

Echoes of Sapphic Gods and Goddesses, Immortality, Eros and Thanatos in the Work of Modernist Women Poets

IRIS RUSU
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

Abstract

In the context of Modernism's constant return to the past that results in self-knowledge and innovation, certain women writers found Sappho's writings relevant for their own poetic endeavours. My article will mainly focus on the mythological aspects of both Sappho's and the modernist women's poetry. Invocations of and allusions to gods and goddesses and other mythical figures, which involve introspection and expressing certain erotic concerns in stylised ways, will be discussed in order to show how all these women poets innovated. and, in many different ways, significantly enriched the literature of their times. Critics have mainly focused on H.-D.'s poetry in relation to Sappho's, most likely because the modernist poet had also translated (or adapted, according to most scholars) a number of Sappho's poems. As regards other modernist women poets, such as, for instance, Amy Lowell or Marianne Moore, critics have refrained, for various reasons, from analysing their work in relation to Sappho's. There are very few critical accounts of Sappho's influence on their (and even H.-D.'s) poetry, and this article will, perforce, draw on these, but aims, all the while, to provide new and relevant insights.

Keywords: Sappho's poetry, Ancient Greek poetry, Modernism, modernist women poets, stylized and interiorized mythological concerns, literature as palimpsest.

Literary historians have always been preoccupied with ancient poets' influence on writers living in different epochs. Many writers have been interested in their predecessors' work, and, during certain cultural paradigms and trends, like the Renaissance and French Classicism in literature, they openly acknowledged, embraced or, on the contrary, rejected their influence. Modernism, as it is generally agreed, sought a recuperation of past values in an era in which the modernist writers no longer felt at ease with their contemporary society which was undergoing unprecedented existential crises. The greatest poets, novelists and playwrights of the period were all interested in studying the past and its accomplishments, and one could even argue that most of the literature of Modernism built on the enormous palimpsest of literary history, which it recuperated by means of rich intertextuality.

Therefore, I believe it can be argued that in the poems selected for comparative analysis in this article, one can identify, for instance, eroticism disguised in mythological concerns, more precisely in the invocations of goddesses, muses and graces, as well as in the allusions to the deities of the ancient Greek pantheon. To begin with, the addressees of Sappho's invocations are goddesses, and the presence of male deities is considerably reduced, as Aaron Poochigian explains: "We find invocations of numerous female deities in Sappho's poems: Aphrodite, Hera, the Muses, the Graces and the Nereids. While reading the extant fragments, one gets the sense that Sappho is giving Greek mythology a feminine slant" (xxv-xxvi). Sappho's "prayers" in the form of invocations are, in fact, kletic hymns, a Classical literary genre in which gods are summoned in order to be asked for help. Sappho's hymn to Aphrodite, one of her few poems that have survived entirely, is an appropriate example of what a kletic hymn is. According to Poochigian, a kletic hymn has a "tripartite structure: invocations [or] summons (...), *hypomnesia* or citation of previous requests and the god's past deeds, (...) and entreaty" (xxvi). Sappho's kletic hymn in which she directly addresses Aphrodite, the goddess she seemed to feel the closest to, is relevant both for identifying and for

exemplifying the structure of a kletic hymn, as well as for illustrating the Sapphic persona's mythical relation to Aphrodite. The first four lines of "Hymn to Aphrodite" (or "Fragment I," as some scholars called the poem) are what Poochigian has identified as invocation or summon:

Subtly bedizened Aphrodite,
I beg you, Empress, do not smite me
Deathless daughter of Zeus, Wile-Weaver,
With anguish and fever (1-4)

Aphrodite is described in a flattering manner, as an adorned, deathless "Empress"; Sappho's references to the goddess as "daughter of Zeus" and "wile-weaver" were common epithets traditionally used to refer to Aphrodite, resembling the use of kennings in Old English literature. The next lines (5-24) of the poem constitute, according to Poochigian, the second part of the kletic hymn, *hypomnesia*, in which the goddess' past interventions are mentioned:

But come as often, on request,
(hearing me, heeding from afar,)
You left your father's gleaming feast,
Yoked them to car,
And came. Fair sparrows in compact
Flurries of winged rapidity
Cleft sky and over a gloomy tact
Brought you to me – ("Fragment 1" 5-12)

These two stanzas present Aphrodite's descent to Earth in response to the speaker's request. It could be argued that the speaker considers herself familiar, even intimate, with the goddess, as the first and the second person verbs and pronouns mirror each other: "hearing me" / "[you] came"; "brought you" / "to me." The next stanzas provide a dialogue between the speaker and the goddess:

And there they were, and you, sublime
And smiling with immortal mirth,

Asked what was wrong? Why I, this time,
 Called you to earth?
 What was my mad heart dreaming of? –
 ‘Who, Sappho, at a word, must grow
 Again so receptive to your love?
 Who wronged you so? (“Fragment 1” 13-20)

The poetic persona feels that she was wronged, her “mad heart” most likely dreaming of revenge, which is then promised by Aphrodite:

