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'After his *wine-dark sea*': H.D. in Homer

Genevieve Liveley (Bristol)

Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), one of the twentieth-century's most extraordinary writers, whose extensive literary canon (stretching from 1912 to 1961) includes an epic catalogue of classically inspired poems, translations, re-imaginings, and 'fragments', repeatedly turns to – and away from – Homer.¹ Again and again her poetry questions the (im)possibility of telling stories, of writing poetry, *after* Homer. Again and again H.D.'s Homeric heroines (Penelope, Calypso, Circe, Helen) question the roles that have been scripted for them, seeking to revise and retell their familiar histories, ostensibly attempting to resist and rewrite the master narratives that have shaped their identities and stories in the classical tradition. In doing so they not only reflect first wave feminist calls in the early 1900s for the political recognition of women's voices and women's viewpoints, but they anticipate and prefigure second wave feminist interrogations and rejections of culturally scripted female identity that would begin in the 1960s.² Indeed, feminist readings (largely biographical and psychoanalytical in approach – informed by H.D.'s own letters and notebooks, including those detailing her therapeutic sessions with Freud in the 1930s) dominate the scholarship on H.D.'s poetry and

¹ See Brinkman and Brinkman 2016, Gregory 2009, and DuPlessis 1986: 1-30 on H.D. as classicist, and on H.D.'s divergence from mainstream 'classical' modernism.

² See DuPlessis 1979 and Friedman 1981 on the profound influence that H.D.'s poetry had upon the development of Anglo-American feminism, feminist literary criticism, and feminist writing in the 1960s-1980s.

represent her writing as straightforwardly revisionist in its attempts at modernist mythmaking.³

Moving beyond this mode of analysis and focusing upon a relatively neglected aspect of H.D.'s classicism, this chapter investigates the ways in which H.D.'s poetry engages directly, and sometimes playfully, with Homeric epic. After analysing a selection of earlier works ('A Dead Priestess Speaks', 'Calypso', 'At Ithaca', 'Circe', 'Odyssey') for insights into H.D.'s witty, quasi-counterfactual classicism, it offers a close reading of the Homeric features of H.D.'s final long poem, the 1961 epic *Helen in Egypt*. The readings offered here argue that H.D.'s responses to Homer ultimately demonstrate a 'releasing' of pre-existing narrative emphases rather than a 'resistant' reading against the grain of the Homeric tradition, in a more sympathetic and less antagonistic engagement with the Homeric source texts than received readings tend to acknowledge.

'A Dead Priestess Speaks', is the title poem from a collection mostly written in the 1930s but only submitted for publication in March 1949, with an accompanying note in which H.D. refers to this programmatic poem as one which 'describes my own feelings.'⁴ In fact, the biographical identification of the speaker of this poem with H.D. herself is unavoidable here. The dead priestess and speaker is named in the course of the poem as 'Delia of Miletus' (CP 372):⁵ 'Delia Alton' was one of H.D.'s own pen names, and in the final

³ See for example Friebert 1980, Friedman 1981, Ostriker 1982, Duplessis 1985 and 1986.

⁴ H.D.-Pearson Correspondence, March 16th 1949. For a nicely nuanced reading of this poem see Flack 2015.

⁵ H.D.'s *Collected Poems* are abbreviated throughout this chapter as *CP*; her *Helen in Egypt* as *HE*; her *End To Torment* as *ET*. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

poem of this collection Miletus is named as the place where H.D. meets Freud for psychoanalysis (CP 451). H.D.'s identification with her character in 'A Dead Priestess Speaks' is rich in significance, then. Particularly when she receives praise and fame for modestly and purposefully refusing to make 'a song that told of war' (CP 376) and for failing to write an 'epitaph / to a dead soldier' on the grounds that 'no one could write, after his *wine-dark sea*, / an epitaph of glory and of spears' (CP 372; italics in original).

Here 'a dead priestess speaks' ostensibly of H.D.'s Homeric reception in and as a mode of resistance and rejection. In the aftermath of one and possibly (given the submission date) two world wars, no one can write 'after' Homer. Any song that tells of war, that treats the topics of classical epic, risks glorifying death in war or accepting uncritically the literary and political dynamics of a classical tradition that supposedly insists (in Owen's Horatian formulation) '*dulce et decorum est, / Pro patria mori*' (Horace, *Odes* 3.2.13; Owen CP 55). Yet, the staging of H.D.'s 'A Dead Priestess Speaks' complicates this apparent resistance. In the voice of Delia of Miletus, H.D. effectively composes an epitaph not to a dead soldier but to a dead priestess, an epitaph of secret glory and unseen bravery, of a woman's lonely battles. It is an epitaph, moreover, that stands in parallel to that 'carved upon the stone' by the anonymous 'they' in the poem: they who revere yet fail to understand their priestess, prophetess, and poet; they who repeatedly misread 'the pattern' of her life story; they who 'did not see ... / ... could not see' who she really was (CP 375); they who do not hear her 'secret song' sung at night (CP 373). 'They', misreading all the signs, praise her for all the wrong things; ignore those nocturnal activities that invite censure as witch or whore; see and say only 'that [she] was good' (CP 377). H.D.'s epigraph sees and hears and speaks otherwise, telling a different story about the life and death of Delia of Miletus, and about her secret triumphs and trials. It also invites us to look again at

‘the pattern’ of H.D.’s own songs and stories – especially those written ‘after his *wine-dark sea*’ (CP 372).

