SAPPHO'S SUPRA-SUPERLATIVES

In perhaps as many as eight instances in the surviving fragments (possibly more if one counts some of doubtful authorship), Sappho makes effective use of comparisons which rely on a special form of hyperbole. The fact is of interest in its own right, but there are problems of interpretation (especially concerning 31, lines 14–15, and 111, line 6) which take on a different complexion in the light of it. My purpose here is to explore the phenomenon and its implications.

Consider these examples:

(156) *χρύσω χρυσοτέρα* (more golden than gold)
(167) *ὠίω πόλυ λευκότερον* (far whiter than an egg)

and

(98a) *ξανθοτέραις ἔχη ταίς κόμαις δάιδος* (has hair more yellow than a torch).[1]

In each of these an ostensible limit is surpassed. Gold is pre-eminently golden in colour; it would seem that nothing could be more golden in colour than gold. The gold that is the exemplar of golden colour must not be dirty, or tainted, or viewed in abnormal light, and so on, but having made such allowances, it seems that the colour of gold is an extreme; there could not be anything more golden than *that*. Even if it is not being golden *in colour* that is at issue, there is still something wrong with being more golden than gold; it is downright inconsistent to describe an object as non-gold, but as having more of the properties of gold than gold does.

Just as gold is a limit in being golden, a really white egg is at an extreme in whiteness. It may be that if white is defined in terms of wavelengths of light there is conceptual room for something to be whiter than a white egg, but can it really be that something is visually experienced as *far* whiter? However that may be, the poetic quality of the phrase results from the feeling that the object described must be imagined as white to an impossible degree. Being far whiter than an egg is, like being more golden than gold, surpassing an unsurpassable.

It is unclear whether hair 'more yellow than a torch', that is, than a pure yellow flame, would be so yellow as to be conceptually impossible. But there are shades of yellow created by the burning of wood (and also of olive oil) which are so extreme it is at least questionable whether blonde hair could ever rival them, much less exceed them. Moreover, the point of the phrase seems best made if it is understood as hyperbolic. Here are the relevant lines from the mutilated fragments (98a) and (98b):

> . . . she who bore me [said?]
> to those in her prime [it was] greatly
> fitting, if someone had hair
> wrapped in a purple headband, . . .
> but [for her] with hair more yellow than a torch,
> [it is preferable to have] crowns of flowers in bloom.
>
> For you, Kleis, I have no place
> from which a coloured headband will come . . .

[1] Translations are mine, except where otherwise indicated. The Greek text and numbering followed are those of E. M. Voigt, *Sappho et Alcaeus* (Amsterdam, 1971).

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For ordinary girls a purple headband is a fine adornment, but for the prettiest girls—the super blondes—the flowers are better still. As Page remarked, Kleis was presumably a blonde.[2] Apparently the lines are supposed to convince Kleis that, for her, flowers are better than a headband, which is just as well, since her mother cannot obtain one anyway. *ξανθοτέραις ἔχη ταίς κόμαις δάιδος* is a bit of flattery, directed at Kleis. Exaggerated praise is in order here as a way is to transfer a child's wish from an unobtainable to an obtainable; for the really special child, the item the parent is offering is even better. (Of course, none of this need be autobiographical, and it makes no difference for present purposes whether Kleis is a young daughter or a youthful girlfriend.)

Having hair more yellow than a torch is like being more golden than gold, or being far whiter than an egg. An extreme is surpassed in a way that is impossible, or which at the least is conceptually or imaginatively difficult. For want of a better name, I shall call hyperboles of this sort 'supra-superlatives'.[3] Adapting Silk's terminology, we may say that supra-superlatives implicitly have the form '*T* is more *N* than *V*', where *T* is the tenor, or subject, *N* is the neutral element or adjective ascribed, and *V* is the vehicle of comparison.[4] The object designated by the term *V* must be an item of a special sort in a supra-superlative, since it must be, or at least ostensibly be, superlatively *N*. Thus in 'whiter than an egg' the unnamed subject is the tenor, *N* is 'white', and 'egg' is the vehicle. In 'hair more yellow than a torch' 'hair' is *T*, 'yellow' is *N*, and 'torch' (or 'torch flame') is *V*. In 'more golden than gold' an unnamed subject is *T*, 'golden' is *N*, and 'gold' is *V*. (In this last case there is a partial identity of *N* and *V*.) Eggs are, or can be, superlatively white, a torch flame is, or can be, superlatively yellow, and gold is superlatively golden. Supra-superlatives appear to be a vivid way of ascribing a superlative; the girls who wear flowers in their hair are blonde indeed.

