

**“Ah, could they know”:  
The Place of the Erotic in H.D.’s *Hymen***

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In this essay I explore and, in part, decode the eroticism of H.D.’s second book of poetry, *Hymen*, published in 1921. First, a word on the context and form of the book. Like H.D.’s previous original poetry and translation, *Hymen* works within a Greek framework. It is set in H.D.’s own Greek world, a world which provided the poet with an imaginary space in which she could explore aesthetics, language and genre, as well as essential human emotions and relationships, both familial and sexual. From her earliest writing days, H.D. had constructed the Greek world as one free from contemporary sexual taboos. Her earliest known poems, *circa* 1910, were modelled on Andrew Lang’s translations of Theocritus, Bion and Moschus and written for Frances Gregg, her first woman lover. As we shall see, H.D. was to continue to make innovative sexual use of Greek pastoral.

The book *Hymen*, published over ten years later, is not the slim volume of brief Grecian lyrics that H.D.’s reputation might lead one to expect. It reflects instead her growing interest in all genres and in cross-generic work. The classical context provided a framework for this exploration of genres. Alongside the lyric “songs” in *Hymen* and *Heliodora*, we find many dramatic poems.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the masque “Hymen”, there is a high proportion of dramatic monologues in different voices. The monologue form allows H.D. to give a voice to women sidelined in Greek epic and drama and to articulate different perspectives. We cannot, therefore, assume the biographical “I” (often associated with the lyric mode) in these poems and should be warned away from the fallacy of biographical interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Many of the poems in *Hymen* reveal the development of H.D.’s distinctive post-imagist style, a writing distinguished by its meditative, repetitive, even philosophical, nature. This style allows for roomy echoing, circling meditations on life, love, infidelity, song and death. Sound and rhythm proceed through irregular, mainly interior, rhyme, assonance and alliteration. H.D. has found a form of writing ideally suited for both the

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articulation of thought processes and, with its caressing, lingering, echoing quality, of emotions and eroticism.

*Hymen* also bears early evidence of H.D.'s growing interest in Greek ritual and religion. Lyric in *Hymen* often takes the form of prayer, and drama borders on liturgy. H.D.'s growing fascination with cult was a transformative influence on her work; her copies of Lewis Richard Farnell's *Cults of the Greek States* (1896), now held in the Beinecke Library, Yale University, are dated 1919 and annotated heavily.<sup>3</sup> During 1918-20 then, when most of the *Hymen* poems were written, H.D. was also familiarising herself with Greek cult and her 1920 prose-poem, "Helios and Athene", is an ecstatic call to take on the Greek spirit at an inspired level:

But the time has come for men and women of intelligence to  
build up a new standard, a new approach to Hellenic literature  
and art.

Let daemons possess us! Let us terrify like Erynnēs, the whole  
tribe of academic Grecians!

Because (I state it inspired and calm and daemonical) they know  
nothing! (*Collected Poems* 328)

The spiritual power evoked in "Helios and Athene" however is also a sexual one: in the world of pre-Christian cult the two are not divided. H.D. also advocates the enflaming love of a statue, a theme common in her early work, and invokes the "doubly passionate" love of "Athene, the maiden, Parthenos" (330). We can read this double passion as a fusion of the sexual and virginal, or as the desire for both male and female, Demeter and Phoebus, at last united.

The flood of sexual intensity that I locate in the pages of *Hymen* in this essay will be shown to explore all these themes: the voyeuristic adoration of the other and the female passion for her own sex, for the other sex and for herself—as well as god in each.<sup>4</sup> I will not dwell overmuch however on the ritualistic element of *Hymen* but will concentrate on the erotic. This is in part a pragmatic decision, since Eileen Gregory has made a rich and full exploration of the theme of spiritual initiation in *Hymen* in her essay, "Scarlet Experience: H.D.'s *Hymen*". Readers wishing to redress the balance I am about to swing in the direction of the erotic should turn to that source. My reading of *Hymen* as erotic is itself a redressing of balance. Not only am I engaged here in decoding H.D.'s own cypher, but also in denying the early critical perception, still lingering, of H.D.'s poetry as cold and chaste. Thomas Burnett Swann for instance, in his *Classical World of H.D.* consistently interprets H.D. as a puritanical poet (188-92), opposed to Aphrodite, who always attempts to "hurry through the experience of passion" (63). We can trace this critical thread right back to contemporary reviews of H.D.'s poetry; *Hymen* itself was described by the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer as "deadening and monotonous" (Guest 144).

