

Fleshing out the gaps: Sappho on stage at The Stork

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Preface

I'd like to start by thanking Lorna and Carol for organising another fascinating series of seminars. Following the previous discussions, I am at risk of lowering the tone somewhat by the informal style of this paper. Its tenor is, however, intentional, and for two reasons. The first is a nod to the fact that this paper is being presented under the banner of the Australasian Classical Reception Studies Network (although it has nothing to do with the misleading stereotype of Aussies being 'laid-back'). When I first discussed ideas for this seminar with Alastair Blanshard, the Network's coordinator, we wondered about the notion of 'Australianness'. Is there anything that differentiates what we do here from the work of reception theorists in the Northern Hemisphere? Do we do things differently, and if so, how and why? Can there be such a thing as a quintessentially 'Australian' form of Reception, and would we recognise it if we found it? These are not rhetorical questions: they are insistent, on-going and subject to endless reframing. They reflect the pressing issues of identity, history and cultural tradition that beset Australian, and particularly migrant, self-definition. As a British immigrant in Melbourne, I balance my roles of whingeing POM and new Australian citizen: one eye to the Mother Country; both feet planted firmly on terra nova. I hold an Australian passport, I vote in Federal elections, but am I Australian enough ...? How can I say what constitutes Australian reception? I speak Strine with the honed tones of the Home Counties. When I open my mouth, my accent betrays me: my voice is still English. And that leads me on to the second reason for the tone of this paper: the question of 'voice'.

In response to Martina True's paper, Lorna made some interesting comments about the use of personal and experiential voice in academic analysis. 'Voice' is inextricably linked with some of the more problematic issues about authority and subjectivity that beset reception studies, and it is a subject that has been engaging me for quite some time; never more so than when considering how to write about the processes of reception that have gone on for me when trying to 'stage' Sappho (and about my reception of the audience reception of that attempt). This paper's subject means that it is, perforce, a first person account. As such, it tests my skills as a quick change artiste as I try to juggle the two hats of 'academic' and 'practitioner'. If there is one thing, however, that 'practice-as-research' (an inappropriately smooth expression for a tricky variety act) demonstrates, it is that the difference between the 'subjective' voice of the practitioner and the 'objective' voice of the academic is often no more than a matter of brim size and decorative cherries. Millinery metaphors aside, behind the personal anecdote, there is often a very serious point about reception and transmission.

So, in this seminar paper, I would like to highlight the issues of identity and voice, and focus on how performance reception can, so curiously and disturbingly, push them into the spotlight. This is a 'different' way 'to do' performance reception': one

that recognises the value of material documentation, but looks to record the affective workings of transmission and interpretation; one that, while aware of caveats about subjectivity and empiricism, still tries to flesh out the gaps...

Introductions...

I love Sappho. Or at least, I do now. I didn't always. When I first met her as a 2nd year undergrad, I found her a very difficult woman: quite impenetrable. Her emotions were as hard to grasp as her Greek was to translate. All those gaps, all those dots, all those brackets, all those *fragments*. Incomprehensible to a 19 year old who had no experience of either the Aeolic dialect or the heartbreak of love. She played very hard to get. But now I get her. Or rather, she gets me. Under my skin, into my passions, gnawing away at me, wantonly tantalising me. This impenetrable woman has unreservedly penetrated me. She has supplanted my other preoccupations: I cannot stop thinking about her. Sappho and I have, totally unexpectedly, developed quite a relationship these past few months. I'm not sure whether it's wholly reciprocal; what the balance of requited and unrequited love is in this story. But whatever the power dynamic, we have a little affair going on. And it will be interesting to see which of us breaks it off first.

Given such passions, I cannot make this paper a traditional academic analysis of Sapphic reception: a fruitful area, but one that has become victim to some overly-intensive academic farming in the last few years.ⁱⁱ Instead, I am going to write a discursive exercise on the burgeoning of a love affair (with just a soupcon of theory thrown in for good measure). This might sound fey, but it is not; in fact, it is rather serious. The progress of my relationship with Sappho follows a well trodden, if still bumpy, path that in fact exemplifies the thorny relationship between 'the heuristic and the hermeneutic' (Taplin 2002); and its ups and downs demonstrate many of the problems and potentials that confront theorists and practitioners involved in performance reception. How can one 'read' the love object as anything other than a projection of oneself? How does one juggle the 'essentialist' with the 'constructivist' (Habinek *xi*)? How does one narrativize one's own cognitive processes and how does one transmit them to others? How much of oneself goes into an understanding of the text? And how does one embody the text when that text is so full of gaps and emptiness?

The question of this embodiment is particularly germane, as my relationship with Sappho has a lot to do with bodies: how they feel, how they fit, how they are invaded, how they are perceived, how they are remembered. Our affair has developed an unintended degree of exhibitionism, and our bodies, in their absence and their presence, are the field on which these questions about reception are exercised, in front of an audience, for all the world to see - or at least as many as could fit nightly into the theatre. We juggle visibility and invisibility, the private and public, the real and the imagined. I start off this relationship quite invisible: a slightly reluctant novice playwright, commissioned to write a one-woman show about Sappho for a reasonably well-known Australian television actor (someone who, interestingly, had none of my prejudices about the lady). I finish it as the

