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THE AGE OF TYRANTS: SAPPHO VIA GOUNOD'S OPERA

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It is April 16th 1851. The Paris Opéra is packed for the premiere of a brand new opera by Charles Gounod, still a largely unknown composer. But the libretto is by a popular young dramatist named Émile Augier; the theme is the famous ancient Greek woman poet Sappho, who is excitingly associated with erotically charged relationships. This is the first work on an ancient Greek theme at the Opéra for two decades.ⁱ Most importantly, the title role is taken by none other than Pauline Viardot Garcia, at twenty-nine the most famous mezzo-soprano in the world, in her vocal prime, and well-known as a highly cultured intellectual to boot.ⁱⁱ Gounod, who is fast falling in love with his leading lady,ⁱⁱⁱ is lucky that such a superstar, after hearing his piano compositions, had asked him to compose an opera for her.^{iv} And he did not disappoint. He found writing it very hard, since his brother died while he was composing it. But then he found that the painful emotions actually helped him create it. Both he and Pauline wept at the beauty of her arias when they first heard them in rehearsal.^v His old friend Hector Berlioz wept when he heard them in performance.^{vi} The three-act opera was a critical success, receiving standing ovations every night. It made Gounod's reputation and secured his future career.

The plot is a simple tale in which Sappho chooses selfless loss over self-centred love, leading to her climactic suicide. The setting of the first act is the Olympic Games, which features a poetry competition as well as athletics. Sappho wins the poetry competition, beating her compatriot from the island of Lesbos, the historically attested poet Alcaeus. She is in love with another man from Lesbos, Phaon, but he is torn between her and a courtesan named Glycera. In Act II we are at home in Lesbos, which is being oppressed by an evil tyrant. The brave resistance is being led by Phaon. But Glycera is prepared to betray the conspiracy to the authorities, and one of the conspirators, Pythéas, betrays details of who is involved to her in exchange for sex. Glycera hands over the details, but she also wants Phaon for herself. So, she lies to Sappho, saying that will *not* betray the plot on condition that Phaon leaves Lesbos without Sappho. Phaon arranges to leave. To save his life, Sappho refuses to go with him. Angry at being rejected, he decides to choose Glycera instead.

In Act III, we are on a windswept beach with a rocky cliff overhanging it at sunset. Phaon, with the other foiled conspirators and the triumphant Glycera, says good-bye to his homeland. Sappho sadly comes to say farewell. Phaon curses her. She forgives him, sings an unforgettable aria, over continuous harps, 'rolling in great waves over the deep subdued notes of the contra-basses' with intermittent cymbals and horns,^{vii} and then leaps into the sea. Here it is, performed by J'nai Bridges at the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition in 2015.^{viii}

O my immortal lyre,
who, in sad times,
ever faithful through all my misfortunes,
always consoled me!
In vain your gentle murmuring
tries to aid me in my suffering.



No, you cannot heal
my latest wound;
my hurt is in my heart!
Only death can end my anguish!
Farewell, torchlight of the world;
descend into the womb of the sea.
I shall sink beneath the waves
to meet my eternal rest.
The day which is due to dawn,
Phaon, will shine for you.
But without thinking of me,
you will see daybreak again.
Gape wide, disastrous gulf.
I shall sleep forever in the depths of the sea!

Almost every self-respecting mezzo-soprano offers this aria in her concert repertoire. On Youtube you can find, amongst many others, Grace Bumbry, Montserrat Caballé and Marilyn Horne. But what, if anything, can Gounod's opera tell us about the great poet of Lesbos herself? The answer is this: not much, except her date, her place, her association with passionate love, her conceptual pairing with her near-contemporary Alcaeus, and the context of tyranny.

Piecing together the facts about Sappho's life is challenging because only a few fragments of her large *oeuvre* survive, and because the ancient Greeks and Romans invented numerous fictional stories about their most celebrated she-poet. Her association with erotic love, and her attraction to her own sex, kept the ancient rumour industry in business. There are plenty of bits of Sappho's biography surviving from classical antiquity, which were used by Augier for the libretto of the opera. But most of these traditions are obviously fabricated.

