

Sappho 16.1-20

οἱ μὲν ἱππῶν στρότον οἱ δὲ πέσδων
οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖς' ἐπ[ι] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὅτ-
τω τις ἔραται·

πά]γχι δ' εὖμαρες σύνετον πόησαι 5
π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ', ἃ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἑλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα
τὸν [πανάρ]ιστον

καλλ[ίποι]σ' ἔβα 'ς Τροΐαν πλέοι[σα
κωὺδ[ἐ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων 10
πάμ[παν] ἐμνάσθη, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὐτὰν
]σαν

]αμπτον γὰρ [
]. . . κούφως τ[]οησ[.]ν
. .]με νῦν Ἀνακτορί[ας ὁ]γέμναι- 15
σ' οὐ] παραιοίσας·

τᾶ]ς κε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα
κάμάρυγμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω
ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κᾶν ὅπλοισι
πεσδομ]άχεντας.¹ 20

¹ Campbell, (1982).

Translation of lines 1-8

Some say the cavalry, others the infantry,
others the naval army, to be the finest thing
on this black earth, but I say that it is
whatever one desires;
it is easy to make this understandable to everyone,
for Helen who was far superior in beauty
than any mortal, left
the very best of men

Summary

Fragment 16 is one of Sappho's poems about love. In the poem Sappho is presenting different points of view regarding the most beautiful thing in existence, creating a contrast by using military and sensual vocabulary. The fragment is structured in five stanzas, and it is clear to the reader that Sappho is using Homeric references to emphasise on the importance of love over war in life. It is also a poem which contains a plethora of contrasting elements both in the structure as well as within the conveyed meanings. Sappho begins the poem with a contrasting argument as to what might be considered the finest thing, mentioning that even though others consider it to be the army forces, she believes it is the thing one loves. She uses the myth of Helen of Troy to enhance her claim and she recalls that she abandoned her family in the pursue of love. After the third stanza the poem seems to switch and Sappho recalls Anaktoria, the woman she loves, and whom she would prefer to get a glimpse of instead of gazing at a mighty military sight.

Commentary analysis

Sappho 16 begins with a rather unusual long sentence, revealing what different people consider as the finest thing in the world. Some consider the finest thing to be an army of cavalry, others of infantry and others of ships, which are all military terms and set up a more masculine energy and vocabulary within the poem. However, Sappho ends the stanza with a very abrupt and short sentence stating that even though others consider military things to be more important, she views the object of one's desire as superior to all. Thus, from the very first lines, Sappho creates a contrast among harsh military terms and softer erotic ones. Sappho uses a "priamel", which is a rhetorical technique to strongly emphasise the contrast between war and love in the first four lines, as well as the distinction between herself and everyone else. In a way, she positions herself across everyone else when it comes to what each party considers as the finest thing, which can be seen in the way the poem is being structured; there is the use of particles of "μεν../δε..", which refer to a number of people who value the army, in contrast to the emphatic use of the personal pronoun (ἐγὼ δὲ) to refer to the one person who values love. The first take up more than two lines in the first stanza, while the latter takes up one and a half lines in the end of the stanza. This only enhances further the contrast of military and love and places it in a wider scale, as it makes the distinction among the many men who are vaguely mentioned and of a single "I" of the poetic persona, who places love above war.

In line 2 of the poem, it is noted that the verb “φαῖσ” is located in the middle of the sentence, which is often used in poetry to create a sense of balance as it is a quite aesthetic feature, however in the specific poem it enhances even more the general contrast within the text, as the verb is located between two very different images, a fleet of ships and the dark earth, which are complete opposite things as ships do not belong on earth but their place is in the sea. This aesthetically pleasing structure is conveying a rather disturbing concept of two things opposite to each other and therefore the verse is unbalanced, and it creates a feeling of uneasiness. Following the first lines of military language, Sappho uses the phrase “γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν” in line 2, which is quite common in the Homeric texts, and epic language is evident in the rest of the poem, such as “πάγχyu” in line 5, “[πανάρ]ιστον” in line 8, and the direct mentioning of Helen and Troy as well. Those immediate references to very specific epic features seem to be contradicting the lyric genre and the more sensual language which is often used in lyric poetry. However, by directly mentioning Helen of Troy, there is a connection to the Iliad, which is a familiar narrative to the audience of the time and even the modern one. Hence, Sappho uses the well-known Homeric narrative and vocabulary to discuss the theme of war and love within the poem. Epic references are sometimes used in lyric poetry to speak of love and refer to the belief that love and the feelings it evokes can hurt like a war, but it is the only thing worth fighting for.

