

RETHINKING THE HOMERIC HERO IN CONTEMPORARY
BRITISH WOMEN'S WRITING: CLASSICAL RECEPTION,
FEMINIST THEORY AND CREATIVE PRACTICE

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Declaration of Authorship

I Ruth MacDonald hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

Sustained engagements with ciphers of traditional Homeric stereotypes can be found in a number of texts written by women. This thesis will examine how three texts in particular, Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* (2001), Gwyneth Lewis's *A Hospital Odyssey* (2010) and Kate Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* (2012), allow an argument to develop for the centrality of various strategies and perspectives, such as embodiment and intersubjectivity. I suggest that the figuration of the nomad, as articulated in the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Rosi Braidotti in particular, is key to understanding both twenty-first century experiences and expressions of corporeality, as well as receptions of the Homeric hero in women's writing today. Heroic bodies in Cook, Lewis, and Tempest are vulnerable and liminal, oscillating between borderlines or lurking at the margins, disrupting heteronormative systems and structures by transgressing boundaries, codes and limits in the relationship between value, the body and the mind as traditionally understood. Though in some obvious ways distant, the Homeric heroic body nevertheless retains a resonance and influence in twenty-first century British cultural understandings. This thesis thus explores the role of an 'intimate other' (the Homeric hero) in engaging classical reception, feminist politics and contemporary women's writing in dialogue.

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Introduction:

Classical Reception, Feminist Theory and Creative Practice

This thesis explores how notions of the heroic are being reconsidered in twenty-first century British women writers' receptions of the Homeric hero. The study will examine Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* (2002), Gwyneth Lewis's *A Hospital Odyssey* (2010) and Kate Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* (2012), whose approaches, although varying in style and content, all belie mutual concerns regarding the status and significance of the body in relation to postmodern subjectivities. I am arguing that Homeric notions of the heroic are being reconsidered by these writers in light of very contemporary concerns surrounding the materiality of the body and that this intersection between feminist theory and women's acts of classical reception is something of a cultural phenomenon. I will analyse the ways in which contemporary feminist thought appears to be reflected in their writings and asking why they seem to be inspired by classical source text/s as a way to explore these concerns.

Many considerations influenced my decision to focus on this intersection between feminism, classical reception and contemporary women's writing in Britain. Nonetheless, that which has arrested me most is the preoccupation with embodied materiality apparent in the work of each author under study. This emphasis on what a body can do encompasses a number of critical concerns, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari articulate:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body.¹

With this in mind, we must ask ourselves: how is the body comprised (physically, socially and psychically)? What are the boundaries of the body, between bodies? How

¹ Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]: 284.

do we interrogate the relationship between the mind and the body? How do subjects understand their bodies? How does embodied experience relate to subjectivity and identity? How do embodied subjects interact? In what ways do the social, the political, the cultural, the biological, the scientific and the technological encode the body and script our identities?

As each author has chosen to focus on the heroic body in their texts, the questions posed in this study are necessarily framed by a critical focus on issues of gender and sexuality. All three explore and problematise traditional gender binaries, illuminating their restrictive, artificial qualities, whilst still acknowledging their influence in twenty-first century British society. In their writing, Cook, Lewis and Tempest advocate for increasingly inclusive and nuanced modes of articulating contemporary subjectivities that are fluid, non-unitary and situated within an intersubjective and material world. This is an approach which is very much in line with the current materialist turn in feminist theory.

Materialist feminist thought is grounded in the recognition of difference and specificity between subjects, whilst simultaneously advocating the conscious creation of connections with the other in ways which are demanding, continuous and negotiated within a particular socio-historical moment. Positioning the subject as embodied, i.e. the product of both natural and cultural forces, it rejects exclusionary *phallogocentric*² modes of thought, involving a commitment to the subject as open-ended and engaging in a continuous process of becoming. This thesis will examine how the hero is perceived and articulated in contemporary women's acts of classical reception, as well as the ways in which heroic bodies are portrayed as liminal, as oscillating in the interstices between binary oppositions. In this way, the work of Cook, Lewis and Tempest disrupts heteronormative systems, rejecting the hierarchical

² Derrida 1968. The term '*phallogocentric*' is used to describe Jacques Derrida's theory that Western culture (i.e. the patriarchal Symbolic order as defined by Lacan) is controlled by the two concepts of *logocentrism* and *phallogocentrism*. The former is, in Derrida's argument, the mistaken belief of and desire for a set of truths which pre-exist and are independent of the signs which are used to identify them within the linguistic system. Derrida employs the latter term to communicate the way in which *logocentrism* has become primarily patriarchal. This is to say that the concept of *phallogocentrism* prioritises the phallus and patriarchal discourse. As a result, women must necessarily participate within this masculine economy which characterises them as lack and other.

structures which define the relationship between the body and the subject as traditionally understood.

I will argue that in contemporary British women's acts of classical reception, although the body is articulated as being socially and historically contingent, it also expresses an innate potentiality for new models of the subject outside of hierarchical binaries. As such, I have come to consider these writers' assorted strategies and approaches as 'nomadic' and suggest that the figuration of the nomad, as articulated in the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Rosi Braidotti in particular, is key to understanding twenty-first century experiences and expressions of embodiment.³ Thus, the aim of this thesis is to explore the implications of nomadism for classical reception, feminist politics and women's writing today.

WOMEN'S WRITING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Before exploring the potential interrelations, and perhaps tensions, between nomadism, feminism and literary perspectives on the body, I would like to present a few apposite thoughts about the position of women's writing in Britain today. The turn of the millennium has seen the British literary scene continuing to foster a diverse creative culture, giving rise to a range of different voices and textual productions.⁴ What is more, contemporary British writing, broadly understood, has increasingly come to the attention of the academy, growing into a significant field of study within the last twenty years⁵ and hosting a wide range of critical approaches, theories and perspectives.⁶ A number of authors whose works have reaped both popular and

³ These concepts will be explained in further detail in the first chapter of the thesis.

⁴ As Sian Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (2013: 1) write: '[t]he first decade of the 2000s has been remarkable for its literary creativity and diversity. The peculiarly rich features of twenty-first century writing include not only the implications of beginning a new century, but also the particularly potent symbolic evocations that arise from the turn of the millennium. In addition to millennial and post-millennial discourses, the catastrophic events of 9/11, the War on Terror, and the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath have created a new political context that is already generating an abundance of creative and critical writing.'

⁵ As Nick Hubble, Philip Tew and Leigh Wilson (2015: ix) write: 'Contemporary British fiction published from 1970 to the present has expanded into a major area of academic study in the last twenty years and attracts a seemingly ever-increasing global scholarship.'

⁶ Bentley 2008: vii.

critical attention are women, perhaps none more so than Carol Ann Duffy, the UK's first female poet laureate in the position's nearly 350-year history. Indeed, it seems as though 'women's writing' is now no longer a minority classification but fully established in mainstream literary culture. However, there remain many issues to be explored, questions answered, experiences mapped, and thus there is a benefit to be garnered from narrowing my critical focus to writing by women. Moreover, despite many years of feminist literary criticism, and the apparent ubiquity of women writers in the twenty-first century, gendered ideological assumptions about what constitutes aesthetic worth and value in literature remain prevalent today.⁷

In many ways, the term 'feminine' continues to hold some derisory overtones when used in relation to women's textual production. As a result, many female writers are not comfortable with the labels 'woman writer' and 'women's writing'. Whereas for some, this sexual differentiation serves to discern the themes and concerns of male and female writers,⁸ for others the categories are reductive. Nowhere is this clearer than in A.S. Byatt's public criticism of the Orange (now Baileys) Prize for Fiction as 'ghettoising' women's writing:

The Orange prize is a sexist prize. You couldn't find a prize for male writers. The Orange prize assumes there is a feminine subject matter – which I don't believe in. It's honourable to believe that – there are fine critics and writers who do – but I don't.⁹

Furthermore, Daisy Goodwin, a judge on the panel for the Orange Prize in 2010, is quoted as having said 'If I read another sensitive account of a woman coming to terms with bereavement, I was going to slit my wrists';¹⁰ whereas Ali Smith and Toby Litt, in their introduction to a Picador anthology of twentieth century women's fiction, despair over the fact that 'On the whole, submissions from women were disappointingly domestic, the opposite of risk-taking'.¹¹ Although the above concerns are in many ways well-founded, it remains important to recognise that contemporary

⁷ Parker 2004: 2.

⁸ Armstrong 2000: xvi.

⁹ Quoted in Davies and Higgins 2010.

¹⁰ Cited in Akbar 2010.

¹¹ Litt and Smith 2005: x.

women's writing is receiving greater critical attention than ever before, with a number of journals and anthologies specifically dedicated to its dissemination and criticism. Nonetheless, it is still possible to read a masculine bias in the considerations paid to literature. Take, for example, the Man Booker prize, an award whose gender biases have been long-scrutinised since the Orange prize for fiction was launched in 1996 in retaliation against an all-male Booker shortlist. In 2014, only three women were placed on the thirteen-strong longlist. The following year, seven out of the thirteen authors longlisted were female, yet only two made it to the shortlist of six. In 2014, Vida, a US organisation for the promotion of women's literature, scrutinised a number of literary publications, concluding that, in the main, coverage remained predominantly male-centred, not only with regards to the books being recognised but also in terms of the gender of their reviewers. In 2014, *The London Review of Books* featured 527 male authors and critics, as opposed to 151 women (22.3%). Only 58 female-authored books were reviewed, compared to 192 by men (a fall of 14 since 2013). That same year, *The Times Literary Supplement* featured 869 women to 2200 men (28.3%) and only 25% of books reviewed were written by women. These statistics seem at odds with the fact that women purchase two-thirds of the books sold in the United Kingdom.¹²

Nonetheless, although these numbers are concerning, it is important to bear in mind that today's readers are less reliant on the critical opinions of reviewers from Higher Education institutions, academic journals or the more 'serious' broadsheet newspapers. Recent developments in media, as well as advances in technology, now have a huge influence on what we choose to buy and read. This, in turn, has affected how authors and publishers market their writing. Even large established publishing houses use social networking sites to reach their target audiences, as Layla West, consumer engagement director at Penguin Random House UK, states:

In an age when we're competing for people's attention more than ever, it's important we're able to reach audiences in the places they are across social media, email and digital, and strong consumer brands enable us to do this.

¹² Figures available at <http://www.vidaweb.org/2014-vida-count/>.

Penguin is our biggest brand on social media, with 913,000 followers on Twitter, 348,000 on Facebook, and 150,000 engaged monthly newsletter subscribers [. . .]

This is about putting the consumer first, so we're able to effectively delight and inspire as many of them as possible to engage with the stories and ideas that matter online.¹³

Whether it is posting comments on Twitter, blogging on Tumblr or updating an author's Facebook page, publishing houses understand the importance of engaging writers with their readers through more popular avenues. The influence of social media and technology on traditional publishing is perhaps best exemplified by E.L. James's best-selling *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, which started out as fan fiction inspired by Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* novels. Self-published online through a small writers' community, The Writer's Coffee Shop, in May 2011, James sold approximately 30,000 e-books in one year.¹⁴ This quickly caught the attention of publishers, as James's literary agent Valerie Hoskins told *Vanity Fair* magazine: '[t]here was already a buzz about the trilogy in early 2012, appreciation for the books had gone viral [. . .] All of the Big Six (five now) publishers in New York City were very keen to offer for it.'¹⁵ After signing a deal with Random House's Vintage Books in March 2012, the first instalment of James's trilogy sold 10 million copies in six weeks and has to date sold over 100 million copies worldwide. As a result, by August 2012, sixteen weeks after its publication, her first novel was the UK's 5th best selling book of all time, and she is not alone. Calculating book sales since 2000, half of the UK's best-selling authors are women, with *Harry Potter* creator J.K. Rowling and former children's laureate Julia Donaldson respectively topping the list.¹⁶ It is apparent that female writers have secured a prominent place in the public imagination and, vitally, achieved equal footing on bestseller lists. Therefore, the question becomes: why, despite the fact that women read, and in many cases, write and sell more books than their male

¹³ Quoted in Shaffi 2015.

¹⁴ Deahl 2012.

¹⁵ Quoted in Lipton 2015.

¹⁶ Data supplied by Nielsen BookScan UK.

counterparts, are male authors overwhelmingly the recipients of major literary prizes and awarded greater critical attention?

Although a sense of parity has been realised at the level of the popular, this has not been extended to what might be termed 'intellectually serious' literature, as *Times Literary Supplement* editor Peter Stothard makes painfully clear: 'while women are heavy readers, we know they are heavy readers of the kind of fiction that is not likely to be reviewed in the pages of the *TLS*'.¹⁷ This statement positions women as readers and writers of 'light' fiction by virtue of their exclusion from the pages of the *TLS*, as opposed to consumers and disseminators of Literature with a capital 'L'. It is already almost a century since this distinction between male and female writing was famously addressed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), where she argued that the criteria against which literary texts are measured are grounded in a set of gendered assumptions about what makes literature 'great': 'masculine' subject-matter is of universal importance, while 'feminine' subjects are often deprecated as insignificant, either romantic or domestic (and therefore not 'literary'). As a result, whereas women's writing is considered to relate to specifically female experience, men's writing is regarded as speaking to humanity on a 'universal' scale,¹⁸ as author and publisher Sophie Cunningham notes:

when men write novels drawn from life, it is still seen as literary, and serious, but these qualities in a work are used to dismiss books by women. When Alex Miller writes a deeply romantic novel, like *Conditions of Faith*, for example, it's seen as literary, and when a woman writes a similar novel (priests, longing, sex, France etc.) it's seen as a 'romance'.¹⁹

Accordingly, writing by men is simply referred to as 'writing', whereas writing by women is often specifically coded as 'women's writing'. Attitudes such as these reify lower estimations of women's textual production, denigrating them as frivolous, domestic, unchallenging and, therefore, undeserving of serious intellectual

¹⁷ Cited in Page 2011.

¹⁸ This not only affects women's writing but also the writing of people of colour, the working classes etc.

¹⁹ Cited in Sanders 2011.

consideration. This has significant implications for women writers, including the very use of the term 'women's writing', in the twenty-first century moment. As such, in reading Cook, Lewis and Tempest via a feminist methodology, I am engaging in an on-going project that challenges such latent perceptions of the feminine and the mainstream, giving the authors under study a platform where the male and female can be considered outside of inflexible structures of gender, which often end in polarities and marginalisation. My reading of these texts highlights the connections between women's writing, contemporary feminist thought and the classics, as well as challenging outdated, albeit still prevalent, stereotypes. In order to think through possible responses to the issues female authors face, I will now consider the relationship between women's writing and contemporary feminist politics.

FEMINISM AND CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING

Many female authors, including Cook and Lewis, identify as feminist;²⁰ however, they remain cautious of characterising their writing as having such an overtly political agenda. When asked in an interview with Elena Theodorakopoulos whether she saw *Achilles* as part of a feminist tradition, Cook responded:

I don't know, I mean I think it might be useful for other people thinking about it. I can't say I self-consciously decided to enter that line but I'm a woman and I'm a feminist but it's not for me a deliberate agenda; it's not something to select as a particular separable item. I suppose my feminism is just part of who I am, over many years and if it . . . It's very hard to talk about it actually [sic].²¹

Although Cook's novella addresses subject matter which is central to current feminist concerns, including issues of gender, sexuality and violence against women, she is wary of whole-heartedly acknowledging categorisations that might limit her writing to

²⁰ Cook 2013; Lewis 2013.

²¹ Cook 2013.

a particular polemical niche. Many women writers, although regarding themselves as feminists, continue to produce work which cannot be directly attributed to a feminist tradition. This hesitation in explicitly identifying their work with feminism could stem from the negativity associated with aspects of the movement, including accusations of anachronism, militancy and elitism.²² Nonetheless, this somewhat asymmetrical relationship reflects how both contemporary feminism and women's writing consist of a plethora of diverse, even dissonant, voices, ideas and opinions, which are in no way united by a singular political programme. This conceptually hazy climate is best described as a series of movements with differing ideas and agendas. However, the one topic which seems to concern the differing factions, one way or another, regards the importance of the physical, material body to one's subjectivity. As such, contemporary feminist thought provides a helpful framework for me to think through the intricacies of twenty-first century reactions to embodied subjectivities and to negotiate multifaceted responses to issues of gender, agency and power in the texts under study. If the authors included in this thesis can be described as writing within a feminist milieu, regardless of their ambivalence towards the label, at stake here is an argument for the continued significance of feminism, both critically and politically. As such, thinking through the current terrain of women's writing becomes a vital area of scholarly exploration.

As we can see, then, the concept of 'women's writing' is a complex one, necessitating sustained critical attention in order to avoid the potential pitfalls that the term poses. Bearing in mind the caveats emanating from my earlier discussion of the pejorative associations that the term seems to engender, I am particularly careful to avoid reductive generalisations about what writing by women might entail. When I refer to the authors under study as 'women writers', all that needs to be taken for

²² Studies have shown a distinction between those who support gender equality and those who identify as feminist. Although 76% of British adults polled support political, economic and social equality between men and women, only 36% (47% of women and 25% of men) identified as feminist, with 35% of people responding negatively to the term. What is more, 31% of those who identified as feminist expressed concern about the term's negative connotations. It has been suggested that this discrepancy can be explained by public perceptions of feminism as aggressive (17%) and anti-men (26%). (Figures available at: <http://www.onepoll.com/36-of-british-adults-define-themselves-as-feminist-yet-76-support-gender-equality/>).

granted is that they write and that they identify as women.²³ As shall become clear as the thesis progresses, whereas sometimes my chosen authors draw our attention to female experience and their own positioning as women, often they do not. Although in referring to texts written by women as ‘women’s writing’, I am signalling my interest in exploring the relationship between feminism and female-authored texts, I am not suggesting that Cook, Lewis and Tempest share a singular feminist agenda. What is more, unlike previous feminist analyses of women’s literature, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) or Elaine Showalter’s *Toward a Feminist Poetics* (1979), I am not using the term ‘women’s writing’ to suggest that these authors and their works have been culturally relegated or side-lined. Despite the fact that, as has been discussed above, relevant concerns remain regarding the continued marginalisation of women’s literary output in Britain, it is important to bear in mind the fact that each of the authors under study have been awarded major literary prizes and that they have all, to a greater or lesser extent, been well-received by both critics and the general public alike. These are writers who knowingly touch upon broad swathes of literature (both classical and non-classical, ancient and modern), contemplate scientific advancements and engage in philosophical debates, whilst simultaneously remaining in harmony with the needs of their reading public. Thus, while acknowledging the potential drawbacks of the term ‘women’s writing’, I hope it is apparent that its usage in the thesis is not rooted in an impulse to categorise or homogenise a heterogeneous field of work but is rather a means of thinking through the issues inherent in women’s textual production in twenty-first century Britain.

As we read the texts that are the focus of this thesis, there are times where we might be able to detect a palpable feminist agenda, a challenge to the *phallogocentric* order; however, at other moments we may perhaps suspect a reification of gendered stereotypes and traditional subjectivities. These three texts are often conflicted and paradoxical, precluding a closed interpretation or an overarching political purpose. Yet, it is exactly this inability to categorise the texts under study that creates a space for the examination of Cook’s, Lewis’s and Tempest’s articulations of the subject in the contemporary moment. Looking at these texts through a feminist lens, the relevance

²³ Moi 2008: 267.

of and need for feminism and feminist literary criticism becomes clear. Again, I am not using this perspective to reduce such diverse literary works to a singular political agenda, rather my approach belies an awareness of the ways in which they might resist such attempts at homogenisation. My critical stance stands on the importance of situating contemporary women's acts of classical reception within the context of the political and literary landscape of contemporary Britain. As such, this thesis will constitute an analysis of embodied subjectivities in twenty-first century women's receptions of the Homeric hero, focusing on intersubjective encounters, liminal subject positions and the positivity of difference.

CLASSICS, FEMINISM AND THE CRISIS OF MASCULINITY IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING

In the context of post-millennial British literature more generally, writers, both male and female, have been preoccupied with thinking through the myths and texts of the past, amalgamating them into their own work. These receptions are not limited to the classical but encompass a wide range of histories and mythologies. This revisiting of pre-existing cultures and literatures is not a simplistic homage to or repetition of established literary traditions but a two-way dialogue with the ancient world which serves to revitalise and inform both text and source-text. As such, acts of classical reception do not merely speak to the 'here and now' but think back to our cultural past and look onwards to our future.

What is more, in the twenty-first century, the body has taken centre-stage like never before. Through the proliferation of often sexualised images, representations of the physical body have been augmented and intensified by advertising and mass media. It is no surprise, then, that embodiment remains a central concern for women's writing. Nevertheless, many female-authored texts often belie ambivalent responses to the physical body. Even in a world with unprecedented medical advancements and technological mediations, Cook, Lewis and Tempest all variously explore contemporary fears about the unpredictability and uncontrollability of the body in their treatments of embodied experience in their texts. As such, even if the body continues to excite the

interest of contemporary female writers, their treatment of embodied subjectivities is not necessarily easily allied to feminist positions.²⁴

The works of Cook, Lewis and Tempest often reveal unanticipated stances towards objectification, sexualisation and violence, including domestic abuse, rape and infanticide. These moments are often described in terms which are simultaneously highly sexualised, even pornographic, as well as disembodied and detached. Rather than a denigration and deconstruction of *phallogocentric* oppression and dominance, there are instances where the texts reveal an ambivalence towards, and in many ways seem to collude with, the violent attitudes articulated. Pushing at the very limits of bodily representation, such explorations of the dark side of embodied experience challenge readers to think through issues of objectification, violence and suffering. They provoke critical intervention and debate, obliging us to reconsider socio-cultural responses to the body, as well as the apparatus through which contemporary subjectivity is articulated.

In the writing of Cook, Lewis and Tempest, then, portrayals of the embodied subject proliferate. The body represents the borderline between self and other but also demonstrates the porousness of those boundaries. It is inscribed with markers of our identity, including race and gender, yet is simultaneously mediated by our historical circumstances and the socio-cultural signifiers which serve to confine our otherwise fluctuating subjectivities within narrow limits. It is my argument that the authors under study not only explore how the embodied subject is materially demarcated and socially constructed, but also ask how we might understand selfhood beyond binary oppositions. By examining the work of these three writers, I will make a case that their articulations of the subject belies a shared concern regarding the status of the body in contemporary British women's writing.

All this, of course, is not to suggest that I am presenting my chosen authors as being wholly representative of women's acts of classical reception, or, indeed, of women's writing in Britain more generally. Rather, they are three striking instances of complex textual responses to the role of the body in contemporary subjectivity that can be found today. Though each of the writers under study identifies as British, this is

²⁴ It is, however, important to remember that contemporary women writers' abilities to explore the correlation between the body and subjectivity is made possible only through the intervention of previous feminisms.

not to ignore their differing socio-cultural backgrounds and perspectives: Cook is a poet, fiction writer and scholar living in London; Lewis is a bilingual poet and the former National Poet of Wales; Tempest is an English spoken-word poet and rap artist. In bringing these writers together, I want to think how concerns about embodied subjectivities are both shared and contested in different, although often interrelated, cultural contexts within the British literary scene. I will argue that the embodied subject materialises in their texts as a central figure of exploration and a locus of multiple discourses at the intersection of passive and active, corporeal and cerebral, social and cultural, self and other.

This thesis is thus concerned with how these three authors reveal a shared ambition to reconceptualise the subject as embodied and that they choose to do so through engaging with the symbol of the hyper-masculine body *par excellence*, the Homeric hero. As such, their texts move towards an opening out of the body beyond strictly demarcated gender borderlines, challenging its forms, as well as emphasising its difference and its transformative potential. As Braidotti writes:

The subject of feminism is not Woman as the complementary and specular other of man but rather a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity. 'She' no longer coincides with the disempowered reflection of a dominant subject who casts his masculinity in a universalistic posture. She, in fact, may no longer be a she, but a subject of quite another story: a subject-in-process, a mutant, the other of the Other, a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis.²⁵

The writers' decision to articulate the contemporary subject through the vehicle of the Homeric hero deserves some attention. What is significant about their use of traditionally 'masculine' texts and themes? Is it a way of moving beyond the label 'woman writer', which, as has been discussed above, is viewed by many as both formally and thematically limiting? To quote Virginia Woolf:

²⁵ Braidotti 2002: 11-12.

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene on a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop²⁶

In engaging with 'masculine' forms and themes, are Cook, Lewis and Tempest seeking to subscribe to the neutrality and universality of male writer? I would argue that this is not the case. Although none of the writers under study is participating in overtly feminist revisions of ancient myth, nor do they express an interest in the recovery of a lost female voice in the vein of Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005) or Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* (1999), their protagonists are often liminally gendered. As Cook notes: 'one of the things I found appealing about Achilles is that he has a fluidity of gender and so is in touch with human experience - not just male experience - and I found that really interesting about him.'²⁷

Of course, the Homeric poems are primarily interested in recounting κλέα ἀνδρῶν, the glorious deeds of men. In pursuit of the status, respect and honour that κλέος brings, the quest for glory is positioned above all other concerns, forming the very core of the aristocratic warrior code.²⁸ This aim, as Glaucus articulates, 'to be always among the bravest' ('αἰέν ἀριστεύειν'),²⁹ is crucial to understanding the Homeric hero, who is often conceptualised as ruthlessly individualistic in his pursuit of martial excellence.³⁰ Taken in this light, we naturally turn to Achilles, the ἀρίστος Ἀχαιῶν, as the quintessential warrior of Homeric epic. The greatest fighter at Troy, his glory lives on long after his death. However, to think of the Homeric male only in terms of his battlefield prowess is to limit our understanding of heroes and their actions. Despite the fact that all of Homer's heroes esteem the values of κλέος and τιμή, each man stands out in his own way. If lion-hearted (θῦμολέοντα)³¹ Achilles is the matchless fighter, Odysseus realises a different kind of heroic pre-eminence as the resourceful

²⁶ Woolf 1981 [1929]: 74.

²⁷ Cook 2013.

²⁸ For further discussion on the Homeric warrior code, see, for example, van Wees (1992) 25–166; Zanker (1994) 1–71; and Seaford (1994) 1–29.

²⁹ Homer *Iliad* 6.208. All translations of Homer's *Iliad* taken from Lattimore 2011 [1951].

³⁰ For further discussion on heroic individualism, see, for example, Redfield 1994: 104.

³¹ Homer *Iliad* 7.228.

(πολύτροπος)³² sacker of cities (πτολιπόρθιος).³³ Each profoundly different from the other, the respective protagonists of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* reveal that, as Gregory Nagy writes, '[e]ven within a single tradition like Homeric poetry, heroes like Achilles and Odysseus seem worlds apart'.³⁴

What is more, even throughout his more martial epic, the *Iliad*, Homer is able not only to invoke the individualistic values of the battlefield, but to offer an alternative, more domestic vision of human relations. In the following exchange between Hector and his wife Andromache, the tension between *κλέος* and the *οἶκος* is made across explicitly gendered lines:

ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε
ἱστόν τ' ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε
ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι: πόλεμος δ' ἄνδρεςσι μελήσει
πᾶσι, μάλιστα δ' ἐμοί, τοῖ Ἰλίῳ ἐγγεγάασιν.

Go therefore back to our house, and take up your own work,
the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens
ply their work also; but the men must see to the fighting,
all men who are people of Ilion, but I beyond all others.³⁵

This division of the masculine domain of war and the feminine domestic sphere is not merely spatial, i.e. the geographical segregation of the battlefield from the home, it is also ideological. What is more, as Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold note, when Hector makes this distinction between the roles of men and women, he also asserts his responsibilities as a warrior 'beyond all others'.³⁶ In this way, the pursuit of *κλέος* not only highlights tensions between masculinity and femininity, but also between the individual and the community. In the following passage, Hector responds to

³² Homer *Odyssey* 1.1; 10.330. All translations of Homer's *Odyssey* are taken from James Huddleston 2006.

³³ Homer *Odyssey* 9.504, 530.

³⁴ Nagy 2005: 71.

³⁵ Homer *Iliad* 6.490-493.

³⁶ Graziosi and Haubold 2003: 70.

Andromache's pleas that he keep away from the vanguard of battle, arguing that the demands of κλέος necessitate his presence on the front line:

τὴν δ' αὖτε προσέειπε μέγας κορυθαίολος Ἕκτωρ:
ἦ καὶ ἐμοὶ τάδε πάντα μέλει γύναι: ἀλλὰ μάλ' αἰνῶς
αἰδέομαι Τρῶας καὶ Τρῳάδας ἔλκεσιπέπλους,
αἷ κε κακὸς ὧς νόσφιν ἀλυσκάζω πολέμοιο:
οὐδέ με θυμὸς ἄνωγεν, ἐπεὶ μάθον ἔμμεναι ἐσθλὸς
αἰεὶ καὶ πρῶτοισι μετὰ Τρῳέεσσι μάχεσθαι
ἀρνύμενος πατρός τε μέγα κλέος ἢ δ' ἐμὸν αὐτοῦ.[']

Then tall Hektor of the shining helm answered her: 'All these things are in my mind also, lady; yet I would feel deep shame before the Trojans, and the Trojan women with trailing garments, if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting; and the spirit will not let me, since I have learned to be valiant and to fight always among the foremost ranks of the Trojans, winning for my own self great glory, and for my father.[']³⁷

Hector's words highlight a separation from others, a heroic self-containment, in his need to be first among the Trojans and visible by all. His relationship with his fellow warriors is competitive, even antagonistic, rooted in shame and, conversely, pride. It is at this moment that Andromache identifies, and implicitly critiques, the hubristic nature of such heroic bravado: 'δαιμόνιε φθίσει σε τὸ σὸν μένος'.³⁸ Hector ultimately decides that the values of κλέος override more domestic concerns as he returns to the battlefield to lead an attack on the Greeks. Unaware that his subsequent successes against the enemy forces are contrived by Zeus at the request of Thetis,³⁹ Hector becomes increasingly over-confident in his own abilities. Pushing himself and his army to its very limits, it is only facing death that he realizes how his pursuit of the heroic

³⁷ Homer *Iliad* 6.440-446.

³⁸ 'your own great strength will be your death' (Homer *Iliad* 6.407).

³⁹ Homer *Iliad* 1.493-527.

ideal has cost him not only his own life but Troy itself.⁴⁰ With the death of Hector, ‘competitive values [. . .] overwhelm gentler attitudes and co-operative ethics’,⁴¹ with tragic consequences for both his family and community.

Nevertheless, the exchange between Hector and Andromache in Book 6 presents to the poem’s reader an alternative to the deeply individualistic heroic code, founded in touching familial and social relations. Although Hector rejects his wife’s advice to refrain from engaging in the destructive competitiveness of *κλέος*, in the lines which follow, Homer gives us a tender moment with the infant Astyanax, who cries at the sight of his father’s helmet. Amused by his son’s fears, he immediately takes off the offending article and places it on the ground.⁴² The helmet is part of Hector’s heroic epithet (*‘κορυθαίολος Ἴκτωρ’*; ‘Hector of the shining helm’),⁴³ as such its removal is significant. Keeping it on throughout his exchange with Andromache, Hector might be understood as attempting to straddle the roles of husband and hero, bridging the competing values of the battlefield and the home. In removing the helmet, he can perhaps be seen to shake off his heroic identity in favour of the more domestic role of husband and father, even as he imagines his son’s future as a great warrior.⁴⁴ As such, the Homeric hero embodies a number of tensions. If Homer’s warrior aristocracy demand admiration due to their strength and courage, it is by this same token that they are undone, spurred to dangerous extremes of rage, violence and recklessness in the pursuit of glory. At the same time, however, these heroes are capable of great empathy and tenderness, even if those softer attitudes are ultimately overwhelmed by the values of *κλέος*. It is this friction between epic and more domestic concerns which has positioned the Homeric hero as central to discussions of masculinity through to the present day.

⁴⁰ ἄνδρ' ἐπεὶ ὤλεσα λαὸν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ἐμῆσιν, / αἰδέομαι Τρῶας καὶ Τρωάδας
ἐλκεσιπέπλους, / μή ποτέ τις εἴπῃσι κακώτερος ἄλλος ἐμεῖο: / Ἴκτωρ ἦφι βίηφι πιθήσας ὤλεσε
λαόν.; ‘Now, since by my own recklessness I have ruined my people, / I feel shame before the
Trojans and the Trojan women with trailing / robes, that someone who is less of a man than I
will say of me: / “Hektor believed in his own great strength and ruined his people.”’ (Homer
Iliad 22.104-107).

⁴¹ Rutherford 1996: 42.

⁴² Homer *Iliad* 6.466-473.

⁴³ Homer *Iliad* 2.816; 3.83, 324; 5.680, 689; 6.116, 263, 342, 359, 369, 440, 520; 7.158, 233,
263, 287; 8.160, 324, 377; 11.315; 12.230; 15.504, 17.96, 122, 169, 188, 693; 18.21, 131, 284;
19.134; 20.430.

⁴⁴ Homer *Iliad* 6.476-481.

Of course, the concept of the hero, and the Homeric hero in particular, although ancient, is in no way ahistorical or fixed. Heroic masculinity does not present itself as an essential, definitive identity; rather, it is an inherently malleable socio-historical construct. As has been discussed, above, even in Homer's poetry, the heroes depicted are in no way homogeneous, although they often uphold common standards of appropriate masculine conduct. Nonetheless, as Michael Silk, Ingo Gildenhard and Rosemary Barrow argue, Homer's protagonists, although varying considerably in their 'heroic' qualities, offer an exemplar of extraordinary existence, particularly figures like Achilles whose divine ancestry and martial achievements offer a model for idealised masculinity from Virgil onwards. The heroic template continues to assert great import in the contemporary West as a paradigm of masculine identity, particularly in film, television, and computer games.⁴⁵ Many portrayals, particularly big-budget Hollywood film productions such as *Troy* (2004), *Immortals* (2011) and *Hercules* (2014), offer their audiences images of hyper-masculinity - ostentatious displays of physical strength from legendary warriors. Their focus on overwhelming physicality and brutal acts of violence brings to mind Helen's descriptions of the Greek warriors in *Iliad* Book 3 as she emphasises Agamemnon's stature, Odysseus' thick torso and the devastating size of Ajax.⁴⁶ However, as Silk, Gildenhard and Barrow again argue, the pursuit of a Homeric masculine ideal is a fraught issue in the twenty-first century:

negotiations between heroic masculinity and the sensitivity and gender-awareness ascribed to the 'new man' have contributed to a perceived 'crisis' in masculinity, where the hero figure largely defined the masculinity to which many Western men aspire, but which just as thoroughly defines their inevitable failure.⁴⁷

The 'crisis' engendered by the diminishing respect for traditional masculinity is a palpable issue for many. Great Britain in the twenty-first century has indeed witnessed a plethora of challenges to strict demarcations of gender, including the continued influence of feminism and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2013. As such,

⁴⁵ Silk et al. 2014: 31-40.

⁴⁶ Homer *Iliad* 3.121-244.

⁴⁷ Silk et al 2014: 40.

across the UK and elsewhere, men are having to rethink how masculinity is constituted in contemporary society, as Bob Lingard and Peter Douglas write:

this reassessment has been most visible through the work of academics, political activists, men's groups, therapists and writers, and spans a range of positions from what might be termed the recuperative (attempting to recapture men's traditional social roles) to the progressive (looking forward to the constitution of a new diversity of masculine expressions and more equal gender relations).⁴⁸

In our current historical moment, twenty-first century manhood finds itself trapped in the middle of a transition between a traditional masculine identity, which although on the decline remains persistently influential, and the new kinds of subject positions being proposed by feminists and other theorists of identity. In such a world where *phallogocentric* norms are being increasingly challenged, where a powerful social identity that was once regarded as fixed, coherent and stable is now characterised by doubt, uncertainty and anxiety, representations of traditional masculinity seem to offer asylum from the complexities of postmodern subjectivities. As MP Diane Abbott notes during a recent lecture at a Demos think-tank event in London:

I'm particularly troubled by a culture of hyper-masculinity – a culture that exaggerates masculinity in the face of a perceived threat to it. We see it in our schools; in the culture of some of our big business financial institutions; in some of our inner cities; and even on many student campuses. At its worst, it's a celebration of heartlessness; a lack of respect for women's autonomy; and the normalisation of homophobia. I fear it's often crude individualism dressed up as modern manhood.⁴⁹

This 'culture of hyper-masculinity' stems from the beliefs of a vocal group of men who view themselves, as Christopher Forth writes, as 'victims of a politically-correct, pro-

⁴⁸ Lingard and Douglas 1999: 32.

⁴⁹ Abbott 2013.

woman culture that left them jealous, jobless and powerless'.⁵⁰ One of the most obvious examples of this is the recent trend to categorise men into 'alpha' and 'beta' categories. Erroneously applying lessons from evolutionary psychology regarding pack-animal hierarchies, proponents separate traditionally strong, aggressive, self-confident men from those who are considered weak, passive and insecure. Very little academic work has been done on these concepts, in spite of a seemingly endless appetite for the topic online. Google 'alpha male' and the first page of results includes: 'Signs You're Not an Alpha Male', '25 Characteristics of an Alpha Male' and 'Alpha Male Characteristics'.⁵¹ There are also a number of books published on the subject, with telling titles including Bruce Byne's *What Women Want In A Man: How To Become The Alpha Male Women Respect, Desire, And Want To Submit To* (2013), Patrick King's *The Modern Alpha Male: Authentic Principles to Become the Man you were Born To Be* (2014) and Jack Landry's *Alpha Male Bible: Become Legendary, A Lion Amongst Sheep* (2015). Even more significantly, a sizeable number of online communities exist in order to coach men how to develop these 'alpha' characteristics.⁵² As a result, for young men in the internet age, attributes of the alpha-male ideal have become deeply internalised, as can be evidenced by the actions of individuals such as Elliot Rodger, a twenty-two year old University of California student who killed six people in a drive-by shooting in May 2014. A frequenter of online forums which rail against women's supposed bias in favour of 'alpha' men, Rodger blamed his virginity on not being able to meet what he saw as the requisite standards of masculinity. His flawed perception of his own inadequacies led to his subsequent violent actions. It is thus apparent that the traditional, hyper-masculine heroic archetype can be seen to promote a limited representation of twenty-first century masculinity with which many do not identify, sometimes with fatal consequences.

Of course, to state that masculinity is in any way as wholly monolithic as the above might suggest is to ignore the fact that gender identity intersects with a number of other variables on both an individual and a social level, including race, class,

⁵⁰ Forth 2008: 227.

⁵¹ See, for example: http://uk.askmen.com/top_10/dating/top-10-signs-youre-not-an-alpha-male.html; <http://www.tobealpha.com/alpha-male-characteristics/>; <http://manstuff.net/alpha-male-traits-characteristics/>.

⁵² Examples of these kinds of communities include TheRedPill [sic] site on Reddit.

sexuality, education and political beliefs.⁵³ What is more, despite the increasing online visibility of adherents to traditional models of masculinity, a 2016 YouGov poll uncovered a generational shift in terms of how men define their gendered identities. Participants were asked to position their masculinity on a scale of 0-6, where 0 is completely masculine and 6 is completely feminine. Only 2% of young men polled (aged 18-24) regarded themselves as totally masculine, as opposed to 56% of men over 65.⁵⁴ Perhaps even more significantly, both young men and young women disclosed negative attitudes towards masculinity as a concept compared to older individuals. Indeed, young men were more severe in their criticism of the concept than young women.⁵⁵ Therefore, there appears to be a dissonance between the masculine ideal, touted by a vocal minority, and the arbitrariness of gendered identities as experienced by the population at large (at least as far as younger generations are concerned).

It is with this in mind that in the iterations of Cook, Tempest and Lewis, the hero, although often rejected as 'patriarchal', has proved fruitful ground for exploring alternative views of the subject. Although often the locus of feminist critique, masculinity cannot be argued away or ignored; rather, it requires recognition and analysis. As such, the authors under discussion invite us to think beyond the crisis of masculinity by disavowing monolithic or fixed gender identities, be they masculine or feminine, and instead offer models of the subject grounded in change and transition, resisting the stability of any identity, gendered or otherwise. Although subjectivities do indeed materialise, it is always only provisionally and momentarily, and boundless pleasure is experienced not by occupying subject positions but in deconstructing them.

Therefore, parallel to more hyper-masculine images are models of heroism which suggest fluid interpretations of gender and sexuality, advancing an understanding of heroic masculinity which is multiple, as opposed to a singular and static ideal. Throughout this analysis, I shall not be arguing that my chosen authors are

⁵³ Mac an Ghail and Haywood 2007: 1.

⁵⁴ There was also a discrepancy between younger and older women in their self-defined levels of femininity, albeit not quite as large. Just 39% of 18-24 year-old women identify as almost entirely feminine (at level 5 or 6), as opposed to 77% of over 65s.

⁵⁵ Interestingly, the majority of young men (58%) and young women (55%) recorded a positive impression of the term 'femininity' (Figures available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/05/13/low-young-masculinity-britain/>)

engaging in a simplistic re-writing or feminist correction of Homer, who, anyway, also challenges traditional notions of the heroic in his poetry; rather Cook, Lewis and Tempest break down what male epic *κλέος* means in a modern world. In presenting us with a new kind of heroism, where the old code of *κλέος* is revealed to be lacking and inappropriate, these three authors showcase the new values needed to survive in today's society, challenging the boundaries between masculine and feminine, troubling notions of unified gender identities. In their writing, the heroic subject is unstable, grounded in terms of indeterminacy, alterity and difference, emerging through embodied and intersubjective encounters with the other.

Thus, this thesis will engage with the perceived limitations of the traditional heroic subject and propose a new model of subjectivity which moves 'across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges.'⁵⁶ Through their construction and deconstruction of gender identities, Cook, Lewis and Tempest resist totalising perspectives on the subject, instead offering insights into potential futures and envisaged alternatives, 'surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come'.⁵⁷ In their writing, the self is allied with, and is not in opposition to, the other in a move which gives rise to the prospect of a subjectivity outside traditional subject-object relationships. In my exploration of the intersection between feminist philosophies of the body, the Homeric hero and women's writing, I mean to begin shaping notions about how women's acts of classical reception, to varying degrees, in diverse ways, and with different implications for notions of gender, power and agency, concern themselves with nomadic becomings of the body and non-effacing, mutually transformative relations between subjects.

I content that, taken together, the writings of Cook, Lewis and Tempest offer thought-provoking insights into the continued relevance of both feminist thought and the classical in contemporary British society. Through this analysis, I suggest that the intersection of these theoretical perspectives and classical literature in women's creative practice opens a new space for dialogue, a space where the traditionally oppositional binary categories of male and female, self and other, ancient and

⁵⁶ Braidotti 2011a: 26.

⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]: 5.

modern, can be aligned with one another, potentially giving rise to generative and regenerative interaction.

THE OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

The thesis begins by thinking through contemporary feminist philosophies of the body, considering a number of concepts and works, which will provide an enriching conceptual framework through which to analyse the texts under study. Chapter 1, 'Nomadic Subjects: A Cartography of the Theoretical Roots of Nomadic Thought', explores how Gilles Deleuze's figuration of the nomad has been adopted by a number of contemporary feminist thinkers, most significantly Rosi Braidotti, as well as providing my own particular readings of contemporary theorisations of the body as a feminist literary critic. The chapter unpicks nomadism and related concepts, such as 'difference' and 'becoming', as a model for contemporary subjectivities, thinking through the ways in which such philosophies might intersect with feminist politics and women's writing today.

Subsequent chapters discuss Cook, Lewis and Tempest in turn, exploring nomadic subjectivities in each author's work. Chapter 2, 'Desire, Sensation and the Body: The Nomadic Subject in Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles*', considers how Cook resists the individualism and alienation which defines heroic masculinity through a nomadic becoming of the body, specifically exploring how sexual desire materialises and shapes the body in its relations with other subjects. In its analysis of Cook's work, the chapter also opens out dialogues with the psychoanalytic thinker Bracha Ettinger, looking in particular at her concept of the Matrix as a means of conceptualising non-effacing intersubjective relations.

Chapter 3, "A man who's putrid/ is hard to pity": Overcoming Abjection in Gwyneth Lewis's *A Hospital Odyssey*', proceeds to analyse how Lewis presents a variation on Homer's *Odyssey*, rewritten from the perspective of a cancer patient's wife. In offering her readers a female epic hero, Lewis suggests a model of the subject which is founded in the connective potential of a *vóσtoς* realised as a series of cross-fertilising encounters with between the poem's characters. Reading the text alongside Julia Kristeva's abject and Mikhail Bakhtin's grotesque, the chapter considers

contemporary attitudes towards the sick body, as well as the trials and tribulations of caring for someone with a chronic illness.

Chapter 4, 'Everyday Epics: *Κλέος* and the Transformative Encounter in Kate Tempest's *Brand New Ancients*' also considers what it means to be a hero in the modern world. Throughout her poem, Tempest affiliates her characters with classical heroes whilst at the same time recoiling from the comparison. Utilising Homeric resonances in order to explore the inadequacies of heroic *κλέος*, Tempest moves towards a model of the subject rooted in transformative encounters which collapse the boundaries between her characters.

In the twenty-first century, we are faced with ever-new possibilities for the deconstruction and reconstruction of our identities, with the contemporary subject now conceived of as a malleable entity caught up in a network of multiple, intersecting discourses. As such, I argue that reading the works of Cook, Lewis and Tempest together provides crucial insights into both the status of feminist philosophies and the perception of classics in Britain today.

1. Nomadic Subjects: A Cartography of the Theoretical Roots of Nomadic Thought

The aim of this chapter is to unpick contemporary feminist philosophies in order to delineate the concepts which have guided my readings of the body in the authors of my thesis. It should be noted that I am tentative to advance the aims as constructing an inert theoretical framework, or as comprising a restrictive lens which might serve to limit the view into the texts under study. This thesis is guided by encounters and interactions between the contemporary and the classical, as well as between theory and practice. It is not my intention to present analyses of the texts in ways which limit them to a single theoretical reading. Rather, it makes more sense to consider this chapter as presenting a number of interconnected perspectives as a means of reciprocally enriching both theory and text. Therefore, the following will explore the concept of nomadology, before going to think about its significance for contemporary women's writing in Britain today.

Nomadology is a theoretical position which promotes a new kind of subjectivity, originating in Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (1968) before becoming of central importance in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). The figuration of the 'nomad' is inspired by empirical nomads, whom Deleuze, and his long-time collaborator Félix Guattari, contrast with civilians living within a state. Whereas the civilian must live according to the codes of the state as an active part of its social machinery, the nomad is not bound by these regulations, nor to a specific territory, but 'travels and transverses terrains, creating a mobile existence instead of a sedentary life.'⁵⁸ In this way, the nomad is defined by transition, as opposed to stasis, undertaking journeys without any sense of a predetermined destination or eventual homeland.

For Deleuze and his followers, the nomad serves as the figuration *par excellence* for the subject in advanced capitalism. It is brand of critical consciousness that refuses to be reduced to the social codes which govern thought, behaviour and, indeed, subjectivity itself:

⁵⁸ Deleuze 1980: 420-1.

The nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. This figuration expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity.⁵⁹

Thinking of subjectivity as nomadic involves a conceptual shift from the universal and unitary subject. As a political fiction, the figuration of the nomad allows us to deconstruct the hegemonic and exclusionary social codes which demarcate the subject in postmodernity as a white, able-bodied, heterosexual male. In proposing an alternative which rests not on fixity but on a sense of constant flux, Deleuze and his followers offer an alternative subject-position which is founded in the affirmation, as opposed to pejoration, of difference, alongside a renewed emphasis on embodiment that will allow for non-exclusionary interaction between the self and the other.

