This article considers the conceptual significance of relationality in Sappho. It argues that Sappho’s poetry reconstitutes systems of relation by making evident exceptions to their explanatory capacity. These exceptions can be profitably understood through the rubric of the “event.” Drawing in particular on the relational function of prepositions and Alain Badiou’s philosophical work on the event, the article examines how “thinking prepositionally” alongside Sappho reveals both the relations that make up the situational world of her poetry as well as those evental moments of non-relation through which that world is impossibly transformed. The article concludes with considerations of Sapphic fidelity—that is, how Sappho’s poetry realizes the transformative potential of the event—and the poet’s articulation of the event through figures of preeminence and comparison.

Sappho’s poetry is concerned intensively with the relations between places and people. The familiar themes of her corpus—absence, aging, desire, homecoming—can be traced back to a relational core: the separation between individuals in time or space, the loss or exchange of objects, and the fragile attachments of friends, loved ones, and family members. Yet perhaps the most striking moments in her poems articulate instances of non-relation—impressions, instants, or points of emergence that exceed the explanatory capacity of these preexisting relations and call for a reappraisal of their configuration and meaning. According to one tradition of reading Sappho,¹

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1. For a succinct summary of this approach, see Robbins 1995: 132: “Sappho’s mechanism is, as I see it, a fairly constant one. Pain (Wilamowitz’s ‘unbefriedigtes Sehnen’) is stilled and given meaning by memory, by epiphany, or by both.”

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these moments demonstrate the power of human thought and speech to overcome, perhaps with some divine help, the often painful longing that shapes the poet’s world. On this view, Sappho’s poetry aims to suture or restore relations that have been severed or misaligned. By contrast, it is the goal of this paper to see Sappho as a poet of non-relation—or, better, to conceive of Sappho’s poetic craft as making the non-relational appear in the world as a way of transforming relationality itself.

I will consider this goal from two perspectives, one poetic and the other conceptual. First, I will examine the ways in which reading for the poet’s use of prepositions makes evident the structure and significance of relation. Linguistic work on prepositions has demonstrated that they, along with case endings, belong to a lexical class for which formal, grammatical relation and semantics are deeply intertwined. Thus prepositions not only create a network of formal relation within language but also indicate some of the meaning ascribed by the speaker to the physical world in which she lives. My intention in examining Sappho’s use of prepositions is not, however, simply descriptive; rather, I aim to “think with” prepositions in order to better understand the linguistic manifestation of her material experience.

For the second, conceptual perspective on the dynamic between relation and non-relation in Sappho, I draw on Alain Badiou’s concept of the “event.” For Badiou an event is precisely an irruption of non-relation within a “situation.” The term “situation” refers to all that appears in the world—the phenomena that have come to the surface of the multiplicity of being; it is all that is apparent, relational, and factual. An event, then, is the emergence of an impossibility according to the factual encyclopedia and causal rationale of the situation. It discloses an un-anticipatable newness in the world, which bears no previously established relation to any of the components of the situation. Yet an event, because it is a form of pure non-relational being, has no defined content. Instead, the meaning and transformative potential of an event must be asserted through the “fidelity” of those who register its appearance and recognize its significance. These faithful subjects move through the situational world, sorting

2. See, e.g., Luraghi 2003: 11: “Cases and prepositions encode grammatical relations and semantic roles of nominal constituents. . . . Especially when encoding grammatical relations, cases and prepositions are often considered purely distinctive markers, without an autonomous semantic content. On the other hand, since prepositions in particular typically also encode some S(ematic) R(ole)s, and the existence of a meaning in such cases is hard to deny, grammatical or semantic uses of prepositions are sometimes regarded as involving homophones” (my emphasis). Luraghi’s carefully descriptive analysis maintains a connection between case endings and prepositions, while also allowing for prepositions to be treated to some extent as privileged bearers of semantico-grammatical relation. Since this paper will not discuss case endings (but cf. n.20 below), it is important to reiterate that prepositions are not the only bearers of relation in language. My reading is not intended to serve as a linguistic argument for the special quality of prepositions generally, but rather to establish their use in Sappho’s poetics specifically. For the semantico-grammatical nature of prepositions and their relation to grammatical cases in Greek, see also Bortone 2010; from a more general linguistic perspective, see, e.g., Zelinsky-Wibbelt 1993; Svorou 1994; Tyler and Evans 2003.

3. The basic terms “situation,” “event,” and “fidelity” are given their fullest definition by Badiou in his foundational work, Being and Event (2005); for a summary of the work’s findings, see xii–xiii. The term “situation” is supplanted by the concept of a “world” in his later writing, especially Logics of Worlds (2009), which is concerned with the nature of appearing.
through impressions, utterances, and experiences in order to establish anew the rela-
tions of the world in light of the effect of the event.\textsuperscript{4} In other words, fidelity is the
means by which the (non-relational) event transforms the (relational) situation.

Since for Badiou an event is, strictly speaking, only ever a matter of ontology,
it is especially in fidelity as the conduit through which the non-relational is brought
to bear on the relational that I see the helpfulness of his concepts for considering
Sappho’s poetics. By examining Sappho’s use of prepositions as markers of relation,
I propose that we can read for the event that shapes her poetic world. In doing
so, I am not claiming to reconstruct any real experience that the living Sappho
may have had. Instead, by examining instances where the relations of her lin-
guistic creations exceed themselves, we can identify non-relational moments
through which she writes a reconfiguration of systems of meaning and compar-
ison. These moments are remnants of Sappho’s fidelity to an event her experience
of which we can never know, but which she leaves for us in the constitution of
her poetry. We should, therefore, think of Sappho’s event as a “literary event”—
one that is poised on the cusp between experience and language, being and
representation: it is a linguistic act that is aimed at making manifest something
paradoxically impossible in \textit{and} vitally constitutive of its author’s experience
of the world.\textsuperscript{5}

As an initial proposition, therefore, this article offers a context-dependent reading
of Sappho’s use of prepositions. On the one hand, I will argue that Sappho’s poetry fea-
tures many examples of prepositions that can easily be explained in purely relational
terms. I will refer to these prepositions as “situational” because they illustrate the ways
in which Sappho and the characters of her poems relate to one another within the situ-
ation: for instance, how individuals are grouped or categorized, arrive and depart, or
exchange words or objects. On the other hand, Sappho creatively uses a number of
prepositions, particularly those that denote roundness, fullness, or belonging, such as
\textit{σύν} and \textit{περί}. I contend that these prepositions can mark poetic events, which share
no preexisting relation to the situation. The emergence of these impossible moments
is disclosed frequently, although not exclusively, through figures of preeminence.

By “thinking prepositionally” alongside Sappho, I will demonstrate how the
poet both maps the poetic world that she inhabits and articulates those instants of
preeminence through which that world is impossibly transformed. I first establish
the effectiveness of reading for prepositions with a close analysis of fr. 1 before con-
ducting a general survey of the corpus focusing on the distinctive prepositions \textit{πεδά}
and \textit{περί}. Next, I consider fidelity as the means by which Sappho’s poetry brings the
non-relational event to bear on the relational situation. Finally, I examine Sappho’s
use of comparison to articulate the preeminence of the event.

\textsuperscript{4} In Badiouian terms, this “effect” of the event is a “truth.” Badiou’s project is essentially a
recuperation of a philosophical (post-Platonic) concept of truth. See esp. his most recent significant
work (2018).

\textsuperscript{5} On the literary event, see esp. Rowner 2015, who provides a valuable overview of the con-
cept in twentieth-century thought. His work, however, does not extend to Badiou.
Before turning to survey the corpus more broadly, I offer a close analysis of fr. 1 in order to demonstrate how reading for prepositions can help in thinking through Sappho’s poetic world. Sappho’s prepositional use complements other formal elements of this poem, such as the cletic hymn structure. In accordance with the characteristics of this genre, the poem’s invocation constitutes a set of fixed relations that defines Aphrodite as divine addressee and Sappho as mortal suppliant. The subsequent narrative gradually alters this initial configuration, using the poetic form to conceive of a different relationship between goddess and poetess.

ποικιλόθρον’ ἀθανάτ’ Ἀφρόδιτα, παῖὶ Δίῳς δολιόπλοκε, λίσσομαι σε, μὴ μ’ ἵσσαι ίμηδ’ ὀνίαισι δάμνα, πόντια, θύμιον, ἀλλά τυιδ’ ἐλθ’’, αἱ ποτα κάτερωτα τάς ἔμας αὐθαίς ἂσισα πῆλοι ἐκλιπες, πάτροις δὲ δόμον λίποισα χρύσιον ἠλθες ἀρμί’ ὑπαθείςμαισα· κάλοι δὲ σ’ ἄγον ὡκεσε στρούθοι περί γας μελανας πῦκνα δίνινετες πτέρ’ ἀπ’ ὅρανω αἰθι- ροις διά μέσωσον· αἰπα δ’ ἐξκοιντο· σῦ δ’, ὡ μάκαρα, μειδιαίςας’ ἀθανάτοι προσώποι ήμε’ ὁττι δήσει πέπονθα κάττι δῆςει κιάλήμμι κιοττί μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι μιμαιλαί (θμώμω· τίνα δήσει πειθω ·· σάγεις ἤκακας’ Ψάμπρ’ ἰδίκησι; 5 10 15 20

6. Fragments are from Voigt 1971 unless otherwise specified. The exceptions are the Tithonus poem, which has been newly published as fr. 58b = Budelmann 2018: 40, and the “Newest Sappho” (i.e., frs. 15, 16, 16a, 17, 18, 18a, 5, 9, Brothers Song, and Kypris Song) published by Obbink 2016. These latter I indicate by “new fr. #;” otherwise I include only “fr. #.” Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.


