

BOOK REVIEWS

“A GENUINE WOMAN’S VOICE”: A NEW APPROACH TO SAPPHO

by Ingrid Swanberg

Philip Freeman, *SEARCHING FOR SAPPHO: THE LOST SONGS & WORLD OF THE FIRST WOMAN POET*. W.W. Norton, 2016. 336p. notes. bibl. index. \$26.95, ISBN 978-0393242232.

*Come, divine lyre, speak to me
and become a voice*

(Sappho Poem 118, p. 222)

In Sappho’s time and place — the late seventh century B.C.E. on the Isle of Lesbos in the Aegean Sea — poetry was sung to the accompaniment of the lyre. Though much of her work has been lost over time, Sappho stands out among other ancient Greek poets, not only as the first known woman, but also for her passionate expression of deep feelings. As Freeman says in his introduction to this volume:

Most of her poems are songs of love wholly unlike the epics of Homer, who lived in the century before her. Gone are the blood and glory of the Trojan War and the monster-battling adventures of Odysseus. Instead, the verses of Sappho are deeply personal and celebrate the joys and agony of the human heart. (p. xviii)

Sappho’s emotional depth and range resound musically in her poems, even as they are quoted in the works of other ancient (male) writers, even in some of the poem fragments, even in translation. Hers is “a genuine woman’s voice from an age overwhelmingly dominated by men” (p. xix). As an example:

*He seems to me equal to the gods,
that man who sits opposite you
and listens near
to your sweet voice*

*and lovely laughter. My heart
begins to flutter in my chest.
When I look at you even for a moment
I can no longer speak.*

*My tongue fails and a subtle
fire races beneath my skin,
I see nothing with my eyes
and my ears hum.*

*Sweat pours from me and a trembling
seizes my whole body. I am greener
than grass and it seems I am a little short
of dying.*

...

(Sappho Poem 31, pp. 188–189)

Searching for Sappho is a search on several levels. On the first level, there’s the need to draw aside the veils of prejudice. Freeman points to various judgments of Sappho carried through different social and religious periods. On the opening page he quotes from the tenth-century Greek encyclopedia *Suda*, which claims that her relations with her three women friends “earned her a shameful reputation” (p. xi). A true biography is impossible, Freeman says, because so little is known for certain about her and because much of what we have from the male writers of the Greek and Latin world is questionable, contrived, or hostile. “Many male writers in ancient times could not bear the thought of a woman having such talent,” he says. “Since her later critics couldn’t dispute her gift for poetry, they turned instead to slander, claiming she was not a proper woman at all” (p. xxi). In Victorian and early modern times, male scholars who encountered Sappho’s erotic poems about women came up with all sorts of “interpretive contortions to maintain the image of Sappho they had created” (p. 122), such as presenting her as a kind of headmistress of a school for young women, or reading one of her erotic poems as something delivered at a wedding banquet. Even modern attitudes about Sappho may be problematic, Freeman points out, because they often view “ancient sexual conduct through a male-centered active/passive model” (p. 110) that colors one’s interpretations.

Rather than writing a biography, Freeman aims to create “an image of Sappho’s life framed by details gleaned from her poetry” (p. xxi). The book’s larger goal is to use Sappho’s songs “as a window into the lives of all women in the classical world and to learn about what the different stages of a woman’s life were in ancient Greece” (p. xix).

The occasional reference to the original Greek language brings specificity to explanations of the poems, but Freeman allows for complexity and potential ambiguity in such

references, and he also explores puns. His analysis of poetic figures, such as repetition — which he compares to incantatory spells in his discussion of Sappho’s poem entreating Aphrodite for help in winning over a woman she desires — is brilliant (pp. 116–120). Different interpretations of poetic phrases are given within the context of Greek women’s lives. This is done in a very lucid presentation.

Freeman is appropriately cautious in his readings of the poems that survive in fragments. Having read many dense, difficult, critical and scholarly works on Sappho, I found his approach refreshingly open and clear, yet still nuanced, balanced, and informed. He gives a good overview of the scholarship as well, gracefully placing Sappho among Greek (male) poets from Homer onward and offering remarks by other ancient authors about her work.

Freeman writes that *Searching for Sappho* is not a book for scholars but rather “for everyone else” (p. xxiv). It is appropriate for general and recreational readers as well as for

use in college-level courses on gender and women’s studies, poetry studies, and the history of women artists, and it will be of interest to creative writers as well. It will appeal to a wide range of readers, from first-time readers of Sappho to (yes) classical scholars. *Searching for Sappho* is a must-read for feminist poets.

