

One Poem, Four Readings:

Sappho fragment 94

τεθνάκην δ' ἀδόλως θέλω ἄ με ψισδομένα κατελίμπανεν		I simply want to be dead. Weeping she left me
πόλλα καὶ τόδ' ἔειπέ[μοι "ὦιμ' ὡς δεῖνα πεπ[όνθ]αμεν, Ψάφφ', ἦ μάν σ' ἀέκοισ' ἀπυλιμπάνω." 5		with many tears and said this: Oh how badly things have turned out for us. Sappho, I swear, against my will I leave you.
τὰν δ' ἔγω τάδ' ἀμειβόμαν· "χαίροισ' ἔρχεο κᾶμεθεν μέμναισ', οἴσθα γὰρ ὡς σε πεδήπομεν·		And I answered her: Rejoice, go and remember me. For you know how we cherished you.
αὶ δὲ μή, ἀλλά σ' ἔγω θέλω ἔμναισαι [. . .] [. . .] αὶ [] καὶ κάλ' ἐπάσχομεν·	10	But if not, I want to remind you [and beautiful times we had.
πό[λλοις γὰρ στεφάν]οις ἴων καὶ βρ[όδων κρο]κίων τ' ὕμοι κα [] πὰρ ἔμοι περεθήκαο,		For many crowns of violets and roses [at my side you put on
καὶ πό[λλαις ὑπα]θύμιδας πλέκ[ταῖς ἀμφ' ἀ]πάλαι δέραι ἀνθέων ἔ[βαλες] πεποημέναις	15	and many woven garlands made of flowers around your soft throat.
καὶ πολλῶι [] μύρωι βρενθείωι. [] ρυ[]ν ἐξαλείψαο κα[ὶ βασ]ιληίωι,	20	And with sweet oil costly you anointed yourself
καὶ στρώμ[αν ἐ]πὶ μοιθάκαν ἀπάλαν πα [] . . . ων ἐξίτης πόθο[ν] νίδων,		and on a soft bed delicate you would let loose your longing
κῶύτε τις [οὐ] τε τι ἱρον οὐδυ [] ἔπλετ' ὄππ[οθεν ἄμ]μες ἀπέσκομεν	25	and neither any[] nor any holy place nor was there from which you were absent
οὐκ ἄλσος [χ]όρος [] ψοφος [] . . . οιδιαι		no grove[] no dance [] no sound [

[trans. Carson, *If not, Winter*]

Four Readings:

Bowra (1961) 191–2:

Despite all the gaps and the uncertainties this gives a picture of Sappho's life with a favourite girl. Such were the delights which they shared – the wearing of flowers as garlands or necklaces, the use of rich scent, visits to shrines and temples, no doubt because ceremonies were held in them. That this life was entirely satisfying and happy seems clear enough. Even in 21–33 the soft beds seem to indicate no more than that the girl; was so absorbed by her activities that she put away all longing for other girls who did not share them. If we had the full works of Sappho, they would surely contain many references to this kind of existence. In the grief of separation Sappho sees the past with the clarity of vivid recollection and almost lives it again. The catalogue of happy occasions might in less skilful hands have become trivial, but Sappho skims lightly through them and evokes their happiness. The simplicity of her manner has some of the qualities of the conversation which she claims to record, and it is hard not to believe that some such conversation took place, and that its substance was not entirely different from this record of it.

Gentili (1988) 83–4:

The structure of the other memory ode (fr. 94 V) is simpler. First there is the evocation of the sorrowful parting of the friend, then that of the “beautiful things enjoyed together,” which introduces one immediately into the active life of the community. The memory fixes lovingly on the wreaths of roses and violets, and garlands of flowers, the hair soft with unguents, and the actual physical joys of love (v. 21 ff. “on the soft couches you satisfied the strong pangs of desire...”). Here, too, are the usual flowers of Aphrodite and finally, though the last two strophes, are, unfortunately, only partly understandable, sacred rites and sacred spots – the holy grove, to be exact (v. 27)...

In their repetition of identical motifs these structures seem to correspond to ritual formulae operating within a system in which the sources of the poet's inspiration – the crises and separations of love, the floral landscapes, the visions of divinity – are *privileged* religious experiences bringing closer communion with the god. In this context the role played by the standard theme of memory is a determining one. Memory is not simply, as in Homer, a means of evoking emotions and sensations: it reactualizes shared experiences in paradigmatic fashion and offers the assurance that the life lived together exists as an absolute *reality* beyond time and space.

Dubois (1995) 137:

This is a poem peculiarly concerned with relations of persons, not just the recollection of persons now absent, as are many of Sappho's poems, but especially here with questions of grammatical persons, and with the changing lines and boundaries between “I” and others. It seems to me that this poem begins with the “I,” moving to an “I-you” dialogue, employs a shifting form of “we” that accommodates first Sappho and her lover, then Sappho and other women. This “we” then partakes of pleasures, becomes embodied, allows room for explication of the pleasures of the “you,” and is returned to and finally defined as a “we” through negation, in absentia, through the irrecoverability of past shared experience.

