SHAKING THE BURNING BIRCH TREE: UNDERSTANDING AMY LOWELL’S SAPPHIC MODERNISM

by

IRIS JAMAHL DUNKLE

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation Adviser: Dr. Judith Oster

Department of English

CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

January, 2010
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Iris Jamahl Dunkle

Candidate for the Ph.D. degree*.

(signed) Judith Oster

(Chair of Committee)

Mary Grimm

Gary Stonum

Martin Helzle

(date) 11/10/2009

*We also certify that written approval has been obtained for any
proprietary material contained therein.
Dedication page

To Judith Oster for all of her support and guidance throughout this project and to my loving husband Mathew Dunkle, our two boys, Jackson and Maxwell and to my Mother, Rebecca Johnson, Father, John Johnson and Mother-in-Law, Andrea Dunkle who encouraged me and helped me find the time to write this dissertation.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ...........................................................................................................6

Abstract ..............................................................................................................................7

Chapter 1 – The Burning Birch Tree: Understanding Amy Lowell’s Expression of Sapphic Modernism .................................................................................................9

Chapter 2 – From Keats to Sappho: Amy Lowell’s New Allusions .................................30

Chapter 3 – Writing the Discourse of Desire into the American Landscape .................69

Chapter 4 – Lowell’s Complicated Heritage: Responding to American Poetry to Create an Inclusive, Modern American Voice .........................................................111

Chapter 5 – “We Are One Family”—Lowell’s Influence, and Sapphic Modernism in the Poetry of the 1920s and Beyond .................................................................153

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................196
Acknowledgements

I’d like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to my committee, Judith Oster, Mary Grimm, Gary Stonum and Martin Helzle for their support. I’d also like to acknowledge Heather Meakin and Tom Bishop for their early support on this project.
Shaking the Burning Birch Tree: Understanding Amy Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism

Abstract

by

IRIS JAMAHL DUNKLE

This dissertation examines Amy Lowell’s poetry, her use of allusion especially pertaining to her expression of Sapphic Modernism, and her significant contribution to a new, lyric tradition rooted in America. In this study, I define Sapphic Modernism as poetry that is written in a style similar to Sappho’s, and which alludes to and refigures the ideas, images, and motifs of Sappho’s work and of other poets in modern ways to gain new poetic perspective. By alluding to Sappho’s images and motifs, and internalizing Sappho’s poetic craft, Lowell empowered her lyric gift and shaped her expression of modernism. Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism activates the female body as a landscape of desire where the beloved is both a subject and object and elevates the act of writing about love into an epiphanic experience. As a woman and as a lesbian, she inherited a fragmented tradition that called upon her to reclaim what had not yet been publically spoken. Lesbian eroticism, the depiction of female desire and a gynocentric approach to literary history and form lay at the heart of this act of reclamation. Like Sappho, Lowell challenges and re-writes her poetic predecessors in order to create poetry that is inclusive of her unique experience as a woman and a lesbian. Lowell’s modernism celebrated the aesthetics of her own daily life while encouraging inclusivity within the poetic tradition
in which she was writing. By close reading of Lowell’s poetry, looking at how she engaged her predecessors, and studying how her work influenced the poets who have written after her, this study illuminates the deep impact her work has had on subsequent generations of poets affected by her work. Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism created a revisionary call and response between the poetic voices of the past and the poets of the future, creating a foundational vision of an American/world poetry that is constantly challenging and refashioning its borders. If we shake the burning birch tree of Lowell’s invention, we can find, almost a century later, the falling fruit of multiple generations flourishing in the work of poets male and female, gay, bisexual and straight.
Chapter 1

The Burning Birch Tree: Understanding Amy Lowell’s Expression of Sapphic Modernism

Amy Lowell opens one of her best-remembered poems, “The Sisters,” by imagining what she knows about her “sister” poet Sappho:

There’s Sapho¹, now I wonder what was Sapho.

I know a slender thing about her:

That, loving, she was like a burning birch tree

All tall and glittering fire, and that she wrote

Like the same fire caught up to Heaven and held there,

A frozen blaze before it broke and fell


In this long poem, Lowell addresses three female precursors, Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Dickinson, in a poetic exercise aimed at defining her own brand of poetry and her place in the canon of female lyric poets. Each poet is taken off the shelf,

¹ It is important to note that Lowell uses the alternative spelling in her poem “The Sisters,” when she publishes it for a second time in What’s O’Clock. As Adrienne Munich observed, this might be traceable to David M. Robinson’s book Sappho and Her Influence, in which he states that her name “appeared on vases and papyri with one p.” The alternative spelling may also be based on the French spelling of the poet’s name.
dusted off, and examined; in this poem, it is Sappho who first intrigues and fascinates Lowell. What is this “slender thing” that Lowell knows about Sappho? Is it her understanding of Sappho’s depiction of female desire? What does Lowell perceive it to be like, to love “like a burning birch tree/ All tall and glittering fire”? I argue that by the time Lowell published “The Sisters,” in 1922, she knew the answers to these questions. By this time in her career, Lowell had discovered Sappho’s discourse of desire as well as her method of refiguring allusions and motifs as a means to disclose a female’s (and lesbian’s) experience in verse. This study will explore how finding these tools affected and accelerated Lowell’s development, both as a poet and as a modernist.

One sees Sappho’s influence on Lowell’s poetic craft throughout “The Sisters,” in the images and motifs Lowell uses in her depiction of Sappho. The first of these intertextual moments is found in lines 16–18, cited above, where she describes Sappho’s writing.

[A]nd that she wrote

Like the same fire caught up to Heaven and held there,

A frozen blaze before it broke and fell (459).

These lines directly allude to Sappho’s famous description of love’s paradoxical effects found in Fragment 2.²

² Today, this poem is commonly referred to as Fragment 31; however, throughout this study, I will be using the numbering of Sappho’s fragments as given in Henry Thornton Wharton’s translation of Sappho, found in Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, the text through which Lowell became familiar with Sappho.
That man seems to me peer of gods, who sits in thy presence, and hears close to him thy sweet speech and lovely laughter; that indeed makes my heart flutter in my bosom. For when I see but a little, I have no utterances left, my tongue is broken down, and straightaway a subtle fire has run under my skin, with my eyes I have no sight, my ears ring, sweat bathes me, and a trembling seizes my body; I am paler than grass, and seem in my madness little better than one dead. But I must dare all, since one is poor… (Wharton 56).

This fragment, often called “The Ode to Anactoria,” “To a Beloved Woman,” or “To a Maiden,” was most likely introduced to Lowell through Wharton’s Sappho: Memoir, Text, Select Renderings. The poem was famously praised in the classical treatise On the Sublime (formerly ascribed to Longinus) for Sappho’s sublime presentation of “not one passion, but a congress of passions,” as well as for the juxtaposition of opposites she used to express the contradictions within erotic madness or crisis (erotica mania) (Wharton 61). On the Sublime praises Sappho’s poetic method, declaring “[u]niting opposites, she freezes while she burns” (Campbell I:114). Lowell’s image of a “frozen blaze,” describing Sappho’s ability to capture the feelings of love, both alludes to Sappho’s conceit in Fragment 2 and responds to the discourse about the poem in On the Sublime.

In Lowell’s poem, however, the erotic crisis Sappho evokes, so praised by “Longinus,” is

---

3 Although Lowell grew up in a privileged and distinguished Bostonian family, she did not receive a formal education and was never educated in the classics. In this study, the references are from Wharton’s work, which Lowell read in translation. Note also that according to classical convention, the translated Greek poetry is presented without line breaks.

4 According to Wharton (61).

5 More detail in later chapters will be provided about the importance of Wharton’s text and its influence on Lowell, since she did not read or write Greek.
elevated to the heavens, transforming the act of loving and of writing about love into a spiritual experience. Reworking the conceits both of “Longinus” and of Sappho herself, Lowell transforms the act of writing about love into a fleeting moment of united oppositions. It is a theme that resonates throughout her work.

The idea that art embodies spiritual values suggests the Hellenism of the Victorian critic Walter Pater. But, as Diana Collecott has pointed out, Pater’s Hellenism was misogynistic, betraying “distaste for the female body” (130–132). As Pater saw it, the only way Sappho could have attained sublimity would have been “by separating her poetry from her femininity” (Collecott 132). While the Victorians celebrated the masculine austerities of Attic Greece, Lowell, on the other hand, celebrates Sappho’s femininity. Her Sappho is a sensuous being, and as she challenges Pater’s misogyny, Lowell reclaims what Page duBois has called the “Sapphic texture of desire” (94). In “The Sisters” and throughout her work, Lowell depicts the female body as an object of desire and elevates the act of writing about love into an experience of epiphany.

As she goes on to describe Sappho’s concept of loving:

That, loving, she was like a burning birch tree
All tall and glittering fire.

Lowell deftly combines the Romantic image of the ardent Sappho with a symbol that was directly tangible to her: the birch, a distinctly New England tree. Refiguring Sapphic images and motifs, she alludes to such poems as Lord Byron’s “Don Juan,” (“The isles of Greece! The isles of Greece! / Where burning Sappho loved and sung”), while inventing her own American Sappho (lines 1–2), planting the Greek poet in her own New England
soil. Expressing love through images of the plants, flowers, and trees in her own
backyard, she creates a new hybrid of the lyric tradition in America, to which she can
add her own voice.

These two small examples showcase the wealth of intertextual discourse in
Lowell’s poetry, and exemplify the mostly undiscovered complexity in her work. As
Jeanne Larsen has noted, “[t]he fascinating complexities beneath the polished surfaces”
of Lowell’s poems have been little explored. “Lowell is often presented as an interesting,
somewhat comic figure in literary sociology, but hardly someone to be taken seriously as
a poet” (201, 204). To date, there has been little scholarship on Lowell’s work and her
contribution to the female lyric tradition—especially in regard to her use of allusions.

This once immensely popular modernist poet has been “reduced to a footnote, sometimes
a derisory one, in the history of modern poetry” since her death at age fifty-one in 1925
(Munich and Bradshaw, xii). To understand Lowell’s significance, one must look first at
the criticism of her work over the course of nearly a century and its fall from critical
favor.

Lowell called the new brand of poetics to which she and many other American-
born poets subscribed (including Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and H.D.) The New
Poetry. The movement’s goals were to reinvent traditionally and formally accepted rules

6 Lowell spent her entire life in her family home, Sevenels, in Brookline, Massachusetts. Lowell’s father
and Lowell after him maintained an extensive garden on the property.
7 Throughout this study, I will be using the terms “intertextual” and “intertextuality” as Julia Kristeva
originally defined them, as a special form of textual inter-relation: the way a variety of texts emerge from a
particular semiotic order (“Bounded” 37–38).
8 Margaret Homans’ articles on Lowell’s allusions to Keats are an exception to this general lack of critical
interest.
9 These are the three poets Lowell names in her essay “Two Generations of American Poetry,” in which she
defines the New Poetry Movement.
of poetry, and to create a distinctly American voice. As Lowell observes, “their aim was
to voice America….[and] taking the work by and large, book after book, here was a
volume of energy, a canvas so wide and sparkling, that something very like the dazzling
tapestry of American life, thought, and activities was obtained” (1). The critic David
Perkins heralded Lowell’s contribution to the New Poetry movement in America, and to
international modernism, as central to the period, arguing, “Amy Lowell did more than
anyone else to win from the general public an understanding reception of the new poetry”
(328). During her lifetime and directly after, many of Lowell’s books became critically
acclaimed best-sellers; What’s O’Clock was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1926. Her
popularity was something Lowell took seriously.10 As she wrote to Richard Aldington,
poetry “is and must be universal, above the customs and the cliques of the initiated”
(quoted in S. Foster Damon’s Amy Lowell: A Chronicle 449). Her belief that poetry
should be “both innovative and accessible” would help democratize poetry as it was
being written in the United States during and after her lifetime. This concern with
accessibility stands at odds with the disregard for audience that we associate with
modernism (and especially high modernism) today (Munich and Bradshaw xv).11 One of
Lowell’s guiding principles as a poet was to insist that her work be not only self-
expressive, but communicative. As her biographer Damon explains, “she believed poetry
was a spoken art…that no poem was complete until it had functioned in the mind of its
audience” (254). Her determination to connect with her audience, and her commitment

10 Pound mocked this popularity in a letter to Alice Corbin Henderson, calling her “Amy-just-selling-the-goods” (5 May, 1916, in The Letters of Ezra Pound to Alice Corbin Henderson, 137).
11 Again, this notion was deeply at odds with Pound’s. As he writes in a letter to Margaret Anderson, “Do you honestly think that a serious writer OUGHT to be reminded of the United States??” (Ezra Pound to Margaret Anderson, 22 April 1921, in Pound/The Little Review).
to developing a popular poetics, had made Lowell one of the leading voices in American letters by the time she died in 1925.

Lowell’s colleagues and friends mourned their loss but found solace in the idea that her poetry would “leave a lasting mark on twentieth-century literary history.” They could not have fathomed the extent to which Lowell would be marginalized after her death (Munich and Bradshaw xii). Lowell’s popularity soon began to fade, and *ad hominem* attacks undermined her critical reputation. Today, aside from a few anthologized poems (her poem “Patterns,” for example) most of Lowell’s poems are out of print, and she is remembered not for her innovative poetry, but for her quarrels with Pound over the Imagist movement, as well as her larger-than-life character and physical presence. What has happened since her death to leave her work in such obscurity?

Pound was not alone in his negative views of Amy Lowell. One of her most savage critics was Winfield T. Scott, who wrote in his 1935 essay, “Amy Lowell after Ten Years,” that Lowell’s life:

was a magnificent masterpiece. She herself must have thought it a failure, for she could not be what she most desired to be: a great poet. Her poems are the work of a woman who would have shone as extraordinary in any career; they are, even at their most expert, remarkable in the very light of their weakness, for Amy Lowell was not a poet at all (329).

Scott’s claim that Lowell “was not a poet at all” was echoed by many of his contemporaries. By 1958, Horace Gregory would claim in his biography of Lowell that
she would be remembered not as a poet or as a critic, but as the recipient of letters from D.H. Lawrence (183). These denigrating accounts of Lowell and her work beg the question: Why have critics so intensely berated Lowell and why have these attacks dwelled so insistently on her personality, her sexuality, and her appearance, and not on the quality of her poetry? Many critics attribute Lowell’s rapid critical decline to two factors: her strong personality, and a writing style that did not adhere to the narrow poetic principles promoted by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, both venerated by the New Critics. Furthermore, few extensive and accurate biographies and even fewer scholarly studies have been written on Lowell and her poetry.\(^\text{12}\)

Most of the critical volumes that discuss Lowell’s poetry prior to Glenn Richard Ruihley’s *Thorn of a Rose* (1975) and Richard Benvenuto’s *Amy Lowell* (1985) focus on her life, rather than on a critical consideration of her poetry. As Benvenuto writes, Lowell’s “new” scholars (C. David Heyman, *American Aristocracy*) have much in common with her “old” scholars and biographers (Gregory Horace, Louis Untermeyer). “[L]ike many others who have written about Lowell…they do not critically examine her work. Instead of offering a detailed analysis of how well or badly she wrote, they tend to offer unexamined assumptions about her superficiality or, in Heyman’s case, ‘depth’” (143). In contrast, Ruihley’s and Benvenuto’s careful analysis is supported by close readings of Lowell’s poems, which have initiated a new method for examining Lowell’s work.

\(^{12}\) With the exception of the memoir written by S. Foster Damon entitled *Amy Lowell: A Chronicle*. This was published in 1935 and did not explicitly state that Lowell was a lesbian.
Pursuing this critical approach to Lowell’s poetry two decades later, Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw have fostered a rebirth of critical interest in Lowell’s work. In 2005, Munich and Bradshaw brought a selection of Lowell’s poems back into print (*Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*).\(^{13}\) They also published a collection of insightful articles (*Amy Lowell, American Modern*) which encourages a new critical dialogue, initiated by Ruihley and Benvenuto, about the poetry of Lowell and her place within modernism, rather than focusing solely on her life. My study intends to add to the modern discourse on Lowell’s poetic contribution by critically analyzing Lowell’s use of allusion. Specifically, it will examine Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism—how her allusions to Sappho’s images and motifs, as well as her internalization of Sappho’s poetic craft, empowered Lowell’s lyric gift and shaped her expression of modernism.

Who was Sappho to Lowell? Sappho had long been an exemplary poet, and her Aeolian lyrics, written in the seventh and sixth century B.C.E., are considered to be some of the earliest forms of the personal lyric poem (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 717). What are left of Sappho’s poems are fragmented, exquisite lyrics written in the first person.

Northrop Frye defines the lyric voice as an utterance “that is overheard….Where the poet…turns his back on his audience” (248, 271). In this self-sanctioned world, the mimesis of sound and imagery is entirely internal. What Frye finds radical in this presentation is the personal address enacted by the lyric, “the hypothetical form of what in religion is called the ‘I-Thou’ relationship” (247–50). Sappho’s poems almost always

---

\(^{13}\) Over the past three decades, a couple of small collections of Lowell’s work have been published, including the exquisitely edited American Poets Project Edition edited by Honor Moore.
possess the intimate quality of “discourse overheard, of privacy temporarily made visible to the listener [reader]” and are constructed in the “I-Thou” relationship (duBois 132–33).

In the personal space of her lyrics, Sappho thematically examines “the place of the individual and her desire” and advocates “turning pre-existing poetic materials to a new use” (duBois 7). The personal construct of Sappho’s poetry, the thematic discourse of desire that is overwhelmingly prevalent in her work, and her process of turning pre-existing poetic materials into a new form make Sappho’s poetry powerfully present to her readers, especially to readers of the same sex, who may directly identify with the “I-Thou” relationship of her lyrics.

As Yopie Prins demonstrates in her study *Victorian Sappho*, Sappho’s name, from the nineteenth century onward, came to symbolize the origin of the Western lyric voice.

Sappho of Lesbos became a name with multiple significations in the course of the nineteenth century, as the reconstruction of ancient Greek fragments attributed to Sappho contributed to the construction of Sappho herself as the first woman poet, singing at the origin of a Western lyric tradition (3).

For women poets, Sappho was not only a symbol of the origin of the Western lyric tradition, but one of the few female poets they could emulate. This, coupled with the immediacy of her lyrics and the fragmented state of her poetry, created a complicated legacy for women writing in the lyric tradition.
As I will discuss in Chapter 2, Sappho’s poetry influenced many poets associated with the modernist movement, including Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and Lowell. Thematically, one can find correlations between Sappho’s predominant themes and the themes examined by these modernist writers, but for H.D. and Lowell, Sappho’s influence was transformational.

As Jane McIntosh Snyder has pointed out, many of Lowell’s short poems “read almost like translations of some of the fragments of Sappho’s poetry preserved for us by later ancient writers” (131). One does not have to look far for the Sapphic influence in Lowell’s work. Central to understanding Lowell’s poetic craft and her contribution to the modernist movement is gaining an understanding of her expression of Sapphic Modernism. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the term “Sapphic Modernism” is highly contested and has been defined in different ways by critics and scholars in the past few decades. In this study, I define Sapphic Modernism as poetry that is written in a style similar to Sappho’s, and which alludes to and refigures the ideas, images, and motifs of Sappho’s work and of other poets in modern ways to gain new poetic perspective. This study aims first to scrutinize Lowell’s expression of Sapphic Modernism and then to understand the influence it has had on the development of American poetry.

What is Sapphic Modernism?

Before a discussion about Lowell’s expression of Sapphic Modernism can begin, a number of brief definitions and explanations are required about the current debates surrounding the terminology used in this study (namely the terms “Sapphic,” “Sapphic

14 As I will discuss in Chapter 2, F.S. Flint, in the March 1913 issue of Poetry, named Sappho (along with Catullus and Villon) one of the three influences on the Imagist movement.
Modernism,” and “Modernism”). First, since the 1970s, a feminist rereading of modernism(s) has been under way. Many feminist literary critics, including Bonnie Kime Scott and Lisa Rado, have re-evaluated much of the canon as it was conceived through the scholarship of Hugh Kenner and Edmond Wilson, in what Diana Collecott has dubbed “Pound Modernism,” to include the “re-discovered work of long-neglected women writers” such as Djuna Barnes, H.D., and Mina Loy (Carlston 2). To represent this debate surrounding the representative reality of the term “Modernism,” I will use the terms “modernism” and “modernist” not to define a canonized set of authors that may or may not include Lowell, depending on the reader’s experience, but as a set of textual (and/or poetic) tropes and methods. Pound’s challenge to “make it new” coupled with democratization of the themes, settings and subject matter of creative works, changed not only what was written about but also who could write about it. In understanding the work of Lowell, this idea of democratization—of a new, American voice and the opening up of the discipline—is of the utmost importance. As Mina Loy eloquently observes, “Modernism rescued people from stabilized culture” and re-infused them with the “joyful aesthetic” possibilities of daily life.

---

15 I use this spelling to refer to the period of modernism because of the current debates within contemporary criticism. As Erin G. Carlston explains in the introduction to her study *Thinking Fascism*, “Contemporary criticism has challenged the notion of modernist canonicity, claiming that modernism was not one movement or even two or three, but many, a literary/social/historical constellation informed by (at the least) the nationality, gender, sexuality, race, and class status of the writers who participated in it. … Thus, according to many of those in contemporary modernist studies, in referring to the literary production of the first half of this century, we cannot speak of Modernism, but only of modernisms”.

16 This definition borrows from Carlston, who also writes on Sapphic Modernism in her book, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity*.

17 Lowell defined “great poetry” as “universal, above the customs and cliques of the initiated” (quoted in Damon 449).
[It] [h]as democratized the subject matter and la belle matière of art; through Cubism the newspaper has assumed an aesthetic quality, through Cézanne a plate has become more than something to put an apple upon, Brancusi has given an evangelistic import to eggs, and Gertrude Stein has given us the Word, in and for itself.

Would not life be lovelier if you were constantly overjoyed by the sublimely pure concavity of your wash bowls? The tubular dynamics of your cigarette? (Loy 298).

In poetics especially, modernism loosened the noose of form and meter and swung wide open the door that locked out themes previously considered inappropriate for poetry. This granted many female writers a more hospitable environment in which to write about female and homosexual desire. From this new poetic landscape, new ways emerged for women writers to emulate the poetics of Sappho.

Since Sapphic Modernism remains a highly contested term, it is important to situate it in context. It was first conceived by Susan Gubar in her seminal 1984 essay “Sapphistries,” in which she made the assertion that “[t]he person and poetics of Sappho have haunted the female imagination” (44). While Gubar did not invent the term, she invented the discourse from which the term would later arise, by initiating an invigorating debate as to what role the poetry of Sappho played in female poets’ “poetic isolation and imputed inferiority.” As Gubar explains, “Sappho represents…all the lost women of genius in literary history, especially all the lesbian artists whose work has been destroyed, sanitized, or heterosexualized.” To the lesbian poet, Gubar explains, “Sappho is a very
special precursor. Precisely because so many of her original texts were destroyed, the modern woman poet could write ‘for’ or ‘as’ Sappho and thereby invent a classical inheritance of her own…in [her] own image” (46–47). Indeed, Gubar claims, it is precisely the fragmented state of Sappho’s work, coupled with the intimacy of the first-person address in her poems and her open depiction of love between women, that encouraged H.D. and Lowell to write of the modern woman’s experience of homosexual love using the language and images in Sappho’s poetry.

Since the publication of Gubar’s article, a debate has ensued over the context and definition of the terms “Sapphic” and “Sapphic Modernism” and what they mean to a scholar writing about the female lyric tradition. For many, as Page duBois has pointed out, the image and poetry of Sappho has been “assimilated into ... [a] feminist utopianism” (9). For Jane McIntosh Snyder and Margaret Williamson, Sappho’s fragments are used to “refract the idealism of second-wave American feminism in imitations of a once matriarchal culture” (Collecott 10). Sappho has become the ultimate feminist precursor, and the term Sapphic Modernism has been used restrictively as a label for any depiction of lesbian eroticism in texts written during the modernist era. This narrow definition overlooks the importance of Sappho’s poetry for female poets writing in the lyric tradition. In her essay “Expatriate Sapphic Modernism: Entering Literary History,” Shari Benstock uses the term to define the “large number of highly experimental works produced by women-identified writers including Djuna Barnes, H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf” (183). According to Benstock, “Sapphic Modernism constitutes itself through moments of rupture in the social and cultural fabric” (198n3). She further uses the term to define a spectrum of lesbian writers during the
modernist era, who range from the “traditional” (lesbians who wrote openly in traditional forms, including Radclyffe Hall and Colette) to the “experimental” Sapphic Modernists (who encoded the Sapphic in experimental form, including Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and H.D.) (185).

Snyder, Williamson, and Benstock’s use of the term “Sapphic” is circumscribed. To them, the impetus of Sapphic Modernism is the depiction of female eroticism (especially lesbian eroticism or Sapphism) in the work of female writers. This limited definition denies the direct allusion to Sappho that the term “Sapphic” implies. As the OED defines the term, “sapphic” is defined as “of or pertaining to Sappho” (2667). Snyder, Williamson, and Benstock’s definition of Sapphic Modernism also excludes the deep, complicated influence that the poetry of Sappho has had on the poetics of female lyric poets, as Gubar originally noted, and an understanding of how each poet contributes to the poetic discourse that surrounds Sappho’s poetry. While I do not deny that the term “Sapphic” can be used to denote lesbian eroticism in a text, I argue that it is equally important when defining the term to take into account its primary definition: a depiction of the influence of Sappho’s poetic craft, which includes the reuse and refiguring of her predecessors’ poetic images and motifs. Sapphic Modernism can be defined as poetry where the Sapphic surfaces in the work of female writers in the modernist era, and where their expression of modernism is enhanced through this intertextuality.

Recently, Diana Collecott and Eileen Gregory have sought to return to a more encompassing definition of the term “Sapphic Modernism” that is closer to the definition I have proposed for this study. *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism* (1999) and *H.D. and
Hellenism (1997) are ground-breaking studies that explore both definitions of “Sapphic” by tracing the complex intertextual relationship between H.D.’s poetry and the surviving fragments of Sappho’s work. Their studies also examine the depiction of lesbian eroticism in H.D.’s work, but their intent is not so much to understand this as it is to trace the deep and complicated role that the poetry and poetics of Sappho played in H.D.’s development as a modernist writer (and also to some extent Lowell’s). Sappho’s lyric poetry inspired a creative response in Lowell and H.D. that was quite different from the that of their modernist contemporaries. My study intends to build on and contribute to the academic discourse initiated by Collecott and Gregory by exploring Lowell’s unique expression of Sapphic Modernism.

**What was Sappho?**

Quite apart from the recent debate surrounding the term Sapphic Modernism, there has been a long history of emblematic representations of Sappho depicting the poet Sappho as a muse rather than as an influential precursor. Lowell’s expression of the influence of Sappho in her work was quite different from those who had come before her, and this shift in perspective may have been due in part to the presentation of Sappho’s poetry in Wharton’s *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation*. In his collection, Wharton aimed to “to familiarize English readers, whether they understood Greek or not, with every word of Sappho,” although he states later in his preface that “Sappho is, perhaps above all other poets, untranslatable” (vi). Wharton

---

18 Ezra Pound and Richard Aldington eagerly translated some of these “new” fragments in their collections *Lustra* (1917) and *The Love of Myrrhine and Konales* (1926), respectively.
carefully catalogs how Sappho’s life and lyrics had been mistranslated and corrupted in earlier scholarship in order to “present ‘the great poetess’ to English readers in a form from which they can judge of her excellence for themselves” (x). As he observes in his introduction, the Sapphic lyric tradition has historically produced a mere ventriloquism of Sappho’s voice. Many of these past imitators heralded Sappho as a poet with “craft never surpassed in literature”; however, they rarely participated in her lyrical tradition by challenging her poetic motifs, as she had once challenged Homer’s (63). Lowell, (along with her Imagist contemporary H.D.) was deeply affected by reading this book,¹⁹ because Wharton’s text encouraged her to question renderings of Sappho that she had read and to approach Sappho’s work directly, as she would the poetry of a modern poet, even though she could only read Sappho in translation.

In the work of earlier poets, fictional images of Sappho often appear. In Ovid, Sappho is Phaon’s rejected and suicidal lover;²⁰ in Byron (who inherited the image from Ovid), Sappho burns with passion for her lost love, as she stands on the Leucadian cliffs ready to leap to her death. Sappho remained a poetic ideal for Ovid, Byron, and in some respects for Swinburne.²¹ Often, she was thought of as a muse, rather than a fellow “sister” poet whose craft was to be admired and whose poetry invited interaction. Instead

---

¹⁹ Records at Lowell’s favorite library, the Athenaeum, show that she checked out Wharton’s 1912 translation on several occasions.
²⁰ “That I may see my fate in the Leucadian wave” (Ovid, trans. Grant Showerman 197).
²¹ Swinburne wrote extensively about Sappho, and in Notes on Poems and Reviews, he aimed to familiarize readers with Sappho’s poetic spirit. Writing about his poem “Anactoria,” he says, “In this poem I have simply expressed, or tried to express, that violence of affliction between one and another which hardens into rage and deepens into despair. The keynote which I have here touched was struck long since by Sappho. We in England are taught, are compelled under penalties to learn, to construe, and to repeat, as schoolboys, the imperishable and incomparable verses of that supreme poet; and I at least am grateful for that training. I have wished and ventured to hope, that I might be in time competent to translate into a baser and later language the divine words which even as a boy I could not but recognize as divine” (Swinburne, quoted in Wharton’s Sappho 31–32).
of writing in Sappho’s voice (in the tradition of Swinburne, Browning, Ovid, and Catullus), or from Sappho’s point of view (as many nineteenth-century female poets, as well as her contemporaries, had done) Lowell used Sappho’s work as the foundation for her own modern poetics. By appropriating and adapting many of Sappho’s images and metaphors, Lowell actively participated in a poetic tradition Sappho initiated, one often ignored by her imitators and admirers. Lowell used these images and motifs to find a language in which to speak of the oppositional forces of desire and loss within an American landscape. For Lowell, Sapphic Modernism was complicated not only by her sexuality, but by her complex relationship with the fragmented text of Sappho as a source of *emulation*22 rather than merely a site of inspiration or a text to be translated. Through their expression of Sapphic Modernism, Lowell and H.D. challenged many of the male-orientated motifs of lyric poetry, in much the same way as Sappho had originally challenged Homer and Hesiod.

Lowell’s success as an Imagist and modernist relies heavily on modeling her own poetry on Sappho’s, not just as a way to express her experiences as a lesbian, but as a poetic method to express her modernism. As this study will examine, Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism is expressed not only in her playful and allusive construction of poetry, and her integration of Sappho’s motifs into an American landscape, but also, as we have already observed with “The Sisters,” in her engagement with the discourse surrounding Sappho’s poetry.