H.D.'s lover, the writer and patron of the arts, Bryher, challenged such dismissals in her review of *Hymen* in *Poetry* (March 1922). She criticised those who saw H.D. as "cold and passionless" and stressed the "color, emotion, desire, beauty" in her work, as well as its relevance to the present age. The dedicatory poem of *Hymen*, dedicated to Bryher and Perdita, H.D.'s daughter, follows a similar pattern. Pallas Athene is defended against the charge of being "high and far and blind" and a range of passionate colour—red, purple, and gold—is revealed beneath her feet:

*Ah, could they know  
how violets throw strange fire,  
red and purple and gold,  
how they glow  
gold and purple and red  
where her feet tread. (Collected Poems 101)*

It is this range of colour, "gold and purple and red", that I want to re-read in this piece, not just as richly passionate, but as sexually specific covering a range of desire.

I want first however to offer a new reading of the masque "Hymen" which begins the book. "Hymen", as I shall show, provides evidence of the significance of the erotic body to the book as a whole; it is written in the tradition of the Greek epithalamion or marriage song with which the bride's female companions sing her to her marriage bed. H.D.'s masque begins with a series of processions: four groups of maidens of different ages are followed by the bridal chorus with the bride, and then two more groups of women are introduced, a male figure of love and a band of boys. All takes place before a "dark purple" curtain unequivocally representing the hymen itself (101). Here H.D. names and visually presents the unnameable: the woman's virginal membrane, the curtain of her sex. It is the Greek context which allows her to entitle her whole volume thus radically; it provides two disguises or veils, for Hymen is also respectably the name of the God of Marriage and the archaic context can be relied upon to blind the conservative reader to what is really being discussed in both *Hymen* and "Hymen": the nature of female sexual experience.

Aside from Gregory's reading of the poem as spiritual initiation, "Hymen" has commonly been read in a sinister light by recent critics (see Burnett 34-37; Gubar 55-56; Ostriker 20-21 and Yorke 193-96).<sup>5</sup> Burnett sees the bride as raped by the solar power of love and the women displaced by the male figures who appear at the end of the piece (35-36). "Man's experience", he writes, "dominates the song" (36) which ends with a heterosexual consummation of both mute darkness and celebration (37). Liz Yorke's reading acknowledges, as Burnett's does not, the lesbian element of the poem. Yorke describes "Hymen" as a lesbian funeral, a Sapphic expression of grief for the bride entering

marriage (195). Like Burnett, she sees the speeches of the chorus of boys as a description of woman's desire eclipsed, "mute and dumb" before the male plunderer (195).

I do not wish to deny these readings of a highly ambiguous text which, like many of H.D.'s works, is open to multiple interpretations. I want instead to suggest another reading of "Hymen" both as erotic spectacle/celebration and as a presentation of multiple sexualities. The processions that are described in "Hymen" do not only suggest the religious rites of festivals which so absorbed the minds of Farnell and Jane Ellen Harrison at the time. They simultaneously, without contradiction, suggest erotic display. Here H.D. is setting herself in the tradition of Euripides and Sappho whose work was censored, she claims in an unpublished essay of this period, for its "erotic-emotional innovation" (*Euripides* 2).<sup>6</sup> We can relate the eroticism of "Hymen" to this tradition and to H.D.'s explorations of how the body can be brought back into thoughts about visionary aesthetics. In *Notes on Thought and Vision*, another contemporary essay written in July 1919, H.D. argues that vision originates from the brain and the body (specifically the womb/genitalia), for which she uses the euphemism "love region" (20-22). She asserts that the first stage of the Eleusinian Mysteries "had to do with sex"; the initiates were shown a series of erotic images which should be enjoyed "really with your body" (30). In this context, we can see the processions of women and girls bearing flowers for the bride in "Hymen" as a daring piece of lesbian eroticism in which H.D. invites her readers into an act of voyeuristic fantasy. Gregory has noted the frequent use of the words "as if" in "Hymen", suggesting that H.D. "attempts to engage her audience in a form of active imagination, to involve them in a dream-rite" (90). I would add that the "as if" aspect of "Hymen" also calls the audience to participate in erotic fantasy.

