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Sappho and the Gods

The gods are a constant presence in the world of early Greek poetry, and Sappho’s work is no exception. Sappho’s presentation of the gods draws on tradition, as we see her reworking the tropes of religious poetry or epic to create a relationship with the divine that suits her persona and interests. Since desire is the primary theme of her poetry, it is not surprising that the central deity in her work is Aphrodite, and this chapter will begin by exploring the complex and personal relationship that Sappho constructs with this goddess. However, Aphrodite is not the only god in Sappho’s poetry, and her treatment of the rest of the pantheon has been less thoroughly treated. The second section will therefore examine the relationship Sappho constructs with other deities through prayer. Finally, we shall investigate how Sappho uses religious and cultic myth, and what this reveals about her poetry’s preoccupations and its performance.

The patronage of Aphrodite

The special connection between Sappho and Aphrodite is one of the major strands of her poetry. Not only is Aphrodite frequently named and invoked, but Sappho’s poetic persona imagines herself as enjoying an intimate relationship with the goddess, as set out most clearly in fr. 1. The poem consists of a prayer to the goddess to save Sappho from the anguish of unrequited love, and she imagines Aphrodite hearing and responding. As well as giving us insight into Sappho’s relationship with her patron goddess, the poem’s sophisticated play on

1 Aphrodite is mentioned by name (or a known cult-title) in frs. 1, 2, 5, 15, 22, 33, 44, 65, 73a, 86, 90, 96, 102, 112, 133, 134, 140, and the new ‘Cypris’ poem. It is almost certain that she is mentioned (though her name does not survive) in frs. 35, 101, 59, and there is a good case for her presence in frs. 16, 40, 58, and 103.
the conventions of the Greek hymn demonstrates her creativity with the tropes of traditional religious song.

Sappho draws on the form known as the ‘cletic’ hymn, a religious poem which invokes a god to appear and requests a favour. Such hymns are known from our earliest sources and usually follow a tripartite structure (for example, *Iliad* 1.37–42). They begin by summoning the god through the use of his or her names, powers, and favourite places. Next they remind the deity of past deeds, either favours the god has previously granted or honours the mortal has paid the deity, or they promise honours in the future. Finally, once the god has been suitably prepared, the petitioner requests his or her assistance. Here Sappho follows this structure, though adapts it to suit her own purposes. The poem begins with an invocation of the goddess by her traits and genealogy: she is ‘Ornate-throned immortal Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, weaver of guile’ (ποικιλόθρον’ ἀθανάτ’ Ἀφρόδιτα, ἵππος Δίος δολόπλοκε). These opening words show Sappho’s blend of tradition and innovation. Aphrodite is regularly depicted on thrones in Greek art, but the epithet ποικιλόθρον’ (‘ornate-throned’) is, as far as we know, Sappho’s own invention, and makes an impact as the first word of the poem.² By addressing Aphrodite as the daughter of Zeus, Sappho nods to her Homeric depiction as the daughter of Zeus and Dione, rather than the tradition preserved in Hesiod where she is born from the foam of Uranus’ castration. Aphrodite’s deceitfulness is well known in myth, but putting the adjective ‘weaver of guile’ (δολόπλοκε, 2) at the end of the sequence draws

² Some manuscripts preserve ποικίλοφρον’ (‘intricate-wiled’), but ποικιλόθρον’ is better attested and fits with the archaic depiction of Aphrodite as seated on a throne: see Delivorrias (1984), Hutchinson 2001: 151. Andromache at *Il.* 22.441 works θρόνα ποικίλα’ into her weaving, and θρόνα must mean flowers or other forms of decoration. Some scholars have therefore argued that ποικιλόθρον’ is derived from θρόνα not θρόνος, see Lawler 1948, Putnam 1960; also Kelly (this volume) p. YYY n. YYY.
attention to it, and ends the description of the goddess on a note that stresses her ambiguous nature and the dangers of trusting her.

The middle section of the hymn is an embellishment on the usual requirement that a petitioner list past deeds, since Sappho gives an extended description of Aphrodite’s visits to her in the past, beginning with a vignette of her departure from Olympus (5–12):

If ever in the past you heard my voice from afar and you heeded it and came, leaving your father’s golden house and yoking your chariot. Lovely swift sparrows drew you over the dark earth with their wings whirring quickly from heaven through the air.

