The Modernist Sappho: Manifesting Hellas in the Poetics of H.D. and Virginia Woolf

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the written works of H.D. and Virginia Woolf in order to elucidate the many manifestations of Hellenic and Sapphic influences on their high modernist queer female poetics. Through scholarship review and direct analysis, I trace the ways in which Hellas and Sappho mediated both writers' creative engagement with themes of fragmentation, matrilineage, marginalization, and homoeroticism. I explore the influence of Sappho's lyrics and legacy on Woolf's and H.D.'s respective poetics of sexuality (e.g., their homoerotics, perspectives on androgyny, and critical engagement with heterosexual inheritances in literature). Moreover, I use H.D. as a foil for Woolf, contrasting her idyllic Sapphic visions of female creativity with Woolf's Hellenic ambivalence – in which Greek and Sappho are inherently associated with loss, obscuration of truth, censorship of love, female disenfranchisement, and the lack of female artistic community in the patriarchal modern world.

List of Abbreviations

ONKG	"On Not Knowing Greek"
TTL	*To the Lighthouse*
TVO	*The Voyage Out*
TW	*The Waves*

If etymology is any indication, English poetry's Greek inheritance cannot be overstated. The words "poetry" and "poet" derive from the ancient Greek ποιεῖν (poiein): to make.[1] The canonical origin of Western literary tradition is ancient Greece, staged by the names of ancestral figures such as Homer, Pindar, Sappho, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato.[2] Though poetry has since lineally fanned out into many varied schools and aesthetics, there remains a particularly strong lineage that can be traced from the likes of Hellas and Greek lyric poet Sappho into the aesthetics of high modernism and further into contemporary veins of queer and lyrical poetics.

In this paper, I examine the functional lineage of Hellas and Sappho in high modernist queer female poetics, by way of focus on the literary works of Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and Virginia Woolf. I have written in-depth elsewhere about Virginia Woolf's ambivalent brand of Hellenism in particular,[3] but here I restrict myself to discussing poetic lineages. Primarily, I use

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[1] The terms used in English prosody are also largely Greek (and Latin), e.g., iamb, trochee, dactyl, etc. The same can be said of our genre terms (e.g., lyric, epic, etc.). Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani, Paul F. Rouzer, Harris Feinsod, David Marno, and Alexandra Slessarev, eds. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), doi:10.1515/9781400841424.

[2] I must defer any debates of historical legitimacy to the historians. There are certainly discussions to be had elsewhere about potential outside or earlier influences (e.g., the ancient Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh) as well as the verifiability of these ancestors as once-living individuals who have been properly credited (or not). However, for my purposes, the canonical origin story is the relevant one.

[3] Woolf's writing is filled with multivalent references to Greece and Greek (the ancient and modern land, the language, the mythos, etc.). My previous study *It's All Greek to Me: Virginia Woolf's Ambivalent Hellenism* sought to identify and analyze some central loci of thought that characterize Woolf's ambivalent Hellenism. One such locus is Woolf's association of Greek with loss, elegiac mourning, truth, and ancient tragedy. Another association is that of Greek with British elite public school education and female exclusion, but also with social, intellectual bonds and her own championing of the common reader. Greek additionally confounds Woolf's anti-fascist, feminist, pacifist views, due in part to

Woolf's intertextual relationship with Hellas and Sappho as a foil to provide useful insight into H.D.'s similarly intertextual poetics by way of comparison, but I also would be remiss to entirely dismiss Woolf's own poetics, even if her poetics are also, in part, prosaic.

Both Woolf and H.D. are queer, high modernist women whose written works are filled with Hellenic and Sapphic[4] allusion and influence. Sappho's presence in H.D.'s corpus is immediately apparent: Multiple H.D. poems are titled as enumerated fragments, such as "Fragment Thirty-six" and "Fragment Sixty-eight," which evoke Sappho in name and style; [5] H.D. even includes the Sapphic epigraph, "Neither honey nor bee for me," preceding her poem, "Fragment 113."[6] Both writers creatively engaged with a non-normative, lesbian, and female prehistory through the works of Sappho, but Woolf's intertextual relationship with Sappho is much more fraught, conjuring up modern female disenfranchisement and homophobic censorship. However, in acknowledging the fragments and contradictions and engaging in unflinching critical thinking, Woolf's view of Greek becomes well-rounded; the fragments become whole. H.D.'s Hellenism, meanwhile, ascends to idyllic heights through Sappho.

What drew these two modernist women to Sappho? As Susan Soroka points out, there was a sizeable resurgence of literary allusions and homages to Sappho in the nineteenth century,

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the co-opting of Greek ideals by fascist entities, but also ultimately informs her special brand of ambivalent critical thinking—one that allows for mixed feelings and contradictions.

[4] I use the capitalized adjective "Sapphic" to denote a noun of or relating to Sappho, and the uncapitalized adjective "sapphic" to refer to same-sex desire.

[5] Bret L. Keeling, "H. D. and 'The Contest': Archaeology of a Sapphic Gaze," *Twentieth Century Literature* 44, no. 2 (1998), doi:10.2307/441870.

[6] This is the title formatting used by Keeling as well as H.D. herself, in which "Thirty-six" and "Sixty-eight" are written out in full, while "113" is written numerically. Keeling, "H.D. and 'The Contest,'" 190; H.D., *Collected Poems of H.D.* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1940), vii-viii, 191.

attributable (at least in part) to the dissemination of new translations of Sappho's poetry. With the publishing of H.T. Wharton's 1885 translation, Soroka writes that "Sappho herself changed," as Wharton's translation was the first to feature "correctly translate[d] pronouns to reflect the homoerotic nature of her poetry."[7] These ambiguous pronouns would prove especially inspiring for two queer, modernist female writers: H.D. and Woolf.

Scholars have certainly discussed Sappho's direct presence in H.D.'s work: Diana Collecott writes that it "is no less solid than Homer's in the work of Pound or Dante's in the work of Eliot."[8] In fact, Collecott writes that fifty-eight distinct fragments (as numbered by David Campbell) are accounted for in H.D.'s work. In "Fragment 113," H.D. incorporates the motif of the "white shell" lyre and its "lyre-note," evoking Sappho's lyre, and describes "no trembling of the string / but heat," which Collecott interprets as an allusion to Sappho's description of the way love causes trembling and fire-starting in the body.[9] Moreover, H.D. incorporates Sapphic and classical aesthetics—using words like "fragrance," "purple," "light," and "sweet" (Collecott 17). Invoking the homoerotic mythos associated with Sappho, H.D. describes the "rose-streaked…pavement," a hymeneal image, according to Collecott (21). Indeed, Sappho's influence led H.D. to refer to her unpublished poems (like "Dodona" and "Delphi") as archival documents of their own: "'fragments…torn from the old Alexandrine

[7] Susan Soroka, "Victorian Women Poets and the Art of Collaboration," in *Womanhood in Anglophone Literary Culture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Perspectives*, ed. Robin Hammerman (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 109.

[8] Diana Collecott. *H.D. and Sapphic modernism, 1910-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.

[9] Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic*, 9-10; H.D., *Collected Poems*, 192.

palimpsest.'" [10] Thus, Sappho's presence in H.D.'s creative work is indisputable, and returning to this Sapphic source material unlocks new and vivid dimensions of layered mythic, historical, and homoerotic meaning.

Another attraction for these two modernist women was the fragment. The fragmentation of Sappho's corpus was complementary and contributory to the modernist aesthetic, as evidenced by the exemplary modernist work, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which features "broken images" from the "detritus of earlier literature," functioning as a fragmented showing of the "cultural inheritance of Europe."[11] Anne Fernald writes that the symbolist poets' model enabled modernist poets to conceptualize "fragments as a symptom of the alienation of modernity" as well as a symbol of "being lost, of being in the midst of shards of civilization too various to organize."[12] The emergence of this disoriented, disillusioned disposition is not difficult to understand, given the context: The first World War had fragmented and decimated the world unlike any other war. Moreover, Sapphic fragments augmented the modernist view that reality is just a construct derived from language.[13] Notably, for both Woolf and H.D., among other female modernists (e.g., Jane Ellen Harrison), this attraction to "ancient Greek material culture" occurred "at the expense of Greece's modern face."[14] This binary is exemplified in one

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[10] H.D., "A Note on Poetry," in *The Oxford Anthology of American Literature*, eds. William Rose Benet and Norman Holmes Pearson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), quoted in Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic*, 14.

[11] Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic*, 15.

[12] Anne Fernald, *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 35.

[13] Ibid., 38.