Each band of girls or women in "Hymen" is described physically, their hair being particularly noted. Group by group, the physical descriptions become more detailed and the visions more erotic. The songs the women sing evoke a wilder landscape and the flowers they bring are more overtly associated with lesbianism. First the prim matrons from the enclosed temple and gardens of Hera, goddess of marriage, wear their hair restrainedly up. The four little girls that follow have an androgynous appeal, their hair curled at the back of the head like Hermes. The four slightly taller girls that follow them are also somewhat androgynous: they wear their hair smooth and waved against the back of their heads and their tunics fall only to their knees. Their song, sung to the fading winter roses, suggests increasingly passionate mourning for the loss of the, as yet unseen, bride:

Like a bird out of our hand,  
Like a light out of our heart,  
You are gone. (104)

The fourth group of girls are the freest and wildest of all. They are the "wood-

maidens of Artemis", very far from the first "matrons" of Hera. They move and sing swiftly, "in contrast to the slow important pace of the first two groups" (104). They are described as "boyish in shape and gesture" and their heads are "tossed back", their hair "rayed out" as in love-making (104). They carry Sapphic hyacinths and anticipate the sister-lover figure of H.D.'s novels *Asphodel* and *Her* in their "swallow-song of joy" (104).<sup>7</sup> Their song is liberated from the stricter regularity of rhyme, rhythm and length of line that characterises the songs of the previous bands of women: free verse echoes free movement. Even as they scatter hyacinths on a path to the bridal door, their sea and hyacinth song suggests overflowing orgasmic passion which, in context, we can only read as lesbian:

Lady, our love, our dear,  
Our bride most fair,  
They grew among the hollows  
of the hills;  
As if the sea had spilt its blue,  
As if the sea had risen  
From its bed,  
And sinking to the level of the shore,  
Left hyacinths on the floor. (105)

With the arrival of the bride the eroticism and lesbianism of the first part of "Hymen" is confirmed. Although the mute veiled figure of the bride suggests the sacrificial victim, the words of her attendants testify to the bride's passion and their own lesbian knowledge of that passion. The chorus asks a series of teasing questions about what lies behind the veil of the figure they escort. The use of the veil in this scene is reminiscent not only of the Mysteries in which the initiate was veiled, but also of the erotic use of veils in Eastern folklore and literature. It is interesting to note that H.D., in a letter to Bryher, referred to "Hymen" as a poem of "Asiatic abandon" (14 February 1919).

Three times, the chorus asks, "Who can say that she is fair?" (105-106). Each question is followed by a stanza dwelling on the layers of veiling that exist between bride and viewer or voyeur:

Bound with fillet,  
Bound with myrtle  
Underneath her flowing veil,  
Only the soft length  
(Beneath her dress) ... (106)

The revelation is not an actual unveiling but a verbal one revealing the girls' lesbian knowledge of their companion: "We can say that she is fair", assert the maidens:

For we know underneath  
 All the wanness  
 All the heat  
 (In her blanched face)  
 Of desire  
 Is caught in her eyes as fire  
 In the dark center leaf  
 Of the white Syrian iris. (106)

Here the iris again confirms the lesbian context and the bridal white is re-visioned as passion between women. Here, we have the lesbian centre or consummation of the poem; the fact that it occupies the centre of the masque could suggest that this experience is perceived as central.

Lesbian experience does not dominate however. The sense of an impending heterosexual consummation continues: more maidens enter, bearing the bed linen for the bride. Yet, the male figure who enters is not the groom, who is displaced at one remove, but a tall youth, a winged figure, Eros or Love. This figure heralds the entrance of heterosexuality into the poem: the crimson of his tunic and his references to the bride's bed-cover suggest penetration:

The crimson cover of her bed  
 Is not so rich, nor so deeply bled  
 The purple-fish that dyed it red,  
 As when in a hot sheltered glen  
 There flowered the stalks of cyclamen (108)

The tuft of "black-purple cyclamen" that he carries, however, suggests the female genitalia, emphasizing the female experience of passion. Love's song does evoke the male erotic experience in the form of a bee making love to a purple cyclamen. The imagery is ambivalent, but the Sapphic image of the buzzing bee with "honey-seeking lips", with its suggestion of oral stimulation, is by no means wholly negative. This is not to say that the song does not present the moment of penetration:

Quivering he sways and quivering clings  
 (Ah, rare her shoulders drawing back!)  
 One moment, then the plunderer slips  
 Between the purple flower-lips. (109)

Here is the heterosexual centre or consummation of the poem, yet again, as with the maidens and the bride, it is at one remove, a song of penetration rather than a dramatic representation of the moment of sexual climax. It is a mistake to read this as simply the marriage consummation: the Love figure is a god not a groom; his song is another "as if", another metaphor. Instead, this heterosexual song of love forms but one part of a continuum of sexualities evoked in the

poem.

