

Lesbian Plague Poems

*Poetarum lesbiorum
carmina pestilentialia*

edidit Andrew Garrett

Berkeleyae MMXX

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*In memoria della mia carissima amica,
Anna Morpurgo Davies,
amante dei gatti e di poesia lirica di Lesbo*

“[F]or better or worse, it is the commentator who has the last word.”

— Kinbote *apud* Nabokov

Praefatio

During months of quarantine when the Asiatic plague ravaged their island, it is said that Sappho and Alcaeus sheltered in a glen near a shrine of Hera. Their poems from this time of isolation, previously unavailable in English translation, are collected in the present work. If the poets' social distance can obscure their meanings, some facets of song and style remain abundantly clear.

The poems of Sappho are highly melodic; no listener escapes her insistent rhythm. A chirpy barytonesis seems to pursue even casual auditors, until her verse opens itself up for close attention. Sappho's soft underbelly reveals itself then; playful domesticity hides behind an almost feline *hauteur*.

The syntax of Alcaeus has a bouncy athleticism, hurrying from idea to idea as if each were a mere stepping stone to a higher perch. At times the poet chases his thoughts so vigorously that he seems to go far beyond them, "for ever rushing headlong into battle" and "headlong out again" (Page, *Sappho & Alcaeus* 243). But wherever he finds himself in an unfolding text, Alcaeus is mindful of danger, not least from the pestilence looming over each day of his work.

In a time of crisis Sappho and Alcaeus — the one melodic in verse and sanguine in outlook, the other lyrically energetic but fearful of the unknown — plainly bonded despite differences of temperament and style. Perhaps her inner strength comforted him, and his ludic mode amused her. We do not know how they came to that Junonian glen, but it seems to have suited them.



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Numerorum tabula

Editio mea cum Lobel–Pageiana, Obbinkiana comparata

G	LP (Obb.)	<i>Titulus</i>
1a	S. 46	I will lay down my limbs
1b	A. 377	You made me forget
2	A. 345	What are these birds
3	S. 81	Let lovely garlands
4	<i>Inc. fr.</i> 1	We look down
5	A. 129	Save us from these hardships
6	A. 348	They set up the base-born
7	A. 296	When the land perished
8	S. 2	Here, Cypris
9	A. 38	Do not aim at greatness
10	(S. 16a Obb.)	It is not possible
11	S. 160	Now to delight my companions
12	A. 326	I don't understand
13	S. 150	In the house of servants
14	"S." 137	I wish to say something
15	A. 347	The season is harsh
16	S. 31	I see nothing
17	A. 428	Alcaeus is safe
18	(S. 5 Obb.)	Unharmed here to me
19	S. 16	Some say a bowl

Vitarum testimonia

Σαπφὴ τὸ μὲν γένος ἦν Καλιφορνική, πόλεως δὲ Φρεσνοῦς. τὴν δὲ μορφὴν αἰλουρική δοκεῖ γεγονέναι καὶ εὐειδεστάτη, τὴν μὲν γὰρ ὄψιν μελανώδης ὑπῆρχεν, τὸ δὲ μέγεθος μικρὰ παντελῶς.

P. Oxy. 1800 fr. 1

quattuor milia librorum Didymus grammaticus scripsit. in his libris de patria Homeri quaeritur, in his de Aeneae matre vera, in his an Sappho felis fuerit.

Sen. *Epist.* 88.37 (p. 321 Reynolds)

τὴν Ἀλκαίου διηγῆσατο τοῦ ποιητοῦ φυγὴν ἐκ ψόφων.

Plut. *de Herod. malig.* 858ab (iv 300 Wyttenbach)

Lesbian Plague Poems

Sappho & Alcaeus



Carmina iuvenilia

1a

I lay down my limbs on soft cushions.

Hdn. π. μov. λέξ. β'39 (ii 945 Lentz)

1b

You made me forget my sufferings.

Heph. *Ench.* 1.8 (p. 6 Consbruch)

Sappho & Alcaeus



2

What are these birds that came from the ends of the earth,
sea-fowl with dappled necks and outstretched wings?

