

Sensual Sappho

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Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works

translated from the ancient Greek by Diane J. Rayor, with an introduction and notes by André Lardinois
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National Archaeological Museum, Naples

Portrait of a young woman often identified as Sappho; fresco, Pompeii, first century CE

In about 300 BC, a doctor was summoned to diagnose the illness afflicting Antiochus, crown prince of the Seleucid empire in Syria. The young man's symptoms included a faltering voice, burning sensations, a racing pulse, fainting, and pallor. In his biography of Antiochus' father, Seleucus I, Plutarch reports that the symptoms manifested themselves only when Antiochus' young stepmother Stratonice was in the room. The doctor was therefore able to diagnose the youth's malady as an infatuation with her. The cause of the illness was clearly erotic, because the symptoms were "as described by Sappho." The solution was simple: Antiochus' father divorced Stratonice and let his son marry her instead.

Plutarch's story invites us to wonder if the relationship between Sappho and erotic symptoms is entirely straightforward. Did Antiochus and his doctor learn to describe the sensations he was experiencing from their knowledge of Sappho's already "classic" love poetry? Did art shape life? Or are such sensations the universal experience of erotically fixated individuals, which would mean that lived experience had been recorded with uncanny realism in Sappho's art?

Sappho has probably had more words written about her in proportion to her own surviving output than any other writer. A couple of complete poems and about two hundred fragments are all that remain of the nine substantial books, in diverse genres and meters, that she produced on her home island of Lesbos in the northeastern Aegean around 600 BC. Her poems could be consulted, complete, in the ancient libraries, including the famous one at Egyptian Alexandria. But they did not survive the millennium between the triumph of Christianity and the frantic export to the West of Greek manuscripts from Constantinople before it fell in 1453. Some Renaissance scholars believed that in the eleventh century Pope Gregory VII had all the manuscripts of Sappho burned as dangerously salacious.

Yet Sappho, for all the meagerness of her extant poetry, is a founder in many more respects than in teaching us what love feels like. She is the first female poet and "learned woman" known to antiquity and to the "Western" literary tradition. Said to have been entitled "the tenth Muse" by Plato, she was the only woman whom ancient scholars included in the canon of significant lyric poets. Nor is it only her poems that have mattered: her life and loves have inspired plays, operas, and novels, skillfully documented in Margaret Reynolds's *The Sappho Companion* (2001). Until the nineteenth century, these biographical narratives mostly derived from Ovid's fictional letter in his *Heroides*, addressed by a suicidal heterosexual Sappho to her male lover Phaon. Although this tradition reached its acme in Charles Gounod's spectacular 1851 opera *Sappho*, it is still going strong—as in Erica Jong's raunchy novel *Sappho's Leap* (2003).

The change in attitudes toward Sappho's work and life came when self-conscious lesbian literary culture emerged in the nineteenth century, thanks to French decadence and Baudelaire's poem "Lesbos" in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857); Sappho was crowned as the first explicit poet of female homoerotic love. Fin-de-siècle Prussian scholars then tried to resist the growing popularity of erotic Sapphos by insisting that her relationship with the young women, whose leisure hours on soft couches she celebrated, was that of the headmistress of a finishing school to debutantes entering the marriage market. But explicitly sexy verses by

Sappho found soon afterward on papyrus made the task of these prudish academics impossible.

Although Sappho is unusual as a female poet, her homoerotic stance, in the ancient setting, was unremarkable. It is found in women's songs related to goddesses' cults, for example in the songs Alcman composed for Spartan girls to sing to Artemis. Homoeroticism is also a feature of symposium poetry written by men, and the age of tyrants and lyric poetry that produced Sappho was precisely the period when the fashion for symposia—drinking parties with musical and literary entertainment imitating Anatolian palace practice—swept across the Greek world. Women held banquets at festivals from which men were excluded. There is no reason to suppose that Sappho's songs were not sung at them.

