

NEH Application Cover Sheet (FEL-273288)

Fellowships

PROJECT DIRECTOR

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Field of expertise: Classical Languages

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APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *Sappho and Homer: A Reparative Reading*

Grant period: From 2021-09-01 to 2022-08-31
Project field(s): Classical Languages; Classical Literature; Gender Studies

Description of project: Like all poets in archaic Greece, Sappho was steeped in Homer's story world; yet scholars typically frame the relationship between the two poets as competitive and antagonistic. Inspired by the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick whose turn in the mid-1990s toward "reparative reading" sparked a new wave of queer feminist criticism, this project seeks to disentangle Sappho's reading of Homer from the combative, arena-like moves and politics of current practices of literary criticism. In queering the markedly heterosexual desire foregrounded by epic, her lyrics furnish alternative endings and new interpretations of epic material. Sappho expertly captures the experience of falling in and out of love, as a woman, a poet, and a reader of epic. This will be one of the first books to offer in-depth discussions of the major fragments, including those only recently published, and to initiate a conversation between philological scholarship on Sappho and Homer and more recent trends in the humanities.

REFERENCE LETTERS

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“Sappho and Homer: A Reparative Reading”

Significance and contribution

At the time Sappho lived (the late 7th to early 6th century BCE), Homeric epic was nearly synonymous with song culture. Homer supplied the repertoire for performances and recitations of poetry at public festivals as well as in private settings throughout Greece, and Sappho, like other lyric poets of the time, was steeped in epic’s story world. Yet modern scholars have typically framed the relationship between Sappho and Homer as competitive and antagonistic. In my project, I seek instead to explore the emotional and aesthetic terrain of the still predominantly oral-poetic song culture within which Sappho responded to Homeric epic. While it does not depend entirely on the existence of the “newest Sappho,” (i.e., the fragments of Sappho published in 2014) the project offers up a timely response to these exciting discoveries. There is no better time than the present, I propose, to reflect on what we are doing when we read Sappho; it is a question I approach by looking closely at Sappho’s own profile as a “reader” of Homer (and by “reader” I mean both an interpreter and a rewriter/ re-composer of epic) and by tracing how her lyrics engage the emotions, characters, plot, and sexual ideology of Homeric epic. The proposed project, which will culminate in a book, is timely not only because it fills a notable gap in the scholarship on Sappho, but also because it complements other recent work on reading practices, affect, and aesthetics, both in and outside of Classics.

Our culture today avidly consumes remakes of classic works—from the BBC Sherlock, to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, to *Fifty Shades of Gray* and, among classically themed rewrites, *The Silence of the Girls* and *An American Marriage*. This pop-cultural fascination with rewriting and reimagining classics of various kinds provides a unique opportunity for scholars who are interested in questions of reception. Those of us who are employed in the academy as professional readers have an obligation to revisit older models of interaction between authors, readers, and texts with a view to acquiring a more capacious understanding of the processes that inform literary appropriation and imitation. My book will be one step in this direction. And as a project that seeks to move beyond both the jargon and the interpretive moves of much academic writing, it will be of interest not only to classicists but to readers and scholars from other humanistic disciplines and from the general public, readers who are interested in discovering and implementing a way of reading that does not replicate the methods of “critique.” It is commonplace for critics to ascribe to the poets they study motivations and methods similar to their own. As Rita Felski (2012, 2) puts it in “Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” critique “promises the engrossing pleasure of a game-like sparring with the text in which critics deploy inventive skills and innovative strategies to test their wits, best their opponents, and become sharper, shrewder, and more sophisticated players.” But in treating the text as an opponent to be sparred with, we burden it with a deceptive and/or competitive agenda that can have a distorting effect on our readings.

Concepts, method, and organization

The NEH fellowship would allow me time to complete the writing and revision of the book-project described above, which is titled *Sappho and Homer: A Reparative Reading*. This will be one of the first books to offer in-depth discussions of the major fragments, including those that have only recently been published. It will also initiate a long-overdue conversation between the philological scholarship on Sappho and Homer (and on the relationship between them) and more recent trends in literary theory and in the humanities at large. Over the past several decades there has been a noticeable shift in reading practices. There has been a turn away from the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that dominated the poststructuralist scene of humanistic scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s to a more “reparative” readerly stance. This shift has had clear effects on intertextuality, a practice that in its obsession with uncovering hidden meanings and its positing of an agonistic relationship between reader and text, and between text and tradition, is a case of “paranoid” reading par excellence.

