

Sapphic Consciousness in H.D. and de Noailles

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**Catherine O. Clark,**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Sapphic Consciousness in H.D. and de Noailles" Catherine O. Clark discusses how female modernists, like their male counterparts, re-evaluated their artistic position in relation to the Greeks and Romans as they explored experimental modes of aesthetic and literary expression. However, many women writers at the turn of the century developed a unique palimpsest with their predecessors, specifically Sappho, that deconstructed and destructed conventional approaches to classical legacy and myth. Clark analyzes selected poems by modernists H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Anna de Noailles in which they evoke a Hellenistic past and that collapses the artificial constructions of a largely hegemonic lyric tradition. These women poets evoke a Sapphic lyrical style as they re-imagine themselves in the poetics of the past, resulting in both fragmentation and reconciliation.

## Catherine O. CLARK

### Sapphic Consciousness in H.D. and de Noailles

Virginia Woolf pointed out that early twentieth-century writers and artists cast a tremulous eye to the classics, even as they sought to reinvent themselves in a new age as symbolists, surrealists, imagists, and cubists: "Entirely aware of their [the Greeks'] own standing in the shadow, and yet alive to every tremor and dream of existence, there they endure, and 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" (38) and T.S. Eliot's declared that "no poet, no artist of any art, has complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists ... you must set him for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (4). Eliot attempts a fusion of the past and his present, a task manifestly less homogenous than represented in his essay. His use of the masculine pronoun is, in this case, not a neutral choice, and does in fact reflect his assumption that the greatest poets are male. Female modernists re-evaluated their artistic position in relation to the Greeks as they explored experimental modes of aesthetic and literary expression. Sappho, the sixth-century BC Greek poet, became a reconciliation of antiquity and the new literary movement looking for fresh inspiration. Sappho's presence under Modernism became a distinctive trend, and many women writers at the turn of the century developed a unique palimpsest with her work that deconstructed conventional approaches to Greek legacy and myth. To demonstrate this, I discuss poems by modernists H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Anna de Noailles in which they evoke a Hellenic past, which effectively collapses the artificial constructions of a largely hegemonic lyric tradition. Their (re)occupation of lyrical traditions destabilizes and challenges the idyllic Hellenic constructions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

John J. Winkler posits that Sapphic poetry occupies multiple categories and demonstrates that this poetry illustrates a "double consciousness" encompassing both the public and private spheres of Greek daily life. He notes that readers of Greek poetry are presented with considerations of performative rhetoric versus internal dialogue: Is it one or the other? Winkler claims that, in Sappho's poetry, it is both, and that this sets her apart from other Greek poets. Winkler argues that minorities (the critical and textual Other) become "bilingual" in their ability to conform to cultural norms and public ethics, as well as speaking the language of their own private reality (in this case, women in a patriarchal society). Most importantly, Winkler's consideration of the Sapphic defines it within the realm of both "otherness" and "masculine norms" (164) and that "Sappho's consciousness is a larger circle enclosing the smaller one of Homer" (176). By developing a link to a destabilization of binaries in general, the Sapphic lyrical voice becomes inclusive rather than exclusive. Winkler's analysis of Sappho helps us understand her lyrical distinctiveness during her epoch and in following centuries. Her use of *pathos* is accentuated by her poetic ability to speak "in many voices." For example, in Fragment 16, one of Sappho's more completely preserved poems, the poet inhabits both the Homeric epic tradition and the lyrical praise of beauty. Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* predate Sappho's verses and scholars agree that Sappho's poem is addressing his epic poetry. Sappho adopts multiple voices surrounding the tale of the Trojan War — that of Homer's narrator and that of Helen's voice, which is traditionally read within the patriarchal discourse of the epic. However, the premise is more elaborate than a simple opposition of binaries: the multiple identities in the poem, as in other Sapphic verse, fail to reconcile themselves, and leave a sense of fragmentation that undermines the poem's apparent premise (which in this poem is often misread as simple female versus male desire).

