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Penelope's Web

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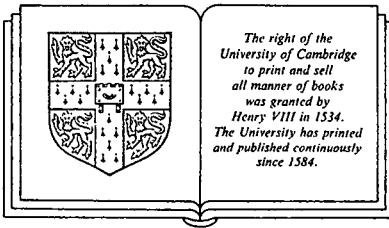
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Penelope's Web

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SUSAN STANFORD FRIEDMAN

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*For
Edward Friedman,
my companion in this flame*

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I have tried to write of these experiences. In fact, it is the fear of losing them, forgetting them, or just giving them up as neurotic fantasies, residue of the war, confinement and the epidemic, that drives me on to begin again and again a fresh outline of the “novel.” It is obviously Penelope’s web that I am weaving.

H.D., *Advent*

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Preface

Penelope's Web examines the weave of H.D.'s modernity as it is patterned by gender, genre, and history in the discourse of her prose. In recent years, H.D. has been read increasingly as a poet whose innovative lyrics and magisterial epics contribute significantly to the remapping of modernism, of women's place within its theory and practice, and of a woman's poetic tradition. H.D., however, worked as hard and consistently at her prose as she did her poetry and produced an impressive oeuvre in a variety of genres – novels, novellas, short stories, essays, and memoirs. She saw only a fraction of this prose in print during her lifetime, most of it privately printed and distributed mainly to friends and an avant-garde network. This prose, much of it now published, was essential to the development of her poetry. Moreover, many of the texts stand on their own as brilliantly innovative and deserve to be read in the context of the experimental writing of modernists like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Dorothy Richardson.

Penelope's Web offers such a reading, examining both the scope of H.D.'s prose oeuvre and its specific achievement in a number of texts. The book argues that H.D.'s poetic and prose texts exist in symbiotic relationship, each constituted as distinct discourses that are nonetheless necessary to each other. H.D.'s prose developed as a personal, narrative discourse in opposition to the impersonal discourse of her early lyrics. Impelled by the catastrophic events of history to reconstruct a shattered self as a woman/writer, her fiction and personal essays were more directly about gender, as well as a performance of it, than her early poetry. Consequently, the prose was more experimental, more disruptive, more distinctly feminized – in short, more disturbing – in its linguistic excesses, its bisexual desire. So personal and radical was this prose in its critique of culture that H.D. suppressed much of it, keeping it in a kind of limbo, as work prepared for publication, but screened from the public eye. It remained a kind of silent speech that represented her particular negoti-

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ation as a woman writer in the male world of letters. Largely veiled, H.D.'s prose constituted a difference that made a difference to her subsequent poetic development, and that makes a difference to the tradition of women's prose and to the way we read women and modernity.

As such, H.D.'s prose anticipates much post-structuralist theory of the feminine, which in turn provides compelling interpretive tools for reading her texts, especially the work of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. However, *Penelope's Web* resists a reading of H.D.'s prose as illustrative praxis for the proof of post-structuralist theory. It argues instead for the double reference in H.D.'s writing: its simultaneous gestures toward "the real" of history (both personal and societal) and toward the intertextual mosaic of various literary languages. Although much of *Penelope's Web* was written before I read Nancy K. Miller's essay "Arachnology," the book is an attempt to perform what she calls an arachnological "reading for the signature." It sets out to locate and interpret the historical and material conditions that mark H.D.'s texts with the story of their production. It proposes as an inseparable part of that reference the narrative of H.D.'s self-conscious reading and rescripting of the cultural and literary texts in which she and other modernists were enmeshed. It assumes, in other words, that H.D., along with many other women writers, asserted an agency and identity made in and through language, one that she constituted in opposition to an ideology that would deny her the status of subject.

