

# The New Criterion

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## “Brothers” & others: new Sappho poems

by Christopher Childers

When he published Oxyrhynchus Papyrus #2289 in 1951, Edgar Lobel remarked that “It cannot be said to add much to our knowledge and in two places it brings new darkness.” Yet now a new papyrus roll has been discovered that overlaps substantially with scraps we had, including those published by Lobel, adding line-ends to beginnings, or vice versa. The upshot is nine poems, eight corrected and augmented, one unknown and almost complete, for over sixty lines new or improved. M. L. West calls the discovery a great “enrichment, the greatest for ninety-two years.” The centerpiece, the “Brothers” poem (Fr. 9a), made international headlines in 2014 and has been widely translated; many readers will have read it. The other discoveries are less well known.

Sappho captivates by a combination of intimacy and mystery. She’s hard to see for many reasons, including her reputation—widely hailed as “the Tenth Muse” by the ancients, she’s been sending moderns into raptures at least since Joseph Addison in 1711, who wrote that “among the mutilated poets of antiquity, there is none whose fragments are so beautiful as those of Sappho.” Now as then, the effusions tend to be gendered: “beautiful” Sappho, she’s called, “the poetess,” and is the rare figure for whom that term is not meant derisively—see Felicia Hemans, or the Stevie Smith poem “Miss Snooks, Poetess.” Sappho’s apparent homosexuality fascinates and scandalizes in equal measure. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars have been as keen on defending her womanly virtue as ancient comedians were on impugning it—they made her a prostitute, or the sexually voracious wife of Cercylus of Andros (Dick Allcock from the Island of Man). Perhaps because her art looks transparent, it’s easy to forget how little we know of her and her dark, distant corner of the world, where our ideas of gender, sexuality, and poetry are likely irrelevant, misleading, or simply wrong.

Sappho thus presents a real challenge to translators and scholars—but not, I think, the same challenge. Translators want to catch the lyrical immediacy of her voice, intimating that we understand, and are understood by, a fellow traveler from an alien time and place. Scholars, on the other hand, see false light as new darkness, false familiarity as deeper ignorance—what is known

must always be firmly defined against what isn't. We must not lose sight of Sappho's mystery. I'm of the translators' party, but hope not to squander any rich darkness in pursuit of what can be known and said.

The Indiana Jones of the new discovery is the Oxford papyrologist Dirk Obbink. He was the first to read the "Brothers" poem, in the possession of a private London collector, and knew immediately what it was. Provenance is a convoluted tale I'll touch on only in passing: de-accessed in the 1980s by the University of Mississippi to make room for Faulkner manuscripts, the group of papyrus scraps containing "Brothers" made its way to Christie's of London, where it was bought by the collector at auction in November 2011. Not knowing what he had, he resold some fragments as too ratty to read; these were acquired by the Green family, the evangelical Christian owners of Hobby Lobby, who collect papyri like eight-tracks or Troll-dolls. (They're building a Bible museum.) After Obbink read and recognized "Brothers," he tracked down the rest as well, and in the end recovered and published a total of five fragments, four owned by the Greens, one by the London collector.

The roll comes from Book 1 of Sappho's Alexandrian edition. Both papyrus and ink date to A.D. 201, and the copyist's hand squares with that period. The poems are in Sapphic stanzas, arranged alphabetically by first letter of first word, here  $\omicron$  and  $\pi$ . The dialect is Aeolic, the vernacular of Sappho's native Lesbos. In papyrus order, the poems are 16, 16a, 17, 18 and 18a (both too scrappy to include), 5, 9, 9a, and 26.

"Brothers" (9a) is still the most important, for several reasons. A largely untattered column preserves its twenty lines—complete but for a stanza or two at the beginning, and unknown before this discovery—in luxurious legibility. It's the first poem we've found in which Sappho mentions her brothers Charaxus and Larichus by name. Charaxus, as we know from Herodotus and elsewhere, was a wine-trader with connections at Naucratis in North Egypt, near the future site of Alexandria; while there, he fell in love with a slave-girl, Doricha, who, after he purchased her freedom, went on to become a famous courtesan—at which Sappho, displeased, vituperated one of them in a poem. Sappho preferred her younger brother Larichus, a public cup-bearer in Mitylene; in "Brothers," Sappho wishes for him to be "a man at last, and hold his head up manfully" (the line is less scathing if he is still an adolescent). As Obbink argues, "Brothers" corroborates Herodotus, just as Herodotus confirms Sappho's authorship of "Brothers."

**O**ur love of Sappho is hard to separate from our own reflection, projected onto the dim, distorting mirror of the past. Her intimacy and mystery—qualities partly intrinsic, partly accidental—half force and half seduce us into recreating Sappho every time we read her; listening to her voice, we imagine *her*. The recreation starts with text, encompasses biography, and extends to the culture, politics, and society of seventh-century Lesbos. When we work to imagine her text within the context of archaic poetry, we reconstruct both the poet and the place where she lived and sang.

