proof positive” of her lesbianism (Devereux 1970: 17). Devereux states that Sappho, as a “masculine lesbian” (23) who identifies with and envies the man in the poem, participates in a love that is self-destructive and “abnormal” (27). Sappho thus comes across as little more than a depressed and sexually repressed neurotic with penis envy. Devereux tries to understand Sappho in terms of his own modern, psychoanalytic terms and constructs. In

doing so, he severely misinterprets not only the poem, but also Sappho's character, social role, and poetic ethos in general.

As Devereux notes, Sappho has also been called a schoolmistress and a games mistress, after the model of European boarding schools, as well as a chorus leader, priestess, and teacher of the arts of love.¹⁵ Such institutional models do not fit what we know of life in archaic Greece; there is particularly no evidence of publicly recognized and regulated institutions for female activities (poetic, religious, educational or otherwise). Rather, "Sappho's society was a group of women tied by family, class, politics, and erotic love...[I]t cooperated in ritual activities, cult practice, and informal social events" (Parker 1996a: 183). This description, while not perfect, comes closest to understanding Sappho on her own terms. As is clear from her poetry, Sappho did have close, meaningful relationships with women, and probably performed her poetry for and with them. She engaged in ritual and sexual activity with these women, and formed close friendships as well as erotic attachments. While not a schoolmistress, Sappho was certainly a lover of women.

Women's Only Religious Rituals in Ancient/Archaic Greece

Sappho's poetry is largely female-centric. With the exception of the epithalamia and the new "Brothers Poem," attributed to Sappho, her poetry focuses primarily on women and on occasions where women are the primary agents of action. As Stehle argues, Sappho tries to create an alternative female world, where the female experience,

¹⁵ Schoolmistress: Parker 150. Games mistress: Parker 151. Chorus Leader: Rayor and Lardinois 14-15. Priestess: Rayor and Lardinois 15. Teacher of love: Hallett 134-135.

the female voice, and relationships between women are explored instead of the traditional male-centered themes (Stehle 1996a: 145). Several fragments invoke female deities—Aphrodite and Hera—and appear to have been meant to recall female ritual contexts and occasions. Indeed, ritual and religion are some of the most common themes in Sappho’s work, and serve as the primary contexts in which Sappho is portrayed as interacting with other women in a meaningful manner. Where male sources tend to characterize female relationships and particularly female conversations as frivolous and dedicated to domestic, trivial, and erotic topics, Sappho shows women’s relationships as profound, deeply felt friendships or erotic/sexual relationships in which women have the opportunity to participate in collective ritual action that is important both to themselves and to the *polis*.

In the ancient world, religious rituals provided women with the opportunity to gather amongst themselves, socialize without the presence of men, and engage in important celebrations in honor of the goddesses. These rituals were often part of the official religion of the *polis* and were thus necessary to the continued functioning of the community. The women who participated in them felt valuable and needed by their fellow citizens.¹⁶ Religion was the one realm where women could participate in civic life (see, e.g., Goff 25). Women would not have perceived the activities performed within the contexts of these rituals as trivial or ridiculous.¹⁷ For the ancient Greeks, religion and social life were not divorced, and often such rituals were loud, joyous, even raucous, and

¹⁶ See, e.g., *Lysistrata* 66 (lines 647-651), where the title character talks of having performed various important religious functions for her city, including shedding her “saffron robe” at the Brauronia as a child and carrying “The Basket,” presumably at the Panathenaia, as a girl.

¹⁷ Stehle (2012) 191.

could involve such activities as drinking, dancing, and engaging in *aischrologia*, or ritual obscenities.¹⁸ Evidence of such rituals can be found in material culture, historical record, and literature. Although much of this evidence comes from classical Athens, many of the same group rituals that were performed during the 5th century BCE likely existed and were performed during Sappho's lifetime, and hence can be used as relevant examples. Indeed, we have no textual evidence of the religious rituals performed in archaic Lesbos, so there is no way of knowing about the local and regionally specific religious practices of Sappho's time. Moreover, since many ancient rituals were sex-segregated and their rites kept secret from the opposite gender,¹⁹ much information about female-only religious rituals was never recorded, and so remains a mystery. There are, however, some examples that can help shed light on the kind of female religious practices and experiences that Sappho invokes in her poetry.

Evidence of female-only religious rituals is recorded as early as the 8th century BCE in Homer. In Book 6 of the *Iliad*, Hector orders his mother Hecuba: "go yourself to the temple of the spoiler Athene, / assembling the ladies of honor, and with the things to be sacrificed, / and take a robe, which seems to you the largest and the loveliest /...Lay this along the knees of Athene the lovely-haired" (269-273). Hecuba follows his orders, and with "a throng of noble women" (296) goes to the temple of Athene and gives the robe over to the priestess Theano, who dedicates it. Supplicating Pallas Athena is thus perceived as the duty of the women of Troy, not the men, whose province is war. They

¹⁸ See Dillon's description of the Haloa, 120-124. The Adonia is another example of a lively female ritual.

¹⁹ Stehle (2012) 191.

engage in a sex-segregated collective activity that is important to the wellbeing of their city. Sappho and her companions probably did likewise.²⁰

The Thesmophoria is another female-only ancient ritual that existed long before classical Athenian times and was meaningful and enjoyable for its participants. In this ritual, married citizen women would gather together for three days to honor Demeter, taking over male political spaces and engaging in a variety of ritual activity (Stehle 2012: 192). On the first day of the festival, the women would set up their tents and perhaps perform a dedication involving the remains of piglets and grain. On the second day, they fasted, sitting on the ground or on mats made of branches of the *agnus castus* tree, which was thought to have anaphrodisiac powers (192). On day three, women banqueted and participated in *aischrologia*, which Stehle describes as “a form of mocking and sexually transgressive speech” (192).

The purpose of the Thesmophoria was to comfort and ritually mourn with Demeter at the loss of her daughter Persephone, so that Demeter would ensure the fertility of the fields and of the citizen population for the coming year (Dillon 110, 113). The women “constituted themselves as a community of mourners together with Demeter, who was an audience for their action” (Stehle 2012: 194). The ritual fasting on the second day was meant to recall Demeter’s fasting after the disappearance of Persephone, while the feasting on the third day emphasized the fertility of the citizen wives and the *aischrologia* recalled the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* wherein Iambe jokes with and thus cheers up Demeter (Dillon 113).

²⁰ Indeed, in the new fragment, “The Brothers,” Sappho tells her brother to let her be the intermediary with Hera on his behalf. She writes: “ἀλλὰ καὶ πέμπην ἔμε καὶ κέλ[η]εσθαι / πόλλα λίσσεσθαι βασίληαν Ἥραν / ἐξίκεσθαι τυίδε σάαν ἄγοντα / νῆα Χάραξον” (Obbink).

Evidence of this festival also appears in Aristophanes' *Women at the Thesmophoria* and the *Assemblywomen*. In both, the women undertake collective action in a ritual context (Stehle n.d.: 1), using the festival as a setting in which to plan activities subversive to the existing order. Though it is satirical, *Women at the Thesmophoria* gives some details about the ritual that are in a measure reliable. The Kinsman declares that on the middle day of the Thesmophoria, the courts are not in session and the council does not sit (96-97). Moreover, the women have come together in an assembly at the sanctuary of the Thesmophoroi, where they plan to vote and carry out an execution of Euripides (98-100). While the plan to kill Euripides reflects male paranoia about women's secret rituals more than the reality of these rituals, still this play provides evidence of the public nature of the ritual, its significance to the *polis*, and its function as a venue in which women had some agency and power. Indeed, this ritual would have been extremely meaningful to the women who participated. They were the only ones capable of mourning with and comforting Demeter, since they too understood what it felt like to lose a daughter in marriage. As Stehle states, the Thesmophoria was a context in which women could "set up an all-female community," in which women's power was acknowledged, and in which the women themselves created a space for their own agency (2012: 194).

Yet another sex-segregated religious ritual in ancient Greece was the Adonia, a yearly ritual for Aphrodite to lament the death of her young lover, Adonis. Women carried pots of sprouted seeds up to their roofs, as a recollection of how Aphrodite laid Adonis in a bed of lettuce as he was dying (Dillon 163). Again, most of our evidence for this festival comes from Athenian sources, but as Dillon writes it should be assumed that

Adonis had similar rites performed for him throughout Greece (163). The ritual was not a public event in which the whole *polis* participated, but was performed by private individuals in their own homes. Citizen women, prostitutes, and perhaps even metics performed this ritual (165). In his play *Samia*, Menander describes an annual celebration of the Adonia through the dialogue of the young man Moschion. Moschion claims that his father's mistress, a former prostitute, went to their neighbors' house to celebrate Adonis' festival, and that the festival "involved a lot of fun" and was carried on all night (35-45). The women carried their "gardens" up to the roof, danced, made a lot of noise, and apparently engaged in enough rowdy activity that Moschion had the opportunity to sneak in and have sex with (or, more likely, rape) a citizen girl (45-50). Like the Thesmophoria, the Adonia would have been an opportunity for women to engage in important collective activity that only they, as women with shared experiences with the goddess, could perform. They would have gained a sense of importance from the ritual, and would have greatly enjoyed themselves celebrating, laughing, drinking, and dancing with their female friends and neighbors.

Another festival that Menander mentions is the Tauropolia, in his play *Epitrepontes*. Dillon describes this ritual as a festival in honor of Artemis Tauropolia that had some aspects in which men participated as well as women-only rites, on which the character Charisios intrudes (127). Charisios came to the festival drunk, and "fell among the women" who were there "reveling throughout the night" (472-472). Habrotonon, the young prostitute-in-training, had been playing the harp for the girls at the festival and joining in their games (476-477). At the festival, the citizen girl Pamphile, after wandering off into the dark perhaps to relieve herself, comes back in tears, tearing her

hair and with a torn dress, raped by Charisios (488-490). This festival thus seems to have included citizen girls as well as non-citizens, though perhaps the non-citizens did not participate in all the same rites. Before Pamphile is raped, however, it is clear that the girls had been having a good time dancing and enjoying each other's company. The Tauropolia, like the other women-only festivals, gives girls and women an opportunity to come together, socialize with each other, and engage in fulfilling, important, and enjoyable activity together.

Several sixth-century BCE vases from Corinth depict *frauenfest* scenes, in which women are depicted “in a line holding hands,” dancing and engaging in some kind of religious activity (Dillon 128).²¹ On some of the vases the women carry wreaths or sacrificial baskets. On others, women are accompanied by smaller female figures, perhaps children, or have children on their laps. Other vessels show women spinning, playing the flute, or simply walking (Dillon 128). While there is no agreement among scholars as to what these vases mean or what specific ritual they depict, it is clear that the women are participating in some cult activity, which may “involve dancing, walking in procession and making offerings” (129). These vases are further proof that women's-only rituals did exist throughout Greece, and that they were popular enough and important enough to be depicted on vases. The imagery of these scenes is, moreover, similar to the imagery that exists of the Brauronia—the festival held for Artemis every four years at her temple at Brauron outside of Athens. Girls between the ages of 6 and 10 acted as bears for Artemis,²² and perhaps made and consumed sacrificial cakes (221). The rite was not

²¹ *Frauenfest* is simply German for “women's festival.”

