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H.D. Feature

H.D.' s Crucible of Fire

by Nancy McGuire Roche

This ordered universe, the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire ever living, being kindled in measures and in measures going out. Heraclitus

Section 1

We do not need a geometric analysis of our life, in order to appreciate or recognize the fragrance of a flower. H.D., *The Sword Went Out To Sea*

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In 1940, the poet H. D. was living at 49 Lowndes Square in London when the bombs started to fall. The period of time while the war raged around her proved to be prolific, a perfect confluence of events: the drama of living in war time, the after effects of psychoanalysis, and the practice of séance as channeled through an extensive knowledge of classical mythology. This convergence of internal and external dynamics at a particular moment in time, motivated her work, *Trilogy*. Hilda Doolittle, in all of her guises and various pseudonyms was trapped, and she was ecstatic.

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Of this period, she would write:

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Now exaltation rises like sap in a tree. I am happy. I am happier than I have ever been ... we were able, night after night, to pass out of the unrealities and the chaos of night-battle and see clear. If my mind at those moments had any regret, it was that I might not be able to bear witness to the truth, I might be annihilated before I had time to bear witness. (Guest 254)

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This statement reveals much about the poet. She had a living spectacle right outside her windows, night after night in the streets. Also, she had a reason to live, a purpose, a mission. In this manner, H.D. would re-create herself as an incarnation of Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian scribe and poet, and the father of alchemy. Like the alchemist who combines exact materials at a particular time and flames them in the crucible to purify their essence, H. D. would frame her great mythological poem cycle from the elements around her, melded with aspects of her classical studies and travel.

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Barbara Guest contends that H. D.'s increased productivity at this point in time was logical:

The war encouraged a creativity in her that had been thwarted by the travels, extensive plans, the shifts of persons and places in the previous year ... Concentrated living, squirreled away in a small apartment, fewer social activities, a narrowing of her dimensions would give her a concentrated world so necessary to her craft. (253)

A fixed vision, intense concentration and the urgency of the message all prompted H. D. to focus intently on the work at hand.

In the process of alchemy, heat and dissolve is necessary to produce the product, to turn base metal into gold. In a similar manner, from a combination of various aspects of her conscious and subconscious states, H. D. would generate one of her greatest achievements in a small, dark apartment on Lowndes Square, during the terrifying and heady experience of living through the London blitz.

It is clearly documented that by the nineteen-forties, H. D. had written about her psychic visions and occult interests extensively in various texts such as *Notes on Thoughts and Visions*, her letters, journals and prose work such as *The Gift*, *The Sword Went Out to Sea* and *Magic Ring*. By this time in her life, the allusion of alchemy and its mystical emblems would have been familiar to H. D. It is the intent of this essay, therefore, to explore the extent to which H. D. knowingly embedded alchemic representation into *Trilogy*

In *Trilogy*, H. D. assumes the role of poet, scribe and witness. It is not surprising that images of fire permeate this text given the circumstances of living in London during the blitz. To understand the complete significance of this imagery, it is also imperative to recognize the role that fire plays in alchemy and its graphic representations or emblems. The chalice or crucible is an important symbol and essential accoutrement of the alchemist's 'Great Work.' H. D. uses the image of the crucible in the poem as the vehicle for synthesis or transmutation, but there are other, less obvious clues to this practice in the three poems that comprise *Trilogy*. There is a classical precedent for the obfuscation of alchemical knowledge as well.

In 1330, Petrus Bonus of Ferrara wrote an alchemical treatise, *Pretiosa margarita novella*, 'in which he stated that the true aim of Homer, Virgil and Ovid was none other than the transmission of alchemical secrets' (de Rola 16). Of this practice, he wrote:

they inserted this art in a mystical way, with linguistic ornaments as their principal and hidden subject, but in such way that their secret object could only reveal itself to those who have the intelligence of it... poems however always possess a certain kind of hidden truth, which is fundamental in the mind of the poet, and the wise alone may extract this hidden truth of poems. (16)

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Certainly, no one who has examined *Trilogy* would disavow the amount of scholarship needed to interpret the symbology of this text. Sarah Graham writes that the poem's visual simplicity belies its complex work, 'A sense of plot or narrative thread, which would seem the natural partner of the easy tone of the writing, is extremely hard to trace; the references are often obscure and the imagery puzzling' (163). She goes on to propose the tension of *Trilogy* is 'the urge to communicate and the will to obscure, the simultaneous desire for and fear of free expression' (163). However, if H.D. is truly following the tradition of alchemy she has no choice, she must obscure.

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In his text, *Alchemy: The Secret Art*, Stanislas De Rola writes:

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Though full of promises, these texts invariably contain elaborate devices to deter the unworthy. They are couched in a language often so obscure and so impenetrable that their study requires years and years of devoted attention, of reading and re-reading, before their exegesis may even be attempted. For secrecy is inextricably woven into the fabric of alchemy, and is still invoked by modern alchemists. (16)

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De Rola proposes that to mediate the 'labyrinthine obscurity' of alchemic literature, one must also 'carefully compare the places where they agree and how they agree... Thus little by little the pattern of truth will emerge, like the watermark in paper held up to the light' (18).