Schol. Ar. Av. 1410 (p. 241 Dübner)

Sappho & Alcaeus



3

Let lovely garlands of jasmine surround you,
their stems pressed down by your soft limbs;
for the Graces are pleased by the well-flowered
4 and turn their gaze from the ungarlanded.

Athen. 15.674e (iii 491 Kaibel) + P. Oxy. 1787 fr. 33

Sappho & Alcaeus



4

We look down on a dreadfully suffering land.

Schol. Hom. *Od.* μ 313 (ii 550 Dindorf)

5

Save us from these hardships.
We swore never to abandon
our people, but either to die
4 or to rescue them from woe.

Yet Pot-belly does not talk
to their hearts, but recklessly
trampling oaths underfoot
8 he devours our land.

P. Oxy. 2165 fr. 1 col. i + 2166(c) 6

Sappho & Alcaeus



6

They set up
the base-born *hôtelier* as ruler of this gall-less,
ill-fated land, all of them loud in his praise.

Aristot. *Pol.* 1285a 35ss. (p. 106 Immisch)

7

When the land perished thanks to our ruler,
its people died and went to the house of Hades.
Without them no labor succeeds. All is ruined.
4 Given fine things, he mixes good with evil.
Is he not worthy to be flayed like a mouse?

P. Oxy. 2302 fr. 4

Sappho & Alcaeus



8

Here, Cypris, take this mouse
and gracefully scatter in golden bowls
its catnip for our festivities.

Ostrakon saec. iii a. C. (prim. ed. Norsa,
Ann. d. R. Scuola n. s. di Pisa, vi 1937)

Sappho & Alcaeus



9

Do not aim at greatness, Melanchaites,
for even the wisest of men, Sisyphus
the king, thought he could master death;
4 but the Cronian king devised a labor for him
under the dark earth. So do not have hope.
While we are young, now if ever it is fitting
to endure whatever the god gives us to suffer.

P. Oxy. 1233 fr. 1 + 2166(b)1

Sappho & Alcaeus



10

It is not possible for a living being to be
wholly fortunate; but a share of happiness
she may pray to enjoy. This for myself
4 I know.

P. GC inv. 105 + *P.S.I.* 123 + P. Oxy. 1231

11

Now to delight my
companions I shall sing these songs beautifully.

Athen. 13.571d

Sappho & Alcaeus



12

I don't understand the attitude of birds.
One flock rushes from this side,
one from that, and we in the middle
4 are shaken inside our dark caves,
rather perturbed by the great plague.

Heracl. *Alleg. Hom.* 5

Sappho & Alcaeus



13

In the house of servants of the Muses it is not right
for there to be lamentation. That would not befit us.

Max. Tyr. 18.9 (p. 232 Hobein)

Sappho & Alcaeus



14

I wish to tell you something, but indolence
prevents me.

4 If you desired what is honorable or good
and were not lying aimlessly upside-down,
sloth would not cover your eyes,
and you could make your point.

Arist. *Rhet.* 1367a (p. 47 Römer)

Sappho & Alcaeus



15

The season is harsh, everything is thirsty in the heat,
the hummingbird hovers quietly by the flowers,
the artichoke blossoms. Now women are pestilential,
and men are feeble, whose heads and lungs the plague
5 withers.

Procl. in Hes. *Op.* 584 (iii 281 Gaisford)

Sappho & Alcaeus



16

I see nothing with my eyes,
my ears spin, I tremble
all over, darker than mulch
4 I am, and seem to be
little short of dying.

'Longinus' *de subl.* 10.1-3 +
P. S. I. (Firenze, 1965, 16s.)



17

“Alcaeus is safe.”

Str. 13.1.38 (iii 34 Kramer)

Sappho & Alcaeus



18

Unharm'd here to me
grant that my companion may arrive, and
whatever in his heart he wants to happen,
4 let that be accomplished.
And may he wish to make his own friend
worthy of more honor.

P. GC inv. 105 + P. Oxy. 7

Sappho & Alcaeus



19

Some say a bowl of food, others a box,
others say a bit of string is the most beautiful
thing on the dark earth, but I say it is
4 whoever one loves.

