

EMILY HAUSER

SANDER BERG



ANCIENT LOVE STORIES

*The Most Remarkable
Romances in History*

B
I
G
P
I
C
T
U
R
E
P
R
E
S
S

ANCIENT LOVE STORIES



DEDICATION – E.H.

TO VELLE, AND TO MR AND MR WILLIAMS,
WITHOUT WHOM THIS COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MADE. – S.B.

BIG PICTURE PRESS

First published in the UK in 2023 by Big Picture Press,
an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
4th Floor, Victoria House
Bloomsbury Square, London WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

Text copyright © 2023 by Emily Hauser
Illustration copyright © 2023 by Sander Berg
Design copyright © 2023 by Big Picture Press

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

All rights reserved

ISBN 978-1-80078-322-5

This book was typeset in Charcuterie Block and Horley Old Style
The illustrations were created digitally

Written by Emily Hauser
Edited by Isobel Boston
Designed by Olivia Cook
Production by Ella Holden

Printed in Poland



EMILY HAUSER

SANDER BERG

ANCIENT LOVE STORIES



CONTENTS

ABOUT THIS BOOK

6

SAPPHO

8

AMYTIS AND NEBUCHADNEZZAR

19

THE SACRED BAND OF THEBES

25

ZHUO WENJUN AND SIMA XIANGRU

33

MARK ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

39

THE LOVERS OF POMPEII

50

HADRIAN AND ANTINOUS

56

ELOISE AND ABELARD

62

FRANCES HOWARD AND ROBERT CARR

71

SHAH JAHAN AND MUMTAZ MAHAL

79

IGNATIUS SANCHO AND ANNE OSBORNE

89

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

96

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Three thousand years ago, in an ancient world where the glittering kingdoms of the Aegean were teetering on the brink of collapse, a prince of Troy ran away with the wife of a Greek king. Their names were Paris and Helen, and their love affair set the world on fire. It kickstarted one of the greatest battles of all time. It was celebrated in poetry, scrawled across the history books, and splashed over richly coloured vases. To the ancients, Helen and Paris were as real as they were infamous.

Today, Helen and Paris might seem little more than a myth. But we don't have to look to fiction – even some of the most famous fictional couples, like Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet – to find true love. The pages of history are crammed with remarkable stories about love that are, quite literally, true. And many of them are among the greatest love stories ever told.

This collection brings together some of the most remarkable true love stories in ancient and premodern history. It is, perhaps, a cliché to say that love never dies. But the survival of these extraordinary tales (in some cases, across millennia) goes to show that love really does stand the test of time. Some couples, like Mark Antony and Cleopatra or

Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, played out on the main stage of history and are instantly recognisable; others are less well known and stand in the wings, waiting to be told. But they all have something to tell us about what it means to be in love, and why across thousands of years of history love, above all, has endured.

Here we see love shot through like a thread in different cultures and time periods, from the bloody revolts of archaic Greece to the cultivated soirées of Han China; from the frenzied witch hunts of Jacobean England to the bejewelled wonders of Moghul India. As is the nature of any collection, particularly one of this breadth and scope, the stories are merely a selection from among thousands of possible candidates reaching up to the end of the early modern era (broadly defined as 'the past'). Each story aims to give an insight into a different culture, a different historical moment, a different type of love. Each story asks us to open ourselves up to love's transformative – and sometimes tragic – power. Each story celebrates the incredible variety and diversity of love – from passion and jealousy to hope and longing; from besotted emperors to loved-up shopkeepers; from men who died for the men they loved, to women whose fierce passion redrew the map of the heart.

Above all, the extraordinary, fearless lovers represented in this book remind us that love is a touchstone we can always come back to in order to understand what it means to be human – today, just as much as three thousand years ago.

SAPPHO

Dawn. Greece. Summer. The air smelled of violets. Pink fingers of sunlight crept over the horizon, already hot, reflecting off the white rocks of the Greek island. A woman stood on the cliff edge, her toes whispering the air, her sandals tracing the stone. Playing with the edge between rock and sky. Her gauzy tunic catching on the sea breeze, tugging her like a ship's sail. Threatening to slip at any moment into the white foam below.

Her name was Sappho. And how she got here is a love story.

