Sappho's Melilot

Among Sappho's repertoire of poetic devices is a strategy of "multiple identification,"
whereby the speaker or other characters of the poem assume multiple identities at the level of
interpretation (Winkler 1989). So, for example, the speaker of Sappho 1 may be identified with
both the wounded Diomedes and the wounded Aphrodite of *Iliad* 5 (Winkler 1989), while the
speaker of Sappho 16 may be identified both with a Helen who has found her Paris (i.e. her
κάλλιστον) and also with a Menelaus who is left behind (Pfeijffer 2000). This paper identifies in
Sappho 96 a related strategy of multiple identification, achieved through a complex network of
allusions to the *Odyssey*.

The Odyssean flavor of Sappho 96 emerges in its diction, simile, and theme. The "epic
flavour" (Hutchinson 2001) of the adjective βροδοδάκτυλος (96.8) and the phrase θάλασσαν ἐπ᾽
ἀλμύραν (96.10) is unmistakable, though this language is perhaps too widespread to be labeled
Odyssean in character. Reading ἀριγνώται at 96.4-5, however, we may detect an allusion to *Od*.
6.101-9, where Nausikaa is compared to Artemis, "distinguished" (ἀριγνώτη) among her
companions (cf. Page 1959, Burnett 1983, Stehle 1997). This allusion then introduces a group
dynamic to the subjects of the poem, as it identifies Atthis, who delighted her absent friend with
song (μόλπαι), with Nausikaa, who leads her group of handmaidens in song (μολπῆς). This
group dynamic is echoed in the moon simile that dominates the poem, in which the absent friend
is said to "stand out" (ἐμπρέπεται, 96.6) among the women of Lydia in language similar to that
by which Nausikaa "stands out" (μετέπρεπε) among her friends. Thus both Atthis and the absent
friend are presented as candidates for identification with Nausikaa, though in the latter case this
identification jars, as the absent friend is likely married and "standing out" among a circle of
married women (γυναίκεσσιν, 96.6-7). This identification of a married woman with Nausikaa

evokes a sense of nostalgia appropriate to the anxiety of separation to which the poem gives voice.

A further layer of complexity is added to this strategy of identification by the mention of the μελίλωτος (96.14). The compound name of this herb evokes both the sweetness of song and the narrow escape of Odysseus from the land of the Lotus-Eaters in *Odyssey* 9. The threat of forgetting one's home and loved ones is particularly relevant to the subjects of Sappho 96 - two loved ones separated by the sea. This interpretation then permits a second set of Odyssean identifications, Atthis/Penelope and the absent friend/absent Odysseus. If we take this word to fix a specifically Odyssean pattern of allusion in this poem, we may also identify at 96.21-22 an allusion to *Odyssey* 5.210-220, where Kalypso indicates the difficulty mortal women have in matching goddesses for beauty; similarly the absent friend's restless longing for Atthis at 96.16-17 resembles Odysseus' longing for Penelope.

The multiple identification of Atthis as Nausikaa/Penelope creates a similarly jarring effect to that of the identification of the absent friend with Nausikaa, which in turn opens up new possibilities for understanding the status of Atthis and the role of the speaker(s) in this poem. For the identification of Atthis with both Nausikaa and Penelope allows for the first person plural of the poem's speaker to be identified with attendants on both figures. The shifting identities of the speakers and subjects of the poem would seem to be most appropriate to the occasion of a wedding, in which the bride transitions from unmarried to married, and which may well have contained choral performances featuring laments for the bride (cf. McEvilley 1973; Lardinois 1996, 2001).

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