

Sappho's Helen

In fragment 16, Sappho engages directly with the Homeric discourses of Helen as a character as well as the pursuit of excellence, “to kalliston.” In responding to this Homeric context, Sappho’s poem features a clear departure from both the typical characterization of Helen within the archaic melic tradition and the glorification of the epic genre. Scholarly attitudes have shifted in recent years to accept a more positive reading of Helen in this fragment, viewing this as a kind of challenge to the more traditional chastising of the literary Helen (e.g., Snyder 1997). Winkler 1990 in particular promotes the agency of Helen in keeping with “Sappho’s perspective.” Building on the work of these scholars, I consider how Helen’s agency functions as an extension of Sappho’s own poetic voice and discuss how Sappho casts Helen as one among the many warriors who sailed to Troy, leaving behind her spouse, child, and aging parents for something much more important: “to kalliston.” As explored to some extent by Rissman 1983 and Blondell 2010 and 2013, Sappho draws on the similarities between Helen and other epic heroes, most notably Achilles, to heighten the Homeric context. I expand this discussion of Helen as hero and show how it helps to develop a clearer sense of agency for Helen, whose choice is central to the sentiment of fragment 16.

Within this paper, I also work with Sappho 1 to contrast the relationship both Helen and Sappho share with Aphrodite. Through the layering of these relationships, Sappho suggests that the pursuit of “to kalliston” is, in fact, service to the goddess, which for Sappho occurs through the composition of love poetry. Rosenmeyer 1997 rightly discusses the “demonization” of Sappho that occurs by commentators who praise her in a specifically female context, and so my paper will consider not only how the poem speaks about gender but also how the genre of lyric provides new opportunities for Sappho (and Helen) to play with subjectivity. I examine how

through her new characterization of Helen and utilization of the lyric “I,” Sappho situates herself among the many who have tackled the Homeric tradition, cultivating a unique voice within an overwhelmingly male chorus of poets and forever changing the conversation between lyric and epic.

Bibliography

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