actor who, through a strange combination of circumstance, ends up playing Sappho, in a rainbow-hued hallucinatory cocktail of writer and performer that turns me into 'the entire perceptual framework' (States 373) for both Sappho and the text. Sappho, meanwhile, begins this relationship as the vehicle for a television star's tour de force: the recalcitrant object of desire, passively aggressive as she lies back and thinks of Lesbos. She ends it, though, completely in control: the conspicuous manipulator of the entire process of creation. Abandoned by her first impersonator, she turns her attentions to me, and, through a combination of ventriloquism and body-snatching, uses my voice and being to fill in her gaps. Word becomes flesh, as those lines which I wrote, stolen from her and never designed for me to speak, end up becoming the both of us - a peculiar melding together (in several senses of the word). Different voices, appropriated bodies: the stock in trade for the actor, but the ever problematic dynamic in the phenomenological conundrum of analysing performance. Whose voice is speaking and being heard? Whose body is feeling and being seen? Whose past and whose emotions are being offered and received? As the boundaries between character, writer, performer and audience slip and slide, there is no simple differentiation between that which is received, and those who do the receiving.

Background – The Stork Stage

Sappho was commissioned in late August 2007 for the The Stork Hotel, a pub theatre in Melbourne's CBD which, over the years, has become something of a cultural anomaly-cum-icon to Melburnians. Located just opposite the Queen Vic market, the hotel is the second oldest pub in Melbourne, and draws to it an extraordinarily mixed clientele. Wander into the main bar, and there is a regular crowd of builders, backpackers, musos, students and drunks. This is no chichi café bar. It is one of the few pubs left in Melbourne that seriously continues the charter of providing cheap hostel accommodation. Up-stairs at the pub are rented rooms that could belong anywhere in time in the last fifty years: crumbling paint work, antiquated fittings - this is not a place to go for chic boutique accommodation. And yet this very earthy, unpretentious and occasionally insalubrious drinking hole has developed a reputation over the years as a place where art and ideas can be (and should be) discussed, and where, even given its limited resources, a vibrant intellectual and cultural community can find a home. Under the auspices of the pub's licensees, Paul and Helen Madden, The Stork has won a steady and devoted following of people who come to this rough and ready venue to take part in what Helen describes as 'theatre of the mind'. The pub regularly holds philosophical symposia and Socratic dinners; it hosts ancient Greek and Gaelic reading groups; it provides a home to The University in the Pub; and it commissions stage adaptations of the works of Camus, Duras and Proust, and semi-staged recitations of Homer and Virgil. Jostling diners from the pub's restaurant, these performances take place in the hotel's back room with a minimum of theatrical trappings (stage rostra measuring 3x10'; two blacks; and lighting made up of 3 birdies, one profile and a fresnel with its barn doors held on with baking foil). The chairs are hard and uncomfortable, and in the Australian summer, the heat is unbearable. Performances must contend with the shriek of police sirens, the thundering of trams and the whirl of ineffectual air-conditioners. And yet, night after night, performances are packed

out with audiences of up to seventy-five prepared to brave the conditions to have a night of unashamedly intellectual theatre.

For some time, Helen Madden had been keen to develop a play about Sappho. As a trained Classicist, a fan of the Mary Barnard translations, and a canny producer with an eye for a one-person show, Madden felt that the poet would be the perfect subject for her venue's type of theatre. On some level too, it was both an audacious and a sentimental punt. Despite her protests, she was about to lose her pub: The Stork was designated for demolition in early 2008 to make way for a shopping mall (the bull-dozer is in as I writeⁱⁱⁱ). *Sappho* was to be her last hurrah: her last of many commissions, but her first of an entirely new work. It was also, as far as we could tell, the first one-woman show ever to be written about the poet^{iv}.

My involvement in The Stork and the Sappho project came late. Having heard on the grapevine about my oddly combined roles of ex-actor/director and Classicist, Madden assumed, with more faith than foundation, that I could turn my hand to scriptwriting, and offered me the commission. The timeline was ludicrously tight, but I was on research leave, the contractual terms were generous, and my brief was extremely open: write a play on Sappho that would be intellectually stimulating, give the audience an idea of why the woman was so extraordinary, and avoid too much Ancient Greek (despite her Classics training, Helen is ever the one for accessibility). The production was scheduled for a three week run at the end of November 2007 (which meant the entire production process, from blank page to actor on stage, would have a gestation of only two and a half months), and earmarked for a well-known television actor, who had worked at The Stork before in an adaptation of Duras' *The Lover*. Since this actress also had a wonderful jazz voice, could I also weave some torch songs into the script? I had four weeks to write the play, and other than that, it was *carte blanche*.

Writing Process

In her book *Victorian Sappho*, Yopie Prins asks 'What is Sappho except a name?' (Prin 8), and in that deceptively simple-seeming question, lies the crux of the Sappho conundrum. To be asked to write a play about Sappho is to be asked to write a play about a gap, a figment, a fragment. Not even the name helps. Her name just shows me the difficulties. 'Projected from the past into the future and from the future into the past, "Sappho" is presented to us now, in the present tense, as a name that lives on' (Prin 8). But lives on how? Projected onto what? Whose past and whose present? The name 'Sappho' contains all the issues of readership articulated by reception theory: mediation, situation, contingency (*pace* Martindale 2006). It carries with it so many connotations, so many possibilities. It drags with it the baggage of millennia and the luggage labels of thousands - all those self-contained groups of cultural tourists with their pinned-on name tags: 'academic', 'classicist', 'Greek', 'lesbian', 'feminist', 'intellectual', etc. It is not an easy name to circumscribe.

Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig could get away with leaving a blank page for Sappho^v, but I have no such luxury. I sit down before a blank computer screen to write a play about a woman whose name scares me with possibility of blankness.

All I have to look at is an empty screen of buzzing whiteness, and that very name, staring back at me from the top of the document. The subject's name is now the play's name: subject and object; means and ends, in a decision taken months before, not by me, but by the producer who holds the purse strings, and wants the play to *sell*. Originally, the play was to be called *Sappho... Unravelling*. I liked that. Again, not my idea, but one I could play with. A name that would have allowed me to show off my post-modern academic credentials; something that would have let me toy wittily with the possibilities of braided narratives and arch in-jokes (I could even put 'unravelling' in lower case square brackets with a few ellipses marks just to show I *really* g]et... [th]e... jok[e...]). But the play will now be called that one word, *Sappho*. That one word will sell, says the producer. That one word will say it all, says the producer. And the producer was right. It does. *Sappho* gets more mainstream media coverage than I could ever have thought possible. *Sappho* gets the bums on seats.

But that is two months down the line, and right now, all I have is a name and a blankness. So how to begin? Begin with the name? But the name gains meaning only in its historicity, and how can you explain something's historicity without describing its reception? And how can you describe that reception without knowing the subject that is being 'received'? Begin with the story? But the story of Sappho is in fact not hers, but that of her interpreters - people who, just like I am trying to do, worked the brief of pinning her down, explaining her to others; people who tried to fill her gaps with their own fantasies, fears and fancies?^{vi} So I begin the play (at least initially) with that very question, 'How do you tell the story when there are so many gaps?' For several days (which seems an eternity when you only have four weeks), that was all I had. The name, blankness, that question, and then more blankness. And that was my problem: there was an honesty about the nothingness that seemed to say everything I wanted to say about Sappho. Somehow I needed to put a gap on stage, and to do that, I needed to make a virtue of her absences. The play should be, consequently, an exercise in fragmentation. It should use Sappho's own words, in their completeness and absences, to weave together disparate narratives about her, that deliberately leave gaps; deliberately suggest to the audience that they need to read between the lines themselves, if they are ever to find the whole story.

I started with the fragments, studying them in both the Greek and in different English versions, knowing there was something about the nature of translation and transmission I wanted to explore in the script. I read and re-read the versions of Carson, Barnard, Balmer, and especially Lombardo; and indeed, I must gratefully acknowledge my debt to them for the different insights their translations offered. In the end, about a third of the play was written from my own direct, if very free, translations of Sappho - although it is becomes hard to pinpoint the exact ratio of new writing to translation, so much did Sappho seep into me during the writing process. Similarly, it is hard to weigh up adequately my debt to other translations: my own versions had become 'encrusted' with the interpretations that had gone before. In the finished script, the allusions, quotations and resonances of other translations ultimately reflect both an appreciative homage to earlier translators,

and a practical enactment of the constantly mutating processes of reception from source to target text.

The fascinating moment of connection, however, happened with the Greek. Looking through Campbell's lovely Loeb edition, I was stopped when I came to fragment 105a,

oilon to\ glukumalon e0reu/qetai alkrw| e0p' u!sdw|,
 alkron e)p' a0krota/tw|, lela/qonto de\ malodro/phev:
 ou0 ma\n e0klela/qont', a0ll' ou0k e0du/nant'
 e0pi/kesqai.

Just as the sweetest apple blushes on the highest bough,
 up there, so high, so high, quite forgotten by the apple-pickers.
 but no, not forgotten... only out of reach.

The effect of reading this was a shock. It was a physical and emotional jarring: a sudden jolt; a direct connection to something from my past; something at the back of my mind I had almost forgotten; something someone had once said to me long ago. And there I was, sitting in Melbourne, reading this Greek in the Australian sunshine, but also right back in time, right back in that room, right back in that freezing winter, with that person, saying those words to me about a blush that could only be captured by her^{vii}. And suddenly, in that instant, Sappho invaded me, and I fell in love with her. What happened in this strange moment of personal connection to this fragment was, I suppose, an affective sense of understanding her at last; an experiential sense of the love and the loss that flows through her words, that I, as a thirty-something, could now, at last, comprehend - could now *feel* - in a way impossible for a 'greener than grass' 19 year old in a Cambridge supervision room.

I knew now that the play would have to be a double act between Sappho and me; my own understanding of love and loss, channelled through Sappho's fragments. We would weave together two intertwined but distinct stories. One strand would be Sappho (or 'a' Sappho) reflecting on her reception over the age; and the other would be a love story, of sorts, that would somehow try to capture the pain and longing that runs through the poetry. It would be an attempt to make an audience *feel* Sappho without realising they were even hearing her; an attempt to put reception on stage in an *affective* form. An academic narrative by stealth, told not through reason and objectivity, but through emotion and subjectivity.

So the play developed along two distinct paths: Sappho's and her lover's. Divided into nine separate fragments in my head - for no particular reason apart from the echo of Sappho's nine volumes of poetry - the play would juxtapose the voice of Sappho in the 'odd' numbered fragments, with the voice of her lover in the 'evens'.

Sappho's sections would give an historical/cultural view of her figure and influence; her lover's sections would tell/enact their passionate and ultimately desolate love affair.

