



# About Aphrodite's birds and her magical flowers in Song 1 of Sappho and elsewhere

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**Consultant for Images:** Jill Curry Robbins

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# About Aphrodite's birds and her magical flowers in Song 1 of Sappho and elsewhere

 Gregory Nagy

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§0. The goddess Aphrodite is linked with a variety of birds and flowers. In this essay, I ask myself: what is it that links her with her birds and her flowers in Song 1 of Sappho? I can answer with one word, magic. I mean, the magic of love charms, of enchantments. When it comes to flowers, I can already say this much, from the start: the enchanting beauty of flowers, together with the pleasure that their beauty gives, is apparent, and it is in fact made apparent, as we will see, even in the first word of Sappho's song. When it comes to birds, however, appearances can be deceiving. The picture I have chosen for the cover of this essay illustrates the point I have just made about deceptive appearances. It is an ancient painting of a songbird, most probably a nightingale, whose drabness in color is most deceptive in hiding the radiant coloratura of a beautiful singing voice that matches the brilliant colors of the equally beautiful roses that surround her. But how will such a picture help us understand the flowery magic of birdsong in Song 1 of Sappho? That magic is hidden, as we will see, in the first word of her song.



Image via **Flickr**.





Image via **Flickr**.



House of the Golden Bracelet in Pompeii (oecus 32, south wall). Image via **Flickr**.

§1. The first word in Song 1 of Sappho, at line 1, is *poikiló-thronos*, an adjective used here in the vocative case (ποικιλόθρον') as an epithet designed to invoke the goddess Aphrodite as a prime mover of erotic love. I interpret this epithet, in the overall context of Song 1, as meaning what I propose to translate this way: '[you, O goddess wearing your robe decorated] with varied-pattern-woven magical flowers'. In the next three paragraphs, I will offer a three-part explanation for this way of interpreting the epithet. The first part, with reference to the element *poikilo-*, is about my translation of that element as 'varied-pattern-woven'. The second part, with reference to the combination of the element *poikilo-* with the element *-throno-*, derived from the noun *thróna*, explains why I translate these combined elements as 'varied-pattern-woven flowers'. And the third part, with further reference to the same noun, *thróna*, is about an expanded translation, 'with varied-pattern-woven magical flowers'.

§1.1. With reference to the element *poikilo-* in the epithet *poikiló-thronos* describing Aphrodite in Song 1 of Sappho, I start by citing what I already observed in Chapters 1 and 3 of my book *Poetry as Performance* (Nagy 1996, hereafter abbreviated as PP). As I showed there, the adjective *poikílos* conveys the idea of variation, especially in the medium of pattern-

weaving. So, I propose a general meaning ‘varied, various’ and a specialized meaning ‘varied-pattern-woven’ in such contexts as we see in Sappho’s Song 1. As I also observed in that same book, the specialized meaning that I translate here as ‘varied-pattern-woven’ became, early on, a metaphor for describing variation in song, specifically with reference to birdsong, and, even more specifically, with reference to the singing of the nightingale. What follows is an epitome of those observations (PP 64–65, with earlier bibliography):

In ancient Greek song culture, an apt adjective for the beautiful handiwork of pattern-weaving is *poikílos* ‘varied, patterned’, as we see it describing that ultimate pattern-woven fabric, the *péplos* ‘robe’ that the goddess Athena herself once wove with her own hands, as we read in the Homeric *Iliad* (5.734–735: πέπλον ... ποικίλον). By way of metaphor, the fabric of song is likewise *poikílos*, as we see in the poetic wording of Pindar (F 179): ὑφαίνω δ’ Ἀμυθαονίδαισιν ποικίλον ἄνδημα ‘I weave [*huphaínō*] a varied [*poikílon*] headband [that is, of song] for the Amythaonidai’. In the Hesiodic *Works and Days* (203), the *aēdōn* ‘nightingale’, as the ultimate songbird, is described with the epithet *poikilódeiros* ‘having a varied [–sounding] throat’.