POLITICS, PHILOSOPHY AND THE AFFIRMATION OF DIFFERENCE

Central to Deleuze's theorisation of the subject in advanced capitalism is the concept of 'difference'. 'Difference' from the norm (white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied) has been grounded in relations of domination and exclusion. This is to say that in traditional Western philosophical thought being 'different-from' means to be 'less-than'. For Deleuzian feminists, such as Braidotti, sexual difference is *the* 'founding, structural difference on which all others rest.'⁶⁰ Women's physical differences from men have historically been used to justify socio-political and cultural disparity, as Iris Marion Young writes:

Because much feminist reflection begins from the socio-historical fact that women's bodily differences from men have grounded or served as excuses for

⁵⁹ Braidotti 2011a: 57.

⁶⁰ Braidotti 2011a: 255.

structural inequalities, inquiry about the status and malleability of bodies in relation to social status is for us a matter of some urgency.⁶¹

The Western philosophical tradition can be characterised by the Cartesian dualism which habitually positions the body as being secondary to the mind. This inculcates a notion of subjectivity as being defined by man's intellectual capacity for thought and reason, a concept which René Descartes nicely conveys through his now ubiquitous conclusion to the *Meditations on First Philosophy: cogito ergo sum*. In opposition to the mind was the body: the physical matter which housed the self. As such, subjecthood was reliant on the - not always successful - subordination of the body to the mind.

If subjectivity is defined as the triumph of the mind over matter, subject positions have historically been denied to women whose more persistent associations with their bodies (e.g. through menstruation and childbirth) positioned intellectual thought as contrary to their nature. Kant argues:

Deep meditation and a long-sustained reflection are noble but difficult, and do not well befit a person in whom unconstrained charms should show nothing else than a beautiful nature. Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroys the merits that are proper to her sex [. . .] A woman who has a head full of Greek [. . .] might as well even have a beard.⁶²

In this way, women's anatomical differences have served to justify their subordination to men. Going back to the ancient world, Rosi Braidotti notes the ways in which masculine bodies have been positioned as normative, while female bodies, in deviating from that standard, are considered 'monstrous':

The association of women with monsters goes back as far as Aristotle, who, in *The Generation of Animals*, posits the human norm in terms of bodily

⁶¹ Young 2005: 4.

⁶² Kant [1764] 1965: 78.

organisation based on a male model. Thus, in reproduction, when everything goes according to the norm, a boy is produced; the female only happens when something goes wrong or fails to occur in the reproductive process. The female is therefore an anomaly, a variation on the main theme of man-kind.⁶³

This, in turn, has wider implications. As Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément argue, Western philosophical thought is *phallogentric*: i.e. wholly dominated by oppositional binaries. One understands a concept in relation to that which it is not: e.g. activity/passivity, day/night, culture/nature, logos/pathos, man/woman. However, these pairs of concepts are not considered equal; instead, they are positioned hierarchically:

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organised [. . .] Thought has always worked through opposition [. . .] Through dual, hierarchical oppositions [. . .] Everywhere (where) ordering intervenes, where a law organised what is thinkable by oppositions (dual, irreconcilable; or sublatale, dialectical). And all these pairs of oppositions are *couples*. Does that mean something? Is the fact that Logocentrism subjects thought – all concepts, codes and values – to a binary system, related to ‘the’ couple, man/woman?⁶⁴

Within these binaries that which is attributed value is associated with the masculine, that of inferior value with the feminine. This gendered and hierarchical relationship between concepts can be traced back to the Pythagorean ‘Table of Opposites’ as it appears in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, which lists ten pairs of principles arranged in dialectical opposition:

⁶³ Braidotti 2011a: 224. Aristotle argues that the perfect offspring is both male and resembles its father. Any deviance from that natural order results in monstrosity: ‘ἀρχὴ δὲ πρώτη τὸ θῆλυ γίνεσθαι καὶ μὴ ἄρρεν. ἀλλ’ αὕτη μὲν ἀναγκαία τῇ φύσει, δεῖ γὰρ σώζεσθαι τὸ γένος τῶν κευχωρισμένων κατὰ τὸ θῆλυ καὶ τὸ ἄρρεν’ ‘The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male, though this indeed is a necessity required by Nature, since the race of creatures which are separated into male and female has got to be kept in being’ (Aristotle *Generation of Animals* 4.3, 767b8-10, trans. A. L. Peck (1942)).

⁶⁴ Cixous and Clément 1986 [1975]: 64-4. Emphasis in original.

Ἔτεροι δὲ τῶν αὐτῶν τούτων τὰς ἀρχὰς δέκα λέγουσιν εἶναι τὰς κατὰ συστοιχίαν λεγομένας, πέρας ἄπειρον, περιττὸν ἄρτιον, ἔν πληθος, δεξιὸν ἀριστερόν, ἄρρεν θῆλυ, ἡρεμοῦν κινούμενον, εὐθύ καμπύλον, φῶς σκότος, ἀγαθὸν κακόν, τετράγωνον ἑτερόμηκες·

Others of [the Pythagorean] school hold that there are ten principles, which they enunciate in a series of corresponding pairs: (i.) Limit and the Unlimited; (ii.) Odd and Even; (iii.) Unity and Plurality; (iv.) Right and Left; (v.) Male and Female; (vi.) Rest and Motion; (vii.) Straight and Crooked; (viii.) Light and Darkness; (ix.) Good and Evil; (x.) Square and Oblong.⁶⁵

Reading through the oppositions listed, as Sabina Lovibond writes in her chapter on the manifestations of binary thinking in ancient Greek philosophy, '[i]t would be naïve to feel surprise at the fact that femaleness is listed among the "bad" attributes'.⁶⁶ This association continues, as Cixous, above, argues, in the present day. Within this patriarchal structure of thought, masculine selfhood is defined against a female or feminised other, effectively precluding any sense of a female subjectivity.

This deprecation of difference was not limited to gender but extended to include other facets of the subject, such as race and sexuality, among others. Therefore, Western philosophy began to equate the rational and self-regulating human subject with the white, heterosexual, able-bodied male. Any deviations from this norm (e.g. women, people of colour, homosexuals, disabled individuals etc.) are designated as 'other', the price of which is preclusion from a subject position. Because Western thought is thus structured around hierarchised dualistic oppositions which serve to create subcategories of otherness, the pejoration of difference in this interplay of power relations has 'made entire categories of beings disposable, that is to say, just as human, but slightly more mortal'.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1.5, 986a23-7. Trans. Hugh Tredennick (1933).

⁶⁶ Lovibond 1994: 89.

⁶⁷ Braidotti 2011a: 138. Specific examples of this would include the contraceptive pill being trialed on women of colour in places like Haiti and Puerto Rico before being marketed to white women, the Holocaust of the Nazi regime in twentieth century Germany and, most recently, the treatment of Middle Eastern refugees by certain member states of the European Union.

Due to its long-standing associations with inferiority, the notion of difference is a highly contested term in philosophies of identity, particularly in feminist theory. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argued that female sexual difference was the primary cause of women's relegation to the role of 'the eternal feminine'. By this she means that 'the eternal feminine' is a myth which constitutes what is considered proper feminine behaviour (passive, relegated to the bodily etc.). The sanctity of the mother is one of the forms which this myth takes and, Beauvoir argues, serves to trap women within patriarchal ideals. Demanding that we overthrow the hierarchical scheme which thus devalorises otherness, she writes: 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.⁶⁸ In doing so, Beauvoir suggests that the difference embodied by women is an as-yet-unrealised female subject position. This is to say that there is a pre-existing, innate female identity behind 'the eternal feminine' which must be represented.

However, unlike Beauvoir, who argued that femininity was 'innate and inherently superior to masculinity',⁶⁹ for Luce Irigaray, the relationship between the self and the other is not one of reversibility. Therefore, moving beyond the dialectical modes of thought which characterised Beauvoir's work, some poststructuralist feminists began to consider whether 'difference' could be thought through productively when uncoupled from its associations with domination and hierarchy.⁷⁰ They argued that the current *phallogocentric* regime ensures that the two poles of the binary engage with one another in an asymmetrical way, turning difference into a mark of pejection, thus limiting power and subjectivity to a small proportion of individuals. To reverse the hierarchy is not enough. That would be to assimilate women into a masculine system of codes, thoughts, practices and values. Instead of spending time critiquing *phallogocentric* culture, feminist theorists began to think about alternative forms of female subjectivity which rested on the positive affirmation, as opposed to the deprecation, of difference.⁷¹

The growing confidence and support for sexual difference and its significance for a liberating discourse meant that a number of feminists began to tackle important

⁶⁸ Beauvoir 1949: 1.

⁶⁹ Dolan 1988: 6.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Irigaray 1985a [1974], 1985b [1977]; Cixous 1976 [1975]; Cixous and Clément 1986 [1975].

⁷¹ Irigaray 1985a [1974]: 59-76.

questions about women's bodies and female bodily experience, such as sexuality, reproduction, violence against women and female objectification.⁷² They were particularly preoccupied with relationship between female subjectivity and the physical female body, as Cixous writes:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard.⁷³

However, such an emphasis on the physical female body did not go unchallenged. Anglo-American gender theorists, perhaps most notably Judith Butler, argued that associating the feminine with the natural and the physical ran the risk of biological essentialism and actually maintained the binary structures which sexual difference feminists sought to deconstruct. As Butler points out, arguments in favour of an essential female identity are in many ways problematic, writing 'the category of sex is neither invariant nor natural but is a specifically political use of the category of nature [. . .] we might say, one is not born a woman, one becomes one; but further, one is not born female, one *becomes female*.'⁷⁴ This wave of feminism was also accused of ignoring the potential differences between women in terms of race, class, ability and socio-historical circumstance. Such a denial of the specificity of an individual's political, social and cultural position is problematic as 'the body, or rather bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself'.⁷⁵

⁷² See, for example, Dworkin 1981 and 1987; Mackinnon 1979.

⁷³ Cixous 1976 [1975]: 880.

⁷⁴ Butler 2007 [1990]: 153

⁷⁵ Grosz 1994: x.

Responding to these criticisms, postmodern feminist theories sought ways of conceptualising subjectivity which did not group all women together in a homogenising category. In this way, analyses of gender, such as those proposed by Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), began to argue that 'natural' feelings of gendered identity or sexual orientation are in fact culturally constructed through repeated stylised acts. Gender is inscribed in everyday practices and behaviour (e.g. women taking on a nurturing or maternal role): '[g]ender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act [. . .] a "doing" rather than a "being."'76 Butler argues that an individual's everyday behaviour, mannerisms and dress are socially conditioned according to what is considered acceptable for his/her biological sex. Adherence to these expected norms give the effect of a stable, 'normal' gender which in turn constructs people in society as being either male or female. Thus, gendered behaviour and heteronormative ideologies are naturalized within an experiencing subject community.⁷⁷ Butler and other social constructionists therefore argue that such gendered behaviour is not an innate facet of identity, despite the fact that patriarchal regulative discourses denote heteronormativity as natural. These artificial categories of gender, which rigidly define men and women, male and female, have been set up to establish and maintain patriarchal power structures, ensuring masculine superiority in society.⁷⁸ Any conduct considered outside of acceptable heteronormative standards are deemed deviant and may be subjected to correction. With this in mind, an individual subject must be understood within the context of his/her social, historical and ideological background, as opposed to being autonomous of these factors. What is more, gender performance should not be considered a conscious choice, rather something which the experiencing subject has interiorised.

Therefore, whereas earlier feminist theorists sought to represent a specifically female subject, Butler's work troubles the notion of any kind of gendered subjectivity entirely: '[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.'⁷⁹ For Butler, the sex/gender divide is problematic in that it posits sex as the opposite of

⁷⁶ Butler 2007 [1990]: 33.

⁷⁷ See e.g. Butler 2007 [1990]: 133, 179; Lorber 2010: 9.

⁷⁸ Butler 2007 [1990]: 33.

⁷⁹ Butler 2007 [1990]: 25.

socially-constructed gender: i.e. as innate and natural. Indeed, it has been discovered that allegedly impartial scientific facts about males and females were, in actual fact, culturally prejudiced.⁸⁰ What is more, the recognition of intersex and transgender identities complicates the simplistic notion of two genders which are easily identifiable by certain physical characteristics. Therefore, it could be argued that biological sex is as equally contingent upon discourse as gender. As a result, Butler argues that the categories of male and female, masculine and feminine should be open to reinterpretation alongside ideas of the self, subjectivity and objectivity. In doing so, Butler seeks to contest the legitimacy, authority and stability of patriarchal discourses. With this understanding of the important distinctions between 'sex' and 'gender', third wave feminism sought to rise above the anatomical differences between men and women. Physiological variations between human beings were deemed irrelevant, what mattered was intellectual ability. Therefore, if intellectual capacity is the test for humanity, to consider women as primarily physical creatures both sexually objectifies and dehumanises them. In this way, female subjectivity, too, became reliant on the subordination of the body to the mind.

This separation of biological sex from socially constructed gender is problematic. Braidotti and other feminist theorists, as well as postcolonial and queer thinkers, have even gone so far as to criticise the concept of 'gender' for its 'theoretical inadequacy'.⁸¹ They argue that gender theory's reduction of the subject to the socio-cultural is equally as essentialist as continental difference feminism (the so-called French feminism of Cixous and Irigaray, among others).⁸² Although the concept of gender as a social construct allows theorists to imagine a potential for change, a way out of the patriarchal system which subordinates women and denies them subject positions, it simultaneously rejects the physical female body as detrimental to the feminist cause. Most of these theoretical positions fail to acknowledge women's very different experiences of their bodies, as exemplified by menstruation, pregnancy etc., reducing them to the level of discourse and designating them as immaterial to the issue of subjecthood. What is more, because the seemingly genderless mind was held in greater esteem than the gendered body, what was considered specifically or

⁸⁰ Butler 2007 [1990]: 129.

⁸¹ Braidotti 2011b: 141.

⁸² See, for example, de Lauretis 1986; Braidotti 2005 [1992], 2011b.

exclusively feminine (such as childcare and domestic labour) was denigrated. To laud women's intellectual qualities does not account for the fact that society, as it now stands, has been built 'with not only the male intellect but also the male body in mind.'⁸³ In the contemporary world, women have different needs and experiences. Issues such as pregnancy and maternity leave are not ones which concern men on a comparable level, as Ann Cahill writes:

By accepting the basic standards and structures that had assumed the masculine generic, the feminist articulation of equality as independent from (at times, opposed to) bodily realities resulted in women being measured by a yardstick distinctly not their own.⁸⁴

The body which social constructionist theorists speak of is sex-and-gender-neutral before being subjected to regulative discourse. However, because this sex-neutral body is traditionally implicitly male, the notion that the male body is normative and the female body is other to that norm is maintained - the exact dichotomy which precluded full female subjectivity in the first place. If experiences of sexual difference are wholly socially constructed, that is to say primarily constituted by the *mores* of the patriarchy, as opposed to innate facets of identity, the social and biological category of 'woman' becomes seemingly useless as a means of political identification and feminist action. It reduces the female body to a mirror image of the expectations of patriarchal society. This near total deconstruction of the postmodern subject obliterates the specificity of feminist critique and silences women's voices. What is needed is to try and articulate yet another theoretical position in order to identify points of exit from the hierarchical dualisms which characterise the *phallogocentric* order.

Following this realisation that a female feminist subjectivity is a tactical political necessity, one conceded even by Butler,⁸⁵ the challenge then became how to articulate a political subject who is embodied and embedded, empowered and regulated, without falling into essentialist traps. That is to say, how to mediate a way between holding on to the category of 'woman' whilst simultaneously recognising the

⁸³ Cahill 2001: 61.

⁸⁴ Cahill 2001: 62-3.

⁸⁵ Butler 1995: 49.

differences between women of different backgrounds. Feminists writing from the 1990s onwards began to think of the subject along multiple axes of identity and networks of power relations, which included variables such as gender, race, sexuality and social class. They re-evaluated how to map, and then resist, the multiple micro-hegemonies which affect us as subjects, before proposing different figurations of the subject in order to help us think through the self as a multiple and open-ended entity.⁸⁶ In their attempts to articulate a subject position at a time in history when terms such as 'gender', 'race' and 'sexuality' have lost their substantial unity, many feminist theorists have turned to Deleuze's radical ideas of affirmative difference, which are most fully realised in his figuration of the nomad.

Of central importance in the work that Deleuze produced together with Guattari is an analysis of the subject in advanced capitalism.⁸⁷ They argue that people in the capitalist West live in a society which is founded on the proliferation and distribution of difference for the sake of profit. This is to say that in postindustrial cultures, 'difference' is marketed for public consumption, causing Braidotti to refer to advanced capitalism as 'the great nomad.'⁸⁸ However, this is a perverse kind of nomadism which is founded on the economic exploitation of often disposable 'others'. This exploitation can range from the neo-colonial appropriation of black culture by mainstream media through to the sex trafficking of women and children. Such commodification of difference produces a scattered and polycentric network of racial and gendered, to name but two, power relations. As Braidotti writes: 'power functions not so much by binary oppositions but in a fragmented and all-pervasive manner.'⁸⁹ Therefore, the challenge is to rethink the subject in such a way that takes into account the fractured economy in which s/he lives. What is more, theorisations of the subject must also examine how the dominant power structures in advanced capitalism organise differences, valorising the male over and above the female. Braidotti argues that so long as difference is coded as pejorative, it necessitates both 'essentialist' and 'lethal' consequences for those who deviate from the normative subject: '[t]hese are the sexualised, racialised and naturalised others, who are reduced to the less than

⁸⁶ As well as Braidotti's nomadic subject, another significant example of such figurations would be Donna Haraway's cyborg (1983).

⁸⁷ See, for example, Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980].

⁸⁸ Braidotti 2011b: 17.

⁸⁹ Braidotti 2011b: 25.

human status of disposable bodies. These 'others' raise issues of power and exclusion.'⁹⁰ She therefore utilises Deleuze's philosophy of the positive affirmation of difference in order to move beyond traditional dialectic ways of thinking.

Deleuze wants to 'liberate' difference from its subordination to what Irigaray referred to as the 'hyperinflated, falsely universal logic of the Same',⁹¹ i.e. the underlying sameness against which deviation, again in terms of gender, race etc., is measured. He argues that Western philosophy's tendency to valorise sameness and reduce difference to the position of the other over-simplifies the specific, concrete experiences of individuals, categorising them in relation to the universal, unified subject. Arguing against this idea of a pre-existing unity, he states that there is no base 'sameness' underlying difference: 'difference is behind everything, but behind difference there is nothing.'⁹² For Deleuze, difference is not a measure of deviancy from the norm; rather difference represents the singularity, uniqueness and specificity of each individual or moment, and is thus integral to every subject or event.

Therefore, the purpose of philosophy for Deleuze is not to suggest a coherent framework by which we may understand the world and our place in it; rather it is to disturb the stable, unified identities post-industrial society offers to us. 'Thinking,' Deleuze writes, 'would then mean *discovering, inventing, new possibilities of life*'.⁹³ If the codes of advanced capitalism offer us a fixed and strictly demarcated sense of identity based on sameness and the pejoration of difference, Deleuze speculates what it might be like if we begin to think of alternative ways of living and thinking outside the laws which govern us:

Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialisation, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow of conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Braidotti 2013: 15.

⁹¹ Irigaray 1985a [1974], 1985b [1977].

⁹² Deleuze 2014 [1968]: 71-2.

⁹³ Deleuze 2005 [1962]: 94. Emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]:178.

Deleuze encourages us to practise 'deterritorialisation' in order to find potential 'lines of flight', ways of escaping the trap of strict *phallogocentric* identities and exploring alternative subjectivities which affirm difference. Through the affirmation of difference, we begin a process of defamiliarising ourselves from the actualities presented to us as inevitable by the *phallogocentric* order. The strictly demarcated borders between subjects become porous, identities fluid, offering us new ways of living. Central to this process is the recognition of the 'becoming' of each individual subject, a process of individuation characterised by affirmative differences, psychic, social and Symbolic influences, as well as non-effacing encounters with others.

BECOMING-WOMAN: DELEUZE, FEMINISM AND IDENTITY

Deleuze's theory of 'becoming' is central to both the figuration of the nomad and his affirmative approach to difference. He contrasts the subject-as-becoming with that which he refers to as the 'Molar centre of being'. Molar identities are the kinds of fixed, unified identities of traditional Western philosophy, e.g.: 'the woman as defined by her form, endowed with organs and functions and assigned as a subject'.⁹⁵ The primary function of molar subjectivity is to ensure the governability of the subjects in advanced capitalism. In order to identify 'lines of flight' from these *phallogocentric* codes, Deleuze emphasises the necessity of new ways of thinking about and alternative figurations of the subject, which he terms 'molecular'. Molecular subjectivities are not predicated on a stable, centralised self but are grounded in processes of becoming. Becoming is not defined as a teleological advancement towards an ultimate state of being, as articulated by e.g. Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex, rather it is series of deterritorialising and reterritorialising processes which create non-unitary, multi-layered and dynamic subjects who are constantly engaging in productive relationships with others. Processes of becoming should be understood as an affirmative deconstruction of the dominant (i.e. white, heterosexual, male) subject position. In a Deleuzian becoming, the other is not marked by alterity, instead sites of

⁹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]: 304.

difference are invested with a positive force. Sara Ahmed has an eloquent reflection on the uplifting power of this otherness-that-connects rather than divides:

Becomings activate *zones of proximity*; they are the movement of desire in which surfaces meet, and particles slide into each other. Since becomings involve two entities, then becomings involve otherness, a division in-between which forms the 'middle' that becomings always inhabit.⁹⁶

The process of becoming consists of transgressing the boundaries between self and other, creating a constantly shifting network of connections which side-step dialectical interaction. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari outline the different levels of becoming, starting with becoming-woman and moving through to becoming-animal/insect/imperceptible in an affirmative deconstruction of hierarchical binaries. They privilege 'becoming-woman' as the becoming which initiates all other becomings. This is due to the fact that, for Deleuze and Guattari, in Western philosophy man is positioned as the majoritarian subject against which all other subject positions are defined. As a result, man cannot engage in a 'becoming-man'. Woman, as man's other, therefore offers the possibility of becoming, a line of flight from *phallogocentric* identities. This is not to say that to become-woman is to oppose the majoritarian subject position in any simplistic way. Rather, becoming-woman must deterritorialise binary oppositions, passing through to other forms of becoming: '[t]he only way to get outside the dualisms is to be-between, to pass between, the intermezzo [. . .] never ceasing to become.'⁹⁷ This continuous becoming, which guarantees a difference that is never sublimated, ensures the deconstruction of binarism, as positions are never allowed to settle. Nomadic thought, or the movement towards the minoritarian through the process of becoming, frees 'woman' from being defined only in relation to its deviation from the male norm, thus enabling thinkers to theorise difference outside of dialectical binaries, whilst simultaneously avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism.

⁹⁶ Ahmed 1998: 70. Emphasis in original.

⁹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]: 305.

It should be noted, however, that becoming-woman, although the starting point for an affirmative redefinition of empirical otherness, cannot be separated from other processes of becoming:

The process of becoming-nomadic is rather a zigzagging itinerary of successive but not linear steps that, starting from 'becoming-woman', marks different thresholds or patterns of 'becoming-minoritarian' that cross through the animal and go into the 'becoming-imperceptible' and beyond.⁹⁸

The process of becoming-minoritarian can be extended to other loci, including children, non-white ethnicities and non-human others, such as animals, plants and molecules. Here, the other is not a mere marker of alterity but the site of a powerful, alternative subject position. Nomadic subjects-in-becoming can be seen to develop alongside, and creatively engage with, dialectical others, thus cutting a path through the discourses and practices which produced the exclusionary dominant model of subjectivity. As a result, Deleuze's minoritarian nomadic consciousness creates and multiplies difference, articulating a subjectivity which is in constant flux. In doing so, he emphasises a subject position grounded in dynamic affirmation, as opposed to a sedentary majoritarian consciousness which limits subjectivity to the masculine, the heterosexual, the white, the able-bodied. By decoupling the subject from binary thinking and dissolving opposition-grounded identities, former dialectical opponents (men and women, European- and non-European ethnic, humans and animals) become allies: '[n]omadic theory moves towards a politics of affirmation through the project of transforming negative into positive relations, encounters and passions.'⁹⁹

It is important to note that, in this context, the terms 'woman' or 'animal' do not refer to empirical females, animals or other minorities but instead should be understood as topological positions:

There is a becoming-woman, a becoming- child, that does not resemble the woman or the child as clearly distinct entities [. . .] What we term a molar

⁹⁸ Braidotti 2011b: 35.

⁹⁹ Braidotti 2011b: 31.

entity is, for example, the woman as defined by her forms, endowed with organs and functions and assigned as a subject. Becoming-woman is not imitating this entity or even transforming itself into it [. . .] Not imitating or assuming the female forms, but emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a micro femininity, in other words, that produce in us a molecular woman, create the molecular woman.¹⁰⁰

This is to say that in order to become-woman, empirical women must reject any sense of a molar identity in order to enter into a form of affirmative nomadic consciousness: '[t]here is no subject of becoming except as a deterritorialised variable of a minority'.¹⁰¹ However, although Deleuze and Guattari's ideas stem from the feminist assertion that a redefinition of the subject must begin with a deconstruction of *phallogocentrism*, their tendency to elide differences, including race, gender etc., into multiple and undifferentiated becomings fails to take into account the very real issues and discriminations that minorities experience in their everyday lives. As a result, Deleuze has been heavily criticised by feminist theorists for his 'masculinist' approach to issues of subjectivity, overlooking the role of the body in the formation of identity and dismissing the tactical importance of a feminist politics.

Although Deleuze and Guattari accept that a feminist molar politics could be considered a real-life political necessity, they are nevertheless wary of the limitations a molar female feminist subject might impose:

It is, of course, indispensable for women to conduct a molar politics, with a view to winning back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity [. . .] But it is dangerous to confine oneself to such a subject, which does not function without drying up a spring or stopping a flow.¹⁰²

For Deleuze and Guattari, while assertions of a specifically female subject position are in many ways politically expedient, feminists are conceptually mistaken in their refusal to let go of identitarian thinking, which they argue merely serves to maintain the very

¹⁰⁰ Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]: 303.

¹⁰¹ Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]: 322.

¹⁰² Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]: 304.

dialectics they try to overcome. Deleuze and Guattari's expectation and hope is that the feminist movement can find the energy to move towards a more post-identitarian way of thinking, allowing the molar woman to dissolve into a series of transformative becomings.

Nonetheless, it is highly problematic to uncouple the deconstruction of *phallogocentrism* from the real-life issues facing women and other minorities. Some feminist theorists have even suggested that Deleuzian philosophy is nothing more than a symptom of the postmodern 'masculine' crisis of identity.¹⁰³ They also argue that one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never possessed, as Braidotti eloquently articulates:

Blurring sexual difference, desexualising masculinity precisely at the historical moment when the feminism of sexual difference is calling for the sexualisation of practices seems to me an extraordinarily dangerous move for women.¹⁰⁴

In order to enter into a total dissolution of the subject, women must first obtain a subject position to speak from.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, despite these valid criticisms, Deleuze's work on the nomadic subject is of ever-growing importance to feminist theory and to embodied articulations of the subject in the twenty-first century, as I shall now go on to discuss in the next part of the chapter.

ENCOUNTERING THE EMBODIED SUBJECT THROUGH SPINOZA AND FEMINISM

Feminist thinkers have turned to the concept of embodiment as the key to addressing the limitations of Deleuze's philosophy of difference. Women's bodies and, perhaps more importantly, women's experiences of their bodies are of great importance to both feminist theory and activism. Embodiment and related issues, including accountability, positionality and location, have become central to the feminist production of alternative paradigms of the subject. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd

¹⁰³ For further discussion on contemporary crises of identity, please see pp. 16-27.

¹⁰⁴ Braidotti 2011a: 54.

¹⁰⁵ Irigaray 1985b [1977]: 139; Ahmed 1998: 69; Braidotti 2011a: 116-22; Grosz 1994: 161.

(1999) argue that Baruch de Spinoza's political ontology of monism was not only influential on Deleuze's nomadic project but also offers many relevant opportunities for feminist theory.

In his *Ethics*, Spinoza writes against the mind-body dualism suggested by Descartes, instead arguing that the mind and the body are ontologically the same. Rejecting notions of a transcendental deity, Spinoza theorises that the whole universe and everything in it follows a single set of natural laws. As a result, the world can be characterised as a single pantheistic totality. Consequently, the mind and the body, although conceived of as separate, should be understood as different attributes of one fundamental reality: 'the mind is united to the body because the body is the object of the mind'.¹⁰⁶ Because the mind and the body act simultaneously ('the body cannot determine the mind to think, nor the mind the body to remain in motion or at rest'¹⁰⁷), one cannot be said to determine or override the other. Spinoza's embodiment of the mind is productive for grounding theories of difference in its rejection of the dualisms which ultimately lead to the universal (i.e. white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied) subject.

This insistence on the importance of the body is not essentialist, instead it posits the body as the site of the production of difference. Although nomadic subjects can universally be understood as embodied beings, it is embodiment itself which assures the recognition of difference. This is to say that by founding subjectivity in embodiment one is obliged to accept important physical differences between individuals. This is at odds with the notion of the universal subject, which is ostensibly race, gender and class neutral, but is in reality none of these things. Instead, embodied subjectivity confronts us with a subject who is specific in terms of his/her gender, race and class among other things. The notion of a subjectivity defined by difference is important for feminism, as Braidotti argues:

The central question here is the extent to which sexual difference meant as the difference that women can make to society – i.e., not as a naturally or historically given difference, but as an open-ended project to be constructed –

¹⁰⁶ Spinoza *Ethics* 2.21

¹⁰⁷ Spinoza *Ethics* 3.2.

also allows women to think of all their other differences. Foremost among these differences are race, class, age, and sexual lifestyles. The female subject of feminism as constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another; therefore the signifier *woman* is no longer sufficient as the foundational stone of the feminist project.¹⁰⁸

Although the signifier 'woman' does not unproblematically refer to a straightforwardly identifiable group, the notion of sexual difference is essential to feminist thought. No longer an obstacle to overcome, sexual difference is in fact a vital component of our individual subjectivities. The female body, by virtue of its difference, confronts the unified, universal, male patriarchal body. What is more, embodied subjectivities embrace differences of sex, race, ability etc. without organising them into hierarchical binaries. In acknowledging the fractured and multiple nature of selfhood, Braidotti's theories allow for the expression of a limitless number of different subjectivities:

The assertion of the positivity of sexual difference challenges the century-old identification of the thinking subject with the universal and of both of them with the masculine. It posits as radically other a female, sexed, thinking subject, who stands in a dissymmetrical relationship to the masculine. Given that there is no symmetry between the sexes, women must speak the feminine – they must think it, write it, and represent it in their own terms. The apparent repetition or reassertion of feminine positions is a discursive strategy that engenders difference.¹⁰⁹

As such, the subject should be understood as corporeal, specifically located in space and time, as well as sexually differentiated. The embodied subject is conceptualised as the interplay between the intellectual and the psychological with the physical body, challenging the traditional, hierarchical separation of the cerebral from the corporeal. What is more, the embodied subject is socially, historically and culturally situated, and

¹⁰⁸ Braidotti 2011a: 105. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁹ Braidotti 2011a: 118.

is therefore restricted by regulative discourses. As Braidotti writes, 'neo-materialism', or 'matter-realist' feminism 'stresses the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power.'¹¹⁰ Of course, this is not to say that the subject is entirely socially constructed as different subjects react to regulative social codes in different ways.¹¹¹ We must acknowledge that the body does not passively mirror patriarchal discourses; rather it is an active participant in both its subjugation and its resistance. Taken from this heavily Foucauldian perspective, power not only confines the individual (*potestas*) but can also produce alternative subject positions and affirmative relations with others (*potentia*).¹¹²

What emerges from this line of thinking is a vision of materialist feminism which does not stop at the deconstruction of *phallogocentrism* but moves on to produce alternative figurations of the subject in advanced capitalism:

The pursuit of practices of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life, is a simple strategy to hold, sustain and map out sustainable transformations. The motivation for the social construction of hope is grounded in a profound sense of responsibility and accountability. A fundamental gratuitousness and a profound sense of hope is part of it. Hope is a way of dreaming up possible futures: an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them. It is a powerful motivating force grounded not only in projects that aim at reconstructing the social imaginary, but also in the political economy of desires, affects and creativity. Contemporary nomadic practices of subjectivity—both in pedagogy and other areas of thought—work towards a more affirmative approach to critical theory.¹¹³

Although the deconstruction of masculinity and eurocentrism could be regarded as an end in itself, the nonessentialist reconstruction of minority perspectives and ways of becoming offer alternative visions of the subject, asserting the political agency of

¹¹⁰ Braidotti 2012.

¹¹¹ This can be reflected in their physical bodies, e.g. whereas some women undergo breast augmentation in order to fit in with a perceived ideas of femininity, other women, particularly in the lesbian community, bind theirs in order to imitate a more masculine shape.

¹¹² Braidotti 2011a: 89.

¹¹³ Braidotti 2011b: 237.

marginalised groups, as well as leading to renewed political and ethical agency in the pursuit of a more sustainable future. As a result, figurations such as Braidotti's nomad aim to represent the subject as a political agent in a historical context, precluding the possibility of fixed identities:

what emerges from these new developments in feminist theory is the need to recode or rename the female feminist subject not as yet another sovereign, hierarchical, and exclusionary subject but rather as a multiple, open-ended, interconnected entity. To think constructively about change and changing conditions of feminist thought today one needs to emphasise a vision of the thinking, knowing subject as not-one but rather as being split over and over again in a rainbow of yet uncoded and ever so beautiful possibilities.¹¹⁴

Braidotti's nomadic subject, in its embodied materiality, is inevitably unfixed and in a continuous process of becoming. It is this concept of the 'split', rhizomatic subject who is 'not-one'¹¹⁵ that creates a space for ethical, social and political transformation. The subject no longer responds to hierarchical models of sexualised or racialised opposition but follows a more dynamic and nonlinear becoming.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I will finish by discussing Braidotti's determined devotion to what she terms the 'intersubjective' space between individuals, that is to say, the ways in which subjects affect each other and evolve in relation to one another in a non-effacing coexistence. Braidotti's notion of the intersubjective is influenced by Spinoza, who argues that the body exists in a social context, which has a bearing on the development of each individual: 'the human body is affected by external bodies in many ways and disposed to affect external bodies in many ways'.¹¹⁶ Here, awareness of one's body, one's

¹¹⁴ Braidotti 2011a: 158.

¹¹⁵ The term 'not-one' can be read as the antithesis of Beauvoir's 'one' in her phrase 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. Whereas the latter implies a belief in subjecthood as a unified concept, the former emphasises its plurality.

¹¹⁶ Spinoza *Ethics* 2.14.

subjectivity, is only realised in relation to others. For Braidotti, too, the self and other are inextricably interconnected, in a perspective which considers not just those exchanges which affect the self, but also thinks about what the self brings to its interactions with other subjects. In this way, Braidotti's work stresses our 'multiple capacities for interconnectedness in the impersonal mode',¹¹⁷ opening up the subject to endless possibility. Conceived of as intersubjective, as well as uniquely and specifically embodied, it necessarily follows that each individual identity must consequently be determined in each case, precluding a 'universal' subject position.

This embodied, interstitial space between subjects is of central thematic importance to each of the authors under study. Cook's, Lewis's and Tempest's protagonists grapple with their bodies, and the bodies of others, in ways which transcend the laws that dictate their possibilities. As such, this thesis suggests that, despite the fact that the authors under study do not write from a clearly delineated feminist position, their receptions of the Homeric hero nevertheless align them with contemporary theoretical thinking about the embodiment of the subject. In their work, Cook, Lewis and Tempest present us with situations where men and women meet one another in mutually transformative becomings, through which a new heroic identity is realised not as an individualistic 'self-appointed subject position' but rather as a 'collectively shared and constructed, jointly occupied spatiotemporal territory'.¹¹⁸ In this in-between space where identity is formed, epic heroism and epic masculinity come down from the pedestal on which they have been bequeathed to us from antiquity. Insofar as the heroic subjects in Cook, Lewis and Tempest belie a capacity for affecting and being affected by other subjects, nomadic embodied intersubjectivity can be seen to redefine the grounds of our common humanity.

Therefore, the following analysis approaches the texts under study through a strategy of 'thinking alongside' feminist ideas in its discussion of the nomadic subject in contemporary British women's writing, as well mapping encounters between ancient and modern, theory and practice, suggesting pathways for further dialogue between the literary, the philosophical and the political in the contemporary British cultural scene.

¹¹⁷ Braidotti 2011a: 66.

¹¹⁸ Braidotti 2011a: 16.

2. Desire, Sensation and the Body: The Nomadic Subject in Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles*

μη̄νιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
ούλομένην, ἣ μυρί' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε,
πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν
ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἐλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν
οἴωνοῖσι τε πᾶσι, Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή,
ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε
Ἄτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilles
and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians
hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls
of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
of dogs, of all birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished
since that time when first there stood in division of conflict
Atreus' son the lord of men and brilliant Achilles.¹¹⁹

The invocation of the Muse in Homer's *Iliad*, as well as prefacing the earliest surviving work of Greek literature, is also the earliest, and in many respects perhaps most famous, introduction to that prototypical hero Achilles. Son of the goddess Thetis and a descendant of Zeus himself, Achilles was destined for prominence as a 'speaker of words' (μύθων ῥητῆρ) and 'one who is accomplished in action' (πρηκτῆρά ἔργων).¹²⁰ In Homer's *Iliad*, he is, as Seth Benardete writes, 'a hero in a world of heroes; he is of the same cast as they, though we might call him the first impression which has caught each point more finely than in later copies.'¹²¹ Almost personifying the epic heroic code, legend presents Achilles as the greatest warrior at Troy. Referred to as ἄριστος

¹¹⁹ Homer *Iliad* 1.1-7. All translations of Homer's *Iliad* are taken from Richard Lattimore 2011 [1951].

¹²⁰ Homer *Iliad* 9.443.

¹²¹ Benardete 1963: 1.

Ἀχαιῶν,¹²² his life, death and subsequent reception are notably defined by κλέος ἄφθιτον,¹²³ his consolation for a life cut short. Nonetheless, Achilles simultaneously embodies the one of the most challenging questions posed by Homer's work: what value should we place on heroic excellence above all other concerns? The poems preclude any kind of straightforward response.

As has been discussed, the action in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is propelled by the pursuit of κλέος, τιμή and their often unintended consequences.¹²⁴ In the former, Achilles' refusal to fight after the perceived insult to his honour results in the death of Patroclus and ultimately sets the scene for his own premature demise. In the latter, Odysseus' inability to resist taking credit for the blinding of Polyphemus catalyses the events of the *Odyssey* as Poseidon, the Cyclops' father, hounds the eponymous hero throughout his ten-year return to Ithaca.¹²⁵ Throughout both poems, we see how the Homeric hero is repeatedly goaded into action, or in Achilles' case inaction, in order to win the respect and admiration of his peers. Through displays of preternatural strength and victories on the battlefield, Homer's heroes leave behind a legacy which lives on even after they themselves die. At the same time, however, the vigour that underwrites heroic κλέος is apt to drive the individual to the very limits of fury. Returning to the epigraph at the start of the chapter, as readers we are instinctively drawn to that very first word, μῆνις, or rage, and it is in the context of Achilles' wrath and its aftermath that Homer teases out the implicit tensions inherent in the heroic code.

The notion of Achilles as 'the best of the Greeks', as one defined by and through his imperishable glory, is challenged by Homer who repeatedly questions the κλέος that warriors such as Hector and Sarpedon seek.¹²⁶ Although initially refusing to fight due to Agamemnon's insult in revoking his war-prize, the slave-girl Briseis, Achilles can be seen to muse upon the heroic code by which he and his fellow warriors live. In *Iliad* Book 9, he dismisses the delegation sent by the Greek leaders, begging him to return to the fray. Citing his mother's prophecy, he tells them that he will return to Phthia and live a long, happy life in peaceful obscurity, rejecting the death

¹²² Homer *Iliad* 1.244, 412; 16.274; *Odyssey* 8.78.

¹²³ Homer *Iliad* 9.413.

¹²⁴ See pp. 19-22, above.

¹²⁵ Homer *Iliad* 18.78 – 126; *Odyssey* 9. 502-5.

¹²⁶ Homer *Iliad* 6.440-46; 7.87-91; 8.538-41; 12.322-28.

and ‘imperishable fame’ promised him if he returns to the battlefield.¹²⁷ Disregarding glorious death in favour of domestic contentment, Achilles troubles the social assumptions that underpin the ancient warrior’s way of life. As a result, both the delegation and his dearest Patroclus struggle to fathom his meaning.¹²⁸

Achilles once more questions the heroic code when his shade encounters the still-living Odysseus in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. In these lines, Odysseus marvels how Achilles has achieved his κλέος ἄφθιτον but is quickly shot down by his former comrade in arms:

[‘ “]σεῖοδ’, Ἀχιλλεῦ,
οὐ τις ἀνὴρ προπάροιθε μακάρτατος οὔτ’ ἄρ’ ὀπίσσω.
πρὶν μὲν γὰρ σε ζῶν ἐτίομεν ἴσα θεοῖσιν
Ἄργεῖοι, νῦν αὖτε μέγα κρατέεις νεκύεσσιν
ἐνθάδ’ ἐών: τῷ μὴ τι θανῶν ἀκαχίζευ, Ἀχιλλεῦ.”

ὥς ἐφάμην, ὁ δέ μ’ αὐτίκ’ ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπε:

“μὴ δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ’ Ὀδυσσεῦ.
βουλοίμην κ’ ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,
ἀνδρὶ παρ’ ἀκλήρῳ, ὃ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἶη,
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.[” ’]

[‘ “]But no man,
before or after, is more blessed than you, Achilles,
for we the Argives valued you alive as equal to the gods,
and you now again wield great power, among the dead,
since you are here. So don’t at all be sorry that you’re dead, Achilles.”

‘So said I, and he immediately in answer said to me:

¹²⁷ Homer *Iliad* 9.410-16.

¹²⁸ Homer *Iliad* 9.430-1; 16.29-35.

“Don’t console me about death, brilliant Odysseus.
I’d rather be a hired farmhand, slaving for another,
for a landless man who hasn’t much substance,
that rule all the dead who’ve perished [” ’]”¹²⁹

In this passage we not only see a juxtaposition of Homer’s two most celebrated heroes, the forthright but temperamental Achilles and the crafty raconteur Odysseus, but a poignant rendering of death as a bitter inevitability. Achilles, who gave up his chance of a long and happy life in order to avenge the killing of Patroclus, has in death become even more disenchanted with the heroic code and the proxy immortality that κλέος offers.¹³⁰ For Achilles, the pleasures of being alive outweigh these abstract notions of fame and glory, an idea which is particularly emphasised through Homer’s reduction of Achilles from the flesh and blood, larger than life protagonist of the *Iliad* to an immaterial shade. Throughout this encounter, Homer’s readers can perceive a tension between Achilles’ characterisation as ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν and his rejection of κλέος in favour of obscure domestic contentment. Achilles is the prototypical Homeric hero yet he rejects that which serves to define his heroism: the glory that sets him apart from all others. It is in the interstices of these tensions between the competing values of the epic and the domestic that Cook positions her Achilles.

British poet and novelist Elizabeth Cook traces her continuing fascination with classical myth and literature back to her early years, more specifically to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Tanglewood Tales* (1853), a volume of Greek myths re-written for children: ‘they caught my imagination very young and the stories felt like some kind of explanation of the world to me’.¹³¹ A lecturer in English literature at the University of Leeds, and editor of *John Keats: The Major Works* (1990), Cook left academia to pursue a career in writing. Her creative output has taken a number of forms: her poetry collection *Bowl* (2006) was published to wide critical acclaim (the titular poem was a Poem on the Underground)¹³² and she wrote the libretto for English composer and

¹²⁹ Homer *Odyssey* 11.482-91. All translations of Homer’s *Odyssey* are taken from James Huddleston 2006.

¹³⁰ It is interesting to note that engaging in combat for the sake of revenge as opposed to κλέος was considered to diminish one’s glory (see Homer *Iliad*: 9.601-5).

¹³¹ Cook 2013.

¹³² Cook 2013.

chorister Francis Grier's *The Passion of Jesus of Nazareth* (2006), a collaborative project co-commissioned by the BBC and choral music organisation Vocal Essence. Reviews, poetry and short fiction have appeared in a number of publications, including *Agenda*, *The London Review of Books* and *Poetry London*. Her first novel, *Achilles*, was published by Methuen Press and Picador USA in 2001. The work was conceived when Cook was commissioned to contribute to an ultimately unpublished volume retelling stories from classical epic poetry. Writing a sample story, which would eventually form the basis of the novella's sixth chapter, 'Father', Cook relates the encounter between Achilles and Priam from *Iliad* Book 24. It was while writing this scene that Cook found herself drawn to the figure of Achilles: 'I wrote that section and had the feeling that I would like to write more but wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do with it. I thought I wanted to write a "Life of Achilles" but I couldn't think how to do it.'¹³³

Cook persevered until she met Greg Hicks, a Laurence Olivier Award-nominated actor whose roles include Orestes in Peter Hall's *Oresteia* (National Theatre, 1981) and Agamemnon in John Barton's *Tantalus* (Barbican, 2001), among a number of other classical parts. The two began adapting Cook's writing into a performance piece, a process which took almost ten years from Cook's initial commission until its first performance in 2000.¹³⁴ *Achilles* was performed by Hicks at the National Theatre, as well as at the Edinburgh Festival, where it won a Fringe First award in 2000. Bearing in mind its performative origins, it should come as no surprise that Cook wrote *Achilles* 'with embodiment in mind', explaining: 'I test everything on the voice which is a bodily thing. It's not a disembodied voice, it's a physical voice and that's how I can work out whether it sounds alright or not, or whether it works.'¹³⁵ As such, it is with embodiment in mind that I, too, would like to analyse her work.

In the first chapter of the novella, 'Two Rivers', Cook re-visits the exchange between Achilles and Odysseus in the underworld where the dead man asks for information about his father and son. Odysseus responds by giving Achilles news of Neoptolemus' role in the sack of Troy, before going on to praise Achilles' posthumous reputation as the greatest hero that ever was:

¹³³ Cook 2013.

¹³⁴ Cook 2013.

¹³⁵ Cook 2013.

‘Noble Achilles [. . .] I have no news of your father Peleus. He must still walk the earth or he’d be here; but in what condition I cannot say. But I do know about Neoptolemus.’

Odysseus stays Achilles. At last he has something to give this terrible, hungry man. It was he, Odysseus, who extracted Neoptolemus from the court at Skiros and carried him over the sea in his beaked ship to the other Achaeans camped on the plain [. . .]:

‘He fought on till Priam’s palace had no life left in it, not Priam’s, not any kin of his. His skill, his courage, his power unextinguishable.

‘All harm came from him. No harm came to him.’

Achilles is proud for his son. He hopes it will be many years before they meet at last down here.

But for himself there is no point in pride. Odysseus, the reputation-seeker, envies Achilles.

‘We honoured you like a god while you were alive. No one could match you. Now that you’re dead we still speak of you as one who will never be surpassed. Here too I see you’re a king.’

A mistake. A moment ago Achilles had needed Odysseus. Now he lets him go, his face dark with scorn.

