Sappho’s φαίνεται μοι κήνος (fr. 31 Lobel-Page) has been the subject of much argument, principally in regard to its interpretation. Recent argument has focused particularly on the nature of the experience described by the narrator of the poem, which is variously taken to be jealousy, anxiety, passionate love, or some combination of these.

It is not my intention to go over the arguments again; the reader who wishes to do so may make use of the references in the notes of the present article for that purpose. Rather, starting from the interpretation that Sappho’s ‘list of symptoms’ consists of those of passionate love, I wish to show the effect of a correct interpretation of the phrase χλωροτέρα ποίας (line 14) upon our understanding of the poem.

Translators and commentators are virtually unanimous in taking χλωροτέρα ποίας in a visual sense: ‘greener than grass,’ or at minimum ‘paler than dried grass.’ However, all this must be put aside now that E. Irwin has shown conclusively that ‘χλωρός, later ‘green,’ is basically ‘moist’ in plants.’ Have we in the present phrase, then, merely a repetition of the reference to χλωρός in the previous line? We do not. The χλωρός refers to exterior moisture; it says nothing as to the presence of interior moisture. The presence of the emotion of fear, for example, may make a man both wet and dry simultaneously.

Fear is χλωρόν δέος ten times in Homer. The adjective is certainly proleptic; but it does not mean ‘fear which makes men pale,’ but rather ‘fear which makes men break out into a cold sweat.’ However, though men may be χλωροί (moist) ύπαι δείονται, they are also ξηροί or ύπαι (dry) ύπαι δείονται. How so? The moisture which is normally within them has passed through their skin in the form of perspiration, thus leaving them dried out inside — and hence, their limbs become stiff (the basic meaning of ὄψις in this context, as Gow’s note shows), lose their suppleness and they are unable to move (‘frozen to the spot’).

Is Sappho’s physical symptom here the same as that produced by fear — wet outside (explicit in ξηρος), dry inside (to be inferred)? No, for that would make χλωροτέρα ποίας redundant (as well as out of place after mention of τρόμος, line 13) and violate the economy of this list, in which each phrase constitutes a distinct ‘symptom.’ We must conclude that Sappho is moist both outside and in.

What form does this interior moisture take? Irwin says ‘we can only guess,’ but suggests two ‘possible explanations’: (i) bile, or (ii) ‘the moisture which is associated with love.’ This latter possibility is not explained, but the footnotes
(nos. 16 and 78) imply that it is a generalized high level of body fluids characterized by the overflowing of excess moisture through the eyes in the form of tears.

There is a third possibility. In a recent article on Catullus 13, R.J. Littman writes: ‘In many instances the pruridry which surrounds discussions of Catullus’ poems has obscured their sexual nature, and in the case of this poem seems to have prevented anyone from seeing an obvious interpretation, or if they have seen it, from explicitly voicing it.’ He continues: ‘I suggest that unguentum refers to Lesbia’s vaginal secretions which sexual excitement causes to flow.’ In a note he applies this interpretation also to Propertius 2.29.15–18.

This interpretation may be applied to our present text as well, affording a more probable analogue (in this context) for the sap of grass than either bile or tears. It is certainly preferable to any suggestion of a generalized interior moisture, since Sappho has just said that there is fire within her (χρόνια καὶ οὐδέδραμηκεν, line 1). Fire and moisture are elemental opposites and do not co-exist in the same place. Hence this moisture is localized.

This view derives some support from the fact that only one more ‘symptom’ of the narrator’s erotic passion is listed after this: τεθυάκην δ’ ὅλαιγο τινάχες (line 15), ‘I almost died.’ The use of death as a metaphor for sexual climax is nearly universal in Western literature.

In short, we are led to interpret the poem as saying, ‘I am so much in love with you that the mere sight of you is enough to drive me almost to the peak of sexual excitement.’

This suggestion is compatible with West’s view of Sappho’s erotic poetry: ‘It is evident that she desires something more specific from her favourites than affectionate regard, and that they know what it is. But . . . she avoids direct mention of it, and is discreet about the identity of her current flame, though not about the intensity of her passion’ (op. cit. 323f, my emphasis).

But the obvious objection to this line of interpretation is that grass, in itself, possesses no clear or strong erotic associations. The interpretation suggested above emerges upon reflection, but is not immediately evident to the auditor of the poem.

