Classic Poetry Series

Sappho

- poems -

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Although they are

Although they are
only breath, words
which I command
are immortal

Sappho

Anactoria

Yes, Atthis, you may be sure

Even in Sardis
Anactoria will think often of us

of the life we shared here, when you seemed
the Goddess incarnate
to her and your singing pleased her best

Now among Lydian women she in her
turn stands first as the red-
fingered moon rising at sunset takes

precedence over stars around her;
her light spreads equally
on the salt sea and fields thick with bloom

Delicious dew pours down to freshen
roses, delicate thyme
and blossoming sweet clover; she wanders

aimlessly, thinking of gentle
Atthis, her heart hanging
heavy with longing in her little breast

She shouts aloud, Come! we know it;
thousand-eared night repeats that cry
across the sea shining between us

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

And their feet move

And their feet move
rhythmically, as tender
feet of Cretan girls
danced once around an

altar of love, crushing
a circle in the soft
smooth flowering grass

Sappho

Awed by her splendor

Awed by her splendor
stars near the lovely
moon cover their own
bright faces
when she
is roundest and lights
earth with her silver

Sappho

Before they were mothers

Before they were mothers
Leto and Niobe
had been the most
devoted of friends

Sappho

Blame Aphrodite

It's no use
Mother dear, I
can't finish my
weaving
        You may
blame Aphrodite

soft as she is

she has almost
killed me with
love for that boy

            Sappho
            tr. Barnard

Sappho

Cleis

Sleep, darling
I have a small
daughter called
Cleis, who is

like a golden
flower
        I wouldn't
take all Croesus'
kingdom with love
thrown in, for her

Don't ask me what to wear
I have no embroidered
headband from Sardis to
give you, Cleis, such as
I wore
        and my mother
always said that in her
day a purple ribbon
looped in the hair was thought
to be high style indeed

but we were dark:
                a girl
whose hair is yellower than
torchlight should wear no
headdress but fresh flowers

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

Cyprian, in my dream

Cyprian, in my dream
the folds of a purple
kerchief shadowed
your cheeks --- the one

Timas one time sent,
a timid gift, all
the way from Phocaea

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

Drapple-thorned Aphrodite,

Dapple-throned Aphrodite,
eternal daughterf God,
snare-knitter! Don't, I beg you,

cow my heart with grief! Come,
as once when you heard my far-
off cry and, listening, stepped

from your father's house to your
gold car, to yoke the pair whose
beautiful thick-feathered wings

oaring down mid-air from heaven
carried you to light swiftly
on dark earth; then, blissful one,

smiling your immortal smile
you asked, What ailed me now that
me me call you again? What

was it that my distracted
heart most wanted? "Whom has
Persuasion to bring round now

"to your love? Who, Sappho, is
unfair to you? For, let her
run, she will soon run after;

"if she won't accept gifts, she
will one day give them; and if
she won't love you -- she soon will

"love, although unwillingly..."
If ever -- come now! Relieve
this intolerable pain!

What my heart most hopes will
happen, make happen; you your-
self join forces on my side!

Sappho

He is more than a hero

He is more than a hero
he is a god in my eyes--
the man who is allowed
to sit beside you -- he

who listens intimately
to the sweet murmur of
your voice, the enticing

laughter that makes my own
heart beat fast. If I meet
you suddenly, I can'

speak -- my tongue is broken;
a thin flame runs under
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears
drumming, I drip with sweat;
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than
dry grass. At such times
death isn't far from me

Sappho

Hymn To Aphrodite

Throned in splendor, immortal Aphrodite!
Child of Zeus, Enchantress, I implore thee
Slay me not in this distress and anguish,
Lady of beauty.

Hither come as once before thou camest,
When from afar thou heard'st my voice lamenting,
Heard'st and camest, leaving thy glorious father's Palace golden,

Yoking thy chariot. Fair the doves that bore thee;
Swift to the darksome earth their course directing,
Waving their thick wings from the highest heaven
Down through the ether.

Quickly they came. Then thou, O blessed goddess,
All in smiling wreathed thy face immortal,
Bade me tell thee the cause of all my suffering,
Why now I called thee;

What for my maddened heart I most was longing.
"Whom," thou criest, "dost wish that sweet Persuasion
Now win over and lead to thy love, my Sappho?
Who is it wrongs thee?

"For, though now he flies, he soon shall follow,
Soon shall be giving gifts who now rejects them.
Even though now he love not, soon shall he love thee
Even though thou wouldst not."

Come then now, dear goddess, and release me
From my anguish. All my heart's desiring
Grant thou now. Now too again as aforetime,
Be thou my ally.

