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Do We Have a New Song Yet? The New Wave of Women's Novels and the Homeric Tradition

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Abstract: The relationship between women and classical antiquity, its texts, artefacts, and study, has been fraught to say the least; the discipline of Classics has often been defined by the exclusion of women, in terms of their education and their ability to contribute to debates more generally. However, we are currently in the middle of an astonishing period when women are laying more of a claim to the discipline than ever before. This article examines three recent novels by women which take on the cultural weight of the Homeric epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, to explore the possibilities of a 'new song' that foregrounds female characters. The novels experiment with different narrative voices and are self-conscious about the practices of story-telling and of bardic song. Their awareness of their challenge to and contest with Homeric tradition renders their 'new songs' fragile as well as precious.

Keywords: Briseis; Circe; Calliope; Pat Barker; Madeline Miller; Natalie Haynes; Homer; narrator; bard; song

1. Introduction

The relationship between women and classical antiquity, its texts, artefacts, and study, has been fraught to say the least; the discipline of Classics has often been defined by the exclusion of women, in terms of their education and their ability to contribute to debates more generally. At the same time, we know, from works like that of Winterer (2007) and Wyles and Hall (2016), that women persisted in constructing productive relationships with the intractable material of Classics. Currently, we are in the middle of an astonishing period when women are laying more of a claim to the discipline than ever before, as instanced in the first English translation of the *Odyssey* by a woman, Emily Wilson. Speaking only of the UK, women classicists not only occupy the heights of academe, but also prominent positions as public commentators.[1] In UK universities, women outnumber men as students in Departments of Classics,[2] and in humanities generally.[3] On a wider canvas, we can also discern a wave of recent novels by women writers which engage deliberately and somewhat combatively with classical texts, of which the first to my knowledge is Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (Atwood 2005). The novels that I shall focus on are like the *Penelopiad* in that they take on the cultural weight of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* and rewrite the stories from the point of view of female characters. I am thinking specifically of Madeline Miller's *Circe* (Miller 2018), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (Barker 2018) and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (Haynes 2019).[4]

These novels have been immediately hailed for their feminist agenda, redressing the imbalance of history and literature by ensuring that women have a voice and that the androcentric perspective of the Homeric poems does not go unquestioned. Thus (Harris 2006; Suzuki 2007; Ingersoll 2008; Haneș 2019) swiftly identify the *Penelopiad* as feminist, even if they draw attention to other aspects of the work; in the case of more recent novels, where there is less published academic criticism, critics in the literary press use similar terms. Of *Circe*, critics write 'The novel, with its distinctive feminist tang' ('Miller makes Homer pertinent to women facing 21st-century monsters', (*Kirkus* 2018)); 'this feminist reworking' (Edemariam 2018); 'masterful feminist retelling' (Charles 2018); and of *Silence*

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of the Girls, we find 'feminist retelling of history' (Flood 2019) and 'a feminist revisioning' (Abrams 2018). Marturano (2021) acclaims *A Thousand Ships* as 'a welcome addition to the recent wave of feminist fictional adaptations and reclamations of ancient Greek and Roman myth and literature', while Memmott (2021) attributes it a 'subversive, feminist spin'. While none of the novels explicitly refers to feminism within its story-world, presumably because that would be anachronistic, they do display feminist sensibilities, not least in the more or less explicit and self-referential call for a new song. Penelope opens her epic by announcing that 'it's my turn to do a little story-making . . . I'll spin a thread of my own' (pp. 3–4), and Briseis in *Silence* thinks 'We need a new song' (pp. 313–14). Conversely, Circe is highly dismissive of existing bardic narratives, contrasting her own version of the initial meeting with Odysseus to the bardic travesty: 'As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep' (p. 181). Similarly in *A Thousand Ships*, the Muse Calliope engages in a long-running battle with 'the poet' (unnamed) over what kind of song will be sung, starting on the first page when she asks: 'Can he really believe he has something new to say?' (1). Instead of his hackneyed song, we understand, Calliope will force through a new one, one that is focussed on the women of the epic story.

The idea of a new song, sung by women and thus distinct from the old songs sung by men, finds memorable articulation in Euripides' *Medea*. It is the chorus of her play that sings of how rivers flow backwards and how justice and everything else is overturned (410–30):

> "ἄνω ποταμῶν ἱερῶν χωροῦσι παγαί,
> καὶ δίκα καὶ πάντα πάλιν στρέφεται·
> ἀνδράσι μὲν δόλιαι βουλαί, θεῶν δ'
> οὐκέτι πίστις ἄραρεν.
> τὰν δ' ἐμὰν εὔκλειαν ἔχειν βιοτὰν στρέψουσι φᾶμαι·
> ἔρχεται τιμὰ γυναικείῳ γένει·
> μοῦσαι δὲ παλαιγενέων λήξουσ' ἀοιδῶν
> τὰν ἐμὰν ὑμνεῦσαι ἀπιστοσύναν.
> οὐ γὰρ ἐν ἁμετέρᾳ γνώμᾳ λύρας
> ὤπασε θέσπιν ἀοιδὰν
> Φοῖβος ἀγήτωρ μελέων· ἐπεὶ ἀντάχησ' ἂν ὕμνον
> ἀρσένων γέννᾳ."
> "Upwards flow the streams of holy rivers
> and justice and everything is turned backwards.
> The plans of men are tricky, and oaths
> to gods no longer hold firm.
> Speech will change to hold my life in good repute.
> Honour comes to the female race;
> The muses of old singers will cease to hymn
> my faithlessness.
> For not to our mind
> did he grant the divine music of the lyre
> Apollo, the leader of songs; then I would have sung a song
> in answer to the race of men."[5]

Defying the logic of their song, the chorus sing that Apollo did not give them the power of song, otherwise they would already have sung a song against men. Now, presumably, as everything else in the world is topsy-turvy, so is the allotment of song, and women can sing, as the chorus is doing. The play does not tell us if men are conversely silenced, although certain subjects for their songs will disappear. The song, moreover, does not tell us if it itself is the new song, or if the new song is still to come; nor does it explore the complexities of the fact that the women of the chorus are men playing women, in a play written by a man. The question remains whether the play *Medea* is itself the new song, imagines a new song to come, or is the old misogynistic song that the culture already recognises. Just before this song, after all, Medea has denounced her sex, whether ironically or not the text itself cannot tell us (407–9):

"πρὸς δὲ καὶ πεφύκαμεν

γυναῖκες, ἐς μὲν ἔσθλ' ἀμηχανώταται,

κακῶν δὲ πάντων τέκτονες σοφώταται."

