

THEA S. THORSEN – STEPHEN HARRISON (eds.), *Roman receptions of Sappho*. Classical presences, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, x+455 pp. \$115.00, ISBN 978-0-19-882943-0.

One might think that receptions of Sappho in Roman poetry were well trodden ground, in little need of a weighty collection of essays such as this. Yet while much has been written about responses to Sappho by individual authors, especially Catullus and Horace, the subject lacks a treatment constructed around the sustained focus that this volume attempts to provide. By tracing such responses from the lifetime of Catullus to the end of the first century AD, the volume aims to correct misconceptions and adjust perspectives that pertain to the longer spans of literary history, as well as to add fresh texture to our understanding of individual authors' refashioning of Sappho's poetry and the idea of Sappho herself. The methods on show here are those that have been solidly established in classical reception studies in recent decades, and are concisely discussed by Thea Thorsen in the introduction (pp. 7-13). Attending to the socio-political idioms of a given period enables insight into the particular ways in which authors interpreted and manipulated a canonical predecessor. Interpretations tend to focus on authorial self-positioning, Sappho's style, comportment, and sexuality interpreted variously as foil, model, or point of departure by means of which authors configure their own roles and project their own interventions into cultural environments both local and historical. The resulting discussions will be thought-provoking reading for anyone with an interest in the interaction of Greek and Roman literary cultures.

Because of the range of material under consideration, the contributions vary in their concerns, but several interpretative preoccupations recur. As well as examining Sappho as a metapoetic figure, the volume foregrounds the claim that the erotic elements of Sappho's poetry were decisive for Roman understandings of it. This is partly a question of evidence; scrutinizing the main strands of Sappho's reception, Thorsen argues that 'the Romans appear to have known a more erotic Sappho than we now have access to through her extant fragments' (p. 6). But several contributions develop the broader interpretative implications of this emphasis. Thorsen suggests that for Roman poets Sapphic eroticism was not (or not only) a cause of anxiety, but a 'catalyst' for creative exploration of 'the fluidity of ... sex, gender, and sexuality in the broadest sense' (p. 43). This general claim is borne out in numerous readings. Considering the deaths of Euryalus and Pallas in the *Aeneid* (9.435-7, 11.68-71), Stephen Harrison points out several Sapphic reminiscences, such as the *purpureus ... flos* of *Aen.* 9.435 echoing the *πόρφυρον ἄνθος* of Sappho fr. 105b.2. Emphasis on this Sapphic undertone allows Harrison to add another layer of significance to Don Fowler's

classic account of this and other Virgilian killings as figurative deflorations.¹ To the associations Fowler explores, ‘Sapphic echoes add a homoerotic perspective’ in which the beautiful warriors of the *Aeneid* are analogous in their homoerotic appeal to Sappho’s beautiful young women (p. 144).

Other discussions of the erotic make larger points about cultural history. Analysing the tradition that there was a courtesan called ‘Sappho’ who was not Sappho the poet (pp. 34–8; for the distinction between them see e.g. Aelian *VH* 12.18–19, and on the blurring of the two figures the discussion on p. 37), Thorsen concludes that the evidence for a widespread perception of Sappho the poet as being (also) a courtesan is lacking, pointing out that ‘only Tatian ... unequivocally calls Sappho the poet a *hetaera*’ (p. 37). Rather than perception of Sappho the poet being persistently coloured by that of Sappho the courtesan, the two figures ‘relate to each other first and foremost as opposites’ (p. 38). The same essay also targets ‘[t]he frequent mention of Sappho’s alleged ugliness in [modern] scholarship’, and judges it ‘grossly disproportionate’ to the ancient evidence, in which ‘testimonies to the beauty of Sappho’ abound (p. 34) and outweigh references to her short stature and ‘swarthy’ complexion (e.g. *POxy* 1800 fr. 1, Maximus of Tyre *Diss.* 18.7, discussed pp. 32–3). The argument is based on texts such as Alcaeus fr. 384, Anacreon fr. 358, and the account of Silanion’s famous statue of Sappho (Cic. *Verr.* 2.4.126), all of which ‘lea[d] us to focus on Sappho’s beauty – even if this beauty is mostly figurative’ (p. 34).

