



PAGE-TURNER

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HEARING SAPPHO

BY DANIEL MENDELSON

PHOTOGRAPH: AKG

“Because once I’ve learned it, I can die.” So said Solon the Wise, the great Athenian lawmaker of the sixth century B.C., when asked why he wanted to be taught a certain poem by Sappho. His extravagant admiration for her hotly yearning lyrics was shared by most literate people in the ancient world: from Plato, who called her the Tenth Muse, to the Roman poet Catullus, who, five centuries after she died, adapted a famous song of hers about erotic frustration into Latin.



And yet today so little of her poetry survives—only one complete poem and a handful of substantial fragments—that the rave reviews of two millennia ago can be more frustrating than inspiring. What was all the fuss about?

Even when we have the words themselves, much is missing. Music, for one thing. For the Greeks, the “lyric” in “lyric poetry” was literal: the verses were composed to be sung to the accompaniment of a lyre. The ancients referred to her as, simply, “the Poetess,” but today the term is likely to give the wrong impression: a life spent cramped over a desk or a laptop; sparsely attended readings in small cafés; Iowa.

What Sappho really was was a singer-songwriter. Like Joni Mitchell or Bob Dylan, she wrote her music as well as her lyrics, and performed her songs in public. Ancient authors loved to quote lines of her work, but for all we know when they did so readers were hearing certain famous melodies in their heads as well as registering the words. (Think of what goes on in your mind when someone mentions the song “Let It Be.”) Unfortunately, although ancient musical papyri have turned up (<http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=9&ved=0CEcQFjAI&url=http://www.bbc.com/news/business-24611454>), Sappho’s melodies, like ninety-nine per cent of her lyrics, are lost.

Still, given Sappho’s dazzling reputation, the temptation to reconstruct what her lyrics may have sounded like in performance has proved difficult for classicists to resist. The late Stephen Daitz, a professor of classical languages and of Hebrew at City College and the CUNY graduate center, devoted much of his career to studying how ancient Greek epic, lyric, and drama sounded in performance (<http://www.rhapsodes.fl.vt.edu>). (And, indeed, in the privacy of one’s own home: silent reading was virtually unknown in the ancient world.) Among the texts that Daitz recorded before his death, last autumn—a list that included the Iliad and the Odyssey in their entirety—was the poem that classicists know as Sappho Fragment 1. The only work of hers to have come down to us intact, it’s a slyly charming riff on a formal hymn to the goddess of love, Aphrodite. In it, the speaker appeals to the divinity for assistance in “yet another” love affair with a lovely girl. You can listen to it below.

But, before you do so, a few things. First, metre. The poem is composed in a rhythmic scheme that Sappho is said to have invented called the sapphic stanza: each four-line stanza consists of three metrically identical lines eleven syllables in length, followed by a shorter fourth line of five syllables. In the schema just below, long syllables are represented by horizontal dashes, short syllables by the letter “u”; an “x” indicates a syllable that can be either long or short. (“Long” and “short” refer to the “quantity” of the syllable: a long syllable simply takes longer to pronounce than a short syllable does. Think of a long syllable as a quarter note and a short syllable as an eighth note.)

	— u — x — u u — u — —
	— u — x — u u — u — —
	— u — x — u u — u — —
	— u u — u

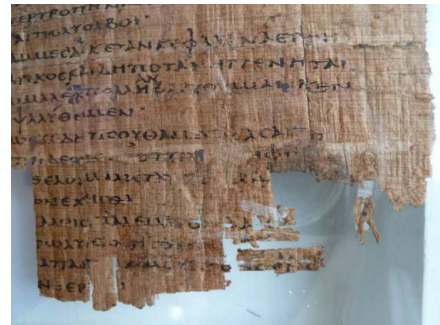
When you practice a little, you may be surprised at how jaunty the line is, with its strong syncopations: BUM-bah-BUM BUM BUM bah-bah BUM bah BUM BUM. You can only imagine what the music was like.

The second thing about Daitz’s recording of Fragment 1 that might seem a bit odd is the singsong quality of the performer’s voice as it rises, plunges, and yowls around the musical staff. That’s because Ancient Greek was a pitch-accented language, a bit like Chinese is today: an accent indicated the relative pitch at which you pronounced a given syllable and not, as in English, the stress (emphasis or loudness) that you put on that syllable. Below, you’ll see three texts of Sappho Fragment 1: the original Greek, a transliteration, and then an English rendering by Diane J. Rayor, whose new book-length translation of most of the known fragments of Sappho was published last autumn, by Cambridge University Press. Take a look at the Greek text: however inscrutable the characters themselves, you’ll notice

accents hovering over certain letters: acute (´), grave (`), and circumflex (^). These markings—which were, in fact, invented by a scholar working at the Library of Alexandria who wanted to help readers of Greek texts know what to do with their voices as they read aloud—indicate tone: where the voice is meant to go up, down, or up-and-then-down. (And where the voice went up and down made *all* the difference. In the late four hundreds B.C., during a performance of a play by Euripides, an actor created a fiasco by pitching the last syllable of the word *galen*’ as an up and then down instead of a simple up. As a result of that one literally false note, a line that was supposed to mean “After the storm, I see a calm once more” ended up as “After the storm, I see a weasel once more.” The audience collapsed into laughter, and tragedy became farce.)

