Love Poetry of Antiquity

ENGL 2800 (FAN)

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Sappho, Ancient Greece, born c. 630 B.C.E.
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the draughtsman drew in it;
the overseer of sculptors carved in it;
the overseer of the works which are in the burial grounds
    busied himself with it.
All the equipment to be put in a tomb shaft— 555
its share of these things was made.
I was given funerary priests;[1]
a funerary demesne was made for me,
with fields in it and a garden in its proper place,
as is done for a Chief Friend. 560
My image was overlaid with gold,[2]
and its kilt with electrum.
It is his Majesty who has caused this to be done.
There is no other lowly man for whom the like was done.
I was in the favours of the king's giving, 565
until the day of landing came.'[3]

So it ends, from start to finish,[4]
as found in writing.

1. Sinuhe receives an endowment to support and continue his mortuary cult after death and burial. At the same time, the "garden" implies that this is a place of delight to which his spirit could return from the next world.
2. No gilded statue of a nonroyal person is known; gilding seems to have been reserved for the gods and the king. This is another instance of likely hyperbole, as is implied by the next two lines. As he dies and is buried, Sinuhe's status becomes higher even than that of a normal member of the elite.
3. A euphemism for death. Since most travel in Egypt was by boat, one "landed" on the other side after death.
4. A short note by the copyist, known as a colophon, written in red at the end of the text.

EGYPTIAN LOVE POEMS[1]

ca. 1300–1100 B.C.E.

Although love poetry must have existed in oral form in earlier periods, love poems only survive on papyri, potsherds, and flakes of limestone from the later part of the New Kingdom. Looking at the women musicians and nearly nude girls singing and dancing in the paintings on tomb walls, we can imagine that love songs were performed with music and dance at banquets. Composed in rather informal, at times graphic language, similar texts were also used in the cult of goddesses and in praise of royal women. Egyptian love poetry shows striking parallels with love poetry of other Near Eastern traditions, such as the somewhat later Song of Songs in the **Hebrew Bible**.

1. All selections translated by Michael V. Fox.

The lovers in the poems are young and often not yet free from parental supervision. As a gesture of endearment, they address each other as "brother" and "sister," words that have a broad meaning in ancient Egyptian. Roughly half of the poems are spoken by the girl, and half by the boy. (A small group, not represented in this selection, gives the words of the garden tree in whose shade the girl and boy have a tryst.) Many poems imagine situations in which the lovers might meet and make themselves attractive to each other: by going into the water to retrieve a fish—an erotic symbol—the girl, for example, can make her dress transparent and expose her charms. Many of the poems brim with imagery of the pleasures of desire and sex, but some also remind us how fleeting love can be: in one poem the girl worries, after the lovers have spent the night together, that the boy is now more interested in breakfast than in staying with her.

The Beginning of the Song That Diverts the Heart

(*Girl*)
How beautiful is your beloved,[2]
the one adored of your heart,
when she has returned from the meadow!
My beloved, my darling,
my heart longs for your love— 5
all that you created!
I say to you:
See what happened!
I came ready to trap birds,
my snare in one hand, 10
my cage in the other,
together with my mat.[3]
All the birds of the land Punt[4]
have descended on Egypt,
anointed with myrrh. 15
The first to come
takes my bait.
Its fragrance comes from Punt,
its claws full of balm.[5]
My heart desires you. 20
Let us release it[6] together.
I am with you, I alone,
to let you hear the sound of my call,[7]
for my lovely myrrh-anointed one.

2. In the original, this is literally "your sister." *Sister* and *brother* are frequent terms of affection in the Egyptian love songs. The terms imply intimacy, not consanguinity.
3. Perhaps to be placed as a cover over the birdcage.
4. A region bordering on the southern Red Sea from which aromatics came, as well as an ideal location known as "God's Land."
5. Or "its claws are caught by the balm." (The Egyptian can be read as a double entendre.) Birds were sometimes trapped by pitch smeared on a tree.
6. "It" is the "bait" mentioned before. This probably refers to the fulfilment of sexual desire.
7. Fowlers imitated bird calls to lure birds to the trap.

You are here with me, 25
as I set the snare.
Going to the field is pleasant (indeed)
for one who loves it.[8]

[My god, my Lotus . . .]

(*Girl*)
My god, my lotus . . .[1]
The north wind blows . . .
How pleasant it is to go to the river. . . .
My heart longs to go down
to bathe before you, 5
that I may show you my beauty
in a tunic of the finest royal linen,
drenched in fragrant oils,
my hair plaited in reeds.
I'd go down to the water with you, 10
and come out to you carrying a red fish,[2]
which feels just right in my fingers.
I'd set it before you,
while gazing at your beauty.
O my hero, my beloved, 15
come and see me!

(*Boy*)
My beloved's love
is over there, on the other side,
The river surrounds my body.[3]
The flood waters are powerful in this season,
and a crocodile waits on the sandbank. 5
Yet I went down to the water
to wade through the flood,
my heart brave in the channel.
I found the crocodile to be like a mouse,[4]
and the surface of the water like dry land to my feet. 10
It is her love
that makes me strong.
She casts a water spell for me!
I see my heart's beloved
standing right before me! 15

8. Just what "it" refers to is vague, perhaps intentionally so. Is it bird trapping? Lovemaking?
1. The lotus was the most important Egyptian flower, whose aroma was held to excite the senses. The "north wind" is the breeze that makes the heat bearable and brings the breath of life.
2. A tilapia, a well-known erotic symbol that was also used as an amulet made of red stone.
3. He has—at least in imagination—stepped into the Nile, braving its dangers to reach the girl on the other side.
4. This alludes to tales of magic in which a magician can turn a tiny figure into a crocodile and vice versa.

(Boy)
My beloved has come,
my heart rejoices,
my arms are open to embrace her.
My heart is as happy in its place
as a fish in its pond. 5
O night, you are mine forever,
since my lady came to me!

