

# Sappho is Worth More than a Discussion of Her Sexuality: A Historiographical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

Previous scholarship has overanalyzed Sappho's object preference more than her male counterparts. By examining the historiographical analyses of Sappho, as well as the progression of ideas throughout these analyses, we can easily see what past scholars have focused on, Sappho's sexuality, and the inherent biases they have brought to the table. Sappho is worth more than her sexuality; it is important to study Sappho's work within her social and cultural context in order to examine how her poetry was received in her own time as well as how her writing may reflect the values of her society. The methodology we use when we approach Sappho must be altered. Rather than debating Sappho's sexuality based on modern biases, it is important to examine the language used within her poems to understand Sappho in her own context. The goal of this article is not to analyze a different aspect of Sappho. Rather, it aims to review past literary studies to show how there has been a problematic focus on Sappho's sexuality, and that there is more knowledge to glean regarding antiquity if such focus is set aside.

Sappho was a Greek lyric poet who lived and wrote sometime around 600 BC on the island of Lesbos. Most of her biography is unknown, aside from what scholars can glean from her poems and the writings of other authors. The mentions of Sappho by her later contemporaries are hard to discern the truth from, as some stories about Sappho were written for comedic value.<sup>1</sup> Much of her own work, however, is centered around both physical and emotional intimacy and very often directed from one female to another. This type of homoerotic content has been very controversial in the past, and many scholars have been fixated on the female homoeroticism within her poems.<sup>2</sup> These analyses of Sappho have been coupled with anxieties surrounding her sexuality and have resulted in scholars overlooking, or

completely disregarding, important nuances in her work.<sup>3</sup> The suspension of biases of one's own era is necessary to fully learn from Sappho regarding not only her sexuality, but her role in her society and the structure of her world.

Previous scholarly discussion on Sappho has been particularly focused on the historiography of sex and gender. Fragment 31 (referred to as "Fr. 31" for the remainder of this paper), written in Aeolic Greek, is an incomplete poem of Sappho's that is extant in Longinus' *On Sublimity*. Oftentimes works from earlier authors may only be found in a later author's work, either in part, in full, or mentioned in passing. This fragment is no exception. *On Sublimity* has been dated to the first century AD and its author is unknown

but referred to as Longinus. In this work, Longinus evaluates the efficacy of literary works written by earlier authors and discusses whether or not they were written well. Fr. 31 showcases many of the complications in analyzing Sappho and her work. Scholars George Devereaux and M. Marcovich focus more on the specifics of her sexuality in this poem as opposed to the general questions of where she fits into the social and cultural history of her era, and what this means for subsequent Greek and Roman eras. The scholarship surrounding Fr. 31 highlights some of the major problems scholars have when analyzing Sappho. Such errors are evident in the scholarly debate regarding Sappho's sexuality that has taken place through the work of George Devereaux and M. Marcovich.<sup>4</sup> A certain facet in the discussion of her object preference is her self-described physiological responses and emotional feelings present in Fr. 31.

One of the larger questions addressed in this debate was whether Sappho's feelings are directed at the man or the woman in this particular poem, often with the negative implication that it would be improper for her feelings to be towards the woman. These

implications reflect common societal views of the 1970s, when George Devereaux was writing, and project them onto a completely separate society. In the 1970s, female homoeroticism was very controversial among certain groups of people and some scholars would go as far as to attempt to clinically diagnose her, assuming that Sappho is describing a sickness in order to fit the narrative they felt most comfortable with as opposed to addressing her sexuality.<sup>6</sup> This often results in attempting to refute the homoerotic nature of her writings or looking for evidence within the modern world to negate what the inflected nature of the Greek language was implying. George Devereaux was a psychiatrist and his method of analysis was to examine each of what Devereaux refers to as 'symptoms' perceived in Sappho's poem and relate them to an illness, thus diagnosing her as having an anxiety attack. It is important to note, however, that in his title and at the end of his argument he calls her reaction a "seizure" and equates it with an anxiety attack.<sup>7</sup> The word "seizure," however, is a word with very different connotations than "anxiety attack." This is problematic in more than one way. First, the connotations of both of these words suggest that whatever Sappho is

#### Fragment 31

φαίνεται μοι κήνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
 ἔμμεν' ὤνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι  
 ἰσθάνει καὶ πάσιον ἄδου φωνεί-  
 σασ ὑπακούει  
 καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὴν  
 καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν:  
 ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὡς με φώναι-  
 σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,  
 ἀλλὰ κάμ μὲν γλπωσσά <μ' > ἔαγε,  
 λέπτον  
 δ' αὐτίκα χρῶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,  
 ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ  
 βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,  
 καδ δέ μ' ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ  
 παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποιὰς  
 ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης  
 φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐτ[α...  
 ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἔπει... καὶ πένητα...