Concentrating so explicitly on a love affair on stage means that a particular kind of focus is placed on the issue of Sappho's sexuality and its reception. When I was first commissioned, I was advised that 'lesbians had hijacked Sappho', and was warned off making this 'a lesbian play' - something I found curious and challenging for a variety of reasons. I didn't really understand the warning; nor did I really know what it meant to write, or not write, 'a lesbian play'. Not write about a woman's love for another woman? Not write a play that might appeal to any lesbians in the audience? Not write gags about Jeanette Winterson and Martina Navratilova? Not write something that connects to my own experience and my own identification? A tricky thing to avoid, if I'm writing a play about Sappho. To me, sexuality, *my* sexuality, is only an issue when other people force it to become an issue - and I say that still smarting after 10 years of John Howard's legislative discrimination and the rise of the religious right in Australia; other than that, I just get on with things. So when I read Sappho, her homosexuality is, to me, such a default position that it is not even an issue^{viii}: obviously she is attracted to women, and why wouldn't she be? I appreciate that a heterosexual might read her very differently; or perhaps might not. But to apologise for and disguise what *I* read in Sappho, to do a Denys Page^{ix} and admit the emotion without the physical eroticism, actually, and perversely enough, gives that sexuality an unwarranted amount of importance. The intensity of the love is the thing; the gender of the lovers, incidental (because, to me, it is so natural); and the physical attraction is a by-product: necessary, not to be ignored, but not the be and end all. So my Sappho will love a woman (of course), and will have sex with a woman (of course), and if she is ever to jump from a cliff for love, it will be (of course) not for love of Phaon, but for love of this girl, whom she wanted so intensely and lost so casually. I don't think that makes it 'a lesbian play'; I think it just makes it a play about love. That 'warning', though, perplexed me, because it carried with it numerous assumptions about both the fixed nature of sexual identification, and the audience's 'horizon of expectation'. The Stork's audience base is by and large educated, upper-middle class, and 50 plus; a profile suggesting an expectation of learned classicism, not lascivious tribadism. Of course, in the end, they got neither, or they got a bit of both - it all depends on your perspective. The overwhelming response from the audience, however, suggested that the gender and sexual orientation of the lovers in the play was in fact irrelevant. The important and affecting elements were the resonances of betrayal and loss that are, dare I say, universals in unhappy love, be it hetero- or homosexual. One of the most frequent comments I heard from audience members after the show was 'We've all been there...'

So, little digression aside, back to the play. In putting together these strands, I undertook two separate processes. The first was research into the reception route for the Sappho sections. I read 'other' Sapphos avidly; firstly looking to fiction (the high-wire butch of Yourcenar, the time-travelling sensualist of Winterson [de Jong's card-board cut-out was quickly returned to the library]), secondly turning to scholarship (Reynolds and Williamson, Carson and du Bois, Greene and Johnson).

Of all I read, the most interesting, and influential, for a myriad of reasons, were the different but intertwined Sapphos of Winterson and Reynolds, and I must fully acknowledge my debt to Reynolds' *The Sappho History* for giving me not just so much factual information, but also influencing me so much in the tenor of my Sappho. These readings led me to concentrate on the intertextuality of Sapphic reception: the readings between the lines of the readings between the lines. They demonstrated the affective way in which her figure and her fragments lure her different interpreters, in a sensual act of literary seduction, that forces even the words of a scholarly work of reception studies to contain the passion and pain of Sappho's eroticism. The 'Sappho' sections in my play not only draw heavily, and gratefully, on Reynolds, but also intentionally ape Winterson's trope in *Art and Lies* of explaining her Dead-White-Males with 'Date:...Occupation:...'; indeed, I adapted and elaborated the idea to include Winterson herself as a Living-White-Female:

'If nature was unkind to me, making me dark and ugly, it recompensed me with my genius; if I am short, at least I am famous: take the measure of me from my fame...' That wasn't me, by the way. That was Ovid – (Dates: 43BC -AD18; domicile: Rome and a rock in the sea; occupation: poet, mythographer and all round naughty boy - neither earnest nor worthy, just a little bit cheeky). He got an awful lot wrong, by the way: obsessed with this Phaon story, much less interested in my poetry than in my suicide note...As if I would fall for a sweaty public transport worker...But more of that later...

No, I became more interesting the less of me there was. But 'WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY POEMS? When I turn the pages of my manuscripts my fingers crumble the paper, the paper breaks up in burnt folds, the paper colours my palms yellow. I look like a nicotine junkie. I can no longer read my own writing. It isn't surprising that so many of you have chosen to read between the lines when the lines themselves have become more mutilated than a Saturday night whore'...

...That wasn't me, either. That was 'the other one': Jeanette Winterson (Dates: 1959 to the present; domicile: London; occupation: writer, darling of the lesbian intelligentsia, professional Sappho mantle-donner, purveyor of overpriced organic root vegetables). You see how others are oooo-soooo-keen to put words into my mouth.

Each 'fragment' of Sappho's story in the play took shape to tell a version of her reception. 'Fragment 1' was her 'introduction'; a roller-coaster of adjectives gleaned from my various academic readings:

'SAPPHO': (Dates: c. 7th Century BC; domicile: Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos; occupation: Tenth Muse; poet, teacher, lover, whore, mother, wife, aristocrat, iconoclast, dissident, exile, rampant hetero, raging queer, top, bottom, butch, femme, rub-a-dub-dub, three dykes in a tub, where's the soap, yes it does, doesn't it, you say *fellashio*, I say *fellatio*, let's call the whole thing off, inspiration, aberration, abomination, lesbian pin-up, Christian tear-up, Romans' reference, Egyptian's refuse, empty vessel,

imaginative void, gap, void, space, gap, dot, dot, dot, brackets,
dot, more space, more dots, more brackets, emptiness, lacuna,
great big gaping HOLE.....

