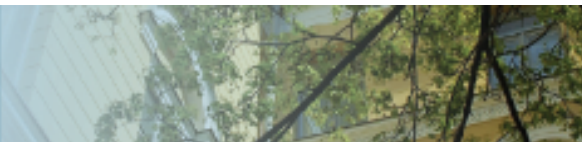


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The Bride in Ancient Greece: an Analysis through Wedding Compositions

1. Introduction

In ancient Greece, during wedding ceremonies an important part was played by wedding compositions that were performed during different moments of nuptial rite. Among them, the most common and frequent are the hymeneals: songs usually performed by a maidens' chorus together with music and dance. Then, we can find monodic poems acted in epic style focusing on the celebration of a mythic wedding, where the heroic couple refers indirectly to the real couple. Finally, within the first centuries A.D., we know of orations addressed to the pair and declaimed by a rhetorician or by one of the guests.

The *corpus* of texts I take into account comprehends a selection of Sappho's wedding songs, an archaic poet who lived in Lesbos in the sixth century b.C. She was the chair of a maidens' group and she composed a lot of poems to celebrate the marriage of these girls¹. I also take into account Theocritus' Epithalamium for Helen's and Menelaus' marriage, a composition written by Theocritus, a poet who lived during the Hellenistic period (third century b.C.) and spent part of his life at the court of Ptolemaic Alexandria, in Egypt. The poem tells us the story of the mythic wedding between two of the most famous heroes in the Trojan war. Finally, I include a prose composition: an oration composed by Himerius, a rhetorician who lived during the fourth century A.D., for Severus, a friend of him who married in Athens.

This selection of works shows us which features were considered more important throughout a long period of time; moreover, this comparison through different centuries is possible thanks

to the fact that wedding tradition is extremely conservative: it is a tradition that is acknowledged and respected by the different poets and authors.

Wedding compositions have the married couple as a central subject and, in particular, the bride: my main purpose is to show the bride's characteristics in these compositions by taking into account the most important and recurrent images employed to accomplish her description.

The subject needs more precise explanation. The bride celebrated in these compositions is not yet a woman, a *gunè*, but she is still a *nymphe*, a maiden who is in a transitory position between the adolescence age and the ripeness². She will definitely reach maturity only after the wedding³. This is not a marginal remark. On the contrary, this particular condition of the woman has a real influence upon the images and metaphors engaged to depict her during the actual wedding. Because wedding compositions are for a rite of transition, it is clear that the bride we are going to analyse is a female figure which is yet "under construction" and it is also clear that poetical word takes an active part in this process. For that reason, examination of wedding compositions represents an interesting point of view: we have access to a "poetical discourse" charged to contribute to the future *gunè* accomplishment.

2. Beauty

First of all, I am going to focus on the physical characteristics of a *nymphe*. The most important quality for a girl in the day of her marriage is beauty. The bride is usually blond or with purple hair, she is well-girdled, with nice ankles and her skin has the colour of roses.

Through the centuries, the most frequent expressions used to describe her good looks are: καλή, ἄβρα, ῥοδόχροος, εὖπους and ἰόκολπος⁴.

In addition to these general references, a bride's beauty is especially praised for particular aspects such as her facial expressions and her appearance: I mean eyes and face.

In Sappho's fragment 44, Andromach, who is going to land at Troy to go to her new home with her groom Hector, is ἐλικώπιδα "bright eyes", and in fragment 112 a bride's eyes are μέλλιχα "sweet", while eros is spread through her face full of "*himeros*", "desire":

Ὅλβιε γάμβρε, σοὶ μὲν δὴ γάμος ὡς ἄραο
ἐκτετέλεστ', ἔχης δὲ πάρθενον, ἄν ἄραο.
σοὶ χάριεν μὲν εἶδος, ὄππατα
μέλλιχ', ἔρος δ' ἐπ' ἰμέρτω κέχυται προσώπῳ
τετίμακ' ἔξοχά σ' Ἀφροδίτα

Happy bridegroom, your marriage has been fulfilled
as you prayed, you have the girl from whom you prayed...
and you (bride) have a graceful form, your eyes are sweet,
and love streams over your desirable face,
Aphrodite has honoured you outstandingly.

