Wit as a Weapon: Male Anxiety and Female Laughter in Feminist Responses to Epic and Ancient Myth

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter.¹

Who laughs most in the canonical texts of Ancient Greece and Rome? And who laughs least? Who laughs last? And what does all this laughter have to do with sex, transgression and trust?

W. Irving Hunt began his 1890 essay ‘Homeric Wit and Humor’ with some sage words of advice: ‘We may judge the literature of any period by the things at which it laughs; for a keen appreciation of the ludicrous side of life implies clear concepts.’² A survey of laughter in Homer’s Odyssey reveals glimmers of a compelling landscape of humour and its functions in Ancient Greece, as well as a basis for analysing laughter in the whole corpus of epic and ancient myth that unfolded from it too. Some of the Odyssey’s more foolish characters, such


as the suitors, laugh carelessly and often, while others, including Odysseus, laugh barely at all. The gods laugh intermittently, at times pitifully, at the folly of mortals, while others merely offer a wry smile in acknowledgement of a scene. In one sense, then, laughter can be seen as symptomatic of ignorance, but the world in which Homer’s *Odyssey* emerged was a world obsessed with the values of social order and standing too, and to laugh at or mock a person was also an act of willing dishonour; an attempt to humiliate them and wound their reputation. ‘Insults and abuse are, in such a world, part of the business of blame and disgrace, which is the necessary corollary of praise and honour. The laughter of ‘blame’ can be seen, therefore, either as a positive weapon – [..] capable of sustaining values and inducing conformity to them – or alternatively as a subversive and disruptive drive,’\(^3\) writes Stephen Halliwell. Thus, from Homer humour is posited as a powerful social tool, but what happens when gender further complicates the nexus of shame and threat associated with laughter?

Throughout the course of this essay, I intend to study the reception and consequence of female laughter in epic and ancient myth, and its subsequent transmission into modern feminist texts. In order to do so, I have structured my argument into three parts. The first, *Dangerous Women and Epic Delays*, outlines the pervasive presence of male anxiety in the face of female laughter in epic. Through the close reading of two key instances of female laughter in Homer’s *Odyssey*, belonging to Penelope and her maids respectively, I untangle the place of a laughing woman from within a far wider sexual politics that posits female sexuality as a danger to the male epic mission in the ancient world. Part two, *Trapped in Language*, offers some critical explorations into the notion of language itself as a gendered system, proposing that the silencing of women’s voices takes place not just in the content of epic or myth, but in the form of it too, entrapping women in the phallocentric stories given to

them by men. Here, I predominantly study the character of Echo, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as one of the archetypal silenced women of myth, trapped inside of language through a repetitive speaking curse. The final section, *Laughter and the Lacunae*, works to bind the subjects of laughter and form together. By weaving through a small constellation of female writers who have performed textual revisions of the ancient Greek and Roman texts from both within the poetic form, and outside of it in essay and novel form, I explore the place of laughter in feminist strategies of writing female experience into the spaces and openings of the ancient tradition. From Denise Riley’s rewriting of Echo in *Affections of the Ear*, and Margaret Atwood’s rewriting of Penelope and the maids in *The Penelopiad*, as well as Helene Cixous’ ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, and Adrienne Rich’s ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’, I select key ideas and quotes as critical co-ordinates towards my final argument.

A special anger is reserved for women who laugh at, or in spite of, men in epic and myth, and in the ancient literary landscape, laughter is most often used against women, with women appearing as both victims of laughter, or as victims because they laughed. In the feminist texts I have chosen to hold up against them, that humour is inverted and subversive, becoming a crucial weapon with which women are able to project their previously silenced interiority outwards. Ultimately, the intention of my investigation is to make a case for the enduring importance of women revising ancient texts as a means to dismantle the gendered literary system that has long acted to silence laughing women in order to quell the suggestions of agency and interiority veiled behind their wit.

**Dangerous Women and Epic Delays**
How many women in myth have had their tongues cut out, been hung or beheaded, or silenced in other symbolic ways? Beginning in the ancient world and seeping out across the entire panorama of epic and myth, countless female characters have been physically gagged. Arachne, Ariadne, Echo, Medusa, Penelope’s maids and Philomela are just a few examples. To understand the threat that female laughter poses in such stories, it is first crucial to understand the shadow of male anxiety that has hung, historically, over the female voice. Speech serves to externalise interiority in epic, and since women are most often represented as characters without interiority, they are seldom allowed to speak in the public sphere. From antiquity, the female voice has been synonymous with the monstrous and the disorderly, wrapped up with stories of witchery, madness, and loss of self-control. Even Rumor is variously depicted across Greek and Roman mythology as a vicious, gossiping female spreading news by word of mouth, sometimes with multiple tongues.

