INTRODUCTION

Ellen Greene

The greatness of a number of writers from antiquity is so thoroughly unquestioned that they are always granted a place in the annals of literature. Yet none but Sappho has become a truly legendary figure.

Joan DeJean

As poet, as legendary literary figure, Sappho has had an undeniable fascination for readers ever since she composed her poems on the island of Lesbos at the close of the seventh century B.C.E. From Plato’s celebration of Sappho as the tenth Muse to Robin Morgan’s renunciation of Sappho as literary foremother (“get off my back, Sappho”), the life and lyrics of Sappho have haunted the Western imagination. Sappho’s intense, burning verses of feminine desire have presided over the Western lyric much the way Homer’s epics have occupied their authoritative position in Western literature. Sappho comes down to us as a kind of mother goddess of poetry: imitated, ventriloquized, renounced, worshiped, and feared, as perhaps no other single poet in the Western tradition.

Why has Sappho come to “inhabit the popular imagination” with so much intensity? Why have her poetics and her persona engendered centuries of fantasy, speculation, and mythmaking? Indeed, Joan DeJean points out that fictions about Sappho started circulating within centuries of her death. To Socrates and Plato, Sappho is the exemplary Sublime Poetess, an authority in matters of love. To the writers of late antiquity, Sappho becomes not only priestess of song but exemplar of the woman who died for love—reputedly flinging herself off the white cliff of Leukas for the love of a ferryman. Interest in Sappho, in both the scholarly and literary traditions, has often reflected a voyeuristic fascination with the “queerness” of a woman writing poetry in which men are “relegated to a peripheral, if not an intrusive, role.”1 Curiosity about Sappho over the centuries has been fueled by the fragmentary condition of her poems, the lack of any concrete information about her life, and the implications of homoeroticism

in her work—implications that all too often have been regarded as sexual “deviance.”

Aside from the provocative images of lesbian love that have disturbed many readers through the ages, one of the most compelling aspects of Sappho fiction—making arises from the tendency readers have had to fill in the gaps of Sappho’s mutilated texts. Modern scholars have been faced with the problem of how to piece together Sappho’s surviving fragments. Nearly all of Sappho’s surviving poems have major breaks in the text or are short excerpts from a longer poem. Many of the approximately two hundred fragments attributed to Sappho contain only one or two words. Out of the nine books of her poetry edited by scholars at the great library in Alexandria during the third and second centuries B.C.E., only forty fragments are long enough to be intelligible. Thus, much of the scholarly work on Sappho from the early part of the century to the 1960s focused on textual and philological analysis and reconstruction. Scholarship on the content of Sappho’s poetry emphasized efforts to construct her biography—often with the aim of endowing Sappho with “Victorian” respectability. And of course the association of Sappho with female homoeroticism has made her, for many readers, a fascinating yet often problematic subject of speculation and fantasy. In 1913, the classical scholar Wilamowitz declared Sappho to be the official leader of a cult of female worshipers devoted to Aphrodite. The notion of Sappho as the head of a thiasos or religious cult for young girls dominated Sappho scholarship and did much to rationalize away the homoerotic aspects of her poetry. As Holt Parker argues in his essay in this volume, “Sappho Schoolmistress,” the image of Sappho presiding over a School of Virgins became canonical in early Sappho scholarship, giving rise to a multitude of related speculations about Sappho as music teacher and sex educator for a cultlike circle of young girls.

Edgar Lobel and Denys Page’s 1955 commentary on Sappho marked a turning point in Sappho scholarship. Their book, Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta, with a complete text and commentary on Sappho’s fragments, became the definitive edition of Sappho’s poems and, to a large extent, resolved the philological issues of textual reconstruction. Within a decade or so of their commentary, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an efflorescence of literary and contextual criticism emerged in which scholars began to read Sappho’s poetry for its literary content and its relation to literary and mythical tradition. Changes in Sappho criticism, moreover, coincided with general changes in classical scholarship; in the 1970s efforts to assimilate methodologies from other branches of literary and cultural studies began to

2. Wilamowitz, Sappho und Simonides 17–78.
appear. In addition, feminist scholarship and, more recently, gender theory and criticism have provoked discussions about how Sappho’s gender has both shaped her poetic discourse and influenced the social context of her poetry.