The detail of the sparrow-drawn chariot adapts Aphrodite’s association with doves or geese, and elevates the birds into noble steeds (the adjective ‘swift’, ὤκεες, in 10 is normally used of heroic animals such as horses and eagles). The image of the little sparrows beating their wings fast to pull the chariot is amusing, as is the juxtaposition of the tiny birds with the vast
journey they make. Again, Sappho hints at her awareness of tradition, but signals that the portrait of the goddess is very much her own.

In the lines that follow, Sappho emphasises the close relationship with the goddess that she enjoys. Homeric gods often have favourite mortals, but the affection and familiarity with which Aphrodite speaks to Sappho is striking (13–20):

σῦ δ’, ὦ μάκαιρα,
μειδιαίσαστ’ ἄθανάτωι προσώπῳ
ήρε’ ὅτι δηήτε πέπονθα κόττι
δηήτε κάλημι
κόττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι
μαίνόλαι θύμοι· τίνα δηήτε πείθω
ἄψαν σ’ ἄγην ἐς σὰν φιλότατα; τίς σ’, ὦ
Ψάφ’, ἀδικήει;

Blessed one, with a smile on your immortal face you asked me what the matter was this time, why I was calling this time, what I wished to happen in my mad heart. ‘Who is it this time that I am to persuade to lead you back to her love? Who, Sappho, has wronged you?’

Sappho styles herself as Aphrodite’s favourite and protégée. The goddess not only manifests herself directly to her, but greets her affectionately by name and acts as a confidante. This presentation of Aphrodite differs from the typical portrayal of erōs in Greek lyric either as an overwhelming force (as, for example, in Sappho fr. 47), or as a god who subjugates the hapless speaker (e.g. Anacreon fr. 413 PMG). In fr. 1, Aphrodite is both anthropomorphised

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3 See Kelly (this volume) for epic interactions more generally.
and approachable, and her relationship with Sappho is surprisingly equal (though the
goddess’ power is still made clear). Aphrodite’s calm and supercilious manner also contrasts
with the idea that erōs is a disruptive force. In fact, Sappho appeals to the goddess’s power to
instil peace and asks her to ‘release me from harsh cares’ (χαλέπαν δὲ λύσον ἐκ μερίμναν,
25–6). Thus Aphrodite stands in opposition to the emotions she creates, as emphasised by her
teasing description of Sappho’s ‘mad heart’ (μαινόλαι θυμῶι, 18).

The repetition of ‘this time’ (δὴ τε, 15, 16) refers to the idea commonly found in
erotic poetry that being in love is an endlessly repeated experience, but also suggests the
ongoing relationship between god and mortal. While Aphrodite may tease Sappho for being
in love yet again, she nevertheless responds to the poet’s prayers each time. Whereas the
Homeric Aphrodite first deceives and then threatens her favourite, Helen (Il. 3.389–420), in
Sappho Aphrodite’s terrifying power is used to the poet’s advantage, as she promises to
inflict desire upon Sappho’s beloved against her will if needs be (24). This sense of alliance
between god and mortal is summarised in the final words of the poem, where Sappho calls
upon Aphrodite to be her ‘ally’ (σύμμαχος, 28). The relationship Sappho constructs with
Aphrodite is reminiscent of the exceptional closeness depicted, for example, in the Odyssey
between Athena and Odysseus. Here too we find a familiar and close relationship, where the
deity teases her favourite as well as promising her allegiance (13.287–310). Just as Athena
admires Odysseus because he represents her qualities of intelligence and cunning to an
exceptional degree, so too Sappho is the lover par excellence, who feels the emotions
represented by Aphrodite more frequently than others.