Though the treatment of women in ancient texts is often brutal, it is clear that their voices are feared because they pose a very real threat to the male epic mission. In the *Odyssey*, for example, women operate as transforming or bewitching agents of the plot, and their voices have the power to delay or completely derail the course of Odysseus’ journey. Perhaps because of this very reason, in the *Odyssey* as elsewhere in epic and myth, women deemed dangerous linger at the very edges of society, far-removed from the sacred space of the *oikos*. The Sirens, attempting to lure Odysseus away from his mission with their voices, exist on a far-flung rock, and the witch-goddesses Circe and Calypso remain on distant islands, a danger to civilisation. It is interesting, then, to investigate what happens to women who use their voices within the *oikos*, when the stakes are altogether higher.
Women in Odysseus’ household are physically or verbally silenced in small ways throughout the *Odyssey*: Telemachus tells his mother to be quiet, Odysseus clutches Eurycleia’s throat to stop her talking (F:19.543) and Penelope warns her with ‘don’t laugh’ (F:23.66). Jokes are often made at the expense of women too. ‘How this pot-bellied pig runs off at the mouth—like an old crone at her oven!’ (F:18.31) quips Odysseus at Antinous. To be the woman is to be the joke, and women are commonly the subjects or victims of humour. When they are the ones laughing, however, the consequences can be vastly different.

To investigate the reception of female laughter in the *Odyssey*, a particularly valuable place to focus attention is book 18, in which a disguised Odysseus returns to Ithaca to regain control of his house. The suitors laugh indulgently throughout this book, with examples including them breaking into ‘gloating laughter’ (F:18.42), ‘whoops of laughter’ (F:18.48) and perhaps most significantly, ‘flinging their hands in the air, died laughing’ (F:18.115). The purpose of the suitors’ excessive laughter here appears to be two-fold; to prove their foolish ignorance in being blindingly unaware of the fate that awaits them, and to accentuate the restraint and poise of wise, virtuous Penelope, who, in contrast, laughs just once:

Forcing a laugh, she called her maid: “Eurynome, my spirit longs—though it never did till now—to appear before my suitors, loathe them as I do.” (F: 18.186)

In advance of this moment, Athena inspires an impulse in Penelope to go to the suitors and ‘fan their hearts’ (F:18.183) in order to hoodwink them further. To ‘force’ a laugh is highly

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suggestive of Penelope’s laugh being a knowing one, but the translation of the word associated with Penelope’s laugh – ἀχρεῖον, or achreion in its transliteration – is complicated. In alternative translations, Penelope’s laugh is ‘whimsical’⁵, ‘inane’⁶ and ‘mysterious’⁷ and elsewhere she is found ‘knowing no reason, laughing confusedly.’⁸ Daniel B. Levine points to the scene: ‘The complexity of motivation has made the passage difficult to interpret. The wide variety of conjectures about the meaning of ἀχρεῖον points up the problem.’⁹ Irene de Jong also references the issue, offering that Penelope’s, ‘embarrassment is reflected in her smiling ἀχρεῖον, literally “without a need”, but the exact meaning is disputed.’¹⁰ De Jong exemplifies the problematic and seemingly popular view that Penelope laughs unwittingly as a result of embarrassment. Confusion or surprise does not necessarily connote ignorance, however, and the most literal definition of ‘without a need’ implies a uselessness I do not believe Penelope’s laugh has. It may be paradoxical, but a ‘forced’ laugh feels more in accordance with Penelope’s role and character. Levine goes on to assert that Penelope’s laugh instead connotes knowledge and loyalty, and I am strongly inclined to agree. It is likely that Penelope is surprised and satisfied by the clever thought that comes to her, and that she forces a laugh while testing out the idea on her maid. If this is the case, then Penelope’s laugh can be seen as one of very few examples of what could be termed ‘acceptable’ female laughter in the Odyssey because it is of no threat to the male epic mission. In fact, it is associated with an action that would be of direct help to the hero. In

contradiction, Penelope’s maids laugh twice, and the consequences of theirs are fatally different.

