

Sappho 16 and the Sense of Beauty¹

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In this paper, I propose a new way of reading the contrast that Sappho draws in poem 16 (Voigt) between two kinds of preference – on the one hand that for military formations, whether on land or sea, and on the other her own attachment to Anactoria, which she treats as analogous to Helen’s infatuation with Paris. First, however, I examine the two prevailing, and competing, ways of interpreting the choice that Sappho presents. Here is the text, followed by a translation²:

1 — I wish here to express my gratitude to the two referees for the journal, who kindly allowed themselves to be identified. Ruby Blondell was in fact the inspiration for this paper, which began as a brief comment in a panel on her book, *Helen of Troy*, at the 2015 conference of the Ancient Philosophy Society, held in Lexington, Kentucky, on 9-12 April; the current version is very different from the original, ten-minute oral presentation, which is not to say that Ruby agrees even now with my analysis. André Lardinois provided detailed comments on a variety of points, together with invaluable bibliographical indications; his wise suggestions have materially influenced the nature of my argument.

2 — The text is adopted from Marco Antonio Santamaría Álvarez, “Nueve novísimos fragmentos de Safo”, available at https://www.academia.edu/11458466/Nueve_nov%C3%ADsimos_fragmentos_de_Safo_2014_texto_griego_traducci%C3%B3n_al_espa%C3%B1ol_y_notas, accessed 31/05/2015; the text is based on Simon Burris, Jeffrey Fish, and Dirk Obbink, 2014: “New Fragments of Book 1 of Sappho”, *ZPE* 189 (2014) 1-28, with comments by Martin L. West, “Nine poems of Sappho”, *ZPE* 191 (2014) 1-12. Dirk Obbink has prepared a new, more conservative text with full critical apparatus, to be published in the chapter “The Newest Sappho: Text, Apparatus

and the bright sparkle of her face
 than the Lydians' chariots and infantry
 in their armor³.

There is a basic disagreement among scholars about just what Sappho is claiming in the first two stanzas of the poem⁴. According to some,

3 — The translation is adapted from Ruby Blondell, *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 111-12, with slight additions and alterations based on the newest readings; I have been somewhat cautious in the rendering of modern supplements in Santamaría Álvarez's text. Dirk Obbink has provided a translation to accompany his new text (see above, n. 2), which I reproduce here with deep gratitude for his scholarly generosity:

⊗

There are those who think a host of cavalry,
 some of foot-soldiers, while others say of ships
 to be the comeliest thing over the black earth. But I:
 whatsoever someone desires.

'Tis altogether simple to make this clearly known
 to all: Helen, by far outstanding in beauty
 of mortals, who had a husband,
 the best of all men,

left him behind, and, sailing, travelled to Troy
 and without any thought at all for her dear child
 or her parents either; but [Kypris?] led her off-course
 [. . .]

for [she (sc. Kypris?) with un]bending mind
 accomplishes? easily [whatever she] thinks;
 [which] now puts me in mind of Anaktoria
 gone away though she is.

Sooner would I watch her desirable gait
 and bright glow of her face
 than all the chariots of Lydia and
 soldiers in arms ⊗?

The sign ⊗ indicates the beginning or end of a poem, as indicated in the papyrus; the question mark after the final verse marks uncertainty as to whether the poem ended here or continued for several more stanzas, including what is now denoted as Fragment 16A. Scholars are divided on the question. Obbink is inclined to believe that the fragments represent two separate poems (communicated to me via e-mail). André Lardinois, "The New Sappho Poem (P. Koln 21351 and 21376): Key to the Old Fragments", in Ellen Greene and Marilyn Skinner (eds.), *The New Sappho on Old Age: Textual and Philosophical Issues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press [Hellenic Studies Series 38] 2009 = The Center for Hellenic Studies of Harvard University, online edition of March 11, 2011: <http://chs.harvard.edu/wa/pageR?tn=ArticleWrapper&bdc=12&mn=3534>), pp. 41-57, esp. pp. 49-50, argues for the continuation of the poem after v. 20: "The first person speaker first describes a painful situation: she would like to see Anaktoria, but cannot do so, because Anaktoria is not there. In the continuation of the poem, starting with the gnomic statement in lines 21-22, she then resigns herself to this situation". Lardinois perceives a parallel structure with that of fr. 31 (φαίνεται μοι κήνος) and the Tithonus poem, with the newly discovered sequel or alternative ending (see below, notes 19, 20). The question, however, lies outside the scope of the present article.

