

Reading Sappho in the Pandemic

In recent years, approaches to the study of Greek lyric have shifted away from the performance-based, anthropological approach typical of much scholarship of the last few decades, in favor of anchoring our responses in our experiences of the poem itself (e.g. Budelmann and Phillips 2018, Fearn 2020). This change of direction arises in part from a dissatisfaction with performance-based approaches, and in part from a larger shift in classical studies toward “embodied” understandings of literature; among the various books on embodied cognition that have come out in the last few years, Meineck 2018 includes a paper on Sappho. We are experiencing a different kind of impetus toward embodied, subjective engagement with ancient literature through the needs of our students during the global pandemic. In this difficult time, we serve both our scholarship and our teaching well by reading lyric poetry in light of our own pandemic experiences.

For the many poems of Sappho that highlight intense physical or emotional sensations, experiential reading like this is relatively straightforward. But Sappho 98 at first glance is not an easy poem to read as an expression of deeply felt subjective experience. Addressing Kleis (98b.1), the speaker says that she does not have a headband to give Kleis, which is connected in some fragmentary and unclear fashion with instability at Mytilene (98b.3). The fragmentary remains of this poem say little to nothing about feelings. The narrator does not explicitly name her own emotions about having no headband for Kleis – she simply states her inability to get one (σοὶ δ’ ἔγω Κλέϊ ποικίλαν [οὐκ ἔχω πόθεν ἔσσειται [μιτράν[αν], 98b.1-3). Rather, the poem describes different hair fashions that are suitable for different complexions (98a) and that the narrator cannot get. The linkage between a “family tradition” about headbands (Kurke 2021:

103) and larger forces of political instability that the headband evokes is clear, but largely implicit. Feelings about either the headband or the political situation remain off stage.

The pandemic has enlivened the emotional force of this poem in a whole new way. After eighteen months of lockdown, virtually all of us have had the experience of losing access to some form of personal adornment or enjoyment that is traditional in our family. Like Sappho seems to have done in poem 98, we are grappling with supply shortages, business closures due to the economic pressures of the pandemic, and isolation from family members from whom we are separated by fears of infection or political differences over vaccination. All of us can point to a personal version of Sappho's headband, a superficially trivial family custom whose unavailability during the pandemic stands for the effect of larger political and social disruptions on the most meaningful and intimate ties. We can now *understand* this poem in a way that many of us could not before. Reading Sappho informed by our own experiences in the pandemic makes us better scholars and better teachers.

Bibliography

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