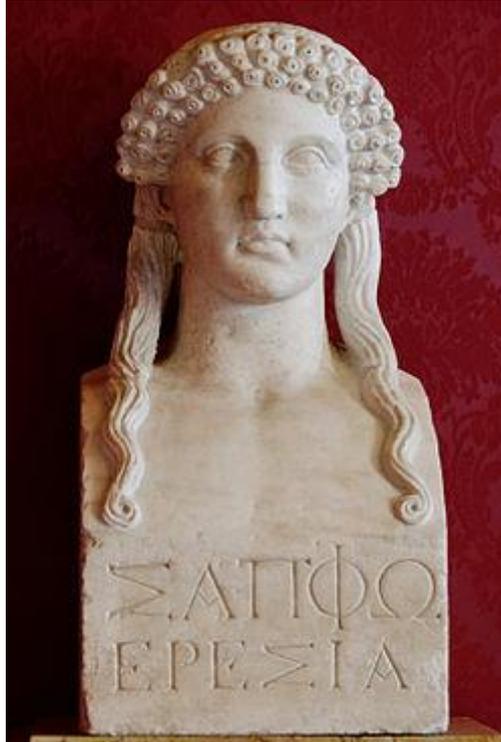


SAPPHO and THE WORLD OF LESBIAN POETRY

By Olga Maieron

**Text reduction from William Harris, Prof. Em. Middlebury College
and pictures from various sources**



When we speak of Sappho, the poet from the island of Lesbos, and her poetry, we are thinking of something very special, a transcendental kind of poetry which is somehow purer, fairer, lovelier than anything else in the Western world.

What is Known

The poet Sappho lived between the seventh- sixth century B.C. on the island of Lesbos, which is situated in the Northeastern Aegean

We do not know the exact date of her birth or death, but it has been suggested that she was alive from about 610 B.C to 570 B.C.

Her family is known to have been wealthy merchants; Lesbos in the sixth century B.C. was very prosperous. It is known that women of Lesbos at this time were exceptionally liberated and moved freely in social and religious circles. Lesbos was the center of a flourishing school of lyric poetry. Some of the other

Lesbian poets of this period were Terpander and Alcaeus, and there were several other women poets. Sappho was born in either Eresus or Mytilene, but lived most of her life in Mytilene.



410 a.C., London, British Museum, Lekythos

(8)

It is said that she flung herself off of the Leucadian promontory over unrequited love for a beautiful boatman named Phaon. This is completely unsubstantiated (if not out of character). This myth formed the basis for several romantic poems about her, for example in Leopardi's poem entitled "l'Ultimo canto di Saffo" (Saffo's last Song).

Sappho the poetess was a very special innovator. There is evidence in several of the poems that Sappho may have been part of a circle of women who were priestesses of the goddess Aphrodite, the so called "thiasos". The purpose of this circle was the complete education of young greek noble women, to prepare them to be perfect wives.

EPITHALAMIA, BRIDAL SONGS

Fr. 91=fr.111LP

Ἵψοι δὴ τὸ μέλαθρον,
Υ᾽μήναον
ἀέρρετε τέκτονες ἄνδρες,
Υ᾽μήναον
γάμβρος ἔρχεται ἴσοσ Ἄ'ρευϊ,
[Υ᾽μήναον]
ανδρος μεγάλο πόλυ μείζων
[Υ᾽μήναον]

Raise high the roof beams, Workmen!
Hymenaeus!
Like Ares comes the bridgroom!
Hymenaeus!
Taller than all tall men!
Hymenaeus!

H. T. Wharton

Tirate su l'architrave – o Imeneo- forza levatelo, capomastri, - o Imeneo- lo sposo è simile ad Ares
- o Imeneo- molto più alto di un uomo alto.

Fr. 93=fr.105 A LP

Οἶον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρεύθεται ἄκρω ἐπ' ὕσδῳ
ἄκρον ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρόπνες,
οὐ μὰν ἐκλελάθοντ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐδύναντ' ἐπίκεσθαι.

As the sweet-apple blushes on the end of the bough, the very end of the
bough, which the gatherers overlooked, nay overlooked not but could not
reach.

H. T. Wharton

Come la dolce mela rosseggia sull'alto ramo, alta su quello più alto,
la dimenticarono i raccoglitori di mele ...
no, non la dimenticarono, ma non riuscirono a raggiungerla.

