Special Issue on Writing & the Classics

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Some Greek Girls

On Teaching Sappho and Praxilla

by Eleni Sikelianos

Who was Mary Shelley?
What was her name
before she married?

—Lorine Niedecker

IF LORINE NIEDECKER'S LINES CHALLENGE us to think about assumptions we might make about women writers (and their names), think about this: How many women writers from Greek antiquity can you name? If you're a classicist or an early lyric poetry fanatic, you might be able to name more than two or three. But if you're the average or even better than average literary citizen, you might be able to name one, maybe none. There were, in fact, a number of women writing in those early years, just past the dawn of written language: Erinna, Telesilla, Korinna, Myrtis, and Nossis were a few. According to first century B.C.E. poet Antipater of Thessaloniki: "Great Heaven created nine Muses, but Earth / bore these nine." By other accounts, there were at least sixteen highly regarded women poets who lived between the seventh century B.C.E. and the end of the Greek period. But history has not always been kind, and many of these texts have been wiped out entirely, by fire or flood or censorship or by indifference to women writers. Those that have survived exist only in fragments, rummaged from other texts or from ancient trash piles. What do these fragments offer? For one thing, many are simply exquisite pieces of writing.

The most famous of these poets—and the first woman writer we have in the Western tradition—is, of course, Sappho. Recently, I have been using poems by Sappho and by a lesser-known Greek woman of antiquity, Praxilla, with my elementary and high school classes.

What do we know of that illustrious and sometimes infamous poet, Sappho? Facts about her life are as scarce as her poems. Born in Mytilene on the island of Lesbos in the late seventh century B.C.E., Sappho was writing not much more than a hundred years after the time we believe

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SPECIAL ISSUE: Writing & the Classics

Homer was composing his accounts of wars and wanderings. Of an aristocratic family, Sappho was bisexual. She married and had a daughter named Kleis, which was also her mother's name. From Herodotus we know that Sappho had a brother named Charaxos and that her father's name was Scamander or Scamandronymos. She may have had two other brothers. She may or may not have run some kind of school, training young women in the arts of poetry and the worship of Aphrodite. From inscriptions found on Parian marble, we know that she was exiled to Sicily, but we don't know why. These are some of the "facts" of Sappho's life; fictions about her abound. One famous legend has it that, love-struck, she leapt to her death from the white cliffs on the southern edge of Lefkas.

Whoever Sappho was doesn't matter so much, perhaps, as the poems she left behind. The Roman poet Catullus and the contemporary American poet Bernadette Mayer were influenced by her, as were a great many poets in between. She was highly respected by the Ancient Greeks. If to Antipater of Thessaloniki she was one of the nine mortal muses, Plato bade us look again: to him, Sappho was "the tenth Muse." The ancient library at Alexandria housed nine books of her poems, most of which were destroyed by censors or by time. What fragments we have today come to us from citations in other authors' works or rehabilitated papyri (from books recycled into mummy wrappings—some found in the wadding stuffed into a mummified crocodile's mouth) discovered in Egyptian sands. Sappho's poems are passionate, vehement, gorgeous, and—according to the third-century scholar Longinus—sublime. Her longest surviving poem is her invocation to Aphrodite, with those much quoted lines "yoking sudden sparrows to your swift chariot...." Sappho wrote in what translator Richmond Lattimore calls "simple but superbly articulated stanzas," in the Aeolic dialect of Lesbos, and was the inventor of at least one form, the eponymous sapphic.

Both a meter and a stanzaic form, the sapphic is composed of two hendecasyllabic lines followed by a sixteen-syllable line. The sapphic was taken up by many Latin writers (including Catullus and Horace); by the Middle Ages, it had made its way into French, English, German, and Italian, and reappeared in the Renaissance.[1]

One of the most interesting things about Sappho is her position in the history of literature. "Sappho," writes classicist Page duBois, "is a part of a great turn in the poetic tradition and in the very history of the development of subjectivity."[2] In simpler terms, Sappho and a few contemporaries were the first poets to begin writing in the first person. The shift that took place from the Homeric emphasis on heroes and the collective doings in an ancestral past, tales that were repeated over and over through the centuries, to an emphasis on the individual "I" and what it does and experiences, was momentous. Although Sappho's work is still part of an oral tradition, she and other Greek poets of this era initiated a new sense of self, a self that is differentiated from its ancestors, and with this they initiated the birth of lyric poetry.[3]

Meanwhile, back in the twentieth century, at Manhattan's P.S. 19, it was Women's History month and a sixth grade teacher had requested that we read women poets. Another teacher was doing a unit on Ancient Greece, and wanted me to focus on Greek poets. Who would fit the bill better than Sappho? I had taught Sappho at the college and high school levels, yet it had never occurred to me to use her poems with young students. Her poems seemed too sophisticated, and it's hard to talk about Sappho without talking about love and sex. But why not talk about Sappho simply in terms of intensity of feeling? Usually I don't ask kids directly to express their feelings in poems, because it seems too solicited and it's hard for them to escape clichés. They tend to express their feelings anyway, in much more interesting ways, when they write about, say, dreams or colors. But these were classes of sixth graders, eleven- and twelve-year-olds already battling (or exalting in?) massive hormone diffusion. I decided to try out a poem of Sappho's that I use with college students: Fragment 31, in which she turns "greener than grass" with jealousy.

I began by giving a little history. I told the students that most of Sappho's poems were lost, and that all we have left are fragments. I told them the story about the papyri being recovered from a mummified crocodile's mouth. This is a real attention-getter; afterwards, the students are game for anything. With high school kids, I always clearly state that Sappho wrote many of her love poems to women, but with these sixth graders I chose not to broach the subject of Sappho's sexuality. "The gender of one's sexual partner may have been irrelevant to the ancient Greeks," according to duBois, but to many contemporary Americans, it is not. Brave souls may use Sappho as an opportunity to dive into the subject of homosexuality; others may want to say simply that Sappho was from an island in the Aegean close to the coast of Turkey.

