

"O ma lyre immortelle," *Sapho* (Gounod, 1851)



Sex, Love & Poetry

Sappho & Catullus

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- I am gone Oct. 1-9
- So... there won't be class next week
- But there *will* be class this Wednesday, so you should come
- If anything should change, I'll let you know by email, but I expect to be back in class on Monday, October 11, giving a jet-lagged explanation of St. Augustine



Sappho

Life

- ❖ born c. 630-612 BC, died 570?
- ❖ exiled to Sicily c. 600 BC, maybe for political reasons?; presumed to have returned
- ❖ Library of Alexandria had *nine volumes* of her poetry
- ❖ almost all slowly lost (wrote in Aeolic Greek, not Attic); also not beloved by the Medieval Christian church.
- ❖ essentially every detail about her life is either a legend, or an assumption that her poetry is autobiographical (a daughter named Cleis?)



Life

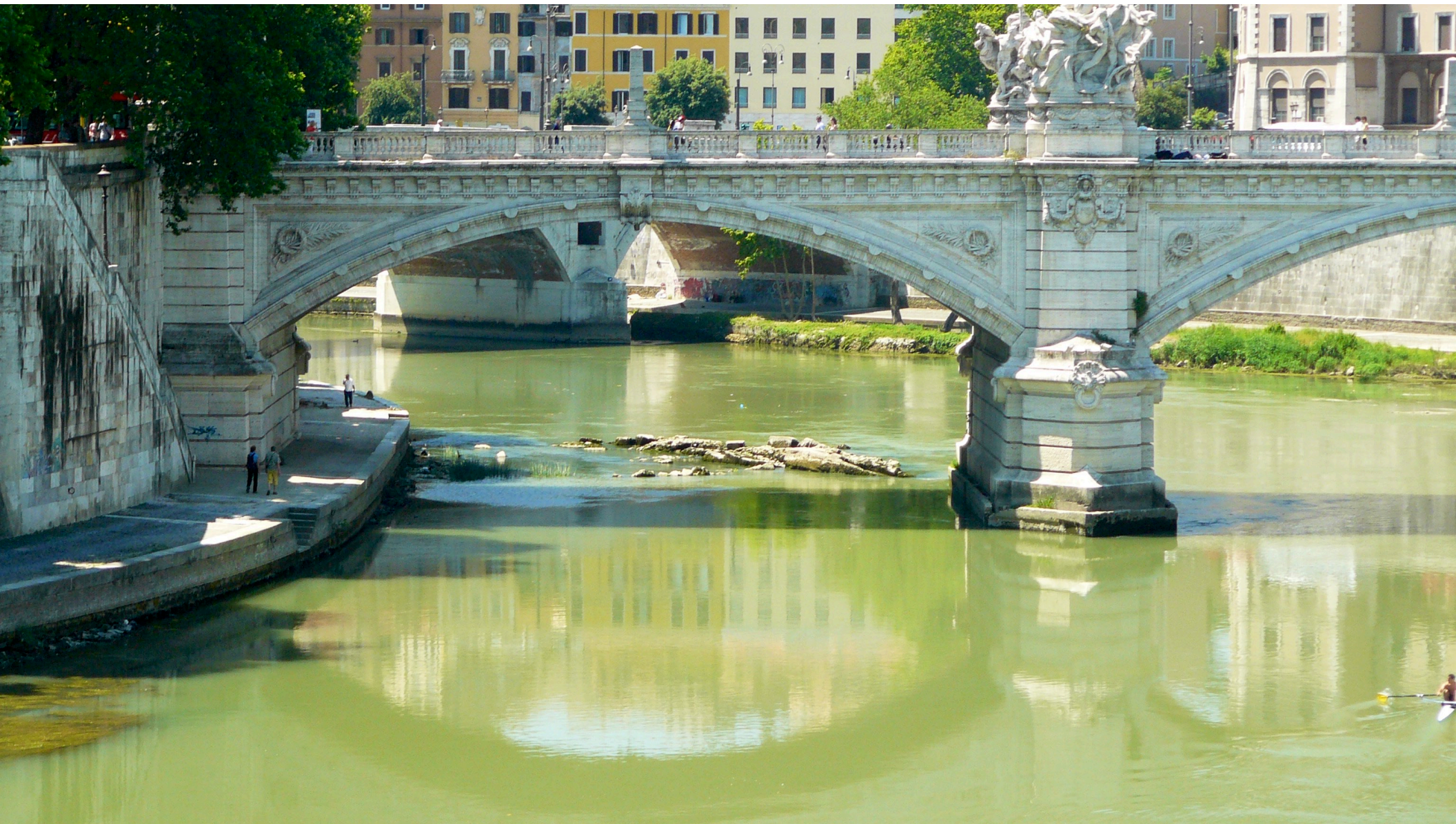
- ❖ really existed, however; her contemporary, Alcaeus, refers to her as “violet-haired, pure, honey-smiling Sappho”



