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Malta Classics Association,

The Department of Classics and Archaeology,
Archaeology Farmhouse, Car park 6,
University of Malta, Msida

info@classicsmalta.org

www.classicsmalta.org

Sappho in the Greek Comedy. Mocked or mocking? A New Consideration on Sappho's Role in the Comic Fragments

*Emanuele Vuono*¹

In the following pages I will consider the existing comic fragments related to Sappho, the poetess from Lesbos.² My aim is to challenge the scholars who have claimed that Sappho was ridiculed in the comic tradition for her licentiousness, for her ugliness, and more generally for her life and habits. I will show that there is no certain evidence for that in the texts that survive and, on the contrary, that some elements indicate the opposite, offering traits that are in common with some Aristophanic female figures.

The Question

The theory that presents Sappho as an object of ridicule can be found in both old and recent works, especially in the field of Latin literature, exhibiting some different *nuances*: generally, Sappho is considered a scenic character who is mistreated by comic writers and has become an object of derision for different reasons, such as her repugnant physical appearance and her insane passion (towards the mythical ferryman Phaon, for instance).³

1 Emanuele Vuono studied Classics at undergraduate and Masters level at the University of Naples Federico II. His main research interests revolve around the figure and works of Sappho.

2 When possible, the comic fragments are quoted from the editions by Kassel and Austin (1986, 1989, 1991, 1998).

3 I provide some examples: 'wahrscheinlich verdankt die ganze Fabel [of Sappho and Phaon] ihren Ursprung den attischen Komikern, welche die Dichterin misshandelten.' Lorenz (1886) 206. 'Seguendo una tale ricostruzione [of Turpilios' Leucadia, whose model would be Menander's and/or Diphilus' Leucadia] il Faone della leggenda si trasforma in un efebo spezzatore di cuori e Saffo in un'ingenua vergine viziata dal sentimentalismo morboso delle metropoli: un piccolo ma realistico dramma borghese i di cui elementi informativi sarebbero provenuti dalla commedia parodica. Del resto, la commedia-parodia del mito è stata la più diretta progenitrice della commedia nuova.' Coppola (1924) 186. 'La commedia rise di Saffo e della sua insana passione.' Traina (1969) 156. 'Ebbe il sopravvento l'interpretazione in tono di parodia del mito [of Sappho and Phaon], sicché i comici ne fecero uno dei loro temi preferiti, e per maggior effetto scenico rappresentarono Saffo sgraziata nel corpo ['ungraceful in the body']' Magno (1979–1980) 85. 'Had plays like the Alazon made it difficult to treat her [Sappho]

In some contributions, this theory is connected to the fifteenth epistle of the *Heroides*, generally ascribed to Ovid.⁴ The epistle's *Leitmotiv* is the opposition between the beauty of Sappho's songs and the strength of her intelligence, on the one hand, and the ugliness of her physical appearance and the fragility of her feelings on the other, crossing the levels of corporeality (the beautiful voice, the ungraceful body, the run-down clothes, the lack of personal ornaments...) and of personality (the brilliance, the fame, the insanity of love, the extravagant behaviour, especially referred to sexual contexts...). In this way, some negative elements emerge from the epistle, in particular Sappho's ugliness:

Si mihi difficilis formam natura negavit,
ingenio formae damna repende⁵ meo.
Sum brevis, at nomen, quod terras impleat omnes,
est mihi; mensuram nominis ipsa fero.
Candida si non sum, placuit Cepheia Perseo
Andromede, patriae fusca colore suae.

'If the cruel nature denied me a harmonic figure,⁶
compensate (?) the damages with my brilliance.
I am short, but I have a name⁷ that fills up
all the lands; I present the measure of the name myself.
If I am not pure white, Perseus liked Andromeda,
daughter of Cepheus, dark with the colour of her homeland.'
(vv. 30–36)

her insane passion:⁸

Ibimus, o nympe, monstrataque saxa petemus;
sit procul insano victus amore timor!

seriously? [...] it is not clear whether these plays made fun of Sappho herself and it is difficult to relate them to her poetry'. Traill (2005) 531–532.

4 See D'Alessio (2018) 84–85 and the bibliography mentioned there, plus Giannikou (2010) 330–374.

5 Bentley's correction for rependo (codd.).

6 Meaning 'a beautiful body, the beauty'.

7 Here there is also the meaning of 'fame'.

8 See also vv. 73–78; 111–134.

‘I will go, o nymph, and I will reach the indicated rocks;⁹
 may the fear be won by the insane passion by far.’
 (vv. 175–176)

and her sexual habits:

Lesbides, infamem quae me fecisti amatae

‘Lesbian women, loved ones who made me dishonoured’¹⁰
 (v. 201)

It has been claimed that such elements, which qualify Sappho in a derogatory, shameful manner,¹¹ date back to the Attic comedy, since comic writers would have been the inventors of such an image of the poetess, or they would have at least employed it for their works. Therefore, Sappho would have been the object of derision by the comic writers, the characters of the plays and the audience. Nevertheless, an analysis of the existing fragments will demonstrate that there is no evidence to surely suggest this conclusion.

