

Poetry of Sappho

Translated by Gregory Nagy

Sappho 1 ("Prayer to Aphrodite")

- 1 You with pattern-woven flowers, immortal Aphrodite,
2 child of Zeus, weaver of wiles, I implore you,
3 do not devastate with aches and sorrows,
4 Mistress, my heart!
- 5 But come here [*tuide*], if ever at any other time
6 hearing my voice from afar,
7 you heeded me, and leaving the palace of your father,
8 golden, you came,
9 having harnessed the chariot; and you were carried along by beautiful
10 swift sparrows over the dark earth,
11 swirling with their dense plumage from the sky through the
12 midst of the aether,
13 and straightaway they arrived. But you, O holy one,
14 smiling with your immortal looks,
- 15 kept asking what is it once again this time [*dē'ute*] that has happened to me
and for what reason
- 16 once again this time [*dē'ute*] do I invoke you,
17 and what is it that I want more than anything to happen
18 to my frenzied [*mainolās*] heart [*thūmos*]? "Whom am I once
again this time [*dē'ute*] to persuade,
19 setting out to bring her to your love? Who is doing you,

20 Sappho, wrong?

21 For if she is fleeing now, soon she will give chase.

22 If she is not taking gifts, soon she will be giving them.

23 If she does not love, soon she will love

24 even against her will.”

25 Come to me even now, and free me from harsh

26 anxieties, and however many things

27 my heart [*thūmos*] yearns to get done, *you* do for me. *You*

28 become my ally in war.

Sappho 1.3–4

Revised translation

³ Do not dominate with hurts [*asai*] and pains [*oniai*], ⁴ O Queen [*potnia*], my heart [*thūmos*].

Sappho Song 5.1–11

¹ O Queen Nereids, unharmed [*ablabēs*] ² may my brother, please grant it, arrive to me here [*tuide*], ³ and whatever thing he wants in his heart [*thūmos*] to happen, ⁴ let that thing be fulfilled [*telesthēn*]. [5] And however many mistakes he made in the past, undo them all. ⁶ Let him become a joy [*kharā*] to those who are near-and-dear [*philoī*] to him, ⁷ and let him be a pain [*oniā*] to those who are enemies [*ekhthroi*]. As for us, ⁸ may we have no enemies, not a single one. ⁹ But may he wish to make his sister [*kasignētā*] [10] worthy of more honor [*tīmā*]. ¹¹ The catastrophic [*ligrā*] pain [*oniā*] ... in the past, he was feeling sorrow [*akheuōn*]... .

Sappho Song 9

... Don't you have the resources for me to be able, Mother, to celebrate [*teleîn*] at the right season [*ōrā*] the festival [*eortā*], which is a delight [*kharma*] for [us] mortals, creatures of the day that we are?

Sappho 16

¹ Some say a massing of chariots and their drivers, some say of footsoldiers, ² some

say of ships, if you think of everything that exists on the surface of this black earth, ³ is the most beautiful thing of them all. But I say it is that one thing ⁴ that anyone passionately loves [*erātai*]. [5] It's really quite easy to make this understandable ⁶ to everyone, this thing. You see, that woman who was by far supreme ⁷ in beauty among all humans, Helen, ⁸ she [...] her best of all husbands, ⁹ him she left behind and sailed to Troy, [10] caring not about her daughter and her dear parents, ¹¹ not caring at all. She was swept along [...] [15] [All this] reminds me right now of Anaktoria. ¹⁶ She is [not] here. ¹⁷ Oh, how I would far rather wish to see her taking a dancing step that arouses passionate love [= *eraton*], ¹⁸ and to see the luminous radiance from the look of her face ¹⁹ than to see those chariots of the Lydians and the footsoldiers in their armor [20] as they fight in battle [...].