...Is that what I am, then, a hole?

.... A nothingness to be filled by the lust of my lovers...

...by their probing, by their fondlings...such stumbling, fumbling
sureness about my needs, about what I would like to fill my hole, to
make me whole....what I would want, about what fills my void, about
what I WOULD HAVE SAID.... 'Sappho would have known Homer';
'Sappho would have been well acquainted with this passage' ; 'Sappho
would have been familiar with the work of the other great lesbian
lyricist, Alcaeus'; ' it can only be conjecture but surely Sappho would
have wanted her listeners to hear resonances of Homer and Hesiod in
these lines'....I think I know what Sappho would have said, and Sappho
would have said 'Pass the scotch.'

'Fragment 3' saw her reflecting on Mytilene, her exile and the Suda. 'Fragment 5'
picked up on Longinus and the interplay with fragment 31, trying to bring together
both the sense of the poem with her ambivalent feelings about its preservation in
On the Sublime. 'Fragment 7' was probably the most static from a reader's
perspective, but in fact most active when staged: a quick run down of Sappho's
visual and literary reception from *il ritratto di Saffo* to Alma Tadema, Queen Victoria
and Mengin, with a passing nod to Baudelaire and Swinburne:

But now come the big boys: my Victorian masters. Virgin or whore;
model or caution. Oh, those Victorians knew how to play with a story.
So now I am split again. A virtuous poetess communing with my Muse;
a sex-crazed whore brought low by lust. There I am now, there, do
you see? I bend over so intently to listen to Alcaeus. Cleis stands by
my side; my girls watch from behind. Look at the seats and you'll see
the graffiti: a hundred loves carved into stone. But sacred love;
Platonic love...with only... the faintest ...hint... of...possibility... Oh, such
torrid potential. Voluptuous virgin or voracious vampire, take your
pick, take your prick. There I am, there, there, do you see? The
depraved invert, brought to my knees, prone and prostrate by the
power of the penis. And there I am, there, there, do you see? The
wistful penitent, crushed with contrition for my love and independence.
Yes, that's right. Punish me, torture me, execute me, I deserve it –
make me in thrall to a man who smells of bilge water; throw me from
the cliff, for love of a redneck. Make me a psychotic, a mad woman, a
suicide. A hysteric, you see how I arch my back; a depressive, you see
how I drop my lyre. Come on, you can do more, you can do worse, out
with your fantasies, punish me, punish me, BRING IT ON !

Her love, her leap, her looks and her lyrics....in that order. That is what
I was to them.

The French were just as bad..., but a little more ...open. They loved
me...*loved* me. Revolutionary ladies in women-only salons: a model, a
role model, a symbol of learning, a man-free utopia. But that didn't

last for long. Napoleon and those that followed saw to that – clever women with independent tastes far too unsettling for the narcissistic gnome. So, a new story, now. Lost or lascivious. Flying to my watery death, or to my nubile lovers. Acrobatic aesthete or doomed, depraved decadent. Look, here comes Baudelaire! How he wishes he were lesbian! And look, there's Swinburne! (there, with the hair – he's not really French, I'm using poetic licence): how he wishes he were Baudelaire! Oh, how these naughty boys use me! I am suddenly immensely promiscuous – up for sale, spreading myself wide. Little figurines of me, made and sold all over Europe. Everyone wants a piece of me. Even the Germans.

I am found and lost a thousand times.

And none of them really knows me.

Finally 'Fragment 9' wove together numerous fragments (including 55, 26, 168B, 149 46 131 146 102, 120 and in particular 94) to bring together Sappho's grief at the end of her affair, and her 'resurrection' at Oxyrhynchus.

The Sappho who was materialising from all this was not a particularly pleasant woman but was nonetheless strangely irresistible: highly intelligent, highly charismatic, witty, urbane, detached, desperate, needy, resentful, angry, immature, sophisticated, bemused, judgemental, conservative, snobbish, yearning, bereft. Plus any other hundred more adjectives you might like to throw at her. The strongest element that was coming through to me, however, as I gave her words to tell the world about how the world had used her, was her pain (*κα\τ ε\lμον στα\laxμον* [37]). She was living in a kind of hell, or limbo: the post-love void, when life is as meaningless as a forgotten but gnawing hunger. Her bravado slowed the drip of pain, sometimes, but could not staunch the flow. And I started to pity her, this woman I was creating, who was really no more than my imagination, no more than a reflection of my own and others' fantasies, yet seemed to be developing a life all her own. And as I started to pity her, I started to fall for her, warts and all. I started to want to tend her in her vulnerability; to protect her from her misinterpreters- all the while quite aware that I was probably as guilty of misreading her as those from whom I would rescue her. It is a very strange feeling to fall in love with a character you are creating. I've experienced it before on stage; I've fallen for many parts I've played and often the oddest ones: Masha, Electra, Vivie Warren, to name but a few, all so flawed in their ways. But I was using other people's words and stories. It is a quite different kettle of fish to be creating from scratch the object of desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion rolled into one; a very strange combination. And this confusion was increased as the second story line of Sappho's lover started to take shape.

