Many Crowns of Violets—Classical Reception in Queer Readings of Virginia Woolf

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Introduction

Throughout history, 'queerness' has never looked the same. What the 21st-century West regards as 'queer' may not have been seen as such in ancient Greece. For the sake of simplicity and accessibility, this research roots queerness in deviancy. To be queer is to live, to desire, or to act deviant from societal norms surrounding sex, romance, and domestic dynamics.[1] Please note that this presents no negative connotation to 'deviant' or 'deviancy'—it simply marks a departure from societal standards. From the 19th century, homosexual activities were labelled as 'peripheral' and 'immoral' and persecuted for their 'immorality', especially in the Victorian age.[2] However, while sex and gender were a part of ancient sexuality, condemnations of sexual activity were based more on the power dynamics between participants and the 'moderation of desires' within the individual.[3] Although heteronormativity and cisnormativity are neither transhistorical nor universal, since this research delves into 20th century Western receptions, these contemporary perceptions remain the core focus.

Just as moral repression, political persecution, and explicit categorization of 'peripheral sexualities' really began in the Victorian age, so did the rise of classical reception for purposes of queer dialogue, most notably as a function of homosexuality amongst elite men.[4] The use of Classics in expressing certain forms of queer desires continues from the Victorian through to the Modernist age into the contemporary era—Oscar Wilde with Platonic models of homoeroticism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, E.M. Forster with classical scholarship as a conduit for homosexual awakenings in *Maurice*, and Madeline Miller with Achilles and Patroclus reframed in a style reminiscent of a modern coming-of-age in *The Song of Achilles*. These traditions of reinterpretation, retelling, and reclamation persists as a

[1] Definition rooted in Epstein (1994), 'A Queer Encounter: Sociology and the Study of Sexuality', p. 188-202.
[2] Foucault (1978), *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, p. 42-43.
[3] Foucault (1984), *The History of Sexuality Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, p. 42-45.
[4] Umachandran (2024), 'Speculation on Classical Reception', p. 473-474.

study in how Classics can be ‘queered’ for the post-antiquity reader regardless of whether it was queer for original audiences. To quote Ormand (2024),

> The issue is not so much the inherent queerness of a text, image, or even historical person. The issue is whether, in relation to their own society, a text, image, or person resonates with our sense of queerness, of running aslant of whatever identity-normative forces we see ourselves in opposition to.[5]

The history of the classical world and its continued influence spans thousands of years and multiple cultures, from the Mediterranean and beyond. This research focuses on a highly specific chapter of classical legacy—its influence on Virginia Woolf and her expressions of queerness in Modernist England.

Born in 1882, Woolf began private Greek lessons when she was fifteen, and Greek literature and culture became a lifelong influence. She acknowledged the impact Greek has had on her work, saying that ‘it is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, confusion, Christianity and its consolations, of our age’.[6] Although she understood Greek literature’s part in patriarchal structures, she associated Greek with feminism through tutors such as Clara Pater, Janet Case, and Jane Harrison, and constantly sought to separate Greek itself from how the English upper class interpreted it and to redefine Greek on her own terms.[7] Woolf stands out as a queer woman living in a heavily patriarchal society and working with female experiences of queerness and feminist reframings of traditionally male-dominated literary spaces. Although she was happily married to a man, Leonard Woolf, she had several female lovers, most notably fellow Bloomsbury Group author Vita Sackville-West. In her

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[5] Ormand (2024). ‘How Did We Get Here?’, p. 18.
[6] Woolf (1920), ‘On Not Knowing Greek’.
[7] For more information on Woolf’s Greek mentorship, see Fernald (2006), ‘O Sister Swallow: Sapphic Fragments as English Literature in Virginia Woolf’, p. 17-27.

letters and diaries, she referred to the two of them as 'Sapphists',[8] a term taken from the Greek poet Sappho who wrote about her love for other women. Woolf's queer expressions contrast those of queer male authors such as the aforementioned Forster and Wilde in subtlety. Although all three of them used Classics in queering their work, *Maurice* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can easily be read as queer even without any knowledge of Classics. However, in the majority of Woolf's work, the queer and the classical are intertwined. Perhaps the tenuous nature of being a woman in the arts led her to 'queer-code' with more delicacy. She targets her queer narratives towards readers just like herself—queer women familiar enough with Classics to know what to look for.

According to Pilinger (2017), Woolf's work shows 'the liberation and rebellion of a woman educated and versed in classics and classical scholarship'.[9] Her gender and queerness enabled her to engage with classical material in distinct ways, allowing her to find new paths of meaning in ancient texts and connect them to her lived experiences and writing. This research investigates how Virginia Woolf's interactions with queerness and with the classical gave her a voice to explore queer identity, desire, and repression in her work, focusing on "A Room of One's Own" (1929), "A Society" (1921), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and *The Waves* (1931).

