POEMS OF SAPPHO
TRANSLATED BY JULIA DUBNOFF

Focus Questions:

1. Sappho presents herself, especially in #1, as having a close relationship with Aphrodite. What are the dynamics of this relationship? What does it say about the religious perspectives possible to women?
2. How does Sappho portray herself as a lover? What is her relationship to the objects of her love? Is her love reciprocated, or is the focus of the love of others?
3. What is the community of women implied by Sappho’s poems? What are their activities? How do they feel about one another? Who are they? What stage of life?
4. Do men have a place in Sappho’s poetry? If so, what is it? Do you get a sense of male/female relationships from this poetry?
5. Is there anything about Sappho’s poetry that makes it particularly feminine?
6. What is it about Sappho’s poetry that would appeal enough to the male readers/listeners so much that she was the only really famous female poet of her period, the best-known female poet ever in the Greco-Roman world, and know as the “tenth Muse”?

≈1≈

Immortal Aphrodite, on your intricately brocaded throne,¹
child of Zeus, weaver of wiles, this I pray:
Dear Lady, don’t crush my heart
with pains and sorrows.

But come here, if ever before,
when you heard my far-off cry,
you listened. And you came,
leaving your father’s house,

yoking your chariot of gold.
Then beautiful swift sparrows led you over the black earth
from the sky through the middle air,
whirling their wings into a blur.
Rapidly they came. And you, O Blessed Goddess,
a smile on your immortal face,
asked what had happened this time,
why did I call again,

and what did I especially desire
for myself in my frenzied heart:
Who this time am I to persuade
to your love? Sappho, who is doing you wrong?

For even if she flees, soon she shall pursue.
And if she refuses gifts, soon she shall give them.
If she doesn't love you, soon she shall love
even if she's unwilling.”

Come to me now once again and release me
from grueling anxiety.
All that my heart longs for,
fulfill. And be yourself my ally in love's battle.

≈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.

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,
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]...
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 their footsoldiers in arms.

≈31≈

That man to me seems equal to the gods, the man who sits opposite you and close by listens to your sweet voice

your enticing laughter— that indeed has stirred up the heart in my breast. For whenever I look at you even briefly I can no longer say a single thing,

but my tongue is frozen in silence; instantly a delicate flame runs beneath my skin; with my eyes I see nothing; my ears make a whirring noise.

A cold sweat covers me, trembling seizes my body, and I am greener than grass. Lacking but little of death do I seem.

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 [hôrâ] 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.
You set me on fire.

A servant
of wile-weaving
Aphrodite...

Eros
Giver of pain...

Eros
Coming from heaven
throwing off
his purple cloak.

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

As a wind in the mountains
assaults an oak,
Love shook my breast.

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

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

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

“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.”
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 Ares!
_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!*

~28~

The Marriage of Hektor and Andromakhe

...Cyprus...

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

...and the rest of Asia...unwilling glory (*kleos aphthiton*).

Hektor and his companions led the dark-eyed luxuriant Andromakhe from holy Thebes and...Plakia in ships upon the salty sea. Many golden bracelets and purple robes...*, intricately-worked ornaments, countless silver cups and ivory.

Thus he spoke. And his dear father quickly leapt up.

And the story went to his friends through the broad city.

And the Trojans joined mules to smooth-running carriages.

And the whole band of women and...maidens got on.

Separately, the daughters of Priam...

And the unmarried men led horses beneath the chariots

and greatly...charioteers...

...like gods

...holy

set forth into Troy...

And the sweet song of the flute mixed...

And the sound of the cymbals, and then the maidens sang in clear tones a sacred song

and a divinely-sweet echo reached the sky...

And everywhere through the streets...

Mixing bowls and cups...

And myrrh and cassia and frankincense were mingled.

And the older women wailed aloud.

And all the men gave forth a high-pitched song,
calling on Apollo, the far-shooter, skilled in the lyre. And they sang of Hektor and Andromakhe like to the gods.

~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.
Julia Dubnoff very kindly gave permission to include her translations of Sappho at Peithō's Web. She noted that her translations were originally created for a Harvard Core course C-14 sourcebook. The course was Greg Nagy's "The Concept of the Hero in Hellenic Civilization." The sourcebook was edited by Lynn Sawlivich. The original can be found here.