



C. Sesselego - P. R. Walker

WILD LOVE

*and other sensual poems from the
Ancient Greek*

*Suitable for Quoting,
Flirting, and Tantalizing*



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DEDICATION

To all who love or long for love,
Who are passionate and romantic,
Who dance and celebrate
And wish to share their hearts.

To all who cannot resist the spell of Eros,
Who do foolish things
Or are about to do them
In the name of Love.

To all who have courage
And desire to unlock the mystery.

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry is the language of love, and no poets approached their subject with more passion, power, and unfettered abandon than the poets of ancient Greece. There is a wonderful freshness to their vision, for they were the first in the western world to make the great leap from epic verse, written to honor gods and great heroes, to a more personal lyric poetry, written to woo the beloved and unlock the mysteries of Love itself.

Their love poetry—selected and presented here in new, accessible English translations—has a raw sensuality mixed with tender subtlety that reflects a land where gods and goddesses lusted and loved with the same wild abandon as did the humans who worshipped them. This is love without judgment, love without rules. This is love because love and only love can sustain the lover's life.

Most of the poems in this collection date from the 7th to 4th centuries B.C., a period when Greek city-states enjoyed independence and unique experience while embracing an overarching identity expressed by the term *Hellas*. It was a time of transition and inter-Hellenic warfare as the Greeks expanded throughout the eastern Mediterranean to find food for their growing population, and political systems evolved from oligarchy and tyranny to the first noble experiments in democracy. Yet even as they fought among and within themselves, the Greeks could unite to

drive out foreign invaders, as they did when they defeated the Persians, first in 490 B.C. and again a decade later.

You will find no politics in these poems, only love. Yet many of these poets were deeply involved in the politics of their time, and it was the combination of individualism and pan-Hellenic consciousness that created the fertile artistic milieu in which these poems blossomed. The Homeric epics, dated to the 9th or 8th century B.C., celebrated an age of kingship, conservative aristocracy, and traditional heroes that was already in a state of collapse at the time the epics were composed. Our poets faced a new age of uncertainty and opportunity.

Some were exiles and wanderers, minstrels in more modern terms, who earned their keep by literary and musical talents. Others were warriors, who fought by day and loved by night. And one—Sappho, the most prolific in this collection—was the center of a female cult dedicated to the Muses. A look at the biographies of the poets, which follow the poems, reveals that they were born in every corner of the Greek world, from the coast of Asia Minor and the islands of the Aegean Sea, to the city-states of the Greek mainland and the distant colonies of the Italian peninsula. Yet their poetry has a fundamental “Greekness” that reflects a consistent cultural perspective.

Literarily, the poets and their poems can be divided into three progressive developments, and the poems are arranged in chronological order to make these developments clearer

to the modern reader. Most of the first group, beginning with Mimnermus and ending with Anacreon, composed in a form called Monodic Melica, meaning a song or chant sung by a single voice, usually accompanied by a stringed instrument. For many of them, poetry was an avocation rather than a profession, although Sappho made poetry and inspiration the very center of her world, and Anacreon, the last of the monodic composers, competed with other professional poets of his era.

The exception among the early poets is Alcman, who lived in the late 7th century and composed in Choral Melica, a song for multiple voices. Ibycus in the mid-6th century and Simonides, whose long life lasted into the 5th century, also composed Choral Melica, and together with Anacreon, they form a cadre of consummate professionals, wanderers who sought the protection and patronage of wealthy lords and composed their poetic songs for a wide variety of social and religious occasions.

The third group, from Dionysius Chalcus to Philoxenus, lived in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C., the Golden Age of Classical Greece, and wrote in both monodic and choral forms depending upon the situation and their own poetic muse. Finally there are poems that do not fall into any of these categories: anonymous fragments, Athenian drinking songs, and a collection of later poems in the style of Anacreon.