Sappho

I have no complaint

I have no complaint
prosperity that
the golden Muses
gave me was no
delusion: dead, I
won't be forgotten

Sappho

I took my lyre

I took my lyre and said:
Come now, my heavenly
tortoise shell: become
a speaking instrument

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

I took my lyre and said

I took my lyre and said:
Come now, my heavenly
tortoise shell: become
a speaking instrument

Sappho

In the spring twilight

In the spring twilight
the full moon is shining:
Girls take their places
as though around an altar

Sappho

It is the Muses

It is the Muses
who have caused me
to be honred: they
taught me their craft

Sappho

It was you, Atthis, who said

It was you, Atthis, who said

"Sappho, if you will not get
up and let us look at you
I shall never love you again!

"Get up, unleash your suppleness,
lift off your Chian nightdress
and, like a lily leaning into

"a spring, bathe in the water.
Cleis is bringing your best
pruple frock and the yellow

"tunic down from the clothes chest;
you will have a cloak thrown over
you and flowers crowning your hair...

"Praxinoa, my child, will you please
roast nuts for our breakfast? One
of the gods is being good to us:

"today we are going at last
into Mitylene, our favorite
city, with Sappho, loveliest

"of its women; she will walk
among us like a mother with
all her daughters around her

"when she comes home from exile..."

But you forget everything

Sappho

It's no use

It's no use
Mother dear, I
can't finish my
weaving
        You may
blame Aphrodite

soft as she is

she has almost
killed me with
love for that boy

Sappho

Leto and Niobe

Before they were mothers
Leto and Niobe
had been the most
devoted of friends

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

Like the gods. . .

In my eyes he matches the gods, that man who
sits there facing you--any man whatever--
listening from closeby to the sweetness of your
voice as you talk, the

sweetness of your laughter: yes, that--I swear it--
sets the heart to shaking inside my breast, since
once I look at you for a moment, I can't
speak any longer,

but my tongue breaks down, and then all at once a
subtle fire races inside my skin, my
eyes can't see a thing and a whirring whistle
thrums at my hearing,

cold sweat covers me and a trembling takes
ahold of me all over: I'm greener than the
grass is and appear to myself to be little
short of dying.

But all must be endured, since even a poor [

Sappho

Must I remind you, Cleis,

Must I remind you, Cleis,
that sounds of grief
are unbecmoming in
a poet's household?

and that they are not
suitable in ours?
[Note: "A poet's household" is more litterally one "dedicated to the Muses."]

Sappho

Must I remind you, Clesis,

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suitable in ours?
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Sappho

No Word

I have had not one word from her

Frankly I wish I were dead.
When she left, she wept

a great deal; she said to
me, ``This parting must be
endured, Sappho. I go unwillingly.''

I said, ``Go, and be happy
but remember (you know
well) whom you leave shackled by love

``If you forget me, think
of our gifts to Aphrodite
and all the loveliness that we shared

``all the violet tiaras,
braided rosebuds, dill and
crocus twined around your young neck

``myrrh poured on your head
and on soft mats girls with
all that they most wished for beside them

``while no voices chanted
choruses without ours,
no woodlot bloomed in spring without song...''

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

Ode to a Loved One

LEST as the immortal gods is he,
The youth who fondly sits by thee,
And hears and sees thee, all the while,
Softly speaks and sweetly smile.

'Twas this deprived my soul of rest,
And raised such tumults in my breast;
For, while I gazed, in transport tossed,
My breath was gone, my voice was lost;

My bosom glowed; the subtle flame
Ran quick through all my vital frame;
O'er my dim eyes a darkness hung;
My ears with hollow murmurs rung;

In dewy damps my limbs were chilled;
My blood with gentle horrors thrilled:
My feeble pulse forgot to play;
I fainted, sunk, and died away.

Sappho

Of course I love you

Of course I love you
but if you love me,
marry a young woman!

I couldn't stand it
to live with a young
man, I being older

Sappho

Prayer to Our Lady of Paphos

Dapple-throned Aphrodite,
eternal daughter of God,
snare-knitter! Don't, I beg you,

cow my heart with grief! Come,
as once when you heard my far-
off cry and, listening, stepped

from your father's house to your
gold car, to yoke the pair whose
beautiful thick-feathered wings

oaring down mid-air from heaven
carried you to light swiftly
on dark earth; then, blissful one,

smiling your immortal smile
you asked, What ailed me now that
me call you again? What

was it that my distracted
heart most wanted? ``Whom has
Persuasion to bring round now

``to your love? Who, Sappho, is
unfair to you? For, let her
run, she will soon run after;

``if she won't accept gifts, she
will one day give them; and if
she won't love you --- she soon will

``love, although unwillingly...''
If ever --- come now! Relieve
this intolerable pain!

What my heart most hopes will
happen, make happen; you your-
self join forces on my side!

