The 'New Sappho' and the *Phaedo*: Reflections on Immortality

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> For it is not right that there should be lamentation
> in the house of those who serve the Muses.
> That would not be fitting for us. —Sappho

In his *Orations*, the second-century philosopher and commentator Maximus of Tyre draws some intriguing parallels between Sappho and Socrates. Drawing on examples from Sappho's erotic poetry and from the depiction of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues, Maximus compares their erotic arts and even suggests that "the love of the Lesbian poetess [is] in fact identical with Socrates' amatory art."[1] Although this comparison may at first seem extreme or unlikely and is probably overstated, it can shed light on what the nature of *eros* is according to both figures. In particular, his comparison highlights the relationship between *eros* and immortality that Sappho and Socrates are both concerned with. Maximus' comparison involves several dimensions, one of which concerns the relationship between lamentation and mortality. Maximus suggests that Sappho and Socrates hold the same view concerning the role of lamentation over death:

> ἀναίθεταί ὁ Σωκράτης τῇ Ξανθίππῃ ὀδυρομένῃ ὅτε ἀπέθνῃσκεν,
> ἡ δὲ (sc. Σαπφὼ) τῇ θυγατρί·
> οὐ γὰρ θέμις ἐν μοισοπόλων οἰκίᾳ
> θρηνῆον ἔμμεν· οὔκ ἄμμι πρέποι τάδε.
>
> Socrates was angry with Xanthippe for lamenting when he was dying, and Sappho was angry with her daughter: "For it is not right that there should be lamentation in the house of those who serve the Muses. That would not be fitting for us."[2]

1 Maximus of Tyre, *the Philosophical Orations*, trans. M.B. Trapp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 18.9.

2. *Orations* 18.9; Sappho fr. 150, trans. David A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric: Sappho and Alcaeus.* Vol.1. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1982).

Dionysius, Vol. XXV, Dec. 2007, 7–20.

Maximus sees a parallel between Socrates' banishment of his wife's grieving from the scene of his death and Sappho's banishment of funeral-songs and dirges from a place of devotion to the Muses. The comparison refers to the moment at the beginning of the *Phaedo* when Socrates' friends find him in prison with his grieving wife:

> τὴν δὲ Ξανθίππην (γιγνώσκεις γάρ) ἔχουσάν τε τὸ παιδίον αὐτοῦ καὶ παρακαθημένην. ὡς οὖν εἶδεν ἡμᾶς ἡ Ξανθίππη, ἀνηυφήμησέ τε καὶ τοιαῦτ' ἄττα εἶπεν, οἷα δὴ εἰώθασιν αἱ γυναῖκες, ὅτι "ὦ Σώκπατες, ὕστατον δή σε προσεροῦσι νῦν οἱ ἐπιτήδειοι καὶ σὺ τούτους." καὶ ὁ Σωκράτης βλέψας εἰς τὸν Κρίτωνα, "ὦ Κρίτων," ἔφη, "ἀπαγέτω τις αὐτὴν οἴκαδε." καὶ ἐκείνην μὲν ἀπῆγόν τινες τῶν τοῦ Κρίτωνος βοωσάν τε καὶ κοπτομένην …
>
> and Xanthippe, you know her, with his little boy, sitting beside him. Then when Xanthippe saw us, she cried out in lamentation and said as women do, "O Socrates! Here is the last time your friends will speak to you and you to them!" Socrates glanced at Criton and said quietly, "Please let someone take her home, Criton." Then some of Criton's people led her away crying and beating her breast …[3]

We can place Maximus' reference to Socrates in the context of the *Phaedo* and therefore begin to understand why Socrates sends the grieving Xanthippe away. Xanthippe is engaging in the actions of ritual mourning, for she is mourning in anticipation of the death of her husband. Her specific actions, lamenting, crying, beating her breast (ἀνηυφήμησε, βοωσάν, κοπτομένην), have their proper place in the *oikos*, and so Socrates must send her homeward. His dismissal of his wife is necessary because the presence of Xanthippe at the death of Socrates is incongruous: she represents the concern for the body of the particular individual from which the philosopher's soul desires its release, and therefore she has no place in the scene of Socrates' final act of philosophy, his death. The banishment of Xanthippe is also consistent with Socrates' banishment of lamentation from the stories told in the ideal city of the *Republic*. As Socrates explains, poetry that includes lamentation has no role in the education of the guardians if they are to become self-sufficient and best:

> ὀρθῶς ἄρ' ἂν ἐξαιροῖμεν τοὺς θρήνους τῶν ὀνομαστῶν ἀνδρῶν, γυναιξὶ δὲ ἀποδιδοῖμεν, καὶ οὐδὲ ταύταις σπουδαίαις, καὶ ὅσοι κακοὶ τῶν ἀνδρῶν, ἵνα ἡμῖν δυσχεραίνωσιν ὅμοια τούτοις ποιεῖν οὓς δή φαμεν ἐπὶ φυλακῇ τῆς χώρας τρέφειν
>
> we'd be right, then, to delete the lamentations of famous men, leaving them to women (and not even to good women, either) and to cowardly men, so that those we say we are training to guard our city will disdain to act like that.[4]

3. Plato, *Phaedo*, ed. C.J. Rowe (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1993) 60ab. I have used the translation of the *Phaedo* by W.H.D. Rouse throughout (New York: Penguin, 1999).

4. Plato, *Republic*, ed. S.R. Slings (Oxford U Press, 2003), trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992) 387e–388a.

These moments in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* reveal Socrates' attitude toward lamentation: it is something weak and base, it belongs to the sphere of women, to the *oikos*, and it has no role to play in proper education of citizens, in conducting the affairs of the *polis*, nor in pursuing the activity of philosophy.

But Sappho's statement concerning lamentation among the *moisopoloi* is much more difficult to contextualize, since Maximus is in fact the only source for this fragment. Furthermore, the statement is startling, for we might have assumed lamentation *does* belong precisely where Sappho claims that it does not: surely lamentation is fitting for Sappho and her female companions, since it traditionally belongs to women and to poetry. Why, then, does Sappho forbid lamentation among her fellow servants of the Muses, and why does Maximus assert that this action is essentially the same as Socrates' dismissal of Xanthippe? Although this statement of Sappho's lacks any immediate poetic context of its own, I suggest a useful context might be supplied by the new Sappho poem or "Tithonus poem." This poem, recently discovered and published, provides an expression of Sappho's insights on old age, mortality, and poetry. An analysis of this poem, and in particular of its use of the Tithonus myth, will be helpful for understanding why Maximus connects these two moments, and will reveal for us the deep connections between poetry, philosophy and immortality that Sappho and the Socrates of the Platonic tradition have in common.

Before turning to consideration of the new Sappho poem, I want to emphasize briefly just how odd this particular observation of Maximus' is in light of Sappho's associations with ritual lamentation. Given how little of Sappho's corpus remains, a striking number of the fragments make reference to Adonis and the ritual mourning of his death.[5] For example, Sappho's fragment 140 represents the antiphonal lament of Aphrodite and the Nymphs:

κατθνάσκει, Κυθέρη', ἄβρος Ἄδωνις· τί κε θεῖμεν;
καττύπτεσθε, κόραι, καὶ κατερείκεσθε κίθωνας

'Delicate Adonis is dying, Cytherea; what are we to do?'
'Beat your breasts, girls, and tear your clothes'[6]

Why does Maximus quote Sappho forbidding lamentation when she was in fact so closely associated with the performance of ritual lamentation?[7] How

5. For an explanation of the festival of Adonis, see Margaret Alexiou's *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002) 55–57.

6. Sappho fr. 140; see also, for example, fr. 168 ("Alas for Adonis") and *testimonia* 58 ("Sappho…lamenting with Aphrodite as she mourns the young offspring of Cinyras").

7. Sappho's alleged banishment of lamentation may be related to the larger trend that was

can he compare her attitude to Socrates' complete intolerance for lamentation? The apparent disparity makes Maximus' identification of their views on lamentation all the more intriguing, and I suggest that in order to discover the meaning behind his identification we must turn not to Sappho's role in ritual celebration, not to the poetry of her formalized lament for Adonis, but to her poetry that expresses what we are to do as mortals who face our own death. We turn to the Tithonus poem, itself a lament that ultimately forbids lamentation.