Most significantly, for Theocritus “in Helen’s eyes there lies every desire” (18, 37) and her face is as beautiful as Dawn and it shines like spring (18, 26-28): ...τᾶς πάντες ἐπ’ ὄμμασιν ἴμεροι ἐντί...

«...as Helen in whose eyes is all desire...»

Ἐὖρος ἀντέλλοισα καλὸν διέφανε πρόσωπον,
πότνια Νύξ, τό τε λευκὸν ἔαρ χειμῶνος ἀνέντος·
ὦδε καὶ ἅ χρυσέα Ἑλένα διεφαίνεται ἐν ἀμῖν.

«Fair, Lady Night, is the face that rising Dawn discloses,
or radiant spring when winter ends; and so amongst as did
golden Helen shine»⁵.

In Himerius, the *nymph*’s facial expression and appearance are irresistible because of the influence of Peitho, Pothos and Himeros: the first one means Persuasion, the others, respectively, longing and love desire (IX 19, 234-240):

Πειθῶ δὲ καὶ Πόθοι καὶ Ἴμερος τὸ σὸν κάλλος ἅπαν ἐνείμαντο· ὁ μὲν ἐφιζάνων τοῖς ὄμμασι, κάκειθεν ἐκπυρσεύων ἀμήχανον· οἱ δὲ τὰς παρειὰς αἰδοῖ φοινίσσοντες πλέον ἢ τὰς τῶν ῥόδων ἢ φύσις κάλυκας, ὅταν ἡριναῖς ὥραις ὑπὸ τῆς ἀκμῆς σχιζόμεναι πετάλοις ἄκροις ἐρεύθωνται·

«Peitho, Pothos and Himeros attend your beauty. Through the eyes Himeros sparks off invincible flame; Peitho and Pothos give red colours to your cheeks because of modesty, more than nature does with rosebud when, in springtime, they bloom and blush on the petal end»

In another passage by Himerius, the bride's face is as white as milk (IX 19, 242-244):

εἰ δε καὶ τὸ ἄνθος τῆς ὄψεως γράφειν ἐθέλοιμι, τὰ ποιητῶν ἀνάγκη φθέγγεσθαι ᾧ λευκότητος καὶ γάλακτος.

«If I would sing also her face's flower, I should employ poetical words: oh flower of whiteness and milk!»

The first feature highlighted by all compositions is brightness and brilliance of facial expression and appearance. The adjective employed in Sappho, ἐλίκωψ, "bright eyes", is very significant in this sense, as Theocritus' comparison with Dawn and spring. Himerius emphasizes the light, invincible fire, of the maiden's eyes.

In ancient Greece, the look is the seat of Eros: the God of Love strikes a lover's heart by shooting his darts from the beloved's eyes⁶. For this reason the bride's glance received particular attention. The relevance of bride's eyes shows us the erotic power and the capacity to seduce assigned to her.

The brightness of the *nymphē* is, on the one hand, characterised as bright white: in Theocritus she is “bright white” λευκόν as the spring and in Himerius she is white as milk; on the other hand, the bride takes also a gold and red shade: Helen is golden and the eyes of Himerius’ maiden set fire while her cheeks are red as rosebuds.

White colour is the symbol of beauty for excellence: Homeric epithet to indicate a beautiful woman was for example λευκώλενος “with white arms”⁷. Gold is the colour of seduction: it refers to the erotic power of the *nymphē*⁸. This colour reminds the saffron colour which is the shade of sensuality: the veil which covers the nuptial bed where bride and groom are going to spend their first night is in fact κροκόεις, “saffron”⁹.

Finally, red colour is, on the one hand, the colour of modesty and shame (Himerius’ bride’s cheeks are red because of modesty), on the other hand, it is also the colour of love’s fire and indeed, in nuptial context, it refers to torches present during wedding procession: they symbolise the eros’ power.

As we have seen, another important feature that bride’s facial expression and appearance has is “desire”, in Greek *himeros*.

In describing a girl’s expression, Sappho says ἰμέρω “desirable”; in Theocritus, Helen’s eyes are the owners of all desire; in Himerius desire has become a divinity which has the power to change maiden’s eyes into invincible flames, ἀμήχανοι.

In Greek language, since the age of Homer, *himeros*, “desire”, has a powerful meaning: it expresses an urgent desire inspired from a seductive face, a desire impossible to resist from; Plato defines it a rushing stream¹⁰. Since the age of Hesiod *himeros* is also a divine personification of desire, as we have seen with Himerius, a divinity associated with Eros and Aphrodite¹¹. Together with Eros, Himeros is the god of love and passion, the divinity who triggers desire.

