

MICHAEL FIELD'S SAPPHISM: AN ONTOLOGY OF THE FEMININE IN *LONG AGO* (1889)

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This article examines the valuable contribution that Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper made to the vast tradition of queer Sapphism in *Long Ago* (1889), their first volume of poetry published under the collaborative pseudonym of Michael Field. Taking as my starting point the well-established assumption among contemporary critics that this volume represents an original instance of lesbian writing, I seek to argue that *Long Ago* not only appropriates and celebrates the figure of Sappho as a lesbian archetype, it also proposes a subversive gender theory that conceptualises the feminine as the essential principle of vitalism, the masculine as the very representation of death, and homoeroticism as the most genuine form of love.

KEY WORDS: Michael Field, *Long Ago*, Sappho, lesbiansm, vitalism.

El Safismo de Michael Field: Una ontología de lo femenino en *Long Ago* (1889)

Este artículo analiza la valiosa contribución que Katherine Bradley y su sobrina Edith Cooper realizaron a la vasta tradición del Safismo queer con *Long Ago* (1889), su primer poemario publicado bajo el pseudónimo compartido de Michael Field. Partiendo de la idea, ya consolidada en la crítica contemporánea, de que este poemario constituye un ejemplo original de escritura lésbica, argüiremos que *Long Ago* no sólo reivindica y se apropia de la figura de Safo como arquetipo lésbico, sino que incluso postula una teoría de género transgresora que define lo femenino como el principio esencial del vitalismo, lo masculino como la representación misma de la muerte y lo homoerótico como la modalidad más genuina del amor.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Michael Field, *Long Ago*, Safo, lesbianismo, vitalismo.

Sappho has always been an enigmatic figure in Western literary history. We know for certain that she was the first woman to use writing to transmit her lyrics, that she inaugurated the very genre of love poetry in archaic Greece, and that her fame was such that she earned the status of the Tenth Muse. Nevertheless, her historical identity has always remained elusive, so much so that classicist Page duBois prefers to see her as a literary and legendary figure in every respect: "Sappho is less a person, an author in a modern sense, than a focus point, a node within a network of knowledge, connections, attachments and projections. We need to abandon any hope of establishing the real Sappho" (2015: 7).

Understood as a radically open textual figure, Sappho has served to project all manner of aesthetic and ideological messages: she has personified poetic excellence in itself, tragic romanticism, proto-feminism, primitive lesbianism, feminine sublimity, silenced femininity, Decadent vampirism, Victorian decorum, and even post-modernist fantasies of ultimate uninterpretability.¹ However, particularly consistent and persistent among these projections has been her image as an icon of female homoeroticism. As Christine White rightly claims, Sappho has provided a respectable Greek referent for writers to legitimate, dignify and “talk about homosexuality as a positive social and emotional relationship” (1990: 198). In other words, Sappho is the proper name that many voices have dared decline to speak of their queer desires and loves.

In *Long Ago* (1889), their first volume of poetry, co-written under the pseudonym of Michael Field, Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper add their own voices to the long-standing tradition of considering Sappho the most classical model of love poetry. In their act of reception, the Michael Fields appropriate some of Sappho's fragments and use them to transform their open silences into a dense textuality of sixty-eight lyrics. In so doing, an experimental biography of the Lesbian poetess takes shape with full complexity: Sappho becomes a radical lover that, according to the prologue to *Long Ago*, seeks to “speak unflinchingly of the fearful mastery of love” (Field, 1889) in a pluralistic, versatile and ambivalent manner. She articulates a language of love that is always complex, heterogeneous, and hence hard to subsume under a clear-cut gender category. In Michael Field's rewriting, Sappho sings of her desire for a gorgeous ferryman named Phaon, of her deepest affection for her fellow maidens, and of the love Alcaeus feels for her. Read jointly and linearly, all her songs form “a category-defying mixture of sexual imagery” (Thain, 2007: 50) and an orchestra of pure affective diversity.

In this article, I seek to focus particularly on how Bradley and Cooper explore Sappho's lesbianism and formulate their own gender theory on the basis of such an exploration. My starting point is a well-established premise: as many contemporary commentators have proven,² *Long Ago* constitutes an original instance of lesbian writing, transgressive sexuality, anti-sexological ambivalence or queer Sapphism. However, notwithstanding its validity, this general construal has been articulated from a biographical perspective, with a huge emphasis on the

¹ For this concise enumeration, I have turned mainly to Ellen Greene (1996), Yopie Prins (1999), Margaret Reynolds (2003) and Page duBois (2015).

