



# SAPPHO

A NEW TRANSLATION

by  
MARY BARNARD

Foreword by Dudley Fitts

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® To Douglas and Marie Paige  
in return for the little volume  
of *Lirici Greci*

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## ▣ FOREWORD

In one of her fragments Sappho says, or seems to say, that men in time to come will remember her. So much is any poet's permissible hope, that

non omnis moriar, magnaue pars mei  
vitabit Libitinam,

yet of few poets has it come more uncomfortably true. Who is Sappho? A lyrist unparalleled, a great beauty, no great beauty, a rumor, a writer of cultist hymns, a scandal, a fame, a bitchy sister to a silly brother, a headmistress, a mystic, a mistress of the poet Alkaios, a pervert, a suicide for love of a ferryman, an androgyne, a bluestocking, a pretty mother of a prettier daughter, an avatar of Yellow Book neodiabolism; a Greek. We can agree to "lyrist" and "Greek," particularising the latter as sixth century and Lesbian, and basing the former on the evidence of two nearly intact poems and a number of fragments. The rest is speculation, when it is not something less savory, and neither the gossip of scandalmongers nor the scru-

pulous research of scholars should cause us to forget that it is nothing but speculation. We have heard a great deal about Sappho, and we know almost nothing. The sands of Egypt have been generous and papyruses are still being found, but unless we are granted a discovery of almost theophanic import we are not likely to learn much more.

Yet a reputation like Sappho's can not be wholly the result of accident. The ancient writers who knew her work agreed that she was a poet of the first importance. The scandal that attaches itself to her may have been popularized by the writers of Middle Comedy, but scandal of this sort does not gravitate towards a nonentity. Moreover, the testimony of the two preserved odes argues an idiosyncratic, almost inimitable power, and even "devouring Time" has been most kind in the very act of devouring: for there is this to be said for fragmentary survival, that no one can prove that you didn't write brilliantly, and an ingenious partisan can make it apparent that you did. A certain radiance may invest even the meanest of your remaining shreds; so that when an old commentator writes

At the porch the most musical and *μελιχρόφωνοι*  
[gentle-voiced] of the girls sang the marriage an-  
them, which clearly is Sappho's most delicate com-  
position,

a word not otherwise notable can become germinally suggestive, a toy for the imagination. From the tiny part we are tempted to imagine the whole: a generous exercise, if we remember that it is intended as nothing

more conclusive, and one that is admirably rewarding in Miss Barnard's book.

What I chiefly admire in Miss Barnard's translations and reconstructions is the direct purity of diction and versification. There are perilous guesses, audacious twists, and inevitable flights to the authority of intuition alone; but there is no spurious poeticism, none of the once so fashionable Swinburne-Symonds erethism provoked by

The small dark body's Lesbian loveliness  
That held the fire eternal.

(I think it did, by the way.) What Miss Barnard perceives, and what no one would ever have guessed from the general run of talk about Sappho, is the pungent downright plain style. An excellent example is the beginning of fragment 16 (Miss Barnard's 41):

Some say a cavalry corps,  
some infantry, some, again,  
will maintain that the swift oars

of our fleet are the finest  
sight on dark earth; but I say  
that whatever one loves, is.

I do not see how that could be bettered. Like the Greek, it is stripped and hard, awkward with the fine awkwardness of truth. Here is no trace of the "sweete slyding, fit for a verse" that one expects to find in renderings of Sappho. It is exact translation; but in its composition, the spacing, the arrangement of stresses, it is also high art. This, one thinks, is what

Sappho must have been like; and Longinus, or whoever wrote that famous treatise *De Sublimitate*, was no fool when he pointed to her marshaling of sharp details, rather than to the melody of her verse, as the secret of her eloquence. Antipoetry, one may say; but it may be that antipoetry is what one needs, if it implies the discarding of gauds and ornamental tropes, the throwing overboard of the whole apparatus of factitious "beauty" that has for so long attached itself to the name of Sappho of Lesbos.

DUDLEY FITTS

## CONTENTS

1. Tell everyone
2. We shall enjoy it

### PART ONE

3. Standing by my bed
4. I asked myself
5. And I said
6. I confess
7. At noontime
8. I took my lyre and said
9. Although they are
10. That afternoon
11. We heard them chanting
12. It's no use
13. People do gossip
14. Peace reigned in heaven
15. When I saw Eros
16. You are the herdsman of evening
17. Sleep, darling
18. Although clumsy
19. Tomorrow you had better

20. We put the urn aboard ship
21. Cyprian, in my dream
22. In the spring twilight
23. And their feet move
24. Awed by her splendor
25. Now, while we dance

PART TWO Epithalamia

26. The evening star
27. It is time now
28. For her sake
29. *Hymen Hymenaon!*
30. We drink your health
31. Bridesmaids' carol I
32. Bridesmaids' carol II
33. They're locked in, oh!
34. Lament for a maidenhead
35. You wear her livery
36. Why am I crying?

