

**Carmelo Salemmè, *Saffo e la bellezza agonale***, Bari: Cacucci Editore, 2013, 109 pp., ISBN 978-88-6611-270-9, € 12.00.

The book under review was published as volume 7 of the newly established series “Biblioteca della tradizione classica” directed by Davide CANFORA and Domenico LASSANDRO. Carmelo SALEMMÈ (henceforth S.) drew on his earlier (1996–2004) contributions dealing with Sappho’s poetry and its environmental context, having, however (cf. “Premessa”, p. 9), amplified, modified and linked them together. The book consists of four chapters entitled, respectively, “Lo splendore del sole e la bellezza” (pp. 11–25), “La bellezza agonale” (pp. 27–51), “La gioia di Saffo e i rimproveri di Afrodite” (pp. 53–59), and “La cerchia di Saffo” (pp. 61–88).

In spite of S.’s declaration, his book does not form a homogenous whole and remains, in principle, a collection of separate articles. Nevertheless, the elements he highlights in each of them are, to a certain extent, relevant to the central topic of erotic rivalry characteristic of the poet’s entourage. But the work can (and perhaps should – to do justice to its good points) be assessed also from a different perspective: as an attempt to revise a number of interpretative questions. S.’s merit lies in painstaking attention to detail and constructive criticism of the scholars’ judgments he deems unsatisfactory.

In the first chapter, S. begins with an analysis of the crucial notion of the Sapphic ἀβροσύνα, the love of which, according to him, has no political subtext in Sappho (a polemic with Leslie KURKE’s view, *The Politics of ἀβροσύνη in Archaic Greece*, *ClAnt* XI 1992, p. 96). For those trying to discern the aesthetic undertones, S.’s subtle interpretation of the relation of ἀβροσύνα to the splendour of the sun at fr. 58.23–26 VOIGT will certainly be rewarding. As far as the poem’s length and termination are concerned, S. holds to the view according to which the above-indicated four lines should not be detached from the preceding part of the text, now much better known thanks to the Cologne Sappho papyrus (*PKöln* 21351 + 21376, lines 9–20 = *POxy.* 1787, lines 11–22) and commonly labelled as the ‘Tithonus poem’. He argues that they form the proper conclusion of the composition, which otherwise would end too abruptly. Respecting the author’s right to such an opinion, one can hardly accept the type of the suggested opposition between the myth and the present situation: “A Titono decrepito e relegato in una oscurità mai visitata da sole Saffo oppone il suo amore per la ἀβροσύνα” (p. 25).

The second chapter deals not only with Sappho’s sensitivity to (particularly feminine) beauty, but also with her tendency to describe it in an evaluative way, for example using comparisons to grade the physical attractiveness of individual girls or women, pointed out by name. Even if she makes no explicit mention of the famous Lesbian beauty competitions (as her compatriot Alcaeus does, fr. 130b VOIGT), she testifies to and recreates the competitive atmosphere which pervaded the circle of her companions and acquaintances. Searching for an analogy, S. refers, aptly, to Alcman’s maiden-songs with their light symbolism serving to enhance the impression of beauty.

The short third chapter, devoted to the interpretation of fr. 22 VOIGT, is a case study of the complex erotic relations between the poet and her friend(s). It forms a kind of introduction to the extensive fourth chapter on Sappho’s circle. In this final part of the book, S. had to face some notoriously disputed questions, such as the social roles attributed by interpreters over the centuries to the Lesbian poet and the members of her circle mentioned in her poems (friends or pupils? hetaeric Sappho or Sappho schoolmistress?). S. excludes any analogy between Sappho’s circle and that of Alcaeus’, as well as any comparison with the men’s political *hetaireia* he belonged to and sympotic gatherings he attended and described (as H.N. PARKER, *Sappho Schoolmistress*, *TAPhA* CXXIII 1993, pp. 309–351, believes). As for the vexed question of the Sapphic ‘pupils’ and *hetairai*, S. follows the later ancient and Byzantine testimonies, trying to explain discrepancies in determining their position in Sappho’s home, and, in some cases (particularly in the case of Atthis), defining

their mutual relations. Generally, he retains the traditional twofold division: the older *hetairai*, (intimate) friends, who help Sappho to instruct the opposed group of the younger ones (called μαθήτριαι in the *Suda*) in various abilities.

Surprisingly enough, some significant aspects are beyond S.'s interest. For example, while discussing Sappho's use of the term of *hetairai* (companions), the author does not take into consideration their possible status as courtesans in the technical sense of the word, which would allow us to presuppose erotic contacts with lovers of both sexes. And, as Renate SCHLESIER (*Atthis, Gyrinno, and other hetairai: Female Personal Names in Sappho's Poetry*, *Philologus* CLVII 2013, pp. 199–222) has recently demonstrated, this is the case in Sappho's poetry where all the female names are onomastically marked and belong to the categories which typically denote females as slaves and courtesans. If so, the emphasis put, among other things, on rivalry, or ambivalent treatment of the females actually identified as Sappho's companions, finds an additional, and rational, explanation. For further important implications of the above-sketched situation I refer to SCHLESIER's article.

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