

Sappho's silent children

The anchors of reading in the performance of texts

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That (some) Greeks by the end of the seventh century BCE were capable of writing and reading lyric poetry is commonly accepted. The question is therefore not IF they could do it but WHY. Why write down your songs and for whom? And why read the librettos of songs if one can also hear them performed? (How many of us, in a far more literate age, read the librettos of songs?). In this paper I will take the songs of Sappho as a test case and argue that the habit of reading her songs was anchored in the practice of hearing them performed.

For the when of their first being read we have a *terminus ante quem* in an Athenian vase, dated around 440-430 BCE, which depicts a figure named Sappho reading a scroll (Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 1260). I will argue that Sappho herself (or others during her lifetime or soon after her death) wrote down her songs as librettos, so that other singers could re-perform them. These singers would read the words of her songs in order to memorize them and subsequently perform them. This vase is evidence of this, as is the oldest Sappho papyrus, dating to the late fourth or early 3rd century BCE (P. Köln Inv. 21351+21376). In this case the reading of texts serves their performance.

I will also examine another possible reason for reading Sappho's songs, which is to re-experience a performance one has witnessed. There is some evidence from the fifth century BCE for this type of reading as well. Here the experience of reading the text of a song is still closely tied to (or anchored in) the experience of hearing it performed, but it does not result in a new performance of the song. This type of reading furthermore resulted in a true innovation: the aesthetic experience of seeing and comparing the words of a text on a page, independent of their once having been performed. In a preserved fragment of the comic playwright Antiphanes (fr. 194.1-21 KA), a character named Sappho refers to letters on a page as her silent children. This image reminds us that words on a page are ultimately rooted in the spoken word.

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