CLASSICAL PRESENCES

Attempts to receive the texts, images, and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome inevitably run the risk of appropriating the past in order to authenticate the present. Exploring the ways in which the classical past has been mapped over the centuries allows us to trace the avowal and disavowal of values and identities, old and new. Classical Presences brings the latest scholarship to bear on the contexts, theory, and practice of such use, and abuse, of the classical past.
Roman Receptions of Sappho

EDITED BY

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Frontispiece: ‘Det svundne er en drøm’ (‘That which is gone is a dream’), photograph, installation, and painting by Ingvild Kjær Tofte
Preface

Sappho is a towering figure in Western culture, whose importance during the last decade has been confirmed by the sensational recoveries of new fragments of her poetry. The reception of Sappho’s poetry as well as of her persona has a vital and captivating history of more than two thousand years. Since the 1980s, significant parts of Sappho’s long-standing reception have been thoroughly examined by scholars. Yet, as Dimitrios Yatromanolakis points out in his Oxford Bibliographies article <www.oxfordbibliographies.com/> on Sappho: ‘the highly complex and multileveled receptions of both the poetry and the figure of Sappho in Antiquity have until recently been underexplored.’ The present volume joins scholars such as Yatromanolakis in taking further steps towards the recovery of Sappho’s ancient reception in classical scholarship. It is the first volume to date which in its entirety is dedicated to her influence on Roman authors.¹ Strikingly, the richest part of Sappho’s Roman reception coincides with what is known as the golden age of Latin literature. Consequently, the present volume takes us not only through a critical phase in the long history of Sappho’s reception, namely that of ancient Rome, but also through some of the most central texts of Latin literature, which in turn have had great influence on the culture of post-classical periods, up until our own time.

The contributors to this volume merit our heartfelt thanks. Their patience over the last few years has been as generous as their chapters are enlightening. We are grateful to Guido Bastiannini and Angelo Casanova for their permission to reprint as our Chapter 8 Richard Hunter’s contribution to their jointly edited volume I papiri di Saffo e di Alceo, atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Firenze 8–9 giugno 2006 (2007, Firenze: Istituto papirologico “G. Vitelli”: pp. 213–25), originally entitled ‘Sappho and Latin Poetry’. Special thanks are also due to Armand D’Angour, Donncha O’Rourke, and Tony Woodman, who served in the capacity of advisors for this project at early stages.

¹ The dissertation of Thévenaz (2010), still to be published in the form of a monograph, will be another.
More recently, Llewelyn Morgan has kindly read through the manuscript and given helpful comments and criticisms. The implementation of their kind and learned advice has greatly improved this volume. We are grateful to the Research Council of Norway for generously funding the conference on which this volume is based. Thanks are also due to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, for hosting the original colloquium in 2010. Student assistants Else Melvær Falkenstein and David Setane Gyberg have done much great work to help complete the volume, and we would like to express our heartfelt thanks to both. We are also deeply grateful to the series editors Lorna Hardwick and James Porter, as well as to the anonymous referees, for helpful comments and criticisms at crucial stages in the making of this book. Finally, at the Oxford University Press thanks are due to commissioning editor Charlotte Loveridge for firm and friendly guidance, and Tim Beck for taking us safely through the last stages of copyediting.

Thea Selliaas Thorsen
and Stephen Harrison

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Abbreviations

Names and titles of ancient authors, works, and modern reference works are abbreviated according to *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (OCD).

Titles of journals are abbreviated according to *L’année philologique*. 
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Notes on Texts and Translations

For the text of Sappho, Eva Maria Voigt’s critical edition (1971) has been used throughout, with occasional additions, mainly from the critical editions of Edgar Lobel and Denys Page (1955) and David Campbell’s in the Loeb Classical Library series (1982). For the newest Sappho papyri, the editions of Dirk Obbink have been used (2009, 2016a). Unless otherwise stated, the translations are taken, frequently in a modified form, from the Loeb Classical Library.
Introduction
Ecce Sappho