A poem written in the same period and intended for the same collection, echoing the same title as ‘A Dead Priestess Speaks’ in its original formulation, ‘Calypso’ or ‘Callypso speaks’, offers us further insights into H.D.’s negotiations with the challenges of writing after Homer. This poem presents an alternative version of Book 5 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, re-visioning the shipwrecked Odysseus’s encounter with Calypso (CP 388–96).⁶ It is presented as a dramatic dialogue between the two Homeric characters, with stage directions provided to direct our reading. Indeed, as in ‘A Dead Priestess Speaks’, the dynamics of reading and misreading, of signs and miscommunication, figure prominently in this poem. In particular, in the overtly gendered comedy of misunderstanding that runs throughout the narrative, neither Calypso nor Odysseus are able to ‘read’ the other.⁷ The apparent dialogue between

⁶ For Friedman 1990: 65 this poem and H.D.’s other Homeric revisions represent ‘directly gendered re-presentations of dominant mythic discourse’ based upon an imagist pattern. Murnaghan 2009: 75 suggests that: ‘The misspelling in H.D.’s original title suggests her unscholarly relationship to classical material; the verb “speaks” manages succinctly to convey that the poem is giving a voice to a character who has previously been denied one.’ For alternative readings see Flack 2015: 175-176 and Friedman 1981: 236–43.

⁷ The humour of this poem is often overlooked, despite Calypso’s own repeated invitations to ‘laugh’ (CP 389); to ‘counter-smile’, ‘to smile awry’, and her confession that she is ‘amused to think [Odysseus] may / fall’ (CP 390); her threat to ‘eat Odysseus, the land-walrus / to-morrow with parsley / and bean-sauce’, and her wry query: ‘Isn’t he drowned yet?’ (CP 392). There is also a playful pun in Calypso’s words as she hides in her cave: ‘no

them turns out to be an interweaving of monologues, staging independent and irreconcilable points of view.

The poem begins with Calypso '*perceiving the long-wandering Odysseus, clambering ashore*' (CP 388). To the sea-nymph ('priestess, occult, nymph / and goddess': CP 389) Odysseus is a repellent creature: 'clumsy ... stupid as an ox ... oaf ... ass ... slow, plodding and silly / animal, ... heavy, great oaf, / walrus, / whale ... Idiot ... Odysseus, the land-walrus' (CP 391-392). Out of his natural environment, the sea (and perhaps, Homeric epic too), Odysseus casts a ridiculous figure. But as he comes closer and tracks Calypso to her hidden cave and lookout, he becomes more dangerous than comic, a 'vision of obscene force' (CP 393). As he first '*clasps her*', makes love to her, and then '*drops her*', he is 'hound – / beast of an insensitive pack' (CP 393); and when he leaves her, she sees that he is a man: and 'man is clumsy and evil, ... man is a devil, / man will not understand ... man is a brute and a fool' (CP 394-395). This, at least, is how Calypso sees things. Odysseus sees things very differently: he sees himself 'at home' just as much on land as on sea, equally 'at home' on Ogygia as Ithaca, with Calypso as with his wife Penelope (CP 391). He knows, moreover, (and repeats the refrain) that 'a nymph is a woman', and as such to her 'All men are fathers, / kings and gods' (CP 393). For Odysseus, the role of woman is to be subject to the control of men, to provide men with the little things they need: food, drink, clothes, sex. But, as Calypso's refrain reminds us, he does not understand – anything. He tries to read what looks like a Greek letter marked on the sand by a fallen branch, alongside 'a snake, wound to a

one can find, / no one can follow –' (CP 392). The no one (*outis*) who follows and finds her is, of course, Odysseus (cf. *Odyssey* 9.364).

cypher', but he cannot tell whether the sign represents an 'alpha' or an 'omega' – a beginning or an end (*CP* 391). He clumsily misreads and misinterprets everything.

Thus, in the richly comedic conclusion to the poem, Odysseus sails away from Calypso's island reciting an epic catalogue of all the things that 'she gave' him to aid him in his onward odyssey (*CP* 395-396):

she gave me water
and fruit in a basket,
and shallow
baskets of pulse and grain, and a ball
of hemp
for mending the sail;

...
she gave me peace in her cave.

But Calypso reads and remembers the things 'he took' from her otherwise (*CP* 396):

he took my lute and my shell of crystal –
he never looked back –

Odysseus sails away, still cataloguing all the things that Calypso 'gave' him, unable to hear her words – or she his.⁸ And as the physical distance between them grows, their semi-stychomythic exchange of incomplete lines and internal rhymes emphasizes the fact that this man and woman were never able to communicate with each other. Even when sex brought them physically close together and Calypso lay with '*her hair spread on [Odysseus's] chest ...[as] He sleeps*', she could not hear or understand him, asking of no one, or of us: 'What did he say?' (CP 394).

