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Citation

Ng, Julia. 2022. Sapphic Sociability. diacritics (Special issue on 'Women in Theory', ed. Erin Graff Zivin), 49(2), pp. 25-32. ISSN 0300-7162 [Article]

Persistent URL

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Sapphic Sociability

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Abstract:

On the rare occasion Sappho makes an appearance in critical theory, she is mobilized as a foil for thinking about theory's need to imagine the effacement of its own material conditions.

This article argues that from Heidegger's pre-discursive disclosure of truth to Nancy's sexuuated ontology and Kittler's hypothesis about the birth of the phonetic alphabet, Sappho is reduced to the trope of the maternal-yet-jealous-lover and transfigured into a doubly self-signifying absence wherein hetero-adjacency goes hand in hand with a supposed Europe-adjacency. Revisiting a philological uncertainty in poem 1, I show instead that rather than ruled by her passions, Sappho is artfully in control of the many-minded inhabitations of her personae and, as such, mounts a challenge to the way the public sphere has been understood since at least Kant. Contrasting Sappho's constructions of synaesthetic space and recursive time with Carazan's dream, the short story that, for Kant, illustrates the "terrifyingly sublime" feeling prompting sociability among the unsociable, I argue that Sappho combines love and strategy to bring friend and foe together in an enchanted state that, as a spectre of her Aeolic dialect in poem 31 illustrates, advances a politics of non-recognition.

Keywords: Sappho, Kant, sociability, synaesthesia, politics of non-recognition

I.

Tis s', ō

Psapph', adikēsi;

Who, O

Psappha, is wronging you?

Rarely does the name “Sappho” appear in critical theory. Unlike Antigone, Sappho is no girl, defiant against the paternalism of state politics; her optics do not lend her to the kind of rallying that, since Hegel, has embraced the feminine singular as an exceptional moment within the unfolding of objective spirit. From the millenia of sensationalist biography and concerted efforts by the Christian church to eliminate her from the written record, we learn that Sappho is a woman with women friends; she sang her poems and luxuriated in her passions for these companions, who shared with her a garden on the isle of Lesbos, separated from the mainland by sea and closer to the shores of Asia Minor than to Hellas. And inasmuch as that is the case, it seems that critical theory has left her out of world history *tout court*.

But unlike Diotima or Aristotle’s sister, we can be sure that Sappho was not a fiction; Aristotle, for one, begrudgingly admitted that Sappho “was honored although she was a woman.”¹ She may even have written down her lyrics rather than solely committed them to memory.² Though no autographed poems have survived, Sappho exists in an impressive array of genres and forms and was widely imitated and responded to in kind—in Anacreon’s song 358, a male narrator laments that the girl he is gazing at (“she comes from Lesbos”) dislikes his hair and “gapes” at some other, unspecified feminine object instead.³ They also include,

¹ Lipking, “Aristotle’s Sister,” 61; Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 177.

² Kittler, *Musik und Mathematik I*, 162-163; Ceccarelli, *Ancient Greek letter writing*, 244-245.

³ Anacreon, *Greek Lyric II*, 57.

famously, Longinus' preservation of Fragment 31 as an exemplary specimen in his treatise *Peri Hypsous (On the Sublime)*.⁴

What, then, does it mean that Sappho has been sidelined by critical theory? According to André Lardinois, “[i]t has become a commonplace among classical scholars when asked to assess the life of Sappho to refer to the entry on her in [Monique Wittig’s and Sande Zeig’s volume] *Lesbian Peoples*” which “devote[s] a full page to her but leave it blank.”⁵ Sappho is, in theory, treated as a historical existence intentionally recorded as an absence; the garrulousness of the speculation surrounding her person and poetry, fueled by the fragmentariness of her literary remains, has turned her into a signifier of the word’s fragility and a most fecund sort of feminine unknowability. Such is Sappho’s reach as signifier of the fragile and unknowable that on the few occasions when Sappho makes an appearance in critical theory, she is mobilized as a foil for thinking about theory’s own material conditions, whose effacement, real or potential, is imagined as theory’s hyper-generative ground. In *Was heisst Denken? (What is Called Thinking?)*, for instance, Martin Heidegger calls briefly upon Sappho, along with Homer, Pindar and Sophocles, to illustrate the *Nähe* (nearness) in which thinking must dwell in respect to “poeticizing.” Sapphic poeticizing promises to Heidegger a post-metaphysical because pre-discursive and pre-reflexive disclosure of truth⁶—but is then expunged from written discourse a second time, never to be mentioned again by Heidegger. Having served her purpose, Sappho is once more forgotten, her sexuater ontology eliminated so as to construct a gender-neutrality on which to base the saying of truth.⁷

⁴ Longinus, “On the Sublime,” 198-199.

