

## Exploring Lyric Tropes

(M. Williamson, *Sappho's Immortal Daughters*, Cambridge, MA 1995,  
and other recent work on Sappho)

*Habent sua fata libelli*, and although scholarly reviews perhaps constitute the most 'subjective' genre of scholarly writing, this review article sets out to explore a neglected sub-genre: I shall trace the history of the scholarly reception of a particular book on Sappho and place it within the wider context of recent publications on Sappho's fragments and their reception.

Scholarship on Sappho has proliferated in recent years to such a degree that university teachers in the fields of Classics and Comparative Literature are baffled as to which book they should include in their reading lists for courses on ancient Greek literature and other literatures or on gender and sexuality. Recent treatments, all appearing within a span of three years, include J. M. Snyder's *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho* (New York 1997), E. Greene's edited volume *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* (Berkeley 1996 [1997]), M. L. West's *Lectio Teubneriana Die griechische Dichterin. Bild und Rolle* (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1996), L. H. Wilson's *Sappho's Sweetbitter Songs: Configurations of Female and Male in Ancient Greek Lyric* (London 1996), J. M. Snyder's *Sappho* (New York 1995), and M. Williamson's *Sappho's Immortal Daughters* (Cambridge, Mass. 1995).<sup>1</sup> Page duBois' *Sappho Is Burning* (Chicago 1995) and Eva Stehle's *Performance and Gender in Ancient Greece: Non-dramatic Poetry in Its Setting* (Princeton, NJ 1997) stand out in terms of their historical and analytical breadth.<sup>2</sup> In the twenty-first century, numerous studies focusing on the modern reception of Sappho continue to appear.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, a brilliant translation of Sappho's fragments by Anne Carson was published, which combines a penetratingly literal style with subtly poetic renderings.<sup>4</sup> This book also contains brief notes on specific renderings and ancient sources relating to Sappho. It is altogether, to my mind, the best recent English translation of Sappho's fragments through the voice of a poet and scholar of outstanding calibre.<sup>5</sup> I have not attempted here to enumerate the articles that have been published in this same period; the bibliography on Sappho overall has become labyrinthine.

In this review article, I shall take M. Williamson's *Sappho's Immortal Daughters* as a case study. I shall focus on its contribution to current

research and its scholarly reception. This book, unprecedented in its unconventional use of scholarly practices, will be more broadly viewed in the context of other recent books and studies on Sappho. Published towards the end of 1995, Williamson's book, comprised largely of useful summaries of the work of others, received glowing reviews in England, U.S., and Canada. To reviewers it seemed a "truly impressive" monograph which "offers a number of original insights about Sappho's poems that will, no doubt, engage the most learned readers of Sappho" (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review*), a "persuasive" book that "sets out to recover something of the authentic Sapphic voice" (*Greece and Rome*), an "absorbing study" that uses "social, political, and literary materials that influenced and reflect Sappho's experience" (*Choice*), a "thoroughly worthwhile" study (*JACT Review*) of individual poems which "produce a flesh-and-blood poet" (*The Independent* [UK]). "This book is important for the new readings Williamson suggests in boldly facing the question of Sappho's historical *milieu*... Th[e] polished joinery ([sc.] in terms of the smooth transitions between different topics) is worthy of Dionysius' tribute to Sappho in praising her fr. 1: like the immortal daughters Williamson's book possesses *λειότης τῶν ἀρμονιῶν*" (Phoenix). The only more balanced, brief review of the book was published in *Helios*.<sup>6</sup>

Τίς ὁ θόρυβος ὄδε, Pratinas would exclaim. While it is a valuable asset for its summaries of scholarship on the subject, why are all these reviews suggesting that this is an original landmark book?<sup>7</sup> At a time when particularly sophisticated or even pathfinding studies receive harsh or hostile critiques, eminently useful handbooks such as this, are praised for their originality and intellectual fervor. Given this enigmatic intellectual climate, it seems important to re-examine specific scholarly perceptual filters and to somewhat challenge the current genre of reviewing academic contributions.

Williamson's book is certainly not hastily written. Not intended for scholars of ancient Greek literature and society or for comparatists, it assumes no knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin, and offers a basic treatment of the subject for the uninitiated. Its authoritative style, however, can be misleading and may do more harm than good for undergraduate students. Its main contribution is to summarize scholarly views on specific aspects of Sappho's poetic corpus and the testimonia about her. The book's unique contribution lies in its elegance in compiling the results of recent research in a unified narrative. Although there is a short bibliography enumerating the works on which it depends, there are no footnotes to guide the reader through the original and secondary sources for further research. While this, in one sense, suggests

the unprecedented scope of the book, it is a substantial limitation for readers who seek to pursue any specific topic.