8. I do not claim that this transformation is an entirely conventional outcome for a cletic hymn, nor that it is Sappho’s unique innovation. Rather, I am interested in describing locally how Sappho uses prepositions to accomplish the union of divine and mortal that is the aim of her poem. On the relationship between Sappho’s poem and the hymnic genre to which it belongs, see Cameron 1939; Kirkwood 1974: 111; and Boychenko 2017: 247–50. See below for my consideration of Sappho’s technique in comparison with other poets.
Immortal Aphrodite with the richly-wrought throne, child of Zeus, wile-weaver, I beseech you, do not overwhelm me with nausea and pains, queen, in my heart, but come hither, if ever on another occasion, listening to my cries from afar, you heard me, and leaving the golden house of your father you came yoking your chariot beneath you. Beautiful, swift sparrows led you over the black earth, whirring their wings rapidly from heaven through mid-air. And soon they arrived. But you, O blessed goddess, smiling on your immortal face, asked what, now again, I have suffered and why, now again, I am calling out and what I wish to happen most in my raving heart. Whom, now again, should I persuade to lead you back into her love? Who, O Sappho, is wronging you? For if she flees, soon she will pursue, and if she does not accept gifts, still she will give, and if she does not love, soon she will love—even against her will. So come also now, release me from grievous cares, and complete for me as much as my heart desires to be completed, and you yourself be my comrade.

The poem opens with a stately and motionless invocation. Aphrodite, sitting on an intricately adorned throne (ποικιλόθρον'), is represented as an immortal divinity (ἀθανάτ') and an untouchable queen (πότνια, 4), distantly removed from Sappho and suspended in timelessness. The deictic “come hither” (τυίδ ἐλθ’, 5) moves the poem out of the elevated timelessness of the invocation into the hic et nunc of lyric address. This movement creates both a spatial relation between Aphrodite (there) and Sappho (here) and a temporal relation between the now (the time of the prayer) and the “other occasions” (αἱ πιοτα κάτεροτα) on which the goddess has come to Sappho’s aid. The establishment of these relations heralds the flurry of movement in the third stanza: Aphrodite’s chariot is yoked “beneath” her (ὑπασδεύξασα, 9) in order for her swift sparrows to pass “over the black earth”

9. On the debate surrounding this epithet, which reads either ποικιλόθρον or ποικιλόφρον, and its multiple persuasive interpretations, see Winkler 1990: 166–76. I opt for “richly-wrought throne” because a seated Aphrodite is appropriate to the motionlessness of the first stanza.

“from heaven” (ἀπ’ ὀράνῳ, 11) and “through mid-air” (σιθέ- / ρος διὰ μέσσω, 11–12), until “soon they arrived” (ἀψα δ’ ἐξίκοντο, 13). This rapid succession of prepositions qualifies the relation established in the previous stanza. The prepositions περί, ἀπό, and διὰ trace the shifting position of Aphrodite’s chariot in relation to the earth and sky as it draws closer to the location of Sappho. The preverb ἐξ-, which modifies the strong verb of arrival ἱκνέομαι, lends a directional quality to the action; it emphasizes a reciprocation of movement in the verb—this arrival is a “meeting.”

Yet the meeting is only momentary. As Aphrodite’s speech changes from indirect to direct discourse, the goddess asks, “Whom, now again, should I persuade to lead you back into her love? (τίνα δηπείτε πείθω / .]σάγην ἐξ γὰν φιλότατα, 18–19). The outward movement (ἐξ-) of Aphrodite’s arrival is answered by the inward movement (ἐξ) of Sappho’s promised reunification, “now again” (δηπείτε),12 with her lover. This oscillation leads in turn to another outward movement as Sappho prays in the final stanza for a release “from grievous cares” (χαλέπαν δὲ λύσον / ἐκ μερίμναν, 25–26). The back-and-forth of the prepositions in the second half of the poem (ἐξ-, 13; ἐς, 19; ἐκ, 26) manifests the phenomenological form of the negotiation between Sappho and Aphrodite: Sappho longs for the arrival and release of final satisfaction, which is associated with an outward movement (ἐξ-, ἐκ), but Aphrodite can only promise a return to repetition (ἐς).13

Sappho’s final prayer for release from cares (λύσον / ἐκ μερίμναν) recalls through sound patterning the poem’s opening prayer for Aphrodite’s responsive listening ἐκλωες (7). The ring-composition formed by ἐκλω- and λῦ- ἐκ outlines the relational movements of the poem. Sappho’s call for Aphrodite to hear and respond introduces the goddess as a moving, active figure. Conversely, the prayer of the final stanza arrests that motion. Sappho emphasizes her desire for completion with the repetition of the verb τελέο (26–27).14 The conditions required for the satisfaction of this desire are communicated in the ultimate phrase of the poem, which is readdressed emphatically to Aphrodite with both personal

11. I will deal with the peculiarities of περί below. For the purpose of the argument at this point, it can be understood here as a situational preposition because, like the others in this list, it qualifies the relation between two discrete spatial points.


13. On the importance of repetition for Sappho’s description of love see, e.g., Burnett 1983: 257n.79: “An important fact about Sapphic love is that it repeats itself endlessly, as it must for anyone who is an ἐραστής of all that is beautiful.” While I take Burnett’s point, the intriguing thing about fr. 1 is that its telos lies in an impossible end to this repetition—that the goal of “Sapphic love” is not the repetition itself but its cessation.

14. For the repetitive use of τελέο in prayer, cf. Aesch. Ag. 973–74 with Cameron 1939: 4. See Carson 1996 for an alternative reading of the final two stanzas of the poem that takes into account the interplay between the general and the particular in Sappho’s request to Aphrodite for satisfaction of her unrequited love.
and intensive pronouns: “you yourself be my comrade” (σὺ δ᾽ αὕτα / σύμμαχος ἔσσο, 27–28).

The prepositional prefix, σύμ-, of the noun σύμμαχος stands out from the other prepositions in the poem. Unlike the previous examples in fr. 1, this preposition does not simply relate two discrete points in space-time, but marks the emergence of a new unity—an “alliance” defined by an impossible parity between goddess and poet-ness which would bring to an end the repetitions and relational oscillations that haunt Sappho’s experience of love. The imperative request, σύμμαχος ἔσσο, does not describe a directional relationship between protector divinity and suppliant, but through the comitative intensity of the prefix σύμ- circumscribes an impossible cohesion of immortal and mortal. The preposition expresses a change of state—not a movement through the world, but its transformation.

This reading of fr. 1 demonstrates the importance of prepositional thinking for an appreciation of Sappho’s poetic craft. A prepositional reading recognizes the movements and relations that make up the situational, narrative world of the poet, but also non-relational moments which are unassimilable to that world. These evental moments, like σύμμαχος ἔσσο, sit untethered and free from situational relations and repetitions. The σύμ- captures a moment of atemporality, non-relationality, and pure belonging that is the telos of the poem. In the poem’s dedication to this impossible goal, the eventual result of Sappho’s prayer exceeds its situational cause: Sappho’s desire for respite from heartache results in unity of immortal and mortal.

SITUATION AND EVENT: πεδά / περί

If prepositional thinking can trace the phenomenological trajectory and the emergence of an event within a single poem, it can also define more broadly the situational world of Sappho’s poetry and the evental moments that punctuate it. In order to facilitate a survey of the corpus, I will focus on two prepositions, πεδά and περί. These two prepositions are noteworthy foremost because both are

15. Note the absence in the Greek of a personal pronoun referring to Sappho. The two are sublated by the σύμ-.

16. In the Badiouian sense of evental “impossibility” discussed above. Sappho’s poetry frequently entertains the impossibility of such an identification of immortal and mortal (see, e.g., fr. 58b), often in hymnic invocations (see fr. 2 or the new fr. 17). Much of the focus of scholarship on σύμμαχος responds to its martial (epic) significance (see, e.g., Rissman 1983); but cf. Barilier 1972, esp. 29, for a careful consideration of Sappho’s relationship with Aphrodite. For a related use of σύμ- in the final prayer of a hymn, see Anacreon fr. 357, where the speaker requests Dionysus to be a good “counselor” to his beloved (Kλεοβούλῳ δ’ ἀγάθῳ γένεω / σύμβουλος, 9–10). Yet, whereas Anacreon’s speaker is asking Dionysus to be “with” (σύμ-) a third party—Cleobulus—Sappho’s request forms a unity between herself and the goddess.