---

22 In his article “H.D and ‘The Contest’: Archaeology of a Sapphic Gaze,” Bret L. Keeling examines Sappho’s influence on H.D.’s writing, focusing on why H.D. refrained from both imitating and directly translating Sappho. As he writes, “H.D.’s are not acts of imitation but of emulation. Emulation suggests competition, even rivalry…that H.D., admiring Sappho above all artists, desires to equal her predecessor’s poetic power” (196).
The poem sequence “Two Speak Together”\textsuperscript{23} includes many of Lowell’s most artful expressions of Sapphic Modernism, but examples can be found throughout her œuvre. Like Sappho, Lowell often crosses allusions in poems like “Venus Transiens” and “Madonna of the Evening Flower,” where Christian, Greek, and American symbols are interspersed and intertwined. As in “The Sisters” and in many of Lowell’s love lyrics, the lover and love itself often awaken a fleeting experience of revelation. At the other end of this spectrum is the theme of the pull of opposites that drive love. This theme that so dominates Sappho’s fragments (most notably in Fragment 2) is found throughout Lowell’s “Two Speak Together,” and particularly in the poem “Opal”:

You are ice and fire.

The touch of you burns

My hands like snow

You are cold and flame.

You are the crimson of amaryllis,

The silver of moon-touched magnolias.

When I am with you,

My heart is a frozen pond

Gleaming with agitated torches (214).

\textsuperscript{23} In Lowell scholarship, this poem sequence has been heralded as “an erotic lesbian verse incomparable to anything until Adrienne Rich’s 1974–76 sequence, \textit{Twenty-one Poems}” (Munich and Bradshaw xx).
Here, the speaker’s beloved is depicted as being both “ice” and “cold,” “fire” and “flame,” with a touch that burns the speaker “like snow.” This conflicting, bittersweet pull of opposites elicits an equally oppositional response: a feeling that the speaker’s heart “is a frozen pond” “agitated” with “torches” whenever she is near the beloved. Lowell ends many of her poems that use oppositions to describe the beloved with vivid juxtaposed images (as in her earlier poem “Absence”).

Throughout “Two Speak Together,” adopting Sappho’s “I-Thou” relationship with the reader, Lowell’s speaker directly addresses her beloved. Just as in Sappho’s work, this technique creates immediacy and intimacy with Lowell’s reader. Equally dominant as a theme is Lowell’s use of natural images to convey the lover’s desire and as representative of the eroticized female body. As D.A Powell points out, in poems like “The Garden by Moonlight,” Lowell invokes natural topoi to convey human passion. “The feminine eros is invoked through the topoi of cat, moonlight, folded poppies, ladies’ delight … the garden is a metonym of the female body reminiscent at times of the Song of Songs” (105–106). I would expand Powell’s definition to include not only the garden but the entire natural landscape as metonymic for the female body and used as a way to communicate the “Sapphic texture of desire.” In “July at Midnight,” it is the air that, lit with fireflies “slit and pin-pricked with sparkles of lemon-green flame,” expresses the lover’s feelings as her lover leans against her.

By adapting Sappho’s own method of allusion, employing a landscape to help communicate female desire, and adapting many of Sappho’s familiar motifs in her work, Lowell actively uses Sappho’s poetry as a model for her own American modernism. This
study will begin by examining Lowell’s use of allusion. How did Lowell’s allusions to Keats differ from her allusions to Sappho? After clearly establishing how Lowell uses allusions, Chapters 3 and 4 examine Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism, by closely reading her poetry against two of Sappho’s most prevalent themes: the discourse of desire and emulation. Finally, this study will look at the influence of Lowell’s lyric poetry on the poetry written in the 1920s and beyond.

As this study will further show through a close study of Lowell’s poetry, Sapphic Modernism as expressed in Lowell’s work travels far beyond Shari Benstock’s or even Susan Gubar’s definition of the term. Lowell’s poetry thrived on her use of allusion. She used Sapphic Modernism not only as a method to express lesbian eroticism, but as a way to expand her own poetic craft. Lowell refigures classical and other poetic images and ideas from the past to express a modern, American, female experience. By engaging Sappho’s poetic method and engaging her audience, Lowell fashions the beginnings of a new, American, poetic voice, both democratic and inventive, that invites generations of poets after her to participate in the same tradition.
Central to an understanding of Lowell’s poetic craft and her contribution to the modernist movement is a clear understanding of the ways she used allusion. A close study of her use of this literary device, and the ways in which it diverges from her Imagist contemporaries, is fundamentally helpful in defining Lowell’s development as a writer and her too-often-forgotten contribution to the modernist movement.

Before embarking on this task, I would like to take note of the controversy that currently surrounds the study of allusion and offer a definition of the term. In the past few decades, there has been much debate concerning its relevance. Harold Bloom argues that allusions have “almost nothing to do with [p]oetic influence” and further claims that source study of this kind is worthy only of “those carrion-eaters of scholarship, the source hunters” (19,17). Despite Bloom’s poststructuralist views, which are in direct opposition to mine in this study of Sapphic Modernism, the study of allusion has been employed by critics as a fundamental tool to help gain understanding of a writer. As Gregory Machacek suggests in his recent article “Allusion,” we lack “a critical vocabulary that will allow [critics] more effectively to discuss the nature and working of [allusions]” (523). In my study, I will be drawing upon the work of Machacek and the classical scholar Stephan Hinds, whose expansive studies have given critics a series of useful concepts with which to describe allusion as it occurs in a poem. In addition, I will be using an expanded definition of allusion, extending it to include a “deliberate
incorporation of identifiable elements from other sources, preceding or contemporaneous, textual or extratextual” (The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 39, emphasis added). This expanded definition includes not only textual echoes, typically understood in any standard definition of allusion, but also extratextual allusions, such as ekphrastic allusions to prints that illustrate volumes of poetry, as well as material allusions to a book’s layout and format. By expanding the definition of allusion to include more than just the words on the page, one can better grasp how Lowell engaged with John Keats’s poetry and what effect this had on her writing.

Most Lowell scholars agree that it was Keats who exerted the greatest influence upon Lowell’s development as a poet, in that he is the model to whom Lowell most often and openly alludes. Most of these direct allusions are found in her first book of poetry and fall terribly flat. As Lowell’s most notable biographer, Foster Damon, notes, Lowell’s allusions to Keats are “about the man, not [the] book” (188): her aim was to invoke the poet himself rather than his poetry, in an attempt to associate her work with Keats’s. Keats’s tone, imagery, and subject matter, however, were not in tune with Lowell’s modern, homosexual lyrics. This mismatch would be cast aside on the day Lowell picked up the March 1913 issue of Poetry magazine and discovered the group of writers who called themselves the Imagistes.

It is no surprise that shortly after Lowell learned about the movement, which was heavily influenced by the work of Sappho,24 that her poetry and, consequently, her use and application of allusion, underwent a major shift. Lowell’s allusions to Sappho, on

---

24 I will establish the crucial role Sappho played in the development of Imagism later in this chapter.
the other hand, are rarely direct, and the external references they refer to (what Machacek calls the originating text or “spur”) are often intentionally recast in what Machacek has dubbed “phraseological adaptation.” Phraseological adaptation represents “the interactivity that is at play when a writer alludes to and refigures an allusion” (528), engaging with the original text in a novel way. Lowell’s Keatsian allusions are artlessly clumsy; but by contrast, her phraseological appropriations of Sapphic spurs or, in Machacek’s terminology, her Sapphic reprises, are subtle and playful. Each allusion is used as a transparent device that enables Lowell to create modern, erotic verse. Sappho is rarely referred to explicitly. Rather, Lowell engages Sappho’s imagery, setting, and tone, modernizing it and making it her own. The allusion is a gateway through which Lowell can explore a modern version of Sappho’s conceit. This phraseological adaptation allows Lowell the license to speak overtly about lesbian sexuality. Sappho’s subject matter (love between women), the natural landscape where she often sets her poems, and her direct voice are all a perfect match for Lowell’s poetry. Ironically, the very advantage she was seeking in referring to Keats, in the hope of establishing her poetic voice in the lyric genre, is found instead in her covert phraseological adaptations of Sappho’s poetry.

As Stephan Hinds observes in his study of allusion in Roman poetry, Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry, the key to a poet’s expression of allusion is the “the process of intertextual negotiation” that occurs between the spur and

---

25 In his article “Allusion,” Machacek points out the shortcomings of the current terminology available to scholars who want to write about poetic allusion. He uses the term phraseological adaptation to replace echo because he feels it better represents the interactivity at play when a writer alludes to and refigures an allusion.

26 Lowell does directly invoke the poet Sappho in two instances, in her long poem A Critical Fable and in her late poem, “The Sisters.”
reprise in those allusions (21). As we will see from a close look at Sappho’s poetry, the poet of Lesbos used complex allusions that incorporated multiple sources, fundamentally refiguring their context. Lowell’s Sapphic allusions also often operate within a much broader context than a one-to-one association. Her allusions are complex and obscure, offering a glimpse into the process of a writer who is using the past to express a vivid present that often cannot be revealed directly. Writing poetry in Sappho’s style enabled Lowell to write vivid, erotic, and self-reflective verse that found a vocabulary in which to express her homosexuality, and which expressed the ideals of Imagism and the New Poetry. It is when she begins to model Sappho’s interactive and adaptive method of allusion that Lowell comes into her own. She leaves behind the forced awkwardness of her allusions to Keats, finally free to develop her poetic gifts.

**Understanding Lowell’s Keatsian Allusions**

Lowell openly alluded to the poetry and to the life of John Keats throughout her career. She wrote seven poems explicitly about Keats and many other poems that allude to his works. She spent her lifetime collecting manuscripts and artifacts from Keats’s life, helped to preserve his last home in Rome, and wrote a two-volume biography about him in the final years of her life. By likening her poetry to that of Keats, Lowell positioned her name next to an admired and popular poet (Keats was experiencing a revival in the United States while Lowell was publishing her poetry). Many of Lowell’s first and most obvious Keatsian allusions appear in her first volume, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*, published in October, 1912. The book had taken her ten years to write and received a tepid reception. It can be read as a self-conscious tribute to Keats in which
Lowell tries, unsuccessfully, one might argue, to boost her poetic purpose on the back of Keats’s growing reputation in the United States. Lowell borrows the format, for both internal and external layout, of an edition of Keats’s *Lamia*, and many poems in her collection refer directly to the poet (“To John Keats”), trope on his famous conceits (“Before the Altar”), or use the construction and format of his books as sources for allusion (“Suggested by the Cover of a Volume of Keats’s Poems”).

As Margaret Homans argues, Lowell’s purpose in constructing her first poetic endeavor on Keats’s material and metaphorical platforms (i.e., copying the format of his editions, referencing his material editions within poems, and by repeated explicit references), was to “ma[k]e Keats into her forebear to acquire an irreproachable pedigree for her own poetic practice” (90). I argue that in making these overt allusions, Lowell forfeits the possibility of interactivity between the spur (or external reference) and reprise (the echo, or “what the later author does with the earlier phrase”). Not only are these allusions stagnant and stale, but her verse suffers in the formal confines of meter. It is not until Lowell comes upon the work of the Imagist poets that her poetry takes a new turn. After the pleonastic references to Keats that dull her poetry and convey an atmosphere of claustrophobic stasis, she moves on to interactive phraseological adaptations of Sappho that invigorate her poems.

Lowell was herself aware of the shortcomings in her first volume. In a letter written to Professor William Lyon Phelps, she self-consciously proclaimed “To John Keats” a “bad” poem, for its use of “old poetic jargon.” In the same letter, however,

---

27 Lowell would keep this book format for all of her published volumes of poetry.
Lowell is quick to defend her mastery of Keats, claiming that she does not “believe that there is a person on the world who knows John Keats better than [she does], even Sir Sidney Colvin.”

Toward the end of her life, Lowell was able to show off all she knew about Keats in a massive, two-volume biography; however, in *Dome*, her display of knowledge seems grandiose and unwarranted.

Lowell begins the sonnet “To John Keats” by hailing Keats as the “Great master!” and calling him a “Boyish, sympathetic man!” This panegyric opening is further elaborated in the extended metaphor about his genius that follows. Finally, the poem closes with this portrait of Keats:

A youth who trudged the highroad we tread now

Singing the miles behind him; so may we

Faint throbbings of thy music overhear.

The reader is left with the impression that there is a great distance between the speaker and Keats. The image of the departing poet, coupled with the wish of the speaker to catch “[f]aint throbbings of [his] music” strongly suggest the gulf that Lowell felt separated her poetry and Keats’s (*Complete* 21). Her verses try to walk the “highroad” she pictures him walking in her poem, but she is unable to separate the poet from his poetry and to attain the lyrical fluency that she so admires in Keats. It is not until she realizes that this “highroad” is not the path for her that she is able to forge her own trail and create a voice worthy of her poetic aspirations.

---

28 Sir Sidney Colvin was Keats’s most famous biographer at the time.
Wild little bird, who chose thee for a sign

To put upon the cover of this book?

In “Suggested by the Cover of a Volume of Keats’s Poems,” Lowell alludes not only to one of Keats’s most famous poems, “Ode to a Nightingale,” but also ekphrastically refers to an extratextual element of Keats’s volume: the bird pictured on its cover. As Homans suggests, the poem echoes Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” in such a way as to “render the bird allegorical” (99). Through an extended metaphor, the bird becomes a prosopopoeic representation of Keats; but from the beginning of the poem, Lowell falls far short of the tenets of imagism she would shortly espouse. The bird and its surroundings are left vague through her use of abstract language, and she focuses little on the central image. In this poetic environment, the allusions she inserts into the poem are less effective.

Who heard thee singing in the distant dim,

The vague, far greenness of the enshrouding wood,

When the damp freshness of the morning earth

Was full of pungent sweetness and thy song?

The “forest dim” of “Ode to a Nightingale” is dulled to a “distant dim” in Lowell’s allusion (line 20 and line 3). While Lowell does amend the spur with a new reprise, she adds little to her poem through this phraseological adaptation, as she switches “forest” to “distant.” Equally, Lowell’s language is cramped by the archaic vernacular of Victorian
verse, with her use of the words “thee” in line 1 and “thy” in line 6. Beyond the descriptors “wild” and “little,” the bird (which Lowell later equates with Keats) remains indistinct and difficult for the reader to visualize. Lowell acknowledges this as she tries to set up a comparison between the “fearful beauty” of the bird’s song and Keats’s own poetry:

We do not know what bird thou art.

Perhaps that fairy bird, fabled in island tale,

Who never sings but once, and then his song

Is of such fearful beauty that he dies

From sheer exuberance of melody.

The bird and the “fearful beauty” of its swan song is compared to the poet, who “sang all he knew/ A little while, and then he died.” Keats and his poetry, in this and many other poems in this volume, remain distant, on a pedestal, and utterly unattainable.

Lowell chose *Dome* as her title for the book after the celebrated lines from Shelley’s elegy to Keats, “Adonais”:

The One remains, the many change and pass;

Heaven’s light forever shines, Earth’s shadows fly;

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,

Stains the white radiance of Eternity
Until Death tramples it to fragments.

In Shelley’s poem, the dome represents the transitory beauties of mortal life. Throughout the volume, Lowell’s Keatsian allusions operate amongst the shattered fragments that remain, and Lowell seems frustrated at her inability to assemble the great dome again. Mid-volume, Lowell reuses Shelley’s image in her poem “Fragment”:

What is poetry? Is it a mosaic

Of coloured stones which curiously are wrought

Into a pattern? Rather glass that’s taught

By patient labour any hue to take

And glowing with a sumptuous splendor, make

Beauty a thing of awe, where sunbeams caught

Transmuted fall in sheafs of rainbows fraught

With storied meaning for religion’s sake.

Here, Lowell engages the idea of refiguring Shelley’s image in a Petrarchan octave. Lowell’s “poetry” inverts Shelley’s dome and converts heaven’s sunbeams into “sheafs of rainbows” that fall onto the living world below. Lowell uses a phraseological allusion (as she will later in order to interact with Sapphic allusions) to add weight to her poem. She purposely changes the words she borrows from Shelley to suffuse them with meaning in the new context of her poem. There is no mention of Shelley or Keats.
Instead, the reprise is only hinted at, and through this subtlety, gains force from Lowell’s own voice and the modern context. Despite this more successful use of allusion, her use of the Petrarchan octave and adherence to rhyming couplets, and her use of Victorian language (“wrought,” “awe,” “splendor”), deprive the poem of the power it could achieve if it were written in a freer form and vernacular idiom.

*Dome*’s central theme, as Damon sees it, is a “veiled record of frustration” (Damon 187). Indeed, in her first book, Lowell seems obsessed with trying to relate her poetry to the poetry and life of Keats, and it is filled with the frustration she feels at the inferiority of her own poetry. Through the decade-long struggle of writing *Dome*, however, she triumphs by finding a new poetic process. She was only able to take full advantage of the allusions she eagerly employs when she begins to write poems liberated from the constraints of form, meter, and Victorian diction.

Ironically, one of the aspects of Keats’s verse that Lowell most admired was the way he artfully employed unmarked allusion. As she wrote, Keats’s “most admirable [poetic] experiment [was] not a combination of fresh images; it [was] a fresh recombination of old images pulled from their original contexts” (96). Lowell saw Keats as a “treasure seeker,” scanning old texts for images to be borrowed and refigured in his own work. By decontextualizing these references in his own verse, Lowell felt Keats robbed them of their authority over him. One finds examples of phraseological adaptations throughout Keats’s oeuvre. These allusions include grand statements such as the allusion found in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” where Keats delivers an axiom, “Beauty is truth; truth, beauty,” that is based on the writings of Sir Joshua Reynolds. There are also
small “treasures” of a single phrase: such as the seemingly Miltonic constructed phrase “pure serene” found in “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”:

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene

Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold (7–8).

This allusion has been traced back to Cary, who used the phrase to describe Dante’s ether and to Coleridge, who uses the phrase in “Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni” to describe an avalanche (Levinson 11–13). Both Levinson and Homans observe how Lowell’s allusions to Keats, “may derive from the same anxious source as his … [a] wish to find a place among the English poets” (94). Keats’s use of phraseological adaptation invigorated Lowell’s reading of his verse; however, Lowell, unable to replicate his form, had not yet found her place in the English pantheon.

Just before the publication of Dome, Lowell began to formulate her own ideas about the New Poetry being published out of Chicago, including the poems published by the “Imagistes.” The influence of this new poetry began to be felt in her poetic voice. She began to experiment with free verse and to draw upon the imagery of everyday life. This new poetic approach is evident in a poem, “Before the Altar,” which she wrote last but chose to publish as the first poem in the collection Dome. Still iambic and rhymed, this was her first attempt at vers libre, an experiment with irregular line-lengths and rhyme pattern. This slight shift in form and image revivified Lowell’s approach to allusion. Thematically, “Before the Altar” tropes on the central symbol of Keats’s
Endymion, the moon, and borrows many of the images in Keats’s poem, including its altar and fire imagery, as one sees in the second stanza of Lowell’s poem.

And while the moon

Swings slow across the sky,

Athwart a waving pine tree,

And so on

Tips all the needles there

With silver sparkles, bitterly (14–19).

In Lowell’s reprise, we see the ownership of the allusion shift (as we saw in “Fragment”). Keats’s “loveliest moon” is repurposed, and no longer belongs to Keats; rather, his image has been transfigured into Lowell’s own (line 592). She fearlessly refigures the spur in her own landscape, choosing a pine tree to catch the moonlight, instead of Keats’s yew trees, which are found only in Europe and Africa. The image itself conveys the weight of emotion she had tried to evoke in clunky, abstract, Victorian phrases throughout the rest of the volume. In its irregular lines, the poem begins to open up into the possibility of a modern cadence, and one begins to see Lowell’s conscious choice of where to break the line in order to best convey the emotion of the poem. This intensifies the emotional weight of Lowell’s image: The pine needles that sparkle “bitterly” conjure up the longing and sadness of the speaker.
After writing *Dome*, Lowell’s transformation as a writer had begun. Her discovery of free verse and her new, vernacular voice allowed Lowell to rethink entirely how she engaged and benefited from allusion in her poetry. In the New Poetry and the tenets of the Imagists, Lowell had found the instruction she had craved in the ten years she had spent laboring over *Dome*. She had found a form and a method to communicate an intense array of emotions. With “Before the Altar,” Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism had begun. This poem was the first she published that displayed Lowell’s true lyric qualities. Written in everyday language and set principally in the garden of her own compound at Sevenels, it moves seamlessly from images to powerful personal emotion.

**Inventing an American Sappho: Understanding Lowell’s Allusions to Sappho**

To fully understand this dramatic shift in Lowell’s poetic craft, we must look closely at what happened during this pivotal moment in her writing career. The March 1913 issue of *Poetry* magazine that captured Lowell’s attention spelled out the three doctrines of the Imagist movement: (1) to treat the “thing” directly, whether it were subjective or objective; (2) to use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation; (3) as regards rhythm, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.29 Also included in this issue were clear, crisp lyric poems signed by H.D., *Imagiste*. Later, Lowell would write that upon reading H.D.’s first published poems, she felt an immediate sense of kinship, exclaiming, “Why, I too, am an *imagiste!*” (*Some Imagist Poets*, “Introduction”)

---

29 The three principles were first printed in *Poetry* (I, 198-200), March 1913. Also included in this article were hints about a mysterious “Doctrine of the Image,” which was not included in the article (curiosity about which would eventually lure Lowell to London).
Lowell immediately arranged to travel to England, armed with a letter of introduction to Ezra Pound from *Poetry*’s editor, Harriet Monroe. In England, Pound, H.D. and Aldington met with Lowell to discuss her poems. As Damon tells it,

they rewrote her old poems before her eyes, underscoring clichés and heaving them out; compressing; making more visible; brooming away Victorian cobwebs; reducing morals to implications; breaking up stiff lines, then realxing them in any number of different ways, to choose the one with the best cadence; in general, cleaning up “literature” and concentrating on reality (208).

The Imagist poetic ideals she gained in these sessions, and her discovery of a lyric voice that openly espoused female eroticism, reconfigured and clarified Lowell’s approach to writing poetry.

Lowell’s visceral reaction to H.D.’s poems owed much to their shared expression of Sapphic Modernism.\(^\text{30}\) Pound grounded the tenets of Imagism on the concise classical style of Sappho, Catullus, and Villon. As F.S. Flint explains it, “[t]hey were not a revolutionary school; their only endeavor was to write in accordance with the best tradition, as they found it in the best writers of all time—in Sappho, Catullus, Villon” (199). Indeed, in the early published works of the Imagists (H.D.’s “Hermes of the Ways,” “Priapus,” and “Epigram,” Richard Aldington’s “To Atthis,” and Ezra Pound’s “The Cloak,” “Papyrus,” and “Ἰμέρρω”), classical allusions appear as the very foundation

---

\(^{\text{30}}\) As I noted in Chapter 1, Sapphic Modernism as I define it in this study is poetry that employs Sappho’s poetic methods to a modernist end. My definition follows Diana Collecott and Eileen Gregory’s use of the term in their studies of H.D.’s poetry, as opposed to the usage of Susan Gubar and later Shari Benstock, who use the term to describe any instance of lesbian eroticism in modernist writing.
of inspiration. Each poet translated and responded to a variety of different ancient poets, but all wrote emphatically in response to the poetry of Sappho.

**Sappho’s Use of Phraseological Adaptation to Express Female Desire**

In order to understand how Lowell, H.D., Pound and Aldington alluded to Sappho, however, it is important to first examine Sappho’s own art of allusion. Sappho uses phraseological adaptation playfully throughout her oeuvre. Rather than “mechanical or slavish reiteration” of a Homeric or Pindaric phrase, Sappho playfully and creatively adapts her precursors’ language to fit her own, new purpose (528). For example, Sappho’s most admired poem, Fragment 2, begins with one of these allusions:

> That man seems to me peer of gods, who sits in thy presence, and hears close to him thy sweet speech and lovely laughter (trans. Wharton) (56).

In the second line of the poem, “that man” sitting next to the beloved is one who seems, from the speaker’s point of view, “to be peer of gods” (*isos theoisin*). There is much debate as to the exact reading of this poem; however, Anne Pippin Burnett asserts that Sappho creates in “that man” “an implement of [her] poetic wit, and on closer study, he proves to be a hybrid creature made up of borrowing from two quite different sources” (235). She connects the first of these sources with the ubiquitous and irresistible figure found in later poems like Pindar's (Frg. 123 Maehler) who, of course, forms the end of a long oral tradition:

---

31 As we will later discuss, this poem is imitated by Catullus (Carmen 51). Also, as previously discussed in Chapter 1, this poem is used as an example in *Treatise on the Sublime*.

32 Some scholars see this poem as a “record of a seizure of sickening jealousy,” while others see it as an instance of a wedding song (Burnett 232).
The man who meets the liquid glance
that gleams from Theoxenus’ eye
and fails to swell with passion must
have tempered his dark heart
within a chilly flame,
or else he is misprized of sloe-eyed Aphrodite—
does her work for hire
or woman-like, pursues cool paths [of chastity] (translation Burnett) (235).

Sappho calls upon this trope and adapts it by portraying “that man” not as cold and hard
as a stone, but as fortunate, safe, and likened to a god because he is close to her beloved.

In addition, Sappho draws upon an echo of a powerful Homeric phrase. In Greek
poetry before Sappho, the only people who are set on a par with the gods are the heroes
of Homeric myth (*isotheos*). Sappho uses this echo of the Homeric mythic hero and
transforms it for her own poetic purpose, equating with the gods not someone who has
accomplished heroic deeds, but a person seated next to her beloved who is basking in the
privilege of listening to her beloved’s voice.\(^{33}\) In using the words *isos theoisin* (“he is
godlike who”), Sappho is engaging with a stock debate of her time, likening men to gods
(237).\(^{34}\) Poets and philosophers alike used this locution to show something of
extraordinary value; it was never used in the context in which Sappho is choosing to use
it. To the speaker in Sappho’s poem, any person who is seated next to her beloved is not

---

\(^{33}\) Girls were routinely compared to divinities in Sappho’s poetry. See Sappho 96.4V; cf. 23.5V.

\(^{34}\) The conventional view was that only marriage or victory at the games could make men feel like gods and
justify comparing them to them; however, poets and philosophers argued other cases. For a list of
historical examples of such writing, see Burnett 237.
only divinely happy, but in the presence of something to which men should accord the highest possible value (Burnett 238). By the same token, she also transforms the beloved into a god-like being with the power to inflict catastrophic damage on the speaker, making the invocation of the lover’s destruction in the lines that follow not only believable, but (as “Longinus” suggests) sublime.

By combining these allusions and transforming them in the opening image of her poem, Sappho has both alluded to her poetic forefathers and emulated their poetic motifs, transforming them so that they can properly depict female desire; in so doing, she has produced a palette to communicate the complex emotions of love. She both affirms the tradition in which she is writing and differentiates herself from it; the subtle changes in her allusions reflect the fact that she does not fit comfortably within the tradition in which she is writing (Conte 76).

Another example of Sappho’s powerful use of an epic simile, a moon that is spun out of a Homeric spur, is found in Fragment 96.

…Sardis…often turning her thoughts in this direction… (she honored) you as being like a goddess for all to see and took most delight in your song.

Now she stands out among Lydian women like the rosy-fingered moon after sunset, surpassing all stars, and its light spreads alike over the salt sea and the flowery fields; the dew is shed in beauty, and roses bloom and

---

35 I am using the term “emulate” as Bret Keeling uses it in his article “H.D and ‘The Contest’: Archaeology of a Sapphic Gaze.” In this article, Keeling examines Sappho’s influence on H.D.’s writing, focusing on why H.D. refrained from both imitating and directly translating Sappho. As he writes, “H.D.’s are not acts of imitation but of emulation. Emulation suggests competition, even rivalry…that H.D., admiring Sappho above all artists, desires to equal her predecessor’s poetic power” (196).
tender chervil and flowery melilot. Often as she goes to and fro she remembers gentle Atthis, and doubtless her tender heart is consumed because of your fate (Loeb 121).

The central image of the poem is the “rosy-fingered moon” that suspends longing throughout the poem. In comparing the absent beloved here to this celestial and feminine image, Sappho here is refiguring the Homeric rhetorical phrase “rosy-fingered dawn,” used throughout the Iliad and the Odyssey to signify the beginning of a new day. In her phraseological adaptation of Homer’s image, this “moon of absent beauty” is recast as a transparent device through which she can express a feminine perspective on desire (Burnett 307). Both the moon and the dew it sheds on the roses, chervil and melilot are feminine symbols enlivened by the intertextual negotiation between spur and reprise. The moon is not a passive image, it is full, vital and timeless, for it illuminates what divides the speaker from her beloved (the sea) and reinvigorates the earth, as the beloved and the lover walk in the dew that waters and releases the scents of flowers. Again, in this Homeric allusion, Sappho both affirms the tradition in which she is writing and differentiates herself from it. Her allusions are purposefully adapted in order to create a feminized poetic landscape made up of feminized images and language in which desire between two women could adequately be expressed.

Understanding How Aldington, Catullus and Pound Allude to Sappho

Lowell’s response to the tenets of Imagism and the influence of Sappho differed

---

36 J. Trumpf writes about Sappho’s creation of “pure longing” with this image in “Kydonische Apfel” Hermes 88 (1960) 22.
37 Recalling Selene, the Greek goddess of the moon, and Herse, the goddess or personification of dew.
dramatically from that of Pound and Aldington; but her work and use of Sapphic allusion displays many similarities to H.D.’s. In order to understand how Lowell responded to the work of Sappho, it is important to first contrast it with her contemporaries, and in particular, to get a basic understanding of how Pound and Aldington responded to the work of Sappho.

Both Aldington and Pound wrote poems in response to Sappho’s Fragment 96,\(^{38}\) and as Hugh Kenner points out, Aldington’s version introduced Pound to the fragment whose images would haunt his and Aldington’s poetry for many years (56). Fragment 96 was newly recovered in 1906 as part of the Oxyrhynchus expedition to Egypt. Aldington discovered a newly translated version of the fragment (which was riddled with gaps in the text) in the *Classical Review* (June 1909), and he was inspired to write a response in his poem, “To Atthis (After the Manuscript of Sappho now in Berlin).”

Aldington’s creative response to Sappho’s fragment is worlds apart from H.D. and Lowell’s. First, and most dramatic, is the shift in the presentation of the beloved. In Aldington’s version, Atthis is not the central object of passion and longing but an absent girl mentioned in passing. While Sappho and later H.D. and Lowell are creating a landscape where female desire and longing can be showcased as something of exquisite beauty, Aldington’s poem centers on the loss of a possession.

Atthis, far from me and dear Mnasidika,

Dwells in Sardis;

\(^{38}\) This fragment was not included in Wharton’s text, and I am therefore using Loeb’s numbering.
Many times she was near us

So that we lived life well

Like the far-famed goddess

Whom above all things music delighted.

And now she is first among Lydian women

As the mighty sun, the rose-fingered moon,

Beside the great stars.

And the light fades from the bitter sea

And in a like manner from the rich-blossoming earth;

And the dew is shed upon the flowers,

Rose and soft meadow-sweet

And many colored melilote.

