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Sappho – A Great Poetess of Ancient Greece

Jie Gu^{*,Δ}, Jing Qin^{†,Δ}

BACKGROUND Sappho is an Ancient Greek poetess, whose poetry is well known in western literature and greatly impacts the development of Greek poetry. In the ancient world she was considered to be an equal footing with Homer, acclaimed as the “tenth muse”.

OBJECTIVE This work focuses on the characters of Sappho and her poetry and her impact on Greek literature as well as western culture. The purpose of the study is to help further understand the great poet and better enjoy her works, thus forming a brighter image of Sappho.

METHOD Based on the studies and books of some scholars like Margaret Williamson and Bliss Carman, this paper attempts to adopt a descriptive-analytical method to summarize and analyze Sappho’s identity and her poems, so as to provide a brighter image of this great poet.

CONCLUSION Among the Greek literature stands the great figure-Sappho. There is an inescapable fact that Sappho may have been the greatest poet who ever lived. In antiquity, Sappho was commonly regarded as the greatest, or one of the greatest, of lyric poets. Today, Sappho has set a standard for poetry that has never been exceeded. The work of Sappho has been widely admired and imitated. ■

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THE poetess Sappho lived in the sixth century B.C. on the island of Lesbos, situated in the north-eastern Aegean. Known to have been born in a family of wealthy merchants in prosperous Lesbos in the sixth century B.C., Sappho was an innovator. At the time when poetry was principally used in ceremonial contexts and to praise the deeds of brave soldiers, Sappho had the audacity to use the first person in poetry and to discuss deep human emotions, particularly the erotic, in

ways that had never been approached by anyone before her. In the ancient world she was considered to be on an equal footing with Homer, acclaimed as the ‘tenth muse’. Much of her work only exists in fragments, however, because the later Christian Church (with its authorities in both Constantinople and Rome) ordered her ‘lesbian’ love poetry to be burnt. Her poetry was collected three hundred years after her death at Alexandria in nine books.

For about two thousand five hundred years Sappho has held her place as not only the supreme poet of her sex, but also the chief lyrist of all lyrists. Everyone who reads acknowledges her fame, concedes her supremacy; but to all except poets and Hellenists her name is a vague and uncomprehended splendor, rising secure above a persistent mist of misconception (1). However, when it comes to the name “Sappho”, many people will tend to associate her with a variety of pioneering concepts,

many of which still seem to be controversial. However, there is no denying the fact that no one can take the place of her status on the Greek literature and western culture.

How could a woman have access to the public medium of song? What was the place of female sexuality in the public and religious symbolism of Greek culture? What is the sexual meaning of her poems? It seems that everyone is eager to get a clear picture of a woman whose place in the history of western culture has been at once assured and mysterious. Through the poetry she wrote, the culture she inhabited, and the myths that have risen around her, perhaps we can know something about the mysterious poetess and her unprecedented impact on western literature. Based on the materials, summary and analysis, this thesis aims to help further understand the great poet and better enjoy her works, thus forming a brighter image of Sappho.

A brief account of Sappho's lifetime and styles of her poetry

One of the great Greek lyricists and few known female poets of the ancient world, Sappho was born some time between 630 and 612 BC. She was an aristocrat who married a prosperous merchant, and she had a daughter named Cleis. Her wealth afforded her with the opportunity to live her life as she chose, and she chose to spend it studying the arts on the isle of Lesbos. Strabo says that Sappho was the contemporary of Alcaeus of Mytilene (born ca. 620 BC) and Pittacus (ca. 645 - 570 BC) and according to Athenaeus she was the contemporary of Alyattes of Lydia



(ca. 610 - 560 BC). The Suda, a 10th century Byzantine encyclopedia, dates her to the 42nd Olympiad (612/608 BC), meaning either that she was born then or that this was her floruit. The versions of Eusebius state that she was famous by the first or second year of the 45th or 46th Olympiad (between 600 and 594 BC). Taken together, these references make it likely that she was born ca. 620 BC, or a little earlier. Judging from the Parian Marble she was exiled from Lesbos to Sicily sometime between 604 and 594 BC.