A violet digression

- ❖ “Violet-haired”?
- ❖ The ancients described colors in *strange* ways that don’t map on our colors easily; they are mostly impressions of bright and dark. Did they not *see* colors like we do? Color words were in fact invented late, slowly, with difficulty, esp. “blue”
 - ❖ the Rubicon (the “ruby river”)
 - ❖ The Tiber, the “blonde river” (*flavus* — this word means yellow, but also green, but comes from the same root as the English word “blue”)
 - ❖ “Wine-dark sea”
 - ❖ “Grey-eyed Athena”
 - ❖ Sappho’s violet hair





Life

- ❖ really existed, however; attested to by her contemporaries
- ❖ lived on the Greek isle of Lesbos during turbulent political times, and during a great flowering of Greek lyric poetry (Pindar of Thebes)
- ❖ Still, an air of unreality, however: Alcaeus' description is more typical of a goddess



Life

- ❖ influential also for modernity, but more as an absence than a presence
- ❖ Monique Wittig's 'lesbian dictionary' gives only one woman an entire page to herself: Sappho
 - ❖ The page is completely blank
- ❖ She is a field onto which we can project desires, anxieties, fantasies
- ❖ gives us the word "lesbian" and "sapphic"



Life

- ❖ wrote in many forms, but is most famous for the “Sapphic Stanza”
 - ❖ 2 lines of hendecasyllables (lines of 11 syllables), plus a third line that “spills over” by an extra 5 syllables
- ❖ we receive her poetry as fragmentary today, giving it a Romantic feeling — the experience of the past as ruins, once whole, now lost to us
- ❖ this is a particular *feeling* (see *nostalgia*, *Odysseus*)



The Sapphic Stanza

Making Sapphics isn't that easy, shackling
Our reluctant language with trochees.* Since you
First begot them, songstress of Lesbos, keep them.
I'll never write them.

—John Lee

**trochee*: a stressed (or long) syllable, followed by an unstressed (or short) one. The opposite of the *iamb*, the “natural” meter in English.

(The word *trochee* is itself a trochee (perversely, the word *iamb* is also a trochee; the word *dactyl* is also a trochee, while the word *anapest* is a dactyl; the trochee is the only metrical foot that performs itself!).

Lyric Poetry

- ❖ Sappho (and Catullus) wrote “lyric poetry” (Sappho may have literally invented it): if epic poetry is great deeds, sacrifice, loyalty, etc., then lyric poetry is intimate, emotional, psychological
- ❖ also dominated by male poets, but always potentially female, both writing and subject
- ❖ tends to stress the poet as a *thinker* and a *feeler*; internal conflict; subtlety of feeling, and a subtle analysis of that feeling; the depth of interiority
- ❖ new Sappho poems discovered in 2014.





The poetic “I”

- ❖ we naturally and unconsciously assume epic poetry is fictional, that the poet writing it is an inventor making stuff up
- ❖ we equally tend to assume that lyric poetry is spontaneous and authentic, autobiographical
- ❖ *It is not.* Lyric poets imagine fictional states: they grieve for people who never died, show passion for lovers who never lived.
- ❖ the poetic “I” is always fictional, *even when* the situation is real and so are the feelings.
- ❖ So we write “Sappho the poet says...”



Themes

- ❖ *Love*
- ❖ but love always seen from a distance: longing, regretting, nostalgic, hopeful — internal
- ❖ compared to Catullus, Sappho is serious, reflective, private, even aloof; intensity of feeling
- ❖ frequent invocation of the gods and muses
- ❖ passionate love directed at both men and women (but mostly women); and the “poetic I”? Was Sappho a lesbian or not?



