
Crossing Sensory and Gendered Borders in H.D.'s HERmione

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Abstract

In the West, the senses are bound by gender: sight and sound are labeled superior and masculine, while smell, taste, and touch are labeled inferior and feminine. Sensory scholar David Howes reminds us that "sensory rankings are always allied with social ranking and employed to order society. The dominant group ... will be linked to esteemed sense and sensations while subordinate groups will be associated with less valued or denigrated senses." In HERmione, H.D. traverses these binaries. Her protagonist, a lightly veiled version of H.D. herself, develops an "odd way of seeing" that emblemizes her non-normative sensory experiences: she tastes music, listens to the sunrise, and touches colors. In so doing, HERmione foregrounds what political theorist Davide Panagia refers to as dissensuality, or "moments of sensation [that] punctuate our everyday existence and...puncture our received wisdom and common modes of sensing." I read HERmione as not only dissensual but, more specifically, transsensual. I examine the ways in which H.D. confronts culturally-imposed sensory divisions and offers cross-modal sensory alternatives that challenge gender norms. Such alternatives invite feminist, trans, and queer readings, since they not only offer alternative modes of sensing, but alternative ways of being. Somewhat ironically, the capitalized HER in HERmione does not underscore femininity-neither Hermione's nor, by extension, H.D's-but instead reads as gender queer: the pronoun that cannot be contained, but instead overflows its boundaries. In crossing reductive sensory and gendered borders, H.D's transsensual text privileges pluralism and invites trans-thinking.

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