

Sappho and Phaon

Mary Robinson

D O D O  **P R E S S**

SAPPHO AND PHAON
IN A
SERIES
OF
Legitimate Sonnets,
WITH
THOUGHTS ON POETICAL SUBJECTS,
AND
ANECDOTES
OF THE
GRECIAN POETESS.

BY
MARY ROBINSON,
Author of Poems, &c. &c. &c. &c.

1796.

PREFACE

IT must strike every admirer of poetical compositions, that the modern sonnet, concluding with two lines, winding up the sentiment of the whole, confines the poet's fancy, and frequently occasions an abrupt termination of a beautiful and interesting picture; and that the ancient, or what is generally denominated, the LEGITIMATE SONNET, may be carried on in a series of sketches, composing, in parts, one historical or imaginary subject, and forming in the whole a complete and connected story.

With this idea, I have ventured to compose the following collection; not presuming to offer them as imitations of PETRARCH, but as specimens of that species of sonnet writing, so seldom attempted in the English language; though adopted by that sublime Bard, whose Muse produced the grand epic of Paradise Lost, and the humbler effusion, which I produce as an example of the measure to which I allude, and which is termed by the most classical writers, the legitimate sonnet.

O Nightingale, that on yon bloomy spray
Warblest at eve, when all the woods are still,
Thou with fresh hope the lover's heart dost fill,
While the jolly hours lead on propitious May.
Thy liquid notes that close the eye of day
First heard before the shallow cuckoo's bill,
Portend succes in love; O if Jove's will
Have link'd that amorous power to thy soft lay,
Now timely sing, ere the rude bird of hate

Foretel my hopeless doom in some grove nigh,
As thou from year to year hast sung too late
For my relief, yet hadst no reason why:
Whether the Muse, or Love call thee his mate,
Both them I serve, and of their train am I.

To enumerate the variety of authors who have written sonnets of all descriptions, would be endless; indeed few of them deserve notice: and where, among the heterogeneous mass of insipid and laboured efforts, sometimes a bright gem sheds lustre on the page of poesy, it scarcely excites attention, owing to the disrepute in which sonnets are fallen. So little is rule attended to by many, who profess the art of poetry, that I have seen a composition of more than thirty lines, ushered into the world under the name of Sonnet, and that, from the pen of a writer, whose classical taste ought to have avoided such a misnomer.

Doctor Johnson describes a Sonnet, as "a short poem, consisting of fourteen lines, of which the rhymes are adjusted by a particular rule." He further adds, "It has not been used by any man of eminence since MILTON." Sensible of the extreme difficulty I shall have to encounter, in offering to the world a little wreath, gathered in that path, which, even the best poets have thought it dangerous to tread; and knowing that the English language is, of all others, the least congenial to such an undertaking, (for, I believe, that the construction of this kind of sonnet was originally in the Italian, where the vowels are used almost every other letter,) I only point out the track where more able pens may follow with success; and where the most classical beauties may be adopted, and drawn forth with peculiar advantage.

Sophisticated sonnets are so common, for every rhapsody of rhyme, from six lines to sixty comes under that denomination, that the eye frequently turns from this species of poem with disgust. Every school-boy, every romantic scribbler, thinks a sonnet a task of little difficulty. From this ignorance in some, and vanity in others, we see the monthly and diurnal publications abounding with ballads, odes, elegies, epitaphs, and allegories, the non-descript ephemera from the

heated brains of self-important poetasters, all ushered into notice under the appellation of SONNET!

I confess myself such an enthusiastic votary of the Muse, that any innovation which seems to threaten even the least of her established rights, makes me tremble, lest that chaos of dissipated pursuits which has too long been growing like an overwhelming shadow, and menacing the lustre of intellectual light, should, aided by the idleness of some, and the profligacy of others, at last obscure the finer mental powers, and reduce the dignity of talents to the lowest degradation.

