

"Hymn to Aphrodite" Sappho, translated by Anne Carson

Deathless Aphrodite of the spangled mind ¹
child of Zeus, who twists lures, I beg you
do not break with hard pains
 O lady, my heart!

but come here if ever before
you caught my voice far off
and listening left your father's
 golden house and came,

yoking your car. And fine birds brought you
quick sparrows ² over the black earth
whipping their wings down the sky
 through midair—

they arrived. But you, O blessed one,
smiled in your deathless face
and asked what (now again) I have suffered and why
 (now again) I am calling out

and what I want to happen most of all
in my crazy heart. ³ Whom should I persuade (now again)
to lead you back into her love? Who, O
 Sappho, is wronging you?

For if she flies, soon she will pursue.
If she refuses gifts, rather she will give them.
If she does not love, soon she will love
 even unwilling. ⁴

Come to me now: loose me from hard
care and all my heart longs
to accomplish, accomplish. You
be my ally. ⁵

1. Or “of the spangled throne”; the variant manuscripts preserve both readings (in the Greek there is a single letter’s difference between them). The word translated here as “spangled” usually refers to a surface shimmering with bright contrasting colors. The reader can choose whether to imagine a goddess seated in splendor on a highly wrought throne or a love goddess whose mind is shifting and fickle.

2. Aphrodite’s sacred birds.

3. In other words, the poet-speaker has asked for help in the past.

4. Aphrodite is speaking in lines 18-24. Consequently, is her proposal a warning or a celebration?

5. In the end, the hymn steps beyond the rules of a prayer— despite the various translations available, the poet-speaker sets up multiple contrasts and strategies within the work. Ultimately, the poet-speaker Sappho acknowledges herself as a psychologically-aware-female seeking aid (again) from a (potentially) distant deity.

Sappho. "Hymn to Aphrodite." Anne Carson, trans. *Norton Anthology of World Literature, Volume A*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 2018. Print.