_Sappho_ is an exemplary case in the history of classical receptions. There are three prominent reasons for this. Firstly, Sappho is associated with some of the earliest poetry in the classical tradition, which makes her reception history one of the longest we know of, almost rivalling that of Homer.¹ Furthermore, Sappho’s poetry promotes ideologically challenging concepts such as female authority and homoeroticism, which have prompted very conspicuous expressions of strategies to deal with issues of gender and sexuality, revealing the values of the societies that have received her works through time. In this respect, Sappho’s reception certainly does rival that of Homer. Finally, Sappho’s legacy has been, and continues to be, very well explored from the perspective of reception studies: important investigations have been made into responses both to her as poet-figure and to her poetry in the earliest centuries following her _floruit_ in Greece, in the European Renaissance, the early modern world, the eighteenth century, and over the period since then, with ever-growing global reach—through to our own time.²

¹ Kivilo (2010, p. 187) sums up the dating of Sappho’s life as follows: ‘Ancient authors synchronized Sappho with the Egyptian pharaohs Mycerinus, Amasis and Psammetichus, the Lydian king Alyattes, the tyrant Pittacus of Lesbos, and with the poets Alcaeus, Anacreon, Archilochus, Stesichorus and Hipponax, placing her therefore in a time span between ca. 2500 BC and the second part of the sixth century BC. Her absolute dates in ancient sources pin her, however, clearly to the turn of the seventh and sixth century BC.’

² For a cursory, and now dated, yet wide-ranging survey of Sappho’s reception from her own time up until the end of the nineteenth century, see Robinson (1924); and, briefly,
One of the few eras in Sappho’s longstanding reception history that has not been systematically explored before this volume is the Roman period.³ As Richard Hunter, in an article originally published in 2007 and reprinted in this volume, points out: ‘the reception of Sappho in Roman poetry is, perhaps unexpectedly, a still under-explored subject.’⁴ And the omission is, indeed, somewhat of a paradox. The neglect of Sappho’s Roman reception has not been due to an ignorance of the fact that her poetry was influential in ancient Rome. On the contrary, the literary responses of Catullus and Horace are among the most famous and most studied receptions of Sappho. Beyond that, however, research on Sappho’s Roman receptions has been limited and sparse. To many, it may therefore come as a surprise that receptions of Sappho can be traced in more than eighteen Roman poets,⁵ among them many of the most central authors in the history of Latin literature. Surely, no other Greek poet, except—again—Homer, and possibly Callimachus, can rival the impact of Sappho at Rome. This fact is extremely important, and cries

³ Another such period is that of the Middle Ages, during which the identification of Sappho as a woman and a poet in the extremely influential Etymologies of Isidore of Seville must have been crucial, since this work appears to have been almost as widely circulated as the Bible; see Barney (2006, pp. 24–6); cf. Thorsen and Berge, Chapter 15, pp. 394–5. Furthermore, the Byzantine monk and scholar Michael Psellus (1017/18–c.1087) refers to Sappho as a part of a scholarly curriculum at Oraciones panegyricae 4.224–38, the Byzantine princess Anna Comnena (1083–1153) twice refers to Sappho in her Alexiad (14.6; 15.9), a Byzantine novelist alludes to her (cf. Cataudella 1965, for more on Byzantium and Sappho, see also Garzya (1971), and Petrarch seems to allude to her (Triumphus Cupidinis IV.25, and Bucolicum carmen 10.89–91, cf. Martellotti (1968, pp. 50–1)); Boccaccio dedicates a section to her in De mulieribus claris (XLVII), as does Christine de Pizan in her Livre de la cité des dames (1.30), cf. Brown-Grant (1999, pp. 60–1).


⁵ For these poets, see nn. 82–93.
out for a systematic approach to Sappho’s Roman reception. This is the aim of the present volume, which focuses on the poetry of the central period of Roman literary history, from the time of Lucretius to that of Martial.

Fundamental to classical reception studies is the assumption that different times are alive to different aspects of the past. One of the greatest scholarly advantages of our time is that it is less hampered than earlier periods by taboos regarding love, sex, and gender, and by prejudices against women framing them as inferior to men. Today we easily dismiss the views of nineteenth-century scholars such as Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker (1784–1868), who claimed that Sappho was not one of the ἑταρίστριαι, adopting a term taken from Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s Symposium. This is the term used to refer to “lesbians” in modern idiom, and the Platonic allusion is ‘the only surviving passage from classical Attic literature which acknowledges the existence of female homosexuality’. In our own day, the significance of the contributions of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1848–1931) to the field of Greek and indeed Sapphic scholarship is uncontested; but we can scarcely follow his view that it is ‘blasphemy’ to conceive Sappho’s poetry as homoerotic.

