



Between Epic and Tragedy

Poetry between epic and tragedy

- ▶ This lecture focuses on archaic (c. 800-480 BCE) and early Classical (c. 480-450) Greek poetry:
 - ▶ Disparate geographically
 - ▶ Disparate socio-economically / demographically
 - ▶ Disparate in terms of content
 - ▶ Disparate in terms of performance context, metre, and musical accompaniment
- ▶ Two focus authors:
 - ▶ Sappho
 - ▶ Pindar

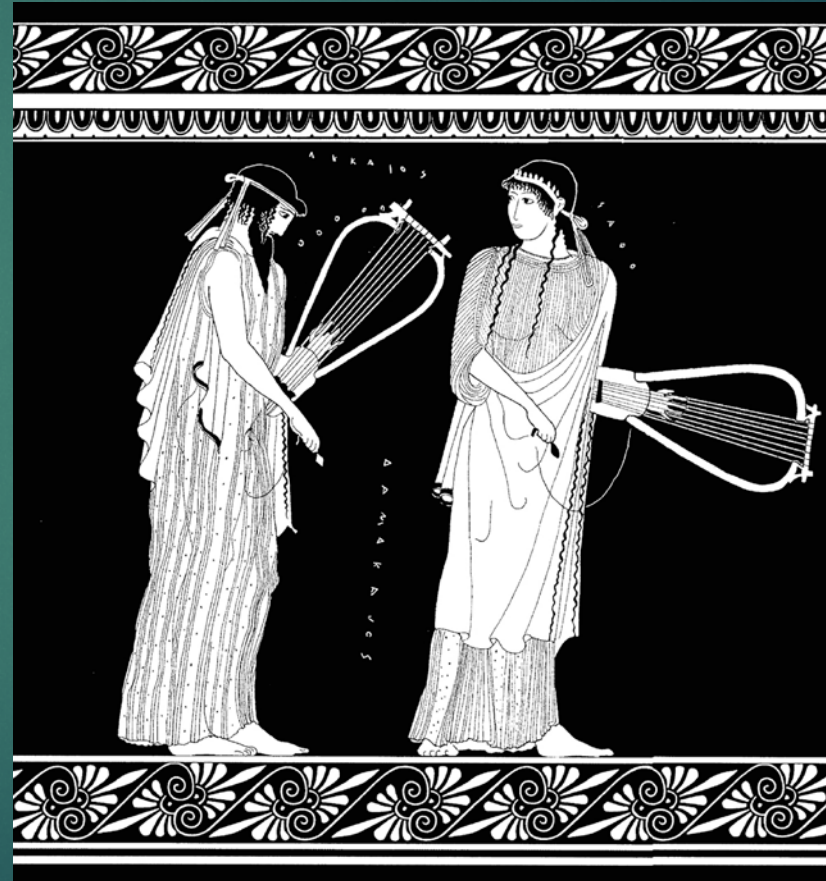
The context of the archaic period

- ▶ (Further) development of the *polis* over the 8th to 6th century BC
 - ▶ Growth of urban centres
 - ▶ Conflicts between *poleis*
 - ▶ => identity of different *poleis*
- ▶ Gradual changes of rule affecting many (but not all!) *poleis*:
 - ▶ From aristocratic dominance to tyranny to...
- ▶ Changing self-definition means changing cultural expression



Changing cultural climate

- ▶ Literature in this period becomes a way of dealing with changes in identity
 - ▶ Whether it approves or disapproves of the changes...
- ▶ Different types of poetry create, support, and sustain different types of cultural identities
 - ▶ Aristocratic
 - ▶ Tyrannical
 - ▶ Democratic
- ▶ Who writes poetry changes over the period: the two focus authors of this lecture stand at the beginning of the development



A vast range of poetry

- ▶ Lyric poetry (also called 'melic' from 'melos' = 'song')
 - ▶ Monodic lyric – a solo voice accompanied by the lyre [e.g. Sappho, cf. the vase painting above]
 - ▶ Choral lyric – for many singers, with lyre (and flute), sometimes dance, on a very wide range of topics and for a very wide range of occasions
 - ▶ E.g. Alcman, Bacchylides, Pindar so ranging from the religious, political, to the somewhere in between...
- ▶ Elegiac poetry – defined by its verse, performed alongside the flute [e.g. Tyrtaeus]
- ▶ Iambic poetry – defined by its content: mocking, rude and graphic [e.g. Semonides, Solon]

Unifying factors?

- ▶ Similarities in form
 - ▶ Brevity compared to epic poetry
 - ▶ Performance, again compared to epic poetry
- ▶ Similarities in content
 - ▶ Generally in the here and now, again compared to epic poetry dealing with the historical past
 - ▶ Applies both to the Pindaric victory odes and to (some of) Sappho's love poems – but cf. Stesichorus for mythological topics
 - ▶ A stronger suggestion of representing a personal perspective: many archaic poems feature a first-person narrator ('I-voice')
 - ▶ Consider this as a potential consequence of societies no longer relying on oral story- or poetry-telling to glue communities together

Using a first-person voice

- ▶ Be cautious! A poet saying ‘I’ and ‘me’ may very well be referring to their own experience, but may also be faking a first-person voice – cf. modern song lyrics or film voice-overs!
- ▶ The first-person voice may be chosen for artistic rather than personal reasons
- ▶ The paucity of evidence makes it more difficult to judge in relation to ancient literature...
- ▶ ...and has led, historically, to an emphasis on biographical interpretations
 - ▶ Cf. Homer and Hesiod

“The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation. He’d been dead for ten days before they found him, you know. [...] I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.”

