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

jacqueline-jones@uiowa.edu

Jacqueline Jones


2) a. Phyllis (Her. 2.147–48):
Phyllida Demophon leto dedit hospes amantem
Ille necis causam praebuat, ipsa manum.

b. Dido (Her. 7.195–96):
Praebuit Aeneas et causam mortis et ensem;
Ipsa sua Dido concidit usus manum.

Exul Hypermnestra, pretium pietatis iniquum,
Quam mortem fratri depulit, ipsa tuit.

Demophon, a guest, ushered his lover Phyllis to a violent end.
He provided the cause of death, she the hand.
Aeneas provided the cause of death, and the blade;
Dido herself perished at her own hand.
Hypermnestra, an exile—the unjust price for piety—
she herself bore the death she averted from a frater.

3) a. Phyllis (Her. 2.145):
Inscribere mea causa invidiosas sepulcras.

b. Dido (Her. 7.194):
hoc tamen in tumuli marmore carmen erit:

c. Hypermnestra (Her. 14.128):
sculptaque sint titulo nostra sepulcras brevi:

Written on my tomb as the hateful cause.
Yet this verse will be on the marble of my tomb:
and let my tomb be engraved with a short inscription:


5) scribere plura libet; sed pondere lassa catenae
est manus, et vires subtrabit ipse timor. (Her. 14.131–32)
I would like to write more, but my hand is exhausted
by the weight of the chain, and fear itself takes away my strength.


7) Lattimore notes common formulae on epitaphs include nolite delere parentes ("parents, don’t erase me,” 18) and memoriae aeterna. (“for perpetual memory,” 245). Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1942.

8) grata lyram posui tibi, Phoebe, poetria Sappho;
convenit illa mihi, convenit illa tibi. (Her. 15.183–84)
The poetess Sappho gratefully dedicated this lyre to you, Phoebus;
that lyre, fitting for me, fitting for you.


Πρεξίδικη μὲν ἔρεξεν, ἔβολεύσας δὲ Δύσης
ἔμα τόδε: ἐνιή δ᾽ ἀμφοτέρων σοφίᾳ.

Prexidike made and Dyseris planned
this garment: the skill shared by them both.
b. Thanks for a cure (Anth. Pal. VI.203):

Η γρηγύρος ή χερνήτεις, ή γνυή πόδας,
πόστιν κατ’ έσθολην ύδατος παυνών
ήλεν ποθερπόκουσα σύν δριός ξύλω,
τὸ μὲν διευκρίπτετ τὴν τετρωμένην-
οίκος δὲ Νύμφας εἶλεν, αὖ ἐρεῦμον
Ἀτηνὴς παρορφίετα Συμαϊθον πατρὸς
ἐξούσι διήνεμον υγρὸν οἰκίων.
καὶ τῆς μὲν ἁμαξύλον ὀρτεμὸς σκέλος
θερμὴ διεστάρηκεν Αἴτνας λιβάς;
Νύμφαις δ’ ἐλείπει βάλτρον, αὖτ’ ἐπένεσαν
πέμπτει μὲν θάτρικτον, ἧπεθεσαίς δόσει.
A poor old woman, lame in the feet,
came after an auspicious rumor of healing water,
and she propped her injured self up,
approaching with the help of an oaken stick.
And pity seized the nymphs, who hold
the watery home of their eddying father Symaethus
in the districts of loud-roaring Etna.
Mt. Etna’s hot spring strengthened the
legs, both lame, of the recovered woman
and she left the stick for the nymphs; who, delighting in the gift,
approved of sending her home unsupported by a staff.


12) “quoniam non ignibus aequis
ureris, Ambracia est terra petenda tibi.
Phoebus ab excelso, quantum patet, aspicit aequor;
Actiacum populi Leucadumque vocant.
binc se Deucalion Pyrrhae successus amore,
missit, et illacis corpore pressit aquas.
 nec mora, versus amor fugit lentissima mersi
pectora. Deucalion igne levatus erat.
binc legem locus ille tenet, pete protinus altam
Leucada nec saxo desiluisse time.”
(Her. 15.163–72)

“Since you are consumed by unequal passion, Ambracia is the land you must seek.
Phoebus looks upon the sea from above, as far as it extends;
the people call it the Actian Sea and the Leucadian.
Here, Deucalion, inflamed by his love for Pyrrha, threw himself down,
and struck the waters with his body unharmed.
At once, his love changed and fled the most indifferent heart
of the one who plunged into the water; Deucalion had been freed from his love.
That place has this rule, Immediately seek high
Leucadia and do not fear to leap down from the rock.”

13) A fragment of Menander provides the only extant comic reference to the story: ὅρας...τῇ]ν [γὰρ] υψηλὴν... / οὗ
δὴ λέγεται πρώτῃ Σαπφῷ / τὸν ὑπέρκομπον θηρώσα Φάων’ / οἰστράντι πόθῳ ρίψαι πέτρας / ἀπὸ τηλεφανοῦς
(“For you see the high cliff, / where Sappho is said to be the first— / in her frenzied longing—to throw herself / from
the rocks you can see from afar / while pursuing arrogant Phaon,” Leukadia, 10–14).

14) inde chelyn Phoeb...ponam (“and then I will dedicate my lyre to Phoebus,” Her. 15.181)


15a. Aoniam Lesbiam amica lyram <tenens> (Am. 2.18.26) The Lesbian lover holding her Aonian lyre.

15b. dat votam Phoebou Lesbou amata lyram (Am. 2.18.34) The Lesbian, loved, gives her lyre as an offering to Apollo.

16a. dolor artibus obstat (Her. 15.195) My grief blocks my art

16b. quidquid erit, melius quam nunc erit (Her. 15.177) Whatever happens, it will be better than the way things are now.

16c. ut mibi Leucadiae fata petantur aequae (Her. 15.220) To seek the fate that the Leucadian sea holds for me.

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