Both Sappho and Alcaeus were wealthy residents of Lesbos, a powerful North-east Aegean island, where the strongest city-state was Mytilene. The old ruling family, the Penthelids, were on the wane, and there was constant in-fighting between rival factions. During the poets' lifetimes at least three tyrants ruled in succession, including the most famous of them all, Pittacus, under whom Alcaeus was forced into exile. It is possible that Alcaeus and Sappho knew each other, although Sappho's dates *may* be somewhat later and as a woman she could not compete in musical competitions at the major Games. Sappho was born into a family with a successful shipping business, and had at least two brothers. She married at some point and had a daughter, Kleis, whom she named after her mother. Sappho was alive during Pittacus' supremacy and there was an ancient tradition that she, too, spent time in exile, perhaps in Sicily.^{ix} But otherwise the political subplot of Gounod's opera has little basis in history. It was thought up by the librettist, Émile Augier, to fit contemporary circumstances. Fewer than eight months after the opera's debut, on December 2nd, 1851, President Louis Napoleon was to stage his coup and overturn the elected National Assembly of the Second Republic. In the months leading up to the coup, his bureaucrats were assiduously trying to quell popular democratic feeling, and indeed they harshly censored Augier's libretto, with its exhortations to stand up against tyrants, because it smacked too strongly of the heady rhetoric of 1848.^x

Even less grounded in archaic Greek historical fact is the idea that Sappho committed suicide out of disappointed love for a man called Phaon. This was one of many episodes invented by ancient Greek authors, beginning at least a century after her death, probably in the raucous comedies of ancient Athens.^{xi} These new stories reacted to Sappho's passionate verses by portraying her not only as heterosexual but as a prostitute or nymphomaniac. But the Phaon story is manifestly fiction. Phaon was actually a mythical ferryman who once transported Aphrodite, the goddess of love, from Lesbos to Asia Minor, when she was disguised as an old woman. He was himself elderly, but as a reward she gave him a lotion which restored his youth. Some ancient wit dreamed up adding the rejuvenated Phaon to the story of the real-life poet Sappho, and the tale of her tragic suicide became firmly entrenched in the tradition, especially after the peerless Roman poet Ovid included a fictional letter in his *Letters from Heroines*, written by a desperate Sappho to Phaon.



So, what was life really like for well-off, cultured people on Lesbos in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BCE, a period often known to ancient historians as ‘The Age of Tyrants’? The island had enjoyed an advanced level of civilisation for many centuries, and was famous for its women—it even had beauty contests, and Lesbian concubines are prized by warriors in the Homeric epics. Moreover, since the decipherment of Hittite, Sappho’s poetry has promised to lead us even further back, into the mysteries of Bronze-Age Anatolia. Lesbos, known to the Hittites as Lazpas, was already sophisticated enough to provide the Hittite king with a cult image in the fourteenth century BCE. Even the name ‘Sappho’ may derive from the Hittite word meaning ‘numinous,’ or from a Hittite name for a holy mountain. The Lesbian families jostling for power were mostly *nouveau riches*, parvenu popular leaders who traded with Lydia and had replaced hereditary kings in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. The term *tyrannos* always carried some negative connotations, but its basic meaning was a ruler who had seized power, usually with popular support, rather than inherited it. When owing to economic turmoil the masses needed an articulate leader to champion their cause and remove the kings, rival aristocrats and newly rich tradesmen were able to exploit the instability of the political situation. The picture was complicated by the economic shifts leading to the introduction of coinage, which was invented in Lydia; a new class of successful traders (like Sappho’s family) and manufacturers challenged the old land-owning aristocracy and that the tyrants were the result of this power struggle. The rising, commercial ‘middle class’ needed a single ruler whom they could bulldoze into supporting their interests against kings or oligarchic groups of hereditary landowners. But the tyrants were not just representatives of newly empowered citizen groups. They were flamboyant, ostentatious, egotistical and materialistic individuals who competed with each other in displays of wealth and their subjects followed suit.

Tyranny was one of many practices the Greeks of the era of colonisation picked up from non-Greek peoples. Most Greek tyrants seem to have been consciously following an example set by the enterprising ruler of their closest eastern neighbours, the near-legendary Gyges of Lydia. In about 685 BCE this unknown (and possibly less than aristocratic) individual had usurped the hereditary monarch, Candaules, conquered much of Asia Minor, and acquired proverbial wealth as well as international renown. The very term *tyrannos* came from the language spoken by the Lydians or one of the peoples further south on the Asiatic seaboard.

