

Poetical Fragments



Sappho

FORWARD

Twice the Greek poetess Sappho, who lived 2,400 years ago, has captured the Western imagination and been recognized as a genius. Initial fame began during her lifetime when she composed and recited verse to the accompaniment of a lyre (alongside her poetry, she is reputed to have invented the plectrum, a new style of lyre, and the mixolydian mode of music). Ancient Greeks and later Romans acclaimed her verse, and the Library of Alexandria collected her poetry into nine books based on metrical form. Her fame was such that for a thousand years her poetry was performed throughout the Mediterranean. Ancients referred to her as *the poetess*, just as they referred to Homer as *the poet*. Eventually, whether through intellectual or artistic decay or through active censorship of her sensuous verse (a censorship often asserted but not proven), Sappho's works fell into neglect.

A second period of fame began with the European Renaissance and continues to this day. Sappho's initial reputation developed from a complete understanding of her work. In this second period, her fame rests upon fragments – literally. Only one complete poem has come down to modern times, the *Ode to Aphrodite*. A few others are nearly complete. The rest survive in brief selections found scratched

onto ancient potsherds, written on bits of papyrus (some used as mummy wrappings!), or quoted in ancient disquisitions upon grammar, rhetoric, and verse.

The fragmentary nature of Sappho's work has not dampened enthusiasm. Quite the contrary, this incompleteness has made it attractive, even romantic — the literary embodiment of Greek and Roman ruins. During the last two centuries especially, readers have felt drawn to Sappho's work. Poets have translated it repeatedly, perhaps because its unfinished appearance invites reworking, recasting, and imitation.

In the original Aeolic Greek, Sappho's poetry is metrically diverse, filled with assonance and consonance, obviously beautiful in sound and form. Even translated into literal prose, its substance is visually immediate, emotionally mature, and self aware. Writing of love and emotions, Sappho varies the tone of her verse dramatically; sometimes it is celebratory, at others it is arch, jealous, sensuous, even cold.

The selections in this chapbook are from Henry T. Wharton's influential *Sappho*. Wharton collected and translated all known passages, 170 in 1895. In the succeeding 116 years another couple dozen fragments have been found, mostly very small pieces. One lovely poem on old age, substantially complete, was discovered in the twentieth century and is not included here. It was first published in garbled

form in 1922; a reasonable text and translation was not published until 2004. Several other good translations of Sappho's work are available, in particular those by Mary Barnard and Anne Carson. For a scholarly treatment of Sappho's verse with excellent prose translations, see David A. Campbell's *Greek Lyric*, vol. 1 (Harvard University Press).

In the present volume we have followed Wharton's system: his prose translation followed by the verse translations of various poets. Greek texts have been provided for the first and last poems. For definitive Greek readings, see Campbell.

Sappho is glorious to read in the Greek. Her dialect is slightly odd to those familiar with more classical forms of the language, yet it remains appealing, and the fragmentary nature of her verse is unexpectedly enabling. Some translators, trusting to an unchanging core of human experience, have attempted to faithfully repair the gaps opened by time; others have freely recovered and re-imagined the remnants, piecing them together in modern, often deeply moving ways. Read this verse, nearly two and a half millennia old. Discover how it touches you.

Tapp & Violin

POETICAL FRAGMENTS

Οἶον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρεύθεται ἄκρῳ ἐπ’
ὄσδω, ἄκρον ἐπ’ ἀκροτάτῳ, λελάθοντο δὲ
μαλοδρόπης· 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.*

— O fair — O sweet!

As the sweet apple blooms high on the bough,
High as the highest, forgot of the gatherers:

So thou —

Yet not so: nor forgot of the gatherers;
High o’er their reach in the golden air,

— O sweet — O fair!

F. T. Palgrave



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

Beauty

A combination of
the previous fragments

I.

Like the sweet apple which reddens upon the
topmost bough,
A-top on the topmost twig – which the pluckers
forgot, somehow –
Forgot it not, nay, but got it not, for none
could get it till now.

II.