Many things told are remembered of sterile Atthis.

I yearn to behold thy delicate soul

To satiate my desire…

---

39 When Aldington showed this poem to Pound, Pound immediately submitted it to Harriet Monroe’s Poetry magazine. Monroe refused to publish the poem as a translation based on its inaccuracies. Paul Shorey, head of the Greek Department at the University of Chicago, “wouldn’t stand for it” (55). Pound disagreed, brashly stating that the Greek was so mutilated that “no living man could talk about it in
As Kenner suggests, Aldington dulls the original metaphors and similes found in Sappho’s poem by de-contextualizing them (57). Because the lover-beloved relationship is no longer central to the poem, the similes and metaphors about the beloved are not as powerful.

Another significant alteration Aldington makes is to change the epic simile used in the poem comparing the beloved to the moon. As we read in Sappho’s original fragment, in using the phrase “rosy-fingered moon,” Sappho is revitalizing a stock Homeric metaphor and refiguring it to make it speak for what she intended: the development of female desire set in a feminized landscape. Aldington alters the vehicle of Sappho’s original metaphor, so that the girl is compared not to a moon that reflects the sunset, but to two images: “the mighty sun” and “the rose-fingered moon.” This de-emphasizes Sappho’s original allusion to Homer’s “rosy-fingered dawn,” giving the sun and moon equal weight. This means the reader must contend with the associations of both moon and sun, losing the focus on the connection the corporeal body has to the earth (moonlight, dew) and instead pondering on the distance and isolation one feels from sun and moon when looking up at them in the sky.

In Aldington’s poem, the epic simile is no longer used to convey the enormous, yet exquisitely beautiful loss that is conveyed in Sappho’s original fragment. Instead of following Sappho’s conscious progression from tenor (moon), vehicle (rosy-fingered) and image (the roses blooming in the meadow), Aldington alters the progression of the absolutes” (55). Pound declared that Aldington’s poem “will take its place in any ‘complete’ English Sappho in the future” (Kenner 55). Pound would later anthologize the poem in Des Imagistes (1914).
simile and thereby changes the tone of the poem from didactic\(^{40}\) to elegiac. Rather than resonating with the beauty of the moon and the beauty of remembering a lost love, Aldington’s poem becomes a poem of loss, where the beloved is “sterile” and as distant as a heavenly body.

This comparison leads to a catalog of images that convey the loss of possessing the beloved by showing them in the landscape: “And the light fades from the bitter sea/
And in the like manner from the rich-blossoming earth” (lines xx). The dew that appears in line 13 becomes tears, not the dew that “is shed in beauty” from Sappho’s poem. In the final image of the poem, “I yearn to hold thy delicate soul/ To satiate my desire…” the speaker expresses her longing for Atthis, and because of Aldington’s alterations, the catalog of longing that has led up to this moment in the poem, the lines act as a culmination of this loss.

In the tradition of Sapphic allusions transformed by the male point of view, however, Aldington’s changes accord with the poetic practice of the Imagists’ other literary hero, Catullus. In his clever imitation of Sappho, “Carmen 51,” Catullus does not hide the fact that he is re-creating a popular poem by one of the greatest poets who ever lived; he is consciously placing his name next to hers in his adaptation of her meter and poetry as he changes the perspective of the speaker of the poem from female to male.\(^{41}\)

That man is seen by me as a God’s equal

Or (if it may be said) the God’s superior,

\(^{40}\) For a comprehensive reading of Fragment 96 as a didactic poem, see Burnett 300–313.

\(^{41}\) Both Greek and Roman writers subscribed to the theory that imitation was the sincerest form of flattery and often adapted earlier poems in the hope that the reader would both notice the allusion and admire how he/she had improved upon the original (Snyder 28).
Who sitting opposite again and again
Watches and hears you
Sweetly laughing—which rips out
All of my senses, for every time I see you,
Lesbia, nothing is left of me… (51 trans. Guy Lee).

Catullus, as Aldington would later, both alludes to and adapts Sappho’s original fragment. However, instead of de-emphasizing Sappho’s allusions to Homer, Catullus adds to the dialogue Sappho had initiated between Homer and herself on the *isos theosin* locution by adding in line two of the poem: “ille, si fas est, superare Diuos (if it may be said) the Gods’ superior.” With this insertion, Catullus not only translates Sappho’s poem, he adds his own perspective into the debate Sappho had begun with Homer (and her contemporaries), layering the historical presence of his time period on Sappho’s and artfully strengthening his allusion with references to both of his illustrious predecessors. As Guy Lee points out, “[t]he Latin epigrams have an immediacy and a closeness to the spoken language that is lacking in the more ornate and ‘poetical' Greek” (xvii). By inserting an epigrammatic commentary on his own allusions “(if it may be said)” he adds immediacy and questions the authority of the allusion.

After reading Aldington’s translation, Pound was also inspired to write a poem on one of the Greek words found in Sappho’s Fragment 96 that Aldington had labored over in his translation: Ἰμέρρω.

Thy soul
Grown delicate with satieties,

Atthis

O Atthis

I long for thy lips.

I long for thy narrow breasts,

Thou restless, ungathered (Personae 116).

In Pound’s example, Atthis is again observed from a male perspective and is blazoned into objects of longing: soul, lips, breasts; the whole of Atthis remaining “restless and ungathered.”

Sappho’s allusions are complex, usually calling upon multiple sources and freely altering those sources in order to gain a lyric poetic space that can express female desire. Aldington and Pound both allude to a single, identifiable Sapphic fragment as told from a male perspective, and because of this, the tone and purpose of their poems is distinctly different from those of Lowell and H.D. As we will see through close examination of Lowell’s poems, the purpose of Lowell’s Sapphic allusions is to gain a transparent device through which she could communicate and empower female desire. What is the purpose of the Sapphic reprise found in the poetry of Aldington and Pound? They do not allude to Sappho in order to gain a feminized landscape of erotic desire, because they could write freely of desiring a woman in their own verse.

42 Pound would go on to write a number of poems that reflected on the problems of translating Sappho’s and other ancient texts that exist only in fragments including, “Shop Girl,” “Ione, Dead the Long Year,” and “Papyrus.”
For Aldington, and later Pound, the purpose behind their Sapphic allusions or translations was to gain an understanding of the Greek text. They were also (especially in the case of Pound) interested in publicly shedding light on the dubiousness of standardization in the Greek translation of fragmented texts. Neither Aldington nor Pound risked anything by associating their names with Sappho’s; in fact, like Catullus, they could gain from it. Lowell and H.D., as lesbians, had more to lose by associating their names with Sappho’s. Forced to use Sappho’s own method of phraseological adaptation, they gained a new poetic perspective.

**Discovering “[I]sland[s] of artistic perfection” in Hellas: Understanding H.D.’s Sapphic Modernism**

As Diana Collecott has pointed out in her study, *H.D. and Sapphic Modernism*, many of H.D.’s Sapphic allusions are embedded in her poetry. H.D. set her poems in an imaginary landscape, “Hellas,” where elements of a Greek island landscape are combined with American and European natural elements.

Nowhere in H.D.’s work are her allusions to Sappho more explicit, however, than in her fragment expansion poems. In H.D.’s fragment expansion poems, H.D. islands tiny quotations from Sappho’s verse in a sea of her own experience and emotions. These dialogical meditations avoid directly speaking in Sappho’s own voice, but instead enact Sappho’s “island[s] of artistic perfection”\(^{43}\) as thematic guides through a maelstrom of

---

\(^{43}\) In *The Wise Sappho*, H.D. describes Sappho as “Little—not little—but all, all roses! So at the last, we are forced to accept the often quoted tribute of Meleager … True, Sappho has become for us a name, she is the sea itself, breaking and tortured and torturing, but never broken. She is an island of artistic perfection where the lover of ancient beauty (shipwrecked in the modern world) may yet find foothold and take breath” (67).
emotion. *Hymen* (1921) and *Heliodora and Other Poems* \(^{44}\) (1924) contain the final published versions of all of her fragment expansion poems: five lyric dramatic monologue poems she creates from Sappho’s fragments “Fragment Thirty-six,” “Fragment Forty,” “Fragment Forty-one,” “Fragment Sixty-eight” and “Fragment 113” (numbered after Wharton). \(^{45}\) In these fragment expansion poems, H.D. uses direct quotations, images and themes of Sappho (and other Greek poets) in the same way Sappho used images and phrases of Homer and Pindar; thereby not only alluding to Sappho, but emulating Sappho’s poetic style.

Thematically, all of the poems written from Sappho’s fragments in *Hymen* and *Heliodora* explore oppositions. As previously stated in Chapter 1, one of the most admired attributes of Sappho’s poetry (as pointed out in *On the Sublime*) was her ability to convey opposites and to express the oppositions and contradictions within erotic madness (*erotica mania*). \(^{46}\) Because each of the themes of H.D.’s fragment expansion poems explore the oppositions of “erotic crisis,” H.D. is able to turn each poem on the device of antithesis and embody Sappho’s most acclaimed theme.

“Fragment forty” stands out among the fragment expansion poems as an extraordinary example of H.D.’s phraseological approach to allusion. The poem employs

---

\(^{44}\) A trio of these poems was collected originally in 1920 under the titles “Eros,” “Envy” and “Amaranth,” as part of a sequence aptly titled, “The Islands.” The earlier drafts, if read biographically, voice the isolation felt by a woman who had experienced the infidelity and abandonment of her husband. These original drafts do not contain the epitaphs that would later crown them and remained unpublished in their more confessional form. Years later, when H.D. revised the poems, she centered each on a fragment of Sappho’s verse as she chiseled away superfluous and revealing words. What emerged from this revision process were her fragment expansion poems.

\(^{45}\) Many scholars also include “Calliope” (DuPlessis) and “Choros Sequence/from Morpheus” (Gregory) as part of the poems grouped as H.D.’s fragment expansion poems.

\(^{46}\) As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, in the classical treatise *On the Sublime* (formerly ascribed to Longinus) the author wrote: “uniting opposites, [Sappho] freezes while she burns” (trans. Campbell I:114).
the same methods used in the other fragment expansion poems; however, in “Fragment forty,” H.D. alludes to multiple sources, including two of Sappho’s fragments, an Alexandrian epigram and the *aubade* tradition, thereby emulating Sappho’s own poetic method of refiguring multiple past poetic images and motifs in order to present a modern point of view. The poem begins by recalling the often mistranslated fragment for which it is named: “Love…bitter-sweet.” As Anne Carson reminds us, the Greek, *glukupikron* (“sweetbitter”) implies that love brings sweetness and then bitterness (3), but many poets who have alluded to this fragment have mistakenly reversed the idea. George Herbert calls love “sour-sweet” (161); while Swinburne elaborates the phrase into a similar reversal, “O bitterness of things too sweet” (I:217). In section 3, H.D.’s use of anacoenesis recalls this tradition.

Ah love is bitter and sweet,

But which is more sweet,

The sweetness

Or the bitterness?

none has spoken it (32–36).

H.D.’s query recalls past allusions to this same Fragment where Sappho’s sentiment had been reversed, instead thematically returning to the sublime “erotic crisis” of Fragment 2. Which is better? The passions of love, or the poetry created from its absence?

47 The full text of Fragment 40 is “Now Love masters my limbs and shakes me, fatal creature, bitter-sweet” (79, trans. Wharton).
At line 14 and again at line 67, H.D. alludes to Sappho’s Fragment 95.

Evening, thou bringest all that bright morning scattered, [the sheep, the goat, the child to her mother.] \(^{48}\)

In H.D.’s reprise, she fuses an allusion to Fragment 95 with a conceit found in the *aubade* tradition. “[F]ire burst from the rocks/ to meet fire/ split from Hesperus” “such fire rent me with Hesperus” (*CP* 173). Hesperus,\(^{49}\) who represents the Evening star, is also a symbol representing lovers within the *aubade* tradition (as opposed to Aurora or dawn, who represents separation). H.D. draws from both the *aubade* tradition and Sappho’s depiction of Hesperus, as the god illuminates the passions of love at line 14. At line 62, just before dawn breaks, the speaker’s explicit expression of grief “I cried: / I must perish/ I am deserted/ an outcast, desperate/ in this darkness” leads not to the destruction of the speaker, but to a metamorphic “fire,“ and dawn.

To illuminate the source of the speaker’s “erotic crisis,” H.D. also alludes to a familiar trope found in Hellenistic Epigram in section 4.

I had thought myself frail;

a petal,

with light equal

on leaf and under-leaf.

\(^{48}\) It is likely, given her fluency in Greek, that H.D. associated evening with Hesperus. In Byron’s allusion to this fragment (which is found in Wharton’s edition) he refers directly to Hesperus: “O Hesperus, thou bringest all good things” (Wharton 106).

\(^{49}\) It is important to note that H.D. also alludes to Hesperus in “The Wise Sappho” (68).
I had thought myself frail;

a lamp,

shell, ivory or crust of pearl,

about to fall shattered,

with flame spent.

The lamp that appears at line 58, and again at line 69, recalls the lamp motif as it is used by Asclepiades (9 G-P=AP 5-7)\textsuperscript{50} to illuminate the infidelity of a lover.

Lamp, Heracleia swore three times in your presence that she would come, and she hasn’t come. Lamp, if you are a god, punish her deceit. Whenever she’s playing, having a lover within, extinguish yourself and give them no more light (Gutzwiller 138).

The lamp of Asclepiades’ poem symbolizes the revenge the speaker seeks against his cheating lover (Gutzwiller 138–139). As ubiquitous as a deity, the lamp is present in the speaker’s house and in the house where his lover is cheating on him. Its godlike powers, however, do not extend to preventing the infidelity that will inevitably occur. It can only turn off its light so that the lovers cannot see one another.

\textsuperscript{50} The lamp motif also appears in 10 G-P=AP 5-7.
In her reprise, H.D. recalls the futility of even a god-like lamp against a lover’s inevitable infidelity when her speaker compares herself to a lamp made of frail materials “about to be shattered” and with “flame spent.” This leads to a climatic image of self-destruction: “I cried/ ‘I must perish,/ I am deserted, an outcast, desperate/ in this darkness,’ ” (lines 62–66). At dawn, a metamorphosis occurs. Hesperus returns, symbolically representing the lover’s departure, and operating as a catalyst for the speaker of H.D.’s poem. After the dawn arrives, H.D.’s speaker no longer has need for a lamp (both symbolically and literally) and this double-entendre leads to the epiphanies of the final section of the poem, where the poetic truth of the poem is lit by the break of day.

What need of a lamp

when day lightens us,

what need to bind love

when love stands

with such radiant wings

over us?

What need—

yet to sing love,

love must first shatter us. (69–75).
Like the speaker of Sappho’s Fragment 2, the speaker of H.D.’s poem must first be destroyed by love in order to reap the “poetic compensation,” of sublime inspiration. H.D. uses the space of this fragment expansion poem to both allude to Sappho’s poetic explorations of this theme, and to emulate Sappho’s poetic style of refiguring multiple allusions in order to create a new, unique and distinctly modern point of view. By alluding to both Hellenistic epigram and a conceit from the *aubade* tradition she re-creates Sappho’s own method of phraseological adaptations of Homer in order to fit her own, new purpose.

**Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism: Understanding the Sappho Rooted in American Soil of Lowell’s Sapphic Allusions**

Contrary to Aldington, Pound’s and even H.D.’s allusions to Sappho, Lowell’s references to the images and tropes of Sappho’s poems are never direct and are refigured into her American landscape. Perhaps because her approach was more subdued, few critics\(^5\) have yet explicated Lowell’s numerous references to Sappho, as they have so extensively for the work of H.D. When one begins to dig up the fossils of Sappho’s verse that lie embedded in many of Lowell’s poems, however, one cannot fail to appreciate the commonality of their poetic style. H.D.’s distinctly classical enactment of Sapphic Modernism, written as an expatriate, and Lowell’s distinctly New England slant, have at their center a common method: a method that reflects the poetic style of revision and adaptation Sappho used in her own poetry. Equally important is the fact that H.D.’s work

---

\(^5\) The critics Jane Snyder and Lillian Faderman have both looked in depth at Sappho’s influence on Lowell.
gave Lowell license to write about female eroticism in the second person. This would transform Lowell’s writing.

In the work Lowell wrote immediately following her trip to England, we see a dramatic shift in not only in her use of allusion, but in the way she refers to her predecessors. After the abundant and direct allusions to Keats in “Dome,” Lowell makes only two direct references to Sappho in her writing (one in the poem “Sisters,” where she addresses the poet, and one in *A Critical Fable*). Lowell’s subtle allusions to Sappho’s poetry stand in stark contrast to the public display of admiration Lowell repeatedly showed for Keats. In Sappho, Lowell had found a poet who wrote to a female beloved, used sensual language, and fearlessly uprooted conventional poetic principles. While Lowell admired Keats, she could never fully connect with the male tradition in which he was writing, and he loomed as a great poet she could never decontextualize through allusions. In the poetry of Sappho, however, Lowell found a “sister” on whose work she could base a new American lyric tradition.

Lowell’s poems include numerous examples of Sapphic allusions that mimic and playfully refigure her allusive style. Lowell’s poem “The Letter” provides multiple examples of her use of Sapphic Modernism to represent a modern love between two women. As Faderman has pointed out, the poem uses a variation of long and short lines that mimic the cadence of Sapphic meter. This material allusion to Sappho’s poetic meter marries Lowell’s free verse to a Sapphic cadence. The poem begins by addressing not the beloved, but the text on the page she has written, in an attempt to capture her loneliness.
Little cramped words scrawling all over the paper

Like draggled fly’s legs,

What can you tell of the flaring moon

Through the oak leaves?

Or of my curtained window and of the bare floor

Spattered with moonlight? (52).

In these first six lines, Lowell reprises two Sapphic spurs. When she alludes to Sappho’s moon of “absent beauty” and loneliness found in fragment 96 and 168, these images appear indirectly in Lowell’s poem, from behind oak leaves or spattered on the bare wood floor (Burnett 306–7). Most importantly for the overall thematic development of the poem, however, the poem recreates the “erotic crisis” of Fragment 2, albeit from a self-conscious and modern perspective. In this first section of the poem, the crisis is not only the lover’s departure, but the inadequacy of language (even poetic language) to recreate this loneliness. The text on the page is cramped, bedraggled and unable to recreate the immediacy and intensity of the emotions that the speaker is feeling.

Overwhelmed in this crisis, the speaker abruptly begins to address her lover in the second stanza.

52 “The moon has sunk, the Pleiades are gone; the night’s half-finished—love’s hour past—and I sleep alone” (Burnett 227).
53 As noted in Chapter 1, one of the attributes of Sappho’s poetry for which she was most admired was her ability to unite opposites and express the oppositions and contradictions within erotic madness or crisis (erotica mania). Lowell turns each poem on the device of antithesis, embodying Sappho’s most acclaimed theme: the love that destroys the poet and at the same time inspires the creation of art.
I am tired, Beloved, of chafing my heart against

The want of you;

Of squeezing it into little inkdrops,

And posting it.

And I scald alone, here, under the fire

Of the great moon.

Lowell finishes the poem by returning to her theme. The moon that looms over the speaker and causes her to “scald” under its “fire” is the same “flaring” moon that peered out from beneath the oak tree in the first stanza of the poem. It is the speaker’s point of view (as we have witnessed) that has changed. In directly addressing her lover, the speaker allows her loneliness, symbolized by the moon, to rise into full view, scalding her in her futile desire for her beloved.

Lowell’s technique of developing an imagistic representation of the progression of longing and desire is a phraseological adaptation of Sappho’s use of the moon in Fragment 96 (and Fragment 168). As we have previously discussed in relation to Sappho’s own use of allusion and Aldington’s translation of Fragment 96, Sappho uses the image of a moon in an epic simile to communicate the conceit that beauty can be derived even from longing and desire. While Sappho’s rosy-fingered moon spreads its light (and dew) on the flowers and fields, Lowell’s moon mocks her speaker’s desire, and illuminates the futility of that desire as it rises and grows to a great size. Sappho’s
speaker is ignited by an erotic crisis, while Lowell’s speaker expresses her frustration with the process of distilling her loneliness into verse. Lowell’s poem also draws from Fragment 2, expressing the speaker’s inability to express through writing of the devastation of losing her beloved (ironically, in the form of a poem).

In “Absence,” we find another example of Lowell’s method of grafting and refiguring multiple Sapphic allusions into a single poem. Lowell’s reprise contains references to four separate Sapphic fragments. Looking closely at these phraseological adaptations, one sees how Lowell liberally refigures each Sapphic spur to fit into her poem and how, through the use of these allusions, her poems gain depth. “Absence” opens by alluding to Sappho’s depiction of Aphrodite’s cup in Fragment 5:

Come, goddess of Cyprus, and in golden cups serve nectar delicately mixed with delights (trans. Wharton 63).

While Sappho uses the image of Aphrodite’s golden cup (a symbol of love) to describe an abundance of love, Lowell reverses this conceit, using it instead to represent the depth of loneliness the speaker is feeling.

My cup is empty tonight,

Cold and dry are its sides (lines 1-2)

By refiguring Sappho’s image and conjuring up an empty cup, Lowell’s cup gains emotional depth. The cup in Lowell’s poem isn’t filled with golden nectar, it is bare and dry.
Lowell’s poem, written in the second person, is direct. Her words are simple and clear, swept clean of the cobwebs of Victorian vernacular. The poem is equally free of metrical constraints. In the lines that follow, Lowell extends the loneliness that resonates from the empty cup in lines 3 and 4 by alluding to Sappho’s exquisite image of the moon, used to represent the loneliness of a lover in Fragment 52.

The moon has set, and the Pleiades; it is midnight, the time is going by, and I sleep alone (trans. Wharton 84).

Lowell’s speaker’s cup is:

Chilled by the wind from the open window.

Empty and void, it sparkles white in the moonlight (3–4).

Like the moonlit pine branches from her earlier poem, “Before the Altar,” her cup is infused with the loneliness of the speaker through her allusions to Sappho. As the cup “sparkles white in the moonlight,” the loneliness it conveys gains the power and weight of the Sapphic spurs, paired with the chill of the open window.

In the stanza that follows, Lowell creates tension by juxtaposing the scent and image of wisteria blossoms as they move in the wind, against the emotive and empty cup:

The room is filled with the strange scent
Of wisteria blossoms.
They sway in the moon’s radiance
And tap against the wall.
But the cup of my heart is still,
And cold, and empty.

In the final stanza, Lowell again employs the “erotic crisis” of Fragment 2 in order to intensify the emotions conveyed by the poem. The speaker’s cup, which is clearly correlated with the speaker’s heart, remains “cold,” “empty” and devoid of love, even as the intoxicating scent of wisteria blossoms (which seem “strange” to the speaker) invade her room and mock her loneliness.

Finally, Lowell ends her poem with an allusion to Fragment 40. In Fragment 40, Sappho uses the word “bittersweet” to represent the pull of opposite extremes created by love:

Now love masters my limbs and shakes me, fatal creature, bitter-sweet
(trans. Wharton 79).

Lowell draws from Sappho’s usage of “bittersweet” to represent love in the final lines of the poem. As was the case in “The Letter,” the erotic crisis of the poem is conveyed through a shift in point of view. In this final stanza, the speaker addresses the beloved directly, in the second person, and the setting of the poem departs from the confines of the lonely room:

When you come, it brims
Red and trembling with blood,
Heart’s blood for your drinking;
To fill your mouth with love
And the bittersweet taste of a soul.

In this final image of the poem Lowell alludes to and alters Sappho’s original usage of “bittersweet” in Fragment 40 with her reprise, “the bittersweet taste of a soul.” Lowell’s cup is transformed by the speaker’s presence into the “bittersweet” pull of opposite extremes. The refigured allusion gains intimacy and gives Lowell a referent through which to speak about female eroticism. Sappho’s speaker merely experienced the “bittersweet” feelings of love as it ravished her limbs and shook her; whereas Lowell’s speaker places the bittersweet taste of a soul, namely, the speaker’s soul, in the mouth of the beloved. The cup which was once bare and cold, now brims, but not with the abstract nectar of Aphrodite found in Sappho’s poem. Lowell’s cup “red and trembling” with “[h]eart’s blood” is present, real and offering love as a sacrament between the two lovers. Through this transformed image, Lowell elevates the act of love into a spiritual act (a theme that continues throughout her lyric work that we will revisit in subsequent chapters). By combining and refiguring multiple Sapphic allusions in this poem, Lowell achieves an intimate and erotic poem about the female experience, set in an American landscape, steeped in the classical tradition but thoroughly modern.

Conclusion

By contrasting how Lowell’s use of allusion changed as she engaged the work of Keats and Sappho, we see a progression in the development of her poetic craft. As the interactivity within her allusions increased, so did the power and strength of her voice. Likewise, Lowell’s poetry greatly improved once she abandoned the confines of metered
verse and embraced the American vernacular, an American landscape, and free verse. Upon discovering Sappho’s poetry and the writing of the Imagists, Lowell found both a foremother and a method in which to engage a tradition that did not for the most part, accept her voice. In the work of H.D. especially, Lowell found a colleague who was as intent as she was on engaging the male canon from a Sapphic perspective.

In the chapters that follow, this study will look more closely at Lowell’s expression of Sapphic Modernism as it developed over the course of her career, by close readings of her poems. Chapter 3 will build upon the significant examples of Lowell’s use of allusion as outlined in this chapter, by examining Sappho’s discourse of desire, how Lowell adapted this discourse into the American landscape, and how this motif empowered Lowell’s contribution to a distinctly American lyric voice. Chapter 4 will also build upon these significant allusions to examine Sappho’s method of refiguring pre-existing poetic materials, to show how Lowell adapted this method into their own expression of modernism, by applying it to the American tradition.
Chapter 3

Writing the Discourse of Desire into the American Landscape

Lowell began her second book of poems with a preface that was meant to explain the dramatic shift in her voice since the publication of Dome. In the preface, she admits her inability to confine herself to a single school, and discusses her need to explore new forms for her poems. She explains that she sees her own development as a writer as a progression. “No one expects a man to make a chair without first learning how, but there is a popular impression that the poet is born, not made, and that his verses burst from his overflowing heart of themselves” (vii). Her opinion was that her poetic skills had grown after the lessons that she had learned from French poetry, particularly the Parnassian school,\(^5\) which she found to be both vigorous and alive. Adapting *vers libre* (or free verse) into an American form that she calls “unrhymed cadence,” she builds her poems on the “organic rhythm” of a speaking voice, using natural breathing pauses to break her lines (x–xi). Thanks to the Parnassians and the critique she received from the Imagists, she made the center of her craft a wish to convey a true emotion that “burns white-hot.” It is within this second volume of Lowell’s poetry, as she tries to tap into this intensity of emotion in her verse, that Lowell first experiments with Sapphic Modernism. Through new lyric poems, boldly erotic and filled with Sapphic allusions, she initiates a dialogue with the lyric tradition.

As noted in Chapter 1, its greatest exponent, Sappho, was writing just as the lyric form was coming of age. In *Lectures on Greek Poetry*, a book Lowell often turned to in

\(^5\) Carl Engel allegedly first introduced Lowell to the French Symbolists (*Imaginary Gardens* 59).
order to gain greater understanding of the Greek poets, J. W. Mackail describes the
inventiveness of the lyric age, describing it as one of the most productive periods in Greek poetry.

[There was a] whole new scope and expansion which Greek poetry took in the lyric age. [The Greek metricians] mean that in form as in spirit the established…practice [of Greek poetry] has been supplemented, and even for a time superseded, by [a] fresh movement of poetry embodying new ideals in a new method (87).

Mackail’s description of the lyric age as a “fresh movement of poetry embodying new ideals in a new method” strikes an uncanny chord with Lowell and Pound’s prescriptions for the poetry of 1912 and the decade that followed. Pound urged modern poets to “Make it New”; to re-invent both the subject and form of poetry. As a first step toward this goal, he enlisted both Richard Aldington and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) to join the Imagiste movement in 1912. Lowell was drawn to their work, and when she returned to the United States after her visit with them, she discovered the “new movement,” where poets “one and all revolted against the taste of their acquaintances,” the fireside poets or “caged warblers” of the 1890s, including Richard Watson Gilder, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Celia Thaxter, and Louise Imogen Guiney. These “gentle music-makers,” whom Americans avidly read in publications such as the Century and the Atlantic Monthly, wrote what Lowell considered to be watered-down imitations of the English poets. As Lowell saw it, the popular grain of American poetics was not American at all. Lowell

55 Pound first published this famous statement in his essay, “A Retrospect.”
applauded the poets who embarked on a new course “and launched, the whole flotilla of them, out into the turbulent sea of experiment and personal expression” (“Two Generations in American Poetry” 112–113). Lowell immediately identified with the “new movement” (also called the New Poetry), which she saw as evidence of a new, native American poetics born of the intensified patriotism that arose out of the struggles of World War I. As Lowell saw it, during and after the Great War American poetry finally cut itself off from its English inheritance. Through her interaction with the Imagists, who treasured Sappho’s lyrics, and through her readings of Mackail and Wharton, Lowell found in Sappho an inspirational source for her American lyric voice.

Two elements essential to Sappho’s poetry are particularly influential in Lowell’s work: the creation and communication of desire (which I will call the discourse of desire), and the re-invention or emulation of earlier poetic motifs. Lowell’s discovery of Sappho’s frankly feminine perspective had a direct effect on her development as a poet. As we will see, Lowell’s lyric duets with Sappho constitute some of her most spectacular verse, and it is here that Lowell first explores lesbian themes in her work. This chapter will look closely at Lowell’s refiguring of Sappho’s discourse of desire, and Chapter Four will review Lowell’s expression of Sapphic Modernism as set in an American landscape. I will then review how Sappho emulated her predecessors’ poetic motifs and how Lowell applied this technique in a distinctly American register.

56 In Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, Lowell states that in her opinion, only two American poets before her generation had successfully divorced themselves from the inheritance of English verse: Edgar Allen Poe and Walt Whitman (5). In Chapter 4, I will explore the influence of Walt Whitman on Lowell’s poetry.
Lowell’s discourse of desire originated in an effort to turn away from the martyred anguish of the poetry of popular women poets in the 1800s (the “caged warblers”), and her discovery of a Sapphic vocabulary. Applying Pater’s principle that art embodies spiritual values, and Sappho’s vision of love and desire as a spiritual act, Lowell used a re-contextualized approach to the several of Sappho’s techniques including the archaic aesthetic to communicate a passionate and often troubled emotional atmosphere. This chapter will review the key elements Sappho employs to create a discourse of desire: her expression of the archaic aesthetic, her use of recurring symbols representative of desire, her use of pothos (longing), and her emphasis on the mutuality of desire through a shifting of the poem’s gaze.\textsuperscript{57} A close reading of Lowell’s poetry follows, showing how Lowell adapted Sappho’s techniques. Finally, this chapter will examine how, by refiguring Sappho’s motifs, Lowell developed an American lyric voice.