Sappho and Liberation in 'A Room of One's Own'

A critique of the sociopolitical conditions that limit a woman's ability to create art, 'A Room of One's Own' (AROO) takes on a queer undertone when read in context with Sappho. Although Sappho herself is only named once in a list of 'great figure[s] of the past' (109), there are Sapphic allusions throughout the essay. In her poems about love, notably her love for other women, Sappho frequently uses descriptions of flowers, birds, and songs/singing. This same imagery is found in AROO as various metaphors for women's freedom. In a thought

[8] Quoted in Knopp (1988), '"If I Saw You Would You Kiss Me?": Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*', p. 25.
[9] Pilinger (2017), 'Finding Asylum for Virginia Woolf's Classical Visions', p. 272.

exercise about the unknown genius of Shakespeare's sister, doomed to be forgotten because of her lack of opportunity stemming from her gender, Woolf states that 'the birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she' (48), a phrase reminiscent of Sappho's Fragment 30, 'no more than the birds with the piercing voice', and Fragment 136 'nightingale with voice of longing'.[10] Fragment 30 in particular is about Sappho's conflicting emotions about an unrequited love getting married to a man. She laments how 'girls/all night long/might sing of [this] love' but how she herself is 'no more than the bird with piercing voice'. Despite her efforts, Sappho is held back from her love by her gender, just as Shakespeare's sister and women in general are held back from art.

As Sappho frequently uses flowers in her writing, floral imagery is often associated with her. Violets are especially associated with queerness by proxy in art and literature.[11] For example, in his 1926 play *The Captive*, Edouard Bourdet writes about a lesbian woman, Irene De Montcel, caught in a love affair with Madame d'Aiguines. While Madame d'Aiguines is never shown in the play, she leaves bouquets of violet for Irene as a symbol of their love. Woolf mentions 'violet-sellers' late in Chapter Five in a passage about how 'the accumulation of unrecorded life' can be a female writer's inspiration and reason to create.[12] Queerness was not widely accepted or publicly discussed in Woolf's time, and queer experiences, especially those of women, were often silenced or 'unrecorded'. However, it was this unrecorded queerness that inspired her to write *Orlando* and to hint at queerness in other writings. Understanding violets to represent queerness ties the passage together. Another mention of violets comes at the beginning of Chapter Six when Woolf describes a 'bustling lady who had, by some means or other, acquired a splendid fur coat and a bunch of Parma violet' (96). The phrasing of 'by some means or another' is intriguing as it seems to imply the lady had

[10] These and all subsequent Sappho translations taken from Carson (2003), *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*.
[11] Flint (2009), 'The "Hour of Pink Twilight"', p. 698.
[12] See AROO p. 89-91.

received the violets in an unconventional manner. Perhaps it was given to her by a female lover.

There are also non-floral echoes of Sappho in AROO. Throughout the novel, Woolf uses the analogy of Mary Carmichael (also called Mary Beton or Mary Seton), an imagined female author whose provocative reflections on 'women and fiction' make up the main substance of the text. Towards the very end of the text, Woolf addresses the inability of women to gain recognition during her time and expresses her belief and hope that the future would be kinder and more encouraging. The line 'She will be a poet, I said, putting *Life's Adventure*, by Mary Carmichael, at the end of the shelf, in a hundred years' time' (94) echoes the sentiment and language of Fragment 147: 'someone will remember us/I say/even in another time'. This reflects how Sappho, a queer woman writing about the queer experience, remains lauded and praised centuries after her lifetime.

In fact, Woolf herself directly acknowledges the homoerotic implications of AROO. In a diary entry, she forecasts 'being attacked for a feminist' and 'hinted at for a Sapphist'.[13] Within the text, she states that 'sometimes women do like other women' before telling her audience 'do not start' and 'do not blush' (82). She goes on to talk about how women in Western literature are often pitted against one another and how for much of history were only viewed in the context of men. It focuses on the relationships women have with each other and how women are so 'terribly accustomed to concealment and suppression' that they must express their affections differently (84). Because these expressions are unnoticed by men, the burden falls on women in art to 'capture those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words'. In order to be able to do so, a woman must first have enough space to create and amplify themselves and one another as whole and complex human beings. To Woolf, a woman's intellectual liberation is inextricable from her sexual liberation. Once a woman has

[13] Quoted in the foreword of AROO, written by Mary Gordon, vii.

been given the intellectual ability to step outside of the relationships and roles society has predetermined for her and to have intimate connections outside those of her husband and household, she has been ‘queered’.