While fragment 1 is Sappho’s most extended description of Aphrodite, the goddess
features throughout her poetry. The frequency of her presence itself attests to the importance
she holds in Sappho’s worldview, and the smaller fragments reinforce the special relationship
apparent in fr. 1. For example, in fr. 22, we are told that Aphrodite has ‘found fault’ with
Sappho (ἐμέμφετ’) for a prayer she has made (perhaps lusting after a new beloved and forgetting the old one), a phrase which evokes the teasing familiarity of fr. 1. Other fragments report further conversations between Sappho and her patron: thus Aphrodite seems to name Sappho in fr. 65, while an ancient scholar tells us that fr. 159 (consisting only of the words ‘you and my servant Eros’, σύ τε κάμος θεράτων Ἐρως) were spoken by the goddess to Sappho. In fragment 133, a speaker (plausibly either poet or goddess) asks Sappho a question about her behaviour towards Aphrodite, though sadly the verb is missing that would supply the crucial ingredient, while fr. 134 reports a conversation that Aphrodite and the poet had in a dream. Fr. 86 seems to present a situation similar to fr. 1, as the poet calls upon Aphrodite to ‘hear my prayer’ (κλῦθί μ’ ἄρας, 5) and describes her leaving one of her haunts (6), presumably to visit Sappho. Aphrodite also seems to play a role in the saga of Sappho’s brother Charaxus, since she is probably invoked at the start of a poem dealing with his adventures (fr. 15). She is called ‘blessed one’ (μάκρα, 1), and is asked to watch over Charaxus’ return but to refuse assistance to his girlfriend Doricha. As the goddess of love, Aphrodite is invoked in the context of an unsuitable love-affair that will cause damage to Sappho’s family. Here too, she is presented as the poet’s ally, who will harm her enemies.

The latest papyrus discoveries have further expanded our knowledge of Sappho’s relationship with Aphrodite through the preservation of a new poem (‘the Cypris poem’) addressed to the goddess under her cult-title Cypris (‘Cyprian one’). The text and translation of this poem are disputed, and scholars have come to radically different interpretations of the opening, but I print here that of Dirk Obbink, the original editor of the papyrus:

\[\piδ̃ς \kappa \delta \tauις \omegaυ \thetaαμε̃ως ἄσαμτο,\]

[^4]: The details of this reconstruction are not certain, but this interpretation is widely accepted. For the text and translation, see Obbink 2016: 17, 28.
How can someone not be hurt and hurt again,

Cypris, Queen, whomsoever one really loves,
and not especially want respite from suffering?

What sort of thoughts do you have

to pierce me idly with shiverings
out of desire that loosens the knees […]

[…] not […]

[…] […]

[…] you, I wish […]

[…] to suffer this […]

[…]]. This

I know for myself.
If Obbink’s interpretation is correct, the situation is not dissimilar to that of fr. 1: Sappho is suffering from unrequited love and beseeches Aphrodite as a result of her suffering. However, Aphrodite is less friendly here and more menacing than in the other poem, as Sappho emphasises her power (and willingness) to hurt her. Conversely, Martin West interpreted the opening as a lament that Aphrodite no longer loves Sappho, translating the first lines as ‘How can a woman help being regularly heartsick, my Lady, if you do not love her’ – but here too, we find a less beneficent Aphrodite than elsewhere.\(^5\) In any case, the same presumption of a close relationship between mortal and goddess underlies the poem on either interpretation: Sappho can address Aphrodite in familiar terms, and can complain about her mistreatment. The idea that the favour of the gods is unreliable is also a theme of epic: we might think, for example, of Odysseus’ rebuke to Athena that she failed to protect him during his travels (\textit{Od.} 13.318–21) and his fear that she is mocking him (13.326–7), or the Iliadic Aphrodite’s threat to Helen that defiance will turn the goddess’s favour into hatred (\textit{Il.} 3.414–17). Equally, the poem’s tone may have become more optimistic as it continued, and Sappho’s fears that Aphrodite has abandoned her may turn out to be as unfounded as Odysseus’ accusations against Athena. To be a favourite of the love-goddess means to experience the pains as well as the delights that she brings, and in Sappho, as elsewhere in Greek lyric, her gifts are not straightforward.\(^6\)

**Prayer and gender**

Compared to the frequency with which Aphrodite appears, mentions of other gods are relatively few, and the discrepancy underscores the importance of Sappho’s relationship with

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\(^5\) A detailed discussion of the text and translation of this fragment is outside the scope of this article, but see Bierl 2016, Schlesier 2016.

\(^6\) For the ambiguity of Aphrodite’s gifts as a motif in epic see \textit{Il.} 3.64–6.
her patron. However, we do find prayers to other deities in Sappho’s poetry, and a full understanding of her theology requires us to venture beyond her erotic songs. We find some evidence of a preference for Hera, and for a difference in the way Sappho expects women and men to worship the gods.

