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## Sappho: Education Made by Women and for Women

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**Abstract:**

*Evoking the memory of Sappho of Mytilene, also known as Sappho of Lesbos, educator and model for the youth of her time, is a good testimony to understand the pedagogical practices of antiquity. The intimate atmosphere which provided at her school ends up as equally arousing desire emulation of her disciples as the inquisitorial suspicion of envy for his methods and teachings. In this article I will emphasize her career as a teacher and appreciate the impact of their personality on her disciples.*

*Sappho was a woman who was devoted entirely to poetry, gathering around her a large number of students and colleagues. It was soon recognized throughout Greece her reputation as delicate poet, who sang the passionate friendship and union of souls with sensuous and intimate passion. Sappho based her educational work on the ideal value of friendship. It is also why I have dedicated a section in this article that brings us closer to understanding the relationships between teachers and students in ancient Greece.*

**Keywords:** Education, poetry, friendship

### 1. Introduction: Poet as Educator in Ancient Greece

In the history of education in ancient Greece has always stood the figure of the poet as educator of his/her people (Redondo and Lasपालdas, 1997). The most important condition of the educational activity was found by the Greeks in the unlimited power of art to direct the spiritual conversion and acculturation of the younger generation (Schnapp, 1996).

When the Greeks began to worry about what ideal should be directed towards the culture of the nation, they took a heroic spirit of 'arête' that was rooted in an essentially aristocratic world. The root is to be found in the expression of the highest chivalric ideal, coupled with a courtesan and elite conduct and warrior heroism displayed in the poems that Homer wrote in his two great epics: The Iliad and the Odyssey (Bowen, 1985). The society that produced this way of life, the world of chivalry, the great traditions, heroic destiny of man, culture and aristocratic moral had to disappear without leaving a testimony to historical knowledge. But his performances, incorporated in Homeric poetry, they would become the foundation of all living Hellenic culture.

### 2. Sappho, a Rebel Woman

The aristocratic culture exalts values that indicate a social structure and a vision of essentially male world. The Homeric epic is responsible for collecting the old heroic songs, and although Jaeger (1993) recognizes that the social position of women never has as high place as in the Homeric period, the fact is that the male figure is erect as a legitimate model. And it is here where we will introduce the work and life of Sappho against this dominant educational ideal.

As with everything that has to do with the life of Sappho, it is not known exactly when he was born. Historians give us several dates for this event it may take place in 618 BC, somewhere in the island of Lesbos (Alehortúa, 2000). What seems clear is that the life of Sappho covers one of the most fascinating periods in the history of Greece: the last two decades of the seventh century BC, and the top three in the sixth century BC. Therefore, she lived in a period of political, ethical and cultural transition in which a decadent aristocratic ideal refuge to protect itself from the growing commercialism (Abbagnano and Visalberghi, 1964).

Sappho and her family belonged to the most ancient Aeolian aristocracy. Her social origin led her to engage in the political intrigues of the island until he was banished between 603-595 BC to Sicily by Mirsil during his tenure (Galiano, 1996; Sistol, 2001; Powell, 2007):

[...]

These memorials of the exile  
Of the children of Kléanax  
] horribly wasted [

(LP 98 cited by Powell, 2007:26)

We do not have to think that the exile in Sicily was a dark period in the life of the poet. In the Sicilian cities Doric culture and Aeolian culture, among others, were strongly held, and although the power was in the hands of a few aristocratic families, in practice in the Sicilian cities ruled a stronger democracy than in the Ionian cities, such as Athens where a predominantly sexist culture prevailed. During the years of Sappho's exile, the city of Syracuse was also enjoying some peace and quiet policy, which favored the emergence of an active cultural movement (Morrow, 1960). This context was used by Sappho to cultivate her art: she attended conferences, carried out research, wrote, studied musical technique and choreography (Galiano, 1996; Sistol, 2001; Powell, 2007). In general, she takes the opportunity to build the basis of these skills that she as a teacher and as creative artist would use to good effect on his return to Mytilene.

Sappho was a delicate and sensitive woman, lover of culture and freedom who founded an academy for young women called 'the house of the disciples of the Muses' or 'the House of Muses' servants" that appeared legally in the form of a religious brotherhood dedicated to the goddesses of culture (Abbagnano and Visalberghi, 1964; Bowen, 1985; Morrou, 1985):

- In the house of the Muses' servant's grief is not right. It would not suit us.

