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*Sappho ... in 9 fragments* costume design sketch for the 2010 Malthouse production by Anna Cordingley.

SAPPHO  
*... in 9 fragments*

**JANE MONTGOMERY GRIFFITHS**



Currency Press,  
Sydney

## CURRENCY PLAYS

First published in 2010

by Currency Press Pty Ltd,

PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia

enquiries@currency.com.au

www.currency.com.au

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### NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA CIP DATA

Author: Griffiths, Jane Montgomery.  
Title: *Sappho... in 9 fragments* / Jane Montgomery Griffiths.  
ISBN: 9780868198866 (pbk.)  
Subjects: Sappho—Drama; Women poets, Greek—Drama; Australian drama—21st century; Lesbos Island (Greece)—History—Drama.  
Dewey Number: A822.4

Typeset by Dean Nottle for Currency Press.

Printed by Hyde Park Press, Richmond, SA.

Cover design by Emma Vine for Currency Press.

Cover shows Mengin's *Sappho* © Manchester City Galleries.

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This publication is supported by the Australian Research Council as part of the Monash University and Malthouse Theatre ARC Linkage Grant, 'Staging Sappho: towards a new methodology of performance reception'. Jane Montgomery Griffiths' participation in the writing and production of *Sappho... in 9 fragments* was undertaken during an Australian Research Council Post Doctoral (Industry) Fellowship at Monash University.



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## Introduction

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Sappho's poetry stands at the head of the lyric tradition in Western culture. We know how influential her work has been, how often her poems have been admired, imitated, revised and re-interpreted, but we know little about the circumstances that gave rise to her song.

Sappho lived on the island of Lesbos, off the coast of what is now Turkey, at the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth century BCE (Before the Christian Era). She seems to have composed for an audience of women and girls, possibly within the context of a cult of Aphrodite, and her songs were probably used in celebrating the rites of passage that mark a woman's life: coming of age, betrothal, marriage, motherhood. Sappho composed in the provincial Aeolic dialect and, insofar as we can tell from the few verses that have come down to us from antiquity, she used a strict metre, and paid attention to form and musicality. The performance of her poetry was often accompanied by the lyre. Her songs were improvised, then memorised and passed from woman to girl, mother to daughter, friend to lover. Her subjects are desire in all its joy and pain; the beauty of the earth; the passing of time; loss and grief; memory; and the power of poetry.

Sappho's fame as a poet spread abroad during her lifetime. Solon of Athens (c. 640–560 BCE) tells how his nephew sang one of Sappho's songs over the wine and begged the boy to teach it to him. When a friend asked him why he was so eager, Solon replied, 'So that I may learn it and then die'.

The little evidence that we have about Sappho's life and reputation comes from scraps gleaned from other writers in the ancient world. These are collected in the *Testimonia*, printed in the Loeb Classical Library edition *Greek Lyric I: Sappho and Alcaeus*, edited by David A. Campbell (1982). But Sappho also appeared on ancient coins, figured on vases and in wall paintings from the end of the sixth century BCE, quite soon after her death, and was portrayed in plays. Cicero mentions a statue of her by the sculptor Silanion erected at Syracuse and which

apparently bore the inscription ‘My name is Sappho, and I surpassed women in poetry as greatly as Homer surpassed men’.

Sappho’s work was written down, on papyrus rolls and pottery tablets, during or just after her lifetime, as the old oral traditions of the Mediterranean world began to give way to a literary practice. It was popular with rich collectors like the great library at Alexandria and her work was said to extend to Nine Books of verse. One whole book contained her *epithalamia* (wedding poems), while another apparently ran to 1,320 lines. Today, we have just over two hundred fragments, some of them only two or three words long.

So why is there so little, given that once there was so much? The problem, in part, lies in the fragility of papyrus – mice eat them, damp composts them, fire burns them up. So long as Sappho’s work was in demand from collectors, it was worthwhile carrying out the laborious task of copying and re-copying to preserve the work. But fashions change. Sappho’s Aeolic dialect came to be regarded as provincial to the promoters of classical Attic Greek – that is, as spoken at Athens – and the poems were no longer recopied. They were not entirely lost though because other, later, writers admired her work. The Roman poet Catullus (84-54 BCE) wrote a series of poems addressed to ‘Lesbia’ and famously revised one her best-known poems into his ‘Ille mi par esse deo videtur’ (‘That man, to me, seems like a god’).

More importantly, later writers quoted Sappho in their own works, which is why we still have two whole (or nearly whole) poems handed down to us. The first of these is ‘Fragment 1’, also known as the ‘Ode to Aphrodite’. This exists today because it was quoted, in full, by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in a textbook called *On Literary Composition* written in about 30 BCE. The second is Sappho’s most famous poem, called ‘Fragment 31’ which begins ‘He seems to me as happy as the gods...’ This poem was quoted – sadly, not quite in its entirety – by Longinus in a philosophical treatise, *On the Sublime*, written during the first century AD.

Until the nineteenth century, Sappho’s work was known only through the small collection of scraps that were quoted by later authors. But then something happened. Farmers in Egypt began turning up bits of early papyrus in their fields. Scholarly institutions across Europe got to hear of this and sent teams out to investigate. In particular, two

young men, Arthur Hunt and Bernard Grenfell, travelled out in 1895 from Queen's College, Oxford, with financial backing from the Egypt Exploration Fund. They set up their tents about a hundred miles south of Cairo in a little town called Oxyrhynchus – now known as Behnasa – and began excavating a group of low mounds. Pretty soon they realised that these were rubbish heaps dating from Hellenistic Egypt. Most of the rubbish had been thrown out around the fifth century AD but some of it was much older, often dating from the second and third centuries. For months, they sifted the scraps of papyrus into reed baskets, packed them in Huntley and Palmers biscuit tins and sent them back to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Grenfell and Hunt collected so much in their crates that the work of deciphering, cataloguing and publishing these precious remnants of the past continues to this day.

A lot of the pieces of papyrus really were rubbish – laundry lists, tickets, bills and IOUs. But there was one page that seemed to record some of the sayings of Jesus. And another was a copy of a previously unknown poem by Sappho, 'Fragment 5', called 'To the Nereids'. Even though they were written down long after her death these papyri are the earliest copies of Sappho's work and as 'authentic' as we can ever hope to see. They must have been copied from some other papyrus, which itself would have been copied from a papyrus that may have actually come from Lesbos – and so on. The finds included some of Sappho's most substantial and important poems including 'Fragment 16' ('Some say a host of cavalry') and 'Fragment 44' ('Hector and Andromache'). It had been a fantasy of the ages to recover the lost Nine Books of Sappho and here, in a dusty Egyptian town, that dream started to come true.

And the dream goes on. In 2005, M. L. West announced that two scholars at the University of Köln, Michael Grönwald and Robert Daniel, had deciphered part of a papyrus roll, dating from the third century BCE, which had been used to wrap a mummy. Some of the writing they found there was a poem on old age by Sappho (M. L. West, 'A New Sappho Poem', *Times Literary Supplement*, June 24, 2005). Scholars still hope more poems will come to light.