² Among these critics are Christine White (1990; 1996), Angela Leighton (1992), Yopie Prins (1999), Marion Thain (2007), Ed Madden (2008), Stefano Evangelista (2009) and Tracy D. Olverson (2009), all of whom have made groundbreaking contributions to the study of Michael Field and their entire work.

complex authorial identity of Michael Field and without paying enough attention to the nature of the texts in which such a problematic identity is fashioned. In this article, I aim to approach the Fields from a more theoretical perspective and provide a new reading of their *Long Ago* strictly based on a special selection of poems and informed by some of Luce Irigaray's pivotal ideas. Influenced by this philosopher, I contend that Michael Field's Sapphism entails an ontology of sexuality that establishes the feminine as the essential principle of vitalism, the masculine as a social symbol of death, and the homoerotic as a genuine form of creativity and love. In what follows, I prove this contention by revealing how the first poem of *Long Ago* lays the foundations for such an ontology, how the Fields construct a discourse of Lesbian and lesbian utopianism, how their Sappho presents the regime of heteronormativity —particularly the institution of marriage— as a tragedy for maidens, and how one can read the entire volume as a subversive revision of the sexual politics of Being.

The Dionysian community of maidens: beyond the Cartesian ego

In the opening poem of *Long Ago*, the Fields establish a recurrent pattern of Bacchic vitalism haunted by the looming shadow of a symbolic death. The inaugural subjectivity of the volume seems indeterminate, dissolved and Dionysian: it is a collectivised and anonymous presence and an iterative plural third person seems to refer to them without providing any clear hint as to their identity. Only the translation of the Sapphic epigraph sheds some light: "But charming [maidens] plaited garlands" (Wharton, 1907: 118).³ Here the anonymous "THEY" resolves its vagueness in a repaired ellipsis and finds its referent in a feminine collective of virgins whose well-garlanded unity renders the principle of individuation invalid. The inaugural subjectivity loses its limits, bridges the gap between self and other, and becomes pure intersubjectivity. In other words, the Apollonian individual, always discrete and self-contained, disappears into the Sapphic feminine community.

The maidens form a fluid community of what French philosopher Luce Irigaray defines as "*women-among-themselves*" (1985: 124), in direct opposition to the long tradition of Cartesian metaphysics. For Irigaray, this notion is, at bottom, an ethical call for women to form a radical and autonomous space of "nonintegration" where "something of a speaking (as) women is heard" (1985: 135), something other than the hegemonic masculine monologism. In *Long Ago*, Sappho's maidens inhabit such a space, dwell in temporal isolation and behave freely like maenads. Together they participate in a Dionysian scene of "Quick

³ Here I use Henry Wharton's work on Sappho and her fragments, for it was the book that inspired the Fields to write *Long Ago*, according to their own prologue.

breath and rapture”, in which all the plaiting and weaving is followed by repetitive kissing and a subsequent “recapture” of their communal work. Their immersion and complicity are absolute, ecstatic, and even erotic in both a literal and figurative sense: not only do they display an innocent and blissful style of affection, but also translate it symbolically into the motif of the garland, which functions as a “sign of being in love” (Wharton, 1907: 118). The first stanza expresses all of this rather plainly:

THEY plaited garlands in their time;
They knew the joy of youth's sweet prime,
Quick breath and rapture;
Theirs was the violet-weaving bliss,
And theirs the white, wreathed brow to kiss,
Kiss, and recapture. (Field, 1889: 3)

The second stanza exponentially enhances the freedom and eroticism of the initial scene by portraying the community of virgins as sexually mature, wildly self-sovereign, and ambitious. Much less innocent than before, they are no longer blind to the secrets of adult love — “Love's golden mysteries” —, presumably unknown in their “youth's sweet prime.” Their ripe spirits become “unloosed” at the sound of a lyre whose melody seems to structure their dance in the free form of Spanish sestet or *sextillas*, composed of feminine rhymes that weld together the central and final lines of each stanza in a well-plaited lyrical symphony of feminine togetherness.

The collective ecstasy shared by the maidens, oblivious to any Cartesian split between subject and object, embraces the unisonous involvement of nature turning it into a ludic participant in the rapturous dance with its “trembling leaves at play”. The text achieves this by using and transcending the trope that John Ruskin denominates *pathetic fallacy*, which, in this particular instance, does not simply consist in attributing the inferences of a living creature to the natural object-world. It is *au fond* a disruptive device in that the ontological (dis)order it institutes dismantles the common polarity between subject and object: the human I and the natural Thou dislocate one another from their respective delimitations, intermingle into a common ecstasy, and form an all-embracing organism of sympathy. A co-feeling or an inter-feeling of vast joy engages both the maidens and the “trembling leaves” in the same pathetic play. The subject-object that emerges out of this joint pathos is therefore a They-cum-nature, strongly redolent of Romanticism's creed of interpenetration between “observer and observed, subject and object, species and biosphere, consciousness and cosmos” (Hutchings, 2007: 179).