Most of the poems in this collection are fragments of longer

compositions, and it is something of a literary miracle that we have these fragments to tantalize and titillate us two-and-a-half millennia after they were written. Although a few verses have been preserved in inscriptions or papyruses, the majority have survived only because they were quoted in the works of later writers from the Alexandrian, Roman, Byzantine, and Medieval periods, who had access to texts that have now been lost. Occasionally these quotations are set in a context related to their subject: a discussion of Aphrodite or how the philosopher Socrates fell in love with a young courtesan in his old age. More often than not, however, the context is a dry discussion of metrical or rhetorical structure, and it seems unlikely that these later commentators understood the service they offered future generations by preserving these beautiful, sensual verses.

Some fragments are no more than a line or two, while others are more substantial: eight lines, sixteen lines, or more. In a few cases, where the fortunes of history have given us more to work with, we have selected specific lines from a longer poem in order to emphasize the thematic focus of the collection. Yet no matter what their length, and whether they were chosen by historic chance or by the translators, all of these verses have a surprisingly satisfying “wholeness” in style and substance that reflects the care with which they were composed and the inspired talent of the poets.

The unifying theme of the collection, spanning centuries and composed in far-flung corners of the Greek world,

is Love with a capital L. It is the passion of Eros, son of Aphrodite, who rises from the beautiful island of Crete to enchant men and women alike. Eros is the personification of Love, and Love is the gift—or curse—of Eros. In Greek myth, only Psyche ever had the privilege of knowing Eros in the flesh. She made love to the god in the dark, but when she shined a light upon him, he disappeared forever. This is the quest of our poets, to find elusive Eros—though some who do, find the passion too powerful to bear.

Unlike our modern world, where we tend to compartmentalize our lives, Love was omnipresent in the Greek world, infusing every aspect of life with passionate desire. It could be carnal and metaphysical at the same time. It was both palpable and unknowable. It could make men mad or heal the soul and transcend the destructive force of time. It was a game of the gods, who played without rules, and human beings played with similar freedom, unconstrained by the mores and morals of modern society.

Many poems sing the glory of youthful beauty, often of the same sex as the poet. What we call bisexuality and homosexuality played an important role in ancient Greece, but it was probably not considered an “alternate lifestyle” in a society where the roles of men and women were far more segregated than they are today. Although some Greek societies gave women substantial freedom to develop their own feelings, others, such as Athens, were fundamentally male, and an Athenian man might have a variety of sexual

outlets: a wife to bear his children, a slave girl, a young male lover, and an occasional visit to the sacred prostitute at Corinth.

The ideal of the youthful lover poses a difficult question for modern sensibilities, but here too we must understand the context. When Sappho sighs over a girl just blossoming into womanhood, or one of the male poets lusts after the same sort of girl or a boy just coming into manhood, it is really Youth that they desire. And if the youth is of the same sex, the desire becomes something even more transcendent, a desire to recapture one’s own youth and taste a kind of immortality.

Other poems sing of more traditional heterosexual love, but most do not suggest the age or sex of the beloved at all. It is Love itself of which the poets sing, and in the end, no matter whom or how they loved, the Greeks considered Love to be what they called an *arreton*, an ineffable mystery that could not be expressed in words. Yet they tried to do it anyway, and in doing so they created a new kind of poetry that forever transformed our world.

THE POEMS

THE FLOWERS OF YOUTH

τίς δὲ βίος, τί δὲ τερπνὸν ἄτερ χρυσῆς Ἀφροδίτης;
τεθναίην ὅτε μοι μηκέτι ταῦτα μέλοι,
κρυπταδὴ φιλότης καὶ εὐνή,
οἷ ἥβης ἄνθεα γίγνεται ἄρπαλέα
ἀνδράσιν ἠδὲ γυναιξίν

What kind of life could it be without golden Aphrodite?
May I die when I no longer care about
Secret love and the persuasive gifts of sex.
These are the flowers of youth
Loved by men and women.

Mimnermus, 1-5



SECRET LOVE

πρὸς τοῖχον ἐκλίνθησαν ἐν παλινσκίῳ.

They made love against a wall in the dark.