Fr. 94= fr.105 C LP

**Οἶαν τὰν ὑάκινθον ἐν οὔρεσι ποίμενες ἄνδρες.
πόσσι καταστείβοισι, χαμαι δ' ἐπιπορφύρει ἄθος.**

*As on the hills the shepherds trample the hyacinth under foot, and the
flower darkens on the ground.*

H. T. Wharton

Come giaggiolo sulle montagne i pastori calpestarono con i piedi, a terra il fiore rosso..

(Compare Catullus, xi. 21-24:)

Fr. 95=fr 104 A LP

**Ἔσπερε, πάντα φέρων, ὅσα φαίνολις ἐσκέδασ' αἰῶσ,
φέρεις οἶν, φέρεις αἶγα, φέρεις ἄπυ ματέρι παῖδα.**

*Evening, thou that bringest all that bright morning scattered; thou
bringest the sheep, the goat, the child back to her mother.*

H. T. Wharton

*Venere , porti tutto ciò che l'aurora rilucente disperse, riporti l'agnello, riporti la capra, ma porti via
alla madre la figlia*

Thus imitated by Byron:--

*O Hesperus, thou bringest all good things--
Home to the weary, to the hungry cheer,
To the young bird the parent's brooding wings,
The welcome stall to the o'erlaboured steer;
Whate'er of peace about our hearthstone clings,
Whate'er our household gods protect of dear,
Are gathered round us by thy look of rest;
Thou bring'st the child too to its mother's breast.*

Byron's Don Juan, iii. 107

Fr. 109=fr.104 A LP

A. Παρθενί α, παρθενί α, ποῖ με λί ποισ' ἄποί χη;

B. Οὐκέτι ἦξω πρὸς σέ, οὐκέτι ἦξω.

A. Maidenhood, maidenhood, whither art thou gone away from me!

B. Never again will I come to thee, never again.

H. T. Wharton

A. Verginità, verginità, dove mi sfuggi dopo avermi abbandonato?

B. Non verrò mai più da te, mai più tornerò.



At the time poetry was principally used in ceremonial contexts for example in the symposium or to extoll the deeds of brave soldiers (elegia, epitafio etc.) . But Sappho had the audacity to use the first person in poetry and to discuss deep human emotions, particularly the erotic, in ways that had never been approached by anyone before her.

Fr.130 V

Ἔρος δαῦτέ μ' ὀ λυσιμέλεσ δόνει,
γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον.

**Now Love, the ineluctable, dominates and shakes my being,
and fills me with bitter-sweetness.**

**Di nuovo Eros che spezza le membra mi sconvolge,
dolceamara, invincibile creatura..**

Fr.47 V

Ἔρος δαῦτ' ἐτίναξεν ἔμοι φρένας,
ἄνεμος κατ ὄρος δρύσιν ἐμπέσων.

**Now Eros shakes my soul, a wind on the mountain
overwhelming the oaks.**

**Eros ha sconvolto il mio cuore come un vento che si abbatte
sulle querce in montagna**

Fr.3 Bergk

Ἄστερες μὲν ἀμφὶ κάλαν σελάνναν
αἶψ' ἀπυκρύπτοισι φάεννον εἶδος,
ὄπποτα πλήθοισα μάλιστα λάμπη
γαῖαν [ἐπὶ παῖσαν]
—υ—υ ἀργυρία —υ—υ'

Sappho fr. 3 (Bergk)
From Wharton's Sappho

**The stars about the fair moon in their turn hide their bright face when she at
about her full lights up all earth with silver.** H.T. Wharton

Le stelle intorno alla bella luna ("leggiadra luna" in Quasimodo) di nuovo nascondono il volto luminoso, quando risplena pienamente sulla terra....argentea

In the ancient world she was considered to be on an equal footing with Homer, acclaimed as the 'tenth muse'. Her poetry was collected three hundred years after her death at Alexandria in nine books.

Today, only a few scraps of her poetry survive, only three of them consisting of more than one verse, the longest being seven verses of four lines.

Some small fragments were found (in the early twentieth century) wrapped around mummies in Egypt; essentially recycled papyrus. These have been identified only because of Sappho's distinctive literary style.

From the surviving fragments, we know Sappho wrote splendid hymns in praise of Aphrodite, and love poetry of great sophistication, passion and deep understanding of the human heart.

