

The sargasso sea femme



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In "Portrait D'une Femme", Ezra Pound contrasts the female inclination towards fragmentation, inertia and subservience with the corresponding male characteristics of spontaneity, wholeness, and dominance in an effort to underscore the threat posed by women who seek to drag the "man's world" down into the depths of a cultural Sargasso Sea. However, Pound also recognizes that women are, ultimately, their own individual entities, and uses the shifting female figure to reveal the emptiness of the chaos that characterizes the metropolitan "new" world. Unlike Eliot, who considers both sexes to be "hollow", Pound sees women as binary opposites of men. The sexes are the "differing light and deep" (27), the "nothing" and the "whole" (28), the "dimmed wares" and the "brighter stuff" (5, 26). Unlike his spontaneous, emotionally fulfilled man, Pound's woman is a stationary, empty being, incapable of progress because there is no trajectory point inside her vacant frame. She is Galatea to Pygmalion, a "wonderful old work" (22), an "idol" preserved with ambergris (23), unable to move, breathe, or think independently of man's influence. Her place is among an exotic collection of "oddments" and "trophies" (4, 16); a static, lifeless work of art from a musty museum that "never...shows use" (20), "that might prove useful and yet never proves" (19), whose internal state is guided by her external possessions. Pound's woman is his man's opposite: she is enclosed by culture, random material things, and "strange spars of knowledge" (5). Men, in contrast, are spontaneous: searching, moving, sailing the world in "bright ships" (3) while women are caught in the sterile backwaters, cemented at the ports like toll-booths richly paid in fees, collecting men's knowledge in a sedentary "sea-hoard" (25). The femme can see the rapid currents of an evolving society "swept about [her]", but can or

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will not participate (2). She is composed of men's detritus, an apathetic Athena born of Zeus's head, a goddess who is jadedly immortal. This lady of Shalott, working her "loom of days", is trapped in a tower with a mirror that reflects the physical artifacts of her worth, weaving a tapestry that shows men's exploits (21). Pound claims that this passivity, this negation of action is what women "preferred...to the usual thing" (8). Woman takes up man's relics because they fulfill a barrenness within her that she is unwilling to face. She accumulates fragments of other lives, straining to create a unified wholeness out of the parts. Totally organized by her environment, she creates temporary identities from the intellect of whomever stops by, so that ultimately, "nothing is quite [her] own" (29). Because she is an immortal figure with a transitory soul, she is in a race against time to siphon off some of man's permanent wholeness. Pound describes this relationship in terms of wood: the wooden, rooted femme hoards man's growing, "deciduous things", and after taking her due, returns the "strange woods half sodden" (25-6). She fills her mind with sparkling, superficial "new brighter stuff" and "ideas, old gossip" to distract her from looking into her ambiguous inner self (26, 4). The lady shatters any hope of a cohesive identity because she is unsatisfied with singularity, but too impatient to find out what makes her singular; she refuses "one dull man" because she needs exciting stories and things to stay a "person of some interest" in order to encourage the next "great minds [to] seek [her]". By doing so, she can again sap their enduring spirit and "take strange gain away" (9, 14, 6, 15). It is a time trap that promotes her misguided association between knowledge and personal significance. She sits "patient...[for] hours, where something might have floated up" (11-2), a spider in her web; Odysseus's Siren; an alluring Sphinx

offering threatening but irresistible riddles. Pound's woman is so fleeting yet so consuming that it is only appropriate that she is able to take on so many faces from so many stories and so many cultures. She is not stable enough to fit into an archetype, as man can, and she can't muscle her way into acceptance, because she "never fits a corner" (20). As an incomplete being, always "half sodden" (26), only of "some interest" (14), filled with a vague "something else" (18), she becomes subservient to men only so that she will have a foundation to base her identity on, an "other" by choice. Despite "her riches, her great store" (24), she is internally impoverished, unavoidably there but "lead[ing] nowhere" (17), reaching for a tangible, material man to fill the void. Pound uses the rhetoric of absence, togetherness, ownership, and fulfillment to illustrate the woman's path to 'satisfaction'. Men want her when "lacking someone else" (6); she is a last priority addendum, an Adam's rib who cannot become a complete being without first completing someone else. Once attached, the story suddenly becomes a "tale for two", in which the lady has a partner to whom she can be "second always" (7), and "richly pay" for her love with "your mind and you" (13, 1). In a way, it is a cold, symbiotic business transaction: she's a modern Colossus of Rhodes, allowing men into her personal cityscape by letting them under her skirts, taking fees in the form of random ideas. Interestingly, her fulfillment from these affairs is a pregnancy with screaming mandrakes, her only voice in her mute, stationary hibernation amidst her cultural bric-a-brac. For Pound, women are secondary, stagnant, and emotionally disjointed. They need to be pushed, compelled and compiled by men, but once they are expected to "prove useful" (19) they become distracted by insignificant baubles that in turn distract men. Pound uses the binary opposition between the sexes as a

conflict between man's flexibility in making lasting, resolute decisions, and woman's weakness of will and action. These two forces are unable to balance out because woman's negative energy dims and dulls man's brightness, and, as a result, jolts the order-maintaining equilibrium in Pound's rapidly expanding world. Despite being a hodgepodge of other people's characteristics, Pound concedes that his femme is a complete, separate entity: "this is you" (30). However, because he has created this particular woman much like artists shape sculptures, he continues to view his subject as a passive receptacle who accepts whatever identity he gives her: equally the London sprawl, the Sargasso Sea, or a possessive hag. Here, she becomes the site for Pound's discussion of the 20th-century "new world", and her faults mirror those of the chaotic global metropolis. Pound sees the close of WWI as the starting line for a new era in which the European cultural and social landscape begins to transform itself at escalating speeds. The world is always moving between uneven grounds, bordering chaos, and must be controlled and stabilized before it implodes into the "slow float" apocalypse that "leads nowhere"; in other words, Eliot's "Wasteland". Pound paints this shifting, rushing reality as "London swept about you" (2), where humanity, innovation, and connections swirl in an accelerating vortex surrounding the stunned, motionless individual. Pound makes his femme out to be an artistic ornament partly to express the sensation of lifeless stillness in the calm of a maelstrom, watching in bewilderment as everything picks up and leaves her behind still fixed to her pedestal, her private problems so petty in comparison to the cataclysmic shifts of society. Like a painting, she epitomizes Pound's poetic goal of complex feeling and thought condensed into a single, passing frame; she

thinks in slides and “ strange spars” (5). In the contradiction of modernity, as life moves out onto different things, we are still trying to “ find [our] hour upon the loom of days” (21), wondering if we are merely a blink on the timeline between bright novelty and recently “ tarnished” antiquity (22). We become laborious, backlogged, being “ patient... hours”, as if hoping the world will pause for us, to allow us a moment to catch up (11-2). To remain at our relatively sluggish pace, we would have to pick and choose from life’s slideshow of minute snapshots breezing by. Pound worries that his femme, not wanting to miss out on anything, tries to keep pace and ends up neglecting what is meaningful about her existence. The new world is empty and trivial, in part because fast communication turns the event of meeting new people into a mere hobby. The value of interaction drops when people compete to pack so many new personalities into their consciousness that they hollow out their own characters. Like Pound’s lady, modern people become shells housing a collection of social and intellectual curios and little else. By throwing together so many “ trophies...idols...riches” (16, 23-4), their initial brightness is dulled, and they become “ dimmed wares of price... gaudy” (5, 22), masking an inner emptiness tarred by the residue of a material world. The femme shows that seeking a respite from emotional mediocrity through pretty things instead of worthwhile thoughts takes a heavy toll, leading all roads to Rome and true spiritual fulfillment to be blocked by barriers of commerce and gain. Once again, in the ongoing effort to “ make it new” Pound arrives at the question of identity and individuality. In a world that operates outside of time, poetry is sparse and Pound’s blank verse is free from the tradition of rhyme, free to be a series of discontinuous impressions and images without a binding narrative. The femme’s free-

floating, fragmented sense of self reflects the individual's struggle to break from the crushing domination of the modern throngs, and the pressure to constantly reinvent oneself to stay separate and unique. Pound accepts the crowded, cosmopolitan, universal world: his femme is the essence of a global citizen; she is named in French but resides in London. She fraternizes with "great minds" and owns exotic rarities, but is not impervious to the abyss of identity crisis. By refusing to settle for "one dull man" in order to gain approval from the rest, she ironically becomes the most overwhelmed and forlorn of all. She often falls short, making "curious suggestions...that lead nowhere" (16-7), trying to "prove useful and yet never proves" (19). Like other new-world "mutts" grasping for scraps to complete themselves, she finds nothing in the whole of the expanding Western civilization that she can completely call her own. Pound was an outspoken proponent of the sophisticated cultural references that came with his artistic elitism. In a way, he is himself the Sargasso Sea Femme, sampling "great minds" like Eliot and Williams, acting as impartial gatekeeper to the voice of a generation. His poetry also reflects the intoxicating effect of the 20th-century notion of fleeting intimacy induced by speed; the ghostly, lingering perfume of a flower of faces from "In a Station of the Metro"; the "caressing air" of the government official in "The Social Order" meeting so many young ladies; a romantic, perpetual blur. But somewhere in the artifact pileup of "Portrait D'une Femme", Pound slows down. In this unusually long poem, there is rhythm in the way he opens his lines with "One dull man.../One average mind" (9-10), "that might prove useful/...that never fits" (19-20), and "No! there is nothing!.../nothing..." (28-9). He tries to maintain some balance in his description of an unfulfilled woman, repeating words like "dull", "bright"

and “ riches” to stabilize her. Perhaps Pound himself was threatened by the shifting world, in which one’s identity was always changing, with no time to form a foundation or to establish a connection, because it was so tempting to sample everything that was flashing past.