Essay Question #3

Many modern and ancient literary critics have viewed Sappho's songs as private and autobiographical. By examining first-person pronouns and selective proper nouns (such as "Sappho" in fragments 1, 65, 94, and 133), these critics often conflate the poetic speaker with the poet herself. More recently, this approach has been criticized by those who notice the songs' (more plausible) public settings. In this essay, I explore how recent hypothesizes on Sappho's public performance context influence perceptions of representation and autobiography in the songs.

The common assumption that the songs first-person speakers function autobiographically is closely related to certain theories on where the songs were originally performed. Historically, many scholars have assumed that Sappho "composed songs […] to be performed by herself" (Lardinois, "Who Sang" 151) in small, intimate (or private) settings. In *Sappho and Alcaeus,* Denys Page says "[t]here is nothing to contradict the natural supposition that […] all or almost all of [Sappho's] poems were recited by herself informally to her companions" (qtd. in Lardinois, "Who Sang" 152). To his credit, Denys (and most scholars) acknowledges that at least some of Sappho's religious hymns and wedding songs would have been chorally performed in public settings, but these, according to him, act as exceptions.

Page's view has been challenged by scholars such as André Lardinois. Lardinois upholds that "solo performances [of Sappho's songs] for more intimate occasions" (*Sappho* 15) occurred, though they are much more uncommon than public performances. He adds, "[n]o one in antiquity says [Sappho sang songs by herself in a small group of her companions], not even Horace, who makes Sappho sing to her own lyre in the underworld"

("Who Sang" 154). Alongside this, Lardinois believes Sappho was probably a leader of women's choruses. This position "agrees best with the testimonia, [Sappho's] fragments, and the historical period in which she lived" (*Sappho* 14-15), and only increases the likelihood that many of her songs were publicly performed. As an example, Fragment 140 demonstrates a possible call-and-response between "daughters" (likely a women's chorus) and "Aphrodite" (A solo singer who could be – but is not necessarily – Sappho).

Lardinois' hypothesis on Sappho's performance context directly challenges how personal pronouns and proper nouns should be perceived in the songs. As public performances, the songs would most likely have been sung with music – by a chorus or a solo singer – to a wider audience. This "implies […] the possibility, if not expectation, of reperformance" (Lardinois, "Personal Poetry" 165-166), meaning some songs could be sung by different performers at different times. With this in mind, personal pronouns and names probably represent a grouping of people and can hail audience members (primarily the female members of Sappho's community) into the song's content. This seems particularly true for religious hymns or marriage songs where the audience would expect "the first-person speaker, whether a chorus, the poet, or another soloist, to express sentiments shared by the community on behalf of which s/he speaks" (Lardinois, "Personal Poetry" 166).

This public and communal quality is visible in many of Sappho's songs when performance context is questioned; nevertheless, some more subjective fragments cause greater tension than others. For example, fragment 1 – "Hymn to Aphrodite" – is often cited as a key instance of autobiography in Sappho's work. It includes the personal pronouns "I" (x5), "me" (x2), "my" (x5), and "you" (x5), along with the naming of "Sappho" and

"Aphrodite." In this unique prayer-like-song, the speaker "I" (referred to as "Sappho") requests Aphrodite to "come" and "persuade" an unnamed lover to "turn back" to her. The explicit mention of "Sappho" and prevalence of "I" are two of the key reasons many scholars perceive the song to be a confessional account of spurned love from the author's life.

As shown, this type of autobiographical reading is best challenged by looking at the performance context. While the inclusion of "Sappho" in this fragment is unique, it does not disqualify it from public performance. As Lardinois points out, it is not unheard of for some ancient lyric poets to include their name in poetry meant for public performance; for example, the ancient choral poet Alcman "composed several songs in which he mentions his own name but which nevertheless may have been performed by a chorus" ("Who Sang" 153). Sappho is no exception – it is very possible that other singers partook in fragment 1's performance (most likely in monodic, public performances). If this is the case, the fragment would most likely have meaning outside of the author's own life and certainly exist outside a small circle of companions.

If this song was most likely publicly performed, how might names and personal pronouns act representatively for others? By looking at the identity of the unnamed woman, one may notice that while she will "chase," "give," and "love," the objects of these actions are unnamed. Who will this woman "chase," "give," and "love"? Is it "Sappho"? Another woman? The answer is ambiguous, and the reader is left to fill in the blank. In regards to "Sappho" the speaker, it seems that she trusts Aphrodite to come and help, but this cannot be conflated with "Sappho the composer […] [who] may not [believe this]" ("Personal Poetry" 168). "Sappho" the speakers thus acts as a poetic character, a "persona" ("Personal Poetry" 168) with an implied opinion on the songs ambiguity. Other listeners, readers, and

performers (including Sappho the author) can relate or dissociate from her – she acts more as a device for audience identity formation than as an autobiographical speaker.

Another contentious fragment is number 16. Here, the first-person speaker directly invokes personal pronouns and names "Anaktoria" as an object of her desire. This has led many to assume that the speaking "I" refers to the historical Sappho who – like in fragment 1 – is allegedly confessing a "real" experience. Again, this type of reading assumes that Sappho is the speaker and performer of the song for a small group, though there is no evidence that Sappho herself (let alone any soloist) sang it. More likely, this song would have been publicly performed (possibly even from a chorus) for a wide audience. From this perspective, the use of "I" would have a wider reach outside of the author's life. In fact, Lardinois adds, that "when the first-person speaker says that she misses Anaktoria and desires to see her, she [most likely] acts as a representative of the audience, inspiring the same longing in them." (*Sappho* 11-12).

As I have shown, the performance context of Sappho's songs is a major factor that must be considered when reading. Historians have traditionally viewed Sappho's songs as autobiographical performances for small, intimate gatherings of companions, but reading the songs with a wider public audience in mind transforms them, revealing a communal quality. From the public performance perspective, personal pronouns such as "I" or even names such as "Sappho" act as representatives for others that invite audience members to be hailed into the song or to push back against it and its characters. While it is difficult to confirm the nature of *how* each song was sung – monodic or chorally – or *who* sang them, the public setting hypothesis must nevertheless be taken into account.

Works Cited

Lardinois, André, and Diane Rayor. *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works*. Cambridge UP, 2014.

Lardinois, André. "Sappho's Personal Poetry" *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho,* edited by P.J. Finglass and Adrian Kelly, Cambridge UP, 2021, pp. 163–174.

Lardinois, André. "Who Sang Sappho's Songs?" *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*, edited by Susan Greene, vol. 2, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2020, pp. 150–172.