

ELIZABETH COOK'S *ACHILLES*: WOMEN'S WRITING OF CLASSICAL RECEPTION AND FEMINISM

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of MASTER OF
PHILOSOPHY (B).

Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity

College of Arts and Law

University of Birmingham

November 2011

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Surname: Toney **First names:** Polly **Degree:** MPhil(B) Classics

College/Department: College of Arts and Law/ Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity

Full title of thesis: Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles*: Women's Writing of Classical Reception and Feminism

Date of submission: 28/11/11

Date of award of degree (**leave blank**):

Abstract (not to exceed 200 words - any continuation sheets must contain the author's full name and full title of the thesis):

Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* raises important questions about the relationship between the woman writer and the classical canon on account of her gender, as well as the way in which restrictive representations of gender can be subverted through classical reception. These concerns bring Cook's novella in line with comparable feminist and gender theory and it is this relationship between theory and literary practice that my study addresses, with an eye to assessing the way in which Cook's work could provide useful for feminist politics and activism. Undermining gender essentialism, wherein the type of body that you have dictates what you can do, Cook expands upon Statius' account in the *Achilleid* of Achilles' girlhood on Skiros. Then refusing to engage with literary narratives of Helen's blame, Cook instead directs attention to an earlier episode in her biography, her rape by Theseus. This sickening tale of abuse lays the moral foundation on which the other episodes of sexual violence related by Cook can be read. Targets of contemporary feminist activism, so-called 'rape myths' are held up to scrutiny by Cook, validating the expectation of certain feminist theorists that mis-readings of rape will only be rectified via the female voice.

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Introduction: Classical Reception and Women's Writing

In view of the emergence in recent years of a hitherto unprecedented dominance of female voices in Classical reception¹ and the interest that these voices have aroused in academics interested in women's writing, both those with an explicitly feminist agenda² and from those that do not self-identify as feminists,³ a substantial study of Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* is overdue. As an example of women's writing of classical reception Cook's is perhaps not an obviously feminist choice, for unlike other recent women writers she does not follow the path of giving a voice to female characters suppressed in the tradition so far.⁴ Nevertheless, I hope to show that the way in which Cook draws attention to and takes part in what is often a divisive relationship between the female writer and the literary tradition renders the contribution of *Achilles* to the area of classical reception an important and timely one. For while it would be disingenuous, not to mention presumptuous, to read Cook's work as merely a literary exegesis of feminist criticism; what is particularly striking about *Achilles* is that it brings to the fore ideas about the female voice in literature and representations of gender that bear a remarkable resemblance to contemporary feminist debate. A close-reading of the final section of Cook's novella will show how Cook gives prominence to these issues and then by turning to the theoretical context in which these

¹ The E-Seminar of Cox & Theodorakopoulos 2009-2010, which formed part of the Open University's Reception Project, was in response to the 'unprecedented upsurge in recent decades of women's translations and adaptations of and creative responses to classical myth and text'.

² For the relationship between women's writing, feminism and classical reception see, e.g., Bahun-Radunovic & Rajan 2011; Doherty 2002; Liveley 2006; McManus 1997; Rajan & Bahun-Radunovic 2009; Zajko & Leonard 2006; Zajko 2008.

³ It is important to make it clear that while I think that the study of women's writing is a feminist pursuit, in the sense that it recognises the importance of the female voice and takes part in its cultural revaluation; it should not be taken for granted that the academics doing this research are feminists.

⁴ See, e.g., Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*; Carol Ann Duffy, *The World's Wife*; Ursula Le Guin, *Lavinia*; Christa Wolf, *Cassandra*.

particular concerns also find academic expression, I will demonstrate the important contribution that Cook's *Achilles* is making, not only to women's writing of classical reception, but to feminism.

'Relay': Homer-Chapman-Keats-Cook

Before turning to 'Relay', the final section of *Achilles*, I will give a brief summary of the novella so that all further discussion of the novella can be understood in its literary context. Originally composed as a monologue for performance, the first two thirds of the novella chart the mythic biography of the eponymous hero.⁵ Bringing together disparate sources, Cook presents a coherent narrative of Achilles' life:⁶ starting from his ghostly meeting with Odysseus in the underworld,⁷ then back to his conception,⁸ his girlhood on Skiros,⁹ his adulthood in Troy including the build up to and murder of Hector¹⁰ and then Penthesilea,¹¹ as well as the visit of Priam to the Greek camp to retrieve Hector's body,¹² bringing the narrative finally back round to his death. It is at this point where the performance piece ends, the rest of the novella's existence being solely literary. This additional material begins with 'Gone', telling the aftermath of Achilles' death with references to the competition between Ajax and Odysseus for his armour, the funeral of

⁵ The first fifty-eight pages of what is now the novella made up the performance piece, *Achilles*, which saw Cook win a Fringe First award in 2001.

⁶ This 'cut and paste' style that Cook deploys, bringing together disparate sources as a way of putting forward her own unique analysis of events, is a narrative tactic that will be returned to throughout this study.

⁷ *Achilles* p.3-12, see, e.g., Homer, *Odyssey* 10.503-11.540.

⁸ *Achilles* p.13-20, see, e.g., Catullus 64; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.221-265.

⁹ *Achilles* p.21-29, see, e.g., Statius, *Achilleid*.

¹⁰ *Achilles* p.31-40, see, e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 22.38-404.

¹¹ *Achilles* p.50-56, see e.g., Quintus of Smyrna, *The Fall of Troy* 1.

¹² *Achilles* p.41-49, see e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 24.160-706.

Achilles and the sacrifice of Polyxena.¹³ The next section entitled 'Fire' focuses on Helen as she reflects back upon her life presumably after having been recaptured by Menelaus, as this is the last scene she recounts.¹⁴ Rather than Troy, however, I think that the main focus of Helen's story is her childhood abuse by Theseus, the consequences of which reverberate through her experience in Troy. This is made all the more explicit by Cook's interspersing of these abuse-episodes within the larger narrative of the Trojan War. Following Helen, the short section 'Vulnerary' focuses on Chiron, the circumstances of his wound and reminiscence on his first meeting with Achilles as well as his grief at his death.¹⁵ Forming the conclusion to *Achilles*, 'Relay' explores the relationship between the Romantic poet Keats and the mytho-literary figure of Achilles, underpinned by Cook's longstanding connection with the former, as editor of his work.¹⁶

At its most straightforward, 'Relay' is about a trans-historical identification between reader and literary character. Keats is described going about his daily life: reading, writing, practising medicine, inspired by a feeling of intimacy with Achilles, who as a result, takes on extra-literary significance.¹⁷ Reflecting on the lock of hair that Achilles cuts at Patroclus' funeral,¹⁸ for example, Keats mimics the action: 'He would like to shear some off this time in

¹³ *Achilles* p.61-70. Competition between Ajax and Odysseus see, e.g., Homer, *Odyssey* 11.543-67; Sophocles, *Ajax*. Achilles' funeral see, e.g., Homer, *Odyssey* 24.35-94. Sacrifice of Polyxena see, e.g., Euripides, *Hecabe*; Euripides, *Trojan Women*.

¹⁴ *Achilles* p.71-82, see e.g., Isocrates, *Helen* 22; Plutarch, *Theseus* 31.1.

¹⁵ *Achilles* p.83-91.

¹⁶ *Achilles* p.95-107.

¹⁷ This line of enquiry is developed much further by Vanda Zajko, who deploys psychoanalysis as a way of understanding trans-historical, trans-cultural and cross-gender identification, with a focus on why certain literary figures have been able to enjoy lasting appeal: 'How might this relationship [between a reader and a character] contribute to an explanation for the persistent way in which certain texts continue to give pleasure to very different readers across the ages?', Zajko 2006a: 46.

¹⁸ *Iliad* 23.152-3: 'ὡς εἰπῶν ἐν χερσὶ κόμην ἐτάροιο φίλοιο/ θῆκεν' ('With that,/ Achilles placed the lock in his dear comrade's hands'). All translations from Homer's *Iliad* herein are from Robert Fagles 1990.

honour of Achilles and place it in his hands', and in doing so goes some way towards breaking down the logistical barriers separating himself, a nineteenth century English poet, from Achilles, a figure from classical myth and literature:

'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 which holds it may be smaller than that of large Achilles, it is made in the same way, the same number of small bones'.¹⁹

While identification is certainly an important theme running through 'Relay', putting too much focus on the relationship between Keats and Achilles at the expense of Cook is a mistake and takes for granted the significance of Cook's editorial position vis-à-vis Keats and her position as a woman writer re-reading male sources.

It is important to remember that 'Relay' is not a transparent account of a male reader (Keats) forming a bond with a male character (Achilles) through the latter's literary manifestation. Keats himself has already complicated this two-way relationship by insisting on mediated access to Achilles through Chapman's translation, demonstrated in his own poem, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer':

'Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

That deep-brow's Homer ruled as his demesne;

Yet did I never breather its pure serene

¹⁹ *Achilles* p.107.

Till I heart Chapman speak our loud and bold'.²⁰

It is to this hierarchy of inspiration (Homer to Chapman to Keats), with Cook tagged on, that Vanda Zajko refers to when she describes the mechanisms of 'Relay' as, Cook reading 'Keats reading Chapman reading Homer's Achilles'.²¹ As far as this interpretation goes, Cook's work comes as a direct consequence of her male literary forefathers (Keats, Chapman and Homer), in which her position as a woman as well as her history of editing Keats' work, has had little or no consequence on what is seemingly a straightforward literary teleology.

I would like to propose, however, that this is simply not the case and that Cook actually sets herself up as an authority over Keats, purposefully ignoring the sentiment of his poem and instead, inserting her own voice into his relationship with Achilles. Cook's position as a woman is of some consequence here, as it breaks up what would be a string of exclusively androcentric relationships between Keats, Chapman, Homer and Achilles; while the effect of her voice, drawing attention to issues of gender and sexuality, brings her re-reading in line with the concerns of comparative feminist literary and gender theory. Much like the role of a translator, the power-dynamic at play between editor and subject is particularly nuanced, especially if, as in this example, it is a woman editing the work of a man. Rather than merely replicating the male voice, Cook subverts the expectation created by Keats' own poetry; so that mention of Keats' reading of Chapman's translation, given pride of place in Keats' poem, is deferred until the final pages of the novella. Add to that the fact that Chapman's is not the only Achilles that Keats feels an affinity for in 'Relay', as Cook

²⁰ Keats, 1990: 5-8. Keats' imaginative affinity with Achilles is referred to in a letter from the poet to his brother and sister-in-law: 'According to my state of mind I am with Achilles shouting in the Trenches', see Keats 1990: 420-9; also referenced in Zajko 2006a: 48.

²¹ Zajko 2006a: 64 note 37.

provides extracts from other male authors including Shakespeare and Dante, and it becomes clear that Cook is intent on putting her expertise as editor of Keats' work to use. While it would certainly be possible for someone who is not an editor of Keats to replicate this effect, there is undoubtedly something 'editorial' about the way in which Cook cuts and pastes these carefully chosen excerpts, distributing them at random intervals within her body of fiction.²²

Crucially, the most explicit description of Keats' delight in a reading of Achilles comes not from Chapman, but from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, depicting a scene of repose for Achilles and Patroclus recounted by Ulysses:

'The large Achilles (on his prest-bed lolling)

From his deepe Chest, laughs out a lowd applause

...“Ah,” he breathes in a low voice, “that’s nice.”

He triple scores the margin too, making this place, this book, his own'.²³

Read in isolation, Keats' pleasure at this couplet initially appears to be as a result of artistic appreciation for the way in which Chapman is able to evoke the hero's size through description, as Cook's Keats goes on to explain that through these two lines, 'you can feel the weight of the man sinking into his bed'.²⁴ Read in its Shakespearian context and within

²² This 'cut and paste' style, in which the female voice exercises editorial authority over her male sources, can also be seen in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, which I will discuss in the second chapter.

²³ *Achilles* p.99-100. See Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* 1.615-6.

²⁴ *Achilles* p.100. Appreciation for the sheer size of Achilles is articulated by Priam in Homer, *Iliad* 24.629-30: 'ἦτοι Δαρδανίδης Πρίαμος θαύμαζ' Ἀχιλῆα/ ὄσσοσ ἔην οἷός τε: θεοῖσι γὰρ ἅντα ἐώκει' ('Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marvelling/ now at the man's beauty, his magnificent build -/ face-to-face it

'Relay' as a whole, however, and a different interpretation emerges. Shakespeare's Achilles is domesticated, removed from the context of battle, with all the attention focused on his same-sex relationship with Patroclus, hence the reference to his 'prest-bed'. Keats' satisfaction in Cook at thinking about 'the weight of the man sinking into his bed' takes on an erotic undertone, in which the size of Achilles ('large Achilles') is not used to evoke his martial, Homeric prowess but a kind of voluptuousness.

Another source that Cook refers to, Carey's translation of Dante,²⁵ adds further emphasis to this alternative Achilles, with his eroticism at the fore:

'...he takes out his Carey again and it falls open at the same place. It is the passage where Dante sees Achilles in Hell. In the second circle, with Paolo and Francesca. With the lovers'.²⁶

Moreover, if Achilles' appearance in Dante is looked at in detail, it is striking that rather than merely displacing the hero's association with battle for love, Dante brings the two together: 'And great Achilles, the hero whom love slew/ In his last battle'.²⁷ Cook's decision to refer to the main characters of Dante's fifth canto, Paolo and Francesca, impresses the potential for slippage between the martial and the erotic even further. In Dante, it is revealed that Paolo and Francesca met their deaths as a consequence of reading: 'One day, for pleasure,/ We

seemed a deathless god'). Cook's equivalent for this Homeric scene also has Priam comment upon the magnificence of Achilles, *Achilles* p.47.

²⁵ There is also the potential to read Keats' use of translations for both Homer and Dante as a comment on class and how this determines access to the classics, especially in regards to Cook coming from a 'marginalised group' in terms of being a woman writer.

²⁶ *Achilles* p.101.

²⁷ Dante, *Inferno* 5.57-8. This translation is from R. Pinsky 1996. The juxtaposition of war and love through the person of Achilles is developed in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, a work of classical reception that I will return to in the second chapter. In H.D., the arrow that kills Achilles is described as representing both *eris* and *eros*. *Helen in Egypt* p.183; see also p.113: 'did Ares bequeath his arrows/ alike to Eros, to Eris?'

read of Lancelot, by love constrained'²⁸, with the subject-matter of Lancelot recalling Achilles, both being fighters and lovers. Moved by the poignancy that the secret love between Lancelot and Guinevere mirrors their own predicament, Paolo and Francesca kiss: 'This one, who now will never leave my side,/ Kissed my mouth, trembling',²⁹ and are killed as a result of their adultery by Francesca's husband, Paolo's brother. At an extra-literary level, the idea of 'death by reading', as Paolo and Francesca are provoked into action by literary inspiration that results in their deaths, points to the erotic side of Achilles' character that Cook's reading seeks to tease out. To Paolo and Francesca, reading becomes an erotic act which finds immortality in death, as the latter notes that Paolo will now 'never leave my side'. In turn, the erotically charged reading of Achilles that Keats takes part in ends with the hero's death, with the extract from Chapman, which similarly becomes characterised as a consequence of love.

When Cook finally gets round to providing an excerpt from Chapman, the cumulative effect of Shakespeare and Dante direct an interpretation of the scene, taken from Patroclus' funeral:

'...Next to him marcht

his friend.

Embracing his cold neck all sad, since now he was to send

²⁸ Dante, *Inferno* 5.112-3.

²⁹ Dante, *Inferno* 5.121-2.

His dearest to his endless home...'.³⁰

From Dante, the juxtaposition of eroticism and death spills over into Chapman's description of Achilles' 'embracing' of Patroclus' 'cold neck', as well as a nod to the impending death of Achilles set in motion by Hector's killing of Patroclus. Moreover, the excerpt taken from Shakespeare sets the tone in which Achilles' affection for 'his friend' becomes indicative of same-sex desire. As with the editorial mastery that Cook exercises over Keats' work, her decision to use that particular extract from Shakespeare is entirely deliberate, ensuring that it is the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus that is emphasised. This is a wholly necessary clarification considering the potential within Dante, as well as Shakespeare³¹ and the *Achilles* itself,³² to displace the figure of Patroclus with Polyxena. In regards to Dante especially, the reference to Achilles whom 'love slew', should actually refer to the hero's love for Polyxena and the tradition in which she lured him to the temple of Apollo resulting in his death.³³ However, due to the coupling of Achilles and Patroclus that Cook sets up with Shakespeare, she is able to concentrate on Patroclus' (unintentional) role in Achilles' death, downplaying Polyxena's involvement.³⁴

³⁰ *Achilles* p.106. See *Iliad* 23.136-7. Interestingly, this is also the sequence in which Achilles cuts a lock of his hair for Patroclus, where Cook's Keats is able to achieve identification with the hero.

³¹ In *Troilus and Cressida* Achilles is not only described as being in love with Patroclus but with Polyxena too.

³² *Achilles* p.56-7. The sequence of Achilles' death involving Polyxena, much earlier in the novella than 'Relay', is recounted by Cook in such a way as to blur the lines between Patroclus and Polyxena further, as Achilles thinks of them both: 'Patroclus' face as it speaks to him these nights, folded in darkness. When Polyxena's form is swallowed by the curtain at the entrance to the temple'. Furthermore, in some traditions Achilles' admiration for Polyxena goes on to cause her own death, as he requests her as a sacrifice. See, e.g., Euripides, *Trojan Women*; Euripides, *Hecuba*; Ovid, *Met.* 13.441-480; Seneca, *Troades*; picked up in Dante, *Inferno* 3. This is also referred to in Cook, *Achilles* p.65.

³³ Brownlee 2007 emphasises Dante's Latin source base with the descent to the underworld modelled on Virgil, *Aeneid* 6 rather than the comparable sequence in Homer, *Odyssey* 11. (This is especially obvious as Virgil is the Dante-figure's companion). Early medieval spin offs from Virgil from which Dante counted as sources, including pseudo-Dares Phrygius' *De Excidio Troiae Historiae*, developed the theme in which Achilles was in love with Polyxena. Although Burgess 2009: 139-140, suggests that the trope probably dates back to the Archaic Age.

³⁴ See *Iliad* 19.408-17, for the description of Achilles' vengeance as setting in motion his own death.

The conscious effort made by Cook to manipulate her source texts so as to stress the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus at the expense of Polyxena creates a reading of 'Relay' in which a straightforward understanding of gender is impossible. In Chapman, the body of Patroclus is feminised in Achilles' desiring embrace and yet at the same time, his death has come about as a consequence of masculine warfare; in turn, while Achilles is potentially feminised through his desire for Patroclus, he has a male body. Through a focus on Achilles' private, same-sex relationship with Patroclus and Keats' reaction to it, Cook disturbs gendered notions of how 'correct' masculinity should present itself. Rather than give the reader Achilles on the battlefield, Cook presents him in a domestic setting and through focusing on same-sex desire, Cook challenges the limits of heteronormativity whereby desire for the male body is only open to those with a female body. To appreciate fully the significance of these issues in terms of what they say about Cook as a female writer of classical reception, it is necessary to show how the concerns that Cook highlights have also been voiced in feminist theory. I hope that providing this introductory contextualisation on which my further readings of Cook will be built will help to make clear how *Achilles* is an especially important and feminist addition to the ever-expanding literary area of classical reception and women's writing.