Thus, in this poem it is not Odysseus but H.D. who looks back, re-visioning, re-reading and re-writing as a romantic comedy the beginning and end, the 'alpha' and 'omega', of a key chapter from Homer's *Odyssey*. Indeed, this is a recurring motif in H.D.'s writing. She adopts a similar strategy of textual re-working in her poem 'At Ithaca', from the 1924 collection *Heliodora*, this time taking Homer's Penelope as her focus. As in 'A Dead Priestess Speaks', the autobiographical analogy between character and poet (and here between Penelope's weaving and H.D.'s poetry) is overt. In one of her collections of autobiographical notes, recollecting her sessions with Freud, H.D. observes of her ongoing attempt to write and rewrite a novel (itself autobiographical) that 'It must be Penelope's web I'm weaving' (*Advent* 153).⁹ She weaves (and unpicks) a section of that same web in the

⁸ H.D. employs the epic catalogue as topos in two other 'Homeric' poems from the 1921 *Hymen* collection: 'The Islands', engaging Homer's epic catalogue of ships (*Iliad* 2.494-760) in a lyric catalogue of islands; and 'Sea Heroes' evoking the same Iliadic catalogue, here overlain with the catalogue of lost Phaeacian sailors in the *Odyssey* (*Odyssey* 8.111-19). In *Helen*, Helen tries to charm Achilles 'with the names of Greek islands' (*HE* 35-37).

⁹ For Friedman 1990, Homer's double-weaving Penelope is H.D.'s own double.

poem 'At Ithaca'. Its opening refrain 'Over and back' matches the recursive movement of Penelope's loom inside Odysseus's palace to the wash of the surf on the shore outside – and to the ebb and flow of Penelope's own 'weary thoughts' as she prepares to 'bind the end' of the completed tapestry each night, praying that one of her many suitors might also bring an end to her 'long waiting with a kiss' (*CP* 163-164). But each night, over and again, she resists that pull and exhorts herself to 'tear the pattern' and undo the work that she had thought 'was done' (*CP* 164):

But each time that I see
my work so beautifully
inwoven and would keep
the picture and the whole,
Athene steels my soul.
Slanting across my brain,
I see as shafts of rain
his chariot and his shafts,
I see the arrows fall,
I see the lord who moves
like Hector lord of love,
I see him matched with fair
bright rivals, and I see
those lesser rivals flee.

In this final stanza, Athene's intervention forces Penelope to look at her work differently, to 'see' (as H.D. repeats six times here) it and the pattern or story it depicts otherwise.

Interwoven (or 'inwoven') with the warp of Penelope's desire for one of her suitors (one of her husband's 'fair / bright rivals' on the home front) to 'conquer' her virtue and her long wait with an adulterous kiss, runs the woof of desire for Odysseus himself. In this re-visioning of Homer's epic and its heroes, Odysseus is recast in the principal role of Penelope's absent lover, 'the lord who moves / like Hector lord of love'; the suitors fighting over Penelope at Ithaca, the Trojans and Greeks fighting over Helen at Troy are all 'matched' in a conflict that is as much domestic and erotic as it is epic.¹⁰

H.D.'s focus here upon one of Homer's pivotal female characters as offering an opportunity to gain a fresh perspective – from a woman's point of view – of the classical tradition and its predominantly male viewpoints conforms to a pattern that repeats throughout H.D.'s writing. For H.D. likes to imitate Homer in casting the various women who Odysseus encounters on his epic journey in more-or-less interchangeable roles: Homer's Calypso, Circe, Nausicaa, and even Penelope essentially perform the same narrative function in alike first delaying and then aiding the hero's *nostos*; H.D.'s Calypso, Circe, and Penelope similarly tell more-or-less the same stories. So, in the poem 'Circe', from the 1921 collection *Hymen*, Circe anticipates Calypso's subsequent encounter with Odysseus – and with H.D. From her island home, surrounded by transformed manimals (which is how H.D.'s Calypso also receives/perceives Odysseus), Circe finds herself impotent; all of her words are useless,

¹⁰ H.D. similarly aligns Greeks and Trojans as equals in *Helen in Egypt* ('The Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion': *HE* 1).

‘all of [her] sea-magic is for nought’ because Odysseus does not love her and will not make her island his home (CP 119).

This keen interest in Penelope, Calypso and in the other female characters from Homeric epic is already signalled in H.D.’s translation of the opening lines of the *Odyssey*, included in her *Translations 1915-1920*. The ‘Calypso’ poem even draws attention to this continuity in referring to Odysseus as one who has ‘no wit’ (CP 390). In her 1920 ‘translation’ of *Odyssey* lines 1.1-98, H.D. characterizes Odysseus instead as the ‘man of wit’ (CP 93)– an apt re-working of Homer’s classic formula ‘*aner polytropos*’ (ἄνδρα ... πολύτροπον: *Odyssey* 1.1). Thus, the opening of H.D.’s ‘*Odyssey*’ reads (CP 93–94 = Homer, *Odyssey* 1.1-21):¹¹

Muse,
tell me of this man of wit,
who roamed long years
after he had sacked
Troy’s sacred streets.

