

Anne carson's  
translations of  
sappho: a dialogue  
with the past?



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' I started getting interested in the language, in trying to get through the opaque screen that a translation can't help being to see what Seneca had actually said' (CARYL CHURCHILL on her translation of Thyestes).

Translations of a text that has been present for millennia encounter the problem of missing portions and incomplete manuscripts: translators encounter a degradation of the actual physical text as well as a loss of meaning imbued only by specific historical context. The ' opaque screen' that stands between a modern translator and their classical text could consist of the language barrier, the weight and influence of previous translations, or this factor, the degradation of time leading to a literally incomplete text. The purpose of a text could be entirely misunderstood through these obstacles, but they also may create incidental meaning or poignancy to a text, which a translator may choose to emphasise.

Anne Carson's 2003 collection of translations, *If not, winter*, is titled after line 6 of fragment 22, and this title conveys her priorities within the actual poems: technical accuracy to the Greek words takes precedence over making comprehensible sense in English, but this technique still succeeds in creating semantic fields of particular emotion (although ' If not, winter' is only a fragment of an English sentence with no discernible meaning, it still evokes a sense of bittersweet regret through the possibility of ' if not' and the invocation of winter as a symbol of decay and endings.) The fragmentary approach is present throughout the book, as of the nine books of lyric scholars estimate that Sappho composed, only one poem has survived intact; the rest we know of are incomplete. Trying to piece together the work of the poet Plato called ' the Tenth Muse' has been compared to ' reading a <https://assignbuster.com/anne-carsons-translations-of-sappho-a-dialogue-with-the-past/>

note in a bottle': her reputation and the mystery of her actual life appear to inspire more interest than her actual poems, or at least heavily influence how people interpret them, simply due to the actual lack of material.

In this book, Carson engages with the culture associated with classical Greek poetry, and the history of censorship and interpretation surrounding Sappho in particular, because they are inescapably connected to Sappho's poetry. Her aim is an accurate modern retelling of Sappho's original ideas, and she explains: ' I like to think that, the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shines through' (although she acknowledges that, as Derrida admitted in *L'oreille de l'autre*, Freud's theory of the subconscious in translation means that there will always be subjective preference.) One way of diverging traditional translations to more accurately accomplish this is her recognition of how music and oral tradition may have been central. As Teare commented, Carson uses allusions to literary traditions in her intertextuality as well as specific texts. In *The Autobiography of Red* she contrasts the ' extroverted epic hero' Herakles with the ' introverted lyric hero' Geryon, and in *Eros the Bittersweet* she uses oral and literate cultures in a similar way. The unusual structure of these fragments echoes her premise at the beginning of lyric tradition (beginning the book with the stark sentence ' Sappho was a musician.')

The blank spaces represented by brackets, and the linguistic technique of stranding line fragments, arguably provide a musicality of rhythm recognisably different to written poetic tradition.

Carson declares a kind of apathy towards the much-speculated details of Sappho's life in the introduction, saying ' It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there?' Through <https://assignbuster.com/anne-carsons-translations-of-sappho-a-dialogue-with-the-past/>

not engaging with the question of sexuality, and by pointedly refusing to contextualise it within modern definitions (as proven in the comparison to music, indicating a use of 'love' that encompasses fondness for abstract concepts or objects as well as people), Carson is however deliberately denying the interpretations of other past translations. Sappho plays an important but confused role in the development of lesbian identification, as indicated by her entry in Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig's "Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary" (1979): to honour her central role in the recorded history of female sexuality, Sappho is given an entire page, which is blank. Her legacy is also confused by the appropriation of her poetry for male heterosexual desire, as with Catullus' translation of Fragment 31, and the origin of the term 'lesbianism' as a medical disorder: Greek culture understood love and marriage differently, so her 'identity' as a positive or negative cultural touchstone may always be an anachronistic discussion. The modern consensus on writers who have censored or denied the possibility of a physical component to her love for other women, however, has largely decided that it is inaccurate to deny it: as with Calder's dissection of Welcker's 1816 protestations that her feelings of innocent female friendship were in no way 'objectionable, vulgarly sensual, and illegal'. By proclaiming that she is only '[standing] out of the way' and placing priority on Sappho's verse rather than her life, and still going on to admit that she loved women and not obfuscating the longing in poems like Fragment 94, Carson is legitimising Sappho's love for women as an undeniable part of the text. She engages with the culture around the text only to contradict it with the obvious facts within the text.