Classical Reception and the Challenge of Feminist Theory

The collective challenge posed by feminist academics to canonical knowledge from the 1970s onwards came to typify a methodology based on rereading and reaction, not by

coincidence, the very same processes that characterise classical reception. For at the same time as second-wave, political feminism sought to uncover and challenge gender-based political, economic and social inequality; politically motivated feminist scholars throughout the academy began to systematically hold their disciplines up to intense scrutiny.³⁵ The link between academic and political feminism was forged through the recognition that in order to achieve political reform the values and ‘knowledge’ that had legitimised and maintained inequality must be confronted.³⁶ For feminists of the second-wave, the interrogation of gender inequality formed the basis of activism and the introduction of the sex/gender system, a theoretical model which soon achieved popular parlance, provided a framework to critique received knowledge about women’s role and position in society.³⁷ The working relationship between feminist academia and politics has been characterised as one of theory and practice respectively and will be a running theme throughout this introduction, with women’s writing of classical reception potentially bridging the gap between the two. I plan to chart how women’s underrepresentation in canonical literature became a political issue, theorised by feminist literary critics who set in place a methodology with which to reread women’s and men’s writing from the past, as well as encouraging a new relationship between women’s writing and the tradition to emerge, of which Cook’s *Achilles* is one example.³⁸

³⁵ For an extensive look at feminist methodology and its relation and reaction to canonical knowledge see Gunew 1991; Ramazanoglu 2002.

³⁶ For the relationship between academia and politics/activism see e.g., Kennedy et al. 1993.

³⁷ For the introduction of the sex/gender system into feminist theory see Rubin 1997 [originally published in 1975].

³⁸ It should be noted that the area, ‘women’s writing and classical reception’ to which I refer is self-consciously restrictive and I am fully aware that Cook’s *Achilles* could very well be assessed in terms of classical reception alone. This point is especially pertinent in light of my research into feminist literary theory and the acknowledgement therein that the marginalisation of works by women on account of their sex can be counterproductive to feminist efforts to promote the female voice, leading to further ‘ghettoisation’. I choose to continue using the descriptor, ‘women’s writing’ when referring to Cook and the work of her peers’, however, because I want to emphasise the specific nature of the relationship between women and the canon.

The incorporation of standpoint theory into feminist theoretical vocabulary enabled gender to become a place of departure for critical analysis. With the recognition that who you are determines what you can know, a woman's particularly gendered experience of the world could act as a spring-board from which to launch a critical position, providing a different but still valid perspective from male-authored/situated analysis. In fact, as a consequence of standpoint theory's preoccupation with 'discourse' and 'power', the standpoint of women can sometimes be privileged over that of men, as their perspectives are less indebted to existing power structures.³⁹ With the hypothesis that all knowledge is dependent on one's standpoint or is 'socially situated'⁴⁰ came the assumption that there must be a link between women's inferior social, economic and political position and the fact that the main proponents of knowledge were men. Equality would therefore be contingent on exposing the inadequacy of the male voice to speak on behalf of women, as well as creating opportunities for the female voice to be heard and new representations of women to emerge.⁴¹ So while discussion within the feminist movement raged over the direction that political reform should take,⁴² the overriding conclusion remained the same: that it was the

What would be interesting, though not possible within the scope of this study, would be to contrast Cook's *Achilles* with comparable pieces of reception by male authors, such as Christopher Logue's *War Music* or David Malouf's *Ransom*.

³⁹ Of course gender is not the only factor that standpoint theory makes account for. Class, race and sexuality are other major identity variables that affect an individual's relationship to power. As such, it is not so simple as to expect all women (or all men) to experience their relationship to power in the same way. This is where intersectionality comes in, which is discussed below, p.16. For feminist standpoint theory, see e.g., Barrett & Phillips 1992; Code 1998; Flax 1990; Harding 2004, 2005.

⁴⁰ Harding 2005. Haraway 1988 tempers the potential for relativism in standpoint theory with a concept of the 'situated-ness' of knowledge.

⁴¹ Attempts by the likes of Grosz 1994 and Battersby 1998 to rewrite the canonical, theoretical texts of their respective disciplines (phenomenology and metaphysics) from a deliberately 'female' perspective, characterise the challenge that feminist academics posed to the universal subject and thus the adequacy of men's writing for women.

⁴² For an overview of the politics of assimilation with or separatism from the status-quo (characterised as liberalism and radicalism respectively) see Beasley 2005.

overwhelming emphasis on the male voice that both reflected and perpetuated an unequal society. For the purpose of this study, the literary canon is the most ubiquitous representative of the male voice against which feminist critics reacted, posing the question: on whose behalf does the voice of the canon really speak?

The authority of the literary canon, which had rested on the humanist assumption that certain works of literature evoked timeless, universal values that transcended their immediate context, became a target of feminist dissent.⁴³ Despite spanning over two thousand years worth of history, these select works had been singled out for their ability to speak on behalf of humankind, meriting the esteem in which they were held as well as their continued publication and teaching.⁴⁴ With standpoint theory giving gender a central place in literary analysis, feminist critics came to the conclusion that, while the canon was dominated by the voices of men, the experiences of women could not be adequately addressed or represented, if at all.⁴⁵ Furthermore, critical readings of canonical works of literature began to uncover their role in maintaining and legitimising an unequal society through misogynist, stereotypical representations of women.⁴⁶ As a consequence, the

⁴³ See Showalter 1986b: 'Feminist critics do not accept the view that the canon reflects the objective value judgements of history and posterity, but see it instead as a culture-bound political construct'. See also Baym 1986; as well as Moi 2003: 43, who goes so far as to argue that feminist criticism of objectivity and universality 'remains one of the fundamental assumptions of any feminist critic to date'. For a feminist classicist's take on the 'positionality' of knowledge see Rabinowitz 2001. For a general historical approach see Shapiro 1992.

⁴⁴ For an attack on the androcentrism of the literary canon and the 'systemic neglect of women's experiences' that the canon's institutionalisation represents see Robinson 1986; see also Greene 1991: 3-7.

⁴⁵ Pam Morris 1993: 37, sums this up as, 'Feminist literary criticism as a recognizable [sic] practice begins at the end of the 1960s with the project of rereading the traditional canon of 'great' literary texts, challenging their claims to disinterestedness and questioning their authority as always the best of *human* thought and expression'.

⁴⁶ Toril Moi 2002: 31, refers to this branch of feminist literary theory as 'Images of Women' criticism, exemplified by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Mary Ellman's *Thinking About Women*, describing 'the search for female stereotypes in the work of male writers and in the critical categories employed by male reviewers commenting on women's work'.

female voice became a feminist issue, with feminist literary critics redefining and expanding the corpus of their respective areas of expertise in an attempt to recover and revalue women's literary voices and female experience.⁴⁷

Within the field of literature, feminist academics began to formulate a critical ideology in which feminist politics and academic theory could find expression and fulfilment through women's writing and the female literary voice.⁴⁸ Just as the traditional canon could trace its literary origins back to Homer,⁴⁹ questions were posed over whether the recovery of works by women would uncover an equivalent, gynocentric lineage. The work of the feminist classicist was of particular use in this regard, bringing historical context to the forefront of literary analysis, as well as questioning whether a counterpart canon for women would really be a positive thing for feminism. The following quote from Marilyn Skinner is a good example of the widely held conviction that the work of Sappho could form the basis of a hypothetical female canon: 'all contemporary women who write, within the Western tradition at least, may call themselves daughters of Sappho'.⁵⁰ Further research into the classical tradition, however, challenged easy recourse to the idea of trans-historical

⁴⁷ The link between political inequality and the denigration of the female voice in literature is explored in Russ 1984. The editorial statement to the relatively new journal, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, notes that the rhetoric of second-wave interest in women's writing was one of (re)discovering 'hidden' or 'silenced' voices, with Cixous' *Laugh of the Medusa* 2001 [1975] as the archetypal text of this approach, see Eagleton and Stanford Friedman 2007.

⁴⁸ For the potential link between feminist politics, literature and theory see De Lauretis 1987; Heilbrun 1979; Heilbrun 1990; Heilbrun & Higonnet 1983; Humm 1991; Kolodny 1986; Moi 2002; Rooney 2006b: 73-95; Showalter 1986b: 3-17. In an earlier essay, Showalter 1975: 437 sets out what were to become the practical goals of feminist literary criticism and its focus on women's writing, 'the correspondence and interplay between what is read and written and what is lived are one of its [feminist literary criticisms] most essential principles'.

⁴⁹ Graziosi & Greenwood 2007: 3: 'For over two millennia Homer has been the defining author of the Western Literary Canon'; see also Hall 2007: 126.

⁵⁰ Skinner 1993:144. Even in publications that take postmodern critical positions, the temptation to create an archetype out of Sappho remains apparent. Greene's collection of essays, for example, describes queer theory's adoption of Sappho through her role as 'proto-queer', Greene 1996a, 1996b: xii.

continuity, demonstrating how misogyny, racism and imperialism had been repeatedly legitimised through the manipulation of historical texts.⁵¹ Rather than offering unmediated access to the past, classical literature in particular was shown to have been invested with the historical and personal context of the reader, including his gender. While some feminists followed suit and made their own unashamedly anachronistic readings of ancient sources based explicitly upon their feminist politics and identity as women critics;⁵² others asked whether the misogynist baggage that the classical past had accrued rendered it irredeemable to feminism.⁵³

Furthermore, the ontological shift instigated by feminist criticism, whereby an author's gender shapes literary composition, was not without its problems. Attempts to define 'women's writing' or 'women's criticism' as something distinct as a consequence of gender, appeared to promote the idea that there is only one way in which all women write and one voice that can speak for all women.⁵⁴ Just as men's writing was subject to critique for its failure to adequately address women's experience; discussion of a 'female aesthetic' hid a similar bias, in which female experience was reduced to shared anatomy.⁵⁵ Critique

⁵¹ Martin Bernal 1987 raised questions about the implicit racism that had gone into shaping the discipline of Classics. For the interrogation of the values that underlie definitions in classical scholarship see Culham 1997; Hallett 1993; Keuls 1993; Richlin 1989; Skinner 1989. This scrutiny is taken further by Marilyn Katz 1992, 1998 who urges classicists to consider the context in which their scholarly questions arise. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz 1993: 1-20 discusses the potential contradiction between being a feminist and a classicist; see also Skinner 1989. Shelley Haley 1989, 1993 explores the difficulty in reconciling her identity as a black feminist woman with her career as a classicist.

⁵² For example, see the great deal of scholarship devoted to the potential 'feminism' of the fifth book of Plato's *Republic*: Annas 1976; Calvert 1975; Fortenbaugh 1975; Glen 1977 Lesser 1979; Pomeroy 1974; Wender 1973.

⁵³ Haley 1989; Lipking 1983; Rabinowitz 1993; Skinner 1989.

⁵⁴ This problem is typified by the question 'Do Women Write Differently?', posed as a section heading for a collection of critical essays, which also includes Joyce Catol Oates' equally enigmatic question, 'Is There a Female Voice?', Oates in Eagleton 1986: 208; see also Battersby 1989; DuPlessis 1985b.

⁵⁵ Eva Stehle 1981: 54, 58, for example, bases her readings of Sappho on the conviction that Sappho's poetry is indicative of a 'feminine biology' and depicts her 'biological role as non-aggressor'.

from black and lesbian feminists exposed the dominant voice of second-wave feminism to have been distinctly white, middle-class and heterosexual, rendering invisible the experiences of other women.⁵⁶ The concept of intersectionality emerged to articulate the ways in which variables such as gender, race, sexuality and class intersect to inform individual experience, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of women's writing to be developed that did not restrict women's experiences to one voice and in which gender was not the sole determinant of identity.⁵⁷

The generic descriptor that I use for Cook's *Achilles*, 'classical reception and women's writing', is a testament to the premise that the gender of an author will have a bearing on how she takes part in the process of classical reception. What makes the area of classical reception in particular so interesting is that it combines both the theoretical and practical elements of feminist literary criticism, so that the author assumes the position of both critic responding to ancient text and artist creating something new, both activities being influenced by her position as a woman.⁵⁸ The feminist potential of this process is made all the more apparent when it is in response to a male-authored text that the new work arises.⁵⁹ This is not to assume that all women's writing of classical reception is necessarily feminist, but I do think that the appropriation and replacement of the male voice by a

⁵⁶ For a critique of second-wave literary criticism by black and lesbian feminists see Smith 1986; Zimmerman 1986.

⁵⁷ Collins 1990. For recent perspectives on the continued relevance of intersectionality within the academy and beyond, see Berger & Guidroz 2009.

⁵⁸ The implication is that gender will inform not just one's writing of classical reception, but one's reading of the source text too. For an analysis of how gender informs reading see Pearce 1997; see also Fetterley 1978; Kolodny 1986; Lipking 1983; Perry 1989 and the earlier collections of essays in which Pearce also appears as editor and contributor respectively, Mills et al. 1989; Mills 1994.

⁵⁹ For the interaction/interrelationship between feminist fiction and feminist criticism see Greene 1991; Rich 1972; Showalter 1975.

woman is an act that has inherent feminist potential.⁶⁰ Alicia Ostriker, in her seminal essay of second-wave literary criticism, describes revisionist mythmaking or reception as a manifestation of ‘feminist antiauthoritarianism’, in which the rereading and rewriting of male-authored texts by women is a political act, with the hoped for consequence of encouraging ‘revaluations of social, political, and philosophical values’.⁶¹ I would like to propose that classical reception is arguably the most political form of revisionist mythmaking as it takes the foundational voices of male, Western culture as its target. Add to that the fact that extant source material for ancient women’s writing is practically non-existent and the role of the female author of classical reception becomes even more vital. While the feminist scholar of English literature, for example, can use tactics of re-appraisal, re-publication and a re-jigged teaching syllabus to disseminate women’s voices; comparable options for the feminist classicist are extremely limited.⁶² Perhaps it is therefore only through classical reception that women’s voices can challenge the ancient male dominance of the earliest canonical texts and their representations of women.

⁶⁰ Whether there is a natural relationship between feminism and women’s writing is a question posed by Rosalind Coward in her essay, *Are Women’s Novels Feminist Novels?*, Coward 1986. This is complicated all the more when a women writer explicitly distances herself from feminism and the genre of ‘women’s writing’, A.S. Byatt being one example of this, see Byatt interviewed by Dusingberre 1983. I remain convinced, however, that even though a particular piece of writing may not be ‘feminist’ in its politics, or by the conviction of the author, the act of classical reception itself when performed by a woman should be recognised as a feminist one.

⁶¹ Ostriker 1982: 87.

⁶² If we look at the pieces that Toril Moi 2002 identifies as groundbreaking works of feminist literary criticism, Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* (1982) [1977], Ellen Moers’ *Literary Women* (1978) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) the thing they all have in common is that they look to the mid-seventeenth century onwards for a comparable female tradition of writing. For institutional changes that encouraged the recovery of women’s writing such as Women’s Studies programmes in Universities and feminist publishers’ like Virago, see Ezell 1993; Milloy & O’Rourke 1991. Compare this with the despair felt by the feminist classicist Sarah Pomeroy who resolves to turn away from literature in favour of material sources as the only way to uncover ‘flesh-and-blood women’, Pomeroy 1976: 229. In a similar vein, Eva Cantarella 1987 looks to legal documents to recover the voices of ancient women and the sourcebooks of Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant 1982, 1992 make use of a wide range of sources from medical documents to inscriptions. In Classics, journals such as *Arethusa*, *Ramus* and *Helios* were singled out as unique for their willingness to publish pro-feminist articles, Rabinowitz 1993: 2.

Gender, the Body and Performativity

Insofar as canonical literature is considered to be the literary manifestation of the type of thinking whereby having a woman's body anticipates narrowly defined 'feminine' behaviour; women's writing of classical reception, with its ability to react to canonical representations of gender whilst at the same time proposing alternatives, has an important role to play in feminist politics.⁶³ Initially deployed within feminist theory to combat biological determinism, in which the type of body you have dictates what you can do, the term 'gender' acted as a counterpart to sex. At the most basic of levels, the sex/gender system offered a way to distinguish between the biological facts of being a man or a woman (sex) and the social rules and expectations that these facts entail (gender).⁶⁴ Set up as the antithesis to biological determinism or essentialism, social constructionist accounts of gender set patterns of behaviour, often associated with a particular type of body (male or female), in context. Whereas for the biological determinist, certain 'feminine' behavioural traits are explained with reference to female biology and are therefore ahistorical and universal; social constructionist argue that 'feminine' behaviour is the product of societal norms and thus that the link between the female body and 'feminine' behaviour is both inessential and contingent.⁶⁵ With feminism being a politics of change, the urgency with which gendered assumptions about what women could (or could not do) needed to be challenged and contextualised, should not be underestimated.

⁶³ Rachel Blau Duplessis characterises twentieth-century women writers by their reaction to gender stereotypes, describing their writing as attempts 'to change fiction so that it makes alternative statements about gender and its institutions', Duplessis 1985a: x; see also Millett 1977; Showalter 1986.

⁶⁴ Rubin 1997.

⁶⁵ Although I am making explicit reference only to 'feminine' behaviour and an understanding of its relationship to the female body, I hope that it is implicit that its theoretical counterpart, 'masculine' behaviour and the male body, is implied too.

Within a social constructionist account of gender, however, there is admittedly little room for individual agency; social norms dictate behaviour with the expectation that more often than not, femininity will find expression in relation to the female body and masculinity with the male. Just looking around us in our day to day lives, however, makes it startlingly clear that this is simply not the case; femininity and the female body do not necessarily co-exist, while ways to express femininity are far from monolithic. Judith Butler's concept of performativity is perhaps the most famous attempt to free an understanding of gender from the rigidity of constructionism.⁶⁶ Despite the immense misunderstandings that her work has produced,⁶⁷ Butler's account of gender provides a tool with which to understand how societal norms are circulated and the consequences of (non)conformity. Performativity itself is a bit of a misnomer, implying a degree of self-consciousness and freedom that Butler's frequent re-clarification of her position seeks to address.⁶⁸ Femininity in the performative model is not a dress that can be put on or taken off at will, but a set of possible behaviours to which compliance means social intelligibility and acceptance. Access to these 'possible behaviours' or ways of acting out femininity or masculinity, however, is not free for everyone but determined by factors such as race, sexuality and class; tying in the concept of

⁶⁶ Butler 1990, 1993.

⁶⁷ Butler refers to the 'confusion' that *Gender Trouble* (1990) provoked in the preface to *Bodies That Matter* (1993: x). Alexandra Howson, for example, accuses Butler of solipsism in failing to address the actualities of women's bodies beyond their textual representations, making the distinction between academic feminism of which Butler represents on the one hand and 'a politically relevant feminism on the other', Howson 2005: 129-150; see also Lloyd 1999. This is an interesting criticism in light of my own research, which envisages the role of works such as Cook's *Achilles* as offering the potential to bridge the gap between theoretical esotericism and political action in feminism.