The ‘Sapphic’ Comic Plays

It is clear that the comic tradition on Sappho was particularly consistent, which is proven by the number of plays known to us that are entitled Sappho: six, more

9 The reference is to the Leucadian Cliff.

10 Actually, Sappho’s homosexuality is absent from existing comic fragments, contrarily to her heterosexual affairs in Diphilus and, perhaps, in Timocles, as we will see. I have mentioned such verses to provide a complete context of pejorative elements in Sappho’s characterization in the epistle. The Attic comedy (and the classical Attic literature in general, except for Pl. Symp. 191e 2–5 and Pl. Leg. 1.636c 5–7) ignores the female homosexuality, perhaps with the exception of Lys. 77–92; see Böhringer (2007) 160–161. Contrarily, it dedicates much discussion to male homosexuality, bisexuality and pederasty. See Dover (1978) 172f; Henderson (1975) 204–22; Böhringer (2007) 89–174; Orth (2013) 269; Böhringer (2014) 153–154.

11 She is also represented as sloppy in her physical aspect, including in clothes, hair and ornaments, owing to the disappointment in love (vv. 73–76):

*Ecce, iacent collo sparsi sine lege capilli,
 nec premit articulo lucida gemma meos;
 veste tegor vili, nullum est in crini bus aurum,
 non Arabum noster dona capillus habet.
 Cui colar infelix, aut cui placuisse latore?
 Ille mei cultus unicus auctor abest.*

than for any other literary or generally historical figure, according to the sources.¹² This is an unchallengeable clue of the great interest that comic writers and the Athenian audience and society in general showed for the poetess, presumably also for her inclusion among the authors who were read at symposia.

However, we are not able to correctly understand this success and its reasons because only a few rare fragments have survived from the six plays. Therefore, with one exception, we have no evidence to reconstruct the plot.

Beyond these titles and fragments, two further references to Sappho in comedy have been preserved. These emerge from two plays where Sappho seems unlikely to be a character (contrarily to the ones with the title *Sappho*) but in which she is mentioned at least in one passage.

Furthermore, I collected twelve plays where scholars assume the presence of Sappho; in one case the proposal is mine. For some of them the connection to the Lesbian poetess is quite plausible, whereas for others it is not. However, we are not sure of Sappho's presence in any, for none of the twelve has survived in full. For this reason, I have chosen to discuss only the plays that definitely involve Sappho, whether as an active character or not.¹³

The plays entitled *Sappho*

I will provide a reasonable chronological order for the six plays,¹⁴ whose authors are Ameipsias, Ehippus, Antiphanes, Amphis, Timocles, and Diphilus.

12 We are aware of two plays about Archilochus and two about Cleobulina: see, for instance, Apostolakis (2019) 226 with further bibliography. See also n. 21.

13 These plays are listed (and some of them briefly commented upon) in Vuono (2020) 143–144 (with bibliography). Here I would like to mention the case of the anonymous Ἀλαζών (Fabularum tituli 3 K.-A.): Traill (2005) proposed, from my point of view quite convincingly, that its plot could have involved Sappho and Phaon, because there would be a parallelism between them and, respectively, the prostitute Acroteletium and the soldier Pyrgopolynices, the main characters of Plautus' Miles gloriosus, whose model was the Greek play. If it is true, Alazon's author could have provided Sappho with traits similar to Ovid (insane passion, lustfulness and so on). However, the analogy could have been 'imperfect', not complete. See also such statements of Traill (2005) 533: 'Acroteletium's Sappho is not a woman of 'insatiable heterosexual promiscuity' but an example of passionate love carried to extremes – a discreditable and immodest love perhaps, but a sincere one. Acroteletium chooses the role precisely because Sappho offered a credible model of female infatuation, perhaps the most credible model available on the comic stage'.

14 To my knowledge Sabrina Brivittello is the only one to have written an article about these six comedies and, briefly, Menander and Epicrates' quotations (1998). See also Neri – Cinti (2017) XCIV–XCVI; Hall (2006) 178f. The first chapter of the Ph.D. dissertation of Maria Georgiou Giannikou (2010) treats the presence of Sappho in the Greek comedy (testimonia, fragmenta, allusions, hermeneutical proposals and so on). Yatromanolakis properly observes that "a title like Sappho cannot be indicative of the plot of a play or of whether 'Sappho' was the name of an ordinary woman/protagonist who,

*Ameipsias*¹⁵ (approx. 450 – approx. 385 BCE), the only one who belongs to the Ancient Comedy, seems to have been the first one to write a comedy about Sappho, from which we have only a one-word fragment (fr. 15 K.-A. = Poll. 9,138 Bethe):

νωθής καὶ νωθρός... ἐν δὲ τῇ Ἀμειψίου Σαπφοῦ καὶ ν ω θ ρ ό τ ε ρ ο ν
εὐρήκαμεν.

‘I have found νωθής and νωθρός... and also ν ω θ ρ ό τ ε ρ ο ν in the
Sappho of Ameipsias.’

This word clearly does not help us guess the characterization of Sappho in the play and does not provide any clue about the plot.¹⁶

Although *Ephippus* he lived around the second quarter of the 4th century BCE, his *Sappho* is generally ascribed to his late production;¹⁷ Papachrysostomou, for instance, dates it to the 340s.¹⁸ The fr. 20 K.-A. is included by Athenaeus (13,572c) in the section of the thirteenth book on the πόρνοι and the πόρνοι: a character talks to another blaming the behaviour of a (hypothetical?) parasite who offers sexual favours in return for food:

through her action, reminded the audience of the figure and the poetry of Sappho” (2007) 297 n. 48. However, based on my research on the diffusion of “Sappho”’s name, I am able to state that the use of the name is otherwise extremely rare. Moreover, as usual for comic writers, they may have used Sappho for another woman with similar characteristics (for example the Lesbian origin) in a sort of literary joke. The case of a common woman who has the same name of the renowned poetess by accident is still possible, but we can reasonably think that it would have been limited to just one or two comedies.