¹¹ H.D.’s library records offer no evidence that she was familiar with or consulted Murray’s 1919 translation in the preparation of her own, but there are a number of suggestive linguistic parallels between the two (emphases mine): in Murray, Odysseus ‘*sacked* the *sacred* citadel of Troy’; in H.D.’s sight rhyme, he ‘*sacked* / Troy’s *sacred* streets’; in Murray, the ‘nymph Calypso’ holds Odysseus ‘in her hollow caves, yearning’; in H.D., ‘Calypso, / that nymph and spirit,’ holds him ‘yearning in the furrowed rock-shelf’; in both translations the Muse tells us ‘And all the gods pitied him’.

All the rest
who had escaped death,
returned,
fleeing battle and the sea;
only Odysseus,
captive of a goddess,
desperate and home-sick
thought but of his wife and palace;
but Calypso,
that nymph and spirit,
yearning in the furrowed rock-shelf,
burned
and sought to be his mistress;
but years passed,
the time was ripe,
the gods decreed,
(although traitors plot
to betray him in his own court),
he was to return
to Ithaca;
and all the gods pitied him;
but Poseidon
steadfast to the last

hated

god-like Odysseus.

Perhaps what is most significant about H.D.'s 'translation' of these lines from the *Odyssey* is not what it includes, but what it leaves out. Eschewing Homer's formal hexameter for an informal modernist lyric which allows certain key words to stand out in their own lines, the effect is of poem as recovered fragment or reconstructed palimpsest. The missing text cedes prominence to an imagist pattern of isolated words ('returned', 'burned', 'hated'); and to a cast of core characters ('Muse', 'Calypso', 'Poseidon', 'god-like Odysseus').

What is more, it presents only a fragment of the first Book of Homer's 24 Book epic, breaking off in the middle of Athene's arming scene (line 98 in the Greek), and it omits crucial parts of the Homeric original along the way: a fragment of a fragment. After the opening invocation (italicized and offset in H.D.'s poem), lines 3-10 of the Greek are lost in the space that is set between lines 5-6 of H.D.'s version. H.D. simply edits out the summary account that Homer gives of the many men and their cities that Odysseus encounters on his travels; she also cuts Homer's reference here to the fatal folly of Odysseus's comrades, along with Homer's second invocation to the Muse as 'goddess, daughter of Zeus' (θεά, θύγατερ Διός: *Odyssey* 1.10). H.D.'s fragment cuts the extraneous men out of the story's prologue to allow the *Odyssey's* female characters – the Muse, Calypso, Penelope, Athene – to come in to the narrative foreground. In so doing, H.D. succinctly foregrounds her own focus and interestedness in telling the *fabula* of Homer's epic differently. Thus, where Homer's Calypso longs for Odysseus 'to be her husband' (λιλαιομένη πόσιν εἶναι: *Odyssey* 1.15), H.D. tells us instead that Calypso 'sought to be his mistress' (*CP* 93). As H.D.'s Athene puts it: 'let us plot / to reinstate Odysseus' (*CP* 97).

H.D., however, simultaneously plots to reinstate Homer's Muse, Calypso, Penelope, and Athene. Her own interest is in 'god-like Odysseus', not as returning hero or epic adventurer, but as a man defined by his relationships with women, 'captive of a goddess, / desperate and home-sick / [for]... his wife and palace,' and protected from Poseidon's ire by the goddess Athene. The translation ends with the goddess (whose Homeric identification as daughter of Zeus, H.D. carefully omits here, just as she had in her earlier representation of the Muse) addressing the epic council of gods, and taking flight on her Homeric mission (unstated in H.D.'s poem) 'to vanquish the ranks of men—of warriors' (*Odyssey* 1.100-101). Thus (*CP* 98 = *Odyssey* 1.96-98):

*She spoke
and about her feet
clasped bright sandals,
gold-wrought, imperishable,
which lift her above the sea,
across the land stretch,
wind-like,
like the wind breath.*

Playing with the lexical possibilities for translating the Greek ('πνοιῆς ἀνέμοιο') in line 98 as wind and breath, Homer's Athene is reconfigured here as a Muse-like, 'wind-like', breath-like force of 'inspiration' for H.D.'s poem (from the Latin *inspirare* – 'breathe or blow into'). Like the Muse through whom her words and actions are spoken, Athene's speech and her intervention in the affairs of the gods and heroes of the epic world serve as a potent analogy

to H.D.'s own literary intervention here – and elsewhere in her poetic engagements with Homer.