PART THREE

37. You know the place: then
38. Prayer to my lady of Paphos
39. He is more than a hero
40. Yes, Atthis, you may be sure
41. To an army wife, in Sardis
42. I have had not one word from her
43. It was you, Atthis, who said

PART FOUR

44. Without warning
45. If you will come
46. Thank you, my dear
47. I was so happy
48. Now I know why Eros
49. She was dressed well
50. But you, monkey face
51. I was proud of you, too
52. After all this
53. With his venom
54. Afraid of losing you
55. It is clear now
56. Day in, day out
57. You will say
58. Tell me
59. I said, Sappho
60. You may forget but
61. Pain penetrates

PART FIVE

62. The nightingale's
63. Last night
64. Tonight I've watched
65. Persuasion
66. Many's the time
67. At my age
68. That was different
69. This way, that way

70. My lovely friends
71. I ask you, sir, to
72. Of course I love you
73. Yes, it is pretty
74. I hear that Andromeda
75. Well!
76. Sappho, when some fool
77. Strange to say
78. I taught the talented
79. Really, Gorgo
80. As you love me
81. Greetings to Gorgo
82. Rich as you are
83. Don't ask me what to wear

#### PART SIX

84. If you are squeamish
85. Before they were mothers
86. Experience shows us
87. We know this much
88. Say what you please
89. Then the god of war
90. As for the exiles
91. In memory
92. Do you remember
93. Be kind to me
94. You remind me
95. When they were tired
96. The gods bless you
97. I have often asked you

98. It is the Muses
99. Must I remind you, Cleis
100. I have no complaint

A Footnote to These Translations	95
Notes	107
Bibliography	111
Descriptive Index	112

☐ 1 Tell everyone

Now, today, I shall  
sing beautifully for  
my friends' pleasure

☐ 2 We shall enjoy it

As for him who finds  
fault, may silliness  
and sorrow take him!



▣ PART ONE

▣ 3

Standing by my bed

In gold sandals  
Dawn that very  
moment awoke me

▣ 4 I asked myself

What, Sappho, can  
you give one who  
has everything,  
like Aphrodite?

▣ 5 And I said

I shall burn the  
fat thigh-bones of  
a white she-goat  
on her altar

▣ 6 I confess

I love that  
which caresses  
me. I believe

Love has his  
share in the  
Sun's brilliance  
and virtue

☐ 7 At noontime

When the earth is  
bright with flaming  
heat falling straight down

the cricket sets  
up a high-pitched  
singing in his wings

☐ 8 I took my lyre and said:

Come now, my heavenly  
tortoise shell: become  
a speaking instrument

☐ 9 Although they are

Only breath, words  
which I command  
are immortal

10 That afternoon

Girls ripe to marry  
wove the flower-  
heads into necklaces

11 We heard them chanting:

FIRST  
VOICE Young Adonis is  
dying! O Cytherea  
What shall we do now?

SECOND  
VOICE Batter your breasts  
with your fists, girls—  
tatter your dresses!

12 It's no use

Mother dear, I  
can't finish my  
weaving

You may  
blame Aphrodite

soft as she is

she has almost  
killed me with  
love for that boy

@ 13 People do gossip

And they say about  
Leda, that she

once found an egg  
hidden under

wild hyacinths

@ 14 Peace reigned in heaven

Ambrosia stood  
already mixed  
in the wine bowl

It was Hermes  
who took up the  
wine jug and poured  
wine for the gods

@ 15 When I saw Eros

On his way down  
from heaven, he

wore a soldier's  
cloak dyed purple

@ 16

You are the herdsman of evening

Hesperus, you herd  
homeward whatever  
Dawn's light dispersed

You herd sheep—herd  
goats—herd children  
home to their mothers

@ 17

Sleep, darling

I have a small  
daughter called  
Cleis, who is

like a golden  
flower

I wouldn't  
take all Croesus'  
kingdom with love  
thrown in, for her

▣ 18      Although clumsy

Mnasidica has a more  
shapely figure than  
our gentle Gyrinno

▣ 19      Tomorrow you had better

Use your soft hands,  
Dica, to tear off  
dill shoots, to cap  
your lovely curls

She who wears flowers  
attracts the happy  
Graces: they turn  
back from a bare head



▣ 20

We put the urn aboard ship  
with this inscription:

This is the dust of little  
Timas who unmarried was led  
into Persephone's dark bedroom

And she being far from home, girls  
her age took new-edged blades  
to cut, in mourning for her,  
these curls of their soft hair

▣ 21

Cyprian, in my dream

The folds of a purple  
kerchief shadowed  
your cheeks—the one

Timas one time sent,  
a timid gift, all  
the way from Phocaea

㊦ 22

In the spring twilight

The full moon is shining:  
Girls take their places  
as though around an altar

㊦ 23

And their feet move

Rhythmically, as tender  
feet of Cretan girls  
danced once around an

altar of love, crushing  
a circle in the soft  
smooth flowering grass

☐ 24      Awed by her splendor

Stars near the lovely  
moon cover their own  
bright faces

                  when she  
is roundest and lights  
earth with her silver

☐ 25      Now, while we dance

Come here to us  
gentle Gaiety,  
Revelry, Radiance

and you, Muses  
with lovely hair

▣ PART TWO

Epithalamia

☐ 26      The evening star

Is the most  
beautiful  
of all stars

27 It is time now

FIRST  
VOICE For you who are so  
pretty and charming

to share in games  
that the pink-ankled  
Graces play, and

gold Aphrodite

O never!