I should add that I have gone out of my way here to cite my book for these observations partly because, sadly, I find no reference to it in some later publications dealing with the metaphorical world of this adjective *poikílo-*. Whatever sadness, however, is easily dispelled for me whenever I look back at the beautiful picture of the ancient nightingale gracing the cover of the book I am citing.



Gregory Nagy

# Poetry as performance

*Homer and beyond*



§1.2. With reference to the combination of the elements *poikilo-* and *-throno-* in the epithet *poikiló-thronos* describing Aphrodite in Song 1 of Sappho, I again epitomize from the same book (PP 101, with earlier bibliography; also PR 93):

I argue that the element *-throno-* is derived from the noun *thróna*, meaning ‘pattern-woven flowers’, and not from *thrónos* ‘throne’, so that *poikiló-thronos* can be translated ‘with varied-pattern-woven flowers’, referring to the robe worn by Aphrodite in Song 1 of Sappho. This goddess of love can make love happen in ways that are as limitlessly varied as the limitless varieties of flowers that are pattern-woven on the surface of her robe.



§1.3. But where is the magic that I think is implied by the epithet *poikiló-thronos* ‘with varied-pattern-woven magical flowers’? I now turn to an overt example where the word *thróna* refers to magical floral patterns that are woven as love-charms into a fabric intended to be worn by someone who is loved by a woman or a girl who weaves the fabric. The example comes from the Homeric *Iliad* (22.437–441), as I showed in *Homer the Preclassic* (Nagy 2010|2009, hereafter HPC; full analysis at pp. 273–277 | II§§373–384). I quote here the relevant lines (*Iliad* 22.440–441):

ἀλλ’ ἦ γ’ ἰστὸν ὕφαινε μυχῶ δόμου ὑψηλοῖο  
δίπλακα πορφυρέην, ἐν δὲ θρόνα ποικίλ’ ἔπασσε.

As for her [= Andromache], she was weaving [*huphainein*] a web in the inner room of the lofty palace,  
a purple fabric that folds in two, and she was in working [*en-passein*] patterns-of-flowers [*thróna*] that were varied [*poikíla*].

Next, I quote the wording that concludes my analysis of this Homeric passage (HPC p. 275 | II§376, with bibliography):

Each flower in the sequence of flowers woven into the web is a love charm, an incantation that sings its own love song. Each flower is different from the next, and the sequence of flowers becomes a variety of love songs within a single sustained narrative, a single love story, which is the pattern-woven web in its entirety.

In *Masterpieces of Metonymy* (Nagy 2016|2015, hereafter MoM), I have more to say about comparative evidence concerning *thróna* as love charms, but I confine myself here to epitomizing the relevance of such evidence to Song 1 of Sappho (MoM 2§76):

Thus, *poikiló-thronos* in Song 1 of Sappho is an epithet invoking Aphrodite in her role as ‘our lady of the varied-pattern-woven floral love charms’. In terms of this epithet, the love charms or erotic enchantments conveyed in love songs are exteriorized as variegated floral patterns that are woven into a fabric. And it is the song itself—in this case, Song 1 of Sappho—that weaves these variegated floral patterns into the enchanted fabric. Once the singing begins, this fabric is ready to wear for the enchanting Aphrodite.