[14] Eleni Papargyriou, Semele Assinder, and David Holton, eds, *Greece in British Women's Literary Imagination, 1913–2013* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 2. doi:10.3726/978-1-4539-1674-2.

of H.D.'s accounts of Freud: When Freud showed her a statue of Athena, she recalled, "'He knew that I loved Greece. He knew that I loved Hellas.'"[15] The distinction between ancient and modern Greece, as Papargyriou and Assinder explain, is that "Hellas amounts to a romanticized specter of a lost civilization…formed on a continuum of lacunae, of gaps and absences."[16] However, Collecott argues that H.D.'s "fragments" in *Heliodora* are reconstructive, "attempt[ing] a new synthesis from archaic materials."[17] Using poetic fragmentation and the motifs of islands and shores (as seen in H.D.'s poem "The Islands," among other places) allowed H.D. to productively explore the idea of female marginalization, since islands are isolated environments and shores are found only on the *margins* of land. H.D.'s feelings of marginalization are unsurprising: As Luce Irigaray notes, the "exclusion of a female imaginary" in the literary canon "certainly puts woman in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily in the little-structured margins . . . as waste, or excess."[18] Still, H.D. found a sense of home and comfort[19] in the marginalized spaces she was allotted, envisioning islands as places of great female artistry. Indeed, in her personal notes, H.D. visualized Sappho herself as "the island of artistic perfection where the lover of ancient beauty (ship-wrecked in the modern

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[15] H.D. *Tribute to Freud. With Unpublished Letters by Freud to the Author* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), quoted in Papargyriou et al., *Greece in British,* 3.

[16] Papargyriou et al., *Greece in British,* 3.

[17] Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic*, 15.

[18] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* trans. Catharine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 30.

[19] Biographically, islands were a place of healing for H.D.: Her longtime lover Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman) took H.D. to the Greek islands in 1920 to recover from both the flu and a rough childbirth, in which she was deserted by both her husband and the father of her child. See Susan Gubar, "Sapphistries," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10, no. 1 (1984): 53, doi:10.1086/494113.

world) may yet find foothold and take breath and gain courage for new ventures and dream of yet unexplored continents and realms of future artistic achievement."[20]

Similar to H.D., Greek literature and culture evoked an idyllic pre-history in Woolf's mind. Through Greek, she could envision beautiful, serene landscapes of "the earth unravaged, the sea unpolluted"[21]—in other words, "an idyllic place before or beyond history."[22] Lamos notes that Woolf is particularly drawn to the idea of a pagan, non-Western pre-history, "as an alternative to Christian civilization." An example of this pagan pre-history occurs in *The Voyage Out* when Miss Allan says, "When I think of the Greeks, I think of them as naked black men . . . which is quite incorrect, I'm sure."[23] Lamos writes that this pagan conceptualization buttresses the queerness and anti-marriage plot in *TVO*, "just as the references to Sappho and Plato form a counterdiscourse to the novel's Austenian, heterosexual romance."[24] A second example comes in the form of the story "A Dialogue Upon Mount Pentelicus," in which Lamos locates "a prehistoric image of Greece in the form of a monk toiling up the mountainside." Woolf refers to him as "'one of those original figures which . . . have resisted time, and recall the first days and

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[20] H. D., "Notes on Euripides, Pausanius, and Greek Lyric Poets" (Unpublished, Beineccke Library, Yale University, 1920), quoted in Gubar, "Sapphistries," 46.

[21] Virginia Woolf, "On Not Knowing Greek," In *Virginia Woolf On Not Knowing Greek*, (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2008), 15.

[22] Woolf's longing for this idyllic pre-history is particularly linked to Woolf's desire for the unfettered existence of homosociality and homosexuality. See pages 17-19 for further discussion of that aspect; Colleen Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek Lessons," In *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. Laura L. Doan and Jane Garrity, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 157. doi:10.1057/9781403984425_9.

[23] Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1920), 125-126, quoted in Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 154.

[24] Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 154.

the unobliterated type' of 'Man.'"[25] In Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts,* this primitive past is evoked by Miss LaTrobe, who daydreams of a prehistoric England, with rhododendrons growing wild in Piccadilly Square (Lamos 159). However, Lamos also argues that Woolf sees this primitive homophilic[26] vision as impossibly distant—a "lost ideal"; she further argues that while H.D.'s relationship with Sappho is "pure" and "uplifting," elevating Sappho to a "mythic, deific status," Woolf neither idealizes Sappho "as an icon of female same-sex desire or as a literary muse, nor regard[s] her as a model for avant-garde literary or sexual practices" (150, 161-162). I contend, however, that this black-or-white thinking only serves to wash out the complexities in Woolf's thought. The evidence at hand supports a much more ambivalent middle ground in which Woolf imaginatively interacts with both a Harrisonian[27] (matrilineal) and

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[25] Virginia Woolf, "A Dialogue Upon Mount Pentelicus," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf,* ed. Susan Dick, (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1989), quoted in Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek" 155.

[26] See pages 17-19 for clarification and further discussion of this aspect.

[27] Jane Ellen Harrison was a classical scholar, suffragist, feminist, and sapphic; she was also tutor and dear friend to Woolf. Her influence on Woolf's work was first noted by Jane Marcus in 1977 but has since been discussed by many scholars (e.g., Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Joseph Kreutziger, Manya Lempert, Colleen Lamos, Sandra Shattuck, Rowena Fowler, and Jean Mills). Harrison is often remembered as the founder of myth-ritual criticism and intellectual leader of the Cambridge Ritualists, or The Cambridge Group of Classical Anthropologists, but she is equally remembered for her scholarship on a matrilineal Greek pre-history. For a comprehensive study of their linkage, see: Jean Mills, *Virginia Woolf, Jane Ellen Harrison, and the Spirit of Modernist Classicism* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014), 7, 28; See also: Manya Lempert, "Virginia Woolf, Charles Darwin, and the Rebirth of Tragedy," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 64, no. 4 (December 2018): 462. doi:10.1215/0041462X-7298974; see also: Joseph Kreutziger, "The Solid & the Shifting: Darwinian Time, Evolutionary Form and the Greek Ideal in the Early Works of Virginia Woolf," (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, August 2017), 202. ProQuest (AAT 10633730); see also: Vassiliki Kolocotroni, "'This Curious Silent Unrepresented Life': Greek Lessons in Virginia Woolf's Early Fiction," *Modern Language Review* 100, no. 2 (April 2005):

Sapphic past but also recognizes her own disenchantment with the ills of modernity that led her to those daydreams in the first place.

Though Woolf was able to picture an idyllic prehistory much like H.D., she was also obsessed with "the romance of what cannot be known" and "how much of the urn or the text had gone missing."[28] This longing is perhaps best captured in a 1916 poem by fellow modernist Ezra Pound, entitled "Papyrus," a fragmentation of Sappho's own fragments:

Spring . . .

Too Long . . .

Gongula . . .[29]

Even as new translations and fragments surface, Woolf asserts that our understanding of the texts will always be fragmentary, as translations can "but offer us a vague equivalent" of the originals.[30] It seems fitting, somehow, that Sappho's poetry can only be experienced through gaps, at a distance (due to the physical destruction of Sappho's corpus, as well as the barriers of language and time). By way of that inherent separation, Sappho's readers (and especially Sappho's translators – H.D. among them) experience a longing and desire that parallels the erotic

318. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hft&AN= 509781563 & site=ehost-live; see also: Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 150, 159.

[28] Gubar, "Sapphistries," 32-33.

[29] Ezra Pound, "Papyrus," in *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1926), 121, quoted in Fernald, *Virginia Woolf: Feminism*, 33.

[30] Woolf, "On Not Knowing," 15.

desire that Sappho describes in her poems.[31] Eros, as Anne Carson[32] theorizes, inherently requires lack or absence: "If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover [her]self and the hole in [her], unnoticed before."[33]

In addition to the loss enacted by the state in which Sappho's work appears to us, Greek as a whole (mythos, language, texts, her private studies thereof) is inherently tied to loss for Woolf. Indeed, Theodore Koulouris dedicated a book to precisely that subject, noting "the ways in which her Greek studies…fostered a language of mourning, a 'poetics of loss.'"[34] Greek was heavily "linked with death" for Woolf personally, but it also symbolized the loss of a "once glorious" ancient civilization, as well as the loss associated with "asymmetrical educational opportunities . . . socio-cultural constraints on . . . female desire; and with the barbarous, nationalist propagandas which helped bolster the industrialised carnage of the two World War" (Koulouris 8, 11).

Even in its beginnings, young Virginia Stephen's relationship with Greek was inextricably tied with mourning. In her youth, she poured herself into her Greek studies in order

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[31] For more on how the dynamics of eroticism manifest amidst the act of translation (and specifically in Anne Carson's translations), see: Kelcie Haas, "Anne Carson and The Erotics of Translation," (University of Michigan, 2002). https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam/english-assets/migrated/honors_files/Haas Kelcie-Anne Carson and The Erotics of Translation.pdf.

[32] Anne Carson is a poet, classicist, essayist, and translator. Her translations of Sappho, though they make only a sparse appearance later in this thesis, are highly recommended reading.

[33] Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay (*Course Book ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 30. muse.jhu.edu/book/34050.