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Allison Coudert brings a different aspect of alchemical obfuscation to light. She contends, 'Aside from the real dangers of imprisonment and excommunication, there were other causes for the obscurity of alchemical writings' (69). It is her assertion that owing to the fact these texts went through many transformations as they spread from culture to culture, multiple translations led to instability of the information. The original works are thought to be Egyptian, translated into Greek. Thus, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus is a combination of the Egyptian god, Thoth and the Greek god, Mercury. From this merger of cultures, texts were subsequently translated into Arabic, Castilian in some instances, Latin and from these languages, into various vernaculars. Coudert cites various cases of root words being mistakenly translated. 'For example, the meaningless Latin word "ethel" or "etelia" corresponded to the Arabic *atal*, *atali*, which went

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back to the Greek, meaning smoke of mercury' (70).

Coudert further proposes that mystery was always an important aspect of the process of metallurgy, primarily for economic reasons. The method of smelting gold in most of Africa and other parts of the world maintains secret rituals which may be passed down only to a carefully chosen apprentice. Other, deeper fears permeate certain myths, as seen in Celtic legends, where metal smiths are often depicted as dangerous wizards. Even the Koran states, 'We revealed iron, wherein is evil power and many uses for mankind' (77). In other words, inherent in the power to create a metal, is the potential for good or evil

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This capability is reflected in the first strophe of 'The Walls Do Not Fall,' 'An incident here and there, / and rails gone (for guns) / from your (and my) old town square:' (H.D. 3). Sarah Graham, focusing on the language of this section, writes that H. D. has appropriated 'the popular euphemism for bombing, "incident," with the "here and there" conveying both casual understatement and the inescapable reach of the bombing' (164). She believes the tone of the poem's beginning reflects a sense of intimacy with the reader, achieved by appropriating euphemisms from the media. In this manner, H.D. is also creating a shared, encoded language known only to those who experienced the blitz, creating a bond of mutual experience among initiates.

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Additionally, H.D. is making a point about the dual nature of this material. The iron of the rails, which characterize passage, freedom and interconnectedness, is also the same substance of the guns, weapons of war and death. Dual and multiple meanings for words and symbols, however, is one of the hallmarks of *Trilogy*. Angela Fritz states, 'The myriad symbols – drawn from Scripture, the Cabala, and Egyptian mythology – constitute the tropes of the quest in *Trilogy*... use of Egyptian mythology with its bearing on mystery, the Word, and the Cabala, enables her to weave these crosscurrents into a unified vision' (96-97).

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Scholars often discuss H. D.'s knowledge of the occult and mythology, and the manner it permeates her work. Albert Gelpi states, 'various elements – Greek and Egyptian, Jewish and Christian – intermingled in her mind as they had for centuries in the ancient world' (319). He also describes details of the sequence of séances H. D. held with her companion Bryher, and other members of the London Theosophical Society during World War II. Gelpi, in his introduction to H. D.'s *Notes on Thought & Vision*, contends, 'the visitations from the magnificent Lady and the apparition of the

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flowering tree in the London blitz . . . generated *Trilogy*; not to mention the countless dreams, spectral moments and séances recorded in her voluminous journals and published works' (8).

Of this the séances, Barbara Guest writes that H. D. believed she was channeling

'a group of brothers or lovers' warning about atomic warfare. This is the first indication of the wave of esoteric research, of magic, of spiritualism, that would engulf H. D. during the war ... The blitzed houses of London—silent, dead—would provoke this. Ghosts were everywhere. The world was a place where there were only the ghosts and the living, and the distinction between the two must have been close. (260)

Whether it was the ambiance of the war or occult interests that caused her to turn to the site of a visit twenty years before is unknowable, yet H. D. would equate London with Luxor, Egypt for the purposes of *Trilogy*. The epigram of 'The Walls Do Not Fall,' connects Egypt in 1923 to London in 1942. In fact, 'Her dedication to Bryher was: "for Karnak the most perfect day of my life,"' (Guest 269).

On February 1, 1923 H. D., her mother Helen, and Bryher arrived in Luxor, took a nap and then strolled out to view the Temple of Karnak by moonlight. They would arrive seventeen days before the main entrance of the tomb of King Tutankhamen was torn down to reveal the burial chambers. A transcription of Bryher's journals by Norman Holms Pearson reveals that the women knew of this event, which became the subject of one of H. D.'s short stories, 'Hesperia.' By the end of February, H. D. left for Italy, but she would have spent sufficient time in the ruins at Karnak for the experience to color her two main poems, *Helen in Egypt* and *Trilogy*. Other, minor works as well were directly inspired by the trip, including *Palimpsest* and a short story, 'Secret Name: Excavator's Egypt,' in which the main character Helen Fairwood spends several days at Luxor musing on the ruins and their meaning.