In this second strand, I needed a modern counterpart to this ancient/timeless Sappho, so I had to ask, who would Sappho be if she were around today? A university lecturer sprung to mind initially, just to keep in with the 'Sappho schoolmistress' trope; the sort of gargantuan intellect of queer theory who would

hold court in seminars, adored and loathed in equal measure by her mesmerised students; the sort of roving, polymath, serial monogamist who leaves a trail of devastated hearts and intellects lying in her wake. Thankfully, though, I soon discarded this idea: a little too dangerous to play with such fire. No, the modern Sappho would need to be some sort of performer, someone who used words to tell stories. A television presenter, perhaps? A jazz singer (Johnson 2007, 147-149) maybe? An actor? Write about what you know, they say, so an actor it would be. Sappho would become the amalgam of all the great actresses I had seen, admired, worked with and known. A monstrous talent, a star, a siren, a lodestone. As for her lover, there were so many to choose from: Gyrrhina, Gongyla, Andromeda, Mnasidika, Atthis? Atthis it would have to be. There was something so strange in what was said and not said in fragment 49:

h)ra/man me\n e!gw se/qen A!tqi p/alai pota/:
smi/kra moi pa/iv e!mmen' e)fai/neo ka!xariv.

I loved you once, Atthis, long ago.

You were such a child: so small, so graceless.

There was such desperate pain in the untold story of fragment 131:

A!tqi, soi\ d' e!meqen me\n a)ph/xqeto
fronti/sdhn, e)pi\ d' A)ndrome/dan po/th|

Atthis hates the very thought of me and flies off to Andromeda.

And Atthis would become that everyone/nobody who has ever lost herself in the quagmire of longing; as empty and interchangeable with all the other victims of love, just as her name's pun suggests:

Fact no. 1: young women are easily seduced.

'Atthis,' she said, 'I will call you Atthis.'

But that's not my name, I said.

'No matter. Atthis, Hatthis – whatever, whoever. You shall be my Atthis.' Her little joke. I didn't know then what I know now. Greek is cruel: only a breath between person and pronoun. I could have been any of them. Who I was was unimportant, so long as I was her Atthis.

Poor Atthis – you were like a child – so graceless, so naïve...I loved you once.

The story of this passionate and desperate love would be told from Atthis's perspective, in the fragments of post-breakup grief. Who she would be, however, was an interesting problem. Here is a young woman who appears in only 4 fragments; yet her influence pervades what we have of Sappho. For anyone trying to tell Sappho's story, Atthis is crucial. Who was she, who is she for us? An unknown – a young woman who moved a great older woman; who was with her and who left her; who went off with another woman, and could not bear even to look at Sappho; a nonentity who touched a star but scraped her fingers on the sky (yau/hn d' ou) doki/mwm' o)ra/nw duspaxe/a [Campbell 52]);. However we approach Atthis says much more about the subjective dangers of reception than it does about Sappho. So in reading between the lines of Atthis and Sappho, I also read the subtext of my own experience. My love, my passion, my heartbreak, my ownership. And since, in my writing of Sappho, I have fallen in love with her, as I write of Atthis' love for Sappho, I must be writing my own story. Of course, the Atthis story in the play is emphatically not autobiographical. There are some elements which come from my own experience (anyone who has lived in North Yorkshire in a harsh winter without heating will know the trick of putting on the hair-dryer to get warm), but Atthis is her own woman. She is created, though, from a combination of myself and Sappho, and I use in the Atthis 'fragments', much more of the poetry than I do in Sappho's story. A case in point is 'Fragment 6', the 'seduction' scene; the latter part of which is entirely woven from, or based on, Sappho's fragments (1; 3; 4; 21; 23;30; 31; 34; 36; 37; 38; 41; 46; 48; 51; 63;96; 126; 138; 141;154), so that Sappho and Atthis in effect end up becoming one and the same to tell their story:

And I lift my eyes to her. She is watching me, unmoving. Her coat is still on. Fully dressed, she views my naked body; my body alive now beyond all thought and feeling and knowledge and sensation my skin on fire with ice of freezing air and all consuming need for touch her touch for her all her for touch on touch igniting tongue and cunt and limbs and breasts and words and life and touch and all-limbloosening-throatconstricting-deep-earchoing-fullvoicestealing-firebreathing-icefreezing-soulshattering YOU...

And I do not know if it is the freezing air or her steady gaze that makes me shake so much.

And the full moon rose

My teeth are chattering. I long for her.

And the women stood

I ache for her; I yearn for her.

Around the altar

And it's freezing but I'm sweating as I look at her

And she comes to me now. Her damp cashmere coat brushes on my naked skin, my skin so sensitized now, the soft strands bruise my flesh. Those perfect, manicured fingers reach out and touch my breast, my nipple, red nails tracing the circles of the moon. And further...

Soft mound, moist with dew...

Further still...Truly, I am close to death...

And Aphrodite's golden cup...sweet nectar.

I spread my legs for you on synthetic fibre pillows.

The eiderdown was soft and yielding, your perfume spoke of money...you drank your fill of me until your thirst was quenched.

... And climax

And we wept. And I cradled your head on my bosom. And all night long...

To you, my love, I will always be true.

And the stars around the moon looked away, hid their radiant jewels, as she bathed the whole world in her luminous glow.

I do not know what to do; my mind has shattered in two.

To you, my love, I will always be true.