The new Sappho poem was discovered in 2004 by scholars from the University of Cologne, Michael Gronewald and Robert Daniel. Fragments of Sappho's poetry were identified on Egyptian mummy cartonnage dating from the third century BC, and this makes the Cologne papyrus the earliest known copy of Sappho, dating from some 300 years after her death. When the text of the Cologne papyrus is added to Sappho fragment 58, which has been known since 1922 and which dates from the third century AD, a nearly complete poem emerges. Here is the new poem along with Martin West's English translation as it was published in 2005:

ὔμμες πεδὰ Μοίσαν ἰοκόλπων κάλα δῶρα, παῖδες,
σπουδάσδετε καὶ τὰν φιλάοιδον λιγύραν χελύνναν·

ἔμοι δ' ἄπαλον πρίν ποτ' ἔοντα χρόα γῆρας ἤδη
ἐπέλλαβε, λεῦκαι δ' ἐγένοντο τρίχες ἐκ μελαίναν·

βάρυς δέ μ' ὁ θῦμος πεπόηται, γόνα δ' οὐ φέροισι,
τὰ δή ποτα λαίψηρ' ἔον ὄρχησθ' ἴσα νεβρίοισι.

τὰ μὲν στεναχίσδω θαμέως· ἀλλὰ τί κεν ποείην;
ἀγήραον ἄνθρωπον ἔοντ' οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι.

καὶ γάρ ποτα Τίθωνον ἔφαντο βροδόπαχυν Αὔων
ἔρωι φ…αθεισαν βάμεν' εἰς ἔσχατα γᾶς φέροισαν,

ἔοντα κάλον καὶ νέον, ἀλλ' αὖτον ὔμως ἔμαρψε
χρόνωι πόλιον γῆρας, ἔχοντ' ἀθανάταν ἄκοιτιν.

You for the fragrant-bosomed Muses' lovely gifts
be zealous, girls, and the clear melodious lyre:

but my once tender body old age now
has seized; my hair's turned white instead of dark;

spreading across the Greek world in the sixth century BC of imposing legislation against excessive funeral rites and lamentation. Solon famously restricted these rites in Athens, but there is also evidence that Pittakos, the tyrant of Lesbos during Sappho's time, imposed similar restrictions. Margaret Alexiou examines these restrictions and argues that they mark a movement "from the ancestor of the clan cult to the hero of the state cult" (19). These circumstances begin to explain why Sappho can forbid lamentation over death and yet compose a lament for Adonis. See Alexiou, 14–23 for a detailed account of funerary reforms.

my heart's grown heavy, my knees will not support me,
that once on a time were fleet for the dance as fawns.

This state I oft bemoan; but what's to do?
Not to grow old, being human, there's no way.

Tithonus once, the tale was, rose-armed Dawn,
love-smitten, carried off to the world's end,

handsome and young then, yet in time grey age
o'ertook him, husband of immortal wife.[8]

It is at first evident that the subject of the poem is human mortality: the poem describes the decay of old age that leaves our bodies unable to do the things they once could, and along with this comes a reflection on the inevitability of old age and death for mortals. The structure of the poem follows the passing of the ages, beginning with youth, moving through old age, and pointing ahead to death. In the present time of the poem, the aging poet occupies the center of the poem, her hair white, her knees and spirit grown heavy; but she looks both toward her past, to the tenderness and eagerness of her girls, and to her future, to the grey aging of Tithonus.[9]

This kind of expression of the inevitability of old age and death is typical among the lyric poets, but Sappho's poem has a unique structure and therefore sets a very different tone. For example, Anacreon fragment 395 is similar to Sappho's Tithonus poem, containing a similar list of the symptoms of aging and a similar expression of regret for the inevitability of death:

πολιοὶ μὲν ἡμὶν ἤδη
κρόταφοι κάρη τε λευκόν,
χαρίεσσα δ' οὐκέτ' ἥβη
πάρα, γηραλέοι δ' ὀδόντες,
γλυκεροῦ δ' οὐκέτι πολλὸς
βιότου χρόνος λέλειπται·
διὰ ταῦτ' ἀνασταλύζω
θαμὰ Τάρταρον δεδοικώς·
'Αίδεω γάρ ἐστι δεινὸς
μυχός, ἀργαλῆ δ' ἐς αὐτὸν
κάτοδος· καὶ γὰρ ἑτοῖμον
καταβάντι μὴ ἀναβῆναι.

