

**THE SAPPHIC STANZA: A  
TENTATIVE STUDY IN  
GREEK METRICAL, TONAL  
AND DANCING ART**

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The Sapphic Stanza: A Tentative Study in Greek Metrical, Tonal and Dancing Art by J. S. Tunison

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BY  
J. S. TUNISON



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J. N.

## PREFACE.

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*The study which follows was originally published in THE DENISON UNIVERSITY QUARTERLY. It is meant as a suggestion for those who take interest in the topics to which it alludes. The basis for a restoration of the primitive Greek music can be found, perhaps, only in a summary of results from a wide investigation of folk-music. Material for such a summary is growing rapidly in quantity at the present day through the efforts of folklorists among primitive races in all parts of the world. It may be discovered that the classical and post-classic treatises are of value only by way of restraint and not by way of guidance. The present writer makes no pretense to originality except as to the general scheme of the essay. In some places the earliest authorities were out of his reach at the time of writing. But his secondary sources were worthy of credence. He takes pleasure in acknowledging an indebtedness to Mr. H. E. Krehbiel which is evinced on almost every page that follows. That Mr. Krehbiel and he hold different opinions is all the better, considering the doubts that embarrass the discussion. The reader thus gets a glimpse of two sides of a subject that has as many facets as Roger Bacon's multiplying glass. Acknowledgement is also due to Professor W. H. Johnson for his kindness in helping forward the little task now finished. Those who like a fancy of the kind are welcome to see in the red covers of this pamphlet a sentimental reference to the robe of the heroine in Grillparzer's play of "Sappho."*



### A Study of the Sapphic Stanza.

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THE name Sappho is suggestive not more of poetry than of music. To understand the metrical forms which she used, it is not merely necessary to study them from the point of view taken by the student of prosody; but the effort should be made, beset as it is with difficulties owing to the lack of information, to discover the relations of these metrical forms to music as Sappho and her Lesbian contemporaries understood the arts of verse-making and song. The fact that the subject cannot be treated with certainty need not prevent the attempt from being useful. It is reason for complaint against Henry Thornton Wharton, that his charming edition of the fragments of Sappho<sup>1</sup> contains so little on this point. In a book like Mr. Wharton's, which appeals to all who have the tastes of the bibliophile, whether they care for Greek learning or not, such a discussion would meet many minds untouched by tradition, and in time one of these might give scholars fruitful hints about problems which can never be solved by mere learning. It is not to the point to say that certain German authors have discussed these topics. The persons whose mere feelings might guide them right in this matter are just the ones who will never read, say, C. F. Neue's Latin treatise<sup>2</sup> on the metres used by Sappho. They need to have the case stated for them in language which they can understand. No promise is here implied that the

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<sup>1</sup> SAPPHO. *Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and Literal Translation.* By Henry Thornton Wharton, M. A. Oxon. The book has passed through three editions.

<sup>2</sup> SAPPHO. *FRAGMENTA* editit C. F. Neue.



present paper will supply the want. Its only purpose is to set forth a theory, with such an analysis of previous discussions of Greek poetry and music as seem suited to the purpose. With this explanation, no express warning is needed against the too hasty acceptance of any statement made by the writer. The need of putting the whole essay in this tentative form is the greater, because in some important cases the signification of technical terms as commonly given is disputed and practically new meanings are given to words more or less familiar.

Setting aside the personal equation involved in Sappho's own genius, the problem is: How was the particular verse form known as the Sapphic stanza originated and developed? The reader probably is familiar enough with classic prosody to know that this stanza is only one of the forms which Sappho used, and may easily recall specimens of it to mind, for example this from Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of Sappho's first ode:

Be it who it may be, he that flies shall follow,  
He that rejects gifts, he shall bring thee many;  
He that hates now shall love thee dearly, madly  
Aye, though thou wouldst not.

or this, from Catullus's version of the second ode:

Lingua sed torpet; tenuis sub artus  
Flamma demanat, sonitu suoapte  
Tintinant aures, gemina teguntur  
Lumina nocte.