For, next on stage, we have the problematic boys who have been interpreted as the final confirmation of the heterosexual nature of the poem's ending. As they sing, they move as if to sweep up the petals of the flowers indicating passion spent. However, their song can also be read another way, for they do not sing of the bride and groom, as one might expect, but of the winged Love. While we can read their song as a celebration of the bride's mute submission to penetration, we can also read it as a song expressing their own desire for the flamboyant male love figure. It appears to be their own feelings of passion that they articulate when they sing:

Our limbs are numb  
Before his fiery need;  
With all their glad  
Rapture of speech unsaid,  
Before his fiery lips  
Our lips are mute and dumb. (110)

The displacement of the heterosexual consummation into a homosexual song evades the moment of penetration, I would suggest, and turns the poem round again into a homoerotic utterance.

In the final words of the boy chorus the figure of the bride returns, reasserting the place of female pleasure at the supposedly male-dominated end. The words are ambivalent, to say the least, suggesting passion but not placing it in any context:

The fringes of her veil  
Are seared and white;  
Across the flare of light,  
Blinded the torches fail.  
(Ah love is come indeed!) (110)

Love has come, but which love? The reader, who must be protected and from whom H.D. must protect herself, can read the marriage consummation in these lines. But it is also possible to interpret this love more broadly: either as representing three kinds of love (lesbian, heterosexual and homosexual) or two kinds of love (lesbian and heterosexual, the homosexual love at the end merely encoding the lesbian love) or as simply one love, whether it impassions women for women, women for men, men for women or men for men. One thing is notable: the symbolic purple curtain remains at the end of the poem, "*the purple curtain hangs black and heavy*" (110). The dark passionate centre of the bride remains unfathomed, her Artemisian virginity unpenetrated.

The figure of Love enters the text of *Hymen* to stay—the song of the boys being in some sense the song of all the characters in the book, each of whom

plays some part in the multiplicity of passionate sexualities evoked in its pages. The more culturally acceptable love of woman for man is evident in the poems in the voice of "Simaetha", "Circe" and "Phaedra", as is the love of a mortal for an immortal in "Hippolytus Temporizes" and "Evadne". "Demeter" and "Thetis", evidence of H.D.'s developing interest in family romance, reflect the desire of the mother for her child, both male and female. Homosexual desire, in particular lesbian desire, is buried at a deeper level in the text, however. We find it both in ambiguous passages in dramatic monologues spoken by specific characters, but, more intriguingly, in poems in which the speakers and addressees are unnamed and unsexed. Most of these are I/You poems, but some are in the first person plural – We.<sup>8</sup>

It is through the interpretation of the colours of passion first introduced in the dedicatory poem to Athene that we can locate the multiple kinds of desire in the poems of *Hymen*. This colour symbolism is closely related to the flower symbolism in H.D.'s work. As Diana Collecott has suggested, flowers in H.D. act as "signs or hieroglyphs poised between the text and its concealed intertexts" ("What is not said" 252). The intertexts H.D. refers to at this stage of her career are usually associated with Greek mythology and literature. In later years, her intertextual reach grew wider and more obscure. DuPlessis has noted H.D.'s early attraction to the "hermetic language of flowers" used by Meleager in his *Garland*, a piece equating female poets with specific flowers (*Career* 21). It is possible that Meleager's *Garland*, which features in several poems of *Heliodora*, provided an inspiration for H.D.'s own hermetic language of flowers.

My own argument is broader and simpler than previous interpretations of specific flowers, but it does build on earlier critical work. I should draw attention particularly to Roz Carroll's work on the "lily" in H.D.'s prose and Diana Collecott's reading of "I Said", the 1919 poem written to Bryher but not published in *Hymen* (*Poems* 322-25). In her essay on "flower upon flower", Carroll observed that the white lily, purple iris and blue hyacinth usually form a homosexual trimvirate of flowers in H.D.'s prose (Carroll 8-13). As Carroll notes, in *The Wise Sappho* H.D. refers to the "Lesbian iris" (63). Here again the Greek context, this time geography, allows H.D. to articulate the unspeakable, for the iris grows in Lesbos but also represents lesbian love. Collecott's reading of "I Said" involves a similar double reading: she notes that the word "hyacinth" in the poem is not only appropriate in terms of the place evoked (Mount Hymettos), but is also a "homosexual intertext", Hyacinth being the ill-fated mythological lover of Apollo whose spilt blood gave birth to the iris flower ("What is not said" 250-51).