‘She who shuns love soon will pursue it,
 She who scorns gifts will send them still:
 The girl will learn love, though she do it
 Against her will.’ (“Fragment 1” 21-24)

According to Anne Carson, “Sappho has suffered an injustice at the hands of her beloved and has called upon Aphrodite to alleviate the pain of this injustice. The girl with whom Sappho is in love has apparently fled from Sappho’s advances, rejected her gifts, and refused her love” (226). Carson further notes that the promise Aphrodite makes to the Sapphic persona is that of “an ideal erotic revenge in the form of a mutual reversal of the roles of lover and beloved” (227), meaning that the girl who now refuses Sappho “will experience a change of heart and will pursue Sappho with gifts and love.” Hence, Carson observes, “Aphrodite is putting forward not a specific program of revenge tailored to Sappho, but a general theory of lover’s justice” because the goddess’ question “Who wronged you so?” is never answered. Thus, the lack of answer to Aphrodite’s question is deliberate: “a deliberate dramatization of the universal law of justice on which lovers can rely as surely as they can rely on the passage of time” (230).

Moreover, “in Fragment I [i.e. the poem in discussion] Sappho portrays erotic relations as an endless game of flight and pursuit, thus presenting a model of erotic relations that involves the dominance of one over the other” but still constructing this “erotic experience outside male assumptions about dominance and

submission” (Greene 243). Sappho’s ability “to construct an alternative to the phallic representation of desire” is due to “the segregated female world of the *hetairia*” where, from her “position of marginality (...) Sappho could express active female erotic desire and claim an authentic subject position” (Greene 235) in a “form of female subjectivity that exceeds the phallic definition of woman as object or Other” (Skinner qtd. in Greene 235).

The last four lines (25-28) of the hymn represent the entreaty, in which Aphrodite is once again asked to help the speaker, in the concluding lines of the poem:

Come to me now. Drive off this brutal
Distress. Accomplish what my pride
Demands. Come, please, and in this battle
Stand at my side. (“Fragment 1” 25-28)

However solemn the topic of a kletic hymn, Poochigian notes that Sappho is “incapable of over-solemnity,” which is proved by her “ability to modulate diction,” i.e. her smooth passage from “a formal mode to an intimate one over the course of a few stanzas [which] is unique in Greek.” In the above-analysed kletic hymn, Poochigian argues, formal passages are followed by colloquial ones (which causes the rhythm to change suddenly), revealing a certain wittiness that is specific to Sappho’s verse.

The stylistic alternation between language registers is tightly related to what critics identified as the private and the public functions of Sappho’s poems. It is generally agreed that Sappho’s poetry comes from the sphere of the personal, mainly because it is also assumed to be autobiographical and because of her frequent use of apostrophe. However, the ritualistic aspect of her poetry also tends to fall into the public, communal sphere. Charles Segal argues that the “private function of ritual is perhaps dominant in the ode to Aphrodite, where Sappho has the goddess address her by name. In other poems, however, Sappho clearly depicts the public or communal setting, whether real or imagined, of rituals” (63). As for the latter category, Segal mentions two examples extracted from

Sappho's poetry that show public ritualised situations: "Kypris, here in the present blend / Your nectar with pure festal glee. / Fill gilded bowls and pass them round / Lavishly" ("Fragment 2" 12-15) and "A full moon shone, / And around the shrine / Stood devotees / Poised and in place" ("Fragment 154" 7-10). While the second example describes a form of nocturnal worship, the first example is part of a direct address to Aphrodite by using the epithet "Kypris" (that shows, according to a well-known legend, her origins). Poochigian interprets Aphrodite's pouring out "nectar or wine mixed with nectar for the celebrants" (4) as symbolising, like the arrival of the goddess herself, the divine presence among them which "integrates the mortal and the immortal" (4). As a consequence, "for Sappho and her audience poetry is public communication. It is not fully separated from gesture, for it retains close associations with dance and with music. It is, in some sense, magic" (Segal 58). Hence, rituals gain both personal and public significance while also integrating thanatotic and oneiric aspects.

Bruce Whiteman considers that starting with Sappho, a tradition has been established in Western literature, a tradition leaning upon "the emotion and the inner life of an individual" (686) because Sappho managed to impose a colloquial style in her verse, which is to be noticed in many of her poems. This does not mean that all of her poems are written in colloquial language, but rather that the reader can encounter such examples in her work. Moreover, this use of vernacular language was not common in the poetry written by her contemporaries: "With the other great archaic poets of Greece she was among the first to speak in poetry the way she speaks to friends or to oneself rather than to a community" (Whiteman 687). Moreover, Bruno Snell states that the personal in Sappho's poetry is not, as the reader would expect, love itself, but rather the emotions that love provokes in the Sapphic persona: "even in Sappho, as personal as her poetry strikes us, love is not generated by the heart but is a gift from Aphrodite or Eros, i.e. from a god. What is generated by the individual heart is the emotional discord released by unhappy love" (qtd. in Whiteman 688).