⁶⁸ In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler sets out to elucidate her position on performativity as put forward in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Her clarification focuses on underlining the constraints that may bar certain individuals from access to certain gender-performances, responding to accusations that 'performativity' is too optimistic in terms of individual agency and divorced from real-life and real bodies, hence Butler's memorable mimicking of her critics in her preface, "'What about the materiality of the body, Judy?'"', Butler 1993: xiii. For the potential for gender display to be read as an affirmative choice see Grosz & Probyn 1995.

intersectionality, as Butler asks the poignant question: 'Which bodies come to matter – and why?'.⁶⁹

Butler's concept of performativity, however, points to the discursive pressures that go towards rendering femininity and the female body natural partners; so that gender should be understood as performative rather than the expression of a pre-existing identity.⁷⁰ It is only through persistent and widespread repetition, including its manifestations in literature, that 'correctly' gendered behaviour (in which femininity and the female body are paired) gains the illusion of inevitability and naturalness.⁷¹ Butler ties this in with what she refers to as the 'heterosexual matrix' in which all desire is rendered unintelligible unless it maintains the distinction between men and women, whereby attraction to men is a consequence of the female body and its inherent femininity.⁷² Heteronormativity enforces the link between femininity and the female body, whereby desire for the opposite sex is the inevitable consequence of 'correctly' gendered behaviour.⁷³ The important place that works of classical reception can occupy in feminist politics lies in Butler's concept of how the repetition of 'correctly' gendered behaviour creates an illusion of inevitability, thus putting Butler's theoretical work to practical use. Literature, like Cook's 'Relay', which disrupts the relationship between the female body and femininity or the male body and masculinity, throws doubt over the naturalness of

⁶⁹ Butler 1993: xii.

⁷⁰ Butler 1990: 192.

⁷¹ Butler 1990: viii refers to the state wherein certain ways of 'doing' gender are presented as more valid than others as 'regimes of truth'.

⁷² The concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' was brought into popular consciousness by Adrienne Rich with the essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980).

⁷³ Butler 1990: xii: 'Under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality'. For the distinction between sex and sexuality in classical scholarship see Halperin et al. 1990.

‘correctly’ gendered behaviour and disrupts the sense of inevitability on which it rests.

Furthermore, the representation of sexual desire that confounds or complicates the male/female heterosexual pairing, similarly acts to disturb the link between the female body and feminine behaviour.

The potential that the re-writing of classical literature has for feminist politics lies in its ability to provoke dissent and complaint, reacting against an androcentric literary canon that has legitimised and normalised the dominance of the male voice, as well as representations of gender which perpetuate an unequal society by presenting femininity and the female body (and by extension, masculinity and the male body) as natural partners.⁷⁴ The key issues that informed my reading of ‘Relay’ at the start of this introduction are indicative of the direction in which this study of *Achilles* as a whole will take; with a concentration on the relationship between women’s writing and the literary canon, as well as a subversive take on gender. What I hope to have demonstrated in the latter half of this introduction is that the issues Cook raises are comparable to the preoccupations of feminist critics. The first chapter will turn its full attention to Achilles and the opportunity that the myth of his stay on Skiros offers to writers looking to disrupt normative representations of gender, as well as an analysis of the confrontation between Achilles and Hector at Troy, concentrating on its alignment with feminist theoretical work on the gendered dynamic of (sexual) violence. The second chapter will go on to consider how Cook’s brief inclusion of Helen adds to the discussion of gender that the *Achilles* as a whole

⁷⁴ Teresa De Lauretis 1987: 9 makes the link between representations of gender in culture, including literature, and how gender is ‘lived’ and understood: ‘the construction of gender is both the product and the process of both representation and self-representation’.

provokes. Posing the question of whether there is something in the literary history of Helen that makes her inclusion important for Cook's project; I will look to the use of Helen in feminist-led classical scholarship as well as in other works of classical reception by women writers. Developing the political potential of the relationship between classical reception and feminist theory further, the final chapter will consider how Cook's depiction of sexual violence in the *Achilles* coincides with and gives literary articulation to, feminist theoretical work on the same subject. I hope to show that not only does Cook's work provide literary articulation for what are often esoteric, theoretical formulations, but the relationship between Cook's *Achilles* and its male authored source texts provides the ideal opportunity to test how representations of sexual violence from the male authorial voice have fallen short for women and thus the vital role that women's writing of classical reception has to play.

Chapter One: Gender in Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles*

This chapter will focus on Achilles' successful masquerade as a girl on Skiros, taken from Statius' *Achilleid* and retold by Cook in the section of her novella entitled 'Girlhood'. Through a close-reading of 'Girlhood' I will show how Cook makes use of the potential within Statius' source text to present an inessential account of gender, while at the same time undercutting and subverting the sequences in Statius that restrict gender expression, particularly the rape of Deidamia. Having already put forward a brief overview of feminist theoretical responses to gender in the introduction, I hope to demonstrate Cook's affinity with these works, putting forward representations of gender in which the pairing of masculinity with the male body or femininity with the female body are not accepted as necessarily natural or inevitable. The importance of Cook's work lies in her ability to produce literature that whether consciously on Cook's part or not, gives accessible representation to what are often complicated theoretical ideas, with the potential that feminist conversations about gender can take place beyond the academy.⁷⁵ The political import of this lies in the fact that for as long as the link between femininity and the female body or masculinity and the male body continues to masquerade as natural and self-evident, deviation renders the subversive individual culturally unintelligible and subject to discrimination.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ See the criticism of Butler in Howson 2005 for a discussion of the need for feminist writings to be easily accessible/understandable and relevant rather than esoteric.

⁷⁶ Kate Bornstein 1994 coined the phrase 'gender outlaws' to refer to individuals who, despite being rendered culturally unintelligible, persist in highlighting the artificiality of expecting femininity to be a consequence of the female body and masculinity of the male. See also Bornstein 1998.

Cook's decision to use Statius' *Achilleid* as a major source text lends itself to a feminist discussion of gender in what is, on the surface, quite a straightforward way. The myth of Achilles' masquerade as a girl on Skiros prior to taking up arms at Troy, points to the potential for an inessential account of gender; Achilles can dress as a girl and appear as a girl to all intents and purposes, while at the same time have a boy's body and be a warrior in the making. In terms of an understanding of gender as performance, what Achilles' stay on Skiros seems to show to the reader is that being a girl is something that any-body can do, regardless of their sex.⁷⁷ As a result, Statius' Thetis is able to provide her son with a set of gendered attributes that she believes will guarantee his successful masquerade, 'she softens the stiff neck, lowers the weighty shoulders, loosens the strong arms; she subdues the unkempt hair, fixing and arranging'.⁷⁸ 'Girling' Achilles is not as simple as this, however, as Cook uses Statius to explore the limitations that alternative expressions of gender are subject to.⁷⁹ In the section that follows I intend to show how Cook presents clothing and societal attitudes towards femininity as both a cultural and practical modifier of gendered behaviour, with girlish clothing often creating a type of feminine comportment and behaviour in their wearer. Femininity is presented as a product of circumstance and 'situation' rather than the natural consequence of having a girl's body and the tools used to create femininity help to restrict access to non-feminine/alternate ways of being. What is most significant and what seems to align Cook's work with feminist thinking about certain

⁷⁷ This optimism should be tempered, however, with the point that while being a girl is presented as something that any-body can do, being a warrior seems to be solely the preserve of men, hence why dressing as a girl is the only way to keep Achilles from Troy. The fact that Cook does not challenge this presumption in the Skiros sequence could be problematic in terms of my argument that Cook promotes an inessential account of gender, especially considering the potential that Deidamia offers to undercut the link between the male body and warrior-masculinity, see note 128 below. However, I would like to propose that Cook's inclusion of Penthesilea in *Achilles*, offers a belated challenge to this gender essentialism.

⁷⁸ Statius, *Achilleid* 1.328-331. The translations of Statius herein are from D.R. Shackleton Bailey 2003.

⁷⁹ The verb 'to girl' is used by Butler 1993:7 as a way of demonstrating how femininity/acting like a girl is an achieved and artificial state.

expressions of femininity, is that a key characteristic of femininity seems to be based on restriction.⁸⁰

In Statius, performing girlhood is dependent upon containment and control, as Thetis teaches Achilles, 'how to talk and move and how to speak with modesty' as well as supplying him with various accessories of femininity that help to achieve this, including clothes which are described as 'constraining his steps'.⁸¹ Once Achilles chooses to reveal his identity to Odysseus, reclaiming his masculinity as a warrior in the making, it is important to note that first thing he does is remove his clothes; the visual signifiers of his girlhood.⁸² Comparably in Cook, her Achilles 'learns to listen, dawdle, play' with the result that he is successful at femininity, 'at court Pyrrha is thought quiet and modest'⁸³ and again it is only through removing these impediments that Achilles is able to regain freedom of movement, gendered as masculine:

'But there are times when girlhood chafes and his underused limbs ache to be stretched. Then he slips off; takes another path into the woods to a cave he's found, removes his girl clothes and bracelets, binds his hands with strips of cloth and starts to box'.⁸⁴

The fact that Cook chooses to follow Statius' description of what makes a girl feminine, with a focus on restriction of movement indicative of the quality of modesty, is demonstrative of

⁸⁰ The work of Iris Marion Young 2005 looks at how the standard version of femininity is based around restriction.

⁸¹ Statius, *Achilleid* 1.150, 1.1330. For an analysis of Achilles' 'education' in Statius in relation to Quintilian see Barchiesi 2005.

⁸² Statius, *Achilleid* 1.878.

⁸³ *Achilles* p.26, p.25.

⁸⁴ *Achilles* p.26.

why Cook's work is so important and able to find common ground with feminist theory. The fact that modesty and restriction of movement can still be recognised as central tenets of femininity after almost two millennia is problematic from a feminist point of view, as well as demonstrating how ancient literary representations still hold cultural sway.⁸⁵ Rather than perpetuate the idea that being a girl and displaying femininity is dependent on modesty and restriction of movement, however, Cook sets this longstanding cultural expectation up, only to undermine it.

It modesty is what makes someone a girl and Achilles' success as being Pyrrha seems to be attributed to his convincing display of feminine modesty, then the implication is that the 'real' girl in the story will be modest. What Cook does with Deidamia, however, is to demonstrate that the tropes of femininity that Achilles adopts are not the only way to be a girl. In Cook, the 'real' girl, Deidamia, shows less feminine modesty than Achilles at a point in the narrative where, crucially, Statius' sequence of events is abandoned. The differentiation that Cook makes between her own retelling and Statius' source text demonstrates how her depiction of gender is deliberately revisionary. While both Statius and Cook anticipate that the relationship between Achilles and Deidamia will result in a son and both describe their first sexual encounter, in Statius this takes the form of rape, whereas for Cook, the encounter is mutual with Deidamia as the initiator. As well as undermining the relationship between feminine modesty and the female body, through transforming Deidamia's rape into consensual sex, Cook rewrites a tradition that feminises

⁸⁵ See Young 2005: 62-74.

Deidamia and expresses the masculinity of Achilles through their respective roles (victim/perpetrator) in the act of rape.⁸⁶

The distress that Deidamia experiences as a result of Achilles' assault is evident in Statius, in which the reader is told that she 'filled wood and mountain with her cries' and was 'horrified by such monstrous happenings'.⁸⁷ In Cook, however, Deidamia is the relatively more aggressive party, demanding that they swim, to Achilles' reluctance:

"Let's swim," says Deidamia.

Achilles, suddenly bashful, hangs back while the princess races ahead to a clearing...'

"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 the two rocks...'.⁸⁸

Everything is initiated by Deidamia, 'Deidamia embraces him', 'she dives down', 'she comes up laughing and kisses him again', until finally they act in unison, 'they find the inside of each other's lips'.⁸⁹ In Cook, Thetis' earlier instructions to Achilles on how to achieve femininity are completely undermined by Deidamia, so that when she 'drags her shift off',

⁸⁶ The gendering of the victim of rape as feminine is something that will be looked at in greater detail at the end of this chapter and again in the third chapter. It should be remembered, however, that there is a degree of nuance in Statius' telling of the rape of Deidamia as his Achilles remains dressed as a girl after the event, suggesting that masculinity has not been entirely achieved through the rape. This is especially striking considering the way the story is told in Ovid, in which the rape clearly brings to an end Achilles' masquerade as a girl. See Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.693-702; discussed in Heslin 2005: 274-276.

⁸⁷ Statius, *Achilleid* 1.644, 1.663. Lorenzo Sanna 2007 reads Achilles' rape of Deidamia in Statius as the moment where Achilles matures from *ephebe* to man.

⁸⁸ *Achilles* p.24-25.

⁸⁹ *Achilles* p.25.

Achilles recognises that 'the gesture is nothing like the one he's learnt girls use'.⁹⁰ The use of the verb 'drag' insinuates inhibition, not feminine modesty, while also implicitly focusing attention on Achilles' embarrassment as his own 'drag'-act is about to be revealed. The complete opposite of Deidamia's unreserved action, he tries his best to prolong his disguise, 'trying to hold his tunic down'. It seems that Cook's Thetis has made a mistake by anticipating that femininity and the female body are natural companions.

Despite freeing her representation of Deidamia's female body from restrictive definitions of modest-femininity, Cook does apply a note of caution by maintaining that the experience of femininity can be shaped by external factors. Although Deidamia demonstrates that modesty and the female body are not natural partners, the way in which Cook's Achilles responds to life as a girl suggests that modesty can be otherwise produced, reflecting feminist theories of the 'gaze' and its production of a feminised, objectified body.⁹¹ Achilles on Skiros, described as: 'Auburn hair in tight coils down to the collar bone; long limbs; a straight and supple back', grabs the attention of the girls of Lycomedes' court, especially Deidamia:

'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 sunlight you can strut or box

⁹⁰ *Achilles* p.24. See also Achilles' surprise that Deidamia can run faster than he anticipated, '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', *Achilles* p.24.

⁹¹ See especially Mulvey 2009 [originally published in *British Film Journal*, *Screen*, in 1975]. Mulvey's feminist reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis for film theory, insists upon a gendered dynamic to scopophilia/the pleasure in looking, in which the object of the gaze is feminised (regardless of whether s/he has a female body) while the subject of the gaze is in the masculine position. For the application of the 'gaze' beyond film theory see, e.g., De Lauretis 1984; Flitterman & Barry 1980; Heru 2003; Kaplan 1984.

the air, make little eddies in the heat. These twenty-five pairs of girls' eyes on him make him less free to move'.⁹²

The collective gaze of the girls creates Achilles' modest femininity⁹³ in a way that complements a gendered reading of the 'gaze', whereby masculinity or femininity is dependent on the position that you occupy (subject or object of the 'gaze' respectively), as opposed to what type of body you have.⁹⁴

Perhaps the most famous representation of the feminine object of the male gaze in ancient literature is in the *teikhoskopia* -scene in the third book of the *Iliad*, in which the Trojan elders catch a glimpse of Helen on the ramparts:

‘οἱ δ’ ὡς οὔν εἶδονθ’ Ἑλένην ἐπὶ πύργον ἰοῦσαν,

ἦκα πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἔπεα πτερόεντ’ ἀγόρευον:

‘οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ ἐϋκνήμιδας Ἀχαιοῦς

τοιγῆδ’ ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἄλγεα πάσχειν:

αἰνῶς ἀθανάτησι θεῆς εἰς ὧπα ἔοικεν.’⁹⁵

(‘And catching sight of Helen moving along the ramparts,

they murmured one to another, gentle, winged words:

“Who on earth could blame them? Ah, no wonder

⁹² *Achilles* p.21-22.

⁹³ Psychological studies show that the consequence of the feminine subject position is the creation of a type of femininity that is about restriction and a heightened sense of self-awareness or self-objectification, something that Cook seems to be referring to with her description of Achilles. See, e.g., Calogero 2004; Fredrickson & Roberts 1997; Heru 2003; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama 2002; Quinn et al. 2006.

⁹⁴ This could be taken further to consider how Achilles' possession of the phallus (what the gaze revolves around), revealed by Deidamia in the pool scene, would further complicate the gendered dynamic of the gaze.

⁹⁵ *Iliad* 3.154-158.

the men of Troy and Argives under arms have suffered

years of agony all for her, for such a woman.

Beauty, terrible beauty!”).

It is possible that Cook has redirected this scene of scopophilia onto Achilles, making full use of the gendered dynamic at play in theories of the gaze in translating the role of the Trojan elders to the girls on Skiros and the role of Helen to Achilles. However, what undercuts this comparison is that whereas in Homer, Helen’s perspective is not given in the *teikhoskopia*-scene; in Cook, the reader is privy to Achilles’ thoughts. What Cook’s Achilles has to reveal offers an interesting corollary to the gendered reading of the gaze, as it suggests that while a female body is not a precondition of the feminine subject position, it does restrict the extent to which the feminine subject position can be evaded.

For even though Cook’s Achilles admits to feeling awkward and restricted as a consequence of his being watched, at the same time, he admits to a sense of pleasure in their gaze, ‘With these eyes still on him he burns. Sense his power’⁹⁶ and:

‘Delighting 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’.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *Achilles* p.22.

⁹⁷ *Achilles* p.26.

There is something playful in the way that Achilles experiences his girlhood, in which restrictive clothing and objectification is tempered by a sense of power. This simultaneous sense of discomfort and pleasure is certainly evocative of postmodern discussions of the gaze and self-objectification, applicable to both men and women.⁹⁸ In Cook, however, there is the sense that the experience of pleasure at being watched is dependent on Achilles' male body and only made possible by the alternative warrior-in-the-making masculinity open to him. Cook's Achilles can escape his girlhood and femininity by retiring to the woods, removing his clothes and boxing,⁹⁹ whereas Cook's Helen cannot cast aside hers so easily. Helen feels nothing but restriction as a consequence of her femininity, a far cry from the playful gender-bending that Achilles can enjoy:

'Men lining up for her.

Having ideas about her.

Fingering her in their thoughts while they finger themselves.

They paste her with their thoughts till there is no air left to breathe.

Not one of them has seen her'.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, the distinction that Cook makes with Helen between being watched, as object of the 'gaze' and being seen, suggestive of a more balanced power dynamic that Cook describes Achilles finding with Hector,¹⁰¹ is especially poignant.

⁹⁸ Note that these tend to be 'popular' rather than densely theoretical books and articles, demonstrating how this postmodern argument has spilled over into mainstream culture. See, e.g., Freedman 1986; Hermes 2006; Hollows & Moseley 2006; Levy 2006; Macdonald 1995.

⁹⁹ *Achilles* p.26: 'But there are times when girlhood chafes and his underused limbs ache to be stretched. Then he slips off; takes another path into the woods to a cave he's found, removes his girl clothes and bracelet, binds his hands with strips of cloth and starts to box'.

¹⁰⁰ *Achilles* p.73.

The feminist concept of the 'gaze' and its reliance on a reading of gender as separate from sex, is mirrored in theoretical readings of (sexual) violence, whereby the victim, regardless of whether they have a woman's or a man's body, is assaulted 'as a woman'.¹⁰² Cook certainly seems to reflect this gendered reading of (sexual) violence in her retelling of Hector's death, making use of the potential for such an interpretation already latent in its Homeric source.¹⁰³ In Homer, Hector anticipates his death and feminisation:

‘μή μιν ἐγὼ μὲν ἴκωμαι ἰών, ὃ δέ μ’ οὐκ ἐλεήσει
οὐδέ τί μ’ αἰδέσεται, κτενέει δέ με γυμνὸν ἐόντα
αὐτῶς ὥς τε γυναῖκα, ἐπεὶ κ’ ἀπὸ τεύχεα δύω’.¹⁰⁴

(‘I must not go and implore him. He’ll show no mercy,
no respect for me, my rights – he’ll cut me down
straight off – stripped of defences like a woman
once I have loosed the armour off my body’).

