

Diane J. Raynor and André Lardinois. *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-107-02359-8

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Sappho was born over two thousand years ago, but we are still disputing almost everything we know about her. An aristocrat from the isle of Lesbos, Sappho was celebrated for her poetic prowess both during her own lifetime and beyond. She has been conscripted into a variety of roles throughout her chequered reception in different time periods and places: cast as a dutiful wife and mother; a charismatic cult leader; a moralistic educator of young women, celebrating music, poetry and dance, as well as all things beautiful; and an outspoken lesbian outcast. These prevailing views have developed according to fashionable social beliefs of the times surrounding the rights and roles of women, and so too have particular translations of the poet cycled in and out of favour. Overly embellished versions produced in the eighteenth century by translators such as John Addison, Ambrose Philips, Francis Fawkes, and Edward Barnaby Greene read as almost laughably inaccurate today. In these translators' cases, poetic trends of the eighteenth century were imposed on Sappho's own content, resulting in twee rhyme schemes, long descriptive passages, and a prevailing heterosexual focus, contrary to the content preserved on the papyri. Modern translators of Sappho are not quite so restrictive in their visions of the poet or her material, and a lot more faithful when it comes to reproducing their

tone, content and technical approaches, but this does not mean that translating the poems is without its challenges.

In part Sappho's troubled relationship with translation over the centuries can be attributed to the fragmentary state of her work. Of an original nine books of poetry, only a few hundred fragmentary segments remain, along with varied reports of Sappho's biographical information. The physical deterioration of many of these excavated pieces, and the questionable authority of versions recorded by Longinus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, have presented numerous problems for translators in the past. The fact that more fragments of Sappho's poetry have been recovered in the recent past may indicate that clarity may come to light on some of the questions raised, but this remains to be seen. In addition, the acts of translating and reading Sappho are intrinsically connected with a long history of scholarly thinking. It is exceptionally difficult to approach the poet without any preconceived notions of her identity as a poet or poetic speaker.

In light of this sporadic and contested legacy, what can be gained from translating Sappho again? A new translation of the ancient poet may sound superfluous to those unfamiliar with her work, or confronted with the dozens of translations already available. However, Sappho's is a poetic legacy constantly in flux; not only are new pieces still being recovered, but several scholarly views of the poet encourage a communal focus of her legacy. Large groups of listeners are mentioned in Sappho's poems and the speaker or singer frequently addresses or instructs specific figures. Joan DeJean observes that

Sappho portrays both the composition and the performance of her verse as an exchange among women, as the product of a female community whose members are united by bonds both personal and professional.¹

Sappho's alleged status as a proto-feminist Ur text is compelling. Andre Lardinois echoes this idea in his comments on Sappho's choices of deities in her poetry; Sappho's "invocation of predominantly female deities is matched by her choice of myths," referring to Eva Stehle's discussion of Sappho's preferred myths, which "often focus on relationships between a strong female goddess and a weaker mortal man, such as the relationship between Eos and Tithonus, Selene and Endymion, Aphrodite and Adonis, or Aphrodite and Phaon."² When Sappho is translated again, it is not merely an intellectual exercise or an unnecessary re-treading of ground already covered, but another stage in the poet's communal and also highly self-motivated legacy. Sappho's existing poems demand agency. To reinvent and revitalise her for later audiences appeals to the strong sense of per-

sonal interest and self-promotion which appears in many of her fragmentary poems, and which Diane Raynor acknowledges in her interpretations.

Raynor comments in her notes on the translation that with “new fragments (58, pre-58 Cologne, and pre-58 Oxyrhynchos) discovered in 2004, it was time for a new Sappho” (19). But even before these translations were completed and the text published, more fragments had been recovered. In early 2014, several long-lost fragments of Sappho’s body of work—including one arguably whole poem—were recovered, inciting anticipation of a later, consolidated collection, as well as further debate on what these pieces add to our understandings of the ancient poet. Although the recovered ancient Greek texts are currently not considered among Sappho’s more technically or creatively proficient works by some scholars, these new poems have been treated with crisp sensitivity in this new collection and offer depth to our understandings of Sappho’s historical and biographical contexts. The text is a welcome starting point for this new chapter in Sappho’s creative legacy.