The terms “paranoid” and “reparative” come from the work of literary scholar and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who adapted them from Melanie Klein, an Austrian-British psychoanalyst and disciple of Freud who is best known for her work in the field of infant psychosocial development. Klein

argued that young children oscillate between projecting feelings of love and hate onto their mother. When they are frustrated, they fantasize about killing or harming her, leading them to adopt an aggressive “paranoid/ schizoid” position. But this in turn triggers feelings of fear and guilt, and the child then reverts to a “depressive” position from which she “heals” the mother with “reparative” fantasies. Like its psychoanalytic namesake, “reparative” reading emerges from the depressive position, and takes a less aggressive approach to the study of literary works. Far from searching for hidden meanings, the reader can be attentive to surface-level features; and instead of interpreting an inherently alien textual artifact, the affect of this way of reading is closer to that of inhabiting the world created by the text.

The proposed project is concerned with a reparative reading of the intertextual relations between Sappho and Homer. It is equally concerned with releasing the queer potential of Sappho’s lyrics from the binary framework of more traditional approaches. A reparative approach allows us to circumvent the assumption that Sappho must at some level be trying to subvert, to challenge, or override Homer and what he stands for. It also allows us to appreciate the way in which the aesthetics, temporality, and sexuality of Sappho’s lyrics are intertwined. What if Sappho’s aim were not to rewrite the master narrative of epic, but instead to “heal” or “repair” the trauma experienced by those inhabiting the world of the *Iliad*? What if she were less interested in contesting the *Odyssey*’s sexual poetics than in queering them?

There has been an unquestioned assumption that Sappho was hostile to the militaristic and male-centered ethos of heroic society; that in her lyrics, she seeks to replace epic, or usurp epic’s place as the central poetic genre (e.g., Rissman 1983, Winkler 1990, Rosenmeyer 1997). This way of reading Sappho is not wrong, but it works only up to a certain point. For Sappho’s lyrics also draw upon some of the quieter, domestic scenes from within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The recently published *Brothers Song* (2014), for example, highlights the place of Lesbos, Sappho’s island, within Homeric geography; its meaning depends not on repudiating epic, but on seeing Sappho’s poem as amplifying a minor episode (on Nestor’s homecoming), that is easily overlooked by readers of the *Odyssey*. In another interaction with epic, similar in its cooperative ethos, Sappho turns our attention to the scene in *Iliad* 22 where Andromache sees her husband’s corpse being dragged and mutilated by Achilles; there she casts off the “shining fastenings” which bind her hair, headpieces which include a veil that was given to her on her wedding day by Aphrodite (22.466-72). Sappho 44, a contextualizing song about the wedding procession of Hector and Andromache, enables the aestheticizing details of this extraordinary Homeric scene to hold our attention. We can slow down and appreciate details that get drowned out in epic’s faster paced and action-focused narrative.

Overview of chapters

The book is divided into three groupings of three chapters each. The first triptych contains two methodological chapters, the first one on reparative reading (Chapter 1, “Sedgwick and Sappho as Reparative Readers”) and the second one on the interactions between epic and lyric on Lesbos (Chapter 2). A transitional chapter (Chapter 3, “Lyric Materialities”) looks at some of the ways Sappho reworks components of Homeric epic, from noun-epithet formulas to memorable epic objects, and argues that the metaphor of crafting (particularly reweaving) yields insight into the material reparative aesthetics of Sappho’s lyrics.

The second, and central, triptych of chapters traces how Sappho’s lyrics imagine queer futures for characters, affects, and stories drawn from Homeric epic. Taking as its point of departure Diomedes’ wounding of Aphrodite in *Iliad* 5, Chapter 4 (“Aphrodite and the Poetics of Shame”) explores the significant emotional trauma of the goddess’s injury and suggests that the shaming to which she is subjected in epic is transformed into the revenge impulse we see in Sappho 1. Festering wounds, left unaddressed within the *Iliad*, instill in listeners a strong desire for a different ending. Epic’s silencing of Aphrodite’s pain, as she retreats in humiliation, calls forth Sappho’s lyric response. Chapter 5 (“Sappho fr. 58: A Queer Romance”) examines the asynchronies of the Tithonos Poem and the temporalities dividing the goddess Dawn from her mortal lover, Tithonos. I draw on Sedgwick’s notion of “bardo”—suspension between death and rebirth—to articulate the in-between position Tithonos finds himself in as he transitions from a human into an insect body. And I suggest that Dawn’s embrace of her soon-to-be-

non-human lover resonates, on many levels, with Sedgwick's own experience of living with a terminal disease, on the threshold between life and death. Chapter 6 ("Andromache's 'No Future' Wedding Song") considers a different kind of queer future, this time one that is furnished by epic itself. The *Iliad* previews the death of Astyanax, the future child of Andromache and Hector, who will be hurled to his death from the walls of Troy. Astyanax's certain death casts a pall over Sappho fr. 44, a marriage song depicting the happy couple as they are *en route* to Troy. Reading *Iliad* 22 and Sappho fr. 44 in tandem, I argue, allows a moment's respite from Iliadic despair and from the pessimistic future forecasted by the epic ideology of "unperishing fame" (*kleos aphthiton*), a future which resonates with the concept of "no future" theorized by queer theorists Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani.