The poem opens with a catalogue of military might using epic language recalling the Greek armies of *The Iliad*. The poetic voice begins as generalized indirect discourse — the poet remains uncommitted by stating "some say" without specifying who "they" are. The reader is referred to a communal discourse since Sappho is speaking in cultural and social generalizations. The poet then asserts her own definition with the introductory conjunction "but I say," using the first person in opposition to the previously expressed cultural norms or consensus. We can see how the symmetry and repetition of "they/oi" creates a specific emphasis in Greek, rhythmically alternating with the on/ón internal rhymes (a dynamic that is lost in translation). This rhythm is then aurally and metrically

disrupted by the poet's personal pronoun "egó." The poetic voice is now individualized and proposes a broader, more encompassing definition of beauty and desire. "What one loves" is not a person or object but an abstract concept: Helen is held up not as an object of desire herself but as an example of an acting subject who followed what she desired. In fact, Helen is herself a complex representation of love since she is both "unsurpassed in beauty" (idealized) and "understandable" to "us" as her peers and readers.

Page duBois defends the poem against Denys Pages's dismissive comment that "the sequence of thought might have been clearer ... The poem opens with a common device ... [that] rings dull in our doubtful ears" (Pages qtd. in duBois 79). DuBois states that, on the contrary, the "common device" in fact serves a specific purpose within the poem: the language of epic verse and the example of Helen of Troy's beauty are in fact challenges to rhetorical tropes of verse. Sappho is manipulating conventional perceptions of desire in favor of a more abstract notion by cloaking philosophical cogitation (analyzing the nature of desire) in the guise of narrative discourse (the story of Helen during the Trojan War). DuBois argues that Sappho's poem accomplishes two effects: "I see ... in this poem, one of the few texts which break the silence of women in antiquity, an instant in which women become more than the objects of man's desire. Sappho's fragment 16 reaches beyond the confines of the lyric structure, looks both forward and backward in time, expresses the contradictions of its moment in history" (79-80). This fluidity of time is linked to the challenged identities in H.D. and Anna de Noailles, as well as in Sappho. In addition, both H.D. and de Noailles engage heavily in repetition of words and images, like Sappho, in order to emphasize the particular poetic formula that they are manipulating. These poets make similar attempts to understand various silences surrounding their identity, and to challenge their own paradoxical moment in history.

The nineteenth-century romantic notions of the feminine included the trope of the dead Beloved who acted as a silent muse for the male poet, and the synonymy of the feminine with the natural world through which the implied male poet attained a kind of privileged enlightenment (which in turn allowed him to speak for mankind in general). Despite modernism's spirit of experimentation and innovation, these particular trends persisted into the twentieth century. In fact, mid-nineteenth-century reactions against romanticism did not liberate the feminine from symbolic associations with Nature, and generally led to a disapprobation of both. Tama Lea Engelking points out that the nature of the feminine in art altered very little from romanticism's idealized Muse to Baudelaire's *femme damnée* since both retained the idea of female as object: "fin-de-siècle art, as well as literature consistently represented woman as bacchant, siren, nymph, more vegetal and bestial than she was human" (99). It is precisely these tropes of the feminine in poetry that H.D. and de Noailles confronted during modernism. H.D.'s 1916 poem, "Eurydice," which follows a discursive pattern from personal disempowerment to autonomous survival. Her challenge to standard gender roles is immediately evident as she gives voice to the mythic Eurydice, beloved of the musician and lyrical poet Orpheus. This choice is notable not only because Eurydice is usually a silent actor in Orpheus's tale of artistic anguish and lost love, but also because the gifted Orpheus is the widely claimed patron of lyric poets, inspired by Apollo himself. H.D. disputes both of these premises, rejecting Orpheus's legacy in favor of Eurydice's more complex experience. The first line establishes the first-person poetic voice directly addressing the second-person "you" (Orpheus), as if the reader has awkwardly stumbled upon a tense lover's quarrel. The initial stanza is accusatory while still granting Orpheus agency and power over the speaker with the passive construction of the phrase "So you have swept me back" (l. 1). However, the interjection "So" indicates a rising assertiveness, and Eurydice berates Orpheus's "arrogance" and "ruthlessness" while still playing the role of the Beloved whose rescue is dependent on the male lover. The repeated "I who..." emphasizes her uncertain identity as neither living nor dead and linked to her mythic husband, as well as her opposing tendency to question her role as the dead or lost Muse/beloved. Her objections also emphasize the rash *hubris* of Orpheus's quest to rescue her from the Underworld — her trip out of hell is an unnatural voyage backwards, temporally and physically.

