

Theme and Variation: “Sappho” Then and Now

Sappho, as Holt Parker reminds us, is a palimpsest – “so thickly written over with critical accumulation that it is almost impossible to make out the words beneath” (Parker 1996). A large part of this accumulation comes from later grammarians; their opinion of her poetry is often complimentary, but the language they use to describe it is strongly gendered in a way that marks Sappho as less a poet than a poetess. Tracing a few strands of Sappho’s reception from antiquity to the present, in terms of both content and style, I argue that there is a consistent use of feminizing vocabulary, as well as a tendency to categorize Sappho’s poetic output as dealing primarily or exclusively with stereotypically “feminine” concerns. I close by looking at a series of studies on language and cognition that show how grammatical gender affects the way we think (Boroditsky 2003). Essentially, the fact of Sappho’s existence as a woman (and hence the use of feminine modifiers in Greek, or feminine pronouns in English) may be shaping the way we approach Sappho’s poetry more than we think.

The discovery and publication (Obbink 2014) of two previously unknown Sappho poems (as well as the subsequent media excitement) offers an opportunity to compare trends in the reactions to Sappho both then and now. When Dionysius of Halicarnassus used her as an exemplar of the polished or elegant style (*γλαφυρά*), for example, his descriptions were overtly feminizing, culminating with the impressive – if confusing – adjective “virgin-faced” (*παρθενωπός*). Media reports on the new Sappho poems, from outlets as varied as the Christian Science Monitor and the Daily Beast, showed a similarly gendered spin; several referred to Sappho with the outdated epithet “poetess” or comparable phrasing, and a few made up for our lack of contemporary depictions of Sappho by providing images of partially-clothed women. This tendency held true even when discussing the poems themselves; despite the substantially

more fragmentary nature of the ‘Kypriis’ poem, most reports gave it as much or more attention than the ‘Brothers’ poem – which, after all, does not fit as neatly into the narrative of Sappho as the poet (or poetess) of love.

Bibliography

- Boroditsky, L., *et al.* 2003. “Sex, syntax, and semantics.” In Gentner, D. & Goldin-Meadow, S. (eds.) *Language in mind: Advances in the study of language and thought* (pp. 61-79). Cambridge, MA.
- Obbink, D. 2014. “Two New Poems by Sappho.” (Forthcoming in *ZPE*)
- Parker, H. 1996. “Sappho Schoolmistress.” In Greene, E. (ed.) *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*. (pp. 146-83). Berkeley.