§2. That said, I bring to a close my explanation for adding the word ‘magical’ in translating the epithet *poikiló-thronos*, and I continue to interpret this epithet, which is invoking Aphrodite at the beginning of Sappho’s Song 1, as ‘[you, O goddess wearing your robe decorated] with varied-pattern-woven magical flowers’. I must add, however, that *thróna* need not be visualized exclusively as floral patterns that are woven into the exterior of Aphrodite’s robe. The word *thróna* can refer to love charms in general, not only to floral love charms in particular. In *Idyll 2* of Theocritus, for example, which dramatizes the incantations of a lovesick woman who is targeting her fickle ex-lover-man by spinning a magic wheel and chanting love spells that are programmed to attract him, to drag him back to her love, the same word *thróna* (line 59) is intoned with reference to love charms that are meant to be smeared as magical unguents at entrances to buildings frequented by the unsuspecting ex-lover. Such unguents, I would argue, are floral, made of oil scented with extracts of flowers. In any case, the *thróna* of *Idyll 2* are a vital part of the love charms deployed by the lovesick woman—love charms that include the actual chanting of love spells while spinning a magic wheel. We can see a picture of such a magic wheel being spun in a Classical Athenian vase painting that I have already described in an earlier essay. Pictured in that painting, by the Meidias Painter, is Aphrodite caressing her boy-love Adonis, and, hovering over the loving pair is a winged cupid or Eros, labeled Himeros, who is a personification of ‘longing, desire’ (described at §5, Nagy 2020.10.30 §5, linked [here](#)). As this hovering Eros spins his magic wheel, he aims it at Adonis, who languidly gazes back at it. And, as we now look further to our left, next to the figure of Eros who is targeting Adonis by spinning his wheel at this lover of Aphrodite, is the figure of a female beauty who is teasing a little bird perched on her index finger (description, again, at §5, Nagy 2020.10.30 §5, linked [here](#)). This bird, as we will see, is directly relevant to the magic wheel.

§3. There is more to say about the magic wheel in *Idyll 2* of Theocritus, where we have just seen how a lovesick woman was applying *thróna* (line 59) as magic charms to attract her fickle lover-man—and how she was spinning her magic wheel while singing incantations, conjuring the wheel to attract her ex-lover with its magical compulsion, dragging him back to her love. Now I must add that the actual word used for that ‘magic wheel’ throughout *Idyll 2* of Theocritus is *iunx*, which is compulsively repeated in a sung refrain that is in and of itself a love spell, a magical formula designed to drag the ex-lover-man back to his lover-woman (lines 17, 22, 27, 32, 37, 42, 47, 52, 57, 63):

ἴυγξ, ἔλκε τὸ τῆνον ἐμὸν ποτὶ δῶμα τὸν ἄνδρα.

O magic-wheel [*iunx*], drag him to my house, that man of mine.

My translation, I should add, interprets the word ἐμὸν here, meaning ‘my’, as applying in this magical refrain not only to ‘my house’ but also, by way of a device known as *apo koinou* in the verbal arts, to ‘my man’.

§4. And here is where my essay can make a smooth transition from magical flowers to birds that I think are linked to the flowers that are conjured in Song 1 of Sappho. The word *iunx*, which I have been translating just now as ‘magic wheel’, is the same word that is traditionally used in referring to a favorite bird of Aphrodite, namely, the *iunx* or wryneck, the *Jynx torquilla*. The wryneck, like the magic wheel that is apparently named after the bird (the wording of Pindar in *Pythian* 4.214 makes such an aetiology explicit), was believed to possess in its own right the magical powers of erotic attraction, and I think that the words of incantation that formalize such powers are making their presence felt in Song 1 of Sappho. The fact is, this song actually deploys wording that we find used in other texts that are explicitly meant to cast magic spells on intended lovers, as I pointed out in another essay about Song 1 (Nagy 2015.11.05 §§11–16, linked [here](#), following a most perceptive study by John Petropoulos 1993, bearing the evocative title “Sappho the Sorceress”). So, the magic eroticism of the wryneck, made explicit by way of the magic wheel in *Idyll* 2 of Theocritus, is at least an implied verbal aphrodisiac in Song 1 of Sappho.