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The difficulties facing anyone who tries to reconstruct what Classical Greek sounded like are enormous because of a peculiar complexity of languages, like Greek, in which the length of a syllable and its



accentuation were two separate issues. Take, for instance, the last word of the first line of the poem, the name of the goddess to whom Sappho appeals: Aphrodite. (*Ahh-phroh-dee-tahh*, as people from Sappho’s island, Lesbos, pronounced it.) If I represent the name with respect to the “quantity” of the syllables—longs in capitals, shorts in lowercases—it looks like this: AHH-phroh-DEE-TAHH. But, whereas the English speaker instinctively wants to stress those capitalized syllables, in Greek the accented syllable was, in fact, the second one, “phroh”—a short syllable that was not stressed as we think of it but, rather, pitched higher than the other syllables in the name.

It's all very tricky: the fact is that when you learn Classical Greek as an undergraduate today you tend simply to stress the accented syllables and leave it at that. But, however tentative reconstructions such as Daitz's may be, they remind you that Greek had a natural music to it. Those quarter notes and eighth notes, the soprano acutes and baritone graves, the Margaret Dumont curveball of the circumflex: even without her lyre, Sappho *sings*.

Ποικιλόθρον', ἀθάνατ' Ἀφροδίτα,
παῖ Δίος, δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε
μή μ' ἄσαισι μήτ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
πότνια, θῦμον·

ἀλλὰ τυῖδ' ἔλθ', αἵποτα κατέρωτα
τᾶς ἑμας αὖδως αἰίοισα πήλυι
ἐκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα
χρῦσιον ἦλθες

ἄρμ' ὑποζεύξαισα· κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον
ῶκεες στρουῦθοι περὶ γᾶς μελαίνας
πύκνα δινεῦντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνω αἶθε-
ρας διὰ μέσσω.

αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο· τὸ δ', ὦ μάκαιρα,
μειδιάσαις ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ,
ἦρε', ὅττι δηῦτε πέπονθα κῶττι
δηῦτε κάλημι,

κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι
μαινόλα θύμῳ· τίνα δηῦτε Πείθῳ
μαῖς ἄγην ἐς σὰν φιλότατα, τίς σ', ὦ
Ψάπφ', ἀδικήει;

καὶ γὰρ αἰ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,
αἰ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ' ἀλλὰ δώσει,
αἰ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει
κῶν' ἐθέλοισα.

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλεπᾶν δὲ λύσον
ἐκ μεριμνᾶν, ὅσσα δέ μοι τελέσσαι
θῦμος ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον· σὺ δ' αὐτὰ
σύμμαχος ἔσσο.

Transliteration

POI-kih-LÓH-throhn' AH-thah-náht' AH-phróh-DEE-TAH,
PAI di-OHS doh-LOH-ploh-keh, LIHSS-oh-MAI SEH,
MAY m'ah-SAI-sih MAYD' oh-nih-AI-sih DAHM-NAH
POT-nee-ah, THUH-mon

AHLL-ah TWEED' EHLTH', AI poh-tah KAHT-eh-ROH-
TAH
TAS eh-MAS OW-DASS ah-ih-OY-sah PAY-LOY
EH-clue-EHS PAH-TROHS deh doh-MOAN lih-POI-SAH
KHRU-si-on AYL-thehs

ARM' hoop-AHZ-DYOO-KSAI-sah; kah-LOI deh s'AH-
GOAN
OH-keh-EHS STROU-THOY pe-ri GAHS meh-LAI-
NAHSS
PUK-nah DINN-EN-TEHS pter' ahp' OH-rah-NOY-theh-
ROSS di-a MESS-ohh,

AIP-sah DEX-EE-KOHN-toh; su d', OH mah-KAI-RAH,
MAY-di-AI-SAIS' AH-thah-nah-TOY proh-SOH-POY
AY-reh' OHT-tih DYOO-teh peh-PON-thah KOTT-ti
DYOOT-teh kah-LAYM-mih

KOTT-ti MOY mah-LISS-tah theh-LOH geh-NESS-THAI
MAI-noh-LAI THOO-MOY; tih-na DYOO-teh PAY-THOH
APS s'ah-GAYN ES WAHN phih-loh-TAH-tah? TIS S'OH
PSAHPF', ah-di-KAY-AY?

KAI gahr AI FYOO-GAY, tah-kheh-OHSS di-OHX-AY;

AI deh DOH-RAH MAY deh-keht', AH-lah DOH-SAY;
AI deh MAY fih-LAY, tah-kheh-OHSS fih-LAY SAY
KOOK eh-theh-LOY-SAH.

EHL-theh MOY KAI NOON, khah-leh-PAHN deh LOO-
SON
EK me-RIHM-NAHN, OHS-sah deh MOY teh-LEHS-SAI
THOO-mohs EE-MEHR-RAY, teh-leh-SON; soo d'OW-TAH
SOOM-mah-khos EHS-soh.

Translation

On the throne of many hues, Immortal Aphrodite,
child of Zeus, weaving wiles: I beg you,
do not break my spirit, O Queen,
with pain or sorrow

but come – if ever before from far away
you heard my voice and listened,
and leaving your father's
golden home you came,

your chariot yoked with lovely sparrows
drawing you quickly over the dark earth
in a whirling cloud of wings down
the sky through midair,

suddenly here. Blessed One, with a smile
on your deathless face, you ask
what have I suffered again
and why do I call again

and what in my wild heart do I most wish
would happen: "Once again who must I
persuade to turn back to your love?
Sappho, who wrongs you?"

If now she flees, soon she'll chase.
If rejecting gifts, then she'll give.
If not loving, soon she'll love
even against her will.”
Come to me now – release me from these
troubles, everything my heart longs
to have fulfilled, fulfill, and you
be my ally.

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.

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