She had a daughter named Cleis and two brothers. The fragmentary remains of Sappho's poems indicate that she taught her art to a group of maidens, to whom she was devotedly attached. Later writers of antiquity, commenting upon the group, accused Sappho of immorality and vice, from which arose the modern terms for female homosexuality, "lesbianism" and "sapphism". Sappho wrote nine books of odes, epithalamia or wedding songs, elegies, and hymns, but the extant fragments are few. They

include the Ode to Aphrodite, quoted by the scholar Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the 1st century B.C. (2).

Sappho's family was politically active, which caused Sappho to travel a great deal. She was also noted during her life as the headmistress of a sort of Greek finishing school for girls. Most likely the objects of her poetry were her students.

According to one legend, Sappho committed suicide. She was apparently in love with Phaon, a young boatman, and jumped to her death when her love was rejected. The year of her death is not known.

Though a lot of Sappho's history and story is unknown, we can still get a basic understanding of her impact not only from the history of Greece, but also from various literatures and her works.

On one hand, having a good look at history, the Greeks accepted the reality of homosexuality and dealt with it in those terms. They did not promote homosexuality, but it may seem that way in the context of Christian morality which condemns it. They did feel that men should wait to be married and they felt that homosexuality may have helped with this process. Greek men first married at about 30 years of age. At that time, there is no doubt that Sappho is a special one. As far as I'm concerned, we cannot simply clarify her as the lesbian, her affection toward women is not out of flesh or body but the pursuit of soul. The only thing she wants to do is to bring the so-called "civilization" to more women, cultivating their mind. Thus, the lyrics became her spiritual sustenance where she reposed her trust in.

On the other hand, what can we see from her works is that she may have been the head of a girl's school and some of the poems may have been written as songs for the girls to sing at weddings and festivals. It is also possible that she was the leader of a poetry circle. Only a small amount of Sappho's poetry remains, most of which very fragmentary. Of her Algernon Charles Swinburne said: "Judging even from the mutilated fragments fallen within our reach from the broken altar of her sacrifice of song, I for one have always agreed with all Grecian tradition in thinking Sappho to be beyond all question and comparison the very greatest poet that ever lived." (3) Sappho was called a lyrist because, as was the custom of the time, she wrote her poems to be performed with the accompaniment of a lyre. Sappho composed her own music and refined the prevailing lyric meter to a point that it is now known as *sapphic meter* (4). She innovated lyric poetry both in technique and style, becoming part of a new wave of Greek lyrists who moved from writing poetry from the point of view of gods and muses to the personal vantage point of the individual. She was one of the first poets to write from the first person, describing love and loss as it affected her personally.

Her style was sensual and melodic; primarily songs of love, yearning, and reflection. Most commonly the target of her affections was female, often one of the many women sent to her for education in the arts. She wrote poems of love and adoration to women, and when they eventually left the island to be married, she composed their wedding songs. Especially in the last century, Sappho has become so synonymous with woman-love that two of the most

popular words to describe female homosexuality – *lesbian* and *sapphic* have derived from her (4).

Estimation of her from other poets and her impact on western literature

How well was Sappho honored in ancient times? Plato elevated her from the status of great lyric poet to one of the muses. Upon hearing one of her songs, Solon, an Athenian ruler, lawyer, and a poet himself, asked that he be taught the song "Because I want to learn it and die." (4) In more modern times, many poets have been inspired by her works. Michael Field, Pierre Louys, René Vivien, Marie-Madeleine, Amy Lowell, and H.D. all cited Sappho as a strong influence on their work.

Many translations of these fragments are available today, with each of these translations offering a different approach to her work. Translating Sappho's poetry is challenging, partly because of the fragmented nature of the material. In reconstructing a poem, the translator must either trail off into oblivion periodically, or speculate on the missing pieces and take the risk (for the sake of lyric flow) of introducing elements that Sappho did not intend. Breaks in the poem can affect the intact lines, as well, robbing them of critical context (4). Even with the complication of fragments aside, a translator still has to decide how to translate the ancient Greek text, where to insert line breaks, how to stress each word, and any number of technical details that affect the meaning and the lyricism of the poem.