‘What’s that to me? Don’t you know that it’s sweeter to be *alive* – in any shape or form – than lord of all these shadows?’

He strides away, leaving Odysseus unblessed.¹³⁶

For our very first glimpse of the eponymous hero, Cook presents us an almost Iliadic Achilles who refuses to fall for the platitudes of his smooth-talking visitor before striding away in one of his infamous tempers.¹³⁷ Cook also portrays an Odysseus who,

¹³⁶ Cook 2002 [2001]: 11-12. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁷ It could also be the case that Achilles also has a personal dislike for Odysseus which comes to the fore in Cook’s reception of this exchange. The statement to Agamemnon’s embassy in *Iliad* 9.312-13 (‘ἐχθρὸς γάρ μοι κεῖνος ὁμῶς Αἴδαο πύλησιν/ ὅς χ’ ἕτερον μὲν κεύθη ἐνὶ φρεσίν, ἄλλο δὲ εἴπη’; ‘For as I detest the doorways of Death, I detest that man, who/ hides one thing

like the protagonist of Homer's *Odyssey*, expresses a longing for the kind of heroic status enjoyed by his late comrade.¹³⁸ In these lines, Cook inverts the conversation as it appears in Homer's *Odyssey*. In her source-text, Odysseus praises Achilles' κλέος before going on, at Achilles' request, to give news of Neoptolemus.¹³⁹ Achilles then takes his leave, evidently pleased with Odysseus' report of his son's martial prowess.¹⁴⁰ 'Two Rivers', by way of contrast, ends with Odysseus showering Achilles with adulations about the posthumous κλέος his myth enjoys, at which point Achilles cuts him off. In the mind of Odysseus, the immortality of Achilles' κλέος surpasses his physical presence, yet for Achilles himself life, in whatever form it might take, is more precious than abstract notions of fame and glory, a sentiment once more given greater poignancy through the disembodied image of the hero in Hades.

Disenchanted with the worth of the everlasting fame which condemned him to this incorporeal existence, Cook's Achilles expresses a hunger for life which only the still-living Odysseus can satisfy. Odysseus provides a link to the world above, a sphere of flesh and blood which contrasts so poignantly with the insubstantiality of the underworld, not only as a living, breathing human being who brings tidings of his fallen comrade's father and son, but through the blood of the victims he has sacrificed, a motif which is present in both Homer's and Cook's accounts.¹⁴¹ At this moment, there is a degree of interdependency, a moment of connection between two men, between two heroes, between the living and the dead. However, the moment Odysseus begins to pay homage to the cult figure of the Homeric Achilles, that connection is broken. In elevating Achilles' deeds to almost divine significance, Odysseus fails to understand him outside the limitations of the heroic code that cost him his life. In re-affirming Achilles' role as bequeathed to him by his mythology, that of ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν, Odysseus not only neglects to recognise the inadequacies of a κλέος with which Achilles himself has become so bitterly disillusioned but also traps his late associate within a system of codes and assumptions that fail to capture his character fully.

in the depths of his heart, and speaks forth another') could perhaps be interpreted as a dig at Odysseus.

¹³⁸ See Homer *Odyssey* 11.481-6 (quoted above, pp. 54-5).

¹³⁹ Homer *Odyssey* 11.505-37.

¹⁴⁰ Homer *Odyssey* 11.538-40.

¹⁴¹ Homer *Odyssey* 11.23-36; Cook 2002: 5.

The resulting sense of distance engendered between the two men towards the end of this exchange is significant. In many ways, we see a return to the sullen hero of Homer's *Iliad*, yet Achilles' response to Odysseus' praise might also be read as a rebellion against his reduction to a mythical image that he detests: the great warrior, the supreme killer. Achilles' short shrift of Odysseus belies a frustration with the long and complex legend that has developed around him; a legend which has characterized him not only as the best of the Greeks, but as a distant and alienated figure. Indeed, by the time of the events of Homer's *Odyssey*, the process of heroic myth-making is already well underway. In fact, it began shortly after his death, as the shade of Agamemnon notes in Book 24:

*μήτηρ δ' αἰτήσασα θεοὺς περικαλλέ' ἄεθλα
θῆκε μέσῳ ἐν ἀγῶνι ἀριστήεσσιν Ἀχαιῶν.
ἤδη μὲν πολέων τάφῳ ἀνδρῶν ἀντεβόλησας
ἡρώων, ὅτε κέν ποτ' ἀποφθιμένου βασιλῆος
ζώννυνται τε νέοι καὶ ἐπεντύνονται ἄεθλα:
ἀλλὰ κε κεῖνα μάλιστα ἰδὼν θηήσασο θυμῷ,
οἷ' ἐπὶ σοὶ κατέθηκε θεὰ περικαλλέ' ἄεθλα,
ἀργυρόπεζα Θέτις: μάλα γὰρ φίλος ἦσθα θεοῖσιν.
ὥς σὺ μὲν οὐδέ θανῶν ὄνομ' ὤλεσας, ἀλλὰ τοι αἰεὶ
πάντας ἐπ' ἀνθρώπους κλέος ἔσσεται ἐσθλόν, Ἀχιλλεῦ*

Your mother asked the gods for gorgeous prizes
and set them in the middle of the assembly, for the best of the Achaeans.
You've by now been present at the funeral of many men,
of heroes, when at some time or other a king died,
and young men gird themselves and get ready for contests,
but had you seen these in particular you'd have been amazed at heart,
how gorgeous were the prizes the goddess, silver-footed Thetis,
set there for you, for you were very dear to the gods.
So, not even in dying, did you lose your name, but your fame,

to all mankind, will be forever good, Achilles.¹⁴²

While alive, the Homeric hero strives for self-assertion, to offer up a version of himself that will live on long after his he is gone (see pp. 19-22 of Introduction). Following his death, however, the processes of mythologising the tales of his deeds fall under the manipulations of others. His mother Thetis, in providing the divine prizes for her son's funeral games, ensures his enduring reputation; Agamemnon, in recounting this wondrous event, adds his own perspective to the myth of Achilles' enduring κλέος; Odysseus, as we have just seen in the exchange above (pp. 54-5), also buys into the narrative of Achilles as ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν. Moreover, Achilles is the subject of poems which commemorate his life and death, not only in the songs of Demodocus¹⁴³ but also, in something of a self-reflexive turn, those of Homer himself. In presenting multiple perspectives of the hero in his poem, Homer acknowledges, and in many ways looks forward to, evermore convoluted processes of myth-making that are already underway. Moving on several millennia to the twenty-first century, hyper-masculine images of the classical hero abound, particularly in Hollywood cinema and other forms of popular culture, such as graphic novels (see pp. 22-3 of Introduction). Alongside heroes such as Dwayne Johnson's Hercules (*Hercules* 2014) and Gerard Butler's Leonidas (*300* 2006), Wolfgang Petersen's 2004 film *Troy* presents us an Achilles (played by Brad Pitt) whose masculine physicality and propensity for violence is highlighted throughout, often eliding those aspects of his mythic biography which perhaps jar somewhat with contemporary ideals of masculinity (see pp. 23-6 of Introduction).¹⁴⁴

It is in response to this tendency, most aptly exemplified by Achilles' and Odysseus' interactions in Hades, to trap Achilles in a mythology which is bound by the heroic code against which he lived and died that Cook chooses not to focus solely on Achilles the warrior but on moments in his life which stand in tension with his public, socially cemented persona. Instead, she provides us with alternative images of a hero who is rooted in the materiality of the body and is presented not in the isolation which

¹⁴² Homer *Odyssey* 24.85-94.

¹⁴³ Homer *Odyssey* 8.62-82.

¹⁴⁴ I refer, specifically, to the re-casting of Patroclus in the role of Achilles' youthful and excitable cousin, with no hint of an underlying sexual tension.

characterises his Homeric incarnation but in connection with other subjects. Of course, Cook is not by any means the first to look back to these more 'domestic' traditions. Although Achilles' reception in Western art and literature is in many ways dominated by his Iliadic incarnation as a sullen, distant warrior, providing often problematic models of heroism ranging, from Virgil's Aeneas to Milton's Satan and beyond, he has a long mythological history which reaches beyond the limits of his Homeric portrait. Many ancient authors have a narrative obsession with 'what happened before' official, grand, master narratives. Achilles' love life, in particular, has proved popular subject matter: Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and *Heroides* reflect on his relationships with Deidameia and Briseis respectively, the latter imagining not the stories told by the great poets but the tales of the women left behind;¹⁴⁵ Aeschylus' lost trilogy, *Myrmidons*, makes explicit something only hinted at in Homer - a homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.¹⁴⁶ Although, as classicists, we are trained to disentangle the Homeric tradition proper from the numerous additions and embellishments of later writers, Cook notes that she 'felt free to pull from any part of the built-up mythology around Achilles, not to stick with a single version.'¹⁴⁷ As such, Cook works with a number of source texts, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Statius' *Achilleid*.

What is more, Cook's *Achilles* is not only a response to a variety of classical narratives intrigued by the intensity of this character, but is also a reflection on the layers of meaning which have accumulated through years of translation, reception and scholarship. This is reflected upon most explicitly in the final chapter of the novella, entitled 'Relay', where she describes poet John Keats's profound feeling of empathy with the figure of Achilles. Contemplating the length of hair Achilles cuts from his head and lays on Patroclus' pyre, Keats takes a pair of scissors to his own curls:

He holds in his own quite delicate hand a hank of auburn hair, not yet made dull or lank by illness. The same colour as Achilles' hair and, though the hand

¹⁴⁵ Ovid *Ars Amatoria* 1.689-704; *Heroides* 3.

¹⁴⁶ In Aeschylus *Myrmidons* fr. 135, Achilles addresses the body of his dead love: 'σέβας δὲ μηρῶν ἀγνὸν οὐ κατηδέσω,/ ὧ̃ δυσχάριστε τῶν πυκνῶν φιλημάτων'; 'And you did not respect the sacred honour of the thigh-bond,/ ungrateful that you were for those countless kisses!' (trans. Alan H. Sommerstein 2009 [2008]).

¹⁴⁷ Cook 2013.

which holds it may be smaller than that of the large Achilles, it is made in the same way, the same number of small bones.¹⁴⁸

Keats' sense of affinity with Achilles is not limited to his reading of Homer, mediated through the translator George Chapman, but is open to a number of post-classical narratives, including Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and Dante's *Inferno*, in a pattern of reception which Vanda Zajko describes as Cook reading 'Keats reading Chapman reading Homer's Achilles'.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, Cook's novella must be understood as being absorbed not only in the Homeric world but, necessarily, in all subsequent reactions to it. Such a technique belies a self-awareness that precludes any sense of an uncomplicated identification with the mythic-literary character of Achilles and encapsulates the various layers and ambiguities of his reception. Juxtaposing Achilles the isolated mythical hero with alternative, less well known images from his mythology, Cook opens up her ancient intertexts to a wider, more pluralistic interpretation. In doing so, she intervenes into and alters aspects of personal history and personal memory in ways that dilute Achilles' received subjectivity, and invites us to look at her story, her reception, and the discourses which surround her hero, anew.

It is with all of this in mind that we must read the following vision of a young Achilles under the tutelage of Chiron, an image which stands in tension with the rage with which Homer begins his poem and which has subsequently dominated Achilles' reception:

Other students were impatient of botany and biology in their longing to be heroes. The child Achilles loved the small life of the earth. He watched it, listened to it and applied himself to it. He who had little time or respect for the sons of Atreus honoured the kingdoms of termites and bees, was humble before the properties of plants.¹⁵⁰

Here, Achilles is indifferent towards the heroic destiny which will eventually colour his whole mythology. The other children, perhaps including a young Theseus, Jason or

¹⁴⁸ Cook 2002: 107.

¹⁴⁹ Zajko 2006: 64.

¹⁵⁰ Cook 2002: 88.

Heracles, envision their futures as great heroes. They begin to mythologise themselves before their stories have even really begun, already imaging the epic tone their legends will take. The young Achilles, however, is content with the small, domestic life of Pelion. Entwining himself within the natural world, his mind could not be further away from the battlefields of Troy or the glorious tales which will be told of his heroic deeds. Having given us false signals and a false security of affinity with the original Homeric Achilles at the very beginning of her novella, Cook moves on and lures us to a qualitatively different place, an alternative world where her protagonist's mythic biography is not dominated by his isolating position as *ἄριστος*. Indeed, after the initial Odyssean encounter, it is not until chapter four that we finally reach Troy and once more meet a character whom we might identify as Homer's Achilles.

The quieter images of Achilles which Cook offers to us seem to nod towards an alternative, more domestic, epic looming in the background of more traditional public-oriented discourses; an epic affirming not so much the distance and segregation that greatness inevitably needs to shine but the connections and spaces shared by its heroes. This more domestic epic is not at odds with the heroic model presented to us by Homer and others; instead it should be considered complementary with it. Indeed, Homer's poetry remains foundational to Achilles' mythic biography, something which Cook herself concedes.¹⁵¹ Although Cook can emphasise, de-emphasise, or, at times, totally rewrite aspects of Achilles' personal history, she cannot change the ultimate trajectory his mythology will take. That Achilles will die at Troy is something she flags on early in her narrative by prefacing her novella with an image of her protagonist in Hades. Cook reflects on the power of the Homeric narrative arc over the reception of Achilles in chapter nine, entitled 'Vulnerable', where she depicts the centaur Chiron reflecting on an ash tree which was to become the spear Achilles would take to Troy:

The tree which made it was always meaning to become a spear. He wonders now if there is a moment in the destiny of a tree when its future is open. When it is simply a quantity of wood – a material which may be used in a variety of ways to give shelter or fodder, adorn or destroy?¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Cook 2013.

¹⁵² Cook 2002: 83.

Here, Cook takes a moment to reflect on the inevitability, the inexorability of the myth of the Homeric Achilles and the power it has had over his subsequent reception. She asks if there was a point at which the future of Achilles was open, undecided; a moment where his path might have taken an alternative trajectory. There are moments in her narrative where this potential for deviation from the established narrative comes to the fore, particularly during Achilles' sojourn in Skiros, a period in his life which Cook reimagines as an 'idyllic interlude' before the tumult of the Trojan war.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, even here, his destiny at Troy hangs forebodingly over him:

He finds a tall pine tree to climb from where he can look out over the island and across the sea. The number of ships is growing. In a hollowed-out tree nearby some bees have built a nest. He speaks to them, observes how they organise themselves. Steals their honey for Deidamia.

From his pine tree lookout he sees the ship with the rust-coloured sails. It is still a long way off but he senses it is aiming at him. He feels the circle tightening.¹⁵⁴

Climbing up to see the ships coming for him, he is mindful of his other outside, unlimited, male world closing in on him. It feels as though Cook is helpless to intervene in the most fundamental aspect of Achilles' mythic biography: his participation in the war at Troy. Nevertheless, even as he feels his destiny closing in on him, Cook's Achilles continues to oscillate in a tense, fascinating blend. Evidently concerned by the approaching ships, he nonetheless becomes distracted by thoughts of Deidameia, stealing the bees' honey for her. It is through this juxtaposition of a number of different texts and tales, of epic incarnations and more domestic mythological traditions, that Cook presents us with an Achilles who is simultaneously Homeric and non-Homeric, who, through both his passionate outbursts and, perhaps more importantly, his gentleness, comes into stark contrast with portraits, like those which Odysseus, above, tries to push onto him, leaving him cold, distant and venerated. In

¹⁵³ Cook 2015. I will discuss Achilles' time in Skiros in more detail later in the chapter.

¹⁵⁴ Cook 2002: 26.

this way, even when we do finally encounter a figure whom we might identify as being inspired by the Iliadic Achilles,¹⁵⁵ our reading of the hero necessarily takes on an irrevocably different quality.

In going back to a period in Achilles' pre-Homeric history, in presenting us with not merely a single master narrative but multiple, different, and at times contradictory narratives, Cook presents us with an Achilles who undermines and reconfigures our notions of the heroic subject; who exposes sedentary and unified responses towards heroic masculinity (of which he has, rightly or wrongly, become a kind of symbol); who appears more fluid and is suffused with the possibility of becoming something different. Eschewing the trappings of Achilles' legendary *κλέος*, Cook exposes the limitations of a heroic code which prioritises individual glory above all else, whilst simultaneously offering her readers an alternative articulation of the heroic subject. There are paths encountered and taken but Achilles' history is made less linear, less inexorable, than his reception in the course of the centuries would have us believe.

This sense of vulnerability and potentiality present in Cook's story makes him, in Deleuzian and Braidottian terminology, minoritarian, molecular and nomadic, separate from secure identities and open to change (see Chapter 1). This sense of the nomadic pervades Cook's writing: Achilles, the son of a goddess and a mortal man, stands between two worlds, not wholly belonging to either. Neither fully human nor fully divine, he never feels completely at ease or entirely at home. This is particularly well emphasised through Cook's use of a non-linear narrative, providing her readers with a series of temporally and geographically diverse vignettes which tell the story of her protagonist from his conception and birth through to his death and subsequent reception. As such, Cook's Achilles is a vulnerable and liminal entity, inhabiting the spaces in-between and experiencing the vitality of the intermezzo.

The Cookian Achilles, then, simultaneously embodies the alienation and isolation brought about by the imposition of restrictive labels onto the heroic subject and relentlessly seeks out ways of disrupting those very categories. Resisting transcendent signifiers of heroic masculinity, Achilles expresses himself through a nomadic becoming of the body, as well as through experiences of non-possessive,

¹⁵⁵ I am thinking specifically of Cook's account of the duel between Hector and Achilles, which shall be discussed in more detail below.

intersubjective relationships with others. It is through this fascination with the body and its interactions with other subjects, that this chapter will explore how Cook's literary universe resonates acutely with contemporary feminist thought. Engaging with feminist philosophies of the body, I will examine the ways in which Cook's novella consists of a series of what we might refer to as Deleuzian deterritorialisations, from the becoming-woman of Achilles' girlhood through to his cross-fertilising encounters with figures such as Deidameia and Hector. In doing so, I will demonstrate the ways in which the figuration of the nomad is key to understanding twenty-first century experiences and expressions of corporeality, as well as receptions of the Homeric hero in women's writing today.

THE RAPE OF THETIS AS A MODEL OF NOMADIC CONSCIOUSNESS

After the initial image of our protagonist in Hades, the second chapter of *Achilles* transports us back to a moment before the hero was even born: the rape of his mother, the nereid Thetis, by his father Peleus. Whereas in 'Two Rivers', Cook emphasised the sense of disembodied disconnect and isolation associated with Achilles' position as ἄριστος, 'Quicken', belies an Ovidian emphasis on the mutability of the body, as well as a focus on intersubjective relations between subjects. Explicitly prefacing her life of Achilles with this encounter is significant. It is my argument that Cook presents this event as a lens through which we must read the action of the rest of the novella. As such, it is necessary to analyse the incident in some detail, before going on to consider Cook's life of Achilles proper.

In the ancient literature there are two differing accounts of how the marriage of Peleus and Thetis came about. One tradition is articulated in Catullus' sixty-fourth poem where their sexual union is portrayed as one of mutual desire; however, Catullus demonstrates an awareness of an alternative mythology by noting Jupiter's influence on the match:

*tum Thetidis Peleus incensus fertur amore,
tum Thetis humanos non despexit hymenaeos,
tum Thetidi pater ipse iugandum Pelea sensit.*

Then is Peleus said to have caught fire with love of Thetis, then did Thetis not disdain mortal espousals, then did the Father himself know in his heart that Peleus must be joined to Thetis.¹⁵⁶

The reader is thus reminded of another story where the match is orchestrated by Jupiter in order to neutralise the threat to his power any divine son of Thetis might pose. That Thetis was coerced, rather than willing, to unite with Peleus is mentioned in Homer,¹⁵⁷ but is most famously narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an account which stems from a mythological tradition whereby Peleus was made to rape an unsuspecting Thetis, who attempts to escape the assault by transforming into different elements and animals.¹⁵⁸ Although these differing versions might appear to contradict one another, they are not, as Peter Heslin (2005) notes, wholly incompatible. Indeed, as Heslin argues, both Pindar (*Nemean* 4.62-8) and Apollodorus (*Bibliotheca* 3.13.5) clearly treat the rape as a prelude to their marriage.¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless, there is a great deal of tension, if not utter irreconcilability, between the two mythological traditions. It is this friction between consent and coercion that typifies Cook's interpretation of the myth in the second chapter of the novella.

'Quicken' is heavily influenced by the Ovidian account of Thetis' rape. Whereas Cook's interpretation of the attack on Deidamia inverts the sexual assault into a consensual act (as shall be discussed in further detail below) her Peleus, like Ovid's, stalks and rapes an unwary, sleeping Thetis. In Ovid, the scene where the incident takes place is described thus:

*Est sinus Haemoniae curvos falcatus in arcus,
bracchia procurrunt: ubi, si foret altior unda,
portus erat; summis inductum est aequor harenis;
litus habet solidum, quod nec vestigia servet
nec remoretur iter nec opertum pendeat alga.*

¹⁵⁶ Catullus 64.19-21. Trans. F. W. Cornish 1933 [1913].

¹⁵⁷ Homer *Iliad* 18.432-4.

¹⁵⁸ Ovid *Metamorphoses* 11.221-65.

¹⁵⁹ Heslin 2005: 262-3.

There is a little bay in Haemonia, curved like a sickle, and enclosed by jutting arms, where there would be a harbour, if the water were deeper: but the waves just cover the surface of the sand. It has a firm shore, free from seaweed, where the sand retains no footprints, and yet does not clog one's steps.¹⁶⁰

Peter Heslin notes with interest the fact that in Ovid's depiction, the sand on the shore is so dense that it is not marked by the footprints of either Thetis or Peleus:

On a metaphorical level, it may be significant that Ovid is describing here an event in the history of the world that had become obscure, replaced by descriptions, such as Catullus 64, of the glorious wedding of Peleus and Thetis. The beach is the setting for a violent act whose 'traces' (*vestigia*) had become effaced from history by Catullus and others.¹⁶¹

This is to say that the rape of Thetis has often been mitigated by other authors in favour of a less culpable interpretation of the conception of Achilles; however, in Ovid, the more violent myth is written back into the canon. Cook's description of the bay is almost identical to that in the *Metamorphoses* with one striking difference:

A little bay, shaped like a new moon, cradling the sea between the delicate horns of its headlands. The sand on the beach is shockingly white: if a crab moves across, denting the drift with heavy claw, its darkness can be seen from the cliffs above.¹⁶²

The sand in Cook's bay retains traces of even the slightest event. Here, the vestiges of the rape will be imprinted on the sand, no longer eroded from but written back in to history. In the Ovidian narrative, she is an object of desire (of both Zeus and Peleus) and the conquered victim of rape. Cook's retelling, however, questions the categories

¹⁶⁰ Ovid *Metamorphoses* 11.229-33. Translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are taken from Mary M. Innes 1979 [1955].

¹⁶¹ Heslin 2005: 263-4.

¹⁶² Cook 2002: 14-15.

of self and other, subject and object, active and passive, desiring and desired, victim and perpetrator by first of all invoking her Ovidian source text only to undermine it as the scene progresses.

The beginning of the episode in Cook is incredibly voyeuristic. Before he attacks her, Peleus watches Thetis sleeping:

Peleus waits and watches; getting to know the shape of her, the edges of bone and the warm furrows. The heft of her as he'll lift her on his cock.¹⁶³

The reader is forced to adopt the role of voyeur, gazing at Thetis through the lens of Peleus and the narrator, fantasising about the impending encounter. Here, the male gaze is a penetrative and intrusive prelude to the rape which is to follow. The erotic visual pleasure experienced by the viewing Peleus causes Thetis to become a mere object of his lust, not a subject in her own right. The narrator's description of her asleep ('She is lying on her back, left arm stretched up, face turned towards it. Her right knee slightly bent.'¹⁶⁴) echoes feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's assertion that '[i]n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.'¹⁶⁵ In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), Mulvey discusses how women on-screen are unconsciously eroticised, and therefore objectified, when they are viewed by men. She argues that what she refers to as the 'gaze' occurs when a movie causes its audience to adopt the perspective of a heterosexual man, by, for example, lingering over the curves of a woman's body. This is to say that the spectator takes pleasure in making the woman on-screen the object of his/her erotic interest. This creates a dominant subject to the detriment of female as object through audience identification with the male on-screen.

I would argue that a similar dynamic is apparent in this scene in Cook's novella as Peleus watches Thetis. Here, the identifiable looks are those of Peleus, the narrator and the reader. On the one hand, as has been noted, the reader is forced to

¹⁶³ Cook 2002: 15.

¹⁶⁴ Cook 2002: 15.

¹⁶⁵ Mulvey 1975: 11 (emphasis in original).

participate in looking upon Thetis' sleeping body, however, the presence of the narrator precludes the possibility of an uncritical identification between reader and protagonist. The use of the third person creates a sense of distance from the actions of Peleus in ways which a first person narration would not. Instead, we are both watching Thetis and watching Peleus watching Thetis. Therefore, although the reader is made somewhat complicit in this act of voyeurism through sharing in Peleus' rape fantasies, the *scopophilic* power dynamics are not as straightforward as they might appear.¹⁶⁶

Tired of merely watching and fantasising, Peleus finally attacks Thetis. In Ovid, Peleus' first effort at rape fails.¹⁶⁷ The second attempt is successful, following the advice of the sea-god Proteus who informs him that he will be triumphant so long as he refuses to let go of Thetis no matter what form she takes:

*vix bene virgineos Peleus invaserat artus:
illa novat formas, donec sua membra teneri
sentit et in partes diversas bracchia tendi.
tum demum ingemuit, 'ne' que ait 'sine numine vincis'
exhibita estque Thetis: confessam amplectitur heros
et potitur votis ingentique inplet Achille.*

Then Peleus seized the nymph's limbs in a firm grip; scarcely had he done so, when she began altering her shape, until she realised that her body was securely grasped, her arms stretch wide on either side. Then at last she gave a deep sigh: 'It is not without heaven's aid that you have beaten me!' she said, and revealed herself as Thetis. When she confessed her true self, the hero embraced her, obtained his desire, and filled her with child; her son was the mighty Achilles.¹⁶⁸

At first glance, Cook's account of the incident seems to follow the Ovidian trajectory: Thetis responds to Peleus' advances by trying to escape her attacker, metamorphosing

¹⁶⁶ *Scopophilia* was a term introduced to translate Sigmund Freud's *Schaulust*, or pleasure in looking, and connotes the feelings of sexual pleasure aroused when looking at objects of erotic interest (Lacan 1994 [1973]: 194).

¹⁶⁷ Ovid *Metamorphoses* 11.238-46.

¹⁶⁸ Ovid *Metamorphoses* 11. 260-5.

into different creatures and elements to no avail. The narrator of the *Metamorphoses* seems to take salacious pleasure in recounting the attack and Thetis' eventual submission.¹⁶⁹ However, whereas Ovid's Thetis eventually accepts her fate and grudgingly acquiesces to Peleus' advances,¹⁷⁰ it is at this point that Cook's narrative noticeably breaks away from that of her source-text. In the context of the initial penetration, Peleus 'scabbards himself fast'¹⁷¹ and holds on as instructed while Thetis conducts her series of transformations:

Her arched back held, she arches more
and bucks.

Her body now one sentient muscle:

A HEART,
AN EEL,
A FISH.¹⁷²

Although set against the backdrop of the version of events as narrated in Ovid's poem, Cook's rewriting of the rape of Thetis constitutes a Deleuzian 'line of flight' from the subject-object relations which Ovid's account invokes. Here, Thetis' metamorphoses constitute not just a desperate attempt to escape her attacker but are vital to Cook's alternative articulation of the subject as nomadic. As has been discussed (see Chapter 1), nomadic consciousness, rooted in processes of becoming, whether that is becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-minoritarian, posits subjectivity as never achieving an 'ultimate' identity. Defying the stable self, the metamorphosing or becoming subject not only celebrates difference and multiplicity but also articulates a provocative vision of corporeality. The metamorphosing subject is no longer autonomous but affects, and is in turn affected by, others in which it comes into

¹⁶⁹ For further discussion of the power dynamics in Ovidian rapes, see Richlin 1992 and Salzman-Mitchell 2005: 22-67.

¹⁷⁰ Ovid *Metamorphoses* 11.263.

¹⁷¹ Cook 2002: 15.

¹⁷² Cook 2002: 16.

contact. Indeed, during the course of events, Peleus too, appears to be engaging in the kinds of transformations only associated with Thetis in the source text:¹⁷³

He feels the charge of her bucking like a thunderbolt. It flings him
breathless to the ground.

On his back now.

Hold on!

As he falls he reaches out, pulls on whatever substance his fingers find.
It burns him and his fingers stick. If he were to pull away his skin would come
away too, charred like fish-skin stuck to hot stone.

Has he become fish to meet her?¹⁷⁴

There is great significance in these mutually affective processes of transformation. The whole encounter is grounded in touch, sound and movement, aligning it with the Ettingerian Matrix. Artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger presents the Matrix as a psychic borderspace of encounter, a realm of open and free-flowing dialogic connections between subjects.¹⁷⁵ As such, the Matrixial breaks free from the phallic oppositions of subject and object, masculine and feminine, self and other, and is instead rooted in intersubjectivities, as well as processes of encounter and co-emergence:

The Matrix is modelled upon certain dimensions of the prenatal state which are culturally foreclosed, occluded or repressed. It corresponds to a feminine

¹⁷³ It is interesting to note that the gods in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* often change their form in order to commit rape. Arachne's tapestry in particular describes the ways in which Jupiter, Neptune, Apollo and Bacchus all disguised their divinity in order to rape and/or seduce the women they desire. (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 6.103-28).

¹⁷⁴ Cook 2002: 16. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁵ Ettinger's Matrix is founded on the relationship between mother and infant, a connection which, according to Freud and Lacan, must be broken and relegated to the pre-linguistic semiotic in order for the (implicitly male) child to develop an autonomous sense of self and enter into the Symbolic order. Instead of this complete separation from the m/Other, Ettinger theorises a subject position which is realised through encounter with other subjects within the Matrix. Here, the semiotic is not an empty void, rather, the exchange between mother and infant should be understood as the first in a series of relationships within the realm of the Matrixial borderspace, a porous, interstitial zone of encounter where the self and the other co-emerge and connect.

dimension of the symbolic order dealing with asymmetrical, plural and fragmented subjects composed of the known as well as the not-rejected and not-assimilated unknown, and to unconscious processes of change and transgression at the borderlines, limits, and thresholds of I and non-I emerging in co-existence.¹⁷⁶

It is my argument that the encounter between Thetis and Peleus personifies Matrixial processes of encounter, a co-affecting co-emergence of subjects who are never stabilised but are instead opened up to perpetual change and transformation. As they drive and follow the changes in each other's bodies, both Peleus and Thetis can be seen to engage in movements backwards and forwards between the phallic dichotomies of aggressor and victim, self and other, subject and object, creating oscillating and permeable thresholds of connection. This sense of the interchangeability of power relations and the breaking down of centres and peripheries transforms the encounter from an act performed by a masculine subject on a violently overpowered feminine object to one which mutually affects both of those involved. In the lines which follow, Thetis and Peleus engage with one another in a way which constitutes neither a total separation from nor an undifferentiated amalgamation with the other:

But she is fire now. Roped flame. A long exhalation of searing heat. Tongue upon tongue of it, each twined on itself, an avid, wildly flickering spiral. Howling with pain he opens his throat and drinks in the flame. He'll be *her* scabbard, her sheath, her cup. No lover entered him so thoroughly.

But she is not yet lover [. . .]

Peleus, cored by this flame, is dissolving. The rest of him is falling away. What is there in him that can follow?

There is nothing of him to hold on with.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Ettinger, 1992: 176.

¹⁷⁷ Cook 2002: 16-7. Emphasis in original.

Here, we see a reversal of roles as Thetis transforms into a rope of flame and penetrates Peleus. Cook continues with the violent martial imagery she used to describe Peleus' attack – that of the scabbard and the sheath – but tempers it with the quieter image of the cup. The metaphor of the cup is significant: that which fills a cup must inevitably take the form in which it is contained. As they penetrate one another, these 'I's and 'non-I's are unknown and unknowable partners-in-difference, who nonetheless cannot be utterly othered and thus must remain close and co-constitutive. This image creates a sense that each is driving and responding to the other's transformation and, for a moment, it seems as though they are about to melt into one another. Yet it is precisely at that point in the narrative that Thetis breaks away: 'as she streams off him she starts to flee – as water – into the sand'.¹⁷⁸ As soon as she begins to escape, Peleus reaches out to her: '*DON'T LEAVE ME!*'¹⁷⁹ Peleus, having experienced this profound moment of encounter with the other, now cannot exist without it. They continue to struggle and, in doing so, begin to mirror one another: Thetis transforms into a lion and is unceremoniously suffocated by Peleus. She responds by turning into a snake and begins to strangle her attacker. Neither one is able to get the upper hand as the dynamics of power shift and change, and positions become interchangeable. As such, this encounter is not the eventual triumph of one over another, rather it can be categorised as a shift in the nature of the understanding of power relationships and subject/object positions in themselves. The climax (no pun intended) of their encounter comes when Thetis transforms into a cuttlefish and envelops Peleus in her embrace:

He feels it will happen soon. She is gathering herself. The tongue is withdrawn. He is still held fast but the dryness of snakeskin has gone; replaced by flesh which is softer, wetter. More enveloping.

Ten pulsing arms are lapping him and on their undersides are a great many mouths which adhere to him: tiny, searching mouths suckling on him; rubbing his flesh against the bony ridge of their toothless gums. There is no surface of his body that she – this cuttlefish – does not contact and which he in

¹⁷⁸ Cook 2002: 17.

¹⁷⁹ Cook 2002: 17. Emphasis in original.

turn does not long have drawn up and used by her. He is very near to losing himself – and if he does so he'll lose her, though just now he doesn't have the mind to care.

Now she has stopped escaping him. She needs him to find her. She cannot feel beyond the next need which is that the nub, the tiny palate of each tiny mouth, be met by him; pursued right in to the tight star which burns at its centre.

He has no choice. The labyrinth now has no false corridors. He can only travel to the centre.

Hit.

Met.

The stars dissolve.

He is covered in sticky black ink.¹⁸⁰

Whereas the initial acts of rape and voyeurism clearly positioned Peleus as subject to the detriment of the sexually objectified Thetis, by the end of scene these stances are held exclusively by neither one nor the other. Throughout the encounter, both Thetis and Peleus express a need, a hunger for each other. At the moment of Thetis' orgasm there is a sense of mutual envelopment, it is difficult to know where one begins and the other ends. As Thetis' many searching mouths suckle and lap at Peleus, the agency here is confused: Peleus seems to have adopted the passive role whereas she is actively suckling; however, her embrace is not penetrative, i.e. not dominating. The 'soft wet enveloping flesh' of her mouths immediately brings to mind the female vagina – usually the passive sexual organ¹⁸¹ – yet at the moment of orgasm, Thetis also ejaculates, an action normally associated with the active male penis, *the* symbol

¹⁸⁰ Cook 2002: 18-19.

¹⁸¹ It is interesting to note that the mouths/vaginas are many, perhaps emphasising the multiplicity of female sexuality which Luce Irigaray discusses in *The Sex Which is Not One* 1985b [1977].

of masculine potency. The dynamics of power here are not abstract, rather they are explored through the multiple boundaries, dynamics and forces of the physical body. When Peleus, too, reaches orgasm, he 'empties himself of all the forms he has ever been'.¹⁸² Here, sexual climax is not merely a physical release but is symbolic of a shedding of autonomous subjectivities. In losing themselves, they find each other, entering into cross-feeding partial subjectivities which are not founded in phallic dichotomies, but are instead rooted in embodiment, as well as mutual need and reciprocity.

Of course, although Cook stresses Thetis' and Peleus' intersubjective connectivity, this encounter is nonetheless a difficult, even traumatising, exchange. Cook herself concedes that the scene is ambivalent and the dynamics of power, sex and violence are 'shifting all the time'.¹⁸³ These moments of unpredictable connections between subjects are pervasive throughout Cook's novella and are often, as we see here, couched in opposition. Nonetheless, these encounters, although painful and violent, are significant. There is a sense of reciprocity, of meeting and being met, or matched, by another. What is more, Thetis becomes empowered by the fact that, in the end, she has chosen to continue in this exchange with Peleus. Rather than resign herself to the submissive role she, as Cook suggests, thinks 'Ok, this is my decision and I'll go with it'.¹⁸⁴ Here, Thetis is rendered an active agent in her own destiny, not a passive victim. Unlike in Ovid, it is not a reluctant acquiescence, rather a conscious choice to escape from the need to see the other as the enemy. Of course, the worry that Thetis is giving in to an assault can never entirely dissipate. She is engaging in processes of ethical decision-making in distinctly murky waters. Nonetheless, it is this alertness to the need to make open-ended ethical decisions which keeps her always switched outwards to the call of the other. As we have seen, Thetis' transformations change Peleus too and both sides genuinely respond to each other. Thus, in Cook's novella, the rape of Thetis by Peleus must be read not as an expression of male dominance and female objectification. It is, rather, a site where male as well as female subjectivities are shown to be continuously transformative, and thus uncertain, transient and never securely powerful. Centring subjectivity within the lived

¹⁸² Cook 2002: 19.

¹⁸³ Cook 2013.

¹⁸⁴ Cook 2013.

experiences of the body – a mutable, changeable substance – Cook articulates a selfhood which is never stable but in constant flux. As such, it is with this sense of the multiple dynamics of the body in mind that I would like to turn our attention to ‘His Girlhood’, the third chapter of Cook’s novella, which recounts Achilles’ sojourn in Skiros disguised as a girl in order to avoid being drafted into the Trojan war effort. Here, Cook explores the idea that an encounter with the feminine can broaden our understanding of the masculine, presenting the young hero’s experiences of his womanhood as vital to a fuller understanding of his heroism.¹⁸⁵

BECOMING-WOMAN: ACHILLES ON SKIROS

Cook’s main source-text for her third chapter is Statius’ incomplete Latin epic the *Achilleid*. In his poem, Statius intended to recount the whole story of Achilles’ role in the Trojan War, not just the small slice presented to us by Homer. However, the epic was cut short during the second book, probably due to Statius’ death,¹⁸⁶ and so the poem as it stands consists primarily of an account of Achilles’ time in Skiros. Without a subsequent account of his heroic efforts in the Trojan war to counter this episode, the impression of Achilles that comes from the *Achilleid* is, as Mairead McAuley writes, ‘not of a wrathful, implacable, aggressive warrior cutting a swathe through the battlefield, but of a draft-dodging, submissive boy in drag’.¹⁸⁷ As such, Statius’ portrayal of Achilles can be seen to undercut his reception as the hyper-masculine, archetypal hero of epic mythology. This is apparent from the very start of the poem - *Achilleid* 1.1-7 invoke two very important literary precedents: Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

*Magnanimum Aeaciden formidatamque Tonanti
progeniem et patrio vetitam succedere caelo,
diva, refer. quamquam acta viri multum inclita cantu*

¹⁸⁵ Indeed, even in the hypermasculine world of the *Iliad*, the seemingly clear boundaries between male and female roles are often more blurred than is usually admitted (see pp. 19-22 of Introduction).

¹⁸⁶ Dilke 1954: 6.

¹⁸⁷ McAuley 2010: 38.

*Maeonio (sed plura vacant), nos ire per omnem
(sic amor est) heroa velis Scyroque latentem
Dulichia proferre tuba nec in Hectore tracto
sistere, sed tota iuvenem deducere Troia.*

Goddess, tell of great-hearted Aeacides and the offspring feared of the Thunderer and forbidden to succeed to his father's heaven. The hero's deeds, 'tis true, are much famed in Maeonian song, but more are yet to celebrate. Be it your pleasure that I (so I crave) traverse the whole hero, bringing him forth by Dulichian trump as he hides in Scyros, nor stopping at Hector's drag, but singing the warrior through Troy's whole story.¹⁸⁸

O.A.W. Dilke argues that the first lines of the poem (*'Magnanimum Aeaciden formidatamque Tonanti/ progeniem et patrio vetitam succedere caelo,/ diva, refer'*) are structurally similar to Virgil's invocation of the Muse in the *Aeneid* (*'Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris/ Italiam fato profugus Lavinaque venit/ litora'*¹⁸⁹), with particular reference to the way in which both poem's key themes ('great-hearted Aeacides' and 'war and the hero' respectively) are further expounded upon in a subordinate clause introduced by the enclitic conjunction *-que*.¹⁹⁰ Thus, through the structure of his first sentence and his invocation of the muse, Statius situates his poem within the Homeric/Virgilian epic tradition. However, Philip Hardie argues that the poet's use of the verb '*deducere*' in the final line of the quoted passage can be interpreted as a reference to Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.1-4:

*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas
corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illas)
adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi
ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen!*

¹⁸⁸ All translations of Statius' *Achilleid* are from D.R. Shackleton-Bailey 2003.

¹⁸⁹ 'I tell about war and the hero who first from Troy's frontier,/ Displaced by destiny, came to Lavinia's shores,/ To Italy' (Virgil *Aeneid* 1.1-3 trans. C. Day Lewis 1986 [1952]).

¹⁹⁰ Dilke 1954: 79.

My purpose is to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind. You heavenly powers, since you were responsible for those changes, as for all else, look favourably on my attempts, and spin an unbroken thread of verse, from the earliest beginnings of the world, down to my own times.

Both Statius and Ovid entreat the gods to 'lead' their poems 'through Troy's whole story' and 'from the earliest beginnings of the world, down to my own times' respectively.¹⁹¹ By invoking Ovid's poem in the first lines of his own, Statius is making a statement of intent: the reader of the *Achilleid* is alerted to the fact that Achilles' metamorphoses from boy to woman to man is going to be of central importance to the poem as a whole. It is understood that what will follow is not a predictable or consistent portrayal of the epic male. We will not be reading about battles and heroes but a less-discussed period in Achilles' history. By invoking both Homer and Virgil alongside Ovid, Statius undercuts his homage to his epic predecessors and the canonical heroes they present in their poems. Instead he offers his readers something much more playful and ambiguous.

If Achilles symbolises the archetypal hero, then Statius' account of Achilles' girlhood can be understood as a challenge to the kind of hyper-masculinity usually associated with epic poetry. Nonetheless, the 'fluid Ovidianism'¹⁹² of Statius' biography of Achilles, as it stands, does not directly challenge the Homeric model, where there is scant mention of his time in Skiros.¹⁹³ Indeed, it is not known whether the tradition of Achilles' girlhood was pre-Homeric (and therefore intentionally left out by the poet as undermining the heroic quality of his protagonist) or post-Homeric.¹⁹⁴ As such, Statius can be seen to be attempting to 'generate and constitute retrospectively an alternative epic tradition'¹⁹⁵ which can exist side-by-side with the

¹⁹¹ Hardie 1993: 63 n. 8.

¹⁹² McAuley 45.

¹⁹³ Skiros is mentioned twice: *Iliad* 9.666-8; 19.326-7. In the first instance, Skiros is a place conquered by Achilles. In the second, he mentions it as the place where his son, Neoptolemus, is being raised.

¹⁹⁴ Both sides of this debate are discussed in further detail in Heslin 2005: 202-205.

¹⁹⁵ Heslin 2005: 70.

martial epics.¹⁹⁶ It necessarily follows, then, that Cook's portrayal of Achilles on Skiros must be read alongside both the Homeric and the Statian models in its deconstruction of traditional heroic narratives. In interrogating the tense relationship between the standardised mythology of Achilles as ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν and other, less well-known, traditions, Cook conceptualises masculinity and masculine heroism in ways which are much more fluid and liminal than subsequent receptions of the hero have generally allowed.¹⁹⁷

Achilles' womanhood is intended to be nothing other than a masquerade, an illusion; however, in order for his impersonation to be successful, Achilles' feminine persona must approach an image of idealised femininity. In Statius' *Achilleid*, our young hero is initially unwilling to acquiesce to his mother's demands.¹⁹⁸ It is only after he catches sight of the beautiful princess Deidamia that he submits to her machinations:

*mulcetur laetumque rubet visusque protervos
obliquat vestesque manu leviore repellit.
aspicit ambiguum genetrix cogique volentem
iniecitque sinus; tum colla rigentia mollit
submittitque graves umeros et fortia laxat
bracchia et inpexos certo domat ordine crines
ac sua dilecta cervice monilia transfert;
et picturato cohibens vestigia limbo
incessum motumque docet fandique pudorem.
qualiter artifici victurae pollice cerae
accipiunt formas ignemque manumque sequuntur,
talis erat divae natum mutantis imago.*

¹⁹⁶ This is not to ignore the fact that both Homer and Virgil address also more domestic themes in their poems.

¹⁹⁷ For further discussion of Achilles' time in Skiros as it is related in Cook's novella, see Toney 2012: 23-44, which argues that Cook's revision of Statius' poem presents a 'situational' reading of gender which troubles the line between masculinity and femininity. The work contains a number of analyses, such as the role of the gaze in gender performance, as well as the gendered power dynamics of sexual violence, which compliment the arguments which are to follow in this thesis.

¹⁹⁸ Statius *Achilleid* 1.274-75.

*nec luctata diu; superest nam plurimus illi
invita virtute decor, fallitque tuentes
ambiguus tenuique latens discrimine sexus.*

He is softened and blushes for joy, casting sly, wanton glances, and lightens the hand that pushes the garments away. His mother sees his indecision, sees that he would fain be forced, and throws the folds over him. Then she softens the stiff neck, lowers the weighty shoulders, loosens the strong arms; she subdues the unkept hair, fixing and arranging, and transfers her necklace to the beloved neck. Constraining his steps with an embroidered hem, she teaches him how to walk and move and how to speak with modesty. As wax that an artist's thumb will bring to life receives shape and follows fire and hand, such was the semblance of the goddess as she transformed her son. Nor did she struggle long. Charm is his in plenty and to spare, though manhood demur, and doubtful sex cheats the observer, hiding in narrow divide.¹⁹⁹

The quoted extract exemplifies Statius' complex attitude towards Achilles' *ambiguus sexus*: alongside the strongly Ovidian feel of the young hero's physical metamorphosis, gender is here presented as both artificially constructed by external forces (his mother's manipulations) and an innate facet of his identity (his limitless '*decor*').²⁰⁰ With regards to the former, merely dressing as a girl is insufficient. Achilles' successful integration relies not only on an assumption of the female form but also on his behaving how woman is expected to behave - he must learn how to walk and talk like a girl. Statius' use of the word '*doceo*' in the ninth line of the quotes passage leads his readers to consider whether or not all gendered behaviour is, like Achilles' cross-dressing, taught: a mere performance. This is certainly the belief of Iris Marion Young who argues that gendered bodily comportment is a socially-constructed, as opposed to innate, facet of identity:

¹⁹⁹ Statius *Achilleid* 1.323-337.

²⁰⁰ The tension between essentialist and constructionist notions of gender in the *Achilleid* is also noted by McAuley 2010: 57 and Heslin 2005: 295.

