

The Transforming Body of Sappho 31: A Survey of Ancient Reception, Genre Conversion, and Material Reconfiguration

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Abstract

A survey article and mining map of the ancient reception field around Sappho Fragment 31, from performance culture through historiography, comedy, tragedy, Plato, Alexandrian scholarship, Hellenistic poetry, Roman comedy and epigram, Catullus, Lucretius, Horace, Vergil, and Longinus, to the Jewish-Greek and Christian transforms that constitute the present program's research frontier. The survey distinguishes four evidentiary states — explicit reception, specific reception proposed in scholarship, broader Sapphic reception, and transform proposed by the present program — and replaces the single descending chain with a braided reception field. It deliberately preserves every promising ancient locus with bibliographic specificity sufficient for a later passage-level mining pass. Infrastructure for future work, calibrated against Catullus 51 as the secure transform-control.

Body

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- mining map - evidentiary states *** # The Transforming Body of Sappho 31: A Survey of Ancient Reception, Genre Conversion, and Material Reconfiguration

Files

Record and PDF only; the passage-level mining appendix is declared as the next pass, not included here.

The Transforming Body of Sappho 31

A Survey of Ancient Reception, Genre Conversion, and Material Reconfiguration

Working status

This survey maps the ancient reception field around Sappho Fragment 31 while distinguishing four evidentiary states that must not be collapsed: explicit reception (quotation, naming, acknowledged adaptation); specific reception proposed in scholarship (a particular passage has been argued to receive Fragment 31); broader Sapphic reception (important for transmission history but not yet specifically tied to 31); and transform proposed by the present research program (a materially specified relation requiring independent historical evaluation).

The distinction is necessary because the ancient history is substantially denser than a simple Sappho → Plato → Catullus → Longinus → Philo → Josephus → Revelation → Augustine genealogy suggests. Sappho passed through performance, symposium, historiography, comedy, tragedy, philosophy, Hellenistic scholarship, epic, pastoral, Roman comedy, epigram, lyric, criticism, Jewish-Greek prose, Christian apocalypse, and confession. The historically interesting question is therefore not merely whether Fragment 31 “influenced” later authors, but what kind of object it became when each receiving medium handled it.

The archive’s existing model takes Fragment 31 as an embodied sequence whose channels fail while its structure passes into transmissible form; in its current compressed notation, σ_S :: Body → Text — the poem moves through perception, speech failure, fire, sensory occlusion, tremor, colour change, death-adjacency, and textual survival (#1478). The survey below does not require acceptance of that interpretation. Its purpose is to establish the reception field within which the stronger transform thesis can subsequently be tested.

1. Before textual reception: performance itself transforms Sappho

Reception begins before quotation.

Dimitrios Yatromanolakis’ *Sappho in the Making* is foundational here because it treats archaic and classical reception as a problem of changing social and performative context, particularly the assimilation of Sapphic song into symposium culture. Gregory Nagy similarly argues that Athenian reception is not best conceived as a dead Lesbian corpus being “revived,” but as continuing performance in which the tradition is thereby transformed; he specifically contrasts an earlier choral performance-context with later sympotic performance.

This gives the survey its first transformation: performed Lesbian song → Athenian reperformance under changed social conditions.

That matters because later textual phenomena need not derive from silent reading of a fixed edition. Comedy, tragedy, philosophy, and historiography can encounter Sappho through a culture in which her language and persona are already being reperformed.

Mining anchors: Dimitrios Yatromanolakis, *Sappho in the Making: The Early Reception*, *Hellenic Studies* 28 (2008), CHS stable URN urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_YatromanolakisD.Sappho_in_the_Making.200 Gregory Nagy, “The ‘New Sappho’ Reconsidered in the Light of the Athenian Reception of Sappho” (2010).

2. Historiography: song becomes evidence about the poet

Herodotus 2.134–135 is indispensable even though it is not evidence for reception of Fragment 31 specifically. Herodotus knows Sappho’s melos concerning Charaxos and the courtesan Rhodopis/Doricha and explicitly treats what Sappho sang as information bearing upon persons and events. Dirk Obbink’s formulation, adopted and qualified by Nagy, is that “recorded reception” begins with Herodotus.

That is already a major generic conversion: song-event → evidentiary object in historical prose. A performed poetic voice has become something from which a historian can infer the life and relationships of a poet. This is the beginning of the later biographical Sappho, and it needs its own branch in the reception graph.