Sappho Song 17.1–16

¹ Close by, ..., ² O Queen [*potnia*] Hera, ... your [...] festival [*eortā*], ³ which, vowed-in-prayer [*arāsthai*], the Sons of Atreus did arrange [*poieîn*] ⁴ for you, kings that they were, [5] after first having completed [*ek-teleîn*] great labors [*aethloi*], ⁶ around Troy, and, next [*apseron*], ⁷ after having set forth to come here [*tuide*], since finding the way ⁸ was not possible for them ⁹ until they would approach you (Hera) and Zeus lord of suppliants [*antiaos*] [10] and (Dionysus) the lovely son of Thyone. ¹¹ And now [*nunde*] we are arranging [*poieîn*] [the festival], ¹² in accordance with the ancient way [...] ¹³ holy [*agna*] and [...] a throng [*okhlos*] ¹⁴ of girls [*parthenoi*] [...] and women [*gunaikes*] [15] on either side ... ¹⁶ the measured sound of ululation [*ololūgā*].

Sappho Song 26.11–12

¹¹ And I—aware of my own self— ¹² I know this.

Sappho 31 (via 'Longinus', On sublimity):

- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | <i>phainetai moi kēnos īsos theoisin</i> | He appears [<i>phainetai</i>] to me, that one, equal to the gods [<i>īsos theoisin</i>] |
| 2 | <i>emmen' ōnēr ottis enantios toi</i> | the man who, facing you, |
| 3 | <i>isdanei kai plāsion ādu phōnei-</i> | is seated and, up close, that sweet voice of yours |
| 4 | <i>sās upakouei</i> | he listens to |
| 5 | <i>kai gelaisās īmeroēn to m' ē mān</i> | and how you laugh a laugh that brings desire. Why, it just |
| 6 | <i>kardian en stēthesin eptoaisen</i> | makes my heart flutter within my breast, |
| 7 | <i>ōs gar es s' idō brokhe' ōs me</i> | You see, the moment I look at you, right |

	<i>phōnai-</i>	then, for me
8	<i>s' oud' en et' eikei</i>	to make any sound at all won't work any more.
9	<i>alla kam men glōssa eāge lepton</i>	My tongue has a breakdown and a delicate
10	<i>d' autika khrōi pûr upadedromāken</i>	– all of a sudden – fire rushes under my skin.
11	<i>oppatessi d' oud' en orēmm' epirrom-</i>	With my eyes I see not a thing, and there is a roar
12	<i>beisi d' akouai</i>	my ears make.
13	<i>kad de m' idrōs kakkheetai tromos de</i>	Sweat pours down me and a trembling
14	<i>paīsan agrei khlōrotera de poias</i>	seizes all of me; paler than grass
15	<i>emmi tethnakēn d' oligō 'pideuēs</i>	am I, and a little short of death
16	<i>phainom' em' aut[āi]</i>	do I [<i>phainomai</i>] appear to me.

Sappho 44 ("The Wedding of Hector and Andromache")

...

...The herald Idaios came...a swift messenger

[lacuna]

- 4 ... and the rest of Asia ... imperishable glory [*kleos aphthiton*].
- 5 Hector and his comrades [*sun-(h)etairoi*] led her, the one with the glancing looks,
- 6 from holy Thebe and ... Plakia, they led her, the lovely Andromache
- 7 in ships over the salty
- 8 sea. Many golden bracelets and purple
- 9 robes..., intricately-worked ornaments,
- 10 countless silver cups and ivory.

11 Thus he spoke. And his dear father quickly leapt up.
12 And the news reached his dear ones throughout the broad city.
13 And the Trojans yoked to smooth-running carriages
14 the mules. And the whole ensemble climbed on,
15 all the women and maidens
And the unmarried men led horses beneath the chariots
and greatly...charioteers...
<...>
[lacuna]
20 [lacuna]
21 looking just like the gods [*ikeloi theois*]
22 ...holy
23 set forth into Troy...
24 And the sweet song of the pipe mixed...
25 And the sound of the cymbals, and then the maidens
26 sang a sacred song, and all the way to the sky
27 traveled the wondrous echo ...
28 And everywhere through the streets...
29 Mixing bowls and cups...
30 And myrrh and cassia and frankincense were mingled.
31 And the older women cried out *elelu*.
32 Meanwhile all the men sang out a lovely high-pitched song,
33 calling on Apollo Pāōn, the far-shooter, master of playing beautifully on the

lyre.