A more inviting conventional name for the period of the tyrants in the 7th to 6th centuries is ‘the Lyric Age of Greece’, for it in these centuries that all the foundational poets of western personal and occasional poetry produced their songs, not just Sappho. Archilochus, Alcaeus, Anacreon, Alcman and Stesichorus, who were all islanders, composed poems to be sung to the accompaniment of the lyres usually smaller than the epic *cithara*, or in some cases pipes. Shorter than the epics of Homer, and in a variety of rhythms suited to dance, song or both, the sheer variety of the poems and their sophistication are astounding. Although most of their authors will have used writing to perfect their pieces, these songs retain strong marks of their genesis in an oral culture, where people sang to mark manifold different kinds of occasion and collective action. Each of them must have known hundreds of songs by heart. Although all the poets shared a poetic vocabulary, they composed in different dialects of Greek according to their own heritage and sometimes the type of poem they were creating: some Greeks found Sappho’s eastern Greek, Aeolic dialect, with its pronounced alpha sounds and numerous borrowings from the Lydian language, rather barbarous to listen to.

The poems of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE are the pre-eminent texts in the whole of ancient Greek literature for the assertion of sheer *joie-de-vivre*, for celebrating love and pleasure, laughter and luxury. Many explore the physical and emotional effects of wine and of sexual desire, suitable for singing at drinking parties or symposia; some are elevated in tone, reflecting on how transitory life is, and others are far more earthy. There are wedding songs and songs for maidens before they are married. There are dirges to perform at funerals and hymns to be sung in the temples of the gods. Greek ‘lyric’ poetry, a rather misleading but conventional label for the poetry of this period in every metre other than the epic hexameter, is an exciting and fast-evolving field. Over the last hundred years, many previously unknown poems have been deciphered from papyrus, texts which were once copied out by Greeks in Egypt and preserved by accident.

But Sappho is these days the most famous of all the Greek lyric poets. Her poems reflect the island’s proximity to the rich barbarian culture of Lydia, only about ten nautical miles away: her child Kleis, she tells us, she loves so much that she would not exchange her for the whole of Lydia. The fragmentary poems in Sappho’s name include some of such emotional directness and sensory appeal that they take the breath away. When she is forced to part from a lover, she is cast into despair: ‘Honestly, I wish I were dead.’ When she developed a



passion, 'Love shook my heart like a wind falling on oaks on a mountain'. She remembers an ardent encounter: 'You came, and I was longing for you; you cooled my heart which was burning with desire'. Her thoughts are full of erotic memories: 'For beside me you donned many crowns of roses and garlands of flowers around your soft neck; you anointed yourself with costly royal fragrance and satisfied your desire on soft couches.' In fragment 58, a poem put back together in 2004 from two separate papyri, she plays with the gender of lover and beloved by never revealing whether the speaker is male or female S/he remembers the beauty of the young mythical man Tithonus, carried to the ends of the world by the lovelorn goddess of the dawn.

For you let the fragrant-blossomed Muses' lovely gifts
be zealous, girls, and the clear melodious lyre.
But my once tender body old age now
has seized; my hairs turned white instead of dark.
My heart's grown heavy, my knees will not support me,
that once on a time were fleet for the dance as fawns.
This state I bemoan, but what's to do?
Not to grow old, being human, there's no way.
Tithonus once, the tale was, rose-armed Dawn
love smitten, carried him off to the world's end
handsome and young then, get in time grey age
o'ertook him, husband of immortal wife.

Two and a half thousand years before Jeanette Winterson's exploration of the ungendered subject in *Written on the Body* (1992), Sappho's meditative poem explored love from the perspective of a poet of indeterminate sex. In ancient Greek this is technically very difficult, since nouns, pronouns, adjectives and participles all decline according to gender.

