

SAPPHIC REFLECTIONS OF FEMININE CREATIVE POWER AND MALE
INTERRUPTION IN THE WORKS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the University
of Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of
Arts of English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Chattanooga, Tennessee

May 2013

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ABSTRACT

With queer theory and gender studies, the knowledge that Virginia Woolf was probably bisexual has come to the forefront of scholarship concerning the writer and her works. With queer theory has come an interest in Sapphism, a term evoking Sappho, the only female lyric poet for whom any poetry remains. Sappho's poetry reveals her to be a "lesbian": a woman expressing homoerotic feelings for other women. The word Sapphist has become interchangeable with the word lesbian, and Virginia Woolf has been proven to be a Sapphist in that sense; however, Sapphism as a literary philosophy has remained untouched by scholars. In the following composition, I examine reflections of Sappho's themes, motifs, and symbols such as the chora and male interruption, to then argue that literary Sapphism as it exists in the fragments, is also present in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *The Waves*.

DEDICATION

For my mother, Amy McAdams Shannon, for her insistent belief in my capabilities and her endless articulation of her faith in me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Dr. Gregory O’Dea, the director of this thesis, and the ever-present guide on this literary journey, without whom this work would never have come to fruition. Much credit is owed to Dr. Susan North, my constant source of intellectual encouragement, and to Dr. Aaron Shaheen for his close editing and rigorous critiques.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: VIRGINIA WOOLF, SAPPHO, SAPPHISM

In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf boldly states, “The truth is, I often like women. I like their unconventionality. I like their completeness. I like their anonymity” (122). Once intentionally and almost entirely neglected, Virginia Woolf’s bisexuality has since come to the forefront of scholarship concerning the writer and her works, especially with the rise of queer theory.¹ With queer theory has come an interest in Sapphism, a term evoking Sappho, the only ancient female lyric poet for whom any poetry remains.² Born to an aristocratic family on the island of Lesbos, Sappho was educated in a manner reminiscent of the intellectual circles of Plato. Sappho’s poetry reveals her to be a “lesbian” in the contemporary sense of the word: a woman expressing homoerotic feelings for other women. With gender studies and female sexuality coming to the forefront of literary theory, the word Sapphist has become interchangeable with the word lesbian, and Virginia Woolf has been proven to be a Sapphist in that sense of the word; however, Sapphism in the context of Sappho’s poetry, or Sapphic style, has much deeper implications beyond the scope of homosexual interactions between women. I will examine “Sapphic style” in the works of Virginia Woolf through themes, motifs, and symbols such as the chora, feminine creative power, and male interruption.

¹ Woolf’s relationship with Vita Sackville-West in the late 1920’s was one of several affairs that Sackville-West had with other women. It is for and about Sackville-West that Woolf writes *Orlando*.

² After many years of studying and piecing together fragments, scholars finally discovered that the subjects of Sappho’s love poems and laments were most often women, usually a woman named Anaktoria.

The two most pervasive ideas in Sappho's fragments are: the existence of a specifically female creative power, which is fostered by exchanges with other women in chora settings, and the male interruption of this creative power. The chora is an idea discussed in Plato's *Timaeus*, where Plato deems the chora, a "receptacle" or a space that creation can occupy, and the chora acts as a womb, or place of growth for creation. In *La Révolution du Langage Poétique*, Julia Kristeva borrows the Platonic idea of the chora, and appropriates its use in semiotics. According to Kristeva, the chora is a provisional and mobile mode of articulation. The child, before it is separated from its mother, is nurtured and exists in this space just before self-realization takes place (*La Révolution du Langage Poétique* 26). Elizabeth Grosz combines and extends the ideas of Plato and Kristeva, adopting the chora for a specifically feminist use. According to Grosz, "[The chora] functions as the receptacle, the storage point, the locus of nurturance in the transition necessary for the emergence of matter, a kind of womb for material existence, the nurse of becoming, an incubator" (*Space, Time, and Perversion* 114). As Grosz explains, the chora's essence operates as a space of stimulation and cultivation, separate from the outside world. "The notion of the chora," she says, "serves to produce a founding concept of femininity whose connections with women and female corporeality have been severed, producing disembodied femininity as a ground for the production of a (conceptual) and social universe" (*Space* 113). The chora becomes an atmosphere of femininity in which participants are able to ascertain where they stand in relation to one another and to the universe. Within this space, women have the privilege of association as well as the privilege of inspiration from one another.

Several instances in the fragments provide examples of Sappho's confidence in her own poetic prowess as she associates with mortal women as well as with the muses. She writes, "It is the Muses / who have caused me / to be honored: they / have taught me their craft" (Barnard 98).

Sappho claims a more intimate relationship with the muses than do male poets. While male writers ask to be inspired by the muses, Sappho is their student. Where male poets are given a momentary gift of poetic ability, Sappho is granted the full knowledge of poetry, passed down to her by the muses. One reason for the retention of this privilege, as Harold Bloom would suggest, is that the relationship between the female muse and the male poet is a sexual one. The poet's inspiration by the muse consists of a primal act in which the poet must "beget himself upon the Muse his mother" (*The Anxiety of Influence* 37). Further exacerbating this anxiety, the poet also knows that the literary forefather has previously engaged in creative "coitus" with the muse, making the fight for creativity an Oedipal affair. Thus the male poet is stunted in two ways: one being his inability to engage in a purely intellectual exchange, as in Sappho's student-teacher dynamic, and two, his inherent need to defeat his literary forefather in order to engender his own creativity upon the muse. Lisa Rado explains, "The voice of the godhead often speaks not through the poet's lips but through those of an imagined female entity with whom he engages is some sort of psychosexual relation" (*The Modern Androgyne Imagination* 3). According to Rado this sexual dynamic produces a need for the poet to dominate the female muse for fear of being feminized. Sappho, because she shares the same sex with the muses and because she has no literary foremothers, remains unthreatened. She does not feel the pressure to beget herself upon the muses, because a productively coital relationship between two women is impossible. Furthermore, a female poet does not experience the fear of feminization as she is already female. Rado goes on to argue that in light of these factors, the male poet's inspiration is the result of a kind of possession of the mind by the muses, rather than a passing of knowledge as in the case of Sappho and her female coterie.

Another of Sappho's fragments represents a similar type of knowledge passing to her, the female poet. Sappho writes,

I have no complaint
Prosperity that
the golden Muses
gave me was no
delusion: dead I
won't be forgotten (Barnard 100)

The wording in this fragment is significant in that the inspiration of the muses is represented as a gift to Sappho, rather than as a momentary possession; it is enduring, even past death. As noted, the muse descends upon the poet, providing only short bouts of poetic ability; however, in Sappho's case the muses have given her lifelong prosperity and abiding renown. Using Bloom's model and Rado's interpretation, Sappho's intimacy with the muses and creativity is derived from her femininity. Because she is also female, there is no psychosexual relationship, and the female poet does not fear feminization. The sexual buffer that exists for male poets is absent where Sappho and female creativity is concerned. Instead, the female poet is provided with the intellectual and creative nourishment, the gift of poetry, not possession by poetry. It is this idea of feminine imaginative nourishment that appears consistently throughout Sappho's fragments.

This artistic ability, the gift of the muses which is uniquely different from male artistic capacity, is inspired by the proximity of women to each other in a chora setting, a purely feminine space, which usually manifests as a garden or the immediate area surrounding an altar. In one another's presence the women in Sappho's poetry receive a unique creative blessing and connection to the muses due to their shared femininity. In fragment 42, Sappho asks her friend to recall their group of women lying in a state of repose "with all that they most wished for beside them" to restore her memory (Barnard). Not only was the purely female presence completely satisfying in the moment, but its mere recollection has restorative powers for the

mind. Just as the female poet receives the privilege of the muses' enduring presence, fragment 96 portrays the divine blessing on female exchanges. Sappho relays this blessing saying, "The gods bless you / may you sleep then / on some tender / girlfriend's breast" (Barnard). One of the last fragments in the Barnard collection, this particular entry establishes a reciprocal relationship between divinity and the power of the chora. The chora invites the prolonged presence of the muses, and even Aphrodite at times, in its pure femininity, giving them a "locus." Similarly, the blessing of the gods provides a type of divine resting place – the breast of an intimate friend. The potential for eroticism, while certainly present, is secondary in consideration of the potential for divine exchange.

In opposition to the women and female muses' exchange in the chora, female artistic faculties are stifled by male presence entering into the chora in the form of a husband, lover, or god. Most often the male presence is Eros, the male god of love. Marriage, loss of maidenhead, the separation of friends by their husbands' pursuits, and the destructive nature of Eros's love are recurring fears throughout Sappho's fragments, and these often produce deadening effect on the poet and the nature of her relationships with other women. The poet often laments the loss of a friend or the inability to write due to the power of love, always described in destructive language. One of Sappho's epithalamia fragments proves to be a lament rather than a celebration. Sappho expresses her jealousy for her friend as she is replaced by a man. First deeming the man a hero, the reader quickly finds that the man is only heroic in his association with the object of Sappho's affection. Made physically and mentally ill by his intrusion, Sappho laments,

if I meet
you suddenly, I can't

speak-- my tongue is broken;
.....
trembling shakes my body

and I turn paler than
dry grass. At such times
death isn't far from me (Barnard 39)

The intrusion of the male into the relationship not only disrupts the female exchange, but Sappho's artistic ability, the power to form words, is also broken. She is unable to speak, and therefore the female exchange is stunted. The greenery and garden scenes of the chora are replaced with the image of “dried grass,” and the chora image is destroyed. Similarly in fragment 85, another female friendship is interrupted by the intrusion of patriarchal societal expectations. Sappho states, “Before they were mothers / Leto and Niobe / had been the most / devoted of friends” (Barnard 85). The relationship between the women went beyond friendship to devotion, a connotation that implies a deeper feeling. This feeling, however, is interrupted by the male presence that manifests in the form of procreation. Separated by maternal and familial duties, the new relationship between the two women, although not specified, is not one of devotion. It is in this manner that Sappho depicts the negative effect of the male presence on female companionship and female creative power. In none of her fragments do both male presence and the muses appear.

Woolf employs this notion of the chora in one of her most well known works, *A Room of One's Own*. In her famous statement, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,” Woolf is describing a chora-like environment, a space separate from familial duties and patriarchal expectations (*A Room of One's Own* 3); however, Woolf's consideration of the chora does not begin there. This idea of chora, exchange, and interruption, this particular brand of Sapphism, is endemic in the female characters in Woolf's works, beginning as early as in *Mrs. Dalloway*. These characters prove to be an extension of Woolf's own Sapphism, both in the creative and in the homoerotic sense. According to Erin Carlston, this particular sentiment

was born as a backlash against Modernism, which many female authors saw as a particularly male movement. Carlston describes the birth of this particularly female artistic endeavor: “Women writers of the period—many of whom could be considered lesbian or bisexual . . . were excluded from a ‘male modernism’ that was inherently reactionary and misogynist, and constituted an entirely different literary movement: Sapphic Modernism” (*Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* 2).

Taking part in this cultural and literary phenomenon, Woolf’s writing often foregrounds characters who experience homoerotic feelings for one another and who engage in homoerotic exchanges. These characters, however, also experience this different type of Sapphism, largely unrecognized by scholars, which takes form through two major ideas: the feminine creative power of women in a purely feminine space, and the propensity for male intrusion and interruption of feminine space and power. In Woolf’s work, the chora takes various forms. Some of these include Clarissa Dalloway’s early experiences with Sally Seton at Bourton and the party at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*, the laboratory of Chloe and Olivia in *A Room of One’s Own*, and finally the anti-chora of *The Waves*. Just as the chora allows Sappho and her coterie of women to engage in creative Sapphic exchanges, Woolf’s chora settings also allow her characters to share intimacy and creativity with one another. Woolf’s characters are similarly allowed Sapphic exchanges within their chora settings and also experience the interruptions of these exchanges by male characters such as husbands, lovers, or friends. While Rado’s analysis suggests that artistic creativity can still take place when the female operates under the male gaze, she also points out that these women usually die in the end of their novels. I argue, however, that creativity is deadened, not sparked by the male presence.