As poetry has the power to raise, so has it also the magic to refine. The ancients considered the art of such importance, that before they led forth their heroes to the most glorious enterprizes, they animated them by the recital of grand and harmonious compositions. The wisest scrupled not to reverence the invocations of minds, graced with the charm of numbers: so mystically fraught are powers said to be, which look beyond the surface of events, that an admired and classical writer, describing the inspirations of the MUSE, thus expresses his opinion:

So when remote futurity is brought
Before the keen inquiry of her thought,
A terrible sagacity informs
The Poet's heart, he looks to distant storms,
He hears the thunder ere the tempest low'rs,
And, arm'd with strength surpassing human pow'rs,
Seizes events as yet unknown to man,
And darts his soul into the dawning plan.
Hence in a Roman mouth the graceful name
Of Prophet and of Poet was the same,
Hence British poets too the priesthood shar'd,
And ev'ry hallow'd druid — was a bard."

That poetry ought to be cherished as a national ornament, cannot be more strongly exemplified than in the simple fact, that, in those centuries when the poets' laurels have been most generously

fostered in Britain, the minds and manners of the natives have been most polished and enlightened. Even the language of a country refines into purity by the elegance of numbers: the strains of WALLER have done more to effect that, than all the labours of monkish pedantry, since the days of druidical mystery and superstition.

Though different minds are variously affected by the infinite diversity of harmonious effusions, there are, I believe, very few that are wholly insensible to the powers of poetic compositions. Cold must that bosom be, which can resist the magical versification of Eloisa to Abelard; and torpid to all the more exalted sensations of the soul is that being, whose ear is not delighted by the grand and sublime effusions of the divine Milton! The romantic chivalry of Spencer vivifies the imagination; while the plaintive sweetness of Collins soothes and penetrates the heart. How much would Britain have been deficient in a comparison with other countries on the scale of intellectual grace, had these poets never existed! yet it is a melancholy truth, that here, where the attributes of genius have been diffused by the liberal hand of nature, almost to prodigality, there has not been, during a long series of years, the smallest mark of public distinction bestowed on literary talents. Many individuals, whose works are held in the highest estimation, now that their ashes sleep in the sepulchre, were, when living, suffered to languish, and even to perish, in obscure poverty: as if it were the peculiar fate of genius, to be neglected while existing, and only honoured when the consciousness of inspiration is vanished for ever.

The ingenious mechanic has the gratification of seeing his labours patronized, and is rewarded for his invention while he has the powers of enjoying its produce. But the Poet's life is one perpetual scene of warfare: he is assailed by envy, stung by malice, and wounded by the fastidious comments of concealed assassins. The more eminently beautiful his compositions are, the larger is the phalanx he has to encounter; for the enemies of genius are multitudinous.

It is the interest of the ignorant and powerful, to suppress the effusions of enlightened minds: when only monks could write, and nobles read, authority rose triumphant over fright; and the slave, spell-bound in ignorance, hugged his fetters without repining. It was then that the best powers of reason lay buried like the gem in the dark mine; by a slow and tedious progress they have been drawn forth, and must, ere long, diffuse an universal lustre: for that era is rapidly advancing, when talents will tower like an unperishable column, while the globe will be strewn with the wrecks of superstition.

As it was the opinion of the ancients, that poets possessed the powers of prophecy, the name was consequently held in the most unbounded veneration. In less remote periods the bard has been publicly distinguished; princes and priests have bowed before the majesty of genius: Petrarch was crowned with laurels, the noblest diadem, in the Capitol of Rome: his admirers were liberal, his contemporaries were just; and his name will stand upon record, with the united and honourable testimony of his own talents, and the generosity of his country.

It is at once a melancholy truth, and a national disgrace, that this Island, so profusely favored by nature, should be marked, of all enlightened countries, as the most neglectful of literary merit! and I will venture to believe, that there are both POETS and PHILOSOPHERS, now living in Britain, who, had they been born in any other clime, would have been honoured with the proudest distinctions, and immortalized to the latest posterity.

I cannot conclude these opinions without paying tribute to the talents of my illustrious country-women; who, unpatronized by the courts, and unprotected by the powerful, persevere in the paths of literature, and ennoble themselves by the unperishable lustre of MENTAL PRE-EMINENCE!

TO THE READER.

The story of the *LESBIAN MUSE*, though not new to the classical reader, presented to my imagination such a lively example of the human mind, enlightened by the most exquisite talents, yet yielding to the destructive controul of ungovernable passions, that I felt an irresistible impulse to attempt the delineation of their progress; mingling with the glowing picture of her soul, such moral reflections, as may serve to exite that pity, which, while it proves the susceptibility of the heart, arms it against the danger of indulging too luxuriant fancy.

