Love’s Battlefield: Rethinking Sappho
Fragment 31

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Love can be likened to an experience of heaven, but it can also feel like the site of bitter suffering and conflict, more akin to the battlefield. Sappho’s poems are the first works of ancient literature to gesture towards this notion, one that was in due course to be explicitly adopted and explored as *militia amoris* by Latin elegiac poets of the first century BCE such as Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid. In Archaic Greece love and its delights could naturally enough be constructed in opposition to war and its horrors, in the same way that men and women were supposed to perform their proper functions within the domains of warfare (*polemos*) and home life (*oikos*) respectively. ‘My child’, Zeus reproves Aphrodite in the *Iliad* (5.428–9), when she flees to him for consolation after being humiliated on the battlefield by Diomedes, ‘matters of war are not your sphere. Better that you should concern yourself with joyful [*ἴμερόιεντα*] matters of marriage.’ In the context of the Trojan War, however, the conflict at whose root were the workings of Eros and the machinations of Aphrodite, there might always be a latent irony in the assertion of such an antithesis. Sappho reveals the irony as well as the potential humour of deconstructing the surface opposition, with her implicit recognition that while the operations of love can appear to be women’s alternative to those of war, they might equally provide a counterpart to it. If women are excluded from the practical aspects of fighting in war, love for them may be experienced not just as opposed to but as analogous to what takes place on the field of battle.

In this regard it is noteworthy that Sappho expresses the ambivalent feelings aroused by *erôs* in terms largely adopted from Homer. The self-conscious lyric exploitation of elements of the epic tradition for the purpose of thinking and speaking of *erôs* allows the emotional contours of love to be constructed as just as painful, violent, and potentially fatal as any martial engagement. In drawing
heavily on and adapting Homeric words and metaphors to express the intensity of both suffering and pleasure, Sappho can effectively position love as war.\textsuperscript{1} In Sappho’s fragments the pain of love is a ‘dripping wound’ (fr. 37: στάλαξμιον);\textsuperscript{2} desire (fr. 48: πόθος) ‘burns’ the heart; Aphrodite ‘overpowers with pain and anguish’ (fr. 1.3), while Eros is ‘sweet-bitter’ (fr. 130.2: γλυκύπικρον) and ‘inflexible’, a ‘giver of pain’ (fr. 172) who can shake the heart like the wind shakes the trees (fr. 47). Sappho’s quandary (‘I am in two minds’, fr. 51) brings to mind the Homeric warrior’s ‘divided thoughts’;\textsuperscript{3} and her description of Eros as ‘loosener of limbs’ (fr. 130.1: λυσμέλης), following the use of the epithet by the more overtly martial Archilochus, recalls Homer’s use of ‘loosening of limbs’ to describe death in combat.\textsuperscript{4} Fearful anxiety and death itself are repeatedly in the frame of her thoughts (e.g. frr. 1.26, 23.9). ‘Honestly I wish I were dead’ is the heartfelt exclamation that precedes her speaking of the departure of a beloved friend (fr. 94.1). Elsewhere she expresses her desperation by declaring ‘a longing to die grips me’ (fr. 95.11).

In the only poem by Sappho that is preserved more or less complete (poem 1), when the poet prays for Aphrodite’s help to win the goal of her desire, the goddess’s response evokes the to and fro of battle with its pattern of alternating flight and pursuit:

\begin{verbatim}
tína dêdê te peítho
.. ἵσαγνα ἐς σῶν ψυκτάτας; τίς σ’, ὦ
Ψάπφ’, ἀδίκητε;
kai γὰρ αἱ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει...\textsuperscript{5}
Who is it this time I must induce
to love you again? Who, Sappho,
is doing you an injustice?
Look, though she flees you, soon she will chase you...
\end{verbatim}

The final word of this poem unveils the battle metaphor explicitly, as Sappho beseeches the goddess:

\begin{verbatim}
δῶσα δὲ μοι τέλεσαι
θύμος ἱμέρρει τέλεσον, σὺ δ’ αὕτα
σύμμαχος ἐσσο.\textsuperscript{6}
Fulfil all that
my heart longs to accomplish, and you yourself
be my fellow-fighter.
\end{verbatim}