There are reasons for caution here, however. While it is a reasonable inference that Silanion’s statue represented ‘an appealing image of Sappho’ (p. 32), Cicero refers to workmanship rather than what is represented (*opus tam perfectum, tam elegans, tam elaboratum*). There is no reason to think that admiring such ‘figurative’ aesthetic qualities would not have been compatible with thinking, on the basis of the biographical tradition, that the real Sappho was not conventionally attractive. Anacreon’s poem does not name the ‘girl’ it describes, and although it was understood in antiquity as addressing Sappho, it is unclear whether this was the prevailing interpretation. Chamaeleon’s report at least, as recorded by Athenaeus (Χαμαιλέων δ’ ἐν τῷ περὶ Σαπφοῦς καὶ λέγειν τινὰς φησιν ..., = T8 Campbell), shows that the view that the poem was addressed to Sappho was not universally accepted.²

More importantly, despite stressing that she wears ornately decorated sandals (νήνι ποικιλοσαμβάλωι, 3) and intimating her flirtatious disposition with Eros’ invitation to the speaker to ‘play with’ her (συμπαίξειν, 4), the poem does not specify that the girl in question is physically beautiful. Read as a reflection on the appeal of Sappho and her poetry, the poem suggests that a relationship between immediacy and elusiveness is central to the experience of lyric’s figurations.

¹ D. Fowler, “Virgil on Killing Virgins”, in Mi. Whitby, P. Hardie, and Ma. Whitby (eds.) *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble*, Bristol 1989, 185–98.

² See the discussions at D. Yatromanolakis, *Sappho in the Making: the Early Reception*, Cambridge MA 2007, 174–83, F. Budelmann, “Lyric Minds”, in id. and T. Phillips (eds.) *Textual Events: Performance and the Lyric in Early Greece*, Oxford 2018, 250–1.

Anacreon transposes Sappho's sexual and temporal remoteness into a movement from allure to rejection. The presentation in Sappho's poetry of a first-person character both winningly revealing and boldly self-possessed (a new dimension of which has been revealed in the domestic manoeuvrings of the 'Brothers Poem') is echoed in the 'girl' whose apparent availability gives way to dismissive self-assertion. The scenario that Anacreon creates can thus be understood as a lightly comic version of Page duBois' account of reading Sappho as the experience of *πóθος*, a sense of being drawn towards 'objects of yearning or longing that will never be satisfied'.³ Although numerous contributions are sensitive to the 'desire' that Sappho and her poetry create (see e.g. pp. 87-8), the recurrent complexities of such experience, as manifest both in poetic reconfigurations and the readerly attitudes that they elicit, might have been probed further in discussions of Sappho's 'figurative beauty', and offer much scope for further reflection.

Several essays recapitulate and make contributions to longstanding debates such as the status of Catullus' Lesbia, the authenticity of *Heroides* 15, and the use of Greek authors as stylistic and intellectual models. Addressing the former, Lars Morten Gram provides a judicious overview of the scholarship on the referents and sense 'Lesbia', and concludes sensibly that the referential and associative multiplicities and ambiguities of 'Lesbia' map onto those of Catullus' relationship with her (p. 115). Analysing the rhetorical strategies employed by 'Sappho' as a speaker in *Heroides* 15, Chiara Elisei argues for the poem's Ovidian authorship and elaborates numerous connections with Ovid's didactic poetry. In doing so, she demonstrates that 'Sappho' puts into practice the lessons of the *Ars Amatoria* and becomes herself a *magistra amoris* (pp. 232-3, 244-7). Laurel Fulkeron identifies almost the opposite effect in Lucretius, where Sapphic allusions (esp. *DRN* 1.24) position her fr. 1 as representative of 'the instability of human erotic attachment' (p. 67), a foil to the 'amused detachment' that the Epicurean ought to cultivate. Starting from Catullus, choice to translate Callimachus and Sappho, Thorsen argues that these two poets are paired as models in a complex relationship that itself became programmatic for later authors (pp. 89-92).

