


Spring 5-18-2018

# Women's Erotic Desires and Perspectives on Marriage in Sappho's Epithalamia and H.D.'s Hymen

Amanda Kubic

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art\\_sci\\_etds](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds)

 Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kubic, Amanda, "Women's Erotic Desires and Perspectives on Marriage in Sappho's Epithalamia and H.D.'s Hymen" (2018). *Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1286.

[https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art\\_sci\\_etds/1286](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/1286)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts & Sciences at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of Classics

Women's Erotic Desires and Perspectives on Marriage  
in Sappho's Epithalamia and H.D.'s *Hymen*

by  
Amanda Kubic

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate School  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts

May 2018  
St. Louis, Missouri

© 2018, Amanda Kubic

## Table Of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1    H.D.’s Collaborative Reception of Sappho’s Poetry.....	1
1.2    Hilda Doolittle: Modernist, <i>Imagiste</i> , and Classicist.....	2
1.3    “The Wise Sappho”.....	6
1.4    Previous Scholarship.....	11
1.5    Chapter Summaries.....	13
Chapter 2: Sappho’s Epithalamia.....	17
2.1    Introduction: The Genre of the Epithalamium.....	17
2.2    The Sapphic <i>Thiasos</i> .....	20
2.3    Longing for Virginitv.....	32
2.4    Praise of the Bride.....	34
2.5    Praise of the Groom.....	40
2.6    Mythological Marriages.....	43
2.7    Conclusion.....	52
Chapter 3: H.D.’s <i>Hymen</i> .....	54
3.1    Introduction: H.D.’s Composite Reception of Sappho.....	54
3.2    “Hymen”: The Beginning.....	56
3.3    “Demeter”: <i>Hymen</i> ’s Mother-Goddess.....	74
3.4    “Simaetha” and H.D.’s Abandoned Mythic Women.....	82
3.5    Phaedra and Hippolyta: Motherhood and Mythic Marriage to Theseus.....	90
3.6    “Fragment 113: ‘Neither honey nor bee for me.’—Sappho”.....	95
3.7    Conclusion.....	99
Chapter 4: Conclusion.....	101
4.1    Summary.....	101
4.2    Writing as a Woman in the Sapphic Tradition.....	102
Bibliography.....	105

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the chair of my thesis committee, Dr. Zoe Stamatopoulou, for the outstanding support and guidance that she has provided me as I have written, revised, and defended this thesis. Her insight and her feedback have been invaluable to me throughout this process. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Catherine Keane and Dr. Robert Henke, for their wonderfully discerning and thought-provoking questions and comments on my work. I offer special thanks as well to Dr. Vincent Sherry and Dr. Mary Jo Bang, whose course on modernist poetry inspired the topic of this thesis. In addition, I extend my sincerest thanks to the entire Department of Classics at Washington University in St. Louis for providing me with the resources I needed to complete this work. Lastly, I want to thank my family and fellow graduate students in the Department of Classics, for whose constant support and encouragement I am extremely grateful.

Amanda Kubic

*Washington University in St. Louis*

*May 2018*

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Women's Erotic Desires and Perspectives on Marriage

in Sappho's Epithalamia and H.D.'s *Hymen*

by

Amanda Kubic

Master of Arts in Classics

Washington University in St. Louis, 2018

Professor Zoe Stamatopoulou, Chair

In her collection *Hymen* (1921), the modernist poet H.D. engages in a collaborative, composite reception of the archaic Greek lyric poet Sappho. H.D. draws on Sappho as a source of lyric power and lesbian erotic authority, and brings together the various women's voices and perspectives represented in Sappho's poems—especially those that have to do with marriage—into her own present poetic moment. As the title *Hymen* suggests, of particular significance to H.D.'s Sapphic reception work is the genre of the epithalamium, or “wedding song.” Sappho, in her epithalamia, constructs a woman-centered and woman-identified *thiasos* that is centered on the bride, her companions, and the poet; she emphasizes these women's experiences of the marriage rite and the several moments of transition necessitated by it. In *Hymen*, H.D. constructs a similar *thiasos*, and like Sappho prioritizes female perspectives of marriage, sex, desire, and loss. Yet, while Sappho's epithalamia appear rather celebratory in tone and look with optimism toward the bride's future as a wife and mother, H.D. reverses the ancient generic function of the epithalamium and uses the form to criticize rather than celebrate traditional heterosexual marriage. H.D. views marriage and the necessitated forfeiture of virginity as a symbolic death for the bride, and throughout *Hymen* highlights the various forms of loss that the institution entails.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 H.D.'s Collaborative Reception of Sappho's Poetry

Of all of the modernist poets who engage with texts from classical antiquity in various modes, such as T.S. Elliot, Ezra Pound, and E.E. Cummings, H.D. stands out for the way in which she collaborates with and indeed “constructs” the Hellenic.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps one of H.D.'s most obvious engagements with ancient Hellenic texts is her work with the lyric poems of Sappho. While scholars have primarily paid attention to the way that H.D. receives, or rather expands upon Sappho's lyrics in her poems that specifically evoke certain fragments in their titles,<sup>2</sup> many of H.D.'s other poetic projects engage in a similar kind of Sapphic revision and reconstruction. Indeed, a critical study of her collection *Hymen* (1921) reveals a kind of composite, collaborative reception of the various female voices and perspectives found in Sappho's poems—specifically, those poems that have to do with marriage.

In *Hymen*, H.D. inherits both the Sapphic construction of the woman-centered *thiasos* and the genre of the epithalamium. Much like her Lesbian predecessor, H.D. explores the homosocial and homoerotic bonds developed within the *thiasos*, particularly in the context of the marriage ritual, where such relationships would serve as a source of comfort and support for the bride and her companions. Sappho and H.D. both prioritize women's experiences of the marriage rite and the various sexual and social transitions involved in that rite. Yet, unlike Sappho, H.D. reverses the original generic function of the epithalamium, using it as a means to criticize rather than celebrate marriage. While Sappho portrays marriage as a social duty that is worthy of

---

<sup>1</sup> Gregory (1997) 1 states that H.D. “operates out of certain fictional constructs of the Hellenic...that overwhelmingly shape her conception of her vocation and of her personal affiliations.”

<sup>2</sup> These are: “Fragment Forty-one / ...*thou flittest to Andromeda.* / Sappho,” “Fragment Forty / *Love...bitter-sweet.* / Sappho,” and “Fragment Sixty-eight / ...*even in the house of Hades.* / Sappho” (*Heliodora* 1924).

rejoicing and that promises the bride a bright future as a wife and mother, H.D. dwells on the loss of virginity, autonomy, companionship, and even creativity that marriage entails for the bride. H.D. ultimately portrays marriage as a kind of symbolic death of the bride—an event worthy of mourning, not rejoicing. H.D.’s amplification and (re)construction of the female voices in Sappho’s fragments is thus accompanied by an upset in generic convention, as H.D., within the epithalamic tradition, rejects the violent use and abuse of women present in traditional, heterosexual marriage, and seeks out new, alternative modes of erotic fulfillment that transcend these kinds of “old desire” and “old passion.”<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Hilda Doolittle: Modernist, *Imagiste*, and Classicist

Hilda Doolittle is known more widely by the name fellow American modernist poet Ezra Pound “scratched” under the typescript of two of her early poems: “H.D., *Imagiste*.”<sup>4</sup> Born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1886 to an academic father and a Moravian mother, H.D. was educated at various private schools in Pennsylvania before briefly attending Bryn Mawr College.<sup>5</sup> At a young age, she came to associate with many of the now-famous literary minds of her day, including Pound, William Carlos Williams, D.H. Lawrence, and Marianne Moore.<sup>6</sup> In her own right, H.D. became a celebrated poet, dramatist, essayist, translator, and scholar, publishing numerous works of both poetry and prose in her lifetime. In 1913, H.D. married another notable poet of the modernist movement, Richard Aldington, whom she divorced in 1915. In 1916, she published her first volume of poetry, entitled *Sea Garden*. H.D. then had a daughter with composer Cecil Gray in 1919, whom she named Perdita. In 1920, H.D.

---

<sup>3</sup> H.D. (1921) 131

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds (2000) 310

<sup>5</sup> Ramazani, Ellmann, and O’Clair (2013) 394

<sup>6</sup> Reynolds (2000) 309-310



and Perdita travelled to Greece with H.D.'s friend and lover, Winifred Ellerman "Bryher." This trip would prove highly influential to H.D.'s subsequent works *Hymen* (1921), *Heliadora* (1924), and *Red Roses for Bronze* (1931).<sup>7</sup> Bryher and H.D. remained friends and on-again off-again lovers for the remainder of their lives.<sup>8</sup> In 1933, H.D. became a pupil of renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud; the pair's shared fascination with the unconscious and ancient religious mysticism features prominently in her later work.<sup>9</sup> Over the next three decades, H.D. wrote several more volumes, including *Bid Me to Live* (1939), *The Gift* (1941-43), *Trilogy* (1942-44), *Tribute to Freud* (1945), and *Helen in Egypt* (1952-54). Many of these were published after her death in 1961.<sup>10</sup>

H.D. wrote amidst the turbulence, violence, and radical change that characterized the decades before, during, and after the first and second World Wars, and was a pioneering member of the so-called "Imagist" movement of the early twentieth century. According to Pound's "A Retrospect," the main tenets of Imagism, which he, H.D., and Aldington all agreed upon in the summer of 1912, were to be as follows:

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.<sup>11</sup>

Imagist poetry is thus often characterized by free verse rather than metrical rigidity, absence rather than presence of excessive descriptions and modifiers, and direct treatment of the Image, defined as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."<sup>12</sup>

Imagism, and modernism more generally, are concerned with the immediacy of experience—the

---

<sup>7</sup> Reynolds (2000) 311-312

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds (2000) 312

<sup>9</sup> Ramazani, Ellmann, and O'Clair (2013) 394

<sup>10</sup> For a full chronology of the composition/publication dates of H.D.'s work, see DuPlessis (1986) xix-xx.

<sup>11</sup> Pound (1918) 929

<sup>12</sup> Pound (1918) 930

sudden and transient moment of “now”—and the poet’s ability to capture that experience with as much precision and concision as possible. Indeed, in the 1913 edition of the *New Freedwoman*, Rebecca West memorably stated that imagist poetry “should be burned to the bone by austere fires and washed white with the rains of affliction.”<sup>13</sup>

This vision of imagist, modernist poetry is thoroughly realized in H.D.’s early poems “Oread,” “Sea Rose,” “Garden,” and “Sea Violet,” all later published in *Sea Garden* (1916). Yet, as poet and critic R.P. Blackmur notes, H.D. has her own “special form of the mode of Imagism—cold, ‘Greek,’ fast, and enclosed.”<sup>14</sup> Although the modernists enjoined each other to constantly “make it new,”<sup>15</sup> many, including H.D., looked to the old—the ancient, in fact—to create something innovative and entirely their own. H.D. was quite well versed in ancient Greek. She was not only “an innovative amateur translator”<sup>16</sup> of texts like Euripides’ *Ion* and poems from the *Greek Anthology*, but through her extensive knowledge of these ancient texts had the capacity to simultaneously critique and assume their “cultural authority.”<sup>17</sup> As Rachel DuPlessis (1986), quoting Homans (1980), notes: “one of the major uses to which H.D. puts the classics is ‘battling a valued and loved literary tradition to forge a self out of the materials of otherness,’ especially traditions of representation.”<sup>18</sup> H.D. was aware that classical literature constitutes a rich but primarily male-centered body of discourse, which only occasionally allows glimpses into women’s lives and points of view, and the study of which was barred to women for

---

<sup>13</sup> West (1913) 86

<sup>14</sup> Blackmur (1945) 339

<sup>15</sup> See Pound, Canto LIII; As Rasula (2010) 713 notes, while “make it new” was a popular phrase propounded by Pound and circulated among modernists, and indeed perhaps “the most frequently repeated quip of the early twentieth century,” it was not until 1934 in Pound’s Canto LIII that it was published. In the Canto, Pound speaks of the Chinese emperor Tching Tang, who supposedly wrote “make it new” on his bathtub.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory (1997) 38

<sup>17</sup> DuPlessis (1986) 17

<sup>18</sup> DuPlessis (1986) 17; Homans (1980) 12

centuries. She sought to find and fashion herself—as a scholar, as a woman, as a lover of women, and as a poet—out of this seemingly exclusive material.

One of H.D.'s ventures as an artist and scholar was, as DuPlessis notes, to study and elaborate the “written trace of female presence in the major genres of the classical world.”<sup>19</sup> Eileen Gregory (1986) argues that one genre of particular importance for H.D. was archaic lyric poetry.<sup>20</sup> H.D. sought to establish “a place for herself” within this tradition, for it is a tradition in which “the voice of the woman poet has a distinct potency.”<sup>21</sup> Gregory argues that the figure of the woman poet—the “Poetess”—is for H.D. a “crucial source of lyric power.”<sup>22</sup> The most famous Poetess from the archaic lyric tradition, in whom H.D. undoubtedly saw herself, is Sappho. Gregory claims: “Sappho herself, the first love-possessed lyricist... carries for H.D. an authority for her own marginal explorations, for her sustained spiritualized eroticism.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, one of H.D.'s most enduring legacies is the way in which she allows her gendered status as a “woman writer” to inform her translation and poetic exploration of both ancient and modern “myths of desire and erotics.”<sup>24</sup> H.D.'s “sapphistries,” as Collecott calls them, allow her to explore a “Lesbian *topos*” and a “Lesbian *eros*” in an otherwise male-dominated tradition,<sup>25</sup> and to forge a “living link between women poets in different times and places.”<sup>26</sup> Both in her poetic style, which is often intentionally fragmented, concise, and refracted, and in her poetic content,

---

<sup>19</sup>DuPlessis (1986) 18

<sup>20</sup> Gregory (1986) 527

<sup>21</sup> Gregory (1986) 527

<sup>22</sup> Gregory (1986) 529

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> DuPlessis (1986) 11

<sup>25</sup> Collecott (1999) 29

<sup>26</sup> Collecott (1999) 24

which emphasizes the homosexual/homosocial and woman-centered experience, H.D. finds a source of authority and inspiration in Sappho.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.3 “The Wise Sappho”

There is little that can be said for certain about Sappho in terms of biography. She lived and wrote during the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, and was a native of the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos.<sup>28</sup> Her family was elite, and likely politically active.<sup>29</sup> She was probably married, though almost certainly not to a man named Kerkylas of Andros, as the *Suda* reports, and seems to have had a daughter named Cleis.<sup>30</sup> Contrary to the speculation of many scholars, it is highly unlikely that Sappho was any kind of “schoolmistress” or professional leader of a chorus of girls, since there is no evidence of publicly recognized and regulated institutions for female activities—educational or otherwise—in archaic Greece.<sup>31</sup> It is obvious from Sappho’s poems, however, that she formed close relationships with her female peers. In her work, she portrays herself as engaged in meaningful friendships as well as sexual and erotic relationships with other women, with whom she may have participated in ritual activities, choruses, or other

---

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that while H.D. knew and often seems to have consulted the original Greek fragments of Sappho, she also referenced the text and translations of Wharton (1898). Wharton’s volume, which begins with a lengthy introduction to the life of Sappho, and ends with a translation of Ovid’s *Heroides* 15, includes 170 fragments grouped by metrical style (Sapphic, dactylic, choriambic, various meters, *a minore*, epithalamia, epigrams, miscellaneous) as well as a short section on the “Fayum Fragments” (Frs. 3V and 4V, published originally by Blass in the 1880 volume of *Rheinisches Museum* but included in Bergk 1882). Wharton adopts the Greek text of the 170 fragments compiled and edited by Bergk (1882) throughout, and after every fragment presents a number of English (and, occasionally, Latin) translations and adaptations. While I have chosen to adopt the Voigt text of Sappho’s fragments for this thesis, when significant discrepancies occur between Voigt and Bergk/Wharton, they will be noted.

<sup>28</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 4

<sup>29</sup> Reynolds (2000) 20

<sup>30</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 3-4. As Rayor and Lardinois note, the name “Kerkylas of Andros” seems to be satirical, and derived from a later antique comedy about Sappho. Cleis, however, appears to be mentioned by name in Sappho Fr. 98bV and Fr. 132V. While one must always be cautious about reading details from an author’s work as biographical or historical fact, H.D., like many scholars, certainly seems to accept that in Fr. 132V, Sappho is speaking about herself when she claims Ἔστι μοι κάλα πάϊς (“I have a beautiful child”).

<sup>31</sup> For a summary of the scholarship arguing for and against Sappho as a “schoolmistress,” see Parker (1991) 146-183.

forms of poetic performance.<sup>32</sup> Yet the extant poems in which Sappho engages in polemics against women like Andromeda<sup>33</sup> show that other equally complex but antagonistic dynamics likely existed between Sappho and women outside of her group. Nevertheless, interactions between and among women remain at the forefront of her work. Like her contemporary Alcaeus, Sappho composed lyric poetry in her native Lesbian dialect and a variety of meters. She is best known, however, for the so-called 4-line “Sapphic stanza,” implemented in some of her most famous poems, including Fr. 1V, Fr. 2V, Fr.16V, and Fr. 31V.<sup>34</sup> Sappho’s corpus is, unfortunately, quite fragmented. Out of the nine books of poetry kept at the library of Alexandria in antiquity, only one full poem (Fr. 1V) and numerous fragments, of varying length and clarity, survive today.

What does exist for Sappho, in lieu of a complete body of work or actual biographical evidence, is a rich history of reception.<sup>35</sup> It is this history that H.D. inherits and enhances in her own work. To H.D., DuPlessis argues, Sappho represents the “quintessential female precursor,” who offers a “triple blankness” in her fragmented text, in the absence of women’s voices from literary history, and in the “cultural silence about lesbianism,” which in turn invites H.D to participate in a “triple collaboration: completing a text, creating a ‘literary matrilineage’ by inventing a female classical inheritance, and finally acknowledging a hidden sexuality.”<sup>36</sup> In her essay “The Wise Sappho,” written some time between 1916 and 1918, H.D. acknowledges this

---

<sup>32</sup> For more on the choral activities and performances of Sappho and her companions, see Lardinois (1989) 150-172.

<sup>33</sup> See Sappho Fr. 57V and Fr. 131V.

<sup>34</sup> Campbell (1982) 260-264

<sup>35</sup> Broad studies on receptions of Sappho in later western literature are numerous, and a full account is beyond the scope of this paper. A few noteworthy volumes include Yatromanolakis (2008) on early/classical reception, Prins (1999) on reception in the Victorian period, DeJean (1989) on the sexual politics of reception from 1546-1937, and duBois (1995) on reception in the fields of philosophy, sexuality studies, and psychoanalysis. For a general, rather comprehensive account of Sappho’s reception throughout the millennia, see Reynolds (2000).

<sup>36</sup> DuPlessis (1986) 23-24

sense of inheritance and, in her reconstructions of the lives and the *ethos* of Sappho and her group, reveals the extent of her collaborative engagement with the Sapphic.

“The Wise Sappho” begins with H.D. quoting and translating the “Alexandrine poet” Meleager’s summation of Sappho’s poetry in the *Palatine Anthology*: “little, but all roses.”<sup>37</sup> Meleager here seems to refer to the fragmented yet sweet and beautiful nature of Sappho’s extant work.<sup>38</sup> Meleager would have also undoubtedly been aware of the numerous references to roses in Sappho’s fragments and their frequent associations with female divinities and young women’s beauty.<sup>39</sup> Yet in her essay, H.D. immediately disagrees with Meleager’s assessment, claiming “impassioned roses are dead.”<sup>40</sup> The overwrought and perhaps platitudinous nature of roses is not enough to capture the passion, the bitterness, and the vivacity that H.D. sees in Sappho. H.D., like Meleager, characterizes Sappho’s poetry through images of flowers, but declares that Sappho’s words are instead “orange blossoms,” “red lilies,” “violets” and “gold.”<sup>41</sup> H.D. is thus clearly engaged not only with the text of Sappho’s poems, in which flowers of various kinds are frequently mentioned, but also the evocative, sensuous spirit of Sappho’s work, and receptions of that work both in the ancient world and in her own time. With this declaration at the outset of “The Wise Sappho,” H.D. announces her intention to overwrite, as a woman reader and woman writer, the insufficient male readings of Sappho that stem all the way back to Meleager. To H.D., Sappho’s work is not sweet and simple roses, but “irregular bays and fiords,” “an island, a country, a continent, a planet, a world of emotion.”<sup>42</sup> H.D. imagines Sappho herself, moreover,

---

<sup>37</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 57. H.D. here translates the *Anth.Pal.* 4.1.5-6: πολλὰ μὲν ἐμπλέξας Ἀνύτης κρίνα, πολλὰ δὲ Μοιροῦς / λείρια, καὶ Σαπφοῦς βαιὰ μὲν ἀλλὰ ῥόδα (“Having woven together many white lilies of Anyte, and many lilies of Moero, and the few [flowers] of Sappho, but [these few] roses”).

<sup>38</sup> The LSJ notes that in Aristophanes *Nubes*, line 910 (ῥόδα μ’ εἴρηκας), ῥόδα comes to mean “all things sweet and beautiful.”

<sup>39</sup> See Sappho Frs. 2V, 53V, 55V, 58V, 74aV, 94V, and 96V.

<sup>40</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 57

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 58

not as a teacher or chorus leader, as much male-dominated scholarship has proposed, but simply “a song or the spirit of a song.”<sup>43</sup> Later in the essay, H.D. explicitly acknowledges the modern reception and conception of Sappho:

True, Sappho has become for us a name, an abstraction as well as a pseudonym for poignant human feeling, she is indeed rocks set in a blue sea, she is the sea itself, breaking and tortured and torturing, but never broken. She is the island of artistic perfection where the lover of ancient beauty (shipwrecked in the modern world) may yet find foothold and take breath and gain courage for new adventures and dream of yet unexplored continents and realms of future artistic achievement. She is the wise Sappho.<sup>44</sup>

For H.D., Sappho is thus an exemplary artist, a paragon of poetic perfection. She is the source of inspiration and courage from whom women writers like H.D. draw when setting out to explore new artistic horizons. Even if nothing else can be said or known about her, H.D. claims, it is indisputable that Sappho was “wise, emotionally wise, we suspect with wisdom of simplicity, the blindness of genius.”<sup>45</sup>

H.D.’s own (re-)construction of Sappho is undoubtedly influenced by some of the scant extant testimony about Sappho’s life and her appearance. H.D. imagines the poet as white faced with twisted eyes, “aristocratic—indifferent—full of caprice—full of imperfection—intolerant” and bitter.<sup>46</sup> Some of this description may be inspired by late and post-classical accounts of Sappho, wherein she is described as jealous, dark, and ugly.<sup>47</sup> The fact, moreover, that H.D. describes Sappho as altogether different from and indifferent to the “country girl”<sup>48</sup> that draws up her skirts around her ankles in Fr. 57V again shows her close engagement with the fragments and her use of these fragments to extrapolate potential biographical details. In her essay, H.D. also

---

<sup>43</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 59

<sup>44</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 67

<sup>45</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 65

<sup>46</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 59

<sup>47</sup> See Most (1995) 11 for more on this physical description and other likely fallacious accounts of Sappho.

<sup>48</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 59

reflects on the “young women of Mitylene”<sup>49</sup> whom Sappho associated with, evoking Atthis, Andromeda, Sappho’s golden daughter Cleis, Timas, Eranna, and others. She acknowledges that “we have no definite portraits” of these women and that “they are left to our imagination,”<sup>50</sup> but nonetheless seems to embrace the notion that women like Atthis and Andromeda were Sappho’s friends and lovers, rather than her students or rivals.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps Atthis was, H.D. writes, a “half-grown awkward girl,” but she was also “a being, a companion, an equal” in Sappho’s eyes.<sup>52</sup>

It is this vision of Sappho—as a poet, a lover of women, a fragmented and tortured but unbroken body of text, a font of wisdom for the poetic project—that is carried over into H.D.’s work. Many of the poems in *Sea Garden* are in fact consciously modeled on fragments of Sappho and other archaic lyric poems, both in terms of their content and in terms of their “precision, concision, and elliptical presentation with . . . no unnecessary word or gesture.”<sup>53</sup> Yet many of H.D.’s other, less studied collections are also imbued with this Sapphic influence. *Hymen* (1921), H.D.’s fourth collection after *Sea Garden* (1916), *The God* (1913-1917), and her *Translations* (1915-1920), is replete with Sapphic themes and modes of representation. Indeed, out of all of H.D.’s work, *Hymen* reveals the most extensive engagement with the epithalamium—a genre for which Sappho was and is well known. Sappho composed several epithalamia, or wedding songs, that were meant for solo performance or performance by female choruses typically composed of the bride’s friends.<sup>54</sup> In *Hymen*, H.D. uses both the form and the themes of the epithalamia to give voice to the female experience of marriage. She also breaks generic tradition by using the wedding song to criticize heterosexual sex and marriage, rather

---

<sup>49</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 62

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> See Parker (1991) 146-183 and Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 14-16 for more on these modern (and anachronistic) reconstructions of Sappho.

<sup>52</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 65

<sup>53</sup> DuPlessis (1986) 23. See Gregory (1986) for an extended analysis of these poems.

<sup>54</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 9



than celebrate them, as Sappho does. It is this reception of Sappho and her epithalamia in H.D.'s *Hymen* that constitutes the topic of this thesis.

#### 1.4 Previous Scholarship

A significant amount of scholarship exists analyzing the reception of Sappho and the Sapphic in H.D.'s work. Both Margaret Reynolds in *The Sappho Companion* (2000) and Eileen Gregory in *H.D. and Hellenism* (1997) devote chapters to H.D.'s reception of Sappho. Indeed, Gregory's seminal article "Rose Cut in Rock: Sappho and H.D.'s 'Sea Garden'" (1986) remains one of the most influential pieces of scholarship on Sappho and H.D., particularly in terms of its focus on the figure of the Poetess and its negotiation of lesbian erotic desire. Diana Collecott, in *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism* (1999), also studies the ways in which H.D., working from a Sapphic tradition of a "lesbian poetics,"<sup>55</sup> negotiates issues of gender, sexuality, Hellenism, modernism, and literary tradition in her work. Erika Rohrbach, in her chapter "H.D. and Sappho: 'A Precious Inch of Palimpsest'" (1996), argues that H.D. identifies with Sappho primarily on a poetic level and that both Sappho's fragments and the multiple "layers of interpretation" insulating them provide H.D. with a stylistic model.<sup>56</sup>

Several articles have focused on specific, often early poems of H.D. in terms of this Sapphic intertext. Robert Babcock, in "H.D.'s 'Pursuit' and Sappho" (1990) argues that "Pursuit" is based directly on Sappho Fr. 105, while Bret Keeling in "H.D. and 'The Contest': Archaeology of a Sapphic Gaze" (1998) examines how in "The Contest," H.D. inherits from Sappho the "'experienced power' and sexual erotics of a gaze that initiates not a fixed

---

<sup>55</sup> Collecott (1999) viii

<sup>56</sup> Rohrbach (1996) 184

subject/object exchange but an oscillating sense of subjectivity.”<sup>57</sup> In her introduction to H.D.’s *Collected Poems* (1925), Louis L. Martz studies H.D.’s “Fragment” poems, which have since received the most scholarly attention due to their direct, indisputable evocation of Sappho and her extant fragments in the titles. Martz’s reading is perhaps overly informed by H.D.’s biography—namely, her divorce from Aldington—but nevertheless emphasizes the importance of the Sapphic “mask” that H.D. assumes in these poems.<sup>58</sup> There are also examinations of H.D.’s reception of Sappho in the “Fragment” poems in Susan Gubar’s chapter “Sapphistries” (1984) and in Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ book *H.D.: The Career of that Struggle* (1986).