"In addition we were born

women, most helpless for noble things

but of all sufferings the most clever artificers."

The chorus's song about songs acknowledges that songs are in an unspoken contest that is gendered; the chorus do not claim that one song holds more truth than another. To this complexity we might add the point that we do not know that women would *necessarily* sing a new song, if they could sing, or if they would repeat accusations as Medea apparently does. After all, it looks as if Euripides' play has sung a new song, or has tried to, which would itself question the gendering of the song.

The call for a new song is thus not straightforward, in the *Medea* and, arguably, anywhere else. The new songs constituted by my chosen novels are like that of *Medea* in that they seek to redress the balance of singing by providing women's voices and speaking from the female perspective that has long gone unexplored. The example of *Medea* shows that the songs of classical antiquity are fertile ground for this kind of exploration, partly because they do themselves offer unforgettable female voices. Of course, the balance is highly male-dominated, but the favourite male-authored texts of antiquity all speak of privileged access as well to a range of extraordinary female voices. We only have to think of Briseis herself, in the *Iliad*, when she leads the women in weeping 'first for Patroclus, then for each one's grief' (19.302). The narrator of the *Iliad* here opens a vista on the captive women's subjectivity that seems to evince a sympathetic viewpoint and, moreover, allows the women a momentary voice of their own. The narrative even makes the audience complicit in the women's mourning by sharing their secret, and it seems clear that the narrative expects the audience to understand the women's point of view.

In this paper I wish not so much to explore the ancient texts, but to interrogate the modern ones, and in particular to suggest the complications in their versions of the new song, by a study of their use of different narrative voices and their foregrounding of the very idea of songs and bards. Of course, I welcome the new wave of feminist rewritings as much as the next woman, and indeed in general I welcome most rewritings, because they increase the vitality of the ancient works to which I am committed both professionally and personally. However, these novels not only channel and challenge the Homeric epics, they also draw specific attention to the complexities of doing so. First, it will be appropriate to summarise each text.

The Silence of the Girls engages with the *Iliad* and tells largely in the first person the story of Briseis, the captured concubine of Achilles. The novel takes us from the fall of her city Lyrnessus to slave status in Achilles' hut. She is then seized by Agamemnon as part of the quarrel between the two men, and sent back to Achilles as part of the uneasy resolution. She is a witness to the supplication of Achilles by Priam, and although she endeavours to escape from the Greeks, she gives up the attempt and eventually reaches

a more positive relationship with her captor. The novel ends with the death of Achilles, the fall of Troy, and Briseis's embarkation on a different life. Although as a captive she is structurally powerless, she is rarely abject, and in particular she recognises a strength in the collectivity of captive women in the Greek camp. She also recognises levels of privilege among the captive women, and makes us aware of a whole other group of women who do not belong to any one Greek, but are at the disposal of all, and are thus even more exploited and immiserated than the concubines. Briseis's first-person voice thus introduces us to various collectivities. As we shall see, hers is not the only voice in the novel, and though she calls for a new song, she struggles to ensure that one may emerge.

Circe engages with the *Odyssey*, but also with several other canonical myths. Circe is an unforgettable character from the epic, but does not have a huge role; in the new novel, her time with Odysseus occupies much less than a third of the story, which otherwise takes us from her birth in the halls of Helios to her partnership with Telemachus, the son of Odysseus. Along the way she encounters figures divine, mortal, and halfway between, such as Prometheus, Glaucus, Hermes, Athena, Daedalus, the Minotaur, Medea, and various sea monsters. We learn that her propensity to turn men into pigs stems from an appropriate revenge on sailors who raped her, so it is not at all unmotivated, as it is in the *Odyssey*, but rather links explicitly to the burden of violence that women have disproportionately borne in history. Her newly comprehensible story, upending the *Odyssey*'s dynamics, points to the ways in which acknowledgement of such violence has been denied and suppressed. The final third of the novel elaborates new relationships among Circe, Penelope, Telemachus, and Telegonus, the last-named being the son of Circe with Odysseus. All the diverse episodes are warranted by ancient sources, but the new novel brings them into provocative collision.

A Thousand Ships binds together *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, by encompassing all the female figures caught up in the Trojan War, in an ambitious scheme that perhaps recalls Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[6] Although the stories are connected, they do not embed as in the *Metamorphoses*, but they often show the same kind of humour, as well as pathos.[7] They also range from human to divine, displaying powerless human women as well as dangerous female divinities. Interestingly, none of the three novels examined here infringes Hilary Mantel's stricture that historical narratives should not anachronistically empower women from the past.[8] Instead, they take different routes to explore the powerful effects that their female characters can have, not least by experimenting with the idea of the 'new song'. Given that the novels model themselves on ancient material, as well as testing and undermining it, the novelty of the song must always be complex.

Each book tackles the issue of narrative voice in a different way. All three offer quite challenging narrative positions, with much self-conscious reflection on the activity of telling stories or singing. The formal choice to produce a novel, a sustained prose fiction, is itself worthy of comment, given both that form's historical predominance and the complex narratives that have proved popular in recent years such as *The Girl on the Train*, *Before I Go to Sleep*, or *Elizabeth is Missing*. Novels such as these offer highly compromised first-person narrators and confusing timeframes. The three classicising novels discussed here largely subscribe to realist versions of the novel form, but with some important caveats. *Circe* and *The Silence of the Girls* are chiefly first-person narratives, while *A Thousand Ships* departs from this insofar as it interweaves both first- and third-person narrative voices, plus an epistolary dimension. A first-person narrative structurally can command assent from the reader and a willing suspension of disbelief, but it is also likely to offer the possibility of the unreliable narrator, which is explored in these books to different extents.