(LP 150 cited by Powell, 2007:37)

'The House of the Muses' would not be an exception on the island of Lesbos. Permanent reference to Gorgo and Andromeda directors of other groups proves it:

*To Andromeda*

- When you lie dead there will be no memory of you, no one missing you afterward, for you have no part in the roses of Pieria. Unnoticed in the house of Hades, too, you'll wander, fluttering after faded corpses.

(LP 55 cited by Powell, 2007:18)

- Certainly now they've had quiet enough of Gorgo

(LP 144 cited by Powell, 2007:36)

It seems that in the shadow of the dictatorship of Pittacus emerged some women's groups who cultivated poetry and met rituals and social functions as it was the creation of epithalamia (wedding songs) (Alehortúa, 2000).

'The House of the Muses' came to be regarded in his day as an exclusive private school of social education for young women of good family to where many parents sent their daughters from all corners of the Aegean world. In it, under the direction of Sappho, the sweet personality of the students would leave setting as an ideal of beauty who aspired to wisdom. Technically, as Marrou (1985:56) describes, the school would be the equivalent of a 'Conservatory of Music and Declamation' where collective dance inherited from the Minoan tradition, instrumental music - particularly the noble lira - and singing was practiced:

- Cretan women once danced this way on gentle feet in time around the lovely altar, softly treading the tender flowers of grass.

(Incertum 16 a & b cited by Powell, 2007:41)

Community life would be governed by a wide number of parties, religious ceremonies and banquets. It is not difficult to note in this environment a strong erotic component in the group membership:

O Sappho, I love you [...]

The Cyprian Queen [...]

And yet great [...]

[...]

(LP 65.5-10 cited by Powell, 2007:21)

What else could be said of all profitable relationship between teacher and student where love, no less than pure reason, is able to enlarge the dimensions of human understanding?

### 3. Poetry and Eros

Surely such associations paid the birth of the passionate flame, shaking the fiery relationship between teacher and disciple through Eros (Galiano, 1999). Submit Sappho as a model for young girls of her time acquires here its true meaning: her legacy, a lyrical force inside those girls around her and the common life of the poet with them.

Women entered her circle as young girls who had just left her family home and left it with deep sadness when they got married:

- "Honestly, I would like to die."
- She was leaving me, saying goodbye, her cheeks wet with tears, and she said to me: "What a cruel unhappiness, Sappho, I swear that I leave you against my will."
- This is what I replied to her: "Go, fare well, and remember me, for you certainly know how we cared for you."
- If you don't, why then, I would like to remind you [] and the beautiful times we had [...]

(LP 94 cited by Powell, 2007: 23)

They received the consecration of beauty through dances, games and songs under the protection of the single woman whose life was consecrated as a priestess in the services of the Muses:

- Please Abánthis, your Sappho calls you: won't you take your Lydian lyre and play another song to Góngyla while desire still flutters your heart-strings for that girl, that beautiful girl: her dresses' clinging makes you shake when you see it, and I'm happy, for the goddess herself once blamed me, Our Lady of Cyprus, for praying [

(LP 22 cited by Powell, 2007:8)

Never poetry and education have been found as closely attuned as in this female *thiasos* dedicated to music (Galiano, 1996; Sistol, 2001; Powell, 2007). The songs of Sappho join the heroic spirit of the male tradition and the grandeur of the female soul in which vibrates the high sense of community life. The education of women, according to the highest nobility of the feminine soul, is conceived by Sappho as an ideal world that stands between the familiar home and married life (Jaeger, 1993; Alehortua, 2000).

The existence of the Sapphic circle presupposes the conception of poetry as an educator element of Greek society of this time. But the big new in it is that women require income in this world and conquer the place that rightfully belong them. This is a real achievement because through it opens for women the service of the Muses and this element merges with the process of the formation of their personality. But this essential function cannot be carried out without the power of Eros that joins the forces of souls. The parallel between the Platonic *Eros* and the Sapphic *Eros* is evident (Lasso de Vega, 1976; Jaeger, 1993:134).

Sappho's poetry shows the *Eros* as an intimate passion that affects with equal force the senses as well as the soul. Male love poetry never reaches the spiritual depth of the lyrics of Sappho, although human polarity of the spiritual and the sensual reach true importance later in the erotic life and training period of young people.