17. I am not claiming that these prepositions impact our understanding of Sappho’s poetry to the exclusion of other linguistic features. For example, the preeminent quality that the preposition περί ascribes to evental moments should not be understood as exhausting the ways in which Sappho expresses the event. As we have just seen, in fr. 1 σύμ- marks a form of evental—i.e., non-relational—belonging, which in many ways contrasts with the articulations of preeminence that I explore in the remainder.
distinctly (although not exclusively)\textsuperscript{18} Aeolic-Lesbian.\textsuperscript{19} Πεδάτια is often regarded as interchangeable with Attic μετά, but, importantly, it is etymologically distinct. Pietro Bortone explains, concerning the development of prepositions from inflected nouns, that “the \textit{Aeolic} Greek preposition \textit{πεδάτια} \ldots [is] a perfect match for the Latin nominal accusative \textit{pedem}.”\textsuperscript{20} As such, there is something distinctly pedestrian about the preposition \textit{πεδάτια}—that is, something bodily, physical, and, consequently, inescapably relational. Περί, on the other hand, presents more dialectal difficulties. While Sappho’s dialect includes the stand-alone preposition περί, the poet never uses an independent form corresponding to the Attic υπέρ.\textsuperscript{21} The standardly accepted argument is that in Sappho’s poems περί can mean, as it does in Attic, “around,” while, at other times, it can have the sense of υπέρ, “above” or “over.” The Lesbian prepositional prefix περ(р)-,\textsuperscript{22} therefore, could be understood to add the sense of either Attic περί or υπέρ to other parts of speech: the form can correspond to either sense.\textsuperscript{23} These definitions, which rely heavily on a comparison to Attic, often seem to fall short of explaining Sapphic usage. I argue that these prepositions can provide a paradigm for Sappho’s prepositional thinking: \textit{πεδάτια} serves the situational function of interpolation—that is, it denotes the assimilation of one element within a preexisting set.\textsuperscript{24} Περί, by contrast, can mark the emergence of a preeminent unity, circumscribing the event as an unassimilable element.

The publication of the “Nearest Sappho”\textsuperscript{25} has increased the number of extant usages of \textit{πεδάτια} in the Sapphic corpus—from seven to nine.\textsuperscript{26} Although this is still

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{18} Πεδάτια appears as a principal conjunctive preposition in Boeotian and Arcadian. It is found alongside μετά in Thessalian, Arcadian, Argolic, Cretan, and Theran as well as in inscriptions from Magna Graecia. See Buck 1955: §135.5. On περί see below.
\item \textsuperscript{19} On πεδάτια in Sappho’s dialect, see Bechtel 1963: §169 and Hamm [Voigt] 1957: §195a; on περί, see Bechtel 1963: §179–80 and Hamm 1957: §195b.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Bortone 2010: 141, emphasis original. Cf. Hamm 1957: §195a, who also compares the etymology of πεδάτια with Att. μετά / μέτωπον.
\item \textsuperscript{21} See esp. Bechtel 1963: §179, “περί im Sinne von υπέρ.” Cf. Hamm 1957: §195b, who argues that the original distinction in function between περί and υπέρ is preserved in Lesbian poetry through the shortened form πέρ (for υπέρ). The notable exceptions occur only in Sappho (fr. 1.10 and new fr. 17.6), which makes it difficult to accept this solution for her specific prepositional use.
\item \textsuperscript{22} The rho is reduplicated typically when prefixed before a vowel; the form is also found in Μοίσαν—enthalten ist. . . .
\item \textsuperscript{23} E.g., Bechtel 1963: §179: “Ferner ein Compositum, das mit einer unverständlichen Erklärung angeführt wird, in dem aber deutlich περιμετα- im Sinne von υπερ- enthalten ist. . . .”
\item \textsuperscript{24} On this sense of the word, cf. its technical use in mathematics to refer to the creation of new data points from within an existing set. It is related to but more specific than “incorporation,” since the field of reference is explicitly already represented within the existing situation.
\item \textsuperscript{25} For text and critical commentary, see Obbink 2016.
\item \textsuperscript{26} See the new fr. 16a and 17 and fr. 44Ab, 55 (x2), 60, 63, 86, 94. If West’s emendation of the first line of S8b (ιμμεσ πεδάτια Μοίσαν ικούσιοτάλων κάλα δώρα, παίδες, 2005: 3–6) is accepted, the number rises to ten. I will not discuss the Tithonus poem here because West’s line (2005: 5) is filled in exempli gratia. On the continuing debate surrounding the first stanza of this poem, see Obbink 2009 and Budelmann 2018 ad loc. Its inclusion, however, would not change my general argument.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
an admittedly small sample, the consistency of function between usages is remarkable. In each case, the preposition describes the interpolation of one element within a preexisting set of relations. This function is evident in fr. 55 where the preposition occurs twice:

κατθάνοισα δὲ κείση ‍οὐδὲ ποτα μναμοσύνα σέθεν ἔσσετ ‍οὐδὲ ἃποκ ‍ὑστερον ‍οὐ γὰρ πεδέχης βρόδων τὸν ἐΚ Πιερίας, ἀλλά ἀφάνης κάν Αἴδα δόμωι φοιτάσης πεδά ‍ἀμαύρων νεκών ἐκπεποταμένα.

Having died, you will lie and there will never be a memory of you, not at any time hereafter. For you do not have a share of the roses of Pieria. But unseen even in the house of Hades you will wander, having flown out, among the obscure dead.

The repetition of πεδά as preverb (πεδέχης, 2) and then as preposition (πεδ’, 4) indicates the significance that this marker of relation holds for the situation of the poem. The usage in the last line locates the addressee of the poem, who is described as “unseen even in the house of Hades” (ἀφάνης κάν Αἴδα δόμωι), in a configuration “among the obscure dead” (πεδ’ ἀμαύρων νεκών). Under this emphatic form of double erasure, the addressee is “unseen” (ἀφάνης) even as she stands in relation to the “obscure” (ἀμαύρων) shades who already inhabit the underworld. Despite the apparent disappearance of the addressee, however, she does not dissolve into the murky background. Rather, she remains isolated and held in place under this erasure by the force of the interpolating preposition. In its most basic function, therefore, πεδά affirms a specific formal relation between the one and the many. In this particular usage, the preposition takes on an additional restrictive quality, which allows Sappho simultaneously to erase and isolate, to reinforce relationality according to the poem’s hostile aims. To be interpolated by πεδά, then, is to be locked forcibly into a definite position within the poetic situation.

It is clear from the case of πεδέχης that, as a prepositional prefix, πεδ- retains both its basic interpolating function and its restrictive valence. In denying the addressee a “share of the roses of Pieria,” Sappho is ensuring that her prediction about the other’s inglorious afterlife will come true. Since “the roses of Pieria” are interpreted typically as a metaphor for poetic achievement, Sappho is denying her adversary “a share of” talent, fame, and the immortality through reperformance that follows a lifetime of poetic success. Πεδέχης, like its Attic counterpart μετέχειν, means positively “to have a share in.” Yet, in Sappho’s corpus, the verb appears only once without a negation: “to have a share in” seems to be less accessible in Sapphic

27. It is never used in the comitative sense of Attic μετά, which differs from Alcaeus fr. 70.4, 7 L-P, where the preposition refers to being “with” companions in a sympotic context. Cf. also πεδέχων in 70.3, which refers to “taking part” in a symposium.
28. See Campbell 1967 ad loc. On the precise nature of the poetic glory and immortal nature at stake here, see Lardinois 2008.
29. New fr. 16a; see below.
diction than “not to have a share in.” As a positive assertion, therefore, πεδέχην means more aptly “to be among those who possess something,” in the sense of “to not be among those excluded from it.”

This use of the prepositional prefix πεδ- with the verb ἔχην seems to have been particularly evocative for Sappho. There are two other extant usages of the verb πεδέχην, which correspond closely to each other and to fr. 55:

[δέξιον] μὲν οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι
[πάμπον ἀνθρωπον· πεδέχην δ᾽ ἀρασθαί
[ἔστιν ἐσφερον μοὴν. ἔγω] δ᾽ ἐμ᾽ ἀσταί
[toúto σύνοιδα.] New fr. 16a

It is not possible for a human to be entirely prosperous. But it is allowed to pray to have a share of good fortune. I know this for myself.

Ὁνομει μελαινα
φ[ο]ιταίς, ὡτα τ᾽ ὑπνος [5

γλύκς τοῦ[ε]ς, ἤ δεῖν ὤνίας μι[5
ζὰ χωρὶς ἔχην τὸν δύναμι[5

ἔλπις δε μ᾽ ἐχει μὴ πεδέχητι[ν
μηδὲν μακάρων ἐλ. [5
[—]
ω ὧν γὰρ κ᾽ ἐν ὦν ὦτω[.] 10
ἀθόρματα κα.[

γένοιτο δὲ μοι[
τοις πάνται[

Fr. 63

O dream [of?] black . . . you wander when sleep . . . sweet god truly from pain terribly . . . to hold entirely separate the power . . . but expectation holds me not to have a share . . . nor of the blessed ones . . . for not being thus . . . toys . . . but may it happen for me . . . entirely for them . . .

Although both the new fr. 16a and fr. 63 are highly fragmentary, it is clear enough that in both poems πεδέχην is used in a gnomic statement that refers to the human condition. In 16a, “it is allowed [for a human] to pray to have a share

30. Cf. Alcaeus fr. 70.3 L-P, as discussed in n.27, where the verb is used without negation. As such, there does not appear to be any pragmatic restriction on its positive use within their shared dialect.