[I wish I were her Nubian maid]

(Boy)
I wish I were her Nubian maid,
her attendant in secret,
as she brings her a bowl of mandragoras.[1]
It is in her hand,
while she gives pleasure. 5
In other words:
she would grant me
the hue of her whole body.[2]

(Boy)
I wish I were the laundryman
of my beloved's clothes,
for even just a month!
I would be strengthened
by grasping the garments 5
that touch her body.
For I would be washing out the moringa oils[3]
that are in her kerchief.
Then I'd rub my body
with her castoff garments, 10
and she . . .
O how I would be in joy and delight,
my body vigorous!

(Boy)
I wish I were her little signet ring,
the keeper of her finger!
I would see her love[4]
each and every day,
And I would steal her heart. 5

1. The mandragora fruit was thought to be an aphrodisiac. It was also an erotic symbol, both for its flower and probably for its long taproot.
2. In the boy's fantasy, he is a maidservant in the girl's bedchamber. He would offer fruit while the girl gave him pleasure. That is to say, she would let him see her naked.
3. Moringa oil was the normal ancient Egyptian oil, and evidently could be perfumed.
4. Her capacity to inspire love.

[I passed close by his house]

Sixth Stanza[1]

(*Girl*)
I passed close by his house,
and found his door ajar.
My beloved was standing beside his mother,
and with him all his brothers and sisters.
Love of him captures the heart 5
of all who walk along the way—
a precious youth without peer,
a lover excellent of character!
He gazed at me when I passed by,
but I must exult alone. 10
How joyfully does my heart rejoice, my beloved,
since I first saw you!
If only mother knew my heart
she would go inside for a while.
O Golden One,[2] put that in her heart! 15
Then I could hurry to my beloved
and kiss him in front of everyone,
and not be ashamed because of anyone.
I would be happy to have them see
that you know me, 20
and would hold festival to my Goddess.
My heart leaps up to go forth
that I may gaze on my beloved.
How lovely it is to pass by![3]

[Seven whole days]

Seventh Stanza

(*Boy*)
Seven whole days[1] I have not seen my beloved.
Illness has invaded me,
my limbs have grown heavy,
and I barely sense my own body.
Should the master physicians come to me, 5
their medicines could not ease my heart.
The lector priests[2] have no good treatment,
because my illness cannot be diagnosed.
But if someone tells me, "Here she is!"—that will revive me.
Her name—that is what will get me up. 10

1. This poem and the next are excerpted from a set of numbered stanzas.
2. Hathor, the goddess of love.
3. Each stanza in this seven-stanza song starts and ends by punning on a word. In Egyptian *six* and *pass by* sound alike.

1. The number seven is used because this is the seventh stanza. Ancient Egypt did not have a seven-day week.
2. Specialists in religious and magical texts. Here the term means "magicians."

The coming and going of her messengers—
that's what will revive my heart.
More potent than any medicine is my beloved for me;
more powerful than the *Physician's Manual*.
Her coming in from outside is my amulet.[3] 15
If I see her, I'll become healthy.
If she but gives me a glance, my limbs will regain vigor.
If she speaks, I'll grow strong.
If I hug her, she'll drive illness from me.
But she has been gone for seven days. 20

[Am I not here with you?]

(*Girl*)
Am I not here with you?
Then why have you set your heart to leave?
Why don't you embrace me?
Has my deed come back upon me?
If you seek to caress my thighs. 5
Is it because you are thinking of food
that you would go away?
Or because you are a slave to your belly?
Is it because you care about clothes?
Well, I have a bedsheet! 10
Is it because you are hungry that you would leave?
Then take my breasts
that their gift may flow forth to you.
Better a day in the embrace of my beloved
than thousands on thousands anywhere else! 15

3. *Amulet* also means "well-being," and both senses apply here.

SETNE KHAMWAS AND NANEFERKAPTAH (SETNE 1)

ca. 250 B.C.E.

The protagonist of *Setne Khamwas and Naneferkaptah*, and of another relatively well-preserved tale from the Ptolemaic period (332–30 B.C.E.), is based on the legendary son of the famous ruler Ramses II (ca. 1279–1213 B.C.E.). Prince Khamwas was high priest of the god Ptah of Memphis and

SAPPHO

born ca. 630 B.C.E.

Sappho is the only ancient Greek female author whose work survives in more than tiny fragments. She was an enormously talented poet, much admired in antiquity; a later poet called her the "tenth Muse." In the third century B.C.E., scholars at the great library in Alexandria arranged her poems in nine books, of which the first contained more than a thousand lines. But what we have now are pitiful remnants: one (or possibly two) complete short poems, and a collection of quotations from her work by ancient writers, supplemented by bits and pieces written on ancient scraps of papyrus found in excavations in Egypt. Yet these fragments fully justify the enthusiasm of the ancient critics; Sappho's poems (insofar as we can guess at their nature from the fragments) give us the most vivid evocation of the joys and sorrows of desire in all Greek literature.

About Sappho's life we know almost nothing. She was born about 630 B.C.E. on the fertile island of Lesbos, off the coast of Asia Minor, and spent most of her life there. Her poems suggest that she was married and had a daughter—although we should never assume that Sappho's "I" implies autobiography. It is difficult to find any evidence to answer the questions that we most want to ask. Were these poems performed for women only, or for mixed audiences? Was it common for women to compose poetry on ancient Lesbos? How did Sappho's work win acceptance in the male-dominated world of ancient Greece? We simply do not know. We also know frustratingly little about ancient attitudes toward female same-sex relationships. In the nineteenth century, Sappho's poems were the inspiration for the coinage of the modern term *lesbian*. But no equivalent term was used in the ancient world. Sappho's poems evoke a world in which girls lived an intense communal life of their own, enjoying activities and festivals in which only women took part, in which they were fully engaged with one another. Beyond the evidence of the poems themselves, however, little remains to put these works into historical context.

