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Sappho’s Lost Sessions

By Meryl Altman

Sappho has come out with a new poem: not bad for someone who’s been dead for about 2600 years.

A little over a year ago, Martin L. West, an emeritus fellow of All Souls College Oxford, announced in the Times Literary Supplement (June 24, 2005) a discovery that has raised goosebumps on the arms of classicists and lovers of poetry worldwide. Two scholars at the University of Köln, Michael Grünewald and Robert Daniel, had deciphered part of a papyrus roll, dating from the third century BC, which had been thrillingly recycled, soaked with water, and used to wrap a mummy. Some of what they found was by Sappho.

West published a reconstruction of the Greek with his own translation in the TLS since then, a number of versions have appeared in print, and WRB readers with even a little Greek may want to try making their own from the helpfully annotated text William Annis has made available at http://www.aoidoi.org/poets/sappho/new.pdf. Here’s mine:

you, who still have
the lovely gifts of the violet Muses,
apply yourselves, girls! and the song-loving
clearsounding lyre.

as for me: already age has taken
my once-soft skin, turned dark hairs white,
made my heart heavy. Knees
which once danced quick as deer,
can’t carry me.

often I sigh, but what can I do?
a human being who never ages,
that’s not possible.

for even Tithonus, they say,
who rosearmed Dawn loved
and carried off
to the ends of the earth
when he was lovely and young,
all the same in time
gray age overcame him,
holding his deathless wife.

In fact the poem is not entirely new. The recently deciphered papyrus overlaps significantly with what has been called Sappho 58, already known from a papyrus two Oxford undergraduates dug out of a rubbish trench at Oxyrhynchus in the 1920s (and which dates to a later period in antiquity). Also, the “new Sappho” is not quite 100 percent Sappho, because the beginnings of the first four lines (of the original twelve) are missing. West has filled these in by erudite “conjecture,” and competing erudite conjectures are beginning to appear.

But it is still a very significant find. It clarifies many of the gaps in the Oxyrhynchus version. The discovery also seems to show that other lines from the Oxyrhynchus papyrus, which until now have stood at the beginning and end of 58, in fact belong to other poems instead. If this is right, we now know the shape of the whole poem and can draw some conclusions about form, which is especially exciting since only three other near-complete Sappho poems are known to have survived, among the many fragments.

Sappho’s voice seems to speak to us so directly that we have to resist the temptation to immediately cover the text with our own preoccupations—in my case, those of a second wave feminist with a pronounced limp who, much as...
“The newly reconstructed poem will undoubtedly reanimate, but will definitively not resolve, a number of other classic questions, including whether Sappho wrote monody or choral poems; whether her poems were performed in public or private; and what exactly was the nature of the group of girls she gathered around her (religious, erotic, pedagogical, therapeutic preparation for marriage, etc.).”

The newly reconstructed poem will undoubtedly reanimate, but will definitively not resolve, a number of other classic questions, including whether Sappho wrote monody or choral poems; whether her poems were performed in public or private; and what exactly was the nature of the group of girls she gathered around her (religious, erotic, pedagogical, therapeutic preparation for marriage, etc.). We are free, at least, to imagine this poem being sung and danced by group and soloist, perhaps as part of a coming-of-age ritual or other rite of passage.

But we should be wary of seeing a separate “female world of love and ritual” here, or a refuge from patriarchal culture, or (especially) a critique or challenge to the male world of war and force. Epithets like “the dark earth” are drawn from epic, and many terms have a martial flavor. For instance, in my translation I’ve chosen the word “heart,” but equally good alternatives would include “spirit,” “soul,” “mind,” “courage,” “desire,” “purpose,” or even “energy,” as when the “heart” of the warrior gives way in the course of battle (or crying). And the phrase “sigh” or “groan” may also have some connotation of the winded fighter (or horse) breathing heavily as the battle turns against him.

In fact, here as elsewhere in Sappho, epic themes and terms are combined, or perhaps balanced, with more lyric conventions. Knees are particularly interesting, as they can point in several directions: the epic warrior whose knees are unstrung in battle; the supplicant, who embraces the knees of the god or more powerful person in begging for his or her life; the knees that give way in the face of desire, “limb-loosening Eros”; or even a maternal image, as in the Hymn to Demeter, where a baby climbs onto the goddess’s knees. Becoming aware of connections between Sappho’s diction and other texts, both epic and lyric, does nothing (in my opinion) to diminish her originality or achievement. Looking at this poem now, I realize that in my own youth, when Sappho’s were the only Greek poems I knew, I might have been tempted to say, for instance, that worry about gray hairs and dry skin was a “woman’s theme”—but now I am aware of close analogues in Alcaeus and Anacreon. Or, I might have made much of the erotic feeling in the ritual dance of the young women, as a sign of a “different voice”—but Alcman, too, wrote of a lovely chorus leader from the point of view of another dancer who admires her. It now seems to me better to talk about this poem as showing not a “reversal” of gender roles or positioning, but a surprising “irrelevance” of gender. The question of who “takes” versus who is “taken” is certainly salient in most cultures, and in the Homeric Hymns as well, so a poem like this one that makes nothing of it is actually saying something different. And the phrase “sigh” or “groan” might have a more.

So could we stop arguing about this? Well... in picking up the TLS report of the discovery, the London Guardian remarks that “Ostensibly at least, the craving in the final image of the new poem is for love from young men.” (What? where?) The Daily Telegraph explains who Sappho was thus: “Heroine of feminists and homosexual.” A TLS report of a public lecture by Germaine Greer suggests that at least one feminist public intellectual has simply been hostile to the new discovery: “Professor Greer soon makes clear her dim view of male professors in ancient universities who think they know who Sappho was, what she might have written and why she might have written it... As for the TLS poem, attributed to the ‘middle aged Sappho,’ it is an implausible mixture of different fragments, assembled according to no logic that she can see, and wholly unworthy in any case.”

Certainly the use of Sappho over the ages to support various strange agendas might make one hang back, or at least side with Barbara Johnson, who in 2003 tried to conceive of Sappho’s texts as coming from an absence, from no point of origin. My own hope is different. The tools of philology, used with humility and restraint, can lead us to see Sappho’s legacy as an intriguing puzzle, a mystery for which we hold, after all, some real clues, rather than as a blank space. The paradoxes with which we are left may indeed be signs of her art.

In any case, the new poem seems destined to provide delight and provoke debate, for experts and others, including among feminists, for many years to come. Let the games begin.

Meryl Altman wishes to thank her Greek teachers, Keith Nightenhelder, Carl Huffman, Nancy Worman, and Dirk Obbink. A fuller and more scholarly version of this discussion, including footnotes, can be found online at www.depauw.edu/acad/women/maltman2006.htm under the title, “Sappho’s Knees.”

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