Some more recent scholars have tried to tame Sappho by turning her into a priestess and claiming that the erotic behaviors she describes were part of formal ritual. Yet nothing has stopped Sappho from inspiring not only lesbians but heterosexual poets and poets of male homosexual love, especially C.P. Cavafy: like this gay Alexandrian proto-modernist, she seems to sing to us, as E.M. Forster described Cavafy, from a position "at a slight angle to the universe." With a single poem, which says that her beloved Anactoria is more valuable than the splendor of any cavalry, infantry, or fleet, she created a tradition of "love-not-war" lyrics whose future stretches from Propertius to Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and Bruce Springsteen. As the definitive *ur*-voice of lyric ecstasy, she is so consequential that poets of every generation, from Catullus to Sylvia Plath and Anne Carson, have used her to define their aesthetic manifestos: among the ancients, only Homer can claim an instrumental role in literary history equivalent to Sappho's.

The incomplete poem that allowed the diagnosis of the Seleucid Antiochus' symptoms is the most influential lyric poem of all time. It is usually known as "Sappho fragment 31," or "*phainetai moi*" (a transliteration of its first two words, which mean "he seems to me"). It describes a triangular scene. Sappho is transfixed by her physiological responses to watching a woman she loves laughing with a man. The brilliance of the poem—besides the luxuriant specification of the symptoms—lies in the paradox that the speaker, the only silent member of the triangle, in putting her thoughts into words nearly becomes silent in death.

"*Phainetai moi*" was imitated by Catullus, the premier Roman love poet. But the Greek original has survived only because it was quoted in *On the Sublime*, the

treatise on literary transcendence attributed to Longinus, writing in Greek under the Roman Empire. *On the Sublime* was first printed in 1554, and translated into English as early as 1652 by John Hall, a supporter of Cromwell. Here is the second half of Sappho's "*phainetai moi*" in Hall's version, containing the famous lines describing her physical symptoms:

*I'm speechless, feavrish, fires
assail
My fainting flesh, my sight doth
fail
Whilst to my restless mind my
ears
Still hum new fears.*

*Cold sweats and tremblings so
invade
That like a wither'd flower I fade
So that my life being almost lost,
I seem a Ghost.*

Hall's unpretentious rhymed iambics convey well enough the force, freshness, and candor of Sappho's original. But Hall is bound by the heterosexist conventions of his contemporaries, whose picture of Sappho was derived mainly from Ovid's diva, infatuated not with the women she names in her poems—Anactoria, Gongyla—but with a man named Phaon. Hall therefore transfers to the male admirer the capacity to dart "languors" into Sappho's "ravish'd heart."

Public access to Sappho's poem was widened by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux's French translation of Longinus (1674). Running through more than twenty editions by 1740, and published in English translation in 1711, Boileau's Longinus put sublimity at the center of literary debate and laid the foundation-stone of the invention of aesthetics as a discrete philosophical field by Burke and Kant. It also ensured that Sappho's "*phainetai moi*" would be encountered by every self-respecting writer. It has been translated or paraphrased, in English alone, by Addison, Smollett, Byron, Tennyson, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Lowell: it is the foremother of every representation of pent-up sexual desire in our cultural repertoire.

For readers who want a complete, up-to-date collection of all Sappho's extant oeuvre in faithful and cautious English translation, this new edition, by two

acclaimed classical scholars, is currently the sole satisfactory option. It contains translations by Diane Rayor, a professor at Grand Valley State University in Michigan and author of reputable translations of other ancient poetry including the *Homeric Hymns* and *Callimachus*. Her Sappho translations, some of which she has been working on for more than thirty years, are presented along with carefully selected suggestions for further reading and André Lardinois's introduction and notes. Almost everything an undergraduate or interested lay reader requires to embark on a first voyage into Sappho's world can be found within this elegant volume.

Lardinois's contribution is exemplary—succinct, accessible, and erudite. The only dimension of Sappho's work that I miss is the hybrid “European/Anatolian” quality of her voice. In a world in which conservatives still claim the ancient Greeks as the cultural ancestors of a “superior” Western civilization, Sappho's oriental features can be helpfully disorienting.

The aristocrats of Lesbos were closely involved with the prosperous barbarian kingdoms on the mainland (now Turkey), ten nautical miles away. Sappho avers that she would not exchange her lovely child Cleis for “the whole of Lydia,” i.e., the ancient kingdom that is now western Turkey; a poignant fragment describes her desolation when one girl leaves her, having contracted a marriage in Lydia. Moreover, since the decipherment of Hittite, Sappho's poetry has promised to lead us even further back, into the mysteries of Bronze-Age Anatolia. Lesbos, known to the Hittites as *Lazpas*, was already sophisticated enough to provide the Hittite king with a cult image in the fourteenth century BC. Even the name “Sappho” may derive from the Hittite word meaning “numinous,” or from a Hittite name for a holy mountain.