²² Hence the reason the Brauronia is also known as the ἄρκτηια (*Arkteia*), or “Bear Ritual.” The word for “bear” in ancient Greek is ἄρκτος (Dillon 220).

compulsory for citizen girls, and indeed the sanctuary did not have enough space for all Athenian girls of the proper age, so a small group went every four years as representatives of their age group (221). Vase fragments at the sanctuary show little girls running around naked with a bear chasing them (221). The Brauronia would have been another opportunity for girls to come together and serve an important function to their city, as well as participate in playful ritual activities with their age-mates.

All these rituals constitute examples of the kind of sex-segregated religious rites that existed throughout ancient and archaic Greece. Sappho and her companions would have taken part in similar festivals and religious activities. Barbara Goff notes, however, that the “ritual practice represented in the Sapphic poems...is almost always private, performed for and among women rather than offered as a spectacle to others” (234). Still, even though the rituals Sappho invokes are private ones rather than public ones like the Thesmophoria or Brauronia, these rituals serve similar functions for the women who participate in them. They are a part of the “shared life” created by women, as well as “once of the activities that bring pleasure in themselves” (234). Women can derive “intimate pleasures and satisfactions” (234) from their participation in both public and private rituals, since even in public rituals women form a close relationship with the goddess and with their female companions.

Sappho on Her Own Terms

My goal in this thesis is to examine Sappho and her portrayal of these female relationships, both sexual and non-sexual, on their own terms and in terms of

archaic/ancient Greek culture without bringing in post-antique models of understanding. I hope to take a more nuanced to understanding this subject by examining the ritual contexts in which these relationships were formed and sustained, the sexual or erotic components of some of these relationships, and the meaning these relationships may have had for Sappho and her companions. Along with scholarship on ancient religion and poetic performance, I draw on Adrienne Rich's concept of the "lesbian continuum" to help define and interpret the various complex forms that female relationships take in Sappho. This term allows for the "greatest possible variation of female-identified experience," including *lesbian existence*, wherein a woman makes her "primary erotic and emotional choices" for other women (Rich 73-74).²³

Chapter Two focuses chiefly on female friendships in Sappho's poetry, particularly the way in which ritual served as an important context where women could meet without men, communicate, and form close friendships. The chapter contains an examination of Sappho's poems 2, 16, 81b, and 96—poems in which Sappho depicts non-sexual female friendships in a religious/ritualistic context. I offer close readings of these poems in order to analyze what they say about non-sexual female friendships, including their context, meaning, and importance.

Chapter Three examines sexual and erotic female relationships in Sappho's poetry, distinguishing between sexual relationships—those in which physical sexual

²³ In Rich's Afterword to "Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), she addresses the fact that her concept of the lesbian continuum came to be misused by heterosexual women looking for a safe way to describe their "felt connections with women" (73). She claims that she did not intend for the phrase to imply "life-style shopping" (73), or that all women "consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (51). The term is meant to capture the wide range of "forms of primary intensity between and among women" (51), not just sexual relationships, which exist at one end of the continuum.

activity takes place—and erotic relationships—those which can be one-sided or unrequited and which are characterized by feelings or thoughts of desire, lust, or yearning for another woman as well as the absence of sexual activity. The chapter contains a close reading of poems 1, 31, 94, 49, and 130b, and examines the way erotic and sexual relationships are built from a foundation of female friendship. Here Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum helps to demonstrate that female friendship should not be "set apart" from the erotic; the erotic should include the sharing of joy and the sharing of work among women (53).

The Conclusion summarizes the results of the previous chapters with comment on the significance this information has for understanding the daily lives of women in archaic Greece. I end this thesis with suggestions for how this information about erotic relationships and friendships in Sappho's work can contribute not only to a better understanding of her poetry and her as a poet, but also to a better understanding of ancient women, who are often excluded, silenced, and otherwise marginalized in ancient sources.

Chapter Two

Female Friendships in Sappho

Sappho presents a view of female relationships within the context of religious activity that is unlike anything found in the texts of her contemporaries or even in the works of later ancient authors. Her portrayal of meaningful, close female friendships is unique and merits special consideration. Female-only religious rituals would have provided Sappho and her companions an important context for the creation and maintenance of such friendships. As discussed in Chapter 1, the basic nature and experience of female-only group rituals varied little from one period or place to another; hence much of our information about such rituals in classical Athens can be applied to archaic Lesbos. Many of Sappho's poems evoke such ritualistic contexts. As Goff argues, "ritual enters the poetry not as itself [i.e. as an actual historical ritual] but as a specific figure in the work of representing both the poet and her female culture" (234). Goff claims that while ritual practices recalled in Sappho's poems need not be understood as

historical events (233), the evocation of such practices aids Sappho in her “poetic project” of representing “an aristocratic female subculture” (232). Poems 2, 16, 81b, and 96 in particular seem to suggest this “idealized female community” (235) where the primary concern is with women and their relationships (232), since the poems not only evoke ritualistic or religious contexts but also depict individualized and profound female friendships. A natural way to understand these female-focused friendships is to see them as located on what Rich calls “the lesbian continuum:” a range of woman-identified experiences, such as “sharing of a rich inner life...bonding against male tyranny...[and] the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (51), in which women like Sappho and her companions would have had participated.²⁴

Poem 2: Natural setting; female ritual to Aphrodite

Although poem 2 does not explicitly discuss Sappho’s friendships or relationships with other mortal women,²⁵ it does portray a ritualistic context that represents the type of setting where such friendships may have been formed and strengthened through participation in religious activity. The poem’s vocabulary is religious, naturalistic, and

²⁴ See footnote 21. In the afterward of her essay, Rich notes that, if she were writing the paper today (1981), she would put more “caveats” around the term *lesbian continuum* (74). She maintains the distinction between the *lesbian continuum*, which is about the full range of female-centered experiences (from friendships to sexual relationships), and the *lesbian existence*, which is about women who make their “primary erotic and emotional choices for women” (73-74).

²⁵ The poem does provide some information about Sappho’s relationship with Aphrodite. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will be focusing on relationships between human women, not between humans and the divine.

feminine, appropriate for an enjoyable ritual conducted by women somewhere outside the city in an isolated, natural setting.

δεῦρο μ' ἐκ Κρητας ἐπ[ὶ τόνδ]ε ναῦον
 ἄγνον, ὅππ[α τοι] χάριεν μὲν ἄλσος
 μαλί[αν], βῶμοι δε τεθυμιάμε-
 νοι [λι]βανώτῳ·

Come to me from Krete to this holy temple,
 here to your sweet apple grove,
 altars smoking with
 frankincense.²⁶

Sappho evokes an image of a beautiful, peaceful, and sacred grove where she and, presumably, some of her female companions—though none are explicitly mentioned—perform a ritual to Aphrodite.²⁷ In the first line, she summons the goddess from Crete.²⁸ The temple (ναῦον, 1) makes specific the religious setting.²⁹ Thus, even from the first line, Sappho situates herself and this poem in a religious context: performance of a ritual at a shrine of Aphrodite.

In line two, the word ἄγνον (sacred/holy) further reinforces the religious nature of the setting, highlighting the temple's importance both to the goddess and to the women

²⁶ All Greek text is as it appears in Campbell (1982). All English translations are from Rayor and Lardinois (2014).

²⁷ It is highly unlikely that Sappho would have performed an outdoor ritual of this nature alone. All female religious rituals described in Goff and Dillon are collective group activities, performed by either small, private groups of women or larger, more public gatherings of women. Even to mount such a ritual, Sappho would have needed assistance, most likely from slaves.

²⁸ Campbell notes that “Cretans claimed Aphrodite was first worshipped on their island,” and mentions the city of Cnossus, where Aphrodite was honored under the name of Ἄνθεια (267).

²⁹ This same word is attested in Homer. At *Iliad* (1.39), when Chryses prays to Apollo to enact vengeance upon the Greek host, he reminds the god that he once built and roofed over a νηόν (temple) for him.

enacting the ritual. In later Greek literature, ἄγνός carries connotations of purity, chastity, and guiltlessness (LSJ). Even in Homeric texts, the word could mean “pure” or “chaste,” as well as holy or sacred.³⁰ While Sappho may be implying no more than that the temple is sacred to Aphrodite, and thus to her worshippers, she also may be hinting at the pure, unpolluted, and fresh atmosphere of this sanctified place. This sense of freshness and purity is continued when Sappho evokes a beautiful grove of apple trees (χαρίεν ἄλσος / μάλιαν) in lines 2-3.³¹ The simplicity and beauty of nature, as embodied in this apple grove, are part of what makes this setting worthy of a temple to Aphrodite.

More religious vocabulary follows: βῶμοι (altars, 3) and λιβανωτῶ (frankincense, 4) further underscore the sacredness of the setting, which is devoted to the worship of the goddess. Thus the first stanza contains at least eight words that carry religious connotations and are consistently used in other literary works to refer to religious settings.³² Yet these images also have a distinctly feminine quality. The scene in the first stanza is lush, fragrant, full of fruit and flourishing nature. As Parca and Tzanetou note, ancient Greek gender ideology closely associates women and fertility: “not only human fertility and childbearing, but also the burgeoning of nature in all its animal and vegetative forms” (34). Their connection to nature allows women to carry out some of the *polis*’ most important religious practices (34). The apples, the incense, and even the altar evoke abundance, fertility, and beauty, all qualities appropriate for a women’s ritual at a ceremony to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality.

³⁰ See *Odyssey* 5.123 where Homer refers to Artemis as “chaste” (ἀγνή).

³¹ See poem 105a: Sappho uses a γλυκύμαλον (sweet apple) as a symbol for a young girl’s virginity, as well as of her fertility and sexual appeal.

³² A ninth word that could be considered religious is the participle τεθυμιάμενοι (smoking), used to refer to the βῶμοι.

In the second stanza, the feminine, naturalistic, religious imagery continues.

ἐν δ' ὕδωρ ψῦχρον κελάδει δι' ὕσδων
μαλίνων, βρόδοισι δὲ παῖς ὁ χῶρος
ἔσκιαστ', αἰθυσσομένων δὲ φύλλων
κῶμα καταίρει·

Cold water ripples through apple branches,
the whole place shadowed in roses,
from the murmuring leaves
deep sleep descends.

Here, the nature vocabulary becomes even more prevalent. Cool water flows through the branches of the apple trees, and the fragrant roses add to the sensuous beauty of the place. The scene is so lovely that it seems like a kind of distant utopia where everything is luxuriant, fertile, nourishing, and beautiful. It is striking that in the final line, Sappho begins with the word κῶμα, a word that means “deep sleep” in Homer,³³ yet is later used by authors like Hippocrates to mean a lethargic state or literal coma.³⁴ The word suggests a trance-like state, or at least something more than the ordinary sleep of mortals. Indeed, Campbell notes that κῶμα refers not simply to sleep, but to “sleep (or deep sleep) induced by enchantment or other special or supernatural means” (267). So this word, like so many others in the poem, carries religious connotations. It thus seems that Sappho establishes a kind of religious context using vivid imagery, some of which she employs in other poems to evoke similar, yet less explicitly religious settings.