Here is most of Fragment 31, which the translator calls "Seizure":

> To me he seems like a god
> the man who sits facing you
> and hears you near as you speak
> softly and laugh
>
> in a sweet echo that jolts
> the heart in my ribs. For now

as I look at you my voice
is empty and

can say nothing as my tongue
cracks and slender fire is quick
under my skin. My eyes are dead
to light, my ears

pound, and sweat pours over me.
I convulse, greener than grass,
and feel my mind slip as I
go close to death...

—Translated by Willis Barnstone

At this point, what we have breaks off into fragments. Part of the poem's beauty is its ambiguity: who is the speaker jealous of, the man who is doing all the talking or the woman who is being talked to, or both?[4] Catullus tried his hand at translating this poem, and Longinus admired how Sappho "summons at the same time soul body hearing tongue sight color, all as though they had wandered off apart from herself."[5]

Yet the emotions are not ambiguous. I asked the kids at P.S. 19 to tell me what was going on with poor old Sappho. Several students immediately shouted out, "She's jealous!" Why? "She sees her guy talking to someone else." I asked them to tell me what happens to Sappho's body when she sees these two talking. "Her heart jumps, she can't hear anything, her tongue cracks, there's a fire under her skin, she can't see, she hears thunder, she starts sweating.... She's dead." They liked the drama. Does she really die, or does she feel like she died? (Here answers varied.) Have any of you ever had really strong feelings about someone, feelings so strong that your ears buzz, you can't see, and maybe you feel you've gone "close to death"? "Yes!" (of course). What kinds of feelings? When? "When my mom left, when Andrew punched me, when my grandmother died, when my dad wouldn't buy me a Sega 64, when I raise my hand and the poetry teacher goes to someone else...." Okay, so what did it feel like? Describe what happened to you physically—make me really see it in an unusual way, so that I know exactly how you felt. Here are some of the poems they wrote:

The Girl I Cannot Have

She looks very nice I like
her but cannot have her I laugh
at all her jokes that are not
funny I like her like I like
a beautiful day but when she
is with a boy I feel like a
bomb's going to blow up

—Tarik Velez

I was happy to see that Tarik tried using enjambment, much like that in the Barnstone translation I had handed out, even though we hadn't yet discussed line breaks.

Beating Up Andrew (excerpt)

When Andrew plans jokes at me
I get angry
The feeling makes me want to punch him
Andrew makes me feel dumb
He makes me feel like fighting someone
But I don't want to fight
So I try hard
not to show my feelings
My mind breaks and feels
like tornadoes coming
and going, to blow my mind away
My head turns
I can't even think
Storms shake my body
It breaks me like
hard metal
I feel like fire is all over me
I can't stand it
I don't know how I am going to end it

—Mary Joyce (Mary J.) Tagatac

Although Mary J.'s poem is pretty much a straight imitation, I was impressed by how she expressed herself so directly about a difficult conflict, and by how the speaker's feelings change. The poem begins with a long, blow-by-blow account of the mounting dispute, during which the poet mostly wants to fight. As the poem continues, the desire for retaliation diminishes; the author begins to focus on what happens to her physically, and how she might end the conflict. Since this poem, Mary J. has been writing up a storm, sometimes two or three poems a day.

Another student wrote about an entirely different "other":

Wanting to Be in Union with the Other Me

When I see myself
the one who comes in my
dreams every night, I feel
why am I trapped here and not
one with him, but a different and
yet similar Matthew sharing one
life and one soul. I am only
with half and not whole with the
other me.

—Matthew Kossey

Admittedly, some of the kids' poems fell into the trap of clichés about first kisses and so on. But the unusual directness in some of the poems made the exercise worth it.

Another Greek girl to use in the classroom is Praxilla. Although Praxilla was first on Antipater's list of mortal muses, even less is known about her than about Sappho. Praxilla was from Sicyon, on the Gulf of Corinth, and was well known in her own time (the fifth century B.C.E.) and for several centuries following.[6] There is evidence that Praxilla wrote poems to be performed publicly at symposia, an unusual honor for a woman, and her drinking-party songs were sung in Athens well beyond her time. These drinking songs often gave advice, such as "O friend, watch out for a scorpion under every stone." One of her most famous poems is "Hymn to Adonis." Adonis, in the afterworld, when asked what he misses from earth, replies:

> Loveliest of what I leave behind is the sunlight,
> and loveliest after that the shining stars, and the moon's face,
> but also cucumbers that are ripe, and pears, and apples.
>
> —*Translated by Richmond Lattimore*

Of the eight remaining fragments attributed to Praxilla, this is the longest, and all that remains of the "Hymn." The story goes that Praxilla was made fun of for her love (in this poem) of simple things. Lattimore cites the saying, "Sillier than Praxilla's Adonis." But the exaltation of simple things is exactly what makes this a wonderful poem.

Although I read and discussed this Praxilla fragment with my sixth graders at P.S. 19, we didn't do any writing from it. But recently I used Praxilla as a writing model, in conjunction with Sappho, while teaching American high school students in a summer program in Paris. In this class, at the Oxbridge Académie, I had the luxury not only of being in Paris, but of three hours in which to work, rather than the standard forty-seven minutes.[7]

The first thing I did with the Oxbridge students was to talk briefly about how we view history—how we tend to imagine it as a kind of seamless fabric even though it is in fact a series of outbursts and events, sometimes simultaneous, sometimes years and years apart. We talked about how there are many kinds of histories occurring at once. I asked the students to imagine everyone in the room writing his or her own history of our times. How would these histories be the same? How would they differ? What if everyone in Paris was asked to write a history? We talked about how a history is constructed by a person—an historian—from a series of fragments (documents, objects, etc.) connected to form a narrative. Can one person be objective? ("No!" the students answered resoundingly. This seemed to touch something.)

