

## Gendered or Ungendered? The Crux of Translation in Sappho's Poetry: Two Case Studies

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*Abstract:* In this article, two issues of translation problems in two poems by the Ancient Greek poet Sappho are discussed. To this end, a selection of English, German, French and Italian translations are analysed. It is demonstrated that translations of the “Jealousy Poem” (fr. 31 Voigt) and the “Tithonus Poem” (fr. 58.11–22 Voigt) are prone to miss or neglect pivotal aspects of gendering which are closely linked to important facets of interpretation. It is argued that in many cases, the result of these translations is too little gendering in one case, and too much in the other. In both cases, the gender-translation problem is ultimately rooted in influential (but problematic) ideas about Sappho as a poet and as a flesh-and-blood person.

As is well known, Sappho's poetry was not transmitted during mediaeval times, but only survived in fragments either from papyri that were preserved in the dry climate of the Egyptian desert or as quotations by later ancient authors such as grammarians or literary critics. Thus, of an estimated total of originally 10,000 lines, as little as 650 lines, or c. 7%, are available to us today, of which many are hardly legible owing to the poor condition of the papyri.<sup>1</sup> Luckily, the corpus of Sapphic poetry has been enlarged twice since the turn of the millennium. In 2004, Michael Gronewald and Robert W. Daniel were able to supplement a heavily damaged fragment with new findings from the papyrological collection of Cologne and thus retrieved an almost complete Sapphic poem (now commonly referred to as the “Tithonus Poem”; see the discussion below).<sup>2</sup> In 2014, Simon Burris, Jeffrey Fish and Dirk Obbink published pieces from an Egyptian papyrus that overlap with, and in parts supplement, already known fragments from Sapphic poetry.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, Obbink published an almost completely intact column from the same papyrus roll that contains 29 lines of previously unknown Sapphic poetry—that is, five stanzas of one continuous poem which is now commonly called the “Brothers Poem,” and the beginning of a hymn to Aphrodite, now known as the “Kypris Poem.”<sup>4</sup>

In a harsh contrast to this virtual heap of textual ruins, ever since antiquity Sappho has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration and fantasies for posterity; above all, ancient biographical writing was exceedingly rich in reports about the poet's life, her family, her personal and sexual relationships, etc.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, these reports on Sappho's biography and her private life are the result of a biographical interpretation of (the remains of) her poems. This phenomenon is, in turn, rooted in a widespread practice in ancient literary criticism (and beyond) which favoured a generally biographical interpretation of literary

<sup>1</sup> On these estimations see, e.g., Kirkwood 1974, 102–103; Robbins 2001, 46–47; Grenfell & Hunt (eds) 1914, 20. The standard edition of Sappho's poetic fragments is that by Voigt (ed.) 1971, 29–174.

<sup>2</sup> See Gronewald & Daniel (eds, tr.) 2004a, 1–8; Gronewald & Daniel (eds, tr.) 2004b, 1–4; Obbink (ed., tr.) 2009, 7–16; Hammerstaedt 2009, 17–40.

<sup>3</sup> See Burris, Fish & Obbink (eds, tr.) 2014, 1–28.

<sup>4</sup> See Obbink (ed., tr.) 2014, 32–49; Obbink (ed., tr.) 2016, 13–33; Obbink 2016, 34–54.

<sup>5</sup> See Kivilo 2010, 167–200. On the reception of Sappho in the late archaic, classical and early Hellenistic periods, see Yatromanolakis 2007.

texts. Typically, ancient literary critics would identify the first-person speaker/narrator of a fictional text or poem with its flesh-and-blood author, and it was therefore common practice to use literary texts as sources for the biography of the authors.<sup>6</sup> The issue is, however, more complex in the case of Sappho because the first-person speaker in Sappho's poems can be identified as female, and the speaker even calls herself (or has herself been called) 'Sappho' on some occasions.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it may seem obvious to equate speaker and author in Sappho's poems nonetheless.<sup>8</sup> That said, the general methodological caveat remains that the speaker or narrator of a fictional text can never be *fully* identified with the text's real author; at best, the readers of Sappho's poems are invited to approximate the poetic voice with their mental construct of the author-figure (viz. the implied author); at the same time, readers are challenged to reflect upon the relation between author-figure and poetic voice.

Aside from the proximity between author-figure and poetic voice/the lyric 'I', what makes Sappho a special case within a large and diverse group of archaic Greek poets is her status as a female poet—a status that was exceptional within an otherwise largely male-dominated culture of poetic production and consumption.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Sappho was (and often still is) regarded as the first openly homosexual woman in recorded history, owing to the fact that many of her poetic fragments celebrate emotional and sexual attraction between women (see the discussion of fr. 31 Voigt below). This, together with a general tendency towards biographical interpretation, has led to the indestructible assumption that Sappho was a 'lesbian,' and this has been debated ever since antiquity.<sup>10</sup> More concretely, one of the most widespread assumptions was (and, again, often still is) that Sappho was a 'schoolmistress' who felt emotionally and erotically attracted to her pupils.<sup>11</sup> There is no room here to rediscuss the entire issue and the problems connected to it; aside from the methodological reservation regarding biographical interpretation of fictional texts, suffice it to state that in antiquity the concept of sexual identity was largely unknown. Sexual orientation was a matter of situational behaviour and variance and was not regarded as a fixed parameter that determined someone's personal identity.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, André Lardinois is right in arguing that, although Sappho's poems may partly reflect "short relationships between an adult woman and a young, marriageable girl," to "call these relationships 'les-

<sup>6</sup> On ancient biographical writing and literary texts as a source of information for authors' biographies, see Lefkowitz 1981a. On the non-existent differentiation between author and narrator in ancient literary criticism, see Whitmarsh 2009, 56–66.

<sup>7</sup> See Sappho frs 1.20; 65.5; 94.5; 133.2 Voigt. The name form used by Sappho herself is "Psappho," on which see, e.g., Zuntz 1951; Brown 1991; Yatromanolakis 2007, 102–103.

<sup>8</sup> On the complex issue of the poetic *persona* in Sappho's poetry see, e.g., the cursory outline provided by MacLachlan 1997, 164–166. See also my thoughts at Bär 2016, 12–15, and the discussion below on the 'pragmatic' vs. 'literary' approach, with n. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Of the 41 pre-Hellenistic Greek lyric poets contained in the canonical edition by Page (ed.) 1962, only four are women. On female authors in the Greek and Roman periods in general, see Snyder 1989; Balmer (tr., comm.) 1996; Plant (ed.) 2004. On Sappho's status within a male-dominated sympotic culture, see Bowie 2016, 148–164.

<sup>10</sup> The first modern scholarly attempt to critically evaluate the testimonia on Sappho's homosexuality was that by Welcker 1816. An excellent discussion of the problem is provided by Lardinois 1989, 15–35. See further Hallett 1979, 447–464; Glei 1993, 145–161; Lardinois, 2010, 13–30.

<sup>11</sup> Von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1912, 41, famously spoke of her as the head of a finishing school ("Mädchenpensionat").

<sup>12</sup> On Greek homosexuality see, e.g., the seminal studies by Dover 1978 and Davidson 2007.

bian' is anachronistic," and the question of "[w]hether the word applies to Sappho herself, her inner life, is impossible to assess" and in fact "constitutes a nonsensical question."<sup>13</sup>

However, despite this aporetic result, the idea of Sappho as a homosexual poet, whose homosexuality is mirrored in her poetry, continues to have an effect on creative and scholarly reception to this day. Moreover, for obvious reasons Sappho also remains an important figure in feminist theory and LGBT movements.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, from a receptional perspective the "Great Sappho Question," in Lardinois' words,<sup>15</sup> remains fundamental. In this article, I consider two issues of translation in two Sapphic poems that are closely connected to, and affect, questions relating to gender and gendering. It will be demonstrated that translations of Sapphic poems are prone to miss or neglect pivotal aspects of gendering—aspects which are, in one way or another, inextricably intertwined with important facets of interpretation. The focus will be on a selection of English, German, French, and Italian translations.<sup>16</sup> As will be shown, the result of these translations is too little gendering in one case, and too much in the other. In both cases, the gender-translation problem is ultimately rooted in the above-sketched ideas and traditions about Sappho as a poet and a person.

## Sappho fr. 31 Voigt ("Jealousy Poem"): Ungendering the Gendered

Φαίνεται μοι κήνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
 ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐναντίος τοι  
 ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδω φωνεί-  
 σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν  
 καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·  
 ὡς γὰρ <ἔς> σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὡς με φώνη-  
 σ' οὐδὲν ἔτ' εἶκει,

ἀλλὰ τ'καμῖ μὲν γλώσσα τ'ἔαγετ', λέπτον  
 δ' αὐτίκα χρωῖι πυρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν,

<sup>13</sup> Lardinois 1989, 30.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Skinner 1993, 125–144; Valentine 2008, 143–169. See also, e.g., Greene 1994, who reads Sappho's poetry as "an erotic practice and discourse outside of patriarchal modes of thought" (p. 42).

<sup>15</sup> Lardinois 1989, 15.

<sup>16</sup> The following translations (and, in a few cases, research articles or books that contain translations of either or both poems) were consulted: German: Rüdiger 1933, Morwitz <sup>2</sup>1938, Rupé (ed., tr.) <sup>2</sup>1945, Treu (ed., tr., comm.) <sup>5</sup>1976, Ebener (tr.) 1980, Geißler 2005, Radke 2005, Schickel (tr.) 2007, Bagordo (ed., tr., comm.) 2009, von Schirnding (ed., tr.) 2013, Schroeder (tr.) 2014. English: Wharton (ed., tr.) 1920, Edmonds (ed., tr., comm.) <sup>2</sup>1928, Lowell 1973 (apud Bidart & Gewanter 2003), Campbell (ed., tr., comm.) 1982, Barnard (tr.) <sup>2</sup>1986, Balmer (tr., comm.) <sup>2</sup>1996, Carson (ed., tr., comm.) 2002, Janko 2005, West 2005a, West 2005b, Rawles 2006, Johnson 2007, Powell (tr., comm.) 2007, Klinck (ed., tr., comm.) 2008, Rayor (tr.) 2014, Poochigian (tr., comm.) <sup>2</sup>2015. French: Falconnet (tr.) 1838, Meunier (tr.) 1932, Reinach (ed., tr., comm.) 1937, Mora (tr.) 1966, Yourcenar (tr.) 1979, Bouvier 2009. Italian: Pascoli 1880–1884 (apud Piantanida 2013), Michelangeli (ed., tr., comm.) 1889, Gallavotti (ed., tr.) 1957, Quasimodo & Savino (ed., tr.) <sup>3</sup>2015, Livrea 2016. – Wharton (1920) also contains a selection of several older translations. A discussion with a focus on gender aspects of some older French translations is provided by Bouvier 2009.

ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημμ', ἐπιβρό-  
μεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἤεκαδε† μ' ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ  
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτιέρα δὲ π.οίας  
ἔμμι, τεθι.νάκην δ' ὀλίγω ἴπιδει.ύης  
φα.ίνομ' ἔμ' αὖτ[αι].

ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ ἤκαι πένητα†  
.....<sup>17</sup>

He seems to me to be equal to the gods,  
That man [over there], who is sitting opposite you,  
And, close [to you], to how sweetly you are speaking  
He is listening,

And to how you are laughing charmingly. This has indeed  
Startled my heart within my breast.  
For, as soon as I look <at> you, then for me to speak  
It is by no means possible anymore,

But my tongue is broken, and a delicate  
Fire has suddenly rushed under my skin,  
And with my eyes I cannot see a thing, and they are  
Roaring: my ears.

Sweat pours down me, and a trembling  
Seizes me entirely, and paler than grass  
Am I, and [only] a little short of being dead  
Do I appear to myself.

But anything is tolerable, since ἤeven a poor†  
.....<sup>18</sup>

This is not only one of the longest, but also one of the best-known of Sappho's extant poems—and, arguably, the most controversial in its interpretation. Already forty years ago, Aurelio Privitera stated that the poem's "interpretation has grown ever more uncertain with the refinement of its analysis, and its beauty all the more mysterious."<sup>19</sup> The same point might be expressed, with even more poignancy, forty years later. It would exceed the scope of this article to undertake even a cursory, let alone a comprehensive, survey of

<sup>17</sup> The Greek text follows the critical edition by Voigt (ed.) 1971, 57–60. The translation is mine. Square brackets in the translation indicate the supplementation of a word which is not in the Greek original but is necessary for clarity in the English translation. For a linguistic commentary on the poem, see Page 1955, 20–26; Tzamali 1996, 166–190.

<sup>18</sup> Here the poem breaks off; the rest of the fifth (and, probably, last) stanza is lost. For attempts at reconstruction see, e.g., West 1970, 312–313; D'Angour 2006, 297–300; Lieberg 2006; Livrea 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Privitera 1974, 85: "[L]interpretazione è diventata sempre più incerta con l'affinarsi dell'analisi, la sua bellezza sempre più misteriosa."

scholarly opinions on what is often (though not unanimously) called Sappho's "Jealousy Poem."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most influential interpretation is that of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who, in his monograph *Sappho und Simonides* (1912), argued that the poem was a wedding song, performed by Sappho, the alleged schoolmistress, on the occasion of the wedding of one of her pupils: "that man [over there]," who is "equal to the gods," is the girl's lucky bridegroom, and the physical reactions described in stanzas 2–4 are the result of Sappho's feelings upon seeing "this pupil for whom she felt particularly hotly."<sup>21</sup> Although von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's interpretation was refuted by Denys Page in his equally influential commentary in 1955,<sup>22</sup> it has nonetheless retained a wide popularity ever since.<sup>23</sup>

It is obvious that von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's reading is, first and foremost, rooted in the misguided, but at that time common and undisputed, biographical approach to poetry, as outlined in the introductory remarks above. In addition, the poem's interpretation is also closely linked to yet another, much-debated question in Sapphic scholarship: the question of whether Sappho's poetry was intended for real-life performances within specific social contexts where the persons mentioned in the poem were physically present (the so-called 'pragmatic approach'), or whether the performative nature of Sappho's poems was only part of the author's poetic strategies of creating a fictional poetic universe within which performative aspects were part of the evoked poetic illusion (the so-called 'literary approach').<sup>24</sup> I do not wish to take a definite stance on this moot point; yet, it has to be acknowledged that, from an analytic point of view, the evocation of a specific performative context always constitutes a significant parameter of a poem's internal fictional reality and should therefore be taken into consideration, irrespective of whether or not an actual performance may historically have occurred.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, many of Sappho's poems create settings that, at first glance, suggest specific performative contexts, but, simultaneously, the general tone, the paradigmatic atmosphere, and the sheer fact that her poetry often seems to speak to us as directly as if it had been composed today, mean that these poems clearly transcend these momentary settings.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, no matter whether we adhere to a 'pragmatic' or a 'literary' approach—or occupy a middle ground, as I suggest—it can be maintained that Sappho's fr. 31 Voigt evokes a triangular communicative situation between a first-person speaker, a second-person addressee, and a third-person object of observation. The speaking person, the lyric 'I,' is presented as an anonymous voice—which may, or may not, be related to, or even be

<sup>20</sup> The most comprehensive analysis in recent scholarship is the monograph by Radke 2005. Furthermore, see also Rudolph 2009, 339–347, with further references in the notes. A comprehensive research report, covering the years from 1920 to 1990, is provided by Gerber 1993, 101–117.

<sup>21</sup> Von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1913, 56–61 (quote p. 58: "daß Sappho für diese Schülerin besonders heiß fühlte").

<sup>22</sup> Page 1955, 30–33.

<sup>23</sup> See especially the defence, and modification, by Snell 1931.

<sup>24</sup> On the 'pragmatic' school see, e.g., Rösler 1984, 179–205; Gentili 1990, 1–17; on the 'literary' school, e.g., Latacz 1986, 34–55. For an overview of more recent developments, see Radke 2005, 8–14, with nn. 8–26, and Rudolph 2009, 331–333, with nn. 3–4. For an explicitly 'pragmatic' interpretation of Sappho's "Jealousy Poem," see Rösler 1990, 271–287; a decidedly 'literary' analysis is offered by Latacz 1985, 67–94.

<sup>25</sup> Along these lines see also Rudolph 2009, esp. 333–339.

<sup>26</sup> As Schmitz (2002, 72) aptly puts it: "Sapphos Gedichte sind [...] von Anfang an darauf angelegt, die Grenzen der engsten Umwelt der Dichterin zu überschreiten und Menschen ohne persönlichen Kontakt zu ihr und ihrem Umkreis das Bild einer in der Dichtung erschaffenen Welt der Liebe und der Schönheit zu vermitteln."

identified with, the flesh-and-blood author Sappho. The lyric ‘I’ finds itself in the role of an observer, reports what it is seeing, and thus forces its audience into the role of eavesdroppers. The object of observation is a man, as becomes unmistakably clear in the two opening lines: *κῆνος ὄννηρ*: “that man [over there]”; the Ancient Greek deictic pronoun *κῆνος* denotes someone who is located at some distance, but is still in visual range, and/or someone who is perceived with a certain sense of emotional detachment.<sup>27</sup> “That man” is sitting opposite, and close to, the direct addressee of the lyric ‘I,’ to whose sweet speaking and charming laughter he is listening with pleasure. Whereas the gender identity of “that man [over there]” is unambiguous from the beginning, the translation of the poem does not give away any information about the gender either of the lyric ‘I’ or of the addressee. The Ancient Greek language, however, reveals these pieces of information through its morphosyntactic nature: in lines 3–5, we find the participles *φωνεῖσας* (“speaking”) and *γελαίσας* (“laughing”). Owing to the fact that Ancient Greek participles are, by default, marked not only in case and number, but also in gender, Sappho is able to subtly reveal the female gender of the addressee on the transition point from the first to the second stanza. As far as the lyric ‘I’ itself is concerned, we have to wait until the fourth stanza when, in line 14, the adjectives *παῖσαν* (“all, entire”) and *χλωροτέρα* (“paler”) reveal the gender of the lyric voice, too. The lyric voice is, indeed, female, as the feminine endings of the two adjectives unmistakably indicate. Again, the Ancient Greek language is able to convey a crucial piece of information that Germanic languages such as English and German are unable to capture, since Ancient Greek adjectives are always marked in case, number, and gender and are accordingly congruent with their word of reference. In contrast, Latin and the Romance languages, such as French and Italian, are, for the most part, as equally gender sensitive as Ancient Greek is in this respect.

The poem’s gendering (in both senses of the word) is of prime importance, as is the oscillation between covertness and overtness on the part of the speaker. On the one hand, nothing is revealed about the identity of the persons involved except their gender; on the other hand, the lyric ‘I’ is provocatively open about her feelings and her physical reactions, the description of which occupies more than half of the poem.<sup>28</sup> There have been numerous attempts at explaining the exact nature of the speaker’s feelings (jealousy, sexual agitation, orgasm, anxiety attack, declaration of love, etc.).<sup>29</sup> No matter which option we prefer—and leaving aside the question of whether we should attempt to determine one specific emotion, or whether it is, rather, the elusiveness and complexity of the emotions involved that are essential—the texture of the poem is characterised by a tension between the overtness and the copious description of the speaker’s “catalogue of symptoms of erotic pathology”<sup>30</sup> and the covertness of her gender identity. The delayed revelation of the speaker’s female gender in line 14 triggers a virtual surprise effect when the reader/listener finally—and unexpectedly—realises that the poetic voice is female and that the poem is therefore about homosexual attraction.

<sup>27</sup> See Havers 1906; Bakker 2010; Bonifazi 2014; also LSJ s.v. *ἐκείνος*. For a discussion of the nature of “that man [over there]” see, e.g., Race 1983, 92–101; Radke 2005, 14–26.

<sup>28</sup> The poem probably consisted of five stanzas (see n. 18 above).

<sup>29</sup> The quantity of critical reading on this aspect is immense; see, e.g., Devereux 1970, 17–31; Radt 1970, 340–346; Marcovich 1972, 19–32; Tsagarakis 1979, 97–118; van Erp Taalman Kip 1980, 341–345; Weissenberger 1991, 209–237, with pp. 211–212, n. 11, for further references; Silveira Cyrino 1995, 145–154; Radke 2005, 31–51.

<sup>30</sup> Silveira Cyrino 1995, 5.

Consequently, it can be maintained that a translation should attempt to imitate, or incorporate, this surprise effect in one way or another. As noted above, the morphosyntactic nature of the Germanic languages does not allow a one-to-one imitation of the Greek original, and a translator will therefore have to look for options as to how this gender aspect, and the surprise effect that arises with it, can be expressed otherwise. Astonishingly, though, it is hardly taken into consideration. From the sample of eleven English and eleven German translations of Sappho's fr. 31 Voigt that were reviewed,<sup>31</sup> only one German translator takes it into consideration (Schickel (tr.) 2007): "fähler als trockne Gräser / bin ich, einer Toten beinahe gleicht mein / Aussehn" (lines 14–16). Here the untranslatable gendering of the adjective *χλωροτέρα* was transposed into a gendering of the subsequent line: the verbal expression "a little short of *being dead* (τεθνάκη) / do I appear to myself" is rendered by way of a feminine noun where the German morphology is gendered indeed ("einer Toten beinahe gleicht mein / Aussehn"). Aside from this singular example, though, the translations reviewed do not acknowledge the gendering of *χλωροτέρα* either in the translation itself or in a note. One particularly illuminating example is that of Josephine Balmer, who, in her collection *Classical Women Poets* (1996), translates the phrase *χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας / ἔμμι* (lines 14–15) as "I am greener than grass" and adds an explanatory note that shows a high degree of awareness of gender issues in the translation process on a semantic level, but nevertheless fails to recognise the morphosyntactic problem:

Sappho here uses the adjective *chloros*, which can mean both brilliant green and pale yellow. Some translators have rendered it as 'paler than grass', a reference to the colour draining from the speaker's face, or seen in it an expression of Sappho's clinical jealousy; Mary Lefkowitz [...] has noted that it could be an echo of Homer's 'green fear', which struck warriors in battle, with Sappho, again, transposing the male language of war to a context of female emotion, an interpretation I have followed [...].<sup>32</sup>

Adjectives in the Romance languages, in turn, have (at least in parts) the same morphosyntactic features as Ancient Greek adjectives have. Let us therefore look at a selection of French and Italian translations of the lines 13–16 (*τρόμος δὲ [...] ἔμ' αὐται*) of Sappho's fr. 31 Voigt. The following translations convey the morphosyntactic gendering of *παῖσαν* and(/or) *χλωροτέρα*:

Reinach 1937: "un frisson me saisit toute; je deviens plus verte que l'herbe, et, peu s'en faut, je me sens mourir"

Mora 1966: "un tremblement / me prend toute et je suis plus verte / que l'herbe, tout près de mourir / il me semble"

Bouvier & Voelke 2000 (apud Bouvier 2009): "un tremblement / me saisit tout entière, je suis plus verte que l'herbe, / je me semble à moi-même presque morte"

Pascoli 1880–1884 (apud Piantanida 2013): "un tremore / tutta mi occupa, e più gialla dell'erba / sono, | ad | esser morta poco mancandomi, / sembro (pazza)"

Michelangeli 1889: "e tremor le membra / tutte m'invade e più de l'erba scialba / divento e poco del morir lontana / sembro"

Gallavotti 1957: "tutta mi coglie un tremito, più verde dell'erba io sono, e ad essere morta sento che poco mi manca"

<sup>31</sup> See n. 16 above.

<sup>32</sup> Balmer (tr., comm.) 1996, 27, n. 24. The reference is to Lefkowitz 1981b, 59–68.

Quasimodo <sup>3</sup>2015: “E tutta in sudore e tremante / come erba patita scoloro: / e morte non pare lontana / a me rapita di mente”

Livrea 2016: “ed un tremito / tutta mi prende, e son più pallida / dell'erba, e dall'esser morta poco lontano / appaio a me stessa”

Any translation that is unable to reproduce the poem's gendering, and the surprise effect in line 14 with it, is necessarily deficient. Whereas French and Italian translations for the most part take this aspect into consideration (owing to their morphosyntactic similarity to Ancient Greek), English and German translations do not. However, as the case of Schickel (tr. 2007) demonstrates, this is not impossible to achieve in a Germanic language either. On the other hand, as the example of Balmer (1996) shows, it is surprising to note that even a translator with a recognisable awareness of linguistic gender issues (and an according sense of mission)<sup>33</sup> misses the opportunity (and necessity) to translate—or at least mention, in a note—this morphosyntactic gender aspect.

### Sappho fr. 58.11–22 Voigt (“Tithonus Poem”): Gendering the Ungendered

[X — ∪∪ — — ] ἰοκ[ό]λπων κάλα δῶρα, παίδεις,  
 [X — ∪∪ — — ] φιλάιδον λιγύραν ἰχελύνναν.  
 [X — ∪∪ — — ] ποτ' [ἔ]οντα ἰχρόια γῆρας, ἤδη  
 [X — ∪∪ — — ] ἐγ'έγοντο τρίχες ἐγ' μελαίναν,  
 βάρυς δέ μ' ὁ [θ]ύμος πεπόηται, γιόνα, δ' οὐ φέροισι,  
 πὰ δὴ ποτα λαίψηρ' ἔον ὄρχησθ' ἴσα νεβριοισιν,  
 †τα† στεναχίζω θαμέως. ἀλλὰ τί κεμ ποείην;  
 ἀγῆραον ἀνθρωπον ἔοντ' οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι.  
 και γάρ τε[ο]τα Τίθωνον ἔφαντο βροδόπαχυν Αὔων,  
 ἔρωι δέπας εἰσάνβαμεν' εἰς ἔσχατα γὰς φέροισα[ν  
 ἔοντα [κ]άλον και νέον, ἀλλ' αὔτον ὕμως ἔμαρψε[  
 χρόνωι πῶλιον. γῆρας ἔχ[ο]ντ' ἀθανάταν ἀκοιτιν.<sup>34</sup>

[.....] of the violet-breasted [Muses?], the beautiful gifts, *paides*,  
 [.....] the song-loving, clear lyre.  
 [.....] once being, the skin, old age already  
 [.....] has become, the hair, from black,  
 And heavy has my heart been made, and my knees don't carry me,  
 Swift as they once were to dance like fawns—  
 This I lament often. But what should I do?  
 Being human, it isn't possible to become ageless.  
 For, they used to say about Tithonus that rose-armed Dawn once,  
 In her love rising up to the [sun's] cup, took him to the far ends of earth,  
 Beautiful and young as he was, but grey old age took him all the same,  
 Gradually—he who had an immortal wife.

<sup>33</sup> See her introduction at Balmer (tr., comm.) 1996, 9–22.

<sup>34</sup> The Greek text follows the critical edition by Gronewald & Daniel (eds, tr.) 2004b, 2. The translation is mine.



As mentioned in the introductory remarks above, this poetic fragment is one of the few lucky cases where new discoveries have enhanced our knowledge of Sappho's poetry. However, despite the new supplements, the poem is still partially fragmentary (as my documentary translation seeks to illustrate) and still presents papyrological, philological, and interpretive problems.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, Martin West optimistically claimed, "everything that is missing in the poem [could] be restored, so far as the sense is concerned, with reasonable certainty,"<sup>36</sup> and he even went so far as to suggest his own reconstruction of the Ancient Greek text where it was missing in the papyrus. In what follows, West's suggested text is printed, alongside his English translation, as it was published first in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 24 June 2005.<sup>37</sup>

Ἵμμες πεδὰ Μοῖσαν ἰ]οκ[ό]λπων κάλα δῶρα, παῖδες,  
σπουδάσδετε και τὰ]γ φιλάσιδον λιγύραν χελύνναν·

ἔμοι δ' ἄπαλον πρίν] προτ' [ἔ]οντα χροά γήρας ἦδη  
ἐπέλλαβε, λεύκαι δ' ἐγ]έροντο τρίχες ἐκ μελαίναν,

βάρυς δέ μ' ὁ [θ]ῦμος πεπόηται, γόνα δ' [ο]ὐ φέροισι,  
τὰ δὴ ποτα λαίψηρ' ἔον ὄρησθ' ἴσα νεβρίοισιν,

τὰ <μὲν> στεναχίσδω θαμέως· ἀλλὰ τί κεμ ποείην;  
ἀγήραον ἄνθρωπον ἔοντ' οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι.

καὶ γάρ π[ο]τὰ Τίθωνον ἔφαντο βροδόπαχυν Αὔων  
ἔρωι φ. .αθρῖσαν βάμεν' εἰς ἔσχατα γὰς φέροισα[ν],

ἔοντα [χ]άλλον και νέον, ἀλλ' αὔτον ὕμωξ ἔμαρψε  
χρόνωι πρόλιον γήρας, ἔχ[ο]ντ' ἀθανάταν ἄκοιτιν.

[You for] the fragrant-bosomed Muses' lovely gifts  
[be zealous,] girls, [and the] clear melodious lyre:

[but my once tender] body old age now  
[has seized;] my hair's turned [white] instead of dark;

my heart's grown heavy, my knees will not support me,  
that once on a time were fleet for the dance as fawns.

This state I oft bewail; but what's to do?  
Not to grow old, being human, there's no way.

<sup>35</sup> Aside from the critical commentary provided by the first editors Gronewald & Daniel (eds, tr.) 2004a, 6–8 and 2004b, 2–4, see also, e.g., Bernsdorff 2004, 27–35; West 2005b, 3–6; Rawles 2006, 1–7; Obbink (ed., tr.) 2009, 7–16; Hammerstaedt 2009, 17–40. See also the note at Rayor (tr., comm.) 2014, 117–119 for a brief sketch of the scholarly status quo.

<sup>36</sup> West 2005b, 5.

<sup>37</sup> West 2005a, 8; reprint in West 2005b, 5. Rawles (2006, 1) prints the same Greek text with his own English translation.

Tithonus once, the tale was, rose-armed Dawn,  
love-smitten, carried off to the world's end,

handsome and young then, yet in time grey age  
o'ertook him, husband of immortal wife.

While I remain sceptical as to the reliability of West's reconstruction of the Ancient Greek text at the beginning of the damaged lines, I agree that in essence, "we can make out the sentence structure and restore the sense of what is lost."<sup>38</sup> In some sense, this poem is comparable to Sappho's "Jealousy Poem": again, an otherwise unspecified first-person speaker is turning towards a second-person addressee (lines 1–2); and, also in a similar way as in fr. 31, the poetic voice describes emotions and a physical state in great detail (lines 3–6). At the same time, however, there are also considerable differences between the two poems. First, cause and effect between emotions and physical state are inverted: in fr. 31 the speaker's bodily reactions are the result of her feelings whereas here a physical state (viz. complaints of old age, lines 3–6) triggers an emotional reaction (resignation and lament, lines 7–8). Secondly, in contrast to the "Jealousy Poem," the "Tithonus Poem" ends with a twist in the realm of mythology: the last four lines (9–12) are devoted to the well-known ancient myth of Eos, the goddess of dawn, who falls in love with the mortal Tithonus. She successfully asks Zeus, the king of the gods, to grant Tithonus immortality but neglects also to ask for his eternal youth. Consequently, Tithonus does not die, but ages nonetheless, and as a result of this he shrinks and is finally transformed into a cicada.<sup>39</sup> Evidently, the Tithonus myth is used here to illustrate and generalise the speaker's point about the burdens of old age and impending death, and these burdens contrast with the consolation of her expected immortality as a poet.<sup>40</sup> Thirdly, the nature of speaker and addressee is treated differently in this poem in the sense that the latter (παῖδες) is in the plural (see the discussion below) and also in the sense that, most importantly, neither the speaker's nor the addressees' gender are specified. Richard Janko, in a response to Martin West's article in *The Times Literary Supplement*, astutely observed:

This ode is unisex. Nowhere does the speaker state her gender, indicate the gender of the young people whom she is addressing, or signal the sex towards which the speaker's and addressees' desires incline. Not even the "fawns" to which the speaker is likened in line 6 are gendered: the word is neuter. The only passage where genders are differentiated is the comparison with Tithonus.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, Janko then continues to speculate that the unisex gendering of the voices in this poem, alongside the implied parallelism between the speaker and the mythical figure of Tithonus, might suggest that "the poem is after all by a man, and so not by Sappho," or that, if it is by Sappho, it could be read as a metapoetic statement, "indicat[ing] [...] her right to claim that her poetry is as good as any man's." Seen from this angle, Janko's

<sup>38</sup> West 2005a, 8.

<sup>39</sup> The Tithonus myth is narrated in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 218–238. For further sources, see Gantz, 1993, 36–37.

<sup>40</sup> On the role of Tithonus as a mythical paradigm in Sappho's fr. 58.11–22, see Geißler 2005, 105–114; Rawles 2006; Edmunds 2009, 58–70; Brown 2011, 21–25.

<sup>41</sup> Janko 2005, 19. See also Rawles 2006, 4 and Greene 2009, 157. A different view is expressed by Vestheim 2016.

gendered interpretation seems to be at odds with West's translation of the Ancient Greek noun *παῖδες* (line 1) as "girls." Evidently, the Ancient Greek noun *παῖς* is considerably more polyvalent than any ordinary English translation is able to express. First and foremost, the word is the common gender-neutral term for "child"; depending on the context, this can be a boy or a girl or, in the plural, a (mixed or unisex) group of children. Secondly, the term can also denote a slave—again, either gender-specific or unisex both in the singular and in the plural.<sup>42</sup> Thus, from a linguistic point of view, by addressing her audience as *παῖδες*, the lyric 'I' emphasises her relation to the addressees in terms of their age difference (and, possibly, also in terms of hierarchy), but not in terms of gender.

When West, upon presenting his reconstruction and translation of the poem, firmly maintains that "[i]t is clear from other evidence that [Sappho] composed her poetry, or most of it, within an intimate circle of women whom she calls her 'companions',"<sup>43</sup> he is, in fact, ensnared in a circular argument: the idea of a "circle of women," for whom Sappho supposedly composed her poetry, is not based upon clear "evidence" but rather is the result of a long and influential, yet problematic, biographical interpretation of Sappho's poetry. When the gender-neutral term *παῖδες* is translated as "girls," this idea is, apparently, complemented by yet another piece of evidence and thus seemingly reconfirms the productive error about Sappho and her circle. It is only by way of a strictly 'pragmatic' approach that such a translation may be taken into consideration (if at all); viewed from a purely textual perspective, however, it is not justified. In fact, the strongly paradigmatic nature of the "Tithonus Poem" is accentuated not only by the mythical example of the Tithonus story at the end, but also by the unspecific address at the beginning. In addition to this, it may be noted that the word *νεβρόισιν* (dative plural of *νεβρία*, "fawns") is not only neuter, as Janko correctly states, but is a diminutive of an otherwise unattested lemma (the regular Ancient Greek word being the masculine *νεβρός*),<sup>44</sup> and that both *παῖδες* and *νεβρόισιν* are emphatically placed at the end of line at the beginning and in the middle of the poem, respectively. Hence, both words evidently constitute key terms of the poem; both are explicitly ungendered and thus shift the poem's focus from a seemingly specific (viz. 'pragmatic') context to a paradigm of the *condition humaine*.

It is astonishing to note, however, that many commentators and translators do not sufficiently reflect upon this gendered translation problem. From the sample of translations that I reviewed,<sup>45</sup> let us have a look at those which were published after 2004 and thus took into consideration the poem's enlargement as quoted above:

- Bagordo 2011: "ihr Mädchen"
- von Schirnding 2013: "ihr, meine Mädchen"
- Carson 2002: "children"
- Johnson 2007: "my children"
- Powell 2007: "children"
- Rayor 2014: "girls"

<sup>42</sup> See LSJ s.v. *παῖς*; Golden 1985.

<sup>43</sup> West 2005a, 8.