Chapter one provides a treatment of a few aspects of the ancient reception of Sappho. Unfortunately, this is neither thorough nor theoretically informed. The chapter sets out with an image that John J. Winkler evoked in *The Constraints of Desire*: the interestingly blank page in the entry on Sappho in Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's dictionary *Lesbian Peoples*.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps a programmatic statement about the scope of the book, since Winkler sets out his chapter on Sappho in exactly the same way. In this chapter, Williamson initially examines the vase-paintings depicting Sappho (pp. 6-7). Despite Ellen Greene's encomiastic tone in her review of this part of the book: "Williamson does an excellent job of surveying the images of Sappho that flourished in antiquity", this is a rather unsophisticated analysis.<sup>9</sup> She omits a couple of important vases, and while she mentions J. M. Snyder's *The Woman and the Lyre* (Carbondale 1989) in her "reading notes" (short bibliography) at the end of the book, she seems unaware of an image of Sappho preserved on a vase in Ruhr-Universität, Bochum and mentioned by Snyder.<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of the well-known legend of Sappho and Phaon, her direct debt to Gregory Nagy and Eva Stehle's work on the story becomes evident, but is not acknowledged, since the author has chosen to include no footnotes. Examples such as this may actually create problems for undergraduates, who, unfamiliar with the secondary bibliography, may deem the book highly original. The rest of this chapter consists of a summary and discussion of some testimonia related to Sappho in the Hellenistic period, as well as in Roman times (a particularly unsatisfactory treatment); such testimonia have already been conveniently collected by David Campbell in his *Greek Lyric I* (Cambridge, Mass. 1982). Williamson's authoritative, at times even over-confident, tone suggesting mastery of the complexities of the subject, obfuscates the difficulties in approaching Sappho 'anthropologically'.

Among these difficulties is the nature of the textual transmission of Sappho's poetry. In chapter two, Williamson embarks on an exploration of this transmission, but originality and rigor are lacking. "Papyrus in Print" is a non-technical sketch of a highly complicated subject. The example of a hypothetically fragmentary version of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy discussed in this chapter might possibly suggest that the author is not well versed in actual cases of Greek fragments that were originally edited and reconstructed anew, but later joined with other papyrus scraps that preserved parts of the same text.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Sappho's fragments themselves provide such cases.<sup>12</sup> Should the author have desired a powerful modern illustration for the sake of uninitiated readers,

she could have explored, for example, the evocative image that James Merrill's "Losing the Marbles" from the collection *The Inner Room* (1988) subtly conjures up.<sup>13</sup>

body, favorite

gleaned, at the  
vital  
frenzy—

act and moonshaft, peaks

stiffening  
Unutter[able]  
the beloved's

slowly  
stained in the deep, fixed  
summer nights  
or,

scornful, Ch[arm]ides,  
decrepitude  
Now, however, that  
figures also

body everywhere  
plunders and  
what we cannot—from the hut's lintel  
flawed

white as  
sliced turnip, the field's brow.  
our old  
wanderings

home, palace, temple,  
having, of those blue foothills  
no further clear  
fancy[.]

The body, favorite trope of our youthful poets...  
 With it they gleaned, as at the sibyl's tripod,  
 insight too prompt and vital for words.  
 Her sleepless frenzy—

cataract and moonshaft, peaks of sheer fire at dawn,  
 dung-dusted violets, the stiffening dew—  
 said it best. Unutterable too  
 was the beloved's

save through the index of refraction a fair, slowly  
 turned head sustained in the deep look that fixed him.  
 From then on veining summer nights with  
 flickering ichor,

he had joined an elite scornful—as were, Charmides,  
 your first, chiseled verses—of decrepitude  
 in any form. Now, however, that  
 their figures also

begin to slip the mind—while the body everywhere  
 with peasant shrewdness plunders and puts to use  
 what we cannot—from the hut's lintel  
 gleams one flawed image;

another, cast up by frost or earthquake, shines white as  
 sliced turnip from a furrow on the field's brow.  
 Humbly our old poets knew to make  
 wanderings into

homecomings of a sort—harbor, palace, temple, all  
 having been quarried out of those blue foothills  
 no further off, these last clear autumn  
 days, than infancy.