In the second section of the poem Eurydice's voice becomes a clamorous echo of the interrogatives "why" and "what." However, Orpheus is given neither opportunity nor means to respond to the poet's barrage of questions, and the speaker ventures her own answer, demanding: "what was it that crossed my face / with the light from yours / and your glance? / what was it you saw in my

face? / the light of your own face, / the fire of your own presence?" (<<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/webtexts/eurydice/>>; in further quotations refer to this website). Orpheus's fatal glance backward is not the impatience of a heartsick lover, but the impulse of a narcissistic artist, hungry for his own image. In the Sapphic mode demonstrated in the previous poem, H.D. is challenging masculinist concepts of desire. The following stanzas move from Eurydice's personal experience to an extended metaphor of the feminine's relation to the natural world. H.D. embraces the interwoven images of female and earth but challenges their significance. The finesse of this prismatic shift (where Orpheus sees his image reflected in Eurydice's face which in turn reflects the earth) can hardly be overlooked. H.D. realigns subtly the conventional Woman-as-Nature who serves as an inspiration for the Artist in order to attain a liminal state of existence: "what had my face to offer / but reflex of the earth, / hyacinth colour / caught from the raw fissure in the rock / where the light struck, / and the colour of azure crocuses, / and the bright surface of gold crocuses / and of the wind-flower, / swift in its veins as lightning / and as white." H.D.'s appropriation of the flower as poetic symbol is strikingly innovative: the surprising combination "wind-flower" is a re-evaluation of conventional imagery, incorporating the harshest aspects of Nature — rock, wind, and lightning — as inherent elements of Eurydice's face and the azure and gold crocuses. This lyrical reorientation of the natural world necessarily redefines the nature of the feminine as well. The dramatic colors (azure/blue, gold, and later red) emerge and fade throughout the poem like Eurydice's own rise and fall from life to death and back again in a twice-repeated cycle. The crocuses, symbolizing new life and fresh beginnings, represent her twice lost life but also foreshadow rebirth, contrasting with the darkness of the Underworld, the "black upon black/ and worse than black, / this colourless light." The flowers themselves, now linked to her image, are sharp and strong, as powerful than the earth itself — they are "flowers that cut through the earth."

The fourth section is defined by the color blue, the lost sights of the living world, and the conditional "if," conveying a sense of nostalgia for what she could have experienced on earth *if* Orpheus had succeeded. Section five returns to the sentiments of stanza two, repeating the accusation that her lover's "arrogance" and "ruthlessness" have cost her "the flowers of the earth." Indeed, Eurydice's mourning for a breath of life, lost to her because of Orpheus's failed quest, seems to be the premise of the poem until Section five. However, lines 92-95 mark a dramatic shift in the tone of the poem, a marker not unlike Sappho's "but I say it is whatever one loves," where the poet asserts an opinion that contrasts with the poem's earlier sentiments: "yet for all your arrogance / and your glance, / I tell you this: // such loss is no loss." Eurydice subverts her previous lament for a lost life, dismissing the earlier imagery of a living earth and a black hell as *Orpheus's* illusions — poetic tropes that carry no meaning for her (or have been misread within his tradition). The repetition of the possessive "your" emphasizes that these are his flowers and light: "hell is no worse / than your earth / above the earth, / hell is no worse, / no, nor your flowers / nor your veins of light / nor your presence, / a loss; / my hell is no worse than yours / though you pass among the flowers and speak / with the spirits above the earth."

The following section expresses new power as Eurydice asserts her own strength against the circumstances of the mythic tragedy. The stanza echoes the conditional "ifs" of Part Four but with a new meaning — it is no longer a matter of if he had succeeded (since her personal agency is now independent from his), but rather if she could make him understand ("if I should tell you"). She is powerful enough to encompass the flowers, the light, and even the dark rocks. The final section emphasizes possessive pronouns again but now the experience and its sensations are hers — her spirit and "thoughts." The dramatic imagery of the final lines echoes the colors black and red from the beginning of the poem as well as the words "loss" and "lost": "though small against the black, / small against the formless rocks, / hell must break before I am lost; // before I am lost, / hell must open like a red rose / for the dead to pass." Not only has Eurydice asserted her own control over her destiny, she has essentially switched roles with Orpheus, asserting her own power to "open hell." The final flower, a red rose, becomes Eurydice's newly defined poetic experience, one that comprehends and encompasses the consciousness of Orpheus while superimposing her own perceptions.

