SHIFTING HELEN: AN INTERPRETATION OF SAPPHO, FRAGMENT 16 (VOIGT)

ο]ἰ μὲν ἰππήων στρότον, οἰ δὲ πέσδων,
οἰ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπ[ὶ] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὄτ-
    τω τις ἔραται·
πά]γχυ δ' εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι   5
π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ'· ἀ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἐλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα
    τόν [περ ἄρ]ιστον
καλλ[ίποι]σ' ἔβα 'ς Τροΐαν πλέοι[σα   9
κωὐδ[ὲ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων
πά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθ<η>, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὔταν
    ˋ   ]σαν
    ]αμπτον γὰρ [13
    ] . . . κούφωστ[   ]οη.[.]ν
. .]με νῦν Ἀνακτορί[ας ὀ]νέμναι-
    σ' οὐ] παρεοίσας,
τᾶ]ς <κ>ε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα   17
κἀμάρυχμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω
ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κὰν ὄπλοισι
πεσδομ]άχεντας.[1]

Denys Page, discussing this poem in his classic *Sappho and Alcaeus*, seemed unimpressed by its aesthetic merits. In his note on line 7 he says: 'The sequence of thought might have been clearer. . . . It seems then inelegant to begin this parable, the point of which is that Helen found τὸ κάλλιστον in her lover, by stating that she herself surpassed all mortals in this very quality' (p. 53). His interpretative essay phrases further objections. 'In a phrase which rings dull in our doubtful ears, she proceeds to illustrate the truth of her preamble by calling Helen of Troy in evidence' (p. 56). About the Helen exemplum itself he says: 'the thought is simple as the style is

[1] The text printed here is based on Voigt's edition of *P.Oxy.* 1231 fr. 1, col. i, 13–32 (containing lines 1–20), 2166 (a) 2 (*Ox.Pap.* XXI, 122, containing lines 7–12), and A.D. *Synt.* 291b, 2.418.9ff. Uhlig (quoting lines 3–4). Some, including Voigt, believe that lines 33–4 of *P.Oxy.* 1231 fr. 1, col. i, belong to this same poem (printed by Voigt as lines 21–2), as well as the scanty fragments of *P.Oxy.* 1231 fr. 36 (printed by Voigt as lines 28–30, assuming a lacuna of five lines between *P.Oxy.* 1231 fr. 1, col. i, 34 and the beginning of *P.Oxy.* 1231 fr. 36) and *PSI* 123, 1–2 (printed by Voigt as lines 31–2). The left-hand margin of *P.Oxy.* 1231 fr. 1, col. i, 32–4 is lost, so we cannot tell whether there was a coronis indicating the beginning of a new poem at 33 (i.e. after our line 20). Moreover, the general sense of 33–4 and of the other fragments is irrecoverable. Thus we only have the sense and compositional organization of lines 1–20 to go by. As I intend to demonstrate, the sense of the poem is complete at line 20; moreover, the echo in 19–20 of the opening stanza is a strong indication that the poem has come to a conclusion at line 20. See G. M. Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody* (Ithaca and London, 1974), 105–6; D. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus. An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry* (Oxford, 1955), 55; L. Rissman, *Love as War. Homeric Allusion in the Poetry of Sappho* (Konigstein, 1983), 55; cf. C. Segal, *Aglaia: The Poetry of Alcman, Sappho, Pindar, Bacchylides and Corinna* (Lanham, MD, 1998), 72–3, 78. On the supplement in line 8 (not printed by Voigt) see n. 9 below.

artless' and 'the transition back to the principal subject was perhaps not very adroitly managed' (p. 56). Page's criticism centres on the function of the exemplum of Helen. A close reconsideration of this exemplum, with special attention to the way in which it is embedded in the preceding and following context, will result in a better understanding and appreciation of this poem.

