

On the gay merchandise. Now spruce and trim
 In shops where beauty smiles with industry,
 Sits the smart damsel, while the passenger
 Peeps through the window, watching ev'ry charm.
 Now pastry dainties catch the eyes minute
 Of hummy insects, while the slimy snare
 Waits to enthrall them. Now the lamp-lighter
 Mounts the slight ladder, nimbly venturous,
 To trim the half-filled lamp,⁶ while at his feet
 The pot-boy⁷ yells discordant. All along
 The sultry pavement, the old-clothes man cries
 In tone monotonous, and sidelong views
 The area for his traffic. Now the bag
 Is sily opened, and the half-worn suit
 (Sometimes the pilfered treasure of the base
 Domestic spoiler) for one half its worth
 Sinks in the green abyss. The porter now
 Bears his huge load along the burning way,
 And the poor poet wakes from busy dreams
 To paint the summer morning.

Sappho and Phaon. In a Series of Legitimate Sonnets, with Thoughts on Poetical Subjects, and Anecdotes of the Grecian Poetess. (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.

Oh 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.

⁶ trim the half-filled lamp to prepare the streetlight for burning after dark.

⁷ pot-boy boy who serves beer to customers in a tavern.

PREFACE

legitimate in the sense of 'correct, proper'.

Thy liquid notes that close the eye of day,
 First heard before the shallow cuckoo's bill,
 Portend success in love; oh if Jove's will
 Have linked that amorous power to thy soft lay
 Now timely sing, ere the rude bird of hate
 Foretell 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.²

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 into 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 30 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.

Dr 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'.³ 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.

² Milton, *Sonnet 1*, composed probably spring 1639; a Petrarchan sonnet, following the Italian metrical scheme of two quatrains and two tercets.

³ The quotation is in fact Johnson's definition from his *Dictionary*, which states in full that the sonnet 'is not very suitable to the English language, and has not been used by any man of eminence since Milton'. Since the death of Dr Johnson a few ingenious and elegant writers have composed sonnets according to the rules described by him; of their merits the public will judge, and the literati decide. The following quotations are given as the opinions of living authors respecting the legitimate sonnet.

The little poems which are here called sonnets have, I believe, no very just claim to that title, but they consist of fourteen lines, and appear to me no improper vehicle for a single sentiment. I am told, and I read it as the opinion of very good judges, that the legitimate sonnet is ill-calculated for our language. The specimens Mr Hayley has given, though they form a strong

exception, prove no more than that the difficulties of the attempt vanish before uncommon powers.

(Mrs C. Smith's Preface to her *Elgiac Sonnets* [see p. 74])

Likewise, in the preface to a volume of very charming poems (among which are many legitimate sonnets) by Mr William Kendall of Exeter, the following opinion is given of the Italian rhythm, which constitutes the legitimate sonnet. He describes it as

a chaste and elegant model, which the most enlightened poet of our own country disdain not to contemplate. Amidst the degeneracy of modern taste, if the studies of a Milton have lost their attraction, legitimate sonnets, enriched by varying pauses, and an elaborate recurrence of rhyme, still assert their superiority over those tasteless and inartificial productions which assume the name, without evincing a single characteristic of distinguishing modulation.

(Robinson's note)

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 schoolboy,⁴ 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 nondescript 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 enterprises, 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 armed 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 shared
And ev'ry hallowed druid was a bard.⁵

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 Waller⁶ have done more to effect that than all the labours of monkish pedantry since the days of druidical mystery and superstition.

⁴ To prove the point, Wordsworth's first published poem, which appeared in the *Lancaster Magazine* when he was a schoolboy of sixteen, was a sonnet.

⁵ 'Cowper' (Robinson's note); the quotation is from *Table Talk* 492-503.

⁶ Edmund Waller (1606-87), royalist politician, poet, and friend of Dryden. His poetry was renowned for its polished simplicity.

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*,⁷ 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 Spenser vivifies the imagination, while the plaintive sweetness of Collins soothes and penetrates the heart. How much would Britain have been deficit⁸ 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 patronised, 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 right, and the slave, spellbound 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 erelong 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. Petrarck 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 favoured 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 countrywomen who, unpatronised by Courts, and unprotected by the powerful, persevere in the paths of literature, and ennoble themselves by the unperishable lustre of mental pre-eminence!

⁷ A reference to Pope's poem, published 1717. ⁸ deficit deficient.

TO THE READER

The story of the Lesbian Muse,⁹ 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 control 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 excite that pity which, while it proves the susceptibility of the heart, arms it against the danger of indulging too luxuriant a fancy.

The unfortunate lovers, Heloise and Abelard, and the supposed platonic Petrarch and Laura, have found panegyrist in many distinguished authors. Ovid¹⁰ 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 2,000 years. The merit of her compositions must have been indisputable to have left all contemporary 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, 600 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 but little consequence from birth or connections. 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.

⁹ *Lesbian Muse* Sappho.

¹⁰ Ovid, 'Sappho Phaoni', was one of Mary's most important sources. It is the fifteenth of Ovid's *Epitales*, and takes the form of a letter from Sappho to Phaon.

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 her 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 correspondent 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...'¹¹

Addison was of 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.¹² They possessed none of the artificial decorations of a feigned passion; they were the genuine effusions of a supremely enlightened soul labouring 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 specimens¹³ 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

¹¹ Pope's *Ode on Solitude* (1717), written, he said, when he was twelve.

¹² Addison's article on Sappho was one of Robinson's

chief sources: 'I do not know, by the character that is given of her works, whether it is not for the benefit of mankind that they are lost. They were filled with such bewitching tenderness and rapture, that it might

have been dangerous to have given them a reading' (*Spectator* 223, 15 Nov. 1711; *The Spectator* ed. Donald F. Bond (5 vols, Oxford, 1965), ii, 366).

¹³ *Few specimens* Addison's 1735 edition of the works consisted of two 'odes', six fragments, and two epigrams.

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 condemned the passion which her brother 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 Abbé 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 surprise 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 not 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,¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

¹⁴ Leucata was a promontory of Epirus, on the top of which stood a temple dedicated to Apollo. From this promontory despairing lovers threw themselves into the sea, with an idea that, if they survived, they should be cured of their hopeless passions. The Abbé

Barthelmi says that "many escaped, but others having perished, the custom fell into disrepute, and at length

was wholly abolished" — vide *Travels of Anacharsis the Younger* (Robinson's note).

