

Bethlehem's H.D.: intense feminist commitment (5)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Arts, the, Fun Stuff, Gadfly's posts, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) February 25, 2019
(5th in a series of posts on H.D.)

Finding H.D.: A Community Exploration of the Life and Work of Hilda Doolittle

The next event is TOMORROW: "H.D.'s Moravian Roots in Bethlehem" by Moravian's Craig Atwood, Tuesday, February 26, 6:30-8 at the Bethlehem Area Public Library.

In this 5th slice of Prof Seth Moglen's January 30 "How I Fell in Love with H.D." lecture at the BAPL in the FINDING H.D. series let's stick with the poetry.

In this brief excerpt, Seth talks about and reads H.D.'s "Helen" (1924). Yes, that would be "the" Helen, "the face that launched a thousand ships" in the Trojan War.

"Helen"

All Greece hates
the still eyes in the white face,
the lustre as of olives
where she stands,
and the white hands.
All Greece reviles
the wan face when she smiles,
hating it deeper still
when it grows wan and white,
remembering past enchantments
and past ills.
Greece sees, unmoved,
God's daughter, born of love,
the beauty of cool feet
and slenderest knees,
could love indeed the maid,
only if she were laid,
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

Almost all of H.D.'s corpus is animated by an intense feminist commitment to the empowerment of women and to women claiming their voices in patriarchal cultures which over centuries and millennia had silenced women. . . . H.D. was able to understand that male dominance in Western society had been hundreds or thousands of years in the making but could still be transformed. . . . [H.D.'s poetry is] an effort to think the long history of male dominance and question what it would take to shape or challenge it. (Seth Moglen)

"Helen" takes as its subject the woman who has been the literary and mythic symbol of sexual beauty and illicit love in western culture. Much has been written about her, but H.D.'s poem does something new: it implicitly attacks the traditional imagery of Helen and implies that such perspectives have silenced Helen's own voice. (Susan Stanford Friedman)

H.D. implies that the beautiful woman is always hated by the culture which pretends to adore her beauty and that the only good beauty, so far as patriarchal culture is concerned, is a dead one. . . . the poet now announces that Helen of Troy, our culture's archetypal woman-as-erotic object, was actually a male-generated illusion, a "phantom," and that "the Greeks and the Trojans alike fought for an illusion." (Alicia Suskin Ostriker)



H.D. presents the title-character in the poem "Helen" as a suffering madonna victimized by the Greeks. (Thomas Burnett Swann)

[Helen] is seen as a woman who suffers for her beauty and is forced to endure the hostile glances of those who blame her for causing the war between the Greeks and the Trojans. (William Pratt)

This is your promised reminder! The next event in the year-long series is "H.D.'s Moravian Roots in Bethlehem" by Moravian's Craig Atwood, TOMORROW, Tuesday, February 26, 6:30-8 at the Bethlehem Area Public Library.