From here I told them about the birth of the first-person voice, how Sappho was one of the first poets to use it. We spent some time discussing subjectivity and objectivity. We read Sappho's Fragment 31 and the quotation from Longinus. Once again, the emotional immediacy of the Sappho poem worked its magic on the students. To help make the transition into Praxilla's poem, I wrote another poem on the board, one by Ezra Pound:

> **In a Station of the Metro**
>
> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

Here, I introduced the concept of luminous detail, Pound's idea about the kinds of sensory details that leap out at us and make a poem. Notice how Pound has distinct faces arise out of a crowd in just two lines. Then I read aloud Praxilla's "Hymn to Adonis." What are the details in Praxilla's poem that leap out? We talked about why Praxilla might have found these "simple" things beautiful. (You might try bringing in a cucumber, a pear, and an apple, and slicing up each.) Some students may notice (as mine did, and I hadn't before) how the things that give light in the poem—sunlight, stars, the moon—reflect off the cucumbers and pears and apples, making the latter luminous.

I then asked the students to think of simple things they themselves find beauty in. What do you see every day but take for granted? Can you recall strong, sensory memories of any "luminous details"? (One student said she remembered lying on the closet floor with her mother's purple dress with little yellow moons on it.) What small things would you miss if, like Adonis in Praxilla's poem, you left Earth? I asked them to write down one or two "luminous details" from the past—maybe the first things they remember seeing or smelling or touching. Then I had the students find details in the present. I asked them to note down at least one or two more details while looking carefully and attentively around the Luxembourg Gardens across the street.

When we met up again under a big plane tree, I asked the students to recopy their details on new sheets of paper, ones they could tear out of their notebooks. As the students finished, they handed me their copies, which I proceeded to tear up. This certainly got their attention! I then collected the fragments and handed one to each student.[8]

For the next part of the lesson, I asked the students to resist the temptation of finding out who wrote the fragments of which they were now in possession. Instead, try to rebuild the full original from what you have. Was it a poem? A recipe? A journal entry? You decide. Once they had "reconstituted" a poem (or whatever they decided it was), I asked them to invent a history for the piece and its author, again using clues, but this time from their own reconstructions. What period of history was the poem from? Where was it from? Was the author a man or a woman? What was his or her profession, what were his or

her loves, dislikes? I asked students to use their imaginations, to let strange things come in, if they felt so moved.

When everyone was done, I had each student read first the fragment, then the reconstruction, then the "biography." Ali Berman, from Connecticut, received this on a scrap of paper:

of wind
is grueling
to see who
the other
is over
to recover

From this, she wrote:

entering a blanket of wind
where being new is grueling and dead, as are
the sick, boarded in the strange shadowed houses
too aged to help each other; the other
empty time is over
too raged, too bent to recover

And then:

This poem was written by a woman in her early twenties living in London in 1665 at the time of the Great Plague. She did not survive from the plague nor did anyone else from her house, where she lived with her mother, father, and brother. It was discovered in 1893 in a trunk full of papers.

The exercise seemed to allow room for all kinds of mysteries to creep in. What the students wrote, and how they responded to the exercise, gave me the sense that they felt a certain liberation from the need to "construct" a poem of their own. Recognizing the fragments from their own original notes in someone else's newly made piece—and comparing the biographies to the real-life authors—was exciting, too.

After everybody had read their pieces, we talked about Sappho and Praxilla again. What had they learned about the effects of history on a writer's work or biography? "It makes me see how we don't know at all who Sappho really was, and how they keep trying to piece her together again," said one student. Beyond that, many of them had created interesting new pieces from fragments left by someone else (much like Catullus did with Sappho). I encouraged them to think of these new creations as their own. Jessica Shaefer started with this:

moving
nd vocal
only ex
The
on me, the
the world. Next to the laugh is
green and brown.
a crowded
the hot sun,
perfect
lt or
moving pho

And ended up with this:

moving
physical and vocal
terraces only exist
in my mouth. The
sun came down on me, the
tongue of the world. Next to the laugh is
green and brown. I still cry out in the
morning of a crowded cosmos but for
the hot sun, pounding again a
perfect murder, slaying my
guilt or pulling itself like
a moving photograph across me.

Given these results, I'm starting to cook up ways to teach poems by the other fourteen known women of antiquity.

Notes

1. You can find a twentieth-century example of the sapphic in Ezra Pound's "Appurit."

2. Page duBois, *Sappho Is Burning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 6.

3. Sappho and the other poets who initiated this shift in consciousness usually performed their poems alone rather than with a chorus. Generally, they performed to the accompaniment of a lyre; hence the term "lyric poet." Sappho is said to have played the lyre herself and even to have invented an instrument.

4. Translators have argued both sides, although in the original the pronouns make it fairly clear that Sappho is addressing the woman.

5. It is actually because of Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime* that we have Fragment 31. Quoted in duBois, op. cit., p. 67.

6. Sicyon still exists—barely—as a small fishing village called Sikya (which means *fig*), about an hour from the city of Corinth. In antiquity, there was a statue of Praxilla in the town square.

7. If you are working in standard class periods, I would suggest dividing this lesson into three parts, or perhaps cutting out the first part dealing with Sappho.

8. This process can be time-consuming. An ideal thing to do is to have the students note down the details in one class. Then you can tear the students' papers—or better, photocopies of them—into fragments at home, and continue the exercise the following day. Be sure to use one fragment from each student.

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Pictures of a Gone World

Using Keats and Shelley

by Laura Gamache

FOR THE PAST SIX YEARS, I HAVE BEEN leading poetry workshops in Lynn Black's fifth and sixth grade classroom at Lake Washington Community School in Kirkland, Washington. My classes always tie in to the school's yearlong focus of study. This year, they are studying ancient Egypt and Greece.*

My first day, freshly ruined pottery shards dotted the windowsill, a Grecian temple entrance projected from the far wall, twenty-eight foam-core buildings were rising from blueprint floorplans, and Grecian urn shapes drawn with colored pens were taped under the window as examples of symmetry. I was to come in for ninety-minute sessions twice a week for four weeks. The lengthy sessions allowed ample time for me to read aloud a poetry model, have kids talk about it, present the writing assignment, give everyone time to write, and have time left for them to read aloud what they wrote.