There is a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement, which is learned as the girl comes to understand that she is a girl. The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment – walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her.²⁰¹

Judith Butler similarly argues that an individual's everyday behaviour, mannerisms and dress are socially conditioned according to what is considered acceptable for his/her biological sex, famously denoting these expressions of gendered behaviour as 'performative'.²⁰² As has been discussed (see pp. 36-8), Butler argues that these artificial categories, which rigidly define male and female, maintain heteronormative power structures, 'othering' those who do not fit the mould. Although this demarcation of the genders is so ubiquitous that they have been almost entirely naturalised, i.e. less a conscious choice, more something which the experiencing subject has interiorised, Achilles' act of cross-dressing can be seen to contest, and in many ways, actually parody, the idea of a natural and innate gender identity. Cook, too, uses the episode to explore the idea that gender expression is determined by more than the physical attributes of a particular sex, adopting from her source text an understanding of heroic masculinity which is more fluid and permeable than the epic code would otherwise seem to allow. Her Thetis can be seen to mirror Statius' as she 'trains [her son] in the arts of being a girl';²⁰³ however, as shall be discussed below, Cook goes even further than Statius in her elision of the boundaries between the body, dress and gendered performance by opening up the relationship between the imitation woman (Achilles) and the real woman (Deidamia) in ways which speak to contemporary feminist discourses.

Instructed by his mother to follow strict rules of appropriate female dress and behaviour, Cook's Achilles naturally expects Deidamia to acquiesce to these expectations as well. However, Deidamia's actions highlight the discrepancy between

²⁰¹ Young 2005: 43.

²⁰² Butler 2007 [1990].

²⁰³ Cook 2002: 21.

the kind of idealised femininity which Achilles tries to emulate and the real-life behaviour of women. This is most apparent in a scene where Achilles, or rather Pyrrha, and Deidamia run off together to go swimming:

She leads Pyrrha out of the palace, past her father's stables to where there is open plain. Then she drops Pyrrha's hand and runs and Achilles – though he has to hold himself back so as not to overtake her – does not have to go as slowly as Thetis had told him to.²⁰⁴

It is at this moment that Achilles begins to realise that women do not necessarily meet the standards expected of them in terms of their femininity. As Deidamia's actions shatter Achilles' illusions as to what constitutes appropriate feminine behaviour, Cook troubles the gendered characteristics traditionally attributed to men and women. This is particularly emphasised by the fact that Achilles' performance of femininity is better than those of the 'real' girls: '[a]t court Pyrrha is thought quiet and modest. A better musician than any of them, but she will not sing; a tireless dancer; good at all their games.'²⁰⁵ That Cook's Achilles is deemed more feminine than the biological women highlights the discrepancies between gendered signs and signifiers, and denies a straightforward link between gender performance and biological sex. Through her juxtaposition of Achilles, and his superior performance of the behaviours usually associated with those in possession of a female body, and Deidamia, who defies such social expectations, Cook's account of Achilles' girlhood deconstructs gender as a signifying practice. As such, both *Achilles* and the *Achilleid* can be seen to open up spaces where different forms of both heroic masculinity and feminine agency might be brought to the fore, presenting gendered identity as a fluctuating and indefinite state, which is not necessarily bound by biological sex.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that either Statius or Cook are entirely committed to advocating an Achilles who is wholly free of the restrictions of gender. Despite Thetis' machinations, Achilles fails to relinquish his masculinity in its entirety – a certain manliness continues to oscillate in the background of both texts. In the

²⁰⁴ Cook 2002: 24.

²⁰⁵ Cook 2002: 25.

Achilleid, this is done to humorous effect as Achilles puts on a less-than-convincing performance of femininity, particularly in his romantic pursuit of Deidamia, who, despite having spotted the trick from the beginning, adopts a flirtatious attitude towards the poorly-disguised young man and willingly receives his attentions, whilst simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the truth about his identity: '*iam iamque dolos aperire parantem/ virginea levitate fugit prohibetque fateri*'.²⁰⁶ Instead, she attempts to refine her paramour's mannerisms to approximate some semblance of grace and elegance,²⁰⁷ a charade which continues with even greater fervour following her attack and subsequent pregnancy.²⁰⁸ Similarly, although while in public Cook's Achilles acquiesces to conventional female gendered behaviour, his masculinity hovers in the background. Cook notes how her protagonist's 'girlhood chafes' as he runs off into the woods to practice boxing,²⁰⁹ an act which, on one level, seems to confirm an innate masculinity behind the feminine charade. Therefore, it is apparent in both texts that although Achilles' masculinity may have been temporarily dislocated, it has not been entirely expunged.

Through this continuous interchangeability between essence and performance, Cook and Statius continue to trouble established gender categories, refusing them any lasting effect. In the *Achilleid*, Achilles rapes Deidamia in a secluded grove as they perform the rites of Bacchus with the other girls of the court, an act which has been interpreted as confirming the hero's innate masculinity.²¹⁰ However, almost immediately after the attack, he once more rejoins the girls' dance,²¹¹ couching what we might call this ultimate expression of his manhood in some doubt. Cook, too, does not allow any notions of innate manliness to settle in her narrative. Just as when he

²⁰⁶ 'Just as he is about to reveal the cheat, she flees with girlish inconstancy and forbids him to confess' (Statius *Achilleid* 1.586-587). This is in marked contrast to the account in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, where Deidamia is seemingly ignorant of Achilles' true identity until the moment he rapes her. (I will be discussing the rape of Deidameia in greater detail later on in the chapter).

²⁰⁷ '*Ipsa quoque et validos proferre medestius artus/ et tenuare rudes attrito pollice lanas/ demonstrat reficitque colos et perdita dura/ pensa manu*' 'She too on her side shows him how to advance his strong limbs more decorously and how to draw out raw wool with his thumb's friction, repairing the distaff and the skeins that his rough hand has spoiled'. (Statius *Achilleid* 1.580-583).

²⁰⁸ Statius *Achilleid* 1. 767-72.

²⁰⁹ Cook 2002: 26.

²¹⁰ Statius *Achilleid* 1.640-643. Again, I shall discuss the significance of the rape of Deidamia in relation to Achilles' realisation of himself as a man in more detail, below.

²¹¹ Statius *Achilleid* 1.645-648.

adopted the role of Pyrrha, Achilles took on feminine clothing and mannerisms in ways which underlined the performativity of gendered identities, when he wishes to recuperate his male form, he discards his feminine accoutrements and performs specific poses of masculinity: '[he] removes his girl clothes and bracelets, binds his hands with strips of cloth and starts to box'.²¹² Here, Achilles' masculinity is rendered equally as performative as his femininity, belying an understanding that, in many ways, gendered identities might be considered a 'set of available poses, a set of costumes rich in history and social power relations, but not fixed or compulsory any longer'.²¹³ Bodies are no longer marked by hegemonic cultural signifiers of gender but are instead the locus for a 'denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself'.²¹⁴ As such, in text and source-text, both meticulous instruction and uncontrollable impulsiveness, performance and essence, although positioned as entirely contradictory, simultaneously appear as strong markers of the hero's identity. On Skiros, Achilles' gender is a blend of immaculate attention and extreme abandon, a fusion of opposites that keeps identity always 'on the edge', at constant risk of tipping over into the 'other side'.

This tension between essentialist and constructionist understandings of gender reaches its climax in both texts with the arrival of Odysseus on Skiros, charged with discovering Achilles and bringing him to Troy.²¹⁵ Heslin argues that Odysseus' arrival in the *Achilleid* provides this effeminate environment with an external injection of masculinity that Achilles can identify with: '[t]he mere presence of men in the feminine context of Scyros begins to break down Achilles' will to continue his transvestite pantomime'.²¹⁶ Statius' Achilles is instinctively drawn to Odysseus, 'drinking in his words with a vigilant ear',²¹⁷ with the latter's presence catalysing a change in the young hero, whose masquerade of femininity becomes more and more preposterous: he drinks too much wine and, as a result, his dress becomes loose, revealing his distinctly masculine chest.²¹⁸ Amongst the crowd, Odysseus spots a girl who decidedly

²¹² Cook 2002: 26.

²¹³ Braidotti 1996.

²¹⁴ Butler 2007 [1990]: 146.

²¹⁵ Statius' poem uses the Latin form of Odysseus, Ulysses, but I have chosen to use the former rather than the latter in order to avoid confusion in the discussion that is to follow.

²¹⁶ Heslin 2005: 294.

²¹⁷ '*Aspicit intentum vigilique haec aure trahentem*' (Statius *Achilleid*: 1.794).

²¹⁸ Statius *Achilleid*: 1.838.

shows 'no mark of maiden modesty'.²¹⁹ It is at this point that he lays his trap, spreading out gifts for the women of the court and, in amongst the wands, drums and headbands, he places a spear and a shield. Achilles, unaware of the trick, is immediately drawn to the weapons:

*at ferus Aeacides, radiantem ut comminus orbem
caelatum pugnas (saevis et forte rubebat
bellorum maculis) acclinem conspicit hastae,
infremuit torsitque genas, et fronte relictas
surrexere comae; nusquam mandata parentis,
nusquam occultus amor, totoque in pectore Troia est.*

But when fierce Aeacides views close at hand the shining round, chased with battles (and by chance it was ruddy with cruel spots of war), as it leaned against the spear, he cried out and rolled his eyes, the hair stood up from his forehead. Forgotten his mother's charge, forgotten his hidden love, Troy is in all his heart.²²⁰

In these lines, Achilles metamorphoses into a hero whom we might more readily identify as the Homeric Achilles. The feminine garb immediately falls from his body the moment he touches the spear and the shield, and he grows until he seems taller than both Odysseus and Diomedes.²²¹ Here, Achilles' heroic nature appears ultimately uncontainable, its expression inevitable, as befits the innate inclinations of his biological sex. In this reading of gender, Statius positions Achilles' predisposition towards the weapons as natural for one in possession of a male body, implying a link between masculine physiology and heroism.²²² However, it is significant to note that it requires the presence of men and, more specifically, the accoutrements of war, to initiate his transformation back into a male of the heroic mould. We find ourselves

²¹⁹ 'nullaque virginei servantem signa pudoris' (Statius *Achilleid*: 1.764-765).

²²⁰ Statius *Achilleid*: 1.852-57.

²²¹ Statius *Achilleid*: 1.880-1.

²²² It is also significant that the heroic male can be contrasted with the women in this scene (i.e. Lycomedes' daughters), who amuse themselves with mere trifles.

asking once again to what extent this expression of masculinity constitutes a stable heroic identity.

Cook's rewriting of this scene adds further layers of nuance and complexity regarding the question of gender and gendered identities. When Cook's Odysseus arrives in Skiros, Achilles plays his part, looking at all the pretty trinkets brought to amuse the girls of the court. Unlike Statius' Achilles, he is not initially attracted to the knife and spear which Odysseus tempts him with but to those gifts intended for the 'real' women: cloth and bracelets.²²³ We ask ourselves if his interest in the girly trinkets is feigned or genuine, or perhaps even more intriguingly, whether these seemingly distinct categories are no longer immune from one another. In any event, it is only when Odysseus goads him into action that Achilles reaches for the weapons.²²⁴ As well as the shield and the spear, Cook's Odysseus also offers Achilles 'a little knife'. This harks back to a point earlier on in the chapter where Achilles laments the fact that his mother had taken his knife from him when she left him in Skiros:

He wishes he were busy at something – whittling some wood to a spear point would be good – but his mother took his knife from him when she dressed him in this thin girl's tunic. He fiddles with the bracelets on his arms; turns them, draws then up to the wrist and lets them fall back towards his elbow. The gentle clash of metal.²²⁵

In lieu of his knife Achilles starts to play with the bracelets Thetis has placed on his arm, which reverberate with a gentle tinkling. The motif of clashing metal is repeated when Odysseus kills one of his own men in order to force Achilles into revealing himself: '[o]utside: the aching ring of metal on metal and the unmistakable sound of a man's breath fleeing his body forever.'²²⁶ The jangling of the bracelets resonate with the clang of weapons on armour: sounds of war which anticipate Achilles' role at Troy.²²⁷ Here, Cook playfully manipulates traditionally masculine (the knife) and traditionally feminine (bracelets) accessories, adding new layers to our understanding

²²³ Cook 2002: 28.

²²⁴ Cook 2002: 28-29.

²²⁵ Cook 2002: 22.

²²⁶ Cook 2002: 28.

²²⁷ This connection is also made by Toney 2012: 36-8.

of heroism. In both scenes, the image of clashing weapons is destabilised through its use in an alternative context, and conventionally masculine scenes of combat will now resound with this feminine resonance, contaminating the world of warriors and battlefields with the supposedly separate world of the home.

This slippage between the masculine and the feminine, the epic and the domestic, is central to Cook's characterisation of Achilles' heroic qualities. The ways in which she locates him in this space between the genders is striking: he needs to experience the feminine in order to come to a fuller realisation of his heroic self. Whereas Statius' Achilles ultimately comes to regard his experiences of womanhood as somewhat shameful,²²⁸ for Cook, Achilles' heroism is the result of both his martial training and his sojourn in Skiros:

*For Achilles these days of girlhood complete the education Chiron began. Refine it; soften his burning impatience. He learns to listen, dawdle, play. Delighting in Deidamia he becomes adept as Pyrrha. He borrows Deidamia's dresses, wanting to feel how her body feels – not just to his hands but to herself – when her soft silks drift over it. He uses her sweetest oils on his skin and hair, lets her plait flowers into his curls.*²²⁹

These lines add even further layers of nuance to Cook's conceptualisation of gender. Whereas Achilles' expressions of masculine behaviour, as we have seen above, are presented as equally performative as his feminine pose, contingent upon the adoption or rejection of gendered accoutrements, and the social pressure to comport oneself in a manner befitting one's biological sex, here, his education in the feminine *becomes* a part of his innate heroic identity. In Cook's novella, Achilles' experience of femininity is not antithetical to his heroism, rather it heightens it. Just as Achilles is physical, vigorous and competitive, he also enjoys the way soft fabrics and oils feel against his skin. In this way, the reader of *Achilles* is encouraged to re-read the signs through which the heroic subject can be identified and to accept the possibility of multiple

²²⁸ *'Longum resides exponere causas/ maternumque nefas; hoc excusabitur ense/ Scyros et indecores, Fatorum crimina, cultus'*; 'Twere long to set out the causes of my tarrying and my mother's crime. By this sword shall Scyros and the unseemly habit be excused, reproach of destiny' (Statius *Achilleid*: 2.43-45).

²²⁹ Cook 2002: 25-26. My own emphasis.

readings and ambiguity in meaning, rejecting simplistic categorisations and any conceptualisation of gender as a closed or finished, as opposed to mutable, product.

Of course, it could be argued that despite the fact that Cook significantly undercuts the hyper-masculine, often essentialist, narratives of her source-texts, Achilles' ultimate transformation back into a man raises problems in that it might ultimately be seen to play into the binaries that his girlhood sought to evade. Nonetheless, throughout the novella, Achilles continues in a tense, liminal blend, less enamoured with those signifiers which in Cook's source-texts explicitly identify him as male. His transformation from boy to girl to man is not intended as a juxtaposition of masculine and feminine extremes, nor as a competition between the values of the battlefield and the values of the home. Instead, we are invited to think through Achilles the idea of a crossfeeding encounter between seemingly oppositional terms (masculine/feminine, epic/domestic). It is through this continual transgression of the borderlines of phallic dichotomies that new conceptualisations of the subject can be realised. As we saw in the metamorphoses of Thetis and Peleus, above (see pp. 66-76), processes of transformation are never teleological, nor are they secure. Moving backwards and forwards between the genders, Achilles not only provides us with a highly charged vision of the heroic body but should also be understood as a figuration of nomadic consciousness who, through processes of becoming-woman, constitutes a 'line of flight' from established categories of identity.²³⁰

This process of becoming, of course, is not achieved in a vacuum. It is only 'delighting in Deidamia' that he can come to this fuller realisation of his heroic self. Throughout his time on Skiros, Achilles and Deidamia engage with one another in ways which eschew the possessiveness of traditional subject-object relationships, an idea initially expressed in Cook's reception of the rape of Thetis, above. In elaborating upon the relationship between not only Achilles and Deidamia, but a plethora of others, Cook explores how the heroic subject is continuously negotiated and renegotiated in a borderspace of continuously evolving connections. Therefore, the following will

²³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari stress that to become-woman is not to impersonate or adopt a female form, but 'emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1980]: 304); however, it is my argument that Cook makes this notion of becoming more concrete in her account of Achilles on Skiros.

explore how Cook articulates a heroic subjectivity which is underpinned by a non-effacing encounter between the I and the non-I.

THE SPACE 'IN-BETWEEN': VIOLENCE, DESIRE AND FEMALE AGENCY

In the *Iliad*, we also see this privileging of relations between individuals, particularly amongst the communities of warriors, or *φίλοι*, that the world of the battlefield necessarily creates. Homer develops a number of these male-male bonds within the context of his poem, most notably that of Achilles and Patroclus. This presents an interesting paradigm for Cook, who displaces this model of heroic comradeship in favour of a different kind of relationship.²³¹ Upon arrival at Lycomedes' palace, Achilles is aware of himself being looked at by Deidameia and the other girls of the court:

Achilles knows perfectly well that the girl is watching him. Not just this one; all of them. It is new, this sensation of being stared at from all sides. It's like standing in the sun at midday, feeling the heat cooking you. Only in the sunlight you can strut or box the air, make little eddies in the heat. These twenty-five pairs of girls' eyes on him make him less free to move. He wishes he were busy at something – whittling some wood to a spear point would be good – but his mother took his knife from him when she dressed him in this thin girl's tunic. He fiddles with the bracelets on his arms; turns them, draws them up to the wrist and lets them fall back towards his elbow. The gentle clash of metal.

With these eyes still on him he burns. Senses his power.²³²

The scene is reminiscent of the way in which Peleus gazed upon Thetis before he attacked her: the narrator emphasises Achilles' physicality throughout, describing the 'thin' tunic, implicitly revealing the contours of his body, and the delicate bracelets around his wrists. His male energy is denied by the removal of his male accoutrements

²³¹ It is striking that the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is tantalisingly underdeveloped in Cook's novella, particularly as the latter's death is the driving force behind Achilles' own eventual demise. Her readers are given only a glimpse of them together in Hades at the beginning of her work (Cook 2002: 6).

²³² Cook 2002: 22.

and the social pressure he feels to comport himself in what is perceived to be a feminine manner. For perhaps the first time in his life, Achilles is presented as an object of potentially erotic fascination, not only for the Skirian girls but for the reader as well.²³³ This sense of being objectified accounts for his heightened self-consciousness and his ensuing sense of detachment from his own body. Although biologically male, and therefore the traditional locus of power, Achilles is rendered passive and feminine through both his cross-dressing and his objectification by the gaze. Conversely, the Skyrian girls play the active, traditionally masculine, part. Once more, the reader is made to identify with the narrator and must adopt the role of voyeur, gazing at Achilles from the perspective of the Skyrian girls. However, although the reader is forced to participate in looking upon Achilles body, the presence of the narrator precludes the possibility of a straightforward identification between the reader of the text and the point of view being represented. Again, the third person narration is crucial: we are both watching Achilles and watching the girls watching Achilles. Therefore, although the reader is made somewhat complicit in this act of voyeurism, it is my argument that the gaze does not always necessarily serve to objectify the looked-upon or to perpetuate asymmetrical power relations. Rather, the dynamics of power present in the passage of *Achilles* under discussion troubles this established paradigm.

A better interpretation of this passage would be to read it as in many ways detaching the gaze from its relationship with masculine dominance as, in this instance, those participating in the active role of looking are female. This is not to say that the Skirian girls, are merely cross-identifying with a masculine point of view, a reversal which ultimately retains the problematic binaries of subject and object which the gaze engenders. Rather, the traditional gaze, i.e. the gaze of objectification, should be understood as only applicable to those who gaze in order to dominate. Cook refuses to limit the gaze to the impulse to objectify but attempts to unearth possibilities for multiple and alternative forms of the gaze, moving beyond the urge to control towards a yearning to understand and engage with (-out dominating) the other. Although in

²³³ Statius' Achilles is similarly made the object of the Skirian girls': '*nec turba piarum/ Scyriadum cessat nimio defigere visu/ verginis ora novae*'; 'The flock of duteous Scyrian girls continue to stare relentlessly at the new maiden's face' (*Achilleid* 1.367-368).

many ways possessive ('Deidamia wants this fish for herself'²³⁴), Cook's gaze acknowledges the asymmetrical and ever-changing power dynamics at play as her subjects negotiate their interactions with one another.

Once again, Ettinger's theories of the Matrix significantly impact how we might think about the gaze in this instance. As we saw in the encounter between Thetis and Peleus (pp. 66-76), Matrixial models of 'subjectivity-as-encounter' posit the subject's becoming as a multiple co-emergence alongside an other who is simultaneously being altered by the same shared experience. This is not to say that in the Matrixial realm the self melds into an undifferentiated unity with the other, rather that subjectivity is a continuous process which occurs in the interstices between individuals, creating 'I's who are neither totally consumed by nor wholly distinguishable from 'non-I's. If we think of the encounter under discussion as occurring in a Matrixial borderspace, we can understand Achilles as oscillating in the peripheries between masculine and feminine, subject and object, self and other. Both Achilles and the Skyrian girls transgress traditional boundaries, constantly moving between the various phallic dichotomies. Dominance is not held by one subject nor another but is in a constantly evolving state of flux. Achilles is simultaneously empowered and disempowered by the encounter, and his objectification does not wholly negate his sense of self. Instead, this moment in the novella constitutes a point where the borderlines between I's and non-I's become permeable thresholds for the production of co-affective encounters between individuals, who become 'partial-objects and partial-subjects in a Matrix larger than our separate one-selves.'²³⁵

What is more, Cook again moves her readers away from the sole privileging of the *scopic* towards a model of subjectivity which is open to other sensory potentialities, such as touch and sound. Aware he is being watched, Achilles feels as though he is standing in the sun at midday. He is exposed, self-conscious, and perhaps also embarrassed, about the situation in which he finds himself. He feels hot, perhaps he is even blushing: is he aware that he is the object of Deidamia's desire? Could the heat correlate to his own lust for the beautiful young women he finds himself amongst ('the nearest he has got to a girl's body is his own, toggled up like this'²³⁶)? Does he

²³⁴ Cook 2002: 22.

²³⁵ Ettinger 1995: 48.

²³⁶ Cook 2002: 24.

feel a sense of anxiety about his sexuality, a concern which first appears here and, as shall be discussed below, comes to a head later on in the chapter as he unsuccessfully tries to hide his erection from Deidamia? Feeling constrained, in lieu of a knife he starts to play with the bracelets Thetis has placed on his arm, creating the tinkling of 'metal on metal', which, as was discussed above (pp. 86-8), resonate with the sounds of war. Immediately following this aural resonance of battlefield, Cook writes '[w]ith these eyes still on him he burns. Senses his power'. Despite feeling somewhat constrained by the girls' looks, Achilles refuses to be relegated to the feminised, passive object position. It is this lingering strength of power which serves to contest the assertion that all gazes are necessarily dominating. Here, the sensation of heat is now associated with a more traditional masculine power.

Thus, it is through this manipulation of both sound and sensation that Cook positions her characters within the interstices and thresholds of phallic dichotomies, blurring previously demarcated boundaries, creating moments, encounters, connections and resonances that are neither completely held nor lost. The subjectivities engendered in this passage are plural and fragmented, brought about through a co-emergence of both the 'I' and the 'non-I' in a mutually affective exchange. As such, power in Cook's novella should not be understood as the supremacy of one (or the Self) at the expense of another (or an Other). Rather, it should be recognised as a much more fluid, as opposed to absolute, concept.

In this way, Cook offers her readers an alternative understanding of subjectivity, with the gaze operating to release the subject from rigidly demarcated borders of selfhood in order to encounter the previously foreclosed other. Cook's Achilles is not characterised as a wholly autonomous being but as one whose subjectivity is defined primarily through intersubjective relationships, moments which often eschew the psychic, and often physical, violence usually associated with traditional subject-object encounters. Throughout the relationships we witness in *Achilles*, we see a re-evaluation of asymmetrical gendered relationships in ways which negate objectification, dominance and oppression. This idea is nowhere more fully realised than in Cook's reception of the rape of Deidameia, where the author not only places a female character up front and centre in the narrative of the great hero but, in doing so, rewrites the violence which characterises her protagonists' initial sexual encounter in the ancient texts.

In both Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and Statius' *Achilleid*, the consummation of the love affair between Achilles and Deidamia is coded as a rape. The narrator of the *Ars Amatoria* lectures Achilles in his unmanliness (*'Reice succinctos operoso stamine fusos!/ Quassanda est ista Pelias hasta manu'*²³⁷), following which, the hero attacks the young princess: *'Forte erat in thalamo virgo regalis eodem;/ Haec illum stupro comperit esse virum'*.²³⁸ Statius' hero similarly berates himself:

*Quonam timidae commenta parentis
usque feres, primumque imbelli carcere perdes
florem animi? non tela licet Mavortia dextra,
non trepidas agitare feras?*

How long shall you endure the devices of your timid mother and squander the prime flower of courage in unmanly durance? May you not carry Mars' weapons in your hands nor hunt affrighted beasts?²³⁹

Asking himself: *'Quonam usque premes urentia pectus/ vulnera? Teque marem (pudet heu!) nec amore probabis?'*,²⁴⁰ he acts: *'Sic ait et densa noctis gavisus in umbra/ tempestiva suis torpere silentia furtis/ vi potitur votis et toto pectore veros admovet amplexus'*.²⁴¹ In both Ovid's and Statius' accounts, the act of taking up arms and the act of rape both serve as expressions of masculinity. Indeed, in these lines, phallic imagery dominates; weaponry is conflated with the male penis, rape with acts of war.

Ovid's version of Deidamia's attack is, as Heslin notes, a staunchly essentialist account of gender and gender roles, where the male is powerful and dominant, the

²³⁷ 'Cast aside your spindle/ With its laborious threading: the Pelian spear/ Is what *you* should wield' (Ovid *Ars Amatoria* 1.695-6). Emphasis in original. Translations of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* are taken from J. H. Mozley 1979 [1929]).

²³⁸ 'It chanced that in the same chamber was the royal maid; by her rape she found him to be a man' (Ovid *Ars Amatoria*: 1.697-8).

²³⁹ Statius *Achilleid* 1.624-27.

²⁴⁰ 'How long will you suppress the wound that burns your breast not even in love (for shame!) prove yourself a man?' (Statius *Achilleid* 638-9).

²⁴¹ 'And happy that in the night's thick darkness timely silence lie inert upon is dalliance, he gains his desire by force, launching veritable embraces, with all his heart' (Statius *Achilleid* 1. 640-3).

female submissive.²⁴² Through the rape of Deidamia, Achilles' violence and aggression signify his hitherto compromised masculinity ('[h]aec illum stupro comperit esse virum').²⁴³ As Amy Richlin notes:

[Ovid's] point is that *pati* – 'to suffer,' 'to be passive,' 'to be penetrated sexually' – is pleasing to women, and this is the mark of the woman, as *vis*, 'force,' is the mark of the man [. . .] When we want to know the gender of the adolescent hero dressed in women's clothing, the signifier of his maleness is his ability to commit rape.²⁴⁴

One would suppose that Statius' account of the rape would similarly settle the issue of Achilles' cross-dressing. Although Statius' *Achilleid* appears to follow the Ovidian trajectory, presenting an account of the rape which seems to affirm his protagonist's masculinity, Achilles' realisation of himself as a man is not quite as straightforward as all that. On one level, Achilles is somewhat successful in expressing his power and dominance. As McAuley notes, through the rape he 'reveals himself to Deidamia as a man and demonstrates his potency by fathering a child, Pyrrhus.'²⁴⁵ However, the act fails to be a definitive avowal of his manhood. Immediately following the rape, Achilles resumes his disguise and continues to live as a woman: '*et thyrsus iterum vibrabat Achilles*'.²⁴⁶ He does not give up on his masquerade until he is discovered by Odysseus, by which point Neoptolemus has already been born. Whereas in Ovid the rape of Deidamia can be read as the ultimate expression of manliness, in Statius the question of Achilles' gender identity is much more ambivalent.

Cook goes even further in problematising the relationship between masculine identity and sexual violence in her version. Here, the encounter between Deidamia and Achilles is consensual. In the scene, the two run off together to go swimming. Once they reach the lake, whereas Achilles shows feminine modesty, being described as 'bashful' and attempting to hide his naked body beneath his tunic, Deidamia again defies expectation and, naked, jumps into the river:

²⁴² Heslin 2005:274.

²⁴³ '[he] soon proved that manhood through rape' (Ovid *Ars Amatoria*: 1.698).

²⁴⁴ Richlin 1992: 169.

²⁴⁵ McAuley 2010: 52-3.

²⁴⁶ 'Achilles once more brandishes the wands' Statius *Achilleid*: 1.648.

Deidamia is now bobbing around in the water.

‘Jump in Pyrrha. Can’t you swim?’

Feeling stupid, trying to hold his tunic down across his thighs, Achilles slithers down between the cleft of two rocks; joins her in the heavenly cool water. Deidamia embraces him – or rather Pyrrha – with cold, fresh-watery kisses. She dives down and sees – in spite of his efforts – what he’s been attempting to hide. She comes up laughing and kisses him again. They find the inside of each other’s mouths – smooth and hot and very unlike the water they bob in and keep swallowing as they struggle to keep afloat.²⁴⁷

This rewriting of the rape of Deidamia upsets the processes by which Achilles in the Ovidian account reclaims his masculinity. Reimagining the rape as a mutually consensual sexual act, Cook challenges the notion that male self-fashioning is contingent upon an exertion of power, be that power physical, psychical, or Symbolic, against a female or feminised other. Rather, the encounter between Achilles and Deidameia should be understood as a process of co-emergence which is no longer rooted in the pain and violence of the source-texts. Whereas in both Ovid and Statius, Achilles’ phallic potency is a source of fear and aggression, in Cook its presence is somewhat amusing. Indeed, Achilles seems very concerned about his penis in relation to these matters. He is embarrassed by the fact that he is aroused by Deidamia’s naked body and tries to hide his erection beneath the dress he is wearing. Instead of being a passive victim of a sexual attack, Deidamia becomes an active agent. She dives under water to glimpse what he has been vainly attempting to hide. Her discovery of his erect penis at this moment is not a precursor to a sexual assault and Achilles’ realisation of himself as a man; instead, she instigates first contact and kisses him. In so doing, Deidameia emancipates herself from her traditional role of objectification and powerlessness and is finally able to inhabit her own subjectivity.

Cook chooses not to include penetrative sexual intercourse in this scene. Instead, as Achilles’ and Deidamia’s mouths envelop each other in an act which mirrors Thetis’ orgasm in the earlier chapter (see pp. 74-6), it is difficult to know where one

²⁴⁷ Cook 2002: 25.

begins and the other ends. As they explore the insides of each others' mouths, the subjects engendered here are neither autonomous nor symbiotic, collapsing the boundaries between them in an act which should be understood as a co-affecting co-emergence of subjects who are never stabilised but are opened out to change and transformation. Grounded in touch, sound and movement, their mutual desire connects them in a shift towards intersubjectivity where the Symbolic subject is undone and is instead enveloped, multiple and open to reciprocity.

MYTHOLOGY, MEMORY AND MASCULINITY: ACHILLES AND HECTOR

After Achilles' discovery in Skiros, Cook immediately transports us to the battlefields of Troy in the fourth chapter of her novella. Here, the idea of the I and the non-I remaining close and co-constitutive is mirrored in Cook's account of the encounter between Hector and Achilles. Again, Cook's reception of the duel between Hector and Achilles is significantly rooted in the pain and violence so prominent in the Homeric version. She foreshadows the meeting between Achilles and Hector throughout the novella. In Skiros, as he runs away in the forest to practice boxing, Achilles seems to pre-empt the most famous fight of his mythic biography:

He longs to be met. To find an opponent who will answer each move with a countermove; who will weigh him up and see him. Daily as he trains he dreams of this opponent. Builds him up in thought.²⁴⁸

In this supposedly solitary moment, Achilles can only make sense to himself as he imagines engaging and interacting with another subject. The use of the word 'met' here is significant. Cook used this term in the earlier episode to describe the rape of Thetis by Peleus. As Thetis approaches orgasm, she 'cannot feel beyond the next need which is that the nub, the palate of each tiny mouth, be met by him'.²⁴⁹ This small

²⁴⁸ Cook 2002: 26.

²⁴⁹ Cook 2002: 19.

word therefore signifies that the connection between Achilles and Hector is not merely a projection, an image of what fighting him will be like – it is also physical:

HECTOR.

Before there was the name there was the shadow.

The shadow Achilles first felt at Skiros. It teased his own body on to growth. Cell by cell, calling him.

Body for body, each grew.

So that Achilles' armour, stripped from Patroclus, now fits Hector perfectly.

And Achilles no longer has a choice.²⁵⁰

Cook's assertion that Hector and Achilles have grown in tandem, and therefore the former's armour fits both the latter and Patroclus, diverts from Homer's account where the armour only fits Hector following the intervention of Zeus.²⁵¹ Linking Hector to not only Achilles but to Patroclus as well lends further sexual overtones to their encounter. This tension between sex and violence, attraction and repulsion also overlays our reading of the duel as it appears in Homer's *Iliad*:

*μή μιν ἐγὼ μὲν ἴκωμαι ἰών, ὃ δέ μ' οὐκ ἐλέησει
οὐδέ τί μ' αἰδέσεται, κτενέει δέ με γυμνὸν ἐόντα
αὐτῶς ὥς τε γυναῖκα, ἐπεὶ κ' ἀπὸ τεύχεα δύω.
οὐ μὲν πως νῦν ἔστιν ἀπὸ δρυὸς οὐδ' ἀπὸ πέτρης
τῷ ὀαριζέμεναι, ἅ τε παρθένος ἠΐθεός τε
παρθένος ἠΐθεός τ' ὀαρίζετον ἀλλήλοιν.*

I might go up to him, and he take no pity upon me
nor respect my position, but kill me naked so, as if I were
a woman, once I stripped my armour from me. There is no

²⁵⁰ Cook 2002: 33.

²⁵¹ Homer *Iliad* 17.210.

way any more from a tree or a rock to talk to him gently
whispering like a young man and a young girl, in the way
a young man and a young maiden whisper together.²⁵²

The verb *ὀαρίζειν*, translated by Lattimore as ‘whisper’, is the same word used to describe Hector’s heart-rending conversation with Andromache earlier in the epic.²⁵³ It denotes the kind of secret, intimate interactions that young lovers share. That Hector thinks of his opponent in terms of an impossible erotic partner is certainly intriguing. This imaginary love relationship might also explain why Hector, the man who earlier so sternly rebuked his brother Paris’ absence from the battlefield, flees his enemy.²⁵⁴ If we picture Hector and Achilles as young, heterosexual lovers, the chase scene begins to resemble the pursuit of a young woman by her would-be paramour. Balancing the violence of their ensuing fight with a gentler, even erotic, discourse, Homer once more juxtaposes the world of the battlefield with the world of the home, the tumult of war with the familial and communal ties it fractures. This is mirrored in the way Homer lingers over Hector’s memories of peacetime domesticity as he is chased around the parameters of Troy:

*οἱ δὲ παρὰ σκοπιῆν καὶ ἐρινεὸν ἠνεμόεντα
τείχεος αἰὲν ὑπ’ ἐκ κατ’ ἀμαξιτὸν ἐσσεύοντο,
κρουνῶ δ’ ἴκανον καλλιρρόω: ἔνθα δὲ πηγαὶ
δοιαὶ ἀναΐσσοι Σκαμάνδρου δινήεντος [. . .]
ἔνθα δ’ ἐπ’ αὐτῶν πλυνοὶ εὐρέες ἐγγὺς ἔασι
καλοὶ λαΐνιοι, ὅθι εἴματα σιγαλόεντα
πλύνεσκον Τρώων ἄλοχοι καλαί τε θύγατρες
τὸ πρὶν ἐπ’ εἰρήνης πρὶν ἐλθεῖν υἷας Ἀχαιῶν.*

They raced along by the watching point and the windy fig tree
always away from under the wall and along the wagon-way

²⁵² Homer *Iliad* 22.123-128. The ambiguous gendered dynamics of the duel between Achilles and Hector is also noted by Toney 2012: 32-5.

²⁵³ Homer *Iliad* 6.516.

²⁵⁴ Homer *Iliad* 3.38-57.

and came to the two sweet-running well springs. There there are double
springs of water that jet up, the springs of whirling Skamandros [. . .]
[. . .]Beside these
in this place, and close to them, are the washing-hollows
of stone, and magnificent, where the wives of the Trojans and their lovely
daughters washed the clothes to shining, in the old days
when there was peace, before the coming of the sons of the Achaians.²⁵⁵

In her own account of the duel, Cook also balances the motions of peacetime heterosexual courtship with the warrior's pursuit of his enemy, as the chase oscillates continuously between the epic and the domestic, the violent and the erotic, the adversary and the lover:

Hector's feet are sure. They know these tracks, where they'll find scree, where the ground is firm. As he runs he remembers each part of his life: the bushes and rocks of his boyhood hideouts, the promontory he lay on one full night to learn the stars; the routes of his hunting, his cattle herding, the waterfall he led Andromache to when he wooed her. The stream of Astyanax's first bathing. The shallow rock pools where women did the laundry before the war. He remembers, his life spread out before him like a giant sheet in the sun, the way ahead narrowing to a tunnel which he runs down.²⁵⁶

Hector's memories of sleeping beneath the stars take us back to another moment in Achilles' pre-Homeric history, where Cook recounts her young hero's closest relationships with others in terms of bodily intimacy: '[Chiron's] body taught him itself and nearly all else. The hoof that drew shapes in the dust, showed him how stars moved.'²⁵⁷ Thus, as Achilles and Hector run, they race around worlds that are lost, and yet still visible despite the ravages of war. Hector's reframing of the duel as the tenderness between lovers merges with his memories of peacetime Troy, as well as creating a spatio-temporal link with a young Achilles on Pelion, snuggling into the

²⁵⁵ Homer *Iliad* 22.145-156.

²⁵⁶ Cook 2002: 38.

²⁵⁷ Cook 2002: 22-3.

centaur's warm belly. The tale here is not merely that of a heroic death, the fulfilment of a pre-ordained destiny which will colour the mythologies of both men for ever more. Here, the war, the epic, the classical myth, becomes an outsider, an imposition that spreads destruction. There is another story that evolves around these spaces which does not fit within the master narrative: a more domestic epic, this time of Hector and Troy, Achilles and Pelion. In many ways, these memories open up the possibility of becoming something different, of a vulnerability and a potentiality which challenge the ethos of the heroic code, showing us alternative paths that could have been taken. Positioning them as peace-time lovers, Cook shows the ways in which Achilles and Hector, the quintessential enemies of Greek myth, *include* each other, co-exist in the interstice. Although Achilles, in the end, does kill Hector and, in doing so, seals his own fate, Cook's account leaves us with a hero who, although in many ways recognisable as the ἄριστος Ἀχαιῶν of Homeric epic, is at the same time irrevocably changed: another Achilles located within the carefully chiselled 'I' that has made him famous.

The language of the erotic continues to saturate both Homer's and Cook's accounts of the duel as Hector, having been tricked by Athena, stops running and turns to face Achilles. Cook's account mirrors Homer's almost exactly: having exchanged a couple of blows, Hector loses his spear and draws his sword. Achilles, clutching his own spear, eyes Hector's armoured body up and down, searching for a point of weakness in a way which represents a different, although parallel, kind of physical intimacy:

Now [Hector] knows he has come to his death. He draws his huge sword and wields it with both hands.

Achilles takes his sword too. After the day's slaughter the divine blade still flashes like a sun. There is all the time he could ever want. He looks Hector over, scanning the armour that fits him so well, searching for a place to insert his blade. Like a lover taking in every inch of his beloved as they lie in the hot sun. All the time he could want, no rush, no fear of missing.

There is one point where the armour does not close over Hector. The tender diamond hollow between the clavicles is naked. Achilles fits his sword's tip here.

Slowly, evenly, the pressure mounting, he pushes.²⁵⁸

The language used here is unequivocally erotic. The phrase which describes Achilles as ‘a lover taking in every inch of his beloved as they lie in the hot sun’ is reminiscent of the way in which Thetis and Peleus lie together on the beach following their own encounter (‘Neither of them wake up until the sun has removed itself from the beach’²⁵⁹). Once more, a violent altercation is couched in sexual terms and is rendered almost tender – the consummation of the love affair which began at the start of their duel. As Achilles’ sword, the ultimate symbol of his phallic potency, penetrates the ‘tender diamond hollow’ of Hector’s flesh, it renders Hector’s bleeding, supine body almost feminine as it lies, open and prostrate, on the ground. Nevertheless, although there appears to be a strong contrast between the hero and the object of his wrath, Achilles’ power over his enemy is troubled by the enduring beauty of Hector’s corpse: ‘[n]ow all those wounds are sealed. Achilles has never seen a body so perfect. It has only one mark: a stain like a kiss on Hector’s throat.’²⁶⁰ In death, Hector is no longer merely a noble prince or a supreme warrior, but an erotically beautiful figure.

Cook troubles this expression of Achilles’ heroic masculinity even further: after the initial fatal penetration, we do not see him perpetuate any further violence to Hector’s dead body – any desecration is merely alluded to.²⁶¹ If the basis of the legendary hero’s power and subjectivity are in the effects of a sexualised violence, does the unspoiled body of Hector in some way impugn on Achilles’ sense of himself as

²⁵⁸ Cook 2002 [2001]: 39-40. See also Homer *Iliad* 22.317-27: ‘οἷος δ’ ἀστήρ εἶσι μετ’ ἀστράσι νυκτὸς ἀμολγῶ/ ἔσπερος, ὃς κάλλιστος ἐν οὐρανῶ ἴσταται ἀστήρ,/ ὡς αἰχμῆς ἀπέλαμπ’ εὐήκεος, ἦν ἄρ’ Ἀχιλλεύς/ πάλλεν δεξιτερῇ φρονέων κακὸν Ἔκτορι δίω,/ εἰσορόων χροά καλόν, ὄπη εἴξειε μάλιστα./ τοῦ δὲ καὶ ἄλλο τόσον μὲν ἔχε χροά χάλκεα τεύχεα,/ καλὰ, τὰ Πατρόκλοιο βίην ἐνάριξε κατακτάς/ φαίνετο δ’ ἧ κληῖδες ἀπ’ ὤμων αὐχέν’ ἔχουσι,/ λαυκανίην, ἵνα τε ψυχῆς ὠκιστος ὄλεθρος/ τῆ ρ’ ἐπὶ οἷ μεμαῶτ’ ἔλασ’ ἔγχεϊ δίος Ἀχιλλεύς,/ ἀντικρὺ δ’ ἀπαλοῖο δι’ αὐχένος ἦλυθ’ ἀκωκή’; ‘And as a star moves among stars in the night’s darkening,/ Hesper, who is the fairest star who stands in the sky, such/ was the shining from the pointed spear Achilles was shaking/ in his right hand with evil intention toward brilliant Hektor./ He was eyeing Hektor’s splendid body, to see where it might best/ give way, but all the rest of the skin was held in the armour,/ brazen and splendid, he stripped when he cut down the strength of Patroklos;/ yet showed where the collar-bones hold the neck from the shoulders,/ the throat, where death of the soul comes most swiftly; in this place/ brilliant Achilles drove the spear as he came on in fury/ and clean through the soft part of the neck the spear point was driven.’

²⁵⁹ Cook 2002: 19.

²⁶⁰ Cook 2002: 42. See also Homer *Iliad* 22.367-404; 24.14-21.

²⁶¹ ‘On this twelfth morning he is making for Hector when Thetis appears . . . “Child,” she says, “this has to stop.”’ (Cook 2002: 42).

a subject? In his imperviousness to the object position, Hector's feminised body stands against the phallic unity of Achilles and his penetrating spear. Once again, subjectivity in *Achilles* seems to emerge as interlinking between the self and the other, a connection which even death cannot sever. Achilles is made of and marked by Hector's honour and beauty, as much as by his own physical prowess and unmitigating hostility and contempt. As such, it is once again fruitful to imagine the sequence of events performed here as successive moments of partial subjectivity, where neither party can be said to claim subject nor object positions in any real or permanent way. Therefore, the death of Hector must be read not as an expression of male dominance over a feminised object; it is, I suggest, a site where male as well as female subjectivities are shown to be changing, continuously precarious, temporary and hence never securely powerful.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Following the death of Hector, Cook moves us away from the war, extending the scope of her novella beyond the confines of the *Iliad* once more. This time, we are permitted a glimpse into the internal world of the Amazon queen Penthiseleia:

She has no taste for this war of Priam's, no feel for its arbitrary rhythms. The battles she and her women excel in are concentrated and unremitting till the end. This war lacks definition; the allies don't know each other; there are too many languages. They cannot move as one. This morning she has ridden away from her warriors to rinse her mind clean.²⁶²

Frustrated by the lack of unity and cohesiveness amongst Priam's allies, she rides away to gaze at the waves breaking on the shore. It is at this moment, when she feels most alone, that she is spotted by Achilles who has also withdrawn and is listening to the low murmurings and shiftings of the wind:

²⁶² Cook 2002: 52.

What is it makes him know it's a woman he sees – that mounted figure looking out over the plain from the cliff? He knows, as surely as if he were next to her, breathing the scent of her flesh.

And he knows he will meet her.²⁶³

Once more, Achilles expresses a longing to be met, to seek out a connection with the other in viscerally physical terms. Again, here it is the bodies that meet; as he inhales the smell of her skin, the oils, the sweat, he incorporates a part of her into himself, blurring the boundaries between them even from this distance. We sense yet another resonance with that first encounter between Thetis and Peleus, above: a man gazing upon an unsuspecting woman who has purposefully secluded herself from all others. Like his father, Achilles stalks and attacks his victim unawares, leaping onto the back of her horse. As with Thetis, Penthiseleia's response to her assailant is decidedly ambivalent:

For Penthiseleia too there is comfort in his belly meeting her back. She is as easy with his movements as she is with her horse whose limbs are almost her own.

But her mind tells her otherwise: tells her to oppose this man and kill him.²⁶⁴

This moment, like so many of the others, is couched in the interstices between the violent and the sexual as Achilles presses his body up against the Amazon queen, triggering arousal. Although her mind bids her otherwise, Penthiseleia, too, finds a strange sort of comfort in his belly meeting her back, in this galloping that is both a deadly chase and an erotic entanglement. Here, we see a triumph of the body over the mind as she second-guesses her actions. Nevertheless, afraid of being spotted in this compromising position, Penthiseleia attempts to throw Achilles from her horse but as he falls, he drags her down with him. Once on the ground, an aroused Achilles positions himself on top of her:

²⁶³ Cook 2002: 51.

²⁶⁴ Cook 2002: 54.

Achilles has taken the knife from her throat. He holds her now to steady her, not to restrain her. He looks at her blazing, furious face and laughs, glad that she exists.

‘My Queen,’ he says, pulling her to him.

The words are nonsense to her; a foreign babble. Though her back still sings with the memory of him pressing her she will not submit.

He draws her close, puts his tongue to the wound at her throat: the iron of blood mixed with the salt of sweat. His tongue will scour it clean’.²⁶⁵

Unable to understand what the other is saying, it is only through their bodies that they can speak to one another. They are reduced to their senses – touch, sight and sound. Once more, the body – touch, sensation, desire – overcomes the mind, overcomes speech, exposing the sterility of binary thinking over a connectivity rooted in the physical, the tactile. Penthiseleia’s back vibrates with the memory of Achilles pressed up against her, as his tongue slides across her throat. She takes his moment of distraction as an opportunity to escape him, digging a sharp rock into the base of his spine: ‘[n]ow he pins her down, all his hurt, unmet tenderness turned to indignation’.²⁶⁶ Incensed, he covers her face with his hand and smothers her:

His hand fits her face perfectly; its mask. He peels it away with a sense of wonder, as if what lies beneath his palm is something he has made and never seen: like a potter when he lifts a piece from the cooled furnace, or a metal worker, brushing away sand. He peels away his hand and finds beneath it a face he could love with all his heart.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Cook 2002: 54-55.

