

‘Shipwrecked in the modern world’: The Reception of Sappho by H.D.

Hilda Doolittle (more commonly known by her pen name H.D.) was one of the founding members of the Imagist movement, a group of poets who used concise language to focus on specific images and drew upon classical ideas and beliefs. Despite this, she is relatively unknown amongst classicists today, and yet her poems are teeming with references to Greece, Greek myth, and Greek literature from Homer to Euripides. But by far the most influential on her work was Sappho, whom she references subtly throughout her poetry and whose fragments she reimagined by translating and expanding them. By analysing H.D.’s poetry and her engagement with Sappho’s lyric poems, this essay aims to demonstrate how H.D. responded to Sappho – her words, her images, her desires – in a unique and modern way, and how Sappho’s natural imagery and vivid descriptions of love and desire influenced her poems. Working from so few and so short fragments (‘Little, but all roses’ as Meleager, and later H.D., described them),¹ she translated Sappho from the original Greek, and traces of Sappho form some of the most exquisite and meaningful lines in her poetry. However, this essay will also explore the influence of Sappho more broadly and how it shaped H.D. as an Imagist poet and in terms of how she wrote about women and reinterpreted the women of Greek myth.

Evocative and interesting imagery is one of the key features of the Imagist poets – H.D. included – and, in many ways, Sappho’s poetry can be seen as a form of Imagism: its experimental and varied use of metre, concise language, and a focus on objects means that it is succinct yet impactful. The use of natural imagery and the symbolism of the natural world is shared between the two poets and, when read together, it is clear that Sappho’s natural imagery in many of her lyric poems inspired H.D. (whose poetry collections include ‘Sea Garden’ which is full of the symbolism of flowers). One influence on H.D. was ‘Fragment 94’² which is one of Sappho’s wedding songs and reads, “As on the hills the shepherds trample the hyacinth under foot, and the flower darkens on the ground”.³ This teasing extract – which is surprisingly violent (“trample”, “darkens”) for a wedding song – was reworked by H.D.

¹ H.D. *The Wise Sappho*. City Lights Books, 1 Oct. 1982, pp. 55–69.

² According to the numbering of fragments given by H.T. Wharton (his book *Sappho* containing the original Greek and translations was used by H.D – see footnote 3); other references to fragments throughout this essay also follow Wharton’s numbering system except where specified.

³ Henry Thornton Wharton. *Sappho*. 1885. The Bodley Head, 1908, www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/57390/pg57390-images.html. Accessed 17 July 2023.

in several of her poems. In 'Pursuit',⁴ H.D. writes from the point of view of a pursuer chasing someone elusive, with the imagery echoing 'Fragment 94': "What do I care / that the stream is trampled", "the heel is cut deep", "a wild-hyacinth stalk is snapped: / the purple buds—half ripe— / show deep purple / where your heel pressed". The idea of a 'pursuit' – especially in the context of Greek myth – immediately suggests sexual desire (e.g., Apollo chasing Daphne). In a similar way to violence contrasting with the happiness of a wedding song, the violent verbs throughout H.D.'s poem ("trampled" – which is taken directly from Sappho, "cut", "snapped", "pressed") contrasts with the lust of this pursuit and brings a darker undertone to the poem. Just as the shepherds carelessly destroy the flowers with their feet, this pursuer does not "care" about the damage done to nature but is looking for hints of their prey and in this way H.D. is echoing Sappho. Below the surface meaning of the poems, both poets employ symbolism. Robert Babcock argues that, in the Greek, Sappho's use of the word "ἄνδρες" (men) – which is unnecessary in this context as she has already used the noun "shepherds" - makes it clear that the hyacinths in 'Fragment 94' symbolise women, taken advantage of – or trampled – by the shepherds.⁵ Meanwhile, in H.D.'s poem this hyacinth could be interpreted, because of the associations of a "pursuit" and the suggestive adjective "half-ripe", as a symbol of love – a love that has been "snapped", suggesting perhaps some rejection and hence explaining this (metaphorical) pursuit. The use of symbolism is important in H.D.'s poems because, like the remnants of Sappho's lyric poems, they are fragmentary in nature so that in 'Pursuit' the reason or context of the pursuit is unexplained and the bathos at the end gives the poem an unfinished feel. In this way, the colour "purple" being repeated twice in the second stanza is important to the meaning of the poem: because Sappho was described as "violet-weaving" in a poem by Alcaeus,⁶ this colour became a symbol in the 20th century for lesbianism. This suggests that – unlike in Sappho's original poem about men *and* women – the pair in 'Pursuit' are both women. H.D. is therefore drawing on Sappho's language and symbolism and making it her own, using it to add deeper meaning to her poems. This inherited use of symbolism therefore develops H.D. as an Imagist poet as it

