

Out of Hyacinth and Apple-Boughs:

Sappho's Aphrodite Myth and the Bisexual Anima

Jessica Quinlan, Lynchburg College

Sappho is always a contradiction, lovely and enigmatic. The fragmentary condition of her work leaves echoing chasms, extended pauses, and sometimes wide, empty swallows of silence in the midst of her graceful lines. Although the famous poetess once had nine collected books of poetry archived in the library at Alexandria, the sheer weight of centuries has pressed them away into tatters, bits and pieces of poems surviving here and there.

Fragments of Sappho's poetry have been found in the quotes of other ancient writers, on stones or tattered pieces of papyrus, and most remarkably and gruesomely, sealed into the wrappings of an Egyptian mummy. Since what the poetry archeologists have discovered is incomplete or damaged, leaving the beginning or resolution of a piece missing or lines broken off in the middle, it seems to the poetic reader as though Sappho's voice resembles a secretive murmur. The enigma of her poetry, with its exotic, ancient silences, is one of the most fascinating aspects in considering it. Yet for all of its indiscernible mystery, for all the difficulty one has in interpreting the poetry on account of the fragmentation, the pieces we do have ring with undeniable familiarity. Sappho's poetic voice is friendly and gracefully accessible, speaking as easily to modern audiences as it once did to ancient ones. Her popularity has seldom dwindled--from the Victorian obsession to the ongoing modern feminist attachment. Like the best poetry of any epoch, it speaks across epochs.

In containing images and sentiments accessible to readers across time, Sappho's poetry is archetypal. Sappho frequently writes of unrequited love, feminine beauty, and relationships, using as her avatars the rulers of Olympus, most notably Aphrodite. She also

mentions herself by name, which affords her poetry some self-reflection, to the point that the reader is not entirely sure if the poetic voice is fictional at all. Aphrodite remains her most fascinating manifested figure, and much of Sappho is lurking in the goddess.

Out of the hyacinth and apple-boughs of Sappho's fragments, the goddess of love repeatedly appears. One of the oldest and most primal goddesses of the Greek pantheon, Aphrodite was ancient even by the time Sappho introduced her into her poetry. Not a Greek original, she appeared in the earlier Babylonian and Phoenician cultures, and it is likely that they inherited her from other cultures that came before them. Though always associated with love and fertility, Aphrodite also at times has been connected with the sea and flowers and was often worshipped alongside such deities as Poseidon and the Graces (Spretnak 69, Otto 91).

While Sappho's birth myth has been cited variously by ancient sources, many of her Greek contemporaries circulated a tale involving the goddess's birth from the sea, and the older generations still connected her with the image and significance of the ocean. Hesiod recounts that when Cronus threw Uranus' mutilated genitals from the sky into the turbulent sea, the severed member mingled with the soft white foam of the ocean, creating Aphrodite. She came forth from the waves dripping and was immediately worshipped as the epitome of feminine beauty (Otto 91-93).

To say that Aphrodite then became a mere goddess of love would be a vast understatement. She ruled over passion, infatuation, and sex—both marital and extramarital—and was known to be cunning and excellent at weaving snares. Sappho's contemporaries often seem drawn to the more deceitful and shameful of her attributes. Homer, for example, recounts her misadventures in his epic *Iliad*. She is often portrayed as wanton, childish, and

conniving; her power manifested primarily through her ability to entangle and cause trouble for mortal men.

In Sappho's work, however, we glimpse a more complex goddess than the whimsical bitch usually portrayed by male storytellers. Although many of Sappho's poems deal with rituals and symbols of Aphrodite, some go so far as to express a personal relationship--an attempt to court and befriend the goddess. In Sappho's only remaining complete poem, one gets a sense of her intimacy with the Aphrodite figure when she asks:

Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind
child of Zeus, who twists lures, I beg you
do not break with hard pains
 O lady, my heart

but come here if ever before
you caught my voice far off
and listening left your father's
golden house and came,

yoking your car. And fine birds brought you
quick sparrows over the black earth
whipping their wings down the sky
 through midair---

they arrived. But you, O blessed one,
smiled in your deathless face
and asked what (now again) I have suffered and why
 (now again) I am calling out

and what I want to happen most of all
in my crazy heart. Whom should I persuade (now again)
to lead you back into her love? Who, O
 Sappho, is wronging you? (Carson 3)

This passage constitutes far more than a hymn or cult song. Sappho employs the usual epithets of Aphrodite, describing her beautiful throne (Carson 357) and invoking the common structural elements of the Greek worship ceremony (128). However, the poem reveals much more than the formal recitation that might be heard at a temple or grove

honoring Aphrodite. It is intensely personal. Sappho takes the bold step of actually speaking for Aphrodite within the text and affords her a shockingly accessible and casual voice. She is shown to be more than the usual impersonal and often conceited deity who works primarily for her or his own pleasure. Instead, she is a friendly and devoted deity, appearing dutifully, if a little wryly, at Sappho's summoning. The poem three times repeats the "now again" refrain, demonstrating almost bemusement and exasperation on Aphrodite's part at her worshippers' constant appeals for aid. In spite of the fact that the problems of Sappho's self-admitted "crazy heart" seem trivial and temporary, in spite of the fact that this request is apparently all-too-common, Aphrodite faithfully flies from her position of deathless power in Zeus' house to soothe mortals:

For if she flies, soon she will pursue.
 If she refuses gifts, rather she will give them.
 If she does not love, soon she will love
 even unwilling

Come to me now: loose me from hard
 care and all my heart longs
 to accomplish, accomplish. You
 be my ally. (Carson 3)

In these last verses, the reader hears Aphrodite's wise advice and is perhaps not surprised to find her acknowledging that the situation is temporary. The translation of "pursue" and the original Greek of the lines suggests that not only will Sappho's desires come to pass, but the roles of her unrequited love affair will in fact be reversed. The undertones of these lines should not be taken to mean that the object of Sappho's desire will be placed under some kind of bizarre love spell, as might occur in Homer's tales, and forced unwillingly to acquiesce to the prayer's call. Instead the love interest will be unwilling because now she is the one pursuing an unrequited love, as Sappho will have invariably turned her own

attentions elsewhere. It will be Sappho's turn to run away and refuse gifts, while the lover chases after her, perhaps formulating her own lamentations and appeals to the goddess (15).

The poetess' perspective takes over once again for the last lines, reiterating her prayer in the same classic style as its invocation. She asks for an ally in the goddess in a manner that might allow her to take on Aphrodite's divine powers for herself and use them again. The idea of asking for a god's powers is a dynamic of the god-human relationship in many cultures. It is reminiscent of such Biblical legends as the Israelites' Old Testament appeal for the Hebrew God to join with their cause and divinely influence various battles.

Sappho's poem significantly does not depict Aphrodite as a trifling patron of flowers and love. The goddess demonstrates a willingness to use all of her godly powers to fulfill Sappho's wants and has returned again to rescue her from her romantic misadventures. Although an occasional exasperated tone and light-heartedness may be detected, the dramatic aspect remains serious and intense. Sappho is wholly in appeal, giving herself over entirely to the divine request. The image of Aphrodite in all of her glory descending upon Sappho to resolve a momentary fluster of emotion is quite profound.

Symbolically, the image of Aphrodite serves as a catalyst for Sappho reaching her full, independent feminine potential. If Carl Jung compared neurosis to an offended, ignored god, then Sappho's celebration and speaking for these aspects of the goddess perhaps help her to identify her own positive, healthy female side (Hollis 120). Figures like Aphrodite build up an intensely passionate, sexual, female archetypal image in a cultural group of people who at the time believed women primarily should be concerned with marriage and raising viable heirs (Williamson 127). In addressing the patron of female independent sexuality, Sappho is embracing her own. She is accessing the wiser feminine spirit within

herself to guide her through the troubles of her love life. Through Aphrodite, she reminds herself of her own inner holiness and of the need to be patient with the temporary troubles which may distract her from the realities of a given scenario.

Beyond appealing to an inner holy wisdom, Sappho is calling upon her own anima through Aphrodite. It has already been established, after all, that Aphrodite is the realized feminine ideal who works with Sappho's own inner desires and unconscious qualities. Moreover, the connotations are deepened by the fact that Sappho is taking on a traditionally male role in the poem, seeking to win the love of a woman and aggressively pursuing her. It makes sense then that one could connect the ideas in this variant manner considering the facts of the poem. In Jung's writing on the subject, he gives several key signs for the existence of the anima in men, including anxious, irritated behavior and moodiness (Walker 47). Sappho exhibits similar qualities, channeling the anima as a figure in her poetry in the same way a man might. She sounds frustrated and flustered by her position at the beginning of the poem, citing her "crazy heart" and begging for help over a seemingly trivial love problem that has occurred before.

Anima--a version of Sappho's erotic inner hidden self, which is also the power of Aphrodite in the poem—is the catalyst for the true personal connection established in the narrative, and this element is still recognizable today, albeit usually beneath the banner of psychology rather than myth. The appeal to some kind of higher, wiser power continues to be pervasive, whether it is in the form of a hunt for inner strength or a belief in one's deity of choice. In this notable case, Aphrodite embodies both the unconscious guide for Sappho's romantic adventures and a personal, universal ideal for all people connecting to a feminine aspect of themselves--in whatever role they find themselves.

Sappho's long, lovely silences breed creation and the unexpected amid hints of her indistinct intentions. Her poetry is important not only because of its grace and beauty, but also because it teaches us about the significance of our own archetypal connections. Sappho perished over twenty-five hundred years ago, but the unconscious chords she strikes in her poetry ring true today. In acknowledging Aphrodite as Sappho has, we are acknowledging the erotic feminine grace in each of us, embracing that inherency almost as a communion. In doing so, we connect back to the myths of her time, while also learning something about what we value in the myths of our own time: their capacity to reaffirm the human soul. We are not so different and alone in ourselves as we might believe.

Works Cited

- Carson, Anne. *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. New York: Knopf, 2002.
- Hollis, James. *Tracking the Gods: The Place of Myth in Modern Real Life*. Toronto: Inner City Books, 1995.
- Otto, Walter F. *The Homeric Gods: The Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion*. New York: Octagon Books, 1978.
- Page, Denys. *Sappho and Alcaeus: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry*. London: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Snyder, Jane M. *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Spretnak, Charlene. *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Walker, Steven F. *Jung and the Jungians on Myth*. New York: Garland, 1995.
- Williamson, Margaret. *Sappho's Immortal Daughters*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.