Save paper and follow @newyorker on Twitter

A CRITIC AT LARGE
MARCH 16, 2015 ISSUE

GIRL, INTERRUPTED

Who was Sappho?

BY DANIEL MENDELSOHN

New papyrus finds are refining our idea of Sappho. Some scholars question how personal her erotic poems actually are.

MANCHESTER ART GALLERY, UK / BRIDGEMAN

One day not long after New Year's, 2012, an antiquities collector approached an eminent Oxford scholar for his opinion about some brownish, tattered scraps of writing. The collector's identity has never been revealed, but the scholar was Dirk Obbink, a MacArthur-winning classicist whose specialty is the study of texts written on papyrus—the material, made of plant fibres, that was the paper of the ancient world. When pieced together, the scraps that the collector showed Obbink formed a fragment about seven inches long and four

inches wide: a little larger than a woman's hand. Densely covered with lines of black Greek characters, they had been extracted from a piece of desiccated cartonnage, a papier-mâché-like plaster that the Egyptians and Greeks used for everything from mummy cases to bookbindings. After acquiring the cartonnage at a Christie's auction, the collector soaked it in a warm water solution to free up the precious bits of papyrus.

Judging from the style of the handwriting, Obbink estimated that it dated to around 200 A.D. But, as he looked at the curious pattern of the lines—repeated sequences of three long lines followed by a short fourth—he saw that the text, a poem whose beginning had disappeared but of which five stanzas were still intact, had to be older.

Much older: about a thousand years more ancient than the papyrus itself. The dialect, diction, and metre of these Greek verses were all typical of the work of Sappho, the seventh-century-B.C. lyric genius whose sometimes playful, sometimes anguished songs about her susceptibility to the graces of younger women bequeathed us the adjectives "sapphic" and "lesbian" (from the island of Lesbos, where she lived). The four-line stanzas were in fact part of a schema she is said to have invented, called the "sapphic stanza." To clinch the identification, two names mentioned in the poem were ones that several ancient sources attribute to Sappho's brothers. The text is now known as the "Brothers Poem."

Remarkably enough, this was the second major Sappho find in a decade: another nearly complete poem, about the deprivations of old age, came to light in 2004. The new additions to the extant corpus of antiquity's greatest female artist were reported in papers around the world, leaving scholars gratified and a bit dazzled. "Papyrological finds," as one classicist put it, "ordinarily do not make international headlines."

But then Sappho is no ordinary poet. For the better part of three millennia, she has been the subject of furious controversies—about her work, her family life, and, above all, her sexuality. In antiquity, literary critics praised her "sublime" style, even as comic playwrights ridiculed her allegedly loose morals. Legend has it that the early Church burned her works. ("A sex-crazed whore who sings of her own wantonness," one theologian wrote, just as a scribe was meticulously copying out the lines that Obbink deciphered.) A millennium passed, and Byzantine grammarians were regretting that so little of her poetry had survived. Seven centuries later, Victorian scholars were doing their best to explain away her erotic predilections, while their literary contemporaries, the Decadents and the Aesthetes, seized on her verses for inspiration. Even today, experts can't agree on whether the poems were performed in private or in public, by soloists or by choruses, or, indeed, whether they were meant to celebrate or to subvert the conventions of love and marriage. The last is a particularly loaded issue, given that, for many readers and scholars, Sappho has been a feminist heroine or a gay role model, or both. "As far as I knew, there was only me and a woman called Sappho," the critic Judith Butler once remarked.

Now the first English translation of Sappho's works to include the recent finds has appeared: "Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works" (Cambridge), with renderings by Diane J. Rayor and a thoroughgoing introduction by André Lardinois, a Sappho specialist who teaches in the Netherlands. (Publication of the book was delayed by several months to accommodate the "Brothers Poem.") It will come as no surprise to those who have followed the Sappho wars that the new poems have created new controversies.

The greatest problem for Sappho studies is that there's so little Sappho to study. It would be hard to think of another poet whose status is so disproportionate to the size of her surviving body of work.