SECOND  
VOICE I shall be a  
virgin always

28 For her sake

We ask you  
to come now

O Graces O  
rosy-armed  
perfection:

God's daughters

▣ 29 *Hymen Hymenaon!*

FIRST  
VOICE Raise the rafters! Hoist  
them higher! Here comes  
a bridegroom taller  
than Ares!

SECOND  
VOICE *Hymen  
Hymenaon!*

FIRST  
VOICE He towers  
above tall men as  
poets of Lesbos  
over all others!

SECOND  
VOICE *Sing Hymen  
O Hymenaon*

▣ 30 We drink your health

Lucky bridegroom!  
Now the wedding you  
asked for is over

and your wife is the  
girl you asked for;  
she's a bride who is

charming to look at,  
with eyes as soft as  
honey, and a face

that Love has lighted  
with his own beauty.  
Aphrodite has surely

outdone herself in  
doing honor to you!

Bridesmaids' carol I

O Bride brimful of  
rosy little loves!

O brightest jewel of  
the Queen of Paphos!

Come now  
to your  
bedroom to your  
bed  
and play there  
sweetly gently  
with your bridegroom

And may Hesperus  
lead you not at all  
unwilling  
until  
you stand wondering  
before the silver

Throne of Hera  
Queen of Marriage

Bridesmaids' carol II

FIRST  
VOICE  
Virginity O  
my virginity!

Where will you  
go when I lose  
you?

SECOND  
VOICE  
I'm off to  
a place I shall  
never come back  
from

Dear Bride!  
I shall never  
come back to you

Never!



▣ 33 They're locked in, oh!

The doorkeeper's  
feet are twelve  
yards long! ten shoe-

makers used five  
oxhides to cobble  
sandals for them!

▣ 34 Lament for a maidenhead

FIRST  
VOICE Like a quince-apple  
ripening on a top  
branch in a tree top

not once noticed by  
harvesters or if  
not unnoticed, not reached

SECOND  
VOICE Like a hyacinth in  
the mountains, trampled  
by shepherds until  
only a purple stain  
remains on the ground

▣ 35

You wear her livery

Shining with gold,  
you, too, Hecate,  
Queen of Night, hand-  
maid to Aphrodite

▣ 36

Why am I crying?

Am I still sad  
because of my  
lost maidenhead?

▣ PART THREE

You know the place: then

Leave Crete and come to us  
waiting where the grove is  
pleasantest, by precincts

sacred to you; incense  
smokes on the altar, cold  
streams murmur through the

apple branches, a young  
rose thicket shades the ground  
and quivering leaves pour

down deep sleep; in meadows  
where horses have grown sleek  
among spring flowers, dill

scents the air. Queen! Cyprian!  
Fill our gold cups with love  
stirred into clear nectar

Prayer to my lady of Paphos

Dapple-throned Aphrodite,  
eternal daughter of God,  
snare-knitter! Don't, I beg you,

cow my heart with grief! Come,  
as once when you heard my far-  
off cry and, listening, stepped

from your father's house to your  
gold car, to yoke the pair whose  
beautiful thick-feathered wings

oaring down mid-air from heaven  
carried you to light swiftly  
on dark earth; then, blissful one,

smiling your immortal smile  
you asked, What ailed me now that  
made me call you again? What

was it that my distracted  
heart most wanted? "Whom has  
Persuasion to bring round now

"to your love? Who, Sappho, is  
unfair to you? For, let her  
run, she will soon run after;

"if she won't accept gifts, she  
will one day give them; and if  
she won't love you—she soon will

"love, although unwillingly. . . ."  
If ever—come now! Relieve  
this intolerable pain!

What my heart most hopes will  
happen, make happen; you your-  
self join forces on my side!

He is more than a hero

He is a god in my eyes—  
the man who is allowed  
to sit beside you—he

who listens intimately  
to the sweet murmur of  
your voice, the enticing

laughter that makes my own  
heart beat fast. If I meet  
you suddenly, I can't

speak—my tongue is broken;  
a thin flame runs under  
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears  
drumming, I drip with sweat;  
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than  
dry grass. At such times  
death isn't far from me

Yes, Atthis, you may be sure

Even in Sardis

Anactoria will think often of us

of the life we shared here, when you seemed  
the Goddess incarnate  
to her and your singing pleased her best

Now among Lydian women she in her  
turn stands first as the red-  
fingered moon rising at sunset takes

precedence over stars around her;  
her light spreads equally  
on the salt sea and fields thick with bloom

Delicious dew pours down to freshen  
roses, delicate thyme  
and blossoming sweet clover; she wanders

aimlessly, thinking of gentle  
Atthis, her heart hanging  
heavy with longing in her little breast

She shouts aloud, Come! we know it;  
thousand-eared night repeats that cry  
across the sea shining between us

To an army wife, in Sardis:

Some say a cavalry corps,  
some infantry, some, again,  
will maintain that the swift oars

of our fleet are the finest  
sight on dark earth; but I say  
that whatever one loves, is.