Some say a host of horsemen, others of infantry, others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the black earth; I say, it is what one loves.   (1–4)

Bundy, in the first volume of his *Studia Pindarica*, quoted the opening strophe as a 'straightforward example' of a priamel, defined by him as 'a focusing or selecting device in which one or more terms serve as foil for the point of particular interest'. 'Here', he says, 'a host of cavalry, a host of foot, and a host of ships are foil for the writer's own choice, which she states in a general proposition.'[2] This is true as far as it goes. It seems relevant to ask why Sappho has chosen exactly these three examples to serve as a 'foil' for her own preference. The answer to this question is at least threefold. First, on a basic level, the priamel manipulates our expectancy in two different ways. After the reference to the different army units the qualification κάλλιστον comes as a surprise: although the syntax guides us to expect a common characteristic of the army units to be given, the association of the military with beauty[3] is by no means so self-evident as to allow us to anticipate exactly this common denominator. Moreover, the connotations of the military units referred to do not help us to anticipate a statement about love—on the contrary: in appealing to a realm that is in its primary associations remote from love, the 'foil' puts us on the wrong track and adds the element of surprise to Sappho's statement about her preference for 'what one loves'. Surprise is a means of generating attentiveness, which is all the more important for poetry that was written to appeal to the ear and to be perceived as a linear succession of moments in time. This element of surprise is combined with suspense, for, as Page (p. 56) acutely observes, from the moment when Sappho says κῆν' ὅττω τις ἔραται we expect the object of her love to be identified. But Sappho withholds this information until line 15. Second, on a perhaps even more basic level, the poet's preference for the object of love rather than armies will be restated in lines 17–20: thus the themes chosen as 'foil' are constitutive of a thematic continuity. Third, the 'host of horsemen, of infantry, and of ships' evoke associations with war; it has been observed before[4] that ἐπ[ὶ] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν is reminiscent of a Homeric formula;[5] the combination of this phrase, conjuring up the world of the epic poems, with the warlike associations evoked by the 'foil' steers us to think of the Trojan War.[6] This has a thematic significance in the light of the central section of the poem, where we are told that Helen left hearth and home to sail to Troy (6–12).

[2] E. L. Bundy, *Studia Pindarica* vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1962), 5.

[3] The noun κάλλος (7), applied to Helen, makes clear that the aesthetic connotations of κάλλιστον predominate. For a detailed analysis of the semantics of κάλλιστον in terms of aesthetic superiority, see W. Liebermann, 'Überlegungen zu Sapphos "Höchstwert"', *A&A* 26 (1980), 51–74.

[4] Rissman (n. 1), 34–8, 48–54 (who argues that this poem is a *recusatio* of epic); P. DuBois, *Sappho Is Burning* (Chicago and London, 1995), 101 (thus also in E. Greene [ed.], *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches* [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996], 81).

[5] *Il.* 2.699, 15.715, 17.416, 20.494, *Od.* 11.365, 587, 19.111. For γᾶ including the seas, cf. Pi. *N.* 3.26.

[6] Rissman (n. 1, 34) observes that line 1 is reminiscent of Homeric πεζοί θ' ἱππῆές τε (*Il.* 2.180, 8.59, *Od.* 24.70) and ἱππῆες πεζοί τε (*Il.* 11.528). This would strengthen the effect.

It is very easy to make this understood by everyone. For she who by far surpassed all mortals in beauty, Helen, left her most noble husband behind and went sailing to Troy, not thinking at all about her child and dear parents, no, [the Cyprian goddess][7] led her from the path . . .   (5–12)

The story of Helen's leaving Menelaus and Sparta for Troy and Paris is emphatically (5–6, note also γάρ) introduced as an exemplum meant to illustrate the validity of the thesis that the most beautiful thing on earth is that which one loves. On the level of the avowed purpose of the exemplum, Helen found τὸ κάλλιστον in Paris; the fact that he, the object of her love, was indeed τὸ κάλλιστον for her is illustrated by the fact that she followed him to Troy, leaving behind those who were supposed to be most dear to her: her husband, daughter, and parents.[8] On this level, the emphasis on Menelaus' nobility ([τὸ]ν ἄνδρα / τόν [περ ἄρ]ιστον, 7–8)[9] serves to underscore the power of her passion.[10]