15 For Ameipsias see Meineke (1839) 199–204; Brivittello (1998) 183 n. 12; Totaro (1998) 133ff.; Storey (2011) 61; Orth (2013) 159ff.; Totaro in Sommerstein (2019) 41f. For his Sappho see Rea (1968) 70–71; Calder (1986) 141 n. 53; Brivittello (1998) 183–184; Totaro (1998) 148–153; Yatromanolakis (2007) 296–297; 306; Giannikou (2010) 178f.; Orth (2013) 268–270; Henderson (2014) 191. Kaibel apud Bethe (1931) 184 and Calder sustained, in my opinion incorrectly, that Ameipsias did not write a Sappho; see also Yatromanolakis (2007) 296–297.

16 For different reasons (the metre, some linguistic elements and the drinking theme, in common with Diphilus’ Sappho) Giannikou interestingly proposes that fr. 21 of Ameipsias may belong to his Sappho: (2010) 179.

17 For Ephippus’ life see Meineke (1839) 351–354; Brivittello (1998) 185 n. 15; Arnott (2010) 287; Pernigotti in Sommerstein (2019) 318f.; and especially Papachrysostomou (2021). For his Sappho see Brivittello (1998) 185–187; 204; Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001b) 1453 n. 1, 2 and 5; Fisher (2001) 213; Giannikou (2010) 242; Papachrysostomou (2021) 193–200.

18 Papachrysostomou (2021) 194.

ὅταν γὰρ ὦν νέος
 ἀλλότριον ἐλθὼν¹⁹ ὄψον ἐσθίειν μάθη
 ἀσυμβολὸν τε χεῖρα προσβάλλῃ βορᾷ,
 διδόναι νόμιζ' αὐτὸν σὺ τῆς νυκτὸς λόγον.

‘When, indeed, a young boy,
 while showing up (?), learns to eat other people’s food
 and puts out his hand without any payment on the food,
 consider for sure that he pays back the bill at night.’

Here there is no trace of any denigration on Sappho’s figure; in reality, we are not sure that Sappho was involved in the scene, since the parasite is indicated as male by the masculine adjective νέος in the first line.

However, I think that Sappho could be the speaker of the fragment: she would assume the role of the blaming and mocking character that we find also in Antiphanes, although the tone sounds ruder here and would suggest a male speaker. This aspect seems to be shared by some of the other plays and will be discussed further.

From *Antiphanes*’ (408/405 – 334/331 BCE) *Sappho*²⁰ we have a one-word fragment (βιβλιογράφος, fr. 195 K.-A. = 7,211 Bethe), which is useless for our purpose. However, he provides the longest comic fragment on Sappho of the existing tradition (fr. 194 K.-A. = Ath. 10,450e-451b):

(Σα.) Ἔστι φύσις θήλεια βρέφη σῶζουσ’ ὑπὸ κόλποις
 αὐτῆς, ὄντα δ’ ἄφωνα βοὴν ἴστησι γεγνωνὼν
 καὶ διὰ πόντιον οἶδμα καὶ ἡπείρου διὰ πάσης
 οἷς ἐθέλει θνητῶν, τοῖς δ’ οὐδὲ παροῦσιν ἀκούειν
 ἔξεστιν· κωφὴν δ’ ἀκοῆς αἰσθησιν ἔχουσιν. 5

(B.) Ἡ μὲν φύσις γὰρ ἦν λέγεις ἐστὶν πόλις,
 βρέφη δ’ ἐν αὐτῇ διατρέφει τοὺς ῥήτορας.

19 The transmitted text (εἰσελθὼν) does not respect the metre; Papachrysostomou, in my opinion correctly, accepts the emendation ἐλθὼν by Grotius (2021) 195. See also Kassel – Austin (1986) 148 and Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001b) 1453 n. 5.

20 For Antiphanes’ life see Meineke (1839) 304–340; Mastromarco (1987) 533; Brivittello (1998) 189 n. 26; Yatromanolakis (2007) 300; Arnott (2010) 286; Konstantakos in Sommerstein (2019) 59f. For his Sappho see Meineke (1839) 277–278; Edmonds (1959) 263 n. h; Knox (1968) 432; Mastromarco (1987) 534; Brivittello (1998) 189–194; 204; Totaro (1998) 173; Prins (1999) 25–27; Konstantakos (2000) 146–180; Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001a) 1110; Martin (2001) 72f.; Rosenmeyer (2001) 96; Ceccarelli (2004); Yatromanolakis (2007) 300–312; Giannikou (2010) 248–262; Ceccarelli (2013) 244–249; Orth (2013) 269f.