8. Martin West, "A New Sappho Poem" (*Times Literary Supplement*: 24 June 2005). I have employed West's restoration of the Greek, including his conjectures, as well as his translation.

9. In a paper entitled "'Now' and 'Once': temporal markers and Sappho's self-representation" presented at the APA meeting in January 2007, Eva Stehle notes the complex temporal structure of the new Sappho poem, and suggests there are "two pasts"—the poet's own youth and the heroic past of Tithonus and Eos. Stehle indicates that the "now" of the poem is the time for remembering, singing, and longing; in other words, it is for engaging in the pursuits of poetry and desire.

> My temples are already grey and my head is white; graceful youth is no more with me, my teeth are old, and no long span of sweet life remains now. And so I often weep for fear of Tartarus: for the recess of Hades is grim, and the road down to it grievous; and it is certain that he who goes down does not come up again.[10]

The resemblance to Sappho's poem is clear, but where Anacreon offers a straightforward lament for death's inevitability, Sappho's lament is framed by the encouragement to pursue the gifts of the Muses at the beginning and the quiet reflection on the Tithonus myth at the end of the poem.[11] Like Anacreon, Sappho tells us there is no way for mortals not to grow old and die, since it is impossible to be a mortal and be unaging (ἀγήραος), but does her poem simply offer resignation to this inevitability? To answer this we have to look more closely at the use of the myth at the end of the poem.

Sappho ends the poem with a brief evocation of the myth of Tithonus and Eos, a handsome youth and the divine goddess of the Dawn.[12] The story holds that Dawn fell in love with Tithonus, and so that she might marry him she asked Zeus to make him immortal. Zeus granted her request, but she forgot to ask for eternal youth for her lover too, and the consequence is that he lives forever, forever aging. Tithonus, in the myth, is the eternal illustration of the process Sappho has just described a few lines earlier. She describes her hair turning white, her heart growing heavy, her limbs unable to carry her, and we see these symptoms overtaking poor Tithonus too for all eternity, as he grows weaker and weaker, older and older, with no promise of death's release. This is a grim picture, and perhaps Sappho offers the myth as a consolation: the myth answers her poignant question "this state I oft bemoan, but what's to do?" saying, we may be doomed to old age, but at least, unlike Tithonus, we have the consolation of death's release. "Being human there's no way not to grow old," and since this is our fate, death is a blessing.

10. Anacreon fr. 395, trans. Campbell.

11. There is some controversy over whether or not the poem is complete because it is rather uncommon for a lyric poem to *end* with the inclusion of a myth without any following commentary upon the particular occasion. Also, there is an inconsistency between the ending of fragment 58 and the Cologne papyrus: where the Cologne papyrus ends with the recounting of the myth, fragment 58 contains the uncertain extra lines, "but I love delicacy … love has obtained for me the brightness and beauty of the sun" (trans. Campbell). Do these lines belong to the Tithonus poem or to another fragment? Is there more to the poem's ending that is lost to us? Are we dealing with two different versions of the same poem? Clearly, interpretations of the poem's meaning will vary according to one's stance on the question of completeness. I follow West, however, in treating the new poem as complete, because the Tithonus myth at the end redirects our attention back to the beginning of the poem, to reflect on the ideas expressed there with the new insight gained by the recounting of the myth.

12. The main source for this myth is the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 217–38. *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer*, ed. and trans. Martin L. West, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 2003).