[34] Theodore Koulouris, *Hellenism and Loss in the Work of Virginia Woolf* (E-book, New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 8.

to cope with the loss of several loved ones[35]—including the "crushing" deaths of her mother Julia Stephen (1895) and half-sister Stella Duckworth (1897), and the "gradual loss" of her father Leslie Stephen "to an abyss of despair" in the wake of both deaths.[36] In her 20s, after barely enough time to catch her breath, she was forced to mourn two more deaths: that of her father Leslie Stephen (1904) and her beloved older brother Thoby (1906). Following Thoby's untimely death—due to a case of typhoid contracted during their family holiday in Greece and the Mediterranean, no less—Greek was the conduit by which Virginia could keep her "'connection'" to him; after all, her private Greek lessons had always been "above all a way of keeping pace with him" while he was at Cambridge.[37] Lamos notes that this growing association between Greece and death was "underscored by the tenuous yet powerful linkage . . . between the Greek language and madness" (150). Indeed, while suffering a nervous breakdown in 1904 after her father's death, Virginia thought she could hear the birds "singing Greek choruses."[38] This event is echoed in *Mrs. Dalloway* when Septimus Smith hallucinates that a sparrow chirps to him in Greek.[39]

The inherent tie between Greek language and loss is perhaps best evidenced by one of Woolf's own enduring images: the empty embrace. As Emily Dalgarno effectively argues, Woolf shifted between her Greek studies and her own writing "on a daily basis," so it is not surprising

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[35] Fernald, *Virginia Woolf: Feminism*, 18, 42.

[36] Koulouris, *Hellenism and Loss*, 2, 103, 136.

[37] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 144.

[38] Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 157; see also: Kolocotroni, "'This Curious Silent,'" 318. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hft&AN= 509781563 & site=ehost-live.

[39] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, (New York: RosettaBooks, 2002), 24, ProQuest Ebook Central.

that canonical Greek texts melded into her fiction.[40] Indeed, Dalgarno argues that Woolf's image of the empty, phantom embrace derives from a line in *Agamemnon*; Woolf quotes the line in Greek in *ONKG* and translates it as such:

> He shall pine for her that is far beyond sea, till he seem, but a phantom lord of the house. Grace of beautiful the husband hateth: with the want of the eyes all the passion is gone. Dream-forms stay with him a while, convincing semblances, & offer delight in vain; for lo, when vainly he thinks to grasp the phantom, the vision escapes through the arms & is gone that instant on wings that follow the passing of sleep.[41]

This same image of the empty embrace appears, for example, in Woolf's autobiographical "A Sketch of the Past," when a young Virginia sees her father walking away from her mother's deathbed: "My father staggered from the bedroom as we came. I stretched out my arms to stop him, but he brushed past me, crying out something I could not catch; distraught."[42] Just as the act of "not knowing Greek" erects impenetrable barriers for non-speakers, this unequal moment of mourning separated Virginia from her father, causing them to "inhabit for the moment different worlds not transcended by translation."[43] Dalgarno also locates the phantom embrace in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "in Peter Walsh's last glimpse of Daisy, the woman he has left behind in India, as she travels away from him in a dog cart. In his dream on a park bench it also figures his loss of Clarissa" (151). Though unacknowledged by Dalgarno, a particularly notable and nearly

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[40] Dalgarno further argues, as other scholars have, that *Mrs. Dalloway* is a retelling of *Agamemnon "*in the language of post-war British society." See Emily Dalgarno, "Virginia Woolf: Translation and 'Iterability,'" *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36, no. 1 (2006): 150. www.jstor.org/stable/3508743.

[41] Woolf, "On Not Knowing," quoted in Dalgarno, "Virginia Woolf: Translation," 150-151.

[42] Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 91.

[43] Dalgarno, "Virginia Woolf: Translation," 151.

autobiographical example occurs in *To the Lighthouse*: "[Mr. Ramsay, stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty.]"[44]

Further connecting Woolf, the Greeks, loss, and death is the paradigm of ancient tragedy. This paradigm—at the heart of which "lies an amoral cosmos, in which heroes and heroines suffer reasonless fates"[45]—is certainly visible in Woolf's fiction. Contextually, the tragic worldview embodied by her novels challenged the reigning contemporary notion that "human mastery of the world renders it increasingly intelligible," while also curtailing the "Judeo-Christian conception of a rational and just universe" (Lempert 450). Working against these prominent ideologies of "conquest and domination," Woolf's particular brand of tragedy instead "embodies an ethics of human limitation and interdependence" (Lempert 450). Woolf's tragedy is also inherently Greek because it follows the traditions of "Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, for whom events lead to unredeemed misfortune," while rejecting the Aristotelian idea that characters author their own fates—instead, she places her novels "within a Darwinian landscape where neither gods nor human beings hold the reins of fate" (Lempert 450-451). Further cementing this conceptualization is Woolf's own argument in *ONKG* that "it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age."[46] Woolf explains in this essay that we are drawn to ancient characters because "they are more aware than we are of a ruthless fate. There is a sadness at the

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[44] The brackets are part of the original text, as quoted; Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1927), 128.

[45] Lempert, "Virginia Woolf, Charles Darwin," 450.

[46] Woolf, "On Not Knowing," quoted in *Virginia Woolf On Not Knowing Greek* (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2008), 18.

back of life which they do not attempt to mitigate" (17). Lempert argues that this fact explains why Woolf praises Thomas Hardy as "neo-Greek, as 'the greatest tragic writer among English novelists,'" writing off the "criticisms of his fiction's godlessness and outlandish coincidences" by stating, "'. . . no symbol of caprice and unreason be too extreme to represent the astonishing circumstances of our existence.'"[47] Woolf parallels this anti-Christian and anti-Romantic sentiment in the "Time Passes" section of *TTL:* "Did Nature supplement what man advanced? Did she complete what he began? With equal complacence she saw his misery, his meanness, and his torture."[48] Lempert points to another supporting image that occurs in Woolf's novel *The Waves*: early on, Neville is frozen by the image of "the immitigable tree; the implacable tree with its greaved silver bark … I was unable to pass by. There was an obstacle. 'I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle,' I said. And the others passed on. But we are doomed, all of us, by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass."[49] Indeed, the tree in this passage cannot help but evoke death[50]—which is equally insurmountable, unintelligible. Lempert notes the "greaved silver" bark, meaning it is "encased in silver armor," connoting the image of "a Greek warrior preparing for battle."[51] Just as Woolf refuses to sentimentalize or cover up death, suffering, and an infinite, amoral cosmos, Lempert interprets this scene as Neville's refusal to "humanize the tree" (and, by extension, death). Instead, his "militaristic metaphor . . . presages

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[47] Virginia Woolf, "The Novels of Thomas Hardy," in The Second Common Reader: Annotated Edition, edited by Andrew McNeillie, 245–57 (New York: Harcourt, 1986), quoted in Lempert, "Virginia Woolf, Charles Darwin," 462-463.

[48] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 134.

[49] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves,* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1931), 24-25.

[50] Judeo-Christian mythos further supports the reading of the "apple tree" as a symbol for death: The tree of knowledge (which bears apples in most Western depictions) signifies death for Adam and Eve.

[51] Lempert, "Virginia Woolf, Charles Darwin," 463.

its victory."[52] Continually confronted with death in her early years and in her studies, Woolf knows that death will win.

Of course, as Lempert is quick to point out, Woolf is not an extreme cynic, subjectivist, or solipsist. Rather, Woolf seeks to "plac[e] human perspectives in perspective" (Lempert 465). In face of that immitigable tree, Woolf's characters find solace in creating particular "moments of being"[53] that are able to "stand out and endure in their minds," giving the characters "their own modest brand of stability" (Lempert 465). Though Mrs. Ramsay hears the waves "like a ghostly roll of drums" and feels "an impulse of terror," knowing that her time is as "ephemeral as a rainbow," she manages to create a moment of "this peace, this rest," attaching herself to the lighthouse beam (*TTL* 15-16, 62-63). Lempert argues that through the lighthouse beam, Mrs. Ramsay "illumines her own personality" and "catalyzes her remembrance of past happiness," leading to "a cry of affirmation, encompassing her life as a whole (466): 'It is enough!'" (*TTL* 65). In Woolf's work, these moments of being not only occur solitarily, they occur socially—just as Mrs. Ramsay turns a party from a frivolous event into a "feat of decided existential significance" (Lempert 466). This transformation is evidenced by the following quote: "Some change at once went through them all, as if this had really happened, and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there" (*TTL* 97). For a moment, they formed a "composed"[54] picture, defying the wavering of

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Woolf uses the phrase "moments of being" to describe living consciously in the moment, as opposed to "moments of non-being" spent doing mundane, nondescript, forgettable things that disengage the mind. See Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past," 70. Jean Mills defines these moments as "intense instances that climax into deeply felt flashes of insight," and she locates them in other Woolfian texts such as "Slater's Pins Have No Points" and "The Mark on the Wall." See Mills, *Virginia Woolf, Jane,* 6-7.

[54] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse,* 97.

endless time beating its drum outside (*TTL* 97). Lempert locates a similar "party consciousness" (as Woolf refers to it in her diary)[55] in *TW*:

> And, half-way through dinner, we felt enlarge itself round us the huge blackness of what is outside us, of what we are not. The wind, the rush of wheels became the roar of time, and we rushed—where? And who were we? We were extinguished . . .and the blackness roared. . . . For me this lasts but one second. It is ended by my own pugnacity. I strike the table with a spoon. If I could measure things with compasses I would, but since my only measure is a phrase, I make phrases—I forget what, on this occasion. (*TW* 277)

As Lempert points out, Bernard fights the "roar of time" with his artist's tool: "phrases," i.e., words.[56] Against their own mortality, the friends "blaze bright . . . our life, our identity . . . Against the brick, against the branches, we six, out of how many million millions, for one moment out of what measureless abundance of past time and time to come, burnt there triumphant. The moment was all; the moment was enough" (*TW* 277-278). This very concept of "moments of being" is also tied to Greek: Jean Mills writes that the concept is inspired by Paterian aestheticism—a life based on sensation.[57] For Woolf, it seems that many of her own

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[55] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell. Volume Three. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1980), 13.