Although Sappho is unusual since she is a female poet, the homoeroticism of some of her works is, in historical context, unremarkable. It is elsewhere found in art and in women's songs related to the cults of goddesses, especially those who oversaw the biological and sexual aspects of their lives, Artemis and Aphrodite, for example in the Spartan songs for choruses of maidens by Alcman. But homoeroticism is also a pronounced feature of symposium poetry written by men, and the age of tyrants and lyric poetry was also the period when the fashion for symposia, probably in imitation of eastern palace practice, swept across the Greek world. Women held banquets at festivals from which men were excluded, and there is no reason to suppose that Sappho's songs were not sung at them, although they were also popular amongst male audiences. The typical male symposium was a ritualised drinking party, from which respectable women were excluded, although female musicians and sex workers often made appearances. By inviting guests to a symposium, a host or hostess could indicate that he shared with them a cultured, leisured and elegant lifestyle. The wealthy began to build special rooms in their own houses designed to hold up to twenty guests, paired, perfumed, garlanded with flowers and facing each other in couches. They would discuss current affairs, sing, listen to the music of pipe and lyre, and tell each other stories.

There was a pronounced element of light-hearted and eroticised inter-generational mentoring: a symposium song by Alcaeus begins simply, 'Wine, my dear boy, and truth!' The collective excitement and physical intimacy were enhanced by the steady intake of wine. The younger guests were schooled in candour, humour, collective values, and the behaviour appropriate to a leisure-class clique. It is in this context that we need to understand the reason why many lyric poems are in the voice of an older lover or admirer to a much younger person. There are hundreds of ancient Greek vase-paintings depicting such drinking parties, as well as cups and jugs created for use at them, although the partygoers are usually men not women. The best visual representation is in the 'tomb of the diver' at Paestum/Posidonia—the guests are singing to a pipe, embracing their partner affectionately, and playing *kottabos*, a boisterous party game in which they competed in aiming the dregs of their wine at targets.

In symposium poems, the flirtatious homoeroticism has a political aspect. Admiration for physical beauty, and the adornment of the self with fine clothes and flowers, are both channeled into non-reproductive sexual relationships and private recreation, the privileges of an elite wealthy social echelon. Homoeroticism is



closely related to the cult of beauty and bodily excellence central to athletics competitions. Consumption of luxury goods in the private and selective environment of a symposium suggests a shared refinement of taste and sensibility. The symposium seems first to have taken hold in Greek cities as a central institution of tyrant's courts and aristocratic life; it offered rich families a way to affirm private relationships with other households that transcended the boundaries of their own city-states, thus offering support and an alternative set of alliances in the face of the internal struggles over resources and power that had led to the rise of the tyrants.

Sappho has probably had more words written about her in proportion to her own surviving output than any other writer. A couple of complete poems and about two hundred fragments are all that remain of the nine substantial books, in diverse genres and metres, that she produced. Her poems could be consulted, complete, in the ancient libraries, including the famous one at Egyptian Alexandria. But they did not survive the millennium between the triumph of Christianity and the frantic export to the West of Greek manuscripts from Constantinople before it fell in 1453. Some Renaissance scholars believed that in the eleventh century Pope Gregory VII had all the manuscripts of Sappho burned as dangerously salacious.

Yet Sappho, for all the meagreness of her extant poetry, is a founder in many more respects than in teaching us what love feels like. She is the first female poet and 'learned woman' known to antiquity and to the 'Western' literary tradition. Said to have been entitled 'the tenth Muse' by Plato, she was the only woman whom ancient scholars included in the canon of significant lyric poets. Nor is it only her poems that have mattered: her life and loves have inspired many plays, operas, and novels other than Gounod's, as skilfully documented in Margaret Reynolds's *The Sappho Companion* (2001). Until the nineteenth century, these biographical narratives mostly retold the story of the suicidal and heterosexual Phaon. Although this tradition reached its acme in Gounod's spectacular opera, it is still going strong—as in Erica Jong's raunchy novel *Sappho's Leap* (2003).

The change in attitudes toward Sappho came when self-conscious lesbian literary culture emerged in the 19th century, thanks to French decadence and Baudelaire's poem 'Lesbos' in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857); Sappho was crowned as the first explicit poet of female homoerotic love. Fin-de-siècle Prussian scholars then tried to resist the growing popularity of erotic Sappho by insisting that her relationship with the young women, whose leisure hours on soft couches she celebrated, was that of the headmistress of a finishing school to debutantes entering the marriage market. But explicitly sexy verses by Sappho found soon afterward on papyrus, mentioning a dildo (fr. 99), hindered the mission of these prudish academics.