¹⁰¹ Cook describes the gazes of Hector and Achilles meeting each other in reciprocity, *Achilles* p.37-8: ‘Achilles reaches the wall and sees Hector outside the gates, an easy spear’s flight away. They look at each other and, just for a moment, time stops, eyes blazing into eyes as each takes in the form and splendour of the other and thinks *It’s him*’.

Moreover, Cook maintains this pessimistic reading of Helen as perpetual object of the gaze and as she does not include the one scene in Helen’s literary tradition that could place her in the subject-position. I am referring to the third book of the *Iliad* in which Helen, at Priam’s prompting, surveys the Greeks warriors: Homer, *Iliad* 3.161-242.

¹⁰² Interestingly, the ‘gaze’ is often described as a type of rape. Teresa de Lauretis 1987: 240 remarks ‘that violence is en-gendered in representation’; similarly, Monique Plaza 1980; 31 refers to rape as a ‘social sexing’; see also Dowd Hall 1984.

¹⁰³ *Iliad* 22.99-130. This scene is discussed in terms of gender Van Nortwick 2001 but with an emphasis on the relationship between Hector and his feminine-self Andromache (as well as Paris-Helen) rather than, as I am putting forward, a focus on the erotic relationship between Hector and Achilles in which it is Hector who becomes the feminine partner. The idea of the hero’s second-self that Van Nortwick concentrates on in his essay is an extension of his earlier work, Van Nortwick 1992.

¹⁰⁴ *Iliad* 22.123-125.

It seems that the skin-deep femininity affected by Achilles' clothing on Skiros is a mirror of Hector's anxiety over the line between femininity and masculinity being about as thick as a suit of armour.

Hector goes on to imagine an alternative scenario in which he and Achilles can meet, not as enemy-warriors, but young (heterosexual) lovers:

‘οὐ μὲν πως νῦν ἔστιν ἀπὸ δρυὸς οὐδ’ ἀπὸ πέτρης
τῷ ἀριζέμεναι, ἅ τε παρθένος ἠΐθεός τε
παρθένος ἠΐθεός τ’ ἀρίζετον ἀλλήλοιιν’.¹⁰⁵

(‘No way to parley with that man – not now –

not from behind some oak or rock to whisper,

like a boy and a young girl, lovers’ secrets

a boy and girl might whisper to each other...’).

Hector's feminisation, anticipated by his speech in Homer, is achieved by Cook when she describes the two finally meeting in battle:

‘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

¹⁰⁵ *Iliad* 22.126-128.

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'.¹⁰⁶

Just as in Homer, where Hector imagined that the two could meet as, 'ἄ τε παρθένος ἠΐθεός' ('boy and girl'), Cook has the two meeting as 'lover' and 'beloved'.

Once Hector is dead and his body has been stripped, Homer has the Myrmidons approach the corpse in awe:

ἄλλοι δὲ περίδραμον υἷες Ἀχαιῶν,
οἳ καὶ θηήσαντο φυὴν καὶ εἶδος ἀγητὸν
Ἕκτορος'.¹⁰⁷

('And the other sons of Achaea, running up around him,
crowded closer, all of them gazing wonder-struck
at the build and marvellous, lithe beauty of Hector').

They then unleash a collective assault upon the body, confirming Hector's prophecy that in death, stripped of armour, his body would be rendered feminine:

“ὦ πόποι, ἦ μάλα δὴ μαλακώτερος ἀμφαφάασθαι
Ἕκτωρ ἢ ὅτε νῆας ἐνέπρησεν πυρὶ κηλέω”'.¹⁰⁸

("Ah, look here –

¹⁰⁶ *Achilles* p.40.

¹⁰⁷ *Iliad* 22.369-371.

¹⁰⁸ *Iliad* 22.374-375.

how much softer he is to handle now, this Hector,
than when he gutted our ships with roaring fire!”).

Cook recalls this sequence in her description:

‘When he had finished killing Hector the Myrmidons had each had a go, killing him again and again. They took it in turns to shove in a spear. Some jabbed; others wiggled, getting the feel of the man...’.¹⁰⁹

The penetration of the ‘soft’, feminised Hector by the spears of the Myrmidons is clearly meant to be read as sexual assault, in which the victim is rendered feminine regardless of the impressive masculinity of his body (‘οἱ καὶ θηήσαντο φυὴν καὶ εἶδος ἀγητὸν/“Εκτορος’ (‘all of them gazing wonder-struck/ at the build and marvellous, lithe beauty of Hector’).¹¹⁰

Having shown how Cook uses Deidamia to trouble the relationship between femininity and the female body, while Achilles and Hector experience the feminising effect of the gaze and violence respectively, I will now turn to how Cook uses Achilles’ experience as a girl to demonstrate that the divide between masculinity and femininity itself is not always particularly clear. Achilles’ stay on Scyros marks a period in his life when his warrior future is in doubt; however, any suspense that Cook may have been able to muster has been undermined by the fact that she opens *Achilles* with what is, in effect, the end of Achilles’ story, with Odysseus meeting the dead hero in the underworld. The reasoning behind Achilles’ seemingly smooth transition from Scyros to Troy is not only in keeping with

¹⁰⁹ *Achilles* p.42.

¹¹⁰ Interestingly the ‘gaze’ is evoked again alongside violence, in which Hector’s feminisation is achieved both through his symbolic rape as the object of assault and as the object of the Myrmidon’s gaze.

the narrative precedent set by Statius, but more importantly, with Cook's description of Achilles' stay on Scyros and experience of femininity as forming the completion of his martial education rather than detracting from it. Cook's challenge to gender essentialism is best served by Achilles going to Troy, as the narrator concludes that, 'For Achilles these days of girlhood complete the education that Chiron began. Refine it; soften his burning impatience'.¹¹¹ Achilles girlhood is not presented as a threat to his Homeric future as it very well could have been, but is a condition of it. The lack of a definite distinction between masculinity and femininity can be read into Achilles' appearance, dressed as a girl, on Scyros:

'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 arm; turns them, draws them up to the wrist and lets them fall back towards his elbow. The gentle clash of metal'.¹¹²

The bracelets that Achilles 'fiddles with' when he arrives on Scyros really seem to echo the bronze weaponry of the *Iliad*, to which Homer frequently refers. By way of comparison to Cook's Achilles on Scyros, the thirteenth book of the *Iliad* which describes a particularly bloody battle for the Argive ships, refers to the 'clashing' and 'clanging' of armour as a soldier falls, 'ὣς πέσεν, ἀμφὶ δέ οἱ βράχε τεύχεα ποικίλα χαλκῶ' ('So [Imbrius] fell,/ the fine bronze armour clashing against him hard');¹¹³ 'δούπησεν δὲ πεσών, ἀράβησε

¹¹¹ *Achilles* p.25. Barchiesi 2005: 47-48 asks whether Statius' *Achilleid* suggests that girlhood contributes to a heroic education.

¹¹² *Achilles* p.22.

¹¹³ *Iliad* 13.181.

δὲ τεύχε' ἐπ' αὐτῷ' ('and down he went, thundering, armour clanging round him');¹¹⁴ as well as:

οἷ δ' ἄμφ' Ἀλκαθόω αὐτοσχεδὸν ὀρμήθησαν
μακροῖσι ξυστοῖσι: περὶ στήθεσσι δὲ χαλκὸς
σμερδαλέον κονάβιζε τιτυσκομένων καθ' ὄμιλον
ἀλλήλων'.¹¹⁵

('Round Alcathous' corpse they lunged in hand-to-hand
with their long spears, and the bronze around their chests
clashed out, a terrific din as they struck each other fiercely').

As far as aural clues go, it seems that Achilles' bracelets and Homeric weaponry could be one and the same, only to be differentiated by their context; with 'clashing' and 'clanging' in the context of battle being aural-nods to masculinity, whilst similar sounds but from someone wearing a 'thin girl's tunic' suggest femininity. The fact that the person wearing the 'thin girl's tunic' has a male body does not detract from the femininity of the situation.¹¹⁶

These leaps in comparison could seem quite far-fetched, were it not for the fact that Cook emphasises the potential for there to be a link between bracelets and weaponry within her own narrative. The bracelets that Achilles wears on Scyros are explicitly

¹¹⁴ *Iliad* 13.187.

¹¹⁵ *Iliad* 13.496-499.

¹¹⁶ Young 2005: 29 for a 'situational' account of gender in which an understanding of how someone achieves femininity (or by implication, masculinity) is dependent on 'the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her [or his] situation'.

positioned as 'feminine' alternatives to weaponry, as the reader is told that the only reason Achilles is playing with bracelets is because Thetis took his knife from him 'when she dressed him in this thin girl's tunic'. This certainly seems to correlate with a 'situational' reading of gender, in which context (in this case have bracelets instead of a knife) determines what you do (play with bracelets rather than a knife) and thus effects your gender presentation. Displaced from their martial context, the sounds of the *Iliad* take on new meanings that are not necessarily masculine.¹¹⁷

Cook returns to this comparison between bracelets and weaponry at the moment when Achilles' identity is revealed. Entering into the type of conversation that reception allows between source text and new work, Cook tweaks the details of Statius' *Achilleid* and transforms what could be a statement of gender essentialism into a moment of gender subversion. Statius' and Cook's Odysseus seem to have made the same assumption in masterminding a plan to uncover Achilles, based around the premise that boys and girls are naturally and divisively different, with girls finding their gendered expression through femininity and boys, masculinity. As such, if you were to set an assortment of treasure out in front of them, it is inevitable that girls will be drawn to the feminine items (in Cook, jewellery and clothes and in Statius, wands and cymbals) and boys to masculine ones (in Cook, a knife, shield and spear and in Statius, a shield and spear). While Statius' Odysseus 'encourages them to choose',¹¹⁸ Cook's Odysseus is even more blatant in his expectations,

¹¹⁷ Not only does this further Cook's presentation of gender as something that is not determined by sex but it could also serve to feminise the *Iliad*, as the link between weaponry and jewellery can now infiltrate a re-reading of Homer.

¹¹⁸ Statius, *Achilleid* 1.845.

adding that, ““there’s something for each of you””.¹¹⁹ Just as Thetis had anticipated that Achilles would achieve girlhood through replacing his masculine knife with feminine bracelets, Odysseus recognises that different accoutrements accessorise different genders; however, whereas Thetis deployed this rule to deceive, Odysseus expects that deception is not possible. The outcome of this plan in both Statius and Cook will, of course, be the same; Achilles will go to Troy, however, it is Cook’s divergence from her source text at this point that gives further emphasis to her commitment to challenge the type of gender essentialism set up by Odysseus.

With the sole purpose of uncovering the identity of Achilles, Odysseus plays upon what he expects to be Achilles’ natural inclination towards weaponry. The assumption that masculinity and warfare will go hand in hand, mentioned above in relation to Homer, is replicated in Statius although via a different course. Rather than solely reiterating the conceptual link between masculinity and warfare, Statius chooses to make his point through the opposite assertion, that femininity is ‘unwarlike’. Odysseus’ companions make the implicit link between the male body, masculinity and warfare and in doing so misunderstand Odysseus’ plan:

““I have long been pondering in perplexity why you brought in the town these unwarlike wands and cymbals...Will you arm Achilles, bane to Priam and Troy, with *these?*””.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ *Achilles* p.28.

¹²⁰ Statius, *Achilleid* 1.713-717.

With warfare gendered as masculine, Statius sets up Achilles' eventual choice of items as an assertion of masculinity, not only dismissing 'unwarlike' gifts in favour of weaponry but in doing so, he sets in motion the sequence of events that will lead to actual warfare at Troy.

Odysseus' plan is executed without fault in Statius as both Achilles and the girls of Scyros adhere to the expectations of their sex, respecting the distinction that Statius sets up between femininity as a consequence of women's 'unadventurous sex and nature'¹²¹ and masculinity/warfare. Achilles reaction to taking up arms in Statius is a clear nod to his Homeric future:

'...he cried out and rolled his eyes, the hair stood up on his forehead. Forgotten his mother's charge, forgotten his hidden love, Troy is in all his heart'.¹²²

Achilles reaction echoes the Homeric scene where he first dons his new armour from Hephaestus:

ἔν δὲ μέσοισι κορύσσετο δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

τοῦ καὶ ὀδόντων μὲν καναχὴ πέλε, τὼ δέ οἱ ὄσσε

λαμπέσθην ὡς εἴ τε πυρὸς σέλας...¹²³

('And in their midst

the brilliant Achilles began to arm for battle...

A sound of grinding came from the fighter's teeth,

¹²¹ Statius, *Achilleid* 1.849.

¹²² Statius, *Achilleid* 1.855-857.

¹²³ *Iliad* 19.364-366.

his eyes blazed forth in searing point of fire’).

Achilles’ visceral reaction to the sight of weaponry and its immediate impact upon his resolve to reassert his male-identity is explained by Statius in terms of gender essentialism. Achilles’ reaction is bodily, rendering the link between his male body and masculinity self-evident and inevitable and Statius describes it thus, likening Achilles’ reassertion of masculinity to the setting free of an untameable, animalistic passion:

‘As a lion snatched from his mother’s dugs learns manners, taught to let his mane be combed, to respect man, and never to fly into a rage unless ordered; but if once steel flashes out in front of him, he forswears his faith and his tamer becomes his foe’.¹²⁴

Here, to be a man is to be naturally inclined towards violence and warfare; a masculine inclination that is both irrepressible and unavoidable. In Cook’s account, however, things are not so straightforward and draw on the relative lack of distinction between bracelets and weaponry, femininity and masculinity, created by Cook through her use of Homeric imagery.

Referring back to the passage of Cook quoted earlier in this chapter it is possible to re-examine the assumption that Achilles’ bracelets were presented as an alternative to the knife that his mother had taken from him. Without such a reassessment, the reader could take for granted that when confronted with weaponry once again, Achilles will revert to type, welcoming the chance to re-take arms as he does in Statius. Moreover, Cook’s decision to include a knife in the gifts from Odysseus, not featured in Statius, seems to be a

¹²⁴ Statius, *Achilleid* 1.858-863.

deliberate attempt to remind the reader of Achilles' earliest preference. In fact, the 'gentle clash of metal' that Achilles makes with his bracelets in his first appearance on Skiros in Cook could be seen as anticipating his soon-to-be reinvention as a warrior. For not only is the 'clash' of bracelets evocative of Homeric warfare but it is also echoed in the 'aching ring of metal on metal' that Cook's Odysseus produces as his spear pierces the armour of a comrade in an attempt to prompt Achilles to arms.¹²⁵ Seen in this way, the clashing of bracelets that characterise Achilles' girlhood becomes the clash of spear on armour that signals the end of his stay on Scyros. However, this is the point in Cook at which a straightforward interpretation that follows Statius in linking Achilles, masculinity and weaponry falls short. Achilles' first choice of gift is not the shield, knife or spear, but like the other girls he 'too experiments with cloth and bracelets'¹²⁶ and it is not until Odysseus launches a real attack (which results in the death of one of his men) that Achilles makes the martial choice. Whereas in Statius, Achilles 'was loosening the clothing from his chest'¹²⁷ even before Odysseus put his plan his action, in Cook, Achilles only takes up arms in reaction to Odysseus' attack.

Moreover, if the earlier description of Achilles' introduction to the girls of Skiros is reassessed, it becomes apparent that his predilection for his knife was never wholly indicative of the type of masculinity associated with warfare anyway:

¹²⁵ *Achilles* p.28.

¹²⁶ *Achilles* p.28.

¹²⁷ Statius, *Achilleid* 1.874-875.

‘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 girls’ tunic’ [italics added].¹²⁸

Achilles’ initial impulse towards a knife was potentially generative rather than destructive. This ambiguity, resting on the unresolved tension between creating a spear and then using it to fight with, is given further emphasis by the fact that Cook returns to it later in Achilles’ biography. In recounting Priam’s supplication of Achilles to release Hector’s body,¹²⁹ Cook describes the response of the former to Achilles; Priam notes that he has ‘huge hands that can fashion as well as place a spear’.¹³⁰ Any sense that weaponry is the natural choice for a boy, as Statius suggests, is undermined; habit, culture or ‘situation’, seems to dictate gendered choice. This has implications for girls and femininity for who is to say that playing with bracelets would be a girl’s first choice in every circumstance? Perhaps Deidamia too would prefer to play with a knife given the opportunity but has only ever experienced bracelets? This returns us to the ‘situational’ gender of Young; in a situation in which the only options for girls are bracelets and boys knives, gendered behaviour is created.¹³¹

Cook’s examination of Achilles’ sojourn as a girl on Scyros demonstrates a concerted effort to disrupt normative representations of gender in which femininity and the female body (and masculinity and the male body) go hand-in-hand. Moreover, through sustaining

¹²⁸ *Achilles* p.22.

¹²⁹ *Achilles* p.41-49, based upon *Iliad*.

¹³⁰ *Achilles* p.47. Compare this generative fantasy of Achilles with the description of his response to Penthesilea’s murder in which he seems to admire the results of his craft, ‘like a potter....or a metal worker’, *Achilles* p.55.

¹³¹ As a result, it is somewhat surprising that Cook does not make use of Deidamia’s request in Statius to follow Achilles to Troy, ‘Why should I not carry Mars’ banners at your side? With me you handled wool and Bacchus’ holy gear’, Statius, *Achilleid* 1.949-951.

the comparison between bracelets and Iliadic weaponry, Cook demonstrates that gender is largely 'situational' and subject to context and as such, the divide between masculinity and femininity is not always clear cut. With Deidamia, Cook shows how representations of femininity based on restriction and modesty are not the natural consequences of a female body, but reflect the way in which certain types of clothing construct a certain type of femininity. The gendered readings put forward by Cook, reflective of feminist theories of the gaze and sexual violence, are good examples of how Cook's *Achilles*, intentionally or not, translates theoretical concepts into accessible, literary representation. The way in which Cook uses the feminisation of Hector to show how the relationship between the masculine subject and the feminine object of the violence does not necessarily correlate with male and female respectively will be developed further in the final chapter of this study. The next chapter, however, will consider the role that Helen plays, who, during the biographical part of *Achilles*, is arguably most conspicuous by her absence.¹³²

¹³² The only direct mention of Helen, prior to the section entitled 'Fire', is a throwaway remark directed at Paris, *Achilles* p.57.

Chapter Two: Helen and Women's Writing of Classical Reception

Helen's time in the spotlight is short (all of eleven pages) but it is undoubtedly important, highlighting the relationship that Cook sets up between her own writing and her male authored source texts, emphasised by the fact that her Helen does not have a pre-literary existence.¹³³ Cook's inclusion of Helen, at the most basic of levels, can be read in the context of the feminist push to counteract the dominance of the male literary voice, especially where the representation of women is concerned. While this undoubtedly gives significance to the shift from Achilles to a female character, it does not really answer the more important question: why Helen? Was the decision to break from Achilles in favour of Helen merely arbitrary, a mythic woman's name out of a hat? Could the likes of Briseis or Iphigeneia have taken the place of Helen without significant change to the novella as a whole? Or, as I would like to propose, is there something about Helen that renders her inclusion vital to what Cook is trying to achieve with her *Achilles*? What I want to ask is: as a female author of classical reception, what does it mean to write about Helen? This chapter will try to put Cook's use of Helen in its literary context, using comparable pieces of classical reception to highlight how Helen has served as an extra-literary figure for female authors; drawing attention to the process of reception itself, the interplay between women's critical reading and artistic creativity, and its political potential for feminism.¹³⁴

¹³³ The section of the novella that concentrates on Helen, 'Fire', is the second of the four sections added by Cook to extend the performance-monologue of *Achilles* for publication.