And what of the poems themselves? Why are they so influential? What makes them so important? Why is Sappho – 2,600 years after her death – still the pre-eminent lyric poet?

The first answer lies in her subject matter. Sappho writes about desire and her descriptions have never been bettered. In fact, on the contrary, they have simply been repeated and re-worked so that one might almost say that there is no expression of desire *without* Sappho.

The key poem for this is ‘Fragment 31’. When Longinus included it in his treatise *On the Sublime* he admired its description of ‘love’s madness’. ‘Are you not amazed,’ he says, ‘how at one and the same moment she seeks out soul, body, hearing, tongue, sight, complexion as though they had all left her and were external, and how in contradiction she both freezes and burns, is irrational and sane, is afraid and nearly dead, so that we observe in her not one single emotion but a concourse of emotions? All of this happens to people in love...’ (D.A. Campbell, Loeb translation, 1982)

Here is what Sappho said:

He seems to me as happy as the gods,  
 This man, whoever he is, sitting beside you  
 Lapping up your words, your irresistible laugh.  
 But for me, each time I look at you,  
 A moment, for just a moment, my throat constricts  
 My voice, so thin, so tight.  
 all-limbloosening-throatconstricting-deep-earechoing-  
 fullvoicestealing-firebreathing-icefreezing-soulshattering...  
 And I do not know if it is the air or your gaze that makes me  
 shake so much.  
 And it’s freezing but I’m sweating as I look at you  
 And me, as green as grass; paler than the palest grass...  
 And truly, I am close to death...  
 Still, even this can be borne...

Sappho, ‘Fragment 31’

translation by Jane Montgomery Griffiths

And the poem, tantalisingly, breaks off there. But you will see what I mean. From Catullus to Madonna, from Shakespeare and John Donne to Verdi and Shania Twain, writers have used and re-used Sappho’s description of what happens to body and soul when we fall in love.

Sappho’s images and vocabulary – new and startling then, old and familiar now – are always powerful in their effects. But there are other

reasons why her work is so important. For one thing, she knew about the traditions she had inherited and she was bold in re-interpreting them. Her most obvious illustrious predecessor was Homer, who lived in around the eighth century BCE, some two hundred years before Sappho. She refers to the story of his great epic poem *The Iliad* in her 'Fragment 16'. But while Homer writes of aggression and battle (the first word of *The Iliad* is 'anger'), Sappho dismisses the might of armies, the warring of nations and the exploits of heroes to speak of Helen and link her to the lives of ordinary women. She tells how desire led Helen astray and made her betray her other family allegiances:

Some say that armies of infantry  
 are the most beautiful sight on earth.  
 Some prefer cavalry.  
 Some even have a penchant for naval fleets...  
 Personally, I say the most beautiful sight on earth  
     is the thing you love most.  
             The thing you want most.

Perfectly obvious, really. Just look at Helen.  
 Had it all: the beauty, the husband, all – but still  
 sailed off to Troy. Not a care in the world. Not a thought for her  
 children, not a thought for her parents.  
 Love led her astray.

And so... remembering Anactoria.... Not here now.  
 Her lovely walk, her beautiful face...  
 More beautiful than all the armies of Lydia.  
 ... but impossible...  
     ... too far from probability...

Sappho, 'Fragment 16'  
 translation by Jane Montgomery Griffiths

In Sappho's version, the story of private lives, of personal need, loss and gain, is more potent and more relevant than any larger civic and national history.

And yet, that private world of the individual is, paradoxically, the one that we all share. Many of Sappho's poems rely on a weaving of many voices, back into the past, and sometimes looking forward to the

future. This is exactly what she does in her one complete poem now extant, ‘Fragment 1’, the so-called ‘Ode to Aphrodite’:

Deathless Aphrodite,  
 Shimmering.  
 Incandescent.  
 Star-throned.  
 Rainbow-crowned.  
 Deathless Aphrodite spinning your noose,  
 Enough, now, enough pain.  
 You’ve quenched your thirst with my prayers before.  
 Swift sparrows’ wings swift carriage pulling  
 Beating path over earth, dark cloud encircling  
 Leaving your palace, you have come.  
 Mouth plays with smile, irresistible laugh.  
 ‘What now, my poor Sappho? Why are you crying?  
 Tell me your fantasies, what your heart most desires?  
 What’s all this heartbreak?  
 Who is she who’s left you?  
 What web shall I spin to bring her back to you?  
 She might run away now, but soon she’ll be begging  
 She turns away gifts, but soon she’ll be giving.  
 Despises you now, but soon she will long for you  
     Whether she wants to or not.’  
 Enough now. Enough pain.  
 Unravel me. Free me.  
 Together, my ally. Together, fulfilled. Together, the perfect whole.

Sappho, ‘Fragment 1’

translation by Jane Montgomery Griffiths

Here Sappho begins in the present, rehearses a past experience, and then looks toward a future when Aphrodite will help her once again. So her time frame is multiple just as her voices are many – Aphrodite herself gets to speak in this poem. This probably mirrors the performance practice that obtained in Sappho’s world. The song would have been passed from one to another in a performance that was collaborative and a theatrical experience that was shared. If you look back at ‘Fragment 31’ and ‘Fragment 16’ you will see a similar multiplicity of time frame,

geographical space and many voices in performance. Like the goddess she worships, Sappho's poetry too is 'myriad' or 'many-minded'.

There is one other major reason why Sappho still appeals to us as a poet. She claims her own name, she takes herself seriously, she tells us who she is. Hers is a startlingly modern sensibility in this. Sappho names herself in 'Fragment 1' and she names herself again, for instance, in 'Fragment 65', 'Fragment 133' and in 'Fragment 94'.

We like Sappho's poetry because it is beautiful, plain, clever, moving, and true. And we like Sappho the poet because she claims a clear identity and because she, quite rightly, believes that poetry can endure.

I tell you:

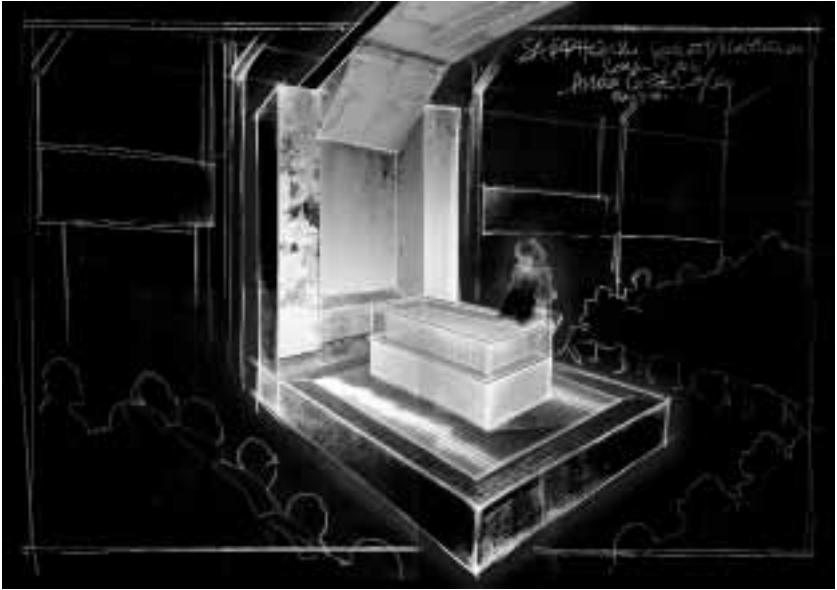
... in time to come

someone will remember us.