§5. Of course the linking of the wryneck with Aphrodite was not confined to the verbal arts. In the visual arts as well, this little bird, like the sparrow, was a great favorite of the goddess, as we saw in the essay previous to this one (Nagy 2020.12.25, linked [here](#)). So, on the basis of what we find in the visual arts, it would be tempting to think of the *strouthoi* at line 10 of Sappho’s Song 1 as wrynecks perhaps, not as sparrows. After all, as I noted in my previous essay, the birds who are the *strouthoi* of Aphrodite in Song 1 can be imagined as birds generically, not only as sparrows specifically. And, unlike the sparrow, the wryneck had an even more special connection to the goddess: whereas the sparrow is a sexual little thing, yes, that particular bird does not possess, it seems, any specially magical powers of sexuality. Here is where the wryneck is more special: this particular bird, not just the magic wheel named after it, is a love charm in its own right, as we see most clearly in the visual arts. A shining example, as we saw above (§2), is a Classical Athenian painting by the Meidias Painter, picturing side-by-side a hovering Eros spinning his magic wheel and, next to our left, a beautiful female

attendant of Aphrodite who is holding a small bird perched on her index finger.

Understandably, art historians are tempted to identify this small bird as a wryneck (Burn 1987:40, 43). Thus the links of Aphrodite with the wryneck reveal the goddess in a special role, as mistress of erotic incantations, love spells, charms. It could even be said that Aphrodite is mistress of all *charm*, of everything that is charming, enchanting, about erotic love. I take advantage here of the fortunate coincidence that the English word *charm* is actually derived from the Latin word *carmen*, ‘song’, which conveys not only the general idea of singing but also the specific idea of magical singing, incantation. And the word *incantation* leads in turn to the idea of *enchantment*, which conveys both the beauty and the pleasure of charm.

§6. Here I pause to take a second look at the *strouthoi* of Sappho’s Song 1. So, what are we to make of these birds now? Are they simply birds generically or are they sparrows or maybe even wrynecks specifically? Looking again at ordinary sparrows, I ask myself: what would be the beauty and the pleasure here? Well, we could invoke once again the notorious sexuality of these little birds, yes, and I have in fact already noted in my previous essays how sex can become celestially beautiful as well as pleasurable when we picture Aphrodite as the radiantly divine beauty who bestows her favor, her *kharis*—even when such divine favoritism extends all the way down to those earthy little sparrows, thus elevating them as favorites of the goddess. So, we cannot rule out sparrows as the sweet birds of Aphrodite in Song 1 of Sappho, but we cannot insist, either, that the *strouthoi* of this song must be sparrows—any more than we can insist that they are, say, the magical wrynecks. All that these birds need to be is to be *charming*—whether that charm is literally magical, as in the case of wrynecks, or just plain worldly, as in the case of sparrows. The beautiful Aphrodite is a fickle goddess, and she has many other favorite birds, not just ordinary sparrows or even magical wrynecks. It is almost as if any given species of the genus I am calling simply ‘birds’ could be made to fit the generic sense of the word *strouthos*—so long as the given bird is not lacking in at least a generic kind of charm—not lacking in what ancient Greeks would describe as *kharis*. But how to translate *kharis*? A moment ago, I used the English word *favor* in referring to the *favoritism* shown by Aphrodite to some of her *favorite* birds. And then, just now, I was using the English word *charm*. Both these words, *favor* and *charm*, convey aspects of a unified idea conveyed by the Greek word *kharis*. In the case of the word *charm*, it conveys the idea of beauty together with the pleasure that comes with the beauty. In the case of the word *favor*, it conveys the idea of sharing, of mutuality, of reciprocity—which is the give-and-take that is needed for the pleasure that comes with the beauty.



§7. And whatever is charming about the favorite birds of Aphrodite can vary. The goddess, indifferent to variations in charm, favors a wide variety that ranges from the endearingly small to the stunningly grandiose. The variety of birds that could be called *strouthoi*, as we already saw in the previous essays, could include not only the earthy little sparrow on a small scale but also the celestial swan on a far grander scale. And a heavenly bird like the swan, with its gleaming appearance, would surely be far better suited to the grandeur of the beautiful goddess—far better than, say, the dusky or even drab little sparrow. Moreover, the radiant birds of Aphrodite do not even have to be big birds like swans. White doves, for example, can be just as grand—at least, they can be just as radiant in appearance. Still, as I already said, appearances can be deceiving. There are also other little birds that are just as drab as sparrows, like warblers or especially nightingales, but such other birds are drab only from the outside, for the eye to see, while they are most colorful from the inside, to the attentive ear. The hearing of a songbird’s song can give as much pleasure, with the beauty of its coloratura, as the heavenly vision of a most beautiful flower such as a rose. As I said before, it is with this contrast in mind that I show, as illustration for this essay, that ancient painting of a drab little nightingale singing in the company of radiantly colored roses.