   On closer consideration, however, the exemplum seems odd. First, as Page (53) complains, it is surprising that the story meant to illustrate that Helen had found τὸ κάλλιστον in Paris emphasizes that 'she by far surpassed all mortals in beauty' (6–7).[11] Second, the consequence of Helen's romantic escape was ten years of war. In fact, our awareness of the Trojan War has been activated by the 'foil' in the opening strophe and is reactivated here by the explicit reference to Troy in line 9.[12] Third, since we are made

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[7] παράγαγ' (11) needs a subject. Since the exemplum is meant to illustrate the power of love, it is very likely indeed that the subject is either Aphrodite ('Veneris latet mentio', LP) or Eros. γάρ in 13 makes clear that a new main clause begins with the word preserved as]αμπτον. So Aphrodite or Eros must have been referred to in line 12 (but the first syllable of line 12 has a *gravis*) or at the very beginning of line 13. Page (p. 54) suggests something like [αὔτικ' ἴδοι]σαν or [οὐκ ἀέκοι]σαν / [Κύπρις· εὔκ]αμπτον γάρ (making use of the supplements proposed by Theander, Schubart, and Wilamowitz; for more details see Voigt's apparatus, p. 44). For an interpretation of this poem centring on Helen's relationship with Aphrodite, see G. A. Privitera, 'Su una nuova interpretazione di S. fr. 16 LP', *QUCC* 4 (1967), 182–7 (esp. 184–6 with n. 8).

[8] Thus Page (n. 1), 53, 56; Segal (n. 1), 66; E. M. Stern, 'Sappho fr. 16 LP. Zur strukturellen Einheit ihrer Lyrik', *Mnemosyne* 23 (1970), 348–61, esp. 355–6, who compares *Il.* 15.662–3 and 21.587 (see also Rissman [n. 1], 44). Helen placed ἔρως above φιλία, as it has been put by N. Austin, *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom* (Ithaca, 1994), 65–8; A. P. Burnett, *Three Archaic Poets: Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 287; Segal (n. 1), 75.

[9] [πανάρ]ιστον (proposed by Page) is not attested in Sappho, Alcaeus, or Homer; it has the disadvantage that the emphatic characterization of Menelaus as 'the very best of all' seems inconsistent with the epic tradition and out of place in the present context. [μέγ' ἄρ]ιστον (proposed by Gallavotti) occurs seven times in the *Iliad* and twice in the *Odyssey*, but nowhere with the article. See E. Degani and G. Burzacchini, *Lirici Greci* (Florence, 1977), 135. τόν [περ ἄρ]ιστον (more recently proposed by Marzullo) occurs four times in the *Iliad* and once in the *Odyssey*; what makes this supplement especially attractive is that the concessive force of the particle περ underscores that Helen's decision to leave him was contrary to what was to be expected, so as to highlight the power of her love for Paris.

[10] Alcaeus (fr. 283.3–10 V.) qualifies their nuptial bed as εὔστρωτον (8) to similar effect (cf. Segal [n. 1], 71). For a comparison of both poems see Stern (n. 8, 360–1), who concludes (following W. Barner, *Neue Alkaios-Papyri aus Oxyrhynchos* [Hildesheim, 1967], 211ff.) that Alcaeus' poem was a protest against Sappho's personal application of the story; but the evidence is inconclusive: see esp. Rissman (n. 1), 58, n. 26. See also W. H. Race, 'Sappho, fr. 16 L.-P. and Alkaios, fr. 42 L.-P.: Romantic and Classical strains in Lesbian poetry', *CJ* 85 (1989/90), 16–33; Segal (n. 1), 63–72.

[11] G. Koniaris, 'On Sappho fr. 16 (LP)', *Hermes* 95 (1967), 267, specifies Page's objection by remarking that, according to the logic of the opening strophe, Paris should have been the one characterized as κάλλιστος On the alleged illogicality of the emphasis upon Helen's beauty, see further Austin (n. 8), 57ff.; G. Most, 'Sappho fr. 16.6–7 L-P.', *CQ* 31 (1981), 11–17, esp. 11–13.