[56] Woolf takes a remarkably similar outlook against war in her 1940 essay "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid." The tool that she champions against war and fascism is the mind and its ideas. In her pacifist musings, she advocates for facilitating creativity in soldiers, as substitute for taking away their guns. *The New Republic* (Oct 1940). https://newrepublic. com/article/113653/thoughts-peace-air-raid.

[57] "Paterian" refers to Walter Pater, a Classicist. Mills writes, "As a young woman, Woolf bought Pater's work, and she was briefly tutored in Greek by Pater's sister," Clara Pater. Furthering the interconnectivity with Greek, Pater's influence on Woolf was also perhaps mediated by Jane Ellen Harrison, who also found inspiration in Paterian aesthetics. Mills, *Virginia Woolf, Jane,* 20.

moments of being arise out of her Greek studies, her "chora,"[58] and the unfettered social and emotional bonds she forges, even in the face of a highly-fettered Victorian/Edwardian society.

Apart from the tragic texts, the Greek language itself also evokes loss for Woolf because Greek words cannot help but to conjure a lost civilization, an unreachable ancient past. This loss materializes in Woolf's *ONKG* – which is equally a veneration of the ancient Greek language as it is a lamentation of the modern world, where emotions are felt and expressed only obliquely. Woolf writes, "In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction" (*ONKG* 14). She envies the ancient times when poets could "be direct" instead of speaking in "a sidelong, satiric manner,"[59] when they could "speak simply of emotion without being sentimental" (14). As an artist who paints in sprawling metaphors, Virginia imagines what it must be like to be the primordial writer, to be able to write simply without fear of clichés, to be able to say "as if for the first time, 'Yet being dead they have not died'" (14). Woolf speaks of metaphor as a blunted tool compared to the sharpness of raw emotion, writing that "no splendour or richness of metaphor could have saved the *Agamemnon* if either images or allusions of the subtlest or most decorative had got between us and the naked cry." Indeed, Woolf writes that the

[58] The term "chora" refers to the coterie of artistic, intellectual females that ancient Greek lyric poet Sappho surrounded herself with. Woolf forged similar coterie with her female tutors and mentors—Clara Pater, Janet Case, Jane Ellen Harrison—and later the Bloomsbury group. Further discussion of Sappho's chora and Woolf can be found on pages 25-26 and 38-39.

[59] In Woolf's autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf retrospectively criticizes her own sidelong indirectness in her earlier written work. Rebecca Nagel astutely sums up how Woolf attributed this sidelong manner "not to the influence of subtle modern masters, but to the contemptible training of the Victorian tea table." See Rebecca Nagel, "Virginia Woolf on Reading Greek," *The Classical World* 96, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 70. doi:10.2307/4352714.

ancient texts "owe nothing of their effect to any extravagance of expression," but she finds that this "compactness of expression" is lost on us, with all the verbosity of English: "Shelley takes twenty-one words in English to translate thirteen words of Greek." The compactness of Greek makes for a pure emotional density, a richness that we cannot achieve, as Greek words are pared of "every ounce of fat," so "spare and bare" that "no language can move more quickly, dancing, shaking, all alive, but controlled." More than just the simplicity of the language, she prizes the purity of the emotions themselves: She admits that "in six pages of Proust we can find more complicated and varied emotions than in the whole of the *Electra.* But," she writes, "in the *Electra* or in the *Antigone* we are impressed by something different, by something perhaps more impressive–by heroism itself, by fidelity itself." Their actions and emotions are most accessible and authentic to us because they are those of "the original human being," behaving "the way in which everybody has always behaved." And unlike moderns bruised by war, sequestered by Victorian manners, Greeks "could march straight up, with their eyes open" and "fearlessly" approach "ruthless fate" and true human emotions, feeling "every tremor and gleam of existence." Seeing the purity of emotional truth in Greek, Woolf felt that modern emotions and English texts were mediocre by comparison, as though "our great age" ought to be "ushered in by a burst of laughter" (*ONKG* 16).

Not only does the Greek language facilitate the communication of emotional truth, it is a medium through which Woolf can explore and express homosexual love. When Woolf references Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, both gay poets, stating that they could only speak of emotions in a sidelong manner, the subtext is that queer writers could not be direct about homosexual love, for fear of censorship.[60] Lamos writes that the taboo nature of

[60] Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 156-157.

homosexuality also prevented modern writers from freely eulogizing their beloved same-sex friends, and thus Woolf envied Greeks like the lyric poet Simonides, who could "write openly and without embarrassment of his fallen comrades." Lamos further points out that this oblique reference to homosexual self-censorship (in the likes of Owen and Sassoon) also "implicitly refers to her own." Indeed, "On Not Knowing Greek" makes three references to Sappho[61], one of which refers to her "alleged leap from the cliff of Leucas, after having been abandoned by her supposed male lover, Phaon" (Lamos 157). Lamos maintains that Woolf knew that this was a discredited myth, but for an essay "that challenges the claims of classical scholarship, Woolf may have wished to avoid a dispute over Sappho's homosexuality." Still, "Greek was a mode of intimacy with her teachers, lovers, friends, and brother—the means through which she formed and articulated some of her most passionate attachments" (including her "emotionally intense romantic relationship" with tutor Janet Case) (Lamos 153-155). Indeed, Woolf deeply enjoyed and benefited from the ability to speak freely with the "sods"[62] of the early Bloomsbury group and Cambridge Apostles. Moreover, Oxbridge's[63] veneration of "the higher sodomy"[64] enabled

[61] Fernald argues that there is a fourth, subtler allusion to Sappho in the essay. When Woolf describes how Sophocles and Jane Austen both chose "the dangerous art where one slip means death," Fernald argues that this image of a writer on a precipice is another nod to Sappho. *Virginia Woolf: Feminism*, 42.

[62] "Sod" is a (sometimes tongue-in-cheek) nickname for those who practice "the higher sodomy." See note 64 below.

[63] "Oxbridge" is a portmanteau that collectively refers to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge – the two oldest and wealthiest colleges in Britain. Oxbridge stands in contrast to other British universities, particularly in terms of intellectual and social elitism.

[64] The formation of intellectual, homosocial, and homosexual bonds among men. This term often refers more specifically to "the erotically charged though putatively chaste relationship between an older male teacher and his younger male pupil," modeled after ancient Grecian pederasty. See Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 152-153.

her exploration and affirmation of her own queerness; as Ruth Vanita explains, "Woolf was able to express her own anxieties" about her sapphic desires by "talking about the relatively more visible phenomenon of male homosexuality."[65] And though Woolf inherited Greek "as a masculine tradition against which she fought bitterly throughout her life," Greek was also that aforementioned vision of "the earth unravaged, the sea unpolluted" (*ONKG* 15)—that "idyllic place before or beyond history"[66] where she could imagine unfettered emotional bonds and queer relationships. As Lamos astutely sums up, Woolf's articulation of same-sex desire in her work, even in "the most personal and genuine" references, is thoroughly mediated by the Hellenic; thus, Woolf implicitly "suggests that intimate desires may be written—indeed, may only be written—through an inevitably alienating language… [an] enigmatic mark of the untranslatability of love" (157).

Faced with the taboo, stigma, and censorship surrounding homosexuality, both Woolf and H.D. resorted to writing sapphic *romans à clef.* Sashi Nair uses this classification to describe the way that both authors carefully encrypt personal information in a "layered address to public, counterpublic and coterie audiences."[67] Their sapphic novels both divulge and disguise a homosexual narrative, "most readily providing evidence of lesbian desire to those with a personal relationship with the author or a shared experience of homosexual affect, and denying evidence to those who recognize lesbian desire only when it is expressed in terms of obscenity

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[65] Ruth Vanita, "Bringing Buried Things to Light: Homoerotic Alliances in *To the Lighthouse*," in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings,* eds. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 167. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qft5j.

[66] Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 157.

[67] Sashi Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic Modernism: Writing Romans à Clef Between the Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 20.

and perversion."[68] Indeed, in the same way that Sappho comes to us in mere fragments, Woolf and H.D. lived in a culture of homosexual fragmentation,[69] with "epistemological gaps and silences surrounding same-sex desire."[70] In the case of H.D., her novels *HERmione, Asphodel* (1992), and *Paint it Today* (1992) were probably left unpublished due to her fears of possible repercussions[71]— e.g., that readers would decipher the personal from the fictional.[72] As a bisexual woman, "H.D's sexual confusion," Nair argues, "was, in part, the product of a society only just beginning to construct the language to explain non-normative desire."[73]

As for Woolf, Molly Hoff writes that one of her *romans à clef, Mrs. Dalloway*, resembles Sappho's Fragment 31: "The components, this 'falling in love' with women and Clarissa's riveted gaze" are reminiscent of Sappho's famed lyrics, filled with a "chaotic flurry of pronouns

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[68] Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic,* 20.

[69] Fernald writes that H.D. studies Greek for the "possibility of recapturing a wholeness, a pre-patriarchal linguistic purity in which being a lesbian was not only accepted but also celebrated." *Virginia Woolf: Feminism,* 33.

[70] Nair also discusses how Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein incorporate these gaps into their representations of homosexuality in *romans à clefs*. See Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic*, 16.

[71] Other such repercussions were known and salient: H.D. had been following the 1928 obscenity trial conducted over Radclyffe Hall's lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* – wherein the magistrate ordered for all copies to be seized and destroyed. Charlie Tyson, "H.D.'s Art of Failure," *The New Yorker*, (October, 2022). https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/hds-art-of-failure.

[72] *HER* features a rather unflattering portrait of her one-time fiancé and longtime friend Ezra Pound, found in the "sexist and clueless" character of George Lowndes. The novel also features H.D.'s relationship with her first female love, Frances Josepha Gregg, lightly disguised as the relationship between characters Hermione and Fayne Rabb. See Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic*, 152-163.

[73] Extending the non-normativity, H.D.'s longtime female lover, Bryher or Annie Winifred Ellerman, was perhaps transgender or gender dysphoric. Bryher wrote in a letter to H.D., "it was most unfair for it to happen but apparently I am quite justified in pleading I ought to be a boy – I am just a girl by accident." See Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic*, 165.

and similar personae."[74] Lamos expands upon this both sapphic and Sapphic association: In the novel, "Clarissa initially recalls 'yielding to the charm of a woman' in which 'she did undoubtedly feel what men felt': a clitoral tumescence, the 'pressure of rapture, which splits its thin skin and gushed and poured' into a climactic 'illumination: a match burning in a crocus.' This striking figure combines the floral and fiery figures common in Sappho's poetry."[75] (Take, for example, the Sapphic line: "Fire is racing under skin,"[76] or the woven flowers in her ode to Attis/Anactoria.[77]) Moreover, the triangular relationship in Fragment 31 (in which the speaker desires a woman who is occupied by the attention of a man) is echoed in *Mrs. Dalloway*: When Clarissa first saw Sally at the party, she "could not take her eyes off Sally" and asked "the man she was with, 'Who is *that*?'"[78] Woolf 's "Slater's Pins Have No Points" is another prime

[74] Molly Hoff, "Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway," Explicator* 55, no. 4 (July 1997): 215. doi:10.1080/ 00144940. 1997.11484184.

[75] Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 158; Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 30.

[76] From Fragment 31, as numbered and translated by Anne Carson. Sappho, and Anne Carson, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 63.

[77] Many translations of Sappho's "Ode to Anactoria" or "Ode to Attis" (as the fragment is sometimes referred to, amongst many different numeration systems) feature some form of the word "crocus" or "crocuses" – the same flower that Woolf mentions here in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Such translators include Michael R. Burch, Mary Barnard, Josephine Balmer, and Diane Raynor. (In those translations, the fragment is numbered as 4, 42, 94, and 14, respectively.); Maria Theresa Hu, "Daughters of the Lesbian Poet: Contemporary Feminist Interpretation of Sappho's Poems through Song," Order No. 1596463, (California State University, Long Beach, 2015), 191. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/daughters-lesbian-poet-contemporary-feminist/docview/1712393630/se-2; Michael R. Burch, "Sappho Translations," *All Poetry* (2019). https://allpoetry.com/poem/ 14736657-Sappho-Translations-by-Michael-R.-Burch.

[78] Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 31.

example of a sapphic *roman à clef,*[79] since the character Miss Julia Craye appears to be modeled after Clara Pater.[80] Perhaps most of Woolf's oeuvre can be considered autobiographical: she once mused, "I …deal thus openly in autobiography & call it fiction?"[81] Nair chronicles Woolf's evolution, from *Mrs. Dalloway* to *Orlando*, transitioning from an interested but socially-ambivalent stance on homosexuality to a critique of both the "marginalization of the non-normative"[82] and the need to conceal same-sex desires. Alternately, Lamos argues that "*Mrs. Dalloway* is the high-water mark of Woolf 's engagement with Sappho. With minor exceptions

[79] In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf even refers to "Slater's Pins" as "a nice little story about Sapphism" (capitalization hers). Notably, the story creates a lesbian reversal of the Hellenic pederastic relationship—a type of relationship that also figures into Woolf's real life, as she continually forged "emotionally intense romantic friendship[s]" with "older, maternal, or powerful women, such as Violet Dickinson, Madge Symonds, Vita Sackville-West, and Ethel Smyth." The story also features characteristically Sapphic floral and fiery imagery, as seen when Fanny drops a flower and Miss Craye crushes it in her fingers, somehow increasing its brilliance. Fanny imagines Julia Craye kissing her, and the end of the story concludes with Miss Craye saying, "Slater's pins have no points." Lamos writes, "While it is difficult to escape the metaphoric significance of the nonpenetrating, nonphallic pin, the American publisher of the story evidently did so. Writing to Vita, Woolf remarked, 'The Editor has not seen the point, though he's been looking for it in the Adirondacks.'" Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 150, 153; See also: Virginia Woolf, "Slater's Pins Have No Points," in *Moments of Being, http://www.feedbooks.com/book/1396/moments-of-being-slater-s-pins-have-no-points.*

[80] Clara Pater is the figure most commonly associated with the character, but Gwyn Jenkins writes that the character is perhaps more likely a composite of several figures from Woolf's life – possibly including Jane Ellen Harrison, "Janet Case, Violet Dickinson, and indeed her other tutors at King's, Miss Lucas, for instance, or Miss Clay, whose name is practically identical to the character's." See: Gwyn Jenkins, "Pater's Pins Stuck: Virginia Woolf and Clara Pater at King's College Ladies' Department," *Woolf Studies Annual* 27 (2021): 27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27112581.

[81] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1920-1924,* 2., ed. Anne Oliver Bell (New York: HBJ, 1978), 7.

[82] Nair, *Secrecy and Sapphic*, 96.

in *The Waves*, references to Sappho and to the Greeks in general dropped out of her published fiction after 1925, although she continued to comment on sapphism in her letters and diaries."[83] The principle reason for this shift, Lamos writes, is that Woolf "became much more sensitive to homophobic censorship. After Hall's *Well of Loneliness* was banned for obscenity in 1928—the same year that *Orlando* became a best seller—she "deleted actionable references to female same-sex love in her public work" (158). Despite all of these deletions, she still voiced the fear of being "'hinted at for a sapphist.'"[84] Even in *Orlando*—her love letter to Vita Sackville-West, in the form of a novel—she excised "dangerous details," such as "references to Sappho, to Orlando's 'lusts' and her love affairs with women" (Lee 524). Nonetheless, while H.D. kept her personal homoerotic narrative largely concealed, Woolf was emboldened to critique such marginalization.

Scholars' speculations demonstrate that Woolf and H.D. each have distinct creative relationships with Sappho. Susan Gubar writes that H.D. engages in a "fantastic collaboration" with Sappho, utilizing Sappho's canonic authority to "heal[] the anxiety of authorship" by creating a narrative "in [her] own [female] image."[85] Sappho was symbolic evidence that a woman poet "need not experience herself as a contradiction of terms" and an assurance that a woman who achieves literary genius "will take her place apart from but also beside a poet like Homer" (Gubar 47). Woolf felt the opposite; in her eyes, Sappho's eminence made it rather impossible for a female to be recognized as a literary great by the press (Gubar 45). In fact, Woolf's contemporary Desmond MacCarthy wrote the following in a newspaper article: "Since

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[83] Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 158.

[84] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 527.

[85] Gubar also discusses Renée Viven's intertextual relationship with Sappho as parallel to H.D.'s relationship with Sappho. See "Sapphistries," 47.

Sappho there has been no female of first rate."[86] Responding to the article, Woolf argued that whereas Sappho had the privilege of "social and domestic freedom," since then, women have been constrained by an inhibiting environment (Gubar 45). Interestingly, Sappho was in a similar position to Woolf, in that her aristocratic standing allowed her access to a premium education that was not the norm for women.[87] Still, Woolf maintained that "Sappho the Great" was able to exist because she had artistic predecessors, a creative-minded coterie, and the ability to act and experience freely. "Perhaps in Lesbos," Woolf wrote, "but never since have these conditions been the lot of women."[88] Emily Hauser argues that Sappho thus becomes "a source of admonishment"[89] to female authors like Woolf, imputing feelings of comparative inferiority when standing next to Sappho and her triumphs; though, perhaps the more accurate assessment is that Woolf could not help but see Sappho as a symbol of what the modern world lacked (e.g., a solid foundation of female community, among other conditions). Yet again, H.D.'s intertextual relationship with Sappho offers a profound foil to Woolf's: Whereas H.D. felt canonically legitimized by Sappho's legacy, Woolf could not help but long for the democratization of

[86] As quoted by Gubar, "Sapphistries," 45.