There are far fewer scholars, however, who have looked closely at the ways in which H.D.’s *Hymen* engages with Sappho. Harriet Tarlo’s article “‘Ah, Could They Know:’ The Place of the Erotic in H.D.’s *Hymen*” (1996) and Sarah Graham’s chapter on “*Hymen* and *Trilogy*” (2012) both investigate the woman-centeredness of *Hymen* and its presentation of female (homo)erotic desire, but do not invoke any Sapphic intertexts. Thomas Swann’s slightly outdated but nevertheless observant volume *The Classical World of H.D.* (1962) does to an extent analyze Sappho’s influence on *Hymen*, though much of this analysis is obscured by Swann’s predilection for broadly categorizing the “types” of women in H.D.’s work. One of the most extensive scholarly engagements with the reception of Sappho in *Hymen* is in Gary Burnett’s *H.D.: Between Image and Epic* (1990), wherein Burnett traces both the Sapphic intertexts and the influence of ancient mystery cults through the majority of the poems in the collection. Gregory, in *H.D. and Hellenism*, dedicates a portion of her chapter on H.D. and Sappho to studying the “most serious of all H.D.’s engagements with Sappho” in *Hymen*.<sup>59</sup> In *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism*, Collecott also engages in some analysis of the poems in *Hymen*, even mapping out

---

<sup>57</sup> Keeling (1998) 177

<sup>58</sup> Martz (1925) xviii

<sup>59</sup> Gregory (1997) 156

in her “Appendix” some of the specific fragments of Sappho that H.D. is invoking. This thesis intends to expand upon these studies, and to explore even further the presence and significance of H.D.’s reception of Sappho and her epithalamia in *Hymen*.

## 1.5 Chapter Summaries

The next two chapters of this thesis explore Sappho, her epithalamia, as well as their reception and broader concepts and visions of the Sapphic in H.D.’s *Hymen* (1921). Chapter 2 analyzes Sappho’s epithalamia, along with a few other poems that were not composed as wedding songs, in terms of their representations of female relationships, experiences, and points of view in the context of marriage. It also attempts to decipher Sappho’s—or, at least, her poetic personas’—attitudes towards marriage, which, as stated, seem generally celebratory. The chapter begins with an overview of the epithalamium as a genre, noting significant generic markers and themes. This is followed by an analysis of the specific fragments of Sappho that provide information and insight into the relationships formed in the Sapphic *thiasos*, primarily in the context of wedding rituals. These fragments include Fr. 27V, Fr. 94V, Fr. 96V, and Fr. 30V. All of these fragments demonstrate that, within the context of the marriage ceremony, the relationships formed between the bride and her companions serve as a source of joy, comfort, support, and mutual pleasure, and play a key role in the bride’s transition from a young, virgin girl to a wife and future mother. The next section analyzes Sappho Fr. 107V and Fr. 114V, which specifically discuss the bride’s virginity and its inevitable loss on the wedding night. The following two segments examine fragments that involve praise for the bride—103V, 103bV, 105bV, and 112V—and praise for the groom—111V, 115V, and 110V—both of which are typical generic features of the epithalamium. The poems praising the bride emphasize her

youthful, blooming beauty and that ways that beauty can be enjoyed and cherished by those who look upon her. The poems dwelling on the physical attributes of the groom and his companions add a sense of levity to the ritual and contribute to the optimistic, celebratory atmosphere Sappho is evoking. The final section of Chapter 2 surveys Sappho's poems about mythological marriages—namely, Fr. 141V, Fr. 44V, and Fr. 16V. These mythic marriages, which contain many of the elements examined in previous poems, may serve as *exempla* to the women of Sappho's *thiasos*, and overall paint a rather positive picture of marriage.

Chapter 3 examines select poems from H.D.'s *Hymen* in terms of their reception of and expansion upon the Sapphic, epithalamic tradition. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to the main techniques in Sappho's epithalamia that H.D. draws upon in her own work, including the use of flower imagery, the prioritization of the female experience of marriage and erotic desire, and the re-writing of mythic female figures. There follows an extensive analysis of the first poem of the series, technically untitled but referred to by scholars as "Hymen." In "Hymen," H.D. establishes the woman-centric *thiasos* and explores the bonds of friendship and *eros* within it; she also, through the bridal chorus, comments on the bride's inevitable loss of virginity and her symbolic death through marriage. This opening "masque" sequence employs a plethora of flower imagery to convey these ideas, and is also the closest to an ancient epithalamium in terms of its performative, ritual aspects. The next section of the chapter examines "Demeter," the second poem of *Hymen*, in terms of its portrayal of marriage, women's relationships, and motherhood. Demeter, the speaker of the poem, has an inherent distrust for men and marriage, which she conveys through her retelling of the myths of Dionysus' birth and the rape of Persephone. The following segment of Chapter 3 looks at the monologue poems in *Hymen* told from the perspective of abandoned mythic women—primarily "Simaetha," but also "Circe,"

“Leda,” and “Evadne.” “Simaetha,” in particular, reveals a decidedly negative attitude towards heterosexual unions, and again reinforces the connection H.D. makes between loss of virginity and death. Next, there is an analysis of a trio of poems told from the tragic heroine Phaedra’s point of view, dealing with her love for Hippolytus, her marriage to Theseus, Theseus’ rape of Hippolyta, and the birth of Hippolytus. These three poems—“Phaedra,” “She Contrasts Herself with Hippolyta,” and “She Rebukes Hippolyta”—all emphasize the violence and danger inherent in heterosexual intercourse and speak explicitly of rape, unwanted pregnancy, and undesired *eros*. The final section of this chapter studies the only poem in *Hymen* that explicitly invokes Sappho—“Fragment 113.” Here, H.D. uses the Sapphic intertext to reject images of heterosexual passion and coupling and to embrace instead a kind of autonomous, “lesbian” female desire foregrounded in the poetic, creative project itself.

The Conclusion of this thesis first provides a summary of the given arguments before aiming to comment on their significance and place them in a broader context. Sappho, in her epithalamia as well as in her non-hymeneal poems, presents a variety of female-centered perspectives regarding marriage. She prioritizes women’s voices and women’s experiences of the wedding ritual, and highlights the sense of unity, friendship, and even eroticism within the constructed female *thiasos* of her poems. In *Hymen*, H.D. creates her own woman-centered *thiasos*. Following the Sapphic, epithalamic tradition, H.D. emphasizes the bonds of friendship and *eros* that connect women during this pivotal, liminal stage of life. She recognizes the importance of giving voice to women’s various experiences of the marriage ritual, so often obscured by the male-authored tradition but at the forefront of Sappho’s songs, and in her own epithalamia amplifies and multiplies the women’s voices found in Sappho’s fragments. H.D. thus creates a kind of composite reception of Sappho in *Hymen*, bringing together the various

women's roles and voices from the fragments into one modernized space and thereby enhancing their volume, their presence, and their importance. In her collection, moreover, H.D.'s prioritization of the female and the homosocial/homosexual bonds between women leads to a devaluation of the male and the heterosexual. Indeed, H.D. excludes much of the male element—i.e. the presence of the groom and his companions—that is present in Sappho's songs. Her attitude towards heterosexual intercourse and marriage is also much more negative than Sappho's, for whom marriage is a social duty that ought to be celebrated despite the inevitable losses it entails. In *Hymen*, H.D. repeatedly stresses these losses of freedom, virginity, and female companionship, and in fact implies that for the young woman of the *thiasos*, marriage involves a figurative loss of life, and so should be viewed as a symbolic kind of death. H.D., by creating a composite reception of Sappho in *Hymen*, thus forges a link between women of the past and present, and continues the Sapphic tradition of giving voice and space to women's experiences.

## Chapter 2: Sappho's Epithalamia

### 2.1 Introduction: The Genre of the Epithalamium

Epithalamia are either a subset or equivalent of the genre known as *hymenaioi*: choral songs performed at Greek weddings that evoke the god of marriage ceremonies, Hymen.<sup>1</sup> Few examples of the genre survive from the ancient world, and those that do vary widely in terms of their time and place of composition.<sup>2</sup> These marriage songs were clearly a central part of the marriage ritual, and would have been performed at various points during the marriage feast and the procession to the groom's home, outside of the bride's home, and outside of the newlyweds' door the morning after the wedding.<sup>3</sup> They would have thus formed a key "part of a *rite de passage* dealing with issues of sexuality and sexual maturity" inherent in marriage.<sup>4</sup> It is likely, moreover, that choruses of young girls—perhaps the friends and contemporaries of the bride—would have performed many of these epithalamia.<sup>5</sup> These girls would have thus comprised a network of support for the bride, and would have shared in her *rite de passage*.

The ritual cry of invocation and subsequent refrain to Hymen is the clearest identifying feature of the epithalamium or *hymenaios*. Calls of "ὕμνησον" (Sappho Fr. 111V), "Ὑμῆν ὦ Ὑμέναιε" (Theocritus *Idyl* 18.19), and "ο Hymenaeae Hymen" (Catullus 61) immediately mark

---

<sup>1</sup> Swift (2010) 242-243 notes that traditionally, scholars would distinguish *hymenaioi* from epithalamia, claiming that *hymenaioi* were songs sung at the wedding procession, while epithalamia were songs sung outside of the bridal chamber. Yet Swift notes that this distinction breaks down when one looks at examples from archaic and classical texts, which are inconsistent in their use of terminology (e.g. Theocritus *Idyl* 18 has its title recorded as an epithalamium and describes singing outside of the bridal chamber, but the song sung by the girls is called a *hymenaios* (ὕμεναίω, 8)). It thus seems possible to use two terms interchangeably, though ὕμεναίος perhaps "retains a particular association with the wedding procession" (243).

<sup>2</sup> Swift (2010) 241-242. For extant examples of *hymenaioi*, see not only Sappho, but also the description of a wedding ceremony on the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18.493, Catullus 61 and 62, Theocritus *Idyl* 18, and Lucian's parody in *Symp.* 41.

<sup>3</sup> Swift (2010) 242

<sup>4</sup> Swift (2010) 241

<sup>5</sup> Calame (2001) 84

these poems as participating in the epithalamic tradition.<sup>6</sup> Conventions shared in Sappho and other extant epithalamia also include extolling the bride's beauty, commenting on the good fortune and virility of the bridegroom, and detailing the ritual preparations and acts of the marriage ceremony. Swift notes that this praise of the groom, bride, and marriage in general is often achieved by means of *eikasia*: "a comparison to something regarded as conventionally praiseworthy," like horses and flowers.<sup>7</sup> Flowers, in particular, play an important role in the Sapphic epithalamia, which are, as Swift notes, the only "authentic and certain examples of Greek *hymenaios*."<sup>8</sup> While in Theocritus *Idyl* 18 Helen is compared to natural images like a pale spring, a cypress tree, and Thessalian horse, it is the flower that seems to have a special resonance in Sappho's fragments as a symbol of the bride's youthful beauty.<sup>9</sup> Many extant epithalamia also contain a *makarismos*, in which the bride and groom are pronounced happy and blessed, mythological *exempla* of happy marriages,<sup>10</sup> as well as humorous jests or crude remarks. Epithalamia also expressed young girls' anxieties surrounding the marriage ritual, and their passing from one state of life into the next. As Swift states, "articulating these anxieties [in epithalamia]...serves as a way to lessen them, portraying them as a normal or necessary part of the transition and so a healthy rather than destructive response to change."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Swift (2010) 245

<sup>7</sup> Swift (2010) 246

<sup>8</sup> Swift (2010) 244. Swift also notes that Contiades-Tsitsoni (1990) 46-63 discuss potential surviving hymenaeal fragments of Alcman, but these are less certain.

<sup>9</sup> Because of the lack of extant epithalamia, one cannot say for certain whether flowers were exclusively Sapphic *comparanda* in this context. Catullus, presumably working from a Sapphic model, compares a bride to a hyacinth flower in 61.89 and 62.39-47. Yet it is clear that H.D., at least, saw flowers and flower imagery as distinctly Sapphic, as evidenced in "The Wise Sappho."

<sup>10</sup> Swift (2010) 246-247. For the *makarismos*, see Hesiod Fr. 211.7 and Sappho Fr. 112V. For the *exempla*, see Aristophanes *Birds* 1731-44 on the wedding of Zeus and Hera, and Sappho Fr. 44V on the marriage of Hector and Andromache.

<sup>11</sup> Swift (2010) 249



Only fragments remain of Sappho's epithalamia, which at one time may have comprised the better part of two or more books.<sup>12</sup> Yet even these fragments reveal a sense of women-centeredness and a prioritization of the female experience.<sup>13</sup> Sappho's epithalamia would have been written for and performed at wedding ceremonies for family and friends, and perhaps later for strangers as her popularity grew and her poems circulated orally. Most of them use the kind of aforementioned formulaic, repetitive, ritualistic language that is also present in Theocritus *Idyl* 18 and Catullus 61 and 62.<sup>14</sup> Yet Sappho is distinct from her male contemporaries and successors in her portrayal of female eroticism and images of desire. Gregory, drawing on Stehle (1977), argues that Catullus 62 celebrates "the triumph of these elemental needs [male penetration and procreation] over the autonomy of the virgin."<sup>15</sup> Yet Sappho's poems "imply a fiction of female relations in the *thiasos* that has a fullness in itself, apart from the male."<sup>16</sup> Like the majority of her other poems, Sappho's wedding songs do not give primacy to the male experience of desire, sex, and procreation, but rather to the experience of the young women as she transitions from a virgin girl surrounded by female friends and lovers to a married woman and future mother.

Because of the ritualistic, often formulaic nature of Sappho's epithalamia, it is difficult to distinguish between Sappho's own opinions on marriage and what the requirements of the genre

---

<sup>12</sup> Yatromanolakis (1999) 181. Yatromanolakis posits that at least the last two books of the eight or nine total volumes of Sappho's poetry at the Library of Alexandria may have contained epithalamia. They would have been grouped together due to their metrical similarities—namely, being composed largely in iambs rather than elegiacs, as monodies, etc. Benelli (2017) 40 notes one ancient testimony on Sappho's book of epithalamia: Servius on Virgil, *Georg.* 1.31 (*Sappho, quae in libro qui inscribitur Ἐπιθαλάμια αἰτ*). Yet Benelli notes that poems like Frs. 27V, 30V, 43V, and 44V seem not to have been included in the book(s) of epithalamia, perhaps because they seem to lack, he argues, any direct address to the bride and groom present at the wedding (40-41).

<sup>13</sup> Denys Page's (1955) assessment that the epithalamia are "trivial in subject and style" (126) is hasty and dismissive. Not only do these poems carry a sense of "poignant beauty...that ought not to be so lightly dismissed" (Snyder 1997: 108), but they also provide information about the female experience of the marriage ritual that is not to be found in many other ancient authors.

<sup>14</sup> See Pindar *Pyth.* 3. 16-19, Longus 4.40, and Lucian *Symp.* 41 for other examples. Bulloch (1989) 44 notes that the end of *Idyl* 18, which is a wedding song to Helen of Sparta, has echoes of Sappho, and is said by ancient commentators to have drawn on Stesichorus' "Palinode."

<sup>15</sup> Gregory (1997) 157. See Stehle, "Retreat from the Male: Catullus 62 and Sappho's erotic flowers," *Ramus* 6 (1977): 83-102.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory (1997) 157

compel her to express. These wedding songs, which are composed for the very purpose of celebrating a *rite du passage*, are accordingly rather celebratory in tone. Indeed, Contiades-Tsitsoni (1990) characterizes Sappho’s epithalamia not only as graceful, charming, folky, and fresh, but also as cheerful.<sup>17</sup> While Sappho certainly acknowledges the loss of female friendship, erotic love, and virginity that accompany the marriage rite, the repeated calls to rejoice, the humor in the poems about the bridegroom’s appearance, and the lack of resentment towards the figure of the groom in the epithalamia all reveal a generally positive perception of marriage. Yet the many layers of speaker, poet, and genre that all come together in these fragments cannot always be separated, and it is possible that what one may read as Sappho’s personal endorsement of marriage is no more than a generic necessity or a ritual function of the wedding song. Therefore, even if later poets like H.D. read the epithalamia as representative of Sappho’s own, private perspective, it is important to acknowledge that, when discussing Sappho’s “attitude” towards marriage, one is necessarily analyzing the way that Sappho, the speaker of any given poem, and the genre all work together to convey a sense of optimism and celebration.

## 2.2 The Sapphic *Thiasos*

Sappho’s Fr. 27V, though badly fragmented, is undoubtedly an epithalamium. The poem seems to be addressed to an individual “you” (σὺ) involved in a wedding ritual, though no indication of the gender or identity of the addressee is provided in the extant, reconstructed text:

]καιπ[  
].[.]νοσ[  
]σι.

. . . ] . και γὰρ δὴ σὺ πάις ποτ[  
. . . ]ικης μέλπεσθ’ ἄγι ταῦτα[  
. . . ] ζάλεξαι, κάμμ’ ἀπὸ τωδεκ[

<sup>17</sup> Contiades-Tsitsoni (1990) 68-69

ἄ]δρα χάρισσαι·

σ]τείχομεν γὰρ ἐς γάμον· εὖ δε[  
κα]ὶ σὺ τοῦτ' ἀλλ' ὅτι τάχιστα[  
πα]ρ[θ]ένοις ἄπ[π]εμπε, θεοί[  
]εν ἔχοιεν  
]ὄδος μ[έ]γαν εἰς Ὀλ[υμπον  
ἀ]νθρω[π]αίικ . [ <sup>18</sup>

]although?]

...

...

] for yes indeed you [were] a child once [  
] come, sing these things  
] talk to us, give us your  
favor

for we are going to a wedding; and well  
you [do/know?] this, but as soon as possible  
send away the girls, and may the gods  
have  
]road to great Olympos  
]for humans

The highly ritualistic language of the fragment—the exhortation to sing, a statement of going to a wedding (σ]τείχομεν γὰρ ἐς γάμον, 8), and an invocation of Olympus—all evoke the celebratory atmosphere of a wedding procession. Yet the addressee remains unclear. Snyder (1994) speculates that the addressee is female, based on linguistic similarities with other epithalamia including the use of the term χάρις (χάρισσαι, 7), though she acknowledges that there are no remaining grammatical clues that reveal the addressee's gender.<sup>19</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) argue that, while the context is unclear, the child (παίς, 4) addressed in the first stanza of Fr. 27V

---

<sup>18</sup> Greek text for all Sappho fragments is from Voigt (1971). All translations in this chapter are my own.

<sup>19</sup> Snyder (1997) 107. Her reading of Fr. 27, and the one provided here, varies from Theander's (1946: 62-67) reading of *eis choron* instead of *eis gamon*. Theander claims that this song is addressed to Andromeda, Sappho's supposed rival poet, who is being asked to send the maidens back to Sappho so they can join her in song and dance. This fragment does not appear in Wharton (1898).

may be the bride, while the speaker—the “we”—is most likely a chorus.<sup>20</sup> While *πάις* can be used to refer to a male or female child, the notion of the bride transitioning from a *πάις* to a married woman—a *γυνή*—is apt for a genre that traditionally celebrates such a *rite de passage*.

Benelli (2017) comments on the various interpretations of Fr. 27V, including Ferrari’s (2010) assertion that the addressee of the poem must be an adult woman, perhaps a neighbor or the leader of another choral or poetic circle, whom Sappho enjoins to allow her girls to participate in the wedding procession.<sup>21</sup> Ferrari’s interpretation, however, seems overly speculative, and depends on the notions of Sapphic “rivals” and a Sapphic “entourage” or school of young girls that are likely anachronistic fabrications, and that have been argued against by Parker (1991) and Stehle (1979). Yet Ferrari’s and Benelli’s skepticism of reading the bride as the addressee because she is said to have been a *πάις* “at one time” (*ποτ[ε]*) in the more distant past and because she is enjoined to sing is valid.<sup>22</sup> It is true that it may be difficult to associate the bride with the *πάις* if one reconstructs *ποτ[ε]* as *ποτ[ε]*, since, as the poem suggests, if the chorus is on its way to the wedding, the bride’s transition from a *πάις* to a *γυνή* is not yet complete. Ferrari and Benelli are correct, moreover, in pointing out the uncommonness of a chorus ordering a bride to sing (*μέλπεσθ’*), as such an exhortation does not appear elsewhere in Sappho’s epithalamia. Benelli’s argument that the fragment is perhaps addressed to an old member of Sappho’s *thiasos*—one who has been married and moved on from the activities of her

---

<sup>20</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 107

<sup>21</sup> Benelli (2017) 130-131. Ferrari (2010) argues that the addressee is “not a young woman on the day of her wedding, but rather a mature woman, presumably one of her [Sappho’s] rivals standing in front of the door of the house where the group pauses on its way to the wedding celebration; a woman, in any case, whose attention the poet tries to capture by making her glance at the possibility of reviving her own past through the youth of the girls who are part of Sappho’s entourage” (32). Caciagli (2009), along with Parker (1991) and Stehle (1979), has also refuted the claim that the addressee is a rival of Sappho.

<sup>22</sup> See Benelli (2017) 131 for a summary of Ferrari’s arguments. Benelli also proposes that the addressee could be the mother of the bride, asked to send away her girls to the wedding along with Sappho’s group (133-134).

youth—thus appears to make the most sense.<sup>23</sup> Sappho and the chorus of young women—Benelli argues—ask the woman to remember when she was a girl and to recollect the fun she had singing and participating in rituals with Sappho and her companions. The chorus asks the woman to send her girls—perhaps her daughters—away to enjoy the same activities.<sup>24</sup>

The chorus of Fr. 27V—the “we” indicated in the verb σ]τείχομεν (8) and the pronoun κάμμ’ (6)—would likely have been composed of age mates of the bride,<sup>25</sup> who would have participated not only in the singing of songs but also in other aspects of the marriage ceremony. If one follows Benelli’s interpretation of Fr. 27V, moreover, the command to send the girls away can be read not as an exclusion of the girls from these marriage rites, but an inclusion of even more young women in the ceremony—perhaps the daughters of one of Sappho’s married friends. πα]ρ[θ]ένοις ἄπ[π]εμπε (10) makes it clear that young women, or παρθένοι, would have been a key part of the marriage ceremony and its accompanying rituals. The girls’ presence marks the bride’s status as a child (a πάις, as the addressee once was) and her membership in this group of young, virgin girls. Their removal or absence will mark a transitional point, at which the bride, like the addressee once long ago (ποτ[ε]), must leave the group and become a married, (hetero)sexually active woman.

As the first extant stanza seems to imply, as a child, the addressee would have regularly associated with Sappho and the παρθένοι, perhaps singing in choruses with them or participating in other kinds of ritual activity.<sup>26</sup> They would have provided an important network of love and support, and would have shared in meaningful collective activity. Indeed, these παρθένοι still

---

<sup>23</sup> Benelli (2017) 134-135.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. There remain, as with every reconstructed interpretation of this fragment, problems with this reading. For instance, how should one understand the age gap between Sappho, the women of her group, the addressee, and the girls who must be sent away?

<sup>25</sup> Lardinois (1989) 151

<sup>26</sup> See Dillon (2001) and Calame (2001) for in-depth studies on girls’ choruses and female religious practices in archaic Greece.

crave the addressee's speech and her χάρις or "grace/favor." Snyder notes that elsewhere in Sappho's poems, as well as here, χάρις implies "pleasurable exchange" among the girls or women of the group.<sup>27</sup> The term, which can be defined as "grace," "pleasure," or also "favor," indicates an exchange of favors and a "symmetrical relationship between the giver and receiver of pleasure."<sup>28</sup> The poem thus implies that the addressee and the speakers were involved in a kind of reciprocal relationship, wherein they derived perhaps both psychological and physical pleasure from each other's presence. The bride would likely be involved in similar relationships with her age-mates. This epithalamium can thus be read not only as a celebration of a marriage, but also a recognition of the addressee's former and the bride's current transition from girlhood to womanhood. Like the addressee, the bride will have to leave behind the female community that provided joy and pleasure in the former period of her life and enter into marriage, wherein her primary "community" will be her husband and future children.

Fr. 94V provides an additional construction of the kind of female community that would have surrounded a young bride before and during her marriage:

Τεθνάκην δ' ἀδόλως θέλω·  
 ἃ με ψισδομένα κατελίμπανεν

πόλλα καὶ τόδ' ἔειπέ [μοι·  
 ὦμ' ὡς δεῖνα πεπ[όνθ]αμεν,  
 Ψάπφ', ἧ μάν σ' ἀέκοισ' ἀπυλιμπάνω.

τὰν δ' ἔγω τάδ' ἀμειβόμαν·  
 'χαίροισ' ἔρχεο κάμεθεν  
 μέμναισ', οἴσθα γὰρ ὡς <σ>ε πεδήπομεν·

αἱ δὲ μή, ἀλλὰ σ' ἔγω θέλω  
 ὄμναισαι [. . (.)] . [. (.)] . εαι  
 ὅς [ ] καὶ κάλ' ἐπάσχομεν·

πό[λλοις γὰρ στεφάν]οις ἴων

<sup>27</sup> Snyder (1997) 108

<sup>28</sup> Snyder (1997) 83

καὶ βρ[όδων ...]κίων τ' ὕμοι  
κα . . [ ] πὰρ ἔμοι π<ε>ρεθήκα<ο>

καὶ πό[λλαις ὑπα]θύμιδας  
πλέκ[ταις ἀμφ' ἀ]πάλαι δέραι  
ἀνθέων ἐ [ ] πεποημέναις.