*Margaret Reynolds*

*July 2010*

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*Sappho ... in 9 fragments* set design sketch for the 2010 Malthouse production by Anna Cordingley.

# Staging Sappho

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## **Prelude...**

*Sappho... in 9 fragments* has had a slightly unusual genesis, and its status now as a play that has been commissioned and performed by Malthouse Theatre is compounded by its role in a larger academic research project, *Staging Sappho: towards a new methodology of performance reception*. This project, an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant between Malthouse Theatre and Monash University, investigates the connections between theatre, creativity, and the ways in which the modern world views the ancient world through the conduit of performance. It is, to our knowledge, the first practice-based project to examine the growing sub-discipline in Classical Studies known as Classical Performance Reception.

As such, the play itself is both an exercise in ‘reception’ and an example of it. Charting the course of how Sappho has been interpreted and mis-interpreted, it is itself also part of that self-same tradition of appropriation; and the story of the play and my connection to it, first as writer, then as writer/performer, is as much an example of the joys and dangers of ‘reception’ as any I can think of. It demonstrates that the ways in which we understand Sappho probably say more about ourselves than about her. Dealing with Sappho, we become Narcissus and Pygmalion all rolled into one...

## **Introductions...**

I love Sappho. Or at least, I do now. I didn’t always. When I first met her as a second-year undergrad, I found her a very difficult woman: quite impenetrable. Her emotions were as hard to grasp as her Greek was to translate. All those gaps, all those dots, all those brackets, all those *fragments*. Incomprehensible to a nineteen-year-old who had no experience of either the Aeolic dialect or the heartbreak of love. She played very hard to get. But now I get her. Or rather, she gets me. Under my skin, into my passions, gnawing away at me. This impenetrable

woman has unreservedly penetrated me. Sappho and I have, totally unexpectedly, developed quite a relationship these past few years, although who is to say what the balance of requited and unrequited love is in this story.

The progress of my relationship with Sappho follows a well-trodden, if still bumpy, path that in fact exemplifies the thorny questions that lie at the heart of Performance Reception. How can one 'read' the object of study, the love object, as anything other than a projection of oneself? How does one juggle the 'essentialist' with the 'constructivist' (Habinek *xi*)? How does one narrativise one's own cognitive processes and how does one transmit them to others? How much of oneself goes into an understanding of the text? And how does one embody the text when that text is so full of gaps and emptiness?

The question of this embodiment is particularly germane, as my relationship with Sappho has a lot to do with bodies: how they feel, how they fit, how they are invaded, how they are perceived, how they are remembered. Our affair has developed an unintended degree of exhibitionism, and our bodies, in their absence and their presence, are the field on which these questions about reception are exercised, in front of an audience, for all the world to see – or at least as many as could fit nightly into the theatre. We juggle visibility and invisibility, the private and public, the real and the imagined. I start off this relationship quite invisible: the slightly reluctant novice playwright, commissioned to write a one-woman show about Sappho for an Australian television actor (someone who, interestingly, had none of my prejudices about the lady). I finish it, through a combination of circumstances, playing Sappho myself, in a rainbow-hued hallucinatory cocktail of writer and performer that turns me into 'the entire perceptual framework' (States 373) for both Sappho and the text. Sappho, meanwhile, begins this relationship as the vehicle for a television star's tour de force: the recalcitrant object of desire, passively aggressive as she lies back and thinks of Lesbos. She ends it, though, completely in control: the conspicuous manipulator of the entire process of creation. Abandoned by her first impersonator, she turns her attentions to me, and, through a combination of ventriloquism and body-snatching, uses my voice and being to fill in her gaps. Word becomes flesh, as those lines which I wrote, stolen from her and never designed for me to speak,

end up becoming the both of us – a peculiar melding together (in several senses of the word). Different voices, appropriated bodies: the stock in trade for the actor, but the ever problematic dynamic in the phenomenological conundrum of analysing performance. Whose voice is speaking and being heard? Whose body is feeling and being seen? Whose past and whose emotions are being offered and received? As the boundaries between character, writer, performer and audience slip and slide, there is no simple differentiation between that which is received, and those who do the receiving.

### **Background – The Stork Stage**

*Sappho* was commissioned in late August 2007 for The Stork Hotel, a pub theatre in Melbourne's CBD which, over the years, had become something of a cultural anomaly-cum-icon to Melburnians. Located just opposite the Queen Vic market, the hotel was the second oldest pub in Melbourne, and drew to it an extraordinarily mixed clientele. Wander into the main bar, and there was a regular crowd of builders, backpackers, musos, students and drunks. This was no chichi café bar. It was one of the few pubs left in Melbourne that seriously continued the charter of providing cheap hostel accommodation. Upstairs at the pub were rented rooms that could belong anywhere in time in the last fifty years: crumbling paint work, antiquated fittings – this was not a place to go for chic boutique accommodation. And yet this very earthy, unpretentious and, by equal turns, part charming, part insalubrious drinking hole had developed a reputation over the years as a place where art and ideas could be (and should be) discussed, and where, even given its limited resources, a vibrant intellectual and cultural community could find a home. Under the auspices of the pub's licensees, Paul and Helen Madden, The Stork had won a steady and devoted following of people who came to this rough and ready venue to take part in what Helen described as 'theatre of the mind'. The pub regularly held philosophical symposia and Socratic dinners; it hosted ancient Greek and Gaelic reading groups; it provided a home to The University in the Pub; and it commissioned stage adaptations of the works of Camus, Duras and Proust, and semi-staged recitations of Homer and Virgil. Jostling diners from the pub's restaurant, these

performances took place in the hotel's back room with a minimum of theatrical trappings (stage rostra measuring 3'x10'; two blacks; and lighting made up of three birdies, one profile and a fresnel with its barn doors held on with baking foil). The chairs were hard and uncomfortable, and in the Australian summer, the heat was unbearable. Performances were forced to contend with the shriek of police sirens, the thundering of trams and the whirl of ineffectual air conditioners. And yet, night after night, performances would be packed out with audiences of up to seventy-five prepared to brave the conditions to have a night of unashamedly intellectual theatre.