Like the wild hyacinth flower which on the
hills is found,
Which the passing feet of the shepherds for
ever tear and wound,
Until the purple blossom is trodden into the
ground.

D. G. Rossetti



*And round about the [breeze] murmurs cool
through apple-boughs, and slumber streams
from quivering leaves.*

Through orchard-plots with fragrance crowned
The clear cold fountain murmuring flows;
And forest leaves with rustling sound
Invite to soft repose.

J. H. Merivale



*Come, goddess of Cyprus, and in golden cups
serve nectar delicately mixed with delights.*

Come, Venus, come
Hither with thy golden cup,
Where nectar-floated flowerets swim.
Fill, fill the goblet up;
These laughing lips shall kiss the brim —
Come, Venus, come!

Anon. (*Edin. Rev.*, 1832)

Ode to Aphrodite

*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 earnest
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 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 accom-
plish, accomplish thou, and be thyself my ally.*

Beautiful-throned, immortal Aphrodite,
Daughter of Zeus, beguiler, I implore thee,
Weigh me not down with weariness and anguish
 O thou most holy!

Come to me now, if ever thou in kindness
Hearkenedst my words – and often hast thou
 hearkened –
Heeding, and coming from the mansions golden
 Of thy great Father,

Yoking thy chariot, borne by the most lovely
Consecrated birds, with dusky-tinted pinions,
Waving swift wings from utmost heights of heaven
 Through the mid-ether;

Swiftly they vanished, leaving thee, O goddess,
Smiling, with face immortal in its beauty,
Asking why I grieved, and why in utter longing
 I had dared call thee;

Asking what I sought, thus hopeless in desiring,
Wildered in brain, and spreading nets of passion –
Alas, for whom? and said thou, “Who has harmed thee?
 O my poor Sappho!

“Though now he flies, ere long he shall pursue thee;
Fearing thy gifts, he too in turn shall bring them;
Loveless to-day, to-morrow he shall woo thee,
 Though thou shouldst spurn him.”

Thus seek me now, O holy Aphrodite!
Save me from anguish; give me all I ask for,
Gifts at thy hand; and thine shall be the glory,
 Sacred protector!

T. W. Higginson



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

Love shook me like the mountain breeze
Rushing down on the forest trees.

Frederick Tennyson

Lo, Love once more my soul within me rends,
Like wind that on the mountain oak descends.

J. A. Symonds



*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 . . .*

Peer of gods he seemeth to me, the blissful
Man who sits and gazes at thee before him,
Close beside thee sits, and in silence hears thee
 Silverly speaking,
Laughing love's low laughter. Oh this, this only
Stirs the troubled heart in my breast to tremble!
For should I but see thee a little moment,
 Straight is my voice hushed;
Yea, my tongue is broken, and through and
 through me

'Neath the flesh impalpable fire runs tingling;
Nothing see mine eyes, and a noise of roaring
 Waves in my ear sounds;
Sweat runs down in rivers, a tremor seizes
All my limbs, and paler than grass in autumn,
Caught by pains of menacing death, I falter,
 Lost in the love-trance.

J. Addington Symonds



*O Muse of the golden throne, raise that strain
which the reverend elder of Teos, from the
goodly land of fair women, used to sing so
sweetly.*

O Muse, who sitt'st on golden throne,
Full many a hymn of dulcet tone
 The Teian sage is taught by thee;
But, goddess, from thy throne of gold,
The sweetest hymn thou'st ever told
He lately learned and sang for me.

T. Moore



*When anger spreads through the breast, guard
thy tongue from barking idly.*

When through thy breast wild wrath doth spread
And works thy inmost being harm,
Leave thou the fiery word unsaid,
Guard thee; be calm.

Michael Field



I loved thee once, Atthis, long ago.

I loved thee — hark, one tenderer note than all —
Atthis, of old time, once — one low long fall,
Sighing — one long low lovely loveless call,
Dying — one pause in song so flamelike fast —
Atthis, long since in old time overpast —
One soft first pause and last.
One — then the old rage of rapture's fieriest rain
Storms all the music-maddened night again.