This is easily proved: did  
not Helen—she who had scanned  
the flower of the world's manhood—

choose as first among men one  
who laid Troy's honor in ruin?  
warped to his will, forgetting

love due her own blood, her own  
child, she wandered far with him.  
So Anactoria, although you

being far away forget us,  
the dear sound of your footstep  
and light glancing in your eyes

would move me more than glitter  
of Lydian horse or armored  
tread of mainland infantry

I have had not one word from her

Frankly I wish I were dead.  
When she left, she wept

a great deal; she said to  
me, "This parting must be  
endured, Sappho. I go unwillingly."

I said, "Go, and be happy  
but remember (you know  
well) whom you leave shackled by love

"If you forget me, think  
of our gifts to Aphrodite  
and all the loveliness that we shared

"all the violet tiaras,  
braided rosebuds, dill and  
crocus twined around your young neck

"myrrh poured on your head  
and on soft mats girls with  
all that they most wished for beside them

"while no voices chanted  
choruses without ours,  
no woodlot bloomed in spring with-  
out song . . ."

It was you, Atthis, who said

“Sappho, if you will not get  
up and let us look at you  
I shall never love you again!

“Get up, unleash your suppleness,  
lift off your Chian nightdress  
and, like a lily leaning into

“a spring, bathe in the water.  
Cleis is bringing your best  
purple frock and the yellow

“tunic down from the clothes chest;  
you will have a cloak thrown over  
you and flowers crowning your hair . . .

“Praxinoa, my child, will you please  
roast nuts for our breakfast? One  
of the gods is being good to us:

“today we are going at last  
into Mitylene, our favorite  
city, with Sappho, loveliest

“of its women; she will walk  
among us like a mother with  
all her daughters around her

“when she comes home from exile . . .”

But you forget everything

@ PART FOUR

☐ 44 Without warning

As a whirlwind  
swoops on an oak  
Love shakes my heart

☐ 45 If you will come

I shall put out  
new pillows for  
you to rest on



▣ 46

Thank you, my dear

You came, and you did  
well to come: I needed  
you. You have made

love blaze up in  
my breast—bless you!  
Bless you as often

as the hours have  
been endless to me  
while you were gone

▣ 47

I was so happy

Believe me, I  
prayed that that  
night might be  
doubled for us

▣ 48

Now I know why Eros,

Of all the progeny of  
Earth and Heaven, has  
been most dearly loved

▣ 49

She was dressed well:

Her feet were hidden  
under embroidered  
sandal straps—fine  
handwork from Asia

▣ 50

But you, monkey face

Atthis, I loved you  
long ago while you  
still seemed to me a  
small ungracious child

▣ 51

I was proud of you, too

In skill I think  
you need never  
bow to any girl

not one who may  
see the sunlight  
in time to come

▣ 52

After all this

Atthis, you hate  
even the thought

of me. You dart  
off to Andromeda

@ 53

With his venom

Irresistible  
and bittersweet

that loosener  
of limbs, Love

reptile-like  
strikes me down

@ 54

Afraid of losing you

I ran fluttering  
like a little girl  
after her mother

☐ 55

It is clear now:

Neither honey nor  
the honey bee is  
to be mine again

☐ 56

Day in, day out

I hunger and  
I struggle

☐ 57

You will say

See, I have come  
back to the soft  
arms I turned from  
in the old days

☐ 58

Tell me

Out of all  
mankind, whom  
do you love

Better than  
you love me?

▣ 59

I said, Sappho

Enough! Why  
try to move  
a hard heart?

▣ 60

You may forget but

Let me tell you  
this: someone in  
some future time  
will think of us

▣ 61

Pain penetrates

Me drop  
by drop

▣ PART FIVE

The soft-spoken  
announcer of  
Spring's presence

▣ 63

Last night

I dreamed that  
you and I had  
words: Cyprian

▣ 64

Tonight I've watched

The moon and then  
the Pleiades  
go down

The night is now  
half-gone; youth  
goes; I am

in bed alone



▣ 65

Persuasion

Aphrodite's  
daughter, you  
cheat mortals

▣ 66

Many's the time

I've wished I, O  
gold-crowned  
Aphrodite,  
had luck like that

▣ 67

At my age

Why does the swallow  
of heaven, daughter  
of King Pandion,  
bring news to plague me?

▣ 68

That was different

My girlhood then  
was in full bloom  
and you—

▣ 69

This way, that way

I do not know  
what to do: I  
am of two minds

▣ 70

My lovely friends

How could I change  
towards you who  
are so beautiful?

▣ 71

I ask you, sir, to

Stand face to face  
with me as a friend  
would: show me the  
favor of your eyes

▣ 72

Of course I love you

But if you love me,  
marry a young woman!

I couldn't stand it  
to live with a young  
man, I being older

▣ 73

Yes, it is pretty

But come, dear, need  
you pride yourself  
that much on a ring?

▣ 74

I hear that Andromeda—

That hayseed in her hay-  
seed finery—has put  
a torch to your heart

and she without even  
the art of lifting her  
skirt over her ankles

▣ 75

Well!

Andromeda has  
got herself a  
fair exchange

▣ 76

Sappho, when some fool

Explodes rage  
in your breast  
hold back that  
yapping tongue!

▣ 77

Strange to say

Those whom I treated  
well are those who do  
me the most injury now

▣ 78

I taught the talented

And furthermore, I did  
well in instructing  
Hero, who was a girl  
track star from Gyara

▣ 79

Really, Gorgo,

My disposition  
is not at all  
spiteful: I have  
a childlike heart

▣ 80

As you love me

Cypris, make her  
find even you too  
bitter! Make her

stop her loud-mouthed  
bragging: "See, twice  
now, Doricha

"has arrived at  
just such love  
as she wanted!"

81

Greetings to Gorgo

I salute, madam,

the descendant of  
many great kings

a great many times

82

Rich as you are

Death will finish  
you: afterwards no  
one will remember

or want you: you  
had no share in  
the Pierian roses

You will flitter  
invisible among  
the indistinct dead  
in Hell's palace  
darting fitfully

Don't ask me what to wear

I have no embroidered  
headband from Sardis to  
give you, Cleis, such as  
I wore

and my mother  
always said that in her  
day a purple ribbon  
looped in the hair was thought  
to be high style indeed

but we were dark:

a girl  
whose hair is yellower than  
torchlight should wear no  
headdress but fresh flowers

PART SIX

▣ 84

If you are squeamish

Don't prod the  
beach rubble



▣ 85

Before they were mothers

Leto and Niobe  
had been the most  
devoted of friends

▣ 86

Experience shows us

Wealth unchaperoned  
by Virtue is never  
an innocuous neighbor

▣ 87

We know this much

Death is an evil;  
we have the gods'  
word for it; they too  
would die if death  
were a good thing

▣ 88

Say what you please

Gold is God's child;  
neither worms nor  
moths eat gold; it  
is much stronger  
than a man's heart

▣ 89

Then the god of war

Ares, boasted to us  
that he could haul off  
Hephaistos, master of  
the Forges, by sheer force

▣ 90

As for the exiles

I think they had  
never found you,  
Peace, more diffi-  
cult to endure!

▣ 91

In memory

Of Pelagon, a fisherman,  
his father Meniscus placed

here a fishbasket and oar:  
tokens of an unlucky life

▣ 92

Do you remember

How a golden  
broom grows on  
the sea beaches

93

Be kind to me

Gongyla; I ask only  
that you wear the cream  
white dress when you come

Desire darts about your  
loveliness, drawn down in  
circling flight at sight of it

and I am glad, although  
once I too quarrelled  
with Aphrodite

to whom

I pray that you will  
come soon

94

You remind me

Of a very gentle  
little girl I once  
watched picking flowers

95

When they were tired

Night rained her  
thick dark sleep  
upon their eyes

▣ 96

The gods bless you

May you sleep then  
on some tender  
girl friend's breast

▣ 97

I have often asked you  
not to come now

Hermes, Lord, you  
who lead the ghosts  
home:

But this time  
I am not happy; I  
want to die, to see  
the moist lotus open  
along Acheron

▣ 98

It is the Muses

Who have caused me  
to be honored: they  
taught me their craft

▣ 99

Must I remind you, Cleis,

That sounds of grief  
are unbecoming in  
a poet's household?

and that they are not  
suitable in ours?

▣ 100

I have no complaint

Prosperity that  
the golden Muses  
gave me was no  
delusion: dead, I  
won't be forgotten

▣ A FOOTNOTE

TO THESE TRANSLATIONS

Lesbos in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. considered itself the very fountainhead of Greek song. Sappho was not, as has sometimes been assumed by those unacquainted with the tradition, a lonely poet adrift on a provincial island. The Greek-speaking world had no capital city, but Mitylene and the neighboring cities along the coast of Asia Minor—Phocaea, Miletus, Ephesus, and Smyrna—were among the richest and liveliest Greek settlements of that period. In the islands lying south of Lesbos off the Asia Minor coast—those which we call the Dodecanese—both art and science were flourishing. This was the age which produced the Hera of Samos and the Pythagorean philosophers.

Sappho was “early” if you consider Periclean Athens the peak towards which Greek civilization was tending, but this of course is a point of view which could never have occurred to her. She was riding the crest of her own wave; her world seemed as modern to her as ours does to us, and just about as troubled. Further-

more, her view of it was not limited. She must have known Egypt and Babylon by hearsay and perhaps even Marseilles, since the city of Phocaea had already established its colony there. If the tradition that she spent a period of exile in Syracuse is based on fact, she knew Sicily at first hand. She is said to have been exiled by the tyrant Pittacus for political reasons; nevertheless, if we may judge by the surviving poems, what interested her most was her private life and her poetry. In these interests she is not untypical of women and poets generally.

The biographical tradition,<sup>1</sup> which is full of contradictions, says further:

That she was born in Mitylene, or in Eresus on the same island;

That her birth date was about 612 B.C., or earlier, or later;

That her father's name was Scamandronymous, or Eurygyus, or Simon, or Eunominus, or Euarchus, or Ecrytus, or Semus;

That her mother's name was Cleis;

That she married a merchant of Andros, named Cercolas, and had a daughter Cleis; or, contrariwise, that Cercolas is a fictitious name, and that Cleis was not her daughter;

That she had three brothers, one being Charaxus, who incurred the displeasure of his sister when he purchased the freedom of a courtesan named Doricha;

<sup>1</sup> Most of the gossip is quoted and discussed by J. M. Edmonds in *Lyra Graeca*, Vol. I (Loeb Classical Library, 1922 and 1928).

That Sappho herself was a prostitute; that she was not;

That, maddened by her hopeless love for Phaon, a ferryman, she threw herself from the Leucadian cliffs (on an island lying between Ithaca and Corfu); or, contrariwise, that she died at home in bed, tended by her daughter, Cleis (see poem 99);

That the girls whose names are mentioned in the poems—Anactoria, Atthis, Gongyla, Hero, Timas—were her pupils, and participants with her in the religious exercises of *kallichoron* Mitylene (Mitylene of the beautiful dances); or, conversely, that they were no such thing.

Most of this material is irrelevant to the reading and enjoyment of her poems in any case. We do not need to know her father's name or her husband's. The dispute about Cleis is more serious because of the references to her in the poems. I have assumed that when Sappho said "daughter" she meant "daughter." All the references to Cleis seem to fit in with that assumption.

The charge of prostitution is usually dismissed by modern scholars as a myth originating in the good-natured fun of Athenian comic poets. The tale about the Leucadian cliffs is seldom taken seriously nowadays. The final argument, that concerning Sappho's role as priestess and pedagogue, has a considerable bearing on the reading and translation of the poems. Unfortunately it is far from being settled. The case *for* has been stated by many scholars, including Sir

Maurice Bowra. The case *against* has been recently and roundly stated by Denys L. Page in terms which have completely convinced some of his readers.

Bowra says in his essay on Sappho:

She was the leader and chief personality in an institution which trained young girls, but owing to the customs of the time this institution had a special character. It was, as she herself calls it, a *moisopolōn domos*, a house of those who cultivated the Muses. But it was much more than a school or an occasional association of girls for religious purposes. It was primarily concerned with the cult of Aphrodite, and its members formed a *thiasos*, resembling that at Eresus, which excluded men from its number, or the company of women on Paros united in the cult of Aphrodite Oistro. Sappho's *thiasos* was not the only one of its kind in Mitylene. Others were controlled by her rivals, Gorgo and Andromeda, and Sappho's relations with them were not of the friendliest character. The members of the *thiasos* were bound to each other and to their leader by ties of great strength and intimacy, and Maximus of Tyre was not far wrong when he compared the relations between Sappho and her pupils with those between Socrates and his disciples. But while Socrates held his young men together by his personal influence and the glamour he gave to the quest for truth, Sappho was bound to her maidens by ties which were at least half religious. . . .

A *thiasos* of this kind cannot really be considered in its proper aspect if we judge it by the standards of the modern world. Its cult was not a self-conscious aestheticism but a genuine worship of a goddess in whom all believed. . . . The Muses were honored with Aphrodite. It was felt that her ceremonies de-

manded songs, and in song her devotees were trained by Sappho. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Professor Page rejects both the *thiasos* and the *moisopolōn domos*. He says:

It is clear and certain that the themes of the great majority of extant fragments are the loves and the jealousies, the pleasures and pains, of Sappho and her companions. We have found, and shall find, no trace of any formal or official or professional relationship between them: no trace of Sappho the priestess of a cult association, Sappho the principal of an academy; with feigned solemnity we exorcise these melancholy modern ghosts.<sup>3</sup>

He does, however, accept the remark of Maximus of Tyre which compares the positions of Socrates and Sappho; he also agrees, as regards the girls, that "They come from Miletus, from Phocaea, from Colophon, to live in Sappho's society; and one day they go away again." This he calls a "commonplace" situation, though it seems to me unparalleled, and altogether more remarkable than the *thiasos* described above, remarkable as that is. Andromeda, he says, is the "leader of a company of young women," a rival like Gorgo; presumably, then, young girls are sent to<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> C. M. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford, 1936), pp. 187-189. (There is a great deal more of this.)