Unfortunately, chapter two constitutes a rather over-simplified and romanticized account of the problems that critical editors and historians of textual transmission actually encounter. Once more, Williamson misses an opportunity to examine constructively the fragmentary nature of the Sapphic corpus, which would have provided a far greater contribution.

Chapters three, four, and five are beautifully written, but the reader will find few original insights here. Snyder's *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho* (1997), and Eva Stehle's *Performance and Gender in Ancient Greece*,

chapter 6 (1997), offer considerably more engaging discussion and analysis of the fragments, while the (almost all previously published) articles collected in Greene's 1996 volume *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* successfully reflect all major trends in post-seventies scholarship on Sappho.<sup>14</sup> It is, in fact, the theses of these articles that constitute the main core of Williamson's book.<sup>15</sup> Chapter five is based on an article by Williamson herself that has been included in Greene's volume.<sup>16</sup> This is the only chapter in the book with any attempt at originality, although it seems that Williamson's ability to understand the subtleties of fragmentary texts is undermined by a somewhat tenuous comprehension of Sappho's literary dialect and the problems of its transmission.<sup>17</sup>

More specifically, the book's elegance is marred by an occasional lack of lucidity in writing and in conception<sup>18</sup> and by the frequent reliance on borrowed stereotypes (e.g., "[m]any of her songs have a devotional aspect, and in some cases they can even be linked with known festivals or cults", p. 79), inaccuracies (e.g., "By far the largest of the Aegean islands, Lesbos... ", p. 63), sweeping statements (e.g., "book 1 contained, we are told, as many as 1320 lines, ... and another consisted entirely of songs written for wedding celebrations", p. 40),<sup>19</sup> and general frequent use of the ideas of others (see above on Winkler, Nagy, and Stehle).<sup>20</sup> Williamson seems disturbed by the work of male critical editors, who, according to her, "consider it their job to reconstruct the text wherever they can" and who "are no more immune to their appeal [of objective reconstructions] than anyone else" (p. 37). This leads her to a contemplation of the fact that "the fate of Sappho's surviving words, as of her reputation, has still been overwhelmingly in the hands of men", despite the fact that the Florentine ostrakon "was published by an Italian papyrologist called Medea Norsa, the only woman to have edited Sappho..." (p. 58).

Among other odd features of the book is that it implicitly employs the scholarly tendencies it otherwise criticizes. On page 136, we hear that "the damaged section at the end of the poem [sc., Sappho, fr. 17] seems to include part of the word *parthenos*, which may indicate a group of young women as singers", but all that is actually preserved is ]αρθ[. On page 140, Williamson engages in biographical criticism, dating Sappho 5 V., the fragment on the poetic voice's brother who ἄμβροτε (= ἤμαρτε) in the past: "it is tempting to think that Sappho wrote this poem when she was herself still a *parthenos* – but we can do no more than speculate". There is no attempt to ponder how fragments such as Sappho fr. 5 could have survived in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., given the so-called 'personal' character of the poem.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps more important, this book rarely shows any traces of healthy scepticism. In the latter example, the author adopts the view that "early texts of Sappho may have taken some forms *unfamiliar to us*. Other poets of this period are said to have dedicated their poems in temples, in copies written in materials like lead or gold; since some of Sappho's poetry is devotional, she may well have done the same" (p. 38; my emphasis). But how were 'poems' such as Sappho fr. 5 V. handed down to the classical or the early Hellenistic periods? The attempt to avoid scholarly sophistication, presumably because this is an introductory book, makes Williamson's discussion end in an unsatisfying aporia. The sources about the forms of transmission that are "unfamiliar to us" can be found in John Herington's book *Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition* (Berkeley 1985).<sup>22</sup> Keeping in mind that the notions of "oral" and "written" in archaic Greece should be viewed not as absolute binary oppositions, but as parts of a qualitative continuum from oral modes to written modes, I would hold that Sappho's poems may well have been written down already in Mytilene not long after she became well-known. We know that Sappho became a known cultural figure in Lesbos and in Athens, if not elsewhere, by the late sixth century, and that as late as the second century C.E. the Mytileneans were cutting coins with her face on them.<sup>23</sup> Further, in a fifth century B.C.E. red-figure *hydria* in Athens, Sappho is depicted seated reading from a papyrus scroll, while other female figures stand around her.<sup>24</sup> Not only does this image indicate that Sappho was already being associated in the Athenian imaginary with the by then established book trade in Athens, it also suggests, I argue, that she was thought of as a celebrated archaic poet who could potentially be *read* too, should relative literacy have allowed. Both in the archaic and the classical period, however, the primary medium of transmission was the performance and re-performance of her compositions – which continued for many years till 'Sappho *wandernde*' reached Alexandria. In the end, what may be "unfamiliar to us" is predominantly oral societies which, however, preserve in any possible way the 'songs' of renowned contemporary or near contemporary poets.

