

## Sappho's poems – Portraits of a poetess

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### **Abstract**

The intimate nature of Sappho's poems has led to different conclusions about her life and her feelings, though few are certain. Plato considered her the 10th muse, marking her importance in Ancient Greek literature. Yet, we only know a few of her fragments. Are these fragments a reflection of the feelings of the poetess towards some of her disciples? Or are they related to what has sometimes been thought her last passion – an old sailor, whose disappearance may have been the cause of her death?

Fernando Campos' recent novel – *A Rocha Branca* – is based on her life using several fragments by Sappho. Are these fragments sufficient to document the poetess' life? Is Campos' analysis adequate? Does he use these fragments with the specific purpose of offering an image of Sappho distinct from the usual one, which associates her with lesbian love?

The purpose of this paper is to examine Sappho's fragments, comparing them with Fernando Campos' readings, and to test how effective they may be as the basis for an historical novel rather than as a true portrait of Sappho in Antiquity.

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## Sappho's poems – Portraits of a poetess

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Sappho is one of the best-known poetesses from Ancient Greece, even if not the only one. She was born in Lesbos, somewhere between the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and was contemporary of Alcaeus, also a native of the island. Though we do not know much about her, we do know that she lived most of her life in the city of Mytilene, where she moved with her family after she lost her father. By then she was probably six years old. When Pittacus became tyrant of Mytilene, she had to leave Lesbos, going with her husband to Syracuse, where she may have met Stesichorus. Later, already a widow with one daughter, she returned, as Pittacus' tyranny had softened. She founded a school to prepare girls for the festivals in honour of Aphrodite and also for their future life, and some of these girls seem to be the subject of her poetic fragments.

Books and reading seemed to have been her main interest since she was a child. Plato called her "the tenth Muse" (*Ant. Pal.*, 7. 44), due to the fineness of her poems. Unfortunately, we only have a few fragments, which are not enough to understand the body of her work. The intimate nature of the fragments we do have has led to different conclusions about her life and her feelings. Some believe they reflect her feelings towards some of her disciples; others consider these love poems as expressions of feelings, but not necessarily towards girls.

The love of an adult man for a youth was not strange among Greeks. It was often considered part of the youth's education, as in Athens. Almost certainly the Greeks did not have the same conception of homosexuality as we now do. Plato is a clear source for us on this respect, when he asserts that this kind of relationship should not necessarily be a physical one. Yet, Socrates blushes while admiring young Charmides' beauty and Alcibiades (*Symposium*) states his love for Socrates, regardless of his age. We wonder if the same could as easily happen between women, as may seem the case in some of Sappho's poems. Some scholars (e.g. J. Davidson or L.H. Wilson) believe it possible. Others, however, believe that her poetry simply echoes in its expression of her feelings for women the conventional forms of male desire, as is pointed out both by Nicole Loraux and Annalisa Paradiso. For them even the form of her suicide is a sign of masculinity (Loraux 2003). Yet, M. Johnson and T. Ryan have no doubt that "Sappho's poetry is an intense and insightful presentation of love among women, her lyrics strengthened by the fact that we hear a female voice expressing female emotions." (Johnson and Ryan 2005, 4).

In a recent study, Philip Freeman (Freeman 2016) explores this kind of relationship, having no doubts about the interpretation of Sappho's fragments. He reminds us of the episode described by Lucian, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, in his *Dialogues of the Courtesans*, about two women – Leaena and Megilla. Allegedly Megilla loves Leaena “as a man is in love” (Freeman 2016, 113). She is married in secret to another woman, Demonassa, and she asserts that, though she was born a woman, both her mind and her desires are those of a man.

As for Sappho, Freeman maintains that “her poems of passion for other women are often fragmentary and open to interpretation, but by reading them closely, we can gain not only a better knowledge of lesbian love in Sappho's age, but a deeper appreciation for some of the greatest poetry the human heart has ever composed.” (Freeman 2016, 115-116). His analysis of some of her poems and fragments, in particular the “Hymn to Aphrodite” asserts how deeply she describes her feelings of love. It should be added, here, that Sappho usually refers to Aphrodite when talking about love. The same already occurs in the Homeric poems, where Aphrodite is the goddess of love. This does not mean that the poetess excludes Eros from her poetry. Quite the opposite, as the god is referred to as a “servant” of Aphrodite (159), or as the god who shakes her hearth<sup>1</sup> (47). But the two lines of 130 remind us of other poets: “Once again limb-loosening Love makes me tremble, / that bittersweet, irresistible creature.” In his *Theogony* Hesiod refers to Eros almost in the same way, enhancing his power over men and gods and describing the god as one of the first deities to exist and effectively the source of other life. It is his action that enables Earth to give birth to other beings. Later poetry stresses Eros power, insisting on the idea of a “bittersweet” deity. While making people fall in love, the god also makes them suffer. This terrible but playful youth (or child, after the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC) takes his pleasure from hurting others with his bitter darts.

In 2011, Fernando Campos published a novel with the title *A Rocha Branca* [The White Rock], based on Sappho's life. As an author of historical fiction, Campos uses, in his own translations, several fragments by Sappho as the basis of his story. The novel begins with the news of her death being brought to Stesichorus, in Sicily, and ends on the ship in which she departed for her last journey, returning to Lesbos and being noticed by Alcaeus. Campos, however, follows her from childhood, establishing a parallel between her life and the accompanying historical events: the war against Athens on the account of Sigium, in which her father died; how Pittacus came to power; Sappho's exile; her relationship with Alcaeus and Stesichorus; her return to Mytilene; and an allusion to Croesus and to the legend, known from Herodotus, of Gyges and Candaules, and its role in his later loss of power.