The first day, I talked about the time we would spend together, took in what was displayed around the room for clues to what they were studying, and asked them to tell me what they had found most interesting in their study of the ancient world. I used what they told me to create the poetry lessons. Among the things they mentioned were pharaohs, hieroglyphics, Egyptian art, and the desert. All of these together made me think of Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias." The kids also were interested in Greek pottery and painting, which reminded me of John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." I decided to use both poems on the same day, since Keats and Shelley were contemporaries and friends, and because the poems had similar themes and subject matter. Reading the two together would serve to point these things out without my having to say anything. In his book, *Making Your Own Days*, Kenneth Koch wrote:

> Much of what I have learned about poetry...has come about...unconsciously, without my knowing it, as a result of my reading and of my feelings. This combination, working in secret, accomplishes a lot for a writer.

My poetry teaching method is based on osmosis, the unconscious acquisition of poetry knowledge through reading poems and having feelings about them. I give kids experiences with poems that really move me and that I think will really move them, and with a minimum of editorial comment, have them write, inspired by that source. I find that what they write shows they have absorbed new ways of using language from a model poem, and have been able to filter their own feelings through language, all in the course of twenty-five or thirty minutes of in-class writing time.

For our experience with Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Shelley's "Ozymandias," I gave the kids copies so they could follow as I read the poems aloud. I believe that seeing as well as hearing the writing is important, that how a poem looks on the page, where the line breaks

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* See addendum for my eight-visit curriculum.

are, and even the spelling teaches kids more about how to make poems. I read with attention to the sounds and the pleasure I got from them, sometimes taking the liberty of repeating certain lines.

Both of these poems are very visual. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" depicts the different scenes painted on an ancient Greek vase. "Ozymandias" describes an enormous statue of ancient Egypt's Ramses II, and includes a powerful paraphrase of its inscription. The urn and the statue are real historical objects.

Before I read "Ozymandias," I told the kids what I discovered from the footnote in my *Norton Anthology of British Literature,* that Ozymandias was the Greek name for Ramses II, Pharaoh of Egypt in the thirteenth century B.C.E., and that the hieroglyphics on his ancient tomb had been translated just a few years before Shelley wrote his poem. The hieroglyphics translated to:

> I am Ozymandias, king of kings; if anyone wishes to know what I am and where I lie, let him surpass me in some of my exploits.

I read the poems once each, and then asked the kids to draw a picture of an image from one of them. Then, as they drew, I read the poems again. I wanted the language of the poems to flow over the kids, and I knew that drawing would free them not only to see the pictures the poets were making with their words, but also unconsciously to take in Keats's and Shelley's ways of using language. Also, I freely expressed my liking of the poems. While they drew, I wrote on the board:

> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
> Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.
>
> —*John Keats*

Next to that I wrote:

> My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
> Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
>
> —*Percy Bysshe Shelley*

I read those lines twice out loud for emphasis.

I had to read the "happy, happy boughs...happy, happy love!" section of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" a couple of extra times because the kids really liked it:

> Ah, happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed
> Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
> And, happy melodist, unwearied,
> Forever piping songs for ever new;
> More happy love! More happy, happy love!

Although I prefer to let the poems' meanings seep in through rereading, rather than by explaining, I did talk a little about how the ancient world had opened up to Europeans in Keats's and Shelley's time, how Lord Elgin had recently brought ancient Greek sculptures back to England from the Parthenon, and how Keats had written about that. I mentioned that the British thought nothing of this looting of Greece's history. The kids had read about the Rosetta Stone, which facilitated the first translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics only about thirty years before "Ozymandias" was written. I talked about how both these poets were fascinated by the ancient world, whose artifacts were so recently accessible, and interested in the permanence of artifacts and the impermanence of human beings. I pointed out that they had both died young. While I did say that these men were writing in the English of the early nineteenth century, which was why their work might sound somewhat old-fashioned, I didn't dwell on that. After twenty minutes or so, I asked the kids to write a poem about the drawing they had made.

I didn't want the model poems to be heard as museum pieces. Having the kids make art while listening, then write their poems in response to their own artwork, helped keep them from writing stilted late twentieth-century translations of second-generation British Romantic Poetry. They also were able to have fun and stay engaged while drawing, which shows in their writing. A month before this lesson I had used a short-lined ode by Pablo Neruda as a model poem. As is obvious from the poems that follow, many of these kids continued to write skinny poems that creep down the left margin.

POEMS INSPIRED BY "ODE ON A GRECIAN URN"

> As the wind rustles your
> hat, O Piper, an ox is
> slaughtered in honor of a
> god. I would be happy
> if I was you, piping and
> playing away in the gentle
> breeze....
>
> —*Joe Jennings, fifth grade*

The Piper

There he was,
the piper with
his smooth pipes
tucked under his
arm. Then he sat
down under the
nearest tree
and started
his morning
song (a-ra a-ra)
he piped as the

birds chirped
and as the chipmunks
scuttled through
the underbrush.
Then as the sun
was blazing overhead
he started his
afternoon song (a-ral a-ral)
he piped as the
squirrels munched
on nuts and as
fish dove in the
river. Then as the
sun was coming
down he started
his Evening song (a-rale a-rale)
he piped as
the owl lunged
and as the mice
ran through
the woods.
Then when the
moon was overhead
he stood up and
left. Waiting for
the next day.

—Adrienne Nova, fifth grade

Ode to a Piper

Oh there he sits
beneath the tree
piping oh so merrily.
His pipe is made of
oak, and is the color
of his cloak.

