

## Gender and Innovation: Sappho and the Homeric Tradition

In recent years, much of the scholarship on Sappho has been devoted to investigating the extremely vexed relationship between a “private” voice and a “public” discourse in Sappho’s poetry (Hallett 1979, Stehle 1981, Winkler 1990, Snyder 1991, Calame 1997, Parker 2005). The tension between Sappho’s expression of personal passions and the seemingly public, social function of her art has prompted a good deal of debate. A central aspect of this debate has focused on the ways in which Sappho’s use of “private” and “public” poetic discourses reflects an encounter between Sappho’s seemingly insular feminine world and male public culture. One of the chief ways in which this encounter occurs is through the dynamic interplay between Sapphic and Homeric discourses.

Most contemporary classical scholars concur that Sappho’s verse appropriates Homeric diction, phraseology, and themes, and that in a number of her poems she explicitly refashions aspects of Homeric epic. Yet few scholars have explored how Sappho presents some of the traditional myths represented in the Homeric epics from a woman-centered perspective, that is, from the perspective of a poet whose consciousness was socially defined as outside the public world of men. This paper will consider the extent to which Sappho’s re-interpretation of Homeric themes may constitute a challenge to epic values (Snyder 1997). I shall argue that Sappho’s literary engagement with Homer gives rise to a discourse that embodies a consciousness of both the public male world and a private female-centered world (Winkler 1990). Even in her poems addressed to other women, poems that evoke an all-female world apart from the typical male concerns of war and politics, Sappho often uses military terminology and draws on allusions to Homeric heroes to characterize love relations. I will argue that Sappho often attempts to show a

commonality between war and love, between the masculine drive to dominate and conquer and “feminine” desire (Carson 1980; duBois 1995, Greene 2008). While some of Sappho’s poems evoke an idyllic world of female affiliation, a world segregated from the violence and strife of masculine concerns, other poems suggest an ominousness and potential for violence that haunt the pristine, insular feminine sphere. The dialogue between Sappho’s love lyrics and Homer’s epic world of war does not, as some scholars maintain, merely express her literary indebtedness to her poetic forefather (P.Rosenmeyer 1998). Rather, as my paper will argue, Sappho’s art lies precisely in her innovative use of conventional literary genres, her ability to create a novel discourse that blends the personal and feminine with the “masculine” art of the heroic.

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