As Odysseus attempts to order the maids to go to Penelope instead of the suitors, the women ‘burst into laughter, glancing back and forth’ (F: 18.363), before one of them, Melantho, goes on to mock him directly. The interpretation of this changes little across translations, with all appearing to agree that the maids laugh directly at Odysseus. His flushed, hot anger at such an embarrassment is palpable in the following lines. ‘You wait’ (F: 18.377), Melantho sneers at him, to which he flashes back, ‘You wait, you bitch’ (F:18.380), before threatening to tell his son Telemachus, who, he says, will kill them. The next instance of their laughter comes in the opening lines of book 20:

And there Odysseus lay…
plotting within himself the suitors’ death—
awake, alert, as the women slipped from the house,
the maids who whored in the suitors’ beds each night,
tittering, linking arms, and frisking as before.
The master’s anger rose inside his chest,
torn in thought, debating, head and heart—
should he up and rush them, kill them one and all
or let them rut with their lovers one last time? (F:20.6)

The sound of the women’s laughter here swells Odysseus’ rage beyond all else; their giggling inciting a fury not yet matched in the narrative. So writes Kim Todd, Odysseus ‘needs no divine prodding to be enraged by the young women’s laughing pleasure in their bodies.’

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This time, the maids do not laugh directly at Odysseus, but with personal pleasure, and it becomes apparent that what unites each instance of his anger in the face of their laughter is the association with sexual misconduct. Their greatest crime is sleeping with the suitors and laughing about it.\textsuperscript{12} If Penelope’s laugh is to be taken as a token of her assistance to the male mission, then in contrast the maids’ laughter makes them the enemy. While Penelope’s laugh is folded into her virtuousness because it plays by the rules of appropriate female laughter, the maids ‘burst’ into laughter, and thus they are carelessly transgressive, disobedient, and ultimately, they pay for it with their lives. It is of no small significance that the maids meet their grizzly end by strangulation; killed by constriction of the products of their voices.

Each of these examples serves to show us that female laughter is only tolerated when it falls in line with, or serves to uphold, patriarchal order. When a woman threatens to defy this social structure, or undermine the male control over the oikos, her laughter is seen as dangerous and congruent with subversive schemes. The Odyssey is full of sexually menacing women that exist as figures of seduction for Odysseus, and this constructs a gendered system that directly marries female sexuality with danger to the male hero. Where female laughter becomes a marker of that sexuality, it needs to be silenced in order to be controlled.

**Trapped in Language**

Sheila Murnaghan writes, ‘the Odyssey testifies to the importance of the female without departing from the prevalent male-dominated ideological of Ancient Greek culture.’\textsuperscript{13} As we observe with characters such as Calypso and Circe – who begin as the very things delaying

\textsuperscript{12} Daniel B. Levine, “‘Flens Matrona et Meretrices Gaudentes’: Penelope and Her Maids’, *The Classical World*, 81.1 (1987), pp.23-27. Though not quoted, I would like to acknowledge my gratitude towards this paper, for helping to shape my ideas concerning the link between female sexuality and laughter in Homer.

\textsuperscript{13} Murnaghan, p. 64.
Odysseus, but also eventually help him continue onwards – women are crucial devices to the epic narrative, but the poet does not hesitate to cast them aside when the male journey needs to continue. In the following lines I survey the role of the male poet, arguing that the fear of the female voice presented in the *Odyssey* endured throughout mythic literature and ancient history alike, subsequently manifesting in a recurring silencing of women that takes place not just in the content of epic or myth, but in the form of it too.

‘It is almost intolerable that needs, affections, hatreds, introspections which we feel to be overwhelmingly our own […] should have to be voiced – even and most absurdly when we speak to ourselves – in the vulgate’. The Damrosch essay in which this Steiner quote is referenced discusses the existential exasperation felt towards being tied to language as the only way to share one’s unique inner experience. The limitations of language are a core debate in the field of comparative literature, but it’s a discussion that is significantly further complicated when gendered, as language in itself is fundamentally a male construct.