In such a pathetic context, the virgins' experience of unbound freedom allows not just for Dionysian merriment and erotic playfulness, but even for “Bright

dreams to follow”. Thanks to their condition of unmarried women, accompanied by their equals, their imagination can—at least temporarily—afford ambitiousness, limitlessness, and oneiric brightness.

They plaited garlands, even these;
They learnt Love’s golden mysteries
Of young Apollo;
The lyre unloosed their souls; they lay
Under the trembling leaves at play,
Bright dreams to follow. (1889: 3)

The third stanza of the poem, much more complex than the previous ones, comprises three parts arranged in a dialectical structure. The first three lines prolong the virgins’ elation; they intensify their alliance exclamatorily (“heavenly twine!”) and intoxicate their “deep pleasure” with wine, thereby keeping the Dionysian fully present and active:

They plaited garlands—heavenly twine!
They crowned the cup, they drank the wine
Of youth’s deep pleasure. (1889: 3)

The fourth line of this stanza, which opens immediately after the only full stop in the whole poem that appears in the middle of a stanza, abruptly interrupts the Dionysian elation with a deictic “Now” that introduces a present scenario of *lyrelessness*. The maidens are, as it were, decelerated—or *dashed* in a graphical manner—⁴ by an ambiguous pendent verb (“lingering”) that forms a subjectless anapodoton and denotes both the fragility of their persistence and the potential decline of their ecstasy: “Now, lingering for the lyreless god—” (ibid.).

The reason behind the abrupt interruption of the Dionysian scene may well lie in the transient status of the maidens’ freedom as unmarried women: given their ontological transience and looming marriageability, they cannot keep on indefinitely plating garlands, enjoying “youth’s sweet prime”, nourishing their “Bright dreams”, and drinking the wine of “youth’s deep pleasure”. Their autonomy of time, love and oneiric imagination has an inevitable end. The god ceases to play his lyre and the dancers’ souls are no longer “unloosed”. Put more bluntly, the “lyreless” scenario may represent a symbolic form of death: the maidens will

⁴ I use the word *dash* deliberately in two of its several senses: as a noun referring to the punctuation mark used to indicate a pause or a break in sense and as a verb that designates an action of dispiriting or causing—someone—to lose confidence. To all appearances, the graphic presence of the dash in the line under scrutiny has a verbal or performative effect: it interrupts and discourages the Sapphic maidens, leaving them suspended in a “lyreless” “Now”.

inevitably lose their communal intersubjectivity and either die as virgins or enter into the patriarchal economy of marriage.

The last part of the third stanza offsets the abrupt anapodoton interposed by the fourth line, returns the focus of attention to the community of maidens, and even suggests a final note of optimism: "Oh yet, once in their time, they trod / A choric measure" (1889: 3). The virgins' chorus closes the poem in a synthesis of hope. Their chrono-autonomy is reaffirmed, at the same time as their choric union surpasses the adverse caesura marked by a "lyreless god" and recaptures the previous rapture. This recapture thus follows a dialectical logic: it integrates the antithetical interruption and reverts to the initial thesis of collective ecstasy, reinforced this time by a touch of optimism. Despite suggesting that the present may not be favourable territory for the maidens, the poem rescues their presence at the very end and, in so doing, intimates that "their song and dance might continue in the choreography of writing" (Prins, 1999: 86). In this manner, the "lyreless" antithesis is bracketed off and superseded by a promising synthesis that leaves the Sapphic chorus at the disposal of Michael Field's following songs.

Nonetheless, the first poem of *Long Ago* not only sets the Sapphic chorus in motion for the imminent future: it establishes a phenomenology of feminine communion and a pattern of Dionysian vitalism always interrupted or threatened by death. As I have shown, the lyric subject is not an isolated ego, but an inter-subject that *exists*, in the etymological sense of the verb, as a "unified phenomenon" or a pure being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1996: 49), standing outside itself and co-belonging with other subjects and objects, with the vast involvement of nature, in a double state of truthful existence and ecstasy. It is in this experience with the object-world that the Sapphic inter-subject—the charming maidens—phenomenalises its profound union with the other, whether intersubjective or objective, through actions that perform, expose and heighten such a union: plaiting, weaving, wreathing, kissing, or twining. Derivative of this lived syntax—of togetherness and proximity—is the major symbol of the garland, which epitomises the organic fusion of the Sapphic subject and her world. However, as the simple "lyreless" line warns, such a life of inter-garlanded fusion unfolds not without perils and menaces ahead: the feminine community is fragile and vulnerable to the deathly appearance of men.