The face of a bride and her physical appearance are then characterised as two powerful instruments of seduction that are able to provoke a lover’s passion.

3. Charis

Together with the capacity to seduce and trigger desire, a bride has also the aptitude to grant favours and reciprocate: the *nymphe* indeed is not only beautiful but also *χαρίεσσα* “graceful”.

One of the most important exclamation continuously addressed to the bride during the rite is: *ὦ καλά, ὦ χαρίεσσα κόρα* “fair, gracious maiden” that recurs in Sappho (fr. 108), in Theocritus (18,38) as well as in Himerius (IX 19,227).

Charis, “grace”, is an important concept in Greece culture and it expresses the capacity to return and build human relations based upon the sentiment of reciprocity¹². *Charis* “grace” is also a divinity of Aphrodite’s circle and she has an important role during marriage as a bride’s assistant¹³.

Why, in wedding compositions, bride is continuously said *χαρίεσσα* “full of grace”? And why *charis* is so important for her? Because, after having provoked love and passion in the groom, the bride has to be able to correspond and satisfy it. Had the bride been just beautiful, this would have been a danger rather than an advantage. The bride would have been a seductress just able to generate unfruitful passions. But we can also say that, had the bride been just pure and innocent, this would have been an obstacle to marriage too. The bride would have been yet too unripe and not ready to marry and to give birth.

In others words, *charis* guarantees a bride’s capacity to satisfy marital life.

4. Comparisons to the Vegetal World

Going forward exploring images employed to describe the bride, we can see that an important role is played by comparisons to the vegetal world: usually fruits, flowers, trees, but also natural phenomena like stars and moon.

A relevant part of these images symbolises her physical maturity and fertility: the bride has reached the right age and she is able to canalize erotic experiences towards reproduction – for the ancient Greeks the real goal of marriage. In fact, in wedding compositions, the bride is not a green or unripe plant or fruit, but a blossoming one and ready to be picked¹⁴. Since we don’t have enough space to analyse all the images, we are going to deal with the most significant one: the apple.

Apple is connected to marriage by many ancient sources: it is for example the Mother Earth’s wedding gift to Zeus and Hera¹⁵; apple is the fruit which helps to win brides, like in the case

of Atalanta myth¹⁶; an apple has to be eaten, according to Solon, by a bride on the night of her wedding¹⁷, and, finally, apple is the bride's favoured element of comparison¹⁸.

The most beautiful simile comes from Sappho's fragment 105:

οἶον τὸ γλυκύμαλον ἐρεύθεται ἄκρῳ ἐπ' ὕσδῳ,
ἄκρον ἐπ' ἀκροτάτῳ, λελάθοντο δὲ μαλοδρόπῃες·
οὐ μὰν ἐκλελάθοντ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐδύναντ' ἐπίκεσθαι

«...as the sweet-apple reddens on the bough-top,
on the top of the topmost bough; the apple-gatherers have forgotten it;
no, they have not forgotten it entirely, but they could not reach it...»¹⁹

Sappho compares a bride to a ripe, sweet apple not easy to reach. Himerius, after many centuries, explains the meaning of this analogy by quoting from the same fragment of Sappho (IX 16, 185-189):

Σαπφοῦς ἦν ἄρα μήλω μεν εἰκάσαι τὴν κόρην, τοσοῦτον χαρισαμένην τοῖς
πρὸ ὥρας δρέψασθαι σπεύδουσιν, ὅσον οὐδ' ἄκρῳ τοῦ δακτύλου γεύσασθαι,
τῷ δε καθ' ὥραν τρυγᾶν τὸ μήλον μέλλοντι τηρῆσαι τὴν χάριν ἀκμάζουσιν·

«Sappho compared the girl to an apple which has delighted those who were eager to pluck it so much that they could not taste it with the tip of a finger, but kept its youth blooming for him who in season intends to gather the apples»²⁰

The ripe apple therefore symbolizes a wise bride who has waited for the right time to marry and who has chosen a worthy groom able to wait for her ripeness. Indeed, a red apple, in nuptial context, represents a bride's physical maturity: its shape reminds us of a woman's breasts and of her sensual female roundness²¹. But apple is a favoured simile in wedding compositions also for others reasons. We must not forget that apple is also the Aphrodite's fruit, the Goddess of love and bride's assistant during the marriage²². Finally, some scholars affirm that apple was so popular in marriage affair because it was a symbol of fertility, in particularly because of the fructifying significance of the pips²³.