We might smile dismissively at David M. Robinson’s defence of the virtue of Sappho in his book Sappho and her Influence (1924), in which he outdoes Welcker by claiming that ‘Sappho is never erotic’. We might even blame Stephen Bleecker Luce for being too cautious in his challenge to Robinson’s argument in his review of the book:

Mention has been made of Professor Robinson’s admiration for the character of Sappho. This leads us to that part of the book, which is most certain to provoke discussion—the defence of her virtue. A strong case is established for the chastity of her life; and there is bitter denunciation for the attacks upon her good name.

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6 As is evident from the survey on p. 19, however, the approach to Sappho’s Roman reception in this volume is not exhaustive.

7 Welcker (1816, p. 76), and Pl. Symp. 191e; cf. DeJean (1989b).


9 Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1913, p. 70 ‘es auf mich wie eine fortgesetzte Blasphemie wirkt [daß] . . . P. L. [ouŷs] faßt Sapphos Dichtung als Tribadenpoesie’). When Pierre Louÿs (1870–1925) published an alleged edition (under the pseudonym G. Heim (‘S. Écret’) of Les chansons de Bilitis (1894), in which a woman with short hair and hanches étroites (‘narrow hips’) potentially could be identified as Psappha (poem 48), Wilamowitz-Moellendorff was provoked to write substantial parts of his Sappho und Simonides (1913) where he defended Sappho’s honour. Cf. DeJean (1989b).


11 Robinson (1924, p. 43).
that have been made from antiquity down to the present day. I find myself in entire accord with Professor Robinson on this point; but it must be borne in mind that much can be said on the other side, and that the argument that only a pure woman could have produced such beautiful verse is not necessarily founded on fact. We all admire the beauty and power of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, for example, but we do not inquire too closely into the private morals of Oscar Wilde!¹²

It is however a recent privilege not to have to rescue Sappho by appealing to her epithalamia, and to claim that the love she describes from a female point of view is reserved for a husband in wedlock, which was the strategy of those three generations of linked teachers and students: Welcker, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, and Robinson.¹³ It is only thirty or forty years since laws such as those that condemned Oscar Wilde to imprisonment were abolished in many countries, and although much has happened since, ideas of the equal value of homo- and heterosexuals or of men and women are still precarious. Nevertheless, the relatively wide pockets of liberal ideology of our time provide us with the scholarly advantage that we can see what previous generations of philologists have not been able to—or, perhaps, what they have had to consciously ignore, not least in the case of Sappho and her Roman reception.

**Sappho: A Classical Presence in Antiquity**

The present book belongs to the Classical Presences series. This series is mainly dedicated to receptions in postclassical periods of works and ideas that were generated during antiquity. Both Sappho and the Roman poets explored in this volume belong to classical antiquity itself. So, how does the present book differ from traditional classical scholarship and contribute to the field of classical reception studies? The question is rendered more acute by the fact that most of the literature referred to in this book comes from what may be considered the traditional field of classics. As shall become clear, however, traditional scholarship and the theoretical awareness advanced by classical reception studies merge in this book, yielding a novel approach to both

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¹² Luce (1925, p. 104).

¹³ This line of succession is attested in Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1913, *passim*) and at the beginning of Robinson (1924).
Sappho and the Roman poets studied, which has the potential to enrich both traditional scholarship and reception studies.

To ask why particular authors and works have been chosen for special attention, and to consider how this may reflect the cultural context of the receivers—these processes are fundamental to the field of reception studies. And such questions are as relevant in the case of the receptions of an ancient author in later antiquity, as they are in the case of the reception of an ancient author in postclassical periods. The potential enrichment offered when reception studies are applied to ancient authors within the framework of antiquity itself has already been demonstrated by a number of publications, such as Barbara Graziosi’s *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic*,¹⁴ Maarit Kivilo’s *Early Greek Poets’ Lives: The Shaping of the Tradition*,¹⁵ and the second, revised edition of Mary Lefkowitz’s milestone study *The Lives of the Greek Poets*.¹⁶

Tellingly, in *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray, James Porter dedicates a whole section to ‘reception in antiquity’ in his chapter on the future prospects of reception studies.¹⁷ Here, Porter makes the important point that ‘[t]o assume that reception is a symptom of historical belatedness and only a late phenomenon in the ancient civilized world is to misgauge the phenomenon altogether.’¹⁸ In some respects it may even be reasonably argued that the reception of ancient authors within the period of antiquity is as important as, if not more important than, the reception of the same authors in postclassical periods, as postclassical receptions tend to be informed not only by the ancient author, but also by that ancient author’s ancient reception.