οὔτοι κεκραγότες δὲ τὰ διαπόντια
 τὰκ τῆς Ἀσίας καὶ τὰπὸ Θράκης λήμματα
 ἔλκουσι δεῦρο. Νεμομένων δὲ πλησίον 10
 αὐτῶν κάθεται λοιδορουμένων τ' αἰ
 ὁ δῆμος οὐδὲν οὔτ' ἀκούων οὔθ' ὀρῶν.
 (Σα.) χ - ὦ - πῶς γὰρ γένοιτ' ἄν, ὦ πάτερ,
 ῥήτωρ ἄφωνος; (Β.) ἦν ἁλῶ τρίς παρανόμων.
 χ - ὦ - καὶ μὴν ἀκριβῶς ὥόμην 15
 ἐγνωκέναι τὸ ῥηθέν. Ἀλλὰ δὴ λέγε.
 (Σα.) Θήλεια μὲν νυν ἐστὶ φύσις ἐπιστολή,
 βρέφη δ' ἐν αὐτῇ περιφέρει τὰ γράμματα·
 ἄφωνα δ' ὄντα <ταῦτα>²¹ τοῖς πόρρῳ λαλεῖ
 οἷς βούλεθ'· ἕτερος δ' ἂν τύχη τις πλησίον 20
 ἐστὼς ἀναγιννώσκοντος οὐκ ἀκούσεται.

(Sappho) There is a feminine creature that guards the babes in its bosom, and, even though voiceless, they raise a loud scream whether through the sea wave or through the whole land for those mortals they want, but for others, though present, hearing is not allowed; they have, indeed, a deaf sense of the hearing.

(Πατήρ) So, the creature you speak of is a πόλις, and nourishes in itself, like babes, the orators. These, indeed, attract here by screaming the transmarine gains, the ones from Asia and the ones from Thrace, and while they enjoy them and abuse each other continuously, the populace

sits by neither hearing nor seeing anything.

(Sappho) [...] How could, old man, an orator be voiceless? (Πατήρ) In case, speaking, they have been caught three times violating a law.

[...] still I believed to have exactly understood what had been said. Come on, speak!

(Sappho) Then, the feminine creature is an ἐπιστολή, and the babes it feeds in itself are the letters; these, though voiceless, chat from afar with whom they want while another, even if they found themselves next to who is reading, would not hear.”

21 Integration by Grotius (1626) 978.

This is the only case in which we are able to satisfyingly understand the dramatic action of a part of a Sapphic play: the poetess proposes a riddle (vv. 1–5)²² to an older male figure (πάτερ, v. 13), who forgets a detail of the riddle and provides an incorrect answer (πόλις, v. 6); Sappho criticizes this answer (vv. 13–14) and offers the solution (ἐπιστολή, v. 17), explaining the correspondences with the riddle (vv. 17–21).

The situation is evidently the exact opposite of the one which has been described in the first paragraph: Sappho is not the mocked character, but the mocking one, who elegantly dismisses the rushed and erroneous answer of another character. In particular, in the lines 13–14 she wittily demonstrates her addressee's limits by simply focusing on the detail which he has forgotten and changed. This is enough to destabilise the πατήρ, who is barely able to reply with a weak and quite absurd explanation of his mistake.

Also the fr. 32 K.-A. (= Antiatticista Δ 29) of *Amphis*²³ (first half – third quarter of the 4th century BCE) consists of just one unhelpful word:

Διενεχθῆναι ἄντι τοῦ μάχεσθαι. Ἄμφις Σαπφοῖ.

“To argue’: instead of ‘to fight’. Amphis in *Sappho*.’

Regarding our topic, the fr. 32 K.-A. (= Ath. 339c) of *Timocles*²⁴ (second half of the 4th century BCE) is too complex to define:

Ο Μισγόλας οὐ προσιέναι σοι φαίνεται
ἀνθοῦσι τοῖς νέοισιν ἡρεθισμένος.

Misgolas appears not to approach to you
because he is excited by young boys.

Misgolas is a historical figure: his sexual interest in young boys is reported also by Aeschines in *Against Timarchos*, a passage of which (cap. 41) is quoted by Athenaeus immediately before Timocles' fragment (339b-c).

22 The models are supposed to be the Epicharmus' Sphinx and particularly Cleobulina, to whom both Cratinus and Alexis dedicated a play (Κλεοβουλῖναι and Κλεοβουλίνη, respectively). Also for Archilochus Cratinus' title is in the plural (Ἀρχιλοχοῖ) and Alexis' one in the singular (Ἀρχιλοχος).

23 For Amphis' life see Meineke (1839) 351–354; Brivittello (1998) 188 n. 23; Papachrysostomou (2016) 11; Papachrysostomou in Sommerstein (2019) 44f. For his Sappho see Brivittello (1998) 188–189; Giannikou (2010) 234f.; Papachrysostomou (2016) 207–209; Neri – Cinti (2017) XCVI n. 339.

24 For Timocles' life see Meineke (1839) 428–433; Brivittello (1998) 194 n. 38; Giannikou (2010) 245f.; Papachrysostomou (2016) 207; Nesselrath in Sommerstein (2019) 955f.; and especially Apostolakis (2019). For his Sappho see Bevilacqua (1939) 39; Brivittello (1998) 194–196; Orth (2013) 269f.; Apostolakis (2019) 226–230.

Generally, the addressee of the speech is thought to be Sappho, who would have been refused by Misgolas for her gender, and perhaps also for her ugliness and/or her old age.²⁵ If this is true, the speaker could be a male character.

