



JACLR

*Journal of Artistic
Creation & Literary
Research*

JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research is a bi-annual, peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access Graduate Student Journal of the Universidad Complutense Madrid that publishes interdisciplinary research on literary studies, critical theory, applied linguistics and semiotics, and educational issues. The journal also publishes original contributions in artistic creation in order to promote these works.

Volume 7 Issue 2 (December 2019) Article 1

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"Sharon Old's 'Ode to the Hymen': An Analysis on the Importance and Necessity of Praising the Hymen"

Recommended Citation

Vega Trijueque, Marta. "Sharon Old's 'Ode to the Hymen': An Analysis on the Importance and Necessity of Praising the Hymen" *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 7.2 (2019): 1-11.

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

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Abstract: Sharon Olds published in 2016 *Odes*, a work in which she explores, amongst other things, both female and male bodies, collecting poems such as "Ode to the Hymen", "Ode to the Clitoris", "Ode to the Penis" or "Ode to the Vagina". In this paper I will only study the poem 'Ode to the Hymen', primarily for its particularity, and I will prove that Sharon Old's appreciation of the hymen is important, relevant and necessary. To help me in my argument firstly I will briefly comment Gaius Valerius Catullus' "Carmen 62" epithalamium in order to appreciate the evolution concerning a woman's relationship with her hymen. Afterwards, I will analyse "Ode to the hymen" in close detail, establishing a comparison with Catullus' ode to prove the necessity of praising the hymen.

Keywords: Sharon Olds, Catullus, hymen, virginity, female sexuality, female empowerment.

Marta VEGA TRIJUEQUE

Sharon Old's "Ode to the Hymen": An Analysis on the Importance and Necessity of Praising the Hymen

0. Introduction

Poetry has dealt with a wide variety of themes that range from love to religion, sex or the most intimate parts of ourselves (physically and psychically). The American poet Sharon Olds rather explicitly explores, amongst other things, both female and male bodies in her most recent work *Odes*, published in 2016. In this compilation of sixty-five odes we can find poems such as 'Ode to the Hymen', 'Ode to the Clitoris', 'Ode to the Penis' or 'Ode to the

Vagina'. In this paper, I will only study the poem 'Ode to the Hymen', primarily for its particularity. In an initial research, I searched for poems and odes that specifically talked about either the vagina, the penis or the clitoris, and quite a few came up. Poems whose focus was solely the hymen, however, were rare to find, leading me to the question as to why one would write an ode to the hymen, and why this praising is important. I will try to answer these questions in the essay by analysing in detail Sharon Olds's 'Ode to the Hymen'.

As to avoid confusion, I will start by defining the hymen. The hymen is "a thin, fleshy tissue that's located at the opening of [the] vagina" ("Virginitiy"). People commonly associate the hymen with women's virginity, as this tissue can be "stretched open the first time [a woman has] vaginal sex, which might cause some pain or bleeding" ("Virginitiy"). Nonetheless, there are other reasons and ways in which the hymen might break, such as when "riding a bike, doing sports, or putting something in [the] vagina (like a tampon, finger, or sex toy)" ("Virginitiy"). Even though science and society have evolved in regard to women's sexuality and, particularly, to the hymen, we can still find misconception and ingrained ideas concerning this tissue. I am specifically referring to the hymen's association with a woman's virginity and thus, her *chastity*.

In this essay I am not going to dwell on the history of women's sexual repression and oppression, but I think it is worth mentioning the notion of 'virginity testing' and give some background context, as I will later address the issue of wedding nights and their implications for newlywed brides. According to The World Health Organization (WHO), "traditionally, the virginity examination [was] performed on unmarried women and girls, often under force, threat or coercion, to assess their virtue, honour or social value" (qtd. in García-Moreno 9). It is not an obsolete practice though, since some countries still test women with this painful and traumatic examination. This testing was used to ensure the woman had not practised sex before her marriage and to prove her chastity the woman had to bleed, as this meant the tearing of the hymen. There were other ways to assess a woman's virginity, like inspecting the sheets after the wedding night in search for blood stains, or even the famous 'bedding ceremonies' that newly married Royals had to partake in. Due to the stigma surrounding women's sexuality, the oppression and repression, and the traumatic and abusive methods they used to ensure their purity and chastity, one would be surprised when finding a poem that praises the hymen. The hymen, as we have seen, is closely related with a woman's first sexual intercourse and the possible pain that results from the stretching and breaking of this tissue. Why write an ode about it? In this paper, I will argue that Sharon Olds's appreciation of the hymen is important and necessary, and to help me in my argument firstly I will briefly comment Gaius Valerius Catullus' "Carmen 62" epithalamium. I have chosen Catullus' text in order to appreciate the evolution concerning a woman's relationship with her hymen, establishing a comparison with Sharon Olds' ode.