Ellen Greene considers that Sappho's verse "privileges personal sincerity and passionate ecstasy" (214) and identifies a certain social function as far as kletic hymns are concerned. Jeffrey M. Duban seems to agree:

The social function of Sappho's poetry is apparent in its highly ritualised form, expression, and situation (...) Invitation to the goddess and a companion's departure from the group present ritualised situations. Ritualised form is expressed in the incantatory, charming, or therapeutic effect produced, for example, by recurrent sound patterns, lulling rhythms, and sentence repetition (...) Her lyrics are also healing enterprises, linguistic attempts to spirit the mind suffering from desire or separation away, into a more satisfactory or pleasurable awareness, drawing upon the medical proprieties of daydream, memory, sensuality, Aphrodite and metaphor to accomplish this. (45)

What Duban implies when discussing ritualised situations in Sappho's incantations could be associated with Segal's use of the term "*thelxis*" to speak about Sappho's poems. Segal states that "this incantatory quality has a special relevance for early love poetry" (59), and, I would add, for kletic hymns addressed to Aphrodite as well, which become quasi-erotic; he points out that Sappho's poetry "seeks to create a verbal equivalent to the magnetic, quasi-magical compulsion which the ancient poets called *thelxis*, 'enchantment', or *peitho*, 'persuasion'" (59). Segal, like Duban, identifies "repetitions and recurrent rhythms" that, he adds, "invoke the magical effect of eros itself" and therefore,

[w]e have to translate such verses into our own psychology and explain this anthropomorphic Eros as a force or a psychic power. But for Sappho the 'power' of love is a god, as power often is for the ancient Greeks, and as such is to be summoned before her by the incantatory power and the quasi-magical *thelxis* of her poetry. Her poetry both portrays *thelxis* and, in a sense, is *thelxis*. (59)

The critic further suggests that for Sappho the relationship between poetry and the physical reactions of the body is essential, and this tight connection reveals what he calls “poetry as *thelxis*”:

The magical *thelxis* of her words seeks to create—or recreate—the magical *thelxis* of love. And she thinks and lives in a society where ritualized patterns are the essential means of achieving this *thelxis*. Ceremonial or ritual elements in the background of poetic composition (which, of course, are not necessarily conscious to the poet) need not imply the actual ceremonial function of such poetry (...) Ritual not only asserts the unity of the society or the group in the presence of the divine, but can also effect a personal transaction with divine powers. (Segal 63)

Sappho tends, then, not only to ritualize eroticism through “enchantment,” but also to use rituals in order to subtly emphasize such feelings. Her invocations of goddesses could be compared to her poems in which she addresses the young girls it is assumed she had relationships with: there is a continuous erotic tension, there are lavish descriptions that are meant to individualize the beauty of the goddesses or of the girls, and the speaker is always tender and delicate towards her addressees. The main difference may be perceived in the status of her addressees as compared to Sappho’s: Sappho’s speaker finds herself in a superior position when faced with her young lover, in the sense that the addressee must perceive Sappho’s poetic persona as having a double role in her development as a person: erotic and intellectual, as the inexperienced girls would evolve in both respects. For instance, Maximus of Tyre (2nd century AD) compares Sappho’s relationships with her girls with Socrates’ own with young boys:

But is it not love of the Lesbian poetess (if one can compare older with more recent) in fact identical with Socrates’ amatory art? It seems to me that each of them pursued a particular kind of affection, for women in the one case and for men in the other. Both claimed to have many beloveds, and to be captivated by anyone who was beautiful. What Alcibiades, Charmides, and

Phaedrus were to one, Gyrinna, Atthis, and Anactoria were to the poetess of Lesbos. (qtd. in Duban 39)

By contrast, when she addresses the goddesses, Sappho's speaker is the one asking for help and advice, and, although she sometimes leaves the impression of intimacy between her and Aphrodite, for instance, in requesting the goddess to be her "ally," they are never on an equal position because of the mortal/immortal dichotomy that exists between them. The following kletic hymn addressed to Hera illustrates this discrepancy between the weak mortal who needs help and the powerful immortal who can offer help:

Reveal your graceful figure here,
Come close to me, Hera, I make entreaty
Just as the kings once made their prayer
like long ago, then, grant this favour,
As you have done... ("Fragment 166" 5-8)

Hera, like Aphrodite, is described and invoked in an aesthetically pleasing manner, precisely in order for them to be flattered and to be shown affection, as well as admiration.

