

Sappho 158

Greek Text

σκιδναμένας ἐν στήθεσιν ὄργας
μαψυλάκαν γλῶσσαν πεφύλαχθαι

Meter:

_ u u _ _ _ u u _ _

(2 choriamb (_ u u _), each with an additional long syllable)

Translation

With anger spreading through your chest,
hold your yapping tongue.

Comments

This fragment is quoted by Plutarch to support a point he is making about controlling anger especially when drinking. ‘Words of wisdom’ or what are also referred to as maxims or gnomic utterances were an important part of the oral poetic tradition and frequently encountered in early Greek poetry (another example from Sappho is S. 58.8b). The advice Sappho offers is consistent with S.120. It is worth contrasting both this fragment and S.120 with the very scrappy S.44A(b). The use of the compound ‘get angry again’ in S.120.1 (the first attested usage) seems to suggest Sappho was all too familiar with the emotion of anger and the difficulty of managing it.

There is an interesting similarity to Sappho’s description of anger spreading ‘in the chest’ here and the heart beating ‘in the chest’ (exact same Greek) of S.31.6 that is a response to what many take to be sexual arousal. For while the sexual arousal keeps the tongue from moving (S. 31.9) because the lover (Sappho?) is perhaps entranced by the beloved, anger seems to have the opposite effect and the tongue needs to be deliberately restrained. It is one more example of Sappho evincing a sensitivity to diagnosing the interaction of psychology and physiology, something for which she was evidently admired by the famous physician Galen (see S. 50 and my comments). Aristotle quotes another fragment of Sappho’s poetry where she evinces a similar sensitivity and refers specifically to the tongue is S. 137. Although Sappho is rarely quoted in antiquity other than to demonstrate poetic technique but it is notable that the three authors who quote her to make a substantive point happen to be among the most important

names in ancient Greek literature.

Translation note: in the second line Sappho uses a rare form of an adjective comprised of a word for 'vain' or 'idle' and an onomatopoeic word most used to refer to a dog's bark. 'Yapping' is from Thomas McEvilley's rendering of this fragment.¹ The final verb is an infinitive used, as it often is in Homer, as in effect an imperative and there is no need to replicate the infinitive form in English (the same usage of an infinitive may occur in S. 44A(b)).

The categorization of the metrical form is not certain as it is the only instance of this form in Sappho.

Bibliography

David A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric I, Sappho and Alcaeus*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Thomas McEvilley, *Sappho*, Putnam: Spring Publications, 2008.

¹ Though unrelated to this poem in any direct way, I want to point out a distinction Paul Celan makes between 'garish chatter' that produces not a poem, but rather just the opposite. He draws upon a wonderful play on two words in German: 'Gedicht' is poem, what is not a poem is 'Genicht.' See the discussion in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word, Negative Theology and Incarnation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p219.