⁵ Lardinois, “Introduction,” 1; Wittig and Zeig, *Lesbian Peoples*.

⁶ Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken?* 139.

⁷ Bigwood, “Sappho. The She-Greek Heidegger Forgot,” 165-195.

Where there is reflection on pre-linguistic sexuation, too, Sappho has remained a cipher for real absence. In “The Birth of Breasts,” Jean-Luc Nancy rehearses the trope of Sappho as the jealous lover, which he retrieves from a “translation” of Sappho’s fragment 133 whose lyrical I describes “narrow breasts” that her “faithless” beloved, Atthis, has reserved for her rival Andromeda.⁸ For Nancy, Sappho’s account of breasts that do not exist “for” her exemplifies how thinking, unlike cognizing, is concerned not with objects but with the thing, “rising” out of self-sameness and detaching from itself as itself—but therefore marking emergence as a “*nothing* [supposed to] have value all on its own.”⁹ The possessives affixing the breasts “for” Sappho in fragments 31 and 126 notwithstanding, Nancy sees her desire directed at precisely “nothing”—a structure that, as Anacreon 358 already demonstrated, returns a male gaze in which women’s passion for one another appears constitutively inaccessible.

Responding to Heidegger’s association of Sappho with unwritten poetry, Friedrich Kittler, too, reconstructs Sappho as an analogy for desirous self-effacement. For Kittler, Sappho lends herself as a vehicle for examining the primacy of sound in thought inasmuch as her lyrics are assumed to be prior to the division of sound and sign. And yet, Kittler argues, Sappho was also the first poet to register the separation of voice and letter and witness the birth of the phonetic alphabet, the transition from Asiatic cuneiform to vocal sign, and the very beginning of Western writing—because of the apparent unanswerability of her desire except in ceaseless division and repetition.¹⁰

⁸ Sappho, *Sappho*, translated by Renée Vivien, 22; Nancy, “The Birth of Breasts,” 66. [my emphasis]

⁹ Nancy, “The Birth of Breasts,” 42 and 66.

¹⁰ Kittler, *Musik und Mathematik I*, 162-163.

In critical theory, therefore, Sappho signifies “Sappho”—a philological, pseudo-biographical and philosophical conflation of mother and jealous lover, transfigured into a self-signifying absence that produces theory by eliminating itself in writing. No emblem of this complex is more fitting than the very name “Sappho”: not the name by which the poet knew herself in her native Lesbos, “Sappho” assimilates the “Psappha” of her Aeolic dialect to the Greek of the mainland by replacing the initial *psi* with a *sigma*, the original consonant neutralized into modern pronounceability. In spite of the fact that Psappha is apostrophized by the goddess Aphrodite herself in the poet’s very “first” and only complete poem, in spite of the fact, moreover, that the letter *psi* persists in reproductions of the Greek text, three authoritative modern translations rename this alter-ego in poem 1 “Sappho,” assimilating her Asiatic vernacular to a Hellenic tradition that her readers are all presumed to inhabit.¹¹

II.

1 -othron’, -ophron (vel sim.) codd.

Sappho’s corpus, then, is contrived as being in need of reconstruction if it is to be accessible to us. Hers is the body of linguistic fragility, the mispronounced name long ago deemed unpronounceable, and the voice heard calling for a self-division assumed to be self-effacing and yielding to a generalized, gender-neutralized public discourse. Its existential horizon determined by the infinite task of restoring it to an original unity, Sappho’s corpus

¹¹ See Sappho, *Greek Lyric I*, translated by Campbell, 55; *Sappho*, translated by Rayor and Lardinois, 20; *If Not, Winter*, translated by Carson, 3.

also has a life and death of its own: historical, completed and, to that extent, unredeemable. In this respect, Sappho's presence in theory also marks the place where a whole life is deemed incorrigible and where this judgment prefigures the demand for reconstruction and interpretation.

