

# CRITICAL RHYTHM

The Poetics of a Literary Life Form

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## Sapphic Stanzas: How Can We Read the Rhythm?

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### Sappho, Still

In 2014 news broke that several new fragments of Sappho had been identified and deciphered by papyrologist Dirk Obbink, Professor at Oxford: “SAPPHO: Two previously unknown poems indubitably hers, says scholar.”<sup>1</sup> Word spread fast in headlines and blogs around the world: “Incredibly rare Sappho love poems discovered on tattered 1,700-year old papyrus” . . . “New poems of Greek poetess Sappho recovered” . . . “New Sappho poems set classical world reeling” . . . “Sappho sings again” . . . “A new Sappho poem is more exciting than a new David Bowie album.”<sup>2</sup>

As classical scholars dove into the details of transcribing, editing, translating, and interpreting the fragments, the reading public followed the story with great excitement. In *The New Yorker*, Daniel Mendelsohn described the dramatic discovery of the papyrus “about seven inches long and four inches wide: a little larger than a woman’s hand” and “densely covered with lines of black Greek characters.” Of course the Greek characters on this papyrus were not actually written *in* a woman’s hand, much less the hand of Sappho, but they could be clearly identified as one of her poems, as Mendelsohn went on to narrate:

Judging from the style of the handwriting, Obbink estimated that it dated to around 200 A.D. But, as he looked at the curious pattern of the lines—repeated sequences of three long lines followed by a short fourth—he saw that the text, a poem whose beginning had disappeared but of which five stanzas were still intact, had to be older.

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Much older: about a thousand years more ancient than the papyrus itself. The dialect, diction, and metre of these Greek verses were all typical of the work of Sappho, the seventh-century lyric genius whose sometimes playful, sometimes anguished songs about her susceptibility to the graces of younger women bequeathed us the adjectives “sapphic” and “lesbian” (from the island of Lesbos, where she lived). The four-line stanzas were in fact part of a schema she is said to have invented, called “the sapphic stanza.”<sup>3</sup>

According to this narrative, although there were other pieces of internal evidence to associate the poems with Sappho, the identification depended first and foremost on recognizing a poetic form associated with the archaic Greek poet Sappho living on Lesbos sometime around 630 B.C. We might even say that the Sapphic stanza is a poetic invention of Sappho that makes possible our poetic reinvention of Sappho as “the seventh-century lyric genius,” singing at the origins of a Western lyric tradition.

The recent discovery of “the new Sappho” repeats the drama of previous discoveries. Exactly one hundred years earlier, the headlines of 1914 also announced big news, first in the London newspapers and then in *The New York Times*: “Poem by Sappho, Written 600 B.C., Dug Up in Egypt” (Figure 1). Written by Joyce Kilmer (American poet and Man of Letters) this article begins enthusiastically:

Out of the dust of Egypt comes the voice of Sappho, as clear and sweet as when she sang in Lesbos by the sea, 600 years before the birth of Christ. The picks and spades of Arab workmen, directed by Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt of the Egypt Exploration Fund, have given the world a hitherto unknown poem by the greatest woman poet of all times.

And Kilmer ends even more hyperbolically:

They have recovered, they have almost recreated, one of the greatest poems of the greatest poet of the greatest age of lyric poetry. It is already a classic, this little song, whose liquid Greek syllables echo the music of undying passion.

To illustrate how a scrap of papyrus is recovered from the past and “almost recreated” as a song echoing in the present, the article includes a picture of men digging in the sand (“Scene of the Discovery of the New Papyri of Sappho at Oxyrhynchus”), a photograph of papyrus fragments (“Three of the fifty-six pieces surviving from the roll which contained Book I of the Unknown Odes of Sappho”), a reconstruction of the Greek



FIGURE 1. Joyce Kilmer, “Poem by Sappho, Written 600 BC, Dug Up in Egypt,” *New York Times* (June 14, 1914), 7.

text from one of these fragments (“The Latest Sapphic Poem”), and a metrical translation of that text in Sapphic stanzas by Kilmer himself (“A Newly Discovered Poem of Sappho, Done into English Verse”). From the composite image of this new poem (now known as Sapphic Fragment 16, to which we will later return) we are invited to imagine the voice of Sappho herself, “as clear and sweet as when she sang,” transcending time through the perfectly measured time of her lyric meters.

The rhetoric around the recovery of new Sapphic fragments, at the beginning of the twentieth century and again at the beginning of our own, repeats a long history of invoking Sappho as a musical figure for lyric, proclaimed the Tenth Muse in antiquity because of the beautiful songs that were composed and performed by Sappho (or in the name of Sappho) for accompaniment by the lyre. But by the time they were collected and organized according to meter in nine volumes for the Alexandrian Library, Sappho’s lyrics were no longer songs to be heard but rather poems

to be read, producing an idea of Sapphic song as always already lost. And this silence is amplified by the historical fragmentation of the Sapphic corpus: out of scattered fragments, Sappho has been incorporated into many languages over many centuries, emerging as an exemplary lyric figure in nineteenth-century poetry as an exemplification of twentieth-century lyric reading.<sup>4</sup> Within this critical tradition, every discovery of a new Sappho is still the same old Sappho, still silent: we imagine her *as if* she could be heard, because we know how to read the Sapphic stanza.