What we do know, and what we must always bear in mind while reading these poems, is that they were composed not to be read on papyrus or in a book but to be performed by a group of dancing, singing women and girls (a "chorus"), to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Other poets of the period composed in the choral genre, including Alcaeus, a male contemporary who was also from Lesbos. The ancient Greek equivalent of the short, nonnarrative literary form we refer to as "lyric poetry" was literally *lyric*: it was sung to the lyre or cithara, ancestors of the modern guitar. It is not really poetry but the lyrics to songs whose music is lost. These songs evoke many vivid actions, emotions, and images, which were presumably dramatized by the dancers, who might well, for example, have acted out the swift journey of Aphrodite's chariot in poem 1 ["Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind"], "whipping their wings down the sky."

Sappho's poems were produced almost two hundred years after the Homeric epics, and we can read them as offering a response, and perhaps a challenge, to the (mostly masculine)

world of epic. The ***Iliad*** concentrates on the battlefield, where men fight and die, while the ***Odyssey*** shows us the struggles of a male warrior to rebuild his homeland in the aftermath of war. By contrast, Sappho's poems focus on women more than men, and on feelings more than actions. Like **Homer**, Sappho often refers to the physical world in vivid detail (the stars, the trees, the flowers, the sunlight), as well as to the Olympian gods, and to mythology. But she interprets these topics very differently. In poem 44, she uses the characters of the *Iliad* but concentrates on the marriage of Hector and Andromache rather than the war. Aphrodite, goddess of love and sex, seems more important to Sappho than Zeus, the father of the gods. Poem 16 offers another reinterpretation of the Trojan War, as a story not about men fighting but about a woman in love: "Helen—left behind / her most noble husband / and went sailing off to Troy." Sappho emphasizes beauty and personal choices, and suggests that love matters more than armies, and more even than home, family, parents, or children.

But Sappho's vision of love is anything but sentimental. Many of these poems evoke intense negative emotions: alienation, jealousy, and rage. In poem 31, for example, the speaker describes her overwhelming feelings as she watches the woman she loves talking to a man: she trembles, her heart races, she feels close to death. The precise clinical detail of the narrator, as she observes herself, adds to the vividness of this account of emotional breakdown. Sappho is able to describe feelings both from the outside and from the inside, and painfully evokes a sense of distance from the beloved—and from herself: "I don't know what I should do. There are two minds in me," she says in a line from a lost poem (51). In poem 58 the speaker is suffering from a different kind of alienation: watching young girls dance and sing, she stands aside, unable to participate, and bitterly regrets the loss of her own youth.

Sappho repeatedly invokes the goddess associated with sexual desire: Aphrodite. It may be tempting to read Aphrodite as simply a personification of the speaker's own desires. But Sappho presents her as a real and terrifying force in the universe, who may afflict the speaker with all the "bittersweet" agony of love, and who may also be invoked—as in poem 1—to serve her rage and aggression, acting as Sappho's own military "ally" in her desire to inflict pain on the girl who has hurt her.

Some passages of Sappho, including the famous account of jealousy, poem 31, were preserved through quotation by other ancient writers. But many of these poems survived only on scraps of papyrus, mostly dug up from the trash-heaps of the ancient Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus. It is exciting that we have even this much Sappho: much of our present text was discovered as late as the nineteenth century. Poem 58 was discovered (supplementing a known fragment) in 2004 in the papier-mâché-type wrapping used on an Egyptian mummy. The final poems in our selection—the "Brothers" poem and the "Cypris" poem—were made public only in 2014, as a result of a new papyrus discovery. Most of the papyrus finds are torn and crumpled, so that words and whole lines are often missing from the poems. Some of these gaps can be filled in from our knowledge of Sappho's dialect and the strict meter in which she wrote. In poem 16, for instance, at the end of the third stanza and the beginning of the fourth, the mutilated papyrus tells us that someone or something led Helen astray, and there are traces of a word that seems to have described Helen. The name *Cypris* (the "Cyprian One," the love goddess Aphrodite) and phrases that mean "against her will" or "as soon as she saw him [Paris]" would fit the spaces and the

meter. Uncertain as these supplements are, they could help determine our understanding of the poem. The publication of the "New Sappho" poems is an exciting reminder that there are new discoveries to be made, even in literature from over three thousand years ago. The new pieces of Sappho have also broadened our understanding of this great poet, who composed her songs about journeys, time, mythology, and family, as well as about love, alienation, and desire.

1[1]

Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind,[2]
child of Zeus, who twists lures, I beg you
do not break with hard pains,
O lady, my heart

but come here if ever before 5
you caught my voice far off
and listening left your father's
golden house and came,

yoking your car. And fine birds brought you,
quick sparrows[3] over the black earth 10
whipping their wings down the sky
through midair—

they arrived. But you, O blessed one,
smiled in your deathless face
and asked what (now again) I have suffered and why 15
(now again) I am calling out

and what I want to happen most of all
in my crazy heart. Whom should I persuade (now again)
to lead you back into her love? Who, O
Sappho, is wronging you? 20

For if she flees, soon she will pursue.
If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them.
If she does not love, soon she will love
even unwilling.

Come to me now: loose me from hard 25
care and all my heart longs
to accomplish, accomplish. You
be my ally.

1. Translated by Anne Carson.
2. Or "of the spangled throne"; the variant manuscripts preserve both readings (in the Greek there is a single letter's difference between them). The word translated here as "spangled" usually refers to a surface shimmering with bright contrasting colors. The reader can choose whether to imagine a goddess seated in splendor on a highly wrought throne or a love goddess whose mind is shifting and fickle.
3. Aphrodite's sacred birds.

2[4]

Come to me here from Crete to this holy
temple, to your delightful grove of apple
trees, where altars smoke
with frankincense.

16

Some say an army of horsemen, others a host of infantry,
others a fleet of ships is the most beautiful thing
on the black earth. But I say
it's whatever you love.

It's perfectly easy to make this clear 5
to everyone. For she who surpassed
all in beauty—Helen—left behind
her most noble husband

and went sailing off to Troy,
giving no thought at all to her child 10
or dear parents, but . . .[5]
led her astray.

. . . for
. . . lightly
. . . reminded me now of Anactoria[6] 15
who is not here.

