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SAPPHO'S "TITHONUS POEM": THE SOLACE OF IMMORTALITY

ΛΟΥΚΑΣ ΠΑΠΑΔΙΜΙΤΡΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ

ὔμμες πεδὰ Μοῖσαν ἰ]οκ[ό]λπων κάλα δῶρα, παῖδες,
σπουδάσδετε καὶ τὰ]ν φιλάοιδον λιγύραν χελύνναν·

ἔμοι δ' ἄπαλον πρίν] ποτ' [ἔ]οντα χροὰ γῆρας ἤδη
ἐπέλλαβε, λεῦκαι δ' ἐγ]έροντο τρίχες ἐκ μελαίναν·

5 βάρυς δέ μ' ὁ [θ]ῦμος πεπόηται, γόνα δ' [ο]ὐ φέροισι,
τὰ δὴ ποτα λαίψηρ' ἔον ὄρησθ' ἴσα νεβρίοισι.

τὰ <μὲν> στεναχίσδω θαμέως· ἀλλὰ τί κεν ποεῖην;
ἀγήραον ἄνθρωπον ἔοντ' οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι.

10 καὶ γάρ π[ο]τα Τίθωνον ἔφαντο βροδόπαχυν Αὔων
ἔρωι διελάθεισαν βάμεν' εἰς ἔσχατα γᾶς φέροισα]ν,

ἔοντα [κ]άλων καὶ νέον, ἀλλ' αὐτον ὕμωσ ἔμαρψε
χρόνωι πόλιον γῆρας, ἔχ[ο]ντ' ἀθανάταν ἄκοιτιν.¹

Since the publication of this poem in 2004² much scholarly controversy has arisen not only concerning its textual restoration, especially over the matter of which are the most suitable supplements of the first two lines, but also regarding

¹ The text is that of West 2005, while in line 10 I adopt the conjecture of Tsantsanoglou 2009.

² See Gronewald and Daniel 2004a and 2004b.

the question of whether this fragment constitutes a complete poem, ending in line 12, or whether it originally incorporated four more mutilated verses found in an *Oxyrynchus papyrus* (P. Oxy. 1787). A middle solution postulates that both versions of the poem were available during antiquity in different contexts.³ The purpose of this paper is twofold: by using exclusively aesthetic criteria I first intend to adduce additional evidence which supports Ellen Greene's contention that Sappho's use of the Tithonus' exemplum implicitly articulates her hope for poetic immortality,⁴ something which constitutes a solace in her old age, and secondly I intend to demonstrate that the poem most likely ends at line 12. Along the way I will also discuss which of the proposed supplements of the first two lines is more in accordance with the poem's internal logic, as I perceive it to be.

The poem, as reconstructed by West, begins with an address to a group of young persons of unspecified gender, before proceeding into a detailed account of the declining effects that old age exercises upon the speaker. Whether we are inclined to accept West's supplements or not, an antithesis is thus established between the person addressing this group of people and the group itself. This antithesis, in turn, renders more likely the possibility that the poetic "I" speaks from a position of authority and is actually attempting to teach its audience something, especially if we bear in mind that the subject that initially preoccupies it – the presents of the Muses and artistic creation in general – is something to which Sappho has devoted her entire life.⁵ The message that the speaking "I" intends to convey is apparently articulated in the maxim in line 8: it is impossible for man to avoid old age. The mythological paradigm that follows seems to strengthen this proverbial truth; even Tithonus, who was carried by Dawn to the ends of the world, did not escape old age despite the fact that he had an immortal consort. Judging from this superficial structure, the poem is characterized by an air of restrained resignation: there is nothing that mortals can actually do in the face of upcoming old age. However, the initial expectation that the poet intends to impart to her audience a "truth" concerning artistic creation, a truth whose weight is increased by the presumed wisdom of her age and experience, remains largely unfulfilled, as the poem seems to support a platitude. This apparent fact

³ See Boedeker 2009, Lardinois 2009 and Nagy 2009.

⁴ Greene 2009.

⁵ And it is precisely this reason which urges us to identify the 'I' of the poem with Sappho.

renders more likely the possibility that the poem originally contained the four mutilated lines of the Oxyrynchus papyrus. Nevertheless, if we pay closer attention to the twelve lines and try to define more closely and systematically the relations between the different parts of the poem, we will soon realize that the first twelve lines may well constitute an entity.