34 And they sang the song of Hector and Andromache, both looking just like the gods [*theoeikeloï*].

Sappho 105a (via Syrianus on Hermogenes, On Kinds of Style):

Just like the sweet apple that blushes on top of a branch,
the topmost apple on the topmost branch. It has eluded the notice of the apple
pickers.

Oh, but no. It's not that they haven't noticed it. They just couldn't reach it.

Sappho 105b

Himerius (Orations 1.16) says: 'Sappho compared the girl to an apple [...] she compared the bridegroom to Achilles, and likened the young man's deeds to the hero's.'

Sappho 115 (via Hephaestion, Handbook on Meters):

To what shall I liken you, dear bridegroom, to make the likeness beautiful?
To a tender seedling, I liken you to that most of all.

Sappho "Tithonos Song"

¹ [. . .] gifts of [the Muses], whose contours are adorned with violets, [I tell you] girls [*paidēs*] ² [. . .] the clear-sounding song-loving lyre. ³ [. . .] skin that was once tender is now [ravaged] by old age [*gēras*], ⁴ [. . .] hair that was once black has turned (gray). [5] The throbbing of my heart is heavy, and my knees cannot carry me ⁶ — (those knees) that were once so nimble for dancing like fawns. ⁷ I cry and cry about those things, over and over again. But what can I do? ⁸ To become ageless [*a-gēra-os*] for someone who is mortal is impossible to achieve. ⁹ Why, even Tithonos once upon a time, they said, was taken by the dawn-goddess [Eos], with her rosy arms [10] —she felt [. . .] passionate love [*eros*] for him, and off she went, carrying him to the ends of the earth, ¹¹ so beautiful [*kalos*] he was and young [*neos*], but, all the same, he was seized ¹² in the fullness of time by gray old age [*gēras*], even though he shared the bed of an immortal female. ¹³ [. . .] ¹⁴ [. . .] [15] But I love delicacy [*(h)abrosunē*] [. . .] this, ¹⁶ and passionate love [*erōs*] for the Sun has won for me its radiance [*tò lampron*] and beauty [*tò kalon*].

Sappho "Brothers Song"

... [5] But you are always saying, in a chattering way [*thrulēîn*], that Kharaxos will come ⁶ in a ship full of goods. These things I think Zeus ⁷ knows, and so also do all the gods. But you shouldn't have ⁸ these things on your mind. ⁹ Instead, send [*pempeîn*]

me off and instruct [*kelesthai*] me [10] to implore [*lissesthai*] Queen Hera over and over again [*polla*] ¹¹ that he should come back here [*tuide*] bringing back [*agein*] safely ¹² his ship, I mean Kharaxos, ¹³ and that he should find us unharmed. As for everything else, ¹⁴ let us leave it to the superhuman powers [*daimones*], [15] since bright skies after great storms ¹⁶ can happen quickly. ¹⁷ Those mortals, whoever they are, ¹⁸ whom the king of Olympus wishes ¹⁸ to rescue from their pains [*ponoi*] by sending as a long-awaited helper a superhuman force [*daimōn*] ¹⁹ to steer them away from such pains—those mortals are blessed [*makares*] [20] and have great bliss [*olbos*]. ²¹ We too, if he ever gets to lift his head up high, ²² I mean, Larikhos, and finally mans up, ²³ will get past the many cares that weigh heavily on our heart, ²⁴ breaking free from them just as quickly.

Sappho Kypris Song 1–6

¹ How can someone not be hurt [= *asâsthai*, verb of the noun *asā* ‘hurt’] over and over again, ² O Queen Kypris [Aphrodite], whenever one loves [*phileîn*] whatever person ³ and wishes very much not to let go of the passion? ⁴ [What kind of purpose] do you have [5] [in mind], uncaringly rending me apart ⁶ in my [desire] as my knees buckle?

Poetry of Sappho

Translated by Julia Dubnoff

Sappho 16

Some say an army of horsemen,
some of footsoldiers, some of ships,
is the fairest thing on the black earth,
but I say it is what one loves.

5 It’s very easy to make this clear
to everyone, for Helen,
by far surpassing mortals in beauty,
left the best of all husbands
and sailed to Troy,

10 mindful of neither her child

nor her dear parents, but
with one glimpse she was seduced by
Aphrodite. For easily bent...
and nimbly...[missing text]...