But it is not the kind you might think. This is a story of a woman who had a gift: she knew how to write about love. In the world of ancient Greece, where women were meant to idolise men and were told to stay silent – seen and not heard – her love was different. She loved women passionately, openly, and she was able to turn what she felt into fierce words of poetry. These words would speak to thousands of people and become famed across one of the most powerful nations on Earth. They would be sung at banquets and written down on scraps of papyrus that were sent on ships and hoarded in libraries across the world of the ancients. These words would see Sappho embroiled in rebellion in the teetering, overcrowded cities of the rocky island of Lesbos. They would cast her into exile across the glittering seas of the Aegean to the ends of the Earth and back again. They would ask her to defy everything

that was expected of a woman and climb to dizzying heights of fame and success, before falling to the repute of a ridiculed prostitute. They would see her challenging ideas about sex and sexuality, and speaking out about love in a way no one had ever done before. Her words would become immortal – even as it took her to her death.

So yes, this is a love story with a difference. And it would change the way we talk about love forever.



The year was 600 BCE, or thereabouts. Greece was a tumbling, rocky mass of hilltop towns lorded over by petty tyrants. The old heroic age of kings and palaces, the era of Achilles' legendary battles and Agamemnon's fabulous jewels was gone: all that was left were the walls ringing the old citadels, made of stones so huge that locals said they must have been built by the gigantic, one-eyed Cyclops. Peasants chained by centuries of debt toiled in the walls' shadows, bringing in crops for the wealthy who lounged in shaded villas nestled among the rubble of the old palaces. These were people who lived among the ruins of better times.

And yet there were glimmers of something new on the horizon. Ships were starting to cross the seas, heaving with a cargo of pressed oils and baked pots, in search of new shores to explore. They brought back new ideas and new letters – the alphabet, named after the Phoenician letters *aleph beth*, or *alpha beta* in Greek – to write down and disseminate those ideas. Politicians and thinkers were rising up to challenge the oligarchs who had maintained a stranglehold on power for so long, since the fall of the kings. In Lesbos, where Sappho was growing up as a child, a series of riots, family rivalries and power struggles would place a new tyrant, Pittacus, on the throne, who would scatter the ruling aristocratic clans that rose up against him across the seas.

Onto this scene of tyrants, debt, social invention and political upheaval, Sappho exploded like a multicoloured supernova burning across the sky. We know little about Sappho for sure. She had a towering reputation in the ancient world: she was hailed by scores of well-known poets as 'the tenth Muse', while a later critic compared her to Greece's

famous father of literature as 'the female Homer'. Her intensely personal, intimate, sensual depictions of love initiated a seismic shift in the landscape of poetry – in stark contrast to the gory battle narratives of epic giants like Homer, who had lived a hundred years before. Paintings of Sappho reading her poems appeared on local pots (the ancient equivalent of a billboard advertisement for a blockbuster film) and famous men wrote songs about how madly they were in love with her. Her poetry was quite literally the soundtrack to the ancient world, sung for hundreds of years at the private parties that defined the ancient Greek social scene.

And yet – because she was a woman, perhaps, or because she wrote about love affairs between women – her poetry is almost entirely lost to us. Barely two hundred fragments remain today of Sappho's original nine books crammed with poems. What little there is survives in scattered quotations or inked on scraps of papyrus that were tossed onto rubbish dumps and dug up by chance thousands of years later in the Egyptian desert.

But what we do know about Sappho – what she tells us herself – is that she was in love, and that she was in love with women. The names of these women echo like ghosts treading lightly through her love poems: Gorgo, Atthis, Anactoria – we know nothing about them except their names. Later biographers trip over themselves to fill the gaps for us with what can only be described as sexually fuelled fantasies, consigning Sappho's love of women to the footnotes with much judgement and raising of eyebrows, and conjuring instead an almost cartoonishly heterosexual version of Sappho.

The end result: to both diminish and contain the dangerously off-centre woman poet. Rumours about an extraordinary list of male lovers and a characterisation of Sappho as something akin to a sex-crazed courtesan tell us more about men's lurid imaginings than they do about Sappho herself. Meanwhile, the widely circulated story of her leap from the white cliffs for a man appears nowhere in her poetry. This is a love story that is, quite literally, in fragments. So how do we piece it all together?