Only within the purely feminine Sapphic exchange can the nurturing of the imagination and mind take place.

Other scholarship surrounding Woolf's work and the creative power of what Rado calls the "sexed brain" focuses largely on the androgyne brain. Scholarship suggests that it is the combination of the two gendered identities in the androgyne brain that promotes creativity and artistic ability. As noted, Lily Briscoe and Rhoda both serve as examples of women who adopt an androgyne identity, have their artistic vision, but are then necessarily subsumed in patriarchy and alienated from their bodies. Marilyn R. Farwell's asserts that the androgyne brain often discounts what femininity has to offer the androgyne, usually bringing things that need to be controlled by the male side of the brain ("Lesbian Literary Imagination" 105). Where Rado ends with the destruction of femininity in the androgyne, Farwell offers a new model that may allow the female to express herself apart from a male identity: the metaphoric lesbian. According to Farwell, the metaphoric lesbian provides women with a means of association where the male influence has no place. While this idea is pertinent to my argument, Farwell's assertions never make the direct connection to Woolf's writings except for a short quote in her introduction; however Farwell's definition of the metaphoric lesbian informs my assertion that a female artists must be free of male influence. She writes, "What is called lesbian does not depend on women loving women genitally, but rather on the presence and attention of women to other women . . . A bond with another woman puts each in touch with her own body and her imagination because that bond opens each to her unconscious" ("Lesbian Literary Imagination" 110,114). While the metaphoric lesbian does have access to creative power, Farwell never completely dissociates the body with the mind as Woolf seems to do. Farwell's creativity remains connected with the body, where I argue that the chora provides a method for a disembodied femininity to manifest,

allowing a creative power outside of the psychosexual relationship, whether hetero- or homosexual.

Peggie Kamuf recognizes that there is a tendency for patriarchal ideals to interrupt Woolf's creativity in *A Room of One's Own*. She points to several passages to which I will later refer that demonstrate these interruptions; however, at the end of her article, Kamuf ultimately concludes that *A Room* concedes to the notion of interruption, depicting it as inescapable. She writes, "Interpreted as a space of interruption, this text cannot give title to the room it names in its title. Instead the title promises a place of intermittent work, a book, that like women's thought, women's body, is frequently broken in upon. And broken off." ("Penelope at Work" 18). Kamuf concludes that interruptions are indubitable and must be expected and accepted. I will suggest, however, that Woolf's room provides, not a space of interruption, but a space of female association and friendship and of uninterrupted access to creative power.

Laurie F. Leach considers the nature of friendship and association with one's peer group as a source of creative power and identity formation. With a special focus on Bernard, she points to *The Waves* to illustrate how the characters form their identities as they perceive themselves in relation to the other members of their peer group and in their own isolation; Leach connects these ideas with artist by suggesting that Bernard's "vacillat[ion] between isolation and community" ultimately lead him to discount his mode of expression—language—at the end of the novel ("The Difficult Business of Intimacy" 59). While she makes the connection between community, identity, and creativity, Leach does not consider gendered communities as I discuss in the chora scenes in Woolf's works. Furthermore, Bernard's association with his peers ultimately impedes his creative power, rather than nurturing it into fruition as I argue the chora does for Woolf's female characters.

As noted, several scholars have begun to explicate these ideas of a gendered creative power and the development of one's artistic identity by association with a peer group. Scholarship has taken pains to assert that these conflicts arise within Woolf's works, but unfortunately, no scholarship proposes a solution to these issues. Stopping short of recognizing Woolf's prescription for curing the problem of a female artistic identity, scholars have failed to recognize that Woolf not only exhibits these problems through her female characters, but ultimately offers a solution as well—that women must be allowed their own feminine space for artistic creation.

My argument combines Rado's idea of the sexed brain with Farwell's metaphoric lesbian, and points to places in Woolf's text where this idea of a metaphoric lesbian and a gendered creative power can be seen. Unlike Rado and Farwell, however, I assert that the female creative power exists completely apart from male influence and as distinctly separate from the body and from sexuality. Moving away from the sexually lesbian aspect of Sapphism, even beyond Farwell's metaphoric lesbian, I attempt to elucidate a type of feminine exchange that can be disembodied within the chora and that occurs only in the minds of the interlocutors. Finally, my argument extends Leach's assertion that artistic identity and creation are influenced by one's peer group by asserting that in order for the imagination to flourish, female artists must participate in a peer group that is necessarily feminine and free from the male gaze. My study of Woolf's works attempts to combine and extend these ideas to create a new brand of Sapphism that addresses the problems of artistic identity, the role of gender in the creative imagination, and the type of environment that must manifest to produce the desired creation of art.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa, as a young woman, engages in a Sapphic exchange when she engages in a kiss with her friend Sally Seton. This kiss, however, proves to be the culmination of

the time the two women spent alone in Clarissa's bedroom engaged with literature and politics. She describes this as the most exquisite experience of her life – but this experience is cut short by the entrance of Peter Welsh onto the terrace. Clarissa feels a sense of loss as she recalls the disruption, “It was like running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!” (*Dalloway* 27). Clarissa's reaction to Peter's interruption is the feeling that she has been assaulted. The event repeats itself years later as Clarissa and Sally are reunited at Clarissa's home in London, but her duties to her guests as wife and hostess keep Clarissa from attending to Sally, even when Sally touches Clarissa's arm. Like Sappho's Leto and Niobe, Clarissa and Sally are ultimately interrupted first by the male presence or gaze, and again by domesticity and patriarchal expectations.

Likewise, Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* have a Sapphic exchange in which Lily is inspired by Mrs. Ramsay's skill in creating a harmonic environment. Like Clarissa, Lily recalls a time when she had laid her head upon Mrs. Ramsay's lap and engaged in an intimate exchange. What Lily ultimately finds inspiring Mrs. Ramsay does not come from a physical connection, but from Lily's admiration of Mrs. Ramsay's ability to orchestrate a maintain a harmonious environment. Lily's artistic pursuits in her painting of Mrs. Ramsay are ultimately gratified at the end of the novel; however, Mr. Ramsay's thunderous stomping about, as well as the interjections from Charles Tansley that "women can 't write, women can't paint," constantly interrupt Lily's creativity. Spending most of her time painting on the lawn, Lily pursues her artistic desires as she attempts to paint Mrs. Ramsay. Lily is, however, cut off from Mrs. Ramsay by her location into which Mr. Bankes intrudes (and Lily feels as if something has been “taken” from her).

Woolf's subsequent turn to nonfiction in *A Room of One's Own* also concerns the chora and male interruption. Woolf herself is interrupted by several male figures as she traverses Oxbridge that bar her from accessing knowledge or certain spaces on campus. Furthermore, her depiction of Shakespeare's sister Judith who provides an example of what might happen to a woman with creative passion and power that does not have access to a chora or exchanges with other women outside of the male gaze. Judith's tragedy reveals itself as she attempts to participate in the creativity of the London theater scene, but is met by the crippling male gaze. Unable to practice her own creativity, Judith commits suicide and is unceremoniously buried. Finally, Woolf's depiction of Chloe and Olivia working intimately together in their laboratory is juxtaposed with Shakespeare's Cleopatra and Octavia, who cannot have a meaningful exchange with one another due to the presence of Antony's male gaze. These ideas, explicated at length in *A Room of One's Own*, are then applied to Woolf's characters in *The Waves*, with special attention on Rhoda.

While Woolf's female figures in *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *A Room of One's Own* are Sapphic in nature, Rhoda in *The Waves* can be read as Woolf's reincarnation of Sappho. She is most often found alone, thinking to herself, and exists so much in her own world, she must watch Jinny and Susan for social cues. Rhoda hides from her friends: "I will go to the beech wood alone . . . They will not find me" (*The Waves* 6). While her friends engage with one another and with the outside world, Rhoda is introspective, only sharing her inner thoughts and feelings with the trees and nature around her. Like Judith Shakespeare, Rhoda is cut off from the chora, unable to have feminine exchanges. Rhoda's interruption takes the form of her brief relationship with Louis; however, this relationship is fleeting and Rhoda promptly returns to the isolation that she made a habit as a child. Just as Judith Shakespeare reaches out only to find a male gaze,

Rhoda reaches out and finds only Louis. It is also noteworthy that Rhoda commits suicide by throwing herself from a cliff, possibly the cliff she describes in an earlier section. Rhoda, unable to participate in the chora, mimics Sappho in her death, and like Judith, commits suicide.

Beginning with *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1925 and ending with *The Waves* in 1931, Woolf's reader can track this progression of Sapphic thought throughout Woolf's work. *Mrs. Dalloway* begins this thought progression with the simplest and most overt example of Sapphism in the homoerotic exchange with Clarissa and Sally; however, as Woolf moves on to *To the Lighthouse*, she does away the overt homoerotic exchange between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, although she does depict a marginal homoerotic exchange in the case of Nancy and Minta. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf begins to take her thoughts down as they occur in her own mind, rather than as they take place in the lives of the characters. In *A Room*, her metaphors for what can be considered chora settings, are clear and overt, easily revealing themselves to the reader in the form of Chloe and Olivia's laboratory and the London acting scene as she depicts it in the story of Judith Shakespeare. Here, her work becomes more theoretical before she returns to fiction with *The Waves* where the lack of a chora and the suicide of Rhoda are the culmination of Woolf's chora characters, as Rhoda so closely represents Sappho. As will be demonstrated more in depth, these characters and works represent a thought process that occurs over the course of roughly 7 years of Woolf's writing life.

CHAPTER II

WHEN CLARISSA MET SALLY: A CHORA, A KISS, AND AN INTERRUPTION

Mrs. Dalloway, published in 1925, is where the reader sees Woolf's first attempt at writing Sapphism. Having introduced Clarissa Dalloway in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf had been dallying with her character for nearly a decade by the time she plans to expand her short story entitled "Mrs. Dalloway's Party" into a novel. In her diary, it is apparent that the character of *Mrs. Dalloway* proves to be a major draw for Woolf, although she has a very difficult time creating in Clarissa what she feels to be a likeable and meaningful character. Writing in her diary about *Mrs. Dalloway* as a short piece, Woolf writes, "I am laboriously dredging my mind for *Mrs. Dalloway* and bringing up light buckets" (*A Writer's Diary* 50). In spite of being unable to find exactly what she is looking for in writing Clarissa's story, Woolf is unable to leave it behind. Her diary reveals that she feels much more confident in her writing of Septimus Smith, but she is nevertheless determined to make something out of Clarissa.

