HENRY THORNTON WHARTON

SAPPHO: MEMOIR, TEXT, SELECTED RENDERINGS, AND A LITERAL TRANSLATION

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LIFE OF SAPPHO

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Sappho, the one great woman poet of the world, who called herself Psappha in her own Aeolic dialect (in fragments 1 and 59), is said to have been at the zenith of her fame about the year 610 B.C.

During her lifetime Jeremiah first began to prophesy (628 B.C.), Daniel was carried away to Babylon (606 B.C.), Nebuchadnezzar besieged and captured Jerusalem (587 B.C.), Solon was legislating at Athens, and Tarquinius Priscus, the fifth king, is said to have been reigning over Rome. She lived before the birth of Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, the religion now professed by perhaps almost a third of the whole population of the globe.

Two centuries have sufficed to obscure most of the events in the life of Shakspere; it can hardly be expected that the lapse of twenty-five centuries should have left many authentic records of the history of Sappho. Little even of that internal evidence, upon which biography may rely, can be gathered from her extant poems, in such fragmentary form have they come down to us. Save for the quotations of grammarians and lexicographers, no word of hers would have survived. Yet her writings seem to have been preserved intact till at least the third century of our era, for Athenaeus, who wrote about that time, applies to himself the words of the Athenian comic poet Epicrates in his *Anti-Laïs* (about 360 B.C.), saying that he too—

Had learned by heart completely all the songs,

Breathing of love, which sweetest Sappho sang.

Scaliger says, although there does not seem to exist any confirmatory evidence, that the works of Sappho and other lyric poets were burnt at Constantinople and at Rome in the year 1073, in the popedom of Gregory VII. Cardan says the burning took place under Gregory Nazianzen, about 380 A.D. And Petrus Alcyonius relates that he heard when a boy that very many of the works of the Greek poets were burnt by order of the Byzantine emperors, and the poems of Gregory Nazianzen circulated in their stead. Bishop Blomfield (*Mus. Crit.* i. p. 422) thinks they must all have been destroyed at an early date, because neither Alcaeus nor Sappho was annotated by any of the later Grammarians. 'Few indeed, but those, roses,' as the poet Meleager said, are the precious verses the zeal of anti-paganism has spared to us.

Of Sappho's parents nothing is definitely known. Herodotus calls her father Scamandrōnymus; and as he wrote within one hundred and fifty years of her death there is little reason to doubt his accuracy. But Suidas, who compiled a Greek lexicon in about the eleventh century A.D., gives us the choice of seven other names. Her mother's name was Clēis. The celebrated Epistle known as that of *Sappho to Phaon*, of which I subjoin a translation by Pope in the Appendix, and which is commonly ascribed to Ovid,[1] says Sappho was only six years old 'when the bones of her parent, gathered up before their time, drank in her tears'; this is supposed to refer to her father, because in fr. 90 she speaks of her mother as still alive.

She had two brothers, Charaxus and Larichus; Suidas indeed names a third, Eurygius, but nothing is known of him.

Larichus was public cup-bearer at Mitylene, an office only held by youths of noble birth (cf. fr. 139), whence it is inferred that Sappho belonged to the wealthy aristocratic class.

Charaxus was occupied in carrying the highly prized Lesbian wine to Naucrătis[2] in Egypt, where he fell in love with a woman of great beauty, Dōrĭcha or Rhodōpis, and ransomed her from slavery for a great sum of money. Herodotus says she came originally from Thrace, and had once served Iadmon of Samos, having been fellow-slave with Aesop the fabulist. Suidas says Charaxus married her, and had children by her; but Herodotus only says that she was made free by him, and remained in Egypt, and 'being very lovely, acquired great riches for a person of her condition.' Out of a tenth part of her gains (cf. fr. 138) she furnished the temple of Apollo at Delphi with a number of iron spits for roasting oxen on. Athenaeus, however, blames Herodotus for having confused two different persons, saying that Charaxus married Doricha, while it was Rhodopis who sent the spits to Delphi. Certainly it appears clear that Sappho in her poem called her Doricha, but Rhodopis, 'Rosy-cheek,' was probably the name by which she was known among her lovers, on account of her beauty.