Bryant and Eaverly state that not only did H. D. visit the temple of Karnak and study its mysteries, she was also a scholar of James Henry Breasted's work. Breasted is considered the father of American Egyptology Studies. They write, 'Breasted entered Tutankhamen's tomb several times at Howard Carter's request, deciphering seals on the doorway and providing other historical information' (437). They also reveal that, 'H. D. owned copies of his *A History of Egypt*, and five-volume *Ancient Records of Egypt*, as well as *A Concise Dictionary of Egyptian Archaeology*' (436). H.

D. would have been well aware of Howard Carter's excavations, as the details were international news.

H. D.'s fascination with Egypt is quite salient to the writing of *Trilogy*, in that she uses images from Luxor openly, compares the ruins of the temple to those of London, and draws a direct connection between the two sites in the epigraph of the poem. There is another important aspect of the tomb at Karnak, however, which is of major significance to *Trilogy*: the hieroglyphs. Bryant and Eaverly state, 'most of the columns and walls are covered with hieroglyphs. Spreading across ten acres and including the colossal temple to Amun, the main complex has hundreds of lotus bud columns, statues and obelisks' (438). And indeed, following the first strophe of *Trilogy*, H. D. writes:

mist and mist-grey, no colour,
still the Luxor bee, chick and hare
pursue unalterable purpose
in green, rose-red, lapis;
they continue to prophesy
from the stone papyrus:
there, as here, ruin opens
the tomb, the temple; enter
there as here, there are no doors:
the shrine lies open to the sky,
the rain falls, here, there
sand drifts; eternity endures: (I, 4-15)

Not only is the essence of her entire poem contained here, from the outset, H. D. directs the reader toward its Egyptian heritage. *Trilogy's* message is resurrection, the flowering of the rod, and the image of the dead tree bursting into bloom, which connotes the Caduceus. In addition, by directing the reader toward Luxor, the poet is pointing the way toward the birthplace of Egyptian mythology, the obfuscated texts of alchemy and the figure of Hermes Trismegistus.

The myth of Hermes Trismegistus would enthrall H. D. throughout her life. Vincent Quinn points out that H. D.'s final poem, published the year of her death, 'Hermetic Definition,' continues her tradition of defining herself by symbols and pseudonyms based on her own initials, H. D. But in this final poem, H. D. also emphasizes that the figure of Hermes defines *her*. 'Hilda Doolittle, H.D., "Hermetic Definition"- the recurrent initials suggest equivalence... '(Quinn 52). An interesting aspect of this poem, which also applies to *Trilogy*, is H. D.'s practice of giving multiple meanings to one person, place or thing. She continues this practice in 'Hermetic Definition:'

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Practicing the free association of words characteristic of her later poems, H.D. decides that her visitor is an incarnation of Horus, the child of the Egyptian goddess Isis (H.D. divides the word 'Paris' into *par* and 'Isis'), that is, the child of the archetypal mother with whom she associates herself as poet. Thus the young man is simultaneously a real person, an archetypal image, and a symbol of the perfect poem. (53)

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This practice is the function of the hieroglyph as well, the use of one symbol which encodes multiple meanings. The significance of this system is especially important to the disguise of alchemical knowledge. In reference to 'Hermetic Definition,' Quinn also relates a second, more important reason H. D. plays with the word 'Paris' to become *par* Is, which also translates as: by Isis or for Isis. In the forward to this poem, Norman Holmes Pearson relates that, 'H.D. received the impetus to work this verbal metamorphosis upon Paris from an occultist book... Robert Ambelain's *Dans l'ombre des cathedrales*' (53). That Ambelain's work was important to H. D. is salient. His work contends that valuable information regarding the practice of alchemy is literally hidden in the shadows of the great cathedrales:

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Ambelain's thesis is that ancient Egyptian religious beliefs were carried into Europe... Specifically, Ambelain claims that the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris is built on the site of an ancient temple of Isis, that the earliest settlers in that locale-the Parisi-were worshippers of Isis, and that this cult has endured through the centuries among small groups of initiates. He says that the dedication of the cathedral is written in code: on the surface it seems merely to mark the dedication of the building to the Virgin Mary in 1257; actually, it expresses an alchemical ritual-formula for controlling the forces of 'Mere-Nature.' (53)

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This theory would have appealed to H. D. As the *Lady of Trilogy* takes on the work of deconstructing the Christian image of Mary, H. D. must have loved the idea that one of the world's greatest cathedrales built to 'Our Lady,' was secretly built to Isis, the great mother-goddess of Egypt. In addition, the significance of an alchemical ritual-formula disguised in words as 'cryptograms' follows the path of H. D.'s oeuvre, which is encoded with symbolic double entendres.