¹⁵ The quotation consists of a series of extracted and revised sentences from Jean Jacques Barthelemy, *Travels of Anacharsis the younger in Greece* tr. W. Beaumont (2nd edn, 7 vols, 1794), ii 63-5.

*Fiendus amor meus est; elegia flebile carmen;
Non facit ad lacrymas barbittos ulla meas.*¹

Ovid.

*Love taught my tears in sadder notes to flow,
And tuned my heart to elegies of woe.*

Pope.²

I. SONNET INTRODUCTORY

Favoured by Heav'n are those ordained to taste

The bliss supreme that kindles fancy's fire,

Whose magic fingers sweep the muses' lyre

In varying cadence, eloquently chaste!

Well may the mind, with tuneful numbers graced,

5

To fame's immortal attributes aspire,

Above the treach'rous spells of low desire

That wound the sense, by vulgar joys debased.

For thou, blessed poesy, with godlike pow'rs

To calm the miseries of man wert giv'n;

10

When passion rends, and hopeless love devours,

By mem'ry goaded, and by frenzy driv'n,

'Tis thine to guide him midst Elysian bow'rs

And show his fainting soul a glimpse of heav'n.

II. THE TEMPLE OF CHASTITY

High on a rock, coeval¹ with the skies,

A temple stands, reared by immortal pow'rs

To chastity divine! Ambrosial flow'rs,

Twining round icicles, in columns rise,

Mingling with pendent gems of orient dyes!

Piercing the air, a golden crescent tow'rs,

Veiled by transparent clouds, while smiling hours²

Shake from their varying wings celestial joys!

The steps of spotless marble, scattered o'er

With deathless roses armed with many a thorn,

Lead to the altar; on the frozen floor,

Studded with teardrops petrified by scorn,

Pale vestals kneel the goddess to adore,

While Love,³ his arrows broke, retires forlorn.

10

III. THE BOWER OF PLEASURE¹

Turn to yon vale beneath, whose tangled shade

Excludes the blazing torch of noonday light

¹ *Hermides* xv 7-8: 'Unsuccessful love complains in sadder notes, and elegy is fittest to express my woe. No harp can serve to paint my flowing tears' (Ovid, *Epistole* 167).

² *Pope, Sappho to Phaon* (1712) 7-8.

³ *Love Cupid.*

III. THE BOWER OF PLEASURE

¹ Cf. Spenser's Bower of Bliss, *Fairie Queene* II xii

st.71-2.

II. THE TEMPLE OF CHASTITY

as old as, of the same age as.

Where sportive fawns and dimpled loves² invite,
 The bow'r of pleasure opens to the glade;
 Lulled by soft flutes, on leaves of violets laid,
 There witching beauty greets the ravished sight,
 More gentle than the arbitress of night
 In all her silv'ry panoply arrayed!
 The birds breathe bliss; light zephyrs kiss the ground,
 Stealing the hyacinth's divine perfume;
 While from pellucid fountains glittering round
 Small tinkling rills bid rival flowrets bloom!
 Here laughing cupids bathe the bosom's wound,
 There tyrant passion finds a glorious tomb!

IV. SAPPHO DISCOVERS HER PASSION

Why, when I gaze on Phaon's beauteous eyes,
 Why does each thought in wild disorder stray?
 Why does each fainting faculty decay,
 And my chilled breast¹ in throbbing tumults rise?
 Mute on the ground my lyre neglected lies,
 The muse forgot, and lost the melting lay;
 My downcast looks, my faltering lips betray
 That, stung by hopeless passion, Sappho dies!
 Now on a bank of cypress² let me rest,
 Come, tuneful maids, ye pupils of my care,
 Come, with your dulcet numbers soothe my breast;
 And as the soft vibrations float on air,
 Let pity waft my spirit to the blest
 To mock the barb'rous triumphs of despair!

V. CONTEMNS ITS POWER

Oh how can Love exulting Reason quell!
 How fades each nobler passion from his gaze!
 E'en fame, that cherishes the poet's lays,
 That fame ill-fated Sappho loved so well.
 Lost is the wretch who in his fatal spell
 Wastes the short summer of delicious days,
 And from the tranquil path of wisdom strays
 In passion's thorny wild, forlorn to dwell.
 Oh ye who in that sacred temple smile
 Where holy Innocence resides enshrined,
 Who fear not sorrow and who know not guile,

² *lover* cupids.

IV. SAPPHO DISCOVERS HER PASSION

¹ *my chilled breast* a recollection of Pope, *Sappho to Phaon* 126: 'Grief chilled my breast, and stopped my freezing blood'.

Each thought composed, and ev'ry wish resigned —
 Tempt not the path where Pleasure's flow'ry wile,
 In sweet but poisonous fetters, holds the mind.

VI. DESCRIBES THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LOVE

Is it to love, to fix the tender gaze,
 To hide the timid blush, and steal away?
 To shun the busy world, and waste the day
 In some rude mountain's solitary maze?
 Is it to chant *one* name in ceaseless lays,
 To hear no words that other tongues can say,
 To watch the pale moon's melancholy ray,
 To chide in fondness, and in folly praise?
 Is it to pour th' involuntary sigh,
 To dream of bliss, and wake new pangs to prove;
 To talk, in fancy, with the speaking eye,
 Then start with jealousy, and wildly rove?
 Is it to loathe the light, and wish to die?
 For these I feel, and feel that they are love.

VII. INVOKES REASON

Come, Reason, come, each nerve rebellious bind!
 Lull the fierce tempest of my fev'rish soul;
 Come with the magic of thy meek control
 And check the wayward wand'rings of my mind!
 Estranged from thee, no solace can I find;
 O'er my rapt brain, where pensive visions stole,
 Now passion reigns and stormy tumults roll —
 So the smooth sea obeys the furious wind!
 In vain philosophy unfolds his store,
 O'erwhelmed is ev'ry source of pure delight;
 Dim is the golden page of wisdom's lore;
 All nature fades before my sick'ning sight:
 For what bright scene can fancy's eye explore
 Midst dreary labyrinths of mental night?