1. Catullus' Epithalamium 'Carmen 62'

The Latin poet Gaius Valerius Catullus is well known for his famous epithalamia, which was influenced by Sappho's poetry. An epithalamium (or epithalamion) is "a song or poem celebrating a wedding, and traditionally intended to be sung outside the bridal chamber on the wedding night" (Baldick 114). For this essay, I will analyse the epithalamium "Carmen

62". I have chosen this text for two main reasons. First, the refrain of "Hymen/Hymenaeus", and secondly, the implications a wedding and the wedding night had for women at that time.

I will only comment the most relevant stanzas and lines for the purposes of this essay. I shall begin by exploring the mentioning of the "Hymen". In every stanza, in the last line, there is a sort of invocation, the "refrain of the marriage hymn" (Garrison), "Hymenaeus Hymen, come! O Hymen Hymenaeus!" (Catullus). This "Hymen" does not refer to the membrane that covers the opening of the vagina; "Hymenaeus" and "Hymen" are the names given, in Greek mythology, to the god of marriage. He is usually represented as a young man carrying a torch. Etymologically, Hymen, as in the Greek god, means "'the joiner', literally, 'the one who sews' (two together)" ("Hymen"); meaning he is "the joiner" of the soon-to-be-wed couple. When referring to the actual hymen, we discover that it derives from Greek *hymen* 'membrane, (especially 'virginal membrane,' as the membrane *par excellence*); thin skin'" ("Hymen"). Even though etymologically they share the same root ("*syu- 'to bind, sew'"), the hymen, apparently, is not connected to the god of marriage Hymen. Of course, in folk etymology they are "supposed to be related" ("Hymen") and there is a clear connection between marriage and the wedding night and a woman's hymen and the loss of her virginity.

Catullus in "Carmen 62" constantly refers to the evening star, influenced by Hellenistic tradition and by Sappho in particular. In contrast to the dawn star, which separates lovers, the evening "is literally and etymologically responsible for bringing the bride and groom together", although the evening is also the time for "extramarital encounters" (Wasdin 66). Nevertheless, in a wedding, "the union inaugurated by the evening star" is expected to be permanent. In this poem, "the evening star has a dramatic effect on the bride's relationship with her family" (Wasdin 70). We have two choruses, one formed by boys and the other by girls that compete against each other: the former is eager for the union, whilst the latter shows reluctance. The third stanza deals with the separation that comes when a daughter is married away:

Evening star, what heavenly body is borne more savagely through the sky?
You, who can tear a daughter away from her mother's embrace,
tear a daughter away from a mother's embrace! though she holds fast,
and give the chaste girl to a young man on fire!
What greater cruelty do invaders inflict when a city has been taken?
Hymenaeus Hymen, come! O Hymen Hymenaeus! (Catullus 20-25)

The mother is especially weary and hurt by the wedding and their subsequent separation, comparing it in line twenty-four to invaders act of *raptus* when taking a city. She is a "daughter", not a "maiden" or "bride", which stresses "her role in her birth family" (Wasdin 70). The stanza that follows, sung by the boys, is an answer to the "tearing apart" of the bride's family, for the bride will be united with the groom's family:

O you, who strengthen with your flame a wedding pledged,
which the men and parents have fixed in place beforehand,

they did not join bride and groom before your blaze carried itself away. (Catullus 26-29)