In the final triad of chapters we return once again to Lesbos, and to what it means to read Homer from Sappho's island. Chapter 7 ("Helen and the Queering of Epic Desire") looks closely at one of epic's proto-queer moments: Anactoria's bright face and lovely step (in fr. 16) can be traced back, I argue, to a glimpse of Paris that is filtered through Aphrodite's description of him in *Iliad* 3. There his appearance suggests that he is either coming from or going to the dance floor, an image, I suggest, that provides insight into the structure of Sappho fr. 16, where the singer's desire for Anactoria is triangulated through that of Helen for Paris, just as Sappho's own lyric voice reaches us triangulated through the prism of epic. Chapter 8 ("Sapphic Remembering, Lyric *Kleos*") explores how Sappho adapts and reorients the motif of gendered remembering in the *Odyssey*. The act of remembering is most fully realized when Sappho voices songs which celebrate, or have been authored by, a departed friend. But Sappho's lyrics queer epic remembering by substituting a woman for Odysseus, who is the sole object of Penelope's remembering in the *Odyssey*. Just as Sappho relies on her audience's familiarity with the Homeric Aphrodite so too does she assume their knowledge of how the epic tradition handles Lesbos, as I argue in Chapter 9 ("Nestor's Lyric Nostos and Prayer Poetics"). This final chapter offers a reading of the Brothers Song in light of Nestor's *nostos* and the travel motifs found in other fragments of Sappho and Alcaeus; it devotes particular attention to the language of deliverance, which gives both thematic structure and religious resonance to the poem.

Skills and qualifications

My first book, *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Chicago 2016), offered a new theoretical model for reading tragedy as a live performance genre. While my current project is focused instead on epic and lyric, its impulses are grounded in a similar goal of making the literary mechanisms and nuances of Greek poetry accessible to readers who do not know ancient Greek. I have published articles on Homer and Sappho and I have contributed a chapter on "Sappho and Sexuality" to the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Sappho*.

Work plan and final product

I had been making steady progress towards completing a first draft of the entire book manuscript when Covid-19 shut everything down in mid-March 2020. At the time of writing this (April 2020) I have yet to draft Chapter 2, and I anticipate that some of the revisions and bibliographic work I had hoped to undertake between May-August 2020 on my earlier-drafted material will need to be postponed until a future date, when library services are once again available. At present, I am making notes for revisions to what I have written, and re-reading Sappho and Homer; but mostly I am looking after my pre-school aged son while schools remain closed. And I am planning when and how to share the preliminary drafts of Chapter 1 and Chapters 3-9 with select readers. A year of supported research leave (September 2021-August 2022), would allow me, first, to draft Chapter 2 (July-November 2021), and next, to do a thorough review of the secondary literature to ensure that my bibliography is up to date; I would also integrate comments from readers on the remaining eight chapters, spending approximately a month on each chapter (December 2021-July 2022). I would then make final edits and formatting changes and send the MS to readers at Cambridge University Press by August 15, 2022. My advance book contract with CUP specifies a submission date of December 2022, and the above timeline allows for final revisions to be made to the manuscript between October and December of that year.

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Professional Positions

ACLS Burkhardt Fellowship at the National Humanities Center, North Carolina (2019-20)
Associate Professor of Classics at University of Massachusetts Amherst (2014-present)
Assistant Professor of Classics at University of Massachusetts Amherst (2007-14)
Junior Fellow at The Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington, D.C. (2009-10)
Visiting Assistant Professor of Classical Studies at Wellesley College (2006-7)
Visiting Assistant Professor of Classical Studies at Wesleyan University (2005-6)
Assistant Professor of Classics at University of Texas, Austin (2002-5)

Education

University of California, Berkeley
ASCSA Regular Member
King's College, University of Cambridge
Barnard College, Columbia University

Dates

May 2002
2000-2001
June 1995
May 1993

Degrees

Ph.D. in Classics

B.A. 1st, Classics
B.A. in Classics,
summa cum laude

Dissertation: *Speaking through Objects: Reciprocity and Gender in Euripides* (Donald J. Mastronarde, Chair; Mark Griffith; Leslie Kurke)