VIII. HER PASSION INCREASES

Why, through each aching vein, with lazy pace
 Thus steals the languid fountain of my heart,
 While, from its source, each wild convulsive start
 Tears the scorched roses from my burning face?
 In vain, oh Lesbian vales, your charms I trace!
 Vain is the poet's theme, the sculptor's art;
 No more the lyre its magic can impart,
 Though waked to sound, with more than mortal grace!
 Go, tuneful maids, go bid my Phaon prove
 That passion mocks the empty boast of fame.

Tell him no joys are sweet but joys of love,
 Melting the soul and thrilling all the frame!
 Oh may th' ecstatic thought his bosom move,
 And sighs of rapture fan the blush of shame!

IX. LAMENTS THE VOLATILITY OF PHAON

Ye who in alleys green and leafy bow'rs
 Sport, the rude children of fantastic birth,
 Where frolic nymphs and shaggy tribes of mirth
 In clam'rous revels waste the midnight hours;
 Who, linked in flaunting bands of mountain flow'rs,
 Weave your wild mazes o'er the dewy earth
 Ere the fierce lord of lustre¹ rushes forth
 And o'er the world his beamy radiance pours —
 Oft has your clanking cymbal's madd'ning strain,
 Loud ringing through the torch-illuminated grove,
 Lured my loved Phaon from the youthful train
 Through rugged dells, o'er craggy rocks to rove:
 Then how can she his vagrant heart detain,
 Whose lyre throbs only to the touch of love?

X. DESCRIBES PHAON

Dang'rous to hear is that melodious tongue,
 And fatal to the sense those murd'rous eyes,
 Where in a sapphire sheath love's arrow lies,
 Himself concealed the crystal haunts among!
 Oft o'er that form enamoured have I hung,¹
 On that smooth cheek to mark the deep'ning dyes,
 While from that lip the fragrant breath would rise —
 That lip, like Cupid's bow with rubies strung!
 Still let me gaze upon that polished brow
 O'er which the golden hair luxuriant plays;
 So on the modest lily's leaves of snow
 The proud sun revels in resplendent rays!
 Warm as his beams this sensate² heart shall glow
 Till life's last hour with Phaon's self decays!

XI. REJECTS THE INFLUENCE OF REASON

Oh Reason, vaunted sovereign of the mind,
 Thou pompous vision with a sounding name,
 Canst thou the soul's rebellious passions tame?
 Canst thou in spells the vagrant fancy bind?

IX. LAMENTS THE VOLATILITY OF PHAON

¹ lord of lustre the sun.

X. DESCRIBES PHAON

¹ hung perhaps an echo of Adam's doting vision of

the sleeping Eve:

he on his side

² Leaning half-raised, with looks of cordial love

Hung over her enamoured . . .

(Paradise Lost v 11-13)

³ sensate feeling, full of sensibility.

Ah no, capricious as the wav'ring wind
 Are sighs of love that dim thy boasted flame,
 While folly's torch consumes the wreath of fame,
 And Pleasure's hands the sheaves of truth unbind.
 Pressed by the storms of fate, Hope shrinks and dies,
 Frenzy darts forth in mightiest ills arrayed,
 Around thy throne destructive tumults rise
 And hell-fraught jealousies thy rights invade!
 Then what art thou? Oh idol of the wise —
 A visionary theme, a gorgeous shade!

XII. PREVIOUS TO HER INTERVIEW WITH PHAON

Now o'er the tessellated¹ pavement strew
 Fresh saffron steeped in essence of the rose,
 While down yon agate column gently flows
 A glittering streamlet of ambrosial dew!
 My Phaon smiles; the rich carnation's hue
 On his flushed cheek in conscious lustre glows,
 While o'er his breast enamoured Venus throws
 Her starry mantle of celestial blue!
 Breathe soft, ye dulcet flutes, among the trees
 Where clust'ring boughs with golden citron² twine,
 While slow vibrations dying on the breeze
 Shall soothe his soul with harmony divine!
 Then let my form his yielding fancy seize,
 And all his fondest wishes blend with mine.

XIII. SHE ENDEAVOURS TO FASCINATE HIM

Bring, bring to deck my brow, ye sylvan girls,
 A roseate¹ wreath, nor for my waving hair
 The costly band of studded gems prepare
 Of sparkling chrysolite² or orient pearls;³
 Love o'er my head his canopy unfurls,
 His purple pinions fan the whisp'ring air;
 Mocking the golden sandal, rich and rare,
 Beneath my feet the fragrant woodbine curls.
 Bring the thin robe to fold about my breast,
 White as the downy swan; while round my waist
 Let leaves of glossy myrtle bind the vest —
 Not idly gay, but elegantly chaste!
 Love scorns the nymph in wanton trappings dressed,
 And charms the most concealed are doubly graced.

XII. PREVIOUS TO HER INTERVIEW WITH PHAON

¹ tessellated formed out of mosaics.² citron a kind of citrus fruit.

XIII. SHE ENDEAVOURS TO FASCINATE HIM

¹ Rose and myrtle together (see l. 11) indicate a coy

defence of femininity, since Venus, Greek goddess

of erotic love, often veiled herself in them when washing.

² chrysolite green gems.³ orient pearls pearls from the Indian Ocean, more beautiful and exotic than those from European mussels.

XIV. TO THE AEOLIAN HARP¹

Come, soft Aeolian harp, while zephyr plays
 Along the meek vibration of thy strings,
 As twilight's hand her modest mantle brings,
 Blending with sober grey the western blaze!
 Oh prompt my Phaon's dreams with tend' rest lays
 Ere night o'er shade thee with its humid wings,
 While the lorn Philomel his² sorrow sings
 In leafy cradle, red with parting rays!
 Slow let thy dulcet tones on ether³ glide,
 So steals the murmur of the am'rous dove;
 The mazy legions swarm on ev'ry side,
 To lulling sounds the sunny people⁴ move!
 Let not the wise their little world deride —
 The smallest sting can wound the breast of love.⁵

XV. PHAON AWAKES

Now round my favoured grot let roses rise
 To strew the bank where Phaon wakes from rest;
 Oh happy buds, to kiss his burning breast,
 And die beneath the lustre of his eyes!
 Now let the timbrels echo to the skies,
 Now damsels sprinkle cassia¹ on his vest,
 With od'rous wreaths of constant myrtle² dressed,
 And flow'rs, deep-tinted with the rainbow's dyes!
 From cups of porphyry³ let nectar flow,
 Rich as the perfume of Phoenicia's vine!
 Now let his dimpling cheek with rapture glow
 While, round his heart, love's mystic fetters twine;
 And let the Grecian lyre its aid bestow
 In songs of triumph, to proclaim him mine!