The maternal ancestor of these novels, Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, draws notable attention to its narrator's unreliability. Although Penelope, as narrator, opens by suggesting that she will set the record straight and do a little story-making of her own (p. 3), to put against the authoritative Homeric account by Odysseus, it becomes clear that the reader cannot trust her very far, any more than that reader could trust her husband. Penelope's narrative is interrupted, and developed, by the musical interludes from the chorus of Maids,

who offer yet another perspective on the events narrated. Crucially, they accuse Penelope of conniving at their deaths so that her adulteries with the Suitors would not come to light. Penelope does not admit this possibility at all, except in a very oblique way during the reunion with Odysseus (pp. 171–73):

> "Assuming that someone had cut through his cherished bedpost, Odysseus lost his temper at once. Only then did I relent, and go through the business of recognizing him. I shed a satisfactory number of tears, and embraced him, and claimed that he'd passed the bedpost test, and that I was now convinced.
>
> As so we climbed into the very same bed where we'd spent a great many happy hours when we were first married, before Helen took it into her head to run off with Paris, lighting the fires of war and bringing desolation to my house. I was glad it was dark by then, as in the shadows we both appeared less wizened than we were . . . .
>
> We took up our old habits of story-telling. Odysseus told me of all his travels and difficulties—the nobler versions, with the monsters and the goddesses, rather than the more sordid ones with the innkeepers and whores. He recounted the many lies he'd invented, the false names he'd given himself . . . . In my turn, I related the tale of the Suitors and my trick with the shroud of Laertes, and my deceitful encouragings of the Suitors . . . .
>
> Then he told me how much he'd missed me, and how he'd been filled with longing for me even when enfolded in the white arms of goddesses; and I told him how very many tears I'd shed while waiting twenty years for his return, and how tediously faithful I'd been, and how I would never have even so much as thought of betraying his gigantic bed with its wondrous bedpost . . . .
>
> The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.
>
> But we did.
>
> Or so we told each other."

The layout on the page is almost too explicit, exposing the gaps in the telling. If Penelope is indeed indulging in a little story-making of her own, there is no obvious guarantee that her story is more credible than that of Odysseus. A story by definition cannot dispense with fiction in order to give us access to a truth, even if along the way it redresses the balance between itself and the tales of the others. The three novels examined here explore the complexities of a 'new song' by interrogating what it means to tell one's own story, to compete with the bardic tradition, and to enter the gendered contest of epic. In each case, the 'new song' emerges as fragile, even while precious.

2. Circe: A Choice of Stories

Only *Circe*, of the three novels considered here, is told by a single voice. Circe is both first-person narrator and central character; she does not give herself away in quite the same fashion as does Penelope in *The Penelopiad*, but the narrative position is still problematic. For a start, the narrator, as a Titan, is undying, so that notions of time and plot, which are usually quite integral to the novel form, are cast into doubt. The inability to die compromises the very possibility of narrative shape or direction, and indeed the novel does not conform to any obvious narrative arc until its final third. This last portion of the novel focusses on the birth, growth, and adulthood of Telegonus; a similar portion of the book is initially occupied by the aeons of Circe's early life, when she meets various other characters such as Prometheus, Glaucus, Scylla, Daedalus, Medea, and Odysseus. While Circe's earlier encounters with Glaucus and Daedalus (like those of Odysseus with random females in the *Odyssey*) have teased the reader with the idea of a romantic liaison, the fact that Circe was immortal meant that such partnerships could not last. In the last third, however, the novel drives towards a traditional marriage plot, albeit with the Oedipal twist

that Circe partners with the son of her earlier lover, Odysseus. While some of the dynamics of this latter part of the novel concern the protective mother who cannot easily let her son Telegonus grow up and leave home, the marriage plot neatly ensures that the departing son is replaced by the younger lover.

The novel does not end with this marriage, however, but instead with Circe's decision to make and drink a potion that will render her mortal, and thus able to stay with Telemachus. In this, as in other characteristics, Circe is like Odysseus, rejecting immortality, and the moment is also a logical outcome of her earlier assistance to Prometheus, who worked and suffered on behalf of mortals. The choice of mortality also offers an interesting contrast with the ancient account in the *Telegony*, where Circe makes Penelope and Telemachus immortal; thus it is a new song, even if it has various recognisable contours.[9] However, this final move also renders moot the position from which the narrative is told, for the narrator tells us simply that she drinks, and does not say whether the potion worked, i.e., whether she became a mortal human or remained as she was (p. 333):

> "All my life, I have been moving forward, and now I am here. I have a mortal's voice, let me have the rest. I lift the brimming bowl to my lips and drink."

Because the potion is said to reveal the true identity of whoever drinks it, Circe also wonders if it will turn her into a monster, as it did Scylla (p. 331)—and no answer is forthcoming. Although she has a vision, before she drinks, of a future in which she is mortal, aging with Telemachus, and happy (pp. 331–33), the narrative does not make it clear whether this is a proper prophetic vision, or a fantasy that might not be realised. Given that all the foregoing narrative must come from the Circe who has drunk the potion, it becomes unclear what kind of narrator she is, and we might even conclude that the narrative comes from an impossible place. Narratives often emerge from unlikely or obscure locations, of course, but they do not always draw such attention to their instability.

As well as eventually throwing the entire position of the narrator into doubt, the text also calls attention to the activity of story-telling at several points, each offering further questions as to Circe's work as a narrator. For one thing, Circe as narrator constantly revises the experiences of Circe the character, with a disorienting effect; over the course of the long life that she narrates, her perspective on herself alters and she backtracks on what she has already told us, introducing disjunctions between experience and narration, so that we learn as readers that at any point we need not trust her narration. She regularly scolds her former self for her foolish blindness to what was really going on (pp. 9, 62, 155) and in the scenes in Crete with her sister, Pasiphae presents two opposed versions of the past, in which Circe was incipiently powerful but also 'stupid and sanctimonious, closing [her] eyes to everything [she] did not understand' (p. 128). The scene is replayed in Circe's mind later, where she also reflects 'I had walked the earth for a hundred generations, yet I was still a child to myself' (p. 136). The postulate of immortality comes into conflict with the narrative pattern whereby the protagonist develops in strength and understanding, because Circe as narrator insists repeatedly that Circe the character learns nothing.

This difficulty with the narration seems linked to the novel's equivocation over Circe's power; we are made aware of her power at various junctures, but it is also important to the narrative that she be presented as powerless. We may trace the equivocation in the pivotal scene of rape by the anonymous sailors, which leads to Circe's legendary identity as the witch who turns men into pigs. Circe ends this scene in full control of her witchcraft and her revenge, but she gets there by conforming to conventional human feminine traits; she senses that something was wrong with her guests but simultaneously chides herself for imagining things: 'You are being silly, I thought' (p. 163). When they will not tell their names but ask hers, she cannot help but reply: 'even after all the years that had passed, there was a piece of me that still only spoke what I was bid' (p. 163). This is, of course, a far too familiar account of how a woman learns not to trust her instincts—'Still I told myself I must be wrong' (p. 164)—but those instincts have already led Circe to prepare a potion against the men, with which she destroys them, and although she cannot save herself from the first attack by the captain, she swiftly puts paid to all the other would-be rapists. There

is thus a constant churn of narration as the different versions of Circe supervene on one another, powerless and powerful, self-aware yet repeatedly wrongfooted.

In the latter parts of the novel, after the departure of Odysseus for Ithaca, we are invited to increased scrutiny of Circe's activity as story-teller. Explaining the past to her son by Odysseus, Telegonus, Circe changes the stories about Odysseus, implicitly undermining what she has already told the reader (p. 229). She similarly shows how she kept certain stories from Telegonus, about the threats from the Olympians (p. 238), and later on (p. 278) she remarks again how she tells only certain stories to Telemachus, as they grow closer, and not others. To him, she also tells stories about herself that she did not tell Odysseus (p. 302). Overall, the last part of the book revises much of what we thought we knew, because it offers us a new story in the form of a completely different and much more troubling version of Odysseus.[10] Unable to settle to peacetime, he became suspicious of and violent towards his family and subjects. Even though the troubling Odysseus is the one who has returned to Ithaca, not the one whom we encountered on Aiaia, Circe as narrator looks back and now calls her time on Aiaia with him not an 'idyll' but an 'illusion' (p. 268), which again permits a doubt about all her capacities as narrator of her own story. To an extent we can attribute these vagaries of narration to Circe's ambiguous status; she is immortal, but not very powerful in the overall scheme of the Greek divinities, and despite her immortality, her story bends towards a choice of mortality and death. The pervasive ambivalence conduces to a 'new story,' but complicates how it may be told.

3. A Thousand Ships: The Woman and the Bard

While the narrative voice in *Circe* is never anything but first person, with the complexities thus entailed, different approaches distinguish the other two novels. *A Thousand Ships* focusses exclusively on the female characters connected to the Trojan War, and is quite explicit, almost from the outset, about its bid to be a new song, as heralded by Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry. The novel is characterised by a proliferation of narratives—even if not quite a thousand—which are told by or about different female characters, so that the voices are a mixture of first and third person. Characters usually appear briefly and then descend into death, but a few punctuate the novel with repeat appearances. Thus, there are seven contributions from Calliope, couched in the first person, and seven letters from Penelope to Odysseus, also in the first person. Other narratives are told in a fairly standard third person. While many characters die after their initial appearance in the novel, a group called the Trojan Women appears several times, tracing the histories of Hekabe and the women with her such as Andromache, Polyxena, Cassandra, and Helen. The narration of these episodes usually has access to the thoughts of several characters, so that there is not such explicit focalising as elsewhere.

The text calls attention to its narrative strategies at a few points. The seven chapters titled 'Penelope' are taken up with letters by Penelope written to her absent husband. Since there are no plans to send them to Odysseus, however, these 'letters' belie their formal identity, and appear more abstract even than those which may be considered antecedents, namely the letters of the Ovidian Penelope in *Heroides* 1. Ovid's Penelope has a plan to forward letters to Odysseus by any sailor who turns up and who might meet him subsequently (*Heroides*. 1.59–62), but the Penelope of *A Thousand Ships* has no such means, or plans (p. 279). Instead, her sequence of letters turns into a kind of contest with unnamed 'bards' who sing to her the barely credible stories of Odysseus's voyages. Sometimes they alter them to please her, as they signally fail to do in the *Odyssey*, when she asks for a different song and is dismissed (*Odyssey* 1.337-44). In these letters, increasingly angry and disillusioned by Odysseus's incomprehensible absence, Penelope turns her sceptical intelligence on the bards' stories, which in this version are not Odysseus's own stories, so she can have less hesitation in dismissing them as outlandish fictions. However, despite the distinction between Odysseus and the bards, Penelope grows more and more exasperated with both, and on occasion is moved to violence against the bards which is implicitly

directed at Odysseus too. For instance, when she hears about Odysseus in the underworld (p. 230):

> "In that moment, I felt truly sorry for you, Odysseus. But when the bard sang this next part, it was all I could do not to have him thrown over Ithaca's rocky outcrops and left to drown in the darkening sea. First you asked your mother how she had died. Then you asked after the health of your father. Then your son. Then your honour. Then your throne. And then, when you had asked about everything else except the dog, you remembered to ask after your wifewife."[11]

The sequence eventually turns into a crescendo of denunciation; the bards' stories, while untrue, nonetheless represent Odysseus accurately, Penelope finds, in his selfishness, arrogance, and cruelty (pp. 230, 317). Her salutations change from 'My dearest husband' (p. 57) to a stark 'Odysseus' (p. 279).

We can also read the letters as a contest with the absent husband, as she revisits his stories and devises better endings to them, thereby offering a version of the 'new song'. Thus, she has worked out a means by which Odysseus might have been successful with his 'madness' trick and avoided the war (pp. 59–60):

> "I would not have let them see I was not mad, and I would not have hurt my child, my beautiful boy. I would have swung the plough into my own feet, and cut them into ribbons before I hurt our son or let the Argives take me away from here."

Similarly, she understands only too well how Odysseus in the Cyclops' cave has scuppered himself and his journey home, and imagines a solution: 'I would never wish you to be anything other than what you are, husband. But I wish I'd been able to cover your mouth before you told the Cyclops your name' (p. 162).

As the duration of Odysseus's absence grows longer, and Penelope's tone grows more and more waspish, she tells Odysseus's stories without these helpful variations, but with unwearying sarcasm, clearly unable to credit the unlikely adventures, and convinced instead that Odysseus has lost interest in his family and is pursuing only his own glory. Despite Penelope's self-assertion, we may also see her as a slightly comic figure, committing her mounting wrath to the letters that she knows she will never send, claiming repeatedly that she will wait no longer (p. 285). Yet at the close of her letter sequence, she becomes more of a tragic figure, acknowledging that she does not know if the returning hero really is her husband of long ago, or if it even makes a difference (p. 323):

> "Perhaps it does not matter if he is the man who left, or a changed man, or even another man altogether. He fits in the space that Odysseus left."

Instead of the knowing Penelope of the *Penelopiad*, who cheerfully deceives her husband as to her recognition of him, this dry and disillusioned Penelope removes herself from the game. Her 'new song' abandons its critical perspective, and far from interrogating Odysseus's stories, she ceases even to interrogate him.

Penelope's is not the only first-person narrative in the novel, since there are also seven contributions from the voice of Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry, telling its own story which is separate from the events unfolding at Troy. Calliope's first-person interjections are not so much a narrative as a series of reflections on her relationship with the unnamed bard whose song she, in some sense, inspires. There is no simple relationship between the utterances of Calliope, what the bard sings, and the stories that we read in *A Thousand Ships*. It cannot be, in fact, that the bard sings what we read, because he is sometimes said to reject the words offered by the Muse, and indeed Calliope sometimes notes that he is not singing.

There is no simple relationship between Calliope and the bard either. At first, she resists his command to 'sing' and the notion that she is subordinate to him, and she soon asserts herself, deciding that she will not grant him a song until he gives her a present (p. 2). She also notes that his eyes are closed, which alerts us to the possibility that this is the blind Homer, particularly as he does not open his eyes within the compass of the

novel. In her second contribution (pp. 40–41) she is scathing about the poet's capacity. He finds that his poem keeps going wrong, and he has not understood at all what he has sung. Calliope despairs of the poet who does not recognise that he is not to trot through the usual epic themes, but instead to sing a new song, the story of 'all the women in the war' and of how 'the survivors were hardly any better off than poor Creusa' (p. 40). Calliope is thoroughly annoyed with the poet, who is an 'idiot' (p. 41), but she does not seem able to choose another bard instead. Nor is she quite in control of the material of the song, since on p. 40 she has not decided whether or not to include Helen in the story, because Helen 'gets on [her] nerves'; but Helen makes a thoroughly memorable appearance later on that Calliope never remarks on.

The tussle over the song continues. In Calliope's third intervention (pp. 108–9) the poet is resisting the subject matter, because there are so many deaths of women, which are tragic rather than epic, and cause him more pain. Calliope is unsympathetic; the poet has to learn the nature of war, that it is 'not a sport' but 'a web which stretches out to the furthest parts of the world, drawing everyone into itself' (p. 109). And crucially, the poet has to learn that 'everyone' includes all the women whose deaths he would rather not sing. However, Calliope is determined to 'teach him this before he leaves my temple. Or he will have no poem at all' (p. 109). This moment casts a further strange light on the text that we have been reading—is it the poem which the poet is making, or not? In these encounters between Calliope and the poet, the song seems always in danger of not existing.

By p. 176, their relationship has become yet more fractious, with the poet apparently complaining to the Muse, and growing 'weary' of the many stories of the women. Calliope insists (p. 176):

> " . . . this is the women's war, just as much as it is the men's, and the poet will look upon their pain . . . and he will tell it, or he will tell nothing at all. They have waited long enough for their turn."

Yet at p. 212, Calliope resists the poet's desire to sing of Helen, because she has 'had enough of Helen. Enough of her beauty, enough of her power, enough of her. I despise the way they all melt at the merest mention of her. She is only a woman'. Here, then, Calliope gives up her earlier desire to memorialise all the women, but her rejection of the Helen that has already been sung, within this text, again puts the status of the text into question. Not only that, but the Helen of this text is distinguished by her intelligence and honesty (p. 178), as well as by the alarming and more predictable effects she has on men: 'a daughter of Zeus turning her full and terrifying attention towards a mortal' (p. 210).[12] So Calliope's characterisation of Helen as a character in the song which she, the Muse, is teaching to the poet, seems incomplete to say the least.

The relationship between the Muse and the poet undergoes further changes when he weeps at his own song (p. 267) and she wishes to comfort him, instead of reprimanding him; moreover, she acknowledges that she and the poet are both dependent on war for their existence. Intriguingly too, in this brief interjection by Calliope, she focusses on the men caught up in the conflict, rather than the women (p. 267):

> "[the poet] is learning that in any war, the victors may be destroyed as completely as the vanquished. They still have their lives, but they have given up everything else in order to keep them . . . And so the man who can win the war can only rarely survive the peace."

The final contribution from Calliope ends the novel. Here, she claims that 'I have sung' rather than pointing to the poet singing. However, at the same time, she envisages that the poet may refuse the song, in which case 'I will take it away and leave him silent' (p. 339). Yet even if that happens, 'their story will be told', so again it is left open as to whether the text that we have read is the 'new song', or whether it, like others, will be silenced.

4. The Silence of the Girls: Girls Not Silenced?

Where *A Thousand Ships* draws attention to its status as a 'new song', it casts that status into doubt, much as does the first-person narrative of *Circe*. In its own quest for a new song, *The Silence of the Girls* experiments with several different narrative strategies. The narrator for much of the novel is Briseis, a central character, the queen of Lyrnessus who is captured by the Greeks in the sack of that city, and allotted to Achilles as prize. Briseis tells of her position as slave concubine, her duties largely consisting of non-consensual sex with Achilles; she must also look after him and his guests by pouring wine and serving food. Although she is initially traumatised by her new situation, she does not suffer violence at Achilles' hands. Only when she is taken from Achilles by Agamemnon to serve as his concubine instead is she beaten up, although interestingly, she does not tell us about it in her own voice; instead, the fact emerges in the course of a different narration (pp. 179–81). As a captive woman, Briseis is clear-sighted in her own narration about her status in the Greek 'rape camp' (p. 324); she refers several times to her reduced status as a thing rather than a person (pp. 38, 93, 211, 289). She is painfully aware of her position as a sign of Achilles' prowess, rather than as a person in her own right, and of the generalised hostility towards her as a Trojan and a source of strife between Achilles and Agamemnon: 'I only know when they weren't blaming the gods, they were blaming me' (p. 124). Other women, it seems, make more compromises and perhaps even come to love their captors, which Briseis does not entirely understand or condone; the prime example of this is Tecmessa, Ajax's captive (pp. 50, 236). At the same time, Briseis's narration draws our attention to a whole other class of women who are not concubines, but who are at the mercy of the soldiery generally, and who are usually hungry and much worse used. Sometimes these women too emerge more clearly into the narrative, as a group of 'common women' (pp. 52, 280) whose fate Briseis desperately hopes to avoid, or as a group of women more or less attached to Achilles' establishment who have more menial duties than hers (pp. 86, 186, 291). Even as she tells us her story of subjection, then, correcting the existing heroic narratives, the narrative points to other women who have even less voice.

Briseis's narration does not have obvious signs of unreliability, partly because her reactions to her conditions are very understandable, and also because she is candid about her own weaknesses and terrors (pp. 28, 36). However, the narrative does sometimes call attention to the conditions of its production in a way that does not always cohere, inviting questions as to where the narrative actually comes from. Thus, quite early on, Briseis remarks that she picked up a particular, sharp pebble on the beach, which had cut her foot as she walked. That moment on the beach is particularly charged, because it is when she sees Achilles in the sea, speaking, though she does not know it then, to his mother Thetis. Smelling of the sea, as Briseis herself often does because she escapes to it frequently, the pebble is a 'gift from the sea' (p. 35) and has retained its sharpness even though all its fellows on the beach have had their edges rubbed off. 'It mattered to me, that obstinate little stone, and it still does. I have it here now on the palm of my hand' (p. 35). It does not take a lot to see that the stone is a version of Briseis herself, unconquered by her experiences, and indeed, as she makes clear, in a position now to narrativize them, having survived.[13] But the here and now of her statement about the pebble in her hand is never elaborated, leaving the place and time of narration tantalisingly unclear, and thus inviting us to scrutinise the story-telling.[14]

There are other moments when our attention is abruptly drawn to the time and place of Briseis's first-person narration, which again do not quite add up. Especially complicated are occasional exchanges apparently between Briseis and another person, whom Briseis as narrator calls 'you'.[15] On p. 38, an italicised voice, not that of Briseis, says '*You seem to have spent a lot of time watching him*', implicitly perhaps accusing Briseis of desire for Achilles. Much later, in the wake of a discussion between Briseis and Patroclus about whether Patroclus could make Achilles marry her, the italicised voice says '*Would you really have married the man who killed your brothers?... I just don't know how you could do that*' (p. 93). Briseis answers that a slave would do anything to stop being a thing and become a person

again, and counters that 'you' have never been a slave. It is possible, then, that we are to imagine Briseis telling her story to another woman, perhaps younger, and obviously free, sometime subsequent to the events of the novel. However, it is also possible that the italicised voice is completely disembodied, and may be an imagined reader. The same dynamic is played out when the italicised voice appears at p. 212 making approximately the same accusations about Briseis's desire to be married to Achilles. Yet this encounter ends with Briseis's voice saying 'Sometimes at night I lie awake and quarrel with the voices in my head' (p. 213), which offers yet another identity for the italicised voice. Briseis's own narrative is thus undermined on occasion by a voice that may or may not also be hers.

Even within Briseis's first-person narration there is thus sometimes more than one voice, but in the novel as a whole there are at least two other narrative voices. Several chapters (19, 22, 24–27) are told by an impersonal third-person narrator, not Briseis, who has access to the thoughts of both Patroclus and Achilles, but not to other Greeks or to Briseis. Most striking of all, however, are the chapters which are devoted to a narration from Achilles' perspective, told in a close third-person style, with full access to his mind and his language such as Briseis, in her first-person narration, does not possess.[16] These narrations are often very lively, with more humour and colloquial language than Briseis allows herself (p. 151):

> "For hours, Achilles had stood in the stern of his ship watching the progress of the battle, divided between exasperation and triumph. The trench was a fucking disaster—as he'd known it would be; the fighting was now quite literally *bogged* down, the men floundering in mud. You might just as well have sent a messenger to Priam saying: '*Don't worry, old man, we know we can't win*'. Well, then: wine, food, celebration . . . ! Fat chance. The atmosphere at dinner was positively funereal. . . . Patroclus hardly spoke. Huh!... His silences were getting steadily louder."

Interestingly, some readers of the novel reject these chapters because they detract from the focus on Briseis as the 'subaltern' who finally finds a voice in this feminist novel.[17] In these chapters, which only begin after Briseis has been taken to Agamemnon's quarters, we see a much more vulnerable and wounded Achilles. He rehearses memories of the loss of his mother as a young child, but he also meditates on his relationship with Patroclus, and at the relevant juncture, on his decision to withdraw from the fighting (pp. 115–18). When Patroclus leaves for the battlefield, Achilles' anxiety seems to cause hallucinations (p. 193), and after Patroclus's death, these episodes with Achilles predominate over other forms of narration, as he struggles with his grief, and then as he pursues his revenge by defiling Hector's body. After the visit from Priam and the return of the body, the scenes of this type of narration are dominated by his knowledge of his coming death, and finally, in elegiac mood, discussion of Patroclus with Briseis, and Achilles' return to the lyre which he had abandoned after Patroclus died (p. 303). To find a new song for Briseis, then, is not to silence Achilles.

The loss of Patroclus brings Briseis and Achilles closer to one another, and Briseis as narrator remarks that they are both alone (pp. 229, 238). It is arguable too that even before the close of the book they begin to mirror each other, and to take up each other's narration, in a 'disturbing intimacy' (p. 159) that again interrogates the possibilities of the 'new song'. When Briseis is brought by the embassy to Achilles as reparation from Agamemnon, he rejects the offer, because he looks in her eyes and sees that Agamemnon is lying when he says that he has not had sex with her (p. 156). Even the gesture of looking into her eyes, when he tilts her heard until she is forced to meet his gaze, echoes those other gestures when in the arena he examines her in front of his troops (p. 21), and when towards the end of the novel he lifts her head up to him to explain about her forthcoming marriage to Alcimus (p. 308). In his tent, during the embassy, she is unable not to let him know the truth about sex with Agamemnon, and when she describes him seeing through her as a 'disturbing intimacy' (p. 159) we can see that this is partly the language of desire, even though it is a desire that Briseis never acknowledges either as narrator or as character in

others' narrations. The 'disturbing intimacy' of the embassy scene is carried further when she is asked to cut Achilles' hair, and she has a vision of killing him with the scissors (p. 252). Briseis remarks on the intimacy (p. 251) of the gesture of hair-cutting, and there is indeed an uncanny intimacy between them because Achilles, watching her in the mirror, seems to know what she is thinking. 'Go on', he said (p. 252). 'Why don't you?'. After this moment he asks her to stay with him every evening, although not during the night.[18] Subsequently, Briseis's narration claims the ability to know what Achilles is thinking, at many points in the scenes with Priam (pp. 264–66). The narratives begin to interlock more closely. Thus, Chapter 41 is told in a third person close to Achilles, and ends with Briseis anticipating his orders to provide food for Priam (p. 263); the next chapter, in Briseis's first-person narrative, takes up exactly where the earlier account left off (p. 264). Similarly, Chapter 46 is focalised through Achilles, and ends with him concluding his song on the lyre; Chapter 47, the last chapter, opens with Briseis's voice telling us that 'the final notes faded into silence' (p. 307). The two narrations thus meld into one another even as the representations of Briseis and Achilles draw structurally closer together.

The emphasis on Achilles' lyre invites us to focus on the ways in which the closing scenes of the book are framed as a contest among songs. Briseis's desire for a 'new song' is provoked by her exasperation with the lament played towards the end of his life by Achilles (pp. 313–14):

> "The words seemed to have got trapped inside my brain, an infestation rather than a song, and I resented it. Yes, the death of young men in battle is a tragedy . . . worthy of any number of laments—but theirs is not the worst fate. I looked at Andromache, who'd have to live the rest of her amputated life as a slave, and I thought: *We need a new song*."

Briseis's contest is partly with the *Iliad*, of course, which is specifically challenged, as well as channelled, at several points in the new text. Acknowledgement of the gendered contest of songs begins with Briseis's recollection of epic stories she had heard as a girl (pp. 56–57):

> "I thought all the stirring tales of courage and adventure were opening a door into my own future, though a few years later . . . I realised the songs belonged to my brothers, not to me."

During Priam's visit to Achilles' tent, the *Iliad* is quoted and decisively beaten at its own game. Briseis remembers Priam's supplication to Achilles, citing the resonant Homeric lines directly: 'I do what no man before me has ever done, I kiss the hands of the man who killed my son'. She tropes and trumps the lines, robbing them of their moving exceptionalism, with a simple statement about the mundanity of her own position (p. 267): 'And I do what countless women before me have been forced to do. I spread my legs for the man who killed my husband and my brothers'. A further staging of the contest with the *Iliad* comes after the return of the body of Hector, during the ceasefire, 'eleven shining days of peace' (p. 293). During this time Ajax and Tecmessa visit, with their small son, whom Tecmessa has to sing to sleep. She sings a Trojan lullaby, and Briseis realises:

> "We're going to survive—*our* songs, *our* stories. They'll never be able to forget us. Decades after the last man who fought at Troy is dead, their sons will remember the songs their Trojan mothers sang to them. We'll be in their dreams—and in their worst nightmares too." (p. 296)

The songs of the captive women are thus set up as a direct challenge to the heroic songs of the Greeks.

Yet this pronouncement, memorable though it is, is not the last word on the last words. The claim is itself interrogated on the next page, when Briseis reflects that (p. 297):

> "It seemed to me I'd been trying to escape not just from the camp, but from Achilles' story; and I'd failed. Because, make no mistake, this was his story—*his* anger, *his* grief, *his* story. *I* was angry, *I* was grieving, but somehow that didn't

> matter. Here I was, again, waiting for Achilles to decide when it was time for bed, still trapped, still stuck inside his story, and yet with no real part to play in it."

Here, Briseis seems to give up the possibility of her own new story, and to consign herself to silence. However, given that Briseis is narrating Achilles' story, it is not ever only his, and we might conclude that Briseis is here an unreliable narrator, because disclaiming her own narration.

Achilles' lyre comes to the fore during the ceasefire, and after he knows that Briseis is pregnant. The narrative focusses on one particular tune that Achilles was working on before Patroclus died, and which is now very painful for him to revisit. He discovers, however, that its unsatisfactory ending, which he was trying to improve, is in fact the correct ending. 'It's been there all along, only he wasn't ready to see it' (p. 306). It does not take much effort to conclude that the song is about Patroclus and Achilles themselves, their deaths and thus their stories that are unfinished, in the sense of cut off young, but also completely finished, in the sense of passed into myth and legend. In this they contrast with Briseis's story, in which her pregnancy signifies a future that Achilles no longer has, and which will not pass into legend—the child is not born before the end of the novel, so it escapes any finished status, and remains a potential.

The contrast between the types of songs and stories persists right to the end of the novel. On the brink of leaving Troy, Briseis tends the corpse of Polyxena and on her burial mound, says goodbye in her mind to Patroclus and Achilles, but recognises that 'it's the girls I remember most'. Although at this point she commemorates the dead women, her sister Arianna and Polyxena, she has also been at pains earlier to memorialise the men who fell at Troy, some of them still boys. In fact, she tells how she made a point, in later life, of seeking out the women of Troy and thus of hearing tales of their sons (pp. 215–19). In the final pages of the novel, Briseis continues to weigh up stories, wondering what future audiences will make of those of the Trojan War. Those future audiences will not (p. 324):

> " . . . want to be told about the massacres of men and boys, the enslavement of women and girls. They won't want to know we were living in a rape camp. No, they'll go for something altogether softer. A love story, perhaps? I just hope they manage to work out who the lovers were."

So here Briseis the narrator withholds a final account of the 'love story', whether it was of Achilles and Patroclus, Briseis and Patroclus, Achilles and Briseis; and she also challenges the current readers of this novel with their pleasure in the story, and with what kind of pleasure it is. If she does have a new song, she implies, nobody will want to hear it. At the same time, she questions whether she does have a new song, since the very last line of the novel is: 'Once, not so long ago, I tried to walk out of Achilles' story—and failed. Now, my own story can begin'. Since this is the last line, her story cannot begin at all. Conversely, since we have been hearing her story all along, the ontological status of the 'new song' is again confusing and precarious.

These three novels adopt different strategies to explore the possibilities of songs that will take on the cultural weight of the Homeric poems and rework them for an audience attuned to the necessity for new songs, and indeed new singers. In doing so, they draw attention to themselves as fictions, and as such, they must also necessarily question the success of their project. There are inescapable complexities in reworking ancient material for feminist ends. However, happily for us as readers or listeners, whether classicists or not, the new songs do not have to be the last songs on the topic—the songs can be renewed again, as further new voices emerge.

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Notes

[1] This is not an unadulterated cause for celebration; according to Leonard and Salvo (2016), slightly less than a quarter of Professors of Classics in the UK are women, and women are much more strongly represented at lower levels of the profession. Public commentators include some very prominent women such as Mary Beard, who has a wide-ranging TV show, *Inside Culture* (BBC Two), alongside many other activities focussed on classics.

[2] See (Lovatt and Leonard 2020).

[3] See (Thompson and Bekhradnia 2009; Preston 2015; Baker 2021), who discuss the downgrading of the humanities in the discourse of UK governments; let us hope the gender of humanities students is not a factor.

[4] We could also cite other works by women such as Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* and Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, but these works are not so obviously feminist in their alignment. I do not include Pat Barker's *The Women of Troy* (Barker 2020), partly because it is very recent and so has not entered the public consciousness in the same way, and partly because it invents its own story and so does not constitute the same kind of response to the Homeric poems. Similarly, I am not writing here on works that respond to tragedies, like Natalie Haynes' *The Children of Jocasta*.

[5] The Greek is from the Loeb edition of the plays, and the deliberately literal translation is mine.

[6] *Circe's* relationship to the texts of Euripides, Ovid, and Apollonius, as well as the Homeric epics, is also recognised, e.g., Preston (2018).

[7] The stories are told side-by-side rather than being concentrically organised, as when the Minyads, themselves the subjects of one tale of metamorphosis, embark on others (*Metamorphoses* IV.86). The Ovidian sensibilities of Miller's text are visible at moments, like Chapter 32, the encounter between Zeus and Themis.

[8] This point is made in the second of her 2020 Reith Lectures, 'The Iron Maiden'. See https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08v08m5, accessed 2 November 2021). Preston (2018) suggests that Miller 'flouts Mantel's interdiction winningly, joyously, and in a way that is powerfully affecting', but Circe's power is rarely unproblematic, and is hard won.

[9] See (Martin 2011). The *Telegony* was an epic poem, now lost, but known to us from a plot summary preserved in the ninth-century *The Library of Photius*. It seems to have provided a sequel to the *Odyssey*. In the *Telegony*, Penelope marries Telegonus, which is not envisaged in *Circe*.

[10] This unpleasant version of Odysseus is also pressed into service to exculpate Telemachus, because it turns out that Odysseus forced him to kill the maids against his will, and he feels enduring guilt and shame (p. 269).

[11] See also p. 281, where the bard is threatened with a flogging for his suggestive description of Circe's island.

[12] The intelligent and perceptive Helen is offered by ancient texts such as the *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Helen*, but is of course hardly standard in the tradition.

[13] There is no mention of Briseis in Greek sources other than the *Iliad*, so her survival is not guaranteed by the ancient accounts.

[14] The pebble connects to other significant moments in the text such as Achilles' loss of Briseis, which grinds him like a pebble (p. 117), her mother's opals which are hung around her neck during the embassy to Achilles (p. 148), and the pebbles she places on Hector's eyes (p. 274).

[15] There are no such extra voices in Briseis's narration in *The Women of Troy*, and not many invocations of a scene of narration. Fleming remarks that the narrator is 'a little too reliable to be interesting' (Fleming 2021, p. 67).

[16] The corresponding sections of *The Women of Troy*, focussed on Pyrrhus, are noted as 'arguably the most effective piece of sustained characterization' (Fleming 2021, p. 67).

[17] See some readers' opinions at https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/37969723-the-silence-of-the-girls, accessed 10 October 2021.

[18] This new relationship is perhaps also connected to the scene in which Patroclus puts on Achilles' arms and in front of a mirror, the two men see each other as mirrors (p. 194). Just after this comes the uncanny moment when each hears the other call his name (pp. 198–99).

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