

# Female Odysseus

*Sappho's Leap* by Erica Jong '63BC '65GSAS (W. W. Norton & Company).

By

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**Did I leap to my death for the love of a handsome young ferryman?** Did I love women or men? Does love even have a sex?" So speaks Sappho in the arresting prologue of Erica Jong's '63BC '65GSAS, new novel, *Sappho's Leap*, as Jong's exuberant heroine—teetering over the edge of the Leucadian cliff—begins to relate the story of her life. In this beautifully written and thoroughly researched work of historical fiction, Jong attempts to rescue Sappho from the classical tradition that characterizes her as a sexual or social deviant as well as a victim of unrequited heterosexual love.

Jong transforms Sappho into a female Odysseus who travels far and wide on a journey of self-discovery. After recalling how she fell in love with the rebel poet Alcaeus and how her family forced her to marry the old sot Cercylas, Sappho embarks on a voyage to obtain information about Alcaeus and the child he had fathered during their intimacy. She travels to Delphi, Egypt, the Land of the Amazons, the Land of the Dead, the Island of the Philosophers, and the Land of the Centaurs. After returning to Lesbos and reuniting with her daughter, she instructs young women in poetry and pleasure, sees through the machinations of the ferryman Phaon, and climbs the Leucadian cliff, unaware that Alcaeus is sailing below.

Jong re-creates Sappho from clues found in the classical testimonies and ideas expressed in Sappho's immortal verses. Throughout her career, Jong's Sappho, a bisexual, composes and sings her famous verses about love and passion—i.e., Jong's adaptations of Sappho from the original Greek and Jong's own creations in imitation of this Greek poet. Jong's adaptations of the fragments sparkle in both serious and

ironic contexts, enhancing the narrative so that Sappho speaks in one eloquent voice. Jong depicts Sappho as a prodigy, enabling the reader to visualize the fictitious Sappho as the author of the historical Sappho's poetry. The novel ends with "Talking to Aphrodite," a sequence of nine memorable poems written by Jong in honor of the nine lost books of Sappho.

As Jong's Sappho passes from youth to middle age, she grows as a character, acquires much wisdom, and relates quotable truths about important subjects—love, marriage, power, freedom, vanity, avarice, and zealotry. As for marriage in her day, Sappho says: "We teach maidens to sing and then we give them husbands to silence them"; and regarding belligerent despots: "People talk of loving peace, but war cements the powers of tyrants and the military." Beyond sexuality and sensuality, Jong's Sappho addresses problems that the ancient Greeks discussed in the greatest of their literary texts—texts that continue to provide modern readers with a mirror of human experience.

As she did for Shakespeare and the Renaissance in *Shylock's Daughter* (formerly *Serenissima*), Jong weaves a tale that mediates between the modern consciousness and a distant time and culture. Although one cannot understand the classical world completely—because of its remoteness and the fragmentary nature of its remains—Jong, exercising the prerogative of the novelist, successfully reinvents an ancient society with all its timeless concerns. Integrating prose with poetry and history with mythology, Jong offers a novel exemplifying the classical tradition at its best, which should inspire readers to learn more about the poet whom Plato called the "tenth Muse."

*Robert J. Ball '71GSAS is a professor of classics at the University of Hawaii; he served as Erica Jong's consultant for Sappho's Leap. He wrote "Gilbert Highet and Classics at Columbia" for the Fall 2001 issue of Columbia magazine.*

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