

REFLECTIONS ON THE THEME OF NATIONALISM*

I - Dreyfus, Sappho and the Fin de Siècle

Joan De Jean

(University of Pennsylvania)

To the Memory of Jack Winkler, who set an example by taking a political stand without sacrificing scholarly standards.

If I wanted to pay homage to classic cinema, this paper could be subtitled «The Earrings of Natalie Clifford Barney». After spending more years than I care to calculate working on a book on Sappho, I thought her file was at last definitively closed. Then, on a visit to the newly revamped Musée des Arts Décoratifs, I was mesmerized by the most splendid Lalique jewels I had ever seen. I noted that all my favorites had been the possessions of Natalie Clifford Barney, poet and co-founder of the movement now known as «Sappho 1900». This meant that they had been chosen by the movement's new Sappho, Renée Vivien, whose lavish presents to Barney during their long relationship received much comment. Had my eyes wandered no further down the cards identifying the objects, I would have felt only fond memories for work past. But I also noticed that the jewels had been given to the museum by a certain «Madame Dreyfus-Barney». Suddenly, the file was no longer closed.

Even though I have little patience with the recently fashionable mode known as personal criticism, I find that the most expedient means of explaining that name's resonance for me is through reference to my recent book, *Fictions of Sappho*. Rest assured that the explanation will be brief. For me, by far the most compelling part of Sappho's modern history was the 19th century, when the German and the French scholarly traditions were so driven by nationalistic concerns that each fought to impose its own wildly idiosyncratic vision of the poet of Lesbos.

This *dialogue des sourds et muets* opened up to a new discourse only in the fin de siècle. In an unlikely turn of events, the French tradition came under the influence of a vision of Sappho developed inside a radically Lesbian milieu with a then unprecedented degree of openness. This new Saphic vision was the coproduction of the owners of the fabulous Lalique jewels, Renée Vivien

* The two papers under this heading were part of the roundtable on nationalism which completed the discourse on people and power and, of course, citizenship, rights and violence which are the very stuff of the dialectic between the two. [Editor's note]

and Natalie Clifford Barney. The proof of its successful invasion of the official scholarly tradition is provided by the still standard French critical edition of Sappho, the last work of perhaps the most eminent French Hellenist of the past century, Théodore Reinach. Since Reinach was also the author of several studies of Jews in antiquity as well as a history of the Dreyfus case, I for some time speculated about the existence of an alliance between what we would now term Jewish studies and gay studies, on the model of the cooperation between special interest groups that we often witness on the current political scene. However, since I had nothing to go on, I left no more than a hint of that intuition in my book. Then I saw that name, Dreyfus-Barney, and I was determined to try again.

Speaking of the Jewish response to the Dreyfus affair, Salomon Reinach, father of Jewish Studies in France, of Dreyfus's main defender, Joseph Reinach, and of Sappho's editor, Théodore Reinach, commented that it would «take well over a century to unravel this mysterious story, if it ever is unravelled» (Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation*, 5). In at least one case, Reinach guaranteed that the affair would remain «mysterious»: he gave Renée Vivien's papers to the Bibliothèque Nationale and ordered that they be sealed until the year 2000. Faced with this unlikely pairing of the flamboyantly decadent lesbian and the most vocal early critic of the Aryan myth, a recent commentator notes laconically that «Vivien's papers passed into the possession» of Reinach, and that he «appears to have been motivated by the desire to protect... the personal reputations of those who had known her intimately» (Jay xii). However, no one concerned with the politics of scholarship could leave the «mystery» of what Reinach was protecting unquestioned. The mystery is made piquant by the irony of his strategy of concealment: the Reinach sons spent years forcing the French government to unseal the secret dossier on the basis of which Dreyfus had been condemned; their father, who had also taken an openly Dreyfusard stand, then sealed up the personal record of the most prominent fin-de-siècle lesbian, so that others (presumably, other Reinachs) would not be condemned by public opinion because of their contact with her.

That the members of the Reinach family never hesitated to put their vast erudition at the service of political causes is evident. A central role in all their endeavors, and in particular in their struggle against threatening ideas of German origin, was consistently reserved for Hellenism. This mission was most clearly formulated by the principal architect of Alfred Dreyfus's defense and the principal recorder of the affair's history, Joseph Reinach, shortly after World War I: «Hellenism must be erected as an indestructible barrier against the ambitions of Germany, which, even though vanquished today, has not given up» (54). Without pausing to comment on the fragility of classical studies as a barrier against German militarism, I will say only that this possibility was first conceived by the Reinachs before the concrete lesson of World War I and that Sappho and her lesbianism were assigned a key role in their construction. To explain how the scholarly commentary in a critical edition could be imagined as a barrier to the spread of fascism and antisemitism, it is necessary

to review the role assigned Sappho in the course of the 19th century by the increasingly nationalistic German scholarly tradition.