I would rather see her lovely walk
and her bright sparkling face
than the chariots of the Lydians[7]
or infantry in arms. 20

. . . not possible to happen
. . . to pray to share
. . . unexpected

4. This and the following Sappho poems and fragments are translated by Philip Freeman.
5. Ellipses represent places where the papyrus on which the poem is preserved is torn, and words, half-words, or whole lines are missing.
6. Presumably Anactoria is a girlfriend. The name may connote "princess," since *anax* means "leader" or "king." Anactoria was also an alternative name for the city of Miletus, a powerful city-state in Asia Minor.
7. A wealthy and powerful non-Greek people in Asia Minor, with whom Sappho, living in Lesbos just off the coast, is evidently familiar. A generation or so later, the Lydians would be absorbed into the expanding Persian Empire, but in Sappho's time they were at the height of their prosperity.

17

Come close to me, I pray,
Lady Hera, and may your graceful form appear,
you to whom the sons of Atreus prayed,
those glorious kings,[8]

after they had accomplished many great deeds, 5
first at Troy, then on the sea.
They came to this island, but they could not
complete their voyage home

until they called on you and Zeus the god of suppliants
and Thyone's lovely child.[9] 10
So now be kind and help me too,
as in ancient days.

Holy and beautiful . . .
virgin . . .
around . . . 15

to be . . .
to arrive . . .

31[1]

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it 5
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin 10
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

8. The sons of Atreus are Menelaus and Agamemnon. In the *Odyssey* (3.133ff.) we find the story of the brothers quarreling after the fall of Troy, and according to Homer, Menelaus stopped to pray to Zeus on Lesbos while Agamemnon traveled separately. Sappho's poem suggests a different legend, in which both brothers together came to her island, and prayed to Hera and Dionysos (son of Thyone) as well as Zeus.

9. Thyone is the new name given to Dionysos' mortal mother, Semele, after she was rescued from Hades by her son and became an Olympian goddess associated with frenzy.

1. Translated by Anne Carson.

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty[2]

44[3]

Cyprus. . . .[4]
the herald came . . .
Idaeus, the swift messenger[5]
". . . and the rest of Asia . . . undying glory.
Hector and his companions are bringing the lively-eyed,
graceful Andromache from holy Thebe and ever-flowing
Placia[6] in their ships over the salty sea, along with many golden
bracelets
and perfumed purple robes, beautifully painted ornaments
and countless silver cups and ivory."
So he spoke. Quickly Hector's dear father[7] rose up
and the news spread among his friends in the spacious city.
At once the sons of Ilus[8] yoked mules to the
smooth-running carts, then the whole crowd
of women and maidens with . . . ankles climbed on board.
The daughters of Priam apart . . .
the young men yoked horses to chariots . . .
in great style . . .
charioteers . . .
. . . like the gods
. . . holy together
set out . . . to Ilium
the sweet-sounding flute and the cithara mingled
and the sound of castanets. Maidens sang a holy song
and a wondrous echo reached to the sky . . .
everywhere in the streets was . . .
mixing-bowls and drinking cups . . .
myrrh and cassia and frankincense mingled.

2. The quotation that is our only source for this poem breaks off here, although this looks like the beginning of a new stanza.
3. This and the following Sappho poems and fragments are translated by Philip Freeman. This poem is our only surviving example of Sappho's narrative poetry. It is composed in the same meter as Homer's epics, dactylic hexameter (unlike all Sappho's other surviving work). It tells the story of the wedding of Hector, prince of Troy, and Andromache, characters famous in myth who feature in the *Iliad*. Some scholars believe this poem may have been composed for performance at a wedding.
4. The island of Cyprus was one of the most important cult centers of Aphrodite. It is not clear how the island related to the beginning of the poem, which is lost.
5. Herald of Troy, a character in the *Iliad*.
6. Homeland of Andromache, in central Greece.
7. Priam, king of Troy.
8. The Trojans; Ilus was the legendary founder of Troy, also known as Ilium.

The older women cried out with joy
and all the men erupted in a high-pitched shout
calling on Paean, far-shooting god skilled with the lyre. 30
They sang in praise of godlike Hector and Andromache.

47

Love shook my heart
like a mountain wind falling on oaks.

48

You came and I was longing for you.
You cooled my heart burning with desire.

51

I don't know what I should do. There are two minds in me

55[9]

But when you die you will lie there and there will be no memory of you nor longing for you after, for you have no share in the roses of Pieria.[1] But you will wander unseen in the house of Hades,[2] flying about among the shadowy dead.

58[3]

. . . I pray
. . . now a festival
. . . under the earth
. . . having a gift of honor
. . . as I am now on the earth 5
. . . taking the sweet-sounding lyre
. . . I sing to the reed-pipe

9. This is a quotation from a lost longer poem, apparently addressed to a rich but talentless woman.
1. Birthplace of the Muses.
2. God of the dead.

3. The first part of this poem has been known since 1922 from a fragmentary papyrus, but the second part (beginning ". . . beautiful gifts") was discovered on another papyrus only in 2004.

. . . fleeing
. . . was bitten
. . . gives success to the mouth 10

. . . beautiful gifts of the violet-laden Muses, children
. . . the sweet-sounding lyre dear to song.
. . . my skin once soft is wrinkled now,
. . . my hair once black has turned to white.
My heart has become heavy, my knees 15
that once danced nimbly like fawns cannot carry me.
How often I lament these things—but what can be done?
No one who is human can escape old age.
They say that rosy-armed Dawn once took
Tithonus,[4] beautiful and young, carrying him to the 20
ends of the earth. But in time grey old age still
found him, even though he had an immortal wife.
. . . imagines
. . . might give
I love the pleasures of life . . . and this to me. 25
Love has given me the brightness and beauty of the sun.

94

. . . "I honestly wish I were dead."
Weeping she left me

with many tears and said this:
"Oh, this has turned out so badly for us, Sappho.
Truly, I leave you against my will." 5

And I answered her:
"Be happy and go—and remember me.
for you know how much we loved you.

But if not, I want to remind
you . . . 10
. . . and the good times we had.

