Death over the sea: A mournful echo of Sappho in Catullus

This paper considers Catullus 101, supported by 68 (a and b), as an echo of Sappho 44, in which the poet's mournful journey culminating in funeral rites for his brother at Troy is a partial inversion of the joyful movement to and in Troy that characterizes Sappho's depiction of the wedding of Hector and Andromache. Recent articles have shown how nostalgia and journeys (Armstrong 2013) and the gendering of grief (Seider 2016) are connected to Troy and his brother's death in these poems, and Feldherr 2000 shows how the funeral rites depicted and enacted in 101 are tied to the Roman social network. Furthermore, the association of Troy with grief is strong and indeed inseparable from any reference to it (see Putnam 2007 for this effect in Latin literature), but the reflection of Sappho 44 in Catullus complicates this grief and sheds light on the character of the network within which Catullus and his poems are embedded. In particular, it highlights the role of desire in this network, thus picking up on the ambivalent nature and power of desire that appears in fragment 44 and the epic tradition generally, while building upon the image of Troy as a focal point in a network connected by war and trade, friendship and family.

The loss of Catullus' brother and the joy he brought (68.95-96) can be seen as an inversion of the joyful union represented by the marriage of Hector and Andromache; the desire satisfied by Catullus' journey to Troy is that of performing funeral rites (101.1-4). Both the necessarily incomplete and symbolic reunion between brothers and the performance of a family rite are thus a mournful echo of the wedding in Sappho 44, but Catullus places himself and Troy within a very real network of Roman government and trade (Nappa 2018). This network is itself connected by desire — for fame, money, glory, power, standing, and indeed connections of duty

and love. This is also an echo of the network reflected in Sappho, for both global and personal come together in the story of the Trojan War, in which one sees desire connected to both the grand movements of empire and war and the creation and destruction of households and love. This mix of personal and public is perhaps given broader scope, if less emphasis, in Catullus.

The intensity of Catullus' grief for his brother befits the scale of the grief connected to Troy, as is underscored by the image of his whole house buried (68.94), but any reference to Troy opens up a range of associations. Journeys, glory, family and friendship, heroism, power, and desire – all are present alongside the great destruction. At the same time, the celebration in Sappho 44 contains its own mournful echoes, for the wedding of Hector and Andromache brings to mind the most famous, and destructive, wedding in the tale of Troy, that of Paris and Helen (Spelman 2017). As fragment 16 makes explicit, that union involves a separation from a husband, but marriage in the ancient Greek world always had an implicit grief in the separation of the brides and their families. This is emphasized in 44 by the references to bringing Andromache across the sea to Troy. The layers of this image are inverted in Catullus' evocation of 44, as loss becomes the primary theme and the joyful a sad counterpoint. Ambivalence in an erotic context is a recurring theme in the poems of Catullus, but he, like Sappho, positions Troy within a larger network, and the entwined imagery of desire, bonds of familial love, and networks of war and trade that is evoked in 101 can add to our understanding of his poetic world.

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