It could be argued that some of H. D.'s poems are written by using certain elements that are specific to kletic hymns, resembling Sappho's. For instance, in "Hermonax," one may read a summon:

Gods of sea;
Ino,
Leaving warm meads
For the green, grey-green fastness
Of the great depths;
And Palaemon,
Bright striker of sea-shaft,
Hear me (1-8)

in which Ino, the formal mortal queen who became a sea goddess under the epithet Leucothea ("the white goddess") and her son

Melicertes, who also became a maritime god under the epithet Palaemon, are asked to listen to the speaker's entreaty: "Hear me." The use of sea-related gods is most likely not coincidental, since H. D.'s Sapphic poems show a fascination for the maritime universe, as is the case in "Hermes of the Ways":

Hermes, Hermes,
The great sea foamed,
Gnashed its teeth about me;
But you have waited,
Where sea-grass tangles with
Shore-grass. (50-55)

Unlike Sappho, H. D. addresses a male deity, only this poem does not seem to be a kletic hymn, because although the speaker uses apostrophe to address the god directly, there is no evident entreaty or enumeration of past deeds. Nevertheless, the appellative "Hermes," who has waited for the speaker, it is suggested, "Where sea-grass tangles with / Shore-grass," is repeated, and this poetic device adds to the mystery and to the mythical aspect of the imagery H. D. uses. The modernist poet makes use of deity invocations to mingle god-like imagery with the poetic persona's inner perception, which reveals a complex poetic pattern Sappho used as well.

One of H. D.'s most famous poems, considered by some critics "the epitome of the Imagist poem" (Reisman 99), "Oread," plays with the concept of kletic hymn by addressing the sea in what may be a summon followed by an entreaty:

Whirl up, sea –
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir. (1-6)

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman also notices the incantatory quality of “Oread” when stating that: “One step beyond the level of the surface imagery, the poem becomes an incantation, a prayer almost, spoken by the remote-dwelling oread on behalf of herself and her cloistered sisters” (102). According to Reisman, “‘Oread’ has, as the Imagists insisted, free verse (...) a rhythmic and linguistic development that is musical rather than metrical, corresponding to the sense of the poem” (100). This statement could easily be correlated to Sappho’s lyrics (rather than verses, as it is generally assumed that her poetry was meant to be sung), thus emphasising that Imagism’s insistence upon the importance of musicality in poems is surely not to be neglected when analysing H. D.’s and Sappho’s common poetic devices.

Reisman defined the oread as “a nymph of Greek myth—in particular, a mountain nymph” (101). The critic further stated that “the oread is one of the multiple forms that H. D. used to develop the central feminine consciousness in her writings” adding that “mountain nymphs were especially identified in myth as companions of the goddess Artemis, the virgin huntress associated with the moon (101).” The series of adjectives Reisman uses to describe personified oreads (“beautiful young girls, amorous, musical, gentle, and shy virgins”) uncannily resembles the traits of character that Sappho’s addressees would evince. As far as the symbolic presence of Artemis is concerned, Reisman adds that “the goddess Artemis is an offstage presence in this poem, as in others. Her figure, white, distant, cold, virginal, yet passionate, is another of the complex manifestations of consciousness that appear in odd guises throughout H. D.’s poetry” (101).

It is important to note that Sappho herself wrote a Fragment about Artemis (it can be assumed she wrote more, but they were lost), but the goddess is only mentioned, not invoked:

Artemis made the pledge no god can break:
 ‘Upon my head and all that I hold dear,
 I shall remain a maid, a mountaineer
 Hunting on summits – grant this for my sake.’

The Father of the Blessed gave the nod – yes;
 And all the gods pronounced her Frontier Goddess
 And slayer of Stags, and Eros never crosses
 Her path... (“Fragment 44” 1-8)

When discussing this Fragment, Poochigian states that Artemis, together with Athena and Hestia, is a virgin goddess over whom “Aphrodite has no sway” (64). Moreover, the critic identifies a “Homeric air” that Sappho gives the poem by using “epic diction and rhythms” (64), as will be shown later on in this article, when Homeric aspects in Sappho’s poetry are discussed.

Thus, H. D.’s allusion to Artemis is “but one of many in H. D.’s poems to the Greek world, which was, along with Egyptian, Roman, and other civilizations of antiquity, a frame of reference and an abiding source of inspiration for her” (Reisman 101), part of which came from Sappho’s own direct or indirect references to mythology.

Amy Lowell also alludes to goddesses when addressing her beloved:

Tell me,
 Was Venus more beautiful
 Than you are,
 When she topped
 The crinkled waves,
 Drifting shoreward
 On her plaited shell?

 For me,
 You stand poised
 In the blue and buoyant air,
 Cinctured by bright winds,
 Treading the sunlight.
 And the waves that precede you
 Ripple and stir
 The sands at my feet. (“Venus Transiens” 1-6, 16-23)

The speaker's lover is compared to the goddess of love and beauty. Moreover, as one might suggest, Lowell's poem seems to echo the Sapphic poetic persona in praising beauty and feminine traits by attributing them to Aphrodite/Venus. While this does not resemble an invocation, the lines could still be correlated to a certain Sapphic erotic feeling, which is present in the Greek poet's stanzas when goddesses are mentioned.

However personal and delicate Sappho's poetry might seem, critics have identified several fragments that mingle the Homeric tradition with the feminine eroticism and delicacy of the rest of the poetess' poetic corpus. Greene writes in the introduction to *Women Poets in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2005) that another Greek poetess, Anyte of Tegea, born three centuries after Sappho, "innovates conventional literary genres by transposing Homeric vocabulary to the personal and domestic sphere" (xi). I argue that Sappho had already achieved such innovations by means of man-related concepts in her poetry, possibly inspiring Anyte of Tegea to follow in her footsteps.