Here too, recent papyrological discoveries have enhanced our understanding, since we now have additions to a poem long known to be a prayer to Hera (fr. 17), as well as a new poem in which the goddess is mentioned (the ‘Brothers Poem’: P. Sapph. Obbink 1–20). Fr. 17 describes a festival for Hera on contemporary Lesbos. The poet addresses the goddess as ‘revered Hera’ (πότνι Ἤρα, 2) and tells how the festival was established by Agamemnon and Menelaus, who vowed to found it in return for finding a route home from Troy (3–10). The festival is in honour of Hera, Zeus, and Dionysus, an unusual combination of gods also attested in Alcaeus (fr. 129) and referred to by scholars as the ‘Lesbian triad’ for this reason. In Sappho’s poem she emphasises the connection between the festival’s foundation myth and its practice in her own day, claiming that ‘we perform these things in accordance with ancient tradition’ (νῦν δὲ . . . ποίμεν / κἀτ τὸ πάλιν, 11–12). Sappho also refers to the active role that women play in this festival, whereby a ‘crowd of maidens and wives’ (ὁχλὸς | παρθένων . . . γυναῖκων, 13–14) are gathered to perform some sort of ritual activity. The details of what was involved are unclear, but the text probably preserves the start of the word ‘ololuge’ in line 16, a ritual cry performed by women, which may suggest female choral performance. It is striking that women of all generations are involved, including married women, who feature less frequently in ritual or choral occasions than young girls. The ritual seems to cross the boundaries between life-stages, involving the whole female community.

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7 Cf. Rösler (this volume).
Women’s rituals in honour of Hera are also attested in Alcaeus fr. 130, where the poet describes a sanctuary where the women of Lesbos participate in beauty competitions; a scholiast on *Iliad* 9.129 tells us that the sanctuary in question belonged to Hera. This also fits with an anonymous Hellenistic epigram (*AP* 9.189 = 1176–81 *FGE*) which invites Lesbian women to a dance led by Sappho at a sanctuary of Hera. It seems, then, that women played an active role in the worship of Hera on Lesbos, and that this is reflected in Sappho’s poetry, some of which (such as fr. 17) may well have been composed for performance at these festivities.\(^8\) Scholars have mostly agreed that all these references relate to the same sanctuary, and that this was a pan-Lesbian shrine at Messon (modern Mesa).\(^9\) Hera appears to have been the most prominent of the three deities worshipped there: in both Sappho fr. 17 and Alcaeus fr. 129 all three are mentioned, but it is she who is directly addressed. A festival for Hera seems also to be mentioned in fr. 9, though too little survives to give any certainty.

The sanctuary at Messon may be the shrine the poet has in mind when she imagines appealing to Hera at the start of the ‘Brothers Poem’ (5–20):

\[\text{άλλα τίρωμα Χάραξον ἔλθην} \] (5)

\[\text{ναὶ σῶν πλήθα. τὰ μὲν οἴρωμα Ζεὺς} \]

\[\text{oίδε σύμπαντες τε θέοι. σὲ δ’ οὐ χρή} \]

\[\text{ταῦτα νόησθαι,} \]

\[\text{άλλα καὶ πέμπην ἔμε καὶ κέλεσθαι} \]

\[\text{πόλλα λύσεσθαι βασιλῆμα Ἡραν} \] (10)

\[\text{ἐξίκεσθαι τοιόδε σάν αὐγοντα} \]

\[\text{νὰ Χάραξον} \]

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\(^9\) First argued by Robert 1960.
κάμμ’ ἐπείρην ἄρτημας. τὰ δ’ ἄλλα
πάντα δαιμόνεσιν ἐπιτρόπωμεν.
eὖδιαι γὰρ ἐκ μεγάλαν αῆταν (15)
αἰγα πέλονται.
tὸν κε βόλληται βασίλευς Ὀλύμπω
δαίμον’ ἐκ πόνων ἐπάρ {η} ὁ γὸν ἱδη
περτρόπην, κῆνοι μάκαρες πέλονται
καὶ πολύολβοι.

but you are always babbling about Charaxus coming with a full ship. It is Zeus and all the
other gods who know these things, I think. You ought not to be thinking like this, but you
should be sending me and instructing me to pray repeatedly to Queen Hera that Charaxus
should return here, bring his ship undamaged, and find us safe and sound. As for the rest, let
us leave it to the gods, for fair weather quickly arises from huge storms. Those whom the king
of Olympus wishes to have a divine helper to turn them from troubles, it is they who become
blessed and fortunate.

