



Finglass, P. J. (in press). Leaping into drama: Sappho and Phaon. In V. Zanusso (Ed.), *Teatro e Drammaturgia in Grecia e Roma (Antico e Moderno Quaderni; Vol. 6)*. ETPBooks.

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Leaping into drama: Sappho and Phaon

Sappho lived long before Greek drama came into existence, at least as it would come to be known at Athens, and from Athens, across the Greek and then the Roman worlds. She was a lyric, not a dramatic poet; her compositions were intended for performance by a soloist or a chorus, not by one or more actors plus a chorus. Whether a tradition of dramatic poetry existed at Lesbos at the time we have no idea; certainly it has not survived if it did.

We have evidence for Sappho's celebrity as an individual as early as the late sixth century, when she first appears on a vase, carrying a lyre, and named. Made at Athens, this vase shows that she was already well known in that city at approximately the time of the establishment of the democracy. A slightly later Athenian vase, from the period of the Persian Wars, shows both Sappho and Alcaeus, each holding a lyre. Both are named. From this visual evidence we see that Sappho was well known as a poet in Athens. Athenians clearly knew her poetry, and talked about her as an individual. We may imagine that her works featured in the symposium, when men gathered to drink and sing; the relative absence of written texts from this period, though, means that this cannot be documented.

In the last third of the fifth century we start to have access to the evidence of comedy, and Sappho seems to have featured prominently in that genre. We know of several plays with the title *Sappho*; the earliest of these was by Ameipsias in the fifth century, after which came homonymous dramas by five different fourth-century dramatists. Sappho was clearly an extremely popular subject for comic poets; there may well have been other plays about her the evidence for which is now totally lost. The only play whose plot we are in a position to say anything about is Diphilus' *Sappho*; in that work the poets Archilochus and Hipponax feature as her suitors. Today we are so used to the concept of Sappho as a lesbian, as a woman who loved other women, that the idea of a drama about her centred on heterosexual

love sounds quite a surprise. But as we will see, this is no isolated detail in the comic treatment of Sappho.

In the latter part of the fourth century a play by Menander with the title *Leucadia* contained the following passage about Sappho:

where it is said that Sappho first,
chasing the arrogant Phaon,
in her frenzied desire, flung herself from the rocks
that can be seen from far away.

This is the earliest securely datable evidence for a story that would prove of immense popularity throughout antiquity. In this story Phaon features as a ferryman who took people on his boat from Lesbos to the mainland and back again. Sappho falls passionately in love with this Phaon; the love is not reciprocated, or is otherwise unsuccessful; and as a result Sappho flings herself from the rock of Leucas. In some accounts this is because she simply wants to die; in others, because she believes that by doing so she will free herself from her passion and live.

Menander's reference to the story is merely in passing, but other fourth-century comedy titles such as *Phaon*, *Leucadia* and *Leucadios*, point towards the same myth. It seems that it was popular in the comedies of this period; and it remains possible that one or more of the plays called *Sappho* was on this theme too. Certainly, the prominence of heterosexual love in Diphilus' *Sappho* consorts well with the Phaon story, whether or not it actually appeared in that play. Whether Sappho's love of women also featured in ancient comedy, we cannot tell; without complete texts, we will never be able to rule out the idea. Nevertheless, what evidence we have points to a heterosexual portrayal of Sappho in that genre.

This portrayal of Sappho, originally found in Greek comedy, is subsequently found in many ancient texts, most prominent among them the Ovidian *Letter to Phaon* from the *Heroides*, in which Sappho, about to take her leap, reflects on her relationship with the

ferryman in an epistle addressed to him. At 220 lines, the whole poem is too long to quote in full, but the following extract gives an indication of Sappho's passionate desire for Phaon:

*tu mihi cura, Phaon; te somnia nostra reducunt,
somnia formoso candidiora die.*

125 *illic te invenio quamvis regionibus absis;
sed non longa satis gaudia somnus habet.
saepe tuos nostra cervice onerare lacertos,
saepe tuae videor supposuisse meos;
oscula cognosco, quae tu committere lingua*

130 *aptaque consueras accipere, apta dare.
blandior interdum verisque simillima verba
eloquor et vigilant sensibus ora meis;
ulteriora pudet narrare, sed omnia fiunt,
et iuvat, et siccae non licet esse mihi.*

You, Phaon, are my care; you my dreams bring back to me, dreams brighter than the lovely day. [125]
There I find you, although in space you are absent; but the joys that sleep provides are not long enough. Often I seem to press upon your limbs with the burden of my neck, often I seem to have placed my limbs beneath your neck; I recognise the kisses, which you were accustomed to give [130] with your tongue, fit to receive and fit to give. At times I fondle you, speak words very similar to the truth, and my face is awake thanks to my senses; I am ashamed to narrate further, but all takes place, and it is a delight, and I cannot be dry.