This is not, then, merely a defensive alliance: Sappho asks to be ‘totally fulfilled’, to achieve complete victory in love. Elsewhere Sappho bids her divine ally to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Rissmann (1983).
\item \textsuperscript{2} All fragments in this chapter refer to L-P.
\item \textsuperscript{3} e.g. those of Achilles in II. 1.189.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Archil. fr. 196; lines 4.469 etc.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Fr. 1.18–21.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Fr. 1.26–8.
\end{itemize}
ensure the defeat of a potential rival who would otherwise, like a Homeric warrior, be in a position to vaunt her superiority over a vanquished foe:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Kóπρα, κα[ί σ]ε πι[κροτά]ταν ἐπεύ[ροι}
\muη][δε καυχάι[σ]εστο τόδ' ἐννέψαια}
\Delta[ωρ'χα, τά δε[ι[τ]ερον ώς πόθε[ννον}
\varepsilon[ς] ἐρον ᾧλθε.\]
\[
\text{[ . . . ]Cypris, and may (s)he find you harsh(er),}
\text{and let Dorikha not boast and tell how he came a second time to love her}
\text{as she desired.}
\]

When the connection between war and love is raised in fr. 16, it highlights the contrast between the two spheres. The poem begins with a priamel in which the poet suggests that the delight felt at the sight of the love-object surpasses that afforded by the sight of massed forces of war:

\[
\begin{align*}
o[ι] μὲν ἵππη[ων στρότον ο[ί δὲ πέσδων,}
o[ι] δὲ νάων φαί[σ' ἐπί γάν μελαναν}
\varepsilon[μεμεια κάλλιστον, ἤγω δὲ κήρ'}
\deltaττω τ[ίς ἐραται.}
\end{align*}
\]

Some say that a troop of horses, others of soldiers, some a fleet of ships, is the finest sight on the dark earth, but I say whatever it is that one loves.

Sappho proceeds to instantiate the generalization by referring to the way Helen succumbed to love: Helen abandoned Menelaus ‘the best of husbands’ (fr. 16.7–8: ἄνδρα πανάριστον) and sailed with Paris to Troy, ‘and thought not at all of her child and dear parents’ (10–11). This brief but vivid allusion to the scenario that triggered the Achaean expedition to Troy leads Sappho to name the woman whom, in sharp contrast to the accoutrements of war, is the thing she herself loves. The fifth stanza evokes a loving image of the absent Anactoria:

\[
\begin{align*}
tά[ξ]ε κε βολλο[ίμαν ἐρατώ τε βάμα}
kαμάρ[υμα λάμπρον ἐδην προσώπω}
\varepsilon] τά Λύδων ἄρματα κάν ὀπλοισι
\piε[σομ]ι[άχεντας.}
\end{align*}
\]

I would rather see her lovely walk
and the bright sparkle of her face
than the chariots of the Lydians and their infantry at arms.

If the feelings roused by love, then, can be represented by Sappho both in parallel and contrast to war and its effects, one might wonder whether

\[\text{Fr. 15.9–12. } \text{Fr. 16.1–4. } \text{Fr. 16.16–20.}\]
Sappho’s most famous and vexed poem of love, fr. 31, is in some way susceptible to interpretation on either of these lines:

He seems just like the gods in heaven, that man who sits across from you and cocks his head to listen to your lovely voice and charming laugh—which sets my heart aflutter in my breast, for when I catch the merest glimpse of you, my voice is gone, my tongue’s congealed, a subtle fire runs flickering beneath my frame, my eyes see blank, a buzzing noise assails my ears, my sweat is cold, my body’s gripped by shivers, my skin’s yellower than grass, it seems as if I’m just an inch from death.

But all is worth the risk since . . .

The first four stanzas of this poem present a more elaborate and extravagant depiction of an anguished response to feelings of love than any in Sappho’s surviving oeuvre. Its Homeric resonances have often been remarked on.\(^\text{10}\) The

