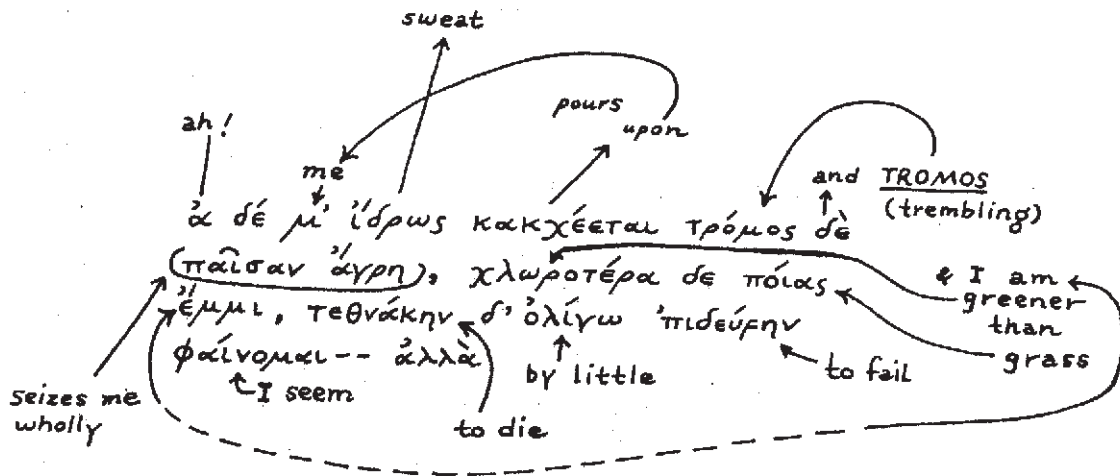


# A Tribute to Sappho

—a talk, with music, given at Poet's House  
in New York City, March 30, 2001

Edward Sanders



Since first I translated Sappho  
and memorized her meters  
in Bluma Trell's Greek Lyric Poetry class  
in 1964 at NYU

I have been in love, in awe, and deepest respect  
for this great great poet!

1.

## Shreds of Infinity

I think of Sappho often  
Her life on little tattered papyrus shreds  
or snippets in critics—  
Longinus, or Dionysius of Halicarnassus

I love her songs of longing  
—the one in the meters known as  
the 2nd paean, ∪—∪∪, the Ionic a majore ——∪∪  
and the Trochee —∪

δέδυκε μὲν ἅ σελάννα  
καὶ Πληιάδες μέσαι δὲ  
νύκτες, παρὰ δ' ἔρχεται ὥρα,  
ἔγω δὲ μόνα κατεύδω

Something like

Selanna (the moon) has dipped  
and the Pleiades too  
Ahh midnight darkens  
& I sleep alone...

but, you know, there's so much more  
in her sequences of sound

O Sappho! Sappho!  
Shreds! Shreds!

They may have heated the baths with your verse  
but I think of you every day  
because you are a helpmate to those of us who are

*Thirsting for Peace in a Raging Century*  
*Thirsting for Peace in a Raging Century*

2.

Time eats poetry



**A Papyrus of Sappho's Verse**

and Sappho sorely suffered from that devoration.  
Her poetry survives in a number of forms:

- on ostraca or pieces of pottery
- on pieces of 6th or 7th century parchment
- on papyrus fragments from a place in Upper Egypt

called Oxyrhynchus, where many ancient writings  
were found in the late 19th early 20th centuries.

- in brief quotes of her poetry by ancient writers
- on lists of her words and lines in ancient glossaries & dictionaries

and, the only two surviving full poems of Sappho  
were saved by two literary writers; one by Dionysius of  
Halicarnassus, and the other by the writer named Longinus  
in their books

What happened to the ancient poems?

Well, you'll recall that Akhenaton's name was chipped  
away from his monuments deliberately  
by those who later opposed his religious innovations.

What the Taliban did

to the rock statues of Buddha in 2001  
the Christians, as they rose to power,  
& the so-called Barbarian invaders that sacked the  
Roman empire  
and later the Muslims, as they too grabbed hegemony,  
tended to do to the ancient manuscripts.

They got rid of as much of the multi-deity past as they  
could get away with.

There were many libraries in the ancient world  
but libraries are often the victims of war  
& the ancient libraries were virtually all rubbed out of the  
tracks of time

When Caesar set fire to the fleet in Alexandria's harbor  
the flames accidentally destroyed one of the big libraries

Around 391 AD, Christians destroyed the books in the Serapeum,  
another big library in Alexandria

It is alleged that when the Muslims seized Egypt  
the ancient manuscripts were used to heat the  
water in the baths

They're not sure today exactly where  
the Great Library at Alexandria was located.

Though war hates books, poets are sometimes fascinated with bellicosity,  
but you won't find much talk of war in the

shreds of Sappho,  
but rather the melodies of love, tenderness, family,  
partying, arousal, longing, sadness, and fun.

An example of this is in the papyrus that begins

οἱ μὲν ἵππῶν στρότον οἱ δὲ πέσδων  
οἱ δὲ νόων φαῖς' ἐπὶ γᾶν μέλαιναν  
ἔμμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὅτ-  
τω τις ἔραται

(in Sappho's own Mixolydian meter)

whose meaning is something like this:

Some say that the most beautiful thing  
on the darkling earth  
is a stroton of horsemen, others a stroton of troops  
and yet others a stroton of ships  
but to me the most beautiful  
is the one whom someone loves.

Later in the same tattered papyrus she  
sings of her friend Anactoria

τᾶς κε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα  
κᾶμάρυγμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω  
ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κᾶν ὅπλοισι  
πεσδομάχεντας

which is:

I would rather look at her erotic walk &  
the shiny sparkle of her face  
than gaze at the chariots & soldiers  
of the Lydians  
fighting on foot

3.

### **Sappho's Legacy**

Greek scholars in the 19th & early 20th Century  
were of course very learned  
& tried to fill in the lacunae of her shredded fragments

Some of the fill-ins were quite clever  
but, in the end, just guesses.

The Loeb Classical Library published an edition  
of Sappho in 1921 which contained many of these  
fragments with the filled-in additions.  
That's the edition I learned Sappho on in college

A updated edition of Sappho was published by Loeb  
in 1982, translated by David Campbell

and reveals more starkly how shredded the Sappho legacy actually is,  
for gone now are the fill-ins

and the fragments stand for what they are  
pieces of a brilliant mind  
& they are sometimes frustrating & maddening  
because you hunger for someone somewhere

in an ancient desert  
to dig up a jar with all nine of her books intact  
so as to savor her entirety!

4.

### **Her Life**

Sappho was born on the island of Lesbos, near Asia Minor, around 650 BC  
She was a contemporary of the poet Alcaeus

Like many controversial humans, you have to sift through the allegations  
to isolate the possible truth.

She apparently was born to a family of means  
She had a brother named Larichus  
She apparently had a child named Cleis

whom she apparently took with her into exile in Sicily  
during one of those Greek times of unrest

There are a lot of “apparently”s when you speak of Sappho’s life

She may have run a kind of finishing school  
for upper class young women of Mitylene, the Asia Minor coast, and nearby islands

Her fragments show clear passion for close women friends,  
with names such as Gongyla, Atthis, Anactoria, and others.

All in all, there is a Shakespeare-level mystery about the facts of her life.

What’s true is that she was thought of as “The Tenth Muse”  
& she was so well known in Greek civilization that  
the city of Mytilene put her likeness on its coins

5.

### The Specifics of Eros

The Greeks did not talk much  
about the vagina, or genitals in general  
in their literature

There are, however, a number of examples of erotic activity  
in ancient Greek vases.

and of course there’s an erotic mystery  
about Sappho  
but you will not find much in her extant verse  
of a specifically erotic nature

The word for clitoris, for instance, ἡ κλειτορίς, is not found in Sappho  
nor is the Greek verb, κλειτοριάζω, to touch or rub the clit.

The word vagina, ὁ κτεῖς, is not found in her verse,  
nor the olisbos, ἡ ὀλίσβος, the Greek for dildo.  
There was even a Greek word, ὀλισβοκόλλιξ for penis-shaped bread  
but it is not found in the complicated lines of the Tenth Muse

The poet Archilochus was known to use the word ἀηδονιδεύς  
the Greek for nestling nightingale, as slang for vagina.

There is a fragment of Sappho  
which uses the word βρενθείω, denoting a young waterbird,  
which, in its context perhaps could be interpreted as the  
same usage as Archilochus.

Or maybe not.

In another of her fragments is a word ὄρπετον “orpeton”  
which could possibly be translated as “hot-bottomed”

The text was saved in Hephaestion’s *Handbook on Meters*  
(It’s written in anapests, ♩ ♩ ♩, a meter not used much in modern times.)

Ἔρος δηυτέ μ’ ὀ λυσιμέλης δόνει,  
γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον  
Ἄτθι, σοὶ δ’ ἐμέθεν μὲν ἀπήχθετο  
φροντίσδην, ἐπὶ δ’ Ἀνδρομέδαν πότῃ

which is translated as

Limb-loosening Eros  
                  shakes me  
sweet-&-bitter, helpless, hot-bottomed  
Oh Atthis! It is hateful to you  
to think of me,  
but instead you  
                  flutter after Andromeda.

What you get from Sappho are the delicate combinations of  
feelings of desire, erotic fascination and longing.

One of her singly saved lines is καὶ ποθήω καὶ μάομαι

for “I hunger and I am longing”

or the fragment saved by Maximus of Tyre

Ἔρος δ’ ἐτίναξέ μοι  
φρένας, ὠ άνεμος κατ’ ὄρος δρύσιν ἐμπέτων

which can be translated as:

Eros shook my being  
as a wind  
    down a mountain  
        shakes the oak trees

There was probably as great a percentage of  
    puritans in ancient times as there is now,  
    & other Greek poets who wrote poems of Eros  
    such as Archilochus & Hipponax  
    suffered the same shreddy fate as the great poet of Lesbos

who, for all the centuries since her life has been controversial.  
The Greek comedy-writers took her up—  
at least six comedies titled *Sappho* were produced in ancient times.

6.

### Poetry & Music

Sappho wrote in a wide variety of meters  
    in the Aeolian dialect of Greek  
    with its interesting verb-endings & variations  
    on words

Her lines have exquisite flows  
    of metrical patterns.

The specifics of ancient metrics & pronunciation,  
as well as those regarding stress or accent, and duration of syllables,  
remain somewhat mysterious and controversial

but there's enough believable information  
to make some educated approximations of the sound of  
    ancient poems.

Basically there were three accents: acute, grave, and circumflex.  
and the syllables of verse were held for different durations  
    according to fairly specific rules  
    to create complicated systems of metrics

Long syllables were to be held about twice as long as short syllables—  
not as easy to accomplish when singing or reciting, say, Sappho



as you might think.

Sappho's verse was written to be sung to a lyre  
She's depicted on vases playing it.  
& she calls out to her lyre in a famous two-line fragment  
(its text not totally clear, and in a difficult meter,  
the first line maybe beginning with a pair of anapests ~ ~ ´ ~ ~ ´ )

ἀγι δὴ χέλυ διᾶ μοι λέγε  
φωναέσσα δε γίνεο

Come o sacred lyre of mine! Speak out!  
Gift yourself with speech.....

Sappho also writes of singing her poems beautifully  
to delight her companions,  
such as in the fragment:

Τάδε νῦν ἔταιροισ  
ταῖς ἑμῆις τέρπνα κάλως αἰείσω

translated as:

I now shall sing  
these poems w/ beauty  
for the pleasure of my female friends.

Sappho wrote 9 books of odes, epithalamia (wedding poems), elegies & hymns

(These 9 books were arranged by a scholar in the Alexandrian era, a  
time of literary classification & scholarship after the time of Alexander  
the Conqueror)

She created her own mode, the Mixo-Lydian, according to Plutarch.  
& she realized her genius in a great variety of meters  
which are astounding today to analyze

They're difficult— some of her meters  
remain elusive to me  
even after years of study

but there's something that only the word exquisite  
can define, about the mystery

and the smooth symmetry  
of her fragments.

Even in her single-word fragments  
you can see her  
genius with words.

Her most well-known metrical creation is the Sapphic stanza  
which is the metrical form of the two poems that have survived  
more or less intact.

The pattern is this:  $\begin{array}{cccccc} -\cup & -\cup & -\cup\cup & -\cup & -\cup \\ -\cup & -\cup & -\cup\cup & -\cup & -\cup \\ -\cup & -\cup & -\cup\cup & -\cup & -\cup \\ -\cup & -\cup & -\cup & -\cup & -\cup \end{array}$

(with substitutions allowed, long vowels for short)

7.

### The Hymn to Aphrodite

Here is the “Hymn to Aphrodite” saved for us by Dionysius of Halicarnassus  
a Greek writer born around the time of Christ.

The poem is utterly remarkable in that it contains  
a conversation between Sappho and the goddess Aphrodite.  
It reveals that Sappho was perhaps an actual religious Aphroditian  
in her sense of the real-world presence of Aphrodite  
whom she summoned in her longing  
to come from afar to help her:

Splendor-throned, deathless  
love-ploy-plotting Aphrodite,  
Daughter of Zeus, I pray to thee.  
Do not overwhelm my heart  
with cares and griefs, my Queen.

But, come to me now, if ever now and  
again in the past, listening from afar,  
you heard my prayers, and harnessed  
your golden chariot to leave  
your father's realm, thy chariot  
drawn by two swift swans with  
thickly flashing wings from heaven  
through the middle of the upper sky  
down upon the darkling earth.

ποικιλόθρον' ἀθάνατ' Ἀφροδίτα  
παῦ Δίος σοχόπλοκα, λίσσομαί σε  
μῆ μ' ἄσκεισι μηδ' ὀνίασι δάμνα,  
πότνια θυμόν

ἀλλὰ τυίσ' ἔλθ', αἴ ποτα κατέροττα  
τάς ἑμας αὖσως αἰοῖσα πήλι  
ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δάμον λίποισα  
χρῦσιον ἦλθες

ἄρμ' ὑπασδέυξαισα, κάλω δε σ' ἄγον  
ἕκεστρούθω προτὶ γᾶν μέλαιναν  
πύκνα δύνεντε πτέρ' ἀπ' ὀρράνω αἰθε-  
ρος διὰ μέσσω,

The swift swans brought thee  
quickly near, o Aphrodite,  
and you asked me,  
with a smile on your deathless face,  
what it was that  
made me suffer so, and why  
was I crying out, what  
did I want most specially  
to assuage my raging heart?

“Whom shall I persuade,”  
you asked, “to bring you  
the treasure of torrid love?  
Who, o Sappho,  
who wrongs thee?”

αἶψα δ' ἔξικοντο· σὺ δ' ὦ μάκαρρα,  
μειδικάσασθ' ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ  
ἦρε' ὅτι δῆυτε πέπονθα, κῶττι  
δῆυτε κάλημι

κῶττι' ἔμῳ μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι  
μαινόλ' αὖ θυμῷ· “τινα δῆυτε πείθω  
καὶ σ' ἔγην ἐς φάν φιλότατα; τίς τ', ὦ  
ψάπφ', ἀδικήει;

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

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λύσον  
ἐκ μερίμναν, ὅσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι  
θυμὸς ἰμμέρροι, τέλεσον, σὺ δ' αὐτὰ  
σύμμαχος ἔσσο

If she flees thee  
swiftly shall  
she dance at  
thy heels

If she does not  
take thy gifts  
swiftly shall she  
give

If she loves thee not,  
swiftly shall  
she glide in  
the beams of desire,  
even be she unwilling  
at first,” you said  
to me Aphrodite.

O come to me at once, o  
Aphrodite, and free me  
from this harsh love pain!

That which my soul craves to be done  
do it! o do it!  
You yourself, in living person  
be thou my ally!

### The “Phainetai Moi...”

The second full poem was saved for us by the writer, Longinus, in his book *On the Sublime*, written sometime in the 1st or 2nd century AD.

This 4-quatrain poem has been translated by Catullus (into Latin), by Byron, by William Carlos Williams, and by many other poets,  
including Edward Sanders.

My translation is:

Equal to the gods  
is the man who sits  
in front of you leaning closely  
and hears you sweetly speaking  
and the lust-licking laughter  
of your mouth, oh it makes my  
heart beat in flutters!

When I look at you  
Brochea, not a part of my  
voice comes out,  
but my tongue breaks,  
and right away  
a delicate fire runs just beneath  
my skin,

I see a dizzy nothing,  
my ears ring with noise,  
the sweat runs down  
upon me, and a trembling  
that I cannot stop  
seizes me limb and loin,  
o I am greener than grass, and  
death seems so near....