I'll start with text. Fr. 16, the Anactoria Ode, is one of Sappho's best-loved poems, despite a three-line gap at 12–14, where Sappho turns longingly from Helen to her darling Anactoria. How did she make the transition? Two new words, one at the end of each line, allow M. L. West to improve previous restorations in accuracy and sense. He suggests the following, with restorations in brackets (note that my versions below also use brackets to show these *exempli gratia* conjectures of scholars): [σ?φρον' ?οι]σαν// [Κ?πρις· ?γν]αμπτον γ?ρ [?μως] ν?ημμα/ [δ?μναται] κο?φως, τ[?κερ' ?ς] νο?ση(ι): "But [Cypris] misled her (*i.e.*, Helen) [despite her womanly virtue;] for easily [she masters even an unb]ending mind to think [melting thoughts of love.]" Though hardly certain, this restoration is still a real advance in the text and understanding of the poem.

Many may object to translating conjectures, as I've done here, on the grounds that the words aren't necessarily the poet's. This is fair, yet it's worth noting that no word of a *translation* will ever be the poet's; that a translator's goal is not to reproduce her words anyway, but, as Dryden puts it, her "sense and spirit;" and that, for this purpose, a conjecture may serve as well as the original, provided it has the right idea. True, a word suggested by a scholar may be merely competent where the lost original is brilliant; but it's still not clear that such brilliance would lend itself to translation, or that it's a worse traducing of Sappho to render a likely guess than a stanza full of holes, or no stanza at all. At any rate, one may hope for future discoveries to confirm or correct the present conjectures, as earlier ones are corrected here.

The intimacy of a poem like the Anactoria Ode encourages us to see Sappho as a sort of proto-Confessional joining emotional vulnerability to clarity and elegance; but the ease of that image conceals a question much-debated by scholars: how might such "confessional" poems have functioned in the song culture of archaic Greece? On Sappho's Lesbos, there would have been little writing, if any. Poems, whether composed beforehand or improvised on the spot, were sung in public, at banquets, weddings, drinking parties, victory celebrations, religious rituals, and state occasions. "Anactoria" could have been performed at a drinking party—except that these were generally, as far as we know, masculine affairs. Perhaps Sappho gave informal readings for a coterie of girls, who may have been her "students"—except that one wonders how the text would have been preserved. (One wonders about that anyway.) It may have been performed at a wedding—but that's just the default guess for any poem of Sappho's whose occasion isn't immediately clear. Does it matter? Perhaps not, but to me the poem changes if I imagine it sung by a chorus as a sort of "maiden-song" or as a solo by the poet after a feast. For what it's worth (not much!), my own fantasy is of "Sappho and her Girls" as a traveling musical act, like Carly Simon or the Supremes, that performed around Lesbos (or even more widely) on religious and secular occasions. But now I've fallen into the trap I set out to illustrate: where our knowledge fails, we retroject our own selves and epoch onto the *tabula rasa* of the past.

The public Sappho—generally less familiar than the confessional one—is an eloquent ambassador for what Anne Carson calls the "unbelievable otherness" of the Greeks. We should perhaps imagine this Sappho strumming her lyre and singing while a chorus of girls danced behind her, as

in an anonymous epigram from the *Greek Anthology* (my translation):

Come out to Hera's temple, Lesbian girls,  
which dazzles where your dainty chorus whirls,  
and for the goddess dance your gorgeous dance;  
Sappho will lead, gold lyre in her hands.  
You happy things, you'll hear such melodies  
you'll think the music is Calliope's. [A.P. IX.189]

This should give us a clear picture of the scene in Fr. 17, which is also set at the temple on Lesbos to Hera, Zeus and Dionysus ("Thyone's son"). The occasion was a yearly beauty pageant called the Kallisteia, described by Alcaeus:

where girls of Lesbos, strutting  
in skirts that swish the ground,  
strive to dazzle the judges  
of beauty, and all around  
the otherworldly echoes ring  
of holy ululation, their yearly offering.

[Fr. 130b]

The context for Fr. 17, then, is clear: it's an entirely decorous cult hymn. For how many of the other poems translated here does this image hold? Where and how were they performed? Were they acts of public celebration or private devotion? Your guess is as good as mine—and as you make it, you'll be participating in the centuries-old pastime of reinventing Sappho in your own contemporary likeness.

**I**t's easy to think of Sappho as one of us. The darkness shrouding her poems, her life, and her milieu allows ample scope for imagination. She has been many things to many people, including a priestess of Aphrodite, a prostitute, a chaste German schoolmistress, the host of a French salon, a homosexual Marquise de Sade, a modernist, a confessional poet, a feminist *avant la lettre*. For all we know, she could have been any or all of those things, but was probably none. The translator wants to keep her close, to channel her voice with elegance and intimacy. Scholars, for whom unfeigned ignorance is better than false knowledge, want to be precise about her mystery.

Not all of these poems may be among Sappho's best, but they contribute both to our understanding and our ignorance; they expand the range of notes struck by the beloved voice—intimate, mysterious, essential—of a poet who lived in and through her art.

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