Epic and ancient myth make little room for female interiority, and the narrative strategies and structure of texts like the *Odyssey* are specifically designed to exclude the female voice; they are products of a language system created by the male, in favour of the male. Doherty writes that ‘the implications, for the poet and his audience, of attributing to female figures the power to tell stories in epic form – the power, that is, to manipulate the traditional and culturally sanctioned discourse of the poet’s own medium’ are just too perilous. Women have been silenced by the cruel fates dealt to them by male characters, but their silencing is as much the work of male authors too. Women have been invariably trapped within the male discourse of the epic world, within the ancient fates thrust upon them by

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men, and consequentially, within the forms of epic and lyric poetry too. What this entrapment
looks like is exemplified particularly well in the ‘Narcissus and Echo’ myth of Ovid’s
Metamorphoses. Echo functions as the perfect emblem of a woman trapped inside of a
language system given to her by a male author. There is a woeful humour to the words Echo
repeats, but the humour is not for Echo’s enjoyment. As readers, we bear witness to her as the
victim of a painful and infuriating comic mimicry, in which she becomes a motif of lyric
poetry’s repetitive structure.

‘Metamorphosis is more than a repeated event in the poem – it is part of its linguistic
texture. Words shift their meaning, through either a change in their form or a change in their
context. Although Echo can only repeat the words of others she subtly transforms them,’
Sarah Annes Brown offers. While it is true that Echo has a small measure of choice in the
specific words she responds with, she is still trapped within Ovid’s male interpretation of
what they should be. In one particularly telling example, Narcissus says, ‘Be off! I’ll die
before I yield to you!’, and the responsive words the poet chooses to ascribe to Echo are ‘I
yield to you.’ Ovid’s Echo is a female character still existing only in reference to the male
story, oscillating vacantly like a satellite at its edges, and while Narcissus is free to say what
he pleases, Echo can only piece together a voice from the scraps of sentences he cries at her;
resigned, eternally, to waiting ‘for words her voice could say again’.

Homeric influence has an omnipresence in Ovid’s work, and the resulting
intertextuality is marked particularly by the presentation of women. It is important to
acknowledge that Ovidian women often have something that Homeric women do not: an ‘I’,
and at least a suggestion of interiority. In Ovid’s Heroides, for example, Penelope is given a

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18 A.D. Melville p.62.
voice in a letter written from her to Ulysses. The Penelope we find here is no longer endlessly gracious, but suspicious of the time Odysseus has been away, and she makes the case for herself as the real victim of the story. ‘You were careful, I’m sure, always to think first of me!’ she quips, and herein we see suggestions of Penelope having the tenacity for a sarcasm unexplored in Homer. But while the Latin poet’s representation of female interiority supersedes that of Homer, he still does not truly represent the female voice, because Penelope’s ‘I’ has still been conceived of by a male author. Ovid’s Penelope is still addressing Odysseus directly, faithfully invested in his mission and imploring him to return, and thus she’s ultimately still caught within the gendered literary framework of the story. Women like Penelope may be the narrators of their stories in Ovid’s world, but they are not the authors, and they are still only able to speak through the language he allows them. This is still man writing woman as he wants her to appear.

Thus epic and myth have delineated our archetypal tales of womanhood. Of Homeric epic, Doherty says, ‘The framing devices and overall shape of the epic plot thus work to circumscribe the narrative power of its dangerous females, that is, those who threaten the kleos of its hero. Yet these circumscribing effects are by no means definitive: They are balanced by a number of openings in the narrative structure that allow, and to some extent invite, a less negative view of Helen and the Sirens.’ Though Doherty and I focus on different characters, it is this idea of narrative openings that I am interested in expanding upon. In her seminal feminist text ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, Hélène Cixous asserted that while ‘woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man’¹²¹, there are powerful possibilities for resistance from within the poetic form, and ample spaces in which woman


²⁰ Doherty, p. 87.

²¹ Cixous, p. 887.
can write herself into these texts. ‘Let us not be trapped by an analysis still encumbered with the old automatisms. It’s not to be feared that language conceals an invincible adversary, because it’s the language of men and their grammar. We mustn’t leave them a single place that’s any more theirs alone than we are,’ she writes. In other words, revolutionary work can be done to change a system from within, as well as outside of it.

**Laughter and the Lacunae**

A lot is being said today about the influence that the myths and images of women have on all of us who are products of culture. I think it has been a peculiar confusion to the girl or woman who tries to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language. She goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps possibilities; and over and over in the "words' masculine persuasive force" of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men.