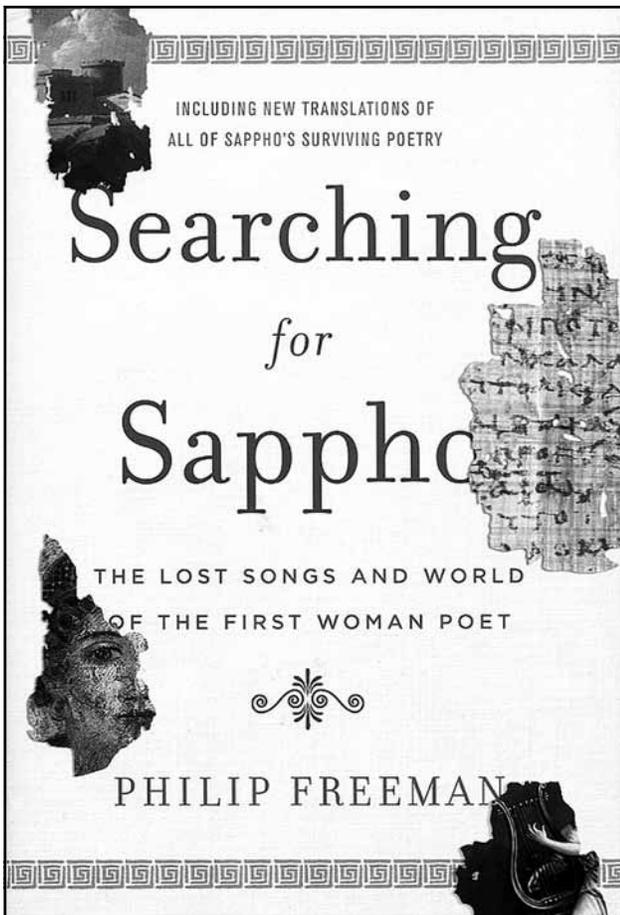
In the main text there are seven chapters describing different stages of ancient Greek women’s lives as revealed in the poems: “Childhood,” “Wedding Songs,” “A Mother’s Love,” “Family Matters,” “Loving Women,” “The Goddess,” and “Unyielding Time.” The writing is straightforward and highly engaging, and the book’s format is quite sparing in the use of distracting scholarly apparatus like footnotes. Sappho’s poetry is presented in these chapters in such a way that one may keenly focus on the poem itself. Generally, there is a simple identification of the source — quotation, original papyrus or pottery, etc. — providing context, but most of the detailed information about a poem is reserved for the “Notes” section. The result is that, having easily read through the main text (whether reading the “Notes” in conjunction or not), one can then proceed straight through “The Poems of Sappho” — which gives translations of all the known poems and fragments — with enhanced enjoyment and understanding, savoring the poems completely, having already gained a deep context of vocabulary, allusions to personal experience, family, friends, lovers, the goddesses...

My Greek is rudimentary at best, so I cannot comment directly on the translation. I did a close comparison, however, between Freeman’s translation and some highly respected translations by Diane Rayor,¹ and found them to correspond closely.

Although commentary on the translations appears in the main text as well as in the “Notes” section, the notes are not to be overlooked; they are richly informative, engaging, and complete. See the note, for example, that accompanies the following poem fragment:

you scorch us
(Sappho Poem 38, p. 191)

The grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus identifies these words as coming from the first book of Sappho’s collected poetry. The Greek verb *optao* (“scorch, burn”) is often used metaphorically in love poetry. (Note, pp. 263–264)



It is not entirely clear how erotic relationships between women were viewed during Sappho's time, but it appears there was some degree of social acceptance. Certainly such relationships were a major focus in Sappho's poetry. The longer poem cited above (Poem 31) is a famous example. There can be no question that the speaker of this poem, gazing enraptured in an erotic swoon at the woman seated close to "that man," is a woman, "thanks to the gendered ending of Greek words" (p. 123), as Freeman notes, refuting some contorted readings of the poem. In the chapter "Loving Women," Freeman states, "Her poems of passion for other women are often fragmentary and open to interpretation, but by reading them closely, we can gain not only a better appreciation of lesbian love in Sappho's age, but a deeper appreciation for some of the greatest poetry the human heart has ever composed" (pp. 115–116).

In his attempts to "let Sappho speak to us through the centuries with her own voice" (p. 174), Freeman brings forward how women's lives were communal, even while being largely restricted (by men) to the roles of wives, mothers, and managers of households. Even so, women of that time participated in religious practices of worship, sacrifice, and celebration, at times in secret cults of mystery religions we know little about. In "The Goddess," Freeman describes certain female religious rituals, such as the Thesmophoria festival honoring Demeter, that excluded men entirely. Women would leave their household responsibilities for a few days to collectively honor Demeter, who brought "fertility and balance back to the world" (p. 137) with the return of spring — something only the women could bring about through their rituals. Such communal sharing in these women's lives, particularly in the context of celebration and worship of the Goddess, bespeaks surviving elements of an earlier matriarchal time, though Freeman does not take this up as such.

Another indication of matriarchal traces in Sappho's time is the closeness described between women and their brothers (husbands were usually a complete generation older) and the fact that the brother (rather than the hus-

band) would become the head of a woman's household upon her father's death. Under patriarchy, a brother — not her father or her husband — was a woman's protector, as lineage was determined solely through the mother (see "Family Matters," pp. 86–87).

"Epilogue" offers brief, vivid introductions to ancient women poets in the centuries after Sappho: Myrtis, Corinna, Praxilla, Telesilla, Erinna, Anyte, Nossis, and Sulpicia. This concluding chapter also describes various (male) Greek and Roman philosophers' and poets' takes on Sappho: Plato, Menander, Catullus, Horace, and Ovid. Finally, we follow Sappho's traces through the early Christian era to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when scholars began translating the poems into modern languages.

In a note to his introduction, Freeman writes, "Undoubtedly, many female poets preceded Sappho in human history, but their songs have been lost" (p. 242). Sappho is indeed the "first woman poet" — not literally, but first in the sense of the greatest, the first rank, as acknowledged throughout this work. The fragment given at the opening of this review expresses a passion that has made Sappho first: it is her love of the song itself.

Note

1. Diane Rayor, trans., *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece* (Univ. of California Press, 1991), pp. 51–81.

[*Ingrid Swanberg's poetry has appeared in numerous publications, including the international journal Osiris, Indefinite Space, Street Value, and Garrison Keillor's The Writer's Almanac. Her recent poetry collections are Ariadne & Other Poems (Bottom Dog Press, 2013) and Awake (Green Panda Press, 2014). She is the editor of the poetry journal Abraxas and director of Ghost Pony Press. She holds a Ph.D. in comparative literature from the University of Wisconsin–Madison.*]