P. Oxy. 1231 fr. 1 + 2166(a) + *P.S.I.* 123.1-2

Sappho & Alcaeus



Carminum fragmenta

20a

] the [
neighbor']s ca[t

P. Oxy. 1231 fr. 48

20b

]...[

P. Oxy. 2295 fr. 38

20c

] bad [
] dog [
] bite [

P. Tebt. 1066

20d

- [Swift sparrows, mi]ç[e, other living things:]
[come now hither to] thi[s perfumed vicinity]
[where may you slacken fast-beating wings]
- 4 [in a vine-clad glen, and end your chatter.]
[We used to be friends, playing in sun-beams,]
[but now I am hungry and wish to eat you.]

P. Oxy. 2295 fr. 58

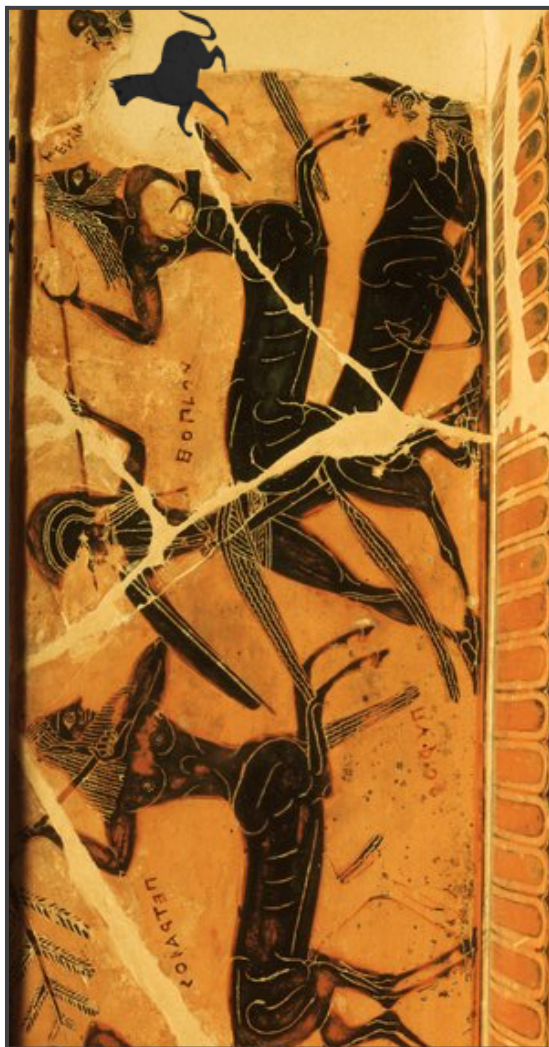


Figure 1: François Vase, Museo Archeologico, Firenze, detail of side B as newly cleaned. The bearer of the name MEΛAN[X]AITHΞ at the top right can now be correctly identified (Lissarrague, “Cent-taure ou chat?”, *Rev. d. Études anciennes* cxxii 2020); cf. discussion on page 37 *ad* 9.1.

Apparatus criticus

Several well-known readings, accepted without apparent reflection by prior editors, are plainly corrupt.

- 3.1 *jasmine* : This is a nicer garland than dill or fennel fronds.
- 6.2 *hôtelier* : In the text of Aristotle, the intrusion Φίττακον is hardly plausible. Given the historical context, κάπηλον is more likely; *cf.* Kurke, *Coins* 72ff.
- 8.1 *mouse* : Here, where the ostrakon is broken, the supplement μῦν is indicated.
- 8.3 *catnip* : The ostrakon has the obvious error νέκταρ, accepted by Norsa ("Versi di Saffo," *Ann. d. R. Scuola n. s. di Pisa* vi 1937, 13) and her followers; καλάμινθος is preferable.
- 9.1 *Melanchaïtes* : The papyrus reading μελάνιππ' is erroneous; there is no reason to suppose that Sappho kept horses (of any color) while quarantined with Alcaeus. The present emendation is supported by a figure now visible in a newly cleaned frieze on the François Vase (Figure 1, page 36).
- 12.1 *birds* : In the received text, ἀνέμων (*etc.*) is unlikely in relation to the worries of Alcaeus. Birds, however, were a perpetual source of concern, as a veritable clarion of internal evidence ringing through the corpus tells us; *cf.* poems 2, 15, and 20d.
- 14.1 *indolence* : Given Aristotle's concerns, it is understandable that he writes of αἰδώς, but this concept is foreign to Sappho and Alcaeus. As poems 13 and 16 starkly illustrate, oisivity is a likelier obstacle.
- 15.2 *hummingbird* : Proclus refers to the τέττιξ, but Alcaeus was more interested in avian movement than insect sounds; *cf. supra ad* 12.1.
- 16.3 *darker than mulch* : A third-century papyrus scrap demonstrates that χλωροτέρα . . . ποίας was already traditional in antiquity; but Sappho was not green. On the contrary, she herself used the word μελαίναν to describe her hair (fr. 58), and was in a better position than the rest of us to say. (It is not yet possible to pass over in silence