These incisive words from Adrienne Rich’s 1971 ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’ reveal a neat critical stage upon which to discuss the conditions of being a female writer through the prism of epic and ancient myth. Here, Rich uses the essay-writing process to self-reflexively assess the experience of existing in a male literary world, but cleverly she does this through a radical exercise in form reflecting content. Beginning in the formal prose style, she soon inserts slices of her own poetry into the text, shattering the traditional style with her own ‘I’. This resolved use of ‘I’ is a point of resistance, as she acknowledges an...
earlier time when she found this more difficult: ‘I hadn't found the courage yet to do without authorities, or even to use the pronoun "I"-the woman in the poem is always "she."’

As she discusses reading female poets, she problematizes her own impulse to look for the same things she would in the poetry of men, querying the damaging notion that in order to be the equals of men, women have to write the same. That notion of breaking from tradition is key to her thesis too, and thus, her concept of ‘Re-Vision’ is proposed: ‘Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for woman more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.’

To pick up a thread from earlier in this essay, Cixous too writes of entering old texts from new directions, and though there are marked nuances between their strategies and arguments – Rich envisions a complete dismantling of traditional forms, while Cixous asserts a potential to function from within male discourse in order to disrupt its power – each of their essays do hone in on the breaking up of language and tradition as key. Both of them refer back to the ancient literary landscape as an important place for feminist writers to identify spaces in which they can write themselves into if they are missing, and out of if they are trapped. In *Laughing with Medusa*, Zajko and Leonard emphasise this point, drawing attention to the ‘desire of feminists to make visible and to fill in the ‘lacunae’ of the tradition’ and highlighting that in ‘writing in the ‘MARGINS SPACES INTERVALS’ of the myth they not only alter its perspective but challenge its very meaning’. To Rich’s concept of ‘Re-Vision’ as an act of survival, Cixous indirectly offers her concept of *écriture feminine* or ‘feminine writing’ in return, in which wit is a corollary weapon, stating that in

24 Rich, p. 175.


27 Zajko and Leonard, p. 2.
order to shatter traditional, phallocentric frameworks, women must write to ‘break up the “truth” with laughter.’

Denise Riley’s feminist rewriting of Ovid’s Narcissus and Echo myth, *Affections of the Ear*, a monologue spoken by Echo, is an interesting text to discuss at this juncture. With echoes of Rich’s textual disruptions, Riley’s Echo fractures the narrative too as she speaks directly to the reader: ‘I should explain myself, I sound derivative?’ This Echo is permitted a projection of interiority that the language she is trapped in cannot quell: ‘my inward ears will jam wide open to internal words that overlying verbiage can’t smother.’ She acknowledges her entrapment within lyric poetry by speaking from within its form, while expressing her disdain towards it repeatedly. Consider the final lines:

[…] Echo’s a trope for lyric poetry’s endemic barely hidden bother:

As I am made to parrot others’ words so I am forced to form ideas by rhymes, the most humdrum.

All I may say is through constraint, dictation straight from sounds doggedly at work in a strophe.

‘To make yourself seen reflects back to you, but to make yourself heard goes out towards another.’

That’s all I, Echo, ever do. Occasionally diverting, it stays my passive hell and small catastrophe.

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28 Cixous, p 888.


30 Riley, p. 96.

31 Riley, p. 96.
Where in Ovid the notion of the female passively yielding to the male is stringently reinforced, in Riley, it is upended: ‘If he’d cried “I’d die before I’d fuck you”, at least I could have echoed back that “fuck you”,’ she quips. Claustrophobic in the language she is forced to speak, Riley’s Echo uses humour to subvert its power, converting the ironic mockery she is powerlessly subject to in Ovid into a wit of her own in order to break herself from it, her laughter connoting a level of interior agency not visible before.

If Riley’s Echo functions from within the lyric poetry form in order to be subversive, then Margaret Atwood’s novel The Penelopiad is, conversely, an example of a character emancipated through a transformation of form. The Penelopiad performs a feminist revision of Homer’s Penelope, making her the protagonist of the story. Previously a passive character serving mostly in emblematic status, Atwood’s Penelope now reveals flaws, and narrates her anxieties at length. The maids also appear in a Greek chorus that punctuates Penelope’s words, and both Penelope and the maids speak through and of their laughter often, reflecting on the place it had in Homer. ‘Remember us? Of course you do! […] we laughed at your jokes’ sing the maids to Odysseus, while Penelope reminisces repeatedly on her learned restraint when laughing. She also directly refers back to the puzzling scenes of Homer’s episode 18, affirming the notion that her laughter was not ignorant:

‘The songs say I didn’t notice a thing because Athene had distracted me. If you believe that, you’ll believe all sorts of nonsense. In reality I’d turned my back on the two of them to hide my silent laughter at the success of my little surprise.’