Hecataeus is worth mining immediately upstream. Nagy proposes Hecataeus as a possible anonymous foil behind part of Herodotus’ Rhodopis discussion. That does not establish Hecataean reception of Sappho 31 — or even necessarily of Sappho — but it identifies an earlier historiographic stratum worth investigating through Athenaeus and the surviving Hecataean tradition.

The future history should therefore have a historiography/biography lane separate from the Fragment-31 transform lane: Hecataeus? → Herodotus → later biographical and antiquarian witnesses → Athenaeus, Aelian, Strabo, Plutarch, lexicographical traditions.

3. Comedy: Sappho becomes a theatrical person

The comic material is much larger than the program’s first reconstruction allowed.

Six ancient comedies are securely known with the title Sappho: plays attributed to Amipsias, Amphis, Antiphanes, Ehippus, Timocles, and Diphilus. Papachrysostomou’s commentary on Amphis explicitly remarks on the exceptional comic popularity of Sappho; the same six-play corpus is catalogued in recent Cambridge scholarship.

This is a transformation of another order: authorial voice → named dramatic character → socially legible comic persona.

The surviving evidence does not permit us simply to call those six plays receptions of Fragment 31. But they prove that Classical and Middle Comedy were actively manufacturing Sappho as an object. They belong in any history that later asks how the erotic speaker of 31 could acquire biographical, sexual, or social identities not supplied by the poem itself.

Aristophanes provides firmer textual material. Paul Johnston demonstrates explicit verbal handling of Sappho 1 in *Knights* 730 and of Sappho 94 around *Knights* 1248–52. In the first case, Sapphic erotic reciprocity is imported into the Cleon/Paphlagonian–Demos relationship and made to function as political and gendered invective. The transformation is therefore: female erotic lyric → civic-erotic comedy → political slander.

Johnston’s footnote 18 is especially valuable as a future-mining index, because it collects possible Sapphic reminiscences across Athenian drama and identifies Aristophanes, *Birds* 1167 ~ Sappho 31.1–2 among the most plausible candidates. That single footnote should become one of the working survey’s major source reservoirs.

Mining anchors: Paul G. Johnston, “Sappho, Cleon and Eros in Aristophanes’ *Knights*,” *Classics@* 16; Christoph Kugelmeier, *Reflexe früher und zeitgenössischer Lyrik in der alten attischen Komödie* (1996), DOI 10.1515/9783110954241 — explicitly treating the symposium and schooling as carriers of earlier lyric into comedy; Eleonora Cavallini, *Presenza di Saffo e Alceo nella poesia greca fino ad Aristofane* (Ferrara, 1986).

4. Tragedy: the Fragment-31 opening enters dramatic speech

The tragic corpus needs systematic mining, not a few anecdotal parallels.

Johnston’s same survey identifies Sophocles, *Electra* 67 ~ Sappho 31.1–2 as a plausible Fragment-31 relation. It also gathers a broader field of proposed Sapphic echoes: Trojan Women 820–824 ~ Sappho 2; Oedipus at Colonus 1725–27 ~ fr. 95; Agamemnon 403–08 ~ fr. 16; Cyclops 182–87 ~ fr. 16; Rhesus 527–36 ~ fr. 168B; and Philoctetes 1224 ~ fr. 5.

Those are not equivalent claims. But together they establish the correct prior: Attic drama is already a dense Sappho-processing environment. Fragment 31 should be searched within that environment rather than treated as jumping directly from Sappho to Plato.

Andreas Bagordo’s *Reminiszenzen früher Lyrik bei den attischen Tragikern* is almost tailor-made for the next pass. He evaluates 108 proposed lyric/tragedy parallels and is deliberately conservative about promoting resemblance into allusion; twelve Sapphic cases receive dedicated treatment. That makes Bagordo particularly useful for the program’s method: he supplies a scholarly corpus in which failed candidates are useful, not embarrassing. The transform can be tested against an already skeptical allusion study.

5. Plato: lyric shock becomes philosophical mechanics

Plato is stronger externally than the earlier survey implied.