4 — For the two views, and the logic of the argument in favor of each, see Harold Zellner,

Sappho is saying that whether it is an army, a fleet, or a man or woman that one loves or desires (ἔραται), that is the thing that one will deem most beautiful. According to others, no one really feels passionate desire for an army or a fleet; hence, these things are not, properly speaking, beautiful at all. The implicit premise in both versions is that *erôs* is aroused precisely by beauty and only by beauty, but they play out differently. The first interpretation ascribes to Sappho a strongly relativist position concerning beauty: if you are passionate about a fleet or an army, then that is the most beautiful thing there is for you, since beauty is simply a function of what you love. If what you love happens to be a man or a woman, then that person will be the most beautiful thing to you, and this latter is Sappho's own view, based on her personal preference. Read this way, the poem may seem to challenge or subvert conventional values, the "Umwertung aller Werte" (in Nietzsche's famous phrase) that Garry Wills perceived as the poem's message half a century ago⁵. More particularly, Sappho would appear to be calling into question masculine, militaristic values. Presumably it is men who adore armies and navies, but women, like Sappho herself, can see that these are not attractive in any absolute way but simply a function of what males like; if women (and no doubt some men, perhaps including Paris) find other people more attractive than boats and soldiers, their judgment about what is beautiful is no less authoritative. Helen fell in love with Paris, whereas Sappho loves Anactoria. Anactoria is thus most beautiful in Sappho's eyes, whatever others might think: there is no suggestion that everyone is attracted to her or would necessarily compare Anactoria's looks to Helen's, who was the paradigmatic instance of beauty⁶.

Apart from gender preferences, there is a further distinction between military formations and the objects that inspire Sappho's passion: armies and navies are generic – one likes that kind of thing – whereas Paris, with whom Helen falls in love, and Sappho's own beloved, Anactoria, are individuals, not types. Sofia Carvalho thus sees in the poem a contrast or dichotomy between the collective and the individual; the latter is in principle subjective, and Sappho's preference for a particular person thus undermines the hegemony of the socially approved values associated with war: "Assim, a beleza está directamente relacionada com o desejo individual e, portanto, subjectivo. Quebra-se deste modo com qualquer convenção tradicional da ideia de beleza, uma ideia profundamente

"Sappho's Alleged Proof of Aesthetic Relativity", *GRBS* 47 (2007) 257-270, with bibliography; also George L. Koniaris, "On Sappho, Fr. 16 (L. P.)", *Hermes* 95 (1967) 257-268.

5 — "The Sapphic 'Umwertung Aller Werte'", *AJP* (1967) 434-442.

6 — What is more, as Blondell astutely points out (p. 114), "The poet shows no sign of following her absent beloved over the sea", as Helen follows Paris; whatever Anactoria's appeal, it does not cause Sappho to abandon her home or lead to war, with its armies and armadas, as Helen's action did.

associada a um colectivo: as armas, a guerra”⁷. Sappho herself clearly recognized that not everyone was necessarily attracted to the same person, and that a woman that she found irresistible might not exercise the same spell on someone else. I am thinking of poem 31 (Voigt), in which Sappho describes herself as suffering all the symptoms of erotic passion as she gazes upon her beloved, while the man sitting next to the woman is so completely immune to her charms as to appear godlike – for who but a deity, thinks the madly enamored Sappho, could resist her⁸? At the same time, Helen would seem to mark something like an objective standard of beauty; as Blondell observes, Helen’s “legendary status allows her to occupy a paradoxical position as *the* most beautiful woman, while at the same time symbolizing the impact of different embodiments of female beauty on individual lovers” (p. 114).