The essays collected in this volume reflect not only the burgeoning interest in Sappho over the last thirty years, but a more recent fascination with Sappho’s “afterlife”—the seemingly endless permutations wrought upon her life and her work through centuries of literary and scholarly readings and rewritings. The history of Sappho imitations, translations, and scholarship is a history of images and perceptions, fictions and fantasies. As many of these essays show, each age, each generation invents its own Sappho. The authors in this volume examine the ways scholars and writers have read the fragmentary remains of Sappho’s poetry and have, to a large extent, created the Sappho they wanted. As Jack Winkler astutely remarked, “Novelists, scholars, and ambitious young literary men (and women), although they knew nothing about Sappho’s actual poetry, used her as a Rorschach blot projecting their fantasies and anxieties about sex, gender, and genius.”

Indeed Sappho’s association with female homoeroticism, the fragmentary nature of her work, and the fact that so little is known about her life have generated a multitude of fictions about her—fictions that are themselves fascinating because they reflect the particular cultural attitudes and biases out of which those fictions emerged. “To retrace the development of fictions of Sappho,” DeJean writes, “is both to measure the standards imposed on female sexuality at any given period and to provide an index, across the centuries, not only of the received ideas about female same-sex love but also of what it was possible to write about that subject at any given period.” Thus, Sappho, as subject of scholarly investigation, translation, and myth, becomes an extraordinary means of access to changing sensibilities and cultural norms about sexuality, gender roles, and notions of female authorship. When we read the history of Sappho scholarship and the numerous translations and imitations of her work, we see how Sappho is, as Yopie Prins points out, “continually transformed and refigured in the process of transmission.” Indeed, the study of Sappho reception raises questions about how literary voice may be recuperated through reading and how Sappho becomes both a cause and an effect of literary transmission.

3. Winkler, back cover of DeJean, Fictions of Sappho.
5. See Joan DeJean’s exploration of a range of literary imitations of Sappho in Fictions of Sappho, which called attention to the intriguing subject of Sappho reception and to Sappho’s importance as a literary and cultural figure. As DeJean points out: “The history of Sappho’s fictionalization has much to teach us about the evolving discourse of gender, the construction of sexual difference through notions of the feminine and the masculine. All fictions of Sappho
To many male writers, from Catullus and Ovid in antiquity to Swinburne, Tennyson, and Baudelaire in the modern era, Sappho represents access to a woman’s voice, the vehicle through which it is possible to “enact a woman’s part” and perhaps to escape the boundaries of masculinity. While it is possible to regard imitation of Sappho as praise, it is equally possible to consider the ways male poets have adapted Sappho’s lines to their own purposes as an appropriation of the woman’s voice, an attempt to master and control feminine desire. For many women poets, on the other hand, Sappho has represented the literary foremother who gave them a poetic tradition of their own. Sappho epitomizes, as Susan Gubar writes, “all the lost women of genius in literary history, especially all the lesbian artists whose work has been destroyed, sanitized, or heterosexualized.” For those women poets who identify with Sappho, Sappho’s stature in literary history authorizes their own poetic talents and provides them with a precursor to whom they can turn not only for inspiration but also for collaboration. For it is in Sappho’s broken fragments that the modern woman poet could reinvent Sappho’s verse and thus inscribe feminine desire as part of an empowering literary history of her own.

While the number of studies of Sappho’s “afterlife” has grown considerably over the last ten years, this book is the first collection of essays that deals exclusively with the topic of Sappho reception and transmission. To be sure, the “afterlife” of Sappho is a huge subject that cannot be addressed in one volume. The essays collected here, however, deal with many of the main themes in afterlife studies of Sappho and are indicative of the wide scope of scholarship in the field. Moreover, these essays are offered as examples of studies of the main historical periods in which Sappho shows up in the literary and scholarly traditions of the West. While the authors in this collection bring diverse critical perspectives to the study of Sappho reception, the selection of recent and new essays included here reflects current scholarly interest in changing discourses of gender at different cultural moments and in a variety of literary and scholarly sources.

are fictions of the feminine: they transmit received ideas about female desire, its expression, its plot, its fate” (22).