However, a girl will only be fit for the marriage if she is "chaste" before getting married, in other words, the girl must not have had any sexual encounter. If so, the girl will no longer be "dear to her people":

So it is that a young woman, as long as she remains untouched, so long she is dear to her people;
but when she has lost her chaste flower, her body besmirched,
she remains neither pleasant for boys nor dear to girls. (Catullus 43-45)

She has to remain "untouched" so that she does not lose her "chaste flower", meaning her virginity. Having sex prior to marriage would mean a rejection both from men and women (Catullus 45). She will have to wait for the right time and the best suitor, "when she has gained marriage with one of equal rank when the time is ripe" and, afterwards, she will become "more dear to her husband" and in turn "less often hated by her father (Catullus 56-57). At that time, and even nowadays in certain countries, girls (and in the case of some cultures boys as well) did not decide whom they married; families (especially the father) arranged the marital union. In this process, social and economic factors were taken into account, since "ancient societies did not assume that marriages were based on romantic love in the same way many contemporary Western societies do" (Wasdin 5). Girls had neither a voice nor a saying concerning their future marital life and even their sex life, as we can see in the last stanza:

And you, young woman, do not resist such a husband!
It isn't just to resist him to whom your father has handed you down;
you must obey your father along with your mother. Your virginity is not completely yours;
it is in part your parents'; a third has been given to your father,
a third has been given to your mother, and only a third is yours.
Do not resist them who gave their son-in-law their own rights over you,
along with your dowry. (Catullus 59-65)

A woman's virginity did not (and still does not) fully belong to her. First, it belonged to her parents, who were the ones to decide their daughter's future husband. Then, on the wedding night she would have to give her "chaste flower" to her husband. Women were not able to decide the "when, and with whom, and where, and why" (Olds 46) they would lose their virginity. Luckily, nowadays the majority of the female population of Western societies have a choice. This fact would be a reason to celebrate and even praise women's virginity, and thus, the hymen.

2. Analysis of "Ode to the Hymen"

In this section, I will analyse Sharon Olds's poem and compare certain lines with Catullus' epithalamium. I will start by looking at the title, which states that this is an ode to the hymen. The ode's poetic form, according to Chris Baldick, is "an elaborately formal lyric poem, often in the form of a lengthy ceremonious address to a person or abstract entity, always serious and elevated in tone" (Baldick 238). There are two classical models, Pindaric and Horatian odes. Since the "Ode to the Hymen" does not have regular stanzas like the odes of Horace, we will have to analyse the poem as a Pindaric ode. These poems were meant to be sung and danced, thus "Pindar composed his odes for performance by a chorus, using lines of varying length in a complex three-part structure of strophe, antistrophe, and epode corresponding to the chorus's dancing movements" (Baldick 238). In "Ode to the Hymen" we can definitely outline the three-part structure.

The strophe would begin in the very first line and end in the twelfth line, with "of my maidenhead" (Olds 12). These first twelve lines could be considered a hymn to nature and the human body, especially to the most intimate female parts. The speaker, which we will later talk about, is constantly talking to a *you*. This "you" is obviously the hymen, although it is not until the end of the poem that it is addressed by its word, with the obvious exception of the title. We can find quite clear and obvious references though. The poem begins when she is in her mother's womb, which gives her (and her hymen) a sense of safety:

I love to think of you then, so whole, so
impervious, you and the clitoris as
safe as the lives in which you were housed, they would have
had to kill both my mother and me
to get at either of you. I love her, at this
moment, as the big fortress around me, the
matronhead around the sweetmeat
of my maidenhead. (Olds 5-12)

The "you" (meaning the hymen) was "whole" when she was just a baby in her mother's womb, for it had not been broken yet. The "you" was particularly safe at that moment, since it was inside the speaker, who in turn was inside her mother. The mother's belly acted as "a big fortress" around her; her mother was the "matronhead" around the "sweetmeat", which we can assume is the speaker's most intimate female parts, of her "maidenhead", that is, her hymen/virginity. Maidenhead is an old term that still has a literary use when referring to a woman's virginity ("Maidenhead"). There is also wonder in the tone, "I don't know when you came into being," (Olds 1), and tenderness when the speaker is thinking of *you*. This tenderness and even admiration are found throughout the whole ode.