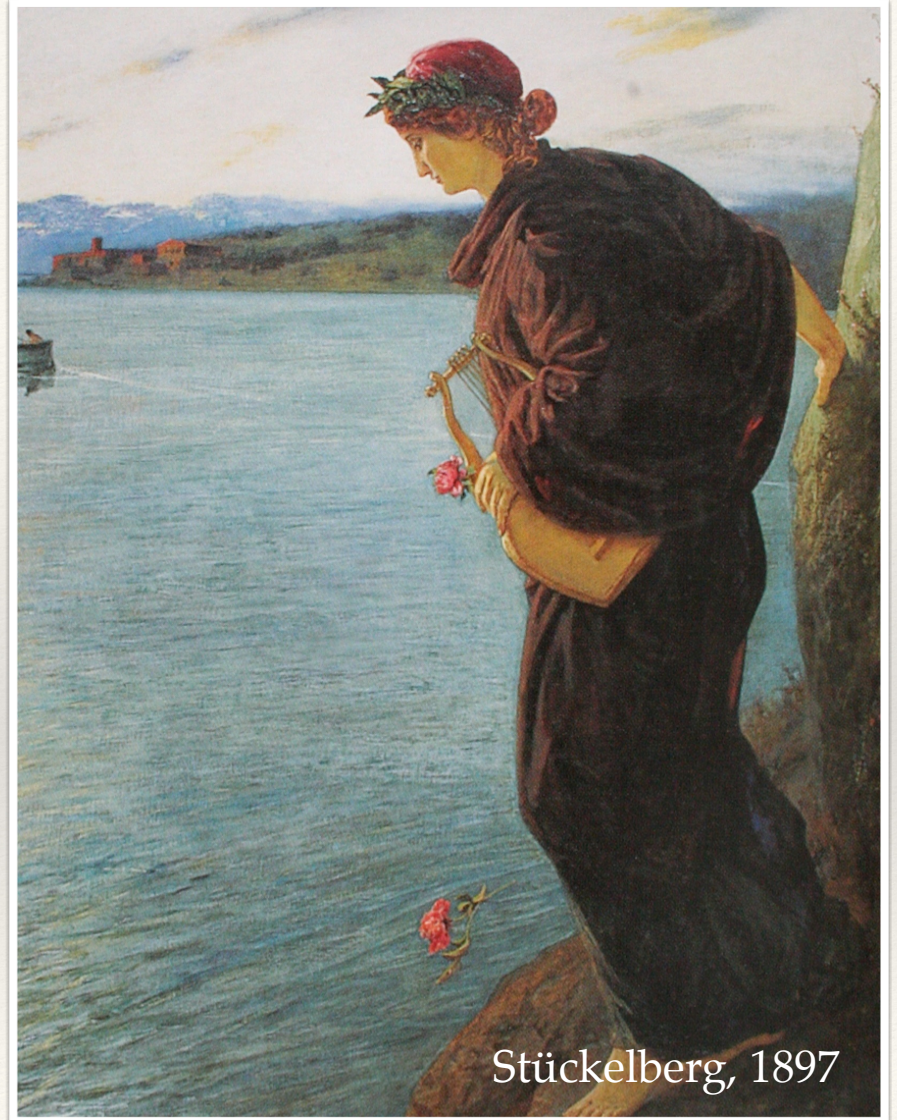
Reception

- ❖ In the ancient world, regarded more highly than any other lyric poet...
- ❖ Held up as the best, but rarely actively imitated
- ❖ Then, always praised, but rarely read; already substantial losses in the ancient world
- ❖ Not surprisingly (but sadly), the dominant historical reactions (since Middle Ages) were:
 - ❖ Actively repress (as by the church)
 - ❖ Emphasis on “tragic Sappho”
 - ❖ Heterosexualize

