

## Archaic Lyric Voices

### An Introduction to Three Greek Lyric Poets: Alcman, Alcaeus, and Sappho

The aim of this short article is to provide an introduction to three lyric poets of the archaic period, Alcman, Alcaeus, and Sappho. We will examine each poet and examples of his or her poetry individually, while at the same time exploring some overarching themes. I will throughout consider how and to what extent the poetry of these authors is different from the well known epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and whether there is any continuity. I will also look at the performance context, mode, and tone of the poetry to give a sense of what is individual and unique about the poetry of Alcman, Alcaeus, and Sappho.

Let me begin by situating these three poets chronologically in the tradition of Greek poetry and geographically in the ancient Greek world. The dates of literary activity I am about to mention are approximate, as our knowledge of the lives of these poets is in most cases quite scanty, but they will at least give you a sense of when these poets were working. The locations are more certain, and, as we will see, very important for the understanding of the lyric poetry. Now, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* attributed in antiquity to the blind bard Homer, although derived from a long oral tradition, were put into a form close to that which we have today between the end of the 8th and middle of the first half of the 7th century B.C.E., most probably in Ionia. Hesiod is generally considered to have composed his *Theogony* and *Works and Days* sometime in the first half of the 7th century, and is known to have worked in Boeotia, in mainland Greece. As for the lyric poets we will look at below: the dates of Alcman's literary production are generally

considered to be between 650 and 600 B.C.E., and although the birthplace of Alcman is uncertain, he was active as a poet in Sparta (Alcman was considered in antiquity to have been a slave originally, perhaps of Lydian descent, but there is not enough evidence to prove this ancient assertion). Alcaeus and Sappho, on the other hand, were contemporary poets both active on the island of Lesbos between 620 and 580 B.C.E.

The poetry of the archaic period is geographically diverse and, although we will go on to see that there are literary qualities common to all lyric poetry, one must always keep this geographical diversity in mind when reading the lyric poets. In fact, in contrast to the Homeric poems and the poetry of Hesiod, we will see that the poetic voices of the lyric poets are far more personal and local; what we know about the lives of these poets comes mostly from references in their own poetry. The epic poetry of Homer and the didactic or theogonic poetry of Hesiod are very much panhellenic, and the individual voice of the poet or narrator very rarely interrupts the narrative; in reading Homer, one notices immediately that there is a lot of direct speech by the characters, and actually more than 50% of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is presented in direct speech, meaning that the narrative is told more directly through the eyes of the characters. One hears very little of the personal thoughts of the Homeric narrator, and certainly nothing about his personal situation. When, however, we come to look at archaic lyric poetry, the switch to a far more personal and subjective voice is immediately clear. This is well demonstrated by two poems that on the surface deal with a similar theme; these are the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, and the appeal to Aphrodite by Sappho (fragment 1), both of which have call upon the goddess of love Aphrodite. The narrator of the *Homeric Hymn*, following the epic tradition of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, invokes the Muse to tell him of the deeds of

Aphrodite, after which the poem quickly moves to an impersonal account of the powers and concerns of the goddess:

‘Speak to me, Muse, of golden Aphrodite’s works,  
The Cyprian’s – she who sends sweet desire on the gods, and subdues  
The tribes of mortal men, the birds that fly through the air,  
And all the many wild beasts that are nurtured by land and sea:  
The works of Kythera’s fair-crowned goddess concern all these.’ (trans. M. Crudden)

Only at the end of the poem does the poet briefly address Aphrodite directly. In comparison, the hymn to Aphrodite offered by Sappho begins with a personal voice and maintains this throughout:

‘Richly-enthroned immortal Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus,  
weaver of wiles, I pray to you: break not my spirit, Lady,  
with heartache or anguish;  
But hither come, if ever in the past you heard my cry from  
afar, and marked it, and came, leaving your father’s  
house.’ (trans. D. Page)

Here we see not only that Sappho is invoking Aphrodite to come to her, but she also reveals her own sorrow and lamentation in matters of love; in this case, she is in love

with another woman, who does not return her love. This theme of the personal voice is an important quality of much of Greek lyric poetry, and I will come back to this below.