⁴ H.D. *Collected Poems 1912-1944*. New Directions Publishing, 17 Feb. 1986, pp. 11–12.

⁵ Collecott, Diana. *H.D. And Sapphic Modernism: 1910-1950*. Cambridge Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999, p. 19.

⁶ Wharton. *Sappho*, p. 8.

helps to contextualise her poems without distracting from the main focus of the poem (the image).

Furthermore, in the poem 'Hymen',⁷ H.D. portrays a bride on her wedding night and the speaker says, "Each hyacinth spray, / Across the marble floor— [...] / To the shut bridal door." with "hyacinth", "floor", and the wedding theme showing that H.D. was indeed inspired by Sappho's 'Fragment 94' in this poem. Continual references to "purple" in the rest of the poem in reference to the bride suggest that these hyacinths here symbolise the bride's hymen ("then the plunderer slips / Between the purple flower-lips") which brings new meaning to 'Pursuit'. This sexual imagery of the natural world shows H.D. interpreting Sappho's poetry – even those parts not explicitly about love - as representations of love (both heterosexual and homosexual). This is shown clearly in 'Fragment 113',⁸ H.D.'s translation and continuation of another of Sappho's wedding songs (the only known line of which is "Neither honey nor bee for me"), which is included in her collection of poems also called 'Hymen'. The speaker of the poem is continually denying herself something ("Not honey", "not the south", "not iris—old desire") and the natural imagery sweeping through the poem – the sweet honey, the flower – suggests that the speaker is turning from temptations and old pleasures and, in the context of a wedding song, dedicating herself to one person instead. Thus, the honey can be seen as a symbol of previous pleasures or lovers, the iris is stated clearly as old desires and so H.D. transforms Sappho's one line into a poem about limiting sexual desire and expands upon Sappho's symbolism of the natural world.

Sappho's natural imagery and the opportunities this gives for an Imagist poet is the basis of H.D.'s collection of poems 'Sea Garden' which contains poems about irises and violets and has a sense of yearning for the ancient world. In 'The Cliff Temple',⁹ the speaker stands entranced at the top of an ancient temple looking across the sea and states "The world heaved— / we are next to the sky / over us, sea-hawks shout". There is a real sense of the sublime in this poem and the reader cannot help but be transported to this location, amazed too at the beauty of nature and the deep connection to the classical world that the speaker is feeling. There is also a calling to

⁷ *Collected Poems*, pp. 101-110.

⁸ *Collected Poems*, pp. 131-132.