Awards, Fellowships, and Honors

ACLS Frederick Burkhardt Residential Fellowship
Flex Teaching award to attend "Reacting to the Past" institute, NYC
Residential First-Year Experience (RFYE) Student Choice Award
UMass Provost's Exceptional Merit Award
Fellowship at Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies in D.C.
Loeb Classical Library Foundation Fellowship
Columbia University Society of Fellows Postdoctoral Fellowship (declined)
Mary Isabel Sibley Fellowship (Phi Beta Kappa)
Lucy Shoe Merritt Fellowship (at ASCSA)
Chancellor's Opportunity Fellowship (UC Berkeley)
Phi Beta Kappa, Barnard College

Dates

2019-20
2014
2011-2012
2011-2012
2009-2010
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2000-2001
1995-1997
1992

Books

1. *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy*, January 2016, The University of Chicago Press:
<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/O/bo22053857.html>
2. *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy: Objects and Affect in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides* (June 2018, Bloomsbury Press), co-edited with Mario Telò:
<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/the-materialities-of-greek-tragedy-9781350028791/>

In Progress: *Sappho and Homer: A Reparative Reading* (book project: under contract with Cambridge University Press, complete manuscript due December 2022)

Journal Articles (Peer-Reviewed)

1. "Recognition and the Forgotten Senses in the *Odyssey*," (2016) *Helios* 43.1: 1-20.

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2. "The Disease of Mortality in Hesiod's *Theogony*: Prometheus, Herakles, and the Invention of *Kleos*" (2016) *Ramus* 45.1: 1-17.
3. "Re-Centering Epic *Nostos*: Gender and Genre in Sappho's Brothers Poem," (2016) *Arethusa* 49: 25-46.
4. "The Politics of Gesture in Sophocles' *Antigone*" (2011) *Classical Quarterly* 61.2: 412-425.
5. "Phaedra's *Defixio*: Scripting *Sophrosune* in Euripides' *Hippolytus*," (2011) *Classical Antiquity* 30: 148-77.
6. "Athens in a Basket: Naming, Objects, and Identity in Euripides' *Ion*," (2010) *Arethusa* 43: 365-402.
7. "Helen's Hands: Weaving for *Kleos* in the *Odyssey*," (2010) *Helios* 37: 1-21.
8. "Penelope and the Poetics of Remembering," (2007) *Arethusa* 40: 337-62.
9. "The Language of Reciprocity in Euripides' *Medea*," (2001) *American Journal of Philology* 122.4: 471-504.

Chapters in Edited Volumes and Encyclopedias

1. "Antigone Reception," (2012) co-authored with Andrés Fabian Henao Castro, for the *Literary Encyclopedia*, ed. J. Burgess (first published 5 November 2012).
2. "Economics and Gender: Greek World," (2014) in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, edited by Julia M. O'Brien. Oxford.
3. "Dressing for Dionysus: Statues and Material Mimesis in Euripides' *Bacchae*," (2016) in *Gli oggetti sulla scena teatrale ateniese: Funzione, rappresentazione, comunicazione*. Edited by Alessandra Coppola, Caterina Barone, and Monica Salvadori. CLEUP, Padua: 57-70.
4. "Gender," (2017) in *A Companion to Euripides*, ed., L. K. McClure. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden and Oxford: 500-514.
5. "Dreamscape and Dread in Euripides' *Iphigenia among the Taurians*," (2018) in *Landscapes of Dread in Classical Antiquity*, edited by Debbie Felton. Routledge: 77-94.
6. "Introduction," with Mario Telò, (2018) in *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy: Objects and Affect in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*. Bloomsbury.
7. "Sappho and Sexuality," invited chapter (9,000 words) for the *Cambridge Companion to Sappho*, ed., P.J. Finglass and A. Kelly. (Forthcoming 2020)
8. "Hippolytus" for Brill's *Companion to Euripides*, ed. A. Markantonatos. (7,500 words): final version submitted December 2018.
9. "Bodily Rhetoric in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*," (7,000 words) invited essay for *Rhetoric and Tragedy*, ed., M. Carmen Encinas (submitted July 31, 2019).

Book Reviews

1. Isabelle Torrance, *Aeschylus: Seven Against Thebes*. Duckworth. 2007. *New England Classical Journal* 35.4 (2008) 289-91.
2. Mary Stieber, *Euripides and the Language of Craft*. Brill. 2011, *Classical World* 106.4 (2013) 704-705.
3. Deborah Lyons, *Dangerous Gifts*. Austin. 2012, BMCR. First published 9/16/13 (<http://www.bmcreview.org/2013/09/20130933.html>).
4. Simon Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy*. Oxford. 2012. *New England Classical Journal* 41.1 (2014) 50-52.
5. Sarah Nooter, *The Mortal Voice in the Tragedies of Aeschylus*. Cambridge. 2017. *American Journal of Philology* 140.3 (2019) 567-570.