καὶ π.... [ ]. μύρωι  
βρενθείωι . [ ]ρυ[. .]ν  
ἐξάλ<ε>ίψαο κα[ἰ βας]ιληίωι,

καὶ στρώμν[αν ἐ]πὶ μολθάκαν  
ἀπάλαν παρ [ ]ονων  
ἐξίης πόθο[ν ] . νίδων

κωῦτε τις [ οὔ] τε τι  
ἴρον οὐδ' ὑ[ ]  
ἔπλετ' ὄππ[οθεν ἄμ]μες ἀπέσκομεν,

οὐκ ἄλσος . [ ].ρος  
]ψοφος  
] . . . οιδιαι

“I simply wish to be dead.”  
Weeping greatly, she left me

and said this to me:  
“Oh me, how terribly we have suffered,  
Sappho; Truly, I leave you behind unwillingly.”

And to her I replied these things:  
“Go, rejoicing, and  
remember me. For you know how we cared for you.

But if not, I wish  
to remind you...  
...] and the lovely things we shared.

For many crowns of violets  
and roses and [crocuses]  
] together you put before me,

and many woven garlands  
made from flower blossoms  
around your soft throat.

...and with sweet oil  
costly  
and fit for a queen, you anointed [me/yourself?]

and on a soft bed  
gentle  
you let loose your longing

and neither some... nor any...  
and no holy site  
was there, from which we were absent

no grove [ ]...dance  
                  ] no sound  
                  [

While there is nothing in this poem that marks it clearly as an epithalamium, one could interpret the context as an unnamed female companion of Sappho—like the addressee of Fr, 27V—leaving to be married and live with her husband.<sup>29</sup> The terms ] .ρος (conjectured in other editions to be [χ]όρος or “dance/chorus,” 27)<sup>30</sup> and ψοφος (“sound/noise,” 28) evoke a ritualistic, perhaps celebratory atmosphere, in which the ceremonial actions of dancing and singing would occur. The fact, moreover, that the first speaker leaves unwillingly (ἀέκοισ’, 5) may imply some kind of social or familial compulsion, which would fit a marriage context.

---

<sup>29</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 213 note that this is one interpretation posited by scholars. Schlesier (2013), however, disagrees. In her article on female personal names in Sappho’s poetry, she argues that Sappho’s companions were not young girls who were part of an educational or initiatory group, led by Sappho, that prepared them for marriage, but rather female slaves and courtesans. She claims that the world Sappho evokes in fragments like 94V and 96V is “not a romantic world of virgins and young girls just before marriage, not a mannerly world suited for future respectable housewives” but instead a “glaring world of luxurious upscale women” who are autonomous, idealized, and versed in many forms of entertainment: “that is, women whose status, in the ancient tradition, is generally reserved for *hetairai*” (214). While Schlesier is correct to assert that Sappho would not have been the leader of any formal institution comparable to a finishing school, the themes of marriage, transition, and virginity are so prevalent in Sappho’s poetry that it does not seem inconsistent or unreasonable to read these same preoccupations into Fr. 94V as they relate to the *παρθένοι* evoked in the fragments.

<sup>30</sup> See Campbell (1982a) 118



Indeed, it is clear that the unnamed woman does not wish to leave Sappho and her group, declaring that she would rather be dead,<sup>31</sup> “weeping” (ψισδομένα, 2) as she goes away, and stating that things have turned out badly for her and Sappho. Sappho comforts her by encouraging her to remember the beautiful things they did together (κάλ’ ἐπάσχομεν, 11), such as weaving garlands of violets and roses and anointing themselves with oil for ritual activities. These activities would have been performed not just by Sappho and her companion, but by a larger female collective—the group of young women implied in the [χ]όρος (27) and in the first person plural verbs πεδήπομεν (“we cared for you,” 8) and ἐπάσχομεν (“we had/shared [lovely things],” 11).<sup>32</sup> Lardinois (1989) argues that the [χ]όρος in line 27 may have been comprised of Sappho, the unnamed girl, and their companions, and claims that “their inclusion in line 8 strongly suggests that they were present at the performance of this song too, either in the audience (as is commonly envisioned) or as the chorus supporting Sappho while she was singing.”<sup>33</sup> Regardless of whether or not the [χ]όρος of line 27 is the same chorus that would have sung this song, this group of girls and women would have served as an important source of female companionship and shared activity in the unnamed woman’s life leading up to her marriage.

In this fragment, moreover, Sappho references a pleasure shared between these female companions that is more explicitly physical than in Fr. 27V. She asks the unnamed woman to remember the “soft bed” (μολθάκαν / ἀπάλαν, 21-22) on which she “let loose [her] longing”

---

<sup>31</sup> As Raylor and Lardinois (2014) note, it is unclear in the Greek who speaks the first line of this fragment—the woman leaving Sappho, or Sappho herself (125). I have chosen to read the line as spoken by the woman leaving, since throughout the rest of the fragment Sappho exhibits an attitude not of despair, but of optimism and consolation.

<sup>32</sup> According to Lardinois (1989), the use of the first person plural in Fr. 94V is complex, as Sappho may be singing the song herself, or there may be another soloist accompanying her or a chorus impersonating her (163).

<sup>33</sup> Lardinois (1989) 163

(ἐξίτης πόθο[v, 23]).<sup>34</sup> There is also, as Snyder states, a “highly sensual description of intimacy between the two women [Sappho and the other speaker] in which one or both of them are wreathed in violets, roses, and saffron, and are anointed with sweet smelling myrrh.”<sup>35</sup> These crowns of flowers, oils, and other sensuous images evoke feminine beauty and grace, as well as erotic attraction. Mutually pleasurable erotic love thus becomes a key part of what these women experience and share among themselves. Indeed, Fr. 94V “constructs a private world of intimate physical sensuality”<sup>36</sup> that can be recalled as a source of comfort and joy by the woman departing. It is clear that this woman was deeply “cared for” by Sappho and her female companions, and would have cared for them in return.

Fr. 94V portrays varying, yet generally positive attitudes towards the institution of marriage. While the unnamed initial speaker grieves deeply at the prospect of leaving her female companions, she does not make any indication that she will resist leaving, or that she resents the man—her husband—with whom she must go and begin this new phase of life. Perhaps this woman recognizes that marriage is a civic duty that must be fulfilled, even if it means leaving behind the intimate female friendships and erotic relationships of her girlhood. Sappho, like the unnamed woman, seems to understand that marriage is a social necessity, and adopts an attitude of optimism and acceptance, encouraging the woman not to mourn but to “go, rejoicing”

(‘χαίροις’ ἔρχεο, 7) and think back fondly on the time they spent together.

---

<sup>34</sup> πόθος can refer to longing, yearning, or regret for something that is absent or lost, as well as love or desire for an individual (For the first meaning, see Homer *Il.* 17.439 and *Od.* 14.144, or Plato *Cratylus* 420a. For the second meaning, see Hesiod *Shield of Heracles* 41, or Aeschylus *PV* 654). ἐξίτης comes from the verb ἐξίτημι, which means to dismiss or satisfy or, as in Homer, either to “send out” or to “put off from oneself” or “to get rid of” (For the first meaning, see Homer *Il.* 24.227, or Herodotus *Histories* 3.146. For the second meaning, see Homer *Il.* 1.469, 11.141; *Od.* 11.531). Thus, when these two words are put together, the meaning becomes something evidently erotic like “you satisfied your longing.” Stehle (1979) concurs that this line “may refer to actual homosexual activity” (146), and that indeed the whole poem moves toward this “erotic culmination” (147). She writes that “with each stanza, the focus is more directly on the body of the other woman,” until, in this line, the woman finally “expels” longing (146). Thus, this physical sexual activity is the climax of the poem, which works to create an atmosphere of “segregation in sensuous surroundings” (146).

<sup>35</sup> Snyder (1997) 57

<sup>36</sup> Snyder (1997) 58

A similar attitude towards marriage and portrayal of loss is present in Fr. 96V. A young woman appears to have left Sappho and her companions in Mytilene to be married, likely to a Lydian man. Near the end of the poem, in lines 15-17 it is revealed that the woman

πόλλα δὲ ζαφοίταισ' ἀγάνας ἐπι-  
μνάσθεις Ἄτθιδος ἱμέρωι  
λέπταν ποι φρένα κ[.]ρ ... βόρηται·

[She] very often goes back and forth, having  
remembered gentle Atthis in longing  
she is consumed in her delicate mind in some way...

The use of the first personal plural “we” (ὠόμεν, 3) earlier in Fr. 96V suggests that Sappho, the absent woman, and Atthis were all part of a collective group—perhaps a network of friends that socialized and enacted rituals like the ones described in Fr. 94V. Indeed, Atthis is mentioned in several of Sappho’s other fragments: 8V, 49aV, 131V, 214cV, and 256V. As Hutchinson (2001) notes, this idea of the collective manifests in a sense of mutual concern in Fr. 96V between the absent woman and her former companions; her longing (ἱμέρωι) acts as a sort of consolation for them, bereft, while the poem itself shows the group’s concern with her loss.<sup>37</sup> Yet, despite the longing that the married woman and her companions feel for each other, Sappho shows “enthusiasm” for the woman’s new situation.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Sappho declares:

νῦν δὲ Λύδαισιν ἐμπρέπεται γυναί-  
κεσσιν ὥς ποτ' ἀελίω  
δύντος ἃ βροδοδάκτυλος <σελάννα>

πάντα περ<ρ>έχοισ' ἄστρα· φάος δ' ἐπί-  
σχει θάλασσαν ἐπ' ἀλμύραν  
ἴσως καὶ πολυανθέμοις ἀρούραις·

But now she stands out among Lydian  
women, as sometimes with the sun  
having sunk down, the rosy-fingered moon

---

<sup>37</sup> Hutchinson (2001) 179

<sup>38</sup> Hutchinson (2001) 178

surpasses all of the stars. And her light  
holds over the salty sea  
equally and over the very flowery lands.

Such a description reveals not only a high opinion of the married woman's beauty or *χάρις*, but also an optimistic vision of her married life. Though the woman is no longer present to grace Sappho and her companions with her beauty, or to participate in the kind of mutually pleasurable activities of Fr. 94V, she has achieved a kind of "external glory"<sup>39</sup> among the Lydian women that is admirable and worth celebrating. As in Fr. 94, then, while Sappho acknowledges the loss of female love, friendship, and companionship inherent in marriage and felt by both the bride and those around her, she does not malign the institution, but rather looks with optimism to the radiant future the woman will have among the Lydians as a wife and mother.

It is possible, moreover, to imagine that the women left behind in Fr. 96V would have been participants in the now-absent woman's marriage ceremony, just as the girls and women invoked in Fr. 94V would have been present at the unnamed woman's wedding.<sup>40</sup> They would in this way act as a support network before and after the marriage, when the bride perhaps grieves the fact that she must leave, as well as during the ceremony itself. They not only could help the women dress and prepare for the ceremony, but also could sing songs throughout the night, as it seems the girls in Sappho Fr. 30V are preparing to do:

νυκτ[ . . . ] . [ ]  
πάρθενοι δ[  
παννυχίσδοι[σ]αι[  
σὰν ἀείδοισ[ι]ν φ[ιλότατα καὶ νόμ-  
φας ἰοκόλπω.

ἀλλ' ἐγέρθεις ἡϊθ[ε

---

<sup>39</sup> Hutchinson (2001) 180

<sup>40</sup> See fn 5. While it is best to read both Fr. 94V and Fr. 96V as constructed fictions rather than historical realities, within the context of these fictions one can imagine that the same women who are depicted as participating in ritual activities with the married (or soon to be married) woman would also be expected to participate in the chorus of her wedding.

στεῖχε σοὶς ὑμάλικ[ας  
ἥπερ ὄσσον ἅ λιγύφω[νος  
ὑπνον [ῖ]δωμεν.

night [

girls  
all night long  
might sing of your love and of the bride's  
with violet breast.

But having woken up, go call  
your young companions  
so that however much sleep a clear-voiced [girl/bird?]  
sees, we may see.

Because of the fragmentary nature of the text, and because of the switch from a third person plural verb (ἀείδοισ[τ]ν) to a second person singular (στεῖχε) to a first person plural ([ῖ]δωμεν) it is difficult to tell who is speaking in each stanza. Benelli proposes that perhaps in the second stanza Sappho speaks separately from the chorus while in the third she joins them.<sup>41</sup> Regardless, it is clear that Sappho and/or the chorus primarily addresses the bridegroom in this song, likely on the morning of his wedding. While their call to the bridegroom to go and wake his unmarried companions (ὑμάλικ[ας, 7) to join in the ritual introduces yet another a male presence into this fragment, there is still a sense of attachment between the bride and the chorus, and a prioritization of the female experience. The girls in this fragment will sing epithalamia the whole day and night of the wedding, including outside of the bride and groom's door as they consummate their marriage. They are thus an integral part of the ceremony, present and providing support and encouragement right at the very moment the bride transitions from being a

---

<sup>41</sup> Benelli (2017) 154. A possible, but less probable option that Benelli notes is that in the second stanza, the chorus may be speaking from the perspective of the bridegroom (154). He rejects the idea of there being two separate choruses, however, and argues that there must be one chorus, which only speaks directly in the last stanza (155). Benelli also rejects the idea, proposed by Ferrari (2010) that the second stanza occurs during the wedding banquet, as such a banquet would occur at the house of the bride's father—not in the house of the bridegroom's father, or the house of the newlyweds, as seems to be the setting here (156).

virgin girl to a (hetero)sexually experienced woman. It is in this moment that the bride will leave the social and erotic attachments formed in her group of female companions and enter into a new social and erotic relationship with her husband.

### 2.3 Longing for Virginit

This transition or rupture in sexuality is further marked in Fragments 107V and 114V, wherein the speaker comments on her loss of virginit, undoubtedly after her marriage. In Fr. 107V, the speaker asks: ἤρ' ἔτι παρθενίας ἐπιβάλλομαι (“Do I still yearn for virginit?”). This fragment implies that the speaker, who one can assume is a now-married woman, did “yearn” for or “eagerly desire” (ἐπιβάλλομαι) her virginit for some amount of time after her wedding. She now asks herself whether she still (ἔτι) desires that same status of maidenhood, in which she likely enjoyed the support and companionship of other girls. In Fr. 114V, this theme of virginit is elaborated upon, and one gets the sense that the first speaker is a more recently married girl or young woman still in the process of coming to terms with her change in sexual status. She exclaims (and is answered):

(νύμφη).	παρθενία, παρθενία, ποῖ με λίποις' ἀ<π>οίχη;
(παρθενία).	†οὐκέτι ἤξω πρὸς σέ, οὐκέτι ἤξω† <sup>42</sup>
(Bride).	Virginit, virginit, where are you going, having left me behind?
(Virginit).	No longer will I come to you, no longer will I come.

---

<sup>42</sup> The second line of the fragment is, as indicated, corrupt. The source of the fragment is a fourth-century BCE treatise *On Style*, attributed to Demetrios of Phaleron, and the text of the second line in the manuscript (cod. P) is unclear. Various emendations and interpretations have been proposed, including Seidler (1829) ποτι σ' οὐκετ' ἤξω and Bowra (1935) οὐκέτ' ἤξω πρὸς σέ πάλιν, νῦν πάλιν οὐκέτ' ἤξω. I have decided to abide by the manuscript reading reprinted in Voigt, however, as it is the version that also appears in Wharton (1898) 145—the text that H.D. often consulted and by which she was clearly influenced. Moreover, my focus here is on the dialogical exchange between the Bride and Virginit, which remains in most reconstructions of the text. While the aside (νύμφη) and (παρθενία) are editors' editions, they are extrapolated from the context in which these fragments appear in Demetrios' text, wherein Demetrios indicates that the Bride speaks the first line to Virginit, and Virginit replies to the Bride with the second line.

As Ferrari (2010) notes in his analysis of this fragment, and as the text in Voigt suggests, the first line of the poem seems to be an exclamation by a νύμφη, a bride or young wife, while the second line is the response of παρθένια, or “virginity.”<sup>43</sup> The bride comments that her virginity has left her behind (με λίποις', 1) and asks where it is going (ἀ<π>οίχηι, 1). Virginity answers that “no longer” (οὐκέτι, 2) will it come to her, doubtless because she has been married and consummated that marriage through sexual intercourse with her husband. Indeed, these utterances in Frs. 107V and especially 114V mark this marital *rite du passage* as irreversible and final.

As Snyder argues, these fragments clearly belong to the genre of the wedding song.<sup>44</sup> Ferrari notes that these two fragments would “well suit a group of maidens” in terms of their performance during the marriage ritual.<sup>45</sup> Yet there is a contrast between Fr. 107V, which showcases a single voice, and Fr. 114V, in which there is an exchange between a single voice and “a chorus of female companions who, as a collective entity, embody the condition of virginity itself.”<sup>46</sup> These female companions, as in Fr. 27 and Fr. 30, would have been a key part of the marriage ceremony. They would have been present to act as pillars of stability, comfort, and familiarity for the bride as she accustomed herself to her new life as a non-παρθένος.

It is also possible to see in these fragments an attitude of acceptance towards marriage, which at the same time acknowledges the earlier, familiar, and more youthful phase in the bride’s life that is lost through her sexual defloration. As Snyder claims, in Fr. 114V Sappho seems to view “Maidenhood” as “something that simply departs, never to return again.”<sup>47</sup> Loss of virginity is a social necessity, which indeed marks the end of the happy period of girlhood, but which is nonetheless necessary and should not be grieved for too long. Similarly to Fr. 94V,

---

<sup>43</sup> Ferrari (2010) 122

<sup>44</sup> Snyder (1997) 105

<sup>45</sup> Ferrari (2010) 122

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Snyder (1997) 106

therefore, in which Sappho adopts an attitude of forbearance towards marriage and the various kinds of loss it creates, Fr. 114V displays a kind of composed tolerance and frankness towards the alteration of sexual status that must necessarily occur during the marriage ritual. Such tolerance is evident also in Fr. 107V, where it is suggested that perhaps one day a bride may not even regret this transition or yearn for her past virginity.

## 2.4 Praise of the Bride

Fragments 103V, 103bV, 105bV, and 112V are all remnants of epithalamia that contain a physical description of the bride during the marriage ritual. Fr. 112V is the most evocative, yet it begins with a direct address to the bridegroom before it turns to praise of the bride:

Ὅλβιε γάμβρε, σοὶ μὲν δὴ γάμος ὡς ἄραο  
 ἐκτετέλεσθ', ἔχῃς δὲ πάρθενον, ἂν ἄραο.  
 σοὶ χάριεν μὲν εἶδος, ὄππατα <δ'....>  
 μέλλιχ', ἔρος δ' ἐπ' ἡμέρτωι κέχυται προσώπωι  
 <.....> τετίμακ' ἔξοχὰ σ' Ἀφροδίτα

Happy bridegroom, your marriage, just as you prayed,  
 has been fulfilled, and you have the bride whom you prayed for.  
 Your form is graceful and your eyes are honey-  
 sweet, and love pours over your lovely face  
 ... Aphrodite has greatly honored you.

Two common generic elements are present here: comment on the good fortune of the bridegroom, and exaltation of the bride's beauty. Rayor and Lardinois note that it is clear from the context in which this fragment is quoted in Chorikios of Gaza that lines 3 through 5 are addressed to the bride, not the bridegroom.<sup>48</sup> The bridegroom, who at first seems to be the focal point of the song, is happy or blessed (Ὅλβιε, 1) because he has made his desired match and married such a beautiful bride. This bride is then described in terms familiar from Fr. 27V, in so far as her form is said to be "graceful" (χάριεν, 3). Indeed, as Snyder argues, the bride is so

<sup>48</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 131





] for...to speak...  
 ] the bride with beautiful feet  
 ] daughter of Kronos with violet breast  
 ] having put aside anger ...with violet breast  
 ] holy Graces and Pierian Muses  
 ] whenever songs... the mind  
 ] listening to a clear song  
 ] bridegroom, for irritating companions  
 ] for her hair, having put down the lyre  
 ] ...Dawn with gold sandals.

As in Fr. 30V and the beginning of Fr. 112V, the addressee of this poem appears to be the bridegroom. While he is thus the center of the chorus' attention, the παρθένοι in the chorus still manage to praise the bride indirectly. The evocative sounds and images of the “clear song” (λιγύραν [ᾠοί]δαν, 7), the lyre (λύρα, 9), the “holy Graces and Pierian Muses” (ἅγναι Χάριτες Πιέριδέ[ς τε] Μοῖ[σαι, 5), and the “gold sandals” of Dawn (χρυσοπέδιλ[ο]ς Αὔωσ, 10) contribute to an atmosphere of grace, beauty, and splendor. These descriptors not only point to the luxury of the occasion, but also emphasize the grace and beauty of the maidens in the chorus and the bride herself. Moreover, the mention of the Χάριτες (5) again suggests χάρις, or pleasurable exchange between the bride and the chorus as well as the bride and groom. The chorus, moreover, enjoins the bridegroom to tell something to the “bride with beautiful feet” (εὔποδα νύμφαν, 2)—an epithet that recurs in fragment 103bV:

]ρηον θαλάμω τωδες[  
 ]ις εὔποδα νύμφαν ἄβ[  
     ]. νυνδ[  
     ]ν μοι·[  
     ]ας γε .[

] the inner chamber  
 ]bride with beautiful feet  
     ]now  
     ]for me  
         ]indeed

This description—εὔποδα (2)—which translates literally to “with good feet,” reinforces the bride’s delicacy, youth, and beauty. On the one hand, such an epithet may be taken as a generic convention that, in a performance context, serves to direct the male gaze of the groom to his bride’s physical beauty inside of the θάλαμος.<sup>51</sup> Yet it is also true that εὔποδα, a description composed by a woman and voiced by a group of women, bears the mark of the female gaze as well, and in this way reinforces the intimate, perhaps erotic connection between these women in the chorus and the bride herself. Moreover, the mention of the θαλάμω (1)—the inner room or bride chamber—is a reminder of the spatial intimacy that not only the groom but also the παρθένοι would have shared with the bride during parts of the wedding ritual. The emphasis in Fr. 103bV thus moves between the erotic interior, private, and female as well as the social and male.

Fr. 103V, while ostensibly even more public in its praise of the bride and its call to action for the bridegroom, nevertheless also contains elements of the idealized “interior Sapphic *thiasos*,”<sup>52</sup> particularly in its use of the adjective *ιόκολπος* (“with violet breast”)<sup>53</sup> and the implied *eikasia* of a goddess. Unlike Fr. 94V, which mentions literal violets (ἴων), Fr. 103V does not reference actual flowers, but rather a woman’s breast that is associated with the color or scent of such flowers. The epithet also appears in Fr. 30V (*ιοκόλπω*, 5). In Fr. 94V, violets are described in sensual terms, and appear to be plaited into crowns (στεφάν]οις, 12) and “woven garlands” (ὑπα]θύμιδας / πλέκ[ταις, 15-16) along with roses (βρ[όδων), used for a ritual purpose, and placed around the “soft throat” (ἀ]πάλαι δέραι, 16) of the woman in the poem. In Frs. 30V and

---

<sup>51</sup> Though it is unclear whether the bride and groom would have actually been in the θάλαμος when this song was performed. For a similar case, see Alcman’s *Partheneia*, in which, scholars have argued, the attention drawn to the beauty of the maidens in the chorus—by the maidens themselves as they perform in a public context—serves to direct the communal and primarily male gaze of the audience to the maidens’ desirability.

<sup>52</sup> Gregory (1997) 157

<sup>53</sup> In the entry for *ιόκολπος*, the LSJ directs readers to the entry for *ιόζωνος*, which is defined as “with purple girdle” and is attested in Callimachus *Aetia* 110.54. Contiades-Tsitsoni (1990) 79-80 notes that *ιόκολπος* is a neologism of Sappho’s, and can be broadly understood as an endearment relating to the bride’s beauty; it is perhaps related to the tenderness of the bride’s skin or the fragrance of her bosom.

103V, the violets no longer adorn the woman in question, but become part and parcel of her body. The violet of the bride's breast is reminiscent of the female-centered, erotic ritual activities enacted in Fr. 94V, but it also serves to signal the bride's delicacy, sweetness, vulnerability, and beauty. She has internalized the flower, and it becomes a part of the *χάρις* that she exchanges with both the groom and the maidens in the chorus. As McEvelley (1973) argues, the Sapphic flower image of the maiden or blossom represents "that brief moment when the beautiful shines out brilliantly and assumes, for all its perishability, the stature of an eternal condition in the spirit if not in the body."<sup>54</sup> This "eternal condition" is manifest not only in the epithet *ιόκολπος*, but even earlier in line three with the phrase "daughter of Kronos." Such language suggests perhaps an *eikasía* of a goddess, wherein the bride is likened to one of the daughters of Kronos: Hestia, Demeter, or Hera.<sup>55</sup> The bride's ephemeral grace and beauty are thus transformed into something divine—something that can be remembered and cherished by her and by those who love and look upon her for all time. Indeed, the bride's beauty in Fr. 103V, like the fond memories recalled in Fr. 94V, can thus serve as a source of joy and comfort to the bride and to the women and girls who formed relationships with her as a *παρθένος*.

Fragment 105bV, which many critics assume to be part of a wedding song by Sappho,<sup>56</sup> continues with such flower imagery, in so far as the bride is described:

οἶαν τὰν ὑάκινθον ἐν ὄρεσι ποιμένες ἄνδρες  
 πόσσι καταστειβοῖσι, χάμαι δέ τε πόρφυρον ἄνθος ...

Like a hyacinth in the mountains that male shepherds  
 trample down with their feet, but the purple bloom on the ground...

---

<sup>54</sup> McEvelley (1973) 269

<sup>55</sup> McEvelley (1973) 261-262 notes that in Sappho, similes comparing humans to gods are common in and so particularly associated with hymeneal song. He claims that Sappho uses such similes seven times, and that five or six of these instances are directly hymeneal (see Frs. 23.5, 31.1, 44.21, 44.34, 105b, 111, and 31, if one accepts that it is in a wedding context).

<sup>56</sup> Snyder (1997) 105

This image seems to conjure ideas of violation and destruction. The bride is like a hyacinth flower, which, once beautiful in its purity and virginity, has now been used and stepped on by careless men. Indeed, Carson (2002) notes that some scholars, relying upon comparison with Catullus 62.39-47,<sup>57</sup> believe that the fragment “intends an image of defloration.”<sup>58</sup> The verb used, καταστείβοισι (“tread/trample down,” 2) indicates a rather violent defloration, which would seem to correspond with a rather negative attitude towards heterosexual, penetrative sex, or, perhaps, rape. Snyder argues that there are intertextual echoes of this fragment in Catullus 62, in which “the chorus of young girls compare themselves to a wonderful hidden flower nourished by rain and sun, a flower that is about to be plucked and stained, therefore losing all desirability.”<sup>59</sup> While Snyder adopts a far more optimistic reading of the fragment in light of the

---

<sup>57</sup> Following the Latin text from Cornish (1913) 88, lines 39-47 read:

ut flos in saeptis secretus nascitur hortis,  
 ignotus pecori, nullo convulsus aratro,  
 quem mulcent aurae, firmat sol, educat imber,  
*iam iam se expandit suavesque exspirat odores;*  
 multi illum pueri, multae optavere puellae:  
 idem cum tenui carptus defloruit ungui,  
 nulli illum pueri, nullae optavere puellae:  
 sic virgo dum intacta manet, dum cara suis est;  
 cum castum amisit polluto corpore florem,  
 nec pueris iucunda manet nec cara puellis.