<sup>3</sup> Denys L. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 139-140. (There is a great deal more of this, too.)

<sup>4</sup> Professor Page might object to "sent to"; however, although a number of scholars are agreed that the women of Lesbos and Miletus may have had greater freedom than Athenian women, no one has ever suggested that young unmarried girls had money to spend as they liked and freedom to travel where they pleased.



them also, from the islands and from Greek cities along the Asia Minor coast, yet there is no formal relationship, and no trace of a religious cult:

. . . the theory finds no support whatever in anything worthy of the name of fact. External sources help it not at all: the search must be limited to the surviving fragments of Sappho's poetry. And there we find nothing that suggests, let alone enforces, the recognition of a priestess or the principal of an academy.<sup>5</sup>

To the phrase "external sources" he appends the following astonishing footnote:

The copious but inane biographical tradition offers nothing more valuable than the word *mathetriaí* in Suidas: certain girls, according to this, were "pupils" of Sappho; this need mean no more than that Sappho taught her friends the tricks of her poetic trade (96.5 [my 40]). Atthis was herself a singer.

In translating and annotating these poems I have followed Bowra. I myself should prefer, however, to compare Sappho's entirely hypothetical position to that of *kapelmeister*, or perhaps to that of a Renaissance painter with a studio full of talented young fellows picking up the tricks of painting altarpieces. The phrase "principal of an academy" makes the whole theory absurd, as, of course, Professor Page intended. In the end he seems to agree on essentials if not on the romantic overtones. His insistence that we have no evidence of a *formal* relationship, may mean simply that we have found no signed contracts, arti-

<sup>5</sup> Page, *op. cit.*, p. 111 and footnote 2.

cles of apprenticeship or licenses to teach. The scholar who deciphers fragments of illegible writing on a papyrus two thousand years old is subject to a discipline which requires him to reject any assumption not forced on him by the evidence before his eyes. That is as it should be. However, when we come to consider the sense of the poetry and the human relationships, we should, I feel, have the privilege of tentatively rejecting any theory which outrages common sense, and tentatively accepting one which clarifies an otherwise incomprehensible picture, whether the theory we accept is forced upon us by the textual evidence or not.

The surprising number of women poets<sup>6</sup> in sixth-century Greece suggests that for some reason people thought it advisable for young women to study and practice the composition of poetry and music. The choruses of girls dancing and singing at festivals in honor of Artemis and Aphrodite suggest a possible reason for this unusual attitude, namely, the use of songs in religious exercises, some of which were performed exclusively by and for women. We know that Alcman trained and wrote for choruses of girls in Sparta, and we have good reason to assume that Sappho performed the same service for her native city. Alcman, it is said, was brought from Sardis to Sparta to fill this role of *kapelmeister*, but local talent must often have been employed; and the parents of ambitious young girls who aspired to the position might,

<sup>6</sup> Even one woman poet would be surprising. We hear, however, of a number of them, including Corinna of Thebes, who is said to have taught Pindar the tricks of *his* trade.

in that case, have been moved to send them to study with the most celebrated lyricist of the day if she were willing to accept them as students, companions, apprentices, novices, or whatever word may be considered appropriate. On this hypothesis an otherwise inexplicable situation becomes understandable even if some aspects of it strike us as highly unusual.

## 2

These translations were undertaken, first of all, for my own pleasure and instruction. I have also tried, for the benefit of those who do not read Greek, to convey some of the qualities of the original which earlier translations do not carry over—at least to the modern ear. I could hardly expect to reproduce all the virtues of a poem by Sappho in an English translation. The flexibility of Greek allows complicated tense structure and swift movement at the same moment. The ambiguities which enrich her simplest lines, the overtones and undertones, the occasional puns, which are not quite puns and seem right instead of ridiculous, are almost impossible to convey in another language. Besides, I would have to be technically as expert as she was in order to approximate the music of her poetry.

Of all her virtues, however, the one most stressed by her modern critics and least taken account of by her translators is that of fresh colloquial directness of speech. Bowra says:

The sense of her poems goes naturally with the meter and seems to fall into it, so that it looks like ordinary speech raised to the highest level of expressiveness. In her great range of different meters there is not one which does not move with perfect ease and receive her words as if they were ordained for it.<sup>7</sup>

I should say, rather: as if she had invented it in that moment for that phrase alone.

This style of writing, which she brought to its greatest perfection, was peculiar to her age, and to the Aeolian lyric tradition. The writers in the iambic meter used speech cadence, but their songs were not sung to the accompaniment of the lyre, and so they are not, strictly speaking, lyricists. Pindar, on the other hand, belonged to a tradition in which personal expression was no longer important. Before he died, the lyrical tradition itself had been superseded by tragedy, and the impersonal lyric had become the chorus.