Indeed, Flack identifies in this translation the outline sketch of what will become 'a major strategy in H.D.'s poetics' in which '[r]ather than outright rejecting the epic tradition and the masculine authority it signifies, H.D. activates the potential for female authority already latent in the *Odyssey's* reliance on both the Muse and Athena in its opening book.'¹² This mode of strategic re-reading and re-visioning of Homeric epic is significant. For it supposes a 'releasing' of pre-existing narrative emphases rather than a 'resistant' reading against the grain of the dominant narrative authorized by the classical tradition. It suggests, above all, a sympathetic rather than antagonistic engagement with the Homeric source text. H.D. may overtly ignore the divine fathers that Homer ascribes to the Muse and Athene, so as to better release their own authority and agency, independent of male influence. But her Athene is unarmed, and her golden sandals allow her to follow in no one else's footsteps, but instead to fly high above the ocean – as H.D. herself seeks to soar above Homer, perhaps.

That flight reaches to new heights in H.D.'s most ambitious undertaking, the epically conceived *Helen in Egypt*, written in the period 1952–6 but not published until 1961 and characterized variously as a 'rewriting of the Trojan War', 'a psychoanalytic narrative', a meditative epic', a 'revisionary Trojan War epic', and 'a new kind of epic narrative: the female nostos quest' (several voices in the poem call 'Helen – come home': *HE* 108; cf. 153,

¹² Flack 2015: 170. Somewhat contradicting her argument here, Flack also describes H.D.'s 'Odyssey' as an 'antagonistic' and 'radically new, fresh, and modern *Odyssey*' (169).

181, 220).¹³ The poem is divided into 3 sections: 'Pallinode' (a defence or apology, set in Egypt, staging an encounter between Helen and a shipwrecked Achilles), 'Leuké' (a white island or blank page in space and time where Helen meets Paris and Theseus – a Freudian figure who guides her through forgotten memories and classical texts), and 'Eidolon' (an image or icon, in which returns Helen to Egypt). Each section contains 7, 7, and 6 books respectively (the seventh book of 'Eidolon' would have been the 1959 poem 'Winter Love'), each book contains 6 poems in *terza rima*, and each poem is introduced by a short prose abstract voiced, so it seems, by H.D. herself (or her Muse). Written at the prompt of her friend Norman Pearson sometime after the poems themselves, these abstracts seem to offer explanatory glosses or readings to help guide us through the polytropic narrative of H.D.'s epic. However, instead of simplifying or clarifying, they work instead to multiply and complicate that narrative, adding additional layers and veils of significance, asking rather than answering questions, contradicting rather than elucidating the arguments played out by the poems they introduce.¹⁴

H.D. had already treated 'Helen' as a subject in a 1924 short poem of that name, starkly summarizing Helen's status in the classical tradition as the deadly, enchanting, dangerous beauty, who 'All Greece hates ... All Greece reviles' (*CP* 154-155). In *Helen*, H.D. initially re-introduces this Helen to the stage (the 'Helen hated of all Greece': *HE* 2), but then sets out to offer a different reading of Helen's story, transforming the silent, viewed, passive

¹³ Duplessis 1986: 84, Friedman 1990: 303 and 1981: 69, Hughes 1990: 380, Flack 2015: 183.

¹⁴ See Hokanson 1992 and Duplessis 2007: 120-121 on the self-consciously palimpsestic character of these abstracts in *HE*.

object of the 'Helen' poem into a speaking, viewing, moving, agent. As the final Book of the 'Leuké' section describes it, she comes both to 'see and be' (*HE* 206; cf. 243, 255).

The inspiration for this transformation, and the key influence upon this 'translation' of Helen from Troy to Egypt, is widely ascribed to H.D.'s reading, not of Homer's epics, but of Euripides' tragedies.¹⁵ In Euripides' various retellings of the myth, Helen is not seduced by Paris and does not go with him to Troy; the gods send a phantom (or *eidolon*) in her place, and remove the real Helen to Egypt, thus preserving her chastity and her status as a good Greek wife and mother, rather than condemning her as the wicked Trojan whore responsible for the 'holocaust of the Greeks' (*HE* 5, 229) as H.D. describes the great war of Homer's *Iliad*.¹⁶ H.D. signals her interest in this version of the story, and her debt to both Stesichorus and Euripides, in her prose introduction to the first book of *Helen*, itself titled 'Pallinode' (*HE* 1):¹⁷

We all know the story of Helen of Troy but few of us have followed her to Egypt. How did she get there? Stesichorus of Sicily in his Pallinode, was the first to tell us. Some centuries later, Euripides repeats the story. Stesichorus was said to have been struck blind because of his invective against Helen, but later was restored to sight, when he reinstated her in his Pallinode. Euripides, notably in The

¹⁵ H.D.'s research notebooks for *Helen* show that she read and annotated five Euripides plays (*Helen*, *Andromache*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *Trojan Women*).

¹⁶ See Austin 2008: 115.

¹⁷ See Barbour 2012.

Trojan Women, reviles her, but he also is “restored to sight.” The later, little understood Helen in Egypt, is again a Pallinode, a defence, explanation or apology.