[12] H. Saake, *Zur Kunst Sapphos. Motiv-analytische und kompositionstechnische Interpretationen* (München, Paderborn, and Wien, 1971), 132, thinks that Sappho, by not mentioning Paris, aims at excluding associations with the consequences of Helen's pursuit in love. Cf. Stern (n. 8), 354;

aware of the fact that Helen's choice resulted in the Trojan War, we also remember the outcome of this war: Troy was sacked, Paris killed, and Helen taken back home by Menelaus. That Helen's choice of κάλλιστον was in the end unsuccessful, not to say disastrous, seems to make the story an infelicitous exemplum for its avowed purpose.[13]

The first and the third oddities must be reconsidered in the light of the remainder of the poem. The second point, however, makes us aware of a further layer of relevance of the Helen story, in addition to its avowed purpose. For the fact that Helen chose to follow Paris with the consequence of war gives rise to the idea that she followed him in spite of the consequence of war. This makes Helen not only an example of someone who took the person she loved for the most beautiful thing on earth; she also becomes an example of someone giving a higher priority to the object of her love than to possible belligerent effects of her preference. Thus, apart from being an illustration of the thesis that the most beautiful thing on earth is that which one loves, the Helen story turns out to be an exemplum also of the opening strophe as a whole, that is of the preference for that which one loves rather than armies. In other words, whereas we are initially led to refer τ[ο]ῦτ' in 6 exclusively to the final part of the opening strophe stating Sappho's own preference, the associations evoked by the Helen story lead us to reassess this interpretation retrospectively and to refer the pronoun also to the opening strophe as a whole.

Lines 13–14 are lost beyond reconstruction.[14] But fortunately the text becomes readable again at the point where the mythic exemplum is closed off and where Sappho specifies its relevance to her current situation:

[This][15] now has put me in mind of Anactoria far away; the lovely way she walks and the bright sparkle of her face I would rather see than those chariots of the Lydians and infantry full-armed.   (15–20)

Segal (n. 1), 72. For the (a priori unlikely and for this poem untenable) idea that Sappho, as a rule, picks out just one element of a myth in order to illustrate a point of personal relevance without being bothered by other elements of the myth, see esp. H. Eisenberger, *Der Mythos in der äolischen Lyrik* (Diss. Frankfurt am Main, 1956).

[13] Cf. Page (n. 1, 56): 'We must not ask whether Sappho *approved* the consequences—the desertion of hearth and home, the doom of Troy; the facts are not in dispute, their application to the present theme is manifestly appropriate; problems of praise and blame may be left to more reflective minds on graver occasions.' There is a general consensus that Sappho avoids blaming Helen in the tradition of Alc. frr. 42 and 283 and Ibyc. fr. 282.5–19 (thus Burnett [n. 8], 287 with n. 27; Koniaris [n. 11], 264–5; Most [n. 11], 16 with n. 32; Stern [n. 8], 354–5; for a different opinion see Austin [n. 8], 65–8; Kirkwood [n. 1], 108; Rissman [n. 1], 38, 42–5). The issue of praise and blame is in fact irrelevant to Sappho's aims.

[14] Attempted reconstructions are as divergent as: εὔκ]αμπτον γὰρ [ἔτεινε τόξον / μειδίαις], κούφως τ' [ἐχάλα β]οη[ο]ν (Milne, with Eros as the subject of the verbs); εὔκ]αμπτον γὰρ [ἔφυ τὸ θῆλυ / ἐκτέλην], κούφως τ[ά κεν ἐνν]οή[σηι] (Page *exempli gratia*); καὶ μάλα γν]άμπτον γὰρ [ἔφυ βρότων κῆρ (Sitzler); ἀγν]αμπτον γὰρ [ἔθηκε θῦμον (Schubart, with Aphrodite as the subject of the verb); ἀγν]αμπτον γὰρ ['Ερον F' ἔπεμψεν (Kamerbeek, with Aphrodite as the subject of the verb); 'Ερος] κούφως τ[ρέπεται ν]οησο[ι]ν (Theander). For more details see Voigt's apparatus (p. 44). For a critical discussion of the tendency of scholars to supply a gnomic statement here (so as to round off the mythic exemplum in Pindar's manner) see Stern (n. 8), 356–9.

