

# OVID AND H.D.'S "THETIS" (HYMEN VERSION)

*Eileen Gregory*

H.D.'s use of classical sources in her early poetry is not so pyrotechnic as that of contemporaries like Eliot or Auden or Pound—to whom, it sometimes seems, erudition is a gentleman's coat-of-arms, a badge of membership. Taking the ironic, self-reflexive postures of these male poets as norms of presentation, critics until recently have assumed, from H.D.'s lyric strategies of appropriating texts, that her real knowledge of classical poetry is modest, that she picks from it arbitrarily with preciousness (avoiding the hard parts, as Eliot says in his review of her translations of Euripides), and that her Hellenism is largely derivative from late nineteenth century writers. These assumptions are simply untrue, as anyone knows who attempts to trace her allusions to their sources. In her conversation with classical works H.D. shows intimate knowledge of original texts and a keen awareness of their possible interplay with her own.

Take, for example, her poem "Thetis" in *Hymen* (CP 116-17, stanzas I and II only). Anyone who has been puzzled by the sensuous obscurity of this poem may turn to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 11.229-37.<sup>1</sup>

There is a curving bay in Thessaly,  
Shaped like a sickle; two long arms run out  
And were the water deeper there would be  
A harbour. smooth across the shallow sand  
The sea extends; the shore is firm; it holds  
No footprints; slows no passage, slopes unlined  
By seaweed. Myrtles grow near by, a grove  
Of double-coloured berries. In their midst  
There lies a grotto, formed maybe by art,  
Maybe by nature, rather though by art,  
Where Thetis used to come, naked, astride  
Her bridled dolphin.

"Thetis" clearly echoes this exquisite configuration: the white crescent-shaped beach of

the “island disc,” the myrtle-wood, the descent into water astride the dolphin which undulates beneath its jewelled harness. In her poem H.D. captures the complex tonality of this original moment, which evokes the untouched purity of sand and shore (crescent/moon qualities) as well as the Aphroditic richness of myrtle grove and charged nakedness. H.D. also elaborates the explicit Ovidian theme of the confluence of art and nature: in- deed part of the obscurity of "Thetis" is in its rich confusion of these two states.

Sensing the acumen within H.D.'s reading of Ovid, we may then notice a deeper play with her source. In her creation of lyric presence H.D. reimagines voice and perspective. Ovid's narrative voice possesses detachment and breadth of vision. In this moment the narrator pauses to set a scene, to demarcate spatial territories, within yet another story of violent sexual assault. But in "Thetis" H.D. interiorizes the scene, rendering the intimacy of this moment. An a-spatial, a-temporal lyric presence (not "speaker," not "narrator" or "I") clairvoyantly describes the moving goddess whose image is vividly manifest. It is as though, having conjured this waking dream, the seer hovered at the threshold (neither inside nor outside\_ of the goddess' body: “On the paved parapet / you will step carefully / from amber stones to onyx / flecked with violet / mingled with light . . . reflecting your white feet.” Our presence to this erotic body becomes progressively more intense as we merge liminally with the *eidolon* of Thetis as she descends into water. The image of the glittering and swaying dolphin's body riding beneath the goddess conjures her own watery, incandescent nakedness more than could any simple words. In "Thetis" the image of descent into water renders a descent into the sensually awakened body. In the lyric terms that H.D. assumes, body is by no means a dear fact-rather, it is (or it arrives at being) a presence, experienced through manifold erotic thresholds.

In a more complex play with Ovid, H.D. contextualizes the moment rendered in “Thetis” within the structure of *Hymen*. The ambivalent domain of “hymeneal” initiation encompasses all the poems in *Hymen*. “Thetis” seems somewhat anomalous among the other poems in the volume, like “Simaetha” and “Circe” (the two poems which directly precede and follow it) in that it describes a (divine) woman’s sexual self-sufficiency, her radical “virginity” or erotic self-possession. But when “Thetis” is seen in the context of *Hymen*, an elided by indelible portion of Ovid’s story becomes visible. In the lines immediately following those quoted above, Ovid tells: “There [in the grotto], as she lay lapped / In sleep, Peleus surprised her and, his fond / Entreaties all repulsed, assaulted her” (238-40). Thetis avoids rape in this case by Protean metamorphosis (into a bird, into a tree, and finally, into a tigress). But Proteus gives Peleus directions for capturing Thetis — to bind her arms apart while she sleeps — and

she is finally forced to reveal her true shape and to yield to this urgent mortal against her will. Then “He held her . . . to his side / And filled with great Achilles his fair bride” (264-65).

It is an old story, especially relished by classical writers, and still employed in rationalizations of rape: such as virginal self-sufficiency, such as possession of sacred territory, apart from the cycle of generation, necessarily calls forth violation. The virgin is provocative, perilous. This ominous erotic configuration is clearly fascinating to H.D. “Thetis” with its classical subtext echoes other poems in the volume (with other figures initiated more or less violently, like Evadne, Leda, Hippolyta, and the Persephone-like bride of “Hymen”). H.D.’s Thetis is an image of erotic/bodily wholeness, yet also of metamorphic evasion and of the fatal mystery within a qualified surrender to mortal violence. “Thetis” also suggests in its images (elaborated subsequently in a second poem entitled “Thetis” in *Heliadora*) a symbolic matrix central to her life-long work: the erotic, inviolable visceral, elusive, many-formed sea-mother of the brilliant son.

“I take my alchemists straight,” the old H.D. remarked in voicing her aversion to Jung (quoted in Walsh, HDWP 62). The same might be said of the early (equally adept) H.D. in her relation to classical writers: here too is a characteristic surety of aim and a directness that we have yet to fully appreciate. Why? Because though she hits the mark she is aiming, always, other than where one expects. H.D. is always *lyrically* on target: her use of allusion, her intertextual play with classical materials, directs us toward affective, intimate territories, not toward abstraction or cultural commentary — conceptual formulation, or “ironic juxtaposition” leading to wise dismay. Just as do her male contemporaries, she does indeed point to cultural crevases, to sexual/political disasters. But these moments are part of a larger history of body and of desire. They matter at all because they matter first to feeling.

#### NOTES

- I. Translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are by A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).