You came to me, and you did exactly what you wanted. And I wanted it too; I wanted you. But you blinded me; you deceived me with passion. You dazzled my mind with my longing for you.

And pain seeps into me...

Shimmering

...drip, drip, drip...

Incandescent.

...black dreams

Star throned.

...encircling Atthis

Rainbow crowned

...a cloud

In this blending between the two voices, something interesting happened, which had to do with the conjoining of my own voice with theirs. As I discuss below, through a twist of circumstances, I ended up acting the play. In doing so, I lent my voice to Sappho's words which I had appropriated to give voice to both her and

Atthis. So although I started off as Sappho's creator, she ended up as mine, as her words came together with my presence and voice to create a new entity. This is the phenomenological conundrum of performance, as States says:

... the problem is complicated still further by the fact that the character is being played by an actor who is not the character but who forms the entire perceptual ground from which any such essence as character can appear (137).

It would take much more space than I have here to try to unpick the different strands of phenomenological braiding that went on in *Sappho*, but it is interesting to note how confused so many of the audience were as to who was Sappho, who was Atthis and who was I. Tears on stage are interesting things. Whose are they? The character's, the performer's? I rarely have cried 'for real' on stage - it's rather frowned upon in British theatrical tradition as something a little too self-indulgent to be quite appropriate^x - but I cannot get through *Sappho* without some serious crying. I don't know why: I don't know what it is about this story, these words, this grief that affects me so badly. And I do not know if it is affecting me, or affecting the two characters I am playing. The viscosity of live performance brings the inside to the outside and forces sensation to become a palpable commodity to be transmitted to an audience. I act a young woman undressing on a freezing winter's night, while in the theatre it is 41C in a Melbourne heatwave: I say the words 'And it's freezing, but I'm sweating as I look at her', soaked with perspiration from the broiling heat, while trying to conjure the goose bumps of one shivering with cold. My sweat is a sign of the parallel universes of performance. And the same is true of my tears. I say the words of the Sappho character (based on fragments 55 and 137) that will destroy Atthis' world:

'If you were not so embarrassed by everything, you might possibly have something worth saying; but you are a coward and a talentless mediocrity, and this 'shame' you talk about is nothing more than a cover for your many inadequacies.'

and I simultaneously cause the pain and receive the pain. Sappho and Atthis become one with/in me, so that the tears I weep as Atthis are carried through to become Sappho's in her last scene. And meanwhile *I'm* the one who ends up feeling thoroughly miserable, empty and drained after the show. The result was a confusion of personas; so much so that a colleague in the drama dept here at Monash (who, you'd have thought, should have known better) sent me an email only last week which asked 'Who was Sappho, who was Jane?' I wonder whether the same question would have been asked of the actress for whom the play was written, had she ended up performing it. Perhaps there is something about the double act of writing and performing that makes the words too close to home; too uncomfortable because just too familiar for both the writer/performer and the audience to take in easily.

Reception and Conclusion

I started this paper wondering about the Australianness of the Sappho project as an example of reception studies. In the writing process, there was very little to make the play Australian (particularly as most of it was written in Oxford during the recent APGRD Performance Reception conference), apart from the incomparable Australian word 'bogan' for a)groiw%tij: even 'doona' got changed to the more generic 'eiderdown' in the final draft. In performance and aftermath, however, the play's Australian credentials became more apparent. As chance would have it, the actress for whom the play was written became unavailable: Fox studios and a TV movie beckoned. Now, with only 3 weeks before the play was due to open, with substantial advanced bookings, and growing national and state media interest, we had no actor, no director, and a designer who seemed to have disappeared. Helen Madden, never one to be fazed, quickly changed my contract, cast me as the performer (at least I was vaguely familiar with the lines...), and employed a director who had the reputation for getting productions on quickly and professionally, if unglamorously. The show opened as scheduled on November 14th 2007, played a sell-out three week run, and won favourable critical and audience feedback.

What makes this Australian, however? What makes this experience so un-English? It is hard to pinpoint, but I would say, it is something about both the size of Australia, and the nature of opportunity here. The country is both too big and too small; an unwieldy continent and a claustrophobic island; and this leads to the strange state of affairs where there are both no opportunities and more opportunities than you could ever have envisaged. I cannot, in a million years, imagine that, in the UK, I would ever have been pulled out of theatrical retirement, either to write or act again. The theatrical business in the UK is so closely guarded, is such a craft, that you do not dabble - you cannot be a dilettante as a professional actor: you either are, or you aren't. In Melbourne, however, where it is virtually impossible to earn a living as a theatre actor, dilettantism is expected. It didn't seem in the least bit unusual that I should be both a professional actor (suddenly, again) and a classics lecturer (the latter was seen more as a curio than a problem). Nor, now, does it seem strange that I might continue to pursue the Sappho project in other incarnations, while still teaching Latin and Greek to undergrads. You have to 'serve your time' in Melbourne theatre (which I have yet to do), but beyond that, there is much less of a clear demarcation between professional, fringe and amateur performance than would be found in British theatre.

The audience response, too, seemed very 'Australian': very open; very unlike what I remembered from my British acting experiences. Large numbers of the audience - particularly those with an interest in Classics - assumed they knew me and chatted to me afterwards about Sappho as if I were an old friend. Something, again, to do with the size of Melbourne, I presume, much more than the nature of the performance. The closure of the old Monash Classics department had prompted a substantial public outcry here, and its shoe-string resurrection with me at the helm 5 years ago clearly had touched a cord in the regular Stork Stage clientele: many audience members (several of whom had either studied Classics, or were doing so at the University of the Third Age <http://www.u3a.org.uk/>) would stay behind to

discuss the department's resurgence, chat about Sappho, or debate the future and fate of Classics and Greek generally.

