
FEMALE VOICES AND VALUES IN EPIGRAMS OF MOURNING

Anyte of Tegea and Emily Dickinson

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Male poets largely dominate the long and complex history of the Western epigram. The Latin poets Martial and Catullus are often cited as the leading epigrammatists from the ancient world, and male authors like Ben Jonson and Oscar Wilde are most closely associated with the genre in later centuries.¹ Yet it can be argued that some of the most innovative writers of epigram were women. During the third century BCE in ancient Greece, epigram developed from its original form as inscription on stone monuments into a formalized, sophisticated genre for literary expression.² One of the most understudied writers of these Hellenistic epigrams is also one of the few female poets from ancient Greece whose work survives: Anyte of Tegea. Anyte not only sought to secure a place for epigram among the major literary genres of ancient Greece, but she is also the “first epigrammatist to project a distinct literary persona” by “setting herself, as a woman and an inhabitant of largely rural Arcadia, in opposition to the traditional [male] composer of inscribed epigram.”³ During the nineteenth century in Amherst, Massachusetts, another female poet also re-worked the traditional epigram and introduced a distinct blending of masculine and feminine points of view to the genre: Emily Dickinson. While these two female poets are rather removed from each other in space and time, a comparison of their epigrammatic poetry—particularly those poems that deal with death in war—reveals how both Anyte and Dickinson react to their prominent male poetic predecessors and contemporaries as well as to their socio-historical circumstances by appropriating male, heroic modes of expression and introducing feminine values and perspectives to this traditionally masculine context. Both poets transform the male-authored epigrammatic tradition by elevating typically less-valued female concerns and points of view alongside of or in place of male ones. In doing so, Anyte and Dickinson declare these female values and voices worthy of preservation in the literary tradition.

It is important to keep in mind that the labels “masculine” and “feminine,” as discussed here, are socially constructed terms. As Kleinman notes, “gender refers to cultural

¹ A.B. Coiro (2016) 112–113.

² See Gutzwiller (1993) 71 on the development of Hellenistic epigram.

³ Gutzwiller (1993) 72.

expectations for how males and females should behave.”⁴ Gender is distinct from biological sex, in that it consists of the expectations that go along with “being ascribed to a male or female sex category.”⁵ None of the values, behaviors, and attitudes associated with masculinity and femininity are inherently gendered, yet patriarchal society has made it so that characteristics like tenderness, compassion, and domesticity are coded as female while heroism, courage, and patriotism are coded as male. In this way, gender is a key feature of organizing social life, as well as a category of inequality, with masculine-coded behaviors and traits being more valued than feminine ones. Because gender is so central to the way one perceives both the world and one’s self, it is important when examining literary texts to study the way that gender expectations and categories shape an author’s work. For female authors like Anyte and Dickinson, a critical feminist approach that analyzes these authors’ relationships to traditional gender oppositions and expectations can help reveal how patriarchal constructions of femininity and masculinity influenced their poetics. This article attempts to implement such an approach.

Anyte has received little attention from scholars, especially in comparison to other female Hellenistic poets like Corinna and Nossis. What particularly merits further study is the way Anyte introduces a feminine voice and emphasizes traditionally female concerns in her epigrams. While Wright (1923) contends that Anyte’s verse has “masculine” characteristics and Wilamowitz (1924) claims that Anyte’s poems lack “personal” and “womanly” qualities,⁶ Banard (1991) maintains that Anyte does more in her poems than simply imitate typical Greek patriarchal values. Even more recent scholars such as Gutzwiller (1993) and Greene (2000) have argued that Anyte’s poems do in fact display a uniquely female perspective. This article, focusing specifically on Anyte’s epigrams about men who die in war, intends to expand on these investigations of Anyte’s deviation from socially constructed masculine values and modes of expression and her elevation of the feminine.

