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HEARING SAPPHO

BY DANIEL MENDELSON



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“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

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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



A CRITIC AT LARGE
GIRL, INTERRUPTED
BY DANIEL MENDELSON

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://classics.uc.edu/music/>),
and classicists are
increasingly confident
about what Greek
music might have
sounded like
(<http://www.bbc.com/news/bu-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
classics 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.ec>

(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 June—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.

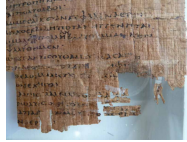
The second thing about
 Daitz's recording of
 Fragment 1 that might
 seem a bit odd is the
 singsong quality of the
 performer's voice as it
 rises, plunges, and yowls
 around the musical
 staff. That's because

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 (<http://www.newyorker.com/r> interrupted) 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,
θύμον·

ἀλλὰ
τυῖδ' ἔλθ',
αἴποτα
κάτέρωτα
τᾶς ἕμας
αὐδως
αἰόισα
πήλυι
ἔκλυες,
πάτρος δὲ
δόμον

λίποισα
 χρύσιον
 ἦλθες

ἄρμ'
 ὑποζεύξαισα·
 κάλοι δέ σ'
 ἄγον
 ὄκτες
 στρούθοι
 περὶ γᾶς
 μελαίνας
 πύκνα
 δινεῦντες
 πτέρ' ἄπ'
 ὠράνω
 αἶθε-
 ρας
 διὰ
 μέσσω.

αἶψα δ'
 ἐξίκοντο·
 τὸ δ', ὦ
 μάκαιρα,
 μειδιάσασ'
 ἀθανάτω
 προσώπῳ,
 ἦρε', ὅτι
 δηῦτε
 πέπονθα
 κῶττι
 δηῦτε
 κάλημι,

κῶπτι
μοι
μάλιστα
θέλω
γένεσθαι
 μαινόλα
θύμω· τίνα
δηῦτε
Πείθω
 μαῖς
ἄγην ἐς
σὰν
φιλότατα,
τίς σ', ὦ
 Ψάπφ',
 ἀδικήει;

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

ἔλθε μοι
καὶ νῦν,
χαλεπᾶν

δὲ λῦσον
 ἔκ
 μεριμνᾶν,
 ὅσσα δέ
 μοι
 τελέσσαι
 θῦμος
 ἰμέρρει,
 τέλεσον·
 σὺ δ' αὐτά
 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.

*From “Sappho: A New
Translation of the
Complete Works
([http://www.cambridge.org/us/
studies/classical-](http://www.cambridge.org/us/classical-studies/classical-)*

*literature/sappho-new-
translation-complete-
works?*

format=HB#contentsTabAnchor,

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Diane Rayor.

Introduction by André

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permission of Cambridge

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*Correction: This piece
originally misstated the
date of Stephen Daitz's
death and his title.*

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.