"ILLE MI PAR ESSE DEO VIDETUR" (Translation from Catullus)

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
ἔμμεν' ὤνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδου φωνεί-
σας ὑπακούει
καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἤμῶν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν,
ὡς γὰρ <ἔς> σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὡς με φώνη-
οὔδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἶκει,
ὄλλ' ἄκαμ μὲν γλῶσσαν ἔξαγετ' ἄλεπτον
δ' αὐτίκα χροῖα πῦρ ὑπαδεδρομήκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,
τέκαδε μ' ἴδρωσ [ψῦχος] κακχέεται
τρόμος δὲ
παῖ σαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐταί·
ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον ἐπεὶ ἄκαὶ πένητατ'

Saffo, fr. 31

Simile a un dio mi sembra quell' uomo
che siede davanti a te, e da vicino
ti ascolta mentre tu parli
con dolcezza
e con incanto sorridi. E questo
fa sobbalzare il mio cuore nel petto.
Se appena ti vedo, subito non posso
più parlare:
la lingua si spezza: un fuoco
leggero sotto la pelle mi corre:
nulla vedo con gli occhi e le orecchie
mi rombano:
un sudore freddo mi pervade: un tremore
tutta mi scuote: sono più verde
dell'erba; e poco lontana mi sento
dall'essere morta.
Ma tutto si può sopportare

... That man seems to me peer of gods, who sits in thy presence, and hears close to him thy sweet speech and lovely laughter; that indeed makes my heart flutter in my bosom. For when I see thee but a little, I have no utterance left, my tongue is broken down, and straightway a subtle fire has run under my skin, with my eyes I have no sight, my ears ring, sweat pours down, and a trembling seizes all my body; I am paler than grass, and seem in my madness little better than one dead. But I must dare all, since one so poor ... H. T. Wharton

The best and most cited evidence is her powerful Hymn to Aphrodite , the longest fragment of Sappho's still in existence. In this poem, Sappho prays to Aphrodite, Goddess of Love to Afrodithes.

Hymus at Aphrodithe fr. 1

(GRC)

« ποικιλόθρον' ἀθανάτ' Αφρόδιτα,
παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,
μή μ' ἄσαισι μηδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
πότνια, θῦμον,

ἀλλὰ τυῖδ' ἔλθ', αἶ ποτα κατέρωτα
τὰς ἔμας αὔδας αἰοῖσα πῆλοι
ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα
χρῦσιον ἦλθες

ἄρμ' ὑπασδεύξαισα, κάλοι δέ σ' ἄγον
ᾠκεες στρουῖθοι περὶ γᾶς μελαίνας
πύπνα δίννευτες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνωϊθε-
ρος διὰ μέσσω.

αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο, σὺ δ', ὦ μάκαιρα,
μειδιαίσαισ' ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ
ἦρε' ὅττι δηῖτε πέπονθα κῶττι
δηῖτε κάλημμι

κῶττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι
μαινόλαι θῦμῳ. τίνα δηῖτε πείθῳ
ἄψ σ' ἄγην ἔς σάν φιλότατα; τίς σ', ὦ
Ψάφφ', ἀδικήει;

Immortal Aphrodite of the
broidered throne, daughter of
Zeus, weaver of wiles, I pray thee
break not my spirit with anguish
and distress, O Queen. But come
hither, if ever before thou didst
hear my voice afar, and listen,
and leaving thy father's golden
house camest with chariot yoked,
and fair fleet sparrows drew thee,
flapping fast their wings around
the dark earth, from heaven
through mid sky. Quickly arrived
they; and thou, blessed one,
smiling with immortal
countenance, didst ask What now
is befallen me, and Why now I
call, and What I in my mad heart

καὶ γὰρ αἰ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,
αἰ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει,
αἰ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει
κωὺκ ἐθέλοισα.

ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλέπαν δὲ λῦσον
ἐκ μερίμαν, ὅσσα δέ μοι τέλεσσαι
θυμὸς ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον, σὺ δ' αὐτὰ
σύμμαχος ἔσσο. »

most desire to see. 'What Beauty
now wouldst thou draw to love
thee? Who wrongs thee, Sappho?
For even if she flies she shall
soon follow, and if she rejects
gifts shall yet give, and if she
loves not shall soon love,
however loth.' Come, I pray thee,
now too, and release me from
cruel cares; and all that my heart
desires to accomplish, accomplish
thou, and be thyself my ally.

[Wharton's literal translation](#)



Venus of Milo