Archilochus, 34

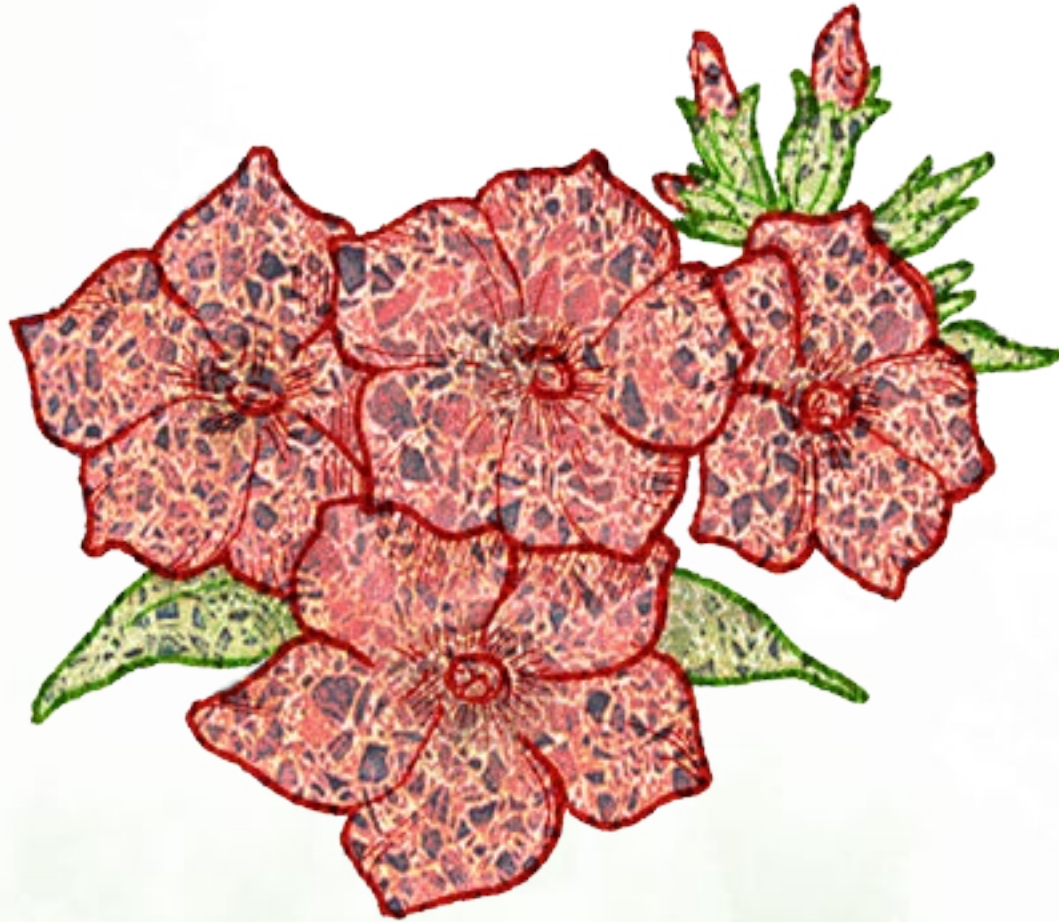


SEARCH FOR DELIGHT

ἄλλ' ἄλλος ἄλλω καρδίην ἰαίνεται·

Many and many more are things that
delight the heart.

Archilochus, 36



Δύστηνος ἔγκειμαι πόθῳ
Ἄψυχος, χαλεπῇσι θεῶν ὀδύνησιν ἔκητι
Πεπαρμένος δι' ὀστέων.

SLEEPLESS NIGHT

Troubled I lie, mad with desire that
Takes my soul, my bones wounded
By bitter suffering destined by the gods.