**Sappho’s Discourse of Desire: Using Recurring Images and Motifs Enhanced by the Archaic Aesthetic to Express Feminine Desire**

As Page duBois and Jane Snyder see it, one of Sappho’s greatest contributions to the lyric tradition was to introduce a female discourse of desire, conveying female erotic passion. In the classical age before Sappho, the desire of women was depicted almost exclusively by men, and as duBois points out, was “always encoded as dangerous, destructive to the order of things” (144).\textsuperscript{58} Both Snyder and duBois encourage using

\textsuperscript{57} The term “gaze” as I will be using it in this study refers to the voyeuristic object of the poem, where and what the reader is shown to look at in the poem and how the character that is presented (passively or actively). The gaze as a literary term dates back to Sartre.

\textsuperscript{58} See Aristophanes’ *Ecclestazousae*, Sophocles Delianeira in the *Trachiniae*, Euripides’ Phaidra in the *Hippolytus*, for some examples of this negative depiction of female desire. In *The Use of Pleasure*, Vol. 2, Foucault traces this negative representation of female sexuality to the “art of governing a wife who must be
Sappho’s work as a way of transforming our view of antiquity to include a gynocentric as well as an androcentric view.

Reading her poetry must transform our view of antiquity as an exclusively masculine domain, one in which women had no voice, [and] served only as the occasions of masculine self-mastery. Sappho’s poems present a powerful challenge to what has sometimes been seen as a monolithically phallic economy, an untroubled history of masculine subjectivity triumphant through all of Western culture. Sappho celebrates not household labor and fertility, not the role of the good wife, but rather memory and yearning, the amorous pleasures women share on soft beds (145).

Sappho’s work offers an opportunity to transcend our prejudices about the lives, roles and feelings of women in antiquity. As duBois notes, it presents us with a “woman who speaks [freely] of her desire” (145). So how does Sappho go about creating a “narrative of desire” that female readers and poets could both understand and contribute to (51)?

The key to Sappho’s approach is her use of the female gaze, as well as her use of self-reflexive perception (29), shifting the way the female body is perceived: women feature simultaneously as both subject and object. As Snyder states, “Sappho stands as one kept under control and respected at the same time, since in relation to her husband, she is obedient mistress of the household” (165).

among the few writers in the Western world who have presented the female body as a landscape for desire in an active sense, not merely as a passive object of male lust” (Snyder 35). We can find evidence of the desire presented from this active vantage point if we re-examine Sappho’s Fragment 2:

That man seems to me peer of gods, who sits in thy presence, and hears close to him thy sweet speech and lovely laughter; that indeed makes my heart flutter in my bosom. For when I see thee but a little, I have no utterance left, my tongue is broken down, and straightway a subtle fire has run under my skin, with my eyes I have no sight, my ears ring, sweat bathes me, and a trembling seizes all my body; I am paler than grass, and seem in madness little better than one dead. But I must dare all, since one is poor… (trans. Wharton 56).

As Snyder interprets it, in this poem, “[t]he narrator gazing upon her beloved…is looking as much at herself as at the woman; in her ‘blindness’ she sees very clearly the nature of her own passion” (35). What the reader is observing is not the object of the desire, but the feelings that have taken over the lover as she observes her beloved and is overwhelmed by the symptoms brought on by this love.

Sappho’s discourse of desire is also defined by her specificity about this desire, which is conveyed through her use of recurring symbols and motifs. For example, the moon is used as a symbol of longing; natural images (such as a garden or a meadow) or
more specifically flowers, are used to represent the female body; the pull of oppositional forces (like fire and ice) represent love, and the recurring motif of the lover depicted as an empty cup or vessel is used to represent desire or longing. With these symbols, Sappho invokes a yearning, or pothos, not for that which is present, but for that which is elsewhere, by applying what Barbara Fowler has called the “archaic aesthetic” (119).

Fowler describes this as the way in which the poets of ancient Greece expressed the abstract emotions of passion and love through poetic devices, including onomatopoeia, synesthesia, and other tropes, applied to animals, birds, flowers, colors, light, clothing, and music. Such devices helped many Greek lyric poets to artfully evoke an atmosphere charged with emotion. Sappho, who by Fowler’s account was “the most elegant practitioner” of this technique, manages to create a vivid depiction of desire, by infusing recurring symbols of desire with emotion. DuBois sees Sappho’s use of the archaic aesthetic as the construction of a texture of desire. By invoking a spectrum of associations such as myths, etymology or precursor’s usage, around a word or image, she argues, the poet “insists on the specificity of her desire,” and thereby increases the emotional intensity of her work (134).

For the ancients, the attributes of animals, color, sound, flora, fauna and texture fused in their descriptions of “the phenomena of their world as they saw, heard, touched, and smelled it” (119). The sea, for example, was not thought of as a static color, such as blue or gray. When the poets of ancient Greece described the sea, they were describing the spectrum of its color, the movement of the water, and other attributes they associated with the sea that were implied metaphorically. As Fowler explains it, they
were fascinated by the variegated nature of the objects of their senses: the sound, color, and movement of birds, insects, fishes, and animals; the subtle variations of pitch in music; the color, texture, and fall of clothing and other dyed stuffs; the touch, the color, and scent of flowers; and above all, the play of light on surfaces of all kinds (119).

In this spectrum of color, descriptive words gain resonance as they are extended to embrace more than a single attribute.

Color words found in the lyric poets seldom, if ever, refer simply to color in our sense of the word … when Sappho calls Dawn golden-sandaled (103.13; 123), she is probably thinking of dawn, not just as divine, but as glowing like gold (134).

The importance of a color lay not in the color alone, but the action or associations related to that color. For example, in describing a woman’s hair as honey-colored, the image simultaneously resonates with all the associations of the word “honey,” including the many shades of color it takes on in different types of light, the taste of honey, and even its moist, sticky texture. In Fragment 2, when the speaker describes herself as “pale as grass” (using the Greek word that means pale in color, but which is also used to describe bile) Sappho is able to convey not only her lovelorn speaker’s pallor but also the feverishly moist quality of her complexion, the sickening feeling of nausea, the loss of control over one’s body, and a number of other associations that intensify the emotional resonance her words communicate.
As another instance of the archaic aesthetic, lyric poets used the names of flowers “in adjectival forms and in compounds, as color words…[such as] ‘violet-haired’ and ‘lily-eyed’ ” (Fowler 140). By using a flower to describe a girl’s hair or eyes, the poet is able to invoke all the hues the flower can assume, as well as its beauty and erotic symbolism. In Sappho, these flowers are often evoked in romantic or erotic settings. For example, in Fragment 4, Aphrodite’s shrine is situated in a grove of apple trees, near a meadow that is shaded by roses. In Fragment 46, the speaker asks her beloved to drape herself in wreaths of violets and roses. Fruit is also used metonymically to represent female sexuality in Sappho’s poetry. In Fragment 93, a “sweet-apple” is used as a symbol of desired but unattainable female sexuality.

As the sweet-apple blushes on the end of the bough, the very end of the bough, which gatherers overlooked, nay overlooked not but could not reach (trans. Wharton 103).

By invoking roses and apples, which stood as tokens of love and courtship in ancient Greece, Sappho adds an erotic element to her poems. The immediate associations these flowers and fruits would evoke create powerful, female-centered erotic images (140–141).60

Words that convey a movement of air or light enliven Sappho’s descriptions and remove the characters in her poems from the passive view of the gaze of the poem,

---

60 The symbol of the perfect apple has had lasting significance in the lesbian tradition. In Judy Grahn’s The Highest Apple: Sappho and the Lesbian Poetic Tradition, Grahn says the apple stands for “the centrality of women in themselves, to each other, and to their society. That apple remained intact, safe from colonization and suppression, on the topmost branch, and in the fragmented history of a Lesbian poet and her underground descendants” (11).
making them active participants in the poem. In Fragments 38 and 68, she uses the words “flutter” and “flit” to describe the emotions, as opposed to the movement, of her speaker (Wharton 78 and 90). In Fragment (16.18), where Sappho’s speaker describes the “sparkle” of her lover Anactoria’s face, she conveys the speaker’s deep longing for her beloved.

Some say a host of cavalry, others infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the black earth, but I say it is whatsoever a person loves. It is perfectly easy to make this understood by everyone: for she who far surpassed mankind in beauty, Helen left her most noble husband and went sailing off to Troy with no thought at all for her child or dear parents, but (love) led her astray…lightly…and she?) has reminded me now of Anactoria who is not here; I would rather see her lovely walk and the bright sparkle of her face than the Lydians’ chariots and armed infantry (trans. Campbell 67).

In this description of Anactoria’s bright expression, contrasted with the metallic gleam of the Lydian troops, heavy with artillery and on the march, Sappho expresses a lover’s gentle reminiscence of her beloved. As Sappho describes her speaker’s memory of Anactoria, she is also creating a gynocentric retelling of the iconic story of Helen, by shifting the gaze of the poem from Helen’s beauty to Helen’s actions (in that she left her

---

61 This fragment is not found in Wharton’s text; however, it was available during Lowell’s lifetime, and she may have come across it through her work with H.D. and Richard Aldington, who were translating new fragments of Sappho as they were published in the Classical Review.
62 Helen is remembered in Greek myth as the woman whose extraordinary beauty brought destruction to people and societies alike. In the Iliad, Homer claims that Trojan War was fought over the abduction of Helen.
home and went sailing away from her responsibilities). What one experiences most vividly in the poem is the yearning or pothos the speaker feels for her beloved, and this memory is enhanced and made active. In focusing on her “bright sparkling face” and her “lovely walk,” the poem conveys not a static, passive view of Anactoria’s beauty but a sense of her as vibrant and alive.

In Fragment 94, Sappho again uses the symbol of a flower to represent female sexuality, using the archaic aesthetic to convey the intense emotion of a violent sexual act.

As on the hills the shepherds trample the hyacinth underfoot, and the purple flower [is pressed] to earth (trans. Wharton 104). 63

In the period in which Sappho was writing, the word for hyacinth flower, uakinthon, had many associations, including the dark, gleaming sea, clouds, and blood. 64 In the Iliad (14.348), Homer uses the hyacinth to describe Odysseus’s hair after Athena has transformed him, saying that his hair “hung down like hyacinth pearls.” In 346/1 PMG, Anacreon also depicts an image of hyacinths in a meadow trampled underfoot by Aphrodite’s horses. Throughout Sappho’s work, however, flowers are repeatedly used to symbolize the female body. 65

---

63 There is a reference to this fragment in Catullus (62.39-47), where it is associated with “deflowering.” A bride is compared to a hyacinth plucked from a flower bed. This reference, along with the fact that this fragment is similar in meter (dactylic hexameter) and form to Fragment 105a L-P, has led some scholars including Page duBois, Wolfgang Schadewaldt, and Hermann Fränkel, to the assumption that Fragment 94 (105c L-P) was once part of an epithalamia or wedding song. However, Arnold W. Gomme argues that this is not the case and that it was part of a narrative song. 64 As duBois points out in her analysis of the poem, (40–46). 65 Sappho also refers to the hyacinth in Fragment 56: “Leda, they say, once found an egg hidden under hyacinth blossoms” (trans. Wharton 86).
In her reference to the hyacinth, which is emphasized by the second reference in close proximity, Sappho intentionally genders the flower as feminine and draws upon the rich texture of meaning the hyacinth conjures up. The image of the trampled flower, which has often been interpreted as an image of deflowering (as included in a wedding song or *epithalamia*), recalls Anacreon’s image and association of the flower with Aphrodite. Meanwhile, it also carries a sense of foreboding, given its connotations of blood and a dark, gleaming sea. As Hermann Fränkel, Anne Pippin Barnett, and Reinhold Merkelbach have pointed out, the likelihood that this image depicted wedding night nuptials is highly unlikely. The image is more likely intended to convey “a less auspicious loss of virginity,” where a girl is “brutally deflowered before her time,” which may have been introduced in a wedding song as a cautionary tale (Burnett 217n17, 269n110). Through the multiple associations of the hyacinth, Sappho conveys an image of sexual violence against a woman and the deep and disturbing emotions that surround such an act.

However, rather than the act of violence itself, the central theme of the fragment becomes the emotions that surround that violence, as well as the resistance to this violence. Through her use of the archaic aesthetic, Sappho is able to create a pastoral scene bristling with sexual violence. But after this image of deflowering, as Snyder has noted, she introduces the possibility of recovery: “after the shepherds have passed it by, its stem, nourished by the mountain air, regains its strength and rises again” (105).

**Amy Lowell’s Discourse of Desire: Emotional Intensity of Sapphic Motifs and the Archaic Aesthetic Rooted in an American Landscape**
In twentieth-century America, where industrial dye factories regulated the colors of things, was there still the variegation of color that existed in the ancient world? Lowell’s Sapphic Modernism expressed through her application and emulation of Sappho’s discourse of desire finds its greatest expression in the plants, animals and objects in her garden at Sevenels. This garden, planted by her father, became the seedbed for the hybrid lyrics Lowell invented and the setting for most of her adaptations of Sapphic motifs and images of desire. Her modern approach to a discourse of desire can be found in poems throughout her career (as in many of the poems which appear in her second book, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, and in the sequence “Two Speak Together,” which appears in her fifth book, *Pictures of a Floating World*). She uses descriptions of the plants in her garden to express the spectrum of her speaker’s feelings, from deep and foreboding fears to the exultation of her passions. Adapting Sappho’s methods enabled Lowell to create poems that were specific about desire, and where lesbian eroticism could be expressed. Lowell makes use of many of the elements and tools with which Sappho created a discourse of desire. Lowell is specific in the details she employs and often, like Sappho uses this specificity to create a feeling of longing. Her verse participates in a female gaze, but often observing an active beloved. Like Sappho, Lowell turns the gaze inward on the self-reflexive emotional landscape of the speaker of her poems. Her poetry is seemingly intent on understanding the workings of desire and its effects on her speaker. She continually reuses and reinvents Sappho’s images and motifs, infusing them with new passion, and setting them in an American landscape.

In early poems, such as the small collection of lyric poems at the end of the first section of her second collection, Lowell begins to experiment with Sapphic motifs of
desire. These early examples rarely draw upon the garden *topoi* that would later dominate her expression of the discourse of desire. “The Taxi” is set in a city, and uses the motion of a car to set the scene. The title is used to establish the setting of the poem, and longing, the main emotion conveyed, is communicated from the first image of a “slackened drum,” as Lowell describes how bereft her speaker feels whenever she is separated from her beloved:

> When I go away from you

> The world beats dead

> Like a slackened drum (*The Complete Poetical Works, 43 lines 1–3*).

This opening image creates an underlying cadence to the poem, like a dull thud that follows the speaker. In the lines that follow, Lowell’s speaker calls out, looking for her beloved in the beauty of the night sky.

> I call out for you against the jutted stars

> And shout into the ridges of the wind (4–5).

In response to this call, the stars and the wind reflect back to the speaker the pain of her loneliness: the stars aggressively “jut,” and the wind is ridged like a turbulent sea, where the speaker’s words will likely only be lost, never to reach the beloved’s ear. After this harsh image, Lowell speeds up the cadence of the poem. The poem picks up pace in the lines that follow, as if the taxi driver has suddenly stepped on the gas.

> Streets coming fast,
One after the other,

Wedge you away from me (6–8).

One feels the acceleration of these lines along with the increasing emotion, until finally, at line 8, a distance separates the speaker and her beloved, who has been “wedge[d] away” from her. Finally, the speaker turns back to the streets, once again looking into the harsh light, and addresses her beloved:

And the lamps of the city prick my eyes

So that I can no longer see your face.

Why should I leave you,

To wound myself upon the sharp edges of the night? (10–12)

The final question re-emphasizes the discordant emotional landscape that has been created, fraught with the anguish of departure and longing that Lowell has been building throughout the poem. The lamps “prick” the speaker’s eyes, leaving her unable to see. Ironically, her complaint is not that she is physically blinded so that she cannot see the cityscape in front of her, but that the lamps have obscured the remembered image of her beloved that exists in her mind. Just as the speaker in Sappho’s Fragment 2 is blinded by the desire she feels but is made to see herself and her reactions to love more clearly, so Lowell’s speaker is blinded by longing for her beloved. Like Sappho speaker’s affliction, Lowell’s speaker’s blindness enables her to understand her own emotions more clearly.
In later poems set at her home and in her garden, including “Vernal Equinox,” “Wheat-in-the-ear,” and “The Garden by Moonlight,” Lowell borrows Sappho’s suspension of desire and evocation of yearning, as she did in “The Taxi.” In her poem “Penumbra,” however, Lowell artfully reverses the motif, as the poem imagines the beloved’s reaction to the speaker’s death and persisting love, as personified in the house they once shared.

After hearing the “sounds that men make/ In the long business of living” (7–8), Lowell’s speaker reflects on her own mortality, and this reflection initiates the theme of the poem.

Sitting here in the Summer night,

I think of my death.

What will it be like for you then? (218, 11–13).

Through the rest of the poem, the speaker uses the image of her home as it will survive her and be left as an offering to her beloved to comfort her in her loss. “The old house will still be here,/ The old house which has known me since the beginning” (23–24).66 The images of the house evoke yearning: the house has known the speaker “since the beginning,” it has gazed upon her as she played as a child. One senses in these images of childhood remorse a yearning not only for a lost childhood but even for children as new heirs to the house and as companions for her beloved.

---

66 It is important to note here that although one could easily surmise that the house that is featured in this poem is Amy Lowell’s home, Sevenels, and that this poem is intended to be read by Ada. I am purposely not assuming this in my analysis of the poem in order to read her poetry as poetry and not as biographical fodder. As noted in Chapter 1, until recently, most critical studies on Lowell’s work have focused on her life, rather than on a critical consideration of her poetry.
Finally, the speaker reflects on how the house will stand in to guard the beloved, as the speaker once did, once she is gone.

The old house will guard you,

As I have done.

Its walls and rooms will hold you,

And I shall whisper my thoughts and fancies

As always,

From the pages of my books (34–39).

In these final lines, the house becomes a conduit for the speaker’s role: “The old house will guard you/ As I have done,” “its walls and rooms will hold you,” and its books immortalize the voice of the speaker. Through the personification of the big, empty house, Lowell conveys the projected feelings of grief and yearning the beloved will feel at the loss of her lover.

In later poems, Lowell begins to perfect her use of Sappho’s technique of creating a discourse of desire by boldly refiguring it into her own landscape. In Lowell’s poem “Frimaire,” the speaker begins by comparing herself and her beloved with the image of “two flowers/ Blooming last in a yellowing garden/… Standing along in a withered desolation.” As in Sappho, flowers represent the female body. As the poem continues, Lowell layers onomatopoeic descriptions on this apocalyptic scene:

The garden plants are shattered and seeded,
One brittle leaf scrapes against another,

Fiddling echoes of a rush of petals (218, 5–8).

The words convey violence; the garden plants are “shattered”; their leaves “brittle” as they “scrape” against one another. Lowell’s adaptation of the archaic aesthetic in these lines adds to the emotional texture of the poem. The dissonance of these lines, and the sounds invoked, prepare the reader for the conclusion, where the speaker and her beloved figure as the last surviving flowers in the garden.

When I scarcely see you in the flat moonlight,

And later when my cold roots tighten,

I am anxious for the morning,

I cannot rest in fear of what may happen (17–20).

The description of the dying flowers intensifies the speaker’s fear of losing her beloved, conveying the overwhelming vulnerability and loss she feels. Lowell again employs Sappho’s recurring images of blindness and moonlight, describing her speaker as “scarcely” able to see her beloved, who appears “flat” and altered in the moonlight. In this state of vulnerability, the speaker is left “anxious” for the rebirth of “morning,” unable to rest “for fear of what may happen.”

In “Grotesque,” Lowell employs a similar technique of jarring onomatopoeic descriptions in order to set the scene for a sense of deep foreboding.

Why do the lilies goggle their tongues at me
When I pluck them;

And writhe, and twist,

And strangle themselves against my fingers

So that I can hardly weave the garland

For your hair (216, 1–6).

The personified lilies are grotesque and contradictory. Threatening the speaker as they “writhe” and “twist” like snakes, they at the same time do themselves violence as they “strangle themselves” against the speaker’s fingers, suggesting the complexity of the speaker’s battling emotions.

Lowell adds in an even greater complexity to the poem in the last two lines by alluding to the garland motif used by Sappho. In her analysis of Sappho’s use of this motif DuBois connects Sappho’s use of images of *upothalamos*, a garland of flowers for a nuptial bed, to the lovers’ *thumos* (soul or breath of life). “The *upthumis*, a garland worn around the neck, contains reference to the *thumos*, the soul, breath, life of the human being. It is as if the very life of the lover were being fettered by these beautiful, tender bonds of flowers” (141). Lowell’s lilies, which cannot be tamed to be woven into a garland, draw upon this conceit, adding complexity to the anxiety felt by the speaker. If the speaker cannot master the lilies and make a garland, she cannot regain control of her soul.

---

67 For example, see Fragment 78.
In “Opal,” Lowell uses color and Sapphic motifs and images (the pull of oppositions used to symbolize desire) to convey the elation and complexity of love.

You are ice and fire,

The touch of you burns my hands like snow.

You are cold and flame.

You are crimson of amaryllis,

The silver of moon-touched magnolias.

When I am with you,

My heart is a frozen pond

Gleaming with agitated torches (214, 1–8).

After describing the beloved as “ice and fire,” she simultaneously evokes “the crimson of amaryllis” and “the silver of moon-touched magnolias,” contrasting the implied heat and intensity of “crimson,” and its associations with the blood rushing to a flushed and reddened face, with the amaryllis flower, which represented the shepherdess in classical pastoral poetry. In direct opposition to this portrait of a blushing country girl, she evokes the cool alliterative image of “the silver of moon-touched magnolias.” As indicated above, Lowell used the symbol of the moon (as did Keats and Sappho) as a symbol of longing. Simply through the images of these two flowers, applying a method similar to Sappho’s use of the archaic aesthetic, Lowell is able to create a sense of vivid desire:
from the shy intimacy, cheeks reddened, of a love that is present, to the cold longing and
desire that grows from separation.

In “Eucharis Amazonica,” Lowell again employs a number of Sapphic symbols of
love, including love as represented by the pull of oppositional forces (fire and ice), and
flowers and natural images representative of the female body. The combination of all of
these symbols in a single poem creates a rich and emotionally charged atmosphere. The
poem begins with a description of the flower of the title.

Wax-white lilies

Shaped like narcissus,

Frozen snow rockets

Burst from a thin green-stem,

Your trumpets spray antennae

Like cold, sweet notes stabbing air  (220, 1–6).

The flower is described at first with cool imagery that is emphasized through alliteration.
It is “wax-white,” “frozen,” and its trumpets spray notes that are “cold” and “sweet.”
Contrasted against these static descriptors are the active words used to describe the
flower: the flower is made up of “rockets” that onomatopoeically “burst,” “spray,” and
stab the air. In saying that the flower is “shaped like narcissus,” Lowell further
emphasizes this suspension of desire, evoking Narcissus, who fell in love with his own
reflection and therefore could never satisfy his desire.
In the final stanza, however, this stasis of suspended desire is disturbed by the physical contact of a kiss.

Wax-white lilies,

Eucharis lilies,

Mary kissed your petals,

And the chill of pure snow

Burned her lips with its six-pointed seal (13–17).

In the final image of the poem, the frozen flower is transformed into fire by the touch of Mary’s lips. “Wax-white lilies” are further specified as “Eucharis lilies,” a South American species. In the line that follows, Lowell associates “Eucharis” with *Eucharist*. Mary (who makes many appearances throughout Lowell’s love poems) transforms the frozen flower through a kiss, “burning” her lips with the lilies’ “six-pointed seal.” The poem closes on this image of beauty, love and desire as a means of reaching spiritual attainment. Love for Sappho, and equally for Lowell, is both intellectual and spiritual, which Mackail equates with the love described by Plato and Dante (*Lectures on Greek Poetry*, 107). Through this image, Lowell is able to apply both Pater’s principle that art embodies spiritual values, and Sappho’s vision of love and desire as a spiritual act. Through the kiss, it is not the lover that is transformed, but the beloved who is left permanently marked with a “six-pointed seal.”

---

68 For another example, see “Madonna of the Evening Flowers.”
In “Vespers,” Lowell’s speaker also describes a spiritual or sensual enlightenment achieved through interaction with her beloved. Flowers again are used to represent the female body.

Last night, at sunset,

The foxgloves were like tall altar candles (444, 1–2).

On first reading, the image that follows seems to favor the interpretation that had the lover been able to share this moment with her beloved, she would have further understood the moment of beauty; but by titling the poem “Vespers” and shifting the tone of the poem to one of longing (by describing her hope for something that could have been), Lowell introduces a religious meaning to her chosen imagery that simultaneously alludes to the Vespers of evening prayers in Catholicism and Vespers as a symbol of the Venus/Aphrodite of Greek myth.

Could I have lifted you to the roof of the greenhouse, my Dear,

I should have understood their burning (3–4).

If the lover had been able to share with her beloved the transformation of the foxgloves ablaze at sunset, she could have understood “their burning,” and thereby on the roof of the greenhouse, found a way to fulfill her desire. The direct allusion to Catholic ritual and to Sappho’s patron, the goddess Aphrodite, bridges these two religious views as a means to experience spirituality through love. Through this image Lowell is able to re-create and Westernize (or Americanize) Sappho’s classic conceit. Meanwhile, the image
enhances the emotional landscape of her poem, where the desire of the speaker is embodied in the image of the foxgloves “lit like tall altar candles” at sunset.

In “Autumnal Equinox,” the speaker, sleepless, listens to her beloved toss and turn in bed, from what she believes to be a nightmare (later in the poem, we discover that the speaker has had the same dream). She contrasts a description of the cold autumn sky with the comfort and warmth she feels sitting by a fire.

Why do you not sleep, Beloved?

It is so cold that the stars stand out of the sky

Like golden nails not driven home.

The fire crackles pleasantly,

And I sit here listening

For your regular breathing from the room above (214, 1–6).

The vignette elicits contradictory feelings through the oppositions it presents. The clarity of the stars set against a crisp autumn night sky is jarringly compared to “golden nails not driven home,” invoking violence, crucifixion, the idea of being off target, and the feeling of being ostracized. The lines that follow read in direct contrast to this image. The comfort the speaker feels by the fire is reflected in the sounds of Lowell’s description of the fire as it “crackles, pleasantly” in the safety of her home, with the sound of her beloved’s regular breathing as she sleeps nearby. This is at odds with the stark, cold images of the outside world. This juxtaposition conveys fear and a sense of ostracization
that explains the speaker’s insomnia, hinted at in the beginning of the poem, which surfaces, in the speaker and in her beloved, only in nightmares.

What keeps you awake, Beloved?

Is it the same nightmare that keeps me strained with listening

So that I cannot read? (7–9)

This paradoxical sense of disquiet adds disturbing power to the poem. The poem creates two opposing worlds: the world of home, where the lover stands guard over her sleeping beloved and the fire keeps them warm, and the outside world that is cold and uninviting. Through use of the archaic aesthetic, Lowell is able to fashion an emotional landscape fraught with threat.

Finally, in Lowell’s poem “July, Midnight,” we find one of the strongest examples of her application and adaptation of Sappho’s discourse of desire. In this example, the fireflies stand metaphorically for the passion between the speaker and the beloved. Lowell artfully uses all the natural elements in the garden, but most exquisitely uses the image of fireflies to build tension and anticipation of the two lovers’ brief encounter.

From the title “July, Midnight” onward, the reader is drawn into the humidity of a hot summer night, as the tiny lights of fireflies begin to bloom in the tops of trees.

Fireflies flicker in the tops of trees,

Flicker in the lower branches,
Skim along the ground.

Over the moon-white lilies

Is a flashing and ceasing of small, lemon-green stars (211, 1–5).

Lowell’s use of alliteration (“fireflies”/“flicker” and “tops”/“trees”) and the repetition of “flicker” linguistically represent the airy on-and-off physical movement of the fireflies. As the poem progresses, the fireflies move lower and lower, to the lowest branches, until finally, they skim the ground over the “moon-white lilies.” As they descend toward the poem’s climax, where the lovers will touch, the language Lowell uses to describe the insects also intensifies. By the fifth line of the poem, from merely flickering in the treetops, the fireflies have progressed to a dramatic and onomatopoeic “flashing and ceasing” on the ground. Lowell’s description of the garden has also intensified. At first, the trees and branches are not named. Then, when the fireflies alight upon the lilies, the garden becomes, quite literally, the center of the speaker’s universe. The flowers and insects take on cosmological qualities: the lilies are “moon-white” and the fireflies are like “small, lemon-green stars.” It is at this point that the speaker describes her meeting with her beloved.

As you lean against me,

Moon-white,

The air all about you

Is slit, and pricked, and pointed with sparkles of lemon-green flame
Starting out of a background of vague, blue trees (6–10).

The beloved, as she leans into the speaker, takes on the color of the “moon-white” lilies (signifying longing) and the light from the fireflies intensifies, becoming sharper and more beautiful. Lowell conveys the action of the fireflies with consonants: the fireflies are “slit,” “pricked,” and “pointed.” Finally, they are described as “sparkles of lemon-green flame,” a flame that symbolizes the charge that has erupted between the speaker and her beloved. Through the application of the archaic aesthetic, Lowell is able to recreate the intensity of attraction between two people in love and the otherworldly feeling they share that the whole world, indeed the universe, is contained in the moment that they touch and are together.

In unpublished poems such as “Carrefour” Lowell more explicitly alludes to Sappho’s fragments, using the discourse of desire and Sapphic images and motifs to express her speaker’s complicated emotions. The poem begins by directly addressing the beloved, recalling an encounter in a setting reminiscent of Aphrodite’s grove (of Fragment 4 with its “cool [water]…[and] apple-boughs”).

O you,

Who came upon me once

Stretched under apple-trees just after bathing.

Why did you not strangle me before speaking

Rather than fill me with the wild white honey of your words
And then leave me to the mercy

Of the forest bees? (558)

In this poem Lowell is clearly alluding to Sappho’s Fragment 113 “Neither honey nor bee,” in which Sappho equates desire and its fulfillment with the bittersweet image of honey coupled with the sting of a bee.\(^69\) The “wild white honey” of Lowell’s poem represents the beloved’s words, and it is these words that leave the lover vulnerable to the forest bees. It seems significant that this poem, whose title evokes a crossroad, and which focuses on the subject of silence and the consequences of speaking, was not published during Lowell’s lifetime. Despite the resurgence of interest in Sappho and her poetry, it was still a risk for a female poet to associate her name with Sappho’s.

**Discourse of Desire, Section 2: Re-membering the Lesbian Beloved through Sappho and Lowell**

Sappho’s poetry as Lowell experienced it (and as it was translated by Wharton), was not always available to female poets who had not been educated in the classics.\(^70\) As Joan DeJean points out, prior to the publication of Wharton’s editions, little of Sappho’s work was available in translation. Late eighteenth-century German scholarship did not value Sappho’s poems or their sensuality, leading to a steep decline in readership (DeJean 157). According to the classicist Karl Müller, Sappho’s poetry contained “no instructions

---

\(^69\) H.D. also wrote one of her fragment expansion poems based on Fragment 113, which Lowell undoubtedly read.

