

Chras writings; Sappho & Homer

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 30 Dec 2002

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Andrew Bollen — 30 Dec 2002, 12:54

No mysteries here, just a little appreciation of Wolfe's craftsmanship. There are two (I think) quotes from the Chras. Writings in RTTW.

Number One:

"Though trodden beneath the shepherd's heel,
The wild hyacinth blooms on the ground."

The words, but not the sense, are borrowed from a poem of Sappho's on maidenhead & its loss:

"Like a sweet apple reddening on the high
tip of the topmost branch and forgotten
by the pickers-no, beyond their reach.

Like a hyacinth crushed in the mountains
by shepherds; lying trampled on the earth
yet blooming purple."

My first observation: Wolfe's version is far better as poetry (in English; Sappho's no doubt rocks in Greek). My second: the deft way Wolfe plucks an image from its original context and transforms it into his own - something he does constantly.

I think that knowing the origin of the image adds a gloss or a highlight to one's appreciation - for Sappho is the poetess of love, and the RTTW context is surely deeply concerned with Silk's love for Hyacinth. I think that SilkHorn's denial up until this point, in the face of all the evidence, is plausible only if one sees that acknowledging his Silk identity would require him also to acknowledge Hyacinth's death. He is in denial, until he reads this passage; having read it, Silk emerges, and weeps for her death.

I think the verses have such a powerful effect because they speak directly to Silk's image of Hyacinth: constantly abused by men, and damaged by it, she remains beautiful and spirited. It is a subtle alteration of Sappho's image - maidenhead violated, innocence spoiled - but clearly related to it, a more positive spin.

For me, this little scene in RTTW is extraordinarily accomplished - deftly working a large emotional and narrative resolution, just by plucking two lines from an obscure poem, and giving them a tiny twist.

Number Two:

(Reading to Olavine.)

"There, where a fountain's gurgling waters play,
they rush to land, and end in feast the day:
they feed; then quaff; and now (their hunger fled)
sigh for their friends and mourn the dead;
nor cease the tears' till each in slumber shares
A sweet forgetfulness of human cares.
Now far the night advances her gloomy reign,
and setting stars roll down the azure plain:
At the voice of Pas wild whirlwinds rise,
and clouds and double darkness veil the skies."

This is a very slight alteration of a scene from Pope's translation of The Odyssey:

"Then, where a fountain's gurgling waters play,
They rush to land, and end in feasts the day:
They feed; they quaff; and now (their hunger fled)
Sigh for their friends devour'd, and mourn the dead;
Nor cease the tears' till each in slumber shares
A sweet forgetfulness of human cares.
Now far the night advanced her gloomy reign,
And setting stars roll'd down the azure plain:
When at the voice of Jove wild whirlwinds rise,
And clouds and double darkness veil the skies."

The main change is deleting the word "devour'd"; this scene occurs after Odysseus escapes Scylla and Charybdis, with the loss of some crew-mates chomped by Scylla. Apart from this, there is the quaffing *after* feeding, presumably to match bread-then-wine; a change to present tense from the narrative past in the penultimate couplet; and the elision of the initial "When" in the penultimate verse, which must be a deliberate change, because SilkHorn emphasizes and glosses the strong colon followed by "At the voice of Pas ...".

If I could explain the meaning of this passage in its context to myself as well as I could the previous one, I think I might have "solved" the Short Sun text (to my satisfaction). But at the moment - I dunno

Michael Andre-Driussi — 30 Dec 2002, 19:56 · follows Andrew Bollen

Thank you, Andrew Bollen, for the research on the Chrasmmological Writings! Good job!

It reminds me of Charles Dye's work in April 1997, where he traced the influence of Marcus Aurelius.

<http://www.urth.net/whorl/archives/v0004/0009.shtml>

I find both cases interesting.

So now we have Marcus Aurelius, Sapho, and Homer as sources.

=mantis=

James Wynn — 30 Dec 2002, 21:04 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

I must say, this find in Sappho is truly astounding. Thanks!

--Crush

Andrew Bollen — 30 Dec 2002, 23:05 · follows James Wynn

Mantis kindly wrote:

Thank you, Andrew Bollen, for the research on the Chrasmmological Writings!

No, no - don't thank me; thank Google! :)