Emily Dickinson, unlike Anyte, has been the subject of a vast amount of critical study. The past three decades have seen an increase in scholarship that examines Dickinson as a woman poet whose work experiments with gender representations and expectations.⁷ Most recently, Loeffelholz (2016) examines Dickinson’s play with conventional gender norms and her undermining of the constructed categories “man” and “woman”. The analysis of Dickinson’s poems in this article is greatly indebted to Loeffelholz’s work. Yet, despite the broad array of scholarship that exists on Dickinson, a scholarly comparison of Dickinson and Anyte has never been undertaken. Such a comparison is worthwhile for it may lead to a better understanding of how both Anyte and Dickinson revolutionize the genre of

⁴ Kleinman (n. d.) 1.

⁵ Kleinman (n. d.) 1.

⁶ Wright (1923) 328 and Wilamowitz (1924) 136.

⁷ Notable examples include Pollak (1984), Bennett (1990), Loeffelholz (1991), Miller (2012), and Loeffelholz (2016).

epigram. As women writers choosing to represent women's voices and values in their poems about death in war, they assert that such perspectives are just as important as men's and merit a place in the male-dominated tradition.

In his book *The Challenge of Comparative Literature* (1993), Claudio Guillén discusses three types of comparison available to literary theorists. One of these is comparison among works from different civilizations with no "genetic contacts" that nevertheless exist under "common sociohistorical conditions." Another is comparison among "genetically independent phenomena" that one may bring together through a theoretical premise.⁸ Certainly, third century BCE Arcadia and mid to late nineteenth century Amherst are vastly different civilizations, and the poems of Anyte and Dickinson do not share any obvious "genetic contacts."⁹ There are, however, common socio-historical conditions that link Anyte's epigrams about death in the context of war to Dickinson's.

Both Anyte and Dickinson lived in eras where women were excluded from the dominant, male, public and political sphere, and where the violence and turmoil of warfare were part of the fabric of daily life. Anyte's homeland Tegea, a settlement in ancient Arcadia, was constantly at war with the Greek city-state Sparta, which controlled Tegea during the third century. Indeed, throughout the third century and culminating in 222 BCE when it was forced to join the confederation of Greek city-states known as the Achaean League, Tegea suffered a gradual loss of political power.¹⁰ Anyte would have thus lived through continuous political and military upheaval. Dickinson would have likewise experienced political and social unrest in the decades leading up to the American Civil War, as well as the war itself, and its turbulent aftermath.

It is evident looking at popular poems from these and other war-torn periods that such wartime contexts typically breed and esteem traditional masculine, heroic, or epic values, which are then reflected or reinforced in literature. One may look to such poems as Simonides' famous epitaph for those who died at the battle of Thermopylae¹¹ or Whitman's "Oh Captain! My Captain!" and "Beat! Beat! Drums!" to see the kind of heroic, male, patriotic ethos that pervades the poetry of these periods. It is this ethos that Anyte and Dickinson react to, or rather against. Particularly in their epigrams that have to do with death and mourning in war, these poets introduce a female persona and values culturally coded as female into the traditional world of masculine achievements and principles. To differing degrees, both internalize or appropriate the typical male perception of death and loss. Yet Anyte and Dickinson also frequently disrupt or undermine this male perspective by choosing to focus on the female experience and female world of grief. Such perspectives,

⁸ Guillén (1993) 69–70.

⁹ It is possible that Dickinson was exposed to some classical epigrams while she attended Amherst Academy from 1840–1847, but it is more likely she inherited the tradition from earlier English poets; see Miller (2012) 28–29.

¹⁰ Roy (2012).

¹¹ See Campbell (1982) 90–91 for Simonides fragment 531.

while typically not valued or represented in the male tradition, are presented by Anyte and Dickinson as worthy of regard and careful expression.

Gutzwiller and Greene note how Anyte often transforms male-centered discourse and heroic tradition by appropriating masculine language and applying it to more domestic circumstances. This re-working of male tradition through a female perspective is evident in Epigram 4,¹² where the speaker mourns a soldier who has died in battle:

Youths buried you, oh Chief. Just as children with their mother,
Pheidias, having perished, you sent them into murky sorrow,
But the rock that is above you sings this beautiful song
That you died for your dear fatherland, fighting.¹³

Greene notes that it is “by means of a simile” in lines two and three of the epigram that Anyte “performs a kind of gender inversion that significantly transforms male-centered discourses of public praise for the dead.”¹⁴ Anyte compares the dead chief or military captain to a mother, and the youths burying the chief to the mother’s children. Through this simile, Anyte shifts the focus of the epigram from the heroic, masculine, and indeed rather Homeric image of the commander fallen in battle to a scene of mourning that, while not inherently feminine, is culturally coded as feminine because of its domesticity. Anyte appropriates the kind of language about collective lament and patriotic glory typically used in funeral orations of the classical period,¹⁵ and through it elevates not just the slain chief, but also the imagined mother who has died, and whom her children now grieve.