XVI. SAPPHO REJECTS HOPE

Delusive hope, more transient than the ray
 That leads pale twilight to her dusky bed
 O'er woodland glen or breezy mountain's head,

XIV. TO THE AEOLIAN HARP

¹ The eighteenth-century equivalent of wind-chimes, the Aeolian harp was left in front of an open window, or hung on a tree, where its strings would be 'played' by the wind (Aeolus is the Greek god of storms and winds); cf. Coleridge, *The Eolian Harp* (1795).

² *his* technically correct; despite the traditional identification of the nightingale with Philomela (see note 5, below), only male nightingales sing, as part of the courtship ritual.

³ *ether* effectively air; upper regions of the sky.
⁴ *sunny people* insects that fly around in the sun.
⁵ Philomela was seduced, according to Ovid, by her brother-in-law, Tereus, King of Thrace. She was turned into a nightingale, and her sad song was said to be caused by a thorn in her breast.

XV. PHAON AWAKES

¹ *cassia* fragrant shrub.

² *myrtle* sacred to Venus, an emblem of love.

³ *porphyry* beautiful and valuable purple stone.

Ling'ring to catch the parting sigh of day —
 Hence with thy visionary charms, away!

Nor o'er my path the flow'rs of fancy spread;
 Thy airy dreams on peaceful pillows shed,
 And weave for thoughtless brows a garland gay.
 Farewell low vallies; dizzy cliffs, farewell!
 Small vagrant rills that murmur as ye flow,
 Dark-bosomed labyrinth and thorny dell;
 The task be mine all pleasures to forego,
 To hide where meditation loves to dwell
 And feed my soul with luxury of woe!

XVII. THE TYRANNY OF LOVE

Love steals unheeded o'er the tranquil mind
 As summer breezes fan the sleeping main,
 Slow through each fibre¹ creeps the subtle pain,
 Till closely round the yielding bosom twined;
 Vain is the hope the magic to unbind,
 The potent mischief riots in the brain,
 Grasps ev'ry thought, and burns in ev'ry vein,
 Till in the heart the tyrant lives enshrined.
 Oh victor strong, bending the vanquished frame,
 Sweet is the thralldom that thou bidst us prove,
 And sacred is the tear thy victims claim,
 For blessed are those whom sighs of sorrow move!
 Then nymphs, beware how ye profane my name,
 Nor blame my weakness till like me ye love!

XVIII. TO PHAON

Why art thou changed, oh Phaon, tell me why?
 Love fies reproach when passion feels decay;
 Or I would paint the raptures of that day
 When, in sweet converse, mingling sigh with sigh,
 I marked the graceful languor of thine eye,
 As on a shady bank entranced we lay.
 Oh eyes, whose beamy radiance stole away
 As stars fade trembling from the burning sky,
 Why art thou changed, dear source of all my woes?
 Though dark my bosom's tint, through ev'ry vein
 A ruby tide of purest lustre flows,
 Warmed by thy love or chilled by thy disdain;
 And yet no bliss this sensate being knows —
 Ah, why is rapture so allied to pain?

XVI. SAPPHO REJECTS HOPE

¹ *luxury of woe* this paradox exemplifies the emotional indulgence that characterized the Della Cruscan sensibility.

XVII. THE TYRANNY OF LOVE

¹ *fibre* i.e. of the body.

XIX. SUSPECTS HIS CONSTANCY

Farewell, ye coral caves, ye pearly sands,
 Ye waving woods that crown yon lofty steep;
 Farewell, ye nereides¹ of the glitt'ring deep,
 Ye mountain tribes, ye fawns, ye sylvan bands:
 On the bleak rock your frantic minstrel stands,
 Each task forgot, save that to sigh and weep;
 In vain the strings her burning fingers sweep,
 No more her touch the Grecian lyre commands!
 In Circe's² cave my faithless Phaon's laid,
 Her daemons³ dress his brow with opiate flow'rs;⁴
 Or, loit'ring in the brown pomgranate⁵ shade,
 Beguile with am'rous strains the fateful hours,
 While Sappho's lips to paly ashes fade
 And sorrow's cank'ring⁶ worm her heart devours!

XX. TO PHAON

Oh I could toil for thee o'er burning plains,
 Could smile at poverty's disastrous blow,
 With thee could wander midst a world of snow
 Where one long night o'er frozen Scythia¹ reigns.
 Severed from thee, my sick'ning soul disdains
 The thrilling thought, the blissful dream to know,
 And canst thou give my days to endless woe,
 Requiring sweetest bliss with cureless pains?
 Away, false fear, nor think capricious fate
 Would lodge a daemon in a form divine!
 Sooner the dove shall seek a tiger mate
 Or the soft snowdrop round the thistle twine;
 Yet, yet, I dread to hope, nor dare to hate,
 Too proud to sue,² too tender to resign!³

XXI. LAMENTS HER EARLY MISFORTUNES

Why do I live to loathe the cheerful day,
 To shun the smiles of fame, and mark the hours
 On tardy pinions move, while ceaseless show'rs
 Down my wan cheek in lucid currents stray?
 My tresses all unbound, nor gems display,

XIX. SUSPECTS HIS CONSTANCY

¹ nereides sea-nymphs.² Circe was an enchantress renowned for her seductiveness.³ daemons spirits.⁴ opiate flow'rs flowers that induce drowsiness and inaction.⁵ pomgranate this spelling is deliberate, but it was already archaic by Robinson's day.⁶ cank'ring consuming.

XX. TO PHAON

¹ Scythia ancient region extending over much of Euro-² pean and Asiatic Russia.³ sue pursue.⁴ resign give up.

Nor scents Arabian; on my path no flow'rs
 Imbibe the morn's resuscitating pow'rs,
 For one blank sorrow saddens all my way!
 As slow the radiant sun of reason rose,
 Through tears my dying parents saw it shine;¹
 A brother's frailties swelled the tide of woes,²
 And, keener far, maternal griefs were mine!³
 Phaon, if soon these weary eyes shall close,
 Oh must that task, that mournful task, be thine?