¹³⁴ For Helen in particular, in her study *Metamorphoses of Helen*, Mihoko Suzuki explicitly sets out to reread the epic tradition 'as a woman', Suzuki 1989: 1; see also Vivante 2001.

It is arguable that any woman wanting to engage with the figure of Helen is forced to confront the gendered baggage that comes with her mythology, entering into a conversation about how she sees her own position as a woman and as a woman writer vis-à-vis the canon. The main accusation levelled at Helen by the canon is on account of her infidelity; in leaving Menelaus for Paris, the implication is that the destruction of Troy and the countless lives lost were ἥς εἴνεκα ('for her sake').¹³⁵ It is striking, however, that most women writers of classical reception do not even attempt to engage with the question of her culpability. This is in spite of there being several potential 'loopholes' to exploit in the tradition of the Trojan War, including the fact that no one but Achilles explicitly lays the blame on Helen in the *Iliad* even though Hector, Priam and Diomedes recognise that her coming to Troy was the provocation for war.¹³⁶ This may be due to the fact that the relationship between being the cause of war and being to blame are not as nuanced to a modern readership as to the epic audience,¹³⁷ but I favour a different explanation. To commit to the narrative of Helen's blame, even to refute it, is to perpetuate the moral judgement whereby leaving Menelaus for Paris is inherently bad; either an act requiring refutation or justification.

¹³⁵ The use of the preposition ἔνεκα in its various forms to suggest that events were on account of/for the sake of, Helen, occurs frequently in the *Iliad*, see for example 2.161, 2.177, 3.128, 3.254, 9.349, 19.325.

¹³⁶ Achilles blames the war on Helen, *Iliad* 19.325: εἴνεκα ῥιγεδανῆς Ἑλένης ('all for that blood-chilling horror, Helen!'). All translations of Homer's *Iliad* herein are from Robert Fagles 1990. Hector blames Paris: *Iliad* 3.39-57, 13.769-773; Priam blames the Gods: *Iliad* 3.163-170; Diomedes blames Aphrodite: *Iliad* 5.348-351. For a synthesis of the alternate ways of reading Helen's blame in classical literature, including Hesiod, Stesichoros, Gorgias, Ovid and Quintus of Smyrna, see Maguire 2009: 109-124.

¹³⁷ Maguire 2009.

Rehabilitation for Helen, in the guise of denying her infidelity, does not negate the overvaluation of a woman's fidelity but maintains it.¹³⁸ Cook, for example, makes absolutely no mention of how Helen got to Troy, whether by her own volition or abduction. Although her Helen expresses ambivalence towards Paris, the same can be said for her attitude towards Menelaus, so it is certainly not made explicit that she was in any way taken against her will to Troy. This aligns Cook's Helen with the receptions of Margaret Atwood, Anne Carson and potentially even Sappho, whose collective female-literary voice refuses to engage with the moral imperative, set up by the writings of men, of a woman's faithfulness.

Atwood sets up concern over Helen's morality, for example, only to undermine it. Having already upbraided Helen for her habit of bathing in the nude, Penelope asks her sister whether her actions are down to guilt:

"So you're washing their blood off your hands," I said. "Figuratively speaking, of course. Making up for all those mangled corpses. I hadn't realised you were capable of guilt."

This bothered her...'

The apparent concern with which Helen responds to the question of her guilt seems to be in keeping with the narrative of morality, whereby her infidelity renders her culpable. Atwood quickly undercuts this, however, creating a scenario rich in parody where potential culpability becomes competitiveness and Helen is able to patronise Penelope on account of her superior death-toll:

¹³⁸ Froula 1986:627 describes the guilty/innocent theme as one in which the status-quo, and thus the moral imperative which sets Helen up as negative exemplar, is upheld. See also Blondell 2009: 4.

'She gave a tiny frown. "Tell me, little duck – how many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?"

"Quite a lot," I said. She knew the exact number: she'd long since satisfied herself that the total was puny compared with the pyramids of corpses laid at her door.

"It depends on what you call a lot," said Helen. "But that's nice. I'm sure you felt more important because of it. Maybe you even felt prettier."¹³⁹

As I hope to demonstrate, Atwood's refusal to take the issues of Helen's culpability seriously is not unique, but seems to be a characteristic response of women writer's.

What is especially interesting about Helen is that her reception by women has an ancient archetype in Sappho, whose *Fragment 16* and its reception by feminists, in literature and scholarship, has influenced revisions of Helen in women's writing.¹⁴⁰ While interpretations of the fragment vary, for the purposes of this study it is particularly interesting to look at the critical analysis of a female critic, working contemporaneously with the feminist literary critics mentioned in the introduction. Page DuBois' reading of *Fragment 16* can be interpreted within its historical context (1978), representative of the critical position of a self-confessed feminist reading the work of one of the few extant female voices from antiquity.¹⁴¹ According to DuBois, *Fragment 16* provides a fine example of

¹³⁹ Atwood, *The Penelopiad* p.155-156.

¹⁴⁰ Both Anne Carson and H.D., whose works I will discuss in this chapter, are both translators of Sappho. It is Anne Carson's translation that I am using (2002). I was not sure about Atwood's relationship (or lack of) with Sappho and so chose to put her extract first so as not to (potentially incorrectly) imply that her Helen was necessarily a consequence of Sappho's.

¹⁴¹ The importance of Sappho to feminist literary critics and the way in which the dissemination of her literary voice was considered to be of political importance, is evidenced by the upsurge in women's translations of Sappho. For example, see the translations of Mary Barnard 1958; Josephine Balmer 1992; Anne Carson 2002.

feminist reception, whereby Sappho's female voice enables her to recreate Helen as 'an autonomous subject, the hero of her own life'.¹⁴² With the female voice of Sappho in charge of representation, Helen is able to become centre of the action, no longer a passive object of the male voice, so that the fragment is evidence of 'an instant in which women become more than the object of man's desire'.¹⁴³ Coming at Helen from a female perspective, according to DuBois, does not involve negating her role in the Trojan War, as we have already seen with the reception of Atwood, but means putting considerations of her subjectivity and desire centre stage.

In terms of how this revaluation of Helen is achieved, DuBois argues along the lines of a 'female aesthetic' in which Sappho is able to subvert the male, epic voice in which Helen is defamed in favour of the female voice of personal relationships.¹⁴⁴ What matters to Sappho, so DuBois' argument goes, is what Helen thinks; a deliberate change in perspective by revisionist mythmakers eager to set themselves up in opposition to the male voice of the source text.¹⁴⁵ This critical position, centring on the 'feminine' concerns of personal relationships, is given literary representation in the opening lines to *Fragment 16* as Sappho explicitly turns away from the public world of warfare:

‘Ο]ἰ μὲν ἱππῶν στρότον, οἱ δὲ πέσδων,

The fact that Barnard's translation predates the second-wave of feminism, could suggest that her work was a contributing factor to feminist approaches to Sappho, especially from literary critics without ancient Greek language.

¹⁴² DuBois 1978: 97. This article has been re-printed in a slightly different form in DuBois' *Sappho is Burning* (1996), however I chose to use the original version as the context in which it first appeared is relevant to my argument.

¹⁴³ DuBois 1978:89.

¹⁴⁴ The celebration of a 'feminine aesthetic' can also be tied in to the revaluation of Sappho's work by feminist scholars like DuBois in opposition to (often) male scholars' devaluation of some of her poetry. DuBois' replies to the scholarship of Denys' Page are indicative of this. See Page 1955 in DuBois 1978.

¹⁴⁵ For the potential to see Helen as occupying the subject position in classical literature see Worman 1997.

οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπ[ί] γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν

ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἐγὼ δὲ κῆν' ὄτ-

τω τις ἔραται'.¹⁴⁶

('Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot

and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing

on the black earth. But I say it is

what you love').¹⁴⁷

Modern scholarly readings of *Fragment 16* attribute to Sappho the role of woman writer of classical reception, responding to and subverting the male, canonical voice. A close-reading of *Fragment 16* can be used to show how Sappho subtly rewrites a passage in Homer and in doing so creates a new Helen.

Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer's analysis of *Fragment 16* shows how Sappho invites comparison with Homeric epic and yet at the same time directly challenges it.¹⁴⁸ It is worth quoting another extended extract from Sappho's poem which offers a perspective on Helen and her elopement with Paris that purposefully goes against the Homeric grain:

‘...ἄ γὰρ πόλυ περσκόπεισα

κάλλοσ [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἑλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα

¹⁴⁶ Sappho, *Fragment 16*.

¹⁴⁷ This translation is from Anne Carson 2002.

¹⁴⁸ Leonard Pfeijffer 2000. Although Leonard Pfeijffer's reading is more cautious than DuBois' as she recommends that the 'disastrous' consequences of Helen's defiance be remembered. In my reading, however, the importance of Helen's desire is that it is so overwhelming that it renders consequences unimportant.

τὸν [αρ]ιστον

καλλ[ίτοις] ἔβα 'ς Τροΐαν πλέοι[σα]

κωύδ[ἐ πα]ῖδος οὐδέ φίλων το[κ]ήων

πά[μπαν] ἐμνάσθ<η>, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὐταν

‘ []σαν’.¹⁴⁹

(‘...For she who overcame everyone

in beauty (Helen)

left her fine husband

behind and went sailing to Troy.

Not for her children nor her dear parents

had she a thought, no –

]led her astray’).

Fragment 16 invites direct comparison with the third book of the *Iliad* in which Helen is described as experiencing deep regret for her decision to go to Troy with Paris, ‘ὥς εἰποῦσα θεὰ γλυκὺν ἴμερον ἔμβαλε θυμῷ ἀνδρός τε προτέρου καὶ ἄστεος ἠδὲ τοκῆων’ (‘And with

¹⁴⁹ Sappho, *Fragment 16*.

those words the goddess filled her heart with yearning warm and deep for her husband long ago, her city and her parents'), leading her in the sixth book to admonish herself for her actions, 'ἐμῆο κυνὸς κακομηχάνου ὀκρυοέσσης' ('bitch that I am, vicious, scheming').¹⁵⁰ Comparably, Sappho's Helen stands by her conviction to leave Sparta, forgoing her domestic role as mother, daughter and wife, despite being married to '[τὸ]ν ἄνδρα/ τὸν [αρ]ιστον' (the best of men) and instead chooses desire. *Fragment 16* is arguably an ancient example of women's revisionist mythmaking, undermining the morality behind its source text which says that Helen's infidelity renders her blameworthy.

Having also worked on translations of Sappho, it is likely that H.D.'s work of classical reception, *Helen in Egypt*, is in part influenced by the sentiments of *Fragment 16*.¹⁵¹

Although predating the feminist theoretical work of the second-wave, H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* can still be read within the narrative of feminist revisionist mythmaking whereby the male voice of the canon is deliberately displaced in favour of the female voice, 'feminine' concerns and a spotlight on Helen.¹⁵² In putting forward the statement that personal relationships mean much more than the consequences of the Trojan War, H.D. is taking part in a revaluation of the 'feminine' as well as denying Helen's culpability. H.D.'s Helen rejects the value of 'the thousand ships', akin to Sappho's 'army of ships', in favour of 'one kiss in the night'; her decision justified by *Fragment 16*'s morality based on 'what you love' ('τῷ τις

¹⁵⁰ *Iliad* 3.139-40, 6.344. Although it should be noted that it is the goddess Iris who is described as causing Helen's outpouring of guilt.

¹⁵¹ Interestingly, Anne Carson, whose *Autobiography of Red* I use in this chapter, is another translator of Sappho. H.D. does not, however, attempt to portray Helen as a weaver. This may be due to the Freudian interpretation of weaving as penis-substitute which perhaps H.D. did not feel able to (or want to) overcome. Unlike H.D., later women writers of classical reception had the backing of feminist critiques of Freud with which to confidently reject his hypothesis and reclaim weaving, see Bergren 1983; Froula 1986.

¹⁵² H.D.'s work of classical reception is discussed in seminal literary criticism essays from the second-wave of feminism, implying that art influenced the direction of theory. See DuPlessis 1985; Ostriker 1982.

ἔραται'). The narrator of H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* poses the following question, setting the value of desire against its human cost, and finding in favour of the former:

'Is it possible that it all happened, the ruin – it would seem not only of Troy, but of the "holocaust of the Greeks," of which she speaks later – in order that two souls or two soul-mates should meet? It almost seems so'.¹⁵³

The triumph of desire is a theme that is returned to throughout *Helen in Egypt* with variants of the question, 'can one weigh the thousand ships against one kiss in the night?'.¹⁵⁴

Cook does something similar with how she redirects the Homeric description of how Helen attempted to thwart the Greek victory by whispering to the men inside the Trojan horse. Homer's Menelaus describes Helen's actions in terms of treachery,¹⁵⁵ whereas Cook suggests that Helen merely acted out of loneliness:

'Loneliness draws her, early, while it is still dark, to stroke the flanks of the great wooden horse, parked an abandoned outside Troy's gates....

She feels an exile's longing to hear her own language spoken again and calls to each of the men crouched inside...

¹⁵³ H.D., *Helen in Egypt* p.5.

¹⁵⁴ H.D., *Helen in Egypt* p.37, p.39; another example would be, 'was it a trivial thing to have bartered the world for a glance?' p.62.

¹⁵⁵ Homer, *Odyssey* 4.274-279: ' ἦλθες ἔπειτα σὺ κείσε: κελυσέμεναι δέ σ' ἔμελλε/ δαίμων, ὃς Τρώεσσιν ἐβούλετο κῦδος ὀρέξαι:/ καὶ τοι Δηϊφობος θεοεΐκελος ἔσπετ' ἰούση./ τρίς δὲ περίστειξας κοῖλον λόχον ἀμφαφώωσα,/ ἐκ δ' ὀνομακλήδην Δαναῶν ὀνόμαζες ἀρίστους,/ πάντων Ἀργείων φωνὴν ἴσκουσ' ἀλόχοισιν'. ('There came a moment, Helen, when you yourself approached the spot – approached it, doubtless, at the prompting of some divinity who wished to give glory to the Trojans; and Prince Deiphobus had escorted you. Three times you circled that hollow snare and felt all round it, and you called by name all the chieftains of the Danaans, making your voice like the voice of each man's wife in turn'). From the translation by Walter Shewring (1980).

She turns back and remounts the hill to the palace.

She had whispered like this in the egg to her brothers. They had not answered her either'.¹⁵⁶

To undercut the narrative of the *Odyssey* even further, Cook subverts Menelaus' role as the innocent almost-victim of Helen's deceit:

'When he hears her Menelaus knows that he will not be able to kill her as he'd planned. He almost giggles with pleasure as he remembers how she made him feel. His cock thickens and his fear of present danger grows smaller'.¹⁵⁷

Menelaus' desire is not reciprocated by Helen and is representative of the unwanted desire that she provokes in all of the Greeks within the Trojan Horse, as she describes:

'The egg is full of vipers. An endless supply of them: if you cut one two will form. They breed and breed...

Nearer they come. Nearer.

Her bed.

Her body.

Fat fingers walking. An endless supply. Cut one and two form. They breed and breed and nothing will stop them'.¹⁵⁸

Cook's description of them as, 'Fat fingers walking' alludes to Helen's earlier rape at the hands of Theseus, 'The fat fingers keep walking till they come upon her and fasten',¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *Achilles* p.75-6.

¹⁵⁷ *Achilles* p.76.

¹⁵⁸ *Achilles* p.77.

downplaying the heroism of the Greek invaders in Homer and instead depicting them, including Menelaus, as sexual predators.¹⁶⁰

Defiance in the face of what is referred to as the 'adjectival tradition of whoredom'¹⁶¹ surrounding Helen, is also characteristic of Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*; which despite following the tradition of Stesichoros rather than Homer, chooses to focus on the context of the *Palinode* rather than use its revelation that 'you [Helen] never came to the towers of Troy' to appeal to her innocence. Like Atwood, Carson uses parody as a way to ridicule the moral posturing that comes with both the traditions of Stesichoros and Homer, whereby fidelity is a marker of a woman's moral worth. In what Carson refers to as 'Appendix C', she draws out the implications of the Stesichoros tradition, in which Stesichoros was blinded by Helen and thus composed his *Palinode* as a way to appease her, to the point of ridiculousness. It goes from the first point that, 'Either Steischoros was a blind man or he was not', to get more complicated at point seven:

'If Helen's reasons arose out of some remark Stesichoros made either it was a strong remark about Helen's sexual misconduct (not to say its unsavoury aftermath the Fall of Troy) or it was not'.

What appears to be moral judgement on Carson's part through the use of the phrase 'sexual misconduct' is wholly diminished by the humour of point fifteen in which, 'If we call Helen up either she will sit with her glass of vermouth and let it ring or she will answer'. Carson

¹⁵⁹ *Achilles* p.79.

¹⁶⁰ This is then realised when the Greeks invade Troy, *Achilles* p.80: 'Listen to the little sigh a child's body makes when you pierce it. See the mother's expression as you rape her with your hand, your penis, your spear, in the presence of her dead or dying child'.

¹⁶¹ Carson, *Autobiography of Red* p.5.

brings her investigation to a close with point twenty-one, 'If Stesichoros was a blind man either we will lie or if not not', whose similarity to the first point shows that the investigation has gotten Carson nowhere. Using Stesichoros to argue for Helen's innocence is thus demonstrated as futile; it does not change the morality wherein her supposed culpability rests, not to mention the fact that the tradition surrounding Stesichoros has nothing to do with Helen's innocence, only her ability to manipulate Stesichoros, to which I will now turn.

What Carson does with Stesichoros is important and draws on a tradition of Helen's literary history that sees her aligned with the poet, as well as deploying an editorial technique strikingly similar to Cook's.¹⁶² Before providing her translation of the extant lines of the *Palinode*, Carson translates and edits excerpts from Isocrates and Plato, which discuss the tradition surrounding Stesichoros' composition.¹⁶³ The resulting effect is that when Carson does offer her translation of Stesichoros it is read within the context of Helen having had a role in its production, where Helen's supposed innocence is a product of her manipulation of the poet:

'No it is not the true story.

No you never went on the benched ships.

¹⁶² Discussed in relation to 'Relay' in the introduction.

¹⁶³ Carson, *Autobiography of Red* p.15-16:

'Isokrates *Helen* 64: Looking to demonstrate her own power Helen made an object lesson of the poet Stesichoros. For the fact is he began his poem "Helen" with a bit of blasphemy. Then when he stood up he found he'd been robbed of his eyes. Straightaway realizing why, he composed the so-called "Palinode" and Helen restored him to his own nature.

Plato *Phaedrus* 243a: There is in mythology an ancient tactic of purgation for criminals, which Homer did not understand but Stesichoros did. When Stesichoros found himself blinded for slandering Helen he did not (like Homer) just stand there bewildered – no! on the contrary. Stesichoros was an intellectual. He recognized the cause and at once sat down to compose [his "Palinode"]...'

