

IF NOT, WINTER

F R A G M E N T S O F S A P P H O

T R A N S L A T E D

B Y

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INTRODUCTION

ON SAPPHO

Sappho was a musician. Her poetry is *lyric*, that is, composed to be sung to the lyre. She addresses her lyre in one of her poems (fr. 118) and frequently mentions music, songs and singing. Ancient vase painters depict her with her instrument. Later writers ascribe to her three musical inventions: that of the *plectron*, an instrument for picking the lyre (*Suda*); that of the *pektis*, a particular kind of lyre (Athenaios *Deipnosophistai* 14.635b); and the mixolydian mode, an emotional mode also used by tragic poets, who learned it from Sappho (Aristoxenos cited by Plutarch *On Music* 16.113c). All Sappho's music is lost.

Sappho was also a poet. There is a fifth-century *hydria* in the National Museum of Athens that depicts Sappho, identified by name, reading from a papyrus. This is an ideal image; whether or not she herself was literate is unknown. But it seems likely that the words to her songs were written down during or soon after her lifetime and existed on papyrus rolls by the end of the fifth century B.C. On a papyrus roll the text is written in columns, without word division, punctuation or lineation. To read such a text is hard even when it comes to us in its entirety and most papyri don't. Of the nine books of lyrics that Sappho is said to have composed, one poem has survived complete. All the rest are fragments.

Sappho lived in the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos from about 630 B.C. It is not known when she died. Her exile to Sicily sometime between 604 and 595 B.C. is mentioned in an ancient inscription (the Parian Marble) but no reason for it is given. Biographical sources mention a mother, a father, a daughter, a husband and three brothers of Sappho. She appears to have devoted her life to composing songs; scholars in Alexandria collected them in nine books, of which the first book alone had 1320 lines. Most of this is lost. Her face was engraved on the coinage of Mytilene (see G. M. A. Richter, *Portraits of the Greeks*, 1.70–72) and Hellenistic poets called her “the tenth Muse” or “the mortal Muse” (see *Palatine Anthology* 9.506 and 7.14). The general tenor of ancient opinion on her work is summarized by a remark of Strabo:

Sappho [is] an amazing thing. For we know
in all of recorded history not one woman
who can even come close to rivaling her
in the grace of her poetry.

(13.2.3)

Controversies about her personal ethics and way of life have taken up a lot of people's time throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship. It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there? As Gertrude Stein says:

She ought to be a very happy woman. Now we are able to recognize a photograph. We are able to get what we want.

—"Marry Nettie," *Gertrude Stein Writings 1903–1932*
(New York, 1999), 461

ON THE TEXT

Breaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone.

—J. Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago, 1981), 24

In general the text of this translation is based on *Sappho et Alcaeus: Fragmenta*, edited by Eva-Maria Voigt (Amsterdam, 1971). I include all the fragments printed by Voigt of which at least one word is legible; on occasion I have assumed variants or conjectures from her apparatus into my translation and these are discussed below (see Notes). In translating I tried to put down all that can be read of each poem in the plainest language I could find, using where possible the same order of words and thoughts as Sappho did. I like to think that, the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shows through. This is an amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labor. If light appears

not ruining the eyes (as Sappho says)
but strengthening, nourishing and watering

—Aelius Aristides *Orations* 18.4

we undo a bit of the cloth.

ON MARKS AND LACKS

Sappho's fragments are of two kinds: those preserved on papyrus and those derived from citation in ancient authors. When translating texts read from papyri, I have used a single square bracket to give an impression of missing matter, so that] or [indicates destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line. It is not the case that every gap or illegibility is specifically indicated: this would render the page a blizzard of marks and inhibit reading. Brackets are an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it. I have not used brackets in translating passages, phrases or words whose existence depends on citation by ancient authors, since these are intentionally incomplete. I emphasize the distinction between brackets and no brackets because it will affect your reading experience, if you allow it. Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp—brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.

A duller load of silence surrounds the bits of Sappho cited by ancient scholiasts, grammarians, metricians, etc., who want a dab of poetry to decorate some proposition of their own and so adduce *exempla* without context. For instance, the second-century-A.D. grammarian Apollonios Dyskolos, who composed a treatise *On Conjunctions* in which he wished to make a point about the spelling of the interrogative particle in different dialects of ancient Greek, cites from Sappho this verse:

Do I still long for my virginity?