For some time, Helen Madden had been keen to develop a play about Sappho. As a trained Classicist, a fan of the Mary Barnard translations, and a canny producer with an eye for a one-person show, Madden felt that the poet would be the perfect subject for her venue's type of theatre. On some level too, it was both an audacious and a sentimental punt. Despite protests, she was about to lose her pub: The Stork was designated for demolition in early 2008 to make way for a shopping mall.<sup>i</sup> *Sappho* was to be her last hurrah: her last of many commissions, but her first of an entirely new work. It was also, as far as we could tell, the first one-woman play to be written about the poet.<sup>ii</sup>

My involvement in *The Stork* and the Sappho project came late. Having heard on the grapevine about my oddly combined roles of actor/director and Classicist, Madden offered me the commission, despite my inexperience as a playwright. The time line was ludicrously tight, but I was on research leave, the contractual terms were generous, and my brief was extremely open: write a play on Sappho that would be intellectually stimulating, give the audience an idea of why the woman was so extraordinary, and avoid too much Ancient Greek (despite her Classics training, Helen is ever the one for accessibility). The production was scheduled for a three-week run at the end of November 2007 (which meant the entire production process, from blank page to actor on stage, would have a gestation of only two and a half months). The actor cast had worked at *The Stork* before and was experienced in one-woman shows. Since she also had a wonderful jazz voice, could I weave some torch songs into the script? I had four weeks to write the play, and other than that, it was *carte blanche*.

### Writing process...

In her book *Victorian Sappho*, Yopie Prins asks ‘What is Sappho except a name?’ (Prins 8), and in that deceptively simple-seeming question, lies the crux of the Sappho conundrum. To be asked to write a play about Sappho is to be asked to write a play about a gap, a figment, a fragment. Not even the name helps. Her name just shows me the difficulties. ‘Projected from the past into the future and from the future into the past, “Sappho” is presented to us now, in the present tense, as a name that lives on’ (Prins 8). But lives on how? Projected onto what? Whose past and whose present? The name ‘Sappho’ contains all the issues of readership articulated by reception theory: mediation, situation, contingency (*pace* Martindale 2006). It carries with it so many connotations, so many possibilities. It drags with it the baggage of millennia and the luggage labels of thousands – all those self-contained groups of cultural tourists with their pinned-on name tags: ‘academic’, ‘classicist’, ‘Greek’, ‘lesbian’, ‘feminist’, ‘intellectual’, et cetera. It is not an easy name to circumscribe.

Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig could get away with leaving a blank page for Sappho,<sup>iii</sup> but I have no such luxury. I sit down before a blank computer screen to write a play about a woman whose name scares me with possibility of blankness. All I have to look at is an empty screen of buzzing whiteness, and that very name, staring back at me from the top of the document. The subject’s name is now the play’s name: subject and object; means and ends, in a decision taken months before, not by me, but by the producer who holds the purse strings, and wants the play to sell. Originally, the play was to be called *Sappho... Unravelling*. I liked that. Again, not my idea, but one I could play with. A name that would have allowed me to show off my postmodern academic credentials; something that would have let me toy wittily with the possibilities of braided narratives and arch in-jokes (I could even put ‘unravelling’ in lower case square brackets with a few ellipsis marks just to show I *really* g]et... [th]e... jok[e...]). But the play will now be called that one word, *Sappho*. That one word will sell, says the producer. That one word will say it all, says the producer. And the producer was right. It does. *Sappho* gets more mainstream media coverage than I could ever have thought possible. *Sappho* gets the bums on seats.

But that is two months down the line, and right now, all I have is a name and a blankness. So how to begin? Begin with the name? But the name gains meaning only in its historicity, and how can you explain something's historicity without describing its reception? And how can you describe that reception without knowing the subject that is being 'received'? Begin with the story? But the story of Sappho is in fact not hers, but that of her interpreters – people who, just like I am trying to do, worked the brief of pinning her down, explaining her to others; people who tried to fill her gaps with their own fantasies, fears and fancies?<sup>iv</sup> So I begin the play (at least initially) with that very question: 'How do you tell the story when there are so many gaps?' For several days (which seems an eternity when you only have four weeks), that was all I had. The name, blankness, that question, and then more blankness. And that was my problem: there was an honesty about the nothingness that seemed to say everything I wanted to say about Sappho. Somehow I needed to put a gap on stage, and to do that, I needed to make a virtue of her absences. The play should be, consequently, an exercise in fragmentation. It should use Sappho's own words, in their completeness and absences, to weave together disparate narratives about her that deliberately leave gaps; deliberately suggest to the audience that they need to read between the lines themselves, if they are ever to find the whole story.

I started with the fragments, studying them in both the Greek and in different English versions, knowing there was something about the nature of translation and transmission I wanted to explore in the script. I read and re-read the versions of Carson, Barnard, Balmer, and especially Lombardo; and indeed, I must gratefully acknowledge my debt to them for the different insights their translations offered. In the end, about a third of the play was written from my own direct, if very free, translations of Sappho – although it is becoming hard to pinpoint the exact ratio of new writing to translation, so much did Sappho seep into me during the writing process. Similarly, it is hard to weigh up adequately my debt to other translations: my own versions had become 'encrusted' with the interpretations that had gone before. In the finished script, the allusions, quotations and resonances of other translations ultimately reflect both an appreciative homage to earlier translators,

and a practical enactment of the constantly mutating processes of reception from source to target text.

The fascinating moment of connection, however, happened with the Greek. Looking through Campbell's lovely Loeb edition, I was stopped when I came to fragment 105a,

oi|on to\ gluku/malon e0reu/qetai a1krw| e0p' u!sdw|,  
 a1kron e)p' a0krota/tw|, lela/qonto de\ malodro/phev:  
 ou0 ma\n e0klela/qont', a0ll' ou0k e0du/nant' e0pi/kesqai.

Just as the sweetest apple blushes on the highest bough,  
 up there, so high, so high, quite forgotten by the apple-pickers.  
 but no, not forgotten... only out of reach.

The effect of reading this was a shock. It was a physical and emotional jarring: a sudden jolt; a direct connection to something from my past; something at the back of my mind I had almost forgotten; something someone had once said to me long ago. And there I was, sitting in Melbourne, reading this Greek in the Australian sunshine, but also right back in time, right back in that room, right back in that freezing winter, with that person, saying those words to me about a blush that could only be captured by her.<sup>v</sup> And suddenly, in that instant, Sappho invaded me, and I fell in love with her. What happened in this strange moment of personal connection to this fragment was, I suppose, an affective sense of understanding her at last; an experiential sense of the love and the loss that flows through her words, that I, as a thirty-something, could now, at last, comprehend – could now *feel* – in a way impossible for a 'greener than grass' nineteen-year-old in a Cambridge supervision room.

I knew now that the play would have to be a double act between Sappho and me; my own understanding of love and loss, channelled through Sappho's fragments. We would weave together two intertwined but distinct stories. One strand would be Sappho (or 'a' Sappho) reflecting on her reception over the age; and the other would be a love story, of sorts, that would somehow try to capture the pain and longing that runs through the poetry. It would be an attempt to make an audience *feel* Sappho without realising they were even hearing her; an attempt to put reception on stage in an *affective* form. An academic narrative by

stealth, told not through reason and objectivity, but through emotion and subjectivity.

So the play developed along two distinct paths: Sappho's and her lover's. Divided into nine separate fragments in my head – for no particular reason apart from the echo of Sappho's nine volumes of poetry – the play would juxtapose the voice of Sappho in the 'odd' numbered fragments, with the voice of her lover in the 'evens'. Sappho's sections would give an historical/cultural view of her figure and influence; her lover's sections would tell/enact their passionate and ultimately desolate love affair.