From communal utopianism to Sappho isolated

The Sapphic being-in-the-world constitutes a communal subjectivity that shares a life of beauty, empathy, intensity, freedom, and radical distance from the oppressive regime of matrimony. Indeed, for Sappho, the state of maidenhood represents the most joyous time in a woman's life. In poem XVII, she openly declares:

Come back again, virginity!
 For maidenhood still do I long,
 The freedom and the joyance strong
 Of that most blessèd, secret state
 That makes the tenderest maiden great. (1889: 27)

With her maidens, Sappho's life gains in brilliancy, beauty and pleasure with no room for suffering. In her female community, there exists "no thought of pain" and no trace of "inward want or woe". What prevails instead is an existential principle of peace, aesthetic sharing, unobstructed communication, emotional support, and "soft vitality". In lyric XXXIII, Sappho addresses her maids and celebrates the affective stability of her feminine community in contrast to the limited, tormenting and painful nature of her relationship with men:

MAIDS, not to you my mind doth change;
 Men I defy, allure, estrange,
 Prostrate, make bond or free:
 Soft as the stream beneath the plane
 To you I sing my love's refrain;
 Between us is no thought of pain,
 Peril, satiety.

Soon doth a lover's patience tire,
 But ye to manifold desire,
 Can yield response, ye know
 When for long, museful days I pine,
 The presage at my heart divine;
 To you I never breathe a sign
 Of inward want or woe.

When injuries my spirit bruise,
 Allaying virtue ye infuse
 With unobtrusive skill:
 And if care frets, ye come to me
 As fresh as nymph from stream to tree,
 And with your soft vitality
 My weary bosom fill. (1889: 52-53)

The lived utopianism that identifies Sappho's feminine community powerfully recalls the vivid topography of ancient Lesbos offered by John Addington Symonds

in his *Studies of the Greek Poets*, a reference book that influenced the Fields at the time of composing *Long Ago*. Of Lesbian women Symonds writes:

While mixing freely with male society, they were highly educated, and accustomed to express their sentiments to an extent unknown elsewhere in history —until, indeed, the present time. The Lesbian ladies applied themselves successfully to literature. They formed clubs for the cultivation of poetry and music. They studied the arts of beauty, and sought to refine metrical forms and diction. [...] Unrestrained by public opinion, and passionate for the beautiful, they cultivated their senses and emotions, and indulged their wildest passions. All the luxuries and elegances of life which that climate and the rich valleys of Lesbos could afford, were at their disposal [...]. In such scenes as these the Lesbian poets lived, and thought of Love. (1873: 128-129)

What Symonds depicts as a Greek retrotopia rife with aesthetic productivity, emotional indulgence, wild passion and overt eroticism among women corresponds neatly to the felicitous sociology of freedom and sensuality that the Fields attribute to Sappho and her virtually indivisible community of women. As Elizabeth A. Primamore has noted, the kind of world that Bradley and Cooper create partly in *Long Ago* is a “world of passion, nature, and art —an environment with few social restraints— conducive to creativity that Virginia Woolf claimed women lacked after Sappho” (Primamore, 2009). Indeed, it is clearly a utopian world for the second sex, now transformed into the very first.

Nonetheless, Sappho revels not only in inhabiting a utopian reality with her maids, but also in the simple yet highly erotic act of sharing her breath with them and watching them sleep together through the night. In poem XLIX, the lyric gaze transforms the recumbent bodies of her girls into sources of hypnotic magnetism and creates a highly sensual scene of scopophilia in which Sappho feels delighted, revitalised and eroticised to the point that she fantasises that the night doubles its duration and lingers on. In the closing lines, Sappho presents, as it were, a subtle symphony or chorus of respiratory pleasure with her weary sighs joining the collective breathing of her beautiful maidens.

WHEN my dear maidens lie
 Each on her bed,
 When all night long sleep holds
 Their eyes, and softly folds
 Their busy hands that ply
 The wheel, or spread
 The linen on the grass,

While hours of sunshine pass:

Thus when they lie and dream
 Of happy things,
 The golden age reburns;
 When youth to slumber turns
 Beneath the Cynthian beam
 Again it brings
 To life such bliss and glow
 As vanished long ago.