Or do we? Even if we know how to recognize the schema of the Sapphic stanza, how can we read the rhythm? That is the question posed by this essay's title, which might be imagined as if it were a line in Sapphic meter. If we approach it as a rhetorical question, we have already given up on the possibility of scanning it: "Sapphic Stanzas: How *can* we read the rhythm?" But if we approach it as a practical question, we could try out different possibilities for scansion: "*Sapphic Stanzas: How can we read the rhythm?*" Measuring the length of syllables, as in classical quantitative verse, we would scan: *long short long short long short short long short long [short]*. And if we decide to call this a choriambic line, we would look for a four-syllable foot in the middle, scanning "*how can we read*" as a choriamb: *long short short long*. To make the scansion work, we would have to assume that the final word "rhythm" has two syllables, and then treat the second syllable as either short or long (since we may not be sure about the rhythm of "rhythm"). Of course this would not be the only way to scan the line. If we were dividing it into feet, according to foot scansion, we would read: *trochee, trochee, dactyl and trochee trochee*. Or, if we were stressing accents, according to beat prosody, we would read: *five strong beats and also some well-placed offbeats*. Or, if we were counting syllables rather than stresses, as in syllabic verse, we would read: *this is just eleven syllabic units*.

But however we choose to scan the line, if we repeat its pattern three times we can construct a Sapphic stanza by adding on a shorter fourth line, like a refrain, to make a quatrain that can be schematized (with – marking long or stressed syllables, and ˘ marking short or unstressed syllables, and x marking the "anceps" syllable that is either stressed or unstressed) like this:

– ˘ – x – ˘ ˘ – ˘ – x  
 – ˘ – x – ˘ ˘ – ˘ – x  
 – ˘ – x – ˘ ˘ – ˘ – x  
 – ˘ ˘ – x

The shorter line at the end of the Sapphic stanza is called "Adonic" and it has five syllables: *long short short long short* (or *long short short long long*). And zipahdeedoodah, with this final *dactyl and trochee* (or *dactyl and spondee*), we have completed the stanza identified with Sappho, now the proper name for a metrical form that has been variously imagined and reimagined by generations of scholars and poets.<sup>5</sup> In reading and writing "Sapphics," they perform different ways to think about the relation between meter and rhythm, stanza and line, form and content.

Scanning the history of such conjectures would be another approach to the question posed by my title. We could run to the library to search for versification manuals and histories of prosody gathering dust on the shelves, or run a search through the Princeton Prosody Archive (PPA), inspired by T. V. F. Brogan's bibliography of English versification and brought into the digital age by Meredith Martin.<sup>6</sup> This full-text searchable database yields numerous references to "Sapphic stanzas," in metrical treatises and a wide range of metrical experiments to recreate the Sapphic stanza in English: for example, in Elizabethan quantitative verse, and in neo-classical Sapphics mediated by Catullus and Horace for imitation by eighteenth-century poets like William Cowper, and with increasing variability and frequency in Victorian poetry, as nineteenth-century poets and prosodists became obsessed with reading classical Greek meters in relation to English ideas about rhythm and meter.

Beyond the collection and quantification of these historical materials, the Princeton Prosody Archive invites us to consider: "What if literary concepts such as meter and rhythm are historically contingent and fundamentally unstable?"<sup>7</sup> This is the theoretical point of doing research in historical prosody. In addition to demonstrating the historical contingency of ideas about the Sapphic stanza, my purpose is to explore how these metrical imaginaries have served to produce allegories of rhythm, and vice versa, thus undoing a distinction between rhythm and meter that has become one of the central orthodoxies of English prosody. According to this orthodoxy, meter in poetry is an abstract paradigm that is realized in the rhythms of speech or embodied in a rhythmic performance or rhythmically perceived in the mind. Yet the phenomenology of poetic rhythm experienced in the present moment depends on how meter is theorized at different moments in history. Such metrical discourses attempt to materialize meter while also idealizing rhythm. Furthermore, this idealization of rhythm is central to ideas about lyric emerging toward the end of the nineteenth century, when Sappho was increasingly read as the very personification of lyric and the Sapphic stanza as its rhythmic perfection. To reflect critically on Sapphic rhythm, I propose a "meta-metrical" reading

of several examples from the past two centuries and in contemporary poetics.

### Allegories of Rhythm

At the turn of the twenty-first century, googling the phrase “Sapphic Stanza” leads us into a labyrinth of dictionary definitions and classroom instructions, Wikipedia entries and Facebook posts, Youtube videos and audio recordings, blogs for poets and poetry websites, including an essay posted online by the Poetry Society of America. Entitled “Marvellous Sapphics” and written by the poet Rachel Wetzsteon, the essay starts with a poetic performance of the Sapphic stanza that presents Sappho as the very embodiment of this metrical form:

I would like to tell you about a lovely  
stanza form I've long been an ardent fan of:  
it was conjured up in a simpler time by  
Classical Sappho.<sup>8</sup>

Wetzsteon presents the Sapphic stanza as a “show and tell,” in both senses of “telling”: she recounts the myth of its origin by carefully counting out syllables in three hendecasyllabic lines that lead up to the final Adonic: “Classical Sappho.” Here we are asked to scan the name of Sappho in Sapphic meter, “conjured up in a simpler time,” suggesting not only the archaic time of ancient Greece but also a time when verse was measured by temporal duration of syllables, in contrast to the modern measures of English accentual-syllabic verse. At the same time, by recreating the “Marvellous Sapphics” of the Sapphic stanza in English, the versification of Wetzsteon’s poem transforms Classical Sappho into modern English meter, conjured up in the present and projected into the past. It’s a lovely performance of a lovely form, to love and “be an ardent fan of.”

Wetzsteon’s essay goes on to describe how the process of reading and writing imitations of Sappho’s meter leads to the internalization of a Sapphic rhythm:

If you try your hand at this stanza, you should be warned that it’s addictive. When you’re in the middle of writing one, its rhythm—so close, after all, to a heartbeat—has a way of entering your bloodstream when you aren’t looking. Get up from your desk and take a walk and clear your head, and you’ll find that the stanza—the last line especially—is following you. Shave and a haircut; oboe concerto;

Emily Bronte; over and over; where am I going? It’s insidious; it’s unstoppable!