Although useful as a summary, at the time of its publication in 1995/1996, this book did not make a substantial contribution to the field.<sup>25</sup> Eight years after its appearance, it has not challenged any scholarly assumptions and has provoked little critical re-consideration of the analysis of specific fragments. Perhaps of greater importance, from an anthropological perspective *Sappho's Immortal Daughters* does little to recapture the complexity of related cultural aspects of archaic, classical, Hellenistic, and Roman Greece. Even considered as an introduction, its unconventional approach to citation and its authoritative style present



serious challenges for readers who might wish to use it to pursue further research. Future investigations, I believe, will find more fruitful ground in the work of John Winkler,<sup>26</sup> Gregory Nagy,<sup>27</sup> Claude Calame,<sup>28</sup> and Page duBois, among others<sup>29</sup>.\*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It will suffice to mention that within the same years two German technical books on Sappho appeared: E. Tzamali, *Syntax und Stil bei Sappho*, Dettelbach 1996, and A. Broger, *Das Epitheton bei Sappho und Alkaios. Eine sprachwissenschaftliche Untersuchung*, Innsbruck 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> Chapter 6 of Stehle's book is devoted to Sappho, although Stehle herself states that to a certain degree "the first five chapters are preliminary, providing context for Sappho" (p. ix).
- <sup>3</sup> See, more recently, J. DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937*, Chicago 1989, E. Greene (ed.), *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*, Berkeley 1996 [1997], Y. Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, Princeton, NJ 1999, J. Dehler, *Fragments of Sappho: Sapphic Fictions in works by H. D., Judy Grahn, and Monique Wittig*, Frankfurt am Main 1999, D. Collecott, *H. D. and Sapphic Modernism 1910-1950*, Cambridge 1999, M. Reynolds, *The Sappho Companion*, London 2000, H. Andreadis, *Sappho in Early Modern England: Female Same-Sex Literary Erotics 1550-1714*, Chicago 2001, C. Écarnot 2002, *L'écriture de Monique Wittig: A la couleur de Sappho*, Paris 2002, M. Reynolds 2003, *The Sappho History*, Basingstoke, Hampshire 2003. J. M. Snyder's *Sappho (101-123)* and *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho (123-159)* also focus on the modern reception. For collections of English and French poems translating, rewriting, or pertaining to Sappho, see P. Jay and C. Lewis, *Sappho through English Poetry*, London 1996, and P. Brunet, *L'égal des dieux. Cent versions d'un poème de Sappho*, Paris 1998.
- <sup>4</sup> Anne Carson, *If only, winter*, New York 2002.
- <sup>5</sup> Appearing at almost the same time is the translation of Stanley Lombardo, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments* (Indianapolis/Cambridge 2002), with a very informative introduction by Pamela Gordon. This Hackett edition offers a much less literal translation and no facing Greek text. Lombardo's renderings are interesting and provocative. Among the numerous recent English translations is Robert Chandler's *Sappho* (London 1998), with an introduction by Richard Jenkyns.
- <sup>6</sup> J. M. Snyder in *Helios* 23 (1996), 194.
- <sup>7</sup> Even in terms of style the book is no more elegant than any other book on Sappho that appeared around that time (for example, L. H. Wilson's *Sappho's sweetbitter songs: Configurations of female and male in ancient Greek lyric*, 1996).
- <sup>8</sup> J. J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and*