As a flower is born secretly in a fenced-in garden  
 Unknown to the cattle, torn up by no plow,  
 Which the winds graze, the sun strengthens, the rain rears,  
*And even now it unfurls itself and breathes out sweet odors;*  
 Many boys and many girls desire it;  
 When the same flower withers, torn by a sharp nail,  
 No boys and no girls desire it;  
 Thus a virgin, while she remains untouched, is dear to her own;  
 When she has lost her chaste bloom with defiled body,  
 She remains neither pleasing to boys, nor dear to girls.

<sup>58</sup> Carson (2002) 374. Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 129 also cite this interpretation. In pre-Hellenistic poetry, the image of an injured or weighted-down flower was not exclusively associated with sexual defloration. In Stesichorus *PMGF* S15.ii.15ff., a poppy, wilting and losing its leaves, is compared to the dying man Geryon’s head. Fowler (1987) xxxvi notes that Stesichorus here is likely drawing on *Iliad* 8.306-308: μήκων δ’ ὡς ἐτέρωσε κάρη βάλεν, ἢ τ’ ἐνὶ κήπῳ, / καρπῷ βριθομένη νοτίησί τε εἰαρνηῆσιν, / ὡς ἐτέρωσ’ ἤμισσε κάρη πῆληκι βαρυνθέν. (“And his head fell to the other side, like a poppy that is in a garden, / heavy with fruit and spring rains, / so his head sunk to the other side, weighted down with his helmet”).

<sup>59</sup> Snyder (1997) 105

Catullus parallel,<sup>60</sup> it rather seems that in 62.39-42 Catullus draws on Sappho 105bV to create a completely reverse image. While Catullus' flower is fenced in, unmolested by cattle and the plow, and so preserved and desirable for the future husband, Sappho's girl—the single hyacinth—has not been protected by a fenced-in garden but rather raped by many men—the trampling shepherds. In reading the Sappho fragment through the lens of Catullan reception and revision, it seems that the “deflowering” or act of penetrative sex invoked in 105bV is in fact a rape that occurs outside of the monogamous marriage context celebrated in the epithalamia. This kind of sexual defilement or devastation, which Catullus echoes in the final lines of the poem, does not seem to occur in Sappho's poems that evoke explicit marital contexts. Fr. 105bV, then, shows the very antithesis of marriage; unlike the careless shepherds, who sully the bride, the groom and the marital union he offers are sources of protection, safety, and chastity.

## 2.5 Praise of the Groom

Many of the extant fragments of Sappho's epithalamia involve descriptions and praise not of the bride, but of the bridegroom. Many of these are humorous in tone, such as Fr. 111V:

Ἴψοι δὴ τὸ μέλαθρον,  
ὕμνησον,  
ἀέρρετε, τέκτονες ἄνδρες·  
ὕμνησον·  
γάμβρος †(εἰς)έρχεται Ἴσος Ἄρει†,  
<ὕμνησον,>

---

<sup>60</sup> Snyder (1997) argues, contrary to my own interpretation, that the hyacinth in 105bV could stand as a symbol of resilience: “the hyacinth has been stepped on and some of its blossoms lie on the ground, but after the shepherds have passed it by, its stem, nourished by the mountain air, regains its strength and rises again toward the sun to bloom once more” (105). This image of the hyacinth for Snyder is a positive, hopeful picture celebrating the beauty and strength of women rather than a negative, violent picture of lost virginity. If one accepts this alternate reading, Sappho's view of marriage, and the sort of life a woman leads once married, seems more optimistic and consistent with the sentiments expressed in Fr. 94V and Fr. 107V. While a bride may at first feel trampled, yearn for her lost virginity, and mourn the companions she lost since she is no longer a *παρθένος*, these things must be endured, and she must rejoice; indeed, perhaps in time these hardships will be easier to bear, and the bride will bloom again. I argue, however, that the intercourse alluded to in this poem may not be a reference to the consummation between a bride and her husband, but rather the rape of a young woman by many men.

ἄνδρος μεγάλῳ πόλῳ μέσδων.  
<ὕμνησον.>

Raise the roof-beam high;  
Hymenaios!  
Raise it up, carpenter men;  
Hymenaios!  
the bridegroom comes in, equal to Ares;  
Hymenaios!  
much bigger than a big man;  
Hymenaios!

Rayor and Lardinois refer to this fragment as part of a “bawdy wedding song,” in which the largeness of the groom may refer not only to his stature, but also to the size of his phallus.<sup>61</sup> Besides this humorous exaggeration regarding the bridegroom,<sup>62</sup> the ritual invocation and refrain to Hymen, the god of marriage, is also present, clearly marking this as an epithalamium. Unlike Sappho’s other epithalamia examined thus far, however, this fragment does not appear to focus on the female experience of the marriage ritual. Instead, it seems to belong to a group of extant hymeneals that involve “bantering raillery,” the sort of which was common in later Greek examples of wedding songs.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Fr. 115V, while slightly different in tone, continues this theme of commenting on the groom’s appearance:

Τίῳ σ', ὦ φίλε γάμβρε, κάλῳς εἰκάσδω;  
ὄρπακι βραδίνῳι σε μάλιστ' εἰκάσδω

To what, O dear bridegroom, may I fairly liken you?  
To a slender sapling, most of all, I liken you.

Snyder suggests that this fragment may allude both to Odysseus’ comparison of Nausikaa to the “young shoot of a palm tree” in *Odyssey* 6.163-164,<sup>64</sup> and to Thetis’ description of Achilles as a

---

<sup>61</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 131

<sup>62</sup> Contiades-Tsitsoni (1990) 92-93 argue that this exaggeration and mockery belong to the folk tradition from which Sappho is drawing in composing her epithalamia.

<sup>63</sup> Snyder (1997) 103

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. *Odyssey* 6.163-164 reads: Δήλω δὴ ποτε τοῖον Ἀπόλλωνος παρὰ βωμῶ / φοῖνικος νέον ἔρνος ἀνερχόμενον ἐνόησα· (“Indeed one time in Delos I saw such a thing beside the altar of Apollo, a young shoot of a palm tree springing up”).

child “shooting up like a sapling” in *Iliad* 18.56.<sup>65</sup> Such a description, she notes, makes the groom seem “less than heroic in proportions,” with his slenderness in stature perhaps correlating to a phallic slenderness as well.<sup>66</sup> Such jesting and ribaldry, present here as well as in Fr. 111V, would have helped mark the wedding as a celebratory occasion—one that had room for humor, jokes, and lightheartedness.

Another example of such humor, this time involving the bridegroom’s attendant, can be seen in Fr. 110V:

θυρώρωι πόδες ἑπτορόγυιοι,  
τὰ δὲ σάμβαλα πεμπεβόεια,  
πίσσυγγοι δὲ δέκ' ἐξεπόνησαν

The feet of the doorkeeper are seven armlengths long,  
And five oxhides for his sandals,  
And ten shoemakers worked on them

Here, the same jest about size of frame corresponding to size of phallus is applied to the doorkeeper’s feet. Rayor and Lardinois note that it was customary during the marriage ceremony for the best man to guard the door of the bridal chamber “to prevent friends of the bride from coming to her rescue.”<sup>67</sup> This song, which would have likely been sung by the female friends of the bride, is quite plainly making fun of this man.<sup>68</sup> This kind of jollity and joking, which would have been sung throughout the wedding ceremony, is not only a formalized aspect of the genre that Sappho repeats; it also reveals a somewhat optimistic outlook on Sappho’s part—or, at least, Sappho as diffused through and shaped by the genre—concerning the marriage ritual and marriage itself. The comedy inherent in these fragments reveals not a completely dour, pessimistic view of an institution that forcibly deprives unwilling young girls of their virginity

---

<sup>65</sup> *Iliad* 18.56 reads: ὁ δ' ἀνέδραμεν ἔρνεϊ ἴσος (“And he shot up like a sapling”).

<sup>66</sup> Snyder (1997) 103

<sup>67</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 130

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*



and female friends (though this is certainly hinted at), but a more positive perspective, wherein the institution itself and its keepers can be approached with humor and levity. Sappho certainly would have been aware of the trepidation and grief felt by the young bride behind the guarded door, as well as her companions' desire to "come to her rescue." Yet, as in Fr. 94V, Sappho appears to acknowledge that loss at the same time that she turns her focus to the rejoicing that ought to be done. Marriage, it seems, is not a cause for grief, but celebration.

## 2.6 Mythological Marriages

There are some notable allusions to the weddings of gods or mythological characters in Sappho's poems, including in some fragments agreed to be epithalamic. Such mythological marriages seem to serve as *exempla* for the mortals—Sappho's contemporaries—celebrating their own wedding rituals. These allusions are also optimistic in tone and provide a rather positive outlook on the institution of marriage. In Fr. 141V, for example, Hermes pours wine for the gods, who toast to the wellbeing of an unnamed bridegroom:

κῆ δ' ἀμβροσίας μὲν  
 κράτηρ ἐκέκρατ'  
    Ἑρμῆαις δ' ἔλων ὄλπιν θεοῖσ' εἰνοχόησε.  
 κῆνοι δ' ἄρα πάντες  
 καρχάσι ' ἦχον  
    κἄλειβον· ἀράσαντο δὲ πάμπαν ἔσλα γάμβρωι

But there a bowl  
 of ambrosia had been mixed  
    and Hermes, having taken the pitcher, poured for the gods;  
 and when all those gods  
 held their cups  
    they poured libations; and they prayed every good thing  
    for the bridegroom.

Snyder notes that, while it is possible that this description of a probable marriage on Olympus formed part of a wedding song, it is impossible to tell even with the context in which the

fragment is preserved.<sup>69</sup> Rayor, in her notes on the poem, argues that since mortals typically make libations to gods, and not the other way around, the new married couple in the poem must either be “divine, partly divine, or particularly honored.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Sappho regularly compares mortals to gods in her hymeneal songs.<sup>71</sup> Such a comparison or *eikasia* could have been an earlier, now lost-part of the poem, and would have temporarily elevated the bride and groom to a divine or quasi-divine status. Regardless of the contextual details, it is clear that Sappho is evoking a celebratory atmosphere in this poem. The wine, the libations, and the prayers would have all been part of a ritual in which the bride, bridegroom, their families, friends, and guests rejoiced at the prospect of a husband and wife entering together upon a new stage of life.

The well wishes for the bridegroom—a standard feature of epithalamia—are in fact echoed elsewhere in Sappho’s corpus. In both Fr. 116V and Fr. 117V, the bride and bridegroom are seen off with χαῖρε and χαίροις —exclamations of parting and good wishes for the future. Fr. 116V reads χαῖρε, νύμφα, χαῖρε, τίμιε γάμβρε, πόλλα (“farewell, bride, farewell, much-honored bridegroom”), while Fr. 117V reads †χαίροις, ἂ νύμφα†, χαιρέτω δ' ὁ γάμβρος (“may you fare well, bride, and may the bridegroom fare well”).<sup>72</sup> Rayor and Lardinois note that the speaker of these two fragments, which are undoubtedly from epithalamia, is probably a chorus of friends of both the bride and groom, who may be saying their farewells to both parties at the very moment they enter their new home.<sup>73</sup> As in other fragments examined previously, therefore, the friends of the bride play an integral part in the girl’s transition from παρθένος to wife and indeed wish her

---

<sup>69</sup> Snyder (1997) 110

<sup>70</sup> Rayor (1991) 167

<sup>71</sup> McEvelley (1973) 261. See fn. 55.

<sup>72</sup> The first part of the text of Fr. 117V is corrupt. Wharton (1898) 142 prints: Χαίροισα νύμφα, χαιρέτω δ' ὁ γάμβρος, with the translation “The bride [comes] rejoicing; let the bridegroom rejoice.” While the sense of the fragment thus somewhat differs in Wharton’s edition, the sense of rejoicing and celebration for the bride and bridegroom remains the same.

<sup>73</sup> Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 133; see also Contiades-Tsitsoni (1990) 101 for more on conventions of singing outside the door or at the threshold of the bride and bridegroom’s home.

the best as she leaves behind her old circle of female friends and enters her new home with her new husband.

Fragment 44V, the famous wedding hymn for Hector and Andromache, is another example of an epithalamium in which a mythological marriage may serve as an exemplum for Sappho's contemporaries. While the poem is long and badly fragmented,<sup>74</sup> the surviving sections depict a detailed, female-centered world in which the celebrations and festivities surrounding Hector and Andromache's marriage eclipse the masculine scenes of war so prevalent in the text from which Sappho draws—Homer's *Iliad*. Snyder argues that In Fr, 44V, Sappho engages in a refashioning of Homeric material and writes her own "mini-epic," which pulls some of its subject matter and a great deal of language from the *Iliad*, but which "is really more reminiscent of the *Odyssey* in its attention to domestic detail and to a female oriented world."<sup>75</sup> She goes on to argue that the poem is completely removed from the battle context of the *Iliad*, and that the various roles of both young and old women which are described in the extant fragments perhaps reflect Sappho's own society as much as Homeric society.<sup>76</sup> Bowie (2010) agrees, arguing that in Fr. 44V Sappho "zooms in on the *rite de passage* that for women canonizes their excellence, ἀρετή, in the way that war does that of men, i.e., marriage."<sup>77</sup> This *rite de passage* is acted out

---

<sup>74</sup> It is for this reason that I have not provided the whole text of Fr. 44, but quote only passages. For the full text, see Voigt (1971) 66-70.

<sup>75</sup> Snyder (1997) 64

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. This interpretation is in contrast to Schrenk (1994) who argues that the Homeric elements of Fr. 44V, specifically the epic vocabulary and narrative structure, "direct the reader to particular episodes in the *Iliad*, namely, Andromache's discovery of the death of her husband in Book X and the return of Hector's corpse in Book Ω" (144-145). Read in such a light, the fragment would take on a much more somber, sinister tone, and would foreshadow Hector's death and Andromache's eventual enslavement. Their marriage would not be an event worthy of celebration, but of mourning. While Schrenk's article makes excellent points about the linguistic reception of Homer in Sappho, and while it is true that Sappho could be subtly signaling Hector's future death in Fr.44V, the overall tone of the poem nevertheless appears celebratory, not sinister. Sappho appears to do more than allude to the eventual, tragic events that take place in Homer. She creates her own world in which this festive, female-centered occasion takes precedence over the gruesome realities of battle. Indeed, Bowie (2010) argues, "The predominance of the Trojan, the domestic and the festive in Sappho's poem invites an audience to reflect that there are happier moments embedded in the story of Troy than Homer chose to celebrate" (73).

<sup>77</sup> Bowie (2010) 73.

through Andromache's departure from her paternal home in Thebe and her subsequent arrival in Troy to marry Hector.

Some of the women evoked in the female-oriented world of Fr. 44V include "delicate, lively-eyed Andromache from holy Thebes and ever-flowing Placea" (ἐλικώπιδα / Θήβας ἐξ ἰέρας Πλακίας τ' ἀπ' [ἀι]ν <v>άω / ἄβραν Ἀνδρομάχαν, 5-7), the crowd of "women and [tender?]-ankled maidens" (γυναικῶν τ' ἄμα παρθενικά[ν] τ . . [ . . ].σφύρων, 15) who climb onto the mule-carts driven by the sons of Ilos, the "daughters of Priam" (Περάμοιο θυγ[α]τρεις, 16) who follow separately, the "maidens" (πάρ[θενοι, 25) who clearly sing a "holy song" (λιγέ]ως δ' ἄρα πάρ[θενοι / ἄειδον μέλος ἄγν[ον, 25-26), and the "women" (γύναικες, 31) or "elder mothers" who "cry out" (ἐλέλυσδον ὄσαι προγενέστερα[ι, 31) in celebration. While there are also several references to male figures in Fr. 44V, including Hector and his companions, Priam, the sons of Ilos, and the men who sing a paean to Apollo, Sappho certainly emphasizes various women's experiences of this wedding ritual. It is evident from the extant fragments of 44V that girls and women of different ages and social classes participate in parts of the ritual, such as the procession and the singing of hymns, and pray for the wellbeing of the bride and groom, as in Fr. 116V and Fr. 117V. The women referenced thus all constitute a network support for Andromache during her marriage ceremony, and share in her joy as well as, perhaps, her trepidation, as she embarks on this new stage of life, in a new land, with a new husband.

As in Fr. 112V and Fr. 103V, the bride Andromache's beauty in Fr. 44V is emphasized and reflected in the images of "many gold bracelets" (πόλλα δ' [ἐλί]γματα χρύσια, 8), "purple perfumed robes" (κάμματα / πορφύρ[α] καταὔτ[με]να, 8-9),<sup>78</sup> "many-colored toys" (ποίκιλ' ἄθύρματα, 9), and "countless silver cups and ivory" (ἀργύρα τ' ἀνάρ[ι]θμα [ποτή]ρ[ια]

---

<sup>78</sup> The description of Andromache's robes, both purple and color and scented with perfume, is reminiscent of the epithet ἰόκολπος ("with violet breast") used to describe the bride in Frs. 103V and 30V.

κάλεφαις, 10). It is also highlighted by the sounds of the “sweet-sounding *aulos* and [*kithara*?] mixed and the noise of *krotala*” (αὔλος δ’ ἄδυ[μ]έλης [ ] τ’ ὀνεμίγνυ[το / καὶ ψ[ό]φο[ς κ]ροτάλ[ων, 24-25) as well as the smells of “myrrh and cassia and frankincense” (μύρρα καὶ κασία λίβανός τ’, 30). Such evocative, sensory descriptions not only enhance Andromache’s delicacy (ἄβραν, 7) and her pleasurable gaze (ἐλικώπιδα, 5), but also evoke a lavish, celebratory atmosphere, in which luxury in all forms is on display for the enjoyment of the bride, the bridegroom, and their guests. In a separate fragment, moreover, which is likely part of the same poem,<sup>79</sup> Sappho makes mention of the Muses (Μοῖσσαν, 5) and the Graces (Χαρίτων, 6), as she does in Fr. 103V. The notion of χάρις is thus again present through the Χάριτες, reinforcing the idea of a relationship between Andromache and the women around her, as is the notion of the bride’s captivating gaze (ἐλικώπιδα), such as is seen in Fr. 112V with ὄππατα <δ’...> / μέλλιχ’ (3-4).

These connections between the language and imagery in Fr. 44V and that used in other extant epithalamia reinforce that notion that, in Sappho’s wedding songs, mythic figures like the heroes and heroines of Homer’s epics can serve as reflections of and inspirations to her contemporary audience. Sappho re-writes mythic episodes like the wedding of Hector and Andromache to fit her woman-centered, optimistic perspective on marriage, and in so doing creates an alternative world in which the tragic couple becomes a happy bridal couple<sup>80</sup> and the male, heroic, and warlike take second place to the female, domestic, and celebratory. She engages in a similar revision in Fr. 16V, which is not an epithalamium but nevertheless makes oblique reference to mythological marriages and acts, in fact, as a kind of foil to the epithalamic

<sup>79</sup> This fragment is often labeled Fr. 44Ab to distinguish it from Fr. 44, which discusses the wedding of Hector and Andromache, and Fr. 44Aa, which discusses Apollo, Artemis, and Eros. See Contiades-Tsitsoni (1990) 104-105 for arguments for and against the unity and authenticity of 44, 44Aa, and 44Ab.

<sup>80</sup> Contiades-Tsitsoni (1990) 106

poems. By understanding the ways that Sappho approaches marriage and notions of female desire and subjectivity in the Sapphic stanzas of Fr. 16V, one can also better understand the way she treats these themes within the generic conventions of the epithalamium.

In Fr. 16V, which like Fr. 44V is badly fragmented, Sappho re-writes the character of Helen, familiar from the Homeric epic, and makes her an active agent of her own erotic desire rather than a passive object of male *eros*. While the story of Anactoria, introduced at the end of the fragment, is irretrievable, the intact stanzas give insight into Sappho's characterization of Helen and her two "marriages"— the first to Menelaos and the second to Paris. It reads:

Οἱ μὲν ἰππήων στρότον οἱ δὲ πέσδων  
οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπ[ι] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν  
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὄτ-  
τω τις ἔραται·

πά]γχν δ' εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι  
π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ', ἃ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθεισα  
κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἑλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα  
τὸν [ ἄρ]ιστον

καλλ[ίποι]σ' ἔβα 'ς Τροῖαν πλέοι[σα  
κωὺδ[ὲ πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων  
πά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθ<η>, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὐταν  
]σαν

]αμπτον γὰρ]  
] . . . κούφωστ[ ]οη.[ . ]ν  
. . ]με νῦν Ἀνακτορί[ας ὀ]νέμναι-  
σ' οὐ] παρεοίσας,

τᾶ]ς <κ>ε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα  
κάμάρυγμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω  
ἦ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κᾶν ὄπλοισι  
πεσδομ]άχεντας.

] . μεν οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι  
] . ν ἄνθρωπ[ . . (.) π]εδέχην δ' ἄρασθαι  
[ ]  
[ ]  
[ ]

[ ]  
[ ]

                  προς [  
ὡςδ[  
..].[  
].[.]ωλ.[  
          τ' ἐξ ἀδοκί[τω.

Some say an army of horsemen, others an army of  
foot-soldiers, and others a host of ships, is the most  
beautiful thing on the dark earth,  
but I say it that thing, whatever it is, that one loves.

And it is entirely easy to make this thing  
intelligible to all;  
for Helen, surpassing all others in beauty,  
having left behind the best man by far

went, sailing away, off to Troy;  
and neither of her children, nor her dear parents  
did she wholly give heed, but [love] led her  
          astray.

. . . for . . .  
. . . lightly . . .  
(and she?) has reminded me now of  
Anactoria, who is not present,

But I would prefer to see her lovely step  
and the radiant sparkle of her face  
rather than the Lydians' chariots  
and the soldiers fighting on foot.

. . . not possible to happen . . .  
mankind . . . but to pray to share in . . .

[ ]  
[ ]  
[ ]  
[ ]  
[ ]

...towards...

...  
...

...  
...unexpectedly.

Scholars have frequently noted Fr. 16V's unique representation of female subjectivity and agency, conveyed through the figure of Helen,<sup>81</sup> and its relationship with and re-writing of Homeric epic.<sup>82</sup> Both of these lenses have value for interpreting how in this poem Sappho represents marriage and women's experience of the institution.

As duBois (1978) argues, Sappho's representation of Helen's relationships with Paris and Menelaos differs significantly from Homer's. She notes that the Homeric world is characterized by gift exchange: "women too are exchanged, as gifts, as valuable prizes of war. The Trojan War is caused by violation of proper exchange, since Menelaos, the recipient of Helen, loses possession of her."<sup>83</sup> In the *Iliad*, therefore, Helen's marriage to Menelaos and her subsequent "marriage" to Paris are seen in terms of exchange. This is clear in *Iliad* Book 3 when, as Paris and Menelaos prepare to fight, Hector tells Paris "you may come to know from what sort of man you have a strong wife" (γνοιῆς χ' οἴου φωτὸς ἔχεις θαλερὴν παράκοιτιν, 3.53). Hector thus implies that Helen still belongs to Menelaos, that she is his property, and that Paris has wrongfully taken her. Paris replies to his brother, ordering:

αὐτὰρ ἔμ' ἐν μέσσω καὶ ἀρηίφιλον Μενέλαον  
συμβάλετ' ἀμφ' Ἑλένη καὶ κτήμασι πᾶσι μάχεσθαι.  
ὀπότερος δέ κε νικήσῃ κρείσσων τε γένηται,  
κτῆμαθ' ἔλων ἐν πάντα γυναῖκά τε οἴκαδ' ἀγέσθω· (3.69-72)

Nevertheless, bring together me and Menelaos, dear to Ares,  
in the middle to fight for Helen and all of her possessions.  
And whoever of us two may prevail and be the stronger man,  
having taken all the possessions and the woman, let him lead them well home.

---

<sup>81</sup> See Snyder (1994), duBois (1978), duBois (1995)

<sup>82</sup> See Bowie (2010), duBois (1995)

<sup>83</sup> duBois (1978) 84



Paris places Helen and the material objects she possesses on the same plane. His challenge to Menelaos is a challenge of exchange and ownership—not love. Helen is thus a passive object, taken from her first husband, fought over, and “waiting to be reclaimed”<sup>84</sup> from her second husband throughout the ten years of the Trojan War. Her marriages are transactions that occur seemingly against her will and that, for all intents and purposes, appear dissatisfying, as is implied in her exclamation to Hector in *Iliad* Book 6:

ὥς μ' ὄφελ' ἤματι τῷ ὅτε με πρῶτον τέκε μήτηρ  
οἴχεσθαι προφέρουσα κακῇ ἀνέμοιο θύελλα  
εἰς ὄρος ἢ εἰς κῦμα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης,  
ἔνθα με κῦμ' ἀπόερσε πάρος τάδε ἔργα γενέσθαι.  
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τάδε γ' ὦδε θεοὶ κακὰ τεκμήραντο,  
ἀνδρὸς ἔπειτ' ὄφελλον ἀμείνωνος εἶναι ἄκοιτις,  
ὅς ἦδη νέμεσιν τε καὶ αἴσχεα πόλλ' ἀνθρώπων. (6.345-351)

Would that, on that day when my mother first gave birth to me,  
an evil windstorm, having carried me off, had left me  
on a mountain or in the waves of the loud-roaring sea,  
where a wave could have swept me away before these things happened.  
Nevertheless, since the Gods ordained these evils in this way,  
then would that I were the wife of a better man,  
who knew the righteous anger and the many reproaches of men.

Sappho, on the other hand, characterizes Helen as an agent of her own desire, and implies that her second “marriage” to Paris is a product of irresistible *eros*. For Sappho, and for Helen, there is nothing better on earth than whatever one loves (κῆν' ὄτ- / τῷ τις ἔραται, 3-4), and what Helen loves is Paris. Led by love, she forsakes her fatherland, her child (παῖδος, 10), as well as her dear parents (φίλων το[κ]ήων, 10) to sail to Troy. As Bowie (2010) notes, in Sappho’s version of Helen’s story, there is no retelling of the epic battle narratives of the *Iliad* or even a mention of the Trojan war;<sup>85</sup> she rejects weapons, infantry, and war, and rather emphasizes Helen’s and her own subjective experience of love and passion. Helen’s marriage—

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Bowie (2010) 69

at least to Paris, if not Menelaos—is not a transaction, but a result of that passion. Perhaps Anaktoria’s marriage is the same.<sup>86</sup> It is possible that, like the unnamed woman in Fr. 94V, Anaktoria left Sappho and her friends against her will to follow her social duty and be married. It is also possible, however, that like Helen, Anaktoria was following *eros*, and is now “not present” (οὐ] παρεοίσα, 16) with Sappho because she left to be with one she loved. Sappho’s re-writing of Helen thus allows audiences to see marriage as more than an impersonal, mandatory transaction. The possibility is opened up for marriage to involve not just loss—of friends, family, home, and virginity—but also desire and passion. Fr. 16V thus reveals a relatively optimistic perspective on love and marriage, as well as a kind of mythic paradigm for mortal marriages.

