Sappho’s Reproach of Helen: Emending a Lacuna to Understand Sappho Fragment 16

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ABSTRACT

In what survives of the poem known as “Sappho 16,” written in the Lesbian Aeolic dialect of classical Greek, Sappho’s speaker claims that the most beautiful sight on earth is whatever the viewer happens to love. She illustrates her point with a mythic exemplum about Helen of Troy and then relates it to her own longing for her former lover, Anaktoria. The interpretation of the poem is complicated by a lacuna in line 12 that obscures a critical part of the text. This gap in the text offers several possibilities for emendations, each of which dramatically affects the meaning of the poem.

I first suggest an emendation for this lacuna that is consistent with the rest of the text and propose an interpretation of the poem in keeping with this emendation. I then discuss how the poem might be translated based on this interpretation, addressing in particular two issues that arise in translating Sappho’s poetry: the importance of conveying the meter of the poetry and the treatment of the lacunae in the damaged text. Because Sappho’s songs were originally performed to music, both questions are essential to appreciating her poems as the musical compositions they are. In an attempt to preserve the musical nature of the text, I offer my own translation of the poem, which retains its original meter. Finally, I suggest a new approach to representing lacunae in translation that reflects the meter of the missing passages and does not impose meaning on the text.

The missing word in line 12 is usually assumed to have been the subject of the verb παράγαγ’ (“[he/she/it] led astray”) in line 11: the person or force responsible for leading Helen astray. Common suggestions are ἀρετή (“virtue”), ἀρετήτω (“virtuous”). I propose an opposite interpretation: taking a person happens to love. She illustrates her point with a mythic exemplum: the story of Helen of Troy. Despite having a husband described as ἄριστον (“the best,” 8), Helen abandoned her family for Paris, whom her love made her regard as καλλίστον (“the best,” 9) πάντων (“beloved walk,” 17) and radiant προσώπων (“face, countenance,” 18) she holds superior to all the armies of the Lydians.

Although Sappho 16 is among the best-preserved fragments of her work and most of its lacunae are easily glossed, this gap in the text offers several possibilities for emendations, each of which dramatically affects the meaning of the poem. In this paper, I first suggest an emendation for this lacuna that is consistent with the rest of the text and propose an interpretation of the poem in keeping with this emendation. I then discuss how the poem might be translated based on this interpretation, addressing in particular two issues that arise in translating Sappho’s poetry: the importance of conveying in translation the meter of the poetry and the treatment of the lacuna in the damaged text. Because Sappho’s songs were originally performed to music, both questions are essential to appreciating her poems as the musical compositions they are.

EMENDATION AND INTERPRETATION

After introducing her idea of beauty in the first stanza, Sappho demonstrates her argument with a mythic exemplum: the story of Helen of Troy. Despite having a husband described as ἄριστον (“the best,” 8), Helen abandoned her family for Paris, whom her love made her regard as καλλίστον (“the most beautiful [thing or person] on the dark earth,” 2-3). Sappho’s speaker then draws a parallel to her own situation: for her, the most beautiful sight on earth is whatever the person happens to love. She illustrates her point with a mythic exemplum: the story of Helen of Troy. Despite having a husband described as ἄριστον (“the best,” 8), Helen abandoned her family for Paris, whom her love made her regard as καλλίστον (“the best,” 9) πάντων (“beloved walk,” 17) and radiant προσώπων (“face, countenance,” 18) she holds superior to all the armies of the Lydians.