This is certainly true for much of the postclassical reception of Sappho. Indeed, her Roman reception has conditioned much of the history of Sappho scholarship, not least that which was produced during the founding phase of classical philology as a modern scholarly discipline, from the 1850s onwards. The numerous editions, commentaries, and other contributions to the establishment of classical texts that were produced during this period still constitute the bedrock of contemporary classical studies. As will be further explored in Chapter 1, the fragments of Sappho as we know them are actually not particularly sexual, which is

why scholars such as Welcker, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, and Robinson felt justified in vindicating Sappho’s chastity—in accordance with the ideals of their own times.¹⁹ In fact, it is first and foremost Sappho’s Roman reception that tells a different story, in which she is clearly associated with homoerotics, and in which poetry and sex merge so much so that it becomes impossible to tell them apart. The poem *Heroides* 15, also known as *Epistula Sapphus* (‘Sappho’s letter’), is exemplary in this regard: here, Sappho mentions all the girls that she *non sine crimine amaui* (Ov. *Her.* 15.19, ‘loved not without reproach’) at the same time as she refers to poetry-making and lovemaking as a single *amoris opus* (Ov. *Her.* 15.46, ‘work of love’).²⁰ Tellingly, the authenticity of *Heroides* 15, which Ovid claims to have written as part of his single *Heroides* (cf. *Am.* 2.18.26), has been disputed for more than a hundred and fifty years.²¹ The history of the debate over this poem’s authenticity thus coincides with—and epitomizes—a general tendency in classical scholarship, which tries to liberate Sappho from such Roman ‘distortions’.²² But are these receptions really ‘distortions’ in the sense of manipulative inventions? Or do they preserve important aspects of the legacy of Sappho? Whatever the answers to these questions, the fact remains that the Romans appear to have known a more erotic Sappho than we now have access to through her extant fragments, which makes an investigation into this particular part of her reception all the more important.

There are, furthermore, three other principal reasons that Sappho may be considered a classical presence in the later period of antiquity that ran from the late Roman republic, when Lucretius was active, to the reign of the emperor Trajan, when Martial died. The first of these reasons is the chronological gap between Sappho and the Roman poets, which is considerable. There is in fact a shorter distance in time between Vergil and Augustine (c.450 years) than between Sappho and Lucretius (c.550 years), and a longer distance in time between Sappho and Martial (c.700 years) than between Boccaccio and the cinematic adaptation of his *Decameron*

¹⁹ See Thorsen, Chapter 1, p. 39, and Ingleheart, Chapter 11, p. 115, n. 38.
²⁰ See Thorsen, Chapter 1, pp. 29–30.
²¹ For the authenticity debate, see Thorsen, Chapter 1, pp. 29–30, Thorsen (2014a, pp. 96–122).
²² See e.g. Welcker (1816), Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1913), and Robinson (1924).
by Pier Paolo Pasolini (c.600 years). Next, there is the difference in language. Not only is the poetry of Sappho in Greek, a different language from the Latin of the Roman poets; it is in the difficult Aeolian dialect. Finally, there is a difference where gender is concerned: Sappho is famously a woman poet, while the Roman poets discussed at length in this book are all male.

There are at least two important observations to be made from this brief outline of some of the prominent differences between Sappho and her Roman receivers. Firstly, the combination of these differences render Sappho unique: while a number of poets were active in the archaic period, at the same time as Sappho, and while all Greek poets, by whom many Roman poets were inspired, naturally used Greek (and frequently used difficult Greek dialects), and while some of these poets were even women, only Sappho represents the combination of all these features: of such a distant separation in time, a difficult Greek dialect, and a feminine identity.

The next, important observation to be made is that while one might easily assume that the combination of such elements would have hampered Sappho’s presence in later times, this is clearly not the case; on the contrary, as each of the chapters in this book demonstrates, these elements of difference appear to have been productive points of contact between Sappho and poets active at Rome, especially in the period between Lucretius and Martial.

