

Sappho

Circa 630BC

One of the great Greek lyricists and few known female poets of the ancient world, Sappho was born some time between 630 and 612 BC. She was an aristocrat who married a prosperous merchant, and she had a daughter named Cleis. Her wealth afforded her with the opportunity to live her life as she chose, and she chose to spend it studying the arts on the isle of Lesbos.

In the seventh century BC, Lesbos was a cultural center. Sappho spent most her time on the island, though she also traveled widely throughout Greece. She was exiled for a time because of political activities in her family, and she spent this time in Sicily. By this time she was known as a poet, and the residents of Syracuse were so honored by her visit that they erected a statue to her.

Sappho was called a *lyrist* because, as was the custom of the time, she wrote her poems to be performed with the accompaniment of a lyre. Sappho composed her own music and refined the prevailing lyric meter to a point that it is now known as *sapphic meter*. She innovated lyric poetry both in technique and style, becoming part of a new wave of Greek lyricists who moved from writing poetry from the point of view of gods and muses to the personal vantage point of the individual. She was one of the first poets to write from the first person, describing love and loss as it affected her personally.

Her style was sensual and melodic; primarily songs of love, yearning, and reflection. Most commonly the target of her affections was female, often one of the many women sent to her for education in the arts. She nurtured these women, wrote poems of love and adoration to them, and when they eventually left the island to be married, she composed their wedding songs. That Sappho's poetry was not condemned in her time for its homoerotic content (though it was disparaged by scholars in later centuries) suggests that perhaps love between women was not persecuted then as it has been in more recent times. Especially in the last century, Sappho has become so synonymous with woman-love that two of the most popular words to describe female homosexuality--*lesbian* and *sapphic* have derived from her.

How well was Sappho honored in ancient times? Plato elevated her from the status of great lyric poet to one of the muses. Upon hearing one of her songs, Solon, an Athenian ruler, lawyer, and a poet himself, asked that he be taught the song "Because I want to learn it and die."

In more modern times, many poets have been inspired by her works. Michael Field, Pierre Louys, Renée Vivien, Marie-Madeleine, Amy Lowell, and H.D. all cited Sappho as a strong influence on their work.

Given the fame that her work has enjoyed, it is somewhat surprising to learn that only one of Sappho's poems is available in its entirety--all of the rest exist as fragments of her original work. At one time, there were perhaps nine complete volumes of her poetry, but over the centuries, from neglect, natural disasters, and possibly some censorship by close-minded scholars, her work was lost. Late in the 19th century, however, manuscripts dating back to the eighth century AD were discovered in the Nile Valley, and some of these manuscripts proved to contain Sappho's work. Excavations that followed in ancient Egyptian refuse heaps unearthed a quantity of papyrus from the first century BC to the 10th century AD. Here, strips of papyrus--some containing her poetry--were found in number. These strips had been used to wrap mummies, stuff sacred animals, and wrap coffins. The work to piece these together and identify them has continued into the twentieth century.

Many translations of these fragments are available today, with each of these translations offering a different approach to her work. Translating Sappho's poetry is challenging, partly because of the fragmented nature of the material. In reconstructing a poem, the translator must either trail off into oblivion periodically, or speculate on the missing pieces and take the risk (for the sake of lyric flow) of introducing elements that Sappho did not intend. Breaks in the poem can affect the intact lines, as well, robbing them of critical context. Even with the complication of fragments aside, a translator still has to decide how to translate the ancient Greek text, where to insert line breaks, how to stress each word, and any number of technical details that affect the meaning and the lyricism of the resulting poem. It makes sense, then, for those who are interested in Sappho's work (and not fluent in ancient Greek) to read multiple translations to obtain several viewpoints. [*]

From ancient times to today, Sappho has remained an important literary and cultural figure. Her works continued to be studied and translated, new poets are inspired by her constantly, and speculation on her life remains popular in the form of fictionalized tales and ardent research. For a woman who has been dead for over two thousand years, this is quite an achievement.

Biography by Alix North www.sappho.com/poetry/sappho