The poem’s interpretation and the significance of the Helen exemplum depend on the lacuna in line 12. The missing word is usually assumed to have been the subject of the verb παράγαγ’ (“[he/she/it] led astray”) in the previous line: the person or force responsible for leading Helen astray. Common suggestions are...
different phrasing with the same sense.

which Sappho composed, of the Attic ἀέκοισαν. The accent at the beginning of line 12, where I have suggested οὐκ. The (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

1-28.2 Zetiscrhift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 189 (2014): of Sappho,

Dirk Obbink, Simon Burris, and Jeffrey Fish, “New Fragments of Book 1 of Sappho,”

Helen herself may be the subject of παράγαγ᾽, making αὔταν ("her," or, in this case, "herself," 11) a reflexive object. Although αὔταν is not usually reflexive – either σε αὔταν or μιν would be a more expected form – the reflexive use of αὔταν is attested in Aeolic.2 The Form may have been used for metrical reasons, since σε αὔταν has one syllable too many for this position and μιν one too few. This interpretation raises some grammatical issues: even if αὔταν is understood as reflexive, the active verb παράγαγ᾽ would more usually be a middle or passive form if used with a reflexive sense. Nonetheless, taking Helen as the subject of παράγαγ᾽ is a possibility, if not the most likely. A second approach, which is grammatically more plausible but has the same effect as taking Helen as the subject, is to assume that the subject of the verb was in line 14, which is beyond reconstruction. This subject may have been Κύπρις, Ἕρως, Πάρος, or another agent, but with the emendation οὐκ ἄεκοισαν in the previous line, the subject of παράγαγ᾽ becomes irrelevant. The question of who led Helen astray does not affect the sense of the stanza: that Helen’s choice of Paris over Menelaus was her own.

This interpretation is consistent with Sappho’s emphasis in the poem on Helen’s agency. Helen ignores the fact that Menelaus, [τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν [περ ἄριστον ("although [he was] the best man of all"), 7-8], is superior to Paris; Sappho’s speaker implies with the concessive particle περ (7) that Helen’s choice is surprising, but presents it as her choice nonetheless. Helen’s agency is underscored by the placement of the participle καλλήνισαν ("leaving behind," 9), which accords with the subject ἄ/Ελες (6/7), at the beginning of a line and of a stanza. The word portrays Helen as active subject rather than passive victim and is further emphasized by enjambment. The idea of Helen’s independence suggested by καλλήνισαν continues in the rest of the line, which is dominated by two participles applying to Helen (καλλήνισσα "sailing") and a verb of which she is the subject (ἐβα “she went”). Each of these three verb forms denotes motion away from her husband, family, and country. Sappho’s independent Helen is the subject of each verb in this stanza – ἔβα (9); ἐμνάσθς (7) (“she remembered, gave a thought to,” 11) – until the oddly sudden shift to passivity that comes with παράγαγ᾽ in line 11, when the speaker appears to present Helen as submissive to the control of an external force that leads her to Troy. This conventional view of Helen as a passive figure is made possible by the lacuna in line 12, which allows readers to assume that this space must have been occupied by Κύπρις or Ἕρως. To take Helen herself, however, as the effective, not necessarily the grammatical, subject of παράγαγ᾽ is more consistent with Sappho’s portrayal of Helen earlier in the stanza as in control of her own actions.

In this interpretation, Helen goes astray “not unwillingly,” not subject to the force of a god or of Paris but acting of her own will. This emendation is both metrically and stylistically possible and consistent with the portrayal of Helen throughout the poem. Stylistically, the line οὐκ ἀέκοισαν is also reminiscent of the epode of the sixth stanza of Sappho 1, in which the speaker, identified as Sappho, imagines Aphrodite promising her that another woman will soon return her love κοῦκ ἐθέλοισα ("even if she is unwilling"). Thematically, Sappho 1 emphasizes Sappho’s own agency in pursuing the object of her love, even enlisting the help of the goddess, just as Sappho 16 depicts an independent Helen who chooses of her own accord to follow Paris. The verb παράγαγ᾽ could now be understood as referring not to a forced “leading astray” but rather to an active choice on Helen’s part. The speaker has already suggested with the particle περ (7) that Helen’s choice is irrational; the word παράγαγ᾽, which I translate somewhat loosely as “went off, let her steps be led” (see p. 31), might imply her disapproval of Helen’s deliberate abandonment of her family.