Sappho prove that the woman was the only being capable of complete surrender of the soul and the senses whose sense deserves the name of love. For women the feeling of love is at the center of her existence and she hugs him only in the unity of its undivided nature (Galiano, 1999). And it is important to note that Sappho runs this feeling towards girls in their circle in a time in which it was difficult for women to conceive love towards a man since the concept of love marriage was alien to Greek society (Dover, 1988). Sappho with her poetic conceptions transgresses the male world with the intention of extolling the female pleasures:

- Now to delight my women friends I'll make a beautiful song of this affair.

(LP 160 cited by Powell, 2007:39)

This is not to say that Sappho assumes an attitude of contempt for men, but they became something completely alien to her world. In fact, she was married to a citizen of Andros called Cercilas who died when she was very young, leaving her mother to a daughter called Kleis (Galiano, 1996; Sistol, 2001; Powell, 2007):

I have a beautiful little girl: the golden flowers  
Are not match for her loveliness, my darling Kleis  
For her, I wouldn't take all Lydia or sweet [...]

(LP 132 cited by Powell, 2007:33)

But for you, dearest Kleis, I  
Have no intricate headband and  
Nowhere that I can get one: The Mytilenean  
[...]

(LP 98 cited by Powell, 2007:25)

Tradition also adds that in Lesbos was living a great young poet who hopeless loved Sappho and sang this in her verses (Galiano, 1996; Sistol, 2001; Powell, 2007):

- And since you are my friend get yourself a younger bedmate for I can't bear to keep house together being the elder.

(LP 121 cited by Powell, 2007:30)

Anyway, the man appears on the poetry of Sappho as a suitor for their beloved girls, outside of that world, and he is regarded with an indifferent look.

In an epithalamium entitled 'A woman' Sappho shows the qualities of the man without presenting it in a very different way to the ideal of Archaic Greece. This man is not a 'handsome and brave knight' or a great bard; he is simply someone who listens to a woman talking sweetly:

In my eyes he matches the gods, that man who sits there facing you—any man whatever—listening from close by to the sweetness of your voice as you talk, the sweetness of your laughter: 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 [

(LP 31 cited by Powell, 2007:11)

Man created by Sappho responds to an abstract ideal in which the man of action is opposed by a contemplative man. In this poem the male praise is partially justified if we consider the text as an epithalamium. These kinds of songs are made exclusively for weddings and in these are expressed praise for boyfriends, but the figure of the man is a means to structure a positive isotopy of the feminine world (Sistal, 2001). In this poem is the woman who really has importance and prominence. She causes insanity, that feeling which destabilizes; she has a sweet voice and a friendly smile. This position is reinforced by Sappho in the poem that compares Helen's beauty (much higher) with the infantrymen, chariots and ships:

Some say thronging cavalry, some say foot soldier Others call a fleet the most of beautiful of Sights the dark earth offers, but I say it's what- Ever you love best.

And it's easy to make this understood by Everyone, for she who surpassed all human Kind of beauty, Helen, abandoning her Husband [...]

(LP 19 cited by Powell, 2007: 7)

#### 4. Inner world and Female Passion

The knowledge of the texts of Sappho occurs in the context of modern times by the interest in its central theme: the love she felt for her disciples or the women to who dedicated her poems. Love or Eros is addressed in all its dimensions: heartbreak, abandonment, anger, uncontrolled passion and so on. Behind it all is the goddess Aphrodite, protectress of both beauty and those who invoke her:

- Goddess, I spoke with you in a dream,  
Cyprus-born Aphrodite

(LP 134 cited by Powell, 2011:33)

Marriage and condescending friendship are inevitable margins of a life marked by primary feelings; essential and alien to any convention, with their disproportions and their consequences (Green, 1996).

Sappho's poems are the only valid test that can contribute to the assessment of this figure. According to Jaeger (1993), Sappho's texts constitute a formal novelty in the Greek literary scene of her day because it was dominated by the epic poetry. Her poetry is personal, it is written in everyday language using their more expressive registers looking for spontaneity and naturalness. Sappho tries to adapt its themes and verses to the need to express the innermost feelings. They are songs conceived for a small auditorium and to be sung by the poet herself. They are a teaching tool, but also are a way of immediate and direct communication.

Today this might seem to us trivial since the history of poetry and in particular of lyric poetry is full of sentimental expressions of artists who sing to your female or male lovers and this fact is accepted as the natural quality of this literary mode. However, in the seventh century B.C. this was new since the verses were used for storytelling, celebrating rituals or to mitigate the daily tasks; nobody thought to sign a poem that declared his love to another person (Sistal, 2001). Thus Sappho is the major landmark of Western poetry defining her nature and her essence in her poetry. The conventions of style and language merge with the deepest feeling to get to the pure expression of individuality. And it is no coincidence that only a woman is capable of it, by force provided by its genre. That is, through love, that is doubled when she sees in danger a youth girl who is forced to surrender to man because of marriage.