For many crowns of violets
and roses and . . .
. . . you put on by my side,

and many woven garlands 15
made from flowers
around your soft throat,

4. According to myth, the goddess Dawn fell in love with a Trojan boy called Tithonus and carried him off to be with her. She made him immortal but could not make him immune to old age. In some versions of the myth, he turned into a cicada, whom the Greeks imagined as eternally singing—a kind of insect poet.

and with much perfume
costly . . .
fit for a queen, you anointed yourself. 20

And on a soft bed
delicate . . .
you let loose your desire.

And not any . . . nor any
holy place nor . . . 25
from which we were absent.

No grove . . . no dance
. . . no sound

102

Truly, sweet mother, I cannot weave on the loom,
for I am overcome with desire for a boy because of slender Aphrodite.

104

104A

Evening, you gather together all that shining Dawn has scattered.
You bring back the sheep, you bring back the goat, you bring back
the child to its mother.

104B

. . . most beautiful of all the stars

105[5]

105A

. . . like the sweet apple that grows red on the lofty branch,
at the very top of the highest bough. The apple-pickers have forgotten it
—no, not forgotten, but they could not reach it.

5. This and the next fragment may be from wedding songs. Perhaps the bride, a virgin inaccessible to men until marriage, is compared to the apple. The hyacinth may also be a reference to virginity.

105B

. . . like the hyacinth shepherds tread underfoot
in the mountains, and on the ground the purple flower

111[6]

Raise high the roof—
Hymenaeus!
Raise it up, carpenters—
Hymenaeus!
The bridegroom is coming, the equal of Ares, 5
and he's much bigger than a big man.

112

Blessed bridegroom, your wedding has been accomplished
just as you prayed and you have the maiden bride you desired.

Your form is graceful and your eyes . . .
honey-sweet. Love pours over your lovely face . . .
. . . Aphrodite has greatly honored you 5

114

"Virginity, virginity, where have you gone? You've deserted me!"
"Never again will I come to you, never again will I come."

130

Once again limb-loosening Love makes me tremble,
that bittersweet, irresistible creature.

132

I have a beautiful child who is like golden flowers
in form, my beloved Cleis,[7] for whom
I would not take all of Lydia or lovely . . .

6. This and the next two fragments are certainly from wedding songs. Hymenaeus is the god of marriage.

7. Sadly, nothing more is known about Cleis, beyond this fragment.

168B

The moon has set
and the Pleiades.[8] It's the middle
of the night and time goes by.
I lie here alone.

The Brothers Poem[9]

But you are always chattering that Charaxus is coming
with a full ship.[1] These things, I suppose, Zeus
knows and all the other gods. But you should not
worry about them.

Instead send me and ask me to call on (5)
and make many prayers to Queen Hera
that Charaxus return here,
steering his ship,

and find us safe and sound. Everything else,
all of it, let us leave to the gods. (10)
For fair weather comes quickly
from great storms.

Those to whom the king of Olympus[2] wishes
to send a helpful spirit to banish toils,
these will be happy (15)
and rich in blessings.

And we—if someday his head is freed from labor
and Larichus[3] becomes a gentleman of leisure
—may we be delivered quickly
from great heaviness of heart. (20)

The Cypris Poem

How can a person not be so often distressed,
Queen Cypris,[4] about someone
you want so much to make
your own?

8. A cluster of stars known as the Seven Sisters.
9. The Brothers poem and the Cypris poem that follows were first published in 2014, from a new papyrus find.
1. Charaxus is known from Herodotus as the name of one of Sappho's brothers. He was supposedly a trader in Lesbian wine. This poem is missing the first stanza or two, so the context of the reference is hard to construct.
2. Zeus.
3. Larichus is also a brother of Sappho's, presumably younger than Charaxus.
4. Cypris is Aphrodite, goddess of love and sex. Presumably this is a single stanza from a much longer poem.

CATULLUS

ca. 84–ca. 54 B.C.E.

The poetry of Gaius Valerius Catullus conveys intense, and often conflicting, emotions. *Odi et amo*, he wrote: "I hate and love." These poems evoke the personal desires and enmities of a privileged but insecure and very young man: Catullus was only about thirty when he died. Reading Catullus, we feel in touch with raw feelings in a way that is rare in the literature of the ancient world. Catullus was also a technical master, who wrote in an impressive range of different verse patterns, and whose moods range from joy to grief, from vituperative obscenities to gentle teasing, and from self-pity to quiet nostalgia for lost and easier days. The pain, passion, lyricism, and humor in his poetry was a lasting inspiration for later love poets, both in ancient Rome and in modern times.

LIFE AND TIMES

Catullus was born in the northern Italian city of Verona, into a prominent aristocratic family (of the high social class called "equestrian"). He spent most of his life in Rome, making close friends and bitter enemies among his fellow Roman aristocrats. Perhaps he had an intense love affair (or several), which inspired the "Lesbia" poems. He does not seem to have married. Traditionally, Lesbia has been identified with Clodia Metella, an aristocratic, educated woman, whom Cicero cast as a sexual predator, a husband killer, and a drunk. But we have no contemporary evidence for the identification, and, of course, poets do not always base their love poems on real life. The name *Lesbia* is obviously designed to evoke literature as much as life: it alludes to the Greek poet **Sappho**, of Lesbos, who, like Catullus, wrote about the conflicting pains and pleasures of bittersweet love.

We know that in his late twenties, Catullus held a position in government that involved a trip to Bithynia, in Asia Minor; en route, he stopped at his brother's tomb, as he describes in a beautiful poem of quiet grief and farewell (poem 101). He died soon after his return to Rome; we do not know the cause.

Catullus lived out his short life in the last century of the Roman Republic. It was a time of conflict, especially between populist and aristocratic factions in Rome. Catullus lived to see the rise of the populist general Julius Caesar, who won extensive victories in Britain and Gaul, although the poet died before Caesar was assassinated (44 B.C.E.). Catullus sometimes satirizes Caesar and flaunts his lack of interest in Caesar's activities: "I am not too terribly anxious to please you, Caesar," he declares (poem 93). Catullus can be read as a deliberately antipolitical writer, who forms a novel and personal interpretation of conventional Roman public virtues. Masculinity, for Catullus, is defined not by military exploits like Caesar's but by sexual prowess and emotional control; even that most characterstic of Roman virtues, duty (*pietas* in Latin) is redefined, applied to Catullus's love for his treacherous girlfriend. Catullus makes use of the values and norms of his society, but he often turns them on their head.