Concentrating so explicitly on a love affair on stage means that a particular kind of focus is placed on the issue of Sappho's sexuality and its reception. When I was first commissioned, I was advised that 'lesbians had hijacked Sappho', and was warned off making this 'a lesbian play' – something I found curious and challenging for a variety of reasons. I didn't really understand the warning; nor did I really know what it meant to write, or not write, 'a lesbian play'. Not write about a woman's love for another woman? Not write a play that might appeal to any lesbians in the audience? Not write gags about Jeanette Winterson and Martina Navratilova? Not write something that connects to my own experience and my own identification? A tricky thing to do, if I'm writing a play about Sappho. To me, sexuality, *my* sexuality, is only an issue when other people force it to become an issue; other than that, I just get on with things. So when I read Sappho, her homosexuality is, to me, such a default position that it is not even an issue:<sup>vi</sup> obviously she is attracted to women, and why wouldn't she be? I appreciate that a heterosexual might read her very differently; or perhaps might not. But to apologise for and disguise what *I* read in Sappho, to do a Denys Page<sup>vii</sup> and admit the emotion without the physical eroticism, actually, and perversely enough, gives that sexuality an unwarranted amount of importance. The intensity of the love is the thing; the gender of the lovers, incidental (because, to me, it is so natural); and the physical attraction is a by-product: necessary, not to be ignored, but not the be- and end-all. So my Sappho will love a woman (of course), and will have sex with a woman (of course), and if she is ever to jump from a cliff for love, it will be (of course) not for love of Phaon, but for

love of this girl, whom she wanted so intensely and lost so casually. I don't think that makes it 'a lesbian play'; I think it just makes it a play about love. That 'warning', though, perplexed me, because it carried with it numerous assumptions about both the fixed nature of sexual identification, and the audience's 'horizon of expectation'. The Stork's audience base was by and large educated, upper-middle class, and fifty-plus; a profile suggesting an expectation of learned classicism, not lascivious tribadism. Of course, in the end, they got neither, or they got a bit of both – it all depends on your perspective. The overwhelming response from the audience, however, suggested that the gender and sexual orientation of the lovers in the play was in fact irrelevant. The important and affecting elements were the resonances of betrayal and loss that are, dare I say, universals in unhappy love, be it hetero- or homosexual. One of the most frequent comments I heard from audience members after the show was 'We've all been there...'

So, little digression aside, back to the play. In putting together these strands, I undertook two separate processes. The first was research into the reception route for the Sappho sections. I read 'other' Sapphos avidly; firstly looking to fiction (the high-wire butch of Yourcenar, the time-travelling sensualist of Winterson, to name but a few), secondly turning to scholarship (Reynolds and Williamson, Carson and du Bois, Greene, Johnson and Prins). Of all I read, the most interesting, and influential, for a myriad of reasons, were the different but intertwined Sapphos of Winterson and Reynolds, and I must fully acknowledge my debt to Reynolds' *The Sappho History* for giving me not just so much factual information, but also influencing me in the tenor of my Sappho. These readings led me to concentrate on the intertextuality of Sapphic reception: the readings between the lines of the readings between the lines. They demonstrated the affective way in which her figure and her fragments lure her different interpreters, in a sensual act of literary seduction, that forces even the words of a scholarly work of reception studies to contain the passion and pain of Sappho's eroticism.

Each 'fragment' of Sappho's story in the play took shape to tell a version of her reception: her uses and abuses through history and her passive/aggressive connection with those that had 'revivified' her through their own imaginings and interpretations. The Sappho who

was materialising from all this was not a particularly pleasant woman but was nonetheless strangely irresistible: highly intelligent, highly charismatic, witty, urbane, detached, desperate, needy, resentful, angry, immature, sophisticated, bemused, judgemental, conservative, snobbish, yearning, bereft. Plus any other hundred more adjectives you might like to throw at her. The strongest element that was coming through to me, however, as I gave her words to tell the world about how the world had used her, was her pain (ka't e1 mon sta/laxmon [37]). She was living in a kind of hell, or limbo: the post-love void, when life is as meaningless as a forgotten but gnawing hunger. Her bravado slowed the drip of pain, sometimes, but could not staunch the flow. And I started to pity her, this woman I was creating, who was really no more than my imagination, no more than a reflection of my own and others' fantasies, yet seemed to be developing a life all her own. And as I started to pity her, I started to fall for her, warts and all. I started to want to tend her in her vulnerability; to protect her from her misinterpreters – all the while quite aware that I was probably as guilty of misreading her as those from whom I would rescue her.

It is a very strange feeling to fall in love with a character you are creating. I've experienced it before on stage; I've fallen for many parts I've played and often the oddest ones. But I was using other people's words and stories. It is a quite different kettle of fish to be creating from scratch the object of desire. And this confusion was increased as the second story line of Sappho's lover started to take shape.

In this second strand, I needed a modern counterpart to this ancient/timeless Sappho, so I had to ask, who would Sappho be if she were around today? A university lecturer sprung to mind initially, just to keep in with the 'Sappho schoolmistress' trope; the sort of gargantuan intellect of queer theory who would hold court in seminars, adored and loathed in equal measure by her mesmerised students; the sort of roving, polymath, serial monogamist who leaves a trail of devastated hearts and intellects lying in her wake. Thankfully, though, I soon discarded this idea: a little too dangerous to play with such fire. No, the modern Sappho would need to be some sort of performer, someone who used words to tell stories. A television presenter, perhaps? A jazz singer (Johnson 2007, 147–9) maybe? An actor? Write about what

you know, they say, so an actor it would be. Sappho would become the amalgam of all the great actresses I had seen, admired, worked with and known. A monstrous talent, a star, a siren, a lodestone. As for her lover, there were so many to choose from: Gyrrhina, Gongyla, Andromeda, Mnasidika, Atthis? Atthis it would have to be. There was something so strange in what was said and not said in fragment 49:

h)ra/man me\n e!gw se/qen Altqi p/alai pota/:  
smi/kra moi pa/iv e!mmen' e)fai/neo ka!xariv.

I loved you once, Atthis, long ago.

You were such a child: so small, so graceless.

There was such desperate pain in the untold story of fragment 131:

Altqi, soi\ d' e!meqen me\n a)ph/xqeto  
fronti/sdhn, e)pi\ d' A)ndrome/dan po/th|

Atthis hates the very thought of me and flies off to Andromeda.

And Atthis would become that everyone/nobody who has ever lost herself in the quagmire of longing; as empty and interchangeable with all the other victims of love, just as her name's pun suggests:

Fact no. 1: young women are easily seduced.

'Atthis,' she said, 'I will call you Atthis.'

But that's not my name, I said.

'No matter. Atthis, *Hatthis* – whatever, whoever. You shall be my Atthis.' Her little joke. I didn't know then what I know now.

Greek is cruel: only a breath between person and pronoun. I could have been any of them. Who I was was unimportant, so long as I was her Atthis.