But there is another way to interpret the myth, or rather there is another shade of meaning to add to this interpretation, and it is found in a part of the Tithonus myth that Sappho does not here relate but perhaps alludes to by implication. The rest of the story as it is related in the *Homeric hymn to Aphrodite* tells of how Tithonus grows so old and weak that eventually Dawn simply shuts him up in his room, for he can do nothing but use his voice. In the end,

> τοῦ δ' ἤτοι φωνὴ ῥέει ἄσπετος, οὐδέ τι κῖκυς
> ἔσθ' οἵη πάρος ἔσκεν ἐνὶ γναμπτοῖσι μέλεσσιν
>
> his voice still runs on unceasing, but there is none of the strength that there used to be in his bent limbs.[13]

An understanding of how the Tithonus myth functions in this story may be useful for interpreting Sappho's poem. In this Homeric Hymn, Aphrodite is relating Tithonus' story to Anchises, whom she has just seduced under the guise of a mortal woman. Aphrodite tells Anchises that he need not fear, since no harm will come to him; his fate will, in fact, be quite ordinary. He will have a fine son by the union, Aeneas, and he will himself die an old man. Aphrodite makes it clear that what happened to Dawn and Tithonus is not desirable: she doesn't want a decrepit husband, nor would she wish upon Anchises the curse of eternal aging. As it is, she tells Anchises,

> νῦν δὲ σὲ μὲν τάχα γῆρας ὁμοίιον ἀμφικαλύψει
> νηλειές, τό τ' ἔπειτα παρίσταται ἀνθρώποισιν,
> οὐλόμενον καματηρόν, ὅ τε στυγέουσι θεοί περ
>
> you will soon be enfolded by hostile, merciless old age, which attends men in the time to come, accursed, wearisome, abhorred by the gods.[14]

Aphrodite's interpretation of the Tithonus myth in this poem therefore tells us two things that are important for interpreting Sappho's poem: first it makes clear that aging is best for mortals, even though it is pitiless and cruel and hateful, or at least it is better than the immortal aging that was Tithonus' curse; secondly, Aphrodite's story leaves us with the striking image of Tithonus as an eternal voice, his voice flowing endlessly while his body endlessly withers.

This image of Tithonus as a disembodied voice became so important that in other versions of the myth, he eventually transforms into a cicada, an insect that, for the Greeks, often represented rejuvenation, and became a symbol

13. *Hymn to Aphrodite*, 237–38.
14. *Hymn to Aphrodite*, 244–46.

for poetry and the immortality of song.[15] In Greek thought, cicadas were an image of *eros* as well as an image of poetry and immortality, for they were thought to spend their lives in sole pursuit of song, never eating or drinking, but sustained only by the nourishment of song until they die.[16] Thus, they live to pursue their one true *eros*, the desire for poetry, and ultimately, they achieve immortality by means of this pursuit. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates, noticing the cicadas singing above them, relates this tale to Phaedrus in order to encourage him to pursue their present discourse:

> λέγεται δ' ὡς ποτ' ἦσαν οὗτοι ἄνθρωποι τῶν πρὶν Μούσας γεγονέναι, γενομένων δὲ Μουσῶν καὶ φανείσης ᾠδῆς οὕτως ἄρα τινὲς τῶν τότε ἐξεπλάγησαν ὑφ' ἡδονῆς, ὥστε ᾄδοντες ἠμέλησαν σίτων τε καὶ ποτῶν, καὶ ἔλαθον τελευτήσαντες αὐτούς· ἐξ ὧν τὸ τεττίγων γένος μετ' ἐκεῖνο φύεται, γέρας τοῦτο παρὰ Μουσῶν λαβόν, μηδὲν τροφῆς δεῖσθαι γενόμενον, ἀλλ' ἄσιτον τε καὶ ἄποτον εὐθὺς ᾄδειν, ἕως ἂν τελευτήσῃ, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα ἐλθὸν παρὰ Μούσας ἀπαγγέλλειν τίς τίνα αὐτῶν τιμᾷ τῶν ἐνθάδε.
>
> The story is that these cicadas were once men, belonging to a time before the Muses were born, and that with the birth of the Muses and the appearance of song some of the men of the time were so unhinged by pleasure that in their singing they neglected to eat and drink, and failed to notice that they had died; from them the race of cicadas was afterwards born, with this gift from the Muses, that from their birth they have no need of sustenance, but immediately sing without food or drink until they die, and after that go and report to the Muses which among those here honours which of them.[17]