Some more recent scholars have tried to tame Sappho by turning her into a priestess and claiming that the erotic behaviours she describes were part of formal ritual. Yet nothing has stopped Sappho from inspiring not only lesbians but heterosexual poets and poets of male homosexual love, especially C.P. Cavafy: like this gay Alexandrian proto-modernist, she seems to sing to us, as E.M. Forster described Cavafy, from a position 'at a slight angle to the universe.' Listen to this poem, which says that her beloved, Anactoria, who has left her to get married in Lydia, is more valuable than the splendour of any mustered militia (fr. 16):

Some say a host of cavalry, others of infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the black earth, but I say it is whatsoever a person loves.

It is perfectly easy to make this understood by everyone: for she who far surpassed humankind in beauty, Helen, left her most noble husband and went sailing off to Troy with no thought at all for her child or dear parents, but (love) led her astray...

And she has reminded me now of Anactoria, who is not here; I would rather see her lovely walk and the bright sparkle of her face than the Lydians' chariots and armed infantry...

We know of no personal love song like this earlier in world literature. Sappho has here created a tradition of 'love-not-war' lyrics whose future stretches from Propertius to Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. As the definitive *Ur*-voice of lyric ecstasy, she is so consequential that poets of every generation, from Catullus to Sylvia Plath and Anne Carson, have used her to define their aesthetic manifestos: among the ancients, only Homer can claim an instrumental role in literary history equivalent to Sappho's.

But a good illustration of the difference between her and Homer comes in another, more traditional poem, about the wedding of Hector and Andromache. This couple are portrayed tragically in the Homeric *Iliad*,



where they part for the last time, and Andromache sings the lament over her warrior husband's cadaver. But they are celebrated in a sensuous poem by Sappho as a young bridal pair. A messenger is bringing news:

.. 'Hector and his companions are bringing the lively-eyed, graceful Andromache from holy Thebe and ever-flowing Placia in their ships over the salt sea; and (there are) many golden bracelets and (perfumed?) purple robes, ornate trinkets and countless silver drinking-cups and ivory.....' ...the news went to his friends throughout the spacious city. At once the sons of Ilus yoked the mules to the smooth-running carriages, and the whole crowd of women and tender-ankled maidens climbed on board. Apart from them drove the daughters of Priam . . . and unmarried men yoked horses to chariots, . . . and they all together . . . set out . . . to Ilium, and the sweet-sounding pipe and cithara were mingled and the sound of castanets, and maidens sang clearly a holy song, and a marvellous echo reached the sky ...bowls and cups . . . myrrh and cassia and frankincense were mingled. The elder women cried out joyfully, and all the men let forth a lovely high-pitched strain calling on Paeon Apollo, the Archer skilled in the lyre, and they sang in praise of the godlike Hector and Andromache.

This lovely song was suitable for singing at a wedding, and Sappho's wedding songs were famous across the entire Greek world.

So, some love affairs feature a celebrated royal wedding. Sappho is connected with another one, about three hundred years after she composed that poem. In about 300 BCE, a doctor was summoned to diagnose the illness afflicting Antiochus, crown prince of the Seleucid Empire in Syria. The young man's symptoms included a faltering voice, burning sensations, a racing pulse, fainting, and pallor. In his biography of Antiochus' father, Seleucus I, Plutarch reports that the symptoms manifested themselves only when Antiochus' young stepmother Stratonice was in the room. The doctor was therefore able to diagnose the youth's malady as an infatuation with her. The cause of the illness was clearly erotic, because the symptoms were 'as described by Sappho.' The solution was simple: Antiochus' father divorced Stratonice and let his son marry her instead.

Plutarch's story invites us to wonder if the relationship between Sappho and erotic symptoms is entirely straightforward. Did Antiochus and his doctor learn to describe the sensations he was experiencing from their knowledge of Sappho's already 'classic' love poetry? Did art shape life? Or are such sensations the universal experience of erotically fixated individuals, which would mean that lived experience had been recorded with uncanny realism in Sappho's art?

