

UC Berkeley

Journal Articles

Title

Dean Lucy Sprague: the Partheneia, and the arts

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8bg8m23m>

Journal

Chronicle of the University of California, 1(2)

Author

Ruyle, Janet

Publication Date

1998

Peer reviewed

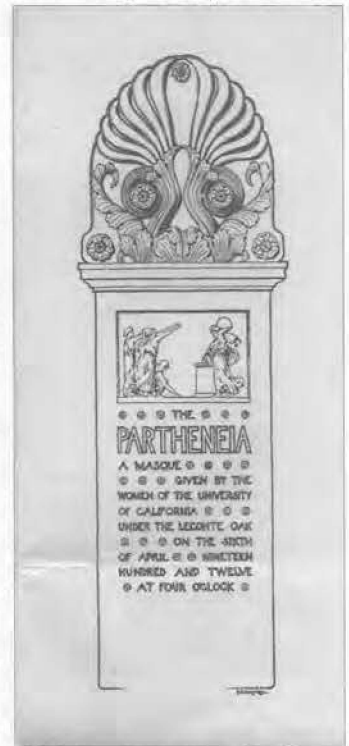
DEAN LUCY SPRAGUE, THE PARTHENEIA, AND THE ARTS

Janet Ruyle

AFTER GRADUATING FROM RADCLIFFE IN 1900, Lucy Sprague (1878-1967) came to Berkeley in 1903 at the behest of President Wheeler to help advise women students. Three years later she was appointed the first dean of women. She also lectured in the Department of English. In her desire to promote women's educational and career opportunities Sprague developed a "curriculum of experience," which became a hallmark of the pioneering educational institution she founded twenty-five years later, the Bank Street College of Education in New York City. Shortly after her appointment as dean, women students claimed that "the best thing that ever happened to the University was the creation of the office of Dean of Women, and that the best thing that ever happened to the office of Dean of Women was the appointment of Miss Sprague to fill it." She was awarded an honorary doctorate in 1958 at the inaugural ceremonies for President Clark Kerr, who hailed her as "one of the greatest professors of half a century ago."

She described the origin of what became an annual spring pageant or masque known as the Partheneia, an original presentation by the women students at Berkeley. After a competition for a student-written script in the fall, the first performance was April 6, 1912 and continued each year until 1931—when students no longer were interested in it. Originally performed under the oaks bordering the eucalyptus grove near the west end of the campus, later performances were given in Faculty Glade, where spectators could be more comfortable.¹ The following excerpt is from Lucy Sprague Mitchell's book, *Two Lives*, published in 1953, which includes her recollections of her years in Berkeley from 1903 to 1912.²

As a group, [women] were tolerated in a man's college. I wanted them to create something that was peculiarly their own, something that would give them standing in their own eyes and in the eyes of the community. Some of the girls were writing on their own and they brought me their poetry. One day at the end of my reading [poetry to the women students who dropped in at her home on Wednesdays], I suddenly suggested that the women students write and put on some kind of dramatic performance on the campus. My remark was like a match put under dry evergreen boughs which turned into a sizzling roaring flame shooting sparks into the air: How could it be done? What kind of thing should they write? Who would choose from the manuscripts? Questions. Excitement. Suggestions. And finally a plan.



1912 program cover for the first Partheneia. *University Archives.*





Costume designs for *The Partheneia*, the first Partheneia, performed April 6, 1912. University Archives.



Program cover of the third Parthenia, presented in 1914. *University Archives.*

We were to ask a group of people to serve as judges. The judges, with a committee of girls, were to draw up a statement concerning manuscripts to be submitted. Only women students could submit manuscripts. President Wheeler approved the plan, and we were off! Judges were selected. The form was left open—it might be a play, a pageant, a dance, an operetta. The subject must concern something important to women, past or present, and could be based on fact or fancy. Over twenty manuscripts were submitted. Most of them were of high quality, showing imagination and a sense of form.