I want to go beyond flowers here with the suggestion that we can read similar encoded sexual significances into colour in these poems. White and blue, I suggest, can be read as an encoding of lesbian desire; red as the colour representing heterosexual passion, and gold as passion between an immortal and a mortal or love so elevated between humans as to seem divine. My reference to



white lesbian sexuality may surprise readers used to reading "white" as frozen passion in H.D., but this passion is not unrelated to lesbian love which is associated, as we saw in "Hymen", with Artemisian virginity and independence. Purple, used more diversely as a passionate colour, is especially associated with the female genitalia and hence suggests female desire, whether it be for man or woman. This reading can be substantiated through a reading of H.D.'s prose work of the period. The sensual world of colour as passion, like the flower intertexts, are undoubtedly inherited in part from Sappho. Sappho's famous image of crushed hyacinths for example surely inspires H.D.'s own use of the purple hyacinth as a symbol of female passion and her references to crushed and "trampled" flowers in the novel *Asphodel* (122, 137, 157).<sup>9</sup> In *Notes on Thought and Vision*, H.D. describes the "words of Sappho as ... colours, or states rather, transcending colour yet containing (as great heat the compass of the spectrum) all colour" (58). In *The Wise Sappho*, she refers to Sappho's "Asiatic riot of colour", a comment we can relate to her description of "Hymen" as a poem of "Asiatic abandon" (63).

As I have mentioned above, white, in H.D.'s work symbolises a female independence not unrelated to lesbianism: the white truth is, in part at least, the lesbianism of the heroine in *Paint It Today*.<sup>10</sup> When Midget attempts to break free of her mother, she seeks to express a "seering white truth"; her face is "white with passion" or "steel white" and she envisages a "white javelin" as her weapon of matricidal passion (472-74). White, the colour of Artemis, does not merely suggest, as is commonly assumed, virginal autonomy as opposed to passion (DuPlessis 13); it also suggests Artemisian independence within homoerotic passion. In *Hymen*, we find the same abundant white and blue used to evoke homosexual passion as in the novels. The use of colour enables us to locate lesbian desire in some of the mysteriously genderless poems. In "White World" a reciprocal paradise of love is asserted by the use of the first person plural. The landscape is eroticised in an interplay of purple, for female sexual desire, and white, for lesbian love:

The whole white world is ours,  
and the world, purple with rose-bays,  
bays, bush on bush,  
group, thicket, hedge and tree ... (134)

The repetition and the description of feature after feature of the landscape suggests the movement from one part of the body to another, from love's pleasure to love's pleasure. The following stanzas suggest the peaks and falls of orgasmic delight of which the lovers never tire:

Slid from the hill,  
as crumbling snow-peaks slide,  
citron on citron fill  
the valley, and delight

waits till our spirits tire  
 of forest, grove and bush  
 and purple flower of the laurel-tree.

Yet not one wearies,  
 joined is each to each  
 in happiness complete  
 with bush and flower (134-35)

There is the same sense here of overflowing multi-orgasmic pleasure that is found in the blue hyacinths passage from "Hymen" quoted above. The eroticism of such landscapes is evoked not only through static colour or single features of the tableau, be they flowers or trees, but through repetition, excess and movement, colour upon colour and flower upon flower. The hyacinth passage in "Hymen" speaks of hyacinths as a sea – spilling, rising and sinking in a double metaphor of sexual orgasm. In addition, as in the *Sea Garden* collection, poems like "White World" and the hyacinth sequence in "Hymen" have a sense of a body or bodies moving swiftly through the landscape, their activity standing in for the sex act.

Such poems find a parallel in the pastoral love-scene between Midget and the white Althaea that ends *Paint It Today*. The passage includes a scene in which the two women race through an oncoming storm. Each sentence of this description eroticises the women and the landscape until we have a love-scene with no explicit description of love-making: the two are "swift, light of limb" moving in unison, "one would push through, the other burrow after"; they welcome the rain with "joy ... such as comes to the heart when certainty is upon us, after hours of tension and enervating unsatisfied expectancy"; they are "two alert and vivid bodies, two shafts attracting the two opposite currents of the electric forces of the forest"; their feet, their bodies and their faces are all described as "passionate, struggling and self-possessed, chaste"; and, above all, says the narrator: "moreover to us, considering them, they were beautiful" (83-84).

The abundance of blue or white is not always associated with movement however. In another mysterious genderless poem, "At Baia", the speaker dreams of a mass of white flowers offered by the desired one:

not heavy, not sensuous,  
 but perilous – perilous –  
 of orchids, piled in a great sheath (128)

The poem concludes with two possible messages that might have accompanied the orchids, the second being

Lover to lover, no kiss,  
 no touch, but forever and ever this. (128)

Here, surely, the poem invokes the dream or fantasy of an impossible lesbian relationship.

