

Sappho of lesbos



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Sappho of Lesbos Sappho of Lesbos was a Greek woman poet whose poems explored internal emotions and themes of love and passion. While only one of her completed poems has survived, fragments of her poetry have been collected which illustrate her lyrical mastery and smooth legato style.

Sappho was one of the few women poets of antiquity, and her overt sexuality and lesbian undertones marks her poetry as entirely unique and still relevant in today's literary climate. This essay examines a series of her poems to determine her relationship with Aphrodite, explore the ways she characterizes the conflicting nature of romantic love, and to decide why the church sought to ban and destroy her work.

Sappho's poetry exhibits an intense relationship with the Greek Goddess of Love Aphrodite. Indeed, Sappho was involved in a thiasos, a cult organized to worship the goddess Aphrodite with poems and songs. In the poems Sappho's relationship with goddess can be seen at times to reflect intense devotion, and at other times Sappho implores the goddess to grant her wishes or end her torment. In a poem titled ' To Aphrodite of the Flowers at Knossos' Sappho calls for the goddess to leave Krete and come and join her. In the final stanza she refers to the goddess deferentially as " Queen Aphrodite" and asks her to exultantly " pour heavenly nectar into gold cups." This poem demonstrates Sappho's thematic concern with Aphrodite as a celestial entity to be adored. In ' Hymn to Aphrodite' Sappho envisions the goddess as an entity towards which she pleases for help with a reluctant lover. In this poem Aphrodite responds, "'Whom,' thou criest, " dost wish that sweet Persuasion / Now win over and lead to thy love, my Sappho?" Like many other poems, this one shows the relationship between the goddess and poet to be intimate and developed.

Throughout Sappho's poetic oeuvre we witness her conflicted relationship with the effects of romantic love. While a large amount of Sappho's poetry concerns love, she characterizes it as equally emitting anguish and salvation.

In a fragment titled 'The Blast of Love' she writes, "Like a mountain whirlwind / punishing the oak trees / love shattered my heart." Fragments like this which lament the throes of love, can be contrasted with other work where she revels and languishes in the powerful emotion. In a fragment called 'To Eros' she writes simply, "You burn me" While direct and simple, the sentiment characterizes Sappho's conflicted nature with love.

Even a quick perusal of Sappho's poetry reveals why church officials would seek to ban and destroy her work. Perhaps the most obvious reason is because the poems reveal an overt sexuality and love for the same sex. In 'Ode To a Loved One' she explores these feelings with poetic veracity: "At mere sight of you / my voice falters, my tongue / is broken." In the poem she describes her jealous ardor while viewing a young woman. A man faces the woman, listening to her "sweet speech and lovely laughter." In other fragments she couples lesbian undertones with an overt sexual desire that would clearly alienate conservative members of the clergy. In 'Ungiven Love' she writes, "I am dry with longing / and I hunger for her." And in 'The Beauty of Her Women' she writes, "Mnasidika has a lovelier body / than even our soft Gyrinnos."

In conclusion, Sappho's poetry exhibits intensely personal emotions with lyrical mastery. Her relationship with Aphrodite is both intimate and adulatory, and approaches the goddess as a supplicant pleading for aid. Sappho characterizes the conflicting nature of romantic love by exploring its anguishing effects, yet also revealing in the intensity of the emotion. Finally,

her thematic concerns with lesbianism and overt sexual ardor, potentially alienates her work from conservative members of the church.