Swinburne, *Songs of the Springtides*



*A broidered strap of fair Lydian work covered
her feet.*



And I flutter like a child after her mother.



*Now Love masters my limbs and shakes me,
fatal creature, bitter-sweet.*

Lo, Love once more, the limb-dissolving King,
The bitter-sweet impracticable thing,
Wild-beast-like rends me with fierce quivering.

J. Addington Symonds



*And tender woven garlands round tender
neck.*



Foolish woman, pride not thyself on a ring.



*I am not of a malignant nature, but have a
quiet temper.*



*Hadst thou felt desire for things good or noble,
and had not thy tongue framed some evil
speech, shame had not filled thine eyes, but
thou hadst spoken honestly about it.*

The Loves of Sappho and Alcaeus

Alcaeus. — I fain would speak, I fain would tell,
But shame and fear my utterance quell.

Sappho. — If aught of good, if aught of fair
Thy tongue were labouring to declare,
Nor shame should dash thy glance, nor fear
Forbid thy suit to reach my ear.

Anon. (*Edin. Rev.*, 1832)







*The moon has set, and the Pleiades; it is mid-
night, the time is going by, and I sleep alone.*

The silver moon is set;
The Pleiades are gone;
Half the long night is spent, and yet
I lie alone.

J. H. Merivale

The moon hath left the sky;
Lost is the Pleiads' light;
It is midnight
And time slips by;
But on my couch alone I lie.

J. A. Symonds

The moon has set,
And the Pleiades;
Midnight slips past,
Yet I lie waking,
Aching,
Alone.

A. L.



*The moon rose full, and the women stood as
though around an altar.*



*Thus at times with tender feet the Cretan
women dance in measure round the fair altar,
trampling the fine soft bloom of the grass.*

Then, as the broad moon rose on high,
The maidens stood the altar nigh;
And some in graceful measure
The well-loved spot danced round,
With lightsome footsteps treading
The soft and grassy ground.

Moreton J. Walhouse
(combining fragments)



*I love delicacy, and for me Love has the sun's
splendour and beauty.*



*Delicate Adonis is dying, Cytherea; what
shall we do? Beat your breasts, maidens, and
rend your tunics.*



*Come now, delicate Graces and fair-haired
Muses.*

*Come hither, fair-haired Muses, tender Graces,
Come hither to our home.*

Frederick Tennyson



*What country girl bewitches thy heart, who
knows not how to draw her dress about her
ankles?*

*What country maiden charms thee,
However fair her face,
Who knows not how to gather
Her dress with artless grace?*



*Sweet Mother, I cannot weave my web,
broken as I am by longing for a boy, at soft
Aphrodite's will.*

Mother, I cannot mind my wheel;
My fingers ache, my lips are dry:
Oh, if you felt the pain I feel!
But oh, who ever felt as I!

W. S. Landor, *Simonidea*

[As o'er her loom the Lesbian maid
In love-sick languor hung her head,
Unknowing where her fingers strayed
She weeping turned away and said —]
“Oh, my sweet mother, 'tis in vain,
I cannot weave as once I wove,
So wildered is my heart and brain
With thinking of that youth I love.”

T. Moore, *Evenings in Greece*



A maiden full tender, plucking flowers.



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

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.

Don Juan, iii

And by Tennyson:

The ancient poetess singeth, that Hesperus all
things bringeth,
Smoothing the wearied mind: bring me my
love, Rosalind.

Thou comest morning or even; she cometh
not morning or evening.
False-eyed Hesper, unkind, where is my sweet
Rosalind?

Leonine Elegiacs



*And there the bowl of ambrosia was mixed, and
Hermes took the ladle to pour out for the gods;
and then they all held goblets, and made liba-
tion, and wished the bridegroom all good luck.*



*Happy bridegroom, now is thy wedding come
to thy desire, and thou hast the maiden of thy
desire.*

Happy bridegroom, thou art blest
With blisses far beyond the rest,
For thou hast won
The chosen one,
The girl thou lovest best.