Whereas the white of homosexual desire suggests Artemis, the moon and the white skin of the lover, the red of heterosexual desire suggests violation and penetration and is often associated with flower spikes or blood-images. Simaetha's wool with which she weaves a spell to draw back her male lover is "Drenched with purple, / steeped in red pulp ..." (115). Commonly, as in "Hymen", "Helios" and "Leda", redness carries the threat of male rape or violence, what Susan Gubar and Cassandra Laity have called a "predatory heterosexuality" ("Sapphistries" 55, "H.D.'s Romantic Landscape" 116). Purple is woven into poems of various modes of the erotic. Hippolytus, for instance, wonders whether he sees a vision of his adored white goddess, Artemis, or whether it is his own desire throbbing through his veins "purple as violets" (122). Golden immortal love plays a significant role in *Hymen*. We can also read this love as the ultimate in successful relations between mortals in which the lover becomes the god. In "Evadne" we find an equality of golden love between Evadne (of violet and hyacinth hair) and Apollo, the god of light:

between my chin and throat  
his mouth slipped over and over.  
  
...  
and my hands kept the gold they took  
as they wandered over and over  
the great arm-full of yellow flowers. (132)

The golden light and the reciprocity and repetition ("over and over ... over and over") of the encounter suggests successful love between mortal and immortal.

"Evadne" makes a pair with the following poem, "Song". This is one of the poems in which gender is mysterious. The preponderance of gold and white in the poem leads me to interpret it as a lesbian equivalent to "Evadne". The poem begins:

You are as gold  
as the half-ripe grain  
that merges to gold again,  
as white as the white rain (133)

The repetition and rhyme of these lines and the suggestion of a white body dappled with gold light creates an erotic rhythm and vision. Aside from the gold of immortal love and the white of lesbian love, other images—white apple blossoms and Sapphic honey—suggest a lesbian context; here is the woman's song, I would argue, to her golden immortal female lover. Perhaps the lover is Aphrodite described as the "golden one, golden one" with the "yellow zone" in "Simaetha" or perhaps it is another mortal transfigured by love into a divinity.

The sexual colour symbolism of *Hymen* is not always simple. Several poems show shifts in colours and sexualities. The poem "Leda" is deeply ambivalent. In the first stanza, the "red swan lifts red wings / and darker beak" (120). These ominous lines, especially given our cultural expectations of a poem about the rape of Leda, suggest whiteness stained with blood. Yet, as Helen Sword has noted in her essay, "Leda and the Modernists", this impression is muted by the subsequent images of the swan's fluttering and quivering wings and breast (Sword 314). The swan, Sword argues, becomes "feminized" by these descriptions into a "hermaphroditic" bird (314). This impression is confirmed and the sexual threat further muted, I would argue, through the preponderance of purple, associated with feminine sexual passion, and gold, associated with happy immortal love, in the rest of the poem. The swan's "soft breast" is of "purple down" and the "deep purple / of the dying heat" and golden evening sun bathe the lily Leda in light (120). By the time swan and lily<sup>11</sup> meet at the place "where tide and river meet" it is hard to read the encounter as a negative one:

Ah kingly kiss—  
 no more regret  
 nor old deep memories  
 to mar the bliss;  
 where the low sedge is thick,  
 the gold day-lily  
 outspreads and rests  
 beneath soft fluttering  
 of red swan wings  
 and the warm quivering  
 of the red swan's breast. (121)

Colours play a very significant part in this poem of a sexual encounter between the divine and the mortal.

Other poems in *Hymen*, like "Hymen" itself, suggest a range of sexualities. In "Fragment 113" we can read a journey through different erotic desires. The poem plays on the Sapphic fragment, "Neither honey nor bee for me", so the poem begins, as is common in H.D.'s work, with what is rejected in order to slowly work its way around to what is desired. The honey and bee of the fragment are associated with the heterosexual "plunder of the bee", the "deep / plunge of soft belly" evoked in Love's speech in "Hymen". This is associated with a red flower image emphasizing the phallic stalk:

not honey, not the south,  
 not the tall stalk  
 of red twin-lilies (131)