From ancient times to today, Sappho has remained an important literary and cultural figure. Her works continued to be studied and translated, new poets are inspired by her constantly, and speculation on her

life remains popular. For a woman who has been dead for over two thousand years, this is quite an achievement.

Sappho really had a heart out of ordinary. It is common accepted that all of her works are considered to be great valuable today. Sappho used a classic meter, the "Sapphic Meter", in many of her poems, although she probably did not invent the meter herself. It is built on the following template:

- u - - u u - u - -
 - u - - u u - u - -
 - u - - u u - u - -
 - u u - u - -
*panchu eumares suneton po éai
 panti tou't , a gar polu perskethoisa
 kallos anthr ép án Elena ton andra
 ton panariston*

The Sapphic meter was one of the most popular meters in ancient Greek, Roman and older English poetry (16th to 19th century) (4). Her work was admired in antiquity for its euphony, and she was credited with musical invention. From the time of the European Renaissance, the interest in Sappho's writing has grown, seeing waves of fairly widespread popularity as new generations rediscover her work. Since few people are able to understand ancient languages, each age has translated Sappho in its own idiomatic way (4). As a result, many early translators used rhyme and worked Sappho's ideas into English poetic forms.

As a poetess in Greece at that time, Sappho was considered one founder of the Aeolian tradition of lyric poetry on Lesbos, Sappho wrote emotionally tender, introspective, first-person poems about the events and people in her life. Some say her work represents a "subjective revolution" in classical literature. She could be considered the first, prototypical romantic, 2400 years before the Romantic poets of the 19th century (5). Today, she is held as one of the finest poets ever in the rank of Shakespeare and Homer. She is still alive in the hearts of all true lovers of poetry.

During the ancient days, her admirers were countless. She was always mentioned as the Poetess (Homer was called the Poet). Her poetry was so renowned that Plato referred to her two centuries after her death as the tenth muse from the status of great lyric poet. An epigram in the Anthologia Palatina (9.506) ascribed to Plato states:

Some say the Muses are nine: how careless!

Look, there's Sappho too, from Lesbos, the tenth.

The philosopher Maximus from Tyrus (second half of 2nd c. AD), writes that Sappho was "small and dark" and that her relationships to her female friends were similar to those of Socrates:

What else was the love of the Lesbian woman except Socrates' art of love? For they seem to me to have practiced love each in their own way, she that of women, he that of men. For they say that both loved many and were captivated by all things beautiful. What Alcibiades and Charmides and Phaedrus were to him, Gyrinna and Atthis and Anactoria were to the Lesbian.

Aelianus Claudius wrote in Assorted History (Ποικίλη ιστορία) that Plato called Sappho wise.

The Greek poet Odysseas Elytis (20th century AD from Lesbos) admired her in one of his Mikra Epsilon:

Such a being, both sensitive and courageous, is not often presented by life. A small-built deep-dark-skinned girl, that did prove to be equally capable of subjugating a rose-flower, interpreting a wave or a nightingale, and saying 'I love you', to fill the globe with emotion.

Mr. J. Addington Symonds says: "The world has suffered no greater literary loss than the loss of Sappho's poems. So perfect are the smallest fragments preserved... that we muse in a sad rapture of astonishment to think what the complete poems must have been... Of all the poets of the world, of all the illustrious artists of all literatures, Sappho is the one whose every word has a peculiar and

unmistakable perfume, a seal of absolute perfection and illimitable grace." (5) No one who wishes to understand Sappho can afford to neglect a study of the poem thus annotated by its author. As Professor F. T. Palgrave justly says, 'Sappho is truly pictorial in the ancient sense: the image always simply presented; the sentiment left to our sensibility.' Actually, her remaining verses are the supreme success as well as the final achievement of the poetic art.

