

## Sappho: Poem of Jealousy

(29 Translations)

*“Translations of Sappho, until recent years, have been fantastically inappropriate. . . . Today a sufficient number of literal translations by modern poets may enable the reader of English to envelop Sappho and measure her as we do distant stars by triangulation from more mundane objects. It then becomes apparent that we are not deluding ourselves. There has been no other poet like this. Wherever enough words remain to form a coherent context, they give one another a unique luster, an effulgence found nowhere else. Presentational immediacy of the image, overwhelming urgency of personal involvement — in no other poet are these two prime factors of lyric poetry raised to so great a power.”*

—Kenneth Rexroth, [\*Classics Revisited\*](#)

Sappho’s poem of jealousy survives only because the ancient critic Longinus quoted it as a supreme example of poetic intensity: “Are you not amazed at how she evokes soul, body, hearing, tongue, sight, skin, as though they were external and belonged to someone else? And how at one and the same moment she both freezes and burns, is irrational and sane, is terrified and nearly dead, so that we observe in her not a single emotion but a whole concourse of emotions? Such things do, of course, commonly happen to people in love. Sappho’s supreme excellence lies in the skill with which she selects the most striking and vehement circumstances of the passions and forges them into a coherent whole” (Longinus, *On the Sublime*).

Below are some of the many translations of this poem (there have been well over 100 into English alone). Most of the early ones have little resemblance to the original, but I have included a few for their historical interest.

The poem as we have it is apparently incomplete, as there is the beginning of an additional line at the end (“But all must be endured . . .”). Most translators have ignored this fragment and concluded with the previous line, but a few modern ones include it.

*Here are two slightly different versions of the original poem, transcribed in Roman characters (the differences presumably reflect different decisions regarding textual emendation or different styles of Romanization). I have replaced macrons (horizontal lines over vowels) with circumflexes, as macrons do not reproduce consistently in Internet formats.*

phainetai moi kênos îsos theoisin  
emmen' ônêr ottis enantios toi  
isdanei kai plâsion âdu phonei-  
sâs upakouei

kai gelaisâs îmeroen to m' êmân  
kardiân en stêthesin eptoaisien  
ôs gar es s' idô brokhe' os me phônai-  
s' oud' en et' eikei

alla kam men glôssa eâge lepton  
d' autika khrôi pur upadedromâken  
oppatessi d' oud' en orêmm' epirom-  
beisi d' akouai

kad de m' idrôs kakkheetai tromos de  
paisan agrei khlôrotera de poiâs  
emmi tethnakên d' oligô 'pideuês  
phainom' em' autai.

Alla pan tomaton . . .

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phainetai moi kênos isos theoisin  
emmen' ônêr ottis enantios toi  
isdanei kai plasion adu phônê-  
sas upakouei

kai gelaisas imeroen to m' ê man  
kardian en stêthesin eptoaisien  
ôs gar es s' idô broche' ôs me phônê-  
s' ouden et' eikei

alla kam men glôssa eage lepton  
d' autika chrôi pur upadedromaken  
oppatessi d' ouden orêmm' epibro-  
meisi d' akouai

ekade m' idrôs kakcheetai, tremos de  
paisan agrei, chlôrotera de poias  
emmi, tethnakên d' oligô 'pideuês  
phainom' em' autai.

Alla pan tomaton [epeî kai panêta] . . .

—Sappho (ca. 500 BC)

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,  
ille, si fas est, superare divos,

qui sedens adversus identidem te  
spectat et audit

dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis  
eripit sensus mihi, nam simul te,  
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi  
vocis in ore,

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus  
flamma demanat, sonitu suoapte  
tintinant aures, gemina teguntur  
lumina nocte.

Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est.  
Otio exultas nimiumque gestis.  
Otium et reges prius et beatas  
perdidit urbes.