The poem distinguishes between Hera, who can be approached and influenced through
prayer, and the other gods, who appear inaccessible. Zeus and the other gods know of
Charaxus’ fate, but it is impossible for humans to share this knowledge. Zeus can choose to
make mortals prosper, but the poem gives no indication of what humans can do to win his
favour, and Sappho advises her addressee to give up trying to influence what is beyond
mortal power (see Stehle 2016: 278–9). Conversely, praying to Hera for Charaxus’ safety is
imagined as a positive and pragmatic course of action, and is contrasted with the empty
chatter offered by the addressee.

Hera is not usually responsible for seafaring, and so it is noteworthy that she is the
goddess uppermost in Sappho’s mind in this context. She is singled out from the mass of ‘all
the gods’, and appears to be more open to influence than her consort Zeus. The implication of Sappho’s advice is that if approached appropriately, Hera might intervene on the family’s behalf. This may reflect her prominence on Lesbos, but probably also relates to the role that women played in her worship there, in that she is the god with whom a young girl would naturally be sent to intercede. This gendered aspect of prayer reflects the gendered division within the poem more broadly, whereby the poet and her (probably female) interlocutor are powerless to act themselves and must depend on their male relatives to restore the family fortunes (see Kurke 2016). In the absence of suitable male protectors, however, a female deity is a suitable conduit for the women’s hopes and fears, and supplicating her is the closest step to public action the youthful Sappho can achieve.

This gendered approach to the gods is also reflected in fr. 44, a description of the wedding of Hector and Andromache. As would be customary in a Greek wedding, the public celebrations involved groups of men and women, and the poem ends with the prayers and choral songs performed to honour the couple (31–4):

> γύναικες δ’ ἐλέλυσθον ὅσαι προγενέστεραι,  
> πάντες δ’ ἄνδρες ἐπήρατον ἴσχον ὅρθιον  
> Πάον’ ὄνκαλέοντες ἐκάβολον, εὐλύραν,  
> ὄμνην δ’ Ἕκτορα κ’ Ἀνδρομάχαν θεοεικέλοις.

The older women cried out ‘Eleleu’, and all the men sent forth a lovely orthian melody, calling upon the Healer, the Far-shooter skilled in the lyre, and they praised the godlike Hector and Andromache.

Here men and women sing to the same god, but do so in distinct groups and fashions. The women’s cry of ‘eleleu’ refers to the oololuge (as in fr. 17 above) – the female equivalent to
the *paian*-cry that the men perform. Just as marriage itself symbolises the mixing of male and female in society, yet upholds the separation of man and wife into their proper spheres, so too do the religious songs that accompany it reflect how men and women must approach the gods in different ways, even when praying for the same ends.\(^{10}\)

**Religious narratives and cult**

Fr. 44, with its extended mythological content, leads us onto the question of how the gods feature in embedded religious narratives, as opposed to direct prayers. The fragmentary nature of Sappho’s work means that we cannot be sure whether a religious myth is told for its own sake or whether it is embedded in a paradigm to illustrate some other (and perhaps more personal) situation. However, examining which myths Sappho chooses and how she tells them can still be revealing.\(^ {11}\) Once again we see a preference in what survives for female-oriented narratives that contain female protagonists and often focus on sex, marriage, and family relationships, the primary focuses of women’s lives.

Given the importance of marriage to Sappho’s poetry, it is not surprising that several of her religious narratives touch on this theme. Thus, for example, fr. 141 describes the gods’ participation at a wedding (possibly that of Peleus and Thetis), where like mortal banqueters they pray for the good fortune of the bridegroom. This may come from a wedding song, in which case the good will of the gods and their beneficence towards the marriage would be a positive image for the contemporary bridegroom. Fr. 27, which is certainly a wedding song, expresses some kind of wish for divine favour (lines 10–11), and the fragment as we have it concludes with a theological moral: ‘there is no road to great Olympus for mortals’ (\(\delta\deltaο\zeta\)

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\(^{10}\) For the gendered nature of paeanic singing, see Rutherford 2001: 59, Ford 2006: 285.

