

Singing Sappho: Female Poetic Skill in the First Century BCE.

Ovid's *Heroides* 15, written in the voice of the archaic Greek poet, Sappho, attests to her long-lasting influence on Greek and Roman literature (Thorsen and Harrison 2019). Sappho's significance to Ovid's poetry is demonstrated by this poem, her inclusion in his catalogues of canonical poets (*Ars am.* 3.331-48; *Rem. am.* 757-766; *Tr.* 2.361-380), and her appearance in a variety of forms throughout his entire corpus (Hallett 2009; Thorsen 2014, 2019; Ingleheart 2019). Ovid's ventriloquism of Sappho in *Heroides* 15 at the end of the first century BCE contains numerous allusions to the extant fragments of her poetry and very likely poems now lost. She can therefore be described as singing the historical Sappho in many passages of the epistle. Ovid's Sappho recalls that she became irresistible to her fictional beloved, Phaon, when she recited her poetry (*at mea cum legerem, sat iam formosa videbar*, "but when I used to read my own verse, then I seemed sufficiently beautiful," 41; *cantabam...oscula cantanti tu mihi rapta dabas*, "I used to sing...you used to give stolen kisses to me as I sang," 43-44), despite her self-described looks (31-4). This paper will consider the broader implications of this passage, alongside similar evidence from Ovid and other sources, documenting the erotic power of performing Sappho and the social capital Roman women accrued from this skill.

I will begin by briefly demonstrating the ubiquitous allusive and thematic correspondences between *Heroides* 15 and Sappho's extant fragments with a few examples. I will then illustrate how Sappho's boast participates in a Roman culture which privileged poetic literacy as a measure of a woman's desirability. For example, the effect of the Ovidian Sappho's recitation on her worth as an object of desire is also reflected in Ovid's instructions to women looking for love in *Ars Amatoria* 3.315-48. Here the poet-*praeceptor* explains that recitation

instead of beauty (*pro facie*, 316) makes many women attractive. Among the poets listed is Sappho (331). A generation earlier, Philodemus writes in an epigram, reworked by Ovid in *Heroides* 15 and *Amores* 1.5, that his beloved is desirable despite being unable to sing Sappho (οὐκ ᾄδουσα τὰ Σαπφοῦς, 12.7; Sider 1997).

I will argue furthermore that the desirability of poetic learnedness in women created the conditions that fostered female authored poetry. While Sulpicia is the only republican or Augustan female writer whose poetry survives, we know of other Roman women writing (Stevenson 2005; Hallett 2009). In the first fourteen poems of his *Heroides*, in fact, Ovid's fictional women compose original poems that rework Sappho, and in particular her famous fragment 31, where she describes the physiological effects of desire on her body. From exile, Ovid offers advice to a young female poet, Perilla. He tells her that, should she continue writing, *sola tuum vates Lesbia vincet opus* ("only the Lesbian bard will outdo your work," *Tr.* 3.7.20). Whether Perilla was a fiction or a real female protégée of Ovid (Ingleheart 2012), Ovid's epistle represents a realistic address to a young female writer drawing inspiration from Sappho. Ovid's contemporary Propertius 2.3.19, while not citing Sappho explicitly, proclaims that his *puella* is attractive because she dances, plays songs on the Sapphic "Aeolian lyre" (19), and composes original poetry rivaling Corinna's and Erinna's (21-2). These conditions serve as persuasive evidence for a literary culture which included more women writing and publishing their own verse in Ovid's day beyond the few we can identify.

Works Cited

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