⁹ *Collected Poems*, pp. 26-27.

ancient beliefs as the speaker invokes the god of this temple (“O god seated on the cliff”) which again shows the links that H.D. was making between antiquity and the present and above all the love she had for the ancient world. Though not explicitly linked to any of Sappho’s fragments, H.D.’s absorption in Sappho’s work and world can be sensed throughout this poem and one can imagine that she is thinking of Sappho when she writes “Shall I hurl myself from here [the cliff temple]” – for in Ovid’s story of Sappho, she throws herself from a cliff when abandoned by her lover Phaon.¹⁰

Whilst natural imagery is important in Sappho’s poems, she is perhaps best known for her descriptions of love (eros) and desire – and particularly homosexual love. H.D. (who was bisexual)¹¹ was also inspired by Sappho’s thrilling metaphors for desire and descriptions about love’s effects on the body which find their way into her poems. One of Sappho’s most popular lyric poems, ‘Fragment 2’,¹² describes the strong desire that the speaker, a woman, feels towards another woman and includes the powerful metaphor “a subtle fire has run under my skin” to describe the speaker’s emotions. In H.D.’s expansion of ‘Fragment Forty’,¹³ this image is used to describe two young lovers: “Fire darted aloft and met fire; / in that moment / love entered us” which shows that H.D. found this image realistic and touching millennia later. The rest of the poem mirrors Sappho too: “I must perish” reflects the speaker of ‘Fragment 2’ (“[I] seem [...] dead”) and ends in the stanza “What need— / yet to sing love, / love must first shatter us” which echoes the speaker’s weakness throughout ‘Fragment 2’. By drawing on Sappho’s language here, H.D. engages with her on the topic of love: the original fragment and H.D.’s poem both share the same message – that love is painful, but also bittersweet. The duality of Sappho’s language with the burning, painful, sensation of fire and the weakness the speaker feels, twinned with love’s emotional passion teeming beneath her skin is truly a powerful, universal metaphor. Thus, H.D. was inspired by Sappho’s ideas and they are reinterpreted in her work.

¹⁰ Nagy, Gregory. “Death at Sunset for Sappho.” *Classical Inquiries*, 4 Sept. 2020, classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/death-at-sunset-for-sappho/. Accessed 17 July 2023.

¹¹ Poetry Foundation. “H.D.” *Poetry Foundation*, 2011, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/h-d. Accessed 17 July 2023.

¹² This is more commonly known as ‘Fragment 31’ according to the Campbell numbering system.

¹³ *Collected Poems*, pp. 173- 175.

The imagery of 'Fragment 2' is further reflected in other poems: in 'Hymen', "Where love is come / [...] / Our limbs are numb / Before his fiery need" echoes not only the fire metaphor but also Sappho's description of "trembling seizes all my [limbs]". The subsequent "Before his fiery lips / Our lips are mute and dumb" draws upon Sappho's "I have no utterance left, my tongue is broken down". This continual engagement with Sappho's language, if known by the reader, enriches H.D.'s poems as she is drawing on the history of lesbian love. In the context of her whole body of work, this imagery which is repeated in other poems (e.g., 'Heliodora') shows H.D.'s love for Sappho and, perhaps, her wish for the more liberal social perspective on homosexuality in ancient Lesbos compared to her own time.

Although it is helpful to find similar images and words between the poems of Sappho and H.D. and to show how H.D. received and interpreted Sappho, there is more to be said about how H.D.'s work as a whole was influenced by her readings and translations of the fragments. Whilst not being direct quotes, much of her poetry is Sapphic in nature – and indeed her style of writing has been termed "Sapphic modernism"¹⁴ – and this is shown most clearly in the representation of women and the reworking of Greek myth which can be observed in Sappho. Sappho's 'Fragment 16' (Campbell)¹⁵ is an interesting example of this and includes the lines: "Helen, abandoned her husband – the best of men – / and went sailing off to Troy; she remembered neither her child / nor her much-loved parents"¹⁶. The active verbs "abandoned" and "sailing" here seem to put blame on Helen for her abduction (which, according to legend, was carried out by Paris and the Trojans) and so Sappho is adapting the myth to create a different story that makes Helen a more active, and therefore a more interesting, character.