So much for the first interpretation of Sappho’s claim. On the second view, when people affirm that an army or a fleet of ships is beautiful, let alone most beautiful, they are simply mistaken: in fact, only an attractive human being can excite *erôs*, and those other things, infantry formations and naval squadrons and the like, are not, strictly speaking, beautiful at all. This view corresponds better to the usual sense of *erôs* in lyric poetry, which suggests sexual desire⁹. Sappho’s point would be that when people

7 — Sofia Carvalho, *Representações e hermenêutica do Eu em Safo: Análise de quatro poemas* (Coimbra: Universidade de Coimbra, 2012), p. 85. Later, Sappho specifies the army as Lydian, but they are still, I think, considered as a type rather than as individual items. Koniaris (above, n. 4, p. 257) sees rather a contrast between “particulars (such as horsemen, infantry, ships)” and “an (objective) definition of what can be claimed as (the) most beautiful”.

8 — For this interpretation of Sappho’s symptoms, as opposed to taking them as a sign of jealousy, see William D. Furley, “Fearless, Bloodless... like the Gods: Sappho 31 and the Rhetoric of ‘Godlike’”, *CQ* n.s. 50 (2000) 7-15; David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 239-41.

9 — In Homer, *erôs* (or rather *eros*) is used to express any intense desire, not necessarily erotic; an example is the Homeric formula, αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἔντο (*Iliad* 1.469, etc.; also twice in Hesiod; cf. the variation with “grief” in place of drink and food at *Iliad* 14.227, γόου ἐξ ἔρον εἶην, and with “war” at 13.638-39, ἐέλδεται ἐξ ἔρον εἶναι/ἧ πολέμου). *Erôs* is used of erotic passion at *Iliad* 3.442 (οὐ γὰρ πῶ ποτέ μ’ ὠδέ γ’ ἔρωσ φρένας ἀμφεκάλυπεν) and in a similar formula at 14.294, both times with omega and in the nominative. Barbara Breitenberger, *Aphrodite and Eros: The Development of Greek Erotic Mythology in Early Greek Poetry and Cult* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 145, notes that when used in the sexual sense, *erôs* refers to an active desire, as opposed to one that has already been satisfied, but she does not distinguish between the two forms of the word. Paul W. Ludwig, *Eros and Polis: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 125, argues that “Far from simply denoting sexual desire, it is unclear whether the word [*erôs*] even had any special sexual connotations”; the core sense is desire, and “only the context adds the sexual element”. The nominative *erôs* occurs only before a word beginning with a consonant, and so the omega is not guaranteed by the meter (see Pierre Chantraine, *Grammaire Homérique*, vol. 1 [Paris: Klincksieck, 1958], p. 211), and is conceivably a correction by Alexandrian (or earlier) scholars, bringing the erotic sense of the word in line with later usage. The scholia ad v. 1.469 note that the form *eros* is Aeolic, and add that, according to some, *eros* is used of various things, whereas *erôs* is used only in connection with sex, but they refute this claim with a citation from Pindar (10.60) which shows that *erôs* may also be used in a more

ascribe beauty to military formations, they are misusing the term: the most beautiful thing is the thing that inspires erotic passion, and that has to be a human being, like Paris or Helen or, finally, Anactoria¹⁰. Our preference for one person over another is perhaps subjective: even in the case of Helen, who was outstanding for beauty, not every man sought to carry her off, nor did every woman pursue Paris all the way to Troy. But there is no such relativity in the choice between ships and people: beauty resides just in what inspires *erôs*, and this is illustrated by Helen's behavior. But then why is exceptional beauty attributed to Helen rather than to Paris? Zellner explains: "That Helen was of unsurpassed beauty to others, though she found someone else most beautiful, is a striking example of conflicting aesthetic evaluations, and is a suitable premise in an argument for relativism concerning the κάλλιστον" (p. 268). We may add that Isocrates, in his encomium of Helen, adopts a similar strategy, though in reverse. He writes:

First of all, Theseus, said to be the son of Aegeus but in fact born of Poseidon, saw her when she was not yet in her prime but already surpassed all other women, and was so overcome by her beauty [*kállōs*] that he, who was used to commanding others since he had the greatest country and the most secure kingdom, did not think it worth living on the basis of the goods he had at hand, apart from a relationship with her (18, 21).