We can say that apple image represents then a girl ready to become a mother and to take part to the community: it is not the case of an untouched beauty, rather of a beauty ready to express its potential²⁴.

5. Ethos and Practical Abilities

The bride does not have only to be attractive and charming, she must also provide morals of high quality and practical abilities. In Sappho's fragment 56, the maiden is the wisest of her friends:

οὐδ' ἴαν δοκίμωμι προσίδοισαν φάος ἀλίω
ἔσσεσθαι σοφίαν πάρθενον εἰς οὐδένα πω χρόνον
τεαύταν

«...I don't believe that another girl who has seen the light of the sun
could never be as wise as that maiden ...».

In Helen's epithalamium we find a perfect bride's complete catalogue: ability with work of hand loom and a musical education of high level (18, 32-36):

οὐδέ τις ἐκ ταλάρω πανίσδετα ἔργα τοιαῦτα,
οὐδ' ἐνὶ δαιδαλέω πυκινώτερον ἄτριον ἰστῶ
κερκίδι συμπλέξασα μακρῶν ἔταμ' ἐκ κελεόντων.
οὐ μὰν οὐδ' λύραν τις ἐπίσταται ᾧδε κροτῆσαι
Ἄρτεμιν ἀείδοισα καὶ εὐρύστερνον Ἀθήναν

« None from her basket winds off such yarn as she,
nor at her patterned loom weaves with her shuttle
and cuts from the tall loom-beams a closer weft.
Nor yet is any so skilled as Helen to strike the lyre
and hymn Artemis and broad-bosomed Athene...»²⁵

Himerius as well fully describes her moral quality and practical skills. After having said that both, bride and groom, are “sages” and “hard working”, he distinguishes between the bride’s and groom’s fields. He reserves wool spinning, spool and lyre for the maiden (IX 15,179-182):

ἡ μὲν γὰρ ταλασίᾳ τὴν Ἀθηνᾶς τέχνην... καὶ τῇ μὲν κερκίς..., ἡ μὲν ἔχει
λύραν...

«...she (is excellent) in spinning, Athena’s art, ... it is for her the spool,... it is
peculiar to her the lyre...»

The bride has to be good in female jobs typical in ancient Greek society: spinning and weaving. She also has to be virtuous and cultivated. In that sense, she seems a model of perfection, the perfect and positive Pandore could say, since on the one hand she is extremely beautiful and full of grace, and on the other she has the most important moral qualities, together with a suitable disposition to work.

6. Conclusive Observations

As we have said at the beginning, since the poetic and rhetoric production that we have taken into account was explicitly tailored for one of the most important rites of passage in a Greek woman’s life, the principal aim of these compositions was to contribute to the accomplishment of the girl-bride. For that reason, they have a relevant function: they remind a

girl, as well as society, the main qualities a bride was expected to have and the main duties she had to assume in order to be the perfect mother and housewife.

As we can observe from this brief survey, wedding compositions confirm our knowledge about married women's roles and functions in Greek society. Furthermore, the continuity that we can see in images and metaphors employed to describe the bride, shows us that these roles and functions remained the same throughout the centuries.

In particular, domestic roles assigned to women in family life are confirmed, as we have seen from the importance given to housework, work of hand loom and spindle. At the same time, there is also confirmation about the woman's reproductive role, as it appears from vegetal comparisons, as we have seen with apple's image. Finally, our knowledge about women's role in society finds a confirmation in the importance given to *charis* and moral qualities such as wisdom, prudishness and the capacity to establish a relation based upon reciprocity and respect with her husband.

In this panorama of correspondence between poetical symbols and social functions assigned to the bride, an interesting element I liked to highlight is represented from the relevance accorded to a *nymphe*'s beauty, charm and sensuality. Let us think, for example, to a bride's and wife's image presented in ancient treatises and in funeral inscriptions – two fields that are considered to be very important to reconstruct the image of the woman in Greek culture: we can see that ethic qualities were given the main attention, while beauty, charm etc. are not really mentioned²⁶. On the contrary, in wedding compositions, great importance is given to bride's good-looking and erotic power.