Another confusion respecting Rhodopis is that in Greece she was believed to have built the third pyramid; and Herodotus takes pains to show that such a work was far beyond the reach of her wealth, and was really due to kings

of a much earlier date. Still the tale remained current, false as it undoubtedly was, at least till the time of Pliny (about 77 A.D.). It has been shown by Bunsen and others that it is probable that

The Rhodope that built the pyramid

was Nitocris, the beautiful Egyptian queen who was the heroine of so many legends; Mycerinus began the third pyramid, and Nitocris finished it.

Strabo and Aelian relate a story of Rhodopis which recalls that of Cinderella. One day, they say, when Rhodopis was bathing at Naucratis, an eagle snatched up one of her sandals from the hands of her female attendants, and carried it to Memphis; the eagle, soaring over the head of the king (whom Aelian calls Psammetichus[3]), who was administering justice at the time, let the sandal fall into his lap. The king, struck with the beauty of the sandal and the singularity of the incident, sent over all Egypt to discover the woman to whom it belonged. The owner was found in the city of Naucratis and brought to the king; he made her his queen, and at her death erected, so the story goes, this third pyramid in her honour.

Suidas says Sappho 'married one Cercōlas, a man of great wealth, who sailed from Andros, and,' he adds, 'she had a daughter by him, named Cleïs.' In fr. 85 (cf. fr. 136) Sappho mentions this daughter Claïs by name, and Ovid, in the Epistle already alluded to, also refers to her. But the existence of such a husband has been warmly disputed, and the name (*Pēnifer*) and that of his country (*Virīlia*) are conjectured to have been invented in ribaldry by the Comic

poets; certainly it was against the custom of the Greeks to amass wealth in one country and go to seek a wife in a distant island. Some authorities do not mention Andros, one of the islands of the Cyclades, but state that Sappho's family belonged to an Aeolian colony in the Troad.

The age in which Sappho flourished is mainly determined by concurrent events. Athenaeus makes her contemporary with Alyattes the father of Croesus, who reigned over Lydia from 628 to 570 B.C. Eusebius mentions her in his Chronicle for the year 604 B.C. Suidas says she lived about the 42nd Olympiad (612-609 B.C.), in the time of the poets Alcaeus, Stēsichŏrus, and Pittăcus. Her own verses in fr. 28 are said to have been written in answer to those of Alcaeus addressing her—

Ἰόπλοκ' ἄγνα μελλιχόμειδε Σάπφοι,
θέλω τι ϝείπην, ἀλλά με κωλύει αἴδως,

'Violet-weaving, pure, soft-smiling Sappho, I want to say something, but shame deters me' (cf. p. 24). Athenaeus says that Hermesiănax, in an elegy (cf. fr. 26), spoke of Sappho as beloved by Anacreon, and he quotes from the third book of some elegiac poetry by Hermesianax, 'A Catalogue of things relating to Love,' these lines of his:

And well thou knowest how famed Alcaeus smote
Of his high harp the love-enlivened strings,
And raised to Sappho's praise the enamoured note,
'Midst noise of mirth and jocund revellings:
Aye, he did love that nightingale of song
With all a lover's fervour,—and, as he

Deftly attuned the lyre, to madness stung
The Teian bard with envious jealousy.
For her Anacreon, charming lyrist, wooed,
And fain would win, with sweet mellifluous chime,
Encircled by her Lesbian sisterhood;
Would often Samos leave, and many a time
From vanquished Teos' viny orchards hie
To viny Lesbos' isle,—and from the shore,
O'er the blue wave, on Lectum cast his eye,
And think on bygone days and times no more.
(*Translated by* J. Bailey.)

Diphilus too, in his play *Sappho*, represented Archilochus and Hippōnax as her lovers—for a joke, as Athenaeus prudently remarks. Neither of these, however, was a contemporary of hers, and it seems quite certain that Anacreon, who flourished fully fifty years later, never set eyes on Sappho (cf. fr. 26).

How long she lived we cannot tell. The epithet γεραιτέρα, 'somewhat old,' which she applies to herself in fr. 75, may have been merely relative. The story about her brother Charaxus and Rhodopis would show she lived at least until 572 B.C., the year of the accession of Amāsis, king of Egypt, under whose reign Herodotus says Rhodopis flourished; but one can scarcely draw so strict an inference. If what Herodotus says is true, Sappho may have reached the age of fifty years. At any rate, 'the father of history' is more worthy of credence than the scandal-mongers. An inscription on the famous Parian marbles, a system of chronology compiled, perhaps by a schoolmaster, in the third century B.C. (cf. p. 17), says: 'When Aristocles reigned

over the Athenians, Sappho fled from Mitylene and sailed to Sicily'; but the exact date is illegible, though it may be placed between 604 and 592 B.C. It is hardly safe to refer to this Ovid's assertion that she went to Sicily in pursuit of Phaon.

