

The literature on Sappho, *fr.1* identifies the “Hymn to Aphrodite” as an instantiation of Sappho’s piety (Burnett; Cameron); most studies, however, centralize the poet-suppliant — her psychological motivation, religious experience and social context (Carson; Hutchinson; Segal) — thereby diminishing, of necessity, the role of the all-powerful object of worship. Such a construction presents the opportunity for continual speculation concerning the “tone” of the poem, particularly as it is established by those narrative elements whose apparent lack of contextualization most inspire subjective interpretation: the purpose of the binding-spell invoked over the beloved (*fr.1.21-24*; cf. Faraone; Winkler; Petropoulos); the characterization of Aphrodite’s smile (1.14); and most notoriously, the repeated *δηῦτε* (1.15-18; cf. Page). It is my view that our reading of *fr.1* suffers from this construction — a consequence of what I call the “unnecessary splendor” surrounding the poet’s biography — which has led us effectively to ascribe to Sappho a concern with the primacy of her own experience hardly distinguishable from that of a nineteenth-century Romantic. At a conference in 2003, M. Williamson argued for an emphasis on Sappho’s elite status as an Archaic lyric poet, a critical shift that would restore her work to its literary-historical context. In the case of *fr.1*, we have only to realize that the god of the text, so to speak, is in fact Aphrodite, not Sappho. This is to grant precedence to the representation of the divinity as ultimate agent or first-mover of the cycle of human suffering and delight that is the poem’s narrative pretext.

For example, looking into the pseudo-Homeric constellation of adjectives by which the god is invoked, *ποικιλόθρων-ἀθάνατος-δολόπλοκος*, we discern that Aphrodite is at once the cause of Sappho’s distress and the source of her relief. The marked use of *ἀθάνατος*, with its connotation of stability, in conjunction with its semantic antithesis, *ποικίλο-*, contributes to the paradoxical image of a god who is eternally changeful. It is the mutability of the immortal, I will argue, which dictates that *pathos* should repeatedly (*δηῦτε*) visit the mortal, rather than Sappho’s own “fickleness” (Page; Hutchinson) or the treachery of her lovers (Cameron; Carson). The remedy, on the other hand, is implicit in *δολόπλοκος*, whose root – *πλοκος* (cf. *πλοκή*) alludes to the *topos* that conflates speech and weaving; the epithet is then fully actuated by the use of the binding-spell at 1.21-24. Secondly, Aphrodite’s smile (*μειδιάσας* ‘*ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ*, 1.14) need have no particular implication for Sappho herself, since Aphrodite is regularly depicted as *φιλομειδίης* or *φιλομηδίης* in Homer and the Archaic poets (*Il.3.424*, 4.10, 5.375, 14.211, 20.40; *Od. 8.362*; *h.Ven.V.17*, 49, 56, 65, 155; *Hes.Th. 200*, 989). Most specifically, line 14 directly recalls the predication of powers in *h.Ven.X.1-3*: “... ἦτε βροτοῖσι / μείλιχα δῶρα δίδωσιν, ἐφ’ ἱμερτῶι δὲ προσώπῳ / αἶεὶ μειδιάει.” I will argue that Sappho’s purpose is to invoke this established aspect of the god — the kindly gift-giving aspect — to effect a change in her circumstances as described earlier at line 3, in her appeal for freedom (*μή μ’... δάμνα*) from the state of domination induced by another aspect of Aphrodite’s power, that by which she “subdue[s] the tribes of mortal men and birds in flight and all the beasts” (*h.Ven.V.3-4*). This construction of line 14 locates the poem more precisely within the conventions of the Archaic literary tradition.

In sum, piety demands the centrality of the god, not the suppliant. It is unlikely that Sappho’s stylization of the kletic form in *fr.1* has so abstracted the poem from its religious function as to violate this proportion. Further, the amplification of Sappho’s persona would paradoxically distance her from the audience’s sympathy. Recognition of the god’s oppressive agency, on the other hand, inspires greater feeling on Sappho’s behalf: we experience epiphany *with* the poet, rather than at a critical remove.