\(^{10}\) e.g. Page (1979) 29.
poet presents herself as gazing on a man whom she describes in Homeric terms as, literally, ‘equal to gods’ (1: ἵσος θέοις). He appears unaffected by the sight of the woman opposite whose voice and laughter make Sappho’s heart (6: ἐν στήθεσθαι ἐπτόαισε) literally ‘cower in her breast’ (6: ἐν στήθεσθαι ἐπτόαισε), but this causes her by contrast to experience physical sensations akin to those caused by terror on the battlefield—loss of voice, cold sweat, trembling, and pallor. This hyperbolic ‘list of symptoms’ reaches an extreme finale: ‘it seems as if I’m just an inch from death’ (15–16: τεθνάκην δ’ ὀλίγω πιδέυης | φαίνομ’ εμ’ αὐτα). Despite these unmistakable resonances, the martial and epic overtones of the poem have rarely been considered central to its interpretation or reconstruction. The literary critic Longinus, in whose writings alone the poem is preserved as a quotation, focuses on the way contradictory emotions are expressed and brought together into a harmonious whole: ‘she both freezes and burns, is irrational and sane, is fearful and nearly dead, so that we may observe in her not a single emotion but a synthesis of feelings.’ Interpretation has, moreover, been heavily and misleadingly influenced by Catullus’ near-translation of these stanzas in his poem 51, in which he addresses his ‘Lesbia’. This raises the spectre of the overwhelming feelings of jealous passion expressed by Catullus for ‘Lesbia’ in his other poems, feelings which some have sought to attribute to those felt by Sappho for ‘that man’. Arguably, however, such feelings have no place in the circumstances surrounding Sappho’s poem, for whom ‘that man’ is an object of admiration rather than envy; some scholars have indeed supposed that this is a ‘wedding poem’ which begins with a makarismos (complimentary praise) of the groom.12

Longinus’ quotation of the poem breaks off just as it undergoes a marked change of tone and direction with ἄλλα πάν τόλματον. The fragmentary line with which the section following the last full stanza opens has been imagined to initiate a generalizing consolation or exhortation. Thus West has reconstructed it in Greek, as expressing a generalized consolation on these lines:

αλλα παν τολματων, εσει [θεος τοι
και σανησα [πλουσιον αιψ ηθηκεν-
και κατηλεν αθη τον εξισωμενον μακρεσσι.

But no thing is too hard to bear

11 Longinus Subl. 10.3; Page (1979) 27 is unduly unsympathetic to the critic’s viewpoint.

12 This once dominant interpretation, with its rather old-fashioned and unromantic overtones, has now largely fallen from favour (though Wilson (1996) 57 pronounces it a ‘not unlikely proposition’) partly thanks to Page’s scathing dismissal of the arguments of its proponents in (1979) 30–3. However, it is arguable that, given that κγος in line 1 can on its own indicate ‘another man’, the emphatic use of ὀνηρ in line 2 signifies ‘husband’ (cf. the use of ἀνδρα indicating Helen’s legitimate husband in fr. 16.7).
for God can make the poor man rich
and bring to nothing heaven-high fortune.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite West’s philologically expert reconstruction of the fragmentary evidence, the shift from the extreme concern with love, suffering, and even death in the previous lines to a bland commonplace about rich and poor, resembling most closely a similar expression in Theognis (662–3), seems implausibly unpoetic in this context. I have previously proposed that we should rather attempt to reconstruct a stanza in which Sappho reproaches Cypris with a personal address and seeks consolation by stressing the fact that she is wholesale and impartial in her infliction of destruction, i.e. love afflicts everyone—rich and poor, noble or serf—alike.\textsuperscript{14} Supposing that the Latin version of the poem constitutes the only independent evidence for any reconstruction of Sappho’s words, I argued that we might read the last ‘otium’ stanza of Catullus 51 with fresh eyes:

\begin{quote}
\textit{otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est,}
\textit{otio exsultas nimiumque gestis;}
\textit{otium et reges prius et beatas perdidit urbes}.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

What irks you, Catullus, is idleness,
in idleness you become restless and hyperactive;
it is idleness that even destroyed in the past kings
and blessed cities.

This stanza is usually supposed to diverge wholesale from the Greek original, but I suggested that Catullus in fact preserves the last two lines of Sappho’s lost stanza with some degree of fidelity, and does so particularly closely in the last two lines, [\textit{otium} \textit{et reges prius et beatas} \textit{perdidit urbes}, ‘idleness] even destroyed in the past kings and blessed cities’: only the fact that the admittedly alien-seeming notion of \textit{otium} here is a purely Catullan insertion is signalled by his emphatic repetition of the word.

