

Although most contemporary classical scholars are in agreement that Sappho's verse appropriates themes and poetic conventions employed by both Homer and male lyric poets, there is considerable disagreement about the extent to which Sappho's extant poetry ought to be considered 'woman-centered,' that is, poetry exclusively concerned with love, sexuality, and 'private' matters in general (Stehle 1981, Skinner 1993, Williamson 1995, Greene 2002). While Sappho's surviving poetry clearly depicts a female world apart from men, and is largely focused on issues connected with love and desire, there is, nonetheless, evidence that Sappho also had interests in politics and philosophy, interests that show a more public dimension to her work (Parker 2005). The recent discovery of a new Sappho poem not only extends Sappho's body of work, but also provides another instance of Sappho's interest in philosophical issues. Considering that poem 58 is thought to be a complete poem, though its ending is subject to some debate (West 2005), it makes an especially important contribution to reinforcing the evidence for Sappho's concern with ethics as well as erotics.

Using West's 12-line text, I will argue that Poem 58 constitutes a philosophical reflection on the human condition in light of the inevitability of aging and mortality. I see this as part of a philosophical thread that runs through several of Sappho's poems that address such central philosophical issues as "what constitutes beauty" and "the nature of the good human life." I will compare Poem 58 to other didactic poetic utterances in Sappho's work, arguing that the speaker's display of equanimity in the face of the body's decay and ultimate death reflects Sappho's more general ruminations on the nature of human experience. As West notes, the decay of the body described in Poem 58 mirrors the symptoms of love evoked in Poem 31. Interestingly, both poems also show how the speaker "Sappho" achieves a kind of recovery from the debilitating effects of bodily dissolution and fragmentation. This recovery is achieved through rational contemplation of the larger scheme of things, or to put it another way, through an ability to detach from the contingencies of self and see personal experience as part of a larger whole.

I will also consider how Sappho's use of the Tithonus myth reinforces her philosophical approach to aging and mortality. I will argue for two equally possible, though not mutually exclusive, readings of the myth. On the one hand, it may be argued that Sappho's image of Tithonus, condemned perpetually to endure the effects of old age, underlines the sense that death may provide a welcome relief from the indignities and suffering brought on by old age. Yet, on the other hand, Tithonus' exemplum may also point to Sappho's recognition of her own poetic immortality, in that Tithonus' voice "flows endlessly" (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*) though his body fails him. On both of these readings, I shall argue, the exemplum serves to highlight Sappho's philosophic perspective on her own mortality and its attendant commentary on the human condition.