Such an interpretation – that Helen left home willingly, to the speaker’s implicit disapproval – makes clear the relevance of the Helen exemplum to the rest of the poem. Helen initially appears to have been introduced to illustrate the speaker’s claim that τὸ κάλλιστον is ὅτι τῆς ἔραται ("whatever one loves," 3-4), since Helen’s love for Paris made him appear to her κάλλιστον [... ἔποι/ν] γάν μέλαγι/να even though she herself was the one τὸλυ περάκεθοιτα κάλλος [ἀνθρώπων ("far surpassing all men in beauty," 6-7). I propose that the speaker has in fact introduced Helen as a parallel to Anaktoria, of whom the story of Helen has reminded her (διήμνημα “reminding,” 15-16) and to whom her subject shifts following two lines, 13-14, too damaged to be reconstructed. Just as the placement of καλλήνισαν at the beginning of the third stanza emphasizes Helen’s agency, so Anaktoria is established as the subject of the fifth stanza from its first word, the simple pronoun ταῖς.


3 Cf. Obbink, Burris & Fish.

4 The surviving manuscript of the poem appears to have a grave accent at the beginning of line 12, where I have suggested οὐκ. The smooth breathing of οὐκ could, however, have been interpreted as a grave accent. ἄκοισαν is the form in Aeolic, the Greek dialect in which Sappho composed, of the Attic ἄκοισαν.

The lacuna in line 12 therefore determines how the Helen exemplum applies to the speaker’s situation. When Helen is understood as a passive figure subject to the control of Κύρις or Έρως, the speaker is cast as Helen and Anaktoria as Paris, the object of affection. Recognizing the agency that Helen and Anaktoria have in common allows a new interpretation of the exemplum: Anaktoria, like Helen, has chosen to follow the object of her love and has left not only the speaker, who is in Menelaus’s position, but also the rest of her family and friends, represented in the exemplum by Helen’s daughter and parents. Just as Menelaus is rejected by Helen despite being [τού] ἄνδρα τῶν [...] διότι τὸν (“the best man of all,” 7-8), so the speaker considers herself superior to the new object of Anaktoria’s affection; she is indignant at Anaktoria’s abandonment “without a thought” (πάρμεν). The speaker’s powerlessness is reflected in the verb βαλλόμαι (“I would wish, want,” 17): the only first-person verb to occur in the poem, it is in the optative mood. This supports an understanding of the role of the exemplum in which the speaker is analogous not to Helen, free to follow the one she loves, but to Menelaus, abandoned by a lover.

Considering Sappho 16 in the context of Sappho’s other works may contribute to an understanding of the speaker’s relationship to Anaktoria. The abandonment of the speaker by the object of her love is a recurring theme in Sappho’s poetry; sometimes the lover is unwilling to go, but more often, it is only the speaker who is left disappointed. Sappho 1, the “ode to Aphrodite,” is a plea to the goddess to have Sappho’s love for an unspecified girl reciprocated. Sappho 16, however, might be most relevant in comparison to Sappho 16. In this poem, the unnamed speaker exclaims that “without a thought” (πάρμενον, 11) the object of her love has left not only the speaker, who is in Menelaus’s position, but also the rest of her family and friends. Anaktoria, like Helen, has chosen to follow the object of her love and has left not only the speaker, who is in Menelaus’s position, but also the rest of her family and friends.

The context is unclear, but the scene described may be a wedding. The speaker silently addresses the bride, describing in detail her reaction to seeing her. The woman, speaking and laughing with the man opposite her, does not seem to notice the speaker’s attention. Perhaps Anaktoria’s situation is similar: she has married and left the speaker and their community. Although this is hardly a betrayal, the speaker nonetheless compares Anaktoria to Helen of Troy, a traitor who chose to follow her own desires despite the disastrous results of her actions. In this context, Sappho’s unusual emphasis on Helen’s agency is fitting to her portrayal of Anaktoria’s choice as a betrayal.

TRANSLATION

Translators of Sappho 16 cannot avoid conveying their own interpretations of line 12 and its implications for the text. This is true of any poem, but especially so of one in which a single line dramatically changes its meaning. Many translators do not attempt to reconstruct the missing Greek of line 12 but assume that the general sense of the line must have been that love led Helen astray. Others, whether from uncertainty as to the line’s meaning or to preserve the ambiguity of the damaged poem, simply leave the space blank, allowing the reader to imagine who might be responsible for Helen’s abandonment of her husband. In my own translation, I have represented my interpretation of Helen as the subject of line 12.