Greek Comedy in ‘A Society’

This text reads a lot like an Aristophanic comedy, and Aristophanes is one of the playwrights Woolf discusses in ‘On Not Knowing Greek’. It has the sarcasm and dry social critique thinly cloaked in humour that is the hallmark of a lot of Greek comedy. According to Romero-Mariscal (2014), ‘A Society’ is an English refiguration of Aristophanic where there is freedom to apply harsh criticism of society within the issues of the story.[14] In particular, it reads very much like the *Lysistrata*, a story about how a group of women withhold sex from men until they end the Peloponnesian War. In Woolf’s text, the women make a deal to not have any children until they figure out if men are worth bearing children for. There is also a line about ‘the horror of bearing children to see them killed’, which is another theme in the *Lysistrata*. Other Greek elements in the story include how the women focus on learning via asking questions as Socrates does and characters like Helen, Castalia, and Cassandra. Named after the Trojan prophetess who was cursed to always speak the truth but never to be believed, Cassandra is particularly interesting because she’s framed as the narrator of the story and has some oracle-like, all-encompassing lines such as ‘Once she knows how to read, there’s only one thing you can teach her to believe in, and that is herself’.

Sappho can also be found in the text as both figure and fragment. There is a scene where male professors talk about Sappho and focus on debating her chastity instead of focusing on her poetry despite the text also saying that ‘since Sappho, there has been no female of first rate’. This leads to some of the women concluding that Sappho was the ‘somewhat lewd intention’ of a lonely professor who actually existed. Castalia, one of the

[14] Romero-Mariscal (2014), ‘‘A Society’: An Aristophanic Comedy by Virginia Woolf’, p. 101.

characters, cries out "Chastity! Chastity! Where's my chastity!" when recounting her Oxbridge visit. This echoes Fragment 114, which goes 'Virginity, virginity, where are you gone leaving me behind? No longer will I come to you; no longer will I come'. The focus on Sappho's sex life instead of her writing as well as the discussion being around chastity instead of queerness critique how female queerness and creation is erased by men. However, Woolf and her readers most likely recognise Sappho's strength as a poet in her own right and her queerness, allowing the dramatic irony to emphasise the injustice of Sappho's misrepresentation.

'A Society' demonstrates some of the ways Woolf interweaves Classics into her work. She alludes to classical myths, and she structures her storytelling and language in ways that parallel classical genres and writers. It's also queer in how it shows women stepping out of traditional sexual dynamics and attempting to reach above their traditional social and intellectual spheres. Although the difficulties they face in the 'real world' and the burden of knowledge cause the characters to retreat back into their pre-established roles, it only amplifies the importance of the female quest for liberation.

Intertextuality and Mythology in *Mrs. Dalloway*

One of Virginia Woolf's more explicitly queer texts, *Mrs. Dalloway* (*MD*) follows a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares for a dinner party. Throughout the text, Mrs. Dalloway brings up her youthful love affair with Sally Seton, describing her one kiss with Sally as 'the most exquisite moment of her life' (18). Though only explicitly queer this once, there are Sapphic and other classical allusions throughout that further queer *MD*. Just as Sappho frequently uses birds and flowers in her poems about female romance, Woolf ties Clarissa and Sally together with similar imagery. Clarissa is described as having 'a touch of the bird about her' at the very beginning of the text when she is '[buying] the flowers herself' (1). Sally is characterised by her skill in choosing and organising selections of flowers and

being incredibly ‘birdlike’ in how she moves and in the carefree way she approaches life; Sally is ‘not like a woman; she was like a bird’ (18).

Another way to approach the floral imagery and how it queers *MD* is by viewing the novel as a reclaimed retelling of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, just as Amy Smith does in her 2022 book *Virginia Woolf's Mythic Method*. Smith writes about how Woolf uses Greek allusion and intertextuality from myth to destabilise patriarchal and herteronormative socio-political issues.[15] Woolf transforms the floral imagery in the *Hymn* to portray lesbianism and social upheaval,[16] thus revising the role of the ‘woman’ in society and various other aspects of female community and companionship. Further structural parallels between the two texts make it queer. Both texts start with men breaking apart moments of female companionship in fields of flowers, depict women mourning that loss of female companionship seeking comfort in traditional motherly/feminine roles but not feeling fulfilled, and allude to the darkness of marriage and how marriage in some ways marks the death of the originally depicted youthful girl in the field. The *Hymn* opens with the kidnapping of Persephone by Hades while she and her female companions are frolicking in a field of flowers; *MD* opens with Clarissa picking out flowers in a florist's shop and reminiscing her time with Sally before she is interrupted by Peter Walsh. The focus of the *Hymn* then shifts to Demeter and how, in her grief, she goes to Eleusis and tries to take on ‘such work as suits a woman past her prime’.[17] On the other hand, *MD* remains focused on Clarissa and how she, when she and Sally are forced apart, tries to find comfort in her role as a wife to Richard Dalloway but ultimately fails. Finally, both texts compare marriage to darkness for women. This is clearer in the *Hymn* as Persephone is married to Hades and has to spend half the year with him in the Underworld, away from her mother and the joys of her companions and her flowers. In *MD*, after her marriage, Clarissa is trapped in a series of roles