The text itself may be limited, but this outside fact of limited textual evidence leads to an incidental literary technique, just as the cultural reception of Sappho's sexuality made Carson's prosaic stance a statement itself. As Yatromanolakis notes, the 'penetratingly literal translations' become 'surrealistic' through their fragmentary nature, as Carson has not tried to provide any semantic context to give the phrases meaning. The context of the text's classical origins and of its translation itself may be emphasised, however, by this layer of incomprehensibility. The inaccessibility of these fragments as poetry may increase the perceived foreign or ancient nature of Sappho's poetry: the reader is always aware of the underlying process of translation that Carson is performing. The brackets used to indicate a gap also underline that process, as they are a physical mark on the page representing blank space. This is purposeful: Carson writes in the introduction, 'Brackets are an aesthetic gesture towards the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it', since she has not marked every gap or illegibility with a bracket, as there would be far too many. Indicating uncertainties in this inaccurate but stylistic manner allows space for the reader themselves to interpret the stark emotions that are left: in her words, 'it will affect your reading experience, if you will allow it.'

Carson is actively recreating the materiality of translating the original manuscripts for the reader, in order to inspire the excitement of a translator looking behind the 'opaque screen': rather than guiding a reader through the text with her own ideas or interpretations, she is leaving it open for exploration. As she promised in the introduction: 'Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the

drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp—brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.'

May he willingly give his sister

her portion of honor, but sad pain

]grieving for the past

]

]millet seed

]of the citizens

]once again no

]

]

]but you Kypris

]setting aside evil

[

]

(Fragment 5, Voigt)

In this fragment, as Sappho wishes her brother safe passage, Carson's translation shifts dramatically half way through from poetic Standard English

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to an entirely different structure. There is no attempt to reconcile these two halves even by appearance on paper, as the unusually formatted, bracketed half is inset across the page. The brackets themselves are uneven, never closed in a grammatically correct way that would reassure a reader: Carson is further conveying the twin senses of loss and foreignness in the incomplete translation here by disconcerting a reader's expectations in this way. Although Sappho obviously had no idea her text would be eroded in this way, and a translator would use that context to heighten the text's ancient, foreign origins, it incidentally does match the theme of a brother coming overseas and leaving behind the wrong he has done (' setting aside evil' as a clause surrounded by blank space takes on irony, as details of this evil are not present.)

The term ' exchange' implies that a modern writer or translator is not simply taking characters, a story or a message from a previous time, but that they are also imbuing the original text with some meaning intrinsic to the translation or contemporary context of this incarnation. The unique element that Carson provides in this exchange with Sappho is the surreal, bittersweet quality of these aesthetic reminders of absence; arguably, even the most joyful of the poems encapsulate a more melancholy tone due to the constant reminder of that joy's transience. The emotions inspiring the poems are heightened in their starkness through this coincidence of time: the narratives or incidents recounted in the story are incomplete, so the poems are structured by their emotional content instead, as in the clearly romantic case of Fragment 78:

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]nor

]desire

]but all at once

]blossom

]desire

]took delight

The classicist Thomas Habinek also observed that this incomplete nature has accidental thematic relevance: 'The fragmentary preservation of poems of yearning and separation serves as a reminder of the inevitable incompleteness of human knowledge and affection.' This assertion is corroborated by Carson's other work: as Erika L. Weiberg comments, overall it demonstrates the connection of grief and 'language rot'. A loss of communication signifies death and decay in her long poem 'The Glass Essay', where the narrator's father in his dementia 'uses a language known only to himself, made of snarls and syllables and sudden wild appeals.' In this poem, which uses extensive allusions to her interpretations of the Brontes' works, her father appears almost like an animal through these 'snarls'; a reader can intuit Carson's beliefs about language, as all hope of a connection with her audience or her father rests on an ability to communicate. There is no hope of translating her father's speech, as this language is 'known only to himself', but there is hope inherent to the poem as she is using a text from a previous age in order to connect to the reader and explain her experience. This previous text has been preserved to an <https://assignbuster.com/anne-carsons-translations-of-sappho-a-dialogue-with-the-past/>



extent through Carson using it in this 'exchange', inspiring hope for the power of translation and allusion even within the context of grief.

There are many boundaries between modern writing and the language of ancient texts: a difference in actual language, the interpretations of others over the years, and the process of time that may have removed layers of meaning only present through subtle references relevant to historical context, or may have removed literal text. Carson chooses not to deny or specify details about Sappho's life like her sexuality, but places the actual texts first in a literal, stark style that cannot help but emphasise the emotions present due to the lack of consistent narrative. Her framing of these poems is proof that the inescapable boundaries or 'opaque screens' between us and the past can create incidental art or messages, if treated with thoughtful translation.