Similarly shaped arguments are propounded in two of the volume's strongest chapters. Jennifer Ingleheart offers a rich account of Ovid's Sapphic imaginary, replete with subtle observations that build a convincing case for seeing in his poetry a 'multi-faceted picture of Sappho' that reflects and reimagines the many facets of her character ('poetess, tenth Muse, hetaera, heterosexual, homosexual, suicide, teacher, lyric poet, Lesbian ...', p. 225). Particularly important are her proposal to emend *amata* to *amara* at *Ov. Am.* 2.18.26, opening up interaction with the celebrated 'bittersweet' desire of Sappho fr. 130 (pp. 211-12), the argument that Ovid constructs Sappho as an Ovidian didactic poet (especially in *Ars* 3.329-34 and *Tr.* 2.365-6, pp. 213-17, 219-20), and the conclusion that Ovid's 'images' should not be read straight, but as 'tendentious' metapoetic figurings thoroughly steeped in the wider reception of Sappho in Old Comedy and Hellenistic poetry (p. 224). Gideon Nisbet walks readers through a similarly nimble

³ P. DuBois, *Sappho is Burning*, Chicago 1995, 29-30; see further 137.

account of Martial's allusions to Sappho, interpreting poems such as 3.84 and 7.69 and their situation in their respective books. Prominent among the numerous implications that Nisbet draws out is that Martial 'marginalizes and travesties' Sappho in order to downplay the lyric aspects of Catullus' oeuvre, a gesture which makes Catullus more straightforwardly appropriable for Martial's own ends. Catullus' 'good faith' in responding to Sappho is contrasted with Martial's conspicuous 'infidelity' in handling his model, a pose which is constitutive of the latter's 'uniqueness' (p. 287).

While these chapters trace large trends in poetic self-positioning, many of the book's most telling interventions occur at the small scale. Tracing Sapphic language and themes in Catullus 1-14, Olivier Thévenaz argues for 'an analogy between Sappho's feminine group and Catullus' circle of male friends' (p. 133), which is realized with particular deftness in Catullus 6. The address to Furius, on Thévenaz's reading, echoes and contrasts with Sappho fr. 137, substituting, among other differences, a 'lascivious and voyeuristic' speaker for Sappho's 'moralistic one' (p. 135), but also plays with the discursive context of the citation of Sappho's poem by Aristotle, who reports it as a reply to Alcaeus (*Rhet.* 1367a). The scenario Aristotle implies, Thévenaz suggests, is the competitive to-and-fro of the symposium; in engaging with the poem through its quotation, Catullus therefore 'assimilates his context(s) ... with a hybrid of Sappho's and Alcaeus' groups of *hetairai* and *hetairoi* ... and questions the gendered role models linked with the performance of Lesbian poetry by adopting a quasi-Sapphic voice in a quasi-Alcaic context' (p. 136). Combining detailed scrutiny of the poems with a fine sense of how rhetorical and intertextual effects can be amplified by the larger intellectual contexts, this reading exemplifies the book's qualities.

Richard Hunter is similarly insightful when examining ancient literary criticism as an intellectual framework against which reponses to Sappho can be understood. Exemplary is his reading of Horace *C.* 4.1 against Sappho fr. 1 in the context of Dionysius of Halicarnassus on the 'smooth' style, and the interactions created thereby with the disavowal of grand Pindarizing in *C.* 4.2 (pp. 151-9). Understood against Dionysius' characterization of the smooth style as a flowing stream (*Comp.* 23.2), Horace's *per aquas, dure, uolubilis* condenses a complex metapoetics: the *aquas ... uolubilis* are the (Sapphic, 'smooth') stylistic textures in which Horace executes his pursuit, their interruption by the jarringly, stylistically resonant *dure* glancing forward to the 'contrast of styles' dramatized in 4.2 (p. 158). This reading leads into an exploration of how Horace *C.* 4.1 articulates a particular response to the questions about desire ('what do lovers want', and what is the relationship between what lovers feel and what is achieved by poems that dramatize such feelings?) that are canonically opened up in Sappho fr. 1 (pp. 158-9).