In her clever reiteration of final Adonics, over and over, there is a repetition compulsion that seems to embed Sapphic meter in the rhythms of the body, and the rhythms of life. Transforming the metrical form of the Sapphic stanza into a rhythmic figure, Wetzsteon imagines it “so close, after all, to a heart beat” that it seems to be “entering your bloodstream” and you can feel it running throughout your body: the pulse of your heart, the breath of your lungs, the pace of your feet (like a pop song stuck in your head, every breath you take, every move you make).

This idea of Sapphic rhythm is an incorporation of the metrical lessons that Wetzsteon learned from her teacher, the poet and critic John Hollander. In *Rhyme’s Reason*, he offers a somewhat more pedantic poetic performance of the Sapphic stanza:

*Sapphics*: four-line stanzas whose first three lines are  
Heard—in our hard English at least—as heartbeats,  
Then, in one more touch of a final short line,  
Tenderly ending.<sup>9</sup>

Slipping from “heard,” to “hard,” to “heart,” Hollander invites us to read the “hard beating” of English accentual verse as if we could hear a heart beating, but more softly, especially in the “touch” of the final short line, the Adonic that is “tenderly ending.” The internal rhyme of this tender end enacts the etymological sense of the Latin verb *tendere*—to stretch out—by extending the length or duration of this syllable. Thus Hollander tries to achieve an effect reminiscent of the alternation of long and short syllables in classical quantitative verse.

In both examples, the imitation of the Sapphic stanza is thematized, explicitly turning meter into a figure for rhythm embodied in the heartbeat of the poem. And often this figurative logic is taken one step further, for example in *The Poem’s Heartbeat*, a manual of prosody by the poet Alfred Corn. He suggests that a primal sense of rhythm (“before an infant is born it develops a sense of hearing, and the first thing it hears is the heartbeat of the mother”) can be developed into a feeling for poetry, “as hearing with the inner ear, a kind of hearing that you will gradually acquire as you examine (and perform aloud) actual examples cited for study.”<sup>10</sup> One of the examples cited in his manual is the Sapphic stanza, illustrating how we might learn to hear quantitative meter in English: “When directed to listen for this auditory feature we can, however, hear

it . . . **Ooom pa ooom pa ooom pa pa ooom pa ooom pa.**<sup>11</sup> Listening to the Sapphic stanza as a variation on the poem's heartbeat, Corn seems to turn Sappho into the mother of poets, giving birth to his own poetic imitations of the Sapphic stanza, and perhaps even giving birth to poetry itself.

This kind of allegorical reading is further elaborated by Amittai Aviram in *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry*, arguing that every poem presents "an interpretation or representation—an *allegory*—of the bodily rhythmic energy of poetic form," and that all poetry can be read allegorically as a manifestation of the sublime power of rhythm in the physical world.<sup>12</sup> In keeping with Aviram's argument, poets like Wetzsteon and Hollander are both "telling rhythm" as the essential meaning produced by the meter of their Sapphic imitations. But in doing so, they hearken back less to Sappho (whoever that was) than to a tradition of imitating Sappho (as the personification of a classical form), and especially English imitations of that form (circulating in the name of Sappho) in the nineteenth century. In other words, the "Classical Sappho" invoked by Rachel Wetzsteon turns out to be "Victorian Sappho," a figure produced by Victorian discourses about Sapphic meter, marking the emergence of a powerful metrical imaginary that persists in the imagination of "Sapphic rhythm" among poets in the twentieth century and beyond.

### Imagining Meter

In the course of the nineteenth century, debates about classical models for English versification raged fast and furious among poets, prosodists, philologists, and pedagogues, all contributing to new ways to think about meter. In 1860, for example, an amateur classicist named Thomas Foster Barham published a treatise "On Metrical Time, or The Rhythm of Verse, Ancient and Modern." Although he admits his theories are but "the reflexions of an isolated country student, living remote from Academic halls and libraries" he insists on the practical utility of reciting meter as a way of learning how to recognize rhythm.<sup>13</sup> According to Barham, the "untutored ear" must be taught to hear the rhythms of poetry by learning first how to read and then how to recite meter: reading comes before speaking, thus predicting and indeed prescribing how English should be pronounced. He offers a quintessentially Victorian idea of metrical education for the perfection of speech, and claims to discover new rhythms for the modern world by recovering an idea of metrical time from the ancients. Barham goes on to exemplify his argument with reference to classical meters including "that beautiful and well-known

The first shall be that beautiful and wellknown system named the Sapphic. This is commonly represented as consisting of three lines, technically termed *epichoriambic*, with a short portion superadded. They are formed however essentially of dactyls and trochays; and as originally written by the poetess, would seem to have been intended for three lines only, the two former trimeters, and the last a tetrameter.

Φαίνεταί μοι κῆνος ἴσος Θεοῖσιν  
 Ἐμμεν ὠνήρ ὅστις ἐναντίος τοι  
 Ἰσθάνει, καὶ πλασίον ἀδὺ φωνεύσας ὑπακούει.

With this rhythm, the effect of the metre is certainly considerably different from that of our ordinary mode of reading, but, as it seems to me, it is preferable.

FIGURE 2. Thomas Foster Barham, "On Metrical Time, or The Rhythm of Verse, Ancient and Modern" (1860).

system named the Sapphic." He proposes that we think of the Sapphic stanza "originally written by the poetess" as three lines instead of four, and quotes the first stanza of fragment 31, the famous *phainetai moi* ode (Figure 2). By visualizing these lines as two trimeters and a tetrameter, he imagines another way to read Sapphic rhythm: "With this rhythm, the effect of the metre is considerably different from that of our ordinary mode of reading, but, as it seems to me, it is preferable." But can we really hear this rhythm, even with a well-tutored ear, or is it a metrical effect that appeals to the eye?

