

## A New & Timeless Sappho

By Denise Low

Book Review

*Sappho: Complete Poems and Fragments*,  
translated by Stanley Lombardo,  
Hackett, 2016.



Lyricist Sappho is the lodestar for every English-language poet. She composed the oldest surviving Greek poetry. Born on the island of Lesbos, she lived in late 700 to early 600 B.C.E., writing in Lesbos. Plato regarded her so highly that he called her the 10th Muse. Sappho used a Greek prosody that is only approximated in English, yet her ardor, her imagery, her voice—all these continue to sing. The challenge is to find translations that present her opus with both accuracy and passion. Another challenge is the fragmentation of her writings through the centuries. Only snippets survive: inconclusive and tantalizing bits, which emphasize the incomplete nature of language, written or spoken, at the very beginning of the literary tradition.

In *Sappho: Complete Poems and Fragments*, Stanley Lombardo, a master translator, updates his 2002 *Sappho* to include newly discovered fragments. He also has rendered admired versions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and works by Virgil, Ovid, and Dante. He is a professor of Greek and Latin, with intimate knowledge of the culture, the prosody, and the languages. His translations preserve the structural integrity of original forms, as well as intent. I have read most of his major works and appreciate his fresh, active diction with no archaic trim. He is authoritative, so the texts are true. He is an artist, so the translations are artful.

Sappho's poetics, unlike English, had sustained or short syllables of classical Greek. "Her meters are based on the time value of syllables," writes Pam Gordon in her introduction, "rather than on word accents." These correspond to quarter notes and half notes of

musical notation. English has no equivalent. Lombardo translates with sensitivity to original texts.

This Ur-literary language, however distant, uses familiar poetic situations. The narrator speaks directly to a deity—Venus, a muse—with personal confessions, which is quite modern. Her images stun, even across the centuries. Fragment 98 has this moment:

For my mother once told me

that in her youth it was considered elegant  
for a girl to put her hair up  
in a purple headband—indeed it was—

but for the girl with hair more golden-red  
than a flaming torch it was better  
to do it up in wreaths of blooming flowers.

Sappho evokes the beauty of a young woman with a simple detail, which she transforms into a sublime image. The poet accompanied her verses on a lyre, and the harp's strums are lost, yet the extreme comparison of "golden-red" hair to a "flaming torch" is striking. It lifts the celebration of beauty into a transcendent moment, no matter what language.

Lombardo's genius with translation is clear when compared to less felicitous versions. This 1924 translation by Edwin Marion Cox, accessible widely on the Internet, clings to 19th-century diction:

Shimmering-throned immortal Aphrodite,  
Daughter of Zeus, Enchantress, I implore thee,  
Spare me, O queen, this agony and anguish,  
Crush not my spirit

Whenever before thou has hearkened to me—  
To my voice calling to thee in the distance,  
And heeding, thou hast come, leaving thy father's  
Golden dominions. . . . (Fragment 1)

Lay this alongside "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," published in 1915, and the artificial antiquity of the diction is clear.

Its use of inverted word order (“Crush not my spirit”); archaic pronoun cases (“thee” and “thou”); elevated diction; and antiquated terms (“hearkened,” “dominions”) all make this difficult reading, especially with the added cultural distances. Compare this to Lombardo’s translation:

Mind shimmering, deathless Aphrodite,  
child of Zeus, weaver of wiles,  
I beg you, do not crush my spirit  
with anguish, Lady,

but come here now, if ever before  
you heard my voice in the distance  
and heeded my prayer, left your father’s  
golden house. . . .

The language is straightforward, with “weaver of wiles” instead of the more romantic term “Enchantress.” Lombardo uses less melodramatic terms: “beg” rather than “implore” and “Lady” rather than “queen.” This translation preserves the four-line stanzas, a poetic form known as the sapphic stanza, with a shortened last line. Lombardo’s strong downbeats for the first two lines of each stanza (trochees) contrasts with the third-line dactyls (stress followed by two unstressed syllables). This seems effortless here and throughout the book. As a result, the images have full color. The emotions are immediate.

Sappho is the original erasure poet. Nine of her scrolls burned in the Alexandrian library during early centuries of the first millennium. Of roughly 10,000 lines, only broken pieces survive, 200-plus fragments. They include five new poem fragments discovered this century in mummy wrappings, as Gordon explains. A broken pot shard preserved part of a song to Aphrodite. Without intention, Sappho’s poems illustrate slippage and disrupted narratives, what remains in this distillation of significance. Lyrics approximate heat maps of emotion formed with language.

Lombardo deliberately composes pages of the least complete fragments to preserve placements of text. This creates a field of inverse lacuna, as the few remaining words appear within the larger

gaps of loss. This is a collage effect. Susan Howe's 2017 book, *Debths*, has a similar, deliberate effect. She composes pages of white space and text clippings, some lines smudged beyond recognition. She explains the bricolage sections: "Our eyes see what is outside in the landscape in the form of words on paper but *inside*, a slash or mark wells up from a deeper place where music before counting hails from."

End matter in *Sappho: Complete Poems and Fragments* includes a detailed glossary, homages to Sappho, and imitations of her works by Ovid and others. Lombardo also footnotes each fragment with sources. This edition of Lombardo's translation is indispensable.

## Chaos Theory

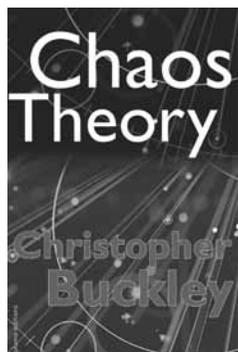
by Christopher Buckley

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I don't think I know of another poet who has such vertical range and depth; Buckley manages to have one foot in the physical muck and tenderness of the world and the other foot planted among the star galaxies of the universe. . . . There is something here that is deeply human and courageous, something like what I find in the essays of Loren Eiseley. And all of this would be nothing, of course, without the language, which is the glory of these poems.

—Peter Everwine

There is a deep nostalgia here, but also wisdom and common sense, and beautiful writing. I welcome him at his matruirist, poet of stardust.

—Gerald Stern