The unfortunate lovers, Heloise and Abelard; and, the supposed platonic, Petrarch and Laura, have found panegyrists in many distinguished authors. *OVID* and *POPE* have celebrated the passion of Sappho for Phaon; but their portraits, however beautifully finished, are replete with shades, tending rather to depreciate than to adorn the Grecian Poetess.

I have endeavoured to collect, in the succeeding pages, the most liberal accounts of that illustrious woman, whose fame has transmitted to us some fragments of her works, through many dark ages, and for the space of more than two thousand years. The merit of her compositions must have been indisputable, to have left all cotemporary female writers in obscurity; for it is known, that poetry was, at the period in which she lived, held in the most sacred veneration; and that those who were gifted with that divine inspiration, were ranked as the first class of human beings.

Among the many Grecian writers, Sappho was the unrivalled poetess of her time: the envy she excited, the public honours she received, and the fatal passion which terminated her existence, will, I

trust, create that sympathy in the mind of the susceptible reader, which may render the following poetical trifles not wholly uninteresting.

MARY ROBINSON

St. James's Place,

1796.

ACCOUNT OF SAPPHO.

SAPPHO, whom the ancients distinguished by the title of the TENTH MUSE, was born at Mytilene in the island of Lesbos, six hundred years before the Christian era. As no particulars have been transmitted to posterity, respecting the origin of her family, it is most likely she derived by little consequence from birth or connection. At an early period of her life she was wedded to Cercolus, a native of the isle of Andros; he was possessed of considerable wealth, and though the Lesbian Muse is said to have been sparingly gifted with beauty, he became enamoured of her, more perhaps on account of mental, than personal charms. By this union she is said to have given birth to a daughter; but Cercolus leaving her, while young, in a state of widowhood, she never after could be prevailed on to marry.

The Fame which her genius spread even to the remotest parts of the earth, excited the envy of some writers who endeavoured to throw over her private character, a shade, which shrunk before the brilliancy of her poetical talents. Her soul was replete with harmony, that harmony which neither art nor study can acquire; she felt the intuitive superiority, and to the Muses she paid unbounded adoration.

The Mytilenians held her poetry in such high veneration, and were so sensible of the honour conferred on the country which gave her birth, that they coined money with the impression of her head; and at the time of her death, paid tribute to their memory, such as was offered to sovereigns only.

The story of Antiochus has been related as an unequivocal proof of Sappho's skill in discovering, and powers of describing the passions of the human mind. That prince is said to have entertained a fatal affection for his mother-in-law Stratonice; which, though he endeavoured to subdue its influence, preyed upon his frame, and

after many ineffectual struggles, at length reduced him to extreme danger. His physicians marked the symptoms attending his malady, and found them so exactly correspond with Sappho's delineation of the tender passion, that they did not hesitate to form a decisive opinion of the cause, which had produced so perilous an effect.

That Sappho was not insensible to the feelings she so well described, is evident in her writings but it was scarcely possible, that a mind so exquisitely tender, so sublimely gifted, should escape those fascinations which even apathy itself has been awakened to acknowledge.

The scarce specimens now extant, from the pen of the Grecian Muse, have by the most competent judges been esteemed as the standard for the pathetic, the glowing, and the amatory. The ode, which has been so highly estimated, is written in a measure distinguished by the title of the Sapphic. POPE made it his model in his juvenile production, beginning—

“Happy the man—whose wish and care”—

Addison was opinion, that the writings of Sappho were replete with such fascinating beauties, and adorned with such a vivid glow of sensibility, that, probably, had they been preserved entire, it would have been dangerous to have perused them. They possessed none of the artificial decorations of a feigned passion; they were the genuine effusions of a supremely enlightened soul, laboring to subdue a fatal enchantment; and vainly opposing the conscious pride of illustrious fame, against the warm susceptibility of a generous bosom.

Though few stanzas from the pen of the Lesbian poetess have darted through the shades of oblivion: yet, those that remain are so exquisitely touching and beautiful, that they prove beyond dispute the taste, feeling, and inspiration of the mind which produced them. In examining the curiosities of antiquity, we look to the perfections, and not the magnitude of those relics, which have been preserved amidst the wrecks of time: as the smallest gem that bears the fine touches of a master, surpasses the loftiest fabric reared by the

labours of false taste, so the precious fragments of the immortal Sappho, will be admired, when the voluminous productions of inferior poets are mouldered into dust.