²⁶⁶ Cook 2002: 55.

²⁶⁷ Cook 2002: 55; Achilles’ wonder at the dead Penthiseleia’s beauty could be a reference to Quintus of Smyrna *The Fall of Troy* 1.718-21: ‘μέγα δ’ ἄχνητο Πηλέος υἱὸς/ κούρης εἰσορόων ἐρατὸν σθένος ἐν κονίησι:/ τοῦνεκά οἱ κραδίην ὄλοαὶ κατέδαπτον ἀνῆαι/ ὀππόσον ἀμφ’ ἐτάριοι πάρος Πατρόκλιοι δαμέντος’; ‘But ever Peleus’ son/ Gazed, wild with all regret, still gazed on her,/ The strong, the beautiful, laid in the dust;/ And all his heart was wrung, was broken down/ With sorrowing love, deep, strong as he had known/ When that beloved friend Patroclus died’ (trans. Arthur S. Way 1913).

Once again, even in death, the instance of the face-to-face encounter is the moment of relationship, a response to the body, which multiplies the subject from one to two. It is an quiet moment of the kind of foreclosed intimacy that Achilles has been so desperately looking for. It is this unmet tenderness that sends him, immediately after this encounter with the Amazon queen, to follow Polyxena to Apollo's temple, where Paris is also waiting, armed with a bow and arrow, to kill him. As Achilles approaches the moment of his death, his life flashes before his eyes; however, it is not his deeds that he remembers but the spectral faces, the people, who defined his life, the border links, the webs of connections, that, although fleeting and transitory, haunt him still:

The difficulty, amidst all this slaughter, is to hold on to what is distinct – catch each little gust of a dying breath, follow the brightness of one face before it is eaten by dark. Sometimes, in battle, he sees a face, the curve of a cheek, the way the light catches it, and he follows it, makes it his guide to lead him deeper into the mess.

So Polyxena's face, pale as the moon.

Always, throughout his life, bright faces moving away, disappearing behind curtains: his mother taken back in a curtain of water, Iphigeneia wrapped in flames, Patroclus' face as it speaks to him these nights, folded in darkness . . . Following this girl he follows them all – his mother, Iphigeneia, Penthiseleia, Patroclus – yes, and Hector too. He will pursue them all to the vanishing point but he must not lose sight of her.

[. . .]

Following a face in a crowd. A face as bright as the moon. The crowd closes in, darkening the way, getting between him and the face he must find and follow. The face of Thetis, Iphigeneia, Penthisileia, Polyxena. The face of Deidamia, of Patroclus, Hector.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ Cook 2002: 56-7.

In the midst of the carnage of the war, the distinctiveness between subjects is lost. Identity lodges only with the body, the face, not with *τιμή*, *κῦδος* or *κλέος*. The legendary war that made the great heroes, the imperishable names, is the reason why, at this very moment, everything blurs. Lost in the crowd, a sea of bodies that speak for him, move for him, touch him, Achilles gives up the need to recognise (and be recognised): the ultimate articulation of intersubjectivity. As Achilles clamours for the faces that war has erased, it is in this moment that he is his most nomadic. Pursuing Polyxena, he pursues a number of now-lost border links. As Braidotti puts it for us:

the nomadic subject functions as a relay team: s/he connects, circulates, moves on; s/he does not form identifications but keeps on coming back at regular intervals. The nomad is a transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason which s/he can make connections at all. Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections.²⁶⁹

Thus, the great conqueror dies still reaching out to the other. In Achilles' final moments, Polyxena stands for all of those spectral faces - lovers, mothers, friends, enemies, all become one, incorporated into each other. They offer Achilles a moment of connection, touch and contact, but they are never conquered and that is why their faces disappear, like Polyxena behind the curtain of Apollo's temple. They are in him and he in them, the I and the non-I together. It is in this way that Cook offers us an Achilles who is neither defined by his greatness nor wholly isolated and self-contained but is instead anchored in the 'in-between' zones of lost intimacy, frustrated desires, misplaced trust. Although the tumult of war has fractured the ties and bonds which he now fervently seeks, in her novella Cook articulates a subject who works against the fixity and confidence of identity that is encouraged and expected by the heroic code; a subject that longs for and pursues a creature (Deidameia, Hector, Polyxena) that is always spectral, always matrixial, always nomadic.

²⁶⁹ Braidotti 2011a: 42.

3. 'A man who's putrid/ is hard to pity': Overcoming Abjection in Gwyneth Lewis's *A Hospital Odyssey*

The first-ever National Poet of Wales (2005-06), Gwyneth Lewis was born into a Welsh-speaking family in Cardiff in 1959. She has published eight books of poetry in both English and Welsh, including the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival Prize-winning *Parables and Faxes* (1995) and *Sparrow Tree* (2011), which won the Roland Mathias Poetry Award. She has been awarded a number of writing fellowships in both the UK and the USA, and was most recently appointed the Bain-Swiggett Visiting Lecturer of Poetry and English at Princeton University.

Lewis's engagement with the classics began during her school days. Speaking to Elena Theodorakopoulos, she notes: 'I did Latin O-Level and I absolutely loved it because we read *Aeneid 2*, the Laocoön episode, which I adored and this to me was a huge revelation about how to create poetic effects'.²⁷⁰ Her classical education continued at Girton College, where she read the Tragedy paper as part of the Cambridge Tripos, as well as at Columbia and Harvard universities in the United States, where she credits her creative writing tutors, the poets Joseph Brodsky and Robert Hass, with turning her attention to a number of classical writers, including Ovid and Lucretius: 'it was being shown to us that that was part of the job of a poet; to look at the whole of a tradition, not just the one that happened to be in your own language.'²⁷¹

The poem which was eventually published as *A Hospital Odyssey* in 2010 was originally conceived of as a 'modern version of the *Odyssey* with container ships in it',²⁷² as she and her husband Leighton, a former bosun with the Merchant Navy, purchased a small yacht and set out to cross the Atlantic ocean to Africa.²⁷³ The trip was cut short when Leighton became ill and was eventually diagnosed with non-

²⁷⁰ Lewis 2013.

²⁷¹ Lewis 2013.

²⁷² Lewis 2013.

²⁷³ *Two in a Boat* (2006) is Lewis's autobiographical account of the voyage and her husband's subsequent diagnosis with cancer.

Hodgkins lymphoma, compelling Lewis to transpose her modern-day *Odyssey* into an NHS hospital.

Unlike Cook's *Achilles*, which is set in the mytho-historical past, Lewis's poem definitively cultivates an association with the extra-textual world of twenty-first century Britain. We first see our protagonist, Maris,²⁷⁴ sitting next to the bed of her cancer-stricken husband, Hardy, begging him not to die. Feverish and barely cognizant, Hardy is unable to respond to Maris's attempts to capture his attention:

She tried again

to reach him but he'd set sail
without her on an internal sea
and, for all she clutched at the flimsy rail
of his cot, he'd already drifted away,
caught by the current, left her on a quay

alone.²⁷⁵

These lines, particularly the positioning of the word 'alone' at the very beginning of the first line of the third quoted stanza, serves to highlight a sense of almost physical separation between the sick husband and the wife who cares so much for him; however, due to the semi-autobiographical quality of the poem, the reader is initially led to suspect that this invocation of an odyssean sense of distance between the lovers is merely metaphorical of the protagonist's emotional turmoil at the thought of losing her partner. It is only when the hospital transforms into a ship and sails away that we begin to understand that the fantastic events of the poem are not psychological projections of grief but are, in fact, part of the poem's fictional world: 'they felt the hospital begin to turn/ like an ocean liner setting sail,/ the hooter sounding, tooting farewell'.²⁷⁶ With these lines, Lewis moves us away from the notion that we are

²⁷⁴ The name Maris is etymologically related to the Latin words *mare*, meaning sea, making it a particularly apt moniker for Lewis's protagonist.

²⁷⁵ Lewis 2010: 8.

²⁷⁶ Lewis 2010: 14.

dealing with a strictly realist treatment of the material and into a more fantastic mode which eventually takes over the whole poem.

It is this foray into the fantastic which forms the 'epic' feel of the poem. Mirroring Homer's *Odyssey*, Lewis's narrative includes a vast mythological setting and her protagonists (Maris, a greyhound called Wilson, the oncologist-come-Knight Templar, Dr. Ludlow, and Ichabod, an organ donor whose visceral physicality is the focus of the discussion on pp. 144-9) are beset by an array of monstrous creatures - illness and diseases which are often terrifyingly personified in the pages of the work. Of course, in the case of ancient epic poetry, which is often set in the mythological past, any departures from reality can be easily assimilated into the world of the text. Homer's Odysseus faces a number of supernatural perils, including sweet-singing sirens, a man-eating Cyclops and the sea monster Scylla. Lewis, however, having begun her narrative in a more realist mode, fails to transpose her reader into a comparable legendary backdrop. Instead she imports the epic fantastic into a world ostensibly analogous to our own. In doing so, she presents her experiences of her husband's cancer and treatment as almost too fantastic to be real, often linking the improbable events and creatures of her poem to specific moments in her life, as she reveals in a blog post written to publicise the 2014 BBC Radio Four production of *A Hospital Odyssey*:

I needed metaphors as tools with which to handle the extreme emotions experienced by patient and carer going through such treatment. I thought of the cancer as a monster, but then understood that it's a life form as valid as any other. I saw a distant doctor as a knight in armour, trying to avoid hurt by defending himself from emotion. When Leighton's immune system was destroyed by the chemo, I became obsessed with hygiene. I imagined microbes in a hospital having a ball in insanitary conditions.²⁷⁷

Such strategies serve to defamiliarise what is, objectively speaking, a relatively common experience, suggesting that it is only through the medium of the fantastic that the seeming 'unreality' of caring for someone who is gravely ill makes sense. As

²⁷⁷ Lewis 2014.

such, the plot of the poem serves as a creative reimagining of a couple's experiences of cancer treatment as a journey through a surreal hospital landscape.

It is in keeping with this sense of unreality which the poem cultivates that Maris screams at a bystander, demanding to know what is going on as she watches from the deck of the hospital-ship as Hardy and the other patients kayak away in their beds.

Wilson replies:

Illness is exile, [. . .]

[. . .] You're on two voyages,
if you're lucky your parallel lines
will cross. Now you're both on your own,

far from each other.²⁷⁸

Maris, however, refuses this separation and decides to go out and find her Odysseus instead of merely waiting for his return: 'Maris had to get back to him,/The husband who was her home.'²⁷⁹ It is with these lines that Lewis presents her poem as a variation on the hero's *νόστος*, except this time the protagonist is both the adventuring hero and the loyal wife.²⁸⁰ However, Maris is not only engaging in a *νόστος*, she is also battling Hardy's illness ('[y]ou're fighting for him, a formidable foe'²⁸¹), the invasion of her husband's body by cancer cells being compared to the sack of Troy (as shall be discussed in more detail below, pp. 147-8). In rewriting Homer's poetry from the perspective of a cancer patient's spouse, it is my argument that Lewis destabilises the traditional vision of the heroic and in its place presents us with what M. Wynn Thomas refers to as an epic of 'health and loving',²⁸² asking her readers: what constitutes 'health' and what it is like caring for someone with a chronic illness?

²⁷⁸ Lewis 2010: 15.

²⁷⁹ Lewis 2010: 16.

²⁸⁰ This could be a triple identification, as Maris's refusal to stay at home and wait is reminiscent of Telemachus' journey to search for news of his father in the first four books of the *Odyssey*.

²⁸¹ Lewis 2010: 22.

²⁸² Thomas 2010.

In recounting the adventures of Maris, Lewis's poem aspires to chart 'a map of the terrain you enter through illness, even if it's not your own',²⁸³ revealing an understanding of cancer treatment as oftentimes constituting processes of trial and error until a successful treatment is located. As such, the following will examine how Lewis rejects models which present cancer treatment as a heroic narrative of individualistic victory against an external foe in favour of an emphasis on a νόστος conceptualised as a series of nomadic, embodied connections with other subjects.

CANCER AS HEROIC NARRATIVE: ΚΛΕΟΣ VERSUS ΝΟΣΤΟΣ

In his review of *A Hospital Odyssey*, M. Wynn Thomas writes that behind the poem 'lies the author's recent experience of her husband Leighton's successful fight against cancer, shadowed in turn by her father's earlier unsuccessful battle with the same disease.'²⁸⁴ The terminology Thomas employs here - 'fight' and 'battle' - exemplifies the kinds of military metaphors which often characterise cancer discourse. The language of the battlefield in many ways informs our understanding of what it means to treat disease: doctors order batteries of tests, patients fight for their lives. In many ways, metaphors of warfare can be helpful in terms of sustaining a patient's optimism throughout long and difficult periods of illness; however, as Iain Twiddy points out, 'cancer has become increasingly associated with heroic narratives, whether the conclusion was successful or unsuccessful'.²⁸⁵ Indeed, a number of cancer patients have galvanised a sort of fame, even κλέος, through accounts of their battle with the disease. Here in the United Kingdom, Jane Tomlinson was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer at the age of 36. She garnered a great deal of media attention by raising more than £1.5 million for charity through participating in a number of gruelling sporting events, including the London and New York marathons, before her death in 2007. In the United States, professional cyclist Lance Armstrong won the Tour de France an unprecedented seven consecutive times following the successful treatment of an advanced testicular

²⁸³ Lewis 2015: 58.

²⁸⁴ Thomas 2010.

²⁸⁵ Twiddy 2015: 6.

cancer which had spread to his brain, lungs and abdomen.²⁸⁶ Nevertheless, metaphors of heroism and warfare can prove problematic, as American writer Susan Sontag, who was treated for stage-four breast cancer in the late 1970s, observes:

Radiotherapy uses the metaphors of aerial warfare; patients are “bomarded’ with toxic rays. And chemotherapy is chemical warfare, using poisons. Treatment aims to ‘kill’ cancer cells (without, it is hoped, killing the patient). Unpleasant side effects of treatment are advertised, indeed overadvertised [. . .] It is impossible to avoid damaging or destroying healthy cells [. . .] but it is thought that nearly any damage to the body is justified if it saves the patient’s life. Often, of course, it doesn’t work²⁸⁷

Here, Sontag problematises the discourse surrounding cancer treatment as a series of attacks and counter attacks, a battle to be fought at any cost, regardless of the often debilitating side effects of treatments which may or may not prove efficacious. This framing of cancer treatment as a heroic struggle to be won or lost is also questioned in Book 9 of Lewis’s poem where, mirroring the *νέκυια* of *Odyssey* Book 11, she recounts Maris and her companions’ descent into the hospital’s basement. Once there, Maris encounters a multitude of cancer patients reimagined as the shades Odysseus encounters in Hades:

Maris searched
but couldn’t find [Hardy] with a bald head
from chemo. Yet others were scorched
by radiotherapy, where they willingly died
in parts of themselves, so they could survive
for partners, children.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ He was, however, stripped of all seven of his Tour de France titles in 2012 following years of doping allegations.

²⁸⁷ Sontag 1979: 64.

²⁸⁸ Lewis 2010: 113.

The quoted lines mirror a number of the issues outlined in Sontag's essay. In aligning modern-day cancer patients with Homer's disembodied shades, Lewis reflects on the often devastating side-effects of cancer treatments which, in the world of her poem, renders sufferers only partially alive. What is more, Lewis can be seen to rewrite the notion of cancer treatment as a heroic, individualistic effort against disease as a willfulness on the part of the patient to stay alive for those who love them.²⁸⁹ In the encounters which follow, she further problematises this military discourse which casts the fight against cancer in an epic mould, choosing instead to valorise the power of the *νόστος*, understood here as symbolic of a journey towards healing through a series of tactile connections with other subjects. As such, the following will examine the tension between epic *κλέος* and more domestic concerns in Homer's poetry, before moving on to analyse its significance in *A Hospital Odyssey* more generally.

We have already seen in previous chapters (see, for example, pp. 19-22; 52-5) how the tension between the competing values of the home and the battlefield are thematically significant in Homer's poetry. In the *Iliad* they are presented in oppositional relation to one another: Achilles must choose between death and imperishable fame or a long and happy, but obscure, life.²⁹⁰ In the *Odyssey*, however, the correlation between the two values is much less straightforward. On the one hand, a successful *νόστος* serves to bolster the returning conqueror's *κλέος*; on the other, a catastrophic homecoming risks extinguishing one's former glory. This is most poignantly expounded upon in the second *νέκυια* where Agamemnon compares the 'wretched destruction' (*λυγρός ὄλεθρος*) of his return with Achilles' enduring fame:

ὥς σὺ μὲν οὐδέ θανῶν ὄνομ' ὤλεσας, ἀλλὰ τοι αἰεὶ
πάντας ἐπ' ἀνθρώπους κλέος ἔσσεται ἐσθλόν, Ἀχιλλεῦ,
αὐτὰρ ἐμοὶ τί τόδ' ἦδος, ἐπεὶ πόλεμον τολύπευσα;
ἐν νόστῳ γάρ μοι Ζεὺς μήσατο λυγρὸν ὄλεθρον
Αἰγίσθου ὑπὸ χερσὶ καὶ οὐλομένης ἀλόχοιο.

So, not even in dying, did you lose your name, but your fame,

²⁸⁹ There may also be an implicit criticism of the pressure to undergo invasive treatments in order to stay alive for loved ones, regardless of the side effects.

²⁹⁰ Homer *Iliad* 9.410-16.

to all mankind, will be forever good, Achilles.

But what pleasure is this for me, since I wound up the war?

For Zeus contrived, on my return, wretched destruction for me,

by Aegisthus' hands, and those of my ruinous wife.²⁹¹

Nevertheless, even if the hero's κλέος should be understood as being enhanced by his successful νόστος, the tension between the epic and the domestic, as it appears in Homer's *Iliad*, continues to seep through the poem. In Book 9, Odysseus, in an attempt to claim κλέος for the blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus, reveals his identity to the monster, shouting from the deck of his ship:

Κύκλωψ, αἴ κέν τις σε καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων
ὀφθαλμοῦ εἴρηται ἀεικελίην ἀλαωτύν,
φάσθαι Ὀδυσσῆα πτολιπόρθιον ἐξαλαῶσαι,
υἷὸν Λαέρτεω, Ἰθάκῃ ἔνι οἰκί᾽ ἔχοντα.

Cyclops, if any mortal man ever asks you
about the shameful blinding of your eye,
say that Odysseus the sacker of cities blinded you,
Laertes' son who has a house in Ithaca!²⁹²

In doing so, Odysseus effectively manages to delay his journey home as the Cyclops' father, the god Poseidon, inhibits the hero's νόστος for ten years as punishment for the mutilation of his son.²⁹³ As with the *Iliad*, it would once again appear, on the surface at least, that for the Homeric hero the pursuit of κλέος comes above all other concerns; however, as I have already argued, Homer's treatment of κλέος in his poetry is decidedly more complex and ambiguous. Throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the poet presents his readers with moments where he positions the domestic as a competing force in his heroes' lives: Achilles must choose between fame and death or

²⁹¹ Homer *Odyssey* 24.93-7. All translations of Homer's *Odyssey* are from James Huddleston 2006.

²⁹² Homer *Odyssey* 9. 502-5.

²⁹³ Homer *Odyssey* 9.19.

anonymous contentment; Andromache begs Hector not to return to the battlefield as he plays with their baby son, Astyanax.²⁹⁴ Although, ultimately, both Achilles and Hector appear to choose κλέος over the competing charms of a safe, but obscure, domesticity, it is my argument that Homer can be seen to question, or perhaps even implicitly criticise, his heroes' deadly quest for glory.

In *A Hospital Odyssey*, Lewis too explores the ways in which the domestic interferes with even the greatest ambition for fame. In Book 9 of her poem, Maris and her companions encounter the shades of the Nobel prize-winning scientist Marie Curie and Ludlow's grandfather, a sergeant from the First World War. As we shall see, throughout these interactions κλέος is attributed to the lives of both of these individuals (one for her advancements in science, the other for his bravery on the battlefield); nonetheless, their glory, like that of Agamemnon, is diminished when they find themselves thwarted in their νόστοι. This is to say that although Curie and Ludlow are regarded as heroic within the confines of the poem, their deaths, while noble, deprive them of the joys of being alive - a price, Lewis suggests, which is almost too high to pay.

The interactions between Maris, Curie and Sergeant Ludlow mirror those between Odysseus and Achilles in the Homeric Underworld. As such, it is necessary to look once more at the dialogue between the two heroes before going on to discuss the passage in relation to Lewis's poem and her attitudes towards Homeric κλέος more generally:

[“] σεῖο δ’ Ἀχιλλεῦ,
οὐ τις ἀνὴρ προπάρριθε μακάρτατος οὔτ’ ἄρ’ ὀπίσσω.
πρὶν μὲν γὰρ σε ζῶν ἐτίομεν ἴσα θεοῖσιν
Ἄργεῖοι, νῦν αὖτε μέγα κρατέεις νεκύεσσιν
ἐνθάδ’ ἐών: τῶ μή τι θανῶν ἀκαχίζευ, Ἀχιλλεῦ.”

ὥς ἐφάμην, ὁ δέ μ’ αὐτίκ’ ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπε:
“μὴ δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ’ Ὀδυσσεῦ.
βουλοίμην κ’ ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,

²⁹⁴ Homer *Iliad* 9.410-16; 6.431-439.

ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρω, ὧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἶη,
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.
ἀλλ' ἄγε μοι τοῦ παιδὸς ἀγαυοῦ μῦθον ἐνίσπες,
ἦ ἔπετ' ἐς πόλεμον πρόμος ἔμμεναι, ἦε καὶ οὐκί.[²⁹⁵']

[²⁹⁵'] But no man,
before or after, is more blessed than you, Achilles,
for we Argives valued you alive as equal to the gods,
and now you again wield great power, among the dead,
since you are here. So don't at all be sorry that you're dead, Achilles."

'So said I, and he immediately in answer said to me:
"Don't console me about death, brilliant Odysseus.
I'd rather be a hired farm hand, slaving for another,
for a landless man who hasn't much substance,
that rule all the dead who've perished.
But come, tell me word of my illustrious son,
whether he went to war to be a chief or not.[²⁹⁵']"

As has been discussed in the previous chapter (pp.54-5), this moment reveals a great deal about Homer's attitudes towards the enduring fame and reputation that his heroes fight for. In these lines, Achilles rejects the everlasting κλέος which defines his life and death, stating that he would prefer an obscure and ignoble existence than remain among the immaterial shades in Hades. Nonetheless, he requests news of the prowess of his still-living son. In one respect, although no longer able to partake in such glorious deeds himself, Achilles is able to derive pleasure from the fact that his son posthumously adds to his κλέος.²⁹⁶ As such, these lines can be understood as an attempt by Achilles, even after death, to maintain a connection with the world above:

²⁹⁵ Homer *Odyssey* 11. 482-93.

²⁹⁶ The idea of a father's κλέος continuing vicariously through his son is an important idea in Homer's poetry. This is not only realised through Achilles and Neoptolemus but other father-son relationships, such as those between Agamemnon and Orestes and, perhaps most prominently, Odysseus and Telemachus.

to insist that his deeds, even though they cost him his own life, left an impact which reverberates still.

Achilles' insistence of news about Neoptolemus is mirrored in the *κατάβασις* of *A Hospital Odyssey* when the shade of Marie Curie asks about the gamma knife, a descendant of her own early forays into the effects of radiation on cancerous tumours. In the following lines, Curie exhibits a desire to hear about the continuance of her own *κλέος* through further research into techniques which she pioneered decades previously:

She requested news

of her work. 'I hear that the gamma knife
is much more effective, a precision tool
compared to radium that took my life
but earned me fame and my Nobel.
Does that which killed me, make others well?'²⁹⁷

Arguably history's most famous female scientist, Curie's *κλέος* is located in her groundbreaking research on radioactivity throughout a career which saw her appointed the first female professor at the University of Paris, win two Nobel prizes (for Physics in 1904 and for Chemistry in 1911) and discover two elements (Polonium and Radium, both in 1898).²⁹⁸ Under her supervision, studies were carried out into the treatment of malignant tumours using radioactive isotopes, offering a means by which cancerous cells could be effectively killed or controlled.²⁹⁹ In many ways, Curie appears as an individual decidedly different from the *κλέος*-seeking heroes of Homer's poetry, living a modest life and refusing a number of awards, including a *Légion d'Honneur* medal from the French government.³⁰⁰ Nonetheless, like Achilles, she earned her fame and lost her life in pursuit of what we might think of as a contemporary heroic ideal, dying

²⁹⁷ Lewis 2010: 113-4.

²⁹⁸ Curie was the first person ever to be awarded two Nobel prizes, and remains the only woman to have done so. She is also the only person, male or female, to have won two Nobel prizes in different scientific disciplines.

²⁹⁹ Williams 1986: 332.

³⁰⁰ Pasachoff 1996: 93.

in 1934 at the age of 66 of aplastic anaemia, a disease of the bone marrow attributed to her long-term exposure to radiation.³⁰¹ However, unlike Achilles, whose κλέος is rooted in distinguishing himself above all others on the battlefield, Curie's pursuit of scientific excellence was primarily philanthropic in nature. As she writes in the biography of her husband and scientific collaborator, Pierre Curie:

You cannot hope to build a better world without improving the individuals. To that end each of us must work for his own improvement, and at the same time share a general responsibility for all humanity, our particular duty being to aid those to whom we think we can be most useful.³⁰²

Here, Curie roots the necessity for self-improvement in the desire to help others, not for individual glory. Nevertheless, despite differing motivations in their respective quests for brilliance, both Curie and Achilles suffer the same fate. In the quoted passage from Homer's *Odyssey* (pp. 117-8), Odysseus pays homage to Achilles' martial achievements and enduring fame, referring to him as a god and a king (11.482-6). Achilles, however, cuts him off, stating that an obscure life is better than death, however glorious (11.488-91).³⁰³ Similarly, in *A Hospital Odyssey*, despite acknowledging Curie's quasi-heroic achievements, Lewis remains ambivalent about the cost of her κλέος. As Maris begins to approach the scientist, she is immediately warned off:

['] No, my dear, don't get too close.
I'm radioactive. Polonium burns
me still, not even the ocean can cool
the heat of nuclear decomposition
that powers everything.' She turned

and glided away, on a thermocline
of interest only to the dead.

³⁰¹ Rollyson 2004: x.

³⁰² Curie 2012: 83

³⁰³ For a fuller discussion of the implications of these lines, please see pp.54-5

'She's always been my heroine,'
said Maris.³⁰⁴

Like Achilles, Curie also achieved fame at the cost of her life, their enduring κλέος rendering them even more pitiful than they might otherwise be, their previous greatness poignantly contrasting with their final diminished status. However, unlike Homer's Achilles, who strides away joyfully upon hearing of his son's outstanding continuation of his own glory,³⁰⁵ Curie floats sadly away, not waiting to hear Maris's response to the questions about her scientific legacy. Doubly marginalised by both her death and her radioactivity,³⁰⁶ Curie's insubstantiality infuses Maris's attempts to reach out to her with a profound pathos, creating a dejected portrayal of death as a deprivation of the tactile interactions enjoyed by the still-living characters in the poem.³⁰⁷ Reflecting sadly on Curie's heroic status, Maris's reaction to the dead scientist's shade belies a sudden realisation of the true significance of death, creating yet another layer of urgency to the quest to save her husband.

Maris' exploration of the inadequacies of κλέος in the face of death continues when she then encounters the shade of Ludlow's grandfather, who was a sergeant in the First World War. Addressing Maris and her companions he asks:

³⁰⁴ Lewis 2010: 114.

³⁰⁵ 'ὡς ἐφάμην, ψυχὴ δὲ ποδώκεος Αἰακίδαο/ φοίτα μακρὰ βιβᾶσα κατ' ἀσφοδελὸν λειμῶνα,/ γηθοσύνη ὃ οἱ υἱὸν ἔφην ἀριδείκετον εἶναι'; 'So said I, and the soul of fleet-footed Aeacides/ went with long strides through the asphodel meadow,/ joyous that I'd said his son was outstanding' (Homer *Odyssey* 11.538-40).

³⁰⁶ On a historical level, Curie's continued radioactivity in the poem might reflect the way in which her notebooks from the 1890s are still regarded as too dangerous to touch and must be kept in lead-lined boxes.

³⁰⁷ Maris's inability to touch Curie is rendered more affecting still if we overlay this passage with another moment in the *νέκυια*: that where Odysseus encounters the shade of his mother. Upon first seeing her in Hades, he weeps and becomes increasingly distressed as he tries to embrace her (11. 206-8). As she evades his grasp not once but three times, he enquires whether the wraith before him is merely an *εἶδωλον* and not truly Anticleia (11.213-4). In a yet another utterly desolate portrayal of death, she responds by explaining that her disembodied state makes it impossible for her to embrace him. What is more, as is also the case in Lewis's poem, the moment of disconnect serves as a heart-rending contrast to other instances of reunion in the poem, such as when the hero is physically embraced by both his wife (23.232-40) and his son (16.213-4) upon his return home to Ithaca.

Is this the Salient?

Oh no, I'm forgetting. It's quite elsewhere.
This isn't Ypres, I recall, and I am dead.
It takes us all some time to recover
from dying, though why I should return to this field
I don't know. I was injured here, not killed,

joined by war to the larger body
of men who've mixed their flesh with mud
in battlefields everywhere. I'll never be free
of that wound, it will forever link my blood
to richer harvests round Mametz Wood.³⁰⁸

Confused, Sergeant Ludlow initially thinks himself on the Salient, an area around Ypres, Belgium, which was the scene of some of the most significant battles of the First World War.³⁰⁹ Here, Lewis's mingling of the body with the battlefield, compounded by the rhyming of 'mud' and 'blood' in the second and fourth lines of the final quoted stanza, creates a visceral image in the reader's mind of crushed bodies. This serves two functions: first of all, we are invited to think about the futility of war as bringing about the mass slaughter of countless young lives. This stern condemnation of the destructive nature of war harks back to Achilles' rejection of Odysseus' mendacious

³⁰⁸ Lewis 2010: 114-5.

³⁰⁹ Sergeant Ludlow, although a fictional character, appears to have been a soldier in the real-life 38th (Welsh) Division of the British Army during WWI, which operated in numerous areas of the front line until the armistice of November 1918. The quoted passage from Lewis mentions two famous assaults which the Welsh soldiers took part in: the Battle of Mametz Wood and the Battle of Pilckem Ridge. With regards to the first incursion, the division was ordered to secure an area of northern France known as Mametz Wood during the opening days of the First Battle of the Somme (1 July -18 November 1916). Although managing to capture the wood, the division suffered nearly 4000 casualties (600 dead) throughout the six-day assault. During the Battle of Pilckem Ridge, the opening attack of the Third Battle of Ypres (31 July-2 August 1917), the division was commanded to capture the German front line. Their charge, although successful, sustained heavy losses (around 1300 men), as they were subjected to German artillery fire constituting a blend of high explosives and mustard gas. Throughout the duration of the war, 4419 of the division's men lost their lives, 23268 were injured and 1693 reported missing (See Munby 2014 [1920]).

platitudes about his enduring fame as he denounces the pursuit of κλέος for cutting his own young life short.³¹⁰ However, whereas Homer attempts to induce pathos by contrasting the image of a disembodied Achilles with a larger-than-life Odysseus, Lewis's poem, with its gruesome imagery of mangled bodies, serves as an even harsher condemnation of the appalling conditions of the front lines of battle.

Secondly, this image of flesh and blood is also connective. Although he did not die during the war, Sergeant Ludlow's blood, having mixed in with that of his comrades into the mud of the battlefield, physically ties him not only to this place but also to those who fought and died there. We can conceive of him as a cell in a much larger body of soldiers, the millions who were wounded and killed not only during the First World War but in all such conflicts throughout history. Amongst such slaughter, men cannot be individualised; body parts intermingle and it becomes impossible to tell them apart. Again, Sergeant Ludlow's experiences of undifferentiated fighting in amongst the masses can be contrasted with the aristocratic culture of the named few that underpins the heroic values of Homer's poetry. In the *Iliad* especially, there is a marked stratification between the warrior aristocracy, whom Homer individually names, and the multitudes of anonymous free peasants who make up the bulk of the Greek and Trojan armies.³¹¹ Homer chooses, for the most part, to concentrate on duels between named warriors, including Menelaus and Paris and, most significantly, Achilles and Hector.³¹² Indeed, it seems as though the rank and file on both sides contribute very little to the outcome of the war at all. In the world of the *Iliad*, κλέος is attained by individual, heroic action, the pursuit of which often taking precedence over the needs of the army or the city as a whole.³¹³

Sergeant Ludlow's grandson, Dr Ludlow, tries to lift his ancestor out of the anonymous masses of soldiers and to individualise his contribution to the war effort,

³¹⁰ Homer *Iliad* 11.482-91.

³¹¹ The sole common soldier named in Homer's *Iliad* is Thersites who, having disrupted the rallying of the army and abused his betters, is immediately beaten and put back in his place by Odysseus (2.211-77). He is the only man in the poem depicted as being unattractive, or αἰσχρὸς (2.216).

³¹² Homer *Iliad* 3.310-82; 22. 247-366.

³¹³ Examples include Achilles' refusal to fight due to the perceived slight to his honour (Homer *Iliad* 1.169-71), even after an embassy is sent to beg him to return to the front lines (9.643-55); Hector, too, ignores Andromache's advice to avoid the vanguard of battle, citing the need to win κλέος for both himself and his family (6.440-6).

remarking: '[y]ou were very daring to join the gas corps'.³¹⁴ However, mirroring Achilles' response to Odysseus' praise, Sergeant Ludlow immediately undercuts the κλέος attributed to his deeds, replying '[n]ot really, I didn't know enough to fear/ the wind in those pre-mustard gas days.'³¹⁵ Despite attempts to mythologise him as some sort of twentieth century hero, a man whose deeds are worthy of renown and admiration, Sergeant Ludlow does not find comfort in the memory of his past actions, deeming them inadequate compared with the greater business of living. This sentiment is emphasised even more fervently as he weeps over the futility of his current disembodied state:

I've learned the body's greater than the soul,
if briefer. It's not true that desire
ends with dying. What would I not give to feel
my skin raised to goose-bumps by evening air?
Or to smell the roots of your mother's hair
as I used to daily?³¹⁶

Like Achilles, Sergeant Ludlow grieves for a life now lost. Mentioning their children, both Achilles and Ludlow invite us to think about the impact of war on families and wider communities, rather than merely at the level of the individual. However, whereas Achilles wishes to return to the world of the living in order to pursue the warrior code and secure his father's honour, by force if necessary,³¹⁷ Ludlow's expressions of regret are rooted in what is bodily, sensory, tactile, a sentiment made all the more poignant when illustrated through a series of physical sensations: the cold air on his skin, the smell of his daughter's hair. Death, although not quenching the desire for these experiences, renders them impossible. As such, for both Achilles, the

³¹⁴ Lewis 2010: 115.

³¹⁵ Lewis 2010: 115.

³¹⁶ Lewis 2010: 115.

³¹⁷ 'εἰ τοιόσδ' ἔλθοιμι μίνυνθά περ ἐς πατέρος δῶ:/ τῷ κέ τεω στύξαιμι μένος καὶ χεῖρας ἀάπτους,/ οἷ κείνον βιόωνται ἐέργουσίν τ' ἀπὸ τιμῆς'; 'If only I could come like that to my father's house, even for a while,/ in that case I'd make my fury and invincible hands bitter/ to anyone who did him violence or barred him from his honour' (Homer *Odyssey* 11.501-3.)

aristocratic Homeric hero, and Sergeant Ludlow, the trench soldier, a material existence is held in greater esteem than the disembodied soul.

In this way, Maris's encounters in the Underworld give her a fuller appreciation of what it means to be alive, causing her to pursue her search for and return with a cure to her grievously sick husband even more fervently than before. In asking us to reconsider the ancient tension between the epic and the domestic, the world of the battlefield and the world of the home, notions of the heroic take on an altogether more contested life in the context of Lewis's poem. Therefore, the following will now turn to an examination of Maris as an alternative to the epic hero in the twenty-first century, one who embodies life and connectivity, not individualistic fame and a glorious death, before moving on to discuss a number of the episodes which constitute her journey towards love and healing more generally.

MARIS: A HERO FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

On a surface level, the distinctions between Penelope and Odysseus in Homer's epic are quite straightforward: as the hero adventures around the Mediterranean, fighting monsters and seducing beautiful women, his wife remains at home, the recipient of an unwelcome courtship by the sons of the local aristocrats. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the hero's movement away from Troy towards Ithaca can be read against the wife's fixity in the home of her presumably dead husband. Such a reading invites a number of polarities, including male and female, active and passive, movement and stasis. However, if we look more closely at the text, we can begin to pick these seemingly inscrutable binaries apart. When we are first introduced to the hero on Ogygia in Book 1, we discover that he has been kept prisoner there for the past seven years by the nymph Calypso. This is to say, Odysseus has spent most of the years following the fall of Troy in the kind of helpless stasis usually associated with his wife. As such, the hero of the *Odyssey* can be seen to represent a kind of in-betweenness, a straddling of the very polarities, mentioned above, which Homer's poem seems to invoke. What is more, Homer's tale does not present the hero's *vóσtoς* as an undeviating passage between the battlefields of Troy and his home on Ithaca but as 'process of shifting back and forth among recollection, recognition, projection, anticipation, in which past,

present, and future dovetail, are refracted in the imagination, and become reconfigured',³¹⁸ making Odysseus a character with rich potential for Lewis's alternative figuration of the heroic subject in the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, Lewis's poem does not merely present us with a female Odysseus, nor a simplistic inversion of the traditional story as given to us by Homer; rather, Maris should be understood as an 'active' Penelope who incorporates both Penelopean and Odyssean traits in ways which merge the seemingly opposing worlds they represent in a manner reminiscent of Braidotti's nomadic subject (see Chapter 1). In presenting a version of the heroic that differs from the more common Homeric representations, Lewis uses the often marginalised perspective of the feminine to augment a point of view which is more latent in the *Odyssey*, thus troubling the dominant paradigms and structures which constitute the epic hero.

Lewis's decision to write her epic poem from the wife's perspective deserves particular attention, particularly in light of her claim that she finds Homer's famously faithful spouse exasperating, stating in an interview with Elena Theodorakopoulos and Polly Stoker: 'Penelope has always infuriated me'.³¹⁹ Like Odysseus, whose exploits have become the stuff of legend by the time of the events of the *Odyssey*,³²⁰ Penelope is similarly mythologised within the confines of the poem. Presented as a foil for the infamous adulteresses Helen and Clytemnestra, Penelope is strongly associated with absolute marital fidelity as she patiently awaits the return of her husband, despite the temptations posed by the suitors.³²¹ It is easy to understand why Lewis might find aspects of Penelope's characterisation in the *Odyssey* infuriating. When she is first introduced to us by Homer in Book 1, she descends from her rooms to object to the bard's performance of a song which arouses memories of her missing husband. Immediately bursting into tears, she is promptly scolded by her young son who wastes no time in asserting his masculine authority:

[']άλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε,
ἰστόν τ' ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε

³¹⁸ Slatkin 2005: 317.

³¹⁹ Lewis 2013.

³²⁰ I refer specifically to Demodocus' song in 8.72-82.

³²¹ Homer *Odyssey* 11.444-6; 24.192-202.

ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι: μῦθος δ' ἄνδρεςσι μελήσει
παῖσι, μάλιστα δ' ἐμοί: τοῦ γὰρ κράτος ἔστ' ἐνὶ οἴκῳ.³²²
ἢ μὲν θαμβήσασα πάλιν οἴκόνδε βεβήκει:
παιδὸς γὰρ μῦθον πεπνυμένον ἔνθετο θυμῷ.
ἐς δ' ὑπερῷ' ἀναβᾶσα σὺν ἀμφιπόλοισι γυναιξὶ
κλαῖεν ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆα φίλον πόσιν, ὄφρα οἱ ὕπνον
ἦδὺν ἐπὶ βλεφάροισι βάλε γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη.

[']So go into the house and tend to your own work,
the loom and the distaff, and bid your handmaids
go about their work. Speaking is of concern to men,
to all, especially to me, for the power in this house is mine'

Astonished, she went back into the house,
for she put in her heart the astute words of her son.
When she'd gone up to the upper floor with her handmaid women,
she then wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband,
until bright-eyed Athena cast sweet sleep upon her eyelids.³²²

Telemachus' unsympathetic response to his mother's protestations operates to underline established gender roles, i.e. the customary division between the work of women, in this instance weaving, and the concerns of men, which incorporates discussion and debate. In these lines, Penelope appears disconcertingly passive, immediately obeying the commands of her young son before closing herself away in grief for her lost husband. However, Penelope is not as subordinate to the men in her life as she might appear. Although she does defer to her son's 'astute words' (μῦθος πεπνυμένος) and returns to her rooms, she ultimately remains outside his absolute control, as Telemachus demonstrates when he articulates a great deal of unease at Antinous' suggestion that he compel Penelope's return to Sparta in order that her father might negotiate her remarriage.³²³ Thus, to restrict Penelope's role to that of

³²² Homer *Odyssey* 1.356-64.

³²³ Homer *Odyssey* 2.130-7.

the faithful wife applies limitations to an indelibly more complex character. Her grief and fidelity are only one part of her characterisation: she is also intelligent, cunning and resolute, as can be demonstrated in Book 2, where Antinous relates to Telemachus the trick she has played on the suitors in order to delay her remarriage:

*στησαμένη μέγαν ἰστόν ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ὕφαινε,
λεπτὸν καὶ περίμετρον: ἄφαρ δ' ἡμῖν μετέειπε:*

*‘κοῦροι ἐμοὶ μνηστῆρες, ἐπεὶ θάνε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,
μῖμνετ' ἐπειγόμενοι τὸν ἐμὸν γάμον, εἰς ὃ κε φᾶρος
ἐκτελέσω, μή μοι μεταμώνια νήματ' ὄληται,
Λαέρτη ἥρωι ταφήιον, εἰς ὅτε κέν μιν
μοῖρ' ὀλοή καθέλησι τανηλεγέος θανάτοιο,
μή τις μοι κατὰ δῆμον Ἀχαιϊάδων νεμεσῆση.
αἴ κεν ἄτερ σπείρου κεῖται πολλὰ κτεατίσσας.’*

*ὥς ἔφαθ', ἡμῖν δ' αὖτ' ἐπεπειθετο θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ.
ἔνθα καὶ ἡματίη μὲν ὑφαίνεσκεν μέγαν ἰστόν,
νύκτας δ' ἀλλύεσκεν, ἐπεὶ δαΐδας παραθεῖτο.*

She set up a great web in the palace, delicate and long-threaded,
started to weave, then soon said among us:

‘Young men, my suitors, since Odysseus has died,
wait, though eager for my wedding, until I can complete
this cloth, lest my weaving be ruined and in vain,
a burial cloth for the hero Laertes, for the time when
baneful doom, of death that brings long woe, takes him down,
lest any Achaean woman throughout the kingdom resent me,
should he who won many things lie without a shroud.’

So said she, and our manly spirit yielded in turn.

Then by day she wove her great web,

but at night, when she had torches placed beside it, she unravelled it.³²⁴

Here, Antinous, a proud and arrogant man, reluctantly commends Penelope's ingenuity in deceiving the suitors with her weaving trick, successfully deferring her remarriage for almost four years.³²⁵ Once more, it appears that Penelope refuses to subordinate herself to the men in her life, be that her son or the suitors. As such, we are presented with two different sides to Penelope: the meek and faithful wife and mother, as well as the crafty trickster. These seemingly oppositional facets of her characterisation can be best encapsulated by the symbol of the loom upon which she weaves. Penelope's web (*μέγας ιστός*) is one of the most prominent images of the *Odyssey*³²⁶ and invites a double reading. On the one hand, Penelope's act of weaving situates her firmly within the domestic space of the *οἶκος*, a place of stasis and chastity. However, as she unravels her work each night, the cunning (*κέρδος*)³²⁷ she exhibits propels her forward into the more active, heroic, space normally associated with her husband. As a result of her scheming, a number of scholars have re-interpreted Penelope's supposed passivity as a wilful resolve to assert herself in a game of masculine domination - she is not merely the faithful wife, wiling away the days weeping for her lost husband; rather her characterisation rejects such simplistic archetypes.³²⁸

Lewis enters into this dialogue about the complex nature of Penelope's characterisation in Book 7 of her poem, where she juxtaposes Maris, whom she refers to as an 'active' Penelope, and Penny, a 'malign' and 'miserable' spider.³²⁹ Having fallen down an elevator shaft, Maris and her companions find themselves trapped in a large web. They soon encounter its inhabitant: Odysseus' wife Penelope, or Penny as she is known here. Lewis's Penny epitomises Penelope's watching and waiting to

³²⁴ Homer *Odyssey* 2. 94-105.

³²⁵ It should be noted, however, that Antinous' regard for Penelope's intelligence is somewhat reluctant, particularly when he attributes her calculating schemes to the interventions of Athena, rather than acknowledging her as resourceful in her own right (Homer *Odyssey* 2.115-22).

³²⁶ Homer *Odyssey* 2.94, 104, 109; 19.139, 149; 24.129; 139; 147.

³²⁷ Homer *Odyssey* 2. 88, 118.

³²⁸ Important studies on the question of Penelope's characterisation in the *Odyssey* include Murnaghan 1986, Winkler 1990, Felson-Rubin 1994, Katz 1991, Foley 1995 and Schein 1995.

³²⁹ Lewis 2013.

almost ridiculous extremes. This stasis is again most aptly symbolised by the image of the web she inhabits, which, like the Homeric Penelope, distinctly positions her within the geographical limits of the *οἶκος*, a space where she patiently wiles away the hours waiting for her husband's return. In this way, Penny embodies Penelope's more passive traits without the concomitant sense of agency that Homer attributes to the weaving trick. Moreover, Penny's web is not merely a physical entity but extends throughout the hospital through a large network of CCTV cameras and computer interfaces, which she constantly surveys, eager not to miss Odysseus' homecoming. When asked by Ichabod where the companions find themselves, Penny responds:

'It interface

of hospital knowings.' Penelope turned,
adjusting the angles of cameras
so, in the flicker of TV screens
they saw patients queuing for scanners,
the concourse. 'We likes to know where enemies are.'

And so each eye kept up a separate stare,
searching the hospital's daily scenes.
Maris asked 'What are you looking for?'
'*Hiss*. Something happening out of routine.
Somebody smuggling a body in

or out, unofficial. Penny afraid
he leave her for good, so she miss
nothing that happen here.[']³³⁰

These lines reveal how, much like a web's vibrations alert a spider to the presence of prey, Penny is intimately connected with the comings and goings of the hospital's staff

³³⁰ Lewis 2010: 83-4. Emphasis in original.

and patients. Informing Maris, '[w]aiting and watching now Penny's life',³³¹ the spider's words betray the ways in which her actions are constrained by the archetype of the ever-faithful Penelope. Having grown eight eyes to facilitate her vigil, Penny tethers herself to a scopic economy: 'Since hubby leave I more cerebral,/ I learn to spy. I knowing wayss/ of living nearly virtual . . .' [sic]³³² In adopting the stance of voyeur, Penny can, in many ways, be regarded as holding a position of absolute power: the more intense her surveillance appears, the more fearful and threatening it comes across. However, her scrutiny of the CCTV footage does not, in fact, generate action but instead deepens her sense of passivity. What is more, her obsessive behaviour reveals a number of neuroses regarding the body, and the sexual body in particular:

I never forgive that bitch Calypso
nor Homer who tell of their affair,
so everyone know how he love that cow.
She turn Penny into voyeur.
All that embodiment, it make her fear

what it is to be trapped in meat.
Penny dread she drown in matter -
burn, she did, in hormonal heat,
appalled by softness and by moisture.
Penny decide she not be smothered,

she choose dryness, far more subtle.
With spider body we feel safe
ethereal and in full control.³³³

In these lines, Penny remonstrates bitterly about the cultural authority of Homer's version of events, belying a frustration at her inability to control her own narrative and her subsequent reputation as a submissive figure in the face of her husband's

³³¹ Lewis 2010: 82.

