

# Poems by Sappho

Sappho



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# Poems by Sappho

## Sappho

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c. 625 B.C.E.

## 1.Anactoria

Yes, Atthis, you may be sure  
Even in Sardis  
Anactoria will think often of us

of the life we shared here, when you seemed  
the Goddess incarnate  
to her and your singing pleased her best

Now among Lydian women she in her  
turn stands first as the red-  
fingered moon rising at sunset takes

precedence over stars around her;  
her light spreads equally  
on the salt sea and fields thick with bloom

Delicious dew purs down to freshen  
roses, delicate thyme  
and blossoming sweet clover; she wanders

aimlessly, thinking of gentle  
Atthis, her heart hanging  
heavy with longing in her little breast

She shouts aloud, Come! we know it;  
thousand-eared night repeats that cry  
across the sea shining between us

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 2.And\_Their\_Feet\_Move

And their feet move  
rhythmically, as tender  
feet of Cretan girls  
danced once around an

altar of love, crushing  
a circle in the soft  
smooth flowering grass

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

### 3.Awed\_by\_Her\_Splendor

Awed by her splendor  
stars near the lovely  
moon cover their own  
bright faces  
    when she  
is roundest and lights  
earth with her silver

Sappho  
tr. Barnard



## 4.Blame\_Aphrodite

It's no use  
Mother dear, I  
can't finish my  
weaving  
    You may  
blame Aphrodite

soft as she is

she has almost  
killed me with  
love for that boy

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 5.Cleis

Sleep, darling  
I have a small  
daughter called  
Cleis, who is

like a golden  
flower  
    I wouldn't  
take all Croesus'  
kingdom with love  
thrown in, for her

Don't ask me what to wear  
I have no embroidered  
headband from Sardis to  
give you, Cleis, such as  
I wore  
    and my mother  
always said that in her  
day a purple ribbon  
looped in the hair was thought

to be high style indeed

but we were dark:  
    a girl  
whose hair is yellower than  
torchlight should wear no  
headdress but fresh flowers

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 6.Cyprian,\_in\_My\_Dream

Cyprian, in my dream  
the folds of a purple  
kerchief shadowed  
your cheeks — the one

Timas one time sent,  
a timid gift, all  
the way from Phocaea

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 7.Death

We know this much  
Death is an evil;  
we have the gods'  
word for it; they too  
would die if death  
were a good thing

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 8.He\_Is\_More\_Than\_a\_Hero

He is more than a hero  
he is a god in my eyes—  
the man who is allowed  
to sit beside you — he

who listens intimately  
to the sweet murmur of  
your voice, the enticing

laughter that makes my own  
heart beat fast. If I meet  
you suddenly, I can'

speak — my tongue is broken;  
a thin flame runs under  
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears  
drumming, I drip with sweat;  
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than  
dry grass. At such times  
death isn't far from me

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 9.I\_Have\_No\_Complaint

I have no complaint  
prosperity that  
the golden Muses  
gave me was no  
delusion: dead, I  
won't be forgotten

## 10.I\_Took\_My\_Lyre

I took my lyre and said:  
Come now, my heavenly  
tortoise shell: become  
a speaking instrument

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 11.In\_the\_Spring\_Twilight

In the spring twilight  
the full moon is shining:  
Girls take their places  
as though around an altar

Sappho  
tr. Barnard



## 12.It\_Was\_You,\_Atthis

It was you, Atthis, who said

"Sappho, if you will not get  
up and let us look at you  
I shall never love you again!

"Get up, unleash your suppleness,  
lift off your Chian nightdress  
and, like a lily leaning into

"a spring, bathe in the water.  
Cleis is bringing your best  
purple frock and the yellow

"tunic down from the clothes chest;  
you will have a cloak thrown over  
you and flowers crowning your hair...

"Praxinoa, my child, will you please  
roast nuts for our breakfast? One  
of the gods is being good to us:

"today we are going at last  
into Mitylene, our favorite  
city, with Sappho, loveliest

"of its women; she will walk  
among us like a mother with  
all her daughters around her

"when she comes home from exile..."

But you forget everything

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

### 13.Leto\_and\_Niobe

Before they were mothers  
Leto and Niobe  
had been the most  
devoted of friends

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 14.No\_Word

I have had not one word from her

Frankly I wish I were dead.  
When she left, she wept

a great deal; she said to  
me, "This parting must be  
endured, Sappho. I go unwillingly."