—Ian O'Donnell, fifth grade

There,
under a small tree
sat a piper
piping notes only
he can hear.
As he sits
the wind shuffles
the leaves on
the branches
of the tree he sits
under. Only
he can
hear the shuffling.
While he plays
his pipe
he hears the
birds
chirping on the
branches
above him. Only he
can hear the
chirping.
While he sits in
the green grass playing,
he hears the
music of
crickets while they
rub their legs
together. Only he
can hear the music. Only
he.

—Elizabeth Spouse, fifth grade

This Is a Tree That Will Never Be Bare

This is a tree
that will
never be bare unless
I erase the
leaves from it.
This is a tree that
will never be bare
unless the wind
blows hard.
This is a tree that
will never be
bare unless it
falls and dies.
This is a tree
that will never
be bare unless
I pick the leaves.

—Arielle Albinger, fifth grade

POEMS INSPIRED BY "OZYMANDIAS"

In the darky dusk of dusky dawn
there is a statue in the distance.
The black bluey black blue of
the statue against orange sky.
The orange sky is so yellow it
is orange. The sword and shield
say "This is my place, stay clear."
I still wonder where its head
is and what that weird stone is.

—Mac McKenna, fifth grade

Ozymandias Lives

During the year of
1800
I was exploring
in one of

Egypt's
greatest deserts
when
I came upon
a
traveler
who said,
"Two vast and
trunkless legs of stone
stand in the
desert...."
When the
traveler left me in
silence I went
to explore
what
the traveler was
talking about.
There, on the
sand
half sunk,
a shattered visage lies
whose frown
and wrinkled lip
and sneer of cold command
tell that its sculptor
well those passions
read
which yet survive.
Ozymandias,
King of Kings,
Lives.

—Katie Lombard, sixth grade

The headless and
bodyless statue stands
there proud and short
for it has only legs,
the rest of it buried
deep in the sand.
Its head detached
from its body and
its body detached
from its head.
His hand on the
pedestal that bears
ancient hieroglyphics. I
stand there looking
blank. What should
I think what should
I say? I say it's headless,
that's great! Its body neck-
down in the sand struggling
to breathe.

—Emily Shields, sixth grade

Ye broken head upon the sand resting
near the feet. I wonder how they thought
of you oh great and ancient statue.
You hear the wind and feel the sun.

—Christine Bull, sixth grade

Ozymandias

Across the vast stretch of land,
on its side,
lays a cracked head,
it is sneering with evil.
Its ancient seat is atop,
really far up,
two thick pillars.
They made the legs
of some Egyptian guy.
On his sand-worn pedestal
is a piece of writing.
No one knows what it says,
so I decided it says
blah blah blah.
Once in awhile
out of the vast echo of blah,
squeaking is heard saying
words like surpass,
exploits,
and Ozymandias.

—Ashwin Kumar, sixth grade

The Mad Man

There is a so-called
thing in the middle of the
desert that has
a head in the ground and hard mad
legs on a tilted platform that
is sunk into the sand
and he has big buff arms
and big buff legs; he was a
big buff man.
All the people of his time
must have been scared of
him I was and I didn't even live
there at that time.
But right above it is
a good-looking
stained-glass sky and his pants
are stained glass too.

—Donn Buck, fifth grade

Oh Statue

Oh statue!
reaching out to the blazing hot sun.
Oh statue!
how you have aged.
Oh statue!
how the head that you lost stares at me.
Oh statue!
your bronze body in a sea of sand.
Oh statue!
your inscription, 'tis so interesting
that king scorpion is looking at
it.

—*Angus Tierney*

Addendum: Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece Curriculum *(Eight Sessions)*

1. Monday, April 20. Introductions by telling something that matters. I wrote responses on the board and read total as list poem. I asked them about their ancient Egypt/Greece study, to gather ideas for the following sessions. They wrote individual "What Matters?" poems and shared them.

2. Wednesday, April 22. "*Smellorama.*" The ancient Egyptians and Greeks were enamored of unguents and perfumes. The class smelled coffee, cedar chips, vanilla, lemon peel, and Mentholatum, and took notes. I asked: What would this smell be if this smell were—

a color
an animal
an article of clothing
a place on earth
weather
a sound?

What memory comes to you when you smell this?

They wrote a poem from one of their sets of notes, and shared.

3. Monday, April 27. *Miu: The Ancient Egyptians and Their Cats.* I read them "Ode to the Cat" by Pablo Neruda and the cat parts of "Jubilate Agno" by Christopher Smart. Each student got a cat postcard and wrote his or her poem from the cat's point of view.

4. Wednesday, April 28. *It's Ancient Greek to Me.* I read from Homer's *Odyssey*, translated by Richmond Lattimore. I chose the section in which Odysseus's men encounter Circe and are turned into pigs; the part in which Circe (mysteriously kinder and gentler) tells Odysseus about the Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis; and the scene in which Odysseus has his men, their ears plugged with wax, lash him to the mast so he can hear the Sirens. The kids freewrote for ten minutes. I gave them a handout with Ancient Greek words that are part of the English language (*physician, choir, rhythm, phrase, pneumatic*, etc.). Each chose six words from his or her own writing, and we as a class chose six Ancient Greek words. Using the two lists, they wrote six-line "Process Poems," with one word from each of the lists on each line, a variation of the "process poem" exercise described in *Poetry Everywhere* by Jack Collom and Sheryl Noethe (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1994).

5. Monday, May 4. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by John Keats and "Ozymandias" by Percy Bysshe Shelley. Students drew a picture based on one of the two poems, and then wrote a poem from the picture they drew. I taught using texts from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, fifth edition, but prefer texts from *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, the revised shorter edition that updates the spelling, replacing *for ever* with *forever*, *desart* with *desert*, etc.

