

Darko R. Suvin

ODE IN THE GUISE OF THE MOST FAMOUS POETESS PSAPFO OF MYTILENE\*/

*(Exiled in Sicily, in old age Psapfo writes a poem with her remembrances)*

For those other times, the future informed by loves & sorrows of the past

Disguise, thou art a wickedness

Wherein the pregnant enemy doth much.

Shakespeare

Some will remember us, i do believe, in the future.

Psapfo to her daughter Kleis

1. Psapfo's Proemium

Immortals, come to me again

if ever you earlier did.

O happiness-giving Venus, O delicate Kypria bringing regrets,

O tricky Cytherea skilled in plots, i implore you,

as you came of yore

Hearing my voice from afar, leaving your Father's house,

Yoking swift sparrows to your golden car, smiling at me,

Asking "Who's done you wrong, O Psapfo? Whom do you now

Want me to bewitch?"

Take me under your wing, hear my cry,

O Mnemosyne, Mother of Muses!

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I remember, O i remember

The past is present

Eros melts my members again shakes me to bits

Bittersweet overpowering

hidden under the heart.

Pain-giver Eros, are your gifts worth it?

Pining after you more than after sleep & death,

Nor was your sweetness in vain. Tearfully smiling Andromache.

*Algesídoros, mythóplokos*: for, you give the weaving of stories.

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Clear water is heard in the rustle of leaves, & the scent

Of roses descends shadowlike on the senses, waking

Dreams, enchantments.

Old age is drying up my skin, knees bear me badly,

I can no longer dance around like a fawn,

Desire is more in my head than in my members,

Pain envelops my mind, what may i do?

Yet memory sings to me

of her lily-coloured breasts

Wherever i'm roaming on this Earth.

We too, in our youth, did these things

many beautiful things

In the cities & on the islands of humans

We lived boldly

& i listened

To your sometimes deep sometimes high voice.

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This is no more the season of my youth. When you die,

Will i be the most loved one, the one who ferries you

Across the River of the Dead?

## 2. Song of the Girls (expectation)

Some say most beautiful upon the black earth is an army of warriors,

Some say it's ships, some cunning rings of gold, i say it's my beloved:

Paphia, you made immortal Helen leave her king, her child, cross

The salt & roaring sea, & so i too, amid the traps, want to follow the

Seductive walk of my beloved, rather than adore the supersonic

Bombers & their white tracks in the sky, or the tanks

Shaking the city streets as they parade by. No jewels compare

To the luminous beloved human face, to the curve of the spine

As it sweetly descends to the places of delight.

Sweet mother of mine, i cannot concentrate on weaving this cloth,

I'm enthralled by a young man thru the will of delicate Venus.

The Moon has set, & the seven



O archer, Psyche's lover, boy

eldest of the gods

Father of your mother

brother of Death.

How often did i cry, how often hid & swallowed  
My tears, embittered my heart! How badly  
You shook it, like a tempestuous gust on high oaks  
When Boreas ululates upon the mountains! As in the house  
Of Hades i was, obscure among the shades, flung  
Flying hither & thither, restlessly, in search of warm  
Flesh & blood.

Sweet god of dreams, as you go across  
The dark night, Onoires, even you  
Vex me horribly: i dream i'm in a river of molasses  
& cannot get to him, i dream i'm in a strange country,  
& nobody has heard of him, of me.

When my beloved forgot sweet-gifting Venus, truly i wanted  
Death. I said to Lord Hermes, i fear unhappy life  
More than death, i'm overwhelmed by the desire  
To see the mossy banks of Acheron & the lotus-  
Flower of forgetfulness.

At gold-sandalled dawn

My beloved found a good reason we should part.

I said, "Go now & be happy, O Child of Peace,

& keep the memory of me. For you know  
How much my love held you dear. Should you forget  
I'll hold up to you the mirror  
Of all the high moments & beauteous  
We have lived together. This treasure  
Of greater value than gold, sweeter than the lyre  
Sounds, nobody can take away  
From us."

