Love and Death in Sappho 31 and 58

This paper will examine parallels between Sappho 31 and the newly-reconstituted Poem 58 (Gronewald and Daniel 2004; Janko 2005; West 2005; Greene and Skinner 2009). In particular, I will show how the decay of the body described in Poem 58 mirrors the symptoms of love evoked in Poem 31 (West 2005b). In Poem 58 the speaker laments the bodily effects of old age, while in fragment 31 she describes the debilitating effects of bodily dissolution and fragmentation brought on by *eros*. Both poems represent the Sapphic body as assaulted by external forces, old age in poem 58 and *eros* in poem 31 (Wills 1967; McEvilley 1978; O’Higgins 1990).

One of the ways we may see parallels in the “symptoms” of eros and old age in 58 and 31 is by examining how Sappho presents both in terms of bodily transformations. In poem 58 the speaker bemoans her whitening hair and unstable knees. Yet, interestingly, she characterizes these changes by evoking earlier physical states; her hair was once dark and her knees were able to support her in the dance like fawns. Similarly, in fragment 31 changes in the speaker’s body at the sight of her beloved lead the speaker to the “very point of death.” In both poems the speaker faces a point from which there is no return; in 58 old age brings the speaker close to inevitable death and in 31 the speaker’s encounter with her beloved leads to physical and mental collapse (Furley 2000).

Despite the undeniably debilitating effects of eros and old age conveyed so vividly in 31 and 58, both poems also reveal the creative and regenerative potential of *eros*. In both poems the speaker “Sappho” achieves a kind of recovery from the debilitating effects of *eros* and old age. I shall argue that the speaker in both poems achieves both a reconstitution of self and emotional recovery through her ability to contemplate her experience as part of a larger whole. In Fragment 31, the speaker’s recovery arises through an acknowledgment of the cyclical nature of desire. In Poem 58 the speaker’s expression of confidence in the poetic immortality afforded by her erotic verse implies, as she says at the end of the poem, that ‘Eros has granted to her the beauty and the brightness of the Sun.’ While earlier in the poem the speaker’s focus is on loss, in the last four lines she reflects on what she has gained through passionate pursuit of her desires (Boedeker 2009).

Finally, my paper will explore the ways in which Poems 31 and the newly-reconstituted 58 show, quite strikingly, the paradox in Sappho’s ability to speak so eloquently and precisely about both the breakdown and re-constitution of self brought about by eros and old age.

**Works Cited**

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