Ancient Receptions: Theories and Metaphors

Such points of contact as those between Sappho and Roman poets may be theorized within reception studies either according to a ‘push-model’, which focuses on the preserving transmission of classical texts and ideas through time,\(^{23}\) or according to a ‘pull-model’, which focuses on the manipulative reception of classical culture by new generations in later historical settings.\(^{24}\) Both models appear relevant not only to receptions of classical authors in postclassical periods, but also to the reception of a classical author (such as Sappho) in later antiquity (in this case, ancient Rome). However, once an instance of reception is detected, it is difficult to establish whether it should be characterized as one of pushing or

\(^{23}\) See Martindale (2005) and (2010).
\(^{24}\) Goldhill (2010).
pulling. This problem becomes all the more acute if one returns to the basic questions of reception studies, such as ‘why Sappho in ancient Rome?’ One reply may be that, for the time during which the ‘Roman cultural revolution’ took place,² Sappho, perhaps more than any other figure, serves to embody the truth of Horace’s famous line, Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit (Hor. Ep. 2.1.156, ‘captured Greece captured her fierce victor’).² Now, how are we to distinguish between the push- and pull-model in this case? Just as the basic questions in reception studies (e.g. ‘why this ancient author at this later point in time?’) are relevant to the reception of ancient authors in later antiquity, so also are the theoretical issues underlying receptions in general. The push- and pull-theories are applicable, yet difficult to disentangle. In fact, in the words of Porter, ‘transmission and reception are not two faces of a single coin. Rather they are two names for the self-same activity.’²⁷

Notably, the theory of classical reception studies has recently been offered a tertium quid,²⁸ as Shane Butler has marked out a third path for ‘contextualizing some of what we all seem to have been doing, all along’:²⁹ Deep Classics. Deep Classics is founded on an existing concept in geology, known as Deep Time, designed to fathom a staggering paradox: a time span so vast that most of it belongs to pre-human history, and at the same time so concrete that it can appear before us in the form of sedimentary layers of age-old stone that not only can be touched by the human hand, but can also be studied and—at least a little at a time—understood by the human mind. The extant, present, and tangible stone that preserves the depth of time in distinct layers of sediment belonging to separate ages thus offers a powerful metaphor for studies of the past, including classical antiquity.³⁰ It captures the paradox of standing ‘face to face with almost unthinkable time-spans’³¹ and embodies the simultaneous presence of ages that in reality never

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²⁶ I owe this observation to Stephen Harrison.
²⁸ Butler (2016a).
²⁹ Butler (2016b, p. 3).
³⁰ Butler presents other metaphors for Deep Classics as well: Heinrich Schliemann’s diagram of the excavations of Troy, the stemma of Friedrich Rietsch’s edition of Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ Prooimium antiquitatum Romanorum, and Sigmund Freud’s comparison between the unconscious and Rome, all of which—in their way—exemplify the depth of classics: see Butler (2016b).
³¹ Butler (2016b, p. 4).
occurred at the same time, but now do—anachronistically, as it were, like one distinct layer of stone next to another in the bedrock.

The metaphor is appropriate to certain crucial aspects in the history of Sappho, exemplified especially by the recoveries of new Sappho papyri during the last decade.³² Here a preserved layer of her poetry—in the form of recently retrieved or supplemented papyri—has remained practically untouched for centuries and is now revealed for us to see, almost to touch (in the form of reproductions, for most of us), and to engage with mentally. Even in terms of less materially intact forms of reception than the recovery of papyri, such as the poetic reception of Sappho at Rome, the metaphor holds some truth, as there are aspects that will be less known to us today that have remained ‘untouched’ for some time, but that will nevertheless enrich our understanding of our past and ourselves when they are brought to light through scholarly endeavours.

The metaphor of sedimentary bedrock suggests something hard, discernible, and scientific, but also petrified and dead. By contrast, even Butler’s own contribution to his volume, entitled ‘Homer’s Deep’, reveals qualities of the reception process that show themselves to be very much alive. The dynamic, metamorphic, miraculously living embrace of pasts merging with presences is particularly prominent in the case of Sappho. If only for the sake of juxtaposing a model that encompasses these more living aspects of receptions with the geological metaphor of Deep Classics, I would like to evoke the metaphor of art, exemplified by the image in the frontispiece of this book: a work entitled ‘That which is gone is a dream’ (‘Det svundne er en drøm’), by the Norwegian figurative artist Ingvild Kjær Tofte. Three main elements in this image are worth pausing over as we contemplate the theoretical issues underlying the classical presence of Sappho in antiquity, in the postclassical tradition and in the Sappho scholarship of today: the shadow, the flower, and, finally, the bottle. These elements are simultaneously present via several layers of artistic media, consisting of photography, installation, and painting. Together, these three layers represent a considerable depth in time: the installation involves the non-human creation of a flower, which belongs to the natural world; the painting represents an artistic activity, and one

that is among the oldest attested in human history; and finally, the
photograph represents a way of fixing time, which has been under
the command of humans for a relatively short time, and which repres-
ts the technological developments of the present.