The incomplete poem that allowed the diagnosis of the Seleucid Antiochus' symptoms is the most influential lyric poem of all time. It is usually known as 'Sappho fragment 31,' or '*phainetai moi*' (a transliteration of its first two words, which mean 'he seems to me'). It describes a triangular scene. Sappho is transfixed by her physiological responses to watching a woman she loves laughing with a man. The brilliance of the poem—besides the luxuriant specification of the symptoms—lies in the paradox that the speaker, the only silent member of the triangle, in putting her thoughts into words nearly becomes silent in death (Sappho 31):

He seems as fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter. Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast. For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am paler than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying.

Form, rhythm, and aural impact, and metaphor and image, are inseparable from the information transmitted in Sappho's words. In this archetypal lyric poem, she is not only describing her inner lives: she is synthesizing sound, rhythm, diction, and mental pictures in order to maximize sensory and emotional impact. It reminds me of what Emily Dickinson said to Thomas Wentworth Higginson in 1870, 'If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.' I recommend the translations by Jo Balmer or Anne Carson.

'Phainetai moi' was imitated by Catullus, the premier Roman love poet. But the Greek original has survived only because it was quoted in *On the Sublime*, the treatise on literary transcendence attributed to Longinus, writing in Greek under the Roman Empire. He offers an insightful piece of literary criticism: 'Sappho,



for example, always chooses the emotions associated with love's madness from the attendant circumstances and the real situation. Where does she display her excellence? In that she is adept at selecting and combining the most important and excessive concomitants'. *On the Sublime* was first printed in 1554, and translated into English as early as 1652 by John Hall, a supporter of Cromwell. Here is the second half of Sappho poem in Hall's version, containing the famous lines describing her physical symptoms:

I'm speechless, feavrish, fires assail
My fainting flesh, my sight doth fail
Whilst to my restless mind my ears
Still hum new fears.

Cold sweats and tremblings so invade
That like a wither'd flower I fade
So that my life being almost lost,
I seem a Ghost.

Hall's unpretentious rhymed iambics convey well enough the force, freshness, and candour of Sappho's original. But Hall is bound by the heterosexist conventions of his contemporaries, whose picture of Sappho was derived mainly from Ovid's diva, infatuated with Phaon rather than with the women she names in her poems—Anactoria, Gongyla. Hall therefore transfers to the *male* admirer the capacity to dart 'languors' into Sappho's 'ravish'd heart.'

Public access to Sappho's poem was widened by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux's French translation of Longinus (1674). Running through more than twenty editions by 1740, and published in English translation in 1711, Boileau's Longinus put sublimity at the centre of literary debate and laid the foundation-stone of the invention of Aesthetics as a discrete philosophical field by Burke and Kant. It also ensured that Sappho's '*phainetai moi*' would be encountered by every self-respecting writer. It has been translated or paraphrased, in English alone, by Addison, Smollett, Byron, Tennyson, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Lowell: it is the foremother of every representation of pent-up sexual desire in our cultural repertoire.

Yet even this poem is incomplete. The sad truth is that, until very recently, the only near-complete poem by Sappho we could read, was no. 1, a dazzling hymn summoning Aphrodite to aid Sappho's erotic pursuit of an unnamed woman. Its seven perfect stanzas survived in entirety because an astute ancient literary critic, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, specified Sappho as the best exponent in verse of what he called the 'polished and exuberant' style. Dionysius explains that the 'euphony and charm of this passage lie in the cohesion and smoothness of the joinery.' But then Dionysius specifies the techniques by which Sappho achieves her effects: 'Words are juxtaposed and interwoven according to certain natural affinities and groupings of letters.' Here is a prose translation by David Campbell:

Ornate-throned immortal Aphrodite, wile-weaving daughter of Zeus, I entreat you: do not overpower my heart, mistress, with ache and anguish, but come here, if ever in the past you heard my voice from afar and acquiesced and came, leaving your father's golden house, with chariot yoked: beautiful swift sparrows whirring fast-beating wings brought you above the dark earth down from heaven through the mid-air, and soon they arrived; and you, blessed one, with a smile on your immortal face asked what was the matter with me this time and why I was calling this time and what in my maddened heart I most wished to happen for myself: 'Whom am I to persuade this time to lead you back to her love? Who wrongs you, Sappho? If she runs away, soon she shall pursue; if she does not accept gifts, why, she shall give them instead; and if she does not love, soon she shall love even against her will.' Come to me now again and deliver me from oppressive anxieties; fulfil all that my heart longs to fulfil, and you yourself be my fellow-fighter.