§8. Mention of beautiful roses brings me back to flowers. Whereas appearances can be deceiving when we consider the beauty and the pleasure that we experience in thinking about the charm of birds favored by Aphrodite, things are different when it comes to the charm of flowers. Here the *kharis* of Aphrodite is more readily visible, even if this *kharis* is just as variable. In terms of my overall argument, then, the variety of Aphrodite’s favorite birds is more than matched by the variety of her favorite flowers, visibly pattern-woven into the robe of the goddess.

§9. For my analysis so far, I have been using two English words to express the Greek idea of *kharis* as the essence of beauty—and of the shared pleasure that comes with the beauty. My first word was *charm*, by which I meant to convey a sense of the enchantment that comes with *kharis* as a sublime experience of beauty and of the shared pleasure to be found in beauty. Then I introduced a second word, *favor*, to highlight the give-and-take of such a shared experience. And now I will add a third word, which is simply a variant of the first, by capitalizing the first letter of *charm*, thus personifying this noun. And I use this personification, Charm, in an effort to convey the enchanting totality of Aphrodite. But such a totality, we will now see, gets to be personified in Greek myth not as a singularity but as a varied multiplicity.

§10. In Greek myth, the singular “common noun” *kharis* can be personified as a plural “proper noun” *Kharites*, which becomes in most mythological traditions the shared name of three goddesses, figured as multiple attendants of Aphrodite. These three goddesses, the *Kharites*, are traditionally called the ‘Graces’ in English. But such a translation, ‘Graces’, cannot fully capture the essence of the Greek plural name *Kharites* as it relates to Aphrodite—nor for that matter is ‘grace’ a fully adequate translation of the Greek singular noun *kharis*. In hopes, then, for a fuller understanding of the word *kharis* and of the name *Kharites*, I will supplement the idea of *grace*, personified as the Graces, with the idea of *Charm* personified—even if I back away from thinking of the multiple Graces as ‘Charms’.

§11. I will now focus on a most relevant remark made by Pausanias, who traveled around the Greek-speaking world in the second century CE. I start by sketching the context (Pausanias 6.24.6-7). Our traveler happens to be visiting the agora of the people of Elis, and he sees there three statues representing the three *Kharites* or ‘Graces’, and each one of these three female beauties viewed by our traveler is holding a symbol of their identities. The first beauty, Pausanias reports, is holding a *rhodon* ‘rose’. As for the second beauty, she is holding an *astragalon*: this Greek word, when you look it up in dictionaries, is translated into English as ‘die’—as when gamblers cast a die or more than one die, that is, dice. Then, finally, Pausanias comes to the third of the three female beauties, and he describes this *Kharis* as holding a small branch of *mursinē* ‘myrtle’. After listing the three things that each one of the *Kharites* ‘Graces’ is holding, Pausanias goes out of his way to engage in a wistful generalization about the die that is held by the *Kharis* who is situated in the middle of this triad of statues. This die, our traveler remarks, is to be cast not at all in serious gambling for material gain, which as he says wistfully is comparable to the ugliness of old age, but as a beautiful *paignion* ‘plaything’ meant for playful love-games that bring delight to young *meirakia* ‘boys’ and young *parthenoi* ‘girls’. Here, then, is the text of Pausanias (6.24.6-7), followed by my working translation:

{6.24.6}... ἔστι δὲ καὶ Χάρισιν ἱερὸν καὶ ξόανα ἐπίχρυσα τὰ ἐς ἐσθήτα, πρόσωπα δὲ καὶ χεῖρες καὶ πόδες λίθου λευκοῦ· {6.24.7} ἔχουσι δὲ ἡ μὲν αὐτῶν ρόδον, ἀστράγαλον δὲ ἡ μέση, καὶ ἡ τρίτη κλῶνα οὐ μέγαν μυρσίνης. ἔχειν δὲ αὐτὰς ἐπὶ τοιῶδε εἰκάζοι τις ἂν τὰ εἰρημένα, ρόδον μὲν καὶ μυρσίνην Ἀφροδίτης τε ἱερὰ εἶναι καὶ οἰκεῖα τῷ ἐς Ἄδωνιν λόγῳ, Χάριτας δὲ Ἀφροδίτη μάλιστα <φίλας> εἶναι θεῶν· ἀστράγαλον δὲ μεираκίων τε καὶ παρθένων, οἷς ἄχαρι οὐδέν πω πρόσσεστιν ἐκ γήρωσ, τούτων εἶναι τὸν ἀστράγαλον παίγνιον. τῶν Χαρίτων δὲ ἐν δεξιῷ ἄγαλμά ἐστιν Ἔρωτος· ἔστηκε δὲ ἐπὶ βάρθρου τοῦ αὐτοῦ.

[In the agora of the people of Elis] there is also a sacred-space [*hieron*] for the Graces [*Kharites*]; their statues are made of wood, with their clothes gilded, while their faces, hands, and feet are of white marble. One of them [= the *Kharites*] holds a rose [*rhodon*], the middle one a die [*astragalon*], and the third a small branch of myrtle [*mursinē*]. {6.24.7} One would consider it likely that the things that have been said about them would be the reasons for their holding these things, and the reasons would be as follows. The rose [*rhodon*] and the myrtle [*mursinē*] are sacred [*hiera*] to Aphrodite and connected [*oikeia*] to what is said with regard to Adonis, while the Graces [*Kharites*] are of all deities [*theoi*] the nearest-and-dearest to Aphrodite. As for the die [*astragalon*], it is a plaything [*paignion*] of young-boys [*meirakia*] and young-girls [*parthénoi*], who are as yet totally exempt from the disenchantment [= that which is *akhari* ‘without *kharis*’ = what is without Charm] that awaits them with the coming of old-age [*gēras*]. On the right of the Graces [*Kharites*] is an image of erotic-love [*Erōs*], standing on the same pedestal.

§12. I find it charming that Pausanias here has been wafted away, if only for a moment, from his down-to-earth description of the statues representing the *Kharites* accompanied by *Erōs*. We now find our traveler flying off on a wistful reverie about the beauty and the pleasure that are personified by the *Kharites*, goddesses whom he links with the playful eroticism of charming young boys and charming young girls as they take their chances in the game of love.

§13. In his far-flung generalizations about the enchanting love-games of youth, contrasted with the grim disenchantments of old age, Pausanias is starting to think about all the different visualizations of Aphrodite in all the different places that he has visited in his extensive travels, and now his mind’s eye fixes on two variations on the theme of Aphrodite’s favorite flowers: just as one of the *Kharites*, those beautiful attendants of Aphrodite, is holding a rose while another is holding a branch of myrtle, so also Aphrodite herself is commonly worshipped as “Our Lady of Roses” in some places and as “Our Lady of Myrtles” in other places. Such variations on the theme of Aphrodite’s charms match beautifully, I think, the varied flowers that are pattern-woven into the variegated robe of Aphrodite in Song 1 of Sappho.

§14. I near the end here on a musical note, as it were, of “local color.” Or, really, on two musical notes, both of which are relevant to the generalization that we have just read in the comment of Pausanias about the various local connections of Aphrodite with either roses or myrtles, both of which flowers, as he says, are in turn also connected with that famous boy-love of the goddess, Adonis. First, I will consider the rose, and then, the myrtle. And I must

emphasize, already in advance, that I will be relying heavily, in the course of these upcoming considerations about Aphrodite and Adonis and their flowers, on a relevant analysis by Marcel Detienne in his lastingly insightful book, *The Gardens of Adonis* (1994 [1977]), and by Lorialan Reitzammer (2016), in her intuitive follow-up book about those exotically perfumed Gardens.