Notably, it is the painting, the most classic of the art forms involved,
that represents the shadow. The metaphor of the shadow has been used
to communicate the dynamics of reception in some prominent works of
scholarship, such as Richard Hunter’s *The Shadow of Callimachus:*
*Studies in the Reception of Hellenistic Poetry at Rome* (cf. Prop. 3.1.1),
and Harrison’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 7), which picks up
on the same metaphor in its title ‘Shades of Sappho in Vergil’, and is also
elegantly embodied by the link between Sapphic allusions and the
lengthening shades in Vergil’s sixth and tenth *Eclogues.* It is an appro-
priate metaphor for reception, as a shadow is evidence for light, which
outlines the contours of a figure that may be distant, and yet is not
absent; it provides coolness that can variously be felt as refreshing or
freezing for those who find themselves in its shade; it is animate, moving
and changing. Viewed from certain perspectives, the metaphor seems to
fit the push-model of the classical tradition, in that the light emanates
from antiquity, casting shadows into postclassical times, such as our
own. Yet the work reproduced on the cover of this volume employs the
image of the shadow in a particularly active manner, suitable also for the
pull-model of reception studies, inasmuch as this shadow is not real; it is
fictitious, a painting that nonetheless appears life-like and perfect in
its completeness.

Were it not for the flower, whose withered form does not match that of
the complete, elegant shadow, we would hardly have noticed the illusory
nature of the painting. As noted above, the flower belongs, like the
geological metaphor of Deep Classics, to the natural world. However,
unlike rock and stone, a flower is not lifeless matter; it is organic. The
organic aspect of the metaphor of the flower is important. A flower is a
witness to life. What is more, a flower is an ancient life form, which is
important from the point of view of reception studies: there were flowers
in the world of Sappho—a fact to which both her poetry and her
reception amply testify, as Laurel Fulkerson demonstrates in Chapter 3—and

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there are flowers now. The flower, so important to Sapphic poetry, may thus function as a reminder of the fact that much of what surrounded the humans of the past is still present to us now: that we have much in common.

With regard to reception studies, it is also striking that the painted shadow seems to match the shadow that the flower must have cast when it was in full bloom. The painted illusion of the shadow may thus reflect a reality of the past. And as with the image by Kjær Tofte, in which the withered shape of the flower makes it hard to determine whether the painted, fictitious shadow on the wall actually matched the original form of the flower or not, so scholars, especially those who study the fragmentary remains of Sappho, are left to speculate on the original, full shape of what we possess only in various states of deterioration.

The reality of the present, as far as the flower in the image is concerned, is that it is well into the process of decay. The perishable nature of our world, of all that was once endowed with life, is a major theme in art, not least that of Sappho, most notably fr. 58, which, thanks to the 2004 discovery of new papyrus evidence, is now more complete than it has been for centuries, and which in this volume is explored by Stephen Heyworth in Chapter 10.³⁵ In this poem, the speaker bemoans her decrepit physique, which hinders her from dancing with her younger companions. Then she brings the couple of Dawn and Tithonus into the picture, in an intricate comparison. The human Tithonus, for whom the goddess Dawn had procured eternal life, but not eternal youth, cannot die. His fate is to grow ever older, and thus to fulfil Sappho’s proverbial statement that δύνατον γένεσθαι ἀνθρώπον ἄγηραον ἄνθρωπον ἔοντ’ ὃ ὀνόματι γένεσθαι (fr. 58.8, ‘it is not possible to be a human and ageless and undecaying’).