And this passage indicates the significance of the leap within the story:

175 *ibimus, o nympe, monstrataque saxa petemus;
sit procul insano victus amore timor.*

quidquid erit, melius quam nunc erit. aura, subito—
et mea non magnum corpora pondus habent.
tu quoque, mollis Amor, pinnas suppone cadenti
 180 *ne sim Leucadiae mortua crimen aquae.*
inde chelyn Phoebo, communia munera, ponam,
et sub ea versus unus et alter erunt:
‘grata lyram posui tibi, Phoebae, poetria Sappho:
convenit illa mihi, convenit illa tibi.’

[175] I will go, o nymph, and seek the rocks which you have pointed out; may fear, defeated by insane love, be far away. Whatever will be, it will be better than it is now. Breeze, come – my body does not have a great weight. You too, gentle Love, place your wings beneath me as I fall, [180] so I do not die, a reproach to the water of Leucas. Then I will dedicate the lyre to Phoebus, our common gift, and under it will be one verse and then another: ‘I the poetess Sappho set up a lyre for you, Phoebus, in my gratitude: it suits me, it suits you.’

To what extent the poem’s author draws directly on Greek comedy is unknowable; by this time, the story of Sappho and Phaon was so well known that writers putting it to use need not have consulted the Greek comedies through which it seems first to have entered the literary tradition. Nevertheless, were it not for Greek comedy, we may doubt whether the story would have become so well known in the first place; and so in that sense, this Latin elegy is indebted to the earlier genre.

Scholars disagree as to whether the *Letter* was written by Ovid or by an imitator not long after his time. This is not the place to enter into that discussion; indeed, from our perspective, the issue does not matter much. The key thing is that the story found its way, by whatever means, into the Ovidian corpus at an early date, ensuring the continued currency of the Sappho–Phaon story in the Roman world; and when the letter was rediscovered in the

fifteenth century, it influenced all subsequent depictions of Sappho. It must be the Ovidian letter, for example, that is held by the figure of Sappho in Raphael's fresco *Parnassus* (1509–11); and it is that line of influence which eventually leads to (among other works in different languages) the popular novels *Le avventure di Saffo di Mitilene* by Alessandro Verri (1782) and *La Faoniade* by Vincenzo Imperiali (1780), as well as to the following lines in Giovanni Pascoli's poem 'Solon' of 1895 (lines 53–60):

Dileguare! e altro non voglio: voglio
farmi chiarezza che da lui si effonda.
Scoglio estremo della gran luce, scoglio
su la grande onda,

dolce è da te scendere dove è pace:
scende il sole nell'infinito mare;
tremola e scende la chiarezza seguace
crepuscolare.

To fade away . . . that's all I want: I want
to become the glow that is diffused from him.
Outermost rock, where rest the final rays of the sun,
rock poised over the wave,

sweet the descent from you to where is peace.
The sun descends into the infinite sea;
the afterglow of the twilight glimmers,
follows the sun's descent.

For many writers in the modern period, the story of Sappho and Phaon was an immensely convenient one. It allowed them to present the sole prominent female writer of Greco-Roman antiquity – the only one whose greatness was universally acknowledged and unchallenged – as subject not to same-sex attraction (which in their eyes would have been a vice), but to a reassuringly heterosexual passion. Authoritative ancient sources revealed, it seemed, that there was nothing disgraceful in Sappho's life. Moreover, the love that she did experience was not only directed at a proper object, but led to feelings of such intensity that she was driven to contemplate, and perhaps attempt, suicide as a means of dealing with them – thereby providing material for dramatic portrayals of her life in different media which could captivate large audiences. It is an irony of transmission that a story whose literary origins lay in comedy – a genre scarcely shy of portraying sexual activity – should have ended up enabling depictions of Sappho which avoided emphasising, or even mentioning, the same-sex love that is so prominent a part of our picture of Sappho today.

This essay closes, however, not with a literary but with an artistic depiction of Sappho's leap for Phaon. It is found in an underground basilica near Rome's Porta Maggiore, dating to roundabout the turn of the eras, and discovered in 1917 during routine railway repairs. The building, perhaps associated with an important Roman family, the Statilii Tauri, depicts various mythological scenes using mosaics, stucco decorations, and mother-of-pearl. On its apse, perhaps the prominent place in the building's decoration, we see Sappho about to take her leap; she is not named, but the lyre that she holds in her left hand means that it cannot be anyone else. A winged figure behind her can only be Eros; below, someone is holding out some cloth in outstretched arms – presumably a marine deity looking to rescue Sappho when she falls. Opposite Sappho, facing towards her with right arm outstretched in some kind of greeting, stands a tall male figure, presumably Apollo, given the bow that he holds in his left hand.

