

ODE TO APHRODITE: A Translation of Sappho Fragment 1

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Preface to the Hong translation

Out of all great poets, both ancient and modern — the artistry and emotion of Sappho deserves especial remark. Writing from the Island of Lesbos around 600 B.C.E, her passionate poetry on her love of woman has given us the very word 'Lesbian' today. It is a tragedy on par with the destruction of Alexandria, that so few of her works have survived until the present age.

Sappho fragment 1 is one of these survivors. For the longest time, considered the only complete poem that is extant today, the *Ode to Aphrodite* paints an vivid picture of unrequited love, filled with not just longing, but humor and wit. Beginning in the same manner as Homer's *Iliad* with an appeal to the Gods, Sappho not only laments her spurning lover, but also paints an surprisingly relatable picture of the Goddess Aphrodite, more teasing co-conspirator, than distant deity.

The translation itself is also of academic and linguistic interest, being particularly noted for the obscureness of the Aeolic dialect. In my translation of Sappho fragment 1, I have attempted to translate from first principles, rather than rely on the pre-prepared glosses offered to the rest of the class. In this process, I have encountered numerous uncommon words and obscure usages of poetic crasis, making the translation technically challenging.

As for the final form of my polished translation, I aimed for a more casual, free-verse rendition, where I emphasized fluency over linguistic accuracy, with particular care to reject archaic English in favor of a more conversational tone. For me, Sappho writes not to the linguist or academic, but to the heart of all that are lovesick or spurned, and it is my wish to make this poem accessible to all those who know the pain of a broken heart.

Sappho Fragment 1 “Ode to Aphrodite”

Original Aeolic Greek

ποικιλόθρον' ἄθανάτ' Ἀφρόδιτα,
παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,
μή μ' ἄσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
πότνια, θῦμον,

ἀλλὰ τυίδ' ἔλθ', αἶ ποτα κατέρωτα
τὰς ἑμας αὖδας αἰοῖσα πῆλοι
ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα
χρῦσιον ἦλθες

ἄρμ' ὑπασδεύξαισα· κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον
ώκεες στρουθοὶ περὶ γὰς μελαίνας
πύκνα δίννεντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνωϊθε-
ρος διὰ μέσσω·

αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο· σὺ δ', ὦ μάκαιρα,
μειδιάσασ' ἄθανάτῳ προσώπῳ
ἦρε' ὅττι δηῦτε πέπονθα κῶττι
δηῦτε κάλημι

κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι
μαινόλαι θύμῳ· τίνα δηῦτε πείθω
μαῖσ' ἄγην ἐς σὰν φιλότατα; τίς σ', ὦ
Ψάπφ', ἀδικήει;

καὶ γὰρ αἰ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,
αἰ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει,
αἰ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει
κῶκ ἐθέλοισα.

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λῦσον
ἐκ μερίμναν, ὅσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι
θῦμος ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον, σὺ δ' αὐτὰ
σύμμαχος ἔσσο.

English Translation

Immortal Aphrodite, on the dazzling throne,
Daughter of Zeus, Oh clever seductress, I pray to you!
Please don't overwhelm me, with such grief and heartbreak,
Please, my Queen — don't overwhelm my heart.

But instead, come to me,
If ever my cries you've heard,
on the other side from afar,
leaving your father's golden home, to me.

With your chariot under arm, escorted with
lovely swift sparrows, circling,
down to the dark-soiled earth,
from the stratosphere of mid-air.

Suddenly they arrive, with you, oh blessed one.
A smile upon your immortal face,
to ask me once again, who it was that
broke my heart.

“What is such desperate longing in your heart?
Who is it, that I must bewitch,
in order to bring her back to your love?
Oh Sappho, who is it, that spurns?”

“If she flees your advances, soon she shall pursue
Should she reject your gifts, soon she shall give them, in turn,
And if she loves you not, soon she will love
Even unwillingly.”

Oh come to me now, Goddess. Unbind me
from such anxious thoughts, and accomplish all things that
my heart so desperately longs for, to fulfill.
That you yourself can fight alongside me, in this war.

Translation notes and interlinear gloss

This appendix of the translation is included in order to demonstrate the process of parsing and glossing the Aeolic Greek source text. The translation process was divided into 7 distinct stanzas. For each stanza, *Translator's Notes* are added for any noteworthy interpretations, or scholarly commentary on particularly difficult clauses.

In addition to the *Translator's Notes*, for the first stanza additional detail has been added in the form of detailed 'glosstables'. These tables contain exhaustive linguistic parsing of each word in the stanza, as well as their declensions/conjugations. In contrast with the prior Apollodorus translation, exhaustive 'glosstables' for each stanza have been omitted for the sake of brevity.

Stanza 1: Sappho's Prayer

For this stanza, exhaustive 'glosstables' have been included in order to further elaborate on the parsing process. The glosstables templates are generated programmatically in Markdown using an Python.