*Translated into Latin by Catullus (Carmina #51, ca. 50 BC)*

*[In his translation Catullus inserts the name of his own love (Lesbia) and adds a coda in which he addresses himself ("Otium, Catulle . . ."). Some of the following versions are actually translated from Catullus's version and thus include that coda. In such cases I have omitted it.]*

Je suis un Demidieu quand assis vis-à-vis  
De toy, mon cher souci, j'escoute les devis,  
Devis entrerompus d'un gracieux soubrire,  
Soubbris qui me detient le coeur emprisonné;  
Car en voyant tes yeux je me pasme estonné,  
Et de mes pauvres flancs un seul mot je ne tire.  
Ma langue s'engourdist, un petit feu me court  
Honteux de sous la peau; je suis muet et sourd,  
Et une obscure nuit de sur mes yeux demeure;  
Mon sang devient glacé, l'esprit fuit de mon corps,  
Je tremble tout de crainte, et peu s'en faut alors  
Qu'à tes pieds estendu, sans ame je ne meure.

*Translated into French by Pierre de Ronsard (1560)*

Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue;  
Un trouble s'éleva dans mon âme éperdue;  
Mes yeux ne voyaient plus, je ne pouvais parler;  
Je sentis tout mon corps et transir et brûler. . . .

*French adaptation from Jean Racine's Phèdre (1677)*

*[For 98 other French versions, see L'Égal des dieux: cent versions d'un poème de Sappho, Éditions Allia, 2001.]*

My muse, what ails this ardour?  
Mine eyes be dym, my lymbs shake,  
My voice is hoarse, my throte scorcht,  
My tong to this rooffe cleaves,  
My fancy amazde, my thoughtes dull'd,  
My head doth ake, my life faints  
My sowle begins to take leave,  
So greate a passion all feele,  
To think a soare so deadly  
I should so rashly ripp up.

*Translated by Sir Phillip Sidney (1554-1586)*

Happy as a God is he,  
That fond Youth, who plac'd by thee,  
Hears and sees thee sweetly gay,  
Talk and smile his soul away.

That it was alarm'd by Breast,  
And depriv'd my Heart of Rest.  
For in speechless Raptures tost,  
Whilst I gaz'd, my Voice was lost.

The soft Fire with flowing Rein,  
Glided swift thro' ev'ry Vein;  
Darkness o'er my Eyelids hung;  
In my Ears faint Murmurs rung.

Chilling Damps my Limbs bedew'd;  
Gentle Tremors thrill'd my Blood;  
Life from my pale Cheeks retir'd;  
Breathless, I almost expir'd.

*Translated by John Addison (1735)*

Thy fatal shafts unerring move,  
I bow before thine altar, Love.  
I feel thy soft resistless flame  
Glide swift through all my vital frame.

For while I gaze my bosom glows,  
My blood in tides impetuous flows,  
Hope, fear, and joy alternate roll,  
And floods of transports overwhelm my soul.

My faltering tongue attempts in vain  
In soothing murmurs to complain;  
Thy tongue some secret magic ties,  
Thy murmurs sink in broken sighs.

Condemned to nurse eternal care,  
And ever drop the silent tear,  
Unheard I mourn, unknown I sigh,  
Unfriended live, unpitied die.

*Translated by Tobias Smollett (1741)*

Good Heavens! what were the thrillings of my soul at that instant! my reflection was overwhelmed with a torrent of agitation! my heart throbbed with surprising violence! a sudden mist overspread my eyes! my ears were invaded with a dreadful sound! I panted for want of breath, and, in short, was for some moments entranced! This first tumult subsiding, a crowd of flattering ideas rushed upon my imagination. . . .

*From Smollett's novel Roderick Random (1748)*

Equal to Jove that youth must be —  
Greater than Jove he seems to me —  
Who, free from Jealousy's alarms,  
Securely views thy matchless charms.  
Ah! Lesbia! though 'tis death to me,  
I cannot choose but look on thee;  
But, at the sight, my senses fly,  
I needs must gaze, but, gazing, die;  
Whilst trembling with a thousand fears,  
Parch'd to the throat my tongue adheres,  
My pulse beats quick, my breath heaves short,  
My limbs deny their slight support;  
Cold dews my pallid face o'erspread,  
With deadly languor droops my head,  
My ears with tingling echoes ring,  
And life itself is on the wing,  
My eyes refuse the cheering light,  
Their orbs are veil'd in starless night:  
Such pangs my nature sinks beneath,  
And feels a temporary death.