6. Wednesday, May 6. I read them "Tale of a Shipwrecked Sailor," an ancient Egyptian tall tale in verse from 2000 B.C.E., from *Echoes of Egyptian Voices: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Poetry*, translated by John L. Foster. They wrote tall tales, some in verse, some using the frame story from "Tale of a Shipwrecked Sailor," whose first-person narrator uses his tall tale to try to divert his listener from punishing him.

7. Monday, May 18. *The Egyptian Desert.* I read them Florence Nightingale's responses to the desert from her 1849–1850 Egypt correspondence, and desert descriptions from *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje. I also read them two contemporary Arab poems about the desert ("Expectation" by Fouzi El-Asmar and "The Lost Mirage" by Ahmad Muhammad al Khalifa) from *The Space between Our Footsteps*, edited by Naomi Shihab Nye.

8. Wednesday, May 20. Everyone chose one or two pieces to read aloud for our end-of-the-year reading at a local coffee house, and up to three pieces to be included in the class anthology. They read their work to each other in pairs and revised, then read aloud to the group, as final practice for the evening reading.

If I Had Wings

Classics and Creative Writing in a Middle School Classroom

by Mimi Herman

ON A COLD MONDAY IN THE MIDDLE OF March, we gathered around tables in the media center of Madison Middle School: thirty-three eighth graders—mostly born and raised in the mountains of western North Carolina—and me.

For the past eight years, I had worked as a writer-in-the-schools, teaching students from ages ten through eighteen and their teachers, working with poetry, fiction, and journal writing. But since I usually only had a week in each school, I rarely got to look at great works of literature with my students, to get them excited about the writers who had inspired me as I was growing up.

When I first heard of Teachers & Writers Collaborative's Classics in the Classroom project, I thought immediately of Madison County, North Carolina, where I had spent a semester as writer-in-residence the previous year, working with teachers to incorporate writing into their curriculum. The project seemed particularly appropriate for Madison County, since its only middle school had recently lost funding for special programs for gifted students, and needed to offer these students educational challenges that would interest them. Rather than limit this project to students who had been labeled gifted, however, I chose to expand our idea of giftedness and open up the project to any eighth grade student interested in attending.

"What makes a 'classic?'" I asked these students on our first day together. "What makes it different from an ordinary book?"

"It's popular," one said.

"It was written by a well-known author," said another.

And a third, "It's been a top-selling book for a while, *at least* two or three weeks."

"Okay," I said, "so why should I read a classic, instead of going out hunting or riding my four-wheeler? Write me a letter, convince me it's worth my time."

"If you don't put anything in your head, nothing will come out. No reading, no ideas," one of the two Davids wrote in his letter.

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"If you read a book it will stay in your brain for a very long time," wrote the other David.

That sounded convincing enough to me, so we continued from there. I had collected my own favorite classics for these students to read. I wanted to use these works to inspire the kids to write their own poems and stories. The works I'd chosen had a common bond: they all dealt with how to live wisely and well in a world that is not always wise or good. I was asking these kids to read some pretty tough stuff: Aesop and Jean de la Fontaine, Confucius and François de la Rochefoucauld, Ovid and Horace. And of course the writing assignments were equally demanding: translating la Fontaine's fables and writing their own, examining the personae of Midas, Daedalus, Icarus, and Atalanta to write from their points of view, and creating original odes and aphorisms.

It might help, I decided, if we had some muses floating around to inspire us. So, on the second day, we talked about the Muses, and muses in general, and then we invented some, trying to coax them into our own lives through help-wanted ads, "personals," and simple descriptions:

> My muse has the wings of a falcon, the head of a reptile, and his back feet have large spurs of ivory. He loves adventure and that's what I write. My muse helps me in my writing. His fiery breath burns the words in my heart and I put them on paper. His reptile body slips through my head and helps me think.
>
> —*David Messer*

Help Wanted

> Someone who understands, cares, and is loyal. Someone who can teach and share and listen. Someone different, loving, and kind; someone with lots of energy and talent, with common sense, intelligence, trustworthy. Someone fun to be with.
>
> —*Shane Franklin*

> Emily Dickinson inspired me to write. The way she sees the world, the things that happen all around her. She can make the most traumatizing accident seem romantic. The way she can make the most boring thing turn into action. The way she puts down her words, that's how she inspired me to write.
>
> —*Miranda Sawyer*

Help Wanted

Need someone great at encouraging writers. Need someone who is very patient because it may take a while to catch on and start writing. Someone who knows how to solve problems that may come to me while writing. I want someone who doesn't mind staying with me for long hours to help, because it may take a long time.

—*Jason Penland*

On that day, I asked each of the students to choose a book they considered a classic, that they would read in addition to the work we were doing in class. We had such a short time together, and I wanted to expose them to a number of different writers and writing styles. But I also wanted them to experience the feeling of falling in love with a classic. I figured the best way to make this possible was to allow them to choose their own books. I also asked them to keep reading journals, containing brief summaries of what they'd read, as well as words and ideas that had intrigued them. This way they were able to engage more deeply in the books they read, and I got a sense of how their reading was progressing.

In the months preceding the residency, I'd put a great deal of thought into how I could immerse these students in the possibilities offered by language. I wanted them to have the opportunity, early in the first week, to think about the sounds of words as well as the meanings. I also wanted them to play with language as if it were a puzzle. So I prepared an unusual exercise for them. I asked them to translate Jean de la Fontaine's "Le corbeau et le renard" ("The Raven and the Fox") into English.

Maître Corbeau, sur un arbre perché,
Tenoit en son bec un fromage.
Maître Renard, par l'odeur alléché,
Lui tint à peu près ce langage:
"Hé! bonjour, monsieur du Corbeau.
Que vous êtes joli! que vous me semblez beau!
Sans mentir, si votre ramage
Se rapporte à votre plumage,
Vous êtes le phénix des hôtes de ces bois."
A ces mots le Corbeau ne se sent pas de joie;
Et pour montrer sa belle voix,
Il ouvre un large bec, laisse tomber sa proie.
Le Renard s'en saisit, et dit: "Mon bon Monsieur,
Apprenez que tout flatteur
Vit aux dépens de celui qui l'écoute:
Cette leçon vaut bien un fromage, sans doute."
Le Corbeau, honteux et confus,
Jura, mais un peu tard, qu'on ne l'y prendroit plus.

