

# On Sapphic Orphism



After the dismemberment of the prophet Orpheus at the hands of Thracian Maenads, the prophet's head and lyre reputedly washed ashore of the Isle of Lesbos, where he continued to sing. The locals installed him in a cave where he went on to give oracle and teach the musical arts. This, of course, calls to mind Sappho, who, on that same isle, perfected the art of the lyre, which Orpheus himself had first received from the god *Apollo*. The fragmentary survival of Sappho's lyric through the ages gives her a place in human memory as an elevated ancestress of writers, musicians, and lesbians alike.

Sappho was more than a singer. Anne Carson reminds us of a Sappho who was "not just a poet of love and a worshipper of *Aphrodite* on Lesbos, but also a priest of *Aphrodite's* cult and a teacher of her doctrines." Orpheus too sang no mundane songs. He too survived antiquity with a reputation as a teacher of mystery rites, an avatar of the gods, an underworld voyager, and, as christian polemicists put it, the first homosexual. No record remains of what the oracular talking head of the first faggot shared with the founder of lesbianism in his cave in Antissa, but Sappho leaves us some suggestions. Again, from Carson's *Decreation*:

It is a spiritual event. Sappho enters into ecstasy. 'Greener than grass I am...' she says, predicating of her own Being an attribute observable only from outside her own body. This is the condition called *ekstasis*, literally 'standing outside oneself,' a condition regarded by the Greeks as typical of mad persons, geniuses and lovers, and ascribed to poets by Aristotle. Ecstasy changes Sappho and changes her poem. She herself, she says, is almost dead.

Ecstasy opens the spirit to the liminal, to the boundaries between ourselves and the gods and the dead. The ancients paired *ekstasis* with the term *enthousiasmos* – to be filled with the gods. Anne Carson calls it a decreation of difference between self and other. Such decreating practices – *katabasis*, ecstatic trance, spirit possession, mediumship, singing, purification and ritual invocation – have come to characterize the tradition of Orphism, a current of idiosyncratic cult activity which draws its lineage back to Orpheus himself.

Orphism, in antiquity, was a tradition of bricoleurs and itinerant spiritual specialists who showed up here and there selling books of magic and promising to cure ancestral trauma by way of revelry and initiatory rites. By way of their wandering, the ancient Orphics left us a great diversity of theological and cultic evidence which varied in each locale and among practitioners. That being said, all Orphic sources gesture toward chthonic and eschatological concerns. Many of these children of earth and starry sky centered *Dionysos* – God of Ecstasy and Lord of Initiation – as an immanent and primordial force. Those threads which emphasize liberation through the worship of *Dionysos* are termed by scholars and contemporary practitioners alike as Bacchic Orphism.<sup>1</sup>

Sappho sings well over Bacchic Orphic waters. After all, *Aphrodite* herself holds a vital place within the Orphic tradition. Aphrodite plays her part in *Dionysos'* courtship of *Ariadne* – Princess of Crete and, as preserved in Linear B, Mistress of the Labyrinth. The connection between *Ariadne* and *Aphrodite* is established by a winding trail of literary sources. Homer tells how *Aphrodite* came to *Ariadne* in her despair after

being abandoned on Naxos to comfort her with assurances that her brother *Dionysos* would soon save her. Hyginus tells that *Venus* gave *Dionysos* the wedding crown which he'd place on *Ariadne's* head and then in the stars to commemorate their marriage and her apotheosis. Pausanias says Daidalos – architect of the labyrinth – gave *Ariadne* a wooden icon of *Aphrodite* which he fashioned himself and that she took with her on her journey. He goes on to say that following her death, *Theseus* gifted that icon to *Apollo* on Delos and there instituted a cult in the memory of *Ariadne* around it. Plutarch confirms this story and adds that around the statue of *Aphrodite*, youths performed a dance in honor of *Ariadne*. This dance is said to imitate the circular movement of the labyrinth. He goes on to report that:

Theseus, driven out of his course by a storm to Kypris, and having with him *Ariadne*, who was big with child and in sore sickness and distress from the tossing of the sea, set her on shore alone, but that he himself was borne out to sea again. The women of the island, accordingly, took *Ariadne* into their care and tried to comfort her in the discouragement caused by her loneliness, brought her forged letters purporting to have been written to her by *Theseus*, ministered to her aid during the pangs of travail, and gave her burial when she died before her child was born. *Theseus* came back, and was greatly afflicted, and left a sum of money with the people of the Island, enjoining them to sacrifice to *Ariadne*, and caused two little statuettes to be set up in her honor. At the sacrifices, one of their young men lies down and imitates the cries and gestures of women in travail; and they call the grove in which they show her tomb, the grove of *Ariadne-Aphrodite*.

So more than *Aphrodite* simply intervening to encourage the union between *Dionysos* and *Ariadne*, we have evidence on both Delos and Kypris – where *Aphrodite* and her cult was born – of a queer, ecstatic and chthonic cult of a syncretic *Ariadne-Aphrodite*. This syncretism surely finds a home in the Bacchic Orphic current. In the Orphic Hymns,<sup>2</sup> a collection of invocations meant to be used in a ritual cycle, *Ariadne* is not named and rather *Aphrodite* is hailed as the “venerable companion of Bacchus,” and “mother of the *Erotes*.” The hymns name *Chthonic Hermes* – guide of souls through the underworld – as a child of *Aphrodite* and *Dionysos*. *Eros*, typically foremost among *Aphrodite*'s children, is in Orphism identified with Protogonos – the first-born incarnation of *Dionysos* and primordial force of desire itself.