In the context of Sapphism, Clarissa becomes a woman who has the privilege of participating in the chora with her close friend, Sally Seton. Married to a man in high society, the majority of Clarissa's adult life consists of planning parties and conducting the household. Clarissa's moment of venture happens in the moment she engages in a homoerotic exchange with her friend, Sally Seton. Incited by her daughter Elizabeth's feelings for her tutor, Miss Kilman, Clarissa recalls her feelings for Sally: "But this question of love . . . this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all,

been love?" (*Dalloway* 25). Years later, Clarissa recognizes the unique nature of her kiss with Sally. Clarissa can remember the event clearly as she recalls the walk on terrace. This resonating kiss is the culmination of the friendship that has blossomed between the two young women as they become friends at Bourton where Clarissa spends her days as a young woman. She and Sally spend large amounts of time together, and Sally opens Clarissa's eyes to a different world. The larger, overarching notion of Sapphism as it is discussed here is found in their mutual psychic engagement. Clarissa remembers,

They sat up til all hours of the night talking. Sally it was who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered her life at Bourton was. She knew nothing about sex – nothing about social problems . . . There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house . . . The ideas were Sally's, of course – but very soon she was just as excited—read Plato in bed before breakfast; read Morris; read Shelley by the hour. (*Dalloway* 26)

While Woolf certainly emphasizes the kiss with Sally and its interruption by Peter Walsh, she spends much more time describing the intellectual nature of her relationship with Sally. Although the kiss resonates with Clarissa, what she seems to ruminate upon is the way that Sally opened up her mind to new ideas, new literature, and a new world. The bedroom in which Clarissa and Sally sit for hours on end becomes a kind of chora, where the two women can be alone together in a purely feminine space to discuss matters of all kinds. The bedroom becomes a place that is separate, even "above" the rest of the house. It is removed from her family's somewhat negative opinions about Sally. Finding her shocking, Clarissa's family recognizes a difference in Sally; however, Clarissa's private room provides a separate space where Grosz's emergence of matter can take place, as the young women talk about politics and sex and discuss ideas for societal reform.

Grosz's idea that this emergence of a creative product, specifically for the purpose of social reform, resonates in Clarissa and Sally's plans to change the world. Clarissa and Sally

quite literally compose a letter to inspire a societal upheaval concerning policies on private property. Together, Clarissa and Sally come up with a plan to reform the world (*Dalloway* 26). It is evident that mental growth takes place as a result of Clarissa's engagement in the chora in that Clarissa feels she "knew nothing" before she met Sally and began talking with her. She begins to consume literature, reading Plato and Shelly. It is clear that within this chora, Sally fosters Clarissa's mind, introducing her to new facets of the world, thus giving the reader an overt example of this artistic creative Sapphism.

Furthermore, Clarissa's thoughts portray an explicit enjoyment of the chora environment, and she recognizes the friendship with Sally as something that could only occur between women. She thinks to herself, "The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one's feelings for a man. It was completely disinterested and besides, it had a quality which could only exist between women . . . [It] sprang from a sense of being in league together" (*Dalloway* 27). Clarissa's feelings for Sally reveal a deep seated emotion that is artistic and unaffected by sexual desire. This revelation about her feelings for Sally is quite different from her feelings for either Peter Walsh or her husband, Richard. Her sentiments for both Richard and Peter are not really emotions at all, but notions of duty and obligation. In many instances, Clarissa considers how much she "owes" the men in her life, rather than expressing the genuine and naturally occurring sensation that she harbors for Sally. Contemplating the nature of her friendship and feeling for Sally, Clarissa remembers the kiss, the culmination of the intimacy that had been building between Clarissa and Sally. Shari Benstock states, "Sapphic Modernism constitutes itself through moments of rupture in the social and cultural fabric" ("Expatriate" 198n3). Having participated in the chora and fostering their mental faculties in politics and literature, the kiss is this "moment of rupture" in the societal prescription

of behavior for young women. It is a physical manifestation of what has already existed mentally: two women's affection for one another produced by their feeling of "being in league" together. It is a mere expression of affection for one another which stems from their mutual mental stimulation and the intellectual nurturance throughout their time together at Bourton, in the chora and aloneness of Clarissa's bedroom.

The kiss takes place on the terrace as a group of friends walk together during an evening gathering.³ Clarissa remembers,

She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared. There she was alone with Sally. (*Dalloway* 27)

The moment that Sally kisses Clarissa seems somewhat arbitrary on Sally's part; however, for Clarissa this moment is divine. The metaphysical aspect of this moment is the product of their intense intimacy in the chora, and it provides a moment of physical connection that Woolf uses to portray the young women's rejection of patriarchal ideals. The kiss lasts only a moment, and is interrupted by Peter Walsh's interjection, "Star gazing?" (*Dalloway* 27). Clarissa finds this intrusion devastating: "It was like running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible! . . . 'Oh this horror!' she said to herself, as if she had known all along that something would interrupt, would embitter her moment of happiness" (*Dalloway* 27). In this passage Clarissa literally deems this incident an interruption. The shock of running into something that could not be seen ahead implies a great intensity in Clarissa's level of release when kissing Sally. Although she feels that she knew something would ruin the occasion, in the

³ Kristeva's notion of a mobile chora, as well as Grosz's assertion that the chora is disembodied resonates here. Although much of Clarissa and Sally's intimate intellectual exchange takes place in Clarissa's bedroom, the chora, in its mobility, accompanies them out onto the terrace.

moment itself, Clarissa is completely enraptured, making Peter's interruption even more agitating.

A close reading of the scene reveals that the source of Clarissa's true enjoyment of the kiss is being alone with Sally, being in close proximity to her female friend, and that the kiss is a culmination of the intimacy that has grown between the two young women. Clarissa's concern with proximity has already become evident in her excitement for Sally's presence: "She is beneath this roof...She is beneath this roof!" (*Dalloway* 27). She is pleased to share a private space with Sally in her bedroom, and it is this feeling that appears again at the time of the kiss. It is their being joined by a male presence and separated that really offends Clarissa. The separation caused by the entrance of the male gaze is the part of this occasion that causes Clarissa's devastation. Clarissa recalls, "She felt only how Sally was being mauled already, maltreated; she felt his [Peter's] hostility; his determination to break into their companionship" (*Dalloway* 27). The paramount detail of this exchange and interruption between Sally and Clarissa is her concern for Sally's destruction under Peter's gaze, or what Rado would call "the paralyzing assault of patriarchal oppression" (*Dalloway* 144). In their moment of rupture, Clarissa and Sally are allowed to escape the male gaze and social expectations. Susan S. Lanser asserts that "Female intimacies and public power are deeply interrelated" ("Befriending the Body" 194). The kiss is indeed a great moment of power for Clarissa and Sally. They have broken away from the rest of their group (their society) and have achieved a purely feminine relationship that had before been uncultivated. This does not last, however, with Peter's entrance into the scene. Clarissa sees in a Peter a possibly imagined desire to destroy the intimacy between her and Sally; however, it is certainly Peter's male gaze that stops this moment of rupture and returns the group to male-female pairings, as Peter joins Clarissa and Sally joins the other male in the group.

The privilege of the female space, the chora that Clarissa and Sally are afforded is something they never again have access to again as they grow older. As in the epithalamia portion of Sappho's fragments, the women move on to be married, leaving behind the chora and all of the nurture that it provided. It is clear throughout the novel that Clarissa struggles with maintaining her own personal identity as she fears that she has become Mrs. Richard Dalloway. Her mind, instead of being occupied with Plato and social reform, becomes taken up with household duties, her husband's luncheon with Lady Bruton, social propriety, and giving society parties; altogether these elements comprise Rado's "paralyzing assault" by the institution of patriarchy. At the end of the novel when Clarissa meets Sally again, she at first does not know who she is. Unaware that the name Lady Rosseter refers to her friend Sally, it is evident that the two women have not even kept in touch or kept up with the important events in one another's lives, such as marriage and childbirth.

Like Sappho's Leto and Niobe, the best of friends before motherhood, Clarissa and Sally lose contact with one another as they are separated by their marriages and children. The entrance of the male gaze and patriarchy causes the chora to dissipate and has a deadening effect on the two women's desire to expand their intellect. In the scene of their reunion, Clarissa and Sally relive subtler version of the same experience they had had with each other years before. Clarissa's mind echoes the excited phrase she had felt when Sally was in her house as a young woman, "Under this roof! Under this roof!" However, the years have changed the circumstances and Sally and Clarissa are no longer alone together under the roof of Clarissa's bedroom at the top of her house. Clarissa recognizes this difference as she thinks, "Under this roof! Under this roof! Not like that" (*Dalloway* 127). While the excitement of Sally's proximity returns, it is immediately met with the reminder that the circumstances have changed drastically. The kiss in

which Clarissa and Sally allow some physical manifestation of their affection for one another is the last moment where the two women are depicted as being alone together.

As the women meet again decades later, they are changed by the male gaze and adherence to patriarchal duties. Clarissa makes note of Sally thinking, “The lustre (*sic*) had gone out of her,” a far cry from the beautiful vitality Clarissa has once seen in her friend (*Dalloway* 127). A socially acceptable version of the kiss is repeated as the women “kiss each other, first this cheek, then that” (*Dalloway* 127). For a moment the women take each other by the hand and Clarissa feels a great deal of satisfaction as she looks over the drawing room at her guests. Once again, however, their moment is interrupted by the presence of the male gaze. This time it is Sally herself who brings this gaze into the picture saying, “I have five enormous boys,” (*Dalloway* 127). Sally can no longer see herself as Sally Seton, political reformer and aspiring intellectual. She is now Lady Rosseter, mother of five boys. Just as Clarissa feels she has become Mrs. Richard Dalloway, Sally has become Lady Rosseter, a name which Clarissa does not recognize. Rado describes this kind of phenomenon in Woolf’s writing as “the awesome power of a male-dominated cultural . . . establishment . . . that works to thwart . . . self expression at every turn” (*Dalloway* 145).

It is noteworthy in a Sapphic context that Sally has five large sons as opposed to sons and daughters or all daughters. Removed from the feminine exchanges with Clarissa, Sally becomes less lovely after many years of living in a predominately masculine household with five sons and a husband. Although Clarissa attempts to find solace for herself and for Sally in her “kindling all over at the thought of the past,” she ultimately cannot avoid the interruption that she and Sally are once again bound for. “But alas, Wilkins; Wilkins wanted her; Wilkins was emitting a voice of commanding authority as if the company must be admonished and the hostess reclaimed from

frivolity” (*Dalloway* 127). Just as Peter’s male presence interrupted Clarissa’s first kiss with Sally, the entrance of the Prime Minister and the expectations of Clarissa as a hostess curtail the joyful reunion. Clarissa, middle aged, once again catches a mere glimpse of the chora as she relishes the view of her party with Sally’s hand in hers; however, as before, this occasion is also terminated by a male presence.

It is quite apparent by the end of this scene, that what has been lost between the two women is not a sexual escapade, but rather a nurturing of a creative femininity separate from the male gaze and from the patriarchal expectation for women. Reunited at the party, the women are unable to abandon their sense of socially appropriate behaviors and concerns to have a meaningful exchange with one another. Instead, the conversation is short and fraught with domesticity. In spite of her inability to relive the chora, Clarissa’s experience in the chora is what allows her to maintain her introspective nature over the years. Clarissa’s recollection of this time in her life is when she seems most lifelike and is the only instance in the novel where the reader sees Clarissa in true abandon, without the pressure she feels as a wife, mother, and society lady. As the muses give the gift of poetic knowledge to Sappho, Sally bestows upon Clarissa a hunger for literature and knowledge. For Sappho, this gift was enduring, and it proves to be so in some sense for Clarissa as well. The reader does not actually see the events at Bourton as they take place, but sees them through Clarissa’s memory, just as Sappho’s reader sees the events in the fragments through Sappho’s memory.

As Clarissa recalls these scenes, her old feelings begin to be revived, and her imaginative power, cultivated earlier by Sally in Clarissa’s bedroom, proves to have endured even through the countless years of party planning and child rearing. This type of thinking allows Clarissa to identify with Septimus Smith when he commits suicide. Clarissa feels as if Septimus’s death

somehow signified a mistake in her life. After employing her imaginative powers recalling her time with Sally at Bourton and meeting Sally again at the party, Clarissa recognizes that she had “lost herself in the process of living” (*Dalloway* 136). Clarissa begins to feel delight in Septimus’s suicide in that he had the nerve to throw his unwanted life away. With this realization, Clarissa returns to the party resolutely and with a new frame of mind. With Shakespeare’s line, “Fear no more the heat of the sun” in her head, Clarissa’s new mindset is depicted as one that is free. In the last line of the novel, it is clear that Clarissa has regained something from her reunion with Sally and her consideration of Septimus’s death. When she returns to the room, her presence is powerful and commanding. Peter’s thoughts assess this new presence: “What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? . . . what is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa . . . For there she was” (*Dalloway* 143). This final moment of the novel is striking in its wording, “There she was,” as Woolf could have chosen many other manners of phrasing. There was not Mrs. Dalloway or even Clarissa. It was “she” who was there, “she” who appeared. Clarissa has appeared in her true identity at the stairs, as is evident even to Peter, even to someone who does not participate in the chora. Through her reunion with Sally and having participated in the chora exchange with Sally at Bourton, Clarissa is able to find her own identity apart from Richard.