—Apollonios Dyskolos *On Conjunctions* 490 = Sappho fr. 107 Voigt

Whose virginity? It would be nice to know whether this question comes from a wedding song (and so likely an impersonation of the voice of the bride) or not (and so possibly a personal remark of Sappho's). Apollonios Dyskolos is not interested in such matters. Or consider the third-century-B.C. philosopher Chrysippos whose treatise *On Negatives* includes this negation from Sappho:

Not one girl I think who looks on the light of the sun will ever have wisdom like this.

—Chrysippos *On Negatives* 13 = Sappho fr. 56 Voigt

Wisdom like what? And who is this girl? And why is Sappho praising her? Chrysippos is not concerned with anything except Sappho's sequence of negative adverbs. There is also the second-century-A.D. lexicographer Pollux whose lexicon includes the following entry:

A word *beudos* found in Sappho is the same as the word *kimberikon* which means a short transparent dress.

—Pollux 7.49 = Sappho fr. 177 Voigt

Who would not like to know more about this garment? But the curiosity of Pollux is strictly lexical. In translating such stranded verse I have sometimes manipulated its spacing on the page, to restore a hint of musicality or suggest syntactic motion. For example the sentence cited by Chrysippos becomes:

not one girl I think
who looks on the light of the sun
will ever
have wisdom
like this

This is a license undertaken in deference to a principle that Walter Benjamin calls “the intention toward language” of the original. He says

The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original. . . . Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the center of the language forest but on the outside; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.

—W. Benjamin, “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,”
originally a preface to Benjamin's translation
of Baudelaire (Heidelberg, 1923), 77

I am never quite sure how to hear Sappho's echo but, now and again, reading these old citations, there is a tingle.

So far we have looked at examples of citation without context. Still more haunting are instances of context without citation. Some wonderful night of Sappho's life, not to say the prayer that it evoked, survives only as an allusion of the fourth-century-A.D. orator Libanius:

So if nothing prevented the Lesbian Sappho from praying that her night be made twice as long, let it be permitted me too to pray for something like this.

—Libanius *Orations* 12.99 = Sappho fr. 197 Voigt

Some song of Sappho's that Solon heard sung by a boy is mentioned in an anecdote of Stobaios but Stobaios omits to tell us what song it was:

Solon of Athens heard his nephew sing a song of Sappho's over the wine and since he liked the song so much he asked the boy to teach it to him. When someone asked why he said, *So that I may learn it then die.*

—Stobaios *Florilegium* 3.29.58

Some shrewd thinking of Sappho's about death is paraphrased by Aristotle:

Sappho says that to die is evil: so the gods judge. For they do not die.

—Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1398b = Sappho fr. 201 Voigt

As acts of deterrence these stories carry their own kind of thrill—at the inside edge where her words go missing, a sort of antipoem that condenses everything you ever wanted her to write—but they cannot be called texts of Sappho's and so they are not included in this translation.

Ποικίλοφρον ἄθανάτ' Ἀφροδίτα,
 παῖ Δίῳσ δολιόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,
 μή μ' ἄσσαισι λιμηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
 πότνια, θυμόν,

ἀλλὰ τυίδ' ἔλιθ', αἶ ποτα κατέρωτα
 τὰς ἔμας αὔιδας αἰοίσα πήλοι
 ἔκλυες, πάτροις δὲ δόμον λίποισα
 χιρύσιον ἦλθες

ἄρμ' ὑπασδεύξαισα· κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον
 ὤκεες στροῦιθοι περὶ γὰς μελαίνας
 πύμνα δίνινεντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνω αἴθε-
 ροῖς διὰ μέσσω·

αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοινο· σὺ δ', ὦ μάκαιρα,
 μειδιαίλαις ἄθανάτωι προσώπωι
 ἦρε' ὅττι δηῖτε πέπονθα κῶττι
 δηῖτε κιάλημιμι

κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι
 μαινόλαι λιθύμωι· τίνα δηῖτε πείθω
 ἄσφαγην ἐς σὺν φιλότατα; τίς σ', ὦ
 Ψάμφ', ἀδίκησι;

Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind,
child of Zeus, who twists lures, I beg you
do not break with hard pains,

O lady, my heart

but come here if ever before
you caught my voice far off
and listening left your father's
golden house and came,

yoking your car. And fine birds brought you,
quick sparrows over the black earth
whipping their wings down the sky
through midair—

they arrived. But you, O blessed one,
smiled in your deathless face
and asked what (now again) I have suffered and why
(now again) I am calling out

and what I want to happen most of all
in my crazy heart. Whom should I persuade (now again)
to lead you back into her love? Who, O
Sappho, is wronging you?