*Poor Atthis – you were like a child – so graceless, so naïve... I loved you once.*

The story of this passionate and desperate love would be told from Atthis's perspective, in the fragments of post-breakup grief. Who she would be, however, was an interesting problem. Here is a young woman who appears in only four fragments; yet her influence pervades what we have of Sappho. For anyone trying to tell Sappho's story, Atthis is crucial. Who was she, who is she for us? An unknown – a young woman who moved a great older woman; who was with her and

who left her; who went off with another woman, and could not bear even to look at Sappho; a nonentity who touched a star but scraped her fingers on the sky (yau/hn d' ou) doki/mwm' o)ra/nw duspaxe/a [Campbell 52]). However we approach Atthis says much more about the subjective dangers of reception than it does about Sappho. So in reading between the lines of Atthis and Sappho, I also read the subtext of my own experience. My love, my passion, my heartbreak, my ownership. And since, in my writing of Sappho, I have fallen in love with her, as I write of Atthis' love for Sappho, I must be writing my own story. Of course, the Atthis story in the play is emphatically not autobiographical. There are some elements which come from my own experience (anyone who has lived in North Yorkshire in a harsh winter without heating will know the trick of putting on the hair dryer to get warm), but Atthis is her own woman. She is created, though, from a combination of myself and Sappho, and I use in the Atthis 'fragments', much more of the poetry than I do in Sappho's story. A case in point is 'Fragment 6', the 'seduction' scene; the latter part of which is entirely woven from, or based on, Sappho's fragments (1; 3; 4; 21; 23; 30; 31; 34; 36; 37; 38; 41; 46; 48; 51; 63; 96; 126; 138; 141;154), so that Sappho and Atthis in effect end up becoming one and the same to tell their story.

In this blending between the two voices, something interesting happened, which had to do with the conjoining of my own voice with theirs. Our designated actor landed a film role. We had advanced bookings but no actor, so Helen decided to employ me to perform as well. Consequently, though I had never originally intended to do so, I ended up acting the play, lending my voice to Sappho's words; words which I had appropriated to give voice to both her and Atthis. So although I started off as Sappho's creator, she ended up as mine, as her words came together with my presence and voice to create a new entity. This is the phenomenological conundrum of performance, as States says:

... the problem is complicated still further by the fact that the character is being played by an actor who is not the character but who forms the entire perceptual ground from which any such essence as character can appear (137).

It would take much more space than I have here to try to unpick the different strands of phenomenological braiding that went on in *Sappho*, but it is interesting to note how confused so many of the audience were as to who was Sappho, who was Atthis and who was I. Tears on stage are interesting things. Whose are they? The character's, the performer's? I rarely have cried 'for real' on stage – it's rather frowned upon in British theatrical tradition as something a little too self-indulgent to be quite appropriate – but I cannot get through *Sappho* without some serious crying. I don't know why: I don't know what it is about this story, these words, this grief that affects me so badly. And I do not know if it is affecting me, or affecting the two characters I am playing. The viscerality of live performance brings the inside to the outside and forces sensation to become a palpable commodity to be transmitted to an audience. I act a young woman undressing on a freezing winter's night, while in the theatre it is 41°C in a Melbourne heatwave: I say the words 'And it's freezing but I'm sweating as I look at her', soaked with perspiration from the broiling heat, while trying to conjure the goose bumps of one shivering with cold. My sweat is a sign of the parallel universes of performance. And the same is true of my tears. I say the words of the Sappho character (based on fragments 55 and 137) that will destroy Atthis' world:

'If you were not so embarrassed by everything, you might possibly have something worth saying; but you are a coward and a talentless mediocrity, and this "shame" you talk about is nothing more than a cover for your many inadequacies.'

and I simultaneously cause the pain and receive the pain. Sappho and Atthis become one with/in me, so that the tears I weep as Atthis are carried through to become Sappho's in her last scene. And meanwhile *I'm* the one who ends up feeling thoroughly miserable, empty and drained after the show. The result was a confusion of personas; so much so that a colleague in the Drama Department here at Monash (who, you'd have thought, would have known better) sent me an email after seeing *The Stork* run of the show, asking: 'Who was Sappho, who was Jane?' Perhaps there is something about the double act of writing and performing that makes the words too close to home; too uncomfortable because just too familiar for both the writer/performer and the audience to take in easily.

### **Reception and the next incarnation...**

The Stork's production opened in November 2007 and played for three weeks to sell-out audiences and a very favourable positive critical response. On the basis of that, it was picked up by Malthouse Theatre for further script development and now commissioned for a full production for August 2010. Some of the play has changed significantly in the last two and a half years: *Sappho* has become *Sappho...in 9 fragments*, the play's structure has altered to make it less didactic and more affective, the brief to create 'theatre of the mind' has now become Malthouse's brief to provide visceral and potentially provocative theatre, and the character of Sappho herself has changed considerably – at least that is how it now feels playing her – she is certainly a much more ambivalent character to play now. I am writing this at the end of the first week of rehearsals, and I am aware that this published version, however much it has already gone on several different and quite rigorous paths over the years, seems like just the beginning of another unknown journey right now. The collective collaborative imagination of the extraordinary creative team at Malthouse has challenged my writer's preconceptions about the project, and opened up previously unimagined possibilities for me as a performer. And perhaps that is the point of this entire Sappho project: to show that our responses to Sappho will always be, in essence, a reflection of whatever specific group in whatever specific circumstance is trying to pin down the poet. When all's said and done, what we choose to do with Sappho says much more about our needs and desires than it does about hers.

### **Acknowledgements and thanks**

My huge thanks to: the management team of Malthouse Theatre for their unswerving support in this project, and partnership with the Monash/Malthouse Linkage Project; the extraordinary creative team of Marion Potts, Maryanne Lynch, Anna Cordingley, Paul Jackson, Darren Verhagen and Lisa Osbourn for their vision and imagination; the Australian Research Council for supporting the APDI Fellowship that made this project viable; the Monash University Faculty of Arts Research Office and School of English, Communications and Performance Studies for their facilitation and support of the Linkage

Project; Partner Investigators Andrew Benjamin, Margaret Reynolds, Edith Hall, Simon Goldhill, Lorna Hardwick; Claire Grady and the team at Currency Press; Alex Pinder, for his direction of *Sappho* at The Stork. My especial thanks to Helen and Paul Madden for instigating this whole process. Finally, all my love and gratitude to my beloved Maz, Eliza and Tilly, without whom none of this would ever have happened:

tai\_\_j ka/laij' u1mmin to\_ no/hmma tw}mon  
ou) dia/meipton

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Helen and Paul Madden have continued The Stork Stage at a new venue, and are now in their second highly successful year of new work and literary adaptations at the Alliance Française in St Kilda, Melbourne.
- <sup>ii</sup> Whereas characters named ‘Sappho’ have appeared on stage several times, the historical figure has had a number of theatrical outings from John Lyly to Lawrence Durrell (and Peggy Glanville-Hicks, just to keep the Australian connection going), and a selection of readings from Reynolds’ *The Sappho Companion* has been adapted for performance, I’ve not been able to find documented any one-woman shows on her. I’d be very grateful for further information, if anyone knows of such a performance.
- <sup>iii</sup> On this, see Winkler (1996, 89 and 1990, 162); Parker (1996, 146); Williamson (1995, 6).
- <sup>iv</sup> Similarly, see Barnstone’s lovely introduction, for the ‘disturbed and trapped’ Sappho, lying at the mercy of those who would rescue her (11–14).
- <sup>v</sup> I have found it interesting to read, retrospectively, Winkler on this passage (1990, 183), where his linguistic analysis of the sexual connotations of *mhlōn* perhaps explains the affective workings of this passage on me; and certainly found their parallels in how I used this fragment in the play. Then again, perhaps on some level I was unconsciously remembering Winkler’s analysis as I re-read fragment 31 in my Melbourne backyard. It all goes to show how deeply encrusted any interpretation and affective reading is going to be.
- <sup>vi</sup> I say this fully aware of the dangers of applying such historically inappropriate tags as ‘homosexual’ to ancient same-sex love, and apply it, rather, as an unavoidable label of modern ‘readings’ of such erotics.
- <sup>vii</sup> Page’s analysis of Sappho’s sexuality (142–6) is a curious combination of the open-minded and the scandalised. While acknowledging and celebrating the fact that Sappho’s love for the girl in fragment 31 is ‘a lover’s passion – the overwhelming emotion of intensest love’ – he nonetheless states that there is categorically no evidence to suggest that Sappho added ‘practice’ to her

'inclination' of being *gunaikerastrī/a*. Though he accepts that 'we must close our eyes to the evidence if we wish still to cherish the illusion of the "virgin purity, feminine softness, and delicacy of sentiment and feeling..." which have been said to make up the character of Sappho' (144), he still seems genuinely affronted that she could be accused of being 'addicted to the perversion the modern world names after her native island' (143). On Page, see Winkler (1990, 162–3) and Gordon (2002).

*Jane Montgomery Griffiths*  
*July 2010*

# Playwright's Notes

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## **A note on the style, font, stage directions and punctuation**

The text is divided into nine fragments – to give a nod to Sappho's Nine Volumes, but that's as far as the allusions to the Alexandrian cataloguing go.

The speakers alternate between Sappho (odd numbers) and Atthis (evens). Each narrator has a distinct/ive narrative style, but within each segment she will use (and be used by) numerous other interjected 'voices'.

When text appears unitalicised, it is the voice of the speaker, even if she is quoting from another. Within her narrative quotation, sometimes there will be quotation marks, sometimes not – that very much depends on the way she is remembering the conversation. Italicised lines are direct quotations from Sappho – although it's up to the performer as to what that means in the dramatic context. There is also a huge number of unitalicised direct quotations from Sappho's fragments in the text, but these are more fully integrated into the action. Punctuation and page layout are erratic, idiosyncratic, and deliberately so. There is generally a distinction intended (in length, intention, rhythm) between colons, semi-colons, dashes and dots. Similarly, with indented lines. How the distinctions are made is up to the performer.

There are currently no stage directions. This is deliberate; to make the play as much of a *tabula rasa* as Sappho is herself. It's in no way to suggest a static/silent/'untheatrical' staging. The initial staging at The Stork Stage concentrated on the language of the script and the performance, because of the simplicity of the resources. Sappho was dressed in a plain black cocktail dress, Atthis simply donned a coat. The tiny size of the stage meant there was very little staging: ripped-up ledgers and books on the floor, a full-length gilt frame to the side. But that was about it as far as design. As the play has developed, and with the resources available from Malthouse Theatre, the staging of *Sappho...in 9 fragments* is very different: a bald and naked Sappho suspended in a glass coffin full of honey, the sterility of an operating room or papyrology

lab, yet with the honey-voiced richness of Sappho's poetry implied in the lighting and patina of the set. Sappho, when she emerges, wears a fur coat, Atthis wear only vest and undies. The difference between the two stagings explains my loathness to be prescriptive with stage directions. I'd much rather leave it up to the creative team of any further incarnation, or the imagination of the reader, to visualise the theatrical possibilities of the play.

### **A few thoughts on the play**

#### Language

Between 25–30 per cent of the play is made up of direct quotations from Sappho – albeit in free translation. The use I make of these direct quotations is practical, dare I say pragmatic. Sappho is much better writing about love and loss than I am, so I might as well use her than try a pale imitation. Unless the audience is very well up on Sappho, it's quite probable that they'll miss quite a few of the direct quotations (not to mention allusions) but again, that's quite deliberate. This is not intended to be an homage to Sappho, and there should be no reverence attached to her lines. Her poetry is a way into the narrative, which is a way into her poetry – an unavoidable, and hence brazen, circularity.

#### Characters

As to characters, well, Sappho is not a particularly pleasant woman – neither in her own narrative, nor in her alter ego's in Atthis' love story. She is highly intelligent, highly charismatic, witty, urbane, detached, desperate, needy, resentful, angry, immature, sophisticated, bemused, judgemental, conservative, snobbish, yearning, bereft. Plus any other hundred more adjectives you might like to throw at her. Her poetry, what we have of it, is full of the complications of her character. From an academic perspective, it is, of course, highly spurious to read into her fragments details of her life. But from a performance perspective, from a solitary reader's perspective, how can we do otherwise? Clearly, there was something about this woman that was both irresistible and impossible. Would she commit suicide for love? Who knows? Perhaps that's the point. That she always keeps you guessing. Certainly she has the neediness to make such a gesture; but perhaps, ultimately, what

makes her so tantalising is that she forces us to decide her destiny again and again in her poetry.

As to poor old Atthis, her gaucheness doesn't mean she is inadequate. In fact I think she's probably rather talented. She'd have to have something about her to attract Sappho's attention, even if all that is her adoration of the older woman. Once together, though, Sappho could never allow her to flourish – that's part of her need to control. Perhaps Atthis has untapped depths that simply couldn't surface while she drowned in Sappho's neediness. Or perhaps she is just another bruised victim in Sappho's tally of conquests. But the love between them in this play must be taken seriously: it is and was true for that moment, in an unlikely but totally committed passion that was as sublime as it was destructive. Which is exactly what we feel, again and again, each time we read between Sappho's lines.

### Structure

Finally, as to the play's structure: when you first read it, it probably feels like a linear narrative. There is, however, that self-same circularity running beneath its structure that crops up so repeatedly in Sappho's reception. When writing, I mucked around with starting the play at different points. As an exercise, I'd go from Fragment 8 to 9 then back to 1, to see what happens to the characters if they are trapped in this synchronic circularity. Memories are rarely linear, and the pain one can feel at a heartbreak of a decade ago can be as immediate as the pain from just stubbing your toe. Play around with the repetition of memory, and the characters become very different. For me, it puts an underlying pain beneath Sappho's bravado in the early part of the play; but it's up to the performer to say whether that's a useful way to look at the character development.

It all depends on how you see Sappho. In my imagination, she will always be poised on the top of that cliff – that is not really a cliff, but a metaphorical precipice of desire and despair – longing not for a ferryman, but for an overly serious, heartbroken young woman who finally stood up to her. For my Sappho, there can never be an ending – let alone a happy one. But then everyone's Sappho will be different, and point of the play is to try to explore that.