In a discussion of Sapphism, Clarissa Dalloway proves to be quite difficult to pin down. The mental and emotional aspects of her relationship with Sally are somewhat overshadowed by the shock of the kiss for the reader. The character proves to be just as difficult for Woolf. In spite of her interest in the novel, Woolf could not seem to attain satisfaction from it. There is a sense in her diary that she consistently feels that something is missing. She describes her writing process as a toil. She writes, “I foresee, to return to *The Hours*, that this is going to be the devil of a

struggle . . . I am always having to wrench my substance to fit it . . . I should like to write away and away at it, very quick and fierce. Needless to say, I can't" (*Diary* 60).⁴ The work of writing *Mrs. Dalloway* proves to be somewhat excruciating for Woolf. It does not flow easily from her mind. She writes, "I've been battling ever so long with *The Hours*, which is proving one of my most tantalizing and refractory books. Parts are so bad, parts so good; I'm much interested; can't stop making it up yet—yet. What is the matter with it?" (*Diary* 61). The intense interest and pull that Woolf feels towards writing *Mrs. Dalloway* is an indication that she recognizes some value in what she is writing, in spite of the fact that she cannot break away from the pervasive feeling that there is something wrong with it, specifically in the character of Clarissa.

It is notable that Woolf had the most misgivings about Mrs. Dalloway's character. Woolf expresses her misgivings about Clarissa: "The doubtful point is, I think, the character of Mrs. Dalloway. It may be too stiff, too glittering and tinselly. But then I can bring innumerable other characters to her support" (*Diary* 63). No doubt, one of these supporting characters is Sally. Clarissa's experience with Sally is what fills out her character for the reader, showing her audience that she was once more than the slightly afflicted wife of a society man, more than Mrs. Richard Dalloway. Woolf even makes this idea clear as she writes of her attempts to reconcile herself with Clarissa, saying, "I remember the night at Rodmell when I decided to give it up, because I found Clarissa in some way tinselly. Then I invented her memories" (*Diary* 79). Even for Woolf it is Clarissa's memories that give her the roundness as a character, making her valuable to her author and to the reader. Ultimately, when discussing the novel with Lytton Strachey, Woolf deems Mrs. Dalloway a "flawed stone," and has by this point become indifferent to it in her intent upon her newest endeavor, *To the Lighthouse* (*Diary* 79-80).

⁴ *The Hours* is the original title that Woolf considered for *Mrs. Dalloway*, and she often refers to the work as *The Hours* in *A Writer's Diary*.

CHAPTER III

LILY BRISCOE AND MRS. RAMSAY: FEMALE INSPIRATION AND THE DEATH OF THE PATRIARCHAL SUBJECT

Leaving behind *Mrs. Dalloway* without ever having solved the mystery of the flaw in Clarissa's character, Woolf began her work on *To the Lighthouse*. Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* revealed itself openly to Woolf and she had far fewer anxieties about the novel. Woolf wrote in her journal, "I am blown like an old flag by my novel. This one is *To the Lighthouse* . . . I am writing as fast and as freely as I have written in my whole life; more so—20 times more so—than any novel yet. I think this is the proof that I was on the right path; and that what fruit hangs in soul is to be reached here" (*Diary* 85). Having been on the "right path" in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf has a chance in *To the Lighthouse* to grasp that certain element she had searched for so fervently, but been unable to find.

To the Lighthouse takes the chora moment in *Mrs. Dalloway*, abstracts it, prolongs it and deals with it more directly and artistically. While Clarissa and Sally dabble briefly in the intellectual and artistic, the character of Lily Briscoe is an actual representation of the female artist. Clarissa and Sally leave their juvenile dalliance to be married and have children; Lily, however, makes her pursuit of artistic realization her life's work. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily finds an inspiration in Mrs. Ramsay similar to what Clarissa finds in Sally. It is significant that Lily is not in love with Mrs. Ramsay herself, but with Mrs. Ramsay's ability to create. Woolf leaves aside the overshadowing homoeroticism of *Mrs. Dalloway*, making Sapphism in the sense of

female friendship and intellectual and artistic inspiration more of a focal point than in the previous novel. While scholars such as Ellen Bayuk Rosenman would assert that Woolf focuses on the erotic aspects of this female relationship, it is clear that Lily is not romantically in love with Mrs. Ramsay. Lily is in love with “this all . . .waving her hand at the hedge, the house, the children” (*To the Lighthouse* 13). What Lily finds inspiring in Mrs. Ramsay is her ability to orchestrate all of the components of her life successfully and with grace. Lily’s desire to become one with Mrs. Ramsay provides an extension of Clarissa’s feeling that she and Sally were in league together; however, in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf does away with the need for an overt homoerotic exchange as Lily is explicitly aware of Mrs. Ramsay’s influence upon her in a way that Clarissa was not aware of Sally’s. While Clarissa and Sally have inadvertently discovered the source of the oneness and the intellectual inspiration, this is something that Lily mulls over quite frequently and in great detail.

Lily’s words provide the reader with an insight into the creative struggle of the female artist. Like Clarissa, Lily contemplates love and the nature of love between herself and Mrs. Ramsay. She desires the intimate company of Mrs. Ramsay, and while Lily paints, she recalls a discovery she made while lying with her head in Mrs. Ramsay’s lap: “What art was there known to love or cunning, by which one pressed into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? . . .Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one?” (*Lighthouse* 36). In this passage Lily moves through several ideas concerning love and art. Woolf uses artistic imagery to describe the process by which two people can experience love, or intimate knowledge of one another. However, in the next line Lily changes both her term for the method by which one is united with the object of affection, and she reclassifies the process. “Art” changes to “device,” and “love”

changes to “becoming.” Instead of trying to classify the relationship between her and Mrs. Ramsay as love, Lily comes to the idea that what she desires from her contact with Mrs. Ramsay is some sort of manifestation. At the end of this passage, Lily realizes, “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” (*Lighthouse* 36). Lily’s revelation describes the method by which two women can become in league with one another.

The connection between knowledge and intimacy is made explicit here, as Lily realizes that her closeness with Mrs. Ramsay produces her desire to paint, to make art. Again, there arises the idea of proximity as Lily lies with her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s lap. It is through this proximity that a kind of chora is created where Lily is allowed both the time and the inspiration to work through her own ideas about love, intimacy, and knowledge. The terms Lily uses to describe the scene just before she begins to detail her thoughts provide spatial imagery: “Then she remembered she had laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s lap . . . now with every trace of willfulness abolished, and in its stead, something clear as the space which the clouds at last uncover—a little space of sky which sleeps beside the moon” (*Lighthouse* 36).

While Mrs. Ramsay’s art is homemaking, to Lily it is still a form of creative invention. The epitome of this creativity and the chora scene for Lily and Mrs. Ramsay takes place in the form of Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party. Many critics have commented upon the visionary aspect of this scene, recognizing its pivotal role in the novel. Jack Stewart describes the dinner party as an “imaginative space loom[ing] large and demand[ing] to be filled” (“A Need of Distance and Blue” 84). Thomas Matro interprets this scene as the point where Mrs. Ramsay achieves her vision, imposing it on the other characters at the table (“Only Relations” 218). Most critics of *To*

the Lighthouse discuss the dinner scene as a significant moment for Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, but I postulate that the chora-like nature of this scene is the source of this visionary atmosphere. Though the dinner begins somewhat awkwardly with some hostility in Charles Tansley's presence, Mrs. Ramsay, in her skill, manages to salvage the event by commanding, "Light the candles" (*Lighthouse* 68). It is when the candles are lit that the two women begin to feel a sense of pleasure. This can be attributed to the beauty that the light of the candles creates as they are reflected in the window. As the world inside is reflected by the windows, the room becomes a singular space. "For the night was now shut off by the panes of glass, which, far from giving any accurate view of the outside world, rippled it so strangely that there, inside the room, seemed to be order and dry land; there, outside, a reflection in which things waved and vanished, waterily" (*Lighthouse* 69). The candles reflecting the room back in on itself creates a closed space, a place of safety and solitude.

The warmth and light of the room provide protection from the outside world and relief from its threats. Before the lighting of the candles, Mrs. Ramsay, Lily, and Mr. Bankes all feel that something is lacking at the dinner table or in the atmosphere. While Mr. Bankes recognizes the lack, and all those present at the dinner table sense a change in the atmosphere, only Lily and Mrs. Ramsay are able to pinpoint the reason for the "sudden exhilaration" (*Lighthouse* 69). Mrs. Ramsay recognizes that her uneasiness turns into "expectation," and Lily recognizes, "Some weight was taken off them; anything might happen, she felt" (*Lighthouse* 69). The dinner party inspires feelings of expectation in both of the women at the table. While Mrs. Ramsay's expectation is domestic, yet still a result of a finely orchestrated dinner, Lily's expectation is a bit more venturesome as she feels that the possibilities in front of her are numerous.

Lily's mind proves more able to tap into the Sapphic creativity of the chora, for even before the candles are lit, Lily is able to block out Charles Tansley's ungainly attitude and find inspiration in Mrs. Ramsay's table cloth. She thinks, "There's the sprig on the table-cloth; there's my painting; I must move the tree to the middle" (*Lighthouse* 61).⁵ As Lily's adoration of Mrs. Ramsay stems from her ability to orchestrate a peaceful home environment, it is appropriate that Lily should thus find her muse in the form of Mrs. Ramsay's table cloth. Like Sappho's girls "with all they wished for beside them," Lily and Mrs. Ramsay find peace, contentment, and fulfillment by their proximity to one another in the chora and in the artistic sphere of Mrs. Ramsay's skillful domesticity. While Rado argues that Mrs. Ramsay ultimately incites despair in Lily, it is actually Mrs. Ramsay's act of creation that inspires Lily and gives her the finishing idea for her painting (*Androgyne Imagination* 153). As Rado points out, Mrs. Ramsay does, in some ways, perpetuate the oppression of patriarchal standards. As the muses are female mouthpieces of male gods, Mrs. Ramsay is the mouthpiece of patriarchy, according to Rado; however, what Rado's work does not consider is the potent creative power of Mrs. Ramsay herself.

As we will see, Mrs. Ramsay ultimately refuses to succumb to patriarchal demands from Mr. Ramsay and she has an imaginative power all her own. It is Mrs. Ramsay's skill in creating beauty and even Mrs. Ramsay's beauty in itself that inspire Lily. After all, while Mrs. Ramsay's attempts at promoting the patriarchal institution of marriage in the case of Minta and Paul is a failure, her ability to inspire Lily artistically remains a success. The fact that Lily is ultimately able to finish her painting is evidence that Mrs. Ramsay's influence produced a positive effect. Although she meets many obstacles, the end of the novel portrays Lily's success (and by extension, Mrs. Ramsay's success in that she is the source of Lily's inspiration). Even after Mrs.

⁵ Again, the reader is provided with a disembodied, mobile chora that travels from the place where Lily lies with her head in Mrs. Ramsay's lap, to the dining room where the women are still able to share inspiration with one another.