And here is the text, which I have set to music  
in honor of the Mixo-Lydian original:

Equal to the gods  
is the man who sits  
in front of you leaning closely  
and hears you sweetly speaking  
and the lust-licking laughter  
of your mouth, oh it makes my  
heart beat in flutters!

When I look at you  
Broches, not a part of my  
voice comes out,  
but my tongue breaks,  
and right away  
a delicate fire runs just beneath  
my skin,  
I see a dizzy nothing,  
my ears ring with noise,  
the sweat runs down  
upon me, and a trembling  
that I cannot stop  
seizes me limb and loin,  
o I am greener than grass, and  
death seems so near...

Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
ἔμμεν ὤνηρ ὅστις ἐναντίος τοῖ  
ἰζάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδῃ φωνή-  
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαιώσας ἡμέρῃσιν τό μ' ἦ μὲν  
κράζον ἐν στῆθεσσι, ἐπεπτακσεν  
ὡς γὰρ ἐς τ' ἰδῶν, θρόσχε', ὡς με φώνης  
οὔδεν ἐτ' ἴκει

Sa a a a rho I yearn for you  
across the centuries

ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲν γλῶσσά φέρε γέ λείπτον  
δ' αὐτικὰ χροῦ πῦρ ὑπερδεδράμακεν  
ὀπηπάτωσσι δ' οὔδεν ὀρη μ' ἐπιφράμ-  
ρῆσι δ' ἄκουσι

ὦ δὲ μ' ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ  
παῖσαν ἄγρη, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποῖας  
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω ἴπισύσθη  
φαίνομαι - ἀλλὰ ....

Sa a a a rho I yearn for you  
across the centuries

Thus have I shared with you  
some of my feelings for the great poet Sappho

# The "Phainetai Moi..."

Melody by Edward Sanders  
Transcribed by Steven Taylor

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 7/4 time signature. It consists of seven staves of music. The first three staves (measures 1-6) feature a melody with a triplet of eighth notes in measure 5. The fourth staff (measures 7-8) contains a chord progression: C major, D major, and A major. The fifth staff (measures 9-10) continues with Amin, C major, and A major. The sixth staff (measures 11-13) includes Amin, C major, A major, D major, C major, and G major. The seventh staff (measure 14) begins with an A major chord and is marked 'Da capo'.

## The Mystery of Ancient Greek Accents

“On the whole I believe that there is fairly wide agreement about the nature of the acute and circumflex accents, but not about the grave. The acute accentuation seems to have been an upward glide of the voice within a gamut of approximately a fifth (say, C to G or *doh* to *soh*). Probably— but this is not attested in the evidence— only the higher tones of this upward glide were clearly audible, and the peak note, *soh*, was probably the salient one, i.e., the point of maximum audibility. The circumflex apparently consisted in an upward glide similar to the acute on the first part of the vowel— which was always long— and a downward glide, also within the gamut of about a fifth, on the second part. Probably— but here again there is no evidence— the falling tone did not audibly descend all the way from *soh* to *doh*. Perhaps it reached its salient tone round about *mi* or E in the range C-G..... We use approximation to these pitch-variations in our interrogative ‘Yés?’ and dubious ‘Yé-ès.’

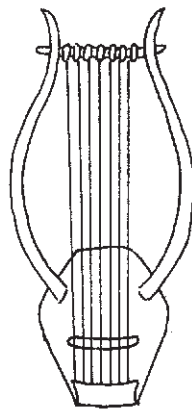
“The vowels which are left without any pitch-mark in a modern Greek text, e.g., the first two in ἄρετή, were apparently pronounced at a pitch-level approximating to the low note of the *doh-soh* gamut.”

The grave is a problem. What did the grave accent actually indicate, as it applies to the chanting or singing of Greek poetry?

Stanford believes that the grave is probably “a modification of the oxytone” or acute. It can be explained, he believes, “if the grave-accent mark was used loosely to mean both ‘keep the pitch of your voice down’ and ‘bring the pitch of your voice down (from the normal high tone.)’”

Even so, Stanford admits, “there is no certain evidence at all” as to how the grave was actually pronounced. He thinks it may be pronounced as a “falling tone within the gamut *soh-doh*...”

—from W.H. Stanford, *The Sound of Greek*,  
“Remarks on the Pronunciation of the Greek Pitch Accent”  
University of California Press, 1967, pages 157-159



Come, o Sacred Lyre!  
Make yourself Sing!





