

Quidquid erit, melius quam nunc erit: Reconsidering Ovid's Sappho through her Inscription

The act of writing has a prominent place in Ovid's *Heroides*, and writing intended for public display is included in several heroines' epistles. Six inscriptions are present in the single *Heroides*, half of which are epitaphs at the end of the letters of women who plan to die soon: Phyllis (*Her.* 2.147–48), Dido (*Her.* 7.195–96) and Hypermnestra (*Her.* 14.129–30). Sappho's letter to Phaon also contains an epigram intended for the public (*Her.* 15.183–84), but I argue that it is meant to be a purely dedicatory inscription, not a funerary one.

Ramsby's study of inscriptions in the *Heroides* shows that one of the primary concerns of Ovid's female authors was presenting their versions of their stories in a medium that was permanent and highly visible (120–21). By utilizing the traditional funereal functions of elegy, Ovid provided a way for the women to express their motivations and experiences. These women who desired visibility and remembrance echoed the concerns of several poets, including Ovid himself, and much of the Roman population at large, as they sought commemoration through epitaphs (Lattimore 55, 241-43).

Ovid had Phyllis, Dido, and Hypermnestra compose their own epitaphs and place them near the conclusions of their letters. Each inscription not only provided information about the situation which led to the woman's death, but also gave insights about the mental state and character of the letter's author. Phyllis and Dido's epitaphs drew attention to the men whom they blamed for their deaths, and allowed Ovid to emphasize their agency, while crafting distinctions in their personalities. Hypermnestra's epistle, while still referencing her upcoming death, focused on piety, ties of kinship and marriage, the circumstances of her anticipated death, and the desire for Lyncaeus to arrange for her burial and epitaph—all reminiscent of features found on Roman graves.

Sappho's inscription, on the other hand, is thirty lines away from the end of her letter, and makes no reference to Phaon, or even the possibility of her death. It is instead a dedicatory inscription which Ovid had her state that she would set up *after* she survived the jump from the cliff at Actium, freeing herself from her love for Phaon (*Her.* 15.177–82). While Ramsby rightly points out that Sappho's epigram also deals with "authority, choice of self-memorialization, and agency" (118), she does not explore what the very different character of this dedication of her lyre to Apollo means for the epigram's classification as funereal or dedicatory. While Ramsby acknowledges the epigram as dedicatory, she is swayed by Sappho's eventual fate to look upon it as an epitaph as well. Other scholars simply present their interpretations of the epigram as either funerary (Lindheim 161 and Rimell 131) or simply dedicatory (Deremetz 42, Jacobson 290, and Knox 309) based on the lines themselves, without considering the other inscriptions in the *Heroides*. However, by exploring the very different character of the dedication, especially in comparison to Roman funerary inscriptions and the three epitaphs in the *Heroides*, we must reinterpret the nature of the epigram which Ovid had Sappho construct, as well as her letter as a whole, and what she hoped to achieve by jumping from the Leucadian cliff.

By examining the context and features of the funerary epigrams in the letters of Phyllis, Dido, and Hypermnestra alongside the epigram in Sappho's epistle, I will show that Ovid did not intend for the poetess' public inscription to act as an epitaph, but only as a dedication of her lyre to Apollo. This offering would have served to strengthen her place as a follower of the god and express her thanks for helping her survive the leap, ridding herself of her love for Phaon.

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