When it is considered, that the few specimens we have of the poems of the Grecian Muse, have passed through three and twenty centuries, and consequently through the hands of innumerable translators: and when it is known that Envy frequently delights in the base occupation of depreciating merit which it cannot aspire to emulate; it may be conjectured, that some passages are erroneously given to posterity, either by ignorance or design. Sappho, whose fame beamed round her with the superior effulgence which her works had created, knew that she was writing for future ages; it is not therefore natural that she should produce any composition which might tend to tarnish her reputation, or lessen that celebrity which it was the labour of her life to consecrate. The delicacy of her sentiments cannot find a more eloquent advocate than in her own effusions; she is said to have commended in the most animated panegyric, the virtues of her brother Lanychus; and with the most pointed and severe censure, to have contemned the passion which her prother Charaxus entertained for the beautiful Rhodope. If her writings were, in some instances, too glowing for the fastidious refinement of modern times; let it be her excuse, and the honour of her country, that the liberal education of the Greeks was such, as inspired them with an unprejudiced enthusiasm for the works of genius: and that when they paid adoration to Sappho, they idolized the MUSE, and not the WOMAN.

I shall conclude this account with an extract from the works of the learned and enlightened Abbe' Barthelemi; at once the vindication and eulogy of the Grecian Poetess.

“Sappho undertook to inspire the Lesbian women with a taste for literature; many of them received instructions from her, and foreign women increased the number of her disciples. She loved them to excess, because it was impossible for her to love otherwise; and she expressed her tenderness in all the violence of passion: your surprize at this will cease, when you are acquainted with the extreme

sensibility of the Greeks; and discover, that amongst them the most innocent connections often borrow the impassioned language of love.

“A certain facility of manners, she possessed; and the warmth of her expressions were but too well calculated to expose her to the hatred of some women of distinction, humbled by her superiority; and the jealousy of some of her disciples, who happened to be the objects of her preference. To this hatred she replied by truths and irony, which completely exasperated her enemies. She repaired to Sicily, where a statue was erected to her; it was sculptured by SILANION, one of the most celebrated staturists of his time. The sensibility of SAPPHO was extreme! she loved PHAON, who forsook her; after various efforts to bring him back, she took the leap of Leucata, and perished in the waves!

“Death has not obliterated the stain imprinted on her character; for ENVY, which fastens on ILLUSTRIOUS NAMES, does not expire; but bequeaths her aspersions to that calumny which NEVER DIES.

“Several Grecian women have cultivated POETRY, with success, but none have hitherto attained to the excellence of SAPPHO. And among other poets, there are few, indeed, who have surpassed her.”

THE *SUBJECT* OF EACH SONNET.

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- I. INTRODUCTORY.
- II. The temple of Chastity.
- III. The Bower of Pleasure.
- IV. Sappho discovers her Passion.
- V. Contemns its Power.
- VI. Describes the characteristics of Love.
- VII. Invokes Reason.
- VIII. Her Passion increases.
- IX. Laments the volatility of Phaon.
- X. Describes Phaon.
- XI. Rejects the Influence of Reason.
- XII. Previous to her Interview with Phaon.
- XIII. She endeavours to fascinate him.
- XIV. To the Aeolian Harp.
- XV. Phaon awakes.
- XVI. Sappho rejects Hope.
- XVII. The Tyranny of Love.
- XVIII. To Phaon.
- XIX. Suspects his constancy.
- XX. To Phaon.
- XXI. Laments her early Misfortunes.
- XXII. Phaon forsakes her.
- XXIII. Sappho's Conjectures.
- XXIV. Her Address to the Moon.
- XXV. To Phaon.
- XXVI. Contemns Philosophy.
- XXVII. Sappho's Address to the Stars.
- XXVIII. Describes the fascinations of Love.
- XXIX. Determines to follow Phaon.
- XXX. Bids farewell to Lesbos.
- XXXI. Describes her Bark.
- XXXII. Dreams of a Rival.
- XXXIII. Reaches Sicily.
- XXXIV. Sappho's Prayer to Venus.

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