He seems as fortunate as the gods  
 to me, the man who sits opposite  
 you and listens nearby to your  
 sweet voice and lovely laughter.  
 Truly that sets my heart trembling  
 in my breast. For when I look at  
 you for a moment, then it is no  
 longer possible for me to speak;  
 my tongue has snapped, at once a  
 subtle fire has stolen beneath my  
 flesh, I see nothing with my eyes,  
 my ears hum, sweat pours from  
 me, a trembling seizes me all over,  
 I am greener than grass, and it  
 seems to me that I am little short of  
 dying. But all can be endured,  
 since... even a poor man...  
 (LCL 142: 78-81)<sup>5</sup>

feeling is a negative medical condition, which is not stated by any explicit evidence in the poem. Second, the evidence within the fragment most assuredly points to this concourse of emotion being related to matters of the heart, which Longinus agrees to.<sup>8</sup> Sappho says in the poem τό μ' ἦ μὲν καρδίαν ... ἐπτόαισεν (that truly sets my heart trembling) as a response to the other woman's γελαίσας ἰμέροεν (lovely laughter) and ἄδου φωνείσας (sweet voice).<sup>9</sup> These traits are most certainly that of the woman because, as Greek is a gendered language, the participles are in the feminine form. The article τό indicates what is causing the reaction of her heart which in this clause τό (a thing which or that) is substantively referring to the entire previous clause ὅτις ἐναντίας τοι / ἰσθάνει καὶ πάσιον ἄδου φωνείσας ὑπακούει / καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν ([the man] who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter).<sup>10</sup> What sets her heart trembling is that the man is sitting opposite the woman and listening to her particularly desirable traits. The physical symptoms following, however, are attributed solely to her reaction to the woman. In the line ὡς γὰρ ἐξ σ' ἴδω βρόχε' (for when I look at you for a moment), the last word here can mean both briefly and for a moment. Coupled with ὡς, meaning when, whenever, as soon as, the implication is that this reaction is what Sappho experiences almost immediately each time she sees (from ἴδω) the woman, not the situation in front of her.<sup>11</sup> It is not jealousy she is feeling, either directed at the man, the woman, or "phallic awe" as Devereaux believes.<sup>12</sup> This feeling she describes corresponds to being lovesick, as Longinus states in his introduction.<sup>13</sup> Devereaux does, however, concede that Sappho is desirous towards women, but rather than accepting her as being a woman with desire towards another woman, he begins to compare her to a man.<sup>14</sup> It seems as though the purpose of his article is to further his viewpoint that homosexuality and heterosexuality are inherently different, and one is decidedly – to him – a negative characteristic. These understandings of sexuality have strongly impaired the Devereaux's ability to analyze Sappho's poem. In terms of historical analysis, the value in Sappho's work comes from its poetic nature as well

as what it can tell historians about the society she lived in and how she herself fit into that world. If she was indeed erotically inclined towards women and this was publicly accepted knowledge, what would that mean for Lesbos, Greece, and even her male counterparts who wrote poetry in response to her? These questions are fundamental to understanding Sappho's society and must be asked after putting aside personal modern biases. Furthermore, these are only a few questions that could be posed, and, due to our modern worldview, there are many questions we have not yet thought to ask.

The opposing argument to Devereaux's is evident in an article written by M. Marcovich, where he uses Devereaux's sources against him. The particular difference in Marcovich's analysis of Sappho is that he relies solely on the Greek in the poem rather than preconceived notions on what proper sexuality ought to be or who specific feelings should be directed to. Rather than making the language fit his own modern worldview, whatever that may be, he focuses on what the language alludes to through analysis of the grammar and inflection of Greek. He also includes possible translations from many other philologists as well as evidence of how other ancient authors received Sappho's work and interpreted what she was saying in her poetry. His method of analysis encompasses a variety of input, which is essential to providing the most well-rounded discussion. The more input there is from a variety of individuals, the more likely scholars and students are to overcome preconceived notions of sexuality and Ancient Greek literature. Marcovich addresses the same τό (a thing which or that) analyzed above and points out that both Devereaux and another scholar, Page, believes it to be referencing the man and thus is evidence that her emotions are towards the man.<sup>15</sup> He disagrees and argues that it must refer to γελαίσας ἰμέροεν and ἄδου φωνείσας (laughing charmingly and speaking sweetly) as he believes these characteristics best explain her feelings of love and desire.<sup>16</sup> While ἰμέροεν directly correlates with the word for desire, ἴμερος, and thus the way in which she is laughing causes desire, the participles are undoubtedly feminine. On