The highest art of Sappho is the description of these intimate experiences. The women of her poems were for contemporary reader mere allegories of rituals of Aphrodite (Green, 1996). There was no scandal when Sappho lamented the loss of a young girl who left her to get married:

- Fortunate bridegroom, now the marriage that you prayed for is accomplished, you have the girl for whom you prayed, and you, bride, your appearance is full of grace, your eyes are gentle and love wells on your delightful face: Aphrodite has honored you beyond all others.

(LP 112 cited by Powell, 2007:29)

Or even when she lamented the solitude of her bed longing to a female friend:

- You have forgotten me or else you love another more than me.

(LP 129 cited by Powell, 2007:31)

Or just this fact was not important in a city shaken by war, where women only could find occasional merchants, old men and young children. There was no place for another kind of love, so Sappho's poetry only shows a historical reality. Without benchmarks, how you can set a moral model. Sex and marriage were different concepts; reproduction was a perfectly institutionalized social need, male homosexual relations are not questioned at all because they were a parcel of privacy comparable to freedom of thought, to commercial activity or civic duties: if men did, why not women (Galiano, 1999). If Alcaeus dedicated poems to her young friends, why Sappho would not do it?

- I was in love whit you, Attis, once long ago.  
To me you seemed a little girl, and not too graceful.

(LP 49 cited by Powell, 2007:17)

Sappho's poems are genuine literary jewels. The passion of love in its physical and spiritual dimension is portrayed with an unusual strength and character. Eros, as sexless god, could justify the essence of these poems. The many female lovers of the female poet - Atthis, Gyryno, Megara, Mica, Telesipa, Anaktoria, etc. - were the reflection of the world where she lived, of her time and a way to understand the culture. We can find neither obscenity nor allusions to physical relationships in her poems, if kisses are excluded. They are small prayers that embody the entire spiritual world of a woman who had the chance to show both her sensitivity and her inner life, in addition the special nature of their island.

In this paper we have chosen the work of Sappho and her educational work in her school founded on the island of Lesbos to show a model of female education very advanced for her time. But the pedagogical work of Sappho goes further. She exalts the subjectivity of the feminine soul and distinction, in a time when the birth and consolidation of the city-state was forced to develop a form of paideia (education and culture) that raised the training of citizens as a collective ideal.

## 5. Conclusion

The pedagogical model represented by Sappho in the history of youth education in Greece allows us to make some considerations relevant to project today.

Sappho appears as a free spirit who is aware of the loss of privileges of the aristocratic class from which she came and she took refuge in the artistic sense to create an ideal world exclusively female (Sistal, 2001). Since that Sappho was well aware of the fate of the young girls of her time and her condition who were first linked to their family and then to married life.

The sentiment expressed by Sappho to her female disciples through her verse was a warning to contemporary citizenship on certain aspects of private and domestic life that were in the background of social and gender inequalities; she referred with deep regret to the matrimonial convention whose immediate consequences were the birth of children and family bondage.

Transgressing the masculine world to extol the delights and pleasures of the women anticipates a very contemporary feminism form that is now present in educational institutions governed by female teachers who have taken a full turn to the way of thinking about education. In response to the demand of these teachers a new subject called 'Education for Citizenship' which educates students on democratic values and human rights appears (Ministry of Education and Science, 2004).

In her school Sappho prepares young girls with infinite care in order to strengthen their souls, since they will face in the near future - when they will leave 'The House of the Muses' - to a series of vital and social combats that are waged in the real world; very far from the utopian life they have enjoyed when they were forming in the Sapphic circle. She achieved her objective extolling the values of her gender as the delicacy and emotional sensitivity, through an aesthetic project which will be inhibited throughout history. Currently some European countries with historically strong educational systems, as is the case of France, propose the setting up of educational projects to recover values similar to those which teachers like Sappho developed in the Ancient World. The recovery of classes called ACP (Artistic and Cultural Project) bears witness to this. These classes are a type of educational activity which aims to help the students to discover their own creative potential. This project tries also that students use this knowledge to make sense of other kind of cultural knowledge (Martí, 2004).

## 6. Abbreviations

LP = Edgar Lobel and Denys Page, eds., *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1955.

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