\(^70\) Lowell was only ever able to read Sappho in translation. Although she grew up in a privileged and distinguished Bostonian family, Lowell was never educated in the classics. As she reflects in a letter to her longtime friend Winifred Bryher (Bryher was H.D.’s partner), “my family did not consider that it was necessary for girls to learn either Greek or Latin, and I have found this ignorance of the classical languages a great handicap” (*Amy Lowell* 87).
in the acquisition of virility,” and was therefore considered “unworthy of the official sanction of the Greek state or the German philologists who are its modern interpreters.”

As a result of this German invention and subsequent popularization of a “chaste Sappho,” Sappho’s poetry was not read or discussed by classical scholars for a hundred years.

Sappho’s homoerotic, sensual lyrics were not rediscovered until Wharton’s first edition of *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation* was published in 1885, with subsequent editions released in 1887 and 1895. Wharton’s text provided all of the known fragments in Greek, in his own literal translations and in selections from other English translations, and led to a new vogue for the poet, especially amongst women readers. Adding to Wharton’s re-popularization of Sappho’s lyrics was an amazing discovery of new Sapphic texts in 1906. Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt made a spectacular discovery at Oxyrhynchus of two ancient libraries that contained “two or three manuscripts apparently of Sappho,” which were greatly damaged (*Times*, 14 May, 1906). Nonetheless, this discovery led to the introduction of “new” Sapphic fragments, which reinvigorated the revival of a lesbian Sappho. These “new” Sapphic fragments were published and reviewed in the *Classical Review* by John Maxwell Edmonds, and were found and translated by Aldington, H.D., and Pound, as they began to establish the Imagist school.

---

71 Sappho was heralded as a symbol of “The New Woman” of the 1880s, and Wharton’s *Sappho* enabled many female poets to write creative responses to Sappho’s work, including Michael Fields’ (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) *Long Ago* (1887), a volume of verse based on Sappho’s fragments.

72 Oxyrhynchus was an archeological site in Egypt where a significant number of fragments of ancient writers were found. So many texts were found at this site that work still continues today deciphering these fragments.
Amid this whir of Sapphic imagery and publicity, Amy Lowell discovered Wharton, and she was likely exposed to the new fragments through her visit and subsequent friendship and correspondence with Aldington and Doolittle. Lowell’s poetry, as we discussed in Chapter 2, greatly evolved through her exposure to Sappho and the Imagists. Lowell related to Sappho’s sensual lyrics not only because they communicated lesbian desire, but because this desire was revealed directly in the second person, to an active beloved, through a discourse of desire where sensual encounters led to spiritual epiphany. The Sapphic presentation of the beloved, which proved so attractive to Lowell, represented a distinct departure from the Petrarchian tradition that prevailed in the depiction of love.

Central to the Petrarchian tradition is the use of blazon. Blazon is a literary term used to describe a poetic device used by Petrarch and the later followers of Petrarchism. To blazon is to describe the parts of a woman’s body in a catalogue-like list in an effort to aggrandize her beauty. The systematic visual descriptions of lips, eyes and cheeks found in a blazon are often hyperbolic, and rarely is the blazoned beloved seen in full. Rather, she is presented as a disparate gathering of beautiful parts. Nancy Vickers has brilliantly studied how Petrarch and his imitators “cut up” the female body in a kind of literary dismemberment in their use of blazons and *ekphrasis* (*Mimesis* 100–109). As John D. Lyons sums it up, in Petrarch’s sonnets, the “description of Laura does not coalesce into a unitary vision of a physically whole person” (9). We remember that Sappho’s

---

73 The blazon originated in Petrarch’s work; however, a similar technique of separately praising a beloved’s specific body parts is found in the work of Roman and Alexandrian Greek poets. After Petrarch, Elizabethan sonneteers (including Shakespeare) and lyric poets following frequently used the blazon in their writing.
Fragment 2 stands in direct opposition to this androcentric perspective, where the female gaze replaces the male gaze and where self-reflexive perception replaces a metaphorical dismemberment of the female body. As Snyder writes, “[i]n Sappho’s general practice, parts of the body are mentioned only as containers of erotic beauty” (69). Just as Petrarch famously blazoned Laura in his sonnets, Sappho and later Lowell voyeuristically observe their beloved in many of their poems. As Snyder has pointed out, however, their bodies are thought of as “containers of erotic beauty” and are not observed passively, but used as a means to communicate the interaction between the lover and beloved.

For Petrarch, the denial of Laura’s love resulted in a kind of spiritual awakening or shedding, and her blazoned body remained dismembered and untouched by live hands. A recurring theme in Rime Sparse (“Sonnets for Laura”) is that it is only through Laura’s death that the speaker will be granted the freedom to love openly. In Sonnet XII, Petrarch presents this theme as the main conceit of the poem.

If my life find strength enough to fight

The grievous battle of each passing day,

That I may meet your gaze, years from today,

Lady, when your eyes have lost their light,

And when your golden curls have turned to white,

And vanished are your wreaths and green array,

And when your youthful hue had fled away,
Whose beauty makes me tremble in its sight,

Perhaps then Love will overcome my fears

Enough that I may let my secret rise

And tell you what I’ve suffered all these years;

And if no flame be kindled in your eyes,

At least I may be granted for my tears

The comfort of a few belated sighs (trans. Shore 17).

The poem is a catalog of the beloved’s body parts as she is overcome by her death: her eyes lose their light, her golden curls turn white, and her youthful color drains away. In essence, only when Laura has lost her beauty and the flames (of passion, desire, and vigor) have been extinguished from her eyes (which Petrarch presents to us in isolated body parts), will the speaker finally have the courage to face her and reveal his love. As exemplified in this poem and Petrarch’s use of blazon, spiritual enlightenment or epiphany for Petrarch can be attained only through the practice of chastity and restraint.

By contrast, in the poetry of both Sappho and Lowell, spiritual epiphany can be gained through the longing for, or the act of, physical contact with the beloved. In essence, in their poetry, chastity is an obstacle to spiritual enlightenment. The love they describe is participatory, mutual, and interactive. In Fragment 40, one finds evidence of Sappho’s vivid sensuality in the allusions to the arousal her speaker feels when she is in love.
Now Love masters my limbs and shakes me, fatal creature, bitter-sweet (trans. Wharton 79).

In Fragment 94 V., Sappho explicitly speaks of a lover satisfying her desire with another woman on a soft bed.

Through Wharton, Lowell encountered an un-chaste Sappho, whose lesbian eroticism was explicit and whose work afforded her not only a rich vocabulary for representing love between lesbian partners but the license to write directly about lesbian eroticism. In Lowell, the interaction between lover and beloved ranges from brief encounters that are only alluded to, all the way to graphic descriptions of sexual acts semi-encoded in floral imagery. As we have seen, “July, Midnight” presents an example of a brief encounter, where, as the beloved leans into the speaker, both the speaker and the landscape are transformed: the air around her becomes “slit and pricked with sparkles of lemon-green flame,” reflecting the excitement the speaker feels.

Other examples that capture brief, yet meaningful physical moments are found in “A Shower,” where the lovers touch as they share an umbrella:

And the touch of you upon my arm

As you press against me that my umbrella

May cover you (212, 4–6).

and “Summer Rain,” where two women lie in bed together listening to the rain and whispering to one another.
And the words you whispered to me

Sprang up and flamed—orange torches against the rain.

Torches against the wall of cool, silver rain (213, 9–11).

A more explicit example of Lowell’s depiction of intimacy between the speaker of her poems and the beloved is found in “The Weather-Cock Points South,”74 where Lowell uses the imagery of flowers to describe an intimate sexual act (as Lillian Faderman has proposed, clitoral stimulation).75

I put your leaves aside,

One by one:

The stiff, broad outer leaves;

The smaller ones,

Pleasant to touch, veined with purple;

The glazed inner leaves.

One by one

I parted you from your leaves,

Until you stood up like a white flower

74 As Lillian Faderman points out, the title of this poem is a slang reference to male genitalia, but also may been “Lowell’s device here for telling the truth ‘slant.’ It also hints at a lesbian sexual act, ‘going down’ (the slang term for cunnilingus that seems to come into the language about 1905)” (72–73).

75 Faderman provides a detailed analysis of how and why Lowell’s poem, which she sees as being sexually explicit, escaped being censored, as Lawrence’s graphic sexual passages were. She sees the poem as an extended metaphor about female genitalia (73–74).
Swaying slightly in the evening wind (211, 1–10).

The contact with the beloved described in “The Weather-Cock Points South” transforms the landscape around her: the stars strain to look at her, and the moon rides low in order to brighten her with silver moonlight. Lowell’s poem, which draws upon the motifs and images established by Sappho as representative of female desire, reveals an active love where the beloved is alive and participatory, and where beauty, sexual pleasure, fulfillment, and even spirituality are alive. In the work of Lowell (as we saw in Sappho), we see a discourse of desire that is distinctly feminized, where the lover is very much alive, and where lyrical power is drawn from the lovers’ intimacy and reciprocation.

Petrarch, Sappho and Lowell all use the suspension of desire as a powerful poetic force. Throughout his sonnet sequence, Petrarch repeatedly recalls his brief encounters with Laura. In CXII, he presents a catalogue of his encounters with Laura as evidence of why his love for Laura overpowers him:

Here I saw her meek, here proud and fair,
Now pitiless and stern, now kind and gay,
Now chastely clad, now in fine array,
Now fierce and cold, now with a gentle air.
Here she sang, and here she sat awhile,
Here she paused, and here I saw her pass,
Here those eyes pierced though me with their light,
Here she spoke a word, and here she smiled,

And here she frowned. And in such thoughts, alas,

Our master Love retains me day and night (trans. Shore 51, 5–14).

The speaker in Petrarch’s poem builds his longing on intangible moments during which he has observed Laura. Laura flits through each moment like a fleeting ghost but is not an active participant in the poem.

In Sappho and Lowell’s construction of pothos, however, two elements are different. First, and most obviously, Sappho’s speaker is a woman observing a woman. This implies an equality of gender and a self-reflection or mirror-like quality, which was picked up on or parodied in Donne’s “Sapho to Philaenis”:

Likenesse begets such strange selfe flatterie,

That touching my selfe, all seems done to thee” (191, 51–52).

Second, Sappho and Lowell’s use of the second person adds an intimacy to their “private” lyrics. As duBois observes, “The ‘I’ and ‘you’ are opposed, correlatives of one another, possessing the marks of personhood, while the third person, ‘he’ or ‘she,’ ‘it,’ ‘they’ are impersonal, not personal” (135). This intimacy shifts the voyeuristic eye of the reader from the lover (as in Petrarch) to the act of loving and the speaker’s longing.

We recall Northrop Frye’s definition of a lyric voice as “utterance that is overheard” (248). What Frye calls “the radical presentation of the lyric” is the construct
of an overheard conversation, or internal dialogue. DuBois further expands on Frye’s general definition by specifying what the I-Thou voice achieves in Sappho.

[T]he audience is given access to a private world, the world of the poet’s inner thoughts, her memories, sometimes an intimate scene between herself and her lover, or between herself and the Goddess Aphrodite, now recalled and overheard by Sappho’s audience (133).

Lowell models most of her love lyrics on the lyric construct Sappho employs, where the reader almost intrusively listens in on deeply sensual and seemingly private conversations between the lover and her beloved.

Lowell’s ode “In Excelsis” combines all of the anti-Petrarchian lyrical elements she shared with Sappho with Lowell’s adaptations of Sapphic motifs and the archaic aesthetic. Lowell’s speaker celebrates her beloved by addressing her directly. It is in this tour de force, and other poems of this kind, that Lowell begins to step away from the shadow of the borrowed or adapted Sapphic tradition of female eroticism and sensuality and begins to forge her own, new American voice. Her deeply sensual love lyrics adapt masculine poetic devices such as the blazon into a feminine perspective.

The poem opens with an intimate blazon.

You – you –

Your shadow is sunlight on a plate of silver;

Your footsteps, the seeding-place of lilies;
Your hands moving, a chime of bells across a windless air.

The movement of your hands is the long, golden running of light from a rising sun;

It is the hopping of birds upon a garden path (444, 1–6).

The effect achieved by this address is intimacy and a spiritual awakening gained from this intimacy, rather than the isolation of the lover from the beloved, as is prevalent in the Petrarchian tradition. As Snyder observes, in this poem, Lowell “returns to images drawn from nature to convey the narrator’s sense of the cosmic importance of the beloved” (133). As in “July, Midnight,” through natural, sensual imagery, Lowell constructs a cosmos to which the lover, beloved, and the reader are privy. Beauty, defined by the poem, is a replication or unity with nature, and the beloved as she is blazoned becomes more and more present within this natural landscape.

In these opening lines, Lowell also emphasizes the intimacy between the lover and the speaker through the use of the second person and the repetition of the word “you.” It is as if the reader is invited to overhear the intimate conversation between these two lovers. The lover described in this poem overcomes even the darkness of shadow to become the life-giving light of the sun, intensified by its reflection on a silver plate, as well as the fertile earth from which lilies grow. Lowell captures the fluidity and beauty of the love that seemingly emanates from the speaker’s beloved through her use of qualities of light, again employing the archaic aesthetic to convey “white-hot” emotions. Sound is also used to convey the delicacy of beauty and grace, when the speaker
compares the movement of the beloved’s hands not just to the sound of bells, but to the sound of bells carried far and wide through “windless air.” In this poem, the beloved is by no means dismembered by blazon; instead, emotional intensity is derived from the beauty of the beloved’s movement as a whole, living being as she is, and pictured within a garden landscape.

Later in this poem, Lowell draws again upon a standard Sapphic motif to depict a shared sensual moment: comparing the lover to a vessel (in this case a jar) that can only be filled by the beloved.

I drink your lips,

I eat the whiteness of your hands and your feet.

My mouth is open,

As a new jar I am empty and open.

Like white water are you who fill the cup of my mouth,

Like a brook of water thronged with lilies

How has the rainbow fallen upon my heart?

How have I snared the seas to lie in my fingers

And caught the sky to be a cover for my head?

How have you come to dwell with me,

Compassing me with the four circles of your mystic lightness,
So that I say “Glory! Glory!” and bow

As to a shrine? (444, 11–24)

The moment of their touch is captured in the poem, and as we have seen throughout Lowell’s work, this touch becomes an epiphanic moment that transforms the speaker and depicts love as both intellectual and spiritual. Lowell activates these lines through the repetition of “I” in the first two lines. Then, by incorporating the motif of the vessel and by ending both lines 13 and 14 with the word “open,” Lowell emphasizes the reciprocity of the speaker and her lover: theirs is an active love.

The naturalness of the speaker, her beloved and their desire is conveyed through the similes that describe their encounter. The beloved will fill the cup of the lover “like white water” or “like a brook of water thronged with lilies.” Even the language of these lines flows melodiously with alliteration. At line 19, the speaker asks how it is possible that she has captured (or in Lowell’s words “snared”) the natural and untamable beauty of the natural world, which is now equated with her beloved. This question leads to the final, epiphany of the poem, which recalls the title, “In Excelsis” (Latin for “in the highest” and part of the title of the famous hymn “Gloria in Excelsis Deo”). In these final lines, the speaker exclaims, “I say, ‘Glory! Glory! ’” and bows to her beloved as she would to a shrine, recalling the religious allusions in “Vespers” and “Eucharis Amazonica,” where Lowell compares love to a religious epiphany. Lowell’s lyric elevates the lover to the level of a deity. She is of the highest order and compares only to the beautiful flora and fauna of the garden that surrounds her. Her beauty is not static but activates the landscape that surrounds her.
Conclusion

In such poems as “In Excelsis,” Lowell shows how she has mastered the craft of poetry. In essence, through her apprenticeship to Sappho, she has learned how to pick the right wood, how to sand the wood smooth, and how to place the wood together to build a newly invented chair that will last for generations. Through her own expression of Sapphic Modernism, she has created poetry similar in style to Sappho’s that reaches beyond the confines of her predecessors’ boundaries of time and place. As shown in this chapter, Lowell’s poetry refigures Sappho’s motifs and methods (such as the archaic aesthetic) and traditional poetic devices (such as the blazon) in order to find a new, American voice that can speak freely about lesbian eroticism.

Lowell had learned how to infuse her poems with the “white-hot emotion” she sought to create through her adaptation of Sappho’s discourse of desire, and through her revision of the blazon. When she wrote her first book of poetry, relying heavily on the symbolism, vocabulary and verse forms used by Keats, she could not express her own female, lesbian, American experience without creating verses that felt awkward and out of place. Through reading and studying Wharton’s Sappho, and adapting many of Sappho’s motifs and poetic devices into an unrhymed form that fit the cadence of her own vernacular, Lowell was able to discover her own American voice, writing honestly about her sexuality in a song of herself—newly gendered, yet equally homoeroticized—set in her own New England. Through her duets with Sappho, Lowell developed the courage to plant herself and her fresh American lyric poetry in American soil. As we will see in Chapter 4, through close readings of poems that exemplify her newly discovered
voice, Lowell began to move from the gardens of Sevenels into the broader American landscape. Extending the breadth of her imagistic reach, she began to establish her own, distinctly American voice, by further emulating or re-inventing past poetic motifs and opening up the discipline of poetry.
Chapter 4

Lowell’s Complicated Heritage: Responding to American Poetry to Create an Inclusive, Modern American Voice

As I have established throughout this study, Lowell found in Sappho a poetic foremother to admire and emulate. Borrowing Sappho’s poetic method of rethinking and refiguring past poetic images, ideas, and motifs, Lowell created a new, hybrid poetics where her experiences as a woman, and more specifically as a lesbian, could be represented. As we examined in Chapter 3, Lowell used Sappho’s own images and conceits and adapted her use of the archaic aesthetic in order to create a discourse of desire set in an American landscape. Yet an equally important element in Lowell’s development of a modern aesthetic was her adoption of Sappho’s technique of emulating her poetic forebears.

This chapter will expand upon the definition Brett Keeling uses to describe H.D.’s response to Sappho’s poetry, in order to establish Lowell’s own parameters for emulation; I will also review and expand upon Sappho’s method of refiguring Homeric epithets. Building on this, we will examine Lowell’s complicated relationship with her predecessors Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, as well as her thirst to “try to solve the problem of poetic isolation and imputed inferiority” in order to build a writing tradition that spoke to her experience (Gubar 44). As Lowell searched for a poetic heritage of lesbian writers, animated by the principles of the New Movement, she created a number of “innovative and accessible” poems, mostly unpublished during her lifetime, that
establish an American poetic voice built on the representation of previously unheard voices and a continual reinvention of the poetry of the past (Munich and Bradshaw xv). A close examination of these poems offers insight into Lowell’s contribution to modernism.

**The Contest: Sappho’s Method of Emulation as an Act of Reclamation**

As noted in Chapter 2, in exploring Sappho’s influence on H.D., Keeling defines as *emulation* Sappho’s method of refiguring her poetic precursors’ images, phrases and conceits. The term is equally applicable to Lowell’s work. Keeling employs this term to extend the definition of Sappho’s influence on H.D. as proposed by literary scholars, including Susan Gubar’s idea of “the dynamic of collaboration” (58). Keeling sees Sappho’s influence on H.D. not as acts of imitation but of emulation. Emulation suggests competition, even rivalry, and an eventual contest … the ideal competition where the struggle is between equals, between two subjects, and results in victory and glory for both. Emulation suggests that H.D., admiring Sappho above all artists, desires to equal her predecessor’s poetic power by attempting to make whole for herself that which has come to her in shattered pieces.

(196).

Keeling’s definition clearly communicates how H.D. responded to Sappho’s fragments in her fragment expansion poems (“Fragment Thirty-six,” “Fragment Forty,” “Fragment Forty-one,” “Fragment Sixty-eight,” and “Fragment 113”) as well as the conversational
and interactive allusions she made to Sappho’s fragments throughout her corpus. As we reviewed in Chapter 2, H.D., who was fluent in Greek and who had translated other Greek texts in collaboration with her husband, Richard Aldington, as part of the Poets’ Translation Series (1915–16 and 1918–19), never translated Sappho for publication and, responded quite differently from her male colleagues to Sapphic allusions. Although she alludes to Sappho in over 30 of her poems, only her fragment expansion poems frankly acknowledge her debt to Sappho as the source of the spur in these allusions. Sappho’s work clearly haunted H.D. throughout her writing career, and the echoes of Sappho’s poetry, combined with a new setting (her imaginary Greece—Hellas) and her own personal experience helped H.D. craft a modern voice.

To Keeling, the fact that H.D. did not publicly translate Sappho is evidence supporting his definition of emulation. Sappho’s work elicited a response from H.D. and, I would also argue, Lowell, that Keeling equates with the competition H.D. depicts in her early poem “The Contest.” It begins by recalling Sappho’s fragmented verses, “chiseled

---

76 As Keeling notes, “H.D. read and responded to translations of Sappho by men, but she herself did not translate the fragments” (194). H.D.’s relationship with translation was different from that of her contemporaries. She saw translation as a means of extending, rather than fixing, meaning. As she insists in her introduction to Euripides, “You cannot learn Greek, only, with a dictionary. You can learn it with your hands and your feet and especially your lungs. … There are no adequate translations for the Greeks and there never will be” (“Notes on Euripides” 16, 167). So even while her husband and Pound were actively translating Sappho (Aldington’s “To Atthis,” 1914), H.D. refrained from translating the work of a poet she felt could create “a world of emotion, differing entirely from any present-day imaginable world of emotion,” because, as Keeling proposes, H.D. saw Sappho as inimitable (195–196).

77 For recent studies on H.D.’s expression of Sapphic Modernism, see Robert Babcock, Thomas Burnett Swann, Eileen Gregory, and Diana Collecott.

78 As Alicia Ostriker points out in her essay “The Poet as Heroine: Learning to Read H.D.,” late in her life H.D. explained in an interview with Norman Holmes that the seascapes in her early poems are based upon her memories of childhood visits to Maine and Rhode Island. “The scenes are made ‘Greek’ but left generalized to stress that the poet describes an imaginary landscape, or better yet, a landscape of the imagination, a map of the poet’s mind” (14).
like rocks / That are eaten into by the sea” (CP 12, 3–4), and continues by recalling Sappho’s habit of depicting love through oppositions:

You are white—a limb of cypress

Bent under the weight of snow.

You are splendid,

Your arms are fire; (13, 20–23).

H.D. portrays her predecessor’s lyric voice as both elemental and rooted to her ideal safe landscape (Hellas), much as Lowell does when she constructs “the burning birch tree” image in “Sisters.” This married Lowell’s familiar garden landscape with disparate images and motifs taken from Sappho’s poetry, thereby rooting her own form of eroticism and discourse of desire in an American landscape. In these imagined, hybrid landscapes, both Lowell and H.D. engage their inimitable predecessor by commemorating, challenging, and finishing her poetry.

Keeling, however, neglects the vital catalyst that explains why both H.D. and Lowell (who did not know enough Greek to translate Sappho) responded so strongly to her work. While both Lowell and H.D. undoubtedly found in Sappho a primary precursor, and borrowed from her gynocentric imagery to create a modern landscape on which to write about female experience and desire, there is another aspect of Sappho’s poetry that is crucial to understanding both H.D. and Lowell’s expression of Sapphic
Modernism. As we began to outline in Chapter 2, in the discussion of Sappho’s Fragment 2, Sappho frequently emulated her predecessors, and Homer in particular, in her own work. In order to understand Lowell’s poetic craft, especially in her relationship to American poets as she established her own poetic voice, we must first study how Sappho herself used emulation.

In her surviving works (see Chapter 2) Sappho frequently used phraseological adaptations of Homeric images and conceits. In fact, as Snyder has pointed out, Homer acts almost as a “palimpsest in Sappho’s songs” (17). Homeric allusions are abundant in Sappho’s poems, both written over and revised, as she playfully adapts her precursor’s language and images to repurpose them to communicate her own unique point of view.

As examined in Chapters 2 and 3, in Fragment 2, Sappho refigures Homer’s use of *isotheos*, reinventing this popular conceit so she can introduce a new gynocentric perspective that challenges the depiction of women in the epic tradition, and focuses the gaze of the poem on the speaker and her reaction to love’s maladies. Another example of this technique is found in Fragment 16 V, where Sappho reclaims and re-evaluates Homer’s depiction of Helen of Troy in order to prove her point that, contrary to the epic tradition, the most beautiful thing in the world is “what one loves.”

Some say a host of cavalry, others infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the black earth, but I say it is whatsoever a person loves. It is perfectly easy to make this understood by everyone: for she who far surpassed mankind in beauty, Helen, left her most noble husband and went
sailing off to Troy with no thought at all for her child or dear parents, but
(love) led her astray…lightly…(trans. Campbell 67).

As discussed in Chapter 3, Sappho rejects Homer’s depiction of Helen as a passive victim whose irresistible beauty caused the Trojan War. She describes Helen not by her attributes but by her actions: “she sail[ed] off to Troy with no thought at all of her child or dear parents but (love) led her astray.” Sappho uses the story of Helen to demonstrate that the most beautiful thing in the world is not found in the gaze, a thing of beauty passively observed, but in an interactive spectrum of emotions shared in the experiences of love. In responding to Homer, she not only writes over his existing text, but adds a previously unspoken voice: the voice of the female experiencing love as an active participant.

In Fragment 44 V, Sappho again recalls a Homeric allusion in an act of reclamation.

Cyprus…the herald came (running…, and when he had stopped spoke) these words, Idaeus, the swift messenger … and of the rest of Asia … undying fame. Hector and his companions are bringing the lively-eyed, graceful Andromache from holy Thebes and ever-flowing Placia in their ships over the salt sea; and (there are) many golden bracelets and (perfumed?) purple robes, ornate trinkets and countless silver drinking-cups and ivory.’ So he spoke; and nimbly his dear father leapt up, and the news went to his friends throughout the spacious city. At once the sons of Ilus yoked the mules to the smooth-running carriages, and the whole
crowd of women and (tender?) ankled maidens climbed on board. Apart
drove) the daughters of Priam … and greatly … charioteers … (gap of
several verses) … like gods … holy … all together … set out … to Ilion,
and the sweet-sounding pipe and cithara were mingled and the sound of
castanets, and maidens sang clearly a holy song, and a marvelous echo
reached the sky … and everywhere in the streets was … bowls and cups
… myrrh and cassia (trans. Campbell 89).79

In this fragment, Sappho, as Snyder has pointed out, creates “her own mini-epic,” filled
with Homeric epithets (such as her use of the phrase “far-shooting Apollo”), that focuses
on the wedding reception for Hector and his bride set in Troy (112–113). The subject
and characters of the poem are drawn directly from the Iliad; however, in Sappho’s
retelling, the focus on this subject matter and the presentation of the characters shift from
the battle context ever-present in the Iliadic model to rituals and events in which female
characters would actively participate. The context of a wedding and all the social rituals
surrounding this ceremony becomes the central event of the poem. As Snyder
summarizes it, “Sappho is producing her own new version of Homer—minus the warriors
carrying on warfare—rather than merely reproducing epic themes in a lyric mode” (64).
As these examples suggest, Sappho’s writing may be read as a challenge to the
patriarchal, heterosexually focused stories of earlier epics. She is not recycling epics, but
reinventing the stories from a modernized, female perspective.

79 This fragment in particular has many gaps in the text. My citation is taken directly from the Loeb
Classical Library edition Greek Lyric: Sappho and Alcaeus.
DuBois partially equates this shift of point of view in Sappho’s poetry with the development of subjectivity in poetry. As she states, Sappho and her peers are “part of a great turn in the poetic tradition and in the very history of the development of subjectivity” (6). Her predecessors from the epic age, Homer and Hesiod, spoke of themselves less as individual men, and more as conduits of divine inspiration or the muse, “as transmitters of truth and lies, of stories and genealogies, of histories that the gods and muses know, which they convey through the mouths of the poets” (6).

The insertion of a female point of view marks a monumental shift. Sappho’s act of poetic reclamation presented to Lowell a model she could adapt and use as she engaged her poetic forebears Whitman and Dickinson, and as she sought to create a vibrant and revisionary American poetry. Just as Sappho’s discourse of desire gave Lowell permission to write about lesbian eroticism, so too Sappho’s emulation offered Lowell a model she could adapt as she engaged the American poetic tradition.

Lowell’s New England Lilacs: Reclamation of Whitman’s American Voice through Images and Hybridity

In Lowell’s essay on Walt Whitman, “Whitman and the New Poetry,” she describes Walt Whitman as “a great poet” who, contrary to the prevailing critical opinion of the day, was not, in her opinion the inventor of free verse. As she states in her essay, “the moderns … owe very little of their form to Whitman. What they do owe is an attitude” (73). Indeed, this invention of an American attitude about identity and this integration of an American voice are at the heart of Lowell’s emulation of Whitman.

---

80 As stated in Chapter 3, Lowell was adamant in her writing about tracing the development of free verse or vers libre to the Parnassian school.
Through close analysis of poems such as “Lilacs” and “The Congressional Library,” we begin to understand both how Lowell emulated Whitman’s poetic voice and how Sappho’s poetic method influenced her engagement with her American poetic predecessors. As Jane Marcus declares in her essay “Amy Lowell: Body and Sou-ell,”

What I hear in “Lilacs” is not only Walt Whitman writing as a woman or the song of my own particular patriotism of place. … “Lilacs” is about being transplanted to American soil and taking. It is about hybridity and hope, about finding a voice (186–187).

In Lowell’s poem “Lilacs”81 (446), one of her own favorite and one of her most popular poems, she uses the archaic aesthetic to describe love of homeland and to develop a distinct American voice filled with “hybridity and hope.” One hears a direct echo of Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom’d” as well as his use of catalogue and lists throughout his poems. Through repetition of the attributes of the lilac flower, Lowell builds upon the relationship her speaker feels with her birthplace.

Lilacs,
False blue,
White,
Purple,
Colour of lilac,

81 “Lilacs” was not published in book form during Lowell’s lifetime. It appeared posthumously in What’s O’Clock, although it appeared in the September 1919 issue of the New York Post Literary Review. This poem was also set to music by E.B. Hill, and Lowell often performed it at her poetry readings.
Your great puffs of flowers

Are everywhere in this my New England (446–447, 1–7).

Throughout the poem, Lowell builds the emotional landscape through recurring images of lilacs set in specific locations throughout New England. The “great puffs” of “false blue,” white, and purple flowers decorate her New England throughout the long poem: the men who work in the custom houses who read the “Song of Solomon,” the boy walking to school, and her own garden at Sevenels.

The lilacs are not just ornamental, however, but a common thread of historical heritage, a unifying force in the disparate landscape. All the people of New England share and are represented by the heritage of the lilac flower. Even the dead “feed” the lilacs “among the slant stones of graveyards,” until the lilacs begin to take on the attributes of the landscape:

you are of the green sea,

And of the stone hills which reach a long distance (447, 46–47).