The speaker seems to reject the plunder of the bee for the passion of lesbian-

associated iris: "ah flower of purple iris, / flower of white" (131); the iris is seen to gather such fire from the sun that it casts a "shadow-print" of light through its petals (131). This echoes "Song" in which "your hair on your brow / casts light for shadow" (133). Both suggest a homoerotic mirroring effect, light on light, petal on petal. Ultimately, both these forms of love are rejected for a new white heat of passion which might signify the "power of poetic bliss", as Burnett proposes, but which also suggests to me the passionate Artemisian white love of the independent self:

not iris – old desire – old passion –  
old forgetfulness – old pain –  
not this, nor any other flower,  
but if you turn again,  
seek strength of arm and throat,  
touch as the god;  
neglect the lyre-note;  
knowing that you shall feel,  
about the frame,  
no trembling of the string  
but heat, more passionate  
of bone and the white shell  
and fiery tempered steel. (132)

The images here invoke the extreme heat of the female self at full strength, the self Midget summons up to confront her mother in *Paint It Today*.

Finally I should like to consider the Phaedra sequence, the final poems in *Hymen* before the three dedicatory poems that end the book. Here, we return to the world of eroticised landscapes so characteristic of the collection. In "Phaedra", the first of three poems, Phaedra despairs of her love for Hippolytus. The images are heterosexual red. The poem begins:

Think, O my soul,  
of the red sand of Crete;  
think of the earth; the heat  
burnt fissures like the great  
backs of the temple serpents (135)

This landscape, harsh, red, dry and scarred, evokes a sterile unrequited love. Three stanzas later, after praying to her gods to help her, Phaedra again suggests the hopelessness of her passion through the image of a storm bursting on the "drab and stale" scene:

suddenly wind and thunder and swift rain,  
till the scarlet flower is wrecked  
in the slash of the white hail. (136)

The red flower is identified as the “poppy that my heart was”, the poppy “made to strike and gather hearts / like flame upon an altar” which now “fades and shrinks, a red leaf / drenched and torn in the cold rain” (136). We sense love quenched, passion tattered.

In the second poem, “She Contrasts with Herself Hippolyta”, the focus of the sequence shifts away from Hippolytus to Hippolyta. Phaedra asks the question, “Can flame beget white steel” (136)? Could she – Phaedra – transform herself into the white steel of Hippolyta who, despite Theseus’ rape, neither “yielded not nor broke” (136-37). Phaedra, then, appears to move closer to Hippolyta in empathy, inventing a song the latter might have sung as she gave birth to Hippolytus, “born of hate” (137). Hippolyta’s cold white passion is perceived as Artemisian: Phaedra portrays Hippolyta praying to Artemis that she be “cold white river” with veins of ice, “strength of white beach, / rock of mountain land” (138). Here is a white landscape of pure white unmoved independence. In the final poem of the sequence, “She Rebukes Hippolyta”, there is a curious reversal of emotion. The “rebuke”, “Was she so chaste?”, is transmogrified into Phaedra’s erotic “vision” or fantasy of Hippolyta roaming the hills. Her horse’s neck “strained forward, ears alert” finds a parallel in the “head of a girl / flung back and her throat” (139). Here, without doubt, we see again the Artemisian maidens of the very first poem of the book, “Hymen”, and the landscape becomes sexualised, echoing the contours of “White World”:

the broken ridge of the hills  
was the line of a lover’s shoulder,  
his arm-turn, the path to the hills,  
the sudden leap and swift thunder  
of mountain boulders, his laugh. (139)

Hippolyta’s “madness” is that of the wild spirit seduced by the “touch of the mountain rocks” until she is “white, intoxicant” (140). While Hippolyta is portrayed as alone and in love with a landscape referred to as male, the fact that the vision is Phaedra’s creates a voyeuristic lesbian context for the vision. We return again to where we began, with the Artemisian maidens of “Hymen” evoked by a poet who wants her reader to enjoy “really with your body” her erotic work.

To conclude, I can simply say that through landscapes and flowers, painted with rich colour symbolism and eroticised through rhythmic, repetitive verse, H.D. explores sexual fantasy passion in a Greek context, a context that provides both the protection and the freedom for eroticism – “ah, could they know...”