I intend to provide a different interpretation. Since σοι (v. 1) could be masculine too, it need not have referred to Sappho;²⁶ therefore, the poetess would be not the addressee, but the speaker, and the addressee is likely to be an adult (male) or old man, in any case not young enough for Misgolas' tastes. The core of my argument is the reason why the 'you' of the fragment is rejected: not the gender, but the age. This hypothesis could be suggested by the relevant position of ἀνθοῦσι at the very beginning of the second verse, as if the speaker wishes to underline the youth of Misgolas' beloved ones, also through the metaphor of the blooming flower.

If my proposal is correct, the situation would be similar to the one in Antiphanes; however, Sappho's attitude towards the addressee would be much tougher and denigratory, similarly to Ephippus. If I have interpreted this fragment correctly, Ephippus and Timocles would have presented two scenes with many similarities, presenting the poetess as blaming a male character's behaviour on homosexuality.

One of the most important exponents of the New Comedy, *Diphilus*²⁷ (second half of the 4th century – first years of the 3rd century BCE) is supposed to have been the last author of a play on Sappho, probably the only one for which we

25 Brivittelto (1998) 196 n. 42: 'possiamo dedurre che il pronome σοι si riferisca ad un personaggio che non rientra nella categoria su dett, quella cioè dei giovani nel fiore degli anni, e si riferisca ovvero ad una persona anziana ovvero ad una donna. A Saffo?'. Apostolakis (2019) 226f.: 'a possible scenario would be that Sappho is here represented either as a lubricious woman running after young boys [...] or as a comic hetaera'.

26 I assume that σοι refers to προσιέναι and not to φαίνεται. See Brivittelto (1998) 195 n. 39: 'Per quanto riguarda poi il pronome σοι del primo verso, dipenderà da προσιέναι piuttosto che da φαίνεται, per quanto σοι φαίνεται rievoca suggestivamente il φαίνεται μοι del fr. 31 V. di Saffo'. And Apostolakis (2019) 229: 'The verb πρόσσεμι denotes an approach with erotic intentions; cf. Hp. Epid. 6.3.4; X. Smp. 4.38 ἂν δέ ποτε καὶ ἀφροδισιάσαι τὸ σῶμά μου δεηθῇ, οὕτω μοι τὸ παρὸν ἀρκεῖ ὥστε αἷς ἂν προσέλθω ὑπερασπάζονται με διὰ τὸ μηδένα ἄλλον αὐταῖς ἐθέλειν προσιέναι; "if ever my body wants sex, my present means are so adequate, so that the women I approach greet me with enthusiasm, because nobody else is willing to approach them"; Pl. Smp. 209e; D.S. 1.72; 10.9.3; Plu. Mor. 140c.' Therefore, the sexual approach would be directed toward the person behind that σοι. However, prof. Konstantakos proposed (and was to my knowledge the first to propose) referring σοι to φαίνεται by adding a semicolon at the end of the sentence: the different punctuation would simply point out the general interest of Misgolas for blooming boys.

27 For Diphilus' life see Meineke (1839) 446–457; Mastromarco (1987) 536; Brivittelto (1998) 196 n. 43. For his *Sappho* see Kock (1862) 76; Coppola (1924) 187; Wehrli (1967) 80; Degani (1984) 33–34; Brivittelto (1998) 196–200; 204f.; Totaro (1998) 173f.; Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001a) 1205 n. 3; Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001b) 1539 n. 1 and 4; Giannikou (2010) 267–279; Orth (2013) 269; Papachrysostomou (2016) 208.

are able to rebuild the plot or at least a part of it. From his play we have two text portions; the first one is a distich clearly related to a symposium²⁸ (fr. 70 K.-A. = Ath. 11,487a):

Ἀρχίλοχε, δέξαι τήνδε τὴν μετανιπτρίδα
μεστήν Διὸς σωτήρος, Ἀγαθοῦ Δαίμονος.

‘Oh Archilochus, accept this overflowing “after-the-washing”²⁹
cup, for Zeus the Saviour, for the Good Demon.’

Although such invocations are made by the male participants at symposia, I also propose here that Sappho could be the character who pronounces these lines, but I will discuss this extremely complex question later.

The other text is not a textual quotation, but a *testimonium* (fr. 71 K.-A. = Archil. test. 62 Tarditi = Hippon. test. 55 Degani):

Δίφιλος ὁ κωμωδιοποιὸς πεποίηκεν ἐν Σαπφοῖ δράματι Σαπφοῦς ἐραστὰς
Ἀρχίλοχον καὶ Ἱππώνακτα.

‘The comic writer Diphilus has made Archilochus and Hipponax lovers of Sappho in his play *Sappho*.’

Although it is not mentioned why the two poets are in love with the Lesbian poetess, we can infer that she is more likely to be a beautiful woman instead of the Ovidian homely figure. It is plausible that her attractiveness to Archilochus and Hipponax is connected also to her physical aspect (although not only to this, presumably).

Other mentions of Sappho

Athenaeus (13,605e) reports us an extremely problematic distich from *Epicrates’ Antilais* (fr. 4 K.-A.):³⁰

Τάρωτίκ’ ἐκμεμάθηκα ταῦτα παντελῶς
Σαπφοῦς, Μελήτου, Κλεομένους, Λαμυνθίου.

28 See Konstantakos (2005) 188f.; 197.

29 This is the etymology of μετανιπτρίς; see also Brivittello (1998) 196–197 and Cherubina in Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001a) 1205 n.3.