[15] Depending on whether they supply Aphrodite or Eros as the *topic* of the preceding lines, scholars have proposed the supplements ἄ] με (Fraccaroli and others) or ὄς] με (Milne, Kamerbeek, and others). If it was Eros who was referred to in 12–14 and not Aphrodite, ἄ] could perhaps refer to Helen (cf. Page [n. 1], 56, n. 3). Other supplements include κἄ]με (Lobel) and ὤς] με (Bigone and Wilamowitz); but the verb in 15–16 seems to need an explicitly expressed subject. One would wish for a neuter singular or plural pronoun referring back to the mythic exemplum as a whole (cf. τὸ in fr. 31.5), but none of the candidates goes with the metre.

Although Sappho does not explicitly say so, it is clear enough that Anactoria is the person she loves and thus for her the most beautiful thing on earth. ἔρατον in 17 echoes ἔραται in 4; the echo links Anactoria to the general statement at the beginning.[16] Lines 19–20 resume the 'foil' (1–3) and, apart from signalling that the poem has come to a closure (see n. 1 above), the repetition makes it clear that Anactoria stands on a par with κῆν' ὄττω τις ἔραται (3–4). 'Those chariots of the Lydians and infantry full-armed' (19–20) are not only contrasted with her, they also share her characteristics.[17] The shiny metal of the ἄρματα and ὄπλα mirrors Anactoria's ἀμάρυχμα λάμπρον . . . προσώπω[18] and the πεσδομάχεντες echo her lovely βᾶμα. It has often been observed that for Sappho Lydia symbolizes the centre of beauty and elegance;[19] the beauty of the *secundum comparationis*, which is rejected in favour of someone even more beautiful, highlights Anactoria's beauty.

The explicit reference to Anactoria's absence by means of [οὐ][20] παρεοίσας in 16 recalls Helen's absence from hearth and home mentioned in line 9 (καλλ[ίποι]σ' ἔβα 's Τροΐαν πλέοι[σα). The idea of distance causes the association of Anactoria with Helen.[21] This makes clear why Helen's beauty is emphasized in such explicit terms (6–7), a point which puzzled Page. It is a great compliment for Anactoria to be compared to the woman who surpassed all mortals in beauty. It is Anactoria's beauty that gets the main emphasis in 17–18. The association of Anactoria with Helen implies a shift in the relevance of the mythic exemplum. The explicit introduction of the exemplum (5–6) guides us to interpret Helen's relevance to reside in her being the *subject* of such love as to make her forget her husband, child, and parents. The equally explicit 'this reminds me of Anactoria who is not here' (15–16) invites us to reassess the image retrospectively and to interpret Helen's relevance to reside in her being the *object* of love so as to be comparable to Anactoria. This retrospective reassessment is not a substitute for the earlier interpretation of the relevance of the exemplum, but produces an additional layer of relevance.[22] With this second layer of relevance of the Helen story, the poem as a whole becomes a perfect illustration of the thesis advanced in 3–4:

[16] Thus also DuBois in Greene (n. 4), 81–2; Segal (n. 1), 76, 78.

[17] Thus Page (n. 1), 56–7 (cf. Koniaris [n. 11], 260, n. 2; Privitera [n. 7], 187; Rissman [n. 1], 45–6; G. Wills, 'The Sapphic "Umwertung aller Werte"', *AJPh* 88 [1967], 434–42, esp. 439; for a different opinion see Stern [n. 8], 353).

[18] Lanata (in Greene [n. 4], 22–3) analyses the conventionality of the 'brightness' motif in erotic poetry. The conventionality of a motif does not exclude a special relevance of its occurrence in a specific context.