In *Objects of Desire* Beryl Schlossman traces the reconsideration of the female muse in modernism to Sappho's poetics via Christian worship of the feminine in the form of the Virgin Mary: "In her portrayal of the subjectivity of love, the poet Sappho sets the stage for modernism ... In part through

Sappho's literary influence, the Madonna figures lead the reader beyond the dichotomies of male and female, of artist and subject, to the resonance of voices in silence. These figures speak from the outside in, or from the inside in ... The voice of the Poet is dramatically altered in the framework of modernism, but Eros the bittersweet takes on modern shapes that echo its lyrical origins" (201). In addition, according to Schlossman female sexuality continues to be "sacred and dangerous, fetishized and fatal to men" under Modernism. She points out that female sexuality continued to fascinate writers: "Virginity appeals to the jealous lover, to the courtly lover at a distance ... For Freud and Lacan, however, love is predicated on the debasement of the object as such. The emphasis on female virginity reinforces debasement, and guarantees that the lover alone possesses his beloved in soul and in body" (33). Definitions of masculine desire therefore depend on the "possession" and thus debasement of the female love object; even under Modernism, a female poet who threatens this dynamic is a challenge to centuries of prescribed gender roles from troubadours to psychoanalysts. As the next poem demonstrates, de Noailles posed just such a threat by adopting the "masculine" role of a sexually expressive poet.

De Noailles's poem "Tu vis, je bois l'azur" follows a more traditional rhyming scheme (abab, or *rime croisée*) than H.D.'s verse but with a similarly Sapphic style and exploring a distinct "double consciousness." The complex opposition between "you" (the Beloved here) and "I" (the poet) is comparable to H.D.'s poem "Eurydice": the initial stanza in de Noailles's poem establishes the female speaker-poet as the lover, and the object of her desire, the male, as the muse-Beloved. The lyrical convention of the "dead Beloved" (best exemplified by Dante's adoration of the angelic Beatrice) is subverted in the poetry of both H.D. and de Noailles — in "Eurydice" the dead Beloved is herself given a voice and perspective, whereas in "Tu vis, je bois l'azur" the gender roles are reversed, and the female poet soliloquizes about her silent male Beloved's impending and inevitable death. Eurydice's accusation that Orpheus desires his own image rather than her is reformulated in stanza seventeen of de Noailles's poem where the Beloved becomes a mirror in which she (the poet) sees her own pain and pleasure. In fact, she refers to her own sight or gaze throughout the poem (in stanzas 3, 7, 10, 11, 13, and 20) and thus to her role as a visionary. The verb "voir" ("to see") is conjugated in the past, present, and future tenses as her Beloved and his destiny reveal themselves or are exposed before her eyes. The reader is guided through a myriad of scenes, each dependent on the poet's vision of past and future events. De Noailles's poem is also characterized by repetitive meter and imagery, linking the progression of the poet's contemplation and orientation of her desire within allegorical spaces and eras. The repetition of hard consonant sounds followed by a soft vowel across the stanza ("Je n'ai ... je n'ai ... j'ai... je") and within individual lines ("de la maison, de l'heure et de l'année") creates a sensual rolling or echoing of the poet's voice. The pattern of internal parallelism resembles Sappho's "*oi men ippéon stroton oi de pesdón*" ("Some say a host of cavalry, others of infantry") and H.D.'s haunting, reverberating prosody in "Eurydice." The phonetic repetition in all three poems marks a specific aspect of the poetic consciousness — the rupture of this repetition often indicates a shift in consciousness or poetic voice. The images "fringe," "blue," and "crocuses" in H.D.'s text disrupt the previous linear progression of Eurydice's experience as she relives her narrative through more than one consciousness (her own, that of the collective feminine, and Orpheus's). The syntactical repetition in de Noailles' verse structurally reinforces the poet's access to multiple moments in time; within the stanza quoted above the poetic "I" exists in both the present and future.

Stanza three's final phrase "tu t'en vas" ("you go away") becomes the initial phrase in the following two stanzas where the poet's breathless anticipation of heartbreak undergoes two interesting transformations, both of which defamiliarize male-female sexual relations. In stanza four the poet's likeness to a "chien farouche" ("wild dog") chasing down the "l'ombre d'un papillon" ("shadow of a butterfly") recasts the female poet as the aggressor chasing down the fragile, ephemeral, and elusive Beloved. In the following stanza the poet's representation of the beloved as a ship ("navire") that is literally and figuratively engulfed by her "vaste et tranquille port" (l. 20) presents a sexual metaphor where desire is both personal and universal. While the ship's role as a phallic metaphor upholds poetic tradition, the power in this instance clearly shifts to the speaker's superior "port" which can hold "la cargaison du monde" ("the weight of the world"). In fact, throughout her poetry de Noailles expresses a sensuality that, while less subtle than that of H.D., is empowering and unapologetic. Like Sappho's, her eroticism is a source of inspiration untinged by Judeo-Christian guilt (de Noailles was an atheist)