This is but one of many ways to visualize the Sapphic stanza in Victorian England; we see another example in the popular 1885 edition of Sappho, introduced and translated by Henry Thornton Wharton, another amateur scholar.<sup>14</sup> He prints the Sapphic stanza as a metrical grid, a strophe with 4 lines of alternating short and long syllables (Figure 3). This image of the meter leads Wharton to imagine Sapphic rhythm not as the perfection of speech, but as a perfect song that he discovers in the poetry of Algernon Charles Swinburne: "Nothing repeats its rhythm to my ear so well as Swinburne's Sapphics," he writes at the end of this passage. The untutored ear can be attuned to Sapphic song by reading Swinburne's imitation of Sappho, according to Wharton:

With such lines as these ringing in the reader's ears, he can almost hear Sappho herself singing:

the various divisions. The metre commonly called after her name was probably not invented by her; it was only called Sapphic because of her frequent use of it. Its strophe is made up thus :

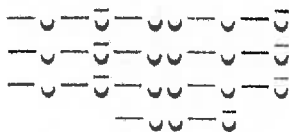


FIGURE 3. Henry Thornton Wharton, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation* (1885).

*Songs that move the heart of the shaken heaven,  
Songs that break the heart of the earth with pity,  
Hearing, to hear them.*

In Swinburne's final Adonic, "Hearing, to hear them," Wharton imagines that Sappho herself can be heard again, or "almost," precisely because she is no longer heard. Swinburne's vision of Sapphic poets singing an elegiac strain in the wake of Sappho, forever echoing her song, is referred back by Wharton to an effect of meter that we must also strain to hear.

Moving from classical to musical models for imagining Sapphic rhythm, a Victorian treatise on the history of music by John Frederick Rowbotham dedicates an entire chapter to "the high state of perfection which Greek singing had reached under the influence of the Lesbian School of Musicians."<sup>15</sup> Rowbotham praises the "thrilling style" of Sappho in particular: "She was full of fire and passion, and is the acknowledged mistress of the Systaltic or 'Thrilling' Style of Music, of which very likely she was the inventress, and it is out of compliment to her introducing a new style into Music that Plato has called her the Tenth Muse."<sup>16</sup> According to Rowbotham, the musical thrill of Sapphic song is its melodic elaboration of epic meter. He suggests that the Sapphic stanza is "a woman's Hexameter," and compares a line in Sapphic meter to dactylic hexameter in order to illustrate how Sappho falls one foot short of Homer (Figure 4).

In contrasting epic and lyric meters, Rowbotham concludes that the Sapphic stanza is an example of "the feminine heroic." Rather than striking up the lyre as prelude to recitation of Homeric battles that went on and on, Sappho used the lyre as harmonious accompaniment to love songs that had greater melodic variation; because the lines were lacking

But when she chose to write in regular falls, and make symmetry of emphasis, no one could do it better than she could. And that which we know as the Sapphic Metre is an instance of this. And it is a woman's Hexameter. And there is a charming timidity about it which makes the difference; or perhaps she is not tall enough and cannot reach so high; for look, when we come to compare it with the real Hexameter, lo! it is one foot too short.

Hexameter. — — — — — — — — — — — — — — — —  
Sapphic. — — — — — — — — — — — — — — — —

FIGURE 4. John Frederick Rowbotham, *A History of Music* (1885–86).

one foot, they could be grouped into a longer stanza that Rowbotham describes as "the extension of the Musical Period and the protraction of the Cadence on the voice."<sup>17</sup>

The interplay of different metrical notations is even more visible in a slim pamphlet published in 1896 by Joseph Salathiel Tunison, entitled *The Sapphic Stanza: A Tentative Study in Greek Metrical, Tonal, and Dancing Art* (Figure 5). Tunison juxtaposes three different ways to visualize the Sapphic stanza, ranging from Diomedes (a Latin grammarian from the fourth century) to Buchanan ("the eminent Scotch Latinist" from the nineteenth century), and in each example the bar keeps shifting to divide the line into different kinds of feet.<sup>18</sup> The materialization of meter in graphic form produces a vision of the Sapphic stanza as a "tonal and dancing art" that can be incorporated into the rhythms of the voice and the body. By (choreo)graphing the meter, metrical feet can be mobilized as dancing feet and naturalized as embodied rhythmic movement. In his Preface, Tunison declares an interest in "primitive Greek music" connected to dance, and he goes on to argue that "the real advance marked by Sappho was in the art of rhythm."<sup>19</sup> Sapphic meter is best understood as the embodiment of rhythm, according to Tunison, who speculates that "her stanza suggests rapid movement thrice repeated, and a sudden complete change at the last. . . like this: Forward, back, forward, then a mere flinging or swaying of the body while the dancer remained in one spot."<sup>20</sup> At this historical moment the metrical imaginary of Victorian poetics, marking the meter as a musical form, was moving toward the rhythmic

accurate description of the metrical formula. For example Diomedes took the following to be the correct prosodic notation :



though he admitted that others preferred to scan the stanza in this manner :



George Buchanan, the eminent Scotch Latinist, preferred the following ambiguous formula :



Neue agreed with Buchanan but added accent marks to indicate the particular syllable on which the emphasis fell in recitation, thus: ' - - - || ' - - - - - . On the other hand Dr. Ambros in his *History of Music* adopted the notation of Diomedes, while agreeing with Neue as to the proper places for the accents. Now, it is plain that whatever notion these various critics had of the relation between the long and the short syllable, they were agreed as to the *cæsura*. They would all have divided the verses into semicolons, to use the ancient grammatical phrase, with one important accent to each subdivision. These semicolons, each with its single strong syllable, answer respectively to the feet of the hexameter.

imagination of twentieth-century prosody, producing a notion of primal rhythm for which Sappho serves as origin.