No you never came to the towers of Troy'.¹⁶⁴

Of course, I am not claiming that readers in antiquity would have taken these claims any more seriously than we would today. What I do want to take from these accounts is that Helen's role in poetic composition, as director of narrative, is an established part of her characterisation and that this is something that Anne Carson thinks is worth emphasising. It could also be of some worth to consider the relevance of Anne Carson's role as translator and the way that her cutting and pasting of Isokrates, Plato and Stesichoros puts into practice the kind of narrative-manipulation that these same sources attribute to Helen.¹⁶⁵ Contrast, for example, with the Helen of Christa Wolf's novel, *Cassandra*, a passive victim of male representation who is described as 'an illusion: a figure invented by poets';¹⁶⁶ and what Carson does is quite striking. Rather than casting Helen's guilt as literary misrepresentation by men; Carson demonstrates how canonical texts can be read in new, interesting ways by women.

So instead of trying to rehabilitate and separate Helen from her literary tradition, Carson uses that same tradition to create something new and in doing so, aligns her authoritative role as editor/translator/reader with that of Helen. It is possible to read Cook alongside Carson in taking advantage of an alternate tradition of reading that has picked up on Helen's role as poetic-director. Cook describes the image of Helen as an inspirational

¹⁶⁴ Carson, *Autobiography of Red* p.17. Again, this is remarkably similar to Cook's method of placing quotes from Shakespeare and Dante before Chapman so as to manipulate a reading of the latter.

¹⁶⁵ For translation of canonical texts as a potentially empowering act for women (although it focuses on the nineteenth century), see Hardwick 2000.

¹⁶⁶ Wolf, *Cassandra* p.24.

force for Achilles, inducing him to represent her in song, familiar from a passage of Isokrates¹⁶⁷:

‘She knew that Achilles had dreamed of Helen: dreams that chilled him with their brilliance, like dreams of a waste of snow. He had awoken from those dreams exhausted and told no one, not even Patroclus, about this nightly irritant of beauty. Seeking it again he’d made songs, plucking the strings of his lyre like a cat flexing its claws’.¹⁶⁸

With Cook suggesting that Achilles is a beneficiary of Helen’s inspiration, it could be argued that the scene from the *Iliad* in which Achilles is described as playing his lyre and ‘singing the deeds of famous heroes’, becomes ‘tainted’ with the idea that Helen has inspired his song:

‘Μυρμιδόνων δ’ ἐπί τε κλισίας καὶ νῆας ἰκέσθην,
τὸν δ’ εὖρον φρένα τερπόμενον φόρμιγγι λιγείη
καλῆ δαιδαλέη, ἐπὶ δ’ ἀργύρεον ζυγὸν ἦεν,
τὴν ἄρετ’ ἐξ ἐνάρων πόλιν Ἥετίωνος ὀλέσσας:
τῆ ὄ γε θυμὸν ἔτερπεν, ἄειδε δ’ ἄρα κλέα ἀνδρῶν’.¹⁶⁹

(‘Reaching the Myrmidon shelters and their ships,

they found him there, delighting his heart now,

plucking strong and clear on the fine lyre –

beautifully carved, its silver bridge set firm –

¹⁶⁷ Isocrates, *Helen* 65.

¹⁶⁸ *Achilles* p.71.

¹⁶⁹ *Iliad* 9.185-190.

he won from the spoils when he razed Eetion's city.

Achilles was lifting his spirits with it now,

singing the famous deeds of heroes...').

While this potential to view Helen as a figure of poetic inspiration or manipulation provides an extremely interesting avenue for reception, there is the feeling within certain feminist circles that this muse-type role is not necessarily a positive one but that actual poetic production is what women should aspire to.¹⁷⁰ From antiquity onwards, the potential for identification between Helen and the poet seems to have been a major part of her reception too but had escaped sustained critical attention until the establishment of feminist criticism within the academy.¹⁷¹ This cannot be a coincidence and neither can the fact that renewed scholarly interest in Helen-as-poet has been taken up almost exclusively by female classicists.¹⁷² There is something about the identification of Helen with the poet and its implied feminisation of the canonical voice that lends itself to feminist theory and encourages female scholars to invest their time into researching it. The description of Helen in the third book of the *Iliad*, weaving what appears to be an artistic representation of the

¹⁷⁰ For a reading of the muse as a redundant figure, complicit in the silencing of women's voices and denying their active involvement in poetic composition see Gilbert & Gubar 1979; Gubar 1981; Joplin 2002; Rich 1972. For an attempt to 'reclaim the muse' as a positive figure for women's artistic production see Murray 2006.

¹⁷¹ Karen Bassi 1993: 60 refers to the reception of Helen's role as epic narrator as having become 'paradigmatic'. Whilst scholars prior to the 1970s do make reference to Helen's *Iliadic* tapestry, they do not make the explicit link between her weaving and poetic composition. For example, George Ryan 1965: 115 downplays any significance that may be attributed to Helen's tapestry, remarking that 'This might be self-glorification on the part of Helen, but after all...the deeds of heroes [sic] would be considered a natural subject for anyone'; see also Groten 1968: 34.

¹⁷² For an exception, see Kennedy 1986. Interestingly, however, Kennedy sets up the relationship between Helen's weaving with poetic composition only to knock it down. Of Helen, 'she can only portray what is before her, and that ineffectively, for there are gaps in her picture...In all of this the oral bard much surpasses her. It is doubtless not a coincidence that he is male and she female', Kennedy 1986: 12-13.

epic itself, is perhaps the most famous passage in which the narrative voice of the poet seems to indicate an affinity between poetic composition and Helen's weaving:

‘τὴν δ’ εὔρ’ ἐν μεγάρω: ἧ δὲ μέγαν ἰστὸν ὕφαινε
δίπλακα πορφυρέην, πολέας δ’ ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους
Τρώων θ’ ἵπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,
οὔς ἐθεν εἶνεκ’ ἔπασχον ὑπ’ Ἄρηος παλαμάων’.¹⁷³

(‘And Iris came on Helen in her rooms...

weaving a growing web, a dark red folding robe,

working into the weft the endless bloody struggles

stallion-breaking Trojans and Argives armed in bronze

had suffered all for her at the god of battle's hands’).¹⁷⁴

While Cook does not depict Helen as either a poet or a weaver, she does seem to exploit the same potential that feminist theorists have recognised in interpreting the role of the contemporary woman writer of classical reception as providing ‘thread’ with which ancient figures can ‘weave’ alternate versions of their stories.¹⁷⁵ Indeed, in bringing together various threads of wide-ranging source material to create a unified tapestry, weaving is not

¹⁷³ *Iliad* 3.125-128.

¹⁷⁴ Interestingly, the final line of this extract deploys the “ἐνεκα” preposition but this time it can be seen as coming either directly from the poet or from Helen herself. This latter interpretation fits in well with Helen's history of self-criticism within the *Iliad* 3.172-180, 3.399-413, 6.344-368, 24.762-775, potentially as a way to control and exert her influence over the narrative. See Blondell 2010; Pantelia 2002; Roisman 2006.

¹⁷⁵ For the conceptual link between weaving and a particularly ‘feminine’ type of storytelling/poetic composition, based on the female voice see, e.g., Parker 1984; Joplin 2002 [1984]. Within classical scholarship, Jane Snyder 1982 makes the link between weaving and song in ancient Greek literature through the verb ‘ὑφαίνω’ (‘to weave’). See also Bergren 1983; Clayton 2004; Mueller 2010: 3-6.

an unreasonable way to describe Cook's methodology in *Achilles*. More importantly, however, is how Cook uses her literary voice to articulate and expand upon what is often an ignored part of Helen's biography, her abuse at the hands of Theseus. For not only is the link conceptual between writing and weaving established in theory, but the gendered violence that this type of weaving-writing can give articulation to, has also been noted. Patricia Joplin points to the importance of the woman reader and re-writer of ancient texts as being able to counteract a metaphorical-type of violence perpetrated against women through their historical silencing.¹⁷⁶ This becomes all the more important when the literary violence is not only metaphorical but physical, as Joplin looks to Philomela as the archetypal 'voice of the shuttle', whose experience of violence and silencing at the hands of Tereus could only be successfully interpreted by a female reader, her sister Procne.¹⁷⁷ Reading as a woman, Joplin puts forward an interpretation of the Philomela myth that she sees as being a direct consequence of her gender, in which Philomela's rape dominates her attention.¹⁷⁸ It is arguable that Cook's own concentration on Helen's abuse is symptomatic of this same affinity that Joplin describes between the woman reader and the violated mythical woman or girl.

In re-focusing attention back on to the victim of abuse, Cook justifies the political importance placed on the female reader and writer as being able to tap into alternate

¹⁷⁶ This idea is put forward by most passionately by Joplin 2002: 259-60: 'In returning to the ancient myths and opening them from within to the woman's body, the woman's mind, and the woman's voice, contemporary women have felt like thieves of language staging a raid on the treasured icons of a tradition that has required woman's silence for centuries'.

¹⁷⁷ For women's rereading as a feminist task and the precedent set in literature by Procne as reader of her sister's rape story see also Perry 1989.

¹⁷⁸ Joplin 1996: 'I could not help hearing a rape story, I could not help feeling that the myth commemorates in structure as well as theme the process by which common violence is worked against women and is passed on (and passed over) in prestigious works by men'.

representations, not explored by the dominant male voice of the canon.¹⁷⁹ Time and again, the abduction of Helen by Theseus is recounted as an episode in the life of the hero. Even Isocrates, who approaches the subject within his larger piece on Helen, seems to use the motif of abduction as a vehicle through which to describe Theseus' journey to the underworld.¹⁸⁰ Similarly, although Plutarch does suggest that if Theseus had raped Helen the age discrepancy between the two would be unsavoury, 'Theseus was already fifty years old, according to Hellanicus, when he took part in the rape of Helen, who was not of marriageable age' ('ἤδη δὲ πενήκοντα ἔτη γεγονώς, ὡς φησιν Ἑλλάνικος, ἔπραξε τὰ περὶ τὴν Ἑλένην, οὐ καθ' ὥραν'),¹⁸¹ the consequences of Theseus' actions for Helen are not explored. The focus on Theseus at the expense of Helen is characteristic of the myth's reception even in more contemporary studies, so that although Robert Graves does use what could be described as emotive language when he says that Helen was 'seized'; the account is a mere footnote in the larger story of Theseus' heroic journey to the underworld.¹⁸²

Re-focusing attention on to the victim of abuse, the rapes of Helen as a young girl are the most harrowing episodes in Cook's *Achilles*, seeing Helen go from being content and secure in her own skin, to vulnerable and defenceless:

¹⁷⁹ In keeping with Joplin's idea of moving what has been unspeakable to the centre of the narrative, Joplin 2002. See also Higgins & Silver 1991b: 4: and 'reading the violence...back into texts'. Cook also downplays any ambiguity in the ancient sources over whether Theseus abduction of Helen was also a rape. Plutarch, for example, favours the version where Theseus leaves the young Helen, not yet of marriageable age, with his mother, presumably not raping her, *Theseus* 31.3.

¹⁸⁰ Isocrates, *Helen* 22: 'δοκεῖ δέ μοι πρέπει περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ διὰ μακροτέρων εἰπεῖν' ('And it seems appropriate to speak of Theseus at still greater length). Translation from George Norlin 1980.

¹⁸¹ Plutarch, *Theseus* 31.1. The translation of Plutarch is from Bernadotte Perrin 1914. Ava Cohen's study of ancient Greek art on the subject of Helen's abduction suggests that the age-gap between the two is downplayed; both Helen and Theseus are most often shown as young adults, Cohen 2007.

¹⁸² Graves 1992: 362-364.

‘She was ten when Theseus broke in. Her thin, sunned body – a source of pleasure and strength, the place where she lived – made tiny and bruised under his hands. Bones that had sung their green strength in her, turned delicate and raw as the bones of a bird devoured.

When Theseus broke in she silently slipped out; back into the shell she could summon from that instant. It became a bivouac she could watch from. What she watched that first time was a big man with gleaming eyes and a red, wet mouth at the heart of his beard. He came up to her from behind to seize the proud bones that rose like little hills at each side of her belly. Then his hands grasped lower, tugging her apart like the halves of an apricot. Then not his hand but the blind brute of his penis, cramming itself in wherever it could.¹⁸³

Cook transports the episode from myth to a real life scenario wherein the rape of a young girl by a much older man is described in the contemporary psychological terms of disembodiment or dissociation, ‘When Theseus broke in she silently slipped out’.¹⁸⁴ The phrases, ‘broke in’ and ‘slipped out’, capture Helen’s self-objectification, in which the only way she can cope with the abuse she is suffering is to separate her sense of self from her body.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ *Achilles* p.72. This is a long quotation but I think it is worth including in full as a way to get across the horror of Cook’s description.

¹⁸⁴ *Achilles* p.72. For dissociation as a reaction to trauma see, e.g., Dowdeswell 1986; Haddock 2001; Wieland 2011.

¹⁸⁵ Wieland 1998: 114: ‘A child threatened by extreme abuse or violence seeks a way to keep herself safe, to keep herself from what is happening. Physically she cannot get away. Psychologically she can’.

The image of Helen's body as a house/object is repeated in another childhood reflection, again with Theseus as the abuser. Theseus interrupts the ten year old Helen's game that involves 'building a little walled town out of twigs and mud' peopled with finger-men and women and appropriates its rules to abuse her. Helen's body merges with her play-town as she becomes Theseus' game,

'...And this is the palace where visitors are arriving.

"Like me," he says. "Like me coming here to visit you in your palace."

And with his great fat fingers he makes his way up the town street. When he gets to the palace door Helen is afraid he will push his way in. His fingers are too big and clumsy for the delicate frame she has made.

But he stops in front of the door.

This time Theseus stops'.¹⁸⁶

Moreover, the game that Theseus interrupts is evocative of the type of abuse-focused play therapy that young victims of abuse undergo as a way of articulating and disclosing what has happened.¹⁸⁷ The descriptions of abuse can therefore be read on two levels, as the actual descriptions of abuse as they happen as well as Helen's recounting of what she experienced; a reading that has the potential to put Cook in the position of therapist, providing a literary space where Helen is able to disclose. This is symbolic of what Joplin anticipates that women's reading can achieve, which is a refocusing of attention onto the

¹⁸⁶ *Achilles* p.78-79.

¹⁸⁷ Drewes 2009; Wieland 1998: 132-133.

experiences of victimised women as a way to draw attention to gendered violence and its enshrinement in literature.¹⁸⁸

Not only does Helen create an object out of her own body as a strategy to cope with abuse, but her abuser reiterates and consolidates the image of her body as house/object. Told from Helen's perspective, the heroic narrative that has accompanied Theseus throughout his literary history seems at best inappropriate, at worst sickening. The consequences of Cook's description extend beyond her *Achilles*, permeating all of Theseus' literary history with her female voice and the victim's perspective. Moreover, the imagery of Theseus having 'broke in' aligns Cook's narrative to the autobiography of Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, who recalls her childhood abuse in strikingly similar language to that of Helen, 'And then there was pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart'.¹⁸⁹ The deliberate reference to the experiences of a real-life survivor of abuse, whose writing has since become a resource for feminist discussions of rape,¹⁹⁰ demonstrates Cook's awareness of a growing tradition of women's writing which focuses on giving articulation to the experiences of the abused, as well as an alignment of her representation of rape with this tradition.

¹⁸⁸ Articulating classical myths of rape from the perspective of the victim aligns Cook's reception of Helen with receptions of Persephone by women writers of classical reception. See for example, the poems of Dashkar Slater, *Persephone Tells* and Rita Dove, *Lost Brilliance* (1999). The potential for identification between the female author of classical reception with Persephone as victims of rape is explored in Hall 2007: 148. Whilst interestingly, H.D.'s *Helen of Egypt* exploits the potential to identify Helen with Persephone, also referring to them as sisters, both the victims of abduction, representatives of desire and death. For Helen as Persephone, see *Helen in Egypt* p.209-215; for Helen and Persephone as sisters, see *Helen in Egypt* p.151, p.157, p.195.

¹⁸⁹ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* p.76.

¹⁹⁰ For example, Brownmiller 1975: 273ff. uses Maya Angelou's autobiography.

Reading these passages of abuse is difficult and uncomfortable to say the least, creating an environment in which the reader is left in no doubt as to where their respective sympathy and disgust lies. The use of contemporary language and scenarios means that any distance between the reader and the text as a consequence of its ancient origins is undermined. It is with this complete lack of moral ambiguity that Cook creates via Helen and Theseus that *Achilles'* other scenes of sexual violence should be assessed, something to which my next chapter will turn. For although the description of Helen's abuse comes towards the end of *Achilles* and is the final rape that is described, I believe that the Helen-Theseus episode is designed to prompt the reader to go back and re-evaluate their initial assumptions and judgements in regards to Thetis-Peleus and Penthesilea-Achilles. Having established the gendered relationship between the perpetrator and the victim of (sexual) violence in the first chapter, reading Hector's feminisation at the hands (and spears) of Achilles and his Myrmidons, I will now look at how Cook's revisions of ancient narratives of sexual violence have the potential to be of importance to feminist activism.

Chapter Three: Representations of Sexual Violence in Cook's *Achilles*

With the expectation that literary representations are of consequence in the real world,¹⁹¹ the type of “disinterested” scholarship that interprets ancient descriptions of rape as formulaic or as distinct from contemporary life are no longer possible.¹⁹² This has seen a concerted effort by feminist scholars to scrutinise the representation of rape and sexual violence in ancient literature (for instance in its use as a comedic-plot vehicle in New Comedy or as aetiology, social commentary and provocation in Ovid), urged on by an understanding that the continued reception of these texts contributes to how a society thinks about rape.¹⁹³ Most problematic in terms of contemporary discourse on sexual violence is the perpetuation of so-called ‘rape myths’, whose insidious infiltration into attitudes about rape are to the detriment of victims; including the idea that women who are sexually active cannot be raped, wearing certain items of clothing incite sexual advances and that there is a ‘proper’ way to respond to rape and only those who respond in this way are eligible to consider themselves real victims.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Summed up as ‘politics and poetics are inseparable’ in Higgins & Silver 1991b: 9; see also Armstrong & Tennenhouse 1989; De Lauretis 1987; Heilbrun 1979; Heilbrun 1990; Heilbrun & Higgonet 1983; Higgins & Silver 1991a; Humm 1991.

¹⁹² As is the case with how Cook approaches the rape of Helen by Theseus, discussed in chapter two. For the importance of recognising representations of sexual violence as just that, rather than metaphorical or symbolic descriptions, see Higgins & Silver 1994b. See also Packman 1993 for her rallying cry to ‘call it rape’.

¹⁹³ For a synthesis of the centring of rape as *the* issue in 1970s/early 1980s feminist activism see Tomaselli 1986a.

For the scholarly reception of rape in comedy, see especially Zola Marie Packman who epitomises the trend described in this chapter to take representations of rape seriously, with the invocation to ‘call it rape’, Packman 1993; see also Fantham 1975; Pierce 1997. For the reception of Ovid, see especially Richlin who asks ‘why should we read Ovid? How badly do we need this history?’, Richlin 1992b: 178; see also Curran 1978; Fantham 1983; Joplin 2002; Segal 1994.

For classical representations of rape and their literary reception see Donaldson 1982; Wall 1988 which focus on Lucretia and Callisto respectively.