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Adalaide Morris deconstructs H. D.'s work by paying special attention to its linguistic devices, particularly the phoneme. The beginning of her book, *How to Live / What to Do* focuses on, 'the acoustical churn of phonemes, syllables, words, and phrases as they pull into play and keep in circulation multiple and simultaneous articulations of information from several different cultural fields at once' (8). In this manner, Morris states that *Trilogy* invites the reader to look at London and Luxor as two 'pictographs'

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which are 'mutual determinatives.' This inducement leads us to interpret the importance of words as images as hieroglyphs. She states, 'Throughout the poem, H.D.'s syntax instructs us to read these charged chronotopes as reciprocal hieroglyphs, each an inflection and interpretation of the other' (46).

Morris also relates, 'Because the reader supplies the vowels for a hieroglyph, the god's name can be translated with equal accuracy *Ammon*, *Amon*, *Amun* or *Amen*' (43). This fact not only explains the impediments encountered by translators of alchemical documents, it also explains H. D.'s use of alliteration as both a poetic device and a trope used to equate mythologies. By connecting the Lady to Isis, and Christ to Amon Ra, H.D. deconstructs tenets of Christianity which prohibit female agency. As 'Hermetic Definition' plays with the idea that 'Our Lady' was actually Isis, the purpose of *Trilogy* is to reconfigure and empower the 'Lady.'

This intent also links to H. D.'s mediations on the Egyptian ruler Queen Hatshepsut, which occur in *Trilogy*. The purpose is the same. From the very beginning of 'The Walls Do Not Fall,' H. D. informs the reader 'they continue to prophesy / from the stone papyrus:' (I. 8-9), it is the hieroglyphs she means. Since the hieroglyphs continue to prophesy and they are Hatshepsut's, she still speaks. This is similar to H. D.'s purpose as poet/prophet/scribe. H.D. leaves her cryptic words to speak for her long after she is dust, like the Egyptians have done. In the section that mentions Hatshepsut, H. D. also uses word play to equate gun cartridges with the Egyptian word 'cartouche.' Again we have the image of rails gone for guns, of manuscripts gone for bullet casings. This imagery also relates to the Egyptian Queen whose history her enemies sought to erase.

Hatshepsut was the Pharaoh of Egypt in fifteenth century B.C., the daughter of a powerful and popular king, Thutmose. She was married to her stepbrother and upon his death, she became a co-ruler with her stepson Thutmose III, basically a dowager queen. Because of her political acumen and charm, she went on to rule Egypt for twenty-one years even after Thutmose III came of age. Most interesting is the fact that Hatshepsut concocted her own mythology, which charged that Amon Ra, the sun god, appeared to her mother during pregnancy and conveyed the status of deity onto the unborn child, Hatshepsut. Most importantly, to allay the fears of the Priesthood and the citizens of Egypt, the Queen Pharaoh dressed as a male at state functions, wearing the kilt of male rulers and also a fake beard.

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Another possible clue to H. D.'s interest with Hatshepsut, is presented by Barbara Guest who writes of H.D.'s fascination with a statue she came upon in the Diocletian Gallery in Rome, a small figure of a hermaphrodite. H.D. was so taken with the figure that she returned to visit it every time she came to that city; she would also write that it haunted her. Guest continues that it was H. D.'s nature to find a particular representation and then use it to define herself, 'because she saw what she needed and retained those same images. She had an assortment of ideas and events that were repetitious;' (51). H.D. defined herself with certain images; they became her emblems. It is also significant to note Guest's observation, 'How early H.D. was attracted to the physical unification of male and female! She may have suspected, even in her pre-Freud days, the depth of her own bisexuality' (51).

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Hatshepsut, perhaps, is another image of the fusion of male and female identities for H.D. Many aspects of Hatshepsut are shrouded in mystery. As the reason for her death is an enigma, it is often assumed by historians she was murdered by her stepson and successor, Thutmose III. He certainly eradicated as much of her legacy as possible by erasing the symbols of her royal cartouche, removing her body from her royal sepulcher and even destroying one of the great stone columns she had erected at her father's tomb. Morris states, 'On the death of her husband in 1504 B.C., Queen Hatshepsut bestowed upon herself the title and powers of pharaoh, but on her death in 1482 B.C, her successor, Thutmose III, erased the hieroglyphs from her royal cartouches' (44).

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Hatshepsut first appears in Section Nine of 'The Walls do not Fall.' H.D. begins this section by stating: 'Thoth, Hermes, the stylus, / the palette, the pen, the quill endure, / though our books are a floor / of smouldering ash under our feet;' (9. 1-4). Although H.D. goes on to write the burning of books is the meanest 'of man's mean nature' (8), she also tells us that Hatshepsut's name is still circled by the cartouche. This is her way of stating that what men do to eradicate the power of women, of scribes and of course, of the poet, is not permanent. For the section continues 'irony is bitter truth, / wrapped in a little joke' (13-14). Not only is H.D. playing with the words 'cartouche' and 'cartridge,' she is also stating that Hatshepsut's name remains for history and so does the writing of the scribe. In this manner, H.D. equates herself with Hatshepsut.