[87] During Woolf's time, a woman "not knowing Greek" was nothing to bat an eye at; instead, a woman *knowing* Greek—or having any Classical education—was the anomaly. Indeed, "one remnant of the old educational system, the Liberal education derived from Greek tradition, remained: the majority of students were male." This unequal access to higher education can be traced back as far as the Hellenistic Greeks. See Elizabeth R. Doolittle, "Virginia Woolf 's Views on the Necessity of Education for Girls," *Papers & Publications: Interdisciplinary Journal of Undergraduate Research* 4, no. 7 (2015). https://theconversation.com/guide-to-the-classics-sappho-a-poet-in-fragments-90823.

[88] Gubar, "Sapphistries," 45.

[89] Emily Susan Vlcek Hauser, "Since Sappho: Women in Classical Literature and Contemporary Women's Writing in English" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2017), 181, ProQuest (AAT 10631605).

Sappho's privileges to all women; she longed for a reality where "Judith Shakespeare"[90] could survive and artistically flourish.

Sappho makes special appearance in many of Woolf's novels. Indeed, Mollee Shannon describes how Sappho appears in Woolf's novels through the motif of androgyny, the use of female chora, and the Sappho-character Rhoda. Just as Sappho's ambiguous pronouns inspired H.D.'s non-normative poetics, they functioned as a precursor to Woolf's inclination toward androgyny. In *A Room Of One's Own,* Woolf describes the ideal of the androgynous mind,[91] and Shannon argues that Lily Briscoe and Rhoda are two Woolfian characters with androgynous identities[92] and creative propensities, "but are then necessarily subsumed in patriarchy and alienated from their bodies" (Shannon 8). According to Shannon, Rhoda in *TW* serves as a double for Sappho, an alienated body thinking in abstractions and lost in her thoughts. Rhoda ambiguously commits suicide at the end of the novel, possibly by jumping off of a cliff that she mentions earlier in the novel, hearkening to the mythic suicide of Sappho[93] (and serving as a foreboding precursor to Woolf's own suicide by drowning) (Shannon 12-13). Additionally, Woolf places her characters in creative spaces that resemble Sappho's chora, allowing free intellectual and artistic discourse as well as comradery. Woolf's novels, Shannon writes,

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[90] A woman of artistic genius. This character / thought experiment comes from *A Room of One's Own*.

[91] Woolf, *A Room of One's Own,* 98-102.

[92] For a full discussion of Sapphic influence and male interruptions in the characters of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse,* Clarissa and Sally in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Rhoda in *The Waves*, see Mollee Kaitlyn Shannon, "Sapphic Reflections of Feminine Creative Power and Male Interruption in the Works of Virginia Woolf" (Master's thesis, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2013), ProQuest (AAT 1537104).

[93] It is interesting to note that Rhoda's jump would be hearkening to the discredited *heterosexual* myth of Sappho, in which she leaps off a cliff after being spurned by her alleged male lover Phaon.

demonstrate "the feminine creative power of women in a purely feminine space, and the propensity for male intrusion and interruption" (58). This presence of a Sapphic chora in Woolf's novels represents Woolf's aforementioned assertion that women need an artistic coterie if they are ever to reach the greatness of Sappho. The "chora's celebration of unique feminine imaginative power" allows a woman to "create for herself a place in the literary canon" (Shannon 58). In the lens of Woolf's continual sacrifice of her intellectual artist characters—from Rachel Vinrace, to Judith Shakespeare, to Rhoda—these female creators and chora are thought experiments, not currently possible in patriarchal society.

Both Woolf and H.D. glean not only from Sappho herself, but also Algernon Charles Swinburne's Sappho.[94] While scholars like Angela Leighton and Lillian Faderman blame Swinburne's "evil vampiric *femme fatale"* portrayal of Sappho for the ambivalence gay writers feel toward Sappho, Sarah Parker argues that Swinburne allowed female modernists to be exposed to "more fluid explorations of sexuality and gender roles" than could be found in normative poetry focused on male desire. Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* contains a "spectrum of desires and gender disruptions" that otherwise did not exist in 1920s modernism. Thus, rather than estranging queer poets from Sappho through a "misogynistic/ pornographic appropriation of [Sappho's] voice," as some scholars argue, Parker claims that Swinburne instead pulls queer poets closer to Sappho (Parker 4-5). The reality probably lies in between these two arguments: queer writers were heartened by the representation of non-normative gender and sexuality, but were less enthused about the fetishizing of queerness as a salacious taboo. Interestingly, Woolf

[94] For a discussion of the modernist writer Amy Lowell and her inspirations from Sappho and Swinburne in poems like "The Sisters," see Sarah Parker, "Whose Muse? Sappho, Swinburne, and Amy Lowell," in *Algernon Charles Swinburne: unofficial laureate,* ed. Catherine Maxwell and Stefano Evangelista (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 193–212.

directly references Swinburne's Sappho in *TVO*: During church service, Mrs. Flushing sees Hirst reading a book with Greek on one side and a translation on the other:

> "What's that?" she whispered inquisitively.
>
> "Sappho," he replied. "The one Swinburne did—the best thing that's ever been written."
>
> Mrs. Flushing could not resist such an opportunity. She gulped down the Ode when Sappho lived, and what else she wrote worth reading, and contriving to come in punctually at the end with "the forgiveness of sins, the Resurrection of the body, and the life everlastin'. Amen." [95]

Jacqueline Shin writes that Hirst is probably reading from Swinburne's "Anactoria" (1866), a rather "sadomasochistic" and "pornographic" depiction of homosexual female love.[96] Through this allusion to Sappho's odes, Woolf "overturn[s] the ode as a genre that is set apart in a male, elite, and scholarly realm that women need to tiptoe on the outskirts of."[97] Colleen Lamos points out that during this same scene, Hirst also writes an "indecent" poem rhyming "God" with "sod," further illuminating the "queer subtext" of the novel that fares better than the (unrealized) marriage plot.[98] Thus, Woolf's allusion transformed the dubiously fetishized, ambivalence-inspiring source material into a powerful subversion of patriarchal, heteronormative tradition—one of her more positive interactions with Sappho.

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[95] Woolf, *The Voyage Out,* 230.

[96] Jacqueline Shin, "It's You I Adore: On the Odes of Virginia Woolf," *Woolf Studies Annual* 23 (January 2017), 118. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26475628.

[97] Shin, "It's You I Adore," 119.

[98] Lamos, "Virginia Woolf's Greek," 154

Sappho can additionally be viewed as a lesbian foremother. Gubar writes that Sappho functions as a symbol of "all the lost women of genius in literary history, especially all the lesbian artists whose work has been destroyed, sanitized, or heterosexualized . . . For the woman poet who experiences herself as inadequate or inadequately nurtured by a nonexistent or degraded literary matrilineage, for the lesbian poet who looks in vain for a native lesbian poetic tradition, Sappho is a very special precursor. Precisely because so many of her original Greek texts were destroyed, the modern woman poet could write 'for' or 'as' Sappho."[99] More specifically, H.D. uses Sappho as a historical base to "remove herself from the contamination of contemporary sentimentality" (Gubar 53), ripe with the runoff of nineteenth-century heterosexual and patriarchal tropes of the dead female beloved as a "silent muse for the male poet"[100] or the romantic nature-woman "through which the implied male poet attained a kind of privileged enlightenment."

Scholars have particularly noted how H.D. used Sappho's gender-ambiguous poetics as a model to avoid heteronormative, gender-stereotypical poetics in her own work. In "Fragment Thirty-Six" by H.D., "both *I* and *you* are indeterminate, in the purest tradition of love lyric," Collecott writes, "[so] readers will engender the speech according to their understanding of the speaker's sexuality."[101] Another example of this gender bending comes in the form of H.D.'s 1916 poem, "Eurydice," in which she rejects standard gender roles by attributing a voice to Eurydice, a normally "silent actor in Orpheus's tale."[102] Catherine Clark writes that this choice is

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[99] Gubar, "Sapphistries," 46.

[100] Catherine Clark, "Sapphic Consciousness in H.D. and de Noailles," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature & Culture* 12, no. 3 (September 2010): 2, doi:10.7771/1481-4374.1541.

[101] Collecott, *H.D. and Sapphic*, 27.

[102] Clark, "Sapphic Consciousness," 3.

especially surprising because "the gifted Orpheus is the widely claimed patron of lyric poets, inspired by Apollo himself."[103] Furthermore, Bret Keeling argues that H.D. was inspired by the ambiguous subject-object relations in Sappho's poetry, leading Doolittle to compose her poem "The Contest" as such:

I

Your stature is modelled
with straight tool-edge:
you are chiselled like rocks
that are eaten into by the sea.

With the turn and grasp of your wrist
and the chords' stretch,
there is a glint like worn brass.

The ridge of your breast is taut,
and under each the shadow is sharp,
and between the clenched muscles
of your slender hips.

From the circle of your cropped hair
there is light,
and about your male torse
and the foot-arch and the straight ankle.

II

You stand rigid and mighty--
granite and the ore in rocks;
a great band clasps your forehead
and its heavy twists of gold.