Balancing all the evidence, Fynes-Clinton, in his *Fasti Hellenici*, i. p. 225, takes the years 611-592 B.C. to be the period in which Sappho flourished.

That she was a native of Lesbos, an island in the Aegean sea, is universally admitted; and all but those writers who speak of a second Sappho say she lived at Mitylēnē, the chief city of the island. The existence of a Sappho who was a courtesan of Erĕsus, a smaller Lesbian city, besides the poetess of Mitylene, is the invention of comparatively late authors; and it is probably due to their desire to detach the calumnies, which the Comic poets so long made popular, from the personality of the poetess to whose good name her own contemporaries bore witness (cf. Alcaeus' address to her, p. 8).

Strabo, in his *Geography*, says: 'Mitylene [Μιτυλήνη or Μυτιληνη] is well provided with everything. It formerly produced celebrated men, such as Pittacus, one of the Seven Wise Men; Alcaeus the poet, and others. Contemporary with these persons flourished Sappho, who was something wonderful; at no period within memory has any woman been known who in any, even the least degree, could be compared to her for poetry.' Indeed, the glory of Lesbos was that Sappho was its citizen, and its chief fame centres in the fact of her celebrity. By its modern name Mitilene, under the dominion of the Turks, the island,

Where burning Sappho loved and sung,

is now mainly known for its oil and wine and its salubrity. In ancient times its wine was the most celebrated through all Greece; and Vergil refers to its vines, which trailed like ivy on the ground, while many authors testify to the exceptional wholesomeness of Lesbian wine. But the clue to Sappho's individuality can only be found in the knowledge of what, in her age, Lesbos and the Lesbians were; around her converges all we know of the Aeolian race. As Mr. Swinburne says—

Had Sappho's self not left her word thus long
For token,
The sea round Lesbos yet in waves of song
Had spoken.

'For a certain space of time,' writes Mr. J. Addington Symonds in his *Studies of Greek Poets*, first series, pp. 127 ff., 'the Aeolians occupied the very foreground of Greek literature, and blazed out with a brilliance of lyrical splendour that has never been surpassed. There seems to have been something passionate and intense in their temperament, which made the emotions of the Dorian and the Ionian feeble by comparison. Lesbos, the centre of Aeolian culture, was the island of overmastering passions; the personality of the Greek race burned there with a fierce and steady flame of concentrated feeling. The energies which the Ionians divided between pleasure, politics, trade, legislation, science, and the arts, and which the Dorians turned to war and statecraft and social economy, were restrained by the Aeolians within the sphere of individual

emotions, ready to burst forth volcanically. Nowhere in any age of Greek history, or in any part of Hellas, did the love of physical beauty, the sensibility to radiant scenes of nature, the consuming fervour of personal feeling, assume such grand proportions did receive so illustrious an expression as they did in Lesbos. At first this passion blossomed into the most exquisite lyrical poetry that the world has known: this was the flower-time of the Aeolians, their brief and brilliant spring. But the fruit it bore was bitter and rotten. Lesbos became a byword for corruption. The passions which for a moment had flamed into the gorgeousness of Art, burnt their envelope of words and images, remained a mere furnace of sensuality, from which no expression of the divine in human life could be expected. In this the Lesbian poets were not unlike the Provençal troubadours, who made a literature of Love; or the Venetian painters, who based their Art upon the beauty of colour, the voluptuous charms of the flesh. In each case the motive of enthusiastic passion sufficed to produce a dazzling result. But as soon as its freshness was exhausted there was nothing left for Art to live on, and mere decadence to sensuality ensued. Several circumstances contributed to aid the development of lyric poetry in Lesbos. The customs of the Aeolians permitted more social and domestic freedom than was common in Greece. Aeolian women were not confined to the harem like Ionians, or subjected to the rigorous discipline of the Spartans. While mixing freely with male society, they were highly educated, and accustomed to express their sentiments to an extent unknown elsewhere in history—until, indeed, the present time. The Lesbian ladies applied

