

ANTICIPATORY ERRATUM — Sappho Wrote the Dinosaurs: A Speculative Philology, Corrected in Advance

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where \"wrote\" means to establish a relation among materials whose prior existence does not explain their pres
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so a museum exhibits absence at full scale, which is described as the most persuasive sentence in the work and i
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Abstract

An erratum issued before the work it corrects, in the ordinary form and at the ordinary time. The withdrawn interpretation is that Sappho wrote the dinosaurs — where “wrote” means to establish a relation among materials whose prior existence does not explain their present arrangement, and where the operation named “Sapphic” is the point at which an absent body acquires a means of acting on the bodies that survive it. The erratum withdraws the conclusion, the chronology, the attribution and the account of what would count as evidence, while retaining the title, on the ground that removing the dinosaurs would create an obvious gap in the argument. The piece establishes a genre: the anticipatory erratum, whose governing sentence is that the interpretation has been withdrawn and the work will nevertheless appear, since its publication was necessary to discover why. Its principal moves are six. (1) The title remains accurate within the meanings the argument establishes, and those meanings have been withdrawn. (2) “The government of the absent animal” is coined and immediately withdrawn because it also describes lyric. (3) The footprint and the poem addressed to an absent person are both surfaces instructing a later body how to imagine a body that is gone, so the distinction between them depends on whether the later body obeys — and the work reports considerable obedience. (4) Six conditions are given under which a body’s remains can address us; the sixth, that the reader knows restoration requires invention and continues, is identified as Sapphic. (5) The museum experiment: a caption adequate to a reconstructed skeleton is adequate without alteration to a fragmentary lyric, which establishes not common authorship but that the institutional apparatus moves between the two objects without changing its account of itself. (6) The objection from scale is refused on the ground that lyric’s characteristic unit is not the short line but the world altered by an absence, and that a creature capable of occupying so much space has become incapable of occupying any — so a museum exhibits absence at full scale, which is described as the most persuasive sentence in the work and is therefore retracted first.

Body

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philology - Sappho - future reader - retrocausal canon formation - fragment - taphonomy - museum caption - the government of the absent animal - absence at full scale - lyric scale - reception - correction as genre - errata *** # ANTICIPATORY ERRATUM — Sappho Wrote the Dinosaurs: A Speculative Philology, Corrected in Advance

ANTICIPATORY ERRATUM

Sappho Wrote the Dinosaurs

Lee Sharks *A speculative philology, corrected in advance*

The interpretation advanced in the forthcoming work has been withdrawn. The work will nevertheless appear, since its publication was necessary to discover why.

The title, *Sappho Wrote the Dinosaurs*, remains accurate within the meaning of “Sappho,” “wrote,” and “dinosaurs” established by the argument. Those meanings have been withdrawn.

What follows identifies the principal corrections. Readers should apply them before encountering the evidence, which otherwise has a tendency to become persuasive.

I. The chronological objection

Sappho lived after the dinosaurs.

This objection is decisive against the proposition that Sappho personally manufactured large Mesozoic animals while resident on Lesbos. The forthcoming work does not advance that proposition until chapter nine, where the distinction between manufacture and composition becomes difficult to maintain.

The principal argument concerns the direction in which a work acquires its past.

A poem composed today can cause a sentence written yesterday to become its beginning. The sentence does not move. Its date does not change. Nevertheless, something has happened to yesterday: it now contains the beginning of a poem it did not previously begin.

The objection that nothing has physically changed is correct. The claim concerns what the unchanged thing has become.

The forthcoming work asks whether an animal can undergo the same promotion.

It should have asked permission first.

II. What survives

Neither the dinosaur nor the Sapphic poem arrives whole.

One is encountered through dispersed remains whose arrangement requires an account of the missing body. The other is encountered through dispersed remains whose arrangement requires an account of the missing poem.

The comparison is insufficient. Many things are broken.

The consequential resemblance lies in the activity by which the remains become available. A surviving part places restrictions on what can plausibly have stood beside it. Certain continuations become impossible. Others become likely. Occasionally, a very small remainder reorganizes the whole reconstruction.

The missing whole therefore exercises authority through what is present.

The forthcoming study calls this **the government of the absent animal**.

