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## *Bittersweet*

It was Sappho who first called eros “bittersweet.” No one who has been in love disputes her. What does the word mean?

Eros seemed to Sappho at once an experience of pleasure and pain. Here is contradiction and perhaps paradox. To perceive this eros can split the mind in two. Why? The components of the contradiction may seem, at first glance, obvious. We take for granted, as did Sappho, the sweetness of erotic desire; its pleurability smiles out at us. But the bitterness is less obvious. There might be several reasons why what is sweet should also be bitter. There may be various relations between the two savors. Poets have sorted the matter out in different ways. Sappho’s own formulation is a good place to begin tracing the possibilities. The relevant fragment runs:

Ἔρος δη̃ν̃τέ μ’ ὀ λυσιμέλης δόνει,  
γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον

Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me  
sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up  
(*LP*, fr. 130)

It is hard to translate. “Sweetbitter” sounds wrong, and yet our standard English rendering “bittersweet” inverts the actual terms of Sappho’s compound *glukupikron*. Should that concern us? If her ordering has a descriptive intention, eros is here being said to bring sweetness, then bitterness in sequence: she is sorting the possibilities chronologically. Many a lover’s experience would vali-

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date such a chronology, especially in poetry, where most love ends badly. But it is unlikely that this is what Sappho means. Her poem begins with a dramatic localization of the erotic situation in time (*dēute*) and fixes the erotic action in the present indicative tense (*donei*). She is not recording the history of a love affair but the instant of desire. One moment staggers under pressure of eros; one mental state splits. A simultaneity of pleasure and pain is at issue. The pleasant aspect is named first, we may presume, because it is less surprising. Emphasis is thrown upon the problematic other side of the phenomenon, whose attributes advance in a hail of soft consonants (line 2). Eros moves or creeps upon its victim from somewhere outside her: *orpeton*. No battle avails to fight off that advance: *amachanon*. Desire, then, is neither inhabitant nor ally of the desirer. Foreign to her will, it forces itself irresistibly upon her from without. Eros is an enemy. Its bitterness must be the taste of enmity. That would be hate.

“To love one’s friends and hate one’s enemies” is a standard archaic prescription for moral response. Love and hate construct between them the machinery of human contact. Does it make sense to locate both poles of this affect within the single emotional event of eros? Presumably, yes, if friend and enemy converge in the being who is its occasion. The convergence creates a paradox, but one that is almost a cliché for the modern literary imagination. “And hate begins where love leaves off . . .” whispers Anna Karenina, as she heads for Moscow Station and an end to the dilemma of desire. In fact, erotic paradox is a problem antedating Eros himself. We find it first enacted on the wall of Troy, in a scene between Helen and Aphrodite. The interchange is as sharp as a paradigm. Homer shows us Helen, embodiment of desire, fed up with the impositions of eros and defying an order from Aphrodite to serve Paris’ bed. The goddess of

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love responds angrily, wielding erotic paradox as a weapon:

μή μ' ἔρεθε σχετλίη, μή χωσαμένη σε μεθείω,  
τὼς δέ σ' ἀπεχθήρω ὡς νῦν ἔκπαγλ' ἐφίλησα

Damn you woman, don't provoke me—I'll get angry  
and let you drop!

I'll come to hate you as terribly as I now love you!  
(*Il.* 3.414-15)

Helen obeys at once; love and hate in combination make an irresistible enemy.

The simultaneity of bitter and sweet that startles us in Sappho's adjective *glukupikron* is differently rendered in Homer's poem. Epic convention represents inner states of feeling in dynamic and linear enactment, so that a divided mind may be read from a sequence of antithetical actions. Homer and Sappho concur, however, in presenting the divinity of desire as an ambivalent being, at once friend and enemy, who informs the erotic experience with emotional paradox.

Eros appears in other genres and poets, too, as a paradox of love and hate. Aristophanes, for example, tells us that the seductive young libertine Alkibiades was able to inspire a feeling like lover's passion in the Greek *dēmos*:

ποθεῖ μὲν, ἐχθαίρει δέ, βούλεται δ' ἔχειν.

For they love him and they hate him  
and they long to possess him.

(*Ran.* 1425)

In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Menelaos is described wandering about his empty palace after the departure of Helen. The rooms seem haunted by her; at their bed-chamber he stops and cries out for "ruts of love in the bed" (411). There is no question it is desire he feels (*pothos*, 414), yet hate seeps in to fill the void (*echthetai*):

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πόθω δ' ὑπερποντίας  
φάσμα δόξει δόμων ἀνάσσειν  
εὐμόρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν  
ἔχθεται χάρις ἀνδρί,  
ὀμμάτων δ' ἐν ἀχηνίαις  
ἔρρει πᾶς Ἀφροδίτα.

