

H.D.'S "PURSUIT" AND SAPPHO

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Few of H.D.'s lyrics have attracted as much attention or praise as her versions of Sappho.¹ In a chapter devoted to H.D. and Sappho Thomas Swann established a canon of her Sapphic verses, "H.D. wrote six poems . . . which were suggested by fragments from Sappho" (CW 109). Most of these poems bear a title acknowledging the Sapphic fragment which inspired them. They are, in the order in which they appear in H.D.'s *Collected Poems*, "Fragment 113," "Fragment 36," "Fragment 40," "Fragment 41," "Fragment 68," and "Calliope." (Earlier versions of "Fragment 41," "Fragment 40," and "Fragment 68" are published in *Collected Poems* [310-21] as "Amaranth," "Eros," and "Envy."²) Critics since Swann have accepted his catalogue, but it is not complete. One of H.D.'s first Sapphic experiments, perhaps her earliest, has been overlooked and omitted from the discourse on H.D. and her interaction with Sappho. The poem is "Pursuit"; it is based on Sappho fragment 105 (Lobel/Page). H.D. read Sappho in Wharton's edition in which the Greek text is accompanied by a number of translations, including one by Rossetti, which H.D. particularly admired:³

Like the wild hyacinth flower which in the hills is found,
Which the passing feet of the shepherds for ever tear and wound
Until the purple blossom is trodden into the ground.

H.D.'s version, in the second stanza of "Pursuit," reads:

But here
a wild-hyacinth stalk is snapped:
the purple buds—half-ripe—
show deep purple
where your heel pressed. (CP 11)

H.D. carefully acknowledges her fondness for the Rossetti translation by her use of the phrase "wild-hyacinth." There is no equivalent in Sappho for Rossetti's "wild" (which appears to modify "flower" as much as "hyacinth"); H.D. incorporates the adjective

into the flower name, making it a specific species, “wild-hyacinth.” In so doing, she avoids adding a word not in Sappho, but also retains an accretion which she liked from the tradition.

The six poems in Swann’s catalogue are the ones which H.D. specifically identified by their titles or epitaphs as having Sapphic sources; all appeared in *Hymen* (1921), *Heliadora* (1924), or *Red Roses for Bronze* (1931). That H.D. did not identify the Sapphic inspiration for “Pursuit” is in keeping with her practice in *Sea Garden*, her first book of poetry (1916), in which sources are not as directly specified. The failure of critics to recognize the sources of her work or to treat her writing as a serious engagement with a literary tradition may have led H.D. to begin explicitly detailing sources in her later books. She expresses her annoyance at the superficial evaluations of her early lyrics, “I grew tired of hearing these poems referred to as crystalline. Was there no other way of criticizing, of assessing them?” (*HDDA* 174) The central role which Sappho plays in recent criticisms of H.D.’s career, particularly in feminist criticism, suggests that one “other way of criticizing” her work would have been to recognize and discuss the presence of Sappho in it.

In reviewing Edwin Cox’s edition of Sappho, H.D. attacks his translation of fragment 105, particularly his “bloodless” avoidance of the purple hyacinth (which Cox translates as “larkspur” rather than “hyacinth”). H.D. calls attention to two aspects of her own poetry which have only recently begun to receive the consideration they deserve, her references to flowers and to colors. The landscape of H.D.’s lyrics, as Ezra Pound emphasized in what is probably the earliest critical comment on her poetry,⁴ comes from her own childhood; but her poems are not naive, romantic descriptions of childhood experience. They craft artistic blends of experience real and literary. Describing her own reactions by using charged words from Greek poems—especially from the writings of Sappho and of the women poets of the Greek Anthology—H.D. presents a maximum of signification in a minimum of words. Eileen Gregory, in her study of *Sea Garden*, discusses H.D.’s meditations on flowers and colors in “The Wise Sappho.”⁵ H.D.’s essay is directly relevant to “Pursuit”: “I think of the words of Sappho as these colours, or states rather, transcending colour yet containing (as great heat the compass of the spectrum) all colour. And perhaps the most obvious is this rose colour, merging to richer shades of scarlet, purple or Phoenician purple” (*NTV* 58). In her review of Cox, H.D. writes in criticism of Cox’s larkspur, “The very word hyacinth is pure Greek and as such would add a classic flavour to the most trivial rendering of the . . . passage. . . . The rose by any other name would *not* smell as sweet. But call a scentless, radiant-petalled oleander-blossom a rose-laurel, and it, by

suggestion and shifting of colour and sense values, obtains a peculiar fragrance.”⁶ H.D. leaves no doubt that “purple” and “hyacinth” have specifically Sapphic connotations, and that fragment 105 lies behind “Pursuit,” even though the source is not explicitly identified in *Sea Garden*.⁷