Dionysius emphasizes the connections between sounds, the most testing thing to transfer from one language to another. The sound-journey of the Greek poem Dionysius quotes hurtles the listener through four breathless, enjambed stanzas in which Sappho entreats Aphrodite for help. Aphrodite eventually responds in more measured rhythmic clusters, giving shrewd advice in sentences end-stopped simultaneously with the stanzas.



What Dionysius called the ‘groupings of letters’ are elaborate: Aphrodite favours alliterative *p* and *d* sounds (symphonious with the sound of her own name), while Sappho begins with dominant *a* sounds (there are five in the first line alone), requiring the poet, who sang her lyrics, to open her mouth wide to summon the deity from afar. But by the end of the poem, the *a* assonance has been replaced by short *e* sounds interwoven with *s*, suggesting a renewed, sibilant determination to catch the attention of Aphrodite.

Another hymn summoning Aphrodite constitutes fragment 2, which gives an unparalleled description of a temple of the goddess on Lesbos, appealing to all five senses:

Hither to me from Crete to this holy temple, where is your delightful grove of apple-trees, and altars smoking with incense; therein cold water babbles through apple-branches, and the whole place is shadowed by roses, and from the shimmering leaves the sleep of enchantment comes down; therein to a meadow, where horses graze, blossoms with spring flowers, and the winds blow gently . . .; there, Cypris, take . . . and pour gracefully into golden cups nectar that is mingled with our festivities.

This text was inscribed on a clay vase by an Egyptian Greek in about 300 BCE, and only published in 1937, by a fine Italian scholar who was, appropriately, a woman—Medea Norsa

Whichever translation you use, without the Greek you will not fully appreciate one crucial aspect of her foundational status as poet: that one of the most exquisite, and difficult, of all verse forms, the Sapphic stanza, is named after her. Sapphics consist of three 11-syllable lines followed by a 5-syllable line, with a circular movement in each line that uses long, strong sounds at both ends, framing short, fast syllables in the middle. Swinburne produced some memorable Sapphics, including these two stanzas where he recalls a vision in which he

Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,
Saw the hair unbound and the feet unsandalled
Shine as fire of sunset on western waters;
Saw the reluctant

Feet, the straining plumes of the doves that drew her,
Looking always, looking with necks reverted,
Back to Lesbos, back to the hills where under
Shone Mytilene;

But my favourite English-language Sapphic stanzas are in Allen Ginsberg’s nostalgic poem, in his late collection *White Shroud* (1986), celebrating the gay trysts of his youth. In a moment of genius, he pays delicate homage to his literary foremother by combining Sapphic form, sensuous diction, and pillow-talk content:

Red cheeked boyfriends tenderly kissed me sweet mouthed
under Boulder coverlets winter springtime
hug me naked laughing & telling girl friends
gossip till autumn

And exactly three years ago, the Classics world was stunned by the publication of a newly identified, complete five-stanza poem by Sappho, in her delicious Sapphic metre. Although not exactly ‘new’ (a misnomer for a song composed nearly 27 centuries ago), it had probably not been read or heard since the 300 CE.

In early February 2014, I was called by the duty editor of BBC 2’s *Newsnight*, Marc Williams, who had studied Classics at university, and had heard me give a lecture on Sophocles long ago. He wanted me to record an interview on the new discovery. In the nearly complete ‘new’ poem, the ‘Brothers Song,’ Sappho explores her frustration at her brothers’ inadequacies. The emotional tone is unexampled in the rest of her *oeuvre* since the poem explores anxiety about mundane domestic obligations. Rather than sensual, it is practical and reflective. It casts Sappho in a new light, as a capable member of an eastern Greek island family with a freight shipping



business. One brother, Charaxos, has not returned from a voyage with his anticipated cargo; her younger brother Larichos is slow to grow up and assume responsibilities.