30 For Epicrates see Meineke (1839) 414; Edmonds (1959) 349 n. i; 351; Campbell (1982) 37; Brivittello (1998) 204 n. 65; Nesselrath (1990) 197f.; Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001b) 1559f. n. 5; 1650 n. 5; Ceccarelli (2004) 16 (her judgement is quite hard to understand); Yatromanolakis (2007) 289f.; Casevitz (2009); Giannikou (2010) 237f.; Nesselrath (2016) in particular 236–238; Neri – Cinti (2017) 257; 458; Nesselrath in Sommerstein (2019) 322.

‘I have perfectly learned these erotic matters from Sappho, Meletus, Cleomenes, and Laminthius.’

In brief, the hermeneutical issues of the fragment are: understanding the sense of the title of the play and of the expression ‘erotic matters’ in this specific passage, and identifying the speaker and the other three poets, along with the reasons of such mention and their connection to Sappho.

The title could refer to the plot itself (“The disapproval against Lais”) or, in my opinion, more likely, to a hetaera, a young prostitute who would have such a nickname since she intends to remove the famous, but aged, Lais from her preeminent role.³¹ Lais’ rival could be the speaker of the fragment: she would affirm that her professional success is not limited to her beauty and youth, but she would provide it with an intellectual justification. However, I consider another option proposed by scholars as more valid: the speaker could be Lais, who is defending her qualities and prestige by her superior experience and formation (also literary) which prevail on her rival’s physical aspect and age. Nevertheless, we have no decisive elements for either of the two positions because of the fragment’s limited text and the lack of a clear context, but this does not decisively affect my proposed interpretation.

I suppose that the speaker (presumably Lais or the Antilais) is supporting her practical and intellectual love skills (in my opinion τὰ ἐρωτικά, has such a generic and wide meaning, and for that I have proposed translating it as ‘erotic matters’) by mentioning some authors who treated erotic themes and contributed to the speaker’s professional formation. However, the list of this sort of literary background is quite curious, since, if Sappho’s mention is easily understandable, the three male poets’ inclusion appears inappropriate: among many well-known and brilliant erotic writers (such as Sappho), the prostitute chooses three semi-obscure figures; moreover, we know from some sources that two of them (Meletus and Cleomenes, if the identification is correct)³² were considered poetasters (inferior poets).

31 On Lais the studies are divergent, in particular regarding the fact that there could have been one, two or three hetaeras with the same name; see Paradiso (2009), who claims the existence of two Lais between the end of the 5th century and the beginning of the 4th century BCE (the period of Lais’ Epicrates) and another one at mid-4th century. See also Schuller-Konstanz (2008) and Nesselrath (2016) 236.

32 Meletus is supposed to be the author of low-quality σκόλια who is blamed by Aeschylus in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* (v. 1302); see in particular MacDowell (1962) 208–209, but also Schanz (1893) 160–161; Kirchner (1901) 63–64; Detienne (1930) 125; Edmonds (1959) 351 n. e; Snell (1971) 186–188 who have divergent opinions about the identification. Athenaeus seems to define Cleomenes as an example of sugary, vapid poetry (14.638d-e): see the words of Gambato in Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001b) 1559–1560 n. 5 and of Citelli in Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001b) 1650 n. 5; see

Many scholars attempted to understand the similarities that the comic character sees between Sappho on the one hand, and the three figures of secondary importance on the other. In my opinion, though, we should consider that the juxtaposition is based not on analogy, but rather on contrast: the hetaera is thinking of the erotic poets she knows and the first one who comes to her mind is Sappho (we must also consider that the speaker is almost certainly a woman) but she combines her with some poetasters, perhaps because she is not able to remember other poets at that specific moment or her literary knowledge is not as good as she intends to show.

The connection with Alcaeus and Anacreon, for instance, would have been more coherent, also owing to its frequency in literature and elsewhere; contrarily, the combination in the fragment is clearly odd and could have become an object of derision for the audience, who would have laughed at hearing that her erotic skills derive from low-quality poets. The evident contrast between Sappho and these poetasters would have underlined the comic effect.

If my interpretation is correct, Sappho is not associated with such poetasters in a negative manner, as some scholars have thought,³³ but she is an example of high-quality love poetry, in contrast to them. In any case, even if my proposal is incorrect, we do not have clear elements to firmly state that Sappho was ridiculed by Epicrates.

Sappho is mentioned in a passage from *Menander's Leucadia* which presents many textual and philological issues (fr. 1 Arnott):

(Πα.) Ἄπολλον, εἰς [οἶο]ν κατωκίσθης τό[πον].

Ἄπαντα πέτρα καὶ θάλαττ' ἐστὶν κύκλω

ἰδεῖν φοβερὰ τ[ι]ς.

(Ζα.) Χαῖρε ἄπολλά', παίδιον.

(Πα.) Νῆ καὶ σὺ γ' ἤτις εἶ ποθ'.

(Ζα.) Ἦτις εἰμ' ἐγώ;

Ἦ ζάκορος ἢ κοσμοῦσα τὸν νεώ, τέκνον. 5

Ἐφ' ὕδωρ βαδίζεις;

also Bagordo (2013) 174–177. Laminthius, then, could be the erotic poet mentioned by Photius (λ 82) and the author of a Lyde, according to Athenaeus (13.597a): see Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001b) 1529 n. 3; 1560 n.5.