Before turning again to Sappho, I would like first to look a bit more closely at the nature and character of the poetry of Alcman, who was, as mentioned above, a poet working in Sparta in the latter half of the seventh century. He is reported by later sources to have written six books of poetry, but very little of this has survived to us today - he is said by some to have been the inventor of love-poetry. He is also known to have composed hymns and wedding songs, but he is most well known for his choral odes, poems which were performed by choruses of young Spartan men and women, who sang and danced. His most famous piece is the Partheneion or 'choral song for a chorus of young women' preserved in a piece of papyrus in the Louvre in Paris. This poem is fragmentary, but the text seems to involve a chorus of ten girls, led by two beautiful women Hagesichora and Agido, which is competing with another chorus. The first section of the poem deals with a mythological theme, the Spartan king Hippocoon, who was killed by Heracles in a quarrel, while the latter part of the poem seems to describe the choral competition.

One striking feature of the poem is the evocation of the actual ritual performance of the poem; Alcman speaks through the voice of an inexperienced young chorus girl. Despite a nod to the mythological at the beginning of the poem, the story of Hippocoon just mentioned, it is the context of performance (or at least that represented by the poem) that perhaps most characterizes the piece. Although no music has survived, we know that this choral ode would have been accompanied by music. Such scenes of choral dancing

are described even in Homer, and are well attested in Greek vase painting. One should note that this choral performance at a festival is in stark contrast to the mode of performance of the Homeric poems. The Homeric poems were performed by professional rhapsodes, who travelled around Greece to recite sections of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (along with narrative hexameter hymns such as the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* cited above) in competition at various festivals and celebrations.

It is also important, even if reading Greek lyric poetry in translation, to be aware of the fact that Homeric epic and lyric poetry were composed and performed in very different poetic metres. The Homeric poems were composed in hexameter verse, each line consisting in its basic form of six repetitions of the pattern long-short-short. The lyric poets composed in a much greater variety of metrical forms, only occasionally using the same hexameter structure found in Homer.

This is only the briefest of looks at Alcman, but let us nonetheless now move on and turn to the poetry of Alcaeus and Sappho, two lyric poets active on the island of Lesbos. Unlike Alcman, Sappho and Alcaeus were not composing poetry for performance by choruses, but rather composed monody, songs meant to be sung by an individual to the accompaniment of the lyre, or on some occasions perhaps just spoken. Sappho is supposed to have written thousands of verses of poetry, divided into nine books by later scholars, but very little of this has survived to us today. Her poems that we do have concern her own personal life, her loves and her hatreds, and one must imagine that much of this poetry was first performed for a small group of her friends, although it eventually gained a wide audience in Greece. Her poetic voice is immediate and direct, as

she speaks of her unrequited or ill-fated love affairs with other women on Lesbos, and we once again see the personal voice that is typical of the lyric poets that we're looking at.

One poem written to a friend is an excellent example of this:

‘Honestly, I wish I were dead. Weeping she left me

With so many tears, and said “Oh what unhappiness is ours;

Sappho, I vow, against my will I leave you”.

And this answer I made to her: “Go, and fare well, and remember

me; you know how we cared for you.” (trans. D. Page)

The beginning of the poem is jarring in its wish for death in the face of lost love, an image that is then juxtaposed with the luxuriant past of the relationship itself. Hers is a voice that is unique because it is one of only a few female voices of ancient Greek poetry, but her verse does share much in common with other lyric poetry. One sees the theme of nature in her imagery, similar to that found in Alcman and other lyric poets; she compares a virgin to an apple out of reach on a topmost branch in one poem. Elsewhere, she is concerned with the passage of time and old age, another common theme in archaic lyric poetry. Apart from the evidence in her poems, we know little about her personal life. It seems probable that her family was in some way involved in politics, as she mentions in one of her poems that she was for a time in exile, but her poetry does not show any concern with politics, in which she would no doubt have had very little involvement.

