

Poems by Sappho

Sappho

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Sappho

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c. 625 B.C.E.

1. 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 purs 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

2. 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
tr. Barnard

3.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
tr. Barnard

4.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

5.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

6.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

7. Death

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
tr. Barnard

8. 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
tr. Barnard

9.I_Have_No_Complaint

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

10.I_Took_My_Lyre

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

11.In_the_Spring_Twilight

In the spring twilight

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

12.It_Was_You,_Atthis

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
purple 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

tr. Barnard

13.Leto_and_Niobe

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

14.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

15.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
tr. Barnard

16.Prayer_to_Our_Lady_of_Paphos

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

17.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

18.Standing_By_My_Bed

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

19. Tell_Everyone

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

20. The_Muses

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

21. To_Aphrodite

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

cover 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 chariot, to yoke the pair whose
beautiful thick-feathered wings

oared 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
tr. Barnard

22.To_an_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

23. Tonight_I_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
tr. Barnard

24.We_Put_the_Urn_Aboard_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
tr. Barnard

25.We_Shall_Enjoy_It

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

26.With_His_Venom

With his venom
irresistible
and bittersweet

that loosener
of limbs, Love

reptile-like
strikes me down

Sappho
tr. Barnard

27.Without_Warning

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

28.Words

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

Sappho
tr. Barnard

29.You_May_Forget

You may forget but
let me tell you

this: someone in
some future time
will think of us

Sappho
tr. Barnard