Sappho

To begin to suggest what this book will do, it might be best to compare it with another recent book, also titled Sappho, that perhaps better fulfills the expectations that title may raise. I have in mind Sappho, by Page duBois, Distinguished Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at the University of California San Diego.¹ DuBois, author of a previous book on Sappho (Sappho is Burning—a title, she notes in her acknowledgments, she owes to Judith/Jack Halberstam²) and the collaborator with John Daley on an edition of translations of the fragments, is an obvious choice to write a book in the “Understanding Classics” series to which it belongs. Unlike me, she is an expert in the field; her volume seeks to let readers know what can be known through the name “Sappho.” To the degree that it is possible, duBois provides information—about the life of Sappho, the corpus of her work, and the transmission of these archaic Greek texts as they were received in antiquity, in


the classical era, and in more modern times. Her final chapter, “Queer Sappho,” is where her project meets mine. Indeed, in seeking to give her readers information, duBois heads in this direction; she offers anything but the concrete knowledge that her topics might lead a reader to expect. The only biography we have of Sappho was written sixteen hundred years after her lifetime. No exact dates for her seventh century BC corpus can be provided, nor is “corpus” really the right word to describe the fragments that we have. Only two or three poems are complete enough to be treated as texts; newly discovered papyri in the last couple of decades have substantiated some biographical information (found in Herodotus) about Sappho and her brothers and filled in the glimpses of herself in old age found in some fragments. They hold out the possibility of more discoveries in years to come. The two texts of Sappho most frequently discussed are Fragment 31, almost all of which is cited as exemplary in Longinus, and the initial poem to Aphrodite that was not printed until the sixteenth century.

How Sappho was known in antiquity (Plato, for instance, alludes to her in the *Phaedrus* and named her as the tenth Muse) stands at some distance from the figure conveyed in the classical era (Ovid, in the *Amores*, penned an anguished letter from Sappho to her male lover Phaon; Catullus translated Fragment 31, substituting himself for Sappho as the presumed speaker in that poem), as well as from being the figure of all sorts of erotic distress she bears in modernity. Compiling the various accounts of Sappho that survive from antiquity, duBois concludes about them that “we will never know” how true any of them might be (80). “What do we make of the appearance of Sappho in [classical] comedy,” where she is the object of ridicule for unbridled heterosexual love, duBois asks, and answers, “Difficult to know” (93). “There is no stable ‘Sappho,’ no fixed person, no knowable biography, no final set of ‘collected works’” (153), she concludes, before turning to “Queer Sappho” for the possibilities that lie beyond the supposed certainties of the stable, the fixed, the known. That is where my Sappho is situated.

It also is where duBois situates hers. Her opening sentences pronounce Sappho a “figure,” “no longer a person” (“a person perhaps,” she puts it a bit later [5]), “not yet an author;
“a somewhat enigmatic name,” “a nexus” of “knowledge, attachment and projection.” “Who or what is Sappho” (33), duBois asks, and seeks to give as full an answer as possible to the unanswerable question. In subtitling my book “Fragments,” I demure from pursuit of the goal of some kind of complete or absolute knowledge, and do not do what duBois attempts in her chapter 4, “Trying to Translate Sappho,” to list everyone from John Donne to Ezra Pound who attempted translations (among them, Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Michael Field, H.D., Monique Wittig, and Judy Grahn, to sample the list of female sapphists mentioned). The aim of duBois’ book is to tell her readers everything that can be known or has been said in the name of Sappho without the definitive delivery that such an exhaustive empirical gathering might aim to provide. My book does not pretend to that kind of knowledge. I hope that by surveying examples that answer in one way or another to the “figure” of Sappho to further the project of what can be said when the hope of empirical knowledge as truth is abandoned. As duBois shows, for example, it is not even the case that we know what Sappho’s words mean; in some cases, we cannot know what words are to be read in texts that don’t separate one word from another. In the first fragment, as duBois demonstrates in a close reading, we cannot tell when another voice — presumably that of the Aphrodite being addressed — enters the text; it enters in an indeterminate relationship of identity and difference to the speaking voice who either is addressed as “Sappho” or addresses herself in that name (8). DuBois provides a literal translation of the final line of the penultimate stanza of the poem, “And if he/she/it will love, even not willing” (28). “He/she/it” is as definitive as the poem gets at this moment when the desired object spoken of throughout the poem is about to acquire the female gender that finally is offered through a verbal ending that matches the alpha-privative that earlier proclaimed Aphrodite’s deathlessness in a privative form that nonetheless includes the death it denies her (10, 28). Until its final lines, the poem fails to specify the eros it speaks (to he/she/it) even as it appears that a woman named Sappho is addressing a goddess named Aphrodite about a woman she desires. As duBois says,
the subject of the poem (and of all the fragments?) is “desire embodied in female form” (12).