There are several translations and editions of Sappho available, some equipped with richer biographical and interpretive discussions than Rayor/Lardinois, as well as more precise documentation about the diverse sources of her surviving poems. For this kind of information, most classicists rely on David Campbell's authoritative Loeb Classical Library *Greek Lyric* Volume I (1982). What makes Rayor's new book indispensable is her timing. She has been able to include five full stanzas of a poem by Sappho that was made public for the first time since antiquity as recently as January 2014. Even in the twenty-first century we are sometimes treated to the publication of previously unavailable ancient texts preserved on papyrus, emanating from the sands of Egypt and passing, sometimes rather shadily, through sequences of anonymous hands. The two latest Sappho poems (or rather most of one poem and a single stanza of another) were

discovered just in time to be included in this collection. Until other translators can publish supplemented versions of Sappho, Rayer's volume now renders all other editions outdated.

In the nearly complete "new" poem, "Brothers Song," Sappho explores her frustration at her brothers' inadequacies. The emotional tone is unexampled in the rest of her oeuvre since the poem explores anxiety about domestic responsibility rather than sexual desire, clothing, flowers, wedding rituals, gods, or mythology. Rather than sensual, it is practical and reflective. It looks toward the future rather than the remembered past. It casts Sappho in a new light, as a capable member of an eastern Greek island family with a shipping business. One brother, Charaxos, has not returned from a voyage with his anticipated cargo; her younger brother Larichos is slow to grow up and assume responsibilities.

Sappho, exasperated and slightly desperate, rebukes an unnamed interlocutor who assails her with unsubstantiated rumors that Charaxos's return is imminent. Sappho retorts that her only option is to pray to Hera (the goddess who oversaw women's social status). This fine poem, evoking a sustained psychological journey, is united by the image of the ship weighed down by freight and jeopardized by storms. The ship is both the vessel steered by Charaxos and a metaphor for the family's fortunes.

Rayer's translation of this poem is disappointing, even taking into account the speed with which she had to produce it. In the first line, the verb Sappho uses to describe her speech, *thruleein*, implies incessant repetition, along with a shade of disparagement that evokes gossip or tittle-tattle. But Rayer opts for the safest, and dullest, phrase, "you keep saying."

In the fourth stanza, Sappho hopes that Zeus might solve her family's problems: she reinforces her mental picture of a divinity intervening to help a struggling ship at sea, with soft bouncy waves of alliterative *b* and *p* sounds. But Rayer's pedestrian version sacrifices Sappho's aural music, producing an almost banal



Peter Smith

Anne Carson, whose Sappho 'is so powerful,'
Edith Hall writes, 'that it will make life
difficult for any future translator'

religious platitude:

*Whenever the king of Olympos wishes
a helpful god to turn people away
from troubles, they are blessed
and full of good fortune.*

The Greek simply is much better than that.

Another substantial “new” poem of Sappho—fragment 58, put back together in 2004 from two separate papyri—fares much better. Perhaps the earliest surviving poem on what became a conventional theme—love viewed from a rueful, aging person’s viewpoint—fragment 58 is nevertheless an unusual example. It does something difficult to achieve in Greek by giving no indication of the speaker’s gender. Two and a half thousand years before Jeanette Winterson’s exploration of the ungendered subject in *Written on the Body* (1992), Sappho’s meditative poem explored love from the perspective of a poet of indeterminate sex. Rayor preserves this unique quality and succeeds in conveying something of the “dancing iambs” around which this poem is built, which are suggestive of its central image: “knees buckle/that once could dance light as fawns.”

The translation of canonical lyric poetry raises fundamental questions about what the translator should aim to achieve. Rayor states in her “Note on Translation” that her dual goal is

accuracy, guided by the best textual editions and recent scholarship, and poetry. I believe that beauty and precision in language need not be mutually exclusive.

But where does that leave the important constituents of the poetic effect?

Form, rhythm, and aural impact, and metaphor and image, are inseparable from the information transmitted in the words of a poem and can be more significant. Lyric poets are not only describing their inner lives: they are synthesizing sound, rhythm, diction, and mental pictures in order to maximize sensory and emotional impact. As Emily Dickinson said to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1870, “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry.”