—*Jean de la Fontaine*

"You *did* hear about the French requirement for this class, didn't you?" I teased them, straightfaced, as I handed out the poem in the original. "You *are* all fluent?"

Stunned, they looked everywhere but at me. Some glanced down at their notebooks, wondering whether they should just pack it in and go back to their regular classes.

"Oh, it's okay," I assured them. "Just do the best you can."

We looked at the rhyme scheme of the poem. They listened as I read. I'd expected at first that they would "translate" the French into English words that sounded similar, so that their poems would approximate the sound of the original, but would vary in meaning. A few did, but most surprised me by wanting to do a direct, accurate, word-for-word translation. "*Monsieur* means *mister*, right?" they asked. "Is *phénix* the same as *phoenix*?"

After a while of letting the students muddle through, I pulled out a cheat sheet, a glossary with the English equivalents of about half of the words in the poem. I hadn't planned to give it to them until they'd finished their mock translations, but they were so intent on getting everything exactly right that it seemed a shame not to offer it to them.

"As a reward for working so hard," I told them, "I'll bring you some translations of this poem tomorrow." I decided that if I made them work hard on the translation, reading the poem in English would be an easy pleasure.

They labored over the assignment, taking it home with them and bringing back their translations the next morning, which were delightful in their aptness and language.

One student, Shana, translated the poem in this way:

Sir Raven, on a tree
Sitting with cheese in his beak.
Sir Fox, how are you today?
Very fine, thank you.
Hey, you speak my language.
Hey, Hello, Sir Raven,
Said the fox.
Did you know you are very handsome
Without a mention of your feathers?
It is very bright.
You are the most loving animal
And you have a beautiful voice
For having such a large beak.
You are on my foot.
Move it, my good sir.

—*Shana Jarvis*

We went on to look at translations of la Fontaine I had brought in, as well as two translations of the Aesop version of the same fable. "Why are the translations different?" one student asked. "Shouldn't they be the same in English if it's only written one way in French?" We discussed the difficulties of translation, how a literal

word-for-word translation might be transformed into a variety of different poems, depending on the rhythm and rhyme and syntax of the English version that each poet created.

After translating from French, writing in English was easy. We started the third day by brainstorming for proverbs they'd heard growing up, which could be used as the morals of their own fables:

A man's work begins with the sun, but a woman's work is never done.
The early bird catches the worm.
You can't stay up with the owls if you want to soar with the eagles.
If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

In a short time we came up with over fifty. To give them a sense of aphorisms from other cultures I tossed in a few from Confucius, such as:

The cautious seldom err.
To go beyond is as wrong as to fall short.
Recompense injury with justice and recompense kindness with kindness.

I also added the cynicism of la Rochefoucauld, gems like these:

Self-love is the greatest of all flatterers.
We all have strength enough to endure the misfortunes of others.

The students were surprised to find how many of Confucius's sayings from *The Analects* had become part of our contemporary Western culture. They were amused at the maxims of la Rochefoucauld, and found a great deal of truth in them. I saw a number of heads nodding in agreement as we read these out loud.

Next, I gave the students some of Aesop's fables to use as models. We discussed how fables worked, using animals to tell a brief, pointed story that resulted in a moral. Then I suggested they might use any of the proverbs we'd discussed to create their own fables, using either the verse style of la Fontaine or the prose style of Aesop.

They made me laugh, these kids, when they came back the next day with their fables. One student, Julia Hood, wrote a story of a daredevil duck and a chicken chicken. The chicken—who gets its feathers singed and a swift kick from a mule for following the duck's lead—finally draws the line when the duck suggests a flying race across the lake while lugging bricks attached to them by ropes. The duck, sadly, falls into the lake and drowns. The moral? "It's better to be a live chicken than a dead duck." Julia was kind enough to provide a postscript: "No live animal was harmed in the writing of this story."

Another student, Miranda, adapted Aesop's "The Fox and the Goat." She chose a different pair of animals from those in Aesop's tale, although she put them in the same well. In the end, Miranda decided to offer her own moral.

Dog and Cat

One time after a rainstorm, a cat tripped and fell into a well. The cat only stayed alive by staying on an island of concrete. The well smelled of a musty smell and was as wet as a small lake, and the young cat hated it.

As a dog passed, he heard the cat singing to himself.

"Say, Cat. What are you doing in that well?" he asked.

"Oh, haven't you heard? All the water on the earth is going to dry up! I'm staying where there is water! Nobody is going to have water but me!" he replied.

"Oh, dear! Cat, may I please join you? There will soon be no water up here! Please?"

"All right. Jump on down. But be careful, it's slippery."

"Oh, thank you, Cat!"

The large brown dog jumped into the well and again thanked the cat.

"No, Dog. Thank *you*."

"Because you were lonely?" he guessed.

As he hopped onto Dog's back, the cat said in reply: "No, dear Dog. I had fallen into the well and couldn't get out. Until a dumb dog—you, my dear friend—came along and helped me get out, only you didn't know it. Now my dear friend, I leave you with some words of advice: Never trust the advice of a man with difficulties."

At this, the cat jumped out of the well and ran off into the street.

—Miranda Poncier

Richard deserted the animal kingdom altogether. He also came up with a contemporary fable, one suited to this neck of the woods, about whether Chevy or Ford makes the better truck.

