Troubled Love, Troubled Gender:
A Fresh Look at Marc Chagall’s Daphnis and Chloe

Jakobsen Conference 2012
Love is the underlying theme that links Marc Chagall and the bucolic novel, *Daphnis and Chloe*. Chagall’s *raison d’être*, his artistic endeavor in life, was to search out the mystical beauty and love in the natural world inhabited by humans and translate his findings into visual plasticity. It was in this vein that he accepted a commission from the editor and art critic, Tériade, to illustrate the time-honored novel written by Longus that centers itself on the predestined love story of a young couple, Daphnis and Chloe. However, personal difficulties arose in his own love life, dampening his desire to illustrate the novel with the typically fond, amorous couple that Chagall is known for depicting. The figure of Chloe in his lithographs is an important symbol in exploring Chagall’s gender categorization of the two characters, and we can see how the hegemonic institutionalized norms manifest in his letters to friends as well as in his oeuvre.

The Greek novel *Daphnis and Chloe* is thought to be written by the author Longus in the early to mid third century CE, during the period when Greece was a colony of the Romans.¹ The tale follows two young orphans, the goatherd Daphnis and the shepherdess Chloe, in their awakenings of mutual love, strife, jealousy that ends happily in marriage, through four short books, chapters not existing in the third century.

The pastoral love story became a well-known classic and many artists, musicians and writers turned its pages for inspiration and edification, and several artists illustrated its pages in *livres illustrés* or *livres de peintres*.² *Livres de peintres*, or Painter’s Books, are novels illustrated by renowned artists, and commissioned and published by a different individual. One of the most beautiful *livres de peintre* done in color lithography with

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forty-two original works was *Daphnis and Chloe*, created by the Russian immigrant to France, Marc Chagall. Tériade, an art critic and publisher transplanted from Greece to Paris, commissioned Chagall to create a numbered, illustrated edition of *Daphnis and Chloe* in 1939. However, Chagall waited until after the war to begin three years of work that saw the completion of the gouaches paintings in 1958.³ It wasn’t until 1961 that the Frères Mourlot printers finished the 270 examples for the limited edition, and the book was printed by Tériade Éditeur.

In the 20th century artists were encouraged to look beyond the simple illustration of the story and instead release the identity and soul of the text through a plastic approach. No longer tied to the narrative, the artist was now allowed to express his vision through a choice of concrete, figurative, or abstract means. Image and text found the perfect synthesis in *livres de peintre*, creating two possibilities of reading at once: one the textual narrative and the other the analysis of Form.⁴

The mystical abstraction that Chagall was known for in his work would be a perfect choice for the marriage of his imaginative, revered images and the love story that focused on the will of the gods in a sacred land. *Daphnis and Chloe* tells the tale of the protagonists from infancy to their marriage. The prologue begins with a description of the author’s incentive to write the love-story, as well as a nod to art itself, the narrator describing a painting of *Daphnis and Chloe* in the sacred woods of Lesbos that he discovered while hunting, and the following four books are his achievement of putting Word to Image. Daphnis and Chloe are abandoned at birth to be found and nurtured

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³ Barber, 80.
respectively by a goat and an ewe, and then discovered and adopted by common herdsmen and their families, who, commanded by Eros, put the youths to tending flocks of their former animal protectors. The young Lesbians fall in love but are challenged through trials, adventures, attempted rapes, kidnapping, and the threat of other suitors, until their true identity is unveiled, they are reunited with their maternal and paternal parents, and Book IV ends with their marriage and the consummation of their love.

Chagall chose to link Daphnis with the color he most connected to the sacred, blue, privileging the young man. His counterpart, Chloe, is represented by a fiery pinkish-red tone, the color connected with passion, love and the possibility of being burned. These symbolic colors and the choice Chagall made in linking them to the female and male foils suggests a deeper meaning that resounds in the artist’s own personal life. In looking closely at Philetas’s Lesson in Love (Figure 1), surprising revelations can be uncovered not just through the artist’s palette, but in the overall composition and the accompanying narration.

The oldest member of the community, Philetas, comes across Daphnis and Chloe one day and recounts his own story of being watched over and guided by the god of Love, announcing that Daphnis and Chloe were now the focus of Love, and ending with the instructions, “The only remedies are kissing and embracing and lying down together with naked bodies.” In their newfound love and the curiosity of assuaging it with the knowledge gleaned from the tales of Philetas, Daphnis and Chloe attempted the first and second techniques, “but were rather slow about trying the third remedy” due to shyness,

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5 Longus and Marc Chagall, 52.
until an extremely passionate embrace knocked them to the ground where “they lay there for a long time as if they had been tied together.”

Though neither was unclothed, Chagall depicts Daphnis as fully nude and Chloe bare-breasted, their bodies melding into one-another’s. Her lower body merges with the blue, green, and purple slope under the blooming arbor, creating a conjoined twin appearance to the reclining couple; Chloe’s breasts push into Daphnis’s chest, her upper body seemingly emerges from his torso. The arm that snakes around Daphnis’s head does not have obvious ownership, with either Daphnis propping his head up to kiss Chloe, or Chloe enveloping Daphnis with her arm. The foot that emerges from Chloe’s skirt is bent at an odd angle as if it was Daphnis’s left foot, putting its possession into doubt, and creating an amorphous, non-gendered couple. The grazing flock in the background contributes to the gender trouble, as the animals are unidentifiable, rounded forms with legs and bent heads, but no clear identifier as sheep or goats, which semiologically would indicate the male or female counterpart of the fledgling lovers.