themselves successfully to literature. They formed clubs for the cultivation of poetry and music. They studied the art of beauty, and sought to refine metrical forms and diction. Nor did they confine themselves to the scientific side of Art. Unrestrained by public opinion, and passionate for the beautiful, they cultivated their senses and emotions, and developed their wildest passions. All the luxuries and elegances of life which that climate and the rich valleys of Lesbos could afford, were at their disposal: exquisite gardens, in which the rose and hyacinth spread perfume; river-beds ablaze with the oleander and wild pomegranate; olive-groves and fountains, where the cyclamen and violet flowered with feathery maidenhair; pine-shadowed coves, where they might bathe in the calm of a tideless sea; fruits such as only the southern sea and sea-wind can mature; marble cliffs, starred with jonquil and anemone in spring, aromatic with myrtle and lentisk and samphire and wild rosemary through all the months; nightingales that sang in May; temples dim with dusky gold and bright with ivory; statues and frescoes of heroic forms. In such scenes as these the Lesbian poets lived, and thought of Love. When we read their poems, we seem to have the perfumes, colours, sounds, and lights of that luxurious land distilled in verse. Nor was a brief but biting winter wanting to give tone to their nerves, and, by contrast with the summer, to prevent the palling of so much luxury on sated senses. The voluptuousness of Aeolian poetry is not like that of Persian or Arabian art. It is Greek in its self-restraint, proportion, tact. We find nothing burdensome in its sweetness. All is so rhythmically and sublimely ordered in the poems of Sappho

that supreme art lends solemnity and grandeur to the expression of unmitigated passion.'

The story of Sappho's love for Phaon, and her leap from the Leucadian rock in consequence of his disdaining her, though it has been so long implicitly believed, does not seem to rest on any firm historical basis. Indeed, more than one epigrammatist in the Greek Anthology expressly states that she was buried in an Aeolic grave.[4]

Still Phaon, for all the myths that cluster round his name, for his miraculous loveliness and his insensibility to love, may yet have been a real personage. Like other heroes, he may possibly have lived at a period long anterior to that of the traditions about him which have been handed down to us. He is said to have been a boatman of Mitylene (cf. fr. 140), who was endowed by Aphrodite with youth and extraordinary beauty as a reward for his having ferried her for nothing. Servius, who wrote about 400 A.D. (cf. p. 39), says she gave him an alabaster box of ointment, the effect of which was to make all women fall in love with him; and that one of these—he does not mention her name—threw herself in despair from the cliff of Leucas. Servius further states, on the authority of Menander, that the temple was founded by Phaon of Lesbos. Phaon's beauty and power of fascination passed into a proverb. Pliny, however, says he became the object of Sappho's love because he had found the male root of the plant called *eryngo*, probably our sea-holly, and that it acted like a love-charm. And when Athenaeus is talking about lettuces, as to their use as food and their anti-aphrodisiac properties, he says Callimachus' story of Aphrodite hiding Adonis under a lettuce is 'an

allegorical statement of the poet's, intended to show that those who are much addicted to the use of lettuces are very little adapted for pleasures of love. Cratinus,' he goes on, 'says that Aphrodite when in love with Phaon hid him in the leaves of lettuces; but the younger Marsyas says that she hid him amid the grass of barley.'

Those fanciful writers who assert the existence of a second Sappho say that it was not the poetess who fell in love with Phaon, but that other Sappho on whom they fasten all the absurd stories circulated by the Comic writers. The tale runs that the importunate love of Sappho caused Phaon to flee to Sicily, whither she followed him. Ovid's Epistle, before mentioned (p. 3), is the foundation for the greater part of the legend. The inscription on the Parian marbles (cf. p. 9) also mentions a certain year in which 'Sappho sailed from Mitylene and fled to Sicily.' The chronicle, however, says nothing about Phaon, nor is any reason given for her exile; some have imagined that she was obliged to leave her country on political grounds, but there is no trace in her writings, nor does any report indicate, that she ever interested herself in politics.