There is no mention here of Homer (although there are direct references to ‘Homer’ in the prose abstracts to ‘Pallinode’ 5 and 6: *HE* 9 and 11), and H.D.’s readers have consequently tended to overlook Homer’s role as one of the other key sources for this *epic* poem, ignoring the Homeric narratives underpinning not only those of Stesichorus and Euripides, but several of H.D.’s own earlier works which appear as ‘palimpsests’ underneath the text of *Helen*. Eileen Gregory, whose comprehensive survey of H.D.’s ‘Hellenism’ has been widely influential, and for whom Euripides is the ‘architectonic’ source of H.D.’s *Helen*, even claims that Euripides’s *Helen* ‘is the solo extant source for the myth that H.D. here takes for granted, and ... constitutes the principal classical subtext of her poem.’¹⁸ Landmark studies of H.D.’s epic by Rachael Blau DuPlessis, Karen Burnett, and Susan Stanford Friedman similarly emphasize H.D.’s dependence upon – and departure from – Euripides, and pay scant attention to her nuanced engagement with Homer.¹⁹ When Homer is adduced, it is typically in the negative: for DuPlessis, ‘H.D. is *not* writing an anti-*Iliad*’;²⁰ for House, ‘H.D.

¹⁸ Gregory 2009: 218.

¹⁹ DuPlessis 1985 and 1986, Burnett 1990, and Friedman 1981.

²⁰ DuPlessis 1985:77. Duplessis 1986 111-12 refers to H.D.’s ‘rather offhand’ treatment of her ‘approximate source’ pointing to what she sees as the sole reference to Homer’s *Iliad*: ‘a two-line allusion, virtually lost in this lengthy text, to deny the central event of that other story: ‘Achilles skulks in his tent, / they said, but it was not true ...’ (*HE* 247).

turns to the radical and revolutionary playwright Euripides as her model for a rejection of Homer';²¹ for Gregory, the poem offers only an 'apparent revision of Homer', and only 'appears as a kind of antiepic', its real revisionary dynamics supplied by the tragedies of Euripides.²²

But *Helen* warns against taking such appearances at face value. H.D.'s polyphonic palimpsest of a poem wholly discredits the idea that there might exist a single hermeneutic key to unlocking its reading or a single 'Helen' behind H.D.'s heroine.²³ An unpublished memoir from 1955 ('Compassionate Friendship') points to a doubly autobiographical dimension to *Helen*, in whom H.D. writes that: 'I had found myself, I had found my alter-ego or my double – and that my mother's name was Helen had no doubt something to do with it.'²⁴ But that autobiographical dimension itself takes on a further personal and literary

²¹ House 2006: 32

²² Gregory 2009: 218, emphases added. Downes reads against the grain of this critical trend in identifying in the poem a 'lyric re-visioning of the Homeric *Iliad*' (2010: 50).

²³ Flack 2015: 9 also highlights the scholarly tendency 'to treat the Homeric epics as an interpretive key for decoding allusive modernist writing [which] can still be felt in reading guides to works like *Ulysses* and *The Cantos* that tend to stabilize dynamic allusive practices in terms of mostly static 1:1 correspondences.' H.D.'s emphasis upon multiplicity belies any such neat correspondence in her modernist epic.

²⁴ H.D. 1955: 16. In her notebook 'Advent', reprinted in the 1956 collection of notes, *Tribute to Freud*, H.D. also recalls that a teacher, 'a Miss Helen', read to her from *Tanglewood Tales* on Friday afternoons; those classical myths and stories, she reflects, 'are my foundation or background' (1956: 187).

multiplicity in the poem's allusions to Pound's unfinished *Cantos* – which opens with a re-visioning of the *nekuia* from Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus visits Achilles and other *Iliad* heroes in the underworld: in her memoir of Pound, H.D. noted, 'Thinking of Ezra's work, I recall my long Helen sequence' (*ET* 41); and in her correspondence with Pearson she called the segments of that poem her own 'cantos'.²⁵ What's more, the poem published as 'Winter Love' (written in 1959, published posthumously in 1974) and originally intended to serve as a coda to *Helen* makes this interpersonal and intertextual allusion even more explicit in staging a final reunion between Helen/H.D. and Odysseus/Pound.²⁶ Indeed, on the cover of her personal copy of 'Winter Love,' H.D. pencilled an epigraph taken from Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* ('and dull life burst with stars and turned to fabled myth': 95), indicating an additional layer of Homeric intertextuality not only to 'Winter Love' but to *Helen*.²⁷

It seems entirely apt, then, that we encounter multiple Helens in H.D.'s epic: 'Helen of Sparta, / ... Helen of Troy, / ... Helena, hated of Greece' (*HE* 14); 'Helen in Egypt, / Helen at home, / Helen in Hellas forever' (*HE* 190; cf. 187, 218). An Egyptian glyph of Isis ('or Thetis': *HE* 14) and her sister Nephthys prompts Helen to remember her own twin sister, Clytemnestra, 'inseparable /as substance and shadow, / as shadow and substance are ...' (*HE*

²⁵ See Gelpi 1982: 245. For Duplessis 1986: 111: the whole poem seems a reworking of 'the obligatory one-book trip to the underworld in epics.'