XXII. PHAON FORSAKES HER

Wild is the foaming sea, the surges roar,
 And nimbly dart the livid¹ lightnings round!
 On the rent rock the angry waves rebound -
 Ah me, the less'ning bark is seen no more!
 Along the margin of the trembling shore,
 Loud as the blast my frantic cries shall sound,
 My storm-drenched limbs the flinty fragments wound,
 And o'er my bleeding breast the billows pour!
 Phaon return! Ye winds, oh waft the strain
 To his swift bark! Ye barb'rous waves forbear,
 Taunt not the anguish of a lover's brain,
 Nor feebly emulate the soul's despair!
 For howling winds and foaming seas in vain
 Assail the breast when passion rages there!

XXIII. SAPPHO'S CONJECTURES

To Etna's scorching sands my Phaon flies!
 False youth, can other charms attractive prove?
 Say, can Sicilian loves thy passions move,
 Play round thy heart and fix thy fickle eyes,
 While in despair the Lesbian Sappho dies?

XXI. LAMENTS HER EARLY MISFORTUNES

¹ "Sex mihi natales ierant, cum lecta parentis / Ante diem lacrymas ossa bibere meas. / Arsit inops frater, victus meretricis amore; / Mistaque cum turpi damna pudore tulit." Ovid' (Robinson's note). The quotation is from *Hermides* xv 61-2, and translates: 'Scarce was I in my sixth year, when the ashes of a deceased parent drank my tears. My brother next, despising wealth and honour, burnt with an ignoble flame, and obstinately plunged himself into shameful distresses' (Ovid, *Epistulae* 171).

² Sappho's brother, Charaxos, became involved with a courtesan called Rhodope, and squandered all his money on her.

³ Sappho gave birth to a daughter, Cleis, named after her mother. Sappho's poems give no indication

of why she might have felt 'grief' for Cleis; possibly Robinson refers merely to the incidental pains of watching a daughter grow up, or perhaps she had read a fictionalized account of Sappho's life that included comments on a possible tragic end for Cleis.

XXII. PHAON FORSAKES HER

¹ livid furiously angry.

XXIII. SAPPHO'S CONJECTURES
¹ To *Etna's scorching sands* my Phaon flies an echo of Pope, *Sappho to Phaon* 11: 'Phaon to Etna's scorching fields retires'. 'Arva Phaon celebrat diversa Typhoidos Etnae' (Ovid' (Robinson's note). The quotation is from *Hermides* xv 11: 'Phaon honours the distant fields of burning Etna' (Ovid, *Epistulae* 167).

Has spring for thee a crown of poppies wove,
 Or dost thou languish in th' Idalian grove?²
 Whose altar kindles, fanned by lover's sighs?
 Ah think that, while on Etna's shores you stray,
 A fire more fierce than Etna's fills my breast;³
 Nor deck Sicilian nymphs with garlands gay
 While Sappho's brows with cypress wreaths are dressed;
 Let one kind word my weary woes repay,
 Or in eternal slumbers bid them rest.

XXIV. HER ADDRESS TO THE MOON

Oh thou, meek orb that, stealing o'er the dale,
 Cheer'st with thy modest beams the noon of night,
 On the smooth lake diffusing silv'ry light,
 Sublimely still and beautifully pale!
 What can thy cool and placid eye avail
 Where fierce despair absorbs the mental sight,
 While inbred¹ glooms the vagrant thoughts invite
 To tempt the gulf where howling fiends assail?
 Oh night, all nature owns thy tempered pow'r;
 Thy solemn pause, thy dews, thy pensive beam;
 Thy sweet breath whisp'ring in the moonlight bow'r,
 While fainting flowrets kiss the wand'ring stream!
 Yet vain is ev'ry charm, and vain the hour,
 That brings to madd'ning love no soothing dream!

XXV. TO PHAON

Canst thou forget, oh idol of my soul,
 Thy Sappho's voice, her form, her dulcet lyre
 That, melting ev'ry thought to fond desire,
 Bade sweet delirium o'er thy senses roll?
 Canst thou so soon renounce the blest control
 That calmed with pity's tears love's raging fire,
 While Hope, slow breathing on the trembling wire,¹
 In every note with soft persuasion stole?
 Oh sov'reign of my heart, return, return!
 For me no spring appears, no summers bloom,
 No sunbeams glitter and no altars burn!
 The mind's dark winter of eternal gloom
 Shows midst the waste a solitary urn,
 A blighted laurel² and a mould'ring tomb!

² *th' Idalian grove* near Mt Idalus in Cyprus. XXIV. HER ADDRESS TO THE MOON
 sacred to Venus.
¹ "inbred" deeply ingrained. XXV. TO PHAON
³ "Me calor Etnaeo non minor igne coquit" Ovid' (Robinson's note). From *Heroides* xv. 12: "while flames fierce as those of Etna prey upon my heart" (Ovid, *Epistles* 167).
 poetry.

XXVI. CONTEMNS PHILOSOPHY

Where antique woods o'erhang the mountain's crest
 And midday glooms in solemn silence lour,
 Philosophy, go seek a lonely bow'r,
 And waste life's fervid noon in fancied rest.
 Go where the bird of sorrow weaves her nest,
 Cooing, in sadness sweet, through night's dim hour;
 Go cull the dewdrops from each potent flow'r
 That med'cines to the cold and reas'ning breast!
 Go where the brook in liquid lapse steals by,
 Scarce heard amidst the mingling echoes round,
 What time the moon fades slowly down the sky,
 And slumb'ring zephyrs moan in caverns bound:
 Be these thy pleasures, dull Philosophy,
 Nor vaunt' the balm to heal a lover's wound.

XXVII. SAPPHO'S ADDRESS TO THE STARS

Oh ye bright stars that on the ebon' fields
 Of heav'n's vast empire trembling seem to stand,
 Till rosy morn unlocks her portal bland
 Where the proud sun his fiery banner wields!
 To flames less fierce than mine your lustre yields,
 And pow'rs more strong my countless tears command;
 Love strikes the feeling heart with ruthless hand,
 And only spares the breast which dullness shields!
 Since, then, capricious nature but bestows
 The fine affections of the soul to prove
 A keener sense of desolating woes,
 Far, far from me the empty boast remove;
 If bliss from coldness, pain from passion flows -
 Ah, who would wish to feel, or learn to love?