The luscious, saturated colors of Chagall’s palette paint a symphony of blues and greens that encircle and emphasize the rose and pink meshed figures who seem to float in a cerulean mandorla, the oval aureole originally used to denote sacred persons that was later adopted by Christian artists to indicate the divinity of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The curved line of the arm about Daphnis’s head brings to mind the Byzantine, flat halos ringing saints’ heads that could be found in twelfth and thirteenth century Greek churches. The setting sun over the blue hills draws attention to the days end, the

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6 Ibid., 54.
unfinished exploration of lovemaking, and Daphnis and Chloe, having wasted “most of
the day they had to part, and began to drive their flocks home, cursing Night.”

One troubling mar to the blissful landscape, the lover’s embrace and the joyful
beauty of the lithograph is the static and lifeless figure that Chloe presents with her neck
bent at an uncomfortable and odd angle, creating a wide distance between her vacant
visage and the close-eyed pucker of Daphnis as he dominantly leans over her. Chloe,
contrasted to Daphnis, has her eyes wide open, staring into a void between what would be
the sky and the viewer. In other plates, such as *Mid-day in Summer* (Figure 2) and *The
Swallow* (Figure 3), the figure of Chloe encircles her head with her arm, creating the
rounded halo and giving credence to Daphnis’s ownership of the mystery arm in
*Philetas’s Lesson in Love*. The arm encircling Daphnis’s head is troubling in that Chloe is
left out of the divine symbol. Though still enclosed in the mandorla, she is not as
important to depict, with her body fading into the landscape or melding into that of
Daphnis, nor is she as deific, lacking the halo arm about her head. Daphnis is engaged,
actively seeking Chloe’s kiss and body, his right arm pulls her closer as he leans over her.
Chloe, however, does not share the invigorated, animated pose of her lover. Instead, her
arm rests limply by her side as she lays flat on her back, staring vacuously. She is a
passive participant in not only this embrace but throughout the majority of the series.

Being the original pastoral idyllic romance, concentrating on a couple’s journey to
a mutual happy conclusion in wedlock, *Daphnis and Chloe* does not privilege one
character over the other in the narration. Because neither protagonist is emphasized over
the other, the differences between the sexes can become confused, resulting in a fusion of

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7 Ibid., 54.
the bodies that becomes androgynous or transgendered. Daphnis has certain qualities that would be considered feminine. The young man is not the typical Greek hero, being short, beardless, “dark as a wolf” according to Dorcon, and particularly sensitive emotionally. As pirates abduct Chloe, Daphnis weeps in his helplessness to aide her, and at her return he faints from joy. Chloe is equally sensitive, weeping for fear that the newly rich Daphnis will no longer want her, and she is the first to become aware of the new stirrings of desire when washing her counterpart’s body. “In fact, she compliments and resembles Daphnis in so many ways that the identification or fusion of the two lovers seems a central point of the story.”

This gender confusion is a prime example of today’s gender study approach in critical theory, and this novel from the third century seems to follow the movement of gender performance as discursive practice. In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler argues that fostering subversive identity confusions using parody will aide in destabilizing the Western biological, dogmatic, and asymmetrical view of imitative gender structures. By categorizing gender, such as Men and Women, a subject creates a falsified notion of identity that does not exist in nature. Daphnis and Chloe are not mutually exclusive as their actions parody one another often throughout the narrative.

This mutuality in love, so crucial to the meaning of this story, sets the Greek romances apart from other literature of love in antiquity. Daphnis and Chloe tells of two lovers’ initiation together, not apart.

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9 Ibid., 14.
10 Ibid., 15.
11 Ibid.
The two characters are often seen sharing the same circumstances, both abandoned to the natural world as infants, they grew up tending flocks of sheep or goats, and they suffered the same pangs of love, jealousy and desire. At the end of Book IV the couple marry, “eko bhu” in Greek meaning “to marry”, but also to “become one”, which supports the fusion of man-woman theme.

Returning to Chagall’s lithographs and his interpretation of Daphnis and especially Chloe, we can see the patriarchal, hegemonic influenced, binary gender definitions he instills in the artistic representation of the two. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Chagall portrays a dominant male, subjecting a placid, dispassionate female. Chloe is always under the dominion and tutelage of Daphnis in Chagall’s world. In almost all of the images, Chloe wears an absent expression of passivity. Devoid of any sensation, her facial expression is indicative of a larger melancholia and apathy that can be found in her body’s languid, drooping form.