Ramsay's death, Lily's recollection of her head in Mrs. Ramsay's lap allows her to finish her painting. As for Sappho and Clarissa Dalloway, the power of memory remains a strong force for Lily. Rado asserts Lily's joining with Augustus Carmichael to form a metaphorical androgyne allows her to finish her painting, but that Lily must ultimately sublimate her femininity in a connection with Augustus Carmichael where she is alienated from herself (*Androgyne Imagination* 158); however, Lily ultimately takes a stand in her femininity, acknowledging that she will never marry. This is Lily's moment of rupture, where she consciously denies the patriarchal ideal of female behavior and its assertions about the feminine artistic capacity. As Clarissa has gained something from her recollection of Sally, Lily is also able to complete her painting as she reminisces about Mrs. Ramsay. The last line of the novel is again important as Lily thinks, "I have had my vision" (*Lighthouse* 149). While Rado would argue that Lily is unable to reconcile her femininity with her art, I argue that the last line of the novel indicates that Lily does this successfully. As Clarissa found her identity, Lily has her artistic vision.

In *To the Lighthouse*, male interruption takes place much as it did for Clarissa and Sally with Peter Walsh's intrusion. Throughout the novel, Lily is faced with several male interruptions: Mr. Ramsay, Mr. Bankes, and, most aggravating, Charles Tansley. As Lily sits on the lawn painting, Mr. Bankes approaches and attempts to give her guidance on her methods. Lily fears that in accepting his suggestions, the "unity" of her painting will be compromised, and as she attempts to take the painting off of the easel she realizes, "It had been seen; it had been taken from her" (*Lighthouse* 38). While Mr. Bankes's intrusion, like Peter's, is not meant to be harmful, Lily feels she is robbed of her artistic endeavor. Mr. Bankes's attempt to offer Lily some aid actually hinders her from discovering her vision of Mrs. Ramsay. As in the case with

Clarissa, Sally, and Peter where, the male gaze is a destructive, even deadening force, Mr. Bankes's male gaze on Lily's painting is a deadening force on her creative power.

In addition to Mr. Bankes's unwanted advice, Lily must also deal with a second source of interruption: that of Charles Tansley. His assertion that, "Women can't paint, women can't write," plagues Lily consistently throughout the novel. The first mention of this statement is Lily imagining Tansley whispering in her ear, confirming her suspicions that her art is terrible, will never be seen, and especially never hung. She recalls Tansley's sentiment once again at the dinner party, where she wonders and almost chastises herself for bothering to care about Tansley's opinion. She wonders, "What did it matter coming from him . . . why did her whole being bow, like corn under a wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort?" (*Lighthouse* 61). Lily is aware that Tansley's opinions are inconsequential, and most of the characters in the novel find him most disagreeable. In spite of this knowledge, Lily still cannot withstand his assaults and must take time to recover from them; The effect of the male presence on the female creative power is damaging. In spite of her determination to finish her painting and to be successful as an artist, Lily cannot help but be affected by Tansley's negative view of female artistic abilities.

The final form of interruption that exists in *To the Lighthouse* affects both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. Mr. Ramsay's constant thundering about the house and constant need for affirmation leaves both women in an interrupted state of creation. After Mr. Bankes's intrusion upon her endeavors, Lily is forced to abandon them for a while as Mr. Ramsay glowers at her from the porch. Having accidentally witnessed Mr. Ramsay in one of his foul moods, Lily feels the need to abandon her location, but she hesitates to leave as it is "with difficulty she [takes] her eyes of her picture" (*Lighthouse* 13). Not only causing a disruption in Lily's creative act, but actually

forcing her to flee the scene, Mr. Ramsay in the most physical intimidation that Lily must face. His interruption proves to be most detrimental to Lily as she takes one last moment to consider her work: “It was in that moment’s flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself – struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage” (*Lighthouse* 13). Mr. Ramsay’s outburst and glare, his striking fear into Lily’s mind, immediately supersedes the descent of her overarching fear that she will never be able to communicate on the canvas what she sees in her head. These interruptions only leave her with a “miserable remnant of her vision” which a great many elements try to “pluck from her” (*Lighthouse* 13).

Later in the novel, Mr. Ramsay continues to interrupt Lily’s endeavors as he desires from her the affirmation that he needed from Mrs. Ramsay before her death. Approaching Lily as she paints, Mr. Ramsay’s need to be praised disrupts Lily’s creative process. In an attempt to assuage him Lily praises his boots, but upon returning to her painting, she realizes that she is off track. Woolf writes, “She looked blankly at the canvas . . . She had taken the wrong brush in her agitation at Mr Ramsay’s presence, and her easel, rammed into the earth so nervously, was at the wrong angle” (*Lighthouse* 112). Just as Peter’s interruption physically separated Clarissa and Sally, Mr. Ramsay’s interruption physically separates Lily from the tools necessary to complete her painting. When Mr. Ramsay leaves, Lily is able to breathe a sigh of relief and after some struggle, is able to resume her painting. Although Lily triumphs at the end of the novel as she completes her painting, the moments of inspiration she feels are often undone by the men in the house interrupting her in some manner or other.

Likewise, Mrs. Ramsay's triumph is diminished by her conversation with Mr. Ramsay after the dinner party. As the couple walks together, Mrs. Ramsay's earlier triumph becomes secondary to Mr. Ramsay's melancholy manner and career insecurities. Mrs. Ramsay must fight against her husband's bad mood and she attempts to do so, saying it is a "perfectly lovely evening" and asking him what he is "groaning about" (*Lighthouse* 49). While Mrs. Ramsay should be able to take pleasure in her dinner and feel successful in light of her masterful orchestration, Mr. Ramsay's constant need to be reaffirmed checks any enjoyment she may be able to feel. Mrs. Ramsay's inclination to revel in the beauty around her is stunted by her knowledge that her husband cannot, or that he will degrade it with his melancholy attitude. As she gazes at the stars, Mrs. Ramsay desires to share her vision of beauty with her husband, but ultimately cannot. Woolf describes the occasion: "And looking up, she saw above the thin trees the first pulse of the full-throbbing star, and wanted to make her husband look at it; for the sight gave her such keen pleasure. But she stopped herself. He never looked at things. If he did, all he would say would be, Poor little world, with one of his sighs" (*Lighthouse* 51). Mrs. Ramsay takes a joy in the beauty in front of her, but cannot share it with her husband. Her experience in nature and with beauty is diminished by his failure to recognize the beauty that she would point out to him.

Mrs. Ramsay's vexation is further exacerbated by Mr. Ramsay's failure to recognize his own daughter's beauty. As Mrs. Ramsay's domestic and familial art suggest that she would take great pride in having such a beautiful daughter would be immense; however, Mr. Ramsay's inability to acknowledge his child's beauty causes the success to be less gratifying for his wife. She thinks, "Did he even notice his daughter's beauty, or whether there was pudding on his plate or roast beef?" (*Lighthouse* 51). Because Mr. Ramsay's sullen attitude and distance are always in

the background, Mrs. Ramsay, although able to create a harmonious household cannot feel the full gratification that such a success should bring as her husband's persistent melancholy interrupts her joyous moments. It is for this reason that Mrs. Ramsay feels she cannot share herself with Mr. Ramsay, that she refuses to tell him that she loves him.

Once the couple has returned to the house, Mrs. Ramsay has what she considers to be a triumph over her husband's oppressive need to be reaffirmed. In this scene, Mrs. Ramsay is engaged in her own art, domestic creation, as she knits a stocking. Mr. Ramsay, with his characteristic negativity, interrupts her as he says, "You won't finish that stocking tonight" (*Lighthouse* 88).

Mrs. Ramsay agrees, but then rises to turn away from him as well as stare out at the beauty of the sea, admiring its nighttime beauty. In turning away from Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay loses proximity to him, and avoids gaze. In making this move away, Mrs. Ramsay is able to momentarily escape the male gaze, even as Mr. Ramsay's need for affirmation presents itself, yet again. She knows that he wants her to tell him that she loves him, yet Mrs. Ramsay turns away from him. In her admiration of beauty, of the art of nature, Mrs. Ramsay is ultimately able to resist Mr. Ramsay's male gaze. Having earlier put aside her willfulness in the chora scene with Lily, Mrs. Ramsay is able to resist, if only momentarily, her husband's deadening presence.

The relationship between Paul, Minta, and Nancy is another, if minor example of the deadening effect of the male gaze on the female chora. In "The Window," Paul, Minta, Nancy, and Andrew make their way down to the waterside to play in the ocean. As Nancy retreats to the attic to escape her family, Minta reaches her hand out and asks Nancy to come along to the beach. On the walk down, Minta repeatedly takes Nancy's hand, and when she does, Nancy "[sees] the whole world spread out beneath her, as if it were Constantinople seen through a mist" (*Lighthouse* 52). The proximity of the women to one another, the taking of each other's hands,

allows Nancy's imagination to open.⁶ She is overcome by this sentiment and fancies that she sees cities and "a pinnacle, a dome; prominent things, without names" (*Lighthouse* 52). Nancy's creative imagination is allowed to flourish by this private exchange with Minta. When Nancy loses this contact with Minta, her mind is closed off again as Nancy realizes, "When Minta dropped her hand, as she did when they ran down the hillside, all that dome, the pinnacle, whatever it was that had protruded through the mist, sank down into it and disappeared" (*Lighthouse* 52). At the loss of the private contact with Minta, in the loss of proximity to one another, Nancy loses sight of what her imagination had previously revealed to her. Nancy's creative machinations are further interrupted later as she creates a small ocean from a puddle on the shore. Woolf describes Nancy's imagined scene: "Brooding, she changed the pool into the sea, and made minnows into sharks and whales, and cast vast clouds over this tiny world by holding her hand against the sun, and so brought darkness and desolation, like God himself, to millions of ignorant innocent creatures, and then took her hand away suddenly and let the sun stream down" (*Lighthouse* 53). Nancy uses her imagination to create a tiny world, where she has the power of God. Inside this little universe, Nancy can create much in the way that Constantinople revealed itself to her earlier.

As in Sappho's fragments, however, the destructive nature of erotic love slices through Nancy's creativity. She notices Paul and Minta kissing and thinks, "Oh, heavens! In each other's arms, were Paul and Minta kissing probably. She was outraged, indignant" (*Lighthouse* 54). Just as Sappho laments the loss of her female friends to their husbands, lovers, or heterosexual desires, Nancy loses Minta to Paul. In the same manner that Clarissa and Sally lose one another

⁶ Here, the reader sees an echo of the scene at Clarissa Dalloway's party, where she and Sally join hands. Considering this, the interaction between Nancy and Minta is more homoerotic than the physical interaction between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay. The physical manifestation of Lily and Mrs. Ramsay's affection for one another mimics the interaction of a mother and daughter.

to their respective husbands, the relationship between Minta and Nancy disappears as Minta refocuses on Paul. Although this short scene is fleeting and seemingly insignificant, it repeats the kind of Sapphic imagination and interruption that is present in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Furthermore, Paul and Minta's eventual marriage fails miserably as Paul takes a mistress. Paul's presence in Minta's life has a deadening effect on her mind as well. Lily observes of Paul and Minta, "Minta went on eating her sandwich annoyingly, while he spoke something violent, abusing her, in a mutter . . . He was withered, drawn; she flamboyant, careless. For things had worked loose after the first year or so; the marriage had turned out rather badly" (*Lighthouse* 124). Minta's vital personality is abused by her husband's mutterings. In "The Window" Andrew recognizes this buoyancy when he thinks that Minta is afraid of nothing. However, this goes completely unappreciated by Paul. This dichotomy is represented by Minta's adventurous nature at the beach and Paul's mere quoting of the guidebook. As Lily's creative power is stunned by Mr. Bankes's scientific observations, the counterpoise of Minta's adventurous nature and the factual dogma of Paul's guidebook ultimately produce a bad marriage and a less spirited Minta. She spends the rest of her life standing next to Paul as he works and "handing him his tools" (*Lighthouse* 125). Minta's nature and imagination become deceased by the end of the novel, where she only assists her husband instead of leading her own life.