POEMS

One hundred sixteen poems of Catullus survive, collected in a little book or "pamphlet." We do not know whether the arrangement as we have it represents Catullus's own authorial wishes. The poems are arranged by meter, not by subject, so that, for instance, the Lesbia poems do not all appear together. His poems are richly varied, including imitations of Greek poets, long poems on Greek mythological themes, personal and often obscene attacks on contemporaries ("I'll fuck the pair of you," one begins), lyrical celebrations of places and seasons, comic verse, and original love poems—some addressed to a woman, Lesbia, and a few to other love objects, such as the boy Juventius (poem 48).

The Lesbia poems are the most famous of Catullus's work. These poems present all the phases of a love affair, and their tone ranges from joy to torment to the depths of self-pity and back. Their direct and simple language seems to give readers immediate access to the poet's experience of desire and betrayal. Yet these are not diary entries but complex literary artifacts: it is one of the remarkable characteristics of Catullus's poetry that strong emotion and technical sophistication are not at odds with each other. Poem 51, for example, powerfully describes the physical symptoms of love in the speaker; but it is also a translation into Latin of one of Sappho's most passionate Greek lyrics (poem 31), which achieves the feat of also imitating Sappho's rhythms in Latin.

Catullus is a highly self-conscious poet who achieves a dynamic dialogue with his readers. The first poem of the collection asks: What kind of reader does Catullus want for his work? And will the reader be worthy of the poet's trust? How are we to interpret what we hear? Catullus often puts his readers in a tempting but awkward position, as if they were eavesdropping on a private conversation—either between Catullus and another person, or between Catullus and himself. In poem 83, for example, when Lesbia seems to abuse Catullus in the presence of her husband, the speaker interprets this as a sign of love for himself to which the husband is obtusely oblivious. But we may also wonder whether this is a wishful interpretation. Who really is the dupe? The reader never gets access to Lesbia's feelings; instead, the poems present the speaker himself constantly struggling to understand the mixed signals in their changing relationship. The poet subjects his own persona to deep and sometimes damaging analysis: we see his defensive constructions and deconstructions of his own masculine identity, and his unresolved tensions and self-deceptions. In the brilliant poem 8, for example, a dialogue the speaker has with himself at the time of a break-up, he resolves, over and over, to "hold out now, firmly," to be a man and get over his beloved; but the reader, overhearing, is aware of how far he is from the goal.

One of the major themes that runs through much of Catullus's work is the vast distance between one era and another, one moment and the next, as well as between one person and another, or even between one person and himself at different times. The Lesbia poems celebrate moments of connection, which can be violently ruptured by betrayal—like the flower brutally cut down in its prime by a plow that never notices its existence (poem 11). Even in the best of times, the joys of connectedness can be fragile, and may depend on delicate threads—a mortal sparrow (poems 2 and 3), a finite number of kisses (poems 5 and 7); the

beautiful celebration of arrival and homecoming, poem 31, emphasizes that this place of relaxation and joy is a "peninsula," almost cut off from the mainland. Spring, in the lovely poem 46, is a time of "rich, sweltering fields," but also a time for friends to say goodbye. The longest poem included here, poem 64, is a celebration of the marriage of Thetis and Peleus, the parents of Achilles. On one level, the subject allows Catullus to challenge the writers of epic, to reinterpret the themes of the ***Iliad*** from an original angle: it is an "epyllion," a mini-epic. On another, the poem is a joyful and sometimes funny celebration of a magical wedding at sea. But this poem also has surprisingly dark elements: the story embroidered on the comforter to be used on the marriage bed depicts a scene of betrayal, of the Greek hero Theseus abandoning his bride, Ariadne, and leaving her crying alone on the island of Naxos. At a time when Rome was expanding into an enormous empire, but when internal factions threatened to destroy the city's stability, the poems of Catullus express a deep awareness of how quickly, and with what devastating consequences, everything can change.

Poems[1]

1

To whom will I give this sophisticated,
abrasively accomplished new collection?[2]
To you, Cornelius![3] You had the habit
of making much of my poetic little,
when you, the first in Italy, were boldly 5
unfolding all past ages in three volumes,
a monument of scholarship & labor!
And so it's yours; I hand this slim book over,
such as it is—for the sake of its patron
may it survive a century or better. 10

2

Sparrow, you darling pet of my beloved,
which she caresses, presses to her body
or teases with the tip of one sly finger
until you peck at it in tiny outrage!
—for there are times when my desired, shining 5
lady is moved to turn to you for comfort,
to find (as I imagine) ease for ardor,
solace, a little respite from her sorrow—

1. Translated by Charles Martin.
2. The original Latin suggests that the physical book has been polished "abrasively" with a pumice stone, to give it a pretty shine.
3. Cornelius Nepos, a contemporary of Catullus, who wrote a (lost) three-volume history, as well as biographies, other prose works, and poetry.

if I could only play with you as she does,
and be relieved of my tormenting passion! 10

3

Cry out lamenting, Venuses & Cupids,
and mortal men endowed with Love's refinement:
the sparrow of my lady lives no longer!
Sparrow, the darling pet of my beloved,
that was more precious to her than her eyes were; 5
it was her little honey, and it knew her
as well as any girl knows her own mother;
it would not ever leave my lady's bosom
but leapt up, fluttering from yon to hither,
chirruping always only to its mistress. 10
It now flits off on its way, goes, gloom-laden
down to where—word is—there is no returning.
Damn you, damned shades of Orcus[4] that devour
all mortal loveliness, for such a lovely
sparrow it was you've stolen from my keeping! 15
O hideous deed! O poor little sparrow!
It's your great fault that my lady goes weeping,
reddening, ruining her eyes from sorrow.