For millenia, Sappho was therefore cast as the prostitute, the profligate lesbian whose works needed to be burned, or the woman rehabilitated to heterosexuality, only to leap off a cliff when spurned by a male *arrivant* from the Occident, her hetero-adjacency inextricably linked to a Europe-adjacency suppressing her Asiatic unspeakability. Yet as psychoanalysis and trauma studies have long known, unspeakability and erasure bear witness to subcutaneous disturbances. In Sappho's "first" poem, one such disturbance is marked by a moment of philological uncertainty regarding its opening line. In some manuscripts the line reads *poikilothron' athanat' Aphrodita*, often rendered as "immortal Aphrodite sitting on the ornately wrought throne," that is, "ruling over a manifold" including Sappho, the objects of her desire, and their various psychosexual states. In other manuscripts the first word reads *poikilophon*, "having a mind (*phronos*)" that is *poikilos*, which is to say "dappled," "many colored," "changeful," or, when describing Prometheus, Odysseus or the Sirens, "artful" and "wily." As John Winkler has suggested, the poem does indeed display formal characteristics of such "many-mindedness": across the field of voices produced by the poem, Sappho undertakes multiple identifications with characters borrowed from the *Iliad*, modifying the scene to fit her purposes as a woman reading Homer's account of male heroism and desire from a distance.¹² She also inhabits multiple iterations of Aphrodite and herself as entreater and entreated, roles that endlessly redouble and triple over the course of repeated petitions and interventions that are projected beyond the end of the poem yet framed by the author's

¹² Winkler, "Double Consciousness in Sappho's Lyrics," 581.

performance as Sappho-Psappha, the character of the woman in need. Indeed, *poikilothron*, too, may have roots not in *thronos* (throne) but rather *throna* (magic drugs) associated, among other things, with Helen as she weaves the story of the *Iliad* on her loom.¹³ According to this reading, Sappho is a poet who is fully, indeed “artfully,” in control of her own “dappled” mind.

This philologically undecidability provides grounds for speculating on the situation of women’s experience in respect to male-dominant public culture. Sappho’s self-performance in others’ perspectives suggest that the scope of her experience is neither marginal nor restricted in respect to a larger world—an evaluation that serves only to reconfirm the prejudice that women’s writing represents only a limited area of experience with no voice of its own. Rather, Sappho is able to participate in the Homeric world, which is “public” inasmuch as it can be accessed by both women and men to one degree or another, and she enjoys access to a sphere only women know and whose language men neither want nor need to learn. Sappho’s many-mindedness registers an alienation from the public sphere, but also the existence of another sphere to which the public has no access. Sappho’s thus turns out to be the experiential sphere that is plurivocal, inhabited by the many-minded, and infinitely richer than that of any sole inhabitant of the male-dominant, publicly validated sphere of language and experience.

Speaking in multiples rather than in fragments, Sappho’s many-mindedness presents more than the opportunity for women and minorities to occupy a “double consciousness” with respect to public culture; it unsettles binarism as such. Take for instance the source for modernity’s conception of the public sphere, Kant’s proposal for a community of the like-minded in regard to moral judgment: the anxious fever dream of a man convinced that he sits

¹³ Winkler, “Double Consciousness,” 584.

alone on his throne and must conjure up a universe in agreement with himself as a necessary supplement to the possibility of his being and acting. The expansiveness he grants to himself—the entire surface of the globe, on which he and his likenesses may limitlessly roam—is the expression, in the genre of a necessary presupposition, of the assumption that everyone is in possession of a “common and healthy understanding,” from which it follows that one may therefore act as if one’s interests could be shared by every other individual on the planet—that is, of course, except for those who lack the requisite “common sense,” but these are not, for Kant, participants in the collective destiny of the human race.¹⁴ The conflation of logical necessity with the pleasure taken in pleasure itself, that is, in the expectation of being able to take pleasure in the same way as everyone else regardless of the content of what pleases—all of this feeling is concentrated in the “as if,” which holds fast to the need to choose between the world as it is or none at all, or at best one that is conceivable only by analogy and on the other side of redemption. The binarism of this world wholly composed of one or the other alternative cascades through the critical system, emanating from the opposition between embodiment and rational capacity versus their loss or absence, through the binary between universalism and particularism, the transcendental and the empirical, to that between existence and its absolution.

