

“Hymn to Aphrodite” by Sappho

c. 600 B.C.E.

Iridescent-throned Aphrodite, deathless
Child of Zeus, wife-weaver, I now implore you,
Don't—I beg you, Lady—with pains and torments
Crush down my spirit.

But before if ever you've heard my pleadings
Then return, as once when you left your father's
Golden house; you yoked to your shining car your
Wing-whirring sparrows;

Skimming down the paths of the sky's bright ether
On they brought you over the earth's black bosom,
Swiftly—then you stood with a sudden brilliance,
Goddess, before me;

Deathless face alight with your smile, you asked me
What I suffered, who was my cause of anguish,
What would ease the pain of my frantic mind, and
Why had I called you

To my side: “And whom should Persuasion summon
Here, to soothe the sting of your passion this time?
Who is now abusing you, Sappho? Who is
Treating you cruelly?”

Now she runs away, but she'll soon pursue you;
Gifts she now rejects—soon enough she'll give them;
Now she doesn't love you, but soon her heart will
Burn, though unwilling.”

Come to me once more, and abate my torment;
Take the bitter care from my mind, and give me
All I long for; Lady, in all my battles
Fight as my comrade.

Translated by Elizabeth Vandiver (www.stoa.org)

The poet, Sappho, lived in ancient Greece sometime in the 6th century B.C.E. on the island of Lesbos. Despite women not having much of a presence in mainland Greece, in Lesbos women were held in high regard. She ~~was~~ married a wealthy merchant so she had time to dedicate herself to the arts. She not only wrote poetry but composed music to go along with it on the lyre. Common themes throughout her work include love and yearning. She was well known and highly praised while she was alive. Her poem “Hymn to Aphrodite” is her only work that exists today in its entirety. (www.sappho.com)

The poem explores feelings behind unrequited love from the point of view of Sappho. The language used portrays the speaker's anguish with words such as “pain”, “torment” and “crush” as she begs Aphrodite for help. Ancient Greeks often used plays and poetry as a form of catharsis, the strong language and writing from first person could indicate she's using this device.

During this time women artists were highly unusual to come across and it was quite a feat to be as successful as she was. What makes her work more unusual is that the object of her affections are regularly women. In this poem she refers to the subject of her unrequited love using the pronoun “she”, clearly meaning a woman, even when translated. Words like “passion”, “gifts”, “love”, “heart” and “burn” lessen the likelihood of this being a platonic pupil and mentor relationship like in some of her other poems. This shows a huge difference between the cultures of people on Lesbos and in Athens. Were she to be a native of Athens it is doubtful she would have the success she did not only because she's a woman but also because of her poem's subject matters.