In the final lines of the poem, however, it is the speaker of the poem who is transformed, as she herself metamorphoses into the flowers.

Lilacs in me because I am New England

Because my roots are in it,

Because my leaves are of it,
Because my flowers are for it,
Because it is my country
And I speak to it of itself
And sing of it with my own voice
Since certainly it is mine (447, 102–109).

Lowell’s ambition to become the poetic voice of New England is abundantly conveyed through her application of the archaic aesthetic in these final lines and through her adoption of a poetic form reminiscent of the priamel.\textsuperscript{82} The images the speaker lists in order to define herself as “New England.” as she states at the beginning of the section, her “roots,” “leaves,” “flowers,” are all quite literally “in it [New England]”, organically part of New England’s soil and landscape. Sequentially, each of these images builds towards a justification of why she is singing about New England in her own voice and why she can claim to speak as the poetic voice of New England.\textsuperscript{83}

Extending the breadth of her imagistic reach in “Lilacs,” Lowell infuses a fresh note into her discourse of desire, moving from the gardens of Sevenels into the broader American landscape. Whereas in Whitman the lilac is a symbol of mourning over Lincoln’s death, Lowell transforms the lilacs into a symbol of thanksgiving and an abundance of historical heritage and diversity. Like the lilacs in Whitman’s poem, Lowell’s lilacs are ubiquitous, and all that they touch is infused with the energy of the

\textsuperscript{82} Sappho uses a priamel in Fragment 16 V. The poetic term stands for a catalogue of a succession of things, followed by a concluding statement that typically asserts the primacy of one item or ties the list together under a concluding assertion (Race 74).

\textsuperscript{83} Both Lowell and Robert Frost battled for this title throughout their lives.
emotion they are meant to convey. In Whitman, their thick, heavy scent masks the scent of death, returning perennially as a living memorial of Lincoln’s death. In Lowell’s poem, the lilac’s intoxicating scent is “the smell of Summers,” which, mixed with the scent of sandalwood and tea at the custom houses, becomes a source of inspiration and identification for the “quill-driving clerks” (79, 31).

In Lowell, the multicolored lilacs are used to convey the beauty of New England’s vast differences (in landscape and in population). One hears echoes of Whitman’s phrases throughout Lowell’s poem. Her lilacs are also found “in dooryards” blooming. She also cleverly reverses one of Whitman’s recurring images of the lilac, his association of the shape of the lilac leaf with the shape of a heart, as he builds the association between the flower and the universal sorrow felt by the nation upon Lincoln’s assassination.

In the door-yard fronting an old farm-house, near the white-wash’d palings,

Stands the lilac bush, tall-growing, with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,

With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,

With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,

With delicate color’d blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,

A sprig with its flower I break. (329, 13–17)
Like Whitman, Lowell uses the image of the lilac’s “heart-shaped leaves” and “sharp blossoms” both to describe the flower’s shape and to evoke an emotional reaction from the reader (8, 67). But in both cases, Lowell draws from Whitman’s original image and transforms it to fit the context of her own poem.

In Lowell’s reinvention of this first image, the hearts of the people of New England have taken on the shape of the lilac leaf.

You are the great flood of our souls

Bursting above the leaf-shapes of our hearts (447, 77–78).

Here, the lilacs represent an effusion of love that pours from the New Englanders’ leaf-shaped hearts because of the connection they feel with their homeland. Lowell retains the idea of a unifying and shared emotion, but her New Englanders, rather than being united through grief, are united by a spiritual attachment to the land.

Lowell’s second adapted allusion to Whitman is used to express the idea of a feminized ars poetica. While Whitman’s lilacs are composed of “a pointed blossom rising delicate with the perfume,” and are meant to express the grief of the nation, Lowell’s “hundred or two sharp blossoms” (14, 67), are meant to represent all New England, and as the poem progresses, become, pointedly productive and feminized, until at the end of the poem they become the voice of the poet: “Heart-leaves of lilac all over New England,/ Lilac in me because I am New England,/ …And I speak to it of itself / And sing of it with my own voice” (111–117). Through this image and previous images in the poem, Lowell merges the ideas that the lilacs represent both the materiality of New
England (its people and landscape) and its literary and historical heritage. Because she is rooted in this landscape, Lowell uses the symbol of the lilac to transform herself into the voice of New England. Lowell’s lilacs are not delicate, heart-shaped flowers, but a synecdoche for the heritage she associates with Whitman (and thereby a greater American heritage) through phraseological adaptation and claims as her own.

In other examples, Lowell both reinvents Whitman’s popular images and draws on Sappho, in order to forge a place for herself within New England’s literary heritage. For example in lines 75–76, just before the lilacs are associated with both Whitman’s heart-shaped leaves, and the souls and hearts of all New Englanders, Lowell compares the lilacs to apples, recalling Sappho’s Fragment 93.84

You are brighter than apples,

Sweeter than tulips (75–76).

Lowell’s allusion is not direct, but refigured. “Brighter than apples” indirectly alludes to Sappho’s “sweet-apple” of Fragment 93 that “blushes at the end of the branch”; Lowell further emphasizes this allusion by beginning the line that follows with “sweet” (trans. Wharton 103). Through this allusion, reminiscent of Lowell’s hybrid image of a “burning birch tree” in “The Sisters,” Lowell links New England’s literary heritage to the poetry both of Whitman and of Sappho. The lilac functions as a unifying symbol between America, New England, and a feminine writing tradition. From this hybridity grows

84 “As the sweet-apple blushes on the end of the bough, the very end of the bough, which gatherers overlooked, nay overlooked not but could not reach” (trans. Wharton 103).
Lowell’s distinct voice, freshly infused with her own experience and perspective, which she can use to “sing of [New England] with my own voice” (117).

Through Lowell’s allusion and adaptation in “Lilacs” and, as we will review later in this chapter, in other poems, we gain both associations to the man who in Pound’s telling “broke the new wood” that would be crafted by future generations into twentieth-century poems, and a chance to write against the grain of his poetic voice where it did not represent her own experience (Lustra 23). Whitman’s creation of a distinctly American poetic voice was in response to a call, or perhaps a challenge, for an American bard extended in a lecture by Ralph Waldo Emerson that Whitman attended in 1842. Whitman’s poetic response in Leaves of Grass was praised by Emerson as “the most extraordinary piece of art and wisdom that America has yet contributed” (162); however, Whitman’s explicit sexuality was at odds with the poetic aesthetic of Emerson and the poetic elite of America. As Whitman responded in the 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass:

I say that the body of a man or a woman, the main matter is so far quite unimpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is. Of bards for These States, if it come to a question, it is whether they shall celebrate in poems the eternal decency of amativeness of Nature, the motherhood of all, or whether they shall be the bards of the fashionable delusion of the inherent nastiness of sex; and of the feeble and querulous modesty of deprivation (163).

At the root of an American poetic aesthetic, Whitman challenged his forebears and contemporaries and contested their notions of sexual censorship and poetic voice and
form. Lowell follows in his footsteps. Just as Sappho had reinvented Homer, so Lowell emulates one of her celebrated American predecessors by feminizing his imagery in “Lilacs” and creating her own American poetic aesthetic, an expression of Sapphic Modernism inclusive of her own experiences (and inclusive of the erotic).

**Writing From the Dark—Creating An Inclusive, Celebratory Poetic Voice for America**

In Whitman’s work, one clearly and distinctly hears a voice meant to represent the democratization of America. Lowell inherited from Whitman the idea that in American poetry each achieved what Adrienne Rich would later call “the dream of a common language” (11). In “Lilacs,” Lowell gives voice to the disparate inhabitants of New England through Whitmanesque catalogues in which no one scene assumes priority. The preacher, the schoolboy, the housewife, the quill-driving clerks, the dead, the children, and even the cows are all represented equally in this landscape to claim a common ground on which Lowell, too, could tread as a female poet writing from female experience. Whitman claimed “the United States are themselves the greatest poem” and used his ambitious catalogues to build a “body electric,” but in Lowell’s “Lilacs,” the greatest poem is not America, but New England and the greatest poet to write that poem (in her opinion) is Amy Lowell (153). As we will see in Chapter 5, the reclamation that Lowell sought of a “common [American] language” through which she could speak

85 For example in “Song of Myself”: “The pure contralto sings in the organloft;/ The carpenter dresses his plank…the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,/ The married an unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,/ The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,/ The mate stands braced in the whale boat, lance and harpoon are ready,/ The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,/ The deacons are ordained with crossed hands at the altar,/ The spinning girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel” (41).
honestly about her daily life, welcomed the voice of future poets, male and female, straight and homosexual, to write from the same common language, and to boldly invent their own.

Lowell’s poem equally alludes to the celebratory tone of Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” By drawing upon and echoing both lyric traditions with “Lilacs,” Lowell fuses the Sapphic with an American poetic tradition. In the final lines of the poem, through the personification of the lilacs, the speaker is empowered to speak for New England in her own uniquely American and active female voice.

“Lilacs” is not the only poem in which Lowell engaged and challenged Whitman and the American poetic tradition to which she is adding her voice. “The Congressional Library” borrows both the cadence and the catalogue form from “Song of Myself,” challenging her own assertion that “the moderns … owe very little of their form to Whitman” (73). According to Lowell, free verse is not the form that Whitman gave the moderns. As we’ll recall from Chapter 3, Lowell traced the development of free verse from the Parnassian school. Instead, the form that Lowell inherited and repurposed in her writing was Whitman’s muscular use of catalogues. She begins “The Congressional Library” by stating, “The earth is a coloured thing,” listing and grouping earthly things by their associated colors, and ends up in the Congressional Library, which she uses to symbolically represent the United States. In these athletic lists, set on extremely long lines and with a Whitmanesque cadence, Lowell paints the colorful spectrum of the American landscape.

See the red clay, and the umbers and the salt greys of the mountains;
See the clustered and wandering greens of plains and hillsides,

The leaf-greens, bush greens, water-plant and snow-greens

Of gardens and forests.

See the reds of flowers—hibiscus, poppy, geranium;

The red-red of little flowers—may flowers, primroses;

The harlequin shades of sweet-peas, orchids, pansies;

The madders, saffrons, chromes, of still waters,

The silver and star-blues, the wine-blues of seas and oceans (452, 2–10).

In contrast to Whitman’s broad brushstrokes, Lowell’s America is made up of flowers, water, and stars reminiscent of those observed in her own garden at Sevenels.

Nevertheless, one hears echoes of Section 33 of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, where he describes the expansive landscape of America:

Over the western persimmon, over the long-leav’d corn, over the delicate blue-flower flax,

Over the white and brown buckwheat, a hummer and buzzer there with rest,

Over the dusty green of the rye as it ripples and shades in the breeze;

Scaling mountains, pulling myself cautiously up, holding on by low scragged limbs,
Walking a path worn in the grass and beat through the leaves of the bush

While Whitman’s catalogue builds toward expansiveness and toward an expression or
definition of the self, Lowell’s relies upon using the natural landscape to represent the
American populace.

This catalogue of American diversity leads to the inner halls of the library, which
stands in for the nation itself:

This is America,

This vast, confused beauty,

This staring, restless speed of loveliness,

Mighty, overwhelming, crude of all forms,

Making grandeur out of profusion,

Afraid of no incongruities,

Sublime in its audacity,

Bizarre breaker of moulds,

Laughing with strength,

Charging down on the past,

Glorious and conquering,
Destroyer, builder,

Invincible pith and marrow of the world,

An old world remaking,

Whirling into the no-world of all-coloured light (452, 48–62).

Lowell uses active verbs to evoke what she sees as a symbol of the nation. Represented at once as “staring,” “making,” “laughing,” “charging,” “remaking,” and “whirling,” the library, like Lowell’s gardens, is alive, growing and evolving.

As the poem progresses, the purpose of this living map of diversity becomes apparent. It is not only the general populace of America that Lowell wishes to describe; the second half of the poem focuses in on America’s literary voices, the “voices of the furious dead who never die” but live on in the Congressional Library (73). At night, Lowell’s library awakens, and the silent words of the books, “the words in the veins of this creature,” speak the music of “the furious dead.”

The entrails, the belly,

The blood-run veins, the heart and viscera,

What of these?

Only at night do they speak,

Only at night do the voices rouse themselves and speak.

There are words in the veins of this creature (452, 64–69).
These words represent America as much as the catalogue of the natural landscape that began the poem. It is under cloak of night that the speaker of Lowell’s poem, who identifies her voice as one of “the furious dead” of the future, questions who will engage and challenge American literary history after her, and in essence keep the animal alive in the future. Her question in whose “belly shall we come to life?” lingers like a challenge to her future readers. To Lowell, American poetry is built on the premise and/or promise of constant revision.

The implacable life of silent words,

Of tumultuous stillness of never-ceasing music,

Lost to being that so it may triumph

And become the blood and heat and urge

Of that hidden distance which forever whips and harries the static present

Of mankind (453, 100–105).

According to Lowell, American literature will remain vital only as long as it contends with the literature that has come before and includes the ever-changing voices that make up its living body.

---

86 This line is also reminiscent of the lines toward the end of “The Sisters” where the speaker of Lowell’s poem asks a similar question of the female poets who will read her poetry in the future: “I only hope that possibly some day/ Some other woman with an itch for writing/ May turn to me as I have turned to you/ And chat with me a brief few minutes” (461). Chapter 5 will examine how Lowell’s challenge/question spoke to and was answered by succeeding generations of both female and male poets.
At the time this poem was written, the libraries (including Lowell’s beloved Athenaeum) were being purged of their inappropriate content by the *Watch and Ward Society* in Boston, making this poem speak not only to the need for revision in American literature, but against the threat to the possibility of inclusivity, by those who chose to decide which voices would be allowed to become “the furious dead” of the future. Lowell’s poetry, deeply encoded with erotic content that would have been deemed inappropriate had it been detected, would certainly have been threatened. It seems important that the voices of Lowell’s library speak under the guise of night because for Lowell, nighttime came to represent symbolically an in-between world between the dead and the living, and where both equality and pure imagination could flourish.

The idea of night as a time that makes possible visitations from dead authors and that makes alternate meanings and artistic truths clearly visible arises in another poem in which Lowell calls upon her poetic forefathers. “Circus Tents by Lake Michigan” presents another strange nighttime scenario. During the day, the speaker is joined by Shakespeare, Keats, and Whitman as she gazes out her window at Lake Michigan. In the poem, the speaker is trying with great difficulty to decipher what her great forefathers are saying but is unable to hear what she assumes are their priceless words, because the outside world, the real world of the poem, is interrupting too much during the noisy daylight hours.

---

87 The *Watch and Ward Society* was a Boston-based organization founded by John Frank Chase in 1891 that censored books and the performing arts from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. The name is derived from an Boston volunteer police force whose mission had been to “watch and ward off evil-doers”.

132
“Mr. Shakespeare,” I urged, “be so kind as to repeat what you just said, I did not quite hear it.

And Mr. Keats, say that once again, if you please, I wish to lose nothing.”

Only Walt Whitman kept on speaking,

Rolling out words which swept through the noise like a heavy moon through clouds,

And his stretched arm pointed to the lake, cutting the tent in two, blotting out the middle flag (570, 10–15).

During the day, the speaker of Lowell’s poem is not able to comprehend what Shakespeare and Keats are telling her. It seems significant that Whitman’s words (and not Keats’s) are the closest to being understood by the speaker of the poem and likewise are associated with the moon since Keats stood as such an important influence on Lowell’s early career. But even Whitman, with whom the speaker seems most to identify, and whose words are able to cut through the chaos of noise like a “moon,” ends up blocking the image of the circus tent and its middle flag in the end. The reality of her world during the day does not match the words that the male poets who came before her are speaking. But at night, something changes, and a quiet imagistic community is both inherited and shared, as all four poets gaze at the revolving red and white lights of the lighthouse lanterns.

88 Lowell may be alluding to Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.”
And the lighthouses shone, red and white, in even pulsations,

Half-way up my black window.

And Shakespeare, and Keats, and Whitman came back and watched the turning lights with me,

Silently we watched them half-way up the window.

Then an elephant trumpeted, dreaming of water and lush trees,

And a jackal, forgetting his cage, howled to the smell of the creeping water,

And I wrote a poem for the trapeze artists which they will never read,

And showed it to my companions, who only nodded,

For they were watching the turning lighthouse lanterns, revolving red and white—red and white—slowly, evenly, half-way up the window (571, 32–40).

It is well documented that Lowell herself wrote almost exclusively at night (Selected Poems xvi). From this and the references in these two poems, we can gather that for Lowell, night was a time of clarified creativity and production when the biases and limitations of the world lifted and literary truth could be achieved. Through the onset of night and the unifying image of the lighthouse, and its mesmerizing lights of red and white, the speaker in “Circus Tents” is finally able to hear, not the observations of her
forebears, but the emotional truths of the caged animals (their dreams of freedom) and to create a poem about the trapeze artists (their “glory” and “grief” and “useless perfection”) never meant to be read by them. At the end of the poem, the poem the speaker produces is the untold story not of the noisy clowns and peanut vendors of the big top, which represents “all America,” but of the emotional and artistic expression of its quiet and complicated inhabitants. This imaginary poem Lowell refers to in the poem is created without any help from a past literary tradition, except a shared and uniting image of the lighthouse, like a mantra of focus. The speaker shares this poem with her “companions,” but they make no comment, only nod and continue to look at the revolving light. It seems as though the poems Lowell intended to write in the voice of America were, in her opinion, not like anything that had ever been written before.

The idea of revisionism lies at the center of Lowell’s idea of an American poetic aesthetic. It is noteworthy that she invokes Whitman’s name and borrows his poetic form in the poems where she is actively trying to define her inclusion within this tradition. Her inheritance as she describes it in “Circus Tents by Lake Michigan” and “The Congressional Library” is imagistic and revisionary and owes much to Whitman. Lowell again complicates the idea of a literary inheritance in her poem “The Immortals,” where the speaker tries to come to terms with the juxtaposition of her need to read her forebears with her inability to find in their work the perfect example of her poetic ideals and the reality she wishes to express in her poetry.

Do I know how a flower comes—

A spurt of blue or a shoot of rose?

135
Plant a seed and watch while it grows.

Chrysanthemums—geraniums—

Let the scientists crack their craniums!

I know what paper is,

And I’ve handled pencils, and pens and ink.

Does grammar teach us the way men think?

Can you narrow a man to synthesis?

Build him from parts if you can.

Shade him to colour and cut him to shape,

Docket his method, something will escape,

And presto! Where is the man?

Two and two make four.

If your two and two will amalgamate,

But who knows the way to add moonshine to paint.
And there we touch the core (541, 13–29).

But even as these poetic forebears fail to get it right from her point of view, they continually flaunt “a challenge” Lowell’s speaker “can’t resist.” “Your burning has seared us with a permanent scar/ We strive in irony.” She sees their work as something to respond to, something to improve upon, in order to find a way to represent her own experience and find the “sunny flashes” in “the mist” that will speak her own poetic truths (57).

**Lowell’s “Kind of Thirst” for a Female Literary Tradition**

Equally unsettling to Lowell was engaging her female precursors. As Elizabeth J. Donaldson points out in her essay “Amy Lowell and the Unknown Ladies,” Lowell had a “kind of thirst” for a female literary tradition and continually addressed the idea of literary inheritance in her poetry (27). As noted in this study (and as we will explore later in this chapter), Lowell’s poem “The Sisters” is one of the most studied examples of her analysis of this female literary inheritance, where Lowell claims Sappho as her eldest sister.

In “Two Unknown Ladies,” Lowell also engages this question, by addressing a pair of unnamed female forebears in an expansive 200-line poem. It begins with the speaker addressing the two writers (one dead, one living).

Ladies, I do not know you, and I think

---

89 Lowell does not explicitly state who the “two unknown” ladies are, and Foster Damon, in his biography, identifies them only as “two Irish authors.” Based on this reference and other details revealed in the poem, Donaldson conjectures that the two ladies were Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, authors of *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* (1899) (35).
I do not want to. And a strange beginning

I make with that. Admitted; there’s the odds

You live between the covers of a book,

At least for me, but then I’ve known a crowd

Of other people who do that. My mind

Is stuffed with phantoms out of poets’ brains.

But you are out of nothing but the air,

Or were, rather, for one of you is dead.

Dead or alive, it is the same to me,

Since all of our contact lies in printer’s ink (562, 1–11).

Donaldson sees Lowell’s greatest dilemma as the fact that she was “a lesbian speaking in a lyric tradition structured by male heterosexual desire” (28). As Donaldson has pointed out, for Lowell, “these two women writers evoke the vexed position of the female artist working in a male tradition.” “These would-be models for caryatides, however, speak themselves and, more important, speak meaningfully to Lowell about her own need, a ‘kind of thirst’ for a female literary tradition” (“Amy Lowell and the Unknown Ladies” 27).

While Lowell has met a “crowd of other people” (namely poets) who live between the covers of a book and who are stuffed into her brain, none have gotten under
her skin as vividly as the clumsily written work of the two unknown writers who speak of their lesbian experience. Thematically, the poem explores why their poorly written prose so haunts Lowell. The speaker in “To Two Unknown Ladies” is appalled by their work even as she is drawn to it.

…is there not

A strange absurdity in being haunted

By ghosts who crack one’s jaw upon a yawn?

If that were all of it! But nothing’s all.

For just as I am oozing into sleep,

See-sawing gently out of consciousness,

A phrase of yours will laugh out loud and clang

Me broad awake (563).

This abrupt and unsettling awakening of Lowell’s speaker, jolted awake by the familiarity she feels after reading their writing, is a “puzzle [that] grows as [she] unravels it.” Lowell identifies with the two writers despite their seeming lack of talent, and likens the shock of this discovery to the sensation of biting into an almond.

And yet—and yet—this clearly is not all.

Or why should I go back to you again,

Evening and evening, in a kind of thirst,
Surprising my tongue upon an almond taste (564).

After finding this image, the speaker questions its legitimacy, asking whether she has stacked the deck so as to make this homosexual reading the only possible interpretation.

In the end, Lowell’s speaker returns to the image of the almond.

But if the pack were dealt again, what then?

So what’s the truth behind my set of it,

If I can keep my eyes clear long enough

To get a squint thereat? Almonds, I said,

Smooth, white, and bitter, wonderfully almonds (562–3).

Here, the realization that the two writers are describing a homosexual experience has indeed become “wonderfully” real. The almond is a recurring symbol Lowell uses to encode lesbian experience in her love lyrics. The most definitive occurrence is found in her poem “Aubade.”

As I would free the white almond from the green husk

So would I strip your trappings off,

Beloved.

And fingering the smooth polished kernel

I should see that in my hands glittered a gem beyond counting (38).
In using the title “Aubade” for a poem about female homosexual intercourse, Lowell not only establishes a symbol for lesbian desire but challenges and reclaims an androcentric poetic form.\(^\text{90}\) The *aubade* (also known as the Alba) is a subgenre of Occitan lyric poetic form popular with the Troubadours in the middle ages. The *aubade* typically describes the longing of lovers who are separating at dawn.\(^\text{91}\) While many are written as dramatic dialogues with up to three voices (the lover, the beloved, and the watchman) the modern adaptation of the form as used by Pound, employs a single male voice describing a lover who rises at dawn.\(^\text{92}\)

As cool as the pale wet leaves
of lily-of-the-valley
She lay beside me in the dawn (*Personae* 112).

In placing the depiction of desire and satisfaction of desire between women as the central crisis of her poem, Lowell inserts her own experience into a genre that had previously not included it. As Paula Bennett describes it, Lowell presents the clitoris “not as space to be entered but as a presence to be uncovered and adored” (244). Indeed, in poems such as “Aubade” and “Two Unknown Ladies,” Lowell uses the symbol of the

\(^\text{90}\) Lowell’s poem “Coq d’or” is also an *aubade*.

\(^\text{91}\) Lowell may in fact be re-claiming a form first employed by Sappho. Some critics argue that Sappho wrote some of the first *aubades*. For example, her Fragment 18 refers to the dawn: “Me just now the golden-sandalled Dawn…” and Fragment 95 “Evening, thou bringest all that bright morning scattered, [the sheep, the goat, the child to her mother.]”

\(^\text{92}\) It is important to mention that many other periods produced significant heterosexual *aubades*, including John Donne’s “The Sun Rising.” For the purpose of this study, I am focusing only on the relationship between Lowell’s use of the *aubade* as compared to her contemporaries’ use of the same form.
almond to represent both a physical and spiritual love between two women that escaped the censorious eye of the Watch and Ward Society.93

Through the creation of lesbian symbols, Lowell finds a place within the tradition beyond “A.B.C., or Keats, or ‘Christabel’ ” where she can give voice to her experience. She has found “a common language,” as Rich suggests, where her experiences and her preferred setting, the American landscape, could be called upon in order to create a new, American voice (563, 24).

Toward the end of “Two Unknown Ladies,” after Lowell’s speaker has identified the love between the two women as being “wonderfully almonds,” she draws a parallel between the two women and caryatides.

This does not finish your effect. For when

I write down Greek, it is inadequate.

Marble you are, but there’s that jet of fire

Like a red sunset on a fall of snow.

I feel a wind blowing off heather hills,

Am vaguely conscious of the moan of waves,

93 Lowell was painfully aware of the careful eye of the Watch and Ward Society and often encouraged fellow writers to censor themselves. As she wrote to D.H. Lawrence “you do not want to stress your sexual side to a public incapable of understanding it.” As she further elaborates in another letter to Lawrence, “when one is surrounded by prejudice and blindness, it seems to me that the only thing to do is to get over in spite of it and not constantly run foul of these same prejudices which, after all, hurts oneself and the spreading of one’s work, and does not do a thing to right the prejudice” (The Letters of D.H. Lawrence and Amy Lowell 1914–1925, 105, 67).
And seaweed fronds pulsating in a pool.

Now this, of course, is anything but Greek. (564, 126–133).

Her image of the two women as caryatides, the female figures used as columns to hold up the great structures of temples, falls short, because they are not flesh and blood. Lowell desires a living female literary tradition. She seeks, in the quiet of night, to awaken amongst the “furious dead” and for the voices among them to be female voices that speak from experiences of female same-sex desire. It is not surprising that when she awakens the dead and breathes life back into the statues she has created of the two unknown ladies, she resorts to Sapphic imagery with a “jet of fire/ Like a red sunset on a fall of snow.” In the final lines of the stanza, she creates an imaginary landscape that combines the seascape reminiscent of the Leucadian cliffs, often associated with Sappho, and of the sea pools of H.D.’s “Oread,” 94 with hills of heather that are found in her own New England. Haunted by the experiences of the two unknown ladies, Lowell is trying to “exorcise” a ghost through the writing of “To Two Unknown Ladies,” the voice of her own experience. To battle it, she must recreate or emulate it.

In her collection Writing Like a Woman, the modern poet Alicia Ostriker describes a similar experience. The book collects five essays that describe and explore the poetics of five women poets she actively admired. As she states in the introduction:

---

94 “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.”
[t]he five poets I have written of here are brave women and strong writers, from whom I have learned and with whom I have wrestled. Each of the essays came about, in fact, because I was tugged and pulled by some particular poet, seduced and irritated, and needed to write to clarify my perplexity (4–5).

Lowell, too, wrote to “clarify her perplexity” with poets who were writing from experiences similar to her own. As an American poet, Lowell, like Whitman and the “furious dead” of the library identified herself as an iconoclast. As a woman and as a lesbian, she inherited a fragmented tradition that called upon her to reclaim what had not yet been publicly spoken. For Lowell, lesbian eroticism and the depiction of female desire lay at the heart of this act of reclamation.

Reclaiming a Feminized American Landscape: Lowell’s American Sister, Emily Dickinson, “the First Imagist”

As Susan Gubar suggests in “Sapphistries,” female poets had a complicated relationship with Sappho (44). While Lowell was haunted by her work, Sappho remained distant, located in the fragmented, un-translatable, and unreachable past. More complicated was Lowell’s relationship with her American sister, Emily Dickinson, whom she and many of her contemporaries considered “the first Imagist” (“Emily Dickinson” 175).
Lowell’s problematic and intimate relationship with Dickinson\(^95\) is on display in her poem “The Sisters,” where she imagines what it would be like to meet Dickinson in person. As one sees in the first few lines, even Lowell’s introduction to Dickinson is hesitant. Dickinson is so close a sister that Lowell (or Lowell’s speaker) has trepidations about approaching her directly. At first, the speaker engages her “spiritual relation” (the term she uses to refer to all three of the women poets she chose to include in the poem) cautiously and indirectly.

I rather think I see myself walk up

A flight of wooden steps and ring a bell

And send a card to Ms. Dickinson. (460, 119–121).

But in the lines that follow, Lowell backtracks and revises her speaker’s entry, forcefully taking the “dream twist-ends” of the thought and inserting new circumstances. Instead, Lowell’s speaker forgoes the front door and climbs instead directly into Dickinson’s backyard in order to see her at work, observing a hummingbird and creating poems.

Yet that’s a very silly way to do.

I should have taken the dream twist-ends about

And climbed over the fence and found her deep

---

\(^95\) It is important to note that reading Dickinson in the 1920s, Lowell would have been reading a Dickinson quite different from the one we are used to reading today. In her essay “Emily Dickinson,” Lowell is reviewing *The Single Hound*, a 1914 edition of Dickinson, which was more expansive than the 1890 edition; however, many of Dickinson’s poems we know today, as well as Dickinson’s unique form (her use of dashes) were not included in the edition.
Engrossed in the doing of a hummingbird

Among nasturtiums. Not having expected strangers,

She might forget to think me one, and holding up

A finger say quite casually: “Take care.

Don’t frighten him, he’s only just begun.”

“Now this,” I well believe I should have thought,

“Is better than Sapho.” With Emily

You’re really here, or never anywhere at all

In range of mind.” (460, 122–133).

In this encounter, the hummingbird represents Dickinson’s unique, imagistic, poetic craft. Reviewing Dickinson’s work in her essay “Emily Dickinson,” Lowell singles out Dickinson’s poem “The Humming-Bird” as exemplary of her greatest work. What is most striking in these lines of the poem is Lowell’s speaker’s internal dialogue. Sitting in Dickinson’s backyard, watching Dickinson in the act of creating a poem, she concludes, is “better than Sapho.” Dickinson’s work is not fragmented like Sappho’s, and Dickinson is close both temporally and geographically. Dickinson set her poems in the same New England landscape and, like Lowell, came from an established New England family. In Dickinson, Lowell found a sister close enough to identify as her own direct lineage.

---

96 As noted in Chapter 1, Lowell uses the French spelling of Sappho in the final published version of “The Sisters.”

97 Dickinson only wrote one poem that refers to Sappho. In poem 371, Dickinson praises old books for their ability to recreate and render available past lives such as “When Sappho—was a living Girl” (Johnson 371).
According to Damon, Lowell wished to write Dickinson’s biography after she finished her biography of Keats, and was looking forward to beginning this project at the time of her death in 1925 (611–612).