Adonis, usually a lover of *Aphrodite*, is hailed by the Orphics as her child with *Eros*. The hymns reveal Adonis as Bacchic, androgynous, and cyclically moving between between our world and the underworld as an “unwithering bloom” – a title which recalls the Myth of Adonis' tragic death upon the tusks of a wild boar.<sup>3</sup> It is said that *Aphrodite*'s sorrowful tears mingled with his blood as she held him and from the mixture the anemone flower grew as a blood-red testament to his life and her grief. *Aphrodite* then instituted the Adonia, a festival where women left delicate flowers – Gardens of Adonis – to die in the hot sun and wither while they wailed in processions and mourning rites.

These stories hint at the eschatological concerns of the Bacchic Orphic initiates who were promised eternal revels in the afterlife, but also call to mind the lamentations of the expert ritual mourners remembered

by the name *goes*. These practices, according to the sorcerer Jake Stratton Kent, in his brilliant *Geosophia*, were the genesis of the variations of necromantic tradition in the subsequent centuries which went on to be called goetia. In *Geosophia*, Stratton-Kent closely associates goetic magic with Bacchic Orphism, the mysteries of *Dionysos* and *Kybele*, and the tradition of the grimoires: magical books with an emphasis on the same decreating ritual invocation of gods and spirits which we find in Sappho. This tradition of magical books continues into the present and flows from the very books peddled by the *orpheotelestai* (as reported by Plato) and the *Greek Magical Papyri*.

A demonstration of the magical power of books is preserved in the papyri in the form of the *Homeromanteion* – a divination system comprised of lines from Homer assigned to random numeric values which correspond to three throws of dice. A querent asks a question, throws the dice, and receives an answer from Homer. Contemporary Bacchic Orphics have revived this system, but opened it to be re-born – in the true fashion of bricolage – as a method of cut-up oracle using lines dismembered from the works of other ancestral spirits.<sup>4</sup>

The *Sapphomanteion* was birthed from the labyrinthine windings of this queer tradition. All the lines in the system are taken from Carson's translations of Sappho's fragments collected in *If Not, Winter*. The most complete fragments illustrate ritual use of the words, speaking to *Aphrodite* in direct address. The more fragmentary lines open this address in any number of directions as marked through her translation as brackets. Anne again: "Brackets are exciting. Even though you

are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp – brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.”

Bibliomancy – the art of divination with books – is then a means to open up that imaginal space and to mobilize fragments toward connection. Every lacuna is a door to the spirits. I’ll call your attention, finally, to one such set of brackets:

dream of black[  
you come roaming and when sleep [

sweet god, terribly from pain[  
to hold the strength separate [

but I expect not to share[  
nothing of the blessed ones [

for I would not be like this [  
toys [

but may it happen to me [  
all [

There, third to last, a most provocative bracket indeed: *toys*. An obscure myth – but one of immense importance for the Bacchic Orphics – tells us that the shapeshifting *Dionysos Zagreus*, hunted by the Titans, was only captured and dismembered after being entranced by a set of children’s toys, including

*astragaloi* – knucklebone dice. Thousands of these mysterious dice have been found at the Korykian cave at the oracular site of Delphi, which is the exact place where bee nymphs taught the god *Hermes* the art of divination. It is more than just distance which these fragments decreate. The toys of *Dionysos* open onto the possibility of ego-death, initiation, and more. It is said that Sappho, mirroring Orpheus’ despair for Eurydice, threw herself into the waves whence that very head washed ashore. Sappho tells us: for the gods, pour. We might add: throw.

*Antheus*  
*Thiasos of the Flowering Branch*  
*May, 2018*



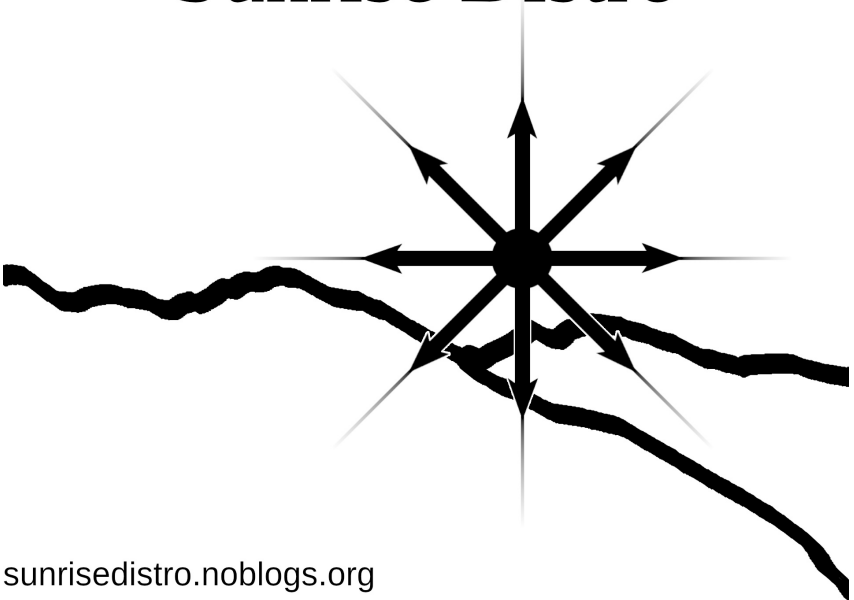
Notes:

1. See: *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife* by Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnson.
2. Reputedly written by Orpheus himself. The translation by Athanassakis is most appropriate for ritual use.
3. In still other stories, Adonis is a lover of Dionysos, which mirrors the floral apotheosis of the God's tragic lover Ampelos. As preserved by Nonnus in his *Dionysaica*, Dionysos turned the young satyr boy into the first grapevine after he was gored to death attempting to ride a wild bull under the moonlight.
4. For examples other than this one, see the *Nietzschemanteion* and *Hunting Wisdom: A Bacchic Orphic Diviner's Manual*.

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