## 2.7 Conclusion

In her wedding poems that treat female communities, longing for virginity, praise of the bride, praise of the groom, and mythological unions, Sappho reveals a perspective that is centered on the female experience of marriage. Her epithalamia in fact reveal a particular focus on female friendships and erotic relationships that have importance before and during the wedding ritual. It is this perspective, this prioritization of the woman and woman’s *eros*, that H.D. adopts and employs in *Hymen*. Sappho, moreover, seems to express an optimistic view of marriage, and views the transition from girlhood to womanhood as not a cause to mourn, but a cause to celebrate. The imagery that she employs as well as her revision of Homeric tradition paint marriage in a rather positive light, even though Sappho recognizes that the institution of marriage requires loss of many kinds. Sappho’s re-writing of mythic weddings and heroines and her lush natural imagery with its focus on colors and flowers also inspire H.D.’s *Hymen*, though

---

<sup>86</sup> Many of the same arguments made for reading the departure of the woman in Fr. 94 as a result of marriage can be applied here.

the modernist adopts a decidedly different attitude towards marriage, its benefits, and its disadvantages.

### 3.1 Introduction: H.D.'s Composite Reception of Sappho

H.D.'s *Hymen* (1921) showcases both direct and indirect interaction with “the wise Sappho”<sup>1</sup> and the “young women of Mitylene”<sup>2</sup> evoked in Sappho’s poems. In *Hymen*, H.D. draws inspiration not only from the general conventions and themes of the epithalamic genre, but also from specific poems of Sappho, and from her modern, abstract concept of the “Sapphic.” The very title of the collection—*Hymen*—recalls the ritual invocation to the marriage god seen in Sappho, Theocritus, and Catullus, and immediately highlights the kind of reception work H.D. performs with the ancient genre of the epithalmium. The title also captures the intense focus that H.D. places in this collection on the very moment when the bride’s hymen is ruptured and her virginity is lost. While there are many other general elements of ancient marriage rituals and songs that surface in *Hymen* such as a choral procession, sung choral exchange, and offerings to the gods, most interesting is the manner in which H.D. receives and reworks the particular epithalamia of Sappho, with their emphasis on women’s experience of *eros* and marriage.

As Gregory (1997) states, H.D. alludes to Sapphic fragments in some of the early poems of *Hymen* to emphasize the experience of the “child” (*pais*) or “young girl” (*parthenos*) as well as “the primacy of bonds within the *thiasos*” and the kind of “imaginative rite”<sup>3</sup> described by McEvelley (1973), wherein “the flowerlike beauty of girls is celebrated in an inner garden where such perishable stuff is transmuted into those timeless flowers, poems.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a great deal of H.D.’s reception of Sappho in this collection is signaled through her use of flower imagery. As is

---

<sup>1</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 63

<sup>2</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 62

<sup>3</sup> Gregory (1997) 158

<sup>4</sup> McEvelley (1973) 269

clear in her response to Meleager in “The Wise Sappho,” H.D. viewed Sappho’s poetry in terms of “implacable flowerings made to seduce the sense,” red, gold, and more brilliant than roses.<sup>5</sup> Like the violets in Sappho Fr. 94V or the hyacinth in Fr. 105bV, flowers in *Hymen* represent feminine sensuality, beauty, and grace, and serve as symbols of female sexuality and the changes this sexuality endures during marriage. Gregory observes that in *Hymen*, the “moments of female erotic life are signified in a sequence of flower-gifts. In this emphasis too H.D. shares a primarily Sapphic orientation.”<sup>6</sup> H.D.’s flower gifts and their embeddedness in the flower imagery of Sappho’s epithalamia become complicated, however, as many transform from tokens of beauty and sensuality to emblems of violence, loss, and even death. In her picture of marital “deflowering,” H.D.’s perspective on marriage and the loss of female companionship and virginity entailed seems decidedly more negative than that portrayed in Sappho’s poems.

H.D. also prioritizes the female experience of marriage and the erotic pleasure (or displeasure) that is a central part of that experience by adopting Sappho’s strategy of re-writing famous women from Greek mythology. Like Sappho in Frs. 16V and 44V, H.D. revises the stories of notable goddesses and heroines from the ancient Greek world so that they are distanced from the dominating male gaze and male ethos and come to inhabit a female-centric world. As Graham (2012) argues, H.D. crafts “revisionary portraits of women that challenge the heteropatriarchy,”<sup>7</sup> an institution that privileges men’s pleasure, voices, and experiences. Indeed, H.D.’s mythic women voice their own experiences of love, pleasure, marriage, childbirth, violence, and loss, by acting as the speakers or primary subjects of many of the poems in *Hymen*. It is this “reconsideration of female figures,”<sup>8</sup> Graham notes, which distinguishes H.D. from her

---

<sup>5</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 57

<sup>6</sup> Gregory (1997) 156

<sup>7</sup> Graham (2012) 113.

<sup>8</sup> Graham (2012) 114

male peers like Pound and Eliot, and which shows the undeniable influence Sappho had on her poetic sensibilities. Yet, while H.D. follows Sappho in her attention to women's relationships and communities in *Hymen*, her poems about mythic women reveal a rather more pessimistic outlook on the institution of marriage than is found in Sappho's epithalamia. While Sappho views marriage as a social duty to be celebrated, and whose losses must be endured, H.D. continually emphasizes this loss and indeed portrays marriage as a violent rupture in the female experience—an institution that leads to men's use and abuse of young women, as well as a symbolic kind of death for the bride.

### 3.2 “Hymen”: The Beginning

The woman-centric world of *Hymen* is marked from the very beginning of the collection by a dedication: “For Bryher and Perdita.”<sup>9</sup> In naming her daughter along with her closest female friend and lover at the very start of *Hymen*, H.D. marks this collection as belonging to these women as well as to herself; she thus immediately creates her own kind of Sapphic *thiasos*. H.D., as someone who imagines herself writing both in the tradition of Sappho and as a Sapphic writer, is at the center of that *thiasos*, composing poems that celebrate the bonds formed and maintained within it.<sup>10</sup> This *thiasos* is expanded, interrogated, and given a Greek mask throughout the rest of *Hymen*. As Friedman (1990) argues, for H.D. these “Greek times, places, and names serve as palimpsestic<sup>11</sup> analogues to the modern world and the people in her circle.”<sup>12</sup> H.D. rewrites and reimagines her own world through the lens of antiquity, and uses Greek modes and Greek-ness to

---

<sup>9</sup> Graham (2012) 114; Graham also notes that this dedication also highlights the absence of men and male voices in the collection.

<sup>10</sup> Collecott (1999) 3; DuPlessis (1986) 24-25

<sup>11</sup> For more on the significance of “palimpsestic,” including H.D.'s application of the term to Sappho's poetry (*Vision* 69), her definition of the term, and how the same notion can be applied to readings of H.D.'s own work, see Collecott (1999) 2.

<sup>12</sup> Friedman (1990) 66

indirectly “tell about her self—the story of a woman, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, a lover”<sup>13</sup> and about the other women, relationships, and social realities that make up the fabric of her existence.

These Greek analogues continue in the ritualistic, processional, highly dramatized poetic sequence that follows, referred to simply as “Hymen,” wherein various groups of women, girls, and boys gradually come together on “the porch or open hall of a palace”<sup>14</sup> in front of a deep purple curtain<sup>15</sup> to sing songs to mark the occasion of the bride’s wedding. These groups include first “sixteen matrons,” “each a queen,”<sup>16</sup> who emerge from the temple of Hera, “four very little girls” who are “small maids or attendants of the sixteen matrons,”<sup>17</sup> followed by “four slight, rather fragile taller children,”<sup>18</sup> then a final group of four who are “boyish in shape and gesture” and “free and wild, like the wood maidens of Artemis,”<sup>19</sup> and, at last, a “bride-chorus”<sup>20</sup> of indeterminate number made up of “tall young women” with the bride in the center. After a series of strophes and antistrophes, there follows yet another group of “four tall young women, very young matrons,”<sup>21</sup> then “five or six slightly older serene young women,”<sup>22</sup> followed by the male figure of “Love,” who is described as “a tall youth”<sup>23</sup> dressed like a flame, and then last of all a “band of boys”<sup>24</sup> holding torches.

---

<sup>13</sup> Friedman (1990) 67

<sup>14</sup> H.D. (1921) 101. Tarlo (1996) 92-93 notes that each of these groups of girls is more liberated, erotic, and “lesbian” than the next.

<sup>15</sup> Tarlo (1996) 91 argues that the deep purple curtain is undoubtedly representative of the hymen itself—the “curtain of her [the bride’s] sex.”

<sup>16</sup> H.D. (1921) 101

<sup>17</sup> H.D. (1921) 102

<sup>18</sup> H.D. (1921) 103

<sup>19</sup> H.D. (1921) 104

<sup>20</sup> H.D. (1921) 105

<sup>21</sup> H.D. (1921) 106

<sup>22</sup> H.D. (1921) 107

<sup>23</sup> H.D. (1921) 108

<sup>24</sup> H.D. (1921) 109

H.D.'s inclusion of girls and women of various ages and statuses in "Hymen's" wedding ritual is reminiscent of Sappho Fr. 44V, and indeed points to the influence which that mythic wedding likely had on H.D.'s reincarnation of the ancient rite.<sup>25</sup> In Fr. 44V, one follows Andromache's wedding procession and is gradually introduced to a luxurious, woman-centered world inhabited by "tender-ankled maidens" (15), "daughters of Priam" (16), maidens singing holy songs (25-26), and "elder mothers" crying out in celebration (31). Just so, in "Hymen," the reader is led through a bridal procession and progressively presented with different groups of girls and women of varying ages performing various ritual activities and singing songs. The atmosphere, as in Fr. 44V, is one of splendor, with the dark purple curtain, marble "Ionic columns," and "crown or diadem of gold"<sup>26</sup> on the head of each maiden in "Hymen" evoking a similar sense of luxury as the "gold bracelets" (8), "purple perfumed robes" (8-9), and "countless silver cups" (10) in Fr. 44V. The allusions, moreover, to both "matrons" and "girls" in "Hymen" suggest a network of relationships formed between women at different stages of life—not only between married and unmarried women, as in Sappho's work, but also perhaps between mothers and daughters. There is, indeed, a strong maternal presence throughout *Hymen*, embodied first by H.D. in her dedication to her daughter Perdita, then by these queenly matrons, and later by goddesses like Demeter. Mothers, who do not have a significant presence in Sappho's extant epithalamia, are, as evidenced in this sequence, an important part of H.D.'s *thiasos* in *Hymen*, and serve as source of wisdom, comfort, caution, and support to the younger girls at the ritual—especially the bride.

---

<sup>25</sup> Swann (1962) 5 indeed argues that *Hymen* may have been influenced by Sappho Fr. 44. The fragment does not appear in Wharton (1898), as the papyrus (P. Oxy. X 1232) on which it was found was not published until 1914. Yet it is known that H.D. was aware of and engaged with the new Oxyrhynchus finds of Sappho. She transcribed the new Berlin and Egyptian fragments for Aldington, who then translated Fr. 96V and shared this work with both H.D. and Pound before it was published in the 1913 edition of *Freewoman*. H.D. also reviewed a 1925 edition of Sappho by Edward Marion Cox, who in his introduction refers to the recent finds and scholarship, and in his annotated bibliography includes one of the new Oxyrhynchus fragments (Fr. 16V). See Gregory (1997) 150.

<sup>26</sup> H.D. (1921) 101



It is also noteworthy that, while both Fr. 44V and many of Sappho's other epithalamia invoke the presence of the groom and his companions, there is a distinct lack of mature, adult men in "Hymen." The groom of the unnamed Bride never appears; there are only small groups of boys, who because of their age and sexual immaturity do not pose a threat to the anti-patriarchal female *thiasos*, and the youthful, divine figure of Love himself. H.D. introduces Love as a youth who "crosses the stage as if seeking the bride door."<sup>27</sup> She writes:

*The figure itself is a flame, and exaggerated symbol; the hair a flame; the wings, deep red or purple, stand out against the curtains in a contrasting or almost clashing shade of purple. The tunic, again a rich purple or crimson, falls almost to the knees. The knees are bare; the sandals elaborately strapped over and over. The curtain seems a rich purple cloud, the figure, still brighter, like a flamboyant bird, half emerged in the sunset.*

*Love pauses just outside the bride's door with his gift, a tuft of black-purple cyclamen. He sings to the accompaniment of wood-winds, in a rich, resonant voice.<sup>28</sup>*

Love here is more a symbol—a living flame—than a mature male presence. After his one song, Love passes out of the scene with a crash of symbols, and so occupies only a small piece of space and time in this procession. His garb, moreover, differentiates him from the other persons present, and likens him to the *objects*—torches, flowers, and curtains—present in the ritual. Yet despite his youth and symbolic status, Love poses a threat to the otherwise female world of "Hymen," because he is a walking emblem of the sexual and social transition the bride will have to endure during and after her wedding. In fact, his "gift" of dark colored flowers can be interpreted as heterosexual sex and the subsequent the loss of virginity, for it is this that the bride will "receive" from her husband on their wedding night. Still, while Love's presence foreshadows the relationship the bride will have with her husband, H.D.'s focus remains, as in

---

<sup>27</sup> H.D. (1921) 108

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

Sappho's epithalamia, primarily on the female experience of *eros* and the female bonds created in the context of the wedding ceremony.

Virginitly, and the loss of virginitly, is evoked several other times in "Hymen." One of the first instances is in the choral performance of the "four very little girls" who pass before the purple curtain and attend the sixteen previous matrons. They sing:

Where the first crocus buds unfold  
We found these petals near the cold  
Swift river-bed.

Beneath the rocks where ivy-frond  
Puts forth new leaves to gleam beyond  
Those lately dead:

The very smallest two or three  
Of gold (gold pale as ivory)  
We gathered.<sup>29</sup>

Seemingly drawing inspiration from Sappho, who in 105bV uses the image of a hyacinth to portray the violation of a young woman's—perhaps a bride's—virginitly, as well as from Catullus 62,<sup>30</sup> H.D. employs the image of a newly blooming crocus to represent the budding sexuality of the "bride most fair"<sup>31</sup> at the center of this ritual action. While the Sapphic and Catullan intertexts hint at the danger of violation that is impending for the bride, these stanzas primarily emphasize the bride's youth and still intact virginitly. The "cold / Swift river-bed," the rocks, the decay and life born from death, and the paleness of ivory suggest both the "cool and

---

<sup>29</sup> H.D. (1921) 103

<sup>30</sup> Wharton (1898) 134 includes Fr. 105bV in his section on epithalamia/bridal songs, indicating that—while the context of the fragment remains unclear—H.D., at least, likely read Fr. 105bV as connected with a bride and/or a wedding ritual. Wharton also cites Catullus under the fragment ("Compare Catullus, xi. 21-24") and includes the following passage from Robinson Ellis on page 134:

Think not henceforth, thou, to recall Catullus'  
Love; thy own slew it, as on the meadow's  
Verge declines, un-gently beneath the ploughshare.  
Stricken, a flower.

<sup>31</sup> H.D. (1921) 104

passive nature”<sup>32</sup> of the bride and her distance, at that point in her life, from the fiery, passionate, purple and red picture of Love. The bride very much embodies the image of the “rose, cut in rock” that H.D. invokes in the poem “Garden.”<sup>33</sup> a fair blossom emerging from harsh circumstances, with skin as pale as ivory but as precious and durable as gold. Gregory, moreover, notes that these lines may have two other fragments of Sappho as subtexts:<sup>34</sup> Fr. 122V, ἄνθε' ἀμέργοισαν παῖδ' ἄγαν ἀπάλαν (“a very tender girl picking flowers”), and Fr. 132V—

Ἔστι μοι κάλα πάις χρυσοῖσιν ἀνθέμοισιν  
 ἐμφέρη<v> ἔχοισα μόρφαν Κλείς < > ἀγαπάτα,  
 ἀντὶ τᾶς ἔγωϋδὲ Λυδίαν παῖσαν οὐδ' ἐράνναν ...

I have a beautiful child, whose form is like  
 golden flowers, beloved Cleis,  
 over whom I would not [take] all of Lydia, nor lovely...

The golden flowers that Sappho likens her daughter to become the golden buds gathered by the bride and her companions in “Hymen.” These Sapphic subtexts or intertexts thus again draw attention to the primacy of female bonds within the world of *Hymen*, and especially to the relationship between mothers and daughters. It is the bride’s age mates, represented by the four little girls of the chorus, and perhaps the bride’s mother who are present throughout the bride’s childhood, when “the first crocus buds unfold” and the young girl leaves behind picking flowers with her friends to become a sexually mature young woman.

H.D. further comments on the unnamed bride’s virginal innocence in the second strophe sung after she enters the stage:

STROPHE     But of her  
                   Who can say if she is fair?  
                   For her head is covered over

---

<sup>32</sup> Swann (1962) 56

<sup>33</sup> H.D. (1916) 24

<sup>34</sup> Gregory (1997) 158

With her mantle  
White on white,  
Snow on whiter amaranth,  
Snow on hoar-frost,  
Snow on snow,  
Snow on the whitest buds of myrrh.<sup>35</sup>

These images of “White on white,” “Snow on snow,” are emblems of the utmost purity. It is this purity, this virginity, which is threatened by the bride’s impending marriage. Indeed, the “whiteness” of her girlhood cannot last, as is indicated in a preceding choral song:

Never more will the wind  
Cherish you again  
Never more will the rain.

Never more  
Shall we find you bright  
In the snow and wind.

The snow is melted,  
The snow is gone,  
And you are flown:

Like a bird out of our hand,  
Like a light out of our heart,  
You are gone.<sup>36</sup>

When the bride is married, the “snow,” which was a stark representation of her virginity, becomes “melted” and so disappears. This disappearance, in contrast to the way that it is depicted in Sappho’s epithalamia, seems to be a categorical loss worthy of mourning. As Swann notes, the “snow-pure young woman is somehow threatened by marriage. At most weddings it is expected that the bride’s friends may shed a tear for their loss, but the friends of this bride behave as if they were attending her funeral.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in Sappho Fr. 94V, the first speaker grieves at the prospect of her leaving behind Sappho and her companions to be married, but that

---

<sup>35</sup> H.D. (1921) 106

<sup>36</sup> H.D. (1921) 103-104

<sup>37</sup> Swann (1962) 57

grief is mediated by Sappho's response to "Go rejoicing," and her reminder of the "the lovely things we shared." There is no such mediation in H.D.'s poem. The girl is simply "gone," from both the hands and hearts of her female companions. The use, moreover, of the third person plural here—"our hand," "our heart"—is as striking as the use of first-person plural verbs in Sappho Fr. 94V. It reinforces the sense of community, and, as Gregory argues, highlights the "context of the bonds of the *thiasos*"<sup>38</sup> that underscores the whole collection. These are the bonds that are irrevocably broken when the bride enters upon her marriage.

This song, "Never more will the wind," also contains a clear allusion to Sappho Fr. 114V: "Virginity, virginity, where are you going, having left me behind? / No longer will I come to you, no longer will I come." Gregory notes that here, H.D. "performs the Sapphic text, playing out its distinct tonality by means of concrete images and musical effects."<sup>39</sup> One of these effects is the repetition of the phrase "Never more," which echoes the "No longer" of Sappho Fr. 114V. Yet while Sappho's fragment seems to be a more lighthearted exchange between a bride, who is coming to terms with her new sexual status, and her chorus of maidens, H.D.'s poem feels more like a dirge. As Swann argues, the bride in "Hymen" is "entering a state that is equated with death."<sup>40</sup> The loss of virginity and the entrance into a heterosexual marital relationship isn't just an inevitable part of life, as it is in Sappho's work, but is in fact the end of life itself. To Sappho, loss of virginity is a natural part of getting older and following one's social duty; for the girls in H.D.'s "Hymen," marriage involves a retreat or withdrawal not just from the circle of female friends, but also from the natural world. Never more will the bride be cherished by the wind and the rain, or found in the snow and wind. It is as if, upon her marriage, she loses some connection

---

<sup>38</sup> Gregory (1997) 159

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Swann (1962) 58

with the earth and life upon it, and can no longer commune with the primal, elemental forces of nature, having lost that “white,” snowy element herself.

As in Sappho’s epithalamia, the female community in “Hymen” serves as a source of support to the bride as she undergoes this transition from virginal girl to (hetero)sexually active woman, even as they actively lament this transition. In a subsequent song sung by the “five or six older serene young women,”<sup>41</sup> H.D. suggests something of the supportive but sinister role of this woman-centric community in the wedding ritual through a catalogue of the materials used to construct the bride’s wedding bed. The women sing:

From citron-bower be her bed.  
Cut from branch of tree a-flower,  
Fashioned for her maidenhead.

From Lydian apples, sweet of hue,  
Cut the width of board and lathe.  
Carve the feet from myrtle-wood.

Let the palings of her bed  
Be quince and box-wood overlaid  
With scented bark of yew.

That all the wood in blossoming,  
May calm her heart and cool her blood  
For losing of her maidenhood.<sup>42</sup>

The focal point of this song is bed upon which bride will ultimately lose her “maidenhood.” As Gregory argues, the imagery here further helps to solidify H.D.’s connection between the wedding ritual and a funeral, or between loss of virginity and death. She claims, “‘From citron-bower be her bed’ suggests unmistakably the homology between the bridal bed and coffin, thus the traditional homology between virginal initiation and death.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, there is a tension here between the image of the blossoming tree, which perhaps represents the bride before her

---

<sup>41</sup> H.D. (1921) 107

<sup>42</sup> H.D. (1921) 108

<sup>43</sup> Gregory (1997) 159

marriage, and the image of the tree that has been cut down to make the bed. The tree, like the bride, becomes effectively dead, its blossoms barren even if their smell still lingers. As in the previous poem, therefore, H.D. here seems to portray marriage as an institution that deprives the bride not only of virginity, freedom, and friends, but also, symbolically, of life itself.

Whether marriage rite or death rite, it seems that the women in the chorus of “From citron-bower be her bed” have an intimate role in the ceremonial proceedings. Their attention here is on the most personal events and objects inside of the bridal chamber, which in itself is a closed, exclusive space to which only the bride and those nearest her have access. Such intimacy suggests not only a kind of homoeroticism with the female *thiasos* of “Hymen,” but also, as in Sappho’s epithalamia, the existence of a mutually pleasing and beneficial network of support. The women of the chorus are able to “calm the heart” and “cool the blood” of the bride as she experiences this rupture in her sexual status, both through their actual presence and through the construction of a bed that is then a reminder of their presence. Indeed, the women of the chorus seem to imbue the marriage bed with symbols of the bride’s and their own youth and beauty. The blooms from the “branch of tree a-flower” and the “wood in blossoming,” much like the violets in Sappho 94V, serve as symbols of the young women’s delicacy, grace, and loveliness. The bride and her companions are “sweet of hue” just like the Lydian apples, and fragrant like the “scented bark of yew” from which the palings are made. These women—the ones present in the chorus of “Hymen”—are thus symbolically embedded into the very frame of the marriage couch, there to serve as a constant reminder and source of support for the bride.

The phrase “Lydian apples” establishes another connection between H.D. and Sappho, as it recalls both Fr. 16V’s reference to the “Lydians’ chariots” (19) as well as Fr. 105aV:

οἷον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρεύθεται ἄκρωι ἐπ’ ὕσδωι,  
ἄκρον ἐπ’ ἀκροτάτῳ, λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρόπῃες·

οὐ μὰν ἐκλελάθοντ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐδύναντ' ἐπίκεσθαι.

As the sweet-apple grows red on the topmost branch,  
On the top of the very topmost, but the apple-pickers forgot it;  
No, indeed, they did not forget, but they were not able to reach it.

This poem, which Snyder and Rayor and Lardinois agree could be from a Sapphic epithalamium in which the bride is likened to an apple and the groom to Achilles,<sup>44</sup> again points to the beauty and virginity of the bride. She is, as Carson notes, “inaccessible...grammatically and erotically;” indeed, the “self-correction” in the final line “emphasizes desire’s infinite deferral.”<sup>45</sup> The apple, or bride, which is perfect in its beauty, has only been able to “achieve and maintain such a beautiful state because it was just out of reach of the apple pickers, who could not fulfill their desire to pluck the ripened fruit.”<sup>46</sup> Sappho thus preserves in these lines an image of the bride “suspended in time at a moment of utter perfection,”<sup>47</sup> with no Achilles-groom present to break the spell. These intertextual echoes enhance H.D.’s depiction of the bride’s and chorus girls’ beauty and innocence in “Hymen.” They, too, are “sweet of hue” like Sappho’s “sweet-apples,” on the verge of being “plucked.” Yet H.D. seems to be aware that the desire directed at the bride in “Hymen” cannot in fact be deferred eternally. While the bride of Fr. 105aV remains suspended in time, preserved in her virginity, H.D.’s bride ultimately moves towards this moment of transition, which is both a rupture of her sexual status as well as her heretofore-perfect beauty.

---

<sup>44</sup> Snyder (1997) 104; Rayor and Lardinois (2014) 129 note that the fragment comes from a commentary by the late fourth / early fifth century CE philosopher Syrianos on a treatise on style. It is one of many examples given where a bride and groom are compared to famous mythological figures. The Greek orator Himerios (fourth century CE) also tells us explicitly that Sappho compared a bride to an apple and her groom to Achilles (see Campbell fr. 105B).

<sup>45</sup> Carson (2002) 374

<sup>46</sup> Snyder (1997) 104

<sup>47</sup> Ibid



The culmination of H.D.'s commentary on the presence and absence of the bride's virginity in "Hymen" comes in the second to last song of the poem, which is sung by Love himself:

The crimson cover of her bed  
Is not so rich, nor so deeply bled  
The purple-fish that dyed it red,  
As when in a hot sheltered glen  
There flowered these stalks of cyclamen:

(Purple with honey-points  
Of horns for petals;  
Sweet and dark and crisp,  
As fragrant as her maiden kiss.)

There with his honey-seeking lips  
The bee clings close and warmly sips,  
And seeks with honey-thighs to sway  
And drink the very flower away.