Lowell’s poem “The Humming-Birds” reads as a response to Dickinson’s poem, which was originally entitled “The Humming-Bird.” In order to properly understand Lowell’s response, one must first examine Dickinson’s poem, which describes the flight of a single hummingbird as it alights on a flowering bush.

A route of evanescence

With a revolving wheel;

A resonance of emerald;

A rush of cochineal;

And every blossom on the bush

Adjusts its tumbled head, —

The mail from Tunis, probably,

An easy morning’s ride (108).\(^98\)

Lowell observed in Dickinson’s work her use of “the exact word, the perfect image.” She saw her own “unrelated method … the describing of a thing by its appearance only,

\(^{98}\) This poem was circulated a great deal even during Dickinson’s lifetime (it was sent to six of her correspondents) and there are many variations of the layout (as shown in Franklin’s *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*). For the purpose of this study, I am using the layout presented in Amy Lowell’s essay of Emily Dickinson, “Emily Dickinson” found in her collection *Poetry and Poets.*
without regard for its entity in any other way” (102–103, 107) perfectly enacted in Dickinson’s portrait of the hummingbird, where the bird is described as an active thing of beauty, both in the spectacular movement of its flying body (“a route of evanescence/ with a revolving wheel”) and the vivid colors of its feathered body glistening in the sun. With the line, “The mail from Tunis probably/ An easy morning’s ride,” Dickinson creates a phraseological adaptation of a spur (or spurs) drawn from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. With this reference, Dickinson makes light of an incredible journey, delivering mail from North Africa to North America in a single morning, and brings Shakespeare into her own backyard. Her powerful portrait of a hummingbird in essence embodies Lowell’s ideal: to be a poet of place and invention who boldly rewrites the lyrics of the past to make them relevant to the experience of a modern, female poet.

Lowell’s response to Dickinson’s “The Humming-Bird” is found in her posthumously published poem “The Humming-Birds” (476–477). The poem takes Dickinson’s hummingbird as a synecdoche for her poetic corpus, or as Lowell dubs it, the first imagistic poem, and begins by observing a garden fountain where a host of hummingbirds fly in and out.

Up—up—water shooting,

Jet of water, white and silver,

Tinkling with the morning sun-bells.

---

Finnerty suggests that Dickinson draws her reference from two separate allusions to *The Tempest*. The first is a passage “She that is queen of Tunis: she that dwells/ Ten leagues below men’s lives: she that from Naples/ Can have no note, unless the sun were post—/ (The man i’ the moon’s too slow,) till new-born chins/ Be rough and razorable; she, from whom/ We all were sea-swallow’d, though some cast again;” (II.i.66–72) The second is to Ariel, who is heard as a “humming” (317).
Red as sun-blood, whizz of fire,

Shock of fire-spray and water.

It is the humming-birds flying against the stream of the fountain.

The trumpet-vine bursts into a scatter of hummingbirds,

The scarlet-throated trumpet flowers explode with hummingbirds.

The fountain waits to toss them diamonds (476, 1–9).

These hummingbirds are unconventional birds of genius. They fly “against the stream of the fountain,” producing elemental beauty, “red as sun-blood, whizz of fire, / Shock of fire-spray and water.” The fountain, like the fountain of knowledge or memory in ancient Greek and Christian traditions, waits to toss the hummingbirds “diamonds,” and the birds unabashedly challenge all the fountain contains, whether knowledge or memory.

Lowell’s speaker however, is hesitant to unleash her own birds.

I clasp my hands over my heart

Which will not let loose its hummingbirds,

Which will not break to green and ruby,

Which will not let its wings touch air.

Pound and hammer me with irons,

Crack me so that flame can enter,
Pull me open, loose the thunder

Of wings within me.

Leave me wrecked and consoled,

A maker of hummingbirds


Because of her hesitation, Lowell’s speaker’s hummingbirds will not appear in green and ruby (or Dickinson’s emerald and cochineal) and will not have wings that can fly a “route of evanescence” towards imagistic perfection unless a beloved can help to ignite her inspiration. Lowell’s speaker pleads to be pounded, hammered, and cracked,¹⁰⁰ so that the flame, or the white diamonds of inspiration, can allow her to unleash her poems. Lowell wishes to be a “maker of hummingbirds who dares [to] bathe in leaping water,” to write verse that tells the queer truth straight, not slant, and to set it in a New England landscape, not some imaginary Hellas. She wishes to write about sensuality and eroticism and the experience of love, directly and from the perspective of a woman who loves another woman.

In “The Sisters,” when Dickinson says, “Take care. Don’t frighten him, he’s only just begun,” Lowell seems to be evoking an idea of an inclusive American poetics somehow conjured up by Emily. It is this tradition Lowell wishes to contribute to, a tradition she considers “better than Sapho,” because, as she states, “with Emily you are really here.” Since she does not speak or write Greek or have direct experience of Greece,

¹⁰⁰ Lowell’s language is also reminiscent of Donne’s sonnet “Batter my heart, three-person’d God.”
Lowell cannot make Sappho’s Fragments a live and rooted tradition to which she can add her voice. In Dickinson, Lowell finds a poet who lived during her lifetime, who spoke of her landscape, and who wrote against the American literary grain to create a space in which she could express herself fully.

But Dickinson was by no means a perfect sister. To Lowell, Dickinson’s poems, though inspired and imagistic, are not sensual: Emily “hoarded—hoarded—only [gave]/Herself to hard, cold paper.” Lowell was troubled by Dickinson’s failure to publish, her lack of a public career as a poet, and also by her perceived celibacy.\footnote{Again, it is important to note that Lowell’s knowledge about Emily Dickinson’s life was limited, due to the limited amount of archival work that had been done by the 1920s in understanding Dickinson’s life.}

She hung her womanhood upon a bough

And played ball with the stars—too long—too long—

The garment of herself hung on a tree

Until at last she lost even the desire

To take it down. (461, 162–166).

For Lowell, whose poetic craft was deeply rooted in her expression of the sensual, Dickinson’s reluctance to embrace this side of her nature was a major shortcoming.

Lowell’s image of Dickinson as a scarecrow “who hung her womanhood upon a bough” is a far cry from Lowell’s “burning birch tree” and Sappho’s discourse of desire and emulation. Still, a vital part of Lowell’s contribution to the modernist movement is derived from her reaction to the two poets. Lowell borrowed Sappho’s “moonlit gowns”
of sensuality and form, tailoring them to meet the needs of her modern experience. But as an American poet and a poet of New England, it was natural that Dickinson should become Lowell’s closest “sister.” To speak for New England, Lowell felt that her own poetry must contain both Sappho’s “uninhibited women’s sensuous poetry” and her revisionary inclusion of the voices of “the furious dead.” Emboldened by the hybridity Lowell gained from Sappho and Dickinson, and because she was not afraid to talk back to the “furious dead,” and Whitman in particular, Lowell was able to develop a distinctly American poetic voice that spoke honestly of her own experience. Her poetry became a poetry of inclusivity that elicited response from future generations of poets. Like any good sister, she wanted to irritate future poets enough to write back to her and to express their own unique voice. As we will review in Chapter 5, Lowell left an open invitation to these future poets to which many poets have continually responded. Lowell’s legacy to American poetry lies in both her hybridity and the inclusivity and revisionism her work fostered both during and after her lifetime.
Chapter 5

“We Are One Family”—Lowell’s Influence, and Sapphic Modernism in the Poetry of the Late 1920s and Beyond

When Lowell concludes “The Sisters,” she finishes by directly addressing a future audience of readers, or “Sisters,” whom she invites to read and respond to her work, just as she has responded to the work of Sappho, Browning, and Dickinson. But first, she bids her older sisters goodbye, both re-emphasizing and celebrating the differences between them and herself.

Good-bye, my sisters, all of you are great,

And none of you has any word for me.

I cannot write like you, I cannot think

In terms of Pagan or of Christian now (173–176).

Lowell concludes with the premise that as a poet and as a sister, it is not for her to figure out what her older sisters did wrong or right, because she will never be able to understand their craft completely and thereby recreate it. Rather, her task as a poet is to be inspired by their work, and use the differences she finds between their work and her own as a catalyst that will enable her to write honestly and inventively from her own, unique
perspective. With this same conceit, Lowell turns toward the future, extending an open invitation to future poets and encouraging them to interact with her work some day.

I only hope that possibly some day

Some other woman with an itch for writing

May turn to me as I have turned to you

And chat with me a brief few minutes (177–180).

Indeed, the sentiment Lowell expresses in “The Sisters,” as we explored in Chapter 4, is on display in Lowell’s own work. Lowell, like Sappho, both engaged earlier poets and poetry and invited her successors to emulate and continually rewrite her work (and that of all other poets) to create a representational poetry of the future.

I understand you all, for in myself—

Is that presumption? Yet indeed it’s true—

We are one family. And still my answer

Will not be any of yours (190–195).

In the work of her predecessors, Lowell found likeness, but no match. Her voice, she knew, was unique, one that spoke from her own experience. Equally, Lowell extends into the future this family of like-minded but different sisters.

Lowell gave voice to homoerotic passion through her expression of a discourse of desire. Her poetic aesthetic was fiercely personal and rooted in an American landscape
and literary tradition. At the same time, she challenged this tradition so that it could be inclusive of a wider breadth of experience. As we have seen in the close analysis of her work in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, Lowell’s allusions to Sappho’s images and motifs, and her internalization of Sappho’s poetic craft, empowered her and shaped her expression of modernism. The Sapphic surfaced throughout Lowell’s work, and her expression of modernism was enhanced by this intertextuality. At the end of this study, however, the concluding stanzas of “The Sisters” invite a final question: What effects did Lowell’s expression of Sapphic Modernism have on the work of poets in subsequent generations?

**Lowell as a Foremother: “We’re a Queer Lot …We Women Who Write Poetry”**

Ellen Bass and Florence Howe begin their breakthrough 1976 anthology, *No More Masks*, with a reference to Lowell’s poem. “The Sisters” is both included and excerpted. The citation “we’re a queer lot/ We women who write poetry” is used as the title for the first section of the book, which introduces poetry from Gertrude Stein to Muriel Rukeyser. In their introduction, Bass and Howe relay their interpretation of Lowell’s words as expressing her “pensive perception of her kind,” as well as her isolation as a woman poet writing in the 1920s (4). As they observe, Lowell stood at the threshold of an opening-up in American poetry (and especially in the poetry being written and published by women) during the twentieth century: “That women should be poets at all was the question in the early decades of the century” (5). Though Howe and Bass praise Lowell by including her as the first foremother in the collection, they also classify Lowell and her female contemporaries (such as Stein and H.D.) as female poets who felt

---

102 The anthology *No More Masks* was significant in bringing important female poets like Muriel Rukeyser into the teaching anthologies of subsequent generations.
unique in relation to other women writers. Howe finds this to be the most significant
difference between women writing in the 1920s and those who were writing in the 1970s.
Even in a revised 1993 edition, Howe again describes Lowell in terms that emphasize her
isolation.¹⁰³

Women poets were “queer” not only in relation to men who were poets
but to women who were not. For a woman to feel chosen enough to take
on allegedly male activity has, in the past, meant that she was separated
from other women and had to make some adjustment in order to survive in
a male world. She might have to deny her sexuality and her human need
for family, for instance—as Amy Lowell did—and live out her days as a
spinster. Lowell could be comfortable in neither world; nor could Sara
Teasdale and Louise Bogan. (xxxiii—xxxiv).

Howe’s classification of Lowell reveals how the stereotypes surrounding Lowell’s life
and work remained even in feminist literature of the 1990s. Contrary to Howe’s
assessment and as noted in Chapter 1, Lowell, was quite comfortable as a public figure
representative of poetry, and adamant about the publication of her own work as well as
the work of her contemporaries.¹⁰⁴ She was by no means a shy spinster.

Ironically, Howe fails to recognize Lowell’s revolutionary (and covert)
publication of erotic same-sex lyrics in the 1920s, even though she includes many of her
poems that display this expression including: “The Garden by Moonlight,” “Interlude”
(where Lowell’s encoded lesbian eroticism features in her use of almond imagery), and

¹⁰³ Bass did not edit nor write the introduction to the second edition.
¹⁰⁴ Her work as a critic and as editor of the imagists anthology series stand as clear examples.
“Autumn.” Although Howe acknowledges Lowell as a significant foremother, she does not acknowledge the important role she played in the new openness in American poetry that began during Lowell’s lifetime and continued after her death. The shift that began to occur in poetry being written by women was exactly what Lowell had wished for and advocated during her lifetime: a shift toward inclusivity. Women began to openly engage a greater breadth of themes that reflected their own unique experiences, and the number of respected female poets began slowly and steadily to increase. Lowell was by no means solely responsible for this shift, but her influence contributed to this move toward the inclusion especially of female eroticism and a Sapphic inclination towards rewriting the work of the past. To date, little to no academic study has been done on how Lowell’s work influenced the Confessional and post-Confessional women’s movements in American poetry. Lowell’s work was clearly not the only flame that lit the fire in American poetry that cleared out the undergrowth and allowed the tall redwoods of unique and inclusive writing to grow and prosper, but her expression of Sapphic Modernism played a role in what occurred in American poetry after her death and into the present day. This chapter is an attempt to begin a serious investigation of Lowell’s influence on subsequent generations, in both American and British poetry.

As Bonnie Kime Scott acknowledges, Lowell spent her lifetime urging artists to express themselves “openly and fearlessly” (*Gender in Modernism* 227). Lowell states this premise in her essay “Nationalism in Art”:
A strong man gains an added sense of power by everything he learns. … He has mastered his technique with infinite pains, and by so doing has been able to fling his personality unimpeded before the world (227).

Lowell saw the essence of great art as an individual’s ability to write from everything (s)he has learned and experienced in his/her lifetime. As a woman, and as a lesbian, Lowell’s poetry recast her experience in poetic models adapted from Sappho. To return to Mina Loy’s brilliant definition of modernism noted in Chapter 1, “Modernism rescued people from stabilized culture” and re-infused them with the “joyful aesthetic” possibilities of daily life (Loy 298). Lowell’s modernism celebrated the aesthetics of her own daily life while encouraging inclusivity within the poetic tradition in which she was writing. In this chapter, I argue that Lowell’s expression of Sapphic Modernism (together with the work of other great poets writing during the modernist period) created a revisionary call and response between the poetic voices of the past and the poets of the future, creating the foundational vision of an American/world poetry that is constantly challenging and refashioning its borders. This chapter will begin by looking closely at a tribute to Lowell written by Lola Ridge just two years after Lowell’s death in 1925, then study the discourse of desire as it began to be expressed even more explicitly from a female and lesbian experience, in the work of Adrienne Rich, and to some extent Elizabeth Bishop, Olga Broumas, and Carol Ann Duffy. We will next turn to works that directly responded to Lowell/Sappho’s method or example of revisionary writing that both alludes to and boldly refigures earlier poetic images and motifs, to fit them out for a poetry of the future (for example the work of Anne Sexton, Broumas, and Duffy).
Writing as a Means to Understand A Lost Sister: An Analysis of Lola Ridge’s 

Portrait of Lowell in “Amy Lowell”

An early example of a direct response to Lowell’s work is Lola Ridge’s poem “Amy Lowell.” Ridge, who was Lowell’s contemporary and also, at the beginning of her career, an Imagist, wrote from a very different point of view. Born in Dublin and raised and educated in Australia and New England, Ridge moved to San Francisco in 1907 and to New York City in 1908. Her work dealt primarily with the cause of labor and the poverty endured by low-paid workers. In her celebrated early work The Ghetto and Other Poems (1918), she presented Imagist portraits of the lives of construction workers and Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side of New York City.

Ridge published “Amy Lowell” as part of her later volume Red Flag in 1927.

Your words are frost on speargrass,

Your words are glancing light

On foils at play,

Your words are shapely … buoyant as balloons,

They make brave sallies at the stars.

When your words fall and grow cold

Little greedy hands

Will gather them for necklets. (81)
As Jane Marcus notes, Ridge’s tribute is a “strange … assault” on Lowell, whom she most certainly knew through her brief work as editor of *Broom* and from the overlapping poetic circles of the Imagist movement (196). Ridge’s poetic response to Lowell is direct at the same time that it is complicated. Throughout the poem, Ridge engages Lowell’s words by repeatedly trying to define them in a bold catalogue.

In her first comparison, Ridge associates Lowell’s words with “frost on speargrass.” The image suggests the possibility of pain (not a sharp pain, but a subtle one), a pain whose sting is numbed, hidden, and beautified by the frost. Ridge compounds this image by likening Lowell’s poetry to a “glancing light,” seeming to imply that Lowell’s words are deceptively painful and that they reflect her experience obliquely. But these first two images convey only passive visions of Lowell’s words. In the line that follows, Lowell’s words become activated, becoming the light that reflects off the blunt ends of flashing rapiers. In line 4, Ridge shifts the family of metaphor from sharp, long objects to light, round balloons, apparently wary of Lowell’s voluptuous words, which rise so easily, as if filled with helium. This shift in metaphor in the middle of the poem alerts us to a conflict or a written-in uncertainty. Woven into this shift and into Ridge’s reticence over Lowell’s words are equal strands of admiration and awe. This layering illuminates the conflict with which Ridge concludes the poem. As she questions the weight and legitimacy (and perhaps even the legacy) of Lowell’s words, she celebrates their ambition and honesty as “brave sallies” toward the uncharted territory of the stars, writing of experiences hitherto rarely documented in American poetry.
Given the timing of the publication of Ridge’s poem, it is difficult not to figure Lowell’s recent death into our interpretation of its final lines. Equally important for understanding Ridge’s poem is the vast difference in the two poets’ politics (Lowell’s family built its fortune partly on the backs of mill workers, and Ridge actively fought for workers’ rights). In her reading, Marcus posits Lowell’s corporeal presence (her large body and small hands) and her wealth (the “greedy capitalist”) in direct opposition to Ridge’s thin body and her vow of poverty. Drawing on this dichotomy, Marcus defines the “necklet” restraints worn by prisoners, or the hangman’s noose that famously killed the convicted anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, as representative of the repression of the ruling class in the United States. She comes close to arguing that the motivation behind Ridge’s tribute is an attack, not only upon Lowell’s words, but also upon her political position. Yet at the end of her essay, Marcus leaves her interpretation open to another reading, in which Lowell’s words, recovered after her death, become a necklet or garland of flowers reminiscent of Sappho’s roses of Pieria. The impetus for Marcus’s essay was her realization of the dramatic influence Lowell’s work had had on her own life both as a working-class scholarship student at Harvard and as a female poet. Marcus ends her essay with an expression of Sapphic Modernism, an assertion that both alludes to and refigures one of Lowell’s popular images, the lilac. “I am making a necklet of lilacs from Amy Lowell’s words. It can protect the voice, and it can choke the voice. But certainly it is mine” (197). Marcus’s interpretation of Ridge’s response to Lowell

105 Lowell’s brother Lawrence, while president of Harvard, headed a commission that denied Sacco and Vanzetti a retrial. This action earned Harvard the title “Hangman’s Hall” among radicals (Marcus 196). 106 “But thou shalt lie dead, nor shall there ever be any remembrance of thee then or thereafter, for thou hast not of the roses of Pieria; but thou shalt wander obscure even in the house of Hades, flitting among the shadowy dead” (Fragment 68 90).
offers insight into the breadth and force of Lowell’s influence on female poets of subsequent generations.

Indeed, Ridge’s lines are not intended as a pretty portrait of Lowell’s words. As an Imagist who captured the unspoken voices of America, and as Lowell’s contemporary, Ridge would have been both surprised and dismayed by the negativity expressed toward Lowell’s work directly after her death. Just two years after Lowell’s body and voice had grown cold, whose “little greedy hands” would have been gathering her words to make necklets? Lowell’s partner, Ada, was loyally bundling those words into the posthumous collections that she would see to print. At the same time, many of Lowell’s contemporaries were gathering her words and finding them deflated of the will and purpose that had filled them during her lifetime. Again and again, poets were responding to her work by writing back to her as she had willed them to do. Ridge herself appears to be engaged in this exercise, playing the part of a smart and weary sister who digs into the depths of her sister’s work to reveal its essence, so that she can find out what about Lowell’s work has so gotten under her skin. A number of poets greedily gathered Lowell’s words, and what she accomplished in her formulation of Sapphic Modernism (both in her thematic approach and through a gynocentric discourse of desire) helped to fashion a live and ever-changing garland of new poetry.


According to Adrienne Munich and Melissa Bradshaw, Lowell achieves an erotic lesbian verse in “Two Speak Together” that is incomparable to anything published until
Adrienne Rich’s 1974-76 sequence, “Twenty-one Love Poems” (xx). Given the 60-year hiatus between the two series, it seems important to examine the relationship between the works of both poets, especially in regard to these two sonnet sequences. Although Lowell wrote under the vigilant eye of the Watch and Ward Society, she successfully wrote about a same-sex relationship by employing the discourse of desire and recurring and encoded symbols of female sexuality that were meant to represent an adaptation of Sappho’s discourse of female erotic desire. To Lowell’s audience and censors, it was not obvious that she was writing about a same-sex affair, the assumption being that the speaker of the poems was male.

Rich, one of America’s foremost poets today and a renowned feminist critic, began her career in 1951 after winning the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Prize for her first book, A Change of World. Like Lowell, Rich did not immediately arrive at a poetics that was both personal and expressive of an active, homoerotic passion and experience. Her work progressed from formal, emotionally restrained verse to “poetry informed by conscious sexual politics whose focus becomes increasingly personal and immediate” (Blain, Grundy, and Clements 898). Rich owed her development as a writer in part to Lowell. Lowell’s homoerotic verse, and her encouragement of an American literary tradition based on the tenets of inclusivity and revisionism, gave Rich a foundation and a sister to talk back to.

107 Rich’s first book, which was chosen for the prize by W.H. Auden, was praised for its chiseled formalism and restrained emotional content (Reading Adrienne Rich 209–211).
108 In contrast to her later work, as critics like Deborah Pope suggest.
Rich’s choice to write against the grain of American poetics in her later works,
however, beginning with her third book, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), was not
without consequence. As Rich explains, to “write directly and overtly as a woman out of
a woman’s body and experience, to take women’s existence seriously as a theme and
source for art … it did indeed imply the breakdown of the world as I had always known it,
the end of safety” (Rich, quoting James Baldwin) (898). Rich, while she did not write
directly to Lowell, used Lowell as a foremother, indirectly pursuing a dialogue with
“Two Speak Together” when she began to write toward “the end of safety,” and crafted
her famous sonnet sequence “Twenty-one Love Poems.”

In “Twenty-one Love Poems” Rich both revisits the formal confines of the sonnet
sequence, and uses this form to write explicitly about same-sex love. Repeated images
and motifs, including the landscape of their shared love and of the moon, allude to
Lowell’s earlier sequence. Recurring images of natural symbols such as flowers, trees,
and volcanoes are used to represent the female body and same-sex sexuality.

Rich’s poem boldly writes from a foreboding setting: a cityscape. Like the two-
sided landscape of the garden at Sevenels that runs throughout Lowell’s poems, in which
both immense and almost unbearable beauty (as Lowell depicts in “Vespers” and “July,
Midnight”) and the threat of death and separation (as Lowell depicts in “Frimaire” and
“Grotesque”) co-exist and clash, the city serves for Rich as a backdrop, both threatening
and at the same time fertile, where Rich can build a powerful island of love between two
women. Traveling this confused landscape, this sequence both records the affair and
attempts to uncover a language that can speak the truth experienced by the two women.
Thematically the first sonnet suggests that the history of women who love women is still being written. Gertrude Reif Hughes has noted that this history extends not only to lesbian women, but to all women who love women, “whether as mothers and daughters, as sisters, as lesbians, or as colleagues and friends—[all women] have to struggle even to believe in the existence of their own love, let alone to live that love” (154 Reading Adrienne Rich). Rich sounds this theme in the first sonnet of the series:

No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
Sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
Dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
Our animal passion rooted in the city (13–16).

The women’s isolation from the greater audience (“No one”) is emphasized by the caesura in line 13 that separates the women from the audience that observes and is unable to understand them. In this apocalyptic cityscape, the women aspire to become as natural as trees: bright sycamore trees that are both threatened (“blazing” in an air that smells of sulfur and the possibility of fire) and prospering (“still exuberantly budding”). Rich creates a hybrid setting that marries the pastoral and the cityscape, as if to emphasize that neither place completely accepts lesbian eroticism. Unlike Lowell’s burning birch tree, the trees in Rich’s poem have been damaged and are “dappled with scars.” But

---

109 As Joanne Feit Diehl points out, “This transference allows the woman to be both subject and object of consciousness, the agent of desire and its aim” (Woman Poets and the American Sublime 148).
110 In the homoerotic works of poets such as Frank O’Hara and Jack Spicer, gay relationships flourish in the urban landscape.
they are still “budding,” even as they stand rooted in an urban landscape that is essentially unnatural and hostile to their survival.

This complicated metaphor reflects the more tolerant literary environment in which a woman poet could write about her same-sex desire in the 1970s. While many foremothers, including Lowell and the “Confessional Poets” before Rich, had won some concessions, none had been won without scars, and few had been recognized for what they had achieved. As Rich points out in her foreword to *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*:

> each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere; as if each of us had lived, thought, and worked without any historical past or contextual present. This is one of the ways in which women’s work and thinking has been made to seem sporadic, errant, orphaned of any tradition of its own (11).

Without the benefit of full knowledge or acceptance from society, Rich’s sonnet sequence aims not only to write about the experience of the two lovers but also to invent a language freed from “male-dominated poetic influence” (*Reading Adrienne Rich* 98). As Diehl puts it,

> The female poet, like Adam in the Garden, can name rather than rename the world around her. This transference foremost allows the woman to be both subject and object of consciousness, the agent of desire and its aim. … The question of renaming the world is at the heart of these poems.
because Rich perceives the necessity of escaping boundaries of convention to make a new world “by women outside the law” (99).

Rich’s sonnet sequence, like Lowell’s, challenges the conventions of androcentric poetic forms such as the sonnet and the blazon. None of the poems adhere strictly to the fourteen-line, ten-syllable form, but vary in length throughout the sequence from thirteen to twenty lines. In addition to these alterations, Rich also inserts an extra, unnumbered poem entitled “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered).” The poem appears in the center of the poem sequence, but as the title of the poem suggests, it is meant to be read anywhere within the sonnet sequence. “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered)” stands out both in form and content. It is the only poem in the sequence in which Rich uses direct, physical descriptions to describe sex between two women. As Templeton describes it, “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered)” “resists being cooped into the heterosexual cultural system it challenges but also resists being systematized even within the structure of ‘Twenty-one Love Poems’” (Templeton 9). Just as Rich creates a hybrid setting (urban and pastoral) in which to write about a lesbian relationship, she also reshapes the conventional poetic form, dispensing with the cultural bias that clings to the sonnet.

In both poem “XI” and “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered)” one finds examples of Rich’s homage to Lowell, albeit set in a more apocalyptic landscape. First, in “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered),” Rich uses the natural image of the fiddlehead fern to introduce and allude to lovemaking between two women.

---

111 The sonnet has long been a form that is altered by poets writing within it. In American poetry, there are many examples of unconventional sonnets such as William Carlos Williams and Elizabeth Bishop.

112 Susan Stanford Friedman draws a parallel between Rich’s landscape in “Twenty-one Love Poems” and H.D.’s setting in the beginning section of “Trilogy” titled “The Walls Do Not Fall” in a bombed-out London neighborhood” (Signs 1983).
Whatever happens with us, your body
will haunt mine—tender, delicate
your lovemaking, like the half-curled frond
of the fiddlehead fern in forests
just washed by sun (1–5).

In this first image, Rich immediately invokes the sameness of the two lovers and their mirrored likeness. Their affair, “whatever happens to us,” which at this point in the sonnet sequence is without a set start point and end point, will haunt the speaker, like the “Two Unknown Ladies” of Lowell’s poem. Rich draws from her foremothers’ imagery to write her own description of homoerotic desire. The image of their lovemaking recalls Lowell’s encoded, yet sensual, description of her lover in “The Weather-Cock Points South,” and Dickinson’s floral imagery used in an anti-blazon to describe the female anatomy and active female desire. The “half-curled frond” of the fern suggests clitoral imagery that is naturalized and outed in the light of the sun.

Directly following this floral metaphor, Rich risks an even more explicit and literal description of clitoral stimulation between the two lovers.

Your traveled, generous thighs
Between which my whole face has come and come—

The innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there—

---

As discussed in Chapter 3.
The live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth—

Your touch on me, firm, protective, searching

Me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers

Reaching where I had been waiting years for you

In my rose-wet cave—whatever happens, this is (5–12).

Like Lowell’s speaker in “Two Speak Together,” Rich’s speaker gains both self-reflexive knowledge and a sense of rebirth (“I had been waiting years for you/ in my rose-wet cave”) through her relationship with the beloved. Drawing from her foremothers, Rich first reminds the reader of the mirror image of two female bodies coming together and the connection between the female anatomy and floral imagery (“like the half-curled frond/
Of the fiddlehead fern in the forests/ just washed by sun”) then, drawing from the heritage of her foremothers, she speaks explicitly about sex and the female body without the cloak of simile or metaphor. As the sonnet concludes, whatever happens between the lovers throughout the sequence that records their affair and however long this affair lasts is irrelevant to the epiphany that the speaker has experienced. The reality of their affair has changed her. When the speaker emerges from the “rose-wet cave”, she is forever and irrevocably changed, seeing her world for the first time, not interpreted or reflected, but directly\textsuperscript{114}. With this statement, the speaker (and Rich) are now a part of the history of women writing directly about women and their desires. The final line implies that wherever this experience takes her, she and her writing will be new, changed ground.

\textsuperscript{114} Though out of scope for my brief analysis for Rich’s poem, it seems important to mention that Rich is most likely also alluding to Plato’s famous allegory with this image.
In poem “XI,” Rich creates “the female landscape in miniature,” an invented and renamed world for the lover and her beloved to inhabit (much like the intimate world of the garden in many of Lowell’s lyrics from “Two Speak Together,” as in “July, Midnight”) where both the two lovers and the landscape become “eternally and visibly female” (Vanderbosch 30).

Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes, making them eternally and visibly female.

No height without depth, with a burning core, though our straw soles shred on the hardened lava.

The volcanic, feminized landscape of the poem is metonymous for the female literary tradition into which this sequence is being written, where the heights have been formed after a great deal of work underground and beneath the surface.