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

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λῦσον
ἐκ μερίμναν, ὅσσοι δέ μοι τέλεσσαι
θῦμος ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον, εὐδ' αὐτὰ
σύμμαχος ἔσσο.

For if she flees, soon she will pursue.
If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them.
If she does not love, soon she will love
even unwilling.

Come to me now: loose me from hard
care and all my heart longs
to accomplish, accomplish. You
be my ally.

]

. .ανοθεν κατιου[ς]-
 δευρουμμεκρητεις[.]ρ[]|. ναῦον
 ἄγνον ὄππ[αι]| χάριεν μὲν ἄλσος
 μαλί[αν],| βῶμοι δ' ἔκνι θυμιάμε—
 νοι [λι]|βανώτω<ν>·

ἐν δ' ὕδωρ ψῦχροιν,| κελάδει δι' ὕσδων
 μαλίνων,| βρόδοιςι δὲ παῖς ὁ χῶρος
 ἐςκί[αςτ', αἰθυσσομένων δὲ φύλλων|
 κῶμα καταιριον·

ἐν δὲ λείμωνι ἰππόβοτος τέθαλε
 τωτ. . . (.)ριν|νοις ἄνθειςιν, αἰ <δ'> ἄηται
 μέλλι|χα πν[έο]ιςιν []
 []

ἔνθα δὴ σὺ συ.αν| ἔλοισα Κύπρι
 χρυσίαισιν ἐν κυλίναςισιν ἄβρωσ
 <ὀ>μ<μ>ε<μ>εῖ|χμενον θαλίαισι| νέκταρ
 οἶνοχόειςα

]

here to me from Krete to this holy temple
 where is your graceful grove
 of apple trees and altars smoking
 with frankincense.

And in it cold water makes a clear sound through
 apple branches and with roses the whole place
 is shadowed and down from radiant-shaking leaves
 sleep comes dropping.

And in it a horse meadow has come into bloom
 with spring flowers and breezes
 like honey are blowing
 []

In this place you Kypris taking up
 in gold cups delicately
 nectar mingled with festivities:
 pour.

|δώσῃν
 κλύτων μέντ' ἐπ[
 κ]άλων κᾶσλων, ς[
]λοις, λύπης τέμ[
]μ' ὄνειδος
 |οιδήσαις . ἐπιτα[
]'αν, ἄσαιο . τὸ γὰρ .[
]μον οὐκοῦτω μ[
] διάκηται,
]μηδ[]. αἴε,
]χίς, ἐσνίημι
]. ης κακότητα[ς
]μεν
]ν ἀτέραις με[
]η φρένας, εὔ[
]ατοίς μακα[
]
]α[

]to give
]yet of the glorious
]of the beautiful and good, you
]of pain [me
]blame
]swollen
]you take your fill. For [my thinking
]not thus
]is arranged
]nor
 all night long] I am aware
]of evildoing
]
]other
]minds
]blessed ones
]
]

]θε θῶμον
]μι πάμπαν
] δύναμαι,
]
]ας κεν ἦ μοι
]ξαντιλάμπην
]λον πρόσωπον.
]
]γχοῖσθεις,
]'. .]ρος

]heart
]absolutely
]I can
]
]would be for me
]to shine in answer
]face
]
]having been stained
]

Κύπρι καὶ] Νηρηΐδες, ἀβλάβη[ν μοι
 τὸν κασίγνητον δ[ό]τε τυΐδ' ἴκεσθα[ι
 κῶσσα F]οι θύμω[ν] κε θέλη γένεσθαι
 πάντα τελέεσθην,

ὄσσα δὲ πρ[ό]σθ' ἄμβροτε πάντα λῦσα[ι
 καὶ φίλοις]ι Fοῖα χάραν γένεσθαι
 ἔ]χθροισι, γένοιτο δ' ἄμμι
μ]ηδ' εἶς·

τὰν κασιγνήταν δὲ θέλοι πόησθαι
]τίμας, [όν]ίαν δὲ λύγραν
]οτοῖσι π[ά]ροιθ' ἀχεύων
]να
]εισαΐω[ν] τὸ κέγχρω
]λεπαγ[. . (')]αι πολίταν
]λλω[. . .]νηκε δ' αὐτ' οὐ
]κρω[]
]οναικ[]εο[]ι
] . . []ν· εὐ [δ]ῆ Κύπ[ρι] . . [. . (')]να
]θεμ[έν]α κάκων []
]ι.