Some of Sappho’s poems have been available in English since 1555, when Sir Philip Sidney produced the first English translations of her work. However, her poetry has been available in French for longer, and Ovid’s *Heroides*, featuring the *Epistula Sapphus* and its reflections of myths associated with the poet, was translated into French in the fifteenth century.³ New challenges have arisen; not only do the newly recovered pieces require careful grammatical and contextual assessment, but also comparison with and incorporation into the rest of Sappho’s translated oeuvre. However, this is potentially a minefield of critical and theoretical concerns. Raynor has been exceptionally careful in her approach to this problem. The “new” Sappho poems have been cut off from the rest of the text. We may also wonder: how do the new poems stand up in comparison to the better-known works? The general critical feedback so far has not been favourable (to the poems themselves, not their translations). To produce a new translation of Sappho’s entire extant body of work is to tread a thin line between offering new considerations and simply re-treading old ground for the sake of publishing a larger text, rather than having a particular desire to assess the original poems anew. Raynor’s translation is one of the first to rise to this not inconsiderable challenge. No stranger to historical and more modern translation efforts, Sappho’s works are yet again presented for an English-speaking audience in a collection that echoes both new and old scholarly efforts.

Reading and translating Sappho has been and continues to be a highly interactive process, moving between languages and negotiating with different interpretations, derived from different cultural backgrounds. The four

poems recovered by Dirk Obbink in 2014 stem from Book 1 of her work,

assembled from some twenty separate pieces recovered from cartonnage, written along the fibers and comprising parts of at least five columns of a papyrus roll, of which at least four are continuous.⁴

The potential chronological locations for these new poems have been subjected to scrutiny by Burris, Fish and Obbink in their first article on the discovery. The importance of their research is clear in the selection of the poems' positions in Raynor and Lardinois' text. The impact of this is a relatively natural transition between the "safer" known ground of Sappho (insofar that anything is certain about Sappho), and the newer, potentially contestable materials.

Raynor and Lardinois are careful in their work. Like several recent translations published before this text, including Willis Barnstone and Aaron Poochigan, this translation appears flanked by critical notes and commentaries. While Mary Barnard and Anne Carson opted for minimal critical direction in their openings to their own translations of Sappho, Raynor and Lardinois are clearly on the more cautious end of the scale. There is so much room already in Sappho's *lacunae*-beset poems as it is that most translators are loathe to leave the text open and without commentary of any kind, and *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works* is no exception. The details provided and frequent references to Obbink's work almost lead the reader to expect that Obbink's paper might also be provided in the appendix. It is exceptionally difficult to read the text in its entirety without stopping to go and track down the article.

The opening of the collection is up-front in its selectivity. Raynor and Lardinois in their translator's notes and introduction respectively acknowledge the sporadic and questionable nature of Sappho's transmission as a series of (pseudo)biographical details, second-hand accounts, unsourced transcriptions and fragmentary texts. This is a sensitive delivery of the poet. To read Sappho is to necessarily strike a balance between the unknown and the cautiously assumed. Rather than bluntly presenting the reader with a uniform "authorised" text, Raynor and Lardinois offer a highly annotated and disclaimed version. Unlike *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, a formidable translation produced by Anne Carson in 2002, *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works* does not include Greek text alongside the English. Instead, Raynor has opted to include more critical references and historical details, including brief notes on the original text sources for each poetic fragment. It is difficult to assess any translation of Sappho without referring to Carson's exceptional contribution to this field. While Raynor and Lardinois' interpretation does not offer the same level of

poetic nuance in its rendering of Sappho, the text's value as a critically conscious and sensitively handled adaptation of the poet's work should be recognised. While Carson's translation encourages a more "hands-on" reading approach in terms of translation issues, Raynor and Lardinois together offer a more guided experience, highlighting issues of transmission and interpretation in the introductory sections, and then consolidating these issues in the endnotes. Both texts ostensibly address new and scholarly readers of Sappho alike, providing critical commentary and notes where needed, though Carson's approach is much more in keeping with a poetic focus than a strict translation. Raynor and Lardinois are more reserved. While Carson's scholarly writings on Sappho are exceptional and highly advisable secondary readings, offering some fantastic insights on the poet and her work, they are not foregrounded in *If Not, Winter*. It is a creative piece, written with great adherence to the poetic talents demanded by the source writer and later creative adaptor. In this sense, *If Not, Winter* is an entirely different reading experience to *Sappho: A New Translation of The Complete Works*, evident even in the title; a creative focus permeates Carson's translation much more strongly than in Raynor's version. To compare the two as Edith Hall has done in an earlier review of this collection is not necessarily fair, but I would echo her advice to read the two translations side-by-side in order to get a better sense of Sappho's poetic prowess, as well as the intricacy of her poetic and scholarly legacy.⁵ Raynor and Carson embrace two sides to this evolving canon for the poet: the cautious scholarly processes associated with Sappho; and the stark and striking creative energies best associated with her. To read these side-by-side is to better recognise not only the strongest aspects of Sappho's poetic legacy, but also the directions it may take in future versions. Rather than arbitrarily separating these two translations and their intended audiences on the grounds that one is more "creative" than the other, both should be promoted to new and scholarly readers of Sappho alike on the grounds that both offer close historical and technical commentary, then exemplifying the diverse range of approaches used to translate her work.