(Ah, stern the petals drawing back;  
Ah rare, ah virginal her breath!)

Crimson, with honey-seeking lips,  
The sun lies hot across his back,  
The gold is flecked across his wings.  
Quivering he sways and quivering clings  
(Ah, rare her shoulders drawing back!)  
One moment, then the plunderer slips  
Between the purple flower-lips.<sup>48</sup>

H.D. unmistakably imagines the act of sexual penetration, or rather the "deflowering" of the bride. The crimson cover that is not "do deeply bled" is evocative of the blood that may be present on the bride's bed after her first experience of penetrative sexual intercourse. The bee, with his "honey-seeking lips," stands in for the husband, who seeks to satisfy his pleasure by drinking nectar from the fragrant purple "cyclamen," which symbolize the bride's genitalia. The bee-husband appears drunk with pleasure as he "sways" and "clings close" and "sips" between

---

<sup>48</sup> H.D. (1921) 108-109

the flower petals; he quivers—perhaps from anticipation, perhaps from pleasure—and seems to wait for his opportunity to enter the flower. There is, however, a sense of pain or resistance from the flower-bride, as the bee must “seek...to sway” her, and the petals are “stern” when they draw back. The bee is, moreover, characterized as a “plunderer” who “slips/ Between the purple flower lips.” H.D. thus likens this act of sexual intercourse in the marriage bed to an act of robbery or theft, as the bride’s virginity is something that is taken by a foreign invader.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the bride’s actions that the bee-husband reads as signs of passion— “Ah rare, ah virginal her breath!” and “Ah, rare her shoulders drawing back!”—could rather be signs of fear or pain. As the poem is written from the male perspective, the bride’s feelings about the encounter are veiled. Yet it seems that H.D. encourages the reader to interpret the “deflowering” as an act of violence, rather than, as the bee-husband perceives it, a pleasurable moment of erotic fulfillment.

The figure of the bee in this song creates another Sapphic connection. Tryphon attributes to Sappho a proverb that reads: μήτε μοι μέλι μήτε μέλισσα (“For me, neither honey nor the bee”). H.D. was clearly influenced by the short fragment, as it resurfaces later in *Hymen* with the poem “Fragment 113,” which will be discussed at length later on.<sup>50</sup> For “Fragment 113,” H.D. provides the translation of the Sappho poem as a subtitle: “‘Neither honey nor bee for me.’—Sappho.” H.D., in both poems, appears to be appropriating this Sapphic rejection of both the honey and the bee, which in her mind symbolize both heterosexual sex and the husband, respectively. The choice of the bee is especially interesting given the associations bees carry in other classical texts. While Semonides exalts the “bee woman” as the best kind of wife a man can have, Hesiod views the *oikos* as a beehive, wherein the bee-husbands toil endlessly for the

---

<sup>49</sup> Burnett (1990) 36 takes her analysis a step further, and argues that the bride in fact risks total annihilation by the bee-husband as he drinks away the flower, thus “destroying the hymen—and the bride with it—even as he enacts the rite of Hymen.”

<sup>50</sup> Fr. 146V. This later poem is in fact named after the given Sappho fragment, as it is numbered 113, not 146, in Wharton’s (1898) collection.

greedy drone-wives inside, and Plutarch characterizes the husband as a bee that collects wisdom and imparts it to his wife.<sup>51</sup> For H.D., however, the bee—an animal that can sting—is a symbol not of a dutiful husband, but of phallic, painful penetration, which she scorns. In “The crimson cover of her bed,” the negative representation of the bee as a “plunderer” reinforces this rejection, as does the bride’s reluctance to give herself over to the sexual act. H.D. thus further aligns herself with Sappho and the Sapphic tradition in her prioritization of female homosexual and homosocial bonds, which abound in *Hymen* and are looked upon favorably, over heterosexual ones—the spurned honey and bee. Yet while H.D., as the poet, has the option of eschewing these heterosexual bonds, the subject of her poem—the bride—does not have that luxury of choice. For the bride, it is inevitable that she will be married and will consummate that marriage. She thus becomes an object of grief and pity, mourned for both by H.D. and by the girls in the chorus of “Hymen.”

The flower imagery in “The crimson cover of her bed,” as well as in the rest of “Hymen,” carries with it other important Sapphic resonances. As Gregory (1986) argues, the flower is “a natural image for the young girls of Sappho’s Lesbos, for the delicacy and beauty of youth coming to distinct perfection at the moment of opening.”<sup>52</sup> It is this image that H.D. appropriates and reinterprets. In “Hymen,” the flower not only symbolizes delicacy, beauty, and youth, but also passion, violence, and death. The deep purple of the cyclamen in the previous poem matches the “deep red or purple” wings of Love and his “rich purple or crimson tunic,”<sup>53</sup> suggesting that perhaps the purple flower should be read as a sign of *eros*. Yet the cyclamen’s similarities in pigment to the crimson “deeply bled”<sup>54</sup> bed cover also evoke images of bloodshed and violence.

---

<sup>51</sup> See Semonides Fr. 7 (Campbell, 1982), Hesiod *Theogony* 590-600, Plutarch *Con. praec.* 145 B-C.

<sup>52</sup> Gregory (1986) 533

<sup>53</sup> H.D. (1921) 108

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*

Much like the hyacinth in Sappho Fr. 105bV, the “purple flower-lips” of the cyclamen experience pain and suffering at the hands of a selfish, careless male lover. In Love’s speech, moreover, the gift he gives the bride is described as “a tuft of purple-black cyclamen.”<sup>55</sup> The addition of black, here, suggests mourning, and maybe even death. The flower thus serves simultaneously as a wedding gift and a funeral gift, and reinforces the connection made elsewhere in “Hymen” between loss of virginity and death.

Yet, as Gregory notes, for Sappho, and so for H.D., flowers are also vehicles of the memories created within the female *thiasos*.<sup>56</sup> This is evident in the poem “From citron-bower be her bed,” as well as in the interchanging Strophe-Antistrophe sequence sung earlier by the two groups standing around the bride. In this exchange, the chorus declares that the bride is “Bound with fillet, / Bound with myrtle” and that they themselves “bleached the fillet, / Brought the myrtle.”<sup>57</sup> One is reminded of the lines in Sappho Fr. 94V:

For many crowns of violets  
and roses and [crocuses]  
] together you put before me,

and many woven garlands  
made from flower blossoms  
around your soft throat.

In both instances, making flower garlands is a memory shared and cherished among the women of the *thiasos*. For both H.D. and Sappho, then, flowers, or garlands of flowers, are emblems and reminders of collective activity and experience shared between the bride and her companions.

Elsewhere in the Strophe-Antistrophe sequence, the chorus invokes the “saffron shoe” of the bride that is bright “As a great lily-heart / In its white loveliness,”<sup>58</sup> along with the “white

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Gregory (1986) 533

<sup>57</sup> H.D. (1921) 105-106

<sup>58</sup> H.D. (1921) 105

foot” that “Drew on the painted shoe / Steeped in Illyrian crocus.”<sup>59</sup> Tarlo (1996) notes that this intimate description of the bride and what lies “underneath her flowing veil”<sup>60</sup> reveals the chorus girls’ “lesbian knowledge” of their companion.<sup>61</sup> She claims that bridal white is “re-visioned as passion between women,” and that while the sense of an “impending heterosexual consummation” lingers, this moment of the girls looking beneath the veil and describing the fairness of the bride is the “lesbian centre or consummation” of the poem.<sup>62</sup> The color contrast here is striking, moreover, as the “white foot” and “white-loveliness of the bride” suggest youth, delicacy, and virginity, while the saffron colored shoe is reminiscent of Love’s golden sandals and the pollen “flecked across [the] wings”<sup>63</sup> of the bee-husband. These flowery descriptors thus highlight the contrasting yet beautiful qualities of the bride, and, as in Sappho’s epithalamia, point to her liminal social and sexual status. The bride’s “moment of opening”<sup>64</sup> is upon her, and she must leave behind the virgin whiteness of the lilies and accept Love’s golden crocus. Indeed, this liminality is again suggested in the final antistrophe, when the bride is described as having a “blanched face,” and both the “wanness” and “heat” of desire “caught in her eyes as fire / In the dark center leaf / Of the white Syrian Iris.”<sup>65</sup> Here one sees the same “paradox of virginity” that Gregory recognizes in the imagery of the pear blossoms in H.D.’s “Sea Garden”: “white and inviolate, yet with purple at its heart.”<sup>66</sup> The pallor of the bride’s face recalls the description of “Snow on snow” in the previous strophe, while the dark center of the Iris calls forward to the imagery of the purple cyclamen in Love’s song. The final picture of the bride in this last

---

<sup>59</sup> H.D. (1921) 106

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Tarlo (1996) 93

<sup>62</sup> Tarlo (1996) 94

<sup>63</sup> H.D. (1921) 109

<sup>64</sup> Gregory (1986) 533

<sup>65</sup> Tarlo (1996) 96 argues that for H.D., the iris particularly represents lesbian love; she refers to the passage in “The Wise Sappho” in which H.D. refers to the “lesbian Iris.” See H.D. (1916-18) 63.

<sup>66</sup> Gregory (1986) 549

antistrophe is thus one of a flower in its “moment of greatest tenderness and freshness,”<sup>67</sup> as well as in its moment of greatest fear and vulnerability.<sup>68</sup> The bride stands, wan and with “blanched face,” on the threshold of womanhood, caught between purity and passion.

While the Strophe-Antistrophe sequence is more reminiscent of ancient Greek drama than epithalamia, there are several ritualistic, generic elements in this opening poem of *Hymen* that mark it as drawing from and participating in the epithalamic tradition. Indeed, as Burnett (1990) argues, even this “mini-masque” dramatization at the beginning “sets the stage for the volume’s exploration of the marriage metaphor.”<sup>69</sup> The ceremonial setting outside of the temple of Hera, the choral processions and sung passages, the praise of the bride, and the evocation of the gods Hymen and Love all harken back to the epithalamia of Sappho, Theocritus, and Catullus. The musical element of “Hymen” is especially important. Dillon (2001) notes that in ancient Greek religious rituals, including wedding rituals, women would play instruments such as the *kithara*, *aulos*, and *tympanum*, often accompanying the choral songs.<sup>70</sup> At various points in “Hymen,” H.D. includes similar string, wind, and percussion instruments in her own ritual. She describes the “deep, simple, chanting notes” of the chorus,<sup>71</sup> a flute and pipes that play “one shrill, simple little melody,”<sup>72</sup> the “mellowness and richness” of the wood winds,<sup>73</sup> how the “hard, hieratic procession of the music—its stately pause and beat—is broken now into irregular lilt and rhythm of strings,”<sup>74</sup> the “blending of woodwind and harp,”<sup>75</sup> and the “crash of

---

<sup>67</sup> Gregory (1997) 158

<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Burnett (1990) 35 remarks that this antistrophe carries a rather subtle sinister undertone, which is echoed both earlier and later on in the poem.

<sup>69</sup> Burnett (1990) 34

<sup>70</sup> Dillon (2001) 68

<sup>71</sup> H.D. (1921) 102

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> H.D. (1921) 103

<sup>74</sup> H.D. (1921) 106

<sup>75</sup> H.D. (1921) 107

cymbals”<sup>76</sup> accompanying Love’s exit. This musicality not only highlights the ancient Greek inspirations and parallels in “Hymen,” but also emphasizes the public nature of the ritual H.D. is creating. “Hymen” is performative, and as such requires an audience, just like Sappho’s ancient epithalamia. Yet, while Sappho’s wedding songs often acknowledge the presence of men in these public celebrations, H.D.’s constructed drama of the wedding-as-funeral is almost exclusively attended and performed by female figures (or unthreatening males, i.e. the boys). Nevertheless, similarly to Sappho’s epithalamia, H.D.’s “Hymen” invites public celebration, or perhaps more accurately public mourning, while simultaneously making a conscious effort to explore the private and personal, both in terms of the bonds created within the female *thiasos* and the attitudes towards marriage that the maidens in the *thiasos* hold.

In short, as Yorke (1992) argues, “Hymen” is a kind of public, “lesbian funeral,”<sup>77</sup> in which the grief felt by the chorus, and perhaps even the author herself, for the bride entering her marriage is expressed through Sapphic imagery and Sapphic notions of *eros*. The social rite that is celebrated with such humor and optimism in Sappho’s epithalamia is reimagined in “Hymen” as a symbolic death. For H.D., unlike Sappho, the bride’s marriage is thus an occasion of mourning, not rejoicing, as it entails an irrevocable loss of female community, virginity, and independent livelihood. Within this re-casting the bride’s experience of marriage as death or funeral in “Hymen,” H.D. explores the bride and chorus’s experience of erotic desire. As Tarlo argues, “Hymen,” like the rest of the collection, examines “the voyeuristic adoration of the other,” as in the bee-husband song, “the female passion for her own sex,” as in the chorus’ descriptions of the bride, as well as the female passion “for the other sex and for herself,” hinted

---

<sup>76</sup> H.D. (1921) 109

<sup>77</sup> Yorke (1992) 195

at throughout the various songs of “Hymen.”<sup>78</sup> These various manifestations of women’s erotic desire are explored and expanded upon in the rest of the collection.

In the subsequent poems of *Hymen*, written variously from the perspectives of Greek goddesses, gods, mythic heroines, unfortunate mortals, and even unnamed and un-gendered speakers, H.D. represents women who both love and hate other women, men, and themselves.<sup>79</sup> Yet it remains true that, within the female *thiasos* of *Hymen*, the bonds between women remain of primary importance. Marriage continues to be portrayed negatively, and heterosexual sex is consistently linked with loss and violence. Indeed, even as H.D. draws from ancient Greek lyricists besides Sappho as well as from ancient Greek drama and epic in her portrayals of the various women in *Hymen*, she continues to play with the *topos* of *eikasia* found in Sappho’s epithalamia. Yet, instead of drawing parallels between the bride and positive divine figures, as Sappho does, H.D. draws parallels between the bride of *Hymen* and female embodiments of abandonment, despair, and other negative experiences linked to heterosexual desire, sex, and marriage. To this end, H.D. reshapes Greek figures to fit her work, drawing from different poetic genres and eras, much in the same way that Sappho reshapes famous mythic women in Frs. 44V and 16V. Therefore, even while H.D. engages with a wide repertoire of Greek literature in the rest of the collection, these engagements are framed with Sapphic resonances and intertexts.

### 3.3 “Demeter:” *Hymen*’s Mother-Goddess

Throughout *Hymen*, H.D. includes poems named after various Greek divinities, including “Demeter,” “Thetis,” and “Helios.” These goddesses—or in one instance, god—contribute to the

---

<sup>78</sup> Tarlo (1996) 90

<sup>79</sup> While an examination of every poem in *Hymen* is beyond the scope of this chapter, a close reading of a few key poems will elucidate how H.D., in terms of her portrayal of women’s relationships and attitudes towards marriage, both adheres to and departs from her Sapphic model.



woman-centric atmosphere of *Hymen*, for they serve as protectors, exemplars, and sympathizers to the bride and her companions, as well as observers of and participants in the wedding ritual. Yet the most revealing of these divinely-centered poems, in terms of H.D.'s portrayal of marriage and the female relationships formed in the context of that rite, is "Demeter." This four-part poem, in which Demeter herself is the speaker, focuses on Demeter's self-perception as well as two main ancient Greek myths: the abduction of Persephone into the underworld, and the birth of Dionysus. Through both her introduction of herself and her rather Sapphic retelling of these two myths, Demeter portrays herself as a mother figure of both gods and humans with an inherent mistrust for men and the marriage rite. She is, in fact, a foil to the male, Sapphic god "Hymen." She recognizes and criticizes the kinds of loss and violence that young women face when compelled to carry out the rites of Love, and positions herself as a protector of the girls and women in the *thiasos* of H.D.'s collection.

"Demeter" seems to be strongly influenced by the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the language used throughout the poem is highly evocative of the mystery cults established at the end of the *Hymn*. Despite the cult imagery, however, "Demeter" begins with a clear rejection of the ritual markers of the marriage ceremony that are so prevalent in "Hymen," as well as a rejection of the more general markers of public sacrifice and ritual performed by men:

Men, fires, feasts  
steps of the temple, fore-stone, lintel,  
step of white altar, fire and after-fire,  
slaughter before,  
fragment of burnt meat,  
deep mystery, grapple of mind to reach  
the tense thought,  
power and wealth, purpose and prayer alike,  
(men, fires, feasts, temple steps)—useless.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> While a few points of correspondence between "Demeter" and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* will be pointed out in this section, an extended, close comparison between the two texts is beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>81</sup> H.D. (1921) 111

Demeter's disdain for the public world of fire and feasting, slaughter and sacrifice, "power and wealth" is clear. Indeed, the language of this stanza harkens back to the final song of "Hymen," in which "the stage becomes the domain of the male rather than of the female,"<sup>82</sup> and a chorus of boys sings about Love being "king," his "fiery need" and "fiery lips," the flaring of the "bridal torch," and the bride's veil which is "seared and white" with a "flare of light."<sup>83</sup> The rejection of men, fires, and feasts in this first stanza of "Demeter" can thus be read as an implicit rejection of Love, his male attendants, and his passionate fires.

In this first section of the poem, Burnett notes that Demeter also clarifies that "the danger of ruin is a given in the dominion of marriage" by imagining this danger as "a passer-by's ephemeral interest in Demeter's marketplace statue."<sup>84</sup> Demeter, who in contrast to a goddess more "slender of waist, / slight of breast"<sup>85</sup> has been fashioned "wide of shoulder, great of thigh, / heavy in gold,"<sup>86</sup> is not "spoken with" or "smiled upon"<sup>87</sup> like this other graceful, beautiful goddess. Demeter, frustrated with this lack of recognition and the "useless" flattery of "the mighty power"<sup>88</sup> granted to her, asks herself:

Do I sit in the market-place—  
do I smile, does a noble brow  
bend like the brow of Zeus—  
am I a spouse, his or any,  
am I a woman, or goddess or queen,  
to be met by a god with a smile—and left?

Demeter thus contemplates and criticizes the traditional "marriage of the marketplace," in which, Burnett argues, the bride is "no more than a representation or image" to the men buying and

---

<sup>82</sup> Burnett (1990) 36

<sup>83</sup> H.D. (1921) 110

<sup>84</sup> Burnett (1990) 38

<sup>85</sup> H.D. (1921) 111. Many scholars have posited this "other" goddess to be Aphrodite, though she is never explicitly named; see Swann (1962) 43 and Burnett (1990) 38.

<sup>86</sup> H.D. (1921) 111

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

selling her, and which “requires the threat of abandonment to support it.”<sup>89</sup> This notion of exchange, of buying and selling a bride like property, is evidenced both in the treatment of Helen in the *Iliad*, as discussed in Chapter 2, as well as in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. In describing the narcissus that Persephone attempted to pick before being abducted by Hades into the underworld, the poet says it was a flower “which Earth brought forth as bait for the blushing girl, by the councils of Zeus, granting this favor to Hades the All-Receiver” (ὄν φῦσε δόλον καλυκώπιδι κούρηι / Γαῖα Διὸς βουλῆισι, χαριζομένη Πολυδέκτι, 8-9).<sup>90</sup> Persephone is little better than prey, a passive object given from one man to another to indulge his desires. So too, in H.D.’s work; Burnett writes: “just as the image of Demeter is less than Demeter herself, the image of the bride—the ‘spouse, his or any’—is less than real, more a simulacra than a real woman.”<sup>91</sup> “Demeter” thus seems to be criticizing the fact that, within the marriage framework, women are viewed as simply shells— objects meant to bend, smile, and serve men, only to be callously “left” by these same men. Marriage thus becomes a threat to women’s autonomy and to the stability of their livelihood.

This distrust and disdain for marriage, and by association Love, is reinforced in the second part of the poem, when Demeter declares:

Soft are the hands of Love,  
 Soft, soft are his feet;  
 you who have twined myrtle,  
 have you brought crocuses,  
 white as the inner  
 stript bark of the osier,  
 have you set  
 black crocus against the black

---

<sup>89</sup> Burnett (1990) 38

<sup>90</sup> For Greek text, see West (2003) 32. The significance of Persephone being led to her rape by a flower would not have been lost on H.D., nor would the fact that the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* includes a narrative of Persephone’s experience of the rape told in the first person (see lines 405-433).

<sup>91</sup> Burnett (1990) 38

locks of another?<sup>92</sup>

Demeter implies that Love, while on appearances enticing with his soft hands and soft feet, nevertheless poses a threat to the bride and her companions, which is symbolized yet again with the “black crocus.” To follow the synopsis given by Swann: “they [the devotees of Love] know the softness of love but what do they know of the harsh sacrifice it demands?”<sup>93</sup> This sacrifice, if one is to interpret the “black crocus” here as a symbol of death and mourning, as it is in Love’s speech in “Hymen,” may even be fatal. H.D. thus again links loss of virginity to loss of life, and implies that Love and marriage entail a kind of symbolic death for the bride. This connection is strengthened by the fact that, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone—the young bride—becomes the literal goddess of Death through her union with Hades. Moreover, as Demeter in H.D.’s poem addresses her anxieties toward the women “who have twined myrtle” and “brought crocuses,” she implicitly recollects the kinds of ritual activity that appears both in Sappho’s epithalamia and earlier in “Hymen.” As in Sappho Fr. 94V, the women in “Demeter” make garlands of flowers together in preparation for the wedding ritual, and in doing so participate in meaningful, collective action that strengthens the bonds of the *thiasos*. Demeter’s knowledge and invocation of these ritual actions seem to imply that she is a part of this *thiasos*—perhaps a self-appointed protector, advisor, or mother figure to the bride and her companions.

Demeter’s role as a mother- guardian figure in the *thiasos* of *Hymen* is reinforced in part three of the poem, which retells the myth of Dionysus’ birth. Much like Sappho in Fr. 16V and Fr. 44V, in this section of “Demeter,” H.D. recasts a well-known ancient Greek myth in order to prioritize female concerns and the female experience, particularly concerning the rites of

---

<sup>92</sup> H.D. (1921) 112

<sup>93</sup> Swann (1962) 43

marriage and childbirth. Demeter announces at the beginning of the section that, regarding the children of the gods, she will speak of first of “Bromios,”<sup>94</sup> or Dionysus. She exclaims:

Enough of the lightning,  
enough of the tales that speak  
of the death of the mother:  
strange talks of a shelter  
brought to the unborn,  
enough of tale, myth, mystery, precedent—  
a child lay on the earth asleep.<sup>95</sup>

Here, Demeter recalls the death of Semele, daughter of Cadmus and mother of Dionysus, who while still pregnant was utterly destroyed by Zeus’ “lightning” when he showed her his true form.<sup>96</sup> In invoking this myth, H.D. again establishes a connection between marriage, sex, and death. As Demeter implies in the following stanza, it was the “soft...hands of Love”<sup>97</sup> that were responsible for Semele’s death; if she had not entered into an erotic union with Zeus, she may have lived. Thus, like Sappho, H.D. revises this mythic account in order to emphasize the woman’s role in and experience of the marriage. H.D., through Demeter, also seems to re-write the myth of Dionysus so that after his mother’s death he is “left” by the very same Love who “begot” him.<sup>98</sup> Demeter claims that the soft hands of Love led to the “soft hands” of Dionysus that “clutched at the thorny ground” and “sought nourishment”<sup>99</sup> with no success. Contrastingly to Sappho, then, H.D.’s recasting of this mythic marriage is not celebratory, but sorrowful. Both Semele and her child suffer on account of her union with Zeus and her association with Love.

At the end of section three, Demeter again highlights her role as a mother-goddess or protector in the female-centered world of *Hymen*. She claims:

---

<sup>94</sup> H.D. (1921) 113. The name “Bromios” in itself, with its meaning “thunderer” and its derivation from the verb βρέμω (to roar or thunder), suggests the violence that falls upon Semele at the hands of Zeus.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid

<sup>96</sup> For an ancient account of the myth of Zeus, Semele, and Dionysus’ birth, see Euripides’ *Bacchae* 1-42.

<sup>97</sup> H.D. (1921) 113

<sup>98</sup> Ibid

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

Though I begot no man child  
all my days  
the child of my heart and spirit,  
is the child the gods desert  
alike and the mother in death—  
the unclaimed Dionysus.<sup>100</sup>

Besides once again reminding the audience of Semele's death at the hands of Zeus, Demeter here draws attention to the manifold status of her motherhood. She is at once the true mother of her daughter Persephone ("no man child"), the spiritual or adopted mother of Dionysus, and the symbolic mother of the *thiasos* in *Hymen*. Her criticism of the gods who kill Semele and who desert and fail to claim Dionysus reveals Demeter's sense protectiveness over those she claims as children. This protectiveness seems to extend to the women of *Hymen* who worship her, and whom she warns with these recast mythic *exempla*.

In part four of "Demeter," H.D. elaborates on the goddess' role as mother of Persephone, as well as her attitude towards her daughter's marriage to Hades. Demeter begins by recalling the time before Persephone's abduction, when she would form a "golden wreath" with her fingers and place it around her daughter's head, where "the whisps escaped / from the fillet, of the tenderest gold."<sup>101</sup> Such memories are similar to those evoked by Sappho in Fr. 94V, and are comparable reminders of intimate, likely ritualistic activity performed between women and producing a mutual sense of χάρις. The lines also evoke Sappho Fr. 132V, wherein the poet comments on the golden hair of her daughter Cleis. Demeter, in H.D.'s work, goes on to explain that her fingers have since become "wrought of iron/ to wrest from the earth / secrets."<sup>102</sup> It is clear here that she speaks of rescuing her daughter from the underworld, by force if necessary. She notes that her hands are "strong to protect, / strong to keep back the winter / when winter

---

<sup>100</sup> H.D. (1921) 114

<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

tracks too soon / blanch the forest.”<sup>103</sup> Demeter thus envisions herself as her daughter’s guardian, and views Hades as a “winter” that must be “kept back,” lest it take her daughter too soon and harm her. The importance of the mother-daughter bond here as a source of protection and support is key here, and indeed is reflected elsewhere in *Hymen* both through mythic figures and through the women in the bridal chorus.

H.D.’s negative attitude towards Persephone’s marriage, and her association of that marriage with death, is made even more explicit in the final three stanzas of “Demeter:”

*What of her—  
mistress of Death—  
what of his kiss?*

Ah, strong were his arms to wrest  
slight limbs from the beautiful earth,  
young hands that plucked the first  
buds of the chill narcissus,  
soft fingers that broke  
and fastened the thorny stalk  
with the flower of wild acanthus.