the other hand, τό (a thing which or that) must be referring to the preceding clause rather than these participles because it is a singular, neuter relative pronoun which does not match in gender or number with γελαίσας ἰμέροεν and ἄδου φωνείσας.<sup>17</sup> In Greek, the gender and number of each word matches with each one that is meant to complete its meaning. As there are two actions that the woman is doing which would be affecting Sappho's heart, the relative pronoun τό would reflect that by being plural, as well as having the same feminine gender. In Greek, it is conventional for a neuter, singular pronoun to refer to a previous clause rather than a feminine or masculine pronoun. The verb, ἐπτόαισεν (to excite or cause flutter), supports the argument that τό refers to the preceding clause because it agrees with τό in the singular third-person form. The verb would be in the third-person plural form if the verb was meant to agree with the feminine, plural participles above. Thus, it is grammatically much more probable, by relying on the Greek itself, that τό is referring to one thing: the preceding clause ὅτις ἐναντίός τοι / ἰσδάνει καὶ πάσιον ἄδου φωνεῖ- / σας ὑπακούει / καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν ([the man] who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter).<sup>18</sup> Overall, the argument that Marcovich provides is much more balanced than Devereaux's and he provides a strong method of analysis grounded in the Ancient Greek, as opposed to modern biases about homoeroticism. While Marcovich's arguments are well-argued and supported, the article is written in response to the ongoing over analysis of to whom Sappho's feelings are directed. There is a lack of depth in this conversation about Sappho because it is ultimately nothing more than an attempt to assign a woman's sexuality.

Sappho, however, is more than her sexuality or object preference. A recent article by Sandra Boehringer uses Fr. 31 to discuss ancient sexuality and, while remaining cognizant of the connotations modern words have when used in relation to antiquity, to show the support for an argument for true sexual fluidity before the concept of 'binary.'<sup>19</sup> In fact, in her article she argues that eros is a force that af-

fects a person, causing feelings similar to the ones described by Sappho in her poem, which affect someone regardless of their gender. Boehringer compares Fr. 31 with a poem of Sappho's discovered in 2014 which contains similar descriptions of her feelings. She asserts that the poems were meant to be sung in public, often as part of a group performance, while eros was usually a private and intimate affair during this era. Boehringer then compares these feelings to heterosexual feelings in an attempt to show that eros is the same regardless of sexual preference.<sup>20</sup> Although Boehringer is using Sappho's work as a historical precedent for modern day sexual fluidity, she is effectively placing Sappho's work within her own cultural and social spheres. Accordingly, her analysis uses the details of how Sappho constructs her work as well as the nuances that indicate gender and moves into how the ideas present relate to the broader world around Sappho and carry into the modern day. Sappho has consistently been analyzed within sex and gender history, often with many weaknesses. In Boehringer's study, however, the discussion is very constructive and shows that the scholarly analysis of Sappho has evolved from Devereaux's inability to accept Sappho's object preference, to Marcovich focusing his argument on the grammatical nuances in Greek, to Boehringer's use of Sappho's themes to study how they relate to the broader world from Sappho's era to present day.

Sappho is clearly a very descriptive writer, who manages to encompass all the senses within her work. The imagery she utilizes transports the reader to the exact moment she describes.

For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying.<sup>21</sup>

Regardless of her sexuality, the poem describes a universal feeling that humans, both in antiquity and the modern world, can relate to. Longinus identifies these emotions as “love’s madness” and praises Sappho’s poetic constructions.<sup>22</sup> This is important to consider for two reasons. First, this reiterates the universality of the theme, the emotions, and the physiological responses, real or poetically emphasized, of love. While Longinus is responding to Sappho nearly 700 years later and is not a contemporary of her, his response carries some weight as he was much closer to her era than we are and likely had access to more information than we do now. For example, we do not have the full poem, but Longinus likely did. The context of the rest of the poem could make some of the debates regarding the object of Sappho’s affection irrelevant, because it is possible the remainder of the poem could have clarified who Sappho’s object of affection is. This makes Longinus credible as a source when he refers to “love’s madness.” Longinus was writing around 700 years after Sappho and is able to relate to her emotions. “[L]ove’s madness” is also a common theme identified in modern-day pop culture. Much like how Shakespeare is analyzed in high school English classes due to his universal themes, Sappho evokes the same experience in Fr. 31 in ancient Aeolic Greek. The second reason why the universality of love is important is because it shows a positive reception of Sappho’s female homoeroticism within the context of art, rather than discussing how controversial object preference can be. How female-female love and desire was viewed, from Sappho’s time to that of Longinus, is a question that should be further researched and deciphered. According to Boehringer, this poem was meant to be sung in public, not recited in the privacy of one’s home.<sup>23</sup> If this is in fact the case, the poem is publicly declaring desire of one female for another and suggests a public acceptance of homoerotic relationships. While there is no concrete evidence of the acceptance or rejection of female homoeroticism in Sappho’s time, many of her poems involve that theme and, as she has much poetry that was meant to be sung, it only stands to reason that this poem would have been no different. This then begs the

question: what does this tell us about her society? How prevalent were female-female relationships, and were they even considered during her time to be of a sexual nature or strictly that of strong companionship between two women? Translations and current analyses of Aeolic Greek seem to point to lust and desire in some of Sappho’s writings, but how would others in her society have perceived such a thing? Questions such as these, and more, are able to be asked only when we put aside our own expectations, beliefs, and modern experiences.

