

Wedding Gifts and Performance in Sappho fr. 44

Sappho's fr. 44, although among the most extant of the poems in the Sapphic corpus, is among the most neglected in scholarship. It has been labeled as a wedding song (Merkelbach 1957 and others) and has been read with a focus on its performative context (Roesler 1975, Lardinois 2001), its place in early Greek oral tradition (and its relation with epic poetry, especially the *Iliad* (Lesky 1956, Kakridis 1966, Saake 1971, Ferrari 1986, Schrenk 1994, Bowie 2010)). In this paper, I offer a comparative reading of Sappho fr. 44 with Hesiod fr. 211 (M.-W) where we have explicit reference to the wedding of Thetis and Peleus. As I argue the two poems can be read as parallels in a tradition of stylization of collective community performance. While community voices and marked performances are alluded to in Homer in wedding scenes, the structure and traditional discourse present in actual wedding songs in ancient oral tradition shape poetic diction in multilayered ways.

In both Sappho fr. 44 and Hesiod fr. 211 there is emphasis on one hand on the 'possessions' *ktemata* that are part of the choreography of objects in weddings, and on the other on the community participation in the event. Peleus in Hes. Fr. 211 is addressed with a *makarismos* in what appears to be a collective performance ("they all said", line 6). Peleus is addressed as thrice-blessed and four times 'happy' after a brief narrative that praises his power over many people. The *makarismos* is at the center of wedding poetics (Hague 1983). From this perspective, the entire poem of Sappho fr. 44 is a *makarismos* exemplified in the procession of people and things addressed to the couple.

As several scholars have noted, it is puzzling that the couple at the center of Sappho fr. 44 is that of Hector and Andromache, certainly not registered as a 'blessed'

couple in the light of the epic narrative. From the same perspective neither is the wedding of Thetis and Peleus without its own share of misfortune. Although this is not incompatible with Sapphic poetic undertones that connect the ‘bitter’ with the ‘sweet’ and prevalent ideologies that reject excessive praise, there are more connections that help us explore further the wedding discourse in archaic poetics.

Kakridis (1966) and Schrenk (1994) have emphasized the connections with death scenes. Shrenk connected the reference to the gifts in Sappho 44 with the catalogue of Priam’s treasures offered as ransom for the body of Hector, which are, in turn, reminiscent of Andromache’s ‘dowry.’ Likewise, in *Iliad* 18.84, Achilles mourning the death of Patroclus makes special allusions to the Peleus’ gifts. There are indeed striking similarities between the most celebrated wedding scenes and the objects offered as ritual reminders for funeral purposes, I argue that the focus on the ‘gifts’ on one hand, and the evocation of communal performances are necessary and distinctive markers of wedding discourse in epic and lyric poetry. Just as in Hes. Fr 211, the collective address to Peleus is clearly marked, Sappho fr. 44 is one of the most polyphonic moments in early Greek literature. The many gifts and the many voices are conjoined and become the focal point of wedding poetics.

Works Cited

- Bowie, Ewen. 2010. – “The Trojan War's reception in early Greek lyric, iambic and elegiac poetry.” *Intentional history: spinning time in ancient Greece* / ed. by Lin Foxhall
- Hans-Joachim Gehrke, Nino Luraghi. Stuttgart : Steiner. 57-87.

- Ferrari, Franco. 1986. "Formule saffiche e formule omeriche." *ASNP: Annale della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* XVI : 441-447.
- Hague, R. 1983. "Ancient Greek Wedding Songs: The Tradition of Praise." *Journal of Folklore Research* 20:131-143.
- Kakridis J. Th. 1966. "Zu Sappho 44 LP." *Wiener Studien*. LXXIX : 21-26.
- Lardinois, André. 2001. "Keening Sappho: female speech genres in Sappho's poetry." In *Women's voices in Greek literature and society* (McClure, L. and A. Lardinois, eds, Princeton: Princeton University Press): 75-92
- Lesky A. 1956. "Peleus und Thetis im frühen Epos." *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 1956 XXVII-XXVIII : 216-226
- Merkelbach R. 1957. "Sappho und ihr Kreis." *Philologus* CI : 1-29
- Roesler W. 1975. "Ein Gedicht und sein Publikum. Überlegungen zu Sappho Fr. 44 Lobel-Page." *Hermes* CIII : 275-285.
- Saake H. 1992. *Sappho-Studien. Forschungsgeschichtliche, biographische und literarästhetische Untersuchungen*. München: Schöningh.
- Schrenk, Lawrence P. 1994. "Sappho Frag. 44 and the Iliad." *Hermes* 122 (2): 144-150.