[15] Smith (2022), *Virginia Woolf's Mythic Method*, p. 12.
[16] Smith, *Mythic Method*, p. 26-27.
[17] Homer attr. (2003), *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, p. 33

to fulfil and societal expectations to meet, separated completely from her youthful happiness with Sally. Once a woman is married, her life is set.

Another queer figure in the novel is Septimus Smith, a veteran haunted by his memories of the war and his dead friend, Evans. Septimus and Evans are queered through their parallels with Orpheus and Eurydice, a heterosexual husband and wife in classical myth. Septimus's mental decline despite the efforts of his doctor and wife and his increasing desperation for Evans's ghost parallels Orpheus's descent into the Underworld. His longing for Evans echoes that of Orpheus for Eurydice. Septimus feels condemned to death because 'he had not cared when Evans was killed' and 'married his wife without loving her' (47). Woolf gives a vivid description of how he feels the world 'clamouring at him to kill himself' but being too in despair to even raise a hand (48-49), similar to versions of the Orpheus myth where Orpheus is hunted down after he fails to save Eurydice and swears off music. He calls out for Evans, and when his wife talks about buying roses from a man outside, Septimus believes the man to be Evans and the roses 'picked by him in the fields of Greece' (49). Roses feature in many artistic portrayals of Orpheus and Eurydice, including Klimt's 1885 *Orpheus and Eurydice* and Corot's 1861 *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld*. Septimus traverses the boundaries between life and death as Orpheus does. He goes from life to near death and back again with severe damage to his emotional psyche. The two men also share a strong connection to nature. Orpheus's music has the power to move plants, animals, and even stones, while Septimus believes that 'the human voice…can quicken trees into life' (11). Ultimately, Septimus's visions and grief drive him to commit suicide just as some myths have Orpheus doing.

Sapphic Fragment and Queer Subjectivity in *To the Lighthouse*

To the Lighthouse (*TTL*) is made up of three main sections—'The Window', 'Time Passes', and 'The Lighthouse'. 'The Window' shows a day in the life of the Ramsay family

and their guests in the Ramsay's Scotland summer home as they prepare to visit a nearby lighthouse but are ultimately unable to; 'Time Passes' describes the decade in between the first and third sections through the physical changes of the house; 'The Lighthouse' has some of the surviving Ramsays and guests return to the home and finally make the trip to the lighthouse. Although not a perfect representation, it somewhat correlates to the classical unities of Greek tragedy. The journey to the lighthouse is the only main action. Even though the novel spans over a decade as a whole, the sections where characters actually interact occur over a period of no more than a day. Finally, while 'The Lighthouse' takes place in the summer home and in the lighthouse, 'The Window' and 'Time Passes' both exist only in the summer home and the immediate surrounding beaches. Greek literature's influence on Virginia Woolf is interwoven into the very framework of *TTL*.

TTL further continues to show the influence of Sappho's imagery in the way Woolf explores emotions and relationships between women. Flowers, including queer violets, and birds are only mentioned in relation with Lily Briscoe, a young painter, and Mrs. Ramsay. Throughout the novel, Lily Briscoe's fervent admiration of Mrs. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay's gentle affection towards Lily in conjunction with Sapphic imagery give their relationship an unconventionally queer undertone. Mrs. Ramsay is described by Mr. Tansley, a family friend, as a woman 'with stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets' (11-12), a very Sapphic description. In a passage about her emotional turmoil surrounding Mrs. Ramsay, Lily again further associates her with violet jacmanna flowers. She feels 'demons set on her who often [bring] her to the verge of tears' when she tries to capture her 'vision' on canvas, the unfulfillment of which fills her with the urge to throw herself on Mrs. Ramsay's knee and say

> "I am in love with you?" No, that was not true. "I am in love with this all," waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children? It

> was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant.
> (16)

This exemplifies the internal conflict Lily feels about Mrs. Ramsay. She struggles to put words to the strength of her emotion and what it represents. Does Lily love Mrs. Ramsay because of what Mrs. Ramsay has and stands for—a stable life within predetermined roles—or does she love in a homoromantic way? Or, perhaps somewhere in between. Lily loves Mrs. Ramsay as an expression of her queer desire to go *against* tradition. Mrs. Ramsay is her muse. Throughout the novel, Lily expresses her distaste towards traditional dynamics. She holds resentment towards men and what they expect from her, and she struggles to make space for herself as a woman in arts. Her greatest joys are her painting and how she 'need not undergo that degradation [of marriage]' (95). Lily Briscoe loves Mrs. Ramsay as Virginia Woolf loves Sappho—both creatives and both queer, they find the keys to their liberation in their older female counterparts.

