SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

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The series *Classics and Contemporary Thought* seeks to encourage dialogue between classical studies and other fields in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. It is based upon the recognition that each generation puts its own questions to the raw material of the past and is grounded in the conviction that the classical past still has much to say to the contemporary world. In contrast to much conventional classical scholarship which seeks ever more sophisticated or detailed answers to questions inherited from earlier scholarship, works selected for publication in this series use the skills of the classicist to address new issues or pose new questions. Because the literature and art of ancient Greece and Rome are distant from our own experience, their interpretation requires the mediation of specialists. But the obligation of such specialists is to the present as much as to the past. It is, in essence, to make the past available to the present.

The essays collected by Ellen Greene in two volumes entitled *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* and *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission* seek to make the poetry of Sappho more readily available to contemporary readers in a variety of disciplines and from a variety of backgrounds. They do not pretend to represent the totality of modern responses to Sappho. Rather, the essays in *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* focus on the leading interpretations of Sappho, her context, and her achievement advanced by scholars in the field of classical studies in recent years, while the essays in volume two, *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*, examine reactions to Sappho at different stages of history from antiquity to the twentieth century. The juxtaposition of the two volumes provides a useful contrast between contemporary and earlier approaches to the poetry of Sappho, while illustrating the more general claim that each generation makes of the past what it will. Our encounter with the poetry of Sappho today

is shaped both by our own experiences and concerns as inhabitants of a late twentieth century post-industrial society and the interests, attitudes, and preconceptions of previous generations of readers, translators, and scholars. By exploring both we can arrive at a richer understanding of Sappho and perhaps even of ourselves.

The essays in the first volume, *Contemporary Approaches*, reflect some of the broader social and intellectual developments that have characterized the last three decades and provide insight into the reconfiguration of classical studies that has accompanied those changes. The increasing empowerment of women, with the resultant interest in women's history, women's writing, and women's "ways of knowing," has accounted for the focus on Sappho as the first female writer in the Western tradition whose works have survived in any quantity. Sappho has become a test case for both the constructivist and the essentialist views of culture and gender, with scholars placing corresponding emphasis on discontinuities and continuities between her era and our own. As proto-queer, Sappho raises comparable issues with respect to sexual orientation: is she the recovered voice of a long-suppressed lesbian consciousness, or does she instead invite us to consider alternative ways of categorizing human sexual behaviors and emotions? Also running through the volume are conflicting views of the importance of institutions and their impact on the creativity of the individual artist. The earlier of the essays, in particular, advocate a direct experience of Sappho's poetry and emphasize the texture of her language and the specificity of her imagery. While later essays never fully abandon such approaches, they pay more attention to Sappho's poetry as a cultural phenomenon, one shaped by and shaping in turn the myths and rituals of the ancient Greek peoples. In this respect, Sappho studies of the past thirty years have followed the trajectory of literary studies more generally, moving toward more deeply historicized and contextualized interpretations.

Underlying the essays in the second volume, *Reception and Transmission*, is a different set of questions concerning the relationship between past and present. For some of the contributors, the vagaries in accounts of Sappho from antiquity through the twentieth century testify to the unrecoverability of past experience or past literature in any but the most attenuated form. In their versions of the reception of Sappho, each generation is seen to create its own Sappho on the basis of its own needs and interests. For other contributors, exploring past versions of Sappho becomes a way of moving closer to a true account of the poet in her original context—like excavating layers of earth at an archaeological site or unwrapping a mummy. For still others, earlier generations' encounters with Sappho become models for our own potentially fruitful relationship with the past. These conflicting views of the task of the critic or historian are not easily reconciled. What unites

them, however, is a sense of Sappho as a figure of potential. While the indeterminacy of certain aspects of Sappho's poetry may, as Glenn Most argues, be due to cultural constraints on the expression of female desire in archaic Greece, it is an undeniable source of the interest she continually attracts from disparate readers. Indeed, the fragmentary nature of the surviving texts has only increased their value for succeeding generations. For some, it has meant the opportunity to create whatever Sappho they need. For others, the historical irony implicit in the fragmentary preservation of poems of yearning and separation serves as a reminder of the inevitable incompleteness of human knowledge and affection.

One year before the publication of the earliest of the essays contained in these volumes, Sylvia Plath's poem "Lesbos" appeared in her posthumous collection *Ariel*. While Plath's poem mimics the dialogue style, the temporal compression, and the natural imagery that characterizes Sappho's writing, its speaker places herself, rather than the unnamed addressee, in the position of departing lover. Plath's suicide makes it tempting to associate her with Sappho, whom legend describes as leaping to her death in despair over a failed love relationship, but the testimony of Plath's poetry suggests that she belongs instead to a long line of female writers who have found it necessary to reject the authoritative example of Sappho in order to get on with their creative lives. In her case, the rejection of Sappho marks a more widespread generational resistance to the hegemony of the elite classical tradition, a refusal, in Muriel Rukeyser's words, to enter "the populated cold of drawing rooms." In a sense, Plath (along with Rukeyser and others), by denying Sappho's authority, closed the door on one generation's reading of her poems and their significance. What we have before us, in the two volumes compiled by Ellen Greene, is a report in progress on the present generation's encounter with Sappho—through direct experience of her texts, through contextualized interpretations, and through reflection on her meaning for past readers and re-readers.