Thus, by the early twentieth century, some classical scholars were looking back to the Indo-European roots of Sapphic meter. In 1909 John Williams White published "The Origin and Form of Aeolic Verse," building on "a commonplace of Comparative Metre that the primitive poetic form in Aryan speech was a dimeter of eight syllables" and that "the language was quantitative, but the order of longs and shorts was not yet regulated (o o o o o o o)." <sup>21</sup> Using each bubble to represent a syllable that could be either short or long, White suggests these syllables were regulated into patterns by a "rhythmicizing instinct that gave melodic form to the second half of the primitive dimeter first in India," and then "among the ancestors of the Ionian poets," and then "their brothers, who in course of time made their way and settled Aeolis" and "metrized differently."<sup>22</sup> According to White, Sappho's poetry represents the artistic perfection of an instinctively rhythmic and distinctively Aeolic impulse, as "their early bards sang to the people in forms that we first meet, at the end of a great period, in the highly developed verse of Alcaeus and Sappho." This interest in Aeolic syllable-counting marked the emergence of a "new metric" that sought to "catch glimpses of the growth of rhythms in the most primitive stages"; by imagining that "centuries before Sappho the Lesbian maidens sang their songs in the measure" of older Aeolic melodies, it became possible for scholars "to refer developed metrical forms back to more primitive previous stages of rhythm."<sup>23</sup>

Responding to such theories, a 1920 treatise entitled *Res Metrica* by W. R. Hardie notes that the discovery of new Sapphic fragments at the turn of the century was "metrically instructive" for generating new ideas about the Sapphic stanza.<sup>24</sup> But in a detailed excursus on Aeolic Verse, Hardie also expresses skepticism about "the 'Indo-European,' 'Aeolic,' or 'quadri-syllabic' theory which has had much vogue in recent years."<sup>25</sup> Although he accepts the claim that Indo-European verse was at first "syllabic"—i.e., although "syllables were merely counted, they were in no way regulated and might be long or short"—he disagrees that this "polyschematist dimeter" persists in the Sapphic stanza. He reprints a Sapphic line, in order to call into question a representation of meter in which the first four syllables appear as bubbles, open to interpretation (Figure 6).

In Hardie's view, this schematic representation is an historical impossibility because of the literary production of the Sapphic stanza; Sappho's verses were not only "things which could easily be sung to the lute" but "they must have been also *read*," and for this reason "the notion that a Sapphic line was in part unregulated or amorphous is the opposite of

FIGURE 5. Joseph Salathiel Tunison, *The Sapphic Stanza: A Tentative Study in Greek Metrical, Tonal and Dancing Art* (1896).

But recent metricians would not admit even as much as this. They regard 'quadrisyllabic' scansion or structure as much more lasting than that, and they find verses in the sixth and fifth centuries which they define as partly 'syllabic' or amorphous. One of them<sup>1</sup> even gives the scheme of a *Sapphic* line as

o o o o — u u — u — ,

and the 'polyschematist' dimeter is discovered frequently in the lyrics of the drama.

FIGURE 6. William Ross Hardie, *Res Metrica* (1920).

the truth."<sup>26</sup> This concern about the quantitative ambiguity of syllables reflects broader critical debates about quantitative versification in English, and about the relationship between rhythm and meter in modernist experiments with syllabic verse: the question of whether English syllables could be quantified or counted implied new ideas about rhythm. Looking back into the prehistory of the Sapphic stanza was a way of looking forward into the future of English poetry as well.

### Meta-Metrics

With nineteenth-century ideas about Sapphic meter morphing into twentieth-century ideas about the Sapphic line, the discovery of a new Sapphic fragment (so enthusiastically announced by Kilmer in *The New York Times* of 1914) proved a critical turning point for English imitations of the Sapphic stanza, and the transformation of Victorian into modern poetics. A photograph of the papyrus is featured in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri Part X*, and edited with transcription, translation, and notes by Grenfell and Hunt (Figure 7). Now known as Fragment 16, the papyrus is riddled with gaps and seems to be part of a longer poem. Grenfell and Hunt were able to construct a somewhat coherent translation in English prose, based on five and a half consecutive stanzas in Greek:

Some say that the fairest thing on the black earth is a host of horsemen, others of foot, others of ships; but I say that is fairest which is the object of one's desire. And it is quite easy to make this plain to all; for Helen observing well the beauty of men judged the best to be that one who destroyed the whole glory of Troy, nor bethought herself at all of child or parents dear, but through love Cypris led her astray. [Verily the wills of mortals are easily bent when they are moved by



Fr. 1

No. 1231

FIGURE 7. Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri Part X* (1914).

vain thoughts.] And I now have called to mind Anactoria, far away, whose gracious step and radiant glance I would rather see than the chariots of the Lydians and the charge of accoutered knights. We know well that this cannot come to pass among men . . .<sup>27</sup>

The fragment sets up a contrast between Homeric epic and Sapphic lyric, beginning with the rhetorical device of a priamel, differentiating between what "some say" in the world of Homer and what "I say," in the



first person singular, in the world of Sappho: what moves the heart is not men on horse, not men on foot, not men on ships but rather whatever one loves (translated here as “the object of one’s desire”). Turning away from men at war in the first stanza, the fragment turns toward women in love in the following stanzas, where Helen and Anactoria appear not only as objects of desire but as desiring subjects. The movement of desire is emphasized through verbs of motion, as stanzas 2 and 3 remember Helen’s departure for Troy, and stanzas 4 and 5 remember Anactoria “far away.” The memory of Anactoria with her “gracious step and radiant glance” is described as more desirable than the advance of Lydian charioteers and footsoldiers (“accoutered knights” is an awkward translation for the Greek word *pesdomachentas*, which contains the word “foot”). As an epic theme is thus transformed into erotic poetry, the fragment demonstrates the transformation of Homer’s marching hexameters into the graceful feet of Sappho’s meter, translating the measures of heroic epic into the melodic cadences of the Sapphic stanza.