Frederick Tennyson



*Well favoured is thy form, and thine eyes . . .
honeyed, and love is spread over thy fair face
. . . Aphrodite has honoured thee above all.*



*For there was no other girl, O bridegroom,
like her.*



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

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

*“Sweet Rose of May, sweet Rose of May,
Whither, ah whither fled away?”*

*“What’s gone no time can e’er restore —
I come no more, I come no more.”*

J. H. Merivale



*But if thou lovest us, choose another and a
younger bed-fellow; for I will not brook to live
with thee, old woman with young man.*



Fool, faint not thou in thy strong heart.



*Death is evil; the Gods have so judged: had it
been good, they would die.*



*This is the dust of Timas, whom Persephone's
dark chamber received, dead before her
wedding; when she perished, all her fellows
dressed with sharpened steel the lovely tresses
of their heads.*

This dust was Timas'; ere her bridal hour
She lies in Proserpina's gloomy bower;
Her virgin playmates from each lovely head
Cut with sharp steel their locks: their strewnments
for the dead.

Sir Charles A. Elton

This is the dust of Timas, whom unwed
Persephone locked in her darksome bed:
For her the maids who were her fellows shore
Their curls, and to her tomb this tribute bore.

J. A. Symonds



*But thou shall ever lie dead, nor shall there be
any remembrance of thee then or thereafter,
for thou hast not of the roses of Pieria; but
thou shalt wander obscure even in the house
of Hades, flitting among the shadowy dead.*

An Uneducated Woman

Unknown, unheeded, shalt thou die,
And no memorial shall proclaim

That once beneath the upper sky
 Thou hadst a being and a name.
For never to the Muses' bowers
 Didst thou with glowing heart repair,
Nor ever intertwine the flowers
 That fancy strews unnumbered there.
Doom'd o'er that dreary realm, alone,
Shunn'd by the gentler shades, to go,
Nor friend shall soothe, nor parent own
The child of sloth, the Muses' foe.

Rev. R. Bland

Thou liest dead, and there will be no memory
 left behind
Of thee or thine in all the earth, for never didst
 thou bind
The roses of Pierian streams upon thy brow;
 thy doom
Is writ to flit with unknown ghosts in cold and
 nameless gloom.

Edwin Arnold



Come, rosy-armed pure Graces, daughters of Zeus.



Over the fisherman Pelagon his father Meniscus set weel and oar, memorial of a luckless life.

On a Fisherman

This oar and net and fisher's wickered snare
Meniscus placed above his buried son—
Memorials of the lot in life he bare,
The hard and needy life of Pelagon.

Sir Charles A. Elton



*For lamentation may not be in a poet's house;
such things befit not us.*

In the home of the Muses 'tis bootless to mourn.

Frederick Tennyson



To you, fair maids, my mind changes not.



Ἄστερες μὲν ἀμφὶ κάλαν σελάνναν
ἄψ ἀπυκρύπτοισι φάεννον εἶδος,
ὅπποτα πλήθοισα μάλιστα λάμπη
γᾶν [ἐπὶ πᾶσαν]
— ὦ — ὦ ἀργυρία — ὦ — ὦ.

*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.*

The stars around the lovely moon
Their radiant visage hide as soon
As she, full-orbed, appears to sight,
Flooding the earth with her silvery light.

Felton

The stars about the lovely moon
Fade back and vanish very soon,
When, round and full, her silver face
Swims into sight, and lights all space.

Edwin Arnold

THE TEXT

Selections are from *Sappho, Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* by Henry Thornton Wharton, London: John Lane; Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1895. Front image is a detail from Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Sappho and Alcaeus*. The image on page 16 is from Théodore Chassériau's *Sappho Leaping into the Sea from the Leucadian Promontory*; on page 17, Jules Elie Delaunay's *Sappho Embrassant sa Lyre*; on page 30, a fragment, P. Oxy. XVII 2076, Sappho, Book ii, held at Oxford University.

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πάντη, πότνια, χαῖρε θεοῖς ἴσα, σὰς γὰρ αἰδᾷς
ἀθανάτας ἔχομεν νῦν ἔτι θυγατέρας.

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