

A Beautiful Death: Sappho's Iliadic Corporeality

In this paper, I aim to identify the poetic significance of Sappho 31's "pathology of love" in terms of her reception of the Iliadic process of dying. Sappho's engagement with the Trojan cycle is well-known. Beyond direct allusions to the subject matter of the Trojan cycle, such as poems 16 and 44, I believe there are also motifs shared between the two poets which reflect more nuanced conceptions of the relationship of the self to the outside world that speak to Sappho's "many-minded" poetics, which John Winkler notes about Sappho 1 (Winkler 1990, 167). One of these conceptions is the perception of the living body, and the difference in the perception of a corpse.

I argue that in poem 31 Sappho is drawing on the same concepts of a piecemeal, living anatomy and the unity of the body in death as Simone Weil documents for the *Iliad*. Michael Clarke briefly addresses the issue of Homeric corporeal wholeness, and concludes that the Homeric body "is defined in terms of processes more precisely than of things" and that "the thing that English calls 'the body' will be exactly coterminous with and identical to the mass of blood, bones, and consciousness that is a human being" (Clarke 1999, 115). When describing the death of a warrior, the poet of the *Iliad* often, if not always, focuses on the debilitation of one or two distinct body parts (Morrison 1999) while the warrior still lives, and describes the human body as a whole only in death. He describes death as a process of the collection of limbs being loosened (λύειν γυῖα; *Il.* 7.12; 15.581; 16.312, 341). Often he uses the motif of τρώμος seizing the γυῖα of an individual who is still alive but is directly confronted with the possibility of death (*Il.* 3.34; 14.506; 20.44).

That the poet of the *Iliad* had no concept of a "body" but rather an aggregation of parts undergoing dynamic processes informs my reading of Sappho's pathology as a distinctly Iliadic

portrayal of a living body approaching, and ultimately reaching death. Parallels with Homeric warfare and the pathology of love have been well-documented by Leah Rissman, but no study has attempted to equate the Homeric description of the failure of discrete body parts ending in corporeal wholeness only in death with Sappho's description of organ failure and the transition to unity in death. My paper will focus primarily on this notion of wholeness in death as Sappho describes it (τρόμος δέ παῖσαν ἄγρει [Sappho 31.13]) and how this corporeal wholeness reflects a consciousness of and engagement with an Iliadic stock formula. Sappho's use of the Iliadic stock formula sheds more light on her deeper engagement with poetic polyphony, as we see in poem 1, as Sappho steps outside of herself at the moment of death and takes on the role of the poet describing a heroic death.

The importance of this observation for a reading of Sappho 31 lies in Sappho's conception of the living body as a conglomeration of discrete parts, and how her description of her transition to a unified, dead whole reflects her poetic ability to give both a subjective and objective perspective on her own death. Sappho begins with a description of the physical effects that would only be apparent to herself (loss of speech and sight) but then shifts to the outwardly visible effects of her experience of death (change of color). By using the Iliadic formulae for not only her subjective experience of death but also what would have to be a third-person narration of the final unity in death, she casts herself as both victim and poet who can conceive of the personal experience of dying and can narrate the final unity of the body that external observers in the *Iliad* see in a dead human being. Sappho thus enriches her lyric concern for the personal experience of her suffering (Holmes 2010, 43) with the narrative description of the heroic death common in the *Iliad*.

Bibliography

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