This “embodiment” remains at once figurative and figured. It takes place in language, as is intimated in a comedy by Antiphanes, when the Sappho in that text sets a riddle about a woman whose voiceless progeny is nonetheless capable of being heard everywhere. The answer to the riddle about what this progeny might be is that “the feminine being is a written message, ... the offspring are the letters...” (92–93). The riddle — the enigma — that “Sappho” poses appears, for example, when, in “Sapho to Philaenis,” “Donne restores to Sappho the eros of lesbianism” (117) denied her by Ovid or Catullus, or by classical playwrights, not to mention the numerous writers of modernity who associate the name “Sappho” with a tragic heterosexuality: “Donne, taking on the voice of Sappho as Catullus once did, engages in a transvestism, a transgendersing, as he imagines himself not to be Catullus replacing Sappho’s speaker, but rather as the woman herself, imagining love-making with another woman” (118). Is Donne thereby “like” Catullus or unlike the Roman poet when he made Sappho’s voice his voice and made her desire for a woman his? Is the desire Donne voices in “Sapho to Philaenis” lesbian desire? Is Donne “a ‘male lesbian’” (126), a phrase duBois uses not about him but in reference to Swinburne’s “Anactoria” and “Sapphics”? If Catullus and Donne each perform acts of “poetic transvestism” (105), what did Sappho do when, in the matrix of Homeric figuration, she turned his tropes of war into hers of love? DuBois cautions that the fragment to Aphrodite does not end by giving “Sappho” her beloved, but by forcing into submission the “he/she/it” who becomes a “she.” No feminine–feminine equivalence is on offer in this poem, no mutuality or mirroring identification is being held out in this hostage situation, except perhaps a shared suffering, inflicted. But was the Homeric matrix in which Sappho made her intervention only one of male domination? Is that the

3 For a stunning essay that works from that supposition to possibilities of female–female erotic expression within the Homeric matrix, see Jack Winkler, “Gardens of Nymphs: Public and Private in Sappho’s Lyrics,” in Reflections of Women in Antiquity, edited by Helene
relation of Achilleus and Patrokles in *The Iliad*? DuBois seems to caution against a sappy sapphism that would turn Sappho into a version of the lesbian writer that she likens to “Lesbian lesbians” exemplified by H.D. and Bryher (128).

Instead, duBois reads Sappho along with her fellow “Lesbian, Alkaios” (2, 33; “Lesbian Alkaios” 43), Lesbians both, but not the same, as can be seen in the ways they depict the figure of Homer’s Helen; she is rehabilitated by Sappho in an effort duBois compares to Plato’s attempt to redefine the good (45), although duBois also wants Sapphic embodiment to be differentiated from platonic philosophical idealism while at the same time seeing how close the account of eros in the *Phaedrus* is to Fragment 31’s depiction of desire (95–96). Are lesbians Lesbians? Only for Monique Wittig, duBois avers (157). Yet it was also Wittig who insisted that lesbians aren’t women, since “woman” is a concept whose meaning is derivative of and dependent on the male/female gender system. Wittig and Sande Zeig’s page on Sappho in their dictionary of *Lesbian People* is a blank, not only because the question of who or what Sappho is cannot be answered by the facts that are missing and the texts we don’t have, but because Sappho baffles the categorical when it comes to sex and gender and sexuality.4 DuBois is impatient with a certain elegiac strain in queer theory that can read backwards only in pain and anguish and under the sign of loss. For her, the past—as in the figure of Sappho—is a site of possibility: “one might reconsider the possibilities inherent in looking backwards differently. That is, looking backward not just to the suffering and depression of gay and lesbian and queer persecution, but also to the model of an ancient world in which the structures of heterosexual norms, punishment, confession and secrecy had not yet been instituted in the name of the one god” (170). Those sentences inspire the ones that follow.