³³² Lewis 2010: 83.

³³³ Lewis 2010: 86.

extramarital exploits. In *A Hospital Odyssey*, the constraints of the Penelopean mythology reduce Penny to a miserable existence. Her lifetime of watching and waiting have caused her to shrivel from a flesh-and-blood human being into an insect: 'Penelope have been loyal, chaste/ Sso long her voice and her eyes are dry/ from crying' [sic].³³⁴ Nonetheless, for all her lauded chastity, Lewis's Penny is obsessed with sex, focalising her husband's tale from the point of view of his adulteries, reducing his heroic *vóσtoς* to a series of 'dirty adventures'.³³⁵ Reminding her readers that most of Odysseus' journey home from Troy consists of his being seduced by Circes and Calypsos, Lewis questions the Homeric Odysseus' status as the active male hero.

What is more, Lewis specifically links Penny's neurotic behaviour to Odysseus' affairs, her sexual repression a direct response to thwarted desire. As such, on the one hand, Lewis's incorporation of Penelope's more passive traits into the figuration of Penny can be read as an affirmation of her reception as an exemplum of feminine modesty. On the other hand, however, her portrayal of Penny simultaneously revolts against the image of the faithful wife by taking it to its extremes, turning Penelope's chastity into a sexually frustrated rejection of the physical body, and reinterpreting her watching and waiting into a hunt for the adulterous husband whom she plans to kill upon his return.³³⁶ For Penny, the sexual body, although usually a source of pleasure, becomes a source of pain in light of her husband's transgressions. As such, she is explicitly afraid of matter, moisture, heat. Disavowing her embodiment, she adopts a spider-like dryness, which she associates with control, in an attempt to rise above the insistent materiality of the body: '[m]essy flesh/ not needed. All it give uss is pain./ Much better to be a moving brain/ than to feel everything.' [sic]³³⁷ By detaching herself from her body's desires and strictly regulating her physical requirements, for example by refusing to eat, Penny gains a greater sense of control over her self and her surroundings.³³⁸

It is this self-subjection to the intense demands of a mythology defined by absolute chastity, patient anticipation, physical restriction and social pressure that

³³⁴ Lewis 2010: 83.

³³⁵ Lewis 2010: 83; 86.

³³⁶ 'She laid/ plans for her husband, a sspecial kiss . . .' [sic] (Lewis 2010: 84).

³³⁷ Lewis 2010: 86

³³⁸ 'Penny look nice/ by sstarving, though plenty of meat/ in hospital, it fall at her feet./ She desiccated but her girlish waisst/ sstill trim.' [sic] (Lewis 2010: 83).

causes Penny to form these obsessive patterns of behaviour, chaining her to an οἶκος-web in order to keep the hospital under constant surveillance. When Maris suggests that Penny leave her lair and go search for Odysseus herself, the spider spits: ‘Penny never – hiss – ever do that.’³³⁹ With these words, she resolutely affirms the official version of her character as the faithful wife *in extremis*. Once more, she simultaneously rails against and adheres to the limitations imposed by her mythology. Indeed, Maris’s suggestion that Penny leave the safety of her web and go out into the world causes her formidable angst: her eyes roll and she begins to convulse as her skin splits and an even more terrifying spider emerges from the exoskeleton.³⁴⁰ Here, Penny’s metamorphosis can be read as a fresh effort to counterbalance the threat ‘thunder-thighs’ Maris poses to the traditional Penelopean mythology, both in terms of her activity and her materiality.³⁴¹

Through the figure of Penny, Lewis challenges the cultural authority of Penelope’s reception as the waiting wife, making room for her more ‘active’ heroine, Maris, a figure who embodies the agency, materiality and capacity for empathy which Lewis constructs as heroic in her poem. Therefore, the rest of this chapter will examine how *A Hospital Odyssey* disavows Penny’s rejection of the physical body and engages in a more haptic economy, a move which emphasises embodied vitality and the primacy of touch. We shall explore how, in the world of Lewis’s poem, the mutability of the body is a source of pleasure, as opposed to a source of anxiety, positing the subject as an essentially heterogeneous entity-always-in-the-making. After Maris, we will no longer merely associate Penelope with the mythology of the forsaken and compliant spouse, as Lewis’s rewriting makes full use of the potentialities traced by a cluster of feminist approaches to the Homeric Penelope³⁴² (though, of course, what is at best subliminal in the *Odyssey*, is given an altogether novel and unpredictable lease of life with Lewis’s Maris). This Homeric archetype, reinterpreted, is suffused with new and multifaceted portrayals that, challenging the limitations placed upon her canonical mythology, refuse simplistic categorisations and assert autonomy.

³³⁹ Lewis 2010: 87. Emphasis in original.

³⁴⁰ Lewis 2010: 87.

³⁴¹ Lewis 2010: 83.

³⁴² See, for example, Felson-Rubin 1994 and Katz 1991.

OVERCOMING ABJECTION: ENCOUNTERING PHILOCTETES

One of the first characters Maris meets on her hospital odyssey is a man called Phil, short for Philoctetes. Like his ancient namesake, Phil has a septic foot which is so foul that, despite calling for hours, no one has come to tend to him. Spotting Maris and Wilson, he calls out to them, pleading '[p]lease don't leave. I feel/ so lonely'.³⁴³ The overwhelming feeling of isolation that his entreaty makes manifest is compounded with the memory of his ancient namesake's abandonment on the island of Lemnos by the Greek army after a bite from a snake causes a stinking wound. Mirroring Phil's words, the Sophoclean Philoctetes is overjoyed when he encounters Neoptolemus, who has been unwillingly enlisted to steal his bow:

*καὶ μὴ μ' ὄκνω
δείσαντες ἐκπλαγῆτ' ἀπηγριωμένον,
ἀλλ' οἰκτίσαντες ἄνδρα δύστηνον, μόνον,
ἔρημον ὧδε κᾶφίλον κακούμενον,
φωνήσατ', εἴπερ ὡς φίλοι προσήκετε.*

Do not shrink from me in fear and be repelled by my wild state, but take pity on an unhappy man, alone, afflicted like this without a companion or a friend, and speak, if indeed you have come as friends!³⁴⁴

The tale of the Greek hero Philoctetes remains amongst the first representations of physical infirmity to have been portrayed in literature. Although Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides all produced their own adaptations of the tale, the Sophoclean version (produced in 409 BC) is the only one which has survived. In her analysis of how physical suffering is understood on a cultural level by society, Elaine Scarry names the *Philoctetes* as amongst the most eloquent portrayals of physiological illness on stage.³⁴⁵ This is hardly surprising - in many ways, the *Philoctetes* is the prototypical

³⁴³ Lewis 2010: 34.

³⁴⁴ Sophocles *Philoctetes* 225-229. Translations of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* are taken from Hugh Lloyd-Jones 1998 [1994].

³⁴⁵ Scarry 1985: 10.

tragedy about pain and suffering, a poignant dramatic representation of what it means to suffer from an incurable disease. A compelling account of chronic illness and the significance of the wider community of warriors in the recuperation of the ailing hero, it is a pertinent choice for Lewis's reflections on the experience and meaning of pain. Therefore, the following will examine in more detail Phil's experiences of suffering and marginalisation.

The physical isolation of the ancient Philoctetes informs our reading of his modern counterpart. In Sophocles' play, the island of Lemnos, on which Philoctetes was abandoned, is conceptualised as an *έσχατιά*, i.e. a geographically marginalised space. As Odysseus notes in the play's opening lines:

*ἀκτή μὲν ἦδε τῆς περιρρύτου χθονός
Λήμνου, βροτοῖς ἄστιπτος οὐδ' οἴκουμένη*

This is the shore of the seagirt land of Lemnos, untrudged by mortals, not inhabited.³⁴⁶

In Sophocles' play, the island of Lemnos not only physically separates Philoctetes from the remainder of the army but also serves to signify his marginality. His experiences of physical degeneration and pain create a barrier between himself and the rest of the healthy Greek forces, for whom illness is a deviant condition. Like Lemnos, Lewis's fantastic hospital is unfamiliar terrain, physically and psychologically on the very borders of her protagonists' lived experience, its patients dislocated from normal interpersonal interactions. However, even in this side-lined life, Phil is a pariah. Just as the ancient Philoctetes, with his open festering wound, is removed to geographical outliers, so is Lewis's Phil relegated to an isolated side-room of the hospital in a move which makes his social ostracism all the more immediate and tangible.

Maris first becomes aware of Phil through the foul smell of his wound: '[i]magine meat rotting,/ pork in a plastic bag, left sweating/ out in the heat of a midday sun.'³⁴⁷ Before we move on to think further about the embarrassment, fear,

³⁴⁶ Sophocles *Philoctetes* 1-2.

³⁴⁷ Lewis 2010: 33-4.

and even disgust, which Maris experiences in front of the open body, it will be enriching to our analysis if we pause for a moment to think about Julia Kristeva's work on abjection. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), Julia Kristeva offers an explanation of the psychological processes which underpin our experiences of repulsion or disgust when confronted with abject objects. Although Kristeva argues that the subject's first experience of the abject is the maternal body, the abject subsequently attaches itself to a myriad of objects.³⁴⁸ Many abject experiences occur within our everyday lives, peripherally haunting us 'unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang'.³⁴⁹ For Kristeva, the abject is primarily allied with the physical body, especially those aspects of bodily experience which emphasise the our insistent materiality. Examples include: the dead body, the ill body, the aging body, the pregnant body; those bodily parts which attest our baser functions, such as the mouth, the genitals and the anus; as well as the wastes and fluids which our bodies excrete (urine, faeces, semen, blood, vomit, saliva etc.). An abject response might be solicited, therefore, when you see blood or vomit, as Kristeva writes:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without

³⁴⁸ In her account, Kristeva writes that, initially, the child's experience of its self is tied up with the body of its mother. This is particularly the case during pregnancy, when the child is literally a part of the mother's body, and in the early stages following birth as the infant is wholly dependent on its female parent to meet its every need. However, in order to become an autonomous subject, the child must extricate itself from this sense of oneness with the (m)other: '[f]or man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine qua non* condition of our individuation' (Kristeva 1989: 27). In order to become a subject in his/her own right, the child must reject the mother. In doing so, the child asserts himself as 'I' because he is 'not that'. In doing so, the maternal body becomes abject; it becomes a source of fear as it reminds us of the time before we entered into an autonomous subjectivity. The mother becomes a symbol of that pre-symbolic time, a time preceding the differentiation between the self and the other. Thus the mother is a constant reminder of the precarious nature of a subjectivity grounded in the hierarchical self/other dichotomy.

Despite their ostensible remove from the originary abject, Kristeva maintains that subsequent experiences of abjection contain within them an echo of the subject's violent separation from the mother: '[t]he abject confronts us [. . .] with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling' (Kristeva 1980 [1982]: 13).

³⁴⁹ Kristeva 1980 [1982]: 1.

makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.³⁵⁰

Abjection is a rejection of the relentless physicality of the subject's embodied existence. When challenged with that which reminds one of one's own eventual decay and death (i.e. bodily wastes and fluids), an abject response is elicited: '[s]uch wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver'.³⁵¹ The abject body, through the processes of consumption, excretion and expulsion, constantly disrupts the 'clean and proper' borders of the self.³⁵² It is ultimately uncontrollable, thus the subject attempts to renounce this anarchic entity with which it is inextricably linked, but which it simultaneously considers itself distinct from. As such, process of abjection can be read as an impossible attempt to rise above the materiality of the body.

Maris's initial experiences of abjection occur as she approaches Phil's bedside, causing her to want to 'flee/ this man who was beginning to drown/ in the poisons of his own body.'³⁵³ As the pungent stench enters Maris's nose, she experiences a dissolution between the boundaries of her own body and that of Phil. Here, Phil's body signifies that which, according to Kristeva, 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.³⁵⁴ As she helps Phil to change his bandages, she becomes increasingly distressed at the sight of the oozing blood and pus: '[i]n the bloody mess/ maggots writhed and she could see bone,/ exposed and sticky. She started to retch'.³⁵⁵ Troubling the borders which serve to differentiate himself from Maris, Phil becomes an object of horror in the Kristevan sense of the term, his degenerate body absolutely abject in a culture fixated on optimum health. Faced with the decaying materiality of

³⁵⁰ Kristeva 1980 [1982]: 3.

³⁵¹ Kristeva 1980 [1982]: 3.

³⁵² Kristeva 1980 [1982]: 8.

³⁵³ Lewis 2010: 35.

³⁵⁴ Kristeva 1980 [1982]: 4.

³⁵⁵ Lewis 2010: 36.

Phil's body, Maris must recognise the insistent potentiality of death within herself. This breaking down of the binary divisions between subject and object, living and dead - so necessary for the formation of subjectivity - results in an abject response. Looking away from Phil's wound and retching, Maris attempts to cast away the challenge Phil poses to socio-symbolical structures of selfhood, as Kristeva notes: '[t]he spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck'.³⁵⁶ Turning away and gagging, Maris attempts to achieve bodily closure, isolation and self-reliance. This experience of disgust should be understood as an attempt to overcome the abject object's - Phil's - challenge to Maris's autonomous self, to re-establish those bodily borders within which she constructs her identity. Retching and vomiting allows Maris to separate herself from that which she is not, an act necessary for a coherent formation of the ego.³⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the abject continually haunts the borders of subjectivity:

we may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.³⁵⁸

As such, Maris's outburst demonstrates the fragility of a subjectivity dependent on such a violent rejection of the other. This is to say that abjection, although allowing the subject to distinguish between the 'I' and the 'not I', simultaneously reveals the fragility of those borders in the first instance, as well as the subjectivity thus engendered. As such, the abject can be understood as 'vortex of summons and repulsion',³⁵⁹ excluded but not fully eradicated from the 'clean and proper' borders of the self. It 'is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object'.³⁶⁰ Therefore, in the lines that follow, Lewis brings to the fore an even more powerful response to this dissolution of the boundaries between subjects, one based on the healing potential of love and empathy rather than fear and disgust.

³⁵⁶ Kristeva 1980 [1982]: 2.

³⁵⁷ Kristeva 1980: 4.

³⁵⁸ Kristeva 1980: 9.

³⁵⁹ Kristeva 1980: 1.

³⁶⁰ Kristeva 1980: 4.

As Maris begins to cry – ‘[I] look at you with a hole/ in your foot, all septic. You frighten/ us all’³⁶¹ – her words reveal an element of self-doubt about her abilities to care for someone with a chronic illness like Phil, or even Hardy. Love, as Phil explains, is the sole solution to this dilemma:

True love goes against the grain
of everything easy, and misery
at another’s suffering is a sign
of real loving. It can feel like pain,

but only unselfishness can heal
and it stings.³⁶²

Here, Phil posits love as the bridge between the ill and those who care for them. It is an emotion which honours others, regardless of whether or not the conditions are agreeable. Although it can hurt, love without such hardship is worthless. At Phil’s words, Maris becomes completely overwhelmed. As he embraces her, she begins to cry and her tears fall into his wound:

like a shower
of rain, the droplets went
into his wound and soothed the gore
and suddenly the heady scent
of soil after drought, so fresh and fragrant,
spread through the room. Think of the rain
which healed the lepers in *Ben Hur*,
that downpour which washed them to health again.
So, in a side-ward, through Maris’s despair,
something was happening – I hardly dare

³⁶¹ Lewis 2010: 37.

³⁶² Lewis 2010: 37.

tell you – but Philoctetes’s wound
was closing.³⁶³

Just as the stench from Phil’s wound penetrated Maris’s nose, once more we can almost see the two characters ebb and flow into one another, however this time it is Maris who leaks into Phil with her tears. Here, the permeable body is no longer abject but a nomadic ‘threshold of transformations’.³⁶⁴ Maris’s outburst is not just a cathartic release of pent up emotions, her tears also purify Phil’s wound, clearing away the infection and decay. That the narrator of the poem identifies the scene as a creative reimagining of the climax of *Ben Hur* (1959), where a leper colony is cured by a rain which falls following the crucifixion of Jesus, is vital to our understanding of the quoted passage. In the film, the healing water is directly associated with the kind of selfless love which characterised Christ’s sacrifice. As such, Maris’s tears should be understood as a gesture encompassing both love and renewal, as well as a celebration of the ambiguous and the composite. As Maris and Phil excrete out of and into one another, displacing, exchanging and affecting parts, rigidly defined subjectivities are washed away. They can now embrace new forms of non-exclusionary relationships, not dependent on the divisions imposed by those responsible for social discipline, and, in our case, public health, but on the disavowal of such boundaries altogether.

Of course, all this is not to say that Lewis’s poem is presenting a fanciful view of the world where love conquers all: love alone, although essential, is not sufficient to treat Hardy. Maris must continue her search for a more tangible cure. Nonetheless, the encounter between Maris and Phil serves to acknowledge the fraught, difficult nature of caring for someone with a chronic illness, and posits love as a salve for the long journey towards healing. The encounter also sees a transformation in Maris’s attitudes towards the body, even the ill, abjected body, as not merely a locus of degeneration and decay but as grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense; that is to say, suffuse with transformative potential in its porousness and inseparability from the world around it. As such, the grotesque body is revealed to be thematically central to

³⁶³ Lewis 2010: 37-8.

³⁶⁴ Braidotti 2011a: 25.

Lewis's poem, a concept which is embodied most fully in the figure of Ichabod, whom I will now go on to discuss in the following part of the chapter.

THE ABJECT AND THE GROTESQUE: ICHABOD AND THE BODY MUSEUM

We encounter Ichabod at the very moment Phil's wound closes. Popping his head around the door, he quickly introduces himself before running off, pursued by a howling hoard. Wilson and Maris leave the newly-healed Phil's room in order find out what is going on. Following the noise that the mob is making, they come across a neo-classical temple entitled *The Body Museum*. Stepping inside, Wilson and Maris enter the 'Hall of the Body Beautiful' where they find a collection of classical and neo-classical statues, all representations of idealised human physicality:

the David, a Perseus, the Dying Gaul,

a goddess Diana – celebrities
of the ancient torso, all flexed and trim,
designed to be seen. Unpainted eyes
were blank, moon-abstract. It was a gym
of superlatives, idealised limbs

in the throes of passion, victory or youth.³⁶⁵

Of course, the kinds of bodies in *The Body Museum* are very different to the abject body represented by Phil in the previous episode. Supremely beautiful, these images of humanity represent an ideal: orifice-less, self-contained and lacking the 'bouquet of blood and shit'³⁶⁶ that defines the abjected human condition. As such, these ancient statues, paradoxically, more closely approximate the ideal 'clean and proper' body than any real flesh-and-blood human could hope to achieve. Nevertheless, for all its

³⁶⁵ Lewis 2010: 39.

³⁶⁶ Lewis 2010: 39.

aesthetic perfection, this exhibition does not strike a chord with Maris, who since her moment of connection with Phil now values breath and touch. She is no longer content just to look at and admire these hyper-real, distant figures, finding these cold, unyielding representations of the human body inadequate and disquieting:

Maris felt a growing disquiet
here, where all was Beauty and Truth,
no oozing wounds [. . .]
It was cold and inhuman.³⁶⁷

It is the haptic and the material that Maris misses here, her disgust at the open body which we witnessed in the earlier episode with Phil now being replaced with anger at the smooth, forbidding closure of the perfect body. Musing that, in the confines of the gallery, 'all was Beauty and Truth', Lewis references John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820). In this poem, the narrator contemplates an image of young lovers lying in a glade of trees which decorates a Greek vase, musing that, although frozen in time and thus precluded from consummating their passion, the image of love and beauty which they offer transcends the flesh-and-blood existence which they ostensibly represent: '[f]orever panting, and forever young/ All breathing human passion far above'.³⁶⁸ The figures represented on Keats' urn and the statues exhibited in *The Body Museum* do not have to face the prospect of illness, aging or death; yet neither can they experience the physical joys of earthly life. For Lewis, they present an aesthetic ideal which is wholly detached from the reality it is meant to represent.

Here, Mikhail Bakhtin's insistence on the potentiality of the body becomes germane to our discussion. In an interview with Gail Ashton, Lewis acknowledges that Bakhtin's 1965 work *Rabelais and His World*³⁶⁹ heavily influenced her writing of *The*

³⁶⁷ Lewis 2010:39.

³⁶⁸ Keats 2008 [1820]: 301.

³⁶⁹ Bakhtin was fascinated by the carnivals of Medieval Europe, festivities during which the rules and regulations of everyday life were temporarily suspended. The revelries were generally characterised by 'low humour', involving the excessive consumption of food and alcohol, as well as the celebration of the physical body through the wearing of costumes and masks which exhibited larger-than-life features, such as oversized noses, mouths, stomachs and genitals. Bakhtin argues that this emphasis on embodied materiality served to eradicate, at least temporarily, social differences as entire communities celebrated their mutual

Body Museum.³⁷⁰ For Bakhtin, the ‘lower strata’ of the body, i.e. the orifices and organs (such as the mouth, anus, penis and vagina), transgress Kristeva’s ‘clean and proper’ boundaries and emphasise the body’s open, unfinished nature. This is to say that it is via these parts that the physical body interacts with the world around it (through sex, eating, drinking etc.), producing fluids and wastes (e.g. urines, faeces, ejaculate), which Bakhtin refers to as ‘gay matter’:

Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sensing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body.³⁷¹

Unlike the classical nude, which ‘kept secret’ the ‘ever unfinished nature of the body’ in its refusal to show conditions such as conception, pregnancy and childbirth,³⁷² the permeability and penetrability of what Bakhtin refers to as the ‘grotesque’ reveals the capacity of the body to violate its own boundaries. Of course, as we have just seen above, it is this very porousness of the borders between the self and the world around it which Kristeva terms as ‘abject’. Bakhtin, however, argues this hierarchy between the body’s ‘lower’ (eating, defecating, copulating) and ‘higher’ (thinking, speaking) functions is historically contingent upon our increasingly privatised and individualistic capitalist society. As such, although the grotesque body occupied an affirmative place

humanity. As such, carnival’s liberating potential came from the fact that established rules and beliefs were not impervious to mockery or revision, allowing for the potential for positive change; however, in the wake of the Renaissance and the displacement of feudalism by capitalism, carnivals all but ceased in Europe and instead morphed into what Bakhtin refers to as the ‘carnavalesque’, that is, the revolutionary potential of carnival condensed into literature. For Bakhtin, the writer who most fully epitomised this outlook was French author François Rabelais, who wrote a series of novels entitled *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (c. 1532-1564). Rabelais’ work tells the tale of two giants who rove through rural France and features a great deal of crude and satirical humour. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin argues that Rabelais’ pentalogy is an exemplary model of the power of the carnivalesque in literature through its mobilisation of the grotesque body. Arguing that Rabelais’ work has been unfairly maligned for its inclusion of ‘low’ or ‘inappropriate’ material, including defecation and urination, voracious feasts, and sexual misadventure, Bakhtin endeavours to re-examine those aspects of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* that have been disregarded and suppressed.

³⁷⁰ Lewis 2015: 56.

³⁷¹ Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 317.

³⁷² Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 29.

during the medieval era,³⁷³ contemporary encounters with the grotesque or abject body tend to emphasise only its degenerative attributes. Nevertheless, Bakhtin's theories attempt to reinstate the regenerative significance which was attributed to the grotesque body during the feudal period. The supposedly base, animalistic elements of humanity are connected not only to decay and death but also to transition and renewal. The body's 'lower stratum', particularly the genitals and the womb, also bring about new life. Connecting degradation to rejuvenation, the grotesque body 'fecunds and is fecundated, gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying'.³⁷⁴

Read alongside Bakhtin's positive stance on the open, leaking body, the experience of abjection is not always and necessarily negative. Although Kristeva emphasises the crisis of the subject when the boundaries between self and other break down, Lewis celebrates these occurrences as constitutive of a new form of subjectivity, grounded in intersubjective relationships and the experiences of the material body. Embodying excess and putting into question restrictive forms of thought, the grotesque offers alternative ways of conceptualising the physical body in the contemporary world. Therefore, it is my argument that in exhibiting diverse bodies and revelling in their biological functions, their incorporations and their excretions, their vigour and their sickness, Lewis presents the abject or grotesque body as a potential site of regeneration and challenges her readers to think through abjection productively.

As Maris browses the gallery, she finds a figure which is different to all of the others – it is IChabod, who has ostensibly disguised himself as one of the statues:

His limbs were flushed with a healthy pigment
that gave his form a sheen of rosy
well-being, he was so vibrant and sexy

that Maris wanted to kiss his skin

³⁷³ 'in grotesque realism, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world' (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 19).

³⁷⁴ Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 319.

just for the fragrant, silky feel of it.³⁷⁵

Repelled by the abstract and inhuman ideal represented by the other nudes, Maris is viscerally attracted to the flesh-and-blood figure before her. Responding physically to the presence of Ichabod's body, Maris engages all of her senses: she notes his rosy, healthy flush and is almost overcome by the desire to touch and smell his skin. Here, Ichabod's vibrant sexuality should be understood as a celebration of the physical body in all of its manifestations. Telling Maris '[m]y job is to show you what the body's for', he begins to metamorphose:

He proceeds to demonstrate
the endocrine system and its diseases.
With arteries, he delineates
atherosclerosis, then *diabetes*
mellitus, what happened to the testes

in untreated cases of gonorrhoea,
then pustules, chancres, herpetic lesions.³⁷⁶

The description of this scene is deeply sensory. The realisation of the epigraph to Book 2 of the poem - '[h]ealth isn't making everybody into a Greek ideal; it's living out the destiny of the body'³⁷⁷ - Ichabod is the embodiment of ecstasy, force and movement, a positive and affirming presence. His display of diseases often caused by bodily excesses, such as sexually transmitted infections and diabetes, celebrate what Bakhtin refers to as the lower strata of life, the orifices and organs which transgress the boundaries of Kristeva's 'clean and proper' body: 'the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus'.³⁷⁸ Epitomising the resolve for continuous and limitless change, Ichabod's body is not a closed, complete unit; rather 'it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits'.³⁷⁹ In this representation of human

³⁷⁵ Lewis 2010: 39-40.

³⁷⁶ Lewis 2010: 41. Emphasis in original.

³⁷⁷ Lewis 2010: 31.

³⁷⁸ Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 26.

³⁷⁹ Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 26.

materiality, Lewis portrays bodies which have no clear boundaries, are always consuming, always excreting, always 'in the act of becoming'.³⁸⁰

Watching Ichabod's celebration of a blemished body in full anarchic swing, the classical statues express horror and outrage. Mirroring Bakhtin's description of the classical nude as 'isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies',³⁸¹ they howl: '[w]e like the body apart,/ single and separate. Not leaving a trail/ of cells behind it'.³⁸² Whereas the grotesque body revels in its own ever-changing materiality, the statues in Lewis's *Body Museum* are autonomous, orifice-less entities: smooth, closed and finished. Ichabod's display, transgressing these 'clean and proper' boundaries, troubles set assumptions about the body and its relationship to other bodies in the world at large. From the perspective of Maris, however, there is nothing troubling or threatening about Ichabod; rather, the menace comes from the marble statues, who attempt to cast the poem's protagonists in bronze: '[t]here's only one way to guarantee/ their compliance. We'll have to cast/ them both as statues'.³⁸³ Here, contact with such paradigms of civilisation has an unusually un-civilising effect as Ichabod and Maris are blindfolded and pushed towards a workshop. It is only through the intervention of Wilson, who distracts the statues by asking them to pose for photographs, that our protagonists escape:

Suddenly a voice cried, 'Freeze!
I want you all to hold that pose,
look at the camera and say "Cheese!"'
A flash. And the statues re-composed
themselves.³⁸⁴

Here, the statues' partiality to afterlife and fame makes them unable to hold on to the present, the material, the bodies of Maris and Ichabod, who successfully escape and move on with their journey. Having been presented with the classical body which, although aspiring to represent human life, simultaneously denies human nature itself,

³⁸⁰ Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 317.

³⁸¹ Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 29.

³⁸² Lewis 2010: 41.

³⁸³ Lewis 2010: 43.

³⁸⁴ Lewis 2010: 43.

we can no longer look at the classical nude without being mindful of the potential sterility of its imposing perfection. In contrast, embodying the grotesque in his representations of excess, death and decay, the dynamism of Ichabod's body posits an alternative to the stasis represented by the statues. As such, Lewis's use of grotesque imagery offers her readers an alternative model for the subject bound up in processes of transition. In this disconcerting world where characters opt for change and multiplicity over stasis and solidity, Ichabod becomes a symbol of emancipation from repressive constraints, speaking an alternative, disruptive (body) language. To embrace that which is suppressed – i.e. the materiality of the body – is to experience one's embodiment as 'a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception'.³⁸⁵ The supposedly base, animalistic elements of humanity are connected not only to degradation, decay and death but also to transition, rejuvenation and renewal, a trope we have seen played out in the earlier episode with Philoctetes (pp. 134-141). In wilfully becoming grotesque, Ichabod personifies subjectivity as an unfinished process and places emphases on shared physicality and the connections between individuals, straddling the spaces 'in-between'.

In this way, Lewis presents her *νόστος* as an increasing awareness of the wonders of the body realised through a series of vital and tactile interactions with others, offering her readers 'an image of the subject in terms of a nonunitary and multi-layered vision, as a dynamic and changing entity'.³⁸⁶ Her poem is therefore a striking response to the constraints of an unforgiving epic male subjectivity built on success, (self-) containment, and, ultimately, *κλέος*. Nonetheless, Maris is not only engaging in a *νόστος*, she is also battling Hardy's illness. At the start of her journey, Maris thinks of cancer as a battle to be fought and won, as can be exemplified in Book 6 where Penny the spider offers to help Maris on her quest to save her husband if – and only if – she can win a computer game in which she has to annihilate Hardy's cancer. Maris wins the first two rounds, zapping cancer cells from Hardy's body in a manner similar to the way radiation beams are used during radiotherapy to target malignancies. The final game, however, is conceptualised as the sack of Troy, with her

³⁸⁵ Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 318.

³⁸⁶ Braidotti 2011a: 5.

husband's body representing the city and the cancer cells the Greek soldiers inside the city walls:

'Don't worry! This time I will defend
the city,' said Maris grimly. 'I feel
sure I can change the story's end.
All it takes is some force of will.
I'll hold off the Greeks, at least until

reinforcements arrive.' 'You have no time.
Remember, cancer's already inside
the city. Odysseus leap fully armed
from the horse,' hissed Penny, overjoyed.

'Your body iss Troy and you're always destroyed [sic].'³⁸⁷

The spider, which is eventually revealed to be one of the Fates,³⁸⁸ articulates what we all know: just as Troy was, always has and always will be, razed by the Greeks, so will the body succumb to its mortality. Death and destruction are inevitable for both Troy and the human subject. Maris, however, is determined that her husband will not be taken now and, although she loses the game, is buoyed by these words from a computer-simulated version of the archer Philoctetes, who had ostensibly returned to ensure Troy's destruction:

Don't listen to her, it's a double cross.
Hardy is far from dead. He's on his knees
but you can still save him. Follow the bees!³⁸⁹

The bees to which Phil refers are figurations of red blood stem cells, the transplantation of which offers the potential for a cure for non-Hodgkins lymphoma.³⁹⁰

³⁸⁷ Lewis 2010: 93.

³⁸⁸ Lewis 2010: 94.

³⁸⁹ Lewis 2010: 94.

³⁹⁰ For more information on the efficacy of *hematopoietic* stem cells on non-Hodgkins lymphoma, see Felfy et al. 2014 and Park et al. 2015.

Following them will lead Maris towards a treatment for Hardy's cancer. As we journey onwards, Lewis's poem suggests new ways of thinking about cancer and cancer treatment, reflecting how, over time, Lewis came to view cancer not as an external adversary to be defeated but as an entity inextricably bound up with the self. She begins to find the military metaphors which she had previously used increasingly unsatisfactory and starts to question the heroic discourse often associated with illness.³⁹¹ As such, Lewis begins to propagate a new kind of heroism which does not see the cancer sufferer struggling alone, however bravely, against an external threat. Instead, borrowing from the latest trends and theories in cancer management, Maris's journey moves her away from aggressive forms of treatment towards those which rejuvenate without damaging the healthy cells in the body. As such, her νόστος simultaneously rescues her husband and acknowledges the loving commitment and many capabilities of those who tend to the dying. In doing so, Lewis reflects poignantly on the effort – both on a scientific and a personal level - that is required to save just one life.

RETHINKING OBJECT FIGURATIONS OF CANCER

As has been discussed (pp. 115-9), Odysseus' νόστος is in constant tension with his pursuit of κλέος, the most significant instance being the blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus, which enrages the god Poseidon who henceforth directly impedes the hero's homecoming. In *A Hospital Odyssey*, however, the engagement with κλέος is somewhat different. This is none more so the case than when Maris hunts down the cancer dragon, a figuration of Hardy's tumour, whom she plans to slay in hope of saving her husband. It is my argument that Maris's encounter with the cancer dragon can be read as a reversal of the Polyphemus episode. Here, Lewis directly questions the centrality of κλέος -obtaining violent acts by refusing to kill the monster. As a result, Maris is no longer pursued by his wrathful parent and is, in fact, aided by him in the realisation of her quest. In this way, Lewis delicately exploits the tensions between κλέος and νόστος present in Homer's *Odyssey*, rejecting the former and

³⁹¹ See pp. 13-5 for a fuller discussion on the use of heroic language in cancer discourse.

reconceptualising the latter in ways which celebrates cross-fertilising relationships and the physical body as a positive, affirming presence.

Lewis's initial characterisation of cancer as a foul creature, regarded by Maris and her companions as 'a stinking rhizome/ oozing a milk whose bitter odour/ makes them gag',³⁹² is significant. Although a condition whereby the body's own cells reproduce abnormally, cancer is habitually regarded as an entity which is foreign to the patient. This tendency to conceptualise cancer as an external invasion of the body's defences aligns our understanding of the condition to the Kristevan abject – the 'me that is not me':³⁹³

[the abject] signals the fading or disappearance, the absolute mortality and vulnerability of the subject's relations to, and dependence upon, the object. The abject is the impossible object, still part of the subject: an object the subject strives to expel but which is ineliminable. In ingesting objects into itself, or expelling objects from itself, the subject can never be distanced from these objects. The ingested/expelled 'objects' are neither part of the body nor separate from it.³⁹⁴

With Kristeva in mind, it appears as though Lewis endeavours to expel the cancerous abject by representing it as a threatening, *external* force. As she writes in *Two in a Boat*, her autobiographical account of Leighton's cancer diagnosis:

Without knowing it, we had been carrying a stowaway on board. Pirates are not just men with guns. They can, just as easily, erupt from the cells inside your body and take over a voyage.³⁹⁵

Here, Lewis can be seen to be engaging in what feminist theorist Karen Barad refers to as a 'thingification' of cancer, a persistent othering of the disease as a pirate or a threatening monster.³⁹⁶ This estrangement of her husband's illness could be

³⁹² Lewis 2010: 100.

³⁹³ Kristeva 1980: 164.

³⁹⁴ Grosz 1992: 197-8.

³⁹⁵ Lewis 2005: 265-6.

³⁹⁶ Barad 2003: 801.

understood as a form of denial; however, in portraying the incomprehensibility of her situation as though it were beyond belief, Lewis is not conducting a psychological flight from the harsh realities of cancer treatment, nor is she refusing to acknowledge the severity of her circumstances. Rather she is expressing her incredulity at the chaotic, unpredictable and cruel reality she is faced with. As such, her figuration of the cancer dragon is not escapist but engages with reality as she sees it: a projection of the all-too-real force that cancer has exerted on her and her husband's lives. By transposing these experiences into a fantastic, epic realm, Lewis conveys a heightened sense of both wonder and despair over events which are all too possible.

Of course, for all its metaphorical value, the text never abandons its epic quality: the fights, the danger, the suspense. The dragon and the threat that it poses is very real, no matter how recognisable the creature is as a product of the mind. As the protagonists try to avoid the dragon's slashing talons and snatching jaws, Ludlow spots a point of weakness in its anatomy. Helping Maris climb up the creature's throat, he orders her to pierce its hide with a dagger. However, for all her determination to follow through with the task, Maris, somewhat unexpectedly, finds herself unable to perform the deed: [e]ven thought Maris is desperate/ she just can't do it'.³⁹⁷ Screaming '[u]se the knife!', Ludlow characterises cancer as a monster which must be regulated through human agency: a tumour to be excised. Once more, the fight against cancer is conceived of as a battle and is couched in terms of the heroic; such attitudes reflect the need to bring the wayward body under control, transforming cancer into an object that the individual can manipulate. Nonetheless, although such contextualisations of the disease are understandable, they do not account for the reality that is the body betraying, the body attacking, itself. As such, the cancer dragon is not the external threat that Ludlow suggests but is, in fact, something much more intimate, as Maris's subsequent actions demonstrate:

she rests her head on the rough

hide, and feels a familiar pulse

beneath her ear. She closes her eyes

³⁹⁷ Lewis 2010: 101.

a moment and, on sudden impulse,
kisses the life that underlies
the beast's exterior.³⁹⁸

It is with this sense of familiarity in mind that we can explain Maris's hesitation. When the dragon's mother arrives and taunts Maris - '[y]ou should have struck/ him, Maris, with your little knife./ You'd have killed your husband. Perhaps a relief,/ if you were truthful'³⁹⁹ – it appears as though, despite its monstrous appearance, that Hardy is in some way inextricably connected with this monster. This parallel is rendered more explicit when taking this next passage from *Two in a Boat* into account:

A bone marrow biopsy showed that his lymphoma had reached stage four. There is no stage five. The bone marrow was very compromised, with hardly any normal cells in it. No wonder he had been feeling awful and behaving like a monster.⁴⁰⁰

In many ways, it is tempting to try and understand Hardy as being under attack from a malign creature which must be defeated. However, in refusing to slay the dragon, Maris comes to a new understanding of the nature of illness: a reconciliation of cancer as part of the self and the formulation of a response which is not necessarily couched in terms of the heroic. As Mark Marqusee writes:

The stress on cancer patients' 'bravery' and 'courage' implies that if you can't 'conquer' your cancer, there's something wrong with you, some weakness or flaw [. . .] Why must every concerted effort be likened to warfare? Is this the only way we are able to describe human co-operation in pursuit of a common goal? And who are the enemies in this war? Cancer cells may be 'malignant' but they are not malevolent.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁸ Lewis 2010: 101.

³⁹⁹ Lewis 2010: 101-2.

⁴⁰⁰ Lewis 2005: 272.

⁴⁰¹ Marqusee 2009.

In refusing to kill the dragon, Lewis can be seen to develop new, less anthropocentric ways of thinking about her experiences: 'I thought of the cancer as a monster, but then understood that it's a life form as valid as any other.'⁴⁰² She finds a way of explaining cancer not as an alien infiltration of the body, an entity in and of itself, but as a part of the human embodied experience, albeit a painful one. In doing so, she reassesses the ways in which we think about the epic hero. The qualities which define the warrior class in Homer's poetry are rejected, physical prowess, the need to obliterate the enemy, is replaced with a need to connect. In coming close to the dragon, Maris experiences a commonality of being between herself and the creature, fully coming to terms with this blending of the self and the other, which, as we have seen, is woven throughout the poem, reaching its fullest realisation here. Upon recognition that the cancer is a part of Hardy's body, she cannot see it as 'other' any longer. As such, it no longer appears monstrous:

Maris hesitates
and sees in the dragon's amber stare
an invitation, something intimate.
She leans and her body penetrates

his hide. Inside she's privy to his pain:
her skin, her teeth, her joints. She can hear –
not people – but everything in between
them happening. Love and fear
build a palace that only appears

to us in glimpses, feels like a ruin
but, seen as a whole, its architecture
glitters, a glorious palace, not to live in
but visited rarely.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰² Lewis 2014.

⁴⁰³ Lewis 2010: 104-5.

The above quotation is a glorious literary representation of the space between selves that Rosi Braidotti so much cherishes: '[s]ubjects are collective assemblages, that is to say, they are dynamic, but framed: fields of forces that aim at duration and affirmative self-realisation. In order to fulfil them, they need to be drawn together along a line of composition.'⁴⁰⁴ In this almost surreal exemplification of Braidotti's insistence of the inseparability of self and other, Maris is literally incorporated into the dragon, flowing into and blurring with him. Here, Lewis gives us a stunning description of that interstitial space between individuals which indelibly marks their identity, even if it is only perceptible in moments and glimpses. In these lines, we see exactly what Maris's odyssey calls her to do – to seek out others in order to participate in a new, mutually transformative, shared life. Whereas Odysseus' blinding of the Cyclops confirms his individual κλέος but defers his homecoming, Maris's moment of connection with her monster secures the help she needs to locate a treatment for Hardy and to make her way back home to him. While they are incorporated, the cancer dragon whispers:

Find the stem cell garden,
there you'll discover what's fundamental,
the real drive behind creation.
I am the centre of this hospital
and yes, in the end, I may be fatal

but, Maris, this is my secret treasure:
my heart is an ancient grave. Two lovers embrace
in death, skeletons turn towards each other,
each skull smiles at the other's face.
This love is the white-hot furnace

in which you'll find Hardy.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁴ Braidotti 2011b: 153.

⁴⁰⁵ Lewis 2010: 105.

In these lines, Lewis once more mingles the imagery of decay and regeneration. The dragon is the ultimate crux between life and death - cancer cells over brim with vitality, even though they eventually kill their host. As the dragon explains: 'I've got no choice./ I'm driven by the most basic force,/ by life itself'.⁴⁰⁶ What is more, the degenerative nature of cancer co-exists in the body with the life-giving potentiality of human stem cells, which the dragon sends Maris out in search of, telling her to use love as her guide. Having rejected more aggressive cancer treatments and their battle-fuelled discourse— the zapping of the Greek soldiers/cancer cells in the computer game (radiotherapy) and the slaying of the dragon (the excision of a tumour) – Maris's mission is no longer to track and kill cancer but to find a stem cell to transplant into her husband. As such, Maris and her companions must enter into Hardy's lymphatic system, re-imagined as an orchard located in the Field of Cells.

'FOLLOW THE BEES': FINDING A CURE FOR CANCER IN THE FIELD OF CELLS

When Maris and her companions finally reach the Field of Cells, they are shocked at how choked-up it is, 'full of rotting, tarry foulness/ that stank with rankness as it deliquesced/ to black ooze running thick and sticky.'⁴⁰⁷ This malodorous decay is figurative of how the lymphatic system is affected by non-Hodgkin lymphoma.⁴⁰⁸ Images of life are intertwined with those of death: the weeds/cancer cells teem with vitality, yet they choke up Hardy's lymphatic system. Once more, the physical body is a reminder of the materiality of subjectivity and the inevitability of illness and death. As Maris desperately claws at the overgrown vegetation, pulling up handfuls of rotting flora, she struggles to trace her way, impeded by weeds which 'grew back like Hardy's tumour'.⁴⁰⁹ Frustrated at her lack of progress, Maris begins to cry. Mirroring the

⁴⁰⁶ Lewis 2010: 104.

⁴⁰⁷ Lewis 2010: 135.

⁴⁰⁸ According to the NHS webpage on non-Hodgkins lymphoma, in a healthy lymphatic system 'a clear fluid called lymph flows through the lymphatic vessels and contains infection-fighting white blood cells known as lymphocytes. In non-Hodgkin lymphoma, the affected lymphocytes start to multiply in an abnormal way and begin to collect in certain parts of the lymphatic system.' (<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/non-hodgkins-lymphoma/Pages/Definition.aspx>).

⁴⁰⁹ Lewis 2010: 136.

previous episode with Phil (pp.139-40), at the moment of utter despair a solution emerges as her tears heal Hardy's lymphatic system:

One single tear

fell to earth, its tiny weight
bending a leaf of maidenhair
which added liquid, to create
the start of a mercury rivulet.

When love's so weary it hopes for nothing
it's at its strongest, though it feels no power.
It pushes, persists and starts its streaming.
Clay relaxes to the touch of moisture,
it gathers force, pushes sand grains over

and, on its way, is fed by everything
it touches, now it's flowing over,
it surges and begins to sing
words of mercy in the throats of gutters,
thoughts translated into sudden flowers [. . .]

Maris lifted her head

and gasped, astonished, as around her she saw
chamomile lawns with fragrant edges
of lavender, plaintain and plumbago.⁴¹⁰

Maris's love for her husband, her desperation for him to get better, feels so weak and little when faced with his decaying and dying body. Despite her earlier experiences, she feels helpless in her inability to save Hardy and still does not fully comprehend the regenerative potential of love at its most frantic, most hopeless. As she cries, the tears once more move Maris and Hardy into a space which transforms that which starts off

⁴¹⁰ Lewis 2010: 136-7.

as a fledgling emotion into a torrent of restitutive affection. As Hardy's body begins to heal, Lewis once again engages all the senses - touch, smell, sight and sound - in her celebration of the regenerative potential of the material body. We see the healing power of love in a way which connects carer and cared for. As her tears flow into Hardy's lymphatic system, clearing away the clogged up lymph nodes, healing is associated with the kind of desperate, weary love of those who care for the dying.⁴¹¹ Once more, love and regeneration can be seen to co-exist and be boundless, or, as Lewis puts it 'the hinge/ on which it all turns'.⁴¹² Nonetheless, despite this miraculous transformation, love, on its own, although vital, will not cure Hardy: Maris must still seek out a stem cell for transplantation which will regenerate his damaged lymphatic system and restart healthy blood cell reproduction.

This, however, is not a straightforward process. As Ludlow points out, there is a scientific hypothesis that malignant tumours are generated from populations of cancer stem cells.⁴¹³ As such, when Maris visits the garden, she must be careful about which kind of stem cell she picks – if she chooses a cancer stem cell for transplantation into Hardy's system, he will die. Unable to decide, Maris begins to despair once more until Ichabod appears and advises her how to make her choice: '[s]tem cells undo the mistakes of time./ They can create a fresh new season/ for Hardy.'⁴¹⁴ Here, Ichabod reveals to Maris the ways in which stem cells can reverse the damage that cancer has caused.

Choose with love, what looks infirm
may be the elixir [. . .]

Now be a good wife

and find your husband a new immune

⁴¹¹ The tears also have a psychological significance. As Lewis notes in an interview with Gail Ashton: '[i]t is striking to me, psychologically, how a really good weep helps you move on in a tight situation, where you might think you have little room for manoeuvre'. Similarly, Maris's crying allows her a moment of release before she has to pick herself back up again and get on with her journey (Lewis 2015: 57).

⁴¹² Lewis 2010: 146.

⁴¹³ Lewis 2010: 131.