This common-sense objection is a strong one, and compels us to agree that the sexual implication is the secondary, and not the primary, referent of the phrase.

But what is the primary referent of the comparison to grass, if it is neither chromatic nor erotic?

Nearly all critics have thought that Sappho (or the narrator) swoons, or comes near to swooning, as a proper Victorian lady should when confronted with an onrush of strong emotion. Even though Sappho is no Victorian lady, it is likely that the critics are correct in their conclusion — but for the wrong reason.

When grass contains interior moisture, it is supple and flexible. This, I submit, is the primary meaning of the phrase here. The narrator feels weak inside; she tells us here, in effect: ‘you could have bent me more easily than a blade of grass.’
Her closeness to fainting is reflected, not by a change in complexion, but by the watery feeling within her.

NOTES


3. Devereux, op. cit. 17 and passim.


7. Eleanor Irwin, Colour Terms in Greek Poetry, Toronto: Hakkert 1974, 201. Chapter Two (pp.31–78 is devoted entirely to χλωρός; ‘ . . . the aim [of the chapter] is to show that the basic meaning of χλωρός is ‘liquid’, ‘moist’ (p.33). Those reluctant to accept Irwin’s arguments will have to explain how blood, tears, and rose petals can all be ‘green’ (Euripides, Hecuba 127; Helen 243f,1189; Medea 906,922), or at least how tears, which are transparent, can be ‘pale’.


10. K 376, 0 4.

11. Theocritus 24.61, ξηρόν ὄντω δειοῦ: Aristophanes, Lysistrata 385, άδος εἶμι’ ἢσι τρέμων; Menander, Epitrepontes 501 Sandbach, άδος εἶμι το δέε, Perikeiremon 352f, δέε εὕς εἶμι’, Samia 515 άδος εἶμι καὶ πέπηγα (Gomme and Sandbach’s note: “I am dry (with fright) . . . I am frozen stiff”); Hesychius s.v. κακομυζέως: ξηράς ὑφ φόβος. Other references in A.S.F. Gow,
RECURRENT METAPHORS IN AESCHYLUS' PROMETHEUS BOUND

Our knowledge that Prometheus taught men to yoke and harness animals, which he himself boasts of at 462–6, lends a particular irony and poignancy to the excruciatingly protracted scene with which P. V. begins. Prometheus, a god and a benefactor of humanity, is reduced to the level of an animal. The first verb Kratos uses in ordering Hephaestus to bind him is ὀψιμάσα (5), later echoed by Io at 618, which according to the scholiast on Apollonius Rhodius 1.743 is properly used of subduing horses. The implements of Prometheus’ fettering and humiliation include ψαλλόν (54), a curb chain or cavesson which was fixed to a horse’s nostrils and apt to cause pain. Even if the word is used more generally here for a bridle, the flavour of the specialised word remains. In keeping with this are μασ-χαλιστήρες (71), girths which pass round a horse behind the shoulders to be fastened to the yoke. Some readers may think even of μασχαλίζειν, applied at Ch. 439 to the mutilation of a corpse. The sympathetic Hephaestus is eager to be off from his handiwork, which he calls ἄνθρωπος, normally a casting net and recalling also the murder of Agamemnon (Ag. 1382). But Prometheus’ own spirit emerges in the use of τούτων (29, 960) and τούτων (174), preceded by a negative. Neither before his punishment nor after it will he cower like an animal.

Just as a link exists between the binding of Prometheus and his earlier teaching of men to yoke and harness animals, a reversal of fortune not always noticed, so the recurrence of this image in metaphorical senses gives the play additional unity, with reality and metaphor merging quite easily. Prometheus describes himself as yoked to constraints: ἀνάγκας . . . ἐνέηγημα (108). When the platitudinous Oceanus urges Prometheus not to kick against the pricks — ὀφθείαν . . . πρὸς κόντρα κάλειν ἐκτενείς (322–3) — the familiar and well-worn proverb μὴ λάκτιζε πρὸς κόντρα, slightly varied in wording, regains some life through Prometheus’ actual predicament. To the chorus the literal shackling of Prometheus appears to symbolise the metaphorical shackling of all humanity (550),
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