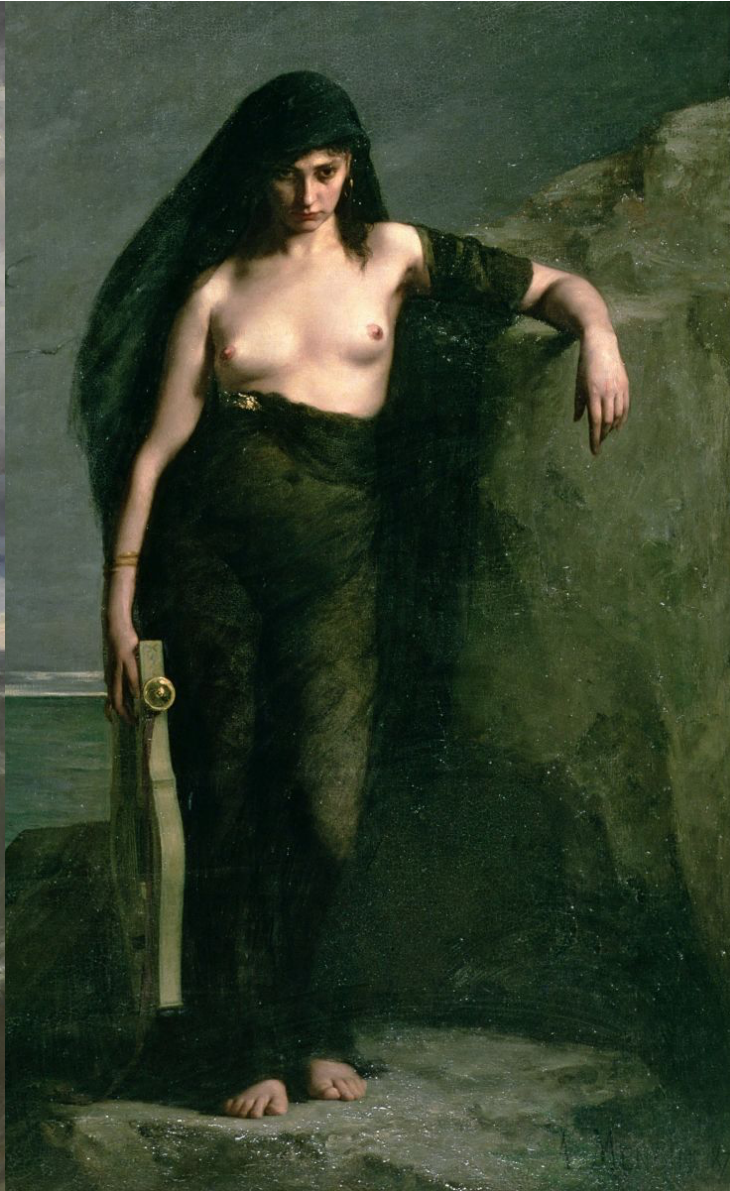




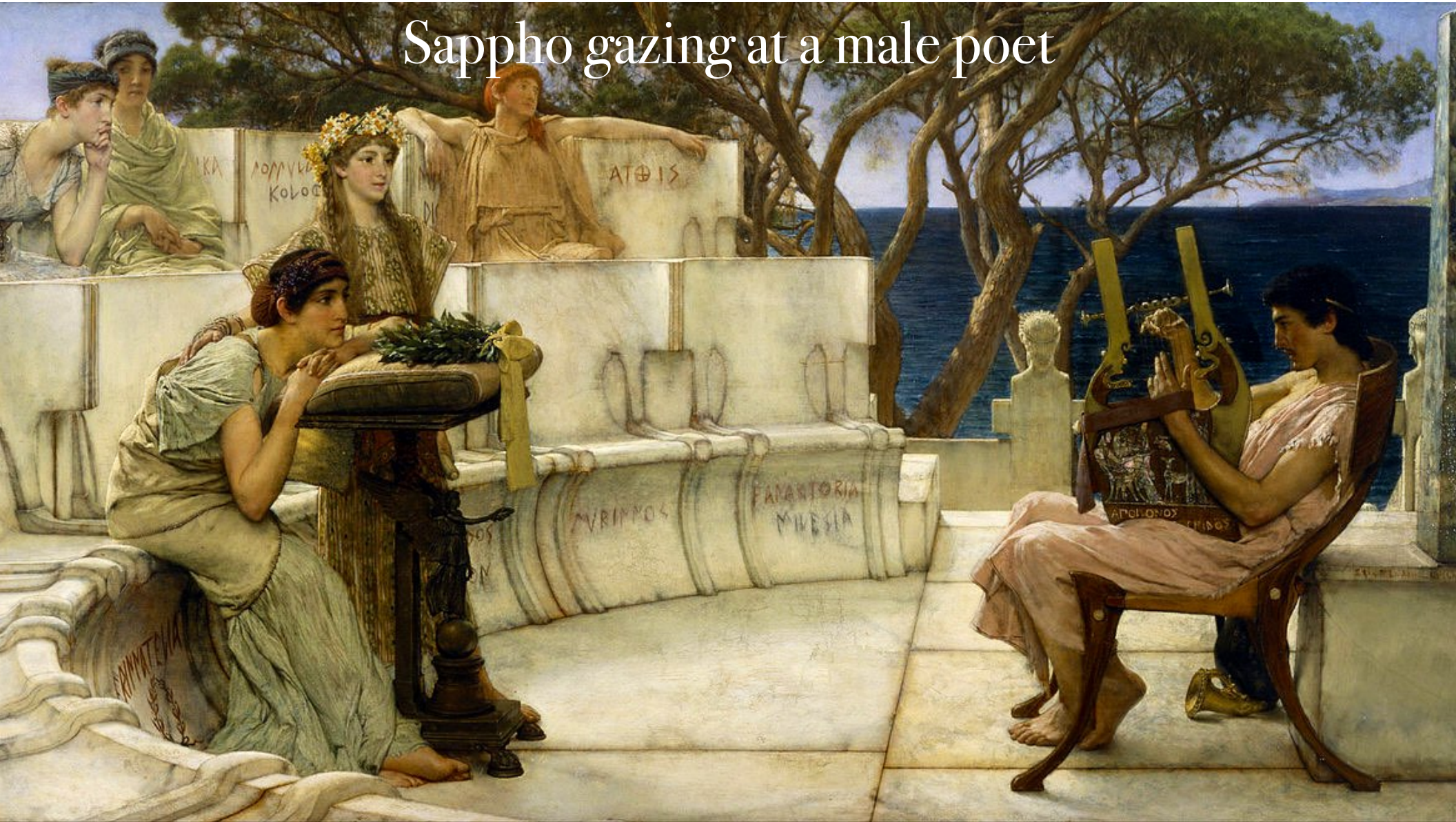
Gros, 1801



Stückelberg, 1897



Sappho gazing at a male poet

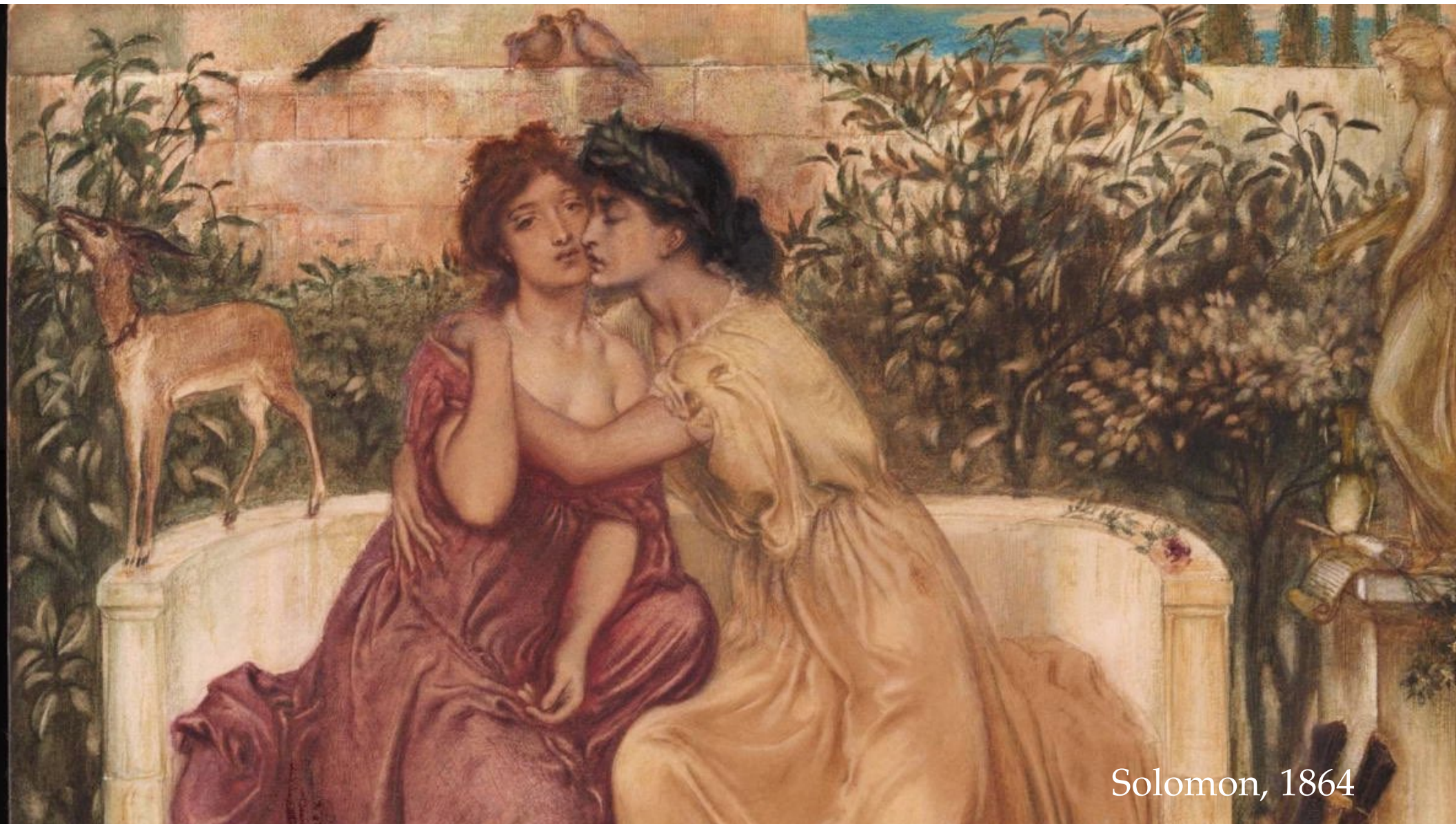






Alone

Godward, 1904



Solomon, 1864

Reception

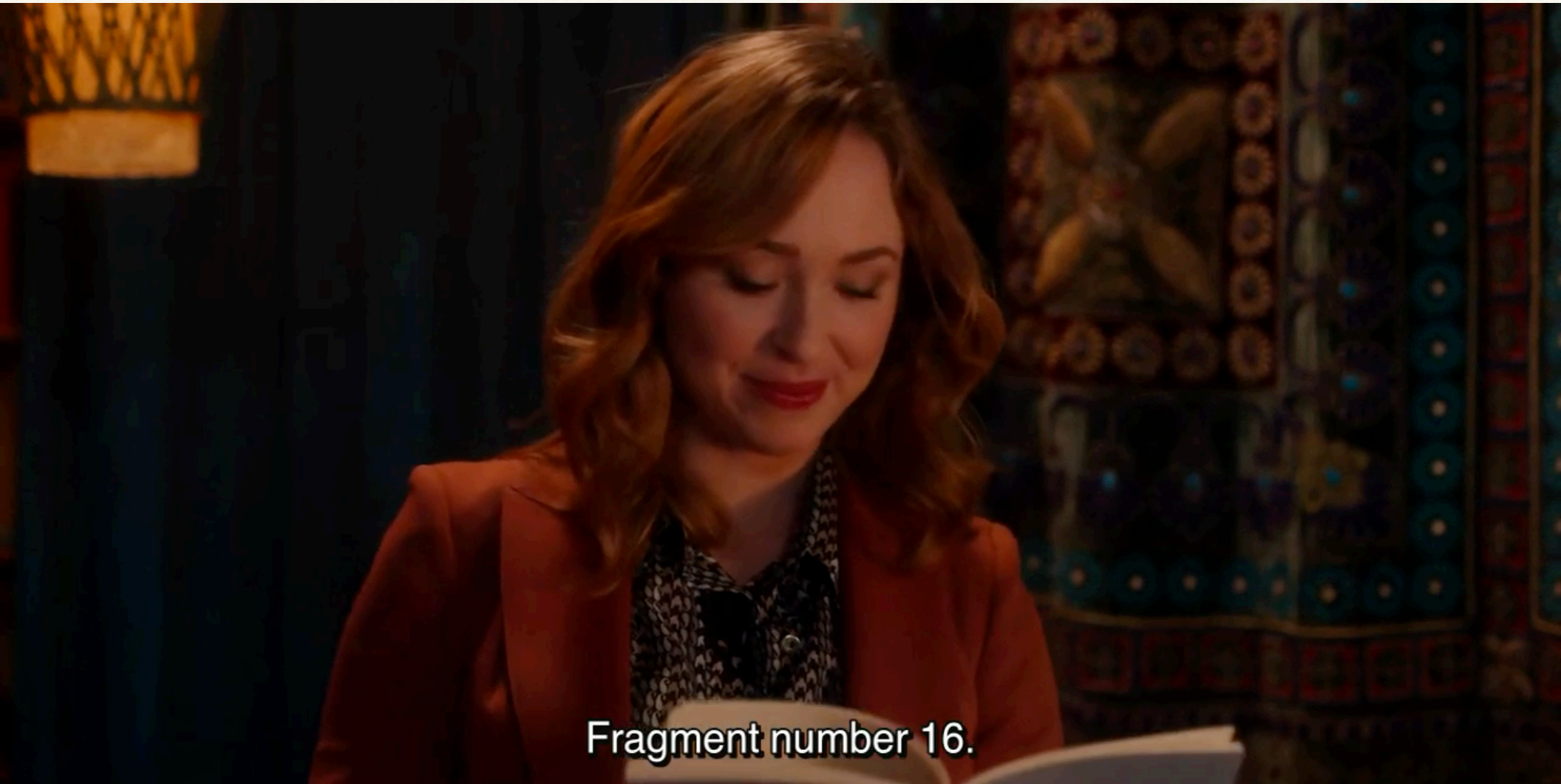
- ❖ More recently, of course, Sappho has become emblematic of a celebration of lesbian identity, its possibilities, the history of women loving women and their achievements
- ❖ Here are two examples of Sappho's appearances — still expressed in “code” — in contemporary popular culture



Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 2000



For All Mankind, 2021



Fragment number 16.

He's equal with the gods

He's equal with the Gods, that man
Who sits across from you,
Face to face, close enough, to sip
Your voice's sweetness,

And what excites my mind?