Another explanation for Chloe’s passive, gloomy attitude in most of the series could come from the artist’s own personal life. Looking at a previous example of lovers embracing and laying down in one another’s arms, the couple in Lovers in the Lilacs (Figure 4) from 1930 shows a happy, smiling woman, independent and defined from her male counterpart, and though her torso faces out toward the viewer, her head turns in her lover’s arms and she smiles, her eyes and visage showing more vigor and interest in her partner than does Chloe. In 1930, Chagall was still happily married to his first wife, Bella, and the two lived in France with their daughter, Ida, before the outbreak of the Second World War. From the trauma and tragedy of this war, Chagall became a sadder man, losing Bella to a viral infection that claimed her life in less than six months in 1944.
when he was living in the United States. Following the traditional Jewish mourning period, Ida introduced a housekeeper into Chagall’s home, and Virginia Haggard McNeil quickly became the artist’s lover and companion, abandoning her husband and giving birth to Chagall’s only son, David.

Having returned to France with Virginia and David in 1948 to live in the south of France, Chagall’s life was suddenly shaken as his common-law wife took their son and moved back to her homeland in England, leaving the artist distraught, as he writes in a letter from April 10, 1952, “But how do I recover? Now I must tell you, my dearest friend, what is happening in my heart. After 7 years of living with Virginia I am almost crushed, as upset as you can imagine.”\(^\text{12}\) He goes on to rage against the “tragedies” imposed on him by the “cold beauty”, saying that Virginia had “1/10 of the genius of Bella,” whom he then lauds as an exemplary of “Jewish wives of artists who stand at their posts.”\(^\text{13}\) It is clear that Chagall’s heart had been broken by the departure of Virginia and yet he ends his letter with an important statement that illuminates the wife’s role in his household and Chagall’s dependence on a woman to care for him while he concentrated on his art, “One great calamity is that I cannot live alone. And not work.”\(^\text{14}\)

Three months later, Chagall sent another letter to the same friends, the Opatoshus, that must have shocked the couple living in America, as it announced Chagall’s marriage to another woman on July 12. Three months and two days after the previous, heart-broken complaints, Chagall mentions Virginia as “the English woman” and writes of her

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 788-89.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 789.
“inexplicable craziness”. He then writes that he had just married a “Jewish woman” who had come “the same day, April 16, to rescue me from the sadness alone in the house”. What should be a joyful, happy letter, full of good tidings of a *coup de foudre* that led to a swift marriage, is instead riddled with a rank and vindictive tone that barely mentions his new bride, and not even by name. Instead, Chagall concentrates on “the other one”, going as far as saying that “For me she is dead. Sometimes I’d like to pity her. But she didn’t have pity for me. Or for her children.”

Shortly after marrying Valentina Brodsky, or Vava, Chagall took his new bride to Greece to survey the land for the project of *Daphnis and Chloe*. As he writes the Opatoshus, “I have to see the country (I have to make a book “Daphnis and Chloe”).” Chagall’s tone in his letters do not indicate any express desire to complete the project, let alone start on it, which could be due to the subject matter of the text revolving around a profound, predestined love.

While Chagall was in Greece for his first visit, Ida writes of the two women in his life and Chagall’s upset in another letter to the Opatoshus, “Father’s instinct pushed him to marry her [Vava], so that she should remain, but his eyes are seeking still Virginia, that poor, poor, fool who was more cruel than if she were bad.” Though Chagall did not start working on the gouache paintings to illustrate the novel until two years later, it seems as though the project was tainted by the lost love between him and Virginia. Even the second trip to Greece in 1954, that saw the greatest output for the *Daphnis and Chloe*

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15 Ibid., 795.
16 Ibid., 795-96.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 812.
19 Ibid., 823-24.
gouaches, was touched by sadness as Chagall learned of the death of his friend Yosef Opatoshu. As he wrote from Athens, learning about the loss of Yosef “threw me here in Greece into a deep mourning….never did the death of a friend evoke such a desert in my heart…”. It is in this context of loss both in a friend and a lover that saw the creation of the images that were made for *Daphnis and Chloe*.

It seems that in his solace, Chagall turned to depicting the natural wonder and beauty of the Greek countryside through color in a medium whose advanced technology allowed for the first usage of a rich, jewel-toned palette in his prints. The figures of the heroes themselves would evoke both the transgender confusion that is found in the text of Longus along with Chagall’s personal enmity toward the feminine sex, stemming from his abandonment issues provoked by Virginia’s departure. Though the figure of Chloe expresses his discontentment with women, the book itself, alongside its illustrations, is a deeply moving *objet d’art*, as its co-creators found in it a representative of the sacred. For Tériade the *livre de peintre* was a continuation of Vollard’s vision for both artist and author where Image and Word could be read and interpreted simultaneously, creating new, overlapping interpretations. *Daphnis and Chloe* was of particular import, the action taking place on Tériade’s birth isle of Lesbos, a sacred isle both in the tradition of Greek mythology and the narrative of the novel. For Chagall as well, the book as an object took on special significance from his Jewish upbringing, as he linked Word with the divinity that God placed on paper. It is in this amalgamation of sorrow and joy, of Word and Image, of binary gender categorizations and personal ties that saw the creation of Chagall and Tériade’s *tour de force*.

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20 Ibid.
Bibliography


Images

Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 3

Figure 12