- Gender in Ancient Greece*, New York 1990, 162.
- <sup>9</sup> *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (1996.04.24).
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Snyder's review in *Helios* 23 (1996), 194.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, the New Simonides fragments edited by Professor Peter J. Parsons in 1992: on these texts see now D. Boedeker and D. Sider (ed.), *The New Simonides: Contexts of Praise and Desire*, New York/Oxford 2001.
- <sup>12</sup> J. M. Edmonds' edition *Lyra Graeca I*, London/New York 1928, is a valuable source for highly idiosyncratic and large-scale restorations of Sappho's fragments. Williamson only briefly refers to such a case, that is, fr. 16 V. (p. 55), but, on Sappho 16, see Norman Austin's insightful 1994 discussion (N. Austin, *Helen of Troy and her Shameless Phantom*, Ithaca, NY 1994, ch. 2). In this review article, fragment numbering follows that of Eva Maria Voigt's edition *Sappho et Alcaeus*, Amsterdam 1971.
- <sup>13</sup> James Merrill, *Collected Poems*, ed. J. D. McClatchy and S. Yenser, New York 2001, 574 and 577.
- <sup>14</sup> G. Lanata's article translated for this volume was first published in 1966.
- <sup>15</sup> Along with the paper by H. Parker, reprinted in Greene's *Re-Reading Sappho*.
- <sup>16</sup> "Sappho and the Other Woman", 248-64. Another version of this article was published in S. Mills (ed.), *Language and Gender: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, London 1995, 76-94.
- <sup>17</sup> See, for example, her discussion of Sappho fr. 22 (pp. 253-54 in Greene's collection).
- <sup>18</sup> For example, on page 137 Williamson writes with regard to fragment 5: "Yet, apart from the choice of deities, and the *probable* inclusion of the word 'sister' (part of it is *missing*, and other reconstructions are *possible*), there is little to mark the perspective of this poem as female." (my emphasis).
- <sup>19</sup> The situation is much more complex: cf. D. Yatromanolakis, "Alexandrian Sappho Revisited", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 99 (1999), 179-195; reprinted in G. Nagy (ed.), *Greek Literature*. Vol. 7: *Greek Literature in the Hellenistic Period*, New York/London 2002.
- <sup>20</sup> On p. 59 she quotes Ezra Pound's poem "Papyrus", but she does not refer to Wilhelm Seelbach's well-known (to classicists) article "Ezra Pound und Sappho fr. 95 L. - P", *A&A* 16 (1970), 83-4 [cf. her p. 177], where he draws attention to Pound's poem. In general, German or French bibliography is only rarely cited in her "reading notes" or explored in the book.
- <sup>21</sup> See Williamson, p. 139. For a possible antidote to such an approach, see the thought-provoking article by Michalis Z. Kopidakis, «Σαπφῶ Φαρμακολύτρια», in *Ἄντι Χρυσέων. Ἀφιέρωμα στὸν Ζήσιμο Λορεντζάτο*, Athens 1995, 333-346.
- <sup>22</sup> See mainly his appendix VI, pp. 201-203.
- <sup>23</sup> See G. M. A. Richter, *The Portraits of the Greeks*, abridged and revised by R. R. R. Smith, Ithaca, NY 1984, 194, and, more recently, K. Scheffold, *Die Bildnisse der antiken Dichter, Redner und Denker*, Basel 1997, 408-409. Cf. Pollux 9. 84 Μυτιληναῖοι μὲν Σαπφῶ τῷ νομίσματι ἐνεχαράξαντο.
- <sup>24</sup> In terms of this vase, Williamson again misses an opportunity to study, let alone 'read', images of

- Sappho in any depth.
- <sup>25</sup> However, it is listed in the four-item bibliography that Williamson herself provided for her entry on Sappho in the third edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1996).
- <sup>26</sup> J. J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece*, New York 1990, ch. 5.
- <sup>27</sup> G. Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*, Cambridge 1995, ch. 4.
- <sup>28</sup> C. Calame, *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece: Their morphology, religious role, and social function*, Second edition, trans. D. Collins and J. Orion, Lanham, MD 1997.
- <sup>29</sup> H. Foley's recent article "'The Mother of the Argument': Eros and the body in Sappho and Plato's *Phaedrus*" in M. Wyke (ed.), *Parchments of Gender: Deciphering the Bodies of Antiquity* (Oxford 1998, 39-70) offers a thought-provoking discussion.
- \* I am grateful to Sharri R. Clark, Gloria Ferrari Pinney, and Deborah Lyons for commenting on an early draft of this review article.

## Περίληψη

Δημήτρης Γιατρομανολάκης: *Εξερευνώντας λυρικούς τρόπους*

Το άρθρο αυτό επισκοπεί την πρόσφατη διεθνή βιβλιογραφία για τη Σαπφώ και τα αρχαϊκά κοινωνικά και πολιτισμικά περικείμενα της ποίησής της, και επικεντρώνεται στις μεθοδολογικές προσεγγίσεις μιας συγκεκριμένης πρόσφατης μελέτης, προσφέροντας ενδεικτικές μεθοδολογικές προτάσεις για την εξέταση της πρώιμης κειμενικής παράδοσης της ποίησης της Σαπφούς.

