

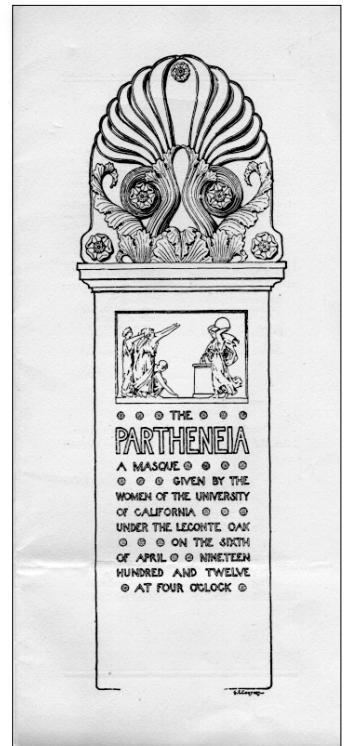
DEAN LUCY SPRAGUE, THE PARTHENEIA, AND THE ARTS

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 *Parthenia* 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 Parthenia* 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.