Oral Tradition and Verbal Repetition in Sappho's Songs

I argue that repeated verbal patterns across the extant fragments of Sappho's songs point to an underlying poetic system characteristic of oral composition and performance. Evidence includes words that recur in the same metrical position throughout the corpus, flexible combinations of proper names and epithets that can fill varying metrical shapes, and grammatical structures that consistently feature similar vocabulary and address similar concepts. Scholars have long recognized the relationship of Sappho's Aeolic song tradition to the tradition of Homeric epic, in terms of both meter and formulas, broadly understood (e.g., Bowie 28-46, Garner, Nagy 439-464). My presentation will build on earlier work, but will take a narrower approach, focusing on Sappho's songs as their own tradition rather than on their relationship to other archaic Greek song traditions. The fragmentary state of Sappho's work prevents the kind of full-scale formulaic analysis that is possible for Homer or Hesiod. As a result, I prefer to speak of repeated verbal patterns rather than formulas. The consistency of these patterns across the corpus, especially now that recent discoveries have augmented it, indicates that Sappho followed the practices of oral composition, regardless of whether she was herself an oral poet.

In my presentation, I will support my argument through the test case of Sappho 1 Voigt, the "Ode to Aphrodite" preserved by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. I will show that lines 1, 3, 6-7, 10, 13, 14, 17, and 25-27 share verbal patterns with other songs of Sappho that point to Sappho's engagement with traditional oral methods of composition. Here, I briefly consider lines 1 and 26-27 as samples of my method and results.

Line 1 exemplifies both a word that consistently appears in the same metrical position and the flexible use of epithets. The line consists of two epithets and a noun in the vocative case: Ποικιλόθρον᾽ ἀθανάτ᾽ Ἀφρόδιτα (– u – u – u u – u – x). Forms of Ἀφρόδιτα (– u – u) regularly

appear at line ends in Sappho (1.1, 33.2, 75.3, 92.26, 102.2, 112.5, 133.2; cf. Bowie 43) and can be preceded by varied epithets appropriate for the case and meter. We can compare:

1.1   ἀθανάτ᾽ Ἀφρόδιτα (– u u – u – x)

33.1   χρυσοστέφαν᾽ Ἀφρόδιτα (– – u u – u – x)

102.2   βραδίναν δι᾽ Ἀφροδίταν (u u – u – u – x)

133.2   πολύολβον Ἀφροδίταν (u u– u – u – x)

The instances of epithet + form of Ἀφρόδιτα at line end are not sufficient to demonstrate the kind of formulaic economy that characterizes Homeric poetry. Nonetheless, we can state with confidence (1) that Sappho tends to use forms of Ἀφρόδιτα at line end, and (2.) that she can modify it with an assortment of epithets appropriate for a range of metrical shapes. It is notable that Sappho never uses Ἀφρόδιτα elsewhere in the line in the extant fragments, although the name would be metrically appropriate for line-initial position in the Sapphic stanza. Instead, Sappho prefers forms of Κύπρις in line-initial position, as in 15.9 and "Kypris Song" 2. This suggests that her compositions recognize constraints besides those imposed simply by the meter. There is a similar pattern for the dawn goddess, Αὔως (– –), who also regularly, but not exclusively, appears at line ends (Tithonus Song 1, 103.10, 104.1, 123.1), sometimes accompanied by epithets of various shapes, as in:

"Tithonus Song" 1   βροδόπαχυν Αὔων (u u – u – x)

103.10   χρυσοπέδιλος Αὔως (– u u – u – x)

123.1   χρυσοπέδιλος Αὔως (– u u – u – x)

        Lines 26-27 exemplify a grammatical construction that is consistently used with similar vocabulary to express similar sentiments. The lines feature a relative clause as the object of an imperative: ὄσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι / θῦμος ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον. The construction and wording recall

those of fr. 5.3-4, κὤττι ϝῶι θύμωι κε θέλη γένεσθαι / κῆνο τελέσθην, where the infinitive is dependent on an earlier δότε. There are no verbal parallels besides τέλεσον and τελέσθην, which have different metrical shapes, but the two phrases are synonymous and grammatically parallel. This indicates that Sappho, even when she is not repeating exact verbal patterns, still composes within a tradition that expresses the sentiment "completing whatever someone wishes" in consistently similar ways. There seems to be a similar construction for the same sentiment in fr. 60.6, ὄ]σσα τύχην θελήσῃ[ς, although the main verb is lost.

By establishing more firmly that Sappho's songs reflect the practices of an oral tradition of composition and performance, my presentation will enrich our understanding of Sappho's poetic art and of archaic Greek song culture. Sappho's genius lies in her ability to compose and innovate within a traditional poetic system.

Bibliography

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