Through Lily's love, Mrs. Ramsay, despite her hyper-traditional behaviours, symbolises freedom from societal roles. Much like Clarissa and Sally in *MD*, allusions to birds and flight emphasise Mrs. Ramsay's 'hidden wildness'. Early in the novel, Woolf describes how Mrs. Ramsay's 'singleness of mind' made her 'alight as a bird', 'her spirit [swooping and falling] upon the truth' (25). And much like Clarissa Dalloway, her marriage squashed the youthful queer wildness inherent in her, and in her efforts to come to terms with these societal limits on her own freedom, she forced herself and others to fit those moulds in order to find the predetermined joys a married woman ought to feel.

> For that reason, knowing what was before them—love and ambition and being wretched alone in dreary places—she had often the feeling, Why must they grow up and lose it all? And then she said to herself, brandishing her sword at life, Nonsense. They will be perfectly happy.

> And here she was, she reflected, feeling life rather sinister again, making Minta marry Paul Rayley; because whatever she might feel about her own transaction, she had had experiences which need not happen to every one (she did not name them to herself); she was driven on, too quickly she knew, almost as if it were an escape for her too, to say that people must marry; people must have children. (55)

However, a part of her still yearns for the wild and queer defiance of pre-married life. And so, when she sees two rooks fighting in the sky, she associates their violent motions with beauty: 'the movement of the wings beating out, out, out…was one of the loveliest of all to her' (74).

The display of Mrs. Ramsay's suppressed 'wildness' through bird imagery continues through Lily's perceptions of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily says that Mrs. Ramsay 'was like a bird for speed' and that '[Lily is] thinking of [Mrs. Ramsay's] relations with women, and [Lily is] much younger, an insignificant person' (44). She recognizes Mrs. Ramsay's hidden queer desires and becomes infatuated. The acknowledgement of their vastly different life experiences and social standings work with the Greek undertones of the text's form and imagery open the door to a reading of their relationship as a subverted pederasty. Blurring the lines between the older *erastes*, the 'lover', and the younger *eromenos*, the 'beloved', Woolf depicts Mrs. Ramsay as the older figure with experience to share but inverts the traditional pederastic dynamic by presenting Lily as the eager, more 'pursuing' figure who longs and yearns, as seen in the following quote:

> …She imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were…tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which…would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. …Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not

> knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee. (Woolf 46)

Lily essentially wishes to learn about life and intimacy from Mrs. Ramsay, similar to the 'guidance' given to the *eromenos* from the *erastes*. However, in ancient Greece, the *erastes* is typically the one who yearns and pursues. Here, these customs are played with and reversed.

Although *TTL* focuses more on Lily's emotional journey and growth, it is important to note that the affection between her and Mrs. Ramsay is not entirely one-sided. Mrs. Ramsay also sees some of her own former wildness in Lily and is fond of it. Within Lily, Mrs. Ramsay finds 'a thread of something; a flare of something; something of her own which Mrs. Ramsay liked very much indeed, but no man would' (96). Just as Lily recognizes the queerness in Mrs. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay recognizes the queerness in Lily and understands it to be something that would keep Lily from fulfilling her traditional roles alongside a man. Her repression calls her to suppress Lily's queerness just as she did her own by attempting to set Lily up to marry family friend William Bankes, despite Bankes being much older and already a widower. That way, Lily would live as she did, from wild queerness to heteronormative domesticity.

Another important Sapphic moment occurs when they have finally made it to the lighthouse. Mrs. Ramsay has died, and as Lily struggles to finish her painting, she sees Mr. Carmichael as an image of Poseidon, 'an old pagan god, shaggy, with weeds in his hair and the trident…in his hand', surveying and crowning the suffering of mankind with a 'wreath of violets and asphodels' (193-194). This image strikes her with the final inspiration needed to finish her painting, and Lily ends the novel by stating 'I have had my vision' (194). The 'wreath of violets' is a distinctly Sapphic image. In Fragment 94, a poem about Sappho's

heartbreak when her female lover leaves her, Sappho writes about 'the beautiful times [they] had' and how her lover placed 'many crowns of violets and roses at [Sappho's] side' and 'many woven garlands made of flowers around [her] soft throat'. By presenting the image of a queer symbol of lost love 'fluttering slowly, [to] lay upon the earth' (194), Woolf poses queer loss and queer resolution as the key to completing Lily's vision and growth. Only when she has accepted and fully embraced the depth of her feelings and grief for Mrs. Ramsay can she fulfil the vision of her life and art which she struggled with all novel.