It seems likely that, although Sappho makes no explicit reference to Tithonus as a cicada in her poem, the allusion to Tithonus extends to include this traditional connection between cicadas and poetry, especially in the context of a poem that is also encouraging its audience to pursue the "gifts of the Muses." In Socrates' explanation, the cicadas are servants of the Muses, spending their lives in uninterrupted, passionate pursuit of song, and in death reporting to the Muses who among mortals has honoured the Muses; Sappho begins her poem with an imperative to attend the Muses, and ends with a reflection on her own aging and Tithonus' deathless old age. In

15. Rory B. Egan offers an account of the role cicadas played in Greek thought, considering them as mythological, philosophical, and religious symbols. He traces their symbolization of rejuvenation and immortality from their earliest representation in Mycenaean tombs to their explicit reference in Plato's *Phaedrus*. See "Cicadas in Ancient Greece," in *Cultural Entomology*, vol. 3, 1994.

16. In "Tithonus and the Tettix," Helen King follows Charles Segal's interpretation of the *Hymn to Aphrodite* and explores the ways in which the cicada is an image of mediation between men and gods (*Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature* [1989] 68–89). Segal suggests the Tithonus myth illustrates the "mediating function of eros" ("the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*: A Structuralist Approach" [1974] 208).

17. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. C.J. Rowe (Wiltshire: Aris & Phillips, 1986) 259b–c.

an intricate way, Sappho is here aligning her aging with Tithonus' aging, her song with the cicadas' song; thus, her service to the Muses achieves a kind of immortality in the same way Tithonus' song becomes immortal. Tithonus can no longer lift his limbs, but he can sing eternally, and the speaker of the poem is in essentially the same state: her limbs are heavy, but she is still singing. In light of this new perspective that the cicadas' song brings to the myth of Tithonus, the answer to that important question Sappho poses in the middle of the poem, "this state I oft bemoan, but what's to do?" is found not in the lines immediately following the question which express a resignation to old age, nor is the answer given in the final lines which point to the consolation for old age we may find in death; the answer to the poet's question posed in the middle of the poem is given, in fact, in the imperative of the first two lines: what's to do? *Be zealous for the lovely gifts of the Muses*, for the dance and for the song. And when old age seizes our limbs and we can no longer take part in the dance, when we have become like Tithonus and like the poet, there is still the song.[18]

The new poem's imperative to be zealous for the gifts of the Muses instead of bemoaning mortality must, I think, be read alongside Maximus' quotation, which likewise asserts that lamentation of death is not a fitting activity for those who serve the Muses. So, returning to Maximus' connection: why do Sappho and Socrates forbid lamentation in the face of death, and do they do so for the same reason, as Maximus seems to imply? I certainly do not mean to suggest that Sappho and Socrates are identical here—that she presents a philosophy of the immortality of the soul, or that he desires poetic immortality; but I do think Maximus' connection can yield some interesting points of contact, especially in light of the Tithonus poem. Socrates dismisses the lamenting Xanthippe and turns instead to pursuing philosophy with his companions; Sappho forbids lamentation in the house of the Muses and urges her companions to pursue the gifts of the Muses instead. There is a close connection between Sappho's alignment of death, poetry and immortality and Socrates' alignment of death, philosophy and immortality.

This general connection becomes much more specific through a closer look at the Greek: Sappho and Socrates both assert that poetry (*mousike*) is somehow the thing that must be done or made (*poiein*) in the face of death.

18. In a paper entitled "Fr. 58: Philosophical Reflections on Death and Aging," presented at the APA meeting in January 2007, Ellen Greene notes that Sappho's poem is not gendered, for the Greek text relays no identification of the sex of the speaker of the poem, nor of the *paides* to whom the poem is addressed (although West and others translate the *paides* as "girls"). Greene argues that the lack of a specified gender for the speaker or the addressees lends a wider, more universal, more philosophical purpose to Sappho's poem. I agree and would add that it is not simply addressed to "Sappho's girls" or to any other girls but also to everyone.