I must state from the outset that the principle through which I am operating is that repetitions in Sappho, as well as in the majority of ancient Greek poets, are almost always intentional and meaningful. It is their combination which essentially creates a subtext that implicitly conveys the message that the poet imparts to her audience. And the repetitions in these twelve lines suggest, first of all, an identification between the speaking "I" or Sappho and Tithonus. Just like Sappho, Tithonus is overtaken by old age (γήρας; cf. 3 to 12), whereas there was a time (ποτα; cf. 3 and 6 to 9) that both of them were young.⁶ The similarity of their situations is strengthened by the further use of the participle ἔοντα (cf. 3 to 11). The recurrence of these three words is, I believe, unmistakable evidence that the poetess intends to somehow align herself with the consort of Dawn. Furthermore, both of them are implicitly linked with the proverbial truth expressed in line 8 through the repetition of the participle (ἔοντα, 8) and the use of the adjective ἀγήραον. And while the initial impression is that their point of identification is old age, there is another –more implicit– parallelism between the speaker and the mythological figure that completes the picture and renders their relation to each other much more meaningful, a parallelism which is established by the repetition of the adjective "beautiful" (cf. κάλα, 1 to κάλον, 11); over her entire life Sappho has tended over the beautiful gifts of the Muses, while Tithonus was carried by Eos to the ends of the world and acquired an immortal spouse due to his beauty.

Consequently, both Sappho and Tithonus were somehow related with deities, Sappho with the Muses and Tithonus with Eos.⁷ The point of this persistent identification is revealed in the very last phrase of the poem. Due to his beauty Tithonus won an *immortal* wife; at the same time, the fact that he was

⁶ The parallelism between the adverbs in the cases of Sappho and Tithonus has already been noted by Stehle 2009.

⁷ However, we should recognize that these are very different relationships: the one musical between a (mortal) woman and virgin goddesses, the other erotic between a (mortal) man and a goddess-lover.

brought to the ends of the world (10) is meant as a mark of distinction from the rest of humankind.⁸ It was also well known from mythology that despite his old age Tithonus won immortality. Similarly, Sappho expresses in a reticent and most implicit manner her wish that the service she has offered to the Muses will ensure her a similar result, immortality. And it is this precise wish which constitutes her greatest solace in old age. It is also this precise wish that justifies her initial exhortation to the young people to pursue the gifts of the Muses. Thus, I believe that West's supplements of the first two lines are more in accordance with the poem's internal logic, as I have outlined it, than those of Gronewald and Daniel or those of Lidov.⁹ The same is true for the propositions of Fernández-Delgado.¹⁰ What is needed at this point is – I think – an exhortation of the poetess to the young people whom she addresses to preoccupy themselves with art because, when they reach her age and will experience themselves its debilitating effects, they will find a fulfilling consolation in the hope of immortality. Moreover, the fact that Sappho is now in a position to teach the younger generation constitutes by itself an additional solace.¹¹ In this context, the suggestion of Janko that Sappho alludes to Tithonus' subsequent transformation into a cicada¹² is not in itself implausible, but it is neither necessary, since Sappho has taken so much pain through repeated verbal repetitions to illustrate the fact that at this point of her life she considers herself similar to Tithonus not only with regard to old age, but also – and more importantly – through her connection to deities that also have the capacity to confer to mortals a form of immortality, as Eos had done for Tithonus. After all, an additional link between the Muses and Dawn is established through the epithets used to refer to them, epithets which both involve certain kinds of flowers (cf. ἰοκόλπων, 1 to βροδοπάχυν, 9).

⁸ Cf. Zellner 2009, 51 and Brown 2011, 22.

⁹ Gronewald and Daniel 2004a propose φέρω τάδε Μοΐσαν ἰοκ[ό]λπων κάλα δῶρα, παῖδες, / λάβοισα πάλιν τὰ]ν Φιλάοιδον λιγύραν χελύνναν·, while Lidov 2009 reads νῦν δὴ μ' ἔτι Μοΐσαν ἰοκ[ό]λπων κάλα δῶρα, παῖδες, (οἱ νῦν μ' ἤδεα Μοΐσαν...) / φίλημμι δὲ φάνα]ν φιλάοιδον λιγύραν χελύνναν·

¹⁰ The conjecture of Fernández-Delgado 2014 is Δέκεσθε τὰ Μοΐσαν ἰοκ[ό]λπων κάλα δῶρα, παῖδες, / ὄρχησθε δὲ κατὰ τὰ]ν φιλάοιδον λιγύραν χελύνναν.