*Translated by Lord Byron (ca. 1820)*

I watch thy grace; and in its place  
My heart a charmed slumber keeps,  
While I muse upon thy face;  
And a languid fire creeps  
Thro' my veins to all my frame,  
Dissolvingly and slowly: soon  
From thy rose-red lips my name  
Floweth; and then, as in a swoon,  
With dinning sound my ears are rife,  
My tremulous tongue faltereth,  
I lose my color, I lose my breath,  
I drink the cup of a costly death,  
Brimm'd with delirious draughts of warmest life.  
I die with my delight, before  
I hear what I would hear from thee.

*Paraphrase by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (ca. 1850)*

Peer of gods he seemeth to me, the blissful  
Man who sits and gazes at thee before him,  
Close beside thee sits, and in silence hears thee  
Silverly speaking,  
Laughing love's low laughter. Oh this, this only  
Stirs the troubled heart in my breast to tremble!  
For should I but see thee a little moment,  
Straight is my voice hushed;  
Yea, my tongue is broken, and through and through me  
'Neath the flesh impalpable fire runs tingling;  
Nothing see mine eyes, and a noise of roaring  
Waves in my ears sounds;  
Sweat runs down in rivers, a tremor seizes  
All my limbs, and paler than grass in autumn,  
Caught by pains of menacing death, I falter,  
Lost in the love trance.

*Translated by John Addington Symonds (1883)*

O, it is godlike to sit selfpossessed  
when her chin rises and she turns to smile;  
but my tongue thickens, my ears ring,  
what I see is hazy.

I tremble. Walls sink in night, voices  
unmeaning as wind. She only  
a clear note, dazzle of light, fills  
furlongs and hours

so that my limbs stir without will, lame,  
I a ghost, powerless,  
treading air, drowning, sucked  
back into dark

unless, rafted on light or music,  
drawn into her radiance, I dissolve  
when her chin rises and she turns to smile.  
O, it is godlike!

*Imitation by Basil Bunting (1927)*

He is changed to a god who looks on her,  
Godlike he shines when he's seated beside her,  
Immortal joy to gaze and hear the fall of  
    Her sweet laughter.  
All of my senses are lost and confounded;  
Lesbia rises before me and trembling  
I sink into earth and swift dissolution  
    Seizes my body.  
Limbs are pierced with fire and the heavy tongue fails,  
Ears resound with noise of distant storms shaking  
This earth, eyes gaze on stars that fall forever  
    Into deep midnight. . . .

*Translated by Horace Gregory (1931)*

That man is peer of the gods, who  
face to face sits listening  
to your sweet speech and lovely  
    laughter.

It is this that rouses a tumult  
in my breast. At mere sight of you  
my voice falters, my tongue  
    is broken.

Straightway, a delicate fire runs in  
my limbs; my eyes  
are blinded and my ears  
    thunder.

Sweat pours out: a trembling hunts  
me down. I grow  
paler than grass and lack little  
    of dying.

*Translated by William Carlos Williams (1958)*

He is more than a hero

He is a god in my eyes —  
the man who is allowed  
to sit beside you — he

who listens intimately  
to the sweet murmur of  
your voice, the enticing

laughter that makes my own  
heart beat fast. If I meet  
you suddenly, I can't

speak — my tongue is broken;  
a thin flame runs under  
my skin; seeing nothing,

hearing only my own ears  
drumming, I drip with sweat;  
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than  
dry grass. At such times  
death isn't far from me.

*Translated by Mary Barnard (1958)*

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.

And the sweat breaks running upon me, fever  
shakes my body, paler I turn than grass is;  
I can feel that I have been changed, I feel that  
death has come near me.