And Persuasion with her golden vase  
Turned away weeping, nor could she pour  
Nectar into our cups.

#### 4. Psapfo in Honour of the Brightness & the Union

In dream i talked to foamborn Venus  
Like the nightingale who trills desire

No matter what the Father-Mother high above concedes to us,  
I love the sun, for we understand  
What is brilliant, what is beautiful.

Those who live see the light of the sun  
Those who have died do not. Loving the sun,  
I claim as my lot splendour & beauty.

I invoke the Muses, the Graces, & my Lady,  
With her unruly son; i'm not stupid  
& expect nothing from heavenly gods.

High Venus told me she loved me, &  
For my comfort on lightless Acheron's banks,  
Promised a glory from all those the sun shines on.

So long as i can see, with me are the works  
Of the Muses. Those who follow them do not cry  
Death cannot be overcome by laments.

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I remember, O i remember  
When i was like the purple hyacinth  
Trode upon, high in the mountains, by the shepherd

When i was a sweet apple, high up on the highest branch,  
That the pickers forgot, reddening alone  
No they didn't forget, they couldn't reach that high.

Raise high the top beam, O carpenters,  
Praise the god of Sexual Union, on the soft sheets  
Of tulle, where desire is sated. Live well, O lovers,  
You who are dreamed about.

O beautiful girls, O gracious boys!

I'm stung by memories.

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That he seems to me tantamount to a god,  
Who, sitting across from you, near to you,  
Sees you & hears you

As you smile saucily, at which my heart  
Stops suddenly: for as soon as i behold  
You, the voice strangles

Within my windpipe, my tongue grows numb,  
Tiny lightning tingles under my skin, a black night  
Blanks out my eyes,

Noises tinkle tinnily in my ear, i start sweating,  
All of me shakes, i grow greener than grass,  
Almost pass out.

\*\*\*\*\*

O Muse of many names, keep thou away from the wars  
& celebrate with me the holy marriages, the banquets of humans,  
& the feasting of the blessed, whom worries do not visit:

From sacred Cilicia come Hector & his companions  
Accompanying Andromache of the slender ankles,  
Shining eyes.

Similar to gods is their union, tremendously mysterious  
To all, hurrying towards us, with sweet sound of flutes,  
Of lyres & rattles.

Girls sang for them, & echo bore the song to high heavens,  
Women cried *eleleu* amid vases of myrrh  
Incense & cinnamon

Everywhere on the streets, & the men raised  
Glad clamour invoking far-arrowing Apollo  
Of the beautiful lyre.

Similar to gods are they, Andromache with Hector,  
Mortal, different from gods, but not so long  
As they see the sun.

I too want to go, think of my age-mates & friends,  
& dance sparkling with joy for the union in Eros.

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As long as the beautiful orb, Selanna, shines aloft  
Stars hide their figure in her scintillating light  
Illuminating all Earth.

Love was good in the hushed night, to which unsated  
Remembrance returns brightly; with a worthy lover

I shared a life.

Thighs entwined, heads not too far on the pillow,

We slept in each other's hollows like two forks.

I rage at the gods.

Still i remember your face, severely framed

White in black. May i see it before i cease

Walking under the sun.

Full shines Selanna, as when the sweet-voiced girls

Delicate danced around the altar, on tender herbs

Lightly treading.

NOTE \*/: Psapfo is what we call Sappho, Mytilene is a synonym of Lesbos; I've avoided the latter terms which for us connote only one type of love. Kypria, Cytherea, Paphia, are all attributes & aspects of Venus/Aphrodite. Mnemosyne is the goddess of memory. Boreas is the North wind; Selanna (or Selene) is the Moon but near to *selas*, luminosity. The sequence of choruses of Girls & Women follows that of the Hellenic *epithalamia*, which Psapfo often wrote (though it canonically ended with one of the Men); but it is twisted to DS's purpose. Psapfo doesn't necessarily identify with all any chorus says, she's a ventriloquist; so is DS in relation to her. But the most outrageous heresies ("I expect nothing from heavenly beings") are hers.