We don't even know how much of her poetry Sappho actually wrote down. The ancients referred to her works as *melê*, "songs." Composed to be sung to the accompaniment of a lyre—this is what "lyric" poetry meant for the Greeks—they may well have been passed down from memory by her admirers and other poets before being committed at last to paper. (Or whatever. One fragment, in which the poet calls on Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to come into a charming shrine "where cold water ripples through apple branches, the whole place shadowed in roses," was scribbled onto a broken clay pot.) Like other great poets of the time, she would have been a musician and a performer as well as a lyricist. She was credited with having invented a certain kind of lyre and the plectrum.

Four centuries after her death, scholars at the Library of Alexandria catalogued nine "books"—papyrus scrolls—of Sappho's poems, organized primarily by metre. Book 1, for instance, gathered all the poems that had been composed in the sapphic stanza—the verse form Obbink recognized in the "Brothers Poem." This book alone reportedly contained thirteen hundred and twenty lines of verse; the contents of all nine volumes may have amounted to some ten thousand lines. So much of Sappho was circulating in antiquity that one Greek author, writing three centuries after her death, confidently predicted that "the white columns of Sappho's lovely song endure / and will endure, speaking out loud . . . as long as ships sail from the Nile."

By the Middle Ages, nearly everything had disappeared. As with much of classical literature, texts of her work existed in relatively few copies, all painstakingly transcribed by hand. Over time, fire, flood, neglect, and bookworms—to say nothing of disapproving Church Fathers—took their devastating toll. Market forces were also at work: as the centuries passed, fewer readers—and fewer scribes—understood Aeolic, the dialect in which Sappho composed, and so demand for new copies diminished. A twelfth-century Byzantine

scholar who had hoped to write about Sappho grumbled that "both Sappho and her works, the lyrics and the songs, have been trashed by time."

Until a hundred years ago or so, when papyrus fragments of her poems started turning up, all that remained of those "white columns of Sappho's song" was a handful of lines quoted in the works of later Greek and Roman authors. Some of these writers were interested in Lesbos's most famous daughter for reasons that can strike us as comically arcane: the only poem that has survived in its entirety—a playful hymn to Aphrodite in which the poet calls upon the goddess to be her "comrade in arms" in an erotic escapade—was saved for posterity because the author of a first-century-B.C. treatise called "On the Arrangement of Words" admired her handling of vowels. At present, scholars have catalogued around two hundred and fifty fragments, of which fewer than seventy contain complete lines. A great many consist of just a few words; some, of a single word.

The common theme of most ancient responses to Sappho's work is rapturous admiration for her exquisite style or for her searing content, or both. An anecdote from a later classical author about the Athenian legislator Solon, a contemporary of Sappho's and one of the Seven Sages of Greece, is typical:

> Solon of Athens, son of Execestides, after hearing his nephew singing a song of Sappho's over the wine, liked the song so much that he told the boy to teach it to him. When someone asked him why he was so eager, he replied, "so that I may learn it and then die."

Plato, whose attitude toward literature was, to say the least, vexed—he thought most poetry had no place in the ideal state—is said to have called her the "Tenth Muse." The scholars at the Library of Alexandria enshrined her in their canon of nine lyric geniuses—the

only woman to be included. At least two towns on Lesbos vied for the distinction of being her birthplace; Aristotle reports that she "was honored although she was a woman."

All this buzz is both titillating and frustrating, stoking our appetite for a body of work that we're unable to read, much less assess critically: imagine what the name Homer would mean to Western civilization if all we had of the Iliad and the Odyssey was their reputations and, say, ninety lines of each poem. The Greeks, in fact, seem to have thought of Sappho as the female counterpart of Homer: he was known as "the Poet," and they referred to her as "the Poetess." Many scholars now see her poetry as an attempt to appropriate and "feminize" the diction and subject matter of heroic epic. (For instance, the appeal to Aphrodite to be her "comrade in arms"—in love.)