In terms of comparative translation style, Raynor's approach to Sappho is safely within the camps of Barnard and Campbell, and not too removed from Carson's. Raynor's translation is respectful towards previous versions and delicately treads new ground. Issues inherent in this process are mentioned in the accompanying notes, but are not forced upon the reader in the poems themselves, offering a much more fluid reading experience on first revision, but still highlighting areas for further discussion later on. To an extent, this collection is so persuasively linked to the most recent Sappho discoveries, detailed in the publications of Burris, Fish, and Ob-

bink, that it would almost have been worth attaching these texts to the collection for ease of interpretation. These are so firmly integrated that it is difficult to read the collection without stopping to track these down mid-poem (I was unsuccessful in avoiding this distraction). However, this direct and clear engagement with sources offers much-needed clarity in the otherwise often highly subjective and ambiguous process of engaging with Sappho.

While translators such as Carson opted to include the entire Greek text alongside the English version, Raynor has not elected to do so. This was something of a disappointment, particularly in light of the recent recovery of the new fragments. It is possible to access these original Greek texts elsewhere, but their absence from this consolidated collection of the complete works is unfortunate. Symbolically, Raynor has highlighted some of the distance that remains between Sappho and her later readers; without access to the original texts—in their complete form or as broken fragments—we can never be entirely sure that we are accurately capturing the messages and techniques before us. For a casual reader, this idea may be important enough to merit the Greek text's exclusion. There are no interruptions to the translated poems via footnotes, and the notes before and after the poetry section are relatively detailed. Lardinois' introduction to the text is a helpful starting point for readers unfamiliar with Sappho, as he outlines what we know of the poet and some of the issues of transmission to which her work has been subject, as well as some of the complexities at work in her poems. Lardinois is also open about the subjective nature of some of these issues, complementing the delicate approach of this text.

A more detailed commentary on the poetic intentions and translation practices of the translator would have been beneficial. As the introductory comments and notes clarify, both Raynor and Lardinois are exceptionally conscious of the importance of subjectivity and uncertainty in Sappho's oeuvre. However, Raynor's creative and adaptive processes could have been explored in more detail. The section on translation is relatively brief and does not give Raynor sufficient credit for her own importance in producing this new vision of Sappho. Since the importance of transmission for Sappho's poetic legacy and the production of further translations of her works has been so clearly examined in the notes, it seems a pity that the same consideration was not extended to Raynor's role in this as well. The personal tone of the brief "Note on Translation: From Sappho to Sappho" is a teaser that deserved more space on this topic, but may well be treated with further critical attention in the future. Our understandings not only of Sappho but also of translation theory and the roles of the translator have evolved, and are highly likely to continue to be linked in critical works.

One of the most interesting features of this collection is its treatment of

the “new” Sappho poems, including the relatively long “Brothers Song” (160). Gautier Liberman has remarked that the strength and weakness of this new piece are linked, in that they

lie in part precisely in this close link to its lost context: weakness, because the references to context seem to represent an awkward black spot; strength, because the loss of context provides an element of undefined mystery and the poem gives the illusion of real speech and the impression of a dramatic situation.⁶

Raynor is not unsympathetic to Liberman’s opinion, if the frank vernacular of her translation is a fair indication. The poem is remarkable in Sappho’s body of work for its length and considerable contextual detail, but not so much for its deft language or explorations of emotion and senses of self, but Raynor’s translation is still both lively and engaging:

you keep saying that Charaxos must come
with his ship full. Zeus knows this,
I believe, as do all the gods.
Don’t think about that,

but send me, yes command me
to keep praying to Queen Hera
that Charaxos return here
guiding his ship safely

and find us secure. Everything else
we should turn over to the gods,
since fair winds swiftly follow
harsh gales.