Just as Lowell drew from Sappho’s imagery and motifs in order to write about homoeroticism, Rich too drew from allusions in “Twenty-one love poems”. For example in “XI,” Rich’s use of the image of a volcano recalls a classic reference but also a contemporary poem, Elizabeth Bishop’s “Crusoe in England,” published in 1971, in which Bishop, according to Gregory Orr, composed a “spiritual autobiography” in the

---

115 As Hayden Carruth describes in his 1978 review, Rich incorporates a “perfectly assimilated classical allusion” (Harpers Magazine).
116 It is equally important to mention that Rich and even Bishop may also be alluding to Dickinson’s “A still—Volcano—Life” where as Margaret Homans has analyzed, Dickinson may be using vaginal imagery (“lips”) as a multivalent figure for female sexual and poetic power… the volcanic “lips that never lie” could therefore be representative of the female literary tradition. (“Syllables” 583–86, 591).
117 Elizabeth Bishop published “Crusoe in England” in her final, acclaimed collection, Geography III.
persona of Robinson Crusoe, “including such painful issues as her sense of abandonment, her alcoholism, and her homosexuality” (658).

Rich’s phraseological adaptation of Bishop’s image is important in understanding Lowell’s influence on Rich because just as Lowell drew from Sappho’s images in order to write about same-sex desire, so Rich drew from and re-figured Bishop’s images that depicted homosexuality. Bishop’s poem, written from the perspective of a rescued Crusoe reflecting upon the “un-rediscovered, un-renamable” island that “(n)one of the books” have ever gotten right, recalls a landscape riddled with “miserable” volcanoes.

Well, I had fifty-two
miserable, small volcanoes I could climb
with a few slithery strides —
vocanoes dead as ash heaps.
I used to sit on the edge of the highest one
and count the others standing up,
naked and leaden, with their heads blown off (11–17).

Bishop, who published Crusoe at the end of her career, and was known for her lack of (or subversion of) self-reflexiveness in her writing, was describing an even less hospitable environment in which one could write from a female (and lesbian) experience. Read from this perspective and in contrast to Rich’s later image of a volcanic island in “XI,” Bishop’s island becomes an in-between world where homosexuality could exist and be written about.
Just when I thought I couldn’t stand it
another minute longer, Friday came.
(Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)

Friday was nice.
Friday was nice, and we were friends.
If only he had been a woman!
I wanted to propagate my kind,
and so did he, I think, poor boy.
He’d pet the baby goats sometimes,
and race with them, or carry one around.

—Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body (142–152).

As Kalstone describes it, Bishop’s depiction of Friday happens almost at an “abrupt halt” in the poem, “like stepping ashore from a rocking boat, this language shocks by its flatness: no description, no double takes, no thickening of the plot” (257). Bishop’s abrupt insertion of a scene that may contain homosexuality is deliberate. From the moment Friday appears the world of the island changes from dreamlike to real. Unlike Rich, who gains from the volcanic island the land to support an inclusive discourse of desire, Bishop leaves the interpretation open. A changed landscape and an unnamable island are all that is left. When Crusoe returns to England, his Friday can’t survive (“—And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles/ seventeen years ago come March”), and all of the meaning that the things he invented while a castaway on the island had (the flute, the knife, the shoes, the goatskin trousers and the parasol) is gone. Back in his place of
origin, all that he had found on the island, a setting where homosexuality could both exist and thrive was lost.

Returning to the volcanic landscape of Rich’s poem, the newly formed and feminized landscape, even when strengthened by her allusion to Bishop remains dangerous, and the speaker and her beloved are not inviolable in their straw slippers. Once again, into a threatening and fertile landscape, Rich inserts a narrative of two women, drawing a parallel between the menacing yet beautiful sight of the lava spouting volcanoes “with a burning core” and the fire that ignites between the lovers as they hold hands and ascend the path.

I want to reach for your hands as we scale the path,

To feel your arteries glowing in my clasp,

This image of arteries glowing with fire is reminiscent of both Lowell’s and Sappho’s fire imagery (including the image in Fragment 2 “fire under skin”). All of these images present fire as a symbol of an “elemental passion” that is both destructive and empowering of desire and passion (Irigaray 43). By coming together, the speaker and her beloved not only kindle and excite this fire, but become godlike (again recalling Sappho), creating something that seems almost impossible in this landscape, a “small, jewel-like flower” that, like a flower in Eden that has not yet been named by Adam (or Eve), will not fully exist until the couple gives it a name.

Never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower

unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her,
that clings to the slowly altering rock—(9–11).

This diadem-like flower, so like the flowers that imply clitoral imagery throughout Lowell’s work, is not something the beloved or the speaker have ever experienced. It is, like Bishop’s island, “unfamiliar” and “nameless,” until the lovers, together, can name it.

As Paula Bennett suggests, the use of flowers recalls the nineteenth-century tradition of deliberate employment of clitoral imagery. She sees this as “part of a highly nuanced discourse of female erotic desire,” an “independent female sexual symbology” that encodes taboo desires and presents a gynocentric version of female sexuality (Critical 241, 253). In her essay “Pearl-diving: Inscriptions of Desire and Creativity in H.D. and Woolf,” Kathryn Simpson extends Bennett’s theory in a study of modernist women’s response and extension of their foremothers’ imagery. The addition of the images of pearls and gems as part of their “clitoral symbology” implies the female modernist’s awareness “that the meaning of the body, and of the female body in particular, is far from single, ‘natural,’ and fixed. The meanings and associations of pearls and gems are mobile, proliferating, ambiguous and contradictory, just as pearls themselves are palimpsestic in structure and gems multi-faceted” (38). Though Simpson does not refer to Lowell,118 she clearly elucidates the Imagistic lineage Rich evokes in her poem. By recalling both the nineteenth-century image of the flower, and combining it with the early twentieth century image of the gem, Rich invents a new image that has not yet been named. The “small, jewel-like flower” is no longer being used as a clitoral

118 In her essay, Simpson refers to the work of H.D. and Woolf.
symbol, but as a non-reproductive trope for creativity that “clings to the slowly altering rock” of female literary heritage.

For Rich, the love shared between the two women and their union signifies something quite different from what it signified to Lowell. While Lowell’s speaker gained creativity and perspective through the union (as in the spiritual awakening that occurs to the speaker in “In Excelsis”):

How have you come to dwell with me,
Compassing me with the four circles of your mystic lightness,
So that I say “Glory! Glory!” and bow As to a shrine? (11–24)

Rich’s speaker instead is moving toward “a vision of social and moral renewal, not of orgasmic transcendence” (7). For Rich, the gain at the end of the sonnet sequence becomes not the conquest of a lover (so typical of the male sonnet tradition she is both echoing and re-visioning), nor a spiritual and creative awakening gained through the discovery of love (as in Lowell’s sequence). Instead, the speaker of Rich’s sonnet sequence gains a self-reliance, a drive for self-knowledge and a stronger hold on a new, creative landscape where Rich can write not of a lesbian experience but of a true, female experience, inclusive of all her experience in her own time.
In the final sonnet of the sequence, Rich describes this new landscape where she can create, echoing a phrase from Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (“I choose to walk at all risks”).

I chose to be a figure in that light,

Half-blotted by darkness, something moving

Across that space, the color of stone

Greeting the moon, yet more than stone:

A woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle. (XXI, 11–15).

Rich’s final statement makes claim to a circle, a room of one’s own, and a new reality after her affair. Invented from this experience, yet not tethered to it, is a new landscape where she can write as “a woman” actively (“the color of stone/ Greeting the moon, yet more than stone”), and directly in full light. Without the “slowly altering rock” of her foremothers’ work and the female lyric tradition, and the discourse of desire in Lowell’s sequence “Two Speak Together,” Rich may not have even seen the small speck on the horizon\(^{119}\) that would be become the island of direct same-sex eroticism enacted in her poem.

**Sapphic Modernism Today: Carol Ann Duffy’s “Words, Wide Night” and “from Mrs. Tiresias,”**

\(^{119}\) As Helene Cixous describes in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, the truth in writing comes from trying to describe that speck on the horizon. “That is the definition of truth, it is the thing you must not say. ‘The miracle into which the child and the poet walk’ as if walking home, and home is there. And for this home, this foreign home, about which we know nothing and which looks like a black thing moving, for this we give up all our family homes” (37).
Lowell’s legacy still resonates today, even in poetry written in the last two decades. Carol Ann Duffy was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and became the first female, openly bisexual poet laureate in England in 2009. Duffy is also influenced by Lowell’s legacy, established through the lyric tradition in her version of Sapphic Modernism, drawing images and ideas from Sappho’s poetry and refiguring them to express a modern experience. Duffy’s articulation of Sapphic Modernism, however, is quite different from Rich’s, drawing less from Lowell and Sappho’s images and more from their motifs and approaching those motifs with a tone infused with humor and wit.

In “Words, Wide Night,” which appeared in her vividly personal collection The Other Country (1990), Duffy emulates both Sappho and Lowell by subtly invoking Lowell’s “The Letter” and Sappho’s Fragments 96 and 168 (fragments to which Lowell responded). When the poem opens the speaker is longing for her beloved at night, who like Sappho’s Atthis and the beloved in Lowell’s poem, is far away.

Somewhere on the other side of this wide night

and the distance between us. I am thinking of you.

The room is turning slowly away from the moon (1–3).

120 “…Sardis…often turning her thoughts in this direction… (she honored) you as being like a goddess for all to see and took most delight in your song. Now she stands out among Lydian women like the rosy-fingered moon after sunset, surpassing all stars, and its light spreads alike over the salt sea and the flowery fields; the dew is shed in beauty, and roses bloom and tender chervil and flowery melilot. Often as she goes to and fro she remembers gentle Atthis, and doubtless her tender heart is consumed because of your fate” (Loeb 121).
Duffy’s speaker (like Lowell’s speaker in “The Letter”) inhabits the in-between space of a night that is both wide and ripe with distance. The width and breadth of this space is elongated through the assonance of the “o” in “on” and “other” and the “i” of “wide” and “night.” In Duffy’s retelling, the moon no longer represents the pleasurable longing that unites the speaker of Sappho’s fragment with her estranged lover, who is looking up at the same moon in Sardis. Instead, Duffy invokes a dreamlike setting or state that exists “somewhere on the other side of this wide night and the distance between” the lovers. Within this state and isolated by the caesura in the middle of the line, the speaker thinks of her beloved. With aesthetic distance, it is the setting for the poem, the room that reacts emotively to this loneliness by turning away from the moon.

At the heart of Duffy’s poem, like Lowell’s, is a thematic engagement of the indescribable state of love. Duffy adapts Sappho’s original epic metaphor, instead employing the setting of the poem (instead of the moon) to convey the speaker’s conflicting emotions. For Lowell, it was the text on the page that could not explain her emotions (which in her poem are symbolized by the bright, full moon).

Little cramped words scrawling all over the paper

Like draggled fly’s legs,

What can you tell of the flaring moon

Through the oak leaves?

Or of my curtained window and of the bare floor
Spattered with moonlight? (209, 1–6).

For Lowell, the words written on the page are excruciatingly incorrect, further emphasizing and depicting her speaker’s anxiety both about being separated from her lover and being unable to adequately express in words how this feels. Duffy’s projection of emotion elicits in her speaker a need to identify that emotion directly, and through anacoenesis, a questioning of what she has identified.

This is pleasurable. Or shall I cross that out and say it is sad? In one of the tenses I singing an impossible song of desire that you cannot hear (4–6).

Like Sappho’s description of “the instant of desire” as being *glukupikron*, both sweet and bitter,¹²¹ in Fragment 130 (what Anne Carson calls the “erotic paradox”), so Duffy invokes the paradoxical emotion of desire, inviting the reader into her speaker’s dilemma. This invitation shortly turns into alienation, when the speaker invokes another tense (like an alternate reality) “In one of the tenses I singing” that first trips the reader on by shifting to a timeless state (where there is no tense) with “I singing” and then further alienates the reader by alluding to “an impossible song of desire” that remains unperceivable to the reader. This inability to name the emotion in Duffy’s poem becomes cathartic: It leads to the invention of a spoken song (like the lyric poem itself) that brings the speaker into union with her emotions.

La la la la. See? I close my eyes and imagine

---
¹²¹ Anne Carson refers to the following translation of Fragment 130 (Loeb): “Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up” (LP, Fragment 130).
The dark hills I would have to cross
to reach you. For I am in love with you and this

is what it is like or what it is like in words (7–10).

It is as if the absurdity of the moment—of bursting into a song, “La la la la,” that is only contained in the lyric space, that the speaker can come to the conclusion of love. At the end of the poem, Duffy returns (if with less angst) to Lowell’s notion that words cannot even begin to describe what love is, but can (tongue-in-cheek) sing a little song that may or may not carry her in her imagination across the dark hills that separate her from her beloved.

All three of these poems revolve around the idea of an erotic crisis—the inability to find words that adequately describe love. They also share a common heritage of lesbianism. Each of these writers is invoking an alternative landscape in which to contain her desire, one open and receptive to habitation by lover and her beloved. For Sappho and Lowell, the need for this alternate universe is understandable, but in Duffy’s twenty-first century Britain, it is difficult to correlate her need to create another universe without prejudice. Duffy’s poem is left genderless—the emotions floating between a distanced “I” and “you” in an alternative universe, where love between the lover and beloved is “impossible.” It is not clear whether Duffy’s speaker is addressing an audience less prejudiced than the Watch and Ward Society of the 1920s but still not able to fully accept a lesbian love poem, but this, like the other threads identified in this section, runs directly
through the three poems as a clear and direct lineage. At the root of all three poems, and their shared thematic thread of boldly retelling history, is an active desire for and invention of a poetic, literary and cultural history inclusive of all women’s experiences.

As she writes lovely lyric poems that engage her foremothers’ conceits, Duffy is also interested in both retelling and refiguring earlier poetic and cultural motifs and images. She often inserts a female perspective, in order to give voice to those who are alienated, and by striving in her poetry, with a zany and unique wit, to give voice to previously unheard voices. In The World’s Wife (1999), she takes on historical and fictional voices, including Mrs. Darwin, Mrs. Kong, and Shakespeare’s wife, Anne Hathaway. Just as Sappho revised and animated her portrait of Helen so she could adequately represent the action of a real woman in Fragment 16 V, so Duffy inserts imaginative, untold biographies of historical and fictional characters, often rewriting preconceived versions that give expression to figures never before given a voice.

In “from Mrs. Tiresias,” Duffy imagines what it is like for Tiresias’s wife after he “went out for a walk a man/ and came home female” (14, lines 2-3). The poem begins with a “tongue-in-cheek response to pedantry”122 by inserting “from” in a title that refers to a single work and continues by retelling or re-visioning Ovid’s story of Tiresias (Wainwright 47). In Duffy’s humorous recasting, Tiresias does not fare well as a woman. In fact, upon getting his/her first period, s/he dramatically spends

One week in bed.

---

122 Wainwright records that Duffy cleverly inserted “from” in the title because of feedback she received during a reading from a heckler who insisted “there was…much more to the story of Tiresias” than Duffy’s poem had told (The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy 2–3).
Two doctors in.

Three painkillers four times a day.

And later

A letter

To the powers that be

Demanding full-paid menstrual leave twelve weeks per year. (44–50).

Besides these jabs about a man’s inability to cope with the daily trials of physically being a woman, the poem also focuses not on the standard story of Tiresias’s transformation, but on the willing transformation of Tiresias’s wife into a lesbian, the partner of another woman. As Wainwright points out, Duffy’s transformed Tiresias is “too sensually obtuse to gain any knowledge of himself. Changed to a woman, he yet remains incorrigibly a man” (49). He remains asexual until the end of the poem, where, as Wainwright points out, Duffy emulates Ovid’s version of the Tiresias myth.

In *Metamorphoses*, Juno and Jupiter argue about whether or not men or women derive greater pleasure from sex, and decide to call upon Tiresias, who has experienced sex as both a man and a woman, in order to end their quarrel. When Tiresias says he thinks a woman derives more pleasure from sex (Jupiter’s view), Juno immediately strikes him blind. In Roberto Calasso’s view, by stating this outright, “Tiresias was trespassing on a secret,” the secret that women “knew a great deal more than [their] master[s]” when it came to sex (84).
In her poetic response to Ovid’s version of the myth, Duffy engages and refigures this outcome. Like many of the characters in *The World’s Wife*, Tiresias does not gain the secret or life-changing knowledge he is known for until his wife has discovered it on her own. At the end of the poem, Tiresias, who by this time is separated from his wife, ends up at the same ball. His wife is there with her lover. It is through this encounter, observing his wife and her lover, that he finally gains access to Juno’s secret. But, what is re-visioned is the pleasure Duffy portrays, which, in her telling, is not heterosexual but lesbian. Instead of going blind, Duffy’s Tiresias is finally granted enough insight to *see* his wife and her sexuality for the first time.

And this is my lover, I said,

The one time we met

At a glittering ball

Under the lights

Among tinkling glass,

And watched the way he stared

At her violet eyes,

At the blaze of her skin,

At the slow caress of her hand on the back of my neck;

And saw him picture
Her bite

Her bite at the fruit of my lips,

And hear

My red wet cry in the night

As she shook his hand (76–93).

The wife’s lover and the pleasure his wife will gain are suddenly revealed to Tiresias in this moment. “from Mrs. Tiresias,” along with many other poems included in The World’s Wife, invites an inclusivity and adaptation that recall Lowell’s symbol of American Literature in “The Congressional Library,” as a library that is filled with “furious dead” who await to be confronted and revised by future voices. In Duffy’s poems, Lowell’s call for a history that is multidimensional and inclusive of women’s and lesbians’ experience comes to life.

A Sisterhood of Re-telling: Sapphic Modernism’s Influence on Historical Reclamation through Imaginative Revision in Olga Broumas, and the “Fairy Tales” of Anne Sexton

Another example of Lowell’s influence can be found in the poetry of Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas. The heritage of retelling in poetry written by women in the twentieth century is a common thread that also surfaces in the work of the “confessional school” poet Anne Sexton, especially in her revisionist fairy tales based loosely on the
stories of the Brothers Grimm. Sexton, who was heterosexual, also employed Sapphic methods, including challenging and re-writing her predecessors and emphasizing a female subjectivity in her poetry. Sexton’s fairytales re-vised gynocentric stories, and this re-telling invited future poets, like Broumas to respond. Like the future sisters addressed in Lowell’s poem (“some other woman with an itch for writing”), Broumas alluded to and revised her foremothers in order to get closer to the specific female experience she was trying to convey in her work.

Sexton, who was also a New England poet, wrote in the 1960s and 1970s. In Transformations (1971), Sexton brilliantly adapts the Grimms’ fairy tales to include the realities and emotions of all of the characters, females included. As Kurt Vonnegut Jr. explains in his introduction to Transformations, “Anne Sexton does a deeper favor for me [than extending the language]: she domesticates my terror, examines it and describes it, teaches it some tricks which will amuse me, then lets it gallop wild in my forest once more” (vii). Sexton’s “Cinderella” and “Rapunzel,” “Hansel and Gretel” and “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)” present often horrifying, domesticated versions of familiar fairy tales. For example, in Sexton’s version of Cinderella, when the prince visits the evil stepsisters with the lost golden slipper, they take drastic measures to ensure the shoe fits.

He went to their house and the two sisters

123 Though I do not mention Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852-1930) in my short study of this lineage, she is considered one of the first feminist fairy-tale revisionists in American literature.
124 During this period, Sexton, like Lowell, was a “popular poet” and “was very much a poet of her time,” attracting large crowds to her poetry readings and receiving a Pulitzer Prize for her 1967 collection Live or Die (Middlebrook xi). Sexton was one of the first poets to give extended voice to issues of female identity. Sexton’s work focused thematically on her family life, and dealt with rarely voiced subjects such as abortion and menstruation.
125 These are often called revisionist fairy tales.
126 Sexton’s Cinderella wears golden slippers (as in the Grimm fairy tale).
were delighted because they had lovely feet.

The eldest went into a room to try the slipper on

but her big toe got in the way so she simply

sliced it off and put on the slipper.

The prince rode away with her until the white dove\(^\text{127}\)
told him to look at the blood pouring forth.

That is the way with amputations.

They don’t just heal up like a wish.

The other sister cut off her heel

but the blood told as blood will (79–89).

Sexton’s often raw and terrifying fairy tales took risks and told truths and these truths spurred other sisters to respond. Six years after the publication of *Transformations*, Olga Broumas in her award-winning collection *Beginning with O* writes in response to Sexton by alluding directly to and rewriting many of Sexton’s fairytale poems.\(^\text{128}\) The dialogue model that Lowell puts forth in “The Sisters” is not competitive; it is an invitation to emulate, aimed at achieving a female poet’s representation of truth and of increasing inclusivity within poetry. Where Sexton included the sexual history of fairy-tale characters and the nightmarish reality of the

\(^{127}\) Sexton uses the white dove to represent the figure known in Disney versions of the tale as the fairy godmother.

stories, after revisiting the Grimm’s original versions, Broumas wished to insert a lesbian reality into the stories that had originally been passed down through women’s voices.

In *Beginning with O*, Broumas, in Stanley Kunitz’s words, “gropes her way back to the language of her ancestral mothers” (x). Just as Lowell had addressed her lyric ancestors in “The Sisters”, so Broumas engages her poetic foremothers in many of the poems found in *Beginning with O*. Broumas’ version of *Cinderella* (which begins with an epigraph from Anne Sexton) instead focuses on female poets’ lack of a poetic heritage.

Apart from my sisters, estranged

from my mother, I am a woman alone

in a house of men

who secretly

call themselves princes (1-5).

The good princes stand for the male canonized authors of the past who offer fame and shelter to those who mimic their work, but who “speak in their fathers’ language” which offers no common heritage to the speaker of the poem. Like Lowell’s speaker in “The Congressional Library”, Broumas’s speaker longed for a “belly” in which she, as a lesbian poet, could write of her experiences and truly “come to life” as a poet (97). In the end, after many years of writing comfortably like a man, Broumas’s speaker longs to
return to the destitution of her sisters’ house (a heritage that has not yet been uncovered/discovered) where she can write happily from a common heritage.

Give

me my ashes. A cold stove, a cinder-block pillow, wet canvas shoes in my sisters’, my sisters’ hut. Or I swear I’ll die young like those favored before me, hand-picked each one for her joyful heart (27–32).

Throughout the poem, Broumas alludes to Sexton’s poem (referring to Cinderella’s ash-dirtied face, among other textual references) but more importantly, the poem holistically becomes an allusion to Sexton, as well as an analysis of the female writing tradition and the role the speaker has played within it. In the poem, Broumas “grieves for the part she has played in the process” of not writing from her own experience (because it was easier not to) and she does this in conversation with Sexton (Warner 210). As Lowell prescribed in “The Sisters,” Broumas talks back to Sexton by revising the same subject matter she had written on: fairytales. She acknowledges and appreciates their shared heritage, but fashions the story to suit her own telling, which becomes for Broumas a story of reclamation and rebirth.

In “Rapunzel,” Broumas again responds to Sexton, including (again as epigraph) the opening lines of Sexton’s own poem of the same title:

188
A woman

who loves a woman

is forever young (1–3).

In Sexton’s version, the focus is on the strange sexual relationship between the witch, “Mother Gothel,” and a young girl named Rapunzel. The witch receives Rapunzel as payment for trespassing from Rapunzel’s pregnant mother, who has climbed into the witch’s secret garden, “more beautiful than Eve’s,” and eaten her magical rampion. In lieu of killing the woman for trespassing, the witch strikes a deal with the husband, who agrees to give the witch their newborn child. Mother Gothel raises Rapunzel, and when Rapunzel grows up into a beautiful young woman, Mother Gothel falls in love with her. In order to keep Rapunzel all to herself, the witch locks her into a tower that has no entrance but a second-story window, periodically visiting her in order to play “mother-me-do” (the phrase Sexton uses to describe the sexual encounters between the witch and Rapunzel).

In Sexton’s version, the young prince who tries to rescue Rapunzel finally finds her again, years later, in the forest where the witch has banished her. The two are united, but there is no happy ending. Sexton’s final stanzas focus instead on the loneliness of the old witch and the absurdity of the idea that one can grow out of one’s homosexuality.

They lived happily ever as you might expect

proving that mother-me-do
can be outgrown,

just as the fish on Friday,

just as a tricycle.

The world, some say

is made up of couples.

A rose must have a stem.

As for Mother Gothel,

Her heart shrank to the size of a pin,

Never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,

Hold me,

And only as she dreamt of the yellow hair

Did moonlight sift into her mouth (42, 145–158).

Just after a tongue-in-cheek reference to growing out of one’s homosexuality, Sexton declares that “some say” “the world is made up of couples.” These final stanzas leave the reader with the uneasy interpretation of the relationship between Mother Gothel and Rapunzel (a relationship tainted with incest). Even if their love hadn’t been forced, the
relationship between Rapunzel and Mother Gothel was forever doomed, because it was love between two women, and “some say” this type of love is wrong.

In the final stanza, Sexton creates a pitiful portrait of the loneliness of the witch, whose “heart shrank to the size of a pin.” The poor witch’s only pleasure is from her memories and dreams of Rapunzel’s “yellow hair.” Sexton’s reference to moonlight to represent Mother Gothel’s sexual pleasure recalls Sappho’s use of the image in Fragment 96, and Lowell’s recurring use of this image to represent erotic (and often forbidden or unobtainable) passion that lingers and unites a separated couple.

In her response, Broumas engages Sexton’s version, including its ironic and confusing conclusions. For Broumas, the fruit of the witch’s garden, (the magical rampion) becomes a symbolic representation of the love between two women. Reminiscent of Lowell, Broumas uses images of flowers as metonyms for the female body and the love between two women. In line 14, a woman’s lust is referred to as a “lush perennial.” In the final lines of the poem, Broumas ends on an image of a row of tulips.

I’ll break the hush
Of our cloistered garden, our harvest continuous
As a moan, the tilled bed luminous
With the future
yield. Red
vows like tulips. Rows

upon rows of kisses from all lips (60, 27–33).

In Broumas’s re-visioned garden, unlike “Eve’s garden,” or Mother Gothel’s of Sexton’s poem (where lesbian encounters exist, but are still taboo), the “kisses from all lips” flourish. Broumas’s image recalls Lowell’s speaker’s vision of her beloved in “Mise en Scene” as “a smooth and stately garden/ With parterres of gold and crimson tulips” (210, 2–3) and in “Interlude,” where the moon is seen “Wavering across a bed of tulips” (212, 14). Broumas’s urge is to “break the hush” of female eroticism in the poetry written by women and to sow the beds of her poems with all experience, including the homosexual eroticism that may have not been recorded before.

Broumas, like Duffy and Sappho, also rewrites Greek myths in order to reclaim a female perspective in these tales. As a Greek-American, Broumas is both reclaiming and feminizing the Greek myths of her own literary heritage. As Snyder and Welsch point out in their collection Sappho (a retrospective on the influence of Sappho on female poets) Broumas, like Lowell, wrote poetry that was heavily influenced by the poetry of Sappho (97). Broumas, unlike Lowell, who encoded her writing, writes directly about female and same-sex eroticism, but also draws from recurring symbols representing female desire (flowers and the moon).

129 Broumas was born on Syros, one of the Cyclades Islands in the Aegean Sea (Snyder and Welsch 96).
Sappho was a major influence on Broumas’ work. When working on her poem “Bitterness” (which contains an epigraph attributed to Sappho) Broumas confesses that she did not know in some lines of the poem where her work began and Sappho’s ended, since she wrote the poem while she was reading and taking notes on Sappho’s fragments.

In her sequence “Twelve Aspects of God,” Broumas, like Sappho, emulates characters from Greek myths, often by re-envisioning them so as to provide a gynocentric perspective. In the lead poem of this series, “Leda and her Swan,” Broumas tells a new version of the Leda myth, casting the swan as female, and powerfully transforming an ancient story of rape into a celebration of the lovemaking between two women (97).

Scarlet

Liturgies shake our room, amaryllis blooms

In your upper thighs, water lily

On mine, fervent delta

The bed afloat, sheer

Linen billowing

On the wind: Nile, Amazon, Mississippi (6, 27–33).

This depiction of female eroticism recalls Lowell’s “Opal,” where the speaker uses the image of amaryllis flower in a Sapphic depiction of her lover: “You are the crimson of
amaryllis./ The silver of moon-touched magnolias” (214, 4–5). More than Sexton and Duffy, Broumas’s reclamation of Greek myth and use of floral imagery to depict lesbian eroticism is a direct act of reclamation, in which a story that once depicted violence against women is transformed into a moment of love between two women.

**Conclusion**

As I stated in the introduction, Lowell’s work was by no means the only factor that brought about the dramatic change in the poetry written by women after her death in 1925, but her part in causing that shift is often overlooked in literary history. At the end of this study, Lowell perhaps appears in a more realistic light, not as a spinster recluse who hid away but as a bold, and inventive poet who borrowed Sapphic methods in order to reinvent American poetry. As Ridge implied, Lowell’s words and images hang like a necklet, a garland, containing the roses of Pieria that carry the scent from ancient Greece to the present, around the necks of female poets even up to those who are writing today. If asked, many acknowledge their connection with her work, but do not understand it. Because Lowell is often dismissed on a biographical level, many, including female poets, still dismiss her as a minor poet. Like Alicia Ostriker’s idea of talking back to complicated foremother’s texts (as mentioned in Chapter 4), or Lowell’s speaker in “Two Unknown Ladies,” Lowell’s poetry often gets under the skin of poets and stays there. The reason Lowell’s poetry invites response lies at the root of Lowell’s own craft, her expression of Sapphic Modernism. Lowell’s poems were written in response to Sappho’s and in the tradition of call and response that has arisen in female lyric poetry.
By a close reading of Lowell’s poetry, by looking at how she engaged her predecessors, and by studying how her work influenced the poets who have written after her, we begin to see the impact her work has had on the strange family that makes up the future generations of poets affected by her work. Ridge, Rich, Sexton, Broumas, and Duffy are just a few of the poets who have turned to Lowell and drawn on her work, just as she turned to Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Dickinson, to chat for “a brief few minutes.” Each sister is different and many are still writing back to each other and revising each other’s work, in the way Lowell responded to the work of Sappho, Browning, and Dickinson. If we shake the burning birch tree of Lowell’s invention, we can find, almost a century later, the falling fruit of multiple generations. A poetic heritage back to Lowell’s adaptations of Sappho through her expression of Sapphic Modernism can be seen in the work of poets male and female, gay, bisexual and straight. From this heritage grows a poetry of the future that can unfurl experiences like Rich’s fiddlehead fern, or Broumas’s tulips, inclusively and in full light. As Bennett and Simpson have observed, the female poet’s quest to find a language to depict active heterosexual desire, homoerotic passion, and a discourse to name creative production that is void of reproductive metaphors has been a slow, hard-earned and interactive progression over centuries. As Gubar so aptly pointed out, the female artist is always plagued by the gaps in her heritage. What Lowell offered in her poetry and modeled in “The Sisters” was an active solution: a bold reclamation that filled the gaps through invention. It is ironic that by calling upon a foremother whose work has come to us in fragments, Lowell was able to initiate the creation of a more cohesive and inclusive future for poetry.
Bibliography


Race, William H.
The Classical Priamel from Homer to Boethius. Leiden: Brill, 1982