The good news is that the surviving fragments of Sappho bear out the ancient verdict. One fine example is her best-known verse, known to classicists as Fragment 31, which consists of four sapphic stanzas. (They appear below in my own translation.) These were singled out by the author of a first-century-A.D. literary treatise called "On the Sublime" for the way in which they "select and juxtapose the most striking, intense symptoms of erotic passion." Here the speaker expresses her envy of the men who, presumably in the course of certain kinds of social occasions, have a chance to talk to the girl she yearns for:

> He seems to me an equal of the gods—
> whoever gets to sit across from you
> and listen to the sound of your sweet speech
> so close to him,
>
> to your beguiling laughter: O it makes my
> panicked heart go fluttering in my chest,
> for the moment I catch sight of you there's no
> speech left in me,
>
> but tongue gags—: all at once a faint
> fever courses down beneath the skin,
> eyes no longer capable of sight, a thrum-
> ming in the ears,
>
> and sweat drips down my body, and the shakes
> lay siege to me all over, and I'm greener
> than grass, I'm just a little short of dying,
> I seem to me;
>
> but all must be endured, since even a pauper . . .

Even without its final lines (which, maddeningly, the author of the treatise didn't go on to quote), it's a remarkable work. Slyly, the speaker avoids physical description of the girl, instead evoking her beauty by detailing the effect it has on the beholder; the whole poem is a kind of reaction shot. The verses subtly enact the symptoms they describe: as the poet's faculties fail one by one in the overpowering presence of her beloved, the outside world—the girl, the man she's talking to—dissolves and disappears from the

poem, too, leaving the speaker in a kind of interior echo chamber. The arc from "he seems to me" in the first line to the solipsistic "I seem to me" at the end says it all.

Even the tiniest scraps can be potent, as Rayor's lucid and comprehensive translation makes clear. (Until now, the most noteworthy English version to include renderings of virtually every fragment was "If Not, Winter," the 2002 translation by the poet and classicist Anne Carson.) To flip through these truncated texts is a strangely moving experience, one that has been compared to "reading a note in a bottle":

> You came, I yearned for you,
> and you cooled my senses that burned with desire

or

> love shook my senses
> like wind crashing on mountain oaks

or

> Maidenhood, my maidenhood, where have you gone
> leaving me behind?
> Never again will I come to you, never again

or—the lines in which the notion of desire as "bittersweet" appears for the first time in Western literature—

> Once again Love, that loosener of limbs,
> bittersweet and inescapable, crawling thing,
> seizes me.

The very incompleteness of the verses can heighten the starkness of the emotions—a fact that a number of contemporary classicists and translators have made much of. For Stanley Lombardo, whose "Sappho: Poems and Fragments" (2002) offers a selection of about a quarter of the fragments, the truncated remains are like "beautiful, isolated limbs." Thomas Habinek, a classicist at the University of Southern California, has nicely summed up this rather postmodern aspect of Sappho's appeal: "The fragmentary preservation of poems of yearning and separation serves as a reminder of the inevitable incompleteness of human knowledge and affection."

In Sappho's biography, as in her work, gaps predominate. A few facts can be inferred by triangulating various sources: the poems themselves, ancient reference works, citations in later classical writers who had access to information that has since been lost. The "Suda," a tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia of ancient culture, which is the basis of much of our information, asserts that Sappho "flourished" between 612 and 608 B.C.; from this, scholars have concluded that she was born around 640. She was likely past middle age when she died, since in at least one poem she complains about her graying hair and cranky knees.

Although her birthplace cannot be verified, Sappho seems to have lived mostly in Mytilene, the capital of Lesbos. Just across the strip of water that separates Lesbos from the mainland of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) was the opulent city of Sardis, the capital of Lydia. Some classicists have argued that the proximity of Lesbos to this lush Eastern trading hub helps to explain Sappho's taste for visual gorgeousness and sensual luxury: the "myrrh, cassia, and frankincense," the "bracelets, fragrant / purple robes, iridescent trinkets, / countless silver cups, and ivory" that waft and glitter in her lines, often in striking counterpoint to their raw emotionality.