I translate (see the Appendix for the Greek text):

Some would say it’s cavalry, some foot-soldiers; 1
Some, again say ships of a fleet are on dark
Earth most beautiful; none of these, I say, but
that which you love best:

simple, really, for everyone to see this,
since the one who’s said to surpass all in her beauty – Helen – had for her husband the best
man of them all, yet

left him: she went sailing to Troy without a
thought for daughter, parents or friends, dear though they
had been: she went off; let her steps be led, not
even unwilling

her familiar steps, which I love, and that bright
radiance of her face, that I’d wish to see – much
more than Lydian chariots with their soldiers
ready for battle.

My interpretation of the poem is apparent in this translation not just from the emendation in lines 11-12 but also from more subtle choices of vocabulary and style. The most significant departure from

6 The reference to Helen’s parents and daughter (10) could suggest Anaktoria’s abandonment not only of her immediate family but also of her community. The speaker’s mention of her lovely step” (ἐπάρτων [...] βᾶμα, 17) may be a reference not only to the way she walks but possibly also to the way that chorus-leaders indicated meter with their feet as they sang. Alcman refers in his first Partheneion to a girls’ chorus led by one singer he calls “Hagesichora.” The chorus he describes is Spartan, not Lesbian, and it cannot be assumed that Sappho’s compositions were performed in a similar setting; however, if Anaktoria’s role was similar to that of Hagesichora, the speaker’s reference to her βᾶμα would have an added significance.

7 “Oh, how terribly we have suffered, Sappho, and truly I am leaving you unwillingly.”

8 “He seems to me equal to the gods, that man who is sitting opposite you and hears from close by your sweet voice and your lovely laughter.”


11 To distinguish between the line numbers of the Greek text and of my translation, I have marked the line numbers in translation with *.

12 See pp. 33-34 for a discussion of representing in translation the lacunae in lines 13-14.
the original is in the addition of the word “friends” as a category of people abandoned by Helen. I did this both for metrical reasons (see pp. 11-13) and because it is consistent with my reading of the poem as a complaint about Anaktoria’s abandonment not just of her lover but also of her community (see note 6 on p. 31). Apart from this slight change, I have sought to maintain as close as possible to the Greek text, conveying the incredulity expressed by the particle ἐρήμην (7) with “yet” (8*) and the indignant tone of πάντα (πάνταν) (“altogether, at all,”) without “dear though they had been” (10-11*), applying the adjective φίλον (“dear,”) not only to Helen’s parents but to all those she left behind. The reference to Helen’s “steps” (11*) is more explicit than the παράγας ἀρτιστήν (11) of the original and is intended to underscore the parallel between Helen and Anaktoria (cf. 17*, βάμα “walk” or “step” in the Greek). In translating ἔρατον [...] βάμα (17) as Anaktoria’s “familiar steps, which I love” (17*) rather than the more literal “beloved walk,” I have attempted to convey both the familiarity implied by ἔρατόν and its suggestion that this was once a repeated or regular sight for the speaker. The addition of “which I love,” with its parallel to “that you love best” (4*) maintains the parallel of ἔρατον (4) and ἔρατον (17) in the original: the mention of love in the first stanza is part of a gnomic statement, whereas the return of this theme in the fifth applies specifically to the speaker’s situation.