The imagery also continues to be feminine: the delicacy and beauty of the roses and the fertility and fruitfulness implied by the apples reflect the “themes of feminine

³³ See *Iliad* 14.359, *Odyssey* 18.201

³⁴ See Hippocrates, *Epidemics* 3.6

grace and beauty” found in several other of Sappho’s poems (Calame 118). As Calame states, the lives and rituals of the women depicted in Sappho’s poetry unfold “almost completely under the sign of Aphrodite and in a setting represented on a mythical level by the famous gardens of the goddess” (118). Perhaps Sappho is trying to evoke such a garden—a space that allows for “the play of the senses” (Goff 237), full of delicate beauties, fragrances, and sensuous perceptions that the goddess will find appealing.

In stanza three, Sappho again uses nature imagery that implies femininity and fertility.

ἐν δὲ λείμων ἰππόβοτος τέθαλεν
 ἡρίνοισιν ἄνθεσιν, αἱ δ’ ἄηται
 μέλλιχα πνέοισιν [
 []

Where horses graze, the meadow blooms
 spring flowers, the winds
 breathe softly...

The meadow is lush and fruitful, described with the adjective used for the plain of Argos at *Iliad* 2.287: ἰππόβοτος or “grazed by horses.” The meadow has bloomed (τέθαλεν)

with spring flowers (ἡρινίοισιν ἄνθεσιν). This phrase recalls the roses of stanza two.

Adding to the earth and water imagery of stanza two, and even the implied fire imagery from stanza one (burning frankincense), stanza three now invokes air and wind imagery:

the winds gently breathe out. Sappho personifies the winds in a way similar to Homer and other writers of ancient Greek myth.³⁵ The winds do not simply blow, but breathe out, as if they have human lungs. This representation of the winds contributes to the divine,

³⁵ See Callimachus, *In Apollinem* line 82 where he speaks of Zephyr as “πνεῖοντος” (blowing); See Homer, *Odyssey* 10.25: “αὐτὰρ ἐμοὶ πνοιὴν Ζεφύρου προέηκεν ἄηται.”

sacred, or even mystical sense of the place being described in the poem. With the addition of the word μέλλιχα (gently), the winds also have a sort of feminine quality, reinforced by the fact that the word Sappho uses for winds, ἄηται, is feminine.³⁶ This association between nature and femininity continues the theme established in the first two stanzas.

The last stanza finally names Aphrodite as the goddess whom Sappho is invoking.³⁷

ἔνθα δὴ σὺ . . . ἔλοισα Κύπρι
 χρυσίαισιν ἐν κυλίκεσσιν ἄβρωσ
 ὀμμεμείχμενον θαλίαισι νέκταρ
 οἶνοχόαισον

Here, Aphrodite, after gathering . . .
 pour into golden cups nectar
 lavishly mingled
 with joys.

The imagery in this stanza is more explicitly divine than natural, making the goddess and her ritual the primary objects of attention. The golden cups are ceremonial, and thus sacred, special, worthy of Aphrodite and the occasion. The gold also implies wealth, abundance, and fertility. The mention of nectar, drink of the gods, is consistent with the invocation of the goddess.³⁸ Moreover, this nectar is being poured out gracefully, delicately (ἄβρωσ)—an adverb that, like μέλλιχα, has a feminine quality. The final word,

³⁶ ἄηται is the nominative, feminine, plural form of ἀήτη. Other words commonly used to refer to the wind, such as ἄνεμος and ἀήτης, are masculine.

³⁷ Sappho refers to Aphrodite as Κύπρις, since she is supposedly from the island of Cyprus.

³⁸ Νέκταρ can sometimes be translated as “wine,” though in this instance it simply seems to refer to the specific drink of the gods (LSJ).

θαλίασι (joys), gives the reader or listener a sense of the mood of the occasion. The fact that Aphrodite is mixing the nectar with joys suggests that this ritual is an important, joyous occasion, where the participants, as well as the goddess, are expected to feel and create joy through their activities.

Poem 81b: Female ritual and friendship

In poem 81b, Sappho again uses naturalistic, ritualistic vocabulary to urge her female companion, Dika, to make herself pleasing to the Graces.

σὺ δὲ στεφάνοις, ὦ Δίκα, περθέσαθ' ἐράτοις φόβαισιν
 ὄρπακας ἀνήτω συναέρραισ' ἀπάλαισι χέρσιν·
 εὐάνθεα γὰρ [πέλεται] καὶ Χάριτες μάκαιραι
 μᾶλλον ποτόρην, ἄστεφανώτοισι δ' ἀπυστρέφονται.

And you, Dika, wrap lovely garlands round your hair,
 weaving together sprigs of dill with delicate hands:
 The blessed Graces see a girl decked in flowers,
 But turn away from those who bear no crown.

The lovely garlands made of stems of dill or fennel— fragrant, vibrant, and pliant green plants, perfect for weaving into crowns or wreaths—signify a ritual context.³⁹ Detienne points out that various vegetable plants like dill and fennel were used in religious rituals like the Adonia (106-107). He notes that the “aphrodisiac and drying properties” of fennel, as well as its “aromatic qualities,” would have made it useful in certain religious

³⁹ ἀνήτω can be translated as “dill,” but its Latin name is *Anethum graveolens* (LSJ). This plant comes from the same *Apiaceae* (parsley) family as fennel and anise. Fennel is a more probable translation here, as its fragrance is much less sharp than that of dill, and therefore would have been more pleasing to Sappho and the women at this ritual (<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/viewhtml.php?id=344>).

contexts (108). Campbell notes that one ancient author, Athenaeus, seemed to think that this poem was directed at people making a sacrifice, and that Sappho was directing them to make garlands for the occasion (277). As in poem 2, Sappho also invokes flowers,⁴⁰ which belong to nature but also have a place in rituals to goddesses. Indeed, the very deities Sappho and her companion mean to worship are named in this poem: the Graces—the goddesses of music, charm, beauty, nature, and song.⁴¹ Poem 81b thus again evokes a ritual context, in which Sappho and her companion Dika are preparing to worship the Graces. Yet, unlike poem 2, this poem speaks explicitly about a female friendship being maintained in the context of that ritual.

This is the only extant poem that names Dika as one of Sappho’s female companions. Because she does not appear in any other fragments, it is difficult to understand their relationship. Sappho expresses a great deal of affection towards Dika: she calls her hands “delicate” or “tender” (ἀπάλαισι) as a kind of endearment, and implies that not only the garlands, but also the girl herself is “lovely” (ἐράτοις). Dika’s age is uncertain, as no word such as παις, κόρη, παρθένος, or γυνή indicates her age or marital status. Indeed, there is nothing in Sappho’s poetry to suggest that she was an “older woman” (Parker 159) and that her “addressees were young children” (159). Parker claims that Sappho’s poetry rather supports the notion that she was surrounded by “agemates,” and cites fragments 23 and 24a as evidence against the popular perception of “Sappho as a predatory gym teacher” or a teacher with whom young girls studied before marriage (160-161). It is thus probable that Dika was close to Sappho’s age, or at least not

⁴⁰ She does so through the word εὐάνθεα, which can be translated as something that is “garlanded” but also “blooming” or “flowering.”

⁴¹ The LSJ notes that in Hesiod, the Graces are three in number and are known as the attendants of Aphrodite.

significantly younger. Nothing in the text suggests that the two have the kind of hierarchical schoolteacher-student or schoolmistress-pupil relationship suggested by authors like Devereux, Calame, or Bennett (1984). Sappho does tell Dika to perform an action—to wrap garlands in her hair—but this imperative does not situate Sappho in the position of “instructor” and Dika in the position of “follower.” Rather than being in an asymmetrical relationship, these women appear to be on equal footing as friends, preparing for and participating together in this ritual to the Muses.

It thus makes more sense to consider Dika a member of Sappho’s “social network.”⁴² She would have participated in common religious and social activities and formed meaningful relationships with Sappho and the other women in her group. The ritual evoked in this poem is an example of one context where such relationships could have been maintained. As Stehle notes, the women in such networks may have aided each other not only in celebrating rituals but also in such matters as pregnancy, childbirth, and protection against male abuse (n.d.: 1-2). These networks would have been instrumental in helping to create the “women’s subculture” (Stehle, n.d.: 2) that Goff claims Sappho is trying to construct in her poems (232).

Poem 96: Sappho’s circle loses a friend; the lesbian continuum

⁴² Stehle (n.d.: 3) uses this term to refer to groups characterized by collective action, communication, and various other forms of practical and social assistance among women.

In poem 96 Sappho again depicts meaningful female relationships in ritualistic language and vivid imagery that suggests a context similar to that described in poem 2. She comforts a female friend who thinks longingly of her departed companion, Atthis.

]Σαρδ . [. .]
πόλ]λακι τυίδε [ν]ῶν ἔχοισα

ὥσπ . [...] . ὠομεν, . [...] . . χ[. .]-
σὲ θεά σ' ἰκέλαν ἀρι-
γνώτα, σῶ δὲ μάλιστ' ἔχαιρε μόλπα.

...Sardis...
often holding her thoughts here

just as...we...
you, like a goddess undisguised,
yet your song delighted her most.

The first line mentions Sardis, the capital city of Lydia where the absent woman mentioned later in the poem has presumably gone (Rayor and Lardinois 124). Sappho says that her friend often thinks of the place, presumably yearning for the company of Atthis. The use of ...ὠομεν (we) suggests that Sappho, her addressee, and Atthis were all part of a collective group—perhaps a network of friends that socialized and enacted rituals like the ones that Stehle (n.d.) describes. Indeed, Atthis is mentioned in several of Sappho's fragments: 8, 49a, 131, 214c, and 256 (Rayor and Lardinois 124). In the *Suda*, she is counted as one among Sappho's many companions and friends (5). With ...ὠομεν, Sappho invokes a kind of communal memory and experience, one in which she, Atthis, and the addressee would have all had a part. In the next line, she uses the religious term θεά (goddess) to describe her addressee, implying that she has deep admiration for the

woman. The comparison of her companion to a goddess also reinforces the ritualistic imagery found throughout the remainder of the poem, as does the reference to song (μόλπα).

As Goff notes, Sappho's poems "may have been produced within a ritual context of choral activity" (233). The use of third-person plural pronouns throughout poem 96 also suggests that the poem may have been sung by a chorus (Rayor and Lardinois 124). As Calame states, choruses, including the ones in which Sappho and her friends could have participated, "always exist for a specific occasion, most frequently for a cult." They therefore possess "a religious aspect that associates [them] closely with a deity" (2001: 89). The mention of "song" in stanza 2 carries religious significance, as the songs Sappho's companions would have sung were likely composed for rituals, perhaps performed within a choral context. There is some debate, however, as to the "choral" nature of Sappho's songs. Lardinois argues that among Sappho's fragments, more poems were meant to be performed chorally than has been acknowledged, and that Sappho was not purely a monodic poet composing private poems to perform on her own (1996a: 150-151). Winkler, on the other hand, claims that Sappho has a "private" voice and that the poetry she composed was "in the person of a woman," was shared with women only, and was sung on informal occasions rather than at formal sacrifices or festivals (91-92). Regardless, singing would have been an important part of both public and private rituals and religious gatherings. Μόλπα thus invokes an activity that Sappho, her addressee, and Atthis would have participated in together when they met to perform such rituals.

Stanzas 3 and 4 continue to employ religious vocabulary, though the words become more sensuous and reminiscent of popular mythological imagery.