Mytilene was constantly seething with political and social dramas occasioned by rivalries and shifting alliances among aristocratic clans. Sappho belonged to one of these—there's a fragment in which she chastises a friend "of bad character" for siding with a rival clan—and a famous literary contemporary, a poet called Alcaeus, belonged to another. Alcaeus often refers to the island's political turbulence in his poems, and it's possible that at some point Sappho and her family fled, or were exiled, to Southern Italy: Cicero refers in one of his speeches to a statue of the poet that had been erected in the town hall of Syracuse, in Sicily. The Victorian critic John Addington Symonds saw the unstable political milieu of Sappho's homeland as entwined with the heady erotic climate of her poems. Lesbos, he wrote in an 1872 essay on the poet, was "the island of overmastering passions."

Some things seem relatively certain, then. But when it comes to Sappho's personal life—the aspect of her biography that scholars and readers are most eager to know about—the ancient record is confused. What did Sappho look like? A dialogue by Plato, written in the fourth century B.C., refers to her as "beautiful"; a later author insisted that she was "very ugly, being short and swarthy." Who were her family? The Suda (which gives eight possible names for Sappho's father) asserts that she had a daughter and a mother both named Kleïs, a gaggle of brothers, and a wealthy husband named Kerkylas, from the island of Andros. But some of these seemingly precious facts merely show that the encyclopedia—which, as old as it is, was compiled fifteen centuries after Sappho lived—could be prone to comic misunderstandings. "Kerkylas," for instance, looks a lot like *kerkos*, Greek slang for "penis," and "Andros" is very close to the word for "man"; and so the encyclopedia turns out to have been unwittingly recycling a tired old joke about oversexed Sappho, who was married to "Dick of Man."

Many other alleged facts of Sappho's biography similarly dissolve on close scrutiny. Was Sappho really a mother? There is indeed a fragment that mentions a girl named Kleïs, "whose form resembles golden blossoms," but the word that some people have translated as "daughter" can also mean "child," or even "slave." (Because Greek children were often named for their grandparents, it's easy to see how the already wobbly assumption that Kleïs must have been a daughter in turn led to the assertion that Sappho had a mother with the same name.) Who were the members of her circle? The Suda refers by name to three female "students," and three female companions—Atthis, Telesippa, and Megara—with whom she had "disgraceful friendships." But much of this is no more than can be reasonably extrapolated from the poems: the extant fragments mention nearly all those names. The compilers of the Suda, like scholars today, may have been making educated guesses.

Even Sappho's sexuality, which for modern readers is the most famous thing about her, has been controversial from the start. However exalted her reputation among the ancient literati, in Greek popular culture of the Classical period and afterward Sappho was known primarily as an oversexed predator—of men. This, in fact, was the ancient cliché about "Lesbians": when we hear the word today we think of love between women, but when the ancient Greeks heard the word they thought of blow jobs. In classical Greek, the verb *lesbiazein* —"to act like someone from Lesbos"—meant performing fellatio, an activity for which inhabitants of the island were thought to have a particular penchant. Comic playwrights and authors of light verse portrayed Sappho as just another daughter of Lesbos, only too happy to fall into bed with her younger male rivals.

For centuries, the most popular story about her love life was one about a hopeless passion for a handsome young boatman called Phaon, which allegedly led her to jump off a cliff. That tale has been embroidered, dramatized, and novelized over the centuries by writers

from Ovid—who in one poem has Sappho abjectly renouncing her gay past—to Erica Jong, in her 2003 novel "Sappho's Leap." As fanciful as it is, it's easy to see how this melodrama of heterosexual passion could have been inspired by her verse, which so often describes the anguish of unrequited love. ("You have forgotten me / or you love someone else more.") The added element of suicide suggests that those who wove this improbable story wanted us to take away a moral: unfettered expressions of great passion will have dire consequences.

As time went on, the fantasies about Sappho's private life became more extreme. Midway through the first century A.D., the Roman philosopher Seneca, tutor to Nero, was complaining about a Greek scholar who had devoted an entire treatise to the question of whether Sappho was a prostitute. Some ancient writers assumed that there had to have been two Sapphos: one the great poet, the other the notorious slut. There is an entry for each in the Suda.