This association of the death of creativity with marriage appears again in the death of Mrs. Ramsay—quite a symbolic moment where Sapphism is concerned in the text.⁷ In "Time Passes" it is revealed that Mrs. Ramsay has died, but there is little ceremony in Woolf's revealing

⁷ It is clear throughout these fragments that marriage is devastating for the female. There is a very obvious struggle to maintain one's maidenhead. The second poem in the epithalamia section states, "I shall be a virgin always" (Barnard 27). The last poem in the section, however, asks, "Why am I crying / Am I still sad / because of my / lost maidenhead?" (Barnard 36). As does Minta, the speaker in Sappho's fragments fails in maintaining her autonomy in her failure to keep her maidenhead.

of the matriarch's death. Mrs. Ramsay, ever scrutinized by the male gaze, and perpetuator of a patriarchal agenda, passes out of the scene, although her memory remains. Lily, who is ultimately able to escape the male gaze, is the female character who lives and is successful, as she resists the pressure to marry Mr. Bankes and is able to achieve her artistic vision. Mrs. Ramsay's failure plays out in the rest of the novel as a result of what Carlston calls "matriotism," which she says "conceals gender inequity behind an idealization of maternity . . . and suppresses women's sexuality in favor of their maternal role" (*Thinking Fascism* 7). While Mrs. Ramsay does attempt to reach outside of her role as a mother and homemaker, she is ultimately prohibited from doing so both by Mr. Ramsay and her own matriotism. Her ultimate failure is represented in the form of Minta and Paul's rotten marriage. Lily recognizes that Mrs. Ramsay's attempt at domestic artistry, her matchmaking, has failed in some manner. Lily thinks, "But the dead . . . one pitied them, one brushed them aside, one had even a little contempt for them . . . Mrs. Ramsay had faded and gone, she thought. We can override her wishes . . . Mockingly she seemed to see her there at the end of the corridor of years saying, 'Marry, marry!' . . . And one would have to say to her, It has all gone against your wishes!" (*Lighthouse* 125). Because her artistry was fraught with patriarchal ideals and catered to the male gaze, Mrs. Ramsay's attempt at creation ultimately fails.

It is revealed that Paul takes a mistress and that Minta is completely disinterested in their relationship. Kathleen Helal considers Mrs. Ramsay's stunted artistic articulation. "She knows something is amiss in her life, [but] she never allows these thoughts to become fully developed" ("Anger, Anxiety, and Abstraction" 86). Although Mrs. Ramsay does refuse to tell Mr. Ramsay that she loves him, this is a passive act compared with her desire to ask him, "Why could he never conceal his feelings?" (*Lighthouse* 68). While Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are able to tap into

the creative power of the chora and achieve a momentary unity, Mrs. Ramsay cannot ultimately let go of domestic ideals. Like Clarissa and Sally, Mrs. Ramsay is allowed some artistic appreciation within her fleeting moments in the chora, but she is ultimately unable to fully step outside of what is expected of her, and she even presses these expectations on others such as Lily and Minta. In Mrs. Ramsay's death Woolf provides an example of what may happen to a woman who is capable of creative imaginings, but is barred from them. At the end of the novel Lily puts down her brush and thinks, "I have had my vision" (*Lighthouse* 149). Refusing to succumb to the expectations of the male gaze in her determination not to marry Mr. Bankes, Lily's vision is realized, whereas Mrs. Ramsay's is not. LuAnn McCracken asserts that Woolf herself "needed to achieve separation from the identity of the mother" ("The Synthesis of My Being" 65). For Lily, this separation is accomplished, but Mrs. Ramsay is never able to completely part with her patriotism in spite of her small attempts to undermine Mr. Ramsay. Ultimately, Mrs. Ramsay successfully creates the chora scene at the dinner party, which inspires Lily, but Mrs. Ramsay is not herself able to participate or achieve the same type of inspiration.

Woolf's Creative Tangent: "Orlando . . . is a freak"

In a discussion of sapphism, it is impossible to leave out *Orlando*, the most sapphic of Woolf's works in the traditional sense of sapphism. Famous is Nigel Nicholson's characterization of *Orlando* as a love letter, and the mania evident in Woolf's journals as she conceives and composes *Orlando* would justify such a characterization as it focuses too greatly on homoeroticism. After finishing *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf pauses for a moment, setting aside these plots and characters that feature chora settings. Having laid down these more abstracted ideas of sapphism in *Mrs. Dalloway* and extended them to *To the*

Lighthouse, Woolf takes a tangential turn in which she begins to compose *Orlando*, a novel that focuses on the homoerotic aspect of sapphism. The source of Woolf's temporary abandonment of her previous train of thought and her adoption of a more traditional version of sapphism is abundantly evident in her journals: Virginia met Vita.

Woolf's conception for *Orlando* comes from her decision to write biographical sketches of all of her friends; however, it is Vita Sackville-West in particular who captures her imagination. Originally meant to be a short creative dalliance, Woolf writes of *Orlando* in her diary on October 5 1933, "I shall let myself dash this is for a week" (*Diary* 113). The dalliance that the novel was supposed to have been (like her affair with Vita) took hold of Woolf and steered her completely off the path she had lain out for herself. Having descended into a state of mania as it seems Woolf did when writing *Orlando*, the sobered author reviews her work and deems it "freakish" and finds herself sick with it. It is evident here that Woolf recognizes *Orlando* as a deviation from her Modernist project in *Dalloway* and *Lighthouse*. Still thinking and working on *The Moths* she writes, "Yet I think something is there . . . It is—whatever I make of it—a large and potential theme—which *Orlando* was not perhaps" (*Diary* 149). While it remains unspoken what Woolf believes to be the overarching theme of her oeuvre, what is made explicit is that *Orlando*, as the outlier, is a deviation and does not belong under the theme of her other works.

CHAPTER IV

“CHLOE LIKED OLIVIA”: THE LABORATORY AS CHORA AND THE TRAGEDY OF JUDITH SHAKESPEARE

A Room of One's Own makes a return to the subject matter of *Dalloway* and the *Lighthouse*, although through a different lens; it overtly clarifies and discusses the ideas about female artists and male interruption present in her two preceding novels from a more technical perspective. The entirety of the work, concerning the plight and place of the female writer in contemporary literature, begins with Woolf's account of her visit to what she calls "Oxbridge," the intellectual community under the influence of Oxford and Cambridge. Traversing campus and ruminating on ideas about female writers, Woolf wanders onto the lawn and lies down peacefully in the grass. Stirred by her ideas about women in the literary canon, Woolf is moved to action. She writes, "It was thus I found myself walking rapidly across a grass plot" (*A Room* 4). Moved by her own creative machinations, Woolf's intellectual process is quickly interrupted. She explains,

Instantly a man's figure rose to intercept me. Nor did I at first understand the gesticulations of a curious-looking object, in a cut-away coat and evening shirt, were aimed at me. His face expressed horror and indignation . . . He was a beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me.
(*A Room* 4)

Having previously depicted the interruption of other female figures in her novels, *A Room* is Woolf's depiction of her own creative struggle and interruption. Attempting to cross over in the

sphere of the intellectual, the place where Scholars and Fellows abound, Woolf is immediately sent running back to the path by the male figure of the beadle. Like Clarissa, Sally, Lily, and Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf's attempt to forge a new path, a more subversive path, is curtailed by a male interrupter. Woolf describes her "little fish [going] into hiding" at this interruption and can no longer remember her train of thought. She writes, "What idea it had been that had sent me so audaciously trespassing I could not now remember" (*A Room* 5). The intensity of the interruption is implied by Woolf's inability to recall an idea that had moments before been so profound that it sent her body into motion as her brain moved.

Woolf is again interrupted during her tour of Oxbridge as she tries to enter the library at Cambridge. Moved by yet another idea and anxious to gain access to a book by Thackeray, Woolf attempts to make entry into the library. Once again, a male interrupts her further investigation. Woolf says,

I was actually at the door which leads to the library itself. I must have opened it, for instantly there issued, like a guardian angel, barring the way with a flutter of a black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction. (*A Room* 6)

Just as Woolf was chased off of the lawn by the beadle, the "guardian" of the library interrupts her creative process and access to the genius and imaginative workings of others. Woolf describes the library as keeping treasures locked up safely in secret; treasures to which women are not allowed access. Although she leaves angrily, Woolf notes, "That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library" (*A Room* 6). While marked by a sense of humor, Woolf takes care to point out the library's indifference to her plight, or the plight of any woman is a matter with which such an institution would not concern itself. The problem with Woolf's creative process is that it reaches out to a male-dominated sphere

to foster her own ideas. The dialectic in which she attempts to participate is a male conversation with no place for a woman. Unlike Clarissa, Sally, Lily, and Mrs. Ramsay, Woolf has no female realm in which to function, no chora to nurture her imaginative machinations.

Woolf creates an allegory for her experience in the third chapter of *A Room*, which concerns the existence Shakespeare's hypothetical sister, Judith. Woolf's creation and rendering of the tragedy of Judith Shakespeare creates yet another Sapphic figure. Like Woolf's, Judith's talent for writing remains uncultivated due to her gender. Woolf begins the story, "What would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say . . . She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog see the world as he was. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil" (*A Room* 50-51). Judith is just as imaginative as her male counterpart, William; however, Judith is kept from the world of education. Here the reader sees Woolf's debarment from the Cambridge library. Judith has a taste for the theater like her brother, and sets out to find a place for herself amongst a troupe; however, Judith is turned out much as Woolf is chased from the lawn at Oxbridge. As a last resort, Judith grants sexual favors to one of the men in the acting company and shortly thereafter commits suicide. Woolf writes, "She found herself with child by that gentleman and so—who shall measure the heat and violence of a poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?—killed herself one winter's night and lies buried as some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle" (*A Room* 52). Frustrated and failed at braving the world, Judith's takes her own life, and her death passes unceremoniously, unlike the death of Shakespeare and the subsequent centuries celebrating his life. Unable to connect to a female coterie as an artistic outlet, both women are left to fend for themselves in a male sphere. Through the dictation of her own experiences and the allegory of Judith's life, Woolf's text provides an

example of the tragedy that lies ahead for women who are given no opportunities to cultivate their ideas among other women.

Careful to point out these dangers, Woolf also provides an example of what happens when women are allowed to enjoy association with one another. In chapter five, Woolf imagines that she is reading a book, *Life's Adventures*. *Life's Adventures* is written by an imaginary author, Mary Carmichael, whom Woolf creates and uses as a vehicle for her own thoughts. Inside this fabrication of reading this imaginary book Woolf imagines herself coming across a statement that stirs her inner thoughts. “Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these-- 'Chloe liked Olivia,' and then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature” (*A Room* 89). Woolf is stunned by this statement—that women should enjoy one another’s company and have the privilege of the chora association. Woolf continues on to tell her reader that “Chloe likes Olivia and they share a laboratory” (*A Room* 91). The laboratory of Chloe and Olivia becomes a chora setting, and Woolf goes on to postulate how history would have been different had women liked each other in past representations of female relationships. Rosenman asserts that the significance of this passage is derived in part from its spatial aspect, but also that “[The] space creates a double image of lesbianism and its suppression” (“Sexual Identity” 636). While the space does create a double image, I suggest that it is an image of female friendship: one under the male gaze, and one free of the male gaze. Woolf uses Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (a connection to her earlier discussion of Judith) to imagine a world where Cleopatra liked Octavia; however, for these two women, no such thing could take place.

