Sappho of Lesbos

by R.L. Fowler

Sappho is one of the most famous names of ancient Greece, but perhaps her very fame has meant that her image and reputation have suffered a great deal of distortion. Mistaken impressions about her are by no means confined to the modern world. In fact, the misinformation about her can be shown to have started circulating as early as the fifth century B.C., little more than one hundred and fifty years after her own lifetime, which ended around 570 B.C. Her love songs certainly deserve to be her most admired, and her affections in the surviving fragments are addressed towards girls. But she wrote other kinds of songs (including ones for weddings), and she herself was married and had a daughter. It was the lurid imagination of comic poets such as Aristophanes that gave rise to the misconceptions, or perhaps encouraged what the general population, always eager for scandal, was happy to believe. For our part, we should emphasize rather the wonderful beauty of her verses, and celebrate the fact that amid a culture otherwise so dominated by men there was at least one woman whose great talents were recognized.

There is, however, no point denying the obvious. A hundred years ago, when one could not even speak the word "homosexuality," people either believed that Sappho was as degenerate as her ancient slanderers claimed, or they tried to deny that her words should be interpreted in the obvious way. Nowadays we are more open about these things and don't need to gloss over some of Sappho's expressions of affection for her girls. But, as so often, the matter needs to be put in perspective. A great deal of what Sappho says could be described under the heading "educational." It seems that her circle consisted of girls quite a bit younger than herself and that she was in some sense their teacher. Fragments of her poetry speak of polished manners, elegant dress, and cultivation of the arts. We can well imagine that these were subjects on the "curriculum." The island of Lesbos was famous for its beautiful women, and to judge by the names and homelands of some of Sappho's girls, parents in far-off places were willing to send their daughters to her to acquire the graces becoming a woman. Not just any parents, either, but aristocratic parents. We know that Sappho's family was one of the most prominent in the city of Mytilene on Lesbos. Although she herself makes no mention of the furious politics that make up most of the poetry of her contemporary and fellow-countryman Alcaeus (the subject of my next Labyrinth article), it is certain that her menfolk were involved in them as partisan leaders; she speaks of exile in one of her fragments, and tradition reports that she spent a period abroad as a result of her husband's exile for political reasons. Sappho herself, then, moved in the highest circles, and the best way to defend her is to point out that the noblest families of Greece were willing to entrust their daughters to her care. They would not have done so if she had been guilty of gross immorality. Rather, affectionate attachments between teacher and pupil were expected as a normal, indeed a welcome, part of education, for boys as well as girls.

It was customary in Greece that any public or group activity was done in honour of a god, and in the case of Sappho's group this deity was Aphrodite, the goddess of female grace. (That she is also the erotic goddess - indeed, the mother of Eros in mythology - did not help keep Sappho's later reputation pure!) Sappho's poetry speaks of Aphrodite in tones of profound devotion. Among the greatest charms of her verse is her ability to render powerful emotions in the most straightforward and unaffected language, without recourse to artificial rhetoric or displays of witty irony such as characterize the love poetry of later ages. These emotions range from religious awe to tender affection, from heartbreak at the loss of a friend to happiness for a bride. Because she chooses simple words, but always the right words, she achieves a greater impact. It helps, too, that her words are so melodious; already in antiquity she was admired for the luxurious sound of her Greek. This musical instinct is no surprise in someone from the island of Lesbos, which had a long history of musical innovation. Sappho herself had a certain kind of rhythm and music named after her, a four-line grouping known as the "Sapphic stanza."

The finest qualities of her verse are all illustrated in the poem that stands first in modern collections, the famous "Hymn to Aphrodite." She wrote a great deal of poetry, but, alas, little survives; in fact, this

poem is the only one that survives complete. Mostly we have only bits and pieces of her original songs. From these it is hard to reconstruct a picture of her art, but enough survives to make us feel the loss keenly. In this poem, Sappho prays to Aphrodite to help her with a difficulty in love. Most of the song (remember, it was originally sung to the accompaniment of a lyre) is taken up with a description of how Aphrodite appeared to her and helped her once in the past. There is no need to doubt, as some rationalists have done, that Aphrodite really appeared to Sappho, although such a close, personal relationship with a divinity is practically unique in the period. Or perhaps it is precisely because it is so unusual that we have no choice but to believe her.

Before I give you a complete translation, you might be curious to hear Sappho's own words and appreciate for yourself what I said about their melody. First I give the Greek of her first stanza, and then a transliteration of it. Pronounce "oi" like "oy"; "ai" like "ie" in "pie"; "é" like "ay"; "í" like "ee"; "ü" like German "ü"; and "a" like "ah". Finally I give the whole poem in English. It is written in Sapphic stanzas.

Ποικιλόθρον' ἀθανάτ' Ἀφροδίτα,
παῖ Δίος δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε,
μή μ' ἄσαισι μήδ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,
πότνια, θῦμον.

Poikilóthron athanát Aphrodíta,
pai Díos dolóploke, líssomaí se,
mé másaisi méd oníaisi dámna,
pótnia, thümon.

Aphrodite, child of Zeus, immortal
weaver of wiles, I beseech you on your golden throne,
neither with anxious cares nor worried fear burden,
mistress, my heart,

But come to me here, if ever before
another time you heard my cry from afar
and leaving your father's home aloft
you came, the golden

Chariot yoked; swift and pretty the sparrows
who drew it over the dark earth,
the flurry of whirling wings through heaven's
vault descending.

At once they arrived, and you, blessed goddess,
a smile on thy immortal face, asked
what I suffered yet again, why I once more
summoned hither,

What in my mad yearning I most hoped to have.
Who is it that I should entice to join
once more in your friendship? Who, Sappho,
that wrongs you?

Why, if she flees, soon she will pursue;
if she spurns your gifts, why, soon she will give them;
if she love thee not, soon she will love thee,
willing or not.

Come to me now too, free me from these
troublesome cares, and what most my heart would have
fulfilled, fulfill for me; be thou thyself
my ever-present ally.