The final two lines of Epigram 4 employ an innovative figure of speech, which Geoghegan calls “the bold metaphor of the singing stone.”¹⁶ While Geoghegan and other scholars read these lines as a rather orthodox celebration of the chief’s manly, heroic death, Greene’s analysis seems more correct in that these two lines employ an “ironic twist” to emphasize the “cold,” “dead,” or “impersonal” character of the singing stone, which is more focused on “abstract glory” than on deeply felt personal suffering.¹⁷ The stone is not moved by the chief’s death, just as the chief’s fatherland is not moved by his brave sacrifice. The chief, unlike the mother, has no actual children to sing his praises and remember him after he dies. He has only an inanimate, immovable stone. These two lines, rather than reinforcing established Homeric and Greek male values, use the traditional language of patriotism and heroism to undermine these values. Through these

¹² Numbers used for Anyte’s poems are from Gow/Page (1965).

¹³ Geoghegan (1979): Ἥβα μὲν σε, πρόαρχε, ἔσαν· παίδων ἄτε ματρός, / Φειδία, ἐν δνοφερῷ πένθει ἔθου φθίμενος, / ἀλλὰ καλὸν τοι ὑπερθεῖν ἔπος τόδε πέτρος αἰεῖει / ὡς ἔθανες πρὸ φίλας μαρνάμενος πατρίδος. All translations are my own.

¹⁴ Greene (2000) 28.

¹⁵ See Holst-Warhaft (1992) 124 for an analysis of classical funeral oration and its differences from laments of the Homeric/archaic period.

¹⁶ Geoghegan (1979) 62.

¹⁷ Greene (2000) 30.

lines as well as through the metaphor in the first elegiac distich, Anyte reveals her poetic perspective to be distinctly more empathetic and critical of war, traits culturally coded as feminine. She appropriates traditional masculine language in her epigrams and inserts her own female point of view into the male-dominated literary tradition upheld by poets like Homer, Simonides, and Anacreon. Anyte in fact offers an “alternative” to this world of masculine battle, death, and glory in her world that is “ruled by feminine sensibilities and rural values.”¹⁸

Emily Dickinson likewise appropriates language typically used by male poets to extol the glory and sacrifice of those who have died in war. Indeed, in her epigrammatic poem “The first We knew of Him was Death,” she interrogates the notion propounded both by earlier classical poets and some of her contemporaries that heroic, manly death brings undying glory. She writes:

The first We knew of Him was Death –
The second, was Renown –
Except the first had justified
The second had not been – ¹⁹

Dickinson composed this poem in 1865, the year that the American Civil war ended. While there is no explicit mention of war in this poem, and no clear indication that Dickinson was thinking of the Civil War when she composed this epigram, nevertheless scholars have argued that many of the poems Dickinson wrote between 1861 and 1865 were inspired by the Civil War.²⁰ Many of these poems have less oblique references to the war, such as “It feels a shame to be Alive” (1863) and “My Portion is Defeat – today” (1863), in which Dickinson considers what it means to be an outsider to the war or a noncombatant, especially when so many young men are sacrificing their lives for the cause. It is thus not implausible to analyze the epigram above against the backdrop of the American Civil War.