Moving on to the 2nd stanza of the poem, one of the first things noticed is the use of the word “κάλλος”, which is similar to the word “κάλλιστον” from the 1st stanza of the poem. Sappho seems to be contrasting the two stanzas of the poem which focus on different notions of beauty, as the word “κάλλος” in line 7 is applied on a woman, while “κάλλιστον” in line 3 refers to the military. Thus, by mentioning Helen’s beauty Sappho is making a mythical reference and reminds the audience of the relevant and well-known myths regarding Helen, which are spread all around the Greek world. Subsequently, we can see her continuing on the same train of thought regarding the distinction between love and military things. Another interesting aspect of the poem is the use of words with a similar sound such as “πάγχyu” in line 5, “πάντι” in line 6 and “[πανάρ]ιστον” in line 8. Those words all have a similar sound resembling “πας” which is the Greek word for everyone, so Sappho is using the repetition of the prefix in order to emphasize that all that is mentioned is in fact accurate and true to everyone who will hear them, in a panhellenic scale, as myths are not created to be confined to individual areas. The alliteration continues on line 6 with the phrase “πόλυ περσκέθοισα”, which again has two similar letters with the “π-” sound in order. Another interesting detail regarding word order in the text is the placement of the definite article on line 6 and the lengthy gap between the article and the subject which is on the next line. This delay creates a feeling of suspense as to whom it might refer to and as soon as it is revealed there is a release of this suspense.

Finally, in the end of the 2nd stanza, it is notable that Menelaus is not mentioned by name, but instead is referred to as Helen’s husband. This draws the emphasis on Helen, making the poem more female centered, without focusing on men as much. This is also evident in the following lines, where Sappho is naming Anaktoria, as well as in the beginning of the poem where men are mentioned as some./some others.... In addition, the placement of “[τὸ]ν ἄνδρα” right after “Ελένα”, should create a balance within the verse and symbolize their union and the harmony between them, but despite placing them together she clarifies the myth of Helen and how she abandoned her husband to pursue love. This creates a sense of uneasiness to the poem and complicates the verse, by subverting the norms of poetic composition.

Turning to the 3rd stanza of the text, the very first word used is “καλλ[ίτοι]”, which is a word that looks similar to “κάλλος” and “κάλλιστον” from the previous stanzas and its function is to immediately evoke the idea of beauty by using a word not related to it, but with a similar appearance. There is direct mentioning of Troy and the epic tradition and the word “πλέοι[σα]” on the first line of the stanza is

connected contextually with the image of ships on the beginning of the poem. This first line is quite interesting when it comes to structure as it is framed by two participles, referring to Helen. Therefore, the poem has got a continuing context and keeps making references to the previous lines and stanzas, creating a circular row of thought. Another interesting detail is the phrase “σ’ ἔβα ’ς”, which is three words conjoined together, creating a flow to convey ideas of quick movement and leaving, while possibly indicating oral performance. The words are blurred together and this creates a pleasing sound as the poem is being presented. On line 11, the word “ἐμνάσθη” is being used to emphasise how Helen forgot about her husband and children and left them to go with Paris. This meaning is repeated on line 15, using a word deriving from the same origin (“ὀγέμναι-”) to speak of her own memories.

The poem up until this point is still focused on the myth of Helen and how she seemed to completely forget her family, which is how Helen must have been portrayed in the Homeric tradition. What Sappho manages in this specific poem is to manipulate the narrative and focus on love, which was the force that made Helen forget her family and children and leave them behind. So, immediately the story is being distorted and Sappho is using a very popular myth to discuss how powerful love and desire are for humans and perhaps offer a new perspective of the popular myth, as the focus is on Helen’s actions and reasoning behind them.

The 4th stanza might be fragmented, but it gives the readers two very important information as to how the poem is being developed. What makes Helen forget is the same thing that evokes memories to Sappho and makes her remember Anaktoria, the woman she loves. Thus the repetition of the words “ἐμνάσθη” and “ὀγέμναι-” emphasizes the way love can affect an individual. Line 16 contains the phrase “οὐ] παρείσας”, which implies that Anaktoria is not present in the poet’s reality. This carries a resemblance to Helen’s absence from her family’s life as described on the previous stanza. This is also emphasized by the use of the word “νῦν”, which takes the poem to Sappho’s present, suggesting that she is done speaking of past myths and that she will be sharing a personal experience of love. The transition from the Homeric myth to her own personal experience is an indication that the claim she makes on the first stanza, about what someone loves being the finest of all things, is in fact true and is supported not only by the argument regarding Helen, but also by a narration of her personal life. In this way she is using the poetic form to justify her argument and present it as a catholic truth.

On the first two lines of the 5th stanza, the vocabulary changes and becomes more lyric and erotically charged, contrasting the rest of the verses, in which the chosen words become more military like. Sappho shares some of her recollections of Anaktoria, which is especially interesting because she does not describe the specific details of her face, but she mentions the way her face glows and the way she walks (“τᾷς <κ>ε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα / κάμαρυχμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω”). The way Anaktoria is being described as she walks (“ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα”) offers a sense of motion to the poem as the audience does not know whether she is walking towards or away from Sappho. The rest of the lines include a more military vocabulary, which emphasises that Sappho does not place the object of her love above anything, not even the finest military force. Moreover, it connects the last lines of the poem with the first ones, which are also about types of militia. Thus, the poem is concluded in a circular notion, and it is also visually pleasing and balanced, as the first lines and the final ones are similar in content and vocabulary choice (“πεσομ]άχεντας” in line 20 and “πέσδων” in line 1).

Text

Campbell, David A. 1982. *Greek Lyric, Vol. I: Sappho and Alcaeus. Loeb Classical Library*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. In <https://digitalsappho.org/fragments/fr16/>.