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There are other 'ironic' reasons H.D. may have chosen to focus on Hatshepsut, that the history of this queen would have appealed to her. H. D., as stated earlier, spent a month in Egypt during the period that Howard

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Carter was opening the tombs at Karnak. She perhaps learned of the Egyptian queen there. Hatsheput's status as biologically female and socially male would have been of interest to H. D. as this figure blended genders, also symbolized by 'the little Hermaphrodite' in Rome. Hatshepsut's gender performance, as well as her status as empowered female and 'Pharaoh,' would have been of great interest to H. D., who sought to reconfigure and empower the Lady throughout *Trilogy*. Susan Gubar states,

In the *Trilogy*, through recurrent references to secret languages, codes, dialects, hieroglyphs, foreign idioms, fossilized traces, mysterious signs, and indecipherable signets, H.D. illustrates how patriarchal culture can be subverted by the woman who dares 're-invoke, re-create' what has been 'scattered in the shards/ men tread upon. (65)

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The unknown 'you' to whom the speaker of *Trilogy* refers in Section Eight is perhaps the patriarchy, or possibly another entity altogether. However, this 'you' is also told that poets are, 'bearers of the secret wisdom, / living remnant / of the inner band / of the sanctuaries' initiate' (9-12) and that the scribe, 'takes precedence of the priest, / stands second only to Pharaoh.' (33-34). Regarding these lines, H. D. wrote to Norman Pearson, 'but do you know that the 'writer' is the original rune-maker, the magic-maker [*sic*], his words are sacred' (Hollenberg 32). As H.D. brings in Hatshepsut immediately after this section, she equates and identifies herself with Hatshepsut in the same way she equates London with Karnak. And it is here, that H.D. begins to encode certain cryptic statements which reference alchemical secrets.

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It is essential to note, as well, how the figure of the hermaphrodite is key to both the practice of alchemy and its emblems. Coudert states, 'Once fixed, mercury attains the qualities of the philosopher's stone ... the stone consists of a union of opposites in perfect harmony, the wet and the dry, male and female, body and soul. This is why it is called the *rebis* or Hermaphrodite. It is whole and complete in itself' (65). She also recounts the origin of this emblem. Hermaphroditus is the mythological son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who united with the nymph Salmacis while bathing in a fountain. The pair was united into a single being, which symbolizes the union of opposites. Since the production of the philosopher's stone is a chemical transaction, the Hermaphrodite emblem symbolizes a certain conjunction in the chemical process.

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This was why the stone was called a *rebis* (the two thing); it was whole and complete in itself, both male and female and, therefore able to reproduce

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on its own. Hermaphrodite figures are not peculiar to alchemy. They appear in many myths and religions and symbolize, as they do in alchemy, the mystery behind creation, when the one inexplicably becomes the many. (132)

H. D., a student of alchemy, as evidenced by her study of Robert Ambelain's work, would have known this fact. Since her argument with the unidentified 'you' is the vindication of poetry and the scribe, the sanctity of creation and the 'Great Work' of the poet/scribe is the essence of H. D.'s argument. In this way, she is creator, wordsmith, second only to Pharaoh. For H. D., words are also sigils, the most powerful of symbols.

As Hermes Trismegistus is the father of alchemy, thus hieroglyphs, symbols and emblems are associated him, and with his alchemical teachings. H. D. goes on in Section Eight to admonish, 'how can you expect to pass judgment / on what words conceal?' (17-18). There is also a warning attached to this section, 'and idols and their secret is stored in man's very speech, / in the trivial or/ the real dream; insignia / in the heron's crest, / in the asp's back, / enigmas, rubrics promise as before, / protection for the scribe;' (26-32). Inherent in these words is the idea there is secret knowledge to which the scribe is privileged.

These lines also reference two hieroglyphs. The heron is associated with the sun, with Ra and light. This hieroglyph also symbolizes resurrection, as the heron is sometimes confused with the benne bird, an Egyptian equivalent of the phoenix. The heron was also the Ba, or physical manifestation of Ra. The second symbol, the asp, is a poisonous snake, but serpents are linked with the Caduceus, or the staff of Hermes. It is interesting that in these lines, H.D. speaks of symbols, rubrics and chooses the word 'insignia.' Alchemists used specific images known as emblems, much like hieroglyphs, to pass down secret knowledge during the Renaissance. In Section Thirteen, H. D. writes, 'we know each other / by secret symbols'(13-14) and tells the reader, 'we know our Name, / we nameless initiates, / born of one mother, / companions / of the flame.' (22-26). While most scholars assume H.D. is describing fellow poet/scribes, perhaps she is describing another category of 'initiates.'