νῦν δὲ Λύδαισιν ἐμπρέπεται γυναί-

κεσσιν ὡς ποτ' ἀελίῳ
 δύντος ἂ βροδοδάκτυλος σελάννα

πάντα περρέχοισ' ἄστρα· φάος δ' ἐπί-
 σχει θάλασσαν ἐπ' ἀλμύραν
 ἴσως καὶ πολυανθέμοις ἀρούραις·

Now she stands out among
 Lydian women as after sunset
 the rose-fingered moon

exceeds all stars. Moonlight
 reaches equally over the brine sea
 and fields of many flowers:

The reference to Lydian women complements the evocation of Sardis in line 1, and makes it clear that Atthis has left Lesbos and now lives, in all of her beauty and splendor, among strangers. Sappho's use of the adjective βροδοδάκτυλος (rosy-fingered) is intriguing, as the epithet is traditionally used in Homer and Hesiod to refer to the Dawn (Hώς).⁴³ By using this word to describe the moon, Sappho may be evoking the Homeric tradition but also modifying it to fulfill her own poetic objective of creating a unique, private, woman-centered world that takes precedence over the male-centered world of war and politics evoked in epic poetry.⁴⁴ Atthis is compared to the moon and outshines the stars, astrological phenomena mentioned frequently in Homer.⁴⁵ As Rayor and Lardinois note, a similar image of the moon outshining the stars is also found in fragment 34 (124). Moonlight recurs in stanza 4, along with the salty sea and fertile fields of flowers. These images of earth and water are reminiscent of the cold water, apple

⁴³ See *Odyssey* 2.1 and *Works and Days*, line 610.

⁴⁴ See Winkler's (1996a) discussion on Sappho and Homer and his contrast of Homer's public, male literary tradition versus Sappho's private, female one.

⁴⁵ See *Iliad* 8.555, 18. 483-489, 19.374; *Odyssey* 4.45, 9.144, 11.17, 12.312

branches, and roses referred to in poem 2. While these lines emphasize the distance that separates Sappho's friend from Atthis, the familiar delicate, fruitful, ritualistic imagery suggests that this poem is evoking memories of a religious context. Perhaps Sappho wants her friend to recall a sacred grove or similar space where she and Atthis used to spend time participating in rituals and enjoying each other's company.

The final two stanzas continue the ritualistic imagery, but also bring Sappho's companion and her strong feelings for Atthis to the center.

ἀ δ' ἑέρσα κάλα κέχυται, τεθά-
λαισι δὲ βρόδα κᾶπαλ' ἄν-
θρυσκα καὶ μελίλωτος ἀνθεμώδης·

πόλλα δὲ ζαφοίταισ', ἀγάνας ἐπι-
μνάσθεις Ἄτθιδος ἡμέρω
λέπταν ποι φρένα, κ[ᾶ]ρ[ι σᾶ] βόρηται·

In the beautiful fallen dew,
roses, delicate chervil,
and honey clover bloom.

Pacing far away, her gentle heart
devoured by powerful desire,
she remembers slender Atthis.

The dew, roses, chervil, and honey clover referred to in these stanzas all have either ritualistic connotations or explicit religious functions, and would likely have been present at the kind of private, female-only religious rituals that Sappho invokes here and elsewhere in her poems. The dew is described as “beautiful” (κάλα) and the chervil as “delicate” (κᾶπαλ'), adjectives often used to describe women and their features.⁴⁶ Such

⁴⁶ Sappho is unique in her use of κᾶπαλα to mean “delicate.” The TLG notes the word may derive from the verb πάλλω, meaning “to sway” or “to quiver.” A common synonym

language reinforces the notion that Sappho is, in fact, trying to create an “alternative world” in which “mutual desire, rapture, and separateness can be explored as female experience” (Stehle 1996a: 149). The desire to which Stehle refers is evident in the last few lines of the poem, where the woman’s heart is being “devoured” or “consumed” with “longing” (ἰμέρω) for her departed friend.

While this poem has evident erotic implications, which I will consider in the following chapter, one of its primary purposes is to “explore the effect of [a] woman’s presence or absence” (Stehle, 1996a: 149). Stehle sees this kind of examination as a theme that recurs throughout Sappho’s poems, as she and her companions experience both the pains of separation and the joys of interaction. She writes, “For Sappho another woman’s presence rather generates a sensuous environment, figured as flowers, fabric, perfume, sacred precinct, which encloses them both” (149). In this poem, Sappho seems to comfort her friend as she mourns the loss of Atthis, easing the pain of the separation by trying to conjure her presence—or at least memories of it—through religious and naturalistic images. As Rayor and Lardinois note, memory is an important theme in this poem (124), serving as a source of both longing and solace.

The relationships portrayed in this poem, both between the addressee and Atthis as well as between Sappho and the addressee, are complex and deeply felt. If Atthis’ departure was the result of her marriage to a man outside of Lesbos, then her absence is permanent. The strength of the addressee’s desire to see Atthis again indicates that the

used by classical authors is ἄβρός. In Aeschylus’ fragments (620.4), ἄβρός is used to describe women (παρθένοις ἄβραῖς). In Sophocles’ *Trachiniae* (523), he describes a woman as ἄβρά. Κάλος is usually used in Homer to refer to men, parts of the body, and clothes (*Iliad* 2.673, 19.285, 23.66; *Odyssey* 6.111, 24.277). Yet authors like Aeschylus (*Agamemnon* 140) and Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 2.6), use ἡ Καλή or Καλλίστη as a female epithet (LSJ).

two women shared more than a casual or superficial acquaintance. They likely sang songs, performed rituals, and participated in other collective activities together, finding joy and support in each other's company. Sappho seems to be trying to provide that same sort of support to the addressee now that Atthis is gone. The three women seem to have had strong emotional connections. They would have maintained their friendships in, and thus helped to construct, the kind of female-centered world that Sappho re-constructs in her poems. It makes sense to view these friendships through Rich's model of the lesbian continuum, since there is "a sharing of joy" and a "sharing of work" among women, which Rich claims are key elements of understanding "the erotic in female terms" (53). Rich writes that "female friendship and comradeship," like that experienced by Sappho and her companions, have wrongly been set apart from the erotic. To understand fully the significance of these relationships, it is important to locate them on a broader spectrum of female-identified experience.

Poem 16: What one loves; the private and female

Poem 16, unlike the other poems I have analyzed in this chapter, does not invoke an explicitly religious context. It does, however, portray an important female relationship. Like poem 96, it evokes the Homeric tradition and the male-centered, public world of epic poetry in order to contrast that masculine world with Sappho's private, woman-centered world.

οἱ μὲν ἰππῶν στρότον οἱ δὲ πέσδων
οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπ[ι] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὄτ-

τω τις ἔραται.

Some say an army of horsemen, others
say foot soldiers, still others say a fleet
is the finest thing on the dark earth.
I say it is whatever ones loves.

In this poem, as Rayer (1991) states, Sappho “uses myth to illustrate her argument that ‘whatever one loves’ appears most desirable” (161). In the first stanza, all the things that many consider “the finest thing” on earth—an army of horsemen, foot soldiers, and a fleet of ships—have Homeric echoes. Homer often refers in the *Iliad* to a ἵππεύς (2.810), ἵππηλάτα (9.432, 19.311), or ἵππότης (10.138), all of which can be translated as “charioteer,” “knight,” or “horseman.” He uses these terms as epithets for individuals, but also to refer to groups of horsemen or cavalry. Homer also frequently uses the term πεζοί (footsoldiers), when describing battle scenes and the movements of the Greek armies.⁴⁷ In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Greek στρότον νάων—literally translated as “army of ships”—plays a significant role. Homer uses νηῦς as his word for ship, often in the plural coupled with the adjective μακραί to mean ships of war (LSJ).⁴⁸ While these words are certainly Homeric, they also refer to public values, or things that everyone considers “finest.” Both men and women consider ships, cavalry, and soldiers as fine or beautiful because these forces keep them safe from invasion and attack. Because defense is crucial to the protection of a city and its citizenry, the public holds its military defenses in high regard.

⁴⁷ Sappho uses the Ionian πεσδοί, but the meaning is the same. See *Iliad* 11.150, 12.59.

⁴⁸ See *Iliad* 2.688, 11.659

This cataloging of public interests makes the last line of the stanza even more striking, as it is a radical statement of individualism. “I say it [the finest thing on earth] is whatever one loves,” Sappho writes. Miller (1994) notes that Eric Gans credits this statement as “the founding moment of female subjectivity in Western poetry” (93). Gans claims that this poem “shows an individual who places the satisfaction of her own desires before those traditionally accepted by the male power structure within the community” (93).⁴⁹ Indeed, while Sappho acknowledges the importance of military protection and understands the public’s admiration of ships and soldiers, Sappho rejects these public values in favor of her own private ones. Whatever you, the individual, love, is the best thing in the world, she says. With this statement, Sappho begins to contrast Homer’s world of war and masculine virtue with her own, more personal, private, feminine world. She continues to do so in the following stanzas.

πά]γχυ δ’ εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι
 π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ’, ἃ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
 κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἑλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα
 τὸν [πανάρ]ιστον

καλλ[ίποι]σ’ ἔβα ’ς Τροίαν πλέοι[σα
 κωὺδ[ὲ πα]ῖδος οὔδε φίλων το[κ]ήων
 π[ά]μπαν] ἐμνάσθη, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ’ αὐταν
]σαν

Everyone can understand this – consider
 that Helen, far surpassing the beauty
 of mortals, left behind
 the best man of all

⁴⁹ Miller (1994) disagrees with this reading, claiming that the poem really shows “how individual (distributional) moments of deviance are reintegrated within the communal body of mythic lore and only there attain intelligibility” (93). He argues that the poem is not a “nonconformist declaration,” but rather a reassertion of traditional values” (94), in which Sappho depicts Helen’s actions as “wrong” (95).

to sail away to Troy. She remembered
 neither daughter nor dear parents,
 as [Aphrodite] led her away
 *

In these lines, Helen—wife of Menelaus and cause of the Trojan War—is used as an example of a woman pursuing “whatever one loves,” which, in her case, is Paris. Unlike the Helen of the *Iliad* who calls herself a bitch (3.180) and “curs[es] herself for abandoning her husband and coming to Troy,” Sappho’s Helen is “held up as proof that it is right to desire one thing above all others, and to follow the beauty perceived no matter where it leads” (Lardinois 1996a: 97). As Lardinois states, the Helen portrayed in this poem is full of “courage and commitment” (97). She does abandon her husband, child, parents, and homeland, but only because she is powerful enough and had enough presence of mind to realize that she values these things less than the person she has fallen in love with (98). Helen is thus depicted as an agent, rather than a target of desire. In the *Iliad*, she is portrayed as the person who is loved and wanted—by Paris, Menelaus, and even the old men sitting on the Trojan walls (3.153-160). Yet in Sappho’s poem, Helen is the person who loves and wants—a desiring subject, rather than an object. Sappho thus radically reinterprets the Homeric account of Helen’s abduction and her relationship with Paris, making Helen, not Paris, the one who actively pursues her beloved. Helen is not taken from her home and carried off to Troy, but leaves on her own volition and actively sails away to be with the person she loves. Thus, as in the first stanza, Sappho appropriates Homeric myths and values and reinterprets them for a more female-centered context.