In the light of the model set by Sappho, there is a defect in Sir Edwin Arnold's lines in comparison with those of Catullus which are as nearly as possible what Sappho herself might have written if she had been Latin instead of Greek. But Arnold's version gives a better notion of the rapid movement characteristic of the Greek original than do most other attempts to imitate the stanza in English.

It may seem that the origin of a given form of metre is a very simple affair. The poet put his mind to it and thought out something. This may have happened in modern times, but it does not seem to be true of the more unconscious art of an earlier age. The disposition of a race had a great deal to do with the thinking and the utterance of the individual poet. The reminiscence of a whole civilization is packed in the Sapphic stanza, if only this reminiscence could be properly interpreted. It must be remembered that the greatest of woman poets stood in the dawn of the historic life of Greece. Mr. Wharton points out that she was contemporary with Jeremiah, the prophet of the Hebrew decadence; with Nebuchadnezzar, the last restorer of Babylonian power; with Solon, the lawgiver of Athens, whose personal identity is beyond question. She lived on an island, a tiny country, within reach of all the agitations of Asia Minor, and so far from the Greek mainland and from the rising forces of European life that she and all her compatriots were looked upon by Western Hellenes as aliens. The forces which had produced the Homeric epics, in which Asiatic and European life was not yet differentiated, were spent. The new forces that were to culminate in the Attic drama and the dialogues of Plato were only beginning to be felt. So far as the Greeks were concerned, then, the period in which Sappho lived was comparable in many respects with that which intervened between classic literature and the literature of modern times. Hers was, so to speak, the Greek middle age. Before it the Greeks were still defective in culture, and, like the Frankish barbarians, waged war to the eastward against civilization which they first hated and then strove to imitate and surpass. While they were perfecting a social and national life, they were, just as was the case in mediaeval times, slow to develop a new literature as characteristic of their changed condition as the epic had

been of an older time. Song and the metrical forms suited to song engrossed them. The multitude of mediaeval hymns and ballads<sup>1</sup> have their counterpart in the fragments of verse left by the Greek citharædists and aulodists. In perfection of form, in the adaptation of sound to sense, in simplicity, directness, and variety of motive within narrow limits, the productions of these two periods in literary history have no rivals except among themselves. So Mahaffy says of Alcaeus and Sappho: "Their lyrics apart from the difficult dialect are far more easy to comprehend than the more elaborate rhythms of Pindar, Alcman or Stesichorus. For, instead of the long, complicated systems, which required all the help of music, and even of dancing, to bring out the symmetry, and carry on the hearer to the antistrophe and the epode, the odes of Alcaeus and Sappho were constructed in short, simple stanzas which were easily comprehended and recitable even without their musical accompaniments. They were, in fact, the earliest specimens of what is called in modern days the song or ballad, in which the repetition of short rhythms produces a certain pleasant monotony, easy to remember and easy to understand."<sup>2</sup> It will be seen in time that Mahaffy has here spoken more wisely than he meant.

The development of the ballad and the music went hand in hand. Terpander,<sup>3</sup> also a Lesbian, who lived just

<sup>1</sup>In no language, however, at least to me, does the rhyme make such a pleasing and powerful impression as in Latin; the rhymed Latin poems of the Middle Ages have a peculiar charm. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, HOLDEN and KEMP's translation, Vol. III, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>MAHAFFY. *A History of Greek Literature*, Vol. I, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup>Terpander ex Methymna vel ex Antissa Lesbios, vel ex Arna, Cumave Boetus, non Archilocho tantum sed et Thalete Cretensi de quo mox dicam, antiquior fuit si audimus Plutarchum Liber de Musica. FABRICIUS. *Bibliotheca Græca*. Vol. I, p. 234. Authorities differed however even in antiquity as will be seen by consulting the remarks and copious references of Fabricius who appears in this matter and many others to be as good an authority as any of a later day.