\(^{11}\) See Scodel (this volume).
μ[έ]γαν εἰς Ὄλ[υμπον . . . ἀ]νήρ[π, 12–13]. To a modern audience this may seem a surprising message to give at a wedding, though we find a similar idea in Alcman’s first partheneion, where the chorus of girls advise their audience ‘let no man fly to heaven or try to marry queen Aphrodite’ (fr. 1.16–18 PMGF). On an occasion such as a wedding, where humans were at the peak of their physical desirability and their blessedness, it was appropriate to sound a note of caution, and to remind the audience that even the most exalted and godlike couple were only frail mortals.¹² Sappho expresses a similar idea in the last surviving lines of fr. 96, where she warns that ‘it is not easy for us to rival goddesses in the beauty of their figures’ (ἐ δμαρ[ε]ς μ[έ]ν οὐκ ἄμμι θέασι μόρφαν ἔπη[ρε]ν ἔξισωσθαι, 20–2). If this is the same poem as the earlier part of the fragment, this warning perhaps acts as a corrective to the praise of the woman’s beauty in what has come before.¹³

Female sexuality is explored through a different religious myth in fr. 44a, where the poet recounts how Artemis vowed to remain a virgin and persuaded her father Zeus to agree. The story is reminiscent of the opening of the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, which explains Aphrodite’s dominion over everything on earth except three goddesses: Athena, Artemis, and Hestia. In the Hymn, it is Hestia who swears an oath to remain a virgin and has her status ratified by Zeus (26–31), though Artemis’ preference for the wild places of the earth is also mentioned (18–20). Sappho’s poem depicts a more assertive Artemis, who swears the oath apparently on her own initiative. Nevertheless, Zeus’ permission is required for this oath to be fulfilled, and her speech ends with a plea that he should ‘assent for my sake’ (τἀ]δὲ 

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¹² A parallel is found in epinician poetry, another genre which aims to praise its recipient, and which therefore counters the praise with reminders of mortality to avoid it becoming dangerously excessive: cf. Pind. Ol. 1.30–4, Pyth. 3.80–3, 7.14–18, 10.19–29, Isth. 3.1–6, 17–28, 4.33–7, 5.13–16, 8.14–16; Bacch. 3.74–82, 5.50–5, 9.88–92, 10.45–7, 14.1–6. For the tradition of praise in wedding poetry, see Hague 1983.

¹³ For the importance of distinguishing between mortal and immortal beauty, cf. Od. 5.215–18.
Thus her behaviour reminds Sappho’s audience of the social hierarchy, whereby young girls are subject to male authority. Artemis’ desire for perpetual virginity reflects a theme we find elsewhere in Sappho’s poetry of sadness at the ending of girlhood (see frs. 107, 114), yet we are also reminded that this is a necessary part of the lifecycle, and that it is only Artemis’ special status that allows her to avoid it. Thus by choosing the myth of how Artemis assumed her role as the virgin huntress, Sappho raises issues relevant to the women whose lives she sings of elsewhere.

Later authors preserve descriptions of other poems that contained a religious myth. Thus Aulus Gellius refers to Sappho’s version of the story of Niobe (fr. 205), where she apparently put the number of Niobe’s children as nine of each sex, rather than the six of each found in Homer. This poem may be connected with fr. 142, which describes the friendship between Leto and Niobe, and is usually thought to have been a personal poem that used the myth to reflect upon one of Sappho’s own friendships. The detail that Leto and Niobe were friends adds poignancy to the myth, as this friendship turns sour and leads to terrible consequences. Niobe’s friendship with the gods, and her acceptance on equal terms by Leto may also be part of the moral, as it leads Niobe to overstep the mark (thus Gantz 1993 537). Sappho is also said to have told the story of Pandora (fr. 207), and to have concurred with Hesiod’s version where the creation of women is a punishment for Prometheus’ theft of fire. Given the prominence Sappho’s world-view gives to women’s lives and concerns, it would be fascinating to know how her perspective differs from the misogynistic account of Hesiod.14

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While we can only guess at the performance context of most of Sappho’s poetry, some of her religious fragments show signs of having been composed for cultic performance. Fr. 2, a description of an idealised sanctuary of Aphrodite, is probably a song to be performed at a real shrine. If the opening of the poem has been correctly restored, the goddess is summoned ‘here to this temple’ (δεόρυ ... ἐπὶ τὸν ναὸν, 1), which makes the ritual and physical context clear. Here the setting is idealised, and what Sappho describes as features of the sanctuary are in fact poetic constructs, imbued with symbolism. Thus the shrine at which the poem was performed may or may not in fact have had apple trees, rose bushes, and cool springs, but in poetic terms an idealised sanctuary of the love-goddess must have these features, as they are associated with eros and turn the sanctuary into the perfect ‘meadow of love’, where erotic activity can occur. Aphrodite is imagined as participating in festivity with the singer (or singers), and acts as a cup-bearer, a role that she seems also to adopt at the end of fr. 96. The goddess is imagined as present at whatever ritual activity has prompted the song, and the description of her shrine praises the goddess and also reminds the listeners of the powers she holds.