Poochigian mentions Sappho's use of Homeric language and atmosphere that are evident in several fragments, like the following:

Idahos, then, the panting emissary,
Reported:
'Out of Asia deathless glory
From holy Thebe [*sic*] and the stream-fed port
Of Plakia, Hector and his men escort
The bright-eyed, delicate Andromache
On shipboard over the infertile sea
.....
The daughters of King Priam stood aloof
And sweetly then the double-oboe's cadence
Mingled with the rhythmic rattles as the maiden
Sang sacred songs. A fine sound strode the air.
Cups on the roadside, vessels everywhere,
Cassia and frankincense were mixed with myrrh.
.....

The men all in a choir
 Summoned first that lover of the lyre,
 The long-range archer, Paeon, then extolled
 Andromache and Hector, godlike to behold' ("Fragment 44" 1-7,
 18-23, 26-29)

The Homeric elements are evident: the mention of Homeric heroes like Hector, Andromache and King Priam, "an objective viewpoint and a dactylic metre suggestive of the metre of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*" (Poochigian 56) and the atmosphere itself, which denotes the "deathless glory" (an element which can also be related to immortality achieved through victorious battle in the case of Homeric heroes, and through art and love in Sappho's case, as will be shown later on) and the celebratory feast. What Sappho manages to accomplish in this poem is the elevation of the wedding scene (a conventional "feminine" scene), which "had no parallel in Homer," to "epic magnitude" without moralizing about the heroes (Poochigian 56). Poochigian mentions another Sapphic fragment that alludes to the concepts of honour and value (which were considered to be masculine qualities): "By giving me creations of their own / My girls have handed me renown" ("Fragment 32" 1-2). "As in the Homeric world the girls here publicly acknowledge Sappho's value by awarding her prizes," since they use the word "*timē* – word which means both honour and value" (Poochigian 40). Another fragment that mingles eroticism with Homeric motifs (in this case, military divisions) is the following:

Some call ships, infantry or horsemen
 The greatest beauty earth can offer;
 I say it is whatever a person
 Most lusts after

 and I think of Anaktoria
 And I would rather watch her body
 Sway, her glistening face flash dalliance
 Than Lydian war cars at the ready
 And armed battalions.
 Far away... ("Fragment 16" 1-4, 12-17)

In this fragment, Sappho uses the *priamel*, “a literary focusing device in which alternatives serve as foils for the true subject of the poem, revealed as the climax” (Poochigian 58). This literary device is also used by H. D. in “Fragment 36,” where the modernist poet imitates “the repetition of negation and recurrent images to recapture [the poem’s] melodic line” (Greene 195). In Sappho’s fragment, the *priamel* consists of the fact that “military divisions serve as foils leading up to the climactic declaration: ‘the most beautiful’ thing is ‘whatever a person most lusts after’ [and it has also been assumed] that this fragment is a straightforward love poem for Anaktoria” (Poochigian 57). Hence, Sappho blends erotic declarations by concealing them underneath war-related vocabulary, and, as Greene states, she “transfers masculine values of conquest to the sphere of love” (245). Greene also suggests that the hymn to Aphrodite, known as “Fragment 1” (previously discussed in relation to the concept of kletic hymn), presents Homeric influences as well: firstly, when the speaker requests Aphrodite to be her “ally in battle” (the “battle” referring to revenge in love), thus employing concepts of “conquest and militarism,” and secondly, in Aphrodite’s descent, which “recalls the scene in the *Iliad* where Aphrodite enters the battlefield and ends up retreating to Olympus to heal the stab wound inflicted on her by Diomedes” (Winkler qtd. in Greene 246). Moreover, when the speaker in Sappho’s hymn makes her entreaty to Aphrodite, she asks the goddess not to “subdue her with cares,” “subdue” being a word that in Greek is often “associated with conquest and domination.” Greene also considers that the choice of sparrows instead of horses to drive Aphrodite’s chariot is a “deviation from the *Iliad* model,” a detail that expresses a certain “resistance” to pure Homeric values (246).

Moreover, the Homeric epic concern for immortality achieved through glory in battle and great deeds is reflected in the Sapphic poetry by means of an interest in attaining immortality through art (i.e. her songs): as Homeric heroes gained immortality through fame in battle and *arete* (i.e. excellence, virtue, from which the Roman concept of *virtus* emerged), so did Sappho want to

achieve it through her poetry. In this context, the fact that the Sapphic persona is concerned about her mortal condition as a human being and a few of her fragments deal with the perishable nature of human existence is worth mentioning:

Stiffness had seized on these once supple limbs,
And black braids with the passing years turned white.
Age weighs heavily on me, and the knees
Buckle that long ago, like fawns, pranced nimbly.
I groan much but to what end? Humans simply
Cannot be ageless like divinities.¹

The realisation that humans are, unlike gods, doomed to die, prompts the Sapphic poetic persona to seek immortality either through love, or, even more often, through her art, which would remain long after her death. The lines:

I declare
That later on,
Even in an age unlike our own,
Someone will remember who we are. ("Fragment 147" 1-4)

suggest either immortality through art, or, because of the plural ("we"), immortality through erotic love. In addition to this, there is a Sapphic fragment which deals with the issue of eternal remembrance through art by addressing a mysterious woman whom scholars assumed to be either "an uneducated woman" (Stobaeus qtd. in Poochigian 28) or "a wealthy [but] uncultivated and ignorant woman" (Plutarch qtd. in Poochigian 28):

But when you lie dead
No one will notice or feel sad
Because you gathered no sprays of the roses
Of the Pierian Muses.
Once lost in Hades' hall
You will be homeless and invisible –
Another shadow fluttering back and forth
With shadows of no worth. ("Fragment 118" 5-12)

This fragment is highly relevant for Sappho's concern with immortality through art, as she does not want to end up in Hades' hall (she also seems to be confident that she will not), where everything is dull and nothing but shade:

except in a few, special cases, Hades' hall is not a place of punishment like Christian Hell; it is a gloomy detention area where the *psychai* (or 'breaths') of the deceased remain forever as insubstantial images or 'shades' of themselves. It is not at all painful but very dull. We find in this fragment the same concern for immortality which we find in 'I declare.' (Poochigian 28)

It could be argued that a similar preoccupation with human mortality is present in Vita Sackville-West's "In Memoriam Virginia Woolf" that resembles Sappho's own poems about the loss of her girls (even if they would leave Sappho in order to get married, it can be argued that the speaker in Sappho's poems mourns the departure of her girls, that is, their leaving is felt as a sort of spiritual and emotional death). Sackville-West's poem reminds the reader of the immortality Woolf acquired through her art, a notion that, as shown above, also preoccupied Sappho:

Many words crowd, and all and each unmeaning.
The simplest words in sorrow are the best.
So let us say, she loved the water-meadows,
The Downs; her friends; her books; her memories;
The room which was her own.
London by twilight; shops and Mrs. Brown;
Donne's church; the Strand; the buses, and the large
Smell of humanity that passed her by.
I remember she told me once that she, a child,
Trapped evening moths with honey round a tree-trunk,
And with a lantern watched their antic flight.
So she, a poet, caught her special prey
With words of honey and a lamp of wit.
Frugal, austere, fine, proud,
Rich in her contradictions, rich in love,
So did she capture all her moth-like self

.....
 Some say, she lived in an unreal world,
 Cloud-cuckoo-land. Maybe. She now has gone
 Into the prouder world of immortality. (1-16, 26-28)

Sappho's use of Homeric values and style in order to present "masculine" values combined with delicate imagery and motifs could be compared to several of Marianne Moore's poems. Moore also mingles delicacy with a certain form of masculinity in order to express herself in some poems that also tackle the issue of immortality:

So he who strongly feels,
 behaves. The very bird,
 grown taller as he sings, steels
 his form straight up. Though he is captive,
 his mighty singing says, satisfaction is a lowly
 thing, how pure a thing is joy.
 This is mortality,
 this is eternity. ("What are Years?" 19-26)

The concern for immortality as opposed to the mortal human condition paves the way for another discussion that starts from Homeric influences and man-related motifs and concepts in Sappho's poetry, which will further lead to an exploration of the Freudian principles of desire and death drive in Sappho's, H. D.'s and Lowell's poetry. For the ancient Greeks, *andreia* was a concept regarding men exclusively, meaning manliness, fortitude, courage. By making use of it in battle, the Greek heroes expected metaphorical immortality through eternal fame, brought by victories and conquests. The same manly, heroic way appears to apply to Sappho's view of conquest in love in "Subtly bedizened Aphrodite" ("Fragment I"), in which "Sappho rounds out her allusions to Homeric epic by asking Aphrodite to be her *summachos* ('ally in battle'). She thus substitutes her trials in love for those of a hero in battle and elevates matters of the heart to the same levels as war" (Poochigian 8). Moreover, in such lines as

In all honesty, I want to die
 Leaving for good after a good long cry,
 She said: 'We both have suffered terribly,
 But, Sappho, it is hard to say goodbye' ("Fragment 94" 1-4)

Sappho uses the metaphor of dying for or because of love in order to render her suffering. As death is tightly related to war in the Homeric tradition, the metaphors of love and conquest in matters of love gain war-like connotations. For instance, the syntagms: "stung by the sword (in battle)" / "stung by Cupid's arrow (in love)," which have now become clichés, suggest violence, suffering and bravery in both war and love.

This constant dichotomy of violence or death in Homeric terms and love paves the way for another dichotomy, that of desire and death-longing (or death-drive in Freudian terminology): Eros and Thanatos. According to Poochigian, Sappho wrote a number of "erotic songs which express death-longing" (20), and one could observe that there is an underworld imagery in Sappho that projects itself into issues related both to love and to death-longing, like in the case of a poem quoted above, "Fragment 118," which dealt with the afterlife in Hades' Hall, as well as in the case of the following fragment: "But a strange longing to pass me on / Seizes me, and I need to see / Lotuses on the dewy banks of Acheron" ("Fragment 95" 1-4). Acheron is "a lake in the underworld across which the boatman Charon ferries the shades (or ghosts) of the dead" and lotuses are "associated with forgetfulness, [and] grow along its shore" (Poochigian 20).