33 Gambato, for instance, thinks that the four, including Sappho, are mentioned as examples of lascivious poetry: Canfora – Citelli – Gambato (2001b) 1559 n. 5. However, I do not find any trace of that in the sources about Meletus, Cleomenes and Laminthius. Neri seemingly supposes that it is a mere association among erotic poets: 'Epicrate nell'Antilaide [...] la annoverava tra i 'manuali' di ars amatoria, insieme con i meno noti poeti Meleto, Cleomene e Laminzio' (2017) 458. In my opinion, the reason for such a peculiar catalogue is more complex, as I explained.

(Πα.) Ναιχί.
 (Ζα.) Τουτί πλ[ησίον
 ἱερ[ὸν θεοῦ ρεῖ ν]ᾱμα.
 (Πα.) Μῆτερ φιλάτ[η,
 ἄκουσον· οἷσθ' εἴ] που πέτρα 'στιν, εἰπέ μοι,
 ἀφ' ἧς ὁ κλισμὸς] ἰθύς, ἵνα τοὺς –
 (Ζα.) Ἐνθαδί.
 ὀρᾶς; μεγάλη τις. Τῇ]ν [γὰ]ρ ὑψηλὴν λέγεις, 10
 οὗ δὴ λέγεται πρώτη Σαπφῶ
 τὸν ὑπέρκομπον θηρῶσα Φάων'
 οἰστρῶντι πόθω ρῖψαι πέτρας
 ἀπὸ τηλεφανοῦς· ἀλλὰ κατ' εὐχὴν
 σὴν, δέσποτ' ἄναξ, εὐφημείσθω 15
 τέμενος περὶ Λευκάδος ἀκτῆς.³⁴

“(Girl) Oh Apollon, [what] a spot you were lodged in!
 Everything is rocks, and sea [around].
 A view frightful to see!
 (Attendant) My hearty greetings, child.
 (Girl) Yes, and the same to you, whoever you may be!
 (Attendant) Whoever I am?
 I’m the attendant, the woman who looks after the temple, girl. 5
 Do you come for water?
 (Girl) Yes.
 (Attendant) Near here (?)
 the holy torrent (?) [of the god flows.
 (Girl) Dearest mother,
 [listen: do you know if] there’s a cliff, tell me,

34 V. 2: Rea considers possible to read πέτραι because of a track that Parsons does not surely identify as ink. Κ[ύκλω] is proposed by Holwerda, whereas Parsons, with uncertainty, proposes κ[άτω] (1994) 44. Unlike Arnott (1996; 2004) and Blanchard (2006), I prefer Holwerda’s integration because I find the sense more satisfying. V. 3: Τ[ις] Handley; for the lecture of τ see Parsons, 1994: 44. V. 5 is integrated thanks to frg. 686 Körte-Thierfelder (1959) from Etymologicum Genuinum; see Parsons (1994) 44f. V. 7: ἱερ[ὸν θεοῦ 'στι Handley, accepted by Arnott; ρεῖ Austin, accepted by Blanchard. For μήτηρ as deferential apostrophe (and not in the sense of “mother”) see Men. Dys. 495. V. 8: ἄκουσον· οἷσθ' ε] Handley. V. 9: ἀφ' ἧς ὁ κλισμὸς] Handley; see Parsons (1994) 45f. V. 10: ὀρᾶς, μεγάλη τις. Τῇ]ν Handley exempli gratia but I substituted the comma with a semicolon; [γὰ]ρ lecture and integration by Arnott (in Parsons [.]). V. 16: ἀκτῆς Musurus; ἀκτίς in Hesychius. The last two verses are normally interpreted as follow: “keep religious silence/ around the temple of Cape Leukas!” with anastrophe with baritonesis for the preposition. However, D’Alessio argued to restore the original accent and to translate the verb as passive, not impersonal (2020) 117 n. 9.

[from which there's the protrusion] straight down, so that the...
 (Attendant) Right here.
 [Do you see? A big one.] Indeed you mention the upland, 10
 where it's said Sappho first,
 pursuing arrogant Phaon,
 because of the frenzied desire threw herself from the cliff
 visible from afar; even so, by your wish,
 o master and lord, be praised 15
 the temple near Cape Leucas!"

For the reconstruction of the text you can see the article I have published and the bibliography mentioned there.³⁵ Here we just need to say that the last lines (vv. 10–16) are the first witness of the legendary deathly jump of Sappho from Cape Leucas because of Phaon's rejection. For this fragment there is also no evidence of a negative approach towards the poetess: claiming that Menander judges Sappho's desire and love as *insanus amor*, like in the Ovidian epistle, to be purely speculative. Her passion is only defined as "overwhelming", "pursuing" (οἰστρῶντι πόθῳ, v. 13), which is enough to consider her behaviour as irrational, but surely not fully insane and lascivious.

I suggest that the legend was likely to be narrated, with further details, also in other points of the comedy (the fragment is supposed to be ascribed to the prologue) but we cannot affirm that Menander added the pejorative elements at the base of the construction of the character in *Heroides*.