The powerful effect of Helen's beauty is indicated by the fact that a hero as great as Theseus found her irresistible: if someone so great could fall in love with her and pursue her, despite the risks it entailed, it shows that her beauty must have been objectively superlative¹¹. So too, Paris's

general sense (in cod. Genevensi gr. 44: λέγουσι δὲ τὸ μὲν ἔρος ἐπὶ πάντων λέγεσθαι, τὸ δὲ ἔρωσ ἐπὶ μόνων τῶν ἀφροδισίων, ὃ ἐστὶν ἀπίθανον. Πίνδαρος γοῦν. «καὶ γὰρ ἑτέροις ἐτέρων <ἔρωσ> ἔκνιζε φρένας»; cf. scholia b(BE³E⁴)T: τὸ μὲν ἔρος ἐπὶ πάντων λέγουσι λέγεσθαι, τὸ δὲ ἔρωσ ἐπὶ μόνων τῶν ἀφροδισίων, ὃ ἐστὶ ἀπίθανον. [T:] Πίνδαρος γοῦν «καὶ γὰρ/ἑτέροις ἐτέρων ἔρωσ ἔκνιζε φρένας». The corresponding verb *eramai* does not, I think, normally mean simply "admire", as Koniaris (above, n. 5, pp. 258-59) suggests, and I do not believe that ἔραται bears this sense in the poem under discussion.

10 — Stefan Radt, "Sapphica", *Mnemosyne* (Fourth Series) 23, (1970) 337-347, argues that Sappho is attracted to Anactoria's gait and look, rather than to Anactoria herself, and that this corresponds to the use of the neuter κῆν' = κῆνο in v. 3: "das Neutrum κῆνο zeigt nur, dass der Gegenstand der Liebe für Sappho nicht unbedingt eine Person zu sein braucht; es kann auch ein Ding sein, und so ist es, streng genommen, ja auch in unserm Gedicht: Sapphos Liebessehnsucht gilt ... Anaktorias βᾶμα und ἀμάρυγμα – Schritt und Blick des Mädchens sind für sie τὸ κάλλιστον" (pp. 339-40). But Sappho says simply that she would "rather see her lovely walk and the bright sparkle of her face", not that these are what she is in love with. The neuter κῆνο is used to cover all cases of what is finest, not to include impersonal characteristics among the objects of *erôs*.

11 — Glenn Most, "Sappho Fr. 16. 6-7L-P", *CQ* 31 (1981) 11-17, invokes Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 2.23, 1398b 19-1399a6, to show that Sappho is employing a well-known rhetorical technique in confirming a general proposition by appeal to the judgment of a universally accepted authority. I

beauty must have been exceptional if Helen, herself outstanding for just this quality, could fall so hopelessly in love with him.

Let me summarize the two strands of interpretation outlined above. On the first, people may think that armies or navies or for that matter particular men or women are the most beautiful thing, but that is only because they happen to love one or another of these items. On the second, people typically say that armies, navies, and the like are beautiful, but in fact beauty is only that which inspires erotic desire, and that is (normally) confined to men and women, among whom Paris and Helen are exemplary. The first view involves something of a catachresis in the use of the verb ἔραται – who falls in love with an infantry formation? – whereas the second entails a misuse of the word “beauty”, which is applied to the wrong kind of object. I believe that there is a third possibility that makes better sense of the whole, and hangs precisely on a matter of vocabulary.

What Sappho says in the first stanza is that people regard cavalry, infantry, or navies as *kálliston*, that is, the superlative of *kalós*. The translation quoted above, and almost every translation and commentary, take the term to mean “most beautiful”, echoed in the follow stanza by the noun *kállos*, applied to Helen¹². However, I have argued in my book, *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea*¹³, that there is an important distinction between the adjective and the noun, despite their surface similarity, which has led most scholars to regard *kalón* and *kállos* as equivalent. *Kalós* generally speaking means “fine” or “excellent”, and while it can be applied to a person’s looks, and so signify “beautiful”, its range is far wider, and very often means something more like “noble” or “virtuous”. The broad semantic span of the adjective has led some scholars to question whether the Greeks had an independent or distinct concept of beauty at all, and Umberto Eco was bold enough to deny outright that they did. He writes: “In fact, Beauty had no autonomous stature in ancient Greece”, and he adds: “The very word *Kalón*, which only improperly may be translated by the term ‘beautiful,’ ought to put us on our guard”¹⁴. If

agree with Most as well in rejecting the notion that “Sappho is criticizing Helen here, exposing her κάλλος as merely external prettiness and setting it in sharp contrast to the true κάλλιστον, which would have an essentially moral component” (p. 12); where I part company with Most is in his further claim that “nothing in the poem permits so sharp a differentiation between the κάλλιστον of line 3 and the κάλλος of line 7” (*ibid.*). I am grateful to André Lardinois for calling my attention to this article (and much else).

