CHAPTER 16

From Lesbos She Took Her Honeycomb: Sappho and the ‘Female Tradition’ in Hellenistic Poetry*

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1 Introduction

The great importance that was attached to Sappho’s poetry in antiquity implied that poetry by women might be of value, especially if it resembled her work. It is not surprising therefore, that Nossis (280 BCE), a woman poet from Locri in Southern Italy, styled herself as a second Sappho.1 Nossis’ contemporaries Theocritus, Herodas and Posidippus read the work of Sappho and the later women poets Erinna, Anyte and Nossis carefully.2 They often imitated Sappho and Hellenistic women poets in one stroke or made intricately entwined allusions to several works.

It seems Sappho was valued by her readers in antiquity for at least two reasons: as an archaic lyric poet and as a unique feminine voice.3 The most popular themes were her love-poetry, her laments and her evocations of a

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1 See for Nossis Gutzwiller 1998, 75–88, Bowman 1998, who argues that this self-presentation was a strategy on the part of Nossis to share in Sappho’s prestige and become part of the literary canon, and Skinner 2005a.


3 Acosta-Hughes 2010, 13–16 sums up ten reasons why Sappho’s archaic poetry was widely admired among Alexandrian poets and their successors, most notably her style, the variety of her metres and her descriptions of the female experience from a woman's perspective. This made her a valuable predecessor and literary model for poets who worked under the patronage of Hellenistic queens, as they needed to present female experiences sympathetically. I think this also explains their interest in the works of later women poets, as they searched for models that might help to give their female characters a ring of authenticity. Kim (ch. 14) in this volume explores the value of archaic poetry for Dionysius of Halicarnassus and his appreciation of Sappho’s style as ‘refined.’
feminine world of beauty. Her poetry was special because it presented rare pictures of the world of women, written from the perspective of a woman, which made it even more intriguing.⁴ Sappho’s archaic style, appreciated for its power of expression and its powerful metaphors, was interpreted as feminine, and her lyrical first-person speaker was often equated with the poet herself.⁵ Sappho was by far the most widely read of all women poets. Far more allusions to and citations and imitations of Sappho are found than for other women poets. Because of the antiquity and uniqueness of her voice, Sappho became a model of imitation for many authors, but as the most famous of women poets she functioned especially as a model for aspiring women poets.⁶

Male poets and critics treated women poets as a separate group, measuring later women poets against Sappho. The reception and transmission of women poets reveal an almost exclusive interest in the feminine voice of Sappho and Hellenistic women poets and a neglect of work that does not fit this mold. The reception concentrated on features women poets had in common, namely, that they often wrote about the world of women, that they wrote in a small number of genres that were traditionally considered as suitable for women, and that they wrote in a similar style. That women poets alluded to Sappho and to each other’s works probably reinforced the tendency to view them as a separate group, with traditions of its own. The idea of women poets as a separate group becomes visible in the first quarter of the third century BCE in the work of Nossis, Theocritus, Herodas and Posidippus. It continues at least into the first century CE, as is demonstrated by an epigram by Antipater from Thessalonica (50 BCE–20 CE), a catalogue of the nine most famous Greek women poets.⁷

⁵ Pseudo-Demetrius, On Style 132 associates Sappho’s style with some of her subject-matter: ‘Grace may reside in the subject-matter, as gardens of nymphs, wedding-songs, love-stories, all of Sappho’s poetry’ (εἰσὶν δὲ αἱ μὲν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασι χάριτες, οἷον νυμφαῖοι κῆποι, ὑμέναιοι, ἔρωτες, δλή ἡ Σαπφοῦς ποίησις). Hor. Carm. 2.13.21–32 does the same in contrasting Sappho’s ‘complaining’ (querentem) voice in a lament for girls to Alcaeus’ ‘manly’ (plenius) voice in songs of war and exile. It seems Sappho’s style was associated with her depictions of the world of women and was therefore read as feminine. A wonderful example of the coinciding of the poet Sappho with her lyrical ‘I’ in the reception is Ovid’s portrait of the poet in Heroides 15, where the first-person speaker, named Sappho, cites the ‘I’ of Sappho’s poems.
⁷ Anth. Pal. 9.26 with de Vos 2012b. Sappho and Corinna figure as the most prominent poets in this epigram. Although no Hellenistic imitations of or allusions to Corinna’s work are known, in Rome she was considered as the second most important woman poet, next to Sappho.