“The first We knew of Him was Death,” like Anyte’s Hellenistic Greek epigram, consists of four lines, and has a rather riddling quality that is characteristic of the genre. In these lines, Dickinson problematizes the connection between “Death” and “Renown.” There seem to be two ways to read this connection. The first is that it is only death that justifies the post-mortem renown that this man receives. In other words, if the man had not died, he would not now be renowned. An alternative reading may be that in order for this man to receive post-mortem renown, his death must have been justified in some way. Both of these readings could be applied to a wartime scenario. In the case of the former, it could be the very fact that the man dies, perhaps in battle, fighting heroically for his country, which

¹⁸ Gutzwiller (1993) 89.

¹⁹ All text for Dickinson’s poems comes from Franklin (1999).

²⁰ See Weiss (1984) and Loeffelholz (2016) 91–98 for a discussion of the Civil War’s influence on Dickinson.

justifies the honor and glory he receives after death. In the case of the latter reading, it may be that the soldier's death was justified in so far as he died in service to his country. Because of this proper, lawful, patriotic justification for his death, he receives renown. The ambiguity of the lines, coupled with the fractured syntax and Dickinson's characteristic use of the dash for punctuation, make this poem an example of Dickinson's innovation within the genre of epigram. Yet, as with Anyte, is it also Dickinson's appropriation and re-working of male heroic values that differentiate her epigram from the poems of her male poetic predecessors and contemporaries.

Regardless of whether one reads Death as the justification for Renown or as the thing that must be justified, it seems that in this epigram Dickinson criticizes the idea of a man being known and celebrated only after he is dead, and not while he is alive. While this may not be a traditional epigram of mourning, Dickinson does use the event of this unknown and unnamed man's death to pose questions less often asked in the more patriotic, male poetic tradition: is death worth the later renown? Can and should renown only come after death? Loeffelholz argues that in her other poems about the Civil War, such as "It feels a shame to be Alive" and "My Portion is Defeat – Today," Dickinson explores the gap between female civilians such as herself, who experience the war through photos, and the soldiers who have actual, lived experience of the war.²¹ It seems that "The first We knew of Him was Death" may also explore what it means to view the war from an outside, female, civilian perspective. Dickinson associates herself with the "We" that is so removed from the context of war that the first thing it knows about a man is his death. Like the cold, impersonal stone of Anyte's Epigram 4, this "We" participates in a cold and abstract glorification of the man, rather than personal, deeply felt grief.

Dickinson's "Go tell it – What a Message" similarly introduces a female perspective into the traditionally male context of war, and elevates that perspective so that it is equal to the male. The poem, which is rather epigrammatic in its length, style, and riddling qualities, is also particularly Dickinsonian in its use of punctuation, phrasing, and the blending of masculine and feminine personas and values. Dickinson writes:

"Go tell it" – What a Message –
To whom – is specified –
Not murmur – not endearment –
But simply – we obeyed –
Obeyed – a Lure – a Longing?
Oh Nature – none of this –
To Law – said Sweet Thermopylae
I give my dying Kiss –

²¹ Loeffelholz (2016) 92–94.

As Loeffelholz notes, Dickinson likely wrote this poem around 1882 in response to the translation of Simonides' famous epitaph by the British poet and cleric William Lisle Bowles (1792–1850).²² The opening lines of Bowles' translation read: "Go tell the Spartans, thou who passest by / That here, obedient to their laws, we lie."²³ Dickinson thus draws on Simonides' invocation of the three hundred Spartans who died at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE when fighting against the Persians, as well as perhaps her own experience of war. While this poem was not written during the years of the American Civil War, and while there is again no clear evidence that the Civil War in particular informed the composition of this piece, it is possible that Dickinson had the Civil War, along with more ancient wars, in the back of her mind as she wrote about the motivations that might compel a man to fight and die for his country.