Regrettably, the top of my head always remains in position when I read Rayor’s Sappho. Consider, for example, her scrupulously accurate translation of the “symptoms” section of Sappho’s most delirious poem, “*phainetai moi*”:

I can say nothing,

*my tongue is broken. A delicate fire
runs under my skin, my eyes
see nothing, my ears roar,
cold sweat*

*rushes down me, trembling seizes me,
I am greener than grass.
To myself I seem
needing but little to die.*

The final sentence here, while reproducing the diction in Sappho (although not the word order, in which the crucial word—“die”—comes first), offers neither idiomatic modern English nor inherent beauty.

The question is whether it is unrealistic of me to expect more. And there are some felicitous touches, such as the word describing the noise in the subject’s ears—“roar.” It is harsh on the ear, stronger than Hall’s “hum,” and less heavy-handed than the traditional translation, “thunder.” But the root of the ancient Greek term, *rhomb-*, implies the sound made when a wheel or circular plate—like a top or a cymbal—whizzes around, while the prefix *epi-* suggests that the spinning sound and sensation are assaulting the speaker. Rayer’s “roar” conveys Sappho’s noise, but not her vertigo. Here, as often, the translator whose lexicographical homework produces the most thoughtful rendering is Josephine Balmer in her neglected *Sappho: Poems and Fragments* (1992): “my ears whistle like/the whirling of a top.”

It is inevitable that Rayer has distinguished rivals, given the enormity of Sappho’s cultural presence. Mary Barnard’s incisive modernist renditions, first published in 1958, have never gone out of print. Other well-loved older translations, such as Willis Barnstone’s, first published in 1965, have recently been revised and reissued: he excelled at conveying Sappho’s most conversational idiom and her clean-cut, lapidary phrasing.

But the new millennium has already produced several new translations with something to recommend them. In *Sappho: Poems and Fragments* (2002), Stanley Lombardo-harnesses authentic American speech rhythms to Sappho’s powerful imagery, creating an eminently speakable modern verse idiom:

*Like the sweet apple reddening on the topmost branch,
the topmost apple on the tip of the branch,
and the pickers forgot it,
well, no, they didn't forget, they just couldn't reach it.*

(fragment 69)

For Penguin Classics, Aaron Poochigian's edition, *Stung with Love: Poems and Fragments* (2009), with a dazzling introductory essay by the British poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy, offers free and rather foxy versions geared toward rhythm and sound effects:

*What farm girl, garbed in fashions from the farm
And witless of the way
A hiked hem would display
Her ankles, captivates you with her charm?*

But no amount of new translations can obscure the sad truth that the *only* complete poem by Sappho we could read, until the "Brothers" poem emerged, was fragment 1, the peerless hymn summoning Aphrodite to aid Sappho's erotic pursuit of an unnamed woman. Its seven perfect stanzas survived in entirety because an astute ancient literary critic, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, specified Sappho as the best exponent in verse of what he called the "polished and exuberant" style.

This essential characterization needs to be remembered by all translators of Sappho. Dionysius explains that the "euphony and charm of this passage lie in the cohesion and smoothness of the joinery." But then Dionysius specifies the techniques by which Sappho achieves her effects: "Words are juxtaposed and interwoven according to certain natural affinities and groupings of letters." There could be no sterner challenge to a translator.

Dionysius emphasizes the connections between sounds, the most testing thing to transfer from one language to another. The sound-journey of the Greek poem Dionysius quotes hurtles the listener through four breathless, enjambed stanzas in which Sappho entreats Aphrodite for help. Aphrodite eventually responds in more measured rhythmic clusters, giving shrewd advice in sentences end-stopped simultaneously with the stanzas. What Dionysius called the "groupings of letters" are elaborate: Aphrodite favors alliterative *p* and *d* sounds (symphonious with the sound of her own name), while Sappho begins with dominant *a* sounds (there are

five in the first line alone), requiring the poet, who sang her lyrics, to open her mouth wide to summon the deity from afar. But by the end of the poem, the *a* assonance has been replaced by short *e* sounds interwoven with *s*, suggesting a renewed, sibilant determination to catch the attention of Aphrodite.