Politics were, however, a major concern of Alcaeus in his poetry, which is full of political invective that is passionate and emotionally involved. Alcaeus must have been a

member of a noble family in Lesbos, which competed for power on the island at the end of the 7th and beginning of the 6th centuries B.C.E. He was involved in the Sigeum war against Athens around 600 B.C.E. and often speaks strongly against Pittacus, the ruler of Mytilene between 590 and 580 B.C.E., with whom Alcaeus was at one point himself allied. At times he can be remarkably direct in his attack. At other times, he appears to have been more poetic in his approach to the political situation, comparing the state to a storm-tossed ship at sea. He is not only political, and is also known to have written hymns, love poetry, and drinking songs, all of which were, like Sappho's poetry, intended at first for a very personal audience, at drinking parties with his friends.

In both Sappho and Alcaeus then, like many other Greek lyric poets, we see a concern with personal and immediate themes that is in contrast to what one finds in the hexameter poetry of Homer and Hesiod. One must not, however, think that these lyric poets have made a complete departure from Homer and Hesiod and the mythological material that is treated there. In fact, Alcaeus and Sappho, for example, did compose several poems on Homeric themes. Alcaeus discussed Helen, the famous woman at the centre of the Trojan war, and Achilles, the great Homeric warrior. Sappho also treated Homeric themes, and, in one of the more complete fragments of her poetry that has survived to us today, she narrates the marriage of the Trojans Hector and Andromache.

Sappho and Alcaeus are undoubtedly as poets very much aware of the Homeric tradition, and through their treating of these Homeric themes one can see that their work does not represent a complete departure from epic poetry. The two poets even use elements of Homeric vocabulary and metre in treating Homeric mythology. But even here, the perspective of these poets in treating these Homeric themes is in many ways

individualistic and un-Homeric. Sappho's description of the union of Hector and Andromache includes a detailed description of the trappings of the marriage: myrrh, frankincense, and exotic female chariots, all un-Homeric, make an appearance. More strikingly, Alcaeus, in writing of Helen, uses his poetic voice to condemn her as a bringer of disaster through her unfaithfulness to her husband; this type of moral or ethical judgement has little place in Homer, where Helen is a tantalizingly ambiguous character, aware of her betrayal of her husband but sympathetic to the Trojans. Sappho and Alcaeus are treating Homeric themes, but they are doing so with very different voices.

Let me then now revisit in summary what we have looked at in this brief introduction to three Greek lyric poets. We have seen on the one hand that there are many departures from the epic, theogonic, and didactic poetry of Homer and Hesiod in the poetry of Alcman, Alcaeus, and Sappho: perhaps most strikingly their poetry consistently contains a far more personal, and in many cases subjective voice than one finds in Homeric epic. Their poetry is situated in their every day lives, their love affairs, their drinking parties, and is a record not only of the society that surrounds them but their own individual emotions; it always strikes me as remarkable that such personal feelings have been transmitted across almost 3000 years. Their poetry is also different from Homer in style and mode: it was written in different metrical forms from those of Homer and Hesiod, and was performed in different contexts, by choruses, or individually at small gatherings of friends and drinking companions. On the other hand, these poets do not represent a complete departure from Homeric poetry and mythological themes, with which they interact. All three of them at times treat mythological themes and characters,



such as Hippocoon, Helen, or Hector and Andromache; but they do so in unique and individual ways, an example of innovation in tradition. We have also looked at the performance context of this poetry and seen that it was delivered and heard in a variety of settings and forms. Alcman composed choral poems, for performance by choruses of women and men. Sappho and Alcaeus on the other hand composed poems for performance in very individual settings, at smaller gatherings of friends. And one must not forget that each of these poets has his or her own individual style and interests. Alcman's poetry displays sharp and direct imagery; Alcaeus is passionate in his concern with politics and in his drinking songs; and Sappho, whom Plato called the tenth of the Muses, presents her own emotional concerns in love - her verse is justly described by one scholar, David Campbell, as 'sheer melody'. Each of these poets, albeit from a different cultural context, speaks to us of common human conditions and experiences, which are as immediately relevant to the modern reader as to the original ancient audiences.

### Bibliography

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