

Mary Barnard's Sappho

In print continuously since it was first published in 1958, Mary Barnard's *Sappho: A New Translation* has introduced generations of Anglophone readers to Sappho's poetry. In this paper, I examine the distinctive female voice—the "Sappho"—that emerges from Barnard's ordering and titling of the fragments and the effects of reading Barnard's translations alongside the Greek fragments, many of whose gaps and discontinuities have been patched over by Barnard's holistic approach to translation. I also discuss several points of intersection between Barnard's own Imagist poetry (Barnsley 2013 and 2025), her translations of Sappho, and the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

A published poet and protégée of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Mary Barnard strove to recreate the sound and metrical feel of Sappho's Greek. Her correspondence with Pound reveals her attempts at creating a "balanced" line of verse with rhythms approximating those of colloquial speech (Barnard 1984). Like her own poetry, Barnard's translations of Sappho combine a lushness of imagery with verbal restraint. They carefully balance the tension between the poet's public voice (reveling in communal celebrations and festivals) and the intimacy of her private voice (gossip, confessions, and affectionate teasing).

Barnard eschews the fetishization of the fragment that we see, for example, in Anne Carson's *If Not, Winter*, preferring to emphasize the continuities between fragments and between the past and the present. The made-up titles for each of the 100 fragments frame them as part of an ongoing conversation between the poet and her circle of intimates. Some of the lyrics mimic the style of diary entries (e.g., fr. 6: "*I confess / I love that / which caresses / me...*") while others highlight the everyday quality of myth (fr. 13: "*People do gossip / And they say about / Leda,*

that she / once found an egg / under / wild hyacinths), or the ritualistic side of revelry. The first line of each fragment (italicized here) is the “title” Barnard has given to the poem. Taken as a whole, Barnard’s collection traces an arc from childhood to old age and posterity, with a thematic focus in the later sections on recollection and loss.

Bibliography

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