Phrases that appear to be supra-superlatives are surprisingly common in the surviving fragments, especially considering how little of Sappho's work we possess. Of different kinds than those we have seen so far are

(168a) *Γέλλως παιδοφιλωτέρα* (loving children more than Gello)

and

(156) *πόλυ πάκτιδος ἀδυμελεστέρα* (much more sweet sounding than a lyre)

Neither has the look of inconsistency that is had by *χρύσω χρυσοτέρα*. Even so, it is arguable that in all three cases hyperbole is generated by surpassing a limiting case. Our sources indicate that Gello was a child-stealing ghost of the same sort as the Lamiae and Empusa.[5] Gello's essential characteristic is apparently that of being a pursuer of children, so loving children still more is conceptually tortuous.

Our source for 'more golden than gold' treats *πόλυ πάκτιδος ἀδυμελεστέρα* as another impossibility, and it is a reasonable assumption that the phrase seemed so to Sappho as well.[6] This may be a case of something's seeming impossible at one time but not at another; aren't violins, for example, sweeter sounding than a lyre? The

[2] D. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford, 1965) , 101. Fragment 132, which compares Kleis to golden flowers, points in the same direction.

[3] Supra-superlatives correspond to the second kind of hyperbole noted in Demetr. *Eloc.* 124–7.

[4] M. S. Silk, *Interaction in Poetic Imagery* (Cambridge, 1974), 9–15, 19–21. I am indebted to an anonymous referee of this journal, who pointed out the usefulness of Silk's distinctions.

[5] See test. 178 in D. A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric* I: *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Cambridge, 2002), 176.

[6] Demetr. *Eloc*. 162.

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qualification πόλυ may make a difference; perhaps there are instruments with a sweeter sound than the lyre, but not *far* sweeter. However that may be, even though the lyre may not seem superlatively sweet to us, it probably did so in the absence of competitors. Perhaps for Sappho being sweeter than the lyre was as inconceivable as being more golden than gold. The extreme conceptually available to poet and audience has been surpassed, and the phrase relies on this for its effect.

The disputed line in fragment 111 looks suspiciously like another example of Sappho's use of supra-superlatives, and this has implications for the controversy surrounding it. Here is the text:

> Up with the roof,
> Hymenaon!
> Seize it, carpenters,
> Hymenaon!
> The bridegroom is coming, equal to Ares,
> far bigger than a big man (ἄνδρος μεγάλω πόλυ μέσδων)

Kirk claimed that ἄνδρος μεγάλω πόλυ μέσων is not a natural way of saying that the groom is a very big man.[7] Kirk's explanation was that the line is phallic humour. He would thus understand ἄνδρος μεγάλω as 'man with a big penis'.The groom is bigger still, so ithyphallic he cannot fit under the roof. Discussion has largely concerned parallels.[8] In any case, the alleged unnaturalness of 'bigger than a big man' does not necessitate Kirk's understanding of it. The bridegroom is a man bigger than a big man, and is thus above the human scale, like Ares. But a man this big is impossible, and the phrase thus seems to be a supra-superlative. To be sure, ἄνδρος μεγάλω πόλυ μέσδων differs grammatically from χρύσω χρυσοτέρα and ὠΐω πόλυ λευκότερον, but conceptually they are similar. This is enough to explain what the line in question says, and why it is worded as it is. Any further explanation is gratuitous. Granted, we are not in a position to know what kinds of *double entendre* would or would not have been appreciated by Sappho's audience. But the phrasing is not of itself evidence for phallic humour, since it can be explained as exemplifying a pattern Sappho uses elsewhere in completely different contexts.

There is another problematic phrase that may be an example of Sappho's use of supra-superlatives. In fragment 31 Sappho gives a list of her symptoms in the presence of a woman and a male companion. Unfortunately, the nature of one item is unclear; she says

(G) . . . χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι . . . 15

Given the ambiguity of χλωρός in Greek, there are at least these possible translations:

(T1) I am paler than grass
(T2) I am greener than grass
(T3) I am more moist than grass.[9]

[7] G. S. Kirk, 'A fragment of Sappho reinterpreted', *CQ* 13 (1963), 51–2.

[8] A useful contribution and summary of the literature is in the appendix to M. Marcovich, 'Sappho Fr. 31: anxiety attack or love declaration?', *CQ* 22 (1972), 29–32.

[9] (T1) is argued for in A. Pippin Burnett, *Three Archaic Poets: Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho* (London, 1983), 242. (T2) is, among other places, in the Loeb; see Campbell (n. 5), 81. (T3) is defended by J. McIntosh Snyder, *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho* (New York, 1993), 33.