Sappho

- ▶ Writing in the late 7th century BCE
- ▶ Associated with the city Mytilene on Lesbos
- ▶ Considered a great poet in antiquity
- ▶ One of the few female voices we have from antiquity
- ▶ Poetry survives in fragments



Sappho

Some say an army of horsemen,
some of footsoldiers, some of ships, is
the fairest thing on the black earth,
but I say it is what one loves.

It's very easy to make this clear to
everyone, for Helen, by far surpassing
mortals in beauty, left the best of all
husbands

and sailed to Troy, mindful of neither
her child nor her dear parents,
but with one glimpse she was
seduced by

Aphrodite. For easily bent...and
nimble...[missing text]...has reminded
me now of Anactoria who is not
here;

I would much prefer to see the
lovely way she walks and the radiant
glance of her face than the war-
chariots of the Lydians or their
footsoldiers in arms.

Fr. 16



From state to individual?

Some say an army of horse-men,
some of foot soldiers, some of ships, is
the fairest thing on the black earth,
but I say it is what one loves.

[...]

I would much prefer to see the
lovely way she walks and the radiant
glance of her face than the war-
chariots of the Lydians or their foot
soldiers in arms.

- ▶ This poem can be used as evidence for the move from general to personal in lyric poetry
- ▶ A meeting with the woman she loves would be more valuable than military power
- ▶ But: military power is mentioned and held as an important measuring stock or the comparison doesn't work
- ▶ => Reflection of society even if the persona rejects it
- ▶ Sappho part of aristocratic society

Relating to mythology (and epic)

It's very easy to make this clear to everyone, for Helen, by far surpassing mortals in beauty, left the best of all husbands

and sailed to Troy, mindful of neither her child nor her dear parents, but with one glimpse she was seduced by

Aphrodite. For easily bent...and nimbly...[missing text]...has reminded me now of Anactoria who is not here;

- ▶ Focus on Helen as an individual
- ▶ Initially: Helen's feelings
 - ▶ The people she leaves behind
 - ▶ Menelaus the safe bet
 - ▶ Cf. later Eur. *Med.* 230-240
 - ▶ Expansion of epic tradition: her child and her parents – leaving them potentially harrowing
- ▶ Later: The pressure of love (Aphrodite)

Personal epic

It's very easy to make this clear to everyone, for Helen, by far surpassing mortals in beauty, left the best of all husbands

and sailed to Troy, mindful of neither her child nor her dear parents, but with one glimpse she was seduced by

Aphrodite. For easily bent...and nimbly...[missing text]...has reminded me now of Anactoria who is not here;

- ▶ Sappho draws on Homer to tell a seemingly personal story
 - ▶ For both, it is important to remember that the core material is taken for granted
- ▶ The Iliadic Helen colours the reader's understanding of Anactoria's character here
 - ▶ ...and therefore also of Sappho's own (if we assume Sappho = I)
- ▶ The comparison of Anactoria to the supposedly most beautiful woman in the world is of course also no coincidence...

Composition: How is it done?

Some say an army of horse-men,
some of footsoldiers, some of ships, is
the fairest thing on the black earth,
but I say it is what one loves.

[...]

I would much prefer to see the
lovely way she walks and the radiant
glance of her face than the
war-chariots of the Lydians or their
footsoldiers in arms.

- ▶ The poem opens with a comparison to military power...
- ▶ ...and closes with a comparison with military power
 - ▶ Ring composition
- ▶ Effects?
 - ▶ Implicit suggestion that the power of love is like the overwhelming power of an army: doesn't have to make sense
 - ▶ General statement grows from a seemingly personal poem
 - ▶ Acknowledgement that military power *does* matter; acknowledgement of the power of normative society

Fragment 31 - Loeb

He seems as fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter. Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast. For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, but once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying. But all can be endured, since . . . even a poor man . . .

Fragment 31 – Anne Carson

whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking and lovely laughing - oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead - or almost
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty

Fragments: Longius *de subl.* 10.1-3

Sappho, for example, always chooses the emotions associated with love's madness from the attendant circumstances and the real situation. Where does she display her excellence? In that she is adept at selecting and combining the most important and excessive concomitants:

...

Are you not amazed how at one and the same moment she seeks out soul, body, hearing, tongue, sight, complexion as though they had all left her and were external, and how in contradiction she both freezes and burns, is irrational and sane, is afraid and nearly dead, so that we observe in her not one single emotion but a concourse of emotions? All this of course happens to people in love; but, as I said, it is her selection of the most important details and her combination of them into a single whole that have produced the excellence of the poem.