A manuscript in blank verse with lyrics, called *The Parthenia* [sic], submitted by Nan Rearden, was chosen. It was an original and exquisite piece of writing and it came from a shy girl with great dark eyes and a mass of dark hair setting off her pale face. What she wrote was a rhythmic, dramatic masque of great historic women and what they cared for and fought for. At the end, these women in the play appeared in a long procession and left an offering on an

altar of hope. We made a real study of historic costumes and props with the help of various professors and museums. Iphigenia carried a genuine amphora loaned by our museum; Jeanne d'Arc dashed in on a white charger; Héloïse, in her nun's gown, held an ancient crucifix. These are a few characters whom I remember. We gave *The Parthenia* under the great Le Conte live oaks on the campus. More than a thousand girls took part in it, and many more helped off stage. One wonderful chorus of fog maidens did a running dance with billowing gray skirts and gray capes over their heads. When the



Wildwood

Rhiannon

Dawn

Characters for *Dream of Derdra*. 1915 *Blue and Gold*.

sun came out, the gray billows floated away, and there stood a whole chorus of yellow-gowned, yellow-haired girls. Another chorus of sea-maidens all had red hair. With some two thousand girls to choose from, we could do anything we dared to. [The number is slightly exaggerated, as the record shows an enrollment in 1911-12 of 1,573 women students, both graduate and undergraduate, and 2,539 men students.³]



Joan of Arc from *The Partheneia*, 1912. University Archives.



The Vision of Marpessa. Partheneia, 1922. University Archives.

. . . The first *Partheneia* was a huge success. Crowds came from San Francisco. A performance was given for several years after I left the University almost with the spirit of a rite. . . *The Partheneia* meant a great deal more to me than just a successful show. It meant a big co-operative undertaking,



A Thing of Dust. Partheneia, 1923. University Archives.



Unidentified Partheneia. *University Archives.*

planned and executed by more than twelve hundred women students—the first they had ever conceived of. It meant bringing the kindling influence of art and a search for source materials into the sterile academic atmosphere of these girls' college life. It meant the release and exhilaration of self-expres-



There Was a Shepherdess. Partheneia, 1926. *University Archives.*

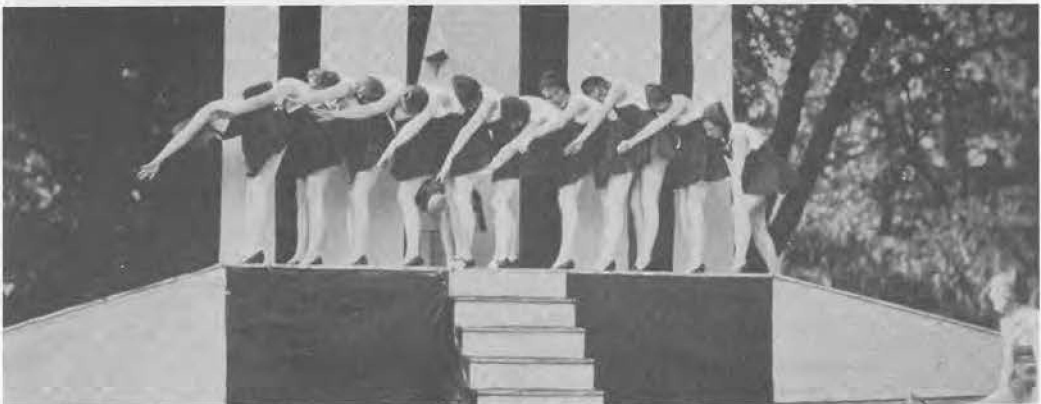
sion—what we now call creative writing and dramatic play—to many shy and lost people. It meant a recognition of the girls through a distinctive and distinguished contribution of their own fashioning. It pleases me that I saw so clearly the value of what I now call “the outgo” aspect of learning. I can only wonder that I had the temerity to launch so big an undertaking in the face of the general apathy. It was reassuring that it met with such response from girls who, for the most part, had been content to attend the University without being a real part of it.

After Lucy Sprague married Professor Wesley Mitchell, she resigned her position at the university and Lucy Ward Stebbins became the new dean of women, serving from 1912 to 1940. She supported the continuation of the Partheneia productions until the final presentation in 1931, *The Potter's Wheel*.

