

Columbia University Seminar on Modern Greek
Wednesday, November 20, 2013

Seminar: Modern Greek (703)

Chair: Evangelos Calotychos (Columbia University)

Rapporteur (substitute): Jeffrey Wayno (Columbia University)

Speaker: Panagiotis Antonopoulos (University of Crete)

Topic: “The Modernization Of Sappho's Reception In Early 20th Century Greek Translation And Poetry”

Attendees:	Affiliation:
Gerasimus Katsan	City University of New York
Erato Basea	Heyman, Blinken
Krystalli Glyniadakis	n/a
George Fragopoulos	City University of New York
Katerina Stergiopoulou	Princeton University

The first part of this talk will focus on the first fragment of Sappho, which is available here on the first handout in English and Greek. The second handout has excerpts of Varnalis. The third and final handout has selections from Myrtilotissa.

In 1910 a Greek journal published a new translation of the first fragment of Sappho that we have here. This translation was fundamentally flawed. For example, it mistranslated Sappho's love as being a male love when in fact Sappho clearly indicated that her tormentor was a woman. But it is indicative of a broader ambivalence of translators towards their subject matter. Some of the pronouns are, in fact, gender neutral, even though translators chose to assign a gender to them. This radically impacts how we interpret Sappho's poetry: was her tormentor a man or a woman? Various early translations of this work—even those by prominent Classicists—make similar mistakes. Other scholars, such as Theodore Berg, a prominent German Classicist, subsequently corrected some of these mistakes. But he could not correct everything. For over three hundred years translators produced faulty translations of Sappho's famous poems, and this has drastically altered how we read and interpret them. Crucially, these translators also tarnished Sappho's reputation among the wider public. It was not until the late nineteenth century that more reliable translations of Sappho's poems began to appear, correcting previous efforts and beginning to alter our perception of this renowned Greek poet. In the years that followed, we see the gradual modernization of the reception of Sappho, in part because of these new translations and in part because of several Greek poets.

Varnalis' *How Sappho's girls lamented when she feel in love with Alcaeus* was first published in 1911. It was published in a literary journal that openly challenged conservative literary works and the accepted interpretation of famous poems. Varnalis tried very hard to mimic Sappho in this poem, both thematically and metrically. Unlike some contemporary Greek poets, who shied away from the theme of lesbian love, Varnalis embraced it. His poem reveals a

keen understanding of this kind of love in Sappho. In doing so, he automatically challenged long-accepted gender roles in Greek society. But Varnalis goes further. In many ways, he raises lesbian love above any other kind of love, homosexual or heterosexual. Lesbian love therefore undermines the biological definition of procreation. The homoerotic element of modern Greek poetry either entered the canon through ancient sources or through these new Greek poems, which in a sense reinterpreted these ancient works. Varnalis is a classic example of how the latter may be the case.

Varnalis' poetry—as exemplified in the passages printed here—thoroughly undercut traditional theological and biological arguments about procreation using Sappho's ancient poetry as evidence. We seem similar trends in the works of Palamas. This evidence provides a compelling case for a fundamental transformation in the way Sappho was seen in Greek society around the turn of the nineteenth century. The modern Greek poets discussed here realized that their efforts to alter contemporary perceptions of Sappho had to embrace some of the most radical elements of Sappho's works. Their reasons were clear: only a radical break would produce the desired effect. Varnalis in particular used a wide variety of poetic techniques to pay homage to Sappho in his own work.

The first lesbian poem in modern Greek, *In my tower*, was published in 1914 by Myrriotissa. The eroticism of the poem is oblique, but—like Varnalis' poem—Myrriotissa's poem recalls some of the recently rediscovered themes and language of Sapphic poetry. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, these new poetic efforts to incorporate Sappho encouraged a vivid intellectual debate about the content and interpretation of Sappho's poetry. Poets and philologists alike often misinterpreted the content of the recently discovered fragments of Sappho's poetry, much to the detriment of contemporary understand of these works. In spite of this fact, however, it would be inappropriate to argue that the rediscovery of some of Sappho's poetry directly encouraged this new interest in her works. In fact, other influences, including several late Victorian literary movements, were just as important.

In the late nineteenth century, Greece bore witness to a new feminist movement. But this movement was fundamentally more conservative than similar movements that were taking place in America or Britain. The emergence of a new poetic sensibility—one that embraced the poetry of Sappho—occurred at precisely the same time. Sappho was assimilated by this modern Greek poetic sensibility.