32 Riley, p. 95.


34 Atwood, p. 140-141.
So Atwood’s Penelope laughs at her husband and her son, but she also self-consciously acknowledges being the victim of laughter directly as it relates to form, when she speaks of being trapped within stories she has no agency over:

‘But after the main events were over and things had become less legendary, I realised how many people were laughing at me behind my back – how they were jeering, making jokes about me, jokes both clean and dirty; how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I’d prefer to hear about myself.’35

It is useful here to turn to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Epic and Novel*, in which he discusses the significance of the novelisation of other genres. He writes:

‘Their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the ‘novelistic’ layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality.’36

While Bakhtin’s argument does not address gender specifically, it does offer a useful starting point with which to consider the place of laughter within the novelisation of the epic more broadly. On this he writes:

35 Atwood, p. 3.

It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it[…].”

Bakhtin’s methodology cites that epic is a completed and distant form, while the novel is still-evolving. If this is the case, then women in the epic are crystallised as they are, unable to escape. In comparison, the novel form allows for a laughter that, as well as familiarising us with the world around us, also removes the archetypal, mythical characteristics of a character or story, and fundamentally equalises. In this sense, the novel form allows feminist writers like Atwood to bring close the inaccessible, closed-off injustices of epic and dismantle them through humour for a modern audience.

As displayed across this small constellation of women’s writing, the value of female laughter as a subversive weapon in the feminist reception of epic and ancient myth has been central to the feminist conversation since it turned attention to the treatment of the female voice in the early 1970s. From this time onwards, feminist writers have probed and deconstructed the gendered hierarchy of voice inherited from antiquity in an ever-expanding intertextual web of revision. In her influential art historical essay, *The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter*, Jo Anna Isaak identified some overarching philosophical threads at which we can also pick here. In particular, she draws attention to the libidinal power of laughter:

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37 Bakhtin, p. 23.
While investigating the revolutionary potential of the workings of the avant-garde text, Barthes was pleased to discover what he called an “admirable expression” – the “body of the text.” The expression stresses the corporeality of language, rather than its instrumentality or its meaning. “Does the text have a human form?” Barthes asks. “Is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but our erotic body.” For Kristeva and other French feminists, this erotic body is the territory of the mother, what Kristeva terms the “semiotic,” verbal play, not controlled by symbolic conventions. It is the language that experimental writing liberates, absorbs, and employs, a “pre-sentence making disposition to rhythm, intonation, nonsense [that] makes nonsense about with sense: makes one laugh.”

Indeed, Cixous also explores the repression of the female body and its sexual pleasure, and highlights how closely connected its liberation is with female authorship. She implores women to write ‘through’ their bodies, to use writing as a means of wrecking rhetoric, and ultimately suggests that the laughing woman is the biggest threat to patriarchal structure. We remember that in Homer, Odysseus is enraged by the maids laughing as they indulge in their sexual pleasures; the very thing they later die for. Cixous counters that writing will return a woman’s pleasures to her: “To write. An act which will not only “realize” the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal.”

When we speak of the spectre of male anxiety that casts it’s shadow over female laughter, what we are really speaking about is the male fear of female sexuality. As

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39 Cixous, p. 880.
demonstrated, it is precisely laughter’s links to libidinal pleasure that makes a woman’s laughter so unsettling to the male ear. Laughter is an act both bodily and vocal; it marries the voice to sexuality. Through writing, women can use their wit as a powerful weapon in reclaiming agency, and engage in a ‘verbal play’ that envisions the text as the external intersection at which her body, interiority and sexuality coalesce.

An oft-used position of critical entry when assessing the translation of texts into new languages or interpretations is to question what is lost or gained. Women have long operated from a point of exclusion, of outside, or of little agency within, texts. The very condition of being female conjures images of the peripheral, and it is difficult to read ancient texts such as the *Odyssey* now and not scour for the same holes in representation that Riley, Atwood, Cixous and Rich found. If woman has classically been the ‘other’ in literature, then agency and power can be gained from writing directly from that place of otherness. A woman in an ancient text is always a dissident to some degree; a laughing woman especially so. Whether rewriting, translating, or altering the form, women must continue to project their laughter into the spaces of archetypal ancient texts, because in transforming them, we set the stage for new narratives of feminist resistance to unfold.

**Bibliography**