In the last two stanzas, Sappho implies that what she loves most is her companion, Anaktoria, and she contrasts her private, female desire with the public, male values expressed in the first stanza.

]αμpton γαρ [
] ... κούφως τ[]οησ[.]ν
...]με νῦν Ἀνακτορί[ας ὀ]νέμναι-
σ' οὐ] παρεοίσας·

τᾶ]ς κε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα
καμάρυγμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω
ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κᾶν ὄπλοισι
πεσδομ]άχεντας.

...[un]bending ... mind
...lightly ... thinks.
...reminding me now
of Anaktoria gone.

I would rather see her lovely step
and the radiant sparkle of her face
than all the war chariots in Lydia
and soldiers battling in arms.

Much of the fourth stanza is fragmented, but the last two lines name Anaktoria, who, like Atthis in poem 96, was probably a woman in Sappho's "social network." She has departed, perhaps because she has been married, and Sappho feels her loss deeply. Sappho praises Anaktoria's beauty and grace, calling her face radiant (λάμπρον) and her step lovely (ἔρατον). By placing Anaktoria's beauty in opposition to things like war chariots and armed soldiers, Sappho implies that the woman's beauty, and therefore the woman herself, is the thing she that she loves most. Anaktoria is thus the finest thing on the earth for Sappho. Like Helen, Sappho is a desiring female subject who chooses love for an individual over love for public, marital entities. The war chariots and armed

soldiers in the last stanza recall the horsemen and foot soldiers named in the first stanza as things that everyone finds beautiful. Again, Sappho respects these male-centered, public values and recognizes their importance to the safety of the city, but she asserts a radically individualistic perspective by claiming that she loves a beautiful woman, not these mechanisms of war, the most.

Poem 16 thus represents a meaningful female relationship between Sappho and her companion Anaktoria. While Sappho may have loved her as more than a friend, the two seem to have had a profound connection that was likely formed and maintained through participation in common activities like singing, dancing, reciting poetry, and performing rituals. As in poem 96, Sappho explores themes of loss and absence, and tries to comfort herself by summoning images of Anaktoria's lovely countenance and elegant tread. Within her social network, Sappho would have experienced such loss often as her friends became married and moved away to live with their husbands. Yet, even though many of Sappho's companions and friends may have been of marriageable age, there is no textual evidence to show that Sappho was, as Calame states, a teacher who turned "young pupils into accomplished women," and thus into marriageable material (1996a: 118). Sappho did not teach "feminine charm and beauty" to young girls in order to prepare them "to be adult, married women" (119). Rather, she delighted in the beauty and charm of her female companions, and formed profound, egalitarian relationships with these women. Sappho never speaks of Anaktoria as a *παῖς* or *παρθένο*, nor is there any mention in this poem of teaching or instruction. There is only Sappho's admiration of and love for her companion, and her longing to see her again. Such devotion would have been

the basis of a non-hierarchical, reciprocal relationship between two women of a similar age.

Conclusion: The female-focused relationships in Sappho; the lesbian continuum

The poems I have analyzed in this chapter depict deeply felt friendships between women and the kind of ritualistic contexts in which such relationships would have been maintained. Poem 2 describes a lovely grove to Aphrodite where Sappho and her friends could have gathered together to perform religious rituals to the goddess, while poems 81b, 96, and 16, all evoke specific relationships and memories associated with them. Sappho addresses her companions individually and by name in these poems, and her expressions of love or longing are specific, tailored to the particular woman she is recalling or addressing.⁵⁰ Unlike many ancient male lyric poets, who tend to praise women in more generic terms and repeat the same phrases to describe different women,⁵¹ Sappho portrays women as individuals with their own distinctive attractions. Her relationships with all of these women would have been different, as the women themselves were different and would have offered and wanted varying things from their

⁵⁰ It is noteworthy that Sappho publically addresses her companions by name. They are not referred to as “the wife of” a man or “the daughter of” a man, as they would be in classical Athenian texts and inscriptions. It is possible that archaic Lesbos did not have the same prohibition as classical Athens on using the names of citizen women in public. Regardless, this use of individual, public names gives the female addressees a kind of individuality and independence.

⁵¹ I have in mind Archaic Greek poets like Alcman, but also later classical poets like Horace and Catullus. All too often for classical male poets, women are either shining paragons of beauty and virtue, or scheming, over-sexed vixens.

relationships. Yet Sappho and her female companions would have been united by their participation in rituals and other forms of collective religious and social activity.

These meaningful friendships between women were part of the female world and subculture to which Sappho belonged, and which she invokes often in her poems. As scholars like Goff and Tzanetou claim, religion and ritual were also vital elements of that subculture, for they allowed women to differentiate themselves from the “dominant patriarchal culture” (Parca and Tzanetou 7). By performing important rituals to goddesses like Aphrodite, Artemis, and Athena, these women would have served an important civic function and contributed to the wellbeing of their city. Yet they also would have formed deep, emotional connections, and created a female-centric network in which women supported, loved, admired, and helped each other. Such female networks are attested elsewhere. For example, in Aristophanes’ *Assemblywomen*, Praxagora refers to a group of friends that gathers together at festivals, shares secrets with each other, and takes “common action against male abuse” (Stehle n.d. 1). In Menander’s *Dyskolos*, women come together to perform a celebratory ritual, sacrifice at Pan’s shrine, dance, drink wine, and socialize (2); in his *Samia*, they celebrate the Adonia together. Yet Sappho is unique in her portrayal of these female networks, for she—unlike Menander and Aristophanes—is a woman, writing about her own experiences and friendships with other women. As Winkler (1996a) states, Sappho is “a woman speaking about women.” (89). She is thus able both to “reenact[t] scenes from public culture infused with her private perspective as the enclosed woman,” and to “spea[k] publically of the most private, woman-centered experiences from which men are strictly excluded” (101). Her poems give insight into the kind of rituals that elite women may have performed in private with their friends, as well

as the strong woman-centered, personal relationships that arose from and were sustained through these rituals. Sappho represents “women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community” (Rich 63) in a way that is unique to ancient authors. The friendships between herself and her companions exist on the “continuum” of lesbian experience that Rich identifies, and thus serve as a “source of energy, [and] a potential springhead of female power” (63) in a culture that is otherwise male-centered and male-identified.

Chapter Three

Female Sexual/Erotic Relationships in Sappho

Sappho's poems depict not only profound female friendships, but also sexual and erotic relationships between women. These relationships are built from a firm foundation of female friendship and comradeship, but have the additional elements of ἔρος (desire) or sexual activity.⁵² For the purposes of this thesis, I distinguish between sexual relationships and erotic relationships in Sappho's poetry. I refer to female relationships as sexual only when it is clear that physical sexual activity is taking place. I use the term erotic to refer to relationships where the element of ἔρος is present, but there is an absence of sexual activity. Erotic relationships and sexual relationships are both characterized by feelings or thoughts of desire, lust, or yearning for another woman, but

⁵² LSJ defines ἔρος as "love" or "desire." Homer uses ἔρος in this sense in *Iliad* 14.315 and *Odyssey* 18.212. ἔρος, which implies passionate, sexual love, is different from φιλία, which is used by authors like Herodotus (*Histories* 7.130), Plato (*Symposium* 179c), and Aristotle (*Poetics* 1453b.19) to mean "affectionate regard" or "fondness" towards family and friends.

only in sexual relationships does this desire manifest itself or fulfill itself through sexual acts. Unlike sexual relationships, erotic relationships can be one-sided or unrequited. Thus, while erotic relationships are not sexual relationships, sexual relationships partake in the erotic.

Adrienne Rich argues for a broader definition of what constitutes the erotic, claiming that the concept has been limited by the exclusion of female friendship, as well as by the “limiting, clinical associations” in the “patriarchal definition” of the term lesbian (53). She asserts that in order to “discover the erotic in female terms,” one must broaden the definition of what constitutes “lesbian existence” and begin to “delineate a lesbian continuum” (53). Thus, the erotic becomes more than a focus on individual body parts or the body as a whole. As Rich states:

[it is] an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,” and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which “makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being...such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (53-54).

Sappho is thus a lesbian in every sense of the term. A woman from the island of Lesbos, she seems to have participated in sexual and erotic relationships with other women that would have entailed an appreciation of women’s bodies, but also of their ability to provide and share in companionship, support, emotional understanding, and joy. All of her relationships with women exist somewhere on Rich’s lesbian continuum, since they are woman-centered, woman-identified, and involve an appreciation of and love for women. Poems 1, 31, 94, 49, and 130b provide examples of these various kinds of “lesbian” relationships.

Poem 1: Unrequited erotic relationships; love and revenge

Frequently referred to as the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, poem one is “a song in the form of a prayer that Sappho (or someone speaking as Sappho) performed in public” (Rayor and Lardinois 7). The performance would likely have taken place among a group of Sappho’s friends, perhaps at a ritual to Aphrodite.⁵³ In the poem, Sappho asks Aphrodite to fulfill her request: to make an unnamed woman love her to the same degree that she, Sappho, loves the woman.

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

ἀλλὰ τυίδ' ἔλθ', αἶ ποτα κατέρωτα
τάς ἔμας αὔδας αἰοῖσα πήλοι
ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα
χρῦσιον ἦλθες

ἄρμ' ὑπασδεύξαισα· κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον
ᾧκεες στρουῖθοι περὶ γᾶς μελαίνας
πύκνα δίνεντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνωϊθε-
ρος διὰ μέσσω·

αἴψα δ' ἐξίκοντο· σὺ δ', ᾧ μάκαιρα,
μειδιαίσαισ' ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ
ἦρε' ὅττι δηῖτε πέπονθα κῶττι
δηῖτε κάλημμι,

κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι
μαινόλα θύμῳ· τίνα δηῖτε πείθῳ
ἂψ σ' ἄγην ἐς Ἔαν φιλότατα; τίς σ', ᾧ
Ψάφ', ἀδικήει;

⁵³ Winkler (1994) suggests that, while it is unclear if the poem would have been part of a formal religious observance, since no specific festival occasion is mentioned, nevertheless “the social realm of communal ritual practice to which it alludes is clear” (91).

καὶ γὰρ αἰ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει·
αἰ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει·
αἰ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει
καὺκ ἐθέλοισα.

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λῦσον
ἐκ μερίμναν, ὅσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι
θῦμος ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον· σὺ δ' αὐτα
σύμμαχος ἔσσο.

On the throne of many hues, Immortal Aphrodite,
child of Zeus, weaving wiles: I beg you,
do not break my spirit, O Queen,
with pain or sorrow

but come—if ever before from far away
you heard my voice and listened,
and leaving your father's
golden home you came,

your chariot yoked with lovely sparrows
drawing you quickly over the dark earth
in a whirling cloud of wings down
the sky through midair,

suddenly here. Blessed One, with a smile
on your deathless face, you ask
what have I suffered again
and why do I call again

and what in my wild heart do I most wish
would happen: "Once again who must I
persuade to turn back to your love?
Sappho, who wrongs you?"

If now she flees, soon she'll chase.
If rejecting gifts, then she'll give.
If not loving, soon she'll love
even against her will."

Come to me now—release me from these
troubles, everything my heart longs
to have fulfilled, fulfill, and you
be my ally.