Ah, strong were the arms that took  
(ah, evil the heart and graceless),  
but the kiss was less passionate!<sup>104</sup>

Another speaker, presumably the chorus from “Hymen,” begins by asking Demeter a question—what of Persephone, the mistress of death, and the kiss of her husband Hades? Demeter responds that Hades was strong enough “to wrest” her daughter from the earth, against her will, and was also the one to take her daughter’s virginity, plucking the “buds” of the “chill narcissus” for the first time. Again, the use of flower imagery here illustrates the fragility and liminality of Persephone’s position. Demeter, moreover, describes Hades’ act of rape as “less passionate” or “soft,” and more violent or “thorny.” As Burnett argues, the “apparent passion of Love, drinking

---

<sup>103</sup> H.D. (1921) 114

<sup>104</sup> H.D. (1921) 114-115

‘the very flower away’ in ‘Hymen’ is unmasked as an act of violence, a strong-arm assault motivated more by love of power than by passionate Eros.”<sup>105</sup> Hades is explicitly said to have an “evil” heart, as he leads Persephone into a marriage that is both a symbolic and literal death. Thus, unlike in Sappho’s epithalamia, the outlook upon marriage in “Demeter” is decidedly uncelebratory. Demeter seems to warn the girls asking the question “*What of her*” that marriage is inherently violent and dangerous. She uses her own daughter’s abduction, rape, and marriage to illustrate the use and abuse of women that the institution entails, and to perhaps warn them from entering into such a covenant.

### 3.4 “Simaetha” and H.D.’s Abandoned Mythic Women

In various other poems in *Hymen*, including “Simaetha,” “Circe,” “Leda,” and “Evadne,” H.D. draws upon the Sapphic revision of famous women from Greek literature and similarly rewrites the male-dominated tradition. These four poems in particular take the form of monologues spoken from the perspectives of the well-known mythic women named in the titles. In the monologues, the women emphasize their ambivalent, if not downright negative feelings towards their male lovers, heterosexual sex, and the kind of union or symbolic marriage which that consummation entails. Like Demeter, these women, their voices, and their experiences contribute to the female-centric world of *Hymen*. Their stories, which prioritize the woman’s experience of passion, desire, violence, loss, and abandonment, are cautionary *exempla* for the bride and other young women of the *thiasos* in *Hymen*. While all four aforementioned poems deserve further analysis, a close reading of the first that appears in the collection, “Simaetha,” can elucidate many of the themes and attitudes shared in all of the monologues.

---

<sup>105</sup> Burnett (1990) 41



“Simaetha,” unlike Sappho Fr. 16V and Fr. 44V, is not a re-writing specifically of Homeric material, but rather a re-writing of Theocritus *Idyll* 2. Yet, like Fr. 16V and Fr. 44V, it appropriates male-authored material in order to emphasize a woman’s thoughts, feelings, and desires as she experiences heterosexual intercourse and its aftermath. In *Idyll* 2, a Hellenistic text written in the third century BCE, Theocritus portrays Simaetha, a woman of uncertain social class,<sup>106</sup> who has been abandoned by her male lover Delphis. In a monologue of ritualistic chants, appeals, and exclamations, she tells the story of their love affair and performs a binding spell to punish Delphis and bring him back. The two refrains that surface in the poem— ἴνυξ, ἔλκε τὸ τῆνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα (“Magic wheel, drag that man of mine to my house”)<sup>107</sup> in the first half, and φράζεό μευ τὸν ἔρωθ' ὄθεν ἵκετο, πότνα Σελάνα (“Show, mistress Moon, whence came that love of mine”)<sup>108</sup> in the second half—emphasize the magical, ritualistic elements of the monologue. Yet within the context of the ritual, Theocritus gives a fair amount of detail concerning Simaetha’s emotional state and her feelings toward Delphis. Indeed, Simaetha begins by speaking bitterly of Delphis, claiming he is a man

ὅς μοι δωδεκαταῖος ἀφ' ᾧ τάλας οὐδὲ ποθίκει,  
οὐδ' ἔγνω πότερον τεθνάκαμες ἢ ζοοὶ εἰμές,  
οὐδὲ θύρας ἄραξεν ἀνάρσιος. ἦ ρά οἱ ἀλλᾶ  
ᾄχετ' ἔχων ὅ τ' Ἔρωσ ταχινὰς φρένας ἄ τ' Ἀφροδίτα.<sup>109</sup>

Who hasn't come to me in twelve days, the wretch,  
and does not know whether I live or have died,  
and has not knocked at my door, implacable. In truth, elsewhere  
Eros has gone, bearing his fleeting heart, as has Aphrodite.

<sup>106</sup> Hopkinson (2015) 36 notes, “Simaetha’s social status and the reason for her unusual lack of a legal guardian are not made clear. She is able to act independently, but the results have not been happy.” It is possible that her sexual freedom is a product of her being of a lower social class, yet it is clear in *Idyll* 2 that she is in possession of a servant—Thestylis—which indicates that she may be a freed woman or even citizen.

<sup>107</sup> Theocritus, *Idyll* 2. 17, etc. For Greek text, see Hopkinson (2015) 38-57.

<sup>108</sup> Theocritus, *Idyll* 2. 69, etc.

<sup>109</sup> Theocritus, *Idyll* 2. 4-7

Simaetha laments the fickleness and carelessness of her departed lover. She fears that love has taken him away from her and to another woman. Theocritus reinforces this sense of abandonment later in the poem when Simaetha refers to Delphis as ὄστοργος (“heartless”),<sup>110</sup> as well as when she recounts their first sexual encounter in detail:

... ὡς ὁ μὲν εἶπεν· ἐγὼ δέ νιν ἅ ταχυπειθῆς  
χειρὸς ἐφάψαμένα μαλακῶν ἔκλιν' ἐπὶ λέκτρων·  
καὶ ταχὺ χρῶς ἐπὶ χρωτὶ πεπαίνετο, καὶ τὰ πρόσωπα  
θερμότερ' ἦς ἢ πρόσθε, καὶ ἐπιθυρίσδομες ἀδύ.  
ὡς καὶ τοι μὴ μακρὰ φίλα θρυλέοιμι Σελάνα,  
ἐπράχθη τὰ μέγιστα, καὶ ἐς πόθον ἦνθομες ἄμφω.  
κοῦτε τι τῆνος ἐμὴν ἀπεμέμψατο μέσφα τό γ' ἐχθές,  
οὔτ' ἐγὼ αὐτὴν φωνήν.<sup>111</sup>

... Thus he spoke. And I, too soon persuaded,  
having taken him by the hand, laid him upon the soft bed.  
And at once skin grew warm upon skin, and our faces  
were hotter than before, and we whispered sweetly.  
And as I would not keep babbling on to you, dear Moon,  
The big deed was done, and we both fulfilled our desire.  
And up until yesterday, that guy had no reason to complain  
of me, nor I of him.

It is clear that Simaetha and Delphis engaged in penetrative intercourse (ἐπράχθη τὰ μέγιστα). While the act itself appears to have been pleasurable, her subsequent abandonment is anything but. It is this sense of loss, of use and abuse, which H.D. interrogates in her poem.

There also several intertexts in *Idyll 2* that seem to inform H.D.'s reading and rewriting of the poem. In fact, in lines 106-110, Theocritus clearly models his description of Simaetha's desire off of the well-known catalogue of symptoms in Sappho Fr. 31. Simaetha claims:

πᾶσα μὲν ἐψύχθην χιόνος πλέον, ἐκ δὲ μετώπῳ  
ἰδρώς μευ κοχύδεσκεν ἴσον νοτίαισιν ἐέρσαις,  
οὐδέ τι φωνῆσαι δυνάμαν, οὐδ' ὄσσον ἐν ὕπνῳ  
κνυζεῦνται φωνεῦντα φίλαν ποτὶ ματέρα τέκνα·  
ἀλλ' ἐπάγην δαγῦδι καλὸν χροῖα πάντοθεν ἴσα.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>110</sup> *Idyll 2*. 112

<sup>111</sup> *Idyll 2*. 138-145

<sup>112</sup> *Idyll 2*. 106-110

I was all over much colder than snow, and from my brow  
water streamed forth like damp dews,  
and I was not able to say anything, not even as much as in sleep  
children whimper, speaking to their dear mother.  
But my beautiful body was broken on every side, like a wax doll.

This chill, shivering, sweating, inability to speak, and sense of being helpless all around echoes the inability to speak, stiffening tongue, sweating, trembling, and feeling of being close to death experienced by the speaker in Sappho Fr. 31V. The passage, as Hunter (2014) argues, also recalls *Iliad* 14.293-294, wherein one sees the effect that Hera, in full possession of the charms of Aphrodite, has on Zeus.<sup>113</sup> Parry (1988) notes that there is also a connection between *Idyll* 2 and Sappho Fr. 1V, the famous “Hymn to Aphrodite.”<sup>114</sup> In *Idyll* 2, as in Fr. 1V, a woman whose love seems unrequited appeals to a goddess for help. Parry argues that while Simaetha is a “creation” or “fiction” of a male muse,<sup>115</sup> this Sapphic intertext could suggest that Theocritus is representing a somewhat authentic female experience in terms of the emotions Simaetha feels and the methods she uses to remedy her unrequited love.<sup>116</sup> It is this female experience—of erotic desire, loss, yearning, and abandonment—that H.D. explores even further in *Hymen*. Yet, while in both Theocritus and Sappho Fr. 1 the featured woman is an active agent who resorts to some kind of magical or divine intervention to address her unrequited love, in “Simaetha,” the heroine appears passive and powerless. Such a deprivation of agency only serves to reinforce the sense of loss and abandonment Simaetha feels at the hands of her lover.

Within the epithalamic context of *Hymen*, the sexual union between Simaetha and Delphis in Theocritus becomes a symbolic marital union in H.D.’s “Simaetha.” Here, Simaetha

---

<sup>113</sup> Hunter (2014) 143. See *Iliad* 14.293-94: Ἥρη δὲ κραίπνῳς προσεβήσεται Γάργαρον ἄκρον / Ἴδης ὑψηλῆς: ἴδε δὲ νεφεληγερέτα Ζεὺς (“And Hera swiftly approached Gargaros, the peak / of high Ida: and cloud-gathering Zeus saw her”).

<sup>114</sup> Parry (1988) 49

<sup>115</sup> Parry (1988) 49-50

<sup>116</sup> Parry (1988) 50

reflects upon that union, its consummation, and the accompanying feelings of pleasure and pain as she performs the same binding ritual described in Theocritus. The poem reads:

Drenched with purple,  
drenched with dye, my wool,  
bind you the wheel-spokes—  
turn, turn, turn my wheel!

Drenched with purple,  
steeped in the red pulp  
of bursting sea-sloes—  
turn, turn, turn my wheel!

(Ah did he think  
I did not know,  
I did not feel—  
what wrack, what weal for him:  
golden one, golden one,  
turn again Aphrodite with the yellow zone,  
I am cursed, cursed, undone!  
Ah and my face, Aphrodite,  
beside your gold, is cut out of white stone!)

Laurel blossom and the red seed  
of the red vervain weed,  
burn, crackle in the fire,  
burn, crackle for my need!  
Laurel leaf, O fruited  
branch of bay, burn, burn away  
thought, memory and hurt!

(Ah when he comes,  
stumbling across my sill,  
will he find me still,  
fragrant as the white privet,  
or as a bone,  
polished in wet and sun,  
worried of wild beaks,  
and of the whelps' teeth—  
worried of flesh,  
left to bleach under the sun,  
white as ash bled of heat,  
white as hail blazing in sheet-lightning,  
white as forked lightning rending the sleet?)<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>117</sup> H.D. (1921) 115-116

Simaetha's first words remind the reader that she has been "drenched" with erotic desire and passion, represented here, as in the opening poem, by the color purple. Yet this purple is also "steeped" in "red pulp," which, like in "Hymen," is a reminder of the blood that was perhaps present after her first act of intercourse as well as of the emotional violence that followed. As Tarlo argues, in *Hymen* red is representative of heterosexual desire, which in turn "suggests violation and penetration and is often associated with flower spikes or blood-images."<sup>118</sup> The "red seed / of the red vervain weed" in the fourth stanza reinforces this image of bloodshed and violence, though it is again paired with a symbol of passion—the burning, crackling fire. This linking of heat and hurt, passion and pain, reflects Simaetha's emotional state as she vacillates between intense desire for Delphis and intense suffering because of his abandonment.

The most obvious intertext in "Simaetha" is the refrain at the end of the first and second stanzas, "turn, turn, turn my wheel!" which echoes the "Magic wheel, drag that man of mine to my house" in Theocritus. Yet the third stanza also contains an intertextual echo, this time with Sappho Fr.1—the "Hymn to Aphrodite." As discussed, Fr.1V and *Idyll* 2 present similar situations of a woman praying to a goddess for assistance in unrequited love. In stanza three of "Simaetha," H.D. has the speaker explicitly call on Aphrodite, just like the speaker of Sappho Fr. 1V. Simaetha's evocation of Aphrodite as "golden one" is reminiscent of the "golden house" (δόμον... χρύσιον) from which Aphrodite must descend in lines 7-8 of Fr. 1V. Moreover, Simaetha's representation of herself as "cursed" and "undone" is similar to Fr.1V, in so far as the Sapphic speaker claims she is oppressed by pain and torment, is full of anguish, and has been treated cruelly. Yet, whereas in Fr. 1V one can assume that Aphrodite will help the speaker because, as the speaker recounts, the goddess has done so before, H.D. gives no such reassurance

---

<sup>118</sup> Tarlo (1996) 99

in “Simaetha.” The playful, teasing tone of the Sappho poem, and its assurance of swift divine aid, is utterly lacking from H.D.’s work. As in Fr. 1V, there is promise of punishment for the one who has rejected the speaker’s love—“what wrack, what weal for him.” Yet this punishment comes too little, too late for Simaetha. She has already suffered loss and hurt at the hands of Delphis, and the “gold” of her former passion has been turned into hard, pallid “white stone.”

The final stanza of “Simaetha” takes a turn, as the speaker imagines what she will look like if and when Delphis returns for her. She imagines that she will be “white” like a “privet,” or a polished “bone” that has been “bleach under the sun,” or white like “ash bled of heat” or “hail blazing in sheet-lightning” or, finally, white like “forked lightning rending the sleet.” As in “Hymen,” whiteness here may suggest virginity or sexual purity. Simaetha may hope that Delphis finds her again as he first encountered her—unsullied, pure, and without the red stain of sexual intercourse. Yet white in this stanza also seems to represent death. The various white objects named have been bleached, bled, or are associated with the violent, murderous power of lightening. These white things, in all instances, are either deprived of their original heat or are overly affected by heat, and so become either worn out, blasted husks of what they used to be, or elemental forces of destruction. The “polished” bone left in the sun has even been gnawed on by the beaks and teeth of animals; such an image may represent Delphis using, consuming, and then abandoning Simaetha. Thus, as in “Hymen” and “Demeter,” in this final stanza H.D. links heterosexual sex—and its implied marital union—to death. Simaetha, like the bone left out to be devoured by animals and withered by the sun, has been used and abused by Delphis. If and when he returns, it will not be to a happy reception or conjugal ritual, but rather to Simaetha’s funeral. H.D. thus resolves the ambiguity of Simaetha’s feelings on a decidedly negative note.

This theme of a woman being used and abandoned by her male lover surfaces again in the poems “Circe,” “Leda,” and “Evadne.” In “Circe,” a re-writing of the episode in Homer’s *Odyssey*,<sup>119</sup> the enchantress herself mourns the departure of Odysseus and recognizes that, despite all of her power, she does not know how to call him back. Circe, in a rather Sapphic mode, claims that she would give up her “island palace” and her “power and magic” just to see Odysseus’ “glance” again.<sup>120</sup> Like Simaetha, Circe has been consumed and then left behind by her lover. She thus vacillates between intense hostility for Odysseus and his men, and longing for their return. In “Leda,” the violence of the heterosexual coupling between the speaker and her lover—in this case, Zeus—is made even more explicit. The “red swan” with its “red wings” and its “red swan’s breast”<sup>121</sup> suggest the bloodshed of rape or, at least, penetration. Yet the purple and gold imagery, along with the sensuous vocabulary and the lines “no more regret / nor old deep memories / to mar the bliss”<sup>122</sup> suggest the sexual act was not wholly undesired, and may have in fact been pleasurable for Leda. As Tarlo notes, while the poem may start by recalling Zeus’ infamous rape of Leda, by the end it is hard to read the encounter as altogether negative.<sup>123</sup> Likewise with “Evadne,” H.D. complicates the myth handed down by Pindar<sup>124</sup> of Apollo’s seduction and abandonment of Evadne, her resulting pregnancy, and her exposure of her son Iamos, so as to give primacy to Evadne’s experience of sexual desire. Indeed, what all four of these poems have in common is their prioritization of the female experience of *eros*, sex, and the quasi-marital union with a male lover that accompanies sex. Whether Simaetha, Circe, Leda, and Evadne view their mythic “marriages” and subsequent abandonment in an ambivalent or

---

<sup>119</sup> See *Odyssey* Books 10 and 12

<sup>120</sup> H.D. (1921) 120

<sup>121</sup> H.D. (1921) 120-121

<sup>122</sup> H.D. (1921) 121

<sup>123</sup> Tarlo (1996) 100

<sup>124</sup> See Pindar *Olympian Ode* 6.28-73.

decidedly negative light, it is clear that H.D. uses their stories as *exempla* for the women in the *thiasos* of *Hymen*, through which she can warn them against the perils of heterosexual sex and marriage.

### 3.5 Phaedra and Hippolyta: Motherhood and Mythic Marriage to Theseus

Near the end of *Hymen*, a series of three poems written from the perspective of Phaedra, the doomed wife of Theseus, brings together in a rather climactic moment many of the themes and images surrounding marriage, motherhood, sex, and female community that appear throughout the collection. In the poems—“Phaedra,” “She Contrasts Herself with Hippolyta,” and “She Rebukes Hippolyta”<sup>125</sup>—Phaedra gives an extended monologue, in which she ruminates on her own passionate desire for Hippolytus, her marriage to Theseus, Theseus’ rape of Hippolyta, and Hippolyta’s experience of that rape. It is in these poems that the reader sees perhaps the most intense criticism of marriage, as well as the most explicit reference to sexual violation, and a rather ambivalent attitude towards procreation and motherhood, which are the direct results of sex (or rape) and marriage. As in many of the other poems in *Hymen*, and as in Sappho Fr. 16V and Fr. 44V, H.D.’s re-writing of a mythic, tragic heroine from the plays of Sophocles and Euripides allows an in-depth representation of Phaedra’s bodily and psychological experiences.<sup>126</sup> This re-writing also places Phaedra and Hippolyta at the center of

---

<sup>125</sup> As Burnett (1990) 45 notes, these three poems, along with “Hippolytus Temporizes,” are H.D.’s first re-working of the “story of the triangle” between Hippolytus, Hippolyta, and Phaedra. In 1927, H.D. produced an original drama called *Hippolytus Temporizes* which, like these poems, drew inspiration from Euripides’ portrayal of the tragedy. H.D. also seems to have been inspired by the rendition of the myth in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

<sup>126</sup> It is important to note that Euripides first wrote *Hippolytos Kalyptomenos*, in which Phaedra is portrayed as a lustful woman unashamed of her passion for Hippolytus. After criticism from audiences, Euripides re-wrote the character in *Hippolytus Stephanophoros* (the extant play) so as to be a victim of Aphrodite, fighting against her unwanted sexual desires. Sophocles, in his now-lost play *Phaedra*, seems to have treated Phaedra with more-than-usual sympathy, portraying her not as a seductress but the casualty of a series of misunderstandings and political entanglements. Thus, in the ancient world, the interpretation of Phaedra’s desire appears to have been contested. See Barrett (1964) “Introduction.”



H.D.'s constructed *thiasos*, serving both as foils to each other as well as another set of mythic *exempla* for the bride of *Hymen* and her companions.

“Phaedra” is the first of this set of three poems that, as Burnett notes, are “dominated by the erotic” but ultimately move from the exploration of the “parent child paradigm” to the “exploration of a relationship between two women.”<sup>127</sup> Phaedra begins by desperately reviling her love for Hippolytus. As Tarlo argues, the images of the “red sand of Crete,” the “burnt fissures” of the earth, and the land “burned with a lizard blue” where the “the dark sea” meets the sand<sup>128</sup> not only paint a picture of an eroticized landscape that reflects Phaedra’s own feelings of *eros*, but also evoke “sterile, unrequited love.”<sup>129</sup> Burnt desert land cannot be fruitful, just as Phaedra and Hippolytus’ love cannot be fruitful. Moreover, the red of the sand suggests heterosexual violence, as in “Hymen” and “Simaetha.” Phaedra goes on to claim that she is “caught in a force, a power, / passionless, not its own,”<sup>130</sup> implying that she has been trapped by *eros* against her will. In the following stanza, she prays that the “Gods of Crete”<sup>131</sup> help her regain control of her emotions and desires, before invoking the image of “the petal of black poppy, / the opiate of the flower.”<sup>132</sup> If one imagines the color imagery to be consistent throughout *Hymen*, the black of the poppy here may symbolize death, and Phaedra may thus be likening her illicit passion to death itself. This connection between heterosexual, quasi-incestual *eros* and death is intensified in the following stanza, as Phaedra compares her soul to a “black cup, sullen and dark with fire.”<sup>133</sup> In the final two stanzas, this symbolic death is carried out in the image of a “scarlet flower” being “wrecked” by “thunder and swift rain” and “the slash of

---

<sup>127</sup> Burnett (1990) 46

<sup>128</sup> H.D. (1921) 135

<sup>129</sup> Tarlo (1996) 101

<sup>130</sup> H.D. (1921) 135

<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> H.D. (1921) 136

<sup>133</sup> Ibid

white hail.”<sup>134</sup> This “poppy,” the symbol of Phaedra’s heart, “fades and shrinks” as it is “drenched and torn in the cold rain.”<sup>135</sup> Burnett remarks that “Phaedra” thus ends on an “image of nearly absolute weakness.”<sup>136</sup> Phaedra’s passion for Hippolytus, a man to whom she is supposed to be a mother but longs to be a lover, has reduced her to a battered, faded husk of the blooming white-purple flower that she used to be.

It is Phaedra’s marriage to Theseus and her assumption of the “adopted-mother-of-Hippolytus” role that make her prisoner to a passion that leads to her ultimate destruction. Yet in the second poem, “She Contrasts Herself with Hippolyta,” Phaedra wonders what would happen if she had been more like Theseus’ former partner, the biological mother of Hippolytus—Hippolyta. “Can flame beget white steel,”<sup>137</sup> she asks; can the “flame” of Phaedra’s passion forge her into the “steel” of Hippolyta—something pure and strong and unbroken by Theseus’ violation? Such a question leads Phaedra to consider the circumstances and nature of Theseus’ rape of Hippolyta and Hippolytus’ birth:

Steel must seek steel,  
Or hate make out of joy  
A whet-stone for a sword;

Sword against flint,  
Theseus sough Hippolyta;  
She yielded not nor broke,  
Sword upon stone,  
From the clash leapt a spark,  
Hippolytus, born of hate.

What did she think  
When all her strength  
Was twisted for his bearing;  
did it break,

---

<sup>134</sup> Ibid

<sup>135</sup> Ibid

<sup>136</sup> Burnett (1990) 47

<sup>137</sup> H.D. (1921) 136

even within her sheltered heart, a song, ...<sup>138</sup>

The act of rape here is depicted in the violent image of a sword clashing on flint and unyielding stone. Not only the rape, moreover, but also Hippolyta's pregnancy is described negatively, in terms befitting a parasitic relationship—"all her strength / Was twisted for his bearing." Later in the poem, Hippolyta prays to Artemis that "no flower / be grafted alien on a broken stalk."<sup>139</sup>

Whereas in other poems in *Hymen* the mother-child, or more specifically mother-daughter relationship is held up as a source of comfort and support, here the mother-son relationship is tainted by sexual violation, and so viewed as an unwanted burden on the mother. Hippolyta, like Phaedra, resents the motherhood that has been forced upon her. Yet unlike Phaedra, Hippolyta is not destroyed by her "marriage" to Theseus and her motherhood. Indeed, Burnett reads this passage as a comment on Hippolyta's indestructibility, despite the rape and pregnancy that she endures. He argues, "Hippolyta passes through the hymenal rape intact; she is stronger, more passionate than her plunderer, and out of the clash with him comes a son bearing a masculine version of her own name."<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, though Hippolyta is not "broken" by Theseus' violation, her rape and Hippolytus' hateful birth serve as reminders to the internal and external audience of *Hymen* of the violence and danger inherent in heterosexual intercourse.

In the final poem of the triad, "She rebukes Hippolyta," Phaedra repeatedly asks of the Amazonian queen, "Was she so chaste?"<sup>141</sup> In doing so, Burnett argues, Phaedra suggests that Hippolyta's chastity—or her unwillingness to give in to Theseus—is "nothing more or less than another form of erotic involvement."<sup>142</sup> Yet this erotic involvement does not take place on the plane of marriage or heterosexual intercourse. Instead, Hippolyta is imagined as taking part in an

---

<sup>138</sup> H.D. (1921) 136-137

<sup>139</sup> H.D. (1921) 138

<sup>140</sup> Burnett (1990) 47

<sup>141</sup> H.D. (1921) 138

<sup>142</sup> Burnett (1990) 49

“Eros free from threat of rape,”<sup>143</sup> wherein there is no touch of man but only the “touch of the mountain rocks / ... white, intoxicant.”<sup>144</sup> This whiteness of the rocks and mountains, as in “Hymen,” suggests a kind of pure, virginal association with nature. The “line of a lover’s shoulder” is replaced with “the broken ridge of hills,” his “arm-turn” with a “path to the hills,” and his “laugh” with “swift thunder”<sup>145</sup> in this idealized, non-heterosexual world. Hippolyta, free from the “lover’s cult,”<sup>146</sup> is at liberty to commune with the natural world, be “frail and wild,” gallop up a mountain slope, and ride her horse with her head and throat “flung back.”<sup>147</sup> Tarlo argues that Phaedra’s vision of this world, and Hippolyta’s existence within in, also carries with it a sense of lesbian eroticizing.<sup>148</sup> While Hippolyta exults in a sexualized natural landscape, Phaedra exults in the “voyeuristic lesbian context” of her vision.<sup>149</sup> Phaedra thus comes to view Hippolyta not only as a foil, but also as an object (and, perhaps, subject) of erotic desire. Such homoerotic bonds are echoed elsewhere in *Hymen*, and are indeed viewed more positively than the bonds of marriage and heterosexual intercourse.