You are white--a limb of cypress
bent under a weight of snow.

You are splendid,
your arms are fire;
you have entered the hill-straits--
a sea treads upon the hill-slopes.

[103] Ibid.

III

Myrtle is about your head,
you have bent and caught the spray:
each leaf is sharp
against the lift and furrow
of your bound hair.

The narcissus has copied the arch
of your slight breast:
your feet are citron-flowers,
your knees, cut from white-ash,
your thighs are rock-cistus.

Your chin lifts straight
from the hollow of your curved throat.
Your shoulders are level--
they have melted rare silver
for their breadth. [104]

In Keeling's study, he notes that there is no *I* in this poem—the speaker's presence is only known through the addressing of a *you.* Keeling writes that this ambiguity creates tension, though he does not explain how or why[105]; one is left to assume that the reader's discomfort (especially for male critics) is due to H.D.'s subversion of standard poetic norms and the lack of role-signification—i.e. who is doing the gazing, and is it a male gaze? Moreover, H.D.'s use of the present tense—unlike a Petrarchan use of past tense, as a peaceful recollection of love transpired—evokes the anxiety of in-the-moment desire (Keeling 190). Although the *you* in the poem is described as having a male torso, Keeling argues that this does not necessarily signify that the *you* is male; rather, he argues that the *you* is purposely made ambiguous in order to subvert conventional poetic gender roles. Indeed, this construction is subversive no matter how

[104] H.D., *Collected Poems,* 12-14, quoted in Keeling, "H.D. and 'The Contest,'" 188-189.

[105] Keeling, "H.D. and 'The Contest,'" 190.

you imagine it: If the *you* is male, then the speaker objectifies him in the fashion that a woman would typically be objectified; if the *you* is female, an element of same-sex attraction arises (Keeling 190). Sapphic tradition thus enabled H.D. to reconfigure the normative subject-object and binary gender relations in poetry into a more ambiguous and dynamic form—an act of creative ascension "beyond the eroticism of fragmentation to the ecstasy of wholeness" (Keeling 187, 190, 196).

Another example of H.D.'s utilization of Sappho's model to avoid heteronormative, gender-stereotypical poetics is offered in both the title poem and "Fragment 113" from the volume *Hymen.* In "Hymen," H.D. describes the forthcoming loss of a bride's virginity, evoked by a "plunderer" bee who "slips / Between the purple flower-lips."[106] The Sapphic epigraph of "Fragment 113", "Neither honey nor bee for me," can then be interpreted as a rejection of this heterosexual image of penetration.[107] The isolation and silence of the veiled bride, coupled with the title "Hymen" which evokes both the female body and a male god, transforms the poem "into a somber meditation on the predatory pattern of heterosexuality" (Gubar 55). Ben Woodward more precisely demonstrates the ways in which H.D. alludes to Sappho's work in order to critique and complicate the standard poetics of compulsory heterosexuality as well as the predatory, objectifying male gaze.[108] Woodward tracks Sappho's imagery in H.D.'s poems – in particular, he notes how Fragment 94[109] reverberates through multiple of her poems. The Sapphic wedding song reads, "As on the hills the shepherds trample the hyacinth under foot, and

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[106] H.D., *Collected Poems,* 158.

[107] Gubar, "Sapphistries," 55; H.D., *Collected Poems,* 191.

[108] Ben Woodward, "'Shipwrecked in the Modern World': The Reception of Sappho by H.D," (St Hugh's College, 2023). https://www.st-hughs.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ Woodward-Ben.pdf

[109] This numbering derives from the Wharton translations, which were the ones H.D. read.

the flower darkens on the ground."[110] The essence of this fragment finds its way into H.D.'s poem "Pursuit" – which, is aptly titled, for the poem is told from the prospective of a pursuer in the midst of tracking and chasing another person. The poem opens:

> What do I care
> that the stream is trampled,
> the sand on the stream-bank
> still holds the print of your foot:
> the heel is cut deep.
> I see another mark
> on the grass ridge of the bank—
> it points toward the wood-path.
> I have lost the third
> in the packed earth.
>
> But here
> a wild-hyacinth stalk is snapped:
> the purple buds—half ripe—
> show deep purple
> where your heel pressed.
>
> A patch of flowering grass,
> low, trailing—
> you brushed this:
> the green stems show yellow-green
> where you lifted—turned the earth-side
> to the light:
> this and a dead leaf-spine,
> split across,
> show where you passed. [111]

H.D.'s imagery echoes that of Sappho's – we see the similarly "trampled" terrain, and the "'wild-hyacinth stalk is snapped" underfoot. The "flower darkens on the ground" in Sappho's fragment, just as H.D.'s crushed hyacinth buds "show deep purple / where your heel pressed." As Woodward points out, "pursuit" as a concept inherently invokes desire, especially in the

[110] Woodward, "Shipwrecked," 1.

[111] H.D., *Collected Poems,* 12.

context of Greek mythos (e.g., Apollo's pursuit of Daphne).[112] Both the original Sapphic fragment and the H.D. poem depict a literalized deflowering that is seeded with violent undertones. H.D. sees and uses Sappho's diction of "trample" but raises it several other injurious actions: "cut deep," "snapped," "pressed," "split." Robert Babcock states that, in the Greek, Sappho's use of the word "ἄνδρες" (men) is an unnecessary addition, since the noun "shepherds" is enough to convey that the trampled hyacinths symbolize women.[113] Interestingly, Woodward argues that H.D.'s poem modifies the original heterosexual scene (of male shepherds deflowering the feminized hyacinths) into a sapphic pursuit; he makes this argument based upon the use of the word "purple" twice within the second stanza. To his point, violets and hues of purple and lavender were considered symbols of homosexuality in the 20th century[114] – both due to the presence of violets in Sappho's work as well as the description of Sappho as "violet-weaving" in a poem by Alcaeus.[115]

The same argument—in which Sappho's poems inspire the questioning and subsequent redefinition of inherited predatory models of romance— could be made for Woolf's *TVO*. The novel's protagonist Rachel Vinrace was clearly exposed to the predatory nature of heterosexuality: She is forcibly kissed by Mr. Dalloway, and she subsequently dreams of being trapped with a sexually predatory, Minotaurian man-beast.[116] Moreover, she is increasingly

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[112] Woodward, "Shipwrecked," 2.

[113] Robert Babcock, "H.D.'s 'Pursuit' and Sappho," *H.D. Newsletter*, 3, no. 2 (1990), 43-7, quoted in Woodward, "Shipwrecked," 2.

[114] Eleanor Medhurst, "From Lavender to Violet: The Lesbian Obsession with Purple," *Dressing Dykes*, (August 2021). https://dressingdykes.com/2021/08/20/from-lavender-to-violet/.

[115] William K. Prentice, "Sappho," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918), 350.

[116] Woolf, *The Voyage Out.*

stifled by her lover Terence—as embodied by their engagement scene, fraught the motifs of stasis and loss of acuity, which Woolf employs as a critique of predatory heterosexual marriage. For example, shortly before their engagement, "Terence and Rachel hardly spoke," and "the silence weigh[ed] upon them," leaving them "unable to frame any thoughts" (*TVO* 270). In what is supposed to be the scene of their grand declaration of love, Rachel merely parrots small echoes of what Terence says, defaulting to his thoughts, rather than contributing her own (271). When Terence states, "'We are happy together,'" Rachel mimics "'Very happy'"—though "he did not seem to be speaking, or she to be hearing"; it is not truly a conversation (271). Moreover, there is very little content in the words they exchange; though marriage is a weighty decision that should be carefully negotiated, Rachel and Terence fail to even mention marriage, engagement, or the future. Terence merely states that they "'love each other,'" and Rachel repeats it (271). As Mary Walker astutely points out, in this jungle scene, the two "never use first person pronouns and they never speak directly to each other."[117] Parroting and "murmur[ing] inarticulately," it is as though Rachel's speech is already regressing, foreshadowing how she would likely to defer to her husband's voice and opinions in marriage, since the Victorian husband speaks for his wife. Furthering the loss of acuity, Rachel's "eyes…saw nothing," and she "was not thinking of anything" (277). Hauntingly, "the grass whipped across her eyes and filled her mouth and ears"—an image that implies that, as a wife, she is now rendered blind, deaf, and mute (283).

Returning, for a moment, to H.D.'s way of complicating heterosexual poetics, we see this same blunting of the senses in the final stanzas of H.D.'s poem "Hymen":

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[117] Mary Beth Walker, "Rachel Vinrace and *The Voyage Out*: A Heroine Out of Time and Out of Place," (Thesis, University of Alabama in Huntsville, May 1998), 6-7. https://www.uah.edu/ woolf/ TVO_Walker.PDF.