Strabo, in his *Geography* already quoted (p. 10), says: 'There is a white rock which stretches out from Leucas to the sea and towards Cephallenia, that takes its name from its whiteness. The rock of Leucas has upon it a temple of Apollo, and the leap from it was believed to stop love. From this it is said that Sappho first, as Menander says somewhere, "in pursuit of the haughty Phaon, urged on by maddening desire, threw herself from its far-seen rocks, imploring thee [Apollo], lord and king."' The former

promontory of Leucas is now separated from the mainland and forms one of the Ionian islands, known as Santa Maura, off the wild and rugged coast of Acarnania. The story of Sappho's having ventured the Leucadian leap is repeated by Ovid, and was never much doubted, except by those who believed in a second Sappho, till modern times. Still, it is strange that none of the many authors who relate the legend say what was the result of the leap—whether it was fatal to her life or to her love. Moreover, Ptolemy Hephaestion (about 100 A.D.), who, in the extant summary of his works published in the *Myriobiblion* of Photius, gives a list of many men and women who by the Leucadian leap were cured of the madness of love or perished, does not so much as mention the name of Sappho. A circumstantial account of Sappho's leap, on which the popular modern idea is chiefly founded, was given by Addison, relying to no small extent upon his imagination for his facts, 'with his usual exquisite humour,' as Warton remarks, in the 233rd *Spectator*, Nov. 27, 1711. 'Sappho the Lesbian,' says Addison, 'in love with Phaon, arrived at the temple of Apollo habited like a bride, in garments as white as snow. She wore a garland of myrtle on her head, and carried in her hand the little musical instrument of her own invention. After having sung a hymn to Apollo, she hung up her garland on one side of his altar, and her harp on the other. She then tucked up her vestments like a Spartan virgin, and amidst thousands of spectators, who were anxious for her safety and offered up vows for her deliverance, marched directly forwards to the utmost summit of the promontory, where, after having repeated a stanza of her own verses, which we could not

hear, she threw herself off the rock with such an intrepidity as was never before observed in any who had attempted that dangerous leap. Many who were present related that they saw her fall into the sea, from whence she never rose again; though there were others who affirmed that she never came to the bottom of her leap, but that she was changed into a swan as she fell, and that they saw her hovering in the air under that shape. But whether or no the whiteness and fluttering of her garments might not deceive those who looked upon her, or whether she might not really be metamorphosed into that musical and melancholy bird, is still a doubt among the Lesbians. Alcaeus, the famous lyric poet, who had for some time been passionately in love with Sappho, arrived at the promontory of Leucate that very evening in order to take the leap upon her account; but hearing that Sappho had been there before him, and that her body could be nowhere found, he very generously lamented her fall, and is said to have written his hundred and twenty-fifth ode upon that occasion.'

It is to be noted in this connection that the part of the cliff of Santa Maura or Leukadi, known to this day as 'Sappho's Leap,' was used, even in historical times, as a place whence criminals condemned to death were thrown into the sea. The people used, it is said, to tie numbers of birds to the limbs of the condemned and cover them with feathers to break the force of their fall, and then send boats to pick them up. If they survived, they were pardoned.

Those modern critics who reject the whole story as fabulous derive it from the myth of the love of Aphrodite and Adonis, who in the Greek version was called Phaëthon

or Phaon. Theodor Kock (cf. Preface, p. xvii) is the latest exponent of these views, and he pushes them to a very fanciful extent, even adducing Minos as the sun and Britomartis as the moon to explain the Leucadian leap. Certainly the legend does not appear before the Attic Comedy, about 395 B.C., more than two centuries after Sappho's death. And the Leucadian leap may have been ascribed to her from its having been often mentioned as a mere poetical metaphor taken from an expiatory rite connected with the worship of Apollo; the image occurs in Stesichorus and Anacreon, and may possibly have been used by Sappho. For instance, Athenaeus cites a poem by Stesichorus about a maiden named Calyca who was in love with a youth named Euathlus, and prayed in a modest manner to Aphrodite to aid her in becoming his wife; but when the young man scorned her, she threw herself from a precipice: and this he says happened near Leucas. Athenaeus says the poet represented the maiden as particularly modest, so that she was not willing to live with the youth on his own terms, but prayed that if possible she might become the wedded wife of Euathlus; and if that were not possible, that she might be released from life. And Anacreon, in a fragment preserved by Hephaestion, says, as if proverbially, 'Now again rising I, drunk with love, dive from the Leucadian rock into the hoary wave.'

> And Sappho with that gloriole
> . . . . .
> Of ebon hair on calmëd brows—
> O poet-woman, none forgoes
> The leap, attaining the repose!