12 — An exception is Diane Rayor, in her new and up-to-date translation of Sappho’s poems, in Diane Rayor and André Lardinois, *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), who correctly (in my view) renders *kalliston* as “the finest” rather than “the most beautiful”.

13 — David Konstan, *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

14 — Umberto Eco, *History of Beauty*, trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Rizzoli, 2004), pp. 37, 39.

in analyzing the classical Greek conception of beauty one focuses exclusively on *kalós* or *to kalón*, then Eco's conclusion is understandable, since it is difficult to sort out when the term is to be taken to signify "beauty" and when it is intended in the moral sense. This is the kind of ambiguity that led Blondell, in her excellent book, to affirm that "Greek culture does not distinguish easily between moral and physical beauty, and is deeply uncomfortable with the potential dissonance between them" (p. X)¹⁵.

Now, what I argued in my book is that classical Greek did in fact have a term that corresponds better to the modern English "beauty", and which, if anything, is more narrow rather than broader than "beauty" is for us. The term is precisely the noun *kállos*. It refers principally to sexual attractiveness, and is typically regarded as a stimulus to *erôs*, that is, passionate love. Since we are dealing with Sappho, it will suffice here to illustrate the uses of the term in archaic poetry, and in particular Homer¹⁶. In the *Iliad*, *kállos* is attributed to Helen, to be sure, and also to Paris: after Aphrodite has whisked Paris from the battlefield, she tells Helen: "Paris is in your bedroom and your well-turned bed, glowing in his beauty and garments" (*Iliad* 3.391-92); we recall that it was his beauty that caused Helen to run off with him, and that original scene is, as it were, reenacted here. We are told that Bellerophon possesses *kállos*, precisely in the episode in which his host's wife falls passionately in love with him. A beautiful woman is compared to Aphrodite, the paragon of beauty and sexual allure (9.388-89). Finally, *kállos* is ascribed to Ganymede, whom Zeus carried off to Olympus to be his cup-bearer. On the other hand, none of the major heroes in the *Iliad* is said to possess *kállos*: grown men are typically the subject of *erôs* – they are the ones who fall in love – not the object, and it would be odd to call someone like Ajax or Agamemnon "pretty" (this asymmetrical distribution becomes still more pronounced in the classical and later periods). In the *Odyssey*, Athena anoints Penelope with ambrosial *kállos* (18.192-93), of the kind that Aphrodite uses, rendering her taller, more massive, and whiter than ivory. When Nausicaa meets Odysseus after he washes up on shore, her companions are said to possess beauty granted by the Graces (6.18), whereas Nausicaa derives her *kállos* from the gods (8.457): Nausicaa has gone to the beach to wash her wedding garments, and her beauty underscores her desirability as a wife. So too, Athena bathes Odysseus in *kállos*, so as to make him attractive first to Nausicaa, who thinks of him as a potential husband, and later to

15 — Cf. Glenn Most, "Sappho and the Heroic Ideal", *AJP* 106 (1981) 32-48: "Sappho's language did not allow her to distinguish systematically between the ethical and aesthetic aspects of *kalon*" (p. 16).

16 — In my book I illustrate the uses of *kállos* and *kalós* in the Homeric Hymns and archaic lyric, iambic, and elegiac verse as well.

Penelope, whom he wins in a kind of reprise of a marriage contest. In the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite*, Aphrodite falls in love with Anchises, who has his beauty from the gods (5.77), whereas she herself possesses “immortal beauty” (174); Zeus, for his part, carried off Ganymede because of his *kállos* (203). So too, the goddess Dawn seized the youth Clitus because of his *kállos* (*Odyssey* 15.250-51).