§14.1. I prioritize the rose here because we have more evidence about the connectivity of this flower with Aphrodite and Adonis together—as a loving couple. As I have already noted (at §§2 and §5 above, with reference to a previous essay, Nagy 2020.10.30 §5, linked again [here](#)), this couple’s amorous connections is pictured in a Classical Athenian vase painting by the Meidias Painter, showing Aphrodite caressing her boy-love Adonis. But I concentrate for the moment on visual evidence that comes not from Classical Athenian pictures but from post-Classical and non-Athenian vase-paintings that situate this amorous pair more specifically in a visual setting of roses and rosettes—a shining example of “local color.” The evidence comes from paintings on a special kind of lekythoi—known to art historians as “Pagenstecher Lekythoi” (named in honor of a pathfinding work by Rudolf Pagenstecher 1912), which were vases produced in Paestum, Campania, and Sicily from the middle of the fourth century and extending into the early years of the third century BCE. An incisive study by Michael Turner (2005, with extensive bibliography), has shown that these lekythoi were “oil vessels, made and decorated for the grave,” and that “they were containers for rose oil” (p. 66). With reference to the use of roses as an essential ingredient for the oil contained in these lekythoi, Turner (again, p. 66), links this use to “the mass cultivation of roses in Campania and Paestum mentioned by later writers,” and he cites an extensive list of references to ancient sources (p. 67), especially the reportage of Pliny the Elder, who lived in the first century CE, in his *Natural History* (3.40, 21.16; also 13.5, 13.26, 18.111). Turner (p. 67) also cites a most valuable set of earlier reportage, dating back to the fourth century BCE. It comes from an essay by Theophrastus, *On scents* (sections 45–47), and I quote here Turner’s summary (with reference to section 45, and with citations of relevant remarks by Jean-Pierre Brun 2000:281–282): “[Theophrastus says that] the perfume of rose oil was strong enough to overpower all other scents and smells, going on to add that it was produced on a large scale in Campania.” In this context, I cannot help but think back to the word *thróna* in *Idyll 2* of Theocritus (line 59), referring to love charms that are meant to be smeared as aphrodisiac unguents at entrances to buildings frequented by an unsuspecting ex-boyfriend who is being targeted by his ex-girlfriend. As I argued in an earlier section of this essay (§2), such unguents could be floral, made of oil scented with extracts of flowers. And the most overpowering of such floral scents, as we have just read in the reportage of Theophrastus, is the sweet scent of roses.