¹¹ The fact that Sappho acts as a teacher has already been acknowledged by Hardie 2005, 29.

¹² Janko 2005; cf. Rawles 2006, 6–7.

Thus, Sappho starts from a position of stated infirmity, especially concerning the effects that old age exercises upon her soul (πεπότηται, 5), goes through a stage of temporary perplexity in her helplessness (ἀλλὰ τί κεν ποείην; 7), only to give the solution to her problem through the ποίημα she has composed. By composing this poem Sappho still brings beauty to the lives of young people by conferring to them her secret about the way that immortality can be obtained by mortals and, at the same time, consoles herself. At this point, it would be useful to contrast the suggestive expression of her hope for poetic immortality, in accordance as it is with the prudence of her advanced age, to the fragment in which she proudly and antagonistically asserts her superiority to another woman who does not possess her artistic skills (fr. 55).¹³ Consequently, it is not improbable that the latter poem had been composed by Sappho at a younger age.

Now that we have analyzed the poem as it stands in the Cologne papyrus, let us examine how the four lines of the Oxyrynchus fragment might relate to it, whether they are adding anything substantial to the meaning which we have already defined. Again our main criterion of evaluation will be verbal repetition. The lines are as follows:

]ιμέναν νομίσδει
]αις ὀπάσδοι
ἔγω δὲ φίλημμ' ἀβροσύναν, ...] τοῦτο καί μοι
τὸ λά[μπρον ἔρος τῶελίω καὶ τὸ κά]λον λέ[λ]ογχε

According to this fragment, delicacy, which Sappho adores, and love has obtained for her the brightness and beauty of the sun. The verb φίλημμ' in the third line of the Oxyrynchus fragment echoes the epithet φιλάοιδον of line two of our poem, connecting thus delicacy with the art of Sappho, which is inextricably linked in its turn with the feeling of love, if we are to consider the two fragments as parts of the same poem. And indeed, love has been the main focus of Sappho's poetry, as we have come to know it through our surviving fragments. On the other hand, the beauty (κόλον) of the Sun reminds us of the beautiful presents of the Muses (κάλα δῶρα, 1), as well as of the beauty of Tithonus (ἔοντα κάλον,

¹³ Sappho also speaks about her immortality as a singer-performer in fr. 32, 65 and 147. See Lardinois 2008, who makes the interesting contention that Sappho first of all expected the *performances* of her poetry to be remembered in the future and not so much their recording in writing.

11), accentuating in this way the latent idea that her poetic merit confers immortality to her, an idea which has already been adequately stressed. In this context, the four lines appear as rather redundant, if they are to be taken as a continuation of the Tithonus poem. However, it could be objected that it might have been Sappho's purpose to give an additional emphasis to this notion, although such an emphasis would have been more plausible if an antithesis had been established between the brightness of the sun and the darkness of impending death. But such an antithesis does not exist in the poem. Another problem of the association between the two fragments arises through the recurrence of the word "love" (ἔρως), which had been previously used to refer to Dawn's feelings for Tithonus (ἔρωι διελάθεισαν, 10). Consequently, Sappho would have intended to relate herself not only to Tithonus, but also to Eos, a prospect which seems rather self-contradictory. The repetition might suggest that, like Dawn, Sappho either has somehow elevated her object(s) of desire or has lost something that was beautiful and of value to her. In the first case, the idea would complement her initial thesis, although it could not efface the redundancy entirely, while, in the second, the suggestion would compromise the solace she can find in her hope for immortality. And it is precisely this incongruity that renders the connection of the two fragments somewhat problematic.

In sum, I believe that the two fragments were probably not connected in any kind of context, as their internal logic is rather different. Of course, we must bear in mind the fact that the lines of the Oxyrynchus papyrus are not preserved in their entirety and that they might have contained information that was more compatible with the content and the logic of the Cologne papyrus. Nevertheless, the examination of both the Tithonus poem as it is preserved in the twelve lines and its purported sequel through the use of the aesthetic principle of verbal repetition has adequately demonstrated that their connection is precarious. The suggestion that Sappho, similarly to Tithonus, has laid her claim on immortality due to the beauty she has offered to the deities is more forcefully articulated through the last phrase of line twelve, which constitutes a more fitting climax to her implicit argumentation.¹⁴

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