The Role of Sappho

Many scholars have proposed that the poetess could have been represented as a hetaera by some comic writers. This suggestion is more than plausible, especially if we consider the relevant presence of such figures in the symposia, to which the fr. 70 K.-A. of Diphilus is clearly related. Furthermore, such a situation is likely to be referred also to Antiphanes, since riddling was a common habit at Athenian symposia.³⁶ In Ehippus' work the topic is related to dining context, which is the precondition of the symposium: in such a perspective, Ehippus could have created a meta-symposial scene, where characters discuss themes somehow

35 Vuono (2020) 138–142 and *passim*. For Menander's life see also Konstantakos (2008); Giannikou (2010) 280–329. For the play see also Petrides 2021.

36 For the riddles in symposia see Brivittello (1998) 191f.; Konstantakos (2005) 190f.; Della Bona (2013); Konstantakos in Sommerstein (2019).

related to symposium. Also, Timocles could have chosen a symposium for the setting of his play but we have no clear evidence of this.³⁷

Consequently, some scholars have thought of the role of hetaera characterized Sappho as a lubricious woman, at the origin of the pejorative characterization at the foundation of *Heroides'* characterization. However, I propose that being a hetaera does not necessarily imply a negative connotation: we could mention the cases of Habrotonon and Chrysis, in Menander's *Ἐπιτρέποντες* and *Σαμία*, respectively, examples of very sympathetic and positive figures.³⁸

In my opinion, Sappho could have shown certain similarities to some Aristophanic female characters, especially in *Thesmophoriazusae*, *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae*. Lysistrata and Praxagora, in particular, determine a great part of the plot, direct the action of the majority of the characters and, finally, provide moral and social judgements. Such behaviour was typical of men, both in reality and in many plays: Aristophanes intends to present a subversion of the traditional gender roles.³⁹

Sappho's figure could have been treated in a similar way in comedy: the most evident clue would be the scene of Antiphanes. I must admit that Antiphanes (and also other comic writers) could have joined this kind of situations with others that ridiculed, more or less explicitly, the Lesbian woman (in those plays by Antiphanes, indeed, the ruling behaviour of the women is also the object of the audience's laughter), although there is no certainty about the existence and the relevance of this aspect in Sapphic plays.

37 However, see Apostolakis (2019) 228f: 'he only pursues love affairs with young boys, probably cithara-players. It is telling that both male and female musicians, who also offered sexual services to the banqueters, participated in Athenian symposia'. For the symposium in the Attic comedy see Konstantakos (2005); Tauber (2018). For hetaeras and especially their role in symposia see also Von der Mühl (1983) 16f.; Henderson (2002); Faraone – McClure (2006); Murray (2009) 519; Kapparis (2018). For the interaction among comedy, symposium and Sappho see Brivittello (1998) 179f; 204f; Apostolakis (2019) 226f. For the complex and controversial connection between the poetess and the figure of the hetaera see Loscalzo (2019)

38 However, I must specify that Menander's plays belong to New Comedy, whereas the other Sapphic comic writers are generally related to Middle Comedy, except for Ameipsias (Old Comedy) and Diphilus (New Comedy). Each of these literary periods and subgenres present different *nuances* and sensitivity; for instance, denigratory and accusatory tones are more common in New Comedy than Old and Middle and, therefore, the same treatment could more likely have been found in Diphilus and Menander than in Ameipsias and Antiphanes. Nevertheless, my methodological approach in this article focuses the attention more on the transmitted material and its interpretation than on hypotheses and suspicions.

39 See Bonnamour – Delavault (1979); Henderson (2002) 83; Faraone in Faraone – McClure (2006).

Conclusion

Considering only the comic plays for which there is no doubt about the connection with Sappho, we have no certainty that she was ridiculed by Attic comic writers and that these plays were the direct or indirect model for Ovid (or Pseudo-Ovid). The fragments of Timocles and Epicrates are too ambiguous to provide a solution in any sense, although my personal readings, if correct, would lead us to a positive (or at least neutral) treatment of her figure. Furthermore, Antiphanes and Diphilus clearly give us some elements that suggest such an interpretation. Finally, the context of the fragments of Ephippus and Menander is too scarce for any certain deduction.

In Antiphanes and Diphilus (and, if my proposal is correct, also in Ephippus) I see, however, a mocking Sappho rather than a mocked one, a woman who seems to rule the scene, the plot and the fate of the other characters and of the events, similarly to some other female figures in the Attic comedy (in particular Lysistrata).

We could try to understand why we find the idea of Sappho as an ugly, foolish, and/or lustful woman in some publications, although there is no proof of it. To sum up, I suppose that external (and substantially unrelated) elements, such as the discussion about Phaon's myth, could have played a role, but I strongly believe that the majority of scholars are influenced by writers from later periods (Tatian, for instance) and in particular by the Latin ones, such as Martial and Apuleius, but especially the 15th epistle of the *Heroides*: a partial clue being the higher frequency of this theory in works about Latin literature. Furthermore, I suspect that, although this is admittedly difficult to prove, some of these scholars do not read the Greek texts (in such contributions they are never quoted) and they base their theory on second-hand information from other scholarly contributions (perhaps misunderstanding them).

I conclude by saying that we are not able to read much of the Sapphic comic plays; therefore, we can imagine that Sappho was mistreated by comic writers, even though no existing fragment can certainly testify to it. However, my intention is not demolish this theory, but rather to demonstrate that its foundations derive from only a few ambiguous lines and especially many (assumed) *argumenta e silentio* and that there are some clues that suggest a contrary conclusion.

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