**Acknowledgements**

Many of the stories in the play are taken from Margaret Reynolds' wonderful *The Sappho History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). I gratefully acknowledge my debt to her for both the scholarship and the wit of her work. Grateful acknowledgement is also made of the translations that have either influenced me, or been echoed by me, and I owe a particular debt to the versions of Mary Barnard, Anne Carson and Josephine Balmer. I must give a special thank you to Stanley Lombardo, who so kindly allowed my echoing and quoting of some of his most moving, apposite and delicate translations.

Extract by Jeanette Winterson from *Art and Lies* (© Jeanette Winterson, 1994) is reproduced by permission of PFD ([www.pfd.co.uk](http://www.pfd.co.uk))

The quotation from Denys Page (23–4) is from Denys Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry* (Clarendon Press, 1955: 143) and reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.

Further quotations have been taken from 'The rainy Pleiads wester' by A. E. Housman and 'The Second Coming' by W. B. Yeats.

*Sappho... in 9 fragments* was first produced by Malthouse Theatre at the Beckett Theatre, Melbourne, on 30 July 2010, with the following cast:

SAPPHO / ATTHIS

Jane Montgomery Griffiths

Staging by Marion Potts

Set and Costume Designer, Anna Cordingley

Lighting Designer, Paul Jackson

Sound Designer, Darrin Verhagen

Dramaturge, Maryanne Lynch

An earlier version of the playscript, *Sappho*, was first commissioned by Helen Madden and produced at The Stork Stage, Melbourne, on 14 November 2007, with the following cast:

SAPPHO

Jane Montgomery Griffiths

Director, Alex Pinder

Music was taken from David Chesworth's 'Badlands' Suite.

## **CHARACTERS**

SAPPHO

ATTHIS

## **SETTING**

A papyrology room or rare-books room in a great university library.

FRAGMENT 1

*The forensic sterility of a papyrology room, or the pseudo-reverential stillness of the rare-books room in a great university library.*

SAPPHO, *under glass, is speaking with some difficulty. Her Greek is fragmented – gaps and the problems of being lost in translation. It has the weariness and necessity of endless repetition.*

*Note: The Greek here is from Sappho's Fragment 1. Square brackets denote transliteration and translation of the Greek and are only there to help the performer, not to be spoken. mhd' sounds much like the French 'merde', although without the glottal 'r'; da/mna is like the English 'damn'. Sound and the action of trying to speak are more important than the actual meaning, and can be played around with at the performer's will.*

SAPPHO:

mhd'... [med – 'don't...']

mhd'... [med – 'don't...']

mhd' m' a!saisi... [me m'... asaisi – 'don't me with anguish...']

mhd' ... o0niaisi da/m... [med... oniaisi dam... – 'don't... with agonies conquer...']

da/m... da/mna... [dam... damna... – 'con... conquer...']

mhd' da/mna... [med damna... 'don't conquer...']

da/mn... [damn... – 'damn...']

damn... [damn... – 'damn...']

damn... damn...

... damn...

Damn.

*Merde.*

Life is not easy in a biscuit tin, nor any easier when spread beneath glass.

poiki/loqron' a0qana&t' Afro/dita  
 pai Di/oj dolo/ploke li/ssomai/ se  
 mh/ m'a@saisi mhd' o0ni/aisi da&mna  
 po/tnia qu~mon

[*poikiothron athanat' Aphrodita – 'star-throned deathless Aphrodite'*  
*pai Dios doloploke lissomai se – 'child of Zeus guile-weaver I beg you'*  
*me m' asaisi med' oniaisi damna – 'don't me with anguish don't with*  
*agonies conquer'*

*potnia thumon – 'goddess my heart']*

...

... mh/ m'a@saisi mhd' o0ni/aisi da&mna  
 po/tnia qumon

[*me m' asaisi med' oniaisi damna – 'don't me with anguish don't with*  
*agonies conquer'*

*potnia thumon – 'goddess my heart']*

Damn.

d-... d-... de-... dhujte

[*deute – 'this time again'*]

And again... and yet again...

... who is it this time, Sappho? Causing all this pain?...

How do you tell the story when there are so many gaps?

Never prod a pebble on the beach...

Sometimes I wish they'd left me alone... all those clever, clever men.  
 Pawing me with such trembling fingers, poring over me with such  
 lustful eyes. So desperate to make sense of me. For me to make sense  
 for them. So desperate... What is it this time? Your frenzied heart's  
 desire... So desperate... All that longing to fill my emptiness. Little

passions, all dry. Dry as the papyrus they fondle, dry as the sands of the desert, dry as the crumbs of a thousand biscuit tins... dry as I am now.

Actually, I'd kill for a drink right now... all the dust and biscuit crumbs... so bad for the vocal folds... And I had such a nice voice once...

... <l>... eptofw/n

[... *l...* *eptophon* – 'thin-voiced']

so thin, so tight, tight-voiced

meli/fwnoj

[*meliphonos* – 'honey-voiced']

honey-toned, sweet-voiced

... yes, well, that's just a sick joke, isn't it...

'Dip me in honey and throw me to the lesbians.'

You can have too much of a good thing...

... too sweet, too sharp...

After a while, honey-coated words can start to pall. They poison you. Rot you. Innards decayed. Periodontal disease attacking not just gums but flesh and sinews. Pink softness oozing with the pus of rotting meat. Too sweet, too sharp. So unfair. We want our love all sugar-coated. Our romance a pink powder puff of scented satisfaction. Completely, intoxicatingly, suffocatingly perfect. We want wholeness, no gaps...

We don't like mutilations.

But it's really just a tease... teasing out the threads of desire and patching up the holes. Desire, the story spinner; Eros, the fantasy weaver. But so easily undone, so easily unravelled.

Too much sweetness is just not good for you.

But you could take my strands. Weave your fantasies with my threads and patches. What do you want me to be tonight? Your wet dream of desire? Your nightmare of decadence? I might not look like much right now, but use your imagination, and who knows what I can become. Your teacher, your lover, your mistress, your whore, your totality of

everything, your wholeness. My strands woven in the tapestry of your longing. Draped round your body and braided through your hair. My textures on your skin, my softness round your throat. A jewel-studded scarf, a diaphanous noose. Suspended by longing's knotted threads.

Choking...

... with emptiness...

... suffocating...

... in sweetness...

... drowning...

... in desire...

Ah, the drowning... yes, much misunderstood...

Never prod a pebble on the beach... at least not if you're squeamish. Who knows what you might find at the bottom of a cliff. Under the rocks and the detritus of centuries. Prodding the seaweed, kicking at the rubble.

A bloodied, bruised hyacinth? A rotten, worm-gnawed apple core?

Or me? broken bones and shredded skin... ripped and torn... fragmented...

Did it to herself, they said. Hurling herself from the cliffs for love of Phaon. For him, she undid her other loves, dismembered her true self and hurled herself from the cliffs – limb-loosened and drowning in desire... the falling, fallen woman.

But no... no I don't think so. I really don't think so. That's not how it was.

Who is it this time, Sappho? Who's causing all this pain?

... dhu]te... dhu]te [*deute* – 'this time again']

... again, yet again, not again...

... not again...

What your heart most desires...

No, you won't find me under that rock. Much better to try in the rockpools. Gaze in the stagnant waters and just see who stares back. Careful though,