5

Lesbia, let us live only for loving,
and let us value at a single penny
all the loose flap of senile busybodies!
Suns when they set are capable of rising,
but at the setting of our own brief light 5
night is one sleep from which we never waken.
Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
another thousand next, another hundred,
a thousand without pause & then a hundred,
until when we have run up our thousands 10
we will cry bankrupt, hiding our assets
from ourselves & any who would harm us,
knowing the volume of our trade in kisses.

7

My Lesbia, you ask how many kisses
would be enough to satisfy, to sate me!
—As many as the sandgrains in the desert
near Cyrene, where silphium is gathered,[5]
between the shrine of Jupiter the sultry 5

4. God of the underworld.
5. Silphium was a plant used in medicine and seasoning grown in the North African city of Cyrene (in modern Libya).

& the venerable sepulchre of Battus![6]
—As many as the stars in the tacit night
that watch as furtive lovers lie embracing:
only to kiss you with that many kisses
would satisfy, could sate your mad Catullus! 10
A sum to thwart the reckoning of gossips
& baffle the spell-casting tongues of envy.

8

Wretched Catullus! You have to stop this nonsense,
admit that what you see has ended is over!
Once there were days which shone for you with rare brightness,
when you would follow wherever your lady led you,
the one we once loved as we will love no other; 5
there was no end in those days to our pleasures,
when what you wished for was what she also wanted.
Yes, there were days which shone for you with rare brightness.
Now she no longer wishes; you mustn't want it,
you've got to stop chasing her now—cut your losses, 10
harden your heart & hold out firmly against her.
Goodbye now, lady. Catullus' heart is hardened,
he will not look to you nor call against your wishes—
how you'll regret it when nobody comes calling!
So much for you, bitch—your life is all behind you! 15
Now who will come to see you, thinking you lovely?
Whom will you love now, and whom will you belong to?
Whom will you kiss? And whose lips will you nibble?
But *you*, Catullus! *You* must hold out now, firmly!

11

Aurelius & Furius[7] true comrades,
whether Catullus penetrates to where in
outermost India booms the eastern ocean's
   wonderful thunder;

whether he stops with Arabs or Hyrcani, 5
Parthian bowmen or nomadic Sagae;[8]
or goes to Egypt, which the Nile so richly
   dyes, overflowing;

even if he should scale the lofty Alps, or
summon to mind the mightiness of Caesar[9] 10

6. The founder of Cyrene.
7. Marcus Furius Bibulus was a satirical poet, a contemporary of Catullus. Marcus Aurelius Cotta Maximus Messalinus, also a contemporary, was a Roman senator, poet, and orator.
8. The Sagae, or Scythians, were nomads in Persia. The Hyrcani are the inhabitants of the Caspian Sea region. Parthia was in modern-day Iran, and Parthians were famous for archery on horseback.
9. Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.E.), who extended the Roman Empire northward to the Rhine and westward to the southern part of Britain.

viewing the Gallic Rhine, the dreadful Britons
at the world's far end—

you're both prepared to share in my adventures,
and any others which the gods may send me.
Back to my girl then, carry her this bitter 15
message, these spare words:

May she have joy & profit from her cocksmen,
go down embracing hundreds all together,
never with love, but without interruption
wringing their balls dry; 20

nor look to my affection as she used to,
for she has left it broken, like a flower
at the edge of a field after the plowshare
brushes it, passing.

16

I'll fuck the pair of you as you prefer it,
oral Aurelius, anal Furius,
who read my verses but misread their author:
you think that *I'm* effeminate, since *they* are!
Purity's proper in the godly poet, 5
but it's unnecessary in his verses,
which really should be saucy & seductive,
even salacious in a girlish manner
and capable of generating passion
not just in boys, but in old men who've noticed 10
getting a hard-on has been getting harder!
But you, because my poems beg for kisses,
thousands of kisses, you think I'm a fairy!
I'll fuck the pair of you as you prefer it.

31

None of the other islands & peninsulas
which Neptune[1] floats on sheets of untroubled water
or on the desolate face of the vast ocean
please me, delight me, dear Sirmio, as you do!
I still can't believe I've gotten back here safely 5
from Thynia, Bithynia—and stand before you!
What could be better? Every care dissolving,
shedding the burden of an exhausting journey,
back home among the gods of our own household
we find at last the couch, the rest we desired! 10
This alone repays us for our long labors.
How are you, sexy Sirmio! Rejoice with your master,

1. God of the sea.

and you too, bubbling lake of Lydian waters—
loose every last chortle of your locked-up laughter!

42

Up now, iambics[2]—get yourselves together,
all of you everywhere, however many!
—A flaming slut imagines that she'll mock me,
and now refuses to return the tablets
I write you verses down on—can you bear it? 5
Let's follow her & force her to return them.
Who're you after? *Her*—that one you see there,
shaking her ass & mouthing like a mimic,
the rabid bitch with the repulsive grimace!
Surround her now & force her to return them: 10
"You wretched slut you give us back the tablets,
give us the tablets back you wretched slut you!"
Doesn't that bother you? You filth, you flophouse,
you drain on even *my* profound invective!
—We mustn't think we've gotten satisfaction: 15
if nothing else, at least we can embarrass
the bitch & give her cheeks a little color.
Cry out once more, in unison & louder:
"You wretched slut you give us back the tablets,
give us the tablets back you wretched slut you!" 20
We're getting nowhere. Nothing seems to move her.
Maybe we ought to try another tactic
and see if it won't work a little better:
"Maiden most modest, give us back the tablets."

46

Spring fetches back the days of warming weather,
the equinoctial bluster of the heavens
is silenced by the Zephyr's[3] tender breezes.
It's time to leave the plains of Troy, Catullus,
and the rich, sweltering fields of Nicaea: 5
those glamourous Aegean cities beckon!
My mind is really anxious to be going,
my feet are dancing with anticipation!
So it's good-by now to those dear companions
who set out from a distant home together, 10
whom varied roads now carry back diversely.