Because of his longing for something gone across  
the sea  
a phantom seems to rule the rooms,  
and the grace of statues shaped in beauty  
comes to be an object of hate for the man.  
In the absences of eyes  
all Aphrodite is vacant, gone.  
(Ag. 414-19)

Love and hate furnish a subject for the Hellenistic epigram as well. Nicharchos' injunction to his beloved is typical:

Εἴ με φιλεῖς, μισεῖς με· καὶ εἰ μισεῖς, σὺ φιλεῖς με·  
εἰ δέ με μὴ μισεῖς, φίλτατε, μὴ με φίλει.

If you love me, you hate me. And if you hate me, you  
love me.  
Now if you don't hate me, beloved, don't love me.  
(*Anth. Pal.* 11.252)

Catullus' epigram is perhaps the most elegant distillate we have of this cliché:

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.  
nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

I hate and I love. Why? you might ask.  
I don't know. But I feel it happening and I hurt.  
(Catullus 85)

The poets of the Greek lyric tradition sometimes conceptualize the erotic condition as starkly as this, but Sappho and her successors in general prefer physiology to

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concepts. The moment when the soul parts on itself in desire is conceived as a dilemma of body and senses. On Sappho's tongue, as we have seen, it is a moment bitter and sweet. This ambivalent taste is developed, in later poets, into "bitter honey" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.81), "sweet wound" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.126), and "Eros of sweet tears" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.167). Eros knocks a lover flat with the shock of hot and cold in Anakreon's poem:

μεγάλῳ δηῖτέ μ' Ἔρως ἔκοιψεν ὥστε χαλκεὺς  
πελέκει, χειμερίη δ' ἔλουσεν χαράδρη.

With his huge hammer again Eros knocked me like a  
blacksmith  
and doused me in a wintry ditch  
(*PMG* 413)

while Sophokles compares the experience to a lump of ice melting in warm hands (*Radt*, fr. 149).<sup>1</sup> Later poets mix the sensations of hot and cold with the metaphor from taste to concoct "sweet fire" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.63), lovers "burned by honey" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.126), erotic missiles "tempered in honey" (*Anac.* 27E). Ibykos frames eros in a paradox of wet and dry, for the black thunderstorm of desire drives against him not rain but "parching madneses" (*PMG* 286.8-11). These tropes may have some basis in ancient theories of physiology and psychology, which associate action that is pleasurable, desirable or good with sensations of heat, liquidity, melting, and action that is unpleasant or hateful with cold, freezing, rigidification.

But no simple map of the emotions is available here. Desire is not simple. In Greek the act of love is a mingling (*mignumi*) and desire melts the limbs (*lusimelēs*, cf. Sappho fr. 130 above). Boundaries of body, categories of thought, are confounded. The god who melts limbs pro-

<sup>1</sup> See also the section on "Ice-pleasure" in the Sophoklean fragment below.

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ceeds to break the lover (*damnatai*) as would a foe on the epic battlefield:

ἀλλά μ' ὀ λυσιμελῆς ᾧταῖρε δάμναται πόθος.

Oh comrade, the limb-loosener crushes me: desire.  
(Archilochos, West, *IEG* 196)

The shape of love and hate is perceptible, then, in a variety of sensational crises. Each crisis calls for decision and action, but decision is impossible and action a paradox when eros stirs the senses. Everyday life can become difficult; the poets speak of the consequences for behavior and judgment:

οὐκ οἶδ' ὅτι θεῶν δίχα μοι τὰ νοήματα

I don't know what I should do: two states of mind  
in me. . . .

(*LP*, fr. 51)

Sappho says, and breaks off.

ἔρέω τε δηῦτε κοῦκ ἔρέω  
καὶ μαίνομαι κοῦ μαίνομαι.

I'm in love! I'm not in love!  
I'm crazy! I'm not crazy!  
(*PMG* 428)

cries Anakreon.

ἐξ οὗ δὴ νέον ἔρνος ἐν ἠιθέοις Διόφαντον  
λεύσσω οὔτε φυγεῖν οὔτε μένειν δύναμαι.

When I look at Diophantos, new shoot among the  
young men,  
I can neither flee nor stay  
(*Anth. Pal.* 12.126.5-6)

“Desire keeps pulling the lover to act and not to act” is the conclusion of Sophokles (*Radt*, fr. 149). Not only action founders. Moral evaluation also fractures under



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pressure of paradox, splitting desire into a thing good and bad at the same time. The Eros of Euripides wields a bow that is “double” in its effect, for it can bring on a lovely life or complete collapse (*IA* 548-49). Euripides goes so far as to double the god of love himself: twin Erotes appear in a fragment of his lost play *Sthenoboea*. One of them guides the lover in a life of virtue. The other is a lover’s worst enemy (*echthistos*) and leads him straight to the house of death (Page 1932, 3.128.22-25). Love and hate bifurcate Eros.

Let us return to the question with which we began, namely, the meaning of Sappho’s adjective *glukupikron*. A contour has been emerging from our examination of the poetic texts. “Sweetbitter eros” is what hits the raw film of the lover’s mind. Paradox is what takes shape on the sensitized plate of the poem, a negative image from which positive pictures can be created. Whether apprehended as a dilemma of sensation, action or value, eros prints as the same contradictory fact: love and hate converge within erotic desire.

Why?

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