§14.2. But there are of course also other scents of other beautiful flowers that rival the rose. One such beauty is the myrtle, as we see in the *Lysistrata* of Aristophanes, featuring a most memorable female character who embodies the tree that produces this beautiful flower. She is a sensuous young woman called *Murrhínē* (lines 70, 850, 851, 874), whose name personifies the *mursínē* or ‘myrtle-tree’. Or, we can say ‘myrtle-bush’ or ‘myrtle-shrub’ if we shift our perspective from nature to culture, since this tree, known to botanists as the Mediterranean variety of *Myrtus communis*, can be cut down to the size of a bush or a shrub when it is transferred, from the wild, to be cultivated in gardens. Further, this word can also refer, more specifically, to a ‘myrtle-spray’ for making a garland to be worn as a beautiful adornment for the hair on festive occasions—including, of course, such amorous scenes of boy-girl courtship that we saw being imagined by Pausanias in that reverie of his that I had quoted a minute ago. Pronounced as *mursínē* by Pausanias, as we saw earlier, this same word was earlier pronounced as *murrhínē* in the dialect of everyday Athenians in the Classical period, as we hear it spoken, for example, in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes (line 1364). In another comedy of Aristophanes, the *Lysistrata* (lines 937–948), we hear the words of *Murrhínē* herself, this sensuous female embodiment of the myrtle, speaking seductively about anointing her bare skin with oil that carries the scent of extractions from myrtle-blossoms. Her wording is designed to arouse—even further—someone who is actually already quite aroused by her sexuality. That someone is the sexually frustrated husband of *Murrhínē*, and his name, *Kinēsíās*, is comically associated here with the idea of sexual arousal implied by colloquial uses of the verb *kineîn*, meaning basically ‘set in motion’. The arousal of the man here is linked with the sexual implications that are built into the name of the woman, *Murrhínē* (line 874), since ancient Greek words for the flower and the berry of the myrtle tree can refer to female genitalia (Reitzammer 2016:193n88 helpfully cites the analysis by Detienne 1994 [1972] 62–64, and I highlight especially the references at his p.168n21). The sexual imagery involves not only the form *murrhínē* but also two shorter forms: first, *múrton*, a feminine noun meaning either ‘myrtle-tree’ or ‘myrtle-spray’, and, second, *múrton*, a neuter noun meaning ‘myrtle-berry’. The sexual imagery built into these words is evident in the *Lysistrata*, where the Laconian word *μύρτω* (at line 1004), genitive singular of *múrton* ‘myrtle-berry’, is a metaphor referring to the female genitalia. In general, such colloquial metaphorizing is well documented by medical writers who correlated their own clinical terms with a variety of such sexualized colloquialisms, especially in the case of *múrton* as a ‘myrtle-berry’ (we find a notable example in a treatise attributed to Rufus of Ephesus, *On names for parts of the human body*, sections 109–113; for accurate anatomical translations into English, with commentary, I recommend the work of Carolyn J. Gersh 2012). Also indicative of the sexual references built into the

naming of *Murrhínē*, ‘Miss Myrtle’, are the sexualized terms of endearment that her frustrated husband directs at this alluring woman in the *Lysistrata*, reshaping her suggestive name with such diminutives as *Murrhinídion* (line 872) and *Múrrhion* (line 906), meaning ‘Little Myrtle’.

§15. I should add that the noun referring to the scented oil that our ‘Little Myrtle’ brings in a flask for anointing not only herself but also her would-be sexual partner in the *Lysistrata* is *múron* (lines 942, 944, 946), and the corresponding verb that refers to the anointing of this scented oil is *murizein*. We find a relevant—and suggestive—context for this word at a point where *Murrhínē* asks this most seductive question: ‘do you want me to give you a [good] oiling [*murizein*]?’ (line 937: βούλει μυρίσω σε;). It goes without saying that my attempt here at a colloquial translation, ‘give someone a good oiling’, comes far closer to expressing the sensuality of the erotic situation here, by comparison with the colorless rendition had attempted earlier, where I spoke of ‘anointing’ the bare skin with scented oil. In this context, I cannot help but think back to the word *thróna* in *Idyll 2* of Theocritus (line 59), referring to love charms that are meant to be anointed as aphrodisiac unguents at entrances to buildings frequented by an unsuspecting ex-boyfriend who is being targeted by his ex-girlfriend. As I argued in an earlier section of this essay (§2), such unguents could be floral, made of oil scented with extracts of flowers. By now we can see that those flowers could have been the myrtles of Aphrodite—or, for that matter, her roses.

§16. But where do we see these two favorite flowers of Aphrodite, the rose and the myrtle, connected directly to Adonis? I divide my answer into two parts. §16.1. In the case of the rose, the connection is clearly visible in the poem *Lament for Adonis*, by Bion of Smyrna (second / first century BCE). As we read there (line 66), the very first rose in existence was generated from the blood flowing from the lips of Adonis at the moment of his death, exactly at the same moment when Aphrodite was about to kiss those lips of his for the last time ever—or at least maybe for the last time ever (lines 8–12). In the case of the myrtle, the connection is less clearly visible, though I think it was successfully explained in an insightful analysis by Marcel Detienne in his lastingly important book, *The Gardens of Adonis* (1994 [1977] 62–64).

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**By Gregory Nagy**

Aphrodite, Kharites, Sappho, sparrow