XXVIII. DESCRIBES THE FASCINATIONS OF LOVE

Weak is the sophistry and vain the art
 That whispers patience to the mind's despair;
 That bids reflection bathe the wounds of care
 While Hope, with pleasing phantoms, soothes their smart!
 For mem'ry still, reluctant to depart
 From the dear spot once rich in prospects fair,
 Bids the fond soul enamoured linger there,
 And its least charm is grateful to the heart!
 He never loved who could not muse and sigh,
 Spangling the sacred turf with frequent tears,

XXVI. CONTEMNS PHILOSOPHY

1 *vaunt* boast.

XXVII. SAPPHO'S ADDRESS TO THE STARS

1 *ebon* black.

XXVIII. DESCRIBES THE FASCINATIONS OF LOVE

1 *And its least charm is grateful to the heart* i.e. the heart is grateful for the least charm which the prospects possess.

Where the small rivulet that ripples by
 Recalls the scenes of past and happier years,
 When on its banks he watched the speaking eye,
 And one sweet smile o'erpaid an age of fears!

XXIX. DETERMINES TO FOLLOW PHAON

Farewell, ye tow'ring cedars, in whose shade,
 Lulled by the nightingale, I sunk to rest,
 While spicy breezes hovered o'er my breast
 To fan my cheek, in deep'ning tints arrayed;
 While am'rous insects humming round me played,
 Each flow'r forsook, of prouder sweets in quest,
 Of glowing lips in humid fragrance dressed,
 That mocked the sunny Hybla's¹ vaunted aid!
 Farewell, ye limpid rivers, oh farewell!
 No more shall Sappho to your grotts repair;
 Or your dank weeds entwine her floating hair,
 As erst when Venus in her sparry cell²
 Wept to behold a brighter goddess there!

XXX. BIDS FAREWELL TO LESBOS

O'er the tall cliff that bounds the billowy main
 Shad'wing the surge that sweeps the lonely strand,
 While the thin vapours break along the sand,
 Day's harbinger¹ unfolds the liquid plain.²
 The rude sea murmurs, mournful as the strain
 That love-lorn minstrels strike with trembling hand,
 While from their green beds rise the siren band³
 With tongues aerial to repeat my pain!
 The vessel rocks beside the pebbly shore,
 The foamy curls its gaudy trappings lave;
 Oh bark propitious, bear me gently o'er,
 Breathe soft, ye winds; rise slow, oh swelling wave!
 Lesbos, these eyes shall meet thy sands no more;
 I fly to seek my lover, or my grave!

XXXI. DESCRIBES HER BARK

Far o'er the waves my lofty bark shall glide,
 Love's frequent sighs the flutt'ring sails shall swell,¹

XXXIX. DETERMINES TO FOLLOW PHAON

¹ Hybla was a mountain near Syracuse, with a town of the same name at its base.

² sparry cell/ cell made out of crystalline minerals.

XXX. BIDS FAREWELL TO LESBOS

¹ Day's harbinger the sun.

² the liquid plain the sea.

² my native home Mytilene on Lesbos.

³ Tritons sea deities, half man, half dolphin.

⁴ Venus sprang from the foaming remains of Uranus,

scattered in the sea by Chronos, his son.

XXXII. DREAMS OF A RIVAL

¹ 'Vide Sappho's Ode' (Robinson's note). This son-

net is an adaptation of Sappho, Φαίεραί μοι κίππος

would be calm during that period.
² the star of day the sun.

While to my native home² I bid farewell,
 Hope's snowy hand the burnished helm shall guide!
 Tritons³ shall sport amidst the yielding tide,
 Myriads of cupids round the prow shall dwell,
 And Venus throned within her opal shell
 Shall proudly o'er the glittering billows ride!⁴
 Young dolphins, dashing in the golden spray,
 Shall with their scaly forms illumine the deep,
 Tinged with the purple flush of sinking day,
 Whose flaming wreath shall crown the distant steep;
 While on the breezy deck soft minstrels play,
 And songs of love the lover soothe to sleep!

XXXII. DREAMS OF A RIVAL

Blessed as the gods, Sicilian maid, is he,¹
 The youth whose soul thy yielding graces charm;
 Who bound, oh thraldom sweet, by beauty's arm,
 In idle dalliance fondly sports with thee!
 Blessed as the gods that iv'ry throne to see,
 Throbbing with transports, tender, timid, warm,
 While round thy fragrant lips light zephyrs swarm
 As op'ning buds attract the wand'ring bee!
 Yet short is youthful passion's fervid hour;
 Soon shall another clasp the beauteous boy;
 Soon shall a rival prove, in that gay bow'r,
 The pleasing torture of excessive joy!
 The bee flies sickened from the sweetest flow'r,
 The lightning's shaft but dazzles to destroy!

XXXIII. REACHES SICILY

I wake! Delusive phantoms, hence, away!
 Tempt not the weakness of a lover's breast;
 The softest breeze can shake the halcyon's nest,¹
 And lightest clouds o'ercast the dawning ray!
 'Twas but a vision! Now the star of day²
 Peers like a gem on Etna's burning crest!
 Welcome, ye hills, with golden vintage dressed,
 Sicilian forests brown, and vallies gay!
 A mournful stranger from the Lesbian isle,

² οὐρανὸν θεῶν, translated by Addison as 'An Ode on a Young Maid whom she loved'.

XXXIII. REACHES SICILY

¹ the halcyon's nest the kingfisher was believed by

classical writers to breed in a nest out at sea, and that

it charmed the wind and the waves so that they

would be calm during that period.

² the star of day the sun.

Not strange, in loftiest eulogy of song,
 She who could teach the Stoic's cheek to smile,³
 Thaw the cold heart, and chain the wond'ring throng,
 Can find no balm, love's sorrows to beguile -
 Ah, sorrows known too soon, and felt too long!

