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Sappho (630 B.C.-570 B.C.)

Sappho and her work. Like Archilochos, Sappho is hard to reconstruct. (Here, even in the midst of the first expressions of personal feeling in Greek culture, the job of rediscovering whole identities behind the mask is almost impossible.) We get the general picture, from the numerous remaining pieces of her intricate lyrics. If we can take our texts at face value, we presume that Sappho was a lady of distinguished rank, living a privileged life on the island of Lesbos, and that she was a member of a coterie of sophisticated female peers, with whom she shares strong passions—perhaps in the setting of the awaiting of marriages, which will separate them. Hence, much longing, much concern about loss, much delicate feeling interwoven with the metrical form we call Sapphic. The rest, as they say, is pure poetry, standard setting for all time, and untranslatable. And yet we try, as did the American poet and classicist Richmond Lattimore, who boldly tackles the Sapphic stanza form:

Like the very gods in my sight is he who
sits where he can look in your eyes, who listens
close to you, to hear the soft voice, its sweetness
murmur in love and

laughter, all for him. But it breaks my spirit;
underneath my breast all the heart is shaken.
let me only glance where you are, the voice dies,
I can say nothing,

but my lips are stricken to silence, under-
neath my skin the tenuous flame suffuses;
nothing shows in front of my eyes, my ears are
muted in thunder.

Rarely has passion been so sharply etched in lyric poetry, and we have to attribute part of the power, here, to the displacement of the impact of the loved one's beauty onto a third party, who can endure such beauty. Literary strategy is never far removed from Sappho's passions.

It is interesting to add, to this tidbit on a woman of great poetic power, that she has been captured by contemporary culture, for the sensational value of her 'Lesbian' life. The fact is, say scholars familiar with the social structures of Archaic Greece, that this lady was quite certainly on the path of marriage, and was taking a very customary path of bonding, as she presents herself in poetry, with age mates who were soon to be part of the heterosexual, and reproductive, mainstream.