

The Art of Becoming Savvy

By Conger Beasley Jr.

Book Review:

Sweetbitter Love: Poems of Sappho, A New Translation by Willis Barnstone.
Shambhala, 2006.

Sappho, the legendary Greek lyric poet, was born on the island of Lesbos in the Aegean Sea around 630 B.C. Little about her life can be accurately tabulated. Who she really was remains concealed in a swirl of rumor, conjecture, and innuendo. Her family was likely wealthy and well-connected, a member of the ruling hierarchy of the island. Her father's name was Skamandronymous, her mother Kleis. She had two brothers, possibly three. She may have married a rich merchant from the nearby island of Andros named Kerkylas, who may have fathered a daughter with her, also named Kleis.

The distinguished translator Willis Barnstone has brought out a revised and updated edition of an earlier translation of all the bits and pieces of the Sappho canon that have been discovered to date. The book comes with praise from writers and fellow translators such as Carolyn Forché, David Ferry, Andrei Codrescu, and Jim Harrison. Barnstone has been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for his own poetry, but he is perhaps best known to the literary world for his translations of the Spanish poets St. John of the Cross and Antonio Machado. He has also translated the work of classical Chinese poets such as Wang Wei.

Sappho's extant work comes to us in dubs and dabs over a period of time that stretches back more than 2,000 years. The story of her life is one of the great literary mysteries. Who was she, and why, on the basis of a mere handful of poems, is she so well-known?

In the centuries following her death (c. 600 B.C.), on the swell of her controversial reputation as a poet and voluptuary, her

countenance came to decorate coins, statues, and vase paintings; so compelling was her life and the poetry she made from it that she became a stock figure of many plays, poems, stories, and satires composed during the golden era of Periclean Greece and later in the days of the Roman Empire. With few actual facts available about her life, writers through the millennia have invented a variety of personae to convey what they think she was really like. (One of the more intriguing was penned in 1960 by the controversial beat-generation druggie and master of erotica Alexander Trocchi, entitled *Sappho of Lesbos: An Amorous Odyssey*.) These renditions run the gamut; for some, she was chaste and pure, for others wanton and promiscuous—a courtesan who sold her favors to the highest bidder.

These same writers have been especially fanciful in their physical descriptions, some configuring her as willowy, elegant, and blond (the “lovely Sappho”), others as short, dark, and homely. Her identity will never be satisfactorily known. She lurks in the misty backdrop of our cultural Mediterranean heritage, like a beguiling siren. After reading the shards and splinters of what remains of her tantalizing poetry, who can resist her allure? Despite the lack of hard facts about her life, we do know one thing—she was the foremost lyric poet of Greek and Roman antiquity.

Lyric as opposed to epic—the sort of bardic, deep-chested poetry that Homer wrote in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* two centuries before Sappho sat down to write anything. Because of their prowess as warriors and politicians, men held sway in public life, and women were expected not only to understand this but also to do everything in their power to help nourish and maintain it.

Sappho objected to this, contending that the particulars of the personal, subjective life were as fit a subject for poetry as wide-angle battle scenes of mayhem and bloodshed. In her lapidary poem “Supreme Sight on the Black Earth,” glowingly translated by Barnstone, Sappho declares that “Some say cavalry and others claim / infantry or a fleet of long oars / is the supreme sight on the black earth. I say it is the one you love. . . .”

She goes on to elaborate: “And I would rather see her supple step / and motion of light on her face / than chariots of the Lydians or ranks / of foot soldiers in bronze. . . .”

Sappho during her short life may have composed about 500 poems; of these, only two survive intact. It was virtually impossible to remain neutral toward her; for some she was a goddess, for others a ribald opportunist. Men feared her; women envied her. She was sensual and headstrong, gifted and outspoken. (Her political wiles are balanced off nicely against her sexual cravings in Trocchi’s biographical novel.) She apparently slept with whoever, male or female, caught her fancy.

She lived possibly to the age of 40 or even 50 before throwing herself off a cliff out of love for the ferryman Phaon, a paramour who frequently betrayed her—or so says the Latin poet Ovid, who may have invented the whole thing. She may also have died peacefully in bed, possibly in the company of her daughter. The uncertainties multiply the deeper one probes.

Several centuries after her death, scholars at the classical library in Alexandria arranged what they could find of her work—epigrams, elegies, dirges, and wedding songs—into nine books; the first book contained 1,320 lines. It’s evident that during her lifetime she piled up a large body of work; sadly, that prolific output today amounts to not more than 2,000 lines.

The surviving fragments that constitute her available work have a curious history. Before they were identified as belonging to the poet, they served a variety of utilitarian uses, including being stuffed as insulation into mummies, coffins, and the carcasses of crocodiles and other sacred animals. Other poems were torn into vertical strips, which gives them the jigsaw, piecemeal appearance they have today. Ironically, the shredded condition of many of these fragments has resulted in the inadvertent creation of some remarkable poetic utterances. “So many words and phrases are elliptically connected in montage structures,” says Willis Barnstone, “that chance destruction has delivered us pieces of strophes that breathe experimental verse.”

At times these remnants seem closer to the modernist improvisations of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky than to the Greek lyric tradition. While it is unfortunate that the vast majority of Sappho's poems were trashed by circumstances beyond her control, the fact that these pieces have survived in a different incarnation underscores their resilience and flexibility. The startling juxtapositions contained in many of these isolated lines give them a charge that is still detectable today.

Consider, for example, this taut, imagist evocation of a lowly insect:

CICADA

Flaming summer
 charms the earth with its own fluting,
 and under leaves
 the cicada scrapes its tiny wings together
 and incessantly
 pours out full shrill song

Or this epigrammatical distillation of the power of love:

Eros loosener of limbs once again trembles me,
 a sweetbitter beast irrepressibly creeping in

Or this disjointed narrative, evocative of the clandestine thrill of illicit love:

BEHIND A LAUREL TREE

You lay in wait
 behind a laurel tree

 and everything
 was sweeter

 women
 wandering

I barely heard
darling soul

such as I now am
you came

beautiful
in your garments

Says H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), perhaps the most Sapphic of the poets to write under the spell of her muse: "Legend upon legend has grown up, adding curious documents to each precious fragment; the history of the preservation of each line is in itself a most fascinating and bewildering romance."

Though venerated and esteemed down through the centuries, few poets have been as vilified. Many early Christian leaders were bothered by her (presumed) licentiousness. To the church mind, Sappho represented the epitome of immoral behavior. Around 380 A.D. the bishop of Constantinople ordered the burning of her writings, wherever they could be found. In 391 A.D. a mob of Christian fanatics set fire to Ptolemy Soter's extraordinary library in Alexandria, where many of her books were sequestered. In 1073 A.D., the little that was left of her writing was publicly burned in Rome and Constantinople by order of Pope Gregory VII.

As damaging in their own way to Sappho's character and reputation were the many poets and critics from the 17th century on down to our own day who tried to sanitize her reputation and transform her into the embodiment of chastity and virtue (the "divine Sappho"). The problem lay with her ambiguous sexuality—was she a lesbian or wasn't she? On the part of her devotees, there seemed to be a collective denial of her errant behavior. In 1913 scholar Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff published a book, *Sappho und Simonides*, in which he repudiated all accusations that Sappho was a sexual deviant. Instead, he said, she was a wife and mother, a paragon of womanly virtues.

One exception to this critical whitewashing, and a man who

paid dearly for his indiscretion, was the French poet Charles Baudelaire. In 1857 he published his masterwork, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, which contained six “lesbian” poems centering around Sappho and the women who followed her. The poems hit the French reading public like a bombshell and outraged official government censors. Both author and publisher were convicted of obscenity charges and fined. The six offending poems were removed from the book and the publisher, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, was sent to prison.

All this changed by the mid-20th century. Hard liners like the eminent British scholar C. M. Bowra revised their opinions of the Greek lyric poet’s sexual identity, and today she is accepted pretty much at her word. The intransigence of these doubters prompts the question: what could they possibly have thought she was doing with those young women who came to live with her in her compounds in Lesbos, Egypt, Sicily, and Malta (locations where she is thought to have resided for unspecified periods of time), and where they received hands-on training in the art of becoming savvy, smart, sophisticated women? The ancient Greeks were a lot more relaxed and accepting of such things; sexuality was sexuality, no matter whom you did it with, or why.

In the last few decades, there have been many translations of Sappho’s work by gifted and well-meaning writers: Josephine Balmer, Paul Roche, Diane Raynor, Mary Barnard, Guy Davenport, Sherod Santos, to name a few. None quite connects the shards and fragments with the same satisfying verve and flair as Willis Barnstone’s. None quite fills out these solitary, orphaned lines with the same rhythm and feeling. Barnstone is one of the greatest translators of literary expression from a foreign language into English. We are lucky to have him.