The modern German tradition of Sappho speculation comes into existence at the very moment when the two concepts on which it was predicated were obtaining legitimacy: the word «nationalism» officially entered French in 1798, «nationality» in 1808, while the word «philology» in the modern sense obtained this status in 1818. The study that founds the German Sappho tradition, Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker's 1816 *Sappho Freed from a Reigning Prejudice*, formulates all the connections that German scholars would continue to articulate until the second World War. Welcker, who had fought against Napoleon's army, knew what may be termed the Imperial fiction of Sappho developed jointly by Italians such as Verri and Imperiale working under the French occupation and by servants of the empire such as the artist Girodet and the amateur Hellenist and professional soldier Coupin, who collaborated on an edition of Sappho in which text and illustrations combined establish the vision of the poet of Lesbos that 19th-century German scholars make part of *their* cultural patrimony. Welcker posits an essential bond between male physical beauty, militarism, and patriotism on the one hand and Sappho's chastity on the other. Welcker never actually spells out what Sapphic chastity could mean. In what he defines as the German national vision, the poet his contemporary Byron called «burning» is essentially frigid. He is willing to admit that she had heterosexual relationships (a husband, an unfaithful lover Phaon). What Welcker will not admit – and what German Hellenists will use all their erudition to combat for the next century – is the possibility of Sappho's lesbianism, or even her authorship of lesbian poetry, because that admission would necessitate the admission of female homosexuality's existence in antiquity.

Welcker was among the most powerful figures of German philology's founding generation. He held the Chair at Göttingen for half a century – among his students who resisted his apparently magnetic influence was Karl Marx. He was more fortunate with virtually every German Sappho scholar up to and including Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, whose *Sappho und Simonides*, dedicated to Welcker, remains influential today. Welcker and his students defended Sappho's «virgin purity» (Richter in 1833), her «moral severity» and «immaculate honor» (Müller in 1841); by 1905 Paul Brandt characterized her as a «Greek girl... who in the final analysis remained a child all her life». Sappho's poetry is proclaimed by these commentators to be «innocent[ly] artless» (Müller), full of «delight in nature» (Brandt). The fragments explicitly addressed to women are explained away as related to the only activity allowed the passionless poet, that of, in Wilamowitz's immortal words, «teacher of the Lesbian virgins».

To promote the master's theory, his disciples were prepared to work against the advances of the very discipline upon whose growing authority their scholarly reputations were dependent. I'll give two examples of the scholarly «dishonesty» in which they were trapped by the chastity theory.

1) Beginning with Neue's 1827 edition, German philologists dismissed the

homosexual reading of fr. 1 (the so-called Ode to Aphrodite) that scholars aware of the metrical inaccuracy on which the heterosexual reading is based were beginning to propose. (So powerful is the authority of German philology that they are still winning the battle for control over the orientation of this key poem in what remains the standard critical edition, Page's 1955 *Sappho and Alcaeus*).

2) Despite the fact that, late in the 18th century, Hellenists were ready to admit that the beautiful young Phaon, whose betrayal, in Ovid's fiction of Sappho, led to her suicide, was only a legendary figure, in 1913 Wilamowitz still defends Phaon's reality: his Sappho, ever the model teacher, shows the Lesbian virgins what is expected of them in their role as future wives and mothers by falling for Phaon.

All the passion that philology subtracted from Sappho and her poetry was reinvested in the subject that is actually at the heart of all classical German Sappho commentary, the Greek practice of *pederastia*. Time and again, Welcker and his followers quickly dismiss Sappho and turn to a eulogy of what they call *Knabenliebe*. To this «love of boys», they attribute a founding role in Greek society: in Müller's formulation, as a result of this «officially sanctioned relation between men and adolescents... the young men learned noble and manly virtue». This argument receives its full-blown expression at the hands of Paul Brandt, who made the strongest formulation ever of Greek love as virile nationalism in 1925, when the theory's appeal in Germany is understandable: «The love of boys was not persecuted, but fostered, to become the power that maintained the State and upheld the foundation of Greek ethics»; «We are indebted to the heroic lovers... for Europe's freedom». From philology's vision of antiquity as expressed in the commentary to the critical edition of Sappho, a clear recipe for national greatness emerges: the Sappho figure chastely prepares virgins for their future role as mothers of the boys who, through their «heroic» relations with older men, learn successfully to defend the State.

This was the condition of Sappho commentary when an Anglo-American heiress, Pauline Mary Tarn, arrived in Paris. Through her companion, an even more important American heiress, Natalie Clifford Barney, she learned of the Wharton edition, the first to publish in translation the homosexual reading of Sappho that rebel German philologists had suggested. Tarn learned Greek in order to give the French this homosexual Sappho, which she did under her pseudonym, Renée Vivien. She presented the French with a Sappho that has been aptly characterized as «far more lesbian than Sappho was in what was then known of her poetry» (Mora 200). In addition, Vivien added a biography of Sappho in which she made plain that her lesbian poet was a direct response to the German chastity theory: Vivien describes Sappho's «scorn for marriage» and ridicules the scenario of Sappho as mother, as well as the Phaon legend.

Vivien's Sapphic commentary is in its own way as excessive as Welcker's. In her translations, she expands the Greek text, sometimes making the briefest of fragments into full-fledged poems. For example, the broken line «Why, daughter of Pandion, lovable swallow, me...» is transformed into twenty lines

of lesbian sensuality, devoted to the poet's abandonment by a woman named Atthis, a description of Atthis's lips, and so on. Surely none of its initial readers would have guessed that Vivien's vision would become the French national Sappho.