> Where love is come
> (Ah, love is come indeed!)
> Our limbs are numb
> Before his fiery need;
> With all their glad
> Rapture of speech unsaid,
> Before his fiery lips
> Our lips are mute and dumb.
>
> Ah, sound of reed,
> Ah, flute and trumpet wail,
> Ah, joy decreed–
> The fringes of her veil
> Are seared and white;
> Across the flare of light,
> Blinded the torches fail.
> (Ah, love is come indeed!)
>
> *At the end of the song, the torches flicker out and the figures are no longer distinguishable in the darkness. They pass out like shadows. The purple curtain hangs black and heavy.*
> *The music dies away and is finally cut short with a few deep, muted chords.*

Here, too, H.D. depicts the heterosexual marital paradigm as coming at the expense of the woman's sensorial faculties: "Our limbs are numb / Before his fiery need," "Our lips are mute and dumb." The chorale declarations of joy and celebration rest uncomfortably against the backdrop of these details. "The fringes of her veil / Are seared" as if aflame or burned, and "Blinded the torches fail" – again a description based in sensorial and perceptive loss, and the image of failing torches does not bode well (connoting a loss of vigor, of innocence, of enlightenment). The final images feel like a spiritual death for the bride, as the human figures become dark and indistinguishable, and "the music dies away and is finally cut short." Here, the final curtain closing over the scene is "purple" and "hangs black and heavy" – which resonates ever so softly against Sappho's trampled hyacinths.

Subverting the typical romantic engagement scene, Woolf infuses also infuses Rachel's engagement with similar premonitions of death and disaster for the heroine. Indeed, Rachel

"appeared to be very tired" and her "cheeks were white" as though she were already degrading, becoming sickly—foreshadowing her impending death (*TVO* 272). Following suit, the imagery of the forest itself becomes eerily foreboding following the engagement—with the blood-like, "dark and crimson" water, "skeleton print[s]," and the trees that "looked more twisted and angular than ever" (275). These deathly images portray heterosexual marriage as a form of violence against women. "Terrible—terrible," Rachel mutters, comparing the "persistent churning" of the waters to "her own feeling" (271-272). As they speak, Rachel and Terence's walking pace keeps "quicken[ing]" and Rachel "hold[s] herself more erect than usual" (271), furthering the aforementioned feeling of bodily and emotional discomfort; indeed, their quickening pace is evocative of an avalanche or landslide, as though they are carried by the normative momentum of heterosexual marriage expectation, without stopping to rationalize or communicate. The water churns "senseless and cruel" and Terence suddenly begins to cry. Seeming to sense impending doom, Terence feels "afraid to kiss [Rachel] again" (271). Even Helen begins to have morbid visions of "[the couple's] fate" and "disaster" shortly after the scene (286). The so-called happy couple "walked on in silence as people walking in their sleep," again evoking a sense of mind numbness (272). Upon returning to the group, Mr. Flushing asks, "Well, was it worth the effort?" earning no direct response from Rachel, nor Terence; they only comment about the heat (273). Painting the moment like a fever dream horror scene, Woolf subverts the prototypical sweet, romantic engagement to cement the idea of heterosexual marriage as doom.[118] It should be noted that the engagement is quickly followed by a homoerotic

[118] Scholars have also noted the evocation of Christian mythos in this scene, as evidenced by Hirst's warning, "Beware of snakes," and the "red fruit" that Terence picks up. In this interpretive light, the premonitions of disaster echo the premonition of the fall of man; however, Rachel derives her enlightenment internally and perishes before marriage or the consummation thereof, thus circumventing

scene between Helen and Rachel, in which Helen tackles Rachel and the two tumble together in an ecstatic flurry—an embrace described in "orgasmic images," especially in the (much less censored) early drafts of *TVO* and *Melymbrosia.*[119] Not only is Helen engaging in an act of subversion against Terence—who epitomizes traditional values when (in the holograph version dated 1912) he yells at Helen "I've a right to protect her! We're going to be married"—and his stifling presence, Helen is also turning the conventional male gaze and predatory role on its head, as she tackles and rolls with Rachel (and kisses her and stuffs fistfuls of grass into her mouth, in some drafts).[120] This moment signifies Woolf's creative engagement with the idea of lesbian predator and prey, but through the gaze and wordsmithing of herself—a woman—rather than a fetishizing man (such as Swinburne).

Sappho's presence is additionally felt in Woolf's 1921 short story, "A Society," a reprisal of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata.* Not only is Sappho directly mentioned, but also the story exemplifies Woolf's aforementioned belief that women are unable to reach Sappho's level of greatness. Indeed, when the Society evaluates the world of culture created by men, they discover one Professor Hobkin's edition of Sappho which is primarily devoted to "a defence of Sappho's

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the standard, heteronormative Christian ethos. Indeed, the tumbling "fall" that happens is between two women, deliberately marking Woolf's subversion of hetero-norms. See Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, 270-271. See also Susan Stanford Friedman, "Virginia Woolf's Pedagogical Scenes of Reading: *The Voyage Out*, *The Common Reader,* and Her 'Common Readers,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 1 (1992): 109. doi:10.1353/mfs.0.0459.

[119] Patricia J. Smith, "'The Things People Don′t Say': Lesbian Panic in The Voyage Out," in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, eds. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 134. www.jstor.org/stable/j. ctt9qft5j.

[120] Smith, "'The Things People Don't," 135-136.

chastity."[121] As Gubar explains. Hobkin's gynecological obsession with "some implement which looked . . . like a hairpin" ("A Society," 560) dramatizes Woolf's notion that "exceptional women like Sappho have been used not for but against the nurturing of a female literary tradition."[122] Moreover, the Society itself—made up of women who dedicate themselves to a mutualistic intellectual pursuit—echoes Sappho's chora. Previously taught to blindly disparage women and hail male achievements, the Society has an epiphany of disillusionment against such teachings: exemplified by Polly's tearful lamentation that most male-authored books are "unutterably bad." (557). Agreeing that life's purpose is to "produce good people and good books" (558), the women form the Society to assess the "worth of patriarchal culture,"[123] intending to stay chaste[124] until they determine what men do in education, arts, law, and the navy. Jane Marcus and Blackmer view this Society as Woolf's foil for "cloistered male scholarly societies such as the Cambridge Apostles"—who ironically "idealized male homosexuality" inside of Greek culture yet remained heteronormative (Blackmer 87). Marcus writes that the Society functions as a "parallel sisterhood of intellectual inquiry and social conscience."[125] Notably, even when Castalia breaks the chastity rule and conceives, the Society does not cast her out; they merely

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[121] Woolf, "A Society," *BBC Radio*: 560. http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/radio4/transcripts/ 20130913-ob-woolf-a-society.pdf.

[122] Gubar, "Sapphistries," 45.

[123] Blackmer, "Lesbian Modernism in the Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein," in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings,* eds. Eileen Barrett and Patricia Cramer (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 87. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qft5j.

[124] Echoing the *Lysistrata*, in which the title character attempts to end the Peloponnesian War by having the women of the warring cities withhold sex from the men.

[125] Jane Marcus, "Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny," in *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, eds. Carolyn Heilbrun and Marget Higonnet, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983), 91, quoted in Blackmer, "Lesbian Modernism," 87.

redefine chastity, apart from the repressive male definition. However, unlike H.D.'s idealized conceptualization of marginalized spaces as places of creativity and safety, Woolf plunges her thought experiment—the Society—into stark reality. World War I is thrust upon them: a reminder that man, caught up in debates about Sappho's chastity, has failed to notice Sappho's association of her "love for women—as friends, students, lovers, and mothers—to her critique of the Homeric epic that glorified violence and nationalistic warfare."[126] With her Sapphic enlightenment, Castalia is all the more troubled by war-hungry society, so much so that she wishes to stop her daughter, Ann, "from learning to read."[127] Symbolized by Ann's tears when she is elected the new president, Blackmer argues that though the women gain "[S]apphic insight into the systemic failures of masculine civilization," they ultimately do not have "the political and economic power to transform their world." This (in the words of Sappho) "sweetbitter" tale—containing an enlightened but ultimately systemically disempowered female chora—is a quintessential example of Woolf's Greek and Sapphic ambivalence, both positively and negatively valenced.

Sappho's poetry has captured the interests of readers for centuries, and H.D. and Virginia Woolf exemplify this capturing. Both modernist female writers were drawn to the fragmented images in Sappho's work, which paralleled the modernist feeling of disorientation in the midst of World War I and II. As queer women, both authors were inspired by Sappho's homoerotic lyrics and use of ambiguous pronouns – leading them to their own considerations of androgyny and employment of poetic sexual ambiguity. As female writers, the two could legitimize themselves in the literary canon by modeling after the renowned Sappho. Both women were able to see a

[126] Blackmer, "Lesbian Modernism," 87.

[127] Woolf, "A Society," 565.

non-normative, lesbian, and female prehistory in Sappho that further enabled them to explore female creativity, homosexuality, and gender ambiguity in their work. Nonetheless, H.D. is a clear foil for Woolf, utilizing Sappho to foster female creativity and idyllic visions of life on the margins, while Woolf could not help but engage critically and ambivalently with Sappho and Greek. Though she created similarly idyllic thought experiments, she also was set on acknowledging, critiquing, and attempting to change reality: she recognized the fragmented unknowns of Hellas, the nationalistic British literary tradition, the privileges of having a female coterie and the ability to have unfettered, uncensored same-sex relations. In Woolf's eyes, a "Modernist" Sappho could not exist—not in the modern heteronormative, patriarchal society.

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