6. Aside from DeJean’s Fictions of Sappho, other important “afterlife” studies of Sappho include Robinson, Sappho and Her Influence; Mora, Sappho; Marks, “Lesbian Intertextuality”; Stein, The Iconography of Sappho; Rigolot, “Louise Labé et la rédecouverte de Sapho”; Gubar, “Sapphistries”; Grahn, The Highest Apple; DeJean, “Female Voyeurism”; Lipking, “Sappho Descending.”
Glenn Most’s essay, “Reflecting Sappho,” leads off the collection with an overview of the “dramatic changes” Sappho’s reputation has undergone over the centuries. As Most points out, Sappho is by no means the only ancient author whose literary fortunes have been drastically altered by generations of mythmaking and literary misunderstanding. But Sappho’s fate in the annals of literary history presents an extraordinary disparity between the mutilated remains of her actual poetry and the widespread celebrity of her person in the public imagination. It is the problematic relationship between text and context that Most addresses in his essay. How do literary reputations come about; and in particular, how does Sappho come to exemplify, for example, “insatiable heterosexual promiscuity” in her afterlife in ancient Athens and in the eighteenth century become an emblem of unhappy heterosexual love, evidenced by her desperate passion for Phaon and her suicide from the Leukadian cliff? Most’s essay surveys the images of Sappho that have flourished from antiquity through the present in both literary and scholarly sources in an effort to interrogate the complex relation between a literary text and its reception in distant ages and cultural contexts. Most suggests that it is the fleeting, “temporarily fashionable” prejudices about women, sexuality, and poetry in a given culture that have determined the ways in which Sappho’s texts were understood, edited, and translated.

Focusing on the theme of translation, Yopie Prins’s essay, “Sappho’s Afterlife in Translation,” traces various English translations of fragment 31 from the seventeenth century to the present in order to focus on the historical and theoretical problems of translating Sappho. While the issue of “reconstituting” Sappho’s fragmented voice from her texts is central in the process of translation and transmission, fragment 31 is the only extant poem in which Sappho explicitly dramatizes desire for the beloved through a loss of voice that is associated with a kind of death. In analyzing a number of translations spanning four centuries, Prins examines the representations of Sappho’s broken tongue and the various ways translators have tried to “recuperate voice from that break.” Her article shows that translation has been one of the most central factors in the transmission of Sappho’s texts. The moment of performance during Sappho’s own life is replaced by the performativity of translation itself that ensures Sappho’s afterlife. Prins reads different translations, not to compare them to the “original” Sappho but to describe how Sappho is continually refugured in the process of translation. Moreover, Prins’s analysis of different translations of fragment 31 shows the engendering of Sappho as a “specifically female lyric subject” within a lyric tradition, an emergence that demonstrates the intertwining of gender and genre in the reading of lyric poetry.

Representations of Sappho on Greek vases of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. and brief references to her in Plato, Aristotle, and Menander
attest to her reputation in antiquity as a poet of considerable stature. But aside from these references, the earliest evidence for Sappho's direct influence on other poets occurs in the Roman period. Catullus's poem 51, his "translation" of Sappho 31, furnishes a significant opportunity not only to examine the reception of Sappho in Rome but also to investigate the "translation" of a feminine discourse within a Roman male cultural context. A number of important studies have been done comparing Sappho 31 and Catullus 51.7 Dolores O'Higgins's essay, "Sappho's Splintered Tongue: Silence in Sappho 31 and Catullus 51," considers the image of the "broken tongue" in the two poems, particularly in regard to how that image reflects aspects of oral and literate culture. Sappho's loss of voice in the context of a lyric tradition that is essentially performative threatens to silence her altogether. For Catullus, on the other hand, poetry is written communication—a book, a libellus, that is separate from himself. Thus Catullus's "broken tongue" does not to the same degree endanger his ability to "create or communicate his poetry." O'Higgins's essay brings into focus the profound impact "reading" Sappho's poems within written culture has on the interpretation and transmission of Sappho's poems.