The uncertainties plaguing the biography of literature's most famous Lesbian explain why classicists who study Sappho like to cite the entry for her in Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's "Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary" (1979). To honor Sappho's central position in the history of female homosexuality, the two editors devoted an entire page to her. The page is blank.

The controversies about Sappho's sexuality have never been far from the center of scholarship about her. Starting in the early nineteenth century, when classics itself was becoming a formal discipline, scholars who were embarrassed by what they found in the fragments worked hard to whitewash Sappho's reputation. The title of one early work of German scholarship is "Sappho Liberated from a Prevalent Prejudice": in it, the author acknowledged that what

Sappho felt for her female friends was "love" but hastened to insist that it was in no way "objectionable, vulgarly sensual, and illegal," and that her poems of love were neither "monstrous nor abominable."

The eagerness to come up with "innocent" explanations for the poet's attachment to young women persisted through the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The most tenacious theory held that Sappho was the head of a girls' boarding school, a matron whose interest in her pupils was purely pedagogical. (One scholar claimed to have found evidence that classes were taught on how to apply makeup.) Another theory made her into an august priestess, leading "an association of young women who devoted themselves to the cult of the goddess."

Classicists today have no problem with the idea of a gay Sappho. But some have been challenging the interpretation of her work that seems most natural to twenty-first century readers: that the poems are deeply personal expressions of private homoerotic passion. Pointing to the relentlessly public and communitarian character of ancient-Greek society, with its clan allegiances, its endless rounds of athletic games and artistic competitions, its jammed calendar of civic and religious festivals, they wonder whether "personal" poetry, as we understand the term, even existed for someone like Sappho. As André Lardinois, the co-author of the new English edition, has written, "Can we be sure that these are really her own feelings? . . . What is 'personality' in such a group-oriented society as archaic Greece?"

Indeed, the vision of Sappho as a solitary figure pouring out her heart in the women's quarters of a nobleman's mansion is a sentimental anachronism—a projection, like so much of our thinking about her, of our own habits and institutions onto the past. In "Sappho and Alcaeus," by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, a Victorian painter much given to lush re-creations of scenes from Greek antiquity, the Poetess and four diaphanously clad, flower-wreathed acolytes relax in a charming

little performance space, enraptured as the male bard sings and plays, as if he were a Beat poet in a Telegraph Hill café. But Lardinois and others have argued that many, if not most, of Sappho's poems were written to be performed by choruses on public occasions. In some lyrics, the speaker uses the first-person plural "we"; in others, she uses the plural "you" to address a group—presumably the chorus, who danced as she sang. (Even when Sappho uses the first-person singular, it doesn't mean she was singing solo: in Greek tragedy the chorus, which numbered fifteen singers, regularly uses "I.")

This communal voice, which to us seems jarring in lyrics of deep, even erotic feeling—imagine that Shakespeare's sonnets had been written as choral hymns—is one that some translators today simply ignore, in keeping with the modern interest in individual psychology. But if the proper translation of the sexy little Fragment 38 is not "you scorch me" but "you scorch us," which is what the Greek actually says, how, exactly, should we interpret it?

To answer that question, classicists lately have been imagining the purposes to which public performance of erotic poems might have been put. Ancient references to the poet's "companions" and "students" have led one expert to argue that Sappho was the leader of a female collective, whose role was "instruction leading to marriage." Rather than expressions of individual yearning for a young woman, the poems were, in Lardinois's view, "public forms of praise of the general attractiveness of the girl," celebrating her readiness for wedlock and integration into the larger society. The late Harvard classicist Charles Segal made even larger claims. As he saw it, the strongly rhythmic erotic lyrics were "incantatory" in nature; he believed that public performance of poems like Fragment 31 would

have served to socialize desire itself for the entire city—to lift sexual yearning "out of the realm of the formless and terrible, bring it into the light of form, make it visible to the individual poet and, by extension, to his or her society."

Even purely literary issues—for instance, the tendency to think of Sappho as the inventor of "the lyric I," a single, emotionally naked speaker who becomes a stand-in for the reader—are affected by these new theories. After all, if the "I" who speaks in Sappho's work is a persona (a "poetic construct rather than a real life figure," as Lardinois put it) how much does her biography actually matter?