48

Juventius, if I could play at kissing
your honeyed eyes as often as I wished to,

2. The original refers to "hendecasyllables," an eleven-syllable meter in which Catullus specialized.
3. The west wind.

300,000 games would not exhaust me;
never could I be satisfied or sated,
although the total of our osculations 5
were greater than the ears of grain at harvest.

51[4]

To me that man seems like a god in heaven,
seems—may I say it?—greater than all gods are,
who sits by you & without interruption
watches you, listens

to your light laughter, which casts such confusion 5
onto my senses, Lesbia, that when I
gaze at you merely, all of my well-chosen
words are forgotten

as my tongue thickens & a subtle fire
runs through my body while my ears are deafened 10
by their own ringing & at once my eyes are
covered in darkness!

Leisure, Catullus. More than just a nuisance,
leisure: you riot, overmuch enthusing.
Fabulous cities & their sometime kings have 15
died of such leisure.

58

Lesbia, Caelius—yes, our darling,
yes, *Lesbia*, the Lesbia Catullus
once loved uniquely, more than any other!
—now on streetcorners & in wretched alleys
she shucks the offspring of greathearted Remus.[5] 5

64

They say it was pine sprung from the crown of Mount Pelion[6]
which swam clear across the perilous waters of Neptune
to the river Phasis in the realm of King Aeetes,[7]
back in those days when the best men the Argives could muster,
eager to carry the golden fleece out of Colchis, 5
dared to go racing their swift ship over the ocean
and stirred its cerulean surface with oars made of firwood.
Athena, who keeps the towers protecting the city,
she fashioned this hurtling carriage for those young men,

4. This poem, except for the last stanza, is a close imitation of Sappho 31; it uses Sappho's meter, sapphics.
5. Twin brother of Romulus; in Roman legend, together they built the walls of Rome.
6. Mountain in Thessaly, in central Greece.
7. The Greek hero Jason, with his crew of other heroes, was supposed to have made the first-ever sea journey when he sailed in the *Argo* from Greece to get the Golden Fleece from Colchis. "King Aeetes:" king of Colchis, on the Black Sea.

when a father could wish for the death of his very own son,
for the new stepmother seems to have found him attractive;
when an unwitting young man lay with his impious mother,
who had no fear of the shades of her deified parents, 405
then good & evil were confused in criminal madness,
turning the righteous minds of the gods from our behavior.
So they no longer appear now when mortals assemble,
and shun the light of luminous day altogether.

70

My woman says there is no one whom she'd rather marry
than me, not even Jupiter, if he came courting.
That's what she says—but what a woman says to a passionate lover
ought to be scribbled on wind, on running water.

72

You used to say that you wished to know only Catullus,
Lesbia, and wouldn't take even Jove before me!
I didn't regard you just as my mistress then: I cherished you
as a father does his sons or his daughters' husbands.
Now that I know you, I burn for you even more fiercely, 5
though I regard you as almost utterly worthless.
How can that be, you ask? It's because such cruelty forces
lust to assume the shrunken place of affection.

75

To such a state have I been brought by your mischief, my Lesbia,
and so completely ruined by my devotion,
that I couldn't think kindly of you if you did the best only,
nor cease to love, even if you should do—everything.

76

If any pleasure can come to a man through recalling
decent behavior in his relations with others,
not breaking his word, and never, in any agreement,
deceiving men by abusing vows sworn to heaven,
then countless joys will await you in old age, Catullus, 5
as a reward for this unrequited passion!
For all of those things which a man could possibly say or
do have all been said & done by you already,
and none of them counted for anything, thanks to her vileness!
Then why endure your self-torment any longer? 10
Why not abandon this wretched affair altogether,
spare yourself pain the gods don't intend you to suffer!
It's hard to break off with someone you've loved such a long time:
it's hard, but you have to do it, somehow or other.

Your only chance is to get out from under this sickness,
no matter whether or not you think you're able. 15
O gods, if pity is yours, or if ever to any
who lay near death you offered the gift of your mercy,
look on my suffering: if my life seems to you decent,
then tear from within me this devouring cancer, 20
this heavy dullness wasting the joints of my body,
completely driving every joy from my spirit!
Now I no longer ask that she love me as I love her,
or—even less likely—that she give up the others:
all that I ask for is health, an end to this foul sickness! 25
O gods, grant me this in exchange for my worship.

83

Lesbia hurls abuse at me in front of her husband:
that fatuous person finds it highly amusing!
Nothing gets through to you, jackass—for silence would signal
that she'd been cured of me, but her barking & bitching
show that not only haven't I not been forgotten, 5
but that this burns her: and so she rants & rages.

85

I hate & love. And if you should ask how I can do both,
I couldn't say; but I feel it, and it shivers me.

92

Lesbia never avoids a good chance to abuse me
in public, yet I'll be damned if she doesn't love me!
How can I tell? Because I'm exactly the same: I malign her
always—yet I'll be damned if I don't really love her!

93

I am not too terribly anxious to please you, Caesar,[8]
nor even to learn the very first thing about you.

101

Driven across many nations, across many oceans,
I am here, my brother, for this final parting,
to offer at last those gifts which the dead are given
and to speak in vain to your unspeaking ashes,
since bitter fortune forbids you to hear me or answer, 5
O my wretched brother, so abruptly taken!
But now I must celebrate grief with funeral tributes
offered the dead in the ancient way of the fathers;

8. I.e., Julius Caesar.

accept these presents, wet with my brotherly tears, and
  now & forever, my brother, hail & farewell. 10

107

If ever something which someone with no expectation
  desired should happen, we are rightly delighted!
And so this news is delightful—it's dearer than gold is:
  you have returned to me, Lesbia, my desired!
Desired, yet never expected—but you *have* come back 5
  to me! A holiday, a day of celebration!
What living man is luckier than I am? Or able
  to say that anything could possibly be better?

109

Darling, we'll both have equal shares in the sweet love you offer,
  and it will endure forever—you assure me.
O heaven, see to it that she can truly keep this promise,
  that it came from her heart & was sincerely given,
so that we may spend the rest of our days in this lifelong 5
  union, this undying compact of holy friendship.