Sappho's identity and impact on modern life

As a poetess enjoying the equal popularity with Homer, it is the identity of her own that made her stand head and shoulders above others. First of all, for over 1,500 years, Sappho's poems were a part of the Greek and Roman literary canon along with Homer, Euripides and the other famous writers of the past. The nine volumes of poems were read by all students and admired for their beauty and emotional strength. A person who had not read Sappho was considered a cultural ignorant.

In the second place, in Ancient history, sexuality wasn't regarded as negatively as it is now. Humans were naturally sexual beings. In ancient Greece, the poems of Sappho were universally admired, so much so that she was called "the poetess" (as Homer was "the poet") (6), and Plato suggested she should be honored as one of the Muses, more than human, a goddess of poetry. Her name and the name of her native island have come to carry the meaning of female homosexuality.

Thirdly, the story of Sappho demonstrates love's universal appeal in prehistoric civilization. It is said that Sappho led a group of women on the island and taught them how to love before marriage. What's more, Sappho started her own school for girls. She embraced girlhood and being young. Sappho focused on passion and love for all, and she demonstrated love between all sexes and people being life's main goal. In a

word, Sappho introduced a new type of lifestyle.

Last but not the least, Sappho's brilliant picture of the girl outshining the ladies of Lydia is interlocked with the image of sunset and the moon rising. But there is a change of focus which immediately surprises. Homer, the ultimate backdrop for everything the coming ages, had spoken dozens of times of the "rosy-fingered Dawn", virtually as a cliché or formula of his bardic tradition. But now Sappho changes the phrase to "the rosy fingered Moon...", a surprising alteration and one which notes the difference between the two human worlds. One is the world of men with swords and fleets of ships over the Homeric "black earth", the other is the world of women and Lovers and what the heart desires (7).

In the eternal universe, every human being has a one-off chance to live-his existence is unique and irretrievable, for the mold with which he was made, as Rousseau said, was broken by God immediately afterwards. Fame, wealth and knowledge are merely worldly possessions that are within the reach of anybody striving for them. Perhaps a full awareness of this made Sappho unswervingly throw herself into the sea. She lived her own life, which is not easy at that time. There is no doubt that this is one of the legacies she left for us in addition to her works, the modern society, which is well worth thinking about. It is not easy to be what one really is. There is many a person in the world who can be identified as anything – either his job, his status or his social role – that shows no trace about his individuality. It does do him justice to say that he has no identity of his own, if he doesn't know his own mind and all his things are arranged by others or decided by the mainstream. In this aspect Sappho does set an example for us.

Conclusion

All in all, to suggest that all of western literature is no more than a footnote to the writings of ancient Greece

is an exaggeration, but it is nevertheless true that the Greek world of thought was so far-ranging that there is scarcely an idea discussed today not already debated by the ancient writers. Among the Greek literature stands the great figure – Sappho. There is an inescapable fact that Sappho may have been the greatest poet who ever lived. In antiquity, Sappho was commonly regarded as the greatest, or one of the greatest, of lyric poets. Today, Sappho has set a standard for poetry that has never been exceeded. The work of Sappho has been widely admired and imitated.

She was not a goddess. She was an historical mortal woman. But she is like a goddess because of her fame and accomplishments. In fact, we are powerless to rebuild the image of the great lyric poetess. Sappho is like a blank space. We may try to listen to

her inner voice, to study the works of her and refine the sense of beauty, to know more about her impact on human civilization, hoping to have as much soul as her, to be and to do all this, we find that all we have done is just try to fill the blank with what we want to do. Sappho, the figure itself and her works may be neglected in modern times, but her pursuit of ideal life, endless exploration of forms of art and the values of truth and civilization will be everlasting, encouraging us to seek a future lighted with the radiant colors of hope. ■

Author Contributions

The paper is written by Jie Gu and Jing Qin. Jing Qin is the co-author who offers very earnest help in the work.

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