In Section Fifteen, she also writes, 'grape, knife, cup, wheat / are symbols in eternity, / and every concrete object / has abstract value, is timeless / in the dream parallel / whose relative sigil has not changed / since Nineveh and Babel.' (11-18). Repeatedly, H.D. reiterates the importance of sigils or symbols. A sigil, however, is more than a symbol. The Oxford English

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Dictionary defines this word as, 'An occult sign or device supposed to have mysterious powers' (www.OED.com). A sigil is a sign so powerful that it is thought to be able to initiate magic from its contemplation. Again, this word links to the use of alchemical emblems. It seems likely that H. D. viewed certain hieroglyphs as sigils. Fritz states, 'The overall heady reiteration of images and talismanic phrases are also in perfect accord with the poet's role as hierophant' (102).

'Hierophant' is defined as, 'An expounder of sacred mysteries; the minister of any 'revelation'; the interpreter of any esoteric principle' (www.OED.com). The *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s citation relates more directly to H. D.'s poet/scribe position, 'in ancient Greece, chief of the Eleusinian cult, the best-known of the mystery religions of ancient Greece. His principal job was to chant demonstrations of sacred symbols during the celebration of the mysteries' (www.encyclopediabritannica.com). Since H. D. seems to group meaning in threes, the initiates she references are quite possibly alchemists, initiates of the Eleusinian cults, or other poets.

From the lyrics that discuss these secret symbols, H. D. goes on to relate that symbols are mediated by dreams. She begins Section Twenty by stating, 'Now it appears very clear/ that the Holy Ghost, / childhood's mysterious enigma, / is the Dream' (1-4). In this strophe, the Dream is equated to H. D.'s visions and séance experiences. The Dream also becomes the means to 'the most profound philosophy, / discloses the alchemist's secret / and follows the Mage / in the desert.' (16-20).

From this point on, H. D. will continue to relate Egyptian mythology, Christianity, Alchemy and personal history into the cosmos of her war poem of survival and regeneration. References to alchemy prevail to become a significant, although obscure trope for the duration *Trilogy*. In her work *Psyche Reborn*, Susan Friedman states that H. D. saw herself as an adept. An adept is one who practices alchemy, but Friedman defines the word in terms of H. D.'s personal interests. 'Originating in the theosophical literature H.D. was reading, "seeker" is a term referring to the adept engaged in the process of spiritual quest' (24).

Friedman also cites two books that influenced H. D.'s occult interests during the nineteen-forties, a second text of Robert Ambelain's, *La Kabbale pratique*, as well as Gustav Davidson's *Dictionary of Angels*. She lists these as two of H. D.'s principal source books. 'Although H.D. ignored Ambelain's minute prescriptions for elaborate rituals of invocation, she did experiment in her own way with his practical Kabbalah –the invocation of

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the seventy-two angels who embody different attributes ... and rule all the hours of the day' (175). These influences are at work in the middle section of *Trilogy*, 'Tribute to the Angels.'

Friedman states, 'Poetic alchemy, inspired by Hermes Trismegistus, becomes the poet's means of revising the misogyny of John and resurrecting the Goddess as a regenerative force in a death-centered world at war' (175). H.D. refutes St. John, the mystic, who describes the ancient mother goddess as the 'Mother of Harlots.' In this passage is one of *Trilogy*'s most obvious references to alchemy. Friedman posits this is a form of 'poetic alchemy,' a synthesis of St. John's visions into her own. There are images in this passage, however, which refer to the actual practice of alchemy:

I John saw. I testify
to rainbow feathers, to the span of heaven
and walls of colour,
the colonnades of jasper;
but when the jewel
melts in the crucible,
we find not ashes, not ash-of-rose,
not a tall vase and a staff of lilies,
not *vas spirituale*,
not *rosa mystica* even,
But a cluster of garden pinks
Or a face like a Christmas-rose. ('Tribute to the Angels,' 43. 11-20)

To deconstruct this passage is to learn much about H. D.'s desire to recreate the figure of the Lady, or Mary. Images of the literal work of the alchemist combine with Christian mythology in this passage. As for the 'rainbow feathers,' alchemical tracts state that the process of turning base metals into gold results in three distinctive color states. Matter goes from black to white to red during the chemical transformation. Following the black stage, which signifies a 'death,' there is a white stage symbolizing purity or resurrection. During or following the white state there is often a 'rainbow stage.' Coudert writes, 'However much they differed in details, alchemists agreed about the sequence their work must take and described this in terms of colour changes ... Sometimes additionally colours were inserted like the "peacock's tail", a gorgeous medley of colours, appearing after the white stage' (42). Also, for H. D.'s angels to have rainbow colored wings instead of the traditional white, must refer to the 'Whore of Babylon,' who would not have dressed in white. In the next line as well, H.D. uses color to deconstruct the idea that white symbolizes purity; the walls of heaven also contain color in her visions.

Before H. D.'s 'jewel melts in the crucible,' or is changed into a different entity or is 'reborn,' as alchemists term this transmutation, the image of 'colonnades of jasper' is used. H. D. chose this stone for very specific reasons. The gemstone jasper, links Minoan Crete with the Book of Revelation. Michael Hogan writes that archaeological recoveries at the site of the city of Knossos in Crete have revealed seals carved in jasper. These are part of the Linear A tablets, which are the oldest known source of written communication. Hogan also contends that many of the symbols of Linear A are based on Egyptian Hieroglyphics.