The significance of this scene again goes beyond the scope of this essay. It must have been bound up with the purpose of the building as a whole, perhaps involving ideas of death and rebirth which Sappho's leap would aptly have symbolised, especially as depicted here, with Sappho not alone but surrounded by sympathetic divinities. What we can do, though, is to note another historical irony of the transmission. Excavations of a different kind during this very period were revealing the papyri of Sappho which would so increase our knowledge of her oeuvre; for example, the basilica was discovered only three years after one of the most important Sappho papyri was published, one that revealed to the world extensive parts of several poems that had otherwise vanished from history. Through those papyri, scholars and readers more generally could obtain a picture of Sappho's poetry that, for the first time, was unmediated by the other ancient authors who had quoted her works (often out of context), or paraphrased them (often carelessly), or recorded stories about her life (often with no regard for accuracy). The first such papyrus (in fact a parchment) was published in 1880; the years that followed saw more, most recently the 'Newest Sappho' papyrus published in 2014. Naturally, these papyri do not allow the recovery of Sappho's corpus in full. But they do provide many random samples, and from those samples patterns emerge.

Across these papyri we find several poems which portray Sappho's love for other women; but none suggesting love for men, and not the merest hint of a mention of Phaon. This evidence fits an inference that we could have drawn even before the publication of the papyri; for it was always mysterious that despite the extraordinary popularity of the Phaon story, no-one ever quotes Sappho's poetry to illustrate it. So thanks to the corroborating evidence of the papyrus discoveries, we can be reasonably sure that Phaon did not in fact feature in Sappho's work. Rather, the entire tradition concerning her love for him, one which inspired artists in different media and languages down the centuries, and which provided a means of denying her status as a lover of women, arose not from her poetry, but from the

portrayal which she received in Greek drama, specifically comedy. Lost though the relevant plays may be, they nevertheless have exerted a cultural influence far more powerful than many ancient dramas which did survive.

Seven pieces can be recommended in particular as further reading for anyone interested in the subject of this chapter. First, G. W. Most, 'Reflecting Sappho', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 40 (1995) 15–38 ≈ E. Greene (ed.) *Re-reading Sappho. Reception and Transmission* (Classics and Contemporary Thought 3; Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1996) 11–35 analyses the centrality of the Phaon story to the ancient reception of Sappho – and indeed modern reception into the nineteenth century. (Since Most wrote, the publication of E. Jong, *Sappho's Leap. A Novel* (London 2004) has demonstrated the continuing vitality of the tale in the third millennium; for a briefer but updated account of the story of Sappho and Phaon story see P. J. Finglass, and A. Kelly, 'Introduction', in id. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho* (Cambridge 2021) 1–7.) Second, L. Coe, 'Sappho in fifth- and fourth-century Greek literature', in P. J. Finglass, and A. Kelly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho* (Cambridge 2021) 263–76 offers the most detailed recent account of Sappho in comedy, to which my brief description is indebted. Third to fifth, out of the immense bibliography on the Ovidian *Letter to Phaon* I would recommend the following three pieces: G. B. D'Alessio, 'Poeta, personaggio e testo nell'epistola di Saffo a Faone', *Materiali e Discussioni per l'Analisi dei Testi Classici* 81 (2018) 83–101; G. Rosati, 'Sabinus, the *Heroides* and the poet-nightingale. Some observations on the authenticity of the *Epistula Sapphus*', *Classical Quarterly* NS 46 (1996) 207–16; and id. 'Gallo in Virgilio e Saffo in Ovidio: due meta-poeti nella riflessione della *Lydia* pseudo-virgiliana', *Dictynna* 17 (available via open access at <http://journals.openedition.org/dictynna/2218>). Sixth,

the Italian texts cited here, together with their translations, are taken from C. Piantanida, ‘Early modern and modern German, Italian, and Spanish Sapphos’, in P. J. Finglass, and A. Kelly (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sappho* (Cambridge 2021) 343–60, a chapter which pursues the analysis of the Phaon story into more recent centuries. Seventh and finally, G. B. D’Alessio, ‘The afterlife of Sappho’s afterlife’, *Cambridge Classical Journal* 68 (2022) 49–82 investigates the Porta Maggiore Sappho. All these works contain suggestions for further reading.

P. J. Finglass

University of Bristol

patrick.finglass@bristol.ac.uk

Acknowledgement: This chapter was written during my tenure of a Major Research Fellowship awarded by the Leverhulme Trust.