BOOK REVIEW

Nephie J. Christodoulides and Polina Mackay, eds. The Cambridge Companion to H.D. New York: Cambridge UP, 2011.

BY MARA SCANLON

H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961) has always been difficult to characterize neatly: poet, novelist, memoirist, editor, translator, essayist, critic, film theorist, actor, American, Moravian, expatriate, Freudian analysand, and spiritualist—any of these can partially name her, and only a few even gesture toward her equally complex relational network with Modernist creators, critics, publishers, and patrons. Publications by and about H.D. have also emerged in complicated and non-chronological waves. For instance, H.D. is frequently vaunted as the premier practitioner of the influential school of Imagism; but, as critics have long argued, strict categorization of her as an Imagist diminished reception of the mid-century long poems which sustain epic reach and are considered her masterpieces by many later readers. And, though she worked devotedly after World War I on experimental prose pieces that deliberately amalgamate autobiography, theory, and fiction, H.D. controlled publication of those early works in her lifetime, even though she returned to them for revision; they have been emerging from the archives in semi-regular posthumous publication since 1981, with more yet to come. These are just two of the complications of any attempt to contain H.D.’s work and legacy. Too, when Susan Stanford Friedman published her foundational recovery, “Who Buried H.D.? A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in ‘The Literary Tradition’” in 1975, the titular question was only slightly exaggerated. Less than fifteen years dead, H.D., a writer at the very heart of Modernist poetry and the first female recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters medal, had largely been erased from the critical map. A relative flood of excellent work, much of it based in feminist criticism and theory, emerged in the twenty years following, and H.D. has gained her place in literature courses. But some H.D. scholars do still feel, I think
fairly, that H.D. is underrepresented for the amount and variety of critical examination she deserves.

Now *The Cambridge Companion to H.D.* (2011), edited by Nephie J. Christodoulides and Polina Mackay, joins the recent *Approaches to Teaching H.D.’s Poetry and Prose* (eds. Lara Vetter and Annette Debo, 2011) in giving H.D. coverage in a principal series of literary criticism. The volume, dedicated to Christodoulides who passed away in 2011, contains work by both senior and junior scholars from Greece, Cyprus, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Available in hardcover, paperback, and e-book, it includes a clear bio-bibliographic chronology and eleven essays divided into two sections: “Contexts and Issues” and “Works,” though the distinction is not always self-evident. The editors describe the book as having an “extensive engagement with” existing criticism (3); at times, especially in Part I, that feels like an exercise in summation, but it signals *The Cambridge Companion*’s intention to be a foundational text for H.D. scholarship. Given that H.D. is clearly reputable enough to warrant inclusion in this premier critical series, the book surprisingly returns at several points to a basic argument that she should, indeed, be considered significant. This reflects, perhaps, a larger uncertainty about audience—while some essays are densely theoretical and presume a working knowledge of H.D.’s texts typical of a specialist, others function more as quick overviews of some well-mapped arguments about her reception and oeuvre. Overall, *The Cambridge Companion to H.D.* is very valuable for enriching our understanding of H.D. and her work in relation to queer studies, periodical studies, translation studies, and more, as well as in reframing discussion of H.D.’s spiritual realism, aesthetic philosophy, and experimentation with genre.

Part I, “Contexts and Issues,” focuses on H.D.’s contested canonicity; the permeable boundary between her life and her writing (a topic that is also examined in two essays of Part II); her contribution to the “little magazines,” primary sites of publication for the avant-garde writers of the era; her relation to Modernism and the centrality of Imagism; and her probing, fluid interrogation of gender and sexuality, which both aligns her with other female Modernists like Virginia Woolf and opens a space for such discourse for writers who follow, only one aspect of her continued significance that is examined for later generations of poets.
Part II of the volume, “Works,” includes analysis of the literature organized roughly chronologically from the early Imagist poetry through the post–World War II memoirs *Tribute to Freud* and *The Gift*. The chronological structure unfortunately highlights one of *The Cambridge Companion to H.D.*’s most striking lacunae, and that is its inexplicably poor coverage of *Helen in Egypt* and the other late poems. Nevertheless, the five essays of the strong second section all offer sophisticated readings that are grounded in fruitful close analysis of H.D.’s experimental language and skilled poetics, something shown beautifully by Diana Collecott, who argues that H.D.’s classically-inflected early poetry is also marked by an “iconoclastic newness that prefers rupture to perfection, kinesis to stasis” (95). Using various theories of metaphor and metonymy, as well as models of liminality, Collecott examines the relationship “between human consciousness and natural objects” (97) and attends meticulously to language and sound in tracing a “way of writing that presents brokenness, without participating in it” (103), developing instead through an (il)logic of reiteration, betweenness, and transitionality.