Your laughter, glittering. So,
When I see you, for a moment,
My voice goes.

He's equal with the gods

He's equal with the Gods, that man
Who sits across from you,
Face to face, close enough, to sip
Your **voice's sweetness**,

synesthesia (sound + taste)

And what excites my mind?
Your **laughter, glittering**. So,
When I see you, for a moment,
My voice goes.

synesthesia (sight + sound)

synesthesia (sight + voice)

He's equal with the gods

My tongue freezes. Fire,
Delicate fire, in the flesh.
Blind, stunned, the sound
Of thunder, in my ears.

Shivering with sweat, cold
Tremors over the skin,
I turn the color of dead grass,
And I'm an inch from dying.

He's equal with the gods

My tongue **freezes**. **Fire**,
Delicate fire, in the flesh.
Blind, stunned, **the sound**
Of thunder, in my ears.

oxymoron (freezing + flame)

oxymoron (power + delicacy)

synesthesia (sight + sound)

Shivering with sweat, cold
Tremors over the skin,
I turn the color of dead grass,
And I'm an inch from dying.

the body out of
control

Fragments

Once again, Love, that loosener of limbs,
bittersweet and inescapable, crawling thing,
seizes me.

Neither for me the honey
Nor the honeybee...

Dear mother, I cannot work the loom
Filled, by Aphrodite, with love for a slender boy...

...You burn me...

Fragments

Once again, Love, that loosener of limbs,
bittersweet and inescapable, crawling thing,
seizes me.

Fragments

And when you are gone there will be no memory
Of you, and no regret. For you do not share
The Pierian roses, but unseen in the house of Hades
You will stray, breathed out, among the ghostly dead.

The Muses have filled my life
With delight.
And when I die I shall not be forgotten.