Ah, once to lie awake
 Seemed sweet to me!
 Now I who even have prayed
 That night might be delayed,
 Yea, doubled for my sake,
 Sigh wearily,
 Watching my maids, where they
 Together breathe till day. (1889: 81-82)

The closing allusion to the collective breathing among women is inevitably evocative of Luce Irigaray's pneumatology, since the French thinker attributes a special signification to the metaphysical equation between breath and woman. For Irigaray, it is the female subject who "has a privileged relation to breath. Feminine breath remains both more linked to the life of the universe and more interior; it unites, without rupture, the most subtle aspects of the cosmos and the body" (Irigaray qtd. in Škof, 2015: 146). In *Long Ago*, the implicit ethics of breath functions in a way clearly analogous to Irigaray's notion of feminine breath: when plaiting, sleeping, dancing or drinking together, the Sapphic maidens share an intimate unity that is virtually indivisible and highly erotic. In poem XIV, the Michaelian Sappho claims: "My darling! Nay, our very breath / Nor light nor darkness shall divide" (1889: 22). The lyric formula of pneumatology that Bradley and Cooper postulate is thus another significant expression of the intersubjectivity and eroticism inherent in Sappho's all-female community.

So intense and possessive is Sappho's rhetoric of union with her maidens, that just one instant of their absence becomes altogether tragic. In her lyric XIV, the Fieldean Sappho reveals how a minimal gesture of separation from her beloved Atthis proves painful and causes her "a great fear and passion". Her profound affection comes inherently with an extreme sense of loss and finitude —with the lived oxymoron of love as an experience of pain-cum-pleasure:

ATTHIS, my darling, thou did'st stray
 A few feet to the rushy bed,
 When a great fear and passion shook
 My heart lest haply thou wert dead;
 It grew so still about the brook,
 As if a soul were drawn away.

Anon thy clear eyes, silver-blue,
 Shone through the tamarisk-branches fine;
 To pluck me iris thou had'st sprung
 Through galingale and celandine;
 Away, away, the flowers I flung
 And thee down to my breast I drew.

My darling! Nay, our very breath
 Nor light nor darkness shall divide;
 Queen Dawn shall find us on one bed,
 Nor must thou flutter from my side
 An instant, lest I feel the dread,
 Atthis, the immanence of death. (1889: 22)

Fearing to find her beloved Atthis dead amidst the brook, Sappho approaches the river and feels as though “a soul were drawn away”. Her heart anticipates the possible loss of her beloved, and this anticipation turns Atthis into a potential ghost drowning and dissipating into the waters. The interplay between love and loss determines Sappho’s eroticism: in suffering and fearing her beloved’s death, she reveals the depth of her love, as well as the dissociative complex of dominance and vulnerability that affects her. Sappho cannot bear “a few feet” of distance from her beloved: she covets her permanent company and depends vitally on it. In other words, Atthis sustains her alive to such an extent that, without her, Sappho would become the “soul drawn away” by the river.

However, as the second sestet shows, Sappho’s irrational fear abates when realising that Atthis has not disappeared: rather, she has been seeking flowers of every description to flatter her lover. Sappho throws away the floral presents and embraces Atthis in an act of intimate proximity and explicit erotic devotion. With her lover lying on her breast, Sappho declares their union and their common breath indivisible and immune to death —if Atthis never dares to stray again.

All in all, in much of *Long Ago*, Sappho composes a long and consistent poetic narrative of her rapturous experiences with her fellow women, laying stress repeatedly on their Dionysian vitality, floral aestheticism, fluent communication, and profound intimacy. This solid sense of unity and affection is not theoretically

groundless: it complies with Sappho's own theory of the feminine, as put forward in a pivotal poem devoted to the Ovidian figure of Tiresias. For the poetess, the Bacchic vitalism that characterises the life within her community of maidens derives from the very ontology of the feminine, which is well encapsulated in the description of Tiresias's metamorphosis into a woman:

When womanhood was round him thrown:
 He trembled at the quickening change,
 He trembled at his vision's range,
 His finer sense for bliss ad dole,
 His receptivity of soul;
 But when love came, and, loving back,
 He learnt the pleasure men must lack.
 It seemed that he had broken free
 Almost from his mortality. (1889: 89-90)

In light of these lines, Sappho implicitly compares womanhood to manhood and places the former on a superior level of visionary intelligence, mystic sensibility, "penetrative charm", mysterious magnetism, sexual potency, Dionysian spirituality, and even virtual immortality. For the Michaelian Sappho, Tiresias owes all his powers and gifts to the discovery of the feminine: it is his femininity that gives him access to the unknown, the occult, the Dionysian, the future, and the dead.⁵ The feminine elevates him above the crude limitations of masculinity and enables him to experience a "finer sense" of life. It is the figure of the maiden that incarnates this particular sense of the feminine in its most intense form, and it is always placed face-to-face with a fatal threat, which contributes to the intensity of its presentation.