Whenever the kind of Olympos wishes
a helpful god to turn people away
from troubles, they are blessed
and full of good fortune.

For us too, if Larichos lifts his head high
 and in time grows into a man,
 our spirits may be swiftly freed
 from such a heavy weight. (160)

Raynor titles the piece “[Brothers Song]” and acknowledges “1-3 stanzas missing,” and also only prints the poem in the appendix. Raynor’s positioning of the poem recognises its liminal position in Sappho’s established canon, but also demonstrates a high degree of caution. But we can be sure that this is definitely a poem by Sappho: the prominent use of the first-person, calls to action, and descriptions are powerfully reminiscent of her other works.

Unusual for Sappho, the major deity in this poem is Zeus rather than Aphrodite, and Hera is also mentioned. This shift in focus to a familial pair of deities mirrors the family focus of the poem, confirmed with reference to Sappho’s brothers in other longstanding poems in her canon. Dirk Obbink asserts that this poem is likely addressed by Sappho to her mother; this may account for the tone shift, unlike many of Sappho’s remaining poems which have a more overtly personal focus, rather than a sense of familial duty and reassuring tone.⁷ Raynor’s translation gives no hint of the current climate of scholarly disdain for this poem, and instead offers it a translation that matches the tone and turns of language already demonstrated across the rest of the text. Martin West was particularly unfavourable in his reception of the original Greek: “My initial impression was that it was very poor stuff, and linguistically problematic . . . It’s certainly not one of her best, but it has her [Sappho’s] DNA all over it.”⁸ Raynor’s delicate translation style has successfully captured this “DNA” link, with none of the scorn. The poem is undoubtedly Sappho’s, but its position in the body of the text is still a reminder of how much more critical attention this new poem demands before it can be entirely encoded into the canon. It is highly symbolic that even in this *Translation of the Complete Works*, there is still something withheld and demanding further investigation.

Raynor’s translation of Sappho is accessible and respectful, and supported well by Lardinois’ contributions. It is not as breathtakingly sharp as Anne Carson’s rendering, but still has much to offer to newer readers of Sappho, as well as scholars engaged with the next stage in Sappho’s evolution. The collection is critically sound and inviting for further engagements. At first I was somewhat disappointed that the “Brothers Song” had not been incorporated into the body of the poems, and believed that more

time to work it into this would have been appropriate. However, further reflection has convinced me that the marginal position of the newer fragments within this text is the right approach. Raynor's translation assumes nothing; the collection is respectful and frank about the nature of the texts being assessed, and definitely recommended to anyone looking for an entry point to the ancient and complex figure of Sappho.

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NOTES

- ¹ Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho 1546-1937*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 47.
- ² André Lardinois, "Keening Sappho: Female Speech Genres in Sappho's Poetry" in *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society*, eds. André Lardinois, Laura McClure, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 79. Lardinois refers to Eva Stehle 1990, 1996.
- ³ Octavien de Saint-Gelais translated Ovid's *Heroides* into French some time in the late fifteenth century, prior to his death in 1502. This version was "widely disseminated in dozens of manuscripts and early imprints" and was "probably available in early sixteenth-century England": Anne E.B. Coldiron, *English Printing, Verse Translation, and the Battle of the Sexes, 1476-1557* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009), 86.
- ⁴ Simon Burris, Jeffrey Fish, Dirk Obbink, "New Fragments of Book 1 of Sappho," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 189(2014), 1.
- ⁵ Edith Hall, "Sensual Sappho", *The New York Review of Books* (7 May 2015). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/may/07/sensual-sappho/> (accessed 23 November 2015)
- ⁶ Gautier Liberman, "Reflections on a New Poem by Sappho concerning her Anxious and her Brothers Charaxos and Larichos", Paper delivered at F.E.E.C. Bordeaux, August 2014, 3-4. Translated from the French by Paul Ellis. <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/Fragments/Liberman.FIEC.Bordeaux.2014.pdf>
- ⁷ Dirk Obbink, "Provenance, Authenticity, and Text of the New Sappho Papyri", Paper delivered at the Society for Classical Studies Panel, New Orleans, 9 January 2015, 7. www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/Fragments/SCS.Sappho.2015.Obbink.paper.pdf

⁸ Email from Martin West to Mary Beard, 3 February 2014, quoted by Obbink, “Provenance, Authenticity, and Text of the New Sappho Papyri”, 4.