

SAPPHO

b. 630 B.C.

d. 570 B.C.

SEVENTH CENTURY B.C. POET

“You who judge me, for me you are nothing.”

Sappho was a lone female voice among the great ancient Greek lyric poets. She flourished in an age when women were rarely afforded a formal education, a place outside the home or a standing among men.

Born to aristocratic parents, Sappho lived most of her life in Mytilene on the Greek island of Lesbos. She had at least two brothers, Larichus and Charaxus. One of her poems describes a daughter, Cleis. Experts have long debated the facts of her personal life, including her sexuality and her marriage to Ceryclas, a wealthy man from the island of Andros.

In the third century B.C., Alexandrian scholars collected Sappho’s poetry into nine books. Today, only fragments of various lengths remain. Just two of her complete poems have survived.

**She was one of
the great Archaic
lyric poets.**

In ancient Greece, “lyric” poetry was meant to be sung, accompanied by a harp-like instrument known as a lyre. Sappho would have been a musician as well as a poet. Her sensual songs largely conveyed themes of eroticism, passion and longing—explicitly toward women. Examples from her canon include a hymn to Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love and beauty, calling upon her to join the poet as a “comrade in arms.” In Fragment 31, Sappho speaks of her yearning for a woman in the company of a man: “He seems to me an equal of the gods—whoever gets to sit across from you and listen to the sound of your sweet speech so close to him.”

Sappho became a symbol of female same-sex ardor. The word “sapphic,” referring to the unique style of four-line stanzas she devised, comes from her name, and “lesbian” derives from her home on Lesbos.

Throughout history, Sappho’s lyrics sparked praise and controversy. Ancient critics celebrated her work and poets imitated it. The Greeks referred to Homer as “the poet” and Sappho as “the Poetess.” Plato, who generally disapproved of poetry, called her the “tenth Muse.” She was honored on coins and in public statuary. Christian censors through various ages in Alexandria, Rome and Constantinople rejected her work. In the first millennium A.D., Saint Gregory of Nazianzus and Pope Gregory VII ordered her verses burned. Victorian moralists and literary editors condemned her.

Sappho’s impact is clear: she altered existing ideas about poetry, which had previously been ceremonial, structured and impersonal. She turned it into an art form, creating unique meter and intimate, descriptive language directed toward female love interests and friends. Scholars recognize Sappho as one of the great poets of world literature.



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