As indicated earlier on, the vitalism of the feminine experience always faces the looming threat of extinction in view of the likely —and deathly— impact that men can have on the affective fabric of Sappho's female community. As the opening poem has forewarned with its final anapodoton, the divine lyre that unlooses the Bacchic maidens runs the risk of ceasing, interrupting their rapture, and condemning them to a state of silence, isolation and virtual death. For Sappho, this risk of fatal lyrelessness looms and imposes itself with the intrusion of men and the

⁵ In this respect, Michael Field's conception of the feminine corresponds approximately to Irigaray's idea of the female subject as "the sex which is not one" (1985: 23-33). For the French philosopher and for the Fieldean Sappho alike, the feminine belongs to a certain sphere of mystery that "resists all adequate definition" and "has no proper name" (1985: 26), thus sharing a close relationship with the wholly other, the unknown, the mystic, and all that lies far outside the regime of mere rational control.

promise of marriage. I use the word intrusion with all its negative and violent connotations and in a way that is, once again, reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's feminist thought. Both the French thinker and Michael Field appear to coincide in interpreting the masculine subject as an intruder or an invader that inflicts symbolic or real violence upon women. With her distinctive psychoanalytic and sexually charged prose, Irigaray sees masculinity as a "violent break-in" or even as "a violating penis" that separates the female self inwardly and socially —from other women (1985: 24). In like manner, for the Michaelian Sappho, the masculine subject and the patriarchal institution of marriage pose a fatal threat to her community of maidens, who are destined to end up separated and deprived of their autonomy if they subordinate themselves to the codes of wifehood.

In poem XVII, Sappho regrets having fallen victim to such a fatality. It seems that, after having lost her status as maiden, she encounters direct rejection: neither Artemis, the deity of virginity nor her own community welcome her in their sacred rituals. The moon, symbol of the chaste goddess, hides away and despises Sappho, who grows desperate, longs for the return of her maidenhood, and considers her passion "regretful". The Lesbian poetess deplors her sexual and ontological condition, feels remorse presumably for having succumbed to the disruptive love of a man, and only wishes to restore the intimate unity with her chaste maidens. Put differently, it seems that Sappho rejects her heterosexual desire, prioritises her affection for her fellow women, and prefers to inhabit a permanent liminality between girlhood and womanhood or between innocence and maturity, as only in this state can she stay within her virginal community and avoid the destructive impact of man-oriented passions. This defence of maidenhood equates to what Irigaray denotes by "defensive virginity" (1985: 24): it is by preserving and defending their chastity that women can protect their freedom, safeguard their bonds with other women, remain inviolate and reject the masculine "desire force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate for himself" the female self (1985: 25). Although some lines of lyric XVII have already been quoted, the integral text sheds greater light and clarity on Sappho's special attachment to her fragile maidenhood:

THE moon rose full: the women stood
 As though within a sacred wood
 Around an altar —thus with awe
 The perfect, virgin orb they saw
 Supreme above them; and its light
 Fell on their limbs and garments white.
 Then with pale, lifted brows they stirred
 Their fearful steps at Sappho's word,
 And in a circle moved around,
 Responsive to her music's sound,

That through the silent air stole on,
 Until their breathless dread was gone,
 And they could dance with lightsome feet,
 And lift the song with voices sweet.
 Then once again the silence came:
 Their lips were blanched as if with shame
 That they in maidenhood were bold
 Its sacred worship to unfold;
 And Sappho touched the lyre alone,
 Until she made the bright strings moan.
 She called to Artemis aloud—
 Alas, the moon was wrapt in cloud!—
 “Oh, whither art thou gone from me?
 Come back again, virginity!
 For maidenhood still do I long,
 The freedom and the joyance strong
 Of that most blessed, secret state
 That makes the tenderest maiden great.
 O moon, be fair to me as these,
 And my regretful passion ease;
 Restore to me my only good,
 My maidenhood, my maidenhood!”
 She sang: and through the clouded night
 An answer came of cruel might—
 “To thee I never come again.”
 O Sappho, bitter was thy pain!
 Then did thy heavy steps retire,
 And leave, moon-bathed, the virgin quire. (1889: 26-27)