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### Notes

1. There are even early signs in poems such as "Sea Heroes", "After Troy" and "The Look-out" of the engagement with the masculine world of epic, which was to culminate in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*.
2. Meryl Altman has drawn attention to the excessive use of biography in approaching H.D.'s work in a recent review-essay tellingly entitled "H.D.: A Prisoner of Biography".
3. It was Thomas Burnett Swann who first noted that poems such as "Demeter" dwell on Greek cult as much as mythology. These ideas are being developed by Eileen Gregory (see bibliography), Helen McNeil (unpublished work) and myself (see Ph.D thesis, "H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*: Origins, Processes, Genres").
4. Although I want to avoid a biographical approach, it is interesting to note that 1918-19, when *Hymen* was written, were years in which H.D. lived very fully in the body. In 1918 she embarked on a new sexual relationship with Cecil Gray, the musicologist, and became pregnant with her daughter, Perdita, and in 1919 she gave birth to Perdita and began a new passionate relationship with Bryher, the historical novelist, who was to remain her lifelong companion. All this is of course as much of a source as Lewis Richard Farnell.
5. The only recent reading that diverges from this is Gregory's reading of the poem as spiritual initiation, a reading also touched on by Rachel Blau DuPlessis (*Career* 29).
6. In another unpublished essay, equally relevant to her own work, she identifies the Sapphic tradition as one of "spiritual-emotional Greek women".
7. *Asphodel*, published for the first time in 1992, and *Her*, published for the first time in 1981, are both novels of notable lesbian content, which H.D. held back from publishing in her lifetime. The female lover figure in these books is seen as a swallow/sister figure (*Asphodel* 170-171; *Her* 124-25, 158-59, 179-80).
8. This refusal to define terms is a noted characteristic of H.D.'s earlier *Sea Garden* poems, almost all of which are obscure in this particular respect. It also continues in *Heliadora*, which contains even more ungendered poems than *Hymen*.
9. H.D.'s novels of the period make sustained use of colour symbolism. In the aptly named *Paint It Today* the narrator in the context of a discourse about the relationship between Midget and Josepha comments, "But there are many colours to our lives ..." (458). In *Paint It Today* and *Asphodel*, we can find the equations of certain colours with certain passions that I have been discussing. The figure of the lesbian lover is consistently associated with profusions and intensities of white and blue, amongst which we find mention of already familiar flowers. In *Paint It Today*, white flowers are an interchange between the two lovers who call each other white star or sword flower (460). Josepha's blue eyes, the colour of hyacinths, are stressed (449, 457). Blue hyacinths are in Josepha's arms as she leaves her lover and they are used later by Midget to berate her (55, 87). The sight of white horse chestnut and almond blossoms distress Midget after Josepha's desertion and, in turn, white iris buds remind the now married Josepha of Midget (470; 50-51). The book ends with a pastoral love scene amongst white petals and purple lilac between Midget and a new love, the "white Althea" (72, 78). In *Asphodel*, Fayne is a white star, a white lily and, repeatedly, a magnolia (8, 11, 80, 84, 87). She is "the very sea-blue edge" and "the edge of hyacinth" (136). The new lover, Beryl, who appears at the end of the book is associated with blue hyacinth and jacinth; also with white snow, foam, steeds, flowers and rocks (168). The blueness of her "far, far too blue" eyes is constantly stressed as

both a rescuing and an over-demanding force (172, 178, 180, 183). The eyes mirror the figuring of Beryl as a tide of multiple blueness, "blue, bluer than gentian, than convulvulus, than forgetmenot, than the blue of blue pansies" (204-205).

10. We find that in both *Paint It Today* and *Asphodel* male lovers are associated with red wine, fruits and flowers, specifically anemone, hibiscus and rose. Basil in *Paint It Today* enters the text with a thousand roses, associated with red wine and the arrows of Eros (464-65). He cannot sympathise with the "whitest passion" with which Midget adores the white body of the Venus statue (60). When Walter enters the text in *Asphodel* as a further potential lover for Hermione, we find reference to "blood chalices", "frozen ruby wine" and cherries (29-30). George's kisses in the novel are associated with hibiscus, "the wrong flowers" contrasted with Hermione's hyacinth; his lips are described as scarlet (70-75, 81). The hair wreath associated with Darrington, whether actual or literary (the passage comes during a discourse about translation), is also out of tune with Hermione's desires (71). The openness and twistedness of the flowers suggests painful exposure. The anemone, springing from the blood of Adonis dying for love of Aphrodite, parallels the iris springing from the love of Hyacinth dying for Apollo: here then we have a heterosexual mythological context to reflect the homosexual subtext of the hyacinth. Purple is persistently associated with passion. Violets, for example, are described as breathing up into Hermione's face at the time of her newly awakened passion for Darrington in *Asphodel* (61, 63, 65). Similarly, gold overlays experiences seen as immortal, both Hermione's early passion for Vane in *Asphodel* and her pregnancy which she experiences as having occurred through the love of a god (152, 155, 162).
11. Carroll points out that the lily suggests both androgynous purity and passion in H.D.'s work (8-9). The androgyny of the lily is suggested in its two parts, the stalk suggesting the phallus and the head the female genitalia.

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