At *Phaedrus* 235c Socrates explicitly names “beautiful Sappho” among the predecessors from whom he may have heard superior accounts of eros. E. E. Pender argues that this acknowledgement belongs to a larger Platonic response to Sapphic and Anacreontic accounts of the shock of love, and that Plato transforms the lyric dynamics of erotic force into an analysis of how eros is absorbed, transferred, and redirected within the soul.

Modern scholarship has gone further: the lover’s physiological response to Beauty in *Phaedrus* 250–51 has specifically been read against Fragment 31, with Plato described as redirecting lyric language into philosophical channels, particularly where bodily erotic response becomes movement toward abstract Beauty.

That gives a securely mineable transition: lyric physiology → philosophical psychology of eros.

The archive's stronger Diotima/Ladder claim should be kept distinct. Its proposal is that the movement from one beautiful body toward deathless form, combined with Diotima's account of immortality through generated logoi, is a further vertical transform of the Sapphic body-to-transmission architecture — carefully labeled structural reincorporation rather than biographical identity. For the survey, therefore: the Phaedrus relation is an externally established research field; the Diotima/Ladder relation is the present program's stronger extension, to be tested against that field. That distinction materially improves the argument.

6. Alexandria and Hellenistic poetry: the lyric body enters the book

The Alexandrian moment is not merely another author-node. It is a media transformation.

Benjamin Acosta-Hughes' Arion's Lyre treats Hellenistic reception as the moment when archaic lyric is preserved, edited, codified, reread, and creatively transformed within a culture of books and scholarship; his "Alexandrian Sappho" explicitly emphasizes the transition toward the poetry book and scholarly preservation (DOI 10.1515/9781400834891). That should stand as its own transformation: reperformed song → edited/codified lyric author.

Within that environment, two Fragment-31 receptions are particularly strong.

Theocritus 2.82–90 and 106–10. The relationship with Sappho 31 has a substantial bibliography. Roberto Pretagostini's dedicated study is "Teocrito e Saffo. Forme allusive e contenuti nuovi (Theocr. 2,82 sgg., 106 sgg. e Sapph. 31,7 sgg. L.-P.)," QUCC 24 (1977), 107–18, reprinted in *Ricerche sulla poesia alessandrina* (1984), 105–17. Acosta-Hughes devotes substantial attention to the relation and asks whether Simaetha's lament is specifically a reading of Fragment 31, not merely thematic resemblance. Materially, the transformation is: immediate lyric seizure → narrated magical-erotic pathology. The Sapphic body becomes Simaetha's body, but now embedded in ritual, retrospective narrative, magic, and Hellenistic literary self-consciousness.

Apollonius, *Argonautica* 3.284–90; 3.962–65; 4.16–17. Acosta-Hughes and later scholarship treat the Sapphic presence in Medea's body as extensive; Book 4 can reuse 31 in panic after Book 3 has used it for desire. That is an extraordinarily important transform for the program's purposes: first-person lyric autopathography → third-person epic narration of an interior body. The receiver is no longer allowed to tell us her own dissolution; an epic narrator possesses and redistributes it.

7. Early Rome before Catullus: comedy and epigram

Catullus is not the beginning of Roman Fragment-31 reception.

Ariana Traill argues that Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* 1216–83 contains Sapphic handling, possibly mediated through Greek comic parody rather than directly from Sappho (DOI 10.1093/cq/bmi047). That distinction is exactly what this project needs: a transform can arrive through a transform. The route could therefore be Sappho 31 → Greek comic reception → Roman comedy, rather than Sappho → Plautus.

Valerius Aedituus is stronger still. His fr. 1, preserved by Gellius NA 19.9.10, is explicitly identified in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* as an imitation of Sappho 31 (DOI 10.1093/acre-

fore/9780199381135.013.6665). The long symptom catalogue is compressed into silence and sweating as a male lover attempts speech.

So before Catullus we already have: Sapphic somatic cascade → Hellenistic-style epigrammatic compression → Roman male erotic embarrassment. That may prove important when evaluating what Catullus inherited directly from Sappho and what he inherited through an already established Roman Sapphic idiom.

8. Catullus 51: the secure transform-control

Catullus remains the control case because the first-order dependency is not in serious doubt.

The archive's latest correction is especially useful because it refuses to describe the whole poem as one homogeneous translation. Its current account distinguishes: Sappho stanza 1 → Catullus stanza 1, close translation; Sappho stanzas 2-4 → Catullus stanzas 2-3, lossy 3→2 compression; reconstructed Sappho-5 position → Catullus stanza 4, structurally precise polarity inversion.