¹⁹⁴ Susan Brownmiller’s seminal work of the 1970s set about making rape an unmistakably feminist issue and one which required a revised cultural narrative to combat mistaken but widespread beliefs about rape, such

The potential importance of classical reception lies in its ability to retell these ancient stories of sexual violence from an alternate perspective, often centred on the voice of the victim, with the hope that ‘rape-myths’ can be undermined.¹⁹⁵ No doubt due to the feminisation of the victim of (sexual) violence, explored in the first chapter with regards to Hector, there is the expectation that women’s writing of reception in particular will advance this perspective, something that Cook does in her exploration of Helen’s childhood.¹⁹⁶

Although the other representations of sexual violence in the *Achilles* (which are startling frequent considering the short length of the novella),¹⁹⁷ do not focus entirely on the victim;

as, ‘NO WOMAN CAN BE RAPED AGAINST HER WILL’, Brownmiller 1975: 311. This type of consciousness-raising work is still going on as rape myths persist. The registered charity, Rape Crisis England and Wales, a contributor as part of an external reference group to the Sex Offences Review, resulting in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 which came into force 01/05/2004, lists and responds to ‘rape myths’. I will quote one example, which responds best to the type of issues that will be raised in this chapter:

‘Myth *The woman did not get hurt or fight back. It could not have been rape.*

Fact Men who rape or sexually assault women and girls will often use weapons or threats of violence to intimidate women. The fact that there is no visible evidence of violence does not mean that a woman has not been raped.

Another myth that goes hand in hand with this is that ‘*rape is a fate worse than death*’ and this links with the belief that women should fight and resist throughout. Faced with the reality of rape, women make second by second decisions, all of which are directed at minimising the harm done to them. At the point where initial resistance, struggling, reasoning etc have failed, the fear of further violence often limits women’s resistance. The only form of control that seems available to women at this point is limiting the harm done to them’ (RAPE CRISIS, ENGLAND AND WALES).

¹⁹⁵ The feminist approach to representations of rape is typified by a centring on the experience of victims, exemplified in titles such as Jane Dowdeswell’s *Women on Rape* (1986). See also Armstrong & Tennenhouse 1989; Buchwald, Fletcher & Roth 1993. The concentration on individual, personal experience in theory and activism links the theoretical to the literary.

¹⁹⁶ See chapter two for my discussion of Helen’s rape by Theseus, described as analogous to ‘consciousness raising’. For women’s rereading of rape as a feminist task and the precedent set in literature by Procne as reader of her sister’s rape story, see Perry 1989. Joplin 2002 also expresses the expectation that women readers are more inclined to identify with the victim of violence.

¹⁹⁷ I count these as between (victim/rapist): Thetis/Peleus, Deidamia/Achilles, Penthesilea/Achilles, Paris/Helen, Theseus/Helen and Hector/Achilles plus his Myrmidons. I include in my count a potential rape that is not described in Cook (Paris/Helen), as well as an episode which is transformed from rape in its source text to consensual sex in Cook (Achilles/Deidamia). I think I am justified in including these examples amongst my tally of episodes of sexual violence because despite the fact that the ancient rape has been changed into something else, that ‘something else’ remains informed by its source text, as I showed in chapter one with Achilles/Deidamia. After all, it is the relationship between the representation of sexual violence in the source text and in women’s writing of classical reception that is at the heart of this chapter.

when read alongside the abuse suffered by Helen, they also succeed in challenging problematic readings of rape. I intend to show how the rapes of Thetis by Peleus and Penthesilea by Achilles, as described in Cook, undercut the narratives of their source texts; exposing the way in which ‘rape myths’, now a major target of feminist activism, find their roots in ancient literature and thus the important role that the woman writer of classical reception has to play in their revision.¹⁹⁸

The initial encounter between Peleus and Thetis, described by Cook, has been interpreted as one in which the original rape is transformed into mutual passion.¹⁹⁹ I plan to show that this is simply not the case and that such a reading is itself a product of the kind of ‘rape myths’ that I think Cook subtly undermines.²⁰⁰ Before turning to Cook, I think it is necessary to establish the literary context of the Peleus and Thetis episode that Cook’s revision is in response. Peter Heslin describes two ‘incompatible’ traditions, one in which their coming together is one of reciprocity and the other in which Peleus rapes Thetis, represented by Catullus and Ovid respectively.²⁰¹ Heslin describes how Catullus transforms the tradition where Thetis is raped by rendering the attraction between Peleus and Thetis as mutual, citing as evidence, ‘for Thetis burned with love/ Then Thetis did not despise human

¹⁹⁸ This is in keeping with Amy Richlin’s conception of how feminist classicists should respond to representations of violence in classical literature, ‘We can appropriate; we can resist’, Richlin 1992b: 79. Similarly, Edith Hall 2007: 136 describes: ‘authorial subjects who feel themselves somehow excluded from the centre (whether by class, gender, race, or sexuality) have been making central what was once peripheral to ancient narratives’.

¹⁹⁹ Vanda Zajko 2006a: 48 note 6 makes the passing remark that Cook transforms ‘the rape of Thetis into a sensual celebration of mutual sexual struggle and orgasm’.

²⁰⁰ Edith Hall 2007: 138 seems to agree with my interpretation of the Peleus/Thetis scene, however, she refers to it only very briefly, calling it a ‘violent sexual encounter’.

²⁰¹ Heslin 2005: 262 referring to Catullus 64 and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.221-265. The translation that I am using for Catullus is from Guy Lee 1990 and the translation for Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is David Raeburn 2004.

hymeneals'.²⁰² Whereas, according to Heslin, Ovid's account is much more straightforwardly about rape and sexual violence as Thetis' resistance is made explicit, 'he clasped her neck in his amorous arms and attempted to rape her'.²⁰³

What Heslin fails to account for, however, are the ambiguities in Catullus' narrative wherein the alternate tradition of Thetis' rape lingers on. Why else would the voice of Catullus 64 feel the need to question Peleus about Thetis' burning love, 'Did Thetis, fairest Nereine, embrace *you*'?²⁰⁴ Moreover, the statements to which this question seems to be in response, 'for Thetis burned with love/ Then Thetis did not despise human hymeneals', is clearly not evidence of enthusiastic consent on Thetis' part. It is arguable that Catullus is exploiting the very real difference, in terms of what separates consensual sex from rape, between Thetis welcoming the advances of Peleus and what the poem actually says, which is that she 'did not despise' (*'non despexit'*) them. These nuances in Catullus 64, where the question of Thetis' consent remains unresolved, is replicated in Cook's version, contrary to more optimistic readings.²⁰⁵

At the most straightforward level, however, the fact that Cook's account draws most heavily on Ovid immediately infuses her retelling with the undertones of the ancient narrative of rape. Cook borrows from the Ovidian imagery of Thetis' safe and secure life on

²⁰² Catullus 64.19-20 in Heslin 2005: 262.

²⁰³ Ovid, *Met.* 11.239-240.

²⁰⁴ Catullus 64.28. The emphasis on '*you*' in Guy Lee's translation, which certainly lends itself to my interpretation, is not so emphatic in the Latin.

²⁰⁵ The ability for women in particular to pick up on this kind of narrative ambiguity is what Joplin 2002 urges women readers to replicate and 'listen for the voice of the shuttle'.

the shore, 'where Thetis riding her bridled dolphin, would often arrive quite naked',²⁰⁶ as Cook describes, 'The sea and air make love to her daily, know each fold and whorl of her, every line of foot and hand, every cleft and dimple'.²⁰⁷ Following Ovid, Cook also has Peleus approach a sleeping Thetis;²⁰⁸ compare, 'One day she was lying there fast asleep, when Peleus surprised her' in Ovid, with 'While she sleeps Peleus watches her...He watches her all afternoon...She does not wake and the sun moves on' in Cook.²⁰⁹ Cook takes things further than Ovid, however, by anticipating on more than one occasion that Peleus' sexual advances will not be welcomed by Thetis, 'No one has bothered to ask Thetis if this *man* they have chosen for her will do' and 'The last thing she wants is some man clambering all over her'.²¹⁰ That Cook can pre-empt Thetis' rejection of Peleus demonstrates her investment in the tradition of rape, going beyond the Ovidian narrative in which Thetis' reluctance is only mentioned once Peleus launches his attack, 'she wouldn't respond to his wooing entreaties'.²¹¹

The description of Thetis' contented independence adds pathos to the rape, situating the classically informed reader who knows what is going to happen in the position of distressed onlooker, unable to prevent Peleus' assault. Peleus is a voyeur, watching the sleeping Thetis and fantasising about what he is going to do to her:

²⁰⁶ Ovid, *Met.* 11.236-237.

²⁰⁷ *Achilles* p.14.

²⁰⁸ Gail Tatham 2000 describes the eroticisation of the 'sleeping beauty' in art and poetry as a 'recurrent theme' in the Hellenistic era, becoming a '*topos*' in Augustan Rome, drawing on the type of gendering that I noted in feminist theorisation on the gaze, see note 90. For the trope of the would-be rapist and the sleeping victim in Ovid, see Richlin 1992b.

²⁰⁹ Ovid, *Met.* 11.238, *Achilles* p.15.

²¹⁰ *Achilles* p.14.

²¹¹ Ovid, *Met.* 11.239.

‘While she sleeps Peleus watches her...She is lying on her back left arm stretched up, face turned towards it. Her right knee slightly bent.

What would it take to take her?

He watches her all afternoon...

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’.²¹²

Peleus’ fantasy revolves around what he is going to do to Thetis, nowhere does he consider what she might do to him, or what they might do together; this is clearly a rape fantasy, in which Thetis’ body is an object for Peleus to do things to. In Cook, Peleus’ actions are overtly sinister, the narrator repeating three times, ‘So he stalks her’.²¹³ Not only does this phrase lend itself to an interpretation of Peleus’ actions as premeditated rape, but like Cook’s use of abuse vocabulary in the Helen episode, it is another example of how Cook allows a ‘real-life’ scenario to intrude into the mythic narrative.

The various transformations that Thetis goes through in an attempt to elude capture and rape, described in the *Metamorphoses*, are also taken up by Cook. Ovid describes her metamorphosis from bird to tree to tigress and Peleus’ steadfast refusal to let go following the instructions of Proteus; while in Cook, Thetis goes from fish to fire to water to lion to snake to cuttlefish and again, Peleus does not give up; a persistence that Cook describes as overtly sinister, ‘She’ll not get away. He’ll have her, *he’ll find her*, whatever form she takes

²¹² *Achilles* p.15.

²¹³ *Achilles* p.14.

to'.²¹⁴ Is it any wonder then that Thetis finally submits? In Ovid, Thetis' weary resignation has not diverted scholarly attention away from what is demonstrably a scene of rape, 'At last she gave in, as she sighed, "You win! Some god must be helping you"'.²¹⁵ It seems remarkable to me, therefore, that Zajko can see Thetis' eventual submission in Cook as a sign of her consent, despite her multiple transformations beforehand, as well as the clear reference to the precedent in Ovid whereby Thetis' submission is not the same as her consent.

Zajko's reading is troubling when read in the context of contemporary feminist activism centred around rape and consent, feeding the so-called 'rape myths' that consciousness raising about rape and sexual abuse seek to address. I can only imagine that Zajko reads the Thetis and Peleus episode in Cook as mutual because it is implied that Thetis reaches orgasm and ejaculates:

'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.

²¹⁴ *Achilles* p.17.

²¹⁵ Ovid, *Met.* 11.263.

The starts dissolve.

He is covered in sticky black ink'.²¹⁶

Firstly, scientific study has demonstrated that orgasm does not negate rape.²¹⁷ To see Thetis' orgasm as being indicative of her consent demonstrates the insidious nature of this particular rape myth and hence justifies feminist efforts to expose it as fallacy. Furthermore, orgasm is only inferred by the 'sticky black ink' of Thetis-as-cuttlefish, a very pertinent point to make considering that the episode in Cook is reported by an unnamed narrator, not Thetis herself. In the context of feminist re-readings of sexual violence in literature, the question of who gets to do the representing is of the utmost importance; therefore the fact that it is not Thetis who is talking is surely significant and begs caution. Moreover, it must be remembered that Thetis has metamorphosed herself a number of times attempting to evade Peleus and even before the attack the narrator had explicitly stated that 'The last thing she wants is some man clambering all over her'.²¹⁸ Surely this demonstrates a lack of consent?

It is the kind of thinking whereby eventual submission or orgasm negates rape that helps to perpetuate rape myths and this is clearly not what Cook is trying to do. On the contrary, it cannot be coincidental that Helen's rape by Theseus in Cook also seems to target this particular myth, whereby the experiencing of pleasure means that it cannot have been rape. Cook describes Helen being penetrated by Theseus' fingers:

²¹⁶ *Achilles* p.19.

²¹⁷ Levin & Van Berlo 2004.

²¹⁸ *Achilles* p.14.

‘They push, tease, slide their way in where they should not go till her body feels like a cooking pot coming to boil...Hot, muddled, excited, angry...The fingers stick to her so closely it’s as if she has grown them; as if it’s her own secret will doing this painful, confusing, exciting thing’.²¹⁹

The more straightforward revulsion a reader may feel when confronted by Helen’s rape by Theseus, in which her ambiguous feelings of both anger and excitement clearly do not negate her experience of abuse, seem to have been used by Cook to encourage the reader to reassess the Thetis/Peleus episode. If a reader accepts that Helen’s excitement does not excuse Theseus’ actions, then perhaps they will apply the same thinking to Thetis/Peleus.

Furthermore, when Thetis transforms herself into a snake, there is the suggestion that this is the turning point at which rape becomes consensual:

‘Being squeezed she lets herself go beyond the point where breath is lost – where lion expires – brings herself smaller, tighter, so she is now one lithe tube.

A snake.

So narrow she could slip away if she wanted to’.²²⁰

The implication being, that ‘she could slip away if she wanted to’, but she does not, hence demonstrating her consent. Firstly, there is the tradition in Ovid whereby Thetis’ weary

²¹⁹ *Achilles* p.79. The confusion felt by Helen in Cook seems to be another reference to Maya Angelou, as she describes the ambivalence of her younger-self in regards to her abuser and his actions towards her. For example, ‘I didn’t want to admit that I had in fact liked his holding me or that I had liked his smell or the hard heart-beating, so I said nothing’, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* p.76. The resulting guilt of these types of conflicting emotions for victims of child abuse is discussed in Brownmiller 1975: 279; Froula 1986.

²²⁰ *Achilles* p.17-18. The description of Thetis’ transformations and reducing herself in size: ‘smaller, tighter’, is also evocative of the kind of dissociation experienced by Helen as a way of withstanding her rape trauma.

resignation does not negate the fact that Peleus rapes her. What is more interesting here, however, is that the notion that 'she could slip away if she wanted to', is reminiscent of the rape myth whereby rape cannot have occurred unless the victim continued to resist throughout.²²¹ This is not Thetis saying that 'she could slip away if she wanted to' after all, but an unnamed narrator, making what seems to be a judgement that justifies Peleus' actions. Again, the reader is given the opportunity to review their judgement of Thetis through Helen who, the reader is told, fails to evade Theseus: 'If she, this slender ten-year-old child, could use her wrestling skills to throw him off and kill him she would do it, but he has her pinned down'.²²² If it is accepted that Helen was raped despite having failed to resist, then surely the same courtesy should be extended to Thetis?²²³

Carol Ann Duffy, in her collection of poetry *The World's Wife*, offers a similar reading of the mythic narrative of Peleus and Thetis, wherein her Thetis goes through eight stanzas' worth of transformation before being impregnated by an unnamed, but assumed, Peleus. Everything Duffy's Thetis does to escape Peleus fails: 'Next I was roar, claw, 50lb paw...But my gold eye saw/ the guy in the grass with the gun. Twelve-bore' and 'I sank through the floor of the earth/ to swim in the sea...Over the waves the fisherman came/ with his hook and his line and his sinker'.²²⁴ This latter example is especially interesting as it quite clearly means holds up Thetis' struggle to intense scrutiny, demonstrating the dangers of interpreting her and Peleus' initial encounter as one of mutuality and consent. For when Duffy refers to Peleus in the role of fisherman 'with his hook and his line and his sinker', we

²²¹ This rape myth finds its ultimate fulfilment in the idea that the only true rape victim is the dead one. See Brownmiller 1975: 330, a theme to which I will return.

²²² *Achilles* p.79.

²²³ Not to mention the question of whether something that begins as rape can ever become consensual.

²²⁴ Duffy, *The World's Wife* p.5-6.

are reminded of the idiom for falling in love, 'hook, line and sinker'; however, here it is used not for someone meeting and falling instantly and deeply in love, but for Peleus literally trying to capture a reluctant Thetis. Duffy is making explicit the problem of misreading rape as something consensual and romantic and perhaps also making a point about the potential defence of the rapist, in which the perpetrator claims that the victim welcomed his advances. If Peleus had caught Thetis while as a fisherman, he could have claimed that she quite literally fell, 'hook line and sinker', hiding his violation behind the narrative of love; this is just like what Cook's narrator is doing in inferring consent through claiming that 'she could slip away if she chose'.²²⁵

Moreover, prior to the rape scene in Cook, when Chiron and Peleus discuss the best way to catch Thetis, both characters seem to accept that Thetis' resistance is par for the course and that it should actually be welcomed as a way to increase Peleus' desire. Chiron advises:

"She will do everything she can to throw you – buck, kick, bite, *dissolve*, shrink and grow horns. You like them lively? This one is flame of life itself...

You'll be burnt, and it will be worth it'.²²⁶

The assurance that female resistance is to be expected but not taken seriously is another persistent rape myth to which feminist activists respond, also finding its articulation in ancient literature; as Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* advises the would-be male lover that:

²²⁵ *Achilles* p.18.

²²⁶ *Achilles* p.13.

'Some force is permissible – women are often pleased

By force, and like what they're giving to be seized.

The girl whose citadel is stormed

By sheer audacity feels warmed,

Complimented; the one who could have been attacked

And taken by force but escapes intact,

Although she affects to look glad,

Feels let down, a little sad'.²²⁷

Then in the third book of the collection, Ovid turns his attention to a female audience and advises that initial resistance will successfully increase the desire of both parties involved:

'That's why a woman often finds

Her husband's ardour falling below scratch –

He has too easy access, the key of the latch.

But change the picture, throw in a door barred

And a doorman with a hard

Expression repeating "No,"

And you, too, will feel desire glow'.²²⁸

²²⁷ Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.673-678. The translation is from James Michie 2002.

In the same vein of thinking, Cook's Chiron can list what Thetis will do to evade Peleus, with the formulaic way that he anticipates her struggle reducing the seriousness of her resistance and making it seem as if she is complicit in a complicated game of courtship to which Chiron knows the rules.²²⁹

The persistent rape myth whereby consent is inferred unless extreme resistance by the victim is shown culminates most dramatically in the narrative of the dead rape victim, in which rape can only be ascertained if the victim struggled so much that he or she died as a consequence.²³⁰ This finds its most extreme ancient expression in Lucretia who, in surviving rape, can only secure her honour through suicide.²³¹ Cook uses the figure of Penthesilea to complicate and expose the problematic nature of this narrative, as her so-called 'perfect' (i.e. dead) rape victim is the archetypal masculine-woman.²³² This is something that Cook

²²⁸ Ovid, *The Art of Love* 3.584-588. Ovid's characterisation of Helen in the *Heroides* is similar in that Helen's resistance towards Paris' entreaties is framed as being part of an amorous game, Ovid, *Heroides* 16-17; see reading of Belfiore 1980. Interestingly enough, both Paris and Helen use Theseus' earlier abduction of Helen as an archetype for Paris' plans. For example, Paris says, 'I will imitate the deed of Aegeus' son and of your brothers. You can be touched by no examples nearer than these', Ovid, *Heroides* 16.327-329. In her reply, Helen says, 'Because the Neptunian hero employed violence with me, can it be that, stolen once, I seem fit to be stolen, too, a second time?', Ovid, *Heroides* 17.21-22. The translation is from Grant Showerman 1914.