Professional Activities and Other Service

Member of the Program Committee for the *Society for Classical Studies* (elected office, 2020-2023)

Book Series Editor (with Lilah Grace Canevaro), *Ancient Cultures, New Materialisms*, Edinburgh University Press (<https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/series-ancient-cultures-new-materialisms.html>)

Sappho and Sexuality¹

Few readers today would deny that Sappho's lyrics are intensely homoerotic, yet there is little agreement on what, if anything, this tells us about Sappho herself. In one camp are the radical constructivists, the heirs to Foucault's legacy, who insist on the historical contingency of sexuality. For them, 'homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality' are discursive inventions of the modern world; they are cultural phenomena with no currency in pre-modern societies. To refer to Sappho (or any of the female figures in her lyrics) as lesbian is to project onto antiquity a binary opposition – between hetero-and homo-sexuality – where none existed.² The ancient Greeks, they claim, did not conceptualise their sexual acts in terms of their partner's gender, whether this was the same or different from their own. They were concerned instead with whether they were occupying an active or passive position relative to their sexual partner, whether that partner was male or female. In the opposing camp are the essentialists who, seeking continuities between past and present, argue that even if the discourse of sexuality had not yet been invented, the reality was there.³ Gays and lesbians, they claim, have always existed. Sappho and her contemporaries may not have been familiar with the binary axes of sexual orientation that we use today,⁴ but their passions and persuasions were fundamentally the same as our own.

Naming is of course a political act. By naming, we legitimise and affirm. We performatively call into being something that may not have existed prior to its naming.⁵ Calling Sappho a lesbian poet has political ramifications. As a female poet, she has been a torchbearer for generations of women writers. 'It is in Sappho's broken fragments', writes Ellen Greene, 'that the modern woman poet could reinvent Sappho's verse and thus inscribe feminine desire as part of an empowering literary history of her own'.⁶ This is a literary history with numerous erasures. In the words of Susan Gubar, 'Sappho represents . . . all the lost women of genius in literary history, especially all the lesbian artists whose work has been destroyed, sanitized, or heterosexualized'.⁷ There is a lot at stake, then, in these naming wars. To deny Sappho's homosexuality, to insist that she is not lesbian, is implicitly to acknowledge the power of that name. It is important, therefore, to be clear from the outset: the question of the poet's sexuality is not one that can be answered through a close reading of her lyrics.⁸ Even if we read her lyrics biographically, or as personal poetry (LARDINOIS), what we see will be shaped by the conceptual horizon and theoretical tools which we bring to the page. For the followers of Foucault, the expressions of same-sex desire within Sappho's lyrics will continue to be

¹ What follows are excerpts from "Sappho and Sexuality," my contribution to the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Sappho*.

² For a strong statement of the 'discontinuity' position see Halperin 1990, Parker 2001.

³ Davidson 2007.

⁴ Although even today these orientations are questioned and malleable: Sedgwick 1990, Ahmed 2006.

⁵ Judith Butler 1997.

⁶ Greene 1996d: 4. For Sappho and early twentieth-century lesbian poets see Gubar 1984 = Greene 1996b: 199–217, GOFF AND HARLOE. For the contemporary politics of Sappho's lesbianism see Haselswerdt 2016.

⁷ Gubar 1984: 46 = Greene 1996b: 202.

⁸ As Most 1995: 31 = Greene 1996b: 32 puts it, perhaps 'the most curious feature of Sappho's literary fortunes has been the contrast between the certainty attaching to the fact of her passion and the uncertainty attaching to the objects of that passion'. In nearly every place in the corpus where we seem to have evidence for the existence of a feminine gendered object of desire, alternative readings have been proposed. See FINGLASS (ch. 18) pp. YYY on the feminine ἐθέλοις at 1.24 and Most 1995: 28–31 ≈ Greene 1996b: 28–32 on fr. 31.7.

disparate parcels of sexual experience which do not add up to a lesbian identity, while for others, they will continue to be the ‘recovered voice of a long-suppressed lesbian consciousness’.⁹

My goal in this chapter, then, is neither to reaffirm nor to revoke Sappho’s lesbianism. After brief general remarks on Sappho and female sexuality, I turn to the lyrics themselves. But rather than reading them as evidence for or against the poet’s homosexuality, I instead trace the destabilising, ‘queer affect’ of Sappho’s work:¹⁰ the way that *erôs* as a force and a feeling captured in and created by her poetry eludes classification by inverting hierarchical relationships between self and other, human and environment, active and passive. Boundaries between sexually and intellectually inflected relationships are not always easily demarcated and may be deliberately blurred. In several Sapphic fragments, the defection of a member of Sappho’s group to that of another woman inspires iambic rebuke of the sort more commonly associated with the spurned lover. Likewise, the speaker of fr. 55 invokes the language of *erôs* to denigrate another woman’s poetry, claiming lack of desire (*pothos*) to hear her songs reperformed. *Pothos*, with its sensual resonances, captures the intertwining of *erôs* and immortality, of sexual and poetic fortunes, whereas elsewhere in Sappho (in fr. 94, for example) its semantic remit is more narrowly sexual. It is these overlapping circles of desire that give us a sense of the expansive range of sexuality in Sappho.