²⁶ Friedman 1990: 371 n 38 confirms that 'Winter Love ...[was] scheduled for publication as a coda for *HE*.' Penelope, it appears, is the 'One greater than Helen' who can answer the riddle of the epic' (*HE* 303).

²⁷ Cf. Flack 2015: 190 and 57; Box 34, folder 885, H.D. Papers.

68). This reminds us too that Helen and her 'phantom', Helen in reality and in image, are equally inseparable: 'She is both phantom and reality' (*HE* 3). Helen identifies herself with numerous other (Homeric) women in the poem too: '*Chryseis, Deidamia, Briseis ...Polyxena*' (*HE* 172) who, like Helen (and Iphigenia), 'were all sacrificed in one way or another' (*HE* 173). And the same is true of the male characters in this story: Achilles, Paris, Menelaus, Theseus, and Odysseus variously play the role of Helen's lover here and thus Helen comes to realize that all of Homer's heroes, 'are one' (*HE* 25). Perhaps we should be wary, then, of seeking to identify any *one* individual classical source as the hermeneutic or architectonic key to this poem: whether we see Homer, Stesichorus, Euripides, Pound, or Kazantzakis in *Helen*, H.D. reminds us that to her they are inseparable, 'they are one'.

In fact, one of the most potent – yet often overlooked – of the multiple intertexts informing the opening of H.D.'s 'Pallinode' section relates to none of these classical or modernist poets but to Virgil and the ekphrasis in Book 1 of the *Aeneid* (Virgil's own re-visioning of Homeric epic) in which Aeneas recognizes himself amidst the Greek and Trojan heroes fighting before the walls of Troy – and along the frieze of Juno's temple in Dido's Carthage (1.464-493).²⁸ Helen similarly tries to read a frieze of hieroglyphs, the 'stone-writing' or 'Amen-script' that decorates an Egyptian temple, when she recognizes that 'She herself is the writing', that she herself is 'a living hieroglyph', simultaneously both viewed object and viewing subject, both text and reader, inscription and translator (*HE* 22-23; cf. 91). Thus, when Achilles – still characterized principally by his implacable (Iliadic) anger despite being (re)cast here as a shipwrecked (Odyssean) ghost, 'shedding his glory' and limping across the sand (*HE* 10) – views her as 'a witch', 'a goddess', as 'a vulture, a

²⁸ Pausanias 3.19.11 casts Achilles and Helen as lovers.

hieroglyph' (*HE* 16-17, 261), Helen recognizes that his reading accords in part with her own. Indeed, Homer's Helen 'reads' herself in the *Iliad* much as Achilles does here, blaming herself for causing the war between Greeks and Trojans, shamefully wishing she'd never been born, and describing herself as 'a bitch, an evil trouble-maker' (*Iliad* 6.344). As H.D.'s prose abstract wryly observes in its reading of this reading: 'This is almost funny' (*HE* 15; cf. 161).

In this new adventure, this new epic, Helen learns to 'read' herself just as she learns to read the stories and myths depicted in the constellations of the night sky, 'the star script' (*HE* 204) or 'The great "frieze, the Zodiac hieroglyph"' (*HE* 271). In a repeated refrain (appearing in both the prose and poetry sections), 'She knows the script, she says ... She says she is "instructed" ...' (*HE* 13; cf. 22): 'I "read" the script, / I read the writing ...' (*HE* 25; cf. 230). This writing, this script, takes diverse forms. Euripides and Stesichorus certainly figure among those 'who set the scene ... of the already-written drama or script' that Helen knows (*HE* 230). But she is 'instructed' in 'other stories' too; including, especially, Homer's *Iliad*, 'the story the harpers tell' (*HE* 129). Indeed, in the epic's final segment, 'Eidolon', with its 'last enlightenment' and its provocatively 'very simple' conclusion, Helen comes back (home) to Homer (*HE* 262):

so it seemed to me
that I had watched,
as a careful craftsman,

the pattern shape,
Achilles' history,

that I had seen him like the very scenes

on his famous shield.²⁹

She realizes that ‘the pattern’ she has been trying to rework, the scripted part(s) she has been trying to (re)play, the hieroglyphs and friezes she has been trying to read, are already there in Homer: ‘the “old pictures” are really there, / eternal’ (HE 264). In ‘Leuké’ it was H.D.’s strange ventriloquist, the Freudian Theseus, who speaks *for* Helen in declaring that “‘I can not go on, on, on // telling the story / of the Fall of Troy’” (HE 153). H.D.’s Helen can and does go on telling that story – across the three movements of *Helen* and on into its coda. In ‘Pallinode’ and in her own voice, Helen may claim that she is done with Homer: ‘I do not want to / hear of Agamemnon / and the Trojan Walls, / I do not want to recall / shield, helmet, / greaves ...’ Nevertheless, she admits that still ‘I might recall them’ (HE 18), since the memory of Achilles is pleasurable. And she does. In ‘Eidolon’ Helen may complain that a ‘million personal things ... tender kisses, ... soft caresses’ were absent from Homer’s narrative – that ‘none of these / came into the story, / it was epic, heroic ...’ (HE 289). Yet, she is still repeatedly ‘called back to the Walls / to find the answer,’ ‘to return and sort over and over, / ... intimate, personal things’ (HE 232-233; cf. 99).