XXXIV. SAPPHO'S PRAYER TO VENUS

Venus, to thee the Lesbian muse shall sing
 The song which Mytilenian¹ youths admired,
 When Echo, am'rous of the strain inspired,
 Bade the wild rocks with madd'ning plaudits ring!²
 Attend my prayer, oh queen of rapture, bring
 To these fond arms he whom my soul has fired -
 From these fond arms removed, yet still desired,
 Though love exulting spreads his varying wing!
 Oh source of ev'ry joy, of ev'ry care,
 Blessed Venus, goddess of the zone divine,³
 To Phaon's bosom Phaon's victim bear;
 So shall her warmest, tend'rest vows be thine!
 For Venus, Sappho shall a wreath prepare,
 And Love be crowned, immortal as the Nine!⁴

XXXV. REPROACHES PHAON

What means the mist opaque that veils these eyes?
 Why does yon threat'ning tempest shroud the day?
 Why does thy altar, Venus, fade away,
 And on my breast the dews of horror rise?
 Phaon is false! Be dim, ye orient skies,
 And let black Erebus¹ succeed your ray;
 Let clashing thunders roll, and lightnings play -
 Phaon is false, and hopeless Sappho dies!
 'Farewell, my Lesbian love', you might have said
 (Such sweet remembrance had some pity proved),
 Or coldly thus: 'Farewell, oh Lesbian maid!'² -

¹ Robinson presumably took the line that Stoics were not easily moved to laughter.

XXXIV. SAPPHO'S PRAYER TO VENUS

² Mytilenian from Mytilene, Sappho's home city, on Lesbos.

³ Echo's unrequited love for Narcissus persisted after death, when she survived as a voice.

⁴ the zone divine Venus' power was enhanced by a magic belt (or zone), which inspired love even when worn by the most deformed.

⁵ Nine the Muses.

XXXV. REPROACHES PHAON
¹ Erebus the god Erebus (darkness) married Night to produce Day and Upper Light (ether).

10

No task severe, for one so fondly loved!
 The gentle thought had soothed my wand'ring shade,
 From life's dark valley and its thorns removed!

XXXVI. HER CONFIRMED DESPAIR

Lead me, Sicilian maids, to haunted bow'rs,
 While yon pale moon displays her faintest beams
 O'er blasted woodlands and enchanted streams
 Whose banks infect the breeze with pois'nous flow'rs;
 Ah, lead me where the barren mountain tow'rs,
 Where no sounds echo but the night-owl's screams,
 Where some lone spirit of the desert gleams,
 And lurid horrors wing the fateful hours!
 Now goaded frenzy grasps my shrinking brain,
 Her touch absorbs the crystal fount of woe!
 My blood rolls burning through each gasping vein -
 Away, lost lyre, unless thou canst bestow
 A charm to lull that agonizing pain
 Which those who never loved can never know!

XXXVII. FORESEES HER DEATH

When, in the gloomy mansion of the dead,
 This with'ring heart, this faded form shall sleep;
 When these fond eyes at length shall cease to weep,
 And earth's cold lap receive this fev'rish head;
 Envy shall turn away, a tear to shed,
 And time's obliterating pinions sweep
 The spot where poets shall their vigils keep,
 To mourn and wander near my freezing bed!
 Then my pale ghost upon th' Elysian shore¹
 Shall smile, released from ev'ry mortal care;
 While, doomed love's victim to repine² no more,
 My breast shall bathe in endless rapture there!
 Ah no, my restless shade would still deplore,
 Nor taste that bliss, which Phaon did not share!

XXXVIII. TO A SIGH

Oh sigh, thou steal'st, the herald of the breast,
 The lover's fears, the lover's pangs to tell;
 Thou bidd'st with timid grace the bosom swell,
 Cheating the day of joy, the night of rest!
 Oh lucid tears, with eloquence confessed,
 Why on my fading cheek unheeded dwell,

XXXVII. FORESEES HER DEATH

¹ Elysium is the idyllic world where the souls of those honoured by the gods spend their afterlives.

² repine complain.

Meek as the dewdrops on the flowret's bell
 By ruthless tempests to the green sod pressed?
 Fond sigh be hushed; congeal, oh slighted tear!
 Thy feeble pow'r's the busy Fates' control!
 Or if thy crystal streams again appear,
 Let them, like Lethe's,² to oblivion roll;
 For Love the tyrant plays when hope is near,
 And she who flies the lover, chains the soul!

XXXIX. TO THE MUSES

Prepare your wreaths, Aonian¹ maids divine,
 To strew the tranquil bed where I shall sleep;
 In tears, the myrtle and the laurel steep,
 And let Erato's² hand the trophies twine.
 No Parian marble³ there, with laboured line
 Shall bid the wand'ring lover stay to weep;
 There holy silence shall her vigils keep
 Save when the nightingale such woes as mine
 Shall sadly sing; as twilight's curtains spread,
 There shall the branching lotus⁴ widely wave,
 Sprinkling soft show'rs upon the lily's⁵ head,
 Sweet drooping emblem for a lover's grave!
 And there shall Phaon pearls of pity⁶ shed
 To gem the vanquished heart he scorned to save!

XL. VISIONS APPEAR TO HER IN A DREAM

On the low margin of a murmur'ing stream,
 As rapt¹ in meditation's arms I lay,
 Each aching sense in slumbers stole away
 While potent fancy formed a soothing dream;
 O'er the Leucadian² deep a dazzling beam
 Shed the bland light of empyrean³ day!
 But soon transparent shadows veiled each ray,
 While mystic visions sprang athwart the gleam!

XXXVIII. TO A SIGH

- ¹ *Fates* The three sisters wove man's destiny and cut the thread of life at the moment of death.
² *Lethé* the river of forgetfulness in Hades, where souls drank and forgot their past existence.
 XXXIX. TO THE MUSES
¹ Aonia was the seat of the Muses.
² Erato was the muse of lyric and love poetry, crowned with roses and myrtle.
³ *Parian marble* Paros, one of the Cyclades islands between Greece and Turkey, was the home of some particularly fine marble.
⁴ *lotus* In Homer's *Odyssey*, the lotus induces a state of dreamy forgetfulness and a loss of desire to return home.

Now to the heaving gulf they seemed to bend,
 And now across the sphyery regions⁴ glide;
 Now in mid air their dulcet voices blend,
 'Awake, awake!' the restless phalanx cried,
 'See ocean yawns the lover's woes to end,
 Plunge⁵ the green wave, and bid thy griefs subside!'