The question of reading thus becomes: who is the “we” of this poem? I mean this not in the sense of the old questions concerning Sappho's actual environment, the debate about her circle of women, her possible status as a schoolmistress, as a mistress of the muses for young girls. I mean this question in a strictly formal sense. What is the intersubjectivity being posited here? Who speaks? To whom? What is the status of layers of persons here, the voices in the poem, the poet behind them, the audience to whom they are addressed?

Payne (2018) 263:

Every great lyric poet has such signature ethical gestures. In the work of Sappho, for example, a basic scenario is the memory of pleasure, with the flower as its essentially evanescent marker. Departing lovers remind each other of the garlands they wore when they lay down together on soft beds (violets, roses, crocuses: fr. 94); the comparison of an absent lover to the moon among stars turns the mind to moonlight on the sea and on fields of flowers, then to dew on the garden plants (roses, chervil, clover: fr. 96). Reflective lingering over the claim that human presence leaves no trace on the natural world is a source of consolation. Cultivating the feeling that one is not at home in the world in the way that flowers and grass are at home in it is a way of coping with the loss of those features of one's lived experience that make the world feel like home. Local details, carefully observed, block the longing for transcendence: what appears in Sappho's poetry is not a fictional *mise-en-scène*, but the real earth on which we find ourselves in pain and which we can never feel the same as, but which we cannot stop wanting to be one with when we grieve.

Interpretation:

Bowra's reading – an attempt to reconstruct an original occasion behind the poem – appears naively sentimental and biographical in the light of subsequent scholarship, but it is also heir to a long-standing tradition of interpretation according to which lyric had been considered 'utterance overheard' (going back to John Stuart Mill: cf. discussion in V. Jackson and Y. Prins 'General introduction' in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore 2014) 3–4; J. Culler, 'Lyric address', chapter 5 in *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge 2015), esp. 186–8). It is also important to note when reading Bowra how we are struck by his feeling for pleasure as projected by Sappho's poetry: how alluring it is on its own terms. However impressionistic this reading is, Bowra emphasizes the extent to which lyric is about experience, aesthetics, and enjoyment, issues which are often occluded in more recent scholarship focused on issues relating to historical context or performance (cf. discussion in Budelmann and Phillips (2018) 1–2).

Gentili's reading is very different – so different, in fact, that one might be forgiven for thinking that it is an interpretation of a different poem entirely. The emphasis here is on an anthropologically structuralist, ritualist, and communitarian reading of Sapphic poetics. A sense emerges that a distinctively 'privileged' space for religious experience is on offer through Sapphic memorialisation: lyric, for Gentili, offers an exemplary projection of communitarian religious experience. It is far from clear, however, how Gentili's notion of community through ritual is construed in relation to this fragment, where no such community, however conceived, fully emerges. While Bowra is responsive to the absences and gaps in our knowledge about the circumstances behind the poem, Gentili writes with a certainty (perhaps unfounded) about broader anthropological structures that, for him, govern the interpretation of Sappho's poetry: structures of reality that appear to exist 'beyond time and space'.

Dubois' interpretation is different again: like Gentili's, it is rather theoretical, but in a very different way. Dubois focuses on Sappho's attention to pronouns and their use as signifiers for, or as placeholders for, ideas about communication between individuals. Crucially, attention to communication allows Dubois then to draw attention to much broader but significant questions about how lyric itself communicates to its audiences and readers across time, including to ourselves. Dubois is therefore much more directly attuned than either Bowra or Gentili to how the specific literary qualities of this text generate questions about meaning and interpretation: the business of what it is to be a lyric reader.

Payne takes Dubois' insight into lyric communication in Sappho a stage further by considering the connection between imagery, temporality (how Sappho's poetry generates a sense of the importance of thinking, with lyric, about time and one's place in time), and the ethics of poetry. Payne rejects the quest for any real, original occasion behind Sappho's poetry, or indeed the idea that Sappho's poetry is interested in creating fictional worlds either. Instead, Payne reminds us how lyric poetry's imagistic expressions of time, space, and loss are fundamentally ours, as we perform or read, and find in Sapphic lyric, with its complex memorializations, and evocations of nature, consolation against the sense of loss that it often thematizes (as here in the opening lines of the fragment). In this sense Payne's interpretation is similar to Gentili's interest in how lyric, in his view 'reactualizes shared experience in paradigmatic fashion'; but the emphasis is very different. Sappho's language of loss and separation resonates for us because it is our expressions, our emotions, our time, our space that it engages with and generates its meanings and significance within, by setting those off against an everlasting ethical landscape. This way of reading Sappho has the distinct virtue of making the poems ours in ways that the readings of scholars such as Gentili cannot quite manage because of the dominance of an essentially diagnostic mode of historicist or ritual-focused interpretation.