²²⁹ Interestingly, in the third book of the *The Art of Love*, it is Penthesilea that Ovid addresses, 'Having armed Greeks against Amazons, I must now prescribe/ Weapons, Penthesilea, for you and *your* tribe' (3.1-2) in what could be an illusion to the encounter between herself and Achilles that Cook also describes.

²³⁰ Brownmiller 1975: 330.

²³¹ Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.57-60 for the rape of Lucretia and her insistence on dying to maintain her honour: "'As for me I am innocent of fault, but I will take my punishment. Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve'". This translation is from A. de Sélincourt 1960.

Ovid, *Fasti* 2.725-812 in which there is the potential to read Lucretia as an elegaic *puella*, inviting the sexual advances of Sextus Tarquinius. If read without irony, Ovid's reception of the rape of Lucretia could be seen as being demonstrative of the type of thinking whereby if a woman does not die during rape, she cannot really have resisted (hence justifying her suicide). As a side note, Ovid's Lucretia is another example of the 'sleeping beauty' trope in Augustan literature that I briefly touched upon in regards to Thetis and Peleus, see Tatham 2000.

For the reception of Lucretia see Donaldson 1982.

²³² Quintus of Smyrna, *The Fall of Troy* 1.445-6 describes the Amazons as encouraging the other women of Troy to subvert the relationship between femininity, here represented by weaving, and the female body: 'ἀπόπροθι δ' εἴρια θέντο/ καὶ ταλάρους, ἀλεγεινὰ δ' ἐπ' ἔντεα χεῖρας ἴαλλον' ('The weaving-wool, the distaff far they flung,/ And to grim weapons stretched their eager hands').

emphasises not through Penthesilea herself but through Achilles and references to his feminine past as a girl on Skiros, thereby undermining the gendered reading of the dead victim as the ultimate display of femininity with his/her attacker as masculine victor.

Cook's Penthesilea is murdered by Achilles as he tries to hold her down against her will, presumably to rape her, 'Now he pins her down...He bends back her fingers...His knee bent across her ribs, holding her down...'.²³³ Note that being held down is common to both Thetis and Helen's rapes too; of Thetis, Peleus is instructed 'The main thing...is not to let go', while as already mentioned, Theseus has Helen 'pinned down'.²³⁴ It should also be borne in mind that Chiron has been Achilles' childhood teacher and in some traditions Theseus', the same Chiron that many years previously in Cook's narrative had told Peleus not to let go of Thetis no matter how much she struggled. This could perhaps explain why Cook chooses to follow the tradition wherein it is Chiron rather than Proteus who instructs Peleus. With the rape of Deidamia transformed by Cook into consensual sex, it seems that the influence of Chiron vis-à-vis rape has been entirely transferred to the Penthesilea [sic] (and possibly Helen) episode(s); perhaps as a consequence of Achilles' femininity on Skiros rendering him unable to take on the masculine position of rapist.²³⁵

²³³ *Achilles* p.55.

²³⁴ *Achilles* p.13, p.79

²³⁵ See Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.11-18 for Achilles as the pupil of Chiron. Interestingly, the rape that Ovid later refers to as demonstrative of Achilles' masculinity is that of Deidamia: Ovid, *The Art of Love* 1.693-702. For the connection between rape and centaurs see Ovid, *Met.* 12.210-535. Furthermore, the spear that Achilles uses to kill Penthesilea in Quintus of Smyrna, is explicitly attributed to Chiron, perhaps deepening the centaur's connection with Penthesilea's death in Cook even further, *The Fall of Troy* 1.593.

Having at first vigorously resisted: 'The moment she knows this enemy behind her she jabs her elbows back into his ribs and would spin round to fight him were it not for the blade tightening at her throat',²³⁶ Achilles' ambush of Penthesilea becomes more ambiguous: 'For Penthiseleia [sic] too there is comfort in his belly meeting her back...But her mind tells her otherwise: tells her to oppose this man and kill him'.²³⁷ Or at least this is what the narrator says, complicated somewhat by her efforts to fight back:

'A sharp, dangerous pain...He twists to throw off whatever it is that attacks him...sees the bloody little nose of flint she's been using to excavate the base of his spine...He bends back her fingers to make her release the flint and she makes those fingers her weapons, tearing his face and stabbing her eyes'.²³⁸

Then in a type of grotesque embrace, Achilles succeeds in tempering Penthesilea resistance but only through breaking her neck:

'...he covers her face with one hand, the feel of the other hand cradling the back of her skull, and pushes. He feels her body trying to arch beneath him, the resistance of her head as she struggles to free it. He pushes on. Pushes and then, with practised economy, twists. He holds her a little longer. Waiting for the turmoil of the body to quieten. Waiting for it to be over'.²³⁹

The deadly embrace between Achilles and Penthesilea in Cook seems to reference the jibes towards the hero in Quintus of Smyrna, as Thersites upbraids Achilles for his

²³⁶ *Achilles* p.52.

²³⁷ *Achilles* p.54.

²³⁸ *Achilles* p.55.

²³⁹ *Achilles* p.55.

attraction to the beauty of the dead Penthesilea.²⁴⁰ While the death of Cook's Penthesilea appears to conform to the 'rape myth' under discussion, whereby death is proof of resistance and femininity, the ambiguity of Penthesilea's gender in relation to Achilles undercuts this reading. For when Achilles goes to meet Penthesilea in Cook, he is not dressed in masculine armour, but in more feminine attire, evocative of the 'thin girl's tunic' he wore on Skiros: 'Not on horseback – though she is mounted – and not encased in his heavenly armour. When he goes to find her he is dressed lightly...'.²⁴¹ Having killed Penthesilea, Cook then describes Achilles' reaction to her dead body as a craftsman surveying his art; impressed with his mastery over life and death:

'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'.²⁴²

Again, the precedent set for describing Achilles as destroyer/creator comes during his stay as a girl on Skiros, wishing 'he were busy at something – whittling some wood to a spear point would be good'.²⁴³

It is interesting that Cook does not make use of what could be the more straightforwardly revisionist account of Penthesilea's meeting with Achilles, in which she

²⁴⁰ Quintus of Smyrna, *The Fall of Troy* 1.721-740.

²⁴¹ *Achilles* p.51.

²⁴² *Achilles* p.55-56.

²⁴³ *Achilles* p.22. The idea that in the act of killing, Achilles straddles the line between destruction and creation is repeated again in Cook when Priam describes Achilles' hands as, 'huge hands that can fashion as well as place a spear' (p.47).

kills and eats him. For although Cook does seem to reference this alternate tradition, “Like Furies,” they say, “like she-wolves.” A pack will stalk, round up and set upon a victim, each taking a part in the kill, each – so they say – tasting the flesh of their prey and smearing herself with his blood’, she does not take the allusion any further.²⁴⁴ Choosing instead to emphasise the ambiguity of Achilles’ gender, Cook also draws attention to the potential similarity between the deaths of Hector and Penthesilea. Not only is Achilles drawn to the beauty of both corpses, but their necks feature prominently in their deaths. While Penthesilea is strangled, the only sign of death that the Gods leave on Hector is described as, ‘a stain like a kiss at Hector’s throat’.²⁴⁵ Where does this leave the gender of the dead victim? In aligning Penthesilea with Hector, Cook emphasises her warrior masculinity and yet in death, Hector and therefore Penthesilea become feminine. On the other hand, Achilles takes the masculine position of perpetrator of violence and yet his actions towards Penthesilea recall his girlhood on Skiros as well as his same-sex attraction to Hector.

Having established the gendered relationship between the perpetrator and the victim of (sexual) violence in the first chapter, I have been able to look at how the way in

²⁴⁴ *Achilles* p.51. For this alternate telling of the Achilles/Penthesilea narrative in which she kills (and eats) him, see Von Kleist, H., *Penthesilea*, trans. J. Agee (NY 1998). For an overtly feminist reception of this text see Cixous 1996, in which she describes her shifting identification as a child from Achilles to Penthesilea under the influence of Von Kleist’s reception.

As an aside, it also strikes me as interesting that in Homer, it is Achilles talks about eating Hector raw, *Iliad* 22.346-8: ‘αἶ γάρ πως αὐτόν με μένος καὶ θυμὸς ἀνήη/ ὦμ’ ἀποταμνόμενον κρέα ἔδμεναι, οἷα ἔοργας,/ ὡς οὐκ ἔσθ’ ὅς σῆς γε κύνας κεφαλῆς ἀπαλάλκοι’ (‘Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now/ to hack your flesh away and eat you raw – such agonies you have caused me! Ransom?/ No man alive could keep the dog-packs off you’).

²⁴⁵ *Achilles* p.42. The trope of the ‘beautiful death’ in epic could be an interesting avenue of enquiry here, as necks often feature heavily in deaths where the fallen young warrior is feminised and eroticised. See, e.g., Virgil, *Aeneid* 9.433-7: ‘Euryalus sank prone in death; upon his goodly limbs the life-blood ran unstopped, and low inclined the drooping head; as when some purpled flower, cut by the ploughshare, dies, or poppies proud with stem forlorn their ruined beauty bow before the pelting storm’. This translation is from T.C. Williams 1910.

which Cook revises ancient narratives of sexual violence has the potential to be of importance to feminist activism. Possibly as a result of her gender, Cook follows Joplin in refusing to read rape as metaphor or narrative-device, filling her description of Helen's rapes in particular with such intensity that any ambiguity regarding Helen's victim status is rendered impossible. This level of clarity sheds light on any of the possible ambiguities in the rape of Thetis by Peleus, whose scholarly reception by Zajko is surely indicative of the contemporary climate in which mis-readings of rape, characterising assault as veiled consent for example, have achieved cultural capital. The most extreme consequence of the 'rape myth' whereby failing to die while resisting becomes indicative of consent finds articulation in the reverence of the dead rape victim. Cook undermines this narrative, however, by mixing up what should be a straightforwardly masculine-feminine gendered dynamic between rapist/violator (Achilles) and his dead victims (Penthesilea and Hector).

Conclusion

Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* is a literary provocation, both to the canonical tradition in which her eponymous hero found fame and to an essentialist understanding of gender wherein biology determines destiny. To appreciate fully what it means to be a woman re-writing canonical literature and why, as a consequence, discussion of the literary tradition and representations of gender take centre stage, it has been necessary to situate Cook's novel alongside an on-going process of revisionist theory and literature informed by feminism. The interplay between theory and literature is arguably at its most evident in works where authors purposefully blur the lines between theory, politics and literature. Monique Wittig's, *Les Guérillères*, is a great example, as Wittig is deliberate in the articulation of her politics and theory through the medium of literature.²⁴⁶ Although it would be wrong to take for granted that Cook, like Wittig, purposefully infuses her work with political sentiment, I still think it is striking that the overall tone of the *Achilles* is one in which the boundaries between feminist theory and practice/literature seem to have been distorted. The way that Cook gives literary articulation to a type of thinking that is also characterised by feminist theory is what endows *Achilles* with its particular nuance, rendering it an important example of women's writing of classical reception.

Holding up what I think are the key issues that Cook raises in her work, her relationship as a woman to the male voices of her source texts as well as to representations of gender, my close-reading of 'Relay' set the tone for the rest of my analysis. The type of

²⁴⁶ Wittig, *Les Guérillères*.

editorial manipulation that Cook wields over her sources in 'Relay' is potentially a stand out piece of evidence for the light that it sheds on how women writers respond to the domination of the male voice in the classical canon. For even though the act of translation or editing ultimately perpetuates the original male voice of the source, by deliberately referencing pieces out of their context as Cook does with Shakespeare, Dante and Chapman, the female voice goes some way towards being heard. In what I described as a 'cut and paste' type effect, the method of bringing together disparate sources in new ways is not only a technique deployed by Cook but also by Anne Carson in her *Autobiography of Red*. Furthermore, the potential for identification between the poet and Helen is also best realised in terms of narrative manipulation, as the extracts from Plato and Isokrates that Carson quotes and Cook seems to refer to both depict Helen as female director of the male poetic voice. I would be interested to see whether further investigation would support the proposition that the use of a 'cut and paste' methodology is something that is particularly attractive to women writers of classical reception, or indicative of a 'feminine' approach to editing.

Reference to Ostriker in the introduction, who defines revisionist mythmaking as a literary manifestation of 'feminist antiauthoritarianism',²⁴⁷ typifies the expectation of second-wave feminist literary critics that the dissemination of the female literary voice would be of political importance, rendered all the more exciting when the female voice took part in the rereading and rewriting of male-authored texts. The conviction that 'politics and

²⁴⁷ Ostriker 1982: 87.

poetics are inseparable²⁴⁸ brought with it the prospect that revised literary representations of what it means to be a woman would emancipate real-life women from the confines of a restrictive femininity established by the male literary voice. It is with this belief in mind that works such as Cook's *Achilles* become categorised as women's writing of classical reception, rather than merely classical reception. To establish whether there really is something different in the way that women reread and revise classical sources it would be necessary to compare women's classical reception with men's, for example, Cook's *Achilles* with Christopher Logue's *War Music*. Even without the clarity that this type of comparison might bring it remains striking that when approaching Helen, neither Cook, Carson, Atwood nor Sappho engage with the tradition of her infamy in a straightforwardly rehabilitative way, as I explored in the second chapter. Perhaps this is an example of Ostriker's 'feminist antiauthoritarianism', in which women writers deliberately choose to undercut the moral reasoning behind their source texts, particularly evident in the use of parody by both Atwood and Caron and the undermining of the heroism of the Greeks in Cook.

The position enjoyed by the male voice in literature, so the argument goes, has described and inscribed a set of gendered attributes for women that are at the same time inadequate and debilitating. In breaking the conceptual link between having a woman's body and behaving in a certain way (understood as feminine), women's writing of classical reception can raise the same kind of issues as feminist literary theory. In the first chapter I demonstrated how Cook complicates the conceptual link between femininity and the female body/ masculinity and the male body. By following a set of gendered 'rules', Achilles

²⁴⁸ Higgins & Silver 1991b: 9.

can successfully masquerade as a girl on Skiros and yet at the same time these laws of femininity are not necessarily taken up by his girl companion, Deidamia. This creates a mood of gender subversion that culminates in Cook's revision of Statius' narrative of rape into a playful scene of passion. It would be interesting to think about this episode in *Achilles* as it was originally performed, first by RSC actor Greg Hicks and then by Cook herself and the extent to which the gender of the actor affected how s/he played both Achilles and Deidamia.²⁴⁹ This approach could be extended even further to consider the theatrical tradition of 'performing' gender, a popular topic within classical reception.²⁵⁰ How, for example, do modern audiences, as opposed to those of Statius' *Achilleid*, react to Achilles' cross-dressing? Is a particular reaction contingent on seeing the scene performed, as opposed to read in private? In a performance setting, how do audiences experience the differences between a woman masquerading as a boy, masquerading as a girl (i.e., when Cook played Achilles on Skiros), and a man playing a boy, playing a girl (i.e., when Hicks took the role of Achilles on Skiros, or indeed, when the narrative perspective shifts to Deidamia)?

There is the sense in Cook, however, that this gender-play is far easier for Achilles than it is for his female literary counterparts, especially Helen. Both objects of the 'gaze', it is only Cook's Achilles who, as a consequence of his access to an alternative warrior-masculinity, is able to enjoy the ambiguous (and thoroughly postmodern) power that objectification can offer. The conceptual link in feminist readings of the gaze and sexual violence, between the feminisation produced as a result of objectification and rape, is

²⁴⁹ Regrettably I did not explore this avenue of enquiry fully in my interview with Cook, however, she did reveal that in the scene where Deidamia 'drags her shift off' (p.25), while she performed the action "straight", Hicks tried to make the movement "seductive" (pers. comm. Elizabeth Cook).

²⁵⁰ For classical cross-dressing, see, e.g., Rabinowitz 1995; Zeitlin 1985. For contemporary discussion of cross-dress/ gender-b(l)ending in performance and real-life, see e.g., Devor 1989; Garber 1992.

nowhere more fully realised than with Cook's Helen, a victim of both. Aligning her work with the likes of Atwood, Carson and Sappho in refusing to enter into the 'blame game' surrounding the classical figure, Cook instead chooses to expand upon an under-developed part of Helen's literary biography. Listening to the 'voice of the shuttle', Cook transforms mythical account into real-life abuse story, infusing Theseus' rapes of Helen with shocking realism, a technique which lends clarity to a reading of the other episodes of sexual violence. Literally 'reading the violence...back into texts',²⁵¹ Cook renders a disinterested reading of the rapes impossible, coinciding with the imperative in feminist activism that attitudes towards sexual violence can only be changed if its representations are recognised as such.

It is in her exploration of how sexual violence finds representation in ancient literature that the political potential of Cook's *Achilles* becomes most apparent. Undermining ancient narratives of rape and the ideas that they advance about consent that continue to hold sway today, Cook provides a literary outlet for the type of thinking found in feminist activism. The gendered dynamic at the heart of representations of (sexual) violence, explored in the first chapter with Hector, is given further emphasis in Cook's appropriation of Penthesilea. In troubling the gender distinctions between the victim of violence (Penthesilea) and the perpetrator (Achilles), as well as resting on the tradition of seeing the Amazon as the archetypal masculine-woman, Cook refuses to characterise the dead victim of (sexual) violence as the pinnacle of femininity.

²⁵¹ Higgins & Silver 1991b: 4. Again, see Packman 1993 and the resolution to 'call it rape' in regards to New Comedy.

The misreading of the Peleus-Thetis episode by Zajko gives an even greater sense of urgency to the exposing of 'rape myths', whose infiltration into how society thinks about rape is to the detriment of rape victims, whereby consent is inferred unless the victim struggles so much that she/he dies. Of course it could be argued that Zajko's misreading is indicative of a flaw in Cook's work, perhaps not making Thetis' lack of consent clear enough. I would like to think, however, that my analysis of the Peleus-Thetis sequence proves that this is simply not the case and that such a misreading is a natural consequence of a cultural narrative whereby orgasm equals consent or an unnamed narrator saying that 'she could slip away if she chose' is taken at face value. To test this further, it would be interesting to survey the interpretation of this scene by other readers and examine whether exposure to feminist activism on the subject of consent has an effect on whether a reader interprets Thetis as consenting or a rape victim.

To conclude, the importance of Cook's *Achilles* lies in its exploration and exposition of what it means to be a woman writing classical reception and how normative gender roles can be subverted via literary representation. Through the interrogation of 'rape myths', her engagement with narratives of sexual violence offers an example of how classical reception can pursue the same goals as feminist activism. Bearing the political potential of Cook's work in mind alongside the recent surge in works of classical reception by women writers and I cannot help but feel optimistic, as a feminist classicist, for a future in which the blossoming relationship between feminism and women's writing of classical reception can become an important vehicle for gender-equality in the twenty-first century.

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