

Shelley P. HALEY    Radical Transformations: Pauline E. Hopkins' Afrocentric Revisioning of Sappho and Heliodorus

Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1859-1930), a remarkably prolific, talented and pioneering writer, insistently probed questions of inheritance and heritage through depictions of mixed race characters, racial intermarriage and passing. Refusing to see literature as a realm of entertainment or leisure activity separate from politics, Hopkins instead insisted on the key role that fiction played in the history and politics of Black Americans and on the crucial need for African American self-representation. Hopkins had straightforward goals: to use fiction “to raise the stigma of degradation from my race” (*Contending Forces* 13).

As sometimes occurs in the world of literary criticism and cultural studies, the role and influence of the classical tradition upon Black authors (especially Black women authors) is often neglected or misinterpreted. The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which Hopkins molds and transforms the classical tradition into an Afrocentric vision that counters the racist perceptions of her time. The focus will be on two of her novels: *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* and *Of One Blood; or The Hidden Self*.

From *Contending Forces*, this paper will concentrate on Sappho Clark. Sappho Clark embodies the novel's complex and interwoven arguments of race, gender and sexual morality. Clearly it is Sappho Clark's name that draws a classicist's attention. It becomes even more intriguing when we learn that our heroine, struggling to move on from her violent past, deliberately adopted the pseudonym “Sappho Clark” as she sought to reinvent herself with a new social identity, one that eschews sexuality. Why did Hopkins choose “Sappho” Clark as the pseudonym for her socio-legally Black heroine? This paper will argue that Hopkins was aware of the homoerotic reputation of the ancient Sappho as well as the contemporary debate as to her morality. It will demonstrate that Hopkins viewed Sappho as a sexual and moral liminality through which Black women in particular could be empowered and redeemed.

In *Of One Blood*, the other focus of this paper, Hopkins problematizes racial identity at the same time that she encourages racial pride for Black Americans. She also voices a Pan-African vision that unifies and celebrates Black people all over the world. There are several explicit references to both classical and African mythology. This paper will explore the extent to which and the ways in which Hopkins draws upon Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* as a source and resource in *Of One Blood*. The paper will demonstrate that Hopkins incorporated parallels to the *Aethiopica* in her novel and re-inscribed the oppositions that define Heliodorus' Charicleia onto her heroine Dianthe Lusk.

The paper concludes that the Classical canon was broader for women than is sometimes suggested by focusing on white European and American women writers. Authors other than Homer and Sophocles, Vergil and Ovid made an imprint upon the creative sensibilities of women, especially Black women, intellectuals.