Where \textit{otium}, therefore, represents how Catullus personally identifies his ‘problem’ (\textit{molestum}), Sappho is likely to have said that Love (Eros, Aphrodite, Cypris) was what had ‘destroyed kings and cities’. Accordingly, I previously proposed a Sapphic continuation on the following lines:

\begin{quote}
\textit{\ άλλα πάν τόλματον, ἐπεί κεν ἑσον}
Κύπρι, μικάσασις ἴσα καὶ πάνηγα
καὶ γὰρ ἄλειας ποτ’ ἀνακτεῖς ἀλβί-}

\textit{αις τε πόλης.}\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

But all is worth the risk since, Love,
you’d ruin lord and serf alike:

\textsuperscript{13} West (1970) 312–13.
\textsuperscript{14} D’Angour (2006).
\textsuperscript{15} Catull. 51.13–16.
\textsuperscript{16} D’Angour (2006) 300.
you who of old brought down great kings  
and cities proud.

However, even if a continuation on these lines might be thought to unite the  
various strands of literary and circumstantial evidence, this stanza alone (no  
less than West’s proposed reconstruction) makes for an unduly abrupt con-  
cclusion to the poet’s agonized outpourings of the preceding stanzas. Moreover,  
while the fact that Love is impartially and universally destructive offers some  
consolation to the sufferer, it does not explain with sufficient amplitude why,  
given the extreme afflictions wrought on the lover’s mind and body, ‘all is  
worth the risk’.

The assumption that Sappho’s poem ended after only five stanzas is open to  
strong challenge on different fronts. One is purely formal: the fragments of  
Sappho’s other poems in this metre mostly represent part of poems longer  
than five stanzas: fr. 1 has seven stanzas, fr. 2 and fr. 16 are likely to have had at  
least six, of fr. 3 five survive but there may have been more. Secondly and more  
decisively, a single concluding stanza could not do justice to the expectations  
set up by the scenario relentlessly expounded in the preceding stanzas, which  
end with the poet’s expression of her feeling that she is ‘on the brink of death’.  
However, a wholly new approach to tracing the poem’s trajectory may be  
opened up once we explore the consequences of the correct interpretation of  
the phrase ἀλλὰ πᾶν τὸλματον, to which critics and commentators have  
accorded virtually no attention. Although the phrase is often taken to mean  
‘but all must be endured’, Hermann Fränkel long ago noted that this is a  
mistranslation: ‘must be endured’ would be τὸλμάτεον, whereas τὸλματον  
means ‘can be endured’.17 I would go further and maintain that τὸλμαν is  
closer to ‘dare’ than ‘endure’: so ἀλλὰ πᾶν τὸλματον properly means something  
like ‘all can be dared’ (hence my translation, above, ‘all is worth the risk’).18 In  
other words, ‘can’ indicates possibility rather than inevitability, and ‘dare’  
indicates an active attitude rather than a passive position.

This reading of ἀλλὰ πᾶν τὸλματον finds a somewhat surprising source of  
support in a hitherto neglected piece of evidence, Catullus’ only other poem in  
Sapphics, Catull. 11.19 It seems reasonable to suppose that Catullus’ efforts at  
adapting Sappho fr. 31 would have had some impact on the composition of his  
only other known Sapphic verses (or in the event that Catull. 11 were an earlier

17 Fränkel (1975) 176; despite his insistence, he does not spell out the interpretative  
consequences of his observation. Hutchinson (2001) 176 downplays its importance, while rightly  
noting that ‘after all that has preceded, the tone of resignation is, within the poem, a striking  
gesture’.

18 It is noteworthy that every usage of τὸλμαν in the Iliad (8.24, 10.205, 10.232, 12.51, etc.) has  
the active connotation of ‘dare’ rather than ‘endure’. Sappho could readily have used a form of  
πλάνα to indicate ‘must be endured’ (cf. fr. 121.3).

19 I accordingly modify my assertion (D’Angour (2006) 298) that Catull. 51 is ‘the only  
independent evidence for reconstructing the final stanza of Sappho fr. 31’.
attempt at Sapphics, would have been affected by them). The Roman poet’s rare incursion into Sapphic metre suggests at least that some coincidence of verbal rhythm and expression might be expected. The expectation of some mutual influence is reinforced by the structural similarity of Catull. 11 and 51: both contain lists spanning two stanzas or more, the former detailing faraway places, the latter bodily afflictions. At the end of these lists, both poems appear to resume the initial direction of the poem, though with a marked change of tone and tempo. Thus in poem 11, following the rhetorically extravagant protasis in which Catullus specifies the ends of the earth to which his friends would go at his behest, we arrive at the words (13–14):

\[
\text{omnia haec, quaecumque feret voluntas} \\
\text{caelitum, temptare simul parati} \ldots
\]

All these, whatever the decision of the gods will bring, (although) you are prepared to face together . . .