*Translated by Richmond Lattimore (1960)*

He'll hie me, par is he? the God divide her,  
he'll hie, see fastest, superior deity,  
quiz — sitting adverse identity — mate, in-  
spect it and audit —  
you'll care ridden then, misery hold omens,  
air rip the senses from me; now you smile to  
me — Lesbia's aspect — no life is to spare me  
[voice hoarse in a throat]  
linked tongue set torpid, tenuous support a-  
flame a day mown down, sound tone sopped up in its  
tinkling, in ears hearing, twin eyes tug under  
luminous — a night.

*Translated by Louis & Celia Zukovsky (1961)*

*(The bizarre style stems from the translators' attempt to echo the sound of Catullus's Latin.  
The first line, for example, reads: "Ille mi par esse deo videtur.")*

I set that man above the gods and heroes —  
all day, he sits before you face to face,  
like a cardplayer. Your elbow brushes his elbow —  
if you should speak, he hears.

The touched heart madly stirs,  
your laughter is water hurrying over pebbles —  
every gesture is a proclamation,  
every sound is speech . . .

Refining fire purifies my flesh!  
I hear you: a hollowness in my ears  
thunders and stuns me. I cannot speak.  
I cannot see.

I shiver. A dead whiteness spreads over  
my body, trickling pinpricks of sweat.  
I am greener than the greenest green grass —  
I die!

*Translated by Robert Lowell (1962)*

he to me wholly godlike seems  
he (please god forgive) seems higher than god  
who sits across from you and over and over  
looks at you and hears you

sweetly laughing, miserably which all  
my senses rips from me, for the minute Lesbia  
I lay eyes on you nothing is left me  
of.....  
but torpid my tongue, thinly down under my skin  
flame trickles, with their own sound  
roar my ears, twin night  
covers my eyes

*Translated by Frank O. Copley (1964)*

To me that man equals a god  
as he sits before you and listens  
closely to your sweet voice

and lovely laughter — which troubles  
the heart in my ribs. For now  
as I look at you my voice fails,

my tongue is broken and thin fire  
runs like a thief through my body.  
My eyes are dead to light, my ears

pound, and sweat pours down over me.  
I shudder, I am paler than grass,  
and am intimate with dying — but

I must suffer everything, being poor.

*Translated by Willis Barnstone (first version, 1965)*

To me he seems like a god  
as he sits facing you and  
hears you near as you speak  
softly and laugh

in a sweet echo that jolts  
the heart in my ribs. For now  
as I look at you my voice  
is empty and

can say nothing as my tongue  
cracks and slender fire is quick  
under my skin. My eyes are dead  
to light, my ears

pound, and sweat pours over me.  
I convulse, greener than grass,

and feel my mind slip as I  
go close to death,

yet, being poor, must suffer  
everything.

*Translated by Willis Barnstone (second version, 1988)*

He is a god in my eyes, that man,  
Given to sit in front of you  
And close to himself sweetly to hear  
    The sound of you speaking.

Your magical laughter — this I swear —  
Batters my heart — my breast astir —  
My voice when I see you suddenly near  
    Refuses to come.

My tongue breaks up and a delicate fire  
Runs through my flesh; I see not a thing  
With my eyes, and all that I hear  
    In my ears is a hum.

The sweat runs down, a shuddering takes  
Me in every part and pale as the drying  
Grasses, then, I think I am near  
    The moment of dying.

*Translated by Paul Roche (1966)*

Godlike the man who  
sits at her side, who  
watches and catches  
    that laughter  
which (softly) tears me  
to tatters: nothing is  
left of me, each time  
    I see her,  
. . . tongue numbed; arms, legs  
melting, on fire; drum  
drumming in ears; head-  
    lights gone black.

*Translated by Peter Whigham (1966)*

He seems to be a god, that man

Facing you, who leans to be close,  
Smiles, and, alert and glad, listens  
To your mellow voice

And quickens in love at your laughter  
That stings my breasts, jolts my heart  
If I dare the shock of a glance.  
I cannot speak,

My tongue sticks to my dry mouth,  
Thin fire spreads beneath my skin,  
My eyes cannot see and my aching ears  
Roar in their labyrinths.

