Norton Anthology of World Literature, Shorter Fourth Edition. Martin Puchner, ed. New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 2019.

SAPPHO

born ca. 630 B.C.E.

Sappho is the only ancient Greek female author whose work survives in more than tiny fragments. She was an enormously talented poet, much admired in antiquity; a later poet called her the "tenth Muse." In the third century B.C.E., scholars at the great library in Alexandria arranged her poems in nine books, of which the first contained more than a thousand lines. But what we have now are pitiful remnants: one (or possibly two) complete short poems, and a collection of quotations from her work by ancient writers, supplemented by bits and pieces written on ancient scraps of papyrus found in excavations in Egypt. Yet these fragments fully justify the enthusiasm of the ancient critics; Sappho's poems (insofar as we can guess at their nature from the fragments) give us the most vivid evocation of the joys and sorrows of desire in all Greek literature.

About Sappho's life we know almost nothing. She was born about 630 B.C.E. on the fertile island of Lesbos, off the coast of Asia Minor, and spent most of her life there. Her poems suggest that she was married and had a daughter—although we should never assume that Sappho's "I" implies autobiography. It is difficult to find any evidence to answer the questions that we most want to ask. Were these poems performed for women only, or for mixed audiences? Was it common for women to compose poetry on ancient Lesbos? How did Sappho's work win acceptance in the male-dominated world of ancient Greece? We simply do not know. We also know frustratingly little about ancient attitudes toward female same-sex relationships. In the nineteenth century, Sappho's poems were the inspiration for the coinage of the modern term lesbian. But no equivalent term was used in the ancient world. Sappho's poems evoke a world in which girls lived an intense communal life of their own, enjoying activities and festivals in which only women took part, in which they were fully engaged with one another. Beyond the evidence of the poems themselves, however, little remains to put these works into historical context.

What we do know, and what we must always bear in mind while reading these poems, is that they were composed not to be read on papyrus or in a book but to be performed by a group of dancing, singing women and girls (a "chorus"), to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Other poets of the period composed in the choral genre, including Alcaeus, a male contemporary who was also from Lesbos. The ancient Greek equivalent of the short, nonnarrative literary form we refer to as "lyric poetry" was literally lyric: it was sung to the lyre or cithara, ancestors of the modern guitar. It is not really poetry but the lyrics to songs whose music is lost. These songs evoke many vivid actions, emotions, and images, which were presumably dramatized by the dancers, who

might well, for example, have acted out the swift journey of Aphrodite's chariot in poem 1 ["Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind"), "whipping their wings down the sky."

Sappho's poems were produced almost two hundred years after the Homeric epics, and we can read them as offering a response, and perhaps a challenge, to the (mostly masculine) world of epic. The Iliad concentrates on the battlefield, where men fight and die, while the Odyssey shows us the struggles of a male warrior to rebuild his homeland in the aftermath of war. By contrast, Sappho's poems focus on women more than men, and on feelings more than actions. Like Homer, Sappho often refers to the physical world in vivid detail (the stars, the trees, the flowers, the sunlight), as well as to the Olympian gods, and to mythology. But she interprets these topics very differently. In poem 44, she uses the characters of the Iliad but concentrates on the marriage of Hector and Andromache rather than the war. Aphrodite, goddess of love and sex, seems more important to Sappho than Zeus, the father of the gods. Poem 16 offers another reinterpretation of the Trojan War, as a story not about men fighting but about a woman in love: "Helen—left behind / her most noble husband / and went sailing off to Troy." Sappho emphasizes beauty and personal choices, and suggests that love matters more than armies, and more even than home, family, parents, or children.

But Sappho's vision of love is anything but sentimental. Many of these poems evoke intense negative emotions: alienation, jealousy, and rage. In poem 31, for example, the speaker describes her overwhelming feelings as she watches the woman she loves talking to a man: she trembles, her heart races, she feels close to death. The precise clinical detail of the narrator, as she observes herself, adds to the vividness of this account of emotional breakdown. Sappho is able to describe feelings both from the outside and from the inside, and painfully evokes a sense of distance from the beloved-and from herself: "I don't know what I should do. There are two minds in me," she says in a line from a lost poem (51). In poem 58 the speaker is suffering from a different kind of alienation: watching young girls dance and sing, she stands aside, unable to participate, and bitterly regrets the loss of her own youth.

Sappho repeatedly invokes the goddess associated with sexual desire: Aphrodite. It may be tempting to read Aphrodite as simply a personification of the speaker's own desires. But Sappho presents her as a real and terrifying force in the universe, who may afflict the speaker with all the "bittersweet" agony of love, and who may also be invoked —as in poem 1—to serve her rage and aggression, acting as Sappho's own military "ally" in her desire to inflict pain on the girl who has hurt her.

Some passages of Sappho, including the famous account of jealousy, poem 31, were preserved through quotation by other ancient writers. But many of these poems survived only on scraps of papyrus, mostly dug up from the trash-heaps of the ancient

Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus. It is exciting that we have even this much Sappho: much of our present text was discovered as late as the nineteenth century. Poem 58 was discovered (supplementing a known fragment) in 2004 in the papier-mâché-type wrapping used on an Egyptian mummy. The final poems in our selection—the "Brothers" poem and the "Cypris" poem—were made public only in 2014, as a result of a new papyrus discovery. Most of the papyrus finds are torn and crumpled, so that words and whole lines are often missing from the poems. Some of these gaps can be filled in from our knowledge of Sappho's dialect and the strict meter in which she wrote. In poem 16, for instance, at the end of the third stanza and the beginning of the fourth, the mutilated papyrus tells us that someone or something led Helen astray, and there are traces of a word that seems to have described Helen. The name Cypris (the "Cyprian One," the love goddess Aphrodite) and phrases that mean "against her will" or "as soon as she saw him [Paris!" would fit the spaces and the meter. Uncertain as these supplements are, they could help determine our understanding of the poem. The publication of the "New Sappho" poems is an exciting reminder that there are new discoveries to be made, even in literature from over three thousand years ago. The new pieces of Sappho have also broadened our understanding of this great poet, who composed her songs about journeys, time, mythology, and family, as well as about love, alienation, and desire.