and thus outside the reductive tendencies of the virgin/whore polarities inherent in the Western cult of the Beloved. De Noailles subscribed to an Aphrodite-inspired concept of maternity and eroticism that were not mutually exclusive (traditionally the Christian concept of "Mother," embodied by the Virgin Mary, was irreconcilable with female sexuality, personified by figures such as Salome and Eve). In addition, the French language allows a play on the homonyms *l'amour* ("love") and *la mort* ("death"), as well as *la mer* ("the sea") and *la mère* ("mother"), which is trifled with in this poem. The role of de Noailles's poet is larger than that of a lover — she is love and death, mother and lover, as implied by line 17 "*et la mer qui te berce*" ("the sea which cradles you") and in stanza 21. Her references to antiquity situate allegorically herself and the object of her desire in the roles of past Greek heroes and heroines. In Stanza 20 we find that, despite the fact that she, like all mortals, will eventually join the "*fantômes hagards*" ("haggard ghosts") (l. 78), she is more than women of myth and with greater knowledge. In this verse, her beloved is like the greatest figures of antiquity — David, Alexander, a Theban athlete — but is mortal and will cease to exist as they did. The following line shifts to the past tense as the poet remembers holding the ashes of these dead figures in a museum, categorized and placed on display. In the next stanza she reiterates her own role as a visionary who, unlike the man (doomed to a death she has already seen), transcends a specific epoch. She can see both past and future ("*Tu seras mort*").

In a final tribute to the traditional lyric formula, the poet's desire and grief are contingent upon her lover's silence and immobility; in stanza six her description of her lover's dying breath also reads like a command: "*ne bouge plus*" ("move no longer") (l. 21), and in stanza nine she includes the object of her desire among the "*grand peuple d'esclaves / Qui gît, muet et tolérant*" ("great slave people/who lie, mute and tolerant") (l. 35-6). Her power over him, it would seem, is complete. However, like the poems of Sappho and H.D., this poem does not simply reverse the gender roles of poet and object. In fact, rather than reaffirming the roles of Poet as subject and Beloved as object, de Noailles re-inhabits these roles in a way that creates a hollowing-out or shell of the cult of the Beloved. While still retaining the privilege of *la parole*, she relinquishes the role of inspired omniscience as a gesture of choice, in favor of a richer and more complicated poetic role. Her poetry embraces a hermaphroditic identity, allowing the poetics of gender to interact with and confront each other. Like H.D.'s "Eurydice," the poetic voice shifts address midway through the poem. In stanza 15 the poet begins addressing "vous" rather than "tu," obfuscating the poet's addressee. Has she "formalized" her lover to an emotional distance? And yet she returns to the pronoun "tu" in stanza 22 in a reaffirmation of their intimacy. The "vous" equally implies, of course, a more general audience than the poet's lover, now including us as readers in the poet's experience (recalling Sappho's fragment, which includes the reader in the poet's own impressions by the second half of the poem). In addition, de Noailles's poet confronts her own mortality in contemplating her lover's finite lifespan, leading to a contemplation of the cyclical nature of human existence, which diminishes poetic claims to immortality or unnatural greatness (similarly to Eurydice's contemplation of her own mortality and her denunciation of Orpheus's hyperbolic abilities). De Noailles's poet demonstrates just the "double consciousness" attributed to Sappho by Winkler — the voices within her poem embrace normalized tropes of lyrical desire and human mortality while also challenging assumptions of the poetic tradition, reorienting concepts of gender and authority in the process.

As a conclusion I return to Woolf and her acknowledgement of the Greeks's lingering presence during modernism. Women modernists evoke a Sapphic lyrical style as they re-imagine themselves in the poetics of the past, resulting in both fragmentation and reconciliation. Sappho's "double consciousness," her voice (like those of H.D. and de Noailles) exists both within and without. For these women, adopting a Sapphic style was a gesture of subversion, to be sure, but also an awareness of the contradictions which make desire so elusive and powerful — to quote Sappho, so "bittersweet."

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