Despite the inevitability of emphasizing my own interpretation of the poem in translation, I have attempted to be faithful to Sappho’s text by maintaining the relationship between its content and its form wherever possible. Where the original has enjambment, alliteration, and other stylistic devices, however, I have not tried to reproduce Sappho’s formal structure but instead to reproduce the effect it has on the poem’s content. For example, I have maintained not only the triple repetition of ὀλεον in the opening priamel but also the relative positions of the words, since the placement of two repetitions at the beginning of the first two lines of the poem draws attention to the contrast between these widely-held opinions and the speaker’s very different view:

Some would say it’s cavalry, some foot-soldiers;
some, again, say ships of a fleet are on dark
Earth most beautiful:

Sappho’s use of alliteration is particularly striking in the second and third stanzas, where each of the six hendecasyllable lines begins with π or κ. These percussive consonants emphasize not only the beginning of each line but also important words throughout the two stanzas (πάλιν περικύκλωσα, πλέοιον καυχής παλίκιος). Even when these repetitions are not close enough together to constitute alliteration, they create a harsh tone throughout the two stanzas that prepare for the speaker’s reproach of Anaktoria. I have represented this in translation with the hissing repeated s and h in the second stanza:

πάλιγχυ δέσμαρας σύνετον πόησαι

Sappho’s placement of words in the line also contributes to its meaning. This is a stylistic possibility in an inflected language, in which word order is more variable, that is difficult to retain in English, even in verse. It often involves beginning a line with the word to be emphasized, but can also mean promoting or delaying a word within a line to achieve a particular effect. Where Sappho places a word at the beginning of a line, I have followed her where possible; for example, in the case of κάλλος / “beauty” (8) and καλλιποίοισι / “left” (9). By contrast, Ἐλενα (7) is delayed, appearing only after the phrase that modifies it, as if Helen’s name need hardly be mentioned after the characteristic description of her as ἀ [...] παλιν περικύκλωσα κάλλος [...φοιτησων (6-7). To reflect the sense that Helen’s name is included as an afterthought, an unnecessary clarification for an audience that already knows to whom the speaker is referring, I have placed her name between explanatory dashes.

Some features of Sappho’s composition, however, cannot be conveyed in English. For example, I had hoped to follow Sappho in including only one first-person verb in my translation, echoing the powerlessness conveyed by her βολλοίμαν (17) with the uncertain “I’d wish” (18*). Unfortunately, although the verb of line 3 can be left implicit in Greek, where the resulting brevity contributes to the gnomic character of the speaker’s statement, I was forced to supply “I say” (3*) in English. Another aspect of Sappho’s poetry lost in translation is the parallel between κάλλος (7) and καλλίποιοισι (9), two words with very different meanings that both describe Helen. The contrast between the speaker’s conventional description of Helen’s beauty (κάλλος) and her unusual portrayal of her agency (καλλίποιοισι) is heightened by the similar sound of the words and their parallel positions at the beginnings of lines. I reproduced the enjambment of καλλίποιοισι, which reinforces the surprise of this characterization of Helen as independent, but could not represent the similarity of κάλλος and καλλίποιοισι and could show the contrast between the words only in their parallel positions.

REPRESENTING METER IN TRANSLATION

Formal features like alliteration, repetition, and even the placement of specific words are usually not difficult to reproduce in translation. One characteristic feature of Sappho’s poetry, however, is much more challenging to represent in English: her use of meter. Most translators do not attempt to follow any metrical pattern in translation, let alone the specific meter Sappho employed. Meter is, however, a crucial aspect of Sappho’s songs, which were originally
set to music. Some may have been intended for performance in a specific ceremonal context, like the songs labeled by Alexandrian scholars later in antiquity as *epithalamia*, wedding-songs; others may have been part of religious rituals or public musical performances. If Sappho herself performed her compositions, she could have done so as a soloist accompanied by a lyre or as a member of a chorus led by a *khoragos* (cf. note 6, p. 31). In short, the context of the songs’ performance is uncertain, but the fact of their performance is not: Sappho’s poems were musical compositions meant to be sung and heard.

It could be argued that there is little reason to cling to meter in translation when every other trace of Sappho’s music has been lost. In a context far removed from ancient religious rituals or choruses singing *epithalamia*, an attempt to preserve the original character of the songs by maintaining their meter in translation seems at best irrelevant and at worst confusing to a reader unfamiliar with the historical and cultural context of composition. In fact, their nature as songs means that Sappho’s poems cannot be fully appreciated without considering their musical characteristics. In the absence of any indications of pitch, tempo, dynamic, accompaniment, or even the number of voices singing, only one musical feature of the songs survives: their rhythm. To translate Sappho’s texts as prose is to strip her songs of the last feature that defines them as such.