<sup>44</sup> See LSJ s.v. *νεβρός*; Gronewald & Daniel (eds, tr.) 2004a, 8. On three occasions, *νεβρός* is recorded as a feminine (*Il.* 4.243; *Eur. Bacch.* 866; *Trag. adesp.* 419 *TrGF*), but, as Vestrheim (2016, 120, n. 7) notes, "in none of these cases does the context demand restriction to the female of the species."

<sup>45</sup> See n. 16 above.

Klinck 2008: “girls”  
 Poochigian <sup>2</sup>2015: “girls”  
 Savino <sup>3</sup>2015: “figlioli”

As can be noted, five translators follow West’s gendered interpretation of *παῖδες*—which, in turn, is owed to the powerful aftermath of the century-old tradition of biographical interpretation, as outlined above—whereas three pursue the line of Janko’s idea of a ‘unisex ode’. Interestingly, however, in most cases translators do not comment on the problem and therefore do not communicate the ramifications of their decision to its audience.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, a most astonishing gendering into an unexpected direction is that of Savino’s Italian translation “figlioli”—a term that clearly denotes boys and cannot be interpreted as generic masculine. Again, unfortunately an explanatory note is missing.<sup>47</sup>

A similar ‘divide’ can be noted when we look at the translations of the term *παῖδες* by editors and scholars. Both the first editors of the enlarged poem, Michael Gronewald and Robert W. Daniel, and Claudia Geißler, author of a research article on the poem published shortly after the publication of the new findings from the Cologne papyrus, translate the term *παῖδες* as “Mädchen.”<sup>48</sup> In contrast, Janko and Obbink translate it as “(my) children”; finally, Richard Rawles, who adopts West’s reconstruction of the Ancient Greek texts, renders it—perhaps most appropriately—as “young ones,” but at the same time claims that the term referred to “a group of young people: presumably, unmarried young women.”<sup>49</sup>

In sum, as demonstrated above, it can be maintained that the non-gendering seems to be a characteristic feature of the “Tithonus Poem” that shapes its paradigmatic quality. A translation that overlooks this aspect runs the risk of resuming and reproducing a problematic biographical approach to Sappho’s poetry—an approach which may, admittedly, not be entirely wrong, but which should be treated with great caution and which has to be based upon firm textual evidence at the very least—textual evidence that is, in this case, not sufficiently present.

## Conclusion

Sappho’s frs 31 and 58 constitute two case studies of Sapphic poems where we are confronted with a translational problem. Both translation problems are idiosyncratic in their own way, but a common aspect is that they are intrinsically tied to questions which are related to gender. In the “Jealousy Poem,” it was noted that the morphology of the original Ancient Greek language reveals important information about the poem’s gendering which not only defines the gender identity of speaker and addressee, but also heavily influences the texture and tone of the entire poem by way of a surprise effect, since the speaker’s female identity and, thus, the poem’s homoeroticity is postponed until the penultimate stanza. It

<sup>46</sup> The only comment is made by Rayor (tr., comm.) 2014, 118—a comment that implicitly demonstrates a certain awareness of the gender issue, but does not make it explicit to the reader: “These ‘girls’ (children) may constitute the audience, but more likely they are girls who are dancing while Sappho sings the song to a wider audience [...]”

<sup>47</sup> The translation is, however, based on the pre-Cologne state of the “Tithonus Poem” (viz. the ‘old’ fr. 58 Voigt).

<sup>48</sup> Gronewald & Daniel (eds, tr.) 2004a, 5 and 7; Geißler 2005, 109–111.

<sup>49</sup> Janko 2005, 19; Rawles 2006, 1 and 4; Obbink (ed., tr.) 2009, 12 and 15.

was noted, then, that Germanic target languages such as English and German are unable to capture this nuance (what is at work here could therefore be called an untranslatable gendering), whereas the problem is absent when it comes to Romance target languages such as French and Italian because of the corresponding morphosyntactic nature of the latter with Ancient Greek. In contrast, in the “Tithonus Poem” we are faced with a case of non-gendering in that the speaker’s addressees are explicitly ‘ungendered’—an aspect which, as we noted, pervades the entire poem to the extent that a critic emphatically, and aptly, labelled it a ‘unisex ode.’ Surprisingly, though, many translations ignore this aspect by translating the key word, the gender-unspecific vocative plural *παῖδες* (“children, young ones”) as “girls.” This situatively problematic translation is ultimately the result of an old, but still influential tradition about the nature of Sapphic poetry and the flesh-and-blood-author Sappho as the head of a girls’ ‘boarding school’ who felt homoerotically attracted to her protégés. Interestingly, the “Jealousy Poem” is one of those poems which once gave rise to this very hypothesis—the “Tithonus Poem”, however, does not contain hard and fast textual evidence to support this assumption, but the same assumption continues to have an effect on its translation. Hence, the “Tithonus Poem” presents a case of gendering which cannot be found in the original text, but which is induced by the translation. In this article, I have restricted myself to two case studies, and to a non-representative selection of English, German, French, and Italian translations. It may be suggested that future studies on translations of Sappho’s poetic fragments incorporate further gender-related questions and attempt to compare and further systematise the way different target languages are faced with, and solve, different gender-related translation problems. Moreover, whoever wishes to make a point in gender studies about Sappho’s poetry should be advised not to do so on the sole basis of a translation.<sup>50</sup>

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