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Which of these best captures the way in which Sappho and her audience understood the line? The issue of translation is closely connected to that of the identity of the symptom in question. If (T1) is correct, (G) describes Sappho's complexion. But if (T3) is preferable, (G) would seem to refer either to sweating, a symptom she has already listed in line 13, or to sexual arousal. It is less clear how we should understand (T2); I shall return to this problem below.

Initially 'paler than grass' looks difficult, since people are *normally* less colourful than healthy grass. To be paler than normal grass would not be exceptionally pale. Pippin Burnett argues that the grass Sappho has in mind is summer grass.[10] Dry summer grass does have little colour, and so to be even less colourful would be strikingly pale. So understood, (T1) is an attractive candidate. On the other hand, the case for (T3) is especially strong. Irwin has shown, as conclusively as such matters can be, that χλωρός originally meant 'moist', and does so throughout an impressive array of early Greek literature.[11] She concluded that the meaning of χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας was 'more moist than grass'.[12] However, there is reason to think both (T1) and (T3) are wrong.

Neither (T1) nor (T3) can plausibly be taken as supra-superlatives. People are sometimes less colourful than dry summer grass; it is not a hyperbolic impossibility. Moreover, whether the reference is to perspiration or to vaginal secretions, people are sometimes more moist than grass. On the other hand, χλωροτέρα . . . ποίας has a striking similarity to 'more yellow than a torch' and 'far whiter than an egg'. Really green grass is a paradigm case of what it is to be green, and being greener than that would seem to surpass an unsurpassable. That is, (G) does have the appearance of a supra-superlative. If Sappho's intention is best captured by (T1) or (T3), it is a *coincidence* that χλωροτέρα . . . ποίας lends itself so readily to interpretation as hyperbole, and looks so much like another example of the pattern which, as we have seen, is prominent elsewhere in the fragments. I do not find this credible. (T2) has the advantage that it preserves the appearance of hyperbole in (G). So , it would seem, (T2) is in, but (T1) and (T3) are out.

However, what symptom does (T2) add? It might be thought that even if (T2) is the best translation, it and (G) should be understood metaphorically.[13] My concern here is primarily to argue that (T2) probably best captures the poet's and her audience's comprehension of (G). But it is worth pointing out that (G) may have been an ascription of literal greenness, and not a metaphor. People are sometimes green, and the fact is almost always associated with states of poor health, injury, or even death. There are green bruises, and green skin can occur in cases of gangrene and iron disorders.[14] Green skin is one kind of discolouration of corpses.[15] Thus (G),

[10] Burnett (n. 9), 242–3.

[11] E. Irwin, *Colour Terms in Greek Poetry* (Toronto, 1974), 31–50.

[12] Ibid. 67.

[13] See, for example, M. R. Lefkowitz , 'Critical stereotypes and the poetry of Sappho', in E. Greene (ed.), *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* (Berkeley, 1996), 32. Lefkowitz is the most recent commentator to suggest a connection between (G) and the pale or green fear of Homeric warriors in battle. This interpretation says, or can be taken as saying, that χλωρός sometimes meant 'afraid', without reference to complexion. Compare saying in English that someone is 'yellow'.

[14] See, for example, C. D. Forbes and W. F. Jackson, *Colour Atlas and Text of Clinical Medicine* (St Louis, 1993), 42, and C. D. Garrison, *The Iron Disorders Institute Guide to Hemochromatosis* (Nashville, 2001), 80. The fact that there is literally green skin should be distinguished from the problematic claim that the so-called 'green sickness' really was a disease more or less peculiar to

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understood as (T2), is intelligible as it stands, especially since Sappho is about to say in the next line that she seems not far from death. Green skin characterizes unhealthiness of various forms, and I do not see a problem of interpretation that an appeal to metaphor is needed to resolve.

There is one other fragment among those uncontroversially assigned to Sappho which can perhaps be illuminated by her fondness for supra-superlatives.[16] Fragment (82a) reads:

εὐμορφωτέρα Μνασιδίκα τὰς ἀπάλας Γυρίννως.

Mnasidika is more well-shaped than soft Gurinna.

A better figure is attributed to the one woman than to the other. Both Mnasidika and Gurinna were apparently members of Sappho's circle. What that circle was is a matter of debate, but it is clear the relationships involved were those of deep personal intimacy. It is thus rather shocking to find Sappho comparing one member to another in this way, especially since the poems were apparently public performances. Sappho was of course what she was and not what we would make of her, but still one wonders whether the line was as distressing in its original context as it appears to us. Unfortunately, no other intelligible lines from the poem have been preserved, so any comments must be somewhat speculative. However, the nature of Sappho's comparisons does make possible an interpretation on which Gurinna has less reason for complaint.