In a similar vein, H.D. reinterpreted Greek myths about women from a feminist perspective (something that has become more popular recently with authors such as Madeline Miller and Natalie Haynes but was pioneering for the 1910s when the following poem was written). 'Eurydice'¹⁷ is a poem taken from her collection 'The God' and is about Orpheus' wife whom he tried to bring back from the dead but failed

¹⁴ Collocott, Diana. *H.D. And Sapphic Modernism: 1910-1950*. Cambridge Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999.

¹⁵ Published in 1914 and so was not included in Wharton's collection; however, it was available to H.D.

¹⁶ Spraggs, Gillian. "Sappho, Fragment 16, Trans Gillian Spraggs." *www.gillianspraggs.com*, 2006, www.gillianspraggs.com/translations/sappho16.html. Accessed 18 July 2023.

¹⁷ *Collected Poems*, pp. 51-55.

because he turned back to look at her. Rather than focussing on the man as many myths do, H.D. in this poem focuses on Eurydice and – similarly to how Sappho describes Helen as actively leaving Menelaus and sailing with the Trojans – Eurydice is not shown as forgiving, but as angry: “so for your arrogance / and your ruthlessness / I am swept back”. The spiteful possessive pronoun in “*your* arrogance” and “*your* ruthlessness” give Eurydice a more realistic anger and bitterness at Orpheus’ failure and it retells the tale from her perspective. Natural imagery too sweeps through the poem - “before I am lost, / hell must open like a red rose / for the dead to pass” - and makes the poem feel Sapphic. Thus, whilst not quoting directly from Sappho’s lyric poems, by using the same features and writing about similar topics, H.D. reinvents Sappho’s style for herself and for modern readers.

Nearly a century before Miller, Circe was reinterpreted by H.D. and the story of the *Odyssey* was told from her perspective. In ‘Circe’, the speaker wonders how to call Odysseus back. Whilst she is portrayed as an evil enchantress in the *Odyssey*, in this poem she says “they [the men] entreated me / till in pity / I turned each to his own self.”¹⁸ with the noun “pity” making Circe seem more sympathetic and opposes Homer’s evil portrayal of her. The poem closes with the stanza: “But I would give up / rock-fringes of coral / and the inmost chamber / of my island palace / and my own gifts / and the whole region / of my power and magic / for your glance.” – by showing her love for Odysseus and her hopelessness without him, Circe turns from the antagonist to a desperate character to be pitied. The natural imagery (“rock-fringes of coral”), the description of her love (with the repetition of “my” and the list of things she would “give up”), and this feminist, revised portrayal of a mythological character show that this modern poem was really a product of Sappho.

In conclusion, the influence of Sappho on H.D. extends further than the mere borrowing of natural imagery or descriptions of love. Rather, it is the features and fragmentary style of Sappho’s writing, the dominance of nature, her ideas of love, and the reworking of myth which abound in H.D.’s poetry and all derive from her reading of Sappho that led to her poetry being termed “Sapphic modernism”. Taken as a whole, H.D.’s poetry is a shrine to the ancient world which she loved and, above all, to Sappho. Poems such as ‘The Cliff Temple’ express her yearning for ancient

¹⁸ *Collected Poems*, pp. 118-120.

Lesbos, and the mythology that forms the basis of so many of her poems is testament to H.D.'s thorough classical education and reading – and thus it is a shame that she is not more widely read amongst classicists. Although she does not get the recognition that she deserves, H.D.'s work – built upon an appreciation and response to Sappho – helped to found the Imagist movement (which preferred the concise yet effective language as used by classical poets such as Sappho) and led to an embrace of free verse in poetry, influencing other poetry movements throughout the 20th century. Whilst Sappho's lyric poems were a source of inspiration – both directly and indirectly – upon H.D.'s work, Sappho herself became for H.D. a symbol both of ancient Greece and of the expression of lesbian love. Indeed, in her essay *The Wise Sappho*, H.D. writes, "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."¹⁹

¹⁹ H.D. *The Wise Sappho*. City Lights Books, 1 Oct. 1982, p. 67.

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