From the perspective of Sapphic many-mindedness, however, the binary between “as if” and not-“as if,” the division of the world into moral and non-moral, free and unfree, traces back to the solitary man’s desperation to feel anything so as to cancel the void in which he has imagined himself necessarily existing as a rational being. Sapphic many-mindedness stands in contrast with Carazan’s dream, the fictional account of a misanthrope’s awakening to his need for touch, which Kant credits in his *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen*

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 173.

und Erhabenen (*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*) for his own discovery that a world of outer relations is needed if freedom and history are to be conceivable.¹⁵ The feeling from which this discovery arises, the “terrifying sublime,” projects a space and time of “vast” and “eternal” dimensions with two notable characteristics. First, it is a solitude nonetheless populated by “dreamlike shadows” in the same manner as “the zephyr whispers to lovers,” which Kant takes as an instance of imagining life in inanimate matter: the mind’s capacity for imagining, specifically the end of history, demonstrates its need of other people for conceiving “[t]he place of humanity within the order of created beings” even if they, like things, seem simple, common or corrupt.¹⁶ Second, the terrifying void that expands the heart through its tactility is devoid of women, who Kant associates with the small, charming, and beautiful: excluding women from the capacity for sublimity, Kant single-mindedly projects an unforeseeable future from which he then derives his insight that it is better to live alongside the immoral than no moral beings at all. The “touch” of this projection awakens a taste for a sociability between equals who need yet repel one another; meanwhile, women are crowded into the non-moral and, eventually, merely procreative domain.¹⁷

By contrast, the “sweet-toned breezes” of which Sappho sings in Fragment 71, for instance, etch out a space populated by lovers who, unlike those whispered to by Kant’s imaginary zephyr, exist not in a necessary bit of unreality to be negated for the production of

¹⁵ Kant, “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,” 16-17.

¹⁶ Kant, “Remarks in Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,” 78 and 81.

Translations modified.

¹⁷ Kant, “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,” 35; Kant, “Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view,” 402.

universal history but, rather, in situations crisscrossed by love and politics.¹⁸ Alliances and rivalries of both kinds track through the remains of her poems, the one often inseparable from the other: mere jealousy, used by commentators to contain Sappho within discussions of sexual preference and loss, loses its plausibility as an explanation of her lyric and gives way to the possibility that the poet's emotional investment in her companions and rivals is, in fact, strategic. Such strategy draws friend and foe alike into a synaesthetic space that, like Carazan's dream, also brings together visual and tactile imagery, except that whereas Carazan is awakened from his poetical "blindness" (*Betäubung*) by the touch of reality's objects, Sappho's listeners are immersed in her blending of vision and touch, induced by the sound of her lyre.¹⁹ In poem 2, "breezes like honey blow" in the place to which Sappho invites her auditor, where "from radiant-shaking leaves the sleep of enchantment descends": the word that Anne Carson translates as "radiant-shaking," *aithussomenōn*, combines the kindling of fire (*aithō*) with the quivering of leaves to produce a sound from which a deep psychosexual slumber drops on those gathered below.²⁰

Sappho's word for sleep, *kōma*, is one that in Pindar's first Pythian ode refers to the state that overcomes even Ares, triggered by the enchanting "shafts" (*kēla*) of Apollo's golden lyre.²¹ *Kōma* is also the word Penelope uses to describe the spell Athena casts on her in the *Odyssey*, which she likens to a "soft death" that she hopes "pure" Artemis will grant so

¹⁸ Sappho, *Sappho*, translated by Rayor and Lardinois, 59. See also Ferrari, *Sappho's Gift*, 1-29; Parker, "Sappho's Public World."

¹⁹ Kant, "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime," 17.

²⁰ Sappho, *If Not, Winter*, translated by Carson, 6-7. [translation modified]

²¹ Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, 212-213.

she will no longer long for her husband.²² Sappho's *kōma*, by contrast, issues not from divine intervention but from her own lyrical invention: an enchanted sleep in which the one sense does not displace another but may be with and become the other without loss or excess. Her "sweet-toned breezes" enkindle a space of a higher order than division into reciprocal self-validation; it is not relegated to the domain of terrifying fantasy by a mind so fearful of alterity that it posits it in order to eliminate it as a condition of its own possibility of being uniquely embodied and rationally endowed. In Sappho's world, the possibility of history does not rely on a trade-off between freedom and causality or a calculus of debt and redemption.