15 has reminded me now
of Anactoria who is not here;
I would much prefer to see the lovely
way she walks and the radiant glance of her face
than the war-chariots of the Lydians or
20 their footsoldiers in arms.

Sapphic Fragments

1

Come now, luxuriant Graces, and beautiful-haired Muses.

2

I tell you
someone will remember us
in the future.

3

Now, I shall sing these songs
Beautifully
for my companions.

4

The moon shone full
And when the maidens stood around the altar...

5

"He is dying, Aphrodite;
luxuriant Adonis is dying.
What should we do?"
"Beat your breasts, young maidens.
And tear your garments
in grief."

6

O, weep for Adonis!

7

But come, dear companions,
For day is near.

8

The moon is set. And the Pleiades.
It's the middle of the night.
Time [*hōrā*] passes.
But I sleep alone.

9

I love the sensual.
For me this
and love for the sun
has a share in brilliance and beauty

10

I desire
And I crave.

11

You set me on fire.

12

A servant
of wile-weaving
Aphrodite...

13

Eros
Giver of pain...

14

Eros
Coming from heaven
throwing off
his purple cloak.

15

Again love, the limb-loosener, rattles me
bittersweet,
irresistible,
a crawling beast.

16

As a wind in the mountains
assaults an oak,

Love shook my breast.

17

I loved you, Atthis, long ago
even when you seemed to me
a small graceless child.

18

But you hate the very thought of me, Atthis,
And you flutter after Andromeda.

19

Honestly, I wish I were dead.
Weeping many tears, she left me and said,
"Alas, how terribly we suffer, Sappho.
I really leave you against my will."

And I answered: "Farewell, go and remember me.
You know how we cared for you.

If not, I would remind you
...of our wonderful times.

For by my side you put on
many wreaths of roses
and garlands of flowers
around your soft neck.

And with precious and royal perfume
you anointed yourself.

On soft beds you satisfied your passion.
And there was no dance,
no holy place
from which we were absent."

20

They say that Leda once found
an egg –
like a hyacinth.

21

"Virginity, virginity
Where will you go when you've left me?"

"I'll never come back to you, bride,
I'll never come back to you."

22

Sweet mother, I can't do my weaving –

Aphrodite has crushed me with desire
for a tender youth.

23

Like a sweet-apple
turning red
high
on the tip
of the topmost branch.
Forgotten by pickers.

Not forgotten—
they couldn't reach it.

24

Like a hyacinth
in the mountains
that shepherds crush underfoot.

Even on the ground
a purple flower.

25

To what shall I compare you, dear bridegroom?
To a slender shoot, I most liken you.

26

[Sappho compared the girl to an apple....she compared the bridegroom to Achilles,
and likened the young man's deeds to the hero's.]
Himerius (4th cent. A.D.), Or. 1.16

27

Raise high the roofbeams, carpenters!
Hymenaon, Sing the wedding song!
Up with them!
Hymenaon, Sing the wedding song!
A bridegroom taller than Arēs!
Hymenaon, Sing the wedding song!
Taller than a tall man!
Hymenaon, Sing the wedding song!
Superior as the singer of Lesbos –
Hymenaon, Sing the wedding song!
—to poets of other lands.
Hymenaon!

29

Blessed bridegroom,
The marriage is accomplished as you prayed.
You have the maiden you prayed for.

30

I don't know what to do: I am of two minds.

31

For gold is Zeus' child.

32

I have a beautiful daughter
Like a golden flower
My beloved Kleis.
I would not trade her for all Lydia nor lovely...

33

When you lie dead, no one will remember you
For you have no share in the Muses' roses.
No, flitting aimlessly about,
You will wildly roam,
a shade amidst the shadowy dead.

34

Death is an evil.
That's what the gods think.
Or they would die.

35

Because you are dear to me
Marry a younger woman.
I don't dare live with a young man—
I'm older.

Key Passages Relevant to the Poetics of Sappho

Translated by Gregory Nagy

1.

And they passed by the streams of Okeanos and the White Rock and past the Gates of the Sun and the District of Dreams.