In the *Phaedo*, just after Xanthippe has been taken away, there is a brief but important passage where Socrates and Cebes discuss verse-making, before the dialogue turns to discussion of the immortality of the soul. Cebes brings up the rumor that Socrates himself has been composing verses in prison, and since he considers it an odd activity for the philosopher to pursue just days before his death, he inquires as to why. Socrates explains that he has had a recurring dream commanding him to compose *mousike*: the dream says to him, "Socrates, get to work and compose music" (ὦ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, μουσικὴν ποίει καὶ εργάζου).[19] He then explains how he had always formerly interpreted this to mean doing what he has always done, namely practicing philosophy, since philosophy is, as he says, the highest form of *mousike* (φιλοσοφίας μὲν οὔσης μεγίστης μουσικῆς).[20] But he decides that in case the dream means the "common" kind (δημώδη μουσικήν),[21] he ought to do this too, so he composes a hymn to Apollo and also sets some of Aesop's fables to verse. Socrates, who has devoted his life to philosophy, in the days before his death, decides that he had better not die before acquitting himself of the obligation to make poetry, insisting that

> ασφαλέστερον γάρ εἶναι μὴ απίεναι πρὶν αφοσιώσασθαι ποιήσαντα ποιήματα καὶ πειθόμενον τῶι ἐνυπνίωι
>
> it seemed safer not to go away before getting it off my conscience by composing poetry, and so obeying the dream.[22]

This is a rather startling passage in the *Phaedo* for several reasons, and Socrates' explanation does not answer Cebes' question so much as it leads to more questions. Why would Socrates decide at this late point in his life that practicing philosophy is not a full response to the dream, and that he must engage in the common kind of *mousike* as well as the highest kind to satisfy the dream's command? Why does he choose in particular to compose the kind of poetry he does, a hymn to Apollo and some verses based on Aesop's fables, instead of composing the kind of poetry Socrates often does in the Platonic dialogues, such as the poetical myths found at the end of the *Republic* and *Phaedo*? Socrates offers the explanation that the hymn to the god is appropriate because the Athenians are currently celebrating a festival of Apollo, while he claims he composed verses based on Aesop's fables simply because they were the fictions he had available at hand. But of course the particular kinds of poetry he composes are more significant than this: the festival of Apollo

19. *Phaedo*, 60e6.
20. *Phaedo*, 61a2.
21. *Phaedo*, 61a7.
22. *Phaedo*, 61a8.

is the circumstance that delays Socrates' execution and thus allows for the dialogue of the *Phaedo* to take place, while the reference to Aesop's fables is important to a central concept in the dialogue, namely that opposite things, such as pleasure and pain, or indeed body and soul, are "hung together from one head" like a kind of fabled creature.[23]

The passage is clearly significant, and what is important to note for the present discussion is that Socrates' response to the dream is precisely to "get to work and make music." This passage leaves us with the remarkable image of Socrates, alone, making up common verses while waiting for death. His assertion here that he must make poetry before he dies, even though he is more than willing to admit that he is not much of a poet, is in a way parallel to Sappho's reflection in the Tithonus poem: using similar language, she answers her own question, what should I do since I am facing immanent death (ἀλλὰ τί κεν ποείην;) with the strong imperative to pursue the activities that have to do with the Muses (Μοίσαν…κάλα δῶρα… σπυοδάσδετε). Somehow the activity of making poetry is necessary or imperative for both Sappho and Socrates as they contemplate the approach of death.

The necessity of this activity reveals the profound universality of Sappho's poem. The Tithonus poem expresses more than that old age and dying are universal for us, for it points beyond bodily decay to the immortality of poetry. But it also says something particular about the nature of poetic immortality: Sappho's aim here, is, I believe, more than to suggest that she achieves personal immortality by being an eminent poet, continuing to sing although her body has withered, and living on in song like Tithonus even after she has perished. This poem discusses death and poetry at the universal level, and Sappho's imperative, "be zealous for the gifts of the Muses" is as true for a man sitting in prison awaiting his death, for the youths who are still able to participate in the song and dance with vigor, and indeed for *us*, as it is for the aging woman. The emphasis is not on the creative product, but rather on the activity of making itself, and so we are all to respond with action as Socrates rightly does.