The antistrophe would occupy almost the whole poem; twenty-two lines that begin with the "I don't know who" from the twelfth line (Catullus 12), and end with line number thirty-three. The antistrophe is usually an answer to the strophe and it gains a more serious, melancholic tone. It might deal with a problem or a traumatic ordeal. For this reason, I decided to divide the poem this way, since there is a clear change of tone and topic. Whilst

the strophe was a short hymn to nature and serves as an introduction to the "you", the antistrophe directly deals with this "you", the hymen, and its "death".

The speaker begins wondering who would invent such a thing that keeps "a girl's inwards clean and well-cupboarded" (Olds 13-14). The hymen would therefore act as a sort of cupboard's door that separates the vagina's insides from any external element. A series of metaphors follow these lines:

clean and well-cupboarded. Dear wall,
dear gate, dear stile, dear Dutch door, not a
cat-flap nor a swinging door
but a one-time piñata. How many places in the... (Olds 14-17)

Firstly, the "wall" echoes Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, specifically the play-within-the-play scene in which Bottom and Flute are respectively playing Pyramus and Thisbe. Snout plays the Wall that separates both lovers, leaving only a hole (formed by his fingers) through which the lovers can talk. The scene is full of sexual innuendos, for instance, when Bottom (as Pyramus) asks the Wall to show him his hole, which can be taken as an anal reference:

BOTTOM (as Pyramus)
[...] Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall,
Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne.
[Wall parts his fingers.] (Shakespeare I. v, ll. 173-174)

What Bottom, as Pyramus, theoretically wanted was to call his lover Thisbe through the Wall's chink. The sexual innuendos, however, do not cease with Flute's intervention as Thisbe, saying that the wall has heard her "moans" "for parting [her] fair Pyramus and [her]", and her "cherry lips have often kissed thy stones" (Shakespeare I. v, ll. 183-185). The hilarious scene continues up to one of the most memorable moments:

BOTTOM (as Pyramus)
O, kiss me through the hole of this vile wall !
FLUTE (as Thisbe)
I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all. (Shakespeare I. v, ll. 195-196)

Sharon Olds with her "dear wall" reference could be playing with the Wall and hole of Shakespeare's play, and we could take it as the Wall being the hymen, which would stretch open and leave a hole so that the vagina can be penetrated.

We then have the "dear gate". A gate is defined as "a part of a fence or outside wall that is fixed at one side and opens and closes like a door" ("Gate"). Again, we have the hymen as a sort of door. If we picture the gate in an outside wall, the wall would now become the vagina's walls with the gate as the hymen. The speaker continues with the metaphoric comparisons with "dear stile", which is a stair used to climb over a fence or a

wall. The idea is the same as in the previous metaphors: the stile would be the hymen, which acts as a "structure" that gets you through to the "other side", that is, the inside of the vagina. With "dear Dutch door" we have yet another comparison of the hymen to a door. This metaphor is particularly interesting because of the Dutch door's structure, since it is a door that is horizontally divided so that the bottom half remains shut while the top one can be opened. It is as though the hymen, as a "Dutch door", is or could be divided in two, so that the penis (or any other thing) can enter a woman's insides.

The hymen, however, would not be like a "cat-flap" or "a swinging door". Cat-flaps and swinging doors easily open, but they also easily close once the individual goes through them. These doors will not stay open unless something or someone is blocking them. Regarding the hymen, one cannot go through the hymen, breaking it, and enter the vagina and expect the hymen to go back to its original state and position once the penetration is over. Therefore, the most accurate comparison would be the "a one-time piñata". In order to open a piñata and release the sweets it contains, you have to break it with (usually) a stick. The piñata will be cracked open with no possible way of fixing it. The exact same thing happens with a woman's hymen. Once the hymen (piñata) is stretched open with the penetration of the penis/fingers (stick), the membrane will not regenerate. That is why the speaker wonders next about "how many places in the / body were made to be destroyed / once?" (Olds 17-19): once it breaks, it is gone.