As Helen is ‘called back to the Walls’, so H.D. is called back to Homer. Indeed, Helen is first introduced in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, in the prelude to Homer’s remarkable *teichoskopia*, when she is called out on to the walls of Troy to observe the duel between her Greek

²⁹ H.D.’s 1921 poem ‘Prayer’ (alluding to *Iliad* 18.478-608) similarly employs the forging of Achilles’ armour as a poetological metaphor for her own writing.

husband and her Trojan lover: here we first see Helen weaving a tapestry depicting something very close to the narrative of Homer's epic itself – Greeks and Trojans fighting and dying for her sake (*Iliad* 3.121-128); and then, with the eyes of the Trojan Elders, we see Helen herself (*Iliad* 3.154-60). In H.D., 'we see, with the eyes of Achilles, Helen upon the Walls' (*HE* 49) but Achilles' reaction is identical to that of Homer's Trojan Elders. As Gumpert puts it (in prose worthy of H.D.):³⁰

The elders waver between admiration and fear, love and hatred, idolatry and the longing to possess. Helen herself is a shimmering figure: now woman, now goddess; now real, now illusory; now here, now there (where? Sparta? Troy? Egypt?); now Greek, now Trojan; now guilty, now innocent; now subject, now object.

This 'shimmering' and contradictory view of Helen is shared by both Homer and H.D., it seems. For Homer's Iliadic Helen, no less than H.D.'s, is already a paradox: she is simultaneously a weaver of epic stories and a character within those stories, both poet and poetry; simultaneously viewer and viewed, reader and text; simultaneously Helen of Troy and of Greece, shameless adulteress and sorrowful wife. Even before we factor in the Odyssean Helen to this complexity – Helen of Sparta, the good wife and witch (*Odyssey* 4.220-289) – Homer's Helen is a multifaceted mosaic of a character: 'a witch', 'a goddess', 'a vulture, a hieroglyph' (*HE* 16-17, 261); or, as Helen describes herself in the *Iliad*: 'a bitch . . . tormented by fate to figure in the songs of people not yet born' (*Iliad* 6.344-358).

³⁰ Gumpert 2001: 4.

Thus, in the ‘last enlightenment’ and ‘very simple’ conclusion to *Helen* (HE 262), we see not a reversal of but a *return to* Helen’s role in Homer’s epic script: this is her *nostos*. Ultimately, H.D.’s Helen is *not* proven innocent of her part in instigating the ‘holocaust’ of Greeks and Trojans, the anger of Achilles, or Homer’s *Iliad*. As the poem’s own ‘Eidolon’ recommends, *Helen* does not ‘strive to re-weave, ... the pattern’ of Homer’s epic (HE 97). H.D.’s witty, polytropic, Helen is Homer’s Helen. Just as H.D.’s angry, damaged, Achilles, soldier and lover, is Homer’s Achilles. He appears in H.D. ‘shedding his glory’ (HE 10), shedding the epic *kleos* conferred on him in the *Iliad*, and re-reading his role in that story, realizing that for all the ‘deathless glory’ promised him there (HE 41), in the end he ‘was shot like an underling, / like the least servant, / following the last luggage-carts / and the burdened beasts’ (HE 60). But Homer’s Achilles has already made this realization, and this re-reading. In the *nekuia* from Book 11 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, Achilles claims that he ‘would rather work as the hired hand of some tenant farmer and impoverished peasant than be lord of all these rotting dead’ (*Odyssey* 11.489-491). Homer has already authorized the re-weaving of the pattern of the *Iliad* that H.D. plots here.

Indeed, Helen’s multiple returns to the Walls of Troy allow her – allow us – not to reweave or replot the *Iliad* but to look again at what was already there; to see that Homer’s martial epic might be read simultaneously as a love story, replete with ‘intimate, personal things’ (HE 232-233; cf. 99); to see that Homer’s ‘epitaph of glory and of spears’ (CP 372) might be read simultaneously as an anti-war poem, in which Greeks and Trojans are not natural enemies but equals, defined by similarity rather than difference (HE 1), in which every death (re)performs the sacrifice of an innocent life (HE 219), in which mothers, and wives, and children on both sides lament their war losses, in which even ‘Achilles’ mother, ...

Thetis mourned, / like Hecuba, for Hector dead' (*HE* 296).³¹ Like Penelope, Calypso, and Circe, H.D.'s complex, contradictory Helen(s) – 'Helen in Egypt, / Helen at home, / Helen in Hellas forever' (*HE* 190) – finally finds herself at home in Homer.

³¹ Cf. Hardwick 2004: 47: 'it is just as easy to read the *Iliad* as an anti-war epic as it is to read it as an encomium to martial power.' On alternative, female-focused subplots and perspectives in Homer see Graziosi and Greenwood 2007, Katz 1991, Felson-Rubin 1997.