Queer Sappho

‘Queer’ is a term often used in connection with non-heteronormative forms of sexuality – sexual acts and identities that do not line up easily along the usual binaries of homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, male, female, and so on. It is also a term that, as Dana Luciano and Mel Chen suggest, speaks to the precariousness of life and the precarity of all things.¹¹ ‘Queer’ applies to the dispersal of human emotions and affect among various senses, sensory objects and things that are in themselves non-material, such as the ephemeral ‘objects’ of memory. Given the impossibility of pinning down the sexual identities of the human figures in many of Sappho’s poems it is appropriate to speak of ‘queer’ affect.

Ellen Greene argues of fr. 94 that the ‘apostrophic structure of the poem . . . dramatizes an experience of desire as mutual recognition’.¹² Believing it possible for contemporary readers to discover in Sappho’s representation of female desire ‘an alternative to the competitive and hierarchical models of eroticism that have dominated Western culture’, she and others have mapped onto Sappho’s poetry an idealistically egalitarian lesbianism, one which avoids the asymmetrical bias of male homosexuality as constructed by Foucault.¹³

Fr. 94 consists of a leave-taking between the speaker of the poem and another woman. Although the beginning of the poem is missing, it starts, for us, with a direct quotation: ‘I sincerely wish to die’, says ‘the woman crying many tears, as she left me’. ‘Sappho’, who is in the position of the one who remembers, recalls the woman’s words, and in doing so, she brings the dialogue between them to life, making the departed woman’s intense feelings present once more: ‘Oh, what awful things we’ve suffered, Sappho, and truly I leave you against my will’, says the other woman.

⁹ Habinek 1996: xii.

¹⁰ See Chen 2012, especially pp. 57–85 on the semantics and lexicography of the term ‘queer’.

¹¹ Luciano and Chen 2015.

¹² Greene 1994: 42 = 1996a: 234; also Greene 1996c: 6–7.

¹³ Greene 1994: 43 = 1996a: XXX. Like much of the feminist scholarship on Sappho in the 1980s and 1990s, Greene compares Sappho’s erotic strategies favourably to those of her male counterparts. Skinner 1996: 182, for example, finds Sappho’s poetic discourse to be ‘open, fluid, and polysemous – and hence conspicuously nonphallic’. Similarly Stehle Stigers 1979 ≈ Stehle 1996, L. Wilson 1996.

To which ‘Sappho’ replies, ‘Go, happily, and remember me, for you know how I (literally ‘we’) held you, and if you don’t, I am willing to remind you . . . and we also experienced beautiful things’.

‘Sappho’ goes on then to remind this absent woman of the ‘beautiful’ things – *kala* – that they have experienced together, and from its earlier focus on I-to-you (speaker-to-addressee) relations,¹⁴ the dialogue swivels the foreground into the background, just as it has collapsed the temporal planes of past and present:

10

αἰ δὲ μή, ἀλλὰ σ' ἔγω θέλω
 ὀμναίαι [] [] εἶ
 ὅς [] καὶ κάλ' ἐπάσχομεν·
 πό[λλοις γὰρ στεφάν]οις ἴων
 καὶ βρ[όδων] κίων τ' ὑμοι
 κα [] πᾶρ ἔμοι περεθήκαο
 καὶ πόλλαις ὑπαθύμιδας
 πλέκταις ἀμφ' ἀπάλαι δέραι
 ἀνθέων ἐ[] πεποημέναις.
 καὶ π [] μύρῳ
 βρενθείῳ [] ρυ[] ν
 ἐξαλείψαο κα[ι] βασιλήῳ
 καὶ στρώμ[αν ἐ]πὶ μολθάκαν
 ἀπάλαν παρ[] ονων
 ἐξίης πόθο[ν] [] νίδων

But if not (i.e. if you do not remember), I wish to remind you . . . and the beautiful things we experienced. Many wreathes of violets and roses and . . . you put on by my side, and you put many plaited garlands around your delicate neck, made from flowers . . . and with costly myrrh you anointed yourself . . . and in a queenly way, on the soft sheets . . . you would satisfy your desire . . . for delicate . . .

