I. Women's Voices

'This stone has heard much lamentation'

Female Poets

'She entered into rivalry with Pindar'

It is only fitting that the first speakers in a book about women should be women. Their words give some sense of the importance of women in women's lives, of the pleasures of owning and giving, of participating in festivals and in household games. But we must wait for men to tell us about the social, legal, and physical environments in which ancient women lived, since the course of women's lives, from birth to death, was set by men, fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, by the male citizens by whom governments were formed and armies raised. It is men too who — selectively, we may presume — tell us most about women's achievements.

Aside from poetry, women's writing survives only in private letters written on papyrus, preserved, by an accident of nature, only from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. Students of the ancient world are always acutely aware that only a fraction of the writings of antiquity has survived. Much of what remains was preserved because men in late antiquity and the Middle Ages felt it to have enduring value. It is thus both logical and poignant that we should have so little of what women wrote. Surviving fragments and references in the work of male authors are tantalising indications that the intellectual efforts of women were, at least occasionally, committed to writing.

That women in all periods of antiquity could write sophisticated verse indicates that at least some women were educated. But the fact that from all antiquity only a few female authors' names and a few fragments of their poetry survive suggests that such intellectual attainments were at best exceptional. If all women had gone to school and had been able to record what they felt about their world, a very different, and surely less self-congratulatory, picture of ancient life would have emerged. As it is, what little remains of women's writings offers eloquent testimony not so much of an informing literary inheritance, as of a potential never realised.

The poetry of Sappho, in the sixth century BC, had a profound influence on both the content and the form of subsequent lyric. The emphasis on emotion and on the action of the mind that distinguished her poetry from that of her male contemporary Alcaeus set the pattern for the concerns of all later love poetry. The sensual appeal in her poetry of the natural world reappears in the careful landscape of Hellenistic pastoral. By imitating her stanza-form and metre, later poets could instantly convey the stance of the isolated lover.
and the pain of a friend's departure or loss.

Many of these poems describe a world that men never saw: the deep love women could feel for one another in a society that kept the sexes apart and the intense excitement of rituals in which only women could participate. Later women poets occasionally write of this other world: Erinna's Distaff speaks of a girlhood friendship lost through marriage and through death. Anyte's epitaphs describe the special offerings women leave goddesses at shrines. But in the Hellenistic age, when women gained new privileges and freedom, women poets began to write about men's subjects and for the same occasions for which male poets wrote. In many cases, if we did not know names, there would be no way to tell the author's sex.

*Sappho (Lesbos, 6th cent. BC)*
‘Release me from my cruel anxiety’

1. *To Aphrodite (Fr. 1. G)*

Aphrodite on your intricate throne, immortal, daughter of Zeus, weaver of plots, I beg you, do not tame me with pain or my heart with anguish

but come here, as once before when I asked you, you heard my words from afar and listened, and left your father's golden house and came

you yoked your chariot, and lovely swift sparrows brought you, fast whirling over the dark earth from heaven through the midst of the bright air

and soon they arrived. And you, O blessed goddess, smiled with your immortal face and asked what was wrong with me, and why did I call now,

and what did I most want in my maddened heart to have for myself. 'Whom now am I to persuade to your love, who, Sappho, has done you wrong? For if she flees, soon she'll pursue you, and if she won't take gifts, soon she'll give them, and if she won't love, soon she will love you, even if she doesn't want to.'

Come to me now again, release me from my cruel anxiety, accomplish all that my heart wants accomplished. You yourself join my battle.

2. *When I look at you (Fr. 31. G)*

The man seems to me strong as a god, the man who sits across from you and listens to your sweet talk nearby

and your lovely laughter – which, when I hear it, strikes fear in the heart
in my breast. For whenever I glance at you, it seems that I can say nothing at all

but my tongue is broken in silence, and that instant a light fire rushes beneath my skin, I can no longer see anything in my eyes and my ears are thundering,

and cold sweat pours down me, and shuddering grasps me all over, and I am greener than grass, and I seem to myself to be little short of death

But all is endurable, since even a poor man ...^4

3. Anactoria (Fr. 16. G)

Some would say an army of cavalry, others of infantry, others of ships, is the fairest thing on the dark earth, but I say it's whatever you're in love with

It's completely easy to make this clear to everyone, for Helen, who far surpassed other people in beauty, left behind the most aristocratic

of husbands and went to Troy. She sailed away, and did not remember at all her daughter or her beloved parents, but [Aphrodite] took her aside

(3 lines missing) which makes me remember Anactoria^5 who is no longer near,

her lovely step and the brilliant glancing of her face I would rather see than the Lydians' chariots or their infantry fighting in all their armour.

4. Parting (Fr. 94. G)

'The truth is, I wish I were dead.'^6 She left me, weeping often, and she said this, 'Oh what a cruel fate is ours, Sappho, yes, I leave you against my will.'

And I answered her: 'Farewell, go and remember me, for you know how we cared for you.

'If you do remember, I want to remind you ... and were happy ... of violets ... you set beside me and with woven garlands made of flowers around your soft neck

'and with perfume, royal, rich ... you anointed yourself and on soft beds you would drive out your passion
'and then ... sanctuary ... was ... from which we were away ...'

5. Remembering the girl Atthis (Fr. 96. G)

... you, like a goddess renowned, in your song she took most joy. Now she is unique among Lydian women, as the moon once the sun sets

stands out among all the stars, and her light grasps both the salt sea and the flowering meadows

and fair dew flows forth, and soft roses and chervil and fragrant melilot bloom.

Often as she goes out, she remembers gentle Atthis, and her tender heart is eaten by grief ...

6. The wedding of Hector and Andromache (Fr. 44. G)

'... Hector and his comrades are bringing a girl with dark eyes from holy Thebes and ... Plakia, soft Andromache in their ships across the salt sea; many curved bands of gold and purple robes and intricate playthings, countless silver cups and ivory.' So he spoke. And [Hector's] beloved father quickly got up, and the story went out to his friends throughout the city [of Troy] with its wide dancing places. Then the Trojan women led mules to wheeled carts and a crowd of women came out, and also of ... -ankled maidens, and separately the daughters of Priam and men brought horses with chariots (unknown number of lines missing) ... and the sweet-sounding aulos was mixed with the noise of castanets, and the maidens sang a sacred song and the holy sound reached heaven ... bowls and goblets ... perfume and cassia and incense were mixed and all the older women shouted out, and all the men cried out a fair loud song, calling on Paean, the far-shooter, the lyre player, to sing of Hector and Andromache, who were like gods ...

Corinna (Tanagra, Boeotia, 5th cent. BC?)

'They hid the holy goddess's baby'

7. The contest of Cithaeron and Helicon (654 P. G)

This fragment from a much longer poem concentrates more on the feelings than on the tangible rewards of victory and defeat.

'... They hid the holy goddess's baby in a cave, a secret from Cronus the crooked-minded, when [his mother] blessed Rhea stole him away and won great honour from the immortals.' So he sang. Straightway the Muses got