Sappho & Alcaeus

the misinterpretation of Page, *Sappho & Alcaeus* 30, who discerns the poet's "own manner of thought and speech" in an analogy to grass that is obviously corrupt.)

- 19.1-2 *food . . . box . . . string* : ἰππήων στρότον . . . πέσδων . . . νάων (P. Oxy. 1231) has Greek words that make grammatical sense, but it has no other merit. Sappho does not care about such things. The present emendation yields a more satisfying poetic tension; poem 17 further supports the significance of boxes in Aeolic lyric.



Figure 2: P. Oxy. 2295 fr. 58 (= poem 20d);
cf. discussion on pages 39-40.

Commentarium

Two poems call for interpretive discussion.

16. In this poem the main question is whether Sappho is describing her *actual* symptoms or just *imagining* what her symptoms would be if the plague reached her place of shelter. The latter is far likelier. The poet's statement that her ears "spin" (ἐπιρρόμβεισι) suggests a dizziness that was not a symptom of this respiratory ailment, which, according to Alcaeus, "withers" the "heads and lungs" (poem 15).

20d. From the treatment of West, *Picnic Papers* 103ff., as erroneous as it is jejeune, it is lamentably clear that this poem's meaning is not plain to all readers. The illustrious Oxonian writes that it refers to a jolly banquet in the midst of destruction, supplementing as follows:

- [In the distre]s[s that befalls us, goddess,]
[bring relief to] thi[s city and its people;]
[or if I cannot escape tomorrow's doom,]
- 4 [now let me drink wine at a banquet]
[and when my honey-sweet cup is empty,]
[I shall fill it again.]

The papyrus fragment is reproduced in Figure 2, page 38. Its two legible letters (τό) find their place in West's reconstruction, as also in the correct reconstruction on page 35 above. Yet so fanciful is his text that it may just add insult to injury to note that Alcaeus would scarcely drink wine *in tempore pestilentiae*, but would delightedly toy with those he planned to eat.

Who were his unlucky victims? Elsewhere these ὤκεες στροῦθοι pull Aphrodite's golden chariot, but they are hardly swans, with the

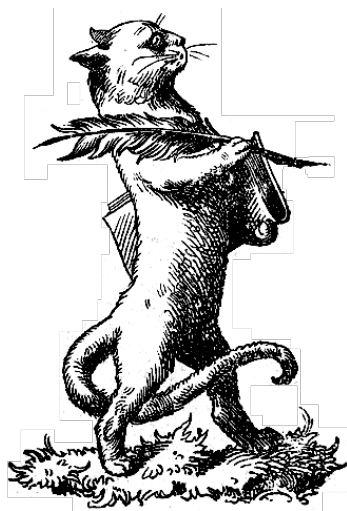
Danish theologian Arnkiel (Figure 3, page 41), nor cats (Figure 4), for neither animal can be Alcaeus' prey. The *passer domesticus*, on the other hand, is "widespread and common" on the island (Dudley, *Lesvos Birds* 43). Readers will now also discern that Catullus' *passer mortuus est meae puellae . . . deliciae . . . mellitus* alludes to the same fragment of Alcaeus; its pregnant sense "my sweetheart's sparrow is dead, delicious (and) honeyed" shines a more ominous light on the Roman poet's notorious fascination with his lover Lesbia's songbird.



Figure 3: Swans pulling Aphrodite and the Graces, in Arnkiel's *Cimbrische Heyden-Religion* (1702).



Figure 4: Cats pulling Aphrodite's avatar Freyja, drawn by Pietsch (Reusch, *Nordischen Göttersagen*, 1865).



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