Albeit in rather pedestrian prose, this flat-footed account of Fragment 16 opens up a meta-metrical reading that invites critical reflection on an allegory of meter, simultaneously projected into and out of Sappho’s poem. For this reason Kilmer’s article on the new fragment expresses special interest in Anactoria, not as an actual “girl so named” who was familiar to Sappho on Lesbos, but because “it is a good rhythmical name, fitting excellently into the middle of a lesser Sapphic strophe.” For Kilmer, the very act of naming of Anactoria here presents the possibility of reading the Sapphic stanza meta-metrically, as a performance of meter. While giving due credit to Professors Grenfell and Hunt from Oxford for deciphering the poem (and dutifully citing Professor Edmonds from Cambridge as well, for producing another prose translation of the fragment), Kilmer sets aside “that peculiar literal-mindedness which characterizes scholars.” Instead he calls to mind a more figurative translation into the form of the Sapphic stanza:

Unto some a troop of triumphant horsemen,  
Or a radiant fleet, or a marching legion,  
Is the fairest sight—but to me the fairest  
Is my beloved.

What matters most (or seems fairest) to Kilmer is the meter, which he has “done into English verse” by finding an equivalent for Greek quantitative meter in accentual-syllabic lines. This metrical performance is especially pronounced in the Adonics at the end of each stanza (for example,

in marking the accent on “Is my beloved” in stanza 1) and in the manipulation of caesuras in stanza five:

Her, to see whose face, fairer than the sunlight,  
Her, to hear whose step ringing on the threshold,  
I’d forego the sight of the Lydian army,  
Bowmen and chariots.

In the reiteration of “Her, to see” and “Her, to hear,” Kilmer visualizes the Sapphic stanza as an appeal to both the eye and the ear, hoping to make its metrical feet visible and audible again, like footsteps ringing on the threshold between past and present.

Fragment 16 prompted many more imitations of, and meditations on, Sapphic meter in the early twentieth century. No doubt this fragment had special appeal for readers in 1914, as soldiers were marching off to World War I. It could be read as an anti-war poem, wishing for a world beyond war, or refusing to step in time to the rhythms of wartime poetry. And because it was written in Sapphic stanzas, it served as an alternative to the ideology of marching meters by introducing more variation into English verse. For example, Edwin Marion Cox concludes his 1916 pamphlet, *Sappho and the Sapphic Metre in English*, with reference to “the latest important Sapphic discovery” as an invitation to modern poets to “expand this fragment into nearly the whole of a poem.”<sup>28</sup> Although Cox acknowledges that “the transfer of perfection in one language into another is not within the bounds of possibility” and “approximation is all that even genius can hope for,” he believes that perfecting Sapphic meter in English would be one way to make Sappho whole again, and so perfect English poetry as well.

To take up this invitation, another American Man of Letters named Dr. Marion Mills Miller attempted a metrical translation in “Two New Poems of Sappho,” published in *The Independent* (1916). While agreeing with Cox that English versification could only approximate the Greek of Sappho, Miller nevertheless aspires to translate Sappho “in as near an approach to the original ‘Sapphic meter’ as a language permits in which accent (time and force) is the rhythmic principle, and not so-called classic ‘quantity.’”<sup>29</sup> Entitled “To Anactoria,” his translation of the fragment compensates for what is lacking in English by introducing rhyme for the amplification of metrical effect:

Of all that the world holds, some deem the fairest  
A brave show of horsemen; others praise as rarest  
Footmen a-march, or a fleet to battle movéd—  
I, my beloved.

In this first stanza, the accentuation of the final syllables in “movéd” and “belovéd” strains the rhyme in order to highlight the final Adonic. And the extra syllable in “footmen a-march” is also an awkward attempt to fit the Sapphic line, suggesting the difficulty of finding the right rhythmic principle to create equivalence to the Greek meter. The marching feet at the start of the poem are transformed in stanza 4, however, by the “soft footfall” of Sapphic meter:

Whose soft footfall sets my heart a-bounding  
Wider than when the clarions are sounding;  
Whose bright face hath power more to charm me  
Than Lydia's army.

While we may debate the virtues of “charm me” and “army” as a light-hearted rhyme, it reinforces the lighter rhythm that “sets my heart-abounding,” making the heart as well as the feet skip a beat in Sapphic meter.

The metrical allegory of marching versus dancing feet in the Sapphic stanza is made explicit by Miller in his Preface to *The Songs of Sappho* (1925):

The rhythmic units used by Sappho in her characteristic metre are the trochee and dactyl, one a marching and one a dancing foot which combine to express vigorous action and graceful movement. . . . The following verse reproduces very well the rhythmic effect of the original sapphic line, which is a succession of four trochees with a dactyl intervening in the middle:

*Sappho's trochees march with a dancing dactyl.*

Let the reader see in his mind four Greek soldiers marching in line with a dancing girl in the middle keeping step with her left foot while her right one executes two skips in the time of one steady stride forward by the soldiers.<sup>30</sup>

While this vision draws on Victorian ideas about the Sapphic stanza as “a woman's hexameter,” the meter is no longer visualized on the page as dactylic hexameter at all. Rather it is reimagined (“let the reader see in his mind”) as four trochees marching in “steady stride” like Greek soldiers, with one dactyl inserting “two skips” like a dancing girl in the middle: Homeric hexameters reversed (and re-reversed) in Sapphic meter. And indeed, Miller goes one step further in turning the Sapphic stanza into a pirouette around its own meta-metrical performance:

Stamp in trochees two to a gliding dactyl;  
Two more trochees trip to the turn; go back till  
Verses three are trod. With the two feet blended  
Strophe is ended.