The simple *kalós* has a much wider range of applications. For example, Thetis takes her seat on a throne that is “chased in silver, *kalós*, and intricately-wrought (*daidaleos*, *Iliad* 18.388); *kalós* is again combined with *daidaleos* in the description of Achilles’ gleaming shield (19.379-80; cf. 22.314-15, of the crest of Achilles’ helmet). Hector’s infant son Astyanax is compared to a *kalós* star (6.400-01). Hera’s skin (*Iliad* 14.175) is *kalós*, but so too is that of a wounded warrior (5.354, 5.858). The simple term is applied also to Hera’s veil (14.184-85) and hair (14.177), and the superlative to the water of a river (*kalliston hudôr*, 21.157-58), the evening star (22.317-18), and the robe that Hecabe picks out for Athena when she supplicates her (6.294). *Kalliston* is also employed in reference to a large mixing bowl or *krêtêr* in the *Odyssey* (4.613-14); interestingly, just such a bowl, made of silver, is the only non-human object in the Homeric epics to which the noun *kállos* is applied (*Iliad* 23.742)¹⁷. In archaic poetry, on the whole, *kalós* most often refers to the way things look, and is especially associated with brightness or glow¹⁸. Agamemnon and Achilles, indeed, are singled out as being especially *kalós* in the *Iliad*, and this may refer to their imposing appearance, but may just as well indicate their noble status, although the moral sense of the word begins to predominate somewhat later (so particularly in the poems of Solon). *Kállos*, however, is primarily ascribed to good-looking youths, or to adults like Paris and Bellerophon who are noted for their seductiveness (and to a rejuvenated Odysseus, when Athena intervenes to make him the more appealing to Nausicaa and Penelope). A poem ascribed to Theocritus (23.32) nicely illustrates the distinction between the two terms: “a boy’s beauty [*kállos*] is a fine thing [*kalón*], but it endures a short while”.

The uses of *kalós* in Sappho – or rather, *kalos*, since accents are recessive in the Aeolic dialect – betray the same wide range of meanings that we find in Homer, with a primary suggestion of visual appeal¹⁹. It is used of the moon (fr. 34.1) and (in the superlative) of stars (fr. 104b1), perhaps with reference to their brightness. So too, in fr. 58.25-

17 — I take it that the bowl, which is provided with a full genealogy, is regarded as an especially attractive and desirable object.

18 — But note the use of the comparative *kállion* in the sense of “preferable”, that is, the better of two options (e.g., *Odyssey* 3.69, 3.358, 6.639, 8.543, 8.549).

19 — The discussion of Sappho’s usage here goes well beyond what I presented in my book, and in fact modifies some of the conclusions I drew there.

26 Voigt (= *P.Oxy.* 1787), independently of whether these lines belong to the Tithonus poem, there is a connection between *to kálon* and the brightness of the sun, although the precise construction of the syntax is debated. Some scholars take τοῦτο κάμοι/τὸ λάμπρον ἔρωσ ἀελίω καὶ τὸ κάλον λέλογχε to mean “love (*erōs*) has obtained for me the brightness and beauty of the sun” (so Campbell, in the Loeb Library translation), whereas others render “love of the sun has obtained for me brightness and beauty”²⁰. In an erotic context, the adjective may suggest sexual attractiveness. Thus, when Sappho applies *kalê* to a girl (fr. 132) who has a figure (*morphê*) comparable to golden flowers, and whom she would not exchange for all of Lydia or a lovable something (the word modified by *eranann* has fallen out), the relevant sense is evidently physical beauty. So too, in the “Tithonus poem” (fr. 58 Voigt), where the goddess Dawn is said to have fallen in love with Tithonus because he was *kálon kaì neon*, 11), the sense is presumably “beautiful and young” (beauty is especially associated with youth in males): the erotic context prompts the connotation of *kálon* here as physically or sexually attractive.

In fr. 50 Lobel-Page, Sappho seems to play on the two senses of *kálos*, as visually attractive and morally fine (unfortunately, the text is corrupt):

ὁ μὲν γὰρ κάλος ὄσσον ἴδην πέλεται <κάλος>,
ὁ δὲ κἀγαθος αὐτίκα καὶ κάλος ἔσσεται.

He who is *kálos* is <*kálos*> just to see,
He who is also good will straightway be *kálos* as well.