Fragment 16, like many of Sappho’s poems, follows the metrical pattern referred to as a “Sapphic stanza.” Each stanza consists of three hendecasyllabic lines followed by what is either a pentasyllabic epode or an extension of the third line:

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__ ^ __   __ ^ ^ __   ^ __
__ ^ __   __ ^ ^ __   ^ __
__ ^ __   __ ^ ^ __   ^ __
__ ^ ^ __
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This raises the question of how to represent Sappho’s meter in translation. Translators into English encounter difficulties in producing a metrically “accurate” translation because, aside from the fact that Sappho’s Aeolic meter may sound unnatural and forced in English, the Sapphic stanza relies on having an exact number of syllables per line (11-11-11-5), whereas literal English translations often have fewer syllables than the Greek original.13

There is no single accurate way to render Sappho’s meter in translation: an entirely different metrical pattern could be used and the meter chosen could differ for each poem (although the pattern should be consistent between stanzas and lines of the same poem). For example, in my translation above, I retained the pattern of the Sapphic stanza, but an equally valid choice is to translate into iambic tetrameter, which might sound more natural in English:

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Some say it’s cavalry, some say foot-soldiers; some that ships among a fleet are on dark Earth the best of all: but I say that it’s what you love
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Sappho’s own hendecasyllable pattern may not always be suitable to English and need not be retained exactly, but a consistent metrical pattern should be present in translation to convey the original character of the text as a song.

**REPRESENTING LACUNAE IN TRANSLATION**

My translation of the fourth stanza (see p. 31) does not attempt to hide the lacunae that have come to characterize Sappho’s work. I have suggested an approach to the lacuna in line 12 that is consistent with the theme of the poem, but to fill in the text of lines 13-14, which are so severely damaged that even their general subject is not clear, would be not to reconstruct but to guess almost randomly at the original text. To leave the lacunae as they are, however, is to emphasize the text’s visual presentation over its oral character. When Carson (27) renders the fourth stanza

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\[
\text{for}
\text{lightly}
\text{reminded me now of Anaktoria who is gone.}
\]
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she offers a translation that can be appreciated only in its written form and makes little sense when spoken aloud. Like ignoring the text’s meter, leaving the lacunae as they are results in the loss of the songs’ character as oral compositions.

I suggest a different approach to representing lacunae in translation. Short gaps of one or two words, where one emendation seems highly likely, may be filled; in this case, the risk of a slight departure from the original meaning is worth the added fluency of the translation (as noted in the appendix, I have followed Voigt’s emendations to the text with a few minor exceptions). When a line or an entire stanza is fragmented to the point of being incomprehensible, however, neither of the two possibilities described above – Carson’s visual presentation or emending all the lacunae – is satisfactory, since both obscure either the musical character or the meaning of the text. In this case, both the meter and the ambiguity of meaning can be preserved by representing the missing passage not as text but as a wordless metrical section. This is the approach I suggest for translating stanza 4 of Sappho 16:

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13 Rayor 1; cf. Page.

14 It may be possible to adhere more precisely to Sappho’s meter in translations into languages other than English. For example, in his poem *Ultimo Canto di Saffo* (1822), Giacomo Leopardi used hendecasyllables, the basis of the Sapphic stanza. This is not, however, because Leopardi was trying to emulate Sappho but rather because the hendecasyllable is common in Italian poetry and the Italian language lends itself to this meter. When translating Sappho into Italian, it might be more natural to retain the metrical pattern of the Sapphic stanza. Sappho’s own hendecasyllable pattern may not always be suitable to English and need not be retained exactly, but a consistent metrical pattern should be present in translation to convey the original character of the text as a song.
APPENDIX: GREEK TEXT OF SAPPHO 16

ο] μὲν ἵππῳ στρότον οἷς δὲ πέσων
οἷς δὲ νέων φαιο’ ἐπὶ[?] γάν μέλαι[ν]αν
τιμέσοι κάλλιστον, ἐγὼ δὲ κήν δήτω τις ἑράται.