The tearing apart of the hymen, though, can be quite painful and difficult. In the next lines the speaker tells us how "sturdy" the "you" (hymen) was, meaning that it was hard to stretch open. She had never felt "such pain", establishing a parallelism with "the hourglass lady / the magician saws in two" (Olds 19-22). We again have another metaphor, now of the hymen as the hourglass lady, comparing the hymen to the iconic and most admired female body shape. Therefore, we have the hourglass lady as the hymen, and the magician who saws the woman in half with a sword, which could stand for a man and his penis. The magician and his sword, the man and his penis, saws the hourglass lady, the hymen, in what appears to be an irreparable and deadly division (even though, of course, it is a magic trick in the magician's context). The breaking will result into "a cupful of the bright arterial / ingredient" (Olds 23-24) – blood. When the hymen is torn apart, some bleeding can occur as we have previously asserted. Here, the speaker states that she is "proud" of this moment, this bleeding. The speaker is almost like a proud mother that is witnessing her child becoming independent. It presents a stark contrast when compared to the fear women had when they were forced to take a virginity test. If they did not bleed, independently of whether they had had sex before or not, this would translate into a punishment or at least a rejection and repudiation from any future husband and family. Even if their virginity was not tested, women like those in the poem "Carmen 62" *had* to be virgins on their wedding night; their husbands would expect bleeding (even if such an assumption is erroneous, as some women do not bleed with the stretching of the hymen).

This whole section has a more personal tone, which makes the reader wonder about the "I" and its identity. The "I" used in poems can have different purposes and meanings. It could be an "I" that pretends to be another person, maybe a historical or made-up character. This type of "I" fits Eliot's definition of the third voice of poetry:

The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. (Eliot 4)

In "Ode to the Hymen", the "I" does not seem to be an imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. For starters, the poem is addressed to a "you" that is the speaker's hymen; but rather than speaking to the hymen, the "I" is speaking to herself and about herself when addressing this "you". This fact also rules out the idea of the "I" as a communal "I", for this "I" could only be applied to women. Moreover, the speaker gives various personal details concerning her "relationship" with her hymen. The adoration and pride she feels, the pain it caused her when it broke, and the ability to choose the moment, place and person she would lose her virginity to are some of the few instances that make the reader realise that the author might be talking about herself and her own personal experience. Thus, we would have the first and second voice that Eliot describes in "The Three Voices of Poetry." The first voice is "the voice of the poet talking to himself-or to nobody" (Eliot 4). In Sharon Olds' poem we have such a voice, because when the "I" is addressing the "you", Sharon Olds would be talking to herself (and of herself): the hymen is(was) a part of her. Then we have the second voice, which "is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small" (Eliot 4). Sharon Olds is addressing, apparently, the hymen. There is an intended audience, albeit not the hymen or herself, but a female audience whose emotions and memories will be evoked when reading the poem. Sharon Olds gives just the right amount of personal details so as to make the poem universal and not wholly about herself.

As we have seen in Catullus' epithalamium, women were married off and for that they had to be "chaste". In Sharon Olds' text, we see an evolution: the speaker chooses "when, and with whom, and where, and why" (Olds 25-26) she loses her virginity. She is aware that she is "lucky" because, as I mention in the introduction of this paper, even in the present-day time not every woman has the power to make that decision. The mundane and rather unromantic location, "it happened on the rug / of a borrowed living room" (Olds 28-29), contrasts with the mythic imagery of her feeling as if they "were in Diana's woods" (Olds 30). Diana was the Roman goddess of hunt, wild animals and woodlands, and the Roman equivalent of Artemis; both considered virgin goddesses and additionally known as a fertility deity. It is obvious how virginity is related to the hymen, but to a certain extent fertility can also be associated with this membrane, in the sense that once it is gone, the penis has access to the vagina and can impregnate the woman. The antistrophe magnificently ends with the image of them, "he, and I, and you", being "magma from the core of the earth" bursting up "through the floor of the sea" (Olds 31-33). The end of this part signifies the hymen's death, which leads us to the third and final part, the epode.