In the first line, the first occurrence of *kálos* means physically handsome, whereas the second (if the supplement is correct) must have the wider sense of “fine” or “good”, which is then specified with the infinitive, “to see”. The second verse affirms that a good man, as opposed to one who is simply good looking, will invariably be fine. There is perhaps

20 — Gregory Nagy, “The ‘New Sappho’ Reconsidered in the Light of the Athenian Reception of Sappho”, *Classics@* Volume 4, ed. Ellen Greene and Marilyn Skinner (The Center for Hellenic Studies of Harvard University, online edition of March 11, 2011: <http://chs.harvard.edu/wa/pageR?t-n=ArticleWrapper&bdc=12&mn=3534>), argues for translating, “Love [*erōs*] of the Sun has won for me its radiance and beauty”, on the grounds that taking the Sun as the objective genitive of *erōs* is parallel to the phrase ὅττω τις ἔραται in fr. 16, taking κάλλιστον there to mean “the most beautiful thing’ in the whole wide world”. In the same volume, Ellen Greene, “Sappho 58: Philosophical Reflections on Death and Aging”, renders the lines: “Eros has granted to me (bestowed upon me) (obtained for me)/ the beauty and the brightness of the sun”, and argues that “These additional lines signal a dramatic shift from the speaker’s earlier expression of sadness, regret, and ultimately resigned acceptance of her mortal situation”. Still in this volume, Deborah Boedeker, “No Way Out? Aging in the New (and Old) Sappho”, leaves the decision between the two versions open, whereas André Lardinois, “The New Sappho poem” (above, n. 3: p. 44), suggests that Sappho may have intended both readings: love for the Sun causes one to regard it as beautiful, and the beauty of the Sun inspires love.

the suggestion that such a man is also attractive, but if so, it must be less in the ordinary physical way – surely Sappho is not claiming that good character is always accompanied by good looks – but because virtue has its own appeal. Thus, in fr. 137, Sappho can speak of a desire (*himeros*) for *esla* (that is, good things) and *kála*: I take it that the two terms here are roughly synonymous (although Ann Carson, for example, along with various others, translates, “a desire for good or beautiful things”). Again, when Sappho writes, *κάλ’ ἐπάσχομεν* (fr. 94.11), she is referring to the good or lovely things that she and Atthis experienced together, not their visual appearance.

Taking *kálliston* in the sense of “finest” in Sappho fr. 16 eliminates any suggestion of catachresis. The question raised by the priamel, on this reading, is not what is most beautiful but what is most excellent or best. Some claim that it is forces martialled on land or sea, but Sappho replies that it is rather what one loves, by which she means a person who possesses *kállos* or beauty, for it is this that inspires erotic passion²¹. As Blondell rightly observes, “*erôs* is in its very essence a response to beauty” (p. 113). Sappho is certainly undercutting the value-laden view that armies and navies are grand things, deserving of admiration; to this she opposes the power of beauty and the passion it arouses – that is what is finest, according to her, and she proves it by showing that beauty is mighty enough to cause even the most gorgeous woman to abandon all that infantry, cavalry, and sailors are meant to defend, namely the integrity of the household. Sappho’s claim is thus analogous to the Theocritean verse cited above, or rather goes it one better: *kállos* is not just a fine thing (*kalón*), it is the finest of all (*kálliston*)²².

21 — In the Oxyrhynchus continuation of the Tithonus poem, Gregory Nagy, in the essay cited in the preceding note, takes love for the Sun to signify “an affirmation of hope for the afterlife”, which “makes it possible for the speaker to possess everything that is bright and beautiful in life – and to prevail over old age and death” (Athenaeus, who quotes these lines [687B], takes Sappho’s words rather to mean “love of life” [τοῦ ζῆν ἐπιθυμία]). Nagy further compares this verse with the priamel in fr. 16, in which the three items listed “are three radiant visions of beauty”, beginning with “the dazzling sight of magnificent chariot-fighters in their luminous war-chariots massing for frontal assault against their terrified enemy”, followed by the visions of “footsoldiers” and of “battleships at sea”. But these “three radiant visions of beauty” are surpassed by the “ultimate brightness radiating from the speaker’s love-object, Anaktoria”, (*κάμάρυγμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω*): “That radiance of Anaktoria is now directly compared with the radiance of the luminous chariots and the other two luminous foils (16.19-20)”. Much as I agree that brilliance and glitter are often associated with beauty in classical Greek texts, I do not find any indication in the poem that the first three items are distinguished for their radiance, as opposed to Anaktoria, whose face, at least, is said to sparkle. This is perhaps another reason to suppose that *kálliston* here bears the sense of “finest” rather than “most beautiful”.

