



Sappho

Poetic Fragments

Translated by D. W. Myatt

Introduction

The aim of the present translation is to try and present something of the unadorned beauty of Sappho's Greek.

From the many fragments that remain of her poetry, I have chosen those that best reflect something of this beauty. The text used is that of Lobel and Page [*Poetarium Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, Oxford 1955] - and the numbering of the Fragments in this present work follows that of their text.

... in the text indicates a break in the fragment; [] indicates a conjecture.

Fragment 1

Deathless Aphrodite - Daughter of Zeus and maker of snares -
On your florid throne, hear me!
My lady, do not subdue my heart by anguish and pain
But come to me as when before
You heard my distant cry, and listened:
Leaving, with your golden chariot yoked, your father's house
To move beautiful sparrows swift with a whirling of wings
As from heaven you came to this dark earth through middle air
And so swiftly arrived.

Then you my goddess with your immortal lips smiling
Would ask what now afflicts me, why again
I am calling and what now I with my restive heart
Desired:
Whom now shall I beguile
To bring you to her love?
Who now injures you, Sappho?
For if she flees, soon shall she chase
And, rejecting gifts, soon shall she give.
If she does not love you, she shall do so soon
Whatsoever is her will.

Come to me now to end this consuming pain
Bringing what my heart desires to be brought:
Be yourself my ally in this fight.

Fragment 16

For some - it is horsemen; for others - it is infantry;
For some others - it is ships which are, on this black earth,
Visibly constant in their beauty. But for me,
It is that which you desire.

To all, it is easy to make this completely understood
For Helen - she who greatly surpassed other mortals in beauty -
Left her most noble man and sailed forth to Troy
Forgetting her beloved parents and her daughter
Because [the goddess] led her away

Which makes me to see again Anactoria now far distant:
For I would rather behold her pleasing, graceful movement
And the radiant splendour of her face
Than your Lydian chariots and foot-soldiers in full armour

Fragment 22

Gather your [lyre] and sing for me
[Soon]
As desire once again [enhances] your beauty:

Your dress excites, and I rejoice
For I once doubted Aphrodite
But now have asked that soon
You will be with me again

Fragment 31

I see he who sits near you as an equal of the gods
For he can closely listen to your delightful voice
And that seductive laugh
That makes the heart behind my breasts to tremble.

Even when I glimpse you for a moment
My tongue is stilled as speech deserts me
While a delicate fire is beneath my skin -
My eyes cannot see, then,
When I hear only a whirling sound
As I shivering, sweat
Because all of me trembles;
I become paler than drought-grass
And nearer to death ...

Fragment 34

Awed by her brightness
Stars near the beautiful moon
Cover their own shining faces
When she lights earth
With her silver brilliance
Of love

Fragment 23

When I look at you
I know that even Hermione
Was not such as you -
Fairer to compare you to Helen
The golden-haired

Fragment 41

Beautiful girls, towards you
My thoughts will never change

Fragment 47

Love shook my heart
Like the mountain wind
Falls upon trees of oak

Fragment 94

I can reveal to you that I wished to die -
For with much weeping she left me

Saying: "Sappho - what suffering is ours!
For it is against my will that I leave you."
In answer, I said: "Go, happily remembering me
For you know what we shared and pursued -
If not, I wish you to see again our [former joys]
The many braids of rose and violet you [wreathed]
Around yourself at my side
And the many garlands of flowers
With which you adorned your soft neck:
With royal oils from [fresh flowers]
You anointed [yourself]
And on soft beds fulfilled your longing
[For me]

Fragment 96

She honoured you like a goddess
And delighted in your choral dance.
Now she is pre-eminent among the ladies of Lydia
As the rose-rayed moon after the sinking of the Sun
Surpasses all the stars and spreads it's light upon the sea
And the flowers of the fields
To beautify the spreading dew, freshen roses
Soft chervil and the flowering melilot

Restless, she remembers gentle Atthis -
Perhaps her subtle judgement is burdened
By your [fate]

For us, it is not easy to approach
Goddesses in the beauty of their form
But you

Fragment 58

Age seizes my skin and turns my hair
From black to white:

My knees no longer bear me
And I am unable to dance again
Like a fawn.

What could I do? I am not ageless:
My youth is gone.
Red-robed Dawn, immortal goddess,
Carried [Tithonus] to earth's end
Yet age seized him
Despite the gift from his immortal lover

I love delicate softness:
For me, love has brought the brightness
And the beauty of the sun

Fragment 126

May you sleep on the breasts
Of your tender companion

Fragment 130

Once again, desire -
That looser of limbs and bitterly sweet -
Makes me to tremble
You are irresistible

Fragment 138/147

Believe me, in the future someone
Will remember us

Because you love me
Stand with me face to face

And unveil the softness in your eyes