Sappho, exasperated and slightly desperate, rebukes an unnamed interlocutor who assails her with unsubstantiated rumours that Charaxos's return is imminent. Sappho retorts that her only option is to pray to Hera (the goddess who oversaw women's social status). This fine poem, evoking a sustained psychological journey, is united by the image of the ship weighed down by freight and jeopardized by storms. The ship is both the vessel steered by Charaxos and a metaphor for the family's fortunes.

As a woman with an elder and a younger brother myself, I am pleased that the new poem shows the poet most famous for her erotic love of other women in a completely different light—as the responsible sister of two men, one a business traveller and the other still a youngster. Before we play the *Newsnight* interview,^{xiii} here's the English version I composed for the programme before they opted for the Greek itself.

Why the incessant gossip about Charaxos' arrival,
in a loaded ship? Only Zeus, I think, knows
the truth, along with all the gods—it's not for you
to have an opinion!

Hardly! You should be telling me to go and make
repeated appeals to Queen Hera
that Charaxos can make his return here,
ship and all,

finding us safe and sound. Let us place
everything else in the lap of the gods.
Sudden spells of fine weather often emerge
from heavy gales.

Some people are lucky enough to have
their problems averted by the King of Olympus.
They are blessed
and enormously fortunate.

In our case, if Larichos can just grow up
to be a man of leisure and status,
then from our heavy cargo of sorrows
we may very soon be freed!

This practical businesswoman and dutiful sibling is a far cry from the male fantasy of a disappointed lover of Phaon, leaping to a violent death in a frenzy of emotion.

Sappho, who still haunts and surprises us, already haunted the imagination of antiquity. The islanders of Lesbos imprinted her face on their coins, as the Greeks have recently chosen to do so again on their new ten-euro coin. An exquisite statue of her stood in the town hall of Syracuse, Sicily. The limestone cliffs from which she was said to have plunged to her death on the island of Leukas (now Lefkada) were an ancient tourist attraction. Sappho knew that her exquisite poems would guarantee her immortality: in poem 55, she tells a less uneducated woman who seems to have been criticising her for composing poetry,

But when you die you will lie there, and afterwards there will never be any recollection of you or any longing for you since you have no share in the roses of Pieria; unseen in the house of Hades also, flown from our midst, you will go to and from among the shadowy corpses.

The roses of Pieria stand for the Muses (who lived in Pieria) themselves. And a poem in the *Greek Anthology* records the verses inscribed on Sappho's tomb, in her first-person voice. She tells the visitor to her grave that she is not truly dead, since her nine books of poetry are as deathless as the nine Muses. We have lost 97 percent



of her poems, and yet the voice of Sappho still speaks to us with grace and authority, from her own poems better even than in Gounod's exquisite aria: 'You will know that I escaped the gloom of Hades, and no sun will ever rise on a world which does not know the name of the lyric poet, Sappho.'

ⁱ Steven Huebner (1990) *The Operas of Charles Gounod*, p. 186. Oxford.

ⁱⁱ April Fitzlyon (1964) *The Price of Genius: A Life of Pauline Viardot*, p. 25. London.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Kendall-Davies (2003) *The Life and Work of Pauline Viardot Garcia*, vol. I, pp. 301, 311. London.

^{iv} W. Hely Hutchinson (1896, transl.) *Charles Gounod: Autobiographical Reminiscences with Family Letters and Notes on Music*, pp. 137-8. London.

^v Marie Anne de Bovet (1891) *Charles Gounod: His Life and Works*, p. 97. London.

^{vi} Hutchinson, *Charles Gounod*, p. 143.

^{vii} de Bovet, *Charles Gounod*, p. 97.

^{viii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vic7jA1iYgo>. [2.03 to 7.42]

^{ix} *Suda* see under S 107; Parian Marble 36; Strabo 13.2.3.

^x Huebner, *The Operas*, pp. 31-3.

^{xi} The testimonia about Sappho and most of the translations in this lecture are taken from David Campbell (1982, ed. and trans.) Greek Lyric vol. I, *Sappho and Alcaeus*. Cambridge, MA & London (Loeb Classical Library).

^{xii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGq1mDYSDnQ>,