Thus poets in the early twentieth century turned to Sapphic stanzas to dance around the tread of metrical feet, not only as a variation on epic hexameter but also as a way to “break the back of the iambic pentameter!”—Ezra Pound's imperative, passed along to young modernist poets like Mary Barnard, who was urged by Pound to “write Sapphics until they come out of your ears.”<sup>31</sup>

But imitating Sapphic stanzas to suit the English ear is easier said than done, as John Trantner ironically proclaims in “Writing in the Manner of Sappho” (1997):<sup>32</sup>

Writing Sapphics well is a tricky business  
Lines begin and end with a pair of trochees;  
in between them dozes a dactyl, rhythm  
rising and falling,  
like a drunk asleep at a party. Ancient  
Greek—the language seemed to be made for Sapphics,  
not a worry: anyone used to English  
finds it a bastard.

Writing in the manner of Sappho is like hosting a bad-mannered guest, a bastard in the colloquial sense (unruly and difficult) and in the figurative sense (born from the illegitimate union of ancient Greek and modern English). In contrast with the “dancing dactyl” imagined by Marion Mills Miller to introduce “graceful movement” into English verse, the “dozing dactyl” in Trantner's poem rudely interrupts the line in “rhythm / rising and falling, / like a drunk asleep at a party.” This rhythmic snoring is an interruption (emphasized in the enjambment after “rhythm” and the stanzaic enjambment after “falling”) that nevertheless awakens the English language to other rhythms. Trantner delights in such irregularities, as John Kinsella points out about this poem: “This seems like a solid argument for metrical consistency, for respecting the rhythms of ‘accepted English.’ It is not.” Rather, he accentuates the interplay of Australian and American rhythms: “Tranter plays with metrics and destabilizes a canonical reading by doing so. These are meta-metrics,” Kinsella concludes.<sup>33</sup> By diversifying the rhythms of English in pseudo-classical versification, Tranter discovers new tricks at the end of the twentieth century, turning

the “tricky business” of the Sapphic stanza into a postmodern meta-metrical performance.

### Bracketing Rhythm

Following the steps of Anactoria in the measures of Sappho, I have been reading Fragment 16 meta-metrically to suggest how twentieth-century poets used the Sapphic stanza to reimagine the relation between rhythm and meter, sometimes performing meter to produce allegories of rhythm and other times performing rhythm to produce allegories of meter. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Anglo-American poetics revolve less around the movement of metrical feet, but the Sapphic stanza persists as a metrical imaginary. I conclude with two recent translations of Fragment 16 by Jim Powell and Anne Carson, who experiment with different ways to see and hear the poems of Sappho, not only in print but also in sound recording and multi-media performance, mediating between what Hollander calls “the poem in the ear” and “the poem in the eye” to perform new forms of Sapphic rhythm.<sup>34</sup>

In *Sappho: A Garland* (1993) Jim Powell arranges his translation of Sapphic fragments into “an integrated collage or mosaic, playing off modernist techniques of poetics sequence, fragmentary montage, and stream of consciousness to create a cumulative movement that points to the integrity of her art,” and in doing so he re-creates and re-integrates an idea of Greek metrics in American verse that moves beyond the foot to the measure of the line.<sup>35</sup> As he explains in the section of his translator’s *Afterword* entitled “Sappho’s Measures,” the metrical virtuosity of Sappho has “exerted a marked influence on later poetry,” because “Aeolic metrics envisions the poetic line not as a composite entity formed by the repetition of a given number of identical ‘feet’ but as an integrated whole” (38). While taking up the measure of the Sapphic stanza is a challenge for all poets—“none succeeds in matching her fluidity, ease, grace, and melodic variety” (39)—his goal in translating the Sapphic fragments is not only to “preserve Sappho’s rhythms, replacing quantity with stress, wherever doing so creates a comparable effect in English” (40), but to recreate a longer sense of the line as a comparable rhythmic effect.

Powell therefore translates Fragment 16 with strategic placement of punctuation for rhythmic effect, and numerous enjambments across lines and stanzas:

Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers,  
others call a fleet the most beautiful of

sights the dark earth offers, but I say it’s what-  
ever you love best.

And it’s easy to make this understood by  
everyone, for she who surpassed all human  
kind in beauty, Helen, abandoning her  
husband (that best of

men) went sailing off to the shores of Troy and  
never spent a thought on her child or loving  
parents: when the goddess seduced her wits and  
left her to wander,

she forgot them all, she could not remember  
anything but longing, and lightly straying  
aside, lost her way. But that reminds me  
now: Anactoria,

she’s not here, and I’d rather see her lovely  
step, her sparkling glance and her face than gaze on  
all the troops in Lydia in their chariots and  
glittering armor.

According to Powell, “Sappho’s secret consists largely in keeping her caesura moving: in her sapphics the caesura (a pause in mid-verse) seldom falls in the same place in two consecutive lines” (39). Likewise, in order to reimagine the movement of the Sapphic stanza, the secret of his translation is to insert punctuation into the middle of lines (such as the parenthesis around “best of men,” the colon after “parents” and in “now: Anactoria,” the period after “lost her way”) and to create enjambments at the ends of lines, through a series of conjunctions (“and / never”) and suspended prepositions (“the most beautiful of / sights” and “that best of / men”) and other grammatical suspensions (“she could not remember / anything” and “I’d rather see her lovely / step”). The effect of these enjambments is to amplify the rhythmic effect of caesura that Powell admires in Sappho’s poetry: it makes the poem move, and moving to the reader.

A caesura cuts both ways, however. Do such breaks enhance or interrupt the rhythm of the lines? Powell’s own reading of his translation is featured in a sound recording on the Academy of American Poets website, where he moves rapidly through the enjambments as if they are not marked on the page, making the poem flow in a more colloquial cadence.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the meter of the Sapphic stanza can barely be heard. Although Powell takes pains to demonstrate in his translator’s “Afterword” how the Sapphic stanza

“can be graphed” in metrical notation (38), his primary interest is to make the poems of Sappho sound, or resound, in the rhythmic flow of the speaking voice: “I am instead to re-create the feel of her poetry in contemporary American English,” he writes (45), so “we might have the chance to hear at least an echo of Sappho’s voice” (48). And yet this echo is less audible than visible, as the Sapphic stanza can only be glimpsed as a metrical counterpoint to the rhythm of his reading: the poem in the ear and the poem in the eye may point to each other, but cannot be read at the same point in time.