The epode comprises the poem's last thirteen lines. It serves as a sort of conclusion and it comes full circle; the hymen is reborn after its death. She starts by thanking the hymen "for [its] life and death" (Olds 34). Its life has been linked to her girlhood and its

death has meant the start of her womanhood. The speaker establishes a parallelism between the hymen's death and the moment a bride walks down the aisle. In a wedding, the flower girl walks the bride down the aisle, leading her unto a new life. The hymen serves a similar purpose: in its "flower girl walk" it has thrown down its "scarlet petals" (blood drops), which leads the speaker "into the animal life / of a woman" (Olds 42-43). This "animal life" can signify, amongst other things, her sex life and motherhood. She makes it clear that the first time she had sex happened long before she got married:

petals. It would be years before
I married – years before I carried, within me,
a tiny, baby hymen, near the
eggs with other teentsy hymens 40
within them – but you unscrolled the carpet, (Olds 37-41)

This marks another crucial difference with the women from Catullus' poem. At that time, it would have been outrageous for a woman to have sex before getting married; they could not even decide who they were marrying. Their virginity was not theirs to have or give: it was their parents to give and her future husband to take. In "Ode to the Hymen", the speaker and her hymen *both* decide. It is as though they were two, even though we only actually have the speaker talking to a part of herself, which brings us to the last lines:

of a woman. You were a sort of blood
mother to me: first you held me
close, for eighteen years, and then 45
you let me go. (Olds 43-46)

One of the most interesting aspects of the poem is the tone the speaker uses when speaking of and to the hymen, in which we can clearly recognize a familial, almost maternal tone. This accompanies the notion of the hymen as a mother that has watched her grow up, and once its protection was no longer needed, the hymen let her go. With the hymen's "farewell" she became a woman who could bear daughters with little baby hymens, and eventually she ends up having one. Thus, we come full circle: the speaker will be the fortress around a tiny baby hymen, just as her mother was when she was in the womb. Thus, nature will follow its course: her daughter will carry other tiny, baby hymens and so on. The hymens will die at some point but will be reborn in the next generations.

3. Conclusion

The hymen is an uncommon subject when dealing with a woman's sexual experience in literary texts. We can find numerous references to the clitoris or the vagina, but references to the hymen are scarce. Whilst it is true that the hymen is only relevant the first time a woman has intercourse, if relevant at all because it might already be broken, this membrane has history and a presence in many women's lives. In "Carmen 62" we do not have a direct reference to the hymen, apart from the refrain sung to the god Hymen, but we certainly

have connotations that involve it. The maidens had to be "chaste" so that they could be married. Even though it is not mentioned in the epithalamium, women would surely have to prove their chastity, and for that they sometimes had their virginity tested in what was a painful and traumatic examination. A check for blood stains in the bed sheets would also suffice. Women were essentially terrorized and seized from their virginity and their right to choose.

In Sharon Old's "Ode to the Hymen" we are presented with a pleasant and witty (and modern) reflection on the hymen. Sharon Olds' poem serves as a praising of the hymen, but she does more than that; she brings awareness to the fact that currently almost all women can make their own choices regarding their sex life, at least those living in Western societies. She cherishes the tiny membrane from the very beginning, when she was in her mother's womb, through its (and her) life, up to its eventual "death". She is the grand architect of this death – she got to choose the "when, and with whom, and where, and why" (Olds 26). Sharon Olds also uses funny and clever instances in her ode, like for example the series of metaphors she establishes with the hymen ("dear gate, dear stile..."). By introducing humour, she offers a relaxed and refreshing stance and connection with her hymen. This thin tissue is not the one to blame for the atrocities, horror and pain women had to suffer. Still, its presence in the female body has consisted on informing against them, hence women's understandable animosity towards the membrane. "Ode to the Hymen" gives us a different perspective: the hymen is actually like a blood sister, a "blood mother" as she calls it, a thing that should not be feared but embraced. For these reasons, the praising of the hymen is indeed necessary. It proves that the hymen, just as the virginity and the ability to decide, belongs to the woman herself, and it is something we should embrace instead of reject. With a time-span of more than two thousand years, the speaker in Sharon Olds poem wins back the sexual agency and virginity that was taken away from the girls in Catullus' epithalamium.

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