In lyric IV, the anti-matrimonial rhetoric becomes all the more patent and even takes on an ironic sense. Sappho calls on the god Hymen to bless brides and grooms with eternal joy, fertility and even affective immortality, assuming that marriage implies some form of liberation from “the harsh rape of death”. Nonetheless, in the middle of the poem, a self-evident irony takes centre stage: “Espousing us, free us / From the harsh rape of death”. Inevitably, the paradoxical combination between espousal and freedom intimates that marriage is far from emancipatory and lively: for Sappho, it annihilates us and robs us of our freedom so that we cannot die again. As it were, under the “funereal discord” of marriage, we lie already dead and harshly raped. In this sense, the poem proves to be fairly deceptive and equivocal in that it starts out as an explicit praise of marital love and ends up as a tacit death sentence against marriage:

O Hymen Hymenaeus,
 Thou hast ambrosial breath;
 We love the grave, sweet fashion of thy suit—
 Espousing, free us
 From the harsh rape of death;
 And we funereal discord will confute
 With silver laughter and with Lydian flute.
 Io, Io! thou comest, and no word
 Of threnody near thee is heard;
 Thou linkest in a living joy
 This virgin and this noble boy:
 For time's defeat thy blessing is conferred. (1889: 97)

In the light of this poem, it becomes evident that, in *Long Ago*, the Fields participate in the New Woman movement and its reformist rhetoric that spread widely in urban Britain at the *fin de siècle*. In this period, claims Heilmann, feminist thinkers raised a heated public debate “about the construction of gender and male violence in society, about the institutions of marriage and motherhood, and about women’s right radically to redefine every aspect of their position in the world” (2000: 53). On the subject of marriage in particular, most New Women —some of them organised around a review called “The Anti-Marriage League”— strongly felt that matrimony was an oppressive, vexatious and violent institution that suppressed women’s freedoms and rights in all senses. The Fields shared this political feeling, espoused a radically free conception of love, and even considered their own union more solid and heartfelt than any kind of traditional marriage.⁶ In *Long Ago*, as some poems suggest, marriage is subject to fierce criticism: it comes to embody the destruction of female-to-female relations, the tragic end of women’s freedom, and the beginning of a life subjugated to the strictures of patriarchy.

Conclusions: The feminine and the subversion of the sexual politics of Being

In *Long Ago*, the dichotomy between masculine and feminine has major metaphysical repercussions. The Fields propose a lyrical ontology that convulses the very grounds of Being in a challenge to what feminist critic Sue-Ellen Case defines as “the Platonic parameters of Being —the borders of life and death” (1991: 3). Particularly, the convulsion affects the gender or sexual politics associated with such parameters by inverting the metaphysical values of masculinity and

⁶ In their common journal, the Fields define their partnership in clear matrimonial terms, considering themselves “poets and lovers” at once, comparing themselves to the famous Browning marriage, and declaring themselves to be “closer married” (Madden, 2008: 74-76).

femininity. In Western literature and thought, death has commonly been gender-coded as feminine: the archetypal figures of Eve or Pandora, for instance, are held responsible for the fall of humankind, the loss of immortality and the origin of human death and misery. In her *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir unmistakably writes: “In most folk representations, Death is woman, and women mourn the dead because death is their work. Thus, Mother Earth has a face of darkness: she is chaos, where everything comes from and must return to one day; she is Nothingness” (2011: 200). The feminine, essentialised as corporality, materiality, alterity, and hence inferior to masculine subjectivity, mentality and spirituality, embodies radical alterity, the mutability of matter, the threat of bodily decay, and the proximity of death.

In stark opposition to the traditional gendering of death, Michael Field postulates a particular metaphysics that equates the feminine with the Platonic parameter of life. In *Long Ago*, the feminine lives ecstatically, unloosens souls, basks in all forms of pleasure, dreams freely, breathes collectively, dwells poetically, and ends up shaping a utopian vitalism that recasts the ontological vices of corporality, materiality and alterity in a positive light. It is now masculinity, by contrast, that stands for misery, deprivation, violence, and mortality, and operates within the ontological parameter of death.