ποικιλόθρον' ἄθανάτ Ἀφρόδιτα,
παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,
μή μ' ἄσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
πότνια, θῦμον,

Greek word	Type	Gloss	Meaning
ποικιλόθρον'	Adj.	sg. fem. voc.	<i>On richly-worked throne</i>
ἄθανάτ	Adj.	sg. fem. voc.	<i>undying/immortal</i>
Ἀφρόδιτα,	Noun	sg. voc.	<i>Aphrodite</i>

Greek word	Type	Gloss	Meaning
παῖ	Noun	sg. fem. voc.	<i>child</i>
Δίος	Noun	sg. masc. gen.	<i>(of) Zeus</i>
δολόπλοκε,	Adj.	sg. fem. voc.	<i>weaving wiles</i>
λίσσομαί	Verb	1st. sg. pres. mp.	<i>I pray (for myself)</i>
σε,	Pron.	2nd sg. acc.	<i>you</i>

Greek word	Type	Gloss	Meaning
μή	Neg.	N/A	not
μ'	Pron.	1st sg. acc.	myself
ἄσασι	Noun	pl. fem. dat.	to/with distress
μηδ'	Partic.	N/A	and not
ὀνίαισι	Noun	pl. fem. dat.	to/with grief, sorrow, distress
δάμνα,	Verb	3rd. sg.	to overpower

Greek word	Type	Gloss	Meaning
πότνια,	Noun	sg. fem. voc.	<i>Queen</i>
θῦμον,	Noun	sg. masc. acc	<i>soul</i>

Translator's Notes

- μ' stems from ἐγώ
- The Liddell and Scott also gives an variety of possible translations for ἄσασι, stemming from ἄση. Alternative meanings can include: surfeit, loathing, nausea, distress, vexation, or even longing and desire.
- μηδ' is taken as μηδέ, which is a particle of negation.
- δάμνα as stemming from δαμνάω instead of the etymologically similar μι-verb δάμνημι

Stanza 2: The Appeal to Arrive

ἀλλὰ τυίδ' ἔλθ', αἵποτα κατέρωτα
 τᾶσ' ἔμας ἀύδωσ' αἰοῖσα πῆλγι
 ἔκλυες πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα
 χρύσιον ἦλθες

Translator's Notes

- τυίδ' stemming from τυῖδε
- ἔλθ' is probably a enclitic form of deponent verb ἔρχομαι
- Supposedly κατέρωτα is Aeolic for ἐτέρωθι.

- πήλοι taken as the Aeolic τηλοῦ, according to the Liddell and Scott.
- πάτρος is father in the genitive. This translation assumes the same usage as in the phrase τὰ πρὸς πατρός.

Stanza 3: Journey from Heaven to Earth

ἄρμ' ὑποζεύξαια, κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον
 ὤκεεσ στροῦθοι περὶ γᾶσ μελαίνας
 πύκνα δινεῦντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνω
 αἴθερος διὰ μέσσω.

Translator's Notes

- ὑπασδεύξαια is compound, taking form of both ὑπο (lit. under) and the μι-verb ζεύγνυμι.
- δίνεντες was especially difficult to find in the dictionary, but eventually I took it as “to circle about”
- ἀπ' ὠράνωιθερος appears to be some form of crasis, perhaps ὠράνου αἴθερος. It is glossed as “heaven” in my translation.

Stanza 4: Aphrodite's Arrival

αἶψα δ' ἐχίκοντο, σὺ δ', ὦ μάσαιρα
 μειδιάσαισ' ἀθάνατῳ προσώπῳ,
 ἦρ' ὅττι δηῦτε πέπονθα κῶττι
 δῆγτε κάλημι

Translator's Notes

- Note that likewise μειδιάσαισ is not standard Attic, but rather Aeolic of μειδιᾶν participle in aorist feminine singular.
- “Smiling, immortal face'd” is indeed an exceptionally ugly translation. However, this is just the rough translation, done with emphasis of speed and preservation of word-order. The final polished translation will be much nicer.
- κῶττι is the crasis form of καὶ ὅττι
- ἦρε Aeolic for ἐρωτᾶν?
- δηῦτε is poetic crasis for δὴ αὖτε

- κάλημμι is Attic of καλέω

Stanza 5: Query for the Heartbreaker

κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι
 μαινόλα θυμῶ, τίνα δηῦτε πείθω
 μαῖσ ἄγην ἐς σὰν φιλότατα τίς τ, ὦ
 Πσάπφ', ἀδίκηει;

Translator's Notes

- And once again, κῶττι is the crasis form of καὶ ὅττι
- μάλιστα is given as the superlative of μάλα
- δηῦτε is poetic crasis for δὴ αὖτε
- Taking ἄγην as the present infinitive form of ἀγάω

Stanza 6: Aphrodite's Consolation

καὶ γάρ αἰ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,
 αἰ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ' ἀλλὰ δώσει,
 αἰ δὲ μὴ φίλει ταχέως φιλήσει,
 κῶκ ἐθέλοισα.

Translator's Notes

- Here the sigma which denotes the future tense is merged in διώξει.
- Thankfully, the only complicated part of this stanza was the usage of κῶκ, the crasis form of καὶ οὐκ
- The Aeolic ἐθέλοισα is the Attic ἐθελοῦσα. Note that it is feminine, hence the unrequited lover is a woman.

Stanza 7: Sappho's wish

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλεπᾶν δὲ λύσον
 ἐκ μερίμναν ὅσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι
 θῦμοσ' ἱμέρρει τέλεσον, σὺ δ' αὐτὰ
 σύμμαχος ἔσσο.

Translator's Notes

- The scholar C.W. Conrad notes that the ἐκ is in tmesis, where it actually belongs to ἐκλυῖσον, but is cut off in some reason. However translating it as a simple preposition seems to work out fine.
- Taking τέλεσσαι as the aorist optative.
- ἰμέρρει is another Aeolic superlative, most likely the Attic ἰμείρει.

This translation is typeset in L^AT_EX, and is version-controlled via git. Historical revisions of this document, including full project repository, are available upon request.