Now, there are all sorts of factors that could contribute to this public engagement: the size and nature of the venue; the intimacy of the playing which can lead to a false sense of knowing the performer; the 'special interest' nature of the play's subject matter; etc. I do wonder, however, whether the connection between play, venue, audience and writer/performer that happened here is an example of the 'Australianness' (whatever that might be) of this exercise in staged reception. When I look at the video of the production (always so dispiriting for the performer, as it captures so little of the spirit of the play), I see something that looks, to me, extremely amateurish: I can just hear Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney yelling out "Let's put on the play right here! This can be the stage!". Yet the simplicity of its staging, and, to be honest, the none too impressive production values, were not just overlooked but were embraced by critics and audience members. One well-known literary commentator wrote to all the major theatre companies about the show; some audience members saw the show several times; there were one or two nights with noisy ovations; there is talk of revivals and reworkings and tours. I never had that experience in the UK. The Stork audiences generally were generous, sympathetic and open to the production. But they were also, strangely, *grateful*: grateful to me as an English woman with an English accent, grateful that I had overlooked the Australian cultural cringe to be and work in Melbourne. Surprising to me; perplexing to me. That issue of 'voice' again; that issue of 'accent'. "You spoke the lines so beautifully", they said. "All that British theatre training", they said. "We in Australia have no tradition of technique like you do over there", they said. "What are you doing *here*?"^{xi} they said.

I have been an Australian for ten years now; I have spent more of my adult life in Australia than in Britain; I no longer even go through the British and EU passport control at Heathrow. But perhaps I am not Australian enough. Perhaps my voice is still too English... So we end where we began with those problems of identification, those problems of 'voice'. Can I talk about Australian Classical Reception Studies? *Am* I Australian enough? Who knows? Who decides? But Sappho and I were received as well as we were not because I am Australian, but because Sappho and I are both English. And in terms of identification, self-definition and the cultural cringe, that says an awful lot about how we Australians 'do' Classical reception.

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ⁱ See Hall (2004) for a comprehensive overview of the different strands of performance reception and Griffiths (2007) for a tentative stab at an experiential model.

ⁱⁱ The field of Sappho reception studies is large and ever growing, and the cross-over in some of the work of Reynolds (2000 & 2003), Johnson (2007) and Goldhill (2004 and 2006) shows how well trodden some areas of Sapphic reception are now becoming.

ⁱⁱⁱ At time of writing, The Stork's website (www.storkhotel.com.au) was still operational, and reflected the diversity of the pub's activities. It also included a YouTube streaming of Channel 10's news coverage of The Stork's closure, complete with pub regular and Australian acting legend Bill Hunter referring to its demise as 'A bloody national tragedy'.

^{iv} Whereas characters named 'Sappho' have appeared on stage several times, the historical figure has had a number of theatrical outings from John Lyly to Lawrence Durrell (and Peggy Glanville-Hicks, just to keep the Australian connection going), and a selection of readings from Reynolds' *The Sappho Companion* has been adapted for performance, I've not been able to find documented any one-woman shows on her. I'd be very grateful for further information, if anyone knows of such a performance.

^v On this, see Winkler (1996, 89 and 1990, 162); Parker (1996, 146); Williamson (1995, 6).

^{vi} Similarly, see Barnstone's lovely introduction, for the 'disturbed and trapped' Sappho, lying at the mercy of those who would rescue her (11-14) .

^{vii} I have found it interesting to read, retrospectively, Winkler on this passage (1990, 183), where his linguistic analysis of the sexual connotations of *mhlōn* perhaps explain the affective workings of this passage on me; and certainly found their parallels in how I used this fragment in the play. Then again, perhaps on some level I was unconsciously remembering Winkler's analysis as I re-read fragment 31 in my Melbourne back yard. It all goes to show how deeply encrusted any interpretation and affective reading is going to be.

^{viii} I say this fully aware of the dangers of applying such historically inappropriate tags as 'homosexual' to ancient same-sex love, and apply it, rather, as an unavoidable label of modern 'readings' of such erotics.

^{ix} Page's analysis of Sappho's sexuality (142-146) is a curious combination of the open-minded and the scandalised. While acknowledging and celebrating the fact that Sappho's love for the girl in fragment 31 is 'a lover's passion - the overwhelming emotion of intensest love', he nonetheless states that there is categorically no evidence to suggest that Sappho added 'practice' to her 'inclination' of being *gunaikerastri/a*. Though he accepts that 'we must close our eyes to the evidence if we wish still to cherish the illusion of the 'virgin purity, feminine softness, and delicacy of sentiment and feeling...' which have been said to make up the character of Sappho' (144), he still seems genuinely affronted that she could be accused of being 'addicted to the perversion the modern world names after her native island' (143). On Page, see Winkler (1990, 162-163) and Gordon (2002).

^x Much as I disagree with most of what Peter Hall has to say, I do think he has a point with his comments about the potential danger of 'indulgent' tears on stage (2000, 23-24).

^{xi} These are all verbatim quotes from audience members, although I appreciate it is unfair to highlight them out of context. I had, incidentally, offered to perform the play with an Australian accent, but the director felt Sappho sounded better as an English woman.