Odyssey xxiv 11-12

2.

...they say that Sappho was the first,
hunting down the proud Phaon,
to throw herself, in her goading desire, from the rock
that shines from afar.
But now, in accordance with your sacred utterance,
lord king, let there be silence
throughout the sacred precinct of the headland of the White Rock.

3.

One more time taking off in the air,
down from the White Rock into the dark waves do
I dive, intoxicated with lust.

Anacreon PMG 376

4.

I would be crazy not to give all the herds of the Cyclopes
in return for drinking one cup [of that wine]
and throwing myself from the white rock into the brine,
once I am intoxicated, with eyebrows relaxed.
Whoever is not happy when he drinks is crazy.
Where it is allowed to make this thing stand up erect,
to grab the breast and touch with both hands
the meadow¹ that is made all ready. And there is dancing
and forgetting [root *lēth-*] of bad things.

Euripides *Cyclops* 163-172**5. Related sources** (summaries and commentary by G.N.)

According to the account in Book VII of the mythographer Ptolemaios Chennos (ca. A.D. 100; by way of Photius *Bibliotheca* 152–153 Bekker), the first to dive off the heights of Cape Leukas, the most famous localization of the White Rock, was none other than Aphrodite herself, out of love for a dead Adonis. After Adonis died (how it happened is not said), the mourning Aphrodite went off searching for him and finally found him at 'Cypriote Argos', in a shrine of Apollo. She consults Apollo, who instructs her to seek relief from her love by jumping off the white rock of Leukas, where Zeus sits whenever he wants relief from his passion for Hera. Then Ptolemaios launches into a veritable catalogue of other figures who followed Aphrodite's precedent and took a ritual plunge as a cure for love. For example, Queen Artemisia I is reputed to have leapt off the white rock out of love for one Dardanos, succeeding only in getting herself killed. Several others are mentioned who died from the leap, including a certain iambographer Charinos who expired only after being fished out of the water with a broken leg, but not before blurting out his four last iambic trimeters, painfully preserved for us with the compliments of Ptolemaios (and Photius as well). Someone called Makēs was more fortunate: having succeeded in escaping from four love affairs after four corresponding leaps from the white rock, he earned the epithet Leukopetras 'the one of the white rock'. We may question the degree of historicity in such accounts. There is, however, a more important concern. In the lengthy and detailed account of Ptolemaios, Sappho is not mentioned at all, let alone Phaon.

From this silence we may infer that the source of this myth about Aphrodite and Adonis is independent of Sappho's own poetry or of later distortions based on it. Accordingly, the ancient cult practice at Cape Leukas, as described by Strabo (10.2.9 C452), may well contain some intrinsic element that inspired lovers' leaps, a practice also noted by Strabo (*ibid.*). The second practice seems to be derived from the first, as we might expect from a priestly institution that becomes independent of the social context that had engendered it. Abstracted from their inherited tribal functions,

religious institutions have a way of becoming mystical organizations.

Another reason for doubting that Sappho's poetry had been the inspiration for the lovers' leaps at Cape Leukas is the attitude of Strabo himself. He specifically disclaims Menander's version about Sappho's being the first to take the plunge at Leukas. Instead, he offers a version of 'those more versed in the ancient lore', according to which Kephalos son of Deioneus was the very first to have leapt, impelled by love for Pterelas (Strabo 10.2.9 C452). The myth of Kephalos and his dive may be as old as the concept of the White Rock. I say "concept" because the ritual practice of casting victims from a white rock may be an inheritance parallel to the epic tradition about a mythical White Rock on the shores of the Okeanos (as in *Odyssey* 24.11) and the related literary theme of diving from an imaginary White Rock (as in the poetry of Anacreon and Euripides). In other words, it is needless to assume that the ritual preceded the myth or the other way around.

6.

Others say that, in the vicinity of the rocks at Athenian Kolonos, he [Poseidon], falling asleep, had an emission of semen, and a horse *Skuphios* came out, who is also called Skirōnitēs ['the one of the White Rock'].

Scholia to Lycophron 766

7.