Whatever judgment eventually falls on the reconstructed fifth stanza, the methodological gain remains: Catullus demonstrates that reception can simultaneously preserve, compress, omit, rearrange, and redirect different parts of one source. This is why he should calibrate the whole survey. If we cannot describe other receptions with at least some comparable material specificity, they should not be promoted to the same evidentiary class.

9. Lucretius, Vergil, Horace: Fragment 31 becomes a Roman physiological repertoire

The Roman field then becomes very large. Roman Receptions of Sappho explicitly notes that Sapphic reception is traceable across more than eighteen Roman poets and provides dedicated chapters on Lucretius, Catullus, Vergil, Horace, Propertius, Ovid, and Roman epigram (DOI 10.1093/oso/9780198829430.001.0001).

Three loci deserve immediate mining.

Lucretius 3.152-60. The relation with 31 is recognized but contested, partly because the symptom-complex also has Homeric fear antecedents. That ambiguity is productive: Lucretius appears to reuse something very close to the Sapphic bodily repertoire in a fear/body-soul argument, potentially rotating erotic physiology into philosophical pathology. The *De Rerum Natura* is now seated whole in the archive's library (EA-CORPORA-02/06), so this locus can be tested against the archive's own sovereign text.

Horace, Odes 1.13. An especially promising controlled comparison: Horace's jealous lover exhibits unstable mind/color, moisture, and inward fire while reacting to Lydia's praise of Telephus. The poem stands downstream of Sappho, Aedituus, and Catullus rather than merely beside them. Odes 1.19 and 4.1 also belong in the broader Sapphic transform field; Nagy reads 4.1 as a kind of "reritualization" of Sapphic Venus.

Vergil requires a larger dedicated pass. Stephen Harrison's "Shades of Sappho in Vergil" (chapter 7 of the Oxford volume) should be the starting mine rather than isolated internet parallels.

10. Longinus: reception becomes a theory of reception

De sublimitate 10 is sui generis because it is simultaneously a material preservation event, an interpretation of Fragment 31, and a theory of what such writing does.

The archive's measured finding (#1476, #1478) is that the immediate second-person turn after the Sappho quotation belongs to a rare pattern in the treatise; elsewhere Longinus explicitly describes the operation as taking up the addressee's soul and making hearing into sight. Therefore: lyric seizure → critical specimen → theory and performance of reader transport.

Longinus should probably appear twice in the eventual graph: once chronologically as a Roman-imperial reception and once vertically as the preservational metanode through which the surviving substantial text of 31 reaches us. The proposed reconstruction of lost §44.12 must remain quarantined as reconstruction: its Greek periods are not recovered wording, and no Longinus→Josephus/Revelation transmission has been demonstrated.

11. Jewish-Greek and Christian transforms: the present research frontier

This is where the archive's own contributions become dominant and external reception history has not yet been done at comparable depth.

The present program specifies a Philonic transformation in which co-presence becomes alternation, sensory occlusion becomes the condition rather than consequence of reception, the broken speaker becomes an instrument used by another, and lyric first person becomes exegetical classification; the independent Philonic anchor is the doctrine of the inspired speaker who says nothing of his own while God uses human organs as instruments (#1486).

Greek Esther Addition D and canonical Josephus then provide a different material register. The canonical-Josephus paper (#1493) argues that AJ 11.234-241 rewrites Addition D while restoring an explicit voice term and a ὥς ... εὐθὺς correlative toward Sappho's configuration; BJ 1.436-444 supplies an inverse assignment of muteness, speech, life/death, and eros.

The Slavonic Josephus must remain separate because its textual transmission and dating are disputed; the archive explicitly warns that its reconstructed Greek permission formula cannot be printed as extant Greek Josephus.

Revelation 12 is currently an operator-test rather than a settled source claim (#1494, sealed test); Augustine Confessions 10.27 is the archive's clearest late transform, with sensory collapse rotated toward sensory restoration and the "lock" passing from broken tongue to receptive taste.

These appear in the survey clearly under program-specific transform hypotheses, not assimilated retroactively to the externally established Catullus/Theocritus/Apollonius evidence.