Sappho's love story starts with a woman called Anaetoria and a journey to the end of the world. We don't know who Anaetoria was, or when Sappho chose to address to her one of the most sensational love poems in history, and a manifesto for her radical redefinition of what it means to be in love:

*Some people say armies of
cavalry, infantry, ships
are the loveliest things on this black Earth.
I say
it's whoever you love.*

The famous Helen, Sappho goes on, renowned as much for her devastating beauty as for starting one of the greatest wars the world had ever seen, ran away to Troy for love of Paris; *it makes me think of Anaetoria, who is gone. I'd rather see her lovely walk, the flaming light in her face, than all the Trojan chariots and fighters in full armour.*

The name-drop of Helen of Troy shows that Sappho is turning the old story of the Trojan War on its head. What if, she asks, instead of telling the story of Troy through the battles of men like Achilles, we focused instead on Helen and the fact she fell in love? What if we put love centre stage in a way that had never been done before?

But there's more to this than just poetry. Helen's voyage across the sea to Troy contains hints of Sappho's own journey. One of our earliest historical chronicles tells us that Sappho was exiled from the Greek island of Lesbos (just off Troy) across the sea to Sicily. Other sources reveal that she was involved in the dynastic power struggles on Lesbos, along with the other riots that were sweeping across Greece like summer fires.


Sappho had been a child during the violent years of the leader Pittacus' rebellion against the ruling family of Lesbos; she had grown up in the ferment of revolution. What she did in later years to warrant banishment, we can only guess. Was she really part of a treacherous coup to take down Pittacus? Was it, perhaps, simply one step too far for a woman to try to involve herself in politics? For Sappho, plucking at her lyre strings and dreaming of her lover hundreds of miles away under the baking Sicilian sun, the tale of Helen must have held a particular fascination. Here was a woman who fell in love with someone she shouldn't. Here was a woman who was vilified as a harlot for trying to break the bounds of her society and caused a war by doing so, who journeyed across the world to Troy – not far from Sappho's own home – and lived much of her life in exile in a foreign land. Helen's journey, in other words, was Sappho's.

But there is the critical point of difference: while Helen loved a man, Sappho loved a woman. There is an undeniable sensuality to Sappho's lingering remembrance of 'Anactoria's lovely walk' that shows that this is much more than just a friendship. For the first time, Sappho – a woman and a poet – celebrates love in a woman's voice that sets her against the battles of men. She conjures up, instead, an intimate world where the two women walk together, hand-in-hand, perhaps, through the olive groves of the Lesbos she remembers, and the lovely Anactoria throws back her head and laughs with sparkling eyes.

We do not know if Sappho ever saw Anactoria again.



Yet sometimes it is the gaps in Sappho's poetry that allow us to imagine her story for ourselves. In one of the most famous of all her poems, Sappho watches her lover – an unnamed woman; Anactoria again, perhaps? – flirting and laughing with a man. (The poem became so famous that, hundreds of years later, Roman poets competed to create their own versions.) We might imagine Sappho returning to Lesbos after years of exile to find her lover and a man, reclining side-by-side at the feast:



*He's lucky as a god
to sit by you:
he gets to listen to
your voice,
your laugh.
It makes my heart shake.
When I look at you
I can't speak any more:
tongue breaks
flesh burns
can't see
ears thrum
sweat pours from me, and I shiver.*

It is impossible to read these lines without feeling, viscerally, the sensations they describe. Every word captures the nerve-tingling frissant of being in love. Metaphors that have defined the way we

talk about love for centuries – tongue-tied, burning, heart trembling, blind with love – started their life here. But this poem is not just about being in love – it is also about the unbearable bite of jealousy when unrequited love turns sour. Sappho's body – older now, perhaps, skin wrinkled by sea voyages – responds, almost against her volition, aching and breaking with a physical rejoinder of passion that is almost the stronger for being unmet.

This is the kind of love that might drive you to the edge of the cliff.

What we don't find here – or anywhere in Sappho's poems – is the Sappho who hurls herself off the edge of a cliff for a man. The story we opened with is a myth, a fantasy – the kind of story other people tell about Sappho's love, not her own. It's a way of trying to turn this extraordinary woman into someone the ancients could understand: a tragic heroine flinging herself to her death for a man, not a stand-out, vocal, independent woman who publicised her love for women and made a name for herself across the world, influencing writers from Ovid and Tennyson to Virginia Woolf.

Piecing together the fragments, we find a very different solution to the puzzle of Sappho's story emerging from the jigsaw. Here is a love that is possessive, fierce, sensual, loyal, tangible and passionate. Here is a love that is different, and unashamed to say it. Did Sappho jump to her death because she fell in love with a man? Probably not. But did the way she wrote about the women she loved change how we talk about love thousands of years later? Absolutely.