⁴¹⁴ Lewis 2010: 139.

system which he and you can grow
together. Beauty's only a clue,
a hint. The secret's in the come and go
between us.⁴¹⁵

Once again, it is love which Maris is expected to use to inform her search for Hardy and the choosing of the stem cells to be implanted into his body. There is a vital symmetry and sympathy here between the importance of love and medical research, each needing the other if any breakthrough in a patient's treatment is to be made possible. Both the scientific (the mental, the individuating) and the care of a partner (the visceral, intersubjective connection) remain vital to the patient's recovery. So much so that Lewis envisages Maris and Hardy as growing the latter's new immune system together, the wife almost becoming a part of her husband's immunity in a manner which culminates all of the blending between subjects which we have seen throughout the poem in a strikingly material and integral form. Therefore, using love as her guide, Maris chooses a stem cell which is then successfully planted into Hardy's lymphatic system. Her quest for healing over, Maris can now resume her *νόστος* proper and be reunited with her husband: 'let's go home'.⁴¹⁶

At the end of *A Hospital Odyssey*, Maris and Hardy are brought together as they escape the sinking hospital-ship. Both Lewis's *Iliad* and her *Odyssey* have come to an end: the cancer siege is over, and husband and wife are together once more. In the final stanzas of the poem, the narrator refuses to confirm whether or not Hardy will remain in good health ('does Hardy stay well?/ Can't tell you.'⁴¹⁷), perhaps a nod to the fact that non-Hodgkins lymphomas tend to recur, although they can be successfully managed for many years. Although unable to predict Hardy's future health, writing: '[h]ere ends my story,/ but not Maris's marriage',⁴¹⁸ Lewis points towards a great hope for the future, a future which incorporates a celebration of the body's connective and regenerative potential.

⁴¹⁵ Lewis 2010:139.

⁴¹⁶ Lewis 2010: 140.

⁴¹⁷ Lewis 2010 156.

⁴¹⁸ Lewis 2010: 155-6.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

A Hospital Odyssey is a creative exploration of cancer and cancer treatment which provocatively confronts the prospect of sickness and dying. Nonetheless, in emphasising the material body as an open and multiple entity, Lewis finds a sense of wonder and endless potentiality even in the most abjected aspects of life. What matters is the spaces between cells, between bodies; spaces open to violation but also to great affection. Subjects seep in to and out of one another, saturating each other in a way which is utterly distant from the world of the resolutely separate Homeric hero who commands and destroys in order to survive and win.

Throughout the poem, Lewis's characters mutate and metamorphose, their cells proliferate. The material body – and all that it represents - is a source of astonishment. Here, fleshy materiality, rather than being considered abject, is elevated to profound significance: it is boundless, limitless and regenerative. Lewis celebrates the bodily in all its manifestations over the dry and impassionate cerebral mind or soul, represented by characters like Penny, and points towards a new model of subjectivity located within the potentiality of embodiment. Although the physical body is the source of the ultimate unknown (i.e. decay and death), this fear is tempered by its inherent capability as 'a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others'.⁴¹⁹ In her rewriting of the Homeric *νόστος*, Lewis presents the mutability of the body, even the sick body, as an almost miraculous phenomenon. Throughout her journey, Maris engages in what we might refer to in Braidottian terms as a 'nomadic, rhizomatic logic of zigzagging interconnections',⁴²⁰ disavowing the marginalisation, exclusion and degradation of those expressly linked to their bodies, instead opening the subject out to the wonder and terror of his/her own materiality. In doing so, Lewis promotes a model of human interaction which emphasises connections, rather than differences. Revealing the body and relationships as simultaneously open to triumph, but also to suffering, Lewis's epic poem is a poignant reflection on the work involved in saving a life, as well as the love and compassion necessary in order to care for someone with a serious illness.

⁴¹⁹ Braidotti 2011a: 25.

⁴²⁰ Braidotti 2011a: 17.

4. Everyday Epics: *Κλέος* and the Transformative Encounter in Kate Tempest's *Brand New Ancients*

Kate Tempest (born Kate Esther Calvert) is a singer-song writer, performance poet and playwright from Brockley in south east London. Tempest began performing when she was 16 years old, starting off at open mic nights in London, notably at Carnaby Street hip hop store Real Deal. Performing as a rapper under the pseudonym Tempest, a reference to the Shakespearean play, she moved on to supporting more established acts such as punk performance poet John Cooper Clarke, singer-songwriter Billy Bragg, Rastafarian/dub poet, playwright and author Benjamin Zephaniah and Scroobius Pip, a spoken word and hip hop artist, before embarking on a world-wide tour with her band Sound of Rum. She has also performed, both with her band and as a solo artist, at UK festivals such as Glastonbury, Latitude, Shambala and The Big Chill and won two poetry slams⁴²¹ at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York.

Most recently, Tempest has established herself as something of a contemporary phenomenon, enjoying increasing recognition for her literary and musical output in both popular media and academic circles. She has produced a wide range of writing across generic boundaries, including poetry (notably *Brand New Ancients* (2012) and *Hold Your Own* (2014)), drama (*Wasted* (2012) and *Hopelessly Devoted* (2014)) and hip hop (*Everybody Down* (2014)), as well as collaborating with bodies such as Yale university, the BBC, Apples and Snakes - an organisation for the promotion of performance poetry in England - The Old Vic and the Royal Shakespeare Company to create one-off pieces and performances.

Her work intertwines the lives of her characters with contemporary socio-political concerns, presenting individuals and communities who feel, in her own words, 'terrified and ignorant and powerless'.⁴²² Her penetrating exploration of themes such as marginality and suffering means that her work appeals to diverse audiences. Nominated for the Mercury Music Prize in 2014 for her album, *Everybody Down*, she was the youngest poet to have been awarded the Ted Hughes prize for innovation in

⁴²¹ Poetry slams are competitions where poets come to perform their work and are judged by a live audience.

⁴²² Quoted in Lynskey 2014.

poetry, as well as being selected as one of the Poetry Society's 2014 Next Generation Poets. Described as 'one of the most widely respected performers in the country', she is said to be amongst 'the most exciting young writers working in Britain today.'⁴²³

In 2012, Tempest introduced *Brand New Ancients*, a spoken word poem, at the Battersea Arts Centre, London as part of its 'Gods, Myths and Legends' series.⁴²⁴ The piece was widely praised by critics⁴²⁵ and was granted the Ted Hughes Award for innovation in poetry, the Off West End Theatre TBC Award for productions which defy traditional categories and a *Herald* Angel Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, all in 2013. Referred to as 'a kitchen-sink epic with orchestral backing',⁴²⁶ Tempest enacts her poem over a live score performed by a band, consisting of a tuba, a cello, a violin and drums, transposing the characters of ancient Homeric epic into contemporary south-east London. Blending rap and poetry with drama and music, Tempest's spoken story weaves together the tales of three young people living at the very margins of society – Tommy, Gloria and Clive - until they finally come together in time and place at the end of her poem. Bringing a number of different perspectives into her work (including that of the thug, that of the businessman and that of the barmaid), Tempest offers diverse viewpoints into twenty-first century British life, emphasising the hardship, disenfranchisement and, in particular, violence, that her characters endure.

Throughout her narrative, Tempest equivocates the day-to-day struggles of ordinary people with those of ancient Greek mythology. Like Gwyneth Lewis, Tempest's poem can be seen to embody a notion of everyday epics, asking her audience what it means to be a hero in a modern, post-heroic world. Tempest grew up listening to tales about the ancient world, as she discusses in an interview with Nicholas Wroe:

My granddad would read Roman history stories to me. My dad loved the *Odyssey*. And these are the sort of stories that really infiltrate – about families, and archetypal human tendencies and raw, dark emotions. The way they seek to know things about you and take things that are in your heart and embody them: they never seemed dead stories to me, they always lived and were

⁴²³ Parker 2012.

⁴²⁴ Other performances in series included: *Orpheus* by Little Bulb Theatre and The Paper Cinema's *Odyssey*.

⁴²⁵ See e.g. Parker 2012; Groskop 2012.

⁴²⁶ Hogan 2012.

real.⁴²⁷

For *Tempest*, classical myths offer a rich and complex nexus of story-telling from which to draw inspiration, both formally and thematically.⁴²⁸ Her attitude towards her classical source-texts, however, is far from straightforward. During an 'In Conversation' event with Justine McConell, hosted by the University of Oxford's Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, she was asked by Professor Stephen Harrison whether a scene towards the end of the poem, where Tommy's girlfriend is attacked, could be regarded as a reference to the suitors' pursuit of Penelope in the *Odyssey*. *Tempest's* response is revealing:

Erm . . . No, it wasn't in my mind. Erm, but, I mean, I'll take that comparison! I feel like these stories are in us, they're in everybody. They inform our instinctual decisions, I suppose, but because they're so much a part . . . not just Homer's version, but the amount of times that's been retold in every movie, and book, and whatever else. The old stories and the new stories, they're all kind of part of the same.⁴²⁹

Here, *Tempest* unveils something of a relaxed attitude towards classical literature and its reception, disclosing the indirectness of the relationship between her poem and its putative source text, Homer's *Odyssey*. Considering her revelation that she had not finished reading the *Odyssey* before commencing the work,⁴³⁰ the scene in question cannot be regarded as a direct response to Penelope's suitors. *Tempest*, however, does

⁴²⁷ Quoted in Wroe 2014.

⁴²⁸ Indeed, as well as *Brand New Ancients*, *Tempest's* relationship to ancient mythology has pervaded her other work, including the poems 'Icarus' (2005), a reinterpretation of the eponymous character's over-ambition, and 'War Music (After Logue)' (2012), a response to Christopher Logue's re-writing of the *Iliad* where she addresses issues surrounding post-traumatic stress disorder amongst war veterans and questions notions of heroism in the context of the modern-day military. The structure of her play *Wasted* (2011), which examines the lives and relationships of three friends who are all, for various reasons, dissatisfied with their lives, is reminiscent of Greek tragedy with its use of the chorus. Her latest collection of poetry, *Hold Your Own*, is inspired by the story of Tiresias.

⁴²⁹ Quoted in McConell 2014.

⁴³⁰ This is a claim which, as Justine McConell (2014) notes, is similar to that of Derek Walcott and the writing of his *Omeros*. Likewise, Tony Morrison claims that any classical references have not been knowingly imputed into her writing (Roynon 2014).

not reject the connection outright. Instead she suggests that the myth is so prevalent that it has entered her work mediated through literature, drama, film, television and/or music. For Tempest, Homer's epics have surreptitiously formed a part of our cultural consciousness, being told and retold again and again. Thus it is vital to maintain throughout an analysis of Tempest's work that her poem, although perhaps not a direct or straightforward response to Homer's poetics or classical literature and culture more generally, is still – even if, at times, unconsciously - engaging with the ancient world via the multiple manifestations that have kept it alive throughout the ages to the present day. This is not to say that Tempest's poem does not betray a certain familiarity with classical culture. The work is replete with enough specific references and allusions which suggest a greater than surface acquaintance with the ancient world. Yet it is my suggestion that Tempest's response to the epic genre is realised both at the level of the conscious and the level of the subconscious, problematising the relationship between text and source-text/s and questioning the position of the classics in the world today. As McConnell notes:

Tempest has wholeheartedly appropriated the ancient world so that she is neither bound by issues of fidelity nor has to kick against them to make her own mark. Her *Brand New Ancients*, then, is more akin to Ali Smith's novel *Girl Meets Boy* (2007)—a modern reinterpretation of Ovid's tale of Iphis and Ianthe from the *Metamorphoses*—than to Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005). Like Smith's novel, Tempest's work is so fully immersed in modernity that it gives the impression of having been conceived only now. It is accessible without knowledge of its classical intertext, yet it is nevertheless illuminatingly enhanced by that knowledge.⁴³¹

Tempest's relationship with her classical source-texts is undoubtedly complex. As with Elizabeth Cook and Gwyneth Lewis, Tempest's act of reception does not write against her source texts but rather alongside them, pulling them apart and drawing out their relevance to the discussion of contemporary issues. This dialogue, between text and source-text, ancient and modern, mutually illuminates the classical world and the

⁴³¹ McConnell 2014: 203.

present moment. Neither the classical nor the everyday are privileged in this new space but the unfamiliarity of the juxtaposition sharpens perspectives and enhances our understanding of both.

One might ask what is so 'epic' about this relatively short (47 page) poem.⁴³² However, it is my argument that a poem's epic quality should not be measured merely in terms of its length but rather in its use of epic tropes and thematic content. As McConnell writes:

Tempest's 'epic' [. . .] warrants that designation for [. . .] specific reasons: starting in medias res, *Brand New Ancients* features gods and heroes (albeit redefined for our modern age), an introductory statement of themes, a mini *katabasis* on the London Underground, and even epithets via the music.⁴³³

Tempest's poem, therefore, should be regarded as an epic for our age. Rather than slavishly adhering to traditional notions of epicity, Tempest modernises the form and brings it up to date for a contemporary audience. In doing so, she asks us to conceive of the everyday struggles of ordinary people as comparable to the trials and tribulations of any Odysseus or Achilles:

There may be no monsters to kill,
no dragons' teeth for the sowing,
but what there is, is the flowing
of rain down the gutters,
what there is the muttering nutters.
What we have here
is a brand new mythic palette:
the parable of the mate you had who could have been anything
but he turned out an addict.

Or the parable of the prodigal father

⁴³² It can be performed in its entirety in round 75 minutes.

⁴³³ McConnell 2014:198.

returned after years in the wilderness.

Our morality is still learned through experience
gained in these cities in all of their rage and their tedium and yes -
our colours *are* muted and greyed
but our battles are staged all the same⁴³⁴

The first two quoted lines invoke images of epic heroes' various encounters with mythological monsters, specifically Cadmus' slaying of the dragon during the foundation of the ancient city of Thebes. Having sown the dead dragon's teeth, the *Σπαρτοί*, fierce armoured men, spring up from the ground and, instigated by Cadmus throwing a rock into their midst, begin to fight, and eventually kill, one another.⁴³⁵ It is from this tale that the phrase 'to sow dragon's teeth' – a metaphor for the provocation of disputes – originates. As such, Tempest's reference to this myth is perhaps a precursor to her examination of the fraught interpersonal relationships between the characters in her poem. As an image, it has connotations of death and destruction; yet the tale of the *Σπαρτοί* also has generative power. In this way, at the end of the myth, the remaining *Σπαρτοί* join with Cadmus to found the city of Thebes. As such, it is a tale of generation (the sewing of the teeth), destruction (the fighting amongst the *Σπαρτοί*) and renewal (the foundation of the city). The degeneration of humanity at both the communal and individual level is of central importance to Tempest's work and her poem can, in many ways, be understood as an appraisal of the issues that arise in a world where empathy and a sense of connection between human beings is lacking. However, just as the destruction of the *Σπαρτοί* gives way to the foundation of a new civilisation, the characters in Tempest's poems are not beyond redemption. In the quoted passage, the image of the dragon's teeth gives way to a much quieter, more domestic notion of heroism. The repetition of the 't' sound in 'gutters' and 'muttering nutters' helps the listener to envision the rain falling in a city filled with the incoherent ramblings of the insane. The poem's protagonists for the most part make

⁴³⁴ Tempest 2012: 2-3. Emphasis in original.

⁴³⁵ For the myth of Cadmus and the *Σπαρτοί*, see especially Pseudo-Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* 3.4.1; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3.101-130.

for improbable heroes; yet this focus on the heroic quality of the everyday is central to the text.

Throughout her poem, therefore, Tempest can be seen to deconstruct the value of traditional heroics. In the contemporary world of *Brand New Ancients*, Homeric *κλέος* has been substituted for a different kind of fame: the cult of celebrity culture. Here, fame and eternal glory are achieved not on the battlefield but by fighting it out on television talent shows:

Pan out, soft focus; reveal the subtext: behind
the couple striving on there is more,
the bloodspecked sword in the sand,
the bodies scattered around
like sun-bathers . . . the tattoos across their hearts read 'when will I be
famous?' [. . .]

Let's all get famous. I need to be more than just this.

Give me my glory. A double-edged spread.

Let people weep when they hear that I'm dead.

Let people sleep in the street for a glimpse of my head

*as I walk the red carpet into the den of the blessed.*⁴³⁶

Here, Tempest takes images which could be lifted straight from Homer's *Iliad* (the 'scattered' bodies and the 'bloodspecked' weapons) and transposes them into a contemporary setting. Nevertheless, the glory referred to in these lines moves us away from the warriors of ancient epic seeking immortal fame through great deeds and their prowess on the battlefield towards a notion of *κλέος* encapsulated by the twenty-first century obsession with stardom. Here, the halls of fame are akin to Elysium, the realm where those chosen by the gods for their righteous and heroic deeds remain after death, whereas the words '[g]ive me my glory' hint at a sense of entitlement perhaps

⁴³⁶ Tempest 2012: 26-8. Emphasis in original.

reminiscent of Agamemnon's insistence on claiming Briseis as his prize, in spite of Achilles' questioning his desert.⁴³⁷

In a scene reminiscent of Euripides' *Bacchae*, Tempest comments on the extent to which Saturday night television talent shows have obtained an almost spiritual dimension, showing individuals humiliate and prostrate themselves before a 'false idol', ostensibly Simon Cowell (our modern day Dionysus) who rouses Maenadic excesses in his devotees: '[w]e kneel down before him, we beg him for pardon,/ mothers feast on the raw flesh of their children struck by the madness/ that floods the whole country, this provocation to savagery'.⁴³⁸ In an image suggestive of Pentheus' death at the hands of Agave, Tempest envisions mothers metaphorically offering their children up to the altar of fame and celebrity but destroying them in the process.

In many ways, the juxtaposition of these two versions of *κλέος*, the ancient and the modern, the warrior surveying his path of destruction and the winner of the X-Factor congratulated by those whom he, too, has defeated, could be seen as perhaps constituting a negative comparison between the ancient epic and Tempest's contemporary performance poem. However, in allying the attainment of epic *κλέος* with the realisation of modern-day celebrity-status, the hero with the television contestant, I would like to argue that the text enables the reader to construct a dialogue between Tempest's act of reception and its source text/s. Her transposition of the ancient concept of *κλέος* into the world of reality television is not simply a criticism of twenty-first century celebrity culture but also of the notion of *κλέος* in and of itself. The phrase 'double-edged spread', referring to a feature in a magazine, is a pun on expression 'double-edged sword' - not only does Tempest, again, conflate martial and more domestic imagery but she emphasises the pitfalls, as well as the benefits, that *κλέος* brings. Power and fame are entrapments as well as gifts for both the ancient

⁴³⁷ 'οἴνοβαρές, κυνὸς ὄμματ' ἔχων, κραδίην δ' ἐλάφοιο,/ οὔτε ποτ' ἐς πόλεμον ἄμα λαῶ
θωρηχθῆναι/ οὔτε λόχονδ' ἰέναι σὺν ἀριστήεσσιν Ἀχαιῶν/ τέτληκας θυμῶ· τὸ δέ τοι κῆρ εἶδεται
εἶναι./ ἢ πολὺ λωῖόν ἐστι κατὰ στρατὸν εὐρύν Ἀχαιῶν/ δῶρ' ἀποαιρεῖσθαι ὅς τις σέθεν ἀντίον
εἴπη'; 'You wine sack, with a dog's eyes, with a dear's heart. Never/ once have you taken courage
in your heart to arm with your people/ for battle, or go into ambushade with the best of the
Achaians./ No, for in such things you see death. Far better to your mind/ is it, all along the
widespread host of the Achaians/ to take away the gifts of any man who speaks against you.'
(Homer *Iliad* 1.225-30). All translations of Homer's *Iliad* are taken from Richard Lattimore 2011
[1951].

⁴³⁸ Tempest 2012: 27.

warrior and the modern celebrity.

What is more, we are once again reminded of the dead Achilles' statements to Odysseus in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*: the emphasis on lived, embodied existence, as opposed to intangible immortal fame. Just as in Cook's *Achilles* and Lewis's *A Hospital Odyssey*, *κλέος* is presented as a force which serves to preclude Tempest's characters from making meaningful connections with one another. As such, in *Brand New Ancients*, Tempest can be seen to be examining the problems, even inadequacies, inherent in the Homeric hero whose search for *κλέος* is, in many ways, held up for ridicule and presented as antithetical to her paradigm of human relations. By conflating ancient and modern pursuits of *κλέος*, the poem becomes a parody of both Homeric and modern culture, akin to the images of hyper-masculinity presented by Hollywood representations of classical heroes.⁴³⁹

In many ways, Tempest can be seen to be contemplating a post-mythical world. In the epigraph of her poem, Tempest quotes a passage from Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1962):

Among the so-called neurotics of our day there are a good many who in other ages would not have been neurotic – that is, divided against themselves. If they had lived in a period and in a milieu in which man was still linked by myth with the world of the ancestors, and thus with nature truly experienced and not merely seen from the outside, they would have been spared this division within themselves. I am speaking of those who cannot tolerate the loss of myth and who can neither find a way to a merely exterior world, to the world as seen by science, nor rest satisfied with an intellectual juggling with words, which has nothing whatsoever to do with wisdom.⁴⁴⁰

In this passage, Jung causally links neurotic behaviour with the loss of religious/mythological belief. For Jung, we remain dominated by forces that are outside our control: 'our gods and demons have not disappeared at all; they have merely got new names', keeping us 'on the run with restlessness, vague

⁴³⁹ For further discussion on this, please see pp. 22-3.

⁴⁴⁰ Quoted from Jung 1995 [1962]: 144.

apprehensions, psychological complications, an insatiable need for pills, alcohol, tobacco, food – and, above all, a large array of neuroses'.⁴⁴¹ In some respects, this post-mythical world is a lesser world, responsible for a certain isolation, a lack of communal consciousness or spirit.⁴⁴² This Jungian perception that the human condition in the secular Western world is one of division within the self is explored in Tempest's poem:

In the old days
the myths were the stories we used to explain ourselves.
But how can we explain the way we hate ourselves,
the things we've made ourselves into,
the way we break ourselves in two,
the way we overcomplicate ourselves?⁴⁴³

This fragmentation of the subject necessarily implies a loss of stable identities and throughout the poem, Tempest provides illuminating analyses of fractured and decentred individuals trapped in stifling social structures. The picture she paints is one of isolation and vulnerability to socio-cultural and psychological forces often beyond her characters' control. In order to stem this neurotic division of the self from itself and from the community in which it exists, Tempest suggests an alternative model for human relationships: one which is established via embodied experience and intersubjective relationships, a new mythic paradigm not founded on the pursuit of epic *κλέος* but on a new kind of glory based on the heroic within the everyday:

the life in your veins
is godly, heroic.
You were born for greatness;
believe it. Know it.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ Jung 1964: 82.

⁴⁴²'the plight of a people who have forgotten their myths/ [. . .] is a sorry plight,/ all isolation and worry' (Tempest 2012: 3-4).

⁴⁴³Tempest 2012: 1.

⁴⁴⁴ Tempest 2012: 4.

Tempest finds unconventional moments of strength in ancient epic. No longer about kings or strong men,⁴⁴⁵ the heroic is located within the everyday, the humble, the unknown, the not-admired. As such, the 'greatness' that she refers to in her poem is not the alienating, isolating strength that *κλέος* represents but moments of connection between individuals. Nevertheless, despite this rejection of epic *κλέος* as traditionally understood, Tempest expresses a certain nostalgia for a mythological world which she imagines as being connected and interlinked, finding succour even in moments of violence:

In the old stories, the gods walked among us.
Fought with each other to save us, 'cos they loved us,
or, sometimes, they turned themselves into animals,
came down and raped us.
They had badness in them; they had conflicted natures.
They felt what we feel, they were imperfect and faulted
and if we excelled, we were by them exalted.
But now, we have distant pin-ups, shining,
advertisements lying with their hands on their hearts
while we gaze up at them smiling.⁴⁴⁶

Reading these lines, one might think of the rape of Leda by Zeus or, perhaps, Persephone's abduction by Hades, as Tempest positions these events as instances of embodied, intersubjective experience and preferable to the modern-day one-sided veneration of 'shining' celebrities. Nonetheless, this is not to say that the quoted verse wholeheartedly and uncritically harks back to a mythical past defined by interconnectivity. As we shall see, Tempest's treatment of her classical source text/s is decidedly ambiguous: she is both attracted to and repelled by the models of subjectivity they represent. Although she is critical of the epic emphasis on *κλέος* and the airbrushed idols who are aloof and distant from the everyday person, she sees potential in the moments where the ancients' 'imperfect', 'conflicted', loving and

⁴⁴⁵ Or, at least, when we do have them, we have Clive and Terry and their spiralling violence, or Tommy and his ridiculous self-importance

⁴⁴⁶ Tempest 2012: 28.

passionate natures come to the fore, using them as inspiration for her new mythic paradigm:

I want humanity.
I don't want this vacuous cavity
ripping the bowels out of our capacity
for quietly excellent acts.
Small heroics. Everyday epics.⁴⁴⁷

Tempest wants her characters to speak through their actions, to reclaim their capacity for empathy and to counter apathy by seeking out connections with other subjects. In this way, Tempest exposes the psychological complexities of contemporary life whilst simultaneously thinking through ways of opening her characters out to a plural subjectivity via embodied interpersonal relationships. As such, the rest of my chapter will examine the ways in which Tempest simultaneously associates her poetic world with classical myth but simultaneously recoils from the comparison. Although her representations of the pursuit of *κλέος* (the quintessential epic gesture) demonstrate the meaninglessness of at least some elements of the heroic code and its inability to make a significant intervention into contemporary life and problems, there is, nevertheless, a nostalgia that seems to tint her text and that wants to experience the old heroic world, here and now, in her struggling south London environment.

That classical heroic behaviours do not ring relevant to a south London epic is of particular importance as Tempest's writing conveys close, personal connections to her native city, as well as a commitment to exploring the social, political and cultural inequalities endured by a number of its citizens. As she stresses in an interview for *The Guardian*: 'I didn't want to make overt political statements . . . But because we live in times that are so mental, we can't tell a story without it feeling political. Obviously, everything is fucking crazy'.⁴⁴⁸ Tempest is writing at a time when an increasingly gentrified south London claims a distinctive status in the city's cultural imagination. While processes of gentrification reinvigorate formerly run down areas, often

⁴⁴⁷ Tempest 2012: 29.

⁴⁴⁸ Quoted in Lynskey 2014.

stimulating economic growth, as the prosperity and buoyancy of central London spills further and further out, local working class people are being priced out of previously affordable boroughs, resulting in an ever-diminishing sense of community. In such an urban space, the assemblage of different communities, from locals to city workers, as well as a plethora of different ethnic groups, creates innumerable cultural, socio-economic and political strata, giving rise to complex inter-relationships between identity and difference, belonging and marginalisation.⁴⁴⁹ Setting her narrative world within this contemporary socio-historical context, any sense of meaningful empowerment would appear to be at a remove for Tempest's characters, who acutely experience British social hierarchies and divisions. Commenting on the findings of the Great British Class Survey, launched in 2011, Mike Savage, professor of sociology at the London School of Economics, notes:

Our core finding is that the British class system is becoming more polarised between a prosperous elite and a poor 'precariat', and also that what used to be termed the middle and working classes seem to be splintering into social classes with systematically differing amounts of cultural and social capital. The British class system is hence fracturing horizontally, at the same time that social divisions are becoming more entrenched. This is a sobering picture which demonstrates that class divisions remain very powerful – even if they have changed in their nature.⁴⁵⁰

Tempest's protagonists are repeatedly bound by and pitted against these alienating social realities, cultural tensions and hierarchical dichotomies of power and difference. Her poem depicts the suffering of young people who variously experience parental rejection, social alienation and physical violence, including rape, in strikingly visceral terms. Throughout the course of the narrative, the experiences of the body are of central importance as her characters struggle to free themselves from subjugation and powerlessness through adherence to a contemporary incarnation of the old heroic code, a process which often involves an internalised self-loathing which can only

⁴⁴⁹ These simmering and increasing tensions erupted spectacularly during the August 2011 riots in London sparked by the shooting of Mark Duggan.

⁴⁵⁰ Savage 2013.

express itself aggressively. Nevertheless, as her characters struggle through the often violent and alienating circumstances to which they are subjugated, they undergo poignant transformations that take place at the very level of the body. In the narrative world of *Brand New Ancients*, although subjectivity necessarily involves experiencing difference negatively and through various forms of segregation and hierarchy, it also demands an opening out to the regenerative potential of mutually transformative encounters. This new mythic paradigm engenders an intersubjective understanding of identity which transcends the fragmentation of the postmodern, entering into an invigorating form of plurality which aims to disrupt codified social hierarchies.

In her articulation of the everyday epic hero, Tempest conceives of subjectivity as an active process, situated within a complex socio-political network of relations and involving a plethora of connections with the other. In doing so, she seems to reach for the possibility of understanding difference beyond hierarchical binaries. As such, it is my argument that Tempest's literary universe is structured through tropes of connectivity, encounter and transformation. Tempest's writing, rather than surrendering to dialectical hierarchies and fixed boundaries, emphasises the inherent multiplicity of the individual and the vitality of experience that comes about in the interstitial space between subjects, as is articulated in the Deleuzian philosophy of becoming (see pp. 42-6). Therefore, the following chapter will examine the ways in which Tempest reconfigures the heroic as a means of moving beyond molar identities through a series of corporeal transformations in which the body is revealed to be a vibrant threshold of flux and transition. In drawing our attention to seemingly insignificant moments which, nonetheless, become loci of strength and dynamism that drive the story forwards, Tempest opens her characters out to intensive difference, facilitating a model of subjectivity comprised of embodied and cross-feeding relations with others.

BECOMING-WARRIOR: CLIVE AND TERRY'S TWO-MAN NATION

All of Tempest's characters experience some form of isolation within the context of the poem. None more so than Clive, the putative antagonist of the piece. Clive's isolation is in many ways much more extreme than that experienced by the other characters.

The son of two alcoholics, he is associated with violence and alienation from the very beginning of his life. Following the breakdown of her marriage, his mother Mary descends into a depression which she attempts to alleviate with alcohol and the distraction of daytime television (recalling the neuroses described by Jung, see pp. 169-70), while his father Brian experiences a similarly depressive state, also abusing alcohol in order to avoid thinking about the problems in his life, including his lack of contact with Tommy, the product of his affair with another woman. Throughout the poem, Tempest emphasises the extreme forms of ostracism and isolation experienced by Clive, his state of alienation reflecting the wider ruptures, divisions and hierarchies which Tempest sees at work in contemporary Britain, and in south east London in particular.

Clive's childhood and adolescence revolves around his parents' categorical rejection of him, a rebuff that is played out in both physical and psychological terms. Tempest refers to his mother as a 'Brand New Medea',⁴⁵¹ a comparison which resonates on a number of levels, when we think about it in relation to *κλέος*. Many studies have examined the 'heroic' elements of the Euripidean Medea,⁴⁵² who not only refuses positions of victimised womanhood (*'βούλομαι γέλωτ' όφλειν/ έχθρούς μεθεΐσα τούς έμούς άζημίους;*⁴⁵³), but explicitly aligns herself with the heroic:

*μηδείς με φαύλην κάσθενή νομιζέτω
μηδ' ήσυχαΐαν, αλλά θατέρου τρόπου,
βαρεΐαν έχθροΐς και φίλοισιν εύμενή:
τῶν γάρ τοιούτων εύκλεέστατος βίος.*

Let no one think me a weak and feeble woman, or one to let things pass, but rather one of the other sort, a generous friend but an enemy to be feared. It is

⁴⁵¹ Tempest 2012: 12.

⁴⁵² Including Burnett 1973; Bongie 1977; Dihle 1977 Knox 1977; Wolff 1982; Foley 1989 to name but a few. Of course, there are distinctions to be made between the hero of epic poetry and the hero of fifth century Athenian tragedy, the later genre adapting the archaic model for its own purposes. Nonetheless, here, Medea can be seen to engage in activity which approximates the epic pursuit of *κλέος* in her punishment of Jason.

⁴⁵³ 'Do I want to become a laughing-stock by letting my enemies off scot-free?' (Euripides *Medea* 1049-50). Translations of the *Medea* are taken from John Davie 1996.

people like that who achieve true fame in life.⁴⁵⁴

Anne Burnett and Albrecht Dihle, in their examination of lines 1021-1080 of the *Medea*, where the eponymous character debates whether or not to kill her children in revenge for her husband's betrayal, interpret her internal turmoil as a struggle between the heroic expectations of the tragic genre and her natural maternal instincts. For Medea, the heroic proves irresistible because it is a proud, 'noble' choice, albeit a destructive one. At the end of the play, wrathful heroism triumphs, although it necessitates the loss of Medea's own children. As Helen Foley argues: 'the heroic code itself oppresses women, both because it traditionally excludes and subordinates them and because it gives priority to public success and honour over survival and the private concerns of love and family.'⁴⁵⁵ Medea's destructive adherence to an archaic heroic code reveals the contradictions inherent in an ethics driven by the pursuit of κλέος,⁴⁵⁶ which is what makes the comparison between Euripides' protagonist and Tempest's Mary significant. On the one hand, in aligning Mary with this ostensibly heroic female, Tempest highlights the epic quality of the single mother, newly escaped an abusive relationship, working hard trying to raise her child in a world characterised by loneliness and isolation; she is 'a hero, knee deep in the desolate grind/ of raising a boy to a man on her own.'⁴⁵⁷ In this way, Mary is a heroine, a Medea, but not the Medea that tried to cling to archaic and destructive patterns of κλέος. She does not conform to type and, in many ways, has more in common with the kind of self-sacrifice which characterises other tragic heroines.⁴⁵⁸ Whereas Medea's refusal to be victimised results in filicide, Tempest finds moments of strength in maternal devotion rather than the heroic code.⁴⁵⁹ However, Tempest also describes the repulsion that accompanies

⁴⁵⁴ Euripides *Medea* 807-10.

⁴⁵⁵ Foley 1989: 79.

⁴⁵⁶ Indeed, ancient texts abound with examples of the kinds of tragic consequences that κλέος - driven heroic individualism seems to necessitate: the death of Achilles following the events of the *Iliad*, the suicide of the eponymous hero in Sophocles' *Ajax*.

⁴⁵⁷ Tempest 2012: 13.

⁴⁵⁸ E.g. Iphigeneia, Antigone, Alcestis.

⁴⁵⁹ Interestingly, at the beginning of the play, Medea conflates the heroic and the maternal during her 'Women of Corinth' speech: 'λέγουσι δ' ἡμᾶς ὡς ἀκίνδυνον βίον/ ζῶμεν κατ' οἴκους, οἱ δὲ μάρνανται δορί,/ κακῶς φρονοῦντες: ὡς τρίς ἂν παρ' ἀσπίδα/ στῆναι θέλοιμ' ἂν μᾶλλον ἢ τεκεῖν ἄπαξ.'; '[Men] say we live sheltered lives, free from danger, while they wield their spears in battle – what fools they are! I would rather face the enemy three times over than bear a child once.' (Euripides *Medea* 248-51).

Mary's observation that Clive resembles his father in terms resonant of Medea's letter to Jason in Ovid's *Heroides*: '[i]t's hard 'cos every day that goes past,/ he looks more and more like Brian, and if she's being honest/ with herself, she fuckin hates Brian's guts'.⁴⁶⁰ Here, Clive's very appearance, his very body, rather than being a source of joy and connection between individuals, as it is elsewhere in Tempest's poem, is a locus of alienation and marginalisation from she who loves him most.

Clive is also rejected by his father who is physically violent towards him⁴⁶¹ and spends hours drunkenly reminiscing about his illegitimate son, 'perfect little' Tommy, while 'a couple of streets away/ his other son is kicking up the stones on his own.'⁴⁶² Here, Brian is revealed to be the archetypical 'prodigal father/ returned after years in the wilderness'⁴⁶³ mentioned by Tempest at the very beginning of the poem. Rather than Odysseus' grand homecoming narrative, we have the story of the dead beat dad. In conflating Brian and Odysseus, Tempest draws attention to some of the less complimentary aspects of Odysseus' mythology. As has been discussed in the previous chapter (see Chapter 3, especially pp. 125-6), although ostensibly famed for his ten-year journey home from Troy, the hero in actual fact spent seven years as the nymph Calypso's lover and another year with the witch Circe. What is more, despite the fact that he was indeed kept prisoner by the former, his time spent with the latter was entirely voluntary. Odysseus only leaves Circe's island upon the insistence of his men, with seemingly little thought for the wife and son waiting for him.⁴⁶⁴

Similarly betrayed by his father's adulteries and ultimately abandoned to grow to manhood with only his mother to guide him,⁴⁶⁵ in an amusing twist to the tale as told in Homer's poem, Clive can be regarded as a modern-day delinquent Telemachus:

⁴⁶⁰ Tempest 2012 11. Interestingly, in Ovid *Heroides* 12.189-90, Medea appears more overcome by the resemblance of her children to their father than Mary: '*et nimium similes tibi sunt, et imagine tangor/ et quotiens video, lumina nostra madent*'; 'Their resemblance to you is all too great and I am touched by the likeness; and as often as I see them, my eyes drop tears' (trans. Grant Showerman 1977 [1914]).

⁴⁶¹ Tempest 2012: 44.

⁴⁶² Tempest 2012: 12.

⁴⁶³ Tempest 2012: 3.

⁴⁶⁴ Homer *Odyssey* 10.469-475.

⁴⁶⁵ Incidentally, this also positions Mary in a Penelopean role, as well as a Medean one.

And now Clive's 12, a little rotter,
mean to all the other kids. Always causing bother,
always giving someone grief. He starts off
nicking dinner money, then he nicks a bike,
then he nicks a kitchen knife
and holds up the corner shop for sweets.⁴⁶⁶

Just as the first four books of the *Odyssey* reflect on Telemachus' transition to manhood and the effect of Odysseus' absence on his family, so does Tempest's poem explore the tragic consequences of an absentee father as she traces the increasing sense of disaffection and exclusion which, as we shall see below, pervades the whole of Clive's narrative. As such, the journey of Telemachus in pursuit of news of his father is turned into the travails of an emotionally neglected child growing up in a single-parent household. Nevertheless, Tempest does not try to excuse Clive's behaviour, nor does she condemn his mother and father, who are as much victims of circumstance as Clive is. Instead, even Brian encapsulates the eventual possibility of redemption. In referring to him as 'prodigal', Tempest conflates Homer's *Odyssey* with the Biblical tale of the prodigal son. The Gospel of Luke 15.11-32 recounts Jesus's parable of a young man who, having asked his father for his inheritance early, squanders it. Destitute, he resolves to return home to his father with the hope of being taken back into the household as a servant. The father, however, welcomes his child back joyfully. Although we are encouraged to think badly of the son's behaviour, the moral of this story is that no one is beyond redemption, so long as empathy exists between human beings. This notion of the redemptive quality of love and compassion is central to Tempest's piece:

We all need to love
and be loved
and keep going.⁴⁶⁷

Throughout the poem, Tempest asks her audience to look again at those whom we

⁴⁶⁶ Tempest 2012: 13.

⁴⁶⁷ Tempest 2012: 2.

may judge unfairly and to recognise the possibility for epic greatness in the seemingly most reprobate of individuals:⁴⁶⁸

Everyone has within themselves the capacity for great good, and great destructiveness. That's why I am aligning us with these old Gods. It's natural to look at someone and make a snap judgement, but the point of the piece is just to say: look again, try and see the possibility of a person.⁴⁶⁹

This significance of seeing the possibility of a person is reflected in the relationship between Clive and his friend Terry, also known as Spider,⁴⁷⁰ who meet as young children at a point in his life when Clive's sense of isolation is at its most abject. Playing football by himself in the street, Clive attracts the attention of Terry, a boy who is being brought up by his grandmother.⁴⁷¹ Despite an initial reticence, Terry catches Clive's attention and invites him back to his house for dinner. In response, Clive 'looks at him briefly/ like he's from another country',⁴⁷² unused to receiving such invitations from other children. Terry's kind gesture sets a transformation in motion for Clive. Growing up, they found their own 'two-man nation',⁴⁷³ metamorphosing into modern day warriors. They begin to resemble one another with their matching jackets, upturned hoods and distinctive walks.⁴⁷⁴ Not only do Clive and Terry spend all of their time together, but they seem to have morphed into the same person: they resemble each other physically and mimic each other's gestures. However, this transformation should not be understood as the result of imitation, rather, their persistent blending

⁴⁶⁸ Again, this harks back to Homer's *Odyssey* which not only deals with the trials and tribulations of an elite Greek male but creates space for rustics and servants, for low lifes and dastardly villains.

⁴⁶⁹ Quoted in Parker 2012.

⁴⁷⁰ Terry's nickname stems from the spider-like scar on his neck caused when Clive sets a fire in his living-room and locks Terry inside.

⁴⁷¹ The text implies that Terry has been abandoned by his parents in much the same way that Clive has.

⁴⁷² Tempest 2012: 14. This invitation is reminiscent of the hospitality Telemachus experiences on his journeys in Homer's *Odyssey*. Like his ancient counterpart, whose home is rendered unstable through the presence of the suitors, Terry's invitation gives Clive a chance to see what stable, loving households are like and to appreciate the worth of proper hospitality.

⁴⁷³ Tempest 2012: 19.

⁴⁷⁴ Tempest 2012: 17, 19.

into one another should be regarded as a breaking down of the borders between individuals.

Following his encounter with Terry, Clive begins to recover the ability to connect with another person, a feeling of mutual affection so emphatically absent from his life up until that moment. Although previously closed off to relationships with others, including his own mother, Terry's act of kindness breaks down the barriers of Clive's total isolation, proving that he is capable of empathy towards another human being: 'Terry was Clive's first real mate./ And he cared about him, though/ he'd never tell it to his face'.⁴⁷⁵ In the world of Tempest's poem, Clive is not beyond saving, although his hard man attitude will never allow him to admit it. What is more, although it is apparent that the ties between the young men run very deep, this sense of camaraderie is based not only on the very genuine friendship between the two but also on their self-characterisation as 'outsiders': a group alienated from and existing on the margins of society. As such, the following will discuss how this sense of exile strengthens the bond between Clive and Terry as they tentatively make their way towards adulthood.

Although *Brand New Ancients* evokes a strong sense of identification within individual relationships and communities, such as the friendship between Clive and Terry,⁴⁷⁶ Tempest simultaneously portrays contemporary London as a somewhat ghettoised society where different groups resist encountering one another. As she commented in an interview with Jon Snow for Channel 4 News at the Mercury Music Awards 2014:

The only thing that's real is how we engage with our fellow human beings; and we've arrived at this very strange place where if a fellow human being asks us for help rather than responding we treat them with suspicion. If I could say anything to anybody it's to encourage empathy, real empathy. There's a horrible fear, ignorance festering in our cities and towns; and globally the situation we've got ourselves in is terrifying.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁵ Tempest 2012: 15.

⁴⁷⁶ Other communities in the poem include Tommy's work colleagues and the customers at Gloria's bar, who shall be analysed in more detail below (pp. 187-93).

⁴⁷⁷ The interview can be viewed at: <http://www.channel4.com/news/kate-tempest-mercury-awards-nominee>

This sense of communion with other human beings is elusive in *Brand New Ancients*. Their friendship, rather than restoring their sense of belonging to society, relegates Clive and Terry further into the margins, a position of alterity from which it appears almost impossible to rehabilitate themselves. In her portrayal of the two young men, Tempest tries to elicit her audience's understanding as to why many young men seem so angry at and disenfranchised by modern society. As the years elapse, passers-by start viewing their physical differences (the scars, the walks, the up-turned hoods) as a threat, precluding any sense of belonging to the wider community in which they live:

If you see them, hoods up,
prowling the pavement at night
you'll walk quickly away,
skin prickling with terror⁴⁷⁸

The attitudes of individuals towards them serves to aggravate their sense of exclusion: when Spider (Terry) approaches a girl named Jemma, who has 'never seen a stranger or more desolate fella', she publicly humiliates him, causing Clive to observe: '*Spider, mate, people are muck.*'⁴⁷⁹ In this way, Tempest explores the extremes of ostracism and isolation experienced by those who putatively differ from everyone else around them. Branded as violent thugs, Clive's and Terry's difference, alienation and, indeed, perceived lack of humanity, reflects the social ruptures, divisions and hierarchies present within contemporary Britain more generally, and south east London in particular:

One man's face is the other's reflection,
it's them against everyone when they go conquering.
All men are weaklings, all women are whores.
And they will have their power,
two starving mouths desperate to devour,

⁴⁷⁸ Tempest 2012: 19.

⁴⁷⁹ Tempest 2012: 18. Emphasis in original.

to digest the flesh of the city
that raised them so sour,
a hunger for vengeance that never sleeps
but endures.
A hunger satisfied every night
but every morning restored.⁴⁸⁰
In the old days, they would have been warriors
swords swinging the names of all the throats that they'd opened
but in these times they're out on the high street, smoking,
nothing to fight for but fighting itself, saying,
'It's me and you Spider. Fuck everyone else.'⁴⁸¹

These lines designate the two outsiders as warriors of a Homeric cast: glorying in their exploits, their fierce male friendship solidified on the battlefields of south east London. Nonetheless, they also bring to mind a phrase from *Tempest's* opening lines: 'inside they're delicate, but outside they're reckless and I reckon/ that these are our heroes,/ these are our legends.'⁴⁸² The association of Clive and Spider with the *κλέος*-seeking heroes of ancient myth serves to elevate these modern-day figures from mere thugs to something more mythical. However, these young men, unlike Homer's warriors, have nothing to fight for. Clive and Terry experience a sense of profound hatred and dissatisfaction, which they express through savage and undirected acts of brutality against innocent people. They glory in violence for violence's sake and, ultimately, their mindless acts of aggression leave them no more placated than before. They do not abide by regular laws and conventions but have their own code of conduct which they adhere to rigorously. Answering to no one but themselves, this is a closed community based on power and might to the exclusion of all others, whom they consider either 'weaklings' or 'whores'. With frightening demeanour, they prowl the streets at night, looking for their next victim, seeking entertainment and relief from boredom in fighting, their frequent acts of carnage an attempt to vent their frustration

⁴⁸⁰ This irresistible hunger might make us think of Tantalus' punishment for the consumption of human flesh. This links the poem to the myths of the house of Atreus which, like *Brand New Ancients*, is a story of inter-familial, intergenerational violence.

⁴⁸¹ *Tempest* 2012: 19-20.

⁴⁸² *Tempest* 2012: 1.

at, as well as punishing, a society which has left them feeling so angry and dissatisfied with their lives.

The heedless violence which defines these young lives is reminiscent of the bloodthirsty lack of control sometimes experienced by ancient heroes, particularly Achilles' routing and slaughtering of the Trojans after he rejoins the battle following the death of Patroclus. Regardless of how many men he kills, or how he attempts to desecrate Hector's body, his thirst for revenge remains unsatisfied.⁴⁸³ Despite *κλέος* providing a carefully codified system of heroic virtue, there are moments where epic warriors exceed set limits. As such, through the actions of Clive and Terry, *Tempest* aligns her characters with the world of classical myth, classical heroes, whilst simultaneously recoiling from the association. In showing us this 'dark side' of the heroic, this exaggerated comparison between ancient and modern pursuits of *κλέος*, *Tempest* reveals the limitations of the old heroic code and its inherent inadequacies in the modern world. Nonetheless, despite portraying their violent lifestyles as in many ways abject and dehumanising, Clive and Spider maintain a sense of openness which characterises their friendship throughout the poem. Although in many ways powerless to alter the circumstances of their suffering, they offer each other love and support:

but they know love, though,
and they know laughter,
know each other as brother,
friend, father.
Equals.⁴⁸⁴

The bond between Clive and Spider should be understood as an affective encounter where each reveals possibilities for empathy, compassion and connectivity in the other. Together they are stronger than they would be individually and their relationship is characterised as both paternal and fraternal, an egalitarian friendship which encompasses the love they never had growing up. Both are sustained by the simplicity

⁴⁸³ It is only after he ransoms Hector's body to Priam that he obtains peace. This exploration regarding the meaninglessness of the loss of life during the Trojan war is also explored in Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2011).

