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Death at sunset for Sappho

 Gregory Nagy

SEPTEMBER 4, 2020 | By Gregory Nagy

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§0. In a painting that goes by the title *Safo*, by Miguel Carbonel Selva, dated 1880, we see the figure of Sappho at the moment when she is about to leap to her death, plunging into the sea from the heights of Leukas. Her death is timed to happen at sunset, and the timing is the same in other renditions as well. A most striking additional example is a painting by Gustave Moreau, dated around 1893. But I ask this question: why sunset?



Safo

CARBONELL SELVA, MIGUEL

Image via Museo Nacional del Prado



Sappho (c. 1893), by Gustave Moreau (1826-1898). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. The story about the fatal leap of Sappho into the sea at a headland named Leukas, which means ‘White Rock’, is best known today from a version that we read in a collection of elegiac poems by Ovid about female heroes, the *Heroides*. This version is *Heroides* 15, which fictionalizes a plaintive letter written by a lovesick Sappho before she takes her fatal leap. Her letter is addressed to a beautiful young male lover named Phaon, whom she tearfully reproaches for having abandoned her and having voyaged off to parts West. Although the attribution of *Heroides* 15 to Ovid has been questioned (Tarrant 1981), the artistry of this poem

has been much admired—and it merits being described as Ovidian (Peponi 2018, with extensive bibliography).

§2. In any case, I concentrate here not on the artistic merits of *Heroides* 15 but rather on the mass of learned references that the poet is making to the poetics of Sappho. In my work on the songs of Sappho, I have found these references to be a most valuable source of information in my efforts to reconstruct the original wording of Sappho's songs, the textual transmission of which is lamentably fragmentary (a case in point is analyzed in Nagy 2015 §129).

§3. The text of *Heroides* 15 is evidently a main source of inspiration for the paintings that I have shown here, and there are many details in these paintings that correspond closely to the details imagined in the verbal art of the poem. My own favorite, among the many such details, is the sight of Sappho's disheveled hair, as lovingly described at line 73: *ecce, iacent collo sparsi sine lege capilli* 'just look how they are arranged, all over the nape of my neck, those lawlessly disheveled tresses of mine'. There is a playful oxymoron at work here, since the form *iacent*, which I translate as 'are arranged', would ordinarily refer to a carefully arranged hairdo, whereas Sappho's hair is at this moment 'lawlessly' and thus erotically disheveled, disarranged. As Charles Murgia (1985:456–457) has noted, the verb *iaceō* that we see here, as the third-person-plural form *iacent* 'are arranged', is used as the passive "voice" of the active verb *pōnō* (corresponding to the Greek usage of κείμμαι as the functional passive of active τίθημι), and this verb *pōnō* 'put, place, arrange' can refer to the art of making a hairdo, as it were, for unruly hair. A fine example is the wording we find in Ovid's *Heroides* 4.77, with reference to the beautiful locks of the boy hero Hippolytus, love-object of Phaedra: *positi [...] sine arte capilli* 'locks of hair arranged [verb *pōnō*] without artifice'. I cite also an imitative reference to the hair of Hippolytus, compared to the unruly locks of Apollo himself, in Seneca's *Phaedra* 803–804: *coma | nulla lege iacens* 'a head of hair, in an unruly way arranged'. The oxymoron, then, is that the verbal art of the poet has artfully arranged the disarrangement of a would-be hairdo. And, evidently, there is a

parallel artistic arrangement going on in the visual art of the painter who depicts the disarrangement of Sappho's hair in the painting I showed for the cover of this essay.

§4. But one detail that we see in both the paintings I have shown is missing in *Heroides* 15. It is the sunset that frames the fatal leap of Sappho. This detail, I think, can be linked more generally to a powerful myth underlying the professed love of Sappho for Phaon, and this myth, I further think, is what may have inspired the painters to synchronize the setting of the sun with the death of Sappho.

§5. The myth, native to the island of Lesbos, homeland of Sappho, is about Phaon as a beautiful boy who was loved, once upon a time, by the goddess Aphrodite. And the meaning of this boy's name is relevant to sunset, because *Pháōn* is a "speaking name," a *nomen loquens*. Quite transparently, *Pháōn* means 'shining [like the sun]'. And, as I showed long ago in an article about the poetics of Sappho (Nagy 1973), Sappho's solar boy *Pháōn* is parallel to another celebrated solar boy in Greek myth, whose name is *Phaéthōn*—a name that likewise means 'shining [like the sun]'. In fact, there is evidence for the existence of at least two different myths about two different solar boys named Phaethon, but I limit myself here to only one detail about only one of these boys: in the Hesiodic *Theogony* 986–991, we read that the goddess Aphrodite abducted this solar boy.

§6. Aside from his link with Aphrodite, I will spare further details about this solar boy Phaethon and return to that other solar boy, Sappho's Phaon. As I also showed in the article I mentioned in the previous paragraph (again Nagy 1973), the poetics of Sappho visualized Phaon as the setting sun personified, who is pursued at sunset by the planet Venus. This planet, which was for Sappho the planet Aphrodite, was visualized as setting into the dark waters of the Western horizon after sunset, evidently in pursuit of the solar boy Phaon. Just as Aphrodite was madly in love with Phaon, so also Sappho, by projection, could fall madly in love with the sun,

source of her poetic eroticism, and so the poetess in her reveries could take her own plunge from on high, at sunset, down into the dark waters below.

§7. The sun, which I have just described as the source of Sappho's poetic eroticism, is actually highlighted as the love-object of her passionate yearning, which is eros, as we read in Sappho *Fragment* 58.25–26 ed. Voigt:

ἴέγω δὲ φίλημ' ἀβροσύναν, ...] τοῦτο καί μοι | τὸ λάμπρον ἔρωσ ἀελίω καὶ τὸ
κάλλον λέλλογγε.

Here is my working translation of the original Greek text (**Nagy 2015.10.22**):

But I love delicacy [(h)abrosunē] [...] this, | and passionate-love [erōs] for the Sun
has won for me its radiance and beauty.

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