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<sup>1</sup> All English translations of Sappho are those by Ph. Freeman (Freeman 2016), keeping the numbers he gives to the fragments.

As Campos tells it Sappho was born into an aristocratic family with three brothers, and received a very good education, studying both music and poetry. Her interest in poetry may have contributed to her friendship with Alcaeus. She marries a merchant, with whom she has a daughter. Soon after the marriage, Pittacus assumed the power, and her political views led to her leaving Lesbos. They went to Sicily, where she lives for some years, meeting the poet Stesichorus. On one of his sea-journeys, her husband loses his life, and soon afterwards, Pittacus accepted her back in Mytilene, where she returned with her daughter.

Her grace and knowledge made some women of Mytilene ask her to prepare their daughters for Aphrodite's festivals, teaching them singing and dancing. As there was already a school for music and poetry in the city, Sappho refused it. Yet, later, some parents from other cities in Asia Minor (e.g. Colophon and Miletus) brought their daughters to her, to be prepared to participate in the gods' cult. This was the beginning of Sappho's school. Her main purpose was to achieve Beauty, meaning that the girls needed to learn more than music and poetry. Thus Sappho began telling them how to take care of their bodies: hygiene and beauty were connected; there was no beauty without hygiene. But this meant not just bathing, but also looking after the skin, the nails, the hair and the use of personal embellishments. Together with personal care, the girls had lessons in deportment. Dance rhythms, music, and singing came later, together with the preparation of floral garlands. In the traditional festivities, Sappho's disciples enchanted the audiences and were thought to be even better than those of the Andromeda and Gorgo's school.

When, after three years, the girls were old enough to marry, their parents took them home and Sappho's suffering began. Several fragments of her poems belong to this period, and are presented to the reader either as a form of comfort for her solitude, or as counsels given to her former disciples in their new married life.

Another element concerns her alleged passion for the sailor Phaon. First referred as an old man, he returns from one of his travels as a handsome young man, due to the arts of Aphrodite. Women talk about him and how they admire his beauty. Yet, Sappho is one of these whom he most admires. In spite of her age, Campos show her experiencing all the feelings of love and desire with allusions to Eros, the "limb-loosening" god whose power is irresistible, in anticipation of their meeting, and also suggesting her anxieties. After the physical consummation of their love she is calmer and happier, but now begin feelings of jealousy in his absence. With whom may he be? Does he still love her? If so how can he, having received eternal youth, while she becomes an old woman? And all of these speculations come to an end when he disappears without trace. Sappho prepares what will become her last journey and throws herself into the sea from the Leucadian cliffs.

This is Campos' account of Sappho's life. Yet, we do not have enough information to be sure of any of it. Some of the facts he presents as real, are not satisfactorily established, as, for

example, her marriage to Cercylas – a name which may be cognate with the Greek word for penis.

Here I am concerned with his interpretation of the poetic fragments. Instead of using earlier translations, Campos translates them into Portuguese, which allows him to present his own version of Sappho's story. It has been assumed that her poetry which is deeply expressive of the feelings of love was addressed to her female pupils. Fernando Campos is aware of this, but he prefers to add another interpretation to some of those fragments. Being a classicist by academic training, he also knows that his interpretation is not a new one, but that scholars are divided among themselves. In his novel, the first poems of Sappho to be cited are only after she marries and leaves Lesbos. Here we have a fragment of one of her marriage songs, so famous in Antiquity (111):

Raise high the roof –  
Hymenaeus!  
Raise it up, carpenters –  
Hymenaeus!  
The bridegroom is coming, the equal of Ares,  
and he's much bigger than a big man.

Some may have criticized her marriage songs at the time:

“The prudish grammarian Demetrius apparently didn't approve of such activities, writing, “Sappho makes cheap fun of the rustic bridegroom and the door-keeper at the wedding, using vulgar rather than poetic language.” More than fifteen hundred years after Sappho, a Byzantine churchman was still complaining about her vulgar wedding songs.” (Freeman 2016, 49)

Freeman considers this one a “bawdy song”. Yet, Campos mentions it as a playful joke by Sappho, on her wedding night, because of Cercylas' height. He presents the marriage as a love relationship that marks Sappho forever, even if she more than once considers herself always as a virgin, if only in her heart. It is this feeling that makes her refuse other marriage proposals.

Most of the fragments usually considered as reflecting her feelings for her disciples, are presented by Campos as counsels given them for their future life, as happens in the case of Anactoria, to whom she sends a poem on the beauty of marriage, after she has revealed her fears of marriage (16):

Some say an army of horsemen, others a host of infantry,  
others a fleet of ships is the most beautiful thing  
on the black earth. But I say  
it's whatever you love.



fire races beneath my skin,  
I see nothing with my eyes  
and my ears hum.

Sweat pours from me and a trembling  
seizes my whole body. I am greener  
than grass and it seems I am a little short  
of dying.

But all must be endured, for even a poor man...

This is one of the fragments cited most often as evidence of Sappho's jealousy towards one of her disciples, probably while she is talking with her husband to be. Thus, it is usually regarded as an expression of her love for the young woman. Freeman presents a searching analysis of this fragment, pointing out all of its subtle sexual allusions. Yet, for Campos this is an expression of her love for Phaon, after moments of making love on the grass, her admiration of his youth and a celebration of their love.

These are just a few examples showing us, how Sappho's poetry is subject to different and opposing interpretations. But equally it shows how Fernando Campos tries in the form of a novel, while not denying the possibility of Sappho's tenderness towards her female disciples, insists on the central importance of her heterosexual desire for two men – Cercylas and Phaon.

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