This is due to the fact that, in this particular moment of a maiden's life, we witness a specific construction of the female image peculiar to that transitory condition. In Wedding compositions this "liminal" stage is clearly reflected by the features we have explored: the bride, in the middle between adolescence and maturity, appears able to possess, in this specific moment, on the one hand, the beauty and the attraction that are normally peculiar to a *parthenos*, and, on the other hand, ripeness, wisdom and industriousness which are peculiar to a *gunè*.

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¹ We have knowledge about a Sappho's book, concerning wedding poems and collected during the Hellenistic period, but only a small part of this work reaches our days. About Sappho's circle and, in general, about maidens' groups in archaic Greece, see Calame Claude, *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece: their Morphology, Religious Role and Social Function* (Lanham (Md.) 1997).

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- ² Calame Claude, *I greci e l'eros. Simboli, pratiche e luoghi* (Roma-Bari, 1992), 96-99 and Andò Valeria, “Nymphe: la sposa e le Ninfe”, *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 53 (1996): 47-79.
- ³ In wedding compositions bride is usually called *parthenos* and *kore* (for example S. fr. 108, 112; Theocr. 18, 37 e Him. IX 15, 183) and sometimes also *pais* (S. fr. 113).
- ⁴ S. fr. 44, 7; 103,2; 103b e 30, 5; Theocrit. 18, 31 e 38; Him. 9, 19, 227 e 9, 20, 263-266.
- ⁵ Engl. Transl. Gow A. S. F., *Theocritus* (Cambridge, 1965).
- ⁶ Upon this subject see: Calame, *I Greci e l'Eros*, 13.
- ⁷ *Il.* 3, 121 and *Od.* 6, 371.
- ⁸ Brulé Pierre, *La fille d'Athenes* (Paris, 1987), 241-242 e 301.
- ⁹ *Anth. Pal.* 7,711.
- ¹⁰ Plat. *Krat.* 420a e *Phaidros* 251c
- ¹¹ Hes. *Theog.* 201. About *imeros/Himeros*: Calame, *I Greci e l'Eros*, 22-23 and “LIMC” s.v.
- ¹² About the concept of *charis*: Brillante Carlo, “Charis, bia e il tema della reciprocità amorosa”, *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 54 (1998): 7-34.
- ¹³ See Lasserre François, *Sappho. Une autre lecture* (Padova, 1989), 125.
- ¹⁴ Hague Rebecca H., “Ancient Greek Wedding Songs: Tradition of Praise”, in *Journal of Folklore Research*, 20 (1983): 237.
- ¹⁵ Eratosthenes, *Catast.* III.
- ¹⁶ Serv., *ad Aen.* III 113.
- ¹⁷ Plut., *Con. Praec.* 138 D.
- ¹⁸ Men. Rh., *Rhet.* 404,5.
- ¹⁹ Engl. Transl. Bowra C. M., *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford 1961, 2nd ed.)
- ²⁰ Engl. Transl. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford 1961), 211.
- ²¹ For example: Ar. *Ach.* 1199, *Eccl.* 903 and *Lys.* 155.
- ²² Paus. II 10,5. For others references see: Foster Benjamin O., “Notes on the Symbolism of Apple in Classical Antiquity”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 10 (1899): 40-41.

²³ McCartney Eugene S., “How the Apple Became the Token of Love”, *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 56 (1925): 81 and A. R. Littlewood, “The Symbolism of the Apple in Greek and Roman Literature”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 72 (1967): 180-181.

²⁴ Stigers E. Stehle, “Retreat from the Male: Catullus 62 and Sappho’s Erotic Flowers”, *Ramus* 6, 2 (1977): 91. About apple’s symbolism see also: Foster Benjamin O., “Notes on the Symbolism of Apple”, *Harvard Studies* 10 (1899).

²⁵ Engl. Transl. Gow A.S.F., *Theocritus* (Cambridge, 1965).

²⁶ Verilhac Anne M., “L’image de la femme dans les épigrammes funéraires grecques”, *La femme dans le monde Méditerrané*” (Lyon, 1985), 85-112 and Mazzoni – Dami Daniela, “L’amore coniugale e la figura della sposa ideale nella trattatistica antica”, *Atene e Roma*, XLIV 1-2 (1999): 14-25.