“Phaedra,” “She Contrasts Herself with Hippolyta,” and “She Rebukes Hippolyta” thus all represent the female experience of erotic desire, whether it be aimed at a man, the natural world, the self, or another woman. Phaedra and Hippolyta become part of the woman-centered community of *Hymen*, and their stories become cautionary tales of passion, violence, forced motherhood, and death. While H.D. certainly draws on Sapphic tradition in her recasting of Phaedra and her prioritization of these women’s experiences of sex and marriage, her representation of heterosexual unions is much more negative than Sappho’s. Hippolyta’s forced

---

<sup>143</sup> Burnett (1990) 50

<sup>144</sup> H.D. (1921) 140

<sup>145</sup> H.D. (1921) 139

<sup>146</sup> H.D. (1921) 140

<sup>147</sup> H.D. (1921) 139

<sup>148</sup> Tarlo (1996) 102

<sup>149</sup> Ibid

consummation leads to a child “born of hate,” while Phaedra’s marriage leads to suffering and death. Unlike the marriages in Sappho’s epithalamia, neither of these unions merit celebration.

### 3.6 “Fragment 113: ‘Neither honey nor bee for me.’—Sappho”

In “Demeter,” “Simaetha,” and the series of poems from the perspective of Phaedra, H.D. displays her extensive knowledge of Greek literary figures, and in fact situates her own poetic project, *Hymen*, as part and parcel of the whole, broad tradition of Greek poetry. She appropriates and re-mythologizes the women from texts like the *Homeric Hymn To Demeter*, Theocritus *Idyll 2*, and the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, placing herself—a woman writer—in the very center of these male dominated poetic traditions. Yet, about three-quarters of the way through *Hymen*, H.D. brings the reader back to Sappho. “Fragment 113,” the only poem in *Hymen* that explicitly invokes Sappho, comes after “Simaetha,” “Circe,” and “Leda,” but before “Evadne” and the triad of poems on Phaedra and Hippolyta. In this way, it serves as somewhat of a reminder of the tradition H.D. is working through in *Hymen*—the Sapphic epithalamium. Just as she framed her collection, which is a composite reception of a number of ancient Greek genres and texts, with the opening hymeneal masque, in “Fragment 113” H.D. uses an explicit reference to Sappho to re-focus her project on the Sapphic *thiasos* and Sapphic *eros*. As discussed, the title and subtitle come from Fr. 146V, numbered 113 in Wharton’s collection: μήτε μοι μέλι μήτε μέλισσα (“For me, neither honey nor the bee”). While Sapphic subtext and intertext is felt throughout the collection, here, by prefacing her poem with a fragment, H.D. makes it explicit that she is taking up the so-called “mask of Sappho”<sup>150</sup> and writing in her tradition. In connecting herself to this oldest of “lesbian poets,” Gubar (1984) argues that H.D. is able to explore “what lesbianism means as an imaginative force;” indeed, her “reinventions of Sappho’s verse” allow

---

<sup>150</sup> Martz, ed. (1925) xviii

H.D. to discover “the promise of excavating a long-lost ecstatic lyricism that inscribes female desire as the ancient source of song.”<sup>151</sup> It is exactly this kind of inscribing of female *eros* into the ancient epithalamic tradition that H.D. performs in “Fragment 113.”

The speaker and addressee of “Fragment 113” are never named. Yet it is this un-naming and un-gendering, Tarlo argues, that allows one to read lesbian desire into the ambiguity of the text.<sup>152</sup> Indeed, the poem explores the repression and reinterpretation of female desire and seethes with passionate, sensual language. The bee symbolism that appears in earlier in “Hymen,” and in fact later again in “White World,”<sup>153</sup> comes full circle. H.D.’s speaker declares that she, like Sappho, wants:

Not honey,  
not the plunder of the bee  
from meadow or sand-flower  
or mountain bush;  
from winter-flower or shoot  
born of the later heat:  
not honey, not the sweet  
stain on the lips and teeth:  
not honey, not the deep  
plunge of soft belly  
and the clinging of the gold-edged  
pollen-dusted feet;<sup>154</sup>

She thus systematically rejects the images of heterosexual passion and coupling that are suggested here and elsewhere in the bee motif. The speaker does not wish to be a victim of the “plunder” enacted by the bee-husband, nor does she want the bee to “cling” to her as it clings to

---

<sup>151</sup> Gubar (1984) 47

<sup>152</sup> Tarlo (1996) 96

<sup>153</sup> As Burnett (1990) 43 notes, the “bee motif as a paradigm of union” surfaces in “White World.” A fuller analysis of “White World” is beyond the scope of this chapter, but of particular significance for the bee motif are the following lines: “ours is the wind-breath / at the hot noon-hour, / ours is the bee’s soft belly / and the blush of the rose-petal, / lifted, of the flower” (135). Burnett (1990) 43 remarks that throughout *Hymen*, the figure of the bee stands at various times for “the male lover as ‘plunderer,’ the female lover, and the memory of the moment of conjunction.” White world is also noteworthy for its emphasis on homoerotic desire between women, signified, as Tarlo (1996) 98 argues, by the “interplay of purple, for female sexual desire, and white, for lesbian love.”

<sup>154</sup> H.D. (1921) 131

the bride in “Hymen.” Moreover, the fact that the bee here possesses feet that are “pollen-dusted” implies that he has already visited many flowers, and still bears with him the evidence of these unions. H.D. flips the sort of image seen in Sappho Fr. 105bV, where the hyacinth girl is trampled on—and thus violated—by many men, and likens the bee-husband to an unfaithful philanderer like Delphis or even Theseus. Yet this catalogue is not without a sense of the speaker’s repressed erotic desire. The “sweet / stain on the lips and teeth” and the “plunge of soft belly” suggest passion and sexual satisfaction, both of which are kept at arm’s length by the speaker’s conscious decision to seek another outlet for fulfillment—erotic or otherwise.

This catalogue continues for two more stanzas, and the sense of repression only grows stronger. The speaker declares she wants no honey, “though rapture blind my eyes, / and hunger crisp / dark and inert my mouth.”<sup>155</sup> She rejects the “tall stalk / of red twin-lilies,” and the “light branch of fruit tree,” and finally the “iris—old desire—old passion— / old forgetfulness—old pain— / nor this, nor any other flower.”<sup>156</sup> It seems that, burn as she might with passion, the speaker is determined to find something different—something other than the old desire, the old flowers like the “red lilies, impassioned roses” of Meleager.<sup>157</sup> She and H.D. thus ultimately and definitively reject the “excessive sweetness of the honey-bee image,”<sup>158</sup> and its implied paradigm of heterosexual relations and marriage. In its place, she tells the audience—the reader, the bride, and the other maidens/chorus members of the constructed *thiasos* in *Hymen*—to:

Seek strength of arm and throat,  
touch as the god;  
neglect the lyre-note;  
knowing that you shall feel,  
about the frame,  
no trembling of the string

---

<sup>155</sup> Ibid

<sup>156</sup> Ibid

<sup>157</sup> H.D. (1916-18) 57

<sup>158</sup> Burnett (1990) 44

but heat, more passionate  
of bone and the white shell  
and fiery tempered steel.<sup>159</sup>

The speaker, and perhaps H.D. by proxy, desire the heat and the passion of the modern, modernist *new*. The golden honey of the bee is found to be inferior to the pure, white element that is heat of “bone and the white shell / and fiery tempered steel.” The whiteness of the bone and shell suggests a kind of newness, which, as in many other poems in *Hymen*, could take the form of virginity, or at least a kind of purity before heterosexual sex and marriage. Yet, as Tarlo argues, white, here and elsewhere in *Hymen*, symbolizes a kind of “Artemisian virginity and independence” that is not wholly “unrelated to lesbianism.”<sup>160</sup> It seems likely, considering the overwhelmingly sensuous language of the poem, that the white of the bone, shell, and steel represent a kind of broader female, lesbian liberation, as in “She Rebukes Hippolyta.” In “She Rebukes Hippolyta,” the “white, intoxicant”<sup>161</sup> touch of the mountain rocks represents a freedom from male sexual violation and the ability to return to and commune with the pure, natural world. In “Fragment 113,” what is sought is the freedom to pursue a kind of woman-oriented, woman-driven physical existence that goes beyond what can be captured in the “trembling string” and “lyre-note.” While such an existence may manifest partly in an erotic relationship with another woman, as seems to be the case in “At Baia,”<sup>162</sup> it on the whole “supersedes both the easy bliss of a secure relationship and the ‘old desire—old passion’” represented at other points in

---

<sup>159</sup> H.D. (1921) 132

<sup>160</sup> Tarlo (1996) 97

<sup>161</sup> H.D. (1921) 140

<sup>162</sup> A fuller analysis of “At Baia” is beyond the scope of this chapter. What is most striking about the poem is its portrayal of what seems to be a lesbian-coded erotic relationship between the speaker and another woman. The lines “flower to flower,” “lover to lover, no kiss, / no touch, but forever and ever this,” and the reference to orchids in a “great sheath” suggest such a reading (128). The idea of there being no kiss, touch, or consummation seems to keep in tact the “purity” of the female erotic relationship, as opposed to a heterosexual marriage that is tainted by sex or touch. Indeed, Tarlo (1996) 99 claims that this poem “invokes the dream or fantasy of an impossible lesbian relationship.”



*Hymen*.<sup>163</sup> Indeed, it is this old desire and old passion that is characterized by violence, voyeuristic violation, fetishization, and consumption by both the male and, at times, the female. H.D. rejects the old paradigms of sex and marriage that are often celebrated in Sappho's epithalamia in favor of a new, infinitely superior kind of passion—one where a lover might “touch as the god,” unbound by constraints of music, genre, and even language. “Fragment 113” thus proposes a different kind of *eros* that women can experience—one tied not to a man, woman, or a marriage, but to a sense of independence and creative purpose.

“Fragment 113” investigates some of the central thematic preoccupations of *Hymen*. The experience of female erotic desire, the sort of which is hinted at in “Hymen” and most explicitly laid out in “At Baia,” is the focal point of the whole poem. H.D. disregards marriage as an inferior avenue to fulfillment, and prefers a sort of transcendence beyond such male-centered institutions. As in “At Baia,” in which an erotic relationship involving “no kiss, no touch” is idealized, and as in “Hymen” where the lovely, snow white purity of the bride is ruined by the consummation of marriage, in “Fragment 113” H.D. seems to view the “old passions” of marriage and sex as somehow tainted, and longs to return to the pure woman-centered power and independence of “bone” and “white steel.” H.D.'s appropriation and reinterpretation Sappho's poetry in “Fragment 113” allows her to perform a kind of Sapphic immersion into the female *thiasos* and the world of creative, poetic expression while simultaneously rejecting the confines of the epithalamic genre and its content.

### 3.7 Conclusion

H.D.'s *Hymen* clearly inherits and reproduces many of the generic markers, themes, and preoccupations of Sapphic epithalamia. The Sapphic intertext is indeed a key interpretive lens for

---

<sup>163</sup> Burnett (1990) 45

this collection, as H.D. draws heavily on the ritualistic atmosphere of the wedding ceremony and on the kind of homoerotic and homosocial bonds formed in the Sapphic *thiasos* when creating her own woman-centric world. Like Sappho, H.D. emphasizes the importance of women's friendships and erotic bonds for the bride and her friends at this liminal, transitional stage of life. She prioritizes the female perspective of the marriage rite, its consummation, and its aftermath, giving voice to the oft-sidelined perspectives of mythic women who experience such a *rite de passage*. Yet H.D.'s perspective on heterosexual sex and marriage is decidedly more pessimistic than Sappho's. To H.D., marriage is a rupture in a formerly pure existence that leads to the symbolic death of the bride. As a modernist working with her own turn-of-the-century agenda, H.D. appropriates the epithalamic tradition—typically used to celebrate marriage—in order to criticize that very institution. In an ingenious revision of such a fragmented yet enduring genre, H.D. uses the wedding song to show the kind of use, abuse, and violence that women undergo at the hands of their husbands or male lovers. In doing so, she innovates the genre and brings the ancient Greek past into the modernist present.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

### 4.1 Summary

In their epithalamic poems, both Sappho and H.D. adopt an “emphatically woman-centered” perspective<sup>1</sup> and focus on the female experience of marriage. Both poets represent female friendships and erotic relationships as sources of support, comfort, and joy in this context. They show that women are an important part of the rituals surrounding marriage, and, more importantly, that erotic love between women is a key component of women’s experience during this transitional stage of life. Sappho finds room within the confines of the ancient epithalamic tradition to explore and celebrate the “familial, spiritual, and sexual”<sup>2</sup> bonds that develop in the female-centered community that she evokes and develops in her poems. It is this tradition that H.D. expands upon in her almost exclusively female world of *Hymen*. H.D. multiples and amplifies the female voices found in Sappho, simultaneously appropriating and breaking generic constraints while diving even deeper into the world of female subjectivity and erotic desire. Moreover, while Sappho presents a more accepting, optimistic perspective on marriage, H.D.’s perspective is rather pessimistic, with a focus on the loss and violence inherent in heterosexual unions. Sappho seems to view marriage as a social duty and, while in her epithalamia she acknowledges the loss of friends, family, country, and virginity that are inherent in marriage, she nonetheless emphasizes the celebratory aspects of the wedding ceremony and portrays the institution of marriage as one worthy of rejoicing. H.D., however, views heterosexual sex and marriage as a symbolic death for the bride, and repeatedly emphasizes the loss of freedom, virginity, creativity, and vivacity that marriage entails.

---

<sup>1</sup> Graham (2012) 113

<sup>2</sup> Graham (2012) 114

## 4.2 Writing as a Woman in the Sapphic Tradition

H.D.'s conscious decision to take up the Sapphic mantle and to follow the legacy of the "Poetess"<sup>3</sup> in writing poetry about women, as a woman, is an inherently political act. As Mary Beard writes in her manifesto *Women and Power* (2017), since the very early point in history when "written evidence for Western culture starts, women's voices are not being heard in the public sphere."<sup>4</sup> Beard notes that in Book 1 of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus' command to Penelope to be quiet and return to her room and her weaving is essentially the first recorded example of "a man telling a woman to 'shut up;' telling her that her voice was not to be heard in public."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, women's voices—literary and otherwise—have been silenced throughout history. Even Sappho—arguably the most prominent female voice from the ancient world—faced the "destruction" and "malevolence" of the Church in postclassical times, as her poems about women's erotic desire were censored and scrubbed clean by monks who sought to make them fit for a male audience and a "patriarchal tradition."<sup>6</sup> To be a woman writer is thus to defy this tradition, and to claim a space for voices and experiences that are overwhelmingly absent from both the western historical narrative and the literary canon.

Sappho creates such a space in her woman-identified, woman-centered lyric poetry. Both in her epithalamia and in her other extant fragments, there is a clear prioritization of women's experiences of love, desire, jealousy, loss, and friendship. Moreover, Sappho's emphasis on (homo)erotic desire felt between women establishes her as the first link in an "erotic-textual chain of longing"<sup>7</sup> that H.D., over two and a half millennia later, picks up and re-forges in the

---

<sup>3</sup> See Gregory (1986) 527 for the epithet.

<sup>4</sup> Beard (2017) 4

<sup>5</sup> Beard (2017) 3

<sup>6</sup> DuPlessis (1986) 23

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

“austere fires”<sup>8</sup> of modernism. H.D. sees in Sappho a source of lyric power and authority, a “Muse” through whom she can try to recover or perhaps re-construct the memory of Lesbos and all that it stands for.<sup>9</sup> As Gregory argues, H.D. longs “as a lover and a poet” for a place like Sappho’s “imagined Lesbos,” with all of its liminality, mystery, song, *eros*, *charis*, and “*aphrodite*” experienced between and among women.<sup>10</sup> H.D. sees herself as a direct inheritor of Sappho’s “lesbian” tradition, and in her own poems raises the figurative Sapphic bar by more thoroughly and explicitly investigating and expressing women’s sexuality and erotic desires.

This collaborative kind of engagement with Sappho is especially worth studying in H.D.’s *Hymen*, since, as Gregory notes:

Critics have continued to admire the early imagist poems [of H.D.] and ignore subsequent work because, as Susan Stanford Friedman says, the “short, passionate lyric has conventionally been thought appropriate for women poets if they insist on writing, while the longer, more philosophic epic belongs to the real (male) poet” (“Who Buried H.D.?” 807).<sup>11</sup>

While *Hymen* still participates in the imagist tradition, it is nevertheless more unwieldy in content and more epic in scope and presentation than its paradigmatically imagist predecessor, *Sea Garden*. As Mary Sinclair expressed in an early review of *Hymen*, many of the poems in the collection—especially “Demeter”—contain a kind of “largeness and mystery” that lead to difficulty in comprehension for readers and critics.<sup>12</sup> *Hymen* has continued to receive less attention from scholars than H.D.’s earlier works, perhaps due to its complexity (and, at times, inscrutability), but perhaps also because it does not always fit the mold of the short, passionate, expressive lyric that is “appropriate” for women writers. The goal of this thesis has been to add to the as-yet rather small body of scholarship that looks critically at how the Sapphic intertext

---

<sup>8</sup> West (1913) 86

<sup>9</sup> Gregory (1986) 529

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Gregory (1986) 526

<sup>12</sup> Sinclair (1927) 336

can inform readers' and critics' understanding of a collection that breaks so many boundaries of genre and of understanding, and that uses and defies tradition in increasingly complex ways.

H.D.'s appropriation of the epithalamic genre in *Hymen* shows both a recognition and engagement with generic tradition, as well as an expansion and rupture of that tradition. Instead of using the epithalamium to praise marriage—as one ought to do, and as Sappho often does—H.D. reconstructs the epithalamium as a vehicle for criticizing marriage. Her assumption of the “cultural authority” of classical texts and genres thus also entails a renegotiation of that authority to suit her own ends. In *Hymen*, the loss of virginity becomes a spiritual death, the marital procession becomes a funeral procession, and the joyous song of conjugal celebration becomes a cautionary, conflicted funeral dirge. Despite her departure from Sapphic tradition in this respect, H.D. nevertheless takes up the mantle of the Poetess in her presentation and *re*-presentation of women's voices in the self-constructed, woman-centered world of *Hymen*. The voices of the Sapphic *thiasos*, scattered throughout Sappho's fragments, are brought together here into one space and one literary moment, amplified and unmistakable. H.D.'s composite reception of Sappho in *Hymen* thus brings the speech, the emotions, and the experiences of women from poetry of the ancient past into the modernist present, creating a sense of continuity between literary women in these widely removed time periods and places. It is this link, this continuity, that supports poets like Sappho and H.D. who, in defiance centuries of exclusion and marginalization, write self-consciously as women, for women.

## Bibliography

- Babcock, Robert. 1990. "H.D.'s "Pursuit" and Sappho." *H.D. Newsletter* 3 (2): 43–47.
- Barrett, W.S. 1964. Ed., *Euripides, Hippolytos*. Clarendon Press.
- Beard, Mary. 2017. *Women and Power*. Liveright Publishing.
- Benelli, Luca. 2017. *Sapphostudien zu Ausgewählten Fragmenten: Teil 1 und 2*. Ferdinand Schöningh.
- Blackmur, R.P. 1945. "Notes on Eleven Poets." *The Kenyon Review* 7 (2): 339-352.
- Bowie, Ewen L. 2010. "The Trojan War's Reception in Early Greek Lyric, Iambic and Elegiac Poetry." *Intentional History*: 57–87. Steiner.
- Bowra, C.M. 1935. "Zu Alkaios und Sappho." *Hermes* 70: 238.
- Bulloch, A.W. 1989. "Hellenistic Poetry." *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, Volume I, Part 4: The Hellenistic Period and the Empire*, eds. P.E. Easterling and B.M.W. Knox: 1-81. Cambridge University Press.
- Burnett, Gary Dean. 1990. *H.D. Between Image and Epic: The Mysteries of Her Poetics*. UMI Research Press.
- Caciagli, S. 2009. "Sappho Fr. 27 V.: L'unità del pubblico saffico." *QUCC* 91: 63-80.
- Calame, Claude. 2001. *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Campbell, David A. 1982. *Greek Lyric Poetry*. Bristol Classical Press.
- . 1982a. Ed., *Greek Lyric, Volume I: Sappho and Alcaeus*. Loeb Classical Library.
- Carson, Anne. 2002. *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. Vintage Books.
- Collecott, Diana. 1999. *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism 1910-1950*. Cambridge University Press.
- Contiades-Tsitsoni, Eleni. 1990. *Hymenaios Und Epithalamion : Das Hochzeitslied in Der Frühgriechischen Lyrik*. Teubner.

- Cornish, F.W., J.P. Postgate, and J.W. Mackail. 1913. Eds., *Catullus. Tibullus. Pervigilium Veneris*. Loeb Classical Library.
- DeJean, Joan. 1989. *Fictions of Sappho*. University of Chicago Press.
- Dillon, Matthew. 2001. *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion*. Routledge.
- Doolittle, Hilda. 1916-18. "The Wise Sappho." Repr. in Doolittle 1982: 57-69.
- . 1916. *Sea Garden*. Repr. in Doolittle 1925: 3-42.
- . 1921. *Hymen*. Repr. in Doolittle 1925: 99-143.
- . 1925. *Collected Poems 1912-1944*. Ed. Louis L. Martz. Revised ed. New Directions.
- . 1982. *Notes on Thought and Vision & The Wise Sappho*. City Lights Books.
- duBois, Page. 1978. "Sappho and Helen." Repr. in Greene 1996a: 79-88.
- . 1995. *Sappho is Burning*. University of Chicago Press.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. 1986. *H. D.: The Career of That Struggle*. Indiana University Press.
- Ferrari, Franco. 2010. *Sappho's Gift: The Poet and Her Community*. Trans. Benjamin Acosta-Hughes and Lucia Prauscello. Michigan Classical Press.
- Fowler, Robert L. 1987. *The Nature of Early Greek Lyric: Three Preliminary Studies*. University of Toronto Press.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. 1990. *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H. D.'s Fiction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Graham, Sarah. 2012. "Hymen and Trilogy." *The Cambridge Companion to H.D.*, ed. Nephie J. Christodoulides and Polina Mackay: 113-126. Cambridge University Press.
- Greene, Ellen. 1996a. Ed., *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*. University of California Press.
- . 1996b. *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission / Ed. by Ellen Greene*.



- University of California Press.
- Gregory, Eileen. 1986. "Rose Cut in Rock: Sappho and H. D.'s 'Sea Garden.'" *Contemporary Literature* 27 (4): 525–52.
- . 1997. *H. D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gubar, Susan. 1984. "Sapphistries." Repr. in Greene 1996b: 199-218.
- Homans, Margaret. 1980. *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson*. Princeton University Press.
- Hopkinson, Neil. 2015. Ed., *Theocritus, Moschus, Bion*. Loeb Classical Library.
- Hunter, Richard. 2014. "'Where do I begin?': An Odyssean Narrative Strategy and its Afterlife." *Defining Greek Narrative*, ed. Ruth Scodel and David Cairns: 137-155. Edinburgh University Press.
- Hutchinson, G.O. 2001. *Greek Lyric Poetry: A Commentary on Selected Larger Pieces*. Oxford University Press.
- Keeling, Bret L. 1998. "H. D. and 'The Contest': Archaeology of a Sapphic Gaze." *Twentieth Century Literature* 44 (2): 176–203.
- Lardinois, Andre. 1989. "Who Sang Sappho's Songs." Repr. in Greene 1996a: 150-172.
- Liddell, H., and R. Scott. 2009. *LSJ: The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon*. Thesaurus Linguae Graecae.
- McEvelley, Thomas. 1973. "Sapphic Imagery and Fragment 96." *Hermes* 101: 257-278.
- Most, Glenn W. 1995. "Reflecting Sappho." Repr. in Greene 1996b: 11-35.
- Page, Denys. 1955. *Sappho and Alcaeus*. Clarendon Press.
- Parker, Holt N. 1991. "Sappho Schoolmistress." Repr. in Greene 1996b: 146-183.
- Parry, Hugh. 1988. "Magic and the Songstress: Theocritus *Idyll* 2." *Illinois Classical Studies* 13

- (1): 43-55.
- Pound, Ezra. 1918. "A Retrospect." Repr. in Ramazani, Ellmann, and O'Clair 2013: 929-938.
- Prins, Yopie. 1999. *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton University Press.
- Ramazani, Jahan, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair. 2013. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Vol 1. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Rasula, Jed. 2010. "Make it New." *Modernism/modernity* 17 (4): 713-733.
- Rayor, Diane J. 1991. *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece*. University of California Press.
- Rayor, Diane J. and Andre Lardinois. 2014. *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works*. Cambridge University Press.
- Reynolds, Margaret. 2000. *The Sappho Companion*. St. Martin's Press.
- Rohrbach, Erika. Date. 1996. "H.D. and Sappho: "A Precious Inch of Palimpsest." Pr. in Greene 1996b: 184-198.
- Schlesier, Renate. 2013. "Atthis, Gyrinno, and Other *Hetairai*: Female Personal Names in Sappho's Poetry." *Philologus* 157 (2): 199-222.
- Schrenk, Lawrence P. 1994. "Sappho Frag. 44 and the *Iliad*." *Hermes* 122 (2): 144-150.
- Seidler, J.F.A. 1829. "Über einige Fragmente der Sappho und des Alcäus." *RhM* 3: 153.
- Sinclair, Mary. 1927. "The Poems of H.D." *Fortnightly Review* 121: 329-345.
- Snyder, Jane M. 1997. *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho*. Columbia University Press.
- Stehle, Eva. 1977. "Retreat from the Male: Catullus 62 and Sappho's Erotic Flowers." *Ramus* 6: 83-102.
- . 1979. "Romantic Sexuality, Poetic Sense: A Response to Hallett on Sappho." Repr. in Greene 1996a: 143-149.

- Swann, Thomas Burnett. 1962. *The Classical World of H.D.* University of Nebraska Press.
- Swift, L.A. 2010. *The Hidden Chorus: Echoes of Genre in Tragic Lyric.* Oxford University Press.
- Tarlo, Harriet. 1996. “‘Ah, could they know’: The Place of the Erotic in H.D.'s *Hymen*.” *Gramma* (Thessaloniki) 4: 89-106.
- Theander, Carl. 1946. “Atthis et Andromeda.” *Eranos* 44: 62-67.
- Voigt, Eva-Maria. 1971. Ed., *Sappho et Alcaeus.* Polak & Van Gennepe.
- West, M.L. 2003. Ed., *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer.* Loeb Classical Library.
- West, Rebecca. 1913. “Imagisme.” *New Freedwoman* 1 (5): 86-87.
- Wharton, Henry T. 1898. *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Readings, and a Literal Translation.* John Lane Press.
- Yatromanolakis, Dimitrios. 2008. *Sappho in the Making: The Early Reception.* Center for Hellenic Studies.
- . 1999. “Alexandrian Sappho Revisited.” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 99: 179–95.
- Yorke, Liz. “Constructing a Lesbian Poetic for Survival: Broumas, Rukeyser, H.D., Rich, Lorde.” *Sexual Sameness: Textual Differences in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, ed. Joseph Bristow: 187-209. Routledge.