The scope of the productions also continued, if slightly reduced from the original inspiration of the masque. For example, besides the large number of women behind the scenes for staging, costuming, organizing, arranging, ticket design and sales, program design, and publicity, the first program lists over 350 women in the cast of characters in *The Partheneia*. Besides the leading role of the Spirit of Maidenhood were Freshman Maidens, Eucalyptus Dryads, Senior Maidens, Fog Spirits, Sea-breezes, Earth Spirits, Rain Spirits, Leaf Spirits, Flower Spirits, Water-Sprites, Spirits of the Past, Spirits of Endeavor, Attendants of Nobility, Attendants of Joy-in-life, Attendants of Service, and Attendants of Light. The final pro-

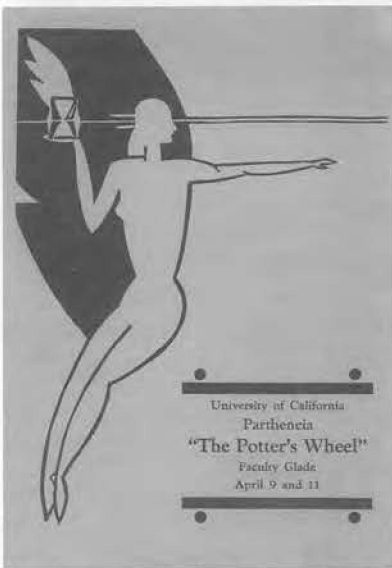


The Druid's Weed. Partheneia, 1929. University Archives.



The Potter's Wheel, 1931, the last Partheneia, in Faculty Glade. *University Archives*.

gram (for the twentieth pageant) listed nearly 120 in the cast. While a few men are credited on the programs as assisting in the orchestra and as the conductor of the orchestra, all others listed are women, and the number of supporting women listed on the various committees is as large as the number appearing on stage, at least in the program for *The Potter's Wheel*.



Program cover for the last Partheneia, 1931. *University Archives*.

By contrast, the synopsis of *The Potter's Wheel* relates, "On the great Potter's Wheel of Life whirl Time's centuries, turning and turning, shaping and re-shaping. Each century is rounded to its close with the same impersonal meticulousness and is hurled off by its own impetus into oblivion, the new century—a bulk of shapeless clay—already growing and forming on the

The idealistic content of these pageants persists through the years, but the character of it has changed by the 1931 production. In 1912 the program's synopsis for *The Partheneia*, with eight episodes, states "After an orchestral prelude and a spoken prologue pronounced by the Spirit of Maidenhood, the action of the masque presents symbolically the spiritual transition of maidens from girlhood into womanhood in a series of episodes . . ." By contrast, the synopsis of *The Potter's Wheel* relates, "On the great Potter's Wheel of Life whirl Time's centuries, turning and turning, shaping and re-shaping. Each century is rounded to its close with the same impersonal meticulousness and is hurled off by its own impetus into oblivion, the new century—a bulk of shapeless clay—already growing and forming on the

revolving wheel.” The description of the three scenes reveals a pageant of concern for technological progress, its evils and virtues, struggles that may reflect the early years of the Depression. Compare the following cast to that of the first production listed above. The 1931 cast includes solo dancers: Expectation, Grace, Woman, Progress, Speed, Power, Jazz, and Destruction; attributes of woman: Gaieties, Blindness, Femininities; virtues of woman: Nobility, Faith, Purity; vices of woman: Intolerance, Smugness; attributes of progress: Aeroplanes and Sciences; virtues of progress: Development, Industry, Invention, Robots, Radio and Telegraphy, Music, Noise; vices of progress: Materialism, Ruthlessness, Avarice, Greed, Wrath, Envy; and ending with a bacchanal of Femininities, Gaieties, Music and Noise.

It would appear that the final Partheneia ended with a splendid bang!



Unidentified Partheneia. *University Archives.*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Verne A. Stadtman, ed. *The Centennial Record of the University of California* (Berkeley: University of California Printing Department, 1967), 115.
- 2 Lucy Sprague Mitchell, *Two Lives, The Story of Wesley Clair Mitchell and Myself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 196-198.
- 3 Stadtman, 218.