31. See Obbink 2016: 19 for text, app. crit., and discussion.

32. This same gnomic statement appears to be repeated in 44Ab.9, but the context is too fragmentary for much else than recognizing θύατον· πεδ· χ.
of good fortune” (πεδέχην δ’ ἄρασθαι / [ἐστιν ἐσλὸν μοῖραν], 2–3). Even if the conjecture ἐστιν ἐσλὸν μοῖραν is rejected, the sense of the first two lines is evident enough: not only do humans not have ultimate control over their happiness and prosperity, but their sole recourse is to pray for a share of the good fortune, which is enjoyed fully by the gods only. The double infinitive construction (πεδέχην δ’ ἄρασθαι) emphasizes the distance between humanity and the gods and introduces exchange into their relation.33 Human prayers must be exchanged for a share in happiness, but the felicity of this exchange is never guaranteed.

The narrative of fr. 63 is uncertain. The poem seems to have invoked a personified “Dream” and lamented painful circumstances beyond the speaker’s control before the gnomic statement of the third stanza, of which the sense seems to have been: “I, as human, do not expect to have a share of the good fortune of the immortals” (ἔλπις δέ μ’ ἔχει μὴ πεδέχην / μηδὲν μακάρων, 5–6). The poem concludes perhaps with a statement about the difference between the mortal speaker and the immortal gods, before issuing a final prayer for some change of circumstance (γένοιτο δέ μοι, 9).

Sappho uses πεδέχην in both poems to trace the “Fußspur”34 of the human condition. “To pray for a share of good fortune” or “not to expect a share of divine favor” summarizes succinctly for Sappho the precariousness and fragility of humanity’s position in the world. A human can only ever be interpolated among and engage in exchange with others—human or divine—in the world around her. The situational relations in which she is submerged describe the phenomena of existence, but also bind her to the condition of “having a share.” The Sapphic situation, therefore, even in the dark vision of the afterlife in fr. 55, takes shape on the thin line between those who have a share and those who do not. The phenomenological arbiter of this situation is the preposition πεδά.

Although this conception of the ephemeral human condition35 permeates the Sapphic corpus in the many depictions of reversal,36 momentary joy,37 and inescapable loss,38 many significant moments in Sappho’s poetry are decidedly not assimilable to this situation—they neither have a share nor are excluded in the narrative world of the poems. These moments, like σύμμαχος ἐσσο of fr. 1, are evental precisely because they do not describe a preexisting relation, but rather mark the emergence of an unassimilable element. Consequently, Sapphic events do not stand in relation to the situational world of the poems; instead, they assert their existence through their ability to transform the very relationships that make up that world. In contrast to πεδά, περί can function as a quintessential evental preposition.

33. Cf. the embedded use of infinitives in the new Brothers Song, 7–13.
34. This is Meillet’s word (BSL 21: 42), cited by Hamm 1957: 110.
35. Intriguingly, Sappho uses the word εφήμερος (Lesb. ἐπαμέρος) once in a highly fragmentary context, at the new fr. 9.5.
36. See, e.g., the poems on old age: frs. 21, 24a, 58b, 121.
37. See, e.g., the growing number of recognizable nostos poems, including the new Brothers Song, new frs. 17 and 5, as well as fr. 20.
38. Possibly the most common Sapphic theme. See, e.g., frs. 26, 36, 37, 49, 67a, 68a, 88a, 91, 94, 95, 129a and b, 131, etc.
But this is not necessarily so: I have already discussed a counterexample in fr. 1, when Aphrodite’s sparrows fly “over” the black earth (κάλοι δὲ σ’ ὄγον / ὤκεες στρούθοι περὶ γας μελαίνας, 9–10). In this instance, περὶ traces the vertical relation between two discrete points in space. The Lesbian synthesis of περὶ and ὑπὲρ may be understood to add curvature or duration to this vertical relation. Like the nearby ἀπὸ and διά, however, this usage describes the relation of the chariot with respect to the earth, even if it does so in a way that simultaneously combines multiple perspectives. Therefore, as a stand-alone preposition in the Sapphic corpus, περὶ can simply serve a situational, narrative function.39

More often, however, περ(ρ)- occurs as a prepositional prefix, in which case its function as a marker of non-relation can be seen clearly. In particular, the situational use of πεδέχην is answered by the evental significance of περρέχην.40 In the sonic palette of Sappho’s poetry, the similarity of these words accentuates their contrast. The most complete example of an evental emergence marked by περρέχην comes at fr. 96 in the “simile” that occurs just where the text becomes fully legible.41 From the previous fragmentary stanza, it is clear that an unnamed woman, who used to delight in Atthis’ song and dance, has gone away:

39. This situational function appears elsewhere at the new fr. 17.6 where the Atreidai carry out games “around” Ilion (ἐκτελέσαντες μἐγάλως ἀέολους πρὸτα μὲν πὲρ Ἰλιον, 5–6). While these situational usages of περὶ should not invalidate a technique of prepositional reading, they do help to reinforce the fact that prepositions are not the sole bearers of relation in language. All prepositional usages are fundamentally dependent on context—this is, indeed, precisely why they are valuable for thinking about relationality. In the case of περὶ, its relational and semantic force is affected greatly, for instance, by its use in compound verbs. See below.

40. The verb περρέχω appears twice: new fr. 16.6 and fr. 96.9. The adjective πέρροχος derived from the verb occurs in fr. 106. In addition to περρέχω, there are also three instances of περτίθημι: frs. 54, 81.4, and 94.14; and one instance of περτροπέω in the new Brothers Song.

41. On the peculiarities of this supposed simile see, e.g., Page 1955: 94–95: “The simile has gone so far beyond its starting-point that the girl is, for the moment, forgotten. . . . The dew and the flowers have nothing to do with the grief of Atthis for a lover lost; but they impart to the poem such colour and charm as it possesses.” A more sophisticated reading of the comparison as the introduction of “symbols” with private, ritualized meaning is found in McEvilly 1973. See also Macleod 1974 for a response.
But now she stands conspicuous among the Lydian women as when, with the sun going down, the rosy-fingered moon entirely surpasses all the stars; and its light seizes equally upon the briny sea and the abundantly blooming fields. And dew is shed in beauty and the roses, soft chervil, and blossoming king’s clover bloom; but she, wandering back and forth, remembering gentle Atthis with desire, is consumed in her tender mind [by your fate].

In the comparison that extends from the first to the second stanza, the tenor is the unnamed woman standing “conspicuously among the Lydian women” (vōn ḍē Λόδωισιν ἐμπρέπεται γυναῖ / κεσοπ, 6–7) and the vehicle is the moon “entirely surpassing all the stars” (ἀ βροδοδάκτυλος <σελάννα> / πάντα περ<ρ>-ἔχοισ’ ἀστρα, 8–9).

The verb, ἐμπρέπεται, and the participle, περ<ρ>-έχοισ’, correspond to one another on either side of the comparative marker, ὡς ποτ’. The prepositional prefix, ἔμ-, of the verb ἐμπρέπω is situational: it isolates and inserts the unnamed woman into the context of the Lydian women.42 The περ<ρ>- of περ<ρ>-έχοισ’ exceeds this relation. The “rosy-fingered” moon does not simply stand in a conspicuous relation to the stars, but “surpasses,” “subsumes,” and “eclipses” them. The synthesis of height and curvature of the Lesbian περι coupled with the action of the verb marks the emergence of a new unity that shares no preexisting relations with the image from which it originates. Instead, the moon erases these previous relations, filling the sky with its own light, eclipsing “all the stars.” This light of the moon spreads out “equally upon the briny sea and the abundantly blooming fields” (φῶς ὀς ἐπί- / σχεί θάλασσαν ἐπ’ ἀλάμμασ / ἱσς καὶ πολυανθέμοις ἔρωσις, 9–11). After its eclipsing emergence, the moon also fades from view, but its light sets out to reestablish the relations of the world in a new image.43

42. In early Greek poetry ἐμπρέπω usually, as here, takes an indirect complement/dative of accompaniment; see, e.g., Bacchyl. 9.27–29. This passage from Bacchylides is particularly noteworthy since it offers a contrasting iteration of the image found in Sappho fr. 96: “For [the victor] was conspicuous among the other pentathletes, as the brilliant moon of a night in mid-month parts the rays of the stars” (πενταέθλοισιν γὰρ ἐνέπρεπεν ὡς / ἀστρῶν διακρίνω φάη / νυκτὸς διομήνιδο[5] εὐφεργῆς σελάνα). This comparandum well how Sappho transforms conventional imagery, in particular through prepositional use: while both Sappho and Bacchylides use ἐμ/ἐπρέπω in the tenor of the simile, where Sappho uses περρέχω in the vehicle, Bacchylides employs διακρίνω. With Jebb 1905: 304–305n.28, this compound verb is best understood in the sense of “parting”—i.e., it signifies how “the moon moves among the stars.” Bacchylides thus maintains a situational balance on either side of his simile with ἐν- and δι-. By contrast, Sappho defers the return of this marker of relation until the end of the metonymic image in the wandering movement of Atthis’ lover (ξαφνίασ’, 15). See below.