Poem 1's penultimate strophe succinctly clarifies the stakes:

"If now she flees, soon she will give chase.

If rejecting gifts, then she will give.

If not loving, soon she will love

even without willing."²³

Sappho speaks here in the guise of Aphrodite, whom she has earlier pleaded for an intercession; in reported speech, she promises Sappho-Psappha that the changeful heart of her beloved will soon favor her again. The poem then continues with present-Sappho reiterating her plea to Aphrodite, who, many-minded, occupied song's first line; in an infinite loop, present-Sappho, past-Sappho-as-Aphrodite, and past-Sappho-Psappha each play their roles while referring to yet another past version of themselves. In the world of Sappho's lyrical negotiations single-mindedness is just one, dimensionless instant, a consciousness

²² Homer, *Odyssey II*, 210-211.

²³ Sappho, *Sappho*, translated by Rayor and Lardinois, 26.

constitutively unaware of its own multiple possibilities and constrained by a notion of bodily existence to evaluating itself on the basis of action and consequence in a field it fancies to be level. In Sappho’s world, what is here is fleeting and what passes will return; just as there is no single destiny, so there is no sense in which “freedom” may be won from annihilating alterity or that debt and forgiveness, fault and correction, or even gift and redemption are relevant in any absolute sense, since the will can un-will itself. In the *kōma* induced by the poem, infused with infinite promise and endless recurrence, the present is always already the unforeseeable future of the past. But the poem is also bookended by battlefield images of Aphrodite called upon to swing down on Zeus’s chariot and act as Sappho’s “fellow-fighter” (*summachos*); as much as it attends to the machinations of love, the poem is also political.²⁴ For this reason, someone like Kant would never have recognized Sappho as participating in the moral realm. By the same token, her world serves all the more as a reservoir of what might be possible as a politics unyoked from the metaphysical and aesthetic strictures of the modern European concept of autonomy—a vastly broader repertoire that begins, for one, with the power of non-recognition.

III.

chlōrotera de poias

emmi, tethnakēn d’oligō d’epideuēs

phainom’ em’ autai

²⁴ Sappho, *Greek Lyric I*, translated by Campbell, 54-55.

I am greener than grass,

and little short of dying

I seem to myself.

Non-recognition can be seen at work in Fragment 31, the poem Longinus preserved as exemplary of the sublime. For Longinus it demonstrates the poet's "skill at selecting and combining the most important and excessive-terrifying concomitants" of the "true situation" for the display of "love's madness"; Sappho summons sublimity by fashioning a unity from apparent opposites and the "congeries" of sensations and emotions rent apart by passion.²⁵ Yet Longinus puts Sappho in control of her corpus at the cost of the contradictory psychophysical states she describes: freezing and burning, irrational and sane, alive and nearly dead, present-Sappho is superseded by a Sappho who has recovered her senses sometime after the present and resolves her previous contradictions with a metapoetical "I seem to myself."

Longinus' interpretation hinges on a reconstruction of the first line that has generated countless attempts at painting Sappho either as a lover jealous of a man who has her beloved's attention, or schoolmistress gifting a song at the wedding of a former charge: "He seems to me godlike in his fortunes," which recognizes "him" as the rival from whom Sappho must both set herself apart and derive her emotional state. But philologists have also suggested that the *mu* in *moi* (myself) is a corruption of an Aeolic *digamma* (*F*) resulting from the disappearance of the sound it designated, such that the line originally read "he must

²⁵ Longinus, "On the Sublime," 198-201. [translation modified]

seem to himself equal to the gods” (*phainetai woi kēnos isos theoisin*). Formally the more satisfactory possibility, this version resonates with poem 1’s “many-mindedness”: mirrored in their self-regard, he nevertheless does not recognize that he is not equal to the gods, while she recognizes herself in the moment she loses speech, sight, and her bodily integrity. To borrow from a speculative reading of the poem by Walter Benjamin: in her silence she speaks the ending of what has been spoken, and in her blindness she sees the completion of what can be seen. When she speaks, she therefore articulates the future as the uncontained and unsettled character of the past.²⁶ In a many-minded and plurivocal world, non-recognition becomes strategy; the “incorrigible” shifts the ground beneath all claims to sovereignty and self-possession.

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²⁶ Benjamin, “Die Metaphysik der Jugend,” 94-96.

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