Cleopatra did not like Octavia . . . Cleopatra's only feeling about Octavia is one of jealousy. All of these relationships between women, I thought rapidly, are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. (*A Room 90*)

For Chloe and Olivia, their chora, their laboratory, provides the interval of exchange that is necessary for the nurturance of creativity. Given their chora, they are able to move beyond the jealousy and hatred that constitutes the exchange between Cleopatra and Octavia who are confined to the male sphere, as Woolf and Judith are. The women can only view each other through Antony's gaze: sexuality. Threatened by and unable to see around Antony's vision of the other, the women are pitted against one another. Because they have no method for viewing their situation apart from Antony's perspective, Cleopatra and Octavia engage in a typically male exchange. The similarity of names in Woolf's rendition of the two Shakespearean women cannot be ignored. The likeness of Chloe to Cleopatra and Olivia to Octavia indicates that Woolf is drawing a parallel between these four characters.

In Shakespeare's version the women are depicted as existing only within the male sphere. As a male, Shakespeare's propensity was to project the characters in this manner; however, had Judith been allowed to try her hand and playwriting, had she been allowed the opportunity to portray women from a female perspective, the acrimonious relationship between Cleopatra and Octavia would have ceased to exist in favor of the friendship that blossoms between Chloe and Olivia. Through a female writer, Cleopatra and Octavia are renamed and transformed. As it happened, only the male writer was provided with any opportunity to cultivate his craft, as Woolf points out is almost always the case; therefore, characters like Chloe and Olivia are rather nonexistent in literature before Woolf's time.

Providing an alternative to female rivalry, Woolf gives Chloe and Olivia a purely female exchange which allows the two women to develop a fondness of one another where Cleopatra and Octavia could not. The laboratory is sterile, uncontaminated, and Chloe and Olivia, inside the laboratory, are unaffected by the influence of the male gaze. Woolf characterizes it as “unlit by the . . . capricious light of the male sex” (*A Room* 92). Unlike Cleopatra and Octavia, their femininity remains unadulterated by masculinity. Providing examples of both scenarios, Woolf paints a vivid picture of the plight of women. Those who have the privilege of association with another—Chloe and Olivia, Clarissa and Sally, Lily and Mrs. Ramsay, have the opportunity in their artistic endeavors. Those who do not have this privilege—Judith Shakespeare and Woolf herself, are left to struggle alone.

CHAPTER V

RHODA AND HER WAVES: THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN ABSENT CHORA

Having explored such scenarios in essay form in *A Room*, Woolf again returns to fiction with *The Waves*. In this novel the reader finds a character that connects Woolf, Judith, and Sappho, embodying the danger of debarment from the chora and the consequences of such artistic stifling. With this more direct connection to Woolf, Judith, and Sappho it is significant that Rhoda, although existing in her private universe, sets a chora-like environment into motion but never actually participates in it. When Rhoda floats petals in a basin, setting ships to sail, she functions more as a maestro for a Sapphic orchestration. Likewise, in her fragments, Sappho presides over the female exchanges, but most often refrains from participating in them. This failure to participate becomes evident as one of her fragments depicts the frustrations of her friend:

It was you Atthis who said,
“Sappho, if you will not get
Up and let us look at you
I shall never love you again!
.....
She will walk
among us like a mother
with all her daughters around her.”
.....
But you forget everything (Barnard 43)

Atthis’s request for Sappho to engage with the other women and her threat to never love Sappho again indicate that Sappho has somehow failed to participate in the chora with the rest of her

coterie. Atthis ultimately does not ask Sappho to take a place among them, but to “walk among [them] like a mother.” Even if Sappho had agreed, her place in the chora would still be a somewhat distant one. She does not share the same proximity to the other women as they share between themselves. The last line of the fragment even indicates that even this distant exchange never took place. Sappho’s words, “But you forget everything” tell the reader that although this idea for Sappho’s participation in the exchange came about, Atthis’s forgetting prevents it from ever coming to fruition.

Like Sappho, Rhoda lies on the outside of the exchange. As children, Jinny and Susan spend time together at school, while Rhoda remains alone and peripheral. Susan thinks, “We go upstairs to change into white socks to play tennis—Jinny and I with Rhoda following after” (*Waves* 21). The text provides many similar examples where Rhoda lags behind the group. Furthermore, Jinny and Susan, in spite of their differences and irritation with each other, build a relationship over the course of their lives and come to love each other. Although Jinny and Susan begin with a relationship not unlike Octavia and Cleopatra’s—governed by Jinny’s love interest in Louis-- the two women are able to have a female exchange (like that of Chloe and Olivia) at the all-girls school they attend later in the novel. The scene in which Susan spies Louis and Jinny kissing and the horror that she feels at this sight is reminiscent Nancy’s shock when she sees Minta and Paul kissing each other on the beach; however, Jinny and Susan are allowed time together as they attend school together into young adulthood. In the case of Nancy and Minta, the two are separated shortly after their brief chora experience walking down to the beach as Minta marries Paul. Jinny and Susan’s animosity is weakened by their time together at school in Switzerland, creating a bond between the two women. Towards the end of the novel Susan thinks, “Our hatred is almost indistinguishable from our love” (*Waves* 78).

This bond, this experience and exchange, is something that Rhoda does not have access to; she never develops the love bond. Rhoda remains an enigma to the other girls and is aware that her presence irritates them. She thinks, “See now with what extraordinary certainty Jinny pulls on her stockings, simply to play tennis. That I admire. But I like Susan’s way better, for she is more resolute . . . Both despise me for copying what they do” (*Waves* 23). Unlike the love tempering Susan and Jinny’s hatred for one another, the love that could temper the hatred for Rhoda never comes into existence. Rhoda remains, again, on the outside of the circle. She is an aloof admirer of Susan and Jinny, but never one of them. Likewise, Susan and Jinny do not seem to exhibit a desire to include Rhoda in anything they do; they only allow her to trail behind them.

Rhoda’s imagination and persona are certainly the most Sapphic of all of Woolf’s characters; however, Rhoda’s imagination and creativity are never cultivated by the interaction with other females. While she sets her own personal universe in motion, it never expands to meet or overlap with anyone else’s. Rado notes that Rhoda’s isolation is a problem, but cites the ultimate source of this problem as Rhoda’s alienation from her own body. For Rado, the source of Rhoda’s “madness and suicide” is the fact that patriarchal ideals impress themselves upon Rhoda’s body as she attempts to “reflect back” the image that society demands of her. I argue, however, that the problem of Rhoda’s isolation is that it bars her not from her sense of self, but from interaction with Jinny and Susan in the chora. Like Rado’s Rhoda, the Sapphic Rhoda’s selfhood is never cultivated; however, for Rado this is due to Rhoda’s alienation from her own body. When Rhoda does attempt to reach outside her own world in her affair with Louis, the attempt at communication is not with a female nor is it lasting. Like Woolf and Judith reach out to a male-dominated sphere, Rhoda must resort to an affair with Louis, rather than a friendship with the other women. Like Judith’s sexual relationship with the man from the acting troupe,

Rhoda engages in a sexual affair with one of the men in her peer group and shortly thereafter commits suicide.

Rhoda's brief affair with Louis ends quickly, and Woolf gives it little attention. The only indication that this relationship even exists is in Louis's short thought, a mere interjection as he thinks about his dwelling, "There Rhoda sometimes comes. For we are lovers" (*Waves* 97).

While Bernard wonders about the nature of their relationship at the end of the novel, this is the only treatment of Rhoda's interaction with another human being. Woolf depicts it as ultimately insignificant. Only shortly after this revelation, Rhoda is once again staring through people, hiding from her peers, and again living in her own head. Rhoda expresses her desire to part from Louis saying, "I, resenting compromise and right and wrong on human lips, trust only in solitude and the violence of death" (*Waves* 132). It is significant that Rhoda's failed attempt to reach out is the result of her relationship with another male. Rhoda, although not experiencing the chora, experiences a male interruption. Rhoda's outreach is curtailed by Louis's love interest, just as Susan and Jinny's friendship was negatively affected by the kiss between Jinny and Louis. There is clear connection between Rhoda and Louis as indicated in Bernard's thought:

Then Rhoda, or may it be Louis, some fasting anguished spirit, passes through and out again . . . It is not enough for them, this ordinary scene. It is not enough to wait for the thing to be said as if it were written; to see the sentence lay its dab of clay precisely on the right place, making character; to perceive, suddenly, some group in outline against the sky."
(*Waves* 112-13)

Rhoda and Louis both feel the need to create something, and cannot wait for this to take place in its own time. They need to have control over creation; they need to perceive on their own.

Together, Rhoda and Louis represent the need for a creative outlet. They desire more than what the world has to offer them, thus Rhoda's attempts to create her own world inside her mind. In

spite of this desire to create, Grosz's "emergence of matter" never takes place. The relationship between Rhoda and Louis produces nothing, and Rhoda returns to her own imaginative solitude.

Just before the end of the novel and shortly after Rhoda's affair with Louis, she commits suicide, a fact revealed by Bernard's mental wanderings that comprise the end of the novel. Bernard recalls, "Rhoda, always so furtive, always with fear in her eyes, always seeking some pillar in the desert, to find which she had gone; she had killed herself" (*Waves* 162). Rhoda's disconnect with the outside world proves to follow her through the remainder of her life. After a failed affair with Louis, Rhoda either literally or metaphorically leaves to find what she is looking for elsewhere, but ultimately takes her own life. In her suicide, Rhoda becomes an example of what happens to women who are not allowed interaction within the chora, who do not have a creative outlet. Michael Kramp argues that Rhoda ultimately "resist[s] social pressure to fold over a distinct identity" ("The Resistant Social/Sexual Subjectivity" 33); however, Rhoda seems to actually be incapable of establishing a distinct identity, as she is consistently hiding and threatened. Her role as an outsider is put upon her rather than an existing of her own active intention. Instead of choosing to exist outside the chora, Rhoda is never able to find her way in. Rhoda laments her unfulfilled life saying, "Oh life, how I have dreaded you . . . How you have nudged, how you have interrupted . . . How you chained me to one spot, one hour, one chair . . . How you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into dirty pellets and tossed them into the waste-paper basket with your greasy paws. Yet those were my life" (*Waves* 116). This passage makes clear Rhoda's feeling of entrapment and isolation even as an adult. Certainly it can be said that this is the same feeling Clarissa felt throughout her novel in her feeling of having become Mrs. Richard Dalloway. Lily's struggle against a world that would crumple up and throw away her life, although successful, could still be described in the

manner Rhoda describes her frustration. Most certainly, this feelings of being chained down and wasted could have come from the mind of Judith as she was forced into domesticity in spite of trying to escape it.

Frustration, fear, and death await those who cannot or do not participate in the chora. Rhoda's articulates her recognition of her outsider role and her attempts to reach into the circle:

But I yielded. Sneers and yawns were covered with my hand, I did not go out into the street and break a bottle in the gutter as a sign of rage. Trembling with ardor, I pretended that I was not surprised. What you did, I did. If Susan and Jinny pulled up their stockings like that, I pulled mine up like that also (*Waves* 117).

Rhoda experiences the same disdain for society that Clarissa, Sally, Lily, and Judith feel. Unlike Clarissa, Sally, and Lily, Rhoda has no one to affirm that her sneers are warranted or that her yawns are appropriate. There is no one looking back at her to reassure her that her doubts about society are not unwarranted. This passage reveals that Rhoda went through the motions of life, without ever participating in it. She was never able to make a connection within the chora that would allow her to connect with the world around her in the way that Clarissa's interaction with Sally did. Unable to exist in the chora and therefore in the world, the only option that remains is for Rhoda to remove herself from it completely. While the manner of Rhoda's suicide is never explicitly revealed, her earlier contemplation over the cliff in Spain suggests that like Sappho, Rhoda flings herself from a cliff.