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The link to St. John comes from a passage in the Book of Revelation, which describes Heaven, 'And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald' (New King James Bible, Rev. 21. 22). According to St. John, the foundation of Heaven is built of jasper. H. D. is using this passage to connect St. John's use of the gemstone to the Minoan civilization. Also, the 'Great Work' of the alchemist is exemplified by the making of the Philosopher's Stone, or the 'great jewel.' H. D. is synthesizing imagery to empower her vision of the Lady. Following these lines, H. D. goes on to describe the Lady, Herself.

60

Ironically, she does so by telling the reader what She is not. She is not ashes, nor ash-of-rose. She is not a tall vase or staff of lilies and she is not *vas spirituale* or *rosa mystica*. It is important to define what the Lady is not, because H. D. is communicating that the Lady is not what Christian mythology has made Her. By telling the reader the Lady is not ashes, we learn she has not been destroyed by the crucible, but transmuted. By conveying she is not a 'staff of lilies,' H. D. is referring to the staff of Hermes, the Caduceus, which was first carried by Isis. She is not Hermes; she is Isis, goddess-mother.

61

The two remaining terms, *vas spirituale* and *rosa mystica* also have specific meanings. The Marian Library describes the term *vas spirituale* as:

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The Latin '*vas*' (vessel) is used to translate the Greek term '*skeuos*' which does not only mean vessel but also instrument or tool. Thus, the expression 'spiritual vessel' should be rendered as 'instrument of the Holy Spirit.' Mary is both dwelling place of the Spirit and his 'agent' in the Incarnation. (www.marioncarnegielibrary.org)

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H. D. is also telling us the Lady is not a mere vase, or vessel. She is more

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than incubator to the Holy Spirit. She is not a passive recipient of the Word, a female container, or merely mother.

The term *rosa mystica* comes from a legend, as described in an anonymous fifteenth century German poem, 'Es ist ein Ros' Entsprungen.' The poem states that a young girl, or sometimes she is depicted as a female shepard, wanted to give the baby Jesus a gift after the arrival of the Magi, but had nothing to offer. She wept, and this act moved an Angel who appeared to her. Where her tears fell, there bloomed a wild rose, which she picked and gave to the Child. The *rosa mystica* is the wild rose, or Christmas rose. H. D. then writes that She is a garden pink or Christmas rose. These are more common flowers, and the Christmas rose is actually not a rose at all but a blooming herb.

65

The image of Mary as the wild rose is important here, but also the idea of Mary as a rose is an ancient ideal, and one with alchemical significance. Robert Ambelain suggests that the rosette windows in the Great Cathedrals are alchemic emblems, embedded into their very walls. It would make perfect sense that H. D. would fuse the Christian image of the rose with an alchemical emblem, especially since this has been done for centuries. In her poem 'Hermetic Definition,' the text itself upholds this assertion, as she states, 'though the five-petalled *rose sauvage* / (pentagram of the alchemists) / sustains me,' (8. 11-13).

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Susan Friedman suggests that like many 'initiates' before her, H. D. took the advice to read texts over and over, and to interpret their meaning into a personal belief system:

67

Echoing H. D.'s own alienation from any religious organizations ... the poet's snarled greeting and speechless communication with her companions suggest that H. D. was not referring to formal initiation into a group ... Rather, initiation develops out of the poet's knowledge of 'secret symbols' and her sense of belonging to an ongoing, hidden tradition kept alive by others like her. (214)

68

This tendency would also explain the density of her imagery and difficulty of deciphering her meanings.

69

Many subversive references to alchemy arise in *Trilogy*. Nonetheless, Section Eight of 'Tribute to the Angels' is an extremely clear reference to alchemical practice as it states, 'Now polish the crucible / and in the bowl distill' (1-2). Other, less obvious, references to alchemy follow this statement of intention. Stanislas De Rola relates:

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the Chaos or *Materia Prima* contains the three unrealized principles or potentialities of the Great Work: sulphur, salt and mercury. This Trinity of Matter corresponds to Spirit, Body and Soul in the Microcosm of Man, and to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in the Macrocosm of God. (De Rola 19)

71

In Section Eight, the word *Mara* refers to Moses' first encampment in the desert after the exodus from Egypt. *Mara* refers to salt and bitterness; the water was too salty to drink. Mid-way through the section she repeats, 'polish the crucible/ and set the jet of flame,' (7-8) which again references the alchemical process. H. D. also writes. 'till *marah-mar* / are melted, fuse and join / and change and alter' (9-11). She intends to take salt, tears and bitterness and fuse them into the 'Star of the Sea/ Mother' (13-14). In this way, she fuses the Star of the Sea or Aphrodite, Venus and Astarte into the Mother of Christ. She is also using the alchemical tropes of salt and flame to accomplish her task.

72

In 'The Flowering of the Rod,' H. D. tells the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the Magi, Kaspar, to obtain the 'alabaster jar.' Section Fourteen of this poem gives his history. The name, Kaspar, translates from Hebrew as 'one who is scribe,' thus relating him to Thoth and Hermes. Hermes connects to the god Mercury. Again, the element mercury is one of the primary agents in the alchemical process.

73

The Great Work done by alchemists is not merely to produce gold, but also the distillation of an elixir which is a balm of healing and eternal life. In Section Fourteen, H. D. relates, 'some said, this distillation, this attar / lasted literally forever, had so lasted / though no one could of course, actually know' (9-12). Of the unguent she says, 'what was or was-not in those alabaster boxes / of the Princes of the Hyksos Kings... They had charms wrought upon them, / there were sigils and painted figures on all the jars' (14-19). And finally, 'his own people for centuries and centuries, / had whispered the secret of the sacred process of/ distillation;' (21-22). These images link the ancient Egyptian kings, alchemical elixirs and hieroglyphics with Mary's quest for the Egyptian ointment, which is perhaps the elixir of life itself.

74

H. D. goes onto weave Kaspar into the story of Mary Magdalene by relating that he is a 'heathen.' As she relates Mary to that status as well, they are both 'other.' The reader is also told that Kaspar 'knew more about precious stones than any other' (28.19) and that he studied 'the old tradition, the old, old legend' (29. 4) which 'was contained in old signs and symbols / and only the most painful application could decipher / them, / and only the very-few could even attempt to do this' (10-13). In other words, this Magi

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was an alchemist. H. D. also states, 'the myrrh or the *spiknard*, very costly, was Kaspar's' (35. 10).

It is also interesting that it is Kaspar the alchemist who receives the principal vision of 'The Flowering of the Rod.' H. D. tells us, 'he saw further, saw deeper, apprehended more / than anyone before or after him;' (40. 9-11). It is Kaspar who envisions that when Christ cast seven demons from Mary Magdalene, he also freed, 'Lilith born before Eve / and one born after Lilith, and Eve;' (33. 21-23). In *Trilogy*, therefore, it is the combining of male and female, of Kaspar and Mary or of Christ and Mary, which liberates the female deities, just as the combination of male and female elements, or opposites, must co-join in the Great Work. In 'The Flowering of the Rod,' H. D. fuses male and female elements to create the work's epiphany, as perhaps she felt a balance of male and female elements to be essential to spiritual progress, as this is the alchemical prescriptive.

Timothy Materer states, 'In alchemical texts, Mercury was conceived in sexual terms that implicitly challenged the dominant masculinity of the Christian deity, which was for H. D., a critical feature of the tradition' (95). He goes on to relate that in alchemical texts, Mercury develops as a 'hermaphroditic figure.' Jung also wrote that 'Hermes or Mercurius possessed a double nature, being a chthonic god of revelation and also the spirit of quicksilver, for which reason he was represented as a hermaphrodite' (Materer 95).

H. D.'s work in *Trilogy* seeks to redefine myths, grant agency to women and to goddesses, to reclaim forgotten religions and to foster hope that the male power which defines war may be tempered by feminine authority. She also demands that the poet/ scribe be given respect as one who defines and preserves history. H. D. does all of this with her sharp Imagist eye and visionary experience intensified by living through war and destruction. Helen Sword writes that *Trilogy*, 'came into being at a time when H. D. was more firmly convinced of the reality and importance of otherworldly inspiration than at any other period in her life' (354).

Trilogy, then, is a product of the crucible, not only figuratively but also literally. While H. D. had been interested in the character of Hermes from the very beginning of her career, it was the chaos of the war which provided the breakdown in barriers that would lead to this particular poem. H. D.'s open experimentation with spirit circles, the analysis with Freud, which provided contact to her dreams and unconscious, and a life spent in the pursuit of classical and occult knowledge provided the material. The fusion

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of these factors in the crucible of war balanced many of the poet's oppositional forces, creating a channel for her creativity and visions. H. D.'s poetry is as challenging and dense as any alchemical text, yet by studying the history and philosophy of this spiritual practice, many of her images and sources are unveiled, enriching the poet's work and revealing the depth of her intention.

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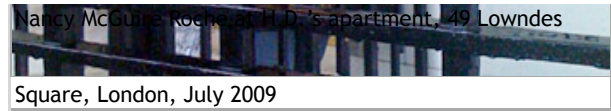
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Nancy McGuire Roche graduated with honors from the M. F. A. Program in Creative Writing at Brown University. She is currently a PhD candidate at Middle Tennessee State University with concentrations in Modern American Literature and Cinema Studies. Ms. Roche is a senior lecturer at Watkins College of Art & Design in Nashville, Tennessee where she teaches Literature, Creative Writing and Film. She was recently published in *LGBTQ*



America Today Encyclopedia with the entry, "The San Francisco Bay Area Poets".



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