43. Note the repeated prefix and preposition ἐπί, which indicates the relational impact of the moonlight on the earth and sea (9, 10), cf. also ἐπί- / μνάσθεις’ in 15–16.
To return to a basic definition drawn from Badiou, an event is a non-relational and impossible occurrence. Its appearance and effect cannot be satisfactorily explained using the facts and causal reasoning of the preexisting situation. With this definition in mind, the emergence of the “rosy-fingered moon” can be considered as evental in three ways: first, if the image of the tenor—the unnamed woman conspicuous among the Lydians—is the situational basis of the comparison, then the vehicle—the total eclipse of the stars by the moon—is certainly in excess of that situation. The two are not equivalent, as might be expected of a simile, but rather the image of the vehicle surpasses and subsumes its starting point. Second, within the image of the vehicle itself, the effect of the moon’s light exceeds its situational cause. Sappho transfers the Homeric epithet of the dawn, “rosy-fingered” (βροδοδάκτυλος), to the moon, thereby lending the light of the moon effects more typical of sunlight. Third, as a poetic figure, the effects of this Sapphic comparison exceed their poetic cause, “the simile.” The comparative marker ὡς ποτε in Homer flags a temporal correlation or simple simile, but Sappho’s comparison surpasses these devices. Like a Badiouian event, therefore, this simile marks a rupture of formal relations and the emergence of an element that escapes the explanatory capacity of the preexisting situation.

Yet the potential of an event to transform the situation is not realized in the event itself. Rather, the event, through its disclosure of a situational impossibility, inaugurates a procedure of fidelity that seeks to reshape the world in its own image. Following the formal rupture marked by the eclipse-simile, then, the poem becomes detached from its former trajectory and turns to follow the moonlight over the sea and fields where it meets the dew, from which it moves to the blossoming flowers before “returning” to the unnamed woman, no longer “conspicuous among the Lydian women,” but instead “wandering back and forth, remembering gentle Atthis with desire.” This metonymic movement beyond the simile is not focalized from any single position within the narrative but unfolds elementally through the poet’s construction of a new world. The repeated enjambment of the preverb ἐπι- (9, 15) performs the creation of this eventally structured space; by reproducing formally the...

44. See McEvilley 1973: 263 for a reading of this transferred epithet as a sign of an “inverted epithalamion.”

45. Most frequently in Homer ὡς ποτε introduces correlative clauses, e.g., II. 8.150: ὡς ποτ’ ἀπελήφη: τότε μοι θάνατο εὔφρα τὴθῶν ([Diomedes says of Hector,] “Just like this will he boast someday—and so on that day may the ground gap wide open for me”); or, a simple temporal comparison, e.g., II. 23.643–44: ὡς ποτ’ ἐστιν· νῦν αὐτῆς νεώτεροι ἀντιστάτων / ἔργων τοιοῦτων ([Nestor says,] “Thus I was once, but as things are now let younger men face such tasks”). See below for further consideration of Sappho’s use of comparison.

46. As, e.g., McEvilley 1973: 265 notes, there are striking thematic parallels between this fantasy-place and the sacred grove depicted in fr. 2. I would add that the use of prepositions in fr. 2, especially the insistent repetition of ἐν (ἐν, 3; ἐν δ’, 5; ἐν δέ, 9; ἐνθα δῆ, 13) serves a corresponding function to ἐπί in fr. 96. While the extant fr. 2 lacks an articulation of the evental moment as it is found in fr. 96, the two poems appear to depict a similar evental effect—the reestablishment of relations according to new spatial configurations and systems of meaning. On fr. 2 see also Budelmann 2018 ad loc.
eclipsing effect of the simile, this device creates a gap in which a set of new relations appears. This gap that the lover wanders into an impossible world of moonlight, dew, and flowers in which she is united consummately with Atthis. The preposition περί initially opens up this evental space. Elsewhere, περί as a prepositional prefix marks the eclipse-like impact of Helen’s beauty,48 the motion of Eros’ cloak as he descends from heaven,49 the enveloping sensuousness of woven flower garlands,50 and the transformative impact of divine presence among mortals.51 Each of these usages of περί circumscribes an element that is unassimilable to the situational world of the poems. These are individuals who cannot be interpolated, objects that cannot be exchanged, and qualities beyond comparison. They do not stand in relation to the world but create their own relations to it. If the quintessential Sapphic situation is “to pray to have a share in,” then the paradigmatic Sapphic event is “to be preeminent.” Sappho’s poetry is frequently preoccupied with the qualities that constitute preeminence.52 To conclude, I will consider how Sappho establishes preeminence paradoxically through forms of comparison. First, however, it is necessary to examine the fidelity of Sappho’s poetry.

SAPPHIC FIDELITY

A “literary event” can be understood either as a linguistic expression of an extra-linguistic experience or, conversely, as an extension of what is constitutively impossible in an experience by means of language. In either case, it is necessary to talk about the “fidelity” with which a literary event makes the jump between experience and language. These two formulations of the literary event are not equivalent, and their difference can be articulated principally in the nature of their fidelities. On the one hand, there are many types of linguistic acts that “put into words” the sequence, sensation, and affect of moments in experience. To take a prominent example from ancient poetry, which has been discussed recently by Mark Payne, the genre of Pindaric epinician might be understood as promising a faithful transformation of the athletic victory into lyrical expression.53 At the close of Olympian 6, for instance, Pindar...

47. My thanks to one of the anonymous readers for this point.
48. New fr. 16.6–7, discussed in detail below.
49. Fr. 54: (‘Ερωτα) / Ἐλθοντ’ ἐξ ὀρατοῦ πορφυρίου περθόμενον χλάμιν.
50. Fr. 81.4–5: σὺ δὲ στεφάνοις, ὦ Δίκα, πέρθεσθ’ ἐράτοις φόβαισιν / ὀρπακας ἀνήτω σω<ν><ο> ἀραμαρ’ ἀπάλαις χέριν; fr. 94.14: πὰρ ἐμοὶ πως>ρεθῆκα<ν>.
51. Brothers Song, 19; see below.
52. This interest is, of course, shared by many other early Greek poets. As I will demonstrate below, however, Sappho approaches the problem in a significantly different manner than, for instance, Pindar, who may be her rival “thinker of preeminence.”
53. See, e.g., Payne 2018: 268: “Reading [Pindar’s] poems for their enactment of fidelity to an event that they constitute as an event through their fidelity to it is simply to read them as they ask to be read.” Payne’s use of the concept of the “event,” which differs somewhat from my own, is aimed at addressing a common question in Pindaric scholarship—the relationship between the athletic
addresses his chorus leader, whom he calls “a true messenger, a message stick of the lovely-haired Muses, a sweet mixing-bowl of loud-sounding songs” (ἐσσὶ γύρ ἄγγελος ὁρθός, ήμύκομοι σκυτάλα Μοισᾶν, γλυκὸς κρατήρ ἀγαφθέγκτων οἰοδᾶν, 90–91). This cluster of compressed metaphoric images functions as an authorial promise that Pindar’s song will be true; that, like the message transmitted by a σκυτάλα, it will faithfully impart in the performance of the choregos the spatial and temporal experience on which it is based, and that it will elicit a powerful affective response, like that of sweet wine in a mixing bowl. According to Pindar’s own measure, his poetry is only successful when it faithfully communicates the glory of the victor from the moment of athletic triumph to the moment of lyric performance.

This Pindaric form of fidelity satisfies the first definition of a literary event—to record and communicate an extralinguistic experience in performative language. By contrast, Sappho’s lyric poetry lacks such an explicit promise of fidelity to a material moment in time. Instead, Sappho’s poetry may be read under the second understanding of fidelity to the event as a linguistic act that is aimed at articulating something impossible, yet vitally constitutive of its author’s experience of the world. That is, Sappho’s poetry extends and explores the newness and significance that is disclosed by an event. If we draw from Badiou’s theorization of fidelity as the process by which the effect of an event is extruded into the world, we can recognize in Sappho’s poetry a site of the faithful transformation of the situation by means of evental moments. The evental moments identified above through prepositional reading in the σύμμαχος of fr. 1 and the περιέχοις of fr. 96 are not “transcriptions” of material occasions, but rather the linguistic expression of what is most impossibly vital in Sappho’s world. Her poetry records these moments “faithfully,” not in a mode of mimetic replication, but as a part of a procedure of

victory that is the subject of the poems and the poetic performance itself. For a historical perspective on this issue see, e.g., Mackie 2003 and Carey 2007.

54. Text of Pindar here and below is from Snell and Maehler 1987.
55. The “Spartan message baton” was at least a communication technology and possibly also a device used for ciphers (on the archeological debate, see Neer and Kurke 2019: 343–45). A piece of leather was wrapped around the staff so that the message could be written lengthwise. When the leather was unrolled, the message was unreadable until it was rolled up again on another staff of identical length and circumference. The point that I take from this image is that the tactile and durative qualities of the device (the unrolling and rolling, the size of the staff, etc.) ensured that the moment when the message was recorded was preserved as faithfully as possible in the moment when the message was received. Cf. Dickson 1990: 124 and Neer and Kurke 2019: 347: “The skutilē in reality enables the seemingly magical conveyance of a message over long distances, superimposing the place of the sender and that of the recipient.”
56. Pace the various attempts throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship to find original performance contexts for her poems, most notably among recent work by Stehle 1997. For a reconsideration of the “occasion” in relation to Sappho’s poetry, see D’Alessio 2018, who argues that “what we have of Greek lyric . . . is the mirage of a lost occasion, and the words: words that were, or might have been, designed to ‘work’ vividly in the performance context, but that survive because they are, or have become, a text independent of the original occasion” (33). For a further comparison of technique between Pindar and Sappho, see Furley 2000.
extension through which the impossibilities of her world are asserted as its defining aspects.