Anne Carson gives us another way to read the rhythm of the Sapphic stanza, contrapuntally. Through the juxtaposition of Greek texts and her English translations of Sappho in *If Not, Winter* (2002) she insists on the fragmentation of Sappho, in contrast to Powell’s insistence on a process of reintegration. In a section of her translator’s introduction entitled “Marks and Lacks,” Carson explains:

When translating texts from papyri, I have used a single square bracket to give an impression of missing matter, so that ] or [ indicates destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line. It is not the case that every gap or illegibility is specifically indicated: this would render the page a blizzard of marks and inhibit reading. Brackets are an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it.<sup>37</sup>

It is a paradox that the brackets do not “literally” mark missing letters from the Sapphic fragments, as this would “inhibit reading.” Rather we are invited to read the brackets figuratively, as an “aesthetic gesture” helping us to imagine the tattered Greek papyrus first presented to the reading public by Grenfell and Hunt, and then prompting us to see that illegibility as part of our own reading experience.

Thus Carson’s translation of Fragment 16 closely follows the Greek text line by line, gradually disintegrating into a column of brackets at the bottom, pointing to the lines that are missing:

Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot  
and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing  
on the black earth. But I say it is  
    what you love.

Easy to make this understood by all.  
For she who overcame everyone  
in beauty (Helen)  
    left her fine husband

behind and went sailing to Troy.  
Not for her children nor her dear parents  
had she thought, no—  
    ]led her astray

    ]for  
    ]lightly  
]reminded me now of Anaktoria  
who is gone.

I would rather see her lovely step  
and the motion of light on her face  
than chariots of Lydians or ranks  
of footsoldiers in arms.

    ]not possible to happen  
    ]to pray for a share

    ]  
    ]  
    ]  
    ]  
    ]  
toward [

    ]  
    ]  
    ]  
out of the unexpected.

While the first three stanzas do not attempt a metrical translation, they preserve the lineation of the Sapphic stanza (including a short fourth line as representation of the Adonic line). And the fifth stanza, still intact, could invite the possibility of a meta-metrical reading, as it contrasts “ranks of footsoldiers” with the “lovely step” of Anaktoria. But in contrast to various metrical theories we have surveyed that try to mark the meter of the Sapphic stanza, presenting it in visible form to make it present to the reader, Carson’s brackets mark its absence. Instead of creating an image of sound, those marks only show us the traces of Anaktoria’s disappearance. And yet this too could be another way to imagine the Sapphic stanza. If we look again at the word “toward [” (followed by the only open bracket facing right), we might see it opening toward what emerges “out of the unexpected” in the final line of this translation: a visual prosody

produced by the typographical play of brackets in a spatialized rhythm on the page.

Carson's translations of Sappho produce surprising metrical effects precisely because of their fragmentation, as John Melillo observes:

Even in the most rebarbative fragments, meter matters. Just as the traditional function of meter is to sequence and measure time, the preserved blips and blops of mouthsound work like some broken beat machine. But Carson also places those rhythms and sounds into a new listening context, a new ambience . . . The poem is not an incomplete metrical form waiting to be dutifully filled in but rather a construction of fundamentally isolated particles—as if each word functioned as an individual sound event, combining and recombining endlessly to form new networks or constellations of sound.<sup>38</sup>

The spacing of phrases, words, brackets, and other punctuation marks makes room for a rhythmic reading of Carson's text, appealing simultaneously to the eye and to the ear to produce "a new listening context," delineating new combinations of sight and sound.

Carson further expands this new listening context in a performance piece that is based on reading her translations of Sappho out loud, including the brackets. Entitled "Bracko"—a conflation of "bracket" and "Sappho"—this performance turns the papyrological event into a multi-media event, with a video projection of brackets as a visual background for a polyvocal reading by Carson and her collaborators. In the performance, as some voices read randomly selected Sappho translations, other voices read passages from Carson's footnotes at carefully clocked intervals or simply pronounce the word "bracket" whenever it appears in the text. These overlapping voices, combined with the reiteration of "bracket, bracket, bracket," turn Carson's translations of Sappho into a polyvalent text, producing unpredictable polyrhythms that move in many directions at once.

This multi-directional movement is also embodied in dance, variously incorporated into different performances of "Bracko." In one memorable version from 2008, dancer Rashaun Mitchell performed his own choreography while several friends joined Carson in a reading of her Sappho translations. "Like an avant-garde Greek chorus, their voices overlapped, interrupted and moved alongside one other," wrote one reviewer, describing how "absence and its relation to presence was also felt in the performance's silences, when Carson and her chorus stopped breathing, allowing only the sound of the dancers' movements, as well as their breath and the collective breath of the audience, to be heard."<sup>39</sup> In another version

of "Bracko" a group of performers raised their arms in bracket-shapes, slowly waving back and forth in front of the video projection, where white brackets moved like expanding constellations of stars on a black screen.<sup>40</sup> Reversing the image of black marks on a white page, these free-floating brackets were projected like vertical scansion marks onto the bodies visible and audible on stage, as another way to imagine the meter.

It was a visionary answer to the question, Sapphic stanzas: how can we read the rhythm? And it remains a question to repeat, over and over.<sup>41</sup>

## Notes

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41. For generous feedback on the question posed by this paper, I am grateful to Ben Glaser and to audiences at Rutgers University, University of Virginia, Northwestern University, University of Washington, University of Tennessee at Knoxville, St. Louis University, University of Arizona, and Princeton University.