I said, "Go, and be happy  
but remember (you know  
well) whom you leave shackled by love

"If you forget me, think  
of our gifts to Aphrodite  
and all the loveliness that we shared

"all the violet tiaras,  
braided rosebuds, dill and  
crocus twined around your young neck

"myrrh poured on your head  
and on soft mats girls with  
all that they most wished for beside them

"while no voices chanted  
choruses without ours,  
no woodlot bloomed in spring without song..."

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 15.Of\_Course\_I\_Love\_You

Of course I love you  
but if you love me,  
marry a young woman!

I couldn't stand it  
to live with a young  
man, I being older

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 16.Prayer\_to\_Our\_Lady\_of\_Paphos

You know the place: then  
Leave Crete and come to us  
waiting where the grove is  
pleasantest, by precincts

sacred to you; incense  
smokes on the altar, cold  
streams murmur through the

apple branches, a young  
rose thicket shades the ground  
and quivering leaves pour

down deep sleep; in meadows  
where horses have grown sleek  
among spring flowers, dill

scents the air. Queen! Cyprian!  
Fill our gold cups with love  
stirred into clear nectar

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 17.Sounds\_of\_Grief

Must I remind you, Cleis,  
that sounds of grief  
are unbecoming in  
a poet's household?

and that they are not  
suitable in ours?

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 18.Standing\_By\_My\_Bed

Standing by my bed  
in gold sandals  
Dawn that very  
moment awoke me

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 19.Tell\_Everyone

Tell everyone  
now, today, I shall  
sing beautifully for  
my friends' pleasure

Sappho  
tr. Barnard



## 20.The\_Muses

It is the Muses  
who have caused me  
to be honored: they  
taught me their craft

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 21.To\_Aphrodite

Dapple-throned Aphrodite,  
eternal daughter of God,  
snare-knitter! Don't, I beg you,

    cow my heart with grief! Come,  
as once when you heard my far-  
off cry and, listening, stepped

    from your father's house to your  
gold car, to yoke the pair whose  
beautiful thick-feathered wings

    oaring down mid-air from heaven  
carried you to light swiftly  
on dark earth; then, blissful one,

    smiling your immortal smile  
you asked, What ailed me now that  
me me call you again? What

    was it that my distracted  
heart most wanted? "Whom has  
Persuasion to bring round now

    "to your love? Who, Sappho, is  
unfair to you? For, let her  
run, she will soon run after;

    "if she won't accept gifts, she  
will one day give them; and if  
she won't love you — she soon will

    "love, although unwillingly..."  
If ever — come now! Relieve  
this intolerable pain!

    What my heart most hopes will  
happen, make happen; you your-  
self join forces on my side!

Sappho  
tr. Barnard



## 22.To\_an\_Army\_Wife

To any army wife, in Sardis:

Some say a cavalry corps,  
some infantry, some again,  
will maintain that the swift oars

of our fleet are the finest  
sight on dark earth; but I say  
that whatever one loves, is.

This is easily proved: did  
not Helen -- she who had scanned  
the flower of the world's manhood --

choose as first among men one  
who laid Troy's honor in ruin?  
warped to his will, forgetting

love due her own blood, her own  
child, she wandered far with him.  
So Anactoria, although you

being far away forget us,  
the dear sound of your footstep  
and light glancing in your eyes

would move me more than glitter  
of Lydian horse or armored  
tread of mainland infantry

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 23.Tonight\_I\_Watched

Tonight I've watched  
the moon and then  
the Pleiades  
go down

The night is now  
half-gone; youth  
goes; I am

in bed alone

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 24.We\_Put\_the\_Urn\_Aboard\_Ship

We put the urn aboard ship  
with this inscription:

This is the dust of little  
Timas who unmarried was led  
into Persephone's dark bedroom

And she being far from home, girls  
her age took new-edged blades  
to cut, in mourning for her,  
these curls of their soft hair

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 25.We\_Shall\_Enjoy\_It

We shall enjoy it  
as for him who finds  
fault, may silliness  
and sorrow take him!

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 26. With\_His\_Venom

With his venom  
irresistible  
and bittersweet

that loosener  
of limbs, Love

reptile-like  
strikes me down

Sappho  
tr. Barnard



## 27. Without\_Warning

Without warning  
as a whirlwind  
swoops on an oak  
Love shakes my heart

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 28.Words

Although they are  
only breath, words  
which I command  
are immortal

Sappho  
tr. Barnard

## 29.You\_May\_Forget

You may forget but  
let me tell you  
this: someone in  
some future time  
will think of us

Sappho  
tr. Barnard