

Unlike 1997's *The Invention of Love*, Tom Stoppard's latest play, *Rock'n'Roll*, does not make the legacy of classical antiquity the principal focus of its plot. Nonetheless, an important figure in its first act is a female professor of classics at Cambridge named Eleanor. By dramatizing Eleanor's tutorials with two female graduate students, Stoppard is able to introduce detailed interpretations of two poems by Sappho (fr. 31, 130). These tutorials unite with other elements—e.g., Eleanor's battle with breast cancer; the mirroring of Act I's tutorials in Act II; the quotation of Catullus 51 in Act II—to form an intricate subplot revolving around Sappho, feminism, gender, and the teaching and reception of classical literature.

Taking its cue from Eleanor's description of herself as someone who “does classics” and “does half-arsed feminism,” this paper explores what *Rock'n'Roll* “does” with classics, feminism, and gender. My aims are to examine how Stoppard appropriates Sappho's voice, and to analyze the dramatic work that is performed by the episodes in which classical texts are taught—always to women by women—in a play otherwise dominated by men caught up in the cultural and ideological clashes of the Cold War. Stoppard, I submit, develops the subplot centered on Sappho and Eleanor as a vehicle for accentuating the fundamental errors of the Communist project in Eastern Europe, as they became manifest in the heavy-handed, intolerant reaction to 1968's Prague Spring. In particular, he uses Sappho's poetry to challenge the materialist underpinnings of Marxism, to which Eleanor's husband Max, a history professor at Cambridge, remains adamantly committed. Sappho's poetry is thus positioned as ancestor to the rock music that catalyzed the “Velvet Revolution” (which eventually brought down the repressive Communist regime in Czechoslovakia), and it disposes us to see rock'n'roll not as a passing fad, but rather as the latest explosive expression of the “uncageable” (so Eleanor renders *amachanon* in Sappho fr. 130) spirit of humanity.

At points, Stoppard's interpretation of Sappho recalls Denys Page's analysis; it owes no discernible debt, however, to actual feminist scholarship. Nonetheless, contemporary feminist approaches [e.g. Greene 1996, 2002; Skinner 1996; Stehle 1996; Peterson 1997], as well as recent studies of the reception of Sappho [e.g. Harvey 1996; O'Higgins 1996; Prins 1996, 1999; Yatromanolakis 2007] supply valuable frameworks for analyzing the methods Stoppard employs and the effects he creates in evoking the poetry of Sappho and in dramatizing the teaching of classical texts by women to women. On one hand, this scholarship seems to legitimate Stoppard's positioning of Sappho as a “countercultural” figure who anticipates rock musicians in challenging dominant discursive conventions [cf. Barre 1993], and it justifies his reliance on both Sappho and his female characters to show up what Ellen Greene has called “male assumptions about dominance and submission.” Yet this same scholarship encourages us to look critically at *Rock'n'Roll*'s interest in gender and feminism—and to reflect on the extent to which Stoppard himself and the male rock stars celebrated in his play may participate in a tradition that extends back to antiquity, whereby men have co-opted for their own ends what women such as Sappho have created and nurtured.