Nevertheless, the dichotomic aspect of desire and death-longing in Sapphic poetry is best observed in her erotic songs that deal with Eros, the god of love:

That impossible predator,
 Eros the Limb-Loosener,
 Bitter-sweetly and afresh
 Savages my flesh.
 Like a gale smiting an oak

On mountainous terrain, Eros, with a stroke,
Shattered my brain. ("Fragment 130" 1-7)

One should note the brutal act of Eros who hurts the lovers with the arrow in order to make them fall in love. Arrows belong to the lexical field of war and death but have, nevertheless, become part of an erotic act, of the act of falling in love. Eros' epithet of "limb-loosener" who "savages" the speaker's flesh is another figure of speech that mingles violence and eroticism, as it expresses an erotic context.

Drawing on this Sapphic fragment for inspiration, H. D. recomposes it in her own "Fragment 40":

Keep love and he wings,
with his bow,
up, mocking us,
keep love and he taunts us
and escapes.
Keep love and he sways apart
in another world,
outdistancing us
Keep love and he mocks,
ah, bitter and sweet,
your sweetness is more cruel
than your hurt
Honey and salt,
fire burst from the rocks
to meet fire
.....
Fire darted aloft and met fire:
in that moment
love entered us. (1-15, 17-19)

Besides the implied violence the poem suggests, H. D. plays with a number of dichotomic images: the leitmotif "bitter-sweet" taken from a Sapphic fragment that also appears as an epigraph for H. D.'s poem, the oxymoron "honey and salt," and the "cruel"

sweetness, all meant to emphasise Eros' (who, ironically, mocks and taunts the lovers) own double-nature.

Similarly, Sappho's songs dealing with the sight of the beloved are violent and tensioned, even without mentioning Eros' presence:

Because my tongue is shattered. Gauzy
 Flame runs radiating under
 My skin; all that I see is hazy,
 My ears all thunder.
 Sweat comes quickly, and a shiver
 Vibrates my frame. I am more sallow
 Than grass and suffer such a fever
 As death should follow. ("Fragment 31" 9-16)

As Poochigian notes, this fragment does not focus on the sight of the lover and on her description, but rather on the inner feelings of the speaker: "instead of an objectification of the beloved we are given an objectification of the lover: she is broken down piece by piece" (Poochigian 22). The "symptoms" of the poetic persona are so intense that she feels she might die, hence another instance of the violent act of falling in love and of eroticism itself.

By playing with the elements of the Homeric epic, Sappho manages, as some critics have suggested, to "break the silence of [famous] women in Antiquity, an instant in which women became more than the objects of men's desire" (Dubois qtd. in Poochigian 58), as she tried to comprehend their actions and give them their own voice:

Helen surpassed all humankind
 In looks but left the world's most noble
 Husband behind,
 Coasting off to Troy where she
 Thought nothing of her loving parents
 And only child but, let astray... ("Fragment 16" 6-11)

Poochigian notes that this fragment implies understanding “Helen [of Troy] as love object instead of active subject” (58). The Helen of Sappho’s poetry is given a subjective point of view as she explains her choices that led to the Trojan War, which is highly innovative for Sappho’s times:

She [Helen] decides of her own free will to give up her husband and family for a person that she desires. Her object of desire, Paris, is not named in what we have of the poem, and this omission better serves the initial philosophical proposition. The audience is left to decide whether Helen’s voluntary abandonment of her family is reprehensible or justifiable. (Poochigian 58)

Poochigian adds that “Sappho is important because she gives a fully human voice to female desire for the first time in Western literature. Since she defiantly chooses the quintessential love-object Helen of Troy as her freethinking agent, she seems fully conscious of the revolutionary claim she is making” (Poochigian xxxix). H. D. also tried to offer a subjective view that would turn away the “objectification” of heroines in mythology. According to Nina Baym et al., “H. D. was struck by the fact that the legend [of Helen of Troy] was related entirely from the male point of view; Helen never had a chance to speak” (350). I argue that as Sappho gave Helen of Troy a chance to express herself, so did H. D. with Eurydice in her eponymous poem, written from Eurydice’s perspective – she addresses Orpheus in an angry, disappointed poetic monologue:

So you have swept me back –
 I who could have walked with the live souls
 above the earth
 I who could have slept among the live flowers
 at last

 So for your arrogance
 I am broken at last,

I who have lived unconscious,
 who was almost forgotten

.....
 Why did you turn back, that hell should be reinhabited of myself
 thus
 swept into nothingness? ("Eurydice" 1-5, 11-14, 25-28)

Eurydice's monologue takes place after Orpheus looks back at her when they are about to exit hell, thus breaking the promise he had made to Hades. H. D.'s Eurydice hopelessly asks Orpheus, her addressee, why he has turned his glance back, thus condemning her to remain in the underworld:

why did you glance back –
 why did you hesitate for that moment

.....
 What was it you saw in my face –
 the light of your own face,
 the fire of your own presence?