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

Sleep, darling

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I have a small
daughter called
Cleis, who is

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headband from Sardis to
give you, Cleis, such as
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day a purple ribbon
looped in the hair was thought
to be high style indeed

but we were dark:
                a girl
whose hair is yellower than
torchlight should wear no
headdress but fresh flowers

Sappho

Song of The Rose

F Zeus chose us a King of the flowers in his mirth,
He would call to the rose, and would royally crown it;
For the rose, ho, the rose! is the grace of the earth,
Is the light of the plants that are growing upon it!
For the rose, ho, the rose! is the eye of the flowers,
Is the blush of the meadows that feel themselves fair,
Is the lightning of beauty that strikes through the bowers
On pale lovers that sit in the glow unaware.
Ho, the rose breathes of love! ho, the rose lifts the cup
To the red lips of Cypris invoked for a guest!
Ho, the rose having curled its sweet leaves for the world
Takes delight in the motion its petals keep up,
As they laugh to the wind as it laughs from the west.

Sappho

Sounds of grief

Must I remind you, Cleis,
that sounds of grief
are unbecoming in
a poet's household?

and that they are not
suitable in ours?

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

Standing by my bed

Standing by my bed
in gold sandals
Dawn that very
moment awoke me

Sappho

Tell everyone

Tell everyone
now, today, I shall
sing beautifully for
my friends' pleasure

Sappho

The Anactoria Poem

Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldiers,
others call a fleet the most beautiful of
sights the dark earth offers, but I say it's what-
ever you love best.

And it's easy to make this understood by
everyone, for she who surpassed all human
kind in beauty, Helen, abandoning her
husband--that best of

men--went sailing off to the shores of Troy and
never spent a thought on her child or loving
parents: when the goddess seduced her wits and
left her to wander,

she forgot them all, she could not remember
anything but longing, and lightly straying
aside, lost her way. But that reminds me
now: Anactória,

she's not here, and I'd rather see her lovely
step, her sparkling glance and her face than gaze on
all the troops in Lydia in their chariots and
glittering armor.

Sappho

The Moon

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

Sappho

The Muses

It is the Muses
who have caused me
to be honred: they
taught me their craft

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

To any army wife

To any army wife, in Sardis:

Some say a cavalry corps,
some infantry, some again,
will maintain that the swift oars

of our fleet are the finest
sight on dark earth; but I say
that whatever one loves, is.

This is easily proved: did
not Helen --- she who had scanned
the flower of the world's manhood ---

choose as first among men one
who laid Troy's honor in ruin?
warped to his will, forgetting

love due her own blood, her own
child, she wandered far with him.
So Anactoria, although you

being far away forget us,
the dear sound of your footstep
and light glancing in your eyes

would move me more than glitter
of Lydian horse or armored
tread of mainland infantry

Sappho
tr. Barnard

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of Lydian horse or armored
tread of mainland infantry

Sappho

To Aphrodite

You know the place: then
Leave Crete and come to us
waiting where the grove is
pleasantest, by precincts

sacred to you; incense
smokes on the altar, cold
streams murmur through the

apple branches, a young
rose thicket shades the ground
and quivering leaves pour

down deep sleep; in meadows
where horses have grown sleek
among spring flowers, dill

scents the air. Queen! Cyprian!
Fill our gold cups with love
stirred into clear nectar

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

To Evening

O HESPERUS! Thou bringest all things home;
All that the garish day hath scattered wide;
The sheep, the goat, back to the welcome fold;
Thou bring'st the child, too, to his mother's side

Sappho

To One who Loved not Poetry

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 now to flit with unknown ghosts in cold and nameless gloom.

Sappho

Tonight I've watched

Tonight I've watched
the moon and then
the Pleiades
go down

The night is now
half-gone; youth
goes; I am

in bed alone

Sappho

We know this much

We know this much
Death is an evil;
we have the gods'
word for it; they too
would die if death
were a good thing

Sappho

We put the urn abord ship

We put the urn aboard ship
with this inscription:

This is the dust of little
Timas who unmarried was led
into Persephone's dark bedroom

And she being far from home, girls
her age took new-edged blades
to cut, in mourning for her,
these curls of their soft hair

Sappho

We shall enjoy it

We shall enjoy it
as for him who finds
fault, may silliness
and sorrow take him!

Sappho

With his venom

With his venom
irresistible
and bittersweet

that loosener
of limbs, Love

reptile-like
strikes me down

Sappho

Without warning

Without warning
as a whirlwind
swoops on an oak
Love shakes my heart

Sappho

Words

Although they are
only breath, words
which I command
are immortal

Sappho
tr. Barnard

Sappho

Yes, Atthis, you may be sure

Yes, Atthis, you may be sure

Even in Sardis
Anactoria will think often of us

of the life we shared here, when you seemed
the Goddess incarnate
to her and your singing pleased her best

Now among Lydian women she in her
turn stands first as the red-
fingered moon rising at sunset takes

precedence over stars around her;
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Delicious dew purs down to freshen
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aimlessly, thinking of gentle
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She shouts aloud, Come! we know it;
thousand-eared night repeats that cry
across the sea shining between us

Sappho

You know the place: then

You know the place: then
Leave Crete and come to us
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where horses have grown sleek
among spring flowers, dill

scents the air. Queen! Cyprian!
Fill our gold cups with love
stirred into clear nectar

Sappho

You may forget but

You may forget but
let me tell you
this: someone in
some future time
will think of us

Sappho