Beyond borrowed imagery, Woolf also uses Sapphic fragment in queer-coding *TTL*. The fragment emphasises Western art's continued attraction to Greek culture despite imperfect knowledge, making it a distinctly modernist literary device.[18] Furthermore, the Sapphic fragment contains suggestions of various themes, including lesbian homosexuality, but never fully develops into a full ideology.[19] This makes it ideal for queer-coding as both author and reader can maintain a sense of plausible deniability, important in times such as the 1920s when queerness was frowned upon and persecuted. Both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily interact with fragment and fragmentary writing. Although fragment is not inherently queer, it remains particularly telling that the female characters with queer undertones are the only ones associated with fragment, just as they are the only ones linked to flowers and birds. Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts are constantly occupied with repeated mantras such as 'children don't forget', 'it will end', and 'it will come'. It is never made clear what the 'it' stands for, opening the door for the fragment to become malleable, which Mrs. Ramsay finds comfort in. The power of the fragment is its ambiguity. At some point, 'children don't forget' may be Mrs. Ramsay reliving her youthful queerness; 'it will end' may represent her solace knowing that her forced domesticity will one day be over; 'it will come' may stand for a dream that at some point, in life or in death, Mrs. Ramsay's liberation will come. The fragment is comforting. On

[18] Fernald, 'O Sister Swallow', p. 18.
[19] Fernald, 'O Sister Swallow', p. 38.

the other hand, Lily is haunted by fragment. First said to her by Mr. Tansley early in the novel, the fragmentary thought ‘women can’t write, women can’t paint’ follows her around and echoes in her head. However, Woolf has Lily weaponise this derision as motivation to fuel her growth. Just as Sappho uses battlefield metaphors to describe love and epic simile for marital discourse, the juxtaposition of diction and intention emphasises the reality that women *can* paint and that women *can* write.[20] Lily’s painting and Woolf’s writing prove that to the reader. Woolf uses these short, scattered phrases to highlight the subtleties and hint at the interpretive queer complexities of what she conveys.

Classical Motif and Interaction in *Orlando*

The most explicit of Virginia Woolf’s novels, *Orlando* contains the least amount of ‘queer coding’. It simply doesn’t need much of it—the son of the woman who inspired it once called *Orlando* ‘the longest and most charming love letter in literature’.[21] Based on and dedicated to Woolf’s female lover Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* follows the eponymous hero’s journey across time periods from the Elizabethan to Woolf’s present day in 1928. True to Sackville-West’s bisexuality and ambiguous relationship with gender, Orlando has sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women and changes from male to female halfway through the novel. After the main switch, Orlando dresses alternatively as a man and as a woman. For the sake of clarity, Orlando will be referred to with gender neutral they/them pronouns as Woolf does immediately after their transformation: ‘The chance of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity’ (138). Perhaps because of the proclaimed biographical nature of the novel, Woolf didn’t feel the need to ‘code’ when the source material was so inherently queer. Regardless, *Orlando* remains strongly supported by the classical.

[20] Fernald, ‘O Sister Swallow’, p. 40.
[21] Knopp, ‘If I Saw You Would You Kiss Me?’, p. 24.

Orlando's queerness is often symbolised by classical motifs. At the very beginning of the novel, Woolf describes a young Orlando standing 'in the midst of the yellow body of an heraldic leopard' (14). The leopard is commonly associated with Dionysus, the Greek god of wine who, in some versions of his myth, was born a boy but raised a girl. Dionysus is further linked to gender ambiguity through the deconstruction of gender roles in his rituals and worship.[22] By associating Orlando from youth with Dionysus, Woolf asserts their future foregoing of traditional gender norms and intrinsic queerness. The leopard motif appears again several times throughout Orlando's journey, most notably when they realise that Sheraldine, the sailor they had fallen in love with, had been born a woman. As with Woolf's other writing, Sappho's birds continue to play an important role in the visual storytelling of *Orlando*. In *Orlando*, birds are closely tied with women, female sexuality, and queer euphoria, whereas in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, they are associated with queer wildness. Early in the novel, Woolf describes the women pursuing Orlando as 'scarcely less bold in their speech and less free in their manners than the birds' (29). Singing birds feature in the scene of Orlando's first erotic experience, with a visiting Russian princess, and again when they reject the advances of Archduchess Harriet. In the latter scene, the shift from possible love into disgust is as if 'a bird of beauty alight upon [Orlando's] shoulder' turned into 'the heaviest and foulest of birds; which is the vulture' (117). Similar to how 'A Room of One's Own' connects birdsong with a woman's voice, *Orlando* connects feathers to a queer woman's gender euphoria. As a young boy, Orlando collected bird feathers, providing retrospective insight into their future gender-queerness and metamorphoses. They follow trails of feathers deep into the forests and imagine chasing birds until they are forever embraced by their feathers, which cheers them up during a period of great disillusionment and loneliness. Finally, birds frequently appear in moments of joy, self-love, and queer liberation for Orlando.