The emphasis that both Sappho and Socrates place on this activity of making music has to do with religious piety and is aimed at ordering human action correctly in relation to the gods. Sappho's poem can be read as a hymn to the Muses, for it celebrates the power of poetry and encourages others to celebrate and pursue the gifts of the Muses. Also, as Maximus' quotation indicates, Sappho is concerned with expressing what is fitting (πρέπει) for those in the service of the divine goddesses, suggesting a prescription of the kind of behaviour that is appropriate and orderly for those engaged in religious

23. *Phaedo*, 60b–c.

worship. There are further indications of a religious context and meaning for this poem, particularly in the line that tells of "knees that once were fleet for the dance as fawns." This line is rich with overtones of ritual and celebration, for the reference to fawns is likely not merely a passing simile employed to express youth and swiftness, but it alludes to the fawns and fawn-skins that have a common and specific role in cult practices, especially in connection with the roles young women play in the performance of Bacchic rites.

Socrates' activity of composing music is similarly an expression of religious piety. Some commentators note that while Socrates' composition of a Hymn to Apollo emphasizes his piety, the passage ultimately dismisses poetry in favour of philosophy.[24] But the emphasis on Socrates' activity of music making is not simply a means of devaluing poetry or evoking poetry in order ultimately to replace it with philosophy; here, and in other key places in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates explicitly identifies philosophy's close relationship with poetry. In the *Phaedo*, he identifies philosophy clearly as the highest form of poetry (φιλοσοφίας μὲν οὔσης μεγίστης μουσικῆς),[25] and he also admits that he has considered his life's work (namely doing philosophy) to have been an activity in the service of the Muses.[26]

In the *Phaedo*, we learn that Socrates engages in a range of pursuits, including composing a hymn to Apollo, setting fables to verse, and ultimately, engaging in the philosophical dialogue of the *Phaedo* itself. All of these pursuits are somehow part of service to the Muses, for they constitute the action Socrates takes in direct response to the divine dream's command, μουσικὴν ποίει καὶ εργάζου. In a similar way, Sappho's imperative also involves a range of pursuits, including singing and lyre playing and dancing, as well as all other lovely gifts of the Muses, all of which play a role in proper worship and service of the Muses.

24. C.J. Rowe notes about Socrates' pious composition of a Hymn to Apollo that "it clearly has a dramatic function, in emphasizing Socrates' piety and devotion to his calling" (note 60d). But Rowe reads the passage ultimately as a way of dismissing poetry and setting up an opposition between poetry and philosophy, suggesting that "the overall effect of Socrates' speech is to *devalue* poetry, at least in comparison with philosophy" (note 61b). John Burnet goes so far as to suggest that Plato shows Socrates pursuing music-making as an activity of purification (αφοσιώσασθαι) at this early stage of the dialogue, in order to invoke the Pythagorean doctrine of music as a soul-purge, so that it may be replaced by philosophy later on: "this is a distinctively Pythagorean doctrine … [but] we shall see that philosophy is the true soul-purge" (note 61a).

25. *Phaedo*, 61a2.

26. The attitude he presents here concerning the relationship between philosophy and *mousike* is consistent with the moment in the *Phaedrus* where Socrates suggests that the Muses Calliope and Ourania have governance over philosophy, since they have *logoi* as their proper sphere, and that they are indeed watching over Socrates' and Phaedrus' dialogue; he asserts a similar relationship again in the *Republic*, where he suggests that the "true Muse" is the one of philosophy and discussion (*Phaedrus*, 259b–d; *Republic* 548b).

The connection Maximus draws between Sappho and Socrates regarding the banishment of lamentation is striking and perhaps somewhat unexpected, but it is valid and it points to further important parallels between the two. Sappho refuses to lament her old age and approaching death, and she finds immortality instead through poetry. Socrates sends the mourning Xanthippe away and turns instead to philosophy and the immortality the soul achieves in death. Plato's banishment of lamentation, Socrates' dismissal of Xanthippe, Sappho's banishment of lamentation, and her refusal to bemoan her mortality, all point to the pursuit of the gifts of the Muses, which include in some sense both poetry and philosophy. For both Sappho and Socrates, the emphasis is on action, and specifically on proper action in relation to the gods. Maximus can rightly imply that Sappho's poetic immortality is akin to Socrates' philosophic immortality because both are aiming at right relation to the gods through the activity of making *mousike*. What Sappho demands of her girls and the dream demands of Socrates is also essentially what the Muses themselves demand of everyone: μουσικὴν ποίει.