Penelope's Web has been a long time in the making. It reflects an expansion in my own education necessitated not only by the difference of H.D.'s prose, but also by the dramatic changes resulting from the introduction of post-structuralist theory into literary studies. In particular, contemporary theories of narrative and lyric, the self or subject, desire and gender, transference and resistance, autobiography, and (inter)textuality inform its feminist inquiry into the production, discourse, and reception of H.D.'s prose. This book does not, however, represent a conversion narrative, but rather reveals a dialogic play in its methodologies that refers back to my own alternating excitement with and resistance to post-structuralism, particularly post-structuralist feminism. The book reflects in many ways a self-conscious negotiation between post-structuralist and non-post-structuralist feminist discourses, between materialist and linguistic interpretive strategies. On the one hand, it owes a great deal to the rich insights about textuality, language, and desire that have been developed by post-structuralist theory. On the other hand, it reflects a strong suspicion of post-structuralism's tendency to stake its claim to radical critique solely on the terrain of the linguistic. However textualized, the historical and the political retain for me their existence

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in “the real,” in the “experience” of writers who act, who make things happen through their writing, who have a reason to write beyond the pleasure of the play of empty signifiers.

The shape of *Penelope's Web* emerges out of the autobiographical project of H.D.'s prose discourse. The Introduction places H.D.'s prose oeuvre within the complex terrain of modernity, both as she herself formulated a modernist poetics and politics in texts like *Notes on Thought and Vision* and *Borderline*, and as we can interpret its Penelopean production, configuration, and reception. Chapter 1 examines the genesis and shape of H.D.'s prose discourse – its relation to her noms de plume; its origin, in the midst of World War I, in flight from the impersonal, timeless discourse of her imagist lyrics; its autobiographical telos; its post-structuralist stylistics. Chapters 2 through 5 present readings of the textualized selves H.D. constructed as she reflected on her various pasts in her prose fictions and memoirs. They follow the life cycle of created selves rather than the chronology of composition – beginning with her self-portrait of the young poet living in her parents' home and ending with the self she (re)made in the midst of the Battle of Britain by circling back to her beginnings in Bethlehem. Chapter 2 examines her portrait of artistic origins in *HER* as the formation and deformation of “H.D. Imagiste” within a bisexual economy of desire acted out before the flight to Europe in 1911. Chapter 3 reads the Madrigal cycle of novels about the young lover/wife/mother/poet caught in the grip of World War I. It treats *Paint It To-Day*, *Asphodel*, and *Bid Me To Live (A Madrigal)* as distinct layers in a composite “text” that is structured like a psyche, interpretable through the lens of psychoanalytic concepts such as the censor, the dream-work, transference, and working through. Chapter 4 charts the postwar borderline selves that H.D. constructed in her history novels and the Dijon fiction that ghosted for her life in the 1920s and early 1930s. It reads texts like *Palimpsest*, *Hedylus*, *Narthex*, *Kora and Ka*, and *Nights* as reconstructions of the increasingly split and bisexual self in exile from the maternal body. Chapter 5 looks at the death and rebirth of the self as narrated in her memoirs of analysis in the 1930s and World War II. Using psychoanalytic concepts of transference, resistance, and working through, it reads *Tribute to Freud*, *Advent*, *The Gift*, and H.D.'s letters to Winifred Bryher from Vienna as a palimpsest made up of distinct but interpenetrating layers that enact a “writing cure” that mirrors the scene of analysis. The Coda returns to the issue of difference by suggesting briefly the tracings of the same in the oppositional, yet symbiotic and ultimately intermingling, discourses of H.D.'s poetic and prose discourses. Throughout *Penelope's Web*, I have drawn heavily from the H.D. Papers, most of which are located at the Beinecke Rare Book and

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Manuscript Library, Yale University. In quoting from her unpublished writings, I have retained her idiosyncratic spelling and corrected a few obvious typos with bracketed additions or silently deleted extra letters.

Complementing the text of *Penelope's Web* is a series of collages inspired by those in H.D.'s Scrapbook, a forty-page photo album kept up over a period of years from the 1920s until the mid-1930s. Encased in an elegantly tooled leather cover, the Scrapbook was probably collaboratively made by H.D., Bryher, Perdita, and Kenneth Macpherson. It includes a number of elaborately arranged collages and snapshots of people and images that meant a great deal to H.D. and her immediate family. The collages in *Penelope's Web*, some of which include images cut from the Scrapbook collages, are visual and narrative arrangements whose self-evident construction draws attention to the compositional nature of H.D.'s autobiographical, experimental writing. They honor the presence of collage in modernism itself, as well as in the traditional femmage of women's scrapbooks and needlework, from which so many of the innovations of modernism sprung. As palimpsests themselves, they are visual commentaries on key layers in *Penelope's Web*, strata that include, first, H.D. and those with whom she was most intimate from youth until the early 1940s; second, H.D.'s fictionalized constructions of her self and her companions; and third, the interpretations I offer of those texts in *Penelope's Web*.