[22] For more detail see Csapo (1997), 'Riding the Phallus for Dionysus: Iconology, Ritual, and Gender-Role De/Construction'.

As the completion of Lily Briscoe's vision is inspired by the Sapphic image of a violet wreath, Orlando's completion of their life's work, their poem 'The Oak Tree', is marked by them hearing birds cry out 'Life, life, life!' (270). The novel ends with Orlando seeing a 'single wild bird' fly off into the distance, bringing them to the height of their joy and hope for their future—queer euphoria completes *Orlando* just as queer resolution completes *TTL*. Instead of acting as hints to lead the reader to queer understandings, the classical images of leopards and birds in *Orlando* support the main queer action.

Orlando also carries several direct interactions with the classical. As a young boy, Orlando was fond of stories about 'mythological personage at a crisis', such as 'The Death of Ajax', 'Iphigenia in Aulis', and 'The Return of Odysseus' (76). In 'On Not Knowing Greek', Woolf describes such dialogues as places where 'we are made to seek truth with every part of us'. This projection of queerness and self-realisation through mythological crisis reflects the biographical nature of *Orlando* and its queer inspirations as Woolf and Sackville-West were both greatly influenced by the classical.[23] Furthermore, Woolf places three women at the heart of descriptions of Orlando's transformation—Purity, Chastity, and Modesty, also known as the Horrid Sisters. They attempt to hide Orlando's transformation, but are ultimately driven away by the unfailing need for the truth, after which Orlando awakes from a deep sleep as a woman. The Sisters represent the prejudices and expectations of society disguised as 'values' which demand Orlando hide their queerness, but the truth of their identity remains unchangeable. Trios of women are common in Greek mythology, such as the *Moirai*, the Graces, and the Gorgons. The Horrid Sisters' names seem more similar to those of the Graces, they actually echo the *Moirai*, more commonly known as the Three Fates. Unlike the Graces who engage more with the gods and entertain them during feasts and dances, both the Horrid Sisters and the *Moirai* govern aspects of society and control human behaviours, with each sister given a

[23] For more about Sackville-West and the classical, see Nagel (2008), 'The Classical Tradition in Vita Sackville-West's Solitude'.

specific role. In the case of the *Moirai*, their work involves making sure people fulfil their destinies; in the case of the Horrid Sisters, they make sure people act as society demands. However, similar to mythical heroes fighting their fates, Woolf has Orlando and the truth reject the constraints of the Sisters and glorifies the liberation and perseverance of queer defiance.

The presence of Greece in *Orlando* even goes beyond mythological allusion and into physical involvement. After their transformation, unsure of how to navigate the world in a new body with different social expectations, Orlando joins a group of Romani and travels to Thessaly in Greece, where they become enraptured by the beauty of its nature. Surrounded in the landscapes in which their favourite childhood myths took place, Orlando fully grows into their identity and figures out what they have to do next. By placing Orlando in Greece for these realisations, Woolf directly brings together the heritage of the classical world with queer becoming. Though Woolf did not necessarily view ancient Greece as a queer utopia as some of her homosexual male contemporaries did, it remained a distinctly queer place. If nothing else, Sappho was Greek, and in Woolf's eyes, she represented the highest form of women's liberation.

Queerness and the Poets in *The Waves*

One of Woolf's later, highly experimental works, *The Waves* (*TW*) follows six friends from childhood to middle-aged, focusing on the impact of the death of Percival, the seventh friend who is only ever mentioned and never actually appears. It opens with an homage to Greek literature by having the six friends it follows chant in sequence, similar to a classical chorus.[24] In fact, the entire novel is built on interweaving dialogue from each of the different characters with passage of imagery, the only non-dialogue writing, separating the nine sections. The choral nature of the writing echoes across the novel through both the characters

[24] Worman (2018), *Virginia Woolf's Greek Tragedy*, p. 86.

and the descriptions, supported by Woolf's ever-present use of birds. At the beginning of the novel, Rhoda says that 'the birds sang in chorus first' (5), and the imagery marking the start of section three includes the line 'the birds that had sung erratically and spasmodically…now sang together in chorus' (42). The very structure of *The Waves* hints at Greek tragedy.