Poseidon *Petraios* ['of the rocks'] has a cult among the Thessalians ... because he, having fallen asleep at some rock, had an emission of semen; and the earth, receiving the semen, produced the first horse, whom they called *Skuphios*....And they say that there was a festival established in worship of Poseidon *Petraios* at the spot where the first horse leapt forth.

Scholia to Pindar *Pythian* 4.246

8.

But I love luxuriance [(h)abrosunē]...this,
and passionate love [erōs] for the Sun has won for me its radiance and beauty.²

Sappho F 58.25–26 V

9.

¹ Timon, who set up this sundial for it to measure out [metreîn] ² the passing hours [hōrai], now [. . .] ground. ³ The girl [pais] Astē [. . .] —I say this to you the passerby —she was left behind by him for as long a time as ⁴ is possible to hope [. . .] that the girl [parthenos] will continue to read the passing hours [hōrai]. ⁵ As for you, O girl [kourē], you will approach old age at this marker [sēma] as you, ⁶ for piles and piles of years to come, will be measuring out [metreîn] the beautiful sun.

Posidippus *Epigram* 52

10.

¹ Everything about Nikomakhe, all her pretty things and, come dawn, ² as the sound of the weaving shuttle is heard, all of Sappho's love songs [oaroi], songs [oaroi] sung

one after the next, ₃ are all gone, carried away by fate, all too soon [*pro-hōria*], and the poor ₄ girl [*parthenos*] is lamented by the city of the Argives. ₅ She had been raised by the goddess Hera, who cradled her in her arms like a tender seedling. But then, ah, there came the time when all her would-be husbands, ₆ pursuing her, got left behind, with cold beds for them to sleep in.

Posidippus *Epigram* 55

11.

. . . just as girls [*parthenoi*] who are age-mates [of the bride] love to do sweet-talk [*hupo-kor-izesthai*] in their songs sung in the evening for their companion [*hetaira* = the bride].

Pindar *Pythian* 3.17–19

12.

. . . that venerable goddess, whom the girls [*kourai*] at my portal, with the help of Pan, celebrate by singing and dancing [*melpesthai*] again and again [*thama*] all night long [*ennukhiai*] ...

Pindar *Pythian* 3.78–79

13.

Drinking all night and getting very inebriated, he [= Philip] then dismissed all the others [= his own boon companions] and, come [= *pros*] daylight, he went on partying with the ambassadors of the Athenians.

Athenaeus 10.435c

14.

Burn and set on fire her soul [*psūkhē*], her heart [*kardia*], her liver, and her breath with love for Sophia whose mother is Isara. [All] you [powers] must bring [*agein*] Gorgonia, whose mother is Nilogeneia, [to me]. You must bring [*agein*] her [to me], tormenting her body night and day. Compel her to bolt from wherever she is, from whatever household, as she feels the love for Sophia.

Supplementum Magicum I 42.14–17

15.

I adjure you, Euangelos, by Anubis and Hermes and by all the rest of you down below, bring [*agein*] and bind Sarapias whose mother is Helenē, [bringing Sarapias] to this Hērais here whose mother is Thermoutharin, now, now, quick, quick. By way of her soul [*psūkhē*] and her heart [*kardia*], bring [*agein*] this Sarapias herself [to me] ...

Papyri Graecae Magicae II 32.1–11

16.

₁ Dōrikha, your bones have turned into dust a long time ago—and so too the ribbons ₂ of your hair, and so too the shawl, exhaling that perfumed scent of yours, ₃ in which you enveloped once upon a time the charming Kharaxos, ₄ skin next to skin,

complexion making contact with complexion, as you reached for cups of wine at the coming of the dawn. ⁵ But from Sappho there still do remain and will forever remain her loving ⁶ song's columns of verses that shine forth as they sound out her voice. ⁷ That name of yours has been declared most fortunate, and Naucratis will guard it safely, just as it is, ⁸ so long as there are ships sailing the waters of the Nile, heading out toward the open sea.

Posidippus 122 ed. Austin and Bastianini, quoted in Athenaeus 13.596c

Notes

[[back](#)] **1.** Euphemism for female genitalia.

[[back](#)] **2.** This translation follows the reading *erōs* (vs. *eros*) *aeliō*.

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