Miranda B. Hickman’s essay, “‘Uncanonically Seated’: H.D. and Literary Canons,” opens the volume usefully, as it moves beyond a review of what the editors rightly call the “turbulent history” of her canonization (3) to argue persuasively that we must take up the question of why H.D. should still be canonical now, since a canon is not inviolate, and since H.D. herself valuably “models a mode of thought resistant to facile truths and complacent orthodoxies” (13). Hickman embraces a heterodox H.D., and briefly demonstrates the approach by discussing the “erotic sublime,” violence, and new models for queerness in H.D.’s writings.

This essay is one of several that positions itself to some degree in the ascendant field of queer studies. H.D., of course, wrote extensively about social, personal, and psychoanalytic models of sexuality, and this has long been an essential focus of the scholarship. Newly nuanced theories of gender identity and sexuality provide rich and fresh insight, especially for the works of fiction, many of which deal directly with same-sex desire. This case is made at most length by Georgia Johnston, in “H.D. and Gender: Queering the Reading,” which focuses on the novel *HERmione*, arguing that “[b]y framing through [mirrors, both literal and
metaphorical], H.D. questions a patriarchal ‘normal’ subjectivity […] defined in terms of a unitary individualized self” (63). Johnston posits instead a textualized identity and one reflected and refracted through both Her’s female lover and the simultaneous use of “I” and the third-person “Her.” Sappho’s words form another layer of reflection, “stand[ing] beside H.D.’s as titles to her poems and, then, through extended images, in her novels” (73). Johnston’s discussion of Sappho is less clearly illustrated, but it marks just one of several moments in the volume when H.D.’s strong connection to Sappho is explored with new and welcome insight.

Throughout the Companion, fruitful attention is given to some lesser known works and to acuter readings of H.D.’s genre-defying writing. For instance, Sarah Graham studies the under-examined Hymen as a work composed during and just after World War I, which presents an “eroticized and celebrated community of women” (114), interrogating “heteropatriarchy” and its attendant forms of violence and prefiguring H.D.’s great poem of the next war, Trilogy, which includes not only the damaged but powerful “capacities of women’s bodies” but women’s spiritual significance as well (117). Matte Robinson and Demetrios P. Tryphonopoulos contextualize and explicate some of H.D.’s prose pieces, including more recently released works like Majic Ring, arguing that they affirm her deep belief in the singular role of the writer and the “mythical, rarefied audience” (128) and may be productively co-read with contemporaneous poetry. Like Brenda S. Hedelt, whose essay on memoir also takes up H.D.’s belief that artistic prophecy, revealed through psychoanalysis, could be “revelatory not only for herself, but for people of all times” (161), Robinson and Tryphonolous examine, in a way that avoids reductive conflation of author and character, the experimental fusion of fiction/imagined experience and history/lived experience characterizing H.D.’s resistance to delimited genre. “What happened and what is important are construed differently for H.D.,” writes Hedelt, “than for practitioners of univocal, chronological, teleological, fact-based modernity” (160).

Two essays in the volume stand somewhat apart in their focus, and both are quite valuable. In “H.D. and the ‘Little Magazines,’” Cyrena N. Pondrom offers an overview of H.D.’s publication in and/or editorial work for various Modernist periodicals, which
is often overlooked. Quoting heavily from fascinating correspondence, Pondrom tracks the little magazines as a powerful outlet for H.D.’s writing and also places her in the pantheon of female editors. In the context of the burgeoning field periodical studies and new accessibility to little magazines made possible by the digital archive The Modernist Journals Project, Pondrom’s clear piece is timely. Likewise, Eileen Gregory’s excellent “H.D. and Translation” draws on contemporary theory of translation in grappling with the paradox that H.D. “deliberately avoid[ed] ordinary production in translation, and yet [saw] translation as central to her work” (144). Gregory discusses the “politically resistant” translation of Sappho and other female poets (146), and her positioning of the translated choral odes as H.D.’s foundation for exploring “lyric polyphony” is only one of her rich insights.

The Cambridge Companion to H.D. is a most welcome addition to H.D. scholarship; the greatest tribute to the volume may well be the work that follows from these fine essays.