The three underlined words strikingly occupy the same formal juncture of the poem as Sappho’s Ἄλλα πάν τόλματον; placed together in sequence they could have been used to render into Latin Sapphics that very phrase.

The possibility thus arises that omnia haec . . . temptare in fact represents a residue of Catullus’ attempt to translate the last stanza of Sappho fr. 31 into Latin. The poet would have opted for temptare (rather than ferre or pati) as a counterpart to τόλμαν in seeking to represent the sense of an active response to adversity (‘to venture’). Supposing the πάν of Ἄλλα πάν τόλματον to refer to the previous list of symptoms—all this can be ventured—Catullus might even have toyed with the metrically precise equivalent omnia haec temptanda. It appears that he altered the thrust of the indictment because he wanted to

20 Wilkinson (1953) 47 proposed the biographical fancy, accepted by other scholars (e.g. Kenneth Quinn, Peter Green), that Catull. 51 and 11 were respectively composed at the beginning and end of the affair with Lesbia. Although Catull. 51 seems likely to have been the earlier poem, in my view they were probably composed close in time to one another in the context of Catullus’ experimentation with Sapphic models.

21 Commentators have noted the repetition in both poems of the prosaic and intrusive word identidem (‘time and again’); I suspect that this is a sly and deliberate verbal allusion to Sappho’s similar, oft-repeated, ‘signature’ term δηνέτε (‘now again’).

22 The salience of the parallel has been partly obscured by the intervening parenthesis, quaecumque feret voluntas caelitum. This is reminiscent of the parenthetical second line of Catull. 51 (ille, si fas est, superare divos), both in what it means and in the way it constitutes an apparently idiosyncratic departure from the actual or supposed Greek original. In both cases, Catullus seems to have felt the need to interpose a rhetorical appeal to Roman piety into his poem, as if thereby stamping his own personality on the resulting verses.

23 Temptare has strong active connotations: it is also used by Horace in the context of bold venturesomeness, mental and physical (Odes 1.28.5, 3.4.31).

24 Other renderings are possible (omne temptandum tibi, omne sed temptandum, cuncta sed temptanda, etc.) but the phrase with added haec makes for a more elegant resumption. Haec points explicitly to the previous list, unlike Ἄλλα πάν τόλματον, but the Catullan phrase suggests that πάν would naturally be read as referring to the foregoing symptoms.
emphasize that the source of his own ruin, unlike that designated by Sappho, was *otium, otium, otium;* but although he then abandoned his original version of the missing stanza, his translation of ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον was available for use in almost identical form and for the same structural purpose in another Sapphic composition.

The fact that Catullus 11 does not end with the stanza beginning *omnia haec* but carries on for a further *two* stanzas gives circumstantial support to the view that a longer coda than just one stanza was to be found in, and is likely to have been required for, the continuation of fr. 31. Catullus 11 is equally tinged with Homeric resonances, which become explicit in the last stanza of the poem where Catullus uses an Iliadic simile (from *Il. 8.306*) to compare his predicament to that of a flower cut down by a passing plough: the poet levels the blame, as does Sappho in fr. 31, on an overwhelming feminine force, but for him that force is Lesbia (*amorem* | *qui illius culpa cecidit*) rather than Cypris. However, the Iliadic resonances and the notion of blame for misdeeds in Catullus 11 recall another Greek poem in Sapphic metre which may also underlie its compositional basis. Alcaeus fr. 42 similarly designates Aphrodite/Helen as the agent of Troy’s ruin, and its first lacunose stanza speaks of the ‘bitter grief’ (*πίκρον ἀχος*) they inflicted on Troy’s kings and their city:

άς λόγος, κάκων ἀ[χος ἐννεκ’ ἔργων
Περράμω καὶ παισ[ί ποτ’ ἡλθ’ Ἐτερί,
ἐκ σιθεν πίκρον, π[ύρι δ’ ἀλεσε Ζεύς
Τηλων ἔρων.\[25\]

As the story goes, grief on account of their misdeeds once came to Priam and his sons, Cypris, bitter (grief) at your hands, and Zeus destroyed with fire holy Ilium.

