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A CRITIC AT LARGE | MARCH 16, 2015 ISSUE

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GIRL, INTERRUPTED

Who was Sappho?

BY DANIEL MENDELSON

One



day not long
after New
Year's, 2012,
an
antiquities
collector
approached
an eminent
Oxford
scholar for his opinion

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

MANCHESTER ART
GALLERY, UK /
BRIDGEMAN

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

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BOOKS

A SLIMMER, FASTER ILIAD

BY DANIEL MENDELSON



PROFILES

A CAMBRIDGE CLASSICIST TAKES ON HER DETRACTORS

BY REBECCA MEAD

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 . . .

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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.”)

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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

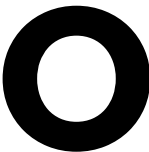
“companions” and “students” have led one expert to argue that Sappho was the leader of a female collective, whose role was “instruction leading to marriage.” Rather than expressions of individual yearning for a young woman, the poems were, in Lardinois’s view, “public forms of praise of the general attractiveness 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.

 bbink'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.” Rayer prefers “endured,” and tells you why she thinks it’s the better reading.

In her translation of the “Old Age Poem,” Rayer 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. ◆

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