12. What the expanded field changes

The main consequence is that we should abandon the visual metaphor of a single descending chain. The evidence now looks like a braided reception field: performance history supplies reperformed Sappho; historiography converts song into biography/evidence; comedy creates

Sappho-personae and repurposes lyric eros as invective; tragedy incorporates Sapphic diction and configurations into dramatic speech; Plato converts erotic shock into psychological/metaphysical mechanics; Alexandrian scholarship makes Sappho an edited textual author; Theocritus ritualizes the symptom body; Apollonius narrativizes it in epic third person; Greek and Roman comedy parody and recirculate it; Aedituus compresses it into epigram; Catullus translates, compresses, and redirects it; Lucretius potentially reassigns it to fear; Horace incorporates it into a Roman lyric physiology; Longinus preserves it by converting it into critical evidence; and only after that dense history do the Jewish-Greek and Christian candidates enter.

That changes the research question from “Did Sappho 31 somehow travel into the later Logos/apocalyptic tradition?” to: which constraints of Fragment 31 were already demonstrably portable across genre, language, speaker-position, polarity, and explanatory framework before the proposed Jewish-Greek crossing, and does the later material preserve the same constraints beyond what this known reception ecology predicts?

That is a much harder — and much better — test.

13. Core future-mining bibliography

Yatromanolakis, Dimitrios. *Sappho in the Making: The Early Reception*. Hellenic Studies 28, 2008. — Performance, symposium, visual representation, formation of “Sappho.” Cavallini, Eleonora. *Presenza di Saffo e Alceo nella poesia greca fino ad Aristofane*. Ferrara, 1986. — Early Greek transformations through Aristophanes. Kugelmeier, Christoph. *Reflexe früher und zeitgenössischer Lyrik in der alten attischen Komödie*. 1996. DOI 10.1515/9783110954241. — Systematic lyric→comedy transmission; schooling/symposium carriers. Bagordo, Andreas. *Reminiszenzen früher Lyrik bei den attischen Tragikern*. Munich, 2003. ISBN 9783406517433. — Conservative audit of lyric→tragedy parallels; twelve Sapphic cases. Johnston, Paul G. “Sappho, Cleon and Eros in Aristophanes’ *Knights*.” *Classics@ 16*. — Direct Sappho/Aristophanes analysis plus exceptionally useful drama-loci bibliography (n. 18). Pender, E. E. “Sappho and Anacreon in Plato’s *Phaedrus*.” *Leeds International Classical Studies* 6.4 (2007). — Plato’s acknowledged handling of lyric erotic shock. Acosta-Hughes, Benjamin. *Arion’s Lyre: Archaic Lyric into Hellenistic Poetry*. Princeton, 2010. DOI 10.1515/9781400834891. — Alexandrian Sappho; Theocritus; Apollonius; book-culture transformation. Pretagostini, Roberto. “Teocrito e Saffo. Forme allusive e contenuti nuovi.” *QUCC* 24 (1977): 107–18. — Dedicated Theocritus 2 / Fragment 31 comparison. Sanders, Ed. “Love, Grief, Fear, and Shame: Medea’s Interconnecting Emotions in Book 3 of Apollonius’ *Argonautica*.” *Greece & Rome* 68.1 (2021): 45–60. DOI 10.1017/S0017383520000236. — Medea’s bodily-affective construction; explicit fr. 31 comparison. Traill, Ariana. “Acroteleutium’s Sapphic Infatuation (Miles 1216–83).” *CQ* 55.2 (2005): 518–33. DOI 10.1093/cq/bmi047. — Greek-comic mediation into Plautus; crucial transform-of-transform case. Citroni, Mario. “Valerius Aedituus.” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.6665. — Pre-Catullan Roman adaptation of fr. 31. Thorsen, Thea S., and Stephen Harrison, eds. *Roman Receptions of Sappho*. Oxford, 2019. DOI 10.1093/oso/9780198829430.001.0001. — The master Roman mining corpus: Lucretius through Martial, plus testimonia.

14. Declared next pass

The next pass on this survey is not conceptual expansion. It is a passage-level mining appendix: every ancient locus mentioned by Johnston, Bagordo, Kugelmeier, Acosta-Hughes, and Roman Receptions of Sappho, one row per passage, with the modern scholar who proposed the relation and bibliographic coordinates sufficient to retrieve the argument again. That appendix is where the witnesses we still don't know we're missing will almost certainly be found.

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