Reimagining the Fragments of Sappho through Translation

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It is difficult to fix words or meaning on a text in flux. Yet that is precisely what a translator must do: interpret and then set that interpretation into print. In January 2014, I submitted the page proofs for Andre Lardinois’ and my Sappho book; the very next day, we found out that a new Sappho papyrus had been discovered. Fortunately, Cambridge was willing to ‘stop the press’. We waited with the same impatience as everyone else until the *ZPE* volume provided the Greek text in April, followed by a flurry of translation. The new Sappho discoveries allow us to reinterpret old fragments in light of the additions to them.

While some of the smaller additions merely clarify the previous Greek text or supplement very fragmentary lines, others are more substantial. For instance, fr. 17 initially was missing the left and/or right hand margins of all twenty lines of the poem. The new discovery adds or completes words in ten line endings and sixteen line beginnings. With this significant increase to the Greek text, we can see in what ways previous guesses about meaning fit and what is now proven incorrect. Nevertheless, even with the additions, the poem is still fragmentary, which has led to a wide variety of interpretations of the first stanza. Textual decisions drive interpretations, while, equally, interpretive stances drive textual decisions. As Renate Schlesier (p. 380) succinctly states: ‘The textual suggestions are not least shaped by the interpretative conception of the poem, in other words, by the idea each individual scholar advocates concerning what Sappho presumably wanted to express’. Translation is an especially intimate and visible active reading in which the reader of the Greek poem becomes the writer of the English poem.2

1 Rayor and Lardinois (2014). I presented a shorter version of this paper at the Society of Classical Studies annual meeting, 2015; I am grateful to André Lardinois and Anton Bierl for encouraging me to expand it and for their detailed critique. I also thank Joel Lidov, Eva Stehle, Deborah Boedeker, and Gregory Nagy for their especially helpful comments, and Dirk Obbink for the updated text.

2 Venuti (1995) 18: ‘Translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader. This
This article focuses on the process of re-translating fragments, particularly the striking new readings of the ‘Kypris Poem’ (formerly known as fragment 26) and of fragment 17. The scholarship that has followed the publication of the texts in April 2014 has again both enriched and narrowed the possibilities for both poems. Most recently, in this volume (ch. 1), Dirk Obbink has corrected the Greek texts again, profoundly affecting the Kypris Poem.

I posit that translations of Sappho, particularly those for readers who cannot consult the Greek, optimally work on three levels: 1) The translation invokes the absent song. 2) The translation reads as poetry. 3) The translation evokes the physical fragment on worn or torn papyrus.

To make these multi-layered translations, I have to pay attention to a number of things. To invoke the absent song, I work with sound, and pay attention to signs that could indicate a variety of performance possibilities (such as feminine plurals for choral song or pronoun use). To insure that the translation reads as poetry, I echo whatever techniques from Sappho that I can make work in English, such as repetition, alliteration, or stanzas. When possible, I help the reader bridge breaks in fragments by selecting words on each side of the gap that work together, as in the Kypris Poem:

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[ \text{c.8} ] \ldots [ \text{\ldots} ] \ \text{κέ, θέλω} [ \sim \ x ] \quad \ldots \text{you, I wish} \ldots \\
[ \sim \ x \ \tau ο\delta ] \to \pi\acute{\alpha}\thetaη[\nu \sim \ x ] \quad \ldots \text{to suffer this} \ldots \\
[ \sim \ x \ \ldots ] \ \alpha ν, \, κω \, \delta' \, \epsilon ι \, \alpha' \, ιται \quad \ldots \text{I know} \\
\tau ο\acute{t}ο \, \text{κύνοιδα} \quad \text{this about myself.}
\]

To evoke the physical fragment on papyrus, I employ various strategies, such as brackets, ellipses, and page layout.

Readers of Sappho come to the Greek text with their own expectations of what makes a Sappho poem. Because translators are readers first and then writers of text, translations provide a lens on the storytelling process. Basically, the translator’s reading becomes the new poem. However, I strive to recreate the original as reliably as possible, given that ‘no translation will ever be a perfectly reliable guide to the original’.

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5 Robinson (2003) 6–7: ‘A text’s reliability consists in the trust a user can place in it ... as a representation or reproduction of the original’.