

The Finest Host: A New Interpretation of Sappho 16

In this paper I stage a simple intervention in the scholarship on Sappho fr. 16 by challenging a traditional and ubiquitous assumption about the word κάλλιστον in its first sentence, leading not only to a richer interpretation of the song as a whole, but also to some broader implications about the roles of translation and intuition in the interpretation of ancient texts. The fragment's first publication in the tenth volume of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* series in 1914, along with Wilamowitz's founding study of the same year, inaugurated the traditional interpretation of its first stanza—[ο]ἰ μὲν ἰππῶν στρότον οἱ δὲ πέσδων / οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπ[ὶ] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν / [ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὄτ- / τῷ τις ἔραται (Obbink 2016, 17, identical to Grenfell and Hunt 1914, 23)—as the Oxyrhynchus editors translated: “Some say that the fairest thing on the black earth is a host of horsemen, others of foot, others of ships; but I say that is fairest which is the object of one's desire” (Grenfell and Hunt 1914, 40). While commentators invariably interpret κάλλιστον as a neuter substantive, “the fairest thing”, I argue that a fluent audience would have understood κάλλιστον primarily as a predicate adjective modifying στρότον, which in turn makes this first stanza primarily about not the finest thing on earth, but about the finest host, in some imagined military discourse. Revising the above translation accordingly: “Some say that a host of horsemen is the finest host on the black earth, others a host of foot soldiers, others of ships; but I say the finest host is that thing which one desires.”

My argument for centering this interpretation depends on both linguistic evidence and a communicable preference for its consequences on the song's meaning. First, on the grounds that κάλλιστον agrees with the masculine στρότον, that the neuter superlative substantive is not a

commonly attested phenomenon without the article, that in early usage κάλλιστος almost always describes something as finest of its kind, and that καλός describes implements of war in plenty of parallels, I claim that understanding κάλλιστον as a predicate would have been by far the most immediate and intuitive path of interpretation for a speaker of Ancient Greek. Then, I propose what I consider a more satisfying reading of this text than is available with the traditional interpretation of the first stanza. This new interpretation first of all establishes a kind of “love is like an army” claim that (unlike the intuitively simple sentiment that whatever you love is most beautiful) actually demands elaboration to be made “understandable by all” (σύνετον...[π]άντι—ll. 5-6). Awareness of this central metaphor opens up a new motive for the much-debated Helen exemplum, ostensibly to say that Paris, as the object of Helen’s desire, or Helen as Paris’s, was the true military force in the Trojan War. The metaphorical equation of Helen with an army, and a confusion of the different valences that καλός can have when describing people and armies (a tension translated by the English word “fine” in various registers), ultimately leads the singer to ironically lose sight of the metaphor and express her preference—as if she were going to war—for Anactoria, simply because she wants her. The structure of the conceit in turn enables an array of other trains of thought at all different degrees of concreteness in the metaphor.

The century of preference for the traditional interpretation of κάλλιστον can be explained on the one hand by certain contingent barriers to intuition, such as the lack of a non-archaic English word to translate σπρότον inclusive of the navy, the currency in English (unlike in Ancient Greek) of the phrase “on earth” to emphasize superlatives, or a gendered instinct to reject Sappho’s appropriation of military discourse. On the other hand, this example shows how resiliently translation, by nature integral to the study of any language without native speakers,

can pre-fix expectations in a reader's intuition and grant texts a false feeling of certain and self-evident meaning.

Bibliography

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