The Chevy said to the Ford, "I can beat you today."
The Ford just smiled and said, "There is no way."
The Ford said, "Let's race and see."
And the Chevy made his brags, "You'll never catch me."
Then there came a Pontiac to talk to the two,
And he said, "I can beat both of you."
The Chevrolet said, "You will not beat me."
The Pontiac said, "Just wait and see.
I will beat you from the start
Because I will race while you go down to Wal-Mart."
The Ford kept quiet because deep down he knew,
"I can beat both of you."
They were off as they all spun a wheel
And the Ford passed them both like they were sitting still.
The Ford won in a breeze
As the Chevrolet and Pontiac were doing just fifteen.
The lesson to be learned from this fable of mine

Is that the Ford will always beat a Chevy or any other kind.

—Richard Reese

Being a Chevy person myself, I tried to argue Richard out of his conclusion, but with no success.

Between the first week of the residency and the second, we had a month apart, in which I taught elsewhere and the students continued to read the classics they'd chosen and to write in their reading journals.

We began our second week with the myths of Ovid. I chose the Rolfe Humphries translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, because it seemed both lyrical and accessible to a middle school reader. (I thought briefly about having them do their own translations, but decided that it might be a bit much to ask them to tackle both French *and* Latin in a month!) I chose three pieces from Ovid: the stories of Midas, Daedalus and Icarus, and Atalanta. I was fairly certain they would be familiar with the first, thought some of them might have heard of the second, and assumed the third would be new to them.

We read Ovid aloud in class. These teenagers at first read tentatively, then with increased confidence, taking great pleasure in the language. We read all three tales, discussing each in depth: clarifying unfamiliar language, talking about what various lines meant, how the characters must have felt. Then I asked them to write their own pieces based on the *Metamorphoses*. Each student chose a character from Ovid, either one of the principals—Midas, Bacchus, Daedalus, Icarus, Atalanta, Venus, Hippomenes—or a peripheral character—such as the fisherman watching Daedalus and Icarus as they flew or the soldier of Minos who saw the father and son escape. Using what they previously knew of these myths, what they'd learned from Ovid, what they'd learned of love and parents and children and life in their thirteen or fourteen years, the students wrote persona poems, telling the stories as if they were the characters.

I touch a tree and watch the leaves.
All the fiber the gold weaves.
It starts down the lively branches.
On the average day, what's your chances?
Down the branch—and to the roots
Further and further the gold shoots.
After that I went a-walking
Everything I touch, gold stalking,
All the people pointing, talking.

—Sarah Leonard

I know now
that such a gift was foul.
It brought me such great pleasure, such riches:
Lovely streets with golden ditches.

—Stephanie Fain

The students spent that day working on their persona poems and sharing them. The next day, we looked at Horace's ode, "Better to Live, Licinius." We examined the ode form and discussed line breaks and ambiguity. Then each student chose someone who might benefit from advice and wrote odes in the style of Horace. The poems we did in these two days proved to be the richest of all the pieces we did together.

Fortress of Loneliness

Always on the loose,
Like a snake that sheds its skin
Will one day crawl under a rock to hide from itself.

Like a hoot owl's worst nightmares,
Endless nights and restless days.
Will the bad dreams ever be gone?

Like a dog with disease,
Driving itself mad,
Going in circles, turning, turning.

And poof, everything is gone
When they bury you.

—Miranda Sawyer

Rescue from Drugs

I wish I knew why you would
like to be this way. I hope
you will listen to what I'm saying.

Clumsy and forgetful is the
path you want to take. Trying
to run from your mistakes.

Like a house flooded and
washed away. You have no control.
Please come back to me.

—Kim Gunter

Toward the end of the residency, I still had so much I wanted to share with these students. So I decided to offer a couple of days in which they could choose what they wanted to write from a variety of centers. On one table, I placed clippings from *The Weekly World News* and *The National Enquirer*, offering the students the opportunity to transform the myths they had read into tabloid stories. Midas seemed to be one of the more popular characters to interview. One student, Holly Rector, wrote, "'People had to feed me,' sobs Midas."

"'I'm very thankful that I have my life back, even though I don't have a lot of gold,'" wrote another, Lydia Briggs.

On another table I placed bookmaking materials and offered students the chance to write and illustrate

children's books of the fables they had written. At a third table the students could write myths to explain why something existed in the world:

Why We Can't Understand the Language of Animals

Once, a long time ago, all the animals and people got along with each other and understood each other's languages. But somewhere along the way they got into arguments over who does what and how things are done. Their gods got tired of all the bickering, so they eliminated the language of animals and humans to silence the problems. So today the animals have their language and people have their language.

—*Matthew Anglin*

At other tables they could create more persona poems, translate a number of passages from the maxims of la Rochefoucauld, write additional fables, or transform the fables they had written into poems.

Finally, on our last day, we chose the poems that would be included in an anthology, peer-edited, and revised them. We finished the residency with a reading and celebration of the work we had done. It was an exciting conclusion, leaving us sad to make our good-byes and looking forward to the next time we'd meet.

These kids, unlike Icarus, understood how their wings worked and how to use them wisely:

I was alone in my boat
resting for a while
When I heard a strange rustle
on the nearby isle.
As I looked over I saw
A man and his son building wings.

I looked off
starting to get back
to my fishing
but then a shadow
was cast
on my boat.
As I looked up toward the sky I saw the boy
with the large feathers on his back.

He started to tremble
as if he would fall. With fear in his eyes
he drew near
to the dark blue water
now close by.
He shrieked one last time before
he plunged deep below.
All that's left
is the wings of death
floating on with no regrets.

—*Rebecca Edwards*

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PLUGS

This April, help celebrate the fourth annual **National Poetry Month**. For ideas that can make poetry more fun for your students, visit T&W's World Wide Web site at http://www.twc.org, or the web site of the Academy of American Poets at http://www.poets.org.

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In a national effort to connect everyone involved with writers-in-the-schools programs and the teaching of imaginative writing, T&W has developed a new resource on the World Wide Web. **WriteNet** is accessible at http://www.writenet.org, as well as through T&W's own web site located at http://www.twc.org.