The cliffs vanish. Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened with sea water. They will float for a moment and then sink. Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me. (*Waves* 118)

Like Sappho, Rhoda never participated in the chora, only orchestrating her own imaginative one, and both figures ultimately resort to suicide.

The indifferent manner in which Rhoda's death is treated echoes the indifference of the great library to Woolf's frustration and anger. The great institution of the library fails to recognize Woolf's devastation at being debarred from the building and thus from the knowledge it represents. Similarly, Rhoda is debarred from the chora Jinny and Susan are able to access as they grow up together at the all-girl school in Switzerland. Even more so, it is an echo of the indifference with which Judith's suicide is met by the people around her. Unlike her brother the great playwright, Judith's death goes practically unnoticed and she is buried unceremoniously in a location that is later covered over with pavement. Likewise, Rhoda's death is treated unceremoniously while the death of her friend, Percival, is given great attention, both by Woolf and the other characters in the book. Percival, although somewhat aloof from the group and never allowed any dialogue, is largely celebrated by his peers. His untimely death devastates his friends, especially his lover Neville. Bernard, Rhoda, and Neville all spend a great deal of time mourning Percival's death, while Rhoda, a major character in the novel representative of Woolf and Sappho, is hardly remembered, much less lamented.

The ambiguity of Rhoda's death and the seeming lack of concern over it (save from Bernard) emphasize the idea that female creativity so often goes unnoticed or uncultivated. Scholars such as Kramp assert that Rhoda's ability to create her own world in her mind is a triumph over the outside world; however, while Rhoda's creative power remains strong, she is denied the fertilization and nurturance of the chora that is afforded Clarissa, Sally, and Lily. The world that she creates in her head is a world in which Rhoda can see herself, but she must exist in isolation. Her inner world and outer world are never able to overlap as they are for Clarissa and Sally and for Lily. Rhoda is never allowed her moment of rupture where she stands against the patriarchal world. Her only success in doing this is in her suicide. In spite of the environment

of her microcosm many more of Rhoda's passages are fraught with feelings of desolation and frustration. Rhoda's stagnation outside of the chora ultimately brings about her death, and due to her isolation from her peers, she passes from the face of the novel with little thought from the other characters.

As Woolf is writing *The Waves*, she has her own moment of rupture. Although writing this novel does not come as easily to her as did *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf felt as if she had finally grasped something concrete. “[I] feel that I have at last, by violent measures—like breaking through gorse—set my hands on something central. Perhaps I can now say something straight out; and at length; and need not always be casting a line to make my book the right shape” (*Diary* 145). Having earlier feared that critics would accuse her of Sapphism and feminism in their review of *A Room*, Woolf's is much less concerned about criticism of *The Waves* than she was with any other novel she writes about in her diary. In fact, Woolf's completion of *The Waves* is one of her greatest triumphs, and she expresses her excitement in her diary: “How physical the sense of triumph and relief is! Whether good or bad, it's done; and, as I certainly felt at the end, not merely finished, but rounded off, completed” (*Diary* 159). As *The Waves* brings the development of the appearance of the chora and male interruption in Woolf's work to an end, it also provides Woolf with a sense of closure. The sense of triumph that she felt in creating *The Waves* and her lack of concern for whether it is good or bad demonstrates that it was a moment of rupture for Woolf where she was able to set aside all of her prescriptions for writing and subject matter, and transfer herself onto the page. It seems that in writing this novel, Woolf felt that she had finally tapped into her own creative power.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE CHORA AS A PRESCRIPTION TO CURE THE LITERARY CANON

As is demonstrated, this idea of the female creative power and male interruption is something that continues to reappear across Woolf's oeuvre. In what appears to be Woolf's first attempt in showing the benefits and beauty of feminine exchange, *Mrs. Dalloway* depicts the beginnings of Woolf's thought process that ends with *The Waves*. Clarissa's ultimate triumph at the end of the novel provides an example of the power of the chora. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the occurrences that depict Sapphic exchanges and male interruption are physical and overt. They make themselves known to the reader quite easily. As Woolf develops *To the Lighthouse* these occurrences become less overt, more abstracted. As Lily and Mrs. Ramsay never engage in an overtly homoerotic exchange, their physical interactions with one another still transcend what society would consider a normal interaction between women. Lily's struggle to ascertain her identity is made primarily through memory, where Clarissa's reunion with Sally is actually a physical one. Lily's however, is disembodied, coinciding more closely with Grosz's idea of a disembodied femininity. With Lily, Woolf works more closely with the female artist, and the issue of artistic and intellectual nurturance comes to the forefront and is not at risk of being overshadowed by a homoerotic exchange as in *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf utilizes several of the same scenes from work to work as Nancy and Minta appear in a pseudo Clarissa-Sally relationship. Nancy's horror at Minta kissing Paul is echoed in *The Waves* where Jinny kisses Louis to Susan's horror. It is clear throughout that Woolf wants to establish a connection between

the male presence, marriage, and erotic love and the separation of female friendships, the detriment of the female mind, and the interruption of creativity.

The question is, to what purpose has Woolf created these images, these juxtapositions of women under the influence of other women and women under the influence of men? The answer to this can be found in *A Room of One's Own*. The majority of scholarship concerning *A Room* has more to do with androgyny than with the cultivation of a unique femininity. Scholars such as Rado argue that Woolf's main concern is with the idea of androgyny; however, Frances Restuccia would argue that the idea of androgyny is an attempt to make subtler her ideas of female difference, fearing male censure ("Untying the Mother Tongue" 255). This idea is quite plausible in light of Woolf's fears as she expresses them in her diary: "I shall be attacked for a feminist and hinted at for a Sapphist" (*Diary* 142). Restuccia's point is further supported by a return to the lab where Chloe and Olivia work side by side, mincing liver. Woolf describes: ". . . these two young women were engaged in mincing liver, which is, it seems, a cure for pernicious aenemia" (*A Room* 91). Consider the condition of anemia, in which the body fails to produce enough healthy red blood cells to carry oxygen to all parts of the body. The body, therefore, is in a state of asphyxiation. Chloe and Olivia aim to cure this asphyxiation by addition of minced liver to the diet. Similarly, Woolf aims to cure the literary world of a kind of asphyxiation. In chapter five she states that literature is "impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women" (*A Room* 91). If anemia is a metaphor for the lack of women's writing in the literary canon, the fact that Woolf describes the anemia as pernicious indicates, in this metaphor, that the dearth of women writers is not only indicative of the canon's sad state of affairs, but is actually harmful and detrimental to its existence. As Chloe and Olivia mince liver

that will cure anemia of the body, they also create a space and a way for women writers to cure the anemia of the literary canon.

What women can then provide for each other within the chora is a mode of recognition, or a sense of being in league together. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out the pressure to which women are subjected to kill their own femininity in order to conform to patriarchy. Certainly this is seen in Clarissa Dalloway and even in Lily Briscoe who constantly battle the pressure to be married. As Gilbert and Gubar assert, women who must operate under the male gaze have male perceptions about themselves. They point out, “It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (*The Queen’s Looking Glass* 53). This idea becomes apparent in *Mrs. Dalloway* as Sally is disliked by Clarissa’s family. The family finds her shocking and untidy, and she is the opposite of what a young woman should have been at that time. Within the chora, however, in the absence of the male gaze, women are able to recognize one another what they are rather than what men tell them they are or ought to be. It is this mode of recognition that the chora ultimately provides: an accurate reflection where one woman can see herself in another. The inability to do this results in death in most cases. Clarissa and Sally saw themselves in each other, and Clarissa has victory at the end of her story. Lily sees herself reflected back to her in Mrs. Ramsay, and therefore is able to complete her painting.

Mrs. Ramsay on the other hand, has trouble seeing past patriarchal ideals. She has the potential to cultivate her creativity, but is stunted by Mr. Ramsay’s failure to recognize the beauty she wishes to point out, or whether she has prepared a beautiful meal. Mrs. Ramsay’s image is reflected back to her by Mr. Ramsay rather than by Lily, bringing about the necessity for Mrs. Ramsay’s death. Similarly, Rhoda never sees herself reflected in the world and in her

affair with Louis, she only gains a male perception of herself. She attempts to create her own world, but is isolated. Rhoda's fear of the male gaze being reflected back upon her is evident in her constant ducking behind doors, hiding, and avoidance of mirrors. She is never able to identify with Jinny and Susan or have an exchange with them. Her exchange is with Louis's male gaze, and the opportunity for Rhoda to see herself through another's eyes is met with the male gaze, which Rhoda fears, rather than the feminine affirmation that Susan and Jinny could provide. Unable to see herself reflected in the world, Rhoda must also die at the end of her story.

It is this mode of recognition that Woolf discusses in *A Room of One's Own* where Chloe and Olivia are safe from the male gaze and from the presence of heterosexual love. They are able to work together rather than against each other as in the case with Cleopatra and Octavia. As noted, the reader is left to ponder whether these characters of Chloe and Olivia are the counterparts, written under Judith's female gaze that juxtapose Cleopatra and Octavia's relationship written under Shakespeare's male gaze. Woolf's own struggles as a female writer are most evident in *A Room of One's Own*, although present in other characters such as Clarissa, Lily, and Rhoda. Woolf contemplates the struggles of past women writers saying, "But how impossible it must have been for them not to budge either to the right or to the left. What genius, what integrity it must have required in the face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking" (*A Room* 62). Woolf overtly identifies the voice of patriarchy as the voice threatening to thwart female creativity, but in doing so, asserts that it can be overcome. By the time she has finished *The Waves*, Woolf herself seems to have overcome the pressure to "write this, think that" that was pressed upon her by society (*A Room* 62).

In her assertion that if a woman is to write fiction, she must have a room of her own, the

spatial images of Clarissa's bedroom, Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party, and the laboratory of Chloe and Olivia all come to mind. Woolf recommends that women need their own space, their own chora, a place where their creative power can be nurtured. According to Woolf, this room is absolutely necessary, or women's novels will have to be shorter and less demanding. "For," Woolf says, "interruptions there will always be" (*A Room* 65). The notion of the room that Woolf sees as an essential component to women's ability to write is, fundamentally, a chora. Woolf's particular development of Sapphism, notions of the chora, and male interruption suggest that the chora is absolutely necessary for the female imagination. If women are to see themselves reflected in the world, they must be able to function within a space that is feminine and removed from patriarchy. Woolf writes, "For my belief is that if we live another century . . . and have five hundred a year and each of us rooms of our own . . . then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down" (*A Room* 95). Woolf makes an overt connection between the room that functions as a chora and the female creative power. Only with the privilege of the chora can women like Judith, who had no feminine space for creation, realize their imaginative power.

Woolf's words resonate in their conviction, and her reader can see the purpose toward which her ideas about female creative power and its need for its own space work. Woolf states, "Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass. Lock up your libraries if you like; there is no gate, no lock, no bolt, that you set upon the freedom of my mind" (*A Room* 63). Woolf insists that the privilege of creation and imagination is something that ought to be open to everyone. For too long women had been shut out of the literary tradition, and once able to insert themselves, did not know where to go for having no literary foremothers. For Woolf, a woman's having a room of her own, a locus of nurturance, a

chora, is the solution to this problem of where the woman writer can insert herself into the literary canon. She can construct her own literary canon that represents female writing rather than the “writ[ing] this and think[ing] that” prescribed for them by their patriarchal ancestors. As Sappho’s female coterie would set an example for the women who followed in her literary footsteps, Woolf’s works demonstrate that women who have access to their own literary coterie are able to achieve the same kind of mental and social freedom that the women of Sappho’s Lesbos did. Like Clarissa, Sally, and Lily, every woman participating in the chora’s celebration of unique feminine imaginative power can create for herself a place in the literary canon.

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