Of course, it is necessary to be more specific about the meaning of the event for which Sappho’s poetry exhibits and performs its fidelity. One way of understanding the content of this event is offered by the extended priamel of fr. 16, a poem often considered programmatic for Sappho’s poetics. 

In this poem, Helen’s eclipsing beauty radically overturns the evaluative criteria of the existing world:

Some say a host of riders and some say a host of foot-soldiers and some say a host of ships is the most beautiful thing on the black earth, but I say it is whatever someone loves.

It is entirely easy to make this understood by all, for Helen, who completely surpassed everyone in beauty, leaving behind her excellent husband, went off and sailed to Troy.

I would rather see the lovely step [of Anactoria] and the bright sparkling of her face than the Lydians’ chariots or the foot-soldiers marching in arms.

In contrast to the “some” (οἱ μὲν) who believe that “a host of riders” or “a host of ships” is the most beautiful thing in the world, Sappho initially submits as an alternative the profoundly indefinite and provocatively hermetic “whatever someone loves” (ἐγὼ δὲ κήν’ ὄτ’ τις ἔραται, 3–4). 

57. On this poem and the use of Helen in particular, there is a sizable body of work with which my argument is generally in agreement. See duBois 1978; Thorsen 1978; Most 1981; Race 1989; Segal 1998; Pfeijffer 2000; Blondell 2010.

58. For the importance of the indefinites τις and τι in Sappho’s narrative construction, see Purves 2014.
the priamel, Sappho provides the exemplum of Helen, who “completely surpassed everyone in beauty” (ἄ γάρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα / κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων, 6–7). “Helen” becomes for Sappho the name of an event in whose image she can negate the epic, masculine valuation of “Lydian chariots and foot-soldiers marching in armor” and, instead, elevate “the step and radiant sparkle” of Anactoria.

The authorial interjection, “It is entirely easy to make this understood by all” ([πά]γχυ δ’ εὐμαρεῖς σώνετον πόσαι / [π]άντι, 5–6), emphasizes the potential universality of the transformation heralded by the Helen-event. These lines also recall the evental moment in fr. 96 through the proximity of related forms: πάντα περ<ρ>έχουσ’ (96.9) and [π]άντι . . . περσκέθοισα (16.6). Just like the woman/moon in fr. 96, Helen emerges as a non-relational and exceptional element, marked by περ-, which inaugurates the transformation of a poetic world. By the end of fr. 16, the opening priamel can be reinterpreted. Rather than advocating for a purely indefinite understanding of ὅτα τις ἔραται—a fracturing of the world according to idiosyncratic proclivities—the poem as a whole offers up an entirely new evaluative structure under the sign of the Helen-event. In the final stanza, the poem returns to an ordered comparison. Yet now, under the sign of the Helen event, the poet can express a new form of relationality: “I would rather see the lovely step [of Anactoria] and the bright sparkling of her face than the Lydians’ chariots or the foot-soldiers marching in arms” (17–20). The return of comparison in Sappho’s expression of preference (βολλοίμαν . . . ἢ) marks the traversal of the old structure of relations and a reconstitution of relationality using the new rubric disclosed by the Helen-event. The name “Helen,” therefore, can be given to the event to which Sappho’s poetry maintains its fidelity, but this name does not exhaust the content of that event. More fundamentally, Sappho is interested in “Helen’s” capacity to reunify the world according to “whatever someone loves”; that is, to use the individual capacity for love in order to reconfigure the world universally.59

The recent publication of the Brothers Song calls for a reconsideration of the ways in which Sappho’s interest in amorous love is related to broader notions of loyalty and piety in the context of familial and human-divine relationships.60 While these forms of non-theoretical faithfulness are not equivalent to the Badiouian conceptualization of fidelity, it is significant that this poem also offers some of the best indications of how Sappho conceives of her poetry’s relationship to her own “real” experience.61 Whereas many of Sappho’s poems are presented as first-person

59. There is a deep irony in Sappho’s use of Helen as a catalyst for universal fidelity; through Sappho’s poetic refashioning, the most famous example of conventional infidelity in the epic encyclopedia becomes the sign of a new world reshaped by passionate fidelity. Cf. Mueller (forthcoming) for a discussion of Sappho’s use of Helen as a contra-epic exemplum.
60. Cf. Bierl 2016: 307: “the Brothers Song treats the sensation of love at a deeper level” (my emphasis). See also Mueller 2016: 27, who addresses some initial responses to the new poem’s lack of “crushingly personal attestations to the effects of eros.”
61. Of course, we have no way of corroborating the historical reality of the situation described in the poem. For my purpose, however, the important point is that the poem treats the situation as real, urgent, and a site of interaction between language and experience.
statements pertaining to a current state of affairs, none contain the level of interest in the impact of discursive forms that is found in this new poem. Consequently, the Brothers Song can be read as expressing the aims of Sappho’s poetic fidelity; that is, the poem itself comments on the ability of poetic language, especially in the form of prayer, to inscribe the effect of the event on the material world. If the effect of Sappho’s event lies in the transformative potential of “whatever someone loves,” then the Brothers Song demonstrates the role of poetry in faithfully rendering this effect on her familial relations.

The first two legible stanzas establish a discursive contrast. In opposition to the addressee, possibly Sappho’s mother, who is “always prattling on for Charaxos to come / with a full ship” (ἄι θρύλησθα Χάραξον έλθην / ναί σόν πλήμα, 5–6), Sappho presents herself as a more effective intermediary with the gods. She asks the addressee to “send me and entreat me to pray to Queen Hera repeatedly that Charaxos may arrive, steering back here a ship that is safe, finding us safe and sound.” The difference between Sappho and the addressee lies in the nature of their speech-acts. Although they both desire Charaxos’ safe return and the reunification of the family, the ineffectiveness of the addressee’s “prattle” (θρύλησθα) is contrasted to Sappho’s own capacity for prayer (λί̣σσεσθαι, 10). Yet the status of the Brothers Song as a prayer in and of itself is less clear: is it an example of one of Sappho’s effective prayers? Or does it simply express her desire to take over this responsibility from the addressee?

Instead of conforming to the expectations of a prayer, the remainder of the poem is organized around two reversals in the third and fifth legible stanzas, which are connected to each of the two brothers mentioned in the poem. Alongside and as explanation of Charaxos’ envisioned safe return, Sappho presents the image of “fair weather” arising “swiftly out from a huge storm” (εὐδῶι γάρ ἐκ μεγάλαν ἀέτας / ἀήμα πέλονται, 15–16). Likewise, when the poem shifts suddenly in the final stanza to consider Larichos, on the condition that he might “one day” fulfill the duties of a “real man” (δή ποτ’ ἄνηρ γένηται, 22), Sappho concludes, “the deep and dreary draggings of our soul / we’d swiftly lift to joy” (καὶ μάλ’ ἐκ πόλλαν βαροθομίας κεν / αἴμα λόθειμεν, 23–24). These images of reversal share two features. First, the “swiftness” of their fulfillment is stressed—note the repetition of αἴσα (16, 24) in the same metrical position—which indicates their apparent unlikelihood or situational impossibility. And second, the realization of these

62. E.g., fr. 1, fr. 94, etc.
63. On the attribution of Sappho’s mother for the addressee, see Ferrari 2014: 4; Nünlist 2014; Mueller 2016: 31. For a broader consideration of the interaction of “gendered spheres” in the poem, see Kurke 2016.
64. ἀλλὰ καὶ πέμπην ἐμε καὶ κέλεσθαι / πόλλα λί̣σσεσθαι βασιζήμαν Ἥραν / ἐξίκεσθαι τυίδε σῶν ἄγοντα / νά σάν Χάραξον / κάμμ’ ἐπείρην ἀρτέμειας, 9–13.
65. This is the translation suggested by Obbink 2016: 33.
66. Note also the repeated use of the situational preposition ἐκ to communicate the relational movement of an individual “out from” danger. On ἐκ in the poem’s “syntax of salvation,” see Mueller 2016: 32 and 39.
reversals turns on divine intercession: “As for the rest,” Sappho advises, “let us turn it all over (ἐπιτρόπωμεν) to the gods.”67 Neither of the reversals will arise as a natural result—or even necessarily as a consequence of prayer—but each depends ultimately on the gods’ intercession.

As a link between and a key to understanding the dynamic of these two fraternal reversals, in the fourth stanza Sappho asserts:

τὸν κε βόλληται βασίλευς Ὄλυµπο
δαίµον’ ἐκ πόνον ἐπάρωγον ἡδή
περτρόπην, κήνοι μάκαρες πέλονται
καὶ πολύολβοι.

Brothers Song 17–20

Those for whom the king of Olympus wishes a helper-divinity to turn them entirely now out from struggles, they become blessed and entirely fortunate.