O Kypris and Nereids, undamaged I pray you
grant my brother to arrive here.

And all that in his heart he wants to be,
make it be.

And all the wrong he did before, loose it.

Make him a joy to his friends,
a pain to his enemies and let there exist for us
not one single further sorrow.

May he willingly give his sister

her portion of honor, but sad pain

]grieving for the past

]

]millet seed

]of the citizens

]once again no

]

]

]but you Kypris

]setting aside evil [

]

ὡς δα .[
κακχ[

ατρ[
κτα .[
.].[
θα[

στεῖχ[
ὡς ἰδω[
τὰς ἐτ .[
ποτνια .[

χρυσοπ[
καππο[
.ανμ[
χᾶρα .[
].[

6

so

]

]

]

]

]

Go [

so we may see [

]

lady

of gold arms [

]

]

doom

]

Δωρί]χας.[.....].[
]κην κέλετ', οὐ γαρ [
]αίς
]κάνην ἀγερωχία[
]μμεν' ὄαν νέοις[
].αν φ[ι]λ[.....].[
]μα. [

]Doricha's
]gives orders, for not
]
]top pride
]like young men
]beloved
]

] . ν . φ . [
] α μ φ . [
 "A] τ θ ι · ς ο . [
] . ν έ φ [
] [

8

]

]

]Atthis for you

]

]

]αρχαλειοιτασε.[
]παν οὐκεχη[
]ερ ἑόρταν
]μαν [Ἡ]ραι τελει[
].ωνέμ[
].. ἄς ἄ.[
]υσαι [
].οσδε[
]ν.[

]invites

]all not

]feast

]for Hera

]

]as long as

]

]

]

],...[
]ςθε,[
] []
]νοημ[
],απεδ[
],ηνεο[
] []
],.ρις.[
],.ιφ[

]

]

]

]thought

]barefoot

]

]

]

]

Οἱ μὲν ἱππῶν στροφήν, οἱ δὲ πέσδων,
οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖς ἐπ[ι] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιςτον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὄτ—
 τω τις ἔραται·

πά]γχυ δ' εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι
π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ', ἃ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἑλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα
 τὸν [αρ]ίςτον

καλλ[ί]ποις' ἔβα 'ς Τροίαν πλέοι[σα]
κωῦδ[ε] πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων
πά[μ]παν ἑμνάσθη, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὐταν
 ']σαν

]αμπτον γὰρ []
]... κούφωσι []ση.[.]γ
. .]με νῦν Ἄνακτορί[ας ὀ]γέμναι-
 ς' οὐ] παρεοίσεας,

Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot
 and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing
 on the black earth. But I say it is
 what you love.

Easy to make this understood by all.

For she who overcame everyone
 in beauty (Helen)

 left her fine husband

behind and went sailing to Troy.

Not for her children nor her dear parents

had she a thought, no—

]led her astray

]for

]lightly

]reminded me now of Anaktoria

 who is gone.

τᾶ]ς <κ>ε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα
κᾶμάρυγμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω
ἦ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κᾶν ὄπλοισι
περδομ]άχεντας.

] . μεν οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι

] . ν ἄνθρωπ[. . (.) πεδέχην δ' ἄρασθαι

[]

[]

[]

[]

[]

προς[

ὥςδ[

..]. [

..]. []ωλ . [

τ' ἐξ ἀδοκῆ[]τω.

I would rather see her lovely step
and the motion of light on her face
than chariots of Lydians or ranks
of footsoldiers in arms.

]not possible to happen

]to pray for a share

]

]

]

]

]

toward[

]

]

]

out of the unexpected.

Close to me now as I pray,
 lady Hera, may your gracious form appear,
 to which the sons of Atreus prayed,
 glorious kings.