One of the main recurrent themes of Sappho's afterlife in both Roman and Renaissance texts is the legend of Sappho's love for a ferryman named Phaon. The famous tale about Sappho and Phaon, which seems to have originated at least two centuries after her life,8 involves her passionate love for Phaon and her suicidal leap from the White Rock of Leukas (off the west coast of the Greek mainland) into the sea in pursuit of him. The earliest complete version of the legend occurs in the first century C.E. by the Roman poet Ovid in his Heroides. In Heroides 15, the last in his collection of fictional letters from abandoned heroines, Sappho appears as an abandoned woman writing to her lost lover Phaon. The famous story reappears in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, most notably in the poetry of John Donne.

Elizabeth Harvey's essay "Ventriloquizing Sappho, or the Lesbian Muse" and Harriette Andreadis's article "Sappho and Early Modern England: A Study in Sexual Reputation" take up the issue of Sappho's treatment as a literary figure in the Renaissance—a period in which Sappho reemerged from a long period of neglect. The Renaissance authors who dramatize Sappho were acquainted with her mainly through Ovid's depiction in his

7. See esp. Paul Allen Miller's article, "Sappho 31 and Catullus 51: The Dialogism of Lyric," for an insightful comparison of the two poems using Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogism. See also Wills, "Sappho 31 and Catullus 51," and Segal, "Otium and Eros."

8. The Sappho-Phaon story first appears in a short fragment from a play by the fourth-century B.C.E. Greek writer Menander called The Leukadia. In the play, a speaker avers that Sappho was the first to throw herself off the White Rock of Leukas.
HEROIDES. As Andreidis and Harvey show, the Renaissance Sappho bears little resemblance to the poet as she is known today.

Elizabeth Harvey’s essay traces the reception of Sappho through Ovid’s Sapphic letter in *HEROIDES* 15 and analyzes the Sapphic voice enunciated in John Donne’s poem “Sappho to Philaenis” and its “Ovidian subtext.” In discussing both the Donne and Ovid poems, Harvey focuses on the intertextual problem of what she calls “transvestite ventriloquism,” the “male author’s appropriation of the feminine voice” and its implications for the silencing of women’s speech and writing. Moreover, Harvey links this silencing to the suppression and faulty transmission of Sappho’s texts. Thus, Harvey’s essay not only provides a study of the images of Sappho perpetuated by Ovid and Donne but also investigates how questions of literary voice and “authorial property” are inextricably linked to gender, to the erasure of a woman’s voice altogether.

Harriette Andreidis’s article follows by discussing the reception of Sappho in Renaissance England. Using Ovid’s “myth” of Sappho as represented in *HEROIDES* 15 as a starting point, Andreidis examines references to the mythologized reputation of Sappho in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England in order to explore the public discourse about sexuality in that period. Andreidis’s article interrogates the issue of how discourses of female sexuality changed in early modern England, examining the way in which Sappho’s literary reputation provided a exemplar for those discourses.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we witness an attempt to explain away Sappho’s supposed sexual deviance. Scholars during this period show a tendency to defend Sappho from implied charges of scandal and aberrant behavior. In “Sex and Philology: Sappho and the Rise of German Nationalism,” Joan DeJean looks to the origins of this tendency in nineteenth-century German philology, which promoted theories about Sappho’s “chastity,” and examines its role in facilitating notions of a German national identity. DeJean argues that early German philologists went to great pains to “defend” Sappho from charges of homosexuality, partly as a way to rehabilitate the Greek “national character” as a model for the German nation state, but, perhaps more importantly, also to keep alive the notion of a “purer, masculine eros” that would help inspire German nationalism.

9. See Bury, ed., *Greek Literature from the Eighth Century to the Persian Wars*; see also Robinson, *The Influence of Sappho*. Suggestions of scandal and deviance can be detected in Bury’s words of caution to readers of Sappho about the need to observe tact and discretion: “Whatever the intimacies of her life may have been—and it may be suggested that there are limits beyond which it is . . . impertinent to inquire into the private lives of eminent people of the past[—] . . . it is clear that in her own day in Lesbos her repute was unblemished” (498).
Likewise, in his article, “Sappho Schoolmistress,” Holt Parker argues that the Victorian view of Sappho as the head of a girls’ school emerged out of an extreme discomfort with the homoerotic aspects of Sappho’s poetry. Parker discusses the myth of Sappho as a schoolmistress as it developed in early “Victorianist” scholarship on Sappho and as it has influenced current views of Sappho and her social context. He challenges the evidence scholars have used to construct images of Sappho as either a “friendly spinster teacher,” sex educator, or music teacher. Parker argues that there is no credible evidence that Sappho’s poetry was associated with formal, ritual settings or occasions that might link her to a cultlike community of women—a thiasos, as it is commonly called. His article calls attention to the difficulties in reconstructing evidence from antiquity and cautions us about the cultural biases scholars often bring to the reconstruction and interpretation of ancient texts and their cultural contexts. Parker is particularly critical of the tendency of critics to assume that Sappho is the older woman in control of younger girls—a tendency Parker attributes to a “disturbing obsession with power and hierarchy” that assimilates Sappho’s poetry to a model of male power relations.

As DeJean and Parker point out, much of the criticism on Sappho in the early part of the twentieth century shows an intense discomfort with the homoeroticism in Sappho’s poetry. Writers and poets in this period, however, often responded to her quite differently. Many early modernist poets sought to rescue Sappho from the attempts of scholars to cloak Sappho’s lesbianism in “modern heterosexual respectability.” Erika Rohrbach’s essay, “H.D. and Sappho: ‘A Precious Inch of Palimpsest,’” discusses the influence of Sappho on the early-twentieth-century American poet Hilda Doolittle (known as H.D.). H.D. so strongly identified with Sappho that she wrote some of her poetry in fragments. For H.D., as for many modernist poets, “rescuing Sappho meant reading Sappho modernly”; that is, reading Sappho with a concern not only for the texts themselves, but for the way they have been read and interpreted through the ages. Rohrbach argues that H.D. turned this palimpsestic reading relationship into a style of writing. Indeed, the modernists’ concern for the layers of interpretation enveloping Sappho’s fragments may be considered the beginning of “afterlife” studies of Sappho as we now know it.

Susan Gubar’s article “Sapphistries” also considers Sappho’s influence on H.D. However, it considers that influence in the context of a more general discussion about Sappho’s influence on women’s writing in the early decades of the twentieth century. Gubar argues that the effort to recover Sappho, for poets like Renée Vivien and H.D., represents an attempt to break away from patriarchal literary tradition and claim a literary inheritance of their own. For both H.D. and Vivien, the recovery of Sappho becomes inextricably
associated with the rediscovery of a utopian land and language of female desire. Gubar points out, however, that later women poets, from Amy Lowell to Sylvia Plath and Robin Morgan, often express an ambivalence toward the Sapphic vision. The gulf between Sappho’s erotic ideal and the conditions of life for the woman poet in the twentieth century are often regarded as nonnegotiable. As Lawrence Lipking observes, “the genius of Sappho has seldom been easy to live with. Her reputation precedes her and dictates a role. At times she has loomed as a stifling and warning presence: the one acknowledged type of woman poet, who forces every other to take her stamp.”10 While the modern woman poet may at times resist the Sapphic mold, she nonetheless turns and returns to Sappho, linking herself not only with Sappho’s poetic brilliance but to a tradition of literary women, that “queer lot, [we] women who write poetry,” as Amy Lowell puts it.11

While in the last thirty years Sappho scholarship has been a vigorous and growing enterprise, Sappho’s afterlife is just beginning to emerge as an important area of study. Joan DeJean’s 1989 book on Sappho’s literary reception, Fictions of Sappho, is among the earliest and most influential works in afterlife studies. DeJean’s pioneering book has been largely responsible for the burgeoning interest in this field. As DeJean shows, the fascination with Sappho as a literary figure has a long and tumultuous history. What is most singular about our present moment in this long history, it seems to me, is the turn by literary scholars, like DeJean and the contributors to the present volume, to the Sapphic tradition itself as a touchstone for cultural critique and a source for intimations of the nature of desire and subjectivity throughout development of the Western tradition. I hope that the essays collected here will inspire further inquiry into the Sapphic tradition and into the questions it poses about the enigmatic, multifaceted interrelationship between present and past, gender and culture, text and context.

10. Lipking, Abandoned Women 97.
11. See Lowell’s poem “The Sisters,” which begins, “Taking us by a :d large, we’re a queer lot / We women who write poetry” (Complete Poetical Works 459).