The *πίκρον ἀχος* that Alcaeus identified as an affliction on kings and cities may have triggered Catullus’ desire to insist on what, for him, was truly *molestum;* he then fused this notion with his implicit rejection of Sappho’s supposition that the problem was Love. That Catullus may have had Alcaeus’ poem as well as Sappho’s in mind (consciously or otherwise) when composing Catullus 11 is suggested not only by its closely related theme but by a curious verbal resonance: in the context of poetry with Trojan associations, the words that

\[25\] My reconstruction following that of Page (L-P), who provides the first line and proposes subsequent lines as follows (also printed by Campbell): *Περράμω καὶ παισ[ί ποτ’ Ἡλει, ἡλθ’ | ἐκ σιθεν πίκρον, π[ύρι δ’ ἀλεσε Ζεύς | Τηλων ἔρων* (*bitter grief came once to Priam and his sons from you, Helen, and Zeus destroyed holy Ilium with fire*). The fact that Helen is mentioned in the final couplet in the third person (οι δ’ ἀπάλοντι ἄμφ’ Ἑλέα, Φρύγες τε | καὶ πόλεσ αὐτῶν: *but they, the Phrygians, and their city perished on account of Helen*) may argue for an apostrophe to Cypris in the first stanza such as I reconstruct here, rather than to Helen.
end Catullus’ fifth stanza create a bathetic but unmistakable echo—‘ιλια ροπαν, ilia rumpens.26

To return to Sappho. What the translation of ἄλλα πᾶν τόλματον as ‘all can be dared’ means for the resolution of fr. 31 requires careful reconsideration: on our revised understanding of the phrase, ‘all’ can hardly refer to the symptoms just listed in the foregoing stanzas. Rather, it points to the potential obstacles posed for ‘that man’ who appears in the first stanza, who ‘dares’ to gaze at his love-object, the very thing that threatens Sappho’s near-annihilation. His actions—gazing at the beloved’s potentially lethal beauty, hearing her beguiling laugh, and facing her fatal charms—require daring worthy of a heroic individual who merits the epithet ἰσος θεόσιος, ‘equal to gods’. Such an act of daring and its consequences, we are told, can be entertained. In short, the change of tone at this point in the poem strikes a note of defiant resolve, rather than one of resignation in the face of Love’s overwhelming power.

If, therefore, we seek to discover how Sappho continued the poem, rather than supposing that the suffering she describes is something that ‘must be endured’, we need to ask why the possibility of such daring behaviour, with its frighteningly hazardous consequences, is envisaged. The generalization about kings and cities is unlikely to have formed an end to Sappho’s own thoughts: such general statements are prone to be supported by specific allusions just as they are in Homeric epic (and the epic diction and imagery throughout the poem means that the Iliad is never far away). We have seen how in fr. 16 Sappho follows the generalization ‘some say X, some say Y’ with the exemplum of Helen, and how in fr. 1 the general advice offered by Aphrodite in the penultimate stanza is followed up by a specific prayer for her help. The recently discovered completion of fr. 58 also shows how Sappho might end a poem—in this case lamenting her loss of youth and consoling herself for the consequent loss of love—by illustrating her sentiments with a mythical exemplum:

τά <μεν> στεναχίσων θαμέως· ἀλλὰ τί κεν ποιείνη,
ἀγήρασιν ἀνθυρωπον ἕνοπτ’ οὐ δύνΑτον γένεσθαι καὶ γάρ π[ό]λτ’ Ἱλίων εἴα[ντ]ο βροδόπαχιν Λύων ἐρω φ. . ο[θείας]ν βά[μειν]’ εἰς ἐσχατα γᾶς φέροισα[v,

26 The ludus otiosus of Catull. 50 is after all undertaken per iocum atque vinum, and it may have struck Catullus that ilia rumpens could suggest a pun on the notion of ‘sacking Ilium’ (cf. Propertius’ similar pun at 2.1.14: longas condimus Iliadas).
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εορτα [κ]άλον καὶ νέον, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸν ἦμοι ἐμψε
χρόνῳ τῶλος γῆρας, εἴχ’ οὐτ’ ἀδανάτων ἄκοιτων. 27
[You for] the fragrant-blossomed Muses’ lovely gifts
[be zealous,] girls, [and the] clear melodious lyre:
[but my once tender] body old age now
[has seized;] my hair’s turned [white] instead of dark;
my heart’s grown heavy, my knees will not support me,
that once on a time were fleet for the dance as fawns.
This state I oft bemoan; but what’s to do?
Not to grow old, being human, there’s no way.
Tithonus once, the tale was, rose-armed Dawn,
love-smitten, carried off to the world’s end,
handsome and young then, yet in time grey age
o’ertook him, husband of immortal wife. 28

