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Helen In Egypt: Poetry (New Directions Paperbook)



Synopsis

A fifty-line fragment by the poet Stesichorus of Sicily (c. 640-555 B.C.), what survives of his Pallinode, tells us almost all we know of this other Helen, and from it H. D. wove her book-length poem. The fabulous beauty of Helen of Troy is legendary. But some say that Helen was never in Troy, that she had been conveyed by Zeus to Egypt, and that Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion. A fifty-line fragment by the poet Stesichorus of Sicily (c. 640-555 B.C.), what survives of his Pallinode, tells us almost all we know of this other Helen, and from it H. D. wove her book-length poem. Yet Helen in Egypt is not a simple retelling of the Egyptian legend but a recreation of the many myths surrounding Helen, Paris, Achilles, Theseus, and other figures of Greek tradition, fused with the mysteries of Egyptian hermeticism.

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Customer Reviews

The fabulous beauty of Helen of Troy is legendary. But some say that Helen was never in Troy, that she had been conveyed by Zeus to Egypt, and that Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion. A fifty-line fragment by the poet Stesichorus of Sicily (c. 640-555 B.C.), what survives of his Pallinode, tells us almost all we know of this other Helen, and from it H. D. wove her book-length poem. Yet Helen in Egypt is not a simple retelling of the Egyptian legend but a recreation of the many myths surrounding Helen, Paris, Achilles, Theseus, and other figures of Greek tradition, fused with the mysteries of Egyptian hermeticism.

H.D. (1886-1961) (the pen name of Hilda Doolittle) was born in the Moravian community of Bethlehem, PA in 1886. A major twentieth century poet with "an ear more subtle than Pound's, Moore's, or Yeats's" as Marie Ponsot writes, she was the author of several volumes of poetry, fiction, essays, and memoirs. She is perhaps one of the best-known and prolific women poets of the Modernist era. Bryher Ellerman was a novelist and H.D.'s wealthy companion. She financed H.D.'s therapy with Freud.

A monument to poetry and unappreciated in general. I read it in an hour and marked up the memorable parts. Highly recommended for those who love poetry.

thanx

Although individual lines are lovely off the tongue, the poem for my taste is 280 pages too long. I read this as a Brain Pain book club read and it drags on and on and on to my admittedly poetry illiterate mind. Hundreds of pages go on repeating the same dozen telephone book entries of gods, goddesses and heroes in a monotonous laundry list that literally goes on for hundreds of lines (I thought the printer made a mistake and was repeating pages, but no), while throughout the poem there is no drama or movement or intention of any kind. Three hundred pages of disassociated angst where everyone repeats over and over, stanza following stanza, "who am I, when am I, where am I?" Everybody can't remember if they were in Troy or not, killed or not, alive or not. The gods can't keep their identities clear in their minds either, constantly wondering if they are Greek or Egyptian. Sometimes Helen is on a beach with Achilles, sometimes on a stair in Troy with Paris, sometimes standing on Sparta or with Theseus - always wondering what happened, whether she wants to remember or not, then comes the pages of gods and goddesses names again, listed practically in the same order as earlier or later in the poem. The effect is cold, boring and tedious. There are these prose 'explanatory' introductions by the poet almost every page that explain the same dull inner life identity confusion that she puts into poetry form below her lifeless explanation. Supposedly these characters are having identity/memory worries because they are living in different universes simultaneously. But no matter which reality plane they experience, they all just stand there wondering for 300 pages.

The poet H.D. [Hilda Doolittle] was born in Bethlehem, PA to an academic family. Her father, Charles Doolittle, was a Professor of Mathematics and Astronomy. "Everything revolved around

him," Hilda wrote many years later. He was stern, patriarch, and hard to impress. At Bryn Mawr College, she met Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Under Pound's tutelage, she began writing poetry. He gave her the moniker "H.D.," and they became engaged. On an August day in a museum tearoom, Pound both gave her a pen name and determined that she should be a published poet. When she left school two years later under something of a cloud, it was Ezra Pound who introduced her to his literary circle, the Imagists, in London. There she met her future husband, Richard Aldington, after the Pound relationship wore off. Naturally, she wrote Imagist poetry and submitted much of her work to the harsh review of her mentor, the patriarchal Mr. Pound. She later had a remarkable friendship with D. H. Lawrence and then Cecil Gray, the future father of her daughter. Before the First World War, she emerged as a young woman firmly under the wing of various men. They ultimately had the effect of both promoting and marginalizing her talents. The war to end wars changed a great deal. In many ways, the pre-war Imagists were poets who reflected in words the aesthetic values of Impressionist painters. They created objectified poetry, based on images of life, both inanimate and human. After the war, the same group of poets [Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens] gradually came to be known as Modernists as they absorbed the harsh realities of the War. In so far as H.D. was an Imagist, she pursued clarity through precise visual images. As she emerged a Modernist, she discovered the need to write about what Rafael Campos has called "human relationships contextualized in their starkly new and sometimes alienating surroundings." Here, H.D. found her voice in the experiences of classical females, like Helen. In Homer's version of the Trojan Wars only the male version of the story is told. In H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, the silent heroine speaks for herself. In *Helen*, it is H.D. who finds a feminist voice with which to speak to the world. As she gained an independent voice, she started to find other women who were fighting a similar fight. H. D.'s personal relationships with women varied a great deal. She was an early friend of Marianne Moore, who encouraged her. After so many disastrous relationships with men, she took up an openly lesbian relationship with the poet, novelist, and critic Annie Winifred Ellerman, who published under the name Bryher. Together they traveled around Europe through the twenties, writing poetry and generally acting out the lives of wild women of the flapper era. In 1933-34, H.D. moved to Vienna and studied under Sigmund Freud. She became one of the few cases where he psychoanalyzed one of his students, after which her poetry became even more openly feminist in tone. As she worked with Freud, she kept notes which were later published as *Advent*. Ten years later, she published a slightly fictionalized version of her psychoanalysis by Freud entitled *Writing on the Wall*. Today, the two manuscripts have been re-issued by New Directions under the title *Tribute to Freud* and a fascinating read it is. Dedicating

your life to the service of others isn't always the best way to serve the development of your own special talents. H.D. wrote long before the idea of genuine human equality between the sexes could be openly contemplated. So, her poetry was largely ignored. H.D. spent most of her life trying to free herself.

How to describe this book? Doolittle's dexterity with our language, her soft languorous voice, the layers upon layers of depth underlying each of the stanzas? It is impossible. Having read the Greek lyrics and tragedians, and that other beacon, Shakespeare, I am still at a loss to do justice to Doolittle's "Helen in Egypt." I can only tell you one thing: read it. But if you do, do it slowly, with care and attention to each of the lines, with long pauses to allow them to sink in, and let yourself be seduced by Helen, Helena, the phantom that, real or not, launched a thousand ships, and languishes between a triumvirate of men, gods, and heroes: Zeus and Amen, Achilles and Paris and Theseus, Castor and Pollux and Clytemnestra...

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