In her re-working of the Simonides poem, after Dickinson comments on the message directed at the Spartans, "Go tell it," she introduces elements that "the masculine world of martial ethos might be thought to repress: the 'murmur' of protest, a word of 'endearment' to a beloved left behind."²⁴ Both Loeffelholz and Lionel Trilling, whose 1967 analysis of the poem Loeffelholz cites, read this "murmur" and "endearment" as representative of orthodox feminine values rather than masculine ones. These two words carry connotations of emotional attachment and deep human ties, and are part of the feminine vocabulary for "desire and differentiation" that Dickinson employs throughout the poem.²⁵ While there is nothing inherently female in emotional attachment or quiet affection, in patriarchal societies like Dickinson's such features are viewed as feminine, and thus contrast with the more masculine vocabulary of the first two lines of the poem. This self-consciously conventional feminine vocabulary continues as Dickinson introduces but then swiftly rejects "Lure" and "Longing" as motivations for the Spartans going to war. These two nouns are placed in direct contrast to the "Law" in the seventh line of the poem. While Lure and Longing again suggest complex, difficult kinds of desire as well as a kind of tenderness that Trilling marks as un-masculine,²⁶ the "Law" is representative of the stoic codes of heroic masculinity that the Spartans embodied and abided by when they chose to obey their summons to war. The "Law" is what the ideal soldier should be: removed, impartial, steadfast, and unemotional. Yet Dickinson calls these values into question, and seems to suggest that "Lure" and "Longing" may be just as reasonable causes for which one could sacrifice one's life.

This contrast between conventional masculine and feminine perspectives and values reaches its height in the juxtaposition between the "traditionally gendered personifications or principles" of Nature and Thermopylae, otherwise imagined as "the goddess and the

²² Loeffelholz (2016) 140.

²³ Loeffelholz (2016) 58.

²⁴ Loeffelholz (2016) 58.

²⁵ Loeffelholz (2016) 60.

²⁶ Loeffelholz (2016) 61.

hero.”²⁷ The Spartan warriors ultimately choose the personified, heroic Thermopylae, and reject the female goddess Nature along with her pull of desire, love, and longing. Dickinson finishes the poem by blending the traditionally masculine with the feminine, placing the feminine epithet “Sweet” in front of the masculine personification of Thermopylae, and describing the Spartan’s heroic death and “final salute to Law”²⁸ in terms of a feminine “Kiss.” Her final lines thus again evoke “heroic masculine self-sacrifice and dedication to law” in contrast with feminine personal desire.²⁹

It is this combination and juxtaposition of masculine and feminine perspectives that connects Dickinson’s epigrammatic poetry to Anyte’s. Both women, unlike their male predecessors, insert and elevate a female presence and values into male-dominated contexts of mourning, and thus re-work typical male, heroic modes of expression. Dickinson’s introduction of the feminine, however, unlike Anyte’s, seems to be a self-conscious performance rather than a sincere adoption of these values. Indeed, Loeffelholz claims that “Go tell it” is “both an italicized performance of femininity and a loving reading of masculinity.”³⁰ Loeffelholz argues that with her concise and rather impersonal style of writing in the epigram, Dickinson “lays her own implicit claim to a masculine terseness of style,” while using femininity as simply “one mode among other styles available to [her]”.³¹ While Dickinson’s epigram is innovative in its equal presentation of both masculine and feminine values, it differs from Anyte’s epigrams in its implicit questioning and distance from both the masculine and feminine. While Anyte embraces an alternative female point of view, Dickinson adopts a perspective that is neither wholly masculine nor feminine, but that perhaps aspires to some “transfiguration beyond gender.”³²

“Go tell it,” thus presents an interesting contrast to Anyte’s Epigram 4, as Dickinson and Anyte appear to appropriate the masculine and embrace the feminine to differing degrees. It also provides a compelling point of comparison to Anyte’s Epigram 21.³³ This poem, which portrays Anyte’s characteristic compassion for the dead as well as her unique attention to personal relationships, reads:

This Lydian Earth holds Amyntor, son of Philipp,
Who seized many matters of iron battle with his hands:

²⁷ Loeffelholz (2016) 59.

²⁸ Loeffelholz (2016) 59.

²⁹ Loeffelholz (2016) 63.

³⁰ Loeffelholz (2016) 64.

³¹ Loeffelholz (2016) 60.

³² Loeffelholz (2016) 70.

³³ While Epigram 21 is attributed to an Antipater of Sidon in Paton (1917), the poem’s authorship is doubtful. Aldington (1919) attributes the poem to Anyte and publishes a translation of it in his volume. Gow/Page (1965) also attribute the poem to Anyte, as does Rayer (1991) in her translations of Anyte’s epigrams.