The human subjects, the original loci for these feelings of sadness and desiring despair, give way to a more dispersed kind of animacy, one in which, partly due to the fragmentary state of the parchment, it is no longer possible to say who, or what, is satisfying whom. We hear only that ‘in a queenly way, and on the soft sheets . . . you would satisfy your desire (ἐξίης πόθο[ν]) . . .’ The addressee is the subject of the verb to ‘exhaust’ or ‘satisfy’, and desire (*pothōn*) is its object.¹⁵ But what it is she has desire *for* is irrecoverable. We simply have no idea what the noun is, in the genitive case, that ‘tender’ (ἀπάλαν) modifies. In this sense, the nonhuman objects, the things themselves that are being recalled, share the stage with the human speakers. All are objects of memory and entangled in the feelings and sensations to which remembering gives rise.

Violets, roses, plaited garlands, and myrrh, the soft sheets and other delicate things enable, through their encounter with human bodies, release from desire. And though these things are not apostrophised directly, it may still be appropriate to recall Jonathan Culler’s insight into the capacity of apostrophic address ‘to posit a world in which a wider range of entities can be imagined to

¹⁴ Cf. Williamson 1996: 255: “‘I’, ‘you’, and ‘she’ (and in fr. 96 we should also add ‘we’) are never clearly differentiated, securely demarcated positions, but are constantly linked in a polyphonic, shifting erotic discourse, a kind of circulation of desire in which the gaps between subjects, figured through time and space, are at the same time constantly bridged by the operations of love and memory.”

¹⁵ Of the expression ἐξίης πόθον, McEvilley 1971: 3 writes that it ‘seems to provide a clear reference to homosexual acts – the only reference in our fragments’; in *id.* 2008: 50 this has become ‘possibly the only such reference in our fragments’, accompanied by a footnote pointing to fr. 99(a).5, where the word ὄλις, ‘dildo’, might be restored.

exercise agency'.¹⁶ The 'queerness' of fr. 94 lies, I propose, in its decentering of the human. Things both natural and crafted, living and remembered, impinge on the senses, and the poem's very language morphs from a human-centred discourse into object-oriented affect.¹⁷

But why 'queer', rather than 'lesbian' or 'gay'? 'Lesbian' is a sexual orientation. It is a term that one ascribes to the author of the lyrics (about whom we know next to nothing) but not to the lyrics themselves. 'Queer' describes the affect, and the effect, of language; how it registers in relation to, or overturns and challenges, existing sexual and social norms. 'Queer' describes the feelings Sappho's lyrics elicit from audiences ancient and modern. And these feelings need not have anything to do with the sexual orientation of the writer or the reader. Luciano and Chen position queerness 'as primarily a tool of incessant unsettling, restless refusal of all forms of identity'.¹⁸ Sappho's lyrics, then, can be queer, as can 'Sappho' the product or invention of her lyrics, without Sappho the author having a knowable, legible sexual identity. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, queer is 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically'.¹⁹

In proposing queer affect as a conceptual tool with which to read Sappho, I acknowledge the groundbreaking work of those who have emphasised the dissolution of boundaries between self and environment in both fr. 94 and 96.²⁰ Eva Stehle, for example, points to the diffusion of erotic affect whereby 'a woman's beauty is displaced onto the surroundings: song, scents, flowers, rich cloth, enclosed places all reflect the woman's erotic attractiveness'.²¹ But the distribution of *erôs* beyond the borders of the human body should not in itself be taken as symptomatic of a gentler, more egalitarian form of sexuality. While the recollections of the sexual acts in fr. 94 (and the love affair between Atthis and another woman in fr. 96) are tinged with pleasurable remembering, elsewhere Sappho gives voice to the painful dynamics of domination and submission which characterise the unrequited desire of the speakers of fr. 1, 31, and the Cypris Poem.

Several times, a speaker is on the verge of death, uttering in Sappho's presence or in 'Sappho's' own voice, that she either wants to or seems to herself to be 'little short of dying'. The intensity of this wish – a 'metaphor for the rejection of present time, and memory' – nearly dissolves the unity of the speaker's body and voice.²² The feelings of disempowerment and disintegration emerge that much more forcefully in the Cypris Poem, where the speaker is fully in the clutches of Aphrodite's spell. And here too the language of domination and lovesickness captures our attention, although it is just one index of the intensity of the feelings ascribed to women in love.

Even when Aphrodite is neither mentioned nor invoked, the effects of *erôs* on the human body are vividly rendered. Take, for instance, the 'bittersweet' serpent, limb-loosening desire, against which one is powerless (fr. 130). Or the soul-shattering experience of desire which causes the singer to appear to herself little short of dying. It is this self-reflexive element, perhaps, that has inspired some to read into Sappho a more progressive, less binary form of eroticism than that found in the love poetry of her male counterparts. The subject, in Sappho, is objectified by its own gaze, rather

¹⁶ Culler 2015: 242. For the animating effect of apostrophe see Culler 2015: 211–43, B. Johnson 1986; for Sappho and lyric see PURVES.