Other illustrations for *Penelope's Web* include four reproductions of typescript and manuscript pages from *HER* and *Tribute to Freud*, chosen to reflect the processes of self-construction and self-censorship. Finally, the cover image was selected from Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* (1355–9) for its resonance with the title and argument of *Penelope's Web*. Boccaccio's idealization of "noble women," both historical and mythical whom he held up as models for contemporary women, is part of a pervasively androcentric perspective, which in turn inspired Christine de Pisan's *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), a visionary vindication of women's nature and achievement. My use of Boccaccio's image is an appropriation made in the spirit of Christine de Pisan's *Book*.

Penelope's Web is a different book from its older companion, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.*, which appeared in 1981 and came out of my own formation as a feminist scholar in the 1970s. Reflecting its emergence in the 1980s, *Penelope's Web* owes as much to feminism as the earlier volume, but a feminism that has changed as it has become intellectually more complex, woven into multiplying discourses of the academy. If anything, my sense of commitment and participation in a collaborative deformation and reformation of knowledge with other feminists has intensified in the past decade. I felt quite lonely at times, in

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writing *Psyche Reborn*, needing to prove to everyone that H.D. was worth reading, intensely aware of my vulnerability as a feminist critic working at the margins of intellectual “respectability.” In writing *Penelope's Web*, I have instead been overwhelmed at the wealth and richness and diversity of feminisms; I have recognized as well that the very success of feminist criticism has been complicated by its dialogic engagement with other discourses and by the politics of its position in the academy.

In particular, this book has been deeply influenced by an immediate audience of H.D. scholars from whose work I have learned a great deal. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, both in her friendship and her work, has been a brilliant teacher and probing listener, as well as partner, in the work on H.D. that we have done together. Albert Gelpi, Alicia Ostriker, and Adalaide Morris have offered striking commentaries on the book that have both sustained and enlightened me. In addition to these, a number of others have published valuable studies of one or another of H.D.'s prose texts – especially Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, Cassandra Laity, Diana Collecott, Jeanne Kerblat-Houghton, John Walsh, Perdita Schaffner, Linda Wagner-Martin, and Joseph Milicia. I am indebted to their readings as I have formulated my own. The biographies of H.D. by Barbara Guest and Janice S. Robinson have pushed me to sharpen my own interpretations of the vast archival material. Louis H. Silverstein, the brilliant cataloguer of the H.D. Papers at Beinecke Library, has been a constant resource who has helped me locate obscure manuscript material and make my biographical summaries more accurate. Robert Spoo was a great help in tracking the early publications of Frances Gregg. I have benefited greatly from the work of Eileen Gregory, whose leadership as the founding editor of the *H.D. Newsletter* has helped to create a community of readers, many others of whom have taught me much about reading H.D.

The University of Wisconsin at Madison has been a lively site for intellectual and personal growth. Judith Walzer Leavitt, Linda Gordon, Nellie Y. McKay, Ruth Bleier, Allen Hunter, Elaine Marks, and Lewis Leavitt have been particularly sustaining presences whose encouragements and challenges are woven deeply into the fabric of *Penelope's Web*. My husband, Edward Friedman, has provided the example in his own work of steadfast intellectual integrity and a probing originality always ahead of its time and far from the safer conventionalities of various prevailing bandwagons. My daughters Ruth Jennifer Friedman and Joanna Stanford Friedman have broadened my horizons as a mother as they have grown their separate ways into young women, thereby providing me with an experiential base out of which to generate the book's examination of mother–daughter psychodynamics. My colleagues in the English Department's Draft Group offered critically important reactions to and suggestions for Chapter 1: I am especially indebted to Cyrena N.

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Perdita Schaffner has been a stunningly wise and kind literary executor of H.D.’s estate – ever willing to provide help and encouragement, ever generous in her written and oral remembrances of things past, reconciled enough to its difficulties to let a hundred flowers of opinion bloom in the community of scholars rushing to write about her mother.

Madison, Wisconsin

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