This famous poem opens with an address to the love goddess, translated by Rayor as follows:

*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...*

Rayor has succeeded in duplicating Sappho's word order, syntax, and even the alternation of long and short vowels. She has faintly suggested Sappho's alliteration with a different consonant ("weaving wiles"). But her Latinate vocabulary lets her down. Words with Latin roots—"immortal" and "spirit"—tend not to translate Greek as effectively as more earthy Anglo-Saxon terms. The word "immortal" does not convey as piquantly the idea of beings who do not die as either the ancient Greek *athanatos* ("without *thanatos*") or the English "deathless" do. The noun "spirit" has associations with Christianity and disembodiment that do not do justice to the grand Greek *thumos*—the seat of emotion and anger, felt bodily by the ancients in their lower ribcage, and better translated "heart" or "guts." But these are questions of taste: the big decision in this stanza comes with the long Greek compound adjective translated by Rayor as "on the throne of many hues."

The actual manuscript refers not to a throne (*thronos*) but an intellect (*phren* or similar), which suggests that the epithet of Aphrodite refers to her variegated *mind* rather than to her furniture. Although Rayor is following numerous scholars who have chosen to "correct" the transmitted text to what they feel is a linguistically more expected reading, they are ignoring the strangeness of Sappho's eastern Aeolic dialect and her capacity for adventurous neologisms.

The other problem relates to the first half of the epithet: Aphrodite's throne, or mind, is *poikilos*. The term is synaesthetic: it can mean dappled like a fawn's skin, or interthreaded like embroidery. But it also suggests oscillations or constant movement, so it can refer to the changes of note in a melody. This is where the irrepressible Anne Carson comes in. In 2002 she published her translations of Sappho, entitled for one of the poignant short fragments, *If Not, Winter*. Carson's

Sappho is so powerful that it will make life difficult for any future translator. Compared with Rayer's "many hues," how much more exciting is Carson's rendition of this first address, "Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind"? "Spangled" really does convey the idea of patches of light and color shifting constantly.

The qualitative difference between the poetic power of Carson's versions and those of the other most recent translators is apparent just from her arresting version of the "symptoms" stanzas in fragment 31:

*no speaking
is left in me
no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears*

*and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me.*

Carson refuses to accommodate English usage by expanding on Sappho's bare-boned words. Greek needs fewer pronouns and articles, and Carson adds none: the sensory overload and faltering syntax overwhelm the reader or listener. In this translation, a remarkable contemporary poet and expert in Greek magnificently rises to the challenge posed by the most celebrated woman poet of antiquity.

I would recommend Sappho novices to read Rayer/Lardinois and Carson in tandem. But even then they will not fully appreciate one crucial aspect of her status as a founder: that one of the most exquisite, and difficult, of all verse forms, the Sapphic stanza, is named after her. Sapphics consist of three eleven-syllable lines followed by a five-syllable line, with a circular movement in each line that uses long, strong sounds at both ends, framing short, fast syllables in the middle.

There can be no better introduction to the Sapphic stanza than Allen Ginsberg's nostalgic poem, in his late collection *White Shroud* (1986), celebrating the gay trysts of his youth. In a moment of genius, he pays delicate homage to his literary foremother by combining Sapphic form, sensuous diction, and pillow-talk content:

*Red cheeked boyfriends tenderly
kissed me sweet mouthed
under Boulder coverlets winter
springtime
hug me naked laughing & telling girl friends
gossip til autumn*

A very few brave translators have attempted to use Sapphics in their modern-language versions of Sappho's own poems. The most successful are the work of the peerless metrician Richmond Lattimore in *Greek Lyrics* (1955).

Sappho, who still haunts and surprises us, already haunted the imagination of antiquity. The islanders of Lesbos imprinted her face on their coins. An exquisite statue of her stood in the town hall of Syracuse, Sicily. The limestone cliffs from which she was said to have plunged to her death on the island of Leukas (now Lefkada) were an ancient tourist attraction. And a poem in the *Greek Anthology* records the verses inscribed on her tomb, in the first-person voice of Sappho. She tells the visitor to her grave that she is not truly dead, since her nine books of poetry are as deathless as the nine Muses. We have lost 97 percent of those books, and yet the voice of Sappho still speaks to us with grace and authority: "You will know that I escaped the gloom of Hades, and no sun will ever rise on a world which does not know the name of the lyric poet, Sappho."

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