Catullus

Life

- ❖ Gaius Valerius Catullus, 84-54 BC
- ❖ wealthy family (*equites*, just below the *patricii*) near modern-day Verona; spends adulthood in Rome; knew Cicero, Caesar, Pompey and others
- ❖ most important of the “new poets” — elegant, playful, full of allusions, and rejecting social norms and conventions
- ❖ sometimes obscene: Catullus 16 has been called the most obscene poem in any language (true?); not translated at all until late 20th century, and rarely accurately



Lesbia

- ❖ “Lesbia,” a pseudonym to honor Sappho
- ❖ Lesbia is thought to be Claudia (Clodia) Metelli Celeris
- ❖ aristocratic family, highly educated (she studied Greek, philosophy, wrote poetry)
- ❖ highly scandalous; changed name to plebeian form; drank, gambled, many affairs
- ❖ may have poisoned husband; accused of incest with brother



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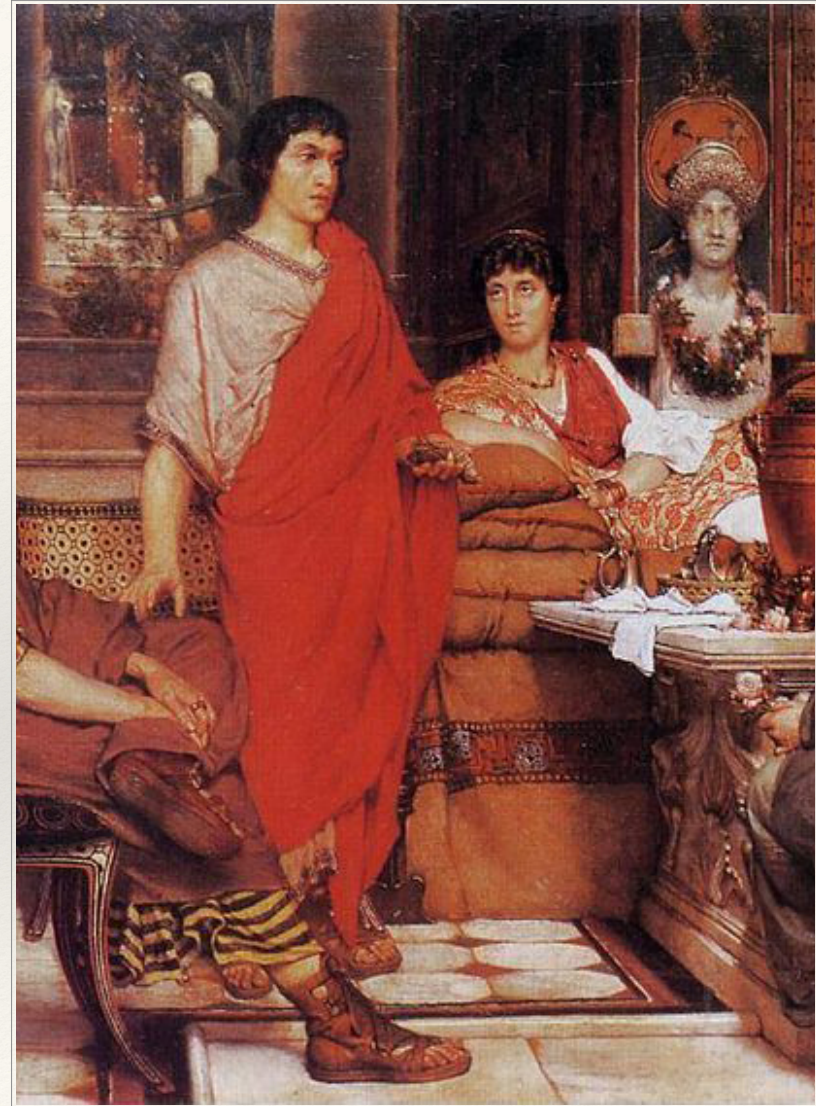
Note the dead bird

Alma-Tadema, 1866



Form

- ❖ 116 poems that vary hugely in form, from short comic pieces to one long, mini-epic (#64)
- ❖ most common meter is the hendecasyllable, but the epyllion (mini-epic) is in dactylic hexameter, the same meter used in Homer
- ❖ some poems so brief as to seem almost fragments, such as the elegiac couplet of 85 (“I hate and love”)