XLI. RESOLVES TO TAKE THE LEAP OF LEUCATA

Yes, I will go where circling whirlwinds rise,
 Where threat'ning clouds in sable grandeur lour,
 Where the blast yells, the liquid columns pour,
 And madd'ning billows combat with the skies!
 There while the daemon of the tempest flies
 On growing pinions through the troublous¹ hour,
 The wild waves gasp impatient to devour,
 And on the rock the wakened vulture cries!
 Oh dreadful solace to the stormy mind,
 To me more pleasing than the valley's rest,
 The woodland songsters, or the sportive kind²
 That nip the turf or prune the painted crest;
 For in despair alone the wretched find
 That unctio³ sweet which lulls the bleeding breast!

XLII. HER LAST APPEAL TO PHAON

Oh canst thou bear to see this faded frame
 Deformed and mangled by the rocky deep?
 Wilt thou remember, and forbear to weep
 My fatal fondness, and my peerless fame?
 Soon o'er this heart, now warm with passion's flame,
 The howling winds and foamy waves shall sweep;
 Those eyes be ever closed in death's cold sleep
 And all of Sappho perish, but her name!
 Yet if the Fates suspend their barb'rous ire,
 If days less mournful Heav'n designs for me,
 If rocks grow kind, and winds and waves conspire
 To bear me softly on the swelling sea,
 To Phoebus only will I tune my lyre -
 'What suits with Sappho, Phoebus, suits with thee!'¹

⁴ *the sphyery regions* the sky.

⁵ *Plunge* plunge into.

XLI. RESOLVES TO TAKE THE LEAP OF LEUCATA

¹ *troubulous* disturbed.

² *the sportive kind* of bird.

³ *unctio* soothing influence.

XLII. HER LAST APPEAL TO PHAON

¹ 'Pope. "Grata lyram posui tibi Phoebe, poetria Sappho: / Convenit illa mihi, convenit illa tibi"; Ovid' (Robinson's note). From *Heroides* xv 183-4: 'Grateful Sappho consecrates her harp to Phoebus, a gift that agrees both to the giver and the god' (Ovid, *Epistulae* 179). As Mary acknowledges in her note, l. 14 is borrowed from Pope, *Sappho to Phaon* 216.

XLIII. HER REFLECTIONS ON THE LEUCADIAN ROCK BEFORE SHE PERISHES

While from the dizzy precipice I gaze,
 The world receding from my pensive eyes,
 High o'er my head the tyrant eagle flies,
 Clothed in the sinking sun's transcendent blaze
 The meek-eyed moon midst clouds of amber plays
 As o'er the purpling plains of light¹ she hies,
 Till the last stream of living lustre dies
 And the cool concave² owns her³ tempered³ rays!
 So shall this glowing, palpitating soul
 Welcome returning Reason's placid beam,
 While o'er my breast the waves Lethae⁴ roll
 To calm rebellious Fancy's feverish dream;
 Then shall my lyre disdain love's dread control,
 And loftier passions prompt the loftier theme!

XLIV. SONNET CONCLUSIVE

Here droops the muse, while from her glowing mind
 Celestial Sympathy with humid¹ eye
 Bids the light sylph capricious Fancy fly,
 Time's restless wings with transient flow'rs to bind!
 For now with folded arms and head inclined,
 Reflection pours the deep and frequent sigh
 O'er the dark scoll of human destiny,
 Where gaudy buds and wounding thorns are twined.
 Oh sky-born Virtue, sacred is thy name!
 And though mysterious Fate with frown severe
 Oft decorates thy brows with wreaths of fame
 Bespangled o'er with sorrow's chilling tear,
 Yet shalt thou more than mortal raptures claim -
 The brightest planet of th' eternal sphere!

From Walsingham; or, the Pupil of Nature (1797)

LINES ADDRESSED BY A YOUNG LADY OF FASHION TO A SMALL GREEN FLY,
 WHICH HAD PITCHED¹ ON THE LEFT EAR OF LADY AMARANTH'S LITTLE WHITE
 BARBET,² FIDELIO, ON A SUMMER EVENING, AFTER A SHOWER, NEAR SUNSET

Little, barb'rous, cruel fly!
 Tell me, tell me, tell me why

XLIII. HER REFLECTIONS ON THE LEUCADIAN ROCK XLIV. SONNET CONCLUSIVE
 BEFORE SHE PERISHES 1 humid tearful.
 1 the purpling plains of light as the sun sets. LINES ADDRESSED BY A YOUNG LADY OF FASHION TO
 2 concave sky. A SMALL GREEN FLY . . .
 3 tempered subdued, diminished. 1 pitched settled.
 4 Lethaean Lethe was the river of forgetfulness in 2 barbet poodle.
 Hades, which souls drank from in order to forget
 their past existence.

You to poor Fidelio bring,
 To vex his ear, so keen a sting?
 Little, barb'rous, cruel fly,
 Hasten away, or you must die!
 'Soft!' I hear Fidelio say,
 'Do not send the fly away;
 Let him hover round and round,
 Let him, let him, let him wound,
 Lest the little rogue should sip
 Honey from my lady's lip!³

A THOUSAND TORMENTS WAIT ON LOVE

A thousand torments wait on love -
 The sigh, the tear, the anguished groan;
 But he who never learnt to prove
 A jealous pang has nothing known!

For jealousy, supreme of woe,
 Nursed by distorted fancy's pow'r,
 Can round the heart bid mis'ry grow,
 Which darkens with the ling'ring hour,
 While shadows, blanks to reason's orb,¹
 In dread succession haunt the brain,
 And pangs, that ev'ry pang absorb,
 In wild, convulsive tumults reign.

At morn, at eve, the fever burns,
 While phantoms tear the aching breast;
 Day brings no calm, and night returns
 To mark no soothing hour of rest.

Nor, when the bosom's wasted fires
 Are all extinct, is anguish o'er;
 For *jealousy*, that ne'er expires,
 Still wounds, when *passion* lives no more.

From The Poetical Works of the Late Mrs Robinson (1806)

THE PROGRESS OF LIBERTY (COMPOSED 1798)

Conclusion to Book I

Superstition, more destructive still
 Than plague or famine, tyranny or war!

Robinson's text continues ironically: 'This extraordinary effort of exalted genius was received by the noble auditors with enthusiastic wonder and applause, while every individual solicited to have a copy.'