Consideration of the Sapphic quotation in “Pursuit” suggests new possibilities of interpreting the poem. The speaker in the poem pursues a missing lover through woods and streams, following a trail of bruised flowers and broken twigs. But the trail suddenly stops, and the speaker assumes “some wood-daemon” has spirited away the lover. The speaker seems to accept the loss somewhat more easily because of this semi-divine intervention and because the signs seem to indicate that the lover has been unwillingly abducted. The Sapphic poem survives as a fragment, and the original context of the lines is unknown; but the traditional interpretation, the one reflected in Rossetti, presents the lines as a simile in which the newly blooming flower, remote in some distant corner of the wilds, represents a young maiden bloodied then discarded by the callous shepherd, her first male lover. If H.D.’s quotation of the Sapphic lines allows the inference that her poem describes a situation analogous in some degree to Sappho’s, it may be worth considering that “Pursuit” dates from the same period (ca. 1916/17) as “Amaranth,” “Eros,” and “Envy,” a series of H.D.’s early Sapphic poems about desertion or betrayal. Louis Martz and others have read the poems as poetic investigations of the emotions inspired by Aldington’s infidelity.⁸ Sappho was clearly a focus of H.D.’s response to Aldington’s unfaithfulness. Though the four early Sapphic poems concern betrayal and abandonment, they all present different levels of awareness and acceptance by the scorned partner. The series explores a wide range of emotions experienced at various moments in the dissolution of a relationship.

The suspicion created by the Sapphic quotation that the poem is about an abandoned lover—one, however, who has not yet accepted the reality of the situation and is still generating excuses for the absent partner—may alter our reading of the poem: the opening, “What do I care,” is more arresting; the interrogative of stanzas eight and nine become almost desperately pathetic in imagining the clutching, the shortness of breath, the gasping of the lover trying to avoid capture; the resolution of the final stanza rings peculiarly hollow. The word “heel” (lines 5 and 15) attracts attention by its repetition. The implication seems to be that the fleeing lover has treated the flower (i.e., the abandoned lover) as indifferently as the dirt. But H.D.’s use of “heel” raises doubts about whether the fleeing lover was truly indifferent, for the planting of heel indicates a more deliberate action than the passing of foot. A fleeing person does not leave heel marks but toe-tracks.

In this quotation of Sappho, H.D. not only participates in a tradition, she also reacts to that tradition and demonstrates her brilliance as a translator. The Sapphic lines have often been quoted, and the Wharton edition of Sappho includes several translations of them. H.D.'s version is refreshingly divorced from the traditional presentation of the fragment as a simile (so-and-so is like a flower). In H.D.'s verses the flower is, for the first time, actually a flower (in addition to whatever else it signifies). H.D. makes the trampled hyacinth a subject of her poem rather than a poetical appendage to it. This startling but simple innovation revivifies the Sapphic fragment to a degree that none of H.D.'s predecessors achieved. It was this type of directness in H.D.'s translations that amazed Pound, who describes H.D.'s work to Harriet Monroe, ". . . no metaphors that won't permit examination. It's straight talk, straight as the Greek!"⁹

Rachel DuPlessis calls attention to the complex and diverse ways that H.D. responds to Sappho as a poet and as a woman.¹⁰ As H.D.'s earliest published version of Sappho, "Pursuit" can contribute to a fuller appreciation of the range and depth of the Sapphic influence on her writing.

NOTES

1. A few of the more recent treatments are Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *CTS*, 23-30; Eileen Gregory, "Scarlet Experience: H.D.'s *Hymen*," *Sagetrieb* 6 (1987): 77-100; Gregory, "Rose Cut in Rock: Sappho and H.D.'s *Sea Garden*," *Contemporary Literature* 27 (1986): 525-52, with extensive bibliography of other works, 550-51; and Susan Gubar, "Sapphistries," *Signs* 10 (1984): 43-62.

2. H.D. used Wharton's edition of Sappho and follows his numbering of the fragments. *Sappho. Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation*, ed. Henry Thornton Wharton (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1908). A copy of the 1907 edition of Wharton's *Sappho* is listed among H.D.'s books now in the Bryher library by Virginia Smyers, "H.D.'s Books in the Bryher Library," *HDN* 1.2 (Winter 1987): 18-25.

3. Wharton 135. H.D. quotes with approval Rossetti's version in her review of Edwin Cox's edition of Sappho, "Winter Roses," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 14 March 1925, 596.
4. *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York, 1950) 11.
5. Gregory, "Rose," 533-35; cf. also Gregory, "Scarlet," esp. 85-87.
6. "Winter Roses," 596.
7. Cassandra Laity, "H.D. Romantic Landscapes: The Sexual Politics of the Garden," *Sagetrieb* 6.2 (1987): 57-75, discusses the poem "Hyacinth" and the character Hyacinth in H.D.'s work. Her comments, especially on 64-70, are of interest to "Pursuit."
8. Cf. the discussions of these poems by Martz, *CP* xiv-xix; DuPlessis 24-26.
9. Pound, *Letters* 11.
10. DuPlessis 23-30.