This gnomic statement is the inverse of those, cited above, in which Sappho laments that a human must pray to have a share in good things. Here the “helper-divinity” (ἐπάρωγον)68 is one who “applies aid onto” (< ἐπ-ἀρήγω) the mortal, who in turn might be rescued “out from” troubles (ἐκ πόνων).69 Yet the impact of the immanent presence of this divinity alongside the human renders a total transformation (περτρόπην) of the human situation into a state of complete happiness and godlike good fortune (κήνοι μάκαρες πέλονται / καὶ πολύολβοι), which is exempted entirely from the previous relations that bound the individuals to each other and the gods. Unlike the deferential attitude conveyed in the previous stanza (ἐπιτρόπωμεν, 14), this transformation (περτρόπην) is accomplished through a unification of human and divine. The evental περ- of περτρόπην marks, in a manner comparable to the συμ- of fr. 1, the effect of a unity of the divine with the mortal, which opens up the potential for a transformation of the human situation.

In the Brothers Song, therefore, Sappho’s poetry aims at bringing into being a transformed interrelation within the familial, human, and divine spheres. This attempt is not accomplished by a direct request to the gods to satisfy a specific desire, as the addressee’s “prattle” seems to have been; rather, Sappho’s poem enacts the necessary conditions for the presence of divinity and the reconstitution of the human situation. The poem is not a prayer in any simple sense—it is perhaps a “para-prayer,” which establishes the conditions of satisfaction for a series of situational impossibilities. As Sappho instructs, the actual realization of these impossibilities depends entirely on the gods’ intercession. The impact or function of Sappho’s poem lies instead in

67. τὰ δ’ ἄλλα / πάντα δαµονέσσιν ἐπιτρόπωμεν, 13–14.
69. Note the string of these situational prepositions. For ἐπί, see ἐξίκεσθαι, 11; ἐκ μεγάλαν ἀθηναί, 15; ἐκ πόνων, 18; ἐκ πολλάν βαρυθυμίας, 23.
reorienting the familial relationships that define the situation as a whole around the evental space marked by περτρόπην. As a consequence of this reorientation, the longed-for homecoming of Charaxos is bound together with the apparently improbable maturation of Larichos in a new rendering of the familial mode of relation. In this poem, Sappho constructs a linguistic instantiation of her familial world reordered and transformed in fidelity to “whatever someone loves.”

Within her canon of poetic imagery, Sappho depicts fidelity to the event frequently by means of the eclipse. Through an inversion of expectations and an assertion of the fictive prerogative of the poet, the eclipsing of the stars by the moon serves as a distinctive emblem for Sapphic fidelity. Aside from fr. 96, this emblem appears in two other, more fragmentary contexts. The first of these, fr. 34, presents a kindred image, but with some significant differences:

\[
\text{ἀστερεῖς μὲν ἄμφι κάλαν σελάνναν} \\
\text{ἄψ ἄπυκρύπτοισι φάεννον ἐδος} \\
\text{ὀπποτα πλήθοισα μάλιστα λάμπη} \\
\text{γάν. . . .}
\]

The stars around the beautiful moon hide back again their shining form, whenever very full she shines on the earth.

What occurs as a momentary eclipse of the stars by the moon in fr. 96 is here given duration and focalized from the perspective of the stars themselves, who “hide back again” (ἄψ ἄπυκρύπτοισι) their light “around the beautiful moon” (ἄμφι κάλαν σελάνναν). The repetition of adverbial ἄψ (cf. Lat. abs) and prepositional prefix ὀπ- (cf. Att. ὀπό) along with the circumstantial clause (ὀπποτα) traces the successive movement of the moon across the sky by means of the disappearance of the light of the stars. Wherever the moon shines at a given moment, the stars recede—a poetic effect that renders the path of the moon visible by the absence of the starlight. The stars’ disappearance and reappearance “around” (ἄμφι) the moon faithfully manifest its fullness and brightness.

Fr. 34 thus elides a firm distinction between starlight and moonlight, as the stars simultaneously are eclipsed by and give definition to the movement of the moon. This imagery is ramified further by fr. 154:

\[
\text{Πλήρης μὲν ἑφαίνετ’ ἄ σελαν<ν>α,} \\
\text{αὶ δ’ ὅς περὶ βόμον ἐστάθησαν}
\]

The moon appeared full. And when/as when the women stood around the altar

The lexeme ὅς in conjunction with the particle δὲ could here introduce a comparison\textsuperscript{70} or could indicate a temporal clause.\textsuperscript{71} Although, therefore, this fragment is

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\textsuperscript{70} Cf., e.g., \textit{Il}. 2.459.

\textsuperscript{71} Cf., e.g., \textit{Il}. 3.21.
grammatically ambiguous, read alongside fr. 34, it appears to present a hypostatized version of the eclipse imagery. The stars whose light is subsumed (ἄστερες μὲν ἀμφὶ κάλαν σελάνναν) around the moon whenever “she shines very full” (πλήθοισα μᾶλλα λάμπῃ) are realized as the women who “stood around the altar” (περὶ βῶμον ἐστάθησαν) when “the moon appeared full” (πλήρης μὲν ἐφάνετ’ ἀ σελάννα). The parallelism draws a correspondence between the women and the stars on the one hand and the altar and the moon on the other. Just as the movement of the moon is given definition by the disappearance and reappearance of the stars, perhaps we can imagine a similar relationship forged between the women and the altar. The stars/worshippers represent the faithful adherents to the eventual emergence of the moon/altar around which these corresponding images are oriented.

The model of fidelity evident in Sappho’s eclipse imagery dwells in the tension between an assertive construction of new worlds and self-effacing reverence. The poet’s ability to reorder systems of relation and meaning relies on coopting the position of evental preeminence. Frs. 16 and 96 and the Brothers Song exemplify Sappho’s seizing upon the transformative potential of the event in order to overcome preexisting relations and the contingencies of the human condition. At the same time, in frs. 34 and 154, Sappho presents faithful adherence to the event as an act of communal reverence—a selfless and even self-effacing surrender to the light of the moon. Maintaining fidelity to the event puts the faithful subject in the position of a worshipper around an altar, that is, a star being eclipsed by the moon. To commit oneself to the transformative potential of the event is to be willingly eclipsed.

COMPARISON-TO-PREEMINENCE

Preeminence within Sappho’s poetry is determined by evental emergence, not by comparison to the preexisting situation. In fr. 96, the woman/moon emerges out of her situation in order to eclipse it, in the process establishing the contours of a new poetic world. In fr. 16, the event named “Helen” overturns conventionally epic, masculine evaluative criteria, while at the same time asserting “whatever someone loves” as the crowning term of Sappho’s poetic endeavor. While in both cases preeminence relies on an exemption from comparison, at the same time, Sappho arrives at an articulation of this preeminence paradoxically by means of comparative poetic devices—specifically, the simile and the priamel. In this final section, I will suggest that Sappho develops a technique of “comparison-to-preeminence” in order to affirm its evental basis.

This technique is built upon an inherent discontinuity between comparison and preeminence—or, more precisely, between a conceptualization of preeminence defined by comparative categorization and one based in an assertion of an element’s exception from categorization. The disjunction between these conceptualizations is
starkly present in fr. 106. A single line preserved in Demetrius’s On Style reads, “Preeminent, as when/just as the Lesbian singer among the foreigners” (πέρροχος, ὡς ὁτ’ ἄνδρος ὁ Λέσβιος ἠλλοδάποιος). Although it may never be known who was so “preeminent” or to whom “the Lesbian singer” refers, the line presents in nuce Sappho’s technique of comparison-to-preeminence. The formulation stretches the “simile” to its breaking point. The subject of the comparison marked by ὡς ὁτ’ both stands in relation to others (ἄνδρος ὁ Λέσβιος ἠλλοδαποίος) and, circumscribed by the evental force of πέρ-, is exempted from relation (πέρροχος). The fragmentary nature of the line, in fact, accentuates the approach of this conceptual rupture. It challenges the reader to imagine what lies beyond the limits of comparison: what does it mean to be in comparison with something that is absolutely preeminent? How can someone be both in comparison to others and preeminent beyond comparison?

Demetrius’s commentary on the line is instructive. He cites it as an example of “charm” (χάρις) derived from comparison: “as in Sappho’s description of an outstanding man (τοῦ ἐξέχοντος ἄνδρος) as ‘preeminent (πέρροχος), etc.”

Demetrius glosses the unusual Sapphic adjective πέρροχος (< Lesb. περρέχην) with a participial form of ἐξέχειν, from which is also derived a more common corresponding adjective ἐξοχος. Although Demetrius presents these two derivatives with their alternative prepositional prefixes as dialectal equivalents, it has been shown above that in the Sapphic corpus πέρ(ρ)-, especially in compounds with ἐξην, circumscribes a non-relational, evental element, whereas ἐξ- defines the situational relation of one element from/out of others.