No real action, other than the recitation of the prayer itself, happens during the course of this poem. Sappho, or at least her poetic persona, only recalls a time in the past when Aphrodite came to her and helped her gain the affection of a beloved. Aphrodite does not actually come again to assist Sappho in this poem, but the vivid manner in which her previous visit is depicted makes it seem as if she has just arrived again and promised her support. In the first stanza, Sappho describes the “pain” and “sorrow” she feels because her beloved does not love her in return. Such emotions would be appropriate for an unrequited erotic relationship.⁵⁴ As Hallett (1996a) states, when Sappho writes in the first person, as she does in poem 1, she does “evince a ‘lover’s passion’ toward other women and give utterance to strong homosexual feelings” (132). Sappho, as a woman experiencing erotic passion, thus calls upon the goddess of erotic love and sexuality: Aphrodite.

The vocabulary and imagery used to depict Aphrodite in the first three stanzas highlight her divine status as well as her femininity. She is called “deathless” and “child of Zeus,” epithets that call attention to her divinity. She sits upon a “richly-worked throne,” an object on which “Olympian gods are typically depicted” (Rayor and Lardinois 97) and is invoked as a “Queen” who flies down from her “father’s / golden home.” All of these characteristics reinforce her status as a daughter of Zeus. The phrase “weaving wiles” emphasizes her femininity, as weaving is a women’s activity in the ancient world. Rayor and Lardinois note, moreover, that the “lovely sparrows” mentioned

⁵⁴ Rayor and Lardinois (2014) note that only in stanza six is it hinted that Sappho’s beloved is a woman (ἐθέλοισα is a feminine participle). Gender is otherwise unspecified.

in line 9 are “symbols of fecundity and therefore sacred to Aphrodite” (98), and so again draw attention to her association with femininity, sexuality, and eroticism.

As a female, and as the goddess of love, Aphrodite is able to sympathize with Sappho’s plight of unrequited erotic attraction. Indeed, she seems to be an honorary member of Sappho’s female social network, since this poem makes it clear that Sappho has called on her many times before to assist her in her troubles with love. Sappho’s repeated use of *δηῦτε* (again) in the fourth stanza indicates that Sappho “spoke repeatedly with the goddess in person about her loves” (Rayor and Lardinois 98). Sappho also asks Aphrodite, in the final stanza, to be her *σύμμαχος*, a term usually used in a battle context to mean “fellow fighter.”⁵⁵ Sappho thus draws on military and epic terminology to create the metaphor of love as a kind of war, in which she and Aphrodite are fighting together as allies. Indeed, as Miller notes, “a number of scholars have remarked on Sappho’s extensive use of Homeric vocabulary and imagery within this poem” (1994: 92).⁵⁶ Winkler (1996a) states that one way to interpret the poem is to say that Sappho “presents herself as a kind of Diomedes on the field of love” who is “articulating her own experience in traditional male terms” (93). Yet Winkler’s second and more plausible reading is that Sappho’s use of Homeric passages is to encourage readers to “approach her consciousness as a woman and poet reading Homer” (93). Indeed, as in poem 16,

⁵⁵ Homer does not use the term *σύμμαχος* in either the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, though the word does have a Homeric sense to it in so far as it alludes to battle and heroes fighting together. It is used in Herodotus *Histories* 1.22 and 1.102 to mean “ally” or “allies” (LSJ).

⁵⁶ Miller specifically mentions the Homeric epithets used for Aphrodite, the way in which Sappho’s traditional prayer formula in addressing Aphrodite “recalls Diomedes’ appeal to Athena in *Iliad* 5. 115-117,” and how Aphrodite’s descent in her chariot evokes Diomedes’ *aristeia* in Book 5 (92). Miller, drawing on the arguments of Jack Winkler, argues that Sappho plays the role of both Diomedes and Aphrodite in this poem (93).

Sappho adapts the masculine, public, epic world of Homer to serve the purposes of the private, feminine world she both inhabits and constructs in her poetry. She uses the terminology of the Homeric world in order to distance herself from it, and makes the focus of the poem her own personal love rather than heroic, public interests and exploits.

Rather than viewing poem 1 as a Homeric imitation, it makes sense to consider it as a revenge poem, in which Sappho prays for her beloved to suffer as she has. Sappho certainly seems to be making light of the fact that this is not the first time she has fallen madly in love and asked for Aphrodite's help. She portrays herself as looking slightly ridiculous with her repeated use of $\delta\eta\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\epsilon$ and her description of her own heart or spirit as $\mu\alpha\iota\nu\acute{o}\lambda\alpha$ (raving, frenzied). It is clear from Aphrodite's speech that she has come to the goddess before, asking her to "persuade" someone to "turn back" to her love. And, as in the past, Sappho in poem 1 wants Aphrodite to coerce her beloved and make her "chase," "give," and "love," even if it is against her will. What is not clear from the poem is if Sappho wants her beloved to chase *her*, give gifts to *her*, or love *her*. The verbs in the stanza six take no direct object. While it is thus possible that Sappho intends for Aphrodite to make her beloved return her affections, it is also plausible that she wants her beloved to love another unspecified woman, and be spurned, the same way that she has been. A value of female revenge is quite apparent in Aphrodite's speech. Sappho wants her beloved to suffer from love just as much as she has, and is willing to make her beloved act against her will in order to ease her pain and fulfill her desire for "concrete and inevitable revenge" (Carson 1996a: 229). As Carson states, Sappho is looking for "erotic justice" (231) that will emerge through the help of Aphrodite as well as the simple passage of time (232).

Poem 1 thus depicts an unrequited erotic relationship between Sappho and her unnamed beloved. It is likely that this woman was a part of Sappho's social group, and that she participated in rituals, religious rites, and various other social activities with Sappho and her female companions. Sappho's erotic attraction may have developed as her friendship with the woman grew stronger. In that case, the ἔρως that Sappho feels would have grown from a basis of φιλία. As Calame notes, the woman in this poem seems to be betraying "the intimate and reciprocal relationship of *philia* that Sappho was setting up with the girls in her group" (114).⁵⁷ Yet perhaps the woman is not betraying the friendship or φιλία that she and Sappho shared, but rather rejecting the idea that the friendship should or could develop into an erotic or sexual relationship. Such a relationship has a place on Rich's lesbian continuum: it is female-centered, in so far as the two parties involved are women, is built from a foundation of female companionship and friendship, and seems to involve erotic attraction—if only on one side—to more than simply the woman's body.

Poem 31: Physical signs of erotic desire; marriage in Sappho's group

Poem 31, famously re-written by the Roman poet Catullus in the first century BCE, depicts Sappho as she looks upon a woman, in whom she has erotic interest, while the woman talks to the man sitting beside her.

⁵⁷ Calame, however, also thinks that the unnamed woman is breaking the bonds of some sort of institutional contract, through which Sappho and her companions were formally, perhaps even legally bound (114). Yet there is not textual evidence that such a contract existed.

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐναντίος τοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδῦ φωνεί-
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
ὥς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὥς με φώναι-
σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει·

ἀλλ' ἄκαν μὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε, λέπτον
δ' αὐτίκα χρῶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

κὰδ δέ μ' ἴδρωσ ψῦχρος ἔχει, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκηγ δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐτ[α].

ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα.

To me it seems that man has the fortune
of gods, whoever sits beside you
and close, who listens to you
sweetly speaking

and laughing temptingly. My heart
flutters in my breast whenever
I quickly glance at you—
I can say nothing,

my tongue is broken. A delicate fire
runs under my skin, my eyes
see nothing, my ears roar,
cold sweat

rushes down me, trembling seizes me,
I am greener than grass.
To myself I seem
needing but little to die.

Yet all must be endured, since...

It is probable that the context of this poem is a wedding. As Miller (1994) states, “it is difficult to imagine, in Lesbos’s sexually segregated society, many other occasions where a man and woman would be publically seated together in close converse” (97). A wedding would have been one such occasion where a recently married young man and woman would have been permitted to sit in close proximity and converse with each other in public.⁵⁸ It is therefore reasonable to assume that this poem is about one of Sappho’s female companions who has just been married, and that perhaps the poem itself was performed at the wedding or at subsequent weddings Sappho attended.⁵⁹ As discussed with poem 96, marriage would have been a common and expected occurrence among the women of Sappho’s group. Although the women may have participated in female erotic and sexual relationships and thus perpetuated a female subculture, they also would have had a social obligation to marry citizen men and have citizen children.

While the opening line of the poem would suggest that the emphasis is going to be on “that man” Sappho’s companion sits next to, the primary focus of the poem is really Sappho’s physical reaction as she looks at this woman “sweetly speaking” and

⁵⁸ Scholars such as Page (as cited in Miller 1984) and Race (1983) reject the idea that the context of this poem is a marriage. Race argues that the poem “has nothing to do with a wedding” (92), since there is no word that suggests marriage, no “address to or congratulation of the couple,” and the actions of sitting and talking in themselves have nothing to do with a wedding (93). Yet McEvelley (as cited in Miller 1994) disagrees with scholars like Page, and claims: (1) Sappho always uses the term *aner* (man) to refer to a husband, (2) The direct comparison with a god only occurs in marriage poems, and (3) Lesbos seems to have been so sexually segregated that marriage is the only context in which such public interaction between a man and woman would have been allowed (97-98).

⁵⁹ See Miller’s (1994) assertion that, while it is impossible to prove whether or not this poem was sung at weddings, it is likely since Sappho did compose several epithalamia and her poems in general seem to have been meant for public performance (98). It was common, moreover, for friends and family to praise the bride’s beauty through song and poetry at ancient weddings (see Lardinois 1996a 167-168).

“laughing temptingly” with the man. Indeed, as Race (1983) notes, the man is “of no intrinsic interest” to Sappho (97). He simply “fades out of the picture” after the first stanza, so that Sappho can focus her attention on her own relationship with the woman (97). By moving the locus of attention away from the man and onto her own reaction to seeing this woman, Sappho establishes a female-centric point of view. The emotions being described in the following stanzas are female-identified and female-centric in the same way that the poem itself gradually becomes so as the man disappears from attention and Sappho’s experience comes to the forefront. Sappho’s poem thus becomes, as Greene (1996c) writes, an “expression of active female desire” that is placed in opposition to the masculine, hierarchical, and competitive kind of eroticism that is predominant in most patriarchal societies (236). She is a woman who makes a conscious effort to write about women’s experiences in a world that privileges the male-centered perspective.

The “symptoms” described in poem 31 are, as Race notes, suggestive of Sappho’s passionate love for the woman (93). All her senses are affected. When she looks at the woman, she loses her power of speech, and her tongue becomes “broken.” Her sense of sight disappears, and she can “see nothing.” Her hearing is also impaired, since her ears begin to “roar.” An altered sense of touch is also suggested by her fluttering or trembling heart, the “delicate fire” that runs beneath her skin, the “cold sweat” that rushes down her body, and the “trembling” that seizes her. She is, in many ways, physically incapacitated by her erotic desire for this woman.

Devereux (1970) claims that in this fragment, Sappho is exhibiting signs of an anxiety attack (17). He writes that her indirect expression of jealousy towards a male rival and her subsequent anxiety are a result of her being overwhelmed by a repressed

homosexual impulse (20). He further claims that Sappho identifies with the man in this poem, desires to be in his place, and thus envies the one thing he has but she does not: a phallus (22). Her envy and her desire to take on the masculine role in the relationship are, to Devereux, what cause her love to be self-destructive and “abnormal” (27). Yet, Devereux severely misinterprets the poem. As Race states, there is, in fact “no expression of jealousy in the poem” (93). He writes that “the emotions appropriate to envy or jealousy consist of *hatred* expressed in invective,” and that “no such feelings are directed toward ‘that man’” (94). Indeed, the phrase “I am greener than grass,” which is often interpreted as an expression of jealousy, actually has erotic or sexual connotations. Rayor and Lardinois note that “the word for ‘green’ in Greek signifies freshness and moisture (like green wood), not jealousy. In archaic poetry, grass often has sexual associations” (109). Poem 31, therefore, is a public expression of Sappho’s erotic feelings and sensations upon looking at a beautiful woman, not an anxiety-induced seizure brought on by jealousy of the male object.

This poem not only demonstrates the physical signs of female homoerotic desire that may have been experienced by Sappho and the other women in her group, but, like poem 96, it explores themes of presence and loss through marriage. The woman whom Sappho desires may very well be a member of her social group who has just been married, and is thus perhaps leaving her circle permanently. Sappho may feel that she needs “but little to die” not only because of the overwhelming power of her erotic attraction and its accompanying sensations, but also because she is experiencing an emotional loss. She does not resent or feel jealous towards the man. She knows that marriage is a social necessity and civic duty, and so will “endure” her pain because she

must. Life will continue, and while she may lose the pleasure of this one woman's company, she will retain her group of female companions who support her and love her, just as she supports and loves them.

Poem 94: Sexual relationships; female presence and loss

Poem 94 is the only extant poem in which Sappho seems to evoke explicit physical sexual activity between women. Although it is quite fragmented, it is plain that the language, like poems 2 and 96, evokes a ritualistic context, nature, and feminine beauty.

τεθνάκην ἀδόλως θέλω·
ἄ με ψισδομένα κατελίμπανεν

πόλλα καὶ τόδ' ἔειπέ [μοι·
'ὦιμ' ὡς δεῖνα πεπ[όνθ]αμεν·
Ψάφφ', ἦ μάν σ' ἀέκοισ' ἀτυλιμπάνω.'

τὰν δ' ἔγω τάδ' ἀμειβόμαν·
'χαίροισ' ἔρχεο κᾶμεθεν
μέμναισ', οἴσθα γὰρ ὡς σε πεδήπομεν·

αἱ δὲ μή, ἀλλά σ' ἔγω θέλω
ὄμναισαι [. . .] . [. . .] . . αι
. . [. . .] καὶ κάλ' ἐπάσχομεν·

πό[λλοις γὰρ στεφάν]οις ἴων
καὶ βρ[όδων κρο]κίων τ' ὕμοι
κα . . [. . .] πὰρ ἔμοι παρεθήκαο,

καὶ πό[λλαις ὑπα]θύμιδας
πλέκ[ταις ἀμφ' ἀ]πάλα δέρα
ἀνθέων ἐ[βαλες] πεποημμέναις.

καὶ πόλλω [. . .] . μύρω
βρενθείω . [. . .] ρυ[. .]ν

ἐξαλείψαιο κα[ὶ βασι]ληίῳ,

καὶ στρώμν[αν ἐ]πὶ μολθάκαν
ἀπάλαν πα . [] ... ὦν
ἐξίης πόθο[ν] . νίδων

κῶϋτε τις [οὔ] τε τι
ἴρον οὔδυ[]
ἐπλετ' ὄππ[οθεν ἄμ]μεσ ἀπέσκομεν,

οὐκ ἄλσος . [χ]όρος
]ψοφος
] . . . οἰδιαί

I simply wish to die.
Weeping she left me

and told me this, too:
We've suffered terribly, Sappho.
I leave you against my will.

I answered: Go happily
and remember me—
you know how we cared for you.

If not, let me remind you
*
...the lovely times we shared.

Many crowns of violets
roses, and crocuses together
...you put on by my side

and many scented wreathes
woven from blossoms
around your delicate throat.

And...with pure, sweet oil
[for a queen]...
you anointed...

and on soft beds
...delicate...
you quenched your desire.

Not any...
 no holy site...
 we left uncovered,

no grove... dance
 ... sound

The poem begins with a similar expression as was found in poem 31: “I simply wish to die.” As Greene (1996c) notes, this line again “plunges the poem into the realities of separation and loss” (239). Yet, this time, the sentence seems to be spoken by Sappho’s unnamed female companion who is leaving, presumably to be married and live with her husband. It is clear that the woman does not wish to leave Sappho and her group, for she is “weeping” as she goes away, states that she and Sappho have “suffered terribly,” and declares that she leaves against her will. She is sorrowful that her marriage will take her away from her female friends and companions, whom she loves dearly. Yet, the woman does not make any indication that she will resist leaving, or that she resents the man with whom she must go. Rather, she recognizes that marriage is her civic duty that must be fulfilled, even if it means leaving these important, intimate female friendships and erotic relationships behind.

Sappho, like the unnamed woman, understands that marriage is a social necessity, and spends the rest of the poem encouraging the woman to “go happily” and think back fondly on the time they spent together. She urges her to remember the shared activities in which they participated, such as “stringing flower wreathes, donning garlands, wearing perfumes, and going to holy places, where there is dance and music” (Rayor and Lardinois 123). These activities were likely performed within group rituals and religious ceremonies. Indeed, Sappho explicitly evokes a group context through her use of first

person plural verbs in lines 8 and 11 (πεδῆπομεν: we cared for [you]; ἐπάσχομεν: we had/shared [lovely things]). Sappho and the woman are both a part of this “we,” as are the other women in Sappho’s group with whom they would have performed these ritual activities. The mention of a “holy site” in stanza 10 and a “grove” in stanza 11 also mark that it is a ritual context Sappho means to recall. One could imagine such a site as being like the grove described in poem 2—removed from the noise and bustle of the city, full of pleasing and delicate smells and objects, and resplendent with nature’s pure beauty.

As Greene (1996c) notes, the picture conjured in stanzas 5 through 10 is “one of idyllic beauty and satisfaction” (241). The crowns of violets, roses, and crocuses and the scented wreaths made of flower blossoms, both of which would have had a religious function in a ritual to Aphrodite or another goddess, also evoke feminine beauty, grace, and erotic attraction. Women and female sexuality are often associated with flowers in ancient poetry.⁶⁰ This imagery thus contributes to the air of “erotic stimulation” (Greene 1996a: 241) that is reinforced in the images of “pure, sweet oil,” “soft beds,” ritual groves, and dancing. Perhaps the oil was used to anoint the women as they performed a ritual to a goddess, while the “dance” and “sound” may have taken place as part of the ceremony, or afterwards as the women celebrated and rejoiced in the pleasure of the occasion and of each other’s company. The “soft beds” may have had a ritual function, but seem also to have served as a site for more explicit “sensual enjoyment” (Greene 1996c: 242).

Poem 94 is the only extant fragment in which physical sexual activity between women is distinctly depicted. Right after she mentions the “soft beds,” Sappho reminds

⁶⁰ See Catullus, other poems of Sappho, Archilochos, etc.

the woman that this was the place where “you quenched your desire” (ἐξίης πόθον). While πόθος can refer to longing, yearning, or regret for something that is absent or lost, it can also mean love or desire for an individual.⁶¹ ἐξίης comes from the verb ἐξίημι, which means to dismiss or satisfy or, as in Homer, either to “send out” or to “put off from oneself” or “to get rid of” (LSJ).⁶² Thus, when these two words are put together, the meaning seems to become something evidently erotic like “you satisfied your longing.” Stehle (1996a) concurs that this line “may refer to actual homosexual activity” (146), and that indeed the whole poem moves toward this “erotic culmination” (147). She writes that “with each stanza, the focus is more directly on the body of the other woman,” until, in this line, the woman finally “expels” longing (146). Thus, this physical sexual activity is the climax of the poem, which works to create an atmosphere of “segregation in sensuous surroundings” (146).

Poem 94 depicts a sexual relationship that occurred between the departing woman and another member of Sappho’s group, or perhaps even Sappho herself. Like poems 31 and 96, it explores themes of marriage and loss, but it also invokes the kind of pleasurable and sensuous activities in which Sappho and her companions would have participated while they were together. It seems that, unlike the sexual relationships that occurred between men in archaic and ancient Greece, the sexual relationships between Sappho and her female companions were, as Skinner (1996a) states, “bilateral and egalitarian” (186). There would have been an emphasis on mutual pleasure and satisfaction, both physical and emotional, rather than “pursuit and physical mastery”

⁶¹ For the first meaning, see *Iliad* 17.439, *Odyssey* 14.144, Plato’s *Cratylus* 420a. For the second meaning, see Hesiod’s *Shield of Heracles* 41, Aeschylus’ *Prometheus* 654 (LSJ).

⁶² For the first meaning, see *Iliad* 24.227, Herodotus’ *Histories* 3.146. For the second meaning, see *Iliad* 1.469, 11.141; *Odyssey* 11.531 (LSJ).

(186). This model of female homoerotic relationships has a place on the far right of Rich's lesbian continuum, since it incorporates not only shared work and joy between women, but also mutual erotic passion and physical, sexual pleasure and activity.

Poems 49 and 130b: Atthis and the end of an erotic relationship

Both poems 49 and 130b mention Atthis, the woman evoked in poem 96 as one of Sappho's female companions who had a deep friendship and potentially erotic relationship with the addressee of the poem. In poems 46 and 130b, the emphasis is on Sappho's unique relationship with Atthis. In poem 46, Sappho writes of her previous affection for the young woman:

ἠράμαν μὲν ἔγω σέθεν, Ἄτθι, πάλαι ποτά· ...
 σμίκρα μοι πάις ἔμμεν' ἐφαίνεο κάχαρις.

I loved you, Atthis, once long ago...
 You seemed to me a small child without charm.⁶³

The use of *πάλαι ποτά* indicates that these erotic feelings were indeed in the distant past, when Atthis was younger and less alluring. The use of *πάις* to refer to Atthis, however, does not indicate that she was an actual child when Sappho loved her. Rather, Atthis only *seemed* (*ἐφαίνεο*) like a child because of her innocence. Her lack of charm made her seem younger than more seductive, cunning women, but it was this very deficiency that

⁶³ Rayor and Lardinois, unlike Campbell, do not print these two lines together, but rather as separate fragments (49A and 49B). They claim it is "highly unlikely" that these two lines belong together, since the first is from a treatise on meter and the second is quoted by Plutarch (114-115). For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will treat them as one fragment.

attracted Sappho to her. Perhaps the reason Sappho no longer has these erotic feelings for Atthis is because she has developed the kind of charms that make her attractive to other women and men, but that mar the innocence and artlessness that Sappho so dearly loved. Maybe Atthis has become too sophisticated, worldly, or seductive. Or, perhaps Sappho is jealous that the now charming Atthis loves and is loved by others, and so is not hers alone to adore. Indeed, in poem 130b, Sappho writes that Atthis has found another lover: Andromeda.

Ἄτθι, σοὶ δ' ἔμεθεν μὲν ἀπήχθετο
φροντίσδην, ἐπὶ δ' Ἀνδρομέδαν πότῃ.⁶⁴

Atthis, the thought of me has grown hateful to you,
and you fly off to Andromeda.