Moreover, the metaphysical revision that the Fields formulate in *Long Ago* disrupts the hegemonic politics of sexual orientation, along with its implicit linkages with the ultimate ontological dimensions of being and non-being. In the vast tradition of Western metaphysics, any ontology of life presupposes heterosexuality as the necessary condition for human existence, procreation and preservation. In essence, life amounts to the fundamental interaction between woman and man, and, from this ultimate reduction, it must follow that heterosexuality constitutes the very ground of Being and the primary site for the anthropological principle of vitalism. By extension and by contrast, homosexual desire becomes perforce correlated with the negation of vitalism and, consequently, with the metaphysical assertion of sterility, extinction and death.⁷

However, as I have shown in the previous sections, *Long Ago* subverts and inverts the sexual politics of Being. In Sappho’s community of maidens, female homosociality and homoeroticism embody vitalism, Bacchic pleasure, sensuality,

⁷ The queer critic Sue-Ellen Case (1991) expresses this idea very clearly and even invites us to situate the figure of the Sapphic maiden within the realm of the other-than living: “Queer sexual practice [...] impels one out of the generational production of what has been called ‘life’ and history, and ultimately out of the category of the living. The equation hetero=sex=life and homo=sex=unlife generated a queer discourse that reveled in proscribed desiring by imagining sexual objects and sexual practices within the realm of the other-than-natural, and the consequent other-than-living” (4).

beauty, creativity, and life itself, thereby transforming the proscribed queer realm of the other-than-natural into a space of legitimate, creative and free desire. Conversely, the mere potentiality of heterosexual love disrupts, destabilises, threatens and ruins *Long Ago's* feminine utopia. The interference of men brings death to the Sapphic world of female autonomy, freedom, harmony, and artistic fertility. The social constraints of marriage and wifehood sever the Sapphic community and subject its members to the death of their independence, their pleasure, and their intersubjectivity. The consequent chiasmus is radical: homosexual desire is conceptualised in harmony and connection with nature, creativity and free love, whilst heterosexuality becomes unnatural, *unheimlich*, violent, and ultimately fatal.

Despite their autonomous vitalism, Sappho and her maids are not alien to the regime of heteronormativity. In fact, they appear to dwell in a social and sexual space of indetermination between their shared self-governing life and the potential death of their freedom and joyance that will occur as soon as they participate in the patriarchal order of matrimony. The maidens have a very fragile status and identity: their fortunate lives, free from men, run the permanent risk of ceasing and yielding to the calamitous invasion of the male other. In consequence, the Sapphic maid is always dangerously poised between the life and death of her own blessed state.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I would contend that it is in such a transient state that the Fieldean conception of the feminine materialises at its best. It is, in other words, the phase of maidenhood that incarnates the feminine in its most pristine, liberated and vitalistic expression. In Sappho's utopia, her maids gather freely, join forces, develop their common senses of pleasure, and engage in no competitions or rivalries. However, their maidenhood is nothing but a phase, as the Tiresian lyric cautions: "free / Almost from his mortality". When Tiresias metamorphoses into a woman, he assumes a nature that is virtually eternal given its vital greatness. Yet, the lyric voice does not neglect to add an antithetical adverb that poses a limit to the lifespan of the feminine Tiresias. In a similar vein, the Sapphic maid leads an ecstatic existence with her equals, but an "Almost" also comes her way. Her experience of the feminine is authentic, Dionysian and rapturous, yet it verges too closely on the fatal encounter with men, heterosexual desire, and marriage. This encounter is perhaps the very catalyst for such a rapturous experience, as I shall explain below.

What is especially striking, then, is that the feminine manifests itself with uttermost radiance through the figure of the Sapphic maid, and that, at the same time, it is through this figure that the feminine approaches its own death. In a way, the maiden lives her experience of the feminine in a phase of transition where her life reaches its zenith of intensity whilst she simultaneously comes closer and closer

to the end of her blissful condition with the foreseeable arrival of adulthood and wifehood. One may presume here that the maiden's vital intensity is a consequence of the anticipation of her death as a free virgin —as though her rapturous life were, or had to be, indeed rapturous because of the proximity of death. This positive attitude towards, and despite, the proximity of death may be related to Martin Heidegger's idea of anticipation as the possibility of authentic existence. For the German philosopher, it is when we assertively and seriously anticipate the possibility of our own death that our life opens up as a whole, becomes liberated, and diversifies into infinite possibilities available for each of us. In other words, then our life exposes us to a vast landscape of freedom, transcendence, and authenticity. One could say that it is in this very landscape, utopian though it may be, that Sappho and her maids live their genuinely existential or ecstatic being-alongside or togetherness with the full awareness, however, that their blessed condition is temporary, vulnerable, and bound to an ineluctable end. The Sapphic maid lives the quintessence of the feminine while standing on the verge of losing this vitality to her potential husband.

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