1

5

καλλίποισ᾽ ἔβα ᾽ς Τροίαν πλέοι[σα κωδ[ὲ πα[]δός αὐθ’ φίλων το[ξ][ή]ν
πά[μπαν] ἐμνάθ<η>, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ’ αὕταν’]

9

βᾶμα

13

μαμένων γάρ [ . . Κούφωστ[ ] νοηση]

17

τάς <χ>:ε βολλοίμαι έρατόν τί θάμα
κάμαρχιμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπως

Ουδὲν ἄμαμα καν δῆλοις

περσδομάχειν.16

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15 I have followed Voigt’s emendations for the minor lacunae in the

16 It is unclear whether the text continues beyond the fifth stanza;
text with two exceptions. In line 8, Voigt has πανάριστον; I have

some fragmented lines may be part of this or of another poem. The

followed Pfeijffer’s suggestion here because the concessive particle

poem appears complete after line 20: the speaker has returned to

περ

is seen to me more logical in the context of the poem. In line

her original topic, military “beauty,” in a ring composition. Because

the speaker has returned to

the later discovery of a new papyrus (cf.

Obbink, Fish & Burris) allowed νοησηι to be filled in.

(see note 6 on p. 31). (This is not an entirely

one can imagine a singer in Sappho’s time forgetting a few words of

resort to humming the melody until she reached a

unrealistic representation of the performance of the original text;

it describes can only be conjectured. What is

not need to be an obstacle to translating her poetry: adopting a

their many lacunae and preserving their meter in translation, the

result in emendations that dramatically change the interpretation

context of the rest of the poem and of Sappho’s other work can

exercise but one that requires consideration of the song as a whole;

as demonstrated by line 12 of Sappho 16, taking into account the

metrical pattern in translation allows lacunae to be represented

features are more faithful to the original poetry than those that

adhere precisely to grammatical detail at the expense of meter and

style. Even the lacunae found in almost all of Sappho’s works do

not need to be an obstacle to translating her poetry: adopting a

metrical exercise but one that requires consideration of the song as a whole;

as demonstrated by line 12 of Sappho 16, taking into account the context

of the rest of the poem and of Sappho’s other work can result in emendations that
dramatically change the interpretation of the text. Furthermore, by representing rather than

obscurring their many lacunae and preserving their meter in translation, the

approach outlined in this paper is equally applicable to Sappho’s other poems, many of which

are far more fragmented than Sappho 16.

CONCLUSION

Very little about Sappho’s poetry is certain. The context of its composition and performance, the music to which it was originally set, and the society it describes can only be conjectured. What is certain, however, is that Sappho’s poems were songs meant for oral performance. Translations that convey their musical character by retaining a sense of meter and recreating Sappho’s use of stylistic features are more faithful to the original poetry than those that adhere precisely to grammatical detail at the expense of meter and style. Even the lacunae found in almost all of Sappho’s works do not need to be an obstacle to translating her poetry: adopting a metrical pattern in translation allows lacunae to be represented while preserving the oral character of the text. When it is possible to suggest an emendation for a lacuna, this is not only a metrical exercise but one that requires consideration of the song as a whole; as demonstrated by line 12 of Sappho 16, taking into account the context of the rest of the poem and of Sappho’s other work can result in emendations that dramatically change the interpretation of the text. Furthermore, by representing rather than obscuring their many lacunae and preserving their meter in translation, the approach outlined in this paper is equally applicable to Sappho’s other poems, many of which are far more fragmented than Sappho 16.

The wordless feet could be represented by tapping, humming, or the steps (βάμα) with which Sappho’s contemporaries may have indicated meter (see note 6 on p. 31). (This is not an entirely unrealistic representation of the performance of the original text; one can imagine a singer in Sappho’s time forgetting a few words of the text and resorting to humming the melody until she reached a passage she remembered.) Such a translation avoids changing the meaning of the text but can still be read aloud, as Sappho’s original compositions were.