22 — Richard Dworin, “Sappho on the Noble and the Beautiful”, in the Proceedings of the Ancient Philosophy Society meeting held at Transylvania University in Lexington, KY, on 9-2 April 2015, pp. 4-11, asks: “Who, then, are the unnamed holders of the view in fr. 16 that military forces are *kálliston*?” He proposes that Sappho had in mind the Tyrtaeus, who affirmed that dying

We must not be misled by the similarity between *kalón* and *kálliston*: they may perfectly well signify different things here, just as, in English, the related words “fine” and “finery” are quite distinct, the latter signifying elegant or ostentatious dress or ornamentation. If Sappho had written, “some think an army is finest, others a fleet, but I think it’s whatever quenches your thirst; and the proof is that Helen, even though she had an abundance of water, left her entire family behind in order to run off with a water-carrier”, we would understand perfectly well that soldiers and ships are not objects of thirst and cannot quench it. Neither are they objects of *erôs*, and they cannot satisfy it. Even though *kálos* in Sappho, as in other writers of the archaic and later periods, can mean “beautiful” when applied to physical appearance, especially in an erotic context, this sense would not, I believe, have been elicited initially by a mention of cavalry, infantry, or naval fleet²³.

Did Helen fall in love with Paris because he was beautiful, or did she think he was beautiful because she was in love with him? In other words, is beauty understood to be objective or subjective? I do not think that Sappho is concerned to pose this question in this poem. Beauty and *erôs* are coordinate, and it is the paired idea that she is opposing to the preferences of others²⁴. Helen is adduced as the paradigmatic case of someone risking all for love, and this puts Sappho in mind of Anactoria, whom she clearly regards as beautiful: her stride is *eraton* – this word is a giveaway – and her face sparkles or flashes, a frequent sign of beauty. Sappho does not mean to compare Anactoria’s beauty with Helen’s, but neither is she necessarily suggesting here that Anactoria appears beautiful to her eyes only²⁵. But concluding the poem with Anactoria rather than

in the front ranks is *kalón*, and declared that virtue and the *kalliston* prize goes to the one who can face death and the enemy: ἦδ’ ἀρετή, τόδ’ ἄεθλον ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἄριστον/κάλλιστόν τε φέρειν γίγνεται ἀνδρὶ νέφ.

23 — This is not to deny that there is some wordplay here; thus, André Lardinois writes in his comments on this article: “I believe that Sappho in lines 5 and following not only relates the concept of *kálliston* to the noun *kálllos* (line 8), but also to the participle *kállipois*’ (line 10), both at line beginnings... She does not simply desire Anactoria, but Anactoria *who is not here*”; Lardinois remarks that the connection among the three words was made first (to the best of his knowledge) by Page duBois, “Sappho and Helen”, in Ellen Greene, *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 79-88, esp. p. 81 (orig. published in *Arethusa* 11 [1978] 89-99).

24 — André Lardinois (above, n. 3, p. 44) suggests that the ambiguity in the sequel to the Tithonus poem (see n. 20, above), where the Sun (in the genitive) is construed “both with *ἔρος* and with *τὸ λάμπρον καὶ τὸ κάλον*, would agree with the idea expressed in the opening priamel of Sappho fr. 16, namely that the most beautiful thing on earth is whatever one loves: the speaker’s love of life makes it for her an object of beauty”.

25 — The Greeks for the most part did seem to believe that there were objective criteria of beauty, which were formalized in the so-called *Canon* of Polyclitus, but they also recognized that the vision of lovers was prone to distortion. Plato hints at such an overvaluation of the beloved at the beginning of the *Lysis*, in reference to Hippothales’ eulogies for the boy *Lysis*, which drive his friends

Helen makes good sense (if indeed the poem ended here). The case of Paris and Helen is exceptional: perhaps anyone would be seduced by such outstandingly beautiful people. If Sappho has the same preference for her beloved, who is an ordinary human being and not a figure out of mythology, over sailors and soldiers, then indeed she has made a good argument that the finest thing is just what excites erotic passion, and that is *kállos*.

to despair, and Lucretius amusingly lists the kinds of exaggerations to which lovers are prone at the end of the fourth book of *De rerum natura*.