Bearing this kind of structure in mind, we can suppose that Sappho’s generalization about kings and cities will not have formed an end to Sappho’s thoughts in fr. 31, but that she is likely to have specified some of those individuals and locations whose destruction could be laid at Aphrodite’s door. ‘Cities’ here points to Troy par excellence, and ‘kings’ must allude to figures such as Priam, Hector, and Achilles, heroes who suit the associations of the epithet ἰσος θέοιων in the first line. Additionally, the Homeric allusions also bring into sharper focus what is at stake in acknowledging that τόλματον means ‘can be ventured’ as the use of temptare in Catull. 11 now seems to confirm: the suffering described by the catalogue of symptoms is responded to with a call to action. The love-smitten onlooker may be only barely alive, but alive she is, to fight and love another day. Sappho is not simply exhorting herself to endure what must be endured, but saying that one can brave all love’s afflictions. If her coda demonstrated why all can be ventured for love, far from simply offering consolation for inevitable defeat it must have indicated that some measure of success might emerge from the struggle and pain.

When we ask which figure might best provide the exemplar of such success, the compelling answer in relation to the tale of Troy is Menelaus. 29 Having sailed to Troy for Helen’s sake and braved death in battle, he managed in due course to regain his wife and to contemplate her beauty. As mentioned earlier,

27 Lardinois (2009) and Edmonds (2009) both give arguments for thinking that this poem did not necessarily end with ἄκοιτω but continued with the two fragmentary couplets in the same metre reflecting on Sappho’s personal situation and ending with the couplet stating ‘but I love delicacy [. . .] and love has obtained for me the brightness and beauty of the sun’.
28 P. Köln 21351 (Gronewald and Daniel (2004)) with West’s (2005) reconstruction and translation. If the obscure elements in the third line from the end are correctly represented, an unusual form of φορέω (e.g. φορεῖται for φορεθὲιται, ‘borne’) might fit the traces and the space available.
29 The stolen passion of Paris also comes to mind (cf. Harrison (2001)); but Paris represents a morally dubious character for Sappho, and will have struck a false note as an exemplum of love’s daring.
Menelaus is referred to by Sappho as Helen’s ‘most noble husband’ (fr. 16.7–8) and his example could well demonstrate why ‘all can be ventured’ in love as in war: the war at Troy, instigated at Love’s bidding, brought about the widespread destruction of men of all ranks, but in the end Menelaus regained (at Aphrodite’s bidding) his rightful spouse. If Sappho’s poem concluded, therefore, with at least two stanzas on these lines after the surviving fragment (and I would contend that more than two originally followed), one might now envisage a continuation of the poem on the following lines:

But all is worth the risk since, [Love, you ruin, now, both lord and] serf:
[you who of old brought down great kings and cities proud,
yes, holy Troy for Helen’s sake,
and Peleus’ son, and all the Greeks;
but Menelaus, he once more
gazed on his wife,
when once he’d left the plains of war
and homeward made his sweet return,
and laid his godlike head to rest
on Helen’s lap.
Grant, Kupris, that I’ll love again,
and leave the pain of loss behind,
and prove that suffering for love
is not in vain.]

The additional lines that may have ended fr. 58 (see n. 27 above) prompt a reconstruction that would allow Sappho here to have similarly ended with a comment reflecting on her own feelings or status as a lover.
Sappho can, then, be understood in this poem to be expressing the struggle of love and passion in terms of the battlefield. But she may also have been indicating that, in the end, the struggle of love is not always a fight to the death. Both in love and war, victory is possible for those who dare; and a restored union with a beloved is possible for those who survive love’s assault. Hers is a message that can be presented both to a husband enjoying the delectable sight of a young wife, and to a bereft or lonely lover gazing on that same scene. *Cras amet qui numquam amavit, quique amavit cras amet.*

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31 ‘He will love tomorrow who has never loved, and who has loved will love again tomorrow’: the refrain of the fourth-century CE Latin poem *Pervigilium Veneris*, which incorporates elements found in the poems of both Catullus and Sappho.