They won very many prizes
 first at Troy then on the sea
 and set out for here but
 could not complete the road

until they called on you and Zeus of suppliants
 and Thyone's lovely child.
 Now be gentle and help me too
 as of old[

Holy and beautiful
 maiden
 around[
]

]]
]
 to be
]to arrive.

<Π>άν κεδ[
<ε>ννέπηγ[
γλῶσσα μ[
μυθολογη[

κᾶνδρι .[
μεσδον[

Pan

to tell[

tongue[

to tell tales[

and for a man

greater[

]

]μενοισα[

]θ' ἐν θύοισι[

] ἔχοισαν ἔςλι[

]

]ει δὲ βαισα[

]ὺ γὰρ ἴδμεν[

]ιν ἔργων

]

]δ' ὑπίσσω [

κ]ἀπικυδ[

]τοδ' εἴπη[

]

]waiting

]in sacrifices

]having good

]

]but going

]for we know

]of works

]

]after

]and toward

]says this

]επι . εςμα[
]ε, γάνος δὲ και . .[
]
 τ]ύχαι εὖν ἔςλαι
 λί]μενος κρέτηςαι
 γ]ᾶς μελαίνας
]
]έλοισι ναῦται
] μεγάλαις ἀήται[ς
]α κἀπὶ χέρσω
]
]μοθεν πλέοι .[
]δε τὰ φόρτι' εἶν[
]νατιμ' ἐπεὶ κ .[
]
]ρέοντι πόλλ . .[
]αιδέκα[
]ει
]
]εν ἔργα
] χέρσω [
] . α
]
] . .[

]

]gladness and

]

]with good luck

]to gain the harbor

]of black earth

]

]sailors

]in big blasts of wind

]upon dry land

]

]sail

]the freight

]when

]

]many

]

]

]

]works

]dry land

]

]

]

]

].επαβολης[

]ανδ' ὄλοφυν [. . .]ε .

] τρομέροισ π . [. .]αλλα

]

] χροά γηρας ἤδη

]ν ἀμφιβάσκει

]ς πέταται διώκων

]

]τας ἀγαύας

]ξα, λάβοισα

]ιᾶεισον ἄμμι

«τὰν ἰόκολπον»

]

]ρων μάλιστα

]ας π[λ]άναται

]

]

]pity

]trembling

]

]flesh by now old age

]covers

]flies in pursuit

]

]noble

]taking

]sing to us

the one with violets in her lap

]mostly

]goes astray

]ἔρωτος ἡλπ[
]
 αν]τιον εἰσίδω[
] Ἐρμιόνα τεαυ[τα
] ξάνθαι δ' Ἐλέναι ς' εἰς[κ]ην
]κε[
] .ις θνάταις, τόδε δ' ἴ[θι,] τὰι ςᾶι
]παίσαν κέ με τὰν μερίμναν
]λαις' ἀντιδ[. .] '[.]αθοις δ᾽
]
]τας ὄχθοις
]ταιν
 παν]λυχί[δ]ην
] [

]of desire
]
]for when I look at you
]such a Hermione
]and to yellowhaired Helen I liken you
]
]among mortal women, know this
]from every care
]you could release me
]
]dewy riverbanks
]to last all night long
] [

24A

]

]you will remember

]for we in our youth

did these things

yes many and beautiful things

]

]

]

24C

]

]we live

]

the opposite

]

daring

]

]

]

] , έδαφο[

]αικατε[

]ανέλο[

]

] , [] , αι

λ]επτοφών[

] , εα , [

24D

]

]

]

]

]

]in a thin voice

]

Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
 ἔμμεν' ὦνηρ, ὅστις ἐναντιός τοι
 ἰσθάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδου φωνεί-
 ρας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελάσας ἱμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
 καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
 ὥς γὰρ <ἔς> σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὥς με φώνη-
 ρ' οὐδὲν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλὰ καμ μὲν γλῶσσαι ἔαγε, λέπτον
 δ' αὐτικά χρωῖ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν,
 ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημμ', ἐπιβρό-
 μειςι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἐκαθε μ' ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
 παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτιέρα δὲ πλοῖας
 ἔμμι, τεθινάκην δ' ὀλίγω ἰπιδειύης
 φαίνομι ἔμ' αὐτ[αι].

ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα

He seems to me equal to gods that man
 whoever he is who opposite you
 sits and listens close
 to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
 puts the heart in my chest on wings
 for when I look at you, even a moment, 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.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty