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To what extent are Barnard's and Carson's translations of Sappho influenced by their personal experiences and values, and what does the text gain from each of their translations?

Sappho is one of the greatest lyric poets from ancient Greece, renowned for developing the Sapphic meter and leading the aesthetic movement towards themes of individual human experiences (Sheehen). Mary Barnard and Anne Carson are the translators of two of the most well known English versions of Sappho's fragments. An exploration of their biographies allows the reader to understand how their personal values and experiences influence their translations. By analyzing their unique qualities, one can further connect to the text by seeing what each translation gains from the life and literary philosophies of both Carson and Barnard. This essay seeks to uncover how each translator serves both an ancient and modern audience through the comparative analysis of Fragments in Carson's *If Not, Winter* (2002) and the poems of Barnard's *Sappho: A New Translation* (1958), integrating an interpretation of how their life histories impact their formatting, thematic influences, and personal interests as seen in their translations.

Both Carson's and Barnard's unique formatting styles accommodate their translations to serve different audiences. Their personal relationships to art and poetry are reflected in their drastically different interpretations of how to best serve both Sappho's original works, and the reader at the time of publication.

Carson's signature use of brackets, to represent the missing fragments of Sappho's work, gives a respectful representation of the remains-- the reader is forced to ponder Sappho's original

intentions. When asked about boredom, Carson stated “I’m really trying to make people’s minds move. . .” (Anderson). The visual appeal of *If Not, Winter* is further supplemented by her careful placement of words about each page, which gave her translation fame on sites like Tumblr in the early 2000’s. In fact, Carson sees herself as a visual, not verbal, artist, stating “I didn’t write very much at all until I guess my twenties because I drew. I just drew pictures. . . I never did think of myself as a writer!” (“Anne Carson” Poetry).

On the other hand, Barnard’s translation appeals to both the modernist audience through her innovative combination of fragments of Sappho’s work. The 100 poems, divided into six parts, achieve similar flow, cadence, and narrative to Sappho’s original works. After finishing college, Barnard wrote a journal entry titled “one true stone” which summarizes her budding views on her own work, “Things have a certain starkness about them in an autumn rain. I should like my writing to be like that -- hard substantial colors, *on* something, not transparent. . .” (Barnsley).

Barnard’s lifelong relationship of mentor and student with modernist poet Ezra Pound influenced her work greatly. Pound’s Imagist philosophy of writing, which favors precise imagery and clear, sharp language is evident in Barnard’s works. To understand Barnard’s translation, one must observe the teachings of Pound’s school of Imagist poetry as follows:

1. “Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
3. As regarding rhythm, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome” (Hartman).

The second stanza of Poem 43 is a strong example of Pound's first rule, as no more than one adjective is used per noun. Barnard's use of nouns to depict imagery parallels the values expressed in her "one true stone" journal entry, which complements Pound's values perfectly. (Barnsley).

The first line of the third stanza of Poem 43 is written in Adonic, a style of meter including one dactyl (one stressed syllable and two unstressed syllables) followed by a trochee. Barnard's attention to detail and intentionality of every word reflects Pound's second rule ("Sapphic").

The first line of Poem 41 is not in iambic pentameter, and the rest are, cueing the reader to absorb the musical phrase, abiding by Pound's signature third rule. Barnard adheres to the integrity of the greek meter more strongly than Carson, using Catullus (four-line stanzas) and trochees (the meter of one stressed syllable and one unstressed syllable), adhering to Sappho's original poetic structure ("Sapphic"). Whereas Carson's Fragment 16 uses catalogue and repetition to convey the whirring emotional motifs of young love in Sappho's works, appealing to a 21st century audience.

Tragedy influenced the thematic nature of both Barnard's and Carson's translations greatly. In 1951, Barnard contracted a near-fatal case of hepatitis. While recovering, she rekindled ponderings of greek metrics and produced her legacy work; her translation of Sappho has never gone out of print. Carson's personal connection to loss is expressed in her lecture at the Brooklyn Public Library. She touches on how memory can edit reality. In Fragment 16 of *If Not, Winter* she jumps from past to present tense to make the reader feel immersed in the world, using

both iambic pentameter and cadence imagery (step, motion, chariots, footsoldiers) to further perpetuate the transcendence of time.

The limits of Sappho's fragments match the struggle of having a family member with dementia, cryptically expressing the inner remains with the tools at one's disposal. Carson uses the Greek word Apeiron, meaning unbounded, to describe the dementia life space. The "bizarre daily choreography of living with someone with dementia," and the mixture between the bounded and the unbounded that is life, reflects the notion of free will and memory in ancient Greece, exemplified in Fragment 94: "Sappho, I swear, against my will I leave you." Followed by repetition of the word "remember," in reference to rejoicing, Carson reflects her values of remembering better times in the face of loss.

She uses the concept of structure to discuss the human psyche through the lens of her dad's dementia, reflecting themes exemplified through *If Not, Winter*. She says structure provides both defense and mobility, and that home provides a psychic state. The Apeiron of dementia leaves one seeking this comfort, as structure is "valued for boundaries and useful in form." The commonality between her dad's dementia and her literary philosophies is control. In demented people, the search for structure leaves them in a perpetual state of wanderlust. Adding structure to unsolvable mysteries, like Sappho's fragments or the brain of a demented person, allows for engagement from two perspectives: the known and unknown. Carson states that language is the most dangerous of good things, and that too little or too much control, or rather the concept of control itself, is what brings this danger. Translating Sappho allowed Carson to explore the dichotomy of freedom and control ("Anne Carson: A Lecture on Corners").

Both Barnard and Carson are known for not being public about their personal lives or interests. Barnard spent much of her time in New York and Europe, gaining recognition for her poetry despite her introverted nature within the urban scene (Bell). Carson was also a private person, saying that “most human talk is an evasion. It is an attempt to keep ourselves to ourselves” (“Anne Carson: A Lecture on Corners”).

Not much is known about Carson due to her distaste in traditional profiles as she is a private and quiet person--her back-flap biography says only “Anne Carson was born in Canada and teaches ancient Greek for a living,” reflecting her minimalistic nature. It is known, though, that Carson’s creative approach to poetry involves the visual: her and her husband Robert Currie (whom she calls “the randomizer”) have crafted live dance performances to accompany her poetry readings (Anderson). Her use of non-conventional characters is also signature; her book, titled “Red Doc >” only has the angle mark because her computer accidentally added it to her title, and she kept it. This reveals her nonchalant and out-of-the-box nature (Anderson).

Upon her return to New York after recovering from hepatitis, Barnard wrote her book *The Mythmakers*” (Ohio University Press 1966), “exploring the role of astronomy and the use of hallucinogenic plants in ancient religious rituals” (Bell). In Poem 43, Barnard discusses the rich history of ritual, and the subsequent punishment and reward. The use of Myrrh gifts for Aphrodite references the story of Myrrha in ancient Greek mythology. She did not honor Aphrodite, and laid with her own father as a consequence. In punishment, Aphrodite turned her into a Myrrh tree. Nine months later when a boar ran into the tree, Adonis was born from the tree out of the incest. Aphrodite ironically fell in love with him because her son Eros accidentally cut her with a magic arrow. She sent the baby to live in the underworld, out of shame for the curse

and her love. The use of Myrrh in this context is a somber reminder to fulfill ritual. The Adonic cadence of the line mentioning Myrrh further perpetuates this hidden meaning through Afrocentricism (“Myrrah”).

The fourth stanza of Poem 43 refers to the conditional nature of ancient rituals. If no woodlot blooms in spring without song, then they must sing (enjambment puts emphasis on ‘out’). The word choice of “woodlot” alludes that something is used from the woods, possibly including hallucinogenic plants, mushrooms, and fungi. If blooming woodlot is associated with fulfilled ritual, then perhaps this is rooted in the association of godlike insights when ingesting the woodlot that bloomed upon fulfilled ritual (Barnsley).

Overall, the translations of Sappho by Carson and Barnard are deeply influenced by their personal values and experiences. Barnard’s rearrangement of fragments and Carson’s use of brackets and negative space suit the unique audiences of each translator. Tragic life events led to profound philosophical and literary insights for both authors. Personal interests and thoughts are subtly but deeply implanted into their translations. Interpreting these factors allows the reader gain a more in-depth understanding of what Sappho’s works gain from Carson and Barnard as translators, and ponder the role of the translator through comparative means, uncovering the truth of each translator hidden (or not so hidden) within the literature.

## Appendix A

Sappho, and Mary Barnard. Sappho, A New Translation. University of California Press 1958.

Poem 43:

“If you forget me, think  
of our gifts to Aphrodite  
And all the loveliness that we shared

“All the violet tiaras,  
Braided rosebuds, dill and  
Crocus twined around your young neck

“Myrrh poured on your head  
And on soft mats girls with  
all that they most wished for beside them

“While no voices chanted  
Choruses without ours,  
No woodlot bloomed in spring with-  
Out song. . .”

Poem 41:

To an army wife, in Sardis:

Some say a cavalry corps,

Some infantry, some, again,

Will maintain that the swift oars

Of our fleet are the finest

Sight on dark earth; but I say

That whatever one loves; is.



## Appendix B

Sappho, and Anne Carson. *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. Vintage Books, 2002.

Fragment 16:

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.

. . .

]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.

Fragment 94:

I simply want to be dead.

Weeping she left me

With many tears and said this:

Oh how badly things have turned out for us

Sappho, I swear, against my will I leave you.

And I answered her: Rejoice, go and

Remember me. For you know how we cherished you.

But if not, I want

To remind you

]and beautiful times we had.

For many crowns of violets

And roses

]at my side you put on

And many woven garlands

Made of flowers

Around your soft throat.

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