Some sources claim that Andromeda was one of Sappho's rivals.⁶⁵ If this is the case, then it is likely that Andromeda was only a personal rival to whom women in Sappho's group were attracted, and not any sort of professional or poetic rival. It is also possible that Andromeda was a member of Sappho's group, to whom Atthis turned her attention when she ceased to care for Sappho. Sappho and Andromeda may have even been friends, moving in the same circle and associating with the same women. Regardless of the details, it is clear from these two poems as well as from poem 96 that Sappho, Atthis, and Andromeda are all somehow connected, and that they all partake in this women's subculture in which women's relationships and shared activities are of primary importance. These relationships would have been all across the lesbian

⁶⁴ Fragment 130b is the only poem I discuss that is not included in Campbell. This Greek text is from Vol.1 of the Loeb *Lyra Graeca*, edited by J.M Edmonds (see page 239).

⁶⁵ See Rayor and Lardinois 117, 137; Calame (1996a) 115.

continuum, ranging from friendships, to erotic relationships, to sexual relationships, and would have been formed, sustained, broken up, and permanently ended as circumstances and personal feelings and preferences changed.

Poems 49 and 130b, as well as poem 96, thus show the variety and mutability of the relationships between various women in Sappho's group. The Atthis and the addressee in poem 96 may have been simply close friends, or they may have had erotic feelings towards each other. Perhaps they even engaged in sexual activity. The "love" that Sappho speaks of in poem 49 (ἠράμην), was likely of an erotic nature, though perhaps over time Sappho's feelings of ἔρος towards Atthis disappeared and she was left only with sentiments of φιλία toward her companion and friend. Atthis, as suggested by poem 130b, may have stopped feeling either ἔρος or φιλία towards Sappho, but developed these feelings for another woman with whom she regularly associated. All these fluctuations indicate that while these female-centered relationships were certainly important, they were not necessarily stable, and could have moved from one part of the continuum to another over time. As women married, grew more mature, or developed different tastes and interests, they may have modified the nature of or even ended their relationships. Yet they would have remained a part of the alternative female world or subculture that Sappho evokes in her poetry and helps to sustain in practice.

Conclusion: Female homosexuality; women's worlds and perspectives

In archaic Lesbos, homosexuality and heterosexuality would not have been mutually exclusive. As Raylor and Lardinois state, the ancient Greeks only made

distinctions between “marital love (Hera) and passionate love (Aphrodite), which included homo- and heterosexual affairs” (10). They claim that Sappho was seen as the “spokesperson of passionate love” who celebrated the power of Aphrodite, both in her epithalamia and in her homoerotic poems (10). Indeed, Sappho explicitly invokes Aphrodite in several of her poems, indicating that she sees herself as a servant and worshipper of the goddess. Sappho revels in erotic love and sensuality, particularly between women, and uses her poems as a means to construct a world where this homoerotic energy and passion can be explored on many levels. There is nothing in her work to suggest that she was hostile towards marriage, or that she meant to oppose the patriarchal, civic world that perpetuated the institution. She would have understood the necessity of heterosexual marriage and procreation, and indeed was probably married herself. Her poems, however, suggest that she found true joy in loving and being loved by women.

Sappho’s poetry allows her to explore the female perspective, or rather what it means to be a woman writing about women. As Skinner (1996a) writes, there is a way in which texts composed by women can “reflect the peculiar conditions of women’s lived experience within their given cultures, ordinarily the shared experience of a ‘subculture’ marginal to the male public world” (179). Sappho takes her “lived experience” as a woman in archaic Lesbos and composes poetry that reveals particular aspects about women’s lives in her time—such as religious rituals and female friendship—and gives women a voice and position of agency in an otherwise male-focused society. The women in her poems are both the subjects and the objects of erotic desire, and participate in meaningful, egalitarian friendships, erotic relationships, and sexual relationships. These

relationships were not linked to any “institutional structures of power” like male homoerotic relationships, but took place on an “equal basis” (Greene 1996a: 247). They were about shared joy, pleasure, work, support, respect, and sensuality, and would have entailed mutual exchange and reciprocity. Sappho would have deeply loved the women in her group, just as these women would have loved her.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

The female relationships depicted in Sappho's poetry are founded on enjoyable, purposeful, and communal ritual activity. While there is little evidence of religious practices in archaic Lesbos, it is quite likely that Sappho and her female companions participated in rituals similar to the Adonia or Tauropolia, where women came together in groups to celebrate a goddess, dance, sing, and socialize. This religious activity would have been important both to the larger community in Lesbos and to the individual women in Sappho's group. A number of the critical rituals performed by women in archaic and ancient Greece would have concerned birth, death, fertility, and marriage, and would have been conducted in both public and private contexts. These activities would have played an essential role in women's lives (Parca and Tzanetou 6). They would have given women like Sappho and her companions the opportunity to come together and participate in fulfilling, enjoyable group activity, as well as a chance to contribute to the wellbeing of the *polis*.

Private religious rituals to goddesses like Aphrodite and Hera seem to be the primary contexts in which Sappho visualizes the formation and continuation of her

friendships with other women. Ritual is constantly evoked in her poetry, and it seems to have inspired certain recurring themes, such as women's presence and absence, as well as images like the lush grove of poem 2 and the flowery garlands of poem 81b. Such rituals would have provided a space for Sappho and the women in her group to form deep, egalitarian friendships. These friendships would have been shaped and maintained through the same kind of shared joy and shared work that Audre Lorde describes,⁶⁶ rather than through formal, hierarchical institutions like schools and standing choruses. Rather than a schoolmistress or a chorus leader, Sappho would have been part of a group of women, all of whom participated equally in ritual activity and supported each other throughout their changing states of life. Sappho and her friends comprised a kind of "network," as Stehle (n.d.) states, where women undertook collective action, shared secrets, protected each other, and formed familiar, intimate bonds (1). Even when marriage necessitated the separation or distancing of friends, the memories of these friendships would have been a source of comfort and pleasure to the women involved. Such friendships would have been profound, and would have been a key element of the "female subculture" (Goff 232) that Sappho represents and affirms in her poems.

These friendships are on one end of the spectrum, or, to use Rich's term, "continuum," of the female-centered, female-identified relationships that Sappho writes about. On the other end of the continuum are the erotic and sexual relationships Sappho would have formed with the women in her group. These erotic and sexual relationships would have grown from a foundation of friendship, and would have been similarly important and deeply felt. They would have involved shared work, joy, support, and

⁶⁶ See Rich 53.

intimate companionship, but with the addition of ἔρως, or erotic love. While only poem 94 explicitly mentions physical sexual activity between women, many of Sappho's poems express erotic desire or yearning for another woman. Indeed, a great deal of her poems, particularly those that evoke a ritual context and a female subculture, have a kind of "delicate sensuality."⁶⁷ As Goff notes, Sappho often eroticizes the ritual sphere in which these relationships would have been formed through her "display of women" in these contexts (245). She emphasizes their beauty and charm, and makes them the primary agents as well as the principal objects of erotic love and sexuality.

Sappho thus depicts a world that is in many ways an alternative to the patriarchal, public, epic model where women are the objects of male desire. In Sappho's poems, and, as it seems, in her group, women are also the subjects of desire. They form relationships that are entirely female-focused, and find just as much meaning, if not more, in these female-centered erotic attachments as in traditional heterosexual relationships and marriages. Such female relationships would have been quite fluid. Sappho's poems show that as women got married, grew older, changed in disposition or appearance, or moved away, their relationships fluctuated. A friendship could develop into a requited or unrequited erotic relationship. An erotic relationship could evolve into a sexual relationship. Or an erotic relationship could cool and change to a firm friendship. Regardless, all of these relationships fall somewhere along Rich's lesbian continuum, since they are centered around women who love and care for other women.

Understanding Sappho and her relationships with women on her own terms, rather than through anachronistic models, leads to a better understanding of both her poetry and

⁶⁷ Goff 244, quoting Skinner (1991).

her as a poet. Rather than a pederast, chorus leader, schoolteacher, or courtesan, Sappho was a woman who wrote and performed poetry about many public and private themes, including her love for women. Nothing in her poems suggests that she held any sort of formal, institutional role, that she gave girls or women either a musical or sexual education, or that she was engaged in relationships that would have been perceived as shameful or indecent. Indeed, Sappho's widespread popularity in archaic and ancient Greece suggests that her contemporaries did not perceive her homoerotic desires as transgressive, or even as completely opposed to the patriarchal social structure and heterosexual institution of marriage. It wouldn't have been a contradiction for Sappho to be a married woman, perhaps with a child, who felt and expressed erotic sentiments for the women with whom she regularly associated. She never seems to censor her homoerotic feelings, nor is there any indication in the ancient record that she was expected or asked to do so. Her deeply felt love for other women is, in fact, one of the most pronounced themes of her work, and one for which she has been remembered for centuries.

The information drawn from Sappho's poetry about female relationships and social networks also helps contribute to modern understanding of the daily lives of women in archaic and ancient Greece. Women, as a marginalized group, were often silenced, and their voices are largely excluded from extant ancient sources. As a woman writing about women in such a patriarchal context, Sappho holds a unique position. Though she was elite and better educated than most other women—and men—of her time, still, her thoughts and experiences, as they are suggested in her poems, speak to

what were likely some of the shared and important experiences of upper-class citizen women in the ancient world.

Ritual and religion was plainly important to Sappho and her companions, as for women of all classes in ancient Greece. Religion was the one realm in which women could participate in civic life in sexually segregated societies like classical Athens. As Goff notes, ancient women used ritual as “a resource for representing themselves and their needs” (227). Religious ritual was a crucial element of the kind of “women’s culture” that existed in such societies, wherein women could theorize and experiment with “alternatives to dominant discourses” (231). Sappho’s poetry, and the female-centric world she creates in it, can be viewed as one of these “alternatives.” While Sappho does not reject or even oppose the public, male world that is embodied in Homer’s epics, she does offer another perspective in so far as her poetry focuses on the more private, intimate female experience. Her work represents a powerful and prominent example of the kind of reactions Greek women of all classes may have had in response to their political, social, and economic marginalization.

Sappho’s poems are also helpful for understanding the kind of close relationships ancient Greek women may have formed with their neighbors, female family members, and even childhood companions. Perhaps only elite women had the time to prepare elaborate private rituals and enjoy extended leisure time in each other’s company, but women even in the lower classes would have set aside time to get together with their neighbors or community members to perform the expected religious rites and catch up on

the latest news or gossip.⁶⁸ Even these relationships, where there was no element or erotic desire or sensuous pleasure, would have been meaningful, since they too would be built from a base of shared labor and common activity. This activity would have been enjoyable to these women, and would have given them the opportunity to provide and experience both “practical help” (Stehle n.d. 2) and social stimulation. Sappho’s poems thus provide a fuller, more accurate account of women’s social lives and relationships than many male sources, who often characterize women’s interactions as trivial and mundane. Her work illuminates the complex, deep emotional and physical ties that many ancient women shared, and positively depicts women as friends, lovers, and companions of other women.

⁶⁸ See Bernard Capp’s (2003) discussion of the British “gossip network,” cited by Stehle (n.d. 2).

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