Archilochus, 84



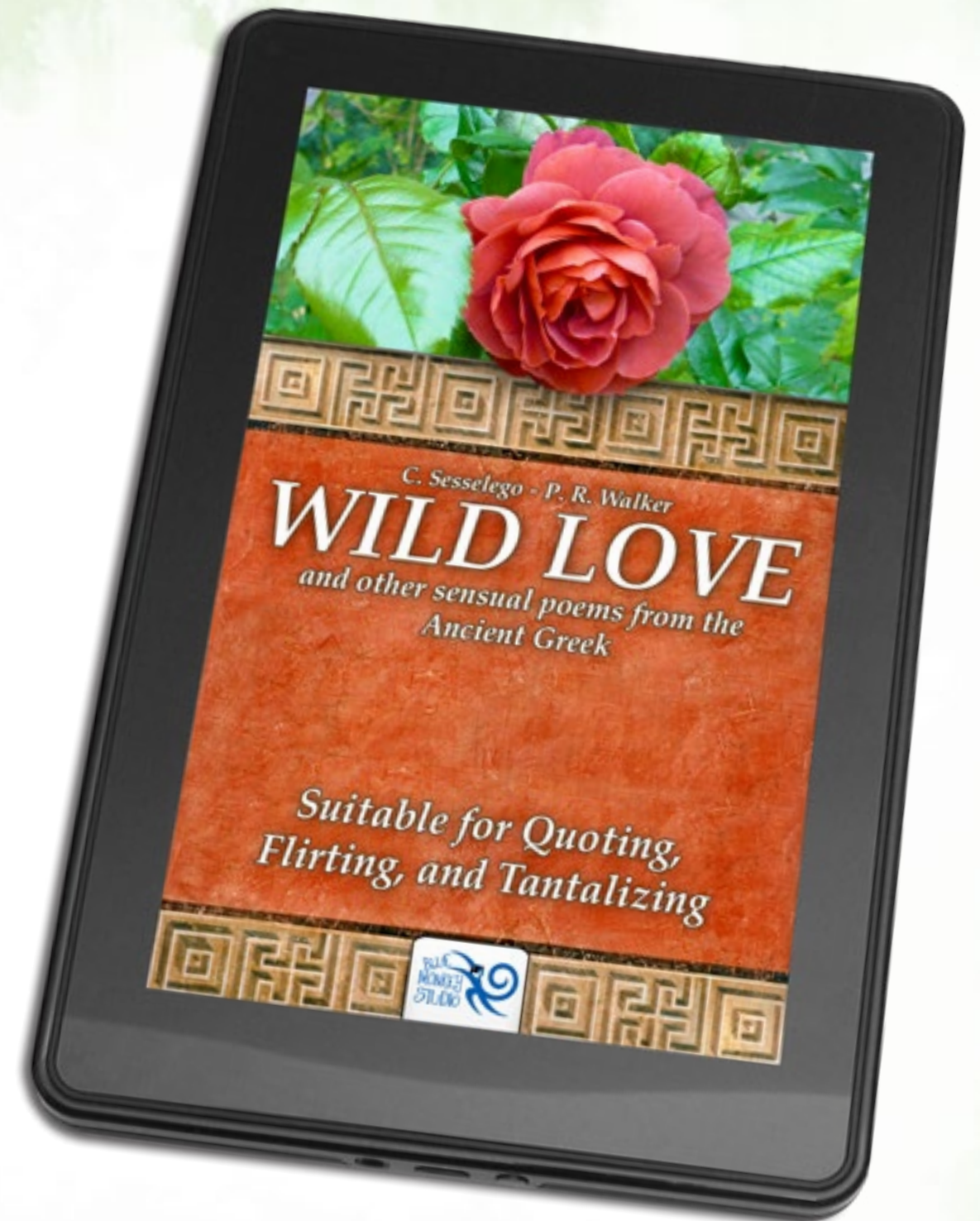
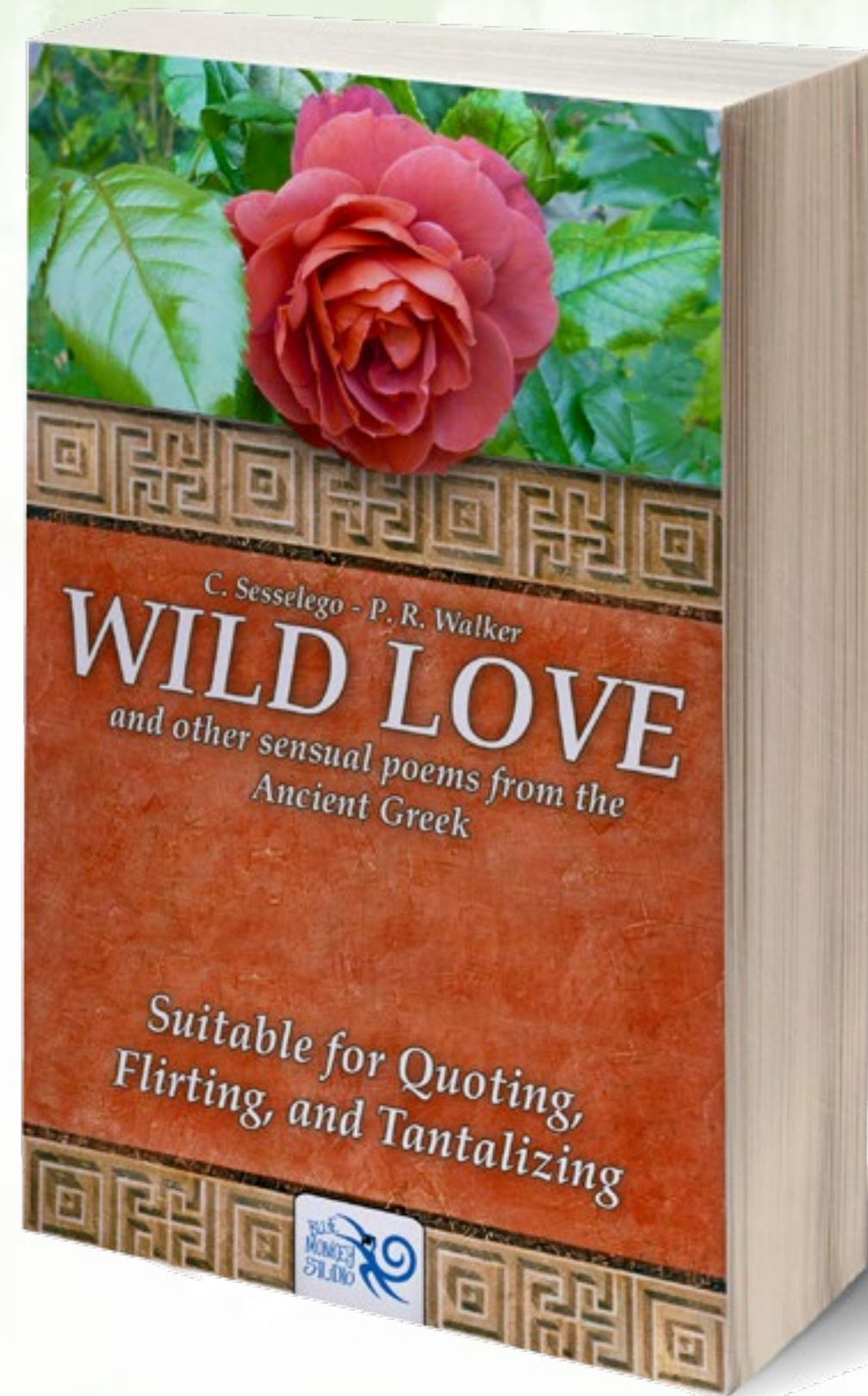
CONFESSION

ἀλλά μ' ὁ λυσιμελής, ὧ ταίρε, δάμναται πόθος.

Desire that exhausts the limbs, my friend, consumes me.

Archilochus, 85





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Blue Monkey Studio (BMS), established in 2010, is an Italian firm specializing in graphic design, illustration and publishing services. BMS provides high-quality art and design to local, national and international clients at competitive rates, focusing on establishing a company's brand and corporate identity through a customized logo, mascot, letterhead, business cards and web design.

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