Between the paucity of actual poems and the woeful unreliability of the biographical tradition, these debates are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Indeed, the study of Sappho is beset by a curious circularity. For the better part of a millennium—between the compilation of the Suda and the late nineteenth century—the same bits of poetry and the same biographical gossip were endlessly recycled, the poetic fragments providing the sources for biographies that were then used as the basis for new interpretations of those same fragments. This is why the "new Sappho" has been so galvanizing for classicists: every now and then, the circle expands, letting in a little more light.

Obbink's revelation last year was, in fact, only the latest in a series of papyrological discoveries that have dramatically enhanced our understanding of Sappho and her work. Until the late nineteenth century, when the papyri started turning up, there were only the ancient quotations. Since then, the amount of Sappho that we have has more than doubled.

In 1897, two young Oxford archeologists started excavating a site in Egypt that had been the municipal dump of a town called Oxyrhynchus—"the City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish." In ancient times, the place had been home to a large Greek-speaking population.

However lowly its original purpose, the dump soon yielded treasures. Papyrus manuscripts dating to the first few centuries A.D., containing both Greek and Roman texts, began to surface. Some were fragments of works long known, such as the Iliad, but even these were of great value, since the Oxyrhynchus papyri were often far older than what had been, until that point, the oldest surviving copies. Others revealed works previously unknown. Among the latter were several exciting new fragments of Sappho, some substantial. From the tattered papyri, the voice came through as distinctive as ever:

> Some men say cavalry, some men say infantry,
> some men say the navy's the loveliest thing
> on this black earth, but I say it's what-
> ever you love

Over the decades that followed, more of the papyri were deciphered and published. But by 1955, when the British classicist Denys Page published "Sappho and Alcaeus," a definitive study of the two Lesbian poets, it seemed that even this rich new vein had been exhausted. "There is not at present," Page declared, "any reason to expect that we shall ever possess much more of the poetry of Sappho and Alcaeus than we do today, and this seems a suitable time to begin the difficult and doubtful task of interpreting."

Sappho herself, it seems fair to say, would have raised an eyebrow at Page's confidence in his judgment. Human fortune, she writes, is as variable as the weather at sea, where "fair winds swiftly follow harsh gales." And, indeed, this verse was unknown to Page, since it comes from the papyrus fragment that Dirk Obbink brought to light last year: the "Brothers Poem."

For specialists, the most exciting feature of the "Brothers Poem" is that it seems to corroborate the closest thing we have to a contemporary reference to Sappho's personal life: an oblique mention

of her in Herodotus' Histories, written about a century and a half after her death. During a long discussion of Egyptian society, Herodotus mentions one of Sappho's brothers, a rather dashing character named Charaxus. A swashbuckling merchant sailor, he supposedly spent a fortune to buy the freedom of a favorite courtesan in Egypt—an act, Herodotus reports, for which Sappho "severely chided" her sibling in verse. Ovid and other later classical authors also refer to some kind of tension between Sappho and this brother, but, in the absence of a surviving poem on the subject by Sappho herself, generations of scholars were unable to verify even the brother's name.

So it's easy to imagine Dirk Obbink's excitement as he worked his way through the first lines of the poem:

> but you're always nattering on that Charaxus must come,
> his ship full-laden. That much, I reckon, Zeus knows . . .

The pious thing to do, the speaker says, is to pray to the gods for this brother's return, since human happiness depends on divine good will. The poem closes with the hope that another, younger brother will grow up honorably and save his family from heartache—presumably, the anxiety caused by their wayward elder sibling. At last, that particular biographical tidbit could be confirmed.

For non-classicists, the "Brothers Poem" may be less enthralling than the other recent Sappho find, the poem that surfaced in 2004, about old age—a bittersweet work indeed. After the University of Cologne acquired some papyri, scholars found that one of the texts overlapped with a poem already known: Fragment 58, one of the Oxyrhynchus papyri. The Oxyrhynchus fragment consisted mostly of the ends of a handful of lines; the new Cologne papyrus filled in the blanks, leaving only a few words missing. Finally, the lines made sense.