Out of the six friends, two are distinctly 'queered': Neville, an artist fascinated by Catullus and the classical world, and Rhoda, a conflicted woman haunted by classical fragment. Woolf frames Neville as explicitly homosexual. He is enamoured with Percival, but, knowing his feelings are not returned, seeks comfort in Classics. Even as a young boy at school, he is obsessed with how Latin '[pronounces] the explicit' and longs to 'chant with a passion that is never obscure or formless the loves of Catullus' (18). Catullus was a Roman poet most known for his poems about his love affair with a married woman. However, he was also known to write about his love for a boy known as 'Juventius'. Both loves would have been considered 'deviant' in Woolf's time—the former for adultery and the latter for homosexuality. By connecting Neville, a gay man in the 20th century, and Catullus, a poet known for queer relationships but respected regardless, Woolf presents Catullus as someone Neville admires and longs for—a talented artist who could embrace his queerness. Catullus is to Neville what Sappho is to Woolf. Neville mentions Catullus several more times in the novel. During his schoolboy days, Catullus is a vessel by which Neville explores his feelings for Percival and laments how he cannot bring himself to desert 'the yellow pages in which [he] reads Catullus' for what is 'natural' or socially accepted (29). As Neville grows up and comes to terms with his unrequited feelings and decides to move on by focusing on his own creation and pursuing relationships with other men, he imagines becoming a university fellow and being able to travel to Greece and 'lecture on the ruins of the Parthenon' (40). This exemplifies his idealisation of the classical world as a sort of queer haven, one common

amongst educated men in the 19th and 20th centuries. Neville himself addresses this when he comes out to his friend Bernard in section three, saying

> I do not impersonate Catullus, whom I adore…one cannot go on for ever cutting these ancient inscriptions clearer with a knife…I am asking you (as I stand with my back to you) to take my life in your hands and tell me whether I am doomed always to cause repulsion in those I love? (51)

Although Bernard ultimately supports and encourages him, the scene shows Neville's awareness of the gap between what he perceives as queer acceptance in his time versus Catullus's time. He knows the futility of the comfort he finds in Catullus and the classical, but he can't help but long for it regardless.

Rhoda's brand of queer-coding returns to Woolf's previous interweaving of female queerness and the Sapphic. Her queer leanings are first established in section two through her youthful affection towards her teacher, Miss Lambert, describing how Miss Lambert makes '[her] body now [let] the light through' (25). However, unlike Neville, Rhoda remains adrift and unsettled in her sexuality. As a young woman, she talks about '[having] no face' and how she must find one with omniscience and 'wear it like a talisman' (19). Simultaneously unable to find heterosexuality within herself but unable to name her queerness, she loses her sense of self and takes up a mask of normalcy in order to conform. She even begins a relationship with her friend Louis in section six but leaves him in section seven. However, despite her efforts, the fragment 'I have no face' continues to haunt her throughout the novel. Rhoda repeats it frequently to emphasise the separation she feels from the solidness and stability of her friends' lives and moments of joy. Ultimately, her inability to recognize her queerness blocks her from being able to experience life at its fullest. Rhoda's mental state further deteriorates after Pervical's death. In section five, she dreams of picking violets and giving them to

Percival. Later, she follows through with this and gathers 'withered violets, blackened violets' as a tribute to Percival and throws them into the sea (94-96). Similar to how violets are only mentioned in relation to Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay in *TTL*, in *TW*, all mentions of violets involve Rhoda. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Rhoda had killed herself by jumping off a cliff, likely the same cliff where she threw violets to Percival. The image of Rhoda, a tortured lesbian, committing suicide by cliff brings to mind Ovid's myth of Sappho's suicide, in which she also jumped off a cliff.[25] Although the story of Sappho's suicide has been discredited, the allusion remains. A stark contrast to Neville's queer self-awareness and how he embraces the perceived freedoms of the classical world, Rhoda is a conflicted and repressed queer woman whom Woolf nevertheless surrounds with the classical as a constant reminder of what could have been. Either way, Woolf's representations of queerness in Neville and Rhoda are deeply rooted in the classical.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf's experiences as a queer woman led to novel interpretations of classical texts. In a time that was kind to neither women nor queer people, she turned to these unique readings in order to give voice to her own queer feminism. By building off of classical forms, connecting characters to 'queered' images, and referencing classical traditions, she highlights the presence of the classical in her work and 'code' their queerness. Woolf further takes this chance to advocate for women's rights by emphasising the disparity between men and women, arguing for intellectual and sexual liberation. Demonstrating the enduring influence of the Greco-Roman world, Woolf reclaims the 'elite' classical and reshapes it to represent and empower demographics that larger society tried to silence—women, queer folk, and queer women.

[25] For more about the myth of Sappho's suicide, see DeJean (1985), 'Sappho's Leap: Domesticating the Woman Writer', p. 16.

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