Nor did any grievous disease bring him to the house of Night,
But he perished, having held his round shield 'round his comrade.³⁴

Like Epigram 4, Epigram 21 showcases Anyte's rural values and female sensibilities, which are contrasted with the bloody, masculine world of war. One can imagine the Lydian Earth holding the body of Amyntor just as a mother or father would embrace a dead child. Like the personified Nature in Dickinson's "Go tell it", the personified Earth in Epigram 21 introduces an element of tenderness that can be coded as feminine and that juxtaposes the harsh, cold "iron battle" in line two. This "battle" represents all that is traditionally masculine, heroic, and epic, similar to Dickinson's "Thermopylae." It is also striking that Anyte identifies Amyntor as "the son of Philipp" at the end of the first line of the epigram. While it was quite common in Greek epic and classical Greek lyric poetry to refer to a man by his patronymic in order to show his heroic lineage, Anyte seems to be appropriating this masculine convention for a somewhat different purpose. Amyntor is not the son of Zeus, or Peleus, or Priam, but an ordinary soldier, the son of an ordinary man. The use of the patronymic, therefore, seems not to point to Amyntor's distinguished heritage, but rather to highlight the son's relationship with his father. The reader is reminded that Amyntor is indeed someone's child, not just an anonymous combatant. Through her depictions of the Earth and this father-son relationship, Anyte thus emphasizes the domestic, personal experience of death and mourning, rather than the impersonal glory and honor characteristic of the male literary tradition.

The second distich continues this focus on domesticity and personal relationships. In line three, Anyte claims it was not a "grievous disease" that led Amyntor into Hades, invoking a more domestic circumstance in which a child would die at home from some sort of fatal illness. Rather than die in his house from a tragic sickness, perhaps in his bed surrounded by his family, Amyntor died in battle, protecting his companion with his shield. He thus sacrifices his life not only for the sake of his city, but also for the sake of his friend. Unlike in Epigram 4, where a chief gives his life for a fatherland that is indifferent to his sacrifice, here in Epigram 21 Amyntor dies in order to protect someone who presumably cared for him while he was alive and will continue to care and grieve for him after his death. By portraying this friendship as the cause of Amyntor's self-sacrifice rather than some abstract idea of patriotism, duty, or, as with Dickinson, "Law", Anyte deviates from the traditional celebration of male heroic values in epigram, placing her poetry and poetic persona in opposition to the poems and personas of men like Simonides and Homer.

By comparing Anyte and Dickinson's epigrammatic poems that treat themes of death and mourning in the context of war, one can see how the two poets differently appropriate

³⁴ Geoghegan (1979): Λύδιον οὐδας ἔχει τόδ' Ἀμύντορα, παῖδα Φιλίππου, / πολλὰ σιδηρεῖης χερσὶ θιγόντα μάχης· / οὐδέ μιν ἀλγινόεσσα νόσος δόμον ἄγαγε Νυκτός, / ἀλλ' ὄλετ' ἀμφ' ἐτάρω σχών κυκλόεσσαν ἴτυν.

the language and principles of the male poetic tradition, and insert their own uniquely feminine perspectives and values into this tradition. It seems that both Anyte and Dickinson recognize their position as women writers within the socially constructed gender binary, and use this status to disrupt and revise the male-dominated epigrammatic tradition. While Anyte transforms patriarchal discourse by offering and embracing an alternative world where elements culturally coded as feminine such as families, personal relationships, and compassion are prioritized, Dickinson blends masculine and feminine perspectives and presents complex, riddling epigrams that in a sense seem to transcend gender, as they do not wholly disavow attitudes and values coded as masculine nor completely adopt those coded as feminine. Through their introduction of these female perspectives, both women significantly contribute to the development of the epigrammatic style. By elevating the domestic, empathetic, and personal in their poems about loss and mourning in war, these poets eschew the notion that all that is worth preserving in epigrammatic tradition is the Homeric and heroic. They broaden the scope of human experience captured by epigram, and unlike their male predecessors and contemporaries claim a space for women and femininity as subjects worthy of attention.

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