¹⁷ Compare McEvilley 1971: 9 = 2008: 61 on the fourth stanza of fr. 94: 'Images of beautiful objects and acts abound in what has been up to now an imageless poem.'

¹⁸ Luciano and Chen 2015: 192.

¹⁹ Sedgwick 1993: 8 (emphasis original).

²⁰ Greene 1994: 48–9 = 1996a: 241, Stehle 1996 (quoted below).

²¹ Stehle 1996: 220; she remarks (*ibid.*) '94 V. is full of flowers and scent, and in 96 V. the woman's beauty is deflected onto the landscape'.

²² McEvilley 1971: 8 = 2008: 59 on fr. 31, 94; also Stehle 1996: 220.

than existing merely as a projection of the male gaze. Instead of a subject and an object, there are only subjects. Yet, even when the apostrophised 'other' is recognised as a 'subject', desire remains elusive and non-reciprocal. At best, it is a bittersweet memory.²³

Songs record episodes of tenderness and gentleness between Sappho and her departed lover, moments shaded over with sadness. The joy the speaker takes in recalling past loves, kept alive through the songs and their reperformance, is itself ephemeral. There is a translation of carnal pleasure into the erotics of remembrance, made possible by the performance of Sappho's lyrics themselves.²⁴ If scholars have occasionally sought in Sappho the reflection of an idealised form of love, there have also been those who cannot help but be repelled by what they find. In writing about fr. 58 before it was supplemented with the Cologne papyrus, Winkler remarks: 'One of the fascinating aspects of studying fragments is to watch the Rorschach effect whereby scholars reveal their underlying attitudes about what is possible or acceptable in life and poetry.'²⁵ Winkler refers here to a scholar whose 'allusion to Ganymede and to Tithonos' supposed "congenital tendency" colors that old patriarchal attitude with the language of modern homophobia'. Making 'no secret of his contempt for a man who is carried away by a powerful woman', this scholar's attitude offers a useful reminder that 'Sappho and sexuality' is as much about the fears and fantasies of readers through the ages as it is about Sappho. One inevitably learns more about those who write about her than one can ever know about Sappho herself. And Winkler is no exception. He resists the idea that the myth of Tithonus is merely being used to exemplify the inevitability of growing old. He suggests that Dawn's role has been underappreciated and argues for an analogy between Sappho and Tithonus, as two figures constrained by mortality. In his view Sappho, as a double of Tithonus, is also swept away in Dawn's arms:

It is, like much in Sappho, a discrete but unmistakable lesbian image. Sappho allows us briefly to see herself in the role of Tithonos, wrapped in the rosy arms of Dawn and rapt away to the goddess' home in the Far East to be her 'spouse' (22) forever. It is a rather extraordinary picture of woman-to-woman passion and rapture.²⁶

For Winkler, this is a lesbian image; but not all readers will see Sappho in the Tithonus figure. From a structuralist perspective, two primary oppositions deserve mention: that between male and female, and that between goddess and mortal. Heteronormative sex in ancient Greece subordinates the female to the male, but as a goddess the woman (i.e. Dawn) in this sexual pairing is unable to be fully dominated. Thus 'the pairing of a goddess and a human man poses, within Greek hegemonic discourse, an irreconcilable conflict between the two established hierarchies, the hierarchy of male and female and that of divine and human'.²⁷ In the Tithonus Poem, Sappho once again destabilises the binaries underpinning established sexual and social relationships.²⁸ And this opens the door to all manner of queer readings.

²³ For Sappho's coinages connoting *erôs* see Lanata 1966: 73–4 ≈ 1996: 20–1.

²⁴ Stehle Stigers 1981 = H. Foley 1981: 45–61, Snyder 1997: 45–61, Klinck 2005: 202, Boehringer 2007: 54.

²⁵ Winkler 1991: 230.

²⁶ Winkler 1991: 232.

²⁷ Stehle 1996: 202.

²⁸ Compare fr. 140(a), which is addressed to Aphrodite and her young lover Adonis, as another pairing that destabilises the 'dichotomous construct usually inserted between gods and mortals' (L. Wilson 1996: 41).

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Wednesday, April 29, 2020

Dear Members of the Selection Committee,

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Yours sincerely,



Emily Greenwood
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6 May 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

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Reference Letter for FEL-273288
Debbie Felton, Professor of Classics

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Kind regards,

Debbie Felton

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