.....
 Everything is lost,
 everything is crossed with black,
 black upon black
 and worse than black –
 this colourless light. ("Eurydice" 29-30, 37-39, 53-57)

Eurydice's anger is conveyed by means of figures of speech that revolve around the imagery of the underworld – the place with "colourless light" that resembles Sappho's description of Hades' Hall. It is, furthermore, suggested that Orpheus is condemned to solitude and eternal sadness as well, and the poem ends with the metaphor of hell opening "like a red rose," a powerful image that manages to fuse the imagery of death and life into one:

My hell is no worse than yours
 though you pass along the flowers and speak
 with the spirits above earth

.....

before I am lost,
hell must open like a red rose
for the dead to pass. ("Eurydice" 106-109, 133-135)

Having taken all of the above-mentioned aspects into consideration, I have tried to argue that Sappho and the modernist women poets discussed in this article share common stylistic, thematic and formal features, which make a comparative-contrastive approach to their work not only legitimate, but also relevant. These women poets' constant return to mythological imagery becomes a means of expressing eroticism, and their common interest in myths evoking women like Helen of Troy and Eurydice simultaneously allude to and dismiss the Homeric tradition of the male hero whose victories on the battlefield bring him fame. In Sappho and H. D. in particular, mythical women are given a voice of their own to express a range of feelings that show their individualisation and, ultimately, their humanisation through poetry and art in general.

Their love poetry expresses the dichotomic relation of desire and death-longing, in which both the act of falling in love and the suffering caused by an erotic disappointment are expressed either by turning to gods – Eros, the god of love, and Artemis, known as the virgin goddess – or by methodically analysing their inner selves in order to show the brutality of what is generally perceived as delicate. Sappho's implied similes in which she compares matters of the heart with matters of war is paralleled in the modernists' search for new ways of expressing "solemn" feelings.

Their oxymoronic poetic universe is expressed in fragmented stanzas, a common feature of modernist poetry, which mirrors the fragmentariness and incompleteness of Sappho's surviving work. The musicality of Sappho's songs reverberates in the modernist women poets' use of language and changing rhythms that combine, as Sappho does, the colloquial and the formal, the private and the universal. Hence, all these women poets turned back to Sappho at some point or another, finding their modernist

Weltanschauung in some Sapphic fragments that influenced their writing in terms of style, form and choice of poetic imagery and motifs.

Notes:

¹ Martin West, "A New Sappho Poem," *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5334 (24 June 2005), p. 8, lines 3-8.

Works Cited

- Baym, Nina, et al. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Vol. D. New York: Norton, 2012. Print.
- Carson, Anne. "The Justice of Aphrodite in Sappho." *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*. Ed. Ellen Greene. Berkeley: California UP, 1996. 227-233. UC PE-Books Collection, 1982-2004. Web. 3 Mar. 2019.
- Doolittle, Hilda. "Selected Poems." *Imagist Poetry: An Anthology*. Ed. Bob Blaisdell. New York: Dover, 2011. 22-36. Print.
- Duban, Jeffrey M. *The Lesbian Lyre. Reclaiming Sappho for the 21st Century*. Clairview Books Ltd., 2016. Print.
- Greene, Ellen. "Apostrophe and Women's Erotics in the Poetry of Sappho." *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*. Ed. Ellen Greene. Berkeley: California UP, 1996. 234-248. UC P E-Books Collection, 1982-2004. Web. 3 Mar. 2019.
- . "Introduction." *Women Poets in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Norman: Oklahoma UP, 2005. xi-xxi. Print.
- Lowell, Amy. "Selected Poems." *Imagist Poetry: An Anthology*. Ed. Bob Blaisdell. New York: Dover, 2011. 93-96. Print.
- Moore, Marianne. "What are Years." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym et al. Vol. D. New York: Norton, 2012. Print.
- Poochigian, Aaron. "Introduction" and "Notes" to *Stung with Love: Poems and Fragments*. Trans. Aaron Poochigian. London: Penguin, 2015. Print.

- Reisman, Rosemary M. Canfield, ed. *Feminist Poets*. Ipswich: Salem P, 2012. Print.
- Sackville-West, Vita. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mary Ann Caws. Macmillan. E-book.
- Sappho. *Stung with Love: Poems and Fragments*. Trans. Aaron Poochigian. London: Penguin, 2015. Print.
- Segal, Charles. "Eros and Incantation: Sappho and Oral Poetry." *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*. Ed. Ellen Greene. Berkeley: California UP, 1996. 59-77. UC P E-Books Collection, 1982-2004. Web. 3 Mar. 2019.
- Whiteman, Bruce. "Sappho; or, on Loss." *The Hudson Review* 66. 4 (2014): 673–688. JSTOR. Web. 20 Mar. 2019.