

## SAPPHO REBORN IN OREGON POET'S TRANSLATION

By Steve Slemenda

Mary Barnard (1909-2001) is well established in her own right as a significant poet of the Northwest. An additional important contribution Barnard made to the literary world is her breakthrough translations of the fragments of Sappho, the great lyric poet of 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Greece.

When Barnard's *Sappho: A New Translation* (University of California Press) was published in 1958, the work not only made Sappho's poetry fresh and accessible for generations to come; it also established Barnard's reputation internationally as an important scholar, particularly of the Classics.

One of the few women poets of antiquity and certainly the best known, Sappho is the only Greek woman among the ancients to have a lasting place in world literature. Socrates called her "Sappho the beautiful," and Plato regarded her as "the tenth muse." Born sometime around 615 B.C., she was a native of Lesbos which, according to Barnard, "considered itself the very fountainhead of Greek song."

Sappho's poetry endowed the lyric poem with a passion that speaks to the heart of the human condition.

Without warning

as a whirlwind  
swoops on an oak

Love shakes my heart

Of her work, only a relatively few complete poems and many fragments have survived. Much of her writing was recorded on papyrus scrolls that were eventually made into paper mache coffins, salvaged centuries later in archeological digs.

Although Sappho's writings were variously rendered through the centuries, it was not until Barnard's translations that their grace and urgency of emotion was expressed in a manner compellingly alive to the modern ear.

Day in, day out,  
I hunger and  
I struggle  
- -  
Pain penetrates  
me drop  
by drop

Sappho's gift, conveyed through Barnard's modern English renditions of her poetry, was the ability to communicate the inner self with a spare phrasing that seems conversational, belying her masterful use of language.

Standing by my bed  
  
in golden sandals  
Dawn that very  
moment awoke me

A central theme of Sappho's writings is love in all its human aspects—desire, admiration, pain, and bliss. She praises the ecstasies of love and mourns the bitterness of love unfulfilled. In one characteristic poem, vivid imagery leads us, like a movie camera, from the night sky downward to earth, into a room, a bed, an isolated self:

Tonight I've watched  
the moon and then  
the Pleiades  
go down.

The night is now  
half-gone; youth  
goes; I am  
in bed alone.

Expressing both motion and the passing of time, this short poem takes the reader from the external world to the internal, from the cosmos to the heart of the speaker—a perfect example of lyric poetry by a master.

It is Barnard's skillful word choice and line placement that brings Sappho's genius home to the reader. In her "Footnote to These Translations," Barnard states her intent to capture Sappho's "fresh colloquial directness of speech."

Sappho's intimate expressions, reborn in Barnard's translations, link us heart to heart with the Greek peoples of 2600 years ago. We share with them the beauty of the evening star—

the evening star  
is the most  
beautiful  
of all stars

Through the verse of one who felt so deeply and expressed her feelings so directly, we discover the common humanity that links us across the centuries to our cultural ancestors.

Thanks to Oregon's own Mary Barnard, Sappho's confidence that her verse would endure is confirmed:

The house of the servants  
of the Muses is pure;  
Somebody, I tell you,  
will remember us hereafter.