CHAPTER 12

Larichos in the Brothers Poem: Sappho Speaks Truth to the Wine-Pourer

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We now have a new poem by Sappho on the subject of her brothers, previously attested only by two fragmentary poems and several testimonia.1 The testimonia report that Sappho mocked the first brother, Charaxos, a merchant sailor, for spending his earnings to free a courtesan named Rhodopis or Doricha and that she praised the second, Larichos, who poured wine at the town-hall of Mytilene.2 The new poem mentions both brothers, but not for the specific activities that the testimonia describe. It therefore gives substance to the idea that there was a series of ‘brothers poems’ involving Charaxos and Larichos.3 It also opens a window on familial gender dynamics from a woman’s perspective. This is an exciting new aspect of Sappho’s poetry.

The first question is whether we should read the poem biographically: did Sappho compose this poem as her response to an actual situation at a particular moment? Our approach to reading the poem depends on the answer. Since Charaxos in this poem is like the merchant seaman in Herodotus and the ‘brother’ in poem 5 whose return is envisioned—and since he has no recorded activities apart from coming home after trading abroad (and buying a courtesan’s freedom)—he seems to be a type.4 His role reflects what must have been

1 I want especially to thank Dirk Obbink not only for bringing us these papyri but also for patiently answering my questions about them. I also thank André Lardinois for organizing the panel and co-editing this volume, Joel Lidov, Diane Rayor, and Deborah Boedeker for helpful comments, Glenn Most for asking a question that I needed to answer, and Anton Bierl for serving as co-editor.

2 Larichos: Ath. 10, 425a (= test. 203a); schol. Il. 20.234 (also test. 203c). The second cites Sappho as saying that it was the custom for good-looking aristocratic youths to pour wine. For Charaxos see note 4.

3 A third brother is mentioned in P. Oxy. 1800 fr. 1 lines 1–35 (= test. 252), where his name is restored as [Ἐρ]ι̣γυιον, and in Suda c 107 s.v. ‘Sappho’ (= test. 253), where his name is given as Eurygios. Nothing is known about Erigyios.

4 Hdt. (2.135) tells the story of Charaxos buying the freedom of Rhodopis. Test. 252 and 254 refer to this episode. Two of them, P. Oxy. 1800 fr. 1 lines 1–35 and Ath. 13, 596bc, give the name Doricha for the courtesan.
a common experience for the women of Lesbos, awaiting the next homecoming of the men on whom their families depended. Larichos does not appear in Sappho’s previously-known poetry, but given that his role in this poem is compatible with his being young, attractive, and at home in the symposium, as the testimonia report, he is probably a type as well. The two “brothers” then represent different aspects of the life of the prosperous class of Lesbos, with its symposium culture of leisure and its mercantile adventuring over the sea.5

Since they appear to be types, I do not think that this poem can be read as biographical. Sappho may or may not have had brothers, but these figures have at a minimum been abstracted from real relatives. Similarly, one might note that in the only mention of her own mother (98) Sappho portrays her as recommending simple adornment for women’s hair in contrast to the luxurious Lydian mitra that seems to be the current fashion. Thus she too could be a type, one representing a now-lost way of life, less driven and wealth-seeking. Certainly Sappho’s attitude toward riches in this poem is aligned with hers.6 However, we would need more passages mentioning her to see whether that really is her role.

Likewise, the first-person voice in the “personal” poems is a creation of the poet. Perhaps I should call this figure “Sappho” with quotation marks, but I also do not want to suggest that the speaker is a fiction only. That Sappho the poet reflected on her life and society by representing herself in relationship with others seems to me to emerge from her themes, which combine realia like festivals and dress with scenarios depicting women’s emotional experience in a male-dominated culture. The continuity between the persona and the poet gives Sappho’s poetry its power, for her dramatic narratives distilled those experiences and expressed them as her own to audiences that knew her.7 So I

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5 See Raaflaub in this volume on some kinds of trade being compatible with elite status. He points out that one shipload could bring tremendous riches in this period.

6 Kurke (1992) 96 describes both Sappho and Alcaeus as claiming allegiance to an elite lifestyle through their use of ἁβρός (‘luxuriant’) and other forms of the stem. For Sappho, she observes, it represents ‘a certain sensuality’. Unfortunately, the most significant line of Sappho’s on the subject (58.25–26), ‘And/but I am fond of ἁβροσύνα …’, has no larger context to show us what it is paired or contrasted with, although the quotation containing it goes on to say something like, ‘and ἐρῶς has allotted me the light of the sun and the beautiful’. So Sappho deeply enjoyed the sensuous and alluring but did not necessarily embrace wealth as power. Kurke (idem: 101, n. 43) thinks she was ambivalent about it.

7 Morrison (2007) 41 speaks of the ‘pseudo-intimacy’ of Sappho’s (and Alcaeus’) poems in explaining why audiences outside the original one would find them attractive, and (48) comments that in archaic lyric the narrator becomes a subject for narration.