[19] Cf. frr. 39, 98a, and 132 V.; see Stern (n. 8), 352. Rissman (n. 1), 46, says: 'in Sappho's time, Troy was part of the Lydian empire. Therefore . . . the Lydians were the contemporary equivalents of Homer's armies.' Others have looked in vain for a biographical connection of Anactoria with Lydia; for a convenient overview of these hypotheses, see M. F. Galiano, *Safo* (Madrid, 1958), 128, n. 29.

[20] The supplement by Agar (*CR* 28 [1914], 189) is generally accepted.

[21] Thus also R. Merkelbach, 'Sappho und ihr Kreis', *Philologus* 101 (1957), 1–29, esp. 15–16; Rissman (n. 1), 42. DuBois (in Greene [n. 4], 82) suggests that βᾶμα in 17 echoes ἔβα in 9 (thus also Williamson, ibid., 262); if this is in fact the case, the verbal repetition would be an additional signal for the association of Anactoria with Helen.

[22] This type of 'sequential polyinterpretability' is not uncommon in Homeric similes. Cf. also Pi. *N.* 3.76–84 and B. 5.14.33 with my 'The image of the eagle in Pindar and Bacchylides', *CPh* 89 (1994), 305–17. The ambiguity of the image was recognized to some extent by C. W. Macleod, 'Two comparisons in Sappho', *ZPE* 15 (1974), 217–19, and Rissman (n. 1), 42; the shift of relevance is hinted at by Williamson in Greene (n. 4), 262. But all fail to recognize the precise procedure by which we are led to reassess the exemplum, as well as the consequences of this shift of relevance for the interpretation of the poem as a whole.

Sappho loves Anactoria; for Sappho, Anactoria is like the woman who far surpassed all mortals in beauty; so that which Sappho loves is for her the most beautiful thing on earth.

If Helen shifts from being the subject of love, leaving Menelaus for Paris, to the object of love so as to be comparable to the absent Anactoria, where does this leave Sappho? Whereas the introduction of the Helen story, which makes clear that the story is meant to illustrate Sappho's own preference for that which she loves, guides us to believing that Sappho is like Helen,[23] the application of Helen's example to the absent Anactoria makes Sappho like a Menelaus. The association of Anactoria with Helen makes it painfully clear that she who is the most beautiful thing on earth for Sappho has left her as Helen left Menelaus for Paris. Sappho's implicit comparison of herself with Menelaus has two sides: Sappho implies that she feels that Anactoria belongs to her to the same extent to which Helen belonged to her rightfully wedded husband; on the other hand, Sappho implies that the invincible power of love took Anactoria away from her just as Aphrodite took Helen away from Menelaus. On this level, the emphasis on Menelaus' worth (8) gets a bitter tone: Anactoria left Sappho, although Sappho considers herself worthy of her love.

Sappho's implicit comparison of herself with Menelaus has a further consequence. As observed above, we are made aware of the fact that Helen's choice resulted in the Trojan War: Menelaus gathered a huge army, went after her, sacked Troy, killed her lover, and took her back home. This consequence of Helen's choice seemed at first to make the story an infelicitous exemplum for the purpose it is said to have in 5–6. But with the reassessment of the story's relevance, which puts Sappho on a par with Menelaus, the associations with Menelaus' successful reaction to Helen's escape are highly functional. $<\kappa>\epsilon$ βολλοίμαν (17) underscores the powerlessness of Sappho's situation. While Sappho resembles Menelaus in having been left by the most beautiful woman on earth, her powerlessness contrasts with Menelaus, who had the power and means to recover the woman who left him. This adds an element of bitter irony to Sappho's avowed preference for 'what one loves' rather than for armies. Sappho has no armies. If the armies symbolize Menelaus' power to recover Helen, Sappho's rejection of such armies only emphasizes her powerlessness. It is only with this final consequence of Sappho's implicit comparison of herself with Menelaus, which makes armies a symbol of the power to respond actively to the situation, that it becomes fully clear why, as the opening priamel suggests, armies could be desirable in the first place.[24]

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[23] Privitera (n. 7), 182–7, emphasizes the equation of Sappho with Helen. Cf. Stern (n. 8), 356, n. 1, 359; Segal (n. 1), 77.