Chill sweat slides down my body,  
I shake, I turn greener than grass.  
I am neither living nor dead and cry  
From the narrow between.

But endure, even this grief of love.

*Translated by Guy Davenport (1980)*

I think that man is like a god  
Who faces you, and sits by you,  
And listens to your gentle words,  
And to your silver laughter. But I—  
My heart explodes within my breast;  
One timid glance, and all my voice is gone,  
My tongue breaks, and a subtle flame  
Races below my flesh, my eyes  
Refuse their sight, my hearing is a gong,  
Cold sweat clings to me, and I shake  
From head to toe, my skin the color  
Of grass: I am about to die, I think. . . .

*Translated by T.G. Rosenmeyer (ca. 1982)*

Equal to the gods does he appear,  
that man who sits close by you,  
hears the sound of your sweet voice  
— instantly near —

and your delightful laughter. That sight,  
I swear, sets my heartbeat pounding;  
the slightest glance at you puts my  
speech to flight!

My tongue unhinges, a delicate  
flame slips racing neath my skin,  
I see nothing, am blinded, my ears  
ring, pulsate,

a cold sweat commands me, dread  
grasps at my heart. More pallid  
than grass, I appear to myself  
nearly dead.

*Translated by Jeffrey Duban (1983)*

To me it seems  
that man has the fortune of gods,  
whoever sits beside you, and close,  
who listens to you sweetly speaking  
and laughing temptingly;  
my heart flutters in my breast,  
whenever I look quickly, for a moment —  
I say nothing, my tongue broken,  
a delicate fire runs under my skin,  
my eyes see nothing, my ears roar,  
cold sweat rushes down me,  
trembling seizes me,  
I am greener than grass,  
to myself I seem  
needing but little to die.

But all must be endured, since . . .

*Translated by Diane Rayor (1991)*

In my eyes he matches the gods, the man who  
sits there facing you — any man whatever —  
listening from closeby to the sweetness of your  
voice as you talk, the

sweetness of your laughter: yes, that — I swear it —  
sets the heart to shaking inside my breast, since  
once I look at you for a moment, I can't  
speak any longer,

but my tongue breaks down, and then all at once a  
subtle fire races inside my skin, my  
eyes can't see a thing and a whirring whistle  
thrums at my hearing,

cold sweat covers me and a trembling takes  
ahold of me all over: I'm greener than the  
grass is and appear to myself to be little  
short of dying.

But all must be endured, since even a poor . . .

*Translated by Jim Powell (1993)*

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

and lovely laughing — oh it  
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  
and in eyes no sight and drumming  
fills ears

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 . . .

*Translated by Anne Carson (2002)*

He must feel blooded with the spirit of a god  
to sit opposite you and listen, and reply,  
to your talk, your laughter, your touching,  
breath-held silences. But what I feel, sitting here  
and watching you, so stops my heart and binds  
my tongue that I can't think what I might say  
to breach the aureole around you there.  
It's as if someone with flint and stone had sparked  
a fire that kindled the flesh along my arms  
and smothered me in its smoke-blind rush.  
Paler than summer grass, it seems  
I am already dead, or little short of dying.

*Translated by Sherod Santos (2005)*

He appears to me, that one, equal to the gods,  
the man who, facing you,  
is seated and, up close, that sweet voice of yours  
he listens to

And how you laugh your charming laugh. Why it  
makes my heart flutter within my breast,  
because the moment I look at you, right then, for me,  
to make any sound at all won't work any more.

My tongue has a breakdown and a delicate  
— all of a sudden — fire rushes under my skin.  
With my eyes I see not a thing, and there is a roar  
that my ears make.

Sweat pours down me and a trembling  
seizes all of me; paler than grass  
am I, and a little short of death  
do I appear to me.

*Literal translation by Gregory Nagy (date unknown)*