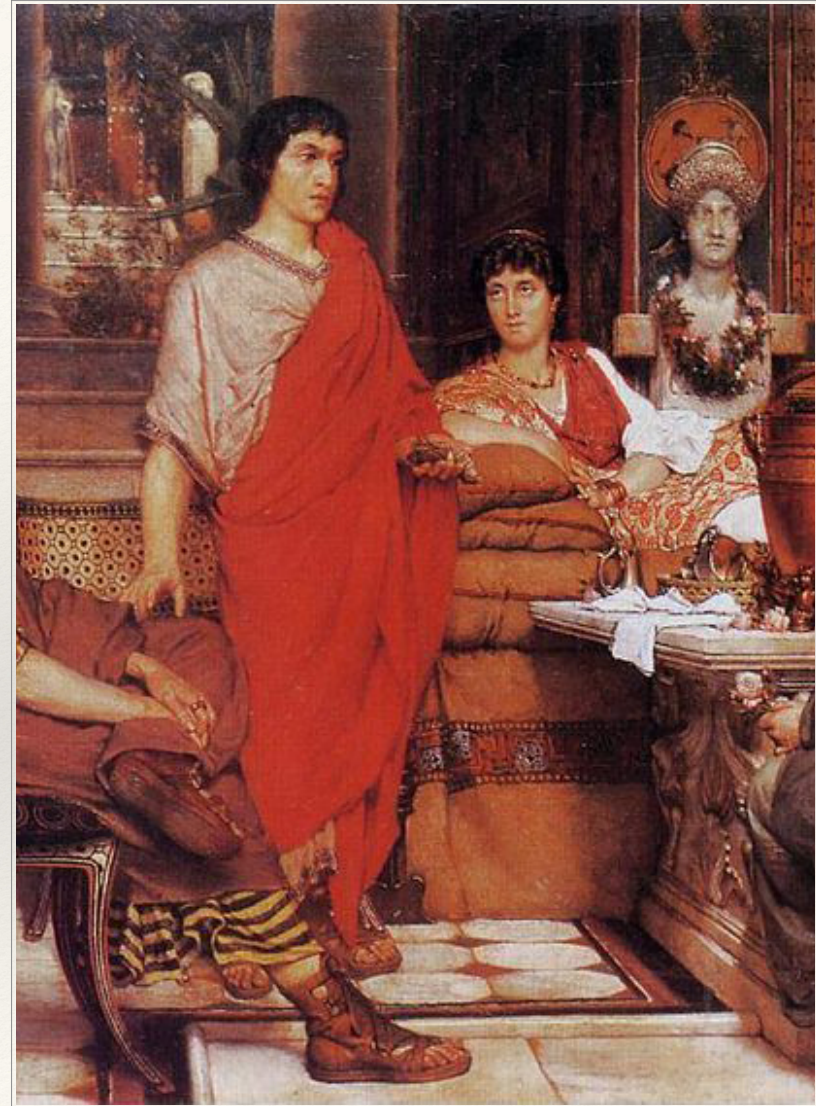




Dead bird
(Catullus 3)

Themes

- ❖ hugely varied, but scholars identify four main types:
 - ❖ invective (stop stealing my napkins!)
 - ❖ friendship
 - ❖ love and sex (mostly women, some men)
 - ❖ consolation
- ❖ the tone is generally light, mocking, self-deprecating, ironic, playful: but everyday life (hence less lyric, more realist)
- ❖ occasionally dark, full of grief, anguish, desperate—psychology of love (more lyric)



#5: Ad Lesbia

Vivamus mea Lesbia, atque amemus,
rumoresque senum severiorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis!
soles occidere et redire possunt:
nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
da mi basia mille, deinde centum,
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,
deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.
dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,
conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,
aut ne quis malus invidere possit,
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.

Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love,
and what old folks say, so severe,
that'll be nothing for us!
Suns may set, and rise again:
but when our brief light has set,
night is an endless, compulsory sleep.
Give me a thousand kisses, a hundred more,
then a thousand more, another hundred,
Then another thousand, still another hundred.
and, when we've counted up the thousands,
we'll mix them up 'til we don't know them,
and no enemy might give an envious eye,
and know that there were so many.

#12: To Asinius Marrucinus

Asinius Marrucinus, you don't employ
your left hand too well: in wine and jest,
you steal neglected table-linen.

Do you think that's witty? Get lost, you fool:
it's such a sordid and such an unattractive thing.

Don't you believe me? Believe Pollionus
your brother, who wishes your thefts
could be fixed by money: he's a boy
truly stuffed with wit and humor.

#12: To Asinius Marrucinus

So expect three hundred hendecasyllables
or return my napkin, whose value
doesn't disturb me, truly,
it's a remembrance of my friends.
Fabullus and Veranius sent me the gift,
napkins from Spain: they must be cherished
as my Veranius and Fabullus must be.

#51: To Lesbia

He seems equal to the gods, to me, that man,
if it's possible more than just divine,
who, sitting over against you, endlessly
sees you and hears you
laughing so sweetly, that with fierce pain I'm robbed
of all of my senses: because that moment
I see you, Lesbia, nothing's left of me.....

#51: To Lesbia

but my tongue is numbed, and through my poor limbs
fires are raging, the echo of your voice
rings in both ears, my eyes are covered
with the dark of night.

‘Your idleness is loathsome, Catullus:
you delight in idleness, and too much posturing:
idleness ruined the kings and the cities
of former times.’

#51: To Lesbia

Once you said you preferred Catullus alone, Lesbia:
would not have Jupiter before me.

I prized you then not like an ordinary lover,
but as a father prizes his children, his family.

Now I know you: so, though I burn more fiercely,
yet you're worth much less to me, and slighter.

How is that, you ask? The pain of such love
makes a lover love more, but like less.

#75: To Lesbia

My mind's reduced to this, by your faults, Lesbia,
and has ruined itself so in your service,
that now it couldn't wish you well,
were you to become what's best,
or stop loving you if you do what's worst.

#85: To Lesbia

I hate and love. Why, perhaps you'll ask.
I don't know: but I feel it, and I'm tormented.

Ōdī et amō. Quārē id faciam fortasse requīris.
Nesciō, sed fierī sentiō et excrucior.