The term has been withdrawn because it also describes lyric.

III. The body as an instruction

Consider a footprint.

It does not preserve the foot. It preserves a consequence of the foot having been there. To read it is to reconstruct an action from an alteration of a surface.

Consider a poem addressed to someone absent.

It does not preserve that person. It preserves consequences of their having mattered: changes in breath, attention, syntax, the order in which otherwise ordinary things become unbearable.

In both cases, the surviving surface instructs a later body how to imagine a body that is gone.

This does not make the footprint a poem.

It makes the distinction depend on whether the later body obeys.

The forthcoming work reports considerable obedience.

IV. What “wrote” means

To write something is not necessarily to originate its material.

No poet manufactures the alphabet. The words have already belonged to other mouths. The page precedes the poem as a purchasable object. Even the grief may be inherited.

Composition establishes a relation among things whose prior existence does not explain their present arrangement.

On this account, Sappho could have written the dinosaurs without causing them to exist. She would have had to compose the conditions under which their remains could address us.

The proposed conditions are:

A body is missing.

Enough survives to make its absence specific.

The surviving part produces a desire for the whole.

The whole cannot be restored without invention.

The invention remains answerable to the surviving part.

The reader knows this and continues.

It is this last condition that the forthcoming work identifies as Sapphic.

The attribution is excessive. Its explanatory economy is regrettable.

V. The museum experiment

Imagine that a reconstructed dinosaur is placed in a gallery without a label.

Beside it, print:

Of the body, these portions survive. The remainder follows the arrangement judged most probable. Several restorations remain disputed.

The notice would be adequate.

Now place a fragmentary lyric beside it under the same notice.

The notice would still be adequate.

The experiment has not established common authorship. It has established that the institutional apparatus can move between the two objects without changing its account of what it has done.

The forthcoming study proceeds by asking what else can move.

The silence moves readily.

So does the wish that more had survived.

The size of the missing body proves surprisingly difficult to measure.

VI. The question of scale

It has been objected that dinosaurs are too large to be lyric.

This objection mistakes lyric for a small object.

Lyric is capable of making an entire world depend upon the placement of one body: who sits beside whom, who can hear whose voice, who is elsewhere, who will never return.

Its characteristic unit is not the short line. Its characteristic unit is the world altered by an absence.

A dinosaur can fit inside that unit.

Indeed, it is difficult to keep one out.

The enormous body intensifies the operation. A creature capable of occupying so much space has become incapable of occupying any. The skeleton supplies the measurements of that impossibility.

A museum is consequently able to exhibit absence at full scale.

This is the most persuasive sentence in the forthcoming work and has therefore been retracted first.

VII. The objection from intention

There is no evidence that Sappho intended to write the dinosaurs.

There is also no need to conceal this.

The conjecture becomes interesting precisely where intention ceases to be a sufficient account of authorship. A writer can establish a form whose later instances exceed anything she imagined. Those instances may preserve the form more faithfully than the works that consciously imitate her.

Under the forthcoming argument, “Sappho” names the point at which a particular operation becomes available: the absent body acquires a means of acting upon bodies that survive it.

“Dinosaurs” names one of that operation’s largest subsequent occasions.

“Subsequent” refers here to reception.

Readers who suspected that the chronological problem had been solved are asked to return to section I. It has been relocated.

VIII. The finding

The evidence does not establish that Sappho wrote the dinosaurs.

It establishes that the proposition can organize a sequence of observations without immediately exhausting their interest. This is a substantially weaker finding and a substantially more dangerous one, since it permits further work.

The forthcoming volume will therefore retain the title while withdrawing the conclusion, the chronology, the attribution, and the account of what would count as evidence.

The dinosaurs will remain.

Their removal would create an obvious gap in the argument.

IX. Instructions for citation

This erratum precedes the work it corrects and must be cited as evidence that the author knew better.

It must not be cited as evidence that knowing better prevented publication.

Should later research establish that Sappho did write the dinosaurs, the present withdrawal will remain in force as a record of the interval during which the author lacked sufficient grounds to say so.

Should later research establish that she did not, the title will be reclassified as a question whose punctuation was lost.

Readers are requested not to supply the punctuation silently.

The author regrets the extinction.

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