Every translator of poetry has to face and solve somehow the problem of "that which is untranslatable." The translator of Sappho has to cope with serious textual problems in addition. The texts vary to such an extent and have been emended by so many hands that the translator has a choice of words and meanings for almost every line. Such problems often arise out of the circumstances of survival. The sources for our texts are various, and most of them are as unsatisfactory as might be expected in the case of a

<sup>7</sup> Bowra, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

poet who lived twenty-five centuries ago. Sappho may or may not have written her poems down. She sang or recited them with lyre accompaniment; they were passed on to professional singers who sang them wherever Greek was spoken. Copies were made and these copies were copied. The earliest papyrus text we possess dates from the third century B.C., about three hundred years after her death. Copyists were not always reliable, so that different texts sometimes offer choices of words, when we are fortunate enough to have two texts.

Papyrus books were long rolls of a kind of durable paper made from the stalks of a water plant. The poems were written crosswise of the roll, in capitals because lower case had not yet been invented. Punctuation marks and Greek accents, which often determine the meaning of a word to the modern scholar, are also lacking. When a sentence is incomplete, or only possibly complete, the absence of these guides to reading becomes more serious. Greek construction allows considerable freedom in the placing of words—adjectives for instance—and the punctuation placed by the modern scholar who edits the text may establish which noun the adjective modifies. These difficulties are added to what appears to be a deliberate use of ambiguity, as in the placing of “gold” where it modifies either the chariot of Aphrodite or the home of her father.

The papyrus scrolls were eventually torn into strips, crosswise of the roll, lengthwise of the poem, and pasted together to form cartonnage coffins. Other papyri

have been found, torn into strips, on rubbish heaps, and other strips were wadded and stuffed into the mouths of mummified crocodiles. The tearing into strips has meant that we have, of the poems which survive only on papyrus, the middles of some lines, both ends of others, and some half lines, but almost no complete lines. This is the case with a good many poems which I have not tried to translate. Other fragments have been preserved by grammarians who quoted a phrase to illustrate a special use of the negative, a grammatical error, or the Aeolian form of a noun ending in *o*. Still others were preserved by literary critics who quoted passages as examples of the felicity of her style, or her use of (for instance) the antispastic brachycatalectic trimeter variation of *ionic a majore* meter. Dionysius of Halicarnassus quoted the whole of the Ode to Aphrodite. Longinus quoted what is probably all of poem 39. Most of their colleagues, confident that their readers would have all her poems well in mind, merely referred to “the poem in which Sappho says” with perhaps a line or two of quotation. Other morsels were cited to illustrate points made by an orator, an antiquarian, or a historian. Aristotle quoted fragment 87.

In translating these poems, I have been careful to put into first lines, set off as titles, the supplementary phrases which are sometimes taken from the context in which the fragment was quoted, sometimes supplied by me for the sake of elucidation, as a setting for the tiny fragment, or as a conjecture to supply the sense of missing lines. Wherever the text is taken

from a tattered papyrus, I have usually preferred to condense instead of filling in the gaps, although here and there it has seemed better to guess at a word or accept the guess of some scholar. I have made minor grammatical changes whenever I had what seemed a good reason for them; and I have added here and there a phrase descriptive of the function of a god or goddess who is less familiar to the modern reader than Aphrodite. As for the music, I have done what I could. The sin which I have been most careful to avoid is that of spinning the fragment out "to make a poem." What is there, with the exceptions which I have noted, is what Sappho said, or at any rate what they say she said.

MARY BARNARD

## ▣ NOTES

In the following notes "E." followed by a number indicates the number of the poem or fragment in Edmonds (see bibliography). The Greek text, full notes on sources, and fairly literal translations will be found in that volume. This is the text I have used unless I have indicated otherwise.

1. Athenaeus, *Doctors at Dinner*. E. 12.
2. Treatise on Etymology. E. 18.

### PART ONE

3. Ammonius, citing grammatical error. E. 19.
4. Hephaestion, on metric. E. 126.
5. Apollonius, on pronouns. E. 7.
6. Athenaeus (*see* 1). E. 118.
7. Demetrius, literary criticism. E. 94.
8. Hermogenes, literary criticism. E. 80.
9. The text of this fragment is from a vase painting; the last word is illegible. E. 1a. *See* Haines, 1, and plate 12.
10. Scholiast on Aristophanes. E. 67.
11. Hephaestion (*see* 4). E. 103.
12. The same. E. 135, including note 2.
13. Treatise on Etymology. E. 97. Text from Wharton, 56.
14. Athenaeus (*see* 1). E. 146.
15. Pollux, on vocabulary. E. 69. Text from Wharton, 64.
16. Demetrius (*see* 7). E. 149.
17. Hephaestion (*see* 4). E. 130.
18. The same. E. 115.
19. Athenaeus (*see* 1). E. 117.
20. Palatine Anthology. This is probably complete. E. 144, including note.
21. Athenaeus (*see* 1), speaking of head kerchiefs. E. 87.