The distinction between πέρροχος and ἐξοχος becomes more apparent if Sappho’s usage is compared with that of Pindar, who frequently uses the adjective ἐξοχος to denote what might be called “categorical” or “selective” preeminence. In

72. Note that the comparison in fr. 106 employs a similar device, ὡς ὁτ’, as in fr. 96.7, ὡς ποτ’. 73. Despite ancient testimony to the contrary (see Voigt 1971 ad loc.), it is possible that the masculine ἄνδρος could refer to Sappho herself. Cf. Hes. Op. 208 where this form refers to the feminine nightingale or Soph. OT 36 where it refers to the Sphinx, etc. 74. On Style 146, text and trans. here and below adapted from Innes and Roberts 1995: Ἐκ δὲ παραβολῆς, ὡς ἐπὶ τοῦ ἐξέχοντος ἄνδρος ἡ Σαπφώ φησι, “πέρροχος . . .” 75. Sappho’s adjective formed from περρέχην appears elsewhere in ancient Greek only in a fragment of Corinna (294.29 P). In Corinna, the word is used in a first-person statement spoken possibly by the Boeotian hero Acraephen to Asopus (see Schachter 1981: 61–64). The dialectal similarities between Sappho and Corinna as well as the heavily local flavor of Corinna’s usage offer evidence that πέρροχος is a regular Aeolic formation. This does not mean, however, that Sappho could not be using this dialectal form in an active and creative manner as an alternative to Homeric usage. The adjective ἐξοχος is common in Homer (39x including Hymns, e.g., ἐξοχος ἄνδρος, II. 2.188; ἐξοχος . . . πάντων / τῶν; 2.480–81; ἐξοχος ἠρώταν; 2.483, etc.). Homer consistently uses the adjective “selectively,” i.e., so that the situational function of the prefix ἐξ- is clear. The Homeric adjective is also found in comparable usages in Alcman (fr. 1.7) and Pindar: O. 1.2, 6.51, 8.23, etc. (12x overall). Sappho uses the adverb ἐξοχο in fr. 112.6, one of the epithalamia. It is possible, therefore, that Sappho employs πέρροχος as a conscious alternative to the Homeric use of ἐξοχος, although the evidence allows only speculation on this account given the absence of the rest of fr. 106 or corroborating usages of the Sapphic adjective.
the opening priamel of *Olympian* 1, for instance, Pindar famously poses a contest between water and gold:

> Ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ, ὁ δὲ χρυσός αἰθόμενον πῦρ ἀτε διαπρέπει νυκτί μεγάνορος ἔξοχα πλούτου.

*O.* 1.1–2

Best is water, but gold, like blazing fire in the night, stands out preeminently from lordly wealth.

The adverbial use of ἔξοχα, prefixed by ἔ-, serves to select gold as a preeminent element “out of” the possible forms of “lordly wealth.” Water may be best, but gold is clearly the best of the best.76 This interpretation of the priamel as selective is confirmed by the following lines:77

> εἰ δ’ ἀεθλα γαρ ἔλδειαι, φιλὸν ἦτορ, μηκέτ’ ἐκλίου σκόπει ὁλλο τολπνότερον ἐν ἀμέρα φαεν- νόν ἀστρον ἥρμα δ’ αἰθέρος,
μηδ’ Ὀλυμπίας ἑγώνα φέρτερον αὐθάσομεν.

*O.* 1.3–7

But if you wish to sing of athletic contests, dear heart, do not look beyond the sun for another star shining more warmly during the day through the empty sky, nor let us speak of a contest better than Olympia.

Pindar’s construction of preeminence—of gold among wealth, of the sun among the stars, and of Olympia among athletic contests—is determined inductively by selecting the most preeminent element of the existing options in a given category. Inter-categorical comparison functions similarly. For Pindar, it presents no conceptual difficulty to compare the status of categorical caps in order to arrive at a formulation of selective preeminence across categories: the selection of gold and the sun as the respective superlatives of their categories enables the selection of Olympia as a categorical cap in its own right.

It is clear from Demetrius’ gloss on πέρροχος that he shares a similar categorical conceptualization of preeminence. He goes on to say that Sappho’s comparison of the “outstanding” man “creates charm (χάρις) rather than grandeur (μέγεθος), as would have been possible if she had said, ‘preeminent like the moon among the stars,’ or the sun, which is even brighter (λαμπρότερος).”78 Demetrius explains his

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76. On the complex and often metaphoric uses of gold in archaic Greek cultural discourse, see Kurke 1999, esp. 41–59 for the poetics of metals.

77. Cf. Bundy 2006: 8: “The priamel, because it selects some one object for special attention, is a good proomial device; it will highlight one’s chosen theme. In the well-known prooimion to *O.* 1, water, fire, gold, and the sun exist as foil for the introduction of the Olympian games” (my emphasis).

78. *On Style* 146: ἑνταῦθω γάρ χάριν ἐποίησεν ἡ παραβολή μᾶλλον ἡ μέγεθος, καίτοι ἔξιθν εἰπεν πέρροχος ὅσπερ ἢ σκλήρης τῶν ἄλλων ἀστρόν, ἢ ὁ ῥηλος ὁ λαμπρότερος.
characterization of fr. 106 as producing “charm” rather than “grandeur” by commenting on Sappho’s use of comparison more generally. The categorical distinction that the critic draws between charm and grandeur is determined by the magnitude of the comparandum. According to Demetrius’ scale, therefore, Sappho’s penchant for lunar comparisons means that, by definition, she leaves open a further, higher comparative object: the sun, “which is even brighter” (λαμπρότερος). Demetrius, like Pindar, conceives of comparison according to categorical caps; the superlative must be determined by its superior relation to comparable objects within its own category or to comparable statuses across categories.

Yet, if we focus on Sappho’s poetry, we can find an alternative conceptualization of preeminence: following the implications of the prepositional prefix περ-, what is preeminent in Sappho’s poetry is precisely not determined by its placement within a situation or by comparison to the other possible choices, but rather by its exception from existing systems of categorization. Like the eclipse of the stars by the moon or Helen’s beauty, Sapphic preeminence escapes the confines of comparison to open up new ways of evaluating and ordering the situation. In the gap between the assertion of preeminence (πέρροχος) and the reestablishment of comparison (ὡς ὄτ’ ἄνωδος ὁ Λέσβιος ἄλλοδάποιν) lies the poet’s freedom to recategorize and reshape the given elements of her world.

This construction of evental preeminence can help to explain Sappho’s frequent use of impossible comparisons. Her poetry displays an affinity for comparisons that force her audience to think beyond the limits of their knowledge or experience. Comparisons of the type “whiter by far than an egg” (ὦίω πόλο λευκότερον, fr. 167), “greener than grass” (χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας, fr. 31.14), or “golder than gold” (χρύσω χρυσοτέρα, fr. 156) operate according to the same technique at work in fr. 106, which interrupts the categorical and selective conceptualization of preeminence found in Pindar and Demetrius. In each example, the categorical cap—“gold” for the color gold, “egg” for white, “grass” for green—is taken as the basis for a comparison that exceeds the cap, while at the same time leaving the category nominally intact: gold is still gold, eggs are still white, and grass is still green, but the poet pushes her audience to imagine what is exempted from and lies beyond these.

79. Additionally, it helps to explain her sparing use of grammatical superlatives. In the entirety of the corpus, there are only eight instances, four of which are idiomatic adverbial uses (μάλιστα in new fr. 16a.11 and frs. 21, 34; τάχιστα in fr. 27). Of the other four, two refer to men—particularly as husbands—with the superlative ἄριστος (new fr. 16.8 and fr. 18.5). The instance in fr. 18 is too fragmentary to interpret, but it is tempting to read Sappho’s reference to Menelaus in the Helen exemplum of fr. 16 as her “excellent husband” ([τ]ὴν ἄνδρα / τον [. . . ἄριστον] as an ironical quotation of a Homeric turn of phrase (cf. II. 2.768, 5.839, etc.). The final two Sapphic superlatives (frs. 104b and 105a) present more of an interpretative opportunity. Fr. 105a, for instance, may be read as a send-up of selective preeminence: the apple that reddens “on the highest of the high branches” (ἄκρον ἐπ’ ἄκροτώι) is either forgotten or escapes the reach of the apple pickers; i.e., the preeminence achieved through situational selection is fragile and always liable to displacement. This short fragment, however, lends itself to many intriguing interpretations.

80. See also the comparisons at new fr. 15.9; frs. 82a and b.5, 88a.9, 98a.6, 121, 156, 168a. My thanks to Jasmine Akiyama-Kim, who brought the density of this type of comparison to my attention.
categorical notions of preeminence. Although these turns of phrase may have significant local interpretations,\(^8\) taken together as iterations of a single device, they challenge the basic structure of categorical comparison by asserting the preeminence of a term that is, by definition, beyond comparison. Rather than collapsing back into relational correspondence, Sappho’s technique of comparison-to-preeminence discloses the limits of the situation and opens up a space of evental impossibility. It is our task as readers to enter this space with Sappho.

**FAITHFUL READING**

Sappho’s poetry works to reconstruct the relationality of this evental space through a powerful fidelity. But fidelity to an event is always a wager. Since an event is not predetermined by or dependent on the situation, there can be no guarantee that it will open up a new world, just as there is no guarantee that Sappho’s request to Aphrodite, σύμμαχος ἔσσο, was ever more than a fantasy. It is through continued fidelity that the transformations called for by the event are realized. After the initial act of composition, the fidelity between poet and event can only be expanded, developed, and asserted in the act of reading and re-reading. By reading Sappho faithfully—by making her impossibilities our own—we contribute to the ongoing realization of the transformations that she envisioned and extend across space and time her poetic world.

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\(^8\) These forms of impossible comparison are objects of ancient stylistic inquiry: fr. 156 is cited by Demetrius (*On Style* 162) again as an example of “charm,” this time created through “hyperbole” (χάριτες ἐκ τῶν ὑπερβολῶν); fr. 31 is discussed as a whole by Longinus (*On the Sublime* 10.1–4). On fr. 167 as it relates to the myth of Leda and the egg (cf. fr. 166), see Winkler 1996: 105–106.