Such discussions pivot, of course, on the identification and description of intertextual connections. Stephen Heyworth's chapter on Propertius highlights how troublesome the search for such connections can be, demonstrating in an admirably careful discussion that passages which might be expected to shimmer with Sapphic intimations often offer few footholds to the allusion-hunter (pp.

191-201). Heyworth himself offers a reading that elegantly combines philological caution with imaginative boldness when he explores the possible Sapphic undertones at work in Propertius' taxing Tullus with self-indulgent enjoyment of 'Lesbian wine' (*Lesbia Mentoreo uina bibas opere*, Prop. 1.4.2). Noting that *Lesbia uina* might not by itself suggest Sappho, and that in a metapoetic context it could be read as nodding to Alcaeus (p. 189), Heyworth then suggests that Sappho's celebrated priamel at fr. 16.1-4, with its cavalry and infantry and ships, lies behind Tullus' gawping admiration (*mireris*) for 'swift skiffs' (*celerēs ... lintres*) and slow-moving barges (*tam tardas funibus ire rates*, 1.4.3-4). Intertexts thus expose superficiality: Tullus 'counterfeit[s] the behaviour of the lover' by drinking 'wine evocative of Sappho', but acting like the 'others' of Sappho's priamel (p. 190).

There are occasions, however, on which the connections proposed are more debatable, both in substance and implication. One such is Richard Hunter's proposal (p. 163) that *incolumem* in Hor. *C.* 1.3.7 (*reddas incolumem precor*) 'unmistakably looks to Sappho's ἀβλάβην' (fr. 5.1). While both poems begin with a prayer for the safe return from a sea voyage of a male dear to the speaker (Virgil, and Sappho's brother), there are numerous contextual and stylistic differences. Aside from the poems being in different metres and directed to different addressees, and differing pragmatically (contrast Sappho wishing her brother brought safely 'here' with Horace's wish that Virgil be brought *finibus Atticis*), Sappho's clipped, almost matter-of-fact directness contrasts with the ornate structure of Horace's prayer, in which the *te* of the first line is not identified as the *navis* until the fifth, the multiple intervening elements creating a distance between Horace and the ship that jars against the intimacy of *debes Virgilium* (6). Given these differences, it is questionable whether the lexical similarity of *incolumem* and ἀβλάβην can bear the weight proposed, creating a window reference with Callimachus fr. 400, and drawing out the Sapphic qualities of that poem (p. 163).

Here, as with many such instances, there is room for both methodological differences, and a range of emphases and inferences. Questions about what does and does not constitute a meaningful connection between texts and how such connections should be grounded have been extensively debated, and such debates will doubtless continue; if found suggestive, the link between *incolumem* and ἀβλάβην might be interpreted differently against the poem's larger structure. But as Heyworth's contribution in particular suggests, future studies of intertextuality are likely to be concerned less with establishing new links than with exploring established ones afresh. Building on this and other similar works, future generations of scholars might find themselves turning to more detailed considerations of readerly experience as an horizon in which multiple, often conflicting possibilities for articulating the literary past, and one's own relation to it, become manifest. More comparative approaches, geared to tracing the ideationally and experientially generative recurrences of formal features, offer another avenue for exploring the demands that Sappho's poetry makes when

mediated by the constellations of Roman literary and scholarly culture.⁴ Whatever directions open up in the future of the field, the many insights offered by these contributions, and the useful catalogue of references to Sappho compiled by Thorsen and Robert Emil Berge with which the book closes, ensure that readers of the Roman Sappho will not lack stimulation.

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⁴ Exemplary is J. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, Cambridge MA 2015, in which Sappho features prominently.