'More well-shaped than tender Gurinna' differs from 'more golden than gold' and from 'far whiter than an egg', in that it does not wear hyperbole on its face. But it may be that the comparison was meant to be hyperbolic, if Gurinna was a paradigm of shapeliness.[17] Gurinna could then be a vehicle in a supra-superlative, just as Gello appears to be in (168a). In Sappho's supra-superlatives one term, *V*, denotes an extreme exemplar of the property in question, a role that Gurinna perhaps plays in

adolescent girls. For this and what may have been historical consequences of Sappho's 'greener than grass', see H. King, *The Disease of Virgins: Green Sickness, Chlorosis, and the Problems of Puberty* (London, 2004), 33–40.

[15] R. G. Mayer, *Embalming: History, Theory, and Practice* (Westford, CT, 2000), 359.

[16] There are examples of doubtful authorship. Greg. Cor. in Hermog. *Meth.* 13 (*Rhet. Gr.* 7, 1236, 10ss. Walz), cited in Voigt 156 test., ascribes the following as τὰ Ἀνακρέοντος, τὰ Σαπφοῦς:
(a) γάλακτος λευκοτέρα (whiter than milk)
(b) ὕδατος ἀπαλοτέρα (more gentle than water)
(c) πηκτίδων ἐμμελεστέρα (more harmonious than lyres)
(d) ἵππου γαυροτέρα (more skittish than a horse)
(e) ῥόδων ἁβροτέρα (more delicate than roses)
(f) ἱματίου ἑανοῦ μαλακωτέρα (softer than a fine robe)
(g) χρυσοῦ τιμιωτέρα (more costly than gold)
Item (a) has an obvious similarity to fragment (167), ὠίω πόλυ λευκότερον, while (c) is closely related to (156), πόλυ πάκτιδος ἀδυμελεστέρα. Item (g) is especially interesting, given the place of gold in ancient coinage and economies; there was probably a conceptual bump in (g) that is not there for us. I have (with some reservations) followed Campbell (n. 5), 165, in the translation of (b). It is a reasonable supposition that (b) was predicated of a female friend. It would appear, then, that in (b) *N* is equivocally predicated of *T* and *V*, and thus differs in an important respect from the supra-superlatives we have examined; without a context, it is impossible to be sure. Something similar may be true of (d); I take it humans and horses would be skittish in different senses.. Items (e) and (f) look like borderline cases; did it seem to ancient speakers of Greek that robes were superlatively soft, and that roses were superlatively delicate? Interesting comments on (e) are in Silk (n. 2), 143, who believes that it is probably Sappho's.

[17] The word ἀπαλός occurs in 94.16, 94.22, 46, and 126. Gurinna's softness is apparently that of a voluptuous woman: see especially 126.

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this case. If so, the line praises the body of the first woman, but it does so by presupposing perfection in the body of the second. It is of course too late to know the truth of the matter. Sadly, we will never see Gurinna.

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CONQUERING LOVE: SAPPHO 31 AND CATULLUS 51

φαίνεταί μοι κῆνος ἴσος θέοισιν
ἔμμεν' ὤνηρ, ὄττις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἆδυ φωνείΆ
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
ὠς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὠς με φώναι-
σ' οὐδ' ἔν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλὰ κὰμ μὲν γλῶσσα πέπαγε, λέπτον
δ' αὔτικα χρῶι πῦρ ὐπαδεδρόμηκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἔν ὄρημμ', ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

κὰδ δέ μ' ἴδρως ψῦχρος ἔχει, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
φαίνομ' ἐμ' αὔται·

ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ [
]καὶ πένητα

To me he appears on a par with gods,
the man who opposite you
sits and bends his ear close to catch
you sweetly speaking

and delightfully laughing. It sets my
heart aflutter in my breast;
for when I but catch a glimpse of you, my
voice fails,

my tongue is paralysed, all at once a delicate
flame runs beneath my flesh,
sight fails my eyes, there's a ringing
in my ears,

a cold sweat grips me, trembling
seizes my whole frame, clammier than meadowgrass,
am I, and little short of dying
I seem to myself.

But all can be braved, since . . . and a beggar[1]

[1] I print Page's text, adopting Barnes's πέπαγε in line 9 (Catullus' *torpet*), and Page's reconstruction of the corrupt text of line 13. The translation is mine.

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