While there is much we do not know about Sappho and her society, there is much we can learn by asking the proper questions. Previous scholarship on Sappho has many weaknesses but has improved over time. It is important that scholars continue to approach her as they would her male counterparts, as Boehringer has, valuing her work and its implications rather than fixating on her object preference. Similarly, although there appears to be certain universal themes, it is important to remember that there is more to be learned about Sappho’s era. We have much to learn about Sappho’s society and culture, and with so much unknown, an open mind is essential for asking the right questions.

## Notes

1. Greek comic poets suggested that she was married to a man called “Kerkylas of Andros,” where Kerkylas comes from the word *kerkos* meaning penis and *andros* meaning man. Thus, the translated name could be Mr. Dick from Manland (or the Isle of Man). It is likely this is a joke about Sappho’s sexuality rather than a fact.
2. I will be using the term *homoerotic* throughout this paper as the term *homosexual* puts a modern definition where there wasn’t one in antiquity. Certain secondary sources have used the word homosexual in the past, and as I discuss them, I will use the words the particular author used. The use of this word is exemplary of the biases of the time at which the articles were written. When I can, I will use object preference to denote sexual orientation as it has fewer modern connotations.
3. The Greeks did not have a word equivalent to sexuality or even a concept, thus the use of this word does have some implications. It is important to keep in mind that everything that encompasses sex for an individual is what we loosely use the term sexuality for, but this method of thinking does not apply to the Greeks themselves.
4. While there are certainly many more scholars involved in this debate stretching back even to the 1800s, I will be focusing on a few key articles to highlight my point.
5. Sappho, Alcaeus. *Greek Lyric, Volume I: Sappho and Alcaeus*. Edited and translated by David A. Campbell. Loeb Classical Library 142. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982. 10.4159/DLCL.sappho-fragments.1982, referred to throughout this paper as LCL 142: 78–81.
6. George Devereaux, “The Nature of Sappho’s Seizure in Fr. 31 LP as Evidence of her Inversion,” *The Classical Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1970).
7. Devereaux, “The Nature of Sappho’s Seizure in Fr. 31 LP as Evidence of Her Inversion,” 31.
8. LCL 142: 78–81; The fragment (31) presented above is accompanied in the Loeb Classical Library by both a foreword and an afterword by Longinus. His input is particularly useful as it is through him that we have access to the fragment. It is important to remember that his response, while essential in determining how Sappho was received 700 years after her death, does not give us specific insight into how her work was received in her own era.
9. That sets my heart trembling; lovely laughter (more lit. laughing charmingly); sweet voice (more lit. speaking sweetly) respectively (LCL 142: 78–81).
10. Heather Waddell, “The Digital Sappho,” accessed November 24, 2020, <https://digitalsappho.org/fragments/fr31/>; cf. M. Marcovich, “Sappho Fr. 31: Anxiety Attack or Love Declaration?” *The Classical Quarterly* 22, no.1 (1972): 19-20 where he presents the viewpoints held by many scholars
11. Heather Waddell, “The Digital Sappho.”
12. Devereaux, “The Nature of Sappho’s Seizure in Fr. 31 LP as Evidence of Her Inversion,” 22.
13. LCL 142: 78–81
14. Devereaux, “The Nature of Sappho’s Seizure in Fr. 31 LP as Evidence of Her Inversion,” 22, mentions the masculine lesbian and other characteristics of homosexuals.
15. Marcovich, “Sappho Fr. 31: Anxiety Attack or Love Declaration?” 19.
16. Marcovich, “Sappho Fr. 31: Anxiety Attack or Love Declaration?” 22.
17. A relative pronoun introduces a relative clause, which gives more information about a noun.
18. Translation: the man who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter (LCL 142: 78–81).
19. Sandra Boehringer, “La force d’ éros. Genre et fluidité érotique dans une société d’ « avant la sexualité »,” *Revue française de psychanalyse* 83, no. 5 (2019): 1558

20. Boehringer, "La force d' éros. Genre et fluidité érotique dans une société d' « avant la sexualité »,» 1558.
21. LCL 142: 78–81
22. LCL 142: 78–81
23. Boehringer, "La force d' éros. Genre et fluidité érotique dans une société d' « avant la sexualité »,» 1558.; McEvilley, Thomas. "Sappho. Fragment Thirty One: The Face Behind the Mask," *Phoenix* 32, no.1 (1978): 1.

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