⁴⁸⁴ *Tempest* 2012: 19.

of this exchange. Despite submitting to the alienation they have experience all their lives, their encounters with each other allow them a different understanding of life: an opening out, a dissolution of boundaries between the self and the other. In this way, the poem captures moments of true transformation for both Spider and Clive through connections which, temporarily at least, remove these two modern warriors from archaic *κλέος*, offering them moments of release which free them from the entrapment and isolation of the heroic code.

ΚΛΕΟΣ, ΝÓΣΤΟΣ AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE EMBRACE

Tempest's poem also follows the narrative of Clive's half-brother, Tommy, the product of an affair between Brian and his neighbour Jane. Despite the close geographical proximity of the two families, the secret is never fully uncovered, although Kevin, Jane's husband, has niggling doubts about his son's paternity.⁴⁸⁵ Like Clive, Tommy experiences a certain level of alienation. Not only is he isolated from his peers, preferring to read comic books alone, but he too is rejected by his parents. Like Mary, Jane notes the similarities between Tommy and his biological father ('it shocks her that suddenly/ she can see Brian in the way that he walks'⁴⁸⁶), whereas Kevin becomes increasingly distant from the boy he reared ('[t]hese days Tommy's old man don't seem to like him very much'⁴⁸⁷). As with Clive, Tommy's experience of rejection is played out

⁴⁸⁵ Like Brian and Mary, Jane and Kevin also take on a mythic quality in the narrative. Jane's attraction to Brian is described in intensely physical terms, much like the symptoms of an illness - a heaviness in her belly and guts and a sensation of heat in her blood (Tempest 2012: 7-8). This designation of her forbidden love as a fever brings to mind other prohibited and intemperate lusts (see, for example, Phaedra's malaise in Euripides *Hippolytus* 239-49). Kevin, by way of contrast, can be seen as an example of the kind of everyday stoic heroism that Tempest speaks of. His struggles take on mythological proportions as Tempest compares him to a long-forgotten god whose alters have been neglected. In the poem, Kevin is the god who 'knows better than most how to settle for less' and stays 'true, even if others do not' (Tempest 2012:8-9). Although this may seem like a bleak description of an individual, Tempest praises Kevin's ability to struggle on through life's difficulties and for not trying to find an escape or meaning in life in fantasies of fame, fortune or adventure. Kevin's heroism is located in his ability to stay true to his wife, even after she betrays him, and his capacity for contentment in a society which is characterised by existential *ennui* and general dissatisfaction. He is prime example of what it means to be a hero in the modern day.

⁴⁸⁶ Tempest 2012: 14.

⁴⁸⁷ Tempest 2012: 20.

in both physical and psychological terms. As soon as he is old enough, he moves out of his parents' home into a flat in Peckham, spending his evenings walking the streets of London alone:

Tommy's out walking. He does it most nights.

Absorbed in the sprawl of the city, he shivers.

He feels like a Spartan in Troy.

He feels like his heart is destroyed.⁴⁸⁸

In comparing the streets Tommy walks to the razed city of Troy, Tempest alludes not only to a city in many ways at war against itself, but also the metaphysical devastation of contemporary disaffection. This sense of isolation is not only sensed by Tommy but also by a barmaid named Gloria. The very same night Tommy is out walking, she too feels 'distant, strange'.⁴⁸⁹ The sprawl of London moves inwards, becomes more enclosed, as their lonely wanderings draw them both to the same bar, where their eyes meet across the room. Tempest then cuts to Tommy and Gloria at home together, the smaller space of the pub becoming even more enclosed as the scene shrinks to them in bed: '[t]he world is as vast and as small/ as this bed, these four walls,/ it's as if other than this there is nothing at all'.⁴⁹⁰ Their whole universe, everything that matters, is contained within the confines of this room, the existence of each revolving around the other. Here, Tommy feels situated: he is very much present in the physicality of the moment. Of course, the bed itself is an unmissable Odyssean reference to the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus at the end of Homer's poem. There, the great and unmoveable bed which the husband and wife share is not only symbolic of the unshakeable foundation of their love but represents a refuge following the toils of the former's homecoming. This sense of shelter and safety is evoked, perhaps even more fervently, in the case of *Brand New Ancients*, where the bed symbolises a sanctuary from the hostile and divided world in which our protagonists find themselves. Here, the bed, the home, is represented as a place where the two can define themselves, where they are accepted for who they are.

⁴⁸⁸ Tempest 2012: 23.

⁴⁸⁹ Tempest 2012: 23.

⁴⁹⁰ Tempest 2012: 24.

In enacting this journey from the streets of London to the intimacy of the bedroom, *Tempest* presents a model of subjectivity founded within the connective potential of touch. The bond between Tommy and Gloria is brought about through the compassion of their responses to one another. Lying in bed together '[h]e wakes up beside her and watches the shape of her/ breathes in the air that she breathes out.'⁴⁹¹ It is almost as though he is incorporating a part of her into his being through this bodily sharing which is immersive but also precarious.⁴⁹² Here, *Tempest's* tactile vocabulary is imbued with a new intensity when read with the Deleuzian notion of becoming, a process of individuation characterised by affirmative differences, psychological, social and Symbolic influences, as well as intersubjective interactions (see Chapter 1). As they lie, their breath mingling, they experience something hitherto unknown: the tender, intimate moments which precipitate real love. The breath creates a continuum, travelling across space to connect the two subjects, almost bringing the two bodies into one. This is an ideal image of this difficult concept of becoming, emphasising the centrality of ever-fluctuating bodily processes to subjectivity, as well as the composite, interstitial space between self and other, subject and object.⁴⁹³ The movement of the breath between Tommy and Gloria highlights the porous nature of the body and the spaces between individuals. The breath has no fixed form and is always in process, always moving, and is therefore a kind of touch which belies pre-conceived boundaries. In this way, *Tempest* presents us with a moment of transformative encounter where the strictly demarcated borders between subjects become porous, identities fluid, offering us new ways of living.

What is more, the intimacy between Tommy and Gloria involves not the possession of a feminised sexual object but a creative re-shaping of one body in response to the body of another, instigating intense transformations on both physical and psychological levels. In this tactile interchange between the two, difference is not eradicated; instead, each finds a relation to an other that is not founded on dialectical division but in non-effacing engenderment. Through what Luce Irigaray would refer to

⁴⁹¹ *Tempest* 2012: 24.

⁴⁹² Their bodily connection is qualitatively different to that between Penelope and Odysseus, whose connection was primarily cognitive (*ὁμοφροσύνη*), a sharing of minds.

⁴⁹³ This idea of mutual envelopment is also present in Cook's narrative (particularly Peleus/Thetis and Achilles/Deidameia), see pp. 66-77, 90-7.

as the 'fecundity of the caress',⁴⁹⁴ Tommy and Gloria experience a desire that evades the possessive violence that the latter has hitherto been subjected to in her relationships with men.⁴⁹⁵ As such, their embrace constitutes a non-appropriative movement towards one another, emphasising a tactility that reveals the possibility of transformative relations which offer to free Tempest's characters from the stifling social realities in which they live. Described in embodied and empathetic terms, this affective encounter between two previously isolated individuals offers the reader of *Brand New Ancients* an alternative model of the subject as dynamic and with borders constantly in flux.

Nevertheless, although this cross-fertilising exchange is rooted in tactility and empathy, following this tender occurrence, Tommy leaves the bed and 'runs to his desk and sketches a scene,/ the hero at peace with his queen'.⁴⁹⁶ In his efforts to trap the moment, in fixing his gaze upon her, it could be argued that he draws her back in a patriarchal specular logic where the 'masculine subject reflects himself onto a feminine other in order to reaffirm himself repeatedly as a self-sufficient subject'.⁴⁹⁷ Although it would be too strong to suggest that Tommy remains wholly unaffected by the experiences of becoming, he still tends towards self-assertion, highlighted in his positioning of himself in the role of both the hero and the artist, with the feminine other sustaining and making possible this subjectification.

Tommy's need to self-assert comes across even more strongly as he obtains a sort of *κλέος* in the advertising company that he works for, becoming well-known for his talent as a graphic designer. Previously a bit of a loner, Tommy relishes in his new-found celebrity, surrounding himself with a wealth of successful and sophisticated new friends whom he aspires to imitate, grinning 'like a school kid in love'⁴⁹⁸ every time they speak. At this point in the narrative, Tommy is trapped within the tyranny of the corporate world. Like many others in his position, he can only express himself through the illusory power of success. At his office, his colleagues 'all knew his name and liked what he did'.⁴⁹⁹ This importance of attaching a name to one's deeds brings to mind the

⁴⁹⁴ Irigaray 1984 [1993].

⁴⁹⁵ Tempest 2012: 22.

⁴⁹⁶ Tempest 2012: 24.

⁴⁹⁷ Lorraine 1999: 23.

⁴⁹⁸ Tempest 2012: 31.

⁴⁹⁹ Tempest 2012: 30.

ways in which in the *Odyssey* the eponymous hero's fame was so wide-spread that his feats became the subject of the bard's song in the Phaeacian king Alcinous' court, even as Odysseus himself was still far from home.⁵⁰⁰

Nevertheless, throughout the epic, Odysseus often chooses to suppress his famous name: he does not immediately identify himself upon his arrival at Alcinous' court and enters his own palace disguised as a beggar. The most famous example of this suppression is in Book 9 where, in order to protect himself from the wrath of the Cyclopes after blinding their kinsman, Odysseus tells Polyphemus that his name is *Οὔτις*. Odysseus' designation of himself as 'Nobody' (a homonym of his name) implies a denial of his heroic self. It is an act which simultaneously protects and threatens: it saves his physical body but also effaces his identity. In both asserting and concealing his name, Odysseus can be seen to undermine the unity between the signifier and the signified and, thus, the stability of his subjectivity. As such, Homer's Odysseus can be seen to be capable of and willing to take up a more fluid identity, opening himself out and losing himself to a nexus of subjectival possibilities. However, the threat posed to the unified self does not last for long as Odysseus, having escaped and made it back to his ship, in a hubristic act reveals his true name to Polyphemus:

*Κύκλωψ, αἴ κέν τις σε καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων
ὀφθαλμοῦ εἴρηται ἀεικελίην ἀλαωτύν,
φάσθαι Ὀδυσσῆα πτολιπόρθιον ἐξαλαῶσαι,
υἷὸν Λαέρτεω, Ἰθάκῃ ἔνι οἰκί' ἔχοντα.*

Cyclops, if any mortal man ever asks you
about the shameful blinding of your eye,
say that Odysseus the sacker of cities blinded you,
Laertes' son who has a house in Ithaca!⁵⁰¹

This need to boast, for the *κλέος* of the deed to be attached to his name, is a signal that he has withdrawn to the security of his stable heroic identity as the 'sacker of

⁵⁰⁰ Homer *Odyssey* 8.62-103.

⁵⁰¹ Homer *Odyssey* 9.502-5.

cities'. By withholding his name, Odysseus, temporarily at least, freed himself not only from a strictly demarcated sense of self but also from the constraints which his mythology had placed upon him. Similarly, once he reveals his name to Alcinous, he is again trapped within the confines of his identity as cunning man and formidable warrior.⁵⁰² As Sheila Murnaghan notes in her introduction to Stanley Lombardo's 2000 translation of the *Odyssey*:

Their names are not just names to them but claims to high status and reputation based on their aristocratic heritage and their own impressive actions, and their relations with each other revolve around the giving and getting of recognition [. . .] Living up to an illustrious name and the privileges that go with it is, for them, paramount. They risk their lives in the hopes of achieving something memorable enough to turn the honour they enjoy in their lifetimes into everlasting fame or *kleos*.⁵⁰³

In reclaiming his name, and thus his *κλέος*, Odysseus is once again imprisoned by his mythology, which in many ways might limit the possibilities for open encounters with new people in his journey. Tommy too is trapped by the idea, the image, others have of him. Like his ancient counter-part, Tommy must play up to a certain set of expectations, perform a certain set of behaviours. As Odysseus proves his identity through tales of his cunning, eloquence and sound judgment, through playing the *role* of Odysseus the great hero, so too must Tommy act the part expected of him: a parody of a young London city-worker who indulges in ostentatious displays of excess, drinking 'liquor from decanter'⁵⁰⁴ and 'shovelling coke'.⁵⁰⁵ In a society where there is an insistence on professional status, Tempest draws on the Greco-Roman cultural figure of the hero in order to undercut the pursuit of *κλέος* to which Tommy has submitted himself. Simultaneously admired and ridiculed, the exaggerated comparison between the values of the battlefield and those of the boardroom once more leads

⁵⁰² 'εἴμ' Ὀδυσσεὺς Λαερτιάδης, ὃς πᾶσι δόλοισιν/ ἀνθρώποισι μέλω, καί μευ κλέος οὐρανὸν ἵκει.'; 'I am Odysseus Laertiades, who am of interest to all men/ for my wiles, and my fame reaches heaven' Homer *Odyssey* 9. 19-20.

⁵⁰³ Murnaghan 2000: xix.

⁵⁰⁴ Tempest 2012: 32.

⁵⁰⁵ Tempest 2012: 31.

Tempest's audience to question the limitations that the archaic heroic code places upon the subject.

As Tommy becomes more secure in his success, he is drawn further into this way of life, causing him to drift away from Gloria. It is as though he is 'far away, lost in a new world'.⁵⁰⁶ Just as Odysseus' adventures, although gaining him *κλέος*, only do so at the expense of his *νόστος*, Tommy's metaphorical journey towards corporate success has caused a gulf to form between him and his Penelope. Gloria distrusts the *κλέος* which serves to isolate Tommy and his colleagues, saying '*If they're quick to know you,/ then they'll be quick to forget you*'.⁵⁰⁷ For Tempest, the kind of fame Tommy seeks is not imperishable but dependent on his continued profitability at work. Here, friendships and interactions between people are cultivated in hope of social or financial gain, creating a culture of disconnection and isolation. The problems inherent in this self-contained individualism, this lack of empathy and compassion between human beings, is at the heart of Tempest's poem:

Why celebrate this? Why not denigrate this?
I don't know the names of my neighbours
but I know the names of the rich and famous.
And the names of their ex-girlfriends
and their ex-girlfriends' new boyfriends.⁵⁰⁸

Here, our seclusion from those around us, the very anonymity that postmodern culture engenders, especially in the inner-city, appears as a sombre manifestation of alienation. It is not enough to reject *κλέος*, to reject the name; what matters is a will to invest it with a new significance. Instead of looking up to the glorified 'heroes' of twenty-first century culture, Tempest invites her readers to look amongst themselves, at the '[m]illions of characters,/ each with their own epic narratives';⁵⁰⁹ to notice '[t]hat face on the street you walk past without looking at,/ or the face on the street that walks past you without looking back'.⁵¹⁰ She encourages us to '[l]ook again, and

⁵⁰⁶ Tempest 2012: 30.

⁵⁰⁷ Tempest 2012: 30. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁰⁸ Tempest 2012: 28

⁵⁰⁹ Tempest 2012: 2.

⁵¹⁰ Tempest 2012: 2.

allow yourself to see *them*⁵¹¹ because, '[t]he stories are here,/ the stories are you'.⁵¹²

It is this very namelessness and facelessness which characterises the everyday hero, releasing them from the traps which bind their named, *κλέος*-defined counterparts and open them up to a subjectivity rooted not in fame but in embodied experience and intersubjective relationships, that is to say: the infinite possibilities of nomadic becoming. Nonetheless, the name remains important in Tempest's new mythic paradigm, although for reasons other than to link the hero to his deeds. Instead, names are rendered vital in their ability to identify everyday heroes, not just those defined by *κλέος*, and, in doing so, are a factor in creating and maintaining relationships between people:

Our morality is still learned through experience
gained in these cities in all of their rage and their tedium and yes -
our colours *are* muted and greyed
but our battles are staged all the same
and we are still mythical:
call us by our names.⁵¹³

Rather than rejecting names outright, Tempest divorces the name from its associations with *κλέος* and invests it with an altogether different kind of energy. Just as Odysseus, at least temporarily, divests his name of a unified, tautological meaning, thus opening himself out to a more fluid sense of self, so do Tempest's characters reject the constraints that their own names place on them and begin to seek a more open way of being or, perhaps more accurately, becoming. Again, Tempest here betrays a certain nostalgia for the classical, using it to elevate the day-to-day struggles of everyday people, whilst simultaneously rejecting its emphasis on the pursuit of *κλέος* at the expense of interconnectivity. In this way, classical resonances can be seen to speak and not speak to the everyday condition, are both a source of inspiration for and antithetical to Tempest's new mythic paradigm. Her demand that these everyday heroes are called by their names elevates them to the level of an Achilles or an

⁵¹¹ Tempest 2012: 2. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹² Tempest 2012: 4.

⁵¹³ Tempest 2012: 3. Emphasis in original.

Odysseus; however, unlike their Homeric counterparts, the name does not serve to isolate them from those around them or trap them in an all-encompassing mythology; rather it opens them up, makes them vulnerable to intervention, even to fusion, establishing and maintaining compassion between human beings. In the following lines, Tempest takes an extended excursus in order to name and delineate the histories of some of these everyday heroes:

There was Sam with the squint
and the dog called Darrel,
four legs and a head
sticking out of a fluffy barrel.
Sam would have a Guinness
and get one for the dog
who lapped it from an ice cream tub at his feet,
whimpered a bit, and fell fast asleep.
There was Davey who lived
on a diet of chips and gravy,
in the pub at noon,
he doesn't leave till 11,
he's got nothing better to do
than sit there by the window
whistling tunes.
There's Geraldine, she used to be a nurse;
she hangs out with Davey getting drunk all day,
reading yesterday's papers.⁵¹⁴

We would be excused to think that there is a certain incongruity in designating Sam, Davey and Geraldine as 'heroes' in the traditional sense. Generally unknown outside the community of Gloria's pub, they are neither elevated or revered members of society, nor do they conduct themselves in a way which could be designated as 'heroic'. Nonetheless, the characters presented here represent the kind of individuals who are

⁵¹⁴ Tempest 2012: 32-33.

the crux of Tempest's new mythic paradigm; individuals who are 'trapped somewhere between the/ heroic and the pitiful'.⁵¹⁵ These are people defined by, and through, their relationships with others, truly integrated within the community that is formed in Gloria's bar:

These are good people by nature,
they just got worn out faces. Gloria serves them happily,
listens when they speak to her,
a lot of them don't seem to have much else,
she's a friendly face, she knows 'em all well,
they finish every order with *and one for yourself*.⁵¹⁶

Unlike in Tommy's overcrowded, trendy bars where everyone is 'fake laughing',⁵¹⁷ here the interactions between Gloria and her customers seem genuinely empathetic. Although, on the one hand, these individuals are marginalised by society, viewed as 'no hopes',⁵¹⁸ Tempest asks her readers to see through the worn exterior to the person, the anonymous everyday hero underneath. In these lines, Gloria, or Glory for short, is held up as the embodiment of the kind of *κλέος* Tempest imagines characterising her new mythic paradigm. Her 'quietly excellent acts'⁵¹⁹ – listening to her customers, or even just being a friendly face behind the bar – reveals the gentler, less flamboyant, glory of Tempest's everyday heroes.⁵²⁰ Unlike Tommy, these people are known for who they are, not just what they do. This kind of *κλέος* is not that handed down to us by epic but one which will facilitate transformative, empathetic and meaningful relationships between human beings.

⁵¹⁵ Tempest 2012: 1.

⁵¹⁶ Tempest 2012: 33. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹⁷ Tempest 2012: 31.

⁵¹⁸ Tempest 2012: 32.

⁵¹⁹ Tempest 2012: 29.

⁵²⁰ This might bring to mind a humbler scene in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, is welcomed by Eumaeus the swineherd into his home, where he offers food and shelter to one whom he thinks a mere indigent.

Tommy and his friends stand in marked contrast to this affectionately conjured up world of new heroism. Compelled to satisfy both the professional and social desires of his bosses, clients and colleagues, Tommy increasingly disconnects from his own corporeality and the cross-feeding interactions which define his physical intimacy with Gloria, becoming 'pent up, closed off, forgetting to caress her/ with the slow tenderness/ that he had shown when he'd met her'.⁵²¹ Once more, Tempest acknowledges the inadequacies of merely transplanting an exaggerated, and ultimately inadequate, epic code into the context of modern-day London. Instead, she turns the classical on its head, using it to elevate the everyday to the level of epic whilst at the same time reconfiguring notions of *κλέος* to fit her context. The values of both ancient and modern *κλέος*-driven heroes are antithetical to her new mythic paradigm; instead, she can be seen to redefine heroic values as the ability to connect, to empathise, to become other. In this way, Tempest alters the image of the classical in the minds of her readers, juxtaposing the old and the new in ways which create a dialogue where one is coloured by the other. Here, the classical is simultaneously a part and yet not a part of contemporary life and our relationship with the ancient world should not be conceived in terms of antithesis but a willingness to work in the interstices, to create a common space of encounter between ancient texts and modern contexts.

Engaging in this kind of competitive, *κλέος*-fuelled environment, Tommy becomes increasingly violent and reliant on alcohol in order to vent his frustration against the emptiness he feels inside, despite his commercial success.⁵²² His psychological descent prompts us to recall Jung's ruminations on the post-mythical subject in the poem's epigraph (see pp. 169-70) as he tries to find solace through the pursuit of material wealth and attempts to dull the pain of nihilism through substance abuse. He has become caught up in a world where empathy has no place, where communication between individuals is realised at the level of increasing profitability.

⁵²¹ Tempest 2012: 32.

⁵²² An emptiness which might remind us of Achilles' inability to satiate his blood-lust following the death of Patroclus, even after he has killed Hector.

In this hyper-competitive, dog-eat-dog world, *κλέος* is achieved through the subordination of the opposition. Even the ‘boardroom banter’ over which Tommy obsesses has aggressive connotations. Although usually indicative of light teasing, an expression of friendly camaraderie, the term has a competitive edge which should not be ignored in this context.⁵²³ As a one-on-one battle with words, rather than swords, one might say that ‘banter’ is the modern equivalent of the duels recounted in Homer’s *Iliad*, such as those between Paris and Menelaus, or Hector and Achilles,⁵²⁴ the incongruous comparison, again, highlighting the ridiculousness of the pursuit of *κλέος* in the contemporary world. As the young men partake in this verbal jousting, a competitive dominance is established over others whose banter is found to be lacking.⁵²⁵ So, whilst ostensibly an example of relationality between two or more individuals, ‘banter’ does not represent the kind of intersubjective experience which Tempest can be seen to advocate in her poem: the encounters between people which blur subject/object positions and allow for different, non-hierarchical subjectivities to emerge.

Nonetheless, as the plot of the poem progresses, Tommy becomes aware of how he might live differently: ‘[h]e got lost along the way, and forgot what was at stake./ Suddenly he understands, and he hopes he’s not too late.’⁵²⁶ This flash of clarity, emphasised by Tempest’s use of the word ‘suddenly’, is a turning point in Tommy’s narrative. He realises that his pursuit of *κλέος* has caused him to close himself off from others, and understands the size of the gulf which he has allowed to emerge between himself and Gloria, separating them from one another as the sea separated Odysseus from Penelope. Now the inadequacies of *κλέος* are revealed to Tommy as illusions, ‘glitchy pixelated smiles’.⁵²⁷ As he becomes aware of the artificiality of the world in which he finds himself, his surroundings start to blur. In this almost unreal environment, there is no space for real empathy between people. In the

⁵²³ An ancient parallel might be the war of words between Agamemnon and Achilles *Iliad* 1.101-87.

⁵²⁴ Homer *Iliad* 3.310-382; 22: 247-366.

⁵²⁵ This could perhaps be interpreted as placing the more competitive elements of Homeric masculinity in an interesting modern light.

⁵²⁶ Tempest 2012: 32.

⁵²⁷ The ‘glitchy pixelated smiles’ might also remind us of images in magazines or online, where the glories of modern heroes are delineated, just as the *κλέος* of ancient heroes was the theme of epic.

face of such a nihilistic existence, Tommy realises that he must reject the success that he had so highly valued and instead structure his sense of self around meaningful relationships with others. Just as Odysseus' *νόστος* moves him away from the gore of the battlefield and home to his wife and son, so too must Tommy make his way back to Gloria. In Tempest's piece, the *νόστος* of Odysseus is given a more domestic flavour; however, this does not diminish its epic quality. Rather, the simple act of Tommy leaving his friends and returning to his girlfriend is constitutive of the kind of 'everyday epics' that make up Tempest's new mythic paradigm. The Homeric hue imbues Tommy's change of heart with a heroic quality, just as it previously exposed the shallowness and eventual disappointment of Homeric *κλέος*.

Yet, just as he 'suddenly' comes to this realisation, he is just as suddenly diverted from his *νόστος* and pulled back into the world of *κλέος*. Before he can leave the pub, '[t]he lads grab Tommy by the shoulders, say *we're off to Legs 11, / you've done a good job mate: call it a present.*'⁵²⁸ Just as the epic hero was often rewarded for his deeds on the battlefield with female sex-slaves, Tommy's 'reward' for his work is a lap dance. As the *κλέος*-driven warrior and contemporary 'lad' are conflated, the temptations and diversions lurking behind the masculine code of epic success are once again exposed. What would be an acceptable award in the Homeric camp outside Troy, or even at points during Odysseus' perambulations, has here become a distinct distraction for Tommy's *νόστος*. Here, his colleagues could be re-interpreted as modern-day sirens, calling him away from his true purpose. Viewed in this light, they are a somewhat menacing presence in the poem; with their 'sharp teeth in neat little rows'⁵²⁹ they not only threaten the hero's homecoming but also his life. Of course, they do not threaten Tommy's physical existence but their 'song' could perhaps annihilate his capacity for becoming otherwise, drawing him further into their world and delaying his return to Gloria indefinitely.

Upon arrival at the strip bar, Tommy continues to feel a sense of unease. Like Odysseus, it is apparent that he is being pulled in two different directions: his desire for a world defined by *κλέος* is constantly threatening to derail the completion of his *νόστος*. In these lines, Tommy's night out could be read as analogous to Odysseus'

⁵²⁸ Tempest 2012: 33. Emphasis in original.

⁵²⁹ Tempest 2012: 32.

entrapment by Calypso and Circe, postponing his homeward journey even as he pines for Penelope. Despite his desire to escape, it is almost as if the dancer, Michelle, like Calypso and Circe before her, is here harnessing some kind of preternatural force to keep this brand-new Odysseus captive in her embrace, diverting him from his reconciliation with Gloria, and attempting to console him as she does so. '[L]ooming over him', Michelle's invasion of Tommy's personal space is almost threatening as she (dis)engages in her parody of intimacy. Just as Circe and Calypso offer to replace Penelope by offering Odysseus their love, and their bodies, Michelle's 'hot breath on his face' merely simulates and commodifies the mutual desire and transformative connection Tommy encountered with Gloria a few short lines previously. Her breath, her penetration of his being, is in this instance a violation, not a moment of glorious connection rooted in becoming. Through these comparative blendings of breath, Tommy's repulsion for Michelle, the 'sickness and loathing', is matched only by the gravitational pull he feels towards Gloria who 'calls him, like a hunger'.⁵³⁰ Here, it seems as though Tommy can appreciate his condition, his subjecthood, only in relation (of attraction or repulsion) to someone else. Tempest's everyday hero needs to connect to exist, in a move which is qualitatively different to the lonely figure of Homer's Odysseus.

Eventually, Tommy finds the strength to leave his friends and set off to find Gloria, his journey under the face of the earth, on the underground, presented a kind of contemporary *κατάβασις*:

The tube becomes a chariot of fire,
and his heart is renewed with an honest desire,
his shoes become wings and he flies towards her side,
to throw himself before her and promise he will try
with new vigour to be better,
to be bigger, he is baptised in the sweat of his fury,
he runs and his breath beats the drums
of the night into rhythms

⁵³⁰ Tempest 2012: 36-7.

that sing *please forgive him* . . .⁵³¹

Just as as Odysseus was pursued by Poseidon, Tommy runs to the tube station as though he is being chased by an invisible force, desperate to get home before he is diverted from his path once more. As Tommy journeys home, the writer places the notion of *νόστος* in dialogue with the possibilities of yet another a transformative encounter with Gloria. He must reject the inadequate and superficial environment he has left behind. As he gets closer to his goal, Tommy undergoes a metamorphosis: he imagines himself as getting bigger and with an increasing sense of purpose. Once again, this change is set in motion through the thought of a co-affective mutual engenderment, opening him out to a more multiple sense of self: '[h]e sees the city through the prism/ of her image, all Glory all Golden'.⁵³² In these lines, Tommy begins to feel heroic, almost superhuman, with a sense of increasing strength and size. In many ways, Tommy's completion of his *νόστος* signifies his mutation into the kind of modern-day hero that Tempest advocates in her poem. He becomes heroic exactly because he is able to give in to an-other's vision, making himself open and vulnerable, rather than insulated and closed-off.

However, this is, again, not to say that Tommy's transformation is not problematic. Although he is beginning to understand the value of reaching through to an-other in order to realise himself, Tempest is still critical of the kind of hero he represents: exaggerated strength and a larger than life personality. In Tempest's world of 'small heroics', bigger does not equal better. What is more, like Odysseus, Tommy's homecoming is undercut by the fact that throughout the narrative, the reader is aware that, as with Penelope, Gloria is being threatened by two men: Spider and Clive, Tommy's secret half-brother.⁵³³ By the time Tommy arrives at the pub, Clive has attacked Gloria, with the intention of raping her. We expect Tommy, who has by now been firmly positioned as an Odysseus-figure, to save his Penelope from the unwanted

⁵³¹ Tempest 2012: 37. Emphasis in original.

⁵³² Tempest 2012: 37.

⁵³³ As well as being a reference to Odysseus' homecoming, Clive and Terry's attack might also pertain to Agamemnon's betrayal by his cousin/foster brother after his return from Troy. This is compounded by the fact that secrets of parenthood abound in Greek myth (e.g. Oedipus), often to tragic ends. The relationship between Tommy and Clive adds another element to the betrayal.

attentions of her suitors, however, upon entering the scene, he finds himself unable to act, leaving Gloria to fend for herself:

Frozen to the spot, summoning the heroes he used to draw . . .
But his supermen abandoned him,
the shock of it anchored him,
he couldn't move a muscle –
he felt like he was dreaming, found himself weeping
to the sounds of her shrieking
but unable to move he stood there,
invisible and useless⁵³⁴

Tommy's presence, or lack thereof, at the scene has absolutely no effect on the situation's outcome. Whereas in the *Odyssey* this is the moment where the eponymous hero throws off his beggar disguise and reasserts his heroic identity as king of Ithaca and Penelope's husband, here the image of Tommy as an epic hero of the Homeric mould is undercut; his fantasy of himself as a superman, arriving in the nick of time to save a damsel in distress is shattered. In this moment, Tommy is an Odysseus who, like *Tempest's* Medea (see pp. 175-7), does not conform to type, does not adhere to an outdated heroic code, does not culminate his narrative with a dramatic revelation of his true, heroic, identity, as he fends off his girlfriend's attackers. All he can do is watch from the sidelines as the events before him unfold.

Nevertheless, throughout his journey, Tommy learns, changes, becomes. He is not who he once was but, unlike Odysseus who travels and acts based on his certainty of self and others, lives and functions in the spaces in-between. Tommy is now simultaneously Odysseus and not Odysseus – a wandering hero who is a far cry from the manly saviour of the weak woman. In this interesting twist of events, Tommy has succeeded at the very moment when he seemed to fail, and it is this instability, this precarious suspension between success and failure which Tommy carries within him, that makes him the new hero that *Tempest* seems to be creating in her poem. *Tempest* is not interested in presenting us with another Homeric-type hero after all.

⁵³⁴ *Tempest* 2012: 40

Instead the hyper-masculine warrior is displaced by quieter, more tactile images, which shall be examined in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

BECOMING GODDESS: GLORIA AND ΚΛΕΟΣ

Throughout her life, Gloria's body has been indelibly marked by the traces that others leave upon her. At the age of seventeen, she runs away with 'the man of her dreams', with 'a smile like a jewel in a sewer' and 'eyes like Kahlùà'.⁵³⁵ She only leaves when 'one day she was in a heap on the floor,/ wiping the blood off her jaw,/ thinking I deserve more'.⁵³⁶ However, as shall be discussed below, Tempest's narrative ultimately refuses to accept the fragility of Gloria's body, rejecting male attitudes of violence and possession towards her. When Spider and Clive first enter the bar, she senses trouble: 'Gloria braces herself: they look out of their minds,/ red eyes, on fire from what looks like a big binge,/ speed or something much worse'.⁵³⁷ Nonetheless, she 'summons the energy to offer them empathy', and as she 'greet[s] them', they 'stare back emptily'.⁵³⁸ As the evening progresses, the bar empties, leaving Gloria alone with the two men. Clive gets up and, drawing the bolt across the front door, turns around to look at her. Gloria becomes increasingly anxious:

A moment passes, she can taste its passage
on her palette, their eyes were burning,
their hands were savage –
she's seen this look before,
she knows where this is going.
They wanna do her some damage.⁵³⁹

Clive pushes her against the bar, with one hand around her throat, the other opening the zip of his trouser. Having understood that there is no way of reasoning with him,

⁵³⁵ Tempest 2012: 22.

⁵³⁶ Tempest 2012: 22.

⁵³⁷ Tempest 2012: 34.

⁵³⁸ Tempest 2012: 34.

⁵³⁹ Tempest 2012: 36.

Gloria challenges Clive. Rather than passively submit, she tries to make him look her in the eye: '[s]he looked him in the face,/ intent on discovering some tiny trace of/ grace, some snatch of goodness'.⁵⁴⁰ When he turns away, she summons all her anger and fury from the times when she has been 'beaten down' in life, focusing that energy onto Clive. In this moment, Gloria can be seen to draw strength from her own sense of fragmentation, detaching herself from her body in order to fight off her attackers:

a scream gathered in her stomach
and she heard it coming from her,
for every time she found herself numb
before the pounding fists of some
disgusting monster, she came to life now,
she found her wits, for every lie she'd been told,
for every time she'd been beaten down, used and made weak –
she called upon that weakness now
for Tommy's silent stares
looking past her, looking through her,
for every one who's ever fucked her over.⁵⁴¹

At this moment in the poem, Gloria is transformed by grief and the repeated violations committed against her body. Internalising this brutality, she moves beyond the dialectical logic of the *phallogocentric* binary and transforms into 'a heroine, a god'.⁵⁴² Scrabbling on the floor, she reaches for a bottle and smashes it into Clive's face. Here, Gloria is an almost ineffable mix, where power and pride is there only *because* subjection and humiliation had existed in the same body before. Reconnecting with 'a strength she'd forgotten she possessed',⁵⁴³ Gloria ruptures out of her passive role and, successfully fending off both attackers, '[burns] brighter than any one of Zeus's daughters'.⁵⁴⁴ This transformation, this becoming-goddess, that enables Gloria to act is not a literal metamorphosis but a moving beyond the boundaries of traditional gender

⁵⁴⁰ Tempest 2012: 39.

⁵⁴¹ Tempest 2012: 39.

⁵⁴² Tempest 2012: 42.

⁵⁴³ Tempest 2012: 41.

⁵⁴⁴ Tempest 2012: 40.

roles. Associated with a goddess, ostensibly Athena, who is allied with authority, courage and strength, Gloria articulates her refusal to be bound to feminine submission. In attacking Clive, she frees her body from its passive position and opens up her previous fragility to an encounter with physical empowerment. As such, Gloria's becoming-goddess, this physical intensity of self-expression that breaks through the mould of her assigned station, can be seen to afford her a release from a feminine role which limits her to passivity, powerlessness and victimisation

However, in her reversal of the traditional sexual hierarchies of power, Gloria's transformation into a heroic female in many ways might be seen to reify the binary logic of *phallogocentrism*. This is to say, Gloria's empowerment could be understood as being located within the self-same structures of violence and effacement that characterise the poem's male heroes. In mobilising the shining goddess from within the fragile woman, Gloria's desire for vengeance against the men who have done her wrong in many ways dehumanises her as the violence, the punishment she inflicts drags her back to a world dominated by traditional sexual hierarchies.

However, Gloria's coming-to-power is not suddenly taking over the man's, the hero's, position. Her body is not afraid to bear the signs, and her mind the memory, of her suffering. It is my argument that Gloria's coming-to-power, this movement beyond the boundaries of traditional gender roles, is not a triumphant victory over a vanquished enemy. Here, positions are always in transition, never absolute. Gloria cannot maintain her transformation into the goddess, or the wrathful hero, for long and, having subdued her attackers with a broken beer bottle, suddenly stops fighting: '[s]he was silent now, she stood still, staring at them with the bottle by her'.⁵⁴⁵ Unlike Achilles, whose quest for vengeance could never be slaked, Gloria's rampage is over almost as soon as it had begun. Exhausted, she falls wordlessly into Tommy's arms:

Tommy couldn't speak, but he walked gently from the wall,
she turned to see him there, feeling like she was about to fall.
And she had nothing much to say to him
but they put their arms around each other,
and he held her trying to tell her

⁵⁴⁵ Tempest 2012: 41.

with his arms everything that he'd discovered
on that journey on the tube and in a moment when he'd watched
her defending herself like a heroine, a god.
And with his eyes he apologised for every night
he hadn't kissed her right.
And he knew that she understood 'cos he felt her hold him tight.⁵⁴⁶

In these lines, words have become irrelevant. This affective corporeal encounter, this movement away from violence towards a peace centred on the happy domestic scene mirrors the end of Homer's *Odyssey*. However, whereas there the epic hero gains *κλέος* through his words, through reclaiming his right to speak, here touch displaces both the verbal and the specular as Gloria and Tommy adopt an alternative form of communication through the interactions of their bodies. Both enact their movements in response to the movements of the other. Through their tactile gestures, Tommy and Gloria enter into a transformative exchange where one does not try to speak for the other, explain the other, even protect the other. Unlike Odysseus who spends all evening regaling Penelope with tales of his adventures, here there is no his-story. Instead Tommy not only tells Gloria with his arms about *his* journey but also about *her* moment of becoming. In this cross-fertilising encounter, each supports the other in an affective interchange which acknowledges the porousness of boundaries and the spectrum of possibilities contained within the fecundity of the caress.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Kate Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* addresses the problems faced by the disenfranchised youth of south east London, whose social contexts seek to reduce them to positions of activity and passivity, violence and victimisation, serving to separate and divide individuals through the bluntness of the roles conferred. In an attempt to think otherwise, Tempest's narrative articulates a dynamic subject position open to multiplicity. Through the mutually transformative affective encounter,

⁵⁴⁶ Tempest 2012: 42.

Tempest's protagonists are able to experience a renewed sense of subjectivity. Reading the poem in light of the Deleuzian notion of becoming draws attention to the ways in which the poem's characters seek to free themselves from *phallogocentric* binaries and molar identities. In her poem, Tempest moves ever towards an ever-changing, fluid subject rooted in transition and transformation through non-verbal reciprocal bodily experiences that emphasise empathetic connections with other subjects. In doing so, Tempest highlights the perversity of the pursuit of a *κλέος* which only serves to alienate and isolate, rendering it inadequate for the purpose of her south London epic. In its place, Tempest creates a new mythic paradigm which is no longer about kings and strong men but gives voice to the everyday, the unknown and unnoticed person.

Of course, a number of her characters, particularly Spider and Clive, in many ways fail to escape the confines of their social reality, despite opening out to each other in an inter-feeding exchange. Their processes of becoming participate in webs of meaning relating to abjection and brutality, ultimately reifying the binaries of us and them, subject and object, self and other. In their actions, Spider and Clive internalise the fear and rejection projected onto them by their families and society more generally, glorifying in violence. Although in many ways their 'two-man nation' reflects a Deleuzian becoming, eschewing boundaries and the divisions between subjects, the young men oscillate throughout the poem between redemption and the reiteration of wretchedness and cruelty. At the end of the poem, following their failed attempt to rape Gloria, there is no wider sense of openness or recuperation, merely a repetition of the hostility and effacement they themselves have suffered.

Nevertheless, Tempest still allows a glimmer of sympathy for the poem's villains. This reversal of stereotypes was important to Tempest in her writing of the work, as she herself notes:

All the characters began in quite clichéd shapes – it's amazing how deep those versions are within us – but taking time away from the characters let me see that these were not the people I wanted to write. Why had I put in a passive, weak female who might be saved by a man? Why was the bad boy just a bad boy?⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁷ Quoted in Wroe 2014.

Tempest asks her audience to look again not only at the violent thug but also the damsel in distress and her heroic rescuer. To allow them courage, humanity and terror. To understand them as human beings capable of great and terrible deeds, or perhaps just paralysing inaction. Although fundamentally flawed, these heroes, these gods, are just as worthy of the designation 'epic' as any of Homer's characters, and their ability to empathise with one another is just as, if not more, glorious than the *κλέος* of any Achilles. Thus, her poem should not be understood as merely an indictment of the loneliness which characterises our society but as an attempt to find a glimmer of hope in the darkness. As she notes in an interview for *The Guardian* where she responds to a critic who called *Brand New Ancients* 'beautiful but unutterably bleak':

Life is pretty fucking bleak but it's also extremely beautiful. It can be so bleak and so hard, and you can slave all day and you're coming up with nothing, and then suddenly one tiny little thing happens and it's like you understand.⁵⁴⁸

Here, and in her poem, Tempest challenges her audience to find the heroic in the everyday, compelling us to rethink our definitions of what it means to be a Brand New Ancient. In doing so, she does not simply conjure up images of modern heroes; instead, she explicitly uses Homeric resonances in order to explore the inadequacies of heroic *κλέος* and to move resolutely towards the body through transformative connections that unlock the subject to the multiple and the in-between. Nevertheless, she still borrows something of those deeply ingrained stereotypes. She does not build new models of the contemporary heroic afresh – preferring to reflect on old paradigms and suggesting ways in which they might be reconfigured to fit with our current moment.

⁵⁴⁸ Quoted in Lynskey 2014.

Concluding Thoughts

In its examination of the reception of the Homeric hero in contemporary British women's writing, and in bringing together twenty-first century acts of classical reception and contemporary feminist philosophies, this thesis has suggested ways in which we might re-conceptualise the modern-day subject in terms of embodied experience and mutually transformative intersubjective relations. The writings of Elizabeth Cook, Gwyneth Lewis and Kate Tempest all belie a shared interest in the centrality of the physical body to our lived experience, often articulating a sense of wonder at its inherent potentiality, albeit with an undertone of anxiety regarding its inevitable fallibility. In their receptions of the Homeric hero, all three authors offer their readers alternative ways of thinking about the subject not as a 'complete' or 'finished' entity, whose sense of self is defined against other subjects and necessitates a transcendence of the body's insistent materiality, but as essentially embodied and irrefutably connected to the world around it. That is to say, engaged in a continuous process of becoming. This is not to suggest that their writing in any way advances a specific brand of feminism, nor do they, read together, necessarily offer us a cogent feminist ideological perspective. Nevertheless, the purpose of this thesis has been to explore, from a feminist standpoint, the critical and creative potential of thinking about the body and its relationship to subjectivity in contemporary women's acts of classical reception.

Writing in a contemporary environment which exhibits a number of multifaceted, and often ambivalent, positions with regards to feminism, Cook, Lewis and Tempest are, again, not engaging in a female/feminist re-writing or correction of any masculinist bias which they perceive in their Homeric source-texts; instead, they engage with issues latent within the ancient tales themselves (such as the tensions between the opposing values of *κλέος/νόστος*, activity/passivity, movement/stasis, male/female). In their work, subjectivities are not defined by an individualistic Homeric *κλέος* but through cross-fertilising, nomadic and incessant becomings of the body. From this perspective, they reflect on the status of the human in the twenty-first century, denouncing the limitations placed on the subject within the borders of the individual body, as well as those articulations of selfhood which are grounded in destructive hierarchies of gender and sexuality. Instead they offer figurations of the

subject which transgress the 'clean and proper' borders of their bodies and engage in non-hierarchical, non-effacing relationships with others.

As such, Cook's *Achilles*, like her Homeric source-text, questions the heroic code and offers her readers alternative, quieter, images of her protagonist, in Skiros and elsewhere, which trouble traditional notions of the hero, the heroic body and heroic interactions with other subjects. These concerns surrounding the inadequacies of a κλέος-driven heroic code are also echoed in both Lewis's and Tempest's poems. In her reinterpretation of Odysseus' homecoming as a wife's quest to return with a cure to her sick husband, Lewis rewrites the Homeric νόστος as a series of tactile interactions with other subjects, examining how we in the contemporary world conceptualise the healthy body and what it means, on a social and a psychological level, to care for someone diagnosed with a chronic illness. Finally, in Tempest's poem, there is a tense attraction to and repulsion for the heroic as simultaneously serving to isolate her characters yet possessing an inherent potentiality to mark out the epic quality of the everyday person, giving us the Glorias and Tommys, the Clives and Terrys, of this world. In their receptions of the Homeric hero, these three authors push at the very borders of the body, engaging with a model of subjectivity which resides in the interstices between self and other. In doing so, they present us with a new kind of hero who is not bound by an alienating heroic code but is instead empowered by his/her connections to other subjects and the world around him/her.

Nevertheless, women's acts of classical reception involve a level of risk. Questions undoubtedly linger regarding the suitability of drawing on patriarchal texts such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. What is more, in the work of the authors under study, the heroic is not always and necessarily wholly recuperated. Though she protests against the ubiquity of the Homeric version of the myth in her depiction of alternative images from her protagonist's biography, Cook cannot save Achilles from his Homeric fate: he must fight and die at Troy. Lewis, similarly, refuses to reveal, despite the successful νόστος, whether or not Hardy will live. In Tempest's poem, intersubjective interactions often slide perilously into abjection and violence, precluding the positive recuperation of a number of her characters, Clive and Terry in particular. However, even if the authors under study resist presenting their readers with empowering feminist reinterpretations of classical epic poetry, choosing instead to engage with the fraught and complex reality that is the subject in the world, they

nevertheless do not fail to reveal to us the ways in which the physiological, psychological and socio-cultural all intersect to shape our experiences of our bodies and our selves, offering us new ways of thinking how the subject, the body and the Homeric hero might be considered otherwise.

In inviting us to reconsider our assumptions, and in exposing the limitations and risks of abjecting the body as extrinsic to subjecthood, Cook, Lewis and Tempest implicitly and explicitly provoke us to engage with both contemporary philosophies and ancient texts. As such, this thesis has been written with the conviction that reading women's acts of classical reception and feminist philosophy together allows for a vital interchange of ideas. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write:

*Philosophy needs a nonphilosophy that comprehends it; it needs a nonphilosophical comprehension just as art needs nonart*⁵⁴⁹

For Deleuze and Guattari, art acts as a crucial counterpoint to philosophy in understanding the world and vice versa. As such, reading feminist philosophy in and through Cook's, Lewis's and Tempest's reinterpretations of the Homeric hero create points of contact, exchange and tension at the intersection of women's writing, the reception of the classics and contemporary theories of embodiment. Such an endeavour makes space for engagement with the political, ethical and artistic considerations of thinking, writing – and experiencing – the becoming of the body.

⁵⁴⁹ Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 218. Emphasis in original.

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