At about the time that Brandt was proclaiming *pederastia's* nationalistic mission, Théodore Reinach was put in charge of what remains today the definitive French Sappho, the *Belles Lettres* edition. When Reinach died before its completion, his student Aimé Puech supervised its publication and used the master's notes as the basis for a preface. Their edition is startling, to say the least: in a complete break with three centuries of mainstream French Hellenism, Reinach gave the French public a Sappho more unhesitatingly homosexual than the version of her poetry presented by the far more recent definitive English edition. His only real precursor in France is his scholarly antithesis, and editor whose Sappho commentary has never received a shred of official recognition, Renée Vivien.

The tie that bound Reinach to Vivien is surely related to «the affair», the case of Alfred Dreyfus. The sister of Vivien's companion at the time of the affair, Laura Barney, married into the Dreyfus family: she is the «Madame Dreyfus-Barney» who gave Natalie Barney's Lalique jewels to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs at the time when Reinach was preparing his Sappho edition. (The Reinach and the Dreyfus families were also linked by the marriage of the children of the principal architects of Alfred's defense, his brother Mathieu Dreyfus's daughter and Joseph Reinach's only son, who was, appropriately, a classical archeologist). All three women were, like the Reinachs, pacifists and passionately anti-German. These political links help explain Reinach's conversion from German philology's vision of Sappho to Vivien's. (The political danger for a Jew of being associated with a German stance, which the Dreyfus affair had made plain, must also have encouraged Reinach's conversion). The full story of the Reinach-Vivien exchanges is undoubtedly contained in the Bibliothèque Nationale's dossiers sealed by Salomon Reinach «to protect the reputations of those who had known [Vivien] intimately».

Nothing we can learn when they are unsealed nine years from now can alter the fact that, by throwing his weight behind the movement André Billy termed «Sappho 1900, Sappho cent pour cent», Reinach gave the French Sappho tradition the national definition it had lacked from the time of the simultaneous rise of philology and nationalism. The proof that his message was understood and that the union of «Jewish Studies» and «Gay Studies» that he and Vivien initiated was seen as a «barrier against the ambitions of Germany» is provided by one of the most mysterious Sappho editions of all times.

Its title page reads simply «Sappho», with no further indication of participation. Inside, we find the most openly lesbian edition since Vivien's. The less erotic poems are made to appear so by the overtly homoerotic etchings that accompany each of them. Even the fragment known as «Alceus to Sappho» and used by German chastity theorists as a proof of Sappho's heterosexuality, since it indicates that a man was interested in her, appears homoerotic

because of the accompanying iconography. Since this fragment is used to close the volume, it makes the edition's point: this Sappho commentary is intended as the erasure of German heterosexual chastity and the victory of openly sensual female same-sex love.

It is only if we happen to turn the final page, which in French books normally contains only not very exciting information about the volume's exact date of publication, that we discover its origin: «Ces fragments des poèmes éoliens de Sappho ont été composés à la main à Paris par l'imprimerie nationale». We realize that «composer» means only «typeset», but in this context it is made to sound like an act of (re)creation. This edition was created in Paris by the *national* printing-press, as though the French nation had chosen as a project this monument to Sappho and lesbianism. Then, with an extraordinary degree of precision, each actor with a role in the enterprise is listed: Claude Garamond, typesetter; Rolande Canudo, translator; and so forth a cast both male and female. When we reach the last line, we see the goal of all this precision: «The printing of this book was completed by the National Printing-Press on December 22, 1944». Even though the actual printing of the volume must have been accomplished in the four months that had elapsed since the liberation of Paris, this project involving so much «collaboration» and a complex mesh between text and image was obviously conceived long before. The 1944 edition was intended as an act of resistance, even though «the barrier of Hellinism against the ambitions of Germany» that Joseph Reinach dreamed of can hardly have seemed «indestructible» at the time when this alliance between the French State and a pro-Lesbian artistic collective was drawn up. The collective viewed its commentary on Sappho, the presentation of an openly lesbian Sappho corpus, as a French national gesture and an act of defiance against German ideals. This surely explains the pseudonym chosen by the artist responsible for the volume's homoerotic engravings «Espérance». Hope for the future; hope for better times for the French nation. And also a name with a heavy legacy: it was the pseudonym preferred by both sides in the Dreyfus affair. This is surely one of the most unlikely roles conferred on Sappho in her modern history...

«We are all German Jews», according to the rallying cry imagined for French students by a notorious foreigner in 1968. «We are all lesbians», according to the rallying cry for feminism coined by Hélène Cixous shortly after «the events» «the Americans remind us», she adds, as though the ghosts of Pauline Tarn and Natalie Barney were speaking once again to the French to announce a «new society» where female homosexuality could openly speak its name. Who can tell what will happen to Sappho in the new Europe now being proclaimed, a Europe without the national frontiers that sheltered the rise of nationalism and of the nationalistic scholarly traditions that for centuries have developed in isolation from each other?