As with much Archaic Greek poetry, the newly restored Fragment 58—the "Old Age Poem," as it is now called—illustrates its theme with an example from myth. Sappho alludes to the story of Eos, the dawn goddess, who wished for, and was granted, eternal life for her mortal lover, Tithonus, but forgot to ask for eternal youth:

> [I bring] the beautiful gifts of the violet Muses, girls,
> and [I love] that song lover, the sweet-toned lyre.
>
> My skin was [delicate] before, but now old age
> [claims it]; my hair turned from black [to white].
>
> My spirit has grown heavy; knees buckle
> that once could dance light as fawns.
>
> I often groan, but what can I do?
> Impossible for humans not to age.
>
> For they say that rosy-armed Dawn in love
> went to the ends of the earth holding Tithonos,
>
> beautiful and young, but in time gray old age
> seized even him with an immortal wife.

Here as elsewhere in the new translation, Diane J. Rayor captures the distinctively plainspoken quality of Sappho's Greek, which, for all the poet's naked emotionality and love of luxe, is never overwrought or baroque. Every translation is a series of sacrifices; in Rayor's case, emphasis on plainness of expression sometimes comes at the cost of certain formal elements—not least, metre. The classicist M. L. West, who published a translation in the *Times Literary Supplement*, took pains to emulate the long line of Sappho's original:

> But me—my skin which once was soft is withered now
> by age, my hair has turned to white which once was black . . .

Still, given how disastrously cloying many attempts to re-create Sappho's verse as "song" have proved to be, you're grateful for Rayor's directness. Her notes on the translations are particularly useful, especially when she alerts readers to choices that are left "silent" in other English versions. The last extant line of Fragment 31, for instance, presents a notorious problem: it could mean something like "all must be endured" or, on the other hand, "all must be dared." Rayor prefers "endured," and tells you why she thinks it's the better reading.

In her translation of the "Old Age Poem," Rayor makes one very interesting choice. The Cologne manuscript dates to the third century B.C., which makes it the oldest and therefore presumably the most reliable manuscript of Sappho that we currently possess. In that text, the poem ends after the sixth couplet, with its glum reference to Tithonus being seized by gray old age. But Rayor has decided to include some additional lines that appear only in the fragmentary Oxyrhynchus papyrus. These give the poem a far more upbeat ending:

> Yet I love the finer things . . . this and passion
> for the light of life have granted me brilliance and beauty.

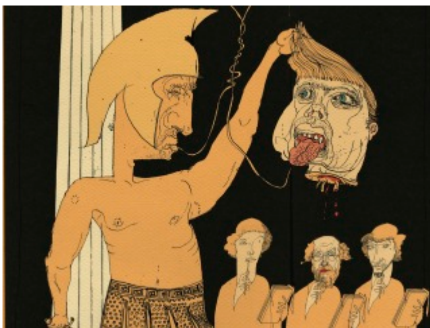
The manuscript containing those lines was copied out five hundred years after the newly discovered version—half a millennium further away from the moment when the Poetess first sang this song.

And so the new Sappho raises as many questions as it answers. Did different versions of a single poem coexist in antiquity, and, if so, did ancient audiences know or care? Who in the "Brothers Poem" has been chattering on about Sappho's brother Charaxus, and why? Where, exactly, does the "Old Age Poem" end? Was it a melancholy testament to the mortifying effects of age or a triumphant assertion of

the power of beauty, of the "finer things"—of poetry itself—to redeem the ravages of time? Even as we strain to hear this remarkable woman's sweet speech, the thrumming in our ears grows louder. ♦

Daniel Mendelsohn is the author of seven books, including "Waiting for the Barbarians: Essays from the Classics to Pop Culture" and "The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million." He teaches at Bard College.

RELATED STORIES



BOOKS

A SLIMMER, FASTER ILIAD

BY DANIEL MENDELSOHN

PROFILES

A CAMBRIDGE CLASSICIST TAKES ON HER DETRACTORS

BY REBECCA MEAD