In fr. 140a Sappho goes beyond simply narrating a religious story, and instead represents it as a dialogue between performers:

– κατθάσκει, Κυθέρη’ ἄβρος Ἀδωνίς· τί κε θέμεν;
– καττύπτεσθε, κόραι, καὶ κατερείκεσθε κίθωνας.
– Delicate Adonis is dying, Cytherea, what shall we do?

15 See Ferrari (this volume).
The singers are presumably a chorus of maidens and a soloist representing Aphrodite (here addressed by her cult title Cytherea), and the occasion they imagine is the death of Adonis, the lover of Aphrodite. Elsewhere in the Greek world this myth is associated with a women’s festival, the Adonia, which in classical Athens involved ritual lamentation and dancing. It is tempting to take this fragment as a cultic performance as part of the Adonia, where the women re-enacted the story of Adonis as they mourned his death. The laments they sing are presented as the original ones mandated by Aphrodite, sorrowful at the death of her lover, and the group take on a mimetic persona which links the current rites to their aetiology. Sappho also treats the theme of a goddess’ sexual relationship with a mortal man in the Tithonus poem (fr. 58), where Tithonus’ inability to escape old age is contrasted with the immortality of his wife Eos. Here Tithonus is not evoked in a ritual context but as an exemplum to illustrate the impossibility of avoiding old age, just as Sappho contrasts herself to a group of young girls. The relationship between god and mortal in both examples highlights human vulnerability, since both mortals come to disaster despite the best efforts of their partner. In both cases, there is also a contrast between female sexual power and male weakness: a combination that leads to sad consequences.

Conclusion

Sappho, like all other Greek early poets, does not have a single model for how to think about the gods, and her poetry demonstrates the range of ways in which poetry could engage with

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18 For literary discussion of this fragment, see the essays in Greene and Skinner 2009; also Scodel (this volume) p. YYY.
the divine. However, some central strands run through her surviving work. First, in matters
divine, as in other aspects of her poetry, Sappho shows particular interest in the the world of
erotic love. This is clear above all in her dedication to Aphrodite, who is presented as patron
and confidante, and whose cult worship Sappho also appears to be involved with. Sappho’s
personal relationship with Aphrodite is unlike anything we find elsewhere in Greek lyric: she
styles herself as the goddess’ protegée and favourite, and depicts affectionate conversations
between them. While the boundary between goddess and mortal is made clear and Sappho
maintains suitable respect for the deity, Aphrodite’s fondness for the poet, and the teasing
way she addresses her, create a feeling of intimacy. An examination of the fragments shows
that this closeness is not confined to fr. 1, its most famous example, but rather seems to have
been a trope of Sappho’s work. By presenting herself as Aphrodite’s favourite, Sappho marks
herself out as the supreme example of the lover: she has special access to Aphrodite’s
favours, yet feels the goddess’s pains acutely. Sappho’s imaginative portrayal of her
relationship with Aphrodite showcases her ability to recast traditional motifs to suit her own
purposes.

When we look beyond Aphrodite, we see a clear interest in how religion affects
women’s lives. Just as Sappho puts a female-oriented spin on traditional stories such as the
abduction of Helen (fr. 16), so too in religious matters, women’s preoccupations take centre
stage. Women’s role in prayer and their role in the cult of Hera seem to be important strands,
and prayer is one way in which Sappho reflects gender differences in her world. The religious
myths she chooses are ones that reflect her own concerns, in particular marriage, virginity,
and female friendships. Thus in matters of religion, as elsewhere, Sappho gives us a
tantalising insight into women’s lives in archaic Lesbos.

FURTHER READING
The hymnic elements in Sappho’s prayer to Aphrodite in fr. 1 have been much discussed, and the bibliography on this poem is large. For the conventions of Greek hymns, see Pulley 1997; Furley and Bremer 2001. On fr. 1’s relationship to cultic hymns, see Cameron 1939, Stanley 1976, Thomas 1999. On Sappho’s relationship with Aphrodite more generally, see Martyn 1990, Schlesier 2016. The recent papyrus finds have led to increased interest in the role of Hera in Sappho’s poetry: see for example Boedeker 2016, Kurke 2016.

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