But what is possible for a human like Sappho? The ultimate decay is death. Death is, however, also important as a contrast to life, especially considered in relation to one of the essential qualities of art: its ability to overcome the decline of its own contemporary world and continue to live miraculously in ever-new settings. Defying death through art is a recurrent theme in the poetry of Sappho.³⁶ And in this context not only the shadow and the flower in the cover image seem relevant, but the bottle as well. However discreetly, the bottle, which seems to have contained

³⁵ See Heyworth, Chapter 10, pp. 198–9.
³⁶ Cf. e.g. Sappho frr. 55, 65, 147, and 150 Voigt.
sparkling wine, prompts sensual associations with luxury, exuberance, and celebration. While in one sense focusing on illusion and decay, two elements that can prove challengingly real in reception studies, the image on the cover of this book might also be regarded as a complex and sumptuous celebration of the power of the death-defying life embodied in art. In this respect, Kjær Tofte’s image may be said to resemble Sappho’s restored fragments, and especially the completely new one from 2004, referred to as ‘Posthumous honour for Sappho’ by Martin West and ‘pre-Cologne fr. 58’ by Diane Rayor and André Lardinois:³ here, one might compare West’s supplements with the fictitious, yet perfect shadow of Kjær Tofte; the precious, and at the same time desperately fragmented remains of Sappho’s poetry, whose meaning is often hard to grasp,³⁸ with the decrepit beauty of the withered flower; and, finally, the celebration of her death-defying song, still to be appreciated in our day, with the gilded bottle’s testimony to festivities, thalia, both past and present:

νῦν θαλαία παρέστω
νέρας έχοισαν γέρας ὦς ἔσκοιν,
πάνταί δὲ με θαμαμάζοιεν, ὥς νῦν ἐπὶ γάδος Κλέως
κάλεσι χελίδω
λειψαν, [α]ἴ κεν ἠλοίασα πάκτιν
η βάρβιτον ἦ τάνδε χελίδω
Μόισι, ἀείδω.

Sappho, ‘Posthumous honour for Sappho’
/ pre-Cologne fr. 58

... be present now, festivities, ... under the earth may [great fame with the privilege of the Muses surround me], as I receive the honour that is fitting; may they, everywhere, admire [me], as now, when I am above the earth; they call me swallow of [harmonious tones, when I grasp the harp or the barbitos lyre or this tortoise shell and, beautiful Muse, I sing.³⁹

The presence of Sappho thus remains mediated, whether by the deceptive perfection of a supplement such as that of modern scholars or through the artistic reception of Roman poets. Either way, looking at Romans looking at Sappho is challenging. For what can we see—through

³⁷ Rayor and Lardinois (2014).
³⁸ As seen from the reading κάλα, Μοίσι’, which I retain, but which West replaces with θαλάμοις (‘in the chambers’), as Sappho never refers to the Muse in the singular in her other extant poetry; see however Di Benedetto (2005, p. 11).
³⁹ My translation; I am grateful to Stephen Harrison for helpful comments.
fragmentation and supplementation—of what they saw? Is it even possible to see something that resembles it? ‘The problem’, Porter explains, ‘[with the fact] that reception necessarily structures access to antiquity’:

...is that it suggests the wrong kind of picture, as though you could look through a viewfinder into a tube at an image, and only the final image mattered—that of a pure uncontaminated antiquity—when in fact antiquity includes the viewfinder and the medium through which the looking is done. The past is mediated already in the past. The problem here, of course, is this: through what viewfinder do you look at the viewfinder and the medium?\

Thus Porter, through the metaphor of the viewfinder, invokes photographic imagery—which is also present in Kjær Tofte’s work of art—at the same time as he elegantly formulates in general terms the concrete challenge of looking at Romans looking at Sappho.

Sappho’s Poetry: A Brief Overview

In order to meet this challenge, it is useful to establish some basics of what is known about the output of Sappho from the point of view of ancient Rome. This output was extensive, judging from the information that we have about her first collected volumes, which were edited by the famous scholars of Alexandria in the Hellenistic period. It is widely presumed that the Romans knew Sappho’s compositions through the reproduction of these editions, perhaps as sung and certainly as written texts. As noted above, the sensational papyri through which the newest Sappho has been recovered stem from editions of Sappho’s texts produced in the Roman period. Thus Dirk Obbink, in his critical edition of the newest fragments, presents observations that are crucial for our understanding of Sappho’s Roman reception:

By the Roman period, readers needed a commentary, together with an adequately corrected and annotated copy, in order to make sense of [Sappho’s] poems. These contained the written words of the songs she had once sung, as they had been

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41 For the songs of Sappho in the context of symposia, as attested in Greek and Latin sources during the Roman era, see Yatromanolakis (2